







# Birthright

**Author:** *Natalia Lourose*

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, New Adult, Crime And Mafia

**Description:** Olivia

New Orleans was supposed to be my fresh start.

A clean slate, free from my toxic ex and overbearing mother.

But fate has a twisted sense of humor.

One second I'm taking out the trash and the next, I'm witnessing a murder.

Behind the gun is a devil in a tailored suit, the king of this city's criminal empire.

I try to hide, but he finds me easily.

I expect him to silence me.

But instead...

He claims me.

Sam

Fresh out of prison, I've got one thing on my mind: revenge.

My uncle framed me for my father's murder, and now he's paid the price.

But I wasn't alone when I pulled the trigger.

A girl: blue eyes, dark hair, and a mouth like sin.

I should've ended it. Tied up the loose end.

But my father taught me one rule: we don't kill women.

So I did the next best thing.

I made her mine.

**Total Pages (Source):** 97

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

## PROLOGUE

Sam

Ten Years Old

It's hot, the humidity making my favorite dinosaur shirt stick to my chest. The ropes tied around my wrists scratch my skin and the ground beneath me is hard. I can't get comfortable with my hands bound behind my back. Water sloshes outside of wherever we're being held, and I can't shake the idea that there might be an alligator right beside me. I can't see if there is, due to the smelly sack covering my head.

Beside me, my mom is talking; she's been talking since they put us in this room — or wherever it is that we are. She's telling me to stay calm, but I think she should be telling herself that. Her voice sounds panicked, the way it does when Dad is out late and she's pacing in front of the door, thinking I can't see her from the top of the stairs.

Lately, it seems like my mom is always scared.

"You gotta be brave for Mama, Sam." Dad just gave me the bravery speech yesterday, reminding me that Costello men aren't afraid. We're strong, resilient, and brave.

I'm strong, resilient, and brave.

"It's okay, Mama." I say, interrupting her. "I'm gonna get us out of here." I can't see her face to know if my words have calmed her, but I assume they do. Without my dad here, I have to be the man. I have to protect her.

"No, no, Sammy. We need to stay put." Her words are quick and worried, sounding like the time I almost got hit by a car when I didn't look both ways to cross the street. Like she's trying to keep me from danger.

But Mama is always worried. And Dad told me to be brave.

I wiggle my wrists, trying to see if there's any slack in the ropes the men used to tie them. When that fails, I reach around me, searching for something to cut the bindings. That's what Dad told me to do if I'm ever kidnapped and they tie my wrists. First step, get your hands free.

Running my fingers along the bottom of the wall I'm propped against, I search for anything sharp enough that I could use. Mama is still telling me to take deep breaths and that Dad will be here soon, but I know my dad wouldn't want me to wait for him. He'd want me to take action, so I keep up my search.

Finally, my fingers touch something metallic. A screw, I think. This should work. I grasp it in my hand and rub it against the rope over and over. Feeling the rough material beginning to fray, I keep working.

With a snap, the material breaks open, and I free my hands, immediately reaching for the sack and pulling it from my head. I blink rapidly. It's dark, so it takes my eyes a minute to adjust. We're in a small room, with a concrete floor and wooden walls. Tossing the sack to the side, I reach for my mom.

"Mama," I whisper, pulling her blindfold from her face. Her eyes widen when she looks at me.

"Sam, what did you do?"

"I got my hands free. Here." I take my screw, reaching behind her to start sawing at

the rope holding her hands together.

"Sam, I told you to sit still!"

"Dad said if I'm ever kidnapped, I need to get my hands free first. I have to be able to protect you, Mama."

"No, baby, you don't need to protect me?—"

The rope snaps before she finishes her sentence, freeing her hands. "There!" I grin.

Mama wraps her arms around me, squeezing me so tightly it hurts. "Sam," she whispers. "I love you, baby. Always know?—"

She doesn't finish her sentence. We're interrupted by the door swinging open and banging against the wall.

"What the fuck did I tell you?" The words are loud and harsh coming from the man wearing ripped jeans and a leather vest with a snake patch.

I push myself in front of Mama, making a tough face just like Dad taught me. "Get away from us!" I shout.

The man doesn't look scared, though. His lips twist up as he laughs loudly. "Carmine Costello's kid thinks he's grown, huh?"

"Don't hurt him." Mama is shoving me behind her now, her hands tight on my shoulders as she shields me with her body. She shouldn't be doing that; I'm the one who's supposed to protect her. That's what dad said.

"I'll do whatever the fuck I want!" The man's shoes thud against the concrete floor as

he marches toward my mother. He reaches around her, yanking on my wrist to pull me out. Mama screams, her hands grasping onto my arms as she plays tug-o-war with the man—only, I'm the rope in the middle.

And then something loud bangs in the distance, startling both of them, hands freezing on my arms and giving me a chance to slip out of their grasps.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

Gunshots. I recognize the sound from when my dad took me to the shooting range. I use my hands to cover my ears as the bangs get closer and closer. They're louder without the big, blue headphones to protect my hearing.

Everything changes so quickly; I don't have time to understand what's happening. My father appears in the doorway, and before I can get excited or greet him, the snake man is shouting.

"I'll kill them!" With a frantic voice, he waves his gun in our direction.

My father has his own gun pointed, finger on the trigger.

I need to do something. I search around me, looking for anything to try to help my mom. My eyes land on a large stick leaning against the wall, and I grab it, pushing to my feet and lunging at the man.

"Sam, no!" Mama screams, and then the next moment happens in a blur.

Mama pushes in front of me, and a single shot rings out through the air.

Pain reverberates in my chest and Mama drops to the sticky ground.

Another shot, and the snake man goes down, a red dot in the center of his forehead.

"No!" It's my father, but he doesn't sound proud of me. He sounds pained as he drops to his knees beside my mama. "Giulia," he cries, his hands gripping her shoulders and shaking violently. "Giulia, no."



There's a puddle of red and it's spreading beneath her body, growing larger and larger as my father continues shaking her, begging her to wake up.

Clutching a hand to my aching chest, I crawl to my parents. "No," I whisper, staring down at my unmoving mother. "Mama?"

But she doesn't wake up, no matter how hard I cry or how much my dad shakes her.

My mama never wakes up again.

ONE

Sam

Abuzz.

A few clinks.

Birds chirping.

That's the sound of freedom.

I stretch my arms, the silky Tom Ford dress shirt a stark contrast to prison cotton. The Louisiana sun hits my face—too bright, too warm after eight months in a cell. For a moment, I let myself feel it all: freedom, grief, and the rage that's been building since they put my father in the ground and me behind bars for it.

John, my cousin and right-hand man, leans against the side of his black Porsche, a smile curling his lips. "Good to see you out of that hideous orange jumpsuit," he says, clapping a hand on my shoulder before pulling me into a hug.

For a split second, I'm back in that interrogation room, pictures of my father's blood-soaked carpet laid out before me. The detective pointing at the gun with my fingerprints. A gun I've never seen or held.

"It's good to be out of it," I manage to say, shoving down the memory.

"I have a fresh suit for you in the car." John points over his shoulder to where a suit bag hangs in the backseat.

My father's voice echoes in my head: "A Costello man always dresses the part, Sammy. The world respects what it sees." Dad had adjusted my first tie when I was eight, his hands steady the way they always were. Grief clogs my throat for a moment when I remember I'll never see or touch those hands again.

"Perfect." I swallow hard. "I'll change after I get this one dirty."

John nods, knowing exactly what I mean by dirty. Someone has to pay for my father's death.

"How's it feel to be out?" my cousin asks quietly.

"Like I've been robbed," I say, the words bitter on my tongue. "Eight months I'll never get back. Eight months when I should have been burying my father properly, mourning him. Instead, I was locked up while his real killers walked free."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

John's eyes darken. "Marcus paid for his part."

"And Damien's still breathing. Not for long, though." My hands clench at my sides, knuckles white. I'd always known the Costellofamigliawas divided, but I never thought they'd go this far—murdering my father, the rightful heir to Nonno's empire, and framing his only son for it.

John nods, understanding in his eyes. He's been my shadow since we were kids, both of us learning at my father's side how to run the family business. Both of us watching as the cracks in our family deepened after Nonno died. Only John stood by me when they came to take me away.

I look over at Adrian Russo, the lawyer who got me out. He's observing us with that nervous energy of his, like he's always calculating the odds. My youngest cousin married him under duress, something I'm sure she's still angry about. But he proved useful, finding the evidence that finally convinced the judge to dismiss my case. It only took a little bit of blackmail.

"Good work, Russo," I tell him, walking toward the man to shake his hand. Before I get another word out, his phone starts ringing.

He shows me the screen displaying my Uncle Damien's name. My blood runs cold, then hot with fury. Damien—the man who helped plan my father's murder, who planted the evidence to put me behind bars.

"Answer it," I tell Adrian, deadly calm.

"Hello?" he speaks into the receiver. I can't make out the words, but I see Adrian's face drain of color. When he hangs up, he looks at my cousin. "John, where's Zoe today?"

"With Madi," he answers as confusion creeps onto his face.

"We need to go," Adrian says, dialing furiously on his phone and getting frustrated when the call rings out and goes to voicemail. "The girls are in trouble."

"Go with him," I tell John. "I'm going to find Damien."

Adrian hesitates, his eyes lingering between me and his car, before finally getting into the driver's seat. The tires squeal as they speed away.

I watch them go, feeling the weight of the gun John slipped me during our hug. Eight months I've waited for this moment. For eight months, I've seen my father's face every time I closed my eyes, heard his mantra on repeat: "Family above all, Sammy. Remember who you are."

I'm a Costello. And it's time my uncle remembers what that means.

TWO

Olivia

Thirty days.

It's been one whole month since I drove the thirty hours from Montreal, Canada, to New Orleans, Louisiana. And all for...this. Rubbing a hand over my face, I sigh.

I stare at Gino's, our family bar, now weighed down by decades of neglect. The once

vibrant spot is a shell of itself, with chipped paint and cobwebs claiming every corner.

This place was my father's pride, my childhood playground. I spent summers spinning on barstools and drinking Shirley temples.

Gino's has always been my family's life.

Our legacy.

And now it's mine.

I grab a duster and extend the handle, reaching into the corners to bat down the cobwebs. Behind me, Joey laughs. "That's the decor, girlie," he says as he slices through a lime, prepping for service later tonight.

"Cobwebs are not decor!" I shout back as I bat down another one. I don't know when the last time this place was cleaned, but the dust might be as old as Joey himself.

As long as I've been alive, the old man has been a fixture in this bar. He worked for my grandfather first, and then my father before he died.

Even thinking about my father's death makes my chest ache. I push it down, still not ready to deal with the mountain of trauma that is Salvatore Marchese.

Three months ago, my father died, and even though I haven't seen him since I was a kid, he still wrote me into his will. Leaving me a few hundred bucks and this bar.

Perfect timing, really. I had just ended my three-year relationship with my fiancé, and while breaking up with Rhett was the right thing to do, everyone in my life thinks I'm going through some sort of early twenties crisis. My mom is counting down the days

for me to give up on the bar, move back home, and beg my ex for forgiveness.

That's not going to happen.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

Not since I caught him balls deep in his pretty blonde secretary.

I shudder at the memory.

Creaking upstairs has both Joey and I pausing, our eyes shooting to the ceiling as we listen.

“He must be up,” Joey says. “Want me to-”

“No,” I cut him off, propping my duster against the wall and wiping my hands off on my yoga pants. “I got it.”

Joey looks like he wants to say something else, but he bites his tongue and goes back to slicing limes.

With my inheritance of the bar, I also received the apartment above it, where my father used to live. And with that, I inherited my grandfather. An eighty-six-year-old man with raging dementia.

I make my way up the stairs to check on him.

“Sally boy,” he calls out as I enter the apartment. “That you?”

"No, Grandpa, it's me, Olivia."

Gino Marchese stands in the living room of the small two-bedroom apartment, where he's lived his entire life. His father, Gino Sr. opened the bar back in the 1920s and my

great grandmother gave birth to him in this very apartment. This building is older than the man himself and has been passed down for generations.

My grandfather looks at me, confusion etched across his dark bushy brows, signaling to me that we're in the midst of another episode.

I can hear my mother's voice echoing in my head. "Do you really think you're capable of taking care of someone with dementia, Livy?" I don't think she meant to sound so condescending, and at the time, I took it as a challenge, telling her that I was more than capable of caring for my grandfather.

But I had just learned of my father's death, and while my memories of him are coated in anger and disappointment, my memories of my grandfather are the opposite. While my father was running up debts and failing as a parent, my grandfather was making me Shirley temples and hosting movie nights with too much chocolate mixed into the popcorn. I don't have a bad memory of the man.

Until now.

Because my mother's words are starting to ring truer. I'm not sure if I am capable of taking care of someone while their mind is slowly deteriorating. But I can't stomach the thought of putting him in a home — even if I could afford it.

"Where's Sal?" he asks, and a pang hits my chest. I can't keep explaining to my grandfather that his son is dead over and over again.

Avoiding the conversation that I know will take us down a deep spiral, I decide on lying instead. "He ran out to the store."

Grandpa huffs, both of his hands hitting his hips. "Damn boy. He keeps stealing my money. I checked the box and there's nothing in there!"



I don't have the heart to tell him that his cash box has been empty for a while. And not just because my father spent it all, but also because...banks exist.

"I bet he'll refill it when he gets back," I say, continuing my new trend of lying.

He waves a hand dismissively. "Never does. Probably out gambling it away." Slumping into his recliner, he scrubs a hand over his face. "Every damn time."

It makes my heart ache to see him so upset over something that's not happening.

"Grandpa—"

At my voice, his head snaps to me, as if he forgot I was even in the room. Confusion strikes again as he looks at me. "Rachel?" He calls me my mother's name, and it's not the first time this has happened. It's as if he's swinging back and forth between timelines, never quite sure where or when he is. "What are you doing here? I thought you and Sal called it off?"

I assume he's talking about my parents' divorce. They officially split when I was five years old, though I don't think they'd been happy for a while. My mother didn't even wait for the ink to dry on the paper before she packed me up and relocated us to Montreal, where her parents and extended family lived.

For her, New Orleans was nothing but a six-year mistake she made in her youth. Even if she tells me I'm the best thing to come from this place, I know that she hates it here. All of her memories were tarnished by my father.

It didn't take long for the appeal to wear off for me either. A few summers alone with him, and I was begging her to never send me here again.

So why'd I come back...

"Yeah," I say, feeling defeated. Going along with his version of reality might be easier in some way, but the memories they bring up aren't so simple. "We did. I'm just here with Olivia."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"Livy." His face brightens at my name, though I assume he's remembering me as a little girl, not the full-grown adult standing in front of him. "You two really did make a good child," he muses. "It's a shame you couldn't stay with him."

I wince. If my mother was here, that would piss her off. As if it was solely her fault that their marriage collapsed.

"Why don't you take a nap?" I suggest, reaching for the blanket draped over the back of the recliner. He nods as I lay it over him, and he leans back to get more comfortable.

I leave him there in his recliner, sighing as I head back down to the bar to continue cleaning.

I wanted a fresh start, and I thought my inheritance might give me one, but now, as I'm feeling bogged down with memories I'd rather not relive, I'm not sure if this is a fresh start or if I'm just repeating my mother's mistakes.

THREE

Sam

A lot of emotions have swirled through my mind in the last eight months since I was arrested for a murder I never committed.

Anger. Hatred. Rage.

A desperate need for revenge has driven me to this point. Planning this moment is how I got myself through the time I spent locked in a tiny cell. I didn't dare let myself explore the feelings that simmered deep below the surface, pushed down by so much pressure. If I let myself feel that grief — the weight of my father's death — for even just a second, I would've exploded. So instead, I plotted all the ways I could kill the people who took him from me.

I know Damien wasn't working alone. And, if I had my way, I would have been the one to kill Marcus, but John already did that. So now, Damien is the only one left for me to take out all this rage on.

My so-called aunts aren't that innocent, but from a young age, my father drilled it into me that we don't kill women. So, while I won't be able to end their lives in retribution, I know the deaths of their son and husband will be enough.

The pizza shop my uncle owns isn't in any of the main hot spots in the quarter. Not near Jackson Square or Bourbon Street. Instead, it sits a few streets back from all the action. Still busy, as is everything in the quarter, but less crowded.

Damien never needed the place to make a profit, anyway; it's all a front to launder the family's dirty money. I know I'll find him there, based on a text from one of the men still loyal to me.

It's the middle of the day, the sun shining brightly as I park John's car outside of the shop. Normally, I'd do this under the cover of night. I'd also wait for John to be available and have my back.

But I can't wait that long.

Even if I wanted to, I don't want to risk my uncle getting tipped off that I've been released. So instead, I'll take care of business now.

I park the car in the alley, which gives me a good view of the back door. My uncle has always had a nasty smoking habit, and it's only a matter of time until that door swings open and he exits, cigarette in hand.

When it finally does, he's not even paying attention.

Stupido.

He pulls the cigarette loose from its packaging and brings it to his lips before lighting it up. I watch as he sucks on the cancer stick before I get out of the car. The sound of the door shutting gets his attention, and his head spins to face me.

As shock coats his features, I revel in his surprise.

"Uncle," I greet coldly.

I can tell from the look on his face that he's weighing his options. His eyes flicker to the door and down the alley, trying to determine if he can make it to either one before I pull my gun on him.

He won't be able to, but it'd be more fun if he tried.

Damien has never been a physical man. He married into the Costello family through my Aunt Carlotta, and though he's a made man, he's always been in the position of running a crew, looking at things from a money-making angle rather than having to be on the streets.

He's only killed one man in his years. Part of his initiation, way back before I was born. And then my nonno let him have a coddled life in la famiglia. He washed our money, managed the legal businesses, and if he needed dirty work done, he had someone else to do it.

So even if he wanted to, I'm not sure he has the balls or the skill to kill me himself. That's why he needed Adrian. Too bad, I got the lawyer on my side instead.

"Sam," he says, blowing out a puff of smoke and straightening his shoulders. I wouldn't expect my uncle to die like a weak man, begging for his life. But I think I'd like to see him on his knees, pleading with me for forgiveness.

We both know that would never happen. Notwillingly, at least.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

Damien sucks on his teeth as his eyes drift from the gun to me as he puts the pieces together. "Was it Adrian?" he asks.

I smile. Marcus had the lawyer working for him, unaware that the man had suffered a great loss at his father's fingertips. Big Al was known for killing anyone who he thought might rat him out, and Adrian's father was picked up with Big Al's drugs. Instead of helping him get the charges dropped, Al had him murdered before he even had his day in court.

It was easy enough for me to figure out; Marcus and Damien just never took the time.

Marcus welcomed Adrian to join their ranks without hesitation, going so far as to offer him his younger sister, Madi's, hand in marriage. And after Marcus was killed, Damien stillforced Madi to marry the man, all without checking into his background. Rookie mistake.

I admit, I did have the lawyer kidnapped and threatened in order to get him to switch sides, but semantics. I'll work on making that right after I handle my uncle.

"I knew I couldn't trust that bastard," Damien hisses. He sucks in another hit of cigarette smoke before dropping the bud and stomping it into the pavement. "You're a little late, though." A smug smile replaces his fury. "I already sent a man to the studio. John's girl will be dead any second now."

I shrug, acting nonchalant, even if inside I'm hoping that John doesn't lose the only piece of happiness he's ever had. "Answer one thing for me." I cock my gun, and Damien swallows, knowing his end is imminent. "Why'd ya do it?"

My uncle swallows and shifts his weight from one foot to the other. I wait patiently for him to spit out the answer, my gun still pointed at him.

"Your father wanted to run things differently," he finally says.

Anger boils in my blood. There's no grieving behind bars, not when you need to stay on your toes. And now, what should be sadness for my father's murder has morphed into something ugly.

I swing my arm with rage, connecting the butt of my gun with his head. The collision creates a sickening smack that rings out in the alley, and my uncle drops to his knees, holding his head in the palms of his hands.

Something stirs in my chest. It feels good seeing him on his knees. Knowing that he's going to die and his last moments are going to be feeling my wrath.

My father wanted this family to be more than low-life criminals smuggling drugs and girls. He wanted to build up our legitimate businesses, create an empire.

And my uncles and aunts wanted to have girls coked up and dancing in strip clubs, where they could sell them to the highest bidders.

"And so he had to die?" I ask with a snarl.

Damien winces, looking up at me with bloody teeth. "He never would have listened to us."

"You're right," I say. "And now you'll die because of it."

Damien raises his hands, and I think he's about to plead his case, to tell me why his vision for this family is better than my father's, but I decide I don't want to hear it. I



wish I could elongate his suffering, make him spend eight months in a cell like I had to, but I have business to attend to, and I need to make sure Zoe and Madi are okay.

So instead, I press the trigger on the gun, the sound muffled by the attached silencer. The bullet speeds from the barrel and pierces my uncle right between his two bushy eyebrows. A dot of red forms in the spot and his body falls back from the force. He hits the concrete with a thud, his last breath whooshing from his chest.

Adrenaline courses through me from retribution served at my fingertips.

And vengeance feels good. Knowing that the men responsible for my father's death will never breathe again feels right.

A squeak pulls me out of my thoughts, my eyes darting up to the dumpster, where a dark-haired girl stands, lips parted and a bag of trash at her feet. Spinning around, she leaves the bag she dropped behind and begins to run, her sneakers smacking against the concrete as she goes. She slips into the back door of one of the businesses, slamming it behind her.

"Shit," I mutter, pocketing my gun.

I'm about to go after her—I can't have any witnesses after all—when my phone rings with a call from John.

"Yeah?" I answer.

"Sam, we have a problem."

FOUR

Olivia

The lock clicks into place and I slam my back against the metal door, my breaths coming out as harsh pants.

What the fuck did I just witness?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"Shit!" I hiss. Fear thrums through my veins as I wait for a knock to sound on the metal door behind me. Fuck, what if he gets inside?

My feet thump against the floor as I run through the back, swinging open the door to the courtyard and rushing through the empty space into the bar at the front of the building. I make it to the front doors, locking them quickly and flicking the light switch. The front windows are tinted, and I thank God for whichever of my family members made that decision.

"What are you doing?—"

"Get down!" I shout at Joey, who's still prepping for service. One of his thick gray eyebrows tics up at my demand. "Girlie?—"

I don't let him finish before I'm behind the bar, my butt hitting the floor as I tug on the bottom of his shirt to pull him down with me.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" he asks once he's sitting next to me. "Dragging an old fella to the ground." He shakes his head. "You think these knees are going to be able to get back up?"

"Shh." I interrupt his rambling, and his head rears back like he can't believe I just shushed him. To be fair, I can't believe I just shushed him. "I saw something that I don't think I should have."

Joey eyes me, waiting for me to continue.

"I was taking out the trash and—" I can't even say it. My throat clogs, and I'm worried I'm going to choke on the words before I ever tell Joey what just happened.

"What is it?" he presses, his voice more comforting. He must be able to tell that something bad happened and that's why I'm acting this way.

"I saw a man kill someone!" I whisper-shout.

Joey's eyebrows shoot up, and he puts his hands on my shoulders in a somewhat reassuring gesture. "Olivia, do you know who it was?" He's serious now, no longer whining about the floor or his knees. He's trying to be calm, but I can tell from his furrowed brow that he's worried.

"No." I shake my head.

"Which building were they behind?"

I close my eyes and try to remember what's next to us. "The pizza shop," I recall after a moment.

Joey sucks in a breath.

"Why?" I ask frantically. "What does that mean?"

"Describe the men you saw. How many? What did they look like?"

I inhale deeply and try to remember. "There were two. One was younger and one was older, maybe middle aged." Normally, Joey would make a remark about me calling someone middleaged "older," but he doesn't say a thing. Just looks at me with big eyes, urging me to continue.

"The younger one was wearing a suit that looked shiny, and he had dark hair. I couldn't really see his face, though. The other one had gray in his hair and he was wearing black pants and a button-down with the sleeves rolled up."

Joey's eyes narrow. "Who shot who?"

"The younger one shot the older one."

"Okay, Olivia, this is important." He's gripping my shoulders tightly now. "Did anyone see you?"

My heart stutters. "Yes." I blow out an exhale. "The younger one. I dropped the garbage bag I was holding, and he turned around. He saw me run away."

Joey closes his eyes and breathes deeply.

This is bad. This is really bad.

"Did he see what building you went into?"

"I'm not sure."

"Okay." Joey nods. "We need to get you out of here."

"What?" I shake my head. "I can't leave! What about Grandpa?"

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"I'll figure it out. You just saw a mob hit, Olivia! You need to go."

Banging on the front door interrupts our fighting, and both Joey and I freeze. Maybe if we don't answer, they'll go away. But deep down, I suspect that's not what's going to happen.

A mob hit.

That's even worse than realizing I just witnessed a murder. It was more than a murder.

Mafia.

The Italian criminal organization has been alive in New Orleans since long before I was born. You don't grow up being half Italian-American without knowing about the mob. And it was a frequent argument between my parents. My mom considered my father a gangster. I asked Grandpa once, and he chuckled, telling me my father was not a criminal, just a dumbass. At the time, I wasn't sure what that meant.

The harsh knocking continues, and after a moment, I hear someone yell, "Open up, or we'll break down the door."

Joey mutters a curse. "Go upstairs. I'll try to get rid of them."

I nod, too scared to argue. Slipping around the end of the bar, I head for the stairs that lead up to the apartment. Grandpa is still napping on his recliner when I shut and lock the door behind me.

I listen as Joey opens the door, straining to hear him talking to the men. He tells them it's just him inside, and I hear as they tell him they're looking for a girl with brown hair. He tells them he's never seen such a girl and they ask to check the bar.

I'm holding my breath as I listen to the sound of their footsteps below. They don't find me downstairs or in the storage room. Finally, I hear them come back into the main section of the bar and Joey asks if they found what they're looking for.

"What's upstairs?" one of them questions.

"Nothing," Joey says coolly. They must not believe him, though, because they ask to check. They're adamant that they need to check up here. Joey is telling them no, but it doesn't matter, because I hear the sound of their shoes as they stomp up the steps.

I'm frozen in place, air stuck in my lungs. They knock on the door and Grandpa startles.

"Who the fuck is that?" he grumbles, sitting up in the recliner.

I try to put my finger over my mouth, signaling for him to be quiet.

"Open up!" the man on the other side of the door yells, and my grandpa stands, hobbling over to me.

"What are you doing crouching there, girl?" he asks loudly, too loudly. And then he reaches over my head, undoing the lock. I steady my back against the door, but it's a futile effort. Once the lock is open, the man on the other side pushes the door, and I slide forward on the hardwood.

I look up, meeting the eyes of two scary men that my grandpa just let into the apartment.

The one in front grins as he looks down at me, and the sight sends a bolt of fear rippling down my spine.

"You're coming with us."

It was stupid to come here. All I wanted was a fresh start, and now I'm absolutely sure that this is how I die.

FIVE

Sam

After my father's murder, I made sure that everyone responsible for his death was punished. So I understand Adrian's quest for revenge perfectly.

Two months ago, after he married my cousin, I had John rough him up a bit and give him an ultimatum. Once he visited me in Orleans Parish Prison, I was able to explain everything I knew about him.

That his father was killed by my uncle because he mishandled the organization. And if his father had worked for mine instead of my uncle, that would've never happened.

I believe in protecting the men who are loyal to me, not cutting them loose at the first sign of trouble.

But clearly, that wasn't enough for him to fully trust me. John called me after he and Adrian arrived at Madi's studio to find they were attacked by one of Damien's men. The girls handled the attacker, but the whole event led to Adrian admitting that he's been playing both sides the entire time. That he married my cousin to have an in with our family, all so he could destroy us in the name of vengeance.



His plan was to film me killing Damien and use it to have me locked up again. Two birds, one stone and all that. I can't help but smile to myself. It's not a bad plan.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

I should kill him for the betrayal, though. For even thinking about going against me. That's what any other man in my position would do, thinking that will exude their power and make sure everyone knows to never cross them.

But I don't work like that.

Like I said, I understand where Adrian was coming from.

If I was in his shoes, I can't say I'd do anything differently.

When he arrives at my home office the next morning, I can tell something in him has shifted. The other piece of information John passed along was that Adrian confessed his love for Madi, the two having a deep moment in the art studio. It seems my cousin has come a long way from detesting her arranged husband to falling head over heels for him.

I have no intention of hurting her any further, but it's obvious that Adrian thinks today will be his last day on earth.

"Morning," I greet as the lawyer enters my office.

His throat bobs on a swallow. "Good morning."

"Sit." I gesture to the seat across from my desk. "So I was right. You were out for vengeance, if what John tells me is true."

"It is." He nods.

"You wanted to take down the whole family for what Big Al did to your father." It's not a question as much as a statement.

"Yes," he admits.

"I can't blame you," I say, leaning forward and setting my mug on his desk. "I think I would have killed us all with my bare hands if someone murdered my father. Actually, I did do that."

Adrian blinks. "I take that as confirmation that Damien is dead."

I smile and wink at him. "I stand by what I said before. Big Al shouldn't have done that. If your father had worked for mine, he'd still be alive right now. But I can't change the past; all I can do is work on the present." I pause briefly, letting the words sink in. "So, you love my cousin, then?"

With his eyes on mine, he nods once more. "Very much so."

"And you would have saved her yesterday if she didn't do it herself, huh?"

He chuckles. "I should have known she'd be too stubborn for my help."

"That sounds like Madi." I can't help but laugh. "She's been like that since she was a kid. Maybe it's because she's the youngest. But she's always been too stubborn for her own good. So you know, I have no intention of making her a widow."

The lawyer's eyes widen, shock etched across his features. "Are you saying..."

"All's forgiven, Adrian." I wave a hand, metaphorically clearing the past and creating a blank slate for the future.

“I—” Adrian stutters, but I interject before he can form a complete sentence.

“I want you to work for me, though. You’re a damn good lawyer, and I also have no intention of wasting your skills. I’m not like my uncle, Adrian. I don’t go around killing for sport, especially not my own men. If you work for me, you’ll be an advisor. A consigliere. I can keep you on the legal side of things, if you’d prefer. But I think you and I could do great work together if you’re willing to be at my side.”

This is the other reason I won't end his life in retribution. It would be a waste of talent. A skill set I need more than ever, now that this family war has killed so many.

“So it’s done, then?” he asks, inhaling a deep breath. “This war?”

I nod, but a flicker of big doe eyes and brown hair running away from me flashes through my mind. “Almost. I have one loose end from last night to wrap up. After that, it’s over.”

“A loose end?” Adrian questions, his eyebrow ticked up. He knows as well as I do that a loose end after you just killed someone means trouble.

“A witness. Don’t worry, it's under control.”

Adrian nods, but I can see the concern in his eyes. If there's a witness to a murder, it’s his problem, after all, considering the new position I just bestowed upon him.

“Okay.” He extends his hand for me to shake. “I’m in.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

I grin, standing from the desk to walk around and shake his hand. “We’re gonna be great partners, Adrian. Welcome to the family.”

“We’ve come a long way.” I stand on the back porch of my family home, looking at my cousins. My family.

Lana and Naz came back from New York. Now that the war is over, and Lana's father, my Uncle Damien, is dead, it's safe for them to be here. Damien is the reason they ran away. He was forcing Lana to marry a congressman who was cruel and abusive, but she was in love with Naz, the low-level soldier who used to work for Marcus. Before I was locked up, I helped them escape to New York, getting Naz a job with Leo De Santis and protection from the Colombofamiglia.

John and Zoe stand next to them, my cousin's arm wrapped around his girl. He met her while pretending to be loyal to Marcus and Damien. He knew right away that something was up with the dancer he met at Saints and Sinners, and he was right. They had a common enemy in Marcus, leading to his downfall. For his entire life, John has been labeled as a psychopath, most of my family never believing he would be capable of love. But seeing him now with Zoe, it's apparent how much he adores her.

And then there's Madi and Adrian. My little blue-haired cousin has always been the most strong willed of all the women in my family. She never wanted to marry the lawyer next to her, but now it's clear that they're the perfect match.

It's strange to see my family members coupled up like this, and a pang of jealousy stabs at my heart, knowing I'll never have what they do. I'll never fall in love with a

woman when I know, in my line of work, that I'll never be able to protect her.

And the family has to come first.

"But we're all here now." I continue my speech. "The next generation, and I believe we can do better than our fathers and mothers did. I believe we are better. Tomorrow, we're going to rebuild this family. Better than it's been before. Stronger. But for today, we're going to celebrate." I raise the glass as my eyes find Naz. "Are you ready?" I ask.

"Absolutely," he says with certainty.

"Then let's have a wedding."

An hour later, my cousin and her love are married. There's food set up and a makeshift dance floor. The small number of guests we invited are eating, drinking, and dancing. Our celebration lasts well into the afternoon, and by evening, it's just family left.

John and I sit on the back porch with cigars as we watch the girls continue to dance, belting out the lyrics from some old Disney channel actress's song.

"This is good," John says.

I nod in agreement.

"And they found the girl."

"Yep." I take another puff, blowing out a thick cloud of smoke.

"What are you going to do with her?" John asks between his own inhales.

"We're celebrating." I clap a hand on his shoulder. "No business talk tonight, yeah?"

"Sure, sure." John nods and mimes zipping his lips.

We are celebrating, that much is true. But my mind is still on business, despite the current festivities.

There're a lot of things I need to handle now that I'm on the outside. It's been almost a year since my grandfather died, and in that time, my family has managed to dismantle his legacy. Our once thriving businesses are failing. Our shipments are missing. And the people once loyal to us are beginning to betray us.

But it's hard to focus on any of that. Because my mind keeps wandering back to the dark-haired girl who's sitting in my warehouse, waiting for me to deal with her.

My little witness.

SIX

Olivia

I'm not sure how long I've been here. My hands are secured behind my back and my ankles are tied to the legs of the chair the two men placed me in. They had a sack over my head, an item that caused me to hyperventilate for most of the trip here. Once we arrived, they switched it to a blindfold, but still, my sight being cut off has me anxious.

They told me I'm waiting for someone, but I don't understand who.

Joey's voice rings in my head, reminding me I'm dealing with themafia.

A scene flickers in the back of my brain, a memory from the last summer I spent in New Orleans with my father. I was at the bar, like I always was, spinning on one of the stools, when strange men walked in. They got in my father's face, shouting that he owed them money, and if he didn't pay, it was going to beherneck on the line. I recall that one of the men pointed at me while they said this.

Other patrons in the bar scattered away and my grandfather, who was still lucid back then, scooped me up and carried me to the stairs, telling me to go up to the apartment and play.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

I never understood what those men meant. But now, I think I'm starting to get it.

Criminals are quick to pull a gun when they have a problem.

And when laws are meaningless to you, the idea of killing someone isn't scary.

The room I'm kept in has been silent for most of the day, save for the three times the men entered to bring me a protein bar, bottled water, and a short bathroom break. I hear footsteps, but this time, they sound different. The shoes click against the cement and slowly come closer. I swallow hard and try to brace myself for whatever's coming next.

I think of my dad getting hit by those men, the way he fell to the ground, and try not to focus on my anxious thoughts, each fabricated scenario ending with my death. Maybe the Marcheses aren't a brave family.

And then, as the footsteps finally reach me, my mind drifts to my grandfather. The man who sold me out to these gangsters. But he doesn't know any better, not with his mind slipping away day by day. Who's going to take care of him if I'm not here?

I try not to think too hard about it, try not to focus on the ending I'm afraid of. Mostly because I don't want to cry and prove to this man just how weak I am.

The figure halts before me, and I inhale sharply in anticipation.

"Who are you?" It's a deep voice that speaks, the words rumbling from his chest like distant thunder. With my eyes covered and my heart hammering against my ribs, my

other senses work on overtime, desperately trying to piece together any information about my captor. He smells like bourbon and spice, the scents masculine — it's like heaven compared to the damp earthy stench I've been breathing in. Each breath I take fills my lungs with his intoxicating presence, making it harder to keep my composure.

Running my tongue over my chapped lips, I decide to tell him the truth. Honesty is the best policy and all that. Though, I'm not sure if murderers abide by the same code. "Olivia," I breathe out, and when he doesn't immediately respond, I add, "Marchese. Olivia Marchese."

"Olivia." I shouldn't like the way my name sounds on his lips, intriguing and sensual. I'm startled when his fingers find the edges of my blindfold, yanking the material over my head. I blink furiously, my eyes adjusting to the flickering fluorescent lighting. They dart around, trying to see where I am. It's a large, open space with high ceilings and concrete floors that are stained with God knows what. There's a metal table not far from me that's bolted to the ground, with cuffs dangling from the sides. I swallow the lump in my throat. Please, don't let me end up on that thing.

"Eyes on me," the man says, and my eyes snap to his obediently. "Good girl," he praises, and my stomach does a flip-flop. I'm not sure if it's from the praise or the sight of him.

I recognize him immediately — the stranger from the alleyway. Now that he's near, I can study every detail. He's breathtaking, his features raw and magnetic, impossible to ignore. Those dark chocolate eyes bore into me with a silent power. His midnight hair falls with perfect messiness around his chiseled jawline. A golden tan has his complexion glowing, and his frame ripples with lean muscle.

He's studying me, and I shrink beneath his penetrating stare.

"Marchese." He says my last name thoughtfully. "Your father is Sal?"

I nod. "He's dead."

"I heard. I'm sorry for your loss." He doesn't sound sorry, but I'm not going to accuse him.

"Who are you?" I ask, my voice hoarse.

A tic in his sharp jawline has his lips turning into a lopsided smile. "You don't know?" he asks, and I get the feeling he's not going to offer up his name, considering what I witnessed.

Feeling uneasy, I shake my head.

"Probably better that way, huh?"

"Are you going to—" I can't manage to say the words, but my captor smiles at my attempt.

"Are you comfortable?" His eyes drift to my restraints, completely ignoring my question.

"No."

"Didn't think so," he muses, and my brow pinches. "I can untie you if you promise to be a good girl and stay seated in that chair."

There he goes, calling me a good girl again. I don't like the way it makes me feel. No one's ever called me good before. Granted, no one's ever called me bad either. I'd have to be seen for either of those things to happen. I've always been in the background—there, but not acknowledged. My parents were too focused on their constant arguing to pay attention to me. And even after the divorce, I was just a

reminder of the other person. The most attention I was paid was when one was pestering me with questions about the other.

Even in school, I was invisible. The quiet girl who sat in the back with her nose pressed between the pages of a novel. It was safer that way. Standing out felt dangerous.

But I'm not invisible now. This man stares at me as if he's trying to embed me into his memory. And there's nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. I'm forced to be seen.

There's a lump in my throat preventing me from answering, so I simply nod once again. The fear from earlier is still here, but now it's swirling with too many other emotions, and I can't make sense of how I'm feeling.

He pulls a knife from his pocket, flipping it open and showing me the blade as he leans down. The ties around my ankles snap loose with a quick flick, and then he walks around me, doing the same to the ties around my wrists.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

Immediately, I bring my hands to the front of me, rubbing the raw skin of my wrists where the ties bit into my flesh.

"Olivia," he says in that deep voice. "Now, we need to talk about what you saw."

SEVEN

Sam

"I didn't see anything," Olivia says, her blue doe eyes flashing up at me. She's still seated in the chair, just like I told her, and there's something about her obedience that sends a spike of pleasure through me.

I want to see what other demands she'd obey, what those eyes would look like with my cock between her lips and her knees on the floor.

Jesus. I shake the images from my brain. I'm just sex deprived from being locked up for months, my mind running wild with these imaginary scenarios. But this isn't the appropriate time to be fantasizing. Right now, I need to make a decision about what I'm going to do with the girl.

It should be an easy one. Anyone else in my predicament would kill her. No witnesses, that's the way it needs to be. I have no desire to go back to prison just because some girl saw me put a bullet in my uncle while she was taking out the trash.

"We don't kill women, Sam. Ever." My father's words ring through my head, a moral code he instilled in me. I've killed many men in my life; my line of work calls for it,

after all. But I've never killed a woman.

This cognitive dissonance leaves me in a frozen state. I can't have a witness, but I can't kill the girl.

She's still looking up at me, blue eyes shining brightly with hope as she waits for me to bestow her punishment for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I want to punish her. I'm coming up with all kinds of dirty images, but death isn't one of them.

"Tell me more about how you didn't see anything, Miss Marchese." I redirect my attention, tamping down the unwarranted thoughts.

Her pink lips press together, eyes dropping from mine as she considers her response carefully. "Well, I was taking out the trash, and the bag broke when I went to toss it into the dumpster." She exhales a heavy breath. "It was wrong of me to leave it there, but I did. I went back into the bar and began to prep for service." Her gaze returns to meet mine, reminiscent of a student anxiously waiting to know if they passed the test.

And she did. She's lying, but her lies tell me exactly what I need to hear. That she doesn't intend to tell anyone about what she saw in that alley.

She's innocent.

But trust is a hard thing to give out. Especially when I've been burned before. She may be innocent, but I can't risk letting her go, only for her to skip on over to the police station and tell them what she saw.

Excuse me, Officer, I watched Sam Costello murder a man, and then he had me kidnapped.

I twist the gold metal on my finger, the signet ring with the Costello family crest. It belonged to my grandfather before it was passed down to my father, and now it belongs to me.

My birthright.

I'm the head of this family. I'm the one who needs to protect us. And I can't do that from prison.

And still, everything in me tells me not to kill the girl.

Her tongue darts across her lips as her hands clench on her thighs. She's quiet, but her eyes show me how nervous she is, how badly she wants to get out of this predicament.

She's handling this surprisingly well. I've seen men tied to that same chair, sobbing and pleading for their lives. But Olivia isn't crying or begging. She's saying all the right things and looking up at me like I'm the only one in the world with the power to save her.

Once again, visions of her on her knees resurface.

You could keep her.

It's a nasty thought that rears its head. Indecent. I can't keep her.

But then again, it would solve my problem.

EIGHT

Olivia

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"Okay" The dark-haired man still hovers above me, watching with curious eyes. I'm holding my breath, hoping my lies are enough to set me free. "I believe you, Olivia."

I relax as the sound of his voice washes over me. He believes me. I'm safe.

Then he adds words that make my stomach clench all over again. "But I don't know if I can trust you."

"You can!" I say quickly.

He chuckles. "Sure, that's what you say. But how am I supposed to believe that?" He looks at me expectantly, waiting for me to add more reasoning of why he can trust me. But he's right, trust is earned.

I chew on my lips, and his eyes dart to them. Slowly, he reaches forward and tugs my bottom lip free, making me gasp. "Don't do that around me," he whispers.

Swallowing hard, I ask. "Why?"

"You don't want to know." He shakes his head, dropping his hand and pulling back.

"I swear I won't tell anyone," I plead, hoping that will be enough for him to let me go, even if I know it's a feeble attempt. I'm dealing with a dangerous man here. A man who clearly doesn't have an issue killing people. Why not just kill me and solve his problem?

"I hope that's true, Olivia. But until I can trust you, I'm going to keep you."



"Keep me?" I nearly balk. Fear wraps around my heart, squeezing tightly. What does he even mean by keep me?

The stranger smiles. "Yes. Keep you. It's a win/win, don't you think? You get to keep your life, and I get to make sure that you won't do something stupid the second I let you go. I'm giving you a chance to earn my trust, Olivia. If you do, I'll set you free."

"And if I don't?"

The corners of his lips tic up even more. "I think you know the answer to that."

I die.

Tears pool at the edges of my vision, and I do everything I can to keep them from falling. Tilting my head back, I swallow past the lump in my throat.

As what he's saying really sinks in, anger builds inside of me. Who is this man to think that he can just keep me? All because I saw something I shouldn't have. But he did it in a public alley! I did nothing wrong. I was just taking out the trash and minding my business.

"This isn't my fault!" I shout, the frustration boiling over.

He doesn't seem to care much, unfazed by my outburst.

"Unfortunately, sometimes bad things happen to good people."

I scoff. "And that's supposed to make me feel better?"

"No." He shakes his head. "It's just the truth."

Somehow, that only makes me angrier, and I clench my fists. This state of limbo that he plans on keeping me in wasn't what I expected. It was black or white to me, life or death. I've escaped death, but now my life isn't mine. Now I belong to this sick murderer until he decides he can trust me enough to let me go.

Is that even possible for someone like him? Will he ever let me go?

My head is spinning and my stomach twists with sickness. I can't handle my new reality, and I have the urge to get up and run. But I'm barefoot and disoriented, with no idea where I am.

He reaches forward, his hands landing on my shoulders, the weight anchoring me.

"You're okay," he says, and that deep voice calms me in a way I wish it didn't. I'm still pissed.

"I don't even know your name!" I shout.

Those perfect lips tilt on that perfect jawline. "Sam. Sam Costello."

Realization floods me, and my pulse stutters. This is why Joey was so worried. Not just because I saw a murder and not just because it involved the mafia. But the Costello family. The Costellos are the mafia in New Orleans. They've run the primary criminal family since before I was born.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

I'm completely and utterly screwed.

NINE

Sam

I can tell the moment she realizes that I'm not just anyone who she witnessed committing a crime. That I'm the head of the Costello family. And now that she knows my name, I have even more reason to keep her.

It's not selfish, I try to tell myself. I'm not doing this because I want her. I'm doing this because I need to protect my interests. Obviously.

"I'm going to need you to wear this," I tell her, grabbing the hood the guys had put on her previously from the nearby table.

"No." She shakes her head rapidly, her hands darting out as if she might push me away if I try to put it over her head. "Where are you taking me?"

The cool demeanor she was wearing vanishes now that I've told her I have no intention of letting her go. She's nervous. Her hands form tight fists, her eyes darting around, a bead of sweat gathering at her temple. She's becoming more frantic, a caged animal running out of options. I don't blame her. I'd be nervous too.

My mind drifts back to the one and only time I was kidnapped, with a sack over my head just like this one. It was the same night my mother died. I wasn't nervous, though, not back then. I was confident. A cocky kid who had so many lessons on

what to do in a kidnapping situation that I was convinced I would come out of it unscathed.

But I guess emotional scars are different than physical ones.

I bend down so I'm at eye level with the girl. Reaching forward, I brush away the hair that's clinging to her face, tucking it behind her ear. Her eyes are glassy when they meet mine, and I can tell that she's losing the composure she's been working so hard to keep.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I tell her, my tone calm.

"How do I know that? How can I trust you?" Her words are an echo of my earlier ones.

"I guess we have to earn each other's trust," I say simply. "But right now, I'm gonna need you to go out on a limb and trust that I'm just putting this hood on while we move locations. Once we get to my house, I'll take it off. No handcuffs, no other restraints. Just this."

"I can't go to your house," she says, sounding exhausted. I think this whole event is starting to set in, plus I don't know the last time she ate. I have the urge to get her back to my house so I can feed her and tuck her into the guest room to rest.

"Why?" I know this is just going to be another run-around that will result in me getting what I want, but I ask anyway.

"The bar. I have a job to do; I run the place."

"You don't have any employees?"

"Not enough."

"Okay, I'll send someone to help while you're with me." Simple. Problem solved.

"No." She shakes her head. "Joey won't want to work with anyone you send, and it's my bar. I own it."

Sal, her father, has been running that place for years. He must've left it to her. I rub my temple. "Olivia, you're going to have to work with me here. I said I'll send someone to assist. If you say no, there's no other option."

She eyes me warily, unsure if she should be accepting my help. And maybe she shouldn't. I am the reason she's in this mess, after all.

"Anything else?" I ask, seeing the look on her face. She wants to say something more.

"My grandfather," she whispers.

"Gino." I know her grandfather; the bar is named after him. He was a friend of my nonno's, both of them Italian Americans. He was always a friend to the family, even after his son got into a lot of gambling debt, but he never joined us. Never became a made man. It gives me even more of a reason not to kill his granddaughter. He should be helpful in keeping her in line.

"He has dementia. I have to care for him. You can't take me..."

There's sadness in her tone, a grief that she's holding on to. I can't imagine what that feels like, having a grandparent whose mind is slowly deteriorating. I feel for her, but I can't just let her go back home like nothing ever happened.

I run a hand through my hair, the solution to this problem not coming as easily.

"I'll send someone over to check on him, and I'll figure it out. Okay? Your grandfather will be fine, I promise."

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"You can't promise me that." She shakes her head.

"Come on, Olivia." I walk toward her, opening the hood. "Let's go."

She nods slowly, her lips pressed together. A single tear drips from one of her eyes, and before I can stop myself, I reach forward, wiping it away.

And then I slip the hood over her head and escort her out to the car.

"I'll hire a nurse for your grandfather while you stay with me."

Olivia is sitting next to me in the car, the hood still over her head and her seatbelt crossed over her chest. I think her exhaustion is the only reason I was able to get her out of the warehouse and into the car without resistance. Her limbs seemed to ache as she stood up on wobbly feet. And her head leaned against the window once the car started moving, her hands clasped in her lap.

I assume she's still scared, still worried. And I don't know why her silence grated on me. I wanted to hear her voice again, see some spark of emotion rather than the dull defeat she's emitting.

That's when I decided I just needed to solve a problem for her. And a nurse for her grandfather seems like the perfect solution. That's what she was worried about, after all. That no one would be there to care for her grandfather if I kept her.

But immediately after the words leave my lips, I can see the anger rise within her. She straightens, her head lifting from the window.

"I don't want a nurse!" she lashes out, her hands flying. The only thing restraining her is the seatbelt. If there wasn't a sack over her head, I think she would've hit me by now.

"Easy." I reach over, grabbing both her hands and pinning them down in her lap. "I'm helping you."

She scoffs. "You're not helping me. You're helping yourself."

Her words cut deep. I solved her fucking problem. Why is this making her mad?

"Take the help or leave it, Olivia. It doesn't change anything for me," I say, my frustration slipping out.

Her body goes limp, the fight leaving her. Wordlessly, she pulls away from me, her head going back to the window. I let go of her hands, but they don't move, staying in her lap.

Suddenly, I miss her fight. Her silence once again seems like a worse punishment for me.

I'm longing for the way she obeyed me back in the warehouse, back when she still thought she had a chance of getting away from me.

For the rest of the drive home, she doesn't speak. And when we arrive, I lead her from the Escalade, waiting to remove the hood until we're inside.

She glances around the mansion I inherited from my father, unbothered by the ornate displays of wealth. Still silent, she follows me up the stairs as I bring her to the guest suite. She waits until I leave, the door closing with a soft click behind me, and then I hear it.



Sniffing and muted cries.

TEN

Sam

I'm thinking about my mother as I enter my home office, my fingers itching for a glass of good alcohol to numb the intrusive thoughts. It's the house. Her ghost haunts me here.

When my father was still alive, I had a townhouse in one of the newly built areas of New Orleans. I liked that townhouse—the modern design, the solitude. Mostly, I liked leaving these ghosts behind.

But John sold it while I was rotting away in Orleans Parish Prison, and this house has been in my family since before I was born.

Waiting for me in my office, I find John. He's holding a crystal glass of amber liquid when I walk in. I go to the bar cart in the corner of the room and pour my own glass of bourbon before bringing the tumbler to my lips and letting the alcohol burn its way down my throat.

It feels good to be out. To be in the comfort of my own haunted home, wearing my clothes, and drinking my alcohol.

"How'd it go?" my cousin asks. Out of everyone in my life, John knows me the best. He's been my closest friend since we were kids. I was two when he was born, and though I don't remember meeting him, I recall my father telling me how he brought me to the hospital where his sister had just delivered her first and only child. How they had helped me "hold" the baby, and when he gripped my little finger inside his palm, I had gasped, declaring that he was squeezing me. And how I had told that

baby that he was my cousin, and that meant we were best friends.

My childlike statement became the truth. John spent a lot of time running through the halls of this house with me. And once my training to take over la famiglia began, John was at my side, ready to have my back through all of it.

"About as well as it could." I shrug, sinking into the cushioned seat next to him.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"The guys said you brought her here," he deadpans. Though, my cousin has never been great with emotions.

"I did."

"Why?" he asks. If I had sent John, he probably would've shot the girl and moved on. Or maybe he would have relayed a very nice threat to get the point across and made her run across the country and never come home. My father gave John the same lessons as me, the same rules to abide by. But the only one that has ever truly stuck in his head is family, above all. And at the end of the day, he'll do whatever it takes to protect the family.

There is no ending where John would have brought the girl home.

Maybe that's because he has his own girl at home, waiting for him. But I digress.

The truth is, I'm not sure why I brought Olivia here. I can boil it down to the turmoil in my head and my inability to kill a woman due to a moral code my father imprinted on me at a young age.

But part of me knows that I just wanted her here. Even if I don't understand why.

I shrug again, and John scoffs at my lack of an answer.

After draining his glass, I watch him discard it onto the side table as he leans forward, resting his forearms on his thighs while his eyes lock with mine. "This is dangerous, ya know."

His words bring forth what my brain has been screaming.

Keeping a witness alive, bringing her into my home — those are bad moves.

"It will be fine." I dismiss his concerns, though my gut nags at me that danger is looming. I've only been out for a little over twenty-four hours. I just killed the acting boss of this family. Everything is chaos, and I decided to take a prisoner.

"We're not in the clear," John adds. "We have a problem with the Iron Serpents."

The name of the motorcycle club grates at my ears, and my chest aches, feeling like someone stabbed a knife right into my heart. I rub at the organ, trying to dull the sensation that rockets through my body every time someone mentions those snakes.

We've been focused on getting me out of prison since my uncle put me away. John's quest for justice on my behalf ultimately led to him killing Marcus, though our cousin didn't leave him much of a choice when he kidnapped Zoe. And once I was released, I was focused on taking out Damien. And then everything with Olivia...

There hasn't been much time for John and me to discuss anything else.

"What happened?" I ask, trying to hide the pain in my voice. John knows that the Iron Serpents grate on me, that even hearing their name sends me back to being that ten-year-old boy, desperate to save his mother, but who failed miserably. I don't need to hide myself from my cousin, my best friend. But still, the idea of showing my vulnerability has me reaching for a refill. I won't be weak in front of anyone.

John sighs, his eyes on my glass as I pour more cognac. "They've been moving into our territory while we were distracted by Marcus and Damien." John leans back, his face tight with concern. "They've taken over some of our neighborhoods. Two of our dealers have been injured, and another two are dead. They're coming for the Quarter

next."

My blood simmers. The fucking snakes. First, they took my mother, and now they're trying to take everything else. I down the rest of my drink, the burn in my throat matching the anger in my chest. I can't let them run this family into the ground.

"How many?"

"At least thirty members spotted in the Quarter. They're operating out of that old warehouse on Tchoupitoulas."

I grip the crystal tumbler so hard, I'm surprised it doesn't shatter.

"We need to send a message. Clear them out, block by block, if we have to." John leans in closer, his voice deadly serious.

My cousin will always resort to violence first. A trait that has its place in our world. But that's not how I handle things. It's not how my father did business or how my nonno started this family.

"We'll start with a meeting," I tell John, trying to calm the anger now pulsing in my ears.

John shakes his head. "And if talking doesn't work?" He says "talking" like it's a bad word.

"Then we'll try your way."

"My way will be bloody." John quirks an eyebrow.

"Well, if talking doesn't work, I'm afraid bloody will be the only way forward."

John claps his hands on his thighs and stands. "I'll have Adrian set something up."

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

I nod, bringing my cognac to my lips and taking another long pull. My brain is already racing with thoughts and plans.

This is what I should be focusing on — not the girl upstairs with those big, blue eyes.

Olivia. Even thinking her name sends a jolt through me that I need to suppress. I can't afford distractions, not with snakes slithering into our territory. The family has to come first. Always has, always will.

John makes a move for the door, but pauses at the last second, turning to me with one more question.

"What about the girl?" he asks.

I clench my jaw.

What about the girl?

"She stays here until I figure out what to do with her."

Something flickers in my cousin's eyes, and it looks like uncertainty. But he doesn't say anything, just nods and leaves me to stew in my office with visions of Olivia.

ELEVEN

Olivia

I wake up in a strange bedroom. It takes a moment before the events of yesterday come flooding back to me.

I'm a prisoner.

At least, that's what I think I am. Sam never said as much, and after he led me to this room, I ended up crying before passing out on the overly comfortable bed. So I haven't checked the door to see if I'm locked in yet.

I feel groggy and disgusting. I've been wearing the same clothes since I saw him in that alley. My gut churns at the memory. I wish I would've never taken out the trash. But the idea of Joey being in my place doesn't sit any better with me. There's no way to know if Sam would've taken Joey as a prisoner or if he would've just killed him.

Releasing a heavy breath, I push myself upright to survey my new prison. A bed dominates the center, flanked by pristine walls. Three entrances break up the space — one reveals a private bathroom, while two remain shut. I recall entering through one of the closed doors. This place is enormous. The hood prevented me from seeing the exterior or our approach, but once Sam removed the covering, I realized we were inside the biggest house I've ever seen.

I touch the sheets. They're soft, probably a high thread count, and I'm covered with a plush duvet. It's not that I grew up poor, at least not when I was in Montreal with my mom and stepdad. My mother's second husband is wealthy. We had everything we needed and many of them with name brands, unlike when I spent the summers with my dad, wearing outdated clothes and socks with little holes. But it was nothing like this.

Tossing off the duvet, I stand from the bed, making my way to the bathroom first. The en suite is twice the size of the one in my apartment that's shared with my grandfather. My chest pangs as I think of him. He's all alone in that apartment,



probably confused and unable to care for himself. I assume after the men took me that Joey would have stayed and helped out, but that's not his job.

Another ache in my chest forms. Joey probably thinks I'm dead. That those men dragged me from our apartment and killed me before I even had a chance to talk to Sam. I scrub a hand over my face. He probably doesn't know what to do with the bar or my grandfather.

I need to get out of here.

Back out in the room, I pull open the heavy curtains on the far wall, exposing a view of what I assume is the backyard. There's a huge in-ground pool with an attached hot tub, the water crystal clear and inviting in the sunlight. Beyond that, beautiful gardens stretch out in meticulously maintained rows, bursting with colorful flowers and perfectly trimmed hedges.

I unlock the latch on the window and push the glass open. So I'm not trapped. Tentatively, I cross the room and try the handle on the door. It twists, seemingly unlocked.

I look between the two, considering my options. I'm on the second story, I think. If I take the window, I'll need to scale the side of the house, and I'm not sure what's out there. If I take the door, I'll probably run into my captor or his guards. I'm not sure how likely I am to succeed in either scenario, but the window calls to me. At least, that way, I'm outside and not trapped in this house.

Sucking in a deep breath, I swing my leg over the windowsill and into the fresh air. My second leg follows and, suddenly, I'm perched on the ledge of the second-story window. The Louisiana air warms my skin and promises of freedom tug at my heart. Below me, the manicured lawn of Sam's estate stretches like an endless green sea and the sun reflects off the surface of the large pool. My heart races, adrenaline surging

through my veins as I prepare for my escape.

There's a branch jutting out of the nearest tree, and I decide my best plan is to try to jump and grab it. From there, I can use the tree to climb the rest of the way down. I steal a glance back into the room, the shadow of Sam's presence looming in my mind. He said he was keeping me. But after he discarded me in this room, he never gave me any rules or instructions. Who knows where he even is?

The best thing for me to do is leave. Negotiating with him didn't work, and I can't stay trapped here with my grandfather at home.

Taking a deep breath, I grip the window frame tightly, my palms slick with nerves, and leap. My fingers grasp around the tree limb, the bark rough on my palms. I exhale a whoosh of air and try to steady my breathing. Shimming to the tree, I wrap my legs around the trunk and slowly work my way down. Finally, I land softly in the grass, my feet on steady ground. A smile lifts my cheeks. I did it.

And then I hear the rhythmic sound of two hands slapping together. Clapping.

Spinning around, I find Sam behind me. My face flushes red with embarrassment, stomach sinking to my feet. How did I not hear him? How long has he been watching me? Worse is the fear that tugs at my nerve endings. What's going to happen now?

"That was quite impressive." He's wearing dark dress slacks and a crisp white button-down. The top few buttons are undone, and the sleeves are rolled up, giving me a glimpse of his muscled forearms. "But where do you think you're going?" There's a sinister edge to his deep voice, and while we both know that I was trying to run away, Sam lets the silence linger between us, waiting for me to admit it.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"I need to go home." I cross my arms over my chest and stand tall, refusing to be intimidated by this gangster.

My display only makes Sam laugh. Three long strides and he's in front of me. I take a step back and he takes another forward. My spine hits the tree, the rough bark snagging against my t-shirt, and Sam cages me in with both arms. With his face mere inches from mine, I can smell his scent — bourbon and spice. It invades my nostrils, overtaking my senses.

"For what?" Sam tilts his head with the question, eyebrows raised. The action feels like he's mocking me, because we both know why I want to go home, and we both know he's not going to let me. And still, we do this dance.

Closing my eyes, I inhale a breath and summon all of my strength. "My grandfather is alone. I don't think you understand how dangerous that is for someone in his condition?—"

"I hired a nurse," he retorts quickly. Definitively. No longer a question of if I want him to hire a nurse. He just did it.

"I told you I didn't want you to hire a nurse." I'm barely holding myself together, already flustered and angry, the emotions rising in my throat.

"And I told you that you were staying here. You need someone to take care of your grandfather, so I hired someone. It's done." Sam isn't worked up the way I am. He's eerily calm. His words matter of fact. It only seems to piss me off further.

I inherited my temper from my father — at least that's what my mother told me. And right now, it's heating my blood stream until it roars to a full boil. I clench my teeth, my molars grinding together in a way I know will cause me pain later. My fingernails bite into my palms, leaving little crescent moon indents.

My foot lifts and shoots down, checkered Vans stomping on the fancy — probably a name brand I've never heard of — shoe Sam is wearing.

Those dark eyes light up, and for a moment, we stand there, with me caged against the tree, breathing heavily, and him staring deeply into my eyes.

"Brat." He doesn't say it like an insult; he almost sounds excited. And before I can retort and tell him I'm not a brat, that he's just an asshole, I'm being lifted. He slings me over his shoulder like I weigh no more than a sack of potatoes.

"Hey!" I shout, my fists pounding on his back. "Put me down, you ogre!"

Sam chuckles, a deep, throaty sound that sparks the butterflies that live inside me, causing them to flap their wings wildly. Traitors.

"It's time we set some ground rules, Olivia."

I don't like where this is heading, and I refuse to give up. My fists continue their assault the entire way into the house.

I'm not sure what Sam's plan is with me, but I do know one thing.

I'm not going down without a fight.

TWELVE

Olivia

I'm in the arms of a killer.

There're about fifty tornados swirling through my mind — each one competing for attention as they wind together, mixing my thoughts and feelings and creating a monster of confusion.

I watched this man shoot someone in broad daylight in an alley, where anyone, I.E. me, could have seen. Who does that?

I grew up with a mother who warned me of tall, dark, and handsome Italian men and how one look at them would ruin your entire life. And one look at Sam is definitely not helping.

I should be afraid of him.

But the way my body responds to his touch — tingles spreading under the surface of my skin — is not fearful.

Like I said. Confusion.

Sam brings me through the back door, past the glimmering pool and patio with its color-coordinated furniture. He moves swiftly through the sunroom and living room, opening French doors that lead into what I assume is an office. His house is large, but I don't get a chance to admire any of the rooms as he drops me onto a leather chair. Before I have a second to catch my breath, he's leaning in. A hand on each chair arm, his face hovers inches from mine.

I can see how it would be easy to fall for someone like him, minus the whole "I'm keeping you" Neanderthal situation. He's easy on the eyes, with chiseled features and

the classic brooding good looks that make hearts flutter. And if you're into the whole being tossed around thing — clearly, he's good at that as well.

But I have no interest in growing closer with my newfound captor. Despite how close he literally is right now.

"Olivia," he basically purrs, and I refuse to like the way it sounds. "I don't think you understand the gravity of the situation you find yourself in." With his admonishment, he clicks his tongue.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"I understand you're a jerk who won't let me leave to check on my sick grandfather." I give him a look filled with sass, somehow overly confident that he's past the option of killing me.

"That's getting old." He shakes his head. "I already told you, I hired a nurse. Find a new excuse."

"What about my bar?" I bite back. "Who do you expect to run it?"

"I can send someone over to take care of it for now," he answers, as if everything I mention has an easy solution.

"I don't want some random man managing my bar. I want to manage my bar. What do you not get about that?" With every word, I'm getting louder. For a moment, I wonder if there's anyone else in this house and what they think about our arguing.

"That's not an option. The options are, I send someone or the bar stays closed. Choose, Olivia."

His voice isn't mean or angry, just stern. I feel like a child, kicking and screaming, while Sam is the calm adult laying out my choices.

I purse my lips together, not wanting to pick one of his options. I need to figure out how to get away from him.

"You're thinking too hard," he says, softer this time. One of his hands reaches forward, finding the piece of hair that fell out of place during the whole being tossed

over his shoulder situation. He swipes it back behind my ear, his knuckles grazing against my skin. He pauses like that for a moment, his touch lingering, and I hold my breath.

"This doesn't have to be difficult," Sam adds. "You don't need to do anything, Olivia. All you need to do is listen to me and prove to me that I can trust you. I'll handle everything else. Do you think you can do that?"

Something about him is lulling me into a sense of comfort. I fight the urge to nod and promise to be good. Maybe it's the people pleaser in me that doesn't want to ever be in trouble. But there's another side of me that rages, the one that doesn't want to be told what to do, that refuses to let anyone else take care of me. I've always taken care of myself, and it's worked better that way. Relying on anyone else has always ended in disappointment, and I don't expect Sam to be any different. Especially not under the circumstances that led us here.

But if I keep fighting, he's just going to keep asserting his dominance, and I get the feeling that Sam doesn't lose.

I inhale deeply and nod.

"Words. I want to hear you say it, Olivia. Tell me you're going to be a good girl for me?"

My heart rate spikes. I don't know what it is about that phrase that sends a bolt of excitement mixed with panic through me. I don't want to be a good girl for him, but something about the words on his lips makes my body tingle.

Sam eyes me expectantly. My lips are still pressed together, and he's still hovering over me. I don't think he's ever going to let me out of this chair if I don't meet his demand. I close my eyes, gathering my strength. I can say what he wants me to and



not mean it. I'll never actually yield to Sam Costello.

"I'll be a good girl," I mumble.

"Promise me," he demands, dragging out this torture.

"I promise."

Sam's eyebrow lifts, and it's clear he wants more. That my promise wasn't good enough.

Swallowing down my annoyance, I try again. "I promise to be a good girl."

That makes him smile, the grin stretching across his stupid perfect face.

"Atta girl," he praises, and even though I hate it, I can't suppress the warm feeling that coats my body. "Now, let's get you settled in."

Finally, he steps back, putting much-needed space between us. Extending his hand, he helps me from the chair.

This is all an act, I remind myself. I just need to survive long enough to get out of here. And if I need to lie to Sam Costello to do so, then that's what I'll do.

THIRTEEN

Sam

She's getting under my skin.

What is it about this little brunette that makes me want to own her? Control her. I

want her obedience, crave it even. She gave me a taste of it, back when she was in my warehouse, pleading for her life. And now that I've spared it, she's all bite.

I seem to like that too. Her constant fight has my dick hardening beneath my slacks.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

I won't break, though. Better men have tried. But they didn't turn me on the way she does.

Lips tilted in a pout, she follows me out of my office, frustrated with not getting her way. She wants to leave, but that pout isn't going to get her what she wants.

"Let's make a deal," I say, and Olivia's gaze snaps to mine. Her arms are still crossed over her chest, and she narrows her eyes, scrutinizing me as if she's trying to figure out my angle.

"What kind of deal?"

"I'll take you to your bar. You can check in on everything and see your grandfather."

"Okay..." She seems hesitant, even though this is exactly what she wanted.

"But first, I need you to shower. I'll have new clothes sent to your room. You'll get cleaned up and dressed. I have some things to take care of, so you'll be on your own this afternoon, but you'll behave." I give her a stern look at that demand. "One of my men will be here to look out for you. I'll be back for dinner, and you'll eat with me. If we get through today with no more problems, I'll take you to your bar in the morning."

Olivia tugs her bottom lip between her teeth, gnawing on the poor thing while she thinks over my offer.

With a mind of its own, my hand darts out, freeing her bottom lip. She gasps as I

make contact, her lips still parted.

Electricity fizzles between us. Just a simple touch, and we both can feel it.

I cough, pulling my hand back and shaking off this interaction. It's nothing.

"So?" I ask, bringing us back to the conversation.

"Okay." She nods. "I accept your deal."

"Good—" I'm about to call her a good girl, a compliment I keep finding myself giving. I can't help it when I see how her eyes sparkle, suggesting that even though she resents being stuck here, my approval still makes her happy. But then John walks through my front door, his eyes serious, and I know there must be a problem.

"Go upstairs," I tell her.

Olivia looks between me and my cousin, and I think she must feel the tension that's just entered the room. Surprisingly, she doesn't argue, just nods her agreement and turns on her heel, heading for the staircase.

I have to redirect my mind, shake her from my thoughts, because I get the feeling that I'm not going to like whatever John's about to say.

Olivia is barely up the stairs before my Aunt Carlotta barges through my front door. One of my men is gripping onto her arm, trying to pull her back, but she shakes it off with a stream of curses flying from her lips.

"Carlotta's here," John deadpans, gesturing to our aunt. My grandfather had four children; three girls, all born before my father. As the only male heir, my father was always meant to take over the famiglia, a fact that angered the oldest two daughters.

And Carlotta? She married Damien.

I expected my newly widowed aunt to be pissed off when she discovered her husband was murdered right after I was “missing.” What I didn't expect was to be distracted with a little blue-eyed witness while also having a motorcycle club coming after my business.

I rub my temples.

"Aunt Carlotta, why don't we speak in my office." I try to redirect her, but she's not hearing me.

She's a disheveled mess, looking the roughest I've ever seen her. My aunt has always been focused on appearance. Dressed to the nines, with a full face of makeup every time she leaves the house. But Carlotta's face isn't made up, save for the black smears under her eyes. She's wearing a matching sweat suit and sneakers, which is very dressed down for her.

With a hiss, she marches until she's face to face with me, a manicured finger stabbing me in the chest.

"You little asshole!"

I grab her finger, pulling it down and away from me. She winces at the roughness of my action. "My office," I growl, tugging her through the French doors.

John follows us, shutting the doors so my new house guest doesn't hear our conversation.

"How dare you!" she shouts, her hand flailing in the air. "Who do you think you are?"

"The boss." My voice is commanding as I step into her space, backing her up until she falls into the chair Olivia was just sitting in. For the first time, I see fear in my aunt's eyes.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

I don't feel bad about scaring her. Not after the mess she put her children through. My cousin, Lily, committed suicide to avoid marrying the monster her parents arranged for her. And her younger sister, Lana, tried to do the same when they wanted her to marry the same man. I had to step in and get her and Naz out of New Orleans, an act that pissed off my aunt and uncle. By that point, they had already framed me for my father's murder, but John was able to get the two of them out of here.

In my aunt's eyes, I'm sure I'm the villain. Ruining her plans, killing her husband. Now she has nothing left. A dead daughter, a dead husband, and her last living child won't speak to her.

But these were her doings. Not mine.

"You ruined everything!" she cries, tears dripping from her eyes, smudging the remnants of her mascara.

"I could say the same for you." I scoff. "I was in prison for eight months, Carlotta."

She sniffs, bringing a hand to her face to wipe away the tears. "What are you going to do with me?" she asks in a weak voice.

With a sigh, I step back. My fingers reach up to rub away the ache at my temples. I won't kill my aunt, as much as I would like to.

"You'll live," I tell her, my voice void of sympathy. "I'll make sure you have money for basic needs, but nothing more. You'll stay in New Orleans, but you'll keep far away from Lana. Understood?"

She nods, dabbing at her tears.

"And my husband's funeral? His body?"

"Traitors don't get funerals," John snipes from where he's leaning against the far wall of my office. I raise a hand to silence him.

He's right, traitors don't get funerals.

"I'll make an exception," I tell my sniffing aunt. "If his body is found, he'll have a cheap and poorly attended funeral."

She winces at my phrasing. Could be that I didn't promise her husband's body would be found, and if it is, the cheap funeral will not be what she wanted, but she doesn't fight back again. She knows she has nothing left to bargain with. Nothing left to hold on to.

Carlotta stands, wiping one last time at her eyes before she turns to leave, wordlessly. Not a thank you or apology. She won't admit that she was wrong and now her husband's dead because of it.

"One last thing," I say, stopping her. She turns her head to look at me over her shoulder. "Did you know they were going to kill him? My father."

Creases form on her face, and her eyes drop to the floor. She doesn't open her lips to respond, but the truth lingers between us.

"Get the fuck out of my house." I gesture to the door, and Carlotta nods, leaving hastily. She plotted to have her own brother killed. She thought she was going to be queen, with her husband reigning, but this was never her castle, and she never had any right to the throne.



This is my legacy.

My birthright.

And she can fuck right off.

FOURTEEN

Olivia

Good girl.

The two words reverberate through my head as I enter the en suite bathroom. This space is huge and exudes wealth. The marble flooring is cool to the touch, and there's a wide walk-in shower with a rainfall head, enveloped by glass. It looks like something out of a spa or a luxury home style magazine.

I shed my clothing, the layers sticking to my sweaty skin. Suddenly, I realize how gross I feel after not showering for however long. It felt like I was trapped in that warehouse for days, but in reality, it couldn't have been that long.

My stomach growls on cue, reminding me that I'm as hungry as I am dirty. I decide that after this, I'll seek out the kitchen of my new prison and find something to eat.

Turning on the hot water, I step into the shower spray and let it scald me. The burn on my skin reminds me I'm alive, and after what I saw in that alleyway, that's something to be thankful for.

Sam said he would take me back to the bar tomorrow. All I need to do is get through the day. That shouldn't be too hard, right?

There's an insert in the shower wall with soaps and shampoos from a local brand, a fleur-de-lis on the logo. Squirting body wash into my palm, I inhale the jasmine scent. I use the matching shampoo and conditioner, and by the time I exit the shower, I feel like a new woman.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

After drying off, I find a fluffy towel hanging on the hook and cover myself with that, remembering that Sam said he would have clothes sent up for me. Whatever the other man who interrupted us wanted, it looked serious. I wonder what it is, and if it will take up enough of Sam's time that I won't have to be close to him again.

Being close to him is a confusing mess.

Whenever he's near, my mind and my body seem to be wanting different things. My thoughts scream at me to keep my distance, to remember all the reasons why getting involved with someone like Sam is a terrible idea, but my body betrays me with every quickened heartbeat and shiver of anticipation. It's already exhausting, this constant battle between what I know I should do and what I desperately want to do.

As I open the door to the bedroom, I'm shocked to see a woman standing there, casually leaning against the dresser as if she belongs. Looking like something out of a social media ad or a perfectly curated Instagram post, she's wearing jeans that are fashionably baggy with a white top tucked into them, the kind of effortless outfit that actually takes hours to perfect. Her lips are painted a bold shade of red that makes her teeth look impossibly white when she smiles, and her blonde hair is swept into a low bun with artfully arranged wisps of curls framing her face in a way that seems both intentional and carefree.

"Hi," she greets with a friendly smile. "I'm Ana. Sam sent me." She gestures to the rack of clothes I failed to notice, brimming with a wardrobe larger than what's in my closet and dresser combined. The sight of so many designer labels and pristine fabrics makes my head spin.

I tug my robe tighter, feeling exposed despite being covered. "Hi," I squeak out. When Sam said he was sending up clothes for me, this is not at all what I thought. I'd expected maybe a few basic items from a department store, not what looks like an entire boutique.

"You're gorgeous," Ana comments, either unaware of my discomfort, or she doesn't care. She reaches forward, fingering a strand of my wet hair, invading my personal space with the casual confidence of someone used to handling reluctant clients. "What a nice color," she muses. "Sam guessed your size, so I brought a few different sizes. And I had to guess what your color profile would be based on his description, but I think I did a pretty good job. Oh! And food. He sent me up with this."

Ana stops talking for long enough to grab a plate filled with breakfast foods — eggs, bacon, hash browns, and fruit — and extends it to me. My stomach rumbles traitorously at the scent of the meal. "You eat while I pull out a few options."

I'm too hungry to argue, so I dig in while she flips through the rack before she finds whatever she's looking for, the metallic sound of hangers sliding against each other filling the room. Once I'm finished, she extends an emerald-colored dress to me. "Here, try this one." The silk catches the light, making the fabric shimmer like liquid.

I take the hanger from her, eyeing the piece with trepidation. This isn't something I would normally wear. I spend most of my days in yoga pants and old t-shirts, even before becoming a bar owner. On a rare night out, I would put on jeans and a "nice" t-shirt. One without a band logo or holes. Dresses are an even bigger rarity for me. Reserved only for weddings and special occasions, and even then, I usually have to be dragged shopping by someone else.

I extend the dress back to her. "This isn't really my style."

Ana tilts her head, studying me like I'm a puzzle she needs to solve. "Okaaaay." She

draws out the word, still staring at me. "What is your style?"

"Comfort."

That makes her snort out a laugh, the sound both elegant and dismissive. "I can work with that, but you should probably try on the dress too."

"Why?"

Ana shrugs, her perfectly manicured nails drumming against a nearby hanger. "Sam said to make sure you have a full wardrobe, no expense spared. And he specifically mentioned dresses. Casual and formal."

"Formal?"

What in the world would I need a formal dress for? I'm his prisoner, not his date to some fancy gala.

Ana already has her back turned, skimming through the racks of hangers with practiced efficiency. "I can call my assistant and have her pick up some leggings, t-shirts, things like that. But in the meantime, try this." She pulls a pair of wide-legged black pants off the rack and pairs them with a simple white top. The outfit doesn't look basic or cheap. The materials seem too soft and luxurious; the kind of clothes I'd normally walk right past in a store.

Once I pull them on, I can't help but see someone else in the mirror, someone who's not me. "God, no," I mutter. I look like a fancy housewife, and I hate the feeling. The clothes fit perfectly, but they feel like a costume.

"Be a good girl." Sam's voice echoes in my head, and I remind myself that I need to get through today, and then he'll take me home tomorrow. The thought feels hollow,

but I cling to it anyway.

I swallow the lump in my throat and steel my spine, squaring my shoulders against my reflection.

I can do this.

It takes far longer than I'd like for Ana and me to decide on a wardrobe that doesn't make me nauseous. I have jeans and comfortable tops, even if they're not old band tees. And leggings and plain t-shirts, which I much prefer. There're also more dresses than I've ever owned and I hope that they never get worn. But if Sam wants to waste his money, that's fine with me.

Ana is packing up the leftover clothes when I get hit with a longing for home. To be in my own space, wearing my casual clothes, dusting more cobwebs from my bar. The familiar smell of stale beer and wood polish seems like heaven in my current state.

And then I think of my mother. She calls me every day, and if I don't answer, her head goes to the worst places. It's been especially bad since I've moved here. My mother can't remember anything she used to love about New Orleans. The whole city is tainted with bad memories. Every time I speak with her, she sounds relieved to hear I'm alive, as if this city might eat me up and never let me go.

Considering I'm trapped in a mobster's mansion...maybe she was right.

"What day is it?" I ask Ana. My internal clock is a little fucked from captivity, and I'm not sure how long I've been here, but it feels like a week.

"Sunday," she replies, continuing to put the discarded clothing back on hangers. She's completely unfazed while I realize it was Friday when I first saw Sam shoot that

man... Two days of my life are completely gone.

Fuck. My mom is probably losing her shit.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"Mind if I use your phone for a sec?" I'm testing my luck here. I saw her use it to contact her assistant about getting me those leggings. When they grabbed me from the apartment, my phone was stuffed in my yoga pants waistband. Between the struggle and everything else, I have no clue if they swiped it or it just fell out somewhere.

Ana glances at me with pursed lips, considering me.

"I just want to call my mom," I add. "Let her know I'm okay."

Something softens in Ana's eyes. "Be quick," she says, pulling the device from her pocket.

I thank her profusely as I grab the phone and type the digits of my mom's phone number. She answers after two rings.

"Mom, it's me."

"Olivia! Thank God. I've been so worried. Where are you? Why haven't you answered my calls? Whose number is this?" She rattles off her questions in quick succession.

"Mom, I'm okay," I interject. "I'm safe." The wordsafeels strange on my tongue. I say it to assure her, but it doesn't feel like a complete lie. It should. How can I possibly feel safe when I've been taken captive by the head of the New Orleans crime family? But at the same time, I do feel safe. Safe in the sense that I don't believe Sam will kill me, or even hurt me. But I also don't believe he's letting me go anytime soon.



"Why haven't you been answering my calls?" she presses.

"I broke my phone," I lie. "I'm using a friend's right now. I'll get a new one soon, I promise. I just need to save up a little."

I can hear as she hisses out a breath. "Do you need me to send you money?"

"No, I got it."

"You can't be without a phone, Olivia! I'm having Richard send you money right now. Richard?—"

"Mom, no," I say sternly, causing her to pause her shouting to my stepfather. "I can handle this. I want to take care of myself."

That part is true.

Back in Montreal, my life was a series of one mistake after another. Jobs that left me unhappy and an ex who was perfect on the outside and toxic when we were alone.

Part of coming here was to escape the life I left behind. And the other part was to prove to myself that I can do it on my own. No man or mother needed. No more meddling in my life from either of them.

My mom clicks her tongue. "Olivia, I'm just trying to help."

"I know." I scrub a hand over my face. As much as I love my mother, the guilt tripping grates at my nerves.

"You always get so mad when I'm just trying to help you. Why won't you let me help?"

Her words activate me, turning me into the little girl who needs to erase her own feelings in order to make my mother happy.

Just take her help so she'll smile again.

Just tell her staying with dad was awful so she'll feel better.

Just keep dating Rhett because she'll be disappointed if you break up.

One after another, I did whatever my mother wanted in order to make her happy, but never myself. Moving to New Orleans was the first step in breaking that chain.

I suck in a breath and steel my spine. No more caving.

"I hear you. I know you're just trying to help, Mom. But I want to do this on my own, okay? I'll get a new phone and let you know when I have it. Can you trust me?"

I can practically hear her nails tapping, the way her teeth are clenching from not getting her way. But she yields, and I breathe in relief. "Okay. But call me every day. I need to know you're okay down in that hellhole?—"

"I will." I don't know if I can keep that promise, but I decide I'll deal with that later. "I have to go. Bye, Mom."

Hanging up the phone, I hand it back to Ana, thanking her again.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

I just need to make it to dinner, put on my best performance, and then tomorrow, I'll be back at the bar.

One step at a time.

I can do this.

FIFTEEN

Olivia

Sam is waiting, sitting at the head of the dining room table, when I arrive. He's too dressed up again. Wearing another pair of sleek dress pants with a button-down shirt that's rolled up at the sleeves. He's typing away on his phone, the muscles of his forearms on display. The top few buttons are undone, giving me a preview of his chest, and a sliver of dark ink peeks out where the fabric meets his skin. I wonder what tattoo is hiding beneath that shirt.

He looks up, pocketing the device just in time to catch me staring at him like some love-struck teenager. A sly, knowing smile rises on his full lips, and he stands in one fluid motion, pulling out the heavy wooden chair next to him and gesturing for me to sit with a gentlemanly flourish that makes my heart skip despite my best efforts to remain composed.

It feels like a silent dance between the two of us, a little game of power and restraint. He gives an order, and I can choose to listen or disobey, each option weighed with consequences I'm not sure I'm ready to face. I want to thrash and yell—still angry

about my captivity, still burning with the indignity of being held against my will. My fingers twitch with the urge to lash out, to show him I'm not some puppet he can control. But the promise of going back to the bar and seeing my grandpa sits heavy between us, a tangible thing that keeps my rebellion in check.

I can behave for just one more night. The thought tastes bitter, but I swallow it down like medicine, knowing it's necessary for now.

I can feel Sam's eyes on me as I slip into the seat he's pulled out, my skin tingling under his gaze. I'm waiting for him to say those two words again. Good girl. He recites them every time I follow one of his commands and they elicit a strange feeling inside me, one I'm not entirely comfortable acknowledging. Butterflies that whip around in my stomach, leaving me simultaneously unsettled and yearning. He doesn't say them this time, and for some reason I don't understand, that disappoints me. The realization that I'm craving his approval makes me shift uneasily in my seat.

Get a grip, Liv.

I've been taken against my will. This isn't a date. I'm not supposed to be attracted to the man who's forced me to be here and is dangling a visit home over my head like a shiny carrot. Making me dance in order to get it.

Sucking in a deep breath, I remind myself that I'm not a pet for this man.

"Olivia." Sam says my name as a greeting, that easy smile still tugging up the corners of his lips.

I'm thankful when someone enters the dining room, the double doors that lead to the kitchen swinging behind her. The young woman carrying the bottle of wine doesn't say anything, just nods to Sam as she sets it down in front of him, and then turns on her heel, leaving the room as quickly as she appeared.

Rising from his seat, Sam walks to the sideboard across the room to grab a corkscrew. My eyes follow him as he inserts the metal spiral, his muscles flexing beneath his sleeve while he pulls out the cork with a practiced motion.

I haven't drunk much since I took over the bar. Mostly because I don't have time, but also because I've never been a get-drunk-on-my-own kind of girl. But right now, I'm thankful for the glass of red wine Sam places in front of me. I need something to calm my nerves or help me escape my head, and alcohol will do the trick.

Tilting the glass back, I chug the contents, feeling Sam's eyes heat my flesh.

"Easy there." He reaches for me like he's going to pull the glass away from my lips, but I twist, avoiding his grasp as I finish it off.

Sam clicks his tongue, as if he's disappointed in me. "Do you remember our agreement, Olivia?"

My core warms at the sound of my name on his lips. It's deep and husky and one eyebrow lifts with his question. He's watching me, waiting for me to answer him.

I swallow. "Yes."

"Remind me."

I know damn well that he remembers the agreement we made this morning. This is all some sort of power play to put me in my place with him, but I dutifully answer anyway.

"You'll take me home tomorrow."

"If?" That eyebrow feels condescending as it waits for me to admit my role in this.

It feels childish to say, and the words burn on my tongue, but still, that fire is sizzling low in my stomach—it's a confusing feeling. Hating him so much, but feeling deeply...turned on.

"If I'm a good girl."

Sam smiles. "That's right, Olivia."

My brain must be wired incorrectly. Because there's no way I like this. Reaching forward, his palm brushes against my cheek as he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. He leans in, moving his body closer to mine, so close I can smell the minty scent of his breath as he speaks again.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"Good girls listen, don't they?"

I can barely breathe, never mind speak. Not when he's this close, but none of his questions are ever rhetorical. He wants me to answer him.

I nod.

"And I said slow down, did I not?"

Again, with wanting me to admit it when we both know the answer.

"Yes," I whisper.

Sam pulls back. It's abrupt, and the loss of his palm on my cheek makes me feel cold. He snatches the wine bottle off the table and stands, knocking on the door to the kitchen.

"No more wine," he announces, and the same girl reappears, taking the bottle from his hands and scurrying back into the kitchen.

I sink into my seat, feeling like a child who's been chastised and had their toy taken away. It's wrong that he's somehow able to make my body long for his touch while simultaneously humiliating me with his controlling nature.

I want to do nothing more than run upstairs and hide under the obnoxiously fluffy duvet.

Sam takes the seat next to me as the same woman reappears, this time with two salads on glass plates in her hands. Wordlessly, she sets them down on the gold chargers that mark our place settings.

"How many people work here?" I blurt out, desperate to change the subject.

Sam chuckles. "A few. Why?"

"How rich are you?" I snap my mouth shut after the question pops out. I can practically hear my mother's voice in the back of my head, telling me it's impolite to talk about money. That's on the list of things you should never discuss in public: money, politics, and religion. For a long time, I thought that list was to keep me from offending anyone or having awkward conversations. Now, I think people spout off that list so no one compares notes or injustices.

The corner of Sam's lips tic in the slightest smile. I don't think he's going to scold me the way my mother would. I think he's amused.

"Rich," he answers simply.

"Obviously." I wave my hand, gesturing to the opulent house we're currently in. Sam laughs softly.

He hasn't flat out told me what he does for a living, but the knowledge lingers between us.

Mafia... Criminal. Gangster. Killer.

The last one reminds me that I should be afraid of the man I'm sharing a table with. I did see him kill someone, after all.



The memory of that night flashes through my mind—the sound of the gunshot, the way the man's body crumpled to the ground.

Another question's on the tip of my tongue, and before I can debate asking it, it pops out. "Who was he?"

Sam's eyebrow lifts. "Who?"

"That man..."

Sam's jaw tightens, the muscles flexing beneath his skin. His eyes darken, losing that playful glint from moments ago. "My uncle."

"Why would you—"

Sam's hand slams down on the table, making the silverware jump. My cheeks heat. This was stupid. I shouldn't have asked.

"That's enough questions." His voice is like ice, sending a chill down my spine. Gone is the man who touched my face so gently moments ago. In his place sits someone dangerous, someone who makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

I stare down at my salad, pushing a cherry tomato around with my fork. The silence stretches between us, thick and uncomfortable. I shouldn't have pushed. The warning my grandfather gave me rings in my ears —the Costellos are dangerous. I'd let myself forget that for a moment, caught up in Sam's charm and gentle touches.

But this man, the one sitting next to me with tension radiating off him in waves, this is the real Sam Costello. The one who puts bullets in people's heads. Even his own family.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

I force myself to take a bite of lettuce, though it tastes like cardboard in my mouth. Sam hasn't touched his food, either, his fingers drumming an angry rhythm against the table's surface.

"I didn't mean to upset you," I whisper, keeping my eyes fixed on my plate.

Sam's fingers stop their drumming. "Look at me."

I raise my eyes slowly to meet his gaze. The darkness is still there, but something else flickers beneath it — something that looks almost like pain.

"My uncle was not a good man." His voice is low, controlled. "He hurt people... People I care about."

I think about the night in the alley, trying to reconcile the violence I witnessed with this explanation. Was this some twisted form of justice? Or just another act in an endless cycle of violence?

"Eat your food," Sam says, effectively ending the conversation. He picks up his fork and starts eating as if nothing happened, as if he didn't just admit to killing his uncle for revenge.

I follow his lead, though each bite is hard to get down. The salad is probably excellent; the chef clearly knows what they're doing, but I can't taste anything. My mind is too busy trying to process everything, to understand the complexities of Sam Costello.

He can smile one moment and be terrifying the next. He can touch me with such tenderness, then speak of murder in the same breath. He's a paradox wrapped in an expensive suit, and I'm starting to realize how dangerous it is that I find myself wanting to understand him better instead of running away screaming.

The same server appears to clear our plates, replacing them with the main course. The smell of perfectly cooked lasagna fills the air, but my stomach is still in knots.

My dad and grandpa would talk endlessly about how incredible my grandmother's Italian cooking was, but she passed before I came into this world. Neither of them could cook worth a damn. Mom's talented in the kitchen, but she gravitates toward French cuisine - Italian food brings up memories of my father that she'd rather leave behind.

I moan over another forkful of lasagna. Sam chuckles, and I find his eyes fixed on me when mine flutter open.

Heat rises to my cheeks.

"My bad," I say quietly, dabbing my lips with the linen napkin. "The food is incredible."

"No need for apologies." Sam takes a drink of water. "I'm pleased you like it. Emilio's the finest chef in New Orleans."

The door suddenly opens, but it's not one of the servers this time. It's the same guy I spotted earlier today, before Sam directed me upstairs to clean up and get fitted for an entirely new collection of clothes. They exchange a glance and, somehow, without words, they communicate, because Sam rises from his chair and drops his napkin, abandoning his half-eaten dinner.

"They'll bring out dessert," he tells me, shifting his focus back. "The staff will handle anything you need. I've got work in my office. Tomorrow morning, meet me downstairs. Clear?"

I nod, and this time, he doesn't insist on a verbal response.

He's already heading out.

And it shouldn't affect me. Shouldn't make me feel this way that he's cutting dinner short.

But there's an unmistakable heaviness in my heart that suggests otherwise.

SIXTEEN

Sam

I follow John into my office, shutting the doors behind us. My cousin goes right for the leather armchair and sits down, waiting for me to join him before he speaks.

"Kade agreed to a meeting. Tomorrow at one p.m."

Kade Marcellus is the president of the Iron Serpents. He's a middle-aged man who took over in his twenties after my father killed most of his club in retaliation for my mother's death. After that, Nonno had a sit-down with Kade, coming to the agreement that's been in place for the last eighteen years.

This is what I wanted. A sit-down with the Serpents. See if there's an agreement we can come to before things turn into a bloody war.

"I promised to take Olivia to her bar tomorrow."

John tilts his head, eyeing me skeptically. "This is more important, yeah?"

Scrubbing a hand through my hair, I nod. "Yeah. Of course. I'll be there. Arrange backup, and I think Adrian should come in with us." It's time to get my new consigliere's hands dirty. Well, I guess dirtier than I've already gotten them.

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"I'll have it taken care of," he confirms, but there's a look on his face, something he's leaving unsaid.

"What is it?" I ask with a huff.

John eyes the door before looking back at me. "The girl. She's becoming a...distraction."

"That's not true." I stand from my chair, moving to the bar cart and pouring myself a little too much bourbon before talking a large gulp.

Deep down, I know he might be right. The blue-eyed devil is running laps in my mind, keeping herself present in my thoughts far too much. But I'm not willing to admit that. I'm the boss of the New Orleans outfit. I can't be obsessed with a woman. I don't have time and I don't do commitment.

"What would you suggest I do, hmm?" I ask, turning back to my cousin.

"Get rid of her. She's a liability."

"I can't kill her."

John blows out a breath and leans back in the chair. "There are other ways to get rid of people, cugino."

"No." I take another gulp. "She's not leaving. Not until I'm certain I can trust her."

That's the plan. Just keep her until I'm sure she won't talk if I let her go.

That will definitely work.

I hope.

Olivia is ready to go bright and early the next morning. I find her sitting at the bottom of the stairs, dressed in a pair of black leggings and an oversized denim shirt paired with sandals. It's a bit casual for me, but I don't comment on her outfit. Even though I had my personal shopper bring her a ton of choices. I'm just surprised to see her wearing such a simple outfit when she could have chosen anything.

Dressing your captive?

My mind rattles at the thought. It's wrong. Weird. Who takes someone captive and then buys them a whole wardrobe. But she didn't have clothes, and what was I supposed to do, make her walk around in the same outfit for weeks?

Or maybe you just wanted to see her all dressed up for you...

So what if I did?

She's alive because of me, after all. Is it so bad if I wanted to see her dressed nicely after I spared her life?

I have to shake away these thoughts. I need to fulfill my promise to her and then get back to work. Already, I think I should've had one of my men take her to the bar, but I wanted to be the one to give her this gift of a homecoming. Even if I don't plan on letting her return indefinitely.

Maybe I just want her gratitude. Something she seems unwilling to give.

I can't blame her. I am the man who had her kidnapped and is keeping her against her will, after all.

"Ready?"

Her head snaps up at my voice, and she stands from the step she's sitting on.

"Ready," she confirms.

I could have someone drive me in the black bullet-proof Escalade, but I decide that would give me too much time sitting next to Olivia in the backseat. I need something to focus on, so I choose to drive myself instead and have my men follow behind. The sleek black BMW M4 is ready and waiting when we exit the front door.

Olivia is quiet as she slips into the passenger seat, buckling herself in. She must be on her best behavior, knowing I'm about to take her home, where she's been begging to go since I first met her in the warehouse.

Something pulls at my chest. Pride? Pleasure? I like knowing I'm the one giving her what she wants.

Gino's bar has been a staple of the French Quarter since I've been alive. I recognized Olivia's last name as soon as she told me. Gino Marchese was already friendly with my grandfather and paid his protection fee on time and without hassle. The one who caused a problem was his son, Sal. Olivia's father had quite the gambling problem before he passed away and never seemed to have the money to pay his fee.

As I pull up to the bar, my crew steps out of the SUV, scanning the vicinity before giving me the all-clear. Olivia's eyes stay fixed on me while I hold back until they confirm it's safe to get out.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"Is someone after you?" she asks, not yet reaching for the door handle.

"It's part of doing business." I shut the door behind me and walk around to her side of the car, opening it for her and extending a hand. She considers it before looking both ways and standing from the car, ignoring my outstretched hand.

I chuckle at her refusal to let me help.

Seems like my girl is fiercely independent.

Something simmers inside me. A dark thought. I want to strip that independence away from her. Make her dependent on me and only me.

Olivia is quick to make her way to the bar, rushing past me. I reach out, grabbing her arm and tugging her backwards. Her spine meets my chest, and I momentarily lose focus, distracted by the feeling of her body against mine.

"This is a reward, Olivia," I whisper into her ear. She gulps, her throat bobbing with the motion, and my eyes dart to it, relishing the way she reacts to my voice. "You can check in on your grandfather and the bar, but then we leave. Understood?"

She nods.

"Say it," I demand, feeling her shiver as my breath skates across her skin.

"Understood," she recites.

I release her, and she's off, rushing toward the bar and swinging open the front door. I nod to my men to keep watch as I follow her inside.

The bar is nice, but in desperate need of some work. It's clear that it's been neglected since Gino's health has declined. It has good bones, though, with dark wooden beams stretched across the ceiling and the exposed brick walls covered in local artwork. The bar itself is a beast made of mahogany with intricate carvings that have probably been there for decades, but it's dull and scratched, needing a good polishing. Behind it are mirrors with shelving that showcase the lines of spirits. There are tables scattered around the place, their surfaces marked by years of use.

An older man stands behind the bar, but I know it's not her grandfather.

"Joey," she calls him, and he moves around the bar quickly to embrace her. My palm clenches. I don't like the sight of another man's hands on her.

He pats her shoulders and looks over her like a scared mother who lost her child in the grocery store, checking to make sure everything is intact. And then his eyes move to me, widening at the sight. I take pride in the fear that ghosts his face.

"Why is he here?" he asks Olivia, and even though I want to step in, tell the man to get his hands off her, and announce that she belongs to me now, I wait. I want to hear what she tells him.

She glances over her shoulder at me before turning her gaze back to Joey. "It's okay. He's not going to hurt me."

The aging fellow appears suspicious as his gaze bounces back and forth between us, then he murmurs to her, "What happened?"

Olivia inhales deeply. "They took me somewhere, I'm not sure where, and then he

showed up." She gestures to me. She's leaving out a few things, likely for his benefit. Like how she was tied to a chair with a hood over her head and made to wait an entire day before I had a chance to interrogate the woman who watched me kill my uncle.

I'm guessing Joey knows what she saw, and that's why he's so concerned. There's one thing he's not asking, though, and I can tell it's eating him alive as he keeps stealing glances at me.

Why is she still alive?"

"Is he..." Joey doesn't finish his sentence, probably afraid to speak whatever words he's struggling with into existence.

"Letting her go?" I fill in for him with a tilt of my head. Both of them spin to face me. "No," I answer.

"Then..."

"She's mine now," I say simply, glancing around the bar to take in the scenery as if this is all boring to me, just another day in the life.

Joey hisses something low to Olivia, clearly not amused by my statement. Not that his opinion matters much.

I stride over to her, placing my hand on her lower back. Whatever comment Joey was making dies on his tongue and his mouth snaps shut as he looks at me.

"Do you want to see your grandfather or not?" I ask, my tone sharp. Olivia and Joey look between each other, a silent conversation taking place that I'm not privy to.

Pivoting her head, she looks at me. "I'll be right back."

"I'm coming with you."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

Her expression darkens as she plants her palms on her waist. "No," she declares with feigned confidence that amuses me. Is she really under the impression I wouldn't press her up against the counter right here, with her worker watching, to remind her exactly who calls the shots?

"Olivia." I click my tongue.

"He doesn't know you!" she spits back.

She's being protective. Every time this version of her comes out, it's when she's worried about her grandfather. I take a step forward, and she takes one back, until her spine hits the edge of the wooden bar and my palms land on either side, caging her in. Her gaze flicks to Joey's position at my back, but I can tell the guy recognizes me, and I'm not concerned about him stepping in.

"Olivia," I repeat, and her eyes dart back to mine. "You don't get to tell me what to do."

"You'll scare him," she says, not backing down. "He doesn't?—"

Instinctively, one of my hands reaches for her face, forcing her to look at me. "I won't. I understand his condition."

She swallows hard, my eyes darting to her throat to watch the motion. She's frustrated with me; I can tell by the way her palms are clenched and her jaw is taut. But she's pausing her fight, probably because she knows she won't win.

"Come on." I step back, extending my hand to her. She eyes it suspiciously, but begrudgingly takes it. I gesture for her to lead the way and follow as she takes me upstairs to the apartment above the bar.

She peeks inside the door, looking around the small apartment before she calls out for her grandfather.

"Grandpa?"

There in the living room, sitting in an old recliner, sits Gino Marchese. He turns his head from the TV show he's watching and looks at Olivia with confusion. The nurse I hired, Kelly, is on the sofa.

"Look, Gino." She smiles brightly. "It's your granddaughter."

Olivia moves to him, kneeling next to his recliner and taking his hand in hers. "How are you?"

He ignores her question, his eyes finding me. "Sal?" he asks. "When did you get back?"

There's a pained look on Olivia's face when she twists to look at me. This is what she was afraid of? An old man with a bit of confusion.

"Just now," I answer. No use in explaining to him that I'm not his dead son.

Olivia exhales a breath and turns her attention back to her grandfather.

"How's Livy?" he asks, his focus still on me. "You gotta go to Canada and see her." He groans. "I keep telling you this. It's not good for a girl to grow up without a father."

Interesting. So Olivia didn't have a good relationship with her father? I make a mental note to pry into this later.

"I'm right here." She squeezes his hand. "It's me, Olivia."

He glances down at her, still confused. "Rachel?" He calls her by the wrong name, and Olivia looks like she's been slapped, as if it physically pains her for him not to remember. "You're here? Where's Olivia?"

"She's downstairs with Joey," Olivia answers, fighting through her pain to play pretend.

"Are you two getting back together?" This question is for me.

"Yep," I answer, moving closer to Olivia so I can place my palm on her shoulder. "We're together." I feel Olivia's body tense under my hand.

"Good, good." His lips lift into a soft smile. "Olivia needs a happy home life. You take care of her, Sal." Gino speaks sternly to me, gesturing toward Olivia, and I wonder if this is a situation that has played out in the past, him urging his son to be a better father.

"I'll take care of her," I tell him, and I mean it.

Olivia is mine now.

And I take care of what's mine.

SEVENTEEN

Olivia

Something's wrong. My heart hammers as I reach for the apartment door and step into the stairwell. I suck in a mouth full of oxygen, but it doesn't feel like enough. My chest constricts and my lungs ache, fear and anxiety swirling through my brain, and I recognize all of these feelings to be pure panic.

Not again.

Hand clutched to my chest, I suck in air with quick gulps, not a single one making me feel better.

I haven't had a panic attack since I've been in New Orleans, not since my breakup with Rhett three months ago, before my father died and I left Montreal to claim my inheritance. I thought I was past this, but now I feel like my head might explode.

I'm a bad granddaughter who can't take care of my grandfather.

I'm useless.

And now I'm owned by the mafia.

"Slow your breathing." A warm hand lands on my back, accompanying the low and calm voice. He mirrors the action, inhaling slowly, and then blowing out the breath even slower.

Rage burns within me, and I push him away, not that he moves an inch. He stands tall



like a statue of pure, unmovable concrete. I pound my fists against his chest, tears trailing down my cheeks.

"This is your fault!" I shout.

He catches my wrists, preventing me from hitting him any more as he tugs me into his hold. He's not the person I want comforting me, but even so, I sink into his warm embrace and sob.

Against my face, his torso lifts gently with each steadying breath. My own breathing remains uneven, but I attempt to match his measured rhythm.

Slowly, my nervous system relaxes. But the panic is quickly replaced by a new emotion. I yank my hands back from him and slap one across his face, his cheek turning the faintest shade of pink.

Time stands still between us.

Did I really just slap the boss of the New Orleans mob?

Sam lifts his hand, rubbing the spot on his cheek while I swallow roughly, preparing myself for whatever retribution he'll claim. There's not much space on the steps, making it easy for him to pin me against the wall before I have a chance to stop him. He grabs both of my hands, lifting them over my head as he holds them against the wall.

I feel exposed in this position, restrained while Sam's dark eyes bore into me.

"Baby girl," he purrs. "You need to use your words with me. Not these." He wiggles my hands to illustrate his point. "Now, tell me what I did that upset you."

He's much too calm, and it scares me, considering his reputation as a man who takes what he wants and kills anyone who gets in his way.

"You told him we were together." I exhale.

"Well, for one, you are mine. So that qualifies as together. And two, I was telling him what he wanted to hear, Olivia. Same as you."

I shake my head furiously. "No. My parents?—"

"Tell me." Sam crowds into my space, dipping his head so he can stare into my eyes. He's so goddamn close, my blood simmers from his heat. I'm simultaneously furious and turned on.

Stupid body.

"What did they do to you, baby girl?"

The nickname worms its way through my ears, and the part of my brain that's needy for attention turns to mush, wanting desperately to melt into his big, strong arms and let him take care of me the way he clearly wants to.

But I know from experience that the only person who can ever take care of me is me. I blink, shrugging off the nickname and the haze it's created in my brain.

"No." I shake my head. "Let me go."

"Not happening until you explain." Sam's massive frame blocks any escape, and my squirming only makes him lean harder into me, pinning me to the wall. His sculpted physique molds against my body, and when his hips make contact, I feel an unmistakable impressive hardness there.

I gasp as my stomach flips.

This is futile. He's going to keep me pinned here until I tell him what he wants to hear. That's the thing I'm learning about Sam; he gets what he wants, and there's no way around it.

Steadying myself, I close my eyes so I don't have to look at him while I spill my childhood. I've seen enough shrinks over the years to know why and how my youth gave me capital 'T' trauma. But still, having to admit it to him has shame creeping into my chest.

"They divorced when I was five."

"And your mom moved you to Canada?" he asks, filling in the gap.

"Montreal," I clarify.

"Did you see your father much?"

"For a few summers." I shrug, my eyes still closed. Luckily, Sam doesn't force me to look at him while I share. "But he was rarely here. Grandpa took care of me, mostly. My mom was frustrated that I would spend a whole summer here and come home dirty, having spent little time with my father. Eventually, I got old enough to say I didn't want to go, and he didn't force me."

"Did he ever come and visit?" Sam asks.

I shake my head.

"Olivia, when was the last time you saw your father?"

"His funeral."

"Before that."

"Ten, maybe?" I shrug. "It doesn't matter. I had my mom and her husband. I'm fine." It's a lie, but it's my lie that I like to spew when I tell the story of why my father is MIA.

I brace myself for the "I'm so sorry that happened to you" that people like to give when they hear something sad. But it doesn't change anything. I was tossed aside by the first man in my life. The one who's supposed to love you through anything. No wonder I clung to my first real boyfriend like he was all the oxygen I ever needed. I wanted someone to love me, and I was too dumb to see that he didn't. Maybe he never did.

I won't make that mistake again.

Sam hisses out a breath. "Look at me," he demands.

I don't want to. I don't want to see the pity behind his eyes.

"Olivia," he growls, warning me to obey.

My eyes pop open, meeting Sam's gaze.

"That was really fucking shitty of him. He doesn't deserve you."

Sam's statement cuts through me, slicing through layers and layers of armor that I've worked so hard to build up. I want to hold them in place, protect myself, but then his hand finds my face, his warm palm resting on my cheek while his finger strokes my skin. As his other hand lands on my hip, his touch feels like it's anchoring me.

I draw in a ragged breath, clinging to whatever shreds of independence remain. But with one gentle caress, Sam is cutting through every last one of them.

"Let me help you," he says. It's not a question, but not quite a demand. A plea, maybe.

I should be putting more space between myself and this man, not letting him get closer.

But for some reason, I say yes.

## EIGHTEEN

Sam

It's exactly one p.m. when I arrive at the location for the meeting. We chose neutral territory outside of the French Quarter, a restaurant that's not owned by either organization. It's somewhat busy, just after lunch. Not a ton of patrons surround our table, but enough to hopefully keep either side from drawing any weapons.

John and Adrian are waiting outside for me, and we walk in together. Kade is already sitting at the long table, his righthand man, Axel Rousseau, next to him. Neither man stands when we arrive and take the seats across from them.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"Little Sam Costello." Kade leans his elbows on the table and looks at me. "You the boss now? Last time I saw you, you were just a kid." His smile is lopsided, showing off a few missing teeth. He's trying to intimidate me, make sure I know he has years of experience that I don't.

But I was born for this job. Trained for it my entire life, waiting in my father's shadow until one day the crown would be mine.

"Didn't realize we ever met." I shrug.

"Well, you had a sack on your head back then." He's watching me, waiting for my reaction, and I have to admit, his words make me tic.

He was part of the kidnapping.

I school my features to not let him know he rattled me. I can't show weakness. Not now. Not ever.

"Ahh, memory lane." I give him a matching smile. "If I recall correctly, that's the same night half of your club was killed, right? And then a few nights later, your clubhouse burned down." I shake my head, feigning sorrow. "With all those men locked inside. What a shame."

Kade grits his teeth. "What the fuck do you want, Costello?"

I match his stance, leaning forward on my elbows. "You out of my territory."

"Well, as I see it, no one was managing those streets. You can't steal something no one owns."

"But I do own it. And you know that, because it's part of the agreement you made eighteen years ago. You really want to throw all those years of peace down the drain?"

Kade's lips twist up into a smirk. "Eighteen years ago, we were weak. Most of our men dead, as you mentioned." He relaxes back into his chair, that smile only widening on his ugly lips. "But we're not the weak ones now."

Fuck.

He might be right. Because back then, my father weakened their forces. They didn't have the manpower to go up against us. But now, after the civil war my uncle and Marcus started, it's me who's lacking the manpower.

"Let's come to a new agreement, then. What do you want?"

Kade mimes thinking, tapping his forefinger to his chin. "I want it all. Every street, our clubhouse, that strip club you got in the Quarter." He leans forward once again, his voice lowering, eyes darkening. "I want everything you took from us, plus more."

"You know I won't agree to that."

Kade chuckles. "Oh, I know. That's why I'm going to take it."

A yellow sheet of paper torn from a legal pad sits in the center of my desk. Olivia's handwriting is the cutest thing I've ever seen. That's how I know I'm losing it. Who thinks handwriting is cute? But hers is. It's rounded and crisp, girly, and so very neat. I'm staring at it until Adrian and John step into my office.

Once again, I find myself daydreaming about Olivia when I should be focused on the family. The sit-down with the Serpents didn't go as well as planned. After Kade announced his plans to take all of our territories and businesses, I could feel my blood boiling from the disrespect. So I stood up, announced we were done, and left.

John glances down at the paper. "What's this?"

Begrudgingly, I hand him the sheet. "A list of things that need to get done at Gino's. Have someone take care of it all, ASAP."

John eyes me skeptically. "Why are we fixing up the girl's bar?"

Because she agreed to let me help her.

What he's not saying out loud is that we have more important things going on. I know he thinks I'm distracted by her, and the problem is, he's right. But I'm refusing to let her go.

So yes, we're fixing the bar. Because once those pretty lips agreed to let me help, we walked downstairs, and I grabbed the yellow legal pad and pen, laying in front of Olivia and asking her to make a list of everything she needed in order to get the bar in tiptop shape.

She had chewed on her lip while she fidgeted with the pen for a while before she finally started making the list. There were quite a few things missing that I scribbled on the bottom, like new appliances and glassware. She was reserved with her list, picking essentials. I wasn't.

Leaning back in my chair, I rub my temples. Sometimes I wish John was a loyal soldier who didn't ask questions, but that's not what I actually want. My cousin is the only one left alive who's willing to stand up to me, and I need that. Even if I don't like



it. "Because I promised her she could keep working there if we fixed it up. Her grandfather's not doing well."

John grimaces before turning his attention to Adrian. "Consigliere, what do you think?"

Adrian's sitting in the seat across my desk, his elbows resting on the arms and hands linked together at his chin. His gaze goes from John to me and back again.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

I don't expect my new consigliere to have much to say on this matter. A few days ago, he thought I was going to end his life, not offer him a job. But if this is going to work, I need him to be honest with me at all times.

I nod. "You can say it."

Adrian sucks in a long breath, as if preparing himself to say something I won't like. "She's a distraction."

I huff. Rising from my seat, I head to the bar cart. "When did you two become friends who agree on shit?" I grumble as I pour two fingers of amber liquid. Since John kidnapped the lawyer and had him beaten up, Adrian's watched John with a wary gaze. And even though I initiated Adrian after Lana and Naz's wedding, John still doesn't fully trust the man. But apparently, when it comes to Olivia, the two are on the same team.

"Since when do you care about some old man with dementia?" John bites back as he drops into the other leather chair next to Adrian. I sigh as I retake my seat behind the desk.

"Since his granddaughter witnessed me killing my uncle." The words taste bitter. "And since she's living under my roof now."

John's gaze flicks back to Adrian. "And what do you think aboutthat?"

Bitterness burns under my skin as my cousin uses our new consigliere to tell me what a bad idea this is. As if I don't already know.

Adrian rubs a hand over his jaw. "She's a liability, Sam. She witnessed you take out Damien. She could run to the police at any moment and?—"

"She's not going to run to the police," I interrupt.

"How do you know that?" John snaps.

I trust her isn't the answer they're looking for. And truthfully, I have no reason to trust her.

"I have men watching her. I installed a surveillance app on her phone." I sigh, pulling her phone from my top drawer and waving it for effect. My men took it when they picked her up. "If she tries to do anything stupid, like call the cops, I'll be alerted. And, as part of that list," I pause to gesture to the yellow paper John's still holding, "you're going to install cameras in the bar, discretely."

John runs a hand through his dark hair, pulling at the roots. "What if you're too late? Or what if you miss her calling someone from another phone? You're not thinking clearly, Sam. Is this girl worth risking everything?"

Yes.

I don't know why I think that. Clearly, the answer is no. But I can't seem to let her go.

"What, you'd have me kill her?"

"It'd be easier. And more efficient," John says, making Adrian wince.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves—" My new consigliere tries to rein us back in.

"But those are the options, aren't they?" I drum my fingers against the wood of my

desk, annoyance simmering beneath my skin. Is that what they would have me do? Kill the girl? I can't do that, and not just because Iwanther for some unknown reason. But also because my father would roll over in his grave if he knew I was killing women.

I scrub a hand over my face. My little witness is making me crazy.

"We're not asking you to kill her," Adrian says. John lets out a huff like he disagrees, but he doesn't say anything. "You sure keeping her close is the best play here? She's a liability. She's holding the key that could send you back to prison. "

The man isn't wrong.

"She won't." I bring my glass to my lips, savoring the smoky liquid.

"What if she talks?" Adrian asks, an eyebrow lifting with the question.

"She's not going to."

"You don't know that." It's John who cuts in this time, the two of them playing a delicate dance of trying to persuade me that keeping Olivia is trouble.

And they're right. All the logic in me knows that keeping a witness alive is a bad idea.

But I can't kill her.

Won'tkill her.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

I want to blame it on the code my father instilled in me, but something in my gut is stopping me.

"She's not going anywhere." I snatch the list back from John, my fingers tracing over her neat handwriting. "And neither is her grandfather. They're under our protection now."

"Our protection?" John's eyebrows shoot up. "Or yours, specifically?"

I level a hard stare at him. "Does it matter?"

"It matters if you're letting this girl get under your skin." Adrian's voice carries that tone he uses in court — measured, calculating. "We need to think about the family's interests."

It's amusing hearing that statement from him, considering a few days ago, he wanted to tear this family apart. But then he fell in love with my cousin and everything changed.

I chuckle to myself, causing both men to look at each other. But it's funny, I think, what love does to you.

Adrian gave up his revenge scheme.

And John is softer than he used to be before he fell hard for Zoe.

That won't be me, though. This little obsession aside, I won't fall for her. I have no

interest in the weakness that comes with attachment.

"The family's interests are whatever I say they are." Done with this conversation, I stand and hand the paper back to John. "Get the repairs done."

They both nod, knowing better than to push further. But I catch the look they exchange as they leave my office. They're right to be concerned. This thing with Olivia — it's complicated. Dangerous, even. But every time I think about her face, about how she handled herself on those steps when she told me about her past, something shifts inside me.

Like I said, I'm losing it.

NINETEEN

Olivia

Two days later, I come downstairs to find Sam in the kitchen. I haven't seen him much since he took me home to see my grandfather. His men have been around the house and his staff has made sure I'm well fed, but for the most part, I've been alone. Staring at the ceiling and reading whatever fiction book I found in his library. There aren't many — apparently, he's a non-fiction kind of guy.

Sam is sitting at the breakfast table, sipping on a cup of coffee while the news blares on the small television. He barely glances up as the newscaster speaks.

"The body of Damien Romano, a local known associate of the Costello crime family, has been found dead under suspicious circumstances."

I freeze. Behind the newscaster, there are several police officers and medical examiners pulling a body out of the Bayou. I can't see the man, but even if I could,

I'm sure his body is torn up from being there for days. Sam doesn't even flinch as he brings his coffee to his lips again and takes another sip.

"The body was discovered earlier today in a remote area of the Bayou, where investigations are ongoing. While details remain scarce, sources reveal that the prime suspect in this case is none other than the head of the Iron Serpents Motorcycle Club, Kade Marcellus, a rival gang embroiled in a long-standing feud with the Costello family."

A mugshot of Kade is displayed on the corner of the screen, showing a middle-aged man with graying hair, tanned skin, and a smug look on his face. I swallow the lump in my throat. The Serpents are as famous in New Orleans as the Costellos are. Both for their criminal enterprises, but the Serpents are known to be more...gruesome.

"Local law enforcement is urging anyone with information to come forward, as tensions rise in the community. Residents are encouraged to remain vigilant as they await further updates on this alarming situation. Stay tuned for more details as they emerge, and we will be following this story closely. We'll be right back after the break."

They want anyone with information to come forward? But the only person with information on that murder is...me.

"Good morning, Olivia." Sam's voice breaks me out of my trance. The commercials end, and they're back in the studio with puppies running around as the anchors encourage viewers to adopt not shop. Sam isn't watching, though, his dark eyes completely focused on me.

"Good morning," I squeak out, causing his lips to tilt into a lopsided smirk.

Sam lifts his napkin, dabbing at the corners of his mouth before dropping it onto the

plate of crumbs. He rises from the seat so he's standing in front of me, and his height forces me to look up to meet his gaze.

"You should have some breakfast before you go to work today," he says simply, as if the statement doesn't cause my brain to short circuit.

"You're letting me go to work?"

Sam smirks, and it's one that screams this comes with strings. "Yes. Roman will be joining you, and you'll stay within his sight all day. I want you back in time for dinner."

I resist the urge to argue that it's a bar and the prime time is in the evenings. But it's also a Monday, which is the one day a week we're closed. Today, I'd just catch up on admin work and do some more cleaning, so I save my fighting for a time it matters more. Instead, I nod in agreement.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"Thank you," I say softly, feeling pathetic that I'm thanking him, but it feels like the right thing to say, to stroke his ego so he continues letting me live my life.

The last thing I want is for him to think I'm a threat.

Someone who could go to the authorities and have him sent back to prison.

I shudder.

"Eat." Sam gestures to the table, where platters of bacon, eggs, and pastries sit. "Roman will take you to the bar when you're ready." Sam nods behind him, and I spin around, seeing that there's another man in the kitchen.

The new man, Roman, nods in greeting. "I'll be out here," is all he says before stepping out of the room.

"One last thing," Sam says. "You'll want this." He reaches into his pocket before extending an old iPhone to me. My old iPhone. "I added my contact. You'll call me if you need anything." It's a demand.

Sam spins on his heel, about to leave, when I stop him. "Wait! How did you get into my phone to add your number?"

The corners of his lips lift into a sly smile. "Your passcode is your birthday, Olivia. Not very original." Then he turns again, heading out the door.

"How do you know my birthday?" I call out after him, but he doesn't turn around, just

leaves me with the echoes of his laughter.

## TWENTY

Olivia

It feels good getting back to work.

There's a pep in my step as Roman leads me out to the car. Apparently, he's my bodyguard and driver.

Is it weird that I saw a criminal shoot someone, and now I'm being pampered and chauffeured? I try not to think too hard about it.

The door chimes as I step into the bar. One look around, and I freeze on the spot. Gone is the worn-out floor, replaced with gleaming hardwood that catches the morning light. The bar top shines, refinished to its original glory, and fresh paint brightens the walls. Even the ancient ceiling fans have been replaced with wrought-iron fixtures that match the bar's aesthetic.

"How?" I don't mean it as a question to Roman, more like my internal monologue coming to life as I try to figure out how it's possible that Sam did everything on my list, plus some, in two days?

"Impressive, right?" Roman leans against the doorframe, his bulk taking up most of the space. "Boss had crews working through the night."

It doesn't escape me that he casually refers to Sam as boss. But I guess that makes sense, since all these men work for him.

"I didn't think he'd actually do all this." I run my hand along the smooth bar top,

remembering how I'd pointed out every flaw to Sam.

Roman chuckles. "You'll learn that when the boss says something, he means it."

I roll my eyes, but can't hide my smile.

"I'm going to check on my grandfather." Surprisingly, Roman doesn't follow as I take the stairs two at a time. The familiar creak of the top step welcomes me home.

"Good morning!" a cheerful voice greets me as I enter the apartment. Kelly, the nurse Sam hired, stands in the kitchen, wearing blue scrubs.

"Hi." I extend my hand. "I'm Olivia. I'm sorry I didn't really take the time to talk to you the other day. Things were..."

"Hectic." Kelly smiles warmly. "Don't worry about it. Your grandfather is such a sweetheart. We had breakfast, and I've got him settled."

"How's he doing this morning?"

"Confused, but calm. Let's sit."

I follow Kelly into the kitchen, watching as she moves around the space with practiced ease. She grabs a mug from the cabinet — the chipped blue one that's been there since before I was born.

"Coffee?" she asks, already reaching for the pot.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

"Please. I could use it."

Steam rises as she pours the dark liquid, the rich aroma filling the small kitchen.

"Cream? Sugar?"

"Both," I admit. "I like it sweet."

Kelly slides the mug across the counter to me, and I wrap my hands around it, savoring the warmth.

"You know," she says, leaning against the counter, "I've been a home nurse for fifteen years, and this is one of my favorite placements."

I raise an eyebrow. "Really? Even with all the confusion?"

"Especially with that." Her eyes crinkle at the corners when she smiles. "Your grandfather has such beautiful stories when he slips into the past. Yesterday, he told me all about meeting your grandmother at a dance. The way his face lit up..." She shakes her head. "That's why I do this job. Those moments of pure joy."

Something loosens in my chest, a knot I didn't realize was there.

"I've been so worried about him," I confess. "Trying to run the bar and take care of him at the same time...it's been overwhelming."

Kelly reaches across the counter and pats my hand. "That's why I'm here. You don't have to do it all alone anymore."

I take a sip of coffee to hide the sudden burn of tears. "Thank you. I mean it."

"He's proud of you, you know. Even in his confusion, he talks about his granddaughter taking over the family business. Says you've got grit."

A laugh bubbles up through the tightness in my throat. "Grit. That sounds like him."

For the first time since I arrived in New Orleans, I feel like I can breathe properly. Like someone's lifted a fifty-pound weight off my shoulders.

I spend the afternoon admiring the new fixtures in the bar and organizing another decade's worth of records. I'm in the middle of ensuring all the new dishes are clean when Roman decides to start up a conversation.

"You know," Roman says, settling onto a barstool, "my nonna had dementia too. Used to spend hours just sitting with her, telling her the same stories over and over."

I pause in my inspection of the new glassware. Roman and I haven't spoken much since Sam assigned him as my babysitter. For most of the day, I've thought of him as a large and silent shadow. His admission surprises me.

"Really? How did you handle it?" I set down the glass and move closer to him.

"Some days were harder than others. But those moments when she'd look at me and really see me? Worth everything."

My throat tightens. "Yeah, I know exactly what you mean."

For some reason, I didn't expect Sam's minions to have lives outside of their duties to him. Hearing Roman speak of his grandmother tugs at my heart.

“He’s not a bad guy, ya know.”

“Who?”

“Sam,” Roman answers. “He made sure my grandmother was taken care of. Paid for the best memory care facility, and when she passed, he paid for her tomb in Lafayette. He takes care of his people.”

Roman’s words and the weight of his sincerity tugs at my chest. I nod, no words forming in my mouth to reply. Is that true? Is the boss of the New Orleans mob actually a good person? My mother would scoff if she heard my internal monologue right now.

I look around the bar, taking in all the changes Sam made once again. Everything’s perfect.

He did everything on my list, plus more. I can’t shake the feeling that he heard me when I said this place was important to me. He said he wanted to help me...and he did. The image of Rhett comes to mind unwillingly and a comparison chart forms in my brain. Rhett didn’t hear me. And he surely didn’t do things like this to make me happy.

How is it possible that a criminal is treating me better than my ex-fiancé?

I stop overthinking it. Instead, I pull out my phone and snap a picture of the renovated space. Before I can stop myself, I send it to Sam.

TWENTY-ONE

Sam

"You motherfucker." Kade's voice echoes through my cellphone, the anger in his tone making me smile.

"Well, good morning," I reply, a little more cheerfully, now that he knows exactly what I'm capable of.

"You framed me?" he shouts. We both know the answer is yes. I needed to do something with Damien's body. Couldn't keep it in the pizza shop freezer forever. And then Kade decided to be an asshole. It seemed like the perfect solution.

I genuinely wanted the sit-down to work. But when it was clear that Kade had no intention of coming to an agreement, I changed tactics. Instead, I had John swipe the beer glass Kade had been drinking from while I made my exit speech. After that, it was easy enough for my cousin to plant fingerprints on the gun I used to shoot Damien and leave the weapon near the swamp.

The Feds have been looking for a way to take down the Serpents, so one call, and they were at the swamp, gun in hand, pulling what was left of Damien's body from the water.

I guess my aunt will be getting that funeral, after all.

"I can't say I know what you're talking about." I feign ignorance, leaning back in my chair with a grin growing on my lips.

The biker thought he had the upper hand. If only he would've sat at the table and came to an agreement with me, then all of this could have been avoided.

I wanted peace, but I can't deny how good this feels. Knowing that I still got it. That I can twist any situation to put me on top. Not the weak little kid now, am I?

Kade sputters on the other end of the line, seething now. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a warning rings out. You should never piss off a snake. But I ignore it. This snake can be as angry as he wants; it won't matter much once he's in prison.

"You've just started a war," he growls.

That should scare me. Especially because I just ended the civil war that's been raging within my family. We can't handle another war, not now.

But his words don't hold much weight. I gave the Feds all the evidence they need to put him away.

"I hope you have a good day, Kade," I reply coolly, about to tap the end call button, when he speaks again.

"This is going to get bloody, kid. Are you sure you're ready for what you've just started?"

I tap the red button, his words ringing through my ears.

They're going to retaliate, and I need to be ready for when they do.

Olivia's name flashes on my phone screen. She's texting me. Something flutters in my chest at the sight. I open the new message.



Olivia

Thank you

She's thanking me. I feel warmer from her gratitude, something she hasn't given me much of. I respond immediately.

Sam

You're welcome. Anything else you need?

Anything she comes back with will be taken care of. I'll have John on it right away. I'm not sure why I care so much. Why I needed to have her bar restored and why I crave her approval of my gesture. I shouldn't. I shouldn't even be thinking about her right now, not when Kade just laid down threats against my family.

But everything in me aches to see her. Visions of her showing me her gratitude in other ways float through my head. The idea of her on her knees, worshipping my cock has me growing hard.

Fuck.

I rub my hand over my jaw and try to shake the dirty thoughts from my mind. I need to focus. I need to get my head back into the game. But before I can stop myself, I'm opening the laptop on my desk and navigating to the program that shows me all the camera feeds for all my businesses. From the drop-down menu, I select Gino's. I made sure when these were installed that I was the only one with access to them.

Multiple feeds appear on the screen, showing different angles of the bar. Olivia is behind the counter and Roman is sitting on one of the stools, his arms folded in front of him on the bar counter. He says something, and she laughs, her lips widening and

her eyes crinkling at the corners. The sight ignites a fire in my veins. I want to be privy to that smile, to her laughter. Hell, I want to be the one who makes her laugh.

My cock is straining against my zipper, still hard from the images of her my mind conjured up. And now seeing her is only making it worse. I watch as she inspects the new glassware. I watch as she flips her long, dark hair over her shoulder. I watch as she shimmies her hips to whatever song is playing. I can't seem to stop watching.

## Page 38

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:02 am*

And then, with a mind of its own, my hand drifts down to my cock, rubbing it over the fabric of my pants. I'm so painfully hard thinking about the girl on my laptop screen. I can't take it anymore.

Finally, I unzip my pants and let myself spring free. I just need to get her out of my system so I can focus.

I stroke my length, my eyes still fixed on her.

And when I come, it's her I'm watching. Her I'm thinking about.

Like a coffee ring soaked into a wooden table, Olivia Marchese has embedded herself into my brain, and I don't think I'm getting rid of her any time soon.

### TWENTY-TWO

Olivia

Sam isn't at the mansion when I get back from the bar. Roman had me pack it up right at five, reminding me that part of my agreement with Sam was to be home in time for dinner. But since he's not here...

I decide I'll find somewhere to sit that isn't inside the four walls of his guest room. I've spent enough time there already, and seeing as there's no end date for my stay, I might as well get comfortable.

Sam's mansion is huge and stylish, a mix of old Southern charm and modern luxury

that would make my mother's designer heart skip a beat.

Through French doors, I discover a hidden courtyard. Bougainvillea spills over wrought-iron railings, and a small fountain trickles in the corner. The late afternoon sun filters through the leaves, creating dancing shadows on the stone pavement.

It's stunning.

I pull out my phone, scrolling through the missed notifications from the days I was without it. I have at least five texts and two missed calls from my mother, but the thought of talking to her right now makes my stomach roll. I'm not in the mood for another guilt trip of I can't believe you moved so far away from me and back to that place.

What would I say? Hey, I'm fine, just living with the New Orleans mafia boss because I accidentally saw him kill someone. No biggie.

I scrub a hand over my face. No, I'm not ready for that conversation. At least Joey knows what happened, so if I suddenly go missing, he can tell the cops that Sam Costello probably killed me.

Do I really think Sam is going to murder me?

A sigh leaves my lips. I'm not sure. He should, that much I know. Isn't that what they do with witnesses in all the gangster movies? Toss them in the sea with a brick tied to their ankles? Swim with the fishes, and all that.

But I still don't think that's Sam's M.O. Maybe I'm naive.

Before I can think better of it, I open the browser and type Sam's name into the search engine. Seconds later, the results appear. I scroll through, my heart rate quickening

with each headline. There's so much information about Sam — more than I expected.

Charges dropped against New Orleans mafia boss, Samuel Costello, due to insufficient evidence in murder trial.

I tap on the article, scanning through the details. The piece outlines how Sam was released less than a week ago after evidence emerged proving his innocence and the judge dismissed his case. He was in Orleans Parish Prison while awaiting trial for the murder of his father.

I freeze, my eyes rereading the line.

Did Sam kill his own father?

I know he's capable of murder; I saw it with my own eyes. But the idea of someone killing their own blood feels foreign to me. But then again, it was his uncle in that alleyway.

Going back to the search results, I tap on a photo gallery and find myself staring at Sam's mugshot. His eyes are hard, defiant, nothing like the calculated charm I've seen directed at me.

Further down, there's a society page from years back. A much younger Sam in a tuxedo at some charity gala, his arm around a stunning blonde. The caption reads: "Samuel Costello and date at the annual Children's Hospital Benefit."

I find myself diving deeper, reading about the Costello family history in New Orleans. They've been here for generations, with legitimate businesses — restaurants, real estate, shipping — serving as fronts for their less legal endeavors.

My stomach drops when I find an article about the murder of Giulia Costello, Sam's

mother, when he was just a child. The details are sparse but horrific — killed during a kidnapping attempt by a rival gang.

I close the browser, suddenly feeling like I'm violating his personal information. This isn't just research anymore; I'm peering into the painful chapters of Sam's life that shaped him into the man who now controls mine.

I nearly drop my phone when Sam's voice comes from behind me.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"Find anything interesting?"

My heart slams against my ribs. I didn't hear him approach — how does someone so large move so silently? I turn to find him leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest. He's wearing a charcoal suit that fits him perfectly, his dark hair slightly tousled from the day.

"Just...catching up on messages." I quickly lock my phone screen, but from the knowing look in his eyes, I can tell he's not buying it.

Sam crosses the courtyard in a few long strides and sits beside me on the stone bench. He smells like expensive cologne and something distinctly him. "Let me see."

"It's private."

"Nothing's private when you're living in my house." His voice is gentle but firm. "What were you looking at, Olivia?"

The way he says my name makes my skin prickle. I consider lying, but what's the point?

"You," I admit, meeting his gaze. "I was looking you up."

Something flickers across his face — surprise, maybe even vulnerability — before his expression settles back into careful neutrality.

"And? Satisfied your curiosity?"

"Not really." I twist the phone in my hands. "I found articles about your...arrest."

Sam's jaw tightens. "You shouldn't believe everything you read," he says. "Come. Dinner's ready."

And then he spins on his heel, leaving me in the courtyard, wondering what really happened to land him in New Orleans Parish facing murder charges.

## TWENTY-THREE

Sam

I pour myself a bourbon and settle into my seat at the head of the table. My phone is gripped in my hand, finger hovering over the tracking app I installed on Olivia's phone.

I want to know what she read.

Tapping the app, it comes to life on my screen. A small blue dot shows her location in the mansion. Currently upstairs, getting changed before dinner.

I tap over to her search history. "Sam Costello New Orleans."

She's been digging, trying to understand who I am. I can't say I blame her, but still. There's something intimate about knowing she's researching me, picking through the digital breadcrumbs of my past like she's trying to solve a puzzle.

The first article she read was about my release. Does she think I killed my father? My fists clench, annoyed that anyone could possibly think that. But she never knew my father; she has no idea what our relationship was like or what we meant to each other. And she watched me kill my uncle. Why wouldn't she think I'm capable of killing my



blood?The thought sits heavily in my chest.

I scroll through the images of my mugshot and photos of me from before I was arrested. A different man stares back at me from those pictures — younger, with fewer shadows behind his eyes.

With my finger hovering over the next article, I'm frozen as I read the headline.

"Giulia Costello Murder Remains Unsolved After 18 Years."

My mother.

I take a long swallow of bourbon, feeling it burn all the way down, hoping it might cauterize something inside me. The memories flood back without permission, breaking through every mental barrier I've built.

The small room. The screw. The feeling of rope against my wrists as I worked them free, my skin raw and bleeding. Mama's frightened eyes as I untied her, that moment of hope before everything shattered. The gunshots. My father's voice, desperate and broken. The stick in my hand, useless and pathetic.

Mama jumping in front of me.

The blood. So much blood. It seemed impossible that one person could contain so much of it.

I close my eyes, but it doesn't help. I still see her there on the floor, life draining from her eyes as my father screamed her name, a sound I've never been able to forget. The moment that taught me the most important lesson of my life: everyone I love becomes a target. Everyone I care for dies.

## Page 40

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

I open my eyes and stare at the phone screen, at Olivia's digital footprint through my past. This thing growing between us, this pull I feel toward her, it's dangerous.

For her.

For me.

It's a vulnerability I can't afford.

Draining my glass, I pour another, heavier this time, the bottle clinking against the crystal. What am I doing, keeping her close? Making her a part of my life means painting a target on her back. The Iron Serpents are just waiting for leverage against me. Anyone I care about becomes that leverage.

But I can't let her go.

The bourbon doesn't dull the memory of my mother's face. It never does.

I'm still staring at my phone when I hear the soft pad of footsteps. I quickly lock the screen and slip it into my pocket, composing my expression into something neutral as Olivia enters the dining room.

She's wearing one of the dresses I bought her, a simple blue one that flares at her waist. Her hair falls loose around her shoulders. Something in my chest tightens at the sight of her.

For some reason, I need her to know that I didn't kill my father. Even if I am a

murderer, it seems important that she knows I didn't do what I was accused of.

I've never felt the need to defend myself to anyone. But right now, I can't help the need to defend myself to her.

Why does it matter?

I try to shake off the thought. Redirecting.

"You look nice," I tell her, gesturing to the chair at my right.

Olivia slides into the seat, her movements cautious. "Thank you."

She watches me pour her a glass of wine, her eyes never leaving my face. There's something different in her gaze now, a new wariness that wasn't there before. She knows things about me that she didn't this morning.

"I didn't kill my father," I say, the words coming out before I can stop them.

Her eyes widen slightly. "You don't have to?—"

"I know."

A flush creeps up her neck, but she closes her mouth, waiting for me to continue.

"I was framed." I take a long sip of bourbon, letting the burn steady me. "My father and I were close. I never would have hurt him. My grandfather had just died, and my father was taking over the family. Someone didn't like that."

She swallows hard. "Is that why..."

She doesn't finish the sentence, but we both know what words are hanging between us.

Is that why I killed Damien.

"Yes."

She flinches slightly, but holds my gaze. "Why would they frame you?"

"Power. Money. The usual reasons people betray family." I shrug, trying to seem casual about the time that was stolen from me. "They wanted control of the Costello empire, and I was in the way."

"So you didn't do it." It's spoken so quietly, almost to herself.

"No. I would never hurt my father." The intensity in my voice surprises even me. "Family is everything to me, Olivia. Everything."

"I'm sorry," she says softly. "I shouldn't have looked you up."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"It's fine. You wanted to know, and now you do."

I notice Olivia's shoulders relax, the tension leaving her body as she processes what I've told her. Her fingers trace the stem of her wineglass, a nervous habit I've come to recognize.

"What was he like?" she asks suddenly. "Your father."

The question catches me off guard. People don't usually ask about him — they ask about his business, his connections, his power. Never about who he was.

"He was..." I search for the right words. "Complicated. Strong. Principled, in his own way."

I take another sip of bourbon as memories surface. "He taught me how to fish when I was six. Had the patience of a saint when it came to untangling my line every five minutes."

A small smile plays on Olivia's lips, encouraging me to continue.

"He loved my mother more than anything. After she died, something in him changed. Hardened." I look down at my glass. "But he never stopped trying to protect me."

Olivia reaches across the table, her fingers hesitating just inches away. Then, with a decisiveness that surprises me, she places her hand over mine. Her touch is warm, gentle, a stark contrast to everything else in my world.

"I'm sorry about what happened to you," she says, barely above a whisper. "Being blamed for something you didn't do."

For a moment, I'm frozen, unable to process the simple comfort of her touch. It's been so long since anyone has reached for me like this, without wanting something in return.

"Thank you," I manage, my voice rougher than I intend.

Her eyes meet mine, and I see something there I wasn't expecting...understanding. Not pity, not fear, just...recognition of pain.

I turn my hand over, our palms meeting, and gently close my fingers around hers. The dining room falls away, the empire, the enemies, the responsibilities — all of it recedes until there's just this: her hand in mine, a quiet moment of connection I didn't know I was starving for.

I should end this now. Before I care too much. Before she becomes something I can't bear to lose.

Before history repeats itself in the worst possible way.

## TWENTY-FOUR

Olivia

There's a hairbrush tangled in my wet hair when Sam knocks on my door the next morning. My thoughts are a jumbled mess after reading a text from my mother begging me to come home.

I'm not even sure I could if I wanted to. What would Sam say if I told himoh, I'm just

gonna move back home and forget any of this even happened. Would he just let me pack my bags and send me on my way?

Doubtful.

But I don't even want to go home. What would I do there? Go back to Rhett and fake happy with the cheating asshole? Put on a fake smile and pretend to be his trophy wife?

When I responded to her message, telling her I was happy here, she replied by asking why I hate her. Guilt churns in my gut. That's always been my mother's response. If I don't immediately agree or do whatever she asks, it must be because I secretly hate her and I'm trying to make her miserable. It couldn't possibly be because I have any thoughts or wishes of my own.

It doesn't help that I tossed and turned all night, thinking about Sam. My brain is a confusing mess. I want to hate him for taking me, for keeping me here. But that seems to be getting harder and harder to do. The more I learn about him...the more I understand why he is the way is.

Sam doesn't wait for me to answer before the door to my bedroom is swinging open. I gasp, dropping the hairbrush to the floor and clutching my towel tighter.

"Shit," Sam mutters, turning around so he's facing the hallway. "Sorry."

"Did you need something?" I ask.

"You're coming with me today. You should wear black."

"Why would I wear?—"

"We're leaving in thirty minutes."



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

He exits my room as quickly as he came, shutting the door behind him and leaving me with more questions than answers.

Thirty minutes later, I'm downstairs with dry and curled hair, wearing a black dress and matching heels, thanks to Ana's insistence that I would need one. The clothes feel foreign on my body, the dress too short and the heels too high.

Sam comes out of his office a moment later, with his associate, who he's never introduced me to, and another man on his heels. All three pause when they see me.

My skin heats as Sam's eyes trace over my body, taking in the little dress and matching heels. He steps toward me, coming closer.

"You look beautiful," he murmurs.

The compliment catches me off guard, simmering under my skin. Ever since I agreed to let him help me by fixing up the bar, things have shifted between us. He's...sweet. And attentive in a way I've never experienced. Rhett's nice gestures and compliments always came with strings. He needed me to attend an event and make him look good, or he simply just wanted sex.

But Sam seems different... Or maybe I'm naive thinking that, and at any moment, the other shoe is going to drop.

"You told me to wear black," I say, as if explaining why I look nice. Or beautiful, as he said. I don't feel beautiful, though. More like a child playing dress up, pretending to be a sophisticated woman when, really, inside, I'm barely surviving. I desperately

want to be back in a pair of leggings and an oversized t-shirt that hides my body.

One of his hands reaches out, his fingers brushing against my cheek as he moves a piece of hair. Our skin touches as he tucks the strand behind my ear, sending sparks through me as our eyes meet, a clash of blue and brown. For a moment, I think he's going to lean in and press his lips to mine. It's the second time since I've met him that I think he's going to kiss me.

And for some reason, I think I want it.

My gaze drops to his mouth, lingering there as my heart hammers against my ribs. His lips are full, the bottom one slightly fuller than the top, and I imagine how they might taste.

The thought has a shiver rippling down my spine, unexpected and thrilling. I've spent so long building walls, protecting myself from men like Sam Costello, men who represent everything my father was and my mother hated. Yet here I stand, captivated by the possibility of his touch.

Would kissing Sam feel like falling or flying? Like danger or salvation? The line between the two seems blurrier every moment I spend in his presence.

"I did." Sam drops his hand and takes a step back, breaking the tension instantly.

Fucking hormones.

I have to shake away all these thoughts plaguing my mind. Luckily, Sam redirects my attention to the two men who were in his office with him.

"Olivia, this is my cousin, John, and my lawyer, Adrian."

I don't trust my voice to work, so I give them a polite wave, and they return with similar greetings.

"Let's go," Sam pulls open the front door. His driver is waiting outside, along with two matching black Escalades. Sam leads me into the first one, and John and Adrian take the second.

"Where are we going?" I ask once his driver pulls out of the semi-circle driveway and onto the road.

Sam is tapping away on his phone again, so he doesn't look up when he answers. "A funeral."

"What?"

A funeral? Why the fuck is he taking me to a funeral? I hate funerals, always have. The last one I went to was my father's. My mom didn't come with me, couldn't stand to see my father again, even in death. Rhett and I were already broken up, so I went alone.

There was barely anyone there. A few regulars from the bar, but that was it. The only family my father had left was me and my grandfather.

The funeral Sam takes me to doesn't seem to have many more people. We pull up to Lafayette Cemetery, and Sam leads me through the front gate and down the rows of tombs. The cemeteries in New Orleans have always freaked me out. The idea of these cement tombs housing your body for the rest of time seems even worse than being buried six feet underground.

I make a mental note to make sure someone knows I want to be cremated. The thought makes me shiver, and Sam reaches out, wrapping his arm around me in a

warming gesture that takes me by surprise.

When we stop in front of the tomb that has the fellow mourners, I spot a blown-up picture of the deceased on an easel. My heart stalls, and my knees go weak. I'd fall on my ass if it wasn't for Sam, who tightens his grip, keeping me standing.

I recognize the picture immediately.

It matches the one I saw on the news just last week.

Sam's uncle. Damien Romano.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

The news reported that he was killed by the Iron Serpents in a feud between the two criminal organizations, but I know better.

I'm standing right next to his killer.

There's a woman wearing a black dress and an oversized hat, dabbing at her nose with a tissue. Beside her is another woman who looks similar enough to be her sister. She rubs her back in a soothing gesture. There's a couple standing across from him, the woman also looking strikingly similar to the other two. Are they all sisters?

Other than us, these are the only people here to mourn the man Sam killed.

Sam told me his uncle was a bad person, and the lack of attendance at his funeral makes me believe him. But still, seeing the woman crying sends daggers into my chest.

She's grieving and probably doesn't even know what really happened. But I do. And I'm not telling anyone. I could go to the police and give her closure. But then what would happen? Sam made it clear that he's keeping me until he believes he can trust me. Going to the police would be an obvious sign that he can't trust me.

"Let's get this over with." Sam's words are harsh as he looks at the priest.

My eyes are fully focused on the crying woman while the priest does his thing. Damien is already closed in the tomb. There are no flowers to be dropped on his grave. We pray and watch his wife cry. And then it's over quickly.

I stand frozen as the mourners begin to disperse. The woman — Damien's wife — walks past me, her tear-stained face hidden beneath her wide-brimmed hat. For a moment, our eyes meet, and I feel like I'm drowning in her grief. Does she see something in my expression? Can she tell I know more than I should?

But I also know that her husband is the reason Sam spent months in Orleans Parish Prison for a murder he didn't commit.

Confusion twists in my gut.

Right and wrong are starting to swirl together, and I'm not sure which is which any more.

Sam's hand presses against the small of my back, guiding me away from the tomb. "Time to go."

My legs move mechanically as we walk back through the cemetery. The sun beats down on us, making the black dress stick to my skin. I feel like I'm suffocating.

"Why did you bring me here?" I finally ask when we're far enough away from the others.

Sam's jaw tightens. "I wanted to see what you would do."

"What I would do... Was this a test? You wanted me to watch a grieving woman, all so you could test me?" I nearly shout, and Sam presses his palm to my lower back, pushing me forward to the car. Opening the door, he urges me inside.

I slide in, grateful for the blast of cold air conditioning. As he settles in beside me, I turn to face him.

"Did you feel anything back there? Watching his wife cry?"

Sam stares straight ahead, his profile hard as stone. "What I feel doesn't matter."

"It does to me." The words surprise even me.

He turns then, his dark eyes meeting mine. Something flickers there — pain, regret, I'm not sure which.

"You think I'm a monster." It's not a question.

I should say yes. I should hate him for what he's done, for keeping me prisoner, for making me complicit in his world. But the truth is more complicated.

"I think you're a man who's convinced himself he has no choice. But there's always a choice. You're not God. You don't get to choose who lives and who dies."

Sam's expression shifts, and he looks away from me for a long moment.

"Donnie, take us to Lana's." He returns his gaze to me. "I think there's someone you should meet."

TWENTY-FIVE

Olivia

The car stops in front of a quaint gray house in the French Quarter with white trim and bright blue detailing sitting behind a wrought-iron gate. Greenery grows along the siding, and there's a floral reef hanging in front of the stained-glass window on the door.

It seemshomey.

Before we even get to the door, it swings open. A woman, probably around the same age as me, with wavy auburn hair, steps out. She's dressed casually in an oversized t-shirt and a pair of jean shorts. When she sees Sam, she smiles and calls behind her to someone else in the house. Moments later, a man with slicked back hair and tattoos covering every inch of his arms down to his fingers appears in the doorway.

Sam presses his palm against the small of my back and leads me forward. "Olivia, this is my cousin, Lana, and her husband, Naz."

Lana's face lights up when he says "husband," and she peers over her shoulder at the tattooed man.

"Lana is Damien's daughter." Sam continues, and the pieces click into place. I can see the way she resembles the woman at the funeral. The dead man's wife, who was sobbing as her husband was sealed away in the cemetery forever. "Can we come in?"

Moments later, we're seated out back on a cute patio that's surrounded by plants. There's an herb garden with popsicle sticks poking from the soil to identify the different sprouts. Potted ferns hang from the railings, and there's a large magnolia tree that I want to lie beneath.

"How's the new house?" Sam asks Naz as Lana places a glass of lemonade in front of each of us.

"Good. Different than being in New York, but it's good to be home."



Sam nods. "And your family?"

That question seems to make Naz smile. "Good. Anthony's getting too big, and my sister's working toward her degree now."

Sam returns the smile. "I'm glad to hear it."

"I know you didn't come over to ask about the house." Lana plops into the seat across from me. "So what's up?"

"I want you to tell Olivia about your father."

That seems to quiet the group. Lana's face falls, and she takes a moment, swallowing hard before she looks back up.

It's not lost on me that Lana wasn't at her father's funeral this morning, and the look on her face tells me this is a sore subject. That's something I understand well. I felt like a fraud at my own father's funeral, the daughter who hadn't seen him in fifteen years.

Lana chews on her bottom lip, and her eyes flash to Sam, as if asking if she really needs to share this. Naz folds his hands together on the table and drops his head. This is a sore subject, I can tell. Guilt settles in my gut. I don't want to force them to tell me anything; this is all Sam's doing.

"My dad just died too," I offer, the words leaping from my lips in an attempt to soothe the energy at the table.

Lana's face pops up, and she looks at me with a hint of shame. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

"It's okay." I shush her apologies as quickly as possible. Maybe because I feel like I don't deserve them, or maybe I'm just tired of hearing apologies over a death that really didn't affect me. You can't miss someone you never had a relationship with, right? "We weren't really close."

A soft smile lifts her pink lips. "I get that. I wasn't really close with mine either."

Beside her, Naz snorts. Lana tosses him a look. "Wasn't close is an understatement," he mutters, causing Sam to chuckle under his breath.

"You don't have to tell me anything," I say. "Despite what he says."

Lana smiles and looks at Sam with a quirked eyebrow. "I like her."

"Yeah, yeah." Sam waves his hand.

"Why don't you show Sam the bar you built, hmm?" Lana nudges her husband, who takes the hint easily.

Sam looks at me, giving me a quick nod before following Naz and leaving me alone with Lana.

"Figured we'd get the peanut gallery out of here." She takes a sip of her lemonade. "So, I know why you're...here. Or I guess, with Sam, I should say."

I nearly choke on my own lemonade, sputtering out the sour liquid while Lana hisses an apology and hands me a napkin.

Is she saying she knows that I saw Sam kill her father? An awkward grief settles over me. I'm not sure what to say in this situation.

"It's okay. You don't need to feel bad. I'm guessing that's why Sam wants me to tell you about my father, so you know he wasn't a good guy."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

There's an ache in my throat as I struggle to find any words. It shouldn't matter who her father was. No one deserves to be murdered. And definitely not killed and tossed into a swamp to become gator food.

"Sam told me he wasn't a good person. And that he framed him for his father's murder..."

Lana nods. "He wanted Uncle Junior dead, and while I don't think he pulled the trigger himself, I know he was behind it. He hurt a lot of people Sam cares about. Me included. "

I meet her eyes, hazel orbs that seem to be filled with grief. I want to ask her what happened, but I don't want to pry.

"I was supposed to marry someone else when I met Naz," she says after a moment. I stay quiet, giving her space to continue. "My parents arranged the marriage. He was...awful."

Tears sparkle in Lana's eyes, and guilt fills my chest. "You don't have to tell me?—"

"No." Lana shakes her head. "I want to. You should know who my father was."

I nod, albeit shakily.

"I wasn't the one who was supposed to marry him at first. My father arranged for him to marry my older sister, Lily." A single tear drips from the corner of her eye. She wipes it away quickly. "I was young. I don't know what happened. But Lily went on a

date with him, and when she returned...she jumped off her balcony. She died from the impact."

My breath catches in my chest. "Oh my god." I can't imagine what Lana went through. "I'm so sorry."

"After that, my father promised me to him instead. The arrangement was part of a business deal, and Davis wanted a wife. He wanted to be part of the Costello family, and Lily's death wasn't enough to stop him. I didn't see a way out. My father got whatever he wanted, so if he said I was marrying Davis, then I was marrying him. I wasn't supposed to be with Naz, but I just wanted an escape. A moment for myself before I gave my life to this man. Davis was cruel, and when he found me with Naz, he nearly killed him. Sam stopping him is the only reason Naz is alive today. My family didn't want us to be together, so I saw him in secret." She smiles fondly when she talks about Naz, but it quickly falls when she thinks about her ex-fiancé. "He was violent toward me. And what's worse, my dad couldn't be bothered. He would've happily sent me off to wed that man who would've beaten me every single day. My existence would've been unbearable, and my parents didn't give a damn whatsoever."

She swipes away another rogue tear. "Sam helped us get away. If he hadn't...I'm not sure I'd be alive today."

I can't imagine what it would be like to have your parents, your protectors, hand you over to a wolf with no care for your happiness and safety.

"I hope this helps you understand why I don't care that my father is dead. Actually, I think I'm happy he's gone. He wasn't a good man, Olivia. If Sam wouldn't have killed him, Naz and I wouldn't have been able to come home."

Her words tumble through me, tilting everything I know on its axis.

Murder is wrong, and that's something I've always known as a fact. You can't just go around killing whoever you want, whenever you want. But Lana's story blurs the lines between right and wrong, creating a murky gray where I'm not sure what's okay and what's not.

Her father sounds cruel for forcing her into an unwanted marriage. Especially after her sister killed herself to escape it. How many daughters was he willing to lose, all for a business transaction? And then I think of Sam, how he spent eight months in prison because he was falsely accused of murdering his own father.

I kind of want to kill Damien too.

That line becomes a permanent shade of gray and, suddenly, Sam Costello doesn't seem so evil anymore.

TWENTY-SIX

Olivia

Once upon a time, my mother fell in love with a gangster.

My father wasn't in the mafia, per se. But he was associated. Not that it mattered when they came to collect his debts. There was no loyalty to the man who owed them money. I don't think my father was really a criminal, not how my mother tells the story. I think he just hung around them, kept a gun under the bar, and had a lot of cash from gambling. When he won, at least.

Still, my mother recounts the turmoil my father put her through with malice. And every time, the story ends with a clear warning. Never fall in love with a criminal.

She's currently on speakerphone, her voice droning on about something or other back

home while I cut lemons and limes. Even Roman, who's sitting on the opposite side of the bar, looks like he's about to fall asleep listening to my mom talk. Joey is at the other end of the bar, taking care of our afternoon customers, two regulars who arrive every day at 4 p.m. for their after-work beers.

"I wish your father wouldn't have left you that silly bar."

Here we go again.

She's switching topics, probably because I wasn't interested enough in her country club tales. Roman perks up at this new conversation starter, and I roll my eyes.

"Mom," I groan as I scoop up the lemon slices and drop them in the appropriate container.

"I know. I know. But you had so much going for you up here! And he goes off and dies and now you're a bar owner in New Orleans." She scoffs, and one of Roman's eyebrows raises.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"Mom," I say again, more sternly. "This is what I wanted."

"Ugh." I can hear the disgust in her voice. "I just don't understand."

"I know, Mom. Listen, I'll talk to you later. Okay? Love you."

I don't wait for a reply before I press the button to end the call. Gripping my hands on the edge of the bar, I close my eyes and heave a sigh. It's exhausting talking to my mother. And no matter what I say, she'll never understand my point of view.

"So she hated your father, huh?" Roman interrupts my mental pity party.

"Something like that." I shake my head in exasperation, opening my eyes and going back to my task. "She used to live here when I was a kid, but now this place just holds so many bad memories for her. I don't think she can handle the idea that I might be happy here." When I was younger, I would spend the summers with my father, and as soon as I'd return, she'd grill me for everything my father did wrong. She wanted to build a case for full custody, but truly, I think she just wanted to know he was miserable without her.

"What is she so afraid of?"

I consider his question for a moment. "I think that I'll fall in love with someone like my father."

I can feel Roman's eyes on me, but I avoid his gaze. I don't want to know what he's thinking about, but I imagine it's the same person I'm thinking about. Sam. In some



aspects, he's worse than my father, isn't he? My father was a wannabe gangster. Sam is the boss of the New Orleans famiglia. He's far past wannabe and strictly in the territory of criminal. He was just released from prison. I can't imagine what my mother would say if she knew I was living with him. It's her worst fear come to life.

A few weeks ago, I would've agreed with her. I did agree with her. From the moment I met him, I thought Sam Costello was bad news.

So why don't I feel that way anymore?

Lana's story pops into my memory. She told me she wouldn't be alive and wouldn't be married to the love of her life if it wasn't for Sam. And as much as I hate to admit it, it seems like the man he killed deserved it.

Ever since talking to her, my brain has been a muddy mess. I avoided Sam last night after he brought me back to his mansion. I was afraid if I stayed too close to him, he might break through the final bits of my resistance.

"Ya know..." Roman leans his elbows onto the shiny bar top and watches me cut open a lime. "Sometimes we hold our parents on a pedestal. Thinking that because they're the adults, they should be all knowing. But the truth is, we're all a little fucked up by our pasts. And we pass on our fucked up-ness and our fears to the next generation, and then they pass it on to the next. So, your mom and dad had a bad relationship? That doesn't mean you have to."

My hands freeze. Is he trying to say that if I date Sam, it won't be like what happened between my mother and father? I blow out a harsh breath and look up to meet Roman's gaze. "That was really wise for a babysitter."

Roman chuckles. "Hey, I'm not a babysitter."

"Then what do you call this?" I wave between the two of us.

"I'm keeping you safe."

I glance down at the cutting board and back to him. "From what? The limes?"

Roman opens his mouth to respond, but whatever he was about to say freezes when the ceiling thuds above us.

"What the hell was that?" Roman straightens, hand moving toward his waistband.

"Grandpa," I mutter, heart instantly pounding as I move toward the stairs.

Before I reach them, my grandfather appears at the top, red-faced and wearing nothing but his boxers and an undershirt. His thin white hair stands up wildly on one side.

"Where is he?" he bellows, gripping the railing. "I know he's here! That son of a bitch!" He rushes down the steps faster than I thought his legs could move.

"Grandpa!" I try to stop him. "What are you doing? You need to get dressed—" But my pleas fall on deaf ears. He's already in the main bar, gaining the attention of the patrons.

"Gino—" Joey catches sight of my grandfather and looks between the two of us, sympathy in his eyes. "Come on, old man, let's get you upstairs."

With newfound strength, my grandfather pushes his old friend away.

"Don't tell me what to do in my own bar!" he shouts, his cheeks reddened. "Where's my son? He took all my money, and I want it back. Now!"

Roman stares wide-eyed as my grandfather storms toward him, finger pointed accusingly. "You bring him back here," he growls. "I told the lot of you to stop letting him play."

My stomach drops. He's having an episode, living decades in the past.

## Page 47

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"Grandpa." I try to place my hand on his shoulder, but he swings his arm back, slapping me across the face. My cheek stings, and time freezes.

Roman and Joey quickly grab him, restraining his arms as they drag him to the stairs and back up to the apartment.

Tears form in my eyes, and I try to choke them back, and when I look up, I find the eyes of my few customers staring.

I guess the ghosts of my family's history are far from done with me.

### TWENTY-SEVEN

Sam

The scent of home-cooked food assaults me when I enter my consigliere's home in the French Quarter. I follow the smell of bubbling red sauce and stewed meats to Adrian's kitchen, shock taking over when I see my blue-haired cousin wearing an apron and rolling out pasta dough.

"Since when do you cook?" I ask Madi.

She blows a strand of hair off her face and presses her palms into the dough, kneading thoroughly before rolling the ball with the palm of her hand and repeating the process. "Don't act so surprised," she grumbles. "I'm a great cook."

At that moment, Adrian walks into the kitchen from the other entrance, pausing when

he hears her statement. From behind her, he meets my eyes, shaking his head and causing me to chuckle.

Madi whips her head around at the sound of my laugh, meeting her husband's face, who's now acting like he didn't do a thing.

My little cousin, the youngest of all of us, spent her entire childhood trying to avoid being the perfect mafia wife, thwarting every attempt at teaching her how to cook or keep house. I'm not surprised to hear she's not good at it. I am surprised to see she's trying, though.

Is this what love does to a person?

"I'm sure it's delicious, Mads. You'll have to have me for dinner, hmm?"

"And your new girl?" She pauses her kneading, flour-covered hands coming to her hips.

My eyes move to Adrian, who's now hanging his head. He shouldn't be telling anyone anything that goes on in la famiglia, and that should also mean not telling your wife. I don't have experience in that area, but I imagine that's easier said than done. Especially when you're married to any of the women in my family.

"Don't look at him," Madi adds. "You took her to see Lana."

I give Adrian an easy smile, signaling it's okay, and redirect my attention back to Madi.

"It's not like that."

"You have a woman living in your house, and it's not like that?" She mocks me with a

deep voice.

I scrub a hand over my jaw, feeling the tension building there. I don't know how to explain Olivia to Madi. She's just a girl I'm forcing to live with me because she saw me murder our uncle. No big deal.

"Tell me," Madi demands.

Most people don't talk to me like that. Don't make demands of me. Behind her, Adrian winces, clearly uncomfortable with the way his wife is talking to his boss. Even Lana would be more polite when discussing this matter, or any other, with me. But Madi is the baby, and since the day she was born, I've been protective of her. Same with my grandfather. And thus, we've created a brat who can make demands and we'll cave every time.

"She witnessed something she shouldn't have." I settle on a partial truth.

Madi narrows her eyes. "She saw you kill Uncle Damien."

Adrian hisses, "Madi?—"

I wave a hand to silence him. "Yes," I admit.

"Is she going to tell anyone?"

Madi seems unfazed by the death of our uncle. Probably because she didn't like him any more than I did. He's the reason Madi was still forced to marry Adrian even after her brother's death. No love lost there.

"I don't think so," I answer truthfully.

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"But you don't know for sure?" Her eyebrow lifts with the question.

"No."

"Are you going to..." she trails off, not saying the words that we're all thinking.

Why haven't I killed the witness?

"No. That's not an option."

Madi nods. "Good. So then, what are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"Do you love her?"

I hiss out a breath, shocked by the question. Do I love the girl I'm forcing to live with me? The one who I'd do anything for to make her smile? The one whose lips I'm desperate to taste?

I can't be falling for her.

It's not safe to be with me.

"No," I answer, even if it tastes wrong on my tongue.

Madi smiles like she knows I'm a liar. "Well then, can I meet her?"

I'm about to say absolutely fucking not when my phone rings. I fish the device from my pocket, seeing Roman's name flashing on the screen.

"Yeah?" I answer, forgoing the greeting.

"Boss, we got a problem. Olivia's grandfather is losing his shit."

I leave Madi and Adrian quickly, hopping in the Escalade and telling Donnie to gun it to the bar. The thought of Olivia in distress or danger has my heart pounding.

Why am I feeling like this?

Why do I care so much?

That stupid organ inside my chest aches as thoughts race through my mind about what she might be going through. It was hard enough for me losing my grandfather, especially knowing that the cancer could take him any day. But Olivia is watching hers slowly lose his mind. And now, with him becoming aggressive, having a single nurse with him might not be enough.

But I doubt she's going to want to discuss other options. Even if I offer to pay for the best care facility in New Orleans, I know she'll say no.

She's going to want to take care of him herself.

And the person stopping her from doing just that is me.

But I'm a selfish bastard, because the idea of letting her go feels equivalent to someone prying my ribs open and yanking my heart out.

I'm not letting her out of my grasp. Not now. Maybe not ever.



But that's a silly idea. Because I know being with me isn't safe. The best thing for her is to stay in my protection, but somehow also far away from me. Only, those two things can't happen at the same time.

I need to make a choice.

Protect the girl or walk away for good.

Like I said, I'm a selfish bastard.

I don't think I can walk away.

### TWENTY-EIGHT

Olivia

When I was a kid, my grandfather was the best thing about coming to visit my father. Normally, he was the one to pick me up from the airport, a cardboard sign in his hands reading my name. He'd have on a black driver's hat and he'd greet me, asking in an astute voice if I was, in fact, Miss Olivia Marchese. I'd giggle as the flight attendant would hand me off to him.

There were always gifts waiting for me at the bar, and he'd make me root beer floats and let me sit at the counter and watch him work. He'd listen to everything I had to say and would spend the summer watching girly movies with me. Once, he even let me teach him how to make friendship bracelets from embroidery thread. We traded the bracelets, and he wore his for the rest of the summer.

With my grandfather, things were easy. He loved me for me. There was no aching past, reminding him of a lost flame like there was with my mother and father. No games or court battles. He was just happy to spend time with me.

"Where is he?" the present version of my grandfather shouts with venom. He doesn't even recognize me, and once again, pain stabs at my chest. It's not his fault, I know that. But still, I can't stop the way it hurts to have been forgotten by him.

"Dad's not here, Grandpa," I say in the most calming voice I can muster. Roman and Joey are still gripping his bare arms, trying to hold him back.

Kelly's on the couch, an ice pack pressed to her head. She tried to stop him from coming downstairs in this state, but he backhanded her, sending her flying backwards until her head smacked the side of the table.

Grandpa looks at me like he has no idea who I am. And to be fair, in whichever decade he's living through his mind, I'm either not born or much younger.

"Sal, your son," I say, moving on from the fact that he doesn't know who I am. "He's not here. He'll be back later."

Just as the words leave my lips, the apartment door swings open. Sam walks in, wearing another suit that probably cost a fortune. Jet black with a white shirt underneath. His dark eyes sweep the place, assessing the situation before landing back on me.

My body heats under his gaze, all of my confusing feelings bubbling under the surface. I can't help the way I respond when he gives me his attention. But I need to focus on the situation at hand, not on how he makes me feel.

"Sal!" Grandpa's gaze is fixed on Sam. He still seems to think that he's my dad. Sam nods at Roman and Joey to let him go, and as soon as his arms are free, Grandpa marches up to him. "You did it again, didn't you?" He's angry, and the emotion seems wrong on him compared to the man I remember from my childhood.

"I'm sorry," Sam says simply, even though he probably doesn't have a clue what he's apologizing for.

"The money." Grandpa's voice lowers as he looks at his mock son. Grief shadows his eyes. "Did you lose it all?"

This is one of the many times my grandfather has mentioned my father losing money

and an ache strikes my chest. I knew my father had chosen gambling over my family, something my mother mentioned on many occasions, any time she was feeling spiteful or if my father came up in any way. She was always quick to remind me — and everyone else — that he was a lying bastard who gambled away every penny. But my grandfather has never once mentioned my dad's gambling habits. Or maybe I'm just remembering my summers with him through the lens of rose-tinted frames.

"Nope." Sam shakes his head, and Grandpa looks at him skeptically. "I won." He gives my grandfather a cheesy grin, and it does something to me, sparks an unfamiliar feeling. Sam tugs his wallet from his pocket, flipping open the leather and pulling a wad of hundreds free. "Does this cover what I took?"

With surprised eyes, Grandpa takes the cash, flipping through the hundreds. I can't count fast enough, but I know there's thousands of dollars there. My chest does that thing again, my heart beating powerfully.

"You won." Grandpa is shocked as he looks at Sam, thinking it's his son who never brought back the cash he stole, now standing in front of him with a stack of winnings.

"I won," Sam echoes. "Now, let's get you settled, hmm? Want me to order some dinner?"

Grandpa smiles at Sam, as if that money suddenly made everything right in the world. "Meatball sub?" he questions.

"Of course." Sam's hand is on his back as he guides him to the recliner. "I'll get it."

Once my grandfather is settled, Sam returns to the kitchen, his eyes on Roman first. "Get him a sub."

"On it, boss." And then Roman is gone, off to fetch the meatball sub Grandpa

requested.

"Can you handle the bar?" Sam asks, looking at Joey.

"Of course." The old man looks my way before he leaves. He doesn't speak a word, but the look is all I need to see the pity he has for me.

"Kelly." Sam looks to the nurse, who's still holding an icepack to her head. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Nodding, she pulls the pack away. "Just shaken up."

"I'll call and ask the agency to send someone else to give you a break, okay?" He pulls his wallet back out, handing a slimmer stack of hundreds to Kelly. She takes the money without question and thanks Sam.

"You." His attention turns to me, his dark gaze raking over every inch of my skin. It's like he needed to handle everything else first so he could give me his full attention. "Are you okay?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

I was holding it together, trying to make sure my grandfather was okay. But something about those three words gets me. Slicing through my restraints. Snipping the cords holding me standing.

Sam waltzed in and took care of everything.

And now, in the safety of the quiet aftermath, I break.

TWENTY-NINE

Sam

I catch Olivia before she crumbles to the ground. One question and her feet give out. Tears steam from her eyes, and she's sobbing. It's like a cord has snapped and, suddenly, she's gone from keeping it together to a full-on meltdown.

Scooping her up in my arms, I move through the apartment until I find the bedroom that I'm certain belongs to her. Her body is trembling against my chest, tears soaking through my shirt, warm against my skin.

Laying her down on the bed, her fingers grip my shirt, reluctant to let go. I don't pull away, instead I tug her close to me and let her cry into my chest.

"I've got you," I murmur.

The small bedroom is sparsely decorated. We sit on a wrought-iron bed frame with pale purple sheets and an old duvet. There's a stack of boxes in the corner and an

open suitcase with clothes hanging out. I don't think she ever truly moved in. I wonder how long she was here before I took her to my place.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, her voice hoarse from all the crying. "I can't?—"

"Don't." I sit on the edge of the bed. "Don't apologize."

I think she needed to break. Holding everything in all the time is impossible. And maybe I've pushed her too hard, put her in a situation that's added more stress to her life. She's still panting through her tears like she can't catch her breath.

She's falling apart in front of me, walls crumbling, and I'm the last person who should be here to witness it.

"Breathe," I order, mimicking the slow breathing I want her to do. She's about to hyperventilate herself to death.

"Breathe," I demand again, my palms finding each of her cheeks, forcing her to look at me as I breathe.

Slowly, she comes to, mimicking my breathing until her own slows down.

"Good girl," I praise her, causing her cheeks to turn pink.

She likes when I call her a good girl. She likes my praise, my touch, my control. And something sick twists inside me, because I want to give them all to her. I want to give her everything.

"I can't handle my head," she says, her voice faint. "It's too many thoughts, and I can't organize them. I just need it all to stop." She looks at me with teary eyes. "Help me."

Those two words do something to me. She's been so strong since the day I've met her, not once asking me for any kind of help.

And now she's in front of me, her eyes pleading.

"What do you need?" I ask.

"I need you to shut my brain off."

The way she's saying it makes me think she wants something more, and my cock springs to life at the thought of giving it to her. But she doesn't know what she's asking for right now; she's upset, vulnerable. And I'm not about to take advantage of her.

"Please," she whispers, her fingers clutching into my arms. "I need you."

The last bits of control I have snap one by one in quick succession.

She needs me.

Who am I to deny her?

"Olivia." It takes everything in me not to tear her clothes off. "What are you asking for?"



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

Her cheeks flush with heat, and the sight has me swallowing roughly. "I want...you."

"Are you sure?" I ask firmly.

"Yes," she answers immediately. "Sam, I need you."

And that's all I need to pounce. I yank her head to mine, kissing her deeply. It's even better than I imagined. She tastes like candy, sweet apples, and fresh citrus. The scent invades my nostrils. I can taste it on my tongue, and I want to devour every inch of her.

My control is long gone. That man who has everything neat and in order, who doesn't jump into situations out of reactions, is long gone. I am nothing but frantic need.

And right now, I need her.

Need to taste, need to feel.

Need to ingrain every inch of her into my memory.

One time might not be enough, but when I wake up from this lust-fueled haze, my logical brain will probably tell me once is all I get.

So I'm going to make sure I enjoy it.

I push her down onto the bed, my weight pressing her into the mattress as my mouth claims hers. Her lips part instantly, inviting me deeper as her fingers grip onto my

shirt to keep me close. I groan into her mouth, my hands roaming her body, desperate to touch every inch of her.

"I need to see you," I growl against her lips.

My fingers find the hem of her shirt, yanking it over her head. The sight of her in a simple black bra makes my cock throb painfully against my zipper. Her chest rises and falls rapidly, her pretty blue eyes darkened with want.

I unhook her bra with one hand, letting it fall away. Her breasts are perfect, full and topped with rosy nipples that harden under my gaze. I lower my head, taking one peak into my mouth, rolling my tongue around it before sucking hard.

"Sam," she gasps, her back arching off the bed.

Her hands fumble with my shirt, pushing it up my chest. I pull back just long enough to rip it over my head before returning to her, skin against skin. The feel of her soft body beneath mine is intoxicating.

I trail kisses down her stomach, unbuttoning her jeans as I go. Lifting her hips, she helps me slide them down her legs, along with her panties. And then she's naked beneath me, all creamy skin and curves.

"You're fucking beautiful," I murmur, taking in the sight of her.

I spread her thighs wider, my hands gripping her soft flesh. The scent of her arousal hits me, making my mouth water. She's already wet for me, glistening and ready.

"Sam," she whispers, a hint of nervousness in her voice. "What are you?—"

"Shh." I press a kiss to her inner thigh. "Let me take care of you."

Her breath catches as I move higher, dragging my lips along the sensitive skin of her thigh. I can feel her trembling beneath my touch, anticipation building with each inch I claim.

"You don't have to think," I murmur against her skin. "Just feel."

When I finally taste her, she gasps, then whimpers, her hips bucking off the bed. I hold her firmly in place, my tongue making a slow, deliberate path through her folds. She's sweet and tangy, better than anything I've ever tasted.

"I don't want you to think about anything except how good your pussy feels right now."

"Oh God," she moans as her fingers find their way into my hair.

I circle her clit with my tongue, teasing her, building her up slowly. Her thighs tense around my head, her breathing becoming more erratic. Sliding one finger inside her, then two, I curl them to find that spot that makes her cry out.

"Sam, please," she begs, but she doesn't even know what she's begging for.

I suck her clit between my lips, flicking my tongue against the sensitive bud while pumping my fingers inside her. Her walls clench around me, her back arching off the bed. She's close. I can feel it in the way her body tightens, the way her moans become higher, more desperate.

"Let go for me," I command against her center, the vibration of my voice sending her over the edge.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

She comes with a broken cry, her body shuddering violently. I don't stop, working her through each wave, drawing out her pleasure until she's pushing at my shoulders, oversensitive and spent.

When I finally look up, her face is flushed, her eyes half-closed in bliss. All the tension has drained from her features, replaced by a languid satisfaction that makes pride surge through me.

I hold Olivia against my chest as her breathing evens out. Her body is warm, soft, completely relaxed now as she drifts off to sleep. The weight of her feels right in my arms, like she belongs here. Her dark hair spills across my skin, and I find myself running my fingers through it, mesmerized by its silky texture.

Something twists in my chest as I look down at her peaceful face. The fierce, guarded woman who stood up to me is vulnerable now, trusting me enough to fall asleep in my arms. When was the last time anyone trusted me like this?

Fuck. This wasn't supposed to happen.

I've built walls around myself for years, keeping everyone at a safe distance. Even my closest men don't truly know me. It's how I've survived, how I've kept my sanity intact while rebuilding what my family lost.

But Olivia is finding cracks in those walls without even trying.

I close my eyes, willing the feeling away. This can't happen. I can't let her matter. The moment someone matters is the moment you give your enemies leverage. In my

world, feelings are liabilities, and liabilities get exploited.

She shifts in her sleep, nestling closer, her hand coming to rest over my heart. Can she feel how fast it's beating? How much she affects me?

I should leave. I should extract myself from her bed and put distance between us. But my arms tighten around her instead.

I listen to her soft, even breathing for what feels like hours, all while fighting the war inside me. Every instinct honed from years in my world screams to pull away, to rebuild the walls she's somehow slipped through. But my body refuses to move.

"What the fuck am I doing?" I whisper to the shadows.

This wasn't part of the plan. Keep her close, ensure her silence, maintain control — those were the objectives. Not this. Not lying in her bed with her curled against me, not feeling this ache in my chest that has nothing to do with desire and everything to do with something I can't afford to name.

Her fingers twitch against my skin, and I wonder what she's dreaming about. Is it peaceful? Or is her mind still caught in the storm that broke her earlier? I hope it's the former. I hope, for a few hours at least, she finds some peace.

Tomorrow, I'll remember all the reasons why this can't happen, why she and I are impossible.

But tonight? Tonight, I allow myself this moment of weakness. This brief escape from the weight of my name and all the responsibilities that come with it.

THIRTY

Olivia

I'm alone in the mansion. Again.

It's become a thing over the last week when I come home by dinner, as agreed upon, only for Roman to tell me that Sam is out for the evening. I eat alone, even after prodding the young woman on his staff to join me. She shook her head like it was a trap and scurried back into the kitchen.

Ever since my grandfather's meltdown when Sam came to save the day, he's been distant. I'm not sure if he's avoiding me or if he really has been busy at work. The idea of calling what he does for a living "work" makes my brain ache.

I'm still coming to terms with reconciling that he's a criminal, but he's not a bad guy. The two things have never been synonymous in my entire life, rewiring my brain to believe it's taking time.

It also means I have to come to terms with the fact that I don't hate Sam anymore. It feels strange to admit that to myself. Hating him is what has been fueling me since he forced me to move into this lavish mansion.

Things are easy when they're black and white. Hate Sam. Play his game. Earn my freedom back.

But now?

I'm not even sure what I want.

I do know that I'm getting tired of spending my nights alone. Sam gave me the best orgasm of my life, and now, he's left me high and dry.

Like the last few nights, I move to the courtyard after dinner and curl up with one of the books from the library. But tonight, it isn't as calming.

Probably because I feel like a caged animal.

If he's going to trap me here, he should at least be here with me!

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

Stupid. I shake off the thought. I shouldn't be pining for my captor to be hanging out with me.

I give up on trying to relax in the courtyard, gathering up my book and retreating to the guest room. I drop everything on the dresser and collapse onto the bed. I'm too worked up, my mind too loud, and I can't stop wondering where Sam is.

I also can't stop thinking about the way he touched me. Shame flames my skin when I remember how I begged him to turn off my mind. He asked me if I was sure, hesitating before he pulled off my clothes and crawled between my legs...

Why am I even thinking about him? This is ridiculous. Sam Costello is a murderer, a criminal, a man who kidnapped me and is holding me hostage in his mansion.

A devastatingly handsome, unexpectedly sweet murderer with eyes that see right through me and a mouth that gave me the best orgasm of my life.

Staring at the ornate ceiling, the memory of his hands, strong and confident, flashes through my mind. The way he softly tucked my hair behind my ear, his knuckles grazing my cheek. Him pinning me to the staircase wall, his breath skating over my skin. The way he slid my jeans over my legs and feasted on my pussy like it was his last meal.

"Stop it," I mutter to myself, but my body isn't listening.

Heat spreads across my skin as I remember how he carried me to my bed, holding me in his strong arms. He really saw me, not with pity, but with understanding. Like he



knew exactly what it felt like to carry that kind of pain.

Suddenly, I'm too warm. My jeans feel restrictive against my skin. I close my eyes, trying to think of anything else, but all I see is Sam's face. The intensity of his gaze when he focuses on me. The way his lips curve slightly at the corners when he's amused.

My breath quickens. I press my thighs together, trying to ignore the ache building between them.

This is insane. I shouldn't be attracted to him. He's dangerous. He's a Costello.

But I can't stop imagining his hands on my body, his lips against my neck. Those capable fingers that know exactly how to touch me.

A small sound escapes my throat: part frustration, part desire.

I press my palms against my eyes. My skin is flushed and sensitive, and the room feels ten degrees hotter than it did five minutes ago.

"This is ridiculous," I whisper, but my hand slides down my stomach anyway.

I shouldn't want this. Shouldn't crave the release that I know will come with thoughts of him. But my fingers are already unbuttoning my jeans, sliding the zipper down slowly.

I lift my hips to push my jeans down my thighs. The cool air hits my skin, making me shiver. I close my eyes, trying one last time to think of anything else, anyone else, but it's useless.

My fingers slip beneath the elastic of my underwear. I'm already wet, embarrassingly

so. A small gasp escapes my lips as I touch myself, finding that sensitive bundle of nerves that makes my back arch slightly off the bed.

In my mind, it's Sam's fingers. Sam's touch. His dark eyes watching me come undone.

"God," I breathe, circling my clit with slow, deliberate movements. Heat builds low in my belly, spreading outward. My free hand moves under my shirt, cupping my breast, thumb brushing over my nipple through the thin fabric of my bra.

I imagine his weight on top of me, his lips on my neck, whispering things that would make me blush in the light of day. The fantasy is so vivid, I can almost feel his breath against my skin.

My movements quicken, the pressure building. I bite my lip to keep from making noise, though part of me wonders what would happen if he heard me. If he arrived back at the mansion just in time to walk in and see me like this, flushed and wanting.

Would he join? Use his hand, tongue, or cock to make blind with pleasure?

The thought sends me over the edge. My body tenses, ecstasy washing over me in waves as I come with his name caught in my throat.

## THIRTY-ONE

Sam

Donnie pulls into the driveway of my estate, the engine's purr fading as he kills the ignition. The day weighs heavily on my shoulders — the Serpents struck back, killing one of my enforcers at Saints and Sinners. Their gunshots scared the shit out of the girls, and we had to kick out all of the patrons, bribing them with cash to keep the cops away.

I left Adrian and Naz to clean up the mess after I made sure the girls were okay. The pair is becoming quite the team after they worked together to help get me released. Naz learned a lot from Leo De Santis during his time in New York, and now he's become one of my top men since he's been back.

Before I left, John and I came up with a plan to retaliate and make sure this time our message was clear as day: retreat to your swamp and stay there.

There's a headache forming at my temples, and all I want is a hot shower and silence. The kind of silence that drowns out all the noise that's still ringing in my ears. Maybe a stiff drink too.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"Need anything else, boss?" Donnie asks, and I shake my head, exiting the car. The cool night air hits my face, offering momentary relief.

Roman is waiting in the front sitting room when I enter. He stands, coming to the entryway to meet me. "Boss." He nods in greeting.

"Everything good?"

"All quiet, boss. Olivia's upstairs." His eyes flick toward the ceiling briefly.

"Have a good night." I nod to Roman, loosening my tie as I head toward the staircase. The silk feels like it's choking me after the day I've had.

The door clicks behind Roman as I trudge upstairs. My thoughts drift to Olivia. I haven't seen her in days. Not since she came apart on my tongue in her bedroom back at her apartment. The sounds she made while I devoured her sweet cunt are playing on a loop in my mind and her taste still lingers on my tongue. I want to taste her again.

I need to shake these thoughts of her. I've been avoiding her because I know that I shouldn't act on these feelings. I'm keeping her captive, for fuck's sake. Sleeping with her is a dangerous road to go down. I should let her go, but that doesn't sit well with me either. Even if I'm not convinced she'll run to the police the second I let her walk through that door. I just don't want to let her go.

Instead of making a decision, I've been avoiding her like a coward.

Halfway up the stairs, I hear something, a soft sound that stops me dead in my tracks.

"Sam..."

My name breathed out in a way I've never heard from her before. Not angry. Not afraid.

I stand frozen, one hand on the banister. The sound comes again on a hitched breath, my name carried with it like a prayer.

"Sam..."

Something sharp and unexpected twists in my chest. I should walk away. This isn't meant for me to hear. But my feet won't move, like they're cemented to the step beneath me.

Another sound follows, a muffled gasp that sends heat crawling up my neck. The door to her room isn't fully closed, a sliver of light spilling into the hallway, casting a golden line across the dark corridor.

"Sam..."

My name again, this time breaking in the middle, followed by a sound that leaves no question about what's happening on the other side of that door. My imagination fills in the blanks, painting images I shouldn't be allowing myself to see.

I move without thinking, my feet carrying me to her door. I should walk away. I should turn around and pretend I never heard a thing. But my hand is already pushing the door open, revealing Olivia sprawled across her bed, one hand between her thighs, the other gripping the sheets.

Her eyes fly open, wide with shock, as she sees me standing in the doorway. She scrambles to pull the sheets over herself, her cheeks flushing crimson.

"Sam! I—" Her voice cracks, mortification written across her face.

I step inside, closing the door behind me. "Don't stop on my account."

"I wasn't—" she starts to say, but we both know it's a lie.

I cross the room in three strides, my body hard and aching. "I heard you, Olivia. I heard my name on your lips."

She swallows, her chest rising and falling rapidly. "This is embarrassing."

"Why?" I reach the edge of the bed, my fingers already working at my tie. "Because you want me as much as I want you?"

Eyes darkening, she watches me strip off my jacket, then my shirt. "I shouldn't want this."

"Neither should I." I climb onto the bed, the mattress dipping beneath my weight. "But here we are."

I hover over her, giving her one last chance to push me away. Instead, she reaches up, her fingers tracing the line of my jaw before pulling me down to her.

Our lips crash together, all the tension of the past weeks igniting between us. I tear the sheet away from her body, revealing her naked form beneath me. My hands explore every inch of her skin, memorizing the curves and valleys of her body.

"Sam," she gasps against my mouth, her fingers fumbling with my belt. "Please."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

That single word breaks whatever restraint I had left. I kick off my pants and boxers, positioning myself between her thighs.

"Is this what you were thinking about?" I growl, nipping at her earlobe.

"Yes," she admits as her nails dig into my shoulders.

My hand slides between her thighs, finding her wet and ready. She moans when I slip a finger inside her, her walls clenching around me.

"So fucking wet thinking about me," I growl, and Olivia bucks against my hand, needy for what I can give her, as if she didn't just come chanting my name.

"Please," she whimpers, her hips rocking against my hand.

I add another finger, curling them to hit that spot inside her that makes her cry out. Her hands clutch at my shoulders as she grinds against me for more.

"I need you inside me," she pants. "Now."

I've never wanted anyone the way I want her. It's consuming, this need to claim her, to mark her as mine. And here she is, laid out before me and begging for me to fuck her.

Who am I to deny her?

I grip her hips, positioning myself at her entrance. She's so wet for me, and I'm

throbbing with need. I want to take my time, savor every moment, but the desperation in her eyes matches my own.

"Tell me you want this," I demand, my voice rough with desire.

"I want you," she breathes out with an eager nod. "All of you."

I thrust into her with one powerful stroke, burying myself to the hilt. We both cry out at the sensation. She's tight, warm, perfect, like she was made for me. I give her a moment to adjust before I move, pulling almost all the way out before slamming back in.

"Fuck," I growl, setting a punishing pace. "You feel so good."

Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me deeper. I grab her wrists and pin them above her head with one hand while the other grips her hip hard enough to bruise. The room fills with the sounds of skin slapping against skin, our mingled moans and gasps.

"Harder," she pleads, her head thrown back in ecstasy. "Please, Sam."

I oblige, driving into her with everything I have. The headboard slams against the wall with each thrust, the bed frame creaking beneath us. I lean down to capture one nipple between my teeth, biting just hard enough to make her whimper.

"You like it rough, don't you?" I whisper against her skin. "You like being fucked like this."

"Yes," she moans, her body arching beneath mine. "Don't stop."

I flip her over suddenly, pulling her hips up while pushing her head down into the



mattress. As I slide back into her from behind, the new angle makes her scream my name. My hand tangles in her hair, pulling her head back as I pound into her relentlessly.

"You're mine," I growl in her ear, not even recognizing my own voice anymore. "Say it."

"I'm yours," she gasps, her words punctuated by moans. "I'm yours, Sam."

"My dirty girl, aren't you?"

I can feel her pussy pulse around my cock when I ask the question. She's getting close, squeezing me as her orgasm gets closer.

I feel myself getting close, too, my release building with every thrust. The sight of Olivia beneath me, her back arched, peachy ass in my grip, her face pressed into the mattress as she takes everything I give her — it's almost too much.

"Touch yourself," I command. "Make yourself come on my cock."

She reaches between her legs, her fingers finding her clit. I can feel the moment she starts circling it, her inner walls clenching around me even tighter.

"That's it," I groan, my hips snapping against hers. "Good girl."

That sends her over the edge. She comes with a cry that might be my name, her body shuddering beneath mine. The rhythmic pulsing of her pussy triggers my own release. I drive into her one last time, burying myself deep as I come harder than I ever have before.

## Page 56

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

For a moment, I can't move, can't think, can barely breathe. All I know is Olivia and the blinding pleasure still coursing through my veins.

I collapse beside her, pulling her against my chest. Her breathing is ragged, matching my own. Pressing my lips to her temple, I taste the salt of her sweat.

"You okay?" I murmur against her skin.

She nods, her eyes still closed, her body boneless against mine. "Better than okay."

I told myself after the last time that I wouldn't let this happen again. But now that I've felt her pussy clench around my cock, I'm not sure I can stop myself.

This wasn't supposed to happen. I wasn't supposed to care about her. She was just a loose end, a witness to tie up. But now...

Now I'm holding her like she's precious, like she matters. And the terrifying truth is that she does matter. More than she should. More than is safe for either of us.

I stroke her hair, watching as her breathing slows, her features relaxing. She looks peaceful now, the anguish from earlier gone. Replaced by something else, something I'm afraid to name.

I've spent my life believing I couldn't protect the people I love. That loving someone means watching them get hurt. My mother's face flashes in my mind, her eyes wide with fear before the light went out of them forever.

I look down at Olivia, resting peacefully in my arms, and a cold fear grips my heart.

What have I done?

THIRTY-TWO

Olivia

I wake up in an empty bed.

Reaching out, I find a cold pillow next to me. I don't even remember when I fell asleep. It takes my mind a moment to adjust, to recall everything that happened yesterday. I was alone in this damn mansion again, my fingers between my thighs when?—

Oh my god. My cheeks flame. Sam heard me touching myself while moaning his name. Embarrassment claws its way up my throat, but then the image of him crawling onto my bed appears. He was turned on by the sight.

Images of him fucking me in this very bed flash through my mind.

I've never enjoyed sex before; it always felt like a chore. But that? That felt nothing like a chore.

Who knew it could be so damn good.

But now I'm alone again.

I'm not sure why that makes me feel so...bad. I'm used to being alone. Alone has always been easier, and it's not like Sam's my boyfriend. He's my captor. I shouldn't be expecting to wake up with him cuddling me and whispering sweet nothings.

And yet, it stings that he's not here.

I shake it off, telling myself I'm being silly. Acting like a child with a crush.

Redirecting, I move the shower and strip down, cleaning yesterday off and focusing on getting ready for today.

When I head downstairs, I expect to see him in the dining room with his normal cup of coffee and whatever breakfast his staff prepared. But his seat is empty. I eat alone, and when I exit the dining room, Roman is waiting for me.

"Ready to go?" he asks.

Something tugs at my heart, and I desperately want to ask where his boss is. But I'm not that girl. I don't pine over men.

"Yeah," I tell him.

I'm not sure what I was expecting. I fucked the man I witnessed kill someone and think he's going to coddle me and give me the girlfriend experience?

I'm acting just like my mother.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

Falling in love with a gangster and expecting them to behave like something other than who they are.

I sling another tray of clean glasses onto the bar with more force than necessary. Roman glances up from his phone, one eyebrow raised.

"Something bothering you?"

"Nope, I'm perfectly fine." I grab one of the glasses, stacking it on the appropriate shelf.

"Sure you are." He smirks. "That's why you've been slamming things around all day."

I narrow my eyes. "Don't you have something better to do than psychoanalyze me? Like, I don't know, standing outside or whatever it is you're supposed to be doing?"

"My job is to watch you," Roman says as he pockets his phone. "And right now, watching you is like seeing a cat with its fur rubbed the wrong way."

"Well, sorry, my emotional state isn't entertaining enough." I grab a bottle of bourbon, restocking the shelf with unnecessary vigor. "Maybe Sam should've assigned you somewhere more exciting."

"Ah." Roman's face lights up with understanding. "So that's what this is about."

"This isn't about anything," I hiss, feeling heat creep up my neck. "Especially not your boss."

"Did something happen between you two?" he asks, both eyebrows now raised with amusement.

"No. No. No." I say the word too many times, my octave changing with each one.

"Uh oh." Roman moves closer, leaning in against the bar. "What did he do?"

"I'm not gossiping like schoolgirls with you." No, instead, I just take out my feelings on inanimate objects.

"Whatever you say, Liv."

"Don't call me that."

Roman lifts his hands in mock surrender and shuts his mouth.

By the time I'm done preparing for service, it's past four and the bar is open for the day. My new bartender called in sick, and the place is starting to pick up. Joey's down at one end, serving beers, while I'm mixing a drink. Even Roman has abandoned his normal spot at the bar to help ring up drinks.

Once five p.m. hits, and I refuse to leave Joey alone, Roman begins glancing at his watch and looking to me. He's sweating. I'm placing him in a battle between me and his boss. I do feel a little bad for Roman, but not enough to abandon my bar.

He eyes me again as he glances down at his phone, concern etched in his brow. I'm getting good at reading his expressions. I'd even go as far as saying that Roman and I are friends. Even if he is my permanent babysitter.

"Whatever he said, I don't want to know," I tell him as I fill another pitcher of beer for the table of jocks.

Not leaving the bar at five p.m. sharp means disobeying Sam's "rules," something that is making Roman twitchy.

"This isn't a good way to get back at the boss for whatever he did last night." Roman sighs, taking a credit card from another customer and sliding it through the machine.

Okay, maybe I am a little mad about waking up alone. But also, there are too many people here right now for Joey to be on his own. It's not like this is all about Sam.

Besides, if he wants to make this thing — whatever it is — between us work, then he needs to loosen his reins a bit. Not that I think Sam is capable of losing any bit of control.

"Roman." It's a woman's voice who speaks my babysitter's name. I look up, finding her standing next to Roman, head tilted with confusion. She has dark roots that fade into teal blue-colored hair that hangs in loose waves. She's with a small group of four men and another girl. I recognize them as regulars from before Sam took me hostage and I stopped my evening shifts. "I didn't realize you got a second job. Is my cousin not paying you enough?" she teases with a smile. But then she looks around the bar until her eyes land on me. "Oh. Does that mean she's the girl?" she asks, flicking her gaze back to Roman.

"Madi," Roman grumbles, clearly unenthused to see whoever this is. "Does Adrian know you're here?"

"He's not my keeper." She frowns, moving away from Roman as she steps up to the bar directly across from where I'm standing. "Are you the girl Sam's keeping locked up in his house?"

Her directness startles me. I'm not sure how to answer her; I don't even know who she is.

Roman clears that up for me quickly. "Madi." He speaks her name with a tone of frustration. "This is Olivia." He waves at me. "Olivia, this is Madi Russo, Sam's cousin."



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"Cousin." I repeat the word. I can see it now. They have some similar features, the same sharp nose. But Madi has more softness to her face, more femininity, whereas Sam's is hard and blunt.

She reaches across the bar, taking my hand in hers. "How are you?" she asks. There's a seriousness in her eyes, like she's genuinely concerned about me. "Be honest. If he's hurting you, I'll take care of it. I swear."

A nervous laugh escapes my lips. I'm unsure of what to say. "Fine, I guess."

"I'm serious," Madi adds. "The men in this family can act like Neanderthals. You have to be stern with them."

"Madi, you're scaring her." Roman huffs.

She whips her hair, looking at him, offended. "I'm helping her," she corrects him. "God knows, no one helped me."

Roman rolls his eyes, scoffing. "That's a lie."

"Keep it up." Madi slaps her hands on her hips, taunting him. "And I'll tell Sam his enforcer is bullying me." She mock pouts, and I can't help but laugh.

"That's an option?"

Madi smiles. "You have endless options, you just need to know how to work 'em."

The bell above the entrance chimes, and my attention turns to greet the new customer, only it's not a new customer. It's Sam.

There's an angry scowl on his face as he marches over to me. "I'll deal with you later." He looks at Madi first, then his attention turns to me. "You. Back room. Now."

"See, Neanderthals." Madi gestures to Sam, and she's right; his one-word sentences do feel very Neanderthal.

"It was nice meeting you," I say to Madi, genuinely meaning it. She seems kind, like someone I'd like to know.

"You too, Olivia. Please, reach out if you need me. That one has my number." She tilts her head to Roman.

Sam rounds the bar, completely ignoring his cousin as he presses his palm to my lower back. I decide not to anger him any further and let him lead me into the back room.

"It's busy out there. Joey needs my help," I say quickly, not wanting him to spend too much time back here while Joey gets overwhelmed out front.

"I don't give a fuck." His hands are on me the second we're alone, making my breath catch. He presses me against the wall of supplies, the shelf rattling as my spine hits it. Checking his watch, those dark eyes flick to the expensive timepiece and then meet my gaze. "It's six p.m. You're supposed to be home."

Bourbon and leather invade my senses, and for a brief moment, I want to melt in his arms. Tell him I'm sorry and let him drag me back to his house.

But then I remember what Madi told me, that I need to be stern with him. I have

endless options, and I just need to work 'em.

"Megan called in sick. I need to cover for her," I try explaining nicely.

"Have someone else do it."

"That's not how this works, Sam. I'm the boss. It was short notice, no one else is available, and I'm already here. It makes sense."

"No," he practically growls. "Find someone else. I don't want you here after dark."

"I'm a big girl, Sam. I can take care of myself. Plus, you have Roman here."

His jaw clenches tight, his eyes narrowing. "I don't care how big of a girl you are. You're not staying."

I cross my arms over my chest, refusing to back down. "And what exactly are you going to do? Throw me over your shoulder and drag me out of here in front of all my customers?"

"If that's what it takes."

My eyes narrow on his. "You wouldn't."

Sam steps closer, towering over me. "Try me."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

Pressing my palms against his chest, I feel the solid muscle beneath his shirt. "What is this?" I ask, the words popping from my lips before I have a chance to overthink them.

Sam tilts his head, his eyebrow ticking. "What is what?"

"This." I wave my hand between our bodies as my heart pounds in my ears. "This thing between us. What are we doing? What are we?"

Sam closes his eyes for a moment, his hands dropping from the wall, no longer caging me in.

"I'm not good at relationships, Olivia," he says finally.

Something burns inside my chest. I don't even want to date Sam, but those words have me aching.

"That's not what I'm asking for," I say. "But you can't just fuck me, abandon ship, and then show up the next day, making demands. It's confusing?—"

"Abandon ship?" Sam muses. "Is this because I didn't sleep over... Is that what you want?"

"No. Yes. I don't know." I huff, throwing up my hands and letting them fall. "I'm confused, alright? You're so hot and cold, and I don't know what I'm doing."

"It's not that complicated, baby girl. You're mine."

"You can't just claim me! You keep saying I'm yours, but I'm a person. I don't belong to you!" I shove my hands against his chest, but he doesn't budge. Instead, he lifts his hands and presses them against the shelf, caging me in again.

"You are mine, Olivia. You've been mine since our eyes met in that alley. Need me to prove it to you?"

THIRTY-THREE

Sam

I'm crossing a line.

It's the thought that's been on my mind since I made Olivia come all over my tongue a week ago. I tried avoiding her, but that didn't work out either. Once I heard her moaning my name while she touched herself, my last thread of self-control snapped, and before I could process another thought, I was back between her legs.

And now that I've both tasted and felt her cunt, I don't think I'll ever get enough.

I'm confusing her, though. That's what she said.

Funny, because I'm confusing myself.

I keep telling her she belongs to me, but everything inside me screams that attachments are dangerous. Yet, I have no desire to let her go. I want to settle between those thighs, night after night, listening to the way she screams as she comes undone around my cock.

"Back up, Sam." Her palms press against my chest again, and she pushes me, a futile effort that doesn't move me an inch. "I need to get back out there."

"Sorry, sweetheart. I think you need a lesson in understanding who you belong to." My fingers find the button of her jeans, pulling it open and tugging the denim material until it's sliding down her legs.

"Saaam..." She draws out my name in a breathy whisper. She may be trying to push me away, but it's clear that she still wants me.

She's wearing a pair of lacy panties. I need to send Ana a large tip as a thank you for Olivia's wardrobe. And maybe have her buy Olivia more panties... I grip the fabric in my hand and tug, watching as it bunches up until it snaps.

"Sam!" Olivia flinches, eyes widening when the material stings her sensitive flesh.

"Don't worry, baby girl, I'll kiss it better."

Placing a hand on each thigh, I push the two apart, making more space for me to get between them.

"Oh God," Olivia pants, her fingers gripping onto the bars of the shelving unit.

"Not God." I chuckle darkly, slipping a finger through her folds. "Who makes you this wet?" I ask, my finger coming away glistening with her juices.

"You." Her pupils dilate as she stares down at me, her voice breathy.

## Page 60

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"That's right, sweetheart. Your pussy knows exactly who you belong to, and it's time for your brain to get the memo."

My tongue lands on her sensitive nub right as the door swings open. Olivia startles, her hands flying down to cover herself.

"Boss. Oh fuck." It's Donnie's voice, and he quickly turns himself around so he can't see anything.

"This better be really fucking important," I growl, tugging Olivia's jeans back up her legs.

"We've got company. Serpents are outside."

Fuck.

It feels like a bucket of ice water is poured over my head. Why are they here? At Olivia's bar in the French Quarter. My name isn't on this place...

I sent John last night to get payback, but this time, I escalated so they knew I wasn't fucking around anymore. When John came back to my place last night to tell me the job was done, he reeked of smoke after burning their makeshift clubhouse to the ground.

Five dead. At least, that's what the news told me this morning. Kade wasn't in the clubhouse, since he's currently on the run, trying to avoid being picked up for the murder of my uncle. His running only makes them more convinced he did it.

I thought it would take them a while to pull themselves together with Kade MIA and their clubhouse gone. But they're here. At Olivia's bar. A place they shouldn't even know about.

"Did anyone follow us here?" I ask Donnie harshly. My driver pales under my scrutiny.

"No. Boss, no, I was careful."

"Clearly not enough," I grumble.

"We got a whole bunch of people here." Roman's voice enters the conversation. "Fuck," he hisses and immediately spins around.

"Wait outside!" I growl. Standing up, I refasten Olivia's jeans.

"What's going on?" she asks, concern etched across her thick eyebrows.

"I need you to clear this place out, baby. Can you do that for me?"

"It's Friday night, I can't just?—"

"Olivia." I place a palm on either cheek, holding her face while I look at her. I need her to understand that this is serious. "I need you to listen to me. Clear out the bar and then stay inside with Roman. Okay?"

"Okay." She nods, and I press a kiss on her forehead.

Stepping outside the back room, I find both Donnie and Roman waiting for me. "Roman, help Olivia clear out the bar, and then keep her in here. Donnie, with me."



I need to face these fuckers and figure out what they want.

Three Serpents stand out front, their bikes propped up on kick stands as they face off with my men. Dressed in denim and leather vests, with snake tattoos visible even in the dim streetlight. My stomach coils at the sight of them. Ever since that night eighteen years ago, I've never been able to stomach the scent of leather or the image of snakes, both tangled in my brain with the worst moment of my life.

I recognize the man front and center as Axel, their vice president.

"Just looking for a drink, Costello." Axel's eyes drift past me to the entrance of the bar. I turn around, finding Olivia standing there. I want to growl and yell at her to get back inside where I told her to stay, but I don't want to tip him off and let him think she means anything to me. I don't like the way he looks at her, the way his eyes scan her body, lingering on her tits.

"Look somewhere else," I respond, turning my attention back to him.

He's still eyeing up Olivia, and my fists clench, fingernails biting into my palms.

"Not trying to start anything." He lifts both hands in a defensive posture, his gaze coming back to me. "Though I see why you frequent this place. Sweet views, if you know what I mean." He nods toward Olivia.

My vision goes red, and all of my logic shuts off instantly. I become a caveman, unaware of my actions or their consequences. In two steps, I'm in his face, my voice low. "You so much as look in her direction again, I'll carve those snake eyes right out of your skull."

Axel's lips curl into a knowing smile. Fuck. I did exactly what I wanted to avoid. Now he knows she means something to me.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"No need to get territorial. We're leaving." He moves to his bike, swinging a leg over, his guys following suit. "Nice meeting your girl, though."

They rev their engines and speed off, but even after they're gone, that smile haunts me. They didn't come here by accident. And now they know about Olivia.

### THIRTY-FOUR

Olivia

"Itold you to stay inside." Sam's voice is as dark as his eyes when he spins around to hover over me. The aggression startles me, and I take a step back, putting space between us. But as always, Sam doesn't allow the distance, stepping forward until we're in a sick dance. I step, he steps and, suddenly, my back is against the bar.

Sam's hand darts out, swiping the bar stool next to me away, creating more room for him to cage me against the freshly polished wood with his large frame. Suddenly, I'm thankful he cleared out all my customers. I'm not sure what's going on with him and the men outside, but we don't need any more witnesses.

I gasp, sucking in oxygen as something akin to fear rattles inside me. Other than when I was first taken by his men, I've never been truly afraid of Sam. But then again, he's never looked angry with me before.

"Iwasinside," I say weakly. Technically, that's true. I was standing in the doorway, still inside the bar. But I don't think Sam cares about technicalities.

A hand tangles in my hair, pulling it back so my face is forced to look up, meeting his eyes. He leans closer until we're breathing each other's air, his lips a mere inch from mine. I'm still amped up from having his tongue against my clit not that long ago, and something desperate inside me wants him to close that distance and kiss me. The fear and lust heat my core in equal measures, tingles spreading throughout my body.

"I'm trying to protect you, Olivia." My name on his lips sends a bolt of lightning down my spine.

Stop, I shouldn't like this.

"I can't do that if you don't listen to me." He continues, taking a deep breath. "What am I supposed to do with you, hmm?"

Let me go. That's what I should say. But the words don't leave my mouth, they stay lodged in my throat, unwilling to part my lips. What I do say is much, much worse.

"Punish me."

Heat flares in Sam's eyes.

"Careful," he warns, his voice like gravel. "You don't know what you're asking for. If you keep pushing me, I'm going to pull down those jeans and spank you right here." His stare burns into me, dark eyes wide as his fingers clench harder against my jaw.

I could stop this. Apologize and try to calm him down. Maybe he'll take me back to his house, and I can hide out in the plush bedroom he's given to me.

But something inside me snaps. Maybe it's the fear of whatever just happened outside my bar. Maybe it's the way he stood up to those men to protect me. Or maybe it's the way he thinks he owns me, something that shouldn't make me this hot and bothered.

For once, I don't want to overthink it. I just want to feel.

"Do it," I goad him, and Sam rises to the challenge, spinning me around and pressing my chest onto the bar top.

"Leave," he demands, startling me. But he's not talking to me. Roman's still in the bar. Wordlessly, he exits, the bell ringing on his way out.

"Are they going to stand out there?" I nod toward the street, where I can see the silhouette of Roman and two other men standing outside my bar.

"They can't see you." Sam turns my head so I'm not looking at his men. "Your windows are tinted, remember? Don't look at them while I'm touching you, though. That's bound to make me angrier than I already am."

I suck in a breath as Sam grips my wrists together, holding them at the center of my back. He moves on from talking about his men quickly, instead using his free hand to snake around my waist and pop the button on my jeans before sliding down the zipper.

It seems like the loudest zipper in the world as it lowers. And then another barrier between us disappears as he tugs on the denim of my jeans. The material pools at my ankles and heat gathers in my core at the anticipation of his touch.

Sam inhales sharply at the sight of me bent over and bare. Heat flushes my cheeks, embarrassment flooding me when I remember that he shredded my panties earlier and the only layer between us was the denim he just discarded.

Before Sam, the last time I was touched in an intimate way, it was with Rhett, but he didn't elicit any of the feelings that Sam does. Sex with him felt like a chore, something I needed to do in order to avoid a fight that ended with me feeling guilty

for not meeting his needs. If I made sure to offer my body enough, then he wouldn't get angry with me. But it never actually worked. No amount of offering myself on a pedestal would ever suffice. Make him love me. Make him loyal to me.

"Where's your head, baby girl?" Sam asks, his voice jolting me back into the present as his hands run over the bare skin of my thighs.

I don't answer. I can't admit to him that my mind was drifting to my shitty ex.

"Don't worry, I'll make you focus. By the time I'm finished with you, I'll be the only one you're thinking about."

## Page 62

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"Promises, promises," I mutter.

Sam's grip on my hip tightens, and his body leans in, pressing mine to the bar until his breath skates over my ear. "Always with the sass, baby girl. I'm gonna spank that out of you now."

My breath hitches. This is what I asked for, but still, knowing that he's about to deliver has my skin tingling with desire.

Any fear I was feeling is gone now, and all that's left is an excited fluttering in my stomach and a desperate ache deep in my core.

One that only Sam can fill.

For a moment, all my self-doubt creeps in, coating my skin in shame. But Sam undoes it with a stroke of his hand over my skin while he groans, audibly affected by me. The reaction bolsters my confidence.

That is, until his fingers lift and come back down with a loud smack.

The sensation scatters through me, going straight to my clit.

This turns me on.

I mean, I thought it would, based on the scenes in the dirty books I've read, but I've never actually tried it. Rhett had no interest in trying anything in the bedroom. He wanted me to suck his dick or lay back and moan like a porn star while he thrust

inside me until he came. My pleasure wasn't of much interest to him.

But I get the feeling that Sam's very interested in my pleasure.

His palm smacks down against my ass, and I yelp this time as the sting radiates through my cheek. "You're stunning when you take a punishment for me," he murmurs, the words stoking the fire that's raging inside me.

Logic has been thrown out the window, my brain completely ignoring the fact that I'm being spanked by the man who kidnapped me.

All I can think about is how much I like it.

And how much better it would be if his hand trailed lower...

Sam's touch lifts again before spanking the other cheek. He goes back and forth between the two, the sound of his hits ringing out in the empty bar. He doesn't stop until I'm panting, tears welling at the corners of my eyes. And then he soothes the ache he's created by caressing his hand over the warmed flesh.

Slowly, his fingers drift lower until they find my core, and he keeps one hand on my lower back, holding me in place while his other hand begins to explore. I become a puppet for him, my mind empty of all other thoughts as his fingers dance over my touch-starved skin.

"Please." The word slips from my lips, a plea for more of anything and everything he's willing to give. I don't care what it will cost me; that's a problem for the morning. Right now, I just need his touch.

"I love hearing you beg." Sam's voice is deep and rumbling. "But what are you begging for, sweet girl?"

"You. Everything. Just touch me."

Sam chuckles. "Where do you want me to touch you, Olivia? Be specific."

Need swirls in my gut, mixing with embarrassment. Having to say it out loud feels wrong and dirty, but I'm too deep. I need a release.

"My clit," I pant. "Make me come."

"Anything you want." Sam's fingers move to where I need him, swirling over the bundle of nerves in slow circles.

My spin tightens as pleasure coils inside me. "More." I arch into his touch, craving the ecstasy right on the horizon.

"You want more?" Sam taunts, and it only serves to make me wetter and needier. "Spanking really turns you into a needy little slut, doesn't it?"

The question should be insulting, but it doesn't make me angry. It makes me want to shout Yes! I'm a needy little slut for you! Something must be broken in my brain, but I can't focus on that right now, because I am a needy little slut for him and I need him to make me come.

"Answer me," Sam demands.

"Yes," I breathe out, and he rewards me with a finger pressing into my entrance. He pumps in and out before adding a second. The combination of his fingers thrusting inside me and his thumb on my clit rockets the pleasure that's building inside me.

"I'm so close." I'm gripping onto the edge of the bar, my breathing coming out in pants as Sam as my orgasm gets closer.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

And then Sam curls the two fingers inside me, hitting a spot only he's been able to reach. Pleasure ricochets through my body as I cry out, coating me in warmth. It's the biggest release I've ever felt, and he continues his ministrations, dragging out the feeling as my screams echo through the bar.

When he finally finishes, I collapse on the wood surface, my body melted into a puddle. Sam drags my pants up my legs before scooping me into his arms. He carries me out of the bar as I nuzzle into his chest, lost in the sensations. And then he holds me in the back seat of the car as his driver takes us home.

And for a moment, I let myself believe that this is how it's supposed to be.

### THIRTY-FIVE

Olivia

"Get dressed." It's early Saturday afternoon when Sam interrupts my reading in the courtyard.

"You have got to stop doing that." I place a bookmark between the pages. "You can just waltz in, demanding I get dressed."

A smirk lifts his lips. "We have a wedding to go to."

I sit up straighter. "First a funeral and now a wedding?"

"We need some happier times." Sam shrugs. "Come, we're leaving soon."

I stare at Sam, bewildered. "Well, whose wedding?"

"John and Zoe." He runs his hand through his hair, a gesture I've come to recognize when he's trying to appear casual about something important. "My cousin and his fiancée."

"And you want me to go with you?" I ask, closing my book completely. "As what, exactly? Your hostage plus-one?"

Sam's expression darkens slightly. "As my date, Olivia."

My heart does a traitorous little flip. I hate how my body reacts to him, how easily I forget that I'm here against my will when he looks at me like that.

"I don't have anything to wear to a wedding," I say, trying to sound practical rather than flustered.

"Already taken care of." He checks his watch. "Ana laid out some options in your room. We leave in an hour."

Upstairs, I find three stunning dresses laid across my bed — one emerald green, one midnight blue, and one in a soft blush pink. Each looks more expensive than anything I've ever owned. I run my fingers over the silky fabric of the green one, imagining how it would feel against my skin.

As I try them on, I catch my reflection in the mirror and barely recognize myself. The emerald dress hugs my curves perfectly, making my eyes look brighter, my skin more luminous. For a moment, I allow myself to pretend this is normal, that I'm just getting ready for a date with a handsome man, not preparing to attend a wedding with the mob boss who's keeping me captive. Even if we have already blurred the lines between captor and captive...

When I descend the stairs, Sam is waiting in the foyer. His eyes darken as they travel from my face down to my shoes and back up again, lingering in places that make heat bloom across my skin.

"You look beautiful," he says, his voice low.

"Thank you." I smooth my hands over the emerald dress, suddenly nervous. "So, this wedding... Am I supposed to know anything? Or anyone?"

"Just stay close to me." He offers his arm. "You'll be fine."

As we walk to the car, I wonder what I'm getting myself into. A mob wedding. Another glimpse into Sam's world, a world I should want nothing to do with but find myself increasingly curious about.

"Olivia!" I'm relieved to see friendly faces when we arrive at the restaurant. Madi tugs me free from Sam's grip and pulls me into a warm hug. Next to her, Lana waits her turn before embracing me as well.

"How are you doing?" Lana asks, her eyes searching mine with genuine concern.

"I'm fine," I say automatically, then catch myself. "I mean, it's complicated."

Madi loops her arm through mine. "We need girl talk. Now." She glances at Sam. "We're stealing her."

Sam's jaw tightens, but he nods once. "Don't be long. The ceremony starts soon."

Madi leads me to a quiet corner of the venue's garden, with Lana following close behind. The moment we're out of earshot, they both turn to me.

## Page 64

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"Spill," Madi demands. "Are you okay? Really okay?"

I take a deep breath. "I don't know what I am anymore."

"Mads, you're scaring her," Lana cuts in.

"Well, excuse me for trying to make sure she's okay."

"I'm okay. I don't think Sam would ever hurt me." No, he just brings me more pleasure than I've ever had...

Madi and Lana share a knowing look and red coats my cheeks.

"So it's good then?" Madi asks with a smile.

"Yes. No. I don't know." I drag a hand through my curled locks. "It's just...one minute, I hate him for keeping me prisoner, and the next..."

Lana squeezes my hand. "You're not the first woman to fall for a dangerous man."

"I haven't fallen for him," I protest, but the words sound hollow, even to me.

Lana's smile is knowing. "The way he looks at you...I've never seen Sam like this."

Before I can respond, a bell chimes, signaling guests to take their seats.

"Saved by the bell." Madi winks. "But this conversation isn't over."

We hurry back to the ceremony space, where rows of white chairs face an elegant floral arch. Sam stands waiting, his eyes tracking me as I approach. He leads me to a white chair in the front row.

"Everything okay?" he murmurs as I sit.

"Fine," I whisper back, smoothing my emerald dress.

Music begins to play, and the guests fall silent. I watch as John takes his place at the altar, his face a mixture of nerves and joy.

A woman with dark brown and steel-gray eyes appears at the end of the aisle. She's wearing a simple white dress that falls to her mid-thigh and she's holding a bouquet of pink roses. She's stunning.

I flick my gaze back to Sam's cousin at the front of the aisle, watching the way his eyes stare at his soon-to-be wife. Every time I've seen him in Sam's house, he's looked cold and closed off, but now, I can see flickers of emotion as his bride slowly descends the aisle.

Sam's hand finds mine beneath the folds of my dress. I should pull away. Instead, I let our fingers intertwine as the ceremony begins.

It's a short ceremony with a small crowd of people seated. When it's over, we're ushered into another room with round tables and a small dance floor and fed the most delicious dinner.

I sip champagne as I watch John and Zoe sway together on the dance floor, lost in each other's eyes. The reception is intimate but lively, nothing like the awkward family gatherings I remember from my childhood.

"They look happy," I say when Sam returns with fresh drinks for us.

"John deserves it. He's been through hell." Sam's eyes soften as he watches his cousin. "We all have."

The band transitions to a slow, sultry melody. Sam sets down our glasses and extends his hand to me.

"Dance with me?"

I hesitate only briefly before placing my hand in his. He leads me to the dance floor, one hand resting on the small of my back as he pulls me close. His touch sends warmth spreading through my body.

"You look beautiful tonight," he murmurs, his breath tickling my ear.

"You clean up pretty well yourself." I allow myself to relax against him, inhaling his cologne.

"Just pretty well?" His eyes crinkle with amusement.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"I wouldn't want your ego getting too big."

He laughs, a genuine sound that makes my chest flutter. "Too late for that."

We move together in perfect rhythm, his body guiding mine effortlessly. Around us, other couples dance, but I barely notice them. In this moment, it's just us.

"Your family isn't what I expected," I admit.

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Cold-blooded killers, I guess."

Sam's hand tightens slightly on my waist. "We protect our own. Sometimes that means making hard choices."

I think about Lana's father, about the pain he caused her. About how Sam stepped in to help.

"I think I understand that now," I say softly.

He studies my face, curiosity evident in his eyes when they lock onto mine. "You're full of surprises, Olivia Marchese."

"So are you, Sam Costello."

Something has shifted inside me. The man holding me isn't just my captor anymore.

He's complex, caring deeply for his family, willing to do anything to protect them. And somehow, I've begun to care for him too.

It terrifies me how easy it is to forget what brought us together in the first place. How natural it feels to be in his arms. But as we continue to dance, the past drifts away and I feel content in this moment, just us.

## THIRTY-SIX

Sam

"You brought your witness to my wedding," John deadpans as he brings a crystal glass of bourbon to his lips.

I can't help but laugh at his bluntness. It's true, I did bring my little witness with me. Lately, it feels like she's becoming more than just a witness. A fact that both excites and worries me.

"I don't need to hear how she's a liability," I say in jest, sipping my own bourbon.

"That's not what I was gonna say."

"No?" I chuckle. "I know you think I'm making a mistake."

"I thought so. And I do think she's a distraction, but..." He shrugs. "It looks like you're really falling for her."

The words surprise me, freezing the glass that's on its way to my lips. I look out to the dance floor, finding Olivia with Madi and Lana. They're laughing as they dance ridiculously to a Taylor Swift song that's blaring from the DJ booth.



I smile at the sight of her like this, looking carefree for the first time since I've met her. I could get used to seeing her like this. I think I'd like to be the reason she's happy and carefree.

Does that mean I'm falling for her?

Something nags at my chest, a reminder that this will never end well.

But something else sparks inside me. What if? What if this could work? What if we could be happy?

Her face lifts, finding me at the edge of the dance floor with John. She grins, waving a hand at me. That smile turns my insides into molten lava.

Beside me, John chuckles.

“Correction. You've fallen for her.”

It's on the tip of my tongue to dispute his claim, but I'm not sure I can.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

I think he might be right.

I've fallen for my little witness.

I can't get Olivia out of my head the entire drive home. The sight of her in that emerald dress, the way it hugs every curve of her body, the way she smiled at me during the wedding. It's all I can think about. My knuckles turn white as I grip the steering wheel, fighting the urge to pull over and take her right here in the car.

When we finally arrive at the mansion, I barely get the front door closed before I'm on her. She gasps as I push her against the wall, my mouth finding hers in a hungry kiss.

"I've been waiting to do this all night," I growl against her lips, my hands already working at the zipper of her dress. The silky material pools at her feet, leaving her in nothing but a lacy black thong and heels.

"Sam," she says, nearly moaning as I lift her, her legs wrapping around my waist.

We don't make it far. The grand staircase is right there, and I can't wait any longer. I lay her down on the steps, the marble cold against her bare skin.

"Here?" she asks, her eyes wide with surprise and desire.

"Right here," I confirm, loosening my tie and unbuttoning my shirt. "I need you now."

Her hands reach for my belt, helping me shed my clothes. I hover over her, taking in the sight of her splayed across my staircase, hair fanned out, chest rising and falling with each breath.

"You're fucking perfect," I murmur, lowering myself over her.

The coolness of the marble against my knees contrasts with the heat of her body. Her back arches as I enter her, another moan escaping her lips that echoes through the foyer. I capture the sound with my mouth, kissing her deeply as we move together.

"Sam," she whispers my name like a prayer, her nails digging into my back, urging me deeper.

I grasp Olivia's hips and flip her over in one swift motion. The marble steps press against her stomach and breasts as I position myself behind her. Her ass is perfect in front of me, and I can't resist giving it a light slap.

"Hands on the steps," I command, my voice thick with desire.

She complies immediately, bracing herself on the cold marble. I grip her hips and enter her again, the new angle allowing me to go deeper. At the feeling, she whimpers, and I feel her tighten around me.

"You like that?" I growl into her ear, leaning over her back, my chest pressed against her. "You like being fucked on my staircase, where anyone could see you?"

"Yes," she moans with a shiver, pushing back against me.

I slide one hand around to her front, finding her clit with my fingers. She jolts at my touch, then grinds against me.

"You're mine," I whisper, my lips brushing against her ear as I thrust into her. "Say it."

"I'm yours," she pants, her voice breaking as I increase the pressure on her clit.

My fingers work in tight circles while I maintain a relentless rhythm. I can feel her trembling beneath me, getting closer to the edge.

"That's it," I encourage, my breath hot against her neck. "Come for me, Olivia. Let me feel you come around my cock."

Her body tenses as the orgasm builds. Driving into her harder, my fingers never stop their movement against her sensitive flesh.

"Sam!" she cries out as she shatters, her inner walls pulsing around me.

I hold her tight against me as she rides out her pleasure, continuing to stroke her through the aftershocks. Her body is slick with sweat, her breathing ragged as she collapses against the steps.

I'm not finished with her yet. Her body trembles with aftershocks, but I need more. I scoop her up in my arms, her naked body pressed against my chest. She's light as a feather as I carry her up the stairs, her arms wrapped loosely around my neck.

"Sam," she whispers, her voice hoarse from screaming my name.

"We're not done," I growl, kicking open my bedroom door.

Tossing her onto my bed, I watch as she bounces slightly on the mattress. Her hair is wild around her face, her lips swollen from my kisses, her skin flushed pink. She's never looked more beautiful.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"Spread your legs," I command, standing at the foot of the bed.

She complies without hesitation, her thighs falling open for me. I crawl onto the bed, positioning myself between her legs. Running my hands up her thighs, I relish her shiver under my touch.

"You're so fucking wet," I murmur, sliding two fingers inside her. She's still sensitive from her first orgasm, and her hips buck at the intrusion.

"Please," she begs, her eyes locked on mine.

I withdraw my fingers and replace them with my cock, entering her in one smooth thrust. She cries out, her back arching off the bed.

"Look at me," I demand, setting a relentless pace. "I want to see your face when you come again."

Her eyes flutter open, glazed with pleasure. Hooking one of her legs over my shoulder, I change the angle to hit that spot inside her that makes her see stars.

"Sam, I can't—" she gasps, her words cut off by a moan as I drive deeper.

"You can and you will," I insist, reaching between us to circle her clit with my thumb.

Her walls clench around me as her second orgasm builds. I can feel my own release approaching, but I'm determined to make her come again first.

"Come for me like a good girl, Olivia," I command, increasing the pressure on her clit.

She shatters beneath me, her body convulsing, my name a broken cry on her lips. The sight of her coming undone pushes me over the edge, and I follow her into oblivion, emptying myself inside her with a guttural groan.

The sound of our breathing is the only noise that fills the room. Once I've come back down to earth, I grab a wet cloth from the bathroom and clean Olivia up, discarding the rag before pulling her into me. She's cuddled against my chest, her hair flowing across the comforter in long dark waves. My palm rests on her bare skin. It feels comfortable like this, and I let myself close my eyes and sink into the feeling.

I can't remember the last time I relaxed.

And then her fingertips trace the raised flesh on my chest. The touch sends a chill down my spine, memories I've buried deep, threatening to surface.

"What happened?" Olivia's voice is soft, curious.

I stare at the ceiling, the warmth of her body against mine suddenly feeling far away. The scar tissue beneath her fingers holds the weight of that night. My mother's blood, her final breaths, the burning pain as the bullet tore through her and into me.

"Sam?" She props herself up on an elbow, those blue eyes searching my face.

My jaw clenches. I don't talk about that night, don't talk about my mother. The scar is the only physical memory of what happened, and I've never let anyone close enough to see it. My chest aches at the thought of opening old wounds, every instinct screaming at me to push her away. But then I see those blue eyes filled with worry. And there's another part of me that wants to tell her. To let her in.

"It's from when I was a kid." The words come out rough.

"You don't have to tell me?—"

"No, I want to," I cut her off. She's silent, her hand continuing to trail circles over my chest while I attempt to gather my thoughts.

"When I was ten, I was kidnapped by a motorcycle club."

Olivia inhales sharply, but doesn't speak.

"They took both me and my mom. My father had begun training me to take over la famiglia that summer. Part of his lessons included what to do in a kidnapping situation." I rub a hand over my face. I've wondered if he suspected danger from the MC and that's why he began those lessons, to prepare me for this situation. I never asked him. That would've meant talking about what happened that night, and that's something we never did. Ignoring our pain was much more the Costello way.

"I tried to get us out. I was able to get my binds free, and I went to undo hers, but my father showed up at the same time. There was a shootout, and their leader came back to move my mother and I, but found us unrestrained. He pulled his gun to shoot me, but—" I choke on the words I've never said out loud.

"It's okay. You're safe." Olivia nuzzles into my neck, her palm running soothing circles over my chest.

"She stepped in front of me." I suck back the tears that threaten to spill over. "The bullet went through her first." My voice sounds distant, even to my own ears. "Before it hit me."

Olivia's hand spreads flat against my chest, right over my heartbeat. She doesn't say

anything, doesn't offer empty condolences or platitudes. She just stays there, her touch grounding me to the present while the past threatens to drag me under.

I stare at the ceiling, letting the memories wash over me. Olivia's steady breathing and warm touch anchor me to the present.



## Page 68

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"My father got there just in time to shoot the asshole. I don't remember much after that. Just his screams when he realized she was gone."

Olivia shifts closer, pressing her lips to my shoulder. The gesture is so gentle it makes my chest ache.

The words come out before I can stop them. "My mother died protecting me. My father... He was never the same after that night. The Iron Serpents might have pulled the trigger, but I'm the reason she's dead."

"Sam." Olivia's voice is firm as she props herself up to look at me. "You were a child. Her death wasn't your fault."

I meet her gaze, seeing nothing but sincerity in those blue depths. Something inside me cracks open at her words, at the unwavering certainty in her voice.

"I've never told anyone about that night." My hand finds hers where it rests on my chest. "Not even John knows the full story."

"Thank you for telling me." She leans down, pressing her forehead to mine.

The intimacy of the moment steals my breath. Having her here, in my bed, knowing my darkest memories...it should terrify me. Instead, I feel lighter somehow. Like sharing the weight of that night has lifted a burden I've carried alone for too long.

I tangle my fingers in her hair, pulling her closer until our lips meet. The kiss is different from our others. Slower, deeper, filled with everything I can't put into

words. When we break apart, she settles back against my chest, and I wrap my arms around her, holding her close.

For the first time since that night, I let myself believe that maybe love doesn't always end in loss.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

Olivia

Everything has changed.

I don't hate Sam anymore. Somehow, he's wormed his way into my heart, and it's a scary feeling. Knowing who he is and what he does makes me feel like I need to run away faster than ever. The past tells me that this is only going to end badly.

But for some reason I don't understand, I can't seem to listen to that little voice in my head.

Maybe it's the sex.

Or maybe it's that, underneath his hard exterior, Sam might actually be a good person. He's just...human.

Once he opened up about his mother and being kidnapped as a child, my heart shattered for him. I had created this image in my mind of him being a hardened criminal. Someone with no feelings and no remorse.

But the truth is, he wasn't born this way. He was created over time, teachings, and trauma.

I don't think he aims to hurt people. I think he's protective of the people he cares about. I've seen him with his cousins, and I think he truly loves them. He would do anything to keep them safe.

Somehow, I'm feeling lighter now.

It's late afternoon and the bar only has the few regulars who Joey is taking care of. Roman sits on his normal bar stool, eyes scanning the place like a threat could arrive at any moment.

"You know," I say, tossing the rag into the sink, "you could at least pretend to be a normal customer instead of looking like you're about to tackle someone."

Roman raises an eyebrow. "I'm security, not an actor."

"You're scaring away my customers."

"Your customers are three old men who wouldn't notice if I was naked, as long as their glasses stay full."

One of the three old men looks our way, but then shrugs his shoulder and takes another sip of his beer.

I snort. "Speaking of which, you haven't touched your drink in an hour. You're taking up valuable real estate."

"You charging me rent now?" He smirks, picking up the virgin daiquiri I made him and chugging it in one go. I've developed a habit of making him the most feminine drinks I can think of. If he's gonna be here watching me, I might as well have a little fun. "Fine. Another one. Make it fancy."

"What, with a little umbrella? You want me to cut the lime into a swan while I'm at it?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"I was thinking more like a lemon twist. Show off those bartending skills you're so proud of."

I roll my eyes but grab a lemon anyway. "These skills cost money. Are you going to pay for this drink?"

Roman chuckles. "I drive you to work every day. Isn't that payment enough? You have terrible taste in music."

This morning, I made him listen to Taylor Swift on the way here while I belted out the heartfelt lyrics. Roman claimed I was making his ears bleed. So I sang louder.

"Aw, is babysitting such a hard job?" I mock pout at him as I strategically peel the skin of the lemon into a little twist, perching it on the rim of his club soda.

"Babysitting." He scoffs. "More like keeping you alive. Though some days that feels like babysitting."

The bell above the door chimes, and I look up with my customer service smile already in place.

It freezes on my face.

Rhett stands in the doorway, his lanky frame silhouetted against the afternoon sun. His blond hair is shorter than when I last saw him, but he's exactly the same in every other way. He's wearing a pair of charcoal gray dress pants and a plaid button-up. I used to enjoy seeing him dressed up, feeling like I was dating a man who did

something important. But he wasn't important at all. Just another employee who worked with my stepfather, shuffling papers all day in a stuffy office. He just liked to feel important and hold it over my head every chance he had.

A toxic mix of emotions spirals through me. Some time ago, I thought I loved the man who's standing in the entrance staring at me. I'm not really sure I knew what love was, though. I was living a make-believe life, pretending that it was everything I wanted because it made my mother happy. But I'm not sure I ever really loved Rhett. On paper, he was perfect. Job, money, house, he had it all. And I was the shiny jewel on his arm. The missing piece that created his picture-perfect life.

When I broke it off, my mother cried more than I did. She thought I was ruining my life, flushing it down the toilet. And then my father died, and I inherited this bar, and she cried again, sobbing about how I hated her. How I was doing this on purpose to make her miserable.

Her misery was what I had been trying to avoid for as long as I can remember.

Moving here was the first time in my twenty-five years that I've been selfish.

Rhett has an easy smile, and he peers around the bar until he sees me, standing with Roman's drink in my hand and a shell-shocked look on my face. Beside me, Roman says something, but his voice is like Charlie Brown's parents, meaningless sounds that don't connect in my head.

Fancy dress shoes tap against the laminate flooring as Rhett moves closer to the bar. The drink in my hand is taken away, and that snaps me out of my head. I look at Roman, who has a concerned expression etched across his features.

"You know him?" he asks, low enough for only me to hear.

"Uh huh." I nod.

"You want me to get rid of him?" he asks, just as Rhett reaches the bar.

I don't have a chance to answer before my ex is greeting me, attempting to reach over the surface to hug me. I step back, avoiding his touch, and he acts like nothing happened.

"Liv." He has that bright, charming smile on his face, the one that makes everyone fall for him.

"Should I call Sam?" Roman asks, his phone already in hand, ready to tap a few buttons and have his boss here in minutes.

I shake my head. What would Sam even do? No. I need to figure out what my ex wants, and then get rid of him.

"Why are you here?"

Rhett flinches at my tone. "Your mom's worried about you," he says, leaning against the bar like he belongs there. "You haven't called her in weeks."

I laugh, but there's no humor in it. "So she sent you across the country to check on me? That's hard to believe."

"I was coming to New Orleans for a conference anyway." He shrugs, his eyes scanning the bar with that subtle judgment I always hated. "Thought I'd see how you're doing with this...project of yours."

The way he says "project" makes my skin crawl. Like the bar is some temporary hobby I'll abandon when I come to my senses. Like he doesn't believe I meant it when

I said I was coming here. He thinks I'll come to my senses and come crawling back to him, eventually.

"It's not a project, Rhett. It's my business."

Roman shifts beside me, his presence suddenly reassuring. I notice how his body has angled slightly between me and Rhett.

"Come on, Liv. We both know this isn't what you really want." Rhett lowers his voice, trying for intimacy. "Your mom misses you. I miss you."



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"You miss having someone to show off at company parties," I snap.

His smile falters. "That's not fair."

"Neither was pressuring me to be someone I'm not for three years." I grab a glass and start wiping it, needing something to do with my hands. "And neither was cheating on me with anything that moved. Tell my mother I'm fine. Tell her the bar is doing well. Tell her whatever you want, but I'm not coming back."

Rhett's expression hardens. "You're throwing away everything for a rundown bar in a dangerous neighborhood? This place isn't even worth?—"

"That's enough." Roman's voice cuts through the tension.

Rhett finally seems to notice him, eyes narrowing. "And who are you, exactly?"

"Someone who thinks you should leave." Roman doesn't raise his voice, but there's steel behind his words. I haven't had the chance to see him in protective mode, since most of the time he's been here, we've been laughing and bantering like siblings. But now his chest is puffed out and his face is a clear warning.

"I'm having a conversation with my fiancée."

"Ex-fiancée," I correct immediately. "Very ex."

"Look, Liv, just come have dinner with me tonight. For old times' sake." Rhett's tone softens, the charm back in place. "We can talk about your options."

"I don't need options. I need you to leave."

The bell above the door chimes again, and I look up, hoping it's just another customer.

But it's not just another customer...

It's Sam.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Sam

Roman

Olivia's ex is at the bar.

I'm down the street from Gino's when my phone dings with a text from Roman. My blood boils for reasons I'm not quite sure of. Or maybe I just don't want to inspect why it bothers me to know that Olivia's ex is at her bar.

I didn't even know she had an ex.

The bell above the door chimes as I enter. I find Olivia standing behind the bar, Roman on the other side, and right in front of her is the man I assume to be her ex. Her blue eyes flash to mine when she hears me enter. Something akin to relief flickers across her features, and then it's quickly replaced with worry.

"You need to leave," she says to her ex.

I study the man she's talking to. He's only a few inches taller than her, with blond hair

styled atop his head. He's dressed for business, wearing pressed slacks and a button-up, but it's not my kind of business. He looks like he's ready to sit in a very boring meeting, or within the walls of a gray cubicle while he taps away on an ergonomic keyboard.

What did she ever see in a guy like him?

"I'm not leaving until you agree to dinner," he says, leaning on the bar in front of her. Olivia takes a step back, putting distance between them, the bar acting like a barrier.

The way he leans into her space makes my jaw clench. Roman catches my eye with a subtle nod, confirming this is the situation he texted about.

"Is there a problem here?" I ask, striding up to the bar. My eyes flash to Olivia, watching her throat as she swallows. She seems nervous, and I wonder if it's because of him or me. "Are you okay?" I ask her.

She nods. "I'm fine."

"Listen." The ex, whose name I have no idea, turns to me with one hand lifted in a defensive back-off posture. "I don't know who you two are, but this is a private conversation. So if you could..." He waves his hand, telling us to move away.

The nerve on this guy.

## Page 71

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

Beside me, Roman chuckles, probably because he knows this asshole just made a huge mistake.

I feel the edges of my lips twist up into a grin that I can only imagine is menacing, by the way the loser's face immediately changes. "You listen," I begin, my voice low and deep. "She asked you to leave. And unless you want to find out exactly who I am, I would listen to her. Capiisce?"

He frowns, but there's a hint of fear lingering in his eyes as he puts the pieces together. Slowly, he turns to Olivia. "You sure you want me to leave you with him?"

Before she has a chance to respond, I do it for her. "She's sure."

The man backs up, hands lifted. He spares one last glance at Olivia. "You have my number. Call me when you're ready."

"She won't," I snip, watching happily as he backs out of the bar, the chime overhead ringing as he leaves.

I take Olivia home myself, giving Roman the night off. Since the Serpents showed up at her bar, I've had extra men on both her and the house. I can't shake the need to protect her at all costs.

My chef makes us dinner, and we sit together at the dining room table, eating as if this is something we do every night. Like we're a normal couple.

I think I like it.

The idea of this being our new normal flashes through my mind, and I enjoy the images of us together, sharing stories about our days.

I've never imagined myself having something like that. A wife. A life.

And now I can't shake the thought.

But I also can't shake the knowledge that she has an ex she's never told me about. A little voice in my head counters that she doesn't owe me that insight. It's not like this started out as a traditional relationship — whatever that means. But she hasn't brought it up.

Is that why she came to New Orleans? Was she running from him?

He called her his fiancée. I grind my teeth at the recollection.

She's not his anything.

"Who is he?" I finally ask, holding my annoyance on a tight leash.

Olivia swallows her bite of pasta, setting her fork down gently. She looks up at me with shining blue eyes.

"He's no one."

"That's a lie."

"Just someone from my past."

"So not no one?" Frustration simmers under my words.

I stare at Olivia, waiting for a real answer. Her eyes dart away from mine, fingers fidgeting with her napkin. The silence stretches between us.

"Fine. His name is Rhett. We dated for three years in Montreal."

"Three years isn't just 'someone from your past,' Olivia." My voice comes out harder than intended. "He called you his fiancée."

She sighs, pushing her plate away. "Ex-fiancée. We were engaged for six months before I ended it."

"Why didn't you tell me about him?"

"Because it doesn't matter." Her eyes flash with defiance. "It was over long before I met you."

"Clearly not to him." I lean forward, my forearms on the table. "He flew all the way to New Orleans to find you."

"I didn't ask him to."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"Why did you end it?"

Olivia crosses her arms. "That's my business."

"It became my business when he showed up at your bar." I feel my control slipping.  
"Did you love him?"

"I thought I did." That hits me like a punch. "But it wasn't real."

I study her face, trying to read the emotions flickering behind her eyes. There's something more, something painful she's holding back.

"Tell me about him," I say, my voice softer now. "All of it."

Olivia takes a deep breath, her shoulders rising and falling. "My stepfather introduced us. They work together. My mother was thrilled; he was everything she wanted for me. A fancy corporate job, came from a good family." Her fingers trace invisible patterns on the tablecloth. "On paper, we were perfect. The happy couple everyone envied."

The bitterness in her voice makes me tense.

"My mother was so happy. After everything with my father, seeing me with someone 'stable' gave her peace. So I stayed." She looks up at me, her eyes suddenly hardening. "But he never loved me, Sam. Just the idea of me. The perfect fiancée he could show off at parties, the arm candy for business dinners."

My hands curl into fists under the table.

"Behind closed doors?" She laughs, but there's no humor in it. "He was cruel. Cold. Made me feel worthless in a hundred small ways. And he cheated constantly. With anyone who'd open their legs for him."

The rage building inside me is immediate and visceral. I want to find this man and tear him apart.

"Why did he come here?" I ask, fighting to keep my voice level.

"Because I embarrassed him by leaving." Her voice is steady now, stronger. "I was supposed to be his perfect trophy wife. When I walked away, it made him look bad. And Rhett can't stand looking bad."

I reach across the table, covering her hand with mine. Her skin is cool beneath my palm.

"If he comes near you again?—"

"Are you jealous?"

"Am I jealous?" I lean back in my chair, studying her face. "I wouldn't call it jealousy. Protective, maybe. I take care of what's mine, Olivia."

She eyes me skeptically for a moment, watching me intensely. I wonder what she sees...a jealous bastard who wants to kill her ex for ever touching her. For thinking he has the right to show up now and demand she go out with him. My fists clench at the thought.

"You keep saying I'm yours, but then you push me away. What is this?"



"Olivia. I?—"

She crinkles her napkin and tosses it on the table, standing up swiftly. "You can't have it both ways. You can't act like a jealous boyfriend, and then pretend there's nothing between us."

"There is something between us," I rush to say, standing up and moving toward her.

"What?" She crosses her arms. "What exactly is between us, Sam? Because you run hot and cold. One minute, you're inside me, and the next, you're pushing me away."

I run a hand through my hair, frustration building in my chest. "It's complicated."

"No, it's not." She moves closer, close enough that I can smell her perfume. "Either you want me, or you don't. Either you're jealous because you care, or you're just territorial about your possessions. Which is it?"

"Of course I fucking care." My voice rises as the dam finally breaks. "You think I'd risk everything to keep you safe if I didn't? You think I'd lie awake at night worrying about you if this was just about sex?"

Her eyes widen as her breath catches.

I step forward, eliminating the space between us. "Fine. I'm jealous. I hated seeing him look at you like he had any right to. I hated hearing him call you his anything."

My hands find her waist, pulling her against me. "Because you're not his. You're mine. And I'm yours."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

I watch the fire in Olivia's eyes, her chest rising and falling faster with each breath. The confession hangs between us, raw and undeniable. She's mine. I'm hers. The simplicity of it hits me like a freight train.

"Show me," she whispers, her voice barely audible.

Something snaps inside me. I sweep my arm across the table, sending plates and glasses crashing to the floor. The sound of shattering crystal barely registers — only her gasp — as I lift her onto the cleared surface, my hands gripping her waist.

"I'm going to taste every inch of you," I growl, pushing her back until she's lying before me like a feast.

I capture her mouth in a bruising kiss, pouring every ounce of possession and need into it. Her lips part beneath mine, a soft moan escaping her throat as I trail kisses down her neck. My hands work quickly, unbuttoning her blouse and pushing it open to reveal the lace beneath.

"Beautiful," I murmur against her skin, my fingers tracing the curve of her breast.

I push her skirt up around her waist, hooking my fingers into her panties and dragging them down her legs. She lifts her hips to help me, her eyes never leaving mine.

"Sam," she breathes, reaching for me.

I catch her wrists and pin them gently above her head. "Not yet. First, I want to taste you."

I drop to my knees between her legs, spreading her thighs wider. The sight of her laid out before me, flushed and wanting, nearly undoes me. As I press my lips to her inner thigh, she trembles beneath my touch.

"I'm going to make you forget every man who came before me," I promise, moving higher with each kiss.

Just as my mouth reaches the center of her, a shrill ringing cuts through the air. Her phone vibrates on the edge of the table where it had escaped my earlier sweep.

She reaches for the device, blue eyes scanning over the caller ID. I can see the moment her face twists, and she silences the phone, flipping it upside down on the table.

"Who was that?" I ask. I want to know, need to know who made her face twist in annoyance like that.

"No one." She reaches for my face, her palm brushing against my cheek. "Please, I need you."

"Olivia—" The phone begins its vibration again, cutting off my words.

She peeks at the caller ID, and then quickly silences it again.

Now I'm becoming annoyed.

"Olivia, who the fuck is calling you?—"

Again, the phone vibrates. This time, I reach over her, snatching it out of her hand with a growl.

My jaw clenches when I see the name on the screen. Rhett.

"Sam, don't—" Olivia reaches for the phone, but I step back, holding it out of her reach.

My thumb slides across the screen, accepting the call. I put it on speaker.

"Olivia? Finally. We need to talk about?—"

"Olivia's busy," I cut in, my voice like ice.

There's a pause on the other end of the line. I can almost picture this corporate prick's face going pale.

"I want to speak to my fiancée," he says, trying to sound authoritative.

I laugh, but it's dangerous. "Ex-fiancée. And right now, she's spread out on my dining table, waiting for me to finish what we started."

Olivia's eyes widen, a flush pinkening her cheeks. I hold her gaze as I continue.

"She's mine now. Every. Inch. Of. Her." I emphasize each word, watching Olivia's pupils dilate. "And I'm about to remind her exactly who she belongs to."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"You son of a?—"

I ignore him, setting the phone down beside Olivia's hip as I drop back to my knees between her legs. Her breath catches as I press a kiss on her inner thigh.

"Sam," she whispers, half warning, half plea.

I grin against her skin, then drag my tongue slowly through her folds. She gasps, her back arching off the table.

"Let your ex hear who you belong to, Olivia."

"What's happening? Olivia?" Rhett's voice comes through the speaker, confused and angry.

I circle her clit with my tongue, feeling her thighs tremble on either side of my head. Her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me closer as she moans loud enough for Rhett to hear.

I focus completely on Olivia, her taste flooding my senses as I worship her with my mouth. Her thighs quiver against my cheeks, her fingers tightening in my hair as I circle her clit with my tongue. I glance up, watching her face contort with pleasure, her back arching off the table.

"Sam," she moans, still loud enough for Rhett to hear every delicious sound she makes.

I slip two fingers inside her, curling them upward as I suck her clit between my lips. Her hips buck against my face, chasing the sensation.

"That's it," I growl against her. "Show him who makes you feel this good."

She whimpers, her body tensing as I increase my pace. I can feel her getting close, her walls tightening around my fingers.

"Please," she gasps, her head thrashing from side to side. "Don't stop."

I have no intention of stopping. I work her relentlessly, my fingers pumping into her as my tongue flicks rapidly over her sensitive bud. Her moans grow louder, more desperate, filling the room and undoubtedly carrying through the phone.

"Come for me, Olivia," I command against her slick flesh. "Let him hear you come on my tongue."

Her body obeys, seizing beneath me as she cries out my name. With her back arching off the table, her thighs clamp around my head as pleasure rips through her. I don't let up, drawing out her orgasm until she's trembling and pushing weakly at my shoulders.

From the phone, I hear Rhett hiss out a curse before the line goes dead.

I rise to my feet, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand as I look down at Olivia. She's breathtaking — flushed, panting, her hair spread out across the table like a dark halo.

"You're mine," I tell her, my voice rough with desire. "And I'm yours. No one else gets to touch you, to taste you, to hear you come apart like that."

I lean down, capturing her lips in a fierce kiss, letting her taste herself on my tongue.

"Mine," I whisper against her mouth.

## THIRTY-NINE

Sam

I lean back in my chair at Saints and Sinners, nursing my bourbon as John goes over the latest intelligence on the Serpents. The dimly lit bar buzzes with afternoon drinkers, none close enough to overhear us.

"Kade's still in the wind," John says, sliding a folder across the table. "Feds are looking, but he's got connections. My guess is, he's holed up somewhere outside of the city."

"And his men?" I tap my finger against the glass.

"Quiet. Too quiet." John's face tightens. "They're planning something. You don't go after a family like ours and then just disappear."

I nod, trying to focus on the threat at hand, but my mind keeps drifting to Olivia. The way she looked this morning, hair spread across my pillow, peaceful in her sleep. How she kissed me before I left, like she meant it.

"Sam? You listening?" John snaps his fingers.

"Yeah, sorry. Go on."

## Page 75

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"I'm saying, we should hit them first. Take out their distribution centers in the Ninth Ward. Knock them out at the knees and make sure they have no legs left to stand on. End this thing."

My phone vibrates on the table. Roman's name flashes on the screen, and my stomach drops before I even read the message.

Roman

Serpents are circling the bar. Spotted them out front. Snuck out the back, getting Olivia out now.

The glass nearly slips from my hand. My heart hammers against my ribs as I stand abruptly, chair scraping against the floor.

"What is it?" John asks, already on his feet.

"Serpents. At Gino's." My voice sounds distant to my own ears as I grab my jacket.

"Olivia's there."

"Sam—"

"Don't tell me to calm down." I'm already moving toward the door, checking my piece. "Just get a crew and meet me there."

"I wasn't going to," John interrupts. "I'll get the guys. Don't do anything stupid until I get there."



The fear clawing at my chest is unfamiliar, raw. I've faced down death more times than I can count, but the thought of Olivia in danger makes my hands shake. When did she become so important? When did I start caring this much?

I slide into my car, tires squealing as I pull away from the curb. My knuckles turn white on the steering wheel.

"Hold on, Olivia," I mutter. "I'm coming."

I screech to a halt outside Gino's, barely remembering to put the car in park before I'm out the door. My gun is already in my hand, tucked against my side as I approach the entrance. The familiar neon sign casts an eerie glow across the sidewalk, but there's something wrong; the usual warmth of the place has been replaced by a heavy silence that makes my skin crawl.

When I push through the door, the scene inside freezes my blood. Four of my men stand with their backs to the wall, outnumbered by Serpents who've made themselves comfortable. Joey's behind the counter, face pale as he mechanically pours drinks.

One of my guys, Marco, steps forward. "Roman got her out the back door before they came in," he whispers.

Relief floods through me, but it's short-lived as I notice Axel Rousseau lounging at the center of the bar, his cut displaying the Iron Serpents patch. He raises his glass in mock salute.

"Costello! Just the man we were hoping to see." His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Nice place you've got here."

I keep my expression neutral, though my trigger finger itches. "This isn't your territory, Rousseau."

"Funny thing about that." Axel takes a slow sip of bourbon and sets the glass down with deliberate care. "We thought about what you said the other day, and we decided..." He gestures around the room. "We like this bar. Atmosphere's good. Drinks are decent. Think this is where we'll be drinking from now on." He grins. "Since our clubhouse burned down and all."

The challenge hangs in the air between us. My men are watching, waiting for my signal, but we're outnumbered, and I know John's still gathering reinforcements.

"Where's your boss?" I ask, keeping my voice level. "Kade too scared to face me himself?"

Axel's smile tightens. "President's got bigger things to handle than a bar dispute. But don't worry, he sends his regards."

I stare Axel down, calculating our odds. Four of my men against eight Serpents. Bad math, especially with Olivia's bar caught in the middle. This isn't the time for pride.

"Enjoy your drinks," I say coolly, my voice betraying none of the rage churning inside me. "But understand something, this is temporary. Very temporary."

Axel's smile falters slightly, clearly expecting me to take the bait. I tuck my gun back into my holster, making sure he sees the movement.

"Joey," I call out, keeping my eyes on Axel. "Put their tab on my account. Serpents drink free tonight."

Understanding my play, Joey nods. Give them enough rope to hang themselves.

"That's mighty generous of you, Costello," Axel says, confusion flickering across his face.

"I'm a generous guy." I gesture to my men. "Let's go."

## Page 76

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

As we back toward the door, I add, "And Rousseau? Tell Kade I'm looking forward to our next conversation."

Outside, Marco falls in step beside me. "Boss, we just letting them take over like that?"

"No," I say, sliding into my car. "But I need to see Olivia first. Make sure she's safe. Then we handle this. Permanently."

With my thoughts racing, I drive to the house. The Serpents made their move, bold as brass. Taking Gino's is a direct challenge, one I can't ignore. But right now, all I care about is making sure Olivia is unharmed.

The house comes into view, Roman's car parked out front. I barely kill the engine before I'm out and striding toward the door.

Roman opens it before I knock, relief washing over his face. "She's in the kitchen. She's fine, boss."

I push past him, following the sound of voices until I see her. Olivia is pacing in the kitchen, the teakettle whistling on the stove, but she's ignoring the damn thing.

Making my way over, I remove it from the burner. Finally, she spins around and sees me, the tension visibly draining from her shoulders.

"Sam," she breathes, setting down her mug and crossing over to me.

I pull her into my arms, burying my face in her hair, inhaling her scent. For a moment, I just hold her, letting her presence calm the storm raging inside me.

"Are you okay?" I murmur against her temple.

"I'm fine. What's going on?" Now that she's felt me with her own hands, knows that I'm safe, her blue eyes flash with confusion. "Roman wouldn't tell me anything, just dragged me out mid-shift."

"You're not going back to work." The words come out harsher than intended, my fear masquerading as authority. "It's not safe."

Her eyes narrow. "Excuse me?"

"The Iron Serpents were watching the bar." I run a hand through my hair, trying to keep my composure and avoid telling her that her bar has now become the new hangout for a motorcycle gang. "You're staying here. End of discussion."

Something shifts between us. Anger marking her features, she takes a step back from me. "Like hell I am." She jabs a finger at my chest, fearless in a way that both infuriates and captivates me. "I have responsibilities. My grandfather?—"

"Kelly can handle him," I cut her off, unwilling to entertain any argument. This is for her safety. No argument she makes would convince me right now. As long as she's alive, it doesn't matter how angry she is.

"That's not the point." Her voice rises, filling the space between us. "You can't just decide things for me. I thought we were past this."

"I can when it comes to your safety."

"My safety?" She laughs, but there's no humor in it, just bitter recognition. "The same safety that had you keeping me prisoner here? The same safety that has your men following my every move?"

"Yes." I grab her shoulders, fighting the urge to shake some sense into her. "The same safety that keeps you alive."

She shrugs out of my grip. "I'm not some porcelain doll you can lock away, Sam. The bar is my life. And I didn't ask for this." Shaking her head, she moves away from me like she's suddenly afraid of me. Like I'm the bad guy here. "You're the one who put me in danger."

My abdomen convulses as if someone's just sliced a knife through my gut.

You can't protect the people you love.

That little voice worms its way to the surface. Because she's right, I am the reason she's in danger.

"The bar won't matter if you're dead." The words tear from my throat, raw with emotion I can't contain. "I won't watch someone else I—" I cut myself off, but her eyes widen.

"Sam—"

I turn away, unable to face the intensity of her gaze, afraid of what she might see. "You're staying here. That's final."

"No." Her voice is steel, unyielding. "It's not."

But I don't stay to let her argue any more. I spin on my heel, walking out. She'll be

safe in the mansion, surrounded by my men.

## Page 77

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

I need to focus on coming up with a plan.

FORTY

Olivia

Lately, it feels like confused is my permeant state. Every time I start to let my guard down with Sam and think there might be something between us, he puts his walls back up, keeping me locked out.

He wants me to belong to him, not be with him.

And as much as I thought he was different from Rhett, something about that tugs at my chest, making me feel like all men are the same.

I'm pacing the living room while Roman stands at the entrance, an apologetic look on his face. We're currently not on speaking terms since he refuses to let me leave. Sam's orders, but still, I'm mad at him.

I want to go home. Back to the bar so I can check on my grandfather and make sure everything is okay and still intact there. But Sam has ordered his men to keep me locked up in this house. He's telling me it's for my safety, but a nagging part of my brain thinks it's so he can control me.

Which only makes me want to rebel.

The doorbell rings, and my head pops up, looking at Roman. Are we allowed guests



during the current state of lockdown?

Wordlessly, my babysitter goes to answer the door, and the three women I've come to know as friends breeze in.

Madi, Lana, and Zoe.

"Olivia!" Madi shouts my name with a smile and opens her arms, taking me into her embrace. Even though I've only met her a few times, she treats me like we're old friends and not like I'm the girl who witnessed her cousin commit a murder.

"Uh, hi." I pull back. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I heard from Adrian that Sam has you on lockdown, and I figured you might need some company. Particularly of the female variety, considering Sam and Roman are probably the only two people you see lately."

"Hey, I'm great company." Roman huffs.

"Mmhmm." Madi nods, as if she's agreeing with him, but when she faces me again, she rolls her eyes.

Lana hugs me next, pulling back and assessing me with worried eyes. "You doing okay?" she asks.

I nod, afraid if I open my mouth, the words will tumble out before I have a chance to think them through.

"I'm Zoe," the brunette with steel-gray eyes chirps, reaching past Madi to give me her own hug. "We met briefly at my wedding. I was glad Sam brought you."

Of the three, Zoe's the one I know the least. I only met her for a bit at her wedding before she was off with her groom. She seems kind, though.

"Hi." I don't know what to say, and I'm still standing frozen in the doorway, in awe of the three beautiful women here to hang out with me.

I've never been good with female friendships. Most of the women I knew were wives and girlfriends of Rhett's friends. It never felt like they were my friends.

Madi breezes past me and straight to the kitchen. Sam's chef, Emilio, is there, and he greets the blue-haired cousin with a smile. I follow, unsure what to do, as she seems more at home here than I do. Emilio pauses from whatever he's prepping, washing his hands and finding a bottle of wine upon Madi's request. He pops the cork for us and then rummages through the fridge until he's made us a gourmet looking charcuterie board.

Not long after, we're settled in the courtyard with wine, cheese, and cured meat.

"Did Sam send you to babysit me, since he won't let me go to work?" I spit out the question that's been burning my tongue.

Lana shakes her head, plucking a grape from the board. "When Madi called me, I figured you might be clawing at the walls being trapped here."

"Plus, we're nosy and want details," Madi adds, hiding a smile behind her wineglass. "About this...situation. We never finished our convo at Zo's wedding."

"I thought..." I pop my mouth closed. What did I think? That after fucking Sam a few times, he'd fall in love with me, and we'd live happily ever after? It sounds dumb even thinking it. He told me that he wasn't good at relationships. Shame creeps in, coating my skin in an embarrassing red.

I thought we were falling for each other. Those are the words that lay strangled in my throat, too embarrassing to say out loud.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

This is exactly what my mother warned me about for years. Her fears seem to be coming to life. I moved back to New Orleans, and within a month, found myself living with the head of this city's mafia family. And now, I'm on lockdown while I wait for him to sort out whatever threat is out there.

"There's no situation," I say.

Madi snorts. "Right. And sleeping with the most dangerous man in New Orleans is just a casual hobby?"

"It's just sex." It's a lie and I know it. But I can't admit that I have feelings for the man who's taken me hostage.

The three exchange knowing glances that make me want to throw something.

"What?" I demand.

"Nothing," Zoe says, pouring drinks. "It's just...we've all been there before."

Lana chuckles. "I swore it was nothing between me and Naz and that we could break it off, but it's not nothing. Never was. He's my soulmate."

"See, a few months ago, I would have gagged at that statement." Madi crunches a cracker between her teeth. "But now..." She shrugs. "I think I kinda get it. Adrian practically forced me down the aisle. But I love him."

Zoe laughs. "Same. I didn't intend to fall for John. I was just trying to figure out what

happened to my friend, but...here we are." She shrugs, reaching forward to grab a bite of cheese.

So they all fell in love in less-than-ideal circumstances?

I shake my head. "That's not the same. I saw... Sam, he..." I can seem to form a sentence.

"You saw Sam do something...bad." Madi tries to finish my thought. "But it was for a good reason. And I could be wrong, but I don't think that's what's bothering you."

She's right. I've moved past the fact that I witnessed Sam commit a murder. It's weird to think about that being how this all started, when now it seems like it doesn't even matter.

"I don't think he's capable of a relationship, even if I wanted one."

Madi chuckles. "He is. He just doesn't know it yet."

"I can't." I shake my head, grabbing my glass and taking a too big sip of wine. "It's complicated enough with Grandpa's care and the bar..."

"And the fact that you like him," Zoe finishes.

That hits harder than they should. Do I like Sam? Beyond the chemistry and the way he makes my body feel? Beyond how he handled Grandpa with unexpected gentleness? Beyond those rare moments when his guard drops and I glimpse something real?

"It doesn't matter if I do," I say quietly. "This world, his world, it's temporary for me."

But even as I say it, doubt lingers.

Because more than just the sex, I think I like Sam Costello.

## FORTY-ONE

Sam

I pace in my office, the dim light from the desk lamp casting shadows across my furrowed brow. My hands clench and unclench, betraying my anxiety. The polished wooden floor creaks beneath my restless steps.

I spent the day in a discreet car, staking out Gino's and watching as more men with snakes on their leather cuts came in and out of the bar. I need to come up with a plan, something to end this once and for all, but at the moment, I have nothing.

The walls close in around me as thoughts of Olivia mix with concerns about the Serpents. This wasn't supposed to happen. She wasn't supposed to matter. A witness, that's all she was meant to be. A problem to solve, not a woman who'd crawl under my skin and make a home there.

"Fuck," I mutter, running my fingers through my hair.

The Serpents are testing me, pushing to see how far I'll go to protect what's mine.

And Olivia is mine.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

I scrub a hand through my hair, messing up the gelled strands. I know better than entangling someone in my world. This is how people get killed. And now that Olivia is here, how am I supposed to keep her safe without shredding her happiness?

Stopping at the window, I stare out at the darkness. My reflection stares back, a ghost of the man I was before her. Before I told her about my mother. Before I let her see parts of me that no one else has.

My phone buzzes with another update from John about Serpent movements in our territory. They're circling, waiting for a weakness. And Olivia? She's become my most dangerous vulnerability.

I slam my fist against the wall, welcoming the pain that shoots up my arm. I need to focus. LaFamiglia has to come first. It's always been that way.

But when I close my eyes, all I see is her face, hear her voice, feel her touch tracing the scar on my chest. The memory of her whispering, "It wasn't your fault," echoes in my mind, a balm I never knew I needed.

I glance at the framed photos on the wall, reminders of a family legacy I feel slipping away. The image of my mother stares back at me, igniting a rush of guilt and fear. Her smile, frozen in time, seems to judge me now. Did I make the right choice, bringing Olivia into this life? Into my world of blood and bullets?

"I'm trying, Ma," I whisper, my voice barely audible.

My mother's eyes in the photograph hold the same warmth they did that night—the

night she stepped in front of me, the night she died because I wasn't strong enough. Because I was just a kid who couldn't protect her.

Next to her photo hangs one of my father and grandfather, Senior and Junior, standing tall and proud outside this very house. Nonno's expression is stern but determined. He built this empire brick by bloody brick, and now it's crumbling in my hands.

You're a failure.

That dark voice echoes in my mind, reminding me that I'm incapable of rescuing anyone.

Mother.Dead.

Father.Dead.

Olivia.Soon-to-be dead if I don't stop this madness.

I trace my finger along the edge of my mother's frame. "What would you think of her?" I ask the silent photograph.

The question hangs in the air, unanswered. But I know. My mother would have loved her strength, her fire. The way she cares for her grandfather, despite everything. The way she looks at me like I'm more than just the monster the world sees.

My chest tightens as I move to the next photo, one of me and John as teenagers, before prison, before everything went to hell. Back when I still believed I would be a great boss. That I would claim my birthright and run this family as good as, if not better than, the men before me.



I step back, taking in the entire wall of memories. Generations of Costellos stare back at me, their eyes seeming to ask what I'm willing to sacrifice to keep what's ours. To protect what matters.

And now Olivia matters. More than I ever thought possible.

I snap out of my thoughts when a knock at the door breaks my concentration. John enters, his expression serious, his shoulders tense beneath his tailored suit jacket.

"You planning to wear a hole in that floor?" he asks, eyeing my restless pacing.

"What is it?" I don't have patience for small talk.

I stop pacing and turn to face John, who stands in the doorway with his arms crossed.

"Kelly called," he says, stepping into the office. "She and Gino are still safe in the apartment. No sign of trouble there."

My shoulders relax slightly at the news. At least Olivia's grandfather is out of harm's way for now.

"That's something," I mutter, leaning against my desk.

"But there's more." John continues, tension clear in his shoulders. "The Serpents are pulling out from the bar. Naz just reported they've been leaving in groups for the last hour."

I straighten immediately, my senses on high alert. "All of them?"

"Nearly. Just a couple left, and they look like they're packing up too."

This doesn't make sense. The Serpents don't retreat without reason. They've been applying pressure, making their presence known, intimidating my people. A sudden withdrawal means only one thing.

## Page 80

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"They're up to something," I say, my mind racing through possibilities, none of them good. "This isn't a retreat. It's a regroup."

John nods. "My thoughts exactly."

I push away from the desk, energy surging through me. "Send men to follow them. I want to know where they're going, who they're meeting with. Get eyes on Axel especially. That fucker doesn't take a piss without Kade's permission."

"Already on it. Donnie and Marco are in position to tail the next group that leaves."

I run a hand over my jaw, stubble rough against my palm. "Make sure they keep their distance. If the Serpents spot our guys, we lose our advantage."

"They know how to stay invisible," John assures me.

My mind turns to Olivia, safely tucked away upstairs with Roman standing guard. But for how long can I keep her here? How long before this war with the Serpents reaches my doorstep?

"Double the security here," I order. "And tell Roman not to let Olivia out of his sight."

John gives me a knowing look. "I never thought I'd see you care about a woman this much."

His words echo in my brain. I care about her more than I've ever cared about anyone.

## FORTY-TWO

Olivia

I press my ear against the cool wood of Sam's office door, straining to catch every word.

"The Serpents are pulling out from the bar. Naz just reported they've been leaving in groups for the last hour," John says.

"All of them?" Sam questions.

"Nearly. Just a couple left, and they look like they're packing up too."

Their voices drop lower, and I back away, heart racing. They're gone. The Serpents are gone. Which means the danger Sam's been using to keep me locked up has vanished too.

I slip back to my room, my mind made up. I need air. Space. Freedom. I've spent too long in cages — first, the one of my own making in Montreal, and now, this gilded prison.

I need room to think. And I clearly can't do so here.

Roman's stationed downstairs, but I know the house layout by now. The side door near the kitchen leads to the garden, and the fence has a loose section I spotted days ago.

Twenty minutes later, I'm sliding into a cab, the night air feeling sweet on my skin.

"Gino's Bar," I tell the driver, relief flooding my veins.

When I walk through the door of the bar, I suck in a calming breath. I've been worried since Roman dragged me out of place and Sam put me on lockdown. Now that I can't see it with my own eyes, I feel more at peace.

The bar is quiet, just a few regulars nursing drinks. Joey looks up from the beer he's pouting, his eyes widening.

"Jesus, girly! What are you doing here? Does he know?—"

"No," I cut him off, sliding onto a stool. "And I don't care. I need to know what's going on."

Joey leans in, voice low. "That damn MC," he hisses. "They've been here all night. Drinking us out of everything. They were asking questions about you..." He looks worried and guilt rushes through me that I brought him into this mess.

This is all my fault.

My stomach tightens. "What kind of questions?"

"Wanted to know when you'd be back and what's up with you and Sam Costello. I didn't tell them shit." He glances nervously toward the door. "But they know this place is yours, and they know there's something between you and Costello."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"Sam thinks they've retreated."

Joey shakes his head. "That ain't retreating. That's hunting. They're figuring you out." He reaches across the bar and grips my wrist. "You shouldn't be here alone. Let him protect you; he's the one who got you into this mess?—"

I pull my hand away. "I'm not alone. You're here."

"I'm not exactly?—"

The bell above the door chimes. Joey's eyes shift over my shoulder, his face draining of color. It tells me everything I need to know before I even turn around.

A tall man with dark hair and a signature Iron Serpent cut strolls in like he owns the place, flanked by three men with matching leather. The VP patch on his vest gleams under the bar lights. My stomach sinks.

His smile is all teeth and danger, and for a moment, I curse myself for abandoning Sam's protection. What have I gotten myself into?

"Well, look who decided to come home," he drawls, eyes locking with mine. "Costello's little pet."

"We're closed," I tell him, throat tightening.

"Door was open." He nods to his men, who spread out around the bar. "Been waiting for you to show up, sweetheart. Your boyfriend's been keeping you under tight lock

and key."

Joey tries to move around the bar to be closer to me, but one of Axel's men appears, blocking his path.

"What do you want?" I try to keep my voice steady.

"Just a little chat." Axel steps closer. "About your man and his business."

I back away, but my spine hits the edge of the bar. "I don't know anything."

"Sure, you do." His smile drops, replaced with a menacing look. "Get her."

Everything happens too fast. One of the men lunges for me, his fingers digging into my arm. I scream, twisting against his grip.

"Let go of me!" I kick at his shins and scratch at his face.

The door crashes open, and I see Roman bursting in through my periphery vision. Thank God. His gun raised and pointed at the man whose hands are still on me. A shot rings out, and the man crumples to the floor.

"Olivia, run!" Roman shouts as he presses the trigger, another bullet releasing from his gun and into one of the men.

I duck behind the bar as chaos erupts. Glass shatters somewhere to my left, followed by a grunt and the sickening thud of a body hitting the floor. My hands shake as I press myself against the wooden panels, trying to make myself as small as possible.

Roman fires again, the sound deafening in the confined space. Someone screams in pain.

"You picked the wrong fucking bar," Roman snarls.

I peek over the edge of the counter. Roman stands with his back to the wall, blood streaming from a cut above his eye. One Serpent lies motionless near the door, another clutching his shoulder and moaning on the floor.

Axel charges at Roman like a bull, catching him in the midsection and slamming him against the jukebox. The glass front cracks under the impact. They grapple, trading vicious blows. Axel lands a punch that snaps Roman's head back, and I wince, calling out his name. Roman counters with an uppercut that sends blood spraying from Axel's nose, and while his opponent is distracted, he looks to me.

"Run, Olivia!" he shouts again, his voice strained as Axel wraps hands around his throat.

More Serpents enter the bar, and Roman is viciously outnumbered. One of the new men spots me and lunges across the bar. I grab the first thing my fingers find, a bottle of bourbon, and smash it across his face. He howls, glass and alcohol burning his eyes.

Joey appears behind him with a baseball bat, swinging it hard against the man's back. The crack of the impact turns my stomach. Another Serpent lurches forward, pushing Joey to the ground. His head smacks against the laminate, and his eyes drift shut.

"Joey—" I shout, running to his side.

Roman and Axel are still fighting, crashing into tables and sending chairs flying. Roman's gun skitters across the floor, stopping inches from my feet. I grab it, the metal cold and heavy in my hand.

Axel has Roman pinned now, a knife glinting in his hand as he brings it down toward



Roman's chest. Roman catches his wrist, muscles straining, the blade inching closer.

## Page 82

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"Stop!" I shout, pointing the gun with both hands, trying to steady my aim. "Get off him now!"

Axel looks up, blood streaming from his nose, eyes wild with rage. His lips curl into a smile that chills me to the bone.

"You don't have the guts, princess."

The knife presses against Roman's throat, drawing a thin line of blood.

I'm trying to summon the courage. All I need to do is press the trigger, and I can protect Roman. Someone who's become my friend over the past weeks.

I squeeze my eyes shut and my finger presses hard against the metal. It clicks, but nothing happens. It's out of bullets.

A sob rips through my chest, and Axel's laughter rings out.

When I open my eyes, Roman is watching me, his dark gaze telling me it's okay. But nothing's okay.

I watch as the knife slips across his neck, a stream of blood coating his skin. And then his head falls back, those dark eyes still open.

Before I can scream or lunge for Axel, everything goes black.

FORTY-THREE

Sam

I pour a fresh glass of bourbon and sit down in my office chair, wiggling the computer mouse until the screen flashes to life. The cameras I had installed in Olivia's bar appear on the screen, each frame showing a different angle of her establishment.

In one quick moment, the glass I'm lifting to my lips falls from my fingers and crashes to the ground, amber liquid spilling across the wood floors, seeping between the planks.

"Fuck," I hiss, my heart suddenly hammering against my ribs.

My fingers reach for my phone, fumbling to hit John's contact, nearly dropping it in my haste.

"Cugino," he greets, his voice casual, unaware of the nightmare unfolding before my eyes.

"The bar." The words are strangled. I'm mortified by the sight I'm witnessing, helpless to watch it through video, where I can't do a damned thing to stop it. "Olivia's at the bar. Serpents are there. Who do we have close enough?"

"Slow down. Olivia's at the house?—"

"I'm watching the fucking cameras!" I shout, my voice echoing off the walls. "She's at the bar, Roman too. There're Serpents there... They're fighting?—"

But before I can get another word out, I watch in horror as Olivia points a gun at Axel. Do it. I wish I was there to do it for her, to prevent her from having to take someone's life. But I'm not. I'm miles away, watching like some pathetic voyeur.

Do it.

And then I watch as her finger twitches and nothing happens. Axel laughs, a sound I can't hear but can imagine all too well, and then he drags the blade he's holding along Roman's throat, slow and deliberate.

"No!" I scream, but my words do nothing to prevent me from watching one of my most loyal men and friends bleed out right before my eyes.

I'm helpless. Completely fucking helpless.

My body is shaking as the sight unfolds. One of the serpents hits Olivia from behind, her body crumpling, and a wide smile grows on Axel's lips. The fucker looks right up at the camera and waves, as if he knows I've just watched the whole thing, as if this is all for my benefit.

Bile rises in my throat, hot and acidic.

I need to rescue Olivia.

And then I'm going to make that fucker pay.

"They took her." My voice feels weak, hollow, like it's coming from somewhere outside my body.

## Page 83

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

The world stops. I can't breathe, can't think. My vision tunnels as rage builds inside me like a volcano, pressure mounting until I might explode.

"Sam? You there? What's happening?"

I hurl the phone across the room. It shatters against the wall, pieces scattering like confetti. My desk flips with one violent push, papers and my laptop crashing to the floor. The bourbondecanter follows, glass exploding, amber liquid spreading across the hardwood like blood.

"FUCK!" I slam my fist through the drywall, again and again, until my knuckles bleed and splinter with white dust. Picture frames crash down. Books sweep off shelves. The room becomes a hurricane, with me at its center.

The door bursts open. Adrian rushes in, eyes wide with alarm.

"Sam, stop!" He grabs me, but I shove him away with enough force to make him stumble.

"They have her." My voice breaks, fracturing like everything else around me. "They fucking have her."

My legs give out. I sink to the floor amid the wreckage of my office, my chest heaving. Tears burn in my eyes. I haven't cried since my mother died, haven't allowed myself that weakness.

"They'll kill her. They'll hurt her first, then they'll kill her." My voice trembles, barely

able to speak clearly.

Visions of my mother's death flash through my mind like a sick montage. I can see her lying there, bleeding out in that ugly shack, her eyes vacant, accusing. History's repeating itself in the cruelest way.

"We'll get her back," Adrian says, but he spends his days behind a desk, using the law to protect us. He doesn't have the firsthand experience with the Serpents that I do. He hasn't seen what they're capable of.

"How?" I look up, my vision blurred through unshed tears. "Roman's dead. I sent him to protect her, and now he's dead, and they have her."

"We'll find her," he tries to reassure me, his voice steady when mine is anything but.

"It's my fault." The words taste like ash. "I did this. I brought her into this. I should have known better."

"Sam." Adrian cuts through my spiral. "Focus. Olivia needs you thinking clearly, not drowning in guilt."

He's right. I take a deep breath, wiping my face with the back of my bloodied hand.

"They want me to suffer," I say, clarity finally breaking through the fog of rage. "He won't kill her right away."

Adrian nods. "That gives us time."

I stand up, purpose replacing panic. "I know where they'll take her."

"The old warehouse?" he asks, eyebrows raised, already reaching for his phone.

"No. Somewhere more personal." I reach for my gun, checking the chamber with practiced ease. "Get the cars ready. Call everyone. They took what's mine. I'm taking her back."

## FORTY-FOUR

Olivia

There's a throbbing ache radiating through my head when I blink my eyes open. I groan, trying to lift my hands to my temples, but they don't obey. I wiggle them, feeling something chafing against the raw skin and keeping them anchored behind my back. The metallic taste of blood lingers in my mouth, and it takes me a moment to remember what happened as I attempt to focus, to make sense of my surroundings through swollen eyes.

I snuck out. The bar. Roman.

A sob lodges itself in my throat. I watched him die. Guilt claws at me. I was angry with him when I left Sam's house. He was just following his boss's orders, but I was ignoring him, annoyed that he was keeping me trapped in that house. And if I would've listened to him...maybe he would still be alive.

"Look who's finally awake." Axel's voice cuts through my disorientation. He squats in front of me, tobacco-stained teeth visible in his twisted smile. "Costello's little pet."

I'm in a small room that smells of mildew and stagnant water. Moonlight filters through cracks in the weathered wooden walls, casting eerie shadows across the floor. Somewhere outside, water laps against a shore.

Fear grips my chest as I look at Axel. I've been kidnapped by this psychopath. What is he going to do to me?

I try to speak, but my throat feels like sandpaper. I manage to croak, "Why?"



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"Why?" He laughs, standing to pace around me. "Because Sam Costello needs to learn his place. Taking over his territory wasn't enough. I want him to feel what real loss is."

My heart hammers against my ribs. The way he circles me reminds me of a predator toying with its prey.

"You know what's funny?" Axel pulls up a rickety chair, turning it backward before straddling it. "This is the same place where his mama died. Same shack. Same rope." He flicks his gaze to my bound wrists. "History repeating itself."

Ice floods my veins. Sam's story of his mother dying to protect him comes back to me. The realization that I'm in the source of his trauma makes me dizzy.

"He told you about that, huh?" Axel's eyes narrow at my reaction. "I can see it in your face. How sweet. Sharing his deepest secrets with his little girlfriend. He must really like you, sweetheart. That makes what I'm about to do even better."

I straighten my spine despite the pain. "He'll kill you for this."

"He won't. But hewilltry to rescue you." Leaning forward, his hot breath hits my face. "I want him to come. I want him to see your pretty face before I put a bullet in it. Just like his mama."

I grit my teeth and do my best to hold back my tears. I don't want this asshole to know how scared I am. "Why?" I ask again.

Axel's face darkens. "He didn't tell you?" He laughs darkly. "Your boyfriend killed my pops that night."

The pieces start to click together.

"Your dad killed his mom..."

Axle shakes his head like my logic is wrong. Like it shouldn't matter that one kill led to another. All that matters to the man in front of me is his own retribution.

"It never ends." I continue. "One death after another. The cycle will just keep repeating itself. The vengeance will never end?—"

A loud crack rings out in the shed as he backhands me across the face. I drop my head, my hands shaking in their restraints as my cheek stings.

"Shut up, bitch!" he shouts.

I've hit a nerve.

I taste blood where my lip split from Axel's backhand. The metallic tang fills my mouth as I try to clear my head, to think of something, anything, that might help me.

Axel stands over me, his eyes glinting with something that makes my skin crawl. "You know, before I kill you, I think I'll have a little fun." His hand reaches for my face, rough fingers tracing my jawline. "Show Costello I can take everything that's his."

I jerk away, but there's nowhere to go. "Don't touch me."

"Or what?" Grabbing a fistful of my hair, he yanks my head back. "No one's coming

to save you yet."

He leans too close as his other hand tears at my shirt. I struggle against the ropes, my wrists burning as they rub against the coarse fibers. In my desperate twisting, my fingers brush against something sharp behind me.

While Axel is distracted by pulling at my clothes, I stretch my fingers farther, feeling the edge of what seems to be a rusted screw sticking out from the floorboard. I work my bindings against it, sawing back and forth while Axel's hands roam my body.

"Please," I whimper, not entirely acting as tears stream down my face. "Please don't do this."

"Beg all you want," he growls, focused on unbuckling his belt. "I like the sound of it."

Bile churns in my gut. I'm running out of time. His hands feel like hot irons on my skin, every touch burning me. I need to get myself free.

The rope finally gives way with a snap. I keep my hands behind me, waiting for the right moment. When Axel leans forward again, I pull my hand from behind my back, and with all my strength, I drive it the screw his neck, but he moves at the last second. The screw sinks into his shoulder instead.

Axel roars in pain and rage, staggering backward. "You fucking bitch!" Blood seeps through his shirt as he yanks the nail out.

His eyes, wide with fury, lock onto mine. "You're gonna regret that." He lunges forward, grabbing me by the throat, squeezing until black spots dance across my vision.

I struggle against Axel's grip, clawing at his hands as he chokes me. The edges of my vision darken, but desperation gives me strength. I kick wildly, connecting with his knee. He grunts, his grip loosening just enough.

I wrench sideways, toppling us both to the floor. My head cracks against the wooden planks, sending pain shooting through my skull. Axel recovers faster, straddling me, his weight crushing my ribs.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"I'm gonna enjoy this," he snarls, pinning my arms.

I buck beneath him, twisting my body. My nails find his face, raking down his cheek. He howls, jerking back, and I use the moment to slam my knee between his legs.

As he doubles over, I scramble away, but he lunges, grabbing my ankle. I kick with my free foot, connecting with his jaw. The impact sends pain shooting up my leg, but his grip loosens.

With heaving breaths, I crawl toward the door, but Axel recovers too quickly. He grabs my hair, yanking me backward. Pain explodes across my scalp, making me groan as he drags me across the floor.

"Enough games," he growls, then slams me against the wall.

Something cracks in my side — a rib, maybe two. I gasp, unable to breathe through the white-hot pain.

Axel pulls a knife from his boot. "Let's see how pretty Costello thinks you are after I'm done."

The blade glints in the dim light as he brings it toward my face. I twist desperately, but the knife slices across my shoulder instead, the pain searing.

Suddenly, gunfire erupts outside, my body freezing at the sound. Axel's head snaps toward the door, his momentary distraction giving me the opening I need.

My hand shoots to his waistband, fingers closing around the cold metal of his gun. Before he can react, I yank it free.

His eyes widen as I press the barrel against his chest.

"Wait—" he starts.

There's no hesitation this time. I pull the trigger.

The gun kicks in my hand. Axel stumbles backward, shock spreading across his face. I fire again. And again. And again.

Each shot reverberates through my bones, but I don't stop. I keep pulling the trigger until the gun clicks empty, my hands shaking violently.

Axel collapses, his body hitting the floor with a dull thud. Blood pools beneath him, spreading across the weathered planks.

The door bursts open. Sam stands there, gun raised, his face a mask of fury and fear. His eyes take in the scene — me standing over Axel's body, the empty gun still clutched in my trembling hands.

"Olivia," he breathes, lowering his weapon and darting toward me. As soon as his arms wrap around me, my legs give out and a sob breaks free.

I'm finally safe.

FORTY-FIVE

Sam

I grip the steering wheel so tight my knuckles turn white, pushing the SUV to its limits as we race through the outskirts of New Orleans. John sits beside me, methodically checking his weapon, his face set in grim determination. Naz, Donnie, and four more of my most trusted men follow in cars behind us, a small army ready for war.

"Not again," I mutter, the words barely audible over the engine's roar and the blood pounding in my ears.

Memories flood back with brutal clarity — being ten years old, trembling in terror, the smell of damp wood and mildew filling my nostrils, my mother's blood pooling on the rotting floor of that shack in the swamp. The same godforsaken swamp we're heading to now, twenty years later, but feeling exactly the same.

"We'll get her, Sam," John says, but his voice sounds distant, like he's speaking from underwater. His reassurance does nothing to calm me.

I see my mother's face, her eyes wide with fear as she jumped in front of me, using her body as a shield. I hear the deafening gunshot, feel the warm spray of her blood across my face and hands. The memory is so vivid, I can almost taste the copper in the air.

"I can't lose her too." The words escape before I can stop them, raw and vulnerable in a way I rarely allow myself to be.

The road narrows as we approach the Bayou, civilization giving way to wilderness. Cypress trees loom overhead like ancient sentinels, Spanish moss hanging like funeral shrouds in the humid night air. The headlights cut through the oppressive darkness, illuminating the twisted path to the old hunting grounds where the Serpents have always taken their victims, where they've always executed their enemies.

I park a quarter mile out, killing the lights. We move silently through the undergrowth, the mud sucking at our boots with every step, as if the swamp itself is trying to hold us back. Through the tangle of trees, I spot it, the same weathered shack where my mother died, where Kade has now taken Olivia. My chest tightens at the sight.

Two guards pace outside, rifles slung over their shoulders, cigarettes glowing in the darkness. Three more men are visible through the grimy windows, their shadows moving against the dim light inside. Gun drawn, I signal to John with practiced precision. We've done this a hundred times before, but never with stakes this high.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

The first shots break the silence like thunder. One guard drops before he can reach for his weapon, a dark stain spreading across his chest. The other manages to fire aimlessly into the trees before John takes him down with two shots to the center mass.

Shouts erupt from inside the shack, panicked and angry. I rush forward as bullets splinter the trees around me, showering bark and wood chips. One grazes my arm, tearing through fabric and flesh. I barely feel it, adrenaline masking the pain.

"Cover me!" I yell, breaking from the tree line into the exposed clearing.

I take down a Serpent who emerges from the side door, his chest erupting in red as my bullets find their mark. Another appears in the window with an assault rifle, his face contorted with rage. Donnie's shot drops him before he can fire, his body slumping against the windowsill.

My men fan out with military precision, engaging the Serpents pouring from the building like rats from a sinking ship. I keep moving, driven by a singular purpose that burns hotter than any bullet wound.

Not this time. Not again. History will not repeat itself.

I reach the porch, kicking in the door with enough force to tear it from its hinges, gun raised and ready. Blood pounds in my ears like war drums. Sweat stings my eyes, blurring my vision. The same floorboards where my mother bled out creak beneath my feet, a haunting reminder of everything I've lost.

The sole of my black boot hits the door with a thud, and the wood cracks, splintering enough that one more kick does it in. Fire races through my veins, anger fueling me as I aim my gun, ready to kill anyone who's touched my girl on sight.

But the smell hits me first, metallic and sharp. Blood.

My heart stops.

"Olivia!" My arms find her, wrapping around her body. As soon as I have her, her legs go limp, but I hold her up, letting her crumple against my body as a sob rips from her chest.

She's alive, her hands and clothes soaked crimson, her eyes dazed with shock, but she's alive. Axel lies on the floor, blood pooling beneath him, spreading across the worn floor.

Just like that night. Just like Mom.

The room spins, memories colliding with reality. I'm ten years old again. In this very same shack, watching my mother's blood spread across the floor while my father stormed in, too late to save her, but in time to kill the man who took her from us.

Except Olivia isn't dead. She's trembling violently, her breaths coming in short, ragged gasps.

History didn't repeat itself.

"Sam," she whispers, her voice barely audible. "I killed him. I had to. He was going to?—"

"Shh," I whisper. "It's okay. I know, baby. I know." I pull her against me, cradling her

head. "You're safe now. I've got you." Her skin is clammy, her pulse racing under my fingertips. There's a gash on her temple, blood matting her hair, and bruises forming on her wrists and neck.

John appears in the doorway, weapon drawn. His eyes widen at the scene.

"We need to get her to the hospital," I order without looking up. "She's hurt."

Olivia's fingers clutch my shirt, leaving bloody handprints. "Roman," she chokes out. "He killed Roman. I couldn't?—"

"Shh. Don't talk." I stroke her hair, careful to avoid her injuries. "It's okay. Everything's gonna be okay."

Her body shudders against mine. I scan the room, taking in the ropes on the floor, the overturned chair. She freed herself. She fought back. Pride swells in my chest alongside the rage and grief.

But I was too late.

I cradle Olivia against my chest as John helps us into the back seat of the SUV. Her blood soaks through my shirt, warm and sticky against my skin. The smell of it fills my nostrils, choking me with memories.

"Drive," I bark at Donnie. "Fast, but smooth. She's hurt."

Olivia's eyes flutter, struggling to stay open. Her breathing is shallow and uneven.

"Stay with me," I whisper, pressing my lips to her forehead. "Just stay with me, baby."

The city lights blur outside the window as we race toward the hospital. I haven't felt this helpless since I was ten years old watching my mother die.

This is my fault. All of it.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

I brought her into this mess. I kept her when I should have let her go. I put her in danger because I was selfish, because I wanted her, because for once in my miserable life, I thought I could have something good.

And look what it got her.

I stroke her hair, careful to avoid the gash on her temple. "I'm sorry," I whisper, though she can't hear me. "I'm so fucking sorry."

The weight of her unconscious body against mine feels like judgment. Like punishment.

I can't do this to her anymore. I can't keep putting her in danger just because I'm too weak to let her go. She deserves better than this life — better than me.

When she wakes up, when she's safe and healed, I'll have to do what I should have done from the beginning.

I'll have to let her go.

FORTY-SIX

Olivia

Brightness stabs my eyes as I blink them open. The antiseptic smell hits me first, then the steady beep of machines. A hospital room materializes around me. Sterile white walls, bland curtains, and an IV dripping fluid into my arm.

Sam sits slumped in a chair beside my bed, his head resting on his folded arms near my hand. His dark hair is disheveled, clothes wrinkled like he's been here for days. When I shift slightly, his head snaps up, eyes bloodshot and rimmed with shadows.

"Olivia." My name comes out like a prayer from his lips. "Thank God."

I try to speak, but my throat feels like sandpaper. Sam quickly reaches for a cup of water, gently bringing the straw to my lips. The cool liquid soothes my parched throat.

"What happened?" I manage to rasp.

"You're okay." His voice cracks. "You had a cut on your shoulder, two broken ribs, and a concussion." Sam's face crumples, the facade of the untouchable mob boss completely gone. "I'm so sorry, Olivia. This is all my fault. I should have protected you better. I should have?—"

"It's okay," I whisper.

The events of the night come back to me in a twisted montage. Visions of Axel slicing Roman's throat, then everything going black before I woke up in that shack. When I remember Axel's hands on me, I feel nauseous, my stomach convulsing.

Sam's hand rubs my back. "It's okay, baby."

"I shot him," I whisper, recalling the weight of the gun in my hands and how I didn't even flinch as I pulled the trigger. Again. And again. His body jerked with each impact. The light leaving his eyes.

I killed someone.

The memory loops endlessly — the screw cutting into my palm as I worked it free, the desperate struggle, the moment I knew it was either him or me. The sound of the gunshots still rings in my ears, so loud they seemed to shake the room.

I can still feel the warm splash of his blood on my skin.

Sam squeezes my hand, pulling me back to the present. "You're safe now," he murmurs.

I nod, but inside, I'm still in that room, watching Axel fall to the floor, knowing I put him there.

I'm discharged from the hospital three days later. My body aches in places I didn't know could hurt, but the doctors say I'm healing well. No permanent damage. Just scars that will fade with time.

Sam hasn't left my side since I woke up. He's been attentive, gentle, making sure I have everything I need. But there's something distant in his eyes, like he's already gone.

He helps me into his SUV, handling me like I'm made of glass. The ride is quiet, tension filling the space between us. When we turn onto my street instead of heading toward his mansion, my heart sinks.

"Why are we here?" I ask as he parks in front of my apartment above the bar.

Sam turns off the engine but doesn't look at me. "This is where you live."

He comes around to help me out, supporting me as we climb the stairs. My legs feel like lead, and not just from the injuries. Each step feels like walking toward something I don't want to face.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

Inside my apartment, Sam sets my bag down. Everything looks exactly as I left it, yet somehow foreign, like I'm seeing it through different eyes.

"Well," Sam says, his voice carefully neutral. "Our deal is complete."

My breath stutters as I turn to face him. "What?"

"I trust you now." His expression is unreadable, his eyes avoiding mine. "You're free."

The words hit me like a physical blow. "Free?"

"That was the arrangement. You're no longer a witness I need to worry about." He shrugs, the gesture too casual. "You can go back to your life."

"No." The word bursts from me. "No, you can't just leave me. Not after everything."

"I have to."

"Why?" My voice rises, cracking with emotion. "Because it's my fault Roman's dead? Because I killed someone? Because I'm damaged now?"

"No, no." He scrubs a hand over his face. "Because I nearly got you killed!" His composure finally breaks along with me. "You almost died because of me, Olivia."

"That wasn't your fault!"



"It was." His jaw clenches, eyes pained. "And it will happen again if you stay with me."

"So you're just going to walk away?" I step toward him, anger and hurt coursing through me. "After everything we've been through...you're just leaving?"

"I'm trying to protect you," he says, voice strained.

"I don't want your protection! I want you!"

His eyes squeeze shut, and he takes a step back, creating a valley of space between us. "Goodbye, Olivia," he says, and then, spinning on his heel, he leaves me. Shutting the apartment door behind him and walking out of my life like he didn't just drop a bomb on my world.

An ache forms in my chest, and my hand clutches at my heart. I can't breathe, my lungs refuse to work.

I collapse onto the floor, my legs giving out as the weight of Sam's rejection crushes me. The tears come in violent waves, my body shaking with sobs I can't control. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to hold the broken pieces together, but it's useless. I'm shattering.

The door opens behind me, and I don't even look up. I don't care who sees me like this.

"Olivia?" Kelly's voice is soft with concern. She kneels beside me, her hands gentle on my shoulders. "What happened? Where's Sam?"

"He's gone," I choke out between sobs. "He just...left me."

Kelly pulls me into her arms, and I bury my face against her shoulder. She smells like antiseptic and floral perfume — the scent of the nurse who's been caring for my grandfather.

"Shh, it's okay," she whispers, stroking my hair. "Let it out."

I cling to her, my fingers digging into her sweater as I cry harder. The pain feels physical, like someone has hollowed out my chest with a rusty spoon.

"He said I'm free now," I manage between gasping breaths. "Like I wanted to be free of him. Like everything between us meant nothing."

Kelly rocks me, making soothing sounds. "Men can be such fools sometimes."

The floorboards creak, and I hear shuffling footsteps entering the living room. I don't need to look up to know it's Grandpa.

"Is dinner ready yet?" His voice is cheerful, completely oblivious to the scene before him. "I'm starving. Is that pasta I smell?"

More tears fall.

This is what I wanted, isn't it? For Sam to let me go so I could come back to my life.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

But then why does it feel so...bad?

FORTY-SEVEN

Sam

I pour another glass of bourbon, watching the amber liquid swirl against the crystal. The bottle's nearly empty. I can't count how many I've had since yesterday, since I left her.

"You're free." The words tasted like poison. The look on her face when I told her we were done haunts me. She was devastated. That's my fault too. I forced her to be here, to be with me, even when she begged me to let her go. I gave her some kind of sick addiction to me when I'm the worst thing for her. Worse than cigarettes or this bourbon that fills my glass. She's better off without me.

I take another sip, the alcohol no longer burning on its way now. I'm somehow both numb and feeling too much. This must be what purgatory is.

My men are out celebrating. The war is over and the Costellos own New Orleans again. Victory should feel better than this. The Serpents scattered like roaches when the lights came on. Axel is dead. The only missing piece is Kade, still on the run.

We won. So why does it feel like I lost everything?

I down the rest of my bourbon in one gulp. The glass slips from my fingers, rolling across the carpet. I don't bother picking it up.

The door to my office bangs open. John stands there, Adrian and Naz behind him.

"Jesus Christ," John mutters, taking in the disaster zone I've created. Broken glass. Overturned furniture. Papers scattered everywhere.

"Get out." My voice sounds strange even to me. Rough. Hollow.

Adrian steps forward, kicking an empty bottle out of his path. "You look like shit."

"Didn't ask for your opinion." I reach for the bourbon again, but Naz moves faster, snatching it away.

"This isn't helping anyone," Naz says. "Especially not you."

John crosses the room, yanking open the curtains. Sunlight floods in, stabbing my eyes. "Enough of this. You're the head of this family. Act like it."

"She almost died." The words tear from my throat. "And Roman's dead because of me."

Adrian sits across from me, leaning forward. "She killed Axel herself. She's stronger than you think."

"That's not the point." I press my palms against my eyes. "Every person I care about ends up dead or broken. My mother. My father. Now I almost got her killed too."

"So your solution is to drink yourself to death?" John's voice cuts through my self-pity.

"What do you want from me?" I snap.

"Pull yourself together!" John shouts, stomping over until he's leaning over me. "Get up, cugino."

I stare up at him. "You giving orders now?"

"Someone has to. Come on, I have a gift for you."

I let them drag me across town to one of our warehouses. Between the three of them, John is lucky he's my cousin and Adrian and Naz are lucky they're dating my cousins. Because right now, I want to kill the lot of them.

But I wouldn't do that to my family.

My real family, the ones who love me, unlike my aunts and uncles who don't care.

I know they're just looking out for me, but I want nothing more than to hide in the darkness of my home and drink until I can no longer feel the sorrow that's burrowed into my chest.

Naz opens the garage door and John pulls the car through. I step out to the sound of muffled screaming. There's someone strapped to the metal table that's bolted to the floor. Tan and inked skin is on display, and it takes a few blinks for me to realize he's naked. A few more, and I realize who he is.

The bourbon buzz slowly subsides as the pieces come together.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

Kade Marcellus.

"How'd you find him?" I ask, my eyes still focused on the fucker.

Naz shrugs. "Leo has some connections."

Leo De Santis, the illegitimate brother of the Colombo family boss. He and I have grown to be friends, or at least acquaintances who trade favors. Naz grew close to him during his time in New York city, which was the favor I cashed in in turn for helping Leo with a problem he had with his brother. Leo then helped Adrian get me released from prison, so at this point, I'm not sure who owes who.

"You didn't get to kill Axel," John says, slapping a hand on my shoulder. "So we thought this might help."

I walk up to the table, taking in the MC leader, who's bound with a ball gag in his mouth. "Kinky." I chuckle as he tries to shout around the object. "You fucked up," I tell him. "You should have come to an agreement with me when you had the chance. Now? You're going to die."

John comes up beside me, handing me a large knife. I test the object's weight in my hands, liking the feeling of it. Guns are used too frequently in my line of work, but this kill is up close and personal.

"This is for my mother," I growl, raising the knife and slamming it down into his chest, being sure to miss his heart. I don't want this to end too quickly. He screams around the gag, and his body shakes, trying to get free.

I pull the blade from his body, causing him to scream and shake again, before thrusting it down into a new spot. "That's for disrespecting me."

Once more, I pull the blade from his body. Kade is losing blood, and I know I won't have much more time to play before he passes out on me, so I decide to make this one worth it. "And this...this is for sending your men after my girl." I slam the blade down, piercing his heart. It's only seconds before the light in his eyes dims, his life leaving him.

"Better?" John asks behind me.

"Better," I reply. I feel lighter, like somehow justice has been served.

Naz cracks open waters, not my first choice in beverage, since I'd much rather have something stronger. But I take one and settle in one of the rickety lawn chairs that are set out on the concrete.

"You need to go to her." Adrian is the first one to speak.

I laugh bitterly. "What's the point?"

Naz sits across from me, leaning forward. "The point is, you're still alive. And so is she."

"She's better off without me."

Adrian scoffs. "Is that the bullshit you're telling yourself? Did she say she wanted you to leave, or did you just leave?"

I purse my lips. Since when does he have the balls to talk to me like this?

"What do you want me to say? That I'm in love with her? Fine. I love her. And that's exactly why I let her go."

Naz shakes his head, muttering, "For someone so smart, you can be a real idiot sometimes."

"Excuse me?" I glare at him.

He looks up, speaking clearly this time. "You think you're protecting her by pushing her away? That's bullshit, and you know it."

Adrian leans forward. "Sam, we've all been there. Thinking we're cursed. That loving us is a death sentence."

"It is," I insist. "Look at my mother, my father. Everyone close to me ends up dead."

Naz looks frustrated with me when he speaks again. "I almost lost Lana because I was too afraid to fight for her. You remember that? Her father was going to marry her off to that psychopath, and I nearly let it happen because I thought staying away was protecting her."

"That's different?—"

"Is it?" John interrupts. "I almost lost Zoe. Marcus was going to kill her, do you remember that? I'd give anything to go back in time and keep her from being trapped in that shipping container. But I can't. And it doesn't matter, because she's safe now."

Adrian's quiet voice cuts through. "I spent years planning my revenge against your family. Years. And when Madi was in danger, I threw it all away in a heartbeat." He meets my eyes. "Some things are worth the risk, Sam."



I rub my face, feeling the stubble against my palms. "And what if I lose her? What if next time, I'm not fast enough? What if?—"

## Page 91

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"What if you waste the best thing that's ever happened to you because you're too scared to try?" Naz challenges.

The room falls silent. I stare at the plastic bottle gripped in my hands, thinking of Olivia's face when I walked away.

"Love isn't safe," Naz says quietly. "It never has been. But it's the only thing worth fighting for."

I look at these men, my family, who have all risked everything for love. Who have all nearly lost everything for love. And somehow, they're still standing.

Maybe I am being stupid.

FORTY-EIGHT

Olivia

I wipe down the bar counter for what feels like the hundredth time today, polishing the already gleaming surface until my arm aches. Everything's too clean now. Too perfect. The floors shine like they never have before, tables arranged with military precision, not a speck of dust anywhere.

No trace of what happened.

My eyes drift to the spot where Roman fell. Where his blood pooled on these old wooden floors. Now it's just...clean. Like he was never here.

Sam must have sent people to clean up the place while I was in the hospital, because when I returned, it was as if nothing had ever happened here. The place was restored and spotless. Not that it has stopped me from cleaning like a madwoman. Despite not being able to see the damage, I still can't shake it from my mind.

I pause mid-wipe, staring at his empty stool by the corner of the bar. Roman always sat there, watchful, alert. Sometimes annoying with his constant vigilance, but always there. Always protecting me.

Until I decided I knew better.

"It should have been me," I whisper, the words escaping before I can stop them.

If I hadn't been so stubborn, so determined to prove I could handle myself, Roman would still be alive. Sam was right to keep me locked away. The moment I stepped out, everything went to hell.

My hands shake as memories flood back — the fight in this bar, the weight of the gun in my hands, it's empty click when I pulled the trigger, and then the look on Roman's face as Axel dragged the knife across his throat.

And then the shack by the swamp floods my brain with more memories. The feeling of Axel's weight on my body, the way his blood splattered all over me when I shot him.

I grip the edge of the bar as nausea rolls through me. I killed someone. Ended a life with my own hands.

What kind of person does that make me?

I remember the look in Axel's eyes when he realized he was dying. I did that. Me.

The girl who once cried for a week after accidentally stepping on a frog.

Now I'm a killer.

And for what? Sam still left me. Roman's still dead. And I'm still here, scrubbing surfaces that can never truly be clean again.

My phone ringing is the thing that pulls me from my head. My mother's name flashes on the screen, and my insides churn, remembering that I never even told her I was in the hospital. Sam had called her to make sure she knew I was okay. But I never talked to her.

"Hi, Mom." I answer.

"Ohmigod, Olivia! I've been so worried!"

"I'm sorry, I should have—"

"It's okay. I'm just glad you hear your voice." The lack of a guilt trip surprises me.

"How are you doing?"

That simple question causes a flood of emotions. Tears I'd thought I'd run out of begin to pour from my eyes and I heave a sob.

"Oh, Livvy." My mom's voice is gentle, unlike her. It sends me back in time to when I was a little girl and she was the one I ran to. Suddenly, I'm desperate for her to wrap her arms around me and tell me everything's going to be okay.

"Tell me what happened," she prods, and so I do. I tell her everything, save for witnessing Sam murder someone. I tell her I fell for someone I shouldn't have. That I didn't heed her warnings, and I let him get under my skin.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

I tell her about Roman, and how he died for me.

I tell her about what almost happened in that shack in the Bayou.

I tell her about how my heart shattered when Sam left me.

“I’m sorry, Mom. You were right; I never should have moved here. If I would have listened to you, I’d still be home and safe and—”

“No,” she interrupts, startling me. “I wasn’t right, Olivia. I was scared. I’ve always been scared. But not you. What you did was brave. I’m sorry I didn’t see that before.”

“How... how is this brave?”

“Because it would’ve been easier to stay here. It would’ve been easy to stay with Rhett, even though you didn’t love him. And I’m not naive, Olivia. I know you never loved him. I think I just wanted to pretend you did because I wanted you to be happy.”

A new wave of tears builds as I listen to my mother.

“Sometimes, love is hard. Not because you have to change yourself or force it to work. Love is hard because you have to face yourself. Your deepest fear. You have to be vulnerable. I’ve never been able to be vulnerable...with anyone. That’s why it didn’t work with your father. And Richard and I are happy, but we’re not in love. It sounds like you found something bigger than I ever have.”

“How can you tell?” I ask.

“When he called me...” She sighs thoughtfully. “He was so upset with himself, apologizing to me for not protecting you. He was putting himself through hell over this situation. And I can hear it in your voice too. You only do that when you truly love someone. So, do you?”

I think about it for a long moment. Replaying her words.

Do I love Sam?

I’ve tried so hard not to. Pushing him away or keeping him at a distance all in an attempt to not fall for him. Afraid that he’s too much like my father.

But he’s not my father. My father didn’t care about my mother the way Sam cares about me. He could’ve chased her to Montreal, he could’ve fought for her. But he didn’t. But Sam came for me. And then he pushed me away. But not because he doesn’t love me. Because he’s scared.

“Yeah,” I finally say.

“Good. Then fight for him.”

And for the first time in my life, I actually think my mom has good advice.

FORTY-NINE

Sam

The stone feels cold beneath my fingertips as I trace my mother's name. Giulia Costello. Eighteen years gone, and sometimes the wound feels as fresh as yesterday.

"I miss you," I whisper to the marble slab, my voice barely audible over the distant sounds of mourners gathering for Roman's funeral one row down.

The cemetery stretches around me, a city of the dead with its above-ground tombs gleaming white in the New Orleans sun. I've funded everything for Roman's service — the best casket, the finest plot, flowers covering every surface. Money can't bring him back, but it's the only way I know how to shoulder this weight.

Roman died protecting what was mine. What I failed to protect.

My mind flashes to images of Olivia in that shack in the Bayou. So much like my mother all those years ago. The parallels claw at my insides — a small room, the smell of water nearby, the sound of desperate breathing.

But this time, the ending was different.

This time, she survived.

I close my eyes, remembering the moment I burst through that door, expecting to find her broken body. Instead, she stood there, gun in hand, Axel's blood pooling at her feet. She'd saved herself when I couldn't reach her in time.

John's hand lands on my shoulder, breaking me out of my thoughts, a silent question in the gesture.

"I'm good," I tell him, though we both know it's a lie.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

We approach the funeral attendees gathered around Roman's tomb.

Roman's mother clutching a handkerchief, his younger brother stone-faced with grief. Their eyes meet mine briefly; no accusation there, just shared pain. I've made sure they'll never want for anything again.

"He was a good man," John says beside me.

"The best." My voice cracks.

The minister begins his eulogy, but something, someone, catches my eye. Olivia stands at the back, amongst the mourners. She wears a simple black dress and her hair hangs in long waves. Dark shades cover her blue eyes, and I find myself longing to see them.

Sorrow bubbles in my chest. Not just for Roman, but for what I've lost with Olivia.

I've spent my life believing love makes you weak, makes you vulnerable. My mother's death taught me that. But watching Olivia fight, watching her survive what my mother couldn't — maybe I've been wrong all along.

Maybe it's not about keeping her safe by pushing her away. Maybe it's about being strong enough to stand beside her, come what may.

The minister drones on, but I can't focus. My mind drifts between the eulogy and Olivia, her presence a beacon amidst the sea of anguish.



My gaze slips back to Olivia, watching as she wipes away a tear, and I want nothing more than to reach for her, to tell her everything will be alright.

But I hold back, waiting for the right moment. I need to see her in this space — at this funeral — before making my move.

When the service ends, mourners shuffle forward to pay their respects. As they approach the tomb, Olivia hangs back. Her eyes scan the crowd before settling on me.

I feel exposed under her gaze, like she can see straight through my carefully constructed walls. The moment feels electric; a pulse of unspoken words thrums between us.

Finally, she steps forward, and my heart races as she approaches me with an air of cautious resolve. The crowd thins around us until it's just us two amidst a chorus of muffled voices.

"Sam." Her voice breaks through the noise like glass shattering.

"Olivia." It comes out rougher than intended.

Showered and dressed in a fresh suit, I feel like myself again as I walk into Gino's. I'm just missing one thing...

"I wanted to talk?—"

"You're an idiot," she interrupts, not letting me finish. I can't help but laugh at her directness. She's also not wrong. I've come to realize, I am an idiot.

"I've been hearing that a lot lately."

"Good. Then maybe you'll actually listen."

Her eyes flash with determination, the same fire I saw when she stood over Axel's body. She's a survivor. A fighter. And I pushed her away.

"You're not leaving me because you want to protect me," Olivia says, her voice steady despite the slight tremble in her hands. "You're leaving because you're scared."

The truth of her words hits harder than any bullet. I open my mouth to argue, but she cuts me off.

"Life is scary and impossible, Sam. If we run from everything we fear, we'll never truly live." She steps closer, close enough that I can smell her perfume. "Being together is a risk. We can't predict the future, but avoiding happiness out of fear is silly."

My heart hammers against my ribs. She's right. I've spent my whole life calculating risks, making plans, controlling every variable. But with Olivia, I've never been in control.

"I love you," she says, her voice breaking slightly on the words.

I close the distance between us in two steps, taking her face in my hands. "Stop," I whisper, my thumbs brushing her cheeks. "I love you too."

Relief floods her features, and I press my forehead against hers.

"I'm so sorry for being stupid," I murmur. "I never should have ended things. I thought I was doing what was right and protecting you, but now I see that I was wrong." My voice catches. "I was just so scared because you almost died, and I can't stop thinking about what could have happened."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

Olivia's hands come up to cover mine, warm and alive. "But it didn't happen," she says firmly, grabbing my hand and placing it over her chest. I can feel her heart thrumming. "Feel that? I'm right here. I'm alive."

I feel her heartbeat beneath my palm, strong and steady. It grounds me in this moment, in the reality that she's here, alive and fighting for us.

"I've been so lost without you," I admit, my voice rough with emotion. "These past days...I couldn't sleep, couldn't think straight. All I could see was you, bleeding in my arms."

"Then stop seeing what could have happened and see what's happening now."

Her eyes hold mine, those beautiful blue depths that saw through my walls from the beginning. I brush my thumb across her lower lip, feeling her breath catch.

"I'm not going anywhere, Sam," she whispers. "Not unless you push me away again."

"Never," I promise, lowering my mouth to hers.

The kiss starts gentle, a reaffirmation, but quickly transforms into something hungrier. My hands slide down her back, pulling her flush against me as she arches into my touch. The taste of her, sweet apples and citrus, floods my senses.

Olivia's fingers tangle in my hair, tugging slightly as she deepens the kiss. A groan escapes me as her body presses against mine, igniting a fire that consumes all rational thought.

I pull back, gripping her hand in mine. "Come on, let me take you home."

We've barely made it through my front door before Olivia's lips are back on mine.

"I need you," she breathes against my lips, her hands already working at the buttons of my shirt.

I lift her, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her to my office.

"I need you more," I murmur against her neck, feeling her pulse race beneath my lips.

I capture her mouth again as my hands squeeze her ass. She arches into my touch, a soft sound escaping her that drives me wild.

Lowering her onto the desk, I sweep papers to the floor with one arm. Olivia's eyes widen, darkening with desire as I position her at the edge, her legs dangling.

I push her shirt up to expose her stomach, pressing my lips to her skin, trailing kisses down the soft curve of her belly. "I need to taste you."

Her breath catches as my fingers tug at the elastic of her leggings. She lifts her hips, helping me slide them down her legs along with her underwear. The sight of her spread out on the desk, half-clothed and completely mine, sends a surge of possessive hunger through me.

I drop to my knees before her, hooking her legs over my shoulders. Her skin is impossibly soft against my rough palms as I spread her thighs wider.

"Sam," she breathes, propping herself up on her elbows to watch me.

I hold her gaze as I lower my mouth to her, my first taste making us both groan. Her

head falls back, a breathless curse escaping her lips as my tongue explores her. I take my time, savoring her, repeating what makes her thighs tremble against my shoulders.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, guiding me where she needs me most. I follow her lead, circling my tongue just right until her breathing turns ragged.

"Don't stop," she pants, her hips rising to meet my mouth.

I grip her thighs tighter, holding her in place as I increase the pressure. Her body tenses, trembling on the edge. I slide one hand up to pin her hips to the desk as I double my efforts, determined to watch her fall apart.

When she comes, it's with my name on her lips, her body arching beautifully off the desk. I don't let up, working her through each wave until she's shaking and pushing at my shoulders, oversensitive and whimpering.

I press a final kiss to her inner thigh, looking up at her flushed face and dazed eyes. Her chest rises and falls rapidly, her hair a wild halo around her head.

Standing slowly, my eyes never leave Olivia's flushed face. She looks utterly wrecked already, sprawled across the desk with her chest heaving and her lips parted. The sight of her like this — wanting me, needing me — makes my control snap.

"I need to be inside you," I growl, unbuckling my belt with urgent fingers.

Olivia pushes herself up on her elbows, eyes darkening as she watches me free myself. "Yes," she breathes, reaching for me.

I position myself between her thighs, running my length through her wetness. The sensation makes us both groan. I capture her mouth in a bruising kiss as I push inside

her, swallowing her gasp as I fill her completely.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

"Fuck," I mutter against her lips, holding still for a moment to savor the feeling of her around me. "You feel so good, baby."

Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me deeper. "Move," she commands, her nails digging into my shoulders.

I obey, withdrawing almost completely before driving back into her. The desk creaks beneath us as I set a relentless pace, my hands gripping her hips hard enough to bruise. Olivia meets each thrust as her back arches off the desk.

"Sam," she moans, her eyes locked with mine. "Don't stop."

I slide one hand under her, lifting her slightly to change the angle. Her reaction is immediate as a sharp cry escapes her when I hit that spot that makes her walls clench around me.

"Right there," she gasps, her fingers tangling in my hair.

The pressure builds at the base of my spine as I drive into her harder, faster. The sight of her taking me, her body yielding to mine, pushes me toward the edge. But I'm determined to make her come again before I lose control.

I slip my hand between us, my thumb finding her sensitive bundle of nerves. Her reaction is electric, her body tensing, her inner walls gripping me tighter.

"Come for me again," I demand, my voice rough with need. "I want to feel you squeeze my cock."

I continue thrusting into Olivia, our bodies moving in perfect rhythm. Her eyes lock with mine, hazy with pleasure but so present, so alive. The connection between us transcends the physical — it's raw, real, undeniable.

"I'm close," she gasps, pulling me closer to kiss me.

"Come with me," I urge against her lips, my voice strained as I fight to hold back my own release. I want to feel her fall apart around me one more time.

Her body tightens, trembling on the edge. I slide my hand between us again, circling my thumb against her. The added sensation pushes her over, and she shatters beneath me, crying out my name. The sight of her coming undone and the feeling of her pulsing does me in.

I bury my face in her neck as my own orgasm crashes through me, groaning her name against her skin as I empty myself inside her. For a moment, we stay locked together, breathing heavily, our hearts pounding in sync.

"I love you," I whisper against her neck, the words slipping out naturally now. "I love you so much it terrifies me."

Olivia cradles my face in her hands, guiding me up to look at her. Her eyes shine with tears and something else — something warm and bright that makes my chest ache.

"I love you too," she says, her voice steady and sure.

I pepper her with kisses before resting my forehead on hers. "I promise I'm done running. Whatever comes next, we face it together."

Her smile is radiant, healing something broken inside me. "Together," she agrees, sealing the promise with a kiss.



## EPILOGUE

Olivia

Six months later

Friday night at Gino's has never looked better. We're packed with customers, and the warm glow of success wraps around me like a blanket.

A lot has changed in six months. For one, I'm no longer a captive of the city's mafia boss. No, I'm his girlfriend now. I smile at the thought.

"Another round for our table, boss lady?" Naz calls over the buzz of conversation. Our crew has taken up a whole section of the bar every Friday night for the last few months. It started when Sam wouldn't leave the bar when I was working evenings, and now it's become a thing.

"Coming right up," I say, grabbing fresh glasses.

I glance across the room to where Sam sits with Adrian, their heads bent together in conversation. Even when discussing business, Sam's eyes find mine every few minutes, a silent check-in that makes my heart flutter.

"You're staring again," Lana teases, sliding onto a barstool beside Madi.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I laugh, pouring their usual drinks.

Zoe joins them. "Your grandfather's killing me at cards again."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:04 am*

I look over to where Grandpa Gino sits in his usual corner booth, shuffling a deck with surprising dexterity. He's having one of his good days — they've become more frequent lately, thanks to a new medical trial Sam got him into. Nurse Kelly sits at his side, sipping a lemon seltzer and watching him swindle anyone brave enough to play against him.

Chuckling, I shake my head. "I'm not surprised."

Once I've placed the drinks for the guys on a tray, I head over to their table, handing them out. Sam catches my hand, pulling me into his lap.

"How's my girl?"

"Happy," I say simply, because it's true.

I used to think I was destined to repeat my mother's mistakes — falling for a dangerous man, ending up broken-hearted and alone. I believed Sam was cut from the same cloth as my father.

I was wrong.

We're writing our own story, Sam and I. Creating something new from the ashes of our pasts. The ghosts that haunted us both have finally found rest.

"What are you thinking about?" Sam murmurs against my ear.

"That we changed the ending," I reply, turning to kiss him softly.

"I have one more page, I think." He straightens me up so I'm standing again, and then he drops to the floor on one knee.

My breath catches in my throat as he pulls a box from his pocket, opening the black velvet to reveal a stunning diamondset on a diamond encrusted gold band, looking like something out of a fairytale.

I stand frozen, the sounds of the bar fading to a distant buzz as Sam kneels before me. My heart hammers against my ribs, and for a moment, I forget how to breathe.

"Olivia Marchese," Sam says, his voice steady despite the vulnerability in his eyes. "When you walked into my life — or rather, when I dragged you into it — I had no idea you would become my everything."

The bar has gone completely silent. I feel everyone's eyes on us, but all I can see is Sam.

"I know this isn't the perfect love story. We didn't meet like normal people." He smiles. "But somehow, in the middle of all that chaos, we found something real."

My vision blurs with tears as he continues.

"You saw the worst parts of me and stayed. You taught me that love isn't a weakness, it's a strength. That family isn't just about blood, but about who you choose. I want to choose you, every day, for the rest of my life. I want to build something that's ours, something better than what either of us came from."

I'm aware of Grandpa Gino watching from his booth, his eyes clear and present in this moment. Of Madi, Lana, and Zoe holding their breath. Of Joey behind the bar, grinning like a fool.

"Olivia Marchese, will you marry me?"

The question hangs in the air between us. Six months ago, I was his captive. Now I'm standing at the edge of forever with a man who's seen me at my worst and loved me anyway.

"Yes," I whisper, then louder, "Yes!"

Sam slides the ring onto my finger, then rises to his feet and pulls me into his arms. The bar erupts in cheers as his lips find mine, sealing our promise with a kiss that tastes like new beginnings.

We're barely through the door back at his house when his mouth crashes against mine, desperate and demanding. I moan as his hands find the sides of my dress, bunching up the fabric until he can pull it over my head. The cool air hits my skin, but I'm burning everywhere he touches.

"Been wanting to do this all night," Sam growls against my neck, his teeth grazing my pulse point. "Seeing you with my ring on your finger... You're mine, Olivia. Mine to own, mine to worship."

I gasp as his hands cup my breasts through my lace bra. "Then worship me already," I challenge.

Sam's eyes darken. He fists my panties, ripping the fabric from my body with one rough tug, making me whimper. "Always a little brat, aren't you?"

I don't get a chance to answer as his mouth swallows any words I might say. He kisses me like a starving man, and I lose myself in his lips.

"Mine," he growls, biting down on my shoulder, hard enough to mark me.

I cry out, the pain blending with pleasure as his fingers find me, testing how ready I am for him. When he feels that I'm already soaking wet, he groans.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:04 am*

"Please," I beg, wrapping one leg around his waist in an attempt to get more friction. He grabs my other one, hoisting me up so my legs are wrapped around him while he walks to the sitting room.

Dropping me on the couch, he hovers his body over me, still peppering my skin with kisses while I writhe beneath him.

"Please," I beg again. "Sam, I need you."

Sam doesn't make me wait any longer. He frees himself from his pants and drives into me with one powerful thrust. The force of it knocks the breath from my lungs.

"Fuck," he hisses, his fingers digging into my thighs hard enough to bruise. "So tight."

He sets a punishing pace, with each thrust harder than the last. I want more. I want everything.

"Harder," I demand.

Sam's response is to slam into me with renewed force, his mouth capturing mine in a bruising kiss. I taste blood — mine or his, I'm not sure.

The intensity builds as he shifts angles, hitting that perfect spot inside me. I'm so close already, my body tensing around him.

"That's it," Sam growls in my ear. "Come for me, Olivia. Let me feel you."

His thumb finds my clit, circling roughly in time with his thrusts. The dual sensation pushes me over the edge, and I scream his name as waves of pleasure crash through me.

My back arches as he grips my hips and continues his relentless pace, pushing me through the waves of ecstasy until I'm screaming.

"Sam," I gasp. "Oh God, Sam..."

His eyes lock with mine, dark and possessive. Sweat glistens on his forehead, his muscles tensing with each powerful thrust.

"You feel so good," he growls, his grip tightening on my hips. "So fucking perfect."

I wrap my legs higher around his waist, changing the angle. Sliding deeper, he hits that spot again that makes me see stars. I'm building toward another climax already, my body responding to him like it was made for this — for him.

"Don't stop," I beg, reaching up to pull him closer. "Please don't stop."

Sam leans down, his chest pressing against mine as he captures my mouth in a searing kiss. The new position creates delicious friction against my oversensitive clit, and I moan into his mouth.

"Never," he promises against my lips. "Never gonna stop loving you."

His pace quickens, becoming erratic. I know he's close, and I want to fall over the edge with him.

"You look so good taking my cock, baby." He slips his hand between us, his thumb circling my clit with just the right pressure. "I want you to come around my cock again, Olivia. Can you do that, baby girl?"

"Yes," I pant. Sam leans in, capturing one of my nipples between his teeth, and that's all it takes to send me spiraling again, waves of pleasure washing over me as I cry out his name.

My release triggers his, and Sam thrusts once, then twice more, before burying himself deep inside me with a guttural groan. I feel him pulsing, filling me as his body shudders against mine.

We stay connected, breathing heavily, our bodies slick with sweat. His weight presses me into the couch, but I don't want him to move. I run my fingers through his damp hair, savoring the aftershocks still rippling through both of us.

Sam holds me close as we catch our breath, his heart pounding against mine. After a moment, he lifts me gently from the couch, carrying me to our bedroom. He lays me on the bed with a tenderness that makes my heart ache.

"I love you," he whispers, brushing hair from my face.

"I love you too."

We curl together under the sheets, my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat slow to a steady rhythm. His fingers trace lazy patterns on my bare back while I stare at the beautiful ring that adorns my finger.

I'm not sure what comes next for us. But I do know that we're no longer held down by parents and our pasts. We've closed that book, and now we're writing a new one. And the best part is, we get to choose our own ending.