



An Exclusive Game

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Description: I'm a federal agent sworn to take down Alessa, the charismatic Mafia princess who runs an illicit empire. But as I infiltrate her exclusive private members' club in an undercover operation, there's an undeniable spark between us.

Wanting her is dangerous. Falling for her is forbidden. And loving her?

Well, that could get me killed.

But Alessa seems hell-bent on seducing me. And the closer we get, the closer my team gets to taking her down.

The line between attraction and deception is blurring. Then, when a web of lies threatens to destroy us both, I'm forced to make an impossible decision.

Will I choose the law?

Or love?

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CHAPTER1

ALESSA

Sunlight filters through the embroidered curtains of Carmela's as I lounge in our favorite corner booth, the leather creaking familiarly beneath me. I fidget with the ruby choker at my throat and my nails tap out a restless beat on the pristine white tablecloth while I wait on my dear cousin. Juno Bianchi may bully her underlings without remorse, but I'll be damned if I let her keep me waiting like one of her lackeys.

Right on cue, the carved mahogany doors swing open and Juno breezes in, surrounded by no less than five bodyguards scrambling to clear her path. Gotta admire my cousin's flair for the dramatic. That linen pantsuit she's rocking probably cost more than my Maserati.

Then again, so do the rubies dripping from my own lobes and throat. I know, I know, talk about overkill for a weekday lunch. But I have a reputation to uphold and a club to advertise—and subtlety has never been my strong suit.

It's not Juno's either, though she'd never admit it. She sweeps through the restaurant, offering the staff a practiced smile that doesn't reach her cool brown eyes. They bow and scrape like the well-trained monkeys they are. Given her status in the city, my cousin expects doors to open and knees to bend wherever she deems fit. To be fair, I expect the same.

But at least I pretend to be pleasant to the people serving me.

“Cugina,” I purr as Juno joins me, and I give a dramatic swirl of my silk scarf as I rise to hug and kiss her. “I see you’re keeping the staff on their toes as always.”

Juno’s blood-red lips quirk. “As are you, Alessa. Though I prefer a more subtle touch.”

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from bursting into laughter. Juno, subtle? She’s about as subtle as a sledgehammer to the face, though in rather a different manner to me. But I swallow the retort on my tongue. Pissing her off this early would make for an even longer lunch, and my appetite is already waning.

I love Juno, I really do. But we grew up in each other’s pockets, always competing for attention in the family, and we’re both very ambitious women. That makes for a little frenemy energy now and then. And this lunch was really a summons from the Bianchi Boss, not a casual lunch-and-chat between cousins.

I must admit I’m a little intrigued to hear what she has to say.

But before we can really sink our claws in, the doors crash open again and a whirlwind of energy comes barreling inside in grease-stained overalls.

“Scusa per il ritardo, bella!” Caitlin O’Sullivan cries, her face flushed as she drops a smacking kiss on Juno’s porcelain cheek, heedless of the furrowed brows following her disheveled appearance from the lunchtime crowd. Her curly red hair is escaping its ponytail, but her blue eyes are bright with joy as she adds another kiss to Juno’s lips.

I hide a wistful smile behind my glass. While Juno grates on my every nerve sometimes, I’m glad for her that she’s found such a true love. I even envy it sometimes.

From time to time I wonder what it would be like to have that kind of relationship, but I'm not built for long-term monogamy. I play the field and sow my wild oats, and that's the way I like it.

I catch the ghost of a smile playing on Juno's lips, the frost in her eyes momentarily melting. Only Caitlin can shatter her Ice Queen facade so effortlessly.

Watching their easy intimacy twists something sharp and hungry in my chest. I wonder if I actually could have that someday. A partner who truly sees me, darkness and all.

And then I shake off the melancholy.

"Your Italian's coming along," I tell Caitlin with a grin. "Did we have a rough morning at the garage?"

Caitlin laughs, tucking a grease rag quickly deeper into her overall pocket at the frown from our waiter. "Wouldn't want to get soft now, would I? Not in this family."

Her playful tone belies the truth. As both daughter and wife to two powerful Mob Bosses, Caitlin understands better than most how ruthless our world can be beneath the glitz and glamor. For all its secrecy, gossip spreads like wildfire through our ranks, and the marital troubles between Juno and Caitlin last year became a juicy tidbit that everyone still whispers about when they think I can't hear.

But one glare from me is enough to silence those wagging tongues. Family drama is best kept in the family. And I'm very happy to see them moving past all that now. If Juno hadn't gotten her head screwed on straight, I would've had to knock some sense into her myself. I suppress a smirk at the thought. Then we'd both end up bruised and bloody. I prefer my family drama without the literal punches these days.

The mental ones cut deep enough.

As if reading my thoughts, Juno's eyes narrow ever so slightly. I widen my smile and turn my gaze to the waiter sweeping in with our drinks—a rich 2010 Brunello di Montalcino for me and Juno, and a bright Aperol spritz for Caitlin. The familiar scents relax me as we settle in, awaiting our dishes—creamy tortellini carbonara for me, gnocchi pomodoro for Juno, and a hearty lasagna bolognese for Caitlin, who is chattering about the Camaro engine she was rebooting this morning. Rebooting? Is that the word? I'm afraid I don't pay all that much attention to Caitlin's car talk, but she's pretty enough just to watch as she talks.

Between bites, Juno turns the conversation little by little to business, delicately and euphemistically. I'm afraid I also tune her out as she natters on about discretion and laying low.

Juno means well in her smothering, control-freak way, but her criticisms always grate on me. She forgets I'm not one of her underlings to command and scold as she pleases.

“The Ruby Realm could attract unwanted attention,” Juno says pointedly, dabbing tomato sauce from her lips with a damask napkin. “Too much noise risks exposure for all of us.”

I resist the acerbic reply simmering on my tongue, my exclusive women-only—and mostly lesbians-only—private members' club being a particular thorn in my cousin's side. My velvet-swathed refuge remains maddeningly beyond Juno's manicured grasp, its secrets guarded by sisterhood and silence. Juno is a member, of course, but the Ruby is my baby.

And I intend to keep it that way.

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“Your concern is misplaced, dear cousin,” I reply breezily over the lip of my wine glass. “The Ruby’s affairs are my dominion. But I appreciate your guidance, as always.” I raise my glass to her, the fruity aromas of cherry and raspberry filling my nose as I finish it down.

I appreciate Juno’s refined taste in wine, if nothing else.

Juno’s eyes flash, but before she can retort, our waiter sweeps in once more with espresso and dessert—a sweet cannoli for me, zabaglione for Juno, and tiramisu for Caitlin. The familiar flavors soothe the tension coiled in my shoulders. For all our power plays and posturing, blood runs thicker than water for those born of la Cosa Nostra.

My mother Maria is Juno’s aunt, the youngest sister of Juno’s father Carmine, may he rest in peace. Maria Bianchi’s marriage to my father, Johnny de Luca, was a love match, but it also strengthened ties between the Bianchi Family and the Mancini Family.

Daddy is a very powerful man, and he dotes on me as his only daughter. I know people call me a Mob princess, but both Daddy and I know better. He raised me well, and I hold influence and sway in this city in a way that Juno—bless her cold, icy heart—could never even dream of.

The difference between Juno and me? People like me. She’s lucky she’s got Caitlin now to fence all that oh-so-irritating people stuff for her. Juno is a master strategist and an unrivaled tactician, but my God, she’s a moron when it comes to emotions.

And of course, rivalry simmers now and then between the Mancinis and Bianchis, but we always come back to the same table. We are *Famiglia*, after all. Still, that has little to do with me. I do Daddy some favors from time to time—a little laundering, for example, or provision of supplies—but I’m not steeped in the business, not like Juno.

Still, I suppose I appreciate her watching out for me. The Ruby Realm is a front for a very different kind of business, though few people know the extent of it.

“Caitlin, sweetheart, remember to pull Juno along to the charity auction on Friday night. She’ll forget all about it unless you remind her—or she’ll pretend to, anyway.”

“I certainly will not,” Juno says coldly, but Caitlin is already chuckling.

“We’ll be there,” she promises me.

“Excellent. Of course, the Bianchi Foundation’s contributions to the cause are much appreciated,” I say to Juno, raising my espresso in an almost-mock toast.

But the truth is, I need Juno there. I need her money there, so if that means I need to suck up to her, I will. She despises being told what to do, even in the name of charity. My dear cousin has never really grasped the true importance of cultivating a positive philanthropic reputation.

But for me, it has become a very useful shield to those curveballs that life likes to throw my way now and then.

* * *

After farewell cheek-kisses and promises again from Caitlin and Juno to attend the charity auction, I step outside, swapping Carmela’s velvet opulence for the grittier streets. Out here, my Daddy used to tell me as a child, one wayward glance or

misstep could spell your end, even for the influential and lovely. But like calls to like, and we de Lucas have never been ones to walk with the sheep.

I smile as I think about my father's bedtime stories—they never gave me nightmares, despite Mama's protests—but all of a sudden, a quick shudder goes through me. It almost feels as though...

I scan the sidewalk casually as I walk, noticing nothing amiss. Still, the sensation persists, raising the fine hairs on my arm beneath the silk sleeves of my champagne-colored blouse. It's not the usual sensation I get day to day of simply being admired. Even the most envious eyes don't make me feel as uncomfortable as this.

No. Whoever is watching me likely knows precisely who I am.

My leisurely pace continues, but every sense sharpens, straining for clues...any scuff of a shoe on pavement, a whisper of indrawn breath, the slide of a safety shifting off a concealed weapon. I turn the next corner into shadow, my own hand sliding deftly beneath the silk folds of my skirt to the sleek contours of my concealed Beretta. I press flat against weathered brick, every nerve honed to action, my heart's rhythm steady despite the adrenaline flooding of my system.

Like I said, Daddy raised a bad bitch.

The seconds tick by as I wait, breathing silenced, my weapon ready in hand. But no one turns the corner after me. No footsteps echo down the alley. Slowly, I release the breath caught in my chest. I'm being paranoid, no doubt. The thought makes me chuckle even as I slide my gun back into its discreet holster against my thigh. Can't be too careful, after all. Perhaps it's time to consider a personal bodyguard like Juno and Caitlin. Even Daddy's been pressing me for years to hire someone—an annoying issue I've somehow evaded until now.

With a rueful smile at my own nerves, I smooth my ruffled feathers and continue onward through the streets. The sun may still be up, but the Ruby Realm beckons tonight, promising laughter, temptation, and eternal possibilities behind its walls.

My ladies expect nothing less.

And I aim to please.

CHAPTER2

NATALIE

The elevator doors slide open, revealing the luxurious penthouse suite on Park Avenue that will serve as my home for the foreseeable future. My breath catches in my throat as I take in the space: floor-to-ceiling windows reveal a panoramic view of New York City, and everything is state-of-the-art, from the glossy hardwood floors to the elaborate light fixtures.

“Pretty swanky, huh?” Sam Wright says under his breath as we step out of the elevator.

I nod, eyes wide. “Just a bit different than my one bedroom in Queens.”

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To the right of the entrance is a chef's kitchen with gleaming granite counters, top-of-the-line stainless steel appliances, and a huge island for prepping meals. I run my hand along the smooth marble, imagining the intricate dishes a private chef could create in this kitchen—the kind of dishes I'll never taste, that's for sure.

Across from the kitchen is an elegant lounge area with plush white couches and a stone fireplace. Abstract art decorates the walls. A baby grand piano sits in the corner, polished black and waiting for someone to bring it to life. Heavy silk drapes frame the windows, softening the light.

Down the hall, the master bedroom features a king-sized canopy bed with luxurious linens. For a split-second, my mind supplies a picture of Alessa de Luca reclining on those sheets.

I shake the thought from my head quickly. This is an operation, not a pleasure cruise, and there's no expectation at all that I...

What, seduce a Mob princess? I have to smile at that idea. Alessa de Luca wouldn't look twice at someone like me, anyway.

No. Hell, no. This operation only requires me to gain entry to de Luca's women-only, private members' club, the Ruby Realm, so that I can scope it out for illegal activities. And as part of that operation, I'm going undercover as a wealthy, connected, women-loving-woman.

Only one of those things is true, and it's not the money or the friendships, let me tell you.

“Quite the digs, huh?” one of my colleagues remarks as he steps by me, carrying a box of surveillance equipment. The rest of his tech team trails behind him, and I can see a mixture of awe and discomfort on their faces. We’re used to working in less-than-glamorous conditions, and this level of luxury is foreign to all of us.

“Definitely not what I’m used to,” I say with a laugh, but I give myself away by nervously tucking a strand of my newly-blonde hair behind my ear. All part of the act; I’m a natural mousy brown, but my role as fabulously wealthy heiress demanded a more luxurious shade. My reflection in the window is so foreign to me now, the slight flush to my cheeks evidence of both excitement and discomfort. Dressed in a tailored YSL suit that hugs my frame, I feel like a total imposter in this world of wealth and excess.

Well...I guess because I am.

Captain Stephen Bell, our unit head, calls the core team back into the living area. “Alright, let’s get to work. We don’t have much time before Miller is expected to make contact.”

I hustle back to the living room and wait as the team assembles. Sam Wright, former military and my appointed handler for this operation, stands at parade rest, ready to follow orders. We went through FBI training together back in the day and it’s almost comforting to have him here with me now. Analyst Patrick O’Conner fiddles with the surveillance equipment, his lanky frame practically swimming in his rumpled suit. Evelyn Chang, our lead tech expert, hums under her breath as she finishes planting a listening device in the corner and then hurdles herself over the back of the couch to land with a thump in the seat, Bell glaring at her. Her trendy undercut and lace-up boots contrast with the other agents’ conservative looks.

Dr. Kristen Hays, our criminal profiler, watches the proceedings with sharp eyes. I’ll rely on her insights about Alessa once I’m undercover.

And I'll rely on her to keep my head straight, too.

Hays joins me now near the window. She raises her eyebrow as she looks over her shoulder. "Quite the view. Should help you get into character."

I force a smile, hoping she's right. An analyst by nature, I've always felt more at home digging through case files than playing dress-up, though I've worked a few undercover roles before. For this operation, I'll have to convince the target I'm an Upper East Side socialite. And that means getting comfortable with all this luxury.

"Try to relax, Miller," Hays says quietly. "Remember, this place is just a tool for our mission."

I nod, trying to take her advice to heart. "You're right. I just...I never thought I'd be living in a place like this, even temporarily."

"Focus on the mission. We're here to take down Alessa de Luca and dismantle her criminal empire. Everything else is just window dressing."

"Window dressing," I repeat with a wry smile, glancing around at the extravagant décor. "I'll keep that in mind."

As the tech team go around ensuring the cameras and bugs are in place, Bell gives us a briefing in the sleek living room.

"Let's recap," he says firmly, "so we're all on the same page. These past six months, we've been building a case to infiltrate Alessa de Luca, daughter of Johnny 'the Gentleman' de Luca, a Caporegime for the Mancini crime family."

At the mention of Johnny's name, a chill runs through me. His reputation is the stuff of legend, for all the wrong reasons. They call him Johnny the Gentleman because of

his quick, clean kills and almost respectful treatment of the corpses, leaving a handkerchief over their head as though to spare first witnesses the gruesome sight of what a gunshot to the face will do to a person.

Oh, yeah. A real gentleman.

Bell continues, “Our intelligence suggests Alessa de Luca, the Gentleman’s daughter, is running an illegal gambling operation out of a private members’ club she owns, called the Ruby Realm. High stakes poker and blackjack for sure, and there are rumors of maybe even a full casino. We also suspect the club is a front for prostitution, drugs—the usual.”

I clench my hands. The thought of someone exploiting women like that always makes my blood boil. This is exactly the kind of darkness I became an agent to defeat.

“We’re hoping to get someone inside this club to gather more evidence, and allow us to—ultimately—take the whole operation down.” Bell nods at me. “That’s where Miller comes in.”

“Love the new look,” Chang calls over with a grin. I almost flip her the bird, but remember myself before I do, and manage to stifle my laughter. She gives me a wink after Bell glares icily at her, and I resolve to make sure she pays next time we’re out for drinks after work.

“We’ve created an airtight cover for Miller,” Bell goes on. “She’ll make first contact with de Luca through Congresswoman Alicia Crane, a frequent patron of the club. We had enough dirt on the Congresswoman to persuade her to make an introduction.”

I think back to our meeting with Crane, how her face paled when we confronted her with evidence of her association with the Ruby Realm. Given that she’s a member of the House Ethics Committee, her hypocrisy was astounding. I take no personal

pleasure in twisting arms, but some people only respond to that sort of treatment. At least Crane complied without too much fuss.

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Her ‘donation’ will serve the greater good.

Bell continues, “Miller’s goal is to gain de Luca’s trust and get access to the inner workings of the club. No one gets into the Ruby Realm without a membership, and getting a membership is damn near impossible these days. De Luca’s been cracking down ever since her cousin Juno took over the Bianchi Family.”

My heart speeds up a little as I contemplate the job. I’ve been undercover before, but never solo. And never using my sexuality as a weapon. The deception required goes against my instincts for honesty. But one look at the faces of my team reminds me what’s at stake. If taking down criminals like Alessa de Luca means dulling my conscience for a while, it’s a price I’m willing to pay.

“Miller,” Bell says, grabbing my attention again, “will be going undercover as wealthy heiress Natalie Moreau. Her father made a fortune in real estate, but he died in a tragic yachting accident six months ago. We planted stories back then, so they’ll be available for a search, along with everything else necessary for her cover. Natalie Moreau is known for her philanthropy and love of art, but also her—shall we say—excesses.”

“And she has a kickass wardrobe,” Chang says, as more team members wheel past several racks of high-end clothes. “Damn, girl. You gonna lookgood,” she sighs wistfully.

“Blending in with de Luca’s world will be crucial to gaining her trust,” Bell snaps.

I try to look completely unconcerned about the clothes, but Chang’s right. They’re

amazing. When I went for the fittings, I just about died at the prices.

Still, I'm not sure I like the idea that I was chosen for this job purely because I'm a lesbian. Bell assured me it wasn't that—but he couldn't quite look me in the eye for longer than a second while he did.

Bell goes on with the briefing, but I find my mind wandering. I've heard most of this before, many times. I'm wondering if I've actually got the guts to pull it off, now that I'm standing here in what's supposed to be my apartment. Because this...

This isn't me.

I look around at the gold fixtures and marble statues, the impeccable and expensive taste evident in every design choice.

Very not me, the Midwest small town girl who grew up in a loving but decidedly lower-class family. But it's who I have to become, at least for a while. I need to blend in and gain Alessa's trust, all while maintaining my own principles and dedication to justice.

Wright must sense some hesitation just like Hays did, because when the team is asking a few questions, he wanders closer and drops his voice. "You still good with all this? I know it's asking a lot."

I give him a resolute look. "It's the job. And it needs doing."

He searches my face to ensure I mean it. Then he squeezes my shoulder. "You need me, anytime, I'm just a call away."

We discussed my wearing a wire during this job, but decided to can that until I'd built up a little trust at least. We can't know what's behind those leather-padded doors of

the Ruby Realm. And frankly, I'm a little relieved. I think I'll lie better if I can do it without anyone listening in.

So I just nod at Wright and give him the smile he's waiting for.

"Regarding surveillance," Bell continues, "we've set up cameras and microphones throughout this apartment, just in case, and we'll be monitoring 24/7, so don't hesitate to reach out if you need assistance or if anything goes wrong. However, Miller and I agreed that wearing a wire is something that might come down the track. No point getting made early—something that happened with one of our guys earlier today. De Luca is jumpy right now, to say the least. She managed to feel the tail hanging on to her, and he had to ditch. So you go in light, Miller. Be careful. Uninterested, until you have to be interested. Hear me?"

What the hell is that supposed to mean, I wonder? But I just nod.

"Let's go back to the Congresswoman," Bell says, shifting gears. "We're using our leverage to ensure she introduces you to de Luca at this charity auction on Friday night. Our hope is that her vouching for you will pave the way for a membership invitation to the Ruby Realm. So you make sure you play your cards right, Miller."

With my background and cover story squared away, all that's left is to slip into character. To bury my doubts and focus on the end goal—bringing justice by any means necessary.

An hour later, the team files out, leaving me alone to get accustomed to the place. I take another long look at the glittering cityscape of New York City shimmering beneath me. The weight of my mission is heavy, and I'm acutely aware of the personal risks involved. My safety hangs in the balance, and one false step could find me with one of the Gentleman's handkerchiefs laid out over my ruined face.

Alessa de Luca is not an ordinary criminal. She's charismatic, alluring, and cunning—traits that have allowed her to weave a web of influence throughout the city. In some ways she holds more influence than even her formidable cousin, Juno Bianchi. And as I gaze out at the sprawling metropolis below, I can't help but think of how many lives have been tainted by de Luca's activities.

But despite her dark deeds, I found myself drawn to de Luca during my research, in a way I can't quite comprehend. Beneath that criminal exterior lies a complex, fascinating woman, one who has admittedly used her power to help those less fortunate. Even if it's a front, a way to launder her daddy's dirty money, she's still done some good in the world.

But she's done a lot of bad, too.

It's this contradiction that gnaws at me. How can someone capable of such charity also be responsible for so much pain?

Somewhere out there, Alessa de Luca is living her life, oblivious to the net tightening around her. This penthouse, like my alter ego Natalie Moreau, is just a facade.

But if, as Bell said, I play my cards right, it will be de Luca's downfall.

So now it's time to deal myself into the most dangerous game of all.

CHAPTER 3

ALESSA

The grand ballroom of this extravagant Manhattan hotel glitters with light reflected off crystal chandeliers. Standing on the raised stage at the front, I survey the room with a practiced eye. It's all come together flawlessly—the event planning team really outdid themselves this time. The tables are draped in silver silk and adorned with centerpieces of exotic orchids and flickering candles. Waitstaff in crisp white shirts glide smoothly through the crowd balancing trays of champagne flutes and decadent hors d'oeuvres; this time I chose to leave my Ruby. An orchestra plays softly in the background, the haunting strains of the violins mingling with laughter and the clink of glasses.

A diverse crowd mingles effortlessly, a mixture of celebrities, high-society figures, and mobsters who play by their own rules. The luxurious attire of the guests—tailored tuxedos, designer gowns adorned with jewels—only adds to the dripping sense of wealth in the room.

Wealth that I intend to direct toward my auction.

“Ms. de Luca,” a well-dressed businessman greets me, offering his hand for a kiss. “You’ve truly outdone yourself this time.”

“Thank you, Mr. Russell,” I reply, a practiced smile gracing my lips as I glance around the room. As hostess, it's essential for me to keep an eye on the dynamics at play. I'm dressed to impress in a sleek, floor-length red dress that accentuates my assets—by which I mean my confidence and power, of course. A diamond and ruby necklace sparkles above my cleavage—a gift from an admirer with connections best

left unspoken—and my dark hair cascades in soft waves over my shoulders.

“Ah, Alessa!” a woman calls from across the room, her voice carrying over the din of conversation. She saunters toward me, her silk dress swishing with each step. “This is simply marvelous! Your events are always the highlight of the season.”

“Thank you, darling,” I respond warmly, embracing her briefly before releasing her back into the throng of attendees. My eyes sweep the room once more, observing the various interactions taking place: a group of mobsters whispering conspiratorially in a corner, an A-list actress laughing gaily as she flits from conversation to conversation.

“Ms. de Luca,” another guest approaches me, offering a glass of the champagne I’ve provided tonight. “What an excellent vintage. It’s divine.”

“Thank you,” I say, taking a sip and allowing the bubbles to dance on my tongue.

I spot my cousin Juno across the room, wearing a silver gown that makes her look rather like she’s frozen in ice. She’s deep in conversation with Caitlin, who gives me a bright grin and a finger-wiggle wave. I wave back, my heart lifting. Those two are a force to be reckoned with. I make a mental note to touch base with them later; Juno mentioned a packaging issue with our latest shipment of champagne for the Ruby Realm that I need to look into—the very vintage I’ve used up here tonight for this crowd.

For now though, it’s showtime.

I step up to the microphone and the babble of voices dies down. “Welcome, friends,” I begin, my voice clear and strong. “Thank you all for being here tonight in support of the Safe Harbor Society.” A smattering of refined applause. “I’ll keep this brief, as I know you’re all eager to start bidding.” A ripple of genteel laughter. “We have some incredible auction items lined up, including a week-long Mediterranean cruise...”

As I speak, I scan the room, taking in the attendees. Politicians rubbing elbows with celebrities, socialites mingling with made men...my world is not one of simplicities. But despite some questionable backgrounds, they all know to be on their best behavior tonight. This event is too visible for anything uncouth.

Many faces I see are familiar—regular patrons of the Ruby Realm who enjoy its luxuries perhaps a bit too much. Speaking of, there's Alicia Crane, a Congresswoman who frequents my club. She's accompanied by someone I don't recognize, a striking blonde in an elegant black gown. I'll have to find out who she is after my speech. Alicia has...diverse tastes when it comes to companionship.

I wrap up my remarks and cede the stage to the auctioneer, a lively little gentleman who immediately gets the bidding war started on that Mediterranean cruise. As patrons start vying for extravagant prizes, I make my way through the crowd, exchanging air kisses and pleasantries, careful not to smudge my ruby-red lipstick. And a bit of harmless flirtation here and there smooths even the most ruffled feathers.

I'm intercepted by Lucia Rossi, the razor-sharp attorney who works for the Mancini Family. "Bellissima serata," she says approvingly. "Once again, you've outdone yourself with this event. The Boss sends his regards as well."

I smile. "A wonderful night for a good cause. Hopefully we'll bring in even more than last year."

We could bring in double, if Don Mancini ever cared to open up his wallet for a cause like this. But I don't let that thought show on my face. As far as Antonio Mancini is concerned, the Family exists to make him rich.

And Lucia is his cousin. She would certainly report any disloyalty straight into his ear.

Before I can continue circulating, Alicia Crane appears at my elbow. “Alessa, darling! You look magnificent.” Her gaze sweeps over me appreciatively. Under other circumstances I might return the sentiment, but Alicia is a little tedious, I’m sad to say. The kind of woman with a bone-deep shame streak. Me? I’m shameless. So we’d never work beyond a fling, and Alicia also tends to get a little obsessive.

“I’m so glad you could make it,” I say politely. The blonde I saw her with earlier materializes at her elbow. “And this must be a friend of yours,” I say with a smile, as the two of them stand there.

Odd.

Alicia clears her throat. “Yes. I’d...like to introduce you to Natalie Moreau. She just moved back to New York recently from the south of France.”

I take in Natalie with interest, her intelligent brown eyes and the gentle curve of her throat as she swallows. But something seems off. There’s a hesitance in her face that speaks of discomfort.

Natalie extends her hand, and as our fingers touch, a jolt of electricity shoots through me. She’s really quite lovely, and I’m immediately attracted to her, but something in her eyes suggests a challenge.

And I do so love a challenge.

I give her my most charismatic smile. “Welcome to our little soiree, Ms. Moreau,” I say.

“Thank you,” Natalie replies, her voice cool and measured. “It’s certainly an impressive event.”

“Do you think so?” I counter, feeling a sudden urge to challenge her. “I’m so glad.”

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Her eyes narrow slightly. “These events bring together such an...interesting group of people.”

“Interesting” isn’t the word I’d use, but I keep that thought to myself. Instead, I ask, “And what brings you here tonight, Ms. Moreau?”

“Supporting a good cause, of course,” she replies, staring straight into my face. “It’s certainly an extravaganza.”

“It’s quite fun, isn’t it?” I say, gazing around with a smug smile, mostly to annoy her.

Ah, the old hypocrisy jab. Why spend so much money entertaining the One Percent when I could send it all to charity? What none of those wielding that particular sword seem to realize is how much more money comes out the other side when I hold functions like this.

“Do you often hold such functions?” Natalie persists.

“Oh, in between partying, when the mood strikes me. You know how it is.” I don’t bother holding back the sarcasm. Doesn’t this little bottle-blonde know who I am?

Alicia gives a strangled laugh. “Well,” she says, with a furious glare at Natalie. “We should probably mingle before the bidding starts.”

“It was nice to meet you, Ms. de Luca,” Natalie says, sounding as though it was anything but.

“Likewise,” I reply tersely, watching her walk away.

What an odd guest for Alicia to bring. A social climber, perhaps? Though her caring so little for the vultures in this room speaks otherwise.

No, she’s quite a mystery—and I do so enjoy unraveling secrets. I’ll have to keep an eye on Ms. Moreau tonight.

My attention turns back to the auction as the bidding begins. The stage is elaborately decorated, with an enormous gilded mirror hanging behind the auctioneer, reflecting the shimmering lights and the eager faces of the attendees. I watch from my vantage point as items are presented one by one: rare paintings, exquisite jewelry, and experiences money can’t usually buy.

The bids fly back and forth like well-aimed arrows. Juno, ever the show-woman, makes a grand gesture of bidding an exorbitant amount on a breathtaking Picasso lithograph. Beside her, Caitlin watches with a mixture of amusement and adoration. I can’t help but smile at the spectacle they create.

Juno and a businessman from Dubai get locked into a heated duel, prompting cheers from the crowd as the bids climb. Whichever of them triumphs, the charity is the ultimate winner.

The Picasso finally sells to Juno—of course—for a staggering sum, and the auctioneer moves on to the final item of the night—dinner for two at Jacques Auclair’s latest restaurant, with yours truly as the dining companion. “Let’s start the bidding at ten thousand dollars!”

Immediately, several hands shoot up. I arrange my features in a look of polite acquiescence while inwardly sighing. More tedious small talk over haute cuisine...joy. At least it’s for a good cause.

The bids climb higher in a cutthroat back and forth, and the three highest bidders are not people with whom I'd enjoy spending time. But needs must. When they reach fifty thousand, I assume we've found our victor. But to my surprise, a clear voice rings out from the back of the room.

"One hundred thousand dollars!"

A ripple of shock sweeps the room. I turn in disbelief to see none other than Natalie Moreau, hand raised calmly. Our eyes meet and something like a challenge sparks in her gaze.

Applause erupts as Natalie secures her prize.

I don't know what game this woman is playing, but I'm not about to let her win. I catch her eye and lift my glass in a subtle toast.

"What on earth is that about?" says a voice in my ear.

With a sigh, I turn to face Juno. "My time is precious, darling, as you've just heard. So get to the point?"

Juno, as usual, does. "Who is that woman?"

"I've no idea. Quite a mystery."

"Then I hope you'll be careful," Juno warns. "It's never wise to get too close to a mystery, Alessa."

"Where's the fun in that?" I shrug off her concern. She should know better, anyway. Telling me not to do something is a surefire way to make me want to do it, just to be contradictory.

But deep down, I know Juno is probably right. There's something about Natalie that draws me in like a moth to a flame, and that never ends well for the moth.

I make my way around the outskirts of the room, and manage to make Natalie Moreau jump when I slide up behind her to murmur in her ear: "It seems we'll be getting to know each other better soon."

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She whirls around, eyes wide, and then stiffly says, “Yes. I...look forward to it.”

I’ve never seen anyone look more uncomfortable at the prospect of spending time with me.

“Tell me, Ms. Moreau,” I ask, leaning closer, “what do you hope to gain from our dinner date? You’ve piqued my interest, and I must admit I’m dying to know more about you.”

Her eyes widen slightly, and for a moment, I think I’ve caught her off guard. But then she smiles, and it’s like the sun breaking through the clouds.

“Isn’t that what we’ll be doing at the dinner, Ms. de Luca?” she asks, her voice lilting with amusement. “Getting to know one another?”

“Of course,” I agree, returning her smile. “I look forward to it. And I think—since we’ll be dining partners—you’d better call me Alessa.”

“Alessa, then. And please, call me Natalie. But I did have one request. I wondered if we might dine privately. At my apartment on Park Avenue.”

“I’m not sure if—” I begin.

She cuts me off. “I prefer staying out of the limelight,” she confides in a low voice. “In Europe, one could never quite escape the paparazzi. Even here—”

“I understand,” I say automatically. Even the mention of the paparazzi gives me the

shivers. I certainly don't need my whereabouts posted all over the internet. "Still, I don't want my generous donors to feel slighted."

Natalie's brown eyes hold mine as she leans in even closer. "I had hoped," she says softly, "for a more intimate experience with you. One on one. Just...for the night." And then her plump lips curve into a hopeful, inviting smile as she trails a hand lightly down my arm.

Ah. Now that's more like it.

"I'm sure darling Jacques will understand," I tell her. "Leave your address with the auctioneer. I look forward to getting to know you better. Much better."

With a seductive flutter of my eyelashes, I smile my goodbye and sashay away.

Always leave them wanting more.

With the auction concluded, the orchestra strikes up a lively tune. The gala atmosphere returns as guests swarm the dance floor and partake of the flowing champagne. I float through the crowd, my smile never wavering. But my thoughts keep straying to the unexpected Natalie Moreau. Her outlandish bid, while beneficial to charity, raises questions about her intentions. There's more to her than meets the eye, I'm sure of it.

Later, as the party begins winding down, I spot Natalie slipping quietly out the door. Watching her departure, I feel the stirrings of something I haven't felt in a long time. Real interest. The mystery of Ms. Moreau intrigues me. I intend to crack it, one way or another.

What's her game? That's the question. But for now, I'll bide my time until our dinner.

Because whatever the game, I plan to enjoy it.

CHAPTER 4

NATALIE

The soft click of the lock echoes through the cavernous foyer as I enter the lavish Park Avenue penthouse. I pause in the doorway, taking in the grandiosity before me. Everything about this place is foreign, from the gleaming floors to the soft light fixtures sparkling above.

This kind of luxury is a galaxy away from my cozy apartment back home. And it makes me feel a little ill to be in here at all.

I wander through the open-concept living space, trailing my fingers along the smooth furnishings. I've looked through the whole place several times, but it feels different at night. Colder. Soulless. A far cry from the worn but comfortable couch I curl up on with a good book back in Queens.

I stop by the floor-to-ceiling windows and stare out at the city. It seems so remote from here. Does Alessa de Luca have a similar view, I wonder? Is that why it's so easy for her, and others like her, to see other human lives as mere amusements? Playthings?

When you're this high up above it all, it must be easy to think of yourself as a god.

Suddenly I need to be out of this dress, these shoes, this makeup. Time to take off the mask. But the decadence of the master suite still overwhelms me. The same floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Manhattan. A canopy bed fit for royalty, piled high with pillows. The attached bathroom houses both an oversized shower and jetted tub. I avoid my reflection in the mirrors as I enter the walk-in closet, a whole room of its

own, my fingers brushing across the rows of designer gowns now stored in here, silks and satins gliding smoothly beneath my fingertips.

As I kick off my heels with a sigh of relief and strip off the slinky black dress, I wonder—am I any better than the vampires who dwell in these buildings? Am I really doing the right thing, manipulating desires, weaving elaborate deceptions just to gain trust?

Does the end truly justify these means?

I think again of trailing my fingers down Alessa's soft arm, of the spark of electricity between us, the way those sea-green eyes flew to mine. I got it just right, the breathy voice, the hesitant invitation.

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And I have no idea how much of that was me playing a role, or just...

Me.

I take a deep breath as the dress crumples to the floor. Naked, I feel exposed. Vulnerable. Alone in this unfamiliar space.

I go back across the luxe carpet into the bathroom. As I begin wiping off my heavy makeup in front of the mirror, I think over my first real glimpse into Alessa de Luca's world, a glittering realm of celebrities and mobsters, where charm and danger mingle freely behind forced smiles.

Seeing it all up close stirred up disgust in me, a disgust I struggled to hide from the very woman I'm supposed to be buddying up to. Can I truly belong in this place? Pass myself off in their midst? I don't know...

I slide the diamond earrings from my lobes. Were they always this heavy?

Playing this role seemed so clear before. Now doubts creep in.

But it's time to report.

I shrug on a satin robe and make my way to the study, where I open up my laptop and flip through the tabs until I find the one controlling the hidden cameras throughout the apartment. Nothing in the bedroom, thank God, but all the more public areas are under surveillance, including this study. One by one, I cycle through the various angles, checking that each one provides a clear, unobstructed view. I test the

embedded microphones, listening for any audible crackle or pop. Satisfied with the setup, I settle in to write my report for the evening before anything passes out of my mind.

Five minutes after I've sent it and gone back to the bedroom, the sudden ringing of my cell phone jars me from my thoughts. I snatch it from the dresser and Sam Wright's codename flashes across the screen.

"Hey, Wright," I answer, my voice wavering slightly.

"Miller. How are you holding up?" Wright's baritone resonates through the phone. Calming. Grounding.

"I'm okay." I wet my lips. "Just sent in my report."

"I saw it. Wanted to check in." After a pause, he asks, "Nat, is everything okay?"

I sink onto the massive canopy bed, clutching a pillow to my tummy like I'm a child with a teddy bear. "It's this role, Sam. I thought I had no qualms but now..." My voice trails off.

Silence. Then: "Yeah. It ain't pretty playing these games, manipulating feelings. But the potential impact here—crippling the Mancini family, getting justice for countless victims—it makes it worth it in my book. You'll do great. Trust your instincts. And remember, I'm right here if you need me."

His steady presence comforts me, as it has so many times before. Sam's confidence in my abilities helps temper my doubts. Not for the first time, I'm grateful to have him as my handler. To have a friend at my back.

"Just stick to the plan we discussed and let her reactions guide you. Don't force

anything.” His advice is sound, as always.

“I know. I just...I find myself questioning whether the end truly justifies these means.”

“Look, Miller, I won’t blow smoke about the moral grey areas here. But taking down an organization profiting off of human lives? That tips the scale for me. You’re strong enough to play a little dirty here. It’s for the greater good.”

“Part of me knows that...” My voice trails off again.

I don’t want to say what’s really bothering me. But I can admit it to myself. This weaponization of my sexuality?

It’s way more uncomfortable than I ever thought it would be.

“I feel like a damn honeytrap,” I burst out.

Wright isn’t dumb enough to deny it. “It’s heavy, putting principles aside. I get that. It ain’t easy. But the respect you’ll get for making this sacrifice, bringing down the Mancinis? It’ll be worth it. You got this. Eyes on the prize, Special Agent Miller.”

Wright’s voice echoes my own thoughts, shoring up my resolve. “You’re absolutely right. Thanks, Wright.” My voice regains its firmness, and I feel almost like myself again.

“All good. Get some rest and we’ll debrief fully tomorrow.”

“Good night.”

As I set down the phone, my doubts subside. Wright’s logic has won out. The

mission's importance makes my moral struggles worthwhile.

Tomorrow I'll work with my team to prepare for this dinner with Alessa. This lavish place, my false identity, it all serves a greater purpose.

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For now, I'll ready myself for the role. And I'll take down Alessa de Luca by any means necessary.

But as I fall into restless dreams, Alessa's sly green eyes seem to pierce my conscience. Something in me knows...

The games have only just begun.

CHAPTER5

NATALIE

I finish applying a final coat of mascara and step back to examine my reflection in the ornate gilded mirror of the master bathroom. My usually practical ponytail has been smoothed into soft waves with the assistance of my teammate Evelyn. The little black dress Kris insisted I buy clings to my body, paired with dangerously high stilettos. I feel like I'm playing dress up, trying to embody the type of woman who belongs in a Park Avenue penthouse.

"You look incredible," Evelyn Chang says from her perch on the edge of the expansive tub. "Alessa isn't going to know what hit her."

I force a smile, but my nerves are starting to get the better of me. In just under an hour, I'll be sitting across the table from the most dangerous woman I've ever targeted. And once again, I need to make her believe I'm someone else entirely.

I was barely able to keep it together for five minutes at the charity event. Am I ready

for a whole evening of play-acting?

“Are you ready for this?” Chang asks, her brown eyes searching mine with concern as she unknowingly echoes my thoughts. “I know it’s a lot we’re asking you to do.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to complete the mission.” It’s true, I would do anything for this job. Bringing criminals to justice is my purpose in life. After growing up in a broken-down small town where crime was a way of life, I always knew I wanted to make a difference. Watching single mothers and kids get targeted made me feel so helpless as a kid.

Now, though, I get to target those criminals right back. And Alessa de Luca is the brightest jewel in the Mancini Family crown. Ripping her out will be a pleasure.

“Well, the place looks fantastic, at least,” Chang says brightly. “Setup team really outdid themselves.”

She’s right about that. The team has gone all out creating the illusion that I’m an Upper East Side heiress with money to burn—down to the monogrammed hairbrush left artfully askew by the sink here, just in case Alessa de Luca wanders into my private bedroom.

God. I need to...not think about that.

In lieu of attending his new restaurant, Jacques Auclair has catered the dinner, though I insisted that none of his staff stick around to serve the meal. I’m pretty sure that any real heiress worth her salt would have insisted on servers, but I’ll just have to persuade Alessa that I’mthatdesperate to be alone with her.

Even though the team will be watching and listening avidly...

Anyway. Hopefully it will be enough to convince Alessa I belong in her world tonight.

Chang glances at her watch. “We should get moving, let you finish up. The caterers will be here any minute with the food, and we don’t want them seeing the team.”

I take a deep breath and smooth my features into a mask of cool confidence. “Ready when you are.”

We make our way down to the living room where the rest of the team is waiting. Patrick O’Conner and Kris Hays are bickering lightheartedly over whether the accent pillows on the sofa need to be rotated thirty or forty-five degrees. Sam Wright is fiddling with the hidden cameras positioned around the room while Stephen Bell stands over his shoulder looking impatient. It’s almost showtime.

When Bell notices me, he claps his hands sharply. “Okay people, final checks. We need to be long gone when catering arrives.”

Hays makes her way over to me. As the team’s psychologist, it’s her job to get inside the mark’s head, and we’ve been over a few techniques already.

“How are you feeling?” she asks. “Nervous?”

“A little,” I admit. Lying to Hays never turns out well. She can read me too easily. “Mostly anxious to get started.”

Hays nods. “Remember what we talked about. Don’t come on too strong. Let her make the first move.”

Leveraging someone’s desires against them leaves a bad taste in my mouth. But I trust Hays’s profiling skills.

“I’ll follow your lead,” I promise her.

“Atta girl.” Hays winks. “Now we’d better vamoose. Catering will be here any minute.”

* * *

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Catering comes and goes, leaving instructions on what to serve when, and then I have nothing to do but wait for Alessa de Luca to show up.

I pour myself a glass of wine, more for the prop than the alcohol. The liquid courage will come in handy tonight. But I need my wits about me.

Settling onto the sofa, I will my nerves to settle. Breathe in for five seconds. Breathe out for seven. Kris Hays's favorite meditation trick.

All too soon, the doorman's desk calls up to alert me to Alessa's arrival. "Please send my guest on up." My voice sounds convincingly bright and welcoming to my ears.

I open the door before she knocks, not wanting to seem overeager, but informed enough to expect her arrival.

Alessa's height surprises me again. Her commanding presence made her appear much taller. But she's only about my height in reality, though the skyscraper heels give her another inch on me, maybe.

The rest of her is exactly as I remember. Long dark hair frames a face that could grace the front of Vogue. Full lips painted a deep red. Piercing green eyes rimmed with thick lashes. Her oxblood dress clings to every curve, the neckline plunging deep. Ruby earrings dangle from her ears, winking in the light.

Clearly, she understands how to use her assets to her advantage.

"Natalie." She leans in to air-kiss me. "A pleasure to see you again."

I step back, allowing her to brush past me into the foyer. The light scent of her perfume lingers in the air.

“The pleasure is mine. Please, make yourself comfortable.” I gesture toward the living area and bar cart. “Can I offer you a drink?”

“That would be lovely, thank you.” She walks further into the apartment, looking not at the view but at the interior. Already assessing. Taking stock. Then she heads to the sofa, settling gracefully against the cushion Patrick had been fussing over earlier, crossing her legs. The movement causes her dress to ride up slightly, exposing more of her toned thigh.

I quickly avert my gaze, and concentrate on pouring out two glasses of wine. She accepts hers with a gracious nod as I take a seat on the other side of the sofa.

“To new friends,” I say, injecting warmth into my tone as I hold up my glass in a toast.

Her smile widens. “I’ll drink to that.”

We both take a sip of our wine, eyes locked over the rims of our glasses. An undercurrent of anticipation hums in the air between us. Or maybe that’s just my imagination.

“Quite a place you have here. The view is magnificent.” Her eyes drift toward the floor-to-ceiling windows, though I suspect she is less interested in the cityscape than scoping the apartment’s security features.

“This place? Oh, it’s an old family property.” I take a small sip of wine. “It’s very beautiful, but I have to confess the gaudy trappings of wealth no longer impress me.”

“No?” One brow arches upwards. “I suppose wealth doesn’t seem to matter much when you can pay a hundred grand for a date.”

Heat blooms across my cheeks. She’s called my bluff and caught me off-guard. I grasp for a plausible cover.

“You’re quite right—I’m extremely privileged. But I wanted to make a meaningful contribution to your foundation. And I was eager to...get to know you better.” I infuse my voice with suggestive undertones on the last phrase.

My response earns me a throaty laugh. “Is that so? Well, you’ve certainly piqued my interest, Natalie. Though perhaps you won’t be here in the city for long, if your home is in Europe?”

“I’ve decided to make New York my permanent home. The energy here is addictive.”

And so is she, damn it. Being this close to her makes it hard to think. I take a larger gulp of wine to steel my nerves. “What about you? Have you always lived in New York?”

Alessa laughs, the sound low and musical. “Born and raised. I know every street and alley like the back of my hand.” She leans toward me conspiratorially. “All the best shortcuts too. The city holds no mysteries from me.”

“I don’t doubt that.” I force a light laugh in return. “Maybe you can show me your favorite hidden spots sometime.”

“Careful, I might just take you up on that.” She leans toward me, green eyes locked with mine. The heady floral scent of her perfume floods my senses once more. She’s close. Too close. My heart pounds against my ribs.

She reaches out and tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear, her fingers feather-light, lingering. And just as I'm certain she means to kiss me, she pulls back abruptly.

“Tell me Natalie, what is it you hope to gain from our acquaintance?” Her voice drops an octave lower. Smooth as velvet and just as rich.

I wet my suddenly dry lips before responding. “I'm not sure yet. But I suspect you and I could have a mutually beneficial friendship.”

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“Oh, I have no doubt of that.” Her eyes travel down my body slowly. Obviously. “But beneficial for whom, I wonder?”

I rein in my rioting emotions. “For both of us, I hope. But before we get in too deep, let’s enjoy some of Jacques Auclair’s creations, shall we?”

I practically leap to my feet. She rises more slowly. More elegantly. I have no idea how she keeps her balance on those shoes, but they appear to be almost extensions of her long, lovely legs.

“Let’s go into the dining room,” I manage to choke out, and then I turn and try not to run.

I need a moment to clear my head, away from her perfume, from her mesmerizing eyes, from her flirtatious smiles. “Please,” I say, showing her into the dining room, “take a seat. I’ll fetch the wine.”

I escape to the kitchen for just a moment, and take in some deep breaths. In for five. Out for seven.

I thought I’d be afraid. I thought that was what I’d have to control, my fear, not my...

Not my damn libido.

Alessa de Luca is a criminal who exploits everyone she comes into contact with, I remind myself fiercely. There’s a black heart under that breast.

That full, creamy, tantalizing breast almost spilling out of her dress...

I drag my attention back to the spread of elegant hors d'oeuvres he prepared: oysters topped with crème fraîche and caviar, seared scallops nestled on cucumber rounds, and rare roast beef layered onto toast points with blue cheese sauce.

Designed for easy at-home service, I was told. And also delicious. I take the platter into the dining room and place it down awkwardly on the table. It's been set just like the new Michelin-starred hotel that the food comes from, and if anything, I'm the only thing in this picture that's wrong.

But when I look at Alessa, she seems delighted. "This looks amazing. Shall we dig in?"

"Absolutely." I slide the platter of oysters closer to her.

She selects one, eyes fluttering closed as she swallows the morsel. "Delicious," she proclaims. "Jacques is talented."

"He certainly is." I sample an oyster myself, savoring the piquant taste.

And just for a moment, I wonder...what does Alessa de Luca taste like?

Oh, God. I take a big gulp of wine and dab my mouth with the damask napkins, desperate to hide my expression from the cameras in this room.

That is not a thought I should be having. And it's not a thought I'll ever have again, damn it.

Alessa de Luca is evil.

I need to remember that.

CHAPTER 6

NATALIE

We continue chatting lightly as we sample the food, and slowly some of the tension in my shoulders begins to unwind. Alessa is charming, I have to admit. Witty too. I can see how she's managed to win over so many influential people to her side. It's easy to forget who she really is beneath the polished veneer.

But I can't afford to be swayed by her charisma. This woman is dangerous, regardless of how innocuous she seems sharing a meal with me.

I bring out the next course, then the next, and I find myself understanding more and more how Alessa de Luca became the powerhouse that she is. She's utterly captivating, or would be, if I wasn't desperately trying to hold on to a cover story.

"More wine?" I ask her, noticing her glass is nearly empty. I refill both of ours without waiting for her answer. The alcohol might loosen her tongue.

"Trying to get me drunk, Natalie?" She smiles knowingly over the rim of her refilled glass.

I force an easy laugh to cover my misstep. "Maybe just relaxed. Can't blame me for wanting the company."

"Oh trust me, I'm relaxed." Her voice takes on a husky edge. "The night's still young though. Who knows where it might lead us..."

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Heat creeps up my neck at the innuendo in her words. “Speaking of, there was actually something I wanted to discuss with you.”

She cocks her head, looking amused. “I’m listening.”

It’s now or never. I take a deep breath. “I’d love the chance to visit the Ruby Realm sometime. I’ve heard such fascinating things about it.”

Something shifts in her expression, though the smile remains fixed on her lips. Her eyes turn assessing. “Is that so? And who exactly has been talking about the Ruby?”

Shit. Is it supposed to be, like, a Fight Club thing? First rule, don’t talk about the Ruby? I scramble to come up with a reasonable story. “Oh you know...word gets around,” I hedge awkwardly. “People love to gossip about places they haven’t been themselves. And...Alicia might have mentioned something.”

She continues watching me steadily and I resist the urge to squirm under her penetrating gaze.

After a long moment she speaks. “The Ruby Realm is extremely exclusive, Natalie. I don’t just let anyone through the doors.” She toys idly with the stem of her wine glass. “And more importantly, I like to ensure aspecifickind of clientele.”

What does that mean? My mind is racing to supply an endless number of possibilities. “I seem to have blundered a little. Please, forget I mentioned it.”

She taps one long manicured nail against her wineglass, clearly still considering. I try

not to fidget as the silence stretches between us.

Finally, she smiles. “Not at all, Natalie. I’m pleased to hear that the Ruby’s reputation is so enticing. But I think I’d have to get to know you a little better before...well.” She gives a little shrug of her shoulders.

I take a too-large sip of wine to disguise my nerves at the promise in her words. This is exactly where Hays coached me to steer the conversation. But now that I’m here, I wish for a way out.

I’ve never been so awkward in an undercover role before. But then, my previous undercovers have all been temporary—a few days at best. Nowhere near this scale.

And certainly not aimed at a woman I was actually attracted to.

Our eyes meet and an electric current seems to pass between us. Alessa’s lips part slightly, her tongue darting out to wet them.

I clear my suddenly dry throat. “Can I interest you in some dessert?” I ask a touch too brightly. “The chocolate mousse is divine.”

Something that looks like disappointment flashes across her face, but it’s gone in an instant, replaced by an easy smile. “That sounds lovely.”

“I’ll be right back.”

In the kitchen, I grip the edge of the counter, drawing in a deep breath. Yes, she’s magnetic. Fascinating, even. But I cannot forget why I’m here tonight.

Justice is the goal.

And I can't forget for a second that every move I make, every word I utter, is being filmed and scrutinized by the team.

I dish up two bowls of the rich chocolate mousse and head back to the dining room.

Alessa accepts her dish with a smile. "This looks decadent. What do you think?" She extends a spoonful toward me.

Before I can react, she slips the spoon between my parted lips. The chocolate melts on my tongue, rich and velvety smooth. Alessa's eyes don't leave my face, watching intently for my reaction.

I swallow, heart racing. "It's...excellent," I manage.

"Mmm, yes, delicious," she agrees, slowly removing the spoon from my mouth.

I sit frozen for a long moment, pulse thundering in my ears.

And then I force myself to look away and take a steady bite of my own mousse. Alessa, when I chance looking back at her, seems more curious than anything else.

We finish our dessert accompanied by harmless small talk about films, music and restaurants, all of which I've been coached on earlier. The charged atmosphere seems to dissipate.

Too soon, Alessa is glancing at the delicate watch on her wrist. "I should get going. Early morning tomorrow."

I walk her to the door, hyper-aware of her proximity and oddly disappointed. I should feel relieved that my cover remains intact.

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But instead, I find myself wondering if she doesn't feel the same charge between us. Or if it was just my imagination in the first place.

I push it aside. This is for the best. I've raised the Ruby Realm, and at our next meeting, I can push a little more.

"I had a lovely time," I tell her as we hover in the foyer. At least that part is true. She's unexpectedly enjoyable company. When she's not trying to seduce me, that is.

She flips her hair over her shoulder and gives me a wink. "Worth a hundred grand?"

I have to laugh. "Yes. And more, besides. Thank you, Alessa. I've found it a little difficult to connect since I moved back to New York. You make me think perhaps there's hope for me after all."

She hesitates, looking uncharacteristically uncertain. "You're...lonely?"

"I-I suppose I am. In a way." My voice is halting. Cool.

This is too close to the truth. And Alessa, with the way her face softens, seems to understand that.

"I've enjoyed tonight very much, Natalie," she says. "I'm glad you won the auction. We'll have to meet again soon."

"I look forward to it." I think I mean that a little too much.

Her answering smile is small but genuine. “Goodnight, Natalie.”

“Goodnight, Alessa.”

The door clicks shut behind her with a note of finality.

It’s done. And despite the awkward moments, I accomplished what I set out to do: establish rapport, and raise the prospect of a Ruby Realm membership. The operation can proceed.

So why does victory feel so hollow?

I let out a heavy sigh, slipping off the torturous heels. Maybe some time and distance will help me regain clarity. For now, a mug of hot herbal tea and my comfortable pajamas are calling my name.

First thing tomorrow, it’ll be back to business as usual. All these strange emotions stirred up tonight are just a strange aberration.

At least that’s what I tell myself as I drag myself to the computer to file a first-impressions report, which I’ll add to tomorrow. No calls come through from Wright tonight, for which I’m grateful. I get ready for bed in the too-large, too-much master suite.

But the image of Alessa de Luca’s vibrant smile refuses to fade from my mind.

I’ve never been attracted to a mark before.

Hell...I’ve never been this attracted to anyone before. Never wanted anyone as intensely as I inexplicably want her.

Is it just the role I'm playing? A side effect of becoming someone else? Or is there something more dangerous at work here? I sink down into the bedcovers, pulling them over my head.

All I know for certain is that this assignment just got a lot more complicated.

CHAPTER 7

ALESSA

Over the past few days, I've found my thoughts constantly drifting back to Natalie Moreau, despite the never-ending demands of running the Ruby Realm. That strange dinner we shared still lingers in my mind.

What on earth did she want? There were moments I thought it was a seduction, and moments she seemed...well, almost revolted by me.

It doesn't do much for a girl's ego, that's for sure.

Her reputation suggested something of a party girl as well as a philanthropist, but she really was quite awkward at times, not at all what I expected her to be.

And so hot and cold, all night. I went with the expectation that we might end up in bed, and came away frustrated and...

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And even more intrigued.

The buzz of my phone jars me from my thoughts. I glance at the screen and suppress a groan. It's Mr. Fonelli, the Mancini Family accountant. Just the reptile I want to deal with before my second cup of coffee.

And when he tells me that he's waiting at the entrance, well, things get even more depressing.

I paste on a dazzling smile as I unlock the side door for him. It would never do to have a man like this tramping through the private club itself. He enters with a briefcase clutched in one hand and his perpetually dour expression fixed on his face.

"Mr. Fonelli! What a lovely surprise." I speak with my usual bubbly warmth, even as my fingers clench hard on the door handle.

His stern face doesn't crack. "Ms. de Luca. I'm here on orders from the Don. He wants a full audit of the Ruby Realm's books for the quarter."

I keep my smile pinned in place, but inside I'm seething. The Don himself ordered this? He's been getting greedy lately, trying to dig his grubby fingers deeper into my pie. The Ruby is my baby, built from nothing into New York's most elite paradise for women. I won't let him bleed me dry.

"Of course, of course," I say smoothly. "Please, follow me to my office."

This audit is a necessary part of doing business with and for the Mancini Family, but

it doesn't make the process any less nerve-wracking. I just hope he won't find anything in the damn ledgers. I keep them by hand, rather than digitally—easier to hand-wave discrepancies, and much more difficult for the Feds to get a look at.

“Have a seat,” I tell Fonelli as we enter my office. The walls are decorated with photographs of the women who've passed through the doors of the Ruby Realm—women who've found friendship, support, and even love within these walls.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, settling into the leather chair across from my desk. “Now, let's see those books.”

I move aside the Monet that hides my safe, then press my fingerprint to the scanner to unlock it. I pass Fonelli the ledgers and watch him like a hawk as he flips through, scrutinizing every number down to the penny. His lips purse occasionally, and he pulls out a small notebook, jotting figures.

But as he flips through the records, my thoughts drift back to Natalie. Her surprised smile every time I make a joke, and the way her eyes seemed to see straight through me...She's a hard woman to shake off. I find myself wondering what she's doing right now...if she's thinking about me as much as I'm thinking about her. I clench my fists under the desk, cursing myself for being so distracted during such an important meeting.

After a deadly dull half hour, he snaps the books shut. “I'm noticing some discrepancies in the blackjack tables' earnings reports. They're lower than projections for this quarter.”

I wave a hand airily. “Oh yes, we had some defective card shufflers that caused us to close two tables for a few nights to recalibrate them. Just a small hiccup.”

Fonelli's eyes bore into mine, assessing my story. I meet his gaze unflinchingly until

he gives a short nod. “I see. Well, everything else seems in order.” He tucks the ledgers under his arm. “I’ll be back to audit the next quarter. The Don is eager to ensure all his businesses are running smoothly. Give my regards to your father.”

“Of course, thank you Mr. Fonelli! Always a pleasure,” I chirp as he leaves, but I’m still furious at his description of the Ruby as “the Don’s business.” As soon as the door shuts behind him, I go back to my office and sink into my chair, rubbing my temples.

This is getting out of hand. If Don Mancini keeps demanding larger tributes, soon there’ll be nothing left of my hard-earned profits. I need to buy myself more time.

There’s a knock at the door. Devon, one of my most trusted bartenders, peers around it. She’s been with me from the early days when the Ruby was just a hole-in-the-wall lounge with big dreams. Her ice blonde hair and pierced nose remind me of my own rebellious youth.

“Any news about that champagne shipment?” she asks.

“What? Oh. That. No, not yet. I’m sorry, Dev, that was the accountant. My head’s spinning with numbers.”

“Let me guess, the men want a bigger cut,” she says bitterly. “Trying to bleed you dry after all the success you built. You don’t owe them anything, boss.”

I give her a grateful smile. “You’re lovely. Unfortunately, I do owe them a teensy little more than I’d like. So for now, I have to play nice or they’ll shut us down.”

Devon sniffs, but she knows better than to ask any more questions. “You’ll figure this out. You always do.” Her steadfast confidence lifts my spirits.

With the books temporarily balanced, Fonelli's stern specter finally fades from my mind. But thoughts of Natalie Moreau quickly swoop in to occupy the empty space.

Most women easily fall under my charms, seduced by candlelight, fine wine and my considerable skills of conversation. Yet Natalie remained an impenetrable fortress I couldn't breach. Each time I thought I glimpsed a crack in those polished marble walls, a way in, they sealed back up moments later.

Her demeanor toward me was almost...disapproving.

As if she saw straight through the glittering facade of my world and found it tawdry and hollow.

But for God's sake, if that's the case, why did she bid an exorbitant amount of money at auction just to share my company for a few hours?

What game is she playing?

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A less self-assured woman might doubt her own powers after such a reception. But I know my worth, and I won't be brushed aside so easily. Still, Natalie occupies far too much space in my thoughts for a woman who barely looked me in the eye through dinner. An unknown player, guarding her secrets and motives as closely as a blackjack dealer guards the hole card.

And I'm not stupid. In my line of work, I need to be on my guard for leaks and moles—and new acquaintances.

Alicia Crane has taken off on a sudden vacation, according to her office, and will not be available for the foreseeable future, so I can't ask any pertinent questions in that direction.

But I want to uncover more about who this Natalie Moreau really is and what she wants with me. So I call the one person I know I can rely on.

"Daddy, I need a favor."

"Anything, principessa. Hold on one moment. You," he says to someone in the room with him, "need to sleep a while." I hear the sound of fist meeting face, and then he comes back on the line. "What is it that you need?"

"A woman named Natalie Moreau."

"Is she causing trouble?" Daddy's tone shifts instantly, protective instincts kicking in.

"No, nothing like that," I assure him quickly. "I just want to know more about her."

She's...interesting." I can't help but smile when I think of Natalie's intense gaze, the way she seems to be challenging me with every word, even when she's agreeing with me.

"Alright," he agrees cautiously. "But sweetheart, be careful. You don't want to get too close to someone you don't know before I check her out."

"Don't worry, Daddy," I reply, my tone light despite the weight of his warning. "I'm always cautious. That's why I want the information."

"I'll see what I can find out."

I recite the few scant details I know and he promises to put his best men on it immediately.

I tap my ruby ring thoughtfully against my desk after we hang up. Soon I'll pierce the veil around this Natalie Moreau. Because whether it's dealing with the Mancini Family or navigating attraction, I've always been happy to take a gamble.

After all, the house always wins in the end.

CHAPTER 8

NATALIE

The sterility of the situation room provides a sharp contrast to the life of luxury I've been living for the past few days. Here, it's all harsh fluorescent lights reflecting off whiteboards covered in organizational charts and surveillance photos. The stale air carries the bitter aftertaste of lukewarm coffee brewed hours ago.

Stephen Bell stands at the head of the table, remote control in hand as he fast-

forwards through footage from the dinner with Alessa at my Park Avenue apartment.

I take my seat next to his right hand, and the rest of the team, already there and waiting, greet me. “Let’s get started,” Bell snaps, and we all turn to the screen as the video begins playing.

We watch as I open the door and Alessa enters. Her dark hair cascades over her shoulders, and her green eyes seem to pierce through the screen even now as she looks around. She begins to prowl through the living room, just as I remember her doing on the night.

“Look at her body language,” Bell comments. “She seems almost predatory.”

“Predatory?” I question defensively before I can stop myself. Immediately, I regret the word choice. I don’t want to appear too emotionally invested. Clearing my throat, I add, “What I mean is, she might simply be confident, not necessarily predatory.”

“She’s predatory alright,” Bell growls. “Either way, she doesn’t seem intimidated by you, which could be valuable information for us moving forward. Right, Hays?”

Kris Hays nods slowly. “It’s a possibility.”

As the video continues, we analyze every detail of our interaction—every glance, every touch, every seemingly innocuous comment. The team takes note of Alessa’s mannerisms and habits, trying to piece together her personality and motivations. But I can’t help but feel that there’s something they’re missing...something they’re almost determined not to see.

The angles cycle through as Alessa and I move from the foyer to the dining room, then the living area after dinner.

“There, slow down and play it,” Hays says, leaning forward. Bell hits play and we watch Alessa tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, her fingers lingering a beat too long.

Hays studies the screen. “Classic proximity-seeking behavior. She’s drawn to you, Miller, despite her hesitation. Well done.”

Heat rises in my cheeks even as my stomach twists. Hays means it as a compliment, proof of my skills at assuming a cover so completely that I blur the line between truth and fiction. But her praise only sprouts tendrils of doubt in my mind that wrap around my conscience and squeeze.

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“Interesting,” Bell muses, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “It seems she’s trying to establish a personal connection with you. This could be a potential vulnerability we can exploit.”

“Or it could be a trap,” Evelyn Chang interjects, skepticism written all over her face. “She might be testing you, seeing how far you’ll go in order to infiltrate her organization.”

The room falls silent as the team digests this possibility.

I recall the warmth of Alessa’s eyes, and find myself wondering. The team is so sure she’s evil personified that I can’t help wanting to look at the other side, just to make sure that our assumptions are actually correct.

“So she’s interested, but we need more,” Arisha Khalil says flatly. Her boots are propped on the conference table beside a stack of files, her blazer draped over the back of her chair, as much a part of her wardrobe as the no-nonsense ponytail she’s worn since I first met her. Khalil is a prosecutor from the Department of Justice, helping out on the case. “You need into that club of hers. The Ruby Realm is our ticket to picking apart her network from the inside out.”

I force steel back into my spine as the footage continues rolling. “I tried. As soon as I mentioned it, she got suspicious, so I had to back off.”

“It was a ham-fisted attempt,” Hays says coolly. “Were you nervous, Miller?”

I fight back the first furious retort that comes to my lips. “I thought I’d softened the

ground enough. Obviously I was mistaken.”

Yes, I was nervous. But not for the reasons I should have been, and that’s the last thing I plan to raise in this team meeting. I avoid Kris Hays’s speculative gaze.

“Well, Miller?” Bell prompts. “You’re the one who spent an evening with Alessa de Luca. What’s your take on her?”

I try to find the right words to convey my thoughts without revealing more than I’d like. “Alessa is...charismatic,” I begin cautiously. “She has this aura about her that makes people want to be near her. She’s also very intelligent. She seemed to know when to push and when to hold back during our conversation, always keeping me on my toes.”

“Does that worry you?” Hays asks.

“Of course it does,” I admit, my heart pounding in my chest. “But it also intrigued me. I think I’ve caught her attention, though. I just need to get a little closer to her.”

“It’s not a matter of getting closer,” Sam Wright interjects, his voice cautious. He’s been very quiet this whole meeting. “It’s a matter of getting an invite to her backroom casino. That’s all.”

“And she’ll do that by pursuing a friendship,” Hays points out. “Come on, now, Wright. That was the play from the start.”

He juts out his chin, and I’m grateful for his protection, even if I’m staying quiet. “Then how exactly should we proceed with the operation? De Luca’s no fool. She’ll suspect something if Miller suddenly starts showing up everywhere she goes.”

“Wright has a point,” Bell concedes, rubbing his cheekbone thoughtfully. “We need

to be careful not to tip her off. But we also can't afford to let this opportunity slip through our fingers. You'll need to get bolder, Miller." Stephen aims the remote at the screen like a weapon, freezing on an image of Alessa leaning toward me. "This woman is our pathway to dismantling one of the most influential crime syndicates in New York. Use whatever tactics you must to get her eating from your hand."

There's a charged silence as his directive sinks in. Whatever tactics.

And the thing is, I don't hate the suggestion as much as I probably should.

"With all due respect," Wright begins, "We can't expect Natalie to—"

"I'll do what's necessary for the op," I cut in quietly. Wright is staring at me, but I avoid meeting those blue eyes, knowing they'll be filled with big brotherly concern. "Just tell me the play."

Wright arches one eyebrow but stays silent as the team launches into a rapid debate on how best to leverage my connection with Alessa. O'Conner advocates using local news stories to pique her interest in my background, carefully fabricated. Chang suggests floating rumors through Alessa's social circles to stoke her curiosity about me. But Hays cautions against overwhelming Alessa with manufactured drama, which might only provoke her suspicions instead.

As their voices blend into a dull roar around me, I slip into my mind, wandering back through the evening with Alessa. Candlelight flickering against her smooth, tan skin. The quiet laughter giving way to charged looks.

And in my fantasy I let her seduce me, let myself get carried away in a haze of stolen kisses and roaming hands.

"Miller." Bell's sharp tone yanks me back. "You still with us?"

“Yes, sir.” I pray no one notices the heat burning my cheeks. God, what is wrong with me?

“As I was saying,” Bell continues, “there’s too much risk in trying to orchestrate an encounter from the outside. We need to utilize the direct channel we’ve already established.” He turns to Wright. “Set up a secure call. We’ll leverage Alicia Crane again.”

My chest tightens at the mention of Crane, the congresswoman we’ve coerced once already into helping us infiltrate Alessa’s circle. She’s our blackmail golden goose, her career on the line if word got out that she uses high-end escorts from Alessa’s club. But even under threat of exposure, I could see Crane’s hatred for me simmering beneath her polished veneer when we met at the charity event.

“Crane has no love for Miller already,” Wright argues. “We try to force this too fast and she could intentionally sabotage the op.”

Bell’s mouth tightens. “Then give her proper motivation. Remind Ms. Crane we can end more than just her political career if she fails to cooperate fully. If she wants to avoid jail time, she’ll do what we tell her.”

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His threat makes my skin crawl, but no one else blinks. Not Rish Khalil, with her career ambitions trumped only by her hunger for justice. Not Patrick O’Conner, whose boy-next-door freckles belie his capacity for cutting insight. Not even Kris Hays, whose psychology degrees enhance rather than erase her aptitude for strategic manipulation when a case requires it.

This life we’ve chosen necessitates moral compromises. It’s not a surprise. It’s always like this. But we still work for the greater good, always.

Right?

And then my phone buzzes. Not my work phone, but the burner set up for this very operation. The arguing of the team fades into the background as I stare at it, my pulse quickening. I’ve received a text from Alessa herself, the screen lighting up with her words.

“Guys,” I say. Then: “Guys!”

They shut up, staring at me in surprise. I hold up my phone for the team to see.

“Alessa just invited me to the Ruby Realm tomorrow night.”

CHAPTER9

NATALIE

The next night, I tuck my lingering concerns away and paint on my armor. I slide

sleek black heels onto feet meant for worn leather boots. Dab rose gloss across lips more familiar with getting chewed than painted with smiles. Drape my body in silk that suggests a boudoir rather than a badge.

When I step out of this apartment, Special Agent Natalie Miller stays behind. Tonight I am Natalie Moreau, woman of leisure, a trust fund baby with a hankering for hedonism.

And I will be whatever Alessa wants me to be.

The hired limousine delivers me right to the discreet entrance I've been briefed on by Alessa herself. My heart hammers an uneven rhythm against my ribs as I approach. The nondescript door sandwiched between a high-end boutique and an art gallery betrays no hint of the secrets that lay beyond. But I know what I'm walking into. Decadence and discretion, temptation and transgression.

Everything I now represent.

A bulky man appears out of the shadows beside the door, and I gasp despite myself. He inclines his head in greeting, lifting his wrist mic to murmur, "She's here."

Before I even need to speak my name, the red door swings inward. I recognize the statuesque brunette hostess from Alessa's charity event, her pin curls and cat eyeliner as flawless as they were the other night.

"Good evening, Ms. Moreau," she says brightly. "Please follow me." She begins to walk up the narrow flight of stairs. "Ms. De Luca is expecting you. This is the back entrance, to avoid the attention that sometimes comes from entering by the front."

"I appreciate the discretion," I reply breezily as we get to the landing, sailing through the doorway she holds open.

I swallow down my nerves as she latches the door behind us with an ominous thud. Too late to turn back now. We stand in an entry hallway, the walls swathed in crimson damask wallpaper that muffles the heavy bass leaking from beyond the inner doors that lead, presumably, to the nightclub. Their sleek red-black surfaces reflect the glittering chandelier overhead, its crystals fracturing the dim light into a kaleidoscope of colors.

But they're not the only doors. There are the entrance doors, much wider and more noticeable than the door I came in.

And there is a discrete door at the end, too, with a deadlock on it. I wonder where that leads.

Like a lamb to slaughter, I follow the hostess through the looming double doors. They swing inward and I pass the threshold into the belly of the beast.

Only...

Only it's not much of a beast. It's a quiet area, and even the crashing noise from the nightclub in the next room is deadened in here, only the heartbeat pulse of music through the floor giving any indication of the noise. This room is an open floor lounge, filled with coffee tables and sofas, the women in here mostly alone, some of them working on laptops.

I scan the room, searching for any sign of the dark-haired beauty who has consumed my thoughts since our first encounter. My breath catches when I spot her, right up the other side of the room in the bar area, leaning against it with—yes, even I have to admit it now—a predatory grace. Her gaze locks onto mine with an intensity that leaves me feeling exposed, as if she can see straight through my carefully constructed facade.

“Hello, Natalie,” Alessa says as I come within earshot, her eyes never leaving mine. “I’m so glad you decided to come.”

“Me too,” I say, my voice betraying a hint of nerves as I accept the drink she offers. “This place is... interesting.”

“Isn’t it?” she agrees, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “I thought you might find it intriguing. Can I get you a drink?”

I force a smile. “Just sparkling water for now, thanks.” I need to keep a clear head. Maybe it was the wine the other night that messed with my judgment.

But being this close to Alessa again is making my insides flip-flop. She raises a sculpted eyebrow and I resist the urge to shift under her scrutiny. After a moment, she relays my order to the bartender.

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Her dark hair spills loose tonight, and the sleek black catsuit she's wearing seems poured onto her body. As she lifts her own cocktail glass to her lips, her eyes are on mine.

I clear my throat. "It was very kind of you to invite me."

Alessa's smile deepens, slow and sinful. "I'm quite particular about who I allow into my inner circle. But I have a feeling we'll get along famously."

Her eyes trace my figure in blatant appraisal. It takes all my training not to fidget or flush under her scrutiny. I remind myself I chose this dress for its allure. I asked Hays and the stylist to advise me how to catch Alessa's eye, to stir her interest. I have no right to balk now just because her gaze threatens to kindle an answering heat low in my belly.

I lean in closer than strictly proper. "I'm quite sure you and I will find plenty of common ground."

Her eyes gleam at my breathy tone before she releases a low laugh. "There, now. We're practically best friends. Come on, let me give you the tour."

She tucks my hand into the crook of her elbow and begins steering me through the Ruby Realm. I cling to the point of connection between us, simultaneously thrilled and unnerved by her nearness.

Focus, I remind myself. Take in the details. This is what you're here for.

I listen as Alessa points out the lounge, the restaurant, a co-working space, even a library. But my eyes rove constantly, probing shadowy corners, studying the patrons laughing around tables.

No obvious criminal activity.

We pass through a beaded curtain into a more intimate space. Low lighting sets an atmosphere of sensuality emphasized by the sunken conversation pits ringed with pillows. In some, women recline together sipping cocktails. Others host groups engaged in hushed conversations. A few pits hold only couples, leaning into each other's space.

My steps slow as we approach an alcove nearly enveloped in shadow. I make out a familiar profile—the elegant swoop of a famous actress's nose, her silver hair unpinned and spilling over bare shoulders as she pulls a statuesque brunette closer—half her age, or maybe a third. Their mouths meet in a messy clash that leaves no illusions as to their relationship.

I startle as Alessa's lips brush my ear. "They're very much in love," she tells me. Her fingers graze my lower back. "I think it's very sweet."

I suppress a shiver as I turn into her space. This close up, I can count each of her long lashes, make out the darker ring of green around her irises.

I let my own lashes sweep down demurely even as I lean nearer. "Very sweet. And I can see you have quite an array of facilities here. Is there more to see?"

"Oh, Natalie." Alessa trails one nail down the bare skin of my arm. "The night's only just begun."

My breath shallows, but I keep my tone light. "Well then, why don't you show me

more?”

With a throaty laugh, Alessa tucks my hand back through her arm and guides me deeper inside, her perfume winding through my senses until I’m drunk on her nearness. I cling to my purpose here, reciting my mission statement like a prayer.

Get close. Gain her trust. Uncover her secrets.

I can do this. I can steel myself and let her pull me further into her web.

Because that’s what she’s doing.

“Now,” she says, taking my hand and leading me toward the nightclub area, “let’s see if you can handle the excitement on the dance floor.”

As we enter the pulsating heart of the Ruby’s nightclub, the energy is electric. Vibrant lights streak across the ceiling, music pulsates through the room, the beat sinking into my bones and compelling my body to move with the rhythm. The crowded dance floor is alive with bodies swaying and hips grinding, each couple—or throuple—lost in their own world of hedonistic pleasure.

“Isn’t it spectacular?” Alessa shouts over the music. She leads me to a place where we can look over the dance floor and then moves closer to me, our bodies almost touching as we sway together to the beat.

“Absolutely!” I yell back, trying to appear unfazed by the sudden intimacy.

I look around, wondering if the casino or backrooms might be accessible from here. Then all at once I hear Alessa’s smoky voice right in my ear. “Come on, Natalie. Let’s dance.”

I find myself being led onto the crowded dance floor. The vibrant lights create a kaleidoscope of colors, casting flickering patterns across the gyrating bodies of the dancers. I can feel the bass reverberating through the soles of my feet as we slip into the throng of people moving to the beat.

Alessa takes my hand and twirls me around, grinning like a woman who knows she owns the room. I can't help but smile back, momentarily forgetting my true purpose here. As we continue to dance, she moves closer, her body pressed against mine in an intimate display.

As we move together, her thigh sliding back and forth between mine, I survey the room over her shoulder, searching for any hint of illegal activity or suspicious behavior. The clientele of The Ruby Realm is undoubtedly sophisticated and influential, but I have yet to see anything that would indicate involvement in criminal activities, not even a little casual drug use.

Nada.

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“Let yourself go, Natalie,” Alessa encourages, her breath warm against my ear. “Enjoy the moment.”

I can do that.

I can spend the night pretending, and then I can shed the glittery facade off and crawl back into the skin of Special Agent Miller, who knows right from wrong. Who doesn't ache for things that could ruin her.

I can spend one night in Alessa's world full of sweet poison without succumbing.

Right?

She draws me close, our hips swaying in sync, guided by the primal beat. Her movements hold a fluid sensuality, and she guides my hands to her hips as we fall into the rhythm.

“You know, you've quite captivated me, Natalie,” she murmurs into my ear. Her leg brushes between mine again, our bodies pressed flush. “But I don't seem to have caught your attention in quite the same way. You look everywhere else but at me.”

Shit. “Just...taking it all in,” I say over the music. “I've never seen anything like this place.”

That's true enough. Though would Natalie Moreau, socialite from the south of France, really not have seen anything like it before?

But it seems flattery is the way to go, because Alessa smiles, satisfied. “Yes, the Ruby is rather singular, isn’t it?”

We stay there dancing, then drinking—I give in to a few cocktails—then dancing again, and Alessa does her level best to, well, seduce me.

It’s a strange feeling.

Me, Natalie Miller, from the bad side of town, the girl with mousy hair who was always painfully worried about her crushes on girls until she grew into herself, really claimed her identity...or thought she had...

But that’s not who Alessa is seducing, it occurs to me. Not at all.

No. Alessa de Luca wants billionaire bombshell Natalie Moreau.

We’re on the dance floor again when the song changes and I step back, the space allowing me to breathe again. “I need a break. Do you?”

Surprise flickers in her eyes before she smooths her features. “Sure.”

While we’re at the bar, just like last time, Alessa is approached by a few different women. Each time, she introduces them to me, and lets them know that I’m new to the city. And each time, they hand me a card and ask me to make sure I call them, they’d love to network, perhaps I can spare some time for coffee?

It’s not until the fourth time I shove a business card into my bag that I realize what she’s doing. “You’re making friends for me,” I say in surprise.

She gives me a puzzled little smile, her nose wrinkling up.

“You’re helping me make connections,” I try again, sounding a little less like a forlorn five-year-old.

Her smile softens and she shrugs, like it’s no big deal. “It can be hard to make new friends in this city. One thing the Ruby is good for is finding people you might connect with. And besides...” She leans in. “I know what it’s like to be lonely.”

Something passes between us then. Some strange, shared understanding, and I feel like, despite all the makeup and the sparkly dress and the heels, Alessa de Luca is seeing the real me. The girl who always felt a little awkward. Still does.

The girl who always wanted the most popular girl in school to see her. That’s what it feels like...

I’m being seen.

I suck in a breath. “It’s getting a little late,” I say. “I should probably get going.”

Alessa’s smile drops. “Late? It’s barely one!”

“I have meetings in the morning,” I say vaguely.

She looks at me for a long moment, and then smiles her brilliant smile. “Of course. Let me walk you out.”

And she does. We approach the front entrance this time, the pulsing beat fading behind us. At the door, she pauses, and I search for something to say that will allow me entrance here again.

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“Thank you for tonight, it was...” I grasp for the right word. “Illuminating.” I don’t dare ask about a repeat invitation—much less a membership.

Alessa laughs. “You’re not what I expected, Natalie. Not at all. I still can’t quite figure you out.” She leans in, her smile almost conspiratorial. “But I intend to peel back all your layers.”

I force a coy smile. “We’ll see about that. Goodnight, Alessa.”

I can feel her eyes following me as I slip outside. The night air hits my skin, crisp and sobering after the club’s warm and humid interior. Blending into the stream of pedestrians on the main street, it occurs to me that I was supposed to call the limo for a pickup before I made my way out, but I forgot.

Shit.

I make my way down the block before glancing back. No one seems to have followed. I suppose I could pick up a cab as long as no one sees me do it—I certainly don’t want to chance the subway, not with these jewels around my neck, and I don’t want to wait around here while the limousine comes.

All at once, I feel very vulnerable as I walk down the street, like the jewels I’m wearing are flashing an invitation to any nearby muggers. I hail the first cab I see, and gratifyingly, it comes to a screeching halt.

Guess I look like I’m good for a big tip.

My mind replays the night's events during the ride home. Dancing with Alessa, bodies intertwined...I shake my head sharply, annoyed at how badly I played things tonight. Aside from laying eyes on those doors I never got into, I'm no closer to uncovering Alessa's secrets.

And I fled from her when things started feeling a little too intimate—even though that was my whole game tonight.

Doubt needles my confidence. The team is relying on me, and I'm fumbling in the dark. Alessa de Luca is not the kind of woman I find easy to understand, which makes it all the more difficult to understand how to play her.

I've been so damn flighty, running hot and cold, and that's not part of the plan, not as far as the psychological profile went. I was supposed to come on subtly, get that membership, and then we'd be at leisure for me to investigate the Ruby.

Back at the Park Avenue apartment, I sink onto the sofa, elbows on my knees and head in my hands. The surroundings feel suffocating, the luxuries ill-fitting on my skin as I admit to myself: I really am attracted to Alessa de Luca.

But this isn't my life.

And Alessa de Luca certainly isn't my woman.

I've never had one. Not really. I've been so focused on my career that sex and dating came a distant second. Until now, my career has been my only focus. That's why I gunned for this operation when it was being floated. A guaranteed promotion if I can be part of the team that hurts the Mancini Family.

And it's baffling to me that a woman like Alessa should now be the one thing tripping me up.

Weariness settles on my shoulders, the night's adrenaline fading, and I head to the bedroom, strip down fast, don't even bother washing off my warpaint. But sleep proves elusive as I lie in the imposing canopy bed, mind racing.

I thought I was prepared for this mission, but self-doubt is creeping in. With a restless sigh, I force my eyes closed, willing sleep to claim me. But behind my eyelids, I still see Alessa's searing green eyes.

Still feel her hands on my waist as we danced.

Still wonder about that last, long look she gave me, and the promise she made.

I intend to peel back all your layers.

CHAPTER 10

ALESSA

My eyes flutter open as faint rays of morning light creep through the curtains. For a moment, everything is still and quiet. Then thoughts of her flood my mind—Natalie Moreau.

I stretch beneath the luxurious silk sheets, perplexed. Never before has a woman resisted my charms so completely. My flirtations, my sultry looks, my subtle invitations...all deflected. I'm accustomed to having my way with very minimal effort, yet Natalie slipped through my grasp like wisps of smoke.

Irritation rises briefly, but fascination quickly overrides it. She's an enigma, an unpredictable element in my world of measured risks and rigged rewards. The novelty is intriguing, I'll admit. I do enjoy the unexpected.

I meant to seduce her last night, to tease her until she melted into my arms. I'd planned to draw her into a private room, to show her exactly how giving I can be for an hour or two, and then be done with this strange fixation. But those normally warm brown eyes froze me out, right near the end before she left. Before I could make a real move, she turned heel and rushed from the club as though it were a den of vipers.

Her loss, of course.

Still, the rejection stings.

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With a frustrated sigh, I force thoughts of her from my mind. Time to focus on business.

I slip from the warmth of the sheets and go into the walk-in closet. Rows of designer outfits and stilettos greet me, but I select a sleek tailored suit and low heels instead. The pencil skirt I hesitated over for a moment might limit movement if trouble arises, and it's easier to conceal a holster in pants and a jacket.

After years of navigating these treacherous waters, I've learned to expect it at any time, and right now I can definitely feel it brewing.

Ready for the day, I make my way downstairs while scrolling through emails on my phone. Most are mundane; updates from contractors renovating the east wing, meeting confirmations, bank statements. But one is worrisome—from Fonelli.

Damn it. This is the trouble I felt brewing. He wants to see the ledgers again next week. I suppose my cover story wasn't all that convincing, but still...

I head to the Ruby, passing through several empty rooms before entering the hidden basement stairs. Time to assess the damage. Here, beneath the polished floors of the high-class lounge, lies the beating heart of my enterprise: the cards and roulette, the dice and drinks, the spies and smugglers. All dangerous, but hazards I've mastered.

The lingering scent of cigars and antique wood greets me as I reach the casino floor. It's eerily still at this hour, tables draped, tokens locked away. Almost peaceful. I find the numbers from last night, and head back up to my office.

But when I crack open the ledger in my office and begin my comparisons, those numbers I collected downstairs just about assault me. Profits much higher than they should be, far beyond what I report to the Don. And Fonelli's no fool. He'll notice the discrepancies unless I do a better job of covering them up.

I sip an espresso as I work, shaving numbers down, re-coding expenses, stitching the webs of lies. I transfer the excess cash into the usual offshore accounts, keeping some aside in an account intended for my philanthropic and charity events, which the Don himself wouldn't be able to quibble over, since the IRS is all over that particular account.

I drum my fingers against the desk as I contemplate how to further refine my system in the future, ensuring that the Mancini Boss remains none the wiser. It's dangerous work, certainly. But as the numbers blur together, I can't help but feel a little thrill at the thought of outwitting the Mancini auditor.

They shouldn't try to play a player, after all.

It takes over an hour, but the doctored, alternate ledger now appears immaculate, ready for Fonelli's ruthless eye. Let him scrutinize it all he likes; he'll find no cracks in this facade. The casino, the lounge, the Ruby itself—all just lovely fronts concealing my true purpose.

Satisfied with my alterations, I return to the floor to help with opening preparations. It's Sunday, so the lounge will operate at half-mast today, but diligence is key. No rest for the wicked, and all that. At some point in the future I'd like to be open 24/7, but that day is a little way off.

I'm inspecting the spirits inventory when my phone buzzes. A text from Caitlin, inviting me to dinner at their place tonight. I smile, quick to accept. Even Juno's prickly personality can't deter me. I don't mind her barbs and barks—it's how she

shows affection, and Lord knows I give as good as I get.

The lounge's subdued energy soothes me as I work, planning tonight's meal in my mind. Caitlin prefers simple, hearty fare after long days as a mechanic—stews, roasts, the like. But dessert is my domain. I'll find the perfect ingredients at the market to craft something decadent. She has a weakness for chocolate.

Plotting the menu keeps darker thoughts at bay: ledger lines, the auditor's menace, Natalie's sudden insistence that she had to leave...

Damn it all, I will not think of her! This infatuation is meaningless, a trifle. I'm just annoyed that she hasn't immediately fallen for me, like everyone else does. But the hollow feeling lingers a little as I instruct Devon on tonight's offerings and remind the staff about proper dress code, which has been a little lax lately.

There was a connection between us last night, I could have sworn, just after I introduced her to the CEO of a tech startup.

You're making friends for me, she'd said, sounding so surprised and uncertain that I worried I'd overstepped somehow.

But what I said was true, perfectly true: I know what it's like to be lonely. My job, my role here at the Ruby, requires me to keep a little distance. And I'm happy to maintain that distance, so long as the Ruby is successful, and I get a little physical companionship now and then.

Or at least, I've been happy enough with that compromise up until now. Whatever passed between Natalie and me last night, it was enough to cause a few wrinkles in the smooth silk of my life. For a moment I saw in her...what?

A woman in need?

Ridiculous. Natalie Moreau is a billionaire heiress with a Park Avenue apartment that is—I'll admit it—even nicer than my own. She is most certainly not a woman in need.

As for me, I do have needs, and I'd like to satisfy them soon. So I'll seduce Natalie as swiftly as I can, satisfy my craving, and be finished with it. And in turn, she'll benefit from her connection with me and the other powerful women in this town.

A nice, transactional relationship. The kind I prefer. The kind I'm used to.

The only kind I can allow myself.

My life is much too complicated for anything more.

* * *

Later that evening I have my town car drive me to Juno's brownstone. She answers on the first knock, greeting me with her customary scowl. "You're late."

I step over the threshold, pausing to kiss her cheeks in exaggerated fashion. "And you're looking as lovely as always, cousin dearest. I come bearing gifts to honor your esteemed hospitality."

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Juno eyes the boxes in my hands dubiously, but takes the desserts with a sniff. Down the hall, the rich aroma of roasting meat wafts from the kitchen. My mouth waters.

Caitlin emerges wiping her hands on a towel, face as sunny as always—well, these days, anyway. The sullen little brat who showed up at the wedding seems like a distant dream. “There you are! Was starting to think you’d been waylaid.”

Laughing, I rub away the grease streak on her cheek. “I would never miss out on your cooking. The club required a bit of extra attention today.”

We chat lightly as she finishes cooking, discussing her work at the garage, neighborhood happenings, Juno’s latest frustrations with the Irish mob bosses—surface topics, carefully skirting dangerous depths. But once seated around the heavy oak table, Caitlin studies me closely.

“So you seem...antsy tonight. Got a new scheme brewing?”

I nearly choke on a mouthful of roast beef at her astute observation. Juno smirks while Caitlin looks at me expectantly.

With feigned nonchalance, I dab my lips and offer a coy smile. “Perhaps I’ve just got a new quarry in my sights.”

Caitlin’s eyebrows shoot up as she leans forward eagerly. “Ooh, do tell! Who’s caught the eye of the infamous Ruby Realm queen?”

I wave her question away airily. “Just another lovely patron. I’ll have had my fill in a

week or so.”

“Aren’t you tired of playing the field?” Juno asks. “Maybe it’s time you settled down instead of chasing every piece of—”

“There are plenty of delicious morsels yet to sample,” I interrupt brightly, keeping my expression pleasant through sheer force of will. “I’d be a fool to deprive myself of those many pleasures. We don’t all want to end up housewives,cugina.”

Juno’s eyes narrow. But before she can retort, Caitlin settles a staying hand on her arm. “All Juno means,” she says gently, “is that the right person, whenever they come along, could be really good for you. You deserve that joy, Alessa.”

The sincerity in her voice pierces me. “Just because settling down suits some, doesn’t mean it suits all,” I tell her, but I keep the venom out of my voice. I know Caitlin only means well. “I’m happy as I am. I like the game, sweetheart.”

Caitlin smiles. “Tell us about this new girl, then. I assume she’s extremely gorgeous and already completely enslaved by you?”

Ouch. “She will be. Soon. Her name is Natalie Moreau.”

“That one who bid a hundred grand for a night with you?” Juno puts down her fork.

“Yes,that one.”

“You know...there’s something different in your voice when you talk about her,” Caitlin observes.

“That, my darling, is called sexual frustration.” Juno rolls her eyes, but Caitlin laughs. “She’s rather... elusive. I guess you could say she’s become something of a

challenge.”

“Elusive?” Juno echoes. “That’s not a word I often hear associated with your conquests.”

“True,” I admit with a smirk, “but that’s what makes her so intriguing. She seems immune to my usual charms and seductions, which...” I give a big, false sigh. “Only makes me want her more.”

“Alessa,” Juno says slowly, “you have had a background check done—haven’t you?”

“Who do you take me for?” I snap back, perhaps a little more defensively than I should. “Of course I have. Daddy said she checked out.”

“Hm,” is all Juno says.

Daddy said she checked out on the surface of it, but we’ve had some troubles lately with our protocols. There is some politicking going on internally in the Mancini Family, which means information is sometimes a little tricky to get hold of.

But Juno certainly doesn’t need to know that. That’s Family business, and none of hers.

“Why don’t we have some of those lovely desserts you brought, Alessa,” Caitlin says, diplomatically changing the subject.

We do that, and the conversation moves thankfully on. Soon enough I take my leave, my town car and driver waiting faithfully under the eye of Juno’s house guards outside.

But as the car moves off, I think about Juno and Caitlin’s well-meaning remarks that

are still needling me, pricking that empty place within. As the brownstone disappears from view, I tell myself it's only the wine and food sitting too heavy—and the irritation of a fox who keeps running when she should have been taken as a trophy already.

“Little vixen should know when to quit,” I mutter to myself.

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I'll see Natalie again as soon as I can. I'll seduce her, sate this inconvenient craving, and be done with it.

I repeat these convictions to myself as the town car maneuvers through the bustling streets toward home. Just one night, I vow. One night to satisfy this temporary hunger, and I'll be free.

One night, and Natalie Moreau will be out of my system for good.

CHAPTER11

NATALIE

By next Wednesday, I still haven't heard a word from Alessa.

And I'm not sure if I should feel relieved or disappointed.

As far as the mission goes, I feel annoyed, if only because every meeting seems to turn into a "What Miller Did Wrong" accusation-fest. And this morning I head back to the FBI offices for yet another one of those meetings with my team. We need to analyze every detail of my visit to see if there's a way for me to get Alessa to invite me back to the exclusive club again.

I grab my usual piping hot black coffee and take my seat at the conference table. Sam Wright gives me an encouraging smile from across the polished wood surface. He's the only one who's been defending me, and I'm grateful for him. Right on time, Bell stalks in, crisp suit neatly pressed as always.

“Let’s get started,” he says without preamble. Miller, I want you to walk us through the events of your night at the Ruby Realm again—” a collective groan goes up from the team “—this time in exhaustive detail. We need to comb back through and find the angle that’s going to get you an all-access pass back into de Luca’s operation.”

Over the next hour, I recount everything—again—about my visit, from the decor of the lobby, to naming all of the elite patrons I can remember who were laughing and chatting in the lounge, to the absolute absence of any drug-taking or indecent behavior in the nightclub, so far as I could see.

I describe Alessa again, outline the conversations we had, and the way she pulled me onto the dance floor for hours.

There are things I keep to myself. While I tell them about the women she introduced me to, I don’t tell the team about the unexpected kindness in Alessa’s eyes.

I don’t tell them what she said: I know what it’s like to be lonely.

And I absolutely do not mention the strange connection and sparks that flew between us, or the thrill that went through me when she casually talked about peeling back my layers...

“And you saw no evidence of this underground casino,” Rish Khalil says again, for the third time today.

“Not apart from that door.”

“And you’re certain she didn’t give any indication of offering you an official membership?” Bell interjects, a hint of annoyance edging his tone. “Even after spending the whole night wining and dining you?”

“This is pointless,” Wright jumps in. “None of us expected preferential treatment like that right from the start. Building real rapport with a mark this cautious will be an intricate process. Miller’s laying the groundwork, but these things can’t be rushed.”

Bell’s jaw tightens, but he doesn’t even look at Wright. “That may be true, but the longer Miller is sniffing around, the more likely her cover will be blown. We’ve had hits on the document cache, which means that a background check was conducted. If we can accelerate progress without raising suspicion, it will be safer in the long run. Any ideas, Miller? We could lean on a few more assets, women we know are members.”

I actively try not to pull a face at that, but I sort through various angles in my mind. “Well...I could...feign romantic interest to secure an invitation back?” Even as I say it, my insides twist—but not only with discomfort. Using my sexuality as a bargaining chip feels unpleasant, but there’s also a darker part of me that likes the idea of getting closer to Alessa de Luca.

Getting more intimate.

Kris Hays nods thoughtfully. “That could work. Get her thinking you want more one-on-one time, leverage that to push for club access.”

“It’s risky,” Wright counters, brows drawn together. “We don’t want Miller compromising herself or rushing into something she’s uncomfortable with.”

For the next half hour, we debate various ways I could persuade Alessa to take our association to the next level—that next level being a membership to her club, rather than the association my stubborn mind keeps suggesting.

Finally Bell dismisses us, still scowling at our lack of progress. Wright lingers, touching my shoulder gently. “Hey, you holding up okay?”

I give him a tight smile that doesn't reach my eyes. "Of course. I know what needs to be done."

Sam searches my face and I see concern etched into the faint lines around his eyes. "Just remember, you call the shots here," he says firmly. "Don't let Bell or anybody else pressure you past your limits."

"I know."

The problem isn't the team, or Bell.

The problem is me.

But I keep that locked down.

He seems to hesitate before giving my shoulder a final squeeze and leaving the conference room. With a heavy exhale, I gather my things and head out. The chauffeured town car delivering me back to the opulent Park Avenue apartment is jarringly quiet after the morning's debate. The car pulls up to the imposing apartment building. I smooth my doubts away, mentally preparing to don the mask of Natalie Moreau once more.

Back straight, head high, I stride through the lobby, wondering exactly what Alessa de Luca is doing at this moment. Not thinking about me, that's for sure. Turning the corner, a flash of crimson in my periphery makes me freeze mid-step.

Speak of the devil and she appears...

Alessa lounges on the lobby sofa like she owns the place, clad in a figure-hugging scarlet dress that hugs every curve, her matching coat thrown on the sofa causally. Her green eyes gleam as they rise from her phone—

To me.

“Well hello, stranger. I’ve been waiting ages,” she purrs, husky voice smooth as velvet.

My heart stutters but I keep my expression bright. “Alessa. What—what a surprise

seeing you here,” I reply, trying to mimic polite warmth.

My insides are doing that flip-flop thing again. Nerves? Or something else?

She rises languidly, swaying toward me with a grace I know I’ll never have. “Surprised? Oh come now, Natalie, did you really think I wouldn’t track you down after you rushed off the other night?”

Up close, her spicy floral perfume envelops me again. I have to resist the urge to lurch forward into her personal space, and instead I arrange my features into an apologetic look. “Rushed off? I’m not sure what you mean. I had a lovely night.”

Alessa’s grin sharpens, ruby red lips stretching over those pearly teeth. “You’re quite adorable when you’re being coy, has anyone ever told you that? But yes, you most certainly did rush off from the Ruby. And after I welcomed you so warmly into my club.”

She steps even closer.

“I’m so sorry,” I say carefully. “You’re...absolutely right, how thoughtless of me. I truly am sorry. Please—allow me to properly make it up to you over dinner on Friday to smooth things over?”

Alessa considers me for a long moment, full lips pursed. Tension coils through me as I await her response, acutely aware of the surveillance in the lobby recording our every interaction.

Finally her expression smooths. “Very well, I’ll accept your apology, contingent on dinner and...more of your delightful conversation.”

Her eyes trail down my body in a way that leaves little doubt as to her meaning. Heat

blooms beneath my skin.

“Excellent. Shall we say seven o’clock on Friday then?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Alessa says, and I blink. “I think we’ll make it tonight. I’ll pick you up at six. I don’t want to waste another minute of time.” Alessa winks and brushes past me toward the door, trailing the scent of her perfume.

I watch her swaying hips for a few moments before I glance guiltily at the doorman, wondering if he’s staring at me in disapproval. But he’s just watching her leave, too.

I can hardly blame him. It’s quite a view.

I let out a long breath as I walk over to the elevator. Well, that was one way to accelerate the timeline, even if not exactly how I would have chosen.

Alessa showing up unannounced puts me on edge. Does she suspect me and my motives? Or is she simply trying to keep me off-balance as a power play? There’s no way to know, and she’s difficult to read.

And dammit, what is it about her that makes it so hard to think?

Pushing down my apprehension, I take the elevator up to the lavish penthouse suite and go straight to the bedroom, where there are no cameras. Alone and away from prying eyes, I sink onto the bed and drop my head into my hands.

What have I gotten myself into?

With a sigh, I straighten my spine. Enough wallowing. I have a job to do. I go to the study and alert the team, so that Kris Hays can suggest some strategies for tonight, and for a second I even consider a wire. Because I find myself wondering if I would

benefit from a little extra protection after all...

Protection from myself.

Alessa is too heady, and that means I might miss something important. Something that could save my life. But the thought of anyone listening into our conversation—no. I don't like it.

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I'll continue as I have been, and try to push for a little more trust. But first things first—I need an outfit that will grab Alessa's full attention.

Time for some strategic wardrobe browsing.

CHAPTER12

ALESSA

The elevator doors open, and I step into Natalie's lavish penthouse.

“Hope you don't mind waiting a moment more,” I hear Natalie call from the end of a hallway. Turning my gaze toward her, I'm struck by the vision she presents. Clad in a slender royal blue dress that skims the floor, she looks every bit as elegant as her home. “I just need a minute to finish getting ready—oh.”

She walks forward a few steps, blinking at my casual attire—a pair of jeans, a sports jacket, and a baseball cap pulled low.

“I should have mentioned to dress down,” I say, drinking in the view. The way that dress clings in all the right places makes me wish I could peel it off slowly, inch by tantalizing inch. I force my gaze back to her face. “But I'm certainly not complaining about the view.”

I let my most charming smile spread across my face. Natalie blinks again, like she's trying to process this new side of me outside the usual glitz and glamour.

“I’ll just...go change,” she says after a moment, cheeks flushed.

“Need a hand?” I ask.

Natalie’s cheeks flush a soft pink, and I can see her weighing the options in her head before she finally shakes her head with a flustered laugh. “I think I can manage, thank you.”

“Have it your way,” I concede, my grin widening as I watch her retreat to what I assume must be her bedroom.

I’m absolutely determined to see the inside of it tonight. But as she disappears, I take the opportunity to wander over to the windows, watching the city come alive as evening turns to night. The vibrant pulse of life below seems so far removed from the quiet intimacy of Natalie’s penthouse, and for a moment, I wonder—if I suggested it—could we skip the evening and stay here instead, preferably in her bedroom?

But no, I can’t do that. I have a standing commitment on Wednesday nights—one that I intend to pull Natalie along to.

When she reappears a few minutes later, gone is the sophisticated elegance of the dress, replaced instead by the casual comfort of jeans and a sweater. There’s a vulnerability in her expression that wasn’t there before, and it makes my chest ache with something that feels dangerously close to...

Tenderness? Oh, dear.

She looks so...real.

Not like all those women who have come and gone, airbrushed to perfection. This version of her is even more captivating than the woman who greeted me moments

ago.

“Sorry again for not giving you a heads-up about the dress code,” I tell her. “It should have occurred to me.”

“Is this better?” she asks, her voice tinged with uncertainty as she looks down at herself.

“Perfect,” I assure her. “You look lovely, Natalie.”

“Thanks,” she mumbles, a shy smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “Now, are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“Ah, you’ll see,” I say playfully. We step into the elevator and she leans against the mirrored side.

“Okay, you’ve got me extra-curious now,” she admits.

“Good.” I grin, feeling a surge of excitement course through me. The doors slide open with a quiet hiss on the lobby, and I lead her outside where a cab is already waiting. Natalie slides in beside me in the back seat, curiosity sparking in those pretty brown eyes. We drive downtown, and then we’ve completely left behind the glittering lights of Manhattan.

I watch Natalie carefully, but she just stares out the window.

“Very mysterious,” Natalie muses, crossing her arms over her chest with a nervous smile. “Should I be...worried?”

“Why should you be worried?”

She flushes. A true, deep embarrassment.

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“Ah,” I say. “You mean, because of who my father is?”

She says nothing for a moment. “I’m sorry,” she says at last. “I didn’t mean to imply—”

“Oh, it’s no big deal.” I smile at her, taking in her discomfort. “Don’t worry, Natalie. You’re perfectly safe with me. And, indeed, you’d be perfectly safe with my father, too. He’s really quite the gentleman.”

Natalie stares at me for a long time and then gives a chuckle. “Alright,” she says with a shrug. “So where are we going?”

“Here we are now.”

The cab pulls up outside a rundown brick building with a small, hand-painted sign near the door: Anna’s Kitchen. I’ve been coming here for years, but never with company. Natalie follows me inside, where the smell of fresh bread and hearty soup envelops us.

“A soup kitchen?” Natalie asks in a hushed voice as we pass stacks of packaged food donations.

“A meal service for those experiencing food insecurity,” I correct her, and then shrug. “Yeah. A soup kitchen. One I help fund specifically for women and children in need. And they can always use extra hands, here. Trust me, you’ll love it.”

“I’ve never done anything like this before,” she says nervously.

“Just remember,” I say, leading her through to the kitchen, “the most important thing tonight is to listen. And to serve the food, obviously. But listening is just as important, if someone wants to share.”

We reach the kitchen, where I grab two aprons from a hook and pass one to her with a flourish. Natalie takes it slowly, eyes darting around the busy kitchen interior.

I wonder if seeing this side of me has thrown her off balance. Good—shows her she isn’t the only one who can be hard to read.

Though her reaction in the cab told me a little something about her. She knows my reputation—or Daddy’s reputation, anyway. Perhaps that’s what’s been keeping her so jumpy the whole time? If so, I’m extra glad I chose Anna’s Kitchen as our “date” tonight.

She can see another side to me than the glamorous Mafia princess that the gossip columns like to play up.

The food is already made, so we begin to bring it through to the service station, where we work side by side serving out soup, stews, and sides like green beans, rice, or bread.

“Hi there,” I greet a woman who approaches my station, her two young children in tow. “How many can I get you?”

“Three plates, please,” she replies softly, her gaze flicking to Natalie, a newcomer, then back to me.

At first, Natalie seems hesitant in her interactions with the people here. But her innate kindness soon takes over. She smiles warmly and asks folks how they’re doing as she hands them their meals—and she listens. Good.

I even catch her slipping an extra cornbread muffin to a young girl when she thinks no one is looking. The simple joy on that kid's face makes my chest ache.

This is why I help fund places like this. Not for any self-serving reasons, but because everyone deserves to be treated with basic human decency.

I think Natalie Moreau has a similar view.

I like that.

Dammit, I like her.

After cleanup, I take Natalie's elbow and steer her toward the door. "Come on. I'm craving a greasy diner burger after all that soup."

"Sounds perfect," Natalie agrees, her eyes sparkling.

She really has enjoyed tonight. And I really have enjoyed her company, too. Natalie had been so open and compassionate, traits that are important to me in the people I let into my inner circle. Even Juno has her soft side, though she doesn't like to admit it.

But seeing Natalie in action tonight...it's stirred something deeper within me. And as we slip into a booth, the scent of sizzling burgers and hot fries making me groan dramatically with hunger, I can't help but feel that this night...

This night is strangely perfect.

We order and soon we're tucking into our plates of greasy goodness. Natalie sips her milkshake, studying me over the rim of her glass.

"Okay, so tell me," I say, after a huge bite of my burger, "what's your guilty

pleasure? I mean, besides dropping a cool hundy on dates with beautiful women.”

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She laughs a lot at that, and then turns thoughtful, grinning wryly as she takes another sip of her milkshake. “I’m a sucker for reality TV. The trashier, the better.”

“Really? I wouldn’t have pegged you for a reality TV fan.”

“Sometimes, it’s just nice to unwind and watch other people’s drama unfold,” she explains with a shrug, trying to brush off the giggly embarrassment. “What about you? Any guilty pleasures you’d care to confess?”

“Crime,” I tell her, cradling my cup of coffee, and then grin at the look on her face. “Or should I say: crimenovels. Every time the next Grisham or Lee Child thriller comes out, I stay home reading that sucker until it’s done.”

Her laugh is a little more awkward then, and I think I’ve nailed it. Her problem isn’t me, exactly.

It’s my connections.

Well, at least I know now. There’s been more than one woman a little reluctant to get involved with me due to those connections, but they always come around in the end, once they get to know me.

And I suspect my intentions to wiggle my way into bed with Natalie Moreau will have to be put on hold another night or two. But that’s fine.

That’s...actually fine.

“I’d like to get to know you better,” I say, impulsive.

She raises her eyebrows, amused. “You sound almost surprised.”

She’s not wrong. But I see something quizzical in her face that makes me say, “What are you thinking?”

“I’m wondering what prompted this evening.” Straight and to the point—I like that about her.

I swirl a fry through some ketchup, weighing how to answer. “Honestly? I wanted to see your reaction to the work I do for women and kids in need. The Ruby is more than just glitz and glamour.”

Natalie absorbs this with a slow nod. I can’t tell if she believes me. I hope she does.

I really hope she does, with an urgency that takes me by surprise.

“And that reminds me,” I go on. I slide an embossed invitation across the table toward her. “I’d like to offer you membership at the Ruby.”

Natalie’s eyes widen a fraction. She turns the invite over in her hands and opens it. I can see when she’s read the financial details, because her eyes go very wide.

One hundred thousand dollars to join.

And an additional fifty in membership fees each year.

“The fees are quite substantial,” I say coolly. “But they come with perks. There are...backroom entertainment options. I know you enjoyed your first peek behind the curtain.”

Natalie chews her lower lip.

Damn it, I want to be the one biting that lip.

“Just something to think about,” I add lightly when she stays quiet. “No pressure. I know it’s a big commitment.”

Good God, after all her hints about it, I would have thought she’d be over the moon.

She nods, tucking the invite into her bag. “I appreciate the offer, very much, Alessa. Thank you. And I’ll consider it carefully.”

Consider it?

This woman is going to drive me crazy.

“Think of it as an investment—not just in yourself, but in the community.” I lean forward. “The fees help fund our charitable endeavors, like the soup kitchen. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg.”

“Oh, I’m extremely flattered and grateful,” she says quickly. “I’ll just have to speak to my accountant, that’s all. He’s so dry and boring—you know how they are. I really prefer to avoid all contact.”

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“I know exactly what you mean,” I say fervently, thinking of Mr. Fonelli. “Anyway, there’s no rush.” I smile, hoping I don’t look too eager.

We finish our meal soon after and then we catch a cab back uptown. As much as I want to haul Natalie into bed and find out if she tastes as good as she looks, I restrain myself when we arrive back at her building, and she hesitantly invites me up “for coffee.” Playing hard to get seems to be her M.O., so I’d like her to see how it feels. I don’t even bother to lean in for a kiss, waving my goodbye from the taxi window instead.

“Not tonight, sweetheart. But I’ll be in touch soon.”

As the cab drives off, I let out a frustrated groan that makes the cabbie eye me in the rearview with alarm. What is it about this woman that drives me to such extremes just to hold her attention? I pride myself on reading people, on getting them to let their guard down so I can learn their desires and drive our interactions.

But Natalie Moreau? The only thing I really learned about her tonight was that she’s a sucker for the Real Housewives.

And that she genuinely likes to help people. I learned that, too.

I chuckle under my breath, marveling at this novel experience. Perhaps I’ve finally met my match. The thought sends an unexpected thrill through me.

Oh, I do love a challenge. They’re so rare.

And I always get what I want in the end. Natalie Moreau will be no exception.

CHAPTER 13

NATALIE

The fluorescent lights of the briefing room cast everything in a cold, clinical glow as I take my usual seat at the table, surveying the team gathered for our morning debrief after my date with Alessa last night. O’Conner taps away on his laptop, eyes glued to the screen, while Chang sips a frou-frou Starbucks, her foot jiggling with pent-up energy.

Bell stands at the head of the table as usual, fingers laced together as he begins the meeting. “Miller’s outing with Miss de Luca last night.” His tone is crisp and businesslike as always. “I take it you all read her report last night.” Everyone nods. “Discuss.”

Their cynical faces already say it all: they don’t buy into the seemingly altruistic side of Alessa that I witnessed.

“Really, though? Asoup kitchen?” Chang snorts. “She’s probably just doing it for appearances.”

“Or laundering money through a charity,” Patrick chimes in.

I can’t help but bristle at their insinuations. “We know that de Luca is heavily involved in charity work. It’s not exactly a surprise. And all I’m saying is, she seemed genuinely invested in helping the people at the soup kitchen. I was there with her, and I saw how she interacted with everyone.”

“Of course she impressed you, Miller,” Rish Khalil sighs. “That’s what con artists do.

They make you believe they're good people so you'll let your guard down. Then she asked for another hundred thousand dollars to join her exclusive little club. Right?"

"Right, but..." My thoughts drift to the way Alessa's eyes lit up when that little girl ran over to hug her last night. How the cook's face softened into a smile at the sight of Alessa rolling up her sleeves to pitch in.

It wasn't for show.

Alessa cares.

I turn to Kris Hays. "Hays, what do you think?"

She raises an eyebrow, looking up from her papers. "What do I think? I think many career criminals like to make themselves feel better by making charitable contributions. And we know the Mafia have strong religious ties. It helps bind them together, along with all the murder and misery."

My shoulders slump a little. So Hays thinks the same as everyone else. "Wright?"

Sam Wright just shakes his head.

And before I spent so much time with her, I would have seen Alessa de Luca in black-and-white terms, too. I would have been nodding along, feeling morally superior—

"I don't give a good goddamn about the charity bullshit," Bell snaps. "That's not our concern. We need to be sure Miller gets that membership. Standards and Ethics will have to approve the fee expenditure, and I'll speak to the SAC about signing off. It's a large amount, but well worth it for this kind of access. This is what we've been working toward, people."

Everyone murmurs agreement, and Bell studies me for a moment, his eyes searching mine as if trying to gauge my thoughts. Then, he smiles—a rare gesture from him.

“Congratulations, by the way,” he says. “Getting that offer was no small feat. You’ve done exceptional work so far, Miller.”

“Thank you, sir,” I respond in surprise, offering a small smile in return. Once I would have been thrilled to have his approval. But now...

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“Keep up the good work,” Bell adds, and returns his attention to the papers before him. “Now, once the membership has been secured, we’ll discuss our next steps.”

The debriefing comes to an end, and the team begins to disperse from the room. I gather my notes and prepare to leave myself, but a soft touch on my arm stops me in my tracks. I turn to see Sam Wright, his eyes filled with a mixture of concern and determination.

As the others file out, Wright pulls me aside. “You got a minute?”

I follow him to a quiet corner. His brow is creased with concern. “How are you holding up? This double life stuff isn’t easy.”

I stare at him. “I’m fine. Managing just like any other op.”

He shakes his head. “I saw you bolting from the Ruby the other night, grabbing a cab a few blocks away. Risky move if de Luca’s people were watching.”

My spine stiffens. “How do you know how I got home?”

Wright holds my gaze. “I tailed you.”

“Youwhat?” I hiss.

“It’s my job as your handler to know what you’re doing, how you’re playing it.”

“Did Bell—”

“Bell didn’t know.”

I bristle at the idea of him tracking me without notice—and without approval, either.

“A little heads up would’ve been nice. If you’d been made—”

“I wasn’t. And with the heat turning up, we should wire you for your safety,” he continues. “Bell should’ve insisted from the start.”

This is the last damn thing I need. “Wright, I appreciate your concern, but you have nothing to worry about.” No way am I wearing a wire, letting them listen to every private moment with Alessa. I can’t work like that.

“I’m putting in a recommendation,” he says doggedly. “I don’t like the way Bell’s running this op and if I can mitigate some of that cowboy attitude, I will.”

I can’t help smiling. “I think that’s the first time anyone has ever described Stephen Bell as a cowboy.”

After a moment, Wright gives a chuckle. “Maybe. But Nat, seriously. I’m worried about your safety. And up until now, you’ve been doing a great job. But with this membership offer and the clear interest de Luca has in you, I can’t help but worry that you’re getting in too deep.”

“Sam, I...” For a moment, I’m at a loss for words. “I never meant for you to worry like this. I’ll consider the wire.”

“Thanks,” he says, squeezing my shoulder reassuringly before stepping back. “Now, I should let you get back to your fabulous life as an heiress.”

I give an automatic smile, but as I head for the elevator, turmoil churns inside me. Having Sam Wright monitor me has never been a problem before. So why does this

idea about a wire feel like a violation?

Wearing a wire could jeopardize my cover, my inner voice argues. If Alessa were to discover it, our entire investigation would crumble.

Hell, she might kill me.

As much as she pretended to reassure me in that cab ride last night, I didn't miss her description of her father. The Gentleman. He's not going to be happy to find out his precious daughter is getting played, is he?

No. Wearing a wire would be the unsafe thing to do.

But as much as I try to focus on the practicalities, I can't ignore the other side of the argument, the part of me that simply wants to shield my private moments with Alessa from the prying eyes of my colleagues.

Each stolen glance, each lingering touch...I can't deny the attention is flattering.

Any undercover operation has moments where lines are blurred. It's not possible to live someone else's life and not really feel how they feel from time to time. So yes, I am attracted to Alessa de Luca. She's gorgeous, charming, and doing her best to seduce me, according to the team—and to my own observations, too.

But so far I haven't observed anything tying her to the Mancini Family, and unless that changes, I'm starting to think this whole operation will be a bust. The team will have to give up any hope of taking Alessa down.

And there's a part of me that is actually happy about that idea.

CHAPTER14

ALESSA

I stand before the floor-length mirror in my office bathroom, smoothing my hands over the luxurious fabric of my dress. It's a deep ruby red, my signature color, and one that I love to wear when I need to feel at my most alluring. The neckline plunges just enough to be tantalizing without being vulgar. A row of covered buttons trails down the front, nipped in at the waist before the skirt slips over my hips to just above my knees. I chose this dress carefully for today's meeting, wanting to strike that delicate balance between professionalism and seduction.

Yesterday, I was dressed like a damn Amish girl for Fonelli's next visit. I saw no reason to make the experience any more pleasant for him than it would be for me, so I went for severity over charm. It seemed to work well enough. He didn't question a thing.

And today... I smile. Today I get to see Natalie again. I try to temper the butterflies in my stomach, reminding myself this is simply an orientation for her membership at the Ruby Realm. But I can't help feeling excited about it as I smooth invisible wrinkles from the dress.

There was a part of me that actually expected her to knock me back. I mean, knock themembershipback. I should have had more faith in myself—and the Ruby.

A soft knock at the door pulls me back into the office proper. "Come in," I call out, and Liana steps into the office. As always, my hostess looks impeccable in her

tailored black suit, not a single chestnut hair out of place in her elegant updo. Her keen eyes sweep over me, one brow quirking upwards.

“You look...nice,” she says, though her gaze implies she knows exactly why I’ve taken such care with my appearance today.

I lift my chin, affecting nonchalance. “I like to look professional for all our new member orientations.”

“Of course,” Liana agrees, though the knowing gleam in her eyes says she sees right through me. “Well, your new member has arrived. Shall I send her in?”

“Yes, thank you,” I reply, hoping my voice doesn’t betray my nerves. Liana’s mouth twitches like she wants to smile but she simply nods and retreats from the office.

Alone again, I take a deep breath, squaring my shoulders. I’ve faced down roomfuls of Mob Bosses without flinching. One woman, even one as enigmatic as Natalie Moreau, is nothing to be anxious about. The money has already been transferred, so today is just the final paperwork. But maybe after that, I can persuade her to stay for coffee...perhaps dinner...

The door opens again and Liana shows Natalie inside, who greets me with that same tentative smile that’s been haunting my dreams.

“Natalie! Hi!” I curse myself for the ineloquent welcome. “Please, have a seat.”

Natalie greets me in return as she folds herself gracefully into one of the wingback chairs across from my desk. I sit as well, and then spend a little too long smiling vacuously at her. She begins to look a little uncertain, and I clear my throat.

“Thank you for coming today,” I tell her, folding my hands atop the desk. “The funds

have been approved, and so you are officially a Ruby Realm member. Congratulations, by the way. I wanted to walk you through everything so you feel comfortable here as a member.”

“Of course,” Natalie replies with an easy smile. “I’m looking forward to learning more about the club.”

Some of the tension eases from my shoulders at her receptiveness. We discuss the various facilities, rules and other aspects of the club. We’ve just begun discussing the process for booking the various private lounge areas when the phone on my desk interrupts me mid-sentence. With an apologetic look at Natalie, I grab the receiver, expecting a brief inquiry from reception.

“Heads up, boss—” comes Liana’s anxious voice, but before she can finish the warning, my office door bursts open.

What the—?

Three men stride inside. I recognize the leader immediately—Vince Ricci, a reckless and arrogant enforcer for the Mancini Family. And his knuckles are a little bloody, I note.

Not good.

What the hell is he doing here?

“To what do I owe the pleasure, gentlemen?” I ask coolly, willing my voice not to shake.

Vince smirks. “I think you know why we’re here, sweetheart. The Boss...” His voice trails off as his eyes land on Natalie, and I can see the gears turning in his head as he

tries to figure out who she is and why she's here. "We need to have a talk about keeping your shareholders happy," he supplies at last, his beady gaze still raking over Natalie. "Alone."

His two hulking cronies loom silently behind him, looking around the place as though they're measuring it for drapes.

The sight of these assholes in my inner sanctum makes fury rise like bile in my throat, but I force my voice to remain steady. "I'm with a member right now. Come back later."

"I ain't waiting around here till you're done, Alessa. I'll be back tomorrow, eight sharp. But before I go, any chance you've seen my niece Sienna? Last place she was seen was around here. Don't want her getting any queer ideas in her head, if you know what I mean."

"How dare you?" I snarl, rising to my feet at once. The three of them look taken aback, as though I should just accept their crude bigotry. I walk around the desk, glowering imperiously. "You and your men should not be in here," I bite out, ice in every syllable. "And I will be informing my father about this intrusion."

Ricci's sneer wavers slightly at the mention of my father's wrath. "Yeah, alright," he mutters, glancing away. "Just thought you might've heard something about Sienna."

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My glare is channeling Juno Bianchi, full-bore. “Get out. Now.”

“Alright, alright, I’m sorry if—”

“Save your apologies for my father when he calls you later. You can explain your unacceptable behavior to him. I’m not interested.”

Ricci’s lip curls but he turns and stalks out without another word, his goons on his heels. But he can’t resist calling over his shoulder as he leaves, “Don’t want to find out she’s been here, got it?”

The insolent pig. I clench my jaw so hard my teeth might shatter, nails digging into my palms as I fist up my hands.

As soon as the door shuts behind them I turn to Natalie, embarrassment and anger churning sickly in my stomach. “I’m so sorry. That was completely unacceptable. You can be assured, it will never happen again.”

To my surprise, Natalie merely arches one brow, looking more inconvenienced than truly bothered. “What did he mean about his niece? Surely you don’t allow minors in here?”

“Absolutely not,” I reply hastily, then want to kick myself. I sound so defensive.

For one wild moment, I think about telling her everything. But there’s too much at stake for me to go blabbing, and too many lives on the line aside from mine. Besides, explaining that Sienna is most definitely not Vince Ricci’s niece would be a whole tale

in itself, and I don't have the time to go into it.

Taking a breath, I steady my voice. "I don't even know his niece. But please, if you're uncomfortable given what just happened, I completely understand. We can postpone everything."

Natalie considers for a moment, brow furrowing. I brace myself for her to leave. But finally she shakes her head. "I understand what it's like dealing with men who think they can control women. I don't see why we should let them interrupt our plans."

"Thank you so much for understanding," I say, trying not to sound rushed. "Why don't you wait in the lounge while I just make a quick call about this unpleasant incident. Then I'll come collect you, and we can continue."

"Alright."

"I'll call Liana again to show you—"

"No need. I can find my own way."

The moment she's gone I grab the phone on my desk with shaking hands and dial my father.

"How'd the audit go, principessa?" Daddy asks without preamble when he picks up.

I sigh. "Not as well as I was led to believe."

I quickly explain the confrontation with Ricci, unable to keep the angry tremor from my voice. "They've never been so bold before, just bursting in here like they own the place," I finish furiously.

My father is silent for a long moment. I hear the click of his lighter followed by a weary sigh. “Divisions within the Family are growing...difficult to manage,” he finally says, each word heavy with implication. “The old rules don’t hold like they used to. How’s the package?”

“I’m going to check on it now,” I tell him. “Daddy—be careful.”

“That’s my line, principessa. You make sure to keep your head down. I’ll take care of Ricci—and I’ll have a word with the Boss, too.”

We end the call shortly after. I take a deep breath, smoothing my dress again and willing my frantic heart to settle. I cannot let this chaos with the Mancinis interfere. The work is too important.

I open up my second safe, the one in my bathroom that no one knows about, and I extract a key—and a gun. I peek into the lounge on my way through; Natalie is there, a coffee at her elbow, and she’s frowning slightly at her phone as she scrolls through it.

Good. She’s busy for the moment.

I go the long way around to the foyer, where Liana gives me an apologetic look. “I’m so sorry—”

“No need,” I tell her, walking backward as I head toward the security door. “Are the bouncers alright?”

“Just a little ego bruising, I think. Jeremiah said he’d call in some backup.”

“Good.” I turn to the door and unlock it. “And Liana—check on Natalie Moreau for me, will you? Make sure she’s kept happy for ten minutes or so.”

“Will do, Boss.” She slides out from behind her desk at once.

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I head down the narrow hallway behind the security door and stop at a panel in the wall, where I scan my palm, then my retina. Daddy insisted on top-notch security for this safe room, and I'm so glad he did.

When the wall panel slides open, I'm greeted by the sight of a very bored young woman lying on the sofa in there, watching TV. She smiles when she sees me, a bright, welcoming smile, the kind of smile that only a week ago I never would have believed she was capable of.

"Alessa! Oh myGod, it's good to see you, I'm so bored today, I—"

"Sienna," I say, coming to sit by her at once and taking her hand. "I just wanted to check on you." I return her smile, but she can tell something's wrong.

"I'm fine," she says with a frown, looking at the gun in my hand. "But—"

"But?" I think I'm being a little too intense, leaning in like I am. I make an effort to lean back.

But her eyes are already a little wide. "Are you okay?"

I almost laugh. AmIokay? "Oh, I'm fine. Just fine."

"Uh, okay." Her eyes wander a little past me. "Hi," she says.

I whirl around, getting to my feet, automatically whipping my handgun up to the entrance—and then dropping it just as fast.

Natalie Moreau is standing in the doorway, looking startled. And then her face changes as she takes in Sienna, and the cramped room she's been living in for the past week.

"Natalie, I..." I trail off. "You were supposed to wait in the lounge," I finish weakly.

I'm cursing my own lack of sense. In my panic to get in here and reassure myself that Sienna was okay, I didn't even shut the damn doors behind me. That kind of fuzzy-headed carelessness is likely to get me—and rather a lot of other people—killed.

And all I can think is, Juno Bianchi would never have made such a silly mistake, not with her cool head and strategic mind.

But it's too late now. Natalie has already moved into the room, looking around with an expression that gets darker by the second.

She turns on me, and asks coldly, "What the hell is going on here?"

CHAPTER 15

NATALIE

I sweep the dimly lit space with a practiced eye, senses heightened. A plain single bed, a bedside table with a half-eaten microwavable meal, a sofa, TV—and on that sofa crouches the startled young woman I heard Alessa refer to as Sienna, her eyes wide as she looks between Alessa and me.

She's so young. So young.

A thousand terrible thoughts flood my mind: Alessa's trafficking her, she's been kidnapped, this is all a front for something far darker.

I turn to Alessa, taking in the fear darkening her usually bright green eyes. She lifts her hands in supplication like I'm the one with the gun. "Let me explain, Natalie. I promise you, it's not what you think."

My gaze snaps back to Sienna. Her breathing comes fast and shallow, muscles coiled tight. Dark hair falls across frightened eyes.

"Are you okay?" I ask Sienna, my gaze locked on her, trying to gauge if she's being coerced.

"Y-yes," she stammers, but her eyes don't leave Alessa.

"Sienna is here of her own free will," Alessa insists, more calmly than I think she would if she was lying.

"Is that true?" I demand, needing to hear it from Sienna herself.

"Yes," Sienna reiterates, more firmly this time. "Alessa's helping me." Her voice trembles still, but she seems to be telling the truth.

"Why did you follow me in here?" Alessa asks, something close to despair in her tone.

I think fast. The best defense, as they say... "I saw you walking by," I say, keeping an edge of suspicion in my voice. "I went after you because I thought you hadn't seen me."

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What really happened was, I snuck after her, avoided Liana the hostess as she crossed into the club to look for me, and caught the security door just before it closed.

“Alessa, what is going on here?” I demand again, hands on my hips. “Who is this poor girl, and why—”

“It’s a long story,” Alessa says. “I’ll—I’ll explain, just give me a moment. Please. If you’d wait outside?”

I fix Alessa with a hard look, but I nod. “I’ll wait outside, but I’m going to need answers.”

“Thank you,” Alessa breathes out, relief washing over her features. “I promise I’ll explain everything.”

I lean against the wall in the corridor, trying to steady my breathing. My thoughts race, and I can’t shake the feeling that there’s more to this situation than meets the eye. Over the sound of my own heartbeat, I catch Alessa’s voice speaking softly through the slightly ajar door.

“Sienna, it won’t be long now,” she reassures, her tone warm and gentle.

“Promise?” Sienna’s voice is small.

“Promise. Now, I need you to stay here just a little longer. Can you do that for me?”

“Okay,” Sienna sighs.

The click of the lock echoes down the hallway as Alessa exits the safe room. She casts one quick, nervous glance at the door before turning to me, her eyes pleading for understanding. “Come with me,” she sighs.

I follow her out, senses alert for any sign of deception. The security door locks behind us with a dull, heavy thud. Oppressive.

To my surprise, Alessa heads not toward the club again, but to the front door. She glances at me when I pause. “Coming?”

I follow her in silence, down to her town car waiting around the corner, which the driver gets out of to open the door for us.

“Where are we going?” I ask, taking a step back.

“To my place,” she replies, her voice barely above a whisper. When I open my mouth to question her further, she places a finger on her lips, signaling for silence.

I have a decision to make. Never let them take you to the second location, they say about killers. The one they’ve set up, the one they control—the one where they can take their time and enjoy the moment.

Is Alessa a killer?

A moment later, I find myself following her into the car.

* * *

The town car only travels a few blocks, then slows to a stop in front of an imposing three-story brick townhouse, its red facade glowing softly in the sunshine. Wrought-iron gates close off the entrance, while ivy climbs up the walls, framing tall windows

adorned with heavy drapes.

“Here we are,” Alessa announces as she steps out of the car. I follow her lead, and she unlocks the front door and ushers me inside quickly.

I don’t have much time to take it in, but the interior is a stunning blend of old-world charm and modern luxury, with dark wood paneling lining the walls, and luxurious furnishings in deep jewel tones. It’s clear that no expense has been spared, but there’s an undeniable warmth to the space—a reflection of Alessa herself.

“Make yourself comfortable,” she says, gesturing to a nearby couch. “This is the only place I can be sure we won’t be overheard.”

I happen to know exactly why that is. During our prep for the operation, we discovered Alessa’s townhouse has surveillance-disruptive technologies built in, and is swept for bugs and cameras regularly.

I take a seat, and note the tremble in her hands, the tightness in her shoulders. Her armor has cracks.

Alessa hesitates, her eyes filled with conflict. “I have to warn you, Natalie,” she begins. “Once I tell you this, your life might be in danger.”

“Are you serious?” I respond, trying to react the way Natalie Moreau might react. But my heart is pounding in my chest, and I can’t help but wonder if I’m making a grave mistake by pursuing this.

“Yes,” she says simply. “So are you sure you want to know?” she asks, her eyes searching mine for any hint of doubt or fear.

“Does it have anything to do with those men who barged in?” She gives a slight nod.

“Then they already know what I look like. You might as well tell me.”

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Very well,” she sighs, sinking back in the chair. “But remember, you asked for this.” She takes a breath, and then she begins. “My father and I rescue girls from the sex trade run by the Mancinis.” Her words come rapid-fire, infused with urgency. “We hide them at the Ruby temporarily before helping them start new lives, far from the reach of the Family. All my charity work—while real—is sort of a cover for, well. For this work. The fees from the Ruby go toward it, too. It takes a lot of money to get someone away from the reach of the Mancinis. But Don Mancini has been sniffing a little closer lately, sending his auditor around to check my books. I think he knows something is going on.”

She seems sincere, her eyes clear and honest. But I know better than to fully trust. Not yet.

“You rescue them?” I ask pointedly. “How, exactly? And why does no one notice these missing girls?”

Alessa’s throat bobs as she swallows. Nervous. “You know that my father, Johnny de Luca, has...connections to the Mancini Family. Well, over the years, the Family has changed—for the worse.”

I can’t stop my scoff. “Your father works for the Mob and, what—they’re not cuddly enough for him?”

Alessa takes it on the chin. “I realize how it sounds, Natalie. I do. But the business has changed. Too many people want a slice of the pie, and that means...well, it means there’s violence where before there might have been talks.”

And in a weird, weird way, I do see what she's saying. Part of the reason the FBI has this whole operation going is because of the increase in Mafia-related crime in New York over the past few years. The recent assassination of Carmine Bianchi was just one event in a line of escalating violence.

Some of that violence has been committed by Johnny the Gentleman. But—as Alessa says—it has always been retaliatory, never an attack. It's been restrained, insofar as he's never killed a civilian, only other mobsters.

And it's been targeted. The Gentleman has never killed indiscriminately, never left any collateral damage.

As far as killers go, he is—as his name suggests—surprisingly gentlemanly.

But he's still a killer.

“Go on,” I say at last, because no matter what I might think about Alessa's father, she clearly adores him.

“The Mancinis have become more and more involved in trafficking. Drugs. Arms. And...people.” She pauses to make sure I understand, and I just nod. “Daddy and I couldn't stand by any longer. We decided to form our own network. We've banded together with other powerful people across the nation. My father has many allies, even within the Mancinis, people who also hate what is being done in the name of the Family.”

I can't help it. I burst out: “If you hate it so much—both of you—why not just...”

But the small, cynical smile on Alessa's lips makes me trail off. “Leave?” she finishes for me.

“You can’t leave.” I answer my own question.

She nods slowly. “There’s no out once you’re in, Natalie. I don’t expect you to understand, but...there’s no getting out.”

She doesn’t expect me to understand, but of course I do. I understood even before I made my silly, naive suggestion to just leave. Anyone working on the problem of organized crime for more than five minutes understands the pressures. How difficult it is to leave the life.

And what happens, nine times out of ten, to those who do.

But at least my outburst is in keeping with the character of Natalie Moreau. Alessa doesn’t even look surprised about it.

She just goes on. “We use our networks with other cities to make these girls and women...” She pauses, searching for the word. “Vanish. We give them new identities. New documentation, new backgrounds. And we pay for housing and meals, set up trusts for them, to allow a safety net. We give them...a second chance.”

I consider her words, thoughts swirling. It makes a sick kind of sense. But helping victims hardly sounds like the M.O. of a mobster and his Mafia princess daughter. There must be an angle I’m not seeing.

“Why take the risk?” I ask bluntly. “What’s in it for you?”

Alessa’s gaze sharpens, mouth pressing into a thin line. A flash of anger, quickly suppressed. “Not everything I do is about gain.” She looks away, jaw tight. “I help them because someone has to.”

I exhale slowly, leaning back in my chair. Perhaps there are more shades of grey in

her world of black-and-white than I anticipated. Hints of a moral code, ethical lines she won't cross—lines her father won't cross, either.

It gives me pause. But I need to be sure.

“And Sienna?” I press. “Who is she?”

Alessa meets my gaze again, holding it steadily. “A new girl for the brothels. Daddy got word of her situation and acted quickly. She was supposed to start this week.” Her voice shakes slightly. “We're just waiting for things to settle a little before we help her escape the city.”

I turn over her story, examining it from all angles. “Is Juno Bianchi one of these powerful people who helps?” I ask.

A flicker of surprise passes over Alessa's face. I curse internally at revealing knowledge of her cousin and the infamous Bianchi family. A misstep. But apparently Juno is well-known enough that it doesn't occur to her to question it.

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“No, Juno isn’t involved,” she cuts me off. “She would help if she knew, but my father and I...we’re already playing with fire. Involving the Bianchis could start a Mob War, and that would put even more lives in danger. And besides, this shame lies on the Mancini Family. It’s our battle, not Juno’s.”

I study the weary lines of her face, the lingering fear and self-doubt in her eyes taking over from her usual bravado.

A flicker of desperation crosses her face. “Please, Natalie,” she implores, “you have to understand.”

I register the raw emotion in her voice, her face. It’s a side of Alessa I haven’t seen before. “Alright. I get it. You’re doing what you think is right—what you believe is necessary for these women.” I mean it, too; despite the chaos this revelation has thrown me into, there’s something real about Alessa’s determination to protect those who can’t protect themselves.

And as for me, I make a mental note to include this information in a briefing. If mobsters themselves are appalled at what’s going on, why the hell isn’t law enforcement?

What is our side doing, if we’re supposed to be the good guys?

“Thank you for understanding,” Alessa says with a rush of breath. She reaches out, hesitating for a moment before placing a warm hand on my arm. I glance at her lips, suddenly aware of just how close we are.

“Your secret is safe with me,” I murmur.

She smiles ruefully. “I’m sorry you had to find out the way you did. And I’m glad you understand. But not a word, Natalie. It’s—it’s dangerous work. But let me take you back to the Ruby now. That is...” She hesitates. “That is, if you still want to join at all.”

I believe I’ve uncovered the truth about her intentions, so far as Sienna goes. But I still have a job to do. “I do,” I say with a smile.

“Excellent. Then...we should...” She stands.

I stand too. “Yes,” I say. “We should...”

She’s so close to me.

So close...

I lean in and press my lips against hers.

Her eyes widen in surprise, but she doesn’t pull away. Instead, she lets me kiss her, tentative and soft, until she kisses me back with a fierce intensity that leaves me breathless, her arms winding around me as our mouths move together in perfect harmony...

I’m kissing Alessa de Luca.

And I never want to stop.

CHAPTER16

ALESSA

For a heartbeat the noise of the outside world fades away, leaving only this bright point of connection. I let myself get lost in the kiss, savoring the taste and warmth of Natalie's mouth.

She's kissing me. She kissed me.

After all my chasing, flirting, innuendo...

She kissed me.

She pulls back and my heart crumples up until I see her eyes, her uncertainty, her need to know that I'm as into this as she is. I take her face between my hands and I settle my mouth over hers again, unmistakable.

Yes, I want this. Yes. Kiss me.

There's a long pulse of electricity running right through me that sets off a heavy throb in my clit. Her tongue presses against mine and now I can smell her, feel her, taste her. Arousal beats in my core like a pounding drum as I cup her head, tilting her deeper into the kiss, drinking her in.

She has less finesse, but that only makes it hotter—her mouth open and seeking, hands fluttering over me until she finds my hips, tugs me against her, hard. I bite at her bottom lip, the one she's always chewing on, and it sparks something new between us, changes the vibe.

The kiss gets deeper. Wetter.

More urgent.

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I suck her tongue into my mouth, and I imagine consuming her completely, owning her, keeping her. I think about what her cunt would taste like, the flavors I could get out of her with my tongue deep inside...

I need to taste her.

And she's responding so eagerly, her fingers digging into my hips now, anchoring me to her as if she's afraid I'll slip away.

"Is this—okay?" I ask between feverish kisses, my voice barely audible in my own ears, my heart's pounding so loudly.

"More than okay," she tells me. And her lips crash into mine again, her tongue sliding inside my mouth like it's looking for its home.

Desire floods my veins. "You've been driving me fucking crazy," I half-laugh against her mouth, fingers threading through her hair. She gasps as I tug her head back, my lips trailing a path of fire down her neck.

"The feeling's mutual," she pants. "Oh, God."

My core clenches with need. I tug at her shirt, impatient to feel her skin against mine. She pulls back, impatiently stripping off her shirt and then bra.

My breath hitches at the sight of her bare breasts, my hands reaching out to cup their weight. I roll her nipples between my fingers, relishing the sounds of pleasure spilling from her lips.

“I want to taste you,” I tell her. She whimpers as I sink to my knees in front of her, fingers deftly climbing up under her skirt, finding the satin panties she wears underneath. I tug them down and let my hot breath fan against her sweet little pussy, neatly trimmed, the scent of her arousal filling my nose as I press it into her soft curls.

“Please,” she begs, her hips bucking. I push her back until she falls onto the sofa again, knees spreading wide as I tug off her underwear completely and press a kiss to her inner thigh.

“Patience, darling.” I grip her hips, holding her in place. “I’m going to take my time with you.”

A strangled cry escapes her lips as my tongue slides through her folds, already dewy and delicious. Fuck, she’s going to be the death of me. Her fingers twist in my hair, urging me closer.

I’m drowning in the sensations, in the smell of her, the taste of her, the feel of her warm thighs, the sounds of her moans and the wet heat of her gorgeous cunt as I drive my tongue deeper.

Nothing else matters buther.

Her hips begin to rise off the couch, her legs falling wider, her back arching as I slip a finger inside her. I press my lips to her clit, flicking my tongue against it, sucking softly. I add a second finger, her inner walls clenching around me as I fuck her with my hand.

Her body is a gorgeous arch, her breasts thrust forward, head thrown back. Her moans fill the room, growing louder and louder as her orgasm approaches. I watch her, my own center aching with desire as she drives nearer and nearer her peak.

She bucks wildly into my face, her taste like an addiction, a drug, and I can't get enough.

"Please," she moans again, and I laugh against her pussy.

"What is it, darling?" I purr, pulling back to look at her. My God, she's gorgeous, flushed, her eyes glazed with lust, hair tousled, her nipples tight and red. "Please what?" I ask again, my voice husky with desire.

"Fuck me," she breathes.

But I don't want it to be over so fast. I want her here with me as long as possible.

So I sit up from my haunches, trailing my lips up her belly, over the swell of her breasts, gathering them together in my hands to suckle at them. Her back arches, pushing herself closer to me.

"Please, Alessa."

"Not yet."

I lavish her nipple with my tongue, teasing until she's writhing beneath me. Her hands fist in my hair, holding my mouth there in place as my fingers slide between her slick folds again, never quite touching her clit, only teasing and stroking around it.

I don't want her to come.

Not yet.

The instant she does, I'm terrified she'll bolt. That post-org clarity can be such a

bitch.

She begs again, her voice thin and reedy. Please, Alessa.

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“Not yet,” I whisper again into her soft, warm cleavage. “I want to make it last.” I trail a hand over her again, breasts to belly, then further down, slipping my fingers between the wet folds of her pussy. She’s soaking wet, and it’s soggifying, the mess she’s making of herself, and all for me.

As for the sofa, I never liked it much anyway. If we ruin it, I’ll gladly replace it.

Or...perhaps I’ll keep it.

I press a kiss to her mouth as my own arousal builds, fueled by her moans and the wet heat between her thighs. I slide lower, leaving a trail of open-mouthed kisses over her stomach. Her thighs part for me instinctively and I settle between them, drinking in the sight of her glistening cunt.

“My God, you are lovely,” I sigh.

She’s breathing hard, a light in her eyes I haven’t seen before when I glance up at her. “I want to see you, too,” she tells me. “Take off your clothes.”

With a smirk, I rise up to my feet. “You only had to ask, darling.” I strip off quickly, and then, to my surprise, she pulls me forward onto the sofa, straddling her on my knees, and she buries her face between my breasts with a satisfied sigh. I wrap my arms around her, keeping her there just as surely as she is anchoring me with her arms around my waist, and we pause, breathing in tandem.

And then she’s moving, wriggling down, positioning herself carefully so her mouth lines up just right with my pussy—her hot breath making me needier than I already

was. I stroke her hair, petting her as she licks, sucks, teases, pressing her tongue flat against my clit, and I let my head fall back, unable to keep the soft noises from escaping my lips.

She's not inexperienced at this, no indeed. There's a sexy sureness to her, a knowledge of what she's doing, and...oh, she's doing it well. Her lips are soft, but not too soft, her tongue is just right.

"God, you taste so good," she mumbles.

"That's it," I whisper, "that's it, darling, just like that." I want to spread my legs wider, but I'm afraid I'll crush her, so I just buck against her face and encourage her, plead with her, Yes, yes, just like that, oh God, right there.

It's coming for me—the wave. I can feel it building fast now, as her tongue begins a slow, steady swirl around my clit, arhythmic pressure that's exactly what I need.

How does she know? God, how does she know...

I grip her hair with both hands, not to guide her, but to hold onto something, to keep myself grounded. My legs are shaking, my thighs flexing, my whole body ready to come apart for her. I can barely breathe...

The wave crashes over me, and I feel myself disappear in that moment, lose my footing and fall into the abyss. I'm pulled apart into atoms, nothing but a wash of pure, liquid pleasure as the orgasm rises, crests, and spreads out through me.

She's still licking me through it softly when I come back to myself, drifting up to the surface, and my God, I hope I haven't drowned her. I slump to one side, flopping across the sofa, legs still shaking as I give a breathless laugh.

“Natalie,” I pant out, “that was fucking incendiary.”

Desire still has her in its grip, but she smirks, dives forward to kiss me, let me taste myself on her lips.

But that’s not the flavor I’m looking for right now.

“I need to taste you,” I groan at her. She’s moving over me on the sofa, her tongue on my nipples, her need still burning hot as a furnace, while mine has died a little to a glow.

I wanted the edge off. Needed the edge off, and now I can take my time with her.

“Well?” she asks, coming back to nuzzle into my neck. “Have I earned it?”

“Oh, darling,” I breathe. “Don’t worry. You’ll get exactly what you need.”

I push her up, then back, draping her over the sofa so that she’s laid out before me, her body a buffet.

And I’m starving for her.

She watches me between half-lidded eyes, a sweet rosy flush spreading down from her chest to her breasts, her nipples tight at the center of those gorgeous, trembling tits. I reach out to feel them, cup them, have them shudder against my palms in time with her shaking breath.

And then I grip her by the hips, yank her down a little, get her legs over my shoulders. She lets out a huff of surprise, a smile on her face, and watches me lower my mouth—slowly, so slowly—to her drenched core.

She's delicious.

Oh, God, she's delicious; as sweet honey-musk, her clit sliding over my tongue, hot and thick. I lick her, suck her, taste her again. I'm hungry for her, hungry to taste everything that makes her Natalie.

I've never been this greedy for a woman before.

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I devour her in meticulous detail, taking my time until she's moaning and pleading, rocking against me, her hips moving in a slow, sensuous roll. She's cupping her own breasts, tweaking her nipples as I watch, and I'm moving with her, matching her rhythm as my tongue explores her, teasing her, tasting her.

I tease her with feather-light flicks of my tongue, drawing strangled gasps from her lips. When I suck at her sensitive clit, rolling it with my tongue, she cries out, reaching down to grab a handful of my hair. I slide two fingers into her dripping cunt, crooking them to stroke that sensitive spot inside her.

I'm drunk on her, on the dew flooding out of her, and her thighs tremble around my face as I drive her closer to the edge. I can feel her inner walls fluttering around my fingers, taste the next flood of her arousal coating my tongue.

She's close, so close.

The selfish part of me wants to keep her here, just like this, edge her for hours, but I'm too greedy for her. I want her to come on my tongue, fill up my mouth with that glorious cream, so I redouble my efforts, lavishing her clit with hard, fast strokes of my tongue. My fingers work inside her, rubbing over her most sensitive spot with every thrust. Her moans blend into a keening wail, her body tensing.

I don't break the rhythm to demand that she come for me. I don't need to; she's watching me eat her, eyes widening when I look up at her, and then she shatters with a cry, clenching down on my fingers as she rides out her ecstasy, and I drink her in.

I don't stop, determined to draw out her pleasure for as long as possible. Her cries

turn hoarse but I can feel the tremors still rolling through her, can taste change in flavor, the bitter edge to the sweet, just as addictive, just as delicious...

Only when her thighs fall open and her fingers loosen in my hair do I raise my head, gazing up at her with a satisfied smirk. Her chest heaves as she struggles to catch her breath, eyes glassy with pleasure.

“You were right,” she pants out.

“About?”

“That was fucking incendiary.”

A sense of deep satisfaction rolls through me, just as blissful as any orgasm. I sit up with a grin, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. “Good. Because we’re just getting started.”

Her eyes widen, pupils dilating with desire and trepidation. Before she can respond I’ve captured her lips again, kissing her deeply as my hands roam over her flushed skin. She sighs into my mouth, murmuring something.

“What is it, darling?” I ask, pulling back a little. “What did you say?”

She says it again. Clearer. “Never felt like that before,” she sighs. “Never so...”

I feel it too, though I can’t bring myself to say it.

There’s a puzzled little crease to her brows and for a moment I almost panic. This is it, I think. A moment from now, she’ll realize what a terrible person she’s just fucked, and she’ll push me away, run out the door.

But that's not what she does. Not at all.

She reaches out her arms to me with a soft smile, and when I lean into them, a little wary, she just wraps me up tighter, runs her lips over mine, and hooks her leg over my hips. "Let's do it like this, next," she murmurs. "I want to watch your face when you come."

I always get what I want. My whole life, everything has been mine to merely pick and choose between. Clothes. Jewels. Women.

But right now, I'd sacrifice anything. Everything. To give Natalie what she wants.

"Your wish is my command," I purr, and I slide my hand between her still-damp thighs.

CHAPTER 17

NATALIE

The heavy door of Alessa's townhouse closes behind me with a muffled thud. I step out into the bustling rush hour streets, my mind swirling with the revelations and unexpected intimacy Alessa and I just shared behind closed doors.

Just hours ago, I was a principled FBI agent carrying out an undercover mission.

Now everything is more complicated than I ever could have imagined.

It's not just the sex—though, God, that's a huge complication, one that I can't even think about right now.

But Alessa revealed secrets to me that could destroy innocent lives. Her work ing

rescuing women from the Mancini Family's clutches, sheltering them secretly at the Ruby until they can safely start new lives far away from here...

It's true. I know it is, because I saw Sienna with my own eyes, and I know Alessa was telling me the truth.

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The whole truth.

And all this happening right under the FBI's watchful eye as part of my 'investigation' into Alessa's affairs.

If the truth about Alessa's secret network ever got out, it would mean torture and death for Alessa, and miserable slavery for countless innocents as well. Young women like Sienna, who deserve a chance to escape their exploitation.

And I swore to Alessa that I would protect her secret, even knowing it obstructs the very mission that brought me here. A mission I once pursued with single-minded focus, so certain of the righteousness of my task...

But now, a web of emotional and ethical complications has ensnared my heart. I'm tangled in feelings I never anticipated, breaking agency rules I never imagined I—

“Miller!”

Sam Wright's voice cuts through the maelstrom in my mind. I turn, astonished, to see him striding toward me, his face tight with anger and concern.

He followed me?

“What the hell were you doing in there?” he demands as he reaches me. He grabs me by the shoulders and I stare at him, speechless for a moment. But I bristle at his tone. Handler or not, he has no right to bully me this way.

“You can’t just follow me around 24/7, Wright,” I snap back. “I’m not some lost little lamb. I’m on a mission.” My voice comes out like steel even as my insides are churning.

“Answer the question, Nat,” he snaps, his eyes burning into mine. “What were you doing in there with Alessa de Luca?”

I’ve never been great at confrontation. But I’ll be damned if I let him talk down to me. “First up, take your damn hands off me.” He does. “And second, I don’t answer to you.”

“The hell you don’t,” he fires back, eyes blazing. “I’m your handler on this op. It’s my job to keep you safe.”

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. “I was gathering information, alright?” I snap back, my cheeks flushing despite myself. “Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do?”

“Information? You expect me to believe that?” He scoffs, shaking his head. “You were in there for hours, Natalie. Hours!”

I am so fucking glad I had a shower before I left her.

But I’m still figuring things out in my own mind. And I’m not going to let Sam Wright railroad me. “Last time I checked, being an FBI agent didn’t come with a curfew.” My voice is ice cold now. “It’s not like you’ve never gone off the grid before.”

“Off the grid?” He barks out a laugh. “This isn’t some undercover drug sting, Natalie. This is the goddamn Mafia! You think you can just waltz in there and play nice with that bitch?”

Hearing him call her that stings like a slap in the face, but I take a breath before I tell him to mind his manners. I can't do anything—say anything—that might reveal what, exactly, I have been doing.

Not just because of the huge ethical issues around an undercover operative sleeping with a target, but because of Sienna.

Because of Alessa's secret, which I promised to keep.

"Maybe if you had any faith in me—" I begin.

"Faith? Faith has nothing to do with it!" His voice cracks. "I'm trying to protect you, Natalie. But I can't do that if you keep shutting me out."

"Protect me?" I scoff. "I knew the risks when I took on the job, Wright."

"Protect you from making a mistake," he says quietly. "One that could cost you everything."

I stare at him for a moment, taking in his words. But there's something else there, apart from concern—something I can't quite put my finger on.

"Do you have any idea," he goes on in a low voice, "what kind of danger you're in? The things that could happen if you let your guard down around that woman?"

I'm already starting to feel angry with myself. How could I have let myself lose my head so much as to actually sleep with the target? But this aggressive, patronizing approach from Wright only makes me angrier. I lift my chin and stare him down. "I'm not some untested rookie straight out of Quantico. I've been undercover before. I know what the hell I'm doing."

His eyes narrow, still seeking answers. “Doesn’t seem that way from where I’m standing. What did Luca want with you in there?”

The question raises my hackles even further. The urge to slap that arrogant expression off his face is so visceral I have to clench my hidden fist to restrain myself. Instead I fix him with an icy stare. “You’ll find out when you read my report, like everyone else.”

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His square jaw tightens at the rebuke, a muscle in his cheek twitching. We stand there in angry silence for several heartbeats, the tension crackling.

Finally he breaks it, his voice low and gruff. “This isn’t just about the job, Miller. We’ve known each other a long time. Almost ten years. I just want you to be careful. Please.”

The sudden shift to vulnerability deflates my anger like air hissing from a balloon. I know his overbearing behavior comes from a place of caring, however misguided. We were green recruits together once, and we’ve had each other’s backs ever since. I can’t forget that bond, no matter how domineering he’s become over the years.

I soften my tone a fraction. “I appreciate you looking out for me. I really do. But this is my assignment. You need to let me do my job, my way. Trust me enough to make my own decisions in the field.”

My own decisions, like sleeping with the target.

Oh, God.

I’m so screwed.

But I need to think it all through, figure out how to own up to that without putting Sienna’s future in jeopardy. It’s not just about me.

His shoulders slump a bit, but his eyes remain clouded with doubt and frustration. Before he can argue further, I step to the curb and wave down an approaching yellow

cab. As it pulls over, tires hissing on the wet pavement, I turn back to Wright with finality.

“I’ll see you tomorrow at the briefing.”

Leaving him standing there on the sidewalk, his tall frame silhouetted by the streetlights behind him, I slide into the back of the cab and pull the door closed. My heart is still pounding from the confrontation as I let out a shaky breath. The stale air and cracked vinyl seats envelop me, the cab’s dingy interior a welcome change from the luxury I’m immersed in day and night.

“Where to?” the driver asks, glancing at me in the rearview mirror. He’s an older man with a neat gray beard and kind eyes. Just a regular working guy making his living, free from the complications of my world.

I envy him.

My first thought is to just give him the Park Avenue address of my elaborate undercover apartment. Keep up the facade, play the part of Natalie Moreau.

But I can’t face going back there right now. Not with its ever-present cameras and bugs monitoring my every move and word. Right now, what I desperately need is sanctuary. A place where I can shed all my disguises and pretenses and just be myself again, if only for a moment.

“Queens,” I say at last. “37th Avenue. I’ll direct you when we get closer.”

He nods, unfazed, and pulls out into traffic. As the bustling city speeds by outside the smudged window, I sink back into my thoughts.

I chose this deep cover assignment to expose the truth. Bring dangerous criminals to

justice. Uphold the law with unwavering conviction. That desire for justice still burns within me, as much a part of me as my own DNA.

But Alessa has opened my eyes to the shades of gray that exist beyond my black-and-white view of the world. She conducts morally questionable deeds to achieve noble ends. She challenges my deepest perceptions of right and wrong.

And every moment with her only further unravels the tight weave of certainties I once clung to. Every look, every touch, every shared secret pulls me deeper into the seductive quicksand that is Alessa de Luca.

And I...Isleptwith her.

With a silent groan, I drop my face in my hands.

What was Ithinking?

Well. I wasn't thinking. I was just...feeling. My heart surrenders all logic whenever I'm near her.

With Alessa, I've discovered parts of myself I never knew existed. Parts that both exhilarate and terrify me in their intensity. She's awakened feelings in me beyond anything I've ever known before.

I came here determined to expose the criminal empress of New York. Instead, I've exposed my own vulnerabilities. And this scares me more than any gun or knife ever could.

Because I know now one thing is certain—if I let emotion override reason and duty, there's no telling where it will lead me. And as long as Alessa remains in my orbit, the temptation to break orbit completely may prove too powerful to resist.

* * *

The cab ride to Queens is both too short and endless. When I finally direct the driver to pull up outside my nondescript apartment building, I pay him quickly and step out onto the cracked sidewalk.

The normalcy of Queens closes around me like a comforting blanket. Here, I can shed Natalie Moreau's opulent lifestyle as easily as I'll shed this dress. Wash away the makeup, take off the jewelry.

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Beneath it all, I'm still just Natalie Miller. Not some wealthy socialite. Just me.

After the emotional rollercoaster of the past few hours, exhaustion crashes over me like a breaking wave. My limbs are leaden as I drag myself up the steps and down the hallway to my apartment door. Between the confrontation with Sam, the ethically fraught revelations from Alessa, and—most confusing of all—the crazy, passionate sex we shared all afternoon, I'm utterly spent.

As soon as I'm inside, I kick off my stiletto pumps and peel off my dress right there in the living room. Too tired to care, I let the expensive garment puddle on the floor and stumble to my bedroom.

I fall face-first onto the tangled sheets in this state of undress. My mind and body are already shutting down into blissful oblivion. Vaguely I register the familiar smells of laundered sheets and old wood polish that mark this place as home.

Then I'm out. I sleep like the dead, free of restless dreams and worries about listening devices or watching eyes. No one can touch me here.

When pale morning light filters between the curtains I wake slowly, stretching like a cat in a sunbeam. Here in my real apartment, I have the luxury of lazily coming to awareness instead of snapping to mission-ready alertness like my undercover persona.

Lying there listening to the mundane sounds of traffic and neighbors outside, everything seems beautifully simple. The familiar scent of the nearby bakery fills the air, a comforting aroma. Removed from the intrigues and deceptions that permeate

Alessa's world, it's just me and my modest corner of Queens.

No pretense, no surveillance, no ethical quagmires.

Everything is comfortingly straightforward.

After a long, steamy shower under crappy water pressure, I towel off and put on yoga pants and a soft FBI Trainee sweatshirt. A gift from Sam Wright during our early academy days, though it holds less sentimental value for me now, as I think about his attitude yesterday.

In the tiny kitchen, I grab a cup of deliciously awful black coffee from my ancient coffeemaker. Yet another thing I miss when surrounded by the luxuries Natalie Moreau takes for granted. Cradling it for warmth, I sit down at my small desk in the corner of the living room and open my laptop. I heave a sigh, steeling myself.

Time to write up yesterday's events in my official report to the agency.

I take a bracing sip of coffee and begin typing up the highlights of my time with Alessa. I'm deliberate and selective in my choice of words, including just enough detail to satisfy Bell, Wright, and the others, without revealing anything too damaging.

I say that Alessa gave me an extensive orientation tour of the Ruby, showing me around the public areas and inner offices. I describe the lavish interior design and atmosphere at the club itself in the same terms as my previous reports stated.

After the tour, I explain, Alessa invited me back to her private townhouse for a more intimate 'get to know you' to further gain my trust. I portray it as a calculated move on Alessa's part to assess me away from the club, while allowing me rare access to her personal space.

But I make no mention whatsoever of the rescued woman in Alessa's safe room. Nor do I describe her work with her father to rescue more of them.

I certainly don't include how it felt to kiss her, or the way my pulse raced during orgasm.

Oh, God. That's something I'll have to face next time I see her. I just can't think about it now without my brain exploding.

As far as the agency is concerned, I spent the time gaining information on Alessa de Luca's business contacts and role within the Mafia hierarchy. Information she cleverly deflected, forcing me to gain more of her trust before revealing anything too sensitive.

And just like my previous updates, I report no concrete evidence of criminal activity tied directly to the Ruby itself. Only hints and implications pointing to Alessa's connections.

At some point, obviously, I'm going to have to confess to Bell. Tell him that I slept with the target. Take responsibility for my actions.

Just...not yet.

Not until Sienna is safely away from New York and the Mancini Family. Once that's done, I swear I'll own up to Bell.

I swear.

I take a deep breath and hit Send. Just like that, my report and files are transmitted securely into the hands of those whose trust I seem to be betraying more with each passing day undercover.

Yet as I settle into a hard plastic seat of the subway on the ride back to Manhattan, I feel only a grim sense of inevitability.

I am bound to return to Alessa. The job demands it.

There's something in me that demands it, too.

Last night changed everything between us. For better or worse, I crossed a line from which there is no return.

And I'm still not even sure how I feel about that.

CHAPTER18

ALESSA

A part of me will always long for the simplicity of youth when my biggest concerns were skinned knees or tracking mud through the house. But this morning I have a much bigger problem staring me right in the face—some man in jeans and a bomber jacket, buzz-cut hair, standing across the road from my house and glaring straight at it.

I know a threat when I see one, and I assume this one has been sent merely to unnerve for now. It's a good thing I'm going to see Daddy today.

After lunch, I set out for Long Island in my Maserati—ruby red, naturally—then take the exit for North Shore and drive another ten minutes before I reach the secluded residential area my family has lived in for generations. Finally the wrought iron gates of the estate appear, adorned with curling vines and our family crest. I punch in the code and drive through as the gates swing open automatically.

My tires crunch along the driveway as I approach the house. Three stories of brick and marble rise up before me, the mansion's impressive facade hinting at generations of accumulated wealth and power. The immaculate gardens lining the curved driveway burst with sculpted hedges and colorful flower beds, evidence of the small army of gardeners my mother employs to ensure not a single leaf is out of place.

I slide the sports car into park beside my father's Audi, and check my makeup in the car mirror before I get out. Flawless. Though my mother will certainly still find fault.

I smooth my hands over my form-fitting black dress after I step out of the car and prepare myself for the onslaught of my mother's critiques. Despite my success with the Ruby Realm, she has never quite approved of my "lifestyle choices," as she delicately puts it—and she doesn't mean the gay thing. In her eyes, nothing measures up to the prestige of marrying and then breeding. She was an actress once—but she quit as soon as she and Daddy married, excited to pop out a new generation of de Lucas.

Unfortunately for me, she's still got that dramatic streak.

Steeling myself, I stride up to the grand double doors and pull one open without knocking. Immediately, the delicate notes of a Vivaldi concerto drift from the music room down the hall, signaling that Mother is home. I follow the soaring strains through the palatial foyer toward the music room situated at the back of the house, my heels sinking into the lush oriental rugs with each step.

As a child, the sound of classical music floating through the halls meant that mother was in a good mood—happy enough to lose herself playing records from her extensive collection. The vinyl's crackles and pops would underscore the swell of violins and cellos while I sprawled on the Turkish rug at her feet, playing with antique dolls that once belonged to my grandmother.

I used to make those dolls kiss each other passionately, so my mother got the picture pretty early, and to her credit, she's never said a word against my sexual orientation. She still wants me married to some staid stockbroker and pregnant via an acceptable (to her) donor, though.

My mother sits straight-backed on a gilded sofa, flipping through an interior design magazine, though I know it's just for show. In her mid-sixties she still has the posture of a prima ballerina and the shrewd nature of a queen holding court. Her salt-and-pepper hair is elegantly coiffed, and she wears understated but no doubt obscenely

expensive jewelry. She glances up as I enter, rose-pink lips moving into the smile of a welcoming hostess.

“Alessa, darling! Don’t you look lovely.” But her gaze sweeps over me, no doubt searching for something to pick at. “Come, sit. Tell me what you’ve been up to.”

I settle onto the sofa across from her, crossing one leg over the other. “The Ruby Realm’s charity gala went wonderfully. We raised nearly two million for the women’s shelter.”

She waves a hand dismissively. “Yes, yes, your little pet projects. But what about you, dear? Any new romances on the horizon?” Right to her favorite topic, then. “You’re not getting any younger, you know. Your father and I would love more grandchildren to spoil.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “You have eight already from the boys, Ma. I think you and Daddy are all set.”

Her lips pinch together in that way she has when she’s about to deliver a lecture. “You know it’s not the same, Alessa. You need to find a good woman and start a family. Look at Juno—married, successful, andsohappy these days.” She sighs wistfully, and I know what’s coming. “Why can’t you be more like Juno?”

“Cut it out, Ma,” I groan. Inside though, her comparison digs under my skin like it always does. Perfect Juno with her picture-perfect life. Not that I would ever admit it to my mother.

And anyway, Juno’s not so perfect as my mother likes to pretend. Not with all that death and danger around her.

“I just think you’ll be much happier once you settle down,” she goes on.

“I’m never going to settle down, Ma, because I don’t plan to settle. I’d have to meet someone truly extraordinary to give up everything I’ve built and focus on them instead of work.”

An image of Natalie flashes through my mind, but I shake the thought away before it can fully form.

Heavy footsteps in the hallway signal the arrival of my father. Saved by Daddy’s impeccable timing. He fills the doorway with his imposing frame. “There are my girls,” he rumbles affectionately in that gravelly voice of his. “Plotting to take over the world again?”

Ma tuts at him even as her stern expression softens. “Oh Johnny, always teasing. Anyway, Alessa, I know you’re Daddy’s little girl, no matter how old you get.” She makes a shooing motion with her hands. “Go, enjoy your time together. I’ve made my critiques; I’m happy.”

Self-awareness? I have to grin. “Love you, Ma,” I say, leaning over to kiss her perfectly-powdered cheek before following my father out of the room.

We head through the sprawling house and out the back door to a large garden shed near the edge of the grounds. But the true destination lies beneath our feet. Inside the shed, my father presses a notch in the worn wooden wall. With a groan, a floor panel slides over to reveal a staircase leading down beneath the earth. He descends first, and I trail after him, a waft of cold, stale air rising up to greet me.

At the bottom lies a surveillance-proof bunker outfitted with encrypted technology and secure communications. It also boasts a fully stocked bar that my father makes a beeline for. He pours two fingers of whiskey neat into crystal tumblers, handing one to me.

Finally settled in leather armchairs, my father's expression turns serious. "I spoke with Vince Ricci," he begins. "He understood the error of his ways after our conversation. You won't be bothered by him again."

I exhale in relief. "Thank you, Daddy."

He nods, taking a sip of whiskey. "I also talked to Don Mancini. Made it clear that any threats against my daughter will be seen as a direct provocation against me. Not that he didn't know it already." His eyes harden like chips of flint. "But to avoid rocking the boat too much, I'd suggest upping what you pay to the old man each month. Throw him a bone to chew on."

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Frustration wells up in me. “That money is meant to help the women and girls who are his victims, not line his pockets.”

My father’s expression softens. “I know, sweetheart. But we have to play the long game here. Keep his attention far away from that club of yours.”

I know he’s right, even if I hate it. “Fine. I’ll wire over extra this month.” I take a bracing gulp of whiskey. “There was a man outside my townhouse this morning. Casually-dressed. Angry. Glaring. I haven’t seen him before, though.”

Daddy frowns. “Get a photo if you see him again, and I’ll take care of it.”

I nod. “Will do. In the meantime, we need to get Sienna out.”

“Miami or LA are both ready for her,” he confirms. “Though Los Angeles may be easier if she wants to leave the country. The ports are less stringent in monitoring exports.”

I nod slowly, considering. “I’ll ask what she prefers.”

“How is she holding up? Can’t be easy, living in that bunker room indefinitely.”

“As well as can be expected. She’s a tough kid.” I swirl the amber liquid in my glass, gathering my courage. “There’s one more thing you should know. That woman I asked you to look into—Natalie Moreau.” I hesitate, the name tasting sweet on my lips. “She, uh...discovered our operation with Sienna.”

My father's expression shutters. He takes a measured sip of whiskey. "And what does Ms. Moreau intend to do with that information?"

"Nothing," I say firmly. An image of Natalie's hesitant but passionate kiss flashes through my mind. "No, really, Daddy. She'll keep our secret. I trust her."

"Completely?"

"One hundred percent." Saying the words out loud confirms something within me, a certainty I didn't know I felt.

My father scrutinizes me for a long moment before nodding slowly. "Then I'll trust your judgment." He chuckles then, a mischievous glint entering his eye. "Especially if she's a looker who's put that color into your cheeks."

I flush on cue, hiding it behind another swallow of whiskey. Still, I can't deny the spark of possibility I feel whenever I think of Natalie. For the first time in a long while, I feel a flame of hope kindling inside me.

"We'll see," I reply evasively, but my father just laughs knowingly. He's always been able to read me like a book. An annoying trait when I was teenager, but now an oddly comforting one.

He raises his glass. "To Sienna, and her new life."

"Her new life," I echo.

We talk a little more, and then we go into the house to have dinner with Ma, who manages to find a few more things to criticize about me before it's time to leave, but then hugs me as warmly as ever as she says goodnight.

“You’re welcome to stay,” Daddy tells me as he walks me out to my car, “unless you have an early morning tomorrow?”

I wave off his offer as I stand gracefully. “Thanks, Daddy, but I should be getting back. I want to look in at the Ruby tonight.”

He nods, moving forward to fold me in a brief but fierce embrace. His familiar scent comforts me, taking me back to piggyback rides around the garden and quiet conversations on the back porch swing.

“Drive safe, sweetheart,” he murmurs gruffly. “And bring this girl of yours around for dinner sometime. I’d love to meet the woman who finally caught your eye.”

Joy and uncertainty swoop through me in equal measure at the casual invitation. But before I can formulate a response, he pulls back with a playful wink and heads back into the house. I watch him go, mind turning over possibilities.

I’ve never introduced anyone to my parents before.

What would it be like, bringing Natalie here? Introducing her to my parents? The thought terrifies me as much as it sets my heart racing.

When I get back home, the man from this morning is nowhere in sight. Maybe he was just late in hearing orders to back off from Ricci.

Even so, I need to watch myself. Be more careful. If Vince Ricci or anyone else close to the Boss finds out about my secret work, Daddy and I would pay the ultimate price.

CHAPTER19

NATALIE

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The cacophony of the city fades away as I step through the entrance of the Ruby Realm. Soft jazz floats through the dimly-lit foyer, and I smile my hello at Liana, who admits me at once to the lounge. In there, I look over the patrons lounging in leather booths or congregating at the sleek black bar, but I don't see Alessa.

It really is something, the Ruby. I feel at ease immediately, like I really belong here—when I definitely don't.

For the past two days, I've been huddled in the sterile FBI briefing room, poring over blueprints of this very club, trying to find a place where an illegal casino might be hidden. The blueprints didn't even include the safe room that Alessa's keeping Sienna in, so at least I didn't have to worry about that.

Sam Wright barely said a word of greeting to me, though he certainly seemed to have gone over my report, questioning exactly what I talked about with Alessa in her townhouse, again and again, until even Bell told him to move on.

I spot an empty table along the back wall of the restaurant and make my way over. The maître d' rushes to pull out my chair and provides a leather-bound menu. If I'm going to maintain my cover here, I need to blend in, which means dining alone.

I've just decided on the seared scallops when a shift in the energy of the room draws my eyes upwards. Conversations quiet to a hush as all heads turn towards the entrance, where Alessa de Luca stands in a shimmering, creamy white gown that clings to every curve. Her raven hair cascades over her shoulders, lips painted crimson. Moving with the confidence of a queen holding court, she seems to revel in the attention, yet her focus stays trained on me.

My pulse quickens as she strides over, hips swaying, never breaking eye contact. She slides into the chair opposite me, full lips curling into a knowing smile.

“What’s a beauty like you doing dining alone?” she asks, propping her chin on her hand.

I mirror her pose, leaning forward. “I could ask you the same question.”

Her grin widens at my retort. She tilts her head, black waves falling to partially obscure one feline eye. “I thought I might have scared you off.”

I swallow. “No. No, definitely not.”

“Then perhaps I can tempt you to join me somewhere more...private?”

I arch an eyebrow. “More private?”

She traces one manicured nail along the tablecloth between us. “Let’s just say I’d like a chance to initiate you into more of the Ruby’s secrets, since your orientation was so rudely interrupted.”

“Mm. We never did get around to that tour,” I agree. The memories of exactly what we did instead rise up, threatening to overwhelm me with desire again. “But I don’t want to monopolize your time tonight,” I add quickly.

“Oh, darling. I fully intend to monopolize yours.” Alessa’s smile holds a tantalizing promise, an invitation into her clandestine world.

I didn’t breathe a word of our intimacies to the team.

I should have.

I should have immediately reported it as an issue.

It's expressly forbidden for undercover operatives to form a sexual relationship with a target, unless a life is in danger. And I don't think I could convincingly argue that my life was in danger.

My heart, maybe...

"Natalie?" Alessa says, tilting her head to one side.

God, I've just been sitting here staring, when this is exactly what I've been waiting for: a look at the more exclusive areas of the Ruby.

But there's something else playing on my mind as well. I look around, make sure we're not in danger of being overheard. "The—the young woman," I say softly. "Is she—"

"Yes." She says it just as softly. "The package was mailed off this very day, in fact, and all is well. Arrived with no problems at all."

I let out an exhalation that's half relief and half joy. "I'm so glad."

She gives a nod. "Me, too. But we shouldn't talk out here in the open." She rises, beckoning me to follow her back to the lounge area, then down a dim hallway lined with elegant mahogany doors.

"We have private rooms for our most exclusive clientele," Alessa explains as we walk. "They provide privacy for sensitive meetings." She pauses outside a door labeled *Scarlet* in gilded script. "Or whatever activities the members wish to pursue."

The innuendo brings heat to my cheeks even as curiosity blooms. What secrets and

assignments have these rooms witnessed?

Alessa unlocks the room, allowing me to step inside first. The glow of candlelight illuminates a lavish lounge area, where a table has been set with an array of delectable foods and gleaming crystal glasses filled with wine the color of garnets.

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I'm about to compliment the setting when something catches my eye. Adjacent to the lounge is an expansive bedroom, dominated by a huge circular bed draped in ruby silk sheets.

“Do some of your guests like to stay overnight?” I ask, unable to keep the edge from my voice.

Alessa steps up beside me, slipping her arm around my waist. “Sometimes our clients need to unwind after a stressful day.” Her voice is low and suggestive. “This room provides them with every comfort they require.”

I turn to face her. “Are you—are you telling me the Ruby Realm doubles as abrothel?” I can't hide my disappointment. After all Alessa's talk of saving and then empowering women, is the Ruby just another gilded cage?

She steps back, expression serious. “Absolutely not. The women who work here have complete autonomy over what services they do or don't provide. Their choices are their own, as is their right to accept payment for their time. I take no cut from them and I don't ask questions. There's a difference between coercion and consent, Natalie—a distinction the Mancini brothels fail to make.”

I consider her words, remembering the whispered stories of what goes on in the Mancini brothels. Alessa seems sincere that things here are different, though the ethical lines are blurred.

Just like my ethical lines have been blurred.

I barely recognize myself these days.

“Of course, my company is always free of charge.” She moves closer, slipping one hand around my neck. Her lips brush my ear as she whispers, “For you, that is.”

My breath hitches at her words. “Company?” I manage to say. “Are you talking about conversation, or...”

“Conversation—and more.” The promise in her smoky voice sends a shiver down my spine. She releases me and steps back. “For example, shall we dine?” She gestures to a spread of food and wine awaiting us.

The atmosphere has shifted back to casual intimacy, but I feel almost dizzy as I take my seat, thoughts spinning as I consider the complex woman before me.

At least for tonight, I’ll play whatever part I need to. Here, now, I am simply Natalie.

Ethics can wait.

Alessa lifts her wine glass in a toast. “To the beauty of unexpected connections,” she says softly. I touch my glass to hers, the crystal ringing out in perfect harmony. No matter where this entanglement leads, I know I will remember this moment, suspended in golden candlelight, when nothing existed beyond the boundaries of this room.

For now, there is only her, only me, and the secrets we have yet to unravel.

Shadows dance across Alessa’s face as she leans in, her lips a breath from mine. “You’re exquisite tonight,” she murmurs, her eyes dark with desire.

My heart pounds. I want her, God how I want her, but...

I place my hands on her shoulders and push her back gently. “I don’t want to be just another conquest. I want more than a night of pleasure, forgotten by morning.”

Alessa studies me, her gaze intense. She runs her tongue over her red lips slowly, deliberately. My sex clenches in response. “You want hearts and flowers? To be wooed?” She sniffs. “I don’t do wooing, sweetheart.”

“You do for me.” I gamble on her attraction, hoping I’ve read the signs right. If not, my mission goes up in flames. But the risk thrills me.

Alessa’s eyes darken, but not with anger. “You’re trouble, Natalie Moreau. But...for you, I’ll try romance.” She pauses, thinking, then asks, “How exactly does one do that?”

“Well, for one thing, I’m certainly not going to sleep with you here. I don’t want to be just another woman you bed for the night in one of your private rooms. They’re not so private. Anyone can book one. Right?”

Alessa’s eyes widen, her lips parting in surprise. “You think that’s all this is to me? From the moment I saw you, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you.”

“Why?” I can’t stop myself asking it, though her words ignite a flame deep inside me. “What is it about me?”

“I find you fascinating,” she says simply, her eyes never leaving mine. “But I think you’re asking the wrong questions. Maybe you should be asking yourself why you’re so continually drawn back here to the Ruby...and to me.”

She’s right: I am drawn to her, and not just because of my duty as a federal agent.

There’s something about Alessa de Luca that makes me question everything I thought

I knew about justice, morality, and the line between right and wrong. And as much as it terrifies me, I can't help but want to explore that darkness.

And I want to embrace the woman who dwells within it.

“But why bring me here?” I demand. “To your—your sex room?”

CHAPTER22

ALESSA

Sunlight streams in through the half-drawn curtains of my bedroom, bathing everything in a warm glow. For one blissful moment, I forget all my troubles and melt into the soft pillows and silken sheets wrapped around me. I stretch slowly, savoring the tranquility of this perfect morning.

Then it hits me like a splash of ice water—the look in Natalie’s eyes when she saw the hidden casino, the silence on my phone. No text from her to say she got home alright.

No word at all.

I grab my phone from the nightstand, irrationally hoping for a message that makes it all make sense. But there’s still nothing.

The second I opened myself up, she pulled away.

But why am I surprised? This is the story of my goddamn life.

Frustration wells up in me, and I consider hurling my phone across the room just to hear something shatter. But I take a deep breath instead. Freaking out won’t solve anything.

I throw off the covers and slide out of bed. As I shrug on a silk robe, my mind starts

running scenarios. What spooked her so bad last night? She's been around far shadier characters than me without blinking—like Ricci and his thugs. And it's not like she didn't know what I'm into—she's gotten closer than anyone.

So what changed? What made her go from writhing around underneath me passionately one minute to running like a bat out of hell the next?

I step out onto the balcony overlooking a small private park for residents only, hoping the fresh air will clear my head. But an uneasiness still lingers, creeping up my spine. I glance down the street and see a man leaning casually against a lamppost.

It's him. That same man again. He looks away quickly when he sees my face turned toward him. I dash inside for my phone, but by the time I get back, he's gone.

My gut twists. I still don't know who he is, but if he's been staking out my building, it's not good.

Not good at all.

Something clicks in my head. Natalie, her cool demeanor when Vince Ricci burst through my office door.

Natalie trailing me to the safe room where Sienna was hiding out.

Natalie asking about Juno's involvement...

I hurry back inside and get dressed, choosing an outfit that will let me blend into a crowd—dark jeans, leather jacket, ball cap pulled low. The kind of thing I wore back when I was still running petty errands for the family.

And then I call my father.

“Principessa,” he greets me as always.

“Hi, Daddy. How are you?”

“I’m alright. You?”

“Well, you remember that painting we talked about a while ago? The one you helped me track down? I was wondering if you could take another look at the provenance.”

There’s a brief pause on the other end of the line, and I know he’s deciphering my coded message. Asking for a second background check on Natalie isn’t something I’d normally do, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

“Alessa,” Daddy replies, his tone cautious, “I’d love to help, but there’s been a bit of a...situation at the gallery. A few of our paintings have lost the paperwork attached, and I’m having a hell of a time finding the information again.”

My heart skips a beat, my breath catching in my throat. Compromised information networks are never a good sign, especially in our line of work. Panic bubbles beneath the surface as I try to wrap my head around the implications. “Is there...anything I can do to help?”

“Right now, just leave it with me. I’ll let you know when I can look into that provenance for you again.”

“Understood,” I murmur, my grip tightening around the phone. The call ends, leaving me with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Dammit,” I mutter under my breath, my mind racing through the possibilities. If our networks have been compromised, then someone is actively working against us.

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And if Natalie is behind it...

If Natalie is behind it, then whoever Natalie is, she's got resources. Enough to disrupt my father's web of connections that took him decades to build. If she's working with Ricci, I need to know.

And I need to know now.

Most of my contacts are tied to the Family in some way. No one I can trust right now. Except...

Grabbing my keys and purse, I take the private elevator straight to the parking garage. As soon as I slide into the leather seat of my Maserati, I take a deep breath, trying to slow my hammering heart, and reach for the glove box.

* * *

The city flies by as I head downtown, trying not to drive too fast. I can't be pulled over; I don't have time to waste.

I take a sharp turn, pulling into the parking lot of Sal's Auto Shop. And there's Caitlin, leaning into an old Cutlass, tools in hand.

She glances up as I approach, surprise flickering over her freckled face. "Alessa. This is new. What brings you to my grease pit?"

I force an easy smile. "It's the craziest thing. My car started making this weird

clunking noise on my way over here. Think you could take a look? Oh—the registration and all of that boring stuff is in the glove compartment. If you need them.” I keep her eye as I put a little more weight into my tone.

She raises one eyebrow ever so slightly before leaning in and popping the glove box to grab the paperwork inside. As she unfolds the registration forms, her eyes skim the note I’ve tucked among them.

I hold my breath, watching her expression.

But she replaces the registration papers without a word, tucking my keys into her overalls.

“I’ll give it a good look-over and let you know if I come across anything unusual.” She meets my gaze. “Shouldn’t take more than a few hours.”

“I’d appreciate that. Thanks, Caitlin.”

Message received. She’ll speak to Juno, who will find out what she can.

Caitlin calls me a cab to take me home for now. I’m just climbing into the taxi when I feel it—that prickle on the back of my neck when I’m being watched. I glance across the street at a white sedan, engine idling. The driver slumps down in his seat, but I caught a good glimpse.

It’s him. The man from outside my building, still following me.

Fine. Let him watch me run errands all damn morning.

I’ll still find out who Natalie Moreau is and why she lied to me.

And God help her when I do.

CHAPTER 23

NATALIE

Inside a cold warehouse where the FBI stores its cars, surveillance tech, and even some weapons, the atmosphere is buzzing. I stand still in the bathroom, my breath measured, as Evelyn Chang meticulously fits me with a wire. The weight of the mission tonight presses on me, and the cold touch of the wire against my skin makes me flinch. But Chang's fingers are nimble as she adjusts the nearly-invisible recording device under my blouse, her brow furrowed in concentration.

Sam Wright paces in the adjacent room, and I can hear them reviewing details of the operation with Bell and the rest of the team. I saw maps, blueprints, and grainy surveillance photos spread across the large table last time I was out there. The low hum of tense voices drifts towards me, punctuated by the occasional crackle of a headset.

"All set," Chang says, stepping back to examine her work. Her voice snaps me from my thoughts. I glance down, seeing no trace of the wire beneath the silky fabric.

Taking a deep breath, I smooth my skirt and walk steadily to join the team. Time for final preparations before the mission begins. As I walk out, each member is absorbed in their respective tasks. Wright avoids my gaze, his body language stiff and distant. The rest of the team buzzes with a mix of excitement and anxiety, their conversations a blend of technical jargon and whispered strategies.

Photos of the Ruby Realm fill the screens on display—the facade, the lavish interiors, even grainy snapshots of the private rooms, which we've dug up from previous undercover operations—operations that didn't go as well as ours have, which is

saying something.

Bell stands at the head of the table, focused as always. He turns to me, his commanding presence immediately hushing the room.

“It all comes down to tonight,” he begins, and God, I don’t need more pressure. “This is our chance to finally get evidence of de Luca’s illegal activities. Miller—you need to capture clear audio and video footage from inside the casino. No mistakes. No excuses.”

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And on and on he goes.

Success tonight means vindication for the team's long hours, sleepless nights, and constant tension.

It means justifying the lies, deceptions, and moral compromises now knotted into my being.

Bell repeats the rendezvous instructions, his voice clipped and precise. I nod along, every detail already etched into my mind, trying not to give in to the dread and fear lurking at the edge of my mind.

I need to get through this. The team depends on me now. There's no room left for doubt or hesitation.

I turn to leave, avoiding Wright's resentful stare. He's not part of the surveillance team tonight, thank God—Bell wanted to be in the van himself, along with Chang, who'll be running comms, along with a driver from the wider unit.

As for me, my FBI-driven town car is waiting outside, ready to take me to my last meeting with Alessa de Luca. Last meeting, assuming all goes well.

As I head toward the side door, Bell calls out, "Good luck, Miller."

The team echoes him—even Wright—and their words follow me as the door clicks closed.

* * *

The Ruby Realm feels almost familiar now, the scents and sounds enveloping me as I walk into the lounge—the sweetness of exotic flowers, ice clinking in crystal glasses, the melodic laughter of women relaxing in the lounge.

I wonder if I'll miss these luxuries when this assignment ends. I know I'll miss Alessa, even as I mean to betray her again tonight. And that makes me unfit for the job—too enchanted by this world of glittering temptation, too seduced by a sparkling pair of sea-green eyes and soft skin.

Alessa emerges from a group of elegantly dressed women, effusive as always. The sight of her still thrills me, even knowing what I plan to do tonight. Her raven waves tumble over one shoulder, contrasting beautifully with her emerald dress, making her eyes stand out even more. Rubies adorn her neck and ears like drops of blood.

Does her smile seem sharper than usual, or is that just my conscience pricking at me?

“Natalie, darling!” she exclaims, air-kissing my cheeks. “I was so concerned when you left early last night, you looked so pale. Feeling better?”

I manufacture an apologetic smile. “So much better. I'm fully recovered thanks to some rest.”

“Wonderful,” she smiles, linking her arm through mine familiarly. “Now we can enjoy ourselves properly.”

Her charm never fails to catch me off guard. I find myself beaming back at her.

I wish I was someone else. Anyone else.

Anyone except Natalie Moreau, about to commit a terrible betrayal... “I’d love to see the casino again,” I say brightly. “I didn’t really get much of a look last night.”

But Alessa’s fingers trail down my arm. “I have private plans for you tonight,” she murmurs. “You simply must experience all the delights the Ruby offers.” Her half-lidded eyes meet mine. “I want to show you everything, Natalie. All you need to do is say...yes.”

“Right now?” I squeak.

She leans in close. “You already saw my bedroom. Doesn’t that show you how much you mean to me? I thought we could make use of the private rooms tonight, now that I’ve proven myself to you.”

Fuck.

A jolt of panic surges through me. She’s hinting at details I never shared with the team. I left out all mention of seeing her bedroom.

Maybe no one will notice.

Who am I kidding? Sam Wright will definitely catch that reference.

I force a coy smile, buying time to think. “Well, we’ll have to rectify that tonight.”

She smiles, satisfied. But behind my façade, my mind races. I curse myself for withholding details from the team. Emotional entanglements are forgiven. Even—even sex, as long as it’s revealed immediately and with full cooperation.

But concealing secrets is inexcusable. I’ve let things spiral out of my control.

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I take a deep breath and try to center myself, but I only succeed in getting a big lungful of Alessa's heady perfume.

I need to get into that casino tonight. If that means a visit to a private room first, I'll do that. But I can't bear the idea of broadcasting our intimate moments to the world.

Or the team, at least.

"I'll tell you what," I say, trying to sound casual, "why don't you give me a minute to freshen up first? Then I'll meet you in the private room."

"Of course, darling." Alessa squeezes my arm gently before releasing me. "The restroom is just down the hall, and I'll be waiting for you in the Scarlet room again. Don't keep me waiting too long."

I nod, unable to trust my voice, and head toward the bathroom. The moment the cubicle door closes behind me, I lean against it, struggling to slow down my panic.

If I go into that private room, there's every chance in the world that she'll discover that I'm wired.

I strip off my blouse, carefully peeling off the wire and the tape that secured it to me.

If Alessa inspects me and finds it, I'm finished. I can't even keep it in my clutch. But if I can come back here afterward...

There's a small trashcan in the powder room under each sink. I'll just have to pray

like hell they don't get emptied before I can get back here to retrieve the wire. That's my only chance to still complete the mission.

I wash my hands and lean down to throw the wire away, balled up in the paper towel I used to dry my hands.

And I stare at myself in the mirror, wondering again...

Who am I?

Who is it that Alessa is so attracted to?

Because this woman staring back at me is a stranger.

But none of that really matters right now. When I leave this room, Agent Miller stays behind. Tonight I need to be Natalie Moreau, wealthy socialite ensnared by the charms of Alessa de Luca.

For better or worse, I've made my choices.

I take a final steadying breath and reapply my lipstick—a splash of color, armor for the role I must play.

Showtime.

I push open the door and step out to find her.

* * *

I knock on the door of Scarlet and it opens at once.

“Come in,” Alessa says, grabbing me and yanking me in with a wicked smile.

The private room’s ambiance tonight is a blend of luxury and intimacy—low lighting warms the polished wood surfaces, and there is a huge floral arrangement in front of the mirror. Romantic, yet tasteful.

Alessa guides me to the chaise, handing me a glass of Syrah that she’s already poured. The tastes of oak and blackberry coat my tongue.

“I want to play a little game,” she tells me, her eyes glinting with mischief.

My thoughts flash hopefully to the casino. “What kind of game?” I ask.

“Oh, just a silly bit of fun between us girls.”

She removes her scarlet stilettos and curls up cat-like on the chaise, beckoning me over. When I sit, she slides behind me, gathering my hair and beginning to twist it into an elaborate braid. Her fingers work deftly, occasionally grazing my neck. I relax into her touch, allowing myself to simply savor her closeness.

“Truth or dare?” she asks playfully.

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I laugh lightly, actually surprised. “Truth.”

Her breath is warm on my skin. “Truth it is. But let’s make it a little more fun.” She winds a silk scarf around me and presses her mouth close to my ear. “I want to blindfold you. Will you let me? Just part of the game.”

“I’m always up for a challenge,” I say, trying to sound more confident than I feel. The warmth of her body winds even closer as she ties the blindfold around my eyes—not too tight, but I’m plunged into darkness.

Deprived of sight, my other senses heighten. The chaise dips slightly under Alessa’s movements. I hear the slide of fabric as she shifts. “Trust me,” she murmurs, taking my hand and pulling me up. She leads me into the bedroom, I think, but not to the bed. “Sit,” Alessa commands, guiding me onto a velvet chair. My heart hammers in my chest, and I can’t tell if it’s from fear or excitement.

Maybe both.

“Relax, Natalie,” she coos, her voice soft and soothing. “This is just a game, remember? A little fun. I’m not going to bite.” Her voice holds a smile. “Unless you want me to.”

Despite the playful tone, apprehension flickers within me. Nothing is ever simple where Alessa is concerned. But I try to stay calm.

Stay in character.

“Let’s begin, shall we?” Alessa’s voice is honeyed and dangerous. “The game is truth or dare, Natalie. And I’ll start with a simple question. Who are you?”

The words hit me like a jolt of electricity. My breath catches in my throat, and my palms grow clammy. “Wh-what do you mean?” I stammer, trying to buy time.

“Come on, Natalie,” she sighs. “You know exactly what I mean. Now, who are you? You promised to tell the truth, remember. And I can tell you, you won’t like my dares.”

I rip off the blindfold, and Alessa is only a few inches away from me, leaning in.

“Well?” she asks, more forcefully. “Are you going to answer truthfully?”

I search wildly for some way to play this, some way to salvage my cover and the operation.

But I know with chilling certainty that my deceit has already been exposed.

Alessa’s eyes are blazing. Angry. And a sudden movement catches my eye—to the side of the room, I finally see that we’re not alone.

Juno Bianchi is here as well.

Juno Bianchi—and her cold face promises murder.

But Alessa’s eyes remain fixed on me, awaiting my response.

“Natalie Moreau” hangs in shreds around me. I know I’m trapped. And the steel in Juno’s stare leaves no doubt that she will do whatever is necessary to get the truth out of me.

“I trusted you, Natalie,” Alessa says softly. “And you’ve made me look like a fool.”

Her words slice through me, sharper than any knife. But my tongue feels leaden, no explanation sufficient.

Juno watches us silently. Waiting to see how Alessa wants this handled.

Alessa’s fingers under my chin force me to meet her hardened stare.

“Give me one good reason not to get rid of you right now.” Her grip tightens painfully. “Tell me why I shouldn’t end your charade for good. Tell me the truth, right now—or face the consequences.”

CHAPTER 24

ALESSA

Natalie pulls her chin out of my hand, her shoulders stiff. “Alessa, this is madness. Let me out of this room. Now.” Her voice holds steady, betraying none of the nerves I know must be coiling inside her.

I laugh, the sound hollow. “Come now, that’s no way to play the game. Let’s try again. Truth—who are you really?”

“I’d speak up if I were you,” Juno warns, her words clipped and icy. “Alessa doesn’t take kindly to liars.”

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Natalie's chest rises and falls with hurried breaths, her fingernails digging into the chair's upholstered arms. Still, her lips remain sealed.

Frustration and fury rise within me. I lean in close, my mouth nearly brushing Natalie's ear. "You won't like what comes next if you don't tell me the truth. My daring side can be quite...creative."

A tense beat passes.

I glance at Juno, unsure. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe Natalie Moreau really is some innocent heiress, and not the Mancini plant I've taken her for.

Juno can see I'm wavering, though, and she takes over.

"You are going to die tonight if you don't speak," she tells Natalie, cool and unmoving. "Because, while I haven't uncovered your true identity just yet, one thing's for certain—you're not Natalie Moreau."

Natalie flinches. "I...no. I'm not."

The confirmation comes as no surprise, but it ignites a fresh wave of hurt and humiliation within me. Whoever this woman is, she infiltrated my world, gained my trust. She slid into my bed and I, fool that I am, believed her pretty words and heated looks.

"Then who are you?" I demand, resisting the urge to slap her silly—for now. "The Mancinis sent you to spy on me, didn't they?"

She shakes her head but refuses to speak again.

Juno steps a little closer. “Answer the question. Now.”

Natalie swallows hard, steeling herself. “I’m FBI.”

The admission drops between us like a stone. Juno and I exchange an alarmed glance.

The FBI’s involvement is a grave complication, beyond anything we anticipated. Far more dangerous than the petty maneuvers of Mafia Families seeking dominance.

Natalie goes on, more boldly now. “My name is Natalie Miller. Special Agent Natalie Miller. And my team is monitoring me, and I’m wired. If I don’t return safely, if my tracker goes offline, they’ll raid this place immediately.”

At this, Juno scoffs. “They’ll do no such thing. There are security cameras in the powder rooms here, Special Agent Natalie Miller. We saw you dropping your wire in the trash. It’s in lost and found as we speak.”

The color drains from Natalie’s face.

And I feel my fury building and building. “Bravo, Agent Miller. I have to admit, you played your part masterfully. Was it enjoyable, seducing me to get your answers? You certainly seemed...invested.” I force my tone to stay light, teasing. I won’t give her the satisfaction of seeing how deeply her betrayal cuts me.

She flushes deeply, her eyes dropping to the floor, but she says nothing.

“Tell me, Natalie,” I continue conversationally, beginning to slowly circle her again. “Do you make a habit of seducing your targets? Gaining their trust, sliding into their beds, all to dig for information?” I shake my head in mock disappointment. “And

here I thought what we had was special.”

Natalie swallows hard. “My assignment was to get close to you, yes, but I never meant to...” She trails off, emotion cracking through her composure. “Things between us went further than I’d planned.” Her voice drops to a whisper, and finally, she looks at me again. “I never intended to hurt you, Alessa.”

Her words spark a surge of anger in my chest. “Save your platitudes,” I snap. “Your intentions stopped mattering the moment you first kissed me.”

At my words, Natalie’s composure finally cracks. Her eyes dampen and she gives a sniff. “Alessa, truly, I never meant to hurt you. My assignment was to get close but then...things got complicated.”

Complicated.

As if her lies are just a silly misunderstanding between us.

As if this betrayal hasn’t shattered the very foundations of my world.

“Please,” she whispers. “Don’t kill me.”

“Don’t kill you? Why, I would never.” I lean in close, my words a furious hiss in her ear. “What do you take me for, Agent Miller? I’m an entrepreneur. A philanthropist. Not some common thug.”

I straighten, smoothing my dress, and look to Juno. Her gaze is cool and calculating. We talked about how to play this. Juno offered to bring a gun, a knife, to set up an interrogation in a seedy warehouse down near the river, but I told her not to.

I didn’t want any excuses for the Mancini Family to move against me. And now I’m

doubly thankful. We've given the FBI no probable cause for a raid.

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Still, despite my bravado, nerves twist my insides. Juno won't easily forget this security breach, or my naive trust in NatalieMiller. I can only imagine the scathing lecture to come.

But that's a problem for later. Right now, I need to decide how to handle the twisted viper sitting before me.

Natalie's spine is ramrod straight, her hands curled into white-knuckled fists in her lap.

Waiting for my judgment. Perhaps even praying for mercy despite knowing she deserves none.

But when I look at her, I recall the fire in those brown eyes the first time she kissed me. The soft sounds she made beneath my touch, the way she looked at me, caressed me as though I were something precious.

Lies, all lies.

Yet even now, some traitorous part of me wants to believe them. Wants to trust in the illusion we crafted together.

With effort, I shove those foolish wishes aside. Natalie Moreau never existed. A stranger sits before me now.

"Despite what you may think, Agent Miller, I'm no murderer." My voice holds steady. "Merely a businesswoman, trying to operate in a town full of people who

prefer to keep power for themselves.” I fix Natalie with an icy look. “But I can assure you, your membership here has been permanently revoked. Get on your feet.”

She doesn’t move, so I haul her none-too-gently upright. Juno follows us as I march Natalie out to the reception area, my hand clamped so hard on her arm that it will surely leave bruises, rage simmering in my blood.

In the foyer Liana looks up, alarmed, but schools her features when I give a subtle shake of my head.

“Liana, dear, I believe an item was found in the bathroom earlier? It was something our guest here misplaced.”

Liana’s eyes dart to Natalie, then back to me. “Of course, Ms. de Luca. I have it here.” She retrieves the wire from beneath the desk. I take it from her and press it into Natalie’s hands.

“There you go. No excuses left. I don’t ever want to see you here again. Do you understand me?” My voice drops to a dangerous whisper.

Natalie gives a single jerky nod, face ashen.

I turn and nod to Jeremiah. “Please escort Ms. Miller out. She is no longer welcome in the Ruby Realm.”

Jeremiah’s massive frame dwarfs Natalie’s as he takes her arm and leads her firmly toward the exit. Natalie glances back once, her eyes shimmering with emotion.

In them, I see echoes of the woman I thought I knew.

A woman who only ever existed in my imagination, conjured by my foolish longing

for something...true.

The heavy door swings shut, sealing Natalie Moreau away forever. The woman who remains in her body is a stranger to me. One I never wish to lay eyes on again.

I blow out a long breath and turn to find Juno regarding me, one eyebrow arched.

Waiting.

“Well?” I challenge, lifting my chin. “Let’s hear it. The admonishments I’m sure you’re dying to unleash.”

Juno considers me a moment, then shakes her head. “Let’s go to your office.”

I nod curtly and lead the way through the dim back hallways. Once enclosed in my office, I turn to face Juno and brace myself for the upcoming lecture. Juno’s never been one to mince words, even with family.

But instead of launching into accusations, Juno collapses onto the leather couch with a tired sigh.

“Pour us both a drink, won’t you? I believe we’ve earned it.”

I blink, startled, but comply. The clink of crystal seems deafening in the heavy silence hanging between us.

When I pass Juno her glass, she raises it in a sardonic salute. “To the FBI. Meddlesome bastards.”

I snort. “I’ll drink to that.” The liquor burns my throat but chases away some of the bone-deep chill left in Natalie’s wake.

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We sit without speaking for several moments. Finally Juno breaks the silence.

“I suppose you’re waiting for me to lay into you. Scold you for allowing an outsider past your defenses.” She shakes her head, almost sadly. “But you’re doing that well enough on your own.”

I look into my glass, watching the caramel liquid swirl. She’s right. I left myself wide open for the attack. The thought makes shame creep hotly up my neck.

“Alessa,” Juno says, her voice softer than I’ve ever heard it, “I’m sorry. Truly.”

I take that in, nod my thanks.

“But what’s done is done.” Juno’s voice hardens into its usual commanding tone. “Now we control the damage. First priority is determining how much she knew, and what she could have told to the Feds.”

I nod, latching onto the tactical talk like a lifeline. “Agreed.”

“And you know what else must be done,” Juno says.

“Oh, yes,” I sigh. “I know.”

CHAPTER25

NATALIE

The heavy door of the Ruby Realm slams closed behind me with finality. I let out a shaky breath as I take a few steps, but then my knees threaten to buckle, and I have to steady myself against the cold brick wall as I try to process everything that just happened.

My mind is reeling.

I got made. By Juno Bianchi, no less.

My cover is blown.

Alessa knows I'm FBI.

Our precarious relationship, built on a foundation of lies and desire, has come crumbling down around me—and I can't even feel surprised about it.

I take a few deep breaths, pushing down the sick feeling in my gut. I can't lose it now. I have to report to my team.

Correction: I have to go get yelled at by Stephen Bell.

I make my way to the white van parked a block away, my heels dragging on the pavement. What will I say? How will I explain this catastrophic failure?

As I slide open the van door, Evelyn Chang offers me a sympathetic glance, her eyes speaking the words her lips do not.

But Bell's face is hard, his jaw clenched so tight I fear it might snap.

“What the hell happened in there?” His voice lashes out like the crack of a whip.
“Why did you remove your wire? Do you have any idea what you've—”

“I got made.” I drop it plain and simple.

And it only makes things worse.

“Youwhat?”

“After I took off the wire, Alessa...she ambushed me. She had Juno Bianchi in there with her, in the private room. Th-they threatened me. Juno said she would kill me, unless I told them who I really was.”

Bell stares at me. “None of that explains why you removed the wire in the first place.”

I open my mouth...but nothing comes out.

He shakes his head. “Thanks to you, we’ve lost our one solid chance to gather evidence on Alessa de Luca. Now we have to start back at square one while she covers her tracks.

“But sir—”

“Enough!” Bell roars, silencing me with a look that could curdle blood. He turns away to grab the radio. “Khalil,” he barks into the receiver, his frustration evident in every syllable. “We need to move on the Ruby Realm tonight. Miller compromised our position.”

There’s a pause before Rish Khalil’s voice crackles through the static, calm but firm. “Bell, we need a warrant first. We can’t just barge in there without cause.”

“Juno Bianchi’s in there,” I say. “She—she threatened me.”

Khalil says, “So? The judge won’t accept hurt feelings as a reason, Miller. We need to make this stick. If this gets thrown out on a technicality—”

“Damn it, Khalil!” Bell growls, slamming his fist on the table. “De Luca’s going to cover her tracks now. We’ve lost our chance!”

I’m only a little bit thankful that his ire is directed at Khalil now, instead of me. I know soon enough it’ll be blasting me again, anyway.

“I understand your frustration, but we have to follow the law,” Khalil insists. “And I’m telling you, it’s not going to happen, not tonight. We’ll get there, but we need to do it the right way.”

I can see the cords in Bell’s neck tighten as he grits his teeth, his fury barely contained. He knows Khalil is right, but it’s clear that he feels the sting of this missed

opportunity.

By tomorrow—probably by later tonight—the Ruby Realm will be swept clean of anything incriminating. No evidence of illegal gambling or money laundering or any of the other suspected crimes. Alessa will see to it.

“Fine,” he finally spits out, his voice tense and strained. “We’ll do this by the book.”

He tosses the radio onto the table with a loud clatter, the sound echoing through the van like a gunshot. Then he turns to me, his eyes blazing with a fire I’ve never seen before. “Well that’s just perfect, isn’t it?” His scowl deepens. “Miller, you just torpedoed the entire op. I hope you’re happy with yourself. You better pray we find something else to nail de Luca with. Because if we don’t, your career is over.” He leans over and bangs hard on the panel behind the driver. “Go!” he shouts.

The engine rumbles to life and we pull away from the curb, enveloped in tense silence. In the side mirror, I watch the block fade into the distance. The twenty minute drive back to the FBI warehouse drags on for an eternity. No one speaks a word, not even Bell, who continues to fume across from me. At one point, Evelyn Chang, sitting beside me, offers a small, sympathetic smile before turning her attention back to the dark streets outside the van.

When we finally reach the warehouse, I know what I have to do. It feels like there’s a stone lodged in my throat, but I need to get this off my chest. After we exit the van, I approach Bell cautiously. “Sir, can I talk to you for a minute? In private?”

He gives me a skeptical look but nods, leading me to a secluded corner of the warehouse. “What is it, Miller?” he asks, his voice tight with restrained fury.

At least we’re out of earshot from the others. I know what I need to say, though the words stick in my throat. But it’s now or never. I can’t live with this secret eating

away at me.

“There’s something I need to confess.” I take a steadying breath. “When Alessa said I’d...seen her bedroom, she meant...”

Bell’s eyebrows shoot up, but he remains silent, waiting for me to continue.

“Something happened between us.”

“Get to the point, Miller,” Bell snaps, his patience wearing thin.

“We were...intimate, on more than one occasion.” There. I said it. The truth I’ve been hiding from him, from myself even. “I know it was a breach of ethics and I take full responsibility—”

Bell holds up a hand, silencing my rambling. “Youwhat?” he hisses. “You compromised our entire operation for some...some romantic tryst?”

“No, sir! God, no. But I should have told you before now. I know that.”

For a long moment he just looks at me, his expression unreadable. Then, slowly, he shakes his head.

“I’m going to forget you just told me that. And I suggest you do the same.”

I stare at him, certain I misheard. “Sir?”

“You did what you felt you needed to in pursuit of the mission,” he says. “I can’t say I fully approve, but the priority now is containment.”

His meaning sinks in. Containment of the fallout. Mitigation of the damage.

“I doubt we’ll acquire a warrant in time,” he continues, “so your indiscretion is likely a moot point. Your role in the team will be suspended anyway. I’ll be recommending leave with full pay while you recover from your...” He sneers. “Undercover ordeal.”

“But sir,” I protest weakly, “what if she uses this against us? She has no reason to hide it. If her lawyers can make a case for improper—”

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“Miller,” he snaps. “Trust me. There are ways to deal with that. For now—just keep your damn mouth shut.” He turns to leave but pauses, looking back over his shoulder. “For both our sakes, Agent Miller, I suggest you keep this between us.”

I open my mouth to respond, then think better of it. His advice to me is against all guidelines and protocols—but can I really report him for a breach of ethics when I’m the one who crossed the line? That would be hypocrisy in its purest form.

Slowly, I nod. “I understand, sir.”

He gives a curt nod and walks away to the rest of the team, who are already bickering among themselves. I remain fixed in place, their muted chatter fading as I think back over the night.

Alone with my thoughts, the day’s events press down on me. I’m drowning in an ocean of regret, ethical dilemmas, misplaced desire. I replay everything, analyzing each choice, every mistake, searching for the exact moment when I lost my way—not tonight, but long before.

Was it when I first refused a wire? When I failed to disclose my knowledge of Alessa’s safe house? When I gave in to a reckless moment of passion?

Or was my fate sealed from the very start, when I accepted this assignment? When I agreed to exploit my own sexuality to achieve my mission?

I’ve ruined everything. My case, my career, my integrity. Worst of all, I’ve lost any chance of a future with Alessa. Though we always had the odds stacked against us, at

least before tonight there had been hope. The faintest glimmer of possibility.

Hearing that she was trying to outplay the Mancini Family made me think, ridiculously, that maybe there was a chance for us. She could get out—I could get out, too, find a desk job somewhere—

But it was foolishness.

Alessa's green eyes will never again look at me with anything but contempt and bitterness.

I am the enemy now.

I give my debrief in a monotone, and finally, halfway to morning, I accept a lift back home from Evelyn Chang, who is the only one who doesn't look at me like I've fucked everything up.

She should. God knows. But she just reminds me carefully that I'm still holding on to the wire I pulled off my body. I hand it over, and she puts it away, marking it off on inventory.

She gives me a quick side-hug as we walk over to her car. She lives out in Queens, too, so she'll be taking me back to my real apartment.

My real life.

"It will be okay," she whispers.

No, it won't. But I'm still grateful for the kindness of the lie.

CHAPTER 26

NATALIE

I zip up my small suitcase and do one final sweep of the expansive Park Avenue apartment. The last few weeks here felt like living in a luxury hotel. But now all the surveillance equipment has been removed, the fashionable clothes and shoes have been reclaimed. Aside from the furniture, the place is empty. A far cry from the bustling hub it was just days ago when it served as one of our headquarters for the operation against Alessa.

Alessa.

My heart still squeezes painfully every time I think her name.

So much has happened in the last few days, it's hard to process it all. After my cover was spectacularly blown at the Ruby Realm, I endured endless debriefings with Bell and the rest of the team. They grilled me for every detail, wanting to know when she might have started suspecting.

I don't know. I'm not sure what tipped her off, not really.

My dreams are still haunted by her. By the way she whispered my name, her fingers tangling possessively in my hair. I can almost feel her silken skin pressed against mine when I close my eyes, her lips exploring my body...

An FBI team raided the Ruby, hoping to find the hidden casino. They made it down to the basement, but all that was there was a bar area by then. I have to admit, I'm impressed by how quickly Alessa had the games and tables dismantled and removed. She doesn't waste time, that's for sure.

Despite my role in taking her down, part of me still admires her. Not that I'd ever admit it to Bell or the others.

I've also had a few sessions with Kris Hays, the psychologist assigned to help me process this intense undercover operation. But I haven't told her the extent of my relationship with Alessa. Haven't told anyone how I've never wanted someone the way I wanted her. The way I still want her. It terrifies me even as it thrills me.

So I lie. I deflect. Pretend, even to myself, that it was all just part of the act, a means to an end.

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But it was so much more than that. Every stolen moment we shared crackles in my memory, as vivid as a live wire. I ache for her like a vital organ has been ripped from my body, leaving me hollow and breathless.

I don't know how to reconcile my feelings for her with my oath as an agent. The only way forward is to shut it down. Bury it deep where no one can ever dig it up again.

Easier said than done when she still haunts me.

Which is why I'm terrified she'll use our relationship against me if I stay with the Bureau. One whisper in the wrong ear and I'd be finished.

So I plan to resign. But I want to let things settle before I do.

Lost in thought, I flinch when I hear footsteps approaching. My gun is in my hand before I even think.

"Whoa, easy there cowboy!" Sam throws up his hands, looking ridiculously out of place in his cheap grey suit against the luxurious surroundings. "Just me."

I instantly relax my white-knuckle grip, feeling foolish for being so twitchy. "Sorry. I guess I'm still wired from...everything."

He eyes my holstered weapon warily. "Remind me not to sneak up on you anytime soon."

I force a tight smile. "Lesson learned."

“I don’t blame you for being jumpy,” he says, glancing around the cavernous space. “It’s been one hell of a ride these last few months.”

“You can say that again.” I tuck my gun back into its holster, regarding him warily. Ever since that night he cornered me outside Alessa’s townhouse, things have been strained between us. His demeanor today lacks its usual bite, though.

“Listen, Natalie...” He shoves his hands in his pockets, staring at the floor. “I owe you an apology. I’ve been kind of a dick lately. Guess this case just got to me, you know?”

I’m taken aback by his sudden remorse. Sam isn’t one for heartfelt atonements. But I know better than anyone that an undercover op can mess with your head.

“It’s okay,” I say. “I think it got to all of us in different ways. But it’s over now.”

“Yeah. But I know I was too hard on you. Rode your ass about getting closer to the target.” He scratches his bristly chin. “I just want you to know, I didn’t mean to...imply anything, you know, untoward.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I reply quickly. “Let’s just put it behind us.”

He looks relieved. “So...we’re good?”

I summon the ghost of a smile. “We’re good.”

A lie, of course. But smoothing things over serves me better than holding a grudge. Even if I do plan to resign, I’d like to know what’s going on with the case against Alessa. And Bell has cut me out completely, issuing me two weeks’ leave with full pay, under the guise of recovering from a tough undercover stint.

“What do you say we grab some drinks later?” Wright asks. “Decompress a little?”

Inside, I die at the thought of pretending everything’s fine over beers and chicken wings. But I need to keep my avenues open.

“Sure, that sounds nice.” I force enthusiasm into my voice. “Why don’t you pick me up from my place later? I’ll text you the address.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You moving out already?”

“Sure am. That’s what I was doing here today. Once I wrap things up here, I’m headed back to Queens.”

“Ah, that’ll be tough after living like this.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Really?” He looks genuinely surprised. Can’t blame him. After watching me living the high life these past few weeks, willingly returning to my cramped apartment must seem odd.

But I crave the familiar. And I need space to think, away from the pressures and politics of the job. A place where I can shed this fake skin and be myself.

“I just need some time, you know?” I say. “Get my bearings again.”

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Wright studies me for a moment, brow furrowed, then nods. “Yeah, that makes sense. You’ve definitely earned a break.” He checks his watch. “I’ll let you finish up here. See you tonight.”

“See you then,” I echo as he departs. The forced smile slides from my face. Finally, I can stop pretending. Pretending I’m fine, pretending the last few weeks meant nothing, pretending my heart and conscience haven’t been shattered beyond repair.

After he leaves, I finish gathering my things, deliberately tuning out the surroundings. I don’t belong in this world. My time here was only temporary, a costume I wore to play a part.

Now I need to rediscover who I really am. Because somewhere along the way, I lost sight of myself.

My feelings for Alessa have blurred the lines in ways I never expected. She operates in moral shades of gray I never knew existed. Shades I’m no longer sure how to navigate.

My inner compass has always been the law and Bureau protocol. The world seemed black and white before all this—legal or illegal, innocent or guilty, right or wrong.

Absolutes.

But now...now I wonder if sometimes the law fails to deliver true justice. If it punishes those undeserving of punishment, and overlooks the guilty hiding behind power and privilege.

I don't know what to think anymore. All I know is, ever since I met Alessa, the world seems a lot more complicated.

I do one final lap, checking cabinets and closets for any personal items left behind. Then I grab my suitcase and take one final look around the apartment where I briefly inhabited Natalie Moreau's glittering world.

Goodbye, Park Avenue.

Hello, reality.

CHAPTER 27

ALESSA

The leather seat sticks to the back of my bare thighs as I shift, the black town car gliding through the Manhattan night. I've ridden in this car a hundred times, but today the luxury interior feels stifling. I press my forehead to the cold glass window, seeking relief. The city lights streak by in a neon blur, doing little to distract my wandering thoughts.

Juno sits across from me, one long leg crossed casually over the other, her short black dress riding up. Her slender fingers are laced with Caitlin's, their joined hands resting on Juno's knee. I notice the way Caitlin's thumb gently strokes over Juno's knuckles, back and forth in a tender motion. Juno catches my eye, one sleek eyebrow raised in silent query.

I drop my gaze, staring down at my lap. My hands clutch each other, nails biting into my palms. I can't bear her concern. She knows me too well.

Juno clears her throat delicately. "Alessa, is everything alright? You seem..."

“I’m fine,” I interrupt sharply, dragging my eyes back to the passing night. I don’t want to hear whatever words she was about to choose.

On edge.

Brittle.

Heartbroken.

I hear her sigh, the leather squeaking slightly as she leans back. “If you say so. I just want to make sure you’re okay. You’re the one who kept telling me how important tonight is.”

Guilt pricks at me. She’s right. Tonight’s charity gala is crucial, the biggest event of the year for Anna’s Kitchen. All of Manhattan’s elite will be there, checkbooks at the ready. I need to be at my best to charm the donations out of their pockets.

“I know,” I reply quietly. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be ready.” It’s as much to reassure myself as her. I’m Alessa de Luca, I remind myself. I can do anything in heels and a smile. Even after...after everything.

Juno seems to accept this, settling back into her seat. I return my temple to the glass, seeking the chilled solace once more. As long as I concentrate on the cold, I can keep my traitorous thoughts at bay.

I ignore the flickers of memory trying to surface. The warmth of tangled sheets. Shared laughter in secret moments. The sweet ache of her body under mine...

No. I squeeze my eyes shut, blocking out the visions. Think of ice. The dark cold of deep water. A barren tundra stretching to the horizon.

Anything buther.

The car slows, pulling up outside the glittering entrance of the hotel. I take a deep breath and smooth my fitted scarlet dress, armor against the coming battle. The door opens, the outside air kissing my bare shoulders. I slip on my mask and step out, chin high. My heels tap out a staccato rhythm, echoing the hammering of my pulse as I pause for photographs.

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Not sneaky FBI surveillance photographs, either. These will be splashed all over the internet, New York society come out to play.

Caitlin and Juno flank me as I enter the lobby. The ballroom beyond glitters with tiered crystal chandeliers and precious metals. Diamonds dazzle at throats and wrists, refracting the light into prismatic rainbows. Laughter rises in counterpoint to the melodic strains of a classical music quartet playing unobtrusively in the corner. Servers in crisp white shirts weave through the guests, offering flutes of champagne and elaborate canapes on silver trays. Despite the charitable purpose, the room reeks of excess.

My lip curls slightly. Some of these glittering socialites could fund the kitchen for a year with just the jewels on one hand. And it's my job to get those hands writing out checks tonight.

I tap my smile back into place as I step further into the ballroom, one hand adjusting the cowl back of my dress, making sure it sits right.

Here we go.

I make the rounds, air-kissing cheeks and squeezing hands, paying compliments and making small talk. Old money, new money, celebrity and infamy—they're all here tonight. My smile gleams, bright and sharp, polished to a ruthless edge. I'm in my element.

These games of smoke and mirrors are my specialty.

A passing server offers a crystal flute and I take it, the champagne bubbles pleasantly teasing my tongue. The vintage we finally got through customs. At least that problem had a solution.

Still, the dry bitterness lingers beneath each sweet sip.

Tonight I will do what my mother most wishes I would do, and be exactly like my cousin Juno. Smooth, cold, flawless.

Untouchable.

I chat and charm on autopilot, detached from the swirl of colorful dresses and exchange of pleasantries. The champagne makes it easier to wear the mask, but it seems to grow heavier with each passing minute.

My cheeks begin to ache from the strain of smiling, but I think I'm succeeding at appearing my usual sociable self until I catch Juno watching me across the ballroom with a contemplative stare.

After an endless parade of small talk, the lights finally dim, signaling the start of the program. I weave between circular tables draped in white linen, making my way to the low stage at the front of the ballroom.

Get through this speech and the worst is over.

Just one more performance.

I take my place behind the sleek podium emblazoned with the logo of Anna's Kitchen. And then I welcome the luminaries to our biggest fundraiser yet.

My speeches usually roll off my tongue fluidly, well-practiced and polished. I've

always enjoyed public speaking, playing my audience like a pianist before a grand piano.

But tonight I feel like the keys stick, clang out of tune.

I'm almost grateful when the double doors crash open halfway through my speech, interrupting my stilted cadence. The interlopers stalk inside, black Kevlar and stern faces contrasting the colorful cocktail dresses and tuxedos.

My heart stops for a moment when I recognize the logo on their helmets.

FBI.

They march through the ballroom in tight formation, paying no mind to the affronted staff fluttering about them. Conversations die away, replaced by the heavy tread of their footfalls. At the front, the lead agent climbs the short staircase to the stage in one long stride.

And I stand there and watch him.

He stops an arm's length away, and when he speaks, his words are picked up by the microphone.

Amplified.

"Alessa de Luca, you are under arrest for fraud, illegal gambling, and racketeering. You have the right to remain silent..."

The Miranda warning fades into white noise as he turns me around. I don't resist. There's no point.

He clasps handcuffs over my wrists, the metal biting cold. I don't resist as he guides me down the steps. My vision tunnels until all I see are the heavy doors ahead.

Numb, I let him lead me through the parted sea of tables, all eyes tracking our passage. Murmuring, judging, horrified.

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No one makes a move to intercept us. Not even Juno and Caitlin—but they know better. My chest aches at the mute concern on their pale faces, and then I see Juno lean in toward Caitlin, whisper something, and they both back away, leaving the room by another exit.

The agent marches me briskly right out the front entrance, where the photographers are still waiting.

I keep my chin up in the face of a thousand flashbulbs, refusing to show weakness.

Let them do their worst.

Just before we reach the armored van—did the FBI imagine I might make some daring escape, I wonder?—I glimpse a familiar figure across the street, half swathed in shadow.

No. It can't be her. I'm imagining things.

Oh, but it is her.

Natalie.

She stands stiffly upright, her hair pulled back in a ponytail and her mouth hanging open. As our eyes meet, her hands fly up across her mouth, as though—as though she's shocked.

Something cracks inside and I stumble, forgetting how to breathe. The agent's grip

tightens, yanking me back into motion. The contact jolts me back to the present, the heavy doors looming ahead now. Natalie's face stays seared into my mind as he pushes me into the custody van.

But she doesn't move from her pool of shadow across the street, doesn't call out or intervene. Just watches them shove me into the van.

Of course. Did I expect anything else? No matter the secrets we shared, when it came down to it, her loyalties never wavered.

I was a fool to fall for her.

A fool to believe she cared about me.

I don't need her. I have myself, cold and steady. I drop my head, hiding my face with a curtain of hair.

Let this be the end. Of her, of the pathetic ache in my chest.

She's dead to me.

CHAPTER 28

NATALIE

I can barely breathe as I watch Alessa being led away in handcuffs, her emerald eyes flashing with defiance. They land on me, and the sounds around me fade to a dull hum, everything narrowed down to this singular, horrifying moment.

I throw my hands over my mouth, instinctive, to stop the scream of protest that's about to burst out of me.

And then Alessa tosses her hair, turning away in a silent, pointed Fuck you.

Standing right beside me is Sam Wright, grinning like a fool, thoroughly enjoying the scene unfolding before us. I'm shaking, though I'm not sure if it's from fury or despair.

"Why did you bring me here?" I ask him, my voice trembling despite my effort to steady it.

He picked me up like we planned, and then—to my irritation—wanted to drive into Manhattan. He said he had an errand to run there, so we might as well get our drinks in the city.

I had no idea, until he parked here, what was going on.

Until I saw Alessa de Luca getting dragged out of her own charity event and pushed into an FBI custody van.

He turns to look at me, eyebrows raised in surprise. "I thought you'd appreciate the surprise. I know Bell's been keeping you out of the loop, but I wanted you to see the fruits of all your hard work."

My lips tighten in disgust.

Is that all this is to him? Some game we've won? Has he no concept of the emotional toll this operation took on me?

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“Why are you treating this like it’s some fun outing? Don’t you understand how hard this is?” My voice comes out harsher than I intend, but I’m unable to temper my outrage.

Wright just shrugs. “Hey now, play stupid games, win stupid prizes, right? Bitch had this coming.”

His flippant remark ignites a fire within me. For a brief, alarming moment, my hand twitches with the urge to punch him, to smack that fucking smirk right off his hateful face.

And to my core, I’m shaken by how deeply Alessa has gotten under my skin, unraveling my restraint.

I dig my nails into my palm, regaining control through the sting. I can’t cause a scene. Not here. So I do the only thing I can do.

Giving Wright one last withering look, I turn on my heel and start to walk away, putting distance between us before I do something I regret.

“Hey, where are you going?” Wright calls after me, confusion coloring his tone.

I don’t look back or respond. I can’t stand to be near him a second longer.

Right now, I need space to think, to process...

To grieve.

Because as much as it pains me to admit, my heart aches at the loss of what Alessa and I shared.

And I can't leave her like this. I can't.

Somehow, I have to find a way to make things right.