



A Wife's Duty

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Description: Lucia Valdez knew she was hated by her family, which is why she was given away as a peace offering. Boone Grinder was not a nice man, and he had been making waves for the Bonaldi mafia for quite some time.

No one knew who this man was, what he did, or why he did it. All they knew, was he was responsible for making the streets run red. Boone Grinder wasn't your ordinary villain. He didn't deal in illegal business, and the truth was, he wanted to be left alone. Only, they wouldn't leave him alone. He saw the injustice that was happening to small businesses at the hands of the Bonaldi mafia, and he couldn't stand by and allow it to continue.

Taking Lucia as his wife was the first step in their downfall. They believed they had insulted him. In fact, they had given him the woman he wanted. Before things get too far, he gives her a choice—him or her father.

It's a wife's duty to stay by her husband's side. Boone has done nothing but show Lucia kindness, and given her a life she never thought possible. She will always pick him, and as for her family ... it was their choice to let her go.

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Chapter One

“I’ll fuck her when I’m ready, not when a bunch of dirty fucks want to see the blood. I’ll find out for myself if she is a virgin ... or not.”

Those were the parting words Lucia Valdez’s husband gave to her father and the Italian mafia nearly three weeks ago. They were the same words that still rung in her head. Even after three weeks, it was like repeat, or a broken record. They just wouldn’t stop, and it was starting to drive her crazy.

Three weeks she had been married, and during that time, she’d not been allowed to talk to her family once. She also hadn’t been locked away like rumor had suggested. It was so odd.

Her husband was the only man in the world that seemed to be able to instill fear into one of the strongest factions in a long time. The Italian mafia were not known for being subtle or scared easily.

Bone Grinder, or perhaps it was Boone—she wasn’t quite sure what her husband’s name was. Only that he was the scariest man, and her own father had agreed to sell her in order to make peace.

The details were a little hazy. Everything about her husband was hazy. From what she knew, Boone or Bone, was making the streets run red with the blood of their soldiers. He was taking turf by turf, and he didn’t scare easily. At least, that was what the rumor mill created. Although, there was nothing concrete on what Boone or Bone did.

Even at the wedding, while everyone in the Italian mafia had been present, Bone or Boone—ugh, it was so frustrating. She was only going to refer to him as Bone, it was easier. Bone had arrived with very few people, mainly men that worked for him. He had no family. No one close to him, other than his men.

In three weeks, she'd not met a mother, father, sister, brother, uncle, niece, grandfather, grandmother, nor a best friend, or even a friend. She met his soldiers, no one else.

Anyway, their marriage was supposed to be a peace treaty. There would be no more bloodshed.

Lucia didn't know if Bone even realized that he got ... her. He didn't get her sister, who was considered the most beautiful woman in the entire mafia. Men were falling all over themselves in a bid to win her sister, Isabella, who was the blonde, beautiful goddess. No one wanted Lucia.

She knew her father hated her on sight. It got so bad that she either ate in the kitchen, or ate earlier, as he didn't want to see her.

Her mother and sister were beautiful, blonde-haired, blue-eyed sirens. She was a brown-haired, green-eyed ... slob. Actually, there were a lot more words she'd been called—ugly, fat, useless, waste of space—and she had gotten so used to those names, they didn't even sting anymore.

So, selling her to Bone hadn't been much of a problem. Her family wanted to get rid of her, and no one in the family wanted to marry her. She was the second daughter, the ugly daughter, the unwanted daughter. All she had to do was wait until Bone realized this, and she imagined she would be as dead as all those other men and women he'd killed. That was the rumor. Bone didn't give a shit if you were male or female. If you were his enemy, you ended up dead without question.

Her days were numbered.

At least, she got to taste the smallest sense of freedom. She was still in a cage, though a much nicer cage than her home back with her family. She didn't have to hide every time her father walked down the hall. He would get so angry when he looked at her, that sometimes he'd simply strike her for punishment of being ugly. This is why she got so good at hiding. She didn't like to be hit, and she feared her father.

Right now, she was currently living at one of Bone's apartments. He had many different places to live. She didn't know if that was intentional or not, or this was just how he decided to live his life. In three weeks, they had been to four different locations. Wherever they went, Bone commanded respect, yet he hadn't done a single thing to earn it, as far as she could see.

Everyone she saw didn't appear to fear him. She had wondered if the only reason he commanded respect was because he had at least earned it, but so far, she didn't see that.

No fear. Unlike the men back home. Fear was a great motivator, and that was how her mafia family lived. They didn't fear the outside, they feared those within. You broke trust, you died. You did anything to cause trouble, and you were dealt with.

Families had been killed on the rumors of others.

During her time, going to parties, she'd seen many women covered in bruises, looking absolutely awful, from their husbands beating them—at least she assumed it was them. She had also heard her own father beating her mother on many occasions.

Since being married to Bone, she hadn't been hit once. There had been no raised hand, or him even reaching for his belt. In all honesty, even though she had been here with Bone, he'd kind of treated her as if she were invisible.

She went wherever he went, or stayed here. There were soldiers present, within the apartment, and outside of it. They didn't stop her from living. They didn't force her to sit and wait.

Her mother had told her that a wife's duty was to do her husband's bidding. Bone hadn't told her to do anything, yet.

So, she would wander around the apartment, wondering if she was going to die soon. Sometimes, she would watch television, or peruse the few books she saw in each of his homes. She would sleep in their bedroom at night. Bone would sleep beside her, but he didn't reach out to touch her. There was no touching.

When it came time to kiss the bride at the wedding, he'd brushed his lips against hers, but it hadn't been a kiss. Not that she knew what a real kiss was like. She didn't know anything.

All she knew was ... fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of waiting. The anticipation of all the bullshit to come. Not that she would say a word about it.

She had started to accept that one day soon, she was going to die, and it was going to be by her husband's hand. If her own father couldn't stand the sight of her, then her husband, a man that had no interest in her, was certainly capable of killing her.

Each night she laid in bed, waiting for the inevitable. Only, it never came. Sleep came instead.

She was reading a murder mystery book, although she wasn't really paying much attention to it, when the main door opened. Within seconds Bone appeared, and he held a wrapped item of clothing with him. She stood and turned toward him.

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“Wear this.” He clicked his fingers. “I want her hair and makeup done.”

At first, she hadn’t noticed the man and woman following behind him. He threw the garment he was holding across the sofa, and then without a single look, he was gone.

Now, she was left with two strangers, both of whom looked at her, assessing. This was new. She was so used to people looking at her like she was a lost cause.

“I think I’m going to do my best work, with the dress on,” the man said.

The woman looked at her, and came toward her. “Come on, what Boone wants, he gets.”

And with that, for the next hour, she was pushed into the most obscene dress she had ever seen.

She never wore jeans. At home, she was only ever allowed in skirts and dresses. Her father simply didn’t allow her to be in anything else. It had to be a dress, and never one like this. The dress dipped down, heading toward her stomach, and yet seemed to stop. Her breasts were pushed together, and her cleavage was shown, however, not her nipples. It looked revealing and classy at the same time. She had never been in such a beautiful dress, which was a deep red.

Next, after the dress, Mitchell got to work on her hair, while Sandra worked on her makeup. Not once did she hear that it was a lost cause, or she was useless, or ugly. There was none of that.

Within the hour, she had been transformed. Her long brown hair she often saw as dull had a lifeful sheen to it, with a curl and bounce that surprised her. She didn't have a lot of makeup on her face, but the smoky eye colors and subtle hint of blush were simply perfect.

For the first time in her life, she could actually pass as pretty. Part of her wanted to think she was beautiful, but she knew that wasn't the case. There was nothing beautiful about her. But she might pass for pretty.

Once they were done, Boone, not Bone, was standing out in the hallway, dressed in a suit, his usual style. Black pants, white shirt without a tie, and a jacket. He always looked so in control and put together.

She watched as he clicked on his cell phone, before looking up. He looked her up and down, nodded his head.

"Good job," he said.

Without another word, her hand was grabbed and she was being marched out of the apartment. She didn't have a choice but to keep up with him. There was no way she could tell him no. That word is not one that is meant to be said to a husband. Her mother had told her so. What the husband wanted, he got, without having to work for it. All the woman had to do was ... exactly as she was told. A wife's duty was to comply, submit, and provide children.

They were suddenly in an elevator, and Lucia couldn't help it, she tried to wrap her arms around her body.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm ... this is ... I'm not used to this."

“Get used to it. Do not cover yourself again,” he said. “It’s not cold out.”

That’s true. It was still the height of summer.

She took a deep breath. She was never allowed to reveal too much of her body. This was crazy and so bizarre.

The elevator doors pinged open, and Boone grabbed her hand, and started to lead her out. His men were everywhere, and no one stopped them.

There was a car parked right outside. Boone opened the door, and waited for her to slide inside, which she did. She moved across and settled in for him to slide in next to her. He was a tall, muscular man. He was also very handsome, which was why it surprised her when her sister didn’t argue about being with him.

Sitting back, she tried not to look at him. Only, she was drawn to the man, who terrified the people she had known were used to being feared.

Boone Grinder. The feared man. The one man the mafia wanted on their side.

“You’re staring at me,” he said, without even glancing her way. “Why?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t ask for an apology. Why are you staring?”

“I...” She didn’t know what to say that might not anger him. He’d not hit her yet, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t capable of it. What if he killed her?

“Lucia, I’m going to be straight with you. You want to last in my world. You want to survive, then you don’t lie to me. I can’t fucking stand liars or cheaters, or bullies.

They don't stand a chance. You want to have a good life, then you be honest with me, from the start."

"Honesty?"

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This made him turn toward her.

She looked into his dark brown eyes. So many women had said this man had come from the Devil himself. She had no idea why. Yes, his eyes were a dark brown, that they almost appeared black, but that wasn't something to hold against him.

“Do you have a problem with honesty?” he asked.

“No, not at all. I mean, I prefer honesty.” She couldn't quite look away. Should she trust him? Should she even attempt to be honest with him? “I was looking at you and wondering why ... everyone feared you. My family and the whole mafia family.”

He chuckled. “Do I not look scary to you?”

“Uh, I guess.”

Another chuckle.

“Your family is used to people who are difficult finally backing down. They attempt to threaten, harm, or even kill someone close to you. With me, that is difficult because I have no one. There is no family for them to hurt. No best friend. No one. They can kill my men, but where one falls, a hundred are willing to join me, and that is because for too long your family, and all the Italian mafia, have fucked any loyalty out of everyone. They take and take and take, and people have nothing left to give. They turn to me, because I give them a chance. Also, I'm not afraid to die.”

“You're not?”

“No, death is inevitable. I’m going to die one day. There is no reason to fear it. It’s coming for all of us, including your family.”

It was a morbid thought, but also a very strange one.

The Valdez family may have thought they had given him the dud, the ugly sister, but to Boone, he didn’t think so. There was more to Lucia than met the eye. He’d seen Isabella, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed siren who was used to men adoring her. She was entitled and expected a certain way of life.

Now, Lucia had intrigued him from the start. She didn’t know he had been watching her. Most people thought it was hard to spy on the Italian mafia, but it wasn’t. They had gotten sloppy with their protection detail, and when it came to Lucia, no one seemed to care about her. She was the forgotten sister, the one no one gave a fuck about.

Boone had known if he squeezed the fuck out of the mafia family, they would eventually snap and offer him a consolation prize. Something that would bring peace seeing as he was making them suffer, losing them thousands of dollars a day. They were all about the money and power. They were a couple of old sick fucks that didn’t know their head from their ass. They were used to people being afraid and complying. He’d seen what they were doing, who they were exploiting, and he’d brought a stop to it.

The truth was, he wanted to be left alone, but for some reason, no matter where he went, trouble followed him. There came a point ten years ago, when he finally decided to face that trouble, accept it, then he started to fight. No one was prepared for him. He began to build up, to learn, to take, and then he watched people run. He watched them wish they had never woken the beast, because now that he was awake

and in charge, everyone was going to pay.

Lucia was different. She didn't command attention. She stayed to her little corner, and he noticed that she tried to avoid her father. At events, she was placed as far away from her own family's table as possible. He had looked into the reason why, assuming her mother had an affair, but there was none of that. Lucia was his real daughter. She just didn't look like her sister, and according to the men within the mafia, she was fat and ugly.

Glancing toward her in the red dress he had known would look amazing on her, Lucia was not ugly. Sure, she was not what most would instantly describe as beautiful. She had kind eyes. They were green, but kind. There was not an evil bone in her body. Her mouth was plump, and he was not going to deny it, he had wanted to kiss her many times, but held himself back. Succumbing to Lucia was not part of his plan.

Then, there was her body. She was not slender. Lucia had curves. Full ripe tits, heavy thighs, thick hips, and a body made for loving. She was fucking stunning, if truth be told. Not that he told anyone, but it was like she had stepped out of his fucking wet dreams.

On top of that, she was supposed to be a virgin. He didn't give a fuck about any of that. Women could have as much freedom as men. To fuck who they wanted, have fun, explore. Boone never had a virgin, nor did he ever want one. However, his wife of three weeks was still a virgin.

He liked to keep her family waiting. They thought he was just going to submit to them. They were in for a shock. He couldn't stand her family, nor any of the Italian mafia.

Boone had seen what some of the men do to the women—the mistresses they had used up and spat out. Some of them bruised, heavily drugged, with a couple of kids

they could no longer afford. He'd seen it happen many times. Capos, who had mistresses spread across each city. They wanted their wives to look pure, to do their duty. Their mistresses were to do everything else, to be at their mercy. To fuck when they wanted, to be beaten at will.

Boone hated them.

He'd seen a lot of women become nothing but a shell once they were used up. Mistresses had an expiration date.

"Are you afraid to die, Lucia?" he asked.

"Yes."

He nodded. "Do you think I am capable of killing you?"

"Yes."

"That is true. I have killed women who have betrayed me, who have lied, and gotten others killed."

He saw her shake just a little, but he noticed her hands clenched, and she somehow got herself together. This was another side of Lucia no one else ever seemed to see.

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She was strong. No one saw her strength. He did.

“Let me tell you a little secret. It’s not a hard one to understand.” He cleared his throat. “I will not kill you, or harm you, if you do exactly as I say. If you follow me, and you follow my rules.”

“You have rules?”

“Yes, and they are simple.” She turned toward him and he couldn’t help but be drawn to her cleavage. The dress hugged her in all of the right ways, just as he knew it would. “Don’t lie to me. Don’t go behind my back. Don’t run back to your family. I’m the one that will keep you safe. You can see this marriage as a prison, or freedom. I don’t want a slave, nor a doormat. I want a wife who can hold her head high and stay by my side. Do you think you can handle that?”

Her eyes had gotten wider. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am sure, and we’re here. Think about it.” The car came to a stop, and he didn’t wait for one of his men to open the door. He climbed out, held his hand toward her, and she didn’t hesitate. Sliding her hand in his, he helped her out of the car.

Mitchell and Sandra had done wonders for her. They were the best hair and makeup artists that worked for him. They each had their own salons in the city. The mafia had attempted to close them down, forcing them to pay for protection. That was what they did, forced the building rates up. They had to pay to work within the Italian mafia turf.

They didn't have to pay him a fucking dime. People had the right to run their own business how they saw fit.

He rose up, took back turf, and stopped people from paying fees they didn't have to. He provided the protection by being there. His soldiers were told to keep them all safe. It was what he did. He earned money through many different business ventures, most of them legal.

It was kind of hilarious, because he didn't run girls, push drugs, or even traffic or do anything evil. He killed people who wouldn't listen to him. He gave them choices, and if they chose wrong, there were consequences.

He had been trained since he was a kid. Nobody knew of his past, and no one would ever know. That was his life. A life that was no more.

Stepping into the nightclub, the music was loud, which was exactly the way he liked it. The dance floor was already full, but he escorted Lucia to the private spot. There were several people who paid a great deal of money for their reserved VIP spots.

One of his waitresses came over, and he ordered them both a drink.

"I don't drink," Lucia said.

"I ordered you an orange," he said.

He was pretty sure she was blushing beneath the makeup.

Lucia nodded her head, and then turned toward the dance floor. Her life with her family had been closed off. There was no way she would have seen the inside of a nightclub. Her father didn't like her. He kept her locked up, training to be the perfect little wife who would not make waves.

She had deserved better. Boone had seen the fire within her gaze. Lucia was not meant to be kept locked up. It would drive her insane.

The waitress came back with their drinks. Lucia thanked her, picked up her drink, and took a sip.

He had made sure there was no alcohol, but her gaze was completely enraptured by the dance floor. The music was heavy and thick, and it sounded so fucking good. He was about to ask her to dance, when one of his men got his attention with a nod. Something was up.

“Stay here,” he said, getting to his feet.

Ronald had been with him from the start. The man knew how he liked to conduct his business. They didn’t talk as they made their way toward the back of the nightclub and exited toward one of the back alleys. There was a small light on, and Ronald turned toward him. He didn’t say a word, and he looked down to see that Ronald was holding a little bag of white powder.

“Who?”

“There.” He nodded to his left. “He was dealing, but you recognize the logo.”

“Yeah, I do.”

It was the Italian mafia his wife’s family was part of, the Bonaldis. He would recognize this shit anywhere, and it was being dealt within his own club. He was pissed off now.

Handing the bag back to Ronald, he made his way toward the man who had attempted to deal that shit in his club. He couldn’t stand drugs. They were the Devil’s work. He

had seen what it did to people, to families, and he wouldn't have anything to do with it.

“Look, man, I was told this was no big deal.”

“What's your name?”

“Fuck you.”

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Boone looked at him for several seconds, and then without a care in the world, he drew his gun and pointed it at his forehead. Instantly, the man before him recoiled and looked quite shaken.

“You’re surprised.”

“What the fuck, Mister? I’m just following orders. I was told you’d be cool. That this shit would be tight.”

“You were told that, were you?” he asked.

The man was shaken, but Boone didn’t care. This piece of shit was selling Bonaldi’s shit on his property, in his line of work. There was only so much he was willing to accept, and this was a line they shouldn’t cross.

“Yes, man. I was told that all of your ... places of establishment are fine to conduct my level of business. Well, I’m just a ... marketer.”

He clicked the safety off his gun, and this instantly silenced the man before him.

“What’s your name?”

“Shit. Fuck. Shit. I ... uh ... it’s Howard.” He held his hands up. “That’s my name, dude. Just Howard.”

Boone looked at him. It would be a lot easier to just kill him right now and deal with the drugs. However, he had Lucia inside looking so beautiful, and he didn’t want to ruin this night.

This man had pissed him off, but he was all about choices. He gave everyone a choice. It was up to them if they made the right one or the wrong one.

“Listen, Howard, you have two choices here. Either you leave and sell that piece of shit to some random stranger, or you leave and go straight to the cops. Do you hear me? You hand yourself in with this little stash of drugs, and you tell them everything.”

He watched as the man instantly recoiled.

“Shit, man, do you know what would happen to me if I did that?” Howard asked.

“What’s it going to be? Two choices. The right one or the wrong one. I’ll know which choice you make, Howard, and if you make the wrong one, this will not be our last meeting.”

He put the safety back on the gun, and then shoved it into its holster. “Give him the drugs,” he said, talking to Ronald.

Ronald handed him back the drugs.

“If I go to the cops, I’m dead. There is no way I’m making it past a day without getting killed.”

“Your choice to make, Howard.”

He stood and watched, knowing he and Howard would be meeting each other again real soon.

“Boss, you know he’s going to sell it.”

“I know.”

“Then why don’t you just end it now?”

“Because, everyone has a choice, Ronald. You know that. Everyone has a choice.”
He slapped Ronald on the chest and made his way inside to find his wife exactly where he had left her.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, turning to look at him.

He held his hand out toward her. “Dance with me.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

She looked a little pale, but he wasn’t backing down. He’d seen the yearning inside her eyes, and now was the time for him to give her a little reward. She hadn’t run off and had stayed exactly where he wanted her to. None of his men gave him the alert that she’d been spoken to.

Everyone watched his back. He didn’t know at times if it was down to fear or loyalty. Either way, he didn’t give a fuck as long as they did their jobs.

Chapter Two

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Another new apartment. Lucia glanced around the apartment she had been placed in just last night. This was similar to all of the others, including the soldier at the door, waiting, watching.

It had been three days since he last took her out. Other than late at night, feeling the bed dip, she hadn't seen him. Even then, she hadn't really seen him, just felt him as she slept with her back toward him.

Married life wasn't quite what she thought it would be. At least, not right now. She still didn't know a great deal about her husband, other than the fact he was an outstanding dancer. Three days ago, she had gone to one of his many nightclubs, and they danced. Not for long, maybe an hour, but it had been the most fun she ever had. She didn't know for certain if that was sad or not. Even when she lived back home, she tended to be constantly on guard.

Moving from room to room, but avoiding the office, she had come to realize that Boone didn't have a single personal effect. Not a single item to his name.

Well, that wasn't true. He had a lot of items to his name, just none of them personalized. No pictures. Nothing to show who the man was. Sure, there were random books, from murder mysteries to romance, to horror, to mechanics. There were not a lot of books, but enough to keep someone entertained for a long time.

There was nothing of his history. She didn't even know where he went to school or what he did for a living. She knew he must have some kind of association with what her own family did. Her father was one of many capos within the Bonaldi family.

Bonaldi was in charge, and told everyone else what to do. Boone was not part of their world, but was he like Bonaldi? He must have been, to instill that kind of fear into the men she had known, who once seemed to have none.

“What are you looking at?”

She spun around to find the man himself looking at her. She’d been so lost in her thoughts, she hadn’t heard him enter.

“Boone? I mean, Mister Grinder.” She felt her cheeks start to heat.

He didn’t dispute her.

“Is that how you greet everyone?”

“Uh, no, you are my husband.” Lucia hated this. She was so out of her depth. She didn’t know what she was supposed to be doing. Her hands felt a little clammy.

He’d not been home during the day before. Usually, he came in, as he did three days ago, barking orders about what he wanted to have done.

There was no dress in his hands this time. Nothing. He stood, one hand slid into his pocket, the other by his side.

“And my husband deserves to have a special title.” She was clutching at straws right now.

Normally, she wasn’t around when her mother greeted her father. She often heard a slap, and seeing as he was usually in a bad mood, it was safer for her to be elsewhere. That was where she often was—elsewhere. Her brothers and sister were usually there to greet him. He never wanted to see the disappointment, and that was exactly what

she was to him.

Boone continued to stare at her.

“You can call me Boone,” he said.

She nodded and then pressed her lips together, as if it was going to be the most impossible task for her to complete. What the hell was going on with her? He was going to start hating the woman he married if she didn’t get her own head out of her ass.

“Good afternoon, Boone,” she said. There, it finally came out of her mouth, and she must have sounded like a stupid fucking child. She didn’t like this.

He smirked.

Why did he get to find this so funny? Nothing about this was funny.

“Is there anything I can get you?”

“What are you looking at?” He’d caught her staring at—surprise—blank walls.

She turned to look at the blank wall and then back at him. “You don’t have any pictures, or much in the way of artwork. Back home, it is odd to see a blank wall.” Her father was always replacing artwork with newer, more expensive pieces. When they had parties where more families under Bonaldi’s power came together, it was her father’s bragging rights. The artwork, the expense of it all. Every single capo did it.

There was always some elaborate piece of furniture on display, or an expensive trinket. Parties were exhausting with men and women talking about their possessions.

It was each capo's way of showing the favor Bonaldi had given them. She didn't know if any of them noticed, but in most cases, it was all the same. No one got better than the other, but all of it was earned.

She was under no illusion that someone had been hurt in acquiring certain artifacts or trinkets. Death within the Bonaldi meant more power.

She hated it, but there was nothing she could do about it. After all, she was just a woman, and no woman in that world had any power, other than her virginity. Their only selling point was their innocence and beauty. Unfortunately, she didn't have beauty, much to her father's irritation. At eighteen, he had tried to remove her from his family. Not by killing her, that would have been a shame on him. He tried to get her married to someone, anyone, but no one would have her.

She pulled out of her thoughts and instead focused on Boone.

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“That was what I was looking at.”

He nodded. “I want to take you out to dinner. Come on.” Boone reached for her hand, and she froze.

“But I’m not dressed.”

At first, Lucia couldn’t believe she had even defied him enough to not move. He had reached for her, Boone was her husband, he was the one in charge. She should never try to stop him in his tracks.

He stopped and glanced down at her, and there was a frown between his brow. “You’re not in pajamas.”

“But I am not dressed to go out.”

She wore a plain blue dress, plain but nice, and comfortable for the hot weather. She didn’t have any makeup on, nor was her hair perfectly styled. She had pulled the locks back into a ponytail at the base of her neck.

Also, her mother would be upset as she wore socks with the dress, and she had on a pair of sneakers, when all women in a dress should wear heels. Again, her mother’s assessment, not her own.

“You look fine,” Boone said.

She wanted to argue with him, but again, that was another big fat no. If she argued

with her husband, that would make him angry, and then he was entitled to slap her. She knew that wasn't normal, but once again, within her own world, that was very normal. Hitting or beating the wife happened. Her own mother had put up with it.

All too soon, it didn't seem to matter as they were out of his apartment building, and once again Boone was full of surprises as he didn't go straight to a car. He held her hand, and they walked outside into the glaring sunshine, and it was beautiful.

They stopped and she stood, waiting. He pulled out a pair of sunglasses and slid them on, then held a pair out to her. This was a surprise. She took them, opening them up and sliding them on her nose.

Also, he pulled out a cap, and again, she didn't know where he was getting these things, but this time he didn't hand it to her. No, he slid that on her head, to protect her from the sun.

Who was this man? This was ... shocking.

Then, he took her hand. Right there, in the middle of the street. His men surrounded them, but still gave them space. They were close enough that if anyone decided to attack, they would be able to protect them.

But Boone held her hand, and that was what was actually blowing her mind in that very moment. Boone was holding her freaking hand, in public, for others to see.

They walked down the street. Again, something so very normal, and yet, in her twenty-two years of age, she had never done anything this crazy before. It was insane. And it felt so amazing.

She must seem like such a weird person to be so happy to be walking out in the sunshine, but she couldn't help the smile that filled her face. She was so

unimaginably happy.

Lucia breathed in the fresh air, or as much of it as she could, being in the city, filled with the fumes of business, cars, and trucks, but she didn't care. Back home, she would have no choice but to keep her head down, to not make waves, and not talk to anyone. That was what she was constantly told to do. She hated it.

Now, this was a new taste of freedom, and she loved it. It felt incredible to her. And she didn't want it to end.

Did he think she was a child? She suddenly realized how happy she felt. It was so quick, and it made her nervous, and then she tried to reel it in. She had to. If he knew how much she enjoyed this, he might take it away from her.

She had no idea where they were going. Glancing from shop window to shop window, she tried to figure out his plan. She watched as he moved in close, and then she felt his lips against her ear.

"You can enjoy yourself. I have no rules against that." And just like that, he pulled away.

He'd seen. And he wasn't angry? Lucia didn't know if she should relax or still be on guard. She didn't know anything. Her mother hadn't exactly been very forthcoming.

"You should consider this marriage a blessing, Lucia. No other man has wanted you, and what he wants, he gets. Remember that. If he wants to hit you, stand and get hit. You don't fight back."

That was the speech her mother had given her on her wedding day, just before she had gotten married. That she should accept anything from this man, because he had decided to marry her. It was embarrassing, but not entirely surprising.

Her brothers and sister had often used her as the butt of their jokes, literally telling her to her face that she was too ugly to be married. It was like a bucket of cold water on the whole experience.

They continued walking, but all of a sudden, Boone gripped her hand, tightened his hold on her, and they came to a stop. At first, she panicked, because this is not what she wanted. She didn't want him to suddenly stop. That was scary.

Then ... his guards closed in. Was he about to hit her?

Her father usually waited until they were behind closed doors, as it was always about image. Was Boone suddenly angry with how she was dressed as she tried to change it?

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He cupped her cheek. It was such a gentle move. Was this going to happen just before the pain?

Only there was no pain. He simply tilted her head back and forced her to look at him, although there was no real force, nor pain.

“What is it?” Boone asked.

Was he concerned?

“It’s nothing.”

“Tell me.”

He didn’t like lies, but she was scared. Should she tell him the truth and run the risk of looking like a fool? Should she lie? Lying was out of the question. She didn’t want him to be angry at her.

“I ... uh, I’m sorry if I embarrassed you.”

“Why would you have embarrassed me?”

“Because ... I was a little ... you know, I was excited about going out to lunch with you, and I know that shouldn’t be the case.”

She looked down at his dress shirt, hating how her cheeks heated.

“I’m not your father,” Boone said.

This took her by surprise and she looked up to him. “What?”

“I know your father was not a nice man. I know he hurt you, but while you are mine, there is nothing you need to fear. I want to enjoy this time. To love it.”

Was he being serious? Was this a trap?

He leaned in close. “You are going to have more freedom than you have ever known, Lucia.”

The way he said her name was like a dirty word rolling off his tongue, but in a good way. Sexy, sensual. She felt a little strange, like her body had heated up.

“And that is what I want. I do believe you’ve been told to give your husband what he wants, and I want you to enjoy yourself, along with every opportunity presented to you.” He kissed her cheek.

And they were walking once again. She didn’t know if it was a trick or not, but she didn’t care. He’d kissed her cheek, and now she had an overwhelming need to touch her cheek, but she didn’t.

She was able to hold it together long enough to walk into a small café with him. No one looked terrified when they saw him. His men followed, but they took different seats.

Boone seated them in the center of the café, at a lovely table. There was a pretty red checkered cloth covering the table, that looked so crisp. A small menu was resting between the salt-and-pepper pots. She loved how quaint it was.

He picked up the menus and handed one to her.

Again, this was a new experience for her. She took the menu, feeling a little out of place. She was used to having someone order for her. Not that her family took her out to many cafés or restaurants. She often stayed home.

The waitress came forward.

“Mr. Grinder,” she said.

“Nancy, how are you doing?” Boone asked.

The waitress was a lovely-looking woman. A small amount of makeup on her face, an easy smile, some greys to her brown hair.

“I’m doing good. We’re doing good.”

“No trouble?”

“Not for a long time, thanks to you.” Nancy placed a hand on his shoulder.

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“How are the boys?” Boone asked.

“They’re great. Loving that play slide you installed for us.”

Who was this man? She had never heard anyone close to him talk like this, with such admiration. People complied with fear and pain. She was used to seeing people nervous, shaking, terrified. This woman had an easy smile and looked happy.

“All right, Boone,” a man said from behind the counter.

“Hey, Tyler,” Boone said.

It wasn’t long before Tyler came toward their table.

“Has Nance told you about our boys?” Tyler asked.

Lucia tensed up as he reached into his pocket, but he didn’t pull out a weapon, instead, his wallet. Within seconds, she was being shown three very devilish-looking boys, and they were covered in mud.

“Damn, can you believe one of those little lads is nearly in high school?” Tyler asked.

Nancy laughed. “He’s a proud papa.”

Lucia loved watching them and she couldn’t look away from the smile on Boone’s face.

“Well, I guess I better introduce you to my wife. Nancy and Tyler Wright, I’d like you to meet my wife, Lucia Grinder.”

She held her hand out. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Wow, man, you got married. I didn’t even hear about it,” Tyler said.

Nancy slapped Tyler in the chest.

“Well, it is so lovely to meet you.” Nancy didn’t take her hand but pulled her in for a hug.

Lucia tensed up because the truth was, she really wasn’t used to too much human affection. Her mother had been so disappointed with her, that she had rarely held her.

She accepted the hug, patted the woman’s arm, and in a whirlwind, they took their orders and were gone.

The café continued to be busy.

“They are nice,” Lucia said, hoping to dispel the awkwardness she felt.

“They are.”

“How do you know them?”

There was silence, and she glanced up to see Boone looking at her.

“I met them four years ago. I came to have a drink and some food. It’s a nice lovely quaint little café. Not too far from one of the many places I lived. Anyway, on the day I came to enjoy my food, Nancy and Tyler had fallen on hard times. The economy at

the time fucking sucked. Prices were soaring and it was hard for small businesses. The land you're standing in was once owned by the Bonaldis. To do business, not only did they have all the usual legal outlay—the general running of the building, initial outlay of expense for food and furniture and such—but Bonaldi decided to set a tax for each business within his own areas. Each month, he sends in a couple of goons to collect. Those that don't pay end up with interest added on. It gets to the point when bones start to get broken.”

She didn't like this story. Nancy and Tyler were nice people.

“So, I was there, minding my own business, enjoying a juicy piece of steak, when two goons walked in. Now, I had no idea who they were and I don't scare easily. Other customers got up and hightailed it out of there. Not me. I sat and watched as they threatened Tyler. He didn't have the money, and they decided to start smashing up the place. I heard enough, especially when one of them grabbed Nancy and said if he didn't pay, they were going to start using his wife.”

Lucia gasped.

“That was when I heard enough. I don't know if you heard of me at that time. You're twenty-two years old, and four years ago, you would have been eighteen. I gave the two men a choice. Leave, and never return, or attempt to throw the first punch. They chose wrong, and I sent them to Bonaldi in body bags. The next night, two more came, and I did the same. Then, piece by piece, I started to take back each of these businesses. The streets we just walked were once owned by Bonaldis and controlled by your father. Now, I control them, and people here conduct business and do not have to pay a fee.”

Boone saw the shame in her eyes and when Nancy came to deliver them food, he also

saw that his wife couldn't look at her. He didn't tell her this story for her to feel guilty. He wanted to make her aware of the family she came from.

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Nancy frowned but he nodded at her, and the other woman left.

“Stop,” Boone said.

“How could you ... they must hate me?”

“They have no idea who you are. Your last name is Grinder, and they probably know you had nothing to do with what happened to them.”

The steak looked heavenly. He didn't need to add any salt because Tyler was one of the best damn cooks around. He picked up his knife and fork and sliced into it. Juicy, just cooked. He didn't like his steak rare. Blood on his plate didn't appeal to him.

Lucia hadn't picked up her knife and fork, and her chicken salad was not going to eat itself.

“Eat and enjoy.”

“They ... how ... what?” she asked.

“I took care of it,” Boone said. At first, he was pissed off at having his dinner interrupted. He hadn't told Lucia that the men had tried to remove him from the building prior to them making threats. He had told them to fuck off, as he had paid for his steak, and he was going to stay and finish it.

The guy who had attempted to threaten him and then threatened Nancy with rape, must have seen something in his eyes. Maybe he was smart, but he still hadn't made

the right choice.

Killing came easy to Boone, as long as they were the right people to kill. He didn't hurt civilians. He gave everyone a choice. He was trained well.

His father had seen something inside him and made sure he was used where needed.

No one knew of his past. He had military training. At one time, when someone needed someone killed or protected, he was the one they put in charge, but that was a long time ago.

He left, his identity erased, just as he liked it. His father had died many years ago, even before he got out of the military. There was no other family.

"Is that what you do? You take care of it?"

Boone looked toward his wife. She looked so ... heartbroken. He didn't bring her here to talk about old memories. That just happened. He came here for some good food, and also because he knew Tyler and Nancy were people he could trust. Staring at her now, he had to wonder what was going on in her mind.

"Can I trust you?" he asked, sitting back in his seat.

She frowned. "I don't know what you mean?"

"You're my wife, Lucia, and I know you have been raised within a very tight, confined family. You're connected to the Italian mafia, and I know they have attempted to use you, to keep me in check. I also know that by you marrying me, they think they have insulted me."

He watched her gaze drop down to the table. "Within your world, you have been

treated as if you mean nothing.”

Lucia lifted her gaze to his and he saw the tears in her eyes. “My sister is considered the beautiful one. My dad tried to sell me off four years ago. No one wanted me. I’m too ugly and fat. No one wanted me.”

He looked at her. “Did he hurt you?”

“What?”

“Your father. Did he hurt you?”

“I got punished. No different from anyone else that displeases their father or parent.” She shrugged.

“He beat you?” Boone asked.

“He’s my dad and I didn’t turn out the way he wanted. He had beautiful children until I came along.”

Did she not see she was beautiful?

“Do you ... are you ... going to give me back?” Lucia asked.

“Why would I do that?”

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“Isn’t that why you didn’t want to consummate the marriage?”

Her face had gone a delightful shade of pink. He loved the look on her. It was stunning. He wanted her to blush a lot more often.

“I didn’t consummate the marriage because I didn’t want to scare you. You don’t know me, Lucia, and the men in your world might be happy bedding women they don’t know, and hanging up some bloody sheets like a prize. You’re my wife. You’re my prize, and there is no fucking way I am going to let anyone look at what is mine, or even think about what I was doing to her. Do you understand? I am not giving you back. You are mine, and when you are ready to take my dick and fuck, that is when we will consummate this marriage in full.”

He had taken her by surprise. Her lips fell, and her face was still a pretty shade of red. It was a color he could get used to on her.

“We’re getting off topic. Can I trust you?”

“Yes.”

“So, if your father were to ask you to spy on me, would you tell me?”

She frowned. “I, uh ... yes, I’d tell you. Does my father want you to spy on me?”

“Lucia, your family and none of the Bonaldis like me. They have given you to me as a peace offering, and in doing so, they think they have insulted me, but they haven’t.”

“They haven’t?”

“No, because of the women I could have chosen, you were the only one I wanted.”

He shocked her.

“I am? Why?”

This made him smile.

“Because you’re different.” She wasn’t ready to hear that he thought she was beautiful.

“I am?”

“Your eyes,” Boone said. They went a little wide. He couldn’t help but chuckle. At times, she was just so adorable.

“What about my eyes?”

“You’re kind,” he said. “You don’t see the world in the same way everyone else does.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Trust me, one day, it is going to make a whole lot of sense. I’ve known a lot of people, Lucia. I’ve met and dealt with a lot of bad people. Most of the people associated with the Bonaldis are bad people. They are going to reach out to you and attempt to sabotage me. They’re going to try and use you against me.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Lucia, when the time comes, I am going to need you to do exactly as I say.”

“You are?”

“Yes, but until that time, I think we should enjoy each other. What do you think? Get to know one another, and you need to stop worrying that I am going to kill you. I have no desire to kill you.”

She was, after all, an innocent in this.

“Okay.”

“Now, enjoy your salad.”

She nodded her head and picked up her knife and fork. He didn't touch another bite of his own food until she had started to eat her chicken salad. He saw the pleasure in her eyes, and it was so good to see her enjoying her food.

“Tell me what you like,” he said.

This made her pause. “Huh?”

“Tell me about your interests. What you like. What you dislike. Tell me about you.”

She twirled her fork within her salad. “I have no idea how to answer that.”

It was strange, because it didn’t surprise him.

“I mean, I am so used to being told what to do, and how to do it, I never really thought about what I liked and didn’t. My mom would tell us it was about our husband’s wants. So, working on that theory, I like what you do?” She frowned.

This was going to be fun.

Her father had thought he’d trapped his daughter in a loveless marriage. Boone had seen how much Lucia’s father hated her, and he had no intention of causing her trouble, or hurting her. He had every intention of letting her fly.

“Then I guess we better get started in finding out what you enjoy. I want you to be totally honest with me, with everything, Lucia. I don’t like liars or cheats. Play by the rules, and you and I will get along great.”

“I like rules,” Lucia said. “Also, I like this café. Like, a whole lot.”

There was a slight smile to her lips, and he chuckled.

They finished their food, and even though Nancy and Tyler never wanted him to pay,

he did so anyway. There was no way he was going to allow any business to suffer on his watch.

Stepping back out into the sunlight, he took Lucia's hand, and then she spun toward him. "I like this as well."

"What?"

"Lame, but walking out in the sunlight, holding your hand. I like this."

"Good."

They walked along the street, and he saw a boutique up ahead. For the rest of the afternoon, he took her in clothing stores, antiques places, bookstores, and jewelry stores. He wanted to learn what she liked. He wanted Lucia to flourish within their marriage.

She liked shopping, but at the same time, she didn't like spending money. He came to realize she liked exploring and watching. She didn't have to spend money. She also loved ice cream.

By the end of the afternoon, they had made a few purchases, and it was time to go back to his apartment. Like all of his places, there were no personal items. Nothing to show for the past life he lived, or even for the one he had now. Nothing. It was the way he liked it. His enemies never stood a chance at using anything against him.

As he entered their home, Lucia was talking animatedly about one of the books they had seen. She was convinced it was a first edition, but he had his doubts.

He didn't say anything, and his cell phone rang. Pulling it from inside his jacket, he saw it was Ronald calling him.

Lucia had stopped talking.

He answered the call. “Talk,” he said.

“Howard sold the product. He didn’t go to the cops, and three girls are in the hospital. Bonaldis attempted to set you up.”

“Do you have the address?”

“I’ve got it.”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

He hung up and Lucia clasped her hands together.

“I enjoyed today,” she said. “Thank you for taking me.”

“I’ve got to deal with this.”

“Okay. That is more important.” She offered him a smile.

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He looked at her and it was strange because for the first time, he didn't want to leave her alone.

"I'll be back." He moved toward her, and she didn't pull away, just tilted her head back, and he pressed a kiss to her lips. "Very soon."

Boone left, going straight to the elevator and toward the parking lot where his car was. He pulled out and went to the nightclub where Ronald was already waiting. Within seconds, Ronald was in the car, giving him the address he needed.

Making his way across the city, he listened to Ronald's update. The cops didn't find any traces of drugs. That had miraculously vanished, but one of the guys he paid to keep him updated on Bonaldi's shit, had said they were attempting to pin the girls at his nightclub.

There was no way they could do that, as they were only on Bonaldi's turf. So, Howard had distributed it back at his boss's. It was kind of poetic.

The address was a run-down dive, known to house addicts and drug pushers. There were also pimps and whores. Parking his car, he saw several men eyeing his vehicle.

He climbed out and looked at Ronald. "Stay with the car."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I got this covered."

He didn't say anything else as he made his way inside the building. It stunk like decay. This was not the first time he'd been in a place like this. This is where the evil sent their prey to die. There were women passed out on used mattresses, needles sticking out of their arms, or naked, with men rutting between their thighs.

No one paid any attention to him.

He got to the top of the floor, and there was Howard, counting the money he made. Boone tutted, Howard looked up, and realizing he wasn't alone, freaked out. He instantly threw the cash down and attempted to make a run for it. He didn't get far as Boone grabbed a broken piece of furniture and launched it across the room. It hit the back of Howard's legs, taking him down with a cry. Within seconds he was there, and he wrapped his arm around the man's neck, cutting off his air supply.

"I gave you a choice," Boone said. "You made the wrong choice and now three women are in the hospital fighting for their lives because you gave them contaminated shit. Did you know it was contaminated?"

"I did what I was told, but I told them to take it in your nightclub. Please let me go. Please. I sent them to you because I knew they would be safe."

And anger flooded Boone. He cut off the man's air supply, and he fought. Howard did fight, but he was no match for him.

Three women were fighting for their lives. They shouldn't have taken the drugs in the first place, and that was a warning to them.

Bonaldi wanted a war, and Boone would give him one.

Chapter Three

The following day, Lucia frowned as she rolled over in bed. There was no sign of Boone, although she had heard him come to bed the previous night. She had been awake, waiting for him, wondering what time he got home. He didn't come back until after two in the morning.

She didn't know if he even knew she was awake and waiting for him to return. He didn't say anything, nor did he attempt to wake her. She didn't know if she was disappointed or not. It didn't matter.

She inhaled again and that was when she smelled it. First, it smelled like coffee, but that had to be bacon, or was that sausage cooking? Her stomach growled, and she threw the covers off and was going to head straight to the kitchen. Only, she needed to use the bathroom.

She veered toward the bathroom, used the toilet, flushed, washed her hands, and then looked at herself in the mirror. There was not a lot of time to get herself presentable. She quickly pulled her hair back into a messy bun, brushed her teeth, and splashed water onto her face.

She wore a pair of shorts and t-shirt. It was the most comfortable wear for bed in the summer. Did she have time to throw on a dress?

She didn't want to waste any more time. Boone had talked to her yesterday. They had spent time together, and it was probably one of the best days she ever had in her whole life. There had been no pain. Even when he got that phone call last night, she hadn't been sad or angry. Sure, she was a little gutted that their time had come to a close, but that was life in general. There was nothing she could do about that.

Stepping out of the bedroom, she made her way to the kitchen.

When Boone was home with her, the guard waited outside.

Boone was wearing an apron, frying bacon. He was already dressed in a pair of suit pants, a crisp white shirt, and a jacket. He looked so smart and put together.

“You’re awake.”

“Good morning,” she said.

He chuckled. “You want some coffee?”

“I’d love some.”

This was not the man she imagined was so terrifying to her family. He was so ... happy. She loved it when he smiled, it lifted his whole face.

She watched as he moved to the coffeepot and poured her some coffee. He added some milk, no sugar, just the way she liked it. How did he know what she liked? He put the mug in front of her, and she lifted it, taking a sip. It was good coffee.

She watched him, and he looked so different. Lucia hadn’t seen him cook before.

“Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah, I did.” She took another sip of her coffee. “Did you finish your business?”

“Yes, I did.”

She didn’t want to know what it was.

He was happy and that meant she was happy. If it also meant he had pissed off her father as well, then she was even more happy.

She watched as he added some food to the plates, bacon, sausage, eggs, and even

freshly grilled slices of tomato, and there was also bread.

“Go sit down,” he said.

Lucia didn’t argue with him.

The table was already set. Boone took the head of the table, while she took the seat right beside him. They sat, together.

He put the plate of food in front of her, and she thanked him. It smelled really good.

Back home, at her parents’ house, she wasn’t allowed to have a cooked breakfast. Everything had to be cereal, low fat, low flavor, the lot. Her mouth watered and she picked up her knife and fork, but habits were hard to lose. She was never allowed to start eating, until she was given permission.

“Eat, enjoy. Don’t let it go cold,” Boone said.

Her father had once made her wait until her food was completely cold. Everyone had been allowed to eat their food, but she had been made to wait. She’d been starving and it had been so humiliating. Her brothers found it funny, as did her sister.

Now, she cut into a piece of bacon and it was salty and so good. The sausage was one of the best she had ever eaten. She enjoyed every single speck, every crumb.

“Lucia, do you know anything about your father’s operations?” Boone asked.

This made her pause and she turned to look at him. Her first instinct was to say no, only that would be a lie.

She had no idea what to do in this situation. So many times over the years, she had

been angry at what he had done or said to her. She tried to stay out of his way, but that didn't mean she didn't get curious, just in case she might need it someday.

Her father's office was soundproof, or at least he thought it was.

She found out, by accident, that the library and her father's office was connected in some way. Either way, there was a grate that allowed her to hear every conversation that had taken place. There were some she remembered, others she didn't.

"I ... uh, yes and no," she said.

"Tell me."

She let him know what she would do and she didn't meet his eyes. It was embarrassing to know she had acted out. Been a child.

Boone reached out and took her hand, locking their fingers together. She expected him to hit her, to scold her. Instead, he waited, and he didn't look angry.

"Tell me," he said again.

She took a deep breath.

“I know they were cooking something up in a lab. They kept saying it was going to wipe something out, and that they already had buyers and suppliers. They also kept implying it would be too late for anyone to do anything by the time this was out. I know that is not a lot to go on. I think it is drugs. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“I know what they’re doing,” Boone said.

She licked her lips and chanced asking him the question. “What are they doing?”

Boone let go of her hand, sat back in his chair, and continued to look at her.

“Three girls were put into the hospital the other night after taking one of Bonaldi’s latest drugs. The guy was attempting to sell it in my club. I believe your father was trying to sabotage me. Make it look like I was selling the product. I don’t do drugs.”

“You don’t?”

Boone smiled. “Lucia, I don’t do anything illegal, apart from killing people that ... need to be killed, but they get a choice.”

This surprised her and she frowned. Aside from the killing people, she wondered how he didn’t deal with illegal business. “How?”

“Simple. I have no reason to.”

“No, no, I don’t mean how are you not into anything illegal. How are you doing business with Bonaldi and my father? How am I married to you? They’re so afraid of you.”

“Because I put men like your father and Bonaldi out of business. I also put them on the dead list.”

“Dead list?”

“I kill people, Lucia. One day, I might even tell you about my past to help you understand. I don’t like when people break the rules. I am against it.”

Okay, now this made her frown. “I ... huh. You kill people.”

“Bad people. I never hurt anyone who is good and follows the rules. Like Tyler and Nancy. Yourself.”

She had no idea who this man was. Her family were so afraid of him, as were the Bonaldis. Sitting back in her chair, she looked at him.

“You can’t be bought,” she said.

“No.”

“But, if that is the case, why did you agree to marry me? I’m part of their world, and based on that, I am not a good person.”

“You are,” Boone said.

“But I was a Valdez.”

“And?”

“Doesn’t that make me guilty by association?”

“Have you ever hurt anyone just because you could?” he asked.

This made her frown again. “No.” She would never dream of hurting anyone.

“Would you manipulate or humiliate someone to make yourself feel good?”

She shook her head. She knew what it was like to feel that way on a daily basis and it wasn’t good.

“You’re a good person, Lucia.”

“But I’ve never shown you that. I’ve never proven it.”

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“I’m a good judge of people and I know what I’m looking for.”

She didn’t know if she should be happy with that or not.

“Tell me more of what you heard.”

“I can’t remember all of it.” She didn’t always go into the library when her father was in his office. She didn’t want to raise suspicion, and at times her brothers were so incredibly nosy. She didn’t like them.

She told him of the recent conversations she did overhear. Before her father had told her of her upcoming marriage, she heard them in his office. They were laughing about how pathetic it was that Boone was going to be married to the ugly daughter. That was what they called her. Her father had laughed and said at least there was going to be some use for her, even if it was to one of their enemies. She was not worth anything.

Lucia hadn’t even cried. It wasn’t like she hadn’t heard it all before. All of his cruel insults had been thrown her way many times. They were easy for her to listen to.

After she finished, Boone sat back, and she looked at him.

“Are you angry at me?”

“Why would I be angry at you?”

“Because I knew this and I didn’t warn you.”

He continued to stare at her. “Lucia, I am only going to say this once, and you are going to believe me. I married the person I wanted. Your father didn’t manipulate me. He didn’t give me a choice. I made sure he knew there was only one person I wanted, and he was the one who thought I was getting stitched up. I knew what I was doing. I had to get you out of there, because I didn’t want you to be in the way of the fallout.”

“Fallout?”

“Lucia, I am going to bring the Bonaldis down to their knees. I don’t like them. I don’t like what they stand for. They are all going to suffer and pay for their sins. If you were still there, you would be in the line of fire, and that is not something I can accept.”

He got to his feet.

“Go and get dressed. I want to leave in five minutes.”

“You want to leave?” she asked.

She didn’t know what to do with the information he had just given her. Bonaldi was going to be brought to his knees. That didn’t seem possible to her. He’d been ruling the Italian mafia, including her father, for as long as she could remember. She didn’t believe it was possible for Bonaldi to be brought down. She didn’t know if she should warn Boone.

“Get dressed. You’re coming with me.”

“Wait ... I am?”

“Yes.”

This was exciting and terrifying at the same time. “Boone, you can’t bring Bonaldi down.” The very idea of it sounded ridiculous. She had been aware of other organizations attempting to remove him from power. The Bonaldis had so many men in high places in their pocket. She didn’t want anything to happen to her husband.

He reached out and placed a hand on top of hers. “Have a little faith.”

Testing Lucia was all part of his plan. Boone didn’t know for sure if he could trust her completely. He also knew she had been part of the Bonaldis ever since she was born. She has known no other way of life. However, the simple fact that she was also willing to tell him about conversations she overheard said a lot.

Now, all he needed to do was set a few little tests to see if she would succumb to what she knew. If she did, he’d be disappointed, as there would be no future for the two of them.

Bonaldi was going down, whether they liked it or not.

The only reason he had married Lucia was because he had noticed her. He’d seen her. She didn’t know what he did, but he had a way of finding out everything he needed on anyone. He had contacts in many places. There had been footage captured of Lucia’s treatment. From the moment he saw her father take a belt to her in the backyard, Boone knew he was going to change her life. All he had to do was make it happen.

Now, he had set his sights on a bigger piece of the pie.

He didn’t want the Bonaldis for himself. He wanted to bring them down once and for all. Over the years he had seen the destruction they created. For a long time, he tried

to ignore it, but now, they would be brought down.

After finishing his meal, he let Lucia go and get changed, and he finished cleaning up the dishes. Once that was done, he pulled out his cell phone and checked his emails. There was nothing of any concern, and afterward he gave instructions to his men on what they were doing today.

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He had eyes on every deal and port the Bonaldis had going down. There were not many people in this world he trusted, but he did trust those who were close to him.

With everything in place, he pocketed his cell phone and looked toward Lucia. She had dressed very conservatively, a dress with a short-sleeved cardigan to cover her arms. The clothes she wore were sent by her father, and he didn't like them.

"Come on," he said, reaching for her hand.

"What are you doing?"

"We're going out." And without another word, he marched her out of the apartment and down toward the elevator.

His men knew when to follow him. They joined him, with two men standing on the elevator with them, and he imagined the others were taking the stairs. Boone didn't wait for them, and once they were out in the main parking lot, he helped Lucia into his car first before rounding toward his own seat, and then he climbed in, buckled in, and turned over the ignition. Pushing his foot to the gas, he rushed out of the underground parking facility and made his way toward the city center.

Lucia didn't say a word. He chanced a glance toward her. Her hands were placed on her thighs, and she stared out the window.

"Are you curious about where we're going?"

"It's none of my business. We're going wherever you want to go."

Said like the good little wife.

“Do you want to please me?” he asked.

He felt her gaze on him.

“Uh ... yes.”

She sounded so nervous. It was cute. She didn't even realize she had nothing to be afraid of. At least not yet. He understood her nervousness when it came to him, taking down a man she had feared. Boone didn't fear Bonaldi. The truth was, he had never known fear. Not since he was a child, but that had been fleeting.

Bonaldi was not even the first criminal he'd brought down. The Italian mafia wasn't even the first he messed with. He'd taken on the cartels, the Bratvas, petty street criminals, drug lords, and plenty of other people in between.

He didn't like bullies. He didn't like men or women who used their power and wealth to get what they wanted. Over the years, he had shut down a lot of bad and dark shit, and he'd done it for fun. This with Bonaldi was just another piece of shit that was going to come to an end, along with everyone associated with him.

He had already sent in some evidence to a news anchor known for exposing political parties and members. One local mayor was caught raping a young girl. A young girl that was supplied by Bonaldi. The young girl's body was found washed up in the sewer. Strangled. The evidence he'd obtained was not going away. By the end of the day, the mayor who was helping to look the other way as Bonaldi exported underage girls was about to be exposed.

This was how he started. Slowly.

He would have already been close to destroying this piece of shit, along with Valdez, if it hadn't been for that footage he'd seen of Lucia. She changed everything. She made him alter his plans. He knew he had to get her to safety.

"Then ask me," he said.

"Ask you what?"

"Ask me where you're going."

He glanced over to her and saw her lick her lips. "Do I really need to do that?" she asked.

"Yes, you do. If you want to please me, your husband, then I need you to ask me that."

She was nervous and he didn't want her to be, not around him. He waited, giving her time. In her world, he was aware she had to be silent. She didn't have a voice. She was taught to follow instructions, to be submissive. He intended to strip that away, build her up, for her to become the woman he knew her to be.

Her hands clenched her thighs, and it made him want to kill Valdez. His time was coming.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

Her voice was so soft, that it was nearly impossible to catch, but he heard her question, and he couldn't help but be proud.

"We're going shopping." He could have teased her a little, but with Lucia he had to use baby steps.

It had taken her a few days to walk around the apartment where he left her. His men had informed him that one of the days, she had sat, not even daring to put the television on. He wouldn't allow that. He wanted Lucia to fly.

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Arriving at one of the boutiques he knew was popular among women, he parked his car and climbed out. He rounded the vehicle and opened the door, waiting for Lucia. She climbed out, and he noticed her covering her thighs as she did so.

Taking her hand, they walked into the boutique. The moment he did so, he looked for the saleswoman, and spotted her already heading toward them.

“Hi, I’m Louise, is there anything I can help you with today?” Louise asked. She had her hair pulled back into a tightly coiled bun. She wore a suit which included a pencil skirt, crisp white shirt, and matching jacket. Small heels on her feet, and her smile actually seemed genuine.

“My wife is in need of a new wardrobe. Whatever she wants, she can have.” He let Lucia’s hand go.

His wife looked at him with fear in her eyes.

“Go and find something you like.”

With that, he turned his back and started to look through the store. Not only was Lucia going to get what she wanted, there might be one or two items he would like to see.

He kept glancing over at Louise and his wife. Lucia was very stiff. She wasn’t relaxed.

He gave her time. Clicking his fingers to one of the other staff, he pointed at a few

items he wanted her to try. Sending them to her, he watched Lucia's eyes widen when they were interrupted. She nodded her head, and he smiled. She would get used to it soon enough.

For a little more fun, he made his way toward the lingerie department and looked through several different sets, imagining his wife in them. Lucia was going to look stunning, and once again, the assistant that had been following him took the lingerie to his wife.

After he was done having fun, he made his way toward the changing room, settled down onto the sofa, and waited.

His cell phone buzzed in his pocket but he ignored it. Checking the time, he knew the news would be now active, and the footage leaked. It was going to start.

Louise appeared. "Would you like to see some of the choices your wife has made?"

"Yes."

And much to his surprise, the first outfit Lucia stepped out in was a pair of jeans and a shirt. The jeans hugged her body, emphasizing her shapely ass. The shirt cupped her tits and flared out. She looked so pretty. Her face was a beautiful shade of red.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

Her gaze went wide and she nodded her head.

"Then get it."

Again, she looked ready to faint.

“Show me more,” he said, leaning back and waiting.

Lucia had picked up many different pairs of jeans, pants, and trousers, including lounge pants as well, which he found so cute. There were a couple of dresses, some of them more revealing than the ones she was used to wearing, and ones he couldn't wait to see her in as well.

Her choices were stunning and he couldn't wait to see her in everything. He also couldn't wait to take Lucia to see her parents, dressed exactly how she wanted. There would come time for that. For now, he had to let a few cards fall into place, before he started to play with Valdez.

Lucia didn't show him the lingerie he had chosen, but there would also come time for that. Only if she was willing. He was not going to force his wife to have sex with him. This was about freeing her—breaking the chains that confined her.

With the last item finished, Lucia came out to him, and he stood. Looking toward Louise, he smiled. “Please have everything delivered to this address by the end of the afternoon.”

He handed Louise a card. It was for the address of his current apartment. She gave him a big smile and said he would have nothing to worry about. He didn't doubt it for a second.

Taking Lucia's hand, he walked out of the store, into the warm sunshine.

“I want an ice cream. What about you?”

“Huh?” Lucia asked.

“Ice cream? You want one?” he asked, and then glanced across the road to the park,

along with the ice cream truck. “Come on.”

He hadn't let go of her hand, and he pulled her along. There was a line for the ice cream, and he stood waiting. As he stood in line, he couldn't help but think back to a couple of years ago, on another line he'd been standing in.

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He'd stood behind a father and son. The son didn't quite know what he wanted, and the father was losing it on his cell phone. Some kind of deal had gone bad. The son grabbed his father's pants pocket, and gave it a little pull. In response, the father growled at his son and literally hit him around the back of the head. The boy started to cry.

When the father went to hit him again, Boone grabbed his hand, twisted it, and looked into the man's face. Reaching across his body, he grabbed the cell phone and crushed it in his hand. "Your son is asking you a question about ice cream. He is allergic to certain types of lactose, and he was being very patient with you. Now, I suggest you pay attention to your son."

"How dare you?"

"I dare because you have your priorities incorrect. Now, help your son, or you and I can end this right now, and I wonder how good you will be answering your cell phone with two broken hands."

He spoke calmly, without any flicker of emotion. He also stood close to the man, and no one knew what they were talking about. To onlookers, it would appear two men were just having a private conversation

Boone pulled out of the memory.

The boy had gotten a vegan ice cream, and the man had left. Afterward, Boone had provided the mother with the means of putting her husband away. He'd been laundering money through her father's company and had multiple mistresses on the

side. He didn't like when men exploited their power. It was irritating to him.

"What would you like?" he asked.

Chapter Four

In all of her twenty-two years, Lucia had never gone out for ice cream. Standing at that truck, at her age, she had looked at the varieties on offer, and it was impossible to choose.

She settled for a mint ice cream cone. It looked and sounded the most delicious, as she loved chocolate and mint together. Not that she got it often. Her father constantly had her on some kind of food ban. It was rare for her to even get chocolate.

Licking her ice cream, they walked into the park gates. Again, this was new for her as well. Going out shopping, getting ice cream, taking a walk—these were things she had never done. She couldn't recall any of the women talking about doing this. They had a duty. And yet, the sun felt amazing on her skin.

"Here, let me take this," Boone said, taking her cardigan off her arms.

She moved her ice cream from one hand to the other as he eased the sweater down her arms, until she was no longer in it. Her arms were exposed, and again, this was a new feeling for her. He surprised her when he threw her cardigan in the trash can.

"Why did you do that?"

The moment the question fell from her lips, she wanted to slap a hand right over her mouth. It was not her place to ask questions.

"It was an ugly cardigan and you don't need it." He took her hand, and they walked

through the park.

Lucia remembered her ice cream and started to lick it before it melted onto her hand. It tasted so good. Each lick made her mouth water for more.

She looked toward Boone. Who was this man? She tried to think of all the conversations she had overheard people talking about Boone. Most of it was speculation. Not once did anyone have anything concrete on him.

Her father feared him and he had to be powerful enough to force a marriage between them. Only, their marriage was fake, wasn't it? They didn't have sex and he had every intention of bringing down the Bonaldis. Did she care if he did that and ... succeeded?

The very thought of the Bonaldis being annihilated was unheard of back home. She shouldn't even be thinking about it. She couldn't help herself. She wasn't back home. She was Boone's wife, and he was going to bring down the Bonaldis, once and for all. The more she thought about it, the more real it seemed. Was it even possible? No one had ever succeeded but then, an outsider had never been able to marry a capo's daughter. Regardless of whether her father liked her or not, this was still a big deal. Was it bigger than she realized?

She licked her ice cream. Today had been crazy. Waking up to Boone making her breakfast, then being asked those questions. Telling him what she could remember overhearing. His declaration, going shopping, eating ice cream, and now walking in the park.

She couldn't help but look around her. For so long she had kept her head down, not daring to look at the crowd for fear of what she might find. There were people, families, couples, men and women, just walking, enjoying the day in the sunshine. There were so many families, fathers, sons, daughters, husbands and wives, children.

They all looked so happy. She had seen them a time or two and known that would never be for her, no matter how much she wished it.

“What’s the matter?” Boone asked.

“Nothing.”

“Talk to me.”

She glanced over toward him, and she didn’t quite know how he did it. How did he know what she was thinking or feeling, or did he even know at all?

“I’m just ... everyone seems so happy.”

“And you’re not?”

“I didn’t say that. It’s just, do they even realize how lucky they are?” she asked. She felt her cheeks start to heat.

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Boone had stopped them. They had now finished their ice cream, and she had nothing to distract herself with.

“How lucky they are to be in love, to have a family, to walk around so free without fear of being hurt?” he asked.

This made her look up at him. No one ever talked or stated the reality of what she lived. She licked her dry lips. Lucia felt the tears start to pool in her eyes.

He placed a finger beneath her chin and tilted her head back.

“Can we keep walking?” she asked.

“You felt trapped and you envy those who are not?”

Did she even dare answer that?

“Boone?”

“Lucia, you do not need to hide from me. One day, you are going to see that I am on your side.”

“No one is on my side.”

“You’re married to me. I’m on your side, and when you realize that I have ... saved you, that you have nothing to fear, you might start to trust me with all your secrets.”

He let her chin go but took her hand, and this made her frown even more. What did he mean, he was on her side? He was going to take down the Bonaldis, and she was part of it. None of this made sense.

They finished walking through the park and made their way back to the car. He helped her into the passenger seat and climbed behind the wheel. The moment Boone sat behind the steering wheel, she turned to him about to ask a question.

He held a finger up. It was silent.

“Get out of the car, and start walking,” Boone said.

Lucia didn’t question him. It was something in his tone.

She immediately climbed out of the car and began walking. Within seconds, Boone was by her side. Lucia didn’t know what was happening. They crossed the street, and she recognized one of his men.

Boone nodded his head. She turned to look at him in time to see that. She was pushed into the back of the car and just as she was about to ask what was going on, she heard it. The car they had been sitting in moments ago exploded right before her eyes.

Her husband didn’t stop, and they were already on the road before the last of the explosion took place. Lucia gasped and she turned in her seat to see the car burning. Someone had set a bomb in the car. Was it a bomb, or had someone shot at it?

“What just happened?” Lucia asked.

Boone wasn’t answering. She looked toward him, but he was not panicking. He looked so very calm as he pulled out his cell phone. He wasn’t even shaking. Someone had tried to kill them. Someone had been intent on blowing them up, and he

was not reacting.

He pocketed his cell phone and spoke to the man in front, informing him to take them home.

She wanted to ask so many questions and couldn't help but look behind her. It was pointless, the burning car was no longer in view. Someone was trying to kill them. Were they after her or Boone? If Boone's men had been there, why hadn't they stopped it?

She had no idea what was going on, or what game was at play.

Who was her husband?

There were no answers right now. She had no choice but to press her lips together, fold her arms, sit down, and wait. She hated this.

Someone had tried to kill them, and Boone was acting like it was nothing. What if they had been killed? What if ... Boone had been killed?

Lucia tried to make sense of her feelings. Was this a hit by her family? By Bonaldi? Their marriage was supposed to create peace, so she didn't know why someone had attempted to blow up their car.

They arrived back at his apartment building, and there were men to escort them to their apartment. She felt her heart racing.

Stepping inside the apartment, she expected someone to inspect the place in case there was another bomb, only that did not happen. Boone closed the door after talking with his men, and that was it.

“Are you hungry?” Boone asked.

Food—that was what he wanted to talk about?

In the back of her mind, she was telling herself she shouldn’t ask questions. It wasn’t her place. Boone was her husband, he was the one in charge, and she should trust him completely. Only, they had both nearly been blown up. All of her training went right out the window as she followed him into the kitchen.

“Are you not ... upset?” she asked.

“About what?”

“Your car was blown up.”

“And?”

“We were in it moments before it was blown up,” Lucia said.

“I’m aware.”

“We could have died.”

“There was a chance of that, but trust me, I know a bomb when I hear one.”

This made her frown. “You heard it?”

“Yes, it was the ticking. I’ve heard it many times. I’ve used them many times myself.” He smiled.

“I don’t know how you can be so calm.”

“It’s not the first time someone has tried to blow me up, and it is not going to be the last.” He pulled out a bottle of water and unscrewed the cap. “Here, have a drink.”

She looked at the bottle of water and frowned. “How?”

“What?”

“You’re so calm and you just lost your car.”

“Cars are easily replaced and we’re both still alive. Besides, it just got a lot more interesting.”

This just made her frown even more.

He reached out and cupped her cheek. “You need to stop worrying. Trust me, I have everything under control.”

Boone got straight to cooking and for a few seconds all she could do was look at him and wonder what the hell was going on. They were nearly killed. This was not the first time she’d been around someone who had nearly been maimed. Her family had been on the hit list for a long time. She’d been near her father when someone attempted to shoot him. It hadn’t ended well. A soldier had lost his life, and she was shoved into a car and driven home. It was one of the few times she considered her father even caring about her, which was crazy.

Her father didn’t love her, yet he didn’t let a madman kill her. She later came to

realize it would have been bad if he had allowed his daughter to be killed. She heard him say that, but if he needed a shield, she would be the first one he used. It was said in drink, but even still that had hurt.

Why were things about to get a whole lot more interesting?

Who was her husband?

What was truly going on?

All security footage was gone. The cameras that focused on the street conveniently had a glitch and all stopped working around the time Boone's car was tampered with. Boone didn't need any of them. One of his men had been in place, filming the whole incident, and from the look of things, Valdez was getting sloppy as it appeared he had sent one of his sons to do the job.

Sitting in his office, Boone took a sip of his tea—black, no sugar—and watched not for the first time as one of his brother-in-law's tampered with his car. Leandro, the youngest son of Valdez, had placed the bomb in his car.

It lined up with all the information he had on him. The boy had been playing around with explosives most of his life. He was responsible for killing the nanny. Apparently, he was so excited to see if one of his bombs worked, he lured the nanny out to the garden shed, locked her in, set the trap, and from a safe distance, watched as it exploded.

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Boone couldn't stand the little shit. When the Bonaldis needed a distraction, Leandro was the one they used.

Closing his cell phone, he looked up and wasn't surprised to see Lucia in the doorway of his office, about to knock. She appeared to be pale. He'd left her watching television, more importantly the news.

"Did you do that?" she asked.

"If you're referring to a certain mayor and leaked footage, then yes. Why? Do you know him?"

"He has done business with my father," Lucia said. "You ... you're not joking, are you?"

"About?"

"Taking down my father, the Bonaldis."

"I'm not joking."

"Why?"

"Let's just say I have an issue with bullies," Boone said. "The Bonaldi empire has been growing for a long time, several decades, and in the beginning, it was just like any up-and-coming mafia organization. It looked after its own. It commanded loyalty and in some respects, probably even deserved it. However, with all power and greed,

something bad happened, and it became like an infection. It took advantage of those it was supposed to protect. It got dark, it got ... evil.”

“And you don’t like that?”

“No, I don’t.”

He watched as she frowned and crossed her arms beneath her breasts. “I don’t get it. You’re like them, right? I mean, you have terrified my family and been a thorn in the Bonaldis’ side, and that is why they wanted a peaceful union.”

Boone smiled and rounded his desk, perching on the end.

“Your family and Bonaldi know what I want them to know. They believe I am just like them—a crime lord. I have men that follow me, and I have multiple businesses.”

“Then why would you try to destroy them?”

“None of my businesses are illegal, Lucia. I am a fully legit businessman. I don’t do drugs. I don’t deal in guns, and I don’t kill people to put fear into them or make them submit to me. I just don’t.”

Her frown seemed to deepen. “Then why did you agree to marry me?” she asked.

“That is for another time and place.” He looked toward his desk and picked up his cell phone. “I always offer people a choice, Lucia. This choice is yours.” He stepped toward her. “You can call your father, tell him everything I have done, and agree to work for him, in trying to lure me to my death. He might even believe you and possibly give you a good husband that will only beat you a little. Or, you put your trust and faith in me, and know that no matter what, I will not lay a finger on you. I will not hurt you. I will make sure you live a life you’ve always wanted, where you

could do whatever the hell you want without fear. The choice is yours.” He put the cell phone in her hand. “I’ll be outside waiting for your decision.”

He walked past her and got to the door before she spoke, “Why me?”

“Because I couldn’t stand to see you hit.”

And with that, he left her, heading out toward the kitchen. The television was playing to itself, and he moved toward it, watching as the mayor was led away in handcuffs. How the mighty fall, with a little help from an outside source.

He watched for several seconds, then got bored. He was not interested in what the newscaster had to say. Turning off the television, he moved into the kitchen. It was dark and the curtains had been drawn. He went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of water. The car had already been taken care of.

Seeing Leandro, he was excited about the next steps. The young boy was used to going around undetected. He wanted to make a name for himself within the Bonaldi family. The title of Capo will fall to the eldest brother, Enzo. Leandro was nothing. He had to compete with Enzo and Bruno in the sea of sons to make a name for himself, and he had turned to explosives. His young age and desperation made it easy for him to slip up.

Boone took a long swig of his drink as Lucia came into view. She stepped into the kitchen, and she still held the cell phone in her hand. He watched her as she held the device tightly within her grip.

“I ... I don’t know if I can trust you or not, but I know I can’t go back. Even though I had nothing to do with what has happened, I’d get blamed. Also, I just want to be free,” Lucia said.

“Is that what you’re asking for? Freedom?”

“Is our marriage even real?”

“Yes.”

“Are you who you say you are?”

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“Yes.” It technically wasn’t a lie. Boone Grinder did exist, and Boone was technically his real name, his last name had changed, and his history. When he was sure he could trust her completely, he would tell her more of his past. Until then, she would only get what she needed.

“You’re going to kill my father?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“What about Bonaldi?”

“He will end up dead, or he will be handed to the authorities, but most likely, he is going to end up dead.” He didn’t like leaving loose ends.

He had experience handing in high-profile leaders like Bonaldi in the past, and they somehow through a technicality got off from prison time. They either struck a deal or someone in charge was still in their pocket. Boone never made that mistake.

“When it is all over, and there is no threat, what will happen to me?”

He intended for them to be married for quite some time. Boone had never met anyone like Lucia before. After all she had been through, she wasn’t cold or aloof. She looked terrified, almost afraid to be hopeful. Her family had beaten every last shred of love and loyalty she had for them.

“Whatever you like. If you would like to remain married, then we will be so. If you would like freedom and total anonymity, you will have it.” He would make sure she

was taken care of.

“Okay,” she said. She looked down at her cell phone. “I don’t want to get involved. I don’t like my father, or my family. I just ... I don’t want to be involved at all. I won’t say anything about what you’re doing.”

He took the cell phone from her, and the moment he touched her fingers, he watched her gasp, just slightly, but she immediately pulled her hand away from his.

“I’m sorry,” Lucia said. “I don’t know if that was the choice you were hoping for.”

“It’s your choice, and that is fine.”

“It is,” she said. “But I am scared.”

“Don’t be.”

“He’s going to know it is you,” she said.

“You let me worry about that.” He closed the distance between them and kissed the top of her head. “Go and get some sleep.”

Lucia nodded and didn’t argue. Instead, she turned on her heel and left him alone.

He looked down at the cell phone, and just to see if he could trust her, he checked to see what her last call was. She hadn’t touched the cell phone. There were no other calls, no texts, not even an Internet search. The phone was left exactly as he had given it to her. His wife was proving to be an interesting person.

Pulling up Ronald’s number, he dialed it.

“Is the cage set up and ready?” he asked.

“Yes, you just need your catch.”

“Good.”

“Do you want to tell me who you have in mind?” Ronald asked.

“No, that will be the surprise.” He hung up and made his way back into his office. Going to the far wall, he slid his fingers along the bookshelf, going to a blank title. Pulling it out, the wall clicked and moved.

Every single apartment had a room he kept hidden. Years of experience had taught him to always have a backup plan. Within this room, there were several weapons, files, and everything he needed at his disposal. One day, he would tell Lucia the combination in the event of an attack. Until he was completely sure he could trust her, he would wait.

Trust was not just given. It was earned, built.

Lucia had been passing multiple tests. Her reaction to Howard and Nancy. Her response to the car explosion, and now, handing him the cell phone and asking for her freedom. She didn’t ask for anything else. But he knew in time, that would likely change.

Also, she willingly had given him the information she knew. Admittedly, it was what he had already obtained, but she was complicit with him. That was enough. He would keep his word.

Lucia would never be hurt again.

Chapter Five

They never stayed in one place and got too comfortable. That was what Lucia came to realize. Boone moved them around the city, to different apartments. All the buildings looked similar, but no one was ever the same. She had lost count of the number of places they had stayed. There had even been a hotel at one time. And they were now approaching the two-month mark in their marriage.

She had not seen her family in two months, and she didn't regret that. The less she saw them, the better. Boone went about doing his work. He wasn't wrong, there were still a lot of businesses he took care of—multiple nightclubs, restaurants, even a casino, and several small businesses as well.

They also went back to Nancy and Howard's café, which was one of her favorite places. She loved their biscuits. They served them with the most delectable strawberry jam and cream. She just couldn't say no.

As for Boone, she didn't really know her husband. He was a man of mystery, and yet he was kind. Each morning, he told her the man's name that was taking care of her, and if she wanted to go anywhere, she should just let him know. She hadn't opted to go anywhere. Back home, the only places she was allowed to go were wherever her father was. Asking to go anywhere else resulted in a beating.

Although, being cooped up in the apartment wasn't exactly fun. She watched television until she could no longer stand it. Then, she would read the books on display in the main sitting room. She'd wander through to the kitchen, cook herself lunch, or just stare aimlessly at the ingredients. For a long time, she would look

through a cookbook and wonder what it was like to make the items inside.

It was at the end of the second month, and she got so bored that she grabbed the book and made her way into the kitchen, determined to cook the first thing she had ingredients for. As it happened, it was meatballs and spaghetti. Also, there were a few baking essentials.

Lucia didn't have a clue what she was doing. Tying her hair back, she hated the length. That was another rule—she wasn't allowed to cut her hair. The men within the Bonaldi family liked women with long hair. Tattoos were off limits as well. They had to remain pure. The men, however, could get ink, have short hair or long hair. There was no freedom for women. They were to do as they were told.

Pushing all of that crap to the back of her mind, she delved into the cookbook. She gathered all the ingredients and made sure to put them at separate points on the counter. There was no way she wanted to run the risk of pouring chocolate chips into her meatballs, or tomato sauce. That would just be gross.

“You can do this, Lucia.”

This is what boredom had gotten her.

Did she make the wrong choice? Did Boone hope for her to choose something else? Something that was betraying him. It didn't matter. Betraying her husband didn't feel right to her. She had to focus on staying alive, cooking, and just attempting to get through. So far, in the last few weeks, there had been no other big scandal to hit the news. She didn't know what her family thought of the fallout from the mayor, if there were any repercussions at all.

When she plunged her fingers into the ground beef, she scrunched up her nose. It felt weird as it squelched between her fingers. After a rather uncomfortable beginning,

she got into the swing of cooking.

The meatballs were formed, and they did not remain the same size. They started out rather small and gradually got bigger, but she didn't change them. That was the joy of home cooking.

Next, she prepared the tomato sauce, and she had never cut an onion before. With tears rolling down her cheeks, she tried to slice it small, but there was no chance of that. She sniffled and worked on the garlic. The scent of raw garlic was disgusting. It didn't matter how many times she washed her hands, the smell was stuck on there. She worked her way through the sauce, constantly washing her hands, using a soap, in the hope of ridding that smell for good.

Putting the sauce to one side, she got to work on the chocolate cake. The instructions were detailed and were supposed to be for a beginner. She worked her way through it, and by the end of the day, she had baked and iced the cake. There was a reason the recipe suggested cooling the cake completely, but after allowing some of the frosting to melt, she did that. It worked, kind of. The cake looked absolutely nothing like the picture, and some of the meatballs were burnt and tough, but it was all cooked.

She served herself some pasta and meatballs, and she was about to head to the table, when Boone entered the apartment. He stepped into the kitchen and she looked at him, then at the food.

"Do you want ... any?" she asked.

"You cooked?"

"Attempted to. It probably tastes bad. I've never cooked."

"I'll have some," he said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’m starving and it beats eating out.”

This made her smile, and she served him a bowl. She might have made way more than two people needed.

Carrying their bowls to the table, she had picked up a second set of cutlery and handed it to him. He took it with a thank you.

She wanted to ask him so many questions, but she just sat beside him and pierced the first meatball with her fork. Placing it in her mouth, she took a bite and moaned. It was so good. Actually, there was a little too much garlic and onion, and then she wondered if she should have put them in the fridge. There was also a chewy meatball, and tender.

She glanced over at Boone.

“You don’t have to eat it if you don’t want to,” she said.

“It tastes good.”

This made her frown. “You don’t have to lie.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:07 am

He looked up and turned his brown gaze toward her. She couldn't look away. She felt drawn to him in some way. Nothing seemed to make sense.

"You think I'm lying?" he asked.

"I, uh, I don't know."

"Lucia, I'm over forty years old. I've had a lot of meals in my time, and trust me, this is good. Is it the best thing I have ever tasted, no. Is it the worst thing I ever ate, no."

Somewhere in between. She could live with that. She smiled at him. "I've never cooked before."

"I gathered."

"And I baked a cake. Kind of. It looks like a cake, but I skipped a few steps. There's no eggshell in it, though. Did you know cracking eggs can be hard?" She was not going to tell him she asked Ben, the guard who was taking care of her today, to show her how to crack an egg. That was too embarrassing.

"I look forward to trying it."

He didn't have to be so sweet, but she was happy he didn't seem to mind that she cooked. Back home, she was not allowed near the kitchen as that was for their staff. She was not allowed to do anything. Her life had been so boring.

What's different here? You do nothing.

Lucia glanced at Boone. Should she ask him? He said he would never hurt her, but what if that had been a lie? She didn't know much about him, other than he claimed not to be like her father or any of the men under Bonaldi's ruling. Yet, she knew he had killed people, so how did that make him so different?

He acted so calm that day his car exploded. Like he expected it.

"Ask," Boone said, making her jump.

"What?"

"You clearly want to ask me something, so ask."

"It's nothing."

"You don't believe me when I say I am not like your father," he said.

"It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

She opened her mouth and then closed it, because in a way, it was exactly like that.

He raised a brow.

She took a deep breath and decided she should just go for it. Back home, she was used to being hit, and if he was no different from her father, she might as well learn now.

"Is there something I can do during the day?" she asked. "I'm going out of my mind, just sitting around. I don't want to watch television, and I've read all the books you

have. I'm bored, and the only reason I cooked today was to do something with my time. I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"What would you like to do?"

His question took her by surprise.

Lucia stared at him. "I ... uh ... I don't know." How pitiful was this? She didn't even know what to do. "Forget it."

"No, let's not forget it. What would you like to do?" he asked.

She dropped her head, and then her hair slid in front of her, and she looked at her long, pain-in-the-ass hair. Lifting her head, she turned to look at Boone. "I'd like to get a haircut."

"Okay. We'll go tomorrow. I know a good place and they'll treat you right."

"You're going to allow me to get a haircut?"

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“It’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“For real?”

He stared at her. “I’m starting to wonder if you’re attempting to fool me with these trick questions.”

She shook her head. “No, nothing like that. I just, I guess I didn’t expect you to agree to allow me to get my hair cut.” She offered him a smile and then pressed her lips together. “Thank you.”

“You’re a strange person, Lucia. One day, you will learn that all you have to do is ask, and you’ll get what you want.”

Should she believe him? He had not hurt her. He’d not demanded his husbandly rights. They shared a bed, yet they had not consummated their marriage. She might be able to start trusting him. Maybe? Possibly.

Boone knew the hairdresser was losing patience, but he gave her a look that told her to wait. Lucia kept getting out of the chair and climbing back in. They had been in the salon for twenty minutes.

Chloe, the hairdresser, had canceled a few of her customers to slot in his wife, and he appreciated it. She was a damn good hairdresser, and had nearly closed a few years ago due to the rates Bonaldi had put in place on the salon to do business within his

sector. She was another person he'd taken care of, and business was booming. He didn't put any rates of business on anyone.

"I'm sorry," Lucia said.

"You want it cut?" Chloe asked. She didn't sound impatient.

"Yes, I do. I want it all off, but you asked me what style I wanted, and I don't know. Do you think you could do something that would ... suit me?"

Chloe looked toward him and he nodded his head.

"Sure thing, sweetheart. Just don't move and don't make any jerky movements, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

She looked so nervous. He continued to watch as she cringed with each touch. At no point did she ask for Chloe to stop. As for Chloe, he had no doubt this was hard for her, working on a client who didn't seem to want to get her hair cut. It took a good fifteen minutes before Lucia relaxed and finally started to enjoy it.

He watched as her hair fell to the floor. A smile filled her face. It was so natural, like she was finally at peace. Her hair must have been another element her father attempted to control, and now that was all gone. There was nothing for her to fear. He'd make sure of it.

Little by little, her hair became styled. It was longer than a bob, but hit her shoulders. There would be no way she'd be able to pull it back into a ponytail. The style curved around her face, and she looked beautiful before, but now, with that smile, it transformed her into stunning.

After Chloe was done, Lucia grabbed the woman's hands. "Thank you," she said.

"Honey, it's fine."

"No, I know I was being a problem, but thank you for working on my hair and not getting angry."

Chloe offered her a smile, nodded to Boone, and that was the end of it.

Lucia looked back toward the mirror and Boone got to his feet, moving in behind her. "You like it?" he asked.

"I do. What about you?"

"It doesn't matter if I like it or not."

"Yeah, it does."

"Why?"

"Because, you're ... I care if you like it or not."

Well, if she cared, then he was not going to hold back. "I love it and it suits you. Are you ready to grab some dinner?" he asked.

"Yeah."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:08 am

He paid at the counter, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw her fiddle with her hair. Twirling the tiny strand around her finger before letting it go. It was new and he imagined the first real time she rebelled against her father.

Taking hold of her hand, they walked out into the sunshine. He slid his sunglasses on, and held a pair out for Lucia to take. She did so with a thank you. Always so polite. It was a shame her family was not as polite as her.

They walked through the city, and people moved to step out of his way. He was used to this. He didn't budge, just kept moving, making his way toward the café with Howard and Nancy.

Stepping inside, he saw how busy it was, but his usual table was still reserved. He'd sent Howard a text to let him know they were coming. He held out the seat for Lucia, before taking his own.

"It's very busy," Lucia said.

Boone nodded.

"Are you not worried?"

"About?"

"I don't know, being attacked?"

This made him look up from grabbing the menu. "Is there something I should know?"

Lucia shook her head. “No, no, it’s just, my dad, he would make the whole restaurant leave if it was this busy.” Her face had lost all color.

He watched her, giving her a chance to compose herself, which she did, and then lifted up, and glared at him. “I told you, I made my choice. What do you mean, is there something you should know?”

There was the spirit.

He smiled at her, and leaned forward. “I didn’t know if you recognized any of your father’s men, or anyone associated with Bonaldi.”

“Oh,” Lucia said. “That makes sense. I thought you meant ... well ... you know...”

He raised a brow. She looked cute when she was nervous.

“What?” he asked.

“Oh, come on, you know and you’re just teasing me right now.”

“I’m not teasing. Tell me.”

He saw her fight with herself, and then it was like she decided she wasn’t going to go down like that. She squared her shoulders and glared at him. “You and I both know what I was trying to say. I wouldn’t ever double-cross you. I’ve made my decision and I’m going to stick to it.”

“That is good to know.” He winked at her.

She gasped. “You did that on purpose.”

“It’s nice to know they haven’t beaten the fight out of you. You’ve still got a lot left.”

Lucia pulled back and shrugged.

He reached across the table and took hold of her hand. “Don’t. Don’t let those bastards win. You got it. I want you to talk to me, talk back, be open with me. I’m different from them.”

“You still get your car blown up!”

“True. What if I were to tell you that I know who did it?”

Looking across the table, he saw her eyes go wide. “What?”

“Yeah, I know who did it.”

“Who did it?” Lucia asked.

“Your brother.”

“Which one?”

“Leandro.”

She pursed her lips, and her brows furrowed as she looked past his shoulder. “That makes sense, I guess. He was always dabbling with explosives. Nearly blew the house up once when he was a kid. Dad did not like that. He got a beating then, first time ever. Not long after, he got him a shed he could dabble in. Actually, he got two. One to dabble in, the other to practice.”

Lucia went a little pale.

“I know about the nanny,” Boone said.

“You do?”

“Yeah. He locked her in the garden shed, set the trap, and got it to explode.”

Lucia nodded. “Yeah. It was ... yeah.”

He saw the sadness in her eyes. “What is it?”

“She was my nanny. She was the only one who seemed to know I was alive. I’m the youngest of my father’s children. Leandro used to laugh and tell me I was the last one out, so in a killing spree, I’d be the first one to go.”

“What?”

“Yeah, people would attempt to kill me first.” She shrugged.

“You don’t need to listen to that bullshit. It wouldn’t work that way.”

“I guess not now, seeing as I’m married to you, and they’re going to spend a lot of time and effort to get to you. You’ve got all those guards.”

He looked at Lucia. That little shit. This made him hate him just a little more. Prior to hearing Lucia, he was going to leave Leandro to have his supposed fun, however, that had just changed his plans completely. He wasn’t happy, in fact, he was very much pissed off.

“What’s wrong?” Lucia asked.

“Nothing at all. Nothing for you to worry about.”

Nancy interrupted them. “What can I get you two?” she asked with a kiss to each of their cheeks.

Lucia was taken aback, but Boone had gotten used to it.

“Your best cheeseburgers, with all the trimmings,” Boone said. Then he turned to Lucia. “Unless you want something different?”

Lucia’s face went a beautiful shade of red. She glanced down at the menu, flicked it backward and forward, and then shook her head. “No, no, a burger is more than okay for me. I’m happy with a burger.”

Nancy offered them both a smile and then left them alone.

“Could you teach me?” Lucia asked.

“What?”

“How to defend myself?”

“Is that what you would like to learn?”

Lucia pressed her lips together, glancing around the café, and then nodded her head.

“Yes, yes, I don’t think I have much of a choice, do I?”

“You have a choice. I have men who are willing to do whatever it takes to keep you safe. If you don’t want to learn, trust in my men.”

“I do trust in your men, but what if ... something bad happens? What if they’re defending you, and I want to be able to defend you too?”

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“Then I guess, baby, you and I are going to learn some defensive moves.”

“We are?” Lucia asked. She shook her head. “Yes, you’re right. We are.”

“So, tell me, is there anything else you have wanted to do?” he asked. “You got your hair cut. What else would you like to do?”

“You mean, besides learning self-defense?”

“Besides that.”

He had every intention of teaching Lucia how to take care of herself. It was important she knew.

“I thought about going back to school, but I have no idea what I would learn. There is so much to be studied. Dad only wanted us to attend high school and graduate. After that, it was about finding a husband.”

“And now, you can do anything. You want me to pick up a couple of brochures?”

“You’d do that?”

“Lucia, I’m offering.”

She nodded. “Yes, yes, I’d love that.”

“What else?”

“I don’t know. It was just stupid stuff. Like, go shopping without having to ask permission. Get my hair cut. Take long walks. Maybe one day get a dog.”

“A dog?”

“Yeah, a dog. I’d like a dog. We were never allowed them back home because my dad is allergic, and he refused to take any kind of medication to help. It was his house anyway, his rules, and if he didn’t want to get a dog, he didn’t have to get a dog.” She shrugged.

She was trying to hide her feelings, but he saw them. It hurt her that he refused to budge on the dog. He made a note to think about looking for one.

Nancy came and brought their food. She didn’t linger, just hoped they enjoyed it, and then she was off again, serving more customers.

“A tattoo,” Lucia said.

Now this did intrigue him. “A tattoo?”

“Yeah, I don’t know, maybe a dolphin, or a rose, or a flower of some kind.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps my hip, or someplace where only I can see.”

“Or your husband?” he asked.

She licked her lips and did she even realize her gaze fell to his lips? “What’s it like?”

He truly believed she was talking about sex, but he had a niggling feeling that wasn’t

the case. “What?”

“Getting a tattoo. You have so many, and I just ... does it hurt?”

Over the years, he had gotten many different kinds of ink. The first was on his back and chest, to hide a couple of bullet wounds. This had been his father’s technique. It wasn’t about hiding the marks, but knowing what each one meant.

Not all of his ink symbolized a near-death experience. Several of them did, but he survived, obviously. Some of the ink he’d gotten just for the fun of it.

“It depends what you can take. Some parts of your body hurt more than others. Where would you want it?” he asked.

She pointed to her hip. “I think, but I’m not sure. No one would be able to see it, but I would know it was there.”

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And Lucia was still hiding. He wasn't going to let her hide forever. The power her father once had was dying, piece by piece. First with her hair, and he was going to make sure her father never had control of anything again.

Chapter Six

Lucia sat at the table, looking through catalogs at the variety of different courses available. Boone had brought them home with him just yesterday. There were a couple of colleges around the main city, each one offering the same, or similar courses. She had no idea what to learn, as it was all so exciting. Each time she looked at one course, a second, third, or fourth appealed to her as much as the last one.

Getting to her feet, she made her way into the kitchen and started to pour herself another mug of coffee. In moments like this, she realized how free she was becoming. There was no one to order her out of the kitchen, or to take the coffee away from her.

Frank, the bodyguard, was out in the hallway, lurking, doing his job. She leaned around the side of the kitchen. "Do you want a drink?" Lucia asked him.

Boone had told her she could talk to her guards, get to know them, if she would like. Frank was one of four men that seemed to be on rotation in taking care of her. He was in his late forties, happily married, with four children. His children meant the world to him, and she had already seen their pictures dozens of times, but she never got bored.

This was a new experience to her, being around a man who was happily married, who was content with his wife and his life. The men in her world—her father and

brothers—were constantly flaunting mistresses and flirting with women that worked in the house. Her mother didn't seem to mind, unless that woman thought she was going to knock her mother out of her place. That was never going to happen.

“Love a coffee. Milk, two sugars. Thanks.”

She nodded.

It was strange, but thinking about Frank reminded her of a time when she was about ten years old. Her father had been sleeping with one of the serving girls. She'd been a beautiful girl as well, with blonde hair, blue eyes, and large breasts. Lucia hadn't known what they were at the time. Just that her brothers would hold their large hands out in front of their chest, and make suckling noises.

The serving girl was a sweet girl, at least as far as she remembered. Penny was her name. Penny, the pretty serving girl, and Lucia's father had taken to her so quickly. She didn't know what happened, but her mother had gotten really upset by Penny serving them, or more importantly, serving her father. Something escalated, Penny snapped at Lucia's mother, and because of that, her dad had no choice but to react.

Fucking the help was one thing, having a favorite was another, but ... speaking to his wife with disrespect, that was not allowed. Right there at the table, Lucia watched as her father choked the life out of the girl. It was the first time she had seen her father defend her mother, or even take her side. She'd been so shocked, she'd not been able to eat, but she had seen the pride in her mother's eyes. Killing that girl, her father's favorite, had meant something to her mother.

It hadn't lasted long. Within a few days, her mother was sporting bruises and the inability to walk without a limp.

Again, Lucia didn't know what had happened, but she pulled out of the memory and

got Frank a drink. She carried it over to him, and he took a sip, trying it, and then he winked at her. "Perfect."

"Thank you. How's Amy?" she asked.

Amy was Frank's wife. Lucia hadn't met the woman, but Frank talked about her constantly.

"She is a demanding woman."

He pulled out his cell phone, and like so many other times before, she saw a picture of her pouting at him.

"Why does she look sad?"

"Oh, sweetheart, she's not sad. Look at her eyes. That was this morning, she didn't want me to leave for work, but she kissed me, told me she loved me, and then she let me take this picture of her."

"She's beautiful," Lucia said.

"Yeah, and look at this, this is one she got of the boys yesterday, and showed it to me."

Lucia looked to see his sons, all four boys.

"Wow, they do look like a handful," she said.

"They are. A very big handful. My wife would like to have one girl. So, we're trying for our fifth." Frank shook his head. "I cannot even believe I am a married man with four kids, working on our fifth."

“You can’t?” Lucia asked.

“Yeah, there was a time, many years ago, that I wouldn’t have anything to do with a woman, unless there was cash involved.”

It took her a second to realize what he meant. “Oh,” Lucia said.

“Yeah, I was that kind of guy. I paid for a woman’s company, but it’s all good. Of course it is all good. I met Amy, and that was that. The moment I saw her, she was a firecracker, and growling at me for walking into her. I hadn’t seen her. The truth is, I’d been on my way to see another woman, and instead ended up taking Amy out to dinner.”

“Wow,” Lucia said.

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Frank laughed. “Don’t worry. Amy knows all about my past and the fact that I only slept with prostitutes. I was clean. I got all the relevant tests and stuff.”

No one had ever talked to her this openly before, it was crazy and exciting, and she loved that he could do that for her.

“Anyway, thank you for the coffee.”

Lucia nodded. “Thank you for teaching me how to make it.”

“No problem. I can’t believe they don’t allow you to learn stuff. Although I’m not surprised. If you started to learn, the men couldn’t control you, could they?” he asked.

She couldn’t argue with him, and instead made her way into the kitchen. Picking up her coffee mug, she blew across the surface and took a sip.

The brochures looked very boring. There were so many choices, and she didn’t even know where to start. Glancing back toward Frank, she decided to stand with him.

“So, if you had the opportunity to go back to college, what would you like to study?” Lucia asked.

Frank laughed. “You have too much choice?”

“Just a smidge.” She held one hand up with her finger and thumb close together. “What would you decide?”

“Simple for me, I simply wouldn’t go back. It’s not something I’m interested in, nor do I care about it.”

“You don’t?”

“Life has taught me everything I know. There is only so much you can learn from a textbook. Sure, it can tell you the facts about shit—science and all that crap—but what can it tell you about life? Nothing. You’ve got to learn to live if you want to make it through.”

“Live?”

“Yeah, you’ve got to learn how to take every moment and opportunity and just go with it. No holding back. The whole ‘no takebacks’ and all that shit. Books are great, don’t get me wrong. They tell some amazing stories, and if I ever dismissed a good book, my wife would kill me. She is a serious book lover of romance, through and through, with the occasional murder mystery.”

Amy sounded like a nice woman, a good woman.

“Is there nothing you would study?”

“No, I know everything I need to know. There is nothing I’m missing. What about you?”

“I have no idea,” Lucia said. “There is so much to learn.”

“Yeah, but the real question is, do you want to?”

Lucia nodded. “I do.”

“Then it should be easy.”

“I just don’t know what I want to learn.” She took another sip of her coffee.

“Then start small,” Frank said. “Start with something you can’t get enough of.”

She went to ask him more questions but at that moment, Boone stepped into the apartment.

“Evening, Sir,” Frank said.

“You all right, Frank?” Boone asked.

Frank finished his coffee. “Delicious. Have a good evening. Bye, Lucia.”

And with that, he was gone.

“You don’t mind that I made him coffee, do you?”

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“No, I don’t mind. I already know you talk to your guards, and I want you to do that. I told you to do that.”

“I didn’t know if you had changed your mind.”

“Never. How are the brochures?” he asked.

She groaned. “Not good.” She spun on her heel and made her way into the kitchen to put Frank’s empty cup in the sink. “Do you want coffee?”

“Love one.”

He was already heading to the main dining room table. She quickly poured him a coffee, topped up hers, and joined him at the table, as he looked through the brochures.

“There are a lot of choices.”

“You can start with one and work your way up.”

“That is what Frank said, well, I think he meant it that way. Start small and work my way up. I don’t know. They all sound so good. I was good in high school. I wasn’t great. What if I take something that is too far out of my depth?”

She hadn’t even thought of that. Her grades had been good, not great. She had always known high school was going to be the last part of her education. No daughter of his was going on to higher education, that’s what her father always said.

Isabella had been expected to look pretty. As for her, nothing had been expected, except to do as she was told, seeing as she was the ugly one. Men wouldn't want her for her good looks, but they would prefer an obedient person.

It sucked. She could even think that now as well.

"Maybe I shouldn't do this?" Lucia asked.

"Or maybe you should sit in on a couple of classes."

"Do you think I could do that?" Lucia asked.

"It's either that, or I can attempt to arrange for you to get a paper or something."

"You could do that?"

"Whichever you would like, is what you can have," Boone said.

Lucia looked to the table and was a little speechless. "Uh, I'd like to go to a couple of classes."

"Excellent. I'll have it arranged. Frank will go with you for your own protection." He was already pulling out his cell phone, glancing through the brochures and finding the phone number.

Who was this man?

She didn't know how this was possible. Her family had sold her for peace, and she had a feeling they had done it in the hope of him being angry and killing her.

Boone was nothing like she imagined. Her mother and sister had warned her that he

was an animal. On her wedding night, she was to lay there and let him do his thing. That was what all men wanted—a willing, submissive wife.

Boone hadn't done that. They had not even stayed the night at the wedding venue. There had been no bloody sheets. Boone wouldn't have any of that. He was not an animal.

Her family was so very wrong when it came to Boone.

Boone sat in the office trailer and looked toward the boss, Jimmy O'Cara, part of the Irish mob doing business between the Bratva and the Bonaldis. He wondered if either family knew the man was double-crossing them both.

There was a shipment of girls locked in a container. It had arrived last night. He'd gotten the news and came down here right away. He left his wife's bed after watching her sleep. The excitement in her eyes at the prospect of going to campus was somewhat infectious. He had mentioned letting Frank go with her as a precaution.

After Bonaldi's attempt on his life through Leandro, he had upped his game in payback. So far, the drugs Bonaldi liked to move had gone missing, conveniently found in local law enforcement's parking lot. There was a big newsreel about it. He'd been the one to remove the drug dealers and send the dope straight to the source. It had made headline news, so all the dirty cops didn't have time to cover it up.

“What the fuck are you doing in my fucking joint?” Jimmy asked.

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The two men with him pulled their weapons.

“I’d be careful if I were you,” Boone said. “I click this button, and this whole joint blows up.”

“You’re not crazy enough to do that,” Jimmy said. “You’re inside.”

“Yeah, but you see, between you and me, I don’t give a shit about living or dying, and if that means I get to take out scum like you, I’m all for it.” He looked Jimmy straight in the eyes. “I’m not afraid to die. Are you?”

Jimmy was already sweating. He had a thickening waist, receding hairline, and chubby fingers, which the gold rings he wore seemed to enhance. Those were the things he noticed about him.

“Fine. Fine. Put your guns down, boys.”

“What is the deal you have with Bonaldi?”

“I’m not telling you a fucking thing.”

Two bullets, and his goons were dead. Their bodies fell to the floor and Jimmy looked panicked.

“Now, you don’t have to save face and pretend you’re in charge here. Let’s face it, I could have killed you the moment you walked in here, but I have a motto. I give people a choice. You had a choice just to comply, answer my questions, and it would

have saved these men. You didn't."

"What the fuck?" Jimmy asked.

"Now, you tell me what I want to know," he said.

"Who the fuck are you?"

He fired the gun, and Jimmy screamed, collapsing to the ground. The noise he made was so damn grating on the nerves.

"I can do this all day long. Do you have any idea how many times I can shoot you, before you bleed to death?"

He got to his feet, rounded the desk, and perched on the end, gun still loaded, and waiting.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Jimmy said.

"You don't know who you're messing with. Just by doing this, you're starting a war."

"War?" Boone asked.

"Yes, an all-out war, and trust me, you'll be at the top of the fucking list. They fucking hate it when people meddle in their business."

"Does the name Boone Grinder mean anything to you?" he asked.

Jimmy went paler. "Fuck."

"Yeah, well, between you and me, you're looking right at him."

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Please, look, just take the girls. All the plans and shit are in the desk. Just keep me out of it.”

“That is an entirely different tune you’re taking,” Boone said.

“I’ve fucking heard of you. You’re a fucking freak. No one knows what shit you are into. People that cross you end up fucking dead. I’ve got a wife and kids, a family that needs me. I’m just the middleman. The guy that gets shit done.”

Boone went to the desk, opened it, and sure enough, there was the paperwork. He saw Valdez’s and Bonaldi’s name.

Flicking through the shipment containers, there were girls and drugs and ... kids. What the ever-loving fuck?

Boone also saw a couple of cops’ names kept coming up, and he wasn’t happy. Cops needed to learn to respect the badge, and that was happening here. They were exploiting it, and women and children’s lives were at stake. Rolling up the paperwork, he rounded the desk.

Jimmy had crawled across the floor and leaned up against the wall.

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“You have a wife you beat repeatedly, and she has tried to run from you at least six times. You drag her back, beat her some more, put her in the hospital, and pay the cops to look the other way.” He lifted his arm and glanced down at the time. “Right now, she is already starting a new life with the kids, away from you.”

“What?” Jimmy asked.

“It would seem your wife would take any lifeline granted to her, all she had to do was make sure you got to work on time.” Boone smiled at him. “The moment you walked into this office, your life was over. The choices you made have led you on this path. I didn’t need to give you those choices, you made them on your own.”

He fired his gun, killing Jimmy with a bullet to the head.

Jimmy’s wife would be free. Boone had taken the money Jimmy had stashed secretly—a couple of million dollars—which was now the means for her to start a new life. That was all she wanted.

Boone got to his feet and made his way out of the trailer. Pulling out his cell phone, he dialed the one cop he knew wasn’t dirty, giving him the directions. He made his way toward the storage container. The few men he encountered didn’t stand a chance.

He broke into the container, and the girls were able to stumble out, gasping for air. It was nearly twelve and already starting to get hot.

This was no longer his concern. He heard the sounds of sirens in the background, and it was time for him to leave. Boone always had an escape plan, and he took it, making

his way to his parked car, pocketing the details he would need.

“You know, if you’re going to bring me along, you might as well use me,” Ronald said.

“Too many men would have spooked them.”

“And you think your crazy ass makes them feel all welcoming?” Ronald asked.

“It was simple. None of them were making it out alive.” He pulled away from their spot, made his way onto the main road, passing the siren-blaring police cars, as they went in the opposite direction. Pulling back onto a small street, he parked the car and brought out the details he’d taken from Jimmy O’Cara.

“You know, this is going to come back to you, if you’re not careful.”

“I’m not trying to be careful,” he said.

“What about Lucia?”

“Lucia is safe.”

“Look, I remember you, Boone. You don’t like to go fast. You like to take your time, but between the mayor and now taking out Jimmy, not to mention the trap you’ve got set for Leandro, this is moving fast.”

He looked toward Ronald. “You got a problem with me setting this in motion?”

Ronald sighed. “I’ve got no problem at all. I know this is a piece of cake for the Boone I know.”

“But?”

“The old Boone didn’t have liability in a wife. This is an entirely different setup, and you know it. She is ... you’re different around her. You’re taking her places. You’re not sticking to your own plan of keeping her inside, locked up, where she would be safe. She’s currently at a fucking campus. She’s a Valdez, Boone. She doesn’t know what freedom is.”

“Are you telling me how to do my job?”

“No, I’m telling you with this one, it’s different. Lucia is not part of the job. You’re treating her as your wife.”

“She is my wife,” Boone said.

“And that is my point exactly. You have a wife now you must consider. Going around killing big-name players like Jimmy comes with repercussions.”

Boone looked at Ronald. “If you’re scared, leave, but I started something and I’m going to end it. I trust Lucia. She made her choice.”

“Women have the power to magically change their choices. Remember that.”

He pointed at the paper. “You read that, and tell me what I just did wasn’t worth it.”

Ronald rolled his eyes, took the document from him, and read it. “What the fuck?”

“They have a warehouse of kids they are using for slave labor, and then the pretty ones they’re selling to the highest bidder. Kids, Ronald. Tell me I’m moving too fast now.”

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“Fuck,” Ronald said. “Let’s go. We can’t leave this shit.”

Boone turned over the ignition of his car and took off, heading toward the warehouse that had been mentioned as a place to send a certain shipment.

These were sick fucks. He always knew they were, but now it was confirmed.

This wasn’t moving too fast. This was moving at the right pace.

Chapter Seven

Boone had promised to try and get to the college campus to spend some time with Lucia. By five o’clock, all the day classes were over, and Lucia sat in the car with Frank as they made their way toward Howard and Nancy’s.

They had a dinner menu, and she wasn’t interested in going to a fast-food place. She liked their place, especially as she knew they were friends with Boone.

Frank parked the car, and they climbed out.

“Has Boone been in touch?” she asked.

He glanced down at his cell phone. “Nah, nothing.”

“Is everything okay?”

“It’s Boone, everything is fine.”

They entered the café and she waved to Nancy who smiled at her. She went straight to Boone's usual table, and Frank slid in after her.

"Hey, you two. No Boone tonight?" Nancy asked.

"He's busy," Frank said.

"That man always is. I think he is trying to save the world." Nancy sighed. "Anyway, what can I get you two?"

Lucia ordered a cheeseburger with chili-cheese fries, as she had been dreaming about them for most of the day. Frank ordered the same.

"How long have you and Boone known each other?" Lucia asked.

"A lifetime."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

She looked at him and tried to implore with her gaze for him to elaborate, only the man wasn't talking.

"When?" Lucia asked.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, but anything you want to find out about Boone, you're going to have to ask him yourself."

She wrinkled her nose. "Why is it so top secret?"

“Boone doesn’t like his shit ... talked about. It is as simple as that. You can either like it or not. As his wife, he would have no issue talking to you about it.” He shrugged.

She wanted to know more.

“Is he a good guy?” Lucia asked.

“You’re curious now?”

“I was curious before, but it’s not like it is something I can ask.”

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Frank chuckled. “Now that is true. It depends on your perspective. You make the right choices, yes, Boone is a good guy. You don’t, and well, you see a side of the guy you don’t want to see.”

She looked at Frank. It was such a vague answer. Boone had given her a choice.

“Does he hate me?” Lucia asked.

“He married you.”

“Yeah, but I know he intends to ... end the Bonaldis forever.” She didn’t know if she should say anything but Frank worked with him. “I’m part of that. My father is a capo in the Bonaldi empire.” She sighed. “Doesn’t that mean he hates me?”

“No, he doesn’t hate you.”

“How do you know?”

“Because Boone, in his way, is showing you parts of his life that he doesn’t share with everyone. Take this place, for example. This place has real meaning for Boone. He loves Howard and Nancy, and would do anything for them. He did do everything for them. Bonaldi made him step out of retirement, Lucia.”

“Retirement?”

“Yeah, look, this is Boone’s story to tell. Not mine. The guy doesn’t like bullies. He doesn’t like people who exploit others just because they can. It pisses him off, and

well, I'm sure you're aware of what was happening here, and Boone took care of it. That is what he does. He takes care of people, in his own way, and now he is taking care of you."

Lucia went to ask him something else, but Nancy brought them some food. She thanked the other woman, and Nancy placed a hand on her shoulder and left.

"How're Amy and the boys?" Lucia asked.

She didn't want to keep talking to Boone. Frank wasn't exactly giving her answers, and he was doing the opposite, giving her a lot more questions.

"They're doing great." He took a bite out of his burger, chewing it. "I've got to leave early on Friday and get to one of my kids' plays. Amy told me she will kick my ass if I don't make it."

Lucia laughed.

"Do you want kids?" Frank asked.

"Uh, I don't know." She frowned. "I guess, one day I will. I think. I'm not sure."

Children had been necessary. There was no choice in her life. Her value was her virginity and having kids, especially a boy. A boy was important. If she was able to do that, it would make her valuable to her husband. She didn't know if Boone wanted kids.

They slept beside each other every single night, yet they didn't touch. There was no sex. Lucia wasn't sure if she wanted sex. Her mother had made it sound terrifying.

"Lucia, tonight you will be stripped naked, and when you're on the bed, you are to

lay still. Spread your legs, and do not make a sound. That annoys them. He will put his penis inside you, and it will hurt, but you do not scream. You do not cry. You take it, and you wait for him to be done. That is your duty.”

She had spent the whole day of the wedding being terrified. Only, nothing had happened. Boone didn't want to consummate their marriage.

Since then, she had watched a lot of television and movies, and the sex scenes did not look as terrifying as her mother made it sound. Was it really like that between a husband and wife? It had to be the case, because her mother had told her what to expect. This was messed up.

“You okay?” Frank asked.

“I don't know about kids. I don't know if Boone wants them. I guess if he wants kids, then we will have them.”

She finished her food, but she no longer felt hungry.

Frank filled the silence with tales of his wife, their children, but she wasn't really listening. They made it home, and Boone was already there. Frank said his goodbyes, leaving her alone with her husband.

Boone sat on the sofa, drinking from a glass with dark amber liquid inside.

“Did you have a good time on campus today?” he asked.

“Yeah, it was ... good,” Lucia said.

She was distracted, thinking about the future and about sex. What was to become of her?

“I’m going to go and take a shower.”

She put her bag in the corner of the bedroom and walked straight into the bathroom. Using the toilet, she flushed, washed her hands, and grabbed a toothbrush. As she brushed her teeth, she looked at her reflection and tried to figure out what was going on.

The choice she made had been to stay with Boone, but what did that mean for her? Were they to stay married? He told her she would be free. The hair was already cut, and she was going to classes. She was still none the wiser at what course to choose. She was hopeless.

Once this was over, and whatever revenge kick Boone was on, what did it mean at the end? Nothing made any sense to her. There were too many questions and no answers. She had no idea about Boone’s past.

Stripping out of her clothes, she stepped beneath the stall, feeling the cold water as it hit her body. She didn’t whimper. Instead, she clenched her hands into fists. It didn’t take long for the water to warm, and she was thankful.

“I have nothing against you using the warm water.”

She gasped and spun around. Lucia had not heard Boone enter the bathroom, or even strip down naked. Boone was very naked. His heavily muscular, inked body was on display. He wasn’t wearing any briefs. Everything was on display. She couldn’t help but look down at his cock. Quickly, she averted her gaze and spun away from him.

This was her husband. He had stepped into the shower, naked, with her. She took a deep breath. The oddest thing of all, she was not afraid.

“What are you doing?” Lucia asked.

“You looked sad and confused. I didn’t like that.” He stepped up close but didn’t touch her.

She felt how close he was, knew if she leaned back, she would be touching him.

His hands reached out, grabbing the bar of soap.

“How was your day?” he asked.

She took a deep breath. “It was good. Frank sat with me as I went to each lesson.”

“Do you know what you enjoy?”

“All of it.” She loved the freedom of being able to choose. “I still don’t know what I want to study. It all seems so fascinating. I love all of it.”

She tensed up as his hands touched her, just at her waist.

“I’m going to wash you. Tell me to stop if you don’t want it.”

His naked hands on her body. One side of her brain was terrified, the other wanted his touch. She didn’t say a word.

Boone had lathered his hands up with the soap, and he touched her. He started at her sides and passed her the soap. “You can do me if you want?”

She looked at the soap. If she turned around, he was going to see her naked. Her very unflattering body that had ... extra weight. She was nothing like her sister, all smooth and firm. She had a curved stomach and her thighs met in the middle, with a touch of cellulite on the outside. Yes, she had been hit on her thighs repeatedly, because they looked ugly. That was one of her father's punishments. He used a belt to make his point of how ugly her body was.

"Look at me, Lucia," Boone said.

She hadn't even realized she was shaking. He turned her, and she had no choice but to follow his lead.

"I'm ugly," Lucia said.

He tilted her head back, and she had to look into his eyes and see what he saw. She expected to see disgust, or something that made her sick to her stomach. There was nothing there.

"You're not ugly." He surprised her even more by taking her hand and curling it around his large cock. "Do you feel that?" he asked. "That is what you do to me. You're not ugly, and you tell me who told you that, and I will kill them for you."

"My father," Lucia said.

"He's already on my list."

She should just stop there, but she couldn't. "My mother."

"Done."

“My brothers.”

“Noted.”

“My sister.”

“On the list.”

What had she done? Did she care? Her whole family had been more than willing to send her to Boone, knowing there was a chance he might kill her. They didn’t want to send Isabella, as she was too beautiful. No outsider of the Bonaldis would get one of their beauties.

Just Lucia. The ugly one.

“No one calls you ugly and gets away with it.” And with that, he gripped the back of her neck and showed her she had not been kissed properly at all.

This was not just a kiss, it felt like a possession. His lips were rough and gentle at the same time. She felt her body come to life under his lips, and she didn’t want him to stop.

This was the kiss that movies were made of.

“We have been invited to a family dinner,” Boone said.

Lucia looked up from the book she had been reading.

“What?”

“Your father sent an invitation.” He pulled it out of his jacket pocket and handed it to her. He noticed how her hand shook as she glanced over the invite.

“Why?”

Boone shrugged. “Does he need a reason?”

“Usually ... yes.”

She looked nervous and he noticed she went to her haircut.

“Don’t be nervous.”

“You want us to go?”

“It would be way too rude not to.” He leaned back against the tree, enjoying the shade.

Boone had decided to take Lucia to the park for lunch. They had already enjoyed their picnic, sat and watched people come and go with their families. He had a few emails to tend to while she read her book.

Since the kiss in the shower, neither of them had said a word. He’d kissed her like he had been wanting to kiss her, and then once the shower had run cold, he dried her, dressed her, and they went to bed. He had been the perfect gentleman.

This was nearly four days ago. Four days since he exposed the child labor warehouse.

The detective he was using seemed to have his plate full. The men on Bonaldi's payroll were also dropping like flies, and Boone had nothing to do with it. Their failure was getting them killed, bodies washing up in lakes, found on beaches, or dead in cars. All of them looked like suicide, but it was just another death in payment from Bonaldi.

No one had any way of knowing who was uncovering their operations. Jimmy's information had been enlightening. It had also led them down another avenue he was currently working through. This next one he didn't like. From what he and Ronald had uncovered, there was some dark web shit, which included snuff.

Boone didn't like it. He had seen some of the women he knew were missing on the tapes. They were being raped and murdered for the highest bidder.

He had a guy currently trying to crack the codes that would give him access to the creators, buyers, and distributors. It had to be somewhere in the city. He just needed to find it. Bonaldi wouldn't have any of that shit linked to him, so he was checking through Valdez. Something wasn't adding up, though. There was a missing piece of the pie.

Ronald didn't like any of it. In fact, Ronald had vomited at some of the shit they had seen. To Boone, it wasn't even the worst he had seen. This is why he had no choice but to step out of retirement.

Lucia sat up. "I don't think I should go."

"Why?"

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“My hair. I don’t know, you gave me that choice. What if they start asking me questions? I’m not a liar. I’m not...” She looked panicked.

He took hold of her hand and pulled her in closer. “You’re not what?”

“I don’t want to ruin what you’re doing.”

“I know, and you won’t. I won’t be leaving your side.”

“But the wives are always left alone.”

“Not with me,” Boone said. “I won’t let you leave. I’ll keep you by my side. This could be kind of fun.”

“Fun?” She was going to throw up.

“Yeah, fun. Your family and the whole Bonaldi family are big on women being submissive, right? You live for your husbands?”

“You know that.”

“Yes, so that means I can have a little fun with you.”

Lucia frowned. “I don’t know if I like the sound of that.”

Boone smiled. “You don’t at the moment, but trust me, you’re going to.”

He stroked her cheek. “Did you have fun today?”

“Yeah, I did. I like coming here. I like seeing the families. It’s fun.”

He moved her so she was sitting between his thighs. “Is it a family you’d like?” he asked.

“One day I’d like a family, but I don’t...” She suddenly stopped.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s ... silly.”

“Nothing is silly.”

“This is.” She sighed.

“You know, I can’t help you if you don’t tell me about it.”

“Do you think you can fix everything?”

“I’ve been doing a pretty good job of it so far. Don’t underestimate me.”

She laughed. “That’s true. Fine, here it goes. If I have a family one day, then I don’t want them to be at the mercy of my dad, or this world. I don’t want them to witness someone getting murdered at the dinner table.”

He felt her tense up between his thighs.

“Did you witness something like that?”

“Yeah, and not just once.” She told him the story about one of the women that served them. How she had become her father’s favorite, and her mother didn’t like it. An insult led to this woman being killed right in front of her.

“I’ve got you,” he said.

“It’s fine. It wasn’t the first time and it probably won’t be the last.”

“Why do you say that?”

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“Because, death just seems to follow me, don’t you think?” She leaned back and tilted her head to look up at him. “You’ve killed people before.”

He didn’t deny it.

Lucia sighed. “Anyway, I know, unfortunately, death is the only option. The only way for us to be free is when you get rid of Bonaldi, right?”

He kissed the top of her head but didn’t say a word.

“You don’t trust me?” she asked.

“I trust you, however, in a park this size, with the enemies I’ve made in the last few weeks, some things just shouldn’t be talked about.”

“Crap, I am so sorry.” She made to get up out of his arms, but he tightened his grip around her.

“You don’t need to be sorry. I’ve got you.”

“Do you think someone could be watching us right now?”

“There is a chance.” He had a sneaking suspicion the man on the bench, currently holding up a newspaper, was watching them. No one read the newspaper that intently. His own men blended in, looking like they belonged in the corporate world, simply having a stroll through the park.

“What do we do?” Lucia asked.

“Nothing. You sit back, relax, and tell me your troubles.”

“Do you think he read my lips ... or she? Is it a man or a boy?”

He laughed. “Don’t worry about it. All you need to worry about is talking with me. I think when we go to your father’s house, you should wear the jeans and one of the shirts that shows off your cleavage. In fact, I’m going to choose your outfit.”

She gasped and pulled out of his arms, turning toward him. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“I’m not.”

“My dad will be upset.”

“You’re not dressing to impress him, though, are you? You’re dressing to impress me and as my wife, that is your duty. Don’t worry. I’ll be by your side.”

“I just feel that would draw ... won’t that be antagonizing the situation?” she asked.

“Probably, but I’m not there to make your dad feel comfortable. I’m there to have dinner.” He grabbed her shoulders and drew her back against him, massaging the tension out of them. “What you do need to do is relax.”

“I can’t. I’m not allowed to wear pants or jeans, or trousers. That is a big no. Women are supposed to wear dresses and skirts, that is it.”

“Well, you’re my wife, and what I say goes, and if I say you wear jeans, guess what, your ass is going to wear jeans.”

There was silence for a brief moment, and he took the chance to watch the man who hadn't even flipped the page of the newspaper. This was so obvious, especially as Boone looked up and caught him peering around the side of the newspaper. Amateur. Who had sent him? It didn't matter.

"You're enjoying this a little too much," Lucia said.

"And you're worrying about it too much. Trust me. That is all I ask you to do. Also, it will sell the story that you can't be invited out to lunch, or for your family to get you alone."

Now, this did make her tense. "What do you mean?"

"Think about it. Out of the blue, your parents are inviting us to dinner. No reason. Why now? Why after all this time of us being married? They're testing the waters, Lucia, and if you don't show your obedience to me, they will believe they can use you. Do you want to be put in that position?"

"No."

There was no hesitation, which he liked.

"Then, being my wife, following what I like, submitting to me, is what they are going to see, and they're going to know not to mess with you. You've become the dutiful, submissive wife. They will not make an ally out of you."

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With that, he knew it was now time for them to move on from their lunch, and he also had a hunch.

“Come on, it’s time to head back,” he said.

They had been in the park for a couple of hours. He was relaxed and ready for the next few days. He had already told her father they would be attending the dinner, so he didn’t have to double-check that. Lucia was nervous, and he made a note not to let her worry.

Once the picnic was packed away, he took Lucia’s hand, and together they walked out of the park, heading toward the car, where one of his men waited, leaning against the vehicle.

Boone watched as the man with the newspaper left the park a few seconds after them, only he disappeared into the small local toilet.

“Watch her,” he said to the guard.

Lucia was already inside the car. He’d stashed the picnic into the trunk of the car and made his way toward the toilet. He was quiet, waiting. He closed the main door and flicked the lock back into place. He had his gun, but he wasn’t interested in using it.

The main bathroom door opened, and out stepped the man. For a second, they both just looked at one another. Boone couldn’t quite place him. It was a standoff.

The guy lightly turned his neck, and there on the side was a small little square. It was

just a square, but Valdez's men were each inked with a square on the side of their neck, signifying who they followed. Each capo had a different symbol, some of them even changed colors. All of Valdez's men had a black square inked at the side of their necks.

Boone waited, and when the man went to strike, he was ready. The man lifted his arms as if to come at his face. No noise came out of him.

Slamming his arm against the man's rib cage, he winded him, but he came back for more. He shoved his fist into the man's gut, then sliced it in an uppercut motion, punching him in the face. He didn't stop, but this little spy had a wit about him. The jabs didn't stop him from coming back for more.

Boone was able to block multiple hits, but one got him in the nose. It wasn't broken, but it stung, and he lashed out. He was getting tired of this piece of shit and that he just wouldn't die. Through the chaos, he held the man's tie and tightened it around his neck. They were now down on the ground, his body wrapped around the man's, trapping him, keeping him in place, as he held that tie, cutting off his air supply. Seconds passed, or perhaps even minutes, before the man slumped and was dead.

Boone didn't waste any time. He shoved the man into the bathroom, pulled the door closed, and then grabbed his cell phone. There was blood on his hands, and he quickly glanced in the mirror. It wasn't from him. The guy seemed to bleed a lot easier than he anticipated.

The cell phone wasn't locked, and there was only one message from an unknown sender: Follow them. Watch them.

Boone was keeping the phone. It might come in handy one day.

Chapter Eight

Boone was out to pick a fight.

That was all Lucia could think this was. Sunday dinner had come around way too quickly, and she was standing on her parents' front porch, wearing her hair down, with a pair of jeans. This was not all. The jeans had a nice tight top that seemed to push her tits together and give her a very large cleavage. He'd also called in Mitchell and Sandra to take care of her hair and makeup.

In her hands was a bouquet of wild flowers. Again, Boone's idea, not hers. Her hands felt clammy, she felt sick to her stomach. In all the years she had known her father, not once had she been allowed to wear pants. This felt so ... scary.

What if they fought? What if her father attempted to beat her? What would Boone do? He promised he would protect her and take care of her, should she believe him? She didn't know what to do or think, or believe. It was insane.

The door opened and it was the butler. This was a new guy, and Lucia didn't recognize him.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Miss Valdez," he said.

"Actually, that's Mrs. Grinder now," Boone said.

She glanced over to her husband and she breathed a sigh of relief. He had her back. This is what he promised.

Her name was Grinder now. She was Boone's wife. She was no longer her father's daughter.

She could do this. If they made it out of here alive, and without a single bruise on them, she was going to celebrate with ice cream.

They stepped over the threshold, and right on time, as if it had been choreographed, her mother stepped out of the sitting room.

“Darling, it is so good to see you,” her mother said.

This was a first. Her mother never, ever, called her “darling.” That was a title reserved for Isabella, the favorite daughter.

“It’s nice to see you, Mother. Boone and I brought you flowers.” She held them out, and right on queue, her father stepped out.

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Her outfit, without the flowers as coverage, was seen, and she saw the anger in his gaze. Right about now, if Boone wasn't here, he'd be removing his belt and hitting her.

Boone put his hands on her shoulders, drawing her back, bringing himself into the picture.

"Valdez, it's good to see you. Long time no see, and it was a nice surprise to get your invite. Wasn't it, sweetheart?" Boone asked.

"Yes, it was lovely."

She put on her smile. Boone had advised that she follow his lead, and wherever possible, she looked completely, one hundred percent devoted to him. So far, that wasn't hard. Boone had given her a freedom no one else had.

Her hair was cut, she wore jeans, she'd been able to wander in the park. She could cook her own food, and she'd even gone and sat in a college campus and listened to multiple lectures. Her life was no prison. Not anymore. Or at least, it didn't feel like it to her.

She offered her parents a smile, then tilted her head back and looked up at her husband. They hadn't said they would be rehearsing this, but Boone pressed a firm kiss to her lips. She loved when he kissed her. Not that they had kissed often. It was sporadic. The shower was the last, most intense kiss they shared.

Turning her attention back to her parents, it was hard to be upset, especially as she

loved that kiss. Her lips tingled. It was strange, because on her wedding day, the very thought of being kissed by him, or even touched by him, filled her with dread, whereas now, she felt a tinge of excitement at the thought. She had no idea what was happening to her.

Her parents were silent. Boone continued to hold onto her shoulders. Her father, in particular, kept looking at her, his gaze going up and down her body. The disapproval was evident on his face.

In response, one of Boone's arms wandered around her waist. She appreciated the possessive touch as it seemed to pull her father out of whatever spiral he was on, and they were able to move to the main sitting room, where all three of her brothers were, as well as her sister.

It was strange to be back in a room with them. The moment they saw her, her eldest brother Enzo glared. Bruno spat his drink back into his glass. Leandro laughed. Isabella let out a huff.

"If you'd like to take a seat," her father said.

Boone took the chair, and then he pulled her down so that she was sitting on his lap. She tried not to feel nervous, but everyone was watching them. It was strange. She'd been wearing her wedding band all this time, and yet today was the first occasion it actually felt heavy. Boone placed a hand on her back, and the room was silent once again.

"I think I better go and check on those drinks," her mother said. "Lucia, would you like to come and help me?"

"No, she wouldn't," Boone said.

She tried not to tense up. Her mother looked aghast, and she quickly glanced toward her father. Lucia saw it.

This was all a setup. Boone hadn't been wrong. This was a setup to try and use her, or to get Boone alone.

"My wife is a guest in your house. If you need help, ask your other daughter who is not doing anything."

"Lucia is not doing anything," Leandro said.

"She is sitting on my lap, entertaining me. She is my wife, and she does exactly what I say, which is why her hair is now cut." He stroked her hair. "And she is wearing the clothes that make me happy."

Did they make him happy? She wasn't going to lie and say she didn't like wearing pants, because she did. The first time she slid on a pair of jeans, it felt so weird. She wasn't used to her legs being so covered. Over the course of the day, it did start to feel great. She loved it.

She couldn't believe she was in her parents' home and thinking about wearing jeans. It was insane. But it was more comforting than what was happening around her. Her brothers looked ready to kill Boone.

"I would very much like to talk business with you," her father said. His name was Enzo, just like her eldest brother.

"I don't talk business at dinner. You want to talk business, then we do so during the week. This is Sunday. I don't conduct business. Unless you have any leads on exactly who blew my car up."

Lucia couldn't help but glance over at Leandro. Her youngest brother got to his feet and moved toward the liquor cabinet. Boone already had him caught on tape, but if he had any doubt about who could have done that, her brother was a dead giveaway.

"I'm afraid we don't have any leads. You were able to make it through unscathed?"

"That's why I'm sitting with you," Boone said, with a smile. "And my wife was with me that day as well."

She offered a smile. They didn't care if they killed her or her husband. Her mother had already taken a complaining Isabella to get their drinks. Lucia didn't know what to do as all the men seemed to glare at one another.

"How about the weather we are having now?" Boone said.

She pressed her lips together, because she happened to find it so incredibly funny that he just randomly blurted out about the weather.

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“It’s hot as hell out there,” Boone said.

“You can’t handle the heat?” her brother Enzo asked.

“I can handle it, but you know, there are just some people that can’t handle that much heat. Being cooped up all day, locked away, you know what I mean?”

Was he baiting them on purpose?

Then, he blew out a whistle. “Did any of you catch the exposé on that mayor? The dirty deeds he was into? I mean, the footage itself was bad enough. Him screwing an underage girl. I guess he got what was coming to him.”

This was baiting. Was Boone wanting to get killed?

“We do not know anything about that,” her father said.

Now that was a lie. Lucia had gotten good at reading her father. Spending most of her life trying to avoid his anger, she knew what to look out for, and this was it. His anger, his rage. She couldn’t look away as he looked so scary. Boone’s hand at her back reminded her of exactly where she was.

“No, I don’t imagine you do,” Boone said. “But that must be a serious warning to whoever is into that kind of thing. I mean, it is gross and unnatural. I guess someone doesn’t like it.”

And her mother and sister entered the room. She was so pleased to see them. They

would stop talking shop at that very moment. Lucia didn't know how she was going to get through the rest of the meal.

She was handed an alcoholic drink. The scent of it was strong, and Boone placed a hand on top of her glass, letting her know not to drink it. She'd never touched a drop of alcohol in her life. She didn't know why her mother was suddenly providing her with a drink so strong, the smell of it was making her stomach turn.

Each time Boone took a sip, Lucia noticed his glass was not getting smaller. He wasn't drinking, just pretending. What the hell was going on?

It wasn't too long before dinner was called, and Boone took her drink, putting them on the table. He, once again, held her hand and wouldn't allow her to be sat anywhere but where he wanted her.

The food that came out looked delectable. It wasn't a meal where they had to take their portions, and Lucia wasn't surprised when her plate came out with barely anything on it.

Boone put his hand beneath the table and squeezed her thigh. What did that mean? She glanced toward him, and he moved his food around the plate. He wasn't going to eat anything.

This had to be one of the most awkward dinners she had ever been to, and she had lived in this very house for twenty-two years. She usually ate separately from her father. He couldn't stand to see the sight of her.

Boone continued to touch her—reaching out, stroking her hair back behind her ear, putting his hand on her shoulder. She loved his little touches. They set her on fire. She didn't want him to stop. The touches and brief smiles were the only good part about this dinner—the way he touched her thigh, squeezed the flesh. This was worth

it. She only wished that when dinner was over and they were back in the privacy of one of his apartments, he would continue to touch her.

Was that normal? Wanting him to touch her? Loving the feel of him?

Should she be wanting her husband in this way?

“Thank you,” Lucia said, as Boone handed her the drive-thru burger.

Tonight, he did have every intention of eating the dinner provided by her parents. However, when the plates came through made up the way they were, he had his suspicions. He noticed how her father kept watching the two of them, almost waiting for them to fall asleep or start dying. He had a feeling something had been put in their food, which is why he squeezed her thigh.

Just like he knew their drinks had been tampered with. Lucia’s drink had stunk way too strong of alcohol, and he had no interest in falling for any of the man’s tricks.

“You thought I wasn’t going to feed you?”

“No, I didn’t think that, but ... I was hungry.”

He chuckled. Unwrapping his own burger, he took a large bite. The truth was, the food had looked delicious, and it was tempting, but trusting the man—not happening.

All tonight had done was confirm his suspicions of how deep Valdez was in the shitstorm he’d been creating. He’d watched Leandro, thinking he had gotten away with blowing up his car. There was already a trap set for that little shit. As for the other brothers, and the rest of the family, their time would come. He had a great deal

of patience.

“This tastes so good,” Lucia said. “You know, I was never allowed a burger back home.”

“You weren’t?”

“No. First of all, we were not allowed fast food. That is why we had a chef. They cooked everything for us. Second, it was fattening, and in case you didn’t see, my plate was pretty much empty.” She wrinkled her nose. “I was not allowed to eat with my father. He got angry when he saw me eat.” She shrugged. “You know, sometimes he would make me wait until everyone had eaten, so my food was cold before he would let me eat.”

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This was not helping Boone. It pissed him off.

“Enjoy.”

Lucia took a bite of her burger. “I will. Can you believe we got through that?”

“Yes.”

“My dad looked like he wanted to kill me with the way I was dressed.”

He’d felt how tense she was, but now she was laughing.

“And they served me alcohol. I mean, that is crazy. We’re not allowed to drink, like at all.”

“You’ve never had a drink?” he asked.

“No, never.”

He shook his head, turned the car over and put it in gear, heading toward one of the nightclubs that was now closed. It didn’t take him long, parking his car and climbing out. Lucia was already getting out of the passenger side.

His men had followed him, and he nodded to them, that everything was okay. Taking her hand, he walked toward his nightclub, pulled out his key, and let them in, with all the security locks. Once inside, he turned on the light for the bar, along with the dance floor.

“Wow,” Lucia said.

“What?” he asked.

“It’s so quiet.”

“It’s late, and we don’t open past eleven on a Sunday. At least, this bar doesn’t.”

He grabbed one of the bottles of scotch from behind the bar, grabbed two glasses, and poured them both a generous amount.

“What are you doing?” Lucia asked.

“Simple. You have never had a drink, and I think it is only fair that I let you ... live a little.”

She giggled. “That’s crazy. Are you really encouraging me to have a drink?”

“I’m encouraging you to have a good time, when there is no one else around to judge you. There’s just me, and you know I am going to take care of you.”

“Okay, then, here goes.” She picked up the glass, tilted it against her lips, and took a swig. The moment she swallowed, she gasped and scrunched up her face. “That is horrible.”

He laughed and knocked back his drink.

She wrinkled her nose, but that didn’t stop her from finishing the drink. “Why do people drink that?”

“Because it helps for a little while to take away your troubles. It is only a short fix,

but it is deadly. Do you want another?"

Her nose was scrunched up, but she did take another one. He watched as she stepped away from the bar and walked toward the dance floor.

"Tell me what you're thinking about right now?" he asked.

"I don't know. Stupid stuff, I guess. You know when you brought me to one of your nightclubs last time?"

He nodded.

"I watched some of the women on the dance floor, just ... dancing." She held her hands out, and spun just once. "They were free to do that. I wonder if they even realized how free they were."

"No one is truly free, Lucia."

“What do you mean?”

“We’re all trapped by something or other. Money, bills, jobs, responsibilities. No one is free and clear.”

“But they are free to come and go as they please. They can choose to date who they want. They’re not told who they are going to marry, or what they have to do. They are not starved against their will, or forced to marry someone they do not know.”

She looked so sad. He watched her, seeing this a little differently. The life he offered Lucia was a freedom she had never known before, but it was still a life she had to have with him. Her family would just pull her back and use her until there was nothing left.

He moved toward the main wall, opened the lock, and turned the lights on to the dance floor, along with the music.

“Dance,” Boone said.

He grabbed their drinks and moved toward the dance floor, handing her a drink as he did so.

“Huh?”

“No one is here now. Be free. Dance like you have no care in the world. Drink, and enjoy yourself. You’ve got tonight, Lucia. No one is going to stop you from living your life and being who you want to be.”

She looked at him with hope. Taking the drink from him, she knocked it back, coughing as she swallowed. She did not look elegant at all, but so adorable. So ... hopeful.

Boone finished his drink and watched her. Lucia closed her eyes, threw her hands in the air, and danced. It was slow at first, kind of jerky, like she was afraid of getting caught.

He moved back to the bar and put their glasses down. As the minutes ticked by, she started to feel the flow of the music and he saw the way it took over, and she stopped waiting for the sting of disapproval.

In the jeans and the shirt, she looked like fire. Her body was made for loving. He felt a stirring in his groin, a need he'd been trying to extinguish. Boone was attracted to his wife, and had been since before he had seen her. She was different.

Her eyes, although clouded by the life she had led, were not filled with hatred and darkness. There was still lightness within her gaze. She didn't hate. She loved.

Stepping away from the bar, he couldn't watch anymore. He moved toward her and took hold of her hand, twirling her toward him, making her eyes open as she looked at him.

He placed one hand at her hip, and the other he slid down to grasp over her ass, drawing her close. The song had changed. It was no longer an upbeat number, but was heavy, sensual, and designed for sex. He took the lead, showing her what she could do, what her body could do.

Lucia didn't pull away. She followed his lead, and it was like they had been doing this for many years, not just a few months. He knew if she took the chance with him, he would be able to set her aflame and have her like fire in his arms.

“I like this,” she said.

“You do?”

He saw her eyes. The two drinks she’d consumed were affecting her.

“Yeah, I do. You know, I like being with you,” Lucia said. “You make me feel special.”

The drink was loosening her tongue.

“You are special, Lucia.”

She shook her head. “Not according to my parents. I’m a waste of space. Their words, not mine.” She let out a giggle. “Tonight was so funny. They looked so angry seeing my jeans and my hair. You’re stronger than them, aren’t you?”

He didn’t say anything as she kept talking.

“Of course you are stronger.” She blew out a raspberry. “You have to be stronger, because otherwise, we wouldn’t have gotten married.”

“I think you have had a lot to drink,” he said.

“Two glasses.” She held up three fingers.

“Is a lot of alcohol for someone who has never drank before,” he said.

She wrinkled her nose. “But it was fun. I got to drink and I get to dance. I love being married to you, Boone. Do you like being married to me?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then why don’t you use me?” Lucia asked.

“Use you?”

“Yeah, like a real husband uses his wife, and then goes and gets a mistress and treats her better. Isn’t that what men do? Women are useful to provide an heir, isn’t that what you want?” She rested her head against his shoulder. “I don’t want to be that way.”

“What way?”

“Where I’m afraid that you want to have sex with me. Where you go to someone else who gives you real pleasure.” She sighed. “That’s what my dad does. Mom has the kids, and other women get the nicer side of dad, or I assume they do. I don’t want to be married like that. I want what they have in the movies and in books, where they’re still together and loving each other years later. Where they’re not cheating and having sex with other people. Do you want that?”

Boone held onto her.

“I don’t even know what you want,” Lucia said. “This is a game to you, and I am just a pawn in your moving chess game.” She sighed and he felt her body getting heavy.

Picking her up in his arms, he left the dance floor and carried his wife up to the office. He didn’t expect her to react this way, otherwise he would have had her first

drinking experience at the apartment.

Laying her down on the sofa, she was already passed out.

“You’re not just a pawn, Lucia. You’re my queen.”

Chapter Nine

“Two glasses?” Lucia asked, lifting her head up from the toilet.

She felt so gross.

“Two glasses.”

She looked at Boone and then felt her stomach roll over, and she groaned, immediately putting her face into the toilet and vomiting everything she had. Another moan left her.

“I’m pathetic.”

“You’re not.”

“Who passes out and then vomits on two glasses of scotch?” It was pitiful. “I thought most people were supposed to have like dozens and dozens of glasses of tequila or scotch, or vodka.” She groaned. “The movies got this all wrong.”

“You’re not used to it, is all.”

“I’m never drinking again.” She pouted and then threw up some more.

Boone held her hair out of the way. His office had a small bathroom, which consisted

of a toilet and sink. She was still dressed in the clothes she went to dinner in yesterday.

Just remembering that experience from the previous day, she was ready to have a heart attack. They had gotten through it, but it had been scary.

Boone rubbed her back, and she couldn't quite remember last night's conversation. What did she say to him? What did they do? They drank and danced, and then it kind of went fuzzy. She didn't like not knowing. What if she had made a real fool of herself? There was no way she would be able to live with that.

"I think I'm good," she said after a couple of minutes. She flushed the toilet, because she didn't want him to see that.

"I've got a toothbrush and paste for you," Boone said. "Do you think you'll be ready to leave?"

She nodded.

"I'll give you a couple of minutes." And he stepped out of the bathroom, leaving her alone.

Getting to her feet, the world was not spinning, and although she had been sick, her stomach was no longer doing a dance. She glanced at her reflection and winced. The makeup Sandra had so painstakingly put on her was melting off her face.

She grabbed some soap and quickly washed her face, trying to seem normal again. It took her several attempts, and thankfully, the mascara was not waterproof. Once her face was clean and no longer looked like a melting mess, she picked up the toothbrush, squirted some paste on it, and got to work cleaning her teeth. This was starting to help her feel normal. After brushing her teeth, she rinsed her mouth and

stepped out. She had run her fingers through her hair.

“How do I look?” Lucia asked.

“You look good,” Boone said. “Come on, let’s go and get some breakfast.”

He held his hand out, which she took. They left the nightclub before any of his staff had even arrived. Outside, she saw the same two guards as last night. Boone looked at them, gave them a nod, and it was their time to leave. They just got into their car and left.

“Wow,” Lucia said. “They stayed all night?”

“It’s their job.”

She climbed into the passenger side of Boone’s car, and blew out a breath.

“How does Howard and Nancy’s sound?” Boone asked.

“Great, it sounds great.” The world was no longer spinning, and eating breakfast sounded ideal to her.

The traffic in the city was not too bad. It was still before eight, but as they approached the café, it was starting to get worse. Lucia frowned as she saw Ronald outside the café. Something was going on. One glance at Boone, and she knew something had happened.

He got out of the car and didn’t even look at her. Climbing out, she quickly moved to Boone’s side. Ronald didn’t look at her, strangely.

“What happened?”

“Last night, Howard got a call at home, saying he was needed. Nancy told him to go and she’d close up. Something about the kids being sick, or something. He left, three men walked in, trashed the place, beat Nancy up pretty bad.”

Lucia couldn’t believe it.

“Where is she?” Boone asked.

“In the hospital. Boone, you’re not going to like it.”

“I don’t give a fuck if I like it or not. Make the necessary arrangements to have this place cleaned up. I want the security footage, the works.”

“Will do,” Ronald said.

Within seconds they were back in the car and on the road. She saw the anger in every cell of Boone. She stayed silent. She had never seen him like this before.

Nancy had gotten hurt last night.

They arrived at the hospital, Boone parked the car, and Lucia followed him inside. No one stepped in his way, just keeping up with him. He reached out and took her hand, and they stepped onto the elevator, going toward one of the wards. Everything was a little fuzzy.

They moved quickly, and then she saw Howard coming out of one of the wards. The moment he saw Boone, the two had a quick embrace.

“How is she?” Boone asked.

“Stable. She was ... she has a couple of broken ribs, a broken leg, and a broken hand. She is bruised. The doctor said they will heal but it is going to take time.”

“Do you have any idea who did this?” Boone asked.

“Not a clue.” Howard pressed his hands to his face. “That should have been me, but the babysitter said the boys were calling for me.”

“And the babysitter called you?” Boone asked.

“Yeah. The cops think it was a burglary that had gone wrong, but they trashed the place and didn’t take any money.”

“I want your babysitter’s name,” Boone said.

“Why?”

“I just want to make sure the cops are following all the necessary leads.”

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Lucia knew for a fact the cops were not going to get that name. Boone was about to take care of this.

Had her father done this? Had he arranged for a hit to be put on one of Boone's places? Or Bonaldi? She felt sick to her stomach, not because she didn't have any food, but because of the reality her family was capable of.

Nancy was a mess. Her face was covered in bruises and she was broken. They hadn't raped her, but that was no consolation. The sight of her set Boone's blood boiling.

Nancy woke up as he and Lucia sat there. Tears were in the one eye that was open. The other was swollen shut.

"It's okay," Boone said.

"Hey, you," Nancy said.

"Don't." He reached for her hand and Nancy took it. "You're going to be okay."

"I know. Bruises will fade," Nancy said. "How is Howard?"

"He is talking to the doctors."

"We can't afford this," Nancy said.

“Stop it, you don’t have to worry.” He’d pay all the necessary costs. He didn’t know who had done this, but by the time he was through, they would all pay.

Nancy sighed and she saw Lucia. “Hey, you,” she said.

Lucia came in close. “You don’t have to talk. You just need to rest and get better.”

“They had baseball bats. Did they take the money?”

“Don’t worry about a thing.”

“I told them they could take the money. Just to leave the shop alone.” She sniffled.

“They busted up the shop and then turned on me.”

He didn’t tighten his hold on her.

“I’ll fix this,” Boone said.

“I know,” Nancy said. “One of them, after he broke my hand, told me to give you a message.”

Boone leaned in close.

“Everything you love is going to die,” Nancy said.

He nodded his head.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

Howard came in, and Boone got to his feet.

“Don’t worry about a thing. I’ve got Ronald fixing up the shop.”

“Boone, you don’t have to do that.”

“I do and I will. Just get well.” He reached for Lucia and she took his hand. He needed to take care of business.

They left Howard and Nancy and made their way out of the hospital. The moment he was outside, he got a text from Ronald. The main security footage had been trashed inside the café, but the morons hadn’t figured out how to remove themselves from outside. There was an image, and he saw the two men. Ronald had also done the work and found where they were, and they were connected to Valdez. With all of that information, he waited for Lucia to get in the car.

“What’s going on?” Lucia asked.

“I’m going to drop you off at my place. You will stay there until you see me again,” Boone said.

“I want to help.”

“Lucia, your father put a hit on two of my friends. He separated them and attacked Nancy. He paid the babysitter. What I am about to do is not going to pretty. I’m not going to ask questions.”

“You’re going to kill them?”

“Yes, and I’m going to make sure they scream and they hurt, and that they know what real pain is like.”

He watched her swallow. “And I am not going to allow you to see that side of me.”

“I want you to kill them,” Lucia said. “What they did to Nancy, I want you to make them suffer.”

This surprised him.

Pulling out of the hospital parking lot, he drove with purpose, heading toward his building. One of his men was already waiting to take Lucia to his apartment.

He reached out before Lucia could leave, gripped the back of her neck, and pulled her

in close to kiss her.

“I don’t want to fuck any kind of mistress,” he said. “If you want to be my wife for real, then we’ll make it so, but I won’t cheat on you.”

And with that, he let her go, leaving Lucia speechless. She climbed out of the car, and he waited for them to head back into the apartment, before driving out and getting Ronald on the phone.

“Talk to me.”

“The café has been broken to shit. It’s going to take a couple of weeks to get it running again.”

“Make it happen. I don’t care what it costs.”

“I’m already on it. Our tech guy has been in touch. Ten thousand dollars was wired into the babysitter’s account last night.”

“Is this a minor?”

“No, it’s a twenty-nine-year-old male,” Ronald said.

“Send me the address.”

The man was going to get two choices, one of them would allow him to live a long healthy life, another would have him six feet under.

With the address of the babysitter, Boone arrived in the neighborhood.

Nancy and Howard lived in a nice place. This was one of the reasons they struggled,

as they wanted a good home to raise their sons.

The babysitter was Donald Snow, twenty-nine-year-old male who lived in his parents' old home. It would appear the parents died within months of each other, leaving everything to Donald. How convenient.

Boone stepped up to the front door and knocked. It was only a little after nine.

The door opened and Boone put a smile on his face. "Good morning," he said.

"Fuck off. I'm not interested in what you're selling." Donald went to close the door, and he used the leverage to smash the door in his face and step into the house. Donald had collapsed onto the floor.

"Dude, what the fuck?" Donald asked.

He closed the door, pulled out the brass knuckles he rarely used, but he felt this was a special occasion. The image of Nancy lying in a hospital bed, bruised with broken ribs, a hand, and a leg. He grabbed Donald off the floor, slammed him into the wall, and sucker-punched him in the gut.

There was no way for Donald to fight back. A blow to the jaw, one to the chest and gut, and the man was on the floor. He picked him up by the scruff of the neck, and that was when he saw the tattoo. A small black square. Valdez's man.

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Boone moved him into the kitchen, forcing him down onto the table. He put the man's hands flat on the surface, and then sat opposite him.

"I suggest if you want to live for the next couple of minutes, you keep your hands flat," Boone said.

"Who the fuck are you?" Donald asked.

He picked up a knife, twirled the tip on top of his finger, and he took a breath, then put the blade in the center of the man's hand.

"The name's Boone Grinder."

Donald was not good at keeping his body language ... still. He tensed up.

Boone tutted. "I would take it from the way you're acting, you know who I am?"

"Shit, man. I don't know what your problem is, but this has nothing to do with me. I've got nothing. I am nothing. I'm a no one."

"I wouldn't say that was true."

He lifted the knife, pulled back the shirt he was wearing, and pressed the blade against the telltale lies.

"Shit, man, that means nothing. That is nothing. Just a little ink I got back from nowhere. It means nothing. I swear, man, I totally swear."

Boone slammed the blade straight through the man's hand, and in response, he screamed.

"Shit, fuck, stop, stop!"

"I'm not the man you should be lying to. You work for Enzo Valdez and he is part of the Bonaldi Italian mafia. One of my friends was targeted last night. A woman. She was beaten up pretty bad. She is in the hospital, broken leg, broken hand, some ribs as well. One eye is completely swollen shut."

"That has nothing to do with me," he said.

"Did you not make the call last night?" Boone asked.

Donald's face scrunched up. "All I had to do was tell Howard to come home. That was all I was told to do and I did it. You don't understand, you follow the rules with these guys. If you don't, you end up with no limbs or you're fucking dead. Do you hear me? You're fucking dead. I did what I had to do."

"And because of it, Nancy is in the hospital. A woman you claim to be a friend. I know all about the nice man, Donald. The one who was willing to take care of four boys. Who conveniently befriended them. I thought it was suspicious, especially as your parents died so close together, leaving you everything."

"Hey, fuck you, man. I didn't do nothing to my parents. I fucking loved my parents. It's why I never left home. I fucking loved them, and they knew how to keep me from doing crazy shit, but ... fuck, the money had run out, and I can't get a job. I've been fucking mourning. I can't throw any shit out. I love my parents."

Boone looked at him, and it was strange, but he actually believed him.

Grabbing another knife, he impaled it into the man's hands. "Stay here. I don't want you to run. If you do, you're dead. You stay, we might be able to negotiate."

"Fuck!"

With that, he got to his feet and started to look around. Heading into the living room, sure enough, there were pictures of a couple through the years, some together, some with Donald. Even Donald looked different. His hair was well groomed. No facial hair, and even neatly dressed.

He made his way upstairs to the parents' bedroom, which looked like it had been cleaned as well.

His first assessment of Donald was not accurate. The parents had died close together, and it would seem they had all been close. The son was in mourning. Pulling out the documents, he saw that Donald's funds had been depleted. Sighing, he made his way downstairs. Desperation had sent this man to the Valdez.

"When did you get the tattoo?" he asked, taking a seat at the table.

"What does it matter?"

"Your life is what matters," Boone said. "If you want to live, tell me when you got the tattoo."

Donald sobbed. "Six months ago. To make money, you had to get this fucked-up tattoo, and it stung like a bitch. My mom would be so pissed if she was alive. She was always telling me that my body is my temple and I had to take care of it. She wasn't a fucking weirdo, but ... she believed in that kind of stuff. Taking care of herself." He sniffled.

Six months ago would align with Valdez becoming desperate. He had already started to push against his turf. Donald's place, close to Howard and Nancy, made it convenient.

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“I didn’t think a phone call was going to hurt her,” Donald said. “I would never hurt Howard and Nancy. They’re my friends. They knew my parents.” He sniffled. “She makes me the casserole my momma made.”

Clearly this man wasn’t thinking with all cylinders. He showed remorse. Boone was usually quite good at reading people, and he had a feeling Donald here was just trying to get by.

“You have two choices,” he said. “The first, you go to this cop.” He continued to talk as he reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out the card of the single cop he trusted. The same one he’d been feeding all the information to. “You tell him everything. You tell him how you joined the Bonaldis. You tell him what you were told to do, and the repercussions.”

“If I do that, I’m dead.”

Boone pulled out his gun and placed it on the table, still within his grip, but the intention was very fucking real. Donald jerked back.

“Or, you can die right now. Those are your two choices.”

Silence fell between them.

“Time’s ticking, Donald.”

More seconds ticked by.

He didn't mind if he had to kill this fucker today. There were already two more men on his list to die. They messed with the wrong people and now they had to pay the price. The image of Nancy in the hospital bed, one eye swollen shut. All they were trying to do was make a living. He'd make sure they were well taken care of, but he was never going to be able to erase the memories.

"I'll go to the cop," Donald said.

"Excellent. Are you going like that or are you getting changed into something more presentable?"

Chapter Ten

There was no sign of Boone.

Lucia couldn't think straight. She had gotten home and made herself something to eat, but she couldn't stop thinking about Nancy.

The guards had changed. Frank wasn't on her duty at the moment, it was someone else. She hadn't gotten his name yet. There was a rotation of guards.

"Are you all right?" the new guard asked.

He wasn't really a new guard, as he'd been on rotation, taking care of her for weeks.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine."

"I'll be out in the hallway if you need me."

Lucia nodded. She knew she should ask him his name, but it didn't seem important. Right now, Boone was killing someone. Actually, from the sound of it, he was killing

a few people. And the strangest thing of all was she didn't care. They had hurt Nancy. They had completely trashed their café and hurt her. She knew there was a lot of bad shit in the world, and she had seen it repeatedly growing up. Men and women getting killed right in front of her.

Moving toward the sitting room, she perched on the end of the sofa, but as her ass hit the softness beneath her, it felt so wrong. She quickly jerked up and began to pace. There was no way she could just walk around and be normal, while Boone was risking his life.

Walking into the kitchen, she paced the length, and then settled on making herself a cup of coffee. That made sense. She needed coffee.

Filling up the coffeepot the way she'd been shown, she turned it on and waited for the heavenly scent to fill the air. All the time, she refused to be distracted, and that pissed her off. She kept thinking about Nancy. Lucia knew what it was like to be hit repeatedly by her father, and a few times he had left bruises. He rarely hit her face. There were random slaps around the face but it was her body that had taken most of the impact.

Just as the coffee finished, she heard the main door to the apartment open up. There was a brief conversation, and she stepped out as the guard left.

She looked at Boone, and she didn't feel fear, although there seemed to still be a crazed look in his eye. He glanced over at her, and she couldn't help but look down at his shirt. There was blood spatter on his shirt, and it looked like his hands were also coated in dry blood.

Anyone else might have been terrified of their husband, but Lucia, in some odd way, knew he had done what was necessary. If those men hadn't been killed, they would have come back for more, and Boone would have shown weakness.

Without a word, she stepped up to him and didn't even hesitate in taking his hand. She was not afraid of him. She walked toward their shared bedroom and straight through to their en-suite bathroom. Boone didn't argue with her.

She reached up and removed his jacket from his body. He didn't fight her. She put the jacket on the floor, not surprised by the weight of it. There was a gun in there. With the jacket gone, she started to work on his shirt, which had a great deal of blood on it.

"Is any of this yours?" Lucia asked.

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Not that she knew any way of taking care of his wounds, but she certainly would try.

“No.”

That was a relief. Not because she would have had to take care of his wounds, but because he wasn't bleeding. She didn't want him to be hurt. Boone was a good man.

Releasing each button, she revealed his heavily inked chest.

“Did you get hurt?”

“No.”

This, again, was a relief.

She removed his shirt, then crouched down in front of him and suddenly realized she was undressing her husband. This should have taken place on their wedding night, yet it hadn't. He wasn't ready to fuck her and make her his wife.

It was strange, the kind of thoughts that entered her mind at moments like this. Sex, right now, didn't matter. It was pointless. She pushed it out of her mind and instead focused on the man before her. From the blood, she knew it had gotten violent and messy.

Releasing the button and working down the zip of his pants, she eased them off his body. Boone didn't fight her, and when it came to it, he simply stepped right out of them. She, unfortunately, was very aware of his boxer briefs. There was no bulge in

them, but she saw the outline of his cock. Boone was not aroused.

She reached for the boxer's waistband, expecting him to make her stop. Only, he didn't. She was able to pull them down his body, revealing his cock, which was flaccid.

With the boxers being the last step, she tried not to think and instead turned on the shower. Boone didn't take her help as he stepped into the shower, however, what surprised her was, he pulled her right inside with him.

Within seconds, he had her pressed up against the corner of the shower. "Tell me to stop," he said. And then he kissed her.

It was a soft kiss, and the moment their lips touched, he pulled back. Lucia didn't know what to say, but telling him to stop was the last thing on her mind. He kissed her again. This time, it was a little harder, and she couldn't help but release a moan. It felt so good to have his lips on hers. He kissed her again, and Lucia wrapped her arms around the back of his neck, pressing her body against his.

Was there some kind of law about kissing after a kill? Was there some kind of rule that said she shouldn't be aroused by her husband after he killed someone? She didn't know, and as his kissed deepened and his tongue stroked across her bottom lip, she didn't care. All she wanted was to feel him, enjoy him.

Boone tugged at the shirt she wore, pulling it up and over her head. The sweatpants she changed into were gone within seconds. Boone removed her clothes so fast, and she was suddenly standing before him in nothing. The lingerie was gone. He literally tore that from her body, and it felt so good as he did.

Boone stepped away from her, but he kept hold of her hands, lifting them a little away from her body. She had the overwhelming sensation to try and hide her body,

but Boone wouldn't allow her to let go of his hands. He was the one in control, not her. And he suddenly pulled her close.

She felt his hard body against hers. The feel of his rock-hard chest against her naked breasts. The feel of his hands, one at the back of her neck, the other sliding down, going toward the curve of her ass. Lucia also felt something else—the hard length of his cock as he started to swell.

“Did you take care of it?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“The men that hurt her, they're gone?”

“Yes.”

A second paused and she smiled. “Good.”

Boone pulled back and looked at her. “You're not afraid?”

“Why would I be afraid?” Lucia asked. “You didn't ask for this. They should have left your friends alone. If they had done that, they'd be alive. They made a choice.” He told her once that he always gave people choices.

He cupped her cheek, tilted her head back, and then kissed her again. “You're going to have to tell me to stop.”

“I don't want to.”

It felt so good to have him kissing her.

All too soon, Boone grabbed her hand but quickly spun her around so that her back was to him. He placed a hand on her stomach.

“Tell me if you want me to stop.”

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She didn't know what his obsession with stopping was, until she realized the hand at her stomach wasn't stopping. He slid down, going toward her pussy, and he cupped her.

Lucia gasped. She had never been touched there.

Boone stroked his fingers through the fine hairs coating her pussy for several seconds, before he ran a finger through her slit. She cried out, but not in pain, in pleasure, as he touched her clit. He didn't move and circled her tiny bud, where there was so much pleasure, so much sensation. She wanted to keep her eyes open, but slowly they slid closed as she basked in every second of sensation. His fingers ignited a spark within her, and it was one she didn't want to put out.

This shower was supposed to be about him, but she had a feeling it was turning into something about the two of them.

The two men who hurt Nancy had been easy to track down. Ronald had given him all the necessary information. Once he had the two men in his possession, he had taken them to a remote location—an old farmhouse, just outside the city. It was land he owned and had to decide what to do with.

One of his plans had been to rebuild the farm, however, he was not interested in farming. Other plans included a few apartment buildings, but there were also some developers interested in buying the land from him.

Both men had been tied up in the back of the old barn, where he asked them the necessary questions. At first, the two men had been happy to mouth off. However, when he impaled a sharp, rusty hook in their feet, they had both started to talk quite freely. They had a lot to say, talking over one another, that Valdez had initiated it. That Boone needed to be sent a message. They were all quite happy to talk.

And then, when it came time to hand out their punishment, he had told them. “I usually give people a choice. One is the right choice, the other is the wrong choice.” He’d looked at the two of them. “But you have both told me you knew who I was, what those people meant to me, and you still did what you did. You attacked a woman who was defenseless, so you made your choice.”

They could have gone to him. He would have listened and dealt with Valdez effectively.

The men had screamed for their lives. To make it fair, he’d not slowly killed one, then worked on the other. They both got to watch as pieces of their body were removed, and currently on the way to Valdez, as well as Bonaldi, as he was now in the shower with Lucia.

They thought they knew who they were dealing with. They were very much mistaken. He was a good man, a kind man, a fair man—to the people that deserved it. To those that didn’t, he was the man monsters feared. There was no remorse.

Seeing Nancy bruised, battered, and broken in that hospital bed was all he needed. Killing those men meant nothing to him. However, he already had wheels in motion for Leandro, as the youngest son had been given instructions to find the means of ending Boone’s life.

The one good thing about going to Valdez’s home was he’d been able to install a few listening devices.

Leandro was going to one of his older apartments, with the intention of setting a bomb. The young man didn't realize that Boone had already got him beat, and the moment he stepped inside his home, there was a trap ready to lock him in place. All he had to do was wait.

Pulling out of his thoughts, he focused on his wife, her naked body in his arms, and playing with her swollen clit. She shook within his arms, and he continued to tease her clit, knowing she was a virgin and there was no holding back. He felt the change within her, and the moment she came, he listened to the soft gasp that escaped her, and he held her in his arms, refusing to let go. Kissing her neck, then her shoulder, she let out a little moan.

He reached for the soap. His hands were already free of the blood. He wouldn't have touched Lucia with blood-coated hands. Lathering up the soap, he didn't bother to reach for the sponge, and instead got to soaping his wife. Touching every inch of her body, running the soap intently across her skin. She didn't have any ink on her. He noticed there were a few scars.

"Did your father do these?" he asked.

She jerked within his hold, but he refused to let her go. "Yes."

He'd pay for that as well. Enzo Valdez Senior had already written his death certificate. It was just up to Boone to execute it. As well as Bonaldi. That man was also going to die. The wheels were in motion.

After soaping Lucia's body, he reached for the shampoo, but Lucia surprised him by taking the soap from him.

"My turn."

He was not going to argue with her. She lathered the soap up in her hands, much like he had. He watched and waited, knowing that imagining her touch was going to be far different from actually touching him. She looked nervous.

He reached for her hand, then placed it on his chest. “To clean me, you have to touch me.”

She rolled her eyes, and it was so freaking cute, he couldn’t resist stealing a kiss. She let out a gasp.

Wrapping his fingers around her wrists, he didn’t squeeze or hold her too tightly. He got her to run her hands all over his body, getting him soaped up. He noticed she kept biting her lip, and it was so sexy the way she did it. It was like he was a piece of her puzzle she was trying to figure out. When she got to his cock, she hesitated, her hand going stiff within his grip.

Taking hold of her hand, he wrapped her fingers around his length, and he was already starting to get aroused at the sight of her.

“You won’t hurt me.”

“But...”

“Touch me, Lucia.”

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He watched her take a deep breath, and then she touched him. her fingers tightening around his length just a little, then squeezing. He gritted his teeth, trying to stay focused. It was next to impossible, although he was not some randy boy. He fucking felt like it with Lucia's touch. If he came now, it was going to embarrass them both.

"That feels so good," he said.

Lucia looked up at him. "I'm doing this right?"

"I'd tell you if you were doing it wrong." He wouldn't hold back in guiding her to do exactly what he wanted.

She continued to play with his cock, only now she certainly wasn't cleaning him. It was time to move this to the bedroom.

Turning off the shower, all the blood had been removed from his body, and he picked Lucia up in his arms, not caring that they were still wet. She let out a gasp, and he carried her through to their bedroom, where he placed her on the bed.

"Tell me now you don't want this," Boone said.

"I want you."

Not what he was expecting. Lucia was full of surprises. He had no doubt tonight was going to hurt. Lucia was a virgin, untouched. No man had ever known pleasure from her body, and he was going to change that.

Laying her on the bed, he stared down into her beautiful green eyes. They looked at him with such trust. He never wanted to disappoint her. Stroking her cheek, he leaned in and took possession of her mouth. A moan escaped her, and he swallowed it down.

Breaking from the kiss was impossible to do, but he managed, sliding his tongue down her body, going toward her neck, and grazing across her pulse. He couldn't resist just teasing her there, biting down, hearing her soft moan as he did so. He didn't linger. Tonight, he wanted to make it all about Lucia. She was going to need these good memories, because the moment he thrust inside her, all bets were off.

Kissing down her body, he moved toward her breasts that were so full and ripe. He pressed them together, and then took each nipple into his mouth in turn. He wanted to be greedy and have both of them, but he took restraint, and just licked and sucked at both puckered buds.

Trailing down her body, he continued to crawl down, spreading her legs, until he got to the apex of her thighs. He spread the lips of her sex, and then without waiting for a second, he pressed his tongue to her clit and began to slide back and forth across her bud. Lucia screamed his name, the sound filling the air, echoing off the walls. He took her clit between his teeth, not biting down but creating a friction he knew would drive her crazy.

Her pelvis thrust up against him, and he pushed a hand on her stomach, keeping her in place as he continued to ravish her cunt.

His cock was so hard, it was verging on the point of pain, but he wanted Lucia to come. He needed her to be soaking wet, because when he took her, it was going to hurt, and he wanted to spare her as much pain as possible.

She cried out.

He saw and felt the change within her, as he pushed her toward that peak. He didn't keep her dancing on it, but sent her over the edge and held her as she came. Her whole body shook, and there was no holding back with Lucia. She was fucking spectacular as she came.

The sounds went straight to his cock, and they were a heady experience. He didn't want it to stop, but the time to wait was over. He moved up the bed, while her body was still in the throes of orgasm. Staring into her eyes, he didn't break contact and kept looking at her.

"Tell me to stop," he said.

This was the choice he had to make, to give Lucia the option.

"No."

"It's going to hurt."

"I don't care. I want to be with you, Boone," she said.

And those words, those eyes, just this woman. She was fucking everything and he didn't want to hold back, not for a second. Reaching for his cock, he continued to stare into her green eyes, and then he pressed his cock to her core, and slid in hard and deep, tearing through the veil of her virginity, claiming her as his once and for all.

Lucia screamed, and he took possession of her mouth, as he held himself balls-deep within her, but he didn't move. He didn't make a sound, hoping the pain would subside. If she wanted him to stop, he would find the strength to do so. Her pussy was so tight.

She squeezed his cock, and he gritted his teeth, holding himself together, as the gentleman he was when it came to Lucia. Whatever she wanted, she would get. If she demanded he stop, he'd stop.

Their life together was her choice.

Chapter Eleven

Lucia stared down at the coffeepot and she felt ... different. She was still the same woman. Nothing had changed in the last twenty-four hours. Only, she was no longer a virgin. Boone had made their marriage official. There was no backing out now.

The moment he took her, it had hurt. The pain had been what she expected, but it still took her breath away. Boone had even warned her it was going to hurt. Yet, she was still surprised, which made her a fool. Anyway, that pain hadn't lasted. At first, she thought it was going to last the whole night. It had stayed maybe a couple of minutes, and then she wanted to know what came next.

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And now she knew what came next—the best feeling in the world, as Boone had made love to her. That was what he told her after he'd completed. That he would make love to her, and there would be time for fucking soon.

She'd woken this morning to an empty bed, but Boone had left her a note saying he was going to the hospital, getting some breakfast, and he'd meet her here at eleven. Checking the time, she saw it was one minute to eleven, and she nibbled her lip, just as the door opened. She moved toward the main hallway, and sure enough, there was Boone, entering his apartment, carrying a bag.

The guard that was in the hallway left, and she was once again alone with her husband. It was strange, because this now felt more real to her. Boone Grinder was her husband.

“Good morning, Beautiful,” Boone said.

She tried to be sensible and do what a normal wife might do, which is control herself. There was no element of control to her. She ran toward him, throwing her arms around him, and Boone lifted her off her feet and spun her around. She'd dressed in sweatpants and a shirt, as well as underwear because she didn't know how long Boone was going to take.

“How's Nancy?” Lucia asked.

“She's doing good. The doctors are happy with her progress. I've told Howard not to worry about a thing, that I am taking care of it. I also stopped by their café, and the guys Ronald has on them have already changed the windows, and are currently

installing the new furniture.”

“That was quick.”

“Ronald is on-site, so slacking off will not be an option. I told him I wanted the café up and running as soon as possible.”

She took a deep breath, feeling a little happier, if not a lot more hopeful that Nancy and Howard were going to be okay. “This is all good news.”

“Yeah, it is the best kind of news for today.” He put her down on her feet. “Do you have the coffee?”

“I’ll go and finish it.”

She rushed into the kitchen, poured them both large mugs of coffee, and joined him at the dining table.

“We’re going to have to move today,” Boone said.

“We are?”

“Yeah, we’ll pack a few things, and then I’m taking you to a secure location.”

“Why?”

“It’s about to get messy,” Boone said.

“And you think stashing me away somewhere is going to ... what?”

“Help me focus and concentrate on the shit that is going to happen. You remember

what I told you about Bonaldi?”

She nodded her head.

“Wheels are being set in motion, Lucia. I can’t back away now. Not after what they did to Nancy. They will pay.”

“Including my father?”

“Yes.”

She nodded.

“Do you have a problem with that?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t.”

Boone reached for her hand and took it.

“But I don’t want to be without you,” Lucia said. “Move me from apartment to apartment if you have to. Train me how to take care of myself, but don’t abandon me. Don’t leave me, please.” She hated sounding so weak.

“I’m not abandoning you. However, your father knows some of my locations. There are a few he is completely unaware of, which is where I’m going to take you. You’re going to be safe there, I promise.” He picked her hand up and placed a kiss to her knuckles. “Trust me?”

“I do trust you.” She smiled at him.

“Great, now eat your sticky bun. It goes great with the coffee.”

He put a rolled sticky bun right in front of her, and she took a bite. The caramel and the nuts were so delicious. After chewing the first bite, she picked up her coffee and took another sip.

Boone had rolled the sleeves of his shirt up to his elbows, and she couldn't help but admire the many tattoos he had.

“What's it like having tattoos?” she asked. I sound so immature.

“Do you mean is it painful?”

“That, and what is it like? Do you like it? Do you regret having them?”

“No, I don't regret them. I imagine it is painful to some, but not to me. Are you curious about having ink?”

She shrugged. “I don't know. Maybe.” She ran her fingers through her hair. “I got my hair cut, and I guess having ink is just another line I could cross.”

Boone continued to look at her, and she wondered what he was thinking. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask, but he held a finger up and moved. She frowned, watching him go to one the few stands he had in his apartment. He opened one of the drawers, and then came toward her. He had some felt-tip pens in his hands.

“Take your shirt off,” he said.

“What? Why?”

Not that she had a problem. If he wanted to have sex, she was happy to oblige.

“Trust me.”

And she did completely trust him. She removed her shirt, and Boone moved his chair closer to her. Lucia didn't have a clue what he was doing, until she felt the tip of the pen on her flesh. Boone was drawing on her flesh. She looked at him, then down at her arm, as he began to draw something.

“Are you an artist?” she asked.

“Hell, no, but I can draw a couple of things.”

She sat still as he held her arm, not tight but firm, and changed colors as he worked. She kept glancing down. He glided the pen over her arm, going around her wrist. Lucia loved being the center of his attention.

She didn't know how much time had passed, until he put the lid on the last pen and told her to have a look. The ink on her arm was a picture of a door, surrounded by vines and flowers. It was not perfect, but it looked beautiful.

“Wow,” Lucia said.

“You can wear that for the rest of the day, see how you like having ink, and then, if you do like it, we'll arrange for you to get a tattoo.”

“Really?”

He stroked some of the hair off her face and moved in close, putting his lips to her ear.

“Do I have to keep reminding you that with me, you’re free to make your own choices?”

“But I can’t stay with you?” she asked.

This made him laugh. “No, you can’t stay with me.”

She looked at him, and it was strange how bold she felt. “Can I ask you to kiss me again?”

“You can ask me for anything.”

He kissed her lips. It was just the merest breath of a kiss, but it made her gasp, and she smiled at him.

“And again?” Lucia asked.

“Ah, you want a real kiss?”

“Yes.”

“You’re becoming quite demanding, aren’t you?”

She didn’t respond as Boone kissed her. He completely stole her breath. His hand landed at her back, right across the strap of her bra.

Lucia turned toward him and she didn’t know what came over her, only she felt like she needed to be as close as physically possible to him. She moved to straddle his lap, and as she did so, she felt the hard ridge of his cock pressing against her core.

Lucia pulled back and looked at him. Boone slowly reached up for the strap of her bra and flicked the clasp, allowing it to spring open. This made her gasp, and then he eased the bra right off her body and threw it to the floor.

She was thankful that his men always left the apartment.

She reached out and began to open the buttons of his shirt, once again revealing his heavily inked chest. She pushed the shirt open but didn’t have the patience to remove it completely.

All too soon, Boone lifted her up and carried her to the other part of the table. He placed her on top of the table, and without any warning, he shoved his hand into her pants and cupped her through her panties. His touch felt so good. Within seconds, her sweatpants and panties were gone, and Boone knelt on the floor in front of her.

His tongue danced across her clit, sliding down to go to her entrance. He circled her entrance, and much to her surprise, he pressed his tongue inside her. Lucia cried out. Boone fucked her with his tongue, before pulling back, then circling her clit, going back and forth across her nub.

She held onto the edge of the table, trying to find composure, but the truth was, with his tongue, she struggled to make sense of anything. The pleasure was intense.

She knew she was close to orgasm, and he'd only been touching her for a few seconds. The last thing she wanted to do was disappoint him, but he sent her right over the edge, making her scream and beg.

Boone drew every last bit of her orgasm from her, and then he stood. His pants were already open, the thickness of his cock in his hand, and she was ready. He pressed inside her, and there was a slight soreness, but no pain, like there had been last night. She loved feeling him inside her.

Wrapping her arms around him, Boone kissed her, and he began to rock inside her. He was so big, so thick, and she felt every inch of him as he pushed inside her and pulled out. Boone didn't pull all of the way out of her, he kept the tip inside, and then slammed even more within her. It felt so good, and she didn't want him to stop.

She never thought it could be like this. Her mother had told her how horrible it was going to be. That she would hate his touch and beg for it to be over.

She yearned for Boone's touch. Craved it.

And then, she felt him, the catch in his throat as he came to his peak. He looked into her eyes, and she didn't glance away but continued to stare into his eyes.

Boone was ... everything. The very thought of it scared her. She had never known

love. Not even parental love. She had never meant anything to anyone, but looking at Boone, she wanted to mean something to him. For the first time in her life, she wanted someone to love her.

She accepted that her parents hated her, and her siblings despised her. She had gotten used to that feeling.

With Boone, she hoped he could one day have feelings for her that went beyond saving her, and not an obligation.

“You know, you could come with me,” Lucia said.

The temptation was strong, but Boone reached over and put a hand on her knee. The apartments he had spread around the city were not ideal. Not for his wife, not when he was about to go to war.

While he’d been enjoying his wife, several Bonaldi residents had been invaded by the police. He had already forwarded the information to the cop on the case, about some of the dealings going on. One of the places was a warehouse that bagged the drugs Bonaldi distributed. That place, along with the staff, had been arrested. The cops on Bonaldi’s payroll were also turning up dead.

Boone had been very clear to the cop he dealt with. He let the man know who was dirty and who wasn’t. It made it harder for Bonaldi to be one step ahead of the game.

Donald had done the right thing and was currently in witness protection.

The men who hurt Nancy had never been caught, but that was because their body parts had been disposed of by Valdez and Bonaldi. Boone had made sure they got

equal men. Admittedly, they both got each other's parts, just for the fun of it.

After the drug warehouse, the shipment of guns had also been ceased. Two brothels had been invaded as well.

There were several other businesses that dealt with the money-laundering, and he'd taken care of that as well. The money had been piled high in stacks, that building had somehow caught fire, and the dirty money had been burnt.

Bonaldi was going to start reaching for straws, and like all desperate men, he would get dirty, which is why getting Lucia to safety was his top priority.

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As for Valdez, Leandro was currently trapped in one of his apartments, with no way to escape. All he had to do was bring up the footage, and he would get to see Leandro in all his glory. The man didn't like being caged up. It was a shame, as there was no way out for him.

"I will come to you. This is not goodbye. I'll be staying with you a couple of days." That should give Leandro enough time to ... panic. "I'll get you settled and we can have some time together. Consider it a mini-honeymoon."

"A honeymoon?"

"Yes, don't you want one of them?"

"That's what normal couples have, isn't it?"

"Yes, and we can be a normal couple."

She laughed. "Okay then, a mini-honeymoon."

He reached over and took her hand. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her glancing out the window, and she had this serene smile on her face, which is exactly how he wanted her to be. Lucia deserved happiness and he was going to make sure she got it.

All of a sudden, she gasped and jerked around in her seat. He looked to see what threat there was, but there was nothing. Frank was following behind him, as he had opted to come and help them get settled.

“What is it?” Boone asked.

“That ... man, he just ... I swear he just kicked that dog.” She looked behind her and Boone looked out his window, seeing a group of men. Most of them without shirts, sporting ink. Just as he was about to ignore it and tell her it was all good, he watched one of the boys kick a dog.

Lucia gasped.

Putting the car in “park,” he let go of Lucia’s hand. “Wait here, and do me a favor, don’t look out the window.”

He got out of his car, went to the trunk, opened it up, and found the claw wrench. Frank was already out of the car.

“What’s happening, Boss?”

He didn’t need to answer as they heard the dog whimper.

“Got it,” Frank said.

With the claw wrench in his hand, he approached the group of men. The dog was cowering from them, but it was also on a leash. It looked like a staff, and from the quick glance, it was also a female dog.

“What the fuck is your problem?” the guy who held the dog asked.

“Is that your dog?” Boone asked.

“Yeah, this is my bitch, what the fuck is your problem?”

“You have two choices,” Boone said. “Give me the dog, or start screaming like a little bitch.”

The group of men looked at one another, and their expressions were all serious, then they burst out laughing.

“Get the fuck out of here. You got a problem with the way I treat my dog, fuck you. There is nothing you can do about it.” The man went to kick the dog, only his leg didn’t hit the animal, as Boone brought the claw wrench down, hard.

The man began to scream and collapsed on the floor, letting the leash go. The dog moved away, but she didn’t go for him.

“I did give you a choice.”

“Fuck him up,” the man said.

Frank was at his back, but he didn’t need the help. Two men attacked him, and he swung the claw wrench, hitting one of them around the face, the second he shoved into the guts of another. The third guy that came at him had piercings, and he pulled them, rending the man squealing. The fourth man got hit by Frank.

Now, the leader was back on his feet, and Boone didn’t wait, he slammed the claw wrench across his face and then swung it at the man coming in from behind. They kept coming, and Boone didn’t stop until they were on the floor, moaning. Teeth were missing, and blood covered their faces.

“Don’t let me catch you ever kicking a dog again.” With that, Boone went to the dog, picked the girl up in his arms, and carried her to the car. The wrench was thrown in the trunk, and he handed the dog to Lucia.

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“I hope you’re ready to be a fur mummy,” Boone said.

“Holy crap, I’ve never had a dog before,” Lucia said.

The dog shook a little.

“She’s a little afraid. She looks young. Hug her, let her know you’re not afraid of her.”

“You’ve had a dog before?”

“A long time ago.”

Lucia wrapped her arms around the dog, and Boone turned over the ignition and began to drive away.

“You saved her,” Lucia said.

“For you.”

“Did it bother you that he was kicking the dog?”

“Yes,” Boone said. “Dogs are loyal. They will fight for you, defend you with their lives. They’re better than all humans and should be protected.”

“Dad never allowed us to have a dog. He was allergic, so no pets for us. No dogs.” She pressed her face against the dog’s neck. “It’s okay. I have no idea how to take

care of you, but Boone is going to teach me. Yes, he is, and you are going to be so loved, and no one is ever going to kick you again.” She let out a sigh. “What animal kicks a dog?”

He didn’t have to say, because the animal that was wouldn’t be having a good time of it. During his attack, he heard a few bones crunching, and he hadn’t been light in teaching that piece of shit a lesson.

On the road, Frank continued to follow him, and it was getting late. The hot summer sun was glaring down, and they had to make a few stops for the dog to do her business. He stared at the dog, and it was strange, because it looked fat to him. Boone had a feeling the dog was pregnant. That evil little bastard was kicking a pregnant dog. Now he wished he hadn’t let the piece of shit live. If he saw him again, there would be hell to pay.

He’d make the necessary arrangements for a vet to see the dog. They were less than twenty minutes from where he wanted to take her, and he looked toward Lucia.

“Do you want to name her?” Boone asked.

Lucia stroked the dog. It hadn’t taken long, but the dog now seemed quite attached to Lucia. She kept hugging her, soothing her.

“I don’t know. Does it have to be dog names?”

“It can be anything you want,” he said.

He glanced over to see Lucia’s lips perched as she started trying to think of a dog’s name.

“I have no idea. What did you call your dogs?”

“I had male dogs, there was Ryan and Blue.”

“You had two dogs?”

“My dad had two dogs.”

“Your father?”

“He passed away a long time ago.”

“You know, I don’t know anything about you, or your past.”

“A lot of people don’t.” He didn’t talk about his past, because that man didn’t exist. No one would find a single trace of him.

“Betty? What do you think?”

“You want to call the dog, Betty?”

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“Yeah, I like the name, and she is so lovely. When I look at her, I think Betty.”

The dog had lifted her head, and Boone laughed. “Betty it is.”

“That is your new name. Betty Grinder.” Lucia kissed the top of her head. “You’re going to have a wonderful life, and I am going to give you so many treats, and I’m going to take such good care of you.”

Betty was already having a good life.

He pulled off the main road, going down a secluded driveway, where he came to the security fence. Reaching out, he typed out the code and the gates opened up, letting them inside.

The old farmhouse he had bought, renovated, and updated was the most secure safe house. No one would ever get within breathing distance of Lucia. Not only did he have the security fence, anyone who climbed the fence would set off sensors, alerting anyone in the house to a possible intruder.

Once inside the house, he had multiple panic rooms, with supplies that would last several days of a possible home invasion, as well as weapons to fight back. He didn’t hold back with this house.

Parking the car, Frank joined them, and Lucia opened the door, allowing Betty out and sniffing the yard before heading toward the front door.

“Wow,” Lucia said. “This is ... incredible.”

The house looked like the old farmhouse, surrounded by trees, and beyond there were endless fields far and wide. It was a beautiful place to raise a family, which is why he'd created it. Although having a family had been the last thing on his mind. Men like him didn't get the option of a family.

After Betty had finishing sniffing around and sat dutifully by Lucia's side, he took her hand and led her into the house.

Most of the furniture was covered in protective sheeting, and he didn't have people coming to clean this place. This was his private place, and he didn't want anyone involved, but those he trusted with his life.

"Damn, this is a pretty nice place," Frank said.

Lucia giggled. "Can I take her off the leash?"

"Sure."

He watched as Lucia bent down and removed the leash from the collar. The dog didn't scurry off but stayed by Lucia's side.

He was going to have to grab some dog food. Then, he remembered the guard, and he pulled out some cash, handing it to Frank. His guard nodded and left. Now, it was just him and Lucia.

"Let me show you the place."

The tour wasn't extensive. A sitting room, game room, dining room that led onto the main kitchen. There was a back porch leading out to a garden, as well as a small vegetable patch that hadn't been worked.

Taking her inside, he led her upstairs to the five bedrooms. All with en-suites. The master bedroom the biggest.

All of the rooms were stark. No memories. Nothing. He'd renovated this house, but he had yet to live in it.

Once she had seen the whole house, it was time to take her to the panic rooms.

"Panic rooms?" Lucia asked.

"Consider them safe rooms." He went into the main bedroom, going toward the closet, sliding the column open, and clicking the code in. The door opened. It was not a large space, enough to fit Lucia, and if necessary, a couple of kids.

They stepped inside, and Betty continued to sniff the space. He pointed out the security cameras spread across two screens that showed every room in the house.

"Wow," Lucia said, which seemed to be saying a lot.

"It's a lot to take in."

"No, it's just that you are so prepared. I don't think my dad was ever this prepared." Lucia turned to look at him, and there was a question in her eyes.

Boone didn't say a word. "I'm going to protect you."

"You built all of this before you even knew me."

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He stayed silent and Lucia nodded, stepping out of the room. She was outside the closet when he spoke.

“One day, I will tell you who I am, what I did, who I was, but right now is not the time. I’m a good man, Lucia, but I am also a bad man. All I hope is that you trust me.”

“I do trust you, Boone. I just hope one day you can trust me as well.”

Chapter Twelve

The house was beautiful, stunning even. It was the perfect place to raise a family. The bedrooms were all ready and waiting for children. The main bedroom was still bare, no pictures, nothing. There was no real history here, but the love and dedication built into the property was clear.

Then there were the safe/panic rooms. They showed a man prepared for all eventualities, but they also showed a man with a lot of enemies to consider. This was not unusual to her.

She imagined, back home, her father had panic rooms, only none of his children, or at least herself, was aware of them. In the event of a home invasion, she would surely be dead.

Before Frank came back, she and Boone removed all the furniture covers and started to open up the house, airing it out. There was some dust, but it was easily managed, as they both coughed and spluttered. They were in the process of cleaning as Betty

got herself comfortable on one of the large sofas they uncovered.

She looked toward Boone to see if he minded the dog being on the furniture, but he didn't even glance in Betty's direction. She had always wanted a dog. Even when she was little and she saw them on the street, she had wanted a dog. They were so adorable. Her father couldn't stand them. Whenever he was near, they made him have uncontrollable sneezes, which is why they were never allowed a dog. Totally unfair and uncalled for, but that was her father.

Frank finally returned, only he didn't just have dog food, Frank had come with toys, a bed, a bath, and all the essentials of raising a dog.

"You thought of everything," Lucia said.

"Yeah, well, pieces of shit were hurting her, so I think it is only fair we treat her like a princess," Frank said.

It would seem between Boone and Frank, they both had a soft spot for Betty.

"Come on then, let's get you a bath ready. What do you think?" Lucia moved toward Betty's side, and she didn't even have to ask Boone for help.

He reached down and cradled the dog in his arms, as if she was so precious. In that moment, as he held a dog, a stranger to him at the start of the day, Lucia couldn't help but fall in love with him. This made her stop as she looked at him.

Falling in love. It was the impossible thing to do, yet as she looked at him, she knew that was exactly how she felt. She had fallen in love with her husband, although this hadn't been any kind of love match. This had been arranged. Was it possible for Boone to have feelings for her?

“Are you coming?” Boone asked.

He was already heading out toward the kitchen.

“You okay?” Frank asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.”

She was not ready to talk about her feelings with him, or with anyone. She had fallen in love with Boone. It didn’t even seem possible to her. There was no way she was in love with him. That would be crazy.

She watched as he lowered Betty to the floor and ran his hand down the dog’s back. The bathtub Frank had purchased was behind him, and Frank was already filling it with water.

There was more to Boone than met the eye. She understood that, but what did it mean exactly?

She felt so compelled to watch him. He was so gentle with the dog, and she didn’t imagine for a second he’d been nice to the men who had kicked Betty. She had done as he asked and not turned to look. Lucia heard the commotion, but she trusted Boone, no one else. She had kept her gaze forward, although the temptation to look back had been so strong. She had refrained from doing so. That had been hard.

Boone looked up at her. “Are you coming to help? I don’t think she has ever been cared for, and she has gotten really attached to you.”

Lucia didn’t hesitate and got her ass moving closer to Boone. She sat down, running both of her hands either side of Betty’s face. “I’ve got you, sweet girl. I’ve got you, and you don’t need to worry about a thing.” She leaned down and pressed her face

against the dog's head. "I love you. Yes, I do. I love you." She didn't quite know if she was telling the dog she loved her, or trying to let Boone know she had developed feelings for him. What would he do? What would he say? She pushed it out of her mind because there was no room to be thinking about any of that.

Working as a team, they were able to get Betty into the warm water. She started off shaking, but Lucia didn't stop talking to her, soothing her. All she did was give directions and talk to Betty, without panicking. She focused on the dog as Boone took the soap and began lathering up the dog. The scent was so adorable.

Lucia kept kissing the dog's nose, and for her efforts, she would randomly get licked. It wasn't long before Betty relaxed.

"You don't think they punished her in a bath or anything, do you?" As she spoke, she did so in a singsong voice, so as not to raise Betty's alarm and have her panicking.

"I fucking hope not, otherwise I'll go back and kill them," Frank said.

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She looked toward Boone who nodded his head, but she wasn't sure if he was agreeing with her or with Frank. Either way, those men were monsters, and Betty was now in good hands, as she was living with her and Boone.

"I love you." She kissed her head. "And we're going to take good care of you and love you. Everyone here. I think Frank already loves you, because he didn't just get you food. No, he got you lots of toys, and a bed, and this bath."

"Hey, I can't help it. I'm a sucker for a girl in need, and this little angel was in need."

Lucia laughed as he reached out and ruffled his head.

"But I wonder if Daddy will love you?" Lucia asked, looking over at Boone. "If I'm the mommy and we're married, that will make you the daddy."

Boone looked at her, and he kept staring at her intently. She didn't know what he was thinking about, but she couldn't look away. It was like she had been sucked into his gaze and there was nowhere out. Nowhere at all.

What was he thinking? Did he want to be Betty's daddy? Did he want to be a daddy at all? She had so many questions, but she spent years keeping them to herself, and she refused to break this, especially in front of Frank. This was for a private conversation between her and her husband, and she didn't need anyone listening in. Although Frank was happily married with children.

She pushed all those thoughts out of her mind. For the next hour, they washed Betty. It did appear the dog had never been cleaned, which was gross. They had to change

the bathwater, because it had gotten so dirty. Once she was clean, they got her dried as best they could, and with the sun shining, Lucia took her out into the yard and allowed her to bask in the sunshine.

Betty did exactly that, spreading out, going from side to side. She sunbathed while Lucia sat on the ground beside her. Every now and then, she would touch her and run her hands up and down the length of her back.

Lucia didn't know how anyone could harm an animal. She sat beside this adorable dog and already felt an overwhelming sense of protection for her. She wanted to take care of her, love her, give her a good life.

And while she did, she wanted to try and make sense of her feelings toward Boone. She'd never hated him, but for a short while she had feared her husband, or at least his reputation. She didn't fear him now.

There was more to Boone than met the eye.

"Do you want me to go back and kill them?" Frank asked.

Boone turned toward the man and shook his head. "If we're destined to meet them again, they'll be dead, but for now they can live."

"You're kinder than I am. I think they should all be killed."

Boone glanced out the kitchen window and watched as Lucia tilted her head toward the sun. Every now and then, she would reach out, touch Betty, stroke the dog, then go back to her eyes closed, looking up at the sky. The tormented look in her eyes had angered him. The instant he saw it, he wanted to protect her, to let her know nothing

bad was going to happen.

“Did you pick up any food when you went to the pet store?”

“Actually, I didn’t need to go to the pet store, I got everything in one trip. The rest of it is in the car. I’ll be right back.”

He wasn’t going to point out the obvious, that for the past couple of hours, if the guy had bought any meat or poultry, leaving it in a red-hot car had probably spoiled it.

Boone couldn’t help but be drawn to his wife. She looked at peace here. When she called him “Daddy,” it had set something off inside him. They had enjoyed each other a couple of times now, and he’d not reached for a condom. It was fucking crazy to him to not have reached for condoms, knowing how important they were. He never forgot about them. Yet, he hadn’t thought about the condoms with Lucia. Never in his life had he been so careless. It only took once. One time to have sex and produce a baby. He and Lucia could be parents now.

He had never even considered the possibility of becoming a father. Fatherhood was never on his list. What the fuck did he know about parenting? Yes, he had a great father. He had a great start in life, but that hadn’t lasted.

At the sound of Frank’s vomiting, Boone turned toward his friend. His face looked green.

“I boo-booed.”

Boone laughed. “The meat gone bad?”

“Fuck me, it has gone worse than bad. I think that stench has filled the car.” He wrinkled his nose. “Crap, Amy is going to kill me.”

This was not his problem.

“Do we have anything I can cook?” he asked, moving closer.

The stench of the rotting meat was overwhelming. He wrinkled his nose and tried to steer as clear from the man as humanly possible.

“You need to toss that shit out, and take it to the nearest dump,” Boone said.

He took the other bags from Frank.

“I’ll be right back.”

He started to unpack the groceries. Different cereals, bread that appeared to be sweating, some baked goods, along with several different pasta bags and sauces. Boone put everything away, glancing toward the pantry. He had a few items he had placed there in storage, as he had every intention of stepping away, retiring, building a life for himself. Only, other plans had gotten in the way.

Now, he picked up a couple of jars of Italian seasoning. Frank had also purchased multiple cans of tomatoes. With no other source of meat, it was going to have to be a tomato pasta. He made a note to go shopping in the morning, possibly with Lucia. For that night, he just got to cooking them a meal.

Frank made his way out into the garden. Once alone, Boone was able to check on Leandro who was still stuck in one of Boone’s apartments. The man looked ready to crack, but it had only been a day. There was no way Leandro would be able to get a signal or contact anyone for help, which was the way Boone had arranged it. A small device sent out a signal, blocking all cell phone signals, apart from the one outside the radius he’d set up for the security feed.

Ronald was working on restoring the café, and by the end of next week, it would be as good as new. Tomorrow, Nancy would be discharged from the hospital. Boone had already taken care of the hospital bills. The men were dead, and he had other men in place to keep an eye on their café.

In the meantime, Valdez and Bonaldi, along with multiple capos under his command, would be distracted, as up and down the country, he had initiated the cops to do some hunting. It was lovely what a nice tip and video evidence could do, that would force a warrant, and then, boom, everything went to shit for them. They had gotten away with too much in the past, and now it was time for them to feel the pain.

Slicing up some onion and bell pepper, he got that in the pan with a little butter. This is what Frank had picked up, rather than olive oil. He already had a pan of water coming to boil. With the onions and pepper sweating down, he added some salt, pepper, along with a good pinch of Italian seasoning. Next, he crushed and chopped up the garlic, adding that to the pot.

Frank had forgotten the olive oil, but he'd purchased a bottle of white wine. Boone did not know how that man's head worked, but it didn't matter. He opened the wine and added a good couple of glugs to the pan. Giving it a stir, he next added the tomatoes, some chicken stock, and turned the heat down to a simmer the moment it had started to boil.

The pasta was thrown into the boiling water, along with a good pinch of salt. His father had always said that to have good pasta, you needed to heavily salt the water. This is what he did, still, to this day.

"Um, something smells good," Lucia said.

"Just a little supper."

She giggled. "We're having vegetarian tonight? Frank already told me his car stinks of dead meat, and he wants to keep all the doors open and spray it with some kind of disinfectant."

"Yeah, you need to blame Betty for the vegetarian meal."

“As it happens, I love vegetarian, so I don’t mind at all.”

Boone smiled.

“So, uh, thank you,” Lucia said.

“What for?”

“For the dog.”

He stopped stirring the pasta and turned toward her. “You don’t need to thank me for the dog. If I had seen them hurting her, I would have stopped anyway.”

“I know, but I have no idea what I’m doing and you got me a dog anyway.”

“A dog is kind of like a baby. Only, babies grow up, leave home, and think they’re better at all the shit than their parents, until they get to an age and realize they’re doing exactly the same, or shittier than their parents.”

Lucia looked at him. “Is that what you thought of your dad?”

He opened and closed his mouth.

“Right, I’m sorry.”

“My dad was dead before I got chance to do that,” Boone said.

“I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t need to be. You didn’t pull the trigger that killed him. Life is what killed him, and getting complacent.” Boone turned back to his sauce. He hadn’t added too

much chicken stock for it to be too watery.

Looking through the stuff, he pulled out a very soggy-looking parmesan cheese. He and Lucia were definitely going shopping tomorrow. No wonder Amy was always threatening to kill her husband. The man didn't seem to focus.

Boone looked outside the kitchen window, and sure enough, he was on his back, sunbathing.

“Is he asleep?”

“Not yet, but I could smell dinner. I’ll go and wake him up if he is. I don’t want him getting sick with sunburn.”

Lucia turned on her heel and was already out the door. Boone looked down at Betty, who had sat on the tiled floor, looking up at him.

“You’re an adorable girl, and you already know it, don’t you?”

Her tongue came out the side of her mouth, and she looked a little on the goofy side, like she was actually smiling at him. She was just too fucking adorable.

He squatted down on his haunches and reached out, stroking the back of her neck. “It’s okay, girl. Even if you are pregnant, your babies are going to be well cared for. You see, your new mommy is going to be a sucker for all of them.” He had no doubt when it came to Betty’s children, they were not going to be able to sell a single one. His very quiet and peaceful home was going to be overrun with tiny little dogs. For Lucia, he didn’t mind.

Frank came in, yawning his ass off.

“What’s for dinner?” Frank asked.

Boone served their dinner, along with the sweating bread. It could have been worse, but thankfully, it wasn’t. The food was good.

It was also getting late.

Frank went to bed first, and Lucia looked down at Betty, when it was time for them to retire. Boone knew that leaving Betty downstairs was not an option. Down he went, picking the dog up in his arms and carrying her upstairs to their bedroom. It would seem even though Betty was more than happy to go walking around the house earlier, she was too tired now. Also, those puppy dog eyes she gave him were impossible to ignore, and he needed to carry her.

Lucia carried the dog bed with her. He was not going to have the dog on the bed, and he opened the closet for Lucia to put the bed down. The closet was going to remain open, but there was enough space for Betty. She would be close enough for them to hear, but giving them privacy as well. He waited to see if Betty was going to be difficult, but he didn't have to worry, as she climbed into bed and settled in.

Now, he looked toward Lucia and held his hand out.

She went straight to him. "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me." He would do anything for her.

Walking into the en-suite bathroom, he pulled Lucia into his arms. He cupped her face, tilted her head back, and took possession of her lips.

She let out a sigh. "That was amazing."

And he kissed her again, this time he traced his tongue across her lips, and she let out a gasp. Plundering her mouth, he deepened the kiss, loving the taste of her lips. Lucia pressed her tongue against his, and they danced together.

Pulling at her shirt, he broke the kiss long enough to throw her shirt across the room.

He didn't even take the time to see where it had landed. Next, he took care of her pants. They were easy to take care of. Now she stood in a bra and panties, both of which were black. He pressed his face against her crotch and breathed her in. In response, she let out a moan.

He was growing impatient, and he tore the panties right off her body. Standing up, he then removed her bra, and that fell to the floor.

Lucia was now naked, and he was very much dressed. She didn't seem too happy about that. He wanted to run his hands all over her body, to learn every inch of her and find what made her yearn for more.

Instead, he was patient, allowing Lucia to remove his clothes. He'd already dispensed with the jacket he was wearing. It was up to Lucia to remove his shirt, pants, and boxer briefs, which she did with shocking speed. Not that he was complaining, seeing as his own patience was starting to wear thin, and he wanted her, badly.

The moment they were both naked, he stepped them into the shower and pressed her up against the wall. Turning on the shower stall, he gritted his teeth as the spray hit him, but he didn't want Lucia to feel the cold.

Taking possession of her mouth, he kissed her again. He would gladly kiss her for the rest of their lives. He was addicted to the feel of her lips on his, and he didn't want to stop kissing her. He consumed each moan for himself.

Running his hands down her body, he tried to hold back, but he needed to feel her. He spun her around, cupping her cheek, tilting her head toward him. He kissed her, and at the same time ran his other hand down her body, stroking across her tightened nipple. Moving from one to the other, he stroked each bud, pinching the tip, before he went straight toward her pussy.

Cupping her in his hand, he slid a finger through her soaking wet slit and then pressed forward, hearing her soft, subtle gasp. He pushed knuckle deep, pulling out, and adding a second finger. She was still so tight, and with a second finger he tried to stretch her cunt so she could take him without feeling a smidge of pain. She whimpered, the sound echoing around the room.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked.

“No.”

“Good.”

He pulled his fingers from her cunt and stroked them up toward her clit. Kissing her lips, he started to stroke her clit, sliding his finger back and forth, circling over her bud. He felt her body start to shake as her orgasm climbed. Boone didn't hold back, though. He pushed her over the edge, hearing her cry out seconds before he kissed her. Boone held her within his arms as the orgasm took over her body. There was no holding back, no acting. This was all woman, pure and simple. His woman. And he didn't want to let her go.

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He was falling in love with this woman. Actually, that was inaccurate, he wasn't just falling for this woman—he was in love with this woman. He had been in love with her from the moment he had seen her. Knew the life she had lived. One picture had made him want to take care of her, love her, to show her life could be better. When it came to Lucia, he wanted to make her world better, show her there was no need to be afraid. He'd take care of anything.

He'd make her world the best fucking place it could be, and he would do so because he loved her, and she meant the fucking world to him.

Chapter Thirteen

Lucia laughed, and she giggled.

“Stop. Stop. Stop.”

Boone's laughter echoed around the room and Lucia couldn't stop giggling.

“You're not playing fair.” She tried to wriggle out of his arms, but there was no use. He was in control, and he held her down. They were playing, and it felt so good to let loose. Betty was still in her bed, fast asleep.

Lucia didn't even know what had happened for them to start playing like this. Boone was so adorable, and she saw a weakness as he lifted up. Taking the opportunity that struck her, she pushed him back and he fell to the bed. There was no way she beat him, he was the one who let her win, as she moved to straddle his waist. She cupped his face, then leaned in and kissed him.

This felt ... strange. It felt so good to be in charge, being able to touch him freely. He put his hands on her thighs, then stroked up her body until he cupped her tits. She let out a moan, whimpering. He pinched her nipples, and she moaned.

Between her thighs, she felt the hard ridge of his cock. Another moan escaped her, and she wanted to feel him inside her. Lifting up, she didn't know how she suddenly felt this bold, but she reached for his cock. Being with Boone made her feel so alive and free.

"That's it, Beautiful," he said.

Lining the tip of his cock to her entrance, she started to lower herself, and Boone had a grip on her hips, guiding her. She stared at him and was completely captured by his brown eyes. All she wanted to do was sink into them.

She loved this man, and she had this overwhelming feeling of never wanting to live in the world without him.

His grip tightened on her hips and he guided her down onto his length. She sunk her teeth into her lip.

"No, let me hear the sounds," he said.

She let go of her lip and moaned. She didn't want him to stop as he continued to thrust up to meet her. Holding onto his shoulders, she slid down, fucking onto his length, taking more of him. Boone groaned. His hands worked over her ass, then around to her hips. When he reached between her thighs and began to stroke her clit, Lucia cried out.

"Does that feel good?" he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then I want you to come all over my cock, Lucia. Come all over my dick, let me feel it.”

She felt that peak and was already climbing toward it. There was no holding back, not that she wanted to. She couldn't stop herself. The pleasure built until she went right over the edge.

Boone held her as she came in his arms, but he didn't stop. Within seconds, he had her on her back, and he thrust hard and deep inside her, filling her over and over. She looked up, even with the aftershocks of pleasure rushing through her, she watched as he came apart. She felt the kick of his cock as he pulsed within her.

Boone collapsed against her, his face pressing against her neck, and seconds later they heard Betty whimpering.

Lucia laughed. “I'll go.”

“I can do it.”

“No, no, I'll go and let her outside.”

Boone kissed her lips. “I'll carry her downstairs.”

Who was this man? He had filled the whole Bonaldi family with fear, and yet he would take the time to carry a dog downstairs.

She quickly pulled on a robe, as Boone pulled on a pair of sweatpants. They walked downstairs, and she rushed toward the door. Betty trotted out, and Boone stepped out into the cold morning. He wrapped his arms around her.

“Go and get a shirt on,” Lucia said, with a chuckle.

As Boone left, Frank stepped out into the yard. He had two mugs of coffee and handed one to her.

“Good morning,” he said.

He looked terrible.

“Didn’t you sleep well?”

“Fuck, no. I never sleep well unless I’m in my own bed.”

“You could go home,” Lucia suggested.

Boone had the house locked up so tight, it was impossible for anyone to penetrate it without him knowing.

“Not yet. I’ll wait until Boone tells me to.”

“How is Amy?”

“She’s good. She sends her love and would one day love to meet you,” Frank said.

This startled her for a second. “Really?”

“Yeah, why?”

Lucia shook her head and then offered him a smile. “I’m just not used to people wanting to meet me. It’s kind of strange.”

Frank chuckled. “That’s the kind of shit Valdez will do to you, huh?”

She didn't say anything but blew across her coffee, then looked out where Betty was sniffing. She had already used the garden as a toilet. She had gone far enough away that there was no stink.

Boone returned, wearing a pair of pants and a dress shirt. He looked ready for a day at the office. Glancing toward Frank, who looked like crap, and her husband who appeared so put-together, she felt bad.

"Boone, don't you think Frank should go and be with Amy for a bit?" Lucia asked.

"Huh?" Boone asked.

"Well, you've already said you'll be staying with me, so it makes sense for Frank to go home and spend some time with the wife and kids before he returns."

Frank glared at her and she smiled.

"Yeah, you could have gone home last night," Boone said.

"Don't you think we should talk about ... you know ... the threat?"

Lucia looked from Boone to Frank. She could only imagine this had to do with her father and Bonaldi.

"There is no threat, and right now it is all taken care of. You can go and be with your family. I want you back in three days," Boone said.

Three days. Was that all the time she had with Boone, and then he was going to finally take care of business? She felt her stomach twist and knot up. Three days, and once Bonaldi and her father were gone for good, what did that mean for the two of them?

She hated the questions that fired through her brain, making it hard for her to focus or do anything.

Frank finished his coffee. “See you guys in three days.”

He left, and Lucia suddenly wished she had kept her mouth shut. This was not what she wanted. Crap. Three days was all she had left with her husband?

Betty came over and sat down at her feet.

“I think someone wants feeding,” Boone said.

She offered a smile.

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Three days. That was all that kept ringing in her head. Three days. Three fucking days. Not that she cussed all that much, but three days didn't seem like a long enough time to get over someone.

They walked back inside, and Boone went to the dog food and started to serve Betty. Lucia went to the fridge and looked inside.

“French toast?” she asked. She had been working on that recipe back at Boone's apartment.

“Yeah, so long as the eggs are good and the bread isn't moldy. Today, we're going to head to the supermarket. Get you stocked up on the groceries you're going to need. I can't rely on Frank.”

“And his return in three days,” Lucia said.

“Yeah. Last night he trashed a lot of food by forgetting it.” Boone chuckled. “Also, I have arranged for Betty to go to the vet.”

“The vet? Why?”

“I don't know if you noticed, but her stomach is somewhat swollen.”

“It is?”

“Yeah, and I have a feeling she might be pregnant.”

Lucia gasped. “Betty might be having puppies?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, wow, talk about going in deep. Puppies. Are you sure?” Lucia looked down at Betty who had finished her food. She had already gone and found a spot in the sun, and now that she looked at her, her stomach did seem a little swollen.

“Yeah, I’m sure. I figured get the vet to check her over, find out what we can do. Make sure that piece of shit didn’t hurt her.”

Lucia hated that. That man had kicked her more than once.

“You don’t think he’s ... hurt her?”

“I don’t know. But we will find out.”

Lucia got the egg mixture ready for the French toast. The hot plate was already heated, and she added some butter. She made sure not to get it too hot. The first pieces she had ever done of French toast, Frank had been polite about, but after one bite, he tossed it into the trash. It hadn’t been cooked properly, and she had somehow flooded the bread with egg. On the outside there had been a lot of burnt edges, and the inside was still wet with uncooked egg. She hadn’t stopped learning, though. Eventually, after several loaves of bread and multiple cartons of eggs, she got it just right. This was a breakfast she could cook.

But it didn’t stop her from thinking about three days.

“What is going to happen in three days?” Lucia asked. The moment she blurted out the question, she wished she could take it back.

“I’ve got to take care of some business,” Boone said.

“And you’ll be back after three days?”

“It will take me a little longer to get back, but once I’m done, I’ll be back.”

Would he divorce her when he was done? If her father and Bonaldi were gone, that meant their marriage was no longer needed. He could divorce her. She had no idea what his intention was, but she did feel like a coward, because right then she didn’t want to find out. She would rather stay in her bubble of illusion which seemed to be the safest option for her.

It was the only option she had.

They went to the supermarket and stocked up on groceries. Lucia was incorrigible as she went down the pet aisle, and any toy Betty didn’t have, she made sure she bought. There was no way he could say no to her.

She had been a little distant since she found out in three days he was leaving. Frank would return, and then Boone had business to tend to. Three days would be enough time for Leandro to weaken as well. The man was not making it out of the apartment.

So far, Valdez hadn’t even sent out a search party to hunt for his youngest child, but he had also been dragged into the local police station for questioning. It would seem Valdez’s past had come back to haunt him as the body of the serving girl Lucia had told him about, had been uncovered.

There were multiple ways to dispose of a body. When it came to women who meant nothing, they were just collateral damage, Valdez didn’t dispose of them through the

proper channels. Boone figured this was because every dead body went through the Bonaldi channels. Killing women as they served no purpose would alert Bonaldi to the waste of resources and further cause Valdez a headache.

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He had it on good sources that some of the women that had been killed were also pregnant with Valdez's offspring. All they had to do was look at the bloodwork, and it would lead back to Valdez.

Thanks to Lucia's information and knowing everything he did about Valdez, finding his dumping ground wasn't hard. He was surprised that in less than twenty-four hours, they had uncovered four women, two of which were pregnant. Only Valdez would know why he had killed them.

From the grocery store, to the vet's, Betty was in perfect shape. She was pregnant, and from the scans, it looked like she was going to have a litter of five pups. All looked good, but if any showed signs of weakness when Betty gave birth, the vet gave him his card, and that was the end of it. He carried Betty back to the car, and Lucia looked pale.

"What's up?" Boone asked.

"He just told us to call him if anything is wrong with the pups," Lucia said.

"Yeah, she could give birth any day now."

"Exactly, when a woman is pregnant, she goes to the hospital. They give her drugs and help bring the baby out, and if there is a complication, they operate."

"And?"

"They have just sent us away with Betty. What are we supposed to do?"

Boone laughed. “We do what they did in the olden days for women—we nurse Betty through, and keep an eye on the pups. That is all we have to do. Betty will do the rest, and nature finds a way.”

“But what if Betty rejects her pups? What if there is something bad? What if something bad happens to Betty?”

“Okay, I think first you need to calm down, as you’re panicking and you’re going to scare Betty. Secondly, everything is going to be okay. Trust me, Betty will let us know if she needs anything. We’ll have five little pups running around, getting under our feet in no time.”

“I don’t know how you can be so calm,” Lucia said. “I’ve never taken care of a dog before in my life, and I’ve never even considered pups.”

“And you’re doing a great job of it now.”

She still looked panicked and they climbed into the car, and Boone looked out the window, toward the vehicle he had seen at the supermarket. There was a man inside, he wore glasses, along with a suit, but something wasn’t sitting right with Boone.

He was now near the vet’s as well.

Lucia reached into the back and stroked Betty’s head. “You’re a good girl.”

Boone didn’t want to scare or alarm Lucia to his suspicions. He pulled the car out of the parking lot and headed in the opposite direction of his home. The car that had joined them at the supermarket and the vet’s was now taking a nice little stroll along with them.

He had been driving a good twenty minutes, before Lucia glanced around.

“Boone, where are we going?” Lucia asked.

He slowed the car, and that was when he saw the glint of the gun.

“Get down!” he yelled and reacted, pushing Lucia’s head down. She let out a scream as the gun went off, shattering the back window.

Betty was on the back seat and Lucia cried out. Boone knew this was a danger, but the car wasn’t going fast enough. One glance in the mirror, the man was distracted, and Boone hit the brakes.

“Hold it,” Boone said.

The car crashed into the back of his, but it wasn’t going too fast to make much of an impact. The airbags went off for his car, as it did for the man behind him.

“Boone?”

“Stay here,” Boone said. He climbed out of the car and got to the driver’s side, opening the door. He stepped out of the way as a shot was fired. Taking the arm, he slammed his elbow down, and the man released the gun.

Within seconds, he was out of the car, and Boone had his arm around the man’s neck, cutting off his air as he struggled to breathe. He saw the mark on the man’s neck—this was Valdez’s man.

“How did you find me?” Boone asked.

The man choked a little more. He relented and allowed him to breathe.

“Fuck you,” he said.

This time, Boone kept hold of him a little longer while he struggled to breathe. He counted down the seconds in his head. One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three, one thousand, and then he let him go. The man coughed.

“Are you going to answer my question?” he asked.

“Valdez asked me to keep an eye on you. I’ve been trying to get in contact with him, to alert him to your location. I’ve got nothing. I need to know what to do with you.”

Boone snapped the man’s neck, grabbed his cell phone, and used the man’s thumb to get into the cell phone. Checking through the texts and calls, he saw the instructions to follow Boone and not to report any location through text. He shook his head. There was no place safer for Lucia, and he only had to hope this piece of shit hadn’t alerted Valdez. He was not going to step up his timetable, but he had the next three days to prepare for an attack.

Shoving the man back into his car, he went to the trunk of his own. He glanced in to see Betty on Lucia’s lap.

“Is she okay?” Boone asked. “Do we need to take her back to the vet?”

“No, I think she’s fine. The glass hasn’t cut her.”

“Good. I’ll just be a moment.”

With that, he pulled out the gasoline he kept, tossed it over the car, and set fire to it. Taking his now empty gasoline can, he tossed it in the trunk, climbed back into the car, and took off in the opposite direction. They were several feet away when the car exploded, and the fire got even more fierce.

“What the hell?” Lucia asked.

“That was one of your father’s men,” Boone said.

He drove back to his home. Typing in the code, he drove down the long driveway, heading toward the main house.

“Boone! Boone!”

He turned to look at Lucia, who was staring down at his shoulder.

“You’ve been shot!”

The adrenaline had been coursing through his body, and he hadn’t even felt the gunshot.

“It’s fine.”

“Fine. This is not fine. Boone, you have been shot.”

He climbed out of the car and went around to pick Betty up.

“You shouldn’t be carrying her,” Lucia said.

“Don’t worry about it. Come on, there’s a first aid kit in my office.”

Once they were inside the house, he let Betty go and followed Lucia into the office. Removing his jacket, he let out a wince as the movement was quite stiff. Lucia's hands were shaking but she looked at him with such concern.

"You've been shot," Lucia said.

"Did it go through?" he asked.

He'd already tried to look out the back.

"Through?"

"Yeah, see if there is an exit..." He thought he had dodged the bullet that came out of the gun, but seeing as it was in front, it must have caught him. Little fucker.

"No, there is no wound out the back. We have to get a doctor."

"No, there's no need for a doctor."

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“Boone, come on, you cannot be serious right now.”

“I am serious, and I don’t need a doctor. Just help me. Grab the things that look like pliers.”

“Boone?” she asked.

“Trust me, Lucia. I know what I am doing.”

She looked ready to argue, but then it was like she gave up, reached into the bag, and pulled out the pliers. He took them from her and placed them against his wound, feeling around.

“Stop. Stop!” Lucia said. “You’re going to hurt yourself. You’re crazy! Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Yeah, I’ve been told many times.”

She watched as he pulled out a torch, shined it on his wound, and then started to work the tip of the pliers inside. He grabbed the bullet and pulled it out.

“How did you know this didn’t require a doctor?” she asked.

“It’s not the first time I’ve pulled a bullet out of my body. You’re going to need to sew it up for me,” he said.

“You’ve been shot before?”

“Multiple times. It’s why I’ve got all the ink.”

“Have you ever thought about trying not to get shot?”

“My charming personality gets in the way.”

Lucia laughed but he heard it was close to hysterical.

“I never knew you had a sense of humor.”

“It would appear being shot at by one of your father’s men brings out the humor in me.”

“I’m so sorry. Did he say what he wanted? Besides killing us?” she asked.

“Yeah, he just wanted to say hello and I was the one who said goodbye.”

“What does this mean?”

“It means your father is a giant pain in the ass,” he said.

Lucia laughed. “We already know that. Does that mean you have to leave before the three days?”

“No, I don’t have to leave just yet. Besides, I don’t want to do that to Frank.”

She sighed.

“Are you sure about this?” she asked, holding up the needle.

“Yeah, I’m sure. I can handle it.”

She shook her head, but she got started on stitching up the hole. “You know this could get infected.”

“It’ll be fine,” he said.

“You’re crazy.”

He laughed and watched as Betty strolled in and went to one of his sofas, jumping on it, and getting settled. He had no doubt in his mind she was the reason he hadn’t spotted them being followed. Lucia had been so upset and he’d been so distracted in fixing the problem that he had been shot. Not that he blamed the dog. Betty was as protected as Lucia was. Whatever his woman loved would be protected.

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Lucia tutted. "I have never sewn anything in my life. I think it looks ugly. You're going to have a scar."

"Babe, I'm covered in scars. Why do you think I've got all the ink?" he asked.

"You're scared?"

"You don't get to where I am today without getting hurt. Trust me."

"Is that why you're not reacting? I mean, you've got to be in pain, right? It looks pretty painful."

"It is painful," he said. "But it's no different than what I have felt before, so don't worry."

Lucia nodded and he watched her take a breath. He saw that in the beginning, she had panicked, yet as the seconds passed, her focus had stayed. Her hands stopped shaking. Once she tied the string into a knot, she clipped the edges and then grabbed some wipes.

"Hold on," he said.

Stepping toward the drinks' cabinet, he found the strongest scotch he owned, pulled out the stopper, and poured it onto his wound.

"Damn it, Boone. You're getting that all over the place."

His wound stung, and Lucia was there, guiding him back.

“You’re insane,” she said. “Alcohol. Seriously?”

“It’s strong and got a high content that will help.” Boone smiled at her.

“You’re getting your wound drunk?”

This made him chuckle. “You’re adorable,” he said.

“And you’re a pain.” She pressed a sanitary wipe to the wound, pressing on it gently.

“You better not die on me through infection. I will be so mad at you.”

“You’ll have to take care of me.”

She cupped his face. “I’m already taking care of you. Maybe, in three days’ time, you shouldn’t leave?”

“Lucia?”

“Maybe, you and I can go. We can leave this house and go someplace where no one knows us. Where no one knows we exist, and we can be free?”

He saw the hope in her eyes, and he wanted to do that. It would be easy to get them both new identities, to start a life somewhere away from all this crap. However, if he didn’t finish what he started, Valdez and Bonaldi would rise up again. Not only would they get bigger, they would get stronger, and there would be men or women who would come hunting for them. That was not acceptable. They could have a life together, one that didn’t involve them constantly looking behind them.

“One day, we will have that. That’s not today,” he said.

Lucia sighed. “But it could be.”

“Lucia, I’ve got to do this.”

“You don’t have to do this. You’re choosing to do this.” She pressed a hand to his cheek.

What was she not telling him?

Chapter Fourteen

For the next couple of days, Lucia felt like she was living on a cloud, or in a dreamworld, or even possibly an alternate reality. Everything that was happening didn’t seem real to her.

It wasn’t like for the past twenty-two years she’d been living with a family, seeing the horrors that happened at their hand, trying to survive. Knowing her father hated her because she wasn’t considered this stunning beauty he could bargain with. Having siblings who enjoyed tormenting her, because it was all part of their fun.

She felt like those years were the dream, and yet this was her reality. She’d been given to Boone Grinder as an insult, but it had been the best thing that ever happened to her.

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Rolling over in bed, she turned to look at him. It was so rare for her to catch a glimpse of him as he slept. He looked so peaceful. She didn't want to wake him up. Time was ticking, she knew this. Frank still hadn't returned, but Boone's cell phone had been ringing, almost off the hook for the past day.

Stuff was going down, and it was only a matter of time before he had to leave. When he did, she knew there was a slight chance he was never going to come back, and that terrified her more than she liked to admit. She had grown to love him so very much, and that scared her. She wasn't used to loving anyone. With him taking on the Bonaldi mafia, there was a chance he was not going to make it. The very thought of never seeing him again filled her with such anguish.

"I can feel you thinking," Boone said.

"I can't help it."

Boone opened his eyes. She didn't know why she was surprised to see him awake.

"You were awake?"

"Of course."

"How did you look so relaxed?"

"I'm a good actor."

This made her laugh.

“You’ve got to stop worrying,” he said.

“How do you know I’m worrying?”

He reached out and put a finger against the center of her brow. “Right here.”

“You don’t have to go.”

He opened his eyes again and smiled up at her. “You know, if I don’t complete this mission, they’re going to come back harder than ever before. People are going to die. Innocent people.”

“You’ve told me before that people die every day.”

“Yeah, and some of those deaths can be avoided. The shit Bonaldi was into ... it has to stop. No one else has been able to stop it.”

“But you can?”

“I’ve been able to cut some of their operations. In a few days’ time, it is all going to end. This needs to happen.”

She wanted to argue with him, but the truth was, she didn’t want to let him go. She was being selfish.

“You’re right.”

“I know I’m right.” He lifted up and pressed a kiss to her lips.

She looked at him, trying to get her fill of every part of him as he pushed some of the hair back behind her ear.

“It’s going to be all right.”

He kissed her again and he climbed off the bed. She figured that was the end of the conversation, but all too soon she was being dragged from the bed, and she let out a little cry. Betty was still in her bed, looking so tired. Their dog lifted her head, watched the two of them, decided there was no threat, and snuggled back into the covers. She was no good as a protector dog, not that she needed one of those with Boone around.

He had her over his shoulder, like she weighed nothing at all. She let out a little scream, not that she felt afraid. He carried her through to the en-suite bathroom and didn’t let her go until she was on her feet. Only then did he turn on the shower, and she screamed again. “What are you doing?”

She laughed, and he quickly stripped her of her clothes. One moment they were on, and the next, they were gone. She had no time to complain as he took possession of her mouth in a searing kiss. It was one that made her toes curl in all the good ways. She wanted to melt for him.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me?” he asked.

“No.”

He took her hand and pressed it against his cock. While he’d been undressing her, it would seem he’d been working on removing his clothes as well.

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She wrapped her fingers around the thickness of his cock. He let out a growl, tugged her closer, and kissed her. When his hands went to her ass, gripping her flesh, she couldn't help but gasp.

One moment she was worried about the future, imagining a life without him, and the next, she couldn't think past her own need. He had control of her body. She was putty in his hands.

Boone slid his hands up, and then he cupped her face, pressing her against the tile. His kisses became more passionate, making her moan and melt against him. He broke the kiss and started to travel down her body. He sucked at her neck, and she closed her eyes, whimpering.

“You drive me fucking crazy,” he said.

His hands were at her breasts, his thumbs stroking each of her nipples. Down he traveled, kissing toward each breast, and then sucking each one in turn. Each hard tug on her nipples made it hard for her to focus.

She felt an answering pull between her thighs, and it was as if he knew. One of his hands went to her thigh and slowly began to travel up until he cupped her pussy. One finger slid between her lips, stroking her clit. He circled the bud, then started to move down, pushing deep inside her. She cried out, then tried to calm the sounds she made by gritting her teeth.

“Let me hear them,” he said. “I want to hear it all.”

She groaned.

“Please.”

“I know what you want.”

And then, without asking him for anything, he sunk down to his knees in the shower. He lifted one of her legs over his shoulder and then began to lick her pussy. She cried out, not wanting him to stop. The somersault of sensation was a heady feeling. She wanted him to keep going. There was no sense in her mind. She knew she wanted to hit that peak.

Boone had other ideas. He was in control, working her body to a fever pitch, where she couldn't think. He tormented her, pushing her to the edge but holding back at the last minute, to the point that she couldn't help but growl her frustration.

“Is my baby desperate for me?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to come?”

“Yes.”

“Then, come for me.”

And it was like her body was at his command. She came hard, moaning his name, screaming, and Boone caught her. He was not going to let her fall.

Before she had even come down from her amazing high, Boone was there, lifting her up, using the wall as leverage. Within seconds, he thrust deep inside her. He was so

big, so thick, and she cried out. She was still so sensitive, but her body was his. She didn't want it to be anything else.

He kissed her, and she didn't want him to ever stop kissing her, to never stop making love to her. She didn't want him to stop being hers. The wedding band she wore in the beginning had felt like a mockery, but now it was part of who they were, and to take it off would feel wrong.

He held tightly to her ass and began to thrust hard and deep within her, and she cried out, feeling hungry for him. He pressed his face against her neck, and she whimpered, feeling his cock as he thrust inside her. This was what she wanted for them.

She didn't ever want to give him up.

If Boone left Leandro any longer, the guy was going to die of starvation, and that was not the plan.

He didn't want to leave Lucia alone at the house, but he also didn't have a choice. After he had fucked her into oblivion, he made sure she was sound asleep before sneaking out of the house and taking the time to drive to his apartment where Leandro was trapped. The whole building had been vacated, but it would seem Leandro was a stubborn individual.

Entering the apartment, he saw Leandro had stripped down to his underwear, and he was sitting as far away from the window as possible. The apartment could get a little hot during the days, especially through the summer. He also made sure none of the air conditioning would come on.

Closing the door behind him, Leandro opened his eyes and laughed. "I should have

known,” he said.

Boone made his way toward the caged area. Most of his apartments had an open plan, but this one had a separate sitting room, where Leandro intended to place the bomb.

“Do you really think I didn’t know about the car?” Boone asked.

“Well, I don’t know. I guess I didn’t think you knew, but then you were so stupid to marry the ugly sister, I didn’t really put much stock in your intelligence.”

Boone tutted and smiled.

“Do you think you, your father, and the Bonaldi mafia have been one step ahead of me this whole time?”

“No one wins against us,” Leandro said.

“Do you remember a short time ago, the news breaking the story about that mayor who was on the payroll?” Boone asked.

Leandro looked at him.

“Who do you think provided the evidence? How about the storage container of girls? That was another impressive moment, yes, no? Or better yet, Jimmy O’Cara?”

Leandro frowned.

“Now, let’s talk about your sister. I never had any intention of taking anyone else. The moment you got greedy and hurt innocent people, was the moment you got me involved. Up until that point, I was happy to build my own life, to continue finding my way.”

“You don’t know who you’re fucking messing with.”

“Really? And yet, you’re locked up in a cage and have been for several days without food and water. Huh, does that bring back a memory?”

Leandro stared at him.

“Maybe I should help you understand. Do you remember a nanny you did this to?” Boone asked.

He saw the recognition on the man’s face and this made him smile. “You sealed your fate, Leandro.”

“You kill me and my father will fucking kill you. The Bonaldi will consider it a personal threat.”

“I’m counting on it.”

The fear finally started to enter Leandro’s eyes.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“I don’t like greedy men. I don’t like men who threaten people just because they can. I don’t like men raping women, girls, children, men, boys. I don’t like the evil in this world. Now, I’m happy to look the other way, but you all got me involved. There is no turning back. Your father, your brothers, everyone in your family, apart from Lucia, are going to pay that price. Each of you had a choice to walk away from what you knew, but you all chose wrong, and now I’m going to fix it. You decided to choose yourselves rather than others. When you tormented your nanny, Lucia was the only one trying to reason with you, was she not?”

Boone had found out everything. The guards, when faced with certain death, were happy to start talking. Boone needed to know if Lucia was a real victim, or just as evil as her family. He was not going to marry someone he would have to destroy.

“Lucia tried to figure out a way of disarming your bomb, trying to feed the nanny,

even though she was young. You got her hurt for meddling. While your nanny decided to end it, you, your father, your mother, your two brothers, and your other sister were in the garden, cheering you on. Lucia was in her bedroom nursing bruises and cuts from your father's belt for interfering. I do believe she was not allowed food for several days, am I right?"

Leandro glared at him.

"How does it feel to be caged without anyone showing you remorse? That nanny did nothing to you. You made the choice to be where you are, Leandro. You decided to set that bomb on my car, and you chose to come here. I know your father is trying to find you, and he will. I will make sure he finds your remains."

"You piece of shit," Leandro said. "You're going to pay for this."

"No, you're about to pay for your sins, Leandro. I'm just about to speed up the process, because you're too much of a coward to do it yourself." He pulled out his cell phone. "I'm going to leave here, and when I do, I'm going to press this button. You will listen to a song, and when it gets to the final verse, know it is the end for you. As for Lucia, she will live a long life—a very happy life, far away from you and your father. Don't worry, your father is also going to be joining you very soon."

And with that, he got to his feet and made his way to the door.

"Who the fuck are you?" Leandro asked.

"I was a guy you should have left alone."

He left the apartment and pressed the button. He stepped away and started to make his way toward his car. It didn't take him long, and as he was driving away from the building, in the rearview mirror, he saw the explosion on the floor where Leandro

was. Boone continued to drive, and when he was a good distance away, he put in a call to Enzo Valdez Senior.

“Hello,” Enzo asked on the second ring.

“You can call off the search party for you son,” Boone said.

“Who is this?”

“You will find what remains of him at the job you asked him to do.” Boone gave him the location.

Leandro hadn’t given his father the exact location of one of Boone’s apartments.

“Boone,” Enzo said.

He didn’t respond.

“If you have hurt Leandro...”

“I simply paid him back for the sin he committed many years ago. A sin you participated in. One I don’t like. The nanny he blew up, do you remember?” Boone asked.

“Was this a friend of yours?” Enzo asked.

“No, she was not a friend. I didn’t even know the nanny, and to be honest, I wasn’t even aware of the story until much later. Anyway, what Leandro did to the nanny, was just done to him.”

“You blew up my son. This is an act of war.”

“When did you think it wasn’t?” Boone asked.

“You have my daughter.”

“Ah, yes, Lucia. I had to get her to safety before I dealt with everything else. I have to wonder, is anyone else in your family missing?” Boone asked.

There was silence.

“I do recall you have Enzo and Bruno, correct? How long has it been since they have been seen, I wonder?”

“If you touch them—”

“You will do absolutely nothing.” Even over the line, he heard the banging and invasion taking place. “Do you know how many enemies you have made along the way, and how easy it is to get them to turn on you?” Boone tutted. “Fear only gets you so far, but it doesn’t hold any real loyalty, Enzo. You should know that, and the fear of Bonaldi is coming to an end.”

“You think you’ve won. You do not know what is going to happen.”

“I’ve not even started.”

And with that, he hung up.

Pulling out his second cell phone, he watched the security footage in Lucia’s father’s office. The man looked spooked. Good. It was the least he deserved.

There was still a lot to process and get through. For now, he could go back to Lucia and spend a few days with her. He’d already talked to Frank, who was enjoying his time with Amy. As for Ronald, the café was up and running. He was keeping an eye on everything, and Howard and Nancy were doing good. Everything was falling into

place.

For now, he could breathe a little easier and go and enjoy his wife.

It wouldn't be long before he had to take care of the rest.

Chapter Fifteen

The house was empty of Boone and anyone else when Lucia woke up the following day. After using the bathroom, she picked up Betty, carried her downstairs, and let her out into the yard. She put the coffeepot on, and then stepped out, breathing in the morning sun. There was a slight chill to the air, and she knew it wouldn't be long before the seasons changed.

She missed Boone. She hadn't even felt him leave last night, which she didn't like.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she looked out over the garden. Did he trust her not to leave? Not to call her family? She rolled her eyes. He'd already given her a choice and there was no way she was going back on it. She didn't regret the decision she had made.

Once Betty was finished, her very pregnant doggy waddled over to her, and she bent down, giving her a stroke.

"He'll be back soon, won't he, girl? He wouldn't just leave you alone. I don't believe that for a minute." She kissed the top of the dog's head, loving her so much.

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“It’s going to be okay.” She didn’t know if she was trying to reassure herself, or the dog. Did Betty even understand her?

“Come on, let’s get you something to eat.”

They walked back into the house, and Lucia closed and locked the door. She trusted Boone’s home, but she didn’t want to make it easy for anyone to get close. She had Betty to protect.

The scent of coffee filled the air, and she put some food into a bowl, allowing her little dog to eat.

“You’re eating for a lot of little pups.” She stroked down Betty’s back, and then poured herself a mug of coffee. “You know what I’m thinking, Betty? I’m thinking some French toast. I think that could be quite nice.”

She pursed her lips and looked inside the fridge. Grabbing the carton of eggs, some milk, along with some bread, she felt her stomach start to growl, she was so hungry.

“I’m hungry.”

She was just talking to fill the silence.

“Do you like eggs?” she asked Betty.

The dog was still eating her bowl of food.

“Of course you do. Everyone likes eggs. I mean, I don’t know for certain, because I don’t know the whole world, but eggs are a pretty good food, right?”

She didn’t want to think. She missed Boone.

Lucia cracked two eggs into a bowl, followed by a splash of milk. She had seen one of those celebrity chefs do this on their cooking channel. She didn’t want any cinnamon, and instead, seasoned it with some salt and black pepper. Once that was done, she got to work melting the butter. It was important not to burn the butter or the bread.

Tears filled her eyes, which was crazy. Why was she crying?

Boone’s gone and he might not come back.

She sniffled. And the tears started to fall.

Slapping the two slices of bread into the pan, she heard the slight sizzle. Using the back of her hand to wipe her nose and rub at her eyes, she took a deep breath.

Her father had beaten her. There were times he would lash out at her for no good reason. A slap to the back of the head, a beating with the belt. Her brothers had tormented her, really terrified her, and her sister hadn’t been much better. Neither had her mother. She had gone through all of that—seeing people die, having to be quiet, listening to screams that would echo through the house—and no one was willing to make her feel okay. After everything she had been through, knowing there was a chance Boone might not make it back filled her with deep sorrow.

Lucia never cried for herself. There was no point. It was her life, and she got used to it.

“Lucia, what’s the matter?”

She jerked her head up and turned to see Boone standing in the kitchen doorway. Dropping the egg slice she had in her hand, she rushed toward him. This was not good, but she didn’t care, as she threw herself into his arms.

“I thought I was never going to see you again,” Lucia said.

He wrapped his arms around her, the tears fell even more freely now, and yes, she still hated them. Boone wrapped his arms around her, pressing his face against her neck. She was so grateful to have him in her arms.

“You’re cooking breakfast?” he asked.

“I’m trying to. French toast looks ... easy, I think.”

He laughed. “Do you want to make me some breakfast?”

She pulled back and nodded. When she went to move away, he stopped her, pulling her in close and wiping her tears.

“Why are you crying?”

It was on the tip of her tongue to lie to him, but that didn’t feel right. Lying was not going to solve things. Boone needed to know the truth.

“I didn’t think I was going to see you again.”

“You didn’t?”

“You’re ... the Bonaldis, no one has been successful in taking them down, Boone. What you’re doing might get you killed?”

He cupped her face, and she had no choice but to look up at him. She didn’t look away, even for a second. She loved his brown eyes. She loved everything about him.

“Do you still want that ink?” he asked.

“What?”

“You didn’t know if you wanted a tattoo. Have you made up your mind?”

Where were his thoughts at a moment like this? She was trying to warn him and all he could think about was ink? It made no sense to her.

“Boone—”

“Do you still want to get some ink?” he asked, completely cutting her off.

Trying to warn him was pointless. Staring into his eyes, she saw he had already made up his mind. There was no changing it, and she didn’t want to ruin the short time they had together. Tattoos were important to him.

“Yes, I would still like to get that ink.”

If she got the ink, that would mean he was going to stick around, wouldn't it?

"I made arrangements for us to go somewhere today. I know a guy who is more than happy to slot you in, and more importantly, I trust him."

There were so many questions she wanted to ask. Her curiosity about where he was when she woke up, what he'd been doing, had he completed his mission? Had he made Bonaldi and her father pay for their sins? Yet, not a single word left her lips.

"You trust him?" she asked.

"Yes."

She nodded. "Then, yeah, I'd love to. What about Betty?"

"She can come along. I'll keep her company."

Again, she had no idea what to say, so she merely nodded her head, which seemed to be her thing to do.

It didn't take Lucia long to be ready for him, changing into a pair of jeans and a large sweater. She did have on a crop top underneath for modesty. With Betty secured in the back of the car, Lucia took the passenger seat, and they were driving out of the main driveway, onto the road. She kept looking toward him, wondering if there was any discernable sign of what he'd been up to. Nothing gave it away.

She pressed her lips together and continued to look straight ahead. That seemed to be her best bet, although she couldn't help but glance toward him.

"Ask me," Boone said.

“What?”

“I can see that something is on your mind, Lucia. Don’t beat around the bush, just ask me.”

Just ask. No one just asked the man in their world what was going on. She recalled all the times her mother even dared to question her father, even if it wasn’t a question, she would get slapped or beaten. A woman’s place was to do as they were told, and nothing else.

Was that what Boone wanted? Hell, no. She couldn’t constantly assume that Boone was like her father. He was nothing like him. She was sitting in his car, on her way to get a tattoo, with short hair, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. She no longer dressed like a woman her father would appreciate.

“What did you do while you were gone?” Lucia asked.

There was no attack, no pain, and she looked toward Boone. He still stared straight ahead.

“Do you really want to know?” he asked.

He held his hand up as she opened her mouth. “I’m not saying you can’t handle it, Lucia. What I’m saying is, are you ready to hear the truth? Do you even want to? You don’t have to.”

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Lucia sat back and thought about it. Whatever he had done, it had involved her family—her father, one of her brothers, maybe her sister. Could she handle anything happening to them, and also her mother? She shouldn't forget her mother. Maybe it made her cruel, verging on heartless, but she didn't care about them. They were not really her family.

Some people were born into amazing families and their loyalty was expected, even deserved. Then there were others that quite simply were not. She didn't love her family. Getting away from them had been the best thing she ever did.

“Yes, I want to know,” she said.

“Leandro is dead,” Boone said. “He attempted to plant a bomb in one of my apartments, only I was expecting it and made arrangements to keep him trapped there. Since we came to my safe house, he'd been trapped with no way of escape. I went and took care of it.”

“What happened?”

“Exactly what he did to the nanny all those years ago.”

Lucia gasped and then sat in her chair.

Leandro was gone. She thought about her brother and his cruel ways. The staff hated him, where their father liked his cruelty. Leandro was a different breed of man. It was one of many reasons she was glad her father had been allergic to pets. She had a horrible feeling Leandro would have hurt them. And she wouldn't have been able to

stand that.

“Okay,” she said.

“Okay?”

“Yeah, he wasn’t a very nice person, and I remember hearing once that karma has a nice or nasty way of paying you back for the way you have lived. I guess his past caught up with him.”

She glanced over toward Boone, who simply gave a nod of his head. What more was there to say? There was no point in arguing for Leandro, or any of them. They were all poison.

Was she poison?

She didn’t know if she was on his list, and she was too afraid to find out.

Betty had curled up at his feet. Boone looked toward his woman, as Cameron got to work on the roses down her arm. It was going to take multiple trips to get the design she wanted. She handled it well. There were only a few gasps and he saw some tears in her eyes, but she didn’t want Cameron to stop.

Over the next few days, Cameron was more than happy to slot Lucia in, so he got the first part of the ink done on the upper arm, which included the main rose itself. A piece of art takes time. This was the only person he trusted with Lucia. Once that part was done, Cameron wrapped it and gave them the necessary care instructions, along with some ointment. Cameron refused payment until the whole tattoo was done.

“Isn’t that ... wrong?” Lucia asked once they were back in the car.

“What?”

“Not taking payment. Aren’t you a little suspicious?”

“If it was anyone other than Cameron, I would be. As it happens, he knows me, and knows I’ll pay. In the early days, he would always take a deposit. Now, he doesn’t have to. He trusts me.”

Lucia shifted back into her seat.

“How does it feel?”

“Good, I think. Tight? I don’t know. It did hurt in places.”

“Ink will do that.”

He glanced over at her and caught her looking at him. The moment their eyes met, she quickly glanced away, and he couldn’t help but laugh. “What?”

“Did any of yours hurt?”

“All of them. Trust me, there were a couple that made me cry like a baby, and Cameron even called me one.”

She turned to look at him. “Are you serious?”

“Yep. Like I said, I cried and Cameron likes to keep it real.”

She shook her head. “I can’t imagine you ever crying.”

“It happens.”

She chuckled. “I fail to believe that.”

They arrived back at the house, and as soon as he put the car into “park,” his cell phone beeped.

“I’ll see you inside,” Lucia said, leaning over and kissing his lips.

He saw her mouth open and then close. She didn’t say anything. He watched her, wondering what was on her mind, what she wanted to tell him. She opened up the back seat, helped Betty down, and both made their way around the back of the house. Betty had been well behaved during the appointment.

His cell phone still continued to buzz. Glancing down at it, he saw there was an incoming call from Enzo Valdez Senior. There was only one Enzo who would be calling him, seeing as the other was detained.

He tapped his fingers against his leg. Valdez was calling him. The call came to an end, and his cell phone went silent. Only, seconds later, Boone was the one calling Valdez. He flicked the little phone sign to green and pressed the cell phone to his ear.

“What do you want?” Valdez asked.

“Well, that is a little rude,” Boone said. “When you answer the call, there is usually a

hello, or how are you, followed by demands.”

“I don’t have time to play games. You have Enzo and Bruno. I want to negotiate their release.”

Boone was silent for several seconds. “Valdez, my man, you’re sounding a little tense. What can I do for you?”

“Listen, you little fuck. Do you think you can mess with me? You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

Boone smiled and so Valdez could hear it, he started to chuckle, and that turned into a full-on laugh. All too soon, he stopped.

“I think I’ve made it quite clear that I know who I’m dealing with, but you and your sons don’t seem to realize who you’re dealing with.”

“What do you—”

“You don’t get to do any more talking, you’re boring. You think you can call me and make demands? Your sons are going to end up exactly like Leandro. There is no out for them, as they made their choices. I warned you when you started to offer peace talks, and your daughter as payment. I told you to make the right choice, and you laughed at me. Negotiations are long overdue and out of the question, and I suggest, Valdez, you come up with a plan, because once I take out your sons, and it is only a matter of days, I’m coming for you.”

There was a sudden explosion in the background.

“Say hello to your wife for me,” Boone said, and then hung up.

Valdez's wife was dead. Boone hadn't thought it possible, the level of cruelty that woman possessed, until he saw it with his own eyes. Lucia didn't know that Valdez used his wife to torment some of the girls that failed to stay in line. Valdez beat his wife, but he then allowed his wife to take her anger and frustration out on the girls who had been difficult from the moment they were captured.

Boone had rescued many of the girls that had been stolen. He talked to them, and they told him of a woman who was cruel, who liked to hurt them, put the fear of the Bonaldi family into them. She would whip them, use knives on them, hot poker, and she even blinded a girl with her rage. Mainly because when the older woman had arrived at one of the houses, she'd witnessed Valdez raping her, and her jealousy had caused her to blind the girl. It had been a hard pill to swallow.

So, Leandro and the mother were gone. They were dropping rapidly.

Putting a call through to Ronald, he got an update on the situation. It would appear Bonaldi attempted to take back some of his turf, however, Boone's men had been in place, and it had bitten Bonaldi in the ass. Some of the men had turned and ratted on Bonaldi.

In attempting to take back the streets, karma had struck. Boone had also blown up one of the boats owned by Bonaldi, as well as three of the warehouses with all of the product inside. The funds for Bonaldi were long gone. The man's empire was practically on the ground.

All the man had to do was leave well enough alone, only he hadn't, which was why they were at this place now.

The cop had more than enough to hang Bonaldi, so that man was no longer a threat anymore. All he had to take care of was the Valdez, as that was now personal. The other capos were dropping like flies. Kind of like taking out the queen in a wasp nest.

The moment the queen fell, the nest fell, and it was a matter of picking up all the pieces.

Climbing out of the car, he didn't follow Lucia around to the garden but made his way straight through the house and into the kitchen. He glanced outside the main kitchen window to find Lucia playing with Betty on the front lawn. For several seconds, he didn't move. All he did was watch.

Lucia had no idea of the true cruelty of her mother, and he hoped she didn't find out. She didn't show any love for her family, not that he could blame her. She'd been the odd one out for so long.

Opening the fridge, he saw a couple of steaks, some potatoes, and got to work on fixing them dinner. He quickly peeled and chopped a couple of potatoes, putting them in a pot to boil. He really wanted some warm potato salad, with eggs. That sounded great. He checked the fridge, and knew he was going to have a few large mushrooms to go with the steaks. His mouth watered at the prospect of enjoying the good food.

Lucia came in as he put the steaks on the grill. It was looking a little grey outside, and as if on cue, it started to rain.

“Wow,” Lucia said. “I came in right on time.”

She walked toward him.

“What are you cooking?”

“Steaks, potato salad, and grilled mushrooms with a cream sauce.”

“Sounds really good.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. “How do you like your steak?”

“Cooked.”

He chuckled. He was a cooked guy himself, no hint of rawness. Keeping it on the grill, it started to smoke, and before he turned it, he sprinkled a little more pepper.

“How did you learn to cook?” she asked.

He turned toward her, and then she held her hands up.

“You don’t have to tell me.”

He laughed. He didn’t have to tell her a damn thing, he knew that.

“I picked it up. My dad taught me.”

“Your dad?”

“Yeah, my dad.”

He expected her to start asking more questions, but she surprised him when she stayed silent.

“I wasn’t allowed to go into the kitchen. My dad always said the staff were paid to do jobs like that,” Lucia said.

“Did you want to learn to cook?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess. I mean, left back at the apartments, and even here, I gravitated toward the cooking channel, and I wanted to replicate all the foods.”

He laughed. “They make it look so easy, don’t they?”

“Yeah, they do, but I’m getting the hang of it.”

He looked toward her. She hadn’t put the sweater on, and the ink didn’t look great beneath the wrapping, but he knew it was going to look amazing.

“What?” Lucia asked.

“Nothing. Did you have fun today?”

“You know what, getting stuck by a little needle like what felt like a thousand times, it wasn’t too bad. It was pretty great.” She glanced down at her arm. “I just hope it is going to look great.”

“It will. I trust Cameron. The guy’s a perfectionist.”

“Yeah, and I don’t think you can get an eraser for the skin, can you?”

“You can. But Cameron wouldn’t be the one to do that.”

Lucia laughed. “I think it is time to feed Betty, don’t you?”

She moved past him, and Boone couldn’t help himself. He pulled her into his arms, then took possession of her lips. There was nothing he wouldn’t do for this woman.

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She looked up at him, and there was a smile on her lips. “What was that for?”

“Because I wanted to.”

And then he kissed her again. “Just like I wanted to do that, and that.” And he kissed her again, and again.

Although Betty wasn’t happy, and she barked as if to remind them she was still there.

Lucia laughed and pulled away from him. “I better go and get her food.”

He watched his wife disappear into the pantry.

Damn. He never thought he could feel this way. Many years ago, his father had warned him that one day he’d find a woman, and the moment he saw her, he would just know that all he wanted to do was spend the rest of his life protecting her, loving her, giving her the world. That was what he wanted. Lucia deserved all kinds of happiness and he wanted to be the one to give it to her.

She came back, carrying a pouch of dog food. He continued to watch her as she fed Betty. All he wanted was to be with Lucia, to give her a good life. The only way to do that was to right the wrongs of the world she had once belonged to.

Once that was done, everything would be okay.

Chapter Sixteen

Lucia had fallen asleep in Boone's arms. After they enjoyed his delicious steak, potatoes, cream sauce and egg, which had been a strange combination but tasty, they had made love. Boone had carried her upstairs and kissed every inch of her body, making her toes curl for more. Afterward, she laid in his arms, and he held her until she couldn't remember anything else.

Rolling over, there was an empty space where Boone had been. She put her hand on his pillow and glanced at the alarm clock that glowed the time right back at her. Three o'clock in the morning. Boone was gone. Had he gone to finish one of his jobs?

She pulled the blanket off her body and climbed out of bed. Checking on Betty, she grabbed her robe and started to make her way downstairs.

She needed a drink, a nice hot chocolate. As she got to the bottom of the stairs, light from Boone's office filtered toward her, and rather than go to the kitchen, she made her way toward the main office. There sat Boone, sipping a glass of whiskey.

"You should be asleep," he said.

"I woke up."

He looked toward her. He wasn't drunk. There was no sign of an empty bottle, and his gaze looked exactly as it had several hours ago.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I've got to leave soon, and when I do, Frank will be here."

Lucia stepped into his office and without an invitation found herself sitting on the coffee table in front of him.

“He is?”

“Yeah. He doesn’t want to leave Amy and the boys, but I need him here to look after you.”

“You know, you don’t have to go.” She reached out and put a hand on his leg, attempting to console him the best way she could.

“I do.”

“Boone, please.”

“I need to do this. They made their choices, Lucia, and I never back out of a choice.”

“Never?”

“No.”

There was no point in even arguing with him. He’d made his decisions, and all she could do was accept them and move on. She went to stand up, but then he started to talk.

“My dad died when I was twenty-five years old,” Boone said.

This surprised her. She stayed seated on the coffee table.

Boone didn't say anything else. She didn't move, though. He clearly wasn't used to talking about himself, and she didn't want to push him. She watched him and waited.

"My mom died when I was five years old. I knew for a short time how happy they were. It's all vague as most of that time is for kids that grow up. There are a few pieces I remember. She used to smell like cinnamon. Dad loved cinnamon and he would often say the only reason he dated her was because she smelled so good." There was a smile on his lips, but it was tinged with sadness. "Whenever he'd see her, he'd go to her, but he'd never kiss her. No, he'd make her laugh by sticking his nose right against her neck and breathing her in."

Lucia smiled.

"It was a long-standing joke of theirs. Dad just loved the way she smelled."

She wanted to know what happened. How did he lose her at five years old? But she stayed quiet. Boone never talked about himself like this.

"Dad was a military man. We moved from job to job," Boone said. "He loved serving his country. Mom always told me he was doing good work. Never knew what it was, just that he was doing good work. For five years, life was amazing. Dad wasn't expecting me. Mom and Dad had tried for many years to have kids, and from what I could gather, had all but given up. Then I came along. They told me I made their family complete." He smiled.

Lucia saw the pain in his eyes.

“It was a perfect life. My dad was amazing. My mom was one hell of a woman. They were the couple that other couples dreamed about. Then, one night in December, that all changed. We’d gone to the mall to see Santa, and Dad got a call. Anyway, what we didn’t know at the time was there was a war brewing on the streets between the cartel and a local, small mafia group. While we waited for my dad, they decided to have their showdown in the mall. Guns went off. Mom was caught in the crossfire.” Boone stopped and she saw it in his face, like he’d been transported back to that day.

She knew what was coming.

“Bonaldi was the small mafia group, and in my arms, Mom told me it was going to be okay. Then dad came in,” Boone said. “He went to Mom, and the blood was too much, and she was cold. I remember her complaining of how cold she was, and she told him she loved him, and it was time for him to take care of me. ‘Raise a good boy.’ That is what she said. ‘Raise a good boy for us.’”

Boone looked at her. “My mom died less than five minutes after the shooting.”

Tears filled her eyes. Bonaldi had done this? Lucia couldn’t believe it. Was this the real truth behind his vendetta?

“Dad ... uh, he lost it. At five years old, I watched him chase down one of the gunmen, and right there in the alleyway, my dad killed the man who murdered my mom,” Boone said.

Lucia didn’t know if she should offer him comfort, console him, or anything else. Bonaldi had taken from his perfect family.

“After that, I’m sure people were expecting me to say that my dad became a shell of

his former self, but that was not the case. He was still hardworking, and he worked his way up into the military, but as he did, he also took on other jobs. He expanded, and it didn't take him long to become one of the best contracted killers out there. If people wanted jobs done without ... mess, my dad was the one they called. He trained me, made sure I had what it took to get in the army. On my eighteenth birthday, he told me what he did, how he did it, then he said it was time for me to make my own path. So, I did. I became one of the best candidates they had seen since my dad. I worked my way up the ranks until I became someone that had to disappear. All the time, I remember Dad keeping an eye on the Bonaldi situation."

"Why didn't he ... deal with it that night?" Lucia asked.

It was the first time she had spoken since he started to talk.

"I asked him that, and he said there is always a time and place to handle problems. That night, my dad killed your grandfather," Boone said.

Her father never talked about his dad. She was aware he was killed by someone no one knew, or at least that was what she heard. Whenever she would listen in on conversations, he rarely spoke of his dad. At the time, Grandpa Valdez was attempting to make a name for himself in the Bonaldi empire. Capo had not been guaranteed. Her father had earned Capo.

Lucia gasped. "Did my dad kill your father?"

Boone looked at her and there was silence, then he nodded his head. "Yes, he killed my father. My dad was checking out the Bonaldi situation. He heard they were getting big. He wanted to attempt to nip it in the bud. However, he had not done his research, which was unlike him. The son of the man he killed had done all the background work he needed. My dad, the contract killer, was killed in the back alley by Enzo Valdez Senior, your father."

Lucia couldn't believe it.

"The cops knew who did it, but they decided to make it look like a drunken suicide," Boone said. "They doused him in alcohol, had a load of empty bottles near him, making him look like a bum. Then, they got the gun pointed at his head, and there was a single picture in his hand when he died. It was the last picture taken of me, my mom, and my dad."

She hadn't realized he'd been holding something, and then he handed it to her. It was an old photo that looked like it had been folded up many times. The edges were torn, but she saw all three people smiling. Boone, as a baby. His mother was a pretty woman, and his father was handsome.

Boone was different, though. He had a smile on his face, and he looked so happy, so carefree. Her family had taken that from him. Her fucked-up, piece-of-shit family—her grandpa, her father—they'd taken away his family.

Lucia looked up at him. "Does this make you want to kill me?" she asked.

"No. I would never harm you, Lucia."

"Why not?" She couldn't believe she was even asking that. It was stupid of her.

He laughed. "You're wondering why I don't want to kill you?"

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“Look what my family took from you. You had the perfect family. You had the perfect life, and they stole it.” Lucia hated them.

There was a new kind of hatred filling her body at this very moment. “They killed your family. It’s only right that you kill me. There is no way we could have any kind of happiness.” She let out a snuffle. “You deserve so much more, and someone who is so much better.”

Hatred was a powerful feeling. She had tried not to hate her family, but right now, in that moment, she couldn’t help but hate every one of them.

Boone put his glass on the coffee table and cupped her cheeks. “Look at me,” he said.

Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Her family had made his suffer, and that was unacceptable.

“You’re not like them,” Boone said. “I can see it in your eyes that you’re hurting for me. You don’t have to hurt for me.” And then he leaned in close and took possession of her lips. “You never have to hurt for me.”

Lucia kissed him back. She couldn’t help it. Even though she didn’t believe it was right for her to kiss him, because he deserved someone better. Someone who wasn’t part of a family that had taken everything from him.

She pressed her head against his. Lucia wanted to tell him how much she loved him, but now was not the time. She didn’t know when that time would be, but it wasn’t

now.

Boone never planned to tell Lucia the truth of his past. He'd tried to forget it. He'd tried to ignore that burning rage in his gut. His father had told him many times that a real man controlled his emotions and didn't make mistakes. His father had made mistakes, and it had gotten him killed.

All those years ago, Boone had kept a level head. It was all down to choices. The ones they made and of course the ones they didn't make.

Glancing at Lucia, he had every intention of leaving Valdez and Bonaldi well enough alone. Then, two things happened: one, the attack on Howard and Nancy, which made him wake up and pay attention to what Bonaldi's greed had done. He tried to ignore it, tried to move on, tried to make out in his own head that this was not his problem, and it really wasn't. His father had died long ago.

Then, he caught the video of Lucia being hit, and that had triggered something within him.

He knew the men in the Bonaldi family were cruel. Their wives were often sporting bruises or some sign of a beating. It was how they kept their women in line. They loved the lifestyle, and he knew some of the women had even accepted it.

Lucia had been different from the start. She tried to avoid the hits, and it had also been unprovoked.

That was when he couldn't turn back. He'd been on the verge of quitting, leaving everything behind, not giving a shit about anyone or anything. Lucia's situation had changed it all. And now, it was time to end it.

She rolled over and sat up. “You’re leaving?”

“Yes.”

“What about my ink?” Lucia asked. “You’re supposed to be taking me back to Cameron.”

“Frank is going to be here in the morning. He already knows the drill and he knows Cameron.”

“Boone ... please.”

He cupped her face. “I’ll be back in no time.”

He went to leave but she captured his hand. “Stay until the morning, for me, please.”

Damn it. He wanted to get this done. Enzo Junior and Bruno were waiting, along with a few other tasks. He looked at Lucia and knew he should say no.

“Son, if there is one thing I would ever ask for, it would be to be with your mother for another minute. Don’t ever allow yourself to be pulled away from having those couple of extra minutes. They matter. Those minutes are important. Nothing else.”

Boone was already dressed and pulled his shirt from his body. Lucia surprised him by sinking onto the floor at his feet. He didn’t push her away or tell her to stop. Instead, he watched as she eased the button of his pants open, and then lowered the zipper down over his dick. At the moment, he wasn’t hard.

He’d been about to leave, to start a lot of killing, and to right a wrong. Now, as Lucia stared at him intently, he pushed that shit out of his mind and focused on the woman currently at his feet. She looked so fucking beautiful.

Reaching out, he stroked her cheek, not wanting to leave her. Her green eyes stared up at him, and he was pretty sure he knew his wife was already in love with him. He loved her too, but he wasn't going to tell her or force her to admit the truth to him.

He stepped out of the pants, kicking off his sneakers as he did so. Lucia gripped the edge of his boxers and began to lower them down his body. Within seconds, they were gone, and he was naked while Lucia wore one of his favorite silk negligees.

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The curve of her tit was exposed, and he loved the way it pushed her tits together, showing off the inviting valley of her breasts. He couldn't resist reaching down and stroking the curve. Lucia surprised him by wrapping her fingers around his length.

She looked up at him, at the same time he stared down at her. "I don't know what I'm doing," she said.

That was fucking sexy. His wife had been a virgin, and he'd been enjoying Lucia's pussy for some time now. He'd not allowed her to suck his cock.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to," he said.

"I do want to," she said.

She licked her lips, and it was the single most tantalizing sight he had ever seen.

Boone moved and sat down on the edge of the bed. He was going to need the support of the bed for this. There was no way he was going to be able to handle her untutored learning without sitting down.

"Touch me, Lucia, and then let everything else happen. Just enjoy it. Don't use your teeth. Don't bite down too hard, but let me feel it."

She nodded and her gaze was on him. He was pretty sure she was trying to figure him out as if he were a puzzle, and she just needed to fit a piece of it.

She put her hands on him, and for a short second, he closed his eyes and just enjoyed

her touch. Her hands were a little cold, but it didn't take them long to warm up. One of her hands was on his cock, the other, his thigh. Her short hair fell around her face, and he couldn't help but reach out, run his fingers through her hair, and then curl them around his fist.

She let out a little moan. Then, she slid the tip of her tongue right across the top of his cock, over the tiny slit of an opening.

He gritted his teeth, and tried to keep control. Her untutored touch shouldn't be this arousing, yet that was exactly what it was. Gritting his teeth, he tried to gain control, but she took him into her mouth and sunk deep onto his length until the back of her throat made contact with his dick. That felt way too good.

Lucia pulled back and he winced as she used just a little too much teeth.

She pulled back. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay."

"Did I hurt you?"

"It's fine. Keep going."

Lucia looked at him, and he stared right back. After a little hesitation, she began to suck him again, only this time she explored, trying to learn what he liked. She didn't use her teeth again, but it felt good. Her mouth was so fucking warm and inviting, and he loved that she wanted to play with him. He'd give her anything she wanted. But his patience and control would only last so long. Her mouth was too damn good, and he quickly pulled her off his cock.

"What is it? What have I done?"

“Nothing,” he said. “But now it’s my turn.”

He pulled her to the bed and tore the negligee from her body. She moaned his name, but he didn’t give her a chance to catch up as he spread her legs open and licked her pussy. Twirling his tongue around her clit, he stroked back and forth, then sunk down and began pressing his tongue inside her.

She cried out, his name filling the air, echoing around the room. He loved hearing her scream his name, especially as she was so close to orgasm.

Once he had fucked her multiple times with his tongue, he then went back to focusing on her clit. Stroking back and forth, he was tempted to keep her at the peak and not allow her to go over the edge. Only, this time he didn’t. He pushed her straight into her orgasm, feeling her body shake as she cried out his name.

Moving between her spread thighs, he pressed his cock in her and slammed in hard and deep. She felt so hot, so tight, so warm. He pressed forward, taking hold of her hands, locking them together, and pressing them either side of her head.

Staring into her eyes, he made love to her, knowing there was a chance he might never return. It was a risk he had no choice but to make. If he didn’t come back, he already had everything in place. Frank and Ronald would know what to do. They would keep her safe and help her build a life for herself, which was all he could offer her at this time.

Chapter Seventeen

Boone was gone the following day. She felt the empty space where he had been last night. She glanced across the room, and Betty was there, waiting to go out. It was already getting late. According to the clock, it was closer to nine now.

“I’m coming,” she said.

Lucia did have to make a quick pit stop at the bathroom. From there, she made her way downstairs, after throwing on a pair of sweatpants and a large, oversized shirt. Both had been worn by Boone, and they smelled like him as well.

Betty had gone to the toilet outside and was eating, while Lucia got the coffee on. This was how Frank found them when he entered the kitchen.

“Hello, Sweetheart,” he said.

She offered him a smile. “Hey, Frank.”

“You’re not looking too happy.”

“I’m fine.”

There was silence and Lucia poured herself a drink. “Do you want a coffee?”

“Sure thing.”

She poured him a glass, and Betty had gone to lay down. Lucia had a feeling it wouldn’t be long before the pups arrived. She was behaving strangely. Each time she watched, it was like she was getting settled in for a nest or something.

“How were Amy and the boys?” Lucia asked.

“They’re good. They all send their love.”

She nodded and then took a sip of her hot coffee. It burned on the way down her throat, but she didn’t show it. All she could think about was Boone.

“So, Boone told me I’ve got to take you to see Cameron. Badass, getting a piece of ink,” Frank said.

“Yeah.”

She couldn't be happy right now. All she could think about was Boone—what he was doing, where he was, whether he was safe. Her family had taken everything from him, and now it was time for Boone to settle the score.

“You're not very talkative today, are you?”

“Sorry,” Lucia said. “It's been a long week.”

“I get it,” Frank said. “A lot of bad shit is about to go down.”

“What are the chances of Boone ... not making it?” Lucia asked. She didn't want to cry.

“Look, I don't want to bore you with facts and percentages—”

“Please, just keep it real.” Frank had never treated her like she was stupid. It was one of the many things she liked about him.

Frank sighed. “There are always risks with this kind of stuff, but Boone is not a fool, and he knows exactly what he is doing, you know?”

He didn't give her anything. Lucia nodded.

“I'm ready to go when you are.”

She didn't feel like getting dressed up, and with how she felt, getting poked by thousands of needles sounded like a lot of fun right about now.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I'm sure.”

She walked to Betty, picked her up, and carried her out to Frank's car. Boone had already left Betty's car harness, and Lucia picked it up and gritted her teeth. He'd left it.

Lucia tried to count in her head, and tried not to think about what that meant. Boone was going to be in danger, and all she could do was attempt to live life as if he wasn't.

Climbing into the back seat, she didn't want to sit upfront. Betty moved in close to her, and Lucia stroked her head, then moved down her body.

"I've got you, honey. He will be back," she said. "He will."

Frank took her to Cameron's, and he worked on her ink. He asked her many times if she was okay, and Lucia agreed. The pain of the ink didn't stop her from thinking about Boone, though.

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Cameron brought the session to an end, covered the ink, checked the other piece, and then told her how to take care of it. She would have another appointment tomorrow.

Another day of not knowing what was going on with Boone.

Frank didn't take her home right away, and instead found a small park where there were a lot of families, along with an ice cream truck. He stepped out, got them both an ice cream, came back and handed her one. She looked in the back to see Betty asleep.

"She's going to give birth soon," Frank said.

Lucia nodded. "Yeah, I always thought Boone would be here, seeing as he knew what to do." She pressed her lips together.

"You know, it is okay to cry," Frank said.

"I don't want to."

"Lucia, I like to think I have come to know you quite well. The Lucia I know would want to cry right about now. Not because it made her feel weak, but because she was missing the man she loved."

She turned to look at him and hated that her eyes filled with tears. "Why did you have to say that?"

"Someone had to say it, Lucia. You think we don't see it. You're in love with him,

and we all see it.”

She sniffled and looked down at her ice cream, which was nearly melting. She quickly took a lick, trying to get herself back in order.

“Does he see it?” Lucia asked.

“Boone probably does. That man doesn’t miss a trick.”

Lucia took a deep breath and turned toward him. “But he doesn’t love me.”

“I didn’t say that,” Frank said. “Boone has always been a hard guy to read. He doesn’t wear his heart on his sleeve, never has. He’s a guy that gets things done, however, when it comes to you, I would say—and I would bet my wife and kids on it—that he loves you.”

“You shouldn’t be so careless.”

Frank laughed. “I’m not being careless. I’ve known Boone long enough to know he doesn’t go out of his way for someone unless he cares. He needed to make you safe. The man is not known for causing scenes. He doesn’t go out of his way to make waves. Boone is and always will be a man that solves problems. However, with you, to get to you, to have you, he had to change tactics. He made a lot of waves, caused a lot of issues, so he could claim you.”

Lucia didn’t want to get her hopes up.

“And knowing Boone the way I do, I have a feeling when he is done doing what he has to do, when he gets back, he is going to give you a choice. Our boy is a man who is always offering choices. Then it will be up to you.”

Lucia felt that little spark. Did he love her? Had he really changed his course to protect her? She was with him now. She was not on his kill list.

Forcing a smile to her lips, she thanked Frank.

“Don’t thank me. It’s the truth, now eat your ice cream.”

Lucia licked her ice cream, and in a strange way, talking to Frank had been easier.

“Are you going to tell me how you and Boone met?” Lucia asked.

“Yep. I won’t give you details. Consider me an ex-solider, a war zone, left for dead. Boone found me, rescued me, and we’ve been friends ever since. Most of us that work for him are ex-military. He earned our trust and respect out in the field. That man has saved a lot of people. Not going to lie, he’s killed a lot of people as well. But, all in all, he’s a pretty good guy. I would not want to make an enemy of him.”

Lucia laughed.

They finished their ice cream and Frank drove them home. When they got home, Lucia went to Betty, and she noticed her dog was panting and there was something about her that didn’t seem right.

“Frank, something is wrong with Betty,” Lucia said.

He opened the other passenger door. “Okay, our fat girl is about to give birth. Let’s get her to her bed.”

Lucia felt her heart racing. She had hoped Boone would make it before then.

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Frank picked Betty up, and she noticed how he did so very carefully. Rushing ahead of him, she opened the door, quickly made her way upstairs, and she heard him following. Going to the special den Betty had made, Frank lowered the dog down.

“What do we do?” Lucia asked.

“In most cases, this big girl knows what to do. I’ll call the vet and get some updates.”

Lucia was left alone with Betty, and she tried not to freak out.

“It’s okay, girl. It’s okay.” She looked at Betty and reached out to stroke her head. Her dog was about to give birth, and she didn’t have a clue what to do. This was not fair. She wanted Boone back.

Frank came back. “The vet said to give her time, to allow her to give birth, and if she shows signs of distress, to call him.”

“Doesn’t she look in distress to you?” Lucia asked.

“No, she looks like a dog in control. You look in distress.”

“I am, my dog is giving birth and I’m not prepared for this.”

“The vet is up to speed, and he will happily stop by and check on the pups and Mommy soon.”

Lucia didn’t like this, but what else could she do?

“You know, I had to make a decision. You or Enzo, or Enzo and then you,” Boone said. “I guess you could consider this your lucky day, I mean, I did come and deal with you first.”

He looked at Bruno who was hung upside down. It hadn’t taken much to get him into this position. He had been trapped for several days, but Boone wasn’t totally cruel. There had been food for him to eat, and he’d eaten it all.

He probably should have left Bruno for last. Unlike Enzo and Leandro, Bruno was not awful, compared to the rest of his family.

“Fuck you,” Bruno said.

This made him smile.

“It’s funny you should mention fucking, because that is one of the reasons you’re here.” Boone clicked his tongue. “I mean, your father was proud of Leandro for what he was able to do, with all the explosions and crap. Then there is Enzo, with his ability to hurt people, which I’m guessing he got from his mother. You, though, Bruno, you have a different gift. You see, you have the ability to keep your dark secrets hidden.”

“I don’t know what fucking game you’re playing, but I want no part of it. You got Lucia, you got your peace, and that is the end of it.”

Boone clicked his tongue. “It’s not the end of it. I know all about Leandro attempting to kill me and Lucia. Do you think I’m that stupid, that I didn’t know?”

Bruno just stared at him, completely clueless.

“Just like you don’t think I know about your little obsession with underage kids?” Boone asked.

He allowed his words to sink in, and he stepped away, pulling out his cell phone that had buzzed. It was a text from Frank, to let him know the pups had arrived and were all healthy. The vet would be stopping by in a few hours to check on them. Betty had given birth in the closet, but not to worry, there was no mess, and Lucia was over-the-moon excited.

Frank also gave him a warning that he doubted he would be able to sell the dogs, as Lucia loved them all. He didn’t think for a second he would have any luck in selling the pups Betty had. The house was big enough for all of them.

“Look, man, I don’t know who you are, or what any of this is about, but you have the wrong guy.”

Boone picked up the remote control and pressed “play” on the television set he’d placed in front of Bruno. The screams and pleads of children filled the air. He didn’t watch. He’d seen it before, and it sickened him.

Bruno began to cry.

“Do you want to keep telling me I’m lying?” Boone asked.

“How did you get this?”

“It wasn’t hard, and it doesn’t matter. Those kids, the ones that are alive, are being given plenty of compensation.”

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Boone had taken some of the money from each of the jobs and began to distribute it to the victims who were alive. They wouldn't have a clue who the money came from, as it simply arrived in a sealed case. None of the money he sent was fake, either. It was the real stuff.

The Valdez and Bonaldi families, and every capo would pay for their sins. Gone were the days they were able to get away with their vile shit.

“Look, I don't know what your problem is, but shit happens. Those kids wanted it, okay. They asked to make some good money, and I paid them well.”

Boone stopped the screen. “You paid this girl with gummy bears, and did you know she ended up pregnant from what you did to her? The girl was twelve. She didn't make it, nor did the baby.”

Bruno began to cry.

“My dad made me. He said he needed me to do this.”

Boone tutted again. “It's so easy to blame our parents for our faults, isn't it? Your father didn't make you do any of this. In fact, it was you that gave him the idea of bringing kids into this in the first place.”

The man before him began to beg. Boone let him fill the air with his empty pleads. He didn't believe a single word. All of it was bullshit. Bruno hadn't cared about the kids he'd abducted from the streets and parks. He'd taken them to a secure location and abused them. This had been going on for many years. No one had known who

had taken the kids. In most cases, the kids were sometimes found, wandering around, traumatized, refusing to tell anyone what happened. They became shadows of their former selves. Some ended up committing suicide, others never recovered.

Boone had visited a couple of them, and the fear Bruno had placed in them had been hard to crack. Boone never gave up easily, though, and he'd given the kids time. It didn't take long for them to open up to him, and once they did, he started to discover the cracks.

The cops that helped Bruno were all dead. He wasn't going to have the filth on the street that couldn't be trusted. Now, he was working on the men involved.

Bruno was going to die. There was no doubt about it. But it was going to be long, torturous.

He had no choice but to leave his wife, to take care of this business.

"I want you to know this isn't personal. Enzo Junior is as bad as you. He liked to rape women, hit them, abuse them. He will be dealt with as well."

"What do you want? Do you want money? I can get you money. Do you want to know the inside workings of my father's business? I can do that. I can get you close to Bonaldi. They would never expect me. I can do all of this. Please, please, I don't want to die. I don't want to die. You've got to believe me."

His cell phone went off, and it was from Ronald. Bonaldi was dead. Killed in prison by the men who had betrayed him. One of the arrests had gone through on the weekend, which had then placed him in temporary holding. Several of Bonaldi's enemies had been transferred during this small window.

The other businesses that belonged to Bonaldi had been ceased. The empire, as

quickly as it flourished, was fast diminishing.

“There is nothing you can offer me, nothing you can give me. Bonaldi is dead. Your mother is dead. The rest of your family will be joining you in Hell, because that is the only place you’re going.”

And with that, he got to work. Bruno screamed, begged. And then he died. It took several hours. Boone was tempted to allow him to live through even some of the worst torture methods, but instead he decided to end the man’s sorry existence.

Once it was done, he got to work cleaning up the mess. After multiple hours, everything was done, and he stepped out of the warehouse and set fire to it. There was no reason to keep that piece of shit, and he no longer wanted anything tainted by Bruno Valdez. This was not going to help the people who were alive, but it would stop any more victims from joining the mix.

Pulling out his cell phone, he dialed Valdez’s number and waited. He didn’t have to wait long before he answered.

“Where are my sons?” Valdez asked.

“Well, I can tell you, as of now, only one son remains. Bruno has joined his brother and your wife in Hell,” Boone said. “Did you hear the good news?”

“You piece of shit. I am going to fucking end you. I’m going to fucking kill you, and that daughter of mine, that traitorous whore.”

Boone tutted. “I suggest you be careful. That traitorous whore is my wife, but don’t worry, all the insults you throw at me, about her, will come for you. I do believe you liked to beat her, didn’t you? I wonder if you can take a beating like you used to give out?” He gripped the cell phone tightly as his anger began to manifest at the reminder

of what that piece of shit did to his daughter.

“Now, I thought you might like to know I’m on my way to deal with Enzo, but I wanted to let you know Bonaldi is dead. Killed in prison. The Bonaldi empire is falling, and your days are numbered, Valdez. You might want to get your shit in order, because I’m coming for you.”

With that, he hung up.

The temptation to call his wife was so strong, but instead he made his way to the car and climbed behind the driver’s seat. There was not much left to do.

Pulling onto the main street, in his rearview mirror, he left behind the burning building with Bruno’s dead body inside. Now, he traveled toward his next target, Enzo Junior, and from there, he was going to get to their father. Then, this would all be over. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel.

Then, he was going to need to give Lucia a choice. The choice to live in peace, away from all of it, or the choice to spend the rest of her life with him, with a new identity.

He had had a feeling he knew which she would choose, but there was always a doubt.

Chapter Eighteen

Enzo Junior was chained to a chair. There was a knife in each hand, as well as each thigh. There were also two pushed into his shoulders to keep him locked against the chair, and to stop him from moving.

The man had already pissed and shit himself. There had also been vomit. Fainting. Begging. Pleading.

The man liked to torture his innocent victims, but he didn't like to feel any of the pain he dished out. Where Bruno liked to attack underage kids, both boys and girls, Enzo Junior liked to hurt women. He liked to rape and beat them as well.

He'd seen some of the pictures of the dead bodies. Their only suspect had been Enzo Junior, but there was no way to tie the two together. The evidence was never there, or according to the reports, there was no evidence.

Boone had a feeling that wasn't quite accurate. There was always evidence, and it seemed surrounding the Valdez's there were plenty of cops that liked a luxury lifestyle. For that, they looked the other way. They screwed over the badge and became selfish.

"Boone, please, you've got to stop."

He sat down in front of Enzo Junior, and looked at him. "You're looking a little pale."

“I get it, you don’t like me. You don’t like any of my family, but ... you’ve got to get out of here.”

“You hurt women.”

“Yes,” Enzo Junior said.

“And you did it for fun.”

“Yes.”

This was not helping his cause.

“Why?”

“I don’t fucking know why,” Enzo said, and then gritted his teeth. Any movement against the knives, and he was at risk of cutting himself more. No major artery or organ had been struck, so he could keep him here for some time. He wasn’t going to.

He wanted to get back to his wife. He quickly glanced at the time. The only two people he needed to deal with were Enzo Senior, and Isabella, who was already being dealt with. Isabella was cruel as well. Her jealousy knew no bounds, and she would have girls arrested for false possession charges, if she felt they were catching the attention of the men she was interested in.

Although she was Valdez’s oldest daughter, and she needed to remain a virgin for her wedding night, it didn’t stop Isabella from playing around. She liked to win over men’s affection, then exploit them to make them do what she wanted. In payment, they thought they were going to win her, but they would never stand the chance. They were all doomed to fail.

It was one fucked-up family, and it made no sense that Lucia was different. From what he could tell, she'd been deemed an ugly baby, a mistake. A late pregnancy that had resulted in another baby. One that had mainly been raised by multiple nannies and other people, or by her own. This was why she didn't act like her family. She didn't have a cruel trait in her body.

Frank had even snapped a little photo, showing off Lucia with Betty and all the healthy pups. He saw the smile on Lucia's face as she looked into the camera. She was nothing like her family. He was going to save her and allow her to live her life away from all this bullshit.

All too soon, he watched as Enzo tried to wriggle, then he let out a scream and sat back, panting.

"You're a piece of shit, do you know that?" Enzo Junior asked.

Boone looked at him and waited. The man was clearly desperate to say something.

He started to laugh. "You're going to kill me anyway. I guess you don't want to know."

It was clear the man just wanted to toy with him, but he heard enough. Getting to his feet, he looked over the tools he hadn't yet used.

"Didn't you ever wonder how Leandro was able to find that car?" Enzo Junior asked.

"Or, that guy, the one that was watching you?"

Now, this made him curious.

"Or didn't you know one of them was watching you?"

“The guy that was watching me is dead, and he died a short time ago,” Boone said.

Enzo Junior nodded. “You know, our dad doesn’t like Lucia. I remember when I was a kid, he considered killing her. He even bought a small pack of dogs and threw her out, hoping they’d eat her. They didn’t. Even when he starved them. It did make me curious, and then I learned that some dogs, not all dogs, won’t attack babies. There is something to do with hormones and shit. I don’t believe it, because let’s face it, dogs are dogs. Anyway, he killed the dogs and had no choice but to keep Lucia around. However, there’s one thing he did do to her on the eve of her wedding night, without her knowing. He put a little tag inside her. Just a little device that allows him to know her location at all times.”

Boone looked at him. The fucker was lying.

Enzo started laughing.

“He figured she may not get eaten by a dog, because she is one of them. A fucking ugly dog. So, I’m guessing if you’re fast enough, you might be able to say your goodbyes, because if what you’re saying is true, then my dad is on his way to finish what those dogs didn’t do.”

It had to be fucking lies. Boone looked at him, but it made an odd kind of sense. Leandro had known where they were, rigged the car, and it was only because Boone had been quick and knew what he was looking for, that nothing had happened. He couldn’t believe it, but it made sense. The apartment Leandro targeted. The guy that followed them from their safe house.

He had to get back to Lucia.

After one last look at Enzo, he pulled out his gun and fired a single shot into the man’s forehead. Pulling out his cell phone, he began to dial Frank. If he got through to him, there might be a chance for him to save her.

Lucia stroked Betty’s head and smiled at the cute little dog. Frank had just stepped out to make a phone call. All the pups were whining. It had been two days since they were born, and they already seemed to want to move around. Not that they were experts or anything.

“You did good,” she said, kissing the top of Betty’s head.

She’d stayed awake with them all through the night. There was no way she was going to risk going to bed while Betty was hurting, so she stayed, watched, and did what she could. It was all she could do.

Kissing the top of her head, she couldn’t help but think about Boone. He hadn’t been here to see it, but Frank had taken pictures and promised to send them to him, which she was grateful for. She had a feeling Boone would have loved to be with them.

Lucia was just about to get to her feet, when the sound of the alarm shocked her. At first, it didn’t quite register to her what was happening. Boone had told her about the alarm, given her a little taste of what it meant, and what she needed to do. He ran through the scenarios, and she couldn’t believe someone had penetrated the gates and walls.

Betty began to stress, and Lucia didn’t hesitate. The closet held the panic room. She attempted to pick up the dog bed, but it was no use.

Making sure all dogs were accounted for, she began to drag the bed into the panic room. She typed in the code with speed, feeling herself panic as she quickly went through the motions. The door opened and Lucia pulled the dogs inside and quickly pressed the alert. She went to the main security camera and started to check them. That was when she saw two men coming close to the house.

Just as she was about to look for weapons with a quick scan of the main house, and she saw Frank had stumbled upstairs. He didn’t look good. She zoomed in and on closer inspection, she saw he was holding his abdomen. He’d been shot.

There was no time to lose. She couldn’t leave him there to die, and she quickly got to the door and typed in the code to open it. She rushed outside. According to the

cameras, the people who had invaded the grounds hadn't made it to the house yet. Frank was leaning up against the stairwell, and he looked so bad.

"You need to get in the fucking panic room," he said.

"Don't start with me. That is where I was, and do you think I'm going to leave you out here to die!" She growled at him, and as she did, she heard the sound of gunshots.

"Get back to that panic room."

"Then get your ass with me. Do you think I'm going to leave you here to die? Hell, no, and I'm not going to allow your wife or your kids to be without a husband and father." She started trying to pull him. "Move. They're coming, and we have the means to be there."

Frank growled as he got to his feet, and Lucia put his arm across her shoulders and rushed him into the room, turning off the lights, closing the closet door, then entering the panic room. She secured the door and closed it. Going to the security cameras, the two men were wearing masks. Lucia had no idea who the men were, or what they were doing.

Frank groaned and her attention quickly changed to him.

"You've got to be quiet. I don't know if they'll be able to hear us," she said, whispering.

Opening his jacket, she saw his blood was soaking through the shirt he wore.

"It's going to be okay," she said.

"You don't have to lie to me. I know this is not good. This is bad, very bad."

She wanted to argue with him, but instead she remained silent. She didn't know what a good or bad bullet wound was.

Betty was being quiet, but she too started to whimper.

Lucia glanced toward her. "What is it, girl?"

She looked to the bed of pups, and once she counted, she hated that she must have miscounted. She went to the door.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:08 am

“Where the fuck are you going?”

“To get the other pup.”

“Lucia, are you insane? They’re not afraid to fucking shoot. Get your ass here. Do you think he is going to allow me to live, if something happens to you?”

She ignored him, opened the door, and then looked around on the closet floor. Sure enough, she found the little guy that must have fallen out of the bed as she dragged it along. Holding him close, she made her way back into the panic room. The moment she did, she heard them enter the main bedroom.

There was no choice for her to make. She entered the panic room and attempted to close the door, quietly. She pointed a finger to her mouth to silence Frank, and then went to the cameras. The two invaders were in her and Boone’s bedroom.

“She’s here,” one of them said.

Lucia recognized that voice. She had spent her whole life listening for it, attempting to avoid him. Her father had invaded her husband’s home.

Lucia looked toward Frank and he gave her the okay signal. He was looking pale.

She couldn’t look away from the screen, though. One person was on a cell phone, and the other looked around the bedroom as if what they saw was fascinating to them.

The man with the cell phone entered the closet. As he did so, he pulled the clothes out

of the way, and without hesitation came straight to the panel of the panic room. He removed his face mask, and Lucia looked into the face of her father.

“The man installed a panic room,” Enzo Valdez said.

“Can you get into it?”

She didn’t recognize the other voice. Knowing her father, it was either one of her brothers, or one of his men. That wasn’t important.

“How good is this?” Lucia asked.

She couldn’t help but duck as she heard the gunshots ring out.

“It’s Boone, and he wouldn’t have built you anything but a strong panic room, Lucia,” Frank said.

He gritted his teeth, and she rushed to his side. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It is all good, kid,” Frank said.

“Don’t do that. Don’t sugarcoat this for me.”

“It’s not good,” Frank said. “I need to get to the hospital soon, otherwise, I’m not going to make it.”

Lucia looked toward the camera. The men were still randomly shooting and kicking at the door.

“How much can it take?” Lucia asked.

“Enough. This is Boone, so they’re going to be trying for some time.”

“And if it doesn’t work?”

“Look, Lucia, this is not your fault. You’ve got to survive. Boone will be here.”

“What if they have killed him?” Lucia asked.

“It’s Boone, they’re not going to kill him. That man is the best.”

“But he was going after my brothers, the Bonaldis, all of them,” Lucia said. “That has risks.”

“Boone had already captured your brothers, Lucia. He had them waiting for him to deal with. As for Bonaldi, the man is dead, and each capo is learning a very valuable lesson. I would never have bet against Boone. The man is a fucking legend, and he always gets his target. He will come for you.” Frank looked past her shoulder. “If he’s not here already.”

Lucia looked behind her, and sure enough, there was Boone. The man that wasn’t her father was dead on the ground. Now, it was just Boone and her father. She looked at the screen as Boone held the gun up in front of him.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:08 am

“You messed with the wrong man,” Boone said.

“You know, we could settle this,” Enzo said.

“Or, we could just settle this.”

And before anyone could react, Boone had sent a bullet straight into her father’s head. At first, Lucia couldn’t believe it. One moment she had been panicking, and the next, Boone had taken care of it.

Rushing to the panel, she quickly pushed the “exit” button, and the panic room opened. Boone was already there, and she fell into his arms.

“You came back,” she said.

“Of course I came back.”

“Frank,” Lucia said, pulling away from him.

Within minutes they had Frank out of the room, and Boone was already working on him. Lucia didn’t know what was happening, but Ronald had arrived, as had an ambulance.

She followed them down, and Boone with Ronald’s help, loaded Frank into the ambulance. Her head was starting to pound, and she turned to look at Boone.

Men were already starting to clean up.

“Is he going to be okay?”

“Frank, hell, yeah, he is going to be fine,” Boone said.

“I thought he was going to die,” Lucia said, tears filling her eyes. “My dad had come to kill me. How did he know where I was?”

And then Boone told her. She had a small tracking chip inside her.

Lucia touched the back of her neck. “He microchipped me?”

“That is what your brother said.”

“My brother?”

“Your family is dead,” Boone said. “I don’t know if this is the right time to ask you, but you have a choice, Lucia.”

She looked at him and waited.

“I can provide you with a new identity, money, a new life, and you never have to look back to the past. You can live your life the way you want. No one will come for you. Or, you can have a new identity and live with me. I don’t think I ever told you this, but I would love to have a family. To be away from all this crap, to have a loving wife, to raise kids, to have some dogs, maybe some cats. Also, before you make your decision, I think you should also know I am in love with you. I have been in love with you for a very long time.”

It was magical. Covered in blood, after fearing death, all she wanted to do was hold Boone, and she wished she had told him how much she loved him.

“I love you too,” Lucia said, and then threw her arms around him.

“Do you choose me?” Boone asked.

She couldn’t help but laugh. “Yes, I choose you. I will always choose you.” She cupped his face. “Besides, I’m your wife, and isn’t it a wife’s duty to always stand by her husband?”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her hard. She just wanted to be in his arms, loving him, not going anywhere else.

Boone pulled away, and they walked back into their home.

“Do you want to come and meet the pups?”

“Hell, yeah, I do!”

Epilogue

Ten Years Later

Boone watched as his wife continued to water the herb-and-vegetable garden she'd been planting all spring. For the summer, she loved to harvest it, and tried to feed them for as long as possible without going to the grocery store. It was kind of pointless, as their four children were hungry little devils.

Phillip, their oldest son, ate everything between bread. He was pretty sure if he could get away with it, he'd even eat his morning cereal between two slices of bread. Thankfully, they were able to get him to eat cereal and toast.

Talia, their oldest daughter, was a little tomboy. She was rolling around with the dogs. They had kept all of Betty's litter.

Betty and her pups were still going strong, and they had also adopted a few more dogs from the local animal shelter, and they were all playing beautifully.

As well as Sean, their next child, and Penelope, their youngest.

He had the grill all fired up and ready to go for dinner.

At the sound of the bell, he made his way through the house. They no longer lived in his country home that had been invaded, but now lived in a small, remote town, on an old ranch.

He was even considering starting to ranch, but at the moment he was just learning the lay of the land. The kids loved the house and had spent multiple Christmases here

now. They wanted to ranch as well, but the final decision would be his.

Howard and Nancy had arrived. He shook Howard's hand, and hugged Nancy.

Next were Frank and Amy. Their children had already gone off to college, so they wouldn't be attending their barbeque. He'd gotten close to them.

Ronald arrived next, but he didn't have a date.

Lucia refused to cut them off. They didn't change their identity either.

Any enemies from the past were dead, and there would be no repercussions for it.

As for the Bonaldi empire, with the cop working the case, it was neatly taken care of. One of the easiest jobs he'd been part of.

Boone made his way back out into the yard and watched his wife, Lucia, embrace their friends. He wondered if Enzo Senior figured it out.

It wasn't his own father's death that caused him to seek vengeance. It was Lucia. Seeing the treatment she endured had sparked a fire inside him, and had set the course for the Valdez and Bonaldi downfall. For Boone, it was quite simple, he couldn't have the men who had hurt his wife walking the streets. They all needed to be punished.

Lucia looked toward him, and then made her way to him. The moment she was within touching distance, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her on the head. They had removed the chip her father installed in her.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I'm good."

“Are you happy?”

Lucia had gotten into the habit of asking him many times over the years if he was happy, and he always responded, “With you in my arms, yes.”

She had given him so much. Lucia loved him and gave him a home, a family, everything he thought he didn’t need. The last time he felt this happy, or even recalled being so at peace, he’d been a boy surrounded by his own family.

Now, so many years later, he finally had everything he needed—a wife, a family, friends, and happiness.

The End