



Control

Author: *Vivian Flame*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: Some loves are beautiful. This one is deadly.

She saw something she shouldn't have. He was supposed to kill her. Instead, he became obsessed.

Daniela's art was her escape, and she was enjoying her life until one day she witnessed a mafia arms deal in an abandoned warehouse.

Now, she's caught in the crosshairs of Remo Callegari, the syndicate's most ruthless enforcer.

He kidnaps her to keep her safe – at least that's what he tells himself. But his obsession runs deeper than protection, and her defiance only makes him want her more.

When Daniela discovers Remo's dark connection to her parents' murders, she must choose: destroy the man who is now in control of her body and possibly her heart or destroy him for what he did.

What will she choose?

Editor's Note: This book was written to appeal to readers who enjoy:

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Prologue

Daniela

I don't know how I got to this point. I don't know why I keep coming back.

It's not like I have much of a choice, though, do I?

I can't pretend I don't feel it. The pull. The heat. The desire.

The way he touches me...like he owns every part of me, like he's taking something but also giving something, something I can't name.

When he looks at me, there's a coldness to it, a depth like he sees everything I try to hide.

Running doesn't change anything. It doesn't stop the hunger. That primal, animalistic hunger to be taken. Owned. Possessed.

I hear his voice in my ear, and it makes my skin crawl in all the wrong ways. And yet, I crave it. The sting. The fix. The way he fucks with my mind and body until I'm not sure where I end and he begins.

It's funny how easily we can become addicted to chaos.

I knew that from the start. I still know it. But somehow, it doesn't matter.

Because when it comes down to it, we will do anything to satiate the hunger with something that makes us feel alive for a second, even if it's just an illusion.

Chapter 1

Daniela

Nights like this devour the city whole.

Brooklyn, at this hour, is like a beast, restless and cold. Shadows in the dark stretch and twist, muffling sounds, swallowing light. Nothing sleeps.

It's my favorite time to be out.

I step into the street, the city's pulse tugging at me. Distant sirens wail, voices blur into echoes, and a car horn in traffic slices through the air. My boots scrape the pavement as I walk, but any sound I make is swallowed by the noise.

I mutter to myself, but it's more of a reflex than a real thought. I'm alone, and I don't need anyone to answer.

The music in my headphones pounds and syncs with my heartbeat, and every thump is a reminder that I'm still alone here, still moving. Still breathing.

The city has a way of making you feel, even when everything else is trying to tear you apart. Maybe that's why I come out at this time. It doesn't care. It doesn't need to be pretty, kind, or safe. It just exists. And somehow, it lets me exist too.

Arriving at my spot for the night, I let my hand take over. The brush moves on autopilot, sweeping across the rough surface of the wall. Colors burst under my touch—orange, blue, red—as I try to drown out the emptiness. As I try to patch the

hollow spaces where everything else has rotted away.

This wall is no different from me. No one notices it. People pass by, their eyes sliding over it like it doesn't exist. But I see it. I see something worth saving.

I pause, my brush hovering in mid-air. There's a crack running through the concrete, jagged and deep, like a scar that never healed. It's been there for years, but tonight, it catches me and holds me.

"You know," I whisper to it, "you're kind of like me. A little broken."

The crack doesn't answer—of course, it doesn't. So I keep painting. Maybe if I cover it up, it won't matter anymore.

When my parents died, the world didn't stop. No grand gestures, no cosmic pauses. Just an empty black hole where their lives used to be. I tried to fill it with scraps—memories as well as stories I spun to make sense of it all. But the hole wasn't satisfied. It ate everything. Pieces of me and things I didn't even realize could be lost, all swallowed without a trace.

Now, the only way I know to push back against the emptiness is to leave something behind. To take blank walls and turn them into something alive, something loud, something no one can walk past without noticing. Maybe if I create enough, I'll finally feel like I've given them something back. Or maybe that's just another lie.

Either way, the brush moves, and for tonight, it's enough.

The warehouse smells like rust, mildew, and regret. It's the kind of stale air that seeps into your skin. A forgotten place in a forgotten part of the city. But here, in this hollowed-out space, I'm free. Free of the weight of my failures, free of the chains that wrap around me everywhere else. At least while I'm painting.

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The wall towers over me, and I welcome how small it makes me feel. Insignificant. Invisible. That's the trick to surviving in a world like this: stay small enough to disappear.

But then, suddenly, everything changes.

The screech of tires tears through the stillness, sharp as a blade slicing skin. My brush freezes mid-stroke. My pulse skips, then slams against my ribs like it's trying to escape.

"Nobody's stupid enough to come here at this hour," I mutter under my breath.

I pull my headphones off, and the silence that follows is suffocating. It presses on, and for a moment, I forget how to breathe.

Then I see them.

Two vans, the engines humming low and ominous, the windows blacked out. Behind them, there was a polished and gleaming sleek black SUV, the kind of car that had been custom-built to scream both money and menace.

Three men step out and start to unload something from one van and shift it into the other. From where I'm standing, hidden in the deepest shadows of this decrepit building, I can't make out what it is. But I don't need to see it to know. Guys like that only move products in the dead of night for three reasons: drugs, weapons, or people.

I stay frozen, watching, my heartbeat pounding in my ears. My fingers still itch to

grab the brush and finish the mural, but I know better. I've seen enough of this world to recognize its danger, even if it's only a glimpse.

From the angle I'm at, I'm cloaked in the dark, and there's no way they can spot me. I picked this place for its shadows and the way they cling to the walls like a second skin. It's perfect for my work.

Perfect for staying invisible.

The city is my canvas. Every abandoned building, alley, and cracked wall is a story waiting to be told. By sunrise, my mark will be here, too, for anyone who cares enough to notice. A bloody dagger clenched in a bleeding hand—the signature I leave behind. My calling card.

It's reckless, I know. Dangerous even. But the risk is the point. It's the thrill of making something loud in a city that would rather I stay quiet.

I don't plan on stopping anytime soon too. It's not about defiance. Or maybe it is. If I'm being honest, I'm not ready to admit why I do it. Maybe it's something darker, something restless inside me. A gnawing emptiness that keeps dragging me back to these empty streets at night like a moth drawn to the flame, even though I know full well how it ends.

My fingers twitch, itching to finish the mural, but I can't. Not with them so close. I stay hidden, my breath shallow as I watch from a distance.

I can't make out what they're saying, and frankly, I don't care to. It's better not to know.

I'm not stupid. I know what will happen if they spot me here...and it's not a slap on the wrist. It's a bullet.

They're arguing now, and it's heated. I bet someone's night is about to take a sharp turn south.

Then, a car door slams. The sound is like a trigger, and the shift in the air is immediate as a figure steps out of the shadows.

I don't need to hear a name. I know who it is.

Remo Callegari.

I know that face. Not from meeting him—God, no—but from whispers, headlines, and the kind of stories that make people lock their doors at night. He's the mafia's enforcer, the kind of man you don't just cross. You don't even look at him wrong if you value breathing.

Tall, sharp-suited, and carved from stone, it's as if humanity's been stripped from him.

Every step he takes is deliberate and calculated. The sound of his shoes against the concrete is barely heard, but it cuts through everything. He moves toward the table piled high with crates filled with guns. Big ones. Military-grade. The kind you can't just buy at any shop.

My chest tightens. This is looking more and more like a bad situation.

One of the men cracks a joke after their argument, and the others laugh. The sound of their laughter shatters the quiet, but Remo doesn't even flinch or join in. His eyes stay focused on the crates and the men as if he's dissecting every move they make. Then, he flicks his wrist, a simple gesture, and another man in a leather jacket steps forward and cracks open one of the other sealed crates.

The gleam of even bigger rifles under the dim light makes my breath catch.

“It’s all there, Boss. I told you I wouldn’t screw up this time.”

“How kind of you to clean up your mess after losing me millions, Davide,” Remo says, his voice flat.

The guy stumbles over his words but tries to cover it up with a shaky laugh. “Look, I’m sorry about that, okay? I swear. But my girl...she was in the hospital. I had to put down money to keep her and the baby alive. It wasn’t good, Boss.”

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Remo's eyes narrow. "A ten million dollar deposit?"

"No, no. It didn't all go to me!" Davide's voice cracks as he rushes his words. "I had to pay customs...and Juan. They all took their cuts. And after the cops busted us, we couldn't sell everything. Getting buyers on the backend wasn't easy. We were fucked."

Remo doesn't say anything right away. He just stands there, hands behind his back, his face blank, like he's heard this bullshit a hundred times before. Then, slowly, he starts circling Davide.

I don't know why I stay. Maybe I'm a masochist, or maybe I just can't look away from the inevitable. Either way, I don't move. I stay right where I am, watching.

Remo stops behind him, his hand landing heavily on the man's shoulder.

"Oh, Davide, you're really lucky, aren't you?" His voice is calm, almost friendly. "The minute I heard what Juan did, I didn't even wait for him to explain himself or beg for mercy. I just shot him right between the eyes."

"I know, Boss. And I'm grateful. I swear on my mother, I'll pay you back every cent. I'll work for you until I die. I owe you my life," the man named Davide says, stumbling over his words.

"That you do, my friend," Remo replies, his voice almost teasing now. He steps closer and taps the man's face like they're old friends. "Why don't you go and make sure it's all there so we can finish up? It's been a long day."

The man swallows. “Sure thing, Boss.”

Davide doesn't make it three steps before the sharp sound of four gunshots cuts through the air. His body jerks, and the back of his skull explodes, spraying blood and brain matter across the wall. The rest of the crew? They don't flinch. They don't even blink. They just keep moving the goods like it's another day at the office.

Another job, another dead body.

I want to say I'm not surprised, at least not in the way I should be. I've heard the rumors about the mafia's dirty deals, the stories about people who just vanish. But this? This is my first time seeing it, watching someone drop like they weren't even human, just another casualty. A man who was about to have a kid. A man with a story, a future.

I want to feel sorry for him. I really do. But I can't afford that luxury. Not when I'm stuck here, praying I don't get caught myself.

I need to move. Now.

Fear finally catches up with me, and my brain screams at my body to run. I take a step back, trying to make as little noise as possible, but then it happens. My foot catches on a loose chunk of concrete. The scrape is loud enough that it echoes in the empty building.

Their movements and everything freezes.

“Chi c'è?” Who's there?

Shit.

Remo's head snaps in my direction, and for a second, the world tilts. His eyes lock on mine—blue, cold, and unrelenting.

Run.

I spin around and bolt, my boots slamming against the concrete, the rhythm frantic. Then shouts behind me erupt—orders barked like commands. Footsteps follow—heavy, fast, closing in.

I don't get far before a hand clamps around my arm and yanks me back like a ragdoll. I scream, but it dies in my throat when I'm spun around to face a man built like a brick wall.

"Let go!" I thrash, but he doesn't budge, dragging me back toward the others as if I weigh nothing. My pulse is a drumbeat of panic.

Remo steps forward, his expression unreadable. Just a calculating coldness, like he's already mapped out every move I could possibly make—and countered it.

"Who are you?"

The words are soft, but they cut deeper than a shout. My mouth dries up instantly, my throat locking like it's forgotten how to work. I can only stare at him, my heart hammering against my ribs so violently that I wonder if it'll crack.

He takes another step. "Answer me."

"I was painting," I croak out. The words are barely audible, swallowed by the roaring in my ears. I know better than to tell him my name. Names have weight, and in the wrong hands, they'll crush you. Especially here. Especially with someone like him. A name is a death sentence if you aren't careful who you give it to.

It's a street-smart lesson you pick up fast—or you don't live long enough to learn it. People disappear over things they could've walked away from. I'm not about to be one of them.

“Painting?” His eyes narrow, cutting into me like scalpels, stripping me layer by layer. “Here? Of all places?”

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“I didn’t know anyone would be here—”

“You didn’t know?” His voice is quiet, cutting like a blade. “That makes you either incredibly stupid...or a terrible liar.”

I flinch as he leans in, the gun in his holster catching the light. He’s so close that I can feel the cold press of his stare.

“I didn’t see anything. I—I’ll leave, vanish. You’ll never hear from me again, I s—swear,” I stammer.

“Swear?” He repeats the word like it’s foreign, rolling it off his tongue with disdain. “You think I believe that?”

My fear crawls up my throat, choking me. I feel small and pathetic, but I can’t stop begging. “Please. I’m just an artist who paints around the city at night. That’s all.”

“You lie poorly,” he snarls.

“I’m not lying!”

Fuck. Did I just yell at him?

“I—I—I mean, I didn’t see anything,” I stammer.

Of all the stupid things I could’ve done, yelling at the man who’s likely a minute away from blowing my brains out? Brilliant.

He tilts his head, his eyes drilling into me. His face is a mask, unreadable and cold, but the silence that follows is unnerving. It goes on for too long, and I can practically see the gears turning in his mind as he contemplates one of a million ways to dismember me.

“I—”

“Shut up.”

His voice isn't loud, but it cuts through the air like a whip. I bite my lip hard, the metallic tang of blood pooling on my tongue.

My mouth snaps shut before I can make things worse, though I doubt that's even possible now.

He gestures, and the man holding me shoves me forward. I stumble, nearly crashing into him. But he doesn't move. He doesn't flinch, even as the space between us buzzes with unease like a live wire ready to snap.

“Boss, I can tell she's not someone who would be missed,” one of the men mutters. “We can just take care of her.”

Remo's eyes stay fixed on mine. “And if she's not?”

The silence speaks louder than words after Remo's question. A breath held for too long.

Remo exhales, slow and measured, his jaw tightening. He tilts his head, his eyes raking over me. “What am I supposed to do with you?”

“Please, I promise I won't say anything. Just let me go,” I plead.

His voice is calm when he replies, “And I’m supposed to trust the word of someone who thinks vandalizing public property is acceptable? Doesn’t exactly scream model citizen, does it?”

“I swear,” I rasp.

“Do you?”

The gun is in his hand before I even register the movement. One second, his hand is empty. The next, the cold barrel is pressing against my forehead.

“No, wait!”

But it’s too late. He pulls the trigger. A loud bang echoes in the air.

Chapter 2

Daniela

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I squeeze my eyes shut, every nerve bracing for the impact. But it never comes. Slowly, I blink. No pain, no blood—nothing.

I'm alive. He shot the wall behind me.

Remo steps back, lowering the gun with a smirk that doesn't reach his eyes. For a fleeting moment, something flickers there. Amusement? Contempt? It's gone before I can name it, replaced by the same impenetrable cold. He tilts his head like he's weighing my worth and coming up short.

Relief floods through me, and I slump forward.

Then, he draws nearer, making his presence felt. His scent wraps itself around me. It's dark and woodsy in nature, almost suffocating. I like it.

"Don't ever come back here," he says, his voice flat. "You won't be so lucky next time."

"I won't," I whisper, my voice trembling and barely audible.

His eyes linger on me for a beat too long, like he's memorizing my face. Then he turns, his coat sweeping behind him like a shadow. "Take her outside till we are done here. Don't hurt her."

The man gripping my arm drags me out of the warehouse without a word. The cold night air slaps my face, sharp and bitter. It feels too clean, too real after the suffocating weight of the inside. I'm alive...for now.

They toss me against the side of a rusted garbage can. My knees slam into the gravel, the sting pulling a grunt from my throat. I don't look back at the warehouse. I don't even lift my head. My teeth chatter as I crouch, trying to keep my breathing steady.

"Stay down like that," one of them mutters, lighting a cigarette. "Don't move till we're gone."

His figure is sharp in the dim light, smoke curling lazily around his head like some unholy crown. I press my palms against the ground, the gravel biting into my skin as I force myself to stay still. This isn't a place for pride. It's a place for survival.

The crunch of boots on gravel snaps me out of my spiraling thoughts.

How the hell did I end up here? So much for being the fearless, vandalizing vigilante of the night.

If I'd just kept my ass at home, I'd be asleep right now, wrapped in blankets instead of fear. But no, I had to chase whatever twisted part of me needed this. And now I'm stuck in this nightmare I didn't sign up for.

From the ground, I can't make out what they're doing. It looked like they were just getting started when I spotted them earlier, so I wasn't expecting them to be finished anytime soon.

I try to keep still and think happy thoughts. You know, the kinds of memories that might make me feel better about the mess I'm in. But nothing comes. Who was I kidding? Happy memories are for people who don't have shit lives. People who have friends, family, neighbors, and loved ones. Not people like me.

Estranged from everyone, I was raised by an alcoholic aunt who took out her anger on life by punishing me whenever it suited her. Like I was the problem, not the fact

that she couldn't close her legs for any Tom, Dick, and Harry who'd steal from her once their "relationship" ran dry.

People like me? We survive alone. My aunt died in her own vomit the night I came home from my high school graduation party. I didn't even get to go to her funeral. Yeah, lucky me, my parents set aside my college fund before they died. I was ten when my aunt came home one day, cold as hell, and told me they were gone. Car accident. Ran into the ocean. And that's it.

I never got to mourn them. I never even saw their bodies. Until today, I haven't even shed a tear.

The whole thing still feels like a bad joke. I still hope every damn day that I'll wake up from this nightmare and find them again, alive. Like everything was just a bad dream. But, as I've learned the hard way, I don't get those kinds of wishes.

We don't get happy memories or nice anniversaries. Even our fucking relationships end in nothing but despair because we weren't made for happiness.

People like me? We work shitty jobs with shitty bosses because life just can't give us a break. We don't get hope. And that's how it is.

I'm still fighting to stay steady against the rough gravel that's digging into my palms and knees when the sound of boots on gravel knocks me out of the spiral of my thoughts.

I glance up, barely catching the silhouette before he steps into view. There he is. Remo. Wrapped in black like the king of darkness with his hands tucked in his coat pockets and a cigar hanging from his lips. The ember at the end is the only thing that shows me his face.

The wind blows through his hair, but his expression stays as cold as ice. The men around me straighten up as soon as they see him. The cigarette guy drops his cigarette and grinds it under his boot.

Remo stops in front of me, his shadow swallowing me whole. I'm a tiny speck compared to him. Hunched over in the dirt, I feel small beneath him. Helpless.

"You have two choices when I leave here," he says, his voice calm, too calm. "You walk away and pretend this never happened. Or you make me believe you're worth the trouble of keeping alive."

"What does that mean?" My voice wavers, and I try to steady it.

He crouches down, his gaze locking onto mine. The cold intensity in his eyes makes me shiver. "It means," he says softly, "if you talk, I will find out you did. There won't be a next time. I'll hunt you down, no matter where you hide. If you run to the police, I'll make sure you never use your mouth again. Even if you try to stay anonymous. I'll make sure that's how you stay, permanently. Do you understand?"

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I nod, swallowing hard, my heart hammering so loud that it's the only thing I hear.

“So,” he murmurs, straightening. “Think wisely as you walk home tonight.”

It isn't a threat. It's a promise wrapped in cold steel. My mind scrambles, desperate for something, anything, that might change his mind. But all I can focus on is the emptiness in his eyes. They don't just look at me. They slice me open, leaving me raw and exposed.

The silence stretches, suffocating me until he finally rises and brushes invisible dust from his coat. “Get her out of here.”

Relief hits me like a tidal wave. But the moment is fleeting, gone as rough hands grab my arms and haul me upright. I'm shoved toward the alley, though one last glance from Remo pins me in place. His face is unreadable, but there's a flicker in his eyes. However, I don't dwell on it.

I'm alive. For now.

The alley reeks of piss. The air clings, thick and heavy, and as I'm shoved forward, I stumble and trip over cracked asphalt. Using my hands to break my fall, they scrape against broken glass on the ground, and the sting is sharp and immediate.

One of the men, who is shorter but just as mean as the rest, crouches down, his face too close to mine. “You're lucky, pretty lady,” he sneers. “The boss doesn't usually let rats skitter away.”

I keep my mouth shut as I get up on shaky feet. Words would only fan the flames of his cruelty. He smirks, and then I'm shoved forward again. Already shaky, I crash to the ground again and bite my lip so hard that I taste blood. The curses bubbling inside me burn like acid, but I swallow them down. Weakness is a death sentence here.

"Get up," one of them barks, his voice tight with impatience.

"She's useless like this," another man mutters, his irritation barely concealed. "Why bother?"

Then, the man who's probably the leader snaps, his voice sharp, "Focus. The boss didn't say to kill her. Yet."

They all laugh, and the conversation veers off into jokes about women and some other crap I couldn't care less about.

I force myself to push up even though my knees scream in protest. Blood trickles down my shin, but I ignore it, pushing myself upright. Every step toward the street feels heavier than the last.

One of them pulls out a phone and glances between me and the cracked screen, his fingers moving like he's waiting for some signal. I don't know what orders he's getting, and frankly, I don't care. It's all just noise. It doesn't matter.

They're never going to see me again.

I'm at the entrance of the alley when a hand slams down on my shoulder and drags me back to reality.

"Are you going to stay quiet?" Cigarette Guy's voice drops low, his eyes narrowing. He's daring me to test him, but for some reason, I think he genuinely means for me to

keep my mouth shut, as though he's doing me a favor by keeping me away from his boss.

I nod, but it's not out of submission.

"Good." He smirks like he's won some sick game. "For your sake, I hope he's right about you."

As he shoves me into the street, the cold night air hits me like a slap. Brooklyn sprawls out before me, alive with noise and chaos. Sirens wail in the distance, taxis honk, and the hum of life presses in, suffocating me.

I don't look back. I can't. Each shaky step forward feels like I'm walking a tightrope over a pit. My thoughts race, replaying every moment of the last hour—the guns, the blood, his voice.

I'm alive. Somehow. But why? The question gnaws at me, sharp and unrelenting. Remo could've ended me. A single word, a simple order, and I'd be another nameless body. Instead, he let me go. The thought terrifies me more than death.

By the time I reach my apartment, my body feels like dead weight. The graffiti-covered door mocks me as I fumble with the key. Inside, the air is stale, reeking of old takeout, but I'm too drained to care.

I shut the door, slide to the floor, and curl up with my knees to my chest. Silence envelops me, but it's not comforting. It's oppressive, dragging me back to his cold eyes and sharp, unyielding face. Remo Callegari. Even his name feels like a curse, something you can't outrun.

I glance at my hands—shaking and stained with paint and blood. My knee burns, but the ache in my chest is worse. It's hollow and unending, a reminder of just how small

I am in his world.

Sleep doesn't come easily. And when it does, I'm still restless. His face looms in my dreams.

When I wake up, I'm no closer to understanding why I'm still alive.

Chapter 3

Remo

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The city sprawls beneath me, an endless sea of lights and steel. From the penthouse, it all looks like a game's board, each building a piece to be controlled, each person just another pawn moving in the shadows. But even from up here, with everything at my fingertips, there's a gnawing in the back of my mind.

Something that won't stop.

Her.

I'm supposed to be focused on the arms deal. That's what I should be doing. But her image keeps slipping into my thoughts, uninvited. I can't even think about the deal without her face hovering at the edge of my mind like a damn ghost.

"Have Livia find out everything you can about this woman," I bark, leaning over my desk, my eyes hard as I lock onto Marco. "Her name, her past, her present. I want to know where she lives, who she talks to, and what she does. I want every detail. No stone unturned. Understand?" My voice is sharp.

Marco nods without hesitation, but he knows better than to move too quickly. This isn't a simple request. It's a demand, a reminder that my expectations never slip. I don't need to repeat myself. My men have been with me long enough to know that the silence that follows a command like that is heavy and loaded with consequences.

"Right away, boss," Marco replies, his tone clipped and formal.

"Make it thorough. I want surveillance, records, and any contact information. Everything." I lean back, my fingerstapping the armrest of the chair, a low hum of

impatience beginning to pulse in my chest.

Marco doesn't react. He's seen me push people to the edge and beyond. He knows how far I'll go for information, and he knows better than to question me.

"Understood, Boss," he says as he walks out of the room.

My mind, though...it keeps pulling back to her.

I glance across the room. The penthouse is almost too still in its silence. It is everything it should be—high ceilings, polished concrete floors that reflect more than just light, and glass walls that open up to a view of Brooklyn. The furniture is sharp, minimal, and expensive—black leather chairs that don't invite you to stay and modern art on the walls that don't need explaining.

My empire, the empire I've built with blood and sweat, is always a few calls away from being run into the ground if I lose my focus. But right now, I can't stop thinking about her. The woman is like a fucking riddle in my head. A distraction I can't shake.

A few hours later, my phone buzzes with a secure message. It's from Livia. Of course, it is. She always delivers. She doesn't just track people; she dissects them, peeling back their lives with a few keystrokes. When I open the file, the photos and reports flood in, meticulously organized.

Livia's notes are precise and annotated with timestamps and patterns that I wouldn't have caught myself. It's almost unsettling how fast she works. It's like she's plugged into the veins of the city itself. This is why she's one of my most trusted allies. Livia doesn't just find information; she owns it.

Daniela Volpi.

She has been in a few art shows. Nothing big, just small-time galleries. Her art is...raw. It's everything that should make me dismiss her, but instead, it pulls me in. It's bold, with expressivestrokes and colors that scream. It's like she's bleeding on the canvas, exposing all the shit she keeps hidden inside. I don't know what she's hiding, but I know it's there. I've seen that kind of vulnerability before.

The more I dig, the more I find. She doesn't have much left in this world. Twenty-five and broke. She used to show her art in galleries but is now living off the grid. No close friends. No family. Her parents are dead—they died in a car accident when she was barely a teenager.

Just a bunch of half-assed connections and the empty echo of a life she's trying to rebuild. Or run from. That's the thing about people like her. They think they can start fresh, but they can't. You can't outrun your past. You can't escape the things you've seen.

I would know. It's the story of my life. A fire I didn't mean to start, a family gone in seconds. And the rest? A blur of cold hands and strangers who weren't kind enough to lie to me. My past? It's a scar etched deep into my chest, one I wear like a brand.

But for a moment, I almost feel it—the crack in my chest that always comes when I think about what it means to lose family. To be alone. The weight of all those years spent running from the things I've done, the things I've let happen.

I shove it aside, just like I always do.

I fucking love being alone.

Still, I can't stop thinking about her, about the crap apartment she calls home, about her artwork, and her pain lingering in every corner. There's something in me—something dark, something I don't want to acknowledge—that calls out to it. To

her.

I lean back in my leather chair and stare at the photo of her online again. She's standing in front of one of her pieces, looking unsure of herself. But it's her eyes that get me. They've got that look—the one that says she's been through too much but keeps going anyway. You can see it in people's eyes, that brokenness. It's a mark that doesn't fade.

I have a lot of those marks myself. But I don't wear them the way she does. I control everything around me, everything that gets close to me. But her...I can't control her. And that pisses me off. I hate it.

“Why can't I get you off my mind?” I mutter angrily to myself, slamming the laptop shut. But the thought doesn't bring any relief. If anything, it makes the weight in my chest heavier.

I grab the whiskey bottle, pour a glass, and let the burn in my throat remind me that I'm still in charge here. Still in control. But I'm starting to doubt it. I'm starting to wonder if I've ever truly been in control of anything.

My phone buzzes. It's Marco. Probably informing me of our most recent drop.

“It's done. We've got everything cleared at customs,” he says.

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I take a long sip of whiskey and force myself to focus.

“Good. Make sure there are no complications,” I tell him.

The business needs me, not my damn thoughts about some artist with more baggage than I’m willing to deal with. And yet, I just can’t stop thinking about her.

Later that night, I’m watching her apartment from a distance. It’s not the first time. I’ve been doing this for a couple of days now. I don’t know why. Maybe I just want to see how she lives and what she does when she thinks no one is watching. It’s stupid, I know. But it’s like I can’t help myself.

Her windows are lit up, but she doesn’t move around. The light from inside flickers through the blinds, and I imagine her sitting there, painting. Creating. She’s a mystery, and I don’t like not knowing things.

Growling, I drive back home. Soon, I’m back in the penthouse, staring out at the skyline again, but my mind is still tangled up with thoughts of her. I try to shake it off. I shouldn’t be thinking of her anyway. What I need is a distraction.

Good thing the woman I’m expecting is about to show up. Right on the dot, the doorbell rings like a sharp crack, echoing through the apartment and unsettling me, just like the rest of this mess.

I take a second to look her over as she steps into the room. Her hair’s a wild mess, falling in tousled waves around her shoulders, framing her face. The soft glow from the lights makes her skin look almost porcelain, with a touch of pink on her cheeks.

Her makeup's barely there, just a hint, but her red lipstick stands out, bright and daring.

I can't stop myself from thinking about those lips, and suddenly, the burn of desire hits me hard. Trying to play it cool, I pour myself a drink.

"You gave some pretty specific instructions in your text," she says, her voice low and almost playful. "How am I doing, sir?"

She's got on a white button-down shirt with three buttons undone, showing off a little cleavage. That shirt barely covers the rest of her, and I can't deny she's got a body that demands attention.

But she's not her.

I grunt, giving her a quick look before setting my glass down and turning my full attention to her. She's right. My instructions were simple enough, and she'd already followed them.

She's ready, standing there with a needy look in her eyes.

Other than the shirt, she's completely bare. Her long, straight legs appeal to me, especially knowing she'll wrap them around my waist when I take her.

"Stand by the bed," I order, my voice rough.

She moves slowly toward the bed, her hand on her hip, the shirt lifting just enough to catch my eye. The sight of her, bare except for that shirt, makes my pulse race. Damn.

"Right here?" she asks, her voice a little breathless.

“Yeah. Let me see you. Really see you.” I let the words hang in the air, dragging them out. “I’m gonna fuck you hard and fast tonight. Take your shirt off—slowly, don’t rush it.”

She starts unbuttoning it, one by one, each button coming undone with deliberate slowness. When the shirt finally falls, it drifts to the floor, and she’s standing there in front of me, completely exposed, just the way I want her.

“Take it all off,” I growl, my patience wearing thin.

She drops the shirt and looks up at me with an intensity that tells me she’s all in, just like me. I step closer, my hand sliding over her face, feeling the warmth of her skin. Her breath hitches, her eyes darkening with anticipation.

“There are going to be consequences if you don’t listen to me,” I say, my tone low and serious.

A shiver runs down her spine. She’s not scared, but there’s a touch of excitement there, too. She wants this. She’s craving it.

“How will you punish me, sir?” she asks, a wicked smile curling on her lips.

The soft sigh she gives is inviting, but tonight, I don’t want to be soft. I focus on her mouth—the one that would soon be wrapped around my dick—and pull her close. “Well, you’ll just have to disobey me to find out, won’t you?”

I move in, pressing my lips against hers in a rough kiss and claiming her mouth the way I need to. She melts into me, her body soft and pliant as I deepen the kiss. Our tongues move together in a fast, messy rhythm, and when I pull away, I can still taste her—the sweet tang of wine and honey.

“Touch yourself,” I instruct, my voice hoarse.

She doesn't hesitate, her fingers finding their way to her nipples, teasing them as she watches me. The way she touches herself for me, the need in her eyes...it's intoxicating.

“I want this so badly,” she murmurs, her breath catching as she plays with herself.

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“I bet it’s exciting, not knowing what’s coming next.”

Her head falls back with her mouth slightly open, and I can see she’s on the edge. The way she’s acting, desperate for more, makes something raw twist inside me.

“You’re putting on quite a show, huh?” I tease, watching her closely.

Before she can respond, I push her roughly against the wall. She yelps but keeps her body poised and ready for me. When I claim her mouth in a wild kiss, she goes limp against me, melting as I fuck her mouth with my tongue. Our kiss is rough and fast, and when I pull away, I lick my lower lip.

“Touch both your nipples.”

She moans in response.

“Pinch them. Squeeze them hard. Oh, yeah...you’re fucking perfect.”

Her eyes glaze over as she stares at me, but she nods again, her lips moving without words.

“Look at my dick. Look how hard I already am. Put your hand around it. You feel that? You feel it pulsing in your hands, huh?”

“Oh, fuck, baby...I—I...”

“No, keep playing with your tits, silly girl. I didn’t tell you to stop. Oh...there you go,

just like that. Pull on it hard. I know you like that. I know you like it rough.”

“Yes,” she moans.

“Then be rough.”

She doesn’t stop touching her tits but begins to twirl faster, desperately trying to relieve the gnawing ache between her legs. I’ve been there before. Watching Daniela in her little apartment has left me on edge, and whether I like it or not, I can’t stop thinking about how much I want to pound my dick into her sweet, tight pussy.

For now, I keep my focus on this woman. “You’re so damn hot. I have to touch myself.”

“Touch me too,” she whispers, a plea glimmering in her eyes. “I need to feel your hands on me, please.”

I shake my head sternly, seizing both of her wrists and pulling her hands above her head. “Tonight isn’t about you, silly. It doesn’t matter what you want, got that? You take what you’re offered.”

“Yes...yes, sir.” Her shiver makes her feel like a delicate, beautiful bird in my arms. “I’m so wet for you...”

“I’m sure you are.” I spin her around, pressing her face hard against the wall. She cries out, panic in her voice, and tries to push away from my grip, but I hold her steady.

“Please...wait!” she yelps.

I want to claim and possess everything about Daniela. I want her, and I can’t shake

the craving. But she isn't here right now.

I deliver a sharp slap to the woman's bare backside, eliciting a moan from her. "Oh..."

"You want me to fuck you? Nah, you're going to have to prove to me that you deserve it."

"How? Tell me, please."

I trap her between my rock-hard cock and the wall, leaving her no room to escape. With a swift movement, I kick her feet apart and push a finger deep inside her without warning. She cries out for a second before wiggling her hips against my finger. I press my body against hers, bruising her soft flesh against the edge of my bedroom wall, marking her as mine. "Touch your clit. No, not too fast. Yeah, just like that."

She moans loudly. When I push in two fingers from behind, she abandons her clit and plants her hands on the wall for support. "You like that? You like the way I finger your pussy?"

"Yes..." she whispers.

"You're so warm and tight. Look at me. No, look at me."

I turn her around and stare down at the red bruises blooming on her stomach. My cock tightens at the sight. The pain I inflict on her intertwines with the pleasure, and the more time I spend with her, the more I think about Daniela and how much I want to spill myself inside her pouty mouth.

"You're my fucking little plaything," I tell the woman instead. "And I want you to

say it.”

“What?”

“Are you going to be good, or am I going to have to make you say those exact words?”

She doesn't hesitate this time, her voice sweet as she repeats the words. I enjoy sex and the thrill of it all, but most of all, I relish being dominant. I like to be in control. This is my world, but I've learned that with women like her, I have to include them in their own degradation. Otherwise, it's not going to be much fun.

I push her down onto the edge of the bed and begin to remove my belt. “Open your legs for me.”

She hesitates, opening them just an inch while propping herself on her elbow to look up at me.

“I said, open your fucking legs for me and take my cock.”

This time, she parts them wide as I slip between her thighs and pull my throbbing cock out of my pants. Then, I thrust deep inside her forcefully, not minding her soft cries. She wants this. We both do. I pump in and out slowly at first, but soon enough, I pick up the pace. In my mind's eye, I can see Daniela and feel her wet, tight pussy inviting me to fuck her like she's never been fucked before.

I smack the brunette's tits hard. The first time surprises both of us, eliciting a little giggle, but the second and third hits land with more force. I relish the sound of my hand connecting with her skin, and by the time I stop, her tits are flushed and red.

“You deserve a little pain, love.”

“Please...”

I use my fingers to peel her folds apart as I thrust deeply inside her. I don't slow down, driving into her fiercely, consumed by the need for someone I shouldn't want but desperately do. “No, don't close your eyes. I want you to look at me when you come.”

It's a command, not a request. I want to see the way her face contorts with pleasure. I want to hear her gasp my name.

“Yes, sir...oh God, fuck...please...”

I wrap a hand around her throat, moving in and out of her with my mouth slightly parted, growling down at her. My thrusts are rough, and my grip is tight, but I don't stop. Not when it feels this good. Just as I sense her building climax, I pull out and yank her roughly onto her knees. “Suck me. Yeah, go on, take my cock in your mouth. Fuck, good girl. Go deeper, faster...that's right, suck the sweetness off of me.”

She takes me deep, gagging as I push her further. I grip her hair, holding her in place as I release my load into her mouth and all over it. “That's good.”

When I'm done, I pull away, button my pants, and head to the bar for another drink. She stays kneeling on the bed, breathless, like she's trying to figure out what just happened.

“What, are you waiting for a hug? Get out.”

She scrambles to her feet and yanks her shirt on with the buttons all messed up. I

walk over to the door and call for one of the guards. “Take her home. I don’t want to see her again.”

That’s how things go with me. It never changes.

The rest of the night is a blur—phone calls, meetings, all the crap that doesn’t matter. Before I know it, I’m back in my office with my mind still stuck on her. Even though she’s miles away, I can feel her presence like it’s still here, like it’s pressing on me. I should be thinking about the rat in the crew or the other factions trying to make a move. But all I can focus on is why she’s still in my head.

I leave the blinds open, looking out over the city below. I think about the people I’ve buried—faces that stopped meaning anything a long time ago. The men who thought they could mess with me but ended up learning the hard way. You don’t cross Remo Callegari and walk away.

But then I think of her.

And for the first time in forever, I don’t feel like I have control.

Chapter 4

Daniela

The sounds wake me up in the dark. At first, it’s just the usual street noise—distant honking, the shuffle of feet, the occasional shout. But this feels different.

I sit up slowly, pulling my knees to my chest while trying to calm the racing in my chest. That’s when I hear it—the unmistakable sound of boots. Heavy. Measured. Like they’re here for something.

I slide my hand under the pillow, my fingers curling around the cold metal of my knife. It's a reflex, one I can't help. It's the only thing that ever made me feel like I had some control in this godforsaken neighborhood.

Then, the door slams open.

I don't flinch. I don't scream. But the chill running down my spine? It's real. My heart beats harder, as though it's trying to break out of my chest, and my grip tightens on the knife. Whoever's coming, they won't be expecting a fight.

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Two men step in. Both wear dark suits, their presence swallowing up the room. The taller one has the kind of eyes that see through you. Cold and calculating, like he's sizing me up. The other doesn't say a word. He just stands at the door, blocking any chance of escape.

I take a breath, trying to sound steady. "Who the hell are you?"

The tall one doesn't answer right away. He just watches me. "We're here to take you to our boss."

The words hit me, but I don't let them show. Not yet. "Boss? You've got the wrong person."

"Don't think so," he replies, a smirk creeping onto his face. It's too easy. Like this is nothing new to him.

I swallow hard. I know what this is. The Mafia doesn't take mistakes lightly.

"Why?" I ask, forcing myself to sound defiant. "Why me? What the hell do you want with me?"

The second man moves, closing in on me. He grabs my arm and yanks it back before I can react. I try to wrench away, but it's no use. His grip is like iron.

Then, the first guy steps closer, his voice low and firm. "Don't make this difficult."

I'm dragged out of the apartment, and my heart hammers with every step. The knife

feels like a dead weight in my pocket. It's useless here. I'm useless here.

When we get outside, they shove me into a car, the doors slamming shut like a final warning. I barely register the drive, too busy trying to breathe, trying not to lose it.

Not long after, we stop in front of a building that doesn't belong in this neighborhood. Probably because it doesn't. We are in the elite area of the city, where the rich live in their shiny, sterile bubbles, worlds apart from everything I've known. It's shiny and sterile, and it feels like a whole different world. I don't even know how they got me here without me noticing. Maybe I wasn't meant to notice.

I'm shoved into the elevator, my stomach flipping as the doors close behind me. One second, I'm in my crappy, cramped apartment, the kind that smells like mold and destitution, and the next, I'm staring up at a building so sleek that it might as well be made of glass and ambition. It's like a fucking luxury magazine cover come to life.

The ride up feels like a countdown, like the seconds are ticking away toward some inevitable disaster I can't stop, no matter how hard I try. I focus on the numbers above the door, watching them climb higher, one after the other, but my mind's too busy spinning. What the hell comes next? Who the hell has the power to just drag me out of my life and throw me into this...whatever this is?

When the doors finally open, I'm hit with this heavy, almost suffocating air. It's rich, the kind of air that's been bought and paid for. The floors gleam like they've never known the touch of dirt. The furniture is sleek, with all sharp lines and polished surfaces, like it's been designed to intimidate, not welcome. It all screams power, control, and dominance. But not warmth. Not comfort.

And then there's me. Standing here in a ragged nightdress, the kind that's seen better days, and wondering why the hell I'm not running yet.

And there he is. Remo Callegari.

He's standing in the middle of it all like he owns every single inch of this space. He doesn't need to move to take over the room. His eyes are locked on me, cold, unblinking, and it's like he's sucking all the air out of the place.

I hold his stare, trying to ignore the strange pull I feel. Is it fear? Curiosity? Some darker, twisted mix of both? I don't know what it is, but I hate it. I hate that my body reacts to him like this. I hate that standing here, in front of him, makes me feel so fucking small.

"Welcome, Dolcezza," he says, his voice smooth but laced with a threat I can almost taste in the air.

His eyes never leave mine.

"I'm sorry about the means of getting you here, but I'm sure you wouldn't have complied if I asked nicely. I'm glad to see you again, Daniela. I want you to have a good time here. What would you like to drink? Or maybe you're hungry? I can have my chef prepare anything you want. She's the best this side of the country. I spent a lot of money to get her to work for me."

I barely resist the urge to laugh.

"Are you insane?" I snap instead, fire crackling in my voice. "You break into my house and drag me out in the middle of the night...and now you're asking if I'm hungry?"

He ignores me like I'm nothing more than an annoying fly buzzing around his head. "Or would you prefer to go to your room? It's been filled with clothes your size and your favorite perfumes and shampoos. I made sure they were particular about that.

Wouldn't want you to feel out of place here."

"Are you deaf?" I snap. Because why the hell not? But before I can even finish the sentence, he's there. He's so fast that I barely have time to blink. His hand wraps around my neck, slamming me against the wall with enough force to knock the air from my lungs.

I don't know why my body reacts the way it does. Why his scent—mint and sandalwood—hits me so damn good that it almost makes me ache, and why I want to press my nose against his neck and breathe it all in, even though it's the last thing I should be thinking about right now.

But I can't stop. I'm not sane. I never have been.

His grip tightens, and I choke out a breath, trying to push his hand away, though it doesn't work.

"Now, Dolcezza," he growls, his voice low and deadly. "Let's try this again. And I suggest you watch how you talk to me. If you don't, I'll make sure you end up in a worse position than you already are. I can do things to you that you won't ever imagine or recover from."

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Up close now, I see how those gray-blue eyes cut right through me. I didn't notice them that night, but now I can't look away. They pierce me with something cold, something sharp that I don't want to understand.

I haven't been able to get him out of my head. Not since that night. Not since he was so close, the heat and darkness that burned off him, a reminder of everything I shouldn't want. Even now, I can't shake the thought of him. I tried, believe me. I went back to the warehouse, hoping—foolishly—I could find something, some trace of him.

But it was burned to the ground.

Everyone says it was arson. That some notorious gang leader pissed off the wrong people, made the wrong enemies, and got his whole life set on fire. But I know better. I know it was a cover-up.

Of course it was.

He shakes me once, snapping me out of my thoughts. His grip is firm, relentless.

“Is that understood?” he says coldly.

I nod, and he smiles. That damn smile, so sinful, so dangerous. I hate myself for wanting to see it again. He leans in closer now, too close. His breath brushes my cheek, and I can feel his eyes on me like a weight I can't shake.

“Let's try this again,” he says again, his voice low.

“Okay,” I whisper.

“I’m Remo Callegari, but I’m sure you already know that by now.”

I glare at him, trying to stay calm. “What am I doing here?”

The corners of his lips twitch, but it’s not amusement. He leans in a little further, his presence overwhelming, like he’s trying to consume me.

“You saw something you shouldn’t have,” he says, his voice dropping to a darker pitch. “Now you’re a problem. A loose end.”

“I already told you I wouldn’t talk,” I snap. “You didn’t have to abduct me. This is a crime. You have no right.”

He steps forward, closing the gap between us until I can smell the dark, expensive cologne he’s wearing. It should repulse me, but it doesn’t. Instead, it draws me in like a drug I can’t resist.

“You see, that’s where you’re wrong.” His voice drips with confidence, so much so that it makes my blood boil. “I have every right. When I see something I want, I take it. No rules. No time to waste on the consequences.”

“So I’m what now? Your prisoner?” I can’t keep the bitterness from slipping into my voice. “This isn’t a Beauty and the Beast spin-off. You can’t just keep people against their will.”

His jaw clenches, a muscle twitching beneath his skin, his anger barely contained. “I can, and I will. You don’t have a choice anymore.”

His words hit me like a slap.

“In the meantime,” he says, his tone shifting slightly, “make yourself at home. Over there is Livia.”

He points to a petite woman standing across the room. Her sharp green eyes are scanning me with curiosity. Her short blonde hair is messy, and she’s dressed in black leather combat boots. She gives me a quick salute and a wink, but I can’t help but wonder why she’s dressed like she’s about to go to war at this hour.

In fact, they all are. The three men and Livia who are surrounding me in this lavish, absurd penthouse. It’s too much, too polished, too perfect. The marble floors beneath my bare feet are like ice, and the windows show the city outside, distant and unreachable, a world I no longer belong to.

I want to run. My feet itch to move, to escape, but I know better. There’s no way out, not without a fight, not without being dragged back and locked away again.

This place is like a showroom. Everything is immaculate—too immaculate. It’s like they’ve scrubbed away any trace of humanity and replaced it with something cold, shiny, and impersonal.

And I? I’m the filthy little secret they’ve decided to claim.

I can feel my heart still pounding, but now it’s mixed with a rising anger. The kind of anger that comes from being underestimated. From being handled like I’m nothing.

I glance back at Remo, and there he is, still standing too close, his body heat making my skin tingle. I refuse to let him see how rattled I am. I won’t give him that satisfaction.

He studies me, his eyes sharp as knives, cutting through me, stripping me down. It’s like he’s trying to read my soul and see through every wall I’ve built, and I hate him

for it.

“Don’t worry,” he says again, softer this time. “You’ll be safe. For as long as you’re here.”

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I stare at him, trying to process it, but the more I do, the more I feel like I'm drowning. His eyes lock onto mine, intense and unyielding. It's like he's trying to break me with just a look, to force me into submission without even touching me.

"So what? I'm supposed to stay inside all day, hiding because of something that, honestly, the cops probably don't care about anymore?" I scoff, the sarcasm slipping out before I can stop it. "You've already covered your tracks. So why the hell are you still doing this?"

"You're a liability," he says with brutal honesty as if it's no big deal. "That's why you're here. I'm keeping you from becoming a problem I don't need to deal with."

His words are casual and detached, but there's something about them that stings. He's not afraid to treat this like business. Like I'm just another inconvenience to be dealt with.

I feel my pulse spike, my anger rising again. I've never been so pissed off in my life.

"Besides," he adds, like he's offering me a favor, "I never said you can't go out. You can visit the one friend I know you have, go shopping, whatever. I've deposited money into an account for you. You can spend it however you like, but you'll be supervised. Livia here will always go with you, along with two of my men. You won't be alone."

I try not to scoff, but it's hard. "Honestly, this is ridiculous. Why not just kill me? Get it over with." I throw the words at him, testing his reaction. "Why keep me alive? What's the point?"

His lips curl. There's a hint of amusement there, but it's twisted. Like he enjoys this, enjoys me squirming. "You're alive because I've decided to let you be. Test me, and you'll wish I hadn't."

I tilt my head, trying to figure him out, but I know I won't. Not now. Maybe never. "You really think that's enough to keep me here? To make me just...accept this?"

His eyes turn sharp. "Do you really think you have a choice?"

I want to retort, scream, and throw the anger that's bubbling up in me right at him, but I can't. There's something in his eyes, something that holds me in place. It's like he's figured me out, every little part of me. Every flicker, every breath. He's too damn in control.

"You think the world bends to you because you've got power and money? Newsflash: I'm not yours to control."

His eyes darken, and he takes another step closer. I feel the space between us narrow, the air thickening. It's too close. Too damn close.

"You've got it all wrong, Daniela." His voice has dropped. "It's not about owning you. It's because you're the one thing I can't figure out, and I don't like mysteries."

"Why me?" I ask again. "Why not just...let me go?" My voice cracks, but I push through it.

His eyes narrow slightly, and I see that spark of recognition, of control, burning through.

Remo breathes in deep, and when he replies, his voice is low, like he's revealing something he never meant to. "Because I don't let people go." He looks at me, his

eyes heavy with that dark pull, and I feel myself sinking. “And I don’t leave loose ends, Daniela. Not anymore. Especially when they’re as tangled up in this as you are.”

The ice-cold truth hits me. I don’t let him see it, but I feel it in my bones.

I take a shaky breath. “What is it that you think I’m a part of?”

His eyes stay locked on mine. “You’re part of the story now, Daniela. Whether you like it or not.”

”And what happens to the people in your story?”

“They die,” he says, simple and cold, like it’s the most natural thing in the world. “At least the ones who don’t learn their place.”

It’s not a warning. It’s a fact.

There’s no going back anymore. I’m no longer just some innocent witness, some random girl who stumbled into a world she wasn’t meant to see. I’m tangled up in it now, whether I want to be or not. And the worst part? I know there’s no escape.

Chapter 5

Remo

The clubhouse smells like stale smoke and forgotten whiskey, the air so thick it’s like breathing through a damp cloth. Dim lights hang from the ceiling, casting shadows that crawl over everything—worn leather chairs, the pool table abandoned in the corner like it’s seen too many games it should never have. This place is a relic, something stuck between the past and the present, like me. It’s where I come to

remind myself who I am.

The men stand around in a half-circle, stiff, like they've seen this before but know they'll never get used to it. They're waiting for the show to start.

And then there's her—Daniela, sitting in the corner. She's trying to make herself invisible, arms crossed tightly over her chest, eyes darting around the room like she can't decide whether to run or stay. She thinks she's just an observer, but this night's not about her. It's about making sure my people know the cost of disloyalty.

The door creaks open, and Lorenzo walks in. He's trying to look tough, but the beads of sweat on his forehead give him away. The nervous glance he shoots around the room tells me everything I need to know. He knows this is the end. But he's too stupid to know that I've known about him for weeks.

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“Ah, Lorenzo,” I greet, clapping him on the back with a smile that doesn’t reach my eyes. “Good to see you again.”

His eyes flicker, unsure whether to be grateful for the friendly tone or terrified. “Yeah, man,” he forces out, trying to sound calm though his voice cracks. “Good to see you, too.”

I motion for a drink, my own already in my hand. I’m taking my time, savoring this moment. The tension in the room is thick enough to choke on. “You’re early,” I say, feigning surprise. “Or maybe I’m just late. Either way, the drinks are on me tonight.”

The whiskey’s poured, and glasses clink, but Lorenzo doesn’t touch his drink at first. His hands are shaking too much, and it’s like he’s trying to hold on to something that’s slipping away.

I take a long sip, and then, just like that, the mood shifts. “So,” I say, my voice dropping low, “I’ve been hearing some things, Lorenzo.”

He freezes. “What...what things?”

The rest of the room quiets down, the men starting to edge toward the walls like they know they shouldn’t interrupt. I let the silence stretch for a beat, drawing out the tension like a slow burn.

“I know about you and Leone,” I start. “I know you’ve been selling me out. Trading your loyalty for promises of power that you’ll never get. Thought I wouldn’t notice? Thought I wouldn’t find out?”

Lorenzo's face falls, color draining from his skin, and his breath catches, coming out as a shallow gasp. "I—Remo, I swear, I didn't mean it," he stammers. "I—I was just trying to—"

I cut him off with a simple gesture, and the silence swallows his words. "Don't lie to me, Lorenzo. I know everything. The meetings. The backdoor deals with the Russians. You thought you could do this behind my back and walk away with your skin? Well, you thought wrong."

His eyes dart around, desperate. "Remo, please...please, I made a mistake. I'm sorry. I'll fix it. I can fix this."

I don't even flinch. "The problem is, you're already dead."

I pull the knife from my boot, its polished steel gleaming under the dim lights. The room falls dead silent, and I can feel their fear like a pressure in the air, pushing down on everything.

Lorenzo's eyes widen, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. "No, no, please! You don't have to do this. I—I'll make it right. I'll—"

But there's no making it right. Not for him. Not for anyone who betrays me.

With one swift movement, I slash the blade across his chest. The sound of it cutting through fabric and skin is sharp, like a scream in a quiet room. His body jerks, and he lets out a strangled cry, stumbling back as blood spills over his shirt and soaks into the fabric. I watch him struggle to stay upright, his hands clutching his chest like he can stop the pain with a touch. But he can't. Nobody can.

I let him bleed for a few moments, dragging it out, watching the life drain out of him. "This is the cost of loyalty, Lorenzo," I say, my voice harsh. "This is what happens

when you forget who you owe everything to.”

His eyes are wide now, panic-stricken, and I can see his mind racing, searching for a way out. But there is no way out. Not for him. Not for anyone who crosses me.

I lean in closer, just enough for him to hear me. “You wanted a shortcut to power? Here’s your shortcut...to hell.”

I pull the knife from his chest and push him back onto the floor with a force that echoes throughout the room. His body crumples like a rag doll, blood pooling beneath him.

Then, I turn to the men around me, my eyes sweeping over them. They’re all standing there, watching, silent but understanding. “This is what happens to those who forget where their loyalty lies. You betray me, you die. Simple as that.”

But I’m not done yet. I look over at Daniela, still sitting in the corner with her arms crossed tightly, trying to stay detached. She doesn’t flinch, but I see her eyes. They’re wide and shaking with something I can’t quite place. Fear? Disgust? A little of both?

“Look at me, Daniela,” I order in a low and insistent voice. She doesn’t look away, but she doesn’t meet my eyes, either. Instead, she watches, her jaw clenched tight. Her chest rises and falls with each shallow breath, and her hands tremble just slightly. But she won’t let it show.

“You think I’m some kind of monster, don’t you?” I ask, my tone softening just enough to make her uncomfortable. “You think what I did to him was...unnecessary. Maybe even cruel.”

She doesn’t answer, but her lips press together in a thin line. She’s trying not to show fear. I can respect that.

“I did what I had to do,” I continue, stepping closer, letting the words linger in the air like poison. “Loyalty is everything in this world. Without it, there’s nothing but chaos. And chaos...chaos is what gets you killed.”

Her voice shakes as she responds, but she doesn’t back down. “You’re wrong.”

I chuckle, a sound that’s all edge and no humor. “Am I? Look around, Daniela. This is the world you’re in now. You’re learning fast. You’ll either adapt or break. And trust me, if you break, it’s worse.”

I turn back to Lorenzo, who’s still gasping, barely conscious now. “This is your final lesson, Lorenzo. Remember it well. Your life was worthless the moment you decided to betray me. And now, it’s over.”

Without hesitation, I draw my gun and fire once. The shot rings out, deafening in the silence of the room. Lorenzo’s body jerks with the impact, and then...stillness. His blood pools around him like a sickening stain.

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The room holds its breath for a second, the silence suffocating. I turn to my men.
“Take care of the body.”

The clean-up twins, aptly nicknamed The Cleaners, are already moving, silent and efficient. Like it's just another job.

I turn back to Daniela, not taking my eyes off her. Her defiance is still there, but so is the fear. She's shaking now; I can see it, but she's not giving me the satisfaction of breaking.

I step closer, my face inches from hers. I can feel the heat between us, the raw energy crackling in the air.

“You're not going anywhere,” I murmur. “You think you can watch something like that and walk away? I'm just getting started.”

Her breath hitches, and for a moment, I think she might say something. But then she doesn't.

“You'll do as I say, or I'll show you the real consequences of disobedience,” I tell her.

I grab her chin, tilting her head back so she has no choice but to meet my eyes.

“Time to see just how far you're willing to go,” I continue, my voice low and dangerous. Then, I turn to Marco and say, “Take her to the room.”

Chapter 6

Daniela

The moment the door shuts behind me, the world outside feels like it disappears. The basement is cold, the kind of chill that settles deep in your bones. The dim red light barely cuts through the darkness, enough to cast an eerie glow but not enough to make the room feel any less menacing.

It's the kind of place that makes you realize you're already trapped in something you can't escape.

Like what I saw a few minutes ago.

When he invited me to have drinks with his friend this morning, I should have known I'd be in for more than I expected.

Lorenzo.

I can still hear the sounds—the sharp crack of the gunshot, the thud of Lorenzo's body hitting the floor, the blood spilling out in a slow, sickening pool.

I had to watch it. I was forced to witness that kind of brutality up close. And he just stood there like it was nothing. Like killing a man was nothing. Like a life was as disposable as a cigarette butt.

And the way his face twisted after, like he was disgusted with the whole thing.

No remorse in him. No real feeling. Just coldness.

And I hate that I noticed how hot he looked in that moment. How the darkness of

what he did seemed to fit him. I hated him for it, hated him for what he was, but I couldn't stop myself from wanting him more.

I didn't know what to feel after that. I wanted to turn away, but I was glued to him, watching him. Part of me wanted to scream, to run as far as I could from this monster he was showing me, but another part of me... God, another part of me wanted to stay.

That's the sick part. That's the part that makes me hate myself.

"Daniela." A voice growls from the shadows. My pulse spikes at the sound of it, and I instinctively hold my breath as my eyes search the dark for him. "I'm so glad you could make it."

I freeze, my heart kicking up into my throat, the urge to run fighting with the part of me that refuses to be scared.

"Like I had a choice!" I snap back, my voice louder than I intended.

Silence follows, but the soft whimper of a woman struggling somewhere near the back of the room stabs through it.

Is she crying?

I stand frozen for a second.

I want to move, want to turn the fuck around, but my feet don't listen.

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He calls me again, and the sound of it is like a baited hook, pulling me closer to whatever hell is waiting for me, just out of reach. “Come join me over here!”

The invitation makes me sick. Like I’m supposed to be grateful for whatever he’s offering. Like I have any fucking say in the matter.

I can’t help the way my feet carry me forward, the way they click on the concrete floor, each step heavier than the last.

When he steps into the light, it’s like the shadows can’t hold him anymore. He’s big, powerful, and dominating in a way that makes the air feel too small, too tight. His smile is too perfect. It’s the kind of smile that doesn’t say, “I’m friendly,” but says, “I’ll fucking destroy you if you get in my way.”

“I promise I won’t bite. Well, not unless you want me to,” he says, his voice smooth.

I can see it...the way he thinks of people as things to play with, things to break down and rebuild just for his amusement. He’s the kind of man who assumes everyone is just waiting to be moved around on his board.

But I’m not a fucking piece.

I’ve never been in a room like this before. Never seen the things happening here. The air smells like wood and something too sweet, but it’s the atmosphere that sends a tremor down my spine. I don’t need to see everything to know what’s happening.

His hand extends toward me, and I take it. His grip is rough, as though it’s been built

from hard labor. But underneath the roughness, his skin is smooth—too smooth. It's tattooed, the way every inch of him is inked with something I'll never understand.

"Sit down," he commands, and I sit, stiff and straight, like I'm trying to make myself invisible in the corner of the room.

He pours us both drinks and slides one into my hand. I take it, my fingers trembling just enough for him to notice.

"Do you know why you're here, Dolcezza?" His voice is still too soft, too gentle. It's as though he's giving me a chance to pretend I have some control. But I know better.

"Don't call me that. My name is Daniela—"

"I asked you a question." His smile doesn't falter as his hands tighten into fists, and I swear the air just got heavier. My throat constricts, and I pull my jacket sleeves down a little further, hiding the nervous twitch of my fingers.

"I...I don't know why I'm here, honestly. Your goons, or whatever you call them, shoved me in here. It's not like they gave me a choice."

"Well, you're about to find out."

In an instant, he raises his hand and claps, and brighter lights come on, revealing a sight that has me holding my breath.

In the center of the room, a woman is bound to a table, her wrists secured with shiny brown tape. She wears nipple plugs on each breast, and something leather encircles her neck. In the corner, green feathers wave gently, like a flag beckoning me closer.

"Welcome to my playroom, Dolcezza." He takes a sip of his drink, his eyes glinting

as if he's savoring my discomfort. Then he nudges me toward the woman on the table. The woman's body is on full display, vulnerable in a way I've seen too many times but never up close. She is beautiful, no doubt, and from here, I can clearly see the fine sheen of her arousal glistening on her shaved pussy.

"Watch with me, darling. Perhaps you'll find yourself enthralled by this too. Don't worry if it turns you on. Even the strongest among us can't help but be drawn to the rawness of watching strangers fuck."

I should get up. I should leave. I tell myself this, but my body doesn't listen. Not even when a man from a back room walks in.

I'm rooted to the spot, stuck in this maddening spell Remo casts so effortlessly, and watching what is undoubtedly an unhinged orgy about to unfold. I feel paralyzed, not because I can't leave, but because I want to stay.

Maybe it's the morbid curiosity. Or maybe it's the quiet part of me, the one I don't let out often, that craves this—to feel, to know what it's like to surrender without consequence.

I want to watch. I want to imagine what it would be like to let a man touch me like that in front of an audience.

To hold me down. To whisper the dirtiest things into my ear and take me like he hates me.

The man, shirtless and unabashed, approaches the woman on the table and cups her breasts in his large palms with a possessiveness that makes me shiver. His muscles ripple under the dim lights, every movement calculated, deliberate, and hypnotic. My eyes drop lower—there, where his trousers strain against him—and my breath catches.

Is it normal for it to be that...big?

I wouldn't know. All I can think about is what it must feel like to be her, to be the focus of such undivided, primal attention. To have your illicit desires fulfilled in front of people who don't even know your name.

And have someone touch you as though the world could burn around you, and it wouldn't matter because you're all that exists in their eyes.

That hungry, "I don't give a fuck" desire to let loose and be pleased. To chase your orgasm like it's the only thing that can stop you from taking your next breath.

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The man leans in close to her, his lips brushing her ear as he whispers something, his voice a dark melody.

I can't catch the words, but I don't need to. The way her body melts into his, how her back arches like he's poured fire down her spine, says it all. Something twists deep inside me—envy, jealousy, and something raw and mean that I don't want to name.

His eyes catch the dim light, warm like melted chocolate but with an edge, like blood swirling in the depths. His hair, short and sharp on the sides but wild on top, looks like he's been running his hands through it—or maybe someone else has. The five o'clock shadow on his jaw adds to the danger, the pull. It's almost unfair how good he looks, except for his mouth. His lips are too full. They look like they don't belong on his face, but somehow, it just makes him harder to look away from.

There's an accent, too, faint but there. It's frustrating how familiar he feels. It's like I should know him, or maybe I just want to. Those thoughts burn, bitter and humiliating.

Men like this, the kind who kiss women's necks and pull their strings like puppets, don't exist in my world. My life is smaller, safer, and boring as hell. I paint, I binge-watch shows, I sleep.

My friends are the same—safe and predictable, a reflection of me.

I don't have the time or the means to make friends that push my limits. My limits stay the same.

So what the hell is Remo doing in my life? Men like him shouldn't even glance my way, let alone pull me into their orbit. Yet here I am in his club, where he throws illegal sex parties like they're art exhibits. And forces me to watch.

I don't want to watch. But no, that's a lie. The heat curling low in my stomach tells a different story. It's been so long since I've felt...anything. Desire, connection, a spark. I want to believe that's all this is—starvation, not lust for him. Not this sick urge to be the woman in his arms.

“Enjoying the show, Dolcezza?” His voice snakes into my thoughts, smooth and taunting. I flinch, realizing how close he's sitting. Too close. Instead of feeling creeped out, I'm drawn to the warmth of his breath and the tingling sensation in the pit of my stomach.

I hate that I don't pull away.

I hate that I feel the heat rise in my cheeks and something heavier and lower that I wish wasn't there.

Chapter 7

Daniela

“My name is Daniela,” I snap, turning to glare at him. “I've told you. I don't do nicknames.”

He smirks, slow and infuriating, like he's savoring the way I bristle. His eyes sweep over me, deliberate and unapologetic. “But Dolcezza suits you,” he murmurs, his voice softer now, almost playful. “And I think you like it more than you'll admit.”

I don't answer. I can't. Because maybe, just maybe, he's right. And that thought

terrifies me more than anything.

He laughs again like he's savoring a private joke. It's the kind of laugh that scrunches his face just slightly but not enough to mar it. Remo Callegari is incapable of being anything less than infuriatingly perfect. He could wear a burlap sack or shave his head on a dare, and it wouldn't matter.

He's always pristine. Tailored suits, polished watch, and his cologne—God, his cologne—that clings to the air long after he's gone. As if mocking me.

"I think you like whatever I call you," he says. "You love it even. I see it in the way your breath hitches when I lean in. And the little sighs you let slip when you think I'm not listening. You like my attention, Dolcezza. So don't pretend otherwise. We both know that's the least of your problems."

The worst part is he's right. My body betrays me in ways I can't control. It's a flaw, a cruel defect in my wiring.

I glance back at the scene in front of me, desperate for a distraction.

The man kneels between the woman's thighs now, his hands spreading them apart with a hunger that feels almost reverent. He sucks in a breath as he stares down at her swollen clit.

His face is close, so close, and when his tongue flicks out, she bucks her hips toward him, a soundless plea for more.

And I hate the fact that I feel it too. That my body is betraying me in the same way hers is betraying her.

"Why? Are you opposed to small talk, Daniela?" His voice is playful, mocking, like

he knows the storm raging in my head.

I don't answer. I can't. Because if I open my mouth, I'll give too much away. So I do the only thing I can. I pretend. I pretend he isn't here and that his presence doesn't twist me into knots I don't know how to untangle. I pretend the heat pooling in my stomach is just the room, the scene, and the overwhelming absurdity of it all.

But even as I try to convince myself that I'm not affected, I can't shake the feeling of how close he is to me. And the worst part? It seems like he already knows how this is all going to play out.

"Hello? Earth to Daniela! Are you there?" he teases, raising an eyebrow.

"Why would you want to talk about a sex room?" I reply, my voice a mix of disbelief and defiance.

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“Isn’t it turning you on?” His smirk twists wickedly as he says this, as though he’s enjoying every second of it.

“No!” I retort a little too quickly.

He chuckles, slow and indulgent, like he’s savoring the moment. That sound both annoys me and sends a strange thrill through me at the same time. He takes a sip of his drink, his eyes locked onto mine in a way that feels way too personal, almost like he can see right through me.

“Come on, Daniela,” he says, leaning in a bit closer. “You can’t tell me you’re not at least a little curious.”

I roll my eyes. “Curious? Sure. But it doesn’t mean I’m interested.”

“Right,” he replies, a teasing smile playing on his lips. “Just like I’m sure you don’t enjoy sex. Who are you trying to convince here?”

I can’t help but laugh a little, even though I want to be serious. “Okay, fine. Maybe I like sex. But it doesn’t mean I want it every day.”

“Ah, but sometimes a little indulgence is good for the soul,” he says, winking.

I glance back at the scene in front of us. The man now has two fingers buried inside her, and they curl upward with a precision that makes her back arch. She thrusts her hips to meet his rhythm, her breathless gasps filling the room.

He lowers his mouth to her clit, his tongue moving in slow, calculated strokes. Her entire body shivers under his touch, and I clamp a hand over my thigh, digging my nails in just to stay grounded.

“Oh, you’re so fucking turned on, aren’t you, Dolcezza?”

I need to leave. Now. Before I let him break me down, just like he promised he would. Before I lose myself completely.

Why does he have so much power over me? Why do I cling to it? Ache for it? One look, one word, and I’m undone. It’s pathetic. Worse than pathetic.

I glance at him, sitting there so casually. It’s like he knows he’s already won. And maybe he has. My body is a traitor, my thoughts a mess.

“I’m not,” I whisper, half to him, half to myself, as if saying it enough times will make it true. “I’m not turned on by this.”

“What is it, then?” His question is a trap, one I almost walk into before the man in front slaps the woman’s ass. The sound cracks through the room, sharp and electric. She gasps—half in shock, half in pleasure—and my thighs press together instinctively.

Another slap. Harder. She writhes against him, her pleasure undeniable, and he bends down, licking the red welts with a satisfaction that borders on cruel.

Fuck. That’s unbelievably hot.

“You’re so quiet,” Remo murmurs. His voice is velvet over steel, cutting through my spiraling thoughts. I turn to glare at him, desperate to reclaim some sense of control, but his hand is already brushing a lock of hair behind my ear. His touch is light,

almost casual, but it sets off a chain reaction I can't stop.

“Are you enjoying it that much?” he asks, his lips curving into a knowing smirk. “You can tell me. Maybe you'd like us to put on a show of our own. Right here. Right now.”

I want to snap at him, to deny it with every ounce of indignation I can muster. But when I open my mouth to protest, no sound comes out. And I hate that it makes him chuckle.

I turn back to the couple. They've escalated. The man's movements are now more fervent, more demanding. Her cries grow louder, and I feel the heat rise in my face, my body betraying me yet again.

Remo leans in closer, his breath warm against my ear. His hand rests on the back of my neck, his fingers just grazing my skin, sending shivers racing down my spine.

I catch myself fighting the pull of attraction.

Yet the part of me that has always been drawn to the bad boy type—the kind that promises nothing but trouble—starts to overpower my judgment as I lean toward him.

“Fuck, the things I want to do to you, Dolcezza,” he breathes, his voice thick with intent. “I want to taste you, lick you until you're shaking, slide my fingers inside you, and feel you dripping for me. And when you're begging for more, I'll give it to you. I'll fill you so deep that you'll forget your own name.”

It's not just the words. It's the way he says them, possessive and unrelenting. His tone wraps around me like a physical thing, squeezing the air from my lungs.

It's as if he's already touching me, and I hate that I want him to. Hate that his voice

alone has me trembling. I squeeze my thighs tighter, desperate to stop the pull, but it's no use.

And he knows it.

My hands slide down to my panties, and I'm shocked to find that I'm wet already, so I let my fingers dip under the material and circle my clit, teasing it. I bite back a moan as he continues to whisper in my ear, his voice commanding and sexy and alluring.

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“I’m going to kiss your neck, right under your ear, and then I’m going to slide my tongue down your neck and throat. I’m going to suck your collarbone, bite your shoulder, and mark your skin so everyone will know you belong to me.”

My breath comes out in short pants, my fingers moving faster as I get more and more aroused. I’m not thinking about who is listening and hearing every little whimper and moan that is escaping my lips. All I can think about is him. His voice, his eyes, his body. Him.

“Are you wet for me, baby?” he growls, and I whimper, the sound coming out without my permission.

“Yes,” I moan. “So wet. So fucking wet.”

“God,” he growls. “You are driving me crazy. I can’t wait to sink my dick into your tight pussy, baby. It’s going to feel so good, so wet. And hot. Jesus, it’s going to be amazing. You’re gonna squeeze me, aren’t you? You’re gonna milk my cock with your cunt.”

“Yes,” I whimper. “God, yes.”

“You’re gonna feel so fucking good, aren’t you, baby?”

“I...I...” I’m gasping for air now. My entire body is on fire. My orgasm is right there. All it’s going to take is a few more strokes of my fingers and a few more words from him.

“I want to be in your cunt when you come, Dolcezza,” he demands. “Do it. Now. Come. Come for me. Now!”

I gasp, arching my back as my body shatters into a million pieces, and his name spills from my lips. Over and over and over. I can't stop, and I don't want to. I ride the waves of pleasure, my mind shutting off, my body taking over.

It's the most amazing, incredible orgasm I've ever had, and it's only because of his words.

That's when he leans over and kisses me.

His kiss is rough and demanding, his tongue exploring mine with an urgency that takes my breath away. His hand slides up the back of my neck, tangling in my hair and pulling me closer until there's no space left between us. I moan against his lips, lost in the sensation of being held like this. The kiss makes me dizzy, stirring a deep craving for more.

When he finally pulls back, he looks at me, his eyes a fiery mix of lust and mischief. “You taste so fucking good, Daniela. I can only imagine how much better you'd taste everywhere else.”

He kisses me again, coaxing my lips apart with his tongue and igniting a fire within me that I can't ignore. “That's it, princess,” he murmurs against my mouth. “Let me taste every part of you.”

And before I know it, he's slipping his fingers into my panties and seeking out my clit. I gasp as his fingers find the sensitive bud and rub slow, sensual circles that send shockwaves of pleasure through my body.

“Please,” I beg. “Please, please, please.” I'm not sure what I'm begging for, but I

know I need something. More of him. More of this.

His fingers continue to stroke my clit, building my arousal to new heights. I writhe and squirm, my hips bucking against his hand, desperate for more.

“Please what, baby?” he murmurs.

“Please, fuck me,” I beg, the words tumbling out of my mouth before I can stop them. “Please, fuck me. Fuck me with your big cock. Fuck me until I can’t remember my own name. Until all I can think about is you.”

He chuckles darkly, his fingers still working my clit.

“Tell me you like the name, Dolcezza,” he demands.

I hesitate. He’s already pushed my limits, but this is something else entirely.

“Tell me,” he repeats.

“I like the name,” I murmur.

“You like what?”

“Dolcezza. I like it.”

He groans. “I knew you would. You’re going to make me so happy, baby. Now, say the other thing.”

I take a deep breath. “Please, fuck me, Remo.”

“Mmmm. That’s right. I’m going to fuck you, baby. I’m going to fuck you so hard

and so deep. I'm going to fuck you until you can't walk straight. Until all you can think about is my cock. And when you can't take any more, I'm going to come inside you and fill you up with my cum. Mark you as mine. Would you like that, princess?"

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“Y—yes,” I stammer, barely able to breathe.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Remo. I want you to fuck me. I want you to fill me with your cum. I want to belong to you. I’m yours.”

Then, he continues, his voice rough. “I’ll spill my load on your tits and in your mouth. And then I’ll watch you swallow it all down. Suffice to say, I’m going to fuck you like I hate you.”

The man in front of us has his face buried in the woman’s pussy, lapping at her clit while she wriggles and moans loudly.

A shiver runs down my spine. “Are...are you gonna kill me?”

He doesn’t hesitate when he answers, “No, I won’t. You’re my pet now. Why would I want to kill my sweet little pet?”

The casual certainty in his tone steals my breath. My chest tightens, and I force myself to respond, even though the words come out in a rush. “So I’m just going to be your...fuck buddy?”

His laughter is deep, rich, and maddening. “You misunderstand me, princess.” He leans in closer, his voice dipping lower, more dangerous. “I’ll fuck you whenever I want, however I want, but you’re not my buddy. You’re a pet. Mine.”

Before I can retort, he releases me, and I stumble out of his grasp and collapse onto the cold, unforgiving floor. My hands press against the ground, and I steady myself as I look up at him.

Remo rises from his seat with an almost lazy grace, licking his lips like a predator who knows the hunt is far from over. He shakes his head, amusement flickering in his dark eyes.

“Clear out!” he barks, his voice sharp and commanding.

The couple in front of us freezes, their moment of passion abruptly interrupted. The man carefully helps the woman out of her restraints, and together, they exit the room without so much as a backward glance.

Now, it’s just me and him.

I sit back on my heels, my body taut with conflicting emotions—rage, fear, and an unwelcome, undeniable heat. He’s watching me, his stare heavy and unrelenting.

He taps the top of his nose with two fingers, a mocking gesture that feels like he’s peeling back my defenses layer by layer. “I know women like you,” he says, his tone laced with quiet menace. “You think you’re better than everyone else. Strong-willed. Stubborn. Trying to prove a point to the world.”

He steps closer, his boots echoing ominously on the floor. “But believe me, princess, I’ve broken men far stronger than you. And you?” He crouches in front of me, so close that I can feel the heat radiating off his body. His voice drops when he adds, “I will break you. That’s not a threat. It’s a promise.”

Chapter 8

Daniela

The walls of this room mock me. Every gilded edge, every silk-draped surface, whispers of wealth so cold that it burns. It's not my home. It's a cage dressed up in luxury, and the locked windows don't let me forget it.

Adeline's call echoes in my head. Her voice had been bright, normal. Like life hadn't turned upside down. "Let's grab a coffee," she said. Like I can just walk out of here and stroll into a café.

I shove my feet into sneakers and yank open the door. The two guards are there, the same as always. Luca and Stefano—stone-faced statues in expensive suits. I try not to look at their holsters.

"I'm heading out," I say, keeping my tone clipped and casual. "Don't wait up."

Luca doesn't blink. "You'll need Remo's permission."

"Excuse me?" My voice rises before I can stop it. "I'm not a kid asking to stay out past curfew. I'm going to see a friend. Now, move."

They don't move. Stefano's lips twitch—almost a smile, but not quite. "Rules are rules."

Frustration boils over. "Rules? What, you think this is normal? Keeping someone locked up like this? You don't get to tell me where I can or can't go."

"It's not us." Luca's voice is calm and flat. "Talk to him."

I glare at them for a beat longer, then spin on my heel. Fine. I'll talk to him. I'll march into his office, throw the door open, and demand answers. But the thought of

facing Remo makes my stomach churn. His presence is like a storm—calm one moment, devastating the next.

Still, anger pushes me forward. My sneakers squeak against the polished wood floors as I head toward his office. When I get closer, I slow down. Voices drift through the slightly open door.

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“...needs to be handled before he causes more problems,” a man says. His voice is deep, gravelly.

“He’s back in New York,” another replies. “The wedding is our chance. It’s clean. Simple.”

“Simple.” That voice belongs to Remo. It’s low, almost lazy, but there’s steel under it. He could be discussing the weather or deciding someone’s fate. Probably the latter.

I shouldn’t be here, but I can’t make myself leave. I edge closer, peering through the crack. Remo sits at his desk, his posture relaxed, one hand resting on a stack of papers. Two men stand before him, one holding a photograph. Remo takes it, glances at it, then tucks it into his jacket.

“It’ll be done,” he says. “Make sure there’s no blowback.”

My pulse hammers as I step back. Unfortunately for me, my sneakers scuff against the floor, and the sound is deafening.

“Do you have a habit of eavesdropping, or is it just with me?”

I freeze. His voice reverberates through the air, sharp and precise. Slowly, I step into the doorway. Remo’s eyes lock onto mine, cold and unreadable, and the men with him glance at me, their expressions impassive.

“I wasn’t eavesdropping,” I say, lifting my chin. “I was looking for you.”

“Congratulations. You found me.” He leans back in his chair, folding his hands in his lap. “What do you want?”

“I want to leave. Adeline called, and I’m meeting her for coffee.”

He studies me like I’m a puzzle that’s missing pieces. “And you thought you’d just...stroll out?”

I grit my teeth. “I didn’t think I needed to ask for permission to have a life.”

His lips twitch, not quite a smile. “You’re bold. I’ll give you that. But no, you don’t leave without my say-so.”

I take a step closer, fists clenched. “Why? What’s the point of keeping me here? You’ve already made your threats. I get it. I’m not going to the cops.”

Remo tilts his head. “Trust isn’t about threats, Daniela. It’s about control. And you don’t have any.”

“That’s not trust. That’s paranoia.”

“Call it whatever you want.” He stands, the movement fluid, predatory. “I know about the call, by the way.”

The room tilts. “What?”

“Your phone is tapped.” He says it so casually, like he’s commenting on the weather.

“You’re spying on me now? Jesus, Remo, do you even hear yourself?” My voice shakes, but I don’t care. “This isn’t normal. It’s sick.”

His eyes narrow, and for a moment, something dangerous flickers there. Then it's gone. "Normal doesn't apply here. Not to you. Not to me."

I swallow hard, my voice rough. "At least call off your watchdogs on me today. If I show up with too many bodyguards to see Adeline, she'll know something's up."

He studies me for a long beat like he's deciding whether to entertain the request. I can see the cogs turning behind those piercing eyes, but he doesn't answer right away. His mouth opens slightly like he has something else to say, but then he closes it again, the moment hanging in the air between us.

We both know what we're thinking anyway. Since that night at the club, neither of us has been ready to speak about it. The raw, unspoken weight of what almost happened still lingers, and maybe it's better left buried.

Remo shifts his posture, a slight change in his stance that signals his decision. "You can go," he finally says. "But remember this: if you try anything funny, if you even think about running—" He steps closer, his voice dropping to a lethal whisper. "I'll know. And you'll regret it."

The door to Remo's office slams shut behind me, and the sound echoes down the hall like a judge's gavel. My fists curl at my sides, my nails biting into my palms. I breathe through clenched teeth, steadying myself.

He gets under my skin so easily. It's maddening.

The guards glance at me when I approach the door to the outside, their expressions blank as ever. One of them, the taller one with a buzz cut, steps aside wordlessly. I push the door open, letting the cool winter air slap me in the face.

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Good. At least they won't stop me now.

Adeline is already waiting when I step into the café we usually visit. Her blonde hair is pulled into a messy bun, and a scarf is wound loosely around her neck. She's scrolling through her phone, her lips twitching with some silent amusement. Probably some ridiculous meme. The sight brings a pang of nostalgia I can't afford to entertain right now.

"Hey, Dani!" Adeline's face lights up when she spots me. She waves, drawing a few glances from nearby tables. Subtlety has never been her strong suit.

She's always had this infectious energy that makes everything feel just a little less heavy.

She lives in Bay Ridge, a neighborhood in Brooklyn with a cozy, small-town vibe that's a far cry from the chaotic, darker parts of New York I'm stuck in. She teaches kindergarten, and as far as I can tell, she's genuinely happy doing it.

I can't remember exactly how we met. It was probably something dumb like I was sitting by myself at some coffee shop, sketching, lost in my usual miserable thoughts, and she just walked up and started talking.

She wasn't bothered by my grumpy silence. I can't even say how it happened, but somehow, she became this constant in my life. Even when everything around me seemed to crumble, Adeline didn't change. She'd laugh at my sarcasm, crack jokes about my tendency to brood, and when I was at my worst, she'd drag me out of my cave just to remind me that life wasn't all black-and-white.

I never really understood her optimism. Maybe because it was so...foreign. In a life where every smile felt like it was hiding something, hers always seemed real, even when it shouldn't have been. Maybe that's why we worked, why we became friends. She didn't try to fix me, didn't try to pull me out of my darkness.

She just let me be, and that was enough.

Even though we couldn't be more opposite. She finds joy in the little things. Things like kids' drawings on the fridge, coffee breaks with coworkers, and buying plants that never seem to die in her apartment. Whereas I'm this walking disaster, constantly dragging myself through a mess of my own making. I can't even imagine a life where I didn't meet her, where she wasn't there to balance me out, no matter how different we were.

I force a smile and slide into the chair across from her. "Hey."

Her eyes narrow the way they always do when she's studying me. "You look...off."

"Off?" I grab the menu and flip it open like I care about the options.

"Yeah, off. Like you've been holding in a sneeze for ten minutes. What's going on?"

I huff a laugh, more out of habit than humor. "Nothing's going on. I'm just tired."

She raises a brow. "Tired doesn't usually come with a side of brooding intensity, Dani. Spill."

I hesitate. Lying to Adeline feels like carving pieces out of myself, but what choice do I have? "I've just got a lot on my plate. Work stuff, life stuff. You know how it is."

Her lips press into a line, but she doesn't push. "Alright. But you're telling me the truth eventually. I'll drag it out of you if I have to."

"I'm sure you will." I crack a grin, the most real one I can muster.

When the waitress comes by, we order. Adeline chatters about her week while I nod along, my responses automatic. I should be paying more attention, but my mind keeps drifting back to Remo—his warning, his infuriating calm, and the way he always seems to know everything before I do.

I can't shake the memory of his fingers inside me, moving with a knowing touch, and the taste of his lips when he kissed me, as if he was savoring every moment before he unleashed his fullest desire. The words he spoke linger in my mind, igniting a warm ache deep within me.

I'm going to fuck you until you can't walk straight. Until all you can think about is my cock. And when you can't take any more, I'm going to come inside you and fill you up with my cum. Mark you as mine. Would you like that, princess?

"You're not listening," Adeline says suddenly, cutting through my fog.

"I am!" I reply a little too quickly, but I know my voice lacks conviction.

"Okay, then what did I just say?"

I blink, scrambling. "Uh, something about your boss being an idiot?"

Her eyes narrow again. "Lucky guess. Dani, seriously, what's going on? You've been weird for weeks."

I swallow the lump in my throat. "I'm fine, Addie. I promise."

She leans back, crossing her arms. “You’re the worst liar, you know that?”

I don’t respond. I can’t.

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The waitress brings our drinks, and thankfully, the conversation shifts to safer topics. We talk about books Adeline is reading, a new coffee shop she wants to try, and the ridiculous amount of snow predicted for next week. For a moment, I let myself sink into normalcy and pretend I'm just another twenty-something having coffee with her best friend.

However, I can't help but still think about him.

As we're finishing up, Adeline checks her phone. "Oh! Before I forget, there's this art exhibit downtown that I think you'd love. It's some local artist with a focus on family and grief. Thought it might inspire you."

My chest tightens. Family and grief. How fitting.

"I'll check it out," I say, my voice carefully neutral.

"Good. And don't make excuses this time. You need to get out more, Dani. Life's too short to stay stuck."

Life's too short. If only she knew how true that was.

When we leave the café, the cold air bites harder than before, seeping through my coat. Adeline gives me a quick hug before heading to her car and waving as she drives off. I watch until her taillights disappear, the knot in my chest tightening.

I turn to head home, but a prickling sensation stops me. It's the kind that tells me I'm being watched. I glance over my shoulder. There's nothing but the usual bustle of city

life. People, cars, flickering neon signs.

Still, the feeling doesn't fade.

I start walking faster, my heartbeat picking up. A shadow flickers in the corner of my eye, and I whip around. A man stands across the street, his stare fixed on me. He's tall, dressed in a dark coat, and his hands are shoved into his pockets.

One of Remo's men?

I don't wait around to find out.

I dart down the sidewalk, weaving through clusters of people. My boots slap against the pavement, the cold seeping through the thin leather. The man across the street doesn't follow, but the knot of unease in my chest tightens.

Every step I take feels like it echoes louder than it should, and every glance over my shoulder brings no reassurance. The man doesn't follow, but his stillness across the street unnerves me more than if he had.

Gripping my phone tightly, I duck into a nearby alley. The city's noise fades here, replaced by the faint hum of a neon sign and the occasional clink of glass bottles. I consider calling Adeline, but what could I even say?

Hey, I think someone's watching me. And it probably has something to do with the brooding, sinfully hot man I live with now. Oh, did I mention I'm his prisoner? And a few days ago, I came on his fingers while we watched a couple fuck in a basement below a club where he murdered a man in cold blood. You know, just your usual mafia drama.

Before I can decide, a familiar voice cuts through the silence. "Relax, Dans. If anyone

were trying to snatch you, they'd be a lot less obvious about it."

I spin around to find Livia leaning against the brick wall with her arms crossed. She's almost swallowed by her leather jacket, but her sharp green eyes practically glow under the neon light. A smirk tugs at her lips as she steps forward.

"You scared me," I snap, trying to slow my racing heart. "What are you even doing here?"

"Babysitting, apparently." She pulls her phone from her pocket and waves it like a badge. "Remo sent me. Said you might get 'distracted.'"

I grit my teeth. "Distracted? I was just grabbing coffee with a friend, not plotting my great escape."

Her smirk widens. "Sure, and I'm not secretly working on hacking the Vatican's security system for fun."

I can't tell if she's joking, but I let it slide. "Did he send you because of that guy across the street?"

Livia glances toward the alley entrance and shrugs. "What guy?"

I turn to see that no one is there. What? He was just standing there.

I cross my arms, trying to push the unease back down my throat. It's not like I've never been watched before—hell, it's practically my life at this point—but something about the way that guy stood there, so still and quiet, doesn't sit right with me.

Livia doesn't seem worried, but she looks over at me for a second, thoughtful.

“You okay?” she asks, a little softer now.

I shake my head, letting out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “I’m fine.”

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Livia doesn't look convinced, but she doesn't press. Instead, she pulls the car into a parking spot in front of the building. "Let's get inside before you freeze to death." She gives me a half-smile, though it doesn't reach her eyes—like she's trying to make sure I don't fall apart on her.

I nod and step off the sidewalk. Then, I open the car door and slide into the passenger seat.

We drive in silence for a while, the only sound being the hum of the engine and the occasional swipe of the wipers across the windshield as the rain starts coming down.

. My mind drifts back to the man. He wasn't one of Remo's men. I would've recognized him. But that doesn't make him any less dangerous. And something about his eyes...it was like he knew exactly who I was.

But I don't tell Livia any of this. I don't want her to think I'm paranoid.

I decide to distract myself with other pressing things. "You've known Remo for some time now, right? Does he trust anyone? Or is paranoia just his default setting?"

She considers this, her expression turning thoughtful. "Trust isn't exactly his strong suit. But he's not completely heartless. He's...complicated."

"Complicated?" I scoff. "That's an understatement."

Livia snorts. "Tell me about it. He's been brooding more than usual lately. Which is saying something, considering 'brooding' is basically his resting state."

I hesitate, the urge to pry tugging away at me. “Why do you think that is?”

She narrows her eyes at me like she’s trying to decide how much to say. “I don’t know. And trust me, I’ve been around him long enough to notice when something’s off. This—whatever’s going on with him—is different. He’s quieter. More...I don’t know. Intense.”

“That’s reassuring,” I mutter..

Livia leans closer, lowering her voice. “Look, I’ve seen him take down entire operations without breaking a sweat. He doesn’t let people in, not easily. If he’s acting weird, it’s probably because of you.”

I blink, caught off guard. “Me?”

She shrugs. “You’re not exactly easy to ignore. Stubborn, defiant, and mouthy...you’ve got a knack for getting under his skin. Not many people do.”

I don’t know how to respond, so I don’t. Instead, I focus on the blur of shops and buildings as we drive past, trying to let her words roll off me.

“Anyway,” she says, sitting up straighter, “look at it this way. You’ve had a taste of freedom for a whole day. That’s more than Remo would usually allow. I’d rather not deal with his bad mood if you’re late.”

I roll my eyes, muttering under my breath, “As if that’s my fault.” I take my eyes off the road and glance at her. “How did you end up working for him?”

Her lips twitch like she’s debating whether to give me the real answer. “Let’s just say he found me at the right time. I was good at getting into places I wasn’t supposed to, and he needed someone with my...skill set.”

“And you trust him?”

Livia’s grip tightens on the wheel for a split second, her expression unreadable before she answers, “Trust might be a stretch. But loyalty? Yeah, I can do loyalty.”

Her answer doesn’t surprise me, but it doesn’t ease the knot in my stomach either.

We pull up in front of the sleek building that looms over the street as though it owns it, the penthouse where Remo’s world spins around its own rules. The city lights reflect off the polished windows, and the weight of the evening sky settles heavily in the air.

Livia slows to a stop before putting the car into park. She looks at me for a beat before nodding toward the entrance. “Home sweet home, Dans. Buckle up.”

I don’t reply. As I slide out of the car and head toward the building, her words echo in my mind. Loyalty, not trust. In Remo’s world, maybe that’s all anyone can afford to give.

Chapter 9

Remo

I can’t believe this is my life now.

I’m sitting in my car like some second-rate stalker, parked a few streets away from the café. The leather seats hug me like they know I’m losing my grip. My car’s tinted windows keep me hidden, not that it helps. I still feel like a fucking idiot.

The car is too quiet, almost suffocating, and I try to convince myself that this is fine. Normal, even.

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She's on another date with her friend, Adeline. I could've had one of my drivers take her. I should've, really. But no, I had to be the one to do it. And now, instead of driving away like a sane person, I'm sitting here, refusing to leave. Why? Because I'm going fucking psycho, that's why.

So here I am, watching Daniela through the window like I have nothing better to do with my life. She's laughing, smiling, and looking like she hasn't been dragged straight into my world of shit. That damn smile. It's almost enough to make me forget everything, almost enough to convince me she really can be happy without me there to ruin it.

My fingers tap the steering wheel, the sound too loud in the car.

"Stupid," I mutter under my breath. But I'm not leaving.

She doesn't notice me, doesn't even look in my direction. Good. Let her have this moment. She deserves it, though it doesn't stop the irritation building inside me.

I should hate her for making me notice these things.

The way her head tilts when she laughs at something Adeline says, how her fingers play with her coffee cup, tracing the rim like she's trying to hold onto something that isn't slipping away. I hate that it gets under my skin. I hate that it pulls at something deep inside me that I've buried for so long. I'd like to say I don't care. That I don't give a damn about her being this...this normal.

But I can't shake the feeling that I've become obsessed with the little details. The

way she looks at the world, the way she breathes when I watch her sleep at night.

The soft clink of cups and the hum of voices from the café make me feel like I'm living in some other world. I watch them from behind the tinted glass, not because I'm worried but because I can't tear myself away.

The way she moves, the way she gestures when she talks...it's everything I can't stand and everything I can't get enough of. I tell myself it's because I don't trust her out here, not without me.

But deep down, I know it's something else.

The days with her are blending into a mess of contradictions. I'm sick of her being here, but I can't stand the thought of her leaving. I lie to myself, telling myself I took her in to protect her. That's a joke. I wanted her in my house, in my space, where I could see her, watch her. Touch her.

That night at the club? It wasn't about trying to prove a point to her. It was my damn fixation to watch her come apart in my arms. To see the hunger in her eyes. To say the thoughts that have been swirling in my mind for months. How badly I wanted to see her naked. To ravage her. To kiss her and taste her flowery scent that has been driving me crazy.

It's not the Russians I keep lying to myself about, the arms deal, or any of that shit. It's about watching her and seeing her face when she realizes what kind of monster I am. It's watching her sleep at night, listening to her breaths, and counting the seconds between each inhale as if it would make me forget what I was doing.

That I'm losing my mind. Fixated on my consuming need to possess her.

I've always been in control. Always. So why does it feel like I'm losing my grip

every time I'm around her? Like I'm a damn fool who can't keep his hands to himself.

But I don't let myself think too hard about that right now. I'm supposed to be focused and in control. So I keep watching. I need to give her some space, right? I can't suffocate her, at least not yet.

I glance at my phone. The call I took earlier about the mafia business distracts me and pulls me back into the real world. I flip through emails while I try to drown out the nagging voice in my head that keeps reminding me I'm a fool for even letting her think she has a choice.

Then my phone buzzes. Marco's voice cuts through the air, and I pull my eyes away from the window. "What's up?" I answer, flipping through some emails while I listen to him.

The conversation about business drags on, and the details are irrelevant, but I stay on the line anyway. I try not to look at the café, but I can feel my attention slipping. My eyes drift back, and when I look up, she's gone.

Goddammit.

I swear under my breath, push the door open, and storm into the café. My eyes dart around the bustling space, scanning every face. I can't find her. Not at the table where I last saw her. And not by the window, where I thought she'd be. I march to the counter, and the barista, a young guy with a scruffy beard, looks at me like I'm a pissed-off bulldozer.

"Did a girl with red hair and a friend just leave?" I ask, trying to keep my tone level, though it's hard with my blood simmering in my veins.

“Uh, yeah,” he stammers, pointing toward the back door. “They left through the alley.”

I swear, if she’s gone and done something stupid, I’m going to lose it. I turn without another word and storm out of the café. I pull up my phone, check the tracker on her, and—of course—she’s gone straight to her damn apartment. Like clockwork. Predictable.

I follow.

I pull up outside her building and slam the car into park. My fingers grip the steering wheel so hard that my knuckles turn white. I don’t even bother to get out of the car until I’ve counted to ten, trying to force some semblance of calm into me. But I can’t. Not anymore.

I march up to her apartment door, and it doesn’t take long for her to open it. Her eyes are wide, like she’s not expecting me. But that’s the thing about me. I show up when I want. When I need to.

“Remo, what the hell are you doing here?” She doesn’t even try to hide the anger in her voice. Not that I expect her to.

I step inside without asking, and her eyes narrow. That defiant look. It only makes the hunger inside me worse.

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Before she can close the door behind her, I hear a faint sound. A giggle. Adeline's voice, I think, from somewhere deeper in the apartment.

I turn toward it, and my eyes lock on the blonde woman emerging from the hallway. She freezes when she sees me, her eyes wide and surprised. She doesn't look scared, just confused. It seems she's trying to figure out who the hell I am and why I'm suddenly looming in her best friend's apartment.

She crosses her arms, glancing from me to Daniela. "Uh, hi?" she says, taking a step back. "Who are you?"

I can't help the smirk that spreads across my face. This is almost too perfect. "Who? Me?" I say with a sarcastic chuckle, giving Daniela a look that I'm sure is dripping with possessive intent. "I'm her boyfriend. Don't you know?"

Adeline's eyes widen, and she raises an eyebrow. "Boyfriend?" She looks at Daniela, who's too stunned to speak for a second. "Since when?"

I shrug nonchalantly, trying to make it seem like the most natural thing in the world. "A few weeks now." I shoot Daniela a glance. "Didn't you tell her, baby?"

Daniela, of course, looks like she wants to strangle me. She clenches her fists, her jaw tight with frustration. "Remo, don't—"

But I cut her off, not even looking at her. "Adeline, right?" I ask, directing my attention back to the blonde. "Sorry to cut your girl time short, but I think it's time for you to go." And with that, I turn back to Daniela. "Me and you are going to have a

talk right now.”

Adeline’s not stupid. She takes a long look at me, then at Daniela, and just shakes her head with a short laugh. “You two are...something else.”

I don’t wait for her to say anything more. I step in front of her and give her a polite nudge out the door. “Go on. Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of her.”

As I close the door behind her, I hear her call back, “If you hurt her, I’ll track you down. And I’m serious.”

I watch Daniela flinch, and I know she’s trying to hold her ground. But I don’t give her the space to argue. I walk right past her, into the apartment, and start pacing. Her place looks small and too normal for what I’m used to. No luxury, just a mess of sketches, art supplies, and photographs that make me feel like I’m intruding on something personal. Like I don’t belong here. But I don’t care. I step into her world with my boots heavy on the floor, making sure she knows I’m here.

She crosses her arms and glares at me. “Seriously, Remo?”

I stop and face her. “You think you can run away? From me?” I take a step closer, my voice dropping low. “Didn’t I tell you notto do exactly that? You’re to be wherever I want you, however I want you. Whether you like it or not.”

“And I told you I’m not your damn property,” she snaps.

I’m so damn tired of hearing her talk like she has any real power. “You think your little escape is some kind of victory?” My patience wears thin. “You’re not as free as you think you are, Daniela. Now that you’re involved with me, there are people who won’t even bat an eyelash before they use you against me.” I take another step forward, my eyes darkening. “I’m not doing this for me. I’m doing this for you.”

She holds her ground, even though I can see the flicker of uncertainty behind her eyes. “I’m not stupid. You can’t manipulate me into staying with you. I’m not some pet you can lock in a cage, Remo.” She spits the words out like venom. “And I’m not afraid of you.”

I step closer, too close. I can smell the faint trace of her perfume, and it does nothing to settle the fire inside me. “You should be.”

The words hit her like a punch. I can see it in her eyes—the fear she won’t admit, the understanding that no matter what she does, she’s tangled in my world now.

Her voice trembles when she speaks again. “You don’t own me.”

“I don’t have to,” I reply. “You’re mine either way.”

And that’s the truth, isn’t it? It doesn’t matter if she tries to run. She’s already mine. She just doesn’t know it yet.

I lean in, my tone colder, more commanding. “I guess I better start showing you.” Then, without breaking my stare, I say, “Take off your clothes.”

Her eyes flash with anger, but she doesn’t speak. For a moment, we just stare at each other, the tightness between us thick as smoke. She wants to fight. She wants to scream. But she knows she can’t defy me. She’s not stupid. She knows the kind of danger I can bring.

But she doesn’t give up. She never does. And maybe that’s what kills me.

“Don’t test me, Daniela,” I murmur softly. “You know exactly what I’m capable of when I’m angry.”

She says nothing, her stare hard and unwavering. I can see her body tense as she fights against the words bubbling up inside her, but she refuses to back down.

Neither will I.

Stepping closer, I grab her by the neck and push her against the wall, the impact making her gasp.

“Remo...what are you doing?”

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“Holy fuck, you smell so fucking good.” I let a finger slip past the waistband of her jeans, teasing, but I don’t let it go inside. I just drag it downward toward her core. I press my fingers against the hard material, cupping her through it. Hovering, teasing. “If I slip my fingers inside, will I find you wet?”

She doesn’t answer, so I bite down on her neck—not too soft, but enough to make her jump. “Yes...yes.”

“Good girl.” With one hand, I squeeze her breasts through her shirt and bra, fondling her through the material with enough pressure to make her arch her back off the wall. Meanwhile, the other hand presses a finger down into her pussy, nearly sending her flying out of my arms. “Why do you insist on defying me, Dolcezza? Do you like making me angry?”

I tighten my grip on her neck. “Answer me,” I command.

“N—n—no.”

“I think you do.”

“Remo, please...I’m not trying to do anything.”

My hand slips under her shirt, shoving her bra aside as I twirl a finger around her already-hardened nipple. “I think this is all part of your plan to provoke me, so I’ll teach you a lesson.” I tighten my grip on her neck even harder. “I think you want to see what I’ll do to you, and that’s why you constantly disobey me. You want to know just how angry I can be. How rough I can be when I hold you up against the wall and

slam my dick inside you without any warning. How I'll listen to your pleas and not slow down. How I won't stop pounding into you until your pussy drenches my cock. How I'm going to thrust blindly into you like a fucking animal. Fist my hands in your hair like this..." I grip her hair tightly, pulling her back against me. "And fuck you like I fucking hate you."

"Oh, Remo..."

"And then when I finally feel your orgasm coming, I'll stop, flip you around, and spill my load on your tits and mouth, and watch you swallow every. Single. Drop. Suffice to say, I'll make sure you think twice before running away from me again."

Then I let her go, watching as she stumbles out of my grasp, her body collapsing against the wall.

My steps are deliberate as I make my way toward the sofa and sit down with the confidence of a man who's always been in control. I stare at her like she's the answer to every question I've never asked, every sin I've committed.

The silence is suffocating, and I can feel the weight of it settle between us as I let the room fill with the echo of my voice.

"Now take. Off. Your. Damn. Clothes."

It's a command more than a request, and I see her stiffen at the words. There's hesitation in the way her chest rises and falls and a brief flicker of rebellion in her eyes. But she knows better than to defy me this time.

Her pride might be a shield, but it's already cracked, and she's learned—just like every other time—that fighting me only makes things worse.

With a sharp exhale, her shoulders drop. Slowly, deliberately, she begins to remove her clothes. Each movement is measured, and it's as if she's trying to maintain some illusion of control, but I can see through it. I see the way her fingers tremble when she takes off her shirt, how her breath catches when she shimmies her pants down.

She knows the game. She knows the stakes.

I watch every movement with a kind of cruel satisfaction, savoring the tension, the discomfort, and the way she moves under my stare. She doesn't say a word as she stands there, now only in her undergarments, a strange mix of defiance and submission written across her body.

Her eyes meet mine. There's that flicker of resistance again, a small ember of fight that refuses to be completely extinguished. I don't let her hold it for long.

"Good," I murmur, my voice low, almost a growl. I let the silence stretch, thick and heavy, before I lean back into the sofa and watch her with a hunger that's more than just physical. It's something deeper, something dangerous. "Now, come here."

She doesn't move immediately, and I see the war in her eyes—the part of her that wants to fight, that wants to scream and run, that knows she can't escape me.

When she steps forward, I let her. But I watch her every move, the way she hesitates before taking that first step, the way she steels herself against me. Her breath is shallow, her body taut with tension.

But I don't wait for her to reach me. I stand up, closing the distance between us with a few long strides, and take her chin in my hand, forcing her to look at me, to see the man who owns her every thought.

"You belong to me, Daniela," I whisper, my voice low and threatening, sending a

shiver down her spine. “You’ll never forget that. Not ever.”

Chapter 10

Daniela

When Remo Callegari focuses all his attention on someone, there’s not much you can do. I’ve seen the powerful effect of his stare—the way it says so much with just one look—and I’ve come to hate it. But now that he’s looking at me, my body doesn’t listen to the warnings from my brain. I should run while I have the chance. I should hurry out of the room, fight him, or scratch him. Anything to make him slow down or look away. But I don’t.

I want to see how this goes. I want to be the one he takes to the edge. I want to be the one he pulls into the storm, even knowing it will tear me apart. I want to feel what it’s like to be lost in that chaos, to be consumed by it.

And that thought makes me sick. Sick of myself. Sick of this whole fucking mess.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:44 am

His expression is lazy, and his eyes struggle to stay on my face. Eventually, Remo glances down at my body and chuckles—a rich, low sound that shouldn't be as addictive as it is. It is dangerous, like him, because it makes me want to stay. To listen. To hear him do it again.

“You have an amazing body, Dolcezza,” he says quietly, his eyes darting between my hardened nipples. Damn it. This isn't supposed to happen. I hate him with every part of me, yet his devilish smile makes me feel hot and needy. “Would you ever disobey me again?”

“No.”

Remo isn't surprised by my quick reply. In fact, judging from his dark and brooding expression, it seems he expected me to disobey him, just waiting for a reason to punish me. Punishme. Shit. That shouldn't turn me on, should it? I'm sweating all over from the way he looks at me and the words he hasn't said but communicates with his hard brown eyes. Being punished by someone as ruthless as Remo should scare me, but instead, it excites me.

When he suddenly moves toward me and pulls me up against him, I can't hold back the moan that slips from my lips.

I struggle for a few seconds to free my hands from his firm grip, but Remo doesn't budge. Instead, he pulls me toward him with such force that I almost stumble forward, but he catches me with ease, as though I'm weightless.

My thoughts scatter, my body falls apart, but damn it, the man holding me hasn't

done anything to prove he's capable of kindness, so why is how effortlessly he keeps me in his arms all I'm thinking about?

I can't ignore the way his ruggedness hits me and the way his skin glistens under the dim light, his dark hair now looking softer with streaks of brown where the light hits. A lock of it falls across his forehead, but he doesn't bother brushing it away. As I stare at him, I'm struck by the realization. This monster in front of me is stunning.

But Remo doesn't hurt me the way I thought he might. Instead, he presses me back against the wall, his grip tightening as he lifts both my hands above my head and holds them still.

"Remo, wait." I try to shove him off, but he doesn't move. I like to think my workouts have made me stronger, but standing in front of a man like Remo makes me feel weak. The more I push to get him to back off, the stronger he seems to get. "You're hurting me. Please...just stop. Screw you!"

"Ah." His chuckle is deep and mocking. "I was wondering when you'd use that mouth of yours to spit out nonsense."

"Fuck you."

"I'm going to enjoy fucking that mouth of yours, princess."

He presses his body against mine, and I can feel the hardness of his cock straining against his pants. My mouth drops open. He's looking at me with hunger in his eyes, and I know the same expression is reflected in my own. My goodness! His cock feels amazing, and I haven't even touched it yet. Ever so gently, Remo drops his free hand to my belly and runs his fingers from my navel to the waistband of my panties.

"I...I have a...boyfriend!"

His inspection pauses, but only for a moment. His voice is raspy when he says, “You don’t have to lie. I ran a background check on you, princess. You have no boyfriend. Haven’t had one in years.”

He’s right. There is no boyfriend, but letting someone as dangerous as Remo touch and use me like one of his mistresses feels wrong. I gather all my strength and push against him. This time, I manage to loosen his hold, but it’s not enough to get him off completely.

“I know you don’t really want me,” I mutter, trying to push away from him.

He doesn’t budge, his grip tightening just enough to keep me in place but not enough to hurt. The slight shift is enough to make me feel his presence all around me, suffocating, inescapable.

I try to wiggle out of his grasp, but he lets me slip just enough that I lose my balance and stumble forward. His laugh follows me, dark and mocking.

“If I didn’t want you, you wouldn’t have made it to this moment,” he says, his voice dangerous, the kind that sends a chill running down my spine. He steps closer, closing the gap between us again. His hand reaches out to steady me, but his fingers linger for longer than necessary as if he’s savoring the moment.

“Trust me,” he adds, his words like a promise. Or a warning. There’s something in the way he says it. Like he knows exactly what I’m thinking, exactly what’s running through my head.

I shoot him a glare, but it doesn’t faze him. His smile only grows, as if he enjoys the struggle. As if he knows I can’t escape him, no matter how much I try.

When he reaches for me, I raise my hands to defend myself. But he doesn’t care. His

strength overpowers me, and he drags me to him.

My stomach lurches. And yet, there's something inside me that can't help but want this. It's like he owns me now. Like he's already branded me and marked me with the same scar that runs through his own soul. The need for power, the need to control, to destroy when it suits him, has somehow seeped into my veins.

I hate it. I hate him for making me feel this way.

“At this point, I think you should have figured that I'll do whatever I want with you.”

Remo's close enough to kiss me, but he doesn't. He doesn't say anything for a while. He starts his silent inspection again, looking down at me, his eyes shining in the dark. His long, pretty eyelashes catch my attention, and as I look up at him, I wonder what he'd look like if he were...softer. He steps away, licking his lower lip like he's savoring something. “I want you to take off my shirt.”

“I don't—”

“It's not a question, Daniela. Take off my shirt.”

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The command is blunt, almost crude, yet it holds weight. His voice doesn't leave room for argument. I know the kind of world he comes from. Remo Callegari is one of the most dangerous men alive. He can break through me without a second thought, but he doesn't. Instead, he waits, making his demands clear, giving me a choice. Still, it doesn't make him any less of an asshole.

He's not someone I should want, even though he's undeniably good-looking. It's a sick kind of irony because here I am, standing in front of him, my body drawn to his like I'm some kind of magnet. Every part of me is screaming to turn around and get the hell out, to walk away, but I don't. I know what he's capable of, and yet...I want it.

I undo the buttons of his shirt and slide it off his shoulders to the floor. With his chest bare and heaving, I step back to take him in. His body is as stunning as his face. He's lean and muscular, with a sleeve of tattoos on each arm. His chest is smooth, but there's a light dusting of hair that starts below his navel and disappears down the band of his slacks. Arousal darkens his eyes as he runs his tongue over his lips, wetting them. My body starts to react to this—his tongue gliding softly, the intensity of his stare, and the wild, burning need in his veins.

Remo touches my nipples, taking them between his fingers and twirling them. I let out a sharp, involuntary moan, which makes him smile. I don't need to look down to know my nipples are rock hard, craving his fingers and mouth. When I meet his eyes again, I'm struck by the urgency in his expression.

“You like it when I touch you like this, don't you, Daniela?”

My first instinct is to lie. I don't want him to know the power he has over me. But as I search for the right words to push him away, my body comes alive, confusing me. "Yes, I do."

I'm breathless. Remo hasn't even touched me the way I know I can be touched, yet he's managed to make me so incredibly wet. He tears my panties away in one swift motion and buries his face in them. I shiver with a mix of desire, hate, and a distracting curiosity about which feeling is stronger: the hate or the ache I feel right now.

The golden-brown of his eyes shines with desire as he looks down at me. "You smell like honey. I bet you taste just as sweet."

I won't pretend I haven't been with men who fucked me roughly, but somehow, this feels different, like a first. "I want...."

"You want what, princess? My fingers inside you?" As he asks, he drags two of his fingers slowly across his mouth and wets them, his eyes never leaving mine. Then, he pushes his wet fingers into me, and I let out a soft gasp. He works his fingers inside me with skill, circling and teasing my clit with ease at the same time. "Say it, Daniela. Say you want me to stop fingering your sweet, tight pussy. Just say it."

"Oh God...ohh..."

"Daniela, tell me you'll never disobey me again..." There's a warning in his voice when he growls my name, but I'm too focused on the way he drags his fingers in and out of me, first slowly, then faster. I shut my eyes, but he wraps a hand around my neck and tilts my head up to look at him. "You'll do as I say, you understand?"

No, I won't. That's what I want to tell him, but when I open my mouth, I can't help but whisper, "Yes...yes."

He pulls his fingers out and shoves them into his mouth to taste my juices. He moans against his fingers, and I grow even wetter. “You taste so damn good.”

Without another word, he kneels before me, hooking one of my legs over his shoulder. I glance down at him and swallow loudly when I see him kneeling as if in silent worship. I shut my eyes for a few seconds, trying to calm my racing heart, but he takes it as something more.

“You haven’t been touched like this before, Daniela. You haven’t been licked and bitten, and...fuck, you haven’t been desired like this.”

I realize he doesn’t ask. He already knows. Ugh, he’s such an arrogant jerk. “I hate you.”

“I know.” He laughs hoarsely and swipes his tongue over my clit. I buckle under the weight of it, but he holds me in place, continuing to taste me. It’s useless to resist him when he sucks on me with such wild demands. “Don’t be shy or afraid to show me what you want, princess. Push your hands into my hair...yeah, like that. Use my mouth to please yourself. Yes, take it.”

I do as he says, rocking forward and backward with my hands tangled in the softness of his hair. He sucks on me reverently while I rub against him, moaning like a mad woman. He knows my body and how to use it.

“Fuck...it feels so good.”

He pushes a finger into me, still licking and sucking me while his fingers work their magic. I’m shivering from the sweetness. When I feel my orgasm approaching with incredible force, I tilt my head back, but Remo stops and looks up at me. “No. You don’t come unless I tell you to.”

“But...but I want...I need to come.”

He speeds up his fingers, working me faster. “Then beg for it.”

“Please...let me come.”

“No, you have to do better than that,” Remo growls.

My body feels like it's on fire, but Remo doesn't relent. “Please...please...fucking let me come.”

Thankfully, he nods, satisfied, and runs his tongue along my pussy and pulsing clit. “Come on my tongue.”

And I do, coming fast and hard in his mouth. I still hate him, but it doesn't stop my orgasm from hitting me like a freight train.

Remo stands while I'm shivering and breathing hard from the fiery release. His hands are rough when he pushes me away, nearly slamming me against the wall to face away from him.

“Remo...”

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“Let this be...” He smacks his palm against my buttocks, and I let out a loud, strangled cry. He smacks me again, harder this time, as if punishing me for forgetting what he only just told me today. The sharp sting of pain races through my brain, but it’s not just pain. It’s a desperate kind of pleasure. “... a warning of just what I’ll do to you the next time you choose to be stubborn.”

Another smack rocks my body backward on impulse. A tear escapes my eye at the pain, but then Remo begins rubbing the sting away gently as if he knows he just hit me a little too hard. When he pushes his fingers beneath me to press against my folds, he lets out a low growl that reverberates deep within him.

“You’re so fucking wet again,” he groans. And that’s all it takes for him to slam his cock inside me. I don’t even know when he took off his pants. His thrusts are fast, deep, and burning, but he doesn’t stop.

My hips begin to move, matching his thrusts until we’re rocking together, chasing our orgasms. My body builds higher and higher, and I reach down to the top of my pussy and draw tight circles around my clit, my fingers thrumming over the sensitive bud.

“Fucking hell, your pussy is squeezing my dick so well, Dolcezza.” He throws his head back, his body stilling, and then he shudders when he bites my neck. “You belong to me, Daniela. Me alone, you hear me?”

“Yes...yes, I’m yours,” I moan.

Later, I’ll probably berate myself for agreeing with his words, but for now, I can’t seem to care. I just want him to fuck me without restraint. He pounds into me,

growling with each thrust. “You’re so tight. Fuck, this feels good.”

“Please...don’t stop...”

We reach the peak together, the sounds in the room raw and unrestrained. Remo spills onto my skin. It’s messy, but I don’t mind. As he adjusts his clothes, his voice is distant, almost bored, when he tells me to clean myself up.

The coldness of his words cuts through everything that just happened, reminding me just how much I hate him.

Chapter 11

Remo

I adjust my tie in the mirror, checking my reflection once more. The dark suit fits perfectly. The shoulders are broad, and the collar is stiff. I look nothing like the man I am, like the man I’ve become. But that’s the point.

Marco, dressed similarly, is already at the door, checking his gun. His usual smirk is nowhere to be seen. He’s all business tonight.

“You sure about this, Boss?” he asks. “We could use more men.”

I don’t take my eyes off my reflection in the mirror, but I feel his stare on me. He knows the kind of situation we’re walking into. It’s too delicate to mess up.

I let out a breath. “I want to be as inconspicuous as possible. Trailing in with a bunch of armed guys in suits isn’t exactly the definition of subtle, now, is it?”

Marco doesn’t argue. He knows better. Especially tonight. No room for flashy shows

of power or threats that don't need to be made.

"Marco," I say, "you handle the logistics on the ground. Livia, stay on the systems. Keep everything tight." Then, turning toward the door, I growl, "Let's move."

As I step into the hallway, my eyes glance at the room where Daniela is, isolated, with two of my men posted by the door.

My voice is harsh when I look at them and say, "Make sure she's safe. No matter what. Don't let her out of your sight."

They give me a quick nod. It's all just a precaution, but it feels like more. I'm controlling things even when I'm not there. I made sure to set up a hidden camera in her room because watching her and knowing what she's doing, even when I'm not around, calms me in a sick, twisted way.

It's all just a way to pretend I'm in control. To pretend I'm not losing my grip.

With that, I head for the door. My car's waiting, the engine already rumbling. Livia and Marco are in the front, ready to move.

"We'll get close," I say in a hard voice, pushing the thought of Daniela aside for now. "Angelo's smart. He'll have people watching, so stay sharp. Don't let anyone see us coming."

They don't say anything. They don't need to. We've been through this too many times.

We're heading for a wedding reception tucked away in some private estate. Angelo's daughter is getting married, so it's the perfect cover for a quiet strike.

I should be focused on that, but as we drive through the dark streets, I can't stop thinking about her. Daniela.

What the hell is she doing? Is she okay?

Part of me—the part that's been hardened by this life—wants to dismiss it all. Wants to pretend I'm not losing my mind over a woman. But the other part of me—the part I don't show anyone—wants to just drop everything and rush back to her.

The estate is surrounded by tall gates, and the security is tight—too tight—but that’s nothing new for this line of work. As we pull up, the reception hall stretches out before us, dripping with opulence. Chandeliers hang from the ceiling like ornate, glowing traps, casting shadows across the space.

I scan the room as we walk in. The laughter in the air feels too far away, almost like it doesn’t even touch me. Everyone’s on high alert, watching, waiting. But not me. I’m here for a reason, and it has nothing to do with making small talk.

I take the lead. In a tight suit and with a sharp British accent, it’s the perfect disguise. No one knows who we are, and that’s how I like it.

Livia’s right behind me with her tablet open and plugged into the network.

“Everything’s in place,” she whispers, more to herself than anyone. “We’ve got eyes on Angelo. It’s time.”

“You seem more tense than usual tonight, Boss.” Marco’s eyes flick to me before they quickly shift back to scanning the room. “Something bothering you?”

I don’t answer right away. I let my eyes sweep across the reception hall, feigning casual observation, but it’s all a ruse. I know exactly what Marco’s doing, probing and trying to get inside my head. He’s trying to dig. About her. He’s a smart guy, but he doesn’t know shit about this.

Maybe, just maybe, I've let some cracks show. But it doesn't mean he gets to ask.

I keep walking, ignoring his question, but Marco's never one to let go easily. Not when he senses weakness.

"You are tense," he presses again. "She's got you rattled? You've been acting different lately. Why haven't we killed her yet? It's been months already, keeping her alive and dragging this out with her around—"

Something inside me snaps—a fuse lighting a fire I can't ignore. The nerve.

I slow my steps and pivot to face him. My jaw clenches so hard that it hurts, my teeth grinding together as I force the words out between them.

"Marco," I growl, the threat in my voice low. "If you want to keep breathing, you better mind your own fucking business."

His eyes harden like stone, but he doesn't flinch. The bastard knows better. He's loyal, but loyalty isn't a free pass to ask questions that shouldn't be asked.

I take a step closer, leaning in just enough so he can feel the heat of my breath against his ear. "You wanna get us both killed by running your mouth? You think I give a shit about anything other than this job? Focus on the mission. Or you'll end up on the other side of my knife."

Marco doesn't speak. His lips tighten, and I see it in his eyes. He's processing, backing off. Good. He knows when to stop. And tonight? I'm not in the mood for games. Not now. Not ever.

We continue moving through the crowd and looking for the one that matters. Angelo's somewhere in here, and I'm not leaving without him.

Livia's movements draw my attention, the subtle shifts as she blends into the background, her eyes darting around, never fully settling. She's good, too good. But something's off. I just don't have time to figure out what it is right now.

I spot Angelo across the room, flanked by his bodyguards. The bastard's still playing king, thinking he's untouchable. I feel the anger coil in my gut, but I keep it in check. Focus. Patience.

I turn to Marco. "Take the exits. I want them covered. Livia, you're with me. We move when I say so."

They nod, and I don't wait to see if they follow.

And then it happens.

"Livia?" The voice rings out across the room, loud enough for a few people to glance in our direction. "Livia Moretti? Is that really you?" The man's eyes lock with hers. He's standing by the bar with a few others surrounding him, but the second their eyes meet, I see it—the flicker of recognition on his face.

Livia's entire body stiffens like she's been hit with a jolt of electricity. For a moment, I think she might run, but she doesn't. She freezes, pale as a ghost.

She forces a smile, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about," she says, her voice unsteady.

She tries to look past him and pretend like he's not there. But he's not having it.

"You don't recognize me?" His grin stretches wide, mocking. "Guess I wasn't good enough for a second date, huh? Well, it was to be expected after you fucked your ex's best friend."

The crowd laughs. It's harmless, in theory. But for Livia? It's anything but.

I step forward. My jaw is locked tight, my temper ready to boil over. "Hey," I snap, my voice cutting through. "What did you say?"

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The man falters, but only slightly, his grin wavering just enough. He shifts his stare from Livia to me, confusion flashing in his eyes.

“Just making a joke, man. No harm meant.” The words come out rushed and nervous now, but it’s too late.

I don’t give him time to explain further. I close the gap between us and lower my voice to a deadly whisper, “You have about thirty seconds to apologize before I take the gun from my holster that’s underneath this suit and shove it so far down your throat that you’ll choke on your blood before you even have a chance to beg for mercy.”

His eyes widen, panic creeping in as he stammers out a half-hearted, “I’m sorry.”

“Good.” I step closer to him, my presence imposing, pressing him further down. “Let this be the last time you ever open your stupid mouth and embarrass a lady, no matter what she’s done.”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I was just hurt. She lied to me. She told me she was dating her boss, Remo Callegari, and used that to scare me off. I swore I’d get her back.”

The mention of my name hits me like a bullet to the chest. I see it—the moment he says it. I see the flash of recognition in Angelo’s guards’ eyes. It’s a split-second reaction, but it’s enough.

The guards immediately go on high alert. One of them murmurs into his receiver, and I barely have time to shove the man aside before chaos erupts.

The shots come so quickly. The room explodes into chaos, with people screaming, running, and diving behind tables and chairs for cover. The explosion of violence is the last thing I expected, but it's the first thing I know how to handle.

I shove Livia behind me. Marco is already on the move, covering me from the side. Gunshots echo through the room, but it's nothing new to me. This is the world I know, the one I've been living in for years. The only thing that matters right now is survival.

I catch a glimpse of Livia. Her hands are pressed against her ears, her eyes wide and distant. She's lost, shaken.

"Pull your freaking self together and shoot!" Marco yells at her, tossing a gun into her hands.

The room erupts in a storm of bullets as Angelo's men swarm us, and we're left fighting for our lives. It's all instinct now, the kind of violence that has become second nature.

The wedding's clearly over. The reception is now a war zone. People scramble for cover behind overturned tables and broken chairs, and windows shatter as people dive through them, desperate to escape.

Screams fill the air, chaos reverberating off the walls.

I drop three men before Marco even moves, though his shots are just as fast and precise. The three of us are a well-oiled machine, trained to fight, to kill, to survive.

I reload my gun. My eyes continue to scan the room, scanning for any threat, but it's Angelo I spot. There, hiding behind the makeshift throne, the pathetic little coward.

The bastard didn't cost me much, just a little betrayal. Snitching to the police over one of our previous powder shipments. He set off a chain of investigations that had me burying operations for months, compromising intel, and feeding it right to the enemy. I didn't have the time to hunt him down before, as it was buried in the mess that came with getting everything back on track.

But now? I'm done waiting. I don't do "later." I take care of shit when it's in front of me. And right now, Angelo is in front of me.

I give Marco a brief glance, signaling him to cover me as I move toward the other side of the room, where the rat's hiding. He's too distracted by his own fear to see me coming, too wrapped up in his pathetic little world to notice that death's coming for him.

I get to him quickly and silently. I knock the groom out with the back of my gun, and the loud thud of his head hitting the ground is enough to rattle the bride. She looks up, and fear immediately spreads across her face.

"Dad—" she starts, but I don't hesitate. I knock her unconscious too. A bit of generosity, given the occasion.

"Wait, Remo. Let's talk about this," Angelo pleads, his voice shaking. "I'm sorry, but I didn't have a choice. It was either me or you."

I look at him, and for a moment, I actually think about it. What he's saying isn't wrong. It's instinct, survival. It's what everyone would do in his position.

"Well," I say, my voice cold, "it's normal to put yourself first in such a situation. I completely understand. But you've had your turn. Now it's mine."

"Remo, wait—" he begs, but it's too late.

I fire two shots straight to the mouth. And another in the center of his forehead. His body slumps forward, his life draining out of him.

I stand there, staring down at him and the blood pooling around his body. The satisfaction is brief, a flicker that dies before it can even register. I've done this a thousand times before, and it's never different. The feeling never changes.

Victory doesn't feel like victory after so many years of this.

Nothing really lasts. The power fades the moment it's in your hands, the moment you realize nothing you do can ever hold it all together.

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The team moves in, and Marco is at my side, checking me over the way he's always done. His eyes flick to my shoulder.

"Boss, you've been hit."

I didn't even notice, but it's there. Blood is soaking through my jacket, but I don't care. Not now. Not yet.

"I'm fine," I tell him, my voice clipped. "Livia, let's go."

Livia, still frozen, is slow to react. Her mind is elsewhere, and I know why. It's on that guy, the one who spotted her earlier, the one who could spill everything if he talked.

We don't stop until we're inside the car, and the engine is roaring to life. Marco takes the wheel, but my mind is already spinning. The city whips by, lights flashing in and out of focus, but none of them seem real.

The wedding? Angelo's men? It's all part of the bullshit of this life. It's a job, a mission. And the rest doesn't matter. But the whole damn thing, it feels off.

Somehow, all I can think about is Daniela. She's there in my head, always there, clawing at the corners of my mind. I hate it, but I can't get rid of it.

I stare out the window, watching the streetlights blur into streaks of light. Livia shifts in her seat, catching my eyes for a split second before looking away. The guilt in her eyes is obvious, but I can't afford to care right now.

Marco pulls off the main road, heading toward the safe house.

I glance at Livia, who's still rattled. She's holding herself together, but just barely. "You better pray that guy didn't talk," I warn her.

She snaps back at me, defensive. "Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it."

I know the kind of "taking care" she means. She'll find him, and she'll end it. But I don't answer. Not yet.

We finally reach the safe house. It's quiet, unsettlingly so. The door shuts behind us, sealing us in, and the finality of it cracks through my bones.

I turn to face Livia with my fists clenched tight.

In a blink, I slam her into the wall. The whole damn room shakes, but I don't care. She's barely holding herself up, and for a split second, I relish it.

My hands tremble as I grab my knife. When the cold steel presses against her neck, her breath catches, and I see the panic in her eyes.

"This is the last time you'll ever be this reckless. I don't give a damn who you fuck. But keep my name out of your fucking mouth. You nearly got us all killed, Livia!" I spit. "I told you before. Your personal bullshit doesn't matter. You keep your head in the game, or I'll make sure you don't get a second chance."

She's already apologizing, talking fast, and trying to talk me down with weak words.

"You fucking understand me now?!" I growl as she nods frantically.

Marco has just come back from his perimeter check, scanning for threats. He stands

in the doorway, his eyes steady, loyal without question.

I turn to him and give a quick nod. “Get her out of here.”

There’s no argument. He just grabs Livia by the arm and drags her out without a word.

I’m alone now.

I take a breath, trying to calm the fire burning under my skin.

I move to the bathroom, ignoring the strain in my neck as I peel off my shirt. My shoulder is a mess—the deep cut, bleeding like a damn faucet. I press a rag to it. The burn of the wound hurts like a bitch, but I keep going.

I feel around for the bullet and yank it out with a pair of pliers. The pain’s enough to make my vision swim, but I push through it. After, I pour antiseptic over the hole, cover it with some gauze, and wrap it tight.

Hopefully, it’ll hold for now.

Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I don’t recognize the man staring back at me. Too much chaos. Too much blood. Too much fury.

I take a breath, steadying myself. There’s only one thing left to do.

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I pull my phone out and scroll through the screens to find it—the live feed of Daniela’s room.

It is all I have left.

Chapter 12

Remo

Daniela’s room is empty when I turn on the video.

The lights are on, and the curtains are slightly parted, but she isn’t there. The walls remain bare, yet the room feels uniquely hers. I don’t know how she does it—makes things hers without trying too hard—but I suppose she has that power.

I screw open the cap of the gin and toss the liquid into my mouth before flinging it aside. I grabbed three of these from the little fridge in my suite to help dull the thumping pain in my arm. Now, two of them lie empty on the soft, plush carpet. I take a seat on the only chair in the room and glare at the screen.

I wait. One minute. Five minutes. Ten. Just as I’m about to call one of the guards stationed outside her door, Daniela dances into the room.

My God...

She’s completely naked and dripping.

My pulse spikes, and I feel a pull, something possessive, but it's different this time. I don't just want her. I need her.

She takes her towel off, and I hold my breath as I watch. My eyes trace her every movement, trying to memorize it and imprint it on my mind. But there's a rawness to it now, something that goes deeper than the usual attraction. There's a hunger in me that I can't fully explain, one I know will consume me if I let it.

She moves with an elegance that doesn't belong in my world. It's like she's untouched and unbroken by the chaos I've created around us. And for a second, I wonder what it would take to break her.

If I have to say it again and again, I will. Daniela Volpi is one hell of a woman, and with a body like hers, I don't think I could ever want for anything again.

She dances to nothing—no music playing in the background, no humming—but her body twists and turns with the ease of a trained dancer. I catch myself smiling at her. She's beautiful. Her breasts are perky. They're big enough to fit in my palms, with pink, soft-looking nipples. I've tasted them before, and I've cupped and felt her breasts in my hands. But as she jiggles them in her flawless dance, it feels like I'm seeing her naked for the first time.

Daniela stops dancing and sits on the edge of her bed, giggling and breathing hard. Then, she reaches for a bottle of moisturizer on her nightstand. I watch her rub it across her body, and it makes me wish I could do it for her because I want to touch her with that same softness, to feel her curves and skin between my fingers, to map her body so I never forget it.

That's how much she's changed me and how obsessed I've become with her. When she starts combing her fiery hair with her fingers, I feel my cock jerk hard against my pants. Without warning, I let out a deep groan and flick my wrist around my growing

bulge.

Daniela stands and slips into her blue lace panties, the kind that would be too easy to snap open if I were there. She's killing me over here, fuck!

Next, she puts on her nightdress and drops slowly and gracefully onto the bed. Although her movements are simple and innocent, my body thinks otherwise. I want to fuck her so badly that it hurts. I palm my cock through my pants, imagining her kneeling in front of me with a tempting smile on her lips as she takes me in her mouth.

I picture fucking that little mouth of hers so hard that she has no choice but to fall with me.

This isn't helping. Thinking about fucking her doesn't come close to what I desperately need right now. So, against my better judgment, I call her. Through the camera, I hear her startle. She picks up the phone with a groan, and I can't help but chuckle. It's nice to know I still have that effect on her, even if she constantly argues otherwise.

"Hey."

God, it's so good to hear her voice.

"I like those blue panties you've got on. They really suit you. Wanna shop for more together?" I tease, knowing she'll realize I'm watching her.

"What are you talking about?" She scrambles out of bed and moves toward the window, looking a bit flustered.

"Remember what I told you about hanging around the windows for too long?" I

respond casually.

“I thought you said this place was the safest...wait! How do you even know I’m by the window? And seriously, how do you know about my panties?”

“I know a lot of things, princess,” I say, a smirk on my face.

She presses her hand against her chest, her eyes darting around the room as if searching for an explanation.

I swallow deeply, clutching the phone to my ear as I drink her in. “I could always get you more panties. I mean, when I snap this one off your perfect little cunt and fuck you until you’re milking me dry, you might just need them.”

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“Stop it! There’s not going to be any more of that!” she shouts, still glancing around, confused.

I can’t help but chuckle again. “Oh, really? You want to bet on that?”

It takes a moment, but then realization dawns on her. “Wait a second...it’s a camera, isn’t it? You’ve had a camera in my room this whole time? Jesus, Remo—”

“What did I say about using my name?” I’m not really concerned about her calling me by my name, but I’m doing it to see how far I can push her.

“Where’s the camera?!” she demands, choosing to ignore my question but not repeating my name twice. She’s usually stubborn, but I can tell she’s reaching her limit. “Is it in the flowerpot? Seriously, how could someone hide a camera in a room this small?”

“Well, why don’t you try and find out?” I challenge her.

“Oh, you bet I will.” She stands, tiptoes to the flowerpot, and scatters the plants around for a few seconds before changing her mind. I thought it’d take her a while to find the camera, but after the flowerpot, her next choice was the clock on the mantelpiece. Her laughter when she spots the camera is loud and almost affectionate, like this is some inside joke between us, even though I know she’s angry. “So I’ve been watched every day since I’ve been here? That’s some pervert move, Boss.”

I admit I would usually have gotten upset at her calling me a pervert, but suddenly, I don’t care about things like that. Sure, my men and I got the job done, but I suspect

there will be deadly aftershocks, meaning we'll need to be extra prepared when we get back. For now, I just want a taste of normalcy and fucking release.

Damn it, I need to come.

"Take off your nightdress and touch yourself," I demand with a growl.

"You really think I'd just do what you say?" she shoots back, raising an eyebrow.

"I can make you do anything, Daniela. I've got guards all around the house who'd be thrilled to help you if you don't cooperate. I'm sure you don't want that, do you?"

She pauses, considering my words. Then, she snarls, "Fine! I'll do it!"

I pinch my brows together as I take her in. Daniela's close to the camera now after shifting her seat to face me. While I appreciate the gesture, I realize it's also her act of rebellion.

She's saying, If you want a piece of this, you'll get what I give, and I'll be in total control all the way.

Too bad there can only be one person in charge, and it's me. I have a feeling she's about to find that out tonight.

Daniela lifts her nightdress over her head and tosses it to the floor. "You're away, so you can't punish me for not doing what you want," she whispers, a smile playing on her lips that sucks the air from my lungs. "Unless you want to call your guards to do the job? I don't think you like giving up your power, Remo."

She says my name like it's a promise. It's enticing on the tip of her tongue, and I realize how much I like it when she says it like that.

“Remove your panties too...”

Daniela complies, sliding them down and holding them out in front of the camera. “Is this what you want?”

“Daniela...”

She stares at the camera for a moment before putting her phone down and turning on the speaker. “Okay, what do you want me to do?”

That’s more like it. “Be a good girl and get yourself wet for me. Run your fingers along your folds...tell me how it feels.”

She opens her legs wider, leaning back in the chair as she skims her fingers along her slick folds, circling and teasing. A sharp moan escapes her lips, and she twists her head away from the camera, embarrassed by how much she likes it.

“I want you to describe everything to me. Talk to me like I’m right there with you—like it’s my hands on you.”

Daniela looks back at the camera, her breath quickening. “I’m so wet right now...just for you.”

She’s a smoke show. “I’m fucking horny, princess. You have the hottest pussy I’ve ever seen.”

Daniela moans into the call, rolling her head back and clearly enjoying this erotic connection between us. “Can I slide my fingers inside now?”

“No.” As much as I want to see her lose control, I want to see her ache for it too. My body feels like it’s on fire, but I hold back, just watching her through the screen. I

pull out my cock and stroke the head. Fuck. This feels so damn good. "I want to taste you so badly right now. I'm so hard for you."

"Yeah?" Her breath comes in shaky gasps. "Remo, I need...I need this...please."

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“I don’t think you’ve been a good girl, princess. I’m going to tie you up and spank you real hard when I get back.”

“Oh yes, I think I need that,” she whispers with a hint of mischief in her voice.

“Now push two fingers inside and start moving them. Imagine it’s me who’s doing it to you.”

Like a little obedient vixen, Daniela pushes her fingers inside and starts to fuck herself. Her moans fill the air, charging me up even more. I pump my cock in my hand, letting it glide smoothly with my pre-come and some spit. Daniela makes me so hard, and as she fingers herself toward a demanding orgasm, I mirror her actions. “Tell me how it feels, Daniela.”

She breathes heavily and rasps, “I feel...like it’s you touching me. And it feels so good.”

“What else do you imagine me doing?” I thrust my hips upward in my hand, pumping hard and groaning loudly.

“I want to feel your mouth between my thighs...your tongue...I want to ride your face, Remo.”

“Yes, that’s perfect.” I watch her stiffen, her body arching away from the chair as her orgasm rolls through her like a tidal wave. “You’re so beautiful when you come. God, I’m going to fuck you so hard when I see you. And punish you for being such a dirty slut and making me so damn hard.”

That sends me tumbling forward in my seat as I spew my release all over my hands and pants. Breathless, I let the aftershocks roll through me. Daniela stands, picks up the phone, and waves it playfully. “I need to go clean up, Boss.”

“You definitely should.”

She hangs up, places her phone back on the bed, and turns to look at the camera. She’s still gloriously naked and a bit angry, but in her eyes, I see a softness that wasn’t there before. A softness that makes my heart race.

Without another word, she walks toward the bathroom, and I turn off the camera for the night.

Chapter 13

Daniela

The walls feel like they’re closing in. Every tick of the clock scrapes against my nerves like a serrated blade. I pace the length of the room for the hundredth time, my shoes scuffing the polished floor as I glance at the window.

The sun mocks me with its freedom, painting the garden in gold while I stew in this sterile cage.

I drop onto the couch, but the cushion gives too easily beneath me, leaving no satisfaction. If I sit here for much longer, I’ll fucking explode.

The guards outside my door are statues in suits—silent, immovable, and dull as hell. I throw open the door with more force than necessary, startling one of them, but he recovers fast, his hand hovering near his gun.

“Relax,” I say, crossing my arms. “I’m not planning a jailbreak. Not today, at least.”

His eyes narrow slightly, but he says nothing.

“I need to get out,” I announce. “Just for a little while. There’s an antique shop downtown that I’ve been dying to visit.”

The other guard, the taller of the two, tilts his head, skeptical.

“Not happening,” he replies. His voice is flat.

I clench my fists, digging my nails into my palms. “Look, I’m not asking to walk into a war zone. It’s a shop run by a sweet old lady who probably doesn’t even know how to use a phone, let alone pose a threat. I’ll behave. And you two can play watchdog all you want.”

“We have orders.”

“And I have cabin fever,” I snap. “If you want me to keep my sanity intact, you’ll let me breathe some fresh air. Or do you want to explain to your boss why his little ‘guest’ had a meltdown?”

The taller one sighs, exchanging a glance with his partner. The shorter guard shrugs slightly as if to say, “Your call.”

“Fine,” the tall one relents. “But we’re sticking to you like glue.”

“Lovely,” I mutter, already turning toward the stairs.

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The antique shop smells like nostalgia and mothballs, a mix of aged wood and forgotten memories. As I step inside, the bell above the door jingles, the sound soft and oddly comforting.

“Daniela, darling!” Betty B’s voice is warm and familiar, like honey in tea. She shuffles out from behind the counter, her wiry frame wrapped in a knitted shawl that’s seen better days. “It’s been too long.”

“Hi, Betty,” I say, smiling despite myself.

She eyes the two hulking guards behind me. “And who are these fine gentlemen? New friends?”

“Something like that,” I mutter.

The taller guard grunts. The shorter one just gives her a tight nod, scanning the shop like Betty might pull a weapon from one of her dusty shelves.

Betty waves them off, unbothered. “Well, come in, come in. I just got a new shipment of art pieces from a local estate sale. Thought of you right away.”

I follow her toward the back, where a mismatched collection of frames leans haphazardly against the wall. Paintings, sketches, photographs—each piece seems to hold a piece of someone’s soul.

The lighting is dim back here, but I’m still able to see. I run my fingers over the edges of a gilded frame, the cracked glass catching faint reflections of me, fractured and

distorted.

“They’re beautiful,” I murmur, my voice almost swallowed by the quiet.

Betty beams, her weathered hands brushing against the frames like they’re old friends. “I knew you’d appreciate them. Always had an eye for the good stuff, haven’t you? How’s your own painting coming along, hmm?”

I hesitate. Then I murmur, “It’s....coming.”

She narrows her eyes, and she has the kind of look that sees straight through bullshit. “That bad, huh?”

A shrug is all I can manage. My fingers trail over the delicate brushstrokes of an oil painting, a pastoral scene so far removed from anything I’ve ever known that it feels like a taunt. “It’s not the painting. It’s...everything else. It’s like I’m screaming into a void, and no one’s listening. I just want—”

“To be seen,” she cuts in, her voice soft but knowing, like she’s been down this road herself.

I nod, swallowing hard against the lump rising in my throat.

She pats my arm, her touch warm and grounding. “Dreams are funny things, dear. Sometimes, they grow quietly, like wildflowers in the cracks of sidewalks. Other times, they get stomped on before they even have a chance to bloom. But don’t let anyone take yours from you. Not even yourself.”

Her words hit harder than I expect, settling in my chest like jagged stones. Dreams are fragile. She’s right about that. And sometimes, they don’t just get stomped on. They’re obliterated, leaving nothing but ashes and regret.

“I’m trying,” I whisper, but even I can hear the doubt in my voice.

Her eyes narrow, but there’s a glimmer of humor behind them. “Trying? If that’s what you call vandalizing half the city with that bloody dagger painting of yours, then I’d hate to see what you’d do if you weren’t holding back.”

I can’t help the smirk tugging at my lips. “You’ve seen it?”

“Seen it?” Betty raises a brow, hands on her hips. “I had a customer the other day swear it was some underground rebellion movement. Asked me if I knew the artist personally.” She leans closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Told him I didn’t, of course. Wouldn’t want to ruin your mystique.”

I let out a laugh, short but real. “Thanks for covering for me.”

She waves a hand dismissively. “Don’t thank me. You owe me. If the cops show up asking about that dagger, I’m sending them straight to you.”

“Fair,” I say, grinning despite myself.

Her tone softens, and she tilts her head, studying me like one of her old, worn paintings. “You know, it’s not just the art. It’s that signature of yours. The bloody hand and the dagger? It’s...well, it’s raw. Honest. It makes people stop and look, even if they don’t understand it.”

I lean back against the wall with my arms crossed. “That’s the point. It’s not supposed to be pretty.”

“Good,” she says firmly. “The world has enough pretty. What it needs is real.”

Her words linger. They make me think of all the nights I’ve spent climbing rooftops

and crouching in alleyways, paintbrush in hand. It's not about rebellion, not really. It's about leaving something behind, a mark that says I was here. That even if everything else fades, that part of me won't.

Betty turns back to the paintings, her fingers grazing a frame. "You keep at it, Daniela. Just don't get yourself arrested, hmm? Not all of us have the cash to bail you out."

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I laugh again, softer this time. “I’ll try not to.”

She shakes her head, muttering under her breath. “Artists. Always walking the line between genius and criminal.”

The restroom smells faintly of bleach and something musty, like old water trapped in the grout. It’s dim, one flickering bulb above the mirror casting uneven shadows.

My reflection in the cracked glass looks worn out—eyes sunken, skin pale. I don’t know who I’m supposed to be anymore.

The sound of a door creaking and heavy boots pulls me from my thoughts. I glance toward the door and the flimsy lock holding it shut. I hold my breath, praying it’s just my imagination. But then I hear a sharp knock.

“Open up,” one of the guards mutters, his voice low and tense.

I push the door open slowly, expecting the usual stern expression and clipped instructions. Instead, his face is different—tight with worry. He steps inside, shutting the stall door behind him. There’s no explanation, no time to ask why he’s breaking the professional barrier he never crosses. His hand grips my arm, not hard enough to hurt but firm enough to tell me this isn’t a game.

“Out. Now.”

“What?” My voice cracks. “What’s going on?”

“Not a question session, Volpi.” He pulls a gun from the holster at his side and shoves it into my hands. “Jump out the window and run. Don’t stop. Don’t think. You hear me?”

I stare at the gun, the weight of it foreign and cold against my palms. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Do it!” He spins back around, the barrel of his weapon aimed squarely at the restroom door. His shoulders tense like he’s waiting for an explosion. “They’re coming. You don’t have time.”

“They? Who’s—” My words die as a muffled shout echoes outside, followed by something heavier—a loud thud against the floor.

I can’t move. My legs freeze like cement, my mind spinning uselessly through half-formed questions. “Why are you doing this? Aren’t you supposed to—”

“Protect you? That’s what I’m doing.” Then his voice drops, hoarse and biting. “Jump, Daniela. Don’t look back.”

I stumble toward the narrow window. It’s high, the glass dirty and smudged. When I unlatch it and shove it open, cold air bites my face. My pulse pounds faster and louder than the voices behind the door.

I glance over my shoulder. “Are you coming?”

He doesn’t answer. He just raises his gun and aims it at the door like a soldier facing his last stand. My heart twists. I don’t know this man’s name. I’ve seen his face a hundred times, but I never thought to ask. And now, he’s staying behind and

sacrificing himself so I can run.

The first gunshot shatters the silence, and the sound sends a jolt through me. My body takes over, acting on instinct. I hoist myself onto the ledge and push off, falling to the alley below. The landing isn't graceful. Pain shoots through my knees as I hit the pavement, but I bite back the curse on my tongue. There's no time for pain.

I run.

The air feels heavier than it should, each breath scraping against my lungs like sandpaper. I dart through the narrow streets as the sound of more gunfire cracks behind me. It echoes off the walls, sharp and relentless. My mind races faster than my feet, and questions flood in.

Who was coming for me? How did they know where I'd be? Why did the guard sacrifice himself?

And then the darker thoughts creep in, the ones I can't shove away. Maybe this was all a setup. Maybe the guard wasn't saving me but pushing me into another trap. It wouldn't be the first time someone used kindness as a weapon.

I shake the thought away. It's too late to turn back now.

My chest burns, and my legs scream for rest, but I don't stop. I can't. Stopping means dying, and I'm not ready for that. Not yet.

A sharp turn leads me to a quiet street, darker and emptier than the others. The faint hum of streetlights buzzes overhead, casting an eerie glow on the cracked pavement. I slow, only slightly, and fumble with the phone in my pocket. My fingers are slick with sweat, trembling as I swipe across the screen.

The number's already programmed. I press call.

It rings once. Twice. Then his voice cuts through, low and sharp. "Where are you?"

"Remo." My voice breaks, barely a whisper. "I—someone—"

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“Breathe.” A single word, but it carries the force of a command. “Tell me where you are.”

I glance around, taking in the faint landmarks. A boarded-up bodega. A graffiti-covered bench. “Near...sixth and Elmont. I think.”

“I’ll find you.” Then the line goes dead.

At the moment, the silence is louder than the gunfire. I grip the phone like a lifeline, leaning against the wall to steady myself. My body’s shaking, adrenaline crashing through me in waves.

A distant engine roars, growing louder with every second. I look up just as a black SUV barrels down the street, its headlights cutting through the gloom. It skids to a stop a few feet away, and the driver’s door swings open.

Remo steps out, and for a moment, I’m not sure if I’m relieved or terrified. His face is stone, his eyes like cold steel. He doesn’t speak, doesn’t ask questions. He just moves, crossing the distance between us in three long strides.

“You’re hurt.” His eyes sweep over me, catching on the scraped palms and smear of dirt across my cheek. “Who?”

“I don’t know.” The words tumble out, rushed and frantic. “The guard...he told me to run. Gave me a gun. Then—” My voice catches. “I don’t know what happened to him.”

Remo's jaw tightens, a flicker of something dangerous flashing in his eyes. "Get in."

I hesitate. "What are you—"

"Now, Daniela." His tone leaves no room for argument.

I climb into the SUV. The leather seat is cold against my skin. Remo slides in beside me and slams the door shut. He doesn't start the engine immediately. Instead, he pulls a phone from his pocket and types something quickly before tossing it onto the dashboard.

"What are you doing?" My voice is hoarse, barely audible.

"Calling backup." He glances at me, his expression unreadable. "Whoever came for you isn't getting away from this."

The weight of his words settles into the pit of my stomach, heavy and cold. It's not just anger that I hear in his tone. Anger would have been easier to handle, something I could push back against. This is something deeper, something darker. A promise.

I've seen what he does to people who make him angry. It's not something you can unsee. The memory of it lingers, and I don't need to ask to know what he'll do now. Whoever's behind this is already a dead man walking. They just don't know it yet.

"Remo..." I trail off, unsure of what to say or even how to say it. What can you say to a man like him?

He kidnapped me. That's how this whole mess started. But somehow, somewhere along the line, the fear I should feel around him dissolved into something else. Something tangled and confusing.

He dropped everything to come for me. A man who operates in the shadows and rules with fear and violence, yet here he is, inches away from me, close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from him even in the cold air.

“I’m going to have my doctor come look at you.” His voice cuts through my thoughts.

I shake my head. “No, I’m fine.”

He doesn’t look convinced, his sharp eyes scanning me for any sign that I might be lying. It’s a strange thing, being scrutinized like this. He’s not looking for a way to hurt me. He’s looking for a way to protect me.

“I’m fine,” I repeat, firmer this time.

His jaw ticks, the only outward sign of the turmoil simmering beneath his controlled exterior. “Good.”

There’s a long, tense silence between us, broken only by the distant hum of the city. I want to say something, anything, to fill the void, but the words catch in my throat.

What do you say to the one person who sees you? The one who makes you feel alive in a way that terrifies you?

The one person who might understand the chaos inside you because he carries his own?

I glance down at my hands, at the faint tremor I hadn’t noticed before betraying my calm facade. “Why did you come?”

He looks at me like I’ve just asked the stupidest question in the world. “Because you

called.”

It’s such a simple answer, but it lands with the weight of a confession.

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I don't know if I want to scream or cry or laugh. This man, who could snap necks and walk away without a second thought, makes me feel...free. It's absurd. None of this should makesense, but it does, in the way that chaos sometimes fits together perfectly.

My chest tightens as my thoughts spiral. Could there ever be more between us? Or is this all we'll ever be—two broken people drawn together by circumstance, by shared darkness and unspoken pain?

“Remo,” I say again, this time with more conviction. He doesn't respond. He just stares ahead, waiting. I take a shaky breath. “Thank you.”

Wait, for what? For saving me? For understanding me? For being the one person I can't decide if I hate or—

He reaches out, and his hand brushes against mine, the touch so brief and fleeting that I almost think I imagined it.

“You don't have to thank me,” he says quietly. “Just don't make me do this again.”

I want to laugh, but there's nothing funny about what seems to be happening between us. There are a thousand things I want to say and questions I want to ask, but all I can manage is a nod.

The city blurs around us, lights and shadows blending together. My mind races, replaying every moment, every sound. The gunshots, the guard's voice, the fear in his eyes. And the question that won't stop gnawing at me:

Why did he save me?

Chapter 14

Remo

The house is silent except for the faint hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen. My boots click against the marble floor as I guide Daniela inside, her small frame leaning against me.

Her copper curls are damp from the rain we just left behind, sticking to her face like a shroud, but it's not the rain that soaked her.

"Watch the step." My voice is low—a poor attempt at softening the sharp edges of this moment. She doesn't look at me. Instead, her stare is fixed on the floor.

Marble floors gleam under dim, recessed lighting, but the air feels sterile. It's a fortress, nothing more. I've never cared before. Tonight, though, it feels wrong to bring her here. Her, with her wide, wounded eyes and trembling shoulders.

"Sit," I say, steering her toward the sofa. She sinks into the cushions without a word.

I grab the first aid kit from the cabinet and kneel in front of her. She flinches when I touch her arm.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

She stares at me, unblinking. Maybe she's thinking of the man I killed in my club that day, his blood staining her memory.

"You're bleeding," I say, nodding toward the scrape on her temple.

She shrugs. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.” My tone hardens. “Hold still.”

The antiseptic stings, and she winces. I try to be gentle, but my hands aren’t used to this kind of care. They’re used to breaking things—bones, spirits, lives.

“Why do you even care?” she mutters.

I don’t answer.

The question gnaws at me as I finish cleaning her wound.

Why do I care? I shouldn’t.

The bathroom light flickers when I turn it on, and the heat from the underfloor system spreads through the tiles. I twist the knob for the shower, and hot water streams out, steam curling in the air.

“You should clean up,” I say, leaning against the doorframe.

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She looks at me with that same unreadable expression. There's defiance in her eyes, but it's muted now, dulled by exhaustion.

"You don't have to babysit me," she says.

"This isn't babysitting," I tell her. My tone is firmer now but not unkind. "Now get in. You'll feel better after."

Her lips press into a thin line, but she doesn't argue. She steps into the bathroom and shuts the door behind her.

The sound of water running fills the room. I lean against the wall, staring at nothing. My mind is a battlefield, torn between the instinct to protect her and the voice screaming at me to keep my distance.

She's not my responsibility.

And yet, she is.

When I hear the water shut off, I push away from the wall. She emerges wrapped in a towel, her hair wet and clinging to her shoulders.

"Clothes are on the bed," I say, nodding toward my bedroom door. "And you're sleeping there tonight."

She hesitates but doesn't reply. She just walks past me. I watch her disappear into the room and hear the door clicking shut behind her.

I go in after a few minutes and pace up and down before moving to sit on the edge of the bed and resting my head in my hands.

She shouldn't be here. This house, this life, it'll eat her alive. She's not built for it. Hell, I'm not sure I am either, but here we are. A pair of misfits in a world that doesn't forgive weakness.

My jaw tightens. Weakness. That's what this is. Letting her in, bringing her here—it's a crack in the armor I've spent years forging. But what's the alternative? I've gotten her wrapped up in all this.

The buzzing of my phone cuts through the silence. It's Marco.

I pick up. "His name. Now."

"We weren't able to get any leads. But James and Elia are dead. So is the old woman."

Shit.

"So we have no fucking idea who the bastard is?" My voice is low and controlled, but a fire is building in me. Frustration. Helplessness.

"They were very careful in covering their tracks. A getaway car was found a few streets from here, and prints were cleaned off every surface. Whoever did this was prepared. They had no way of knowing she was going to be there."

"Unless we have a mole," I mutter, the thought settling coldly in my chest.

"Even so, with the time they used to get in and out without leaving a trace...there's no way they could've known. It had to be premeditated. I've already vetted all our

men since she moved in. Everyone's under strict surveillance, their houses wired. If there'd been a leak, I'd know by now."

"So I'm supposed to just sit back and chill while this psycho roams free?" I don't hide the bite in my words.

"I'm still on it, Boss. I promise. As long as she stays put until this blows over...it's all clear."

"For now," I say resignedly.

"Don't sound so optimistic," Marco quips.

"Optimism gets you killed," I mutter, my fingers tightening around the phone.

He sighs, his frustration palpable. "You really know how to brighten a guy's day."

"Just keep your bloody eyes open," I say, cutting him off and hanging up before he can say anything else.

When Daniela reappears, she's wearing the clothes I left for her—an oversized sweatshirt and sweatpants. They swallow her small frame, but there's something strangely fitting about the way she looks in my things.

"I have my own clothes, you know."

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“I like these on you more. Feel better?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Define ‘better.’”

“Alive.”

Sinking onto the edge of the bed, she gives a humorless laugh. “Barely.”

There’s a bitterness in her tone that I recognize all too well. It’s the sound of someone who’s seen too much, lost too much.

“Eat something,” I say, handing her a plate of pasta I whipped up in the kitchen earlier.

She stares at it like it’s a foreign object before raising her brows in mock surprise. “You eat and cook?”

I laugh. “Sometimes.”

“Doesn’t seem like your style.”

I smirk. “What’s my style, then?”

“Brooding in the dark. Whiskey. Cigars. Off with his head now.”

She’s not wrong, but I don’t tell her that.

“You’re welcome,” I say instead as I sit across from her. “Now eat.”

The bedroom is dim, the only light coming from the lamp on the nightstand. The bed is also unmade, the sheets crumpled from the last time I managed to get more than a few hours of sleep. I guide her to the edge, and she sits down without protest.

“You should rest,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

She looks up at me, her hazel eyes glassy but sharp. “Why are you doing all this?”

“Doing what?”

“Being...nice,” she says, the word seeming foreign on her tongue. “You’re not exactly the nurturing type.”

I shrug. “Don’t read too much into it. You were about to collapse. It seemed practical to let you do that somewhere soft.”

She huffs—a weak attempt at a laugh. “Practical. Right.”

I hand her a bottle of water from the nightstand. She takes it without a word, her fingers brushing mine for a split second. Her hands are cold, even after the shower.

“You’ll stay here,” I tell her. “At least until things calm down.”

She looks at me again with the same sharpness in her eyes. “And what if they don’t?”

Her look doesn’t waver, but there’s a flicker of something in her hazel eyes. Fear? Defiance? Or maybe...curiosity. It’s impossible to tell with her, and that frustrates me

more than I care to admit.

“You don’t have to act like you’re protecting me,” she says after a moment. “I know what this is.”

“And what’s that?”

“Damage control.”

Her words are like a slap to my face. Maybe because they’re not entirely wrong. But they’re not entirely right, either.

I lean forward, elbows resting on my knees. “You think I dragged you out of there and put myself on the line just to keep the peace? I don’t do charity, Daniela. If you’re still breathing, there’s a reason for it.”

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She huffs out a laugh, but there's no humor in it. "And what's my reason?"

My jaw tightens. She doesn't understand. But how could she? How could anyone?

"Doesn't matter," I say, the words heavier than I expected. "Just go to bed."

Her lips part like she wants to argue, but nothing comes out.

Within minutes, she's asleep, her breathing slow and even. I sit at the edge of the bed, watching her. There's a part of me that wants to walk away, to leave her to fend for herself the way I've always done with everyone else. Attachments are liabilities. That's the rule—the only rule that has kept me alive this long.

But there's another part—a quieter, more dangerous part—that wants to stay. To watch over her. To keep her safe, even if it means breaking every rule I've ever lived by.

It's a weakness, no matter how I spin it. And in this world, weakness gets you killed.

She shifts in her sleep, her face relaxing. For the first time since I met her, she looks peaceful. It's unsettling.

I reach for the lamp and turn it off, plunging the room into darkness.

I wake a couple of hours later to find myself on the bed with my arms around her and

her back pressed to me. I can't believe we're fucking spooning. What the hell is happening to me?

I stare at the ceiling for a moment, my mind racing. This isn't who I am. I've built walls, ones that have kept me alive. But here she is, tearing them down without even trying.

Carefully, I start to pull away, trying not to wake her, but my hand grazes her side in the process. She stirs, shifting in my arms, and then she turns to face me.

God, she's beautiful.

Hazel eyes flecked with gold look at me, their intensity making my head spin. She has fair skin dusted with faint freckles across her nose and a small scar on her left temple, faint but there, from some childhood accident she mentioned once. Also, paint stains her hands, remnants of the world she creates.

And those lips...I'd do anything to kiss them right now. But no, not now. She's still shaken, still vulnerable from everything.

I swallow hard, kicking those thoughts away. "Didn't mean to wake you," I mutter, my voice lower than I intended.

"It's fine," she says softly.

I don't move, but she does—a subtle shift, her body leaning closer. It's almost imperceptible, as though she doesn't even realize she's doing it. Her hair clings to her cheeks, still damp, framing her face in a way that makes her look even more delicate.

"Why are you staring?" she whispers, her voice cracking just enough to betray what's beneath her calm.

“Am I?” I ask, even though I know the answer.

Her breath hitches, and for a moment, I see it—the crack in her armor, the vulnerability she doesn’t let anyone else see. I should stop this. I should pull back and put some distance between us before I do something I can’t take back.

“I have to tell you something,” I say, the words heavy in my mouth.

“Okay.”

I hesitate for a brief moment before saying, “The old lady you went to see...she didn’t make it.”

Her eyes widen, and the color drains from her face. “Oh my God.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say, my voice softer now, but it still feels like sandpaper in the silence. “I’m going to find whoever did it, I promise. And when I do...” My voice hardens, my resolve solidifying. “I’ll bring you their head on a platter.”

Her eyes meet mine, and for a moment, neither of us speaks. The tension between us is electric, a live wire humming just beneath the surface, ready to snap and spark.

“You keep looking at me like that,” she says finally, her voice barely above a whisper. “What do you want?”

The question hangs in the air, heavy, dangerous, and impossible to ignore.

What do I want?

To keep her safe. To keep her close. To keep her mine.

“Nothing you’re not willing to give,” I say in a low voice, the edge in it softer than I intend.

“And if I am?”

She doesn’t look away, and neither do I.

I should move back. I should put some space between us before this goes any further. But she’s already too close, and I’m not sure I want the distance anymore.

Her scent—something faintly floral mixed with the rain—wraps around me, clouding my judgment and suffocating the logic I’m trying to cling to. My pulse pounds in my ears, a deafening rhythm that matches the storm brewing in my chest.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asks again, her voice trembling, though not from fear.

“Because I can’t stop,” I answer.

The words slip out raw, unguarded, and they hang between us like a gauntlet thrown down. A challenge.

And for a heartbeat, I wonder if she’ll pick it up.

She's the first to break. Her lips part, her breath shallow, and in that moment, I'm lost.

I move before I can think better of it, closing the space between us in one deliberate motion. My hand finds her jaw, my rough fingertips brushing against her soft skin. She doesn't pull away. She doesn't even flinch.

Instead, she tilts her head just slightly as if inviting me closer.

Her lips are soft when they meet mine, a hesitant brush that ignites something primal in me. It's tentative at first, but the moment she doesn't pull back, I deepen the kiss.

She tastes like uncertainty and something sweeter, something intoxicating. My free hand moves to the small of her back, pulling her closer as the world around us falls away.

The kiss is dominating—firm, possessive—as though I can't help myself, as though she's the only thing tethering me to this moment, to this need.

She makes a sound in the back of her throat, somewhere between a sigh and a gasp, and it sends a shiver down my spine. I want more—more of her, more of this—but I force myself to pull back just enough to meet her stare.

Her hazel eyes are wide, her lips swollen and parted, and there's something unreadable in her expression.

"Why did you do that?" she whispers, her voice barely audible.

My thumb brushes against her jawline, a ghost of a touch. "Because I couldn't not."

She doesn't respond, but she doesn't move away, either. And for the first time in a

long time, the silence doesn't feel suffocating.

"I want to give you something," I murmur, my voice rough with desire.

I reach into my bedside table and pull out a .22 caliber handgun, the cold metal smooth against my fingertips. The serial number's scratched off, deliberately, and I hold it out to her.

"It'll be easy for you to handle. No problem for a first-time shooter. Just point and shoot."

She looks at the gun, then at me, and shakes her head, her brows furrowing in defiance. "I'm not interested."

I keep my stare steady, not giving in. "What happened to you...what they did to you can't happen again. I need to be sure you have some sort of last resort on you. My men will never leave your side, but I need you to take this." Her chest rises and falls, and I can see the war behind her eyes. I lean in closer. "You need to protect yourself. I might not always be there. You understand that, right?"

Her hand trembles slightly as she reaches for the gun, her fingers brushing against the cold metal. The hesitation in her eyes is clear, the weight of what I'm asking her to accept sinking in. After what feels like an eternity, she nods, her grip tightening around the weapon.

"Good," I mutter rising up from the bed, satisfied that she's finally relented.

I move toward the door, my hand brushing the handle, ready to leave her to wrestle with the new reality I've forced on her. But her voice stops me.

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“Aren’t you scared?” she asks, soft but piercingly. Like the question had been clawing its way out of her.

I pause, keeping my back to her for a moment longer than necessary before slowly turning to meet her eyes.

“Scared of you?” I ask, a humorless laugh escaping me.

She doesn’t flinch. Rather, her eyes lock on mine, searching for something in my response.

“No,” I say simply.

My chest tightens at the sight of her holding the gun, her fingers gripping it as if it burns. I know what she really means. I know she’s asking if I trust her not to point it at me, to take her shot if she thinks she can.

My voice is steady when I add, “I’m not afraid of a bullet.”

For a second, the air between us seems to crackle with unspoken tension. Then I turn and leave without another word, the door clicking shut behind me.

Chapter 15

Daniela

The box is wrapped in smooth black paper, the kind that feels like silk against your

fingers. A neat bow ties it all together, a sharp crimson ribbon that screams elegance. I stare at it like it might explode.

“You gonna open it, or are we just gonna stand here all day?” Remo’s voice comes from behind me, low and impatient.

I glance over my shoulder. He’s leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed. The light catches the edge of his wolf tattoo, where ink curls over muscle.

God, he is so freaking handsome.

“I didn’t ask for this,” I say, even though my fingers itch to tug at the ribbon.

“And I didn’t ask for your opinion.”

I roll my eyes and yank the bow free. The paper falls away, revealing a flat, rectangular leather case. It’s not a gun this time, which is both a relief and a curiosity.

I open the case slowly. Inside is a set of brushes—paintbrushes. The handles are sleek and black, with fine gold lettering that spells out a brand name I can’t even pronounce. The bristles are perfect, smooth, and soft, the kind that can glide over a canvas like silk.

Red-colored rose petals are scattered around it.

For a second, I can’t breathe.

“Roses?” I glance at him, raising an eyebrow. “What, no skulls or snakes?”

His lips quirk, but just barely.

“What exactly is this, Remo?” My voice comes out sharper than I intended, but I can’t help it.

Remo doesn’t move from the doorway. “Brushes. Thought you’d know what they were, considering.”

I snap the case shut and clutch it to my chest like a shield. “Why?”

“Why not?” His tone is casual, but his stare is anything but.

“This—” I shake my head, searching for the right words. “This doesn’t make any sense. You don’t even—”

“Care about your art?” He steps closer, his presence like a storm cloud. “Maybe I don’t. But I care about you not giving up on something that keeps you sane. You don’t get to quit.”

I glare at him, my chest tight. “You think this will fix everything? That a few fancy brushes will magically make me start painting again? You’re part of the reason I can’t even look at a canvas anymore.”

His jaw ticks, but his voice stays steady. “I think it’s better than watching you drink yourself into oblivion or sitting in front of a blank canvas like it owes you answers.”

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I hate that he's right. I hate that he can see through me like this. Like all my armor doesn't mean a damn thing.

"You don't know me."

"Maybe not," he says, his voice softening. "But I know what it's like to have nothing except the things you can create. And I know what happens when you lose them."

The air between us feels too heavy. I look down at the case in my hands, my fingers tracing the edge. The brushes are beautiful, perfect, and completely out of place in my messy, chaotic life.

"Thanks," I mutter in a tone barely above a whisper.

He shrugs, but there's something in his eyes—something guarded—as if he's given me more than just a gift. "Don't make me regret it."

I want to say something else, something biting or sarcastic, but the words won't come. So I just turn away, gripping the case tightly as if it might vanish if I let go.

As I walk to my room, I wonder if he's right—if the only thing that's keeping me sane is the thing I've been trying to abandon.

The next delivery isn't a weapon. It's a wardrobe. If you can even call it that.

I open the boxes to find dresses that shimmer in the light, the kind of heels that make walking feel like a sport, and jewelry so delicate that it feels like it might shatter if I breathe wrongly.

A note sits on top of it all.

Wear this to the party tonight. We leave at 6.

No “please.” No explanation. Just an order.

Adeline snorts when she sees me holding the note like it might bite. “Wow, your guy’s got the whole mobster romance cliché nailed down, huh?”

I glare at her. “He’s not my guy.”

“Sure. So all this is just some casual Wednesday thing?” She picks up a dress and holds it against herself. “This is worth more than my car.”

I shrug, even though my heart pounds like it’s running from something. “It’s a game, Adeline. That’s all.”

She gives me that look—the one that says she doesn’t buy it but doesn’t have the energy to fight me on it.

The party is held in one of those sprawling mansions that make you wonder who has this much money to waste. Chandeliers drip from the ceiling, their crystals scattering light like shattered glass, and the air smells like cigars and expensive perfume.

Remo’s hand stays on the small of my back, a constant reminder of whose date I am

tonight.

“You clean up nice,” Marco says as we walk past. His tone is teasing, but there’s something sharp under it.

“I’m not doing this for you,” I reply without missing a beat.

Remo chuckles. “She’s got teeth, Marco. Be careful.”

The first glass of champagne goes down too easily. The second loosens the tightness in my chest. By the third, I don’t care that the eyes of half the room are on me, judging, assessing.

Remo disappears into a side room with a group of men whose faces are carved from stone. Business, I assume.

Which leaves me alone in a sea of silk and diamonds.

“Lost?” Livia appears at my side, holding a glass of red wine.

“Not even a little.”

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Her smirk is sharp enough to draw blood. “You’re braver than most women here. Or maybe just dumber.”

“Maybe both.”

She laughs, the sound surprisingly warm. “You’ve got guts, Dans. I’ll give you that.”

The night blurs after that. I talk to strangers who smile too wide and laugh too loud. The kind of people who’d sell their souls for power and then wonder why their lives feel empty.

There’s a chill in the air when I step into the garden. Above me, on the balcony, I catch the faint outlines of a man and a woman, their silhouettes blurred by the dim light. I don’t stop to watch. I have other things on my mind.

The garden glows softly under string lights draped between wooden posts, casting a warm, almost magical light over the space.. I spot roses, chrysanthemums, and dahlias, their vibrant colors muted in the night. There are other flowers I can’t quite name, though that might have more to do with the drinks I’ve had rather than my lack of gardening knowledge. Benches painted in bright, mismatched colors sit scattered across the space, their edges wrapped in zigzagging fairy lights. Everything looks surreal and dreamlike, as though I’ve wandered into another world.

I hate how much I like it. Staying here, in Remo’s world, is supposed to be temporary, but a place like this makes me wish for something I can’t quite put into

words.

And then I see him.

The air is cool, laced with the faint scent of roses. He's sitting on a stone bench with his head tilted back as he exhales a curl of smoke into the night.

His back is to me, his phone pressed to his ear. His voice carries through the garden—low, harsh, commanding. He's speaking Russian this time, and though I know he's fluent in Italian and English, the sharp, guttural rhythm of his Russian stirs something deep inside me. It's ridiculous, I know. But his voice—so raw, so controlled—makes my pulse quicken in ways I'd rather not admit.

As I watch him, I'm struck by the thought that this is the man who could destroy me, and yet, he's the one I can't seem to stay away from.

I think about touching myself to the sound of his voice but stop myself.

I need to taste him to relieve this tension. As I take a step forward, he stops talking and turns around so quickly that I don't have time to prepare. His face is lit by the lights, but there's a searing shadow there too. Just as I'm about to tease him, he wriggles his hand, revealing a gun. Instinctively, I raise my hands, resisting the urge to scream when he doesn't immediately lower the barrel.

"Remo," I say quickly, my voice unsteady. "It's me. Daniela. Don't shoot."

He doesn't lower the gun immediately. His eyes narrow, scanning me like I'm a stranger. "Daniela," he says slowly. "What are you doing here?"

I force myself to hold his stare. "I saw you were done with your meeting and came out here. I thought..." My words falter. "I thought you might need someone to talk

to.”

“Why?” His voice is gruff and hard, making it almost impossible to reason with him. Still, I forge on, fueled by too much alcohol and a desperate need to confront him about everything he represents.

“I saw that you were upset,” I say. “I wanted to make you feel better.”

For a tense ten seconds, he keeps the gun pointed at me as if on the verge of making a fatal decision. Remo pulls away the safety, cocks his head, and places a finger on the trigger. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t shoot you right now, Daniela.”

I’m scared, but the alcohol dulls my fear enough for me to find my footing. “If you shoot me, you’ll never hear what I came here to tell you.”

There’s a long pause, the kind that makes my heart pound so loudly that I’m sure he can hear it. Finally, with an exasperated shake of his head, he flips the safety back on and lowers the gun. He mutters something into his phone before ending the call and slipping it into his jacket.

“Fine. Talk,” he says, his tone clipped. “What was so important that it couldn’t wait?”

I close the distance between us and place a hand on his chest. His body tenses under my touch, but he doesn’t push me away. It’s a small victory, but I take it.

“You look...” I falter, suddenly aware of how ridiculous I must sound. “There’s no word in the dictionary for how good you look tonight.”

His expression doesn’t change. If anything, it hardens. “That’s it?” he says flatly. “You came all this way to tell me that?”

“I mean it,” I say, doubling down. “You’re...you’re pretty.”

He blinks at me, his incredulous stare making me want to crawl into a hole. “Pretty?” His voice drips with disbelief. “Are you drunk?”

“Not drunk,” I say quickly. “Maybe a little intoxicated, but drunk? I’ve never been into that.”

“What are you into then?” he asks.

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“You?”

“That’s a question, princess. A piece of advice: when you come for me, you better be goddamn sure.”

I swallow hard. “Are we still talking about this...thing between us or something else?”

He studies me for a moment, his eyes unreadable. “You tell me.”

For a moment, neither of us speaks. And I know I should be afraid, but all I feel is the pull—stronger than ever—to step closer to him, to see how far I can push before he pushes back.

He flicks ash from his cigarette. “What do you want, Daniela?”

“To prove you wrong,” I reply.

His brows lift just slightly. “About what?”

“That I’m not some delicate flower who needs saving.”

I pull off my heels, the cool grass grounding me. “You think you know me, Remo, but you don’t. You don’t know what I’ve survived.”

“And you think you’ve got me all figured out?”

“Maybe.”

He stands, towering over me. “Then tell me, what am I?”

The words bubble up before I can stop them. “You’re dangerous. Ruthless. But you’re not empty. Not entirely.”

I think about everything I’ve heard about him. The rumors, the whispers of a man who trusts no one and never lets his guard down. Remo doesn’t just survive in this world. He rules it, bending others to his will with calculated moves and merciless decisions. A man like him doesn’t care what someone like me thinks. Not really. And yet, for reasons I can’t explain, I need him to hear me.

For a split second, I think I see something shift in his expression—a flicker of something human and vulnerable beneath the hard exterior. But it’s gone so fast that I wonder if I imagined it.

He crushes the cigar under his shoe, grinding it into the pavement with deliberate force before stepping closer.

“Careful, Daniela,” he says, his voice rough, almost a growl—the kind of tone that sends a shiver down your spine whether you want it to or not. “Terrible things happen to people who think they know me.”

I don’t flinch, though every nerve in my body tells me I should. Instead, I hold my ground, meeting his icy stare with a defiance I don’t entirely feel.

“Maybe I don’t care,” I say stubbornly.

My pulse pounds as he steps closer, close enough that I can see the faint scar cutting through his jaw.

“You should,” he says softly, his hand brushing a strand of hair from my face.

The moment stretches, taut and electric, before I break it.

I lean closer, rising up on my tiptoes to gently press my lips against his. His lips are soft, with a hint of whiskey lingering on them. At first, the kiss is shy, with him remaining stiff against me. But suddenly, it feels like a switch is flipped, and we lose ourselves in each other. His tongue meets mine, filled with raw, animalistic desire. He pushes against me, kissing me passionately and groaning even as I feel myself grow wetter. I nibble at his lips, urging him to let out another low moan, and then I reach down to palm his growing erection through his pants.

“Daniela—”

“I know what I want,” I reply, my voice strong. “I want to pleasure you tonight, Remo. Just tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll make it happen. I’ll do anything for you.”

He wraps his hand around my throat, his grip firm, and I gasp at the thrill of it. His eyes darken as he stares down at me. “I love how eager you are. And your body...you’re so incredibly tempting, princess.”

Why do I like this so much? I’m supposed to be pretending to enjoy this, but when he speaks to me like that or grabs me as if I might run away, I become delirious with desire. “Tell me how to make you come.”

He doesn’t hesitate. Remo undoes his belt and pushes his pants down slightly, revealing his cock as it springs free from his boxers. He strokes himself, his eyes locked on me and lips parted, burning with desire. Pre-cum glistens at the tip of his magnificent shaft, which he rubs around the pink head. “Get on your knees,” he commands.

His cock is long and hard, stiff against the cool night air. I kneel in the soft grass, staring at his throbbing erection. Remo's skin is a warm bronze, perfectly tanned, matching the color of his shaft except for the inviting pink head. Riddled with veins, it's clear he craves release as desperately as he needs air. He smells divine—vanilla, expensive cologne, and pure masculinity.

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“Put your hands on me,” he growls, wetting his lips above me. “I want to feel your hands on me.”

I gently wrap my fingers around his balls, following his command. As I swirl my tongue over the tip of his cock, I moan against him, and he groans in approval. His pre-cum tastes salty as I swipe my tongue around his cock and then take him into my mouth. “Yes, Daniela, I love how you suck my dick like a dirty little slut. Keep doing that, baby. Oh, fuck.”

He pulls my hair, gathering locks in his hands to control the movement of my tongue. The pressure on my scalp is intense, and even though it stings, he doesn’t relent. I can tell he enjoys the control he has over me just as much as I relish the sensations he gives.

His moans, accompanied by whispers of my name, ignite a fire within me as I continue to work on him. I glide my tongue off him, causing him to hiss, only to take him in again, sucking hard before pulling back. He shakes his head, giving me a stern look. “Don’t tease me like that, Daniela. I want to fuck your mouth so hard that you forget where you are. If you keep teasing me, I might lose control.”

The truth is, I want to see him lose control. The dare, the thrill, and the uncertainty behind those words draw me in. Remo is changing me, and even if I deny it, I know it’s only a matter of time before I give in completely. “Use my mouth however you want.”

“Oh, I will.” With his hand still in my hair, he shifts closer. “Open that pretty mouth for me, princess.” I obey, but he doesn’t immediately push himself back in. Instead,

he uses his free hand to stroke himself, grunting, “This night just became fucking amazing.”

“Yes...”

I take his cock back into my mouth, lapping my tongue around him and drawing deep moans from his throat. The hard flesh feels incredible, and Remo tastes heavenly. I don't want this night to end. I kiss the hard ridges of his burning flesh while my hands tease his balls.

Then he begins to fuck my mouth, just as he promised. His hips thrust forward, his grip on my hair guiding my movements. I drown in the pleasure, feeling as if I, too, am being consumed. He plunges deeply, grunting with each thrust, and I gag slightly. He pulls out briefly to stroke himself, then pushes back inside again, pounding harder while I moan, empowered by the pleasure I'm giving him.

As his shoulders and rock-hard abs tighten, I realize he's close. He rolls his head back, grunting, “Holy hell, you take me so deep, Daniela. Damn, do you feel what you do to me? Hold still...I'm going to shoot my load deep in your mouth.”

I obey and hold still, craning my neck to catch a glimpse of his face and his slightly parted lips. He floods my mouth with his salty release, and I sink into the sweetness of his arousal. After he empties himself, he pulls back, breathing heavily, and tucks his cock back into his pants. I get to my feet and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

Suddenly, someone coughs in the darkness, pulling my attention. I look up quickly to see a figure lurking in the shadows.

I grab Remo's arm and point to the figure as Marco steps forward, looking conflicted and avoiding eye contact with me. “I came to get you, Boss,” he says to Remo.

“They’ve agreed to your demands and want to renegotiate the deal. Is it still on the table?”

“I’m still trying to decide whether to put a bullet in Jared’s head, to be honest. Trying to smuggle drugs within my territory? Rookie move.”

Marco seems like he’s about to say more, but then he glances at me and back at Remo as if to acknowledge my presence. Remo catches on, placing a possessive hand on the small of my back and leaning in to nibble on my earlobe. “I have to take this meeting,” Remo whispers. “Go back to the party and enjoy yourself. We’ll head home soon, and I’m going to fuck that pretty little pussy of yours until you’re screaming my name.”

A thrill runs down my spine at the thought, and I nod, looking at Marco, though his eyes still refuse to connect with mine. He had seen me. He had witnessed me pleasuring Remo, and he seemed to enjoy it. I should feel angry, embarrassed, or even mortified, but instead, I feel exhilarated.

What does that say about me? Staying with Remo is changing me.

Chapter 16

Remo

The moment the box lands on my desk, it doesn’t feel right. There’s a chill that hits me before I even open it, like the kind of cold you feel when someone steps too close to you, and you can’t quite shake them.

I don’t move at first, my fingers just lingering over the edges. I know what’s inside, what they want me to see. It’s never a good sign when they send me something wrapped up like this, and sure as hell, it’s not a gift.

I rip it open. The smell hits me first. A damp, rotting scent I can't ignore even for a second. It's the kind of smell that makes a stomach turn. Inside, there's a mess of black roses, withered and brown, and dead spiders curled into tight, lifeless balls. I blink, but the image doesn't go away. It burns into my mind, and something inside me cracks. I can feel the pressure building up in my chest, but I don't let it show. Not yet. Not here.

I know who it's from, though. And suddenly, it all makes sense.

It's Vizzini's. He's sending a message, and I know damn well what it means. They're making a move.

Things are about to get worse, and I'm already one step behind.

My hand tightens around the box, but I don't crush it. I don't need to break it. It's already broken enough.

My office is dark—dark leather chairs, cigar smoke clinging to the air, and the scent of old whiskey bottles sitting on the shelf like trophies of a past life I'm still trying to outrun. I throw the box into the trash can, but the image of the dead spiders stays with me.

I should've seen this coming. He knows I have grown soft. And he thinks he can rattle me with a box of dead bugs and wilted flowers.

I feel the shift in the air when she enters my office.

She's always there now, a constant presence, like an itch I can't scratch. Every time I try to focus on something else, there she is, in the back of my mind, reminding me that I can't keep her safe.

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There's a bright look in her eyes, the one that's so damn naïve. Like she hasn't seen the world for what it really is.

“Remo?” Her voice pulls me out of my thoughts, her eyes narrowing as she catches the look on my face. She knows something's wrong, and damn it, I can't hide it.

“Don't ask,” I say. I don't want to talk about it. Not with her. Not now.

“What happened?” she pushes. She's persistent. Too persistent.

I grab a bottle of whiskey from the bar and pour myself a glass. The burn doesn't help, but I drink anyway.

Daniela

One hour earlier

I wake up to the smell of burnt coffee in the kitchen.

I don't need to check to know Remo's the one who made it. He's always been a disaster in the mornings, just like he's a disaster at pretty much everything else in his life.

I look for him in the kitchen, but he isn't there, so I go to his office.

The box is sitting in the trash can when I get there, withered roses on top of dead spiders.

What the hell?

I look at him. His eyes are colder than usual, and he glances at the box like he already knows what it is. He's been on edge all week, the tension in his shoulders making him seem like a coiled spring, ready to snap.

"Who's sending these?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Don't ask."

I'm not sure why I even try to hold it together anymore. Maybe it's the last shred of dignity I've got left, or maybe it's just because I don't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me completely lose it. But I can feel the rage building inside me, the heat starting to rise in my chest. I know he's not going to give me an answer, but I ask anyway.

"What happened?" I push.

"I said don't ask. It's none of your business anyway."

"Don't make me laugh," I say bitterly. "You made this my business the minute you took me from my apartment against my will. You made it my business when I almost died the other day and when I lost Betty B in a stupid shootout that I still don't know the genesis of today. You also made it my business when you stuck your dick down my throat and when you fucked me and told me I belonged to you. So you don't just get to shut me out now without at least giving some sort of explanation for receiving such an ominous package."

He shoots me a glare that feels like a physical blow. The weight of it is enough to make me step back. My heart skips a beat, but I'm not going to show him that. I won't.

"I can control this. And I will."

I roll my eyes. He's so damn certain and so convinced that he can bend everyone and everything to his will. But he's wrong. He's not invincible. None of us are. I don't care how many roses he burns or how many bodies he buries. He's still just a man. A broken one at that.

I can see his frustration bubbling over, anger so deep that it's starting to leak into everything. The longer I stay here, the more I see it. His control is slipping, and he doesn't know how to handle it. And I...I'm starting to wonder how much longer I can stay in his world without breaking myself.

I glance down at the roses again, my stomach twisting. The realization hits me harder than anything. It's one thing to be pulled into something you can't control, but to stay here, knowing what it's costing me...well, that's the real trap.

When I turn to leave, he catches my arm.

"This isn't the fantasy relationship you wish it to be, Daniela. Your only concern is that I keep you safe and—"

"Safe," I repeat, the word sounding like a joke in my mouth. "You call this safe? You lock me up in this cage and call it safe? You're full of shit, Remo."

"Say that sentence again one more time," he spits warningly, the words hitting me like stones.

I feel a knot tighten in my stomach, but I refuse to back down. “You don’t get to decide what’s best for me, Remo. You’re not my fucking keeper. I’m not your prisoner, and I’m done with all this.”

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That's when he snaps. His face twists in a way I've never seen before, a mix of anger and desperation and something darker than the usual cold rage.

"You want to fight me?" he growls. "You think you can do whatever you want because I lick your pussy, huh?"

Before I can react, he grabs my wrist, yanking me toward him. I struggle, trying to break free, but his grip is too strong. I feel a surge of panic, my heart hammering in my chest as he picks me up easily and stomps to the bedroom.

My mind races, thoughts flying in every direction as I try to find a way out of this.

"Stop!" I shout, but my voice comes out shaky. "Remo, don't—"

"Shut up," he barks, his hands firm as he ties my hands to the bed rails. The roughness of the rope bites into my skin, and my heart sinks, a cold chill running through me.

I thrash, panic rising in my throat, my breath coming in short gasps. "You can't do this! Remo, please—"

"You think I won't?" he sneers, his eyes dark and filled with a kind of anger I've never seen before. "You think I won't do whatever it takes to protect you, to keep you safe? Why can't you just trust me, Daniela?"

I try to break free again as my mind screams at me to escape, but he's too strong. A knife flashes in front of my face, the blade gleaming in the dim light. I freeze. The

reality of the situation slams into me like a truck.

“You’re never leaving me,” he says, his voice quiet now. “And if you keep pushing me, I’ll do what needs to be done. What I should have done from the beginning. Don’t fucking make me go there.”

My body trembles, not just from fear but from the weight of what’s happening. I’ve seen Remo angry before, but this...this is something else. I can see the madness in his eyes, the edge of desperation he’s always tried to hide behind his control.

I know he means it.

Then, he leaves without another word, slamming the door behind him. And I’m left there, tied up, with my heart racing and every inch of my body screaming to escape.

I hear the sound of his voice outside the door—the harsh, clipped words telling someone to bring me food. Then I hear the footsteps fading, though his presence lingers even after he’s gone.

I hate this. I hate him. And yet, there’s a part of me that knows this is just the beginning. Just another step in the twisted dance we’re both caught in.

Remo

I watch her struggle, her eyes wide with anger, confusion, and fear.

It’s the only thing that still gets to her, the one thing I can use to remind her of the boundaries, the things she doesn’t get to cross.

I'm not afraid to use the knife. And I'm not afraid to cause damage. If I have to, I'll make her understand that this isn't a game.

I won't be the one who gets hurt in this. If anyone has to break, it's her. She may think I'm bluffing, but deep down, she knows damn well I'm not.

I just want to shut her up and stop her from making this harder than it has to be.

She kept fighting me, kicking and screaming. She doesn't get it. She never has. She thinks she has control over this, over me. But she doesn't. Not anymore. I'm not the one who's weak here.

I'm back in the room after five hours.

I stand there, watching her for a moment and letting the tension settle in the room. It feels like too much. I shouldn't have done it. But I did.

And now she has to deal with the consequences.

She is calm now. It means she gets it.

She pauses when she spots me, her body going rigid as she stares at the steel in my hands, at the promise of pain if she pushes me too far.

I untie her hands, ignoring her silent glare as I leave the room.

I don't need to check on her again tonight.

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She won't be going anywhere.

I don't trust myself to be alone with her right now, not after what just happened. Not after I had to remind her who was in charge.

I send one of my guys in with food and water for the night, knowing she'll eat out of sheer necessity. She'll stay quiet, but I know better than to think she's forgotten what happened. She won't forget. But I'll be damned if I let her believe she's running anything here.

Back in my office, I pull up the cameras on my phone and watch her from a distance. I watch the dark outline of her sitting on the bed, staring at nothing. She's pissed. She's hurt. And I know she's trying to figure out if she wants to hate me or need me.

Maybe it's both. Maybe that's what makes it so fucking complicated.

I don't blink as I watch her, my eyes glued to the screen.

There's nothing more I can do right now.

She's not going to break easily. But I'll make sure she knows how much worse it can get if she doesn't start playing by the rules.

Chapter 17

Daniela

The evening air is cool against my skin as I step onto the balcony, the scent of cigars lingering from the night before. It's one of those nights where everything feels too quiet, like the world's holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

I find him leaning against the stone railing, staring out into the darkness. His glass of whiskey catches the light from inside, the amber liquid swirling lazily as he takes a sip.

I don't speak at first. I just watch him for a second. There's something about the way he holds himself like he's made of steel. But under it all, there's a kind of vulnerability I can't quite understand. Maybe I never will.

"I need to talk to you," I say, breaking the silence.

He doesn't look at me, but his shoulders tense. "Come here then," he says, his voice low, like he's not really offering but more so demanding it. He pours me a drink without asking, and I take it from him without hesitation. The glass feels cool in my hand, but it doesn't settle the unease rolling in my stomach.

We stand there for a moment, neither of us speaking, as if we're both trying to figure out how to talk about the recent incident.

Finally, he turns to me and mutters, "I owe you an apology."

I blink, caught off guard. Remo doesn't apologize. Ever.

He exhales sharply, his jaw tightening as if the words cost him. "I was out of line the other night. I...I hate it when you doubt that I can protect you. I don't want anything to happen to you, Daniela."

I hold his stare. "I didn't ask for your protection."

He looks at me like I just slapped him, the hurt in his eyes sharp but quickly masked. "I know."

"I'm sorry for how I acted too," I admit, my voice softer now. "I just...I thought this might all be too much for you. That maybe leaving would be easier for you."

His hand clenches into a fist at his side. "It's not," he says firmly, his voice edged with desperation. "You leaving would never be better for me. Do you understand that?"

The intensity in his eyes makes me swallow hard, and I nod, unable to argue.

"I've been hearing things," I say, breaking the moment. "I know I shouldn't pry, but...the attack at the shop, the package. It isn't random, is it? It's someone from your past. Someone you know."

At my words, his eyes narrow, the flicker of trust from before now replaced with suspicion. "Where did you hear that?" His tone is cold.

"It's not exactly a secret," I reply with a shrug. "I overheard some guys talking after the shootout."

He says nothing for a moment. He just watches me like he's deciding whether or not to trust what I'm saying.

"You shouldn't concern yourself with any of it," he finally says, his voice a low growl. "The fucker will be in the ground soon enough."

I stare down at my drink, swirling the liquid as if it holds the answers. "For all the macho you act," I mutter, "your men worry about you. And I don't think it's just blind loyalty. I've seen glimpses of something else. A good heart."

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He lets out a low chuckle, and when he meets my eyes again, there's a strange flicker of something behind them—amusement or maybe something darker. “Good heart, huh? And here I thought you didn't smoke weed.”

“You don't have to admit it,” I say, meeting his stare. “But if you didn't have a good heart, they wouldn't follow you the way they do.”

He shakes his head, his smile fading into something darker. “They're loyal because they're paid to be.”

I tilt my head, challenging him. “Money runs out. Real loyalty doesn't. They stay because they see something in you, something you don't let yourself see.”

For a moment, he's silent, his eyes searching mine as though trying to find the catch in my words. “Maybe,” he concedes at last, “but it doesn't change anything.”

“You're not as bad as you think you are,” I say, and I don't even know why I'm telling him this. But it's true. There's more to him than the killer everyone thinks he is.

His face softens, just for a heartbeat, and I dare to hope I've gotten through to him. But then his mask slides back into place.

“I'm not a good man,” he says, his tone colder now, final. “And you're a fool if you think otherwise.”

I don't know why it stings so much, but it does. He's right, I suppose. He's not a

good man.

We fall into a brief silence, both of us lost in our thoughts. I want to ask him about his past—what really happened that made him the man he is—but I don't.

Instead, I look at him, really look at him, trying to find some trace of the boy he used to be beneath the hardened exterior.

The Remo Callegari I see now, the one who rules with an iron fist, is the result of too much loss. Too much pain.

"I was just a kid when I lost my family to a deadly fire. And it was all my fault."

I don't move, don't even breathe. I just wait, my eyes locked on him, waiting for him to decide whether or not he's going to finally show me the parts of himself that he keeps buried beneath that unbreakable shell.

"I set the fire," he continues in a voice barely above a whisper. His eyes drift to the side like he's trying to escape the weight of his own confession. "I was just a kid. My family—" He stops, clenches his fists, and for a moment, I think he's going to leave it at that. But he doesn't. "I was playing with matches. Don't even remember why. Maybe I was bored. Or angry. Maybe I just wanted to see if I could control something for once." His voice cracks slightly, and I'm almost too afraid to look at him. But I can't tear my eyes away. This is it—the thing he's been hiding all along.

"I didn't know the house would burn down. I didn't know the walls would crumble. I didn't know it would get out of control. But it did," he says, his voice growing colder as the memories flood back. "By the time I realized what was happening, it was too late. My parents didn't have a chance. I thought I could fix it, you know? Thought I could stop it before it went too far. But I was just a fucking kid. I didn't know anything."

His hands are shaking now, just slightly, but enough for me to notice. I don't say anything. I just let him talk.

“When the firemen pulled me out of the rubble, I didn't know what the hell had happened. I didn't know everything I knew was gone. My parents, my house, my life—all of it turned to ash in a matter of minutes. And I was the one who caused it. I was the one who killed them.”

I want to say something to comfort him, but I don't know what or how. I'm not sure there's anything to say that would make this better. Hell, I don't even know if it's something that can be fixed.

“But that's not the worst part. The worst part is that I remember it all—the fire, the screams, the way it felt like everything I loved was ripped from me without a single damn thing I could do about it.”

I listen, and even though I can't imagine what he's been through, something inside me twists.

“And after that, I was thrown into the system,” he continues, his voice flat. “Foster homes. Jail. No one cared. No one gave a damn about the kid who burned his family alive. I was just another lost cause. I wasn't worth saving.”

His eyes shift, locking with mine like he's daring me to judge him. But I don't. I can't. Because I understand.

“I tried to forget about it. Tried to bury it, like I buried everything else. But you don't just forget something like that. It's there. All the time. No matter how much you drink or fuck up or throw yourself into this world...those ghosts? They're always watching.”

I don't know how to respond. I'm not even sure if I should say anything at all. So I just nod. But it's not pity in my eyes. It's something else, something darker. Something that says I get it. I know what it's like to carry that kind of weight. I know what it's like to feel like you're suffocating under the pressure of something that never really leaves.

"I thought I could outrun it," he adds, a bitter laugh escaping him. "Thought I could find control in this world. I joined the Mafia because it was the only way I could gain some control. But I just ended up making it worse. I became the very thing I hated. I became the guy who hurts people, who doesn't care, who breaks the rules without thinking twice."

"You're not that guy anymore," I say, my voice steady, even though I'm not sure if I believe it. "You're not just some monster."

He scoffs. "Aren't I?"

I shake my head, taking a step closer. "You're a guy with a past. But that doesn't mean you're doomed to repeat it forever. You've got people who care about you now, Remo. People who don't see you as the sum of your mistakes. Hell, I don't even see you like that."

"You don't know me," he mutters, his eyes flicking away from mine.

“No, I don’t. But I want to.”

For a long moment, he says nothing. Then, almost to himself, he mutters, “You really don’t know what you’re asking for.”

I can hear the fear in his voice, and it only makes me more determined. “Maybe I don’t,” I admit. “But you don’t have to face it alone anymore, Remo. You don’t have to hide behind this...this bullshit. Not with me.”

He stares at me for a beat like he’s trying to figure out if I’m lying. Or if I’m crazy. Or both.

Finally, he sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. “I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do with that.”

“Maybe nothing,” I say, my voice softer now. “Just know I understand you.”

The thing is, though, understanding someone doesn’t make it easier. It just makes it more complicated. More painful. Because once you understand the scars, once you see the cracks, it’s hard not to want to fix them.

But I know I can’t. He’s too far gone for that.

So, I settle for something else instead.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say. “Whether you like it or not, I’m in this with you. And I’m not leaving.”

He doesn't look at me. Doesn't need to. But I can tell by the way his body tightens, the slight shift in his posture, that my words hit harder than I expected.

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Volpi," he finally says.

I smile just a little because I know something he doesn't. I don't make promises I can't keep.

Chapter 18

Remo

Daniela is in my head, like a song I can't shake or a dream that lingers long after I wake.

It's not just attraction. Attraction, I can handle. This is something deeper. It claws at me and drags me under, and I know it's only a matter of time before I lose control.

Obsession. That's the word. She's carved into my thoughts, my skin, my goddamn soul, and I don't know how to scrape her out. Part of me doesn't want to. It's sick. It's sick wanting something so badly that it hurts and needing to claim her, to leave a mark she can't erase.

Yet here I am, teetering on the edge, knowing I'll fall. Maybe I already have.

I hate it. I hate how powerless I feel, how she can twist me up with a single look. But I crave it too—the fire, the chaos, the way she makes me forget the hollow inside me.

I've fought for control my whole life. But with her? It's slipping. And the scariest part? I don't think I want it back.

The car hums beneath us as the buildings pass by us in a blur. Daniela sits beside me, her copper hair catching the glow of passing streetlights. She hasn't spoken since I told her about the surprise, but I can feel her curiosity itching beneath her calm façade.

Finally, she breaks the quiet. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

A smirk pulls at my mouth. "What would be the fun in that?"

She rolls her eyes but doesn't argue. Smart. There's no winning against me when I've made up my mind.

Then, her voice softens, sounding almost playful. "So kidnapping me wasn't enough. Now you're dragging me to mystery outings?"

I glance at her. Her lips are curved in a teasing smile. "If you didn't want to come, you could've said no."

"Right. Like that's an option," she says with a scoff.

I let out a low laugh, but the sound dies quickly. The way she looks tonight—hazel eyes daring, the curve of her dress clinging just right—makes my chest tighten. I can feel the obsession crawling under my skin, carving into me like a sickness I don't want to cure.

"You clean up well, Volpi," I say, my tone gruff.

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“Was that...a compliment?” She feigns shock. “Did Remo Callegari just admit I look good?”

“Don’t let it go to your head,” I grunt.

“Oh, it’s already there.”

I shake my head, focusing back on the road. Every second I spend near her, I lose pieces of myself. And truth be told, I don’t hate it.

Daniela gives me a bewildered look as we approach the weathered glass of the erotic shop. I still have my hands shoved in my pockets to hide my bulge, which I suspect she already knows about. For a moment, it seems like she might bolt in the opposite direction, but then she frowns, casting a pitying glance at Marco, who flanks the door of the SUV.

“Why are we at an adult toy store?” she asks, her eyes snapping back to me.

“Window shopping,” I mutter, pulling my hand out to place it on her lower back. At first, she hesitates, but then she changes her mind and follows me inside. “I brought you here as a way of teasing you, but now I’m starting to like it myself.”

“What? You’re starting to like the erotic display of the toys?”

I shake my head, aroused by her seemingly naïve response. “No, I think the real

answer is that you can't say 'sex' without blushing really fucking hard."

"What are you talking about, Remo? I can talk about sex without blushing, see?" As if to prove my point, Daniela's face turns crimson. Instinctively, she cups her cheeks with both hands and ducks her head to the side to avoid my stern expression. "You know what? It doesn't matter. I think we can safely enjoy today either way."

"Good, I like the positivity." I try to sound cold and expressionless, but my words come out rushed, revealing a deeper need beneath the surface that shows how much I'm starting to care for this woman. She shrugs, swallows, and moves deeper into the shop. I take in the extravagant décor—the ambient red and blue lights transforming the space—and feel a rush of power take over me. Initially, I wanted to bring her here to tease her, but now that she's with me, it feels like an awakening and a chance to explore things we haven't before.

There's a shelf of toys on the far wall, and beside it, a display of lingerie I'd definitely like to see on Daniela's body. She picks up a pink vibrator and twirls it in her hands. I wrap my arms around her from behind and press a kiss on the dip of her neck. She melts into my embrace, tilting her neck to accommodate my kisses.

"Remo," she whispers, her voice hoarse.

"What?"

She says nothing, just sighs into my kisses as I take control of her body. Back at the restaurant that I took her to for a date, I wanted to touch her badly, but knowing Daniela's shy nature, I kept my hands to myself. In this place, however, I can't help myself. I slowly ride up her dress, pushing my hands steadily between her thighs. Daniela stiffens in my arms, trying to turn around to look at me, but I don't let her.

"Remo...we can't do this..."

“Huh? Do what, exactly?” I wrap one hand around her neck from behind to keep her in place and then guide the other hand to the insides of her thigh, where I can tell she’s hot and bothered.

She sucks in a deep breath. “You know what.”

“No, I don’t. Tell me what you think I’m actually trying to do to you, princess.” I shift my hands between her thighs, skimming upward until I touch the lacy outline of her panties. Then, I press a thumb against her opening. “Fucking tell me, Daniela.”

“Oh,” she murmurs, shivering in my arms. “You’re trying to finger fuck me in public, Remo.”

The shop isn’t exactly busy. It’s a late Thursday afternoon, the sun falling limply against the mirrored glass and shiny countertops. That’s precisely why I chose this place. There are two exits in the building, with the back one leading to an alley guarded by a few of my men. The front door, the one we came in from, is subtly guarded to avoid spooking anyone. I counted a total of eleven people, including staff, when we walked in, and with the size of the establishment, it didn’t feel crowded—or very public, either.

“Shhh, relax.” I press a knuckle against her folds through her panties, and I’m rewarded with a little, breathy moan from her. “Back at the restaurant, I was wondering what panties you had on and how much I wanted to tear them away and fuck your little pussy raw.”

“Remo...” Her shiver is now more pronounced, her words dripping with need, but I don’t peel back her panties or push my fingers into her.

“You have to tell me what you want, Daniela.”

“What?” she says breathily.

I pull my hand away and step back from her. Just then, a woman with a nose ring and tattoos approaches us. She wears a uniform, and her name tag spells “Nyla.” Two of her buttons are undone, revealing enough cleavage as she points to the line of toys. “What can I help you both with?”

I watch as Daniela reddens like she’s been caught doing something wrong, but then she squares her shoulders, stepping up like she’s heading into a war zone. Damn, this woman keeps surprising me. “My fiancé and I are looking for something to spice up our sex life. What would you recommend...uh...Nyla?”

Nyla glances from Daniela to me and back to Daniela before speaking in the most rehearsed voice I’ve ever heard. “Please come with me. We’ve got an assortment you can both try out.”

We follow her to the next shelf, where a man is fingering an artificial vagina with the ease of someone who has been in one of these places before. He gives me a quick, embarrassed smile before his attention snaps to Daniela. I watch his eyes do a double-take because, let’s face it, Daniela has that kind of power. The dress she’s wearing practically begs for her to be fucked hard. And with that pretty face of hers?

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Ugh, calling my obsession with her an understatement would be generous.

Leaning into her, I nibble her earlobe. “You were jealous, weren’t you?”

I think she’s about to argue with me, but then she gives me a hard glare. “Of course I was. She was all over you.”

“She wasn’t.” Or maybe I just hadn’t noticed.

Daniela sighs and rolls her eyes. “She’s the classic ‘pick me’ girl, and...she was going after my man. What did you want me to do?”

Hearing her refer to me as “my man” sends a rush of heat through my body. I can feel my cock respond as I reach forward to cup her butt. “Fuck, that’s it, princess. I like it when you get possessive and say what you want.”

Nyla turns to us, smiling brightly. “Do you both have any particular kinks or fetishes?”

I take the reins on this one. “Yeah, we need something that offers both pleasure and pain.”

“Yes, we do have one that I think will meet your standards.” She steps into a room and returns a minute later with what she calls a Clamp Painsure. “I know most people hear the name and think I made it up, but I assure you, I didn’t. It’s literally the best around here.”

Daniela covers her mouth and whispers, “I’m pretty sure she made the name up.”

The Clamp Painsure—an awful name, to be fair—looks intriguing. It has shackles designed to bind a person’s hands and feet, keeping them at a distance so you can inflict both pain and pleasure. There’s a certain power in handing control over to another person that I find incredibly appealing. Or maybe that’s just me. Either way, it’s all the persuasion I need to get it, along with a few others, including the panty vibrator.

Nyla shows us a little pink vibrator that, to my surprise, feels surprisingly sturdy.

“I want you to go in there and wear it,” I tell Daniela, deliberately avoiding the subtlety our conversation has taken. She gives me a wide-eyed look, unable to believe what I just said, then clamps her mouth shut, knowing I mean it. “Go on in, Daniela. Just put it on and come out. Then we can leave.”

She looks doubtful but heads to the dressing room with Nyla, who artfully helps her put it on. When she emerges, she looks like she hasn’t just worn something that gives me total control over her. Nyla explains its usage, detailing how it can be controlled via Bluetooth or an app on my phone. Right now, both options sound appealing, but since we’re close in proximity, I opt for the Bluetooth connection, though the app stays on my phone in case she steps out of reach.

After connecting it, I catch Daniela shooting me death glares the entire time as we move on to the lingerie section. As we walk, she looks over her shoulder at me and asks, “Can we go get some ice cream after this?”

“Yeah, sure, of course we can get ice cream.” It’s easy to agree with Daniela, even though with what I have planned for her, I’m not sure we’ll reach that point. I turn on the button and watch Daniela’s face contort into a mix of pleasure and surprise. She quickly brings her hands up to hide her expression, but I’ve already seen it all. I reach

forward, tearing her palm away and reveling in the sweet innocence reflected in her gorgeous hazel eyes. “Think about how it feels to give up your freedom and control to me, Daniela.”

She shakes her head, a low murmur escaping her lips that edges her on.

“That’s the lowest setting,” I tell her, and she gasps, clutching her heart. “You can’t take the vibrator off until I tell you to, Daniela. And...you can’t come either.”

“How...how do you want...me to...ahh...ohh, fuck!”

I would have burst out laughing at her halting words if I weren’t so damned turned on by her too. With each increase in pleasure, her words become slurred, her breath quickening. Every now and then, Daniela pauses to grind her thighs together, trying to balance the pleasure even though she knows I have all the power now. “We should leave, princess.”

She nods quickly, biting her lip to stifle a moan. “Yeah, we definitely need to leave. As in, right about fucking now.”

Outside, the evening air is thick with anticipation. The sky is a somber gray, and it’s as if rain might come crashing down any minute, but the encroaching darkness makes it feel more like a secret adventure. People weave in and out along the sidewalk, oblivious to the charged atmosphere between us as we steady ourselves outside. Daniela turns to me, breathless. “The car isn’t here?”

“It’s around the back, somewhere.”

She rolls her eyes, and I can feel her tension as I increase the vibrator’s pace. Her groan escapes in a rush of breath. “Remo, you’re killing me. I need to come...please.”

“No, not now.”

“Then where’s the bloody car?” she yells, frustration and desire mixing in her voice. “You know where the car is, Remo. They work for you. And knowing you, there’s no way in hell you wouldn’t know...fuck...please...oh, that feels so good.”

“Keep walking.” I brush light kisses up her arm, guiding her away from the shop. “Walk in front of me, princess.”

Her breaths quicken, but she hurries to the front as best as she can. “I thought you said you were protecting me, Remo. Staying in front of you doesn’t seem much like protection.”

A smile creeps onto my face at her words. “Don’t worry about that. It’s not like we’re walking alone. I’ve got people all around, watching you.”

She stops and spins to face me, placing a hand on my chest. “So, essentially, they’re going to watch you pleasure me?”

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I lean down to her ear and kiss it softly. “No, they’re going to watch you come.”

“Oh...” she gasps.

“Now, keep walking. We’re almost at the car.”

We move together for a moment, but when we reach the parked cars, I stop her from entering and ramp up the vibrator to the highest setting. Daniela fights to contain her reactions, but it doesn’t take long before she succumbs to the sensations. I wrap her in my arms, relishing the shivers that course through her body.

“It’s...ah...ahh...” she groans.

“It feels fantastic, right?”

She nods, a loud moan escaping her as she grinds against me, unbothered by the people around us.

“Wait until we get home,” I say with a groan. “I’m going to take my time with you until you’re clawing at my back.”

“I need that,” she whispers. “I need to feel your cock right now.”

“Not right now, princess.” I chuckle, feeling the heat of desire bubbling beneath my skin. “Remember what I told you? I’m the one in total control right now, and you do what I want. Is that clear?”

“Ye—yes.”

I sink my teeth into her neck and suck, leaving a mark that sends a rush through me. My cock tightens in my pants at her reaction, and I’m tempted to pull it out and stroke myself right then and there. I want to bring her to her knees, to feel her take me deep and long. There’s so much I want to do, but for now, I let her ride out her pleasure in my arms.

And damn, it feels fucking perfect.

Chapter 19

Daniela

The kitchen is colder than I expected, the walls stark and uninviting, like everything else in this place.

I pull the sleeves of my sweater over my hands and squint at the overhead bright light.

The counters are clean—almost clinical—but it has a stove and ingredients, and right now, that’s enough.

I open the fridge and start pulling out vegetables, meat, and anything remotely fresh. My hands move automatically, peeling, chopping, dicing, and trying to drown out the echo of my own thoughts.

Behind me, the faint creak of the door reminds me that I’m not alone.

“You sure this is a good idea?”

I don't turn around. He's leaning against the doorway, arms crossed, watching me like I might sprout horns and start cackling at any second.

"Cooking isn't exactly high-stakes, is it?" I say, tossing a carrot into the growing pile of diced vegetables. "Unless you think I'm planning to sneak a knife in your pasta."

He doesn't laugh. Doesn't even smirk. His face is like stone, as usual.

"You could." He steps into the room, his boots heavy against the tiled floor. "Wouldn't be the first time someone tried."

I roll my eyes and turn back to the cabinet. "Relax, Remo. I'm trying to make myself useful, not commit murder."

There's a pause, one long enough for me to feel his eyes burning into my back.

"You don't need to be useful," he finally says. "You just need to look pretty, spend all my money, and fuck me."

I stop mid-motion. Slowly, I turn to face him, arching a brow. "Wow, sexist much? You always this charming, or is this some special effort just for me?"

His lips twitch—almost a smirk, but not quite. "Depends. Is it working?"

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I scoff, shaking my head as I grab a pan and set it on the stove. “Oh, absolutely. Nothing gets me hotter than outdated gender roles and a personality straight out of a villain handbook.”

He moves closer, looming just enough for his presence to press against me without touching. Most people would crumble under the weight of it, but I don’t flinch.

“Go sit down, Remo,” I say, not even bothering to look at him. “And don’t interrupt me until the food’s done.”

He doesn’t answer, but I hear the scrape of a chair as he pulls one out and sits at the small kitchen table.

I start pulling ingredients from the shelves: canned tomatoes, olive oil, dried herbs. The pantry isn’t exactly gourmet, but I’ve made do with worse. The knife feels good in my hand as I slice through an onion, the rhythm grounding me in a way I hadn’t expected.

“You cook often?” he asks.

His question catches me off guard.

“Not as much as I’d like to,” I admit, keeping my focus on the chopping. “I used to cook with my mom, though. Every Sunday, without fail.”

There’s a flicker of something in his expression, but it’s gone too fast for me to name it.

“Your mother.” His tone is careful. Like he’s walking a tightrope. “She taught you?”

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Yeah. She always said you could tell a lot about someone by how they cooked.” I glance at him, my knife stilling for a moment. “What about you? Ever cook?”

He snorts, a sound that’s almost a laugh. “Not unless you count burning toast.”

The image of Remo, this tall, intimidating enforcer, standing over a smoking toaster almost makes me smile.

“Figures,” I say, shaking my head. “You probably don’t have the patience for it.”

“Patience isn’t my strong suit.”

The air shifts slightly, the mood between us thinning just enough to breathe. I stir the onions in the pan, their sharp, sweet scent filling the room. For a moment, it feels...normal.

Just then, the door swings open, and Marco steps in, his broad shoulders nearly brushing the frame. He’s holding a bag of flour in his hands, his fingers dusted with flour.

“What’s this?” he asks, his voice gruff but not unkind.

“Cooking lesson,” I say without looking up. “You want in?”

He grins—a rare sight that softens the hard lines of his face. “I’ll pass. But here.” He holds it out and then whispers, “And again, sorry for keeping you waiting. Just don’t tell Remo I used the previous bag to bake pastries in my spare time. I’ve got a reputation to uphold.”

I laugh despite myself. Marco, with his hulking frame and perpetually scowling face, kneading bread like a disgruntled baker. It's absurd.

"You bake?"

He shrugs. "Keeps me busy. Plus, it's better than listening to these idiots argue over card games."

Remo doesn't react, but I catch the faintest hint of amusement in his expression.

"Let me guess," I say, slicing into the meat. "You make sourdough in your free time too?"

Marco snorts. "Don't push it, Volpi."

I raise my hand in mock surrender. "I just didn't expect you to be so domestic."

"There's a lot you don't know." His tone is teasing, but there's an edge to it. He leans against the counter, watching as I knead the dough into something resembling order.

"You two done yet?" Remo's voice cuts through the moment, irritated.

"Relax," Marco says, smirking. "I'm just here for quality control."

“Get out.”

The two of them exchange a look, some unspoken understanding passing between them. Marco pushes off the counter, grabs a piece of bread from his pocket, and tosses it onto the table in front of Remo.

“Enjoy,” he says, his voice laced with mockery. “Don’t choke.”

Remo glares, but Marco just chuckles and walks out, leaving behind the faint smell of yeast and mischief.

“Is he always like that?” I ask, half-smiling.

“Worse,” Remo mutters, breaking off a piece of bread and popping it into his mouth.

The quiet returns, but it’s not as heavy this time. I focus on the food, on the way the dough softens under my hands, and the way the sauce simmers in the pan. For a moment, it feels like I’ve carved out a tiny pocket of normalcy in a world that refuses to slow down.

As the sauce thickens, the room grows quieter. Remo doesn’t leave, and I don’t ask him to. His presence is oddly grounding, even if it comes with a side of scrutiny. I steal a glance at him now and then—how his fingers drum lightly against the table and the subtle furrow of his brow like he’s lost in thought.

“Something on your mind?” I ask, breaking the silence.

His eyes snap to me, sharp and unyielding. “Always.”

It’s the kind of answer that tells you everything and nothing at the same time.

I turn back to the stove. “You know, this whole brooding-in-the-corner thing doesn’t exactly scream ‘trustworthy.’”

“I don’t need to scream it,” he replies coolly. “I’d rather make you scream instead.”

“Is that so?”

No reply. Until I hear the scrape of his chair against the floor. His boots echo softly as he approaches, and I feel the weight of him standing behind me.

“How about I make you do it now?” His voice is low, almost a whisper, and there’s a rumble to it that sends a shiver down my spine.

I turn to face him, the wooden spoon still in my hand. “Step back, mister. I am cooking.”

He stares at me, his jaw tightening. A faint smirk appears on his lips, and then he leans in slightly, his eyes locked on mine.

“I’m going to fuck you right now, Daniela,” he says, his tone heavy with meaning. “And from my experience, there’s little you can do to stop it. So why don’t you put down that spoon, take off your clothes until you’re completely naked underneath that apron, and go wait for me on your knees in my bedroom?”

I don’t look away, even though every instinct tells me I should. There’s something magnetic about him—dangerous, yes, but also compelling in a way I can’t quite explain.

The sauce bubbles behind me, and the smell of garlic and tomatoes fills the space, but I can't seem to focus on anything other than the way his eyes drill into me.

"Careful, Dolcezza," he murmurs, his lips twitching into the faintest hint of a smirk. "You're drooling." That damn nickname. He hasn't used it in so long that I actually miss it.

I blink, heat rising to my cheeks as I turn back to the stove. "You're imagining things."

"Am I?"

The smugness in his voice is infuriating, and I grip the spoon a little tighter. "You're insufferable, you know that?"

He chuckles softly, a sound so rare it catches me off guard.

"You're not the first to say that," he admits, and when I glance over my shoulder, there's a softness in his expression that I haven't seen before.

It disappears as quickly as it came, replaced by his usual mask of indifference.

The mood in the room shifts again, heavier this time, as if the air itself is bracing for whatever comes next. After I finish stirring the sauce, I turn off the burner and wipe my hands on a towel.

"There," I say, stepping back. "Dinner's ready."

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Remo picks up the spoon, tastes the sauce, and nods. “Not bad.”

“Not bad?” I repeat, crossing my arms. “That’s all you’ve got?”

“It’s edible,” he says, smirking now.

I roll my eyes. “High praise coming from a man who burns toast.”

Nodding toward the dining area where the other men are scattered, I ask, “You think they’ll eat this?”

“They’ll eat anything if they’re hungry enough,” Remo says.

I give him the middle finger. “Asshole.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, but before he can respond, the sound of footsteps echoes down the hallway.

Livia appears in the doorway, breathless and wild-eyed, her sharp eyes darting between us. “We’ve got a problem,” she says, her voice clipped.

Remo’s smirk vanishes instantly. “What is it?”

“I’ve found them,” she says, her voice shaking. “Vizzini’s hideout.”

The room freezes, the gravity of her words sinking in.

And just like that, the fragile peace I'd found in the kitchen is gone, replaced by the chaos that seems to follow Remo wherever he goes.

Chapter 20

Remo

I'm here for blood.

It's a feeling that's as familiar as my own skin, raw and hollow, but with a promise of release. Something primal. The kind of thing you don't talk about unless you've lived it, felt it, been consumed by it.

Livia and Marco are right behind me as we approach the warehouse, a grim little spot tucked in the shadows of a crumbling neighborhood. It's all concrete, steel, and dirt—perfect for hiding shit you don't want to be found. That's where Leone and his rats have been holed up for the last few weeks.

My men move in silently, setting charges. The blast rips through the air, a deafening roar that shakes my chest.

When the dust settles, there's nothing but the stench of burning metal and blood.

I step out from behind the truck, scanning the wreckage. Bodies are scattered everywhere—some of them my own men, but most of them Leone's.

I don't care if it's a massacre. I want him, the bastard who's been slipping under my radar for too long.

He's not here, though. The fucker's hiding like the cockroach he is. It's also too damn quiet, too still.

I signal to Marco. He gives me a quick nod, and we start moving in, guns raised, every step measured. We know the drill by now. We've been through this shit a thousand times.

"Boss," Marco mutters, his eyes scanning the shadows and narrowing in suspicion. "I think something is amiss here."

I don't need him to say it. I know. I can fucking feel it.

And then, just like that, the silence shatters.

A whole goddamn army bursts from the remaining parts of the building, guns blazing.

My instincts kick in, and I dive for cover as the sharp sound of bullets sings by my ears, close enough for me to feel their heat.

I catch Marco's eye for a split second before the world goes to hell. He doesn't need to be told.

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“Fire!” I growl, my voice like gravel.

The air turns into a war zone. My own gun roars in my hand, sending bullets straight into the chests of two of Leone’s men without a second thought. No hesitation. No mercy.

The bastard had to know it was coming.

The bullets start flying, a blur of noise and chaos. A bloodbath. My men move like ghosts, ducking, firing, never stopping. I take out another three with clean shots to their heads.

That’s what this life is, isn’t it? A constant balancing act between what you have to do and what you feel. And I don’t feel a damn thing anymore.

I duck behind a stack of wooden crates, my heart pounding as bullets ricochet off the walls around me. The fucking noise is deafening, but I’ve trained myself not to listen.

A scream rips through the air, and one of my men drops, blood pouring from his side. I grit my teeth, trying to focus. But then I catch movement. Fast. Almost too fast.

Leone.

The bastard’s slipping away.

“Shit,” I mutter, my pulse spiking as I push out of cover. I can’t let him get away. Not again.

I spot his car—a black piece of shit, the kind you’d think only a coward would drive. Within moments, he’s peeling out, speeding down the street like he’s trying to outrun his fate. But I won’t let him.

I get in my car, leaving Marco, my men, and Livia to take care of the remaining men, and the chase begins.

His car swerves around corners, tires screeching against the asphalt. I follow, closer and closer, slamming my foot down on the gas.

I’m not losing this time.

I cut the wheel hard, slamming my car into his. The crash rattles my teeth, but I don’t give a damn. I’m out of the car before the dust even settles.

Leone stumbles out of his car, looking like a fucking animal caught in a trap. He’s sweating, eyes wide, trying to act like he’s got control of the situation.

“Who would’ve thought I’d see the day you actually give two shits about someone else other than yourself?” he sneers, trying to mask the tremble in his voice with a forced laugh. But it’s a hollow thing, dead in his chest. His laugh doesn’t reach his eyes. It’s nothing but a sound to hide the panic gnawing at him. “Times sure have changed, haven’t they?”

Then he steps closer, his voice dripping with malice. “You’re lucky I wasn’t with my men that day, Remo. If I had been, I would’ve made sure to shoot the bitch myself.”

I don’t wait for him to finish. I’m already on him, my fist crashing into his face with all the fury I can muster. He stumbles back, but he doesn’t go down. No, he’s tougher than I thought. A goddamn cockroach, as I said.

His fist catches me in the lip. The pain is sharp, sudden, and fucking blinding. I taste blood, but it just makes me angrier.

I don't fight like a man anymore. I fight like I'm already dead. Like there's nothing left to lose.

He catches me with another uppercut, and I feel my lip split open. The blood's warm on my skin, but I don't give a shit. I'll kill him with my bare hands if I have to.

We're locked in this fucking dance, neither one of us giving an inch. His breath is ragged, and I can see the fear in his eyes now, but it doesn't stop him from swinging. We're both too far gone to stop. It's the kind of fight that's meant to end in one of us dead.

I get the upper hand for a second, my fist connecting with his ribs, but then I don't see him pulling something from his hand, and he's on me, stabbing me in the hand.

The pain's instant, brutal. I feel the sharp edge sink into my flesh, and for a second, all I can do is breathe. He uses that opportunity to kick me in the face with his boots, sending me down to the ground.

I grit my teeth and push through it, trying to stand up. I'm losing so much blood.

"Fucking coward," I growl through the pain.

He doesn't respond because he's too busy getting back in his car. He slams the door shut and floors it, peeling off into the night.

I don't chase him. I can't. My hands are too fucked up.

Marco pulls up beside me, his face grim. "You good, Boss?"

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I don't answer.

I should've killed him years ago. That's the truth of it. Every second I've wasted, every inch I've let him get away, it's all gonna cost me.

Chapter 21

Daniela

I can't even remember when the warmth started to creep in.

Maybe it was when I first started nursing him back to health, tending to his wounds with the care of someone who's been through enough pain to know how much it hurts to be helpless.

Maybe it was when his gruff voice softened for the first time when he let me see more than just the controlled monster he wears like armor.

Every night, he holds me. It's strange how it feels like something familiar now. Like his warmth is all I have left, the only thing I can count on.

I used to hate the idea of being close to anyone, too scared that the closer I got to them, the worse it would hurt when they left. But with him, I'm...used to it.

I can't deny it anymore. I'm falling for him. Hard.

I see it in the way his fingers trace the edge of my jaw when he thinks I'm asleep, in

the way his breath slows when I curl into him at night. But I know better than to believe in it.

I can feel the wall he's built around himself, the distance he keeps even when we're tangled up in the dark together. I can feel it every time he pulls away, like a refusal to let me see too much, to let me in.

Maybe I don't want to get in. Maybe I'm scared of what it will cost.

It's been weeks now, and the closer I get to him, the more I realize he's hiding something from me. He's always been careful around certain things, like when I talk about my parents. It's the way his expression flickers, just for a second, before he goes cold again. Like he's afraid of something coming to the surface.

I don't say anything. I just watch him. And when I do, I start to see the little things—the way his hands shake when he thinks I'm not looking, the way he flinches when a sound reminds him of something, maybe of a memory he wishes would die already.

And that's the thing. Remo's got this way about him that makes you think you've figured him out, only to realize you haven't even scratched the surface. But the more I try to understand, the more I feel like I'm drowning in the silence he leaves behind.

One day, I'm in my room, rifling through my things, when I find the envelope. It's one with no return address, just a single sheet of paper inside. I don't recognize the handwriting, but my hands freeze when I read the words.

Remo Callegari is the one who killed your parents.

I'm not sure what I expected, but this wasn't it.

It feels like someone just yanked the ground out from under me. I can't breathe, can't think straight. Remo? He's the one who...he's the one who killed them?

No. It can't be true. They died in a car accident. But how? Why would someone send me this?

My parents died when I was ten. That's what I've been told my whole life. Fifteen years ago. That's the story.

But this letter says something else.

It says Remo did it. Remo, the man who's been right in front of me, holding me close and making me think—no, feel—something I haven't allowed myself to in years.

I know how the mafia works. I know they take you young. They carve you up and make you a soldier before you're even old enough to understand what loyalty really means.

But Remo? Him? He couldn't have been the one.

But he was only fifteen. Fifteen when it happened. A kid—no, a boy—pushed into a world he didn't ask for.

How does that even make sense?

I don't believe it. Not yet.

I clutch the letter tighter, almost crushing it, but I can't bring myself to throw it away.

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What if it's a lie? A sick joke? What if someone's playing with my head, trying to twist the truth into something it's not?

Why would someone do this to me? Why would they tell me this now?

And then there's Remo. Why is he always so damn closed off when it comes to my parents? Every time I mention them, he pulls away, like there's something he's trying to hide. Like he's afraid that I'll figure it out.

But he wouldn't—he couldn't have been the one to take them from me, could he?

No. It can't be.

I force myself to breathe, to calm down, but the words still echo in my head. Remo did it. He killed my parents.

I know better than to trust anything that comes without a name, but the thought gnaws at me. Every time I try to push it away, it comes rushing back, biting harder.

The letter shouldn't have gotten to me. I've seen the way things are usually handled. Everything gets screened. Nothing slips through the cracks unless someone inside is making it happen. But even that doesn't make sense. It feels wrong, like someone wanted me to see this, wanted me to question it.

The next morning, I don't waste any time. I wait until Remo's busy with his men, and then I slide the letter across the table. He doesn't even look up at first. He's too focused on whatever plan he's making with Livia. But then he finally looks up, and

his eyes flick to the paper.

“Where’d you get this?” His voice is calm, but I can feel the tense tone.

“It doesn’t matter where it came from. What matters is what it says.” I cross my arms, trying to hold my ground, but I’m shaking inside.

Remo stays quiet for a moment, his eyes scanning the letter like it’s some kind of threat. Then, with a slow exhale, he leans back in his chair.

“I’ll find out who sent it.” His words are clipped and controlled. But I can see the way his jaw tightens, the way he stands a little too fast. He’s hiding something.

“Remo,” I press, leaning forward, “you’re not answering the question.”

His eyes flick up to mine, and there’s a flicker of something there—something close to guilt, something that makes the pit in my stomach deepen even more.

“I was under orders to take them out and make it look like an accident,” he says, and I can hear the weight of those words in his voice. “I had no choice.”

I don’t know how to respond to that. It feels like my whole world just shifted. Like I can’t trust anything anymore. The man I’ve been falling for? The one who’s been holding me every night and whispering promises I’m foolish enough to believe? He’s the one who took them from me.

I don’t think. I don’t reason with myself. All I feel is the rage, boiling up from deep inside, all the years of longing for answers, for closure, for revenge.

I stand up so fast that the chair crashes to the ground.

“You’re lying,” I spit, my hands shaking. “You’re lying. You—you can’t—”

I grab his shirt, my fist clenched, and for a moment, I just want to hurt him. I want him to feel the pain that’s been eating me alive, the way I’ve been dragged through the mud because of the life he chose.

I scream at him, but it doesn’t even feel like it’s my voice anymore. It’s all the rage, all the hurt, all the things I never said but have been carrying since the day my parents died.

Two of his men rush in like they’ve been waiting for this. They’re quick to draw their guns, ready to do their job, but Remo raises his hand.

“Leave,” he orders.

The men hesitate, their eyes flicking between us. But when Remo doesn’t budge, they lower their guns, giving me one last look before leaving the room.

I can hear the sound of my own heartbeat in my ears. The world is spinning, and I can’t breathe. I want to fight him, but deep down, I know I’m in his house, in his world, and I don’t stand a chance.

“You’re a monster,” I mutter, barely able to get the words out.

“I did what I had to do,” he repeats, as if that makes it okay. Like it’s some justification for what he’s done. As if saying it enough will make it feel less like a crime and more like survival. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“You’re right,” I snap. “I don’t understand. I don’t want to understand.”

I can’t. I won’t.

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He steps closer and tries to reach for me. The anger in me burns hotter and fiercer, and my chest tightens. He's just standing there, still so calm, like he's in control of everything. Like this is just another day for him.

But I can't let it go. Not now. Not after everything.

I move quickly, my hand reaching for the gun tucked in the back of my jeans. The one he gave me. The one I never wanted to use but always kept close. I pull it out and point it at him.

I should kill him. I should.

"If you ever touch me again," I spit, my voice trembling with the weight of everything inside me, "I swear to God I'll blow your fucking brains out."

He doesn't flinch. He doesn't move. His eyes meet mine, and there's something in them, something I can't quite place. "Dolcezza, please. Let me explain."

I laugh. But it's not really a laugh. It's a sharp, broken sound. Like I'm trying to keep it together but failing miserably. "Explain what?" I scoff. "That all this time I've been fucking the murderer who killed my freaking parents? The man who turned my whole life into a mess, who made me this empty, depressed girl who thinks the world is out to get her?"

I can feel my heart breaking all over again, but I don't let him see it. I won't let him see it.

He doesn't respond right away. Instead, he looks at me like I'm some puzzle he's still trying to figure out. Then, finally, his voice comes, rough and regretful, like it's been held back for far too long. "I didn't have a choice. It was either me or them. You don't know how sick and twisted this world is...what more for me, someone who had no one and was just trying to find my footing. I was given an order and told to do it, no questions asked." Then, his voice drops lower. "They were connected. Your parents, Daniela, they knew too much. They were involved with some things they shouldn't have been. Things I didn't even know about until it was too late." He pauses, his face hardening as if the memory is a knife twisting inside him.

"Your father...he was a lawyer, right? A good one. He had his hands in every goddamn pot. Corruption, shady deals, money laundering for people who would kill to keep their names out of the public eye. They didn't know he was trying to get out, trying to cut ties with people who could pull him back in. He thought he could walk away clean. But they don't let people walk away clean. Not in this world."

The words hit harder than I expected, like a punch to the gut. My hands clench at my sides, and I have to force myself to stay calm.

"You're lying," I hiss, shaking my head, refusing to believe it.

"Maybe I wish I were," he says, his voice tight. "But that's the reality. Your parents...they were tangled with people who had no problem making them disappear. The order wasn't about them, per se. It was about keeping the secrets buried. My loyalty was to my boss, and I had a job to do."

I want to scream at him. Tell him he's a monster. Tell him he's justifying murder like it's just another day at the office. But it's like the words stick in my throat.

"If I hadn't done it...if I had hesitated...I'd be dead right now, and you wouldn't be standing here. It's how this world works, Daniela. You do what you're told, or you

don't survive."

The truth stabs deep, sharper than any knife could.

It's the way he says it that makes me want to scream. I can hear the regret in his voice.

Because now, I understand him. I get it. I get why he did it. Why he didn't think twice. But understanding doesn't make it right. It doesn't make me forgive him.

I hate myself even more because I get it. I see the pain in his eyes—the weight of everything he's done—and I know it's not something he can ever undo. But it doesn't stop the fury inside me from rising up, doesn't stop me from wanting to scream at him, to make him feel what I feel.

And then it hits me. He didn't know me back then. He didn't know who I was. He didn't know what kind of person I'd grow into. He didn't know he'd pull me into this twisted, fucked-up world.

But I'm here, and I'm already in too deep.

I stare at him, trying to hold on to the hatred, but all I feel is exhaustion. All I feel is emptiness. "How long have you known?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper at first. It feels like the most important thing in the world.

"Dolcezza—"

"Don't fucking call me that," I snap, my fury rising again. "You pathetic piece of shit. Answer my fucking question, or I swear to God, I'll shoot you right now. How long have you fucking known?"

His eyes don't even flicker. There's no hesitation. Nothing. Remo Callegari doesn't fear death. He's seen it too many times to care about the threat in my voice.

But what pulls me under is the sadness in his eyes. It tugs at my heartstrings, twists them, and makes me wish I could crawl out of my own skin and leave this nightmare behind.

I close my eyes for a second when I feel like I'm drowning in everything that's happened, everything that's been said. I regret it all. I regret stepping into his house. I regret trusting him. I regret ever letting myself care.

"I've known since the minute you stepped into my house," he says. "I just didn't care enough to let that keep you away from me. I wanted you. And the past is the past."

In my head, I've already shot him a thousand times and watched him fall to the floor with his blood pooling around him. I've already killed him over and over again.

But when I open my eyes and see him standing there, so close, his chest rising and falling with every breath, all I feel is that hollow emptiness.

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I can't do it.

I don't want to be like him. I won't become like him.

I lower the gun, my hands trembling, and he steps forward, coming too close. He pries it from my grip, his fingers cold against my skin, before leaning in and whispering in my ear. "You should've taken the shot while you could," he murmurs. "Now, you'll never be able to get rid of me again."

Then he walks out without another word, leaving me standing there with my heart heavy in my chest.

What the hell did I even want from him? What did I think was going to happen? I don't know anymore.

But I do know one thing.

He's ruined me.

And I'm not sure I'll ever be able to pick up the pieces.

Chapter 22

Remo

I don't think twice when I find out who betrayed me.

There's no hesitation, no need for a drawn-out process. She made her choice, and I'm not in the mood for explanations. I shoot her twice in the face just like that. No warning, no moment of doubt. It's over.

This is Leone's one last move at getting to me—compromising my staff to put the letter in Daniela's room and offering her a hefty payout. Too bad she'll never live to spend it.

Daniela wanted the truth, and now she has it.

I don't waste time with theatrics. I just turn to "The Cleaners." They know the drill. They'll make her disappear. It's what they're good at.

The weight of it doesn't hit me until I'm back at the house.

I push open the door to her room. She has refused to visit mine since that day.

Daniela also hasn't left her space, and she's holed up and avoiding me like I'm the plague. And honestly? I don't blame her. But I'm not gonna let it slide. She's mine, even if she doesn't realize it yet. So, I do what I always do. I approach the problem head-on.

I knock once, then twist the handle.

Nothing.

I step in, my boots heavy on the hardwood floor. She's curled up on the bed, her eyes staring at the wall, her face set in a way I know all too well. It's like she's trying to erase everything in her head. Like she's trying to pretend she's somewhere else.

"Daniela," I say her name quietly, but there's something raw in my voice that cracks

when I do.

She doesn't react.

I don't know what I expected, but it's not this—this cold nothingness. It gnaws at me, and for a moment, I want to punch something. Anything.

“Look at me,” I demand. I hate that she's avoiding me like I'm some kind of disease she's trying not to catch.

Her eyes shift over to me for just a second before she shuts them again.

I step closer.

“Daniela,” I say, my voice softer than I want it to be.

Still nothing.

I take another step, closing the distance between us. “We need to talk.”

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She finally looks at me. Her eyes narrow. They're sharp and cold, full of venom. "I have nothing to say to you."

"Don't shut me out." I move closer, not backing down. "You think I wanted to hurt you? You think I don't regret what I did? You think I've been able to sleep a single night since you walked into my life and turned it upside down? I know I don't deserve your forgiveness, not even a fraction of it, but goddamn it, I can't stay away. Yes, I'm selfish, but it's because I can't imagine my life without you in it."

She laughs, but it's empty, hollow.

"I never wanted this for you," I say, my voice lower now, quieter and raw. "I don't know how to make it right, but I know it's the truth. And I know nothing I say will change the past. But I can't live without you, Daniela."

"You can't live without me?" Her voice cracks, but she doesn't look away as she rises to her feet. "What about what I want? When has this messed-up relationship ever been about me? You kidnapped me, forced me to live with you, and threatened me over and over. And then, just when I thought it couldn't get worse, I found out you killed my parents. And your answer to all of that is you can't live without me? What about me, Remo? What about what I want? How the hell am I supposed to look at you? Kiss you? Touch you? When everything about you just takes me back to the worst moment of my life?"

Her anger seeps into every word, and they hang in the air like a heavy fog. The silence between us feels like a wall, thick and suffocating. My chest tightens, but I can't pull away. Not now.

“I never meant for any of this to happen,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “You’re right. Everything’s been about me. About what I wanted and what I thought I needed. But I’ve never stopped thinking about you. Even when I hurt you. Even when I shouldn’t have.”

She turns away, but I can see the way her body trembles. It’s not fear. It’s something deeper, something raw, and it pulls at something in me. I don’t know what’s left to say, but I can’t just stand here and let her go.

“I can’t fix what I’ve done,” I continue, my voice thick with frustration and desperation. “But I need you to know I’m trying. I can’t promise I’ll be everything you want, but I’ll never stop fighting for us. For you.”

She stares at me. Her eyes are filled with so much hurt, so much rage, that it makes my stomach turn. I don’t know how to make it right. I don’t know how to fix any of this. But I do know this: I can’t let her slip away. Not like this.

I take a step toward her, and she flinches, but I’m already too close. I grab her wrists before she can throw something at me.

It’s a stupid, childish move, but rage is crawling up my throat, and I can’t control it.

“Get your filthy hands off me, you bastard!” she growls.

“You’re the one wanting to throw shit at me.” I corner her to a wall.

“Because you deserve it!” she finally snaps, fury blazing in her eyes. “I trusted you. You dragged me into this mess, and you’ve been lying to me from the start.”

I don’t flinch. “You don’t get to play the victim here, not when you know what I do for a living. You knew what you were getting into.” My jaw tightens. “And it’s not

like I had any other choice. They were gonna kill them. They would have sent someone else if I didn't do it. It wasn't just me—"

"You killed them!" she screams, the sound so raw and real that I feel it in my chest. "You just...you just killed them like they were nothing. And you think you can justify it by saying you were saving me? Well, guess what, Remo? You're not the fucking hero here."

I slam my hand on the wall next to her head, my breath ragged. "I didn't want this for you, but you're not a fucking child. And what I did kept you safe."

She doesn't back down. "Safe? Safe? I don't need your protection. I don't need you making decisions for me."

"You think I like this?" My voice drops, suddenly quiet and dangerously low. "You think I wanted to bring you into my world? You think I wanted to make you a part of this mess?" I run a hand through my hair. "I've been trying to keep you out of it. To forget you. But like a damn curse, you occupy my every waking thought. I haven't been myself for months, Daniela. I'm not some victim here, and I know I've hurt you. But you don't understand. This thing, this thing I have for you, it's not something I can control. It's not something I want to feel, but it's there, eating at me. I think about you every second, even when I try not to. You haunt me."

"I didn't plan this. I didn't plan to need you the way I do. I didn't plan for you to be the one thing in my life that actually matters. But you are. And I can't undo that. I know I'm a mess. I know I'm broken, I know I've done horrible things, but this...this isn't something I can fix. It's not something I can walk away from. I've tried. I've pushed you, I've hurt you, I've kept you at arm's length because I was scared—scared of how deep this goes. Scared that if I let you in, I wouldn't be able to let go."

“But every time you look at me, I’m reminded of how damn far gone I am. I’ve never wanted anyone like this, Daniela. I’ve never needed someone like this. And it terrifies me. So much so that I can’t fight it anymore, no matter how much I want to. I’m freaking in love with you.”

She stares at me for a long time before her face falls, and for a moment, I think she might break. But she doesn’t. Instead, she steels herself, even more distant now than before. “You...you don’t get to say that to me. I will never accept your love. You disgust me, and I regret ever meeting you. I wish you shot me that night instead so I would never have to see your pathetic face again.” she whispers.

I laugh, short and humorless. “You don’t mean that.”

“I. Mean. Every. Single. Word.”

“You’re lying,” I say, barely able to keep my frustration from boiling over.

Then, there’s silence between us, thick and suffocating.

“You should go,” she finally says, her voice so small, so defeated. “Just go.”

I shake my head. “I’m not leaving you alone. Not when I know you’re hurting. You think I don’t know that? You think I don’t see it?” I lean in, my voice low. “I’m right here, Daniela. I’m not going anywhere.”

For a moment, she doesn’t speak. She doesn’t move. It’s like the world stops, just for a second. And in that second, I close the gap between us.

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My lips crash down on hers, hard and desperate. She doesn't fight me. Not at first. But then she pulls back and pushes against my chest like she's trying to break free.

"Don't pretend you don't feel it," I whisper against her mouth. "Don't pretend you don't want this."

She stays silent, her breath shallow, but she doesn't pull away. And that's enough for me.

"Don't lie to yourself," I mutter against her mouth. "You feel it. You can't shut it out."

She stays frozen for a moment longer, then softens just a little.

One kiss is all it takes.

Her breath catches, and I know. I fucking know she feels it too.

So I kiss her again. Harder.

It's not gentle. It's rough and almost frantic because I can't hold back anymore. I need her to feel this, to understand it's not just words. It's everything I've been too damn afraid to say.

At first, she doesn't kiss me back. I can feel the tension in her, the resistance. But then, slowly, she softens, her hands coming to rest on my chest. Her breath mingles with mine, and for a moment, time stops.

The kiss is raw. I force my tongue between her lips and take—just take.

Her legs quiver. Oh, God...this damn woman is my ruin.

I devour her and feel her melt against me. Then, I grab the back of her hair and yank it as I continue to plunder her mouth. Electric jolts shoot straight to my groin. No woman has ever responded like this before, and oh my God, she kisses me back with such greed, and it's like a soothing balm for my shattered ego.

This woman...desires me...is kissing me.

I rip my mouth from hers and suck on her neck, trailing soft kisses up to her earlobe.

"I swear I'm going to fuck you so hard..."

Her legs nearly give way, but I steady her.

"Tell me you didn't mean those words," I whisper into her ear. "Tell me, now."

She opens her mouth, but all that escapes is a sigh.

I thrust my tongue into her ear canal and watch her nearly melt into a puddle right then and there.

"Tell me," I demand again. "Did you mean those words you said?"

"Yes."

I clamp my mouth on hers once more. Our tongues swirl together again, and her legs threaten to give way. I feel her hands slide up my hard arms, relishing the muscle beneath my skin. She grips my shoulders and wraps her arms around my neck, trying

to close whatever distance remains between us.

Closer...she wants to be closer—

But I break the kiss with a loud smack, releasing her hair so she nearly tumbles backward. She catches herself by the wall, a whimper escaping her at the loss of my lips, my arms, my need.

I stand there, staring at her.

No, I'm glaring at her, my eyes burning two holes into her skin.

"Where is it?" I implore, my impatience boiling over. I'm impatient with her, with the world, and with myself.

"What?" Daniela mumbles, still trying to regain her bearings.

"The vibrator I got you."

“No.”

“I’m not going to ask twice. Where. Is. It?”

She visibly swallows before answering, “It’s in the second drawer.”

I reach for the second drawer and pull out the vibrator, its sleek surface glinting under the dim light. “You’re going to take back every single word you said to me, princess. I won’t let you stop cumming until I’ve had my fill and drained every last drop from you.”

Daniela pulls back, her throat working as she swallows. “You don’t just get to fuck me into submission again, Remo. I hate you.”

“I know, but I don’t give a damn about how you feel right now.” I gesture at my pants, where my dick is threatening to break free. “You see this? You’re going to take care of it. Your sharp little tongue caused it, and I won’t rest until I’ve punished your body for making me this way.” I hand her the device, and she takes it quietly, holding it close to her racing heart. “Now, before I get angrier, show me how to use this, princess.”

“There’s nothing to show,” she replies, a hint of defiance in her voice. “It’s a clit vibrator. When it’s placed on your clit, all you can think about is how it works its magic on you.”

“Do it then.” Despite having seen this toy being used before, I’ve never witnessed Daniela use it on herself. And the very thought of her using it ignites a fire within me.

I hope my expression conveys the seriousness of my request because I feel a desperation that words can't capture. "I want to watch you pleasure yourself, Daniela."

Her brows knit together instinctively, but she doesn't resist. I suspect she craves pleasure just as desperately as she craves air. "Go on, Daniela. Show me what you like."

She bites her lip, weighing her options, then lies on the floor. "I haven't had anyone watch me masturbate before, Remo."

"Does it feel weird?" I ask, my voice dropping to a husky whisper.

"No, I'm turned on. I want you to watch me too."

Well, that settles it, doesn't it? Still, I can hear the animosity lacing her words. She truly seems to hate me, and I don't know how to shift that perception yet. All I can do is focus on earning her trust again, no matter how long or difficult that road may be. For now, though, we both surrender to the intoxicating pleasure our bodies offer, teetering on the edge of desire and longing.

Daniela spreads her legs, revealing the wetness seeping through her panties. "Can you see how wet you've made me?" she asks, biting her lower lip.

I lean closer, dragging a finger along the front of her panties and feeling the slickness beneath the fabric. Her thighs jerk at my touch, already sensitive, but I don't stop. I shift her panties aside and rub my fingers against her, careful not to go too deep. Daniela rolls her hips against my hand, her eyes fluttering shut in pleasure. My cock strains against my jeans, and we both know that if I keep this up, we'll end up crossing a line. Reluctantly, I pull my fingers back and sit back to watch her.

Slowly, she removes her clothes and then her panties, teasingly peeling them away, each deliberate motion makes me gulp. “Holy fuck, Daniela, you’re killing me here.” She turns on the toy, and my throat bobs with anticipation. “Do it, Daniela,” I rasp. “Show me what it’s like when you fuck yourself.”

She guides the toy to her swollen clit, gasping as it makes contact. My senses sharpen, captivated by the soft hum of the vibrator against her. Without thinking, I reach down to stroke my cock, unable to tear my eyes away as she rocks her hips, moving in rhythm with the vibrations while I match my strokes to her movements.

“Oh my fucking God!” Her voice drops to a whisper, hoarse with raw need. Her beautiful face is lost in euphoria as she moans. I can barely hold back, watching beads of sweat form on her forehead. A fine sheen trails down the dip of her breasts to her navel, unfurling like a flower in spring.. “I’m cumming!”

I snatch the vibrator from her hand, and as she jerks forward to protest, I lean in and lick her swollen clit, lapping eagerly at her pussy. “I want to taste your cum on my tongue, princess.”

She groans, pulling my hair with such force that sharp pain shoots from my scalp to my feet, igniting a fire in my core. Still, it hardens my cock to an unbearable degree.

“You taste so damn good,” I mumble, my words muffled against her thighs. I glide my tongue from her clit to the inner walls of her pussy, using my fingers to pull her folds apart. My tongue swirls up, down, and side to side until she’s buckling beneath me, crying out in ecstasy. I savor her sweetness, committing the taste to memory before letting her go.

Panting, she crawls onto her knees. “Can I please ride you, Remo?”

For the first time, I’m stunned into silence. It’s not just the plea to ride me until we

both explode in pleasure, but the fact that only minutes ago, she had voiced her hatred for me. I know women like her—those who, after facing a hard truth, become deceivers just to crash against someone else. I’ve always avoided those kinds of women, but suddenly, I don’t want to hide or run away. I want to ride these waves with her, damn the consequences.

“Ride my damn dick, princess,” I growl, leaning back against the wall. Without another word, Daniela positions herself on either side of me. I reach out to cup her breasts. “You have the most beautiful body, Daniela.”

She smiles, though it doesn’t quite reach her eyes, and begins to slide down, taking me in. I stop her, and she falters. “What? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, you didn’t. You’re good at this.”

She doesn’t look convinced. “Then why won’t you let me pleasure both of us?”

It feels strange to be vulnerable. Honestly, I haven’t allowed myself to be vulnerable in front of a woman I’m sleeping with, but I can see how much she’s changing me and how deeply I want to be better for her. So, I lay it bare. “I want to always remember this. Because with you, I’m never sure.”

“Remo...”

“Please tell me you didn’t mean those words, princess.”

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She ignores me. There's no stopping her this time as she slides down fully, sheathing me completely. She shuts her eyes, rolling her head back in ecstasy. "God, I've missed your huge cock inside me. I've missed you."

I know she doesn't mean it at this moment, but hearing those words feels like a punch to my chest. I take one of her hard nipples into my mouth, sucking harshly and listening to her moan. "It feels good. You feel so damn good already, Daniela."

"Yeah?"

She starts moving, circling her hips around my cock in slow, deliberate motions. But when I stop her by curling my hand around her neck, she lets out a whimper. Looking into her eyes, I see a familiar expression—one that tells me she needs this as much as I do. "I'll do anything you ask me to, Remo, except that. I don't want to say that, please. Not now."

"I want you to know that if we do this...if you go down this path tonight, you're never getting out."

"What?"

I swallow hard, the weight of my words hanging in the air. "If this is just about sex, I will fuck you so hard that you'll be begging me to stop when we're done. I want to fuck you like an animal, but I won't if this is your idea of revenge."

"Just stop talking." That's all she says before resuming her pace, slow and steady.

As she slides up and down on my dick, it feels like pure bliss. Everything heightens, slick and intoxicating, and I become dangerously aroused.

Holy shit!

“Look at me,” I command, my voice rough. Daniela meets my gaze, biting her lip. “I want your eyes on me at all times, Daniela.”

I feel her muscles clench around me at my words. “I’m so freaking wet for you.”

“I know.” I grab her hips and pound into her, both of us moaning loudly with each wet impact. “You’ll only ever be wet for me. You hear me?” I slap her ass, and she groans. “Answer me,” I command.

“Yes, I will only ever be wet for you,” she replies breathily.

“You like the way I fuck you, don’t you?”

“Yes...please, don’t stop.”

“Tell me, who fucks you?” I demand.

“You do.”

I slap her ass again. “Say my freaking name.”

“Only you fuck me, Remo.”

We’re both breathless, panting, and glistening with sweat as we ride the waves together. It builds, the waves thick in the air, and it feels like we’re on the brink of ignition.

“Fuck, baby, I love your pussy.”

We come together with our mouths joined, allowing me to swallow her shaky moans. Everything about this moment feels so right, but even as we come down to earth and I peel her away from my arms to look into her eyes, I can tell the war is far from over.

Chapter 23

Daniela

I’m scrubbing the kitchen counter for the third time today, but the rhythmic motion doesn’t help. My thoughts keep drifting to him. His piercing eyes, the way they hold secrets I’m not sure I want to uncover. And then the truth—the awful, jagged truth—claws its way back in.

Remo Callegari killed my parents.

I press harder, the sponge squeaking against the surface.

How do you reconcile something like that? You don’t. Not really. You bury it, maybe, under layers of anger, confusion, and something disturbingly close to longing. I can’t stand being around him right now, so I’ve been avoiding him, keeping my focus on painting, cooking for his people, and anything that lets me pretend my life isn’t crumbling. But it’s like trying to outrun a storm. He’s everywhere, a shadow in the corner of my mind, impossible to ignore.

Adeline’s laugh filters through my thoughts, a memory of her teasing me about how I take life too seriously flashing in my mind. Maybe she’s right. Maybe I need to get out of here, even if just for a little while. Being locked up in this house feels like slow suffocation.

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I grab my phone and type out a message: Need to see you. Can we meet?

Adeline replies almost immediately: Of course. My treat, but you owe me for bailing on our last coffee date.

A small smile tugs at my lips.

Convincing Remo to let me leave is harder than I expected. His jaw tightens, the scar along his neck catching the light as he paces the room.

“You’re asking me to send you out there like a lamb to the slaughter,” he snaps.

“It’s just a coffee shop, Remo. Adeline’s place isn’t exactly on the mafia’s radar.”

“You think that matters?” He stops pacing, pinning me with a glare. “Leone would slit your throat just to send me a message. You’re not going anywhere alone.”

“I’m not asking to go alone,” I argue. “Livia and two of your goons can babysit me. Happy?”

His silence stretches uncomfortably long before he finally relents and nods. “Fine. But text me.”

The café Adeline picks is cozy and tucked away, its ivy-covered walls a stark contrast to the chaos of my life. I sip on my coffee, letting the warmth soothe some of the tension in my chest. Adeline leans forward, her chin resting on her hand as she studies me.

“You look like you haven’t slept in days,” she points out.

“Thanks for the confidence boost.”

She grins. “You’re welcome. But seriously, though, what’s going on? You’ve been avoiding my calls, and now you show up looking like you’re auditioning for a zombie movie.”

I hesitate, swirling the coffee in my cup. “It’s...complicated.”

Her eyes narrow. “Complicated how? Does it have anything to do with your mysterious boyfriend?”

“Something like that.” I glance at Livia, who’s sitting a few tables away, her sharp eyes scanning the room. “It’s...messy, Adeline. Let’s leave it at that.”

Before she can press further, a loud crash shatters the relative calm of the café. My head snaps up, and my stomach drops as men in dark suits burst through the door, guns drawn.

“Down! Everyone down!” one of them shouts.

Adeline freezes, her face pale. I grab her arm, pulling her behind me as chaos erupts. Livia leaps to her feet, her weapon already drawn.

“Go,” she barks at me. “Now!”

I don’t think. I just grab Adeline’s hand and run. We duck behind a dumpster in the alley the moment we exit the back door. My hands shake as I fumble for my phone to call Remo. Screams and gunshots continue to echo in the distance.

The line rings once. Twice.

Before it can connect, a hand grabs me from behind, and a blade presses against my throat, cold and unforgiving, as my phone is snatched away and tossed into the bin.

“Not so fast,” a voice growls.

I catch a glimpse of Livia through the alley entrance just in time to see her crumple to the ground. A single gunshot echoes in my ears, and I scream. The man holding me strikes me hard across the head. Pain explodes behind my eyes, and the world goes black.

When I come to, my head throbs, and the cold, damp air bites at my skin. I’m chained to the wall of a basement, and my wrists are raw from the metal cuffs. Water drips somewhere, a steady, mocking rhythm. As I lick my dry lips, the metallic tang of blood fills my mouth.

Footsteps echo, deliberate and heavy, and soon, a man steps into view, his presence commanding the dimly lit room. He’s tall and imposing, with dark, brooding features that seem to be carved from granite. His sharp suit is immaculate, the kind of tailored perfection that screams power. His hair, black as ink, is slicked back, and his cruel smile sends a chill racing down my spine.

There’s an aristocratic air about him, and it’s as if the very walls should bow in his presence.

He crouches in front of me, his eyes scanning my face with unsettling intensity. “Awake already? Impressive,” he says, his tone smooth and almost pleasant. “You’ve got guts. I’ll give you that.”

I stare at him, the pounding in my head making it hard to think straight. “Who the

hell are you?" I manage, though my voice comes out weaker than I want it to.

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He chuckles, a low, mocking sound that reverberates in the damp space. “Forgive me, how rude of me not to introduce myself.” He rises, adjusting his cuffs with a practiced elegance. “Leone Vizzini,” he says, inclining his head slightly as though his name alone should explain everything. “I’m the man your dear Remo wishes he could be.”

The name rings a faint bell, but my thoughts are sluggish. All I know is that he’s dangerous. More dangerous than anyone I’ve ever encountered.

“What do you want from me?” I ask, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice.

Leone tilts his head, studying me like I’m some rare exhibit. “Want? That’s such a simplistic way of looking at things.” He leans closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “This isn’t about what I want, my dear. It’s about what I can take.”

“Where’s Adeline?” My voice comes out hoarse, but I force myself to meet his gaze.

“Safe, for now. She’s not my concern. You, on the other hand...”

My stomach twists, but I force myself to hold his gaze. “Remo will come for me.”

“Oh, I’m counting on it.” He straightens, clasping his hands behind his back. “Do you know what I love about opera?” he asks all of a sudden as if we’re having a casual conversation.

I blink, caught off guard by the question. “What?”

“The drama. The passion. The inevitable tragedy.” He smiles, but there’s no warmth in it. “Every note, every act, building toward a crescendo of heartbreak and despair. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

I don’t answer. Especially since he doesn’t seem to need me to.

“You’re the crescendo, Daniela. The final, devastating act in Remo’s little opera. And when the curtain falls, he’ll have nothing left but the echoes of his failure.”

My chest tightens, fear clawing at the edges of my composure. “You’re insane.”

“Perhaps.” Leone shrugs as though the idea amuses him. “But then again, insanity and genius often share the same stage.” He laughs, a soft, chilling sound. “Every bullet I put through you will be for the brother he stole from me.” His voice is like ice, sharp and cutting. “I won’t stop until he’s lost everything.”

The door creaks open, and a man steps in to murmur something to Leone. Leone nods, his gaze never leaving mine. “Duty calls,” he says, straightening his jacket. “But don’t worry. We’ll have plenty of time to get acquainted. Welcome to my world, Daniela. Let’s see how well you perform.”

As he turns to leave, his parting words hang in the air like a death sentence.

He leaves me alone with my thoughts, and they’re not kind. I remember Livia’s lifeless body and the blood pooling around her. The bastard shot her.

Then, I think of Remo, his voice low and gravelly, telling me to stay safe.

And I wonder if safety is even possible in a world like this.

Chapter 24

Remo

The ground is soft from yesterday's rain, swallowing each step I take toward the edge of the cemetery. The air hangs heavy with the stench of fresh earth and something metallic I can't shake. Livia deserves better than this. She deserves a celebration, not a hole in the dirt, but this is the world we live in. We're all just filling graves until there's no one left to bury.

I'm numb. Or maybe I've just mastered the art of pretending I am. Either way, I'm standing here with Marco and my adopted brother Yuri and watching the last person I trusted disappear under a mound of dirt.

Yuri shifts beside me, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jacket. He doesn't look like he belongs here. With his kind eyes and the calm that always seems to follow him, he's the antithesis of this world. The only reason he's here tonight is Livia—an old friend he couldn't say no to despite having walked away from this life long ago.

Marco lights a cigarette, the glow from his lighter briefly illuminating the dark hollows of his face. "She knew what this life meant," he says. "Doesn't make it easier, but she'd tell you not to fall apart."

"I'm not falling apart," I snap, sharper than I intended. Marco doesn't flinch, but I catch the way Yuri's stare softens like he's already dissecting every fracture in my armor.

"The job's personal this time," Yuri says softly, his words deliberate. "Don't let it eat you alive. Try to make it home for Christmas this time."

I glance at him, searching for a reason why he's really here. He's made it clear he doesn't want anything to do with this world. And yet, he showed up anyway, standing

at the edge of the abyss he once escaped and offering me something I don't deserve.
Hope.

"It won't," I mutter, turning back to the grave.

By the time night falls, I'm back in the shadows where I belong. Leone's men think they're untouchable, but they've never faced me when I've got nothing left to lose. I'm running out of patience and favors, cashing in every debt and calling every shot I've earned to find Daniela. And when I do, the streets will run red.

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I crouch on the rooftop of an abandoned building overlooking one of Leone's strongholds. The music from their party blares so loud that I can feel the bass rattling in my chest. They're too drunk on their own power to notice the wolf at their door. My wolf tattoo burns on my forearm as if reminding me who I am.

"You're sure she's here?" I whisper into my earpiece.

Livia would've been my eyes in this situation, but Marco fills the role tonight. His voice crackles back through the comms. "She's here. Basement. Five guards outside, maybe more inside. You're walking into a hornet's nest."

"Good," I mutter. "I'm in the mood for a fight."

I scale the wall like it's second nature and slip through a broken window into chaos. The first guard doesn't even see me coming. He's on the ground with my knife buried deep in his chest before he can sound the alarm. I've crossed lines before, but tonight feels different. Every move is calculated, every kill personal.

They took her. That's all the justification I need.

The rest fall like dominoes. A gunshot here, a broken neck there. I move like a shadow—swift and silent—until I'm standing in the basement doorway. My heart pounds as I push it open, the hinges creaking in protest. And then there she is. Daniela.

She's tied to a chair, her face bruised, her lip split. But her eyes—those fiery, stubborn eyes—snap to mine the second I step inside. Relief washes over her face,

though it's quickly replaced by anger.

"Took you long enough," she mutters.

I let out a harsh laugh as I crouch to untie her. "You're welcome."

Before I can finish, a voice cuts through the tension like a knife. "Not so fast."

Leone. He steps out of the shadows with a gun trained on me and a smirk plastered on his smug face. "This is touching, really. But you're too late, Remo."

My jaw tightens. "Let her go."

"Or what?" He gestures toward a monitor displaying a video feed of a ledger—the same one I've spent years keeping hidden. "I've got everything I need to bring you and your precious mafia empire down. One word from me, and it's over."

Daniela's voice is sharp when she snaps, "You're bluffing."

Leone chuckles. "Am I? Do you really want to find out?"

I glance at Daniela, her defiance sparking something in me that I can't name. Leone doesn't see it coming when I lunge, but the pain from his bullet sears through my shoulder as I tackle him to the ground. We're a flurry of fists and fury, and his smirk turns to panic as I gain the upper hand. With a menacing grin, I grab the bloody shirt from his chest and shove it into his mouth before pulling the trigger three times.

The echo of gunfire is deafening. But I continue shooting.

Suddenly, Daniela's voice breaks through the haze. "Remo, stop!"

Her hands are on me, pulling me away from Leone's lifeless body. My breathing is ragged, my knuckles raw, but her touch anchors me. She's trembling, but her grip is firm.

"Let's go," she says. "Please."

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat as I lead her out of the carnage. She collapses in the car with her head resting against the window. I glance at her through the rearview mirror, my chest tightening at the sight of her pale face. The ledger sits on the seat beside her, a cruel reminder of everything I've sacrificed to get here.

But as I drive into the night, one thought consumes me. Daniela is alive. She's here, breathing, and that's all that matters. Let the world burn if it has to.

She's my world now, and I'll do whatever it takes to keep her in it.

Chapter 25

Daniela

I wake up to the smell of coffee and something faintly charred, like burnt toast. The kitchen light is dim, the curtains half-drawn. Remo stands by the counter, his broad shoulders hunched as he fiddles with the coffee machine. His movements are stiff and deliberate. Like he's forcing his body to cooperate. He's still healing, but he refuses to act like it.

"You know that thing has an auto-brew feature, right?" My voice is rough from sleep.

He glances over his shoulder, a rare smirk tugging at his lips. "Where's the fun in that?"

“Fun? I thought you preferred things done efficiently.” I sit up, my muscles aching in protest. It’s not just my body that’s tired; it’s my soul. Every part of me feels like it’s been dragged through hell. And maybe it has.

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Remo walks over, a cup of coffee in each hand. He's careful not to spill, but his movements lack his usual grace. He hands me a cup and sits on the edge of the bed, his eyes scanning my face. "You look better," he observes.

"Thanks," I mutter, taking a sip. The coffee's strong, almost bitter, but it's exactly what I need. "You still look like crap."

He chuckles—a low, gravelly sound. "You're welcome to fix that."

"Oh, sure," I tease. "Let me just wave my magic wand and make your bruises disappear."

"You've got a smart mouth, Daniela." His tone is light, but there's an edge to it. He's not used to being challenged, and I'm not used to letting things slide.

We eat breakfast together in silence, the kind of silence that's heavy with unspoken thoughts. I've been trying to make sense of everything—the violence, the chaos, and the way my heart races when he's near. It's like I'm caught in a storm, and I don't know if I'm fighting to survive or letting it carry me away.

"You're thinking too hard again," Remo says, breaking the quiet.

"Am I not allowed to think?"

"Not when it makes you look like that." He reaches out, his fingers brushing against my cheek. "Like you're trying to solve a puzzle that doesn't have an answer."

“Maybe it doesn’t,” I say softly. “Maybe some things aren’t meant to make sense.”

Remo’s eyes darken, his hand lingering for a moment before he pulls away. “Finish your coffee.”

By the time night falls, the house feels quieter than usual. Remo and I sit on the couch, the TV playing some old black-and-white movie neither of us is watching. He’s reclined, his arm stretched along the back of the couch. I’m close enough to feel his warmth, but we’re not touching. Not yet.

“You’ve been hovering,” I say, breaking the silence.

“You need someone watching over you.”

“I’m not a child,” I protest.

“Didn’t say you were.”

I glance at him, raising an eyebrow. “You sure act like it.”

His lips twitch, almost a smile. “You’d prefer if I ignore you?”

“I’d prefer if you treat me like an equal.”

At that, Remo leans closer, his gray-blue eyes locking onto mine. “An equal? You really think that’s what this is?”

My heart pounds, but I refuse to look away. “What else would it be?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he closes the distance between us, his lips brushing against mine. The kiss is soft at first, almost hesitant, but it deepens quickly, pulling

me under. His hand tangles in my hair, and for a moment, everything else fades away as Remo fucks me on the couch.

Lately, Remo and I have made love everywhere in this house. It's like we've been trying to erase the past, the hurt, and the weight that's been hanging over us both.

I think it's part of the healing process. At least, that's what I tell myself. Every time, it's in a different place, like we're trying to claim the house as ours, one space at a time.

And I don't know, it doesn't matter anymore if we're heard or seen. It used to bother me, the idea of someone knowing, someone catching us, but now? Now, all I care about is being with him. Just the two of us. Sometimes, when I'm down on my knees, with his men standing guard at the door, I realize I kind of like it.

It's dangerous, it's wrong, but there's something about it...about feeling the control slip away from me and still wanting more. It's like I'm giving up control and letting the chaos in, and it feels like healing.

When we pull apart, his breathing is ragged. "You drive me insane, you know that?"

"Good," I whisper. "Maybe now you'll understand what you do to me."

The days blur together after that. Remo insists on taking care of me, even though he's the one who's still injured. He's relentless, making sure I eat, rest, and don't overexert myself. It's infuriating and endearing all at once.

"You're worse than a mother hen," I say one afternoon as he places a plate of food in front of me.

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“Eat,” he orders, ignoring my comment.

I roll my eyes but pick up the fork. “You ever take a break? Or is this your idea of fun?”

“Keeping you alive? Yeah, it’s a blast.”

“You’re hilarious,” I deadpan.

He smirks, leaning back in his chair. “You’re the one who keeps things interesting.”

As much as I hate to admit it, I’ve started to depend on him in a way that scares me. He’s a constant presence, steady and unyielding, and I’m not sure if I can imagine life without him anymore.

But I have to.

When Remo leaves for Moscow for work, the house feels emptier than ever. I’ve gotten used to him being around, his quiet strength filling the space. Without him, it’s just me and my thoughts, and they’re far from comforting. I start exploring the house, partly out of boredom, partly out of something else. A need to understand him, maybe. Or a need to find something—anything—that can help me make sense of the chaos he’s dragged me into.

Then, that’s when I find it. The hidden ledger Leone threatened him with, tucked away in his office, filled with names, dates, and numbers. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what it is: evidence. Proof of the Cosa Nostra’s crimes.

My hands tremble as I flip through the pages. This is it. This is my way out. My chance to break free from this world and take him down with it. But as I pick up the phone and dial, doubt creeps in.

The sound of the 911 operator's voice sends a chill down my spine when she asks, "What's your emergency?"

I hesitate, my throat dry, but then I say, "I—I have information. About the mafia."

The line goes quiet for a moment before the operator responds, her tone neutral. "Please hold."

As the silence stretches, I realize there's no turning back. This decision will change everything. For me. For him. For both of us.

And I'm not sure if I'm ready for what comes next.

Chapter 26

Remo

As I storm into my house, the front doors barely stay on their hinges, and the sound of them crashing open feels like an echo of everything that's gone wrong.

The place smells wrong now, like burned paper and the sickly sweetness of too many bodies packed into one space. My men are scrambling, their voices echoing in the halls, but I can't make sense of it.

Federal agents. They're everywhere. They're like ants, flooding into my house and swarming every inch, every shadow I used to control.

The government doesn't just freeze the bank accounts. They dismantle everything. Every illegal front, every operation I've run—gone. They'll use my ties to the mafia to pull me into endless investigations and charges for racketeering, money laundering, and tax evasion. They'll expose every deal, every connection, and make sure no one ever trusts me again. They'll lock down my empire, suffocate it, and force me to watch as they tear apart my world. Anyone connected to me will be dragged in and forced to testify, turning on me to save their own skin. And if I don't break, they'll keep going until I have nothing left but a life full of enemies and regrets.

That sinking feeling in my gut? It's the truth slamming into me, something worse than anger.

"Where is she?" I snap. My voice is harsh, but I can barely hear it over the shouts and hum of confusion.

Marco's face turns pale. "She left as soon as they came, Boss."

I look around at all the men, at my empire falling apart. And at that moment, I don't want to think, don't want to feel. I want to scream, but instead, I press the cold metal of my fist against my temple. "Tell me how."

Marco shifts uncomfortably, but then, as if he can't hold it in anymore, he spits the truth out. "One of ours got ambushed, and they took him. The ledger, everything, she handed them over."

Everything. It's gone.

I don't ask for more details. I don't need to. The truth is clear as daylight now. Daniela. The woman I thought I could trust. The woman I let in. The woman who looked at me like I wasn't the monster I was. She's the one who just brought

everything I've built to its knees. Betrayal tastes like ash in my mouth.

I move without thinking. My feet practically don't touch the ground as I get to the car. I don't even notice the cold. I'm boiling from the inside out, my rage mixing with something else, something worse. Something I don't want to admit.

The drive through the city is a blur. But I know where to find her.

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The place where I first saw her has been burned down. The only other place she could be is at home—quiet and lost in her world of paint and canvas like an artist trapped in a dream. That was before all this. Before I let her get under my skin. Before I made the mistake of believing she was something she wasn't..

I pull up, the tires squealing on the wet pavement. I don't even bother shutting the car off. The headlights slice through the night, illuminating the dark, empty street. Everything is cold, still, like the world is holding its breath.

The front door is cracked open, and I don't waste time.

The smell of paint hits me first, and then her scent, lingering in the air. Still the same. Still there. The tension in the room could choke anyone. And there she is, standing in front of her painting, the one that still doesn't make any sense to me. Her back is to me, but she knows I'm here. I can feel her stiffen.

I step forward, my boots echoing on the concrete floor.

My hand clenches into a fist, but I keep it at my side. For now. "You do know I have no choice but to kill you now."

She doesn't turn. Not right away. She just stands there like she's waiting for something. Like she knows this is coming. Finally, her shoulders loosen, and she turns slowly. When our eyes meet, I can see it. The one thing I wasn't expecting. Vulnerability. Like she's the one who's been crushed, not me.

"Remo," she says, her voice soft, too soft for the storm that's coming. "You don't

understand.”

I don't give a damn what she thinks I understand. “I understand enough.” The words come out like venom. “You did this to me. To us. And for what? A grudge?”

“No,” she says, her eyes sharp now, cutting through the fog of my rage. “I did it for you.”

Her words don't register at first. My mind skips over them, trying to figure out what she's really saying. “For me? What the hell are you talking about?”

She steps closer, and I don't move. I'm frozen, waiting for something. Maybe an apology. Maybe more lies. But what she says next rips through the last of my resolve.

“I gave them the ledger,” she whispers like it's a confession. “I traded it for your freedom.”

The world tilts. My heart sinks, disbelief settling in. She traded me to the feds, but not for revenge. She did it for me.

My chest tightens, and before I can stop myself, I ask, “You...didn't turn me in?”

Her gaze is steady. “I see what this world has done to you...to both of us. I knew getting rid of you would be what I needed, but I knew I couldn't survive it. I didn't want to hurt you. I thought maybe if I did this, you'd have a real chance to get out.” Her voice trembles when she adds, “I did it because I love you.”

Love. The word lands like a punch, and I can't breathe, can't think.

I don't know what to say. I want to scream, to ask why, but I already know. She chose this for me. For us. Even if it meant burning everything down.

I step closer, every part of me torn. “I can’t fix myself, Daniela. I’m too broken.”

She doesn’t flinch. “I don’t need you to be anyone else.”

She takes a step toward me, her hand trembling as it reaches for mine. I don’t stop her. I don’t pull away.

After a moment, I crash my lips on hers.

I force her mouth open with my tongue and plunge inside. This kiss is feral—more feral and animalistic because it means something more.

I grip her shoulders, bringing us closer together as though I want to disappear inside her skin.

She returns my kiss, not only because I want her to, but because she seems to need it so much. Just as much as I do.

Epilogue

I should’ve known it was coming, judging by the way he looks at me sometimes and the way his eyes soften when he thinks I’m not paying attention. It’s like he’s thinking about something we’re both avoiding. Something that’s too ugly to speak of, too real to ignore. But we’re here. In Greece.

I stand on the edge of a small dock, feeling the saltwater splashing against my bare feet and staring out at the calm blue sea stretching out in front of me like it could go on forever. Maybe that’s what we need. Something that feels like an endless possibility, where the world can’t catch up with us. Where we can finally breathe without looking over our shoulders.

Remo's standing behind me, close enough that I can feel the heat radiating off his body. His presence is unmistakable. I glance at him, the same brooding silence still hanging between us. We've been through enough shit to know that silence doesn't mean peace. It's just the calm before another storm.

"Do you ever think about what happens after this?" I ask, my voice quieter than I mean it to be, like I'm afraid the world will hear and come crashing down again.

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He looks at me, his gray-blue eyes darkening. “No,” he says simply, as though it’s that easy to erase everything that’s happened. But we both know it’s not.

The last few months have been...complicated. But we’ve decided to leave it all behind. His past, my past, whatever life we lived before this. The mafia, the guns, the blood, the fear. It’s over. Or at least, that’s the plan. We’ve taken steps, small ones. We disappeared into the chaos of a new country—a new place where no one knows our names. But the ghosts don’t fade so easily. I see it on his face every night. He’s still haunted by his choices, by the violence he’s been a part of. And me? I carry my own demons. The ones that don’t let me sleep, the ones that never really leave.

“Come on,” he says, breaking through the fog of my thoughts. His hand is already reaching for mine, pulling me toward the kayak we rented for the day. “We’ve still got time.”

I hesitate for a second, then nod. Whatever’s haunting me can wait. For once, I want to be in the moment. I want to feel something that doesn’t tear me apart.

We push off from the dock, the boat rocking slightly as I get settled beside him. The oars cut through the water, smooth and rhythmic; our movements synchronized without needing words. It’s almost peaceful. Almost.

I think about the life we’re trying to build here. It doesn’t feel real, not yet. It’s like we’re living on borrowed time, waiting for the moment someone finds us and drags us back to our old lives. The feds are still out there, circling. And Remo? He’s a walking target. There’s no way we’ll ever truly outrun the past.

“Remo,” I say in a low voice, more to myself than him, “we can’t run forever.”

He doesn’t stop paddling. “I know,” he mutters.

I turn to look at him and watch as he moves with the water, his expression set, hard like stone. It’s the same look he gets when he’s not ready to face the truth. “We can try,” I whisper. “But I can’t do it alone.”

For the first time in weeks, his eyes soften just a little. He looks at me, really looks at me, and for a moment, the weight of everything doesn’t feel so crushing. “You won’t have to,” he says, his voice low, steady. “Not now. Not ever.”

“Remo,” I say, my voice becoming even softer, “I don’t want to run anymore. Not from you.”

He doesn’t stop paddling, but his jaw tightens like he’s waiting for me to say more.

“I didn’t mean what I said before,” I continue, looking at him now and finally saying the words I’ve kept locked inside. “I don’t hate you, Remo. I never did.”

This time, when he glances at me, his gaze is a little softer than usual. “I know. I was scared too,” he says.

“I love being here with you,” I tell him, feeling the weight of it sink in. “I love this. With you.”

His hand finds mine, his touch steady, grounding. “I won’t do anything to ever hurt you again,” he says. “Not now. Not ever.”

And for the first time in a long while, I believe him.

Soon, we reach a small cove. The water here is quieter and calmer. The sun is beginning to dip low in the sky, painting the horizon in shades of orange and pink. It feels like the world is holding its breath. Like we're the only ones who matter in this moment.

He stops paddling and looks at me with a flicker of something in his eyes that makes my heart skip a beat. "I have something to ask you."

I raise an eyebrow, the teasing edge in my voice too sharp to ignore. "Are you sure you want to do this in a kayak? You know, the whole 'romantic gesture' thing might get a little soggy."

He smirks that half grin that never fails to get under my skin. "It's not like that," he replies.

I study him, watching the way his fingers grip the paddle tightly like it's the only thing keeping him grounded. "Then what is it?"

He looks down for a second, and when he meets my stare again, there's something different there. Something that's impossible to ignore. "Daniela," he starts, his voice rougher now, as if saying the words is harder than he expected, "I want this. With you. All of it."

For a moment, I think I heard him wrong. "What?" I gasp, my breath catching in my throat.

He's staring at me now, his eyes steady. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

I blink, trying to process the weight of his words. He's serious. I can tell by the way his jaw tightens and the way he's holding his breath like he's afraid I'll say no.

“But...” I start, unsure of how to respond.

He doesn't give me a chance to finish. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a small box—its edges are worn from being carried around—and opens it. Inside is a simple silver ring, nothing flashy, nothing grand. Just...real. Just us.

I can't stop the laugh that slips from my lips, a mix of disbelief and relief. “You're really doing this now, huh?”

He doesn't smile. Instead, his voice is raw, his words a promise. “Yes.”

I stare at him, at the ring, and at the wild ocean stretching out behind us. “You're out of your mind.”

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“Yeah, but you love it,” he says, a grin finally tugging at his lips.

I roll my eyes. “I’m not sure I can handle your crazy.”

“Then you better learn,” he says, the teasing turning into something deeper, something more serious. “Because I’m not going anywhere.”

I think about it for a moment, about everything we’ve been through and how we’ve managed to make it this far. And then I realized that maybe, just maybe, this could be enough.

I smile the first genuine smile in what feels like forever. “Alright,” I say. “I guess I’m stuck with you.”

He slides the ring onto my finger with a steady hand and then exclaims, “Damn right, you are.”

And for once, for the first time in a long time, it feels like the world is actually on our side. Like we’ve won something, even if it’s small and fleeting. Maybe it won’t last. Maybe we’ll screw this up, too. But for right now, this is ours.

I kiss him, not caring about the world, the past, or the future. It’s just him and me, and the quiet understanding between us that, no matter how much pain we’ve caused each other, we’re willing to keep fighting for this.

“I love you,” I scream into the open air, the words tumbling out like they were always meant to be said.

“I love you, too,” he says, his voice strong, steady. “Utterly, completely. Till death.”

And in that moment, it feels like we can take on whatever comes next. Because no matter what happens, we have each other.

And sometimes, that’s enough.

THE END.