



Cruel Betrayals

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Category: Romance

Description: I changed my name to escape my tortured past, but not all secrets can stay hidden.

Giuseppe Rossi is a man no one wants to cross, but my father's insurmountable gambling debt leaves me with two choices: work his debt off by spying on Arturo Marino or pay with my life. Being Arturo's assistant gives me the advantage I need, but the Marinos are the family I've always craved. I must choose to give in to my feelings and confess my sins, or run away from the life I've created.

But that's easier said than done because Giuseppe Rossi is out for blood, and I'm the one standing in his way.

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Chapter One

ALEXANDRA

My desk vibrates for what feels like the millionth time in the past ten minutes. I don't need to pick up my phone to know who is calling and messaging.

It's the same person it's been all day. Hell, all week, month, and year.

Joseph Marino.

My heart races just thinking about him, just like it has since the day I started working for his father two years ago.

I flip my phone over and ignore all the calls and text messages. He's just downstairs practicing with the team. If it's important, he will find me.

I verify the last Saturday of the month's date before filling out the paperwork for the new club's grand opening.

My desk phone rings. Glancing at the caller ID, I see Arturo's name pop up.

"Good morning, Sir." I say as I pick up the phone.

"Alexandra, you are like a daughter to me. Must you keep calling me sir?"

"I'm sorry, sir." I let out a small chuckle. "I only mean it as a sign of respect."

“I know that. It’s one of the reasons I keep you around.”

His deep chuckle warms my heart. I’ve seen every side to this man.

I’ve seen the way his heart melts every time he donates to the children’s charity and the way his expression instantly hardens when he has to keep his men in line.

I’ve seen him exhausted from his many responsibilities, and I’ve seen him pissed beyond belief when someone crosses him.

Not once has he ever talked down to me or demanded me to do unreasonable tasks.

He likes his coffee hot, his meetings set on a reminder, and his personal life kept a secret.

Joseph is the exact same way. He lives a private life away from his teammates. He doesn’t date in public, and he doesn’t discuss his family’s affairs.

Unlike his father, Joseph does things to me that no other man has with just a single look. He turns my insides to goo and my brain to mush.

I clear my throat and focus on the matter at hand. “What can I do for you, sir? Uh, Mr. Marino?”

“When it’s just the two of us, call me Arturo. When we are around others, you can call me sir or Mr. Marino. Okay?”

“Yes, sir.” I shake my head while laughing. “It might take me a little while to adjust.”

“How is the paperwork coming along?”

“Great, sir. I just finished and am going to reply to the caterer to finalize the details for the grand opening.”

“Great. Thank you for taking care of it.”

“It’s not a problem, sir. That’s what I’m here for. I’m your executive assistant, after all.”

“You are more than that. You’re irreplaceable.”

“I appreciate you saying that. I would do anything for you and your family. I’m grateful for the opportunities you have given me.”

Maybe it’s because it’s getting closer to the day I ran away from home, but I’m feeling more emotional than usual. This time of year is harder on me. It’s harder for me to face the past and everything I’ve been through.

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It's easier to pretend.

"Are you alright?" His voice is soft and caring, like a father worrying about his child.

I want to tell him the truth, but I can't. I won't. It's my burden to bear.

"Everything is fine. I'm just extremely grateful, and I don't think I say it enough. Anyway, back to the grand opening."

I swipe at the lone tear that falls down my cheek.

Get it together Alexandra. He doesn't have time for your problems.

"Ah. yes. I'm about to step out of the office for a private meeting. Do you need anything from me?"

His definition of a private meeting is that absolutely no one knows about it. Not even his children. It must be an important business meeting because this is the fourth one in a little over a week.

"Yes, sir. Just for a quick moment, and then, you can be on your way and I'll forward your calls to my desk. The new manager for the club was wondering if you were going to make an appearance for the opening, and if you are, how big of a party will there be for the VIP section?"

"I'm not sure I'm going to make it, but Joseph and Francesca are more than welcome to claim the VIP section with their dates. After all, the club is their inheritance. You

should take the night off and join them.”

Dates.

That one word causes my stomach to perform somersaults like it’s the Olympics and my heart to constrict with pain.

I don’t want to imagine Joseph with a date, let alone see him with someone.

If he’s with anyone, I want it to be me.

It should be me.

“I’ll pass along the word to your children. Will you be out for the rest of the day?”

“More than likely. If you have anything that needs my immediate attention, email or fax it over to the house.”

Joseph barges into my office with a glare that could kill. I place my hand over the microphone so Arturo can’t hear me.

“What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be practicing with the team?”

He doesn’t speak. He continues to glare at me as if he’s waiting for me to hang up.

Getting back to Arturo, I say, “Yes, sir. Will do.”

I hang up the phone and sigh. “You can’t just barge into my office, Joseph.”

“I can and I will. You’re mine, Alexandra.” He grunts out.

Spinning around, he closes and locks my office door before turning off the overhead light. The few rays of sunlight peeking through the dense clouds filters in through the blinds, letting us see just enough of each other.

He presses his lips together in a tight, thin line as he stalks across the office to me.

“You were ignoring my calls and texts. Why?”

“I was busy.”

It’s mostly a lie, but I can’t tell him the truth right now. He’s standing too close to me. Close enough to smell the citrus scent of his cologne with hints of smoke, and right now, my body is reaching out to him.

Craving him.

Begging him for just one more time.

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His hand wraps around the back of my neck, squeezing ever so slightly. “You will not ignore me again, or else.”

He doesn’t need to finish that statement. I know what he’s saying. Or else he will punish me.

I gulp. My chest heaves as I struggle to get air to my lungs. My back arches and pushes my breasts into his chest.

His deep, commanding voice goes straight to my core.

The last time he punished me, I was on my knees with a vibrator pressed against my clit as he shoved his cock down my throat.

My tongue snakes out and runs along my bottom lip. I moan at the memory, needing it to be a reality again.

“You’re thinking about the ‘or else’, aren’t you?”

I nod, afraid of my voice cracking if I dare to speak.

“I bet your cunt is dripping for me. I bet it’s begging to be stretched wide and filled with my cum.”

With one long swipe of his arm, the edge of my desk is cleared. The stack of paper scatters to the floor. I can’t be mad, though. I know exactly what’s about to happen.

Joseph lifts my pencil skirt, exposing my most intimate area, and pulls off my lace panties before tucking them into his pants pocket. “On the desk. Now.”

I position myself on the edge of my desk in front of him. He kneels on the plush carpet and eases my legs open.

Joseph fucking Marino, the mafia prince, is between my legs, eyeing me like I’m the most decadent dessert he’s ever seen.

I close my eyes and tilt my head back. My heart can’t take much more of this- seeing him eager to bring me pleasure.

“Open your eyes and look at me. Watch me feast on your pussy. Watch your arousal coat my face.”

Oh, fuck.

My arousal leaks from me, slickens my pussy and coats my lower lips. His eyes watch me like a hawk for a moment before he dives in.

His arms hold my legs open as he licks my slit.

“Oh, fuck.” I moan.

It hasn’t been long since I’ve been with Joseph, but it feels like an eternity. His tongue lashes at me, leaving searing hot pleasure in its wake.

He sucks my clit into his mouth, and I practically leap off the desk.

“It’s too much.”

It's too sensitive.

Too much pleasure.

Is that a real thing?

“Please, just fuck me.” I beg as his tongue circles my clit before thrusting inside my pussy.

“Not until you come all over my face. Let me taste you.” His fingers replace his tongue, fucking me and bringing me closer to the edge.

He continues to deliciously torture my clit, and as hard as I try to resist, I can't. As the edges of my vision blur, I squeeze my eyes shut and cry out. Waves of pleasure crash into me.

“Open your eyes,” Joseph commands.

I do as he says and watch as he pulls his fingers from my pussy and shoves them into my mouth. I suck his fingers into my mouth, tasting my arousal.

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“Good girl.” He praises as I let his fingers go with a resounding pop. “Now turn around, so I fuck you.”

I climb off the desk and turn around, leaning against the cool wood.

The sound of his zipper lowering is the only sound in my office beside the blood rushing through my ears.

He grips my hip with one hand and rubs the head of his cock through my juices before slamming all the way inside me.

My walls stretch around his cock. He doesn't give me time to come down from my high. He pounds into me like a man on a mission.

With one hand on my hip, the other hand reaches around my body and grips my throat.

My whole body hums like a live wire. Everywhere our bodies touch burns.

“Fuck, baby girl, you're so tight.”

I arch my back and push against him, giving him as much as he's giving me. The fire burns in my belly as my need for release grows.

His thrusts get erratic the closer he gets to his own release.

“Come for me again, baby. Tighten your perfect cunt around my cock. I want to feel

you milk every drop.”

His words spur me on. I want him to fill my pussy with his cum. I want to feel the warmth coat my walls.

I need it.

Clamping my eyes shut, I give in to the pleasure and scream out my release. Joseph releases his grip on my throat and covers my mouth to keep me quiet.

His thrusts stop as his cock swells and spills inside my pussy. His grip on my hip tightens until he falls forward, leaning against my back.

Male voices echo in the hallway before stopping right outside my office door.

Please don't knock.

Please don't try to open the door.

Just keep walking.

Their voices drift off as they turn around and head back the way they just came.

“It's probably Montgomery or Reed looking for me,” Joseph whispers into my hair.

He reaches around me and grabs the box of tissue. After pulling out of me, he gently parts my legs and cleans our combined juices.

“What about my panties?” I ask while pointing to his pocket.

He smirks. “I'll keep them safe.”

I roll my eyes and fix my skirt in silence. My heart grows heavy with what I'm about to say.

"I can't do this anymore." I turn away from him, not wanting to see the look in his eyes.

"What? This or us?"

"Both." My voice is barely above a whisper. "I want more than this. I want more than quickies in my office and booty calls at random. I deserve more than the occasional sext when it's convenient."

His face instantly hardens. "You know I can't give you what you're looking for. With my family's lives on the line, the future of the business up in the air, and my demanding hockey career, this is all I can offer."

"Bullshit." I mutter as tears sting my eyes.

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“What?” His hand wraps around my arms, spinning me around until I am face to face with him.

“It’s an excuse. It doesn’t have to be this way.”

He growls. “No, it’s not. This is the way it is. If you don’t like the way things are, then leave.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way.” I repeat. “Look at Rhett and Spencer. They both found a way to balance a love life, hockey life, and mafia life. Their girlfriends understand their hectic schedules.”

“They aren’t the heir to the empire. They don’t share the same responsibilities as I do.”

“I get that. I really do. I’m not trying to monopolize your time, but I can’t keep us a secret. I don’t want to keep us a secret anymore.” I let out a sigh as more tears blur my vision. “So this is it, then?”

He crosses his arms. “Only if you say it is.”

“I want more with you, Joseph Marino. I want to go out on dates with you. I want to tell our friends we are together. I want to have hope for a future together.”

His gaze darts to my office door. “That’s never going to happen, Alexandra. Not as long as you are with me.”

He grinds his teeth together before continuing. “You need to find someone who can give you everything you want and need because I’m not the man for you.”

He walks over to my door, unlocks it, and leaves without giving me another glance.

My heart shatters into a million pieces. I knew this was a possibility when I decided to confront him, but I didn’t expect to feel this torn.

I don’t want to be a secret any longer, and if I need to pick myself up and move on, then I will.

As of this moment, Joseph Marino is dead to me.

Chapter Two

JOSEPH

Blood can’t actually boil in your veins, but I’m pretty sure my blood is damn close to it. My foul mood is still lingering days later, even though I’ve hit the gym for two hours.

I’m sweaty, my muscles are sore, and I’m pissed and ready to take it out on anyone that dares to cross me, starting with the guy downstairs in the interrogation room.

I’m pissed at the family I was born into.

I’m pissed at Alexandra.

Most of all, I’m pissed at myself.

Why couldn’t I tell her the truth? Why couldn’t I just man up and agree to take her

out on dates?

I shouldn't have strung her along as long as I have, but I can't promise her a happy future. I can't promise to keep her safe. Just look at Francesca and Savannah.

Alexandra deserves a safe and stable life, not one filled with danger and crime. She deserves to be treated like a queen and shown off.

I can't give her the life she deserves.

It's more like I can't, and I won't.

I let out a sigh and jog down the flight of stairs to the basement. It's quiet and dark. Everyone else is out enjoying their lives and their girlfriends while I'm here alone, trying to deal with my pent up anger.

I'm turning into my father more and more by the day, and not in a good way.

I stretch my neck from side to side and crack my knuckles before heading inside the interrogation room.

It's dark and quiet except for the small red light hanging from the ceiling beams. It illuminates the man sitting on the metal chair.

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The air is stale and musty in here and reeks of piss and shit, no doubt from the prisoner soiling himself.

Rhett came in earlier and tied him to the chair and gagged him. The man's head is slumped forward with his chin resting on his chest.

I rip the gag out of his mouth and take a few steps back to keep my distance. Men like him are prone to spit, and if he spits on me, I know I'll kill him.

There's nothing more disrespectful than spitting at someone.

I can't ruin my family's chance of getting dirt on Rossi by letting my anger get the best of me. Not right now.

Pulling out my pocket knife, I gently run the blade over my fingers. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way. If I were you, I'd choose the easy way. The other way is going to be extremely painful and drawn out."

The man doesn't bother looking up. He's bruised, beaten, and exhausted, like he's been through an interrogation already.

Did we do this to him? Or perhaps the Reapers got to him first.

"What is your name?" I growl out.

He doesn't speak.

I stalk over to him and wrap my fingers in the back of his hair and yank his head back until he's looking at me. I press the knife blade against his throat.

There is a hint of fear in his eyes, but it's mostly a haunted, dead look. It's almost as if he's wishing for death, but why?

"Tell me your name!" I yell. Standing over him, I watch his expression change from fear to shock to anger.

I remove the blade from his throat and run it down his forearm, pressing the tip into his skin with enough force to draw a small amount of blood.

"John Smith." He croaks out.

"Like the Englishman?"

He nods and gulps.

Rossi chose a man named John Smith to work with? That is the most common and generic name ever to exist.

I let go of his hair, and his head slumps forward.

"What is Rossi up to? What is his plan of attack? How is he going to get revenge on my family?"

I bark out question after question, to which the man shakes his head over and over again.

"Answer me!" I yell as I dig the knife into his other arm.

He flinches and his voice cracks. “I don’t know anything. I swear. I have no reason to lie to you.”

Turning away from him, I take a few steps back again. “How can you not know anything? Rossi doesn’t keep his plans to himself.”

Unless he just started keeping future plans to himself and his right-hand man. Maybe this guy is being honest, and he really doesn’t know. He does seem to be low on the hierarchy.

“What do you do for Rossi?” I put my knife up.

“I gather information for him.”

I spin around and level a glance at him. “What kind of information?”

He takes a deep breath but doesn’t answer. I put my knife up and stalk back over to him. I yank his head up, ball my hand into a fist, and swing. I land my punch right on his jaw.

Blood spurts all over my hand.

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He groans in pain but doesn't answer my question.

“Do you really want to do this the hard way? I will get the answers out of you one way or another.”

“He usually sends me out to get random pieces of information. It's never consistent and never jaw-dropping.”

That doesn't sound like Rossi.

Is John lying to appease me?

“What was the last thing he had you do?”

“He had me count the number of houses on his street.”

“Why?”

“I don't know. I just did what he asked.”

“How many houses were there?”

He looks at me with wide eyes. I'm even surprised to hear myself asking this.

“Thirteen.”

“What did he ask you to do before that?”

“Count the number of parking spaces at random businesses all around town.”

Was Rossi just seeing if John was loyal to him? This seems almost like an initiation, albeit different from the Marino initiation.

“And before that?”

There has to be something worth noting here.

“He told me to take pictures of different places around town.”

I give him a pointed look to explain, and he continues.

“I had to climb to the Tybee Island Lighthouse, face north toward South Carolina, and take photos of the water. I had to go to two different ports and take pictures of their loading docks. There was also a new club being built that I had to take pictures of during the framing stage.”

He takes a deep breath. “None of this made sense. It was like he was sending me on a wild goose chase, but secretly they already captured the goose.”

The lighthouse doesn’t make any sense. What could he want with the dual state waters?

The ports could be my family owned port and the east port they switched our cargo order to.

I have no doubt the new club Rossi had John photograph is ours. The same one that is re-opening soon.

Why does Rossi want pictures of the framing? The blueprints are public knowledge.

All he'd have to do is make a trip downtown and request a copy.

"Is there anything else Rossi had you do? Big or small?"

"Well, I-" He glances down at the ground and stops mid-sentence.

"You what?"

"I had to get addresses and photographs of three women. I had to show him where they go during the day, where they live, what cars they drive, and any friends they have. They all seem like loners. They never hung out with friends. They seem to live quiet, peaceful lives."

My heart pounds in my chest, and I yell out, "Who? What women? What are their names?"

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I swear to God, I will rain pain and destruction on the entire Rossi organization if John names Francesca, Savannah, or Alexandra.

John looks at me, eyes wide and lip trembling. “Savannah Whitlock, Alexandra Ferguson, and Avery Brown.”

Damn it. This isn't good. He's going after our women. I'll die before I let them touch a hair on Alexandra's head.

My vision blurs as I unleash all my anger on John. Unbeknownst to him, he just handed Rossi the gun to take us out. If there's something I know about the guys, it's that they will do anything to protect their women.

Even sacrifice themselves.

After several minutes, my knuckles scream in pain. I turn around and leave the room. Rhett or Spencer can come in, untie him, and bandage him up.

I have to inform Dad about what I just found out.

Running up the stairs, I quickly shower and change into proper mafia attire. My suit is fitted and wrinkle free, my shoes are shined, and my knuckles show that I'm not afraid of getting the job done.

I hop into my car and race to the arena for the weekly meeting with Dad and Alexandra.

I park in the empty parking spot next to Dad and make my way inside the arena and up the stairs to the conference room.

Dad is sitting at the head of the table, talking on the phone with a supplier.

Alexandra ignores me as she brings Dad a cup of coffee. I walk over to the coffeemaker and pour myself a cup. I add a splash of non-dairy French vanilla creamer and take my seat at the opposite end of the long table.

I guess I do deserve the cold shoulder, but I'm not going to stop caring about her.

While waiting for Dad to get off the phone, I send Rhett and Spencer a group message.

Will you two be around in half an hour?

Spencer immediately responds.

I'm downstairs in the gym. What's up?

Not waiting for Rhett to reply, I respond to Spencer.

I need to talk to you two after my meeting with Dad.

Spencer's reply is everything that I expect it to be.

Is everything alright? I can come upstairs now if it will make things easier.

Having Rhett and Spencer here will help keep me from repeating everything that is discussed during the meeting.

Yeah, get Rhett, and come join us in ten minutes.

The conference door opens and Francesca steps inside, joining the meeting.

“What are you doing here?”

If she’s here, then where is Rhett? The two of them are practically attached at the hip.

She plops down in the chair to the left of Dad. “Uh, attending the meeting because I’m part of the family and want more responsibilities. My opinion matters, too, you know.”

I shake my head and apologize. “I’m sorry. That didn’t come out how I intended it to. I was trying to get in touch with Rhett to have him come up here for the meeting and assumed the two of you were together.”

“We were, but he was heading downstairs to find Spencer. Why do you need him here for the meeting?”

“There are some things I need to discuss, and it will be easier if Rhett and Spencer are here to hear as well.”

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“What’s going on?”

Dad ends the call and offers Francesca a smile. “Glad to have you join us this morning.”

“Joey was just telling me he invited Rhett and Spencer to the meeting.”

Dad quirks his eyebrow. “Is that so?”

Alexandra sits down in the chair opposite of Francesca, briefly distracting me.

I clear my throat and keep my gaze off her. “I told them to come up here in ten minutes. That way, we have a chance to go over whatever is on your agenda first.”

Dad nods. “The only thing on my agenda is to check in with Alexandra regarding the grand opening of the club.”

She sits up straighter in her chair. “Everything is finalized. The caterers and reporters have confirmed their end of things. All we have to do is re-employ the dancers and bartenders.”

Dad grabs his notebook and makes a note for himself. “I’ll handle that this afternoon.”

A knock sounds on the conference room door. Looking over, I see Rhett and Spencer standing there waiting. I wave them in.

“Sorry to interrupt.” Spencer says as he walks around the table to sit next to Alexandra while Rhett sits next to Francesca.

“You’re right on time. Joseph was just about to catch us up to date on what’s going on.”

Everyone glances my way, waiting for me to spill the secrets.

“I interrogated the guy in our custody. His name is John Smith, and he works for Giuseppe Rossi and has had to go on seemingly random scavenger hunts.”

Several snickers echo throughout the conference room at his name.

“He had to count how many houses were on the same street as the Rossi estate, count the parking spaces at businesses around town, take pictures at the top of the Tybee Island Lighthouse, take pictures of a couple of ports, and-”

Dad interrupts me. “Why the hell does Rossi need to know these things?”

“I can only assume it’s John’s initiation to prove that he’s loyal to the Rossi family.”

Dad frowns. “That doesn’t seem dire enough to call Rhett and Spencer in.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Of course, Dad jumps straight to the wrong conclusion. “That’s not all I found out.”

I chance a glance at Francesca, then Alexandra.

“John had to take pictures of the club while it was being framed, and he had to get information on Savannah, Alexandra, and Avery.”

Spencer jumps out of his seat and slams his hands down on the desk. “What kind of information?”

If he wasn’t dating Savannah, I’d yell at him about decorum, but I know he’s worried about her.

“He had to get their addresses, their car make and model, and who they hang out with.”

My gaze moves to Alexandra, who is fear-stricken and panting, and I instantly regret openly telling them about the information I discovered.

Francesca whispers, “What can we do?”

“I’ve been brainstorming. Savannah is practically living with Spencer, so she’s protected most of the time, but we can hire extra security to follow her around. Avery has her father, but she’s probably left alone a lot, so she would benefit from having her own security detail.”

My gaze meets Alexandra’s.

“Alexandra is here most of the time, but I think if we have a couple of extra apartments, we can have Avery move into one and Alexandra move in another. There’s security there all the time. Players live there and can keep an eye on them. Francesca is there when we have away games.”

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This makes the most sense for the time being.

Francesca perks up. “My apartment is completely furnished and clean, so Alexandra can have mine.”

Alexandra shakes her head and glares at me. “I appreciate the offer, but I’m fine in my apartment. It’s safe and secure, and every building can only be accessed by a keycard.”

I clench my jaw before saying, “You can move into the apartment with the team or the guesthouse. Your choice.”

No one speaks as the two of us stare at one another.

She doesn’t want to start her shit with me today because I will get my way, and my way will be to have her close to me.

I imagine sneaking into the guesthouse at night. Having her so close will be a blessing and a curse.

She will still want more from me, but being so close will give us a chance to grow closer to one another.

Maybe then I’ll be able to move past my issues.

Her voice drags me from my thoughts. “What about my lease? I can’t afford to break the contract.”

Is she going to fight me every step of the way?

“We’ll pay the fees to terminate your lease. Your safety is more important than a couple thousand dollars.”

She crosses her arms and narrows her eyes at me. “Fine. I’ll move into Francesca’s old apartment, but I’m not moving until this weekend.”

Chapter Three

ALEXANDRA

Rushing around to finish up work, I grab the last receipt off my desk and make a beeline to the scanner. I quickly close the lid, pinching my pinky finger in the process.

“Shit!” I yank my hand back, grabbing my hurt finger.

This is what I get for rushing and trying to leave work before lunch on a Friday morning.

My computer chimes with an instant message. I finish scanning the last receipt, put it in the correct folder, and close the filing cabinet.

I plop down in my office chair and move my mouse to wake up my computer to see who the message is from. Arturo is in a meeting with Alvin Brown at a secret location and Joseph is with the team, traveling to Florida for an away game.

Francesca’s name pops up as she sends me another message.

Can you help me finalize something?

It's an outing for the team, but Dad will be there, too, so I could use your advice on security.

I stare at her messages for a few moments before replying.

Is a team outing wise with everything going on?

John Smith, one of Giuseppe Rossi's men, specifically named me as one of the targets Giuseppe Rossi is coming after.

While I wait for her reply, I close my blinds and turn off my essential oil diffuser. The chime on the computer sounds again.

We can't show the public that we are afraid. We have to keep up appearances. They can't know we are dealing with outside threats.

I mentally roll my eyes. Of course, she would be more concerned about the public's opinions rather than keeping her and her family safe.

That's one of the few things I agree with Joseph on. Francesca is naïve and doesn't really think about the consequences until they are right in her face, but at least she is trying to think about security beforehand.

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Whether the public is supposed to know or not, they are going to see the increased security and wonder what's going on.

If they listen to the news, they will already know that someone burnt the club down. They will already be aware of the connection with Arturo, but I'll come to your office.

I exit out of messenger and turn off my computer. If Francesca sends a reply, I won't get it. I grab my stuff and head down the long hallway to Francesca's office.

There's soft music floating through the open door.

"Hey." I say as I sit in one of the chairs nestled in the corner of her office.

She glances at me before returning her gaze back to her computer screen. "I just need to finish replying to this email and then we can put our heads together."

Her fingers tap against the keys at lightning speed for a few minutes. "There. All done."

"So, what do you have in mind for the team outing?"

She picks up a folder and hands it to me. It's full of ideas for outdoor events with the community.

"What if we combined some of these ideas? We can do a meet the player type event and a charity event."

I continue reading her ideas when an idea pops into my mind.

“What if we host a skate with a player day where fans can buy tickets to come skate with their favorite player for a certain amount of time? It will be inside the arena so more secure than an outside event, and we have cameras everywhere.”

Francesca nods slowly while mulling over my idea.

I continue to speak my thoughts. “What if we host an auction and all proceeds go to the children’s hospital? We will need to get a bunch of raffle tickets, though. We can have the auction set for a couple of days before the event and draw tickets live.”

Francesca grins. “That’s a great idea. We can set it up so fans can buy tickets online or here at the arena in person.”

“What can we auction off? When were you wanting this event to take place?”

The charity auction will bring good publicity as well as keep Arturo in the public eye. Surely, the Reapers and Giuseppe Rossi won’t do anything stupid with the team in the spotlight.

“Next Saturday, and we can auction off signed pucks. Fans love getting autographs.”

My eyes almost bulge out of my skull. “Next Saturday. As in eight days?”

Is she seriously thinking we can get extra security in place for an event happening in a week?

She nods. “Yeah, next weekend.”

“Isn’t that too soon to get the word out and get people to show up?”

“Not at all. I’ve already talked to the team’s reporters and put the word out on social media. The fans are eagerly waiting for the official announcement on what will be auctioned off, so it has to be something great.”

This might be doable. Plus, she will be the one organizing it, not me.

“What if we auctioned off a date with the players? It’s during the break, so the guys won’t have practice or games. The second highest bidder can get a bag filled with team merchandise and something signed by that player, and we can still raffle off signed pucks for those that can’t afford the bids on the date.”

She scrunches up her face. “That all sounds great, but is a date a good idea? That can get out of hand and reeks of the potential for bad publicity and allegations. I do think the fans will go crazy for a chance to spend time with their favorite player.”

“I didn’t think of that. What if the so-called date happens here in the arena? We can get catering from a local restaurant and then the players and the highest bidder can eat a nice, safe meal where everyone is protected.”

Francesca’s face lights up. “Yes! I love that. Okay, so we will have raffle tickets for a random signed puck. Fans can buy them online or in person. Saturday night, we can choose like ten or twenty winners.”

“I think that’s a great idea. With twenty winners, more people will feel like they actually have a chance to win a puck.”

Francesca leans forward, resting her elbows on her desk. “Exactly. Saturday morning, we will have the skate with a player event where fans can buy tickets online to skate. Let’s say, uh, fifteen minutes with a player. They can arrive early to get rental skates.”

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“That would be great because then they will be ready when it’s their time and won’t spend half their time putting on skates. We will have to make sure they are wearing appropriate attire.”

She jots down our ideas. “And then after the skate event, fans can fill the stands for the live raffle for the signed pucks.”

“Will you be announcing the auction winners after the raffle? How will they know when the date with a player will be?”

It would be nice to win a date with Joseph, but I don’t want everyone to know if I bid on him.

“I don’t think we should broadcast the winners live because they will be spending a lot of money. We can send the winner an email that they’ve won and the time and place of the dinner. It will probably be a couple of weeks to a month later when the guys have a string of at home games.”

Moving onto the reason she wanted me in here, I say, “We can use the normal security and local police we would for a home game. They are familiar with the arena and the crowds and will probably appreciate the extra money.”

“That’s perfect. To the fans, it won’t seem abnormal or excessive because security is here every game.”

“Great, so I guess I should leave you to plan these events. I’m going home to finish packing.”

I haven't started packing yet. I don't own that much, so I waited until the last possible minute. Plus, I was hoping things would settle down and I could keep my apartment, but all week, Joseph and Arturo kept asking how packing was going.

Francesca digs inside her purse and hands me the other key to her apartment that was in Rhett's apartment. "Do you need help? I can work on this from home later and come help you pack."

"Thanks, but it's not necessary. There isn't a lot to pack since the furniture is staying. I'll be done in no more than fifteen minutes."

She gives me a worried glance. "If you're sure. My apartment is on the second floor. I decorated the door for you, so it's not hard to miss."

"Thank you."

We say our goodbyes and I head downstairs to grab a couple of empty boxes before heading to my car.

Six boxes should be enough for all of my stuff.

Traffic is much lighter than normal, so it only takes a few minutes to get to my apartment.

I park in my assigned parking spot, grab the boxes from the backseat, and make my way to my bottom floor apartment.

I've never been happier to live on the first floor than I am right now. At least carrying the full boxes to my car will be effortless.

Grabbing two of the boxes, I head straight to my closet. I fill one box with my dressy,

professional attire and fill the other box with the rest of my clothes. Grabbing a trash bag, I throw my four pairs of shoes inside and place the bag in the second box.

I should be surprised that all of my clothes fit in these two boxes, but I'm not.

I moved to Savannah with just a backpack. I was living on the streets until I got the job with Arturo. It took me three months to get this apartment and a year to buy a car outright.

For the past year, I've been saving as much as I can in case I need to run away and start over again.

I carry the two boxes to the living room before returning to the bedroom. I grab all of my personal items from my end table and throw them in my purse.

My bathroom items take up less than half of the box. I add my cleaning supplies and the few pictures I have from my childhood.

I sit on the couch as I stare at the naïve, young girl in the photograph. She's smiling and having the best day of her life.

Little did she know that in just two brief hours, her life would turn into a living nightmare.

The house she grew up in would become a distant memory. Her bed, toys, and friends would be a thing of the past.

She would learn about the horrible world of drug and gambling addiction and how it affects everyone around the troubled person.

She would see her father lose all control and give into his anger. She would become

helpless to protect herself.

My vision blurs as tears sting my eyes. I haven't been helpless for a long time. I'm stronger now and independent. No one will ever make me feel that way again.

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No one.

I swipe my tears away and place the picture in a box before packing the rest of my stuff. I have bigger issues to deal with. There's no time to reminisce about my tortured past.

My father won't ever see me again. No one knows about my past, and my future is hopeful.

For the most part.

When my apartment is void of all my belongings, I carry the boxes to my car. The bigger clothes boxes fit in my trunk with the cleaning box, and the other three boxes fit in the back seat.

I run back inside to grab my clothes hamper and my pillow and place them in the front seat.

Large hands wrap around my arms and a deep male voice says, "Don't move and no one will get hurt."

I gasp. "I don't have any money and have very few belongings."

"Shut up, bitch."

"Please, just let me go."

Another man cackles. “It’s cute when they beg. It’s even better when they beg on their knees when my cock is in their mouth.”

The man behind me chuckles.

I spin around, catching him off guard. I punch him in the stomach. He grunts in pain and hunches over, giving me an opportunity to punch him in his nose.

“Fucking Bitch. You’ll pay for this.”

Ripping his grip off my arms, I run around the car and reach for my door handle.

If I can get in my car, I can get away from him.

The other man anticipates my move. He stalks over to me and wraps his arms around me in a bear hug.

I try to throw my head back to headbutt him, but he pushes me into my car door. The door handle jams into my hip. I have to bite back the urge to scream out in pain.

His hand threads through the back of my hair a second before he yanks on it. My head snaps back, forcing me to stare up at the sky.

“Stop fucking fighting, or I’ll shoot you. The boss may want you alive, but you’re not worth the trouble.”

I ignore his warning and fight back.

I’m not going down without a fight and if his boss wants me, then he’s going to have to earn it.

I lift up my leg and push back with all my strength.

“Son of a bitch.” He grunts as I kick him in his knee.

He lets go of me with one arm a second before something hits me in the back of my head.

My vision goes black as I’m knocked out.

I guess I’m going to meet their boss.

Chapter Four

JOSEPH

Coach Bobby stands up at the front of the bus and addresses us as we finally arrive at the hotel after fighting through miles of traffic.

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“Okay, guys, rest up, get some food, and be ready to head back to the arena in three hours for the game.”

The guys head upstairs to their hotel rooms to order room service, shower, and nap while I head outside to meet my driver.

I’m using this away game in Florida to meet with a potential business partner. He has more demand than he can keep up with, but he needs more capital to make the product.

We need to expand to a new market since we are constantly fighting with Rossi and the Reapers.

I greet my driver, Mr. Eastly, before getting into the back seat of the fully blacked out car. Mr. Eastly is the personal driver of the Valentino family. He doesn’t speak as he drives me across town to the restaurant where the meeting will be taking place.

When we arrive, I am escorted inside the elegant seafood restaurant to a private room. We pass several patrons who eye me suspiciously. Two men in all black suits stand as Mr. Eastly and I approach.

I reach out to shake the older man’s hand before shaking the younger man’s hand.

“Mr. Marino?” The older man asks.

“Yes sir, but please call me Joey or Joseph.”

“Joey it is. I’m John Valentino, and this is my son, Nicholas.”

“Nick.” He corrects his father.

“It’s nice to meet you both.”

From the research I’ve done, John is the same age as Dad and Nicholas is a couple of years older than me.

The Valentinos dabble in everything. They have been convicted of drug trafficking, prostitution, gambling, money laundering, and protection racketeering.

John gestures to the table. “Shall we sit and eat while we discuss business?”

“That sounds great. I’m starving.”

Nicholas takes the seat next to his father. “So, how do you manage professional hockey and running your family business?”

He looked into my background the same way I looked into his and his family’s background.

“It’s tiring, but we have systems in place to make sure everything runs as smoothly as possible. Plus, my father is always there to keep things running.”

John gives me a questioning look. “He doesn’t travel with the team?”

“He’s not an athletic trainer, reporter, or coaching staff, so there’s no point in him traveling with us. He has other businesses to run and, of course, acquire while I’m gone. Then I get to spend the next few days filling out all the paperwork.”

We share a laugh as the server brings us all a glass of ice water and a chef salad.

Needing to know more about their operation, I ask, “If you don’t mind, can you tell me a little more about what you guys have going on down here?”

The two men share a glance before John speaks. “You should know, we are new to Florida. Most of our businesses are in New York. The family still lives there and handles the day to day. Nick and I moved here in hopes of bringing businesses down here for my retirement.”

This is not what was discussed during the preliminary meeting over the phone. Dad would never have sent me out of the way to meet with someone who is just starting over.

“Do you have any businesses started down here? How established are you two in the community?” I try to keep my voice calm and respectful, but I need to know where they stand.

Nick grabs a folder from the table behind him. “We have this restaurant and two clubs. One is downtown and the other one is at the oceanfront. They are showing progress and are on track to be very profitable, but we aren’t there yet.”

I take the offered folder and flip through their financial sheets. Dad will want me to verify their numbers and make sure the profit/loss sheet is as accurate as it can be, but there’s something promising about starting in a new market.

John clears his throat. “We know it’s a lot to ask for a partnership with us, but we already have clients here begging for more. We have already discussed negotiations with the mayor and the police chief.”

I put the folder to the side and take another bite of my salad. I can look over their

paperwork later tonight after the game. “How much product did you come down here with initially, and what were you selling?”

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“We came down here with ten thousand ecstasy pills that sold out within two weeks. Our strategy was to start with the clubs and grow from there. It worked for us in New York, so we gave it a shot down here.”

Club goers are the easiest customers to start with. They are more open to taking recreational drugs to enhance their night.

Nick chimes in. “We had to ship another ten thousand pills down here to keep up with demand. We are down to our last two hundred, though, and when they run out, we are finished. If we had more capital right now to buy a warehouse to produce our own, we will see bigger profit margins.”

“Do you have a warehouse already or are you still in the pre-purchase stage?”

Nick waves over the server before saying, “We have a meeting with a real estate agent later this afternoon to look at our top three choices. My favorite pick is the most expensive, but it has intercoastal water access and more privacy than the other two.”

The server takes our empty salad bowls and refills our waters.

John adds, “That one is a huge liability because it’s almost double the price, and it’s further from any of our other businesses.”

“I understand your hesitation based on the price, but water access is a huge perk. If we partner with your family, we can send product from our cargo ships down here to you, and vice versa.”

Our wine glasses are filled as several servers bring large platters of seafood.

The first platter is full of pasta in a garlic butter sauce, another is piled high with lobster tails with clarified butter, and a third is full of steamed mussels, clams, and oysters.

After making sure we don't need anything else, the servers leave the three of us alone.

"This looks and smells amazing." My stomach growls in agreement.

"Let's eat, enjoy the food, and table the heavy talk for now. You can look over the folder when it's convenient, and we will answer any questions you or Arturo have."

We raise our wine glasses in a toast before taking a sip. The citrusy flavor explodes on my taste buds. It's been a while since I've had wine, but I'm not one to refuse when another family is being hospitable.

We load up our plates and dig in. I don't like eating in silence. It reminds me of the nights when Dad would come in looking haunted.

That was before I knew what really went on. Before I knew the horrors that came with this lifestyle.

"So, Nick, are you planning on staying down here, or are you moving back to New York?"

Nick's expression changes. Gone is his carefree smile and in its place is a hardened, blank slate.

I shouldn't have pried, but it was an honest mistake. John said this operation was for

his retirement. How was I supposed to know there were bad feelings mixed in?

“I haven’t decided. It was supposed to be a temporary move. I was going to help Dad get set up and established down here and then go back to New York and run things up there.”

“I can understand the indecisiveness. It’s important to make sure your established businesses don’t fall through. Over the past few years, I’ve thought about moving back to New York over a dozen times, but my hockey career is in Savannah.”

If we are going to partner with the Valentinos, they need to be transparent with their intentions. I’m not one to beat around the bush, especially when my family name and reputation are on the line.

“What about when your hockey career is over or if you get traded?”

I won’t be traded off the team. Neither will Rhett, Spencer, or Gage, but I can’t tell him that.

“When I’m done with hockey, because I retire or any other reason, I will assess business and go from there. It also depends on a lot of other factors.”

I don’t explain those other factors, but the biggest one is dependent on what happens with Giuseppe Rossi.

The topic of our conversation changes to a much lighter tone. We talk about sports for a little while before talking about family traditions.

John laughs and says, “I just hope that Nicholas is happy, successful, and meets a great woman to settle down with.”

I'm reminded of my childhood. Francesca and I spent the evenings talking with Dad and Uncle Tony about our futures and their hopes for us.

Dad used to say the same thing. He wanted me to meet a nice Italian woman and settle down and start a family of my own.

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Little does Dad know, I've already met the woman he hoped I would find.

Alexandra.

My body craves her, needing to be close to her. I need to see her.

I crave a future with her.

Fuck, I'm stupid.

Nick's voice drags me out of my thoughts. "Dad, I'm still young. I have plenty of time to meet a woman and settle down."

I chuckle. "You're older than me, so if you still have time, then there's still hope for me."

John frowns. "There's no woman waiting for you back home?"

"Waiting for me? No."

Alexandra isn't waiting for me to get back home. Not after the way I left things.

He tsks. "That's a shame."

I shrug, not wanting to open Pandora's box. "The right woman will come along at the right time."

When we are finished eating, the servers remove the dishes from the table, leaving just our water and wine glasses.

John greets Mr. Eastly as he steps into the private room. “Is everything alright?”

Mr. Eastly blushes. “Yes, sir. I was informed to let Mr. Marino know it is time to head back to the hotel. His team will be expecting him shortly.”

I place my napkin on the table and stand. “Ah, yes. Thank you.”

Turning toward the men, I stretch my hand across the table to give each of them a handshake.

John shakes my hand and says, “It was a pleasure meeting you.”

“You, too. I’m sure we will be speaking again soon.”

Nick adds, “Let me know if you need anything, and I’ll get it to you as soon as I can.”

“Thank you. I’ll let you know.”

I’m sure what they already gathered, plus what information I can dig up will be enough.

“Thank you for the meal. It was delicious.” I say before I walk over to where Mr. Eastly is waiting for me.

I follow him outside to his car. He opens the door for me before closing it after I am settled inside.

I don’t normally like having a private driver, but today, with my mind preoccupied

with Alexandra, it's a welcomed privilege.

Speaking of Alexandra, I grab my phone and dial her number.

It rings several times before her voicemail picks up.

"I'm sorry to have missed your call. If this is urgent, please call me at the office. If not, please leave your name, number, and a brief message, and I'll call you back as soon as I can."

I end the call and immediately hit the redial button. Once again, the call goes to her voicemail. I end the call before I hear her voice again.

Why isn't she answering? She knows I'm meeting with potential business partners. She should be near her phone today.

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Is she not answering because I'm the one calling?

I type out a text before erasing it. Starting over, I send a nicer message first.

Just met with the potential business partners, give me a call so I can run some ideas past you before I meet with Dad.

I leave it at that while Mr. Eastly drives me back to the hotel. He parks right next to the charter bus.

"Thank you for the ride."

"You're welcome, Mr. Marino. Here, take my card. If you are ever back in town, give me a call, and I'll drive you around."

I take his business card and get out of the car just in time to see Rhett and Spencer walking out of the hotel.

"What's going on?" I ask when I get closer to them.

Rhett glances at Mr. Eastly's car. "Have you heard from Alexandra today?"

I frown.

Why would he ask me that?

"No. What's going on?"

Rhett runs a hand through his hair. “Francesca gave her the extra key to her apartment, but she said she hasn’t moved in yet.”

Is this seriously what they are worried about?

“Alexandra said she was moving in this weekend. She could be at home packing for the big move tomorrow.”

“So you haven’t heard from her today?”

“No, but I was just in an important meeting. Besides, it’s not like I talk to Alexandra every day. She’s my father’s assistant, not mine.”

They stare at me as if they don’t believe what I’m saying.

I don’t talk to her every day, but I try my damndest to at least lay my eyes on her.

An image of her wearing that short tight skirt she loves to wear around the office flashes in my mind.

That skirt and her tight white blouse always make my dick hard.

Like it is now.

The main doors to the hotel open and our teammates flow out and head toward us with Coach Bobby in the front.

“Get on the bus. You can finish your gossip while we are stuck in traffic.”

I roll my eyes as Rhett laughs. “He’s a smartass, but he’s right. We can talk on the bus.”

We get settled in our seats at the back of the bus.

Their concerns leave me worried about Alexandra, so I send another text.

How's the packing going?

I wait a few minutes before sending another message.

Please call or message me and let me know you are safe. The guys and Francesca are worried that you haven't moved in yet.

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By the time we get to the arena, Alexandra still hasn't called or messaged me. I clench my jaw.

She has to be ignoring me because I wouldn't publicly date her. Is she trying to punish me? Is she just busy packing and hasn't heard her phone go off?

The longer it takes her to respond to me, the angrier I get.

Warm-ups pass by in a blur of anger and impatience.

When we get back to the locker room, I grab my phone and head into the office to call her.

It's no surprise that she doesn't answer. This time, though, I wait for her voicemail to pick up.

Her voice is smooth like butter. "I'm sorry to have missed your call. If this is urgent, please call me at the office. If not, please leave your name, number, and a brief message, and I'll call you back as soon as I can."

As soon as the beep sounds, I unleash all the anger that has built up over the past thirty minutes.

"Alexandra, answer my call, damn it. I don't give a flying fuck if you're pissed that I said no to publicly dating you. I've been patient and understanding, but that stops now. Stop ignoring me and pick up the damn phone."

I end the call and take several deep breaths before redialing her number. When it goes to voicemail, I end the call and redial.

Over and over, I try to reach her, with each passing call causing me to worry more and more.

A knock sounds on the door before Rhett pokes his head inside. “We’re heading back to the ice. Are you coming?”

I glance at my phone before standing. “Yeah, I’m coming.”

I toss my phone onto my pile of stuff and follow the guys out of the locker room.

I’m on autopilot as the anthem is sung, and the game begins. I’m grateful hockey is a sport where I can take my anger out on the ice.

When a player on the Jacksonville Jays shoves Gage into the back of the net, I skate over to them and start swinging.

The referees blow their whistles and send me to the penalty box for roughing.

I roll my eyes and sit down on the tiny bench. Looking across the ice, I meet Coach Bobby’s gaze.

He’s pissed and glaring right at me.

Sure, I might have to answer for my actions, but right now, I just want to finish what I started.

And I will.

The two minutes go by swiftly. I take the bench and wait for another chance to take the ice.

The Jays player shoves Gage into the boards right in front of me and the rest of the team. “Why don’t you come do something about it, tough guy?”

I glance at Coach Bobby, hoping he gives me the go ahead, but he shakes his head. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Why the fuck not?”

The players beside me freeze, not believing I just spoke to Coach that way.

“Don’t start, Marino.”

“Someone needs to put the asshole in his place. Clearly, Gage isn’t going to be the enforcer he is supposed to be.”

Coach glances at the ice before turning toward me. I see the resolve in his eyes before he sighs and says, “Fine.”

When the players on the ice need to change, I jump over the boards and skate straight toward the asshole.

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Gage yells at me. “Don’t do it, Marino. It’s not worth it.”

I glare at him before shoving the dickhead into the boards. He hits the plexiglass with an oomph before turning around and dropping his stick.

“I’m surprised your coach let you off the bench.”

I throw my stick and gloves down on the ice, preparing for a fight. “He didn’t have a fucking choice. I was coming for you one way or another.”

“Let’s do this.”

We square our shoulders and skate around in a circle. He’s the first to move, but I dodge his punch and grab a fistful of his jersey.

My fist sails through the air a second before connecting with his jaw.

Whistles are blown, and the referees break us up.

I don’t wait for the penalty to be announced. I skate back to the penalty box as the crowd boos me.

If they think that’s going to throw me off my game, they are sorely mistaken.

I plop down on the bench and take a swig of water. I might as well get comfortable because the game has just started and I’m already on my second penalty.

Fighting did nothing to quell the anger busting inside.

Looking across the ice, I see Coach Bobby yell something at the referee before gesturing to me. It's clear he is pissed, but whether it's at me or not is undetermined.

One thing is certain, if Alexandra doesn't call me back tonight, my first stop after we land in Savannah will be at her front door.

Chapter Five

ALEXANDRA

The back of my head throbs. I try to reach up and touch the spot, but my hands are chained to my feet in front of me.

Memories flood into my mind of loading my moving boxes from my apartment to my car and being confronted by the men.

I open my eyes and am temporarily blinded by the bright light. The throbbing in the back of my skull intensifies tenfold. Snapping my eyes closed, I wait a few moments before cracking my left eye open.

I regained consciousness in a work van. I'm chained to the wall railing and shoved into the corner.

Blankets, tarps, and old carpet litter the floor of the van. As well as old paint brushes and several used paint trays.

Glancing around, I search for any way to escape.

There aren't any.

The chains are wrapped around the railing and padlocked. I assume the back doors are locked as well. The only advantage I have is that the wall separating me from the two men is solid and they can't see me.

I never took Arturo up on taking a lock-picking class.

Or shooting lessons.

I'm a sitting duck here and can only hope I'll get a chance at running away when we get to our destination.

I do the only thing I can. I listen to their conversation for any clues that will help me find out why they wanted me.

The two men, oblivious to my awareness, speak as if they are alone.

"I can't believe that asshole ditched us like that."

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His voice is deep and gruff, and I remember it all too vividly. He's the man that wrapped me in a bear hug. The one that I kicked. The one that knocked me out.

The man in the passenger seat chortles. "The boss is going to be pissed when he finds out one of his men ran."

"Well, let's not let him find out."

"How are we going to hide it? He's going to expect a report from Justin Miller tomorrow, and he's not going to show up."

The passenger's voice is light and carefree, as if they aren't discussing their boss being pissed.

"Then we need to find him first."

Their conversation pauses as the van stops.

Are we at a red light? Perhaps a stop sign?

Are there other cars around?

Could I kick the back doors open so someone sees me tied up?

The van jolts forward as the driver steps on the gas.

I recap their conversation, burning it into my mind for future use.

A man, Justin Miller, is missing, and the boss is expecting a report from him tomorrow.

The driver clears his throat. “You know, he probably skipped town. He probably figured he was as good as dead, so this was the best way to live and have a future.”

“There is one way to guarantee his return.”

There is a long pause before the driver barks out, “Well, are you going to fucking tell me or not?”

“Put a bullet in his wife and kids’ skulls to send him a message. He will come flying back faster than he left.” His voice is too upbeat and chipper for this gruesome conversation.

The driver chuckles. “That’s pretty damn cold of you to say, but Justin would deserve it for deserting the family.”

The family? Like Giuseppe Rossi?

“To be honest, if I was in the hot seat with the boss, I’d skip town too. I’d grab everything I could fit in a backpack and go.”

“You’d leave your family? Your friends? Your job?”

“Hell yeah I would. I’d leave in a heartbeat and start over. I’d change my name, get an inconspicuous job, and buy a small shack on some decent acreage. I have to save my own ass, you know, and if you repeat what I just said, I’ll kill you.”

“How can I trust to work with you going forward if you’re already telling me you’d skip town like Justin did?”

“As long as we aren’t in the hot seat, I’ll be here.”

Neither man speaks.

If these two men work for Giuseppe Rossi, there is no such thing as leaving the family. Once you are a part of the family, you stay for life.

It’s literally a life sentence, and if Justin ran away, Rossi will hunt him down and make an example out of him.

I’ve seen it before.

A long, long, long time ago.

A lifetime ago.

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A loud explosion echoes through the van, like a bomb going off. My heart races and I yelp out loud.

Are we under attack?

Did someone shoot at us?

“Fucking dick.” The driver says with no emotion in his voice.

The van doesn’t speed up or slow down.

Did I imagine all of this?

I inhale deeply, filling my lungs to the max before letting the breath out through my mouth.

“Nice to see you awake. Did I scare you back there?” The driver cackles, like the villain he is.

I clamp my mouth shut. There’s no way in hell I’m answering him.

He continues. “Ah, you’ll be alright. We will be at the house in just a minute. Don’t fight me or else I’ll have to shoot you, too.”

I gulp.

Did he shoot his partner because he said he would run away? He’s unhinged and

psychotic.

The vehicle slows down and stops before the driver turns off the van. “I’m coming around back to get you. Remember, one false move and you’re dead. Do you understand?”

My voice cracks as I speak. “I understand.”

He opens the back door and freezes as he stares at me.

Is he trying to gauge my flight or fight response? I already told him I understood his instructions.

“I’m not going to fight or try to run away.” I whisper.

He grunts in response.

“I promise to go peacefully. You have my word.”

Sure, he might not know me, but when I give someone my word, I mean it.

He hesitates for a few moments before pulling out his gun and climbing into the back with me. With the gun pressed into my chest, he reaches into his back pocket and digs out the key to the padlock.

“Don’t move.”

His hand shakes as he inserts the key and unlocks the lock.

My chest heaves, pushing the gun harder against my skin. I stay still and allow him to unwrap the chains from the side railing and pull me out of the van.

He removes the gun from my chest, only to shove it into my back and push me towards the doubled wooden front door.

He leads me down a long hallway to a bare dark room with an old twin mattress shoved in the corner. Even from here, I can smell the pungent odor.

“Get in there, sit on the mattress, and wait for the boss to arrive.”

I glance around the windowless room.

There’s no escaping.

I reluctantly plod over to the mattress with blood and piss stains, choking down the bile that threatens to make an appearance.

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There's no way in hell I'm sitting on that. I'll probably catch something just by being near it.

I turn around and take several steps toward the opposite wall and sit on the bare concrete floor.

The man scoffs before leaning against the door frame. "Suit yourself, but the concrete will hurt after a few minutes."

I don't bother speaking. I'd rather be sore and hurting than sit anywhere near that mattress.

"Move," a deep voice says from the hallway.

The driver immediately holsters his gun and steps out of the way as a tall man takes his place.

Giuseppe Rossi.

"It's been a long time, Alexandra." He says with a hint of a sinister chuckle.

Shit. I was hoping he wouldn't remember me. It's been so long since I've seen him. I was practically a little girl.

"It has." I say nonchalantly.

I want to ask him why I'm here and what he plans to do to me, but I don't.

I can't.

The words won't come out.

My mouth flops open and slams closed like I'm a fish out of water.

"I bet you're wondering why you are here."

He stares at me, waiting for my response.

I keep my voice flat, showing no emotion or curiosity. "That thought has crossed my mind a time or two in the past half hour or so, but I figured I would find out sooner or later."

The corner of his lips curl up into a smirk. "You're still the same sassy woman you were back then. Of course you're grown now."

Is that supposed to be a compliment? And what the hell does he mean I'm still the same sassy woman I was back then?

Years ago, when I first met him, I was a frightened little girl. I never spoke and hardly spent time outside of my bedroom.

Even then, I knew Giuseppe Rossi was a serious man who didn't take any shit. He's the one that clued me and my mother in about my father's trouble.

He's also the one that I had nightmares about for months.

"So am I your prisoner? Hostage? Bargaining chip?"

There has to be an underlying reason for them kidnapping me, and it's not to rehash

old business.

I haven't seen or talked to my family in years, and I've changed my last name, making it where they couldn't find me.

Giuseppe Rossi snaps his finger, and the driver disappears down the hallway for a few seconds before returning. He drags a man into the room, shoving him toward me.

I lean closer to see who the man is, but there's not enough light to see for sure.

The man looks to be older and malnourished. He's dirty, frail, tied up, and gagged. He stumbles and falls to the ground with a loud thud.

It's not until he sits up and faces me that I recognize the hollow face.

Dad.

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“Your father’s gambling is causing a problem once again. He’s not paying his debt, and I’ve grown tired of the old cat-and-mouse game we’ve been playing.”

I ignore the pleading look from Dad and turn my attention to Giuseppe Rossi. “How did you find me? I’ve changed my name and moved away.”

“It was all him. I received word that he was on his way here and I had him followed. We watched him for a few days and he kept following you. We eventually connected the dots. How ironic that you moved away and changed your name but still ended up in my town.”

Yeah, that wasn’t part of the plan. I was already working for Arturo when I found out Giuseppe Rossi bought a vacation house down here. By then, it was too late to quit without drawing attention to my past.

I glance at dad, holding back the anger that is burning in my veins.

He’s bloodied and bruised, and it’s clear Giuseppe has been starving him. I should feel sadness and remorse, but all I feel is anger.

I’m pissed he found my new identity. I’m pissed he led Giuseppe to finding out where I lived.

“I said it before and I’ll say it again. You are dead to me.”

“Don’t say that, Alex.”

“It’s Alexandra, and you can’t honestly be surprised at my feelings. You sold all my stuff to pay for your addiction. We barely had food in the refrigerator and pantry. I was starving and malnourished. We ended up being evicted and had to sleep in the car!”

“It’s not like I ever planned for things to turn out that way.” His voice is raspy and dry.

“Well, they did, and instead of life getting better, it only got worse year after year.”

“I tried, Alex. I really did. I didn’t want to drag you and your mother down with me.”

“Bullshit. If you wanted to get better, you could have checked yourself into a facility, or hell, you could have just packed your shit and left. Mom and I were better off alone.”

His eyes glisten with unshed tears, but he doesn’t defend his actions.

Good. I’m tired of hearing his excuses. They didn’t help back then, and they won’t help now.

Giuseppe clears his throat, effectively stopping my conversation with Dad. “I’m going to give you a choice. It’s a pretty simple decision, but I need your answer before I decide what’s going to happen to you.”

This doesn’t sound good. It sounds almost like a life and death decision.

Is he going to make me choose between my life and Dad’s?

Would I be heartless if I choose to save my own ass over his?

Mr. Rossi stares at me, waiting for me to acknowledge his conditions.

“I understand.”

“Good. Here are your options: you can work for me and pay off your father’s debt, or you can pay with your life.”

Is he fucking serious? Work for him or die? What kind of sick son of a bitch would ask that?

“That’s not fair.” I glare at him, hoping to convey my shock and anger.

He smirks. “Life isn’t fair, cupcake.”

I glance at Dad before returning my gaze back to Giuseppe Rossi. “Why not just kill him?”

“Because that would be too easy.”

The driver stalks over to me, wraps his hand around my arm, and yanks me up until I’m standing in front of Mr. Rossi.

“Which option are you choosing?”

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The grip on my arm tightens, and I know there will be bruises left that are exact replicas of his fingers.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Something easy and safe for you to execute.”

Is that all of a hint I’m going to get?

“Can I know what it is, or do I need to commit to working for you first?”

He already knows I’m going to work for him. I’m not sacrificing my life for my father.

“Spy on Arturo Marino. Get me any information on whatever business endeavors he’s getting into.”

“You want me to spy on Arturo Marino?”

“It should be easy since you are his assistant. When you get information, write it down in a private folder and we can discuss it at our weekly meeting going forward.”

“Weekly meeting?”

“Yes, I need to make sure you aren’t planning on running away.”

“I’m not going to run away.” I pause and sigh before saying, “I accept your terms.”

He snaps his fingers, and the driver releases my arm. “You’re free to go, but keep your phone on because I will be reaching out to you.”

The driver turns toward me. “Follow me and I’ll get your phone and call you a taxi.”

As I follow him out of the room, my heart drops into my stomach. I don’t look back at Dad, but I can feel his gaze on me.

How am I supposed to spy on Arturo when he’s been nothing but kind to me? How can I spy on Joseph when I just asked to be in a relationship with him?

Chapter Six

JOSEPH

My phone rings, pausing the music that’s currently playing at maximum volume. I lower the dumbbells to the floor and check to see who is interrupting my workout.

“Rhett, what do you want? I’m in the middle of working out.”

It’s Monday morning, and the team has the day off. Dad has another meeting at an undisclosed location, so our morning meeting is postponed until lunch. This is the only time I have to clear my head and work out my frustrations.

Both work and sexually related.

Normally, I’d turn to Alexandra, but she’s still avoiding me.

“That’s perfect. I’m on my way. Don’t freak out when I barge in.”

“What if I wanted to work out in peace?” Not that I usually ever have alone time, but

I need to sort out my own shit right now.

Preferably alone.

“Pfft. You’re practically my brother. It’s my right to interrupt your workout.”

I roll my eyes even though he can’t see me. “Just because you’re fucking my sister doesn’t mean you’re my brother.”

He scoffs. “Oh, you wound me. I was referring to being teammates and working for your father.”

I laugh, feeling better than I did ten minutes ago. “Well, then I guess you are my brother and can interrupt me whenever you want.”

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“Being engaged to your sister does make us family, though.” He says in a more serious tone.

“Not until you tie the knot.” I laugh at our old jokes.

Back when he and Francesca first started dating, he would tease me about being my brother. Of course, I told him to fuck off, and he wasn’t family until it became official, but after Franny left and we brought him on board, he did become the brother I never had.

“Are you fine if I stop by?”

“Only if you get a workout in, too.”

“Are you calling me fat?”

“I’m not calling you fat, but you’ve been skipping gym time ever since you and Franny got back together.”

“Don’t worry, Joey. I’m getting my workouts in.”

The last thing I need is to picture him and my sister in bed together, especially when I’m having problems with Alexandra.

“Just get your ass over here and quit interrupting my workout.”

He laughs and ends the call.

I turn the music back on and resume my dumbbell rows. My muscles burn as I push them to their limits, but the physical exertion keeps my mind off Alexandra.

Walking over to the rack, I place them in their respective places before grabbing my bottle of water. I chug half of it before stretching my neck from side to side.

“Save some water for me.” Rhett says from the doorway.

I turn around and give him a head nod. “There’s plenty more in the refrigerator.”

“I know. I was just fucking with you.” He jumps on the treadmill and sets a leisurely pace as I lay down on the bench to get in a few sets of bench presses.

“Not that I really need to hear the details, but how’s engaged life treating you?”

Rhett’s smile turns into a huge, goofy grin. “It’s great. Chessie is deep into wedding planning. She’s wanting a summer beach wedding and an extravagant honeymoon overseas.”

“The beach during summer is going to be packed and hot. Why does she want to get married outside?”

He turns the speed up on the treadmill. “Better pictures.”

“Why can’t she get married in a Catholic church and take pictures outside?”

He shrugs. “These are her dreams. As long as I get to marry her, I’ll be a happy man. I don’t care if we get married in a church or on a beach. For all I care, we can elope and throw a huge reception.”

I scoff. “That will make my family happy.”

“Hey, your sarcasm isn’t helpful. She’s already been through the ringer with your mother. Hell, she still has nightmares about killing her.”

She shouldn’t have shot Mom, but voicing my opinion isn’t going to help anything now.

“Does she regret it?”

“I think she’s still wrapping her head around the fake death part. I offered to book her an appointment with a grief therapist, but she said no.”

“That’s because in the Marino family, we don’t talk to strangers about our lifestyle. We keep it private.”

“That isn’t a healthy habit.”

“That’s the way it’s always been. If we talk to therapists or doctors, they will report us to the police. That’s why we only goto Doctor Matteo. He knows about our lifestyle and he knows how to keep his mouth shut.”

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Rhett clamps his mouth shut, but looks like he wants to say more. He may disagree with the way my family deals with our problems, but it's the safest option.

We stay quiet for a while, each of us concentrating on our own workout.

He's the first to break the silence. "What's going on with you and Alexandra?"

"Nothing." And unfortunately, that's the truth.

His eyebrows furrow as he starts to jog. "Why?"

"Because apparently I'm a fucking masochist."

His laugh echoes off the walls. "Not the role I would have guessed, but to each their own."

I glare at him and he only laughs. "I'm kidding. Lighten the fuck up."

"I can't. I'm on edge." I push my muscles to their breaking point before returning the bar to its resting spot.

He stops the treadmill and gets off. "Damn, dude. What are you training for? The Strongman Competition?"

"I have to work towards something." I hop on the treadmill and set it to my normal jogging pace.

“What about working toward bettering your hockey career?”

“The Sharks aren’t my future, and you know it. I love the sport, but eventually, I have to hang up my skates and face the real world. My father is expanding the family business faster than I expected, and it’s too much for him to keep up with alone.”

“Damn, dude. I didn’t know. I just thought the only thing on our agenda was the club rebuilding.”

“No one knows what is really going on behind the scenes. Not even you and Spencer. Dad’s been meeting with several new partners, and I had a meeting with the Valentino family.”

“Who?” Rhett grabs a set of dumbbells and carries them over to the bench.

“The Valentino family. They are another mafia family from New York. They want to expand their empire to Florida so the father can retire down there.”

“Why would you want to work with another mafia family? Especially one that is close by and can take over your territory? Do you know anything about the Valentino family? Are they comparable to Giuseppe Rossi or more like Arturo?”

“Dad and I aren’t interested in expanding our operations in Florida. We would keep our territory and they would keep theirs. They have a huge demand in the clubs down there, but they can’t keep up with supply.”

I turn up the speed until I am running.

Why is he being so combative? Where is this coming from?

He places the dumbbells on the floor and grabs a bottle of water out of the

refrigerator. “So we are going to be their supplier? Why not just take over the territory if it’s that in demand?”

“Because we aren’t a Rossi. We have enough drama dealing with them and the Reapers. We can supply them with capital for now, and they can have their own market.”

He chugs the water and throws the empty bottle away. “That doesn’t seem wise when the feds are already on your asses.”

“The Valentinos are still in the early stages of setting up their operations. They are looking into purchasing a warehouse so they can make their own products.”

Rhett picks up the dumbbells and continues his workout. “Do you not hear how risky that is? They are back on square one. They are desperate for money. Aren’t you afraid they will turn to the feds and strike a deal with them?”

“No, because then the spotlight will be on their family and their activities. They do everything we do as well as run a prostitution and escort ring. Their crimes outweigh ours.”

He drops the dumbbells to the ground and stands up. “What the fuck? Prostitution? Really?”

I narrow my eyes on him. “Did you become a prude all of a sudden or adopt a holier than thou attitude? The mafia is a business that deals in organized crime. We do what we have to and save the judgment for our death day.”

“I understand it’s a business. I get it, okay? But there are certain lines I thought we didn’t cross, and harming women and children wasn’t on the list.”

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“Who said they were harming women and children? They don’t have children working for them, and the women choose that profession just like Emily chose to work at the club for us.”

Speaking of Emily, I haven’t heard anything from her since Dad reached out to all the employees. Is she still planning on working for us, or did the Reapers scare her away?

“Do you really think women choose to be prostitutes?” He takes a few steps toward me and clenches his jaw as if he’s looking for a fight.

That would be the biggest mistake he could make right now.

“Some, yes. Look, I don’t know every little detail about them, but from all the research I’ve done about their family and their financial situation, I trust that they aren’t going to screw us over. If you have a problem with our businesses or where our operations are headed, then you are free to leave.”

Rhett Montgomery might be the captain of the Savannah Sharks, but I’m the captain of this team. I’m not going to let him derail our future because of his hesitations over prostitution.

He can either get in line, or take my sister and go his separate way.

I guess this is why Uncle Tony didn’t want Dad to bring in outsiders. It’s easier when everyone is supportive of the family’s goals.

“I get that you’re going through some shit, but I’m not going to stand around while

you are being a dick.”

He places the dumbbells back on the rack before turning toward me.

“I’ve always put the family above everything else, even my own happiness, and you know it, but I think you are making a huge mistake by partnering with another mafia family. Prostitution is a line we never should cross, and if that means I take a step back from the family, then so be it.”

He turns around and leaves without giving me a chance to respond.

I turn the speed up on the treadmill until I can barely keep up. Rhett is my oldest friend on the team, but if this is the hill our friendship dies on, then so be it.

After several minutes of sprinting, I turn off the treadmill and head upstairs to shower.

My phone chimes with a message from Dad.

I just finished with my meeting and am heading back to the house. Be ready for the meeting in twenty minutes.

I don’t bother messaging him back. I take a quick shower before getting dressed. Jogging downstairs to the meeting room, I hear Dad yelling at someone.

“I don’t fucking care what excuse he gave. Fix it today, and then fire his ass. Make sure he doesn’t get a job around here ever again.”

I sit at the opposite end of the meeting table and listen to his conversation.

“Just get it done. I’ll call the shipping company for an insurance claim.”

He hangs up the phone and immediately makes another call.

“Victor, hey, it’s Artie. I need you to file an insurance claim for the last shipment. I’ll get all the necessary information after my meeting.”

He ends the call and glances around the room. “Have you heard from Alexandra?”

“Not since last week.”

I glance at my watch. Alexandra is late. She’s never late unless she has a doctor or dentist appointment.

Dad frowns, as if he’s worried. If neither of us has heard from her, then who has?

“I can reach out to Franny to see if Alexandra is at the office. Maybe she thinks the meeting is over there this morning.”

Alexandra never gets her meetings mixed up.

She wasn’t at her new apartment, even though her car was in the parking spot. Or maybe she looked through the peephole and saw who it was and ignored me.

I don’t blame her, but I warned her.

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The back door opens before softly closing. Standing up, I say, “I’ll check to see if it’s her.”

Dad lets out a deep sigh as his phone rings. “I’ll be here on the phone.”

I make my way to the kitchen and watch as Alexandra tucks her phone into her purse.

She’s wearing a long sleeve shirt and dress pants.

“You’re late.” My tone is much harsher than I intended. “Is everything alright?”

“I’m fine.” She says softly as her gaze darts around the kitchen.

She’s lying. I know when she’s fine and when something is bothering her, and right now, something is on her mind.

Is it me?

“You didn’t return my calls or texts.”

She crosses her arms and winces in pain. “I was busy.”

“Did you get moved in and settled?”

Are her arms sore from moving? Did she do it by herself? Did she have to carry everything upstairs alone, or did she hire movers?

“Yep. We’re supposed to be in the meeting with your father.”

She pushes past me, but I reach out and grab her hand. “Alexandra wait. Please.”

“What do you want, Joseph?”

“I want more with you. I shouldn’t have hesitated when you asked me last week. I was scared and running from my true feelings.”

“There isn’t anything between us.”

“Don’t say that, Alexandra. Everything is still here. Our feelings are real.”

“No, they aren’t. I don’t want to be with you.” Her voice cracks as she pulls her hand out of mine.

“Why? What changed?” How can she change her mind all of a sudden?

“Everything has changed.”

She disappears down the hallway, leaving me more confused than ever.

What the fuck just happened?

I walk back to the meeting room. Dad is off the phone and looking at the folder Alexandra just handed him.

He looks up at me as I take my seat. “Where do we stand on information regarding Rossi?”

“There hasn’t been any word from Rossi or any of his informants.”

He frowns. “How’s the prisoner?”

“Stubborn as shit and refusing to eat.”

“We can move him to one of the known safe houses and see if he will speak more freely once he’s clean and comfortable.”

“I’ll speak to Alvin and get him transferred this afternoon.”

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I glance to my father's left and meet Alexandra's gaze.

God, she's so fucking beautiful. How could I be so stupid and let her get away?

I'll earn her love back one way or another.

Chapter Seven

ALEXANDRA

Rushing away from Joseph, I head straight to the meeting room. I want to run into his comforting arms. I want to tell him what happened with Giuseppe Rossi on Friday.

But I don't.

I run away like a coward and hide behind my work.

Reaching into my bag, I hand Arturo the envelope with the financial documents he requested Saturday evening.

"Here are the profit/loss sheets for the past three years for the casino, as you requested."

He takes the folder from me and immediately flips it open. "Thank you, Alexandra. I will up your pay for the weekend work."

My stomach flips and hardens as guilt washes over me.

“That’s not necessary, sir.”

Especially since I agreed to spy on him for Giuseppe Rossi to pay Dad’s debt.

He offers me a genuine smile. “You deserve it.”

“I’m living rent free in one of your apartments. I think that is enough payment.”

The meeting room door opens and Joseph walks in. Without looking at me, he sits down at the other end of the table.

Arturo glances up from the financial statements. “Where do we stand on information regarding Rossi?”

“There hasn’t been any word from Rossi or any of his informants.”

He frowns. “How’s the prisoner?”

“Stubborn as shit and refusing to eat.”

Well, he is a mafia man. It’s going to take a while to break him.

“We can move him to one of the known safe houses and see if he will speak more freely once he’s clean and comfortable.”

I look over at the end of the table at Joseph. He types something into his phone.

“I’ll speak to Alvin and get him transferred this afternoon.”

I should try to talk to the prisoner alone first. Maybe I can find out something about Giuseppe Rossi that I can use to get out of this arrangement.

Joseph places his phone down on the table and meets my gaze.

My face blushes at being caught staring at him. His eyes darken the longer we stare at one another.

Arturo clears his throat and asks Joseph for an update regarding the team outing Francesca is working on.

I could probably answer any question Arturo has regarding the event, but I'm here as a bystander.

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I tear my gaze away from Joseph and take my laptop out of my bag to research the guy in Arturo's interrogation room downstairs.

Doing a generic search for John Smith turns up several pages related to cartoons and early American history. I need something relevant to present day events. I need something that ties him to Giuseppe Rossi.

After trying several phrases and multiple search engines, I still come up empty handed. It's no surprise he gave Joseph a fake name, but Joseph should have caught that.

How many guys are named John Smith in our lifestyle? I would guess not that many. Besides, why would someone give up their name that easily?

Joseph is slipping and now isn't the best time to fuck up.

This 'John Smith' guy must be associated with Giuseppe Rossi one way or another. I open the database Arturo, Joseph, and I started last year with every Rossi family member and known associate.

I scan through the photographs, hoping to find one that matches the man in the interrogation room. We have pictures of men and women, both young and old, but none of them look remotely similar to the prisoner.

What am I missing here? I start at the beginning and look at every photograph again. Maybe he changed his look. He could have dyed his hair, shaved, or even resorted to plastic surgery.

There aren't any men that share the same jaw line, lips, eyes, or nose with 'John Smith'. He isn't in our database.

Looking up, I meet Joseph's gaze. He narrows his eyes and whispers, "Is something wrong, Alexandra?"

My name sounds exotic on his lips. I could listen to him whisper my name for the rest of my life.

No. I can't. I can't give in to the lust flowing through my veins.

My heart clenches in protest.

I want Joseph. My body craves him. No man will ever take his place.

I take a deep breath and say in an even tone, "Everything is fine. I just keep hitting roadblocks with my research."

My gaze moves to Arturo, where he is furiously texting someone before returning to the dark gaze that makes my heart and pussy flutter.

"Do you need help? Two minds are usually better than one."

He smirks and I almost faint.

Why is it that we always want what we can't have?

Forcing myself to put some distance between Joseph and me and shut down my emotions has only made the urge to be with him even more unbearable.

My eyelids flutter as memories flood through my mind. I shake my head and dislodge

those memories from the forefront of my mind.

This entire weekend, I had to force myself to not pick up my phone and call him. I wanted to tell him what happened with my father. I wanted to confess to agreeing to work with Giuseppe and spy on Arturo.

But I couldn't trust myself to be near him. I couldn't trust the well of emotions bursting free.

"Uh, sure. I don't mind your input on this."

Joseph stands and moves his stuff to the seat next to mine. Leaning over the arm of his chair, he asks, "What are you working on?"

"The prisoner you have downstairs was lying about his name, and I'm trying to uncover his true identity."

"And that's the roadblock?"

"Yes. I searched the internet for his name and any association I could think of, but came up empty. Then, I looked through our entire database twice and his picture wasn't in there. If he is associated with Giuseppe Rossi, we don't have a profile written up on him."

Joseph frowns. "That's not possible. We have every associate he's ever had, dating back to before my parents were married."

"I remember his face, and it doesn't match any of the photographs we have."

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“That’s odd.” He reaches under the table and places his hand on my upper thigh, causing me to gasp at the intimate touch.

I should slap his hand away, but my body hums like a live wire. I’m more grateful than ever that I wore pants today. If I were wearing one of my normal skirts, I’d be begging him to do much more than rest his hand on my thigh.

He gestures to my laptop. “Can I?”

I scoot the machine over until it is sitting in front of him. “Sure. Be my guest.”

He slowly scrolls through the database, studying the photographs as if he is committing them to memory. When we reach the end, he sits back and rubs his chin.

“How do we not have any information about this man? How could I not know he was lying to me the entire time?”

I turn to look at him. “Mistakes happen.”

“But I shouldn’t be making mistakes, not when it’s as important as this.”

I hate seeing him beat himself up like this, especially when it’s something he couldn’t have seen coming. “Joseph, look at me. Everyone makes mistakes. It’s impossible not to, but we are a team, and we will figure this out together.”

I clamp my mouth shut.

Why the hell did I just say that? Why do I always feel the need to intervene when Joseph is going through these phases?

Something glimmers in his eyes as his gaze hardens on me.

Is it anger or lust?

The silence drones on as our gazes stay locked on one another. The shrill ringing of Arturo's phone causes my heart to leap out of my chest. I jump in my seat and glare at Joseph when he chuckles at me.

I push my chair away as he leans in closer to me.

"How about I go grab us some water?"

Rushing away from him and the meeting room, I head to the kitchen and grab three bottles of water out of the refrigerator and set them on the counter.

Joseph sneaks up behind me and slams the refrigerator door closed. "We need to talk."

"There's nothing left for us to talk about." I say with a sigh.

I try to push past him, but he wraps his arms around my waist and pushes me up against the refrigerator.

"We have everything to discuss."

I reach between our bodies and push on his chest. The harder I push, the closer he steps to me. A smirk forms on his face when my nails dig into his shirt.

“You said no, Joseph.”

“I was stupid and hesitated. There’s no other woman for me. It’s always been you.”

My heart aches from his sweet words, but there’s no going back now. “I-I can’t. I mean, we can’t.”

“Why?” His breath tickles my lips, leaving me wanting to close the gap between us.

“Because-” I pause. I can’t tell him the truth. “Because I work for your father.”

“So?”

“I need to stay professional.”

He leans forward and whispers in my ear. His warm breath sends chill bumps down my spine as pleasure shoots to my core. “You always are when you are at work.”

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I slowly shake my head. He's making it hard to think straight. "We aren't being very professional right now."

"In that case-" He reaches around and threads his fingers through my hair before closing the gap between us.

His lips press firmly against mine, and his tongue demands my lips to part. His nails dig into my skull and his hips thrust into mine as my lips open for him.

My fingers grip his shirt and pull him closer to me as moisture gathers in my panties.

Fuck it. I need him more than anything right now. We can always talk later.

"Now." I say, not being able to form a coherent sentence.

"What do you want?"

I groan, wanting to get my needs taken care of as soon as I can. "You to fuck me."

He growls and carries me into the butler's pantry, shutting and locking the door behind him. My fingers grasp at his belt as he reaches for my pants. Limbs tangle, but we manage to remove the clothing from our bottom halves.

He props me up on the counter and slides his fingers through my arousal. "Damn, you're so wet."

I have been pretty insatiable lately, and I'm not ovulating, so what is causing the

increase in arousal?

My curiosity gets pushed to the back of my mind when Joseph thrusts two fingers inside me. My walls tighten around his digits, wanting to keep him inside me.

His fingers rub against my inner nerves and his thumb circles my clit, driving me close to the edge.

How am I already this close to an orgasm? He just started.

He captures my lip between his as I come and moan into his mouth.

“Oh, God.”

I rock my hips, needing him to finger fuck my pussy as I ride my high. He slowly pulls his fingers from my pussy, dripping with my arousal, and brings them to his mouth. His lips wrap around one of his fingers as he sucks off my juices.

“Fuck, Joseph. That is so hot.”

He shoves the other finger between my lips. I wrap my tongue around his finger, tasting my arousal before sucking.

His entire body tenses, as if he was close to coming.

Ripping his finger from my mouth, he pulls me closer to the edge of the counter and steps between my legs, lining his cock up with my slit.

He glides his cock between my lower lips before angling his hips and thrusting into me in one quick movement.

His hands grip my hips as he relentlessly pounds into me. I reach up and dig my fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck, pulling his face closer to mine.

He kisses my jaw before lowering to my neck. He nibbles at the sensitive flesh and drives his cock deeper into my aching cunt.

“Please, Joseph. Please make me come.” I beg as pleasure builds deep inside my belly.

He lifts me up, spinning us around until my back is pressed against the wall. He thrusts upward, filling my pussy. His thrusts get shallow and faster as his orgasm approaches.

My muscles tighten, and my walls clamp down on his shaft as my vision blurs. A light sweat forms on my skin as my body shakes from the overwhelming pleasure.

His mouth covers mine as I scream out in ecstasy. He thrusts deep inside my channel and stills. His cock swells for a second before hot strings of cum coat my walls.

Breathing heavily, he pulls out and lowers me to the ground. We straighten up and redress in silence.

He clears his throat and turns to face me. “So you can keep fucking me, but you can’t tell me what’s going on?”

I sigh.

Are we really doing this right now?

“Nothing is going on.”

“Bullshit. You’ve changed, and you’ve changed overnight. You aren’t cheery anymore. You always look worried. You did a complete one eighty on wanting to be with me. If I had to guess, I’d say there’s another guy.”

“There’s just a lot going on, so of course I’m worried, but this is the last time we can be together. I don’t know what it is about you, but I always get sucked in. I’m always left wanting more than you can offer me. I’ve finally had enough. I need someone stable and caring.”

“You mean someone predictable and boring?”

I shrug. “Probably, but we both know that’s not you.”

My heart aches.

I want him to want me.

I want him to come home to me every night, but even that isn’t a guarantee. Not in this lifestyle.

“You would get bored with a normal guy. You love the excitement and danger of

being with a mafia man. It's why you keep coming back to me. It's why you get so fucking wet. It's why, even though you already came, your cunt aches for more."

He's right, but I'll never admit to it. I love the dark and dangerous side of him. I love the rough and hard fucking after a shootout when he's a bit unhinged. I love how unpredictable life is with him.

He continues. "You can deny it all you want, but I know you, Alexandra. I know what your body craves."

My pussy drips with new arousal.

I squeeze my eyes closed and whisper, "I can't."

The conversation from the van pops into my mind as the puzzle pieces start connecting. The missing man my kidnappers were talking about is the man downstairs. He's not a Rossi informant or family member; he's a hostage.

Not bothering to explain things to Joseph, I run downstairs to the interrogation room. Flinging the door open, I blurt out the prisoner's real name.

"Justin Miller."

Both Joseph and the prisoner are surprised.

Justin sits up and leans against the back wall. "How did you find out?"

I cross my arms. "I did my research."

Joseph walks up beside me, smirking. "You should tell him how I feel about lying."

I glance toward the prisoner, who is looking like he just saw a ghost. “I think he already knows.”

Joseph stares at me for a moment, looking pleased. “You need to leave the room because things are going to get messy.”

I need to find out why Rossi is blackmailing him.

“Wait. Instead of jumping straight into torture, why not try talking to him just this once?”

Joseph frowns, but eventually gives in. “Fine. Just this once, and only because you uncovered his true identity.”

Now how am I going to get him to spill Giuseppe Rossi’s secrets without coming right out and asking?

Chapter Eight

JOSEPH

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The mafia lifestyle and violence go together like spaghetti and meatballs. That's the way it's been my entire life. Dad and Uncle Tony were always violence first and talking second.

It's always worked for us, but Alexandra's idea of talking first seemed productive. Justin didn't want to talk to me. He only talked to her. She is less intimidating, so I didn't take offense.

Justin Miller has a wife and two kids who are being held hostage. He's being blackmailed by Giuseppe Rossi to work for him and gather information about rival businesses and even us.

He got on Giuseppe's bad side and is repaying his debt by working as an informant. At least he was until we scooped him up.

He was supposed to give Rossi a report this morning about the information he dug up on the Reapers. From his findings, the members of the Reapers all work for the city. They wear all black clothing and contacts to conceal their true identities.

Their meetup spot is an underground bar. I'll need to do some surveillance and scope the place out before barging in on some half assed plan. I'll have to get a team together to come with me on a night that we don't have a game.

I stare at the folder Francesca dropped off last night containing the details of the Savannah Sharks community event. Grabbing my phone, I call Alvin to see.

He answers on the first ring. "Mr. Marino, is everything alright?"

“I was just looking at Francesca’s plan for the community event and wanted to get your professional opinion.”

Alvin sighs. “I would strongly recommend the team not take part in any community event right now. The threat from Giuseppe Rossi was real, and there’s no telling when his revenge is coming.”

“Unfortunately, we have to participate in the community event because Francesca already leaked it to the press.”

“Why would she leak it when it hasn’t been approved yet?”

“She wanted to make the team look good despite everything going on. Those are her words, not mine. The event is supposed to take place this weekend.”

Alvin scoffs. “Piss poor timing. That’s not a lot of time to pull off an event of this caliber.”

“I couldn’t have said it any better, myself. I’m not worried about the event. Francesca is an excellent planner and negotiator, but my concern is the security.”

“I’ll be there and only vetted security officers will be there as well.”

“Alexandra was able to get our prisoner to open up yesterday. He’s been digging into the Reapers’ true identities. I don’t know how, but he thinks they all work for the city.”

“Hmm, that seems a little far-fetched. Is he confident?”

“We snatched him before he could find out for sure, but he did find their base. I’m going to get a team together to do surveillance and then, when the time is right, we

will strike.”

“I’ll help anyway I can, but you should do your due diligence and make sure it’s the correct place. I just wonder how he was able to get answers and not one of our informants could.”

“I appreciate your help and will double check everything. If his research is true, then our trusted circle just got a lot smaller. If the Reapers were able to get to our informants, then we need to clean house.”

“I agree. I’ll ask some of my people if they’ve heard anything.”

“Thanks.” I end the call and throw the folder back on the table.

Glancing at my watch, I hop up and head upstairs to get ready for the club opening. It feels stupid getting dressed up to attend the opening of a strip club that deals drugs, but it will be good publicity for the family.

It will also send a message to Giuseppe Rossi that we aren’t afraid of him or his threat of coming for blood.

I head into my large closet and grab the suit still hanging in the dry cleaner’s bag. It’s my favorite fitted custom made suit from a top designer in New York.

The jacket is black with a hand sewn floral design that came from Italy with satin lapels and a red satin pocket square. The vest is plain red satin to match the square, and the tie is black with a hand sewn red floral design to match the jacket.

Laying the suit on the mattress, I grab a fitted white button up from the closet before laying out the rest of my attire.

I want to look good for the press and the opening, but mostly, I want to look good for Alexandra.

When I am dressed, I give myself a once over in the mirror. I button the single satin button of my jacket and make my way downstairs.

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Dad is deep in conversation with Alvin that he doesn't hear me approach the bar cart. Pulling out three whiskey glasses, I pour each of us a drink and carry them over to the men.

"Great timing, son," Dad says as he takes a glass from me.

I hand Alvin another glass before downing my drink.

Alvin looks at my suit before whistling. "Damn, you look too good for your own good. You're going to have women falling all over you tonight."

There's only one woman I want falling all over me, and I'm not even sure she's going to come to the opening.

I give him a dry laugh in return. "I highly doubt that, and if they do, it's because they want my money."

"That's the downside of being young, rich, and handsome, but what a problem to have."

I roll my eyes and he laughs.

Dad downs his whiskey and claps me on the back. "Be safe out there, son. Keep your guard up."

I place my empty glass on the bar cart and say, "I always do."

Making my way to the garage, I unbutton my jacket and climb into the driver's seat. The drive to the club usually takes fifteen minutes, but tonight, traffic is backed up on the interstate.

I turn on the radio and find the local traffic station. The reporter is in the middle of a traffic report.

“The overturned tractor trailer has caused all lanes to be shut down. For the folks trying to get to Tybee Island, you might want to make other plans. Those of you coming to the city will have your lanes opened here shortly.”

Fucking great.

I send a group text to Rhett, Francesca, and Spencer.

I'm stuck in traffic. Will be there as soon as I can.

Traffic inches forward ever so slowly. I flip through the radio channels, stopping when I get to a rock station playing Disturbed.

A smile forms on my face as long-forgotten memories come back. The summer after we moved to Savannah, I begged Dad to take me to their concert. I offered to do all the household chores and help him and Uncle Tony file the paperwork for all of their businesses.

He refused, saying it was a waste of time and money.

It wasn't until Francesca asked to come that Dad agreed to take us. Uncle Tony and AJ tagged along to keep Dad company and to keep Francesca and me from arguing.

That concert was the last time we acted like a real family.

Dad and Uncle Tony went their separate ways with their own businesses. I grew up and helped Dad grow our family name and our connections, and Francesca moved away for college.

We aren't the close knit family we used to be.

Traffic continues to move slowly, and before long, I drive around the accident. Speeding up, I pass the slow cars and head straight to the club. I pull into the shipyard and park in the back.

Brian stops moving the empty pallets and raises his eyebrow at me until I step out of my car. "Damn, where are you heading looking like that? The Grammy's?"

Laughing, I shake my head and button the button on my jacket. "Across the street. I didn't want to get trapped in by other cars. It's the club re-opening. You should stop by after you are finished here."

"I'm already finished for the night. I was just tidying up a bit for the crane work tomorrow."

"Why don't you finish this and head over? I'll tell the bouncer at the door you are with me and put you on the VIP list."

"I'm not really dressed as nicely as you."

I narrow my eyes at him. "I don't give a fuck what you're wearing. You work for my family; you're one of us. Come over, eat all the food you can, drink expensive champagne and whiskey, and watch the girls dance. You deserve it."

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Brian has been working at the shipyard for three years now and has never missed a day. He's the first one here and the last one to leave. He shows up on short notice and never complains.

It helps that he doesn't have a family to go home to. Working is his life.

He glances around the shipyard. "Alright, I'll come over, but if the boss complains about the pallets, I'm throwing your ass under the bus."

"I'll call him right now and tell him."

His face pales. "God, no. Don't do that. There's no point in interrupting him."

I laugh. Dad and Alvin are probably three drinks in and shooting the shit right now.

Brian moves the forklift back inside the building and locks up. We walk across the street and head straight to the door, bypassing the long line waiting to get in.

Terry, our new bouncer, gives me a head nod and lets us in, despite several groans from the crowd.

As the door closes behind me, Terry yells at the crowd. "Shut the fuck up or get the hell out of my line. That's the owner, and he gets priority entrance."

I chuckle and head straight to the new VIP lounge. The club is empty, with only workers finishing up their last-minute tasks and the caterers setting up the food next to the bar.

We enter the VIP area and are immediately greeted by a cocktail waitress who offers us a private dance.

“I’m good for now, but why don’t you take my good friend Brian to one of the private rooms?”

Brian looks at me wide eyed. “Are you sure? I am just here to enjoy the food, booze, and festivities.”

I reach into my pocket and pull out a wad of cash, handing it to the woman. “Brian, this is part of the festivities. This dance is on me. Make it a good one.”

She pulls Brian to the back of the club, and I head to the bar. “Whiskey neat, please.”

The bartender nods and makes my drink. I hand him a couple of bills, but he refuses. “VIP drinks are on the house, sir.”

“Then take it as a tip to keep my drink full and immediately serve me when I come over.”

The bartender hesitates but eventually takes the cash. “Thank you, sir.”

I wave him off, and head to the lights control panel to dim the lights and turn them a deep dark red instead of the bright white. The darker lights set the erotic mood.

The main door to the club opens and Gage Roberts, Phoenix Young, and Chase Williams head straight for me.

They are all dressed in perfectly tailored suits.

Gage reaches me first. “Hall sends his congratulations for the opening, but his wife is

sick and they are unable to make it tonight.”

Easton is the only married player on the team and has children. He’s also the oldest.

“Thanks. I’ll send him a message later. Feel free to look around or get a dance. I’m heading back to the VIP lounge before the doors open.”

Gage follows me as Chase and Phoenix order drinks at the bar.

I grab my phone and type out a quick message to Easton, hoping his wife feels better soon before tucking my phone back in my pocket.

Commotion and loud banging at the front causes me and Gage to jump up and run to the main room of the club.

Spencer and Savannah are sitting at the end of the bar, talking with Chase and Phoenix.

I glance at Gage, who looks just as bewildered as me. “Did we just imagine the banging, or was it them?”

He shrugs. “I’m wondering the same thing.”

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The door opens once again and I'm momentarily stunned as Alexandra walks in wearing a formfitting black dress with a deep V in the front showing off her cleavage and a dangerously high slit that showcases her smooth thigh.

Gage gasps and whispers, "Whoa. That dress is a showstopper."

He took the words right out of my mouth. Alexandra is a walking GQ wet dream.

I can't believe she showed up tonight.

She leans her head back and laughs. It's not until I look to her side to see that she's hanging out with Rhett.

Alexandra heads to the bar where Spencer and Savannah are sipping on their drinks.

I march over to Rhett and pull him to the side. "What the fuck, dude."

He glances around the club, looking confused. "What?"

"You came with Alexandra?" I hiss.

He points toward the stage where Francesca is speaking with one of our new dancers. "Uh, no. I came with Chessie. Alexandra was pacing back and forth outside, trying to talk herself into coming inside and facing you. Chessie spent almost ten minutes trying to get her to come inside."

"That's not what it looked like."

“Think whatever you want, but that’s the truth.”

I haven’t spoken to Rhett since the day in my gym. Tension is high, and it’s clear that he still objects to working with the Valentinos.

Francesca joins us and wraps her arm around Rhett. “Do I need to find someone else to spend the night with because you two are going to be gossiping all night?”

Rhett glares at me before turning to my sister. “Fuck no. You’re mine and only mine.”

He pulls her closer to his side and they go their separate way. Spencer comes over to me, carrying a couple of bottles of beer.

“Thanks.” I say, taking one from him.

He quickly glances at Rhett’s retreating figure before turning his attention to me. “What’s going on with you two?”

“Rhett doesn’t agree with some of the family’s future decisions.”

“Like what?”

“Like working with the Valentino family.”

“The other mafia family that escaped the stressful life of New York City?” At my questioning look, he says, “Arturo filled me in this afternoon because he didn’t want you to stress about this alone.”

“I can handle it.” I grumble.

“I know you can, but he doesn’t want you to stress about it alone. We might not be blood related, but we’re family. Some of us more than the others.” He glances to where Francesca and Rhett are sitting.

“He might be marrying into my family, but there’s still a hierarchy to things.”

Spencer holds up his hands. “Hey, I get it. If you want to tell me to fuck off and let you handle things on your own, then I will respect that, but I’m also here and willing to help however I can.”

I glance over to the bar where Alexandra and Savannah are laughing.

“How do you feel about the Valentino family? Specifically, about them running a prostitution ring.”

He thinks for a moment before saying, “This lifestyle isn’t black or white. There are things we deal with that normal citizens don’t. I understood that before I agreed to work for you and your father. Prostitution is a lucrative business, and one that I’m surprised Arturo never dived into.”

I’m surprised by his response. Rhett was so against it, I assumed Spencer would be as well.

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“We discussed it years ago, but decided the club was a safer option. Now that we have the Reapers and Giuseppe coming after us, we have to keep it on the back burner.”

He follows my gaze to the women at the bar. “And what’s going on with you and Alexandra? You keep looking at her, but you’re not going over to the bar to talk to her.”

I sigh. “She wanted more, and like a jackass, I said no.”

“Why? I see how you look at each other. You want her and clearly she wants you.”

“That was before-”

“Before what?”

“She changed. She doesn’t want a future with me.”

She wants me to fuck her and pleasure her, but she doesn’t want to be with me.

Spencer and I head into the VIP lounge as Terry opens the door and lets people in. I can drown my sorrows in food, booze, and friendships, but no one can replace Alexandra.

A cocktail waitress greets Spencer. “Would either of you men care for a private dance?”

Savannah pushes past the waitress and sits on Spencer's lap, claiming her territory. "He's already taken."

The waitress scoffs and turns to me. "What about you? Are you taken?"

Movement behind the waitress gets my attention. Alexandra stands next to the waitress and crosses her arms while she waits for my answer.

I smirk. "Not yet, but hopefully one day soon the woman of my dreams will come to her senses and realize what a great catch I am."

Alexandra purses her lips and fumes. Spencer chuckles and Savannah slaps him on his chest.

The waitress laughs and drags her finger along my hand. "Her loss. How about-"

Her question is cut off by yelling. A few seconds later, someone yells, "Smoke grenade!"

Spencer jumps up and grabs Savannah's hand. I stand and grab Alexandra as smoke fills the club. "Everyone needs to head to the back door. My car is across the street at the shipyard. We can group there and figure out what the hell is going on."

I try to keep a positive look on my face, but I already know what's going on. Giuseppe Rossi is coming for his revenge.

Chapter Nine

ALEXANDRA

It's been a couple of days since the disastrous grand opening of the club. The police

chalked it up to a bunch of teenagers pulling a prank on us, but I know otherwise.

It was either Rossi or the Reapers, and my bet is on Giuseppe Rossi. I think he did it to let us know he intends to make good on his promise.

And to remind me of the promise I made to gather information for him.

Swiping on a coat of mascara, I rush into my bedroom and throw on my favorite white blouse and jacket.

“Ugh.” I groan in frustration as the button pops off my jacket. “Fuck it. No jacket today.”

I throw the piece of clothing on my bed and stomp my way to the kitchen. I hate being late. It throws my entire day off, and stresses me out more than I normally am.

I hurriedly chug my coffee, groaning when the hot liquid burns my mouth. “Damn, that’s hot.”

Leaving my coffee cup in the sink, I rush downstairs to my car, freezing in my tracks when I spot a note on my windshield bearing Giuseppe Rossi’s seal. I avoid making eye contact with the players who are heading across the street to the arena for morning practice.

What if someone saw the note on my windshield? What if they think I’m working for Giuseppe Rossi to take down the Marino family?

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I grab the note and climb into my car. When I'm sure no one is looking at me, I rip the envelope open.

In perfect calligraphy, it reads:

You can move, and you can hide, but in the end, I will get what I want.

My breathing comes out in short pants, and my hands tremble as I throw the letter in the passenger seat and start my car. He knows I live here. He knows what car I drive and where to find me.

I have no escape.

I have to tell Joseph and Arturo what's going on or pack my car and run away. Since Joseph is at the arena, I drive straight to Arturo's house.

He's on the phone when I lightly knock on his office door. One glance at me and he says, "I'll have to call you back."

He tosses his phone on his desk and motions for me to come in. "Alexandra, come in and tell me what's wrong."

I shakily walk to the chair in front of his desk. Sitting down, I place my bag on the floor and let out a shaky breath.

Where do I start? How do I tell him I'm being blackmailed by the man who is holding my father hostage?

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. My vision blurs as tears sting my eyes. They fall like a cascading waterfall.

Arturo jumps out of his seat and makes his way over to me, as if I'm injured. He probably thinks I am.

"Alexandra, what's going on? You can tell me anything. I'll listen and won't interrupt. I won't get angry or jump to conclusions."

I meet his gaze and sob.

I can't tell him what happened Friday afternoon. I can't be the one that breaks the trust between us.

This time when I open my mouth, I confess to everything, and true to his word, he doesn't interrupt.

"This morning I found a letter on my windshield with Giuseppe Rossi's seal. I don't know how long it was there or who all saw it, but it was noticeable to me."

I dig in my bag and pull out the letter and hand the paper to him. He quickly reads it before placing it on his desk.

"When I was loading boxes into my car to move into my new apartment, I was kidnapped by Giuseppe Rossi's men. He has my dad locked up in his house. He put me in a windowless room. He hasn't been paying off his gambling debt."

I try to string my thoughts into coherent sentences, but it all comes out in a jumbled mess.

"Giuseppe knew my true identity. He knew I ran from my past and changed my

name. He was going to kill my dad if I didn't agree to work with him. He wouldn't let me leave and the smell was turning my stomach."

I pause to grab a tissue off Arturo's desk and dab my eyes. So much for wearing mascara.

I whisper, "I was so scared."

A ball of emotion forms in my throat, preventing me from swallowing my saliva. I hang my head in shame as I let the tears fall for several moments.

This is it. Arturo is going to hate me forever. He's going to tell me to pack my shit and get the hell out.

I'm going to be homeless, family-less, and jobless.

When the tears subside, I look up and say, "I would never betray you like that because I think of you as a father figure. You let me spend every holiday with your family, here in your house. You three have been my family for two years, and I would never turn my back on family."

Without speaking, Arturo walks back to his chair and gently sits down. He leans forward, resting his elbows on the desk and his chin on his fists.

This can't be good, right?

I slowly move my gaze over his face. His lips are set in a hard line, but his hands are balled into tight fists. His eyes are closed, but his eyebrows are furrowed in concentration. His breathing is normal, but it could be the calm before the storm.

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When his eyes open, I don't see any ounce of anger or hatred. He's looking at me like a father would look at his daughter when he asks for his help and advice.

My heart pounds in my chest as I wait for him to speak.

Will he be angry that I didn't confess earlier? Will he be angry that I agreed to work with Giuseppe?

"First, are you alright? Did they hurt you? Do you need medical attention?"

When I shake my head, he continues.

"Second, I want to say thank you for telling me. I know sometimes I come off as irrational and intimidating, so I know it took a lot of courage to come here this morning."

He's not mad? Or is that part coming up next?

"Third, the fact that you're crying makes me believe you feel so strongly about me and my family. I wholeheartedly trust you. It's part of why I hired you so long ago."

I interrupt. "But I lied to you about my true identity and my past."

He chuckles. "I already knew about that. I knew about it the second your fingerprint and background check came back."

My mouth falls open. "You didn't say anything."

“I figured there was a reason you changed your name and if you wanted me to know, you would have told me yourself.”

“What should I do? What can I do?”

He crosses his arms, letting them rest on the desk in front of him as he thinks of our options.

“The two of us will work together to feed Giuseppe Rossi false information. You’re my assistant, so it makes sense that you would know plans before anyone else. From now on, you will sit in on every meeting and follow me around wherever I go.”

“Is that wise? I never join your solo meetings and rarely do I join your weekly meetings with Joseph.”

He sits up straighter in his chair. “To the outside world, it must look like you are betraying us. You need to be suspicious and raise flags.”

“I don’t want to hurt Joseph and Francesca.”

I can’t hurt Joseph more than I already have. I just can’t.

“Joseph and Francesca will know when they need to know.”

“What am I supposed to say?”

“Nothing. Say nothing. Do nothing. Just carry on about your day like normal, and when Giuseppe wants information, I’ll give you something to say. To give us more time to come up with lies, you can tell him about the shipment coming in next week.”

I narrow my eyes at Arturo. Has he lost his mind? “The furniture shipment?”

“Yes. Tell him I’m expecting a rush order shipment next week. Tell him you just overheard me on the phone and verified it with the shipyard.”

That is a really good tidbit of information.

“He’s going to be furious when he finds out the shipment is just furniture.”

“Don’t let him know. Let him find out when he steals it.”

I lean forward and scoff. “You’re going to let him steal your entire shipment?”

“Yes, and then I’m going to have a meeting with him. If he doesn’t comply with my demands, I’ll take the video footage to the police and have him arrested.”

It’s a risky plan, to leave Francesca and Joseph out of the loop like this, but I trust Arturo with my life. If he thinks this is the best plan, then I have no choice but to play my part and follow through with it.

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“And what happens if I’m kidnapped again?”

“I will send in a rescue team to come get you. Now, take a few minutes to get yourself together and freshen up because we have a meeting at the arena in thirty minutes and you are going to be my plus one.”

He makes his way over to me and pulls me into his arms. The hug is warm, comforting, and safe. It gives me hope he will keep me safe and will always be in my corner.

“Thanks, Arturo.” I chuckle. “I needed that.”

I make my way into the hall bathroom and look at my reflection in the large oval mirror. The woman staring back at me isn’t the one I’ve strived to create. She’s weak and scared and nothing like the woman who fell in love with the man running a mafia empire.

I wash off the long black streaks of mascara that stain my cheeks and give myself a pep talk.

“Arturo believes in you. You are safe, and you are alive. Everything will work out. Now, pull yourself together and be the badass you’ve worked your ass off to become.”

I stand taller and smooth out my blouse before joining Arturo in the kitchen.

“Coffee?” He holds out a travel mug.

“Thank you.”

I follow him outside and head to my car when he stops me. “I’ll follow you to the arena to keep an eye on things.”

He rarely drives, so this might raise suspicions with Giuseppe.

“You don’t usually drive.”

He grins. “I gave my driver the day off. It’s a nice sunny day. I might put the top down.”

He opens the garage, disappears inside, and drives out in his luxurious convertible with the top down.

I laugh and get in my car. True to his word, he follows me the entire way to the arena, never letting anyone cut in between us, even though several cars tried.

He drives to the front of the parking lot to park in his front row parking spot with his name on a plaque. I park in my normal parking spot, grab my bag, and speed walk to the sidewalk to meet up with him.

“Today’s agenda is packed with meetings. First, we have a meeting with the mayor to go over potential housing developments, which we will go see in person. Later this afternoon, we have a meeting with John and Nicholas Valentino. They came up from Florida and want to go over future plans.”

“Did they close on the warehouse yet?”

Arturo looks surprised that I know about the Valentino’s and the plans for the two families to work together, but I’ve paid attention in the meetings.

“Yesterday. Since they bought the warehouse with a dock, we are going to plan a secret shipment down to them. A shipment that Giuseppe Rossi won’t find out about because he will be arrested or preoccupied with another fake shipment.”

“If we can pull that off, that plan is genius.”

We share a smile before heading toward the main arena doors.

Tires squeal through the parking lot behind us. Arturo pulls me through the front door and throws me to the ground just as gunshots shatter the glass doors.

“I think Giuseppe sent some of his men to take us out.” I say as more gunshots ricochet throughout the arena’s lobby.

“We need to take him out the first chance we get before he succeeds in getting the revenge he seeks.”

It’s life or death now, that much is clear. How the hell am I going to balance staying alive and feeding Giuseppe Rossi fake information, all the while keeping Francesca and Joseph out of the loop?

Chapter Ten

JOSEPH

I stare at Nick Valentino through the screen of my computer.

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“Have you found workers to help with the warehouse?”

He glances to the side at whatever caused the banging. “Yeah. Four of my cousins have moved down here to help run things.”

“And things will still run smoothly up in New York?”

“Oh, yeah. My family is enormous. There are probably still a dozen more cousins living in New York, not to mention second cousins.”

“Great, because it’s going to be all hands on deck until we have all the kinks worked out and a steady flow of cash and product.”

“Don’t worry. We are ready for the long nights and heavy lifting as soon as we get the permits back.”

“Are you applying pressure to the inspector like Dad advised?”

“Every single day. Your father bribed him enough to buy that yacht he’s been eyeing.”

“Perfect. That’s what we like to hear. Once we are done with the inspector, we will switch targets to the police chief. We need him on our side to extend our reach to the entire city.”

His eyes widen. “I thought we were just targeting the clubs at the beach.”

“For starters, but we always need to be looking to the future. If we have several steady streams of clients, then our earning potential will be infinite.”

“That will mean we need more manpower.”

“Eventually, yes. If you want to keep it in your family, you can always bribe your cousins by seeing babes in bikinis all the time. They will probably jump on the next plane down.”

“That’s a great idea. It was like pulling fucking teeth to get the four to move down here until they spent an afternoon at the club.”

My phone chimes with a message from Dad.

I need you downstairs. The contractor is here to go over the necessary repairs.

I sigh. “My presence is needed downstairs.”

“Is everything alright?”

“Temporarily. You remember how Giuseppe Rossi had his men shoot at my father and his assistant a few days ago as they were entering the arena? Well, Dad thinks it’s necessary to replace all the doors and windows with bulletproof glass.”

“I can’t say I blame him.”

“Yeah, except games start back next week, so we are really pushing the timeline here.”

“You go handle that, and I’ll go eat dinner.”

We say our goodbyes and end the video call. Nick and I have been having daily update calls to go over everything. I want to show Dad I'm more than capable of running things while expanding into new territory.

I grab my phone and head downstairs to where Dad and Alvin are sitting in the living room with a man who appears to be in his fifties.

Dad stands. "Joey, this is Dean. He's the contractor that's going to replace all the windows and doors."

I shake the man's hand before heading to the bar cart to pour myself a scotch. "Nice to meet you."

Alvin chimes in. "We were just discussing the timeline and the importance of keeping the public unaware of the true reason for the glass change."

Dean interrupts. "Ah, yes, about that." He pulls out several sheets of artwork from his briefcase. "I had these mockups done today. We can change the artwork if you don't like them."

He hands me a sheet. The mockups show the arena windows and doors with our team's logos and colors on them.

Dean continues. "These are durable and weatherproof. We can easily change them out every year if you want."

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“And these can be placed on the bulletproof glass?” I ask.

“Absolutely. I thought having custom windows would be a reasonable excuse to tell the community as to why you are renovating in the middle of the season. We will put these logos on in the warehouse and bring the glass panes to the arena on install day.”

“How long will it take to prepare all the windows and install them? We have games starting back next week.”

“If you give me the go ahead, my team will get started on it today and we can install them Monday and Tuesday. We will start with the common area windows and end with the office windows.”

I glance at Dad to gauge his expression. It’s blank, as if he’s wanting me to step in and make the decision.

“The install needs to be on Saturday and Sunday. That will give you today and tomorrow to get the mockups printed and the glass cut. You already have every window and door dimension, so it shouldn’t be too hard to make it happen.”

“We are closed on the weekends. My men deserve the time off.”

Doesn’t he know we are a high paying client? Our schedule doesn’t conform to the typical nine-to-five workday.

“I will pay double your going rate to make sure it fits in our timeline. You can always give your crew Monday and Tuesday off.”

He thinks about my offer for a moment before glancing around the room at Dad and Alvin.

This amount of money will be hard to turn down, especially since there are other contractors that want our business and will be willing to work on the weekend.

Dean nods his head and shakes my hand. “We have a deal.”

Alvin says, “Call me Saturday morning and I’ll make sure the arena is unlocked for you. If you need any other measurements, just let me know and we will let you back in.”

Dean glances at all of us before saying, “Thank you. I appreciate everything. I’ll let the team know of their new schedule and we will make sure everything looks perfect when we are finished.”

Alvin says his goodbyes and walks Dean out, leaving Dad and me alone.

“You handled that very well. I’m proud of you.”

My heart swells with pride. The last time Dad said he was proud of me was after my first kill, and that was over a decade ago.

He continues. “I know you want more responsibilities and a bigger role in the organization. If you keep maturing and handling things like you just did, then I have no doubt you will be able to handle more.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I sit down in my normal seat and take a swig of my drink.

“That brings to another reason I needed to see you.” Dad doesn’t sit down. He turns away from me and stares at the picture of him and mom that’s sitting on the mantle.

“What’s going on?”

If this concerns Mom, shouldn’t Francesca be here?

Dad lays the picture face down. I wouldn’t want reminders of the biggest lie of my life staring at me. Dad hasn’t dealt with the emotion and pain of finding out Mom faked her death in order to be with Giuseppe.

I doubt he ever will.

“I want you to oversee the new shipment coming in tonight. You will need to scan each pallet in and do a complete inventory of everything.”

The shipment tonight is just furniture, so I don’t know why I have to do it, but he is adamant.

Dad sits in the chair opposite of me. “You will also be training a new guy, so it may take longer than normal.”

What the fuck? Why is a new guy starting on a Thursday night? What is Dad hiding from me?

“If anyone shows up, hide or leave, but don’t try to fight over the inventory, that’s what insurance is for.”

This doesn’t make sense. Why would anyone show up, and why would I just hand over the shipment?

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“Who would show up tonight, and why would it matter? It’s just furniture.”

Dad doesn’t seem normal. Maybe he just doesn’t want to work at the shipyard tonight.

It is Mom’s birthday.

I’ve stayed busy, so I wouldn’t think about all the lies we’ve recently uncovered. I want to hate her. I do a little, if I’m being honest, but she did it for love. I’ve tried to put myself in Mom’s shoes all day.

Would I fake my death to be with Alexandra?

Would I walk away from the family I created?

No matter which way I look at things, my answer is no. I wouldn’t put my children through the pain and sorrow for my own selfish wants like she did. Not in this day and age where divorces are more common than marriage.

“Have you heard from Francesca today? She didn’t answer my call earlier.” I ask, changing the subject.

“I didn’t even reach out. She needs time to grieve and heal.”

“It’s not like she did anything wrong. Mom would have shot her first. It was self defense.”

“Well, you know your sister. It takes her longer to deal with things. Give her space and she will call us if she needs anything. Rhett is there with her, so I know she’s safe.”

She’s been MIA all day. It’s not like her to not answer my text messages or phone calls.

“Yeah, I guess. Well, I guess I need to be heading out.”

Dad grunts in response.

I head to the garage and hop in my sports car. I drive toward the shipyard with the windows down and my music turned up.

Dad’s been pissed all day, barely speaking to me. And Alexandra has avoided me for several days.

She’s closer to Dad nowadays. It’s almost weird. She sits in on every meeting, even the ones that don’t involve the family business.

At first, I figured it was because she was interested in the team events, but now, I’m not so sure. She’s always taking notes and texting someone.

When I get to the shipyard, I park in my normal parking spot and get out in search of the new guy.

I look everywhere, but the only other person is Brian, the normal night worker. “Have you seen the new guy?”

Brian turns off the forklift. “What’s his name?”

“No fucking clue. I was told I need to train the new guy with the new shipment.”

He shrugs. “I don’t know of anyone starting tonight. Why would he start in the middle of the week and do a night shipment?”

“That’s what I wondered.”

“So I guess it’s just you and me tonight.”

I look around the empty shipyard and say, “It’s looking that way.”

Grabbing my phone, I send Spencer a message.

Sorry to ask on such a short notice, but can you help with tonight’s shipment? It’s just Brian and me.

He immediately replies.

On my way. Do I need to get Rhett?

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No. He's dealing with something more important.

More important than an understaffed shipyard when we are getting a shipment?

I'll explain when you get here.

Spencer shows up and parks next to me.

"Where the hell is everyone?" He asks as he jogs over to me.

"No clue. Dad said a new guy was starting tonight, but he's a no show."

He raises an eyebrow. "He's starting on a Thursday night?"

Brian gives Spencer a head nod. "Hey that's what I said."

The lights from the cargo ship illuminate the shipyard even more than the yellow hazed city provided lights do.

"Showtime." I say before grabbing a pair of work gloves from the building.

Spencer and I get the cargo ship tied up while Brian gets the pallets unloaded.

"Are we doing a full inventory of the order?" Spencer asks, as Brian does circles around him in the forklift.

I roll my eyes. "That's what the boss requested."

As soon as I turn around, headlights turn into the shipyard.

Spencer points. “How many new guys were starting tonight?”

Turning around, I see three black Mercedes pull into the parking lot. “That’s Giuseppe and his men.”

Several more cars show up behind the three Mercedes.

Reaching into my waistband, I pull my gun out, but Rossi’s men already have guns on us.

“Shit.” Spencer whispers from beside me.

Giuseppe Rossi’s right hand man, Vincent, steps out of the last car. “Leave, and no one gets hurt.”

How the fuck did he know about this shipment? Did Dad know they were going to show up tonight?

I glance at Brian and Spencer. “Let’s go.”

“What?” they both say in unison.

“I said let’s go. We are severely outnumbered, and it’s not worth putting up a fight.”

Vincent cackles. “Smart man.”

I wait until Spencer and Brian leave before following them. I race home, ignoring the stop lights and speed limit signs.

By the time I get home, I'm raging. I slam the door behind me and yell, "Dad?"

"In here." He calls from the kitchen.

"What the hell was the purpose of sending me to the shipyard if you knew they were coming?" I confront Dad.

"I didn't know anyone was going to show up." He is way too calm for his entire shipment to have just been stolen.

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“So you warned me just because?”

“This shipment was the first one you checked in by yourself, and I know how stubborn and heated you can get when you think you are right. We will file an insurance claim and get it all back.”

“That’s it?”

Has today really fucked with Dad this badly? This isn’t his normal response.

“No, that’s not it. I called the police.”

“How did you know Rossi and his men were there?”

“Giuseppe wasn’t there. Well, according to Brian.”

“You know what? You can keep your secrets and continue lying to me. I’m going out.”

I don’t really have anywhere to go, but I can go hang out with the guys in the apartment’s recreation room. They are always there playing pool, shooting darts, and hanging out.

I slam the door behind me like I’m an angry teenager and peel out of the driveway.

The further I can get away from the house, the better I will feel.

Chapter Eleven

ALEXANDRA

I've never been this exhausted in my entire life. All I've been doing on my days off is sleeping and cuddling on my couch while watching sappy romance movies.

"I need a new life." I mumble to myself as I get up to grab yet another doughnut from the box on the counter.

I've been avoiding the Marino house like the plague. Tension with Arturo and Joseph has hit an all-time high. Neither has spoken about what happened between them, but it must be bad.

Arturo stays in his office either at home or at the arena. He calls and emails me when he needs something and has canceled all in person meetings for the unforeseeable future.

Joseph has practically locked himself in the gym when he's not at the arena skating. I've caught glimpses of him from afar and can't believe what he's doing to himself.

He looks exhausted, like he hasn't slept in days. His knuckles are swollen and bloodied from hitting the punching bag. When our paths crossed, he would glare at me as if I've done something to him.

Almost as if I did something worse than turning him down.

To avoid running into him at his house, I've been working from my office at the arena. It's quiet and most of the time, I'm left alone.

A knock sounds on my door. I take another bite of the doughnut and ignore the

person at the door.

If it's important, they will call me or send a message.

The knocking continues, followed by Francesca's voice. "Alexandra, open the door. I can hear the television on, so I know you're in there."

"It's open." I yell out to her.

A second later, the door opens, revealing a shocked Francesca. "Do you seriously leave your door unlocked? Do you know how dangerous that is?"

I shrug. "Having a locked door doesn't really make a difference. If someone wants to get me, they will. The locked door is only going to piss them."

She closes the door behind her and joins me on the couch. "That's a very cynical way of looking at things."

"It's the truth."

She huffs and turns to look at me. "Whatever is going on with you isn't healthy."

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My heart races. “What are you talking about?”

There’s no way she came over here knowing everything that is going on. If she did know, she’d be pissed.

“The way you look. The food you are eating. This isn’t healthy.”

I glance down at my oversized t-shirt and leggings. “What’s wrong with the way I’m dressed? It’s after hours and I want to be comfortable.”

“Well, nothing, I guess, but something is bothering you.”

“I’m just tired and exhausted. Between moving, working more hours, and the threat from Giuseppe Rossi, I haven’t been sleeping well.”

She stares at me as if she’s trying to see if I’m telling the truth.

“I’m not lying.” I say with a yawn.

“I believe you, but keeping your door unlocked for anyone to just walk in probably isn’t helping the restlessness.”

“I always lock the door before I go to bed.”

She purses her lips as she thinks. “Maybe it’s the winter blues. It’s cold outside and you’re always stuck behind a desk. Plus, add in the stress of Giuseppe Rossi coming after us because of my impulsiveness-”

I interrupt her. “You did what you had to. From the way your brother and father explained things, you didn’t really have a choice in the matter.”

“I know that, but all of this-” She gestures to me cuddling on my couch. “-is directly related to my actions. All because I couldn’t stand to see the evil woman she turned into. Hell, maybe she was always that way and I was too blind to see it. Just knowing that she planned for me to stand beside her makes my stomach turn.”

I sit up straighter and place my hand on top of hers. “If anyone can relate to shitty parents, it’s me. Well, in your case, just one parent. Besides, didn’t she say she’d rather see you dead?”

At least, that’s what Joseph and Rhett said that night.

“Yeah, but I don’t know if she would have shot me. She had to have known it wouldn’t have turned out well for her.”

“Maybe she wasn’t thinking about the consequences. Maybe she was just speaking in the heat of the moment. I’m not saying she didn’t mean what she said, but it’s a well-known fact that mafia members are hotheaded.”

“Hey!” She throws a pillow at me.

“Tell me your father and brother are level-headed. Tell me you have never acted on impulse because of anger.”

“I guess you’re right.” Her phone beeps with a message. “Oh, right. You need to get ready. We can’t be late.”

“Get ready for what?”

She rolls her eyes and leans back against the couch cushion. “For the Sharks’ community event. Aren’t you coming?”

“Uh, I didn’t plan to. This is your event. Besides, Arturo said he wasn’t going, so there’s no point in me going.”

I don’t want to go anywhere close to the arena and Joseph, especially after just meeting with Giuseppe and giving him false information.

I feel guilty for ignoring Joseph and lying about everything. I feel even guiltier sitting here next to Francesca while carrying this enormous secret.

Francesca waves me off. “You helped me plan this event. It’s as much yours as it is mine.”

“Not really, but-”

She presses her lips into a thin line and narrows her eyes at me.

I sigh. “Fine. I will go, but I’m warning you now, I’m not in a social mood.”

“You can sit by yourself and watch the events.”

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“I already said I’ll go. What should I wear?”

Her face scrunches up as she thinks. She grins and says, “Something cute.”

I head into my closet and pull out my favorite baggy team long sleeve shirt. The team name runs up the sleeves and the shark is dead center of my chest.

It’s also the one Joseph said I looked sexy in.

I change into the long sleeve shirt and grab a pair of slip-on shoes. Francesca’s frown tells me she doesn’t think my outfit is cute, but it’s comfortable.

“It’s cold outside and it will be cold in the arena.”

She holds up her hands. “I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to say anything. Your face said it all.” I grab my phone, wallet, and keys before adding, “Alright, I’m ready. Let’s get this over with.”

“This is an all day event,” Francesca says as she walks past me into the hallway.

I roll my eyes and lock my apartment door. “Yippee.”

The last thing I want to do is plaster on a fake smile and pretend everything is alright, but I will because no matter how bad I feel, Francesca is feeling worse. She’s still dealing with the guilt and grief of killing her mother, and that is far worse than my own secrets.

When we are outside, Francesca grabs her keys out of her purse. “You can ride with me. I promise I’ll bring you home at a decent hour.”

Her smile causes me to laugh.

Maybe, just maybe, I can forget about my problems and just enjoy the community event.

“Oh my God. Look at how long the line is!” I point to the line of people waiting to enter the arena. “It wraps around the building.”

Francesca chuckles. “That’s because our community really wanted to skate with a player. I had to extend it for two hours just to keep the crowd happy. Of course, there are probably upset fans that didn’t get a time slot, but I booked as many as I could.”

“That’s amazing. Just think of all the money we are raising for the children’s hospital.”

“You should see how much I dropped on the win a date with a player.”

“How much?” I whisper. I know she is pretty well off, so I’m not surprised she spent a lot to get a date with Rhett.

“Over ten thousand.”

My eyes widen. “That’s... wow.” I can’t form a sentence.

There’s no way I could or would ever spend over ten thousand dollars to go on a date with my fiancé. I did check Joseph’s auction late last night, and it was already up to seven hundred dollars.

“Did you bid on anyone?” She parks in her assigned spot and gets out.

“Um, no, because they were all in the several hundreds.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. I’m sure there are several single guys that would love to go out with you.”

I shrug and follow her to the side entrance where the staff was instructed to enter.

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

Even from here, I can see the extra security officers standing around the exits and entrances. It looks like a normal game night, but we aren’t going to have nearly the same amount of people here today.

Maybe tonight when they draw the raffle winners and allow guests to fill the arena.

I glance around the wide open lobby. Several people linger around, chatting animatedly amongst friends while others are buying last minute raffle tickets. A few people wander to the team store to buy merchandise.

The new windows and doors with the team’s logo and colors look great. Only a select few people know it’s actually bulletproof glass.

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“Come on. We need to buy some raffle tickets for a chance to win a signed puck.”

“You can get a signed puck whenever you want.” I point out.

Francesca loops her arm in mine and pulls me toward the nearest table, selling raffle tickets. “Well, this is for a good cause.”

“Would you two ladies like to buy some raffle tickets? All proceeds are going to the children’s hospital. You can win some pretty amazing prizes.”

“Sure.” Francesca says as she reaches into her back pocket and pulls out a wad of cash.

She buys more than enough to secure at least one prize, and I buy a more modest amount, opting for only twenty raffle tickets.

The crowd that’s lingering in the lobby lines up at the arena doors for their fifteen minute time slot to skate with a player.

A security officer verifies their tickets before opening the doors and allowing them inside.

“Do you want to go watch the players and fans skate? We don’t need to stand here all day. We have workers that can handle everything.”

“Sure.”

If I can hide in the stands, then I can steer clear of Joseph.

I follow her all the way down the stairs to the ice. She sits in the row directly behind the team's bench. Several players, including Joseph, glance our way. This is not what I wanted. I wanted to blend in with the crowd, not have all eyes on me.

I settle into my seat and watch as families skate with our players and get their autographs after their fifteen minute time slot.

Children's faces light up as they hug their favorite player. It's honestly the cutest thing I think I've ever seen. Who knew they even made ice skates that small?

Fans leave the ice with huge grins on their faces as they gush about this once in a lifetime event, promising to treasure these memories for the rest of their lives.

I turn and grin at Francesca. "This was such a great idea."

"I was already thinking that we may have to host this event every year or even twice a year. It's been such a tremendous success. The community loves it."

I lean over and whisper, "And they don't even realize the extra security we have because they are floating on cloud nine."

"Exactly. Although, hopefully, next time we won't have to have this many security officers."

"You may have to because of over enthusiastic fans." I nod toward the ice where a security officer is escorting a couple of women off the ice and away from Rhett.

Francesca leans forward as Rhett skates over to her. "What happened?"

He glances behind him to make sure no one is close by. “They were reporters.”

“What did they want?” I ask, interjecting myself into their conversation.

“To ask about the family and rumors circulating about the Marino family, Rossi family, and vigilante gang going head to head to head.”

“Ugh, leeches. Why can’t they just leave us alone? We have enough going on. We don’t have time for their bullshit.”

Rhett places his hand on the plexiglass separating him from his woman. “That’s why I signaled to security. We already figured a few reporters would slip in. That’s why we came up with a plan.”

“We’ll have better vetting next year, and I won’t wait until the last minute to plan an event of this caliber.”

Rhett gives her a smile before turning away and joining Spencer Reed, who is currently skating with two little boys and their parents. They laugh at something Rhett says before welcoming Rhett into their group.

Francesca and I watch as each new group takes the ice to greet the players, skates, and takes their picture before leaving with grins on their faces. Some fans sit in the stands and wait for the raffle.

“I bet their faces are going to hurt from smiling so much.” I scoot down in my seat and rest my feet against the boards in front of me.

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“Why don’t you go for a skate?”

I glance around the ice where most players don’t have fans skating with them. “I’ll pass. Besides, it should be almost time for the raffle.”

Several ice girls, including Spencer Reed’s girlfriend Savannah Whitlock, take the ice carrying a giant bucket full of raffle tickets and place it on the ice in front of the group.

The remaining fans are escorted off the ice as the players skate toward me and Francesca and take a seat on the benches.

The bubbly blonde in the middle grabs a microphone from a staff member and taps it several times to verify it’s working.

“Alright, we are about to get started. If you are one of today’s lucky winners, we need you to hold on to your ticket until after we are finished and meet us at the Booster Club table on the concourse to claim your prize.”

She glances around the arena and adds, “If the winner is not present, we will hold on to their prize and notify them later today. Now, how about we give the players a huge round of applause for giving up their entire day to be here for us, the fans, and the entire community.”

Claps and cheers echo through the arena as the players smile and wave.

Each winning raffle ticket is called and told which surprise bag they won. The

winning ticket is then stapled to the bag and placed in a box to be carried upstairs.

“Well, that’s all our winners. If you didn’t win, you can take your losing tickets to the team shop to get ten percent off any purchase until the end of the month.”

The crowd stands and makes their way up the stairs to the concourse. Francesca and I stay in our seats as the arena empties.

Her phone chimes and as soon as she sees the message, she grins and turns the phone toward me.

I read her message aloud. “Congratulations! Your bid of six thousand dollars on Rhett Montgomery was the winning bid. Stay tuned for another message containing the details of when and where to arrive for the event.”

“Wait.” I narrow my eyes at her. “You said you spent over ten thousand. This says six thousand.”

“About that.” She glances around nervously.

“Francesca.” I say her name in a scolding manner. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t want some random woman bidding on my brother, trying to get close to him and use whatever he says as leverage against the family, so I made a bid in your name.”

I yell, “YOU WHAT?”

My phone chimes with a message. I don’t have to look at it to know what it says. Francesca’s grin tells me all I need to know.

The message is from the generic Sharks texting account. “I won a date with Joseph Marino because I bid four thousand five hundred dollars.”

“It won’t be that bad. You and Joseph already know each other, so it’s going to be like friends eating a meal together.”

If only she knew the truth.

This is just my luck. I agree to come to the event and I leave, knowing I’m being sent on a date with Joseph.

My heart won’t be able to handle being that close to him, even if it’s not a romantic setting. My stomach tightens and churns.

“I feel sick.” I murmur before running up to the concourse.

I throw the bathroom door open and empty the contents of my stomach. After a few minutes, I clean myself up and make my way out of the bathroom, running into Francesca.

“Are you alright? I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It’s not your fault. I just feel a little faint. Can you bring me home?”

Francesca stares at me for a few moments before nodding. “Yeah, let’s go.”

I sway on my feet, but make it to her car.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:15 am

“You need to go to the hospital.” She says as she helps me into the passenger seat.

“I probably caught something. I just need rest.”

She runs around to the driver’s side. “Why not get checked just in case? I can bring you and stay with you the entire time.”

“I’m fine.”

We are silent as she drives across the street to the apartment building. She parks in the handicap spot right at the front door. “I’m going to go back and pick up Rhett, if you are alright.”

“I’m fine. Thank you for driving me home and spending thousands of dollars to win me a date with your brother.”

As soon as I get out of her car, my vision blurs, and I fall to the ground.

Chapter Twelve

JOSEPH

I pace in front of my car, walking from one end of the restaurant’s gravel parking lot to the other.

He’s late.

“I hate when fuckers are late.” I grumble to myself as I glance down at my dust covered shoes.

Fucking gravel. Who doesn’t have a paved parking lot these days?

The meeting should have started fifteen minutes ago. He might be a highly recommended private detective, but my time is worth more than his.

I can hire three or four average private detectives for the price I agreed to pay him. I get back in my car when a black 1967 Chevy Impala pulls into the parking lot, looking like they are auditioning for an episode of Supernatural.

A short, balding man steps out of the car wearing a too-tight pinstripe suit that costs more than his car.

I scoff to myself. He clearly thinks highly of himself and tries to use his expensive clothing as a bargaining chip, but it won’t work on me. Getting out of my car, I make my way over to him.

“Are you Joseph Marino?” He asks as he gives me a once over.

“I am.” I hand him the envelope containing everything he asked for.

“Is this her picture and information I asked for?”

Is he serious? What else would be in the envelope?

“Yeah.” I bite my tongue to keep from insulting the man.

He flips through her photograph, a picture of her car, and any and all information I could get on her. Surprisingly, it was a lot harder than I thought it would be.

Dad's been in a mood since our argument and has been in his home office all week. His office at the arena has been locked, and I don't have a key. I'm sure I could pick the lock or even get a copy of the key, but I didn't want to risk Francesca or Alexandra seeing me.

"So, Alexandra Ferguson is the woman you want me to look into?"

"Yes."

"And she works at the Savannah Sharks arena as an assistant to your father, Arturo Marino?"

"Yes." I reply dryly. All the fucking information is in that envelope. Why is he asking me?

He hums for a few moments before shoving all the papers back into the envelope.

"Why do I need to follow your father's assistant?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "Because that is what I'm paying you thousands of dollars to do. Do you always question your clients like this, or is it because of my family name?"

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His expression doesn't change. It's like he isn't surprised to hear me question him. "What are you hoping I find? What is the end goal here? Do you want to know where she goes and who she talks to, or are you wanting more of a deep background check and financial summary?"

"Anything and everything. I want to know who she talks to, where she goes, and what she does. I want to know where she grew up, who she dated, and any enemies she may have. She's hiding something, and I want to know what it is. Given my family name and the nature of our work, you can understand why we need complete honesty and loyalty."

"Absolutely. I understand. Nothing we talk about and nothing I discover will be shared with anyone except you."

"Good. Then I expect a full report in forty-eight hours."

His eyes widen slightly, but his expression doesn't change. "I'll be in touch."

He spins around and gets back in his car and leaves without a backward glance.

Now, I just have to wait. In two days' time, I will know what Alexandra is hiding. My heart constricts with pain as if it's protesting the thoughts swirling in my head.

I don't want her to be hiding anything from me, but she's not acting like herself, and I need to know why.

Did an ex-boyfriend suddenly show back up? Did she have a sudden change of heart?

If so, why?

I roll my shoulders, stretch my neck from side to side, and climb back into my car. Now that I have that situation taken care of, there's one more thing I need to do today.

And I need backup in order to do it.

Rhett and Spencer are busy with their women tonight, but I know they'd help me in a heartbeat. I just don't want to hear the judgment in their voices. I need someone that will keep his opinions to himself.

I grab my phone and call Gage as I drive out of the parking lot. He answers on the second ring.

"What's up, Joey?" His tone is cheerful and happy but cautious, like he knows I'm about to fuck up his entire night.

"Are you at your apartment?"

"Yeah. Well, I'm downstairs in the recreational area with some of the guys. What's up?"

I cut straight to the chase just in case he put me on speakerphone. "Right now, I need someone I can trust."

I hear him tell the guys he will be right back before asking, "What do you need? What's going on?"

That's a loaded question. I need Alexandra. I need my family to be a family again. I need to get rid of the Rossis and the Reapers.

Breaking for a red light, I say, “I know you know about my family being in the mafia and some of the guys working for us. I need someone to come out with me for a couple of hours on a secretive mission. I’ll explain in a few, if you are available.”

Of course, if he agrees, then he will be a part of the family. This will be the start of his new life. A life of servitude, as Uncle Tony would always say.

“Yeah, I’m available. Do I need to get anyone else?” His voice lowers to a whisper.

“No, just you. I don’t want anyone knowing we are going out. Not even the guys. Make up a story and meet me out back.”

I end the call and pull around to the back of the building. Gage jumps into the passenger seat with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“What did you do?” I ask as I drive away from the apartment building.

His expression falls. “What do you mean?”

“You look too happy right now.”

Has my life really turned into this? Am I so miserable that I don’t want to see my friends happy?

“I just have a feeling we are going to have a great time tonight.”

“That’s one way to look at things.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:15 am

“So what is this secretive mission we are going on?”

“Have you heard about the vigilante gang called The Reapers?”

“Yeah, they are supposed to be some super secretive gang that no one knows who they are. They are like the Illuminati. We all know they exist, but we don’t know who they are.”

I raise an eyebrow. “The Illuminati? Really?”

I’ve never taken him to be a conspiracy theorist.

He shrugs and laughs. “What can I say? I love a good conspiracy theory. I love going down the rabbit holes. You never know what you will uncover.”

I roll my eyes and shake my head. “Anyway, back to The Reapers. An informant told me about an underground bar that The Reapers hang out in.”

“And you want to go in there and knock some heads together?”

“Yeah. I’m itching for a fight, and I know I don’t have to worry about judgment coming from you.”

He doesn’t hesitate to answer. “I’m always down for a bar brawl. Say no more.”

A smile grows on my face. “That’s the answer I was hoping for. I also have plans for the Rossi estate, but I need time to gather all the supplies for that mission.”

“Well, you can count me in on that one, too. I promise not to go overboard.”

“Tonight, you can go as hard as you want. Just get back to my car as soon as you can if shit hits the fan, because I will leave without you.”

“Hey, I can take care of my own. Why do you think I have all these muscles?” He flexes his arms, showing off the years of hard work.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” I say as I turn off of the main road to take the smaller, lesser known back roads.

“Don’t be jealous. You’re finally catching up. Within a year, you’ll be where I am.”

Yeah, only because I’m sexually frustrated and refuse to beg Alexandra. At least until I find out what she’s hiding. I’m not above groveling and begging, but I need to know what she’s hiding first.

I follow a police officer past the park and through the historic district. He finally turns off into the back parking lot of a small pub, and I slowly ease past him.

He stares at my car longer than necessary before turning around.

“Whew.” Gage pretends to wipe his forehead. “I just knew he was going to come after us.”

“He thought about it, but I’m the only one in this town with this car, so he must know it’s me.”

“I guess it’s a good thing the police don’t really mess with you.”

“That’s because we pay their salary.”

He leans forward in his seat. “You what?”

“My family donates a hefty sum to the local police department.”

“So, you bribe them?”

“Bribes are illegal.” I grin and glance over at him. “We contribute to the betterment of the city.”

He chuckles and leans back. “I guess I’ve got a lot to learn about your family and what happens away from the public eye.”

“You have a lifetime to learn.” I say in a serious tone.

It’s true. He has the rest of his life to learn about the customs and traditions of a mafia family.

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I slow down as we pass in front of the bar. The windows are blacked out, so there's no way to see how many people are inside. There isn't anyone lingering on the sidewalk in front of the building.

"Maybe they are around back or inside." Gage says from the passenger seat.

"Maybe. Or maybe they were tipped off."

If they were tipped off, heads will roll. I'm not tolerating traitors.

I park a block away from the bar in a diner's parking lot. The cook is outside smoking a cigarette. His eyes widen as I hand him a couple of hundred-dollar bills.

"Make sure no one fucks with my car. If they do, I'm coming straight for you, and trust me when I say that I will hunt you down, so don't run off. I'll be back within the hour."

He glances down at the money in his hand before looking at me and then Gage. "Yes, sir. I will keep your car safe."

When we are down the street, Gage laughs. "I'm pretty sure the kid thought you were pranking him. You give him money and then threaten to hunt him down."

"Yeah, well, he better keep my car safe because we need a way home."

We get to the bar and walk up to the solid wooden door.

“Oh, I forgot to ask, are you carrying?”

“A gun? No. Why would I be? You said a bar fight, not a shootout.”

I give him my back up gun. “Sometimes, they are one and the same, but we’re going to try to stick to our fists.”

He tucks the gun into his waistband and gives me a nod. “Let’s do this.”

Not bothering to turn the doorknob, Gage rears back and kicks open the door. It breaks the door frame, rips the hinges off, and splinters into pieces.

“Effective.” I push past the broken door and step inside.

All conversation stops as everyone turns to look our way. There are only a handful of people lingering around the bar.

A couple of men are playing pool and a couple are throwing darts, but it’s not full of Reapers, like the informant made it seem.

In the back corner of the bar, away from all the action, there are two Reapers dressed in all black. Their bright green eyes and the fact that they are wearing ski masks inside give them away.

“Is that them?” Gage whispers.

“Let’s find out.”

I clench my jaw and head straight toward them.

The two men stand as Gage and I get closer. Gage cracks his knuckles, a clear sign

that he's looking forward to the fight just as much as I am. The two Reapers put down their bottles of beer and walk toward the middle of the bar.

Gage doesn't wait. He marches over to them and throws the first punch. Both men swing at Gage, landing one punch to his side and another on his stomach.

I pull one man off of Gage and throw my fist at his face. I put everything I have into this punch. My fist connects with his jaw in a loud crunch. If his jaw isn't broken, it's a miracle.

He lands a punch on my stomach and my cheek, but I retaliate and land two on his stomach. When he hunches forward, I drive my fist up to his mouth.

He spits at me, his blood lands on my shirt.

"Fucking asshole." I grab the front of his shirt with one hand and reach up to grab his ski mask with my other hand.

Someone clears their throat behind me. Before yelling, "Hey, Marino!"

The four of us stop fighting just long enough to turn around and see who it is. Three more Reapers are standing behind us with their arms crossed and pissed expressions on their faces.

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“I’ve waited way too long to get a piece of you, Marino. Leave the rookie alone and take on a man your own size.”

The voice sounds familiar, like I’ve heard it recently. But where? And who are these men? One thing is certain, by the end of tonight, I’ll know who’s behind the mask.

I glance at Gage. “Are you good for a few more rounds? I’m feeling a second rush. It’s about time we expose the Reapers for who they really are.”

Gage grins. “Hell yeah, I am. I’ve got years of pent up rage to get out of my system.”

The Reaper cracks his knuckles as he glances at the two men standing on either side of him. “The only ones that are going to be exposed tonight are you and your criminal father. We are going to eliminate the mafia families and take back our community.”

“In your dreams, coward.”

Even if they run me, Francesca, and Dad out of town, they will still have to deal with Giuseppe Rossi, and Uncle Tony and AJ.

The mafia is here to stay. Cowards who have to hide their true identities do not intimidate us.

A sinister grin forms on his face. “We will see who is still standing at the end of the night.”

Chapter Thirteen

ALEXANDRA

I've never taken a day off work, let alone an entire week, but I did. I texted Arturo that I need the week off from work. I didn't even explain why. I'm sure Francesca told him I was sick and needed the rest because I told her I had a stomach bug.

But that's not the case.

In my hands are the results of my blood test from the night I passed out. It's been a week and I still can't stop staring at the sheet of paper.

I can't believe it, but my name is at the top of the paper with all of my information.

I sink into the back of my couch and pull my cover over me as I stare at documents from the hospital.

We were always careful, right? Because there's just no way that I'm pregnant. Nine weeks and five days, according to the obstetrician.

Right now, there is a living baby inside of me. A baby that is rapidly growing and forming all the necessary organs he or she needs to live.

I am going to be a mom, and Joey is going to be a dad.

Reaching down, I rub my stomach, feeling an ever so slight bump. It wasn't there last week, was it?

My heart races, and my breathing turns into pants as I freak out. Joseph Marino is the father of my baby.

Will he be excited?

Nervous?

Upset?

I practice breathing deeply, like the doctor instructed. Breathe in through my nose, and breathe out of my mouth.

Inhale for three seconds and exhale completely out of my mouth.

By the time I do this five times, my nerves are settled and my heartbeat returns to normal. It's not just me and my health I need to worry about right now. There's another life depending on me to do the right thing.

I grab my phone and text Francesca.

Hey, are you still at work?

My phone buzzes with her reply.

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Nope. I'm picking us up some dinner. Do you want egg drop or wonton soup?

My stomach growls.

That's perfect because I need to talk to you. Can you get me a small sweet and sour chicken and the sesame chicken with broccoli and white rice?

My phone rings, showing her name at the top of the screen.

"Are you sure you should be eating all of that while recovering from a stomach bug?"

My stomach growls louder. "I'm starving and pretty much over the stomach bug."

She's quiet for a minute before saying, "Fine, I will get the food and bring it over, but if you throw it up, it's on you."

"I'll be fine, Mom." I say with a chuckle.

"I'll see you in a little bit." She says before ending the call.

I place the paperwork on the coffee table and turn on the television, stopping when I get to the local news channel. A helicopter is flying over the interstate where a car is on fire.

Firefighters battle the fire as large clouds of black smoke fill the air.

The cameraman from the helicopter zooms in on the car and my stomach turns.

There's only one person with that car. One person who had a custom vinyl wrap done on it.

Joseph Marino.

I grab my phone and dial his number. With each passing ring, my heart fills with dread. Did Rossi finally get to him? He did promise retribution, and it's been fairly quiet since Giuseppe Rossi sent that letter.

Light knocking sounds at my door, but I'm unable to tear my gaze off the television.

The doorknob jiggles for a second before Francesca pushes it open. "Hey, I thought you were going to start locking your door? With you being sick, your reaction time isn't--"

She stops mid sentence as I turn to glance at her. Tears blur my vision before falling down my cheeks.

"Oh my God. Alexandra, what's going on?"

"It's Joseph." I point to the television.

She kicks the door closed behind her and rushes into the living room to join me. She drops the food onto the coffee table and plops down on the couch.

"What happened?" Her voice is soft as the camera zooms back in on the car.

My voice cracks. "I tried calling Joseph, but he didn't answer."

She picks up her phone and dials her brother's number. When the voicemail picks up, she ends the call and immediately dials again. Once again, the call goes to voicemail.

“Do you think he was rushed to the hospital?” I whisper, not wanting to think about the alternative.

She ends the call and dials Rhett’s number, putting the call on speakerphone.

“Hey, babe. I was just about to come upstairs and see if you wanted to go out for dinner.” His tone is cheery, without an ounce of worry.

She doesn’t greet him, she just asks, “Have you heard from Joey? His car is on the news right now, engulfed in smoke. I’m trying not to freak the fuck out.”

“No, he left the arena almost an hour ago to go to a meeting. He looked like shit, though, like he was in a bar fight last night. Gage, too.”

“He was in a bar fight?”

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“I don’t know. He isn’t speaking a word of it, but I’ll call him and see where he is.”

“Thanks, hun. Please let me know as soon as you hear from him. I’ll keep trying on my end.”

“How about you call your father and I’ll call Joey? Nevermind. He just walked in. I’ll call you back.” He hangs up, leaving us with more questions than answers.

“What? Why would he hang up?”

Francesca sighs. “The good news is Joey is alive. The bad news is that we still don’t know what happened.”

I grab a tissue off the end table and dry my eyes and cheeks. “At least we know he is alive.”

Francesca pulls the containers of food out of the brown paper bag and sets them on the table. “And Joey was walking, so he can’t be that hurt.”

“That’s true.” I say awkwardly.

After she sets the food out like a buffet on my coffee table, she turns toward me and asks, “So, what did you need to talk to me about?”

I grab the hospital paperwork off the table and hand it to her.

“These are the actual results from the blood tests.”

She skims the paperwork before turning toward me. “So if it’s not a stomach bug, what is it?”

I point to the middle section, to the tiny line that reads:

PREGNANT: YES- 9wk, 5dy

“I’m pregnant.” I confess, no longer able to keep the secret to myself.

She gasps and her mouth falls open. She’s not the only one that’s shocked. I’ve known for a week, and I’m still just as surprised as I was when the doctor told me.

After a few moments, she asks, “Who’s the dad? I didn’t even know you were serious about anyone. You’ve never talked about a boyfriend, or been seen with a man.”

I can’t tell her about Giuseppe Rossi and the reason I’m not with Joseph, but I know she won’t stop asking who the father is.

“Um, how mad are you going to be, if I say it’s your brother’s?”

“What? No way! You’re sleeping with Joey? Oh, I don’t need to picture that.” Her eyes widen as she leans back to look at me. “When did this start? How did it start?”

“It’s nothing serious, but it started a few months after I started working for your father. You know how it goes. Longworking hours and being stuck with one another will eventually lead to sexual frustration.”

“And you two have only been with each other?”

Is she insinuating that someone other than Joseph is the father of my baby?

Does she think I just sleep around?

Staring at her, I narrow my eyes and say, “As far as I know, we have only been with each other, but we weren’t ever exclusive. I don’t know if there have been other women. I’ve never asked. For me, though, it’s only been Joseph since our first time.”

“I didn’t mean to imply-” She shakes her head and frowns. “Alexandra, I didn’t mean that you slept around. I’m just surprised that you two have been together for so long and no one knew. At least I didn’t know, and I’m pretty sure Rhett doesn’t know.”

“Joseph and I aren’t dating.”

“So you two are just long-term fuck buddies?”

“We were. We haven’t been together for a couple of weeks now. Sorry. I don’t know why I’m telling you all this.”

“Uh, because I asked, and I’m nosey.”

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We share a laugh and grab food. We might as well eat while the food is warm. Besides, Rhett said he will call Francesca back.

“Joseph doesn’t know about this yet. Please, just keep this between the two of us.”

“I won’t say a word.” She leans over and wraps her arms around me in a giant hug. “I’m so happy for you and my brother. I’m going to be an aunt! Just so you know, I’m already planning on spoiling that baby. Well, if you are keeping it.”

I stare at her, frozen in my spot. Her words play on repeat in my mind.

If you are keeping it. If I am keeping it. Am I keeping it? Will Joseph want to keep the baby?

My hand rests on the small baby bump. My heart races as I imagine what it will feel like to feel my baby kick, to watch my bump grow bigger with each passing week, and to become a mother.

Before I can freak out, Francesca says, “I’m sorry. That was stupid of me to say. That’s yours and Joseph’s business, not mine. I just wanted you to know that you are our family and you and the baby will be taken care of.”

Emotion swells in my throat, and I croak out, “Thank you. I really appreciate you saying that. To be honest, I’m scared to tell Joseph. I don’t know how he will react. We’ve never discussed having a family. Hell, we haven’t even gone out on a date.”

“Well, you will have your first date soon because you won the auction with my

brother.”

I roll my eyes and smile. “You mean you won the auction and just put my name down?”

“Because I wanted to protect Joey. At least this way, I know he’s going to be with someone he likes, and it’s not like you can get pregnant because you already are.”

I throw my pillow at her before digging into my sweet and sour chicken. She laughs and places the pillow between us before grabbing her container of fried rice.

“I hope it’s a girl.” Francesca whispers between bites.

“Yeah, a girl would be nice. We are always surrounded by all the guys. It’s too much testosterone. Well, now there’s me, you, and Savannah.”

Francesca leans forward. “We need a girl’s night. Or better yet, a girl’s weekend. Just the three of us, and preferably before you have the baby.”

“A spa weekend where we can be pampered.”

“Oooh, that sounds divine. I’ll set it up and make sure it’s during a weekend where the guys have back to back away games.”

“I can’t wait.” I switch to the sesame chicken, loving the rich flavor of the sauce.

Francesca’s phone rings. “It’s Rhett.” She puts the call on speakerphone.

“So what happened to Joey?”

“That is a long story. Hey, where are you? I went by your office, but you were

already gone.”

“I already had dinner plans with Alexandra. We are just sitting on her couch relaxing and eating some Chinese.”

“Hey.” I say, so he knows he’s on speakerphone.

“Hey, Alexandra. Do you mind if I swing by? It will be easier to fill everyone in on what’s going on.”

That doesn’t sound good. I want to ask how Joseph is doing. I want to see that he’s alright.

“Come on over. The door is unlocked.”

He barks out, “The door is what?”

Francesca chimes in. “It’s a work in progress.”

Rhett growls before hanging up.

“Oops. I guess he didn’t like that.”

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“No shit. I told you it’s dangerous.”

I shrug. “My apartment, my rules.”

Francesca guffaws. “I’d love to see you say that to Rhett and Joey. I’ve been on the other end of their anger and it isn’t pretty.”

“What is there to be angry about? It’s my apartment, and I don’t belong to no one.”

She raises an eyebrow and glances at my stomach. “It’s different now, and if they knew the truth, they’d watch you like a hawk.”

“But they don’t know and won’t find out this way.” I say sternly as I grab the paperwork off the table and shove it under the couch cushion I’m sitting on.

“Not a peep from me.” She pretends to zip her lips and throw away the key.

My apartment door slams open, making me and Francesca jump. Rhett glances over at us and frowns.

“Do you know how dangerous it is to keep your door unlocked? Do you know how many dangerous men are looking for the two of you right now?”

He stalks toward us. His heated gaze locks onto Francesca, and I swear I hear a soft moan come from her. But Rhett isn’t what holds my attention. It’s the bruised and bandaged man that has stolen my heart.

Not to mention impregnated me.

“Joseph.” I whisper. His name sounds sensual as it slips from my lips.

He closes and locks my apartment door before walking over to the couch. Glancing at the coffee table, he picks up my container of sweet and sour chicken, dips one in the tangy red sauce, and pops it into his mouth.

We stare at one another as he licks a drop of sauce off his lips.

Thankfully, Rhett plops down between Francesca and me, breaking the lust filled spell that Joseph holds over me.

I have read that hormones are heightened and there’s a chance I will become insatiable, but I’ll have to rely on my toys because Joseph Marino is off limits.

At least until I’ve told him about the baby.

Francesca breaks the silence. “So, do either of you want to clue us in on what happened and why your car is currently burning into a crisp on the interstate?”

I look at Joseph’s black eye that is yellowing around the edges and the small cut on his cheekbone. There’s no way he just got that. That bruise is at least a day or two old.

“Giuseppe Rossi fucking happened. He tried to fucking kill me. Hell, he almost succeeded. What do you think happened?”

“It was just a question, Joey. Calm the fuck down.”

“Calm the fuck down?” Joseph yells and waves his free hand around. “When was the

last time you had to look over your shoulder? When was the last time you genuinely feared for your life?”

Francesca leans forward and places her container on the table. “Every fucking day! Don’t you think I worry about not only my life but everyone’s as well? I know this is my fault. I own it, and I’m sorry that everyone has to be on alert all the fucking time because of what I did.”

Joseph’s expression softens. “Franny, I-”

She jumps up. “Don’t bother. I know you think the sun shines out of your ass, but some of us have real problems we are dealing with right now. How about you take your head out of your ass and think about someone other than yourself for a change?”

She turns to head for the door, but Rhett grabs her hand and pulls her back down to the couch.

“We still need to discuss what is going on. The two of you can play nice for five minutes, right?”

I glance at Joseph, who is glaring at Francesca. “So you think this attack was from Giuseppe Rossi?”

“Yeah, Gage and I were monitoring both exits of the Rossi estate and noticed a couple of cop cars leaving his house. This seemed odd, so we followed them, but lost them on the interstate because Vincent and his men rear-ended me and pushed me into the concrete barrier.”

He pops another bite of chicken into his mouth.

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“Thankfully, Gage drove separately and was a couple of cars behind me, so they didn’t know I had backup. Gage rear-ended Vincent and almost pushed him over the bridge wall. Vincent called off his men, but he was heading this way.”

“How did you get the bruises?” I ask, bluntly.

“That’s not Rossi related.”

Rhett sighs. “When did Gage become part of the team?”

Joseph clenches his jaw for a few moments. “The other night. I knew we needed more manpower with everything that’s been going on, so I made the executive decision.”

Francesca scoffs. “Without consulting with Dad or me?”

“Dad is letting me make decisions. He knew Gage was coming on board. It was his idea in the first place, but he was leaving the when up to me.”

Francesca stands and pulls away from Rhett’s outstretched hand. “I’ve tried to be included in the family’s affairs. Begged, even. But it’s clear that I don’t belong here. Congratulations. From now on, I’m done. I’m joining Uncle Tony and AJ. At least they respect me enough to consider my thoughts, concerns, and opinions.”

Francesca gives me an apologetic glance before grabbing her food and leaving. Rhett stands and follows her, but Joseph stops him.

“Before you decide to jump ship and join my sister, uncle, and cousin, I’d think back to the oath you took. I’d hate to make you an enemy, but I won’t let my family’s reputation take a hit.”

“First off, fuck you. Francesca is almost my wife. I’ll choose her over everything else, and your father knows this. Second, calm down. Once the adrenaline from today wears off, come find me. You’re my best friend and I’ll always have your back, but you’re way out of line right now.”

Without another word, he leaves my apartment, leaving me and Joseph alone.

I should tell him now. I should just rip the bandage off.

“Thanks for the food.” Joseph places the chick on the coffee table and stands.

“You don’t have to go. Especially after everything you’ve just been through. I can listen if you need to bitch and get things off your chest.”

His eyes darken with lust, making my pussy clench with need. His gaze roams over my body, lingering on my stomach for a few seconds before moving back up to my face.

Letting out a long sigh, he says, “I wish I could, but I need to get my car towed and meet with Dad about this. Rossi isn’t backing down. I’m just surprised he’s taking his time in between attacks.”

“He wants us to be scared and looking over our shoulders.”

He wants to control when and where he attacks us. He wants to control when and where we die.

“Yeah, be careful, and lock your damn door.”

I don't know what propels me to open my mouth, but I whisper, “I will, but only because I don't want you to be worried about me.”

He heads to the front door and turns around. “You look good, Alexandra.”

I'm left speechless as he closes the door behind him.

I should run after him and tell him about the baby. I should confess to everything and beg for another chance with him.

But I can't.

If I learned only one thing from tonight, it's that Giuseppe Rossi is coming for blood, and I'm already on his radar.

Chapter Fourteen

JOSEPH

Just as I'm walking out the door to head to the arena for my morning workout, my phone rings. It's the private detective.

I answer his call as I get into the rental car. “Hello?”

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“Mr. Marino, I have everything you asked for.”

“Great, and right on time. Email everything over to me, and I’ll wire your payment.”
I can read the paperwork while I workout.

He hesitates. “I think it’s best if we meet in person.”

I scoff. “It’s that bad, huh?”

“It’s a lot of information to email over. I’d have to get you an external hard drive. You basically asked for her entire life story, and I delivered.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. It’s not horrible, it’s just a lot of information. “Alright, that’s fair. Meet me at the arena in fifteen minutes.”

I send a group text to the guys, letting them know I’ll be a little late.

I have a last minute meeting, but I’ll be in the gym in about half an hour.

Rhett responds first.

Coach canceled the morning workout. We are meeting tomorrow at nine for a morning skate before the game.

What the fuck? Why wouldn’t Coach Bobby let everyone know?

Thanks for the heads up.

It was posted in the team chat. Check your messages.

I check all of my group chats, including the ones specifically for mafia business, and come up empty.

Nothing. Are you sure it was in the group chat?

Spencer chimes in.

I never got a message either. I'm here now with Williams and Young. They are going to stay. I'll work out on my own.

As I'm typing my reply, Rhett messages.

rhett

Sorry, guys. It was my fuck up. The message was just to me. I'll double check next time.

I'll go work out for a little while. I could use the workout.

spencer

Dude, you have a state of the art gym at your house. Why not stay home?

Sometimes, it's nice to clear my head away from my house.

rhett

Are you alright? I can cancel my brunch plans with Chessie.

gage

I'm heading to the gym now if you need to get something off your chest.

I'll let you guys know after my meeting.

I put my phone in its cubby and drive to the arena. The private detective is already waiting for me.

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“Mr. Marino, thank you for meeting me.”

It’s not like I had a fucking choice.

“Give it to me straight. What did you find out?”

He glances around the empty parking lot before handing over a large manila envelope.

“Before you read what’s in that envelope, I think you should meditate beforehand and make sure you are alone.”

That doesn’t sound good at all. The faster my heart pounds in my chest, the more shallow my breathing becomes.

“How about you just tell me what you found out, so I can hit the gym with my teammates?”

“Finding out what she’s been doing the past couple of weeks was the easy part. The hard part was finding her past and what drove her to Savannah.”

“I’m not following.”

“Alexandra Ferguson has been meeting with Giuseppe Rossi almost every couple of days. They meet. They talk. Then she heads back to work.”

The edges of my vision blur as anger fills my veins.

He continues. “When she was seventeen, she petitioned the court to become an emancipated minor. She changed her name from Alex Marie Wilson to Alexandra Marie Ferguson.”

“What else?” I bark out, needing to know what else he found out.

He glances around nervously before saying, “Her father is a habitual gambler that has racked up more debt in Giuseppe’s casino than your family’s net worth.”

“Are you sure about all of this? She’s been meeting with Rossi?”

“Yeah. No doubt about it. There are almost one hundred text messages and phone calls between the two of them. I’ve printed out the call logs and the messages.”

I clench my jaw and grit out, “Thanks. I’ll wire your payment.”

He holds up his hand to stop me from leaving. “Wait, there’s a lot more in the envelope that I think will interest you.”

“That’s all I need to know.” I walk away from him and head straight to the gym.

With my jaw clenched, I walk past William, Young, and Roberts and head straight to the punching bag. I drop my duffle bag and start hitting the bag without gloves.

I need to feel the pain from every punch.

I need to get Alexandra out of my system. Damn if she didn’t look great last night. I could tell she was crying, but at what? I don’t know.

The news was on and they were covering my accident, but would Alexandra really cry over me being in an accident? Does she still care about me?

No. Stop it, damnit. I can't think about her in a caring manner. I need to face the fact that my heart and mind are not on the same page.

With each set of punches to the bag, I ask myself another question.

Smack. Smack.

How long has she been working for Rossi?

Smack. Smack.

How long has she been lying to me and my family?

Smack. Smack.

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Did she ever care about me, or was I just an easy way for her to get information about my family and our businesses to give to Giuseppe Rossi?

Smack. Smack.

How does she even know Rossi? Did she meet him when she was growing up because of her father's debt?

Smack. Smack.

Why do I still care about her? Why is my heart begging my mind to forgive her? Why do I want to fuck her until she confesses to everything and begs for forgiveness?

Pain radiates through my hands as the skin on my knuckles split open.

Blood coats the bag, but I don't let up. I need to get all the anger out. I need to getherout of my system.

Chase Williams and the other rookie, Phoenix Young, laugh at one another.

Young jumps off the treadmill and walks over to the refrigerator for a cold bottle of water. "Hey, Marino, how was your break?"

Williams answers for me. "Probably lonely."

Young downs half his water before saying, "Yeah, everyone's been talking about how you don't have a woman in your life. You don't want to grow old and become a

bitter, lonely man. Just ask Coach Bobby.”

The two of them continue to tease me back and forth about being alone during the break.

Finally, I have enough, and I snap.

“How about the two of you just shut the fuck up and let me work out in peace? If you two are such experts in women, why don’t I see any rings on your fingers?”

The two of them open their mouths to talk, but I cut them off.

“How about instead of gossiping about shit you don’t know, you work on your skating, passing, and shooting?”

Williams rolls his eyes. “Damn, dude, you just need to get laid and relax.”

The only person I want is Alexandra, but she’s a fucking traitor and a liar.

Young nods and says, “He must be angry at himself or at a woman. No man punishes himself to the point his knuckles are bleeding all over the equipment unless it’s something serious.”

He finishes his water before adding, “We sure do love them, but women leave nothing but destruction behind. Am I right?”

Williams stops the treadmill and wipes his face with the towel draped across his shoulder. “This is why I fuck them and leave them. There are no attachments. No love. No unhealthy, whatever this is.”

He gestures toward me.

I grab the spray bottle and clean my blood off the bag. “Fuck off, or your face is next.”

Gage shoots them a glare and nods toward the showers.

Williams picks up his bag. “Fine, we’re going. We will let the seniors have the gym to themselves so they can sort out their problems before the game tomorrow night.”

Young follows Williams through the gym’s double doors.

Gage walks over to one of the weight benches. “So, do you want to talk about it? Or do you want to continue punishing yourself for whatever happened?”

“There’s a lot to unpack.”

“And I’m just starting my workout. I have hours to listen. Or if it will make you feel better, I have a stocked beer fridge right across the street.”

Right across the street where Alexandra lives.

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I finish cleaning up my blood and grab a bottle of water, downing the entire bottle. I make my way to the treadmill. It will be easier to run and talk.

“I don’t even know where to begin.”

“How was your meeting? Who was it with?”

I set the speed on the treadmill to a light jog. “A private detective. Alexandra has been acting weird, and I needed to know what she was hiding.”

I catch his reflection in the mirror. He’s surprised. “Whoa. You had your father’s assistant investigated? Why do you think she’s hiding something?”

“One minute she wanted to pursue a relationship with me and the next she changed her mind. She started attending every meeting with my father and always took notes. She wasn’t being herself. Something changed.”

“And you just found what it was? Based on your attack on the bag, I’d say it wasn’t good.”

“She’s been working with Rossi. There are calls and texts between the two, and the private detective said she’s been meeting with him every couple of days.”

“Damn, dude. What are you going to do about it? Am I the only one that knows?”

“I just found out, but eventually, I’ll have to tell my dad, Francesca, and the rest of the guys. I don’t know what to do except fire her and lock her out of everything.”

She has access to everything, including bank accounts, business accounts, and the entire shipyard database.

I murmur, “My heart and mind are at war right now, and I don’t know what to do. I’m pissed. I’m hurt. I feel betrayed.”

“Rightfully so.”

“To be honest, I was afraid of falling in love, especially with the events from the past couple of months. I didn’t want to risk being betrayed like my father was with his mother, but it happened anyway. This is the same shit my mother did.”

“I think what your mother did was worse, but we don’t know the entire story. Maybe there’s a reason she’s been meeting with Giuseppe Rossi. You can always ask her.”

“There’s absolutely no reason for Alexandra to be consorting with the enemy. Giuseppe Rossi waged war on us and named her specifically, so why work with him?”

“What if she’s being the middleman for your father? He hasn’t included you in everything lately, has he?”

“When it comes to something like this, I’m always included.”

“Alright, if you want to fire her and lock her out of all accounts, then I support you and will help you, but I think you should be certain there isn’t more to the story than there seems.”

“I have an entire envelope full of proof that she isn’t who she said she is. She changed her name for fuck’s sake because her family is associated with Giuseppe Rossi. I bet if I pull up the database, her father will be in there.”

He puts the weights down and holds his hands up. “Hey, I’m not arguing. I work for you. I’m just playing devil’s advocate right now. I don’t want you to do something you regret.”

“It’s too late for that. I never should have fucked her in the first place.”

A stabbing pain radiates through my heart, but I push all emotion to the deep corners of my mind, where I won’t think about them. I don’t have time to let emotions cloud my judgment.

Giuseppe Rossi is still coming after us, but this time, he has a mole on the inside that’s been giving him information.

We are severely disadvantaged, but I won’t let a woman I might have loved take us down from the inside.

Chapter Fifteen

ALEXANDRA

I quickly type up an email to Arturo, reminding him of his car’s scheduled maintenance tomorrow. Francesca pushes open my office door and plops down in the chair on the other side of my desk.

“What’s up?” I ask her as I send the email.

“Do you have lunch plans?”

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“Not yet. I’ll probably just run home and make a sandwich. Why?”

“How about you take off the rest of the day and come eat lunch with me?”

“Lunch is usually only thirty minutes to an hour.” I pull up my calendar to see if there is any other pressing matter I need to deal with right now.

“Call it a long lunch.” Her phone chimes with a message, but she ignores it.

“I really should finish up the Valentino contract before I leave for the day.”

Francesca leans forward, draping her arms across my desk. “That’s not due for another week. It doesn’t have to be done right now, does it?”

“Well, no, but I don’t like falling behind.”

“You can do it tomorrow morning. Please? I really need girl time. It’s always the guys around, and I’m tired of their testosterone. Pretty please?”

“Alright, I’ll take the day off, but I need to run an errand.”

She raises her eyebrow. “Please tell me it’s something fun and not like mailing something for my father.”

“I want to get something for Joseph to tell him about the baby.”

She squeals. “Yes! Shopping. Let’s go.”

She practically pulls me out of my chair and drags me to the elevator.

“We are going to have so much fun! But first, we need food. Is there anything you are craving?”

“Um, sushi sounds incredible right now.”

She frowns as we step inside the elevator. “You can’t have sushi.”

I push the button for the bottom floor and say, “That’s not true. As long as it’s from a reputable place, and as long as I don’t eat the fish eggs, or overdo it on the mercury, I’m all cleared. I asked my obstetrician, and she said it was alright.”

She stares at me for a few moments. “If you say so, but I’m pretty sure you can’t.”

“That’s just an old wives’ tale. People say you can’t eat raw fish, but that’s not true. They also say you shouldn’t have caffeine or wine, but my obstetrician said I can still drink my coffee in the morning and have a glass of red wine later in my pregnancy if I want to.”

We pause our conversation as we walk through the lobby.

“I’ll drive.” Francesca says as we step outside.

I slide into her passenger seat. “The last time I was in your car was the night I found out I was pregnant.”

“Well, it’s not like you can find out you’re pregnant again. Unless it’s twins.”

I feel the blood drain from my face.

Twins? I've barely wrapped my head around one baby. How will I survive if there are two?

She laughs and drives away from the arena. "Relax. I was just kidding."

"That's too scary to think about."

"I'm pretty sure they would have caught baby number two if you were having twins. Besides, you have loads of support."

I need to get the subject off me and the baby. I'm already nervous about telling Joseph. I don't need more stress on top of it.

"What about you? Are you and Rhett planning on waiting until after the wedding to start a family?"

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“Well-” She stops at a stop sign before turning right. “We are planning on getting married in a small ceremony this summer when he’s off, but I really want to be a mom. I stopped taking my birth control, and we have been trying for the past two months, but no luck so far.”

“That’s incredible. We can have babies that are the same age.”

“My dad would be in heaven. Not one, but two grandchildren; he’d be over the moon. What about your family? When are you planning on telling them?”

“Oh, um, I was emancipated at seventeen, so I don’t speak to my family anymore.”

Although, I did talk to Dad recently. It wasn’t by choice, though.

Francesca reaches across the center console and squeezes my hand for a second. “I’m so sorry, Alexandra. I can’t imagine what you’ve been through, but you have a family now.”

Tears fill my eyes. Even though I’m not romantically involved with Joseph, I’ve always felt like I was part of the Marino family.

This baby will always be a part of the family. He or she will be loved, treasured, and will never have to worry about being safe.

“Alright,” Francesca changes the subject. “Are we still craving sushi? I know the best restaurant down by the river.”

“Tacos.”

She chuckles and shakes her head. “Do you want to go to a sit-down restaurant or stop by the food truck in the park?”

“Ooh, the food truck. Those tacos are the best in the city.”

Francesca laughs and drives in the food truck’s direction. My stomach growls as she parks in the semi empty parking lot.

“I guess we just missed the lunch rush.”

There are a couple of people in front of us, but it doesn’t take long to order and get our food.

I carry my plate of tacos to a picnic table under a large oak tree. “I swear they must be mind readers. Every time I come here, I never have to wait more than a minute or two, and the food is always fresh and hot.”

Francesca sits across from me. “I know. Rhett and the guys will order like six tacos each, and it still only takes a couple of minutes. I don’t know how Manny does it, but he’s amazing.”

I glance around the park as we eat in silence. Children are swinging and sliding down the slides as parents watch nearby. Older couples rest on the benches as others run and walk on the walking trail.

“Hey, are you okay?” Francesca nudges my foot with hers.

“Oh, yeah. I was just people watching.” My gaze wanders to a stressed mom who is feeding an infant a bottle while a toddler pulls on her leg, begging and pointing at the

slide.

“I know it might sound crazy, but I’m ready for that life.”

I glance at her and follow her gaze to the mom. “You want two kids that close in age? That seems too stressful.”

“I teased Rhett that I wanted three in three.” At my questioning look, she says, “Three kids in three years.”

My mouth falls open. “Why? That’s a lot of diapers. A lot of tantrums, too.”

“I want my kids to be best friends. I want them to grow up and be close to one another.”

I get up and throw my trash in the trash can. “More power to you and Rhett. That’s more than a handful.”

“We have an entire village behind us that would be willing to chip in and help. The same goes for you. My dad and most of the guys will help put together furniture or whatever you need when the time comes.”

“I’ll probably need help moving my furniture around to make room for the baby’s furniture.”

“We will all help out.”

We head back to her car and head to a shopping center.

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“Come on.” Francesca says as she locks her car doors. “I know the perfect place. They have everything you can think of for a baby, including maternity clothes.”

Shopping with Francesca should be an Olympic sport. There’s sprinting, heavy lifting, and even pole vaulting. Well, the way she jumped over the gliders on display to get to the newborn onesies was equivalent to pole vaulting.

She holds up a plain white onesie. “Look at these. They are so cute and tiny.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to have to push out anything bigger than that.”

Her eyes widen, and she puts the onesie back. “Good point.”

We walk around the store and stop at the maternity section. She picks out several cute maternity dresses.

“I don’t need dresses right now. It’s not warm yet. Besides, I still fit in all of my clothes.”

“But it will be warming up in less than a month and then you will be grateful you have them.”

A very pregnant woman speaks from the other side of the dresses. She rubs her bump and smiles.

“Bumps can pop out at any time. This is my second baby, and I swear as soon as I hit twelve weeks with both of my babies, none of my clothes fit. I went from having a

tiny bump that you couldn't see under a shirt to looking like I was six months pregnant."

"How far along are you now?"

Francesca looks at the next rack, leaving me to continue my conversation.

"Thirty-three weeks. He's due just in time for our annual family Easter celebration. Both families get together and host a huge breakfast, followed by an egg hunt for all the kids."

"Aww congratulations. I'm eleven weeks, and I'm kind of freaking out."

"Is this your first one?"

"Yeah, and a complete surprise. This is all new to me, and if I'm being honest, I'm completely overwhelmed. There's so much to buy and prepare for."

"I totally understand how overwhelming it can be. For our first, we bought everything we thought we would need. We had the convertible crib, changing table, dresser, glider, and every accessory you can imagine, but the second we brought our baby home, we didn't use anything."

"Nothing? You didn't even use the crib?"

She smiles and shakes her head. "Nope. She refused to sleep in the crib or the bassinet. I always changed her on the floor or on our bed. I still use the glider though. That was an amazing purchase, so I'd recommend that. Oh, and don't bother getting the diaper trash can. It doesn't keep the odor away."

"That's good to know, because that was going to be one of the things I bought."

“I just saved you a hundred dollars. You can use it for newborn pictures.”

“Good idea. Thanks for the advice.”

“No problem. There are several great social media groups in our area filled with wonderful women. Just remember, every piece of advice you are given is given out of love, but that doesn’t mean you have to follow it. Do what’s best for you and the baby.”

She turns around and walks away, leaving me wondering if my baby will turn out to be like hers? Will he or she sleep in the crib? Will he or she love their room?

Francesca comes back holding an arm full of clothes. “Try these on.”

My eyes widen as I look at the pile of clothes. “All of these?”

“No, just the top three. The other ones are the same brands, just in different colors and patterns. I didn’t know what size you would fit into now.”

I grab the three dresses and head to the fitting room. I throw on the first dress with a white flowery pattern and stare at my reflection in the mirror. I don’t recognize the woman staring back at me.

The ruching on the side accentuates my tiny baby bump, but allows for my bump to grow. The dress hugs my curves in all the right places and flows down to the ground.

I rub my stomach, feeling tears well up in my eyes.

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“How are you doing in there?” Francesca calls from the other side of the door.

I blink the tears away and open the door to show her the dress.

“Oh my God, Alexandra. That dress was made for you. It’s so perfect and makes you look like a goddess.”

My face flames with embarrassment. “You’re making me blush.”

“If you don’t buy this dress, I will. Your bump is so adorable.”

I trail my fingers down my stomach. “This dress makes it stand out.”

Francesca gushes. “How have I never noticed it before? You really should stop wearing baggy clothes. Flaunt your bump.”

“I will after Joseph knows. I don’t want everyone to find out before I tell him.”

“Well, then, let’s go tell him.”

I quickly try on the rest of the dresses and pick out a couple of blouses. We skip most of the store and head back to the baby clothes. With Francesca’s help, I pick out a cute onesie that reads, My Dad is my Hero and a card that says, Congratulations! You’re going to be a DAD!

“Joey is going to love this. I wish I could see the look on his face. You’ll have to tell me all about it tomorrow.”

On the way to the checkout counter, I grab aDaddy and Mepicture frame and toss it on top of all the clothes.

I pay for everything and put my bags in Francesca's backseat. The drive home is silent. I try to remain calm and meditate, but the closer we get, the more nervous I am.

Francesca parks and glances over at me. "Relax. You will be great. Take a few breaths and just speak from the heart."

"Thanks."

I run inside and throw the bags on the couch. I grab an empty green gift bag from the back of my closet and put the frame and onesie inside.

Grabbing a pen, I write a note in the card.

Joseph,

While I'm unable to wrap my head around everything just yet, I will try to put my thoughts into sentences. I know this wasn't planned, and it's not something we've ever discussed, but I couldn't be happier knowing I am carrying your child.

You are going to be a loving and caring dad for our child. I know this because you are so loving and caring toward me. You protect me and never hesitate to let me know that I'm safe with you.

And while you might be rough around the edges and live a dangerous lifestyle, you are one of the most gentle and kind-hearted men I know.

I can't wait to watch our baby grow with you by my side.

Love,

Alexandra

I place the card in its envelope and toss it in the bag before heading over to his house with a grin on my face.

Today is a new start for Joseph and me. Today, I will tell him how I really feel and tell him about our baby.

When I pull up to the Marino house, Joseph meets me in the driveway. He must have seen me on the camera. He's flanked by Gage Roberts and his cousin AJ Fanucci, and all three men have scowls on their faces.

This can't be good. What happened?

I grab the gift bag from the passenger seat and get out to greet the men. My gaze wanders over the three men before landing on Joseph's bloody hands.

"Oh my god. Are you okay, Joseph? What happened?" I take a few steps toward him, but the two men at his sides hold out their hands to stop me.

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“Don’t act like you fucking care.” He spits out at me with venom in his tone.

He’s never talked to me like this before. What the hell happened?

I shoot the two men a glare before narrowing my eyes on Joseph. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play coy with me. I know you’ve been meeting with Giuseppe Rossi. I have proof of the text messages and call logs. I know you’ve been feeding him information from our meetings.” He crosses his arms and clenches his jaw.

Shit. This isn’t good. This is exactly what I was afraid of happening.

“Look, I can explain.”

He scoffs. “Explain what? Explain how you lied about your identity, Alex Wilson. How you lied about your family’s debt to Giuseppe Rossi? Or how you lied about your loyalty to my family?”

I feel as if all the air has been punched out of my lungs. I can’t breathe. I can’t think. I feel like I’m drowning in an abyss.

“It’s not like that.” I whisper.

“It is like that. I know everything.” His tone is harsh and cold. It’s the same tone he uses with hostages.

Does he really think I'm an enemy? Does he really think I would betray his family?

"Please, just listen to me. I'm begging."

I can beg until I'm blue in the face, but he's already made up his mind.

"I've already heard enough." I can see the hatred in his eyes. If I were anyone else, he'd throw me in the interrogation room and let his frustration out on me.

But he took it out on himself already.

With no fight left in me, I whisper, "Fine. If you won't listen to me, listen to your father." It's my last ditch effort to keep him from completely hating me.

"I'll pass. I'm not listening to anyone except the few I trust. Oh, by the way, your access to the house, to the arena, and to our accounts has been revoked. You can stay in the apartment for one month, but after that, you will be evicted. So I'd start looking for other employment as soon as you get back."

Gage eyes the bag in my hand. "What's in the bag?"

"A gift for Joseph." I whisper.

A gift that was supposed to reunite us, not tear us apart.

I drop the bag and get back in my car without another word. I fight off the tears until I can no longer see the Marino house in my rearview mirror.

I pull into a parking lot and let out the sobs I've been choking back.

How did my life spin upside down in just a few minutes?

How did I go from being giddy and hopeful to being ripped to shreds and feeling less wanted than the dirt on the bottom of his shoe?

I don't hold back my sobs. I let it all out.

The only thing that's clear is if I ever recover from this heartbreak, Joseph Marino will never be involved in mine or my baby's life. He will be a long forgotten memory, like my childhood.

Chapter Sixteen

JOSEPH

It's been a week since I've seen or heard from Alexandra. Gage keeps tabs on her when he's home, but we've had back to back away games and haven't been home in three days.

Being away has given me a chance to process everything alone, with no one voicing their opinions or telling me what I should do.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:15 am

Alexandra's pregnant.

With my child.

I should be ecstatic and over the fucking moon, but I'm anything but that. How can I be happy when she lied to me and betrayed me like my mother betrayed my father?

I turn up the speed on the treadmill, needing something to concentrate on. No matter how fast I run or how hard I hit the punching bag, I can't get her off my mind.

I go to bed thinking about her, and I wake up with her on my mind. If I had dreams, I'm pretty sure they would be of her.

When my muscles burn and I can't run any longer, I slow the treadmill down to a light job, and after a minute, I stop the machine and head upstairs to shower.

I know what I need to do. It's what I've planned to do for almost a week now, but my heart protests.

I don't want this to be the end of us. I want to punish her and make her pay, but I can't live with what she's done. I can't look into her eyes and trust her ever again. What kind of relationship would we have if there isn't trust?

Maybe I do love her, but sometimes, love isn't enough.

I get dressed, opting for gym clothes and my sneakers. I tuck a gun into the waistband of my shorts and grab the two duffle bags from my closet.

Sneaking out the back door, I throw the bags in my trunk and quietly drive away. Dad has been working from home for several days, and Alvin has been interviewing for another security officer that will help him with the workload.

Blasting my music, I try to stay calm, but the closer to Alexandra I get, the angrier I am.

I feel like I'm going to eat, breathe, and live in the gym. No matter how much pain I cause myself, I can't get her out of my system. I know I can't keep living like this, but I can't deal with the pain. I'd rather cut off all emotions and move on with my life.

The truth is, I feel like a part of me died that day, and the rest died as I read her sweet words in the card. I could tell she was nervous. Happy, but extremely nervous. She showed up with the gift and was going to share the news that I'm going to be a dad, like she hadn't betrayed me, but I knew.

I could see the truth in her eyes. I didn't need to read the paperwork in the envelope to know the detective was telling the truth. She gave herself away.

It doesn't make sense, though. Nothing makes sense.

Her betrayal- why now? Her sweet words- how can someone who is working with Giuseppe Rossi to take down my family, write those words to me? Even the way she begged me to listen to my father doesn't add up. It's like she just gave up.

Besides, what does Dad have to do with all of this?

Did she think a baby would make up for years of lies and betrayal?

I shake my head, getting rid of any lingering emotion. She made her bed, and now

she has to lie in it. After today, I'm done with her. I won't think about her, and I sure as fuck won't talk about her.

She's dead to me.

When I get to the team's apartment building. I park in front of the main doors. Darla, the apartment manager, is standing outside smoking a cigarette.

"You aren't supposed to park there." She croaks out.

I ignore her and head to the back of my car.

She speaks louder. "Excuse me, young man. That is a no parking zone. If you don't move your vehicle, I'll call to get it towed."

Her condescending tone irks me.

Does she really think I'm going to be staying here long enough for a tow truck to get here?

"Sir, I will tow your vehicle." She holds up her cell phone to show me she means business.

I unleash my anger on her. "Do you know who I am? Do you realize I could fire your ass for violating the employee code of conduct for smoking that close to the entryway? Not to mention, leaving your desk and all resident information unattended because I'm sure you didn't lock your office. Am I right?"

Her face pales.

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Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:15 am

Good. It's about time people start fearing me and stop thinking I'm a pushover. I'm a Marino, and I will make an example out of those that disrespect me and my family name.

Changes are coming, and not everyone will be spared.

"I'd worry more about doing your job and keeping this place up to standards than worrying about where I park. Remember that next time I show up, because this is your only warning."

If looks could kill, I'd be dead. She clenches her jaw and glares at me while trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Even though I've been here multiple times, Darla doesn't know who I am.

Rhett pushes the doors open and jogs outside. "Hey Marino. What are you doing here? Are you up for a little run, or are you too busy?"

"Maybe later. I have a list of errands to do first."

"Alright. Hit me up later, and we can all get together for dinner and drinks." He jogs away with a wave.

I guess Coach Bobby's warning about staying in shape hit him hard. He hasn't been hitting the gym lately. At least not as often as he used to since he and Francesca got back together. Spencer was also on Coach Bobby's shit list, but not as much as Rhett.

Realization covers Darla's face. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Marino. Please don't-"

I grab the bags of cash from my trunk and glare at her as I walk through the main doors. I don't want to hear her excuses. I don't want to hear her beg me not to tell my father.

My father would never fire her. Mainly because she's closing in on sixty years old and retirement age. Dad has a soft spot for the elderly.

While I can understand his reasoning, and I respect my elders, we are running a business. We are very much for profit, and sometimes, a business has to fire its weakest employee in order to take the business to the next level.

I take the stairs to the second floor and make my way to Alexandra's apartment. After dropping the duffle bags, I take a deep breath and knock on her door.

There's no answer. There's not even any movement inside her apartment. Did she already move out? I was generous and gave her an entire month to find a new job and apartment.

I knock again, this time harder. The banging echoes through the hallway.

Shuffling footsteps sound from the other side of the door. The unlock clicks open and she cracks the door before slamming it in my face.

I raise my fist to knock again when I hear the chain slide open.

At least she's locking her door now.

She opens the door and stares at me. Her eyes are red and puffy, and she's wearing an oversized sweater that swallows her whole.

Has she been crying nonstop for the past week? That can't be healthy for her or the

baby. My heart aches as I think about the stress this is putting on the baby and the risks associated with my callousness.

I shake my head. She should have thought about that before she went behind my back and sold out my family.

I pick up the two duffle bags and hand them over to Alexandra. She hesitates at first, but eventually takes them. She drops the bags and squats down to open one of them.

She eyes the cash before zipping the bag back up and glaring at me. “What is the meaning of this? What is the cash for? Why are you showing up now?”

I look past her into her apartment. Taped up boxes litter the small living room while take out containers fill her trash can. It looks as if she’s locked herself away for the past week.

I clear my throat. “The money is for you and the baby, if you choose to keep it.” I say, with no emotion in my voice. “I wanted to hand it directly to you, so I knew you had it and would be set for life. Believe it or not, I don’t want you struggling.”

She holds her stomach as she stands and looks down at the bags of money. “Joseph, please let me explain.”

The pain in her voice threatens to tear me apart and change my mind, but I have to stay strong. I can’t give in now. “There’s nothing left to say, Alexandra. I want you out of my life. I want nothing to do with you or the baby.”

This will be the last time I speak her name.

She stares at me as tears fall down her cheeks. “Joseph, please-”

I spin around and leave. Her sobs echo through the hallway and tear at my heart, but I can't be with a traitor. Not after what my mother did.

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With time, she will move on and so will I.

I take the stairs two at a time. I need to get away from here. Away from her and any reminders of what could have been.

Grabbing my phone, I call Dad. He answers on the third ring. “What’s wrong, son?”

“We need to have a heart to heart and talk about the future of the Marino legacy. I have some ideas.”

“Great. I finished with my meetings early and am starving, so let’s grab a bite to eat.”

“I’ll meet you at Mario’s in ten minutes.”

I end the call and head straight to the restaurant. It will be good to do a checkup on the businesses we protect. Spencer usually handles it, but being the boss’s son, I need to make an appearance every once in a while.

I park on the side road and the laundromat that’s next door to Mario’s Pizzeria. The owner, Bruno, is sitting behind the counter changing the channels on the small television that’s hanging from the ceiling.

He stands up as soon as I pull the door open and step inside. “Mr. Marino, what can I do for you?”

“I’m just checking on things before I get a bite to eat with my father and making sure you are being taken care of.”

“Oh, yes, sir. I’m extremely grateful for the added protection. There hasn’t been an incident since the last time. The Reapers don’t come around anymore.”

“Good. That’s what I like to hear. Let me know if anyone ever causes problems. I’ll make sure you’re taken care of.”

“Thank you for everything.” He goes to the register. “Are you here to collect the payment as well?”

“No. I was just in the area and checking up on things. Keep with the same payment schedule.”

“I wanted to thank you for being so lenient when I got behind on my payments.”

“That’s no issue. Is the backroom working out for you?”

After he struggled to make payments, I came up with the idea of using the back storage room for weekly poker games. Of course, he pays me a small percentage for sending guys his way, but it’s turned his business around overnight.

“It’s been great. If there’s anything I can do to repay you, just let me know.”

“That’s not necessary. Your loyalty to my family is enough for now.”

When a small family comes inside to wash their clothes, I head next door to Mario’s Pizzeria. Mario and Lucia are in the kitchen cooking, while a few patrons occupy a couple of booths along the side wall.

They greet me with a friendly smile when they see me.

“Look who it is! Little Joey Marino. It’s been forever. And you’re not so little

anymore.”

“Hi, Lucia. How are you?”

The older woman rushes over to me and wraps her arms around my waist. “My God. If you put on any more muscle, I won’t be able to hug you.”

Mario comes out of the kitchen for a minute to give me his normal handshake, with a clap on my back. “It’s good to see you, son. How are things?”

Growing up, Mario’s door was always open to me when I would need to escape Dad’s overprotectiveness. Sure, he might have put me to work, but I knew I was safe here and Dad knew I was off the streets.

“Eh, you know how it is. Some good days and some bad days. The Reapers seem to have crawled back into the hole they came from, but that usually means they are plotting something.”

Mario lowers his voice. “How are things with Rossi?”

“Not good. He shot at Dad when he was entering the arena, and he tried to have me killed. I almost didn’t make it out of my burning car.”

“He’s playing with you guys. He wants you to be scared.”

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“I know. I’m planning to hit them before they can come after us again.”

“Be careful.” Lucia pats my arm. “I’m glad you are here because there’s something we need to tell you. We sold the restaurant and will be moving at the end of next month.”

I’ll have to meet the new owners and offer our services to them.

“That’s wonderful. Where are you moving to?”

Lucia beams. “Right outside of Tampa.”

“You two deserve it.”

“If you’re ever down that way, come visit us.”

“I will.”

Our conversation is cut off when Dad arrives. He orders us a pizza and an order of garlic knots. He greets Mario and Lucia, but their demeanor changes. I wonder if Dad ever said something to them about letting me come here when I was younger.

Lucia writes down the order and says, “Sit anywhere you’d like, and we will bring it out to you as soon as it’s ready.”

I thank them and offer them another smile before following Dad to a booth in the back corner of the restaurant.

Dad jumps straight to the chase. He's usually not one for small talk. "So, what do you want to tell me?"

"Well, the other night, Francesca started the idea and I've come up with a plan, but it all starts with bringing AJ and Uncle Tony into our future plans."

Dad's jaw clenches. I knew it was going to be a touchy subject, but I press on.

"We need to join forces in order to get rid of both Rossi and the Reapers. We need to attack the Rossi estate head on before they can come after us again. Unfortunately, we are spread too thin with several guys on the team and having to travel for games. Uncle Tony and AJ are always here and they have several great men."

Dad hesitates, but doesn't immediately shoot down the idea. "It's risky."

I nod in agreement. "The bigger the risk, the bigger the reward."

He reaches up and rubs his chin like he does when he's deep in thought. I can see it in his eyes that he's still not convinced. "Your plan seems pretty reckless and not fully thought out."

"Maybe, but don't you want to send them packing? Don't you want to live life without looking over your shoulder? What kind of future do you want for Franny and Rhett and the children they are going to bring into the world?"

At the mention of children, a stabbing pain gnaws at my heart. I have a child that's going to be brought into this world.

"What about the Reapers?" Dad asks, bringing me out of my thoughts.

"They are going to be harder to get rid of because we still don't know their true

identities. We thought they all worked for the city because that's what the Rossi informant, Justin Miller, said, but our findings were inconclusive."

"But there's still a chance they work for the city?"

"Maybe. I can't for sure say yes, but it would make sense if they did."

No one had bruises or busted lips after Gage and I started the bar fight, and believe me, we showed up early to city hall and looked at everyone who entered the building.

"We can put the Reapers on the back burner for now. I'll have Alvin look into the backgrounds of every city employee. I'll hire a few more security men to help with the extra workload."

Lucia brings our order of garlic knots and a large side of marinara over to us with two sodas. "Enjoy."

When she leaves, Dad grins and says, "Great work, Joseph. You keep proving yourself. I'm happy to let you take the lead on the Rossi plan if you want it."

"Hell yeah, I do."

"Then make me proud." He reaches for a garlic knot with a smile on his face.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:15 am

It's been a long time since I've seen Dad this carefree and happy. It makes me wonder if he's thinking about retirement, or maybe he's met a woman.

Either way, my plan is a go. All I have to do is wait for the supplies to arrive, then all hell will rain down on Giuseppe Rossi and anyone that stands in our way.

Chapter Seventeen

ALEXANDRA

I've stared at those two duffle bags for far too long. They sit by the door mocking me, as if they know I'm not going to do anything with them.

I've thought about throwing the bags in Joseph's face and telling him I don't want his bribe before setting them on fire. The look on his face might be worth losing out on half a million dollars.

The thought of leaking my pregnancy to the press and letting them know that Joseph Marino is a deadbeat, good-for-nothing dad also crossed my mind, but I don't want to draw attention to myself. I'm already showing more than I ever thought I would be this early in my pregnancy.

I've also thought about taking the money and moving far away where Giuseppe and his men won't find me. Maybe an island in the Caribbean or a Greek Isle where the views go on for days.

That has to be better than what I'm planning on doing with it. I'm going to give the

money to Giuseppe Rossi to pay for my father's debt.

Half of a million dollars should be more than enough to cover his debt and let me move on with my life.

Will I move, or will I try to stick around here and find another job? Could I work in the same town as Joseph and pretend nothing ever happened?

I throw on a pair of leggings and an oversized shirt and grab my phone, wallet, and keys. With the two duffle bags in hand, I make my way downstairs to my car. I toss the bags into the backseat and drive straight to the Rossi estate.

Traffic is minimal since it's the middle of the day during a work week.

When I pull up to the gate, I click the button and announce myself. The gate buzzes for a couple of seconds before opening.

No matter how many times I've met up with Giuseppe Rossi, I'm always nervous.

Will he accept the money in exchange for my father's freedom?

What will he think when I tell him I've been fired and banned from being around Arturo and Joseph?

Will he let dad and me walk away or will we always be on his radar?

I park in front of his house and carry the bags to the front door. The double doors open as soon as I step in front of them.

Two security officers immediately yank the bags out of my grasp and dump the contents on the floor in front of me.

“What the hell, guys? It’s not a weapon. It’s just cash for Mr. Rossi.”

The security guys inspect the bundles of money before throwing them back inside the duffle bags. Each man picks up a full bag of money.

“Come with us.” The taller man, Vincent, instructs.

He’s Giuseppe Rossi’s right hand man. Why is he standing guard at the front door? Did he see who was at the gate and came to meet me?

I follow the men down the hallway toward the room I was in last time. This time, I am led to a room with a giant metal table and chairs all around it.

Is this an interrogation room or a meeting room?

“Empty your pockets, and put all of your stuff on the table.” He barks out.

I do as I say, afraid of the consequences if I rebel.

He gathers up all of my stuff and shoves it in a small black bag before tossing the bag onto the duffle bags full of money.

What the hell is that about? Are they worried I will call Arturo or Joseph? I probably should have let someone know where I was going, even if it was just a note on my coffee table.

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“Sit here.” Vincent pulls out a chair and gestures for me to sit down.

“Is Giuseppe Rossi going to come talk to me? I don’t understand what’s going on? I thought I was just handing over the cash and he’d let my father go.”

The two men glance at each other before staring at me.

“We will let Mr. Rossi explain what is going on.” The other man says before turning around and leaving.

Vincent closes the door behind him, and I hear the distinct sound of a lock clicking into place.

“What the hell is going on?” I yell, but don’t receive an answer. Am I a prisoner? A hostage, or a bargaining chip? What did I do wrong?

I sit in the quiet room with nothing but my thoughts running wild. Is the excessive waiting part of the game? Are they trying to wear me down so I reveal my secrets?

I scoff. I don’t have any secrets. There’s nothing I can share with them that they probably don’t already know. Joseph cut me off a week ago. Arturo and Joseph could have already altered every plan I knew about.

After what feels like fifteen minutes, the lock clicks and the door opens. Giuseppe Rossi stands in the doorway, taking up the entire space. He looks pissed. He presses his lips into a thin line and narrows his eyes at me.

Vincent tosses the duffle bags into the corner of the room and sits in the seat at the head of the table. Giuseppe takes the seat across from me.

He slams a folder on the table between us. I jump from the sudden loud noise. Before I can question what is in the folder, Giuseppe speaks.

“The shipment was a bunch of junk. It was nothing but couches, tables, and mattresses.”

“What shipment?” I ask, trying to act innocent.

“The one you led me to believe was full of drugs. The one you said was a special order for Arturo himself.”

He yanks open the folder and spreads pictures of the merchandise across the table. There are white tufted couches with matching ottomans, wooden end tables that look to have been hand carved, and pallets full of mattresses.

“It was supposed to be full of drugs. I overheard Arturo on the phone and he specifically said there was over a million dollars’ worth of cocaine.”

That’s the lie that Arturo and I came up with before I even told Rossi about the shipment.

“Then where is it? Because that shipment was nothing but what these pictures show. What’s worse is that the cops showed up and arrested my men. All for some pieces of shit. You set us up, and for that, you must pay.”

“I’m telling you what Arturo said. You wanted me to relay any and all information, and that is exactly what I did.”

“You are a horrible liar.”

I stare at the pictures as I try to come up with more lies that will help me get out of this mess.

“What if Arturo had the drugs hidden in the furniture? Where is the furniture from the cargo delivery? I can help you tear them apart and find what you are looking for.”

Giuseppe’s eyes widen as he thinks about the possibility. “Son of a bitch.”

He swipes the pictures off the table in a fit of rage. “Arturo Fucking Marino bested me once again, but I won’t let him have the upper hand. Not this time.”

Giuseppe turns his anger on me. “What is he planning? What has been going on this week since our last check in?”

I don’t want to tell him that Joseph knows everything, but I have to. It’s my only hope of being released.

“I was fired and blocked from every account and email that belongs to the Marinos because they found out I was talking to you. They have the text messages and phone logs. They had me followed, and they saw me meet up with you.”

“That’s inconvenient, but not the worst thing to happen to us. I have other plans because, like them, I also had you followed.”

My mouth falls open as I let out a gasp.

How much does he know?

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When did he start having me followed? The night he made me start working for him?
Or after I was fired by Joseph?

My mouth dries up quicker than the Sahara Desert. He must know about the baby,
and that's why he is calm right now.

Would Giuseppe Rossi be that cruel? Would he really do something that will harm
me and my baby just to get back at Arturo Marino?

Does he even know Joseph is the father?

Giuseppe Rossi stands up with a sinister grin on his face. "Now, I just need to put my
plan into motion."

He walks out the door and heads toward the foyer. Vincent wraps his hand around my
arm and yanks me up.

"Ow. You don't have to be so rough. It's not like I'm fighting you or anything."

"If you think this is rough, wait until I get my hands on you later." His haughty tone
sends shivers down my spine. He pulls me out of the room and down the hallway to
the room I was thrown in last time.

This time, though, the room smells clean and there's a brand new mattress in the
corner.

Vincent shoves me inside the room. I lose my balance and fall forward. My knees

slam into the concrete a second before my hands reach out and break my fall. I stretch and lock my arms to keep my stomach from hitting the ground, but the impact is too hard.

Pain radiates through my wrist, and I cry out in pain.

Vincent chuckles from behind me. “Get used to the pain. There’s more coming.”

The door slams shut. The sound echoing off the walls of the near empty room. I’m scared to look back. Did Vincent leave, or is he still here with me? Is this the part where he delivers more pain?

I crawl toward the mattress, keeping all weight and pressure off my left wrist, and I don’t turn around until I am as close to the corner as I can get. Spinning around, I shove my back against the wall and scan the room. I’m alone.

I take a deep breath and glance at my wrist. I stretch it from side to side and up and down before rotating it to inspect the skin for any bruising. It looks normal. There’s no swelling or visual bruises, and it’s not broken.

Glancing down at my stomach, I run my hand along the side. The fall could have been so much worse than a hurt wrist. I don’t even want to think about the worst case scenario. I need to keep my focus on getting out of here alive.

The door opens and a very familiar woman walks in like she owns the place.

“Emily? What are you doing here?”

I haven’t seen her in months, not since The King’s Empire burnt down. When Arturo and I asked her to work in the new club, she said no and that she was pursuing other employment. I thought it was because The Reapers and the fire scared her, but now I

know otherwise.

She's been working for Giuseppe Rossi, but for how long? Was it after the club burnt down? Was it before?

"Well, you'd probably find out sooner than later anyway, so I might as well just tell you. I've been working for Mr. Rossi for about a year now."

Before the club burnt down.

She continues. "I was the one that revealed the drug trafficking to Mr. Rossi. Who do you think bought all of my supply? It was my idea to burn the club down and start working for him full time."

I cut her off, letting out the anger that's building. "Arturo was nothing but kind to you. He paid you more than any other employee, and he trusted you! How could you turn your back on him and betray him like this? How could you work for a cold hearted murderer like Giuseppe Rossi?"

She shrugs. "It's all about the money. Mr. Rossi was willing to pay me double what Arturo was."

"Why is it always about the money? Doesn't anyone stay loyal anymore?" Arturo handpicked each and every one of his employees. He vetted them, gave them a job, and treated them like family.

She leans her head back and laughs. "In this economy, money is everything. Sure, Arturo paid me well, but getting triple my salary was hard to turn down. Especially after Francesca started poking her nose where it didn't belong."

"What do you have against Francesca?" I ask with a bite to my tone.

“She acts like she’s part of this world, but she’s not.”

“That’s because her father and brother excluded her to protect her from the violence.
Why am I even arguing with you? There’s no point.”

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She's not going to be the one that helps me escape, so I don't need to keep her here.

Emily glances down at my stomach and asks, "How far along are you?"

I lean my head against the wall. "What? How do you know?"

"You keep rubbing your stomach and under your tear soaked face, you're glowing."

After several quiet moments, I just give in and tell her. "I just recently found out, but I should be around twelve and a half weeks. Give or take. I haven't been back to the obstetrician."

"Congratulations."

I narrow my eyes at her for a second. She seems genuine, like she doesn't wish any ill harm to me or the baby.

"Yeah, thanks."

Footsteps echo down the hallway, getting louder the closer they come. Giuseppe Rossi steps into the room holding a camera. "Look at the camera."

The flash temporarily blinds me.

He takes several more before saying, "I need an excellent picture of you to send to Arturo and Joseph Marino. You are going to be my bargaining chip."

I roll my eyes and blurt out, “They don’t care about me or the baby.”

My eyes widen as I register my slip up.

Oops. That wasn’t supposed to come out. If he knows they don’t care about me or the baby, he may kill us just for the hell of it.

A sinister grin stretches across his wrinkled face. “They will when they find out it’s the future heir to the Marino mafia. You are their only hope for an heir because, according to Jax, Francesca is infertile and unable to produce an heir.”

I feel the blood rush from my face. Francesca wants to be a mom so badly she’s already trying to conceive.

How will she feel when, month after month, her tests come back negative? How devastating will it be when I have to tell her she’s infertile?

Will I crush her dream of becoming a mom when I show off my bump? How could I flaunt my pregnancy in her face like that?

How will she ever forgive me?

Chapter Eighteen

JOSEPH

The sweet smell of coffee cake floats downstairs and into the gym where I’m currently running on the treadmill, trying to escape from my problems. My stomach betrays me and growls like a beast.

It’s been years since I’ve smelt fresh coffee cake baking in our house. Mom used to

make one every Saturday morning, and the four of us would sit around the table and eat and talk. Mom and Dad would sip on their coffees while Francesca and I would chug our hot cocoas and beg for a second cup.

Dad tried to keep up the tradition after Mom's death, but it just wasn't the same without her. By the time we moved to Savannah, it was a long forgotten tradition, never to happen again.

So, who's baking a coffee cake upstairs right now? And why this late in the day?

My stomach lets out another growl, like it's begging for a piece of cake and a cup of cocoa. Well, now, I'd drink a cup of coffee, but my stomach can't distinguish the age difference.

With another growl, I stop the treadmill. I guess my workout is over. Grabbing my bottle of water and towel, I jog upstairs to see who is responsible for my shortened workout.

Francesca is dancing around the kitchen while singing along to the upbeat pop song that's playing on the local radio station. There are mixing bowls and spatulas piled high in the sink. One coffee cake is cooling on the stove as another one bakes in the oven.

Dad is sitting at the counter reading the newspaper, like he used to when Mom was alive. Well, before her first death.

"What's the meaning of the coffee cake? Are you trying to bring back happier memories or something?"

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Francesca spins around and slams her hand over her chest. “Joey, oh my God, why don’t you give me a heart attack?”

I chuckle and take a seat next to Dad. He hands me the sports section, like he did when I was a kid and just getting into sports. “It’s not like it’s quiet here. You have the radio playing and you’re singing.”

She scowls. “But I wasn’t expecting you to come upstairs for another fifteen minutes.”

“Well, tell that to my stomach because he decided my workout was over and it was time to grab a mid-afternoon snack.”

“This one will be done in five minutes. I just need to get plates and forks and put the dishes in the dishwasher.”

I get off my stool and head to the dishes. “I’ll load the dishwasher.”

“This is just like old times.” She says as she reaches around me to rinse off her hands.

“Speaking of old times, why are you baking coffee cakes at four thirty in the afternoon?”

“Because it’s time to bring back some of our traditions. Even though Mom is dead, for real this time, we are still a family and should act like one.”

I narrow my eyes at her before loading the dishes into the dishwasher. There has to be

another reason. Why would she wake up today and feel the urge to bake?

“Are you sure there isn’t another reason?” I ask as I sit back down on the stool next to Dad.

“Like what?” She sets three plates down on the table in our normal spots and lays a fork on each plate.

We stare at each other as we try to gauge who has a bigger secret. Growing up, she always had the bigger secrets, but she would find a way to turn the questioning around to me. I’d end up confessing to something else just to keep Mom and Dad from finding out what I was really hiding.

“Maybe you and Rhett have something to share with the rest of us?”

Dad lays down his section of the newspaper to listen to our conversation.

Francesca rolls her eyes. “Well, Rhett and I do want a family. Everyone knows that.”

Dad looks at Francesca, like he’s about to scold her. “But not until you two are married, right?”

Francesca laughs. “We are getting married this summer. Even if I got pregnant right away, I wouldn’t have a baby before then.”

She glares at me before taking the coffee cake out of the oven and placing it on the stove next to the other one.

“Fran, you know how I feel about having babies out of wedlock.”

She interrupts him. “Daddy, I’m not pregnant, but yeah, let’s discuss having a baby

out of wedlock. It's not like anyone will really know. Uncle Tony, AJ, and Angelica are the only ones that keep in touch, and they won't judge me."

Dad pinches the bridge of his nose. "After all the trouble of you dating the Rossi heir, the last thing I need to worry about is you bringing a child into the middle of this war."

Francesca leans across the bar and kisses his cheek. "Relax, Daddy. I am not pregnant. Rhett would be here if I were, and as you can see, he's not."

Her gaze lingers on me for a second too long before she cuts the coffee cake and brings it over to the table. "Come on and eat before it gets cold."

I grab a cup of coffee and refill Dad's cup before joining them at the table.

When the cake is plated, Francesca bounces in her chair like a child.

"So?" she asks as I take a bite.

I nod as the cinnamon flavor explodes in my mouth. "This is really good, Franny. Thanks for baking it."

"That's not what I meant."

Dad glances from me to her and back to me. "What's going on?"

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I shrug. “I’d like to know as well because this is awkward as hell.”

Francesca grins and blurts out. “You’re going to be a dad!”

Her statement catches me off guard. I drop my fork with a loud clang and growl out, “How the hell do you know about that?”

She waves me off. “I was with Alexandra when she bought you the present.”

Dad grins with a bite of cake a mere inch from his mouth. “Alexandra is pregnant with my first grandchild? I’m going to be a Nonno?”

I glare at Francesca before turning my attention to Dad. “No, you’re not.”

He places his bite of cake back on his plate and scratches his head. “What do you mean? If she’s pregnant with your child, why won’t I be a Nonno? Or is the baby not yours?”

“All you have to know is that I took care of it, and I’d like to stop talking about it now.” I stab another bite of the cake with my fork and shove it in my mouth. I should have known Francesca had ulterior motives for baking the coffee cakes. She’s never baked before.

Dad places his hands in his lap and speaks slowly, like he’s trying hard not to show his anger. “What do you mean you took care of it? Where is Alexandra? Are you the reason I no longer have an executive assistant working for me?”

I turn to face him. “Alexandra lied to me. She lied to all three of us. Hell, she even lied about her name. She’s been working with Giuseppe Rossi for God knows how long. There are pages upon pages of text messages and calls between the two of them.”

Francesca huffs and drops her fork on her plate. “What did you do?”

“I fired her and then gave her a bag of cash to make her disappear. I told her I didn’t want anything to do with her or the baby. I can’t be with someone like her. Someone who can betray me like that without a second thought.”

Dad clenches his jaw and Francesca glares at me. They are pissed. Francesca jumps out of her seat and yanks her purse off the counter.

“I’ve got to go check on her. I’ll call you later, Dad.” She slams the door behind her.

Dad sighs. “Joey, I wish you came to me sooner. Actually, I wish I put two and two together because all of this could have been avoided.”

“What’s going on?”

“I need to tell you the truth about what’s been going on. Alexandra came to me a while ago and told me Giuseppe Rossi had kidnapped her and her father. He gave her no choice but to spy on us and leak information to him.”

Anger and guilt build inside me. What did I do? “You knew?”

“It was my idea to leak fake information to Giuseppe Rossi every few days. It was his idea for the two of them to meet in person.”

“The furniture shipment was your idea too, wasn’t it?”

“It was. She didn’t want you to get hurt and now I know why, but I told her to leave you and Francesca in the dark about our plan. The fewer people that knew, the more convincing it would be to Rossi and his men.”

I stare down at the cake on my plate, feeling like the worst person in the world. “I really fucked up, didn’t I?”

Dad lets out a deep breath. “That depends on what happened to Alexandra and how you plan on making it up to her and your child.”

His phone goes off with a text message. He opens the message and stares at his screen with a frown. I watch, frozen in my spot, as his frown turns to pure, unadulterated anger.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” I finally ask.

He spins his phone around, showing me his screen. I take the phone to get a closer look at the picture he was just sent. My heart drops into my stomach.

It’s a picture of Alexandra sitting on a thin as shit mattress on the floor. She has tucked herself into the corner of the room with her knees pressed as close to her chest as she can get them. Her eyes are red and puffy, like she’s been crying for days.

“You need to fix this, and you need to fix this now.” Dad takes his phone back as it chimes with another message.

“I will figure out a way to get her out of there and to make things right.”

I have to. This is all my fault. I’m responsible for the tears in her eyes and the ache in her chest.

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Dad spins the phone around to show me the message.

If you want to live to see your heir, come to the fort at six tonight. Come alone or else.

There's no way I'm letting Dad go to the fort tonight, let alone by himself.

"You're not going. I'm going to put an end to this once and for all."

"This is a risky plan, Joseph. Alexandra isn't going to be with him and you know it. There's a reason he wants to meet alone at the fort, and I should be the one to find out why."

"We all know why. He's going to kill you. He's been trying to kill you, and he isn't going to stop just because Alexandra is pregnant with my child. If anything, he will want to kill her and the baby to put an end to our family line."

My hand slams down on the table, causing our forks to clang against the glass plates.

Dad's voice is much calmer than mine. "That's exactly why I need to be the one to go to the fort. He wants me there. You can assemble a team and go get Alexandra tonight."

"And just let you walk to your death? Over my dead fucking body, will that happen?"

"Alexandra and your baby need you."

“And the family needs you. I know I’ll take over one day when you retire, but that day is not tomorrow. And it sure as fuck isn’t going to be because you died.”

I have to clench my jaw and gnash my teeth to keep from telling Dad what I really think of his decision-making skills right now. He’s not thinking clearly. He’s not thinking about the future.

“You are more than capable of running things. Sure, it might be harder on you when you have away games, but that’s why you will have a right-hand man.”

“Look, Dad, I don’t want to argue. I respect the hell out of you, but how could I live with myself if something happened to you at the fort? How will Franny react to losing both parents so close together?”

Dad closes his eyes for a moment. “I want you to bring a tracking device in case Giuseppe has other plans in mind. I’ll have Alvin pull it up on the television, and we will track you the entire time until you are back home.”

I nod. “That’s a reasonable request that I can comply with.”

“I’ll call Alvin and see if he can come over. You can grab a tracker out of the security room and message your sister and let her know you are going to meet Giuseppe.”

I start to protest, but Dad holds up his hand. “She’s probably worried she can’t find Alexandra. The least you can do is let your sister know Rossi has Alexandra.”

I pull out my phone and send a quick message to Francesca.

Dad wants me to let you know I’m going to the fort to meet up with Giuseppe. He also has Alexandra at his house.

She immediately replies.

Are you a fucking idiot? Please tell me you aren't serious. Don't go to the fort. That's where he brings men to die.

Giuseppe wants Dad to come. I volunteered to go in his place. It's better this way. I'm bringing a tracker, so all is well.

Don't do this, Joey. Don't go. Let's think of another plan.

I can hear the desperation in her voice.

Bring Rhett over to the house. You can watch my every move on the television and keep Dad company. I'll have my guns.

I tuck my phone into my pocket and head to the other side of the house where the security wing is. Grabbing two of the trackers, I tuck one into my sock and one into my pocket.

If, for some reason, Giuseppe gets ahold of me and searches my belongings, they will find the one tracker in my pocket and not look for a second one.

I make my way to the living room where Dad is talking to Alvin on the phone and trying to get the television input changed.

My phone chimes with a message.

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We are on our way. Rhett is going to ride with you. Drop him off a couple of blocks away so it will look like you are alone. Don't argue about this, please.

I don't bother messaging her back. They will be here in a few minutes.

"Do you need help, Dad?"

He shakes his head before banging the remote on the table. "Dead batteries. I'll have to get new ones."

He listens to what Alvin says while getting two new batteries out of the television stand drawer. He quickly changes the batteries before ending the call. "Alvin is pulling in now. He was already on his way here to do an update on the system."

"Francesca and Rhett should be here in a few minutes."

Dad doesn't say anything. He sits down on the couch as if he's carrying the weight of the entire world on his shoulders.

A few minutes later, the back door opens. Alvin, Francesca, and Rhett walk in.

"Let's go." I say, looking at Rhett. "The sooner we get there, the sooner we can eat dinner."

"No complaints from me."

Francesca wraps her arms around his waist. I leave the two alone to have their

moment and head over to Alvin and Dad.

“I have two trackers, so don’t be alarmed when you get it up and running.”

Rhett and I get in my car and head to the fort. I circle the parking lot before parking along the tree edge and letting him out.

He leans through the open window. “I’ll keep to the edges and look out for any of his men. I’ll make sure I have eyes on you at all times. If shit hits the fan, just give the signal.”

When I first met him and the team, the signal they used to alert one another was always a loud whistle. The whistle always drew attention, so we switched to a bird call.

“Will do. Don’t get caught.”

He dips behind a row of trees as I drive off. I park next to Giuseppe’s car and slowly walk along the paved path to the footbridge that goes over the moat that’s surrounding the fort.

Giuseppe is standing on the bridge alone. “So the great Arturo Marino sends his son?”

“No. I came on my own. Why did you want to meet with my father?”

“I wanted to hash things out with him, man to man.”

“It’s a little too late for that, don’t you think?”

We stare at one another for a few moments before he turns away and walks deeper

into the fort.

“It’s never too late to forgive. That’s a lesson you can take with you for the rest of your life.”

He seems weird and not like his usual self. Did something happen to Alexandra? Is regret sinking in?

“Would you like a glass of wine?” He picks up a picnic basket from one of the benches along the walkway.

“No, thank you. I need to stay in peak performance. I have back-to-back games coming up.”

That, and I don’t trust him not to poison me.

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot you have a career besides the criminal lifestyle. Your mother was proud of you. She talked about you and Francesca all the time.”

“What the fuck is going on?” I ask bluntly.

He glances my way. His expression is softer, almost kinder. “I told you, I came here to hash out old problems. It’s a stepping stone, so to speak.”

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Is he sick? Is he really trying to make amends? I feel like I stepped into an alternate dimension.

“Well, if you really want to hash out old problems and make things right, you can start by releasing the mother of my child.”

A smirk forms on his face. “I’m not done with her just yet. She still has a purpose to fulfill.”

My fists clench as anger fills my veins. I will get Alexandra out of his house, and there will be hell to pay for anyone involved in her kidnapping.

Chapter Nineteen

ALEXANDRA

Giuseppe Rossi took my pictures and left. He hasn’t been back since. I don’t know if it’s been hours or days.

I’ve cried off and on and even napped when my eyes refused to stay open. I’ve tried counting, but that’s not really entertaining.

There’s no way for me to escape this room. I’ve tried twice. There are no windows to crawl out of, the door locks from the outside, and the air conditioner vent is too narrow.

My only option to get out of this room is for Giuseppe or Vincent to let me out, and

that's as likely to happen as a unicorn coming to save me.

The lock tumbles on the door a second before the metal hatch swings open. Vincent steps into the doorway with a smirk on his face. "I think it's time for some family bonding time. You two can get reacquainted."

He shoves Dad into the room with me. Dad is skinnier than the last time I saw him. His hair is longer and matted in the back and he looks like he needs a shower.

"Talk, and enjoy captivity with one another." Vincent slams and locks the door behind him.

Dad walks to the other side of the room and sits on the mattress in the corner. "It really is good to see you again, Alex. You grew into a very beautiful woman. I hear you are pretty successful, too."

I lean back against the wall, not in the mood for friendly small talk.

"I had no choice but to work my ass off. I was lucky to find the job I did, especially without a college degree."

"You could have found another job. You didn't have to go straight to the mafia boss in town and beg for a job."

I sigh. Clearly he's not going to shut up, but maybe if I don't engage too much, he will stop talking. "I didn't beg."

There might have been some desperate pleading, but I didn't really beg for the job. We were both equally desperate at the time. He needed someone to keep him organized and on time for his meetings, and I needed a job to get a place of my own and a car.

His voice is as soft as a whisper. It's the opposite of what I've known. "Alex, I didn't mean it like that. I just meant that there are less risky jobs out there. You didn't have to go straight to Arturo Marino and the life of crime."

I mentally roll my eyes. He's one to talk. Most of the money he used for gambling was acquired illegally.

"For the most part, I sit at a desk and answer phone calls and reply to emails. My life was never at risk until you came to town and painted a target on my back."

That is technically not true, but I was a whole hell of a lot safer with Joseph and the guys watching out for me. I never would have had to lie and pretend to be working for Rossi if Dad was still in the hellhole he calls home.

He clears his throat and speaks louder. "You could have graduated high school, gone to college, got your degree, and found a great job back home."

My dry laugh echoes throughout the room.

Is he fucking for real?

"With lots of help and advice from Arturo, I got my GED and driver's license. I don't need a degree to get a great job because I already have a great job. The pay is amazing, the benefits are better than anywhere else, and I'm always surrounded by great people that always take my thoughts and opinions into consideration."

"I don't understand why you felt the need to run away and change your name. You were always so dramatic as a child. I'm surprised you didn't get a job in acting or theater."

I scoff as he tries to pretend my childhood wasn't that bad, like I made it all up on my

own.

“The only smiling picture I have from my childhood is from my eighth birthday. I wanted a cake so bad, but you and Mom never celebrated my birthday. Mrs. Edith found me crying on the front porch and snuck me a tiny cupcake. After I ate it, she took my picture.”

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“So because we didn’t want you addicted to sugar, we were terrible parents?” I can see him rolling his eyes from here.

I ball my hands into fist and fight the urge to punch the wall beside me. “No, not because you didn’t want me addicted to sugar. Have you really forgotten what happened that day? What event made me grow up instantly and leave my childhood behind?”

He doesn’t speak. He is either ignoring my questions, or because of the decades of drug and alcohol abuse, he really doesn’t remember what happened all those years ago.

So, I share the events with him.

“Two hours after I ate the cupcake, my life turned into a living nightmare. Mom overdosed and fell through the glass coffee table. The police dropped off an eviction notice because you gambled all our money away and didn’t pay rent. You came home drunk and saw Mom unconscious and blamed me for not being a better daughter.”

I wish I could forget the events that day, erase them from my memory, and replace them with happier ones.

“That’s not true.” Dad’s voice is full of disbelief, as if I read that scenario in a horror story and claimed it was my life.

No longer able to sit here calmly, I stand up and take a few steps in his direction.

“We lost everything that day! The house, our clothes, my toys, and all our belongings. Hell, I even lost my friends because you kept borrowing money from their parents to feed your addiction. Gambling and getting high was your only priority.”

“You make me sound like a monster, like I’m the villain and you are the princess.”

I sit back down on my mattress and shrug. I wouldn’t have used the words villain and princess, but that sums up my childhood.

“If the shoe fits. You didn’t just hit me that day, you unleashed your anger on me and lost control. I was an innocent little girl, and you beat me until I was an inch from death. You threatened to kill me if I told anyone the truth, so I had to lie to the police just to get medical attention.”

He gives a half-suppressed laugh. “There you go, exaggerating again. I’ve never almost killed you. If I wanted you dead, I would have killed you a long time ago. It would have saved me a lot of money.”

I inhale deeply and clench my teeth together. I can’t lose my temper right now. At least not while I’m a hostage in Giuseppe Rossi’s house.

“I don’t know what fantasyland you’re living in, but you need to snap back to reality. I had to get over twenty stitches. Two of my ribs were cracked. My ankle and wrist were broken. Bruises covered my body, and my right eye was swollen shut.”

I squeeze my eyes tightly together to keep the tears from falling. I won’t let him win. I’m not the helpless girl I was once. I’ve grown up and made a life for myself. Besides, Giuseppe Rossi and Vincent don’t need any more dirt on my family.

But even that thought doesn’t keep me from continuing my tirade.

“I snuck out of every seedy hotel we stayed in because I didn’t feel safe being that close to you. I stayed late at school just so I wouldn’t have to be around you. How Mom was able to stay sober is a mystery because you left your drugs lying around like you wanted her to kill herself.”

“That would have been a better ending to our story.”

Against my better judgment, I lower my voice and calmly ask, “What happened to Mom?”

“She divorced me for some rich banker the year after you left. As far as I know, they moved to California and started their own family.”

My heart constricts with pain. Mom started another family without trying to look for me? I shouldn’t be surprised, but I am. She wasn’t the best mother I could have asked for, but she was nowhere near as bad as Dad.

“Good for her.” I reply dryly.

“Don’t be jealous, Alex. I heard the guys you work with are professional hockey players. Talk about unlimited income. You should get knocked up by one of them. You will be set for life.”

I want to say too late, but I keep my baby and the father a secret. If anyone would blackmail Joseph for millions of dollars, it’s my dad.

I scoot closer to the corner and close my eyes. Concentrating on my breathing will help me relax and focus on my true problem- getting out of here. If the light wasn’t on, I’d probably be able to sleep some.

Dad huffs and mumbles from the other side of the room, but I ignore him. I never

should have gotten that upset about my childhood. It's not healthy for the baby, and it happened a long time ago. Dad is dead to me. His opinions and excuses don't matter anymore.

I let my thoughts wander to Joseph, Francesca, and Arturo.

Do they know I'm locked up here?

Did Giuseppe send them the pictures he took of me?

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Do they even care?

Will Joseph feel guilty for everything he's done when he learns the truth about me working for Giuseppe?

Will anyone try to come save me?

Will my dad get to go free while I stay a prisoner? I gave Rossi a lot of money for Dad's freedom.

I'm so deep in thought that I barely register the lock on the door being unlocked. Giuseppe Rossi comes into the room.

He claps his hands together. "Well, now we wait."

"Wait for what?" I ask, with no enthusiasm in my tone.

"Wait for Arturo to meet me at the fort tonight. It's going to be an eventful evening. I'll make amends for my wrongdoings, and then I'll kill him like I've killed many unsuspecting men before him. It will be over before he even knows what's happening."

"Do you really think Arturo is going to come unarmed? He's not going to be that stupid."

"I'm not planning on shooting him. I have a very expensive bottle of wine that just happens to be mixed with thallium."

“Thallium?”

“It’s the best ingredient to poison someone. Many murderers used it because it is tasteless and odorless. I will start by telling him I want to make amends and then I’ll offer him a glass of wine. Within minutes, his vision will blur, and depending on how much he drinks, he will be dead.”

My heart races as I picture Arturo drinking the poisoned wine.

Changing the subject, I say, “Why isn’t my father free? I paid his debt.”

Giuseppe rubs his chin. “You did pay for his freedom, and I was going to release him, but he will just rack up more debt. There really isn’t anything we can do to help addicts. Trust me, I know.”

I scoff. “So I gave you half of a million dollars for nothing?”

He cocks his head to the side. “It was to prove my point.”

“What point?”

Why is he speaking in riddles?

“That your father isn’t really dead to you. You care about him, even though you pretend to hate him.”

“He is dead to me. You could kill him now and I wouldn’t shed a tear for him.”

Dad flinches on the other side of the room.

A smirk forms on Giuseppe’s face. “Is that so? Then why did you get the money?”

You could have left town with it, never to be seen again.”

I shrug. “It was either work for you to pay for his debt or you kill me. I was fired so I couldn’t keep up with my end of the deal, so I gave you the money instead.”

He seems amused by my answer, like he wasn’t expecting me to be this honest or trustworthy. To his credit, it is hard to find honest men in this industry. Giuseppe lifts his arm, points his gun straight at Dad, and pulls the trigger.

I can’t stop the scream that comes out of my mouth.

Blood splatters everywhere. It stains the mattress, floor, walls, and even my clothes.

Giuseppe pulls the trigger three more times before holstering his gun and saying, “There. Problem solved. No more addict wasting our time and energy.”

I keep my gaze off Dad, but I can hear his body slump over and fall to the ground. He might not have been the best father growing up, but he didn’t deserve this to be his last moment.

It’s kind of my fault, too, for challenging Giuseppe Rossi like I did, but I never expected him to kill Dad.

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The saying is true, be careful what you wish for because it may come true, and rarely do wishes come true exactly as you have imagined.

The metallic smell of blood wafts over to me, causing my stomach to turn.

I can't throw up right now. Not here, and not in front of them. Besides, I don't have anything on my stomach and would prefer to keep the embarrassment of dry heaving to myself.

"Why am I still here? You have my money, my father is no longer a problem, and you are about to kill Arturo. What purpose do I serve? Just let me go so I can move on with my life and raise my baby away from this lifestyle."

He glances toward Dad's lifeless body. "I haven't decided what I'm going to do with you yet. I don't like the idea of a baby Marino running around and growing up full of revenge just to cause me problems in twenty years, but I don't see the harm in letting you raise your child away from here."

I don't speak as I watch his expression change several times. It would be poetic justice for my child to come back and kill him for everything he's put me through, but I don't want my child growing up and resorting to a life of crime.

"Hmm, decisions, decisions." He rubs his chin. "For now, just sit still and wait for my return. I'll have Emily bring you some food."

He leaves the room without another word.

When I am alone, I glance at Dad's body and choke down a sob. He lost his life because of me.

The door opens, and Emily walks in carrying a tray of food.

"Don't feel guilty." She starts to say before walking over to me. "Mr. Rossi was never going to allow your father to walk out the front door. He was too much of a liability."

Is that supposed to make me feel better? I risked my lifetime and time again for Giuseppe Rossi. I paid my father's debt when I could have moved away and started my life over again.

"If that was the plan all along, then why am I still here? The Marinos will not talk to me or come save me, so if that's Giuseppe's plan, he shouldn't get his hopes up."

Emily places the tray of food on the mattress in front of me.

I shake my head. "I can't eat right now."

"You need to eat. Your baby needs you to eat so he or she can grow."

"How am I supposed to eat with my father's dead body ten feet away?"

She glances to the other side of the room and nods. "Alright. Follow me and carry your tray, but if you try to escape, I won't hesitate to shoot you."

She shows me the gun at her hip for good measure.

"I understand, and I won't try to escape." I'd be lying if the thought didn't cross my mind, though, but being this weak won't get me far. Plus, they have my car.

I follow her down the hallway, past the interrogation room and into the room I was in the first time Giuseppe kidnapped me.

“This room is clean.” Emily gestures for me to head inside.

The room is different from the last time I was here. There is a newish mattress in the corner and a solid metal table and chair against the other wall.

“You can eat on the mattress or at the table. I’ll bring a cover for you. Try to get some sleep while Mr. Rossi is gone because you never know what kind of mood he’s going to be in when he returns.”

It sounds like a warning, and one that I should take seriously.

“Thank you for the food and blanket.”

I head over to the table and stare at the food. Is it poisoned? If he will poison the wine for Arturo, there’s no chance that he will spare my life.

My stomach growls at the smell of the warm food.

Am I stupid for wanting to eat the food? There’s no telling how long I will be locked up, so I can turn food away when it does come.

With my mind made up, I scarf down the chicken parmigiana, spaghetti, and garlic bread. I don’t even hear Emily return, but when my stomach is full, I head to the mattress where a nice comforter is laying on top.

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Opting to get some rest, I turn the overhead light off and slowly make my way back to the mattress.

I'll feel better when I'm not sleep deprived. I just hope Giuseppe Rossi doesn't return in a foul mood because my life remains in his hands.

But if he were to return in a good mood, then that would mean he was successful in killing Arturo, and that's not something my pregnant heart can handle.

Chapter Twenty

JOSEPH

Unable to get any rest, I roll out of bed and get dressed for my morning workout with the team. I tossed and turned all night, wondering how I was going to get Alexandra to forgive me.

After the meeting at the fort, Rhett and I drove toward my house, but circled back around and followed Giuseppe to his house, where he waited out front until a box truck picked up several pallets of taped up boxes and crates.

Vincent and three other men followed the box truck as it left, so Rhett and I had no choice but to come home.

Dad and Alvin were just as clueless as we were. Francesca wondered if he was moving his supply because he knew we would come for Alexandra.

I want to stop him before he prepares more than he already has. I want it to hurt when I destroy his house. I want him to feel every ounce of pain he's ever caused my family before watching the life drain from his eyes.

Grabbing my phone, I send a group text to Rhett, Spencer, and Gage.

If you are awake, meet me at the arena gym in fifteen minutes.

rhett

I'd rather stay in bed with your sister. It's not even six. Team workout isn't for another two and a half hours. I mean this as nicely as I can, but fuck off.

spencer

The sun's not even up yet. Bang one out, and go back to sleep. We can meet up in two hours.

gage

I don't have anyone to cuddle with, but I don't think working out for an extra two hours is wise. Coach is going to be pissed. He has a long workout planned for the team.

spencer

I like my bed right now. Savannah is a better cuddler than you. Do you need a blow-up doll or a pocket pussy?

I shove my phone into my shorts pocket and grab my keys before quietly making my way down the stairs to the garage. When I am situated in the driver's seat, I send a

reply.

Look, I fucked up. Big time. I am asking as your friend to meet me at the gym to blow off some frustration and let me vent before you give me advice. This isn't just personal. This is family related.

I head toward the arena, driving like I'm the only person on the road. Most people aren't heading to work yet, so traffic is light.

I park in my normal spot and unlock the back door. It's no surprise that I'm the first person here. The sun hasn't even risen.

Checking my phone for any missed messages, I see a reply from Gage.

Alright, I'm up. I'm making a protein shake, and then I will head over. Do you want one?

I'll make a whole blender and bring it over. I have a feeling we are going to need it.

I don't bother sending a reply, as they should be heading over in the next few minutes. I head to the gym and turn the surround sound up until near deafening volume. I play the normal work out playlist and start my workout by lifting weights.

I can't help but let my thoughts run wild. Is this what my life has turned into? Working out alone at six in the morning because I'm miserable and can't sleep?

The guys have their lives and their women, and here I am, pulling them away because I fucked up.

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The gym doors open and all three men walk in looking like they are still half asleep.

Gage places the blender on the side table before grabbing some paper water cups from the cabinet. Rhett heads over to the surround sound and turns the volume down while Spencer hops on a treadmill.

Rhett runs a hand through his hair. “So, what’s going on?”

Where to start?

I open my mouth and blurt out, “I’m going to be a dad.”

That seems to get their attention.

Rhett’s mouth falls open, and Spencer’s eyes widen to the size of plates. The only guy that shows very little emotion is Gage, and that’s because he’s the only one beside me that knew.

After AJ left, I opened the bag from Alexandra. Gage was sitting beside me and saw the gifts.

“That’s amazing.” Rhett says before coming over to me to give me a clap on the back.

Spencer narrows his eyes for a second. “So, how did you fuck it up? I’m assuming it’s related to becoming a father, since that’s the first thing you said.”

I lay my dumbbells down and glance at Gage as he pours us all a shake.

He's the only one that knew, and he didn't say anything. I didn't even ask him to keep it to himself. He just did.

"Before I tell you what I did, I need to tell you who it is so you can understand why I did what I did."

The three men stare at me like they are waiting for me to confess to my sins.

"The mother of my baby is Alexandra." Someone gasps, but I continue. "I hired a private investigator to dig into her past and what she's been up to because she changed so suddenly. She started acting weird, so I went with my gut."

I pick up my weights and continue my workout, needing the distraction.

Rhett sits on the weight bench across from me and asks, "How was she acting weird? Like she was hiding something?"

"She started attending every meeting my dad and I had, regardless if she was needed, and she took notes all the time and then would immediately get on her phone. It was almost like she was texting someone."

Spencer interrupts. "And you were jealous, thinking she was messaging another man?"

I glare at him. "That thought wasn't the deciding factor. She wanted more with me and I said no. Then, when I realized she was the woman I wanted, she immediately said no."

Spencer shakes his head and turns up the speed on the treadmill. "Hell hath no fury."

Gage and Rhett laugh as I flip them off.

Rhett drops his dumbbells and downs his shake. “I still don’t see where you fucked up.”

I sigh. “The detective found out Alexandra was busy calling, texting, and meeting with Giuseppe Rossi. I confronted her and promptly fired her before giving her a bag of cash and telling her I never wanted to see her or the baby ever again.”

Rhett gapes at me. “Yikes.”

Spencer whistles. “Damn, dude. Are you sure she was meeting with Rossi? She was your dad’s assistant.”

I place my dumbbells back on the rack and stretch out my muscles. “Yeah, she even admitted to it, but I was an asshole who wouldn’t listen to her reasoning. Come to find out, she was kidnapped and was forced to work with Rossi, but my dad knew the entire time.”

I shake my head. “My dad knew she was being framed. He knew she changed her name and was emancipated at seventeen. He knew her father was an alcoholic and a habitual gambler who had anger issues. He knew everything about her, and I didn’t. She didn’t share anything with me, but never hesitated to let me fuck her.”

Now that I know the truth, I feel hurt and confused. Why wouldn’t she share her past with me? What was she afraid of?

Gage chimes in as he starts the treadmill. “Maybe look at this situation in a different light. That is a lot of personal stuff you don’t share with someone right away. That’s something you wait to share until you have been dating for a few months. You two weren’t dating.”

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That is one way to look at things. Dad did say that he found out about her family before he hired her, but he never mentioned it until she came to him about the Rossi situation.

I shake my head and get to the point. “Well, Alexandra’s been kidnapped again by Rossi, and he knows about the baby. I wouldn’t put it past him to kill the heir of the Marino empire.”

Gage throws his hands up in the air. “What the fuck are we doing here, then? Let’s go get her. That is more important than the team workout.”

“Believe me. I want to get her. Hell, I wanted to get her last night, but I’m waiting for a shipment to arrive. Then we can put my other plan in motion.”

When Spencer gets off his treadmill, I hop on and set it to a fast run.

Gage reaches over and lightly punches my arm before grabbing his bottle of water in the cup holder. “You’re going to overdo it before our back-to-back games tomorrow, and Coach Bobby will bench you to make an example out of you.”

“I need to figure out a way to fix everything. I need to make things right. I need to show Dad I’m mature enough to take on more responsibilities and run the empire.”

Gage chokes on his water. “Is he retiring?”

My heart races, and my breathing turns into pants as my muscles burn from the fast-paced run. I turn the speed down and say, “No, he’s not retiring. At least not yet. Not

as long as I'm on the team."

"Do you want to take everything over?"

I've never really had a choice. This is how I grew up. This lifestyle was ingrained in my upbringing.

I shrug. "That has always been the plan. I've followed in his footsteps, and I've learned how to run the business side of things as well as the political side of things."

Rhett interjects. "But that doesn't mean you want to take over the Marino empire. Would you rather take over the family side of things or continue with your hockey career?"

"Honestly? I'm not sure. I love hockey, I love the game, and I love skating, but I'm tired of all the travel. I always figured I'd play until Dad retired or I started a family, and now that Alexandra is pregnant, I want to be stationary as much as possible."

Rhett raises an eyebrow. "Are you thinking about retiring from hockey?"

"If Alexandra takes me back, it's a conversation I plan on having with her."

Spencer clears his throat. "Just playing devil's advocate here, but what if she doesn't take you back?"

I squeeze my lips together as I think of the alternative. "I guess I'll still have that conversation with her. I don't want to be a part-time parent. I want to be involved in my child's life. I want-"

I'm cut off by my phone ringing. It's Brian at the shipyard.

“Please tell me you are calling with good news.” I don’t think I can wait another day to get Alexandra. Every cell in my body is begging for a fight.

On the other end of the call, I hear him chuckle. “I am, Boss. We just got the shipment in. I am going to check it in and unload it.”

“Great. I’m finishing up my workout now, and then I will head over there.”

“See you soon, Boss.” He ends the call and I glance at the three men staring back at me.

“My shipment just arrived. Cancel whatever plans you have today because it’s time to rain hell on Giuseppe Rossi.”

Gage stops his treadmill and turns to look at me. “Well, are you going to fill us in or make us guess?”

“It will be easier to show you once we open the crates.”

Rhett places his dumbbells on the rack and says. “Then let’s go.”

The gym doors open and Coach Bobby walks in sporting a frown. “What are you guys doing here so early? Team workout doesn’t start until eight thirty.”

I answer before anyone else can. “We decided to get our workout in ahead of time.”

Coach Bobby scans the large room, locking gazes with each of us. “We have physicals lined up, followed by a regimented team workout today. I guess you four will just be extra sore.”

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He tries to be intimidating like always, but I've dealt with deadlier men than him for most of my life. "Can we just do our physicals now or do we need to reschedule them? There are more pressing things that require our attention for the rest of the day."

Coach Bobby's eyes narrow, and he clenches his jaw. He wants to put me in my place and tell me no, but I can see the small glimmer of fear in his eyes.

"Fine. I'll just do your physicals since William and Chad aren't here yet."

Spencer turns off the music and follows Coach into one of the smaller physical therapy rooms.

The ringing of my phone sounds throughout the quiet gym. It's Brian. He wouldn't be calling me back so soon unless there's a problem with the shipment.

"What's going on?" I say as I answer his call.

"A couple of cops keep driving by, staring into the shipyard. Please tell me this shipment isn't illegal."

"They'd have to have a warrant in order to search the shipyard, but no, there's nothing illegal in there. I'd let you know if there was anything to worry about."

"Alright. Good to know. They parked across the street at the club."

"Can you tell who they are?" I'll call the police chief if they cause any problems.

He hums for a moment before saying, “Not really, but they look young. They aren’t the ones we usually deal with. They are driving the older police cars that the rookies usually drive.”

I blow out my breath through my mouth. Those young cops are going to be a pain in my ass. “Keep me updated. I’m on my way.”

End call and head into the room off of the gym where Coach Bobby is testing Spencer’s range of movement.

“We need to go now.”

Coach Bobby opens his mouth to protest, but Spencer stands up and rotates his shoulders. “I feel great Coach. There’s no stiffness or pain. In fact, all four of us are in peak performance.”

Coach Bobby rolls his eyes. “Fine, but if one of you hurts yourself, I’ll bench all of you. For at least four games.”

“Understood.” I say before heading outside. “Rhett, you take your truck, and I’ll ride with you. Spencer, you can ride in Gage’s truck. We will need both trucks for this mission.”

We split up and head to the shipyard. I know Rhett is dying to know what is going on. I can see it in his eyes, but it will be easier to explain what’s going on when we get there. It will be easier, too.

The two cop cars are still parked across the street at the club when we arrive. “That’s another problem for another day.”

Rhett grunts. “Yeah, unless they follow us.”

Shit. I didn't think of that.

"I'll make a few calls if they do, or we can regroup at my house and wait until nightfall."

Rhett parks and says, "I would wait until nightfall. We can always get a team to stake out the place and see who is coming and going."

"That's not a bad idea."

He smirks. "That's why I'm your number two."

We get out of his truck and walk toward Brian and the shipment.

"You're my number two because you're with my sister and about to be family." At his shocked look, I add, "Also, because I can trust you."

Brian gives us a wave and greets us. "Hey. I just got the pallets unloaded."

I glance at the stacks of crates. "Let's open them."

Brian chuckles. "I was saving that for you, Boss."

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Spencer pulls his pocket knife out and opens the first crate. His eyes widen as he glances inside. “RPGs?”

Gage grins. “Hell yeah. This is every man’s dream. Real life video games.”

Laughing, I jog to the building and grab the blueprint for Giuseppe Rossi’s house before stretching it across Rhett’s tailgate.

“Alright. The hostage and interrogation rooms are here.” I point to the front corner of the house.

Rhett adds, “There is a door here that leads outside. The hallway is long and narrow with cameras pointed at both doorways.”

Spencer points to the back center of the house. “This is where the living room is and there is an entire wall of windows. There are two exits here, but I wouldn’t count on them being here. If we want to do the most damage, we need to attack upstairs or in this back corner.”

Gage looks at the floor plan, confused. “What’s in the back corner? It looks like a breakfast nook.”

I answer for Spencer. “That is where the secret cellar is. It’s also where his armory is. If we can collapse that side of the house, they won’t be able to get in or out.”

Rhett’s expression changes. “Then that’s the place we hit first.”

“First, I need to reach out to my cousin and make sure the first part of the plan went down without a hitch.”

All three men stare at me. Gage is the first to speak. “And what was that?”

“A little retribution.”

Rhett frowns. “Are you going to explain more, or are you going to make us guess?”

“Rossi tried to kill me last night, so I put a hit out on his favorite nephew. One hundred and fifty thousand to whoever kills him and sends Angelica the proof. That will teach Giuseppe not to fuck with my family.”

All three men glance at one another.

Spencer clears his throat. “Well, that’s a sure fire way to start a war. So, what’s the plan of attack?”

“Alright, here’s how it’s going to go down...”

Chapter Twenty-One

ALEXANDRA

Giuseppe barges through the doorway, looking like he hasn’t slept in days. His eyes are hollow with large bags underneath, and his face is pale.

Maybe he didn’t sleep last night.

There was so much commotion when he came back that it woke me up. Men were yelling and arguing and several things broke, but no one came down this hallway. Not

even Emily.

Giuseppe paces around my room, stopping to mutter to himself for a moment before resuming his pacing.

I scoot closer to the corner, trying to get as small as I can.

He looks unstable. Almost as if he's been drinking all night. His head snaps in my direction, drilling me with his hard gaze.

"Maybe I should kill you right here and right now. Francesca did kill my queen. It would be an eye for an eye, so to speak."

I don't dare speak, for fear that he will crack under the madness and actually shoot me right here.

He continues to pace, and mumbles, "I'm losing this war. How does he always get the upper hand? I can't lose. Not after everything I've been through. Not after losing Elizabeth."

He's going to wear his shoes thin, walking back and forth and turning around that fast.

Every once in a while, he turns his enraged glare on me. I feel helpless and hopeless, like I'm just waiting for my execution. I discreetly rub my stomach and pray that something will take his attention away from me and my inevitable death.

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“Arturo will pay.” He rambles on, leaving me confused.

What did Arturo do last night? Based on Giuseppe’s anger, I’d guess he didn’t drink the wine. I can only hope that Arturo is alive.

Joseph would be here shooting every one of them if they murdered his father, whether he had a chance of surviving the attack or not. That much I know.

I also know that Francesca, Rhett, Spencer, and Gage will be right behind him, followed by Anthony Fanucci and his son, AJ.

Hell will rain down on Giuseppe Rossi and everyone he associates with if they kill either Arturo or Joseph.

It will be the beginning of the end for one of the families. An all out war until one family ceases to exist.

Footsteps echo down the hallway, getting closer to my room before Vincent appears in the doorway.

“Sir, a package was just delivered from your nephew in New York. It looks important.”

Giuseppe Rossi pulls his phone out and glances at the screen before shoving it back inside his pocket. “He can’t call or message to warn me? Where is it?”

Vincent glances at me before saying, “It’s in the foyer on the table. There’s another

matter we need to discuss, but in private. It's regarding the research you sent me after."

The two men walk out of the room, leaving the door wide open.

Was this done on purpose? Are they testing me? Baiting me? So they have a reason to shoot me?

I can't escape even if I wanted to. I overheard Emily talking about the cameras in the hallway. Someone will be alerted the second I step out of the room. Not to mention having to run past them in the foyer to get to my car.

They probably moved my car by now. There's no way they left it parked out front this whole time.

I lay back down on the mattress, laying on my side so I can watch the door. I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of just laying here.

Yelling and screaming comes from the foyer. Their loud voices drift down the hallway. Whatever was in the package can't be good because Giuseppe Rossi is swearing up a storm.

My heart races as I picture him marching down the hallway to my room with a murderous glare on his face and his pistol in his hand.

The walls to my room rattle like an explosion just went off. All yelling ceases for a moment before the house rattles again.

What the hell is going on? It sounds like a war zone.

Something slams into the wall in front of me a second before someone runs into my

room. I yelp out in surprise.

It's just Emily, calm down.

She has a wild look in her eyes, like she can't believe what is happening. She closes the bedroom door behind her and drags the table in front of the door. She pushes it for good measure.

I sit up and lean against the wall. "Emily, what's going on? It sounds like we are under attack."

"We are!" She yells as she spins around and leans against the desk. "This isn't the morning wake up call I dreamed of. Your saviors have arrived, and they are fucking psycho."

"Huh?" She isn't making any sense. "Who are my saviors?"

"It's Joseph Marino and his men. They have fucking missiles, and they are shooting them out of the back of their trucks. They are going to destroy the house. The other side of the house is completely gone."

My heart leaps out of my chest.

Do they know I'm here?

Did something happen to Arturo, and that's why they are blowing up the house?

Emily continues. "I can't believe they are destroying the entire fucking house! I'm not going to have a job when they are done. If Giuseppe doesn't kill them, he will have no choice but to move away. It's all turning to rubble."

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There are no complaints from me. The further away from Savannah Rossi is, the less chaotic my life will be.

If I make it out of here in one piece.

The walls rattle as an explosion sounds nearby. It's getting closer.

Emily paces in the same spot Giuseppe was pacing in earlier. "We're sitting ducks here, but we can't leave. It's not safe."

I don't know why I feel propelled to help her, but I say, "You can leave. You can sneak out the back. I'll stay here."

"I can't leave you. If Mr. Rossi sees me fleeing, he will put a bullet between my eyes. I just need to wait it out." She walks over to the chair and sits down. Her leg bounces as she glances all around the room.

I lean my head against the wall and close my eyes. It's quiet. The yelling and the explosions have stopped.

"I think it's over." I whisper to Emily.

"Let's give it a few minutes just to be sure, and then I'll go check on everyone."

"Yeah, that might be wise in case the house is unstable."

Emily and I sit in silence as we listen for any noise to clue us in on the damage. To

pass the time, I count my breaths.

In.

Out.

One breath.

In.

Out.

Two breaths.

Over and over I breathe in and out and add another number until my eyes grow heavy and my stomach growls. I haven't had any food today. I know it's not healthy for me or the baby, but I can't exactly demand food when I'm being held hostage.

Please let Joseph come and get me. Please let me make it home safe. Please let my baby be safe.

I close my eyes and continue to pray to get out of here.

All of a sudden, the lock on the door explodes a second before the door swings open.

I'm going to die. I'll never get to see my child grow up. I'll never get to tell Joseph that I'm sorry and I love him.

I stare at Emily, waiting for something, anything, to happen.

She shrugs as she gets up and peeks into the hallway. Two gunshots ricochet off the

metal door a second before Emily groans and falls to the floor.

Blood drips down her face, coating her hair before pooling on the floor.

If the shooter is anyone other than a Marino or a friend of a Marino, then I might as well prepare to meet God.

Footsteps get louder, mimicking my racing heart until they stop right outside the door.

“Alexandra? It’s me, Gage. I’m coming in.” Gage yells from the hallway a second before he steps into the doorway.

He barely fits through the door. How have I never noticed how buff he is?

He scans the room, keeping his gun pointed in front of him, and when he sees I’m alone, he makes his way over to me. “Are you hurt? Can you walk?”

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“No. Yes.”

He raises an eyebrow, causing me to smile for the first time in days.

“No, I’m not hurt, and yes, I can walk, but slowly because I feel extremely weak.”
Probably from the lack of food.

His face scrunches up as he thinks. “I’m going to pick you up. Wrap your legs around my waist.”

“What?” Is he serious? He does know I’m pregnant, right?

He repositions himself so he is facing the doorway, keeping his gun at the ready in case someone sneaks up on us. “I can’t carry you with both of my arms and protect us at the same time.”

He does make sense, but I still say, “Isn’t that a bit inappropriate, given my situation?”

He glances at me with a raised eyebrow and cocks his head slightly. “What situation? You being pregnant? Or you being Joseph’s woman?”

My heart flutters at hearing him declare I’m Joseph’s woman. I’ve wanted to be his for so long. “Uh, both.”

Gage glances at his watch and sighs. “I need an arm free in order to hold my gun and protect us, and this is the best way I can think of getting you out of here as fast as I

can. Do you have a better idea?"

"Um, let me walk?"

"The building is crumbling all around us. It's not safe. We need to run and you can't. I promise I will be a gentleman the entire time."

I hesitate. What if Joseph sees and gets the wrong idea? It's not like it would be the first time he jumped to conclusions.

Gage huffs. "Or I can give you a piggyback ride. Your choice."

I'm grateful he came to save me, and I know I'm just wasting time. If Joseph wants to get upset about this, then that's his problem.

"Fine, but you better not get hard."

His eyes widen at my statement. "Come on, let's go."

I walk over to him and let him pick me up. My legs wrap around his waist, squeezing tightly.

"I need you to press your body against mine and rest your head on my shoulder. I need to be able to see as much as I can and move my arm as needed."

I do as he says, and he immediately heads back into the hallway, turning away from the foyer.

"Wait." I say, stopping him in his tracks. "We need to go to the room next to mine. There's something I need in there. A lot I need, actually."

He starts to protest, but turns around and heads to the interrogation room. As soon as he clears the room, I unlatch my legs and walk over to where the duffle bags of money are. My bag of stuff is still on top, so I throw it in one of the money bags and carry them over to where Gage is still waiting.

“What is that?”

“My money and personal belongings.”

He lifts both bags and drapes one over each shoulder before turning toward me. “Alright back on.”

“Are you sure you can carry all of that and me?”

“That’s kind of insulting, you know.”

I stutter. “I-I-I didn’t mean it like that, Gage. I just meant the bags are a lot of weight and then, if you add my weight on top, it’s a lot for you to carry.”

“Come on.” He gestures for me to get closer. “Trust me. I’ve got your back.”

I reluctantly let him lift me back up. He stumbles for a second before regaining his balance. With a quick adjustment to the bags of money, he heads back into the hallway.

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One of Rossi's men appears in the doorway to the foyer.

"Gage behind us." I yell out.

He spins around and fires off several rounds, hitting the man in his chest every time. The quick spin and the lack of food on my stomach causes me to become dizzy. The hallway spins and my stomach lurches.

Don't throw up. Don't throw up. Please, God, don't let me throw up.

When he gets to the end of the hallway, he pushes on the door, but it won't budge. He even tries to kick it, but it stays closed.

"Son of a bitch." He mutters before turning around and racing toward the foyer.

The front door is splintered, and the wall is crumbled. Bloodied bodies litter the foyer and are half covered in debris.

He kicks some concrete and stone out of the way, clearing a path to the front door. "We're going out front."

He slowly walks through the hole where the front door used to be. I watch his back, making sure no one sneaks up and surprises us.

"What about my car?" I ask when we are on the front lawn.

"Where was it?" Gage asks as he spins around.

“I parked it right here.”

“Well, I would assume that it’s gone. Don’t worry, we can get you a new one. There wasn’t anything important inside your car, was there?”

Just some ultrasounds.

“Nothing that can’t be replaced.”

Gage nods and jogs down the long driveway to the busted up gate, stepping over and around dead bodies and debris.

“It’s a total bloodbath. How many guys are here with you?” I try to look for any movement, but come up short.

“Just me, Spencer, Rhett, and Joey.”

“It looks like a small army came through here.”

Explosions happened all over the place. Most of the house has collapsed, except for the front corner where I was.

They had to have known I was there, and that’s why it’s still standing.

When we make it through the gate, he helps me down before throwing the bags of cash in the backseat.

“Come on. I’ll help you up.”

With a little boost, I climb into the passenger seat and buckle my seat belt. He closes the door and jogs around to the driver’s side.

Grabbing his phone, he dials someone and puts the call on speakerphone.

“What’s going on, Gage? Did you get her out safely?”

It’s Spencer.

“Yeah, we’re in my truck.”

“Ten four. We’re on our way to you.”

Police sirens sound in the distance.

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Gage glances toward the house. “Police are coming. We have to get out of here. We’ll meet at your apartment.”

He ends the call and drives off without his teammates.

“Don’t we need to wait for them?”

He shakes his head. “It’s better if we aren’t caught at the scene of the crime. Besides, they will only be a minute behind us.”

He cuts through several side streets before following close behind a moving truck. Several police cars race past us, heading toward the Rossi mansion.

When the police lights and sirens are no longer in view, Gage changes lanes and races to the apartment building.

He carries the bags upstairs and stops in front of Spencer’s apartment.

“I’d really just like to shower and eat.”

He looks unsure, but finally relents. “Alright, you can head there, and I’ll let Spencer know. I’ll send Savannah down there in a few minutes to check on you.”

I give him a hug, give him a chaste kiss on his cheek, and whisper, “Thanks for saving me.”

Grabbing the duffle bags from him, I spin around and head to my apartment. I close

and lock my door behind me and head straight to the bathroom, dropping the bags off in my bedroom on the way. I throw my clothes in the trash can and turn the water as hot as it will go.

Stepping under the spray, I feel empty, almost as if my body is in shock. My stomach growls, propelling me to wash my hair and scrub my body quickly.

What am I going to eat when I am done with my shower?

I don't feel up to cooking. I could order Chinese takeout or a large pizza with all the toppings. My stomach growls, making me laugh.

"Pizza it is."

I quickly dry off and throw on some lounge pants and a large t-shirt.

As I am looking up the phone number for the nearest pizza place, a knock sounds on the door.

Looking through the peephole, I see Savannah holding a pizza box.

I open the door and say, "Oh my God, you read my mind. I'm starving."

She laughs. "Can I come in?"

"Of course. You brought me food."

I grab some plates and carry them over to the coffee table.

"The guys are de-briefing in my apartment and I couldn't stand to hear the details of what happened. Plus, I figured you'd be hungry and could use some girl time.

Francesca is on her way here with dessert.”

My eyes sting with tears. “You guys are amazing. Do you know that?”

“It’s the least we can do after everything you’ve been through. Now, let’s eat.”

I scarf down the first slice and reach for another when another knock sounds on the door.

“I’ll get it.” Savannah puts her pizza back on her plate and heads to the door. She looks through the peephole and says, “It’s Francesca.”

As soon as the door is opened, Francesca hands Savannah the bag full of dessert and pulls me into a hug.

“I’m so glad you are safe.”

I melt into her hug. It feels like a hug from a sister. One that I’ve never had. The warmth from her hug breaks my resolve. Tears stream down my face as all the worry and fear from the past couple of days come to the forefront of my mind.

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“Part of me hates Joseph and never wants to see him again, but the other half is so damn grateful they came to get me today.”

Francesca leads me over to the couch and sits next to me. “You know I’ll never make excuses for my brother, but he was hurt and thought you betrayed us. He doesn’t like talking about his feelings, but I know he’s hurt after what our mother did. He was scared you were like her.”

“I guess I can understand that, but he wouldn’t let me explain.”

“He shuts people out and never lets them get close. It was easier for him to push you away instead of listening to reason.”

She picks a slice of pepperoni off my pizza and pops it into her mouth before continuing.

“Not that it’s an excuse, but these men that we are in love with are completely irrational and protective. Rhett killed my ex boyfriend Jax and part of me thinks he did it because he was jealous. Jax also tried to kill me and he kidnapped me, so Rhett was protecting me in his eyes.”

“And Jax tricked you and lied about his true identity.”

“Yeah, there’s that, too.”

I sigh and pick up my pizza. “This is exactly what I need. Comfort food in my apartment with the girls.”

“Here, here.” Savannah says.

“So, Savannah, how’s school going?” I ask, hoping to get the conversation off me and Joseph.

She smiles. “It’s almost over. I’m so close to graduating, but I’m still unsure about the future.”

Francesca asks, “Are you leaning toward opening your own business or working for an already established designer?”

She glances down at her plate. “I’m not sure. Spencer wants me to open my own boutique, where I can sell my own custom designs, but working for a designer is cheaper.”

As someone who wasn’t born into money, I can understand her hesitation. The start up cost is intimidating. “Putting the cost aside, what do you want more?”

She whispers, “My own boutique.”

“Then Francesca and I will help make that dream come true.”

Francesca’s face lights up. “Hell yeah, we will. And I demand a Savannah Whitlock original as my wedding dress.”

Savannah blushes. “I would love to do that for you. How are things progressing with the wedding and all that?”

Francesca grins. “We are still trying for a baby. I feel like this could be our lucky month.”

I suck a breath in through my teeth. “I really hate to be the bearer of bad news, but while I was kidnapped, Giuseppe told me how Jax confirmed you are infertile. I just can’t stand the thought of you getting your hopes up just for every test to come back negative.”

Savannah gasps and presses her hand against her mouth.

Francesca looks confused.

I try to explain. “Giuseppe told me Jax told him you said you were infertile.”

She leans her head back and laughs.

“Jax kept going on and on about kids, and I sure as fuck didn’t want any, so I lied and said I was infertile because of an accident I had as a teenager. He believed me and never brought it up again.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “Oh, that’s a relief.”

“Wow, I can’t believe he told his father that.”

Savannah nods and chimes in. “Well, they were and still are trying to tear down your family. I wonder if Giuseppe was one of the casualties this morning.”

“That’s a good question.”

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Silence fills the air as the three of us wonder.

Was all of this done in vain?

Will I still have to look over my shoulder and worry about being kidnapped again?

Will my baby have to worry about losing both its mother and father?

Is it too late to escape this life?

Chapter Twenty-Two

JOSEPH

I pass Rhett the puck as the announcer notifies the arena of the last minute of the third period.

“You take it. You’ve earned it,” Rhett says as he passes the puck back to me.

I shuffle the puck back and forth and bring it behind Knox Anderson.

“Hell of a game Marino.”

I give him a head nod and pass the puck down the ice to our center, Easton Hall. We are able to pass the puck around the ice and keep it away from the Texas Titans.

Spencer passes me the puck right as the buzzer sounds, and the crowd stands to cheer

for us.

I follow my teammates through the team's tunnel to the locker room. Jerseys and pads immediately hit the floor before skates are taken off.

Coach Bobby walks in with the biggest grin on his face. "Now that's what I'm talking about, Marino. Way to keep your head in the game and stick with it."

The guys clap and congratulate me on my hat trick.

Coach Bobby continues. "Because Marino got that hat trick and you guys listened and played like a professional team. You can have tomorrow off. Enjoy your night. Now hit the showers. I'm ready to get home to my wife."

This was the best game I've played in years. Probably the best game of my NHL career.

Chase Williams and Phoenix Young walk over to me. Young punches Williams. "Man, tell him tonight's plan."

Williams laughs and says, "We are going to the black light club downtown. I made reservations for the VIP lounge for the entire team. It comes with unlimited bottles of booze and as many babes as you could want."

There's only one babe I want and she definitely won't be at the black light club tonight. Not unless she recently got a job there.

"I don't think so, guys. Thanks for the invitation, though."

Young drapes his arm around my shoulders. "Aww, don't be a Debbie-downer. You earned a night off. How many hat tricks does a hockey player get in his lifetime? You

got one tonight and deserve to celebrate.”

They continue to beg me to come out with them.

“Let me shower in peace, and I’ll let you know before I leave.” I grab my shower stuff and leave the two of them to pester other teammates.

I want to celebrate, but I can’t. It feels wrong to party and have a good time with my teammates after everything I’ve put Alexandra through.

It’s been three days since the attack on Giuseppe Rossi. Three very long and sleepless days.

The fucking bastard ended up escaping his house. The question I’ve been asking myself on repeat is how? How did he get away when we were circling the house? We never saw a car leave. We never even saw him.

Where was he?

I don’t have any answers. No one knows where he was or where he went. He hasn’t surfaced since before the attack.

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I'll get him though. If he's still alive, he won't be for much longer. I've got a bullet with his name on it.

Thankfully, Alexandra is home safe, but she hasn't returned any of my calls or text messages.

She doesn't answer the door for me, and all of my gifts have been ignored. Bouquets of flowers, boxes upon boxes of chocolates, and even stuffed animals litter the hallway in front of her door, like it's a fucking memorial.

That thought scares me more than I ever could have imagined.

Alexandra could have died.

Our baby could have died.

I was so careless and cruel to her. I deserve more than the cold shoulder she's giving me, but it kills me knowing she's ignoring me.

She is talking to Francesca and Savannah and they talk to Spencer and Rhett, who fill me in on whatever is going on.

She's trying to sort her life out and decide where she goes from here. At least, that's what Rhett told me this morning.

I want to beg her to come back to work for my father, but how could I be that selfish when she was just kidnapped because she worked for my family?

“Earth to Marino.” Rhett says as he waves his hand in front of my face.

“Huh?” I blink rapidly and glance around the shower.

“Are you alright?” He stares at me as if he’s checking to see if I have a concussion.

“Oh, yeah, I was just deep in thought.”

He whispers, “About Alexandra?”

There’s no point in lying. He and Spencer know all my secrets. “Yeah. I royally fucked up, and I don’t think she will ever forgive me.”

He gives me a sympathetic look. “Just give her time and space. I know it’s hard because you just want to be with her, but Alexandra needs time to process everything. If it makes you feel better, Francesca and Savannah are over there right now. They are trying to put in a good word for you.”

I stand under the shower spray and close my eyes, letting the cool water run down my face.

Rhett sighs. “Come out with the team. It will be a good distraction for you tonight. Spencer and I will be there to keep you company.”

I roll my eyes. “Fine. I’ll go out with the team tonight, but only because I don’t have any other plans.”

Williams cheers in the locker room.

I quickly shower, dry off, and get dressed. Most of the team is gone by the time I finish changing. Grabbing my bag, I head out to the parking lot.

I could just leave and ignore everyone's calls and texts. I could even say something came up.

But luck is not on my side tonight.

My car is one of the last ones in the parking lot, and standing next to my car are Rhett and Spencer.

"We didn't want you to change your mind and try to ditch us." Spencer laughs at my glare.

"Fuckers." I grumble. "Why is it so important that I come out tonight, anyway? You do know that I'm going to be terrible company, right? Why not just let me be in my sour mood alone?"

I unlock my car and throw my bag in my trunk. Rhett and Spencer follow suit before climbing in my car.

Rhett claps me on my shoulder. "This is probably one of the last times the three of us can have a guy's night. I'm getting married in a few months, you're having a baby, and Spencer here is well, Spencer."

He reaches into the front seat and punches Rhett as I pull out of the parking lot. "What does that mean?"

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“It means that you are always on your own schedule. You’re always with Savannah and after she graduates, you two will be inseparable.”

“Actually, I think she’s enjoying hanging out with Francesca and Alexandra and being around other women that understand this lifestyle. I just hope she doesn’t get the baby fever. We couldn’t handle three babies at the same time.”

“We are rich enough that we can hire a nanny or three for the babies.” I laugh along with my friends. It feels like a lifetime ago that we’ve laughed together like this.

We laugh and joke like old times, and just for a second, I don’t hate myself. My phone rings as I pull into the parking garage to the club.

It’s Nick Valentino. I glance at the two men and say, “I’ve got to get this.”

“Hey, Nick, what’s going on?”

“Hey, I’m sorry to bother you on a game night, but I wanted to let you know that we just got your shipment.”

“Oh great. That is some of the best shit out there. Make sure you charge a premium for it. It’s harder to get, so we don’t want to just give it away.”

He chuckles. “Oh, we’re planning on it. I’ll keep you updated after the weekend, but I suspect it won’t make it past tomorrow. Hell, maybe even tonight.”

I end the call and follow the guys to the front door of the club. Fans scream and stop

us to take a picture and get our autographs. After several minutes of interacting with the fans, Rhett politely tells them we will have more community events coming up and to enjoy their night.

When we are shown inside, I say, “That seemed to calm the fans down for a few minutes. Let’s hope the VIP lounge has great security.”

We are escorted to the top floor of the club, where we can see everything that is going on down below.

“Welcome to the black light club. My name is Desiree. Can I get you guys something to drink? Beer? Wine? Champagne? Maybe something a little stronger?”

“Beer, please.” I say before making my way to the furthest couch in the corner of the lounge. I pass a pool table and a poker table where the guys are challenging one another.

“Here’s your beer, sir.” The waitress bats her fake eyelashes and bends forward a little too much to show off her fake tits.

“Thanks.” I grumble, not wanting to make conversation.

Rhett and Spencer mingle with the other teammates, but glance at me every now and then. I raise my beer and plaster on a fake smile.

I could be doing this at home, where it’s quiet and peaceful. Not here where everyone’s goal is to get drunk and hook up.

Bottle service girls take turns coming over to me under the guise of checking on me, but they’re really coming over to flirt. I politely turn every one of them down.

They aren't who I want.

Rhett plops down on the couch next to me. "Alright, Mr. Sourpuss, what can we do to turn your night around?"

"Let me go home, where I can be alone with my thoughts, my booze, and my favorite snack food."

He shakes his head. "Tonight is supposed to distract you from your real-life problems. Tonight, you can be whoever you want to be. You can dance, flirt with women, or just hang out with your teammates, who want to celebrate the best game of your career."

"Fine." I huff and get up. "One game of nine ball, and then I'm going home."

"Fine by me, but you are playing the winner of Spencer and Chase."

Chase wins and downs his beer. "I guess you are just too old to keep up, Reed. The young guns are coming for your jobs."

"When you make it to the championship and win your first cup, then you can talk." Spencer tosses his cue to me and shoves past Chase.

"Let's make this quick. I'll break." I say as I chalk my stick.

I roll my shoulders and stretch my neck from side to side before leaning forward and lining up my shot.

I slowly pull the cue back and slam it into the cue ball. The balls on the table scramble and bounce off the banks. Two balls make it into the corner pockets.

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The four ball and the nine ball.

Several guys laugh as realization crosses Chase's face.

"What? How? That's impossible." Chase pulls the nine ball out of the pocket and stares at it.

"It's all in the backspin." I say as I hand off the cue to Rhett. "This was fun, but I'm going home. I'll see you all in a couple of days."

"Wait, I'll come with you." Spencer jogs toward me. "You drove us here."

Rhett downs his beer and says, "I'm coming, too."

We say our goodbyes to the team and head downstairs.

A group of bikers stands at the bottom of the steps with their arms crossed. "Just who we were looking for. The one and only Joseph Marino."

I am not in the mood to be confronted by a wannabe gang.

"Where's Gage? These look like some of his people." I try to push past them, but they step in my path.

The middle man with a Santa Claus white beard says, "Listen here, wannabe frat boy. We are here to deliver a message. Nothing more. Nothing less."

“Well, go on, because you’re wasting my time, and my time is valuable.”

He ignores my dig and says, “We were sent by the Emerald City Reapers. They want you to know they have video evidence of the attack from three days ago. They know you destroyed Giuseppe Rossi’s house, and as soon as they find him, they will take the evidence to the police and have all of you arrested.”

“What attack?” I play dumb, hoping like hell that they are bluffing.

Santa doesn’t take the bait. “You’re done. All of you. Your daddy won’t be able to buy his way out of this.”

I glance at the men standing at my sides. “Any idea of what he’s talking about?”

Both men shake their heads, but I can see the fear and worry in their eyes. They mimic my own.

We were supposed to scrub the video footage at Rossi’s house, but we must have forgotten. Now, it could bring my entire family down. Everything we’ve worked to build will be gone in an instant.

Part of me feels relieved.

I could live a normal life with Alexandra and our baby. If she ever forgives me.

“You can play dumb all you want, but the truth will come out and your futures will be wiped in a second.”

The bikers turn around and leave without another word.

I stare at Rhett and throw his words back at him. “It will be a good distraction for me

tonight, huh?”

He shrugs. “It was supposed to be a small distraction from your personal problems.”

“Yeah, well, now we have bigger problems to deal with.”

When will I get a break?

Chapter Twenty-Three

ALEXANDRA

My phone chimes with a notification. Grabbing my phone off my coffee table, I see a new post from the Savannah Sharks social media account. Also known as the Director of Public Relations, who just happens to be Francesca Marino.

The picture shows the guys warming up before this afternoon’s game in San Diego. She must have asked a reporter or a fan to take the picture.

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I spot Joseph in the background. His expression is hardened, like he'd rather be anywhere but there. Maybe work is getting to him.

They did just blow up Giuseppe Rossi's house, and I'm sure the police are breathing down their necks. I'm honestly surprised no one has been arrested. Francesca thinks it's because Rossi is nowhere to be found and only he can press charges.

I just hope they were careful and covered their tracks because if the video footage is leaked, it could ruin their hockey careers.

Grabbing the television remote, I turn on the game just in time to watch the referee drop the puck and the game begin.

I watched the Sharks' last home game and silently cheered Joseph and the guys on. They played so well together, and the team dominated. Joseph got a hat trick, which made me want to congratulate him.

It was his first hat trick, after all, but I'm not ready to forgive and forget. We need to have a sit down and talk through everything first. Then, I might be willing to accept his apology and gifts.

A knock sounds on my door. Looking through the peephole, I see Francesca and Savannah holding up several bags of takeout from my favorite Chinese restaurant.

I open the door and eye the food. "Now you're speaking my language. Come in."

Savannah bounds through the door first. "We thought we would keep you company

during the guys' game today."

"And you brought me food. How could I say no to that?"

Francesca walks past me. "You don't, unless you want both of us to be sad and think you hate us. You know how we women tend to overthink."

She places the bag of food on the coffee table and fake pouts, making me laugh.

"Oh good. You already have the game on." She plops down on my couch and turns the volume up on the television so we can hear the referee give Rhett a penalty for interference.

I head to the kitchen and grab three plates, forks, and spoons before returning to the living room.

Once the food is laid out and our plates are full, I say. "I think we need to talk."

Savannah sits on the couch next to me. "Uh-oh. When a woman says that, it's usually not a good thing."

"I'm not breaking up with anyone. It's not about us. Well, not directly."

Francesca places her plate on the table. "I have a feeling I'm not going to like what is about to be said."

"It's not bad."

Both women raise their eyebrows at me.

"It's not! I swear!" I chuckle before spitting out the news. "Emily is a mole. She's

working for Giuseppe Rossi. She must be close to them because she walked into my room unescorted. She even brought me food twice.”

Francesca barks out, “Twice? That’s all you were fed when they had you locked up there? We will deal with her later because I’m pretty sure she’s been working for the Reapers as well.”

I frown. “So she’s like a double agent? Or a triple agent? She worked for Arturo, Giuseppe, and the Reapers? How did she pull that off? Who was she really working for and who was she screwing over?”

Savannah nods. “If she’s working for Rossi, then she definitely is a double agent. I can confirm she’s double dipping in with the Reapers because I saw Emily at the Reaper party.”

“What Reaper party?”

At my confused look, she clarifies. “The Reapers hosted a party and me and Francesca crashed it and pretended to be waitresses. Emily was really cozy with the Reapers. If she wasn’t really working for them, then she fooled them and me.”

I blow out my breath. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Emily’s dead. Gage shot her when he came to save me.”

Francesca chuckles. “Good, because we have more pressing matters to worry about right now.”

Savannah and I glance at each other and say, “We do?”

Francesca grins. “I want to be godmother to your baby no matter what happens with you and Joey, and I want to throw you a baby shower. Every expectant mother and

her baby should feel cherished and loved.”

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“That’s not necessary.”

“I want to do it. Please. It would be an honor to celebrate my niece or nephew.”

“Alright, but please don’t go overboard. I don’t want a huge, elaborate party. Keep it small and intimate.”

Savannah cocks her head to the side. “Like just the three of us? We could celebrate over brunch with just the three of us. A baby shower should have many guests.”

Francesca types on her phone. “Do you want a co-ed party or just ladies?”

“Uh, co-ed I guess.”

“Good, that’s what I was thinking. The guys will want to be there. Now, do you want a certain theme or color scheme?”

“Like what?” I ask, suddenly feeling overwhelmed.

“Teddy bears, ducks, rainbows, circuses, a cartoon character, or maybe sea creatures?”

Woah, that’s too much to consider.

She continues, oblivious to my mini freak out. “Ooh, we can do playful sharks because Joey plays for the Sharks, or what about greens and yellows, like a forest theme with all the baby animals?”

Her fingers type at the speed of lightning as she tries to jot down all her ideas.

“What about diaper cakes as the centerpieces? They are super cute and practical since you will use the diapers once the baby is born. What about games? I think we should do at least three, but do you think guests will want to play along?”

Savannah places her hand on Francesca’s, stopping her frantic typing. “Hey, I think you are starting to overwhelm Alexandra.”

“I’m already way past the starting line. That sounds like it’s going to be far from small and intimate.”

Francesca glances from Savannah to me. “I’m sorry, Alexandra. That was not my intent. Just leave all the tiny details to me and Savannah. We will plan the perfect baby shower for you.”

“Thanks. I would appreciate that. I don’t even know which hospital I’m going to deliver in. There are too many decisions to make, and I shouldn’t have to make them alone. I don’t want to make them alone, but I can’t just forgive what Joseph has said and done.”

Francesca and Savannah share a look, but neither of them speak.

“What is it? What are you two hiding from me?” I ask before taking a bite of my fried rice.

Francesca clicks and swipes on her phone before turning it around to show me the video footage from the gym at the arena.

Joseph, Rhett, Spencer, and Gage are working out and talking.

I pause the video. “Should I even be watching this? Where did you get this from? This is their private conversation.”

Savannah interjects. “Yes, you should. You need to watch this. Aren’t you curious to hear what the guys talk about when they are alone?”

“Sure, but it’s none of my business. If they wanted me to know what they talked about, they would tell me.”

Francesca hands me her phone. “How do you think I even knew about their conversation? I was told to download the video and show it to you.”

“By who?” I can’t imagine Joseph telling his sister to show me the video of a conversation he had with his three best friends.

“Just watch it, please.”

I huff and pout while debating if I should watch the video. “I feel like this is the moment I’ll see on replay as I stand at the pearly gates. They will ask me why I chose the immoral choiceto watch the video instead of turning it off and asking Joseph directly.”

“I’ll defend you and tell them I made you watch the video. I will take all responsibility for this event and you can get into Heaven with a clear conscience.”

Savannah nods. “Me too. I’ll take the blame off you.”

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I roll my eyes. “Fine, but I will remember this moment and haunt both of your asses if I can’t get into heaven.”

Francesca reaches over and presses the play button on the screen.

Joseph hops onto the treadmill and presses the speed button a dozen times until he is practically sprinting. “I need to figure out a way to fix everything. I need to make things right. I need to show Dad I’m mature enough to take on more responsibilities and run the empire.”

Gage chokes on his water and slaps his chest several times. “Is he retiring?”

Joseph’s face turns red, and he pants as he continues his fast-paced run. He clicks a few buttons to turn the speed down and says, “No, he’s not retiring. At least not yet. Not as long as I’m on the team.”

“Do you want to take everything over?”

Joseph shrugs. “That has always been the plan. I’ve followed in his footsteps, and I’ve learned how to run the business side of things as well as the political side of things.”

Rhett interjects. “But that doesn’t mean you want to take over the Marino empire. Would you rather take over the family side of things or continue with your hockey career?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure. I love hockey, I love the game, and I love skating, but I’m

tired of all the travel. I always figured I'd play until Dad retired or I started a family, and now that Alexandra is pregnant, I want to be stationary as much as possible."

Rhett raises an eyebrow. "Are you thinking about retiring from hockey?"

"If Alexandra takes me back, it's a conversation I plan on having with her."

Spencer clears his throat and glances around the gym. "Just playing devil's advocate here, but what if she doesn't take you back?"

He presses his lips together. "I guess I'll still have that conversation with her. I don't want to be a part-time parent. I want to be involved in my child's life. I want-"

The video shuts off, leaving my mind spiraling as it tries to process what I just watched.

"Wait. What does he want?" I glance from one woman to the other, hoping they have the other part of the video.

"You." they say at the same time.

Savannah places her hand on my forearm. It's a gentle and caring touch. "It's up to you to see things through. Both of you are miserable and want to make things right. Take time to think about what you want for yourself and your baby and then go for it. Francesca and I will be next to you every step of the way."

Francesca grins. "Speaking of your baby, I have a surprise for you and we need to head out right now, so take a few more bites and let's go. Hell, bring the container of food. You can eat in the car."

"Where are we going?"

“The sooner you grab your phone, wallet, and keys, the sooner you will find out. You actually don’t have to go far, just a few miles down the road.”

Eager to see where we are going, I leave the food untouched and follow them downstairs to Francesca’s car. She drives towards downtown but turns down a side road and parks in a doctor’s office parking lot.

When we walk inside, we are immediately shown to a room where a doctor is waiting for us.

“What’s going on?”

“We thought we would surprise you with an ultrasound so you can see your baby.”

The doctor looks at the folder on her desk. “You’re also getting a 4D ultrasound, correct?”

Francesca nods. “Sure are. Well, if she wants one.”

“That would be amazing.”

The two women walk to the door to leave, but I stop them. “Wait. Why don’t you two stay and watch? I promise it won’t be weird.”

They close the door and sit in the seats next to the table.

I lift up my shirt so the doctor can squirt the gel onto my stomach. Unlike my last ultrasound, this gel is warm.

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As if she can sense my confusion, she says, “I hate using cold gel on my patients. I find the warm gel to be more soothing and relaxing.”

“Well, you would be nice. I braced myself for the cold but was pleasantly surprised.”

The doctor grabs the wand and runs it over my stomach, locating the baby. A whomp whomp whomp sound echoes through the room. It sounds like someone is waving a large sheet of plastic.

“That’s your baby’s heartbeat. It’s very healthy and strong. She’s already a fighter.”
The doctor explains.

“She?” I ask, while scanning the screen for confirmation.

I’m having a girl?

“She or he. I always seem to go with ‘she’. It’s an old habit. One that I should really try to break. You are still a little too early for us to tell with certainty.”

I shrug. “Well, boy or girl doesn’t matter to me. As long as I have a healthy baby, I will be one happy mama.”

She continues with the ultrasound, showing me the baby’s face, hands, and teeny tiny feet.

I feel overwhelmed, but in a good way. Tears temporarily blur my vision as a ball of emotion lodges itself into my throat.

That's my baby. My little girl or boy. My perfect little baby.

"Your baby is growing so much." Francesca says, like the proud aunt she is.

The doctor prints several pictures and saves the heartbeat to a disc before switching to the 4D ultrasound.

It's unlike anything I've ever seen or experienced before. I can see my baby. I can see its little button nose and its tiny fingers.

My baby opens its hand and reaches out toward the ultrasound wand.

A chorus of awws sound through the room as all three of us are amazed at what we are seeing.

The baby opens its mouth and kicks its leg out to stretch.

"Ow. That one hurt."

The doctor laughs. "Be prepared for bigger kicks the bigger the baby gets."

"Gee, Doc, you're making me look forward to the later months." I chuckle as the baby flips off the camera.

Francesca laughs. "Oh yeah, that's a little Joey alright."

The doctor finishes up and prints several pictures for me and puts the entire ultrasound on a flash drive.

When we are back in Francesca's car, I let the tears flow. Both women stare at me with worry in their eyes.

“These are happy tears. I promise.” I swipe my tears away as I hold the ultrasound pictures close to my heart. “Thank you for this. I can’t tell you how much this means to me. Like really.”

Francesca’s eyes glaze over as if she’s on the brink of crying, too. “Thank you for letting us sit in there with you and experience this together. When it’s my turn, we will all have to do this again.”

“Maybe in a couple of months.” I say with a grin.

“From your lips to God’s ears.” Francesca says before backing out of the parking spot and driving back to my apartment.

This was the best surprise ever and I’ll cherish these memories for the rest of my life. I just wish I could have shared this experience with Joseph.

Maybe there’s still hope for us.

Chapter Twenty-Four

JOSEPH

It's been one week since Francesca told me not to give up on Alexandra. One week of me giving her space so she can figure things out without my presence and gifts.

But tonight, that all changes.

Tonight is the dinner with a player event at the arena. Alexandra won my auction, so like a gentleman, I'm going to pick her up from her apartment.

After I get dressed, that is.

I had a custom suit made just for tonight's reunion. I want to look nice for Alexandra, and I want her to enjoy tonight. That's why I begged, pleaded, and paid Savannah to make Alexandra a stunning dress that she will feel beautiful and loved in.

I polish my shoes before getting dressed. The all black suit has velvet lapels and a silk pocket square that matches the tie.

Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I make sure there are no wrinkles or lint lingering.

Damn, I look nice. I just hope Alexandra thinks so, too.

I grab my phone and wallet and slip them into my pockets before heading across the hallway to the guest bedroom where Rhett is getting ready for his date with my sister.

With a gentle knock on the door, I crack it open. “Are you almost ready?”

“Yeah, come on in.”

I push the door open and see him tying his bowtie.

“Damn, you cleaned up well.” I say as I eye his pristine white tux with black lapels.

“You don’t look so bad yourself. I’m almost done. I’m just trying to tie this damn thing.”

“Why do you think I usually opt for a tie or a clip on bowtie?” I walk over to the chair in the corner of the room and sit down.

Rhett adjusts his bowtie and gives himself a once over in the mirror. He fixes his hair before turning toward me. “Thanks for letting me get ready here. I just wanted to pick Francesca up like it’s an actual date.”

“Hey, no problem. We have all these guest rooms. We might as well put them to use.” I laugh and ask, “What do you plan to do once you two are married and have children?”

“I still plan to pick her up for our dates. Besides, you just said you have all these guest rooms. I’m sure you will always have room for your brother-in-law.”

“Alright, let’s go. Our women are waiting.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” He grabs his duffle bag and heads downstairs.

I follow him down the stairs and reminisced about old times when he and Franny just started dating, and he came to pick her up for the Sharks Gala. She made me follow

her down the stairs because she didn't want to miss out on her stair debut.

I knew from the way Rhett looked at her in her ballgown that he was head over heels in love with her.

"I know I don't say it often, but I'm glad Franny has a good man like you. It used to bug the hell out of me you and her were sneaking around, but I know you will take care of her."

Rhett spins around as he reaches the bottom of the steps. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, why?"

He stares at me for a moment before saying, "You are speaking like you are on your deathbed."

"I was just remembering when you came to pick up Franny for the Sharks Gala. Even back then, you were all in with her."

He chuckles. "Yeah, and she was just as stubborn as she is now. She made Arturo take a hundred pictures."

We share a laugh as we remember having to pose for pictures on the stairs, in the backyard, and in front of the front door. Of course, Franny wanted pictures of all of us alone and together. She also wanted pictures of just me and her, her and Rhett, and even Rhett and me.

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It took over an hour, and we were late for the event.

“Tonight, I’m not taking any pictures.” I warn. “You will have to find someone else to do it.”

He claps me on my back. “You have more pressing issues to attend to, but make sure you get at least one picture taken with Alexandra. It might be nice to look back on when you’re an old married couple.”

I roll my eyes. “She has to accept my apology and forgive me first.”

“I’m sure she will. Do you think Francesca and Savannah would set you up to fail?”

“I hope not.” I grab my keys off the kitchen counter and check my phone for any missed calls or texts before turning it on silent. There’s only one person I want to talk to tonight, and I’ll be sitting across from her.

“Don’t leave just yet,” Dad calls out to us from the living room. He meets us in the kitchen.

“What’s going on?”

“I just wanted to see both of you all dressed up for tonight. Is that too hard to believe?”

“Yes.” Rhett and I say at the same time before laughing.

I add, “Did you get some news? Has Giuseppe popped up?”

Dad frowns. “No, but even if he did show back up, I wouldn’t tell you. Both of you deserve a night off. Enjoy your night, and use protection. We don’t need another surprise baby.”

Dad stares at Rhett for a moment before adding, “Take a picture of my girls. I want to see them all dolled up.”

Rhett nods. “We can video call once we are at the apartment so you can see them before anyone else.”

Dad grins. “Alright, go now. You don’t want to be late like last time.”

We say our goodbyes and drive to the apartment building. Several teammates are chatting in the foyer as we walk in.

Gage whistles. “Damn, you two look like you stepped right out of the cover of GQ.”

He’s wearing a fitted navy blue suit with a matching tie and a light blue shirt.

“And you look like the fucking Hulk, Gage. Seriously, though, how’d you get your jacket on?”

The guys laugh and tease Gage, who flips me off.

“Coach said I needed to be a brick wall.” He rolls his eyes and laughs. “For real though, this is an old suit, and I forgot to go buy a new one.”

Rhett shrugs. “Well, at least the ladies will appreciate your hard work.”

The elevator dings and Spencer and Savannah step out wearing matching black and forest green attire.

I glance over at Rhett. “This is feeling very prom-esque, but I guess we shouldn’t keep our dates waiting any longer.”

We excuse ourselves and head upstairs.

“Wish me luck.” I mumble as I head down the hallway to Alexandra’s apartment.

“You’ll do great.” Rhett says to my retreating back.

I stop in front of Alexandra’s door and take a deep breath. The flowers, chocolates, and teddy bears have been removed. Hopefully by her, and not Darla.

Lifting my fist, I knock on her door and wait. After several moments, I knock again. She still doesn’t answer.

“Alexandra, I know I’m the last person you want to see, but please come out for dinner with me. If you hate my company, then dinner is all it will be and you can move on with your life, but please give me one dinner.”

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I hear her shuffling around for a few moments, followed by glass shattering.

“Son of a bitch!” She yells, sounding like she’s in pain.

Without thinking, I wrap my hand around the doorknob and twist. The door opens, revealing a very shocked Alexandra, who is bent over trying to latch the buckle on her heels.

“What are you doing here?” She asks, annoyed.

I’m transfixed by her ass in the air to speak, let alone think about what I’m doing. “The better question is, why is your door still unlocked? Anyone can just walk in and hurt you.”

“YOU just walked in.” She glances at me as she still struggles with the straps.

“I thought you hurt yourself.” I eye the broken vase that is shattered on the ground beside her.

“Yeah, well, I’m not hurt. I’m just struggling a little.”

I close the door behind me and stride over to her. After unbuttoning my jacket, I squat down and lift her foot onto my leg.

“What are you doing, Joseph?”

“I’m helping you.” My fingers slowly slide up the side of her foot to her ankle. She

shivers and lets out the tiniest moan.

I buckle the straps before doing the same to the other foot.

“Thank you.” She says as she tries to stand.

“Don’t move. There’s glass everywhere.”

I head to the kitchen and grab the broom to clean up the glass. I dump the glass shards into the trash can and make my way back to her. I offer her my hand and help her stand.

She’s beautiful. Stunning.

“Alexandra, you look-”

“Silly?” she asks, looking down at herself.

“Like a goddess.” I finish my sentence. “You’re absolutely glowing, and that dress is perfect.”

She slowly swirls around, showing me her dress. Her knee-length, semi-fitted light blue dress flows like it was made just for her.

“Francesca helped me with my makeup, and Savannah made me the dress.” Her face blushes as she reaches down and rubs her baby bump.

Our baby.

“It’s perfect. You’re perfect.” My compliment causes her blush to darken. I clear my throat and say, “So, what do you say? Will you go to dinner with me?”

She sucks her bottom lip between her teeth and nods. “Sure. Dinner will be great. Besides, we’re already dressed up.”

We head downstairs to the lobby, where everyone is waiting for us. Francesca rushes over to us.

“Alexandra, that dress is incredible.”

She chuckles. “Savannah is a magician. Seriously, your wedding dress is going to be amazing.”

I cock my head at my sister. “You’re already planning your wedding dress?”

“I don’t need to plan my dress. I’m leaving the design to Savannah. I trust her completely.”

Savannah yells across the room. “No pressure, right? Anyone want to take my place?”

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Several guys nearby laugh. We know all about working under pressure, but designing a wedding dress with no guidelines? No, thank you.

“You’ll do great. Just look at this masterpiece you made.” I spin Alexandra around. Her laugh goes straight to my heart, making it feel whole again.

“Pictures. We need to take pictures.” Francesca yells to everyone.

“And a video call to Dad. He insisted on seeing you ladies.”

After way too many pictures and a video call that lasted longer than an entire period, we head outside to our cars.

Everyone drives across the street, but I turn right and head to the main road. I have other plans for the two of us that don’t include a dinner under the spotlight that feels more like an interview.

Since we are already dressed to the nines, I’m taking her to an upscale restaurant.

She turns around to look through the back window. “I thought we were supposed to go to the arena for the event.”

I grin. “I want to bring you somewhere special. Trust me, the food will be infinitely better than what they are serving in the arena.”

I drive a few miles and pull up to the golf resort’s main gate.

“How can I help you?” The attendant asks, peering into my car.

“I have dinner reservations in, uh,” I glance at my watch. “Five minutes.”

“Name?” He asks dryly.

“Joseph Marino.”

The attendant’s eyes widen, as if he immediately recognizes my name. “Of course, sir. Enjoy your dinner.”

The gate opens, giving us entry. I follow the signs to the restaurant and park right at the door for the valet to park my car for us. I grab the ticket from the valet and lead Alexandra inside with my hand on the small of her back.

We are immediately shown to our intimate table. The tables are all set the same way, with a white tablecloth and a candle burning in a vase in the middle of the table. The lights are dimmed, giving off the very romantic vibe.

Alexandra glances around the restaurant in awe before turning her gaze on me. Her eyes shine with adoration and astonishment. “I’ve always wanted to come here. It’s been a dream since I saw it in a magazine almost two years ago. How did you know?”

A small smile forms on my face. “I had a little help.”

“A little help from Francesca?” She asks with a grin stretching across her face.

“Yeah. Do I lose brownie points for not guessing it on my own?”

She leans forward and stretches her hand across the table. “No. I love how you asked for recommendations. This is seriously the sweetest thing you could have done.”

Her expression changes, and she snatches her hand back.

Clearing my throat, I pick up my menu and say, “Let’s see what’s on the menu.”

I need the distraction, or else I might blow it. I’ve never felt this unsure before.

The waiter spends time talking about the restaurant’s specials and the different wines they have before pouring us a glass of ice water and taking our dinner order.

When we are alone, I lean forward and whisper, “I am eternally grateful that you agreed to dinner tonight. I know I have a lot to apologize for, and I will spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you. If you give me a chance.”

She sighs. “Joseph, I have been doing a lot of thinking. I’ve been weighing every option in my head. When that wasn’t helpful, I took a page out of Savannah’s handbook and made a pro/con list. I’ve listened to Francesca and Savannah for hours on end, as well as Rhett and Spencer.”

The guys talked to her? They never mentioned that. They only said Alexandra talked to Francesca and Savannah, and the women talked to them. Not once did they say they talked to Alexandra.

She pauses to take a sip of water. “The fact of the matter is that we are having a child together, and while you said you didn’t want anything to do with me or my child, everyone has assured me you don’t feel that way anymore.”

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“I don’t.” I say, abruptly. “If I could take it all back, I would. I’m so incredibly sorry for the way I acted and the things I said. I was cruel and heartless, and I want you to know that I will carry that guilt with me for as long as I live.”

She closes her eyes for a few moments. “There are a lot of conversations we still need to have, and a lot of them are going to be hard. I will probably cry due to all the extra hormones, but we need to have them.”

“I’m ready whenever you are. I’ll do anything to prove how much I’ve changed. I will grovel, grovel, and grovel some more until you forgive me.”

She gives me a small smile. “I could get used to that.”

“You deserve it and so much more. You are incredibly sweet and caring, and I know you will be the best mom to our child.”

Her eyes gloss over as small tears form in the corner of her eyes. “See? These hormones are unpredictable.”

She rubs her fingers over my cut knuckles. They don’t hurt anymore, and even if they did, it’s only a fraction of the pain she went through.

As if she can read my thoughts, she says, “You’ve punished yourself enough, Joseph.”

I shake my head. “It’s never enough. Not for the monster I was to you. To our unborn child.”

She links her fingers with mine. “It’s time to heal. It’s time for both of us to talk about what happened and let go of the past and then move on. I don’t want our baby growing up in a self-deprecating environment. I want our child to only know love and endless support.”

“Of course. I want that, too.” I give her hand a reassuring squeeze and her face lights up.

The waiter brings our food, and it feels as if the atmosphere shifts. Alexandra and I talk and laugh like nothing ever happened. It feels as if my heart is stitching up its pieces and starting to heal.

She pops a bite of steak in her mouth and moans. “If dessert is as good as this steak, you might get lucky tonight.”

Her face blushes a deep red as she realizes she just said that out loud.

“Well, then, aren’t I just the luckiest guy in the world?” I flash her a grin before adding, “If things do go that route tonight, pleasuring you will be the highlight of my day. Hell, my entire year.”

She glances around the restaurant and whispers, “Is it bad that I want to take our meal to go and see what else can happen tonight? I’ve always wanted to try giving a blow job with whipped cream.”

Fuck. Me.

My dick hardens as the blood drains from my brain.

“Eat your dinner.” I command. “You will need the energy for what I have planned for you, but dessert can be to go.”

My heart races in my chest as I quickly chew another bite of my steak. God, I really am one lucky fucker.

Chapter Twenty-Five

ALEXANDRA

I wish I could be spontaneous and carefree and throw caution to the wind instead of always worrying about consequences.

It's hard to eat dinner when all I can think about is Joseph taking me right here and right now on our small two-person table. I don't care that we are in the middle of an elegant restaurant eating a meal that costs as much as a week of groceries.

The ache between my legs grows with each passing minute. I'm going to self combust if I don't get some relief soon. The thought of taking care of myself crosses my mind, but there's no way I can be discreet.

Not with the hormones racing through me.

I take a sip of my water and swipe my tongue along my lower lip to lick up the bead of water that dripped.

His fingers grip his fork and knife like they are his lifeline. His heated gaze bores into mine. "Do you have any idea what you are doing to me? Do you know how badly I need you right now?"

His dark stare drives me wild. I lean forward and whisper, "I could say the same to you. I'm over here feeling like I'm in heat and seconds from taking care of things myself."

He growls a low but predatory growl. “If you do, you better be prepared for me to spread you here and eat you like you’re my Thanksgiving feast.”

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Moisture gathers in my panties as I picture him eating me out in front of a restaurant full of people. My nipples pebble and my breathing gets faster.

Joseph places his fork and knife on his napkin. “You love that idea, don’t you?”

That sounds more like heaven to my ears. I open my mouth to answer him, but no words come out, so I nod.

“You want me to show everyone who you belong to. You want to come all over my face.”

He knows exactly what I want. He picks up his silverware and continues to eat.

How the hell is he still eating right now? How is he not rock hard and begging to fuck me in the bathroom right now?

“You need to eat,” He says as he points to my mostly uneaten plate.

I want to argue and tell him I need him right now. I need him to stretch my pussy and fuck me like he used to until I’m screaming his name and he’s coating every wall of my pussy with his warm cum.

But I don’t.

I cut another bite of steak and slowly chew it as I ponder how I can speed up the rest of our meal and get to the exciting part of the date.

Clearing my throat, I ask, “I’m not trying to ruin the mood of our dinner, but how have you been? Like the truth, not some placated response.”

My question catches him off guard, and not in a good way, but I need to know.

He takes a large gulp of water before saying, “Not good. It’s been a rollercoaster ride of emotions, and I’ve been just trying to survive.”

I wait for him to pause. “I’m so sorry, Joseph. It wasn’t all cupcakes and rainbows on my side, either. Did Giuseppe ever pop up?”

He glances around the restaurant as if he’s expecting Giuseppe to materialize right in front of our eyes. “No, but I know he will at the worst possible moment, and it’s going to put me in a position where I have to choose my family or the team.”

I want to tell him I saw the video of him in the gym with the guys, but I don’t. “Where is your heart leading you?”

He stares at me and for just a second; I see love and hope swirl in his eyes. “Honestly, I’m not sure. There are so many things to consider. It’s not a question I can just answer on a whim.”

“Sure, you can.” He raises an eyebrow at me. “Look, just close your eyes for a few seconds.”

When he does, I continue.

“Without thinking about anyone except yourself, think about these questions. What or who makes you the happiest? What do you want to do more? Where do you want to be?”

His eyes open and lock with mine. “You make me the happiest. I want to be with you. Wherever you are is where I want to be. I can do anything, but I want it to be with you by my side.”

That is not what I was expecting him to say. My stomach does somersaults as I see the love in his eyes. He was telling the truth. He meant every word he spoke.

“I can’t be your reason for quitting the team or stepping away from your family. I don’t want you giving up anything to be with me, Joseph. I respect you working hard at everything you do, and no matter what you choose, I’ll be there.”

I take a sip of water to ease the dryness in my throat. “If you want to retire from hockey to work for your father, then I support you one hundred percent. If you choose hockey, I’ll still support you. If you want to continue both, I’m here. I never went anywhere and I won’t.”

A fluttering sensation in my stomach causes me to gasp. Looking down, I rub my stomach and chuckle. “We aren’t going anywhere.”

“Did you feel the baby?” Joseph’s eyes widen as he stares at my stomach.

I smile. “I felt something. It was like a flutter. It wasn’t really a kick.”

Our conversation is interrupted by the waiter. “Would you like to order dessert?”

Joseph glances at me, the heat in his eyes returning.

I answer for both of us. “Can we get it to go?”

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The waiter looks taken aback, like he can't believe we don't want to eat it here. "Sure. What will you have?"

I look at Joseph and ask, "What sounds better? Cheesecake with strawberries or German chocolate cake?"

"Both." He turns his attention to the waiter. "We will have one of each to go, please."

The waiter nods and promptly leaves.

Having a new plan in mind, I abandon the rest of my dinner. I stretch my leg out and run it up his leg.

His lips tighten into a thin line. "You're pushing your luck, Alexandra."

The way my name comes out of his mouth is almost sinful. It's too sexy, too erotic, and leaves me purring like a kitten.

"What are you going to do about it?" I ask defiantly as my foot moves higher up his thigh.

"Don't think I won't bend you over the hood of my car, because I will." His tone has a bit of a warning in it.

I roll my eyes. "You're all talk, Joseph Marino. You wouldn't fuck me for all to see because you'd be too jealous of others looking at me."

If there's one thing I know, it's that Joseph is as private as one man can be. He always needs to be in control and aware of his surroundings when in public, and fucking me on the hood of his car is the complete opposite of staying in control.

He leans forward and in a low, husky voice, he says, "Do you really think I won't do it? I'm Joseph Fucking Marino. My family practically owns the city. I'll do whatever I want, whenever I want, and right now, I want to fuck you until you can't walk."

My foot drops to the floor as my thighs squeeze together. Arousal leaks from me, coating my inner thighs. I'm so wet and turned on. I may come as soon as he touches me.

The waiter comes back with a to go bag of dessert. "Is there anything else I can get you two?"

Joseph pulls out several hundred-dollar bills and hands them over to the waiter. "No, thank you. Dinner was excellent. Please keep the change and give our compliments to the chef."

"Thank you, sir." The waiter pulls out my chair and helps me stand.

"Thank you." I whisper to the waiter before heading to the restaurant's entrance. My legs feel like jelly, and the only thing propelling me forward is the thought of coming in just a few minutes.

Butterflies swarm in my stomach as Joseph's hand trails down my spine before pressing against my lower back. Any lower and I'll be arching my back to urge him to continue his descent.

Joseph pulls me into his chest as the hostess leads a couple past us to their table. His erection nestles against my ass.

He pulls me close and leans down to whisper in my ear. “Do you feel how hard you make me, Alexandra? Do you know how many nights I’ve jerked off thinking about you? Hoping I’d get a chance to get you back in my arms.”

I let out a small moan and wiggle my ass against him. His words ignite a fire deep in my belly.

“Then show me.” I grab his hand and pull him toward the door. Looking over my shoulder, I whisper, “Lean me over the hood of your car and fuck me like you’ve missed me, because that’s all I can think about right now.”

I can’t remember the last time I felt like this, where getting laid was the only thing on my mind.

He wraps his hand around mine and pulls me toward him. Spinning around, he presses me against the brick wall of the restaurant. “Oh, I have missed you, Alexandra. Don’t ever doubt that, but if you want me to fuck you hard and fast, you don’t have to beg. I’m going to fuck you all night.”

The sun has already set, giving us the perfect amount of privacy for an outdoor rendezvous.

“Then what are you waiting for?”

We rush to his car and ignore the stares and glares older couples shoot our way.

I place the dessert in the passenger seat with my purse as he takes his jacket off and lays it on the hood of his car. He lifts me and lays me on his jacket and pushes my dress up, eyeing the small scrap of fabric.

“Fuck, Alexandra. How am I supposed to last when you show up like this?”

“You aren’t. Not while I’m laying half naked on the hood of your car. Besides, we have all night for you to work on your rebound time.”

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He pulls my panties off and drapes my legs over his shoulders. The cool night breeze causes chill bumps to form on my skin.

He kisses his way up my inner thigh, teasing me and bringing me closer to the edge.

“Please, Joseph. I need you.” I glare at him as he kisses my other thigh.

This man is trying to kill me.

The second his tongue snakes out and licks up my arousal, I’m sent spiraling. It feels like a million sparks hit every nerve in my body.

Joseph doesn’t give me time to adjust to the onslaught of pleasure. He attacks my clit with laser precision. My body squirms on the hood of his car, needing to find release.

When I think I can’t handle more pleasure, Joseph thrusts two fingers inside my pussy and fucks me until I’m sobbing in need.

I squeeze my eyes closed, silently begging for release. Pleasure continues to build. My legs squeeze around Joseph’s head, needing him to continue his

He sucks my clit into his warm mouth, sending me over the edge. I scream out loud.

Joseph releases my clit with a resounding pop and clamps his hand over my mouth. “Shh, baby, there are people walking this way, and we don’t want to get caught, do we?”

I shake my head, but something in his voice tells me he wouldn't care either way.

"I need more. Fuck me. Please. I need more."

Standing up, he pulls his fingers out of me, leaving me feeling empty.

He removes his tie and shoves it into my mouth. "Scream into this if you need to, because I'm not stopping until you come all over my cock."

I moan around his tie as he grips my hips and pulls me down his hood and lines his cock up with my slit.

With one quick thrust, he buries himself inside my warmth. His thrusts start out slow and methodical, keeping me teetering on the edge of ecstasy. He grips my hips and lifts my bottom half off of the car.

His cock glides across my g-spot, feeling like I just stuck my finger in the electrical outlet. A deep chuckle echoes through the surrounding air.

"Do you like that?"

I roll my hips. God, yes. Just like that.

His hips slam into mine over and over again, bringing me higher and higher. The sound of our flesh slapping together sounds like a symphony.

It's too much, but I need more. I'm so close.

"Let go, Alexandra. Come all over my cock."

I bite down on his tie and cry out as my pussy gushes. My walls tighten around him,

wanting to keep him locked inside me.

He continues to fuck me, keeping my body taut and floating on cloud nine. He grunts out as he gets closer to his release.

Voices drift over to us as people get closer. I bite down harder on Joseph's tie and try to keep my moans as quiet as I can.

He leans over me and pins me to the car as his cock swells inside my pussy. A few thrusts later, he stills. His gaze locks with mine as his cum coats my walls.

Still shaking, he eases my legs back down.

"I didn't hurt you or the baby, did I?" Worry is laced in his tone as he looks down at me.

"No. You don't have to worry about hurting me or the baby."

He pulls my dress higher and admires my bump.

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“You are so beautiful, just like this.” He leans down and places a kiss on my bump.

Joseph is being so gentle and caring when just a few moments ago, he was pounding into me with a bruising pace. I’m turned on even more when he whispers to our baby. If I wasn’t already pregnant, I would be now.

The smoldering ember reignites deep in my belly as a dull ache settles between my legs. It might be from being stretched, or it could be because I’m insatiable, but I’m not one to look the gift horse in its mouth.

“I think we need to continue this at my apartment before I move this to your driver’s seat.”

He nips at my inner thigh before helping me off the hood of his car. “That might be a little too snug.”

I look down at my baby bump. “You might be right.”

He holds the passenger door open for me and helps me inside before getting behind the wheel.

“Where are my panties?” I ask, feeling his cum drip out of me.

“Don’t worry. They are somewhere safe.” He pats his pants pocket as he pulls out of the parking spot.

“You don’t have to steal my panties. I have an entire drawer full at home.”

He glances over at me. “And I plan on seeing you in every pair of them. I’ll buy you hundreds or thousands of pairs.”

“If you steal every pair I own, I’ll have nothing left to wear.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing. You can always stay naked. We never have to leave the house.”

“Now that sounds like a fantastic idea. Let’s start by staying in all night and all day tomorrow.”

If my hormones stay the way they are right now, I have a feeling we will be sleeping most of the day tomorrow.

Chapter Twenty-Six

ALEXANDRA

It’s been an extremely quiet six weeks. There has been no word from Giuseppe Rossi or any of his men. The Emerald City Reapers also seem to be under the radar at the moment.

It feels almost too good to be true, almost like we won the battle, but we still have to fight the war.

Francesca’s cousin, Angelica, has been monitoring the Rossi residence in New York, hoping to get a clue about what is going on. She hasn’t seen or heard anything since the guys attacked the Rossi estate down here.

Something big is going to happen. I can feel it in my gut. I just hope it doesn’t happen today because Joseph and I are going to find out the sex of our baby, and then we are

going to attend our baby shower.

“Alexandra?” the medical assistant calls from the doorway.

Joseph and I stand and follow her to the ultrasound room.

“You can get comfortable. I’ll let the doctor know you are ready.” She leaves and closes the door behind her.

“Thank you.” I say as I climb up on the bed with Joseph’s help and lie back.

He drags one chair closer to my side. “Do you need me to get anything? Are you comfortable? Thirsty?”

I chuckle and grab his hand. “I’m fine, Joseph.”

His phone chimes with a text.

“If that’s your sister, tell her we don’t know the gender yet. Geez, I’ve never met someone so persistent.”

“My cousin Angelica is practically Francesca’s twin. She will probably come down for Franny’s wedding. You’ll get to meet her then and see for yourself.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:15 am

He glances down at his phone. “It’s Spencer, letting me know that the community center is completely decorated from top to bottom and guests will be arriving in thirty minutes.”

“How did they decorate it so fast?”

“I would assume Francesca and Savannah recruited the entire team and directed them to what they wanted.”

That would make sense. They are a force to be reckoned with.

Joseph’s phone chimes in rapid succession. He spins it around to show me the pictures Spencer had just sent.

There is a giant pink, blue, and white balloon arch in front of the community center’s double doors. Inside, there are balloons and streamers everywhere. Food, drinks, and desserts cover three rectangle tables, and in the corner is a present table that is already stacked high with presents.

“Oh my God. Where am I going to fit all those presents? My tiny condo will be full of baby stuff.”

“There are plenty of rooms at home. If you would give it a second thought.”

I sigh. I really don’t want to have this conversation again. “I like my condo. It’s my own place, and it’s right on the water near your uncle’s restaurant.”

I moved out of Arturo's apartment two days after my date with Joseph. He begged me to just move into the house with him, but I felt weird about things. I needed to get my own place, somewhere that is in my name.

That way, no matter what happens, no one can ever take it away from me. I'll never be homeless again because my condo is paid in full.

He stands and leans closer to me to look me in the eye. "Like I told you a dozen times before, I'll never disown you or the baby again. You and the baby will always have a room at my house. I am so sorry for making you feel like you can't trust me. I'll never forgive myself for putting you through that."

"I know that, Joseph, but it's your father's house."

"And? He's head over heels with the baby already. He started renovating one of the guest bedrooms with its own ensuite for the baby."

"The baby won't need its own bathroom for several years."

"I guess he figured if you stayed in there while the baby was young, you'd use it."

"Yeah, I guess that-"

A knock on the door cuts our conversation off.

"Alexandra?" The doctor opens the door and shakes Joseph's hand. "Are you ready to see the baby?"

I grin. "More than ready."

She checks my folder before glancing at both Joseph and me. "You are right at

twenty weeks pregnant. Are we finding the gender out today, or is it going to be a surprise for later?”

I look over at Joseph. “Are you wanting us to find out alone or with all our friends and guests?”

His expression softens, and he squeezes my hand. “That is entirely up to you. I will support the decision either way. At most, we will have to wait like an hour, or we can find out right now and share the news with our guests later.”

I press my lips together for a few moments before saying, “Let’s find out now. Just the two of us. This is your firstultrasound, and I want it to be special for you. Our friends can find out in an hour.”

He gives me a smile before pressing a kiss to my temple. “That sounds perfect to me.”

I lift my shirt over my growing baby bump and tuck it into the band of my bra before pulling the hem of my leggings down to expose my entire stomach.

Joseph looks confused, like he’s trying to figure the ultrasound out. “It’s for the ultrasound. She will squirt some gel on my belly and use that wand to see the baby.”

Joseph glances at the wand in the doctor’s hand. “Oh, I thought they had to do the ultrasound internally.”

The doctor chuckles. “Not this late in the pregnancy. We usually only do an internal ultrasound in the very beginning to find the heartbeat, but don’t worry, the wand for an internal ultrasound is way smaller than this one.”

The doctor and I laugh at Joseph’s relieved look.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:15 am

If he thinks my vagina would be permanently stretched out from an ultrasound, then what does he think happens after giving birth?

“Now, shall we see how big your little peanut has grown?” She gets up and grabs the tube of gel. “I warmed it up for you.”

“Oh, thank you. It’s more enjoyable when the gel is warm.”

The doctor concentrates as she checks on the baby’s heartbeat and organs. She pauses for a few moments to let Joseph listen to our baby’s heartbeat.

He stares at me with love in his eyes. “It’s even better in person.”

The morning after our date, I shared all the ultrasound pictures with him. We listened to the baby’s heartbeat, and I showed him the 4D ultrasound. He didn’t really like that one, saying it was creepy seeing our baby like a clay monster.

“Alright, here we are.” The doctor pauses for a moment before clicking a few keys on the keyboard. “Congratulations Mommy and Daddy, you have a very healthy, very active baby boy.”

A boy.

Joseph stands up and leans closer to the screen to see our baby. “Are you sure?”

She shows him the baby’s legs and right in the middle, without a shadow of a doubt, is our baby boy’s junk. She laughs. “Yeah, I’m pretty confident you are having a

boy.”

My eyes water as I imagine a baby Joseph growing up and running around, causing trouble with his friends the way Joseph does now. He turns to face me and presses his lips to mine.

“A boy. We are having a boy.” He says as if he’s going into shock. He sits back down and stares at the screen, showing our baby.

“A little boy who you can teach to play hockey.”

A grin forms on his face before falling. I know what he’s thinking. ‘If I continue playing hockey.’

I squeeze his hand reassuringly.

The doctor helps clean me up before handing me an envelope with today’s ultrasound pictures and a pop up card showing the baby’s gender.

After we make a follow-up appointment, we rush home to get ready for the baby shower.

I change into a cute maternity dress, and Joseph stays in his jeans and fitted t-shirt. I don’t mind because he looks sexy as hell and all I can think about is jumping his bones.

“Stop looking at me like that, Alexandra, or we will be skipping the baby shower.”

“I can’t help it when you look the way you do.” I admit.

He stalks toward me and pins me to the wall. One hand wraps around the back of my

neck and the other hand gently cups my baby bump. “How do you think I feel? Seeing you pregnant with my child is the biggest turn on of all time. All I can think about is burying my cock in your pussy.”

I moan at the thought. At this rate, with the way Joseph is staring at me, I’m going to be pregnant constantly.

His lips press against mine as his hand lightly grips the back of my neck. Our lips move together as our tongues duel. I press my body against his, needing to be closer to him.

He backs up a few steps. “I don’t want to squish our baby.”

I chuckle. “You won’t. There’s plenty of cushion protecting our baby. He is only the size of a banana.”

Joseph cocks his head. “A banana, huh?”

I nod. “That’s what my book says.”

He shrugs. “If you say so. Come on, let’s go. Our guests are waiting.”

I guess our moment is over, but there will be more. Even if I have to pull him into a closet for a quickie, I’ll get some relief today.

He tucks a gun into the back of his jeans and at my questioning look he says, “We always have to be prepared. We don’t know when Giuseppe will pop back up and with a huge event like this, we need to expect the worst.”

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“Didn’t we hire extra security?”

“Yes, but Rhett, Spencer, Gage, and I are still going to be strapping since the event location was leaked to the community.”

“Can we limit it to just one gun? I don’t want all of our baby shower pictures to look like an NRA endorsement.”

He frowns and starts to protest, but concedes. “Alright, fine. Just one.”

I kiss his cheek. “Thank you.”

We are silent as he drives to the community center. His expression is hard, and he glances at the rearview mirror every couple of seconds.

“What’s going on? Are we being followed?” I spin around in my seat and look out the back window.

“I don’t think so, but there is a white van that’s been three cars back for the past mile and a half.”

A few seconds later, the van turns onto a side road. As soon as we park at the community center, Joseph pulls the guys to the side to let them know about the van.

Savannah and Francesca walk over to me. They pull me into a hug and ask, “Is everything alright?”

“Just another day in the mafia lifestyle.” I sigh and rub my bump.

Francesca offers me a sympathetic smile. “It should get better with time. Times are just rough right now. So what are you having?”

Joseph and the guys join us. Joseph offers me his hand. “I was just about to announce it to everyone. Do you still have the card?”

I nod and hand it to him before following him to the front of the room, where a special table is set up for the two of us.

Joseph clears his throat to silence the crowd. “Thank you for being here to share this wonderful moment with Alexandra and me. As most of you are aware, we just came from an ultrasound where we found out the baby’s gender.”

Francesca yells, “Tell us already. Am I going to be an aunt to a baby girl or a baby boy?”

The crowd laughs. I scan the room for Arturo, not finding him. I lean in close to Joseph and whisper, “Where’s your dad?”

He scans the room and discreetly nods to the far corner where Arturo is standing with Alvin.

He holds up the card and says, “I am so proud to announce that we are going to be the proud parents of a baby boy.”

He opens the pop up card that reads “It’s a BOY!”

The crowd cheers and congratulates us. After being passed around to all our guests, Joseph presses his lips to my temple and whispers, “I’m going to have a chat with my

father. Get some food and make sure you rest.”

I narrow my eyes at him, but nod. Now is not the time to get into specifics on what is going on. There will be plenty of time later when we are alone.

Francesca and Savannah join me at my table. They add a third chair and scoot closer to me.

Savannah glances around before whispering, “The FBI agent, Tyler Smith, called me this morning.”

“Wait, what? Why?” Are they still trying to get information on Arturo and the Marino family?

“He asked if I’ve seen Emily recently. When I said no and asked why, he told me she was an undercover agent and has gone missing.”

“She’s an undercover FBI agent?” My head spins. Is that why she was so scared when Joseph, Rhett, Spencer, and Gage came for me?

Savannah waits until people are out of earshot to continue. “According to Mr. Smith, the last time he heard from her, she told him she uncovered something important and it would lead to an all out war if people knew the truth.”

“What could it be?” I glance between Francesca and Savannah. We all have the same questioning look on our face.

“Whatever it is,” Francesca whispers, “is enough to amplify tensions more than they already are and that’s going to cause everyone to come out and try to get their hands on the information. It will not end well, that’s for sure.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:15 am

“Who all knows? Just us and the guys?”

Savannah shakes her head. “The three of us and Spencer. I begged him not to tell anyone until after your baby shower. I thought we all could get together and talk.”

Francesca nods and glances around the room, looking like she’s about to throw up. “Good idea.”

“Are you okay?” I ask, giving her a once over.

“I’m not feeling very well. I think it might be food poisoning. Rhett and I tried a new restaurant downtown last night, and the food tasted a bit off, so we left. I think I just need some fresh air.”

“Take your time. I’m going to get some food and then we will open presents.”

Savannah and I head to the food tables where Spencer and Joseph are deep in conversation as Rhett meets up with Francesca and they head outside.

Joseph smiles as I wrap my arm around his waist. “You should try the strawberry shortcake. It’s delicious.”

He feeds me a bite and I can’t help but moan. The sweetness of the strawberry burst on my tastebuds.

“Who made this or where did it come from? It has to be the best cake of my life.”

Spencer and Savannah laugh. “We made it.”

My eyes get wide. “You have to teach me. It’s incredible!”

Arturo’s voice cuts in as he gives me a side hug. “Congratulations, Alexandra.”

“Thank you, Grandpa. Oh, remind me to show you today’s ultrasound pictures. I left them at the condo, but I’ll make a copy for you.”

“I would love that. Thank you.”

Joseph pulls me into his chest. “And he’s Nonno, not Grandpa.”

“Nonno.” I repeat. “I like it. It suits you.”

“It’s grandfather in Italian.” Joseph explains before feeding me another bite of cake.

That makes sense.

Loud popping noises outside get all of our attention. The guests are still eating, laughing, and chatting as if no one heard anything.

“Maybe it was a car backfiring.” I whisper to the group.

We stand frozen. Joseph places his plate down and reaches for his gun. Spencer does the same before pushing me and Savannah behind them.

“Don’t make a scene.” Savannah whispers to Spencer.

He glares at her and whispers back, “Your safety is more important than a party. Sorry, Alexandra.”

“I understand.” I just hoped trouble wouldn’t find us today.

The main doors to the community center slowly open. Time seems to still as I try to prepare myself for what we might see.

Are Rhett and Francesca coming back in from getting air?

Are they coming in shot and bloodied from an unexpected attack?

Will it be a security officer looking for Arturo to tell him Giuseppe was just here and what we heard were their bullet shots?

My heart races as I peek over Joseph’s shoulder at the open doors.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:15 am

Instead of Rhett and Francesca walking back in, two masked men walk through the open doors holding guns. As soon as guests notice them, screams and panic echo through the building as people jump up from their spots and try to run away from the entrance.

The gunmen look our way before lifting their guns and pulling the triggers.

Time returns to normal as Savannah and I are thrown to the ground. She pulls me behind the cake table, shoving me against the wall as gunshots ricochet.

“Sorry.” She mouths when I wince.

Women scream in fear.

Men shout at each other.

I peek around the table and immediately feel as if I’m going to lose the contents of my stomach. The pastel decorations on the tables and walls are splattered with blood. Blood drips on the floor, pooling up in spots.

Bodies lie limp on the ground or hunch over tables. Groans can be heard from people who were hit by stray bullets.

What was supposed to be a happy, fun-filled day has turned into a nightmare. My vision blurs as I think about my son’s future.

I don’t want this life for him. I don’t want his girlfriend or wife to constantly live in

fear, wondering when the next attack will be.

But the fact of the matter is, it's too late. He is the heir to the Marino mafia, and there will always be people coming for him and his throne.