



Forbidden

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Dark

Description: He said I was too young. Then he followed me into the shower and proved otherwise.

Obsessive alpha-males like him and morally grey heroines like her are a recipe for a five-star spice disaster. This age-gap dark mafia romance blends forbidden love and off-limits attraction into a story so tense it hurts to read. An HEA you'll ache for—but only after control cracks and pride falls to its knees.

When twenty-year-old Penelope Rosseti returns to New York for her sister's wedding, she doesn't expect to run into Adriano Vieri—her late best friend's father. He's nothing like she remembers. Older, stripped of softness, and radiating danger.

Adriano's predator's gaze never leaves Penelope. Every instinct says run, yet something deeper, darker, makes her stay.

And once the line between them is crossed, there's no pulling back. She's his now, and he won't give her up. He takes her hard, knowing that's where her "yes" lives.

And she doesn't just moan it. She means it.

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Chapter 1

Penelope

I get off the plane at JFK, and New York hits me all at once. Car horns blare from the pickup area, loud and insistent. The heat presses against me, carrying the pungent scent of jet fuel, and my shirt clings to my skin with sweat. Behind me, my suitcase rattles over the floor, its wheels noisy against the tile.

Everything is louder than I remember. Or maybe I've just forgotten how sound works here. How every honk, every distant shout, and every rush of wind between buildings surrounds me from all sides.

Italy was quieter. Here, the noise crashes over me all at once, relentlessly.

Three years away dulled the edges of this place. But now I'm back.

I tighten my grip on my suitcase and step onto the curb. I should feel something—nostalgia, maybe, or relief. Instead, there's only a strange hollowness, like I slipped out of this city's rhythm and can't find my way back in.

"Penelope!"

Gianna's voice cuts through the chaos, and then she's pushing through the crowd with arms outstretched and her floral dress fluttering around her knees. She's barely taller than me, still wearing that same unimpressed expression, like the world exists just to inconvenience her.

She hugs me tight, and for a second, it feels like home.

“Took you long enough,” she mutters, pulling back to scan me up and down. “You look... alive.”

“Wow,” I deadpan. “So heartfelt.”

She grins. “Come on, let’s get you settled.”

I crossed an ocean for my sister—her wedding’s tomorrow, and she guilt-tripped me into coming early to help. I have no money, no plan. Just this. And I guess that’s enough.

Italy was an escape, a hazy blur of cramped apartments and late shifts at a trattoria. My hands were raw from dish soap. Aunt Carla’s Florence apartment where I stayed stank of garlic and old wine.

I ran there after I got the call from Adriano that Sophia had died. After my best friend was ripped from my hands. One moment, we were laughing at my house. A few hours later, she was on the ground, her body mangled on the pavement and blood spilling from her mouth. Her fingers had twitched like she was trying to hold on.

I’d dropped to my knees and screamed her name. She didn’t answer. She just stared at me, eyes wide, unblinking like she knew this was the end.

I was seventeen. And she was gone before I could even beg her to stay. Or ask for her forgiveness.

Until today, those sad eyes as she laid there have never left me. They lurk in the quiet. I still wake up choking on the visual, gasping like I did that night, reaching for her even though I know there’s nothing left to hold.

People say grief softens over time. They're wrong. It doesn't fade. It carves you into someone you don't recognize, someone who has to keep going and pretending you're okay when everything inside you is still bleeding.

"Penelope, move your ass!" Gianna waves from the parking lot, her blonde hair bouncing. Her red 2003 Honda Civic is parked crooked at the curb with the hazards blinking.

I smile, dragging my suitcase over. "Still a control freak, huh?"

She rolls her eyes. "Damn right. Coffee—now."

She hops in, already bossing me around, and a big part of me is glad some things didn't change.

We end up at a small coffee shop in Brooklyn, the kind with a glinting neon sign and tables sticky from spilled sugar. Gianna talks with her hands, like the drama queen, rattling off wedding details and barely pausing for breath.

I'm stirring my latte, nodding along like I'm invested, when I see him.

My breath catches, and my spoon clanks onto the table.

He steps out of the black SUV with an easy grace, the crisp lines of his dark suit molding to him like a second skin. His double-breasted jacket hangs open, effortless and suave and the flash of his sleek watch reflects the light as he gestures. Strawberry-blond hair, now brushed with silver, falls over his forehead, unruly as ever. Well over six feet, broad-shouldered and built like a fortress. And those tattoos, midnight and ragged, climb his neck in uneven strokes, bold against his skin, like a

story half-told in shadow.

The man I used to sneak looks at when he grilled burgers in his backyard, watching the way his forearms flexed as he flipped them. I was just a kid then, unaware of what that strange pull in my stomach meant. Back when he was only my best friend's father and nothing more.

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But this isn't the man from my childhood. This version of him is a facade of his former self I'm not familiar with.

Across the street, Adriano Vieri stands near a black luxury vehicle, deep in conversation with a man I don't recognize.

He looks the same but not quite.

I hold my cup tighter.

He's always had that presence, the one that makes people pay attention. Makes them afraid. The kind that drives people to reckless acts, altering the lives of three individuals in a single night. I speak from experience, yet I find myself unable to look away. Part of me foolishly hopes he'll notice me, or worse, say hello.

My throat tightens inexplicably. It shouldn't matter anymore; it's been three years. So why, then, does the crush I thought long buried return the moment I lay eyes on him, as if it had never faded?

I should look away. Instead, I continue to stare as my pulse hammers.

"Is that—?" My voice falters, coming out thinner than I want. I don't want Gianna to think he still affects me.

Gianna tracks my stare, and her breath hisses out. "Yeah."

"Who's that with him?" I nod at the guy beside him with a scarred face and black hair

yanked into a tight knot, leaning in like they're plotting a hit.

"Ralph. His latest shadow." She shifts. "Psycho with a leash and only listens to Adriano."

I swallow hard, watching them pause by another black SUV, all glossy menace. Their heads tilt close, their words lost in the hum of the city. Ralph's hand twitches toward his jacket, and Adriano's stance, still broad, screams control. Too much money flows through him for it to be clean. He has always been rich. It's been obvious from those cars, the beach houses, and the way people scatter when he walks in. Sophia used to laugh it off and call him "the boss of everything," but we never asked. Because somehow we all knew.

"Stop staring," Gianna mutters, slumping back in her chair. "It's a one-way mirror. He can't see you anyway."

But I can see him.

I drag my eyes off him. "Is he doing okay?"

Her nails tap the mug's edge with a restless clink. She doesn't answer fast. And gives me a look that says, What do you think? But she answers. "He's not over it."

Something inside me folds.

"He did try faking it for a while," she continues, her spoon swirling her coffee slowly. "Paraded women around from blondes to brunettes, whoever. Didn't stick. So he plunged himself into work. Acquiring companies going under here and there. He's not the guy we knew."

I nod, remembering the cool but kind, gruff laughs over dinners. No one can really be

the same after that.

“Ruthless doesn’t even cover it.” Gianna’s voice dips, her eyes flicking up. “I heard if you cross him wrongly in his businesses, you’re meat. Last I heard, he strung a guy up last month for like three days. Made his men beat him to a pulp until he was bleeding slowly and begging.”

A chill winds its way up my spine, but there’s heat too, coiling low and unwelcome—yet not entirely. I despise it, though not enough. Adriano Vieri has never pretended to be a man you could cross and walk away unscathed.

Gianna’s eyes search mine. “You still blame yourself, don’t you?”

I don’t answer.

“Penelope,” she sighs, her voice softer now. “It wasn’t your fault.”

I shake my head, staring at the table. “She called me that night. I ignored it.”

She reaches across and squeezes my wrist. “You can’t keep carrying this.”

I let out a shaky breath. “I know it’s not healthy.” Hence why I even went to Italy in the first place after the incident. So why don’t I feel better? It’s been three damn years. But trust grief to have its way and creep back in just when you think you’ve finally let go of it.

Gianna doesn’t push. Just watches me with that quiet understanding only she ever had.

I swallow hard, then look back at him. “You still see each other, right?”

“Yeah. While you were gone. He made sure Mom was taken care of. Her rent at first. Then her medical bills when she got admitted. He checks on me sometimes. Sent me money once when I was broke and Gerald and I weren’t speaking.” She pauses. “We still hold conversations when we can but since he moved, I hardly see him. He is clearly... different now. The accident messed him up.”

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A slow pulse starts at the base of my throat. I know Adriano has always been part of our lives, but I didn't know he'd been this involved.

I remember Sophia's funeral with Adriano standing rigid and his eyes hollowed out, his fists clenched like they were the only things holding him together. I wanted to say something, to reach out, but I didn't.

I just stood there.

My hands tremble as I snap out from my reverie. Outside, Adriano's and the other SUV are gone, their red lights fading. My stomach twists as I realize that in a way, he's a ghost again. And even after all this time, I still can't stop chasing him.

Gianna breaks the silence. "He'll be at the wedding, you know."

I exhale slowly, staring into my cup.

"Oh, it'll be fun," she adds. "Adriano in a tux? I'd ditch my groom if I could."

I choke on my coffee. "Jesus, Gianna. He's Sophia's dad." I get that she is trying to make light of the situation but I honestly can't. Yes, Adriano has always had the female population of Brooklyn turning and he might have indulged a few but I doubt it's the same now.

"So?" She takes a slow sip, eyes flashing with something dangerous. "I'm sure he's still a fucking menace to anyone's lady parts." Then she glances at me, head tilting, her voice dropping into something silkier. "The things I know that man would do to

me if I wanted... I don't even think I'd tell him no. I'll just let him take it as far as he wants."

My stomach knots, but I scoff anyway. Deflection. As always. I shouldn't be thinking about it, those gloved hands tight on my throat, holding me there, then loosening and clenching again. Tighter. Like a test. A lesson. A claim.

Gianna's lips twist like she sees it on my face. "Reminiscing, I see. Remember that time you 'accidentally' dropped your towel?"

"Fuck off!" I shove her arm, heat rushing to my face. "I was barely seventeen. He didn't even look. You're the one who's been screwed since he walked into our lives, drooling over him at Sophia's pool parties."

Sophia. Her name guts me quickly and deeply. I focus on my coffee cup, the steam curling like ghostly fingers.

Gianna's smile falters as we realize it might be too soon to joke about this. "Yeah. I wonder how things would've turned out if she were here now. Losing her that way wrecked us all."

"Wrecked him worse," I murmur. "She was his world."

"And you were hers. Full circle." Until I fucked it up.

But I don't say that out loud.

We finish our coffees, and Gianna drags me to her car, where she continues ranting about seating charts. I don't hear her. My mind is still stuck looping on him. That suit. Those tattoos. The way he moves, like he owns everything he touches. Like he could crush you, ruin you, and you'd beg for it anyway.

Back at my apartment, night falls fast. The place is a dump with cracked walls, a sink that never stops dripping, and a mattress that groans like it's dying. But it's all I am able to afford till I find a job.

Gianna offered to let me stay with her and Gerald, but I don't want to impose, not when they just got their apartment. Mom's been in a nursing home since she started forgetting things more often, and even keeping her there has put a huge dent in our pockets.

After high school, I planned to take a gap year before college, but then after the accident, everything changed, and my mental state was a mess. Somehow, going back just never felt like a priority.

Maybe one day I will, but for now, just getting through each day is enough.

After helping me settle in, Gianna disappears to fuss over her veil, leaving me alone.

I peel off my dress, the yellow fabric hitting the floor in a heap. My skin's sticky from the day. Shower time.

Hot water pounds my shoulders as steam fogs the tiny bathroom. But as I close my eyes, Adriano's there. As he always seems to be. It's not a memory or fantasy. But a fucking haunting. His presence coils around me, and my body lights up—hot, needy, alive.

I'm pissed I didn't go after him today, but damn, I've missed him. It's twisted, three years apart should've been enough to kill this. But nothing dulls it. Nothing stops the way my body aches for him. Craves him.

My fingers skim down, slow, and my stomach flutters. Lower. I'm already wet and not just from the water.

"Fuck," I whisper, circling my clit, the pressure mounting.

Like an apparition emerging from the darkness, I see him. First, he appears with rainwater dripping from his skin. Then, he steps into the shower. Finally, his low, rasped command whispers against my ear as his hand grabs me roughly.

"Don't stop, Penelope."

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I don't.

My breath shatters. My knees buckle. One hand slaps against the tile, keeping me upright as I picture his front pressing into my back, his inked skin against mine, the scent of him drowning me. He'd pin me there, hold me down, make me take it—make me feel how much he owns me.

"Adriano," I gasp, fingers speeding up, the pressure cresting, burning, consuming. I see him, feel him, hear him. His growl, his breath, the weight of his hands forcing me apart. Touching me everywhere.

Guilt tears through me when my mind takes me back to that night. But my body is a traitor, too far gone, too desperate to care. Then Sophia's face flashes through my mind, and I freeze.

My dead best friend's dad.

Her dad. Her fucking dad.

Life's a cruel bastard. Dangles what you can't have, then laughs while you burn.

The water goes cold. My body jerks, the pleasure vanishing into ice.

I stumble out, the water dripping from my skin, and I drag a towel around me. My legs tremble as I collapse onto the mattress, the springs groaning under me. The room isn't completely dark and the streetlight slices through the blinds, casting dim streaks of light, breaking through just enough to keep the darkness at bay.

I try to sleep, but it won't come. Not with his name still caught in my throat.

My hands shake as I reach for my phone.

And I give in.

It's not wrong. It can't be. Everyone's online these days, from pictures, to articles. We all have pieces of our lives scattered like breadcrumbs. If he didn't want to be seen, he wouldn't be here. He wouldn't exist for me to find.

Every obsession starts somewhere. Every girl with a filthy little secret does this.

So why does it feel like sin?

Adriano Vieri.

I type his name fast, desperate. The first image hits like a fist to my ribs, those gray-green eyes cutting through a gala shot, so sharp and soulless. Detached. A man who doesn't waver, doesn't falter, doesn't belong to anyone.

My breath catches. I draw the sheets up and hold my phone tighter. I should stop. I don't.

Because I've wanted him forever.

Not in the harmless way girls want things. Not in a way that fades. I've wanted him in ways I wasn't supposed to, in ways that rooted deep, in ways that made me feel wrong. So many stolen glances that I yearned for.

I was young, but not blind. Not stupid.

He never looked at me. Not once.

But that never stopped me from waiting for the moment he would.

I scroll, starving.

I go through the motions with my phone, from grocery shopping online, to answering Gianna's texts, and back to pretending I'm not looking him up again. Pretending I'm not thinking about him. But I am. It's a sickness, gnawing, and dragging me back to him.

I keep replaying that moment in my head. Should I have gone outside? Would he have recognized me? Why did the sight of him make it hard to breathe?

I should sleep, but my mind is restless, tangled in memories I thought I'd buried.

I open a new tab.

It's stupid. Reckless. But I need to know more.

In another picture, this time he's standing outside some ritzy building, flanked by men in dark suits. No smile, no frown, just a blank intensity that burrows under my skin. Next, he's kneeling with a golden retriever, head tilted back, eyes closed. Like he's at peace.

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Lies. We both haven't been at peace since that night.

I dig deeper, but it is always the same: dark suits, unreadable expressions, and effortless control. I click one. Then another.

Then I stop pretending and I'm just looking.

Because the truth is, I'm remembering.

The way he looked today. The way he's always looked when I used to steal glances when I was younger before I understood what this feeling was.

Now I do.

And it's fucking ruinous.

I shift under the covers, heat licking through me, letting my mind wander where it shouldn't.

I drag a finger over the screen, imagining him here, towering over me, his breath hot against my skin.

I tip my head back against the pillows and shut my eyes too tightly. My body is too wired, too desperate. I sit up and—

The thought of him is forbidden, wrong, yet here I am, lost in the heat of it. Imagining his hands tracing the map of my body, igniting a fire that defies

explanation. His mouth, a dangerous playground of kisses, bites, and licks, trapping me between the sharp edge of his teeth.

The man in those pictures, like a wanton danger personified, sends shivers dancing up my arm, pooling low in my belly. It's that very danger that makes my body ache with a pleasure so acute it borders on pain. I squeeze my eyes shut, summoning his image: those gray, almost green eyes, pulling me under like a siren's call.

My thighs begin to press together. Every nerve ending screams for his touch. I need his hands, his face, his mouth buried between my thighs, tasting my secrets. For now, a pillow will have to suffice. I clutch it, pressing it hard against my core.

As I rub against the soft cotton, soft moans escape my lips, each one a whispered prayer to the phantom of his touch. With each thrust of my hips, I surrender further to the fantasy, until finally, control snaps.

I throw the pillow aside, desperate for unfiltered sensation. Naked and unashamed, I reach down, and my fingers find the swollen bud, already slick with anticipation.

Watch me fuck myself, Adriano. I'm already dripping, aching, and so fucking needy for you. Imagine your fingers between my thighs, dragging through the mess I made thinking of you.

Now taste me. Taste what's yours.

A tremor of fear dances through me. What would he do if he found me like this, so raw, so exposed? Would he be angry? Disgusted? The age gap yawns between us, a chasm of societal disapproval. And then there's our history. The tragic one that makes this impossible.

But desire, a raging inferno, consumes all doubts, reducing them to ash.

Are you hard for me, Adriano? Are you stroking yourself in the shadows as you watch me fall apart?

My fingers tease slow, lazy circles, slickness coating them as I spread myself wider.

Can you see how fucking wet I am for you? I sink two fingers deep, gasping at the stretch, my walls pulsing around them.

“Adriano,” I moan, the name spilling out, forbidden, delicious. I call it again, louder, rubbing my clit with my thumb while I fuck myself harder. The sheets twist in my fist, anchoring me as my hips buck, my instinct taking over.

In my head, he’s here towering over me, those beautiful gray eyes blazing, lips parted as he watches me finger myself senseless.

“Mmm, fuck, so good,” I whimper, voice breaking. “Please, Adriano...” I don’t even know what I’m begging for—his tongue, his hands, his cock driving into me. I’ve wanted him forever, a crush that faded to embers when I fled to Italy.

But one glimpse of him today lit it all back up, and now I’m burning alive. For that need, the want, the damn craving with a desperation that scares me. This man, who has haunted my thoughts for years, now resurrected in the heat of this moment.

Do you want me to come for you, Adriano? Do you like how I call your name like a prayer, a plea?

My hands move to my breasts, cupping them, teasing the nipples that harden instantly beneath my touch. In my mind, it’s his hands, so rough and demanding, that claim my flesh. He’d put his mouth on each nipple, suckling hard, nipping, licking, until it’s tight and aching. I’m a gasping, writhing mess beneath him.

You're so damn gorgeous, he'd say, his voice a low growl, eyes dark with possessive hunger. And I'd fall, willingly, gratefully, into the abyss of him.

It's too much. I thrust my hips, faster, harder, my fingers pumping in and out of me, pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

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“Oh, oh, oh, oh...Mmmm...”

My pussy clenches tight around my fingers, the waves of heat swallowing me whole.

Then orgasm explodes, a supernova of sensation that rips through me, leaving me gasping and trembling. I’m screaming, thrashing, lost in the storm of pleasure, unsure if I’m still in my room or adrift in some other reality.

I’ve never touched myself like this before, with such abandon, such raw hunger.

As the aftershocks fade, I sink into the mattress, limbs boneless, breath ragged. My fingers slip free, wet with my own release, the evidence of just how far I’ve let myself go for him.

I force myself up, legs shaking, my knees weak like I’ve been fucked for real. The bathroom tiles are cool beneath my feet as I brace against the sink, flicking the faucet on. Cold water rushes over my fingers, then splashes against my flushed skin, a failed attempt to rinse away the heat still coiling deep inside me.

But there’s no shame. No regret. Just the slow, drugging pulse of the best orgasm I’ve had in ages.

So wrong. But so damn right.

And it’s all him. That immovable, untouchable man who has owned my thoughts for as long as I can remember. Seeing him again has only made it worse.

Because now, I don't think I'll ever stop wanting more.

Chapter 2

Adriano

I'm pacing the warehouse floor, my boots slamming against cracked concrete, restless as hell while my men sift through the latest powder stacks in the back. The space reeks of rust, stale smoke, and that faint, chemical bite leaking from the crates.

Tony's over there, barking orders, his voice bouncing off the rusted walls as Marco tears open a bag, checking the weight. My empire's humming with millions in white dust, all fresh off a boat and ready to flood the streets.

The twinkling bulb overhead buzzes like it's laughing at me, and my fists tighten, then loosen, aching for something to smash. Ralph barrels through the steel door just then, his face pinched, jaw locked, eyes skittering away from mine like a rat dodging a trap. I know it's shit news before he even opens his mouth.

"Spit it out," I bark, stepping toward him.

He scratches his scarred knuckles, stalling. "The deal's off. Kessler's pulling out."

"What the fuck do you mean, 'pulling out'? I had that bastard locked down. Five million on the table, meetings every damn week—he was drooling for it!"

Ralph shifts, boots scraping. "Guess he grew balls overnight. Says he's not selling. Snagged some investors to prop him up."

I smash my fist into the metal table, the crash ricocheting off the walls. Pain sears my knuckles. That company—Kessler's crumbling little kingdom—was mine. I need it

badly, not just for the cash, but to scrub my dirty money clean. Millions piling up in shadow accounts, begging to bleed through those books. And now this prick thinks he can yank it away?

“Boss, we can still—” Ralph tries, but my glare slices him silent.

“Get me everything on him,” I snarl. “Every fucking crumb of filth. I want his life gutted.”

Ralph nods and his thumbs are already jabbing his phone. “On it.”

I turn to stare at the wall, its peeling paint like shredded flesh. I’ve scraped my empire from dirt and blood, broken every rule to climb, and still, it’s never enough. One asshole with a sudden backbone, and it all wobbles.

Pain’s not a choice; it’s the fucking toll for breathing.

For three years, I’ve been neck-deep in this world. No room for softness. No time for grief. Business deals, money laundering, power plays—it’s all I know now. Now I’ve got nothing but this: deals, fists, and a void that swallows everything good.

That, and the fleeting relief I find in a willing body.

I lean against the table with my gloved hands flexing. Thinking about it. I should have a woman pinned against some hotel wall now. A blonde maybe, loud and forgettable. Her nails scratching my back, and her moans fake as hell. I’ll fuck her hard, fast, chasing something I never find.

And when it’s over, I shove her off, toss cash on the dresser, and leave without a word. No kissing, no repeats—just a transaction.

That's all it's been since Sophia died. Women come and go, mouths on mine when I let them, but it's empty. Mechanical. I don't feel shit anymore, just the grind of moving forward because stopping means drowning.

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Two hours later, Ralph slumps into the chair across from my desk. We're upstairs now, in my office—a tight, scarred box above the warehouse. He drops a thin folder, and the papers spillout like guts. “This is it?” I snatch the folder, flipping through the pages. “A fucking parking ticket? A year old?”

Ralph leans back, arms crossed. “The guy’s spotless, Adriano. Fifty, married, no kids. Runs his company like a saint—taxes filed, no dirt. The worst he’s done is skip a meter.”

I hurl the folder across the room, sheets scattering like ash. “Spotless? Nobody’s that pure. Dig deeper.”

“I did,” he replies, steady but cautious. “He’s a ghost. Either he’s dull as fuck, or he’s a goddamn genius at covering his tracks.”

I lean forward, my elbows gouging the desk and fingers laced tight. My pulse pounds, and there’s a dull ache in my skull. Kessler’s screwing me, and time’s running out. The cash has to move—now. Every day it sits, the feds creep closer, their stench on the wind.

“Then we stop asking,” I say, surging to my feet, the chair screeching back. “Get the boys. We’re hitting his place.”

Ralph’s brows shoot up. “You sure? This ain’t quiet.”

I grab my jacket, yanking it on as the leather settles heavily on my shoulders. “Quiet’s for losers with patience. I’m done.”

The drive is dead quiet, the SUV engine growling low. Ralph taps his knee beside me while Tony and Marco click magazines into their guns in the backseat. Streetlights smear yellow across the glass. I choke the wheel as I picture Kessler's smug grin, thinking he's safe. He's about to learn otherwise.

We roll up to his brownstone in Queens—neat brick, cushy setup, lights glowing warm like a damn postcard. I cut the engine and step out, nodding to the crew. They move like shadows, fast and sure.

Tony picks the lock in ten seconds, and the door pops open. We slip inside, our boots hushed on the hardwood. The living room is too perfect—lavender and old paper, a lie of peace. Kessler lounges on the couch, glasses low, the TV muttering news. His wife is knitting, her gray bun tight.

She spots us, and her needles crash down as a gasp tears free. Kessler jolts up, eyes bugging, hands scrabbling for the remote like it'll save him.

“Who the hell—” he stammers, but I'm on him, seizing his shirt and slamming him to his feet.

“Shut it,” I hiss, smashing him into the wall. His glasses skid away. “You think you can fuck me?”

His wife shrieks, a piercing sound. Marco grabs her, dragging her toward the kitchen. She kicks and thrashes, but he's a brick wall.

“Let her go!” Kessler chokes, his voice splitting.

I twist his collar tighter. “You had a deal. My money, your company. What flipped?”

He wheezes, his face purpling. “I—I got a better offer. It's not personal!”

“Not personal?” I ram him again, his skull cracking against the drywall. “You’re bleeding me dry, you fuck. That’s as personal as it gets.”

Ralph steps up, papers in hand—the contract, the transfer. I shove them into Kessler, pinning him. “Sign.”

He shakes his head, quaking. “I can’t—”

I jerk my chin at Tony by the kitchen. “Do it,” I say, my voice ice cold.

A scream cuts off, muffled, then a thud. Kessler’s eyes whip toward it, frantic. “No, please—don’t hurt her!”

“Sign the fucking papers,” I growl, bearing down. “Or she’s gone.”

His hands tremble as he snatches Ralph’s pen. He scrawls his name, ink bleeding, tears streaming. I rip the papers free, scanning the signature. Done.

“Secrecy clause,” I snap.

Ralph slides it over. Kessler signs again, blind, sobbing like a kicked dog.

I release him, letting him crumple. “Smart move.”

Tony returns, wiping his hands. “She’s fine. Tied, gagged, breathing.”

Kessler crawls toward the kitchen, whimpering like a beaten dog, his hands scrabbling at the hardwood. I don’t look back. I pivot, snatch the papers from Ralph and shove them into my jacket, the leather creaking as I jam them deep. Then I step closer to Kessler, looming over him. His sobs hitch, pathetic and wet.

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I crouch just enough to grab his hair, yanking his head up so his terrified eyes meet mine.

“Cross me again,” I hiss, voice a blade, “and I’ll carve her screams into your skull before I end you both.” I release him, letting his face smack the floor, and turn to Ralph. “We’re out.”

Back in the SUV, night presses thick against the glass. My gloves flex on the wheel, the signed documents a hot weight in my pocket. Victory is mine, but it’s bitter, like chewing gravel. This is me now, full of force and fear, a machine that takes because asking is for suckers. Sophia’s ghost flickers—her smile, her voice, and then, as always, it vanishes, leaving a hole that has been rotting me out for three years.

I’m neck-deep in this game, have been since she died. Deals like Kessler’s, blood on my hands is all I know. Women, too, are just bodies to burn through. Last week, I had a brunette in a bar; her lips tasted of whiskey and regret. I fucked her in the bathroom, rough and without words. She clung to me afterward, begging for more, but I gave her a fake number and walked away. They’re all the same, to warm me for a night, and gone by morning. No connection. Just a release I barely feel.

“You good, boss?” Ralph cuts through the quiet.

I grunt, my eyes locked on the road. “Good enough. Kessler’s ours.”

He grins, slouching in his seat. “So funny when the guy pissed himself. Think he’ll squeal?”

“He won’t,” I reply, my voice hard. “Not unless he wants her head blown off next.”

Ralph laughs. “You’re a mean fucker.”

Being mean keeps me standing. It keeps the empire from crumbling. Sophia’s death broke me, leaving me ruthless, empty, a bastard who doesn’t stop. I breathe in the cold night air but feel nothing. His company is mine now, just like everything else I set my sights on.

I’ve yet to see something I want but don’t get.

I hold the wheel tighter and drive into the black.

Chapter 3

Penelope

I stand in the corner of Gianna’s wedding, clutching a lukewarm beer and watching the small crowd of friends and family mill around her backyard. The string lights swing between the trees and cast jagged shadows on the grass.

Laughter bounces off the wooden fence, and the smell of barbecue clings to everything. It’s simple, messy, real—not some fancy blowout. Just Gianna’s style. My short blue dress hugs my legs, the fabric creased from hours of hovering between folding chairs and sticky grass. I tug at the hem, wishing I’d gone for something breezier, but it’s cute enough to survive the night.

Then he walks in.

Adriano Vieri shoves through the gate, and the whole damn yard freezes. Heads snap his way and chatter dies fast, like he’s a black hole swallowing sound. He’s in a black

suit, no tie, his top button popped and tattoos on his neck like dark vines. His strawberry-blond hair—gray streaks cutting through—drops over his forehead as he scopes the place out.

He strides in, his boots hitting the grass like he's claiming it, all pure muscle and menace. My gut twists into a hard, sick lurch. I duck my head and then pretend to fuss with my beer label, but I can't peel my eyes off him.

Gianna's at my side in a heartbeat, her white dress rustling and veil jammed back like it's pissing her off.

"Caught sight of tall, dark, and deadly yet?" she mutters, jabbing me with her elbow.

"Yeah," I grunt, ripping the label now. "Guy's a damn spotlight."

She grins and takes a swig of her wine. "A saint when he's not snapping bones for fun."

I choke on my beer, coughing hard. "A saint? Didn't you just say he tortures guys daily?"

"Give him a break, Pen." She shrugs, eyes sharp. "He's fucked up, sure, but he's got a soft spot buried under all that psycho. Sophia's death still guts him, same as us."

Her name slices me open, fast, and brutal. I swallow, my throat closing up. Adriano's here, and I'm a wreck of nerves buzzing like live wires and palms slick with sweat. I've been getting off to his pictures, panting his name in the dark like some twisted loser.

I gulp my beer, praying it'll calm me down. It's useless.

He's coming our way now, clutching a small silver-wrapped box. Gianna straightens up, flashing a grin.

"Here's my VIP, rolling in like royalty."

"Congrats, kid," he says, voice rough like gravel. He hands her the gift, then his gray eyes land on me. They widen, just a fraction. "Penelope?"

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My heart slams against my ribs. “Hey,” I manage, voice thin.

He steps closer, and before I can brace myself, he pulls me into a hug. His arms lock around me, so solid and warm, crushing me against him. I smell him, it’s leather, smoke and something strong and male. My hands freeze at my sides, then creep up to his back, feeling the hard lines under his jacket. I don’t want him to let go. Ever.

But he does, pulling back, his hands lingering on my shoulders for a beat too long.

“Didn’t know you were back,” he says, studying me.

“Surprise,” I croak, forcing a wry smile. “Italy got old.”

He nods, lips twitching. “You look good.”

“Thanks.” I tug at my dress again, thankful it’s short and pretty, showing off my legs. It’s the first time he’s seen me in years, and I’m not some scrawny kid anymore. “You too.”

Gianna snorts, unwrapping her gift and it’s a sleek silver bracelet. Definitely expensive.

“Oh, damn, Adriano. You didn’t have to flex this hard.”

“Shut up and wear it,” he grunts, but there’s a flicker of a smile.

She punches his arm. “Bossy as ever. Gerald’s gonna hate you for stealing my heart

today.”

“Tell him to fight me for it,” he shoots back, deadpan.

I laugh and his eyes snap to me again, and my breath jams. I look away, fast, but it’s too late. He’s hooked me.

The party drags on, and I’m stuck orbiting him. I grab another beer, and chat with Gianna’s colleague, Lisa, about her dumb ex, but every few minutes, my eyes find him. He’s by the grill now, flipping burgers with a neighbor, and his sleeves are rolled up, those herculean forearms flexing. Then he’s laughing at something Gerald says, a rare, low rumble that hits me in the gut. God, I miss that laugh. I haven’t heard it since that night. Each time our eyes meet across the yard, it’s equivalent to a punch, and I can’t fucking breathe.

It’s like, despite everyone standing there, he sees only me.

My skin prickles, wishing it could be true, and I hate it.

I hate wanting him this bad when it’s impossible. He could never feel that way. Not after what happened.

Lisa catches me staring and moves closer beaming. “Got a type, huh?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I snap, then chug my beer.

She laughs. “Oh, so touchy. He’s old enough to be your dad, you know.”

“Piss off,” I mutter, shoving past her. She’s right, and it stings worse than I’ll admit.

Later, I’m tipsy, the yard spinning a little, and Gianna’s shoving cake in Gerald’s

face. Most of the guests have left, leaving the ones who live nearby, and I stumble toward the cooler for water, but Adriano's there, leaning against it, watching me.

Okay, fine. I'm not actually thirsty, I just needed an excuse to talk to him.

But I am drunk, so thank the universe for liquid courage.

"You okay?" he asks when it seems like I'm finding it hard to shuffle through the bottles.

"Fine," I lie, grabbing a bottle. My hand shakes when I bring it up to drink and he notices.

"Too much beer?" He steps closer, looming over me.

No, too much you. God, he is so close and so handsome. Did he even age a day?

"Maybe." I twist the cap off, and take a sip. "You gonna judge me?"

"Nah." There's a soft, wicked twist to his lips. "Been there."

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“Yeah, well, I’m not you,” I shoot back, sharper than I mean.

His brow lifts. “Fair enough.”

I turn away, but his voice stops me. “Need a ride home?”

I freeze, bottle halfway to my lips. “I’m good.”

“You’re not,” he says, flat. “Come on.”

I should say no. I’m drunk, not stupid. But my mouth betrays me. “Okay.”

He nods once and steps aside, gesturing to the gate. I clutch the bottle tighter, my knuckles white, and stumble past him. His arm brushes mine—hard muscle under that suit—and my skin ignites a slow, shameful burn.

I hate how much I want him closer, how every step toward his car feels like a plea for him to wreck me.

We’re in his black SUV now, the leather seats icy against my bare legs. He drives, one hand on the wheel, the other slack on his thigh. I stare out the window, the streetlights flashing past and my head a drunken blur. His scent—leather, smoke, him—floods the car, choking me. I shift, cross my legs, and my dress hikes up. His eyes snap to it, then jerk back to the road. My gut clenches.

“Thanks,” I mumble, cracking the silence.

“For what?”

“Driving me. Gianna’s too busy playing bride.”

He grunts and laughs a little. “She’s a damn nuisance. Always will be.”

I snort. “Tell me about it. Good thing she’s Gerald’s problem now.”

The quiet between us stretches thin, prickly, and taut. I steal a glance and his jaw clenches as though he notices it too. He’s close enough to brush against and fuck, I want to. I’ve wanted him forever, ever since I’d sneak looks over at Sophia’s, too young to name the ache I felt. Now I’m twenty, and it’s grown into something monstrous, those unholy fantasies fueled by his pictures and his name slipping out in the dark.

He’s right here, oblivious, and it’s twisted. Wrong. Life’s a cruel fucker, dangling the forbidden in front of me just to watch me writhe.

“You’re too quiet. Little Penelope doesn’t talk much anymore?” he teases, his eyes still fixed on the road.

His referring to me as ‘Little’ hits a nerve, but I shove it down.

“Thinking,” I mumble.

“About what?”

I hesitate, then let it out. “That night. Sophia. How I didn’t pick up when she called.”

He stiffens, knuckles whitening on the wheel. “Leave it alone, Penelope. It’s done.”

“Done?” My voice cracks, bitter. “I see her bleeding out every damn night. Her eyes—I didn’t—”

“Stop.” He cuts me off. “You were a kid. It’s in the fucking past.”

“Is it?” I turn, glaring at him. “You’re not haunted? You don’t wake up choking on it?”

His jaw ticks, but he doesn’t answer. Silence slams back, heavier now, like a fist. I slump against the seat. He doesn’t get it or maybe he does, and that’s worse. Sophia’s death ripped us both open and left us bleeding in different ways. I ran to Italy; he turned into this—whatever the hell he is now.

Finally, he speaks, voice quieter. “Italy. What was that like?”

I scoff out a jagged laugh. “Pasta, wine, and a shit-ton of regret. Worked in a dive, hands stinking of garlic. Thought I’d outrun her ghost. Nope, I just traded nightmares for olive oil.”

He grins. “Sounds like you lived it up.”

“Oh, yeah,” I deadpan. “Real glamorous. You should’ve seen me crying into my spaghetti the first few months I got there.”

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A low chuckle escapes him and I relish it. “You’re still a mess, kid.”

“Pot, meet kettle,” I shoot back as I roll my eyes, annoyed. “And kid? Really? Lay off the babysitter vibe, huh?” My tone’s sharp, but I keep it light so he knows it is just a jab and not a fight. I’m not some child he can pat on the head, not after everything.

He glances at me, beaming. “Noted,” he says, dry, and his eyes linger a beat too long. My breath hitches, and I look away fast.

Chapter 4

Adriano

The silence in the SUV is a fucking chokehold, pressing down hard after her babysitter jab. My knuckles bleach on the wheel, the streetlights slicing her face in gold streaks.

Penelope’s slouched against the seat, legs crossed in that blue dress hiking up her thighs and flashing skin I shouldn’t clock. She’s twenty and way too young, too forbidden, too tied to Sophia. And I’m thirty-nine, too hardened to be this rattled.

But damn it, her scent—sweet, floral, spiked with beer that floods the car, clogging my lungs and having my pulse hammering like I’m some dumb kid again.

She shifts, snapping the quiet with a huff. “You’re brooding again.”

“Not brooding,” I grunt. “Driving.”

“Liar.” She twists toward me. “You’re all dark and moody over there like you always are. What’s always in that head of yours?”

“None of your damn business,” I say with a little edge in my voice, but she’s grinning, her dimples flashing, and it’s a sucker punch. She’s not the Penelope I remember, the quiet one who faded into Sophia’s orbit.

That was the Penelope of three years ago. I saw her today for the first time since the funeral and she’s a fucking wildfire now, bold and biting, and it’s screwing with me. I liked her better when she didn’t exist in my peripheral. Now she’s all I can see, her skin glowing, her dress hugging every curve I shouldn’t want, and legs I’d kill to spread open and—

“You’re staring,” she says, low, catching me. Her coffee-brown eyes glint, daring me to lie.

“Road’s ahead,” I mutter, jerking my gaze forward, but my cock’s twitching, waking up fast. She’s a brat, poking at shit she doesn’t understand, and I’m a bastard for letting her get this far under my skin.

“Uh-huh.” She leans closer, elbow on the console, breath brushing my arm. “You think I’m pretty, don’t you?”

“Christ, Penelope.” I roll my eyes, throat dry. “You’re drunk.”

“So?” Her fingers graze my sleeve, lightly. “Answer me.”

I shouldn’t. I should shut this down, dump her at her door, and bury it. But she’s relentless, heat rolling off her, and my walls are cracking like old plaster. One day—hours—since she walked back into my life, and I’m strung out, craving her like some pimply kid chasing his first lay.

I nod. “Objectively speaking.”

She tilts her head, watching me. “Objectively speaking? That sounds like you’re trying not to say something inappropriate.”

I smile. “I don’t try to do anything.”

Her laugh is soft but knowing. “You really don’t, do you?”

I don’t answer. I shouldn’t have said anything in the first place. I’m already breaking the rules just by taking her home. Indulging this back-and-forth, watching her shift in her seat, admiring the way the passing headlights skim over her skin—I’m testing my own limits. And I don’t like feeling out of control.

She leans closer, lowering her voice. “If you were trying to say something inappropriate, what would it be?”

I glance at her, my patience thinning. “Just try to sleep it off before we get to your house.”

Her smile widens. “That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only one you’re getting,” I say, voice rough.

She studies me like she wants to push further, to see how much I can take before I snap. Then she beams and shifts so her knee bumps mine. “Say it like you mean it.”

“Fuck’s sake,” I growl, glaring at her. “You’re fucking stunning, alright? Now sit back.”

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She laughs and it's bright, reckless and it's a match to gasoline. Her hand slides higher, brushing my forearm, and my skin's blazing, a burn I can't kill.

"See? Wasn't so hard," she teases. "Bet you've been thinking it all night."

"Keep dreaming," I shoot back, but she's right. That dress, so short, tight, and hugging every curve, has been replaying in my mind since I saw her. One look today, and I'm a goddamn mess, wanting to rip it off, shove her down, and fuck her till she's hoarse from screaming my name. It's been hours, not years, and I'm acting like I've never seen a woman before, dick throbbing like I'm sixteen again. She's Sophia's best friend. Nineteen years my junior. A line I can't cross. But my dick's got no morals.

"You're fun when you're mad," she says, grinning wider, leaning so close her breath hits my neck. "Bet I could make you madder."

"Try it," I warn, voice a jagged edge, but she's fearless, her fingers trailing to my wrist, lingering.

"Oh, I will." Her lips graze my ear softly, and my hold firms, the wheel creaking. "You're hot when you're grumpy, you know that?"

"Penelope," I rasp, shoving her hand off, but my blood's roaring, surging south. She's flirting hard, shamelessly, and I'm a heartbeat from breaking because I'm already picturing her under me, those thighs wide, her center dripping wet and my hands bruising her hips as I pound into her till she's mine.

But she's not and she can never be. Your daughter's death should be your bloody reminder.

We hit her street, my tires crunching the gravel, and I slam the brakes a little too hard. Her building looms ahead with cracked siding.

Why is she living in this dump? But it isn't my business. The quicker she gets out of my life, the better.

I kill the engine, and the silence is electric, snapping between us. She doesn't move, just watches me with lips parted and eyes dark with intent.

She shifts again, her fingers playing with the hem of her dress and the movement draws my eyes before I force them away. Her lips part slightly, like she's about to say something. Or maybe she's just waiting for me to close the space between us.

But I won't. I'm smarter than that.

"Go inside, Penelope."

She leans in instead, close enough her breath fans my jaw. "You don't want me to."

"Penelope." My voice is a growl, warning, but she's suddenly deaf. Her hand slides to my thigh—bold, too fucking bold—and my cock jumps, straining painfully against my slacks.

"Kiss me," she whispers, lips an inch from mine, daring me. "I know you want to."

I do. Fuck, I do. I want to crush her mouth, taste her, own her till she's trembling. Her heat seeps into me and I'm caught between shoving her off and pulling her closer. Our breaths tangle, I'm slowly caving already imagining her naked and writhing with

my tongue buried in her cunt, her screams ringing in my ears.

“Shower,” I snarl and force her door open. “Bed. Now.”

She blinks, dazed, then smiles. “Yes, boss.” She slides out, hips swaying as she stumbles to her door.

After making sure she enters and the door closes behind her, I peel out, my tires howling, trying to ditch her—those legs, that mouth, her goddamn nerve shredding me. Then I spot it, her phone, winking at me from the seat. Shit.

I shouldn’t go back. She can grab it later or I can give it to Gianna. But fuck, she’s alone in that dump, what if some bastard breaks in and she’s got no way to call for help?

Excuses. Fucking excuses. I know it’s a lie. I just want her under my skin again.

Muttering a cuss, I spin the SUV around, the headlights cutting the dark, and roll back to her place.

When I arrive, I park and walk up the front steps to find that the door’s unlocked. Ok, that is dumb as hell. I’ll give her an earful later. I’m just going to drop this quickly and be out of here.

The place is faintly scented like her.

I move through the apartment, following the distant sound of running water. When I reach her room, I see the bathroom door is open with steam spilling out.

“Penelope?” I call, gruff, but no answer.

Just to check that she hasn't slumped since she drank so much, I walk forward and take a look and there she is.

Naked. Wet. Unaware that I'm standing at the threshold, watching as the water cascades over her skin. My breath comes slower but my body responds instantly, every muscle going rigid with restraint.

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God, she's grown.

Full tits, tight waist, hips curved just right, all slick and glistening like a fucking fantasy. My cock's rock-hard instantly, aching, and I can't move. She's humming, her head tipped back, oblivious, and I'm a sick fuck for standing here, staring.

I should leave but my feet lock, and my hand drops to my dick, stroking slowly through my pants. She shifts, the soap sudsing over her breasts, dripping down her stomach, and I bite my tongue, tasting blood.

Damn, I've got no control, no shame. I want to storm in, slam her against the tile and fuck her till she passes out. I want her cunt clenching around me as I fill her up.

I exhale sharply, forcing myself to turn away, stepping back into the shadows before I lose the last thread of self-control I have left.

Her phone thuds onto the bed—I don't even clock letting go—and I'm out, door banging shut, back in the car.

The engine roars as I peel away with her naked body burned into my brain. One hand tearing at my fly, freeing my thick, leaking cock.

I stroke hard, fast, precum slicking my fist as I picture her spread wide on my bed, her wrists bound with my tie and her legs forced apart, her cunt glistening, pink and swollen.

The things I would do to her should have me locked up.

I'd bury my face between her thighs and drive my tongue deep and vicious, tasting her for the torment she's put me through. She'd buck against me, her cries breaking loose as slickness coats my chin. Then I'd flip her onto her knees, position her ass up, and slam into her from behind. Her flesh would tremble as she stretched around me. She'd gasp my name and plead for a break, but I'd keep going, denying her any mercy.

How can I be seeing her for the first time in three years and I'm this feral and unraveling? What hold does this woman have on me?

Why do I picture her dropping to her knees and then shoving my cock deep in her mouth? Watching as she gags as I thrust roughly, fucking her throat raw. Reveling in those tears spilling down her cheeks, and her lips swelling red as she chokes around me.

I want her bent over my desk with her skirt hiked up, no panties. I want to slap her ass hard till my handprints bloom as I pound into her. I'd love to see her cunt juice drip down her thighs as she clenches tight around me. I want to unload inside, marking her deep, and ruin her completely.

I want to fuck her in every position I can think of.

I want her spread on my bed. Her wrists tied, her legs forced apart, and my tongue buried in her. I want her screams as I suck her clit, her body jerking wild. I want to flip her over and slam into her from behind again. I want to watch her ass ripple with each brutal thrust. I want my hand circling her throat, squeezing till she's close to meeting her maker. I want her pulse racing under my fingers, her gasps shifting to moans as I drive her into oblivion.

And like some cruel punishment for the last three years, Sophia's face flashes before me. A haunting I can't outrun, born from less than five minutes of reckless judgment.

Her laughter. Then blood.

Guilt tears through me but the darkness is stronger—it always is. Haven't we suffered enough? Haven't we both?

I growl, my hand stroking faster, Penelope's voice ringing in my head: "Harder, Adriano, fuck me harder." I imagine her pussy spasming as I tighten my hands on her throat. Then she comes, screaming, wrecked, and I'm lost, spilling over the edge with her.

One damn day. That's all it took.

Now I'm here, my cock in hand, lost in the filth of wanting her.

I should stop. I should feel shame, disgust, something that pulls me back from this edge.

But I don't.

She's going to ruin me this time.

And I think I'll let her. I have nothing left to lose anyways.

Chapter 5

Penelope

I'm still buzzing from snagging this job at Caruso's, a name that drips prestige like honey off a gold spoon. It's no ordinary jewelry store—think Bvlgari, but more ruthless, a palace of excess where every gem screams wealth.

The showroom's a cathedral of decadence: black marble floors veined with gold, walls draped in silk, glass cases cradling diamonds and sapphires so flawless they look alive.

Chandeliers dangle like icicles, casting light that dances over gold cuffs and necklaces. Luxury pieces that cost more than my soul. The air is filled with leather, a scent that clings. This isn't just mere luxury; it's power, curated and cold, and I'm elbow-deep in its numbers now.

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Day one's a blur. I'm good—damn good—and the staff's sidelong glances say they're clocking it. But last night's gnawing at me—Adriano's growl when he shoved me out of his SUV, those gray eyes burning holes I can't patch. It's a splinter under my nail, sharp and restless.

Afternoon creeps in, and my manager, Mia, glides over, coffee mug steaming, a tight, controlled expression on her face that could cut glass.

"Upstairs, newbie. The man wants you."

"The man?" I tilt back, chair groaning, pulse kicking. "Who?"

"Figure it out," she says, sipping slowly, eyes glinting like she's betting on my crash. "Don't mess it up."

My gut twists as I rise, smoothing my blouse, heels striking the floor like gunfire. Nobody's dropped a name, just hushed talk of "him," like he's a myth carved in smoke.

The spiral staircase's wrought iron is cold under my fingers, tightening the knot in my stomach. The place feels alive, watching me, its elegance a mask for something feral. I pass a display of emerald rings, their green fire winking like eyes, and wonder who really pulls these strings. The office door looms, made with ebony wood, frosted glass etched with a subtle "C." I push through, holding my breath.

Only Adriano's there.

My breath stalls, and my legs lock. Him? Here?

“You,” I say, voice flat, fists clenching at my sides.

“Sit,” he says, jabbing a finger at a chair like I’m some punk nabbed with sticky fingers.

I don’t budge, my feet remain planted. “You’re my boss? Since when does Caruso’s belong to you?” My eyes narrow.

Last I heard, this place was a glittery upstart, barely a decade old, pushing its way up with sleek designs and whispers of dirty cash. Word was some syndicate shark snapped it up to wash his money clean, turning blood into diamonds.

Adriano Vieri, Sophia’s dad, the guy who’d grill steaks and dodge her questions about late-night “business” is a mafia kingpin? It fits too well, and that scares me.

“Surprise,” he drawls, tongue sliding slowly across his lips, a predator’s tease. My pulse slams but I choke it down as last night is still raw, his shove-out-the-door a fresh welt, and now this twist guts me.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I step closer, my anger flaring hot. “Last night—in the car, at my place—”

“Didn’t figure you’d pull that shit if you knew, huh?” he growls, stepping into my space. “Teasing me, daring me to kiss you. What the fuck was that, Penelope?”

“You’re mad at me?” I tilt my chin. “You couldn’t peel your eyes off me the whole night, playing chauffeur like a damn gentleman.”

“Drunk girls need rides,” he snaps. “How’s that a green light for your little game?”

You should know better.”

Of course I do but why does it have to be that way?

His jaw clenches, those gray eyes slitting when I don’t bite back. “You pushed too far, acting like a brat, begging for shit you can’t handle.”

“Bullshit,” I fire back. “You wanted it, you still do. Don’t play saint now.”

He steps closer, looming, his voice dropping to a rasp. “You’re a reckless little thing who keeps pushing things that should be left alone, and you’ll see what happens when I stop holding back.”

“But you didn’t,” I say, locking eyes, defiance blazing. “And now I’m here, under your thumb. What’s the move, boss?”

He snorts. “To keep you in line. And I’m only doing this because of Gianna. You’re good with numbers so don’t make me regret keeping you.”

“Then don’t,” I retort, stepping into his heat, his cologne sharp and dizzying, oud bleeding into leather. “But you hauled me up here for more than a slap on the wrist. So out with it.”

That thing Adriano does with his nose when he’s pissed, it’s barely a twitch, but on him, it commands both fear and restraint. I remember it from years ago, back when I used to sneak into his beach house, watching him bark orders at unseen men through a computer screen. Now, I’m seeing it again, only this time it’s directed at me.

“Christ, Penelope,” he mutters, stepping back only to flex his hands, his fingers curling tight, then loosening, like he’s strangling the air between us. “You’re a fucking kid, and you’re torching me alive.”

“Twenty’s not a kid,” I say, closing the space he just put between us. His heat pulls me in, the space between us crackling, and I can see it. The storm brewing and the way his shirt strains as he breathes too fast, too hard. “And you’re not exactly running in the opposite direction.”

He freezes, his eyes darkening to slate. His jaw ticks, a muscle jumping under stubble, and I feel it, his control splintering, fraying at the edges like a rope about to snap. My knees wobble, heat surging insistent, but I don’t retreat. I want it and I want him to shatter, to see the beast he’s caging slip its leash.

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I lick my lips and lean closer, my voice a soft taunt.

“Go on, Adriano. Lose it.”

His arms cross, those muscles bulging under his shirt, a wall snapping shut.

“Lose it?” His voice drops to a guttural snarl that coils through me, sparking a slick, pulsing ache between my thighs. “You think you can fuck with me like before, Penelope? Just strut like a cocky little tease, begging for it? Keep pushing, and I’ll have you thrown out. I won’t let you fuck with me.”

My breath catches, his glare locks me in place, my defiance crumbling, and my voice snags. “I—I’m sorry, I stepped out of line.”

His arms flex tighter, a hard line of muscle, and my throat turns to dust. “Stepped?” he cuts in. “You leaped, Miss Rossetti, and I’m done putting up with you being inappropriate.”

The way he says my name is heavy with threat and it jolts me back to reality. “I shouldn’t have said all I did last night and today,” I murmur, eyes dipping, then flicking back to his.

He stalks to the desk’s edge and drops onto it, thighs splaying wide. A rough sigh escapes him like he’s shedding a load too heavy to haul.

“A lot’s moving here, much more than you grasp. Hiring is not my fight; I don’t care who they pick if they deliver. But I will not tolerate my employees crossing their

boundaries. So tell me, Penelope, did they stick me with a liability?”

His words sink in, and it hits even harder that he holds my paycheck and my current livelihood in his hands. My senses snap awake.

“God, no! I’m fine...this is fine. More than fine, sir, the job is amazing. I will give it my best.”

He drags a hand through his strawberry-blond hair, and those eyes—fuck, they’re burning—rake over me like I’m the reason his world’s tilting.

I’m half-convinced I might keel over right here in his office. How can anyone be this gorgeous? This overwhelming? This... everything?

He’s ditched the suit today—no gloves either. Just a button-down tucked into slacks, sleeves rolled up, showing off forearms corded with muscle. It makes him look younger, less like the untouchable kingpin, and more like a man I could reach for.

His shoulders stretch the shirt taut, the fabric straining like it might split if he flexes too hard. I catch myself staring—no, gawking, really—and jerk my eyes away, cheeks flaming with embarrassment.

Then, abrupt as a gunshot, he straightens, his tongue sweeping slowly across his lips. My breath hitches. I want to kiss him so bad it’s a physical ache, a desperate pull deep in my core but it’s a fantasy, locked tight in my skull. A man like Adriano Vieri doesn’t see me that way. He’s too far out of reach.

Reality’s a cold bitch, and I hate her for it.

“There’s something else,” he says, voice softening just enough to throw me. The hardness melts, leaving a shadow of the man I used to know, the one who cared, who

patched up scraped knees and grilled burgers with a grin.

“Yes, sir?”

He doesn’t hesitate when he speaks next, his eyes bright on my face. “You really need to lock your damn doors when you get home. New York’s crawling with filth and criminals who’d love to stumble in and catch you...”

He trails off, lips twitching, like he’s picturing it.

My pulse stumbles. Catch me how? Naked? Vulnerable? The thought of him walking in—of those eyes raking over me, stripping me bare—sends a shiver racing down my spine. I bite my lip, fighting the urge to press my thighs together, and his eyes flick to my mouth, darkening for a split second before he looks away.

“The phone—” I blurt before my brain catches up because I know that damn phone didn’t just magically land by my bedside when I know I left it in his car.

His face twists, regret flashing in those gray eyes, like he’s kicking himself for mentioning it. He shakes his head, a mock exasperation I don’t buy for a second. I’d fantasized about him watching me in the shower and his words now strip away any doubt. He saw me.

Fuck.

It’s intoxicating. Thrilling. No, it’s insane—ludicrous, even. How do I play this? Do I tell him it is fine he saw me naked and now I want him to fuck me until my name’s a blur, till I’m nothing but sweat and screams under him?

Yes. That’s what I’ll do. I finally have the man of my dreams in a tight spot and I’ll be damned if I don’t take advantage of it.

I step close despite the tremors I feel. “Tell me, Mr. Vieri, anyone could’ve walked in and seen me... what? Shower?”

“You were doing much more than just showering, Penelope. Exactly why I brought it up.”

Holy shit. Slow is out the window. We are careening down the flirty lane now, full speed, and I’d walk through fire to keep it going. That’s why I don’t hesitate, the question burning on my tongue. “What else did you see?”

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He takes his time answering. “We shouldn’t do this.”

“Do what?” I’m the one closing the gap, inching toward him until he’s so close I could kiss him if I just stretched a little.

Just as I brace for him to toss me out, his big, rough hands slide up to my face. His touch is a paradox, hard yet tender, calluses grazing my skin as he cups my cheeks. My heart’s a wild thing, slamming against my ribs.

He strokes me, thumbs tracing my jaw, eyes drinking me in like he’s committing every curve to memory. Then he lets go, snagging my right hand instead, lifting it to his mouth. Slowly, he kisses each finger—one by one, and I’m melting, my legs trembling, a puddle forming beneath me.

I’m a wreck before he speaks.

“You touched yourself that night with these hands. These gorgeous fingers were deep in your pussy. I want to taste them. I want to taste you.”

“Oh...” It’s not what I expected, but fuck, it’s everything I’ve craved. This could be a dream, and if it is, I’d rather die than wake up.

He drops my hand, jabbing a finger toward the door. “Walk out now, Penelope, before I cross that line.”

I don’t budge. I stand there, rooted, staring up at him. Defiance sparks in my eyes and he sees it, because next he asks, “Have you been with an older man before?”

“Yes.” My voice is breathy but he’s been my god for too damn long. The thought of him finally seeing me is a drug, too potent to resist. “Yes, I have.”

He nods once like he’s closing a deal and his eyes shift, sizing me up anew. “Then you know they only want sex. Nothing more.”

It’s my warning to bolt. He’s tossing the choice at me, daring me to run. He’s twice my age, my boss, my dead best friend’s father. A line so jagged it could cut us both to ribbons. But I don’t care. I want the fall.

“You won’t hurt me, Mr. Vieri,” I say, cool as ice, though my insides are molten. If he wanted to break me, he could, and I’d still worship at his feet. That’s the hold he’s got.

“You willing to bet on that?”

“Yes.”

He swallows hard, the sound loud in the quiet, and his eyes rake down my body—slow, greedy, stripping me bare.

“Tell me,” I whisper. “You watched me. What else did you want yesterday? What do you want now?”

He drops my wrist. “To shove you on this desk, rip those panties off, and lick you till you’re screaming my name. Right here. Right fucking now.”

A shiver rips through me. “Then do it,” I say. “I dare you.”

I wait and then—

“Take off your heels and get on my desk.”

I bend to slip them off, but he stops me with a shake of his head. “No. Don’t look away from me. Understand?”

“Yes...” I catch myself, breath hitching. “Yes, Adriano.”

I kick off my heels, eyes locked on his, then hoist myself onto the mahogany desk. My breath is gone when he steps in and slots himself between my thighs.

“Push up,” he growls, and I obey, scooting back. He shoves my skirt higher, a hiss escaping him as he clocks my panties and suspenders. It’s black lace, daring, a gamble I took for him. “You’ve been dreaming of this, haven’t you?”

“Since forever,” I admit, voice breaking, raw with want.

His hand slips under my shirt. He finds my bra and pinches my already stiff nipples roughly through the fabric, and I throw my head back with a moan. It’s been ages since someone touched me, too damn long, and I’m unraveling fast.

“Jesus,” I gasp, not meaning to say it aloud, but he continues to viciously palm my breasts, kneading their fullness as he grunts. “Fuck, you’re dangerously beautiful. Who wouldn’t want to fuck you?”

“I—I—” Words fail me, lost in the heat of his touch.

He shifts between my thighs and pulls his hand away, leaving me feeling bereft. But then he uses one finger to caress my folds through my panties, and I think I see sparks fly. Adriano leans down close enough for me to smell the freshness of his breath and the expensive cologne he wears.

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“When you touched yourself, Pen, who were you imagining?”

I don’t hesitate. “You. When I touched myself, I wanted it to be your fingers, your tongue... doing it to me.”

Adriano doesn’t bother with finesse—he rips my panties off, the fabric snapping once. I watch it flutter to the floor, tattered, and bite the inside of my cheek, a thrill spiking through me.

“I’ve been starving for your pretty pussy,” he rasps, cutting straight to my core. “Will you let me taste it, Pen?”

“Please...” My voice trembles. “Please, I need you.”

He drops into the chair, his hands clamping around my hips, and pulls me forward until I’m splayed right in front of his face. Embarrassment floods me—he’s so damn manly, all muscle and edge, exuding experience I can only guess at.

I’ve had lovers, sure, but it was always quick, mechanical, just fucking to fuck. This? This is different—spread out like a feast for Adriano Vieri, the man I’ve craved forever, and I’m already slick, teetering on the brink.

He starts slow, lips brushing the insides of my thighs—kissing, licking, nipping hard enough to sting, then soothing the bites with soft and wet strokes. Red welts will bloom by morning, I know it, and the thought makes me clench.

“You’re so hot,” he murmurs and trails kisses from my knees up to my dripping core.

“Forgive me, sweetheart, but I don’t think I’ll be gentle. You’re soft. Fragile. Fucking perfect.”

“Oh, Adriano…” His name slips out in a breathy plea.

“Talk to me,” he whispers, voice a velvet command. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want your mouth on me.”

“Beg for it.”

“Please…” I’m desperate.

“Fuckkk—” His eyes darken, locked on me. “Your pretty pink pussy’s dripping for me. I need to taste it.”

His tongue swipes over my folds, and a gasp rips from my throat, loud and unbidden.

“Shh, sweetie,” he warns, lips grazing my skin. “Don’t want the whole damn building hearing how loud I make you.”

I want to scream it—how good he feels, how he’s unraveling me—but my career’s barely started, and I can’t torch it yet.

“Okay… okay,” I pant, biting back the noise.

He dives in again, a skilled finger parting me open for his tongue. Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck. Pleasure slams through me, electric and wild. My hands plunge into his hair, holding tight, anchoring him between my thighs.

“This feels so good,” I moan, voice breaking. “Please don’t stop—don’t stop making

me feel this good.”

His beard scrapes my pussy, rough and delicious, sending jolts up my spine. I can’t help it. I grind into his face, hips rolling as he sucks my clit hard, fingers pumping inside me, fast and deep.

“You taste sweet,” he growls, voice muffled against me. “Fuck, I could eat you everyday.”

“Mmmm,” I whimper, pleasure searing through every nerve. “Right there... oh, Jesus, there...”

He kisses my clit, tongue flicking, teasing my wetness while his fingers stay buried, curling up to hit that spot—the one that makes me see stars. Then he’s back, sucking hard, and I’m lost.

“Adriano,” I whine, grinding harder, chasing the edge.

He pulls back just enough to rasp, “Come on my tongue, Pen. I want your orgasm in my mouth. Give me that sweetness.”

“I’m so close...” My voice cracks.

That’s all he needs. He goes harder, faster, tongue and fingers relentless. I shatter, coming undone in his mouth, a sob muffled against my palm as ecstasy floods me, hot and blinding.

“Holy hell, Pen,” he mutters, standing, stepping back, snagging my ruined panties from the floor. “Gonna need these for a while.”

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I slide off the desk, shaky, pushing my skirt down. My legs wobble like they're not mine—he's seen me naked, stripped me bare, and I'm still on his tongue.

Adriano Vieri, my oldest, dirtiest crush, just devoured me, and reality crashes in hard. I can't meet his eyes, heat creeping up my neck.

“You're dismissed,” he says softly, before slipping into his bathroom, because of course he's the damn boss, and I've just leaped over a line there's no un-crossing.

Heaven, hell, and every twisted shade between—I'm kidding myself if I think I regret it.

Chapter 6

Adriano

It's been three days and I can't shake her from my mind. Penelope Rosetti is like damn cocaine.

Her curves, the heat of her, that scent like jasmine and sin tangled together have been calling at me for days and sinking its teeth into every quiet moment. I want her bad. But I can't have her. I've already messed up too many times and crossed lines I swore I'd never touch.

There's a deal hanging over me too—a pact with a man I can't cross, a noose tightening every time she crosses my thoughts. One wrong move, and it's not just my neck on the line.

A sudden knock jolts me out of it. Tommy, one of my men strictly handling logistics, barges in with his face tight and eyes darting like he's expecting a bullet.

“Boss, we got trouble. The docks got hit. Three of us—Vinny, Paulie, and that new kid got caught in the crossfire. Paulie and the new kid got cleaned out.”

I slam my fist on the desk and the wood groans under the impact. “Who?”

“Not sure but they left a message. Said they're coming for you until you comply. Says you know what.” He shifts, uneasy. “They torched the new crates too. All of it.”

Rage burns through me. My docks. My men. I've built this whole damn empire on shadows, making sure nobody knows my face and nobody gets close. That's how I stay alive, how I keep control. And now some bastard thinks he can poke holes in it? I lean back trying to force the fury down and let it simmer.

“Find out who. I want every last fucking name.”

Tommy nods and bolts. I'm already plotting my next move, mind racing. I'll rip them apart—piece by piece, root and stem. Nobody threatens what's mine and walks away breathing.

Hours later, I'm hunched over maps and burner phones when another of my men, Sal, slides in with his greasy hair slicked back and voice uneven.

“We got something, boss. It's Ricci's crew. The old man's been quiet too long since you sided with the senator. Guess he's itching now. Tommy and the others have been on his tail, but word is, his son's running point.”

“Ricci?” I growl, cracking my knuckles. That slimy fuck's been sniffing around my territory for years. “What else?”

Sal hesitates, then spits it out. “The son—Theodore—he’s been spotted with Penelope recently. They’ve been hanging out, actually. He’s been chatting her up at that café she likes to visit during her work break. Shows up almost every day under the guise of work and even brings flowers and everything.”

A slow, coiling heat twists inside me. Theodore Ricci. With her. I don’t know if it’s a joke which would mean they’ve clocked her as my weakness or if the kid’s just dumb enough to want her for real.

Either way, it’s too coincidental to be by chance. She’s been seen with me. They must know she’s working for me. Her family’s tied to mine. They probably made their findings and got information dating back to before Sophia’s death. They must believe she’ll be a crack in my armor, a way to pull me apart.

“You sure?” My voice is ice but underneath, it’s boiling.

“Yeah. I saw it myself. They looked pretty cozy.” Sal shrugs, oblivious to the storm he’s kicked up.

I shove past him and grab my keys. I’m out the door before I can think. Her place isn’t far—ten minutes away if I floor it. The whole drive, I tell myself it’s for her. To keep her safe. Ricci’s crew could hit her next and use her to draw me out. But that’s bullshit, and I know it. I want her under my thumb, where I can see her, feel her, even if it’s just through a screen.

Her house is dark when I get there, the same as always. That flimsy lock—God I have told her a thousand times to change it—gives way with two twists of my pick, and I am in. The space is thick with her scent, so soft and maddening and curling into my lungs like it is daring me to lose control. I move quickly and start planting cameras in the corners: living room, kitchen, hallway. Tiny black eyes to track her every breath and every step. I have memorized her routines: coffee at 7:12, barefoot pacing by 8,

and getting ready for work before she leaves at 9, so these lenses are just an extension of me, showing me the visual of what I've already claimed.

I stop at her bedroom door. My hand hovers and my fingertips graze the wood. I do not go in. But the image hits me hard, of her sprawled out in her nightwear with the sheets tangled around her bare skin, completely oblivious to me standing here and watching.

I agree, it is sick, the way it makes my blood pound and the way I am straining against my jeans just thinking about it. But I do not care. She is in my head all the time anyway, her laugh, her lips, and the way she tucks her hair behind her ear like she knows I am staring. I have got a whole gallery of her in my mind, little snapshots I have stolen from shadows and glances, and it is still not enough.

It is the middle of the night, and here I am, a ghost in her house, wiring her life to mine. Some lunatic with no boundaries? Sure. But I stopped pretending this was anything else when I first saw her at the wedding and felt that jolt like she had reached out and grabbed me herself.

I need to see her, know her, have her. Everything in me screams to push that door open and slip inside, to let her wake up to my weight on the mattress and my breath on her neck. She would freeze and maybe scream, but then she would feel it, the pull I know she has got buried somewhere. I would not force her, not outright. I would just be there, so close she could not say no, so close she would wonder why she ever wanted to.

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But I do not. Not tonight. The thought alone, with her sleepy eyes widening and her voice catching as I murmur her name, works me up enough. It is an aphrodisiac, so raw and twisted that it floods my veins. I want her. No denying it. And soon, I will have her, whether she is ready to admit she wants it too or not.

Back in my car, I pull up the feed on my phone. She is still in there, hidden behind that door. Part of me regrets not wiring the bedroom. I could have seen her chest rise, fall, and caught the way she curls into her pillow like she is waiting for someone to fill the empty space.

But no, I held back. Not out of morals because those are long gone, but because I do not want her bolting too soon. She has only just stepped into my world, this twisted game I have crafted around her every move. I have got her keys duplicated and her schedules mapped down to the minute, even her favorite coffee shops around the area are flagged on my GPS so I can linger nearby, unseen. She does not know it yet, but she is mine already.

That moment in my office the other day, when I tasted her, pinned her against the desk, sealed it. Every sigh she let slip, every secret shudder, every moan and writhe her little body gave up, it all belongs to me now. I replay it constantly, her hesitant gasps turning into something she could not stop, something I pulled out of her whether she meant to give it or not. If I scare her off now, I would lose the thrill of watching her unravel, piece by piece, realizing she is caught in me, too tangled up to run.

I flick through the feeds again, my thoughts restless but the empty rooms stare back at me, mocking me. I shouldn't be doing this. Shouldn't be anywhere near her. But with

Ricci's dogs circling, she feels like mine to protect. Mine to claim. And that's the problem—I don't just want to save her. I want to ruin her.

"Boss, you good?" Frankie's voice, my driver, crackles through the line later that night. I don't usually use him but I needed a getaway driver in case tonight went bust.

"No," I snap, eyes locked on the screen as Penelope walks out of the bedroom to the kitchen for a drink. She's shedding her robe, probably feeling too hot, her hair tumbling loose. "What did Sal say the kid's doing now?"

"Brought home some chicks he took back from the club. Sal's still trying to get into the building and into his apartment."

I grit my teeth. "He's got no idea who he's messing with."

Frankie laughs, rough and short. "Yeah, well, neither does she. You gonna tell her?"

"Fuck no." I watch her rinse the cup in the sink and pad barefoot around the kitchen. "She'd run."

"Smart girl." He pauses. "You sure this ain't personal? I mean, why do you have to install the cameras, we could just take out the boy."

"Shut your mouth and drive." My hands flex, itching to break something—Theodore's face, preferably. But Frankie's not wrong. This isn't just about territory anymore. It's her. She's deep in my blood, and I hate it.

"You will start tailing her outside the house tomorrow," I order.

"Yes, Boss."

Later, I am nursing a whiskey when the feed catches her again making breakfast. It's morning now and she is in a towel, fresh from the shower with steam curling around her like some taunting halo. I should look away, but I don't tend to reason much when she's around.

She is humming, soft, and oblivious, and it is tearing me apart. I have killed men for less than what is burning through me now, this raw, possessive and fucked up need rising at my gut. But there is something else too, something softer, and it pisses me off even more because it makes me want her worse.

I lean closer, muttering to the empty room. "You are going to be the end of me, sweetheart." My voice is rough, barely mine, and my free hand is already moving, sliding down to my jeans.

The zipper is loud in the silence, but her humming cuts through it, so innocent and maddening. I shove the fabric aside and wrap my hand around myself, hard and leaking already because just seeing her like this, so damp and unaware, has me fucked beyond reason.

The screen glows with her. That towel barely covers her thighs, and I picture ripping it off and pinning her to a corner as my fingers bruise her hips while she squirms. I stroke myself slowly at first, imagining her throat under my palm, squeezing just enough to feel her pulse jump and her gasps choke out as I fuck her against the wall. She would fight it, maybe, but then she would break and moan my name while I took her apart.

I want her bent over that sink, ass up and my hands fisting her wet hair as I pound into her from behind. Then on her back, her legs spread wide and pinned down so she can't move while I bury myself deep with every thrust, making her tits bounce, her eyes wide and glassy.

My pace picks up, and the fantasies spiral. I want her on her knees, choking on cock, her tears streaking her face as I force her to take it all. Then I'd flip her over on her stomach down on the floor with my weight crushing her while I fuck her raw with no mercy, no pause until she is screaming, begging.

I want to fill her every way I can, mouth, cunt, ass, mark her so she can't wash me off, so she feels me for days. My sick head spins with it. There will be no limit when I take her body under mine. She is mine to ruin, mine to own. Mine forever.

The whiskey glass hits the table, forgotten, and I am jerking faster now, eyes locked on her as she bends to grab something and her towel rides up. That little flash of skin snaps me.

I'm heaving and I am close, so fucking close.

"Penelope," I groan, low and guttural, her name a curse, a prayer, a claim. It rips through me, and I come so hard I'm spilling over my hand. It's so hot and messy as I chant her name on my lips again, like she is here, like she knows.

I slump back, panting and staring at the screen, where she is still humming, still clueless, and it is not enough. It will never be enough until she is mine for real.

The next day, Tommy's back with worse news. "They hit another spot. Took out two more crates. Then left a note—'Face us, Vieri, or she's next.'"

My blood goes cold. I was right. They know. They fucking know. I shove the table, papers scattering. "Get everyone. We're ending this."

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But as I gear up, my mind is on her. Not the fight, not the bodies I am going to be piling up by the end of today, just her. I see her laughing with Theodore in the pictures Frankie sent today, their heads too close, her smile too bright, and it is a blade twisting deeper until I can taste blood.

How can she sit there, giggling with that bastard, when she let me bury my face between her thighs in my office? How could she let him lean in, let him make her smile, when she was moaning my name with her legs shaking under my tongue?

I hold my gun so tight that the metal bites my palm, but all I see is her with him. Theodore. The kid I am going to carve into pieces today. I will start slow, drag him somewhere quiet, and tie him up so he can't squirm away. First, I will break his jaw and let him choke on his own teeth for daring to speak to her. Then I will take a knife with a jagged edge and peel his skin off strip by strip, then watch him scream while I tell him she is mine and that every laugh she gave him belongs to me. I will gut him slowly, allowing his insides to spill out while he is still alive and still twitching so he knows what happens when he touches what is not his.

I will leave his eyes for last, gouge them out with my thumbs because he does not deserve to have ever seen her smile.

My gut churns, but my cock twitches too, because this rage is tangled up with her. That day in my office keeps replaying, over and over, like a drug I can't quit. How I had her pinned against my desk when she did what she did best, riling me up. I did not fuck her, no, I held back, but I shoved her skirt up, ripped her panties, and licked her until she was dripping.

Her hands grabbed my hair and pulled, her thighs clamping around my head while she whimpered my name like it was the only word she knew.

I sucked her clit hard, tongue fucking her deep, and she came undone, shuddering, soaking my chin, her voice breaking on these little gasps that I can still hear. I have not thought of anything else since, not my guilt for going this far with my daughter's best friend, nor my empire that is riding on a deal I've been briefed on, not the kills, just her intoxicating taste, her heat, the way she bucked against my mouth like she needed me. I should have taken her then, bent her over, and fucked her raw, but I stopped, and now it is eating me alive.

What am I even protecting? An empire? Or a woman who does not know I am watching her every move, who does not know I am unraveling because she smiled at fucking Theodore? I catch my reflection in the office bathroom mirror, eyes shadowed and jaw locked, a king in the dark losing his hold. I built all this to never feel weak, to never need anyone, and now I am breaking every rule for her.

I do not know if I am chasing power anymore or just her shadow, but I am in too deep to stop.

"Boss," Tommy calls, snapping me back. "We rolling?"

"Yeah." I grab my gun, voice steady but gut churning. "Let's go."

But as I step out a few hours later, I glance at the feed one last time. She is curled up on her couch, reading, peaceful, like she did not just rip my world apart with that smile she gave him. That image of her with Theodore, her laugh echoes in my skull, mocking me while I drown in it.

For a split second, I wonder what it would be like to walk in, sit beside her, and let the world rot. Then I shake it off. That is not my life. Never will be. Aside from us

being from two different worlds and the monumental age gap, she is my dead daughter's best friend. And she died because of her.

Chapter 7

Penelope

I slam the apartment door shut, my hands shaking as I twist the lock. It's been days since Adriano pinned me to his desk and licked me until I couldn't breathe right. I was a mess then, and I still am. My skin hummed every time I thought about it. How his rough beard scraped my thighs, and his tongue claimed me like I was his to ruin. I wanted to purge it from me, that ache that wouldn't quit. He lodged himself in my head, and I hated it.

Work didn't help. He'd kept his distance, but I spotted him the very next day in the hallway at Caruso's. He strutted by in that sharp suit, with eyes even sharper, and brushed past me like I was a ghost. Cold as hell. Didn't even glance my way. Fine. If he was done, I told myself I was too. Except I wasn't. I burned alive, and he held the match.

That same day, Theodore strolled into my life. I was grabbing coffee at that hole-in-the-wall shop on 5th, stirring sugar into my latte, when he slid up next to me. Tall, lean, with a tech-bro vibe—messy hair, soft brown eyes, and a grin full of charm.

"You look like you could use a refill already," he said, nodding at my cup.

My lips curled up and I stirred slower. "What, you a barista?"

"Nah, just good at spotting someone who needs a pick-me-up." He leaned on the counter, easy, relaxed. "I'm Theo."

“Penelope.” I sipped my coffee, eyeing him. He wasn’t Adriano—nowhere near that raw edge—but maybe that was the point. Maybe I needed someone who didn’t make my pulse feel like a fistfight.

We talked. He was chatty, funny even, tossing out stories about coding glitches and late-night pizza runs. It felt light. Normal. By the time I finished my drink, he asked me out.

“Let me take you out to dinner tomorrow. Nothing fancy, just food and decent company.”

“I can’t. I’m going to see my sister.”

“But you’re free eventually, right?”

“Sure,” I said, shrugging. “Why not?”

Big mistake.

Today, I’m meeting up with him and the dinner’s fine at first. We hit a diner and get greasy burgers, sticky tables, and the buzz of Friday night chatter. Theo’s still talking, his hands waving as he rants about one of his apps crashing. I nod, half-listening and picking at my fries. He’s nice. Too nice, maybe. But it’s better than sitting home and replaying Adriano’s hands on Me like a broken record.

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“Wanna head back to your place?” Theo asks, wiping ketchup off his lip with his sleeve. His grin is cocky. He’s too sure of himself, like he’s already mentally kicking his shoes off at my door.

I stop short, my sneakers scuffing the pavement as we step out and clutch my purse tighter. “No,” I say, sharp enough to cut glass. “Let’s just call it a night.”

He laughs, a little too loud, stepping closer with his hands raised. “Come on, Penelope. Movie night at your place will be the continuation of an already great evening. I’ll even let you pick the cheesiest rom-com. I won’t make a move, scout’s honor.” He beams and wiggles his fingers like a kid swearing an oath. “Unless you count me stealing your popcorn as a felony.”

I bite my lip, fighting a grudging smile. He’s an idiot—goofy in a way Adriano never is, and tonight, I need that. Anything to drown out the echo of leather and smoke still clogging my head.

“Fine,” I sigh, rolling my eyes. “Just a movie. No funny business, or I’m tossing you out faster than you can say ‘popcorn bandit.’”

“Deal.” He grins wider, practically bouncing, and nudges me forward like he’s won the lottery.

We walk the three blocks to my house, and my streetlights flicker overhead. The night’s breeze is thick and humid, sticking my shirt to my back. He’s close and more than once, his arm brushes mine. But I don’t pull away.

Inside, I flick on the kitchen light, then kick off my sneakers.

“Want a drink?” I head for the fridge, grabbing a beer.

“Sure.” He’s right behind me and I notice his voice drop. “But I’d rather have you.”

I freeze with the bottle in hand. Then turn slowly to find he’s grinning, but it’s sharper now, hungrier.

“Chill, Theo. That’s not happening.”

“C’mon, Pen.” He steps in and his hands snake to my waist. “Don’t tease me.”

I shove him off, hard. “I said no.”

He grabs me again, fingers digging into my arms. I twist, heart slamming, but he’s stronger and he is yanking me back. “Stop playing hard to get,” he growls, his breath hot on my face.

“Let go!” I swing, my fist clipping his jaw. He staggers but recovers fast and shoves me against the counter. My hip bangs the edge, and pain shoots up my side. I kick then scratch, anything to break free but panic buzzes loud in my skull. His hands are everywhere. And the sudden realization that I’m trapped manifests, and the room shrinks around me with the walls pressing in.

“You don’t get it,” he snarls, eyes wild. “My dad wanted you dead. Said you’re tied to Vieri. But I liked you, Pen. Fell for you. And now you won’t even fuck me?”

“What?” My brain scrambles, confusion tangling with fear. Dead? Vieri? His words don’t make much sense, but there’s no time to unpack it. He’s shoving harder, then one of his hands is tearing at my shirt and the other clamping my throat. I thrash,

gasping and my nails rake his arm.

That's when the door explodes open. The wood cracks, splinters flying around. Adriano storms in with a baseball bat clutched tight. Theo doesn't even turn before the first swing lands and crunches into his shoulder. He howls as he collapses.

Adriano swings again, going for his ribs, this time a sickening snap echoing. Theo's a heap now, groaning, but Adriano keeps going. The bat keeps slamming down, precise and brutal, like he's carving meat. Blood pools, thick and red, soaking my floor.

"Enough, Adriano!" I scream. Adriano freezes, the bat mid-air and he's breathing loudly. Theo's barely alive and wheezing, his face a mess of purple and crimson.

Adriano drops the bat with a thud and the silence crashes in, heavy as lead. My hands tremble and I smear blood on my jeans as I wipe them. Adriano's staring at me with a speck of red on his cheek, gray eyes blazing. I'm shaking—pissed, scared, and thankful. It's all twisted up.

"You okay?" His voice cuts through, low and rough.

"Yeah. Maybe." I cross my arms, forcing my breath steady. "How'd you get here so fast?"

"Was close by." He shrugs and grabs a rag from the counter, then wipes the bat.

"I see." I step toward him. "So you just happened to be outside?"

"Yeah, I was around the area. I had to check something." He doesn't look at me and scrubs harder.

"Check what? Me?" My voice climbs. "Tell me the damn truth, Adriano."

He stops and his shoulders stiff. “I did it for you. That’s it.”

“That’s not enough!” I grab his arm, my fingers digging in. He flinches but stays put.

“How’d you know he was here? How’d you know I needed you?”

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“I just did.” His eyes lock on mine, hard and unreadable.

“Stop dodging!” I’m yelling now, shoving him. He doesn’t budge, like a damn wall.

“What’s going on?”

He steps closer, towering over me. “You’re alive because of me. That’s what counts.”

I laugh. “Alive? You smashed a guy to pieces in my kitchen!”

“Would’ve been worse if I didn’t.” His voice drops, dark as tar. “You don’t get it, Penelope. Guys like him don’t quit.”

“And you do?” I push him again, uselessly. “You think you’re my savior now?”

“No.” He snags my wrists and holds me tightly. “I’m the bastard who keeps you standing.”

I pull free and stumble back. My head’s spinning, a storm of too much. “I don’t even know what we are,” I spit, voice cracking. “You lick me senseless one day, freeze me out the next, then show up swinging a bat like some psycho knight. What the hell is this?”

He steps in, pushing me against the wall, his body and pinning me there. His weight is crushing, all muscle and heat.

“I’ve been fighting myself raw, Pen. Trying to do right by you—by her.” His voice cracks, just a tremor. “Sophia’s ghost has been at my throat every fucking day, and

you're like gasoline on the fire. I can't stop thinking about your cunt, how you taste. I've jerked off to you so many times that my hand is raw from picturing you spread out, screaming my name."

"Then stop!" I shove him, tears stinging hot in my eyes. "We can kill this before it buries us. We're choking on guilt, so let's fucking end it!"

"No." His hands crash against the wall, framing my head and trapping me. "I've had my tongue inside you, felt you explode on it. You're burned into my fucking soul now, Pen. I'm not letting you go. I can't."

My breath snags. He's too damn close, leather and smoke choking my lungs, his scent sinking into me. His hand drops, rough fingers shoving up my skirt, ripping past my panties to find me soaked—fuck, I'm drenched—and I hate how my body screams for him. He drives two fingers deep, curling them hard into that spot that makes me see white, and I gasp, fisting his shirt.

"Adriano—" My voice breaks, and my hips jerk into his touch before I can stop them.

"Feel that?" he growls, his thumb dragging slow, torturous circles over my clit. "You're fucking gushing for me. Lie to yourself all you want, but this pussy's begging." His free hand snatches mine, then forces it down to his jeans where his cock is throbbing, already thick and hard as iron. "Touch me. Wrap your hand around me now, sweetheart."

I shouldn't. I should poke his eyes out, scream, anything but this. But my fingers tremble, fumbling, and then I'm stroking him through the denim, feeling him pulse in my hands. He groans, deep and feral, rocking into my hand. We're grinding against each other, desperately with Theo's bleeding body still sprawled nearby, his blood pooling slick under my boots.

It's fucked up, twisted as hell, and I'm drowning in it, heat twisting tight and low.

"Say it," he rasps, his fingers pumping faster, slick and relentless. "You want me."

"No," I spit, but my hips grind harder, chasing his hand.

"Say it, Pen." He orders this time. "Tell me you want my cock."

"I want you," I choke out, the truth flying free. It sends me over—shattering hard, crying his name, nails digging into his shoulders as he grunts, hot and ragged, spilling into his jeans against my hand. We're gasping, ruined, the air thick with sex and death.

He doesn't stop there. His hands pull my shirt up, which was already half-torn from Theo's grabby bullshit, and bares my tits.

"Been dreaming about these too," he mutters.

His mouth crashes down, sucking my nipple hard, teeth grazing the peak until I whimper. He's rough, and greedy, his tongue swirling wet and hot, then biting just enough to sting. His other hand kneads my ass, pulling me tighter against him, fingers digging into my flesh like he's branding me.

"Every night, Pen," he growls against my skin, switching to the other breast, sucking harder, leaving marks. "Fisting my cock, imagining you riding me, these tits bouncing, your cunt choking me dry. You've fucked me up since you came back and I'm addicted to every goddamn inch of you."

I moan, my head tipping back against the wall, still lost in the heat of his mouth, the filthy confession sinking into me like a drug. It's too much—too raw, too fucking everything—and I'm still trembling, my legs quaking from coming so hard, slick

dripping hot down my thighs.

His teeth graze my nipple one last time, a sharp sting that jolts me, before he pulls back, eyes black with hunger.

He swipes his hand—still wet from me—across his jeans, smearing the mess like it's nothing.

“This ain't over, Pen,” he tells me. “It was a fucked up thing for me to do, pulling away for the past days but I was a goddamn idiot. It won't happen again. You're in me now, and I'm keeping you there.”

I slump against the wall, barely holding myself up, my legs like jelly. His words hit hard, but it's the way he's looking at me—like I'm his next breath—that has my pulse hammering. He steps closer again, crowding me, his hand planted beside my head.

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“Don’t you dare smile at anyone else.” His voice drops, laced with something feral. “Not Theo, not any other prick sniffing around you—nobody. Swear it to me.”

“Yeah,” I mutter, dazed, my head still spinning from the orgasm. “I swear.”

He grabs my chin, forcing my eyes up to his. “I mean it, Pen. I’ve seen them— some bastards at the office eyeing you, thinking they can touch what’s mine. I’d kill them all before letting that happen. I’ve jerked off to you so much I’ve lost count, imagining you under me, screaming my name while they rot. You don’t get how fucking deep this goes. I’d burn this city down to keep you.”

My breath catches heat flaring again despite the ache between my legs. “Adriano, I—”

“Say it again,” he cuts in, his thumb brushing my lip, possessive as hell. “Tell me I’m the only one you want. That I own you.”

“You’re the only one,” I rasp, my voice shaky but true. “You fucking own me. I can’t even think straight around you.”

His jaw tightens, a flash of triumph in his eyes, but there’s jealousy there too, twisting it dark.

“Good. Because I’ve been losing my mind picturing you with someone else. Some smarmy ass from work buying you coffee or Theo’s hands on you before I smashed his face in. I’d rip their throats out, Pen. You’re mine—every moan, every shiver, every drop of you.”

I swallow hard, pinned by his stare. “I don’t want them. Just you, fuck, it’s always been you.”

He leans in, his forehead pressing to mine, his breath hot against my lips. “Damn right. And I’m not letting you forget it. Next time I see some fucker look at you too long, I’ll fuck you right in front of him just to show him who you belong to.”

A shiver runs through me, half fear, half want, and I nod, too wrecked to argue. “Okay.”

He pulls back just enough to show that wry smile. He’s unhinged and obsessed, and I’m caught and hooked on every filthy promise, every jealous claim. Theo’s blood is still sticky on the floor, but all I feel is Adriano, burning me alive.

He nods, a quick jerk of his head, satisfied with my surrender, then snatches his phone off the counter.

“Tommy, haul your ass over here. Got a mess to scrape up.”

“You already knew who Theo was, right?” I speak up.

His eyes linger on me, holding for a beat too long before he adds, “Just got back from the docks. Theodore, a piece of shit, was Ricci’s kid. A rival of mine who has been attacking my shipments unprovoked. We attacked their crew today. All of them were completely wiped out. Theo’s joining the pile.”

I blink, still propped against the wall, my legs wobbly from the way he just wrecked me.

“Old man Ricci’s been gnawing at my territory for years, sending his rats to chew holes in my docks. Theo was his son and muscle, dumb as a brick but mean as hell.

Thought he could flex, get close to you, fuck with my head.” He steps in, crowding me, his breath still ragged from what we just did. “I saw him with you at the I, then at your place, Pen. Saw his hands on you. Nearly lost my shit right then. Had to end him before he touched what’s mine again.”

My stomach twists. Theo’s blood still glistens wet on the floor, his broken body a ghost in the room. “So he wasn’t just some creep. He was after me because of you?”

Adriano’s jaw tightens a muscle ticking. “Partly. Ricci’s been sniffing for a weak spot, and you, you’re it. Theo wasn’t just gonna scare you. He was gonna use you to gut me. Probably thought he’d fuck you first, send me the pictures to twist the knife.”

His hand clamps around my arm, firm, possessive, but not harsh. “I’ve been watching you too long to let that happen. Especially not some Ricci trash.”

“You killed him just for me?”

“For us.” His thumb drags over my skin, rough and deliberate, his gaze pinning me in place. “He’s not the first, won’t be the last. If anyone tries to touch you, they’re dead. I don’t give a fuck who they are. I’d stack bodies to keep you safe, Pen.” He leans in, his voice dropping to a growl. “Do you understand?”

I nod, slow, my pulse still catching up. “Okay. Shit, just... okay.”

A hint of a smile touches his lips as he turns back to the phone. And that’s when I realize he hasn’t hung up. “Hurry up, Tommy. The floor’s a damn mess.”

Tommy’s voice crackles through. “On it, boss. Gimme ten.”

Adriano hangs up, pocketing the phone. I stare at him.

“How’d you know to come? Really.”

“Had to keep you safe.” He avoids my eyes and grabs the bat again.

“That’s not an answer.” I grab his sleeve, pulling him back. “How?”

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He shakes me off and then heads for the door. “You know.”

“Adriano!” I shout, but he’s gone, leaving me with blood on the floor and a storm of questions raging in my brain. Tommy shows up minutes later with Ralph, both grim-faced, hauling a tarp.

“Hey, Pen,” Tommy says, tossing me a weak grin. “Rough night, huh?”

“Just get him out of here,” I snap, crossing my arms.

Ralph snorts, rolling Theo’s limp body into the tarp. “Boss sure knows how to pick ‘em.”

“Shut it,” Tommy mutters, heaving the bundle up. “She’s not in the mood.”

They shuffle out, boots scuffing the floor, leaving me alone with the mess. I grab a mop from the corner, dunk it in a bucket, and start scrubbing Theo’s blood off the tiles. The water swirls pink, then red, staining my hands. They shake, badly, and my mind’s a tornado.

How did I even end up here? I was just rolling into town for a wedding, three years deep in grieving my best friend, trying to come out of that black hole. Now I’m tangled up with her dad, letting Adriano shatter me piece by jagged piece.

Maybe this is my reckoning, craving what’s forbidden, sinking into it until it chokes me. I know it’ll destroy me one way or another, rip my soul out, or get me killed. And I’m too weak, or too stupid, to walk away.

Chapter 8

Penelope

I can't shake him. These past few days, Adriano's been a ghost in my head, haunting every quiet second. I want him so bad it hurts. It's like a deep ache that's eating me alive. I'm slowly losing it, unraveling, and I know it.

Ever since he made me come right there in front of Theo's corpse with his blood still warm on the floor, I haven't slept right. I should be sick to my stomach, bolting for the nearest exit, or at least drowning in guilt over screwing my dead best friend's dad. But no. All I can think about is his mouth, his hands, and the way he broke me open. It's been weeks since he licked me into a screaming mess on his office desk, and I'm starving for it again.

He is in a meeting, holed up in the back office of Caruso's, the jewelry store where I have been stuck running the counter since I got into town. It is his clean front, all glittering diamonds and polished gold to cover up the dirty cash, the guns, and the deals that fuel his real life.

I am behind the register, wiping down a display case for the third time today, when he walks out around ten. His suit fits him too well, dark and crisp, and his eyes cut sharper than the stones we sell.

Tommy and some beefy guy with a scar across his knuckles follow him, muttering about "shipments." I catch his look and my stomach twists. We are keeping it strictly business here, or at least pretending to.

"Penelope, ring up that ruby necklace for Mrs. Vitelli," he says casually. "She will pick it up later."

“On it.” I nod, grabbing the tag and keeping my hands moving so I do not fidget. His gaze lingers a second too long, and I feel it crawl over me, but I focus on the case.

Just then Mia swoops in from her office like an unwanted fly, all fake smiles and swaying hips. She brushes past me, leaning over the counter just enough to flash her cleavage his way.

“Anything else you need, Adriano? I can pull the sapphire set from the safe if you want.” Her voice drips, too sweet, like she thinks she has got some edge with him.

He barely glances at her. “Just the necklace, Mia. Penelope is already handling it but thank you.”

Then he is gone, back to his meeting and shutting the door with a solid click. Mia smiles wryly at me, flipping her hair, clearly thinking she has scored points. I roll my eyes and keep wiping, harder now, the glass squeaking under my rag. She has no clue what is really going on, and I am not about to tell her.

An hour later, the store is dead quiet, just the hum of the air conditioning and the faint rumble of voices from the back. He is still in there, running his world of blood and power, barking orders I can only catch pieces of through the walls.

I cannot sit still. Then deciding I only live once, I do something stupid. I grab my phone with my fingers shaky and type out something filthy: “I can’t stop thinking about you fucking me until I cannot walk. I want your cock so bad, I am wet just texting this.”

I hit send before I can rethink it, my heart pounding loud enough to drown out the silence.

No response comes. Minutes drag into an hour. He is in there with his guys, maybe

ignoring it, maybe pissed, and I am out here, ringing up some old lady's pearl studs while my mind spins. Did I push too far? Break some unspoken rule? My gut knots up, but there is this twisted buzz underneath it, knowing he is right behind that door, my words sitting in his pocket like a live wire.

When work ends, I'm dragging my purse over my shoulder when I spot him outside, leaning against his car wearing a black pristine suit, gray eyes locked on me like a predator. "Need a ride home?"

"Yeah, sure." My voice wavers, but I climb in. He doesn't say much as the driver peels out into the night.

If I didn't know him, that look would scare the shit out of me. But I do know him. Hell, he's had his face shoved between my thighs, tongue working me over until I couldn't breathe. So this tension, this thick, suffocating heat between us has got no business being here. I try to will it away, but it sticks, coiling tighter.

I shift in my seat, going from slouched to bolt upright. My hands flatten on my thighs, pressing into these damn trousers. No skirt tonight—just long, dark fabric and a blue top with sleeves that cling to my arms. My hair's a wild mess, spilling over my shoulders and down my back, untamed. All I managed before he dragged me out was a swipe of nude lipstick. I'm not even close to the knockout I want to be, which makes it baffling why he offered to take me home.

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Then my phone buzzes. Gianna. I twist away from him, hitting accept. “Hey, G.”

Her voice comes through, panting like she’s mid-sprint. “Gerald and I were thinking—what if you were godmother to our kid?”

“Godmother? I’m already the baby’s coolest aunt.”

“Yeah, but our friends suck. You know, the type who can’t even prop up a bottle, let alone a kid. You get me, right?”

I do. I’ve met her crew—some by accident, some on purpose—and they’re a mess. She’s not wrong. But this isn’t the moment for baby talk. I can’t exactly blurt out, Oh, by the way, I’m in a car with Adriano, a close friend of our family, who tongue-fucked me on his desk while the whole damn world could’ve walked in, and I’ve been replaying that shit every night since, rubbing myself raw to the memory of his mouth on my pussy.

I cough, scratching my forehead. Adriano’s staring out the window, lost in the jagged skyline, so I drop my voice.

“Can I call you back? I’m heading home. Gonna shower, eat, then I’ll ring you.”

“Oh, yeah, sure, sure.” She sounds distracted. “Call me, okay?”

“Promise.” I hang up, shoving the phone into my bag.

Beside me, Adriano’s voice rolls out, deep and smooth, making the hair on my arms

and neck stand up like it's been shocked. "You should call her back. Tell her something else. You're not going home tonight."

"What?"

"I'm not dropping you off, Pen."

"Then where are you taking me?"

"To my place." He says it calmly, cocky, like he's claiming ground and I'm standing on it. "I'm taking you to my home where you're going to climb on my face and ride my tongue until you're dripping down my chin. Then I'm going to fuck you. Hard. And since you've been teasing me, dragging this out, I'm not holding back, sweetheart. It's going to be rough. You'll feel me for days."

My brain melts. Just—gone. I squirm, my thighs clenching, and clear my throat to cover the fact that my panties are already soaked. His tone's flat and lazy, like he's stating the weather, but it's pure fire underneath. He wants me. This untouchable, dangerous bastard wants me, and it's the same feral ache I've got for him. Nothing's ever lit me up like this.

"If you don't want that, Pen, say it now." He's watching me, unblinking.

I shove hair off my face then tuck it behind my ears. My hands are unsteady. "Should I be scared?"

He crosses his arms, muscles flexing under his shirt. "You tell me. I'm not going to baby you or cuddle up after. I'll fuck you like I want to break you. Like I hate you. If that's too much, I'll have the driver spin this car around, drop you at your door, and we pretend I never said a damn word."

I lick my lips, slowly tasting the tension. He's daring me, eyes sharp. "It sounds like you're giving me an out."

"I am."

"I don't want it."

"And you're sure?"

"Fucking yes."

"Good." His voice drops a quiet growl. "It would've been a damn shame if you ran from that."

I'm overthinking this, no question. His "shame" comment's gnawing at me. Does he mean it'd be a shame because he's dying to fuck me senseless, or because he'd rather I bolt and save him the trouble? My head's a mess, spinning it over and over.

Two minutes tick by, and he breaks the silence. "What color panties you got on?"

"Uh, green. Lacy." My voice catches, barely steady.

We pull up to his place. The driver yanks my door open first. I slide out, legs shaky, just as Adriano climbs out his side. Over the car's roof, our eyes crash into each other—his dark, molten, mine probably wide as hell. He holds my eyes for a beat, then turns, stalking toward the entrance. Someone stiff in a uniform swings the door wide for us. Adriano scans his card, gets the green light, and we hit the elevators.

The ride up's dead quiet, the space so thick I can taste it. We step out, hit the sleek hallway to his penthouse. I'm a step behind when he grabs my wrists, pulling me hard against him. He looms over me so tall, solid, radiating heat and I crane my neck to

meet his gaze. Desperation is carved into his eyes, wild and raw.

“Fuck—I’ve been thinking about your pussy all damn week. I want to bury myself balls-deep in you until morning and leave you sore as hell, aching everywhere.”

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“Yes, I want that too.” My words tumble out, greedy.

His mouth slams into mine, and everything else just fades away. That kiss? There are no words for it. His tongue dives in, tangling with mine, teeth scraping my lips with this perfect, filthy edge. I unravel, clutching his arms to stay upright. He’s owning my mouth, fucking it raw, and I’m moaning into him, loud and shameless. It’s like no one’s ever kissed me before—he’s that good, that brutal.

He pulls back, licking down my neck, wet and slow. I shiver, grinding into his cock—already thick, straining against his pants.

“If we keep this up, I’ll fuck you right here in the hall. But knowing you, you’d want a wall between us and the world.”

I nod, dazed, like some kid fighting sleep. Nerves twist in my gut, but it’s not fear—it’s this insane thrill. My childhood crush, towering over me, ready to wreck me. It’s natural, primal, but my tongue’s glued. Normally, I’m yapping too much or clamming up and never balanced. With him, I can’t scrape together a damn thing to say.

“Are you just going to stare? Or do you no longer have the guts you showed in your text?” His voice rumbles, teasing.

“No, no, I’m just... you’re here, and I’m here, and it... I...” I’m floundering, heat crawling up my neck.

He hooks a finger under my chin, lifting my gaze to meet his. “Tell me what you’re

fighting so hard to keep down.”

With his sincerity urging me on, I speak unabashedly. “I have a crush on you. I’ve been dying for you to fuck me stupid...”

“What else?” He’s not letting me off.

I swallow hard, no fight left. It is clear in his eyes he wants me to totally relinquish myself to him. The words pour out, easy now.

“I’m soaked for you. Dripping down my thighs.”

“Prove it.” Lust glazes his eyes, matching the haze in mine.

“Here?” I glance down the empty hall.

“Fuck yeah.”

My hands shake as I unzip my trousers, sliding them low. I shove past the lace, fingers sinking into the slick heat between my legs. He steps back, watching—all of me—and yeah, there’s a flicker of shame, but I don’t stop. Legs spread, I rub my clit, teasing my folds, moaning loud enough to echo. His gaze burns into me, and I’m lost in it.

“Jesus, you’re so fucking gorgeous,” he groans, voice wrecked. “I need your body under my hands. You’re a goddamn drug, Pen. I’m hooked already.”

“Love when you talk dirty like that,” I gasp, fingers still working. “I’ll do anything. Use me however you fucking want—please.”

“Fuck.” He grabs my hand, pulling my wet fingers free. They slide into his mouth,

and he sucks them clean, eyes shut like he's worshiping the taste. Lightning rips through me and I'm falling, hard. He opens his eyes, swipes the keycard, and growls, "Get in there right now."

I stumble into his penthouse, him right behind, and the door slams. He strides to the kitchen bar, pouring two bourbon sours. The amber glows in the glass as he hands me one. I sip—cough—sip again, throat burning. Set it down and lock eyes with him. He downs a gulp, keeps his glass, and nods.

"Strip. Now."

I peel everything off—trousers, top, bra, those green panties—until I'm bare, skin prickling under his stare.

He strips bare too, and fuck, there it is—tattoos sprawling across his body, down his arms, a map of ink I want to trace with my tongue. His abs ripple, tight and begging to be touched, that V-line slicing below his navel straight to where his cock juts out, thick and hard as steel. He's fucking massive, and my brain short-circuits. All I can think is how he's going to split me apart.

There is no preamble, and no games. He drops flat on his back, sprawled like a sacrifice on the cold kitchen floor, tiles gleaming under the dim light. He does not say a word, and does not need to. His eyes, black as tar, scream what his mouth will not, the pure unhinged want. In the car, he told me he is craving my pussy on his face and said he wants me to ride it until I am gushing down his chin and soaking him.

So that's exactly what I am going to do. It is like a phantom tether, some sick silent pull dragging me to him, and I obey.

I swing a leg over, straddling his chest, my skin prickling against his heat. I slide up slowly, deliberate until I am hovering over his face, close enough to feel his breath

ghosting my wet folds. Adriano's hands snap to my waist, fingers sinking into my flesh, bruising, like he is terrified I will slip away from his grasp. Then his tongue lashes out, swiping hard, licking deep, sucking my pussy like a man possessed, starved, pulling me apart with every wet drag. I grind down, hips rocking, smearing my slickness across his mouth, his beard scraping my thighs bloody raw, the burn feeding something feral in me.

"Oh my goodness, Adriano," I moan, picking up speed.

"Don't stop—please, it's so fucking good."

He doesn't let up, not for a second, and I'd swear it's the most any bastard's ever gotten right with me.

"Take me—faster, oh, like that, mmm... it's yours, all fucking yours..."

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I buck harder, chasing it, and then I'm gone—bursting into flames, shaking so bad my legs give out. When I climb off, he's beaming, smug as hell, like he's the one who just came all over me.

“Has anyone ever told you how goddamn perfect you look when you come? Hot enough to ruin me?”

“Adriano...” My voice cracks.

“I mean it.” He hauls me back into his arms, flipping me down until the floor bites into my spine. “Spread your legs, sweetheart. Wider. I want to feel every fucking inch of you tonight.”

“Ohhh...” It's all I've got, a needy whimper.

He nudges his cock against my entrance, teasing, then starts sliding in. I gasp—sharp, ragged. He's huge, stretching me until it stings. He's rock hard and ready to break me open. He stops, eyes searching mine.

“You don't want this, sweetheart?”

“I want it—God, you've got no idea how bad. Just... scared I won't pleasure you right, not how you need.”

He laughs, low and dirty, then sinks his teeth into my neck. I gush wetter, dripping for him.

“You just soaked my tongue, Pen. You came so hard I’m still tasting you. That’s more than enough. I’m here with you. I’ll show you how I like it.”

“Okay.” It’s a whisper, but I mean it.

He slams his cock into me, and we both gasp like air got punched out of us. “Fuck,” he growls. “So tight, Pen—shit.”

One thrust, hips rolling slow, then another, harder. A raspy moan rips out of me, eyes fluttering shut.

“Sweetheart, eyes on me. See what your pussy does to me.”

I force them open, hands digging at his back. “Faster—please, fuck me faster.”

“Patience,” he groans, but then he moves, and I’m seeing stars. He pounds into me, tearing me apart without a word. I’m screaming, begging—stop, don’t stop, fuck me harder—all at once.

“You’re taking it so good, sweetheart. So fucking perfect. You feel—like a damn dream.”

“Oh, Adriano,” I moan, desperate. “I need this—need you, please.”

He gives it—soft one second, brutal the next until I shatter again, screaming under him, body seizing. He leans down, still thrusting relentlessly, chasing his own edge.

“You’re my good girl, huh? Say it.”

Breathless, high as hell, I mean every word. “I’m your good girl.”

“Louder—fucking scream it!”

“I’m your good girl! I’m your fucking good girl!” I’m shouting, voice hoarse.

He pulls out, hand flying over his cock for a few rough strokes, then he’s spilling his hot, thick ropes of cum, splashing across my stomach.

“I’ve got you, Pen. I’m never fucking leaving you…”

I don’t know if it’s real or if he’s just saying things he thinks I want to hear. But I don’t care. I yank him down and crash my lips into his, kissing him like I’m claiming him back.

Like a fuck you, universe. This is mine. I just fucked Adriano Vieri.

Chapter 9

Adriano

I’m slouched on the leather couch, staring at the jagged New York skyline, when the intercom buzzes. Ralph’s voice cuts through, rough and tight.

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“Boss, Henry Holden’s here. Says it’s urgent.”

My stomach lurches. I drag a hand down my face, feeling the stubble scrape. Henry Holden doesn’t have the luxury of being ignored, not when he’s desperate. I take my time answering. Let him stew. The man wants me in his family as soon as possible, and I’m sure whatever brought him here at this hour only means he’s found a way to make that happen faster.

“Send him up.”

The elevator hums, then dings. Henry Holden shuffles in with his cane thudding against the hardwood and his bald head catching the dim light. That politician’s grin curls his lips, but his black eyes glint like a predator’s. He thinks he’s got me cornered. He’s wrong.

“Adriano,” he drawls, smooth as venom. “You’ve been dodging me.”

“Yet you found me.” I rise, towering over him, hands jammed in my pockets to keep from smashing his smug face. “What’s this about?”

He hobbles over to the bar, pouring himself a scotch without asking. “We need to talk about the wedding. The clock’s ticking, and you still haven’t gotten back to us on a date. So I decided to take matters into my own hands and I’ve got a party planned. A ceremony before the ceremony if you must say. It will be a big announcement. You, Charlotte, and the whole damn city watching.”

I stiffen. “You should’ve asked before making those plans.”

His lips twitch, not quite a smile. “No need for the formalities when this engagement was agreed over three years ago. We were just waiting for the buzz on Charlotte’s return to die down and now it has.”

Penelope slams into my mind—her wild brown eyes, that damn ponytail swinging when she moves, the way she gasps my name. Guilt consumes me. I’ve kept this from her, this rotting deal with Henry. I’ve been hunting for a way to bury him, to snap this chain, but the bastard’s slippery. Nothing solid to hold over him —no dirt sticks. And now he’s here, tightening the screws.

I step closer. “I don’t remember signing up for your timeline.”

A lopsided grin appears as he sips the scotch. “Well, maybe it’s because I didn’t ask. The party’s next week. And there, we will make the engagement announcement, then the wedding. All in public. I’m sure it will be perfect. One month out, and we need to sell this. My daughter’s reputation—my career—depends on it. You and Charlotte, saving the Holden legacy.”

Legacy. The word tastes like ash. I think of my daughter—her laughter, her tiny hand in mine, snuffed out by a hit-and-run I couldn’t stop. Henry gave me the name of the bastard who did it, and I swore I’d pay him back. This marriage was the price. But that was before Penelope. Way before we got involved, when I was just a man out for blood. Before I knew I’d kill for it. Penelope walked back into my life, lighting up every dark corner I’d buried myself in. Now? This deal feels like a noose.

I grab my jacket, nodding toward the stairs. “Let’s take this to my office.”

He follows, cane tapping a rhythm that drills into my skull. My home office is a bunker forged with dark wood, steel edges, and monitors. I point him to the chair across my desk and drop into mine, fingers laced tight.

He leans forward, elbows digging into his knees. “So I was thinking you and Charlotte fly out next week, Adriano. To meet the in-laws in Sardegna...”

I interrupt. “Your entire reputation has been circling the drain since Charlotte’s little stunt with that gold-digger she eloped with.” I cross my arms. “This marriage was your fix, not mine.”

His teasing smile fades, but he recovers fast. “And you owe me, Vieri. I dug up the dirt on that hit-and-run. Gave you names. You promised me this.”

I clench my fists, nails biting into my palms. He’s right—I owe him. But again, this was before her.

“No.” The word drops like a hammer. “I’m out.”

His face twists, eyes narrowing to slits. “What the hell did you say?”

“I said I’m out.” I stand, looming over the desk. “This deal’s off, Henry. Find another sucker to prop up your shitshow.”

He slams his cane down, the crack splitting the air. “You don’t get to do that.”

“I just did.”

He exhales harshly through his nose. “I don’t think you understand the stakes here.”

“I understand them just fine. I know you need this marriage to clean up your daughter’s mess. I know your political career is hanging by a thread. I also know you think threatening me is your best move.”

His jaw flexes. “It is the best move.”

I smile. “Then take your shot.”

“You don’t back out on me, Vieri. I know who you are. The blood you’ve spilled. I’ll expose every fucking shadow you hide in. One tip from me, and the FBI is knocking down your door.”

I laugh. “Do it. You have no proof. You’ve got nothing but bluster and a bad leg.”

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He hauls himself up, his face flushed. “You’re finished. I’ll torch your life—your empire, everything.”

“Try it.” I round the desk, close enough to smell the fear under his cologne. “You’re losing control, Holden. The moment you walked in here, begging, you lost. Now, be grateful I’m letting you walk out of here with your dignity.”

His nostrils flare. “You’ll regret this.”

“Doubt it.”

He glares, then storms out, cane pounding. The door bangs shut, and I’m alone. I slump back into my chair, staring at the void above. Penelope’s everywhere in my head—her scent, her skin, the way she looks at me like I’m salvation and damnation rolled into one. She dares me to break every rule I’ve got. I should’ve told her about Henry, about this cage I built. Should’ve warned her I was tangled up in Henry’s mess. But I didn’t, and now it’s a fucking avalanche.

And yet the question still comes to me in the deeper corners of my mind. Why her? Why risk it all? Because she’s a fucking wildfire, burning through every wall I’ve got. I’ve spent years carving out power, burying grief, and keeping my heart cold. Then she walks in—young, fearless, all sunshine and sin—and I’m unraveling. I see her in my daughter’s smile, in the life I lost, but it’s more than that. She’s a drug I can’t quit, a pulse I need to feel. I’d ruin myself for her, and I wouldn’t blink. My empire, my rules, my soul—none of it means shit if she’s not mine.

I snatch my phone, punching Ralph’s number.

“Get me everything on Holden. Dig deep. I want leverage by sunrise.”

“On it, boss,” he rasps. “Anything else?”

“That drug bust he dodged last year—the one Vincenzo’s still on trial for? Pin it on him. Leak it. I want him drowning in it by morning.”

Ralph snorts. “You’re a vicious fucker.”

“Keeps me warm at night.” I cut the call and toss the phone onto the desk.

The room’s quiet now, but my mind’s a warzone. I know Henry’s not bluffing—he’ll come for me. And if he digs too deep, he’ll find Penelope. She was the line I shouldn’t have crossed, a kid tied to my past and my daughter’s ghost. But I don’t care. I’ve crossed it already, tasted her, claimed her and I’d do it again. Rules are for men who don’t know what they want. I do. Her. Even if it drags us both to hell. She’s mine, and I’ll burn this city down before I let him touch her.

I pour a whiskey, the glass biting my gloved hand. My daughter’s face haunts me, now gone because I wasn’t fast enough, strong enough. Gone forever because of a coward behind a wheel. I was supposed to protect her. Failed. Now Penelope’s here, and I’m failing her too, dragging her into this pit. What kind of man does that make me? A monster? A fool? Both, probably. All I know is I’d let Henry burn me alive before I let her go.

The phone buzzes. It’s a text from Penelope: Missed you today.

Simple. Innocent. Fucking devastating. I want to text back, tell her to run, save herself from me. Instead, I drain the whiskey, heat burning down my throat. I’m too far gone. She’s in my blood, and I’m not strong enough to cut her out.

By morning, Ralph delivers. Henry's linked to the drugs, and the leak's viral. By noon, his name's trending with a shitstorm of headlines. I'm in my office when he calls, voice shaking with rage.

"You piece of shit," he spits. "This isn't over."

"It's over when I say it is."

"You will marry her."

"We'll see." I hang up, lips twitching.

But I know him. He'll regroup and strike back. He's a snake, and I've just kicked the nest. But for Penelope, I'd kick it a thousand times. She's worth the chaos and the collapse. I'll shield her with every fractured piece of me, even if it's the last thing I do.

Chapter 10

Penelope

I push open the door to Gianna's apartment, the smell of fresh paint and baby powder hitting me right away. Trust Gianna to already be gearing up for said baby when her bump is hardly visible yet. She's perched on the couch, her belly round under a loose shirt, flipping through a magazine. She looks up and grins, all dimples and warmth.

"Hey, you made it."

"Wouldn't miss it." I kick off my shoes and drop onto the cushion next to her, sinking into the softness. "How's the little kicker doing?"

“Already keeping me up all night.” She rubs her stomach, laughing. “How’s Mom?”

“Better. Less fog in her head these days.” I lean back, stretching my legs out. “She asked about you yesterday. Actually remembered your name.”

Gianna’s eyes soften. “That’s progress. God, we’ve been through some shit, huh?”

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“Yeah.” I pick at a thread on my jeans, thinking about the years of scraping by, Mom forgetting who we were half the time. “We made it, though.”

She nods, and we sit there for a minute, just breathing in the quiet. Then she shifts, setting the magazine down. “So, what’s up with you? How’s it like working for Adriano Vieri?” She drags out his name like there’s a hidden meaning to it.

“Not as bad as I thought. I have a shitting manager but it’s fine. Pays the bills. But there are just some things about his business that marvels me and...” I hesitate, fiddling with my hair. “You ever hear anything weird about Adriano?”

Her face tightens, just a flicker, but I catch it. “Weird how?”

“I don’t know. Just... stuff.” I tug my ponytail tighter, avoiding her eyes. “He’s got all these guys around him all the time. I know he’s into big gangs here in the city but I always just thought it was power vibes. Maybe he had to work with them for business. You ever wonder what he’s really into?”

She snorts, crossing her arms. “Pen, we’ve talked about this. He’s not just a jewelry guy or some rich entrepreneur. Never has been.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I sit up, voice sharper than I mean it to be.

“It means he’s got shadows. Deep ones.” She leans closer, dropping her voice. “I’ve heard things. Remember how I said he tortured a man for days when we talked when you first arrived? Well, what did you think I was talking about? People whisper. He’s not just petty muscle, he’s bigger. Darker. Maybe even moving shit that’d make your

skin crawl.”

“Like what?” My heart kicks hard, but I force a laugh. “Come on, Gianna. Trafficking? That’s crazy.”

“Is it?” She tilts her head, eyes piercing. “You work for him. You see the kind of cars he drives. Can all of that money be from being a good investor or what? You see him. Tell me I’m wrong.”

At this moment, I want to spill it all—Theo’s blood on the floor, Adriano’s possessive nature, his hands on me and indifference, the way he fucked me against that wall while a body cooled nearby. But my throat locks up.

“You’re reaching,” I say instead, shoving the truth down deep.

“Am I?” She sighs, rubbing her temples. “Look, I get it. He’s hot, he’s intense, you’ve got a crush. But Pen, he’s not safe. How are we sure Sophia’s death wasn’t from something he did?”

“Gianna! How can you say that? After all he’s done for us.”

“I was just speculating, sis. Honestly don’t mind me, I know he is a good man underneath all that darkness, but you wanted to know if there was anything weird or unusual about him and I told you my own scattered thoughts. But these are things I have heard. It doesn’t mean I believe them.”

I roll my eyes, but my mind is racing. Could this actually be true? No way, his shady deals had something to do with Sophia. And trafficking? Well, I might have to check the facts since I already know murder is a done deal. Maybe this is all true. Now that I think about it, it fits—too well. His sudden possessiveness and the way he controls everything. I’ve been screwing a man who might be a monster, and I didn’t even ask.

What does that make me?

Back home, I'm wiping down the kitchen counter when I spot it—a tiny black lens tucked behind the coffee maker. My stomach drops. I yank it out, fingers trembling, and find another in the living room, then the kitchen. Fucking cameras. I don't find any in my bedroom, but I wouldn't put it past him to keep those even more hidden.

So Adriano's eyes have been everywhere? Watching me shower, sleeping, maybe even touching myself. Heat floods my face, then rage. He's sick. Obsessed. And I'm the idiot who let him in.

I grab my keys and storm out, driving to his penthouse with my pulse hammering. The elevator ride up feels like forever, my fists clenching tighter with every floor. I bang on his door, ready to rip him apart. It swings open, and there he is—tall, shadowed, gray eyes locking onto mine. But he's not alone. A woman stands behind him, blonde and polished, her hand resting on his arm like she belongs there.

"Penelope," he says, voice rough, stepping forward.

"Who the hell is she?" I jab a finger at the woman.

There's a satisfied curl of her lip, then she steps up beside him and speaks at the same time he does.

"Charlotte. And she was just leaving."

"Charlotte. His fiancée."

The word slams into me, knocking the air out. Fiancée. My knees wobble, but I lock them, glaring at him. "What the fuck, Adriano?"

“It’s not what you think,” he growls, reaching for me. I slap his hand away.

“Not what I think? You’ve got cameras in my place, and now this bitch says she’s marrying you?” I laugh, bitter and loud. “You’re a real piece of work.”

Charlotte crosses her arms, her slow-spreading smile wider. “He didn’t tell you? Typical. Always keeping his toys in the dark.”

“Shut up,” he snaps at her, then turns to me. “Penelope, listen. I can explain.”

“Bullshit,” I spit, stepping back. “You’ve been playing me this whole time.”

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“No.” He grabs my wrist, pulling me inside despite my struggle. The door shuts, and Charlotte’s still there, watching like it’s a damn show. “I was stuck in a deal. She was part of it. It all happened before I even got involved with you. I’m putting it all down for you.”

I wrench free, shoving him. “For me? You must have a screw loose or something. You put cameras in my house! You’re fucking crazy!”

“I had to know you were safe,” he says, voice low, eyes blazing. “I couldn’t stop myself.”

“Safe?” I laugh again, tears stinging. “You killed Theo. You fucked me over his body. And now this? Who the hell are you?”

Charlotte claps, slow and mocking. “Oh, this is priceless. You really didn’t know, did you? He’s a killer, sweetheart. A kingpin. Enjoy the ride while it lasts.”

“Get out,” he snarls at her, pointing to the door. She saunters off, tossing a wink my way. The door clicks shut, and it’s just us, the atmosphere thick with fury.

I spin on him. “Is she right? Are you in some mafia? I mean, I had my speculations but trafficking, killing people must be a regular thing for you, right?”

He stares at me, jaw tight, then nods once. “Penelope, you have to let me explain.”

My world tilts. I stumble back and hit the wall. “And me? What am I to you? A side piece? You thought fucking the dead daughter’s best friend was some kind of twisted

thrill?”

“No.” He closes the gap and cages me in with his arms. His breath brushes my face, hot and desperate. “You’re everything. I’d tear my life apart for you. I already am.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me?” My voice cracks, raw and small. “Why let me find out like this?”

“Because I’m a selfish bastard.” He presses his forehead to mine, and his hands slide to my hips. “I wanted you too bad to let you run.”

I try to shove him, but he doesn’t budge. His hold tightens, possessive, and heat coils low in me despite everything.

“You don’t get to decide that,” I whisper, hating how my body leans into him.

“I know.” His lips hover over mine, a dare. “But it’s too late to change things now.”

I should slap him, scream, leave. But I don’t. I stand there, trapped in his orbit, feeling the weight of what he is, of what we are. He’s a hurricane, and I’m caught in the eye, too fucked up to care. What’s wrong with me? I still want him, still would let him touch me right now, even with her scent still lingering in the room?

I’m drowning in him, and I don’t know if I’ll ever surface. Maybe I don’t want to. Maybe that’s the worst truth of all and I’m just as twisted as he is, chasing this darkness because it feels like home.

Chapter 11

Adriano

Penelope stands there, eyes wild, like she's ready to scratch my face off. Seeing her in my space, like that day I had her in my kitchen, makes my insides all mush. I like it too much, even when she's storming in, all fire and hurt. She belongs here, even if she's about to tear me apart.

Her voice shakes, barely above a whisper. "How could you hide this shit from me? Leave me to choke on it alone?"

I scrub a hand over my face, stubble biting my palm, my gut twisting. "Because I'm a fucking wreck, Pen. I couldn't stand the thought of you bolting—not when I've memorized every damn inch of you."

She surges forward, slamming her palms into me, but I snag her wrists, trapping her against me. "You don't get to bury secrets and pretend it's for me, Adriano!"

"I know." I crash my forehead to hers, breath ragged, lips brushing her skin like a plea. "But I'm too far gone. Every time you're near, I want to keep you close."

She freezes, her eyes snapping up, wet and blazing. "You're a killer. Some twisted bastard."

"Fuck yes, I am." I press into her, pinning her to the wall, voice dropping to a rough hiss. "And I'd carve my hands bloody again just to feel you breathe next to me."

"Theo," she gasps, shaking like a leaf. "You bashed his head in—"

"For you." My fingers dig into her hips, frantic, like she'll slip away if I let go. "I'd slaughter a thousand more to keep your heartbeat in my ears—I can't fucking sleep without it."

She stares at me, torn apart, and I see it—the moment she breaks. Her hands fist my

shirt, pulling me in, and her lips crash into mine. It's not soft, not sweet. It's desperate, angry, all teeth and heat. Different. She knows who I am now—dangerous, fucked up—and she's still here, kissing me like she needs it to breathe.

I groan into her mouth, hands roaming her sides. “God I’m so crazy for you baby,” I mutter against her lips.

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“Why did you have to lie to me?” she fires back, biting my lip hard enough to sting.

“I’m sorry sweetheart,” Just thirty seconds in, kissing her like his, of having her in my arms, and I know that I am totally fucked.

It's not a hard decision to come to. Hell, it's not even a decision, if I'm being honest. Judging from the cold look on her face and the way she leans into my kiss, I can tell that she's thinking one of two things: bolt or fight me on this.

“Sweetheart—”

She pushes me back and walks out of my embrace. “No, don't call me that,” she says, her voice gravelly, insistent. “I'm not your sweetheart or your...Pen.”

“You know my truth now,” I say. “I don't want to lie to you. This is the man I am.”

Penelope doesn't say anything for a couple of seconds. In that time, I watch her every move, from the way her eyes dart around the house like she's trying to remember it for the last time to the way she skips backward, edging toward the door.

“Penelope, I haven't changed from the man you knew when Sophia was here.” I cover the space between us so quickly that she lets out a sharp gasp of fear when I reach her. My brows crease together on instinct when I see the fear etched across her beautiful face. “I'm still the same man you've known. The same man you've always known—”

“You have a dark side,” she groans. I notice the tremor in her voice and in the way

she still can't seem to look me in the eyes. My blood begins to run cold at the thought that maybe my honesty is going to be the one thing that drives her away for good. "You kill people in cold blood. You're not a good man."

"Is that who you're looking for? A good man?"

"Yes."

I reach a hand up to cup her cheek. It's stained with her tears. I can see that she's hurt and afraid and clearly shaken up but when I touch her like this and hold her close, we become one. She's mine just as I'm hers and I don't think anything or anyone can change that.

"I can't let you leave me, Penelope."

That's what gets to her because then, she's trembling even more. "Are you going to kill me?"

"Jesus Christ, Pen, I'm not a monster!" I don't think anyone's ever asked me a question that's managed to both rile and hurt me like this. To kill her? Sure, I've taken the lives of enemies before. When I'm presented with the choice of taking a person's life and ending their deceit or showing mercy to them and risking a betrayal, I go for the former.

I kill people, yes. But I sure as hell won't touch this lady in front of me.

I didn't think I'd feel this way for someone. I don't think this feeling is meant to be short lived. I think my obsession with Penelope is so great I'd become ruined if it didn't pan out.

"If you aren't gonna kill me, why won't you let me leave?"

A part of me—the old, nonchalant me—wants to open the door and let her leave. Honor style. I want to let her go so she can be safe because my world isn't the kind people like her stay in and survive. But if I do let her go, I'm destroying myself in the process.

“Call it selfish, Pen, but I can't do that.”

“Adriano—”

I pick up my gun, then twirl it around in my palm and flip around to where she's still huddled by the door. When she sees the gun in my hand, she pushes backward until her body's pressed against the door.

“Don't hurt me, please.”

I stumble back to her, take her palm out, then place the gun there. Then, I raise her hand wrapped around the gun and dare her to look me in the eye.

“Listen to me and listen to me well because I'm going to make sure you hear this every chance I get. I'm not letting you leave because I'm incapable of doing that. You're a drug I'm addicted to. I'm addicted to you, to your body, your smell, your soul. Sweetheart, I could never hurt you. I exist for you. My heart is in you and if it isn't beating for me anymore, say it.”

“Adriano...”

“Say that this changes everything,” I growl, hurt. “Say that what you've just discovered doesn't make you hate me.”

“I'm scared, Adriano.” Her voice is small and fragile. This has affected her way more than I'd bargained for. Maybe I really should let her go.

“You're frightened of me.” It's not a question. I can see it in the way she looks at me now.

But she shakes her head, biting the insides of her cheeks, before saying, “I don't know what to tell you. You're still you but...I don't know.”

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“Then press the trigger, damn it. I breathe for you and now, I'm giving you the power to end me.”

“You can't do that,” she says.

“Why not?”

“Because you and I know you're more than capable of overpowering me. Heck, I'm sure you've taken men out for less.”

I chuckle. “What do you know of the Mafia world, Pen?”

“Not a lot, apparently.” She swallows and I can see a part of the fear leave her. “I know that you're powerful and you're the boss and if I put a trigger through your heart right now, the cops would be the least thing I'd be worried about.”

I can't help the laugh that comes out right then. In a way, she's right. So like Pen to overanalyze. She breaks into a smile too. Then, because I'm still laughing, she joins me and we're both laughing and suddenly, there's this mountain before us that we're certain we can pass.

I cup her face in my hands and kiss the top of her head. Her hair is in a messy ponytail but she smells and looks so damn good, it has to be criminal. She sighs contentedly when I crush her body to mine.

“I'd never hurt you, Pen, I promise.”

“I like you too much for my own good,” she murmurs against me. “I can't help it, Adriano. I can't help the way I feel for you.”

I tilt her chin up to me and kiss her. She tastes salty from all the tears. I want to kiss her every damn day.

The kiss is different. I can't explain it. Before, when we kissed, there was an invincible line of chastity we didn't cross because she didn't know the real me. Now, though, with the amount of danger lurking in the darkness, the kiss is fierce. She grabs a hold of my shirt and tugs, pulling me down to her with a force she hasn't used before. Our tongues swipe and thrust each other's mouth. I bite her lower lip and lick off the sting. She moans into my mouth.

I take off my T-shirt. Then, I work on the zipper of her dress, dig my fingers into the curve of her body and peel it off her. She shimmies out of the dress. Her bra and panties are in different shades of red.

Almost as if she read my mind, Penelope quickly says, “I was upset. I was coming to your place to yell and fight with you over the cameras. To end this whole thing. I wasn't...I didn't think...”

“You didn't think we'd fuck?” I like the way her cheeks immediately turn crimson when I say this.

She nods, turning her gaze down to the floor. “Yes, that.”

“You're out of this world,” I tell her because it's true. Her body is divine. No matter how long and hard I look at it, I can never quite get used to seeing the stretch of tanned skin, the creamy undersides of her breasts.

I lead her out to the balcony where the moon shines and sit down on the chair there.

She crosses her arms, rubbing the sides of her arms to quell the cold.

I stretch out my hands to her. "Come here."

She settles on my thighs, sitting sideways just the way I like it. There's a chance we could be seen out here. Personally, I don't give a fuck, but right now, this is all for Penelope.

I want what she wants.

I run my index finger around a firm nipple, tracing the outline from her bra while she squirms, trying to hide how good she feels.

"Stop fighting what you want, Penelope. Tell me what feels good when I touch you."

"O-okay," she says in a whimper.

I flick her nipples with my thumb, feel it swell and pinch it. The shudder that goes through her then feels divine. I don't even need to ask her before she says, "I like when you touch me like that..."

So I do it again and again before skimming my fingers down her body to the band of her panties. I slip my fingers in, watching her face for a reaction and getting one of her flushed expressions.

"You know how I love your tight little pussy." I hold her close, tighter, and touch her. She's wet. Dripping even, and when I touch her like this, it feels perfect.

She flips her body to me and straddles me on the chair. "I can't wait," she cries out. "I just can't."

She helps to unhook my belt and my cock springs free, sitting between us.

Penelope doesn't take off her panties. I don't let her. Instead, I use a finger to hook it to the side and watch as she settles her wetness on my already throbbing cock.

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“Fuck!” I let out a groan that reverberates through the space. “You’re perfect. My perfect little vixen.”

Penelope rides me hard and fast like both our lives depend on it and maybe they do. Maybe this is what we’ve both been hoping for all our lives.

I grab a hold of her waist, pull her down with each thrust until she’s crying out from the sheer pleasure of the moment. And that’s when I burst open too, spilling completely into her.

I like her.

Fuck, I love her.

There’s no going back anymore for me. I see it now.

We’re a mess, panting, stuck together. I lift her chin, smiling wryly. “Still pissed?”

“Always,” she mutters, but her arms wrap around my neck, holding tight.

“Good.” I kiss her slowly, tasting the fight still simmering there. She’s mine, and I’m hers, and that’s the truth that’ll bury us both. I don’t care anymore. She’s worth every damn second of the fall.

Chapter 12

Penelope

I hang up the phone with Gianna and Gerald, my ears still ringing from their goofy banter about baby names. “If it’s a boy, I’m pushing for Gerald Junior,” Gerald said, his voice crackling through the speaker. “Gives me legacy vibes.”

Gianna snorted loud enough to make me wince. “Over my dead body. I’m not cursing my kid with ‘Junior’ baggage. How about something cool, like Blaze?”

“Blaze?” Gerald laughed. “What’s he gonna be, a wrestler? I’d rather name him after my grandpa—solid, dependable Frank.”

“Frank?” Gianna fired back. “Sounds like a guy who owns a deli and yells at kids for stealing gum. No way.”

I couldn’t help the small smile that played on my lips as I shoved my phone into my pocket and stepped onto the street outside Caruso’s. Their bickering is the kind of normal I crave, a lifeline to a world where babies and delis matter more than blood and bullets. My sneakers scuff the pavement, the atmosphere thick with exhaust and late-night chill. I tug my jacket tighter and feel the weight of Adriano’s world pressing heavier on me, like it does every damn day.

That is when they hit me.

Three guys melt out of the shadows, moving fast. Before I can scream, a hand clamps over my mouth, pulling me into an alley. My heart slumps against my ribs. I thrash and kick at shins, trying to remove the arm pinning me, but they are too strong. One shoves me against the brick wall, the jagged edges biting into my back. My breath hitches, and my eyes dart between them. I take in their greasy hair, scarred knuckles, and cold stares. And for some inexplicable reason, I just know they’re Ricci’s men. I know it without them saying a word.

“You fucked up, girl,” the tallest one growls. He towers over me, his leather jacket

creaking as he leans in. “So you killed Theo, huh? Boss says you do not get to breathe easy after that.”

My stomach drops. They think I killed Theo. Not Adriano. Me. I freeze, processing their words, my mind racing back to that night—Adriano swinging that bat, Theo’s skull cracking, sticky blood pooling everywhere. I was scared shitless then, watching him turn a man into pulp. Now? Now I know that psychotic edge is his and his alone. These idiots have no clue who they are really dealing with.

“I did not kill him,” I spit, shoving against the guy holding me. My voice shakes, but I keep my chin up. “You have the wrong person.”

“Bullshit,” the second one snaps, stepping closer. He’s shorter, wiry, with a twitchy eye that makes him look unhinged. “Theo’s face was smashed to hell. No way a little thing like you did that solo. Tell us how you pulled it off and made it look like some freak accident.”

The tall one nods, cracking his knuckles. “Ricci wants the truth. You had help, right? Some bastard backing you up. Spill it, or we start breaking shit that a hospital can’t fix.”

I swallow hard, my pulse hammering in my throat. They do not know about Adriano. Not really. They think I’m the mastermind, that I staged it. If they knew he was the one who turned Theo into a mangled mess, they would have a target and a reason to hunt him down. Proof to take to Ricci. I realize that I want to protect him. Even after the cameras, the lies, Charlotte’s smug bitch face, the stupid and unreasonable part of me still wants to shield him. He’s shown me his dark side, the part that rips people apart, and I’m the only one who’s seen it raw. That makes it mine to guard.

“I did it alone,” I lie, staring them down. “No help. Just me.”

The wiry one laughs, sharp and mean. “You expect us to buy that? Look at you, you’re barely big enough to swing a bat. Theo was a tank. No human could do that without backup.”

“Maybe I’m stronger than I look,” I shoot back, my voice steadying. “Ever think of that?”

The tall one squints, studying me like I’m a puzzle he cannot crack. “Nah. You are hiding something. Ricci says you do not get peace till we know. So talk, or we make you.”

I clamp my mouth shut, glaring. They want Adriano’s name, his shadow to chase. I will not give it. Not because he deserves it, but because letting them have him feels like handing over a piece of myself. And I’m too fucked up to let that go.

“Last chance,” the wiry one says, pulling a gun from his waistband. My breath catches, but he does not aim it. Instead, he flips it in his hand, holding the barrel like a club. “Tell us who helped you fuck Theo up.”

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“Fuck you,” I snarl, spitting at his feet.

He moves fast, smashing the gun’s handle into my temple. Pain explodes, white-hot and blinding. My knees buckle as I crumple. The world spins as blood trickles warm down my cheek. I hear them muttering, their boots scuffling, before everything fades to black.

I wake up to sterile lights and the sharp sting of antiseptic. My head throbs, a dull ache pulsing where the bastard clocked me. I’m in a hospital bed with tubes snaking from my arm and a scratchy blanket pulled up. Adriano sits beside me, his chair shoved close, those gray eyes burning with a fury I can feel across the room.

“Who did this?” he demands, his voice rough. He leans forward, elbows digging into his thighs. “Tell me now, Penelope.”

I turn my head away, staring at the beige wall. “I want to be alone.”

“Fuck that.” He stands, looming over the bed, his shadow swallowing me. “Someone put you here. I’m going to find them and rip their goddamn throats out. Tell me who.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, the ache in my skull flaring. His anger is a storm, but I’m too raw to face it. “Just leave, Adriano.”

“No.” He grabs the bedrail. “I’m burning this city down till I get them. You do not get to shut me out. Talk.”

I open my eyes, glaring up at him. “It was Ricci’s guys. They jumped me after work. Happy now?”

His jaw tightens, a muscle ticking. “What did they want?”

I hesitate, my throat dry. “They think I killed Theo. Wanted to know how I did it and how I made it look like an accident. They were fishing for proof that someone helped me.”

He freezes, eyes narrowing. “And you said?”

“Nothing.” I sit up, wincing as pain stabs my head. “I told them I did it alone. They did not buy it, but I was not giving you up.”

“You should have,” he snaps, voice rising. “You should have thrown my name at them and ran.”

I laugh, bitter and short. “Right. Because that would have stopped them from smashing my head in? They would have hurt me either way, Adriano. They were pissed. Theo was Ricci’s son.”

He stares at me. “You protected me. Why?”

I look away, my fingers twisting the blanket. “Because you are mine to hate. Not theirs.”

He goes quiet, like the space is uncomfortable between us. Then he sits back down, then drags the chair closer until his knees bump the bed.

“You are a damn idiot,” he mutters. “Risking yourself for me.”

“Yeah, well, you are not exactly a prize either,” I shoot back, meeting his eyes. “What are we even doing? This is not some fairy tale. You are a killer, and I’m... what? The dumbass who keeps coming back?”

“You are the pain in my ass who does not know when to quit.”

I scoff, but it hurts—deep, where the truth lives. “If Sophia could see us, she would hate me. She would say I’m shitting on her grave, screwing her dad like this.”

His face hardens, but he does not look away. “She would hate me more. For touching you and needing you like air. For wanting you this bad.”

I swallow hard. Her last words were, “You two deserve each other.”

“Maybe she was right to run from us. That night... I let her go and did not pick up her call after she stormed out. You did, too. And now we are drowning in it, fucking each other like it fixes anything.”

He stiffens. “That is all you think this is? Just fucking?” His voice cuts and he’s pissed, like I slapped him.

I laugh, coldly. “So what is it then? Love?” I lean forward, my head throbbing but my words flat. “Oh please, Adriano. I do not deserve love. I killed my own father, for God’s sake. I’m nothing but a whore who got her best friend dead too and now I’m screwing her dad to top it off.”

He moves fast, his hand snapping up to hold my jaw, fingers pressing into my skin. “Do not ever talk about yourself like that,” he growls, his breath hot on my face. A tear slips free, burning down my cheek, and he leans in, licking it off slowly, tasting my shame. “You are my goddamn sickness, Penelope. I’d carve my chest open just to keep you in it.”

His tongue lingers, salty and possessive, his eyes wild with something mysterious and sweet all at once.

I freeze, my pulse hammering, caught between shoving him off and pulling him closer. “You are insane,” I whisper, my voice cracking.

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“And you are mine,” he says, his thumb brushing my lip. “Guilt and all. I do not give a fuck what we deserve. She is not cursing us from the grave, okay?”

I shake my head. “I think we are cursed either way. This thing between us—it is not normal. It cannot end happily. We are kidding ourselves if we think it can.”

His hand hovers over mine before pulling back. “I will fix it. I will protect you. Those bastards who touched you? They are dead. I swear it.”

“Stop,” I close my eyes. “I do not need your promises. I need you to let me be.”

He does not move, his eyes locked on mine, fierce and unyielding. “I cannot. You know that.”

I glare at him because deep down, I do not want him to. Even now, with my head pounding and his world crashing into mine, I want him here—his heat, his chaos, his fucked up devotion. I hate myself for it. Hate him more.

I lie back, staring at the ceiling, the hum of the hospital machines filling the silence. He stays, a stubborn shadow I cannot shake. My head spins with more than just pain.

Sophia’s call from that night rings in my ears—the one I did not answer. She died mad at me, and now Adriano’s carving his own chunk in me. I hate that I need that. Hate that it might be my punishment for loving him when she cannot forgive me for it.

This is his life bleeding into mine with violence, secrets, and bodies stacking up. I

protected him tonight, kept his name out of their mouths, and for what? To keep this twisted thing alive? I wonder if I'm strong enough to walk away, to let him go for good. But the truth gnaws at me, cold and ugly: I do not know if I can. Not when he is the only one who makes me feel this alive, this broken.

Sometimes I think life is just a game of who gets to hurt you first. Sophia's death taught me that. In a flash, she was just gone after being hit by some drunk asshole who did not even stop. I carry that every day, a knife in my gut that twists when I least expect it. Maybe I deserve this. Maybe it is penance for failing her. Or maybe I'm just too weak to say no to the one person who sees me, really sees me, and still stays.

"Ralph's on it," he says suddenly, breaking my thoughts. He pulls out his phone, thumb jabbing the screen. "He will find those fuckers. You rest."

I roll my eyes. "Great. Your lapdog's going to save the day."

He smiles. "Lapdog? He would gut you for that."

"Bring it," I mutter, crossing my arms. "I could use a good fight."

He laughs. "You are something else, Penelope."

"Yeah, a real catch," I say, voice dripping sarcasm. "Bleeding in a hospital bed, covering for a psycho. Living the dream."

He leans closer, his breath brushing my ear. "You are my dream. Fucked up as it is."

I turn my head, our faces inches apart, and my pulse jumps. "That is the problem," I whisper. "It is too fucked up to last."

He does not argue, just holds my eyes, and the tension crackles, hot and heavy. I want to shove him away. I want to pull him closer. I do neither, trapped in this limbo where we both know the truth: this is killing us, and we cannot stop.

Chapter 13

Adriano

I crash my fist into the warehouse table, the metal groaning under the hit. “We’ve got them,” I growl, glaring at the map Ralph shoved in front of me. Red ink circles a rundown dockside shithole, Ricci’s rats’ nest, where those bastards who jumped Penelope are holed up. Of course Ricci won’t be there as he has been a freaking coward hiding and sending his goons to do his dirty work. We haven’t even been able to find him and interrogating his shit-for-brains men came to a dead end. But I’ll get him. For sending his asshole son after my Penelope and for what his men did to her. I will get him.

My blood’s boiling as I address Ralph, itching to spill theirs. “Round up the crew. We hit them tonight.”

Ralph nods, already barking orders into his phone. Ten of my men grab their guns, checking clips with sharp clicks, their faces set like stone. These pricks hurt her, cracked her skull, then left her bleeding and I’m gonna bury them alive for it. Every second I picture her in that hospital bed, bruised and pale, and I die a little.

“Boss one more thing,” Ralph says, stepping close, my voice dour. “She’s gone. Penelope checked herself out of the hospital an hour ago. Slipped past Tommy and the boys I had watching her.”

My stomach lurches. “What the fuck do you mean, gone?” I grab his collar, drawing him forward. “You were supposed to make sure she didn’t move an inch!”

He holds up his hands. “She’s smart, Adriano. Ditched them clean. Nobody’s seen her since.”

I shove him back, cursing under my breath. “Fuck!” My head’s spinning—she’s out there, hurt, alone, and probably visible to sick fuckers out for me. Quiet people, like Holden. I haven’t heard from him. I know it is only a matter of time before he shows me what he’s planning after what I did to him.

I rake my hands through my hair, pacing the concrete floor, boots thudding hard. The realization that having her in my world is causing more harm than good crushes me and it is so freaking frustrating that there isn’t much I can do to make it all stop.

“You take Tony and Marco. Hit Ricci’s crew. Make it bloody and send that asshole a message he cannot crawl away from. I’m finding her.”

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Ralph squints, hesitant. “You sure? We can handle—”

“Go!” I snap, grabbing my keys and storming out. The warehouse door bangs shut behind me, the sound echoing like a gunshot.

I peel out in my SUV, tires screaming against asphalt, tearing through the city. The first place I hit is that shitty apartment she refused to leave with the dripping sink. I offered so many times to get her a better place. But trust Penelope to stick to her beliefs and not want anything from me she didn’t work for. I kick the door open, wood splintering—maybe when she doesn’t have a door, she will accept my help. But the place is empty. Her bed’s unmade, sheets twisted like she bolted fast. No note, no trace. My gut twists tighter. Where the hell is she?

Then it hits me, cold and heavy—Sophia’s grave. The one fucking place I cannot face without choking on guilt but where she’d probably go to breathe after the conversation we had at the hospital.

I gun the engine, weaving through traffic, horns blaring as I blow red lights. The cemetery looms ahead, iron gates rusting under the gray sky. I screech to a stop, gravel spitting, and climb out, my boots crunching the path.

She’s there, kneeling by Sophia’s headstone, her floral dress is stark against the dead grass. Her hair’s up, messy in that green band, and she’s clutching her jacket like it’s armor. I stop a few feet back, watching her trace my daughter’s name with trembling fingers. She looks small, broken, and fuck, I want to fix it—fix us.

“Penelope,” I say, voice rough.

She stiffens, not turning. “I do not want to see you right now.”

I step closer, gravel grinding under me. “Too bad. I’m here.”

I crouch beside her, staring at the stone—Sophia Vieri, forever 17. The ache hits me hard, same as always.

“I miss her every damn day. You know that?”

She nods, slowly, her eyes locked on the carved letters. “Yeah. Me too.”

We sit there, silence thick between us, the wind whistling through bare branches. I can still hear Sophia’s laugh, see her running off with Penelope, both of them giggling like the world wasn’t a shitshow waiting to blow. That night she stormed out, keys in hand—I let her go. Penelope didn’t pick up. Now we’re here, drowning in the wreckage.

“Why’d you leave the hospital?” I ask.

She twists her head, locking those coffee-brown eyes on mine—bloodshot, shadowed, like she hasn’t slept since they attacked.

“Because your world’s choking me, Adriano,” she cries. “I thought I could handle the blood, the bodies. I thought it was what I wanted, that I could be part of it. But I’m drowning. Everyday I realize that I made a mistake wanting you all these years.”

I wrap my arms around her, then haul her against me. She stiffens, before pushing back for a split second, then collapses into me, her heat bleeding through my shirt, her breath shaky on my neck.

“Are you scared of me?” I rasp, my lips grazing her hair, the honey scent hitting me

like a drug. “Tell me straight if I’m the monster keeping you up at night, I’ll walk. I swear it on her grave.”

She freezes, her fingers caving into my jacket, but no words come. Her silence shows the fear, want, guilt. It’s all swirling in those eyes, screaming what her mouth won’t.

I tighten my hold, burying my face in her neck, inhaling that honey scent that’s haunted me since she came back. “You’ve fucked me sideways, Pen,” I say, my voice splitting open, raw as hell. “I cannot function without you dominating my thoughts. Every curve, every scream, it’s got me by the throat. I hate how bad I need you, but I’d choke on my own blood before letting you go.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I mean every damn word.” I pull back, my lips curling up despite the ache. “Broke your door down looking for you, by the way. Splinters everywhere. You have to stay with me now. You have no choice.”

She jerks upright, eyes flashing. “The hell I am! I’m not your prisoner, Adriano. Fix my damn door or I’m staying put.”

I laugh. “What, you’ll sleep here in a cemetery? You gonna bunk with the ghosts, Pen?”

“Yes,” she deadpans. “They’re quieter than you and don’t hog the blankets.”

“Come on, stop being so stubborn. Your place is a shithole, babe. One kick and it’s a free-for-all. I’m sure rats probably throw parties in there. You’re safer with me.”

“Safer?” She snorts, crossing her arms so tight her boobs practically salute me. “There’s absolutely nothing safe about you. Please. I’d rather spoon a skeleton than

dodge your bullshit. Get me a new door, it's nonnegotiable."

I throw my head back, cackling. "Oh, you're savage. Fine, I'll get you a door—solid oak, fit for a queen. But I'm training the rats to chew through it when I miss you."

She grins, eyes glinting. "Good luck. I'll bribe 'em with cheese to bite your toes off first."

I tilt my head. "Alright, princess. So it's settled then. New door, steel bolts, my cameras are already there, I'll upgrade your security system and the works. But I get a key."

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“No key,” she fires back, poking me. “You knock like a normal person.”

“Fine. No key.” I lean in, voice dropping. “But I’ll still climb through your window when I want you.”

“Try it. I’ll shove you out.”

“Deal.” I fish my phone out, dialing Ralph while she watches, smug. “Ralph, yeah, it’s me. Penelope’s door’s fucked. I kicked it in. Get a new one, heavy-duty, and slap a security system on her place. Cameras, locks, the full deal. Today, asshole, not next week. She’s stubborn as hell, thinks she can keep me out.” I hang up, catching her glare. “Happy now?”

“Thrilled,” she says, voice dripping sarcasm, but her lips twitch, and I know she’s mine, door or not.

We don’t speak for a while, the silence filled with things we want to say but aren’t ready to.

“I have not been here in weeks, not since you,” I say.

She grunts, distracted, sliding her handbag onto her shoulder as she rises. “I figured stepping foot in this place again would gut me, leave me feeling like absolute shit.”

Penelope spins to face me, her eyes locking onto mine. Instantly, I’m flung back to that first spark at Gianna’s wedding and her in that short dress, me pretending I did not want her. So much has twisted since then. She’s still a goddamn vision,

carved like the world bends just for her. Traces linger of that shy girl who tried schooling me on lust versus obsession, but now? Now she's a puzzle I cannot crack, edges sharpened by pain I helped carve.

Her floral dress clings short, sleeves barely hiding the tan of her arms. That's when I spot it—a tattoo peeking from the fabric, ink bleeding into view. “You got a tattoo?”

Shock glints across her face before she masks it with a scowl, stammering, “Yeah, I did, but it's nothing. Anyway, I need to go.”

“Can I see it?”

She jerks her arm back, twisting it out of sight. “It's not a big deal. It's not ugly, just...”

“Show me.”

She hesitates, jaw tight like she might snap at me again, but then relents. Lifting her arm, she lets me grab her wrist. I turn it slow, fingers brushing her skin, and there it is—my name, Adriano, etched in black.

“Fuck, Pen—”

She pulls her hand free, eyes flashing. “You're gonna call it stupid, right? Go ahead. Maybe it is, but do not think I did it because I'm in love or pining for you.”

“Were you not?” I step closer, voice dropping. “Thinking about me?”

“It was a drunk fuck up, Adriano. After the incident with Theo. I thought I'd get a sick memento of what I've let myself become.”

Her stare turns icy, hardened by years of bullshit—some mine, some not. I see it now: I've torn her open, left scars she cannot hide. She's got my heart in a chokehold, and letting her slip away might kill me.

"It's not stupid," I admit. "It's the most anyone's ever given me, Sweetheart. I sure as hell do not deserve it—not from you."

She nods, lips pressing tight, silence swallowing us. Then, snapping back to the moment, she asks, "So, how do you feel being here now?"

I tear my eyes from her, scanning the sea of tombstones stretching out like silent judges. Beyond, to the east, trees carve a path to my parked car. Wind slices through the branches, rustling them wild, and I shut my eyes, sucking in the crisp, earthy air—moss, dew, a whisper of peace. "I cannot pin it down," I say, exhaling. "But it's not guilt anymore. You?"

She turns, her sandals crunching the cobblestone as she heads toward the trees. I trail her, my hand brushing the handgun tucked in my waistband. We pass two women kneeling at a grave, their prayers a low hum, and Penelope's voice breaks the quiet.

"Back then, I could not face this place. It crushed me—her being my best friend, gone like that. Now, though? Like you said, guilt's faded, replaced with hatred for myself. But I miss her. God, I miss her so fucking much."

"Yeah," I murmur. "More than I can ever say."

We start approaching the gated entrance after a few minutes. Once we reach the edge, she stops, wrapping her arms around me. The height difference between us has never really registered in my head until today. With her arms around me, I suddenly feel at peace. The smell of nature, of green moss and dew and sunlight filter through my subconscious but all that fully registers is the sweet smell of her honey-tinged

perfume.

“I’ve missed you like hell,” I rasp, pressing a kiss to her head, my lips grazing her hair. “Every damn day, you’re in my head. I cannot keep pretending I’m fine without you.”

“Adriano, I... I cannot do this anymore.”

She pulls back, leaving me hollow. I rake a hand through my hair, biting my lip to cage the flood inside, but it spills out anyway. “Why not, Pen?”

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She shakes her head, those coffee-brown eyes lifting to mine—bright, not from the sun glaring down this afternoon, but from something raw: fear, longing, maybe love, all tangled up. “Just because.”

“No, Sweetheart.” I step into her space, voice hardening. “You owe me more than that.”

Her lips pout, and fuck, I want to crash into her, devour that mouth with my tongue until she’s gasping. My cock twitches, straining against my jeans, begging for her. “It’s your world,” she says, voice cracking. “Your life—I’m scared of it, Adriano. I keep saying it because it’s true.”

“My love,” I drawl out and she sighs, slowly closing her eyes as I cup her face in my hands and caress her cheeks. It hits me that this is the first time I’m actually calling her that. I tell myself that it hadn’t been intentional but the more I stare at her, the more certain I become. I really do love her. “I have hundreds of people under me, and I protect each one fiercely. You’re the entire world for me. I’ll protect you with my life.”

She stays silent, but her eyes scream it. The desire, desperation, a mirror to my own hunger. They tell me she’s drowning in this too, maybe deeper than I am, grasping at straws to hold onto us.

I push harder, chasing that last thread of her surrender. “I said I’d give you space in the hospital, but I’m done. It’s been only two weeks, and I want to die. You’re my air, Pen. I’ve pictured your body every fucking day since.”

Her cheeks flush red. “Adriano please...” she breathes, soft and shaky.

I kiss her left cheek, then her right before moving to her nose and eyelids. “I have missed the way you smell...the way you taste...Fuck, I need to feel you right now, Sweetheart.”

She goes still, her breath hitching.

“Penelope, Sweetheart please give in to me—”

“Adriano....”

“Let me give you what I know your body craves.”

“Fuck....you drive me up a wall. I cannot wait,” she whispers, voice trembling.
“Please fuck me, Adriano.”

That’s it—my heaven, her begging me to take her. I grab her hand, dragging her through the trees. My car’s an option, but her ragged gasps and my slick palms say we won’t make it. I stop by a thick oak, stepping back to drink her in.

“You’re all I’ve ever wanted.” It feels difficult to breathe now that I’m standing in front of her. It’s strange the way I’ve let myself become addicted to this woman. What I’ve learned in my line of work is that getting this seriously involved with a woman could prove to be both a blessing and a curse. Somehow, now, I couldn’t care less. All I want is her.

“You’re so hot. I need to have a taste of your pussy. I fucking need to taste you again, please.”

She gulps, loud and raw, leaning against the tree, her eyes pinned to mine, so wild

and daring me.

I drop to my knees, the damp grass soaking my jeans. The dirt's going to cling to us, but I give zero fucks.

"I need you now," she whines, lips parting, her voice a plea that ignites me.

I do not have it in me to tell her to wait, because patience is for suckers. Right here, right now, all that fucking matters is how bad we both crave this. How bad we've always craved it, even when we pretended otherwise.

Penelope hikes her dress up, exposing her panties, a thin scrap of fabric daring me to rip it off. I draw them down her legs, rough and fast, letting them pool at her ankles. I kiss her thighs, open and trembling, tasting the creamy smoothness of her skin. She's soft, too damn soft for a bastard like me. I drag my tongue along her inner thigh, slow and hungry, then scrape my teeth across it, marking her. She gasps, sharp and needy, pressing a hand to her stomach like she's holding herself together.

"I'm fucking dying here," she whispers. "Quit teasing me, Adriano. I cannot take it. I need your mouth on my pussy now."

That's my green light. I shove a finger inside her, curling it deep, pressing hard against her slick walls. She stumbles, knees buckling, but I clamp my arm around her hips, pinning her to the tree.

"Relax, Sweetheart. I've got you."

I dive in, rolling my tongue through her dripping folds, and she moans so loud, shameless, a sound that shoots straight to my cock. I do it again, lapping at her, tasting how soaked she is, just to watch her squirm. She grinds against me, hips bucking, chasing my finger and mouth. I plunge deeper, sucking her wet pussy, every

lick pulling me into her orbit. She's my goddamn salvation, right here, spilling over my tongue.

My jeans strain, my cock throbbing, rock-hard and leaking, but I do not stop. I need her to feel it—how she drags me to the edge of sanity and back. I hum against her clit, vibrations pulsing through her, and she digs her fingers into my hair, nails digging into my scalp. The sting mixes with the heat, a fucked up cocktail I cannot get enough of.

Then she shatters, coming hard, flooding my mouth with her taste. I drink her down, every last drop, greedy for it.

“I want to bury myself in you,” I growl, surging to my feet, wiping her slickness off my chin.

“Please... please... fuck, please!” she begs, voice breaking.

I hook one of her legs over my arm, shoving my jeans and briefs down just enough to free my cock. I thrust into her, raw and deep, and her cry, half pain, half ecstasy, it sets my blood on fire. I plunge in fully, pounding into the woman who owns me, body and soul.

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“You feel that?” I snarl, clutching her hips with bruising force. “I cannot live without this. Without you.”

She cries out, a sound that rips through me, her pussy squeezing tight around my cock.

“You’re so tight... so fucking perfect... made for me.”

“Mmm... oh my God...” she whimpers, her voice a wrecked mess.

Her nails rake my neck, drawing blood, and I hiss, loving the sting. I fuck her harder, the tree leaves raining down.

“You’re mine, Pen,” I rasp, my forehead pressed to hers, sweat dripping. “To have you like this every single day, I’d kill for it.”

Our bodies slap together, wet and filthy, the only sound cutting through the rustling trees and whispering breeze. She wraps her arms around my neck, clinging, and I hoist her other leg up, lifting her off the ground. I fuck her harder, driving into her tight, dripping pussy, the tree bark scraping her back raw.

“You take me so goddamn good, Pen,” I snarl into her ear, teeth grazing her lobe. “You love this, huh? Love me fucking you stupid?”

“Yes... yes!” she screams, her voice echoing through the graveyard, her legs wrapping around me, pulling me deeper.

This is us. So loud, so messy, so unhinged. We've fought this pull for too long, pretending we could outrun it. Now it's spilling out, dirty and desperate, and we cannot stop. Footsteps crunch behind us, some nosy bastard stumbling down the path, but I keep going. She hears it too and I feel her tense, but her nails dig deeper into my shoulders, urging me on, begging for more.

That's when I hear the loud, surprised gasp.

"What the hell!" a woman yelps, her voice cracking with shock.

I cannot stop—would not, even if I could. I'm buried balls-deep in Penelope, her wetness swallowing me whole, her heatsearing me alive. The stranger staggers off, muttering, and I laugh against Pen's throat before sucking the salt off her skin.

"I'm gonna come, baby... gonna fill you up so fucking deep..."

"Yes, that's it... I need it..." she pants, her words slurring into a plea.

I explode inside her, pumping hot and thick, claiming every inch of her. We stay locked like that, panting. Then I ease her down, her feet hitting the grass shaky and unsteady. I grab her hands, pulling her close, her breathless giggle vibrating against me. "I cannot walk after that," she says, half-laughing, half-dazed.

I slam my lips against hers, devouring the salty mix of her sweat and mine, with a faint trace of that filthy lie she calls 'just chapstick.' Our fingers entangle.

"Good thing I'm here to carry you, huh, Pen?" I growl, teeth grazing her earlobe, tugging it rough. "But fuck, those thighs could choke me out anytime, and I'd beg for it while licking you clean after."

She pulls back just enough, flashing that wicked grin that says she's already plotting

my ruin. “Carry me, please?” she purrs, her voice a filthy, mocking drip as her nails sink into my knuckles.

“Of course, baby. Then we’re fucking again in the car,” I shoot back, my mouth twisting in quiet amusement.

“No,” she snaps, but it’s weak, barely a protest.

“Yes.”

“Ok, fine,” she huffs, rolling her eyes, but the way her voice cracks like she’s already wet tells me she didn’t even want to fight.

Chapter 14

Penelope

I’m bent over the kitchen counter with my skirt shoved up to my hips, and Adriano’s pounding into me, relentlessly, his hands bruising my skin where he holds my waist. The granite digs into my stomach, no doubt going to sting like a bitch tomorrow, but all I feel is him. His hot, thick, cock splitting me open with every thrust. My nails scrape the edge, trying to hold on, and he’s panting, growling filthy shit in my ear that makes my whole body shake.

“You’re such a fucking slut for me, Pen,” he rasps, voice rough, his teeth nipping the back of my neck. “Look at you, dripping all over my cock like you can’t get enough. Bet you’d let me fuck you anywhere, anytime, wouldn’t you? My dirty little bitch.”

I moan, loud and shameless, pushing back against him because he’s right, and I hate that I love it.

“Shut up,” I choke out, but it’s weak, and he laughs, dark and mean, driving harder until my legs shake.

His fingers dig into my hair, pulling my head back, and he bites my shoulder, marking me like some animal claiming its kill. I come hard, shuddering, and he follows, groaning as he spills inside me while squeezing my boobs so hard it hurts.

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Fuck. We're insatiable but that's what makes this exciting. I've been to his house everyday since the cemetery tryst. And it's been an unhinged sex marathon ever since.

He doesn't pull out right away, just stays there, heavy against my back, catching his breath. I feel him soften, and when he finally slides out, I wince at the emptiness. He smacks my assplayfully before crouching down to lick my virgin hole like some depraved psycho. I'm only able to let him get in a few swipes before and I spin around, shoving him off me.

"You're a pig," I say, but my voice is hoarse, wrecked, and he grins like he knows I'm full of shit.

"Yeah, but you love it," he says, wiping his hands and mouth on a dish towel, casually, as if he didn't just fuck me senseless.

The kitchen stinks of sex and the garlic we burned earlier, and I grab a spatula, smacking him with it. He snatches it, tossing it into the sink, and pulls me close, hands sliding down my spine. It's softer now, and I hate how my body caves into him, craving the quiet after the storm.

"Let's actually try to cook something this time," I mutter, pulling away to grab a pot.

He nods, handing me a spoon, his fingers brushing mine slowly, intentionally. We move around each other, and it's weirdly normal—him chopping onions, me stirring sauce—like we're not a mafia enforcer and his fucked up obsession.

He's quiet for a minute, then says, "My ma used to make this. Meatballs, sauce, the works. She'd sing these old Italian songs, with her nasally voice cracking like a busted radio. I'd hide under the table just to shut it out. Now I'd kill to hear it again."

I glance at him, seeing the kid he used to be. "She sounds like she was fun. What happened?"

"Cancer. I was twelve. Pop was already running hits by then, so I got raised by guys who taught me how to break kneecaps instead of bedtime stories." He chops harder, onion bits flying.

I stir the pot, the steam hitting my face, thick with tomatoes and a rancid edge that churns my stomach.

"And Sophia's mom? I never met her. Sophia wouldn't talk about her, just said she's better off without her."

Adriano stops chopping, the knife shaking over the onion, his fist clutching so hard the veins bulge. He drops it slowly, like it's loaded, and slumps against the counter, arms crossed tight, eyes fixed on the cracked tile floor.

"Carla was my stepmom. After Ma died, Pop married her a year later. She was thirty-two, all fake tears and tight dresses, and moved in, always beaming and with a glass of wine. I was sixteen when it started, already a pissed off kid running errands for the family. She fucked me up worse than any bullet ever could."

I stop stirring, sauce dripping onto the stove, splattering red like blood, and face him. "What'd she do?"

He nods, jaw grinding, eyes moving up to mine. "Yeah. Carla groomed me. It started small, brushing my arm, calling me 'her little king,' saying I'd be a made man soon.

I'd be patching up Pop's bullet holes or counting his cash, and she'd linger, staring, licking her lips. Then she'd corner me anywhere she could. The kitchen, hallway, rubbing against me, whispering how I'd learn to please her. One night, she came into my room drunk while Pop was out of town, tore my shirt off, climbed on top while I laid there, stiff, choking on my own breath. She laughed, said I'd grow into it. Eventually, Sophia showed up."

A sick twist knots inside me and I clutch the counter, nails scraping the edge. "She raped you. And Sophia..."

"Was the result," he finishes, voice scraped raw. "Carla didn't even care. She told Pop the baby was his. But I knew. I fucking knew but I couldn't quite tell my father without sounding like some kid acting up on his hormonal problems. I was already a messed up kid from missing Ma. I was going to tell him, but I just didn't know how. When she gave birth, Pop was thrilled. It became even more impossible because it was getting worse for Sophia. When Pop wasn't home, she'd leave Sophia screaming in a bassinet while she fucked his dealers for kicks. I was nineteen, changing diapers, heating bottles, while Carla told me I'd owe her for 'giving me a kid.' I started locking my room, sleeping with a bat, but she'd still slink in and put her hands on me, grinning. I told Pop when Sophia was six months old, and I was shocked he believed me. Maybe he had some doubts of his own too and I felt even stupider for not telling him soon. That day, he confronted her, and he smashed her face in, then dumped her ass on the street. She didn't even glance at Sophia on her way out."

I step closer, heat rolling off him, the stove hissing behind me, and push. "Did she ever come back? Try to find Sophia?"

His laugh is cold, jagged, and he grabs the knife again, slicing the onion like he's gutting a memory. "Once. Sophia was two, toddling around, when Carla showed up at Pop's door, strung out, begging cash. Said she'd take 'her baby' if I didn't pay. I grabbed a gun, shoved it in her mouth, told her I'd blow her brains out before she

touched my daughter. She pissed herself, ran off sobbing. I made damn sure she never got close again, restraining orders, paid off cops, and had boys tail her until she vanished. Don't know where she is now. Don't care."

I frown, leaning in. "You never looked? Not once?"

He stops, wipes the blade on his jeans. "Could've. I had the muscle, the contacts, over the years. I could've hunted her down, snapped her neck. But I didn't. At first for Sophia, I didn't want her knowing what a lunatic her mother was. Then later for me. Not because I was scared or couldn't face her again. I just didn't give a fuck. She was dead to me, Pen. Let her rot wherever she crawled to. Sophia's mine—always was, always will be. Even in death."

I nod, the weight sinking in, and pry deeper, softer now. "So what about other women? Love? After her?"

He snorts. "Oh, for a long time I believed love to be a con. Carla taught me that I should just fuck women, that's it. I had rules too: no names, no repeats, no bullshit. For me, they were just holes who were wet, willing, and gone by dawn. It helped for the longest. Kept my head straight to focus on what was important."

My throat tightens, a dull ache spreading, and I force it out, voice shaky. "So I'm one of them? Another notch you'll forget?"

He turns and grabs my face with rough hands, fingers digging into my cheeks, eyes blazing like black fire. "Fuck no. You're not them, Pen. This was all before I got involved with you. You're... shit, you're my goddamn soul. I'd die before I'd let you be some random lay. You're in me. My blood, my fucking marrow. I'd kill for you, fuck you until the earth cracks, and keep you until I'm dust. Every rule and principle I had about women, I torch 'em for you. You're my everything."

Tears sting my eyes, and I blink hard, caught in his hold, his words tearing through me. “That’s deranged. You’re deranged.”

“Yeah,” he says, voice softening, thumbs stroking my skin, sweet in its madness. “But it’s you and me. You’re my sickness, Pen. I’m not screwing around with you. I’m chained to you.”

I press my forehead to his, hands fisting his shirt, and mutter, “You’re a psycho. But I’m locked in too.”

He kisses me, slow and fierce, tasting like salt and old wounds, and I feel everything he just said deep inside my heart. The sauce spits, and we pull back, a shaky laugh breaking the air, brittle but real.

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“Salt,” I say, wiping my eyes, grasping for something solid. He hands it over, fingers brushing mine, lingering too long, and we cook in quiet. It’s fucked up, jagged, but it’s us. The two broken bastards scooping meatballs, pretending we’re not fused at the seams.

I know I will think about it late at night back in my room. Carla’s sick hands turning him into this, a man who guarded Sophia like a fortress and loves me like a rabid dog because it’s all he’s got left. It’s not soft or sane. It’s a brutal, bloody wreck, and I’m wondering if I’m as lost as he is.

But for now, I laugh and we sit down with plates of half-decent food, knees bumping under the table. He’s telling me about stealing hubcaps off some rival’s ride when he was a teenager, and I cut in with another question that has plagued my mind for a while.

“What’s our endgame here, Adriano? You and me?”

He stops, fork hovering. “Endgame?”

“Yeah. Like, I could go back to college, get my accounting degree. But I don’t know if I want that now. Not with you in my head all the time.”

His eyes narrow. “How can you not want that? Your career should be because of you and you alone. You can’t get mixed up with this life. It is for people already far too fucked up, like me. College keeps you out of this shit. My world’s a meat grinder, Pen. You’d get chewed up.”

I lean in. “Well, the way I see it, I’m already halfway there. And maybe I don’t care. Maybe I want the mess. You ever think about us, long-term?”

He drops the fork, then grabs my hand, squeezing until it hurts. “Long-term is a fantasy. You with me? It’s ducking bullets, not picking out curtains. I’d slit throats to keep you, but it doesn’t mean we’d make it.”

“So we hide it,” I say, testing him. “Sneak around. I can do that.”

He pulls me closer, breath hot on my face. “You don’t tell a soul. We keep it under wraps for now.”

“Why? You scared they’ll judge the age gap or think you’re taking advantage of me?”

He lets go, raking his hair back. “It’s not that. One slip, and you’re dead. My enemies don’t fuck around. You’re my weak spot, and they’d carve you up to get to me.”

It hits me then, it’s not shame, but survival. He’s paranoid, possessive, always grabbing me like I’ll slip away. I’m pissed he wants me caged, but I’m hooked on how he needs me, how he can’t keep his hands off me. It’s twisted, and I’m too deep to care.

The next day, I’m at his place as usual, sprawled on his couch watching TV, when I spot a crate in the corner, cracked open, bags of white powder spilling out like guts. My heart bangs against my ribs, and I’m up, pointing at it, voice shaking.

“What the fuck is that?”

He glances over from his phone, cool as ice. “Business.”

“Business? That’s fucking dope, Adriano! You’re peddling death!”

He stands, looming over me, all muscle and menace. “It’s just work, Pen. Pays for the roof, the food, the life.”

I shove him. “That’s a lie! That shit kills people. Kills kids, junkies! You don’t have to do this anymore. You’re not doomed to be the bad guy just because Sophia’s gone.”

His face twists, and he grabs my wrists, slamming them against the wall. “Don’t you dare bring her up. This has nothing to do with her.”

“Doesn’t it? Everything’s about her with you. You’re drowning in guilt because you feel she hated you for keeping her mother from her, when you could have just told her why all these years. So you’re playing king of the filth to punish yourself, and I’m the idiot wading through your shit. You think I don’t see it?”

He tightens his hold. “You think you’re any different? Screwing me, knowing I’m a goddamn rot pile? Hate to break it to you. But you’re neck-deep in this muck like I am, sweetheart so don’t pretend your hands aren’t dirty.”

“Dirty? I’m not the one giving people poison to shove into their veins, you bastard! You’re not just rotten, you’re a fucking plague, and you love it. Hiding behind Sophia’s ghost so you don’t have to face what a monster you’ve become. I might be in the mud, but at least I know it.”

His eyes flash and his voice drops an octave. “Keep talking, Pen. You’re really good at cutting me open, but you’re still here, aren’t you? Clinging to the plague because you can’t walk away.”

I wrench free, tears stinging. “I know I can’t, but you could stop, be something else!”

He steps in. “I don’t want to be something else. I’m this. And you’re kidding yourself if you think you’re above it.”

I slap him, hard, the crack echoing. He doesn’t move, just stares, eyes burning. “Go to hell,” I hiss, storming out, slamming the door shut so hard it rattles.

The street’s cold, and I stumble. He’s right. I’m not clean or different. I’m in love with a monster, a dealer, a trafficker, a man who’d burn the world for me but won’t climb out of it. I want to scream, to purge him out of my soul, but I can’t. I’m as fucked as he is, and the worst part is I don’t know if I’d change him even if I could.

Then tires screech against the pavement, spitting gravel, and Tommy’s black SUV jerks to a stop beside me. The window rolls down, thick cigarette smoke unfurling like a veil. He rests his elbow on the frame, a knowing smile tugging at his mouth. I know Adriano sent him, his shadow trailing me to take me back.

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“Lovers spat, huh, doll?” he says, voice scraped raw from years of nicotine and grit, eyeing my tear-streaked face.

“Go away, Tommy,” I snap, swiping at my wet cheeks with my sleeve. “I’m not in the mood.”

He chuckles. “Boss is a live wire, huh? Fucks like a machine, fights like a devil, burns hotter than a torched warehouse. But I have never seen him like this. Not since Sophia. You must really have him down bad.”

I’m tempted to go on a rant, but I decide against it. I step closer. “Why don’t you go tell him that when you run back to lick his boots.”

Tommy’s laugh bursts out, his head tilting back so the scars on his neck catch the light. “Damn, I like you. Adriano’s a tornado, doll. Been with him ten years, watched him crush skulls over a wrong look, screw women until they crawl, then ditch them before sunrise. But he is loyal, through and through. He pulled a knife from my gut in ’19, took the next hit himself. But he is a mad dog, heart buried deep. You are either nuts or steel to stay with him.”

“Maybe I am both,” I say, hands on hips. “But he does not own me, Tommy. He is a wreck, and I see it better than you. So shove your advice and just leave me be.”

He tosses the cigarette onto the street and leans out the window. “Get in. I will take you home.”

“No thanks. I will walk.”

Tommy sighs, rubbing his jaw, grin fading. “Boss will cut my balls off and hang them on his rearview if I let you stumble off alone. Come on, doll. Save my sack and get in.”

I glare but his stupid plea lands. I picture Adriano’s rage, Tommy bleeding out, and I groan, stomping to the passenger side. That lunatic might really do it.

“Fine. But I hate you both.” I pull the door open, slide in, and slam it shut, the leather creaking under me. The car is stale with ash and old blood, and Tommy’s wearing that same crooked smile as he steers forward.

“For what it’s worth, he is a bastard about you,” he says, glancing over.

I stare out the window, but my head’s spinning. Adriano was everywhere on me a few hours ago. His smell, his hands, the way he owns me. I hate it. I need it. Sometimes I think this is my sentence, a life of shadows, drugs, and a man who’d die for me but drags me down instead. It’s not pretty. It’s a goddamn disaster, and I’m riding it straight to the edge, wondering if I’ll jump or pull him with me. Maybe we’re both too broken to fix. Maybe that’s why I stay.

Chapter 15

Adriano

I sit in the back room of the warehouse, the space reeling with rust and sweat, staring at Vinny. He’s tied to a chair, wrists raw from rope, sweat pouring down his face like he’s melting. My guys dug up the dirt this morning: messages to Henry Holden, leaking my shipments, my safe houses, every move I make. Traitor. I don’t hesitate. I rise, pull my gun from my waistband, and jam it against his skull. He whimpers, a wet stain spreading down his leg, his words tumbling out.

“Please, Adriano, I swear it was just—”

I fire. The shot booms, blood splatters the wall, and his head lolls, body sagging like a broken doll. My crew lines the room, eight sets of eyes locked on me, none daring to blink. I turn, gun still warm in my hand, and wipe it on my sleeve.

“Anyone else want to rat me out to Holden?” I say, voice cold. “He thinks me backing out of his daughter’s wedding gives him a free pass to fuck up my life? I will rip your throats out before he blinks.”

Silence. They know I mean it. I storm out and step into the night after the workday fades. The cold is harsh tonight as I slide into my car and rev the engine. Henry’s a scavenger, that’s how he was able to get me an unrecorded incident in the first place when all my other sources couldn’t. He is always circling, but I’m primed, waiting for his next play. My head drifts, though, tires buzzing on the highway, and it’s been three days since I last saw Penelope.

Three days since I tore open my heart in my kitchen, letting her see the rot inside about Carla, Sophia, and the whole ugliness my life has been. Nobody’s ever gotten that piece of me, and now she’s gone quiet, a shadow I cannot shake.

I overtake the sluggish trucks. These three days of silence wear away at me, a knife sinking deeper with every mile. She’s flipped something in me, and I despise how it weakens me, but I crave it too. I cannot keep driving away from her. I cannot be away from her. I jerk the wheel, spinning the car in a screeching U-turn, gravel spitting under the tires, and head straight for her place. My phone’s in my hand while at a traffic light, and I type, words spilling out, raw, unfiltered, laying my soul bare.

Penelope. My world was a gutter before you, a cold, filthy place where I broke bones and scrubbed blood from my palms, living like some chained animal with nothing to hope for. Just darkness and sadness. Then Sophia came, my little girl, and she

changed everything. She was this tiny spark, her giggles lighting up parts of me I thought were dead, her hands tugging my hair like she could pull me into something good. Losing her cracked me wide open, left an ache I carry every day, a hollow I cannot escape. I hear her voice in quiet moments, see her chasing shadows in my dreams, and I would trade my last breath to hold her again, but life does not give second chances. Then you stepped in, Penelope, and it was like the sun broke through. You are wild and strong, a flame I cannot look away from, and I am just a wrecked man who should not even dare to touch you, but I cannot stop wanting you, needing you. That night haunts us both, a scar we carry, and I know we feel the weight of it, the guilt twisting in our guts for chasing this love despite it. But if it never happened, I know Sophia would not have totally hated the idea of us. Sometimes I see her in dreams, her small smile beaming down at us—at me struggling to be more for you, to become a man worth your fire. Maybe it's just my mind grasping for comfort, weaving hope from ghosts, but something inside me, knowing my little girl, tells me if she were here, she would want this—want me to fight for something good, for you. I am so damn tired of keeping you in the dark, shoving you into shadows like you are some sin I am afraid to own. You are not a mistake, Penelope. You are everything I never knew I could have. You are not a secret or sin. You are the one thing I want to get right. You are my heartbeat, the fight in my chest, the reason I look up some mornings. I want you beside me, out loud, where everyone can see, because you deserve that. I have been a mess my whole life, but you make me believe I could be different. With you, I see something real. A life, a home, us. I love you, Penelope, and it shakes me to my core because I have never known how to hold something so good without breaking it. But I want to learn. For you, I would try anything. Call me, please. I miss your voice more than I can stand.

I hit send and lean back, picturing her. Not just her body—the way she arches under me, her skin hot, her nails carving my back in ways that could end me—but everything else too. The way she bites her lip when she's pissed, hiding a storm behind those eyes. How she hums off-key when she cooks, oblivious, stirring sauce like it's a battle she's winning. Her laugh when she finds something funny even when

no one else does. How she fidgets with her hair when she's nervous, twisting strands until they knot, and I've memorized every twitch, every tell. She's stubborn, calls me out when I'm a prick, but softens when I least expect it, brushing my hand like I'm worth touching. I want to be better for her, to crawl out of this pit, and she makes me believe I could.

The road stretches when I merge onto the express, my headlights cutting through fog, and I'm lost in her, imaging her voice, her scent, the way she fights me and fits me all at once. How I wish I can just close my eyes and be there by her side. Then suddenly a loud bang jolts me, then another.

I'm trying to contemplate what just happened when I feel both back tires burst, rubber peeling off in chunks, and the car swerves hard. I curse like that would somehow help, but it spins out as the tires shriek. I try to rein in control to break my crash and reduce the effect on impact but the force is so strong. The metal crashes into the guardrail as glass shatters inward, slashing my face and my neck.

The world flips three times on the road, the sky blurring, and I crash down, roof crumpling, pinning me. Pain explodes in my skull, ribs, everywhere and blood floods my mouth, thick and bitter. My phone glows on the floor, her name bright, but I cannot move, I cannot reach it.

Her face flashes, a mental image in my head, glaring at me, laughing, whispering my name. Sophia too, giggling, tugging my beard. My girls. Blood drips, pooling under me, and I know I'm done. Henry's behind this, or maybe it's just my luck running dry. Either way, I'm fading and she's all I see—Penelope—her strength, her flaws, the only thing I ever got right. I wanted to fix this, to love her out loud, but I'm too weak to fight it.

Tires squeal outside and I hear voices shout. A woman's scream pierces the haze.

“Oh my God, someone’s in there!”

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A man yells back, “Call 911, he’s bleeding bad!”

Footsteps crunch glass as a stranger’s face peers through the wrecked window, wide-eyed. “Hang on, buddy, help’s coming!”

But I’m slipping, my breath shallow, her name stuck in my throat as everything goes black.

This life was always a gamble. I knew loyalty, blood, and power mattered and I played it hard. I have no mercy, no regrets. I built walls, kept my crew tight, but it’s dust now. Sophia’s gone. Penelope’s out there, holding my heart, which I never gave her properly, and I cannot tell her goodbye. I wanted to be her shield, to be her chance at something good, but I guess life had other plans. I’m just another body on the road, and the last thing I feel is her, burning bright as I sink into nothing.

At least I might see Sophia again, her little arms reaching for me. That softens the sting, makes this cold less bitter.

Chapter 16

Penelope

The mattress creaks beneath me as I twist in the sheets. Tonight, my apartment is suffocatingly quiet save for the drip of that damn sink I never fixed. It’s 2:47 a.m., the red glow of the clock mocking me, and sleep’s a distant bitch tonight. My skin’s clammy, sticking to the thin tank top I threw on after pacing the room raw.

I grab my phone off the nightstand, the screen's glare slicing through the dark, and there it is, Adriano's text from an hour ago. His words unravel me, pulling at stitches I did not even realize were barely holding. Line after line, he bleeds onto the screen, raw and unguarded, stripping away the walls he always keeps so high.

The last line sends my heart beating so fast...

But I want to learn. For you, I would try anything. Call me, please. I miss your voice more than I can stand.

My throat knots up, a sob forcing its way out as I clutch the phone like it's his hand. Tears blur the screen, hot and useless, spilling down my cheeks. I miss him too—fuck, I miss him so much it's a physical ache, a hollow gnawing at my ribs. My fingers tremble as I type back:

Adriano. I am a mess without you. These three days have been hell, and I keep hearing your voice, seeing your face, feeling you even when you are not here. You ripped me open too, showed me your scars, and I love you for it, for trusting me with that ugly truth. I miss you so much it chokes me, and I am counting the seconds until I can see you, hold you, tell you I am yours. We are fucked up, but we are real, and I want us. Just the way we are. Loud, messy, all of it. I love you too, you crazy bastard. I miss you too. And even though every second's dragging like a lifetime. I'll be there at dawn, I promise.

I hit send, press the phone to my lips, and taste salt. It's not enough, it never is but it's all I've got until the sun comes up.

Till then, the words he wrote circle in my mind.

I'm not just something he wants, but something he needs. Something he is willing to fight for. He calls me his heartbeat, his reason to look up in the morning. I stare at the

words, my pulse hammering, my throat tight. My hands tremble, and I grasp the phone harder, like I can hold onto this moment, this impossible, terrifying truth that I am something more to him than just a complication. Than just a mistake he is too afraid to claim.

He loves me.

The realization crashes over me, a tidal wave I am not prepared for. Not in the way I thought it would be. It is not soft or sweet. It is a free fall, an earthquake, a fucking firestorm burning through me because this—this is everything. This is the thing that will ruin us or save us, and I do not know which one scares me more.

My fingers hover over the screen. He asked me to call. He misses my voice. I want to hear his too, need to hear it, to know this is real and not just some fever dream I will wake up from. I press the button, lifting the phone to my ear.

Ring.

Ring.

No answer.

I swing my legs out of bed, barefoot on the cold tile, and shuffle to the kitchen for water. The doubt presses in and as I fill a glass, my mind lurches back to that night years ago. The night that broke everything.

Flashback: Three Years Ago

17 years old

The night starts normal, or at least what passes for normal in this house. It's just us

three, a Friday night that feels normal until it doesn't.

The smell of pizza grease clings to the air, empty boxes stacked on the coffee table. The TV hums low, half-forgotten, as I sit curled up on the couch with a warm buzz in my veins. The cheap red wine burns my throat, but it makes everything softer, easier. I'm seventeen. I shouldn't be drinking, but Adriano poured the glass himself and slid it across the table like it was nothing. Like I wasn't sitting there, hanging onto every slow, deliberate movement he made.

Sophia's in the kitchen, laughing as she rummages for a soda, her voice bouncing off the cabinets. I hear the hiss of a soda can popping open, the shuffle of her socked feet against the tile.

Adriano drops onto the couch beside me, too close, his knee brushing mine. He's got a tumbler of whiskey in his hand, the ice clinking as he swirls it, and his eyes catch mine with a glint I've seen before—teasing, testing, but sharper tonight.

After a few minutes he shifts beside me, stretching an arm along the back of the couch, his fingers dangerously close to my shoulder. It's nothing. It's everything. He's always been a little too charming, a little too aware of what his presence does to people, and I've always been too stupid to pull away.

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“You’re quiet, Pen,” he says, voice rough like gravel over silk. “What’s rattling around in that head of yours?”

I giggle, the wine loosening my tongue, and shrug. “Dunno. Just... vibing.” My crush on him’s been simmering forever. It’s stupid, reckless, a kid’s fantasy I’ve never shaken. He’s Sophia’s dad, late thirties, all tattoos and quiet menace, but when he beams like that, my stomach flips.

He leans in, elbow on the back of the couch, his breath warm with liquor. “Vibing, huh? You’re a lightweight, cara mia. That wine’s got you flushed already,” he mutters, watching me over the rim of his glass. Whiskey. Not wine. Something older, sharper, like him.

I giggle, rolling my eyes. “Barely. I can still walk in a straight line.”

“Impressive.”

From the kitchen, Sophia calls out, “Pen, you want a Coke too?”

“Yeah!” I yell back, but my eyes don’t leave his. He’s still watching me, amusement flickering across his lips, the space between us taut.

Then Sophia’s phone rings and she groans. “Ugh, it’s Jason. Be right back.” She steps outside, the screen door slapping shut, leaving us alone.

Adriano’s brow lifts. “Jason?”

“Her ex. The one who cheated.”

For a split second, anger flashes in his eyes. He was always fiercely protective of her. But they fought, and now this is him pretending not to care. He exhales, masking it with indifference. “Figures.”

A taunting grin crawls on my face. “That was a little too casual. You plotting something, or just letting karma do the dirty work?”

His lips twitch. “Men like that bury themselves. I will not waste the effort.”

Something about the way he says it—calm, sure, final—sends a slow pulse of heat through me.

“Damn,” I murmur, tilting my head. “That was... weirdly attractive.”

A faint grin plays on his face. “Careful, Penelope. Keep talking like that, and you might start making bad decisions.”

I let my eyes drop to his mouth before thinking, Oh, I think I already have.

His lips twitch, and I know I have his attention. He’s always careful, measured, never giving too much away, but I’ve seen the way his eyes linger when he thinks no one’s looking. I’ve seen the restraint in his hands, the hesitation just before he pulls back.

Tonight, he doesn’t pull back.

“Wouldn’t bet on it,” I tease, shifting to face him fully. My bare knee brushes his thigh, and his jaw tightens, and something mysterious flashes behind his eyes. Power. Control. Something else I can’t name but want to push just to see how far it’ll go.

“Dare me,” I blurt, heat rushing to my face before I can think better of it.

His brow lifts, amused. “To do what?”

I don’t have an answer. Or maybe I do, but saying it out loud would make it real, and that would be dangerous. So I do the next stupid thing that comes to mind.

I swallow, my mouth dry despite the wine. “I dare you to... let me sit on your lap.” It’s dumb, reckless, a half-drunk impulse, but the words are out before I can stop them. His brows lift, surprise flashing, then something hungrier settles in his eyes.

But the words from his mouth contradict. “No.”

“Come on, you’re no fun.”

“I’m not playing this with you.” His voice is firm. He moves to stand, but I grab his wrist, holding him back.

“Okay, fine. I’ll ask you, then.”

His jaw tightens. “Penelope.”

“I promise. No more funny business.”

Liar.

“You promise?” His voice is skeptical.

I nod, lips pressing together to hide the smile threatening to form. “No more funny business.”

A muscle ticks in his jaw. For a second, I think he’ll call my bluff. Then he exhales, shaking his head like he’s already regretting this.

“Fine.”

Victory flares in me, but I keep my expression even.

“Ok, here it goes. Truth or dare?”

He sighs, then. “Truth.”

“I dare you not to stop me from sitting on your lap, Adriano.”

“I picked truth.” His tone should scare me, but it doesn’t.

“I know. But I can tell that isn’t what you really want.”

His eyes dart down to where my fingers wrap around his wrist, then back up to my face. He doesn’t pull away, but he doesn’t relax either.

Like that is the invitation I need, I shift, moving onto his lap like it's nothing, with my knees sinking into the couch on either side, like the press of his thighs beneath me isn't short-circuiting my brain.

His body is rigid, those muscles locked under my weight. His hands stay at his sides, like he doesn't trust himself to touch me.

I tilt my head. "See? Not so bad."

His eyes burn into mine. "You're playing with fire, Penelope."

I lean in just slightly, my lips close enough to catch the breath he exhales. "Maybe I like the heat."

His hands snap to my hips. Not rough. Not pulling me closer. Just holding. His fingers flex, a slow, deliberate press, and my pulse jumps in response.

"This isn't funny," he murmurs.

I should stop. I should climb off his lap and quit while I'm ahead.

But I don't.

I let my hands skim up his body, slowly and teasing. "Then tell me to move."

He doesn't.

And that's all the answer I need.

I roll my hips once and feel him hard under me. My breath stutters. Damn he is so big. He is going to wreck me.

“Penelope—”

“Relax,” I sneer, ignoring the way my pulse hammers against my ribs. “You’re acting like this is a big deal.”

He exhales through his nose, like this is causing him pain but his fingers flex against my thighs. “It is.”

The moment stretches tight between us, crackling with something unnamed, something waiting to detonate. I feel the heat of him through my thin shorts, the roughness of his jeans pressing between my legs. My hands slide up, slow, curious, testing.

I lean in anyway, my lips brushing near his—close, so fucking close—when the door bangs open.

“What the fuck?”

Sophia’s voice cuts through the room, ice-cold. My stomach drops. I whip my head around to find her standing in the doorway, a can of soda clutched in her trembling hand. Her face is stunned, eyes wide, and her mouth parted like she can’t believe what she’s seeing.

I scramble off him, my limbs clumsy as I nearly fall. “Soph, it’s not—”

“What the hell are you doing with my dad?”

“Soph, it’s not—I didn’t—” I stammer, useless, my hands shaking.

Adriano’s up too, reaching for her. “Sophia, wait—”

Adriano runs a hand down his face, muttering something under his breath, but Sophia doesn’t even look at him. Her fury is locked on me, burning hot and ruthless.

“It was a joke,” I try, but the excuse crumbles in my mouth. We both know what this was.

Sophia shakes her head, laughing, but there’s no humor in it. “A joke? You were all over him. So this is why you keep asking weird questions about him. Why you always managed to bring him up in every conversation we have.” She marches forward, shoving me back when I try to grab her arm. “Don’t you fucking touch me. You slut. Are you fucking serious, Penelope? My dad? What is wrong with you?” Her voice rises, tears glittering in her eyes. “I trusted you!”

“It was a dare, Soph!” I yell, desperate, but it sounds pathetic even to me. “I’m sorry, I—”

“Sorry?” she spits, cutting me off. “You were on his lap, Pen! What’s next, you gonna screw him on the couch while I’m gone?” She’s trembling now and I’ve never seen her this mad. This hurt. “No wonder your mom can’t even look at you. Why she’s slowly losing her mind because you fucked up your entire family to ride your neighbor’s dick a few times. Your dad died in a cell because of your shit, and now you’re slumming it up with mine?”

The words hit like a blade, slicing deep. She knows—fuck, she knows—about my dad, the neighbor’s son, the bloody mess that ended with him shanked in prison trying to defend me when he thought 24-year-old Austin was taking advantage of me. How his father had my father locked up for beating up his son until he knocked him out. How his rich father arranged for him to be stabbed in prison and left to bleed. How it affected my family when we heard. How we couldn’t do anything about it because we had no proof or money. How my mom got lost to dementia, blaming me with every silent stare.

Sophia’s never thrown it in my face, not once, until now. It’s a betrayal heavier than anything I’ve done tonight.

My blood turns to ice. My vision narrows to her face, twisted in disgust, in rage, in something that makes me want to curl in on myself and disappear. My father’s screams echo in my skull, the ones I never heard but still feel, trapped in that prison cell, bleeding out on the floor because I ruined him.

“You do not get to throw that in my face.” My voice shakes, my nails biting into my palms. I lunge forward, but Adriano steps between us, hands out. “I trusted you with that information. You were my best friend.”

She flinches, just barely, but the moment passes, and she steels herself. “Yeah. I was. Past tense.”

My breath stops.

Then she looks at him. “This is why you refused to tell me about my mother or let me see her because you want to have enough space to fuck girls half your age. Well, have it. I’ll give you guys the space you need.”

Adriano reaches for her.

Sophia shoves past him. “I’m done. You two deserve each other.” She snatches his car keys off the counter, the jangle loud in the tense air. “I’m out of here.”

“Sophia, wait!” Adriano grabs for her, but she’s too fast, slamming the door behind her. The engine roars outside, tires squealing as she peels out.

I stand there, breathless, my whole body trembling as Adriano tries to get another cab this late to chase after her.

My phone buzzes minutes later—her name flashing—but I’m too shaken, too pissed, and I let it ring out, the sound echoing in my skull. That’s the last time I hear her voice.

Hours later, I’m screaming her name into the pavement, her body twisted and broken, blood seeping into the cracks of the road with Adriano’s car totaled. Because of some drunk fuck who didn’t stop.

Her fingers twitch, just barely, like she’s trying to hold on.

She doesn’t.

She never had a chance.

I killed her. Not with my hands, but with my silence, with the call I ignored, with the car she took because I made her run. And maybe—maybe—with the way I looked at her that night, like she had already died in my eyes.

Adriano was the last person she saw before she got behind that wheel.

I was the last person she called.

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And now she's a ghost I'll never outrun.

The guilt sinks its teeth in and never lets go. She died hating me, maybe him too, and every touch from Adriano since feels like I'm carving her name deeper into that grave.

Present Day

The glass slips from my hand, shattering on the tile, jolting me back. Water pools around my feet, cold and sharp with glass, but I barely feel it, that night replaying like a looped reel. I stumble to the counter and try Adriano's number again. It rings out, no answer, his voicemail a hollow tease.

"Fuck," I mutter, my voice breaking. Where is he?

A creak sounds from the living room and makes my spine stiffen. I'd dismantled the cameras, sick of his constant watch, so there's no feed to check. Another noise. Then a shuffle, closer now. My pulse spikes, dread twisting in my gut. I grab a knife from the block, the blade glinting in the moonlight spilling through the window, and creep toward the sound, barefoot and silent.

The living room's shadows pool thick, and I catch a figure A tall, broad one moving near the couch.

I move silently, pressing my back against the wall, holding the knife tightly. Every breath feels too loud, my pulse hammering in my ears. I inch forward, my body taut, my muscles coiled. If they are here to hurt me, I will make them bleed first.

A shadow moves at the edge of the hallway.

I do not hesitate. I lunge.

The knife slashes through the air, catching flesh. There's a sharp inhale and a grunt of pain before a hand grabs my wrist and twists hard. I collide into a body, and my free fist connects with solid muscle. A rough snarl breaks through the quiet, and though it sounds familiar, I am too caught in the fight to process it.

A hard shove sends me stumbling back, my vision swimming. The knife clatters to the floor, and I move to grab it again, but then—

“Penelope.”

His voice.

My breath hitches. “Adriano?”

He lets out a breath. “Jesus Christ, you cut me.”

I suck in a breath as he steps into the low light, his features twisting in pain. Blood drips from his right arm, splattering onto the floor.

“Oh my God.” The knife feels like fire in my hand, and I drop it. “I—fuck—I didn't know it was you.”

“No shit,” he mutters, shaking his head, but his voice is softer than I expect.

I reach for him, my fingers ghosting over his torn sleeve. “You are hurt.”

“I have had worse.”

“That does not mean it is fine,” I snap, my voice tight with guilt. “What the hell, Adriano? You broke into my apartment?”

He does not flinch. “You were not answering your phone.”

My stomach tightens. “You weren’t, either.”

“I was in an accident. My phone screen is damaged.”

“What? Oh my God, are you okay?”

“Yes, just my right arm is injured and a few ribs busted up bad, but I’m okay.”

“So you just—what? Decided to scare the shit out of me in the middle of the night?”

He does not apologize. He does not even look guilty. Instead, his lips curl into something almost satisfied. “You worried about me?”

“Of course I am!” I gesture at his bleeding arm. “You are literally dripping blood all over my floor.”

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Despite the pain, a slow, teasing curve forms on his lips. “I think it’s romantic that I was just in a car accident and still made it all the way to see you.”

“You are insane.”

“And you love it.”

I should throw something at him. But instead, I grab his good wrist and drag him to the sofa in the living room. “Sit.”

He obeys, though his smile does not fade. He watches me, those gray-green eyes hooded as I rummage through the cabinets, grabbing the little supplies I have.

When I return, I kneel beside him, biting my lip as I pull up his sleeve. The cut is deep, but not lethal. I clean the surface first with shaking hands, pressing a dish towel to the wound to stop the bleeding. He does not flinch.

“You did not have to do this,” I murmur, not meeting his eyes. “Break in, I mean.”

His fingers brush my chin, tilting my face up. “I needed to see you.”

The words settle low in my stomach, burning slow.

“I was going to see you in the morning,” I whisper.

“Morning was too far away to be near you. Not with the way we left things. I’m sorry, Pen.”

Something in me breaks.

I lean in before I can stop myself, my hands grab his shirt and pull him closer. His lips crash against mine, roughly and I melt into it, into him, into this depraved and twisted thing between us. His fingers tangle in my hair, his body pressing against mine, and I know that this man will ruin me.

And I will let him.

I pull back for a while to wrap the towel tighter, my hands slick with his blood, and glare at him. “I’ve got nothing here, just peroxide and bandages. This needs stitches and if I do it, it won’t be pretty.”

“Then stitch me up,” he says, leaning closer, his lips brushing my jaw. “I trust you.”

My breath hitches, his heat seeping into me, and despite the mess, the blood, the insanity of it all, I’m drawn in and hooked on him, his chaos, the way he makes me feel alive even when it’s wrong. I thread a needle and get into it. The sting of peroxide wafts around as I clean him up. He doesn’t flinch, just watches me, eyes vigilant and hungry, like I’m the only thing keeping him tethered.

The last stitch pulls tight, and I tie it off, but his good hand’s already on me, sliding up my thigh, fingers rough and calloused.

“Sit on my lap,” he rasps, his voice thick with want, a command that sends a shiver racing down my spine.

“But I just—” I start, glancing at the fresh stitches, the blood still oozing.

“Sit on my damn lap, Penelope, now,” he cuts me off, his tone flat, dripping with heat and menace and the kind of filthy promise that makes my pulse stutter and my core

clamp. His eyes lock on mine, black and burning, daring me to disobey. “I don’t give a fuck about the stitches. I need you on me, grinding that sweet little pussy against me, right fucking now.”

“Adriano...”

“Fuck, Penelope,” he growls, pulling me onto his lap when I hesitate a beat too long. I straddle him, his blood staining my shorts, hot and sticky against my skin, and grind down hard, the friction sparking heat that coils tight in my core. His good hand grabs my hip, hard enough to bruise, guiding me as I roll against him, the bulge in his pants pressing insistent and thick against me. He groans, a raw, animal sound, and slides his fingers up my thigh, finding the edge of my shorts, teasing the damp fabric clinging to me.

“Even when I thought I was taking my last breath, this is what I was thinking about, how I might never feel your slippery cunt wrapped around me again.” His fingers dig into my hips, then slip under my waistband, finding me soaked, and throbbing. He groans, low and guttural, and plunges two fingers inside me, curling them deep until my back arches and a whimper spills out.

“Adriano—” My voice is a plea, hips rocking against his hand, chasing the ache.

“Need you,” he begs, voice cracking, pathetic and raw. “I need to be inside you, cara. Please, fuck, I’ll die without it.” His fingers pump faster, slick and relentless, thumb circling my clit until I’m trembling, teetering on the edge.

I hesitate, the stitches fresh, blood still seeping, but he’s kissing me now, hard and messy, all teeth and tongue, tasting of copper and desperation.

“Please,” he whines again, a broken sound that shatters me, and I’m done resisting. I shove his pants down, his cock springing free. The thick, veined, tip glistens with

precum and I grab him, stroking once, twice, watching his head tip back with a choked moan. I line him up, the blunt head nudging my entrance, and sink down, slowly savoring the stretch, the burn, the way he fills me so deep It's almost too much.

"Fuck," he snarls, his good hand on my ass, smearing blood across my skin. The stitches split as I move, crimson trickling down his arm, pooling where our bodies join. I ride him hard, hips rolling, thighs trembling, the wet slap of flesh loud and obscene. He grabs my hair, draws my head back, and drags his tongue up my throat, sucking a bruise into my pulse.

"Look at you, my filthy fucking angel. Taking me so good, all covered in my blood. You love this, don't you? Love being my dirty little whore."

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“Yes,” I gasp, nails raking his chest, leaving red welts. He thrusts up, brutal, relentless, the head of his cock hitting that spot inside me that makes stars burst behind my eyes. Blood smears between us, so slick and warm, and he grabs my hand, pressing it to his wounded arm, making me feel the pulse, the heat.

“Fuck me harder,” I beg, voice hoarse, and he obliges, pounding into me with a growl, his good hand sliding between us to rub my clit in tight, vicious circles.

“You’re so wet for me,” he rasps, teeth grazing my jaw. “Dripping down my cock, soaking me. I’m going to fuck you until this is all you ever think about, until you’re ruined for anyone else. You’re mine, cara—my tight little cunt, my everything.” His words are a filthy litany, dripping with possession, and I’m lost in it, body melting around him, pleasure building so sharp it hurts.

“Did you mean it?” I pant, mid-thrust, my hands braced on his shoulders as I ride him, his cock buried deep, pulsing inside me. “Everything you said in that text?”

He freezes for a split second, then surges up, flipping me onto my back without pulling out, pinning me beneath him. His bloodied hand is on my throat, squeezing just enough to make my head spin, and he drives into me, slow and punishing, each thrust dragging against every nerve.

“Every fucking word,” he snarls, eyes wild, unhinged. “I missed you so much I’d crawl through hell to get to you. You’re my obsession, Penelope—my blood, my breath, my goddamn soul. I’d kill for this pussy, die for it, fuck you even when the world burns down around us.”

His hips snap harder, deeper, the chair creaking under us, the headrest colliding against the wall so hard it's leaving dents. And I'm shattering, screaming his name as I come, walls pulsing around him, milking him dry. He groans, a primal sound, and spills inside me as his body shudders and he collapses, his blood and sweat and cum a sticky mess between us.

We're panting, wrecked, and he laughs—a weak, raspy sound, his hand limp against my thigh.

“Better get me to the hospital, cara. Don't want me bleeding out to death before I can fuck you again.”

I smile and kiss the corner of his mouth, tasting iron and him. “You're impossible and we need therapy.”

“And you're addicted,” he murmurs back, eyes glinting with that unhinged spark that pulls me in every time. His good hand slides up my back, possessive even in its weakness, fingers tracing the sweat-slick curve of my spine.

He's right. I am.

Chapter 17

Adriano

I'm in the warehouse office today with my boots propped on the desk. My right arm throbs, stitched up and bandaged from Penelope's knife slash two nights ago and the accident, but the pain feels good. Reminds me of all the things I could have lost that night. Just one thing actually. Her.

The place as usual stinks of rust and old cigarette smoke as Ralph drops a folder

down, the papers spilling like guts across the wood. His scarred face twists, half pissed, half smug, his black hair in that stupid knot.

“Told you I’d find it,” he says, leaning back in his chair, arms crossed. “Vinny fucked with your tires. Sliced the rubber clean through on Henry’s orders. Probably laughed while he did it, the slimy prick.”

I snatch the folder, flipping it open. Photos stare back—Vinny’s shaky hands on my SUV, a grainy shot of him meeting Henry in some alley, passing cash. My jaw locks tight. I shot that bastard’s brains out days ago, watched his blood paint the wall, and still, he nearly took me with him. The crash replays in my head: tires bursting, metal screaming, glass biting my skin. I taste blood in my mouth just thinking about it.

“Henry’s been busy,” Ralph keeps going, tapping his knee like he’s itching to hit something. “Been sneaking around under an alias, some bullshit name, ‘Paul Grayson.’ Holed up at the Regency Hotel. Guess who he’s been fucking cozy with? Ricci.”

That name lands like a punch. Ricci. The bastard who sent his goons after Penelope, who nearly broke her before I broke his men. Who I haven’t been able to find since. With his resources and influence, he has been under the radar for too long.

“Ricci’s supposed to be hiding. Licking his wounds.”

“Yeah, well, he’s not,” Ralph spits. “He’s plotting with Henry. New player, sure, but Ricci’s got the means, money, men, connections. If he links up with more of your rivals, you’re looking at a war we can’t win. Not now.”

I shove the folder aside, papers scattering, and stand up fast, chair scraping the concrete. My rage boils. Henry’s a dead man—always was—but Ricci’s the bigger snake. More power, more pull. If he rallies my enemies, I’m fucked. My empire’s

fucked. Penelope's fucked. I pace around, picturing Ricci's throat under my hands, his windpipe crushing slowly. But I stop. Breathe. I need a plan, not a rampage. Not yet at least.

"I'll gut Ricci first," I say. "Henry's a gnat. Ricci's the one who'll burn me down if I don't move fast."

Ralph nods. "Smart. Hit the head, the body drops."

"Get Tommy on it," I tell him, grabbing my jacket. "Tail Ricci. I want his every piss tracked. Then we carve him out."

Ralph's already on his phone, thumbs jabbing. "Done, boss."

I storm out, my mind on one thing alone as I slide into the SUV. My ribs ache from the crash, a dull stab with every breath, but I ignore it. Penelope's face appears in my head. Her wild eyes, her sharp mouth, the way she cut me and then stitched me up. I need her now. Not just her body, though fuck, I crave that too. I need her voice, her fire, the way she sees through my bullshit. The way she calms me. The engine growls as I peel off, tires chewing asphalt, heading straight for her apartment.

I open the door with my key this time. She's on the couch, legs curled under her, some shitty reality show blaring on the TV. Her head snaps up, coffee-brown eyes narrowing, then softening when she sees it's me. She's in a loose tank top and shorts, hair wild, like sleep's been dodging her as hard as it's been dodging me.

"You look like you crawled out of a ditch," she says, muting the TV, her lips twitching.

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“Feel like it too.” I kick the door shut, shedding my jacket, and drop onto the couch beside her. My arm brushes hers, and heat flares under my skin, instant and fierce.

She shifts, facing me, her knee bumping mine. “What’s going on? You’ve got that face like you’re about to snap someone’s neck.”

“Close.” I lean back, running a hand through my hair “Found out who fucked my car. Vinny, on Henry’s dime. He is dead now, but not dead enough. And Henry’s teaming up with Ricci. That bastard who sent his dogs after you.”

Her face hardens, jaw tightening. “Ricci? Thought you scared him off.”

“Thought so too. He’s back, and he’s got plans. Big ones.” I meet her eyes, holding them. “I’m taking him down first. Before he takes me.”

She nods slowly, processing, then smiles. “So, what, you’re here for a pep talk? Or just to brood on my couch?”

I laugh and grab her wrist, pulling her closer. “Maybe I just wanted to see you before I start breaking skulls.”

“Lucky me,” she mutters, but she doesn’t pull away. Her pulse jumps under my fingers. “You’re a walking disaster, Adriano.”

“Been a mess since I was born.” I let go of her wrist, leaning in, my voice dropping. “Want to hear something fucked up? Something I’ve never told anyone?”

Her eyes spark, curious. “Spill it.”

I pause, the words hard to voice. Then I let them loose. “I noticed you before I should’ve. Back when Sophia was still here, when we would come over and spend time with you or when I dropped her off. I saw you even when I didn’t want to. The sneaky glances at me over pizza boxes, the lingering stares and unending questions. You were too young, too close to her, and I hated myself for it. But I saw you. Those legs, that laugh—fuck, even then, you got under my skin. I’d grill burgers, flip them fast, just to keep my hands busy so I wouldn’t stare too long.”

Her breath catches, eyes widening. “You’re serious?”

“Dead serious.” I scrub my face, the memory stinging. “Sophia was everything to me. You were hers, and I still couldn’t stop it. But that night she caught us? I wanted you on my lap more than I’ll ever admit. When she died, it crushed me—guilt, rage, all of it. I thought it’d kill whatever I felt for you. It didn’t. You stuck, Penelope. Even when I tried to shove you out.”

She stares, quiet, then murmurs, “That’s heavy.”

“Yeah.” I press my forehead to hers, breathing her in. “My world’s built on secrets. You show nothing—weakness, want, it’s a death sentence. But with you, I don’t give a fuck. I trust you. Completely.”

She grabs my shirt, pulls me in, and kisses me hard. Her lips crash against mine, fierce and needy, her tongue pushing past, tasting me. I groan, hands sliding to her hips, pulling her onto my lap. She straddles me, her heat pressing through her shorts, setting me on fire.

“Fuck, I want to make you feel good,” she says, voice husky, hands roaming, nails scraping light. “Tell me how.”

I tilt her face up, locking eyes. “You want to make me feel good, cara? Get on your knees. Show me what that mouth can do.”

She slides off, dropping between my legs, hands tugging at my belt. I lift my hips as she pulls my pants down, my cock springing free, hard and throbbing. She licks her lips, staring, and I tangle my fingers in her hair, guiding her close.

“Suck me,” I say, voice rough, firm. “Start slow, take it deep.”

Her lips close around me, warm and wet, and I groan loud, head falling back. “Fuck, yes, like that. Harder.” She sucks, tongue swirling, sliding deeper until I hit her throat. My hand holds her tighter, watching her take me.

“Deeper,” I growl. “Let me feel you choke.”

She moans, the sound buzzing through me, and pushes further, gagging but eager. Spit slicks her chin, and I thrust shallow, then I’m fucking her mouth, messy and perfect, and I thrust up, fucking her mouth slow, watching her eyes water.

“Good girl,” I rasp. “You’re so fucking good at this. Look at you, taking my cock like it’s yours.”

Her hands seize my thighs, nails digging in, and she tugs me closer, breathlessly diving in again, sucking harder, more urgently. I’m losing it, heat coiling tight in my gut, but I grab her shoulders, pulling her up. “Not yet. Climb back up here.”

She scrambles onto my lap, her shorts gone now, her bare pussy slick against my cock. I grab her ass, spreading her, and slide her along my length, not entering, just teasing. She whimpers, rocking against me, desperate.

“Tell me what you want,” I say, biting her neck, sucking a mark.

“I want you inside me,” she pants, hands clutching my shoulders. “Please, Adriano.”

“Take it then.” I lift her, lining her up, and she sinks down, slow, tight, swallowing me whole. We both groan, loud and raw, and she starts moving, riding me hard, her tits bouncing under that tank top.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” I snarl, grabbing her hips, bringing her down harder. “Tight and wet, just for me. Say it.”

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“It’s yours,” she gasps, nails raking my neck. “All yours.”

I flip her onto her back, pinning her down, and drive in deep, relentless. The couch shakes, her legs hook around me, pulling me closer, and she’s moaning my name, loud and wild. I lean in, voice rough against her ear.

“We’re done hiding from it. Sophia’s gone, and it fucking hurts, but this—you and me—it’s real. I’m not drowning in guilt anymore. I’m choosing you.”

Her eyes lock on mine. “I choose you too. No more running. I love you,” she blurts, mid-thrust, her voice breaking, eyes locked on mine.

I freeze. “Say it again.”

“I love you,” she says, voice breaking, raw. “Fuck, I love you.” I thrust harder, claiming her, and she arches, gasping.

“I love you too,” I growl, kissing her deep, tasting her truth. “You’re mine, Penelope. Forever.”

She shatters, crying out and I spill inside her, groaning, and so spent. We collapse, tangled, her fingers in my hair, my lips on her neck.

She laughs, breathless. “Think the neighbors heard that?”

“Worth it. I love fucking you.”

“You’re gonna get me evicted with all that noise.”

A curve appears on my face and I nip her ear. “Let ‘em. Next time, I’ll gag you.”

“Promises, promises,” she shoots back, grinning, and I laugh and feel like the weight’s gone. Sophia’s ghost isn’t choking me anymore. It’s just us now, messy and real.

I lie there, her heartbeat thudding against mine, and think about how life’s a brutal fucking joke. You build walls, wield power, spill blood, and it still strips you bare. I used to think love was a trap, a weakness I’d never survive. Now I see it’s the only thing worth the fight.

Penelope’s not my redemption, she is my reckoning. A truth I can’t outrun, and for once, I don’t want to. This is us, scars and all, and I’ll kill to keep it. That’s my reality: she’s the fire I’ll burn for, and I’m done pretending otherwise.

Chapter 18

Penelope

I trudge home from Caruso’s, my legs heavy and aching. My keys jingle in my hand as I climb the steps to my apartment, the weight of the day clinging to me as I shove the door open, kick it shut, and toss my bag on the couch. Something feels off, though.

I step toward the kitchen, rubbing my neck, and freeze. The window’s cracked open with the curtains fluttering softly. I know I locked it this morning, I know my scatterbrain’s bad, but not that bad. My pulse kicks up and I grab the knife from the counter, my fingers tightening around the handle. I edge back into the living room, eyes darting, when a shadow shifts near the couch.

“Who’s there?” I snap, voice calm despite the tremor in my hands. The shadow steps forward, and blonde hair catches the light, all wild, tangled, framing a face I don’t really know but feel like I should. Then I remember. She was the lady I saw in his apartment the other day. Charlotte Holden. Henry’s daughter. Adriano’s ex-fiancée. Her eyes are wide, glassy, and she’s holding a gun, the barrel shaking as she points it at me.

“You bitch,” she hisses, stepping closer, her voice splintering. “You ruined my fucking life.”

I stumble back, my hip smacking the coffee table, pain spiking hot. “Charlotte, what the fuck? Put that down!”

She laughs, a high, shattered sound, tears streaming fast down her face. “No! You don’t get it! Nobody wants me. Nobody! First Ethan, that bastard. I loved him, gave him everything. My dad warned me, said he was a gold-digging piece of shit, but I didn’t listen. Ran off with him anyway. Then he robbed me blind one night, took my money, my dad’s too, and vanished. Left me with nothing!”

“Charlotte, I—” I start, knife still up, but she cuts me off, sobbing harder, the gun shaking wild.

“Shut up! I thought Adriano would fix it. Marrying him was my way out, my chance to take something back. He was fine with it, you know? Ready to put a ring on me, build a life. Then you came back, you little teenaged whore, and he wouldn’t even look at me! I’ve been throwing myself at him, begging, crying, fucking seducing him and he’s too busy screwing you to care!”

“Charlotte, wait...”

“Don’t act stupid. You took him. Adriano was mine—mine—until you came along

and fucked it all!”

I see her unraveling, mascara streaking black rivers down her cheeks. “He didn’t want you,” I say, slow and firm, my nails digging into the knife handle. “That’s not on me. You’re losing it. Back off!”

She swings the gun wide, tears choking her voice. “Losing it? I’m lost! My dad hates me now, he says I’m a disgrace, a failure. Nobody wants me! Why? What’s wrong with me? Adriano but I know what can fix it. Maybe if I kill you, he’ll see me again, want me again!”

I duck as she lunges, tackling her low, my shoulder jamming into her gut. We crash to the floor, the impact rattling my teeth, and the gun skids across the tiles, clattering loud. I scramble for it, fingers brushing the weapon, but she grabs my hair, pulling hard enough to burn my scalp.

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“He’s mine!” she screams, scratching my arm, her nails drawing blood. I swing back, my fist smacking her jaw, and she reels, gasping.

“You don’t get it. I loved him. I was going to marry him, be everything he needed. Then he humiliated me and called it off because of you!”

“He didn’t want you, Charlotte. That’s not my fault. You’re not well. Stay down!” I shout, lunging for the gun and snagging it.

I lurch to my feet, panting, pointing it at her, my hands shaky. Blood trickles warm from my shin, staining the floor red. She scrambles up, sobbing, her face a mess of tears and rage, but headlights flare outside, tires screeching sharp.

The door bursts open, and Adriano storms in, his face twisted with fury, gray eyes blazing. Tommy’s right behind, gun drawn, moving quick.

“Grab her!” Adriano snaps, and Tommy hauls Charlotte back by the arms, her screams echoing as she thrashes.

“Let me go! She stole him! She—” Her voice cuts off as Tommy drags her out, the sound fading into the night.

Adriano turns to me, his eyes locking on the blood, the gun trembling in my hand. He steps close, snatching it from my hands and tossing it aside.

“You hurt?” he says, voice rough, hands hovering like he’s afraid I’ll break.

I shove him hard, stumbling back, my shin screaming, head throbbing. “Yeah, I’m hurt! Your psycho ex broke in, waved a gun at me, and I’m bleeding because your fucking life keeps spilling into mine!”

His jaw tightens, guilt flashing raw, but he reaches for me. “I didn’t know she’d—”

“Bullshit!” I yell, slapping his hands away, my voice cracking loud. “You didn’t know? This is exactly why I didn’t want us together before. She’s your mess, Adriano, your ex, your enemies, all of it! I told you we’re cursed from the jump and now look! She wants me dead because you picked me over her! We’ll never be happy, can’t you see that?”

He grabs my wrists, holding tight, his eyes boring into mine. “I see it, Penelope. I see the fucking wreckage. But I’m not letting you bleed for my shit. I’ll handle her, I swear.”

“Handle her?” I laugh, sharp and bitter, pulling free. “You can’t handle crazy! You can’t stop your life from swallowing me! Every time I think we’ve got a chance, something—someone—tries to kill me! We’re doomed, and you’re too stubborn to admit it!”

His face twists, pain slicing deep, and he steps back, hands falling limp. “You think I don’t know how fucked this is? I hate myself every day for pulling you in. But I can’t let you go. I won’t.”

“Then you’re a selfish asshole,” I spit, tears burning hot down my face. “I need space, Adriano. Real space this time. I can’t think with you hovering, with this shit crashing down. I don’t know if I can keep living in your hell.”

He stares for a while, then nods slowly, reluctant. “Alright. I’ll give you that. But I’m watching. Keeping you safe. That’s not negotiable.”

“Fine,” I mutter, turning away, swiping my cheeks hard. “Just get out.”

He grabs his jacket, hesitates, then walks out, the door clicking behind him. I sink to the floor, blood smearing the tiles, my body shaking. Charlotte’s gone, hauled off by Tommy, but her face sticks in my head. She’s Henry Holden’s daughter, Adriano’s ex, dumped hard before their wedding. Publicly shamed, she ran to her dad, who’s been scheming ever since, pairing her off with some rich widower now, a consolation prize. But she’s here, feral, blaming me for losing him. I get it—love twists you up, leaves you desperate and dumb. I’d be a wreck too if he’d tossed me like trash.

Days slog by, heavy and gray. I bandage my shin, the cut raw and angry, and limp to Caruso’s every morning. The store’s allshine with black marble, gold veins, diamonds glinting cold, but it feels like a lie now, a glossy cover on a rotting core. I punch numbers into the computer, file papers, my hands moving automatic while my mind spins.

Outside, I feel them. Today it’s Tommy’s SUV, tomorrow it’s Frankie, another it’s Sal. All lurking a block away when I leave work, cigarette smoke drifting from the cracked window. I know it’s Adriano’s doing, his way of keeping me “safe” without crowding me. I shove my hands in my pockets, pretending I don’t notice, and start walking home.

Sometimes it’s Ralph, his scarred face peering from a shadowed car. Adriano hasn’t been coming to the store, I know first-hand that he doesn’t absolutely need to except for emergencies, which rarely happen, and I am grateful he is giving me the time off that I need. I keep my head down, pretend I don’t see, my steps quick on the pavement. I’m not ready to face him, to untangle the mess of want and fear knotted in my gut.

“Subtle as a brick, huh?” I mumble under my breath, kicking a pebble down the sidewalk. It skitters into the gutter, and I imagine Tommy’s dumb grin if I flipped

him off. But I don't.

Back at my apartment, I unlock the door, step inside, and freeze. Something's off. It smells different and my heart kicks up, fast and hard, and I scan the room. Nothing moves. The TV's still off, the couch sagging where I left it. But that feeling, it's like a hand on my spine, pressing slow. I grab a knife from the kitchen block, and creep toward the bedroom.

"Anyone here?" I call, voice steady even though my pulse hammers. No answer. I nudge the door open with my foot, blade ready, and peek inside. Empty. Just my unmade bed, sheets twisted from last night's tossing. I exhale, lowering the knife, but the unease sticks, slimy and cold.

I lock the door tight, double-check every window, my hands shaky.

I flop onto the couch, tossing the knife on the coffee table, and stare at the ceiling. He's out there, watching, waiting. I know it's him or his guys, at least. Part of me wants to storm that SUV, drag Tommy out, and scream at him to tell Adriano to fuck off. But I don't. I sit here, stewing, because facing him means facing me and my want, my fear, the way I'm tangled up in him so deep I can't tell where I end anymore.

Charlotte's memory lingers and I wonder if that's my life now, if I'm always supposed to be braced for the next hit. It's not his fault, not really. He didn't send her. But fuck, I can't shake it, this gnawing thought that loving him means drowning in this shit forever. I see us, tangled in blood and want, and it's a beautiful mess I crave and hate all at once. Happiness? That's a fairy tale, a lie for people who don't know what we do. With Adriano, it's survival, raw and brutal, and I'm not sure I'm built for it anymore.

I grab my phone, scroll to his name, and stop. My thumb hovers, trembling, then

drops. Space. I need it, even if it's killing me. Because the truth's a bitch: I'm caught, hooked deep, and every step away just pulls the line tighter. Life with him is a fight I might lose, and I'm too damn tired to decide if it's worth it yet.

Next morning, I'm at Caruso's again, hunched over ledgers, when Lisa struts in. She's all heels and attitude, her blonde hair bouncing as she drops a stack of invoices on my desk. She also recently got employed at Caruso's after she resigned at Gianna's company. It has been a dream of hers to work here and when the store was looking to employ some positions last month, I helped push in her resume.

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“You look like shit,” she says, leaning against the filing cabinet. “Rough night?”

“Rough life,” I shoot back, not looking up. My fingers stab the keys harder than they need to.

She laughs. “Still sulking over that hot mess of a boyfriend? What’s his name—Adrian?”

“Adriano,” I correct, glaring at her. “And he’s not my boyfriend. How did you even know? Does Gianna—”

“No, she doesn’t know anything, but I suspected from the wedding that something was going on. He totally had the hots for you.”

“He did not. And we aren’t together.” Liar.

“Sure, whatever you say.” She crosses her arms and taps her nails on her elbow. “He’s trouble, you know. Saw him outside yesterday, lurking like some creepy stalker. You into that?”

I snort, shoving the invoices aside. “He’s just... protective. It’s complicated.”

“Complicated’s a nice word for fucked,” she says, grinning wider. “Bet he’s good in bed, though. That brooding type always is.”

“Jesus, Lisa.” I roll my eyes, but heat creeps up my neck, uninvited. “Go bother someone else.”

She winks, sauntering out, and I'm left alone, her words digging in. He is good. Too good. I can still feel his hands, rough and sure, pinning me down, his voice growling in my ear. I shake it off, focusing on the numbers, but they blur into nothing. All I see is him.

That night, I'm walking home again, the SUV trailing a block behind. I stop at the corner store, grab a soda, and lean against the wall outside, popping the tab. The fizz burns my throat, and I catch Tommy's reflection in the glass. He's lighting another cigarette, pretending he's not staring. I sip slowly, letting the tension simmer, then turn and march straight for him.

He rolls the window down as I get close, smoke curling out.

"Hey, doll," he says, voice gravelly, beaming like he's won something. "Miss me?"

"Cut the crap, Tommy." I cross my arms, glaring. "Tell Adriano I'm fine. He doesn't need to babysit me."

He chuckles, sweeping the ash onto the street. "Boss's orders. You know how he is. He somehow thinks you're gonna trip over a crack and die if he's not watching."

"Yeah, well, I'm not his fucking damsel." I step closer, voice dropping. "Tell him to trust me for once."

Tommy's smile fades, eyes narrowing. "He trusts you, kid. More than anyone. That's why I'm here, freezing my balls off instead of drinking at Sal's."

I blink, caught off guard, then scoff. "Great. So, I'm special. Still don't need a shadow."

"Tell him yourself," he says, shrugging. "I'm just the grunt."

I turn away, soda can crumpling in my fist, and stalk off. His words stick, though. Trust. Adriano trusts me, and I'm the one running, hiding behind this "space" bullshit. I toss the can in a trash bin, the clang echoing, and keep walking, feeling eyes on me the whole way.

Back home, I lock the door, kick off my shoes, and collapse onto the bed. The mattress groans under me, and I stare at the cracked ceiling, shadows stretching long from the streetlight outside. My skin itches, restless, and I know why. Him. Always him. I roll over, burying my face in the pillow, and let the truth hit me hard.

I'm not scared of his world anymore. Never really was. It's not the blood, the guns, the dark. I'm scared of myself. How much I want it, how much I want him, even when it's ugly and wrong. I used to think guilt was my chain and Sophia's death, her hate, the way it broke us both. But it's not. It's gone, burned out somewhere between his hands on me and my choice to stay. Now it's just this: I love a man who's a fucking storm, and I'm not sure I can live without the chaos.

I sit up, grab my phone, and almost call him. My thumb hovers but not yet. I need more time to wrestle this shit down, to figure out if I'm strong enough to stand in his fire without burning up. But deep down, I know I'm kidding myself. I'm already ash, and he's the one holding the match.

I could walk away, build something clean, safe. But safe's a lie, nothing's safe when you've felt this alive. Adriano's my poison, my pulse, and I'm too fucked to let him go. That's the raw, ugly truth I'm stuck with, and it's eating me alive while I pretend I don't see his shadow outside my window.

Chapter 19

Adriano

I stand outside her window with my breath fogging in the cold. My ribs ache from the crash weeks back, a dull throb, but it's nothing compared to the hole she's carved in me. I've been here every night since she told me to back off, watching her place like a goddamn guard dog, making sure no one gets close. My hands itch to smash something, but I keep them shoved in my pockets, eyes locked on her silhouette moving behind the blinds.

Her door creaks open, and she steps outside, barefoot, wearing a sheer nightgown under an open robe. The fabric clings to her, see-through in the light, and I catch the outline of her nipples, hard against the thin material. My cock jumps, heat surging fast, and I step forward as she spots me. She sees me, freezes, then runs straight for me. Before I can brace myself, she jumps, crashing into my arms, her legs wrapping around my waist, her hands clutching my neck.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," she says, voice rough, her breath hot on my neck. "I can't stay away."

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I push her back against the wall of the building, my hands on her ass, pressing hard into her.

“You sure?” I growl, pressing hard against her, my cock already twitching as her hips grind into me. “You told me we’re doomed.”

“I know,” she gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders, her body rocking against mine. “I was scared. But I’m done running. I need you.”

“Good,” I growl, my hips grinding against hers, feeling her heat through my jeans.

Her lips crash into mine, fierce and messy, tasting of salt and want. I groan into her mouth, tongue shoving past, claiming her as I grind harder, the friction sparking heat through my jeans. She’s soft, warm, trembling under me, and I pin her tighter to the wall, my hands roaming her thighs, squeezing hard enough to bruise.

Her robe falls open wider, and I see her tits clear now, nipples stiff and begging. I pull the nightgown down, fabric stretching, and pull her boobs free, my mouth closing over one fast. I suck hard, tongue flicking, tasting her skin, and she moans loud, arching into me.

“Adriano,” she gasps, her hands grabbing my hair, pulling me tighter as I bite down, then switch to the other, sucking rough, leaving marks. Her hips rock against mine, desperate, the friction driving me wild.

“Take me inside,” she whispers, voice shaky and her eyes needy when I pull back to look at her.

I don't waste time. I carry her, her legs still locked around me, and shove the door open with my shoulder, stumbling into her apartment. The room is full with her scent—floral and sweet. I head for the couch, ready to drop her and fuck her right there, but she squirms, pushing at me and slips out of my reach.

“Wait,” she says, panting, her nightgown hanging crooked, nipples still out, glistening from my mouth. “Not yet.”

I stop cold, hands flexing, my blood pounding loud. “What the fuck?”

She drags a hand through her hair, pacing a step, then faces me, eyes fierce. “I mean it—I'm sorry. But we got to talk first. I can't just dive back in like nothing happened.”

I lean against the wall, arms crossed, fighting the urge to grab her again. “Then talk. Say what you got to say.”

She bites her lip, glancing away, then back at me. “Charlotte told me everything. Some gold-digger cleaned her out, stole from her dad too. She thought you'd save her, marry her, fix it all. Then I came back, and you wouldn't even look at her. She said if I was gone, you'd want her again. She's broken, crying about how nobody wants her, not even Henry now.”

“Charlotte's fucking unhinged,” I snap, pushing off the wall, pacing tight. “I never loved her, it was a deal, a move with Henry. She turned it into some fairy tale in her head. Then you showed up, and I couldn't keep up the act. That's my shit, not yours.”

“I know,” she says, stepping closer, voice softer. “But it scared me. Made me think this is us forever, always dodging crazy. I pushed you away because I was scared I'd drown in it.”

I grab her face, rough but steady, locking eyes. “You’re in it, cara. So am I. It’s messy, bloody, fucked—but I’d take a bullet before I let you go. You hear me?”

She nods, tears welling, and presses her forehead to mine. “I hear you. I’m just scared I’ll lose myself.”

“You won’t,” I say, low and firm, thumbs brushing her cheeks. “You’re tougher than me, always were. I’m the one falling apart without you.”

She laughs, quick and raw, and I feel us locking back together. We’re still a mess but she’s here, choosing me back. That’s enough for now.

I kiss her again for a while before she pulls her mouth from mine, breaking the kiss just as it teeters on the edge of chaos. I nearly snarl in protest, but then she lets her robe slip off her shoulders, slowly, peeling it away for my greedy eyes. She stands there, bare except for that pendant I gave her years back, dangling between her breasts like a filthy little secret.

My tongue darts out, wetting my lips as I devour her with my eyes, every curve and contour sinking into me like it’s the first damn time. That’s the twisted truth with her—that every second with Penelope feels like I’m cracking open something new, over and over, a junkie chasing that first high.

“Jesus Christ, Penelope, you’re my fucking drug!” I rasp, voice thick with need.

A small, wicked smile curls her lips, tempting and ripe with unspoken promises. She doesn’t say a word, but I can feel it in her bones that she’s hooked on me just as bad. That silent vow in her eyes pulls me deeper into her orbit.

“Touch your tits, Pen,” I growl, not giving a shit how feral I sound. “Play with them for me, sweetheart.”

She obeys, her fingers tracing down her clavicle first, teasing the skin before sliding to her nipples. They're pink, stiff, and begging, and she works them with her palms, brushing soft at first, then pinching hard between her fingers. My cock throbs painfully against my pants, the sight of her like this a gut-punch of depravity. It's intimate, obscene, a private show I can't tear my eyes from, and I fucking revel in it.

"What else do you want?" she whispers, her stare piercing straight through me, bold and unguarded. "I'm yours tonight, Adriano. All yours."

"Sit on the edge of the couch and spread your legs for me," I snarl. She steps back until her heels bump the couch. She sinks down, thighs parting wide, her eyes locked on mine, unflinching, hypnotic, daring me to look away.

"Touch your tight little pussy for me, sweetheart."

"Tonight's just for you..." she murmurs, a low rumble of defiance in her tone.

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“Watching you fuck yourself is what I need right now. I need it... I need you, right fucking now!” My words break out of me, desperately.

Penelope wets two fingers, dragging them out slowly, making me suffer for it. Then she plunges them deep into her slick heat, a loud, guttural moan ripping from her throat. “Mmmm, you like watching me finger myself, huh?”

“Yes...” I choke out, barely holding it together.

She pulls her fingers free, glistening with her arousal, and holds them up to me. I stalk over, seizing her hand, shoving those wet digits into my mouth. I suck hard, tasting her—sweet, salty, primal—but it’s not enough. It never is. My thirst for her is a bottomless pit.

I scoop her up from the couch, crushing her against me, kissing her like I’m trying to consume her whole. When I pull back, she licks her lower lip, that smile of hers dripping with sin and hunger, daring me to dive back in.

Her lips trail soft, filthy kisses from my neck, working downward with purpose.

“Have I ever told you I adore your body?” she asks, and it’s not some coy, girlish tease. Her voice is fierce, laced with wild reverence, like she’s confessing a truth that could unravel us both.

“You’ve told me before,” I mutter, breath hitching. My cock aches, straining without her touch, but her naked devotion, her willingness to bare everything just overrides every other thought.

She presses open-mouthed kisses along my biceps, her tongue sticking out, leaving a wet trail down to the V disappearing into my pants. She's on her knees now, gazing up at me with a longing that borders on worship.

"I like that you watch over me, Adriano. God, I love it. You tell me I'm your world, and you prove it every single time. You're as fucked up over me as I am over you, right?"

I swallow hard, cupping her face with my right hand. Her skin's so soft it almost hurts to touch her. "You got no clue what I'd do for you, Pen. When you let me in like this, spilling your guts, trusting me to lock it down. Fuck, it's like you're handing me your whole damn soul every time. I'd die before I'd let it slip. You're my obsession, and I'm not even sorry." My voice cracks, carrying shit I can't put words to yet.

"Show me," she whimpers, tugging at my zipper with trembling fingers. "I want to pleasure you tonight. You're all I care about. Show me how."

I guide her hands to undo my zipper, then step back, letting her take over. She tugs my boxers down, and my cock springs free, hard and throbbing.

I hear a tiny gasp slip from her, quick and soft, before she wraps her hand around me. Her eyes blaze, fierce and hungry, and I'm sucking air, lost in it. This feels huge, like we're tipping into something we can't undo.

"Open that pretty mouth, cara."

She kneels there, thighs pressed into the grimy carpet, gazing up with a reverence that twists my gut. "Like this, Mr. Vieri?"

That name on her tongue—Mr. Vieri—while she's down there, submitting to me,

makes me almost bust right there. It's power and filth wrapped in devotion, and she knows it. Her smile deepens, and I'm lost, tumbling deeper into her.

"Wider," I command, voice tight.

She stretches her mouth open, inviting me in. I step closer, feeding her just the tip of my cock.

"Suck the head, darling. Don't take it all yet."

Penelope closes her lips around me, sucking slow and wet, her tongue teasing with sloppy little kisses. She doesn't push further, and I'm grateful but barely hanging on as it is.

"Fuck... fuck... Pen... fuck..." The words spill out, ragged and broken, as she unravels me piece by piece.

She swirls her tongue around the head of my cock, licking and sucking with a filthy precision that threatens to shred what's left of my sanity. Her head tilts, lazy and deliberate, before she takes me deep, swallowing me into the tight hollow of her throat. The suction pulls a groan from me, and I reach down, snagging a fistful of her hair. I twist it around my arm, pulling hard.

She gasps, my cock slipping free as her eyes snap wide—wild, alive, brimming with lust and something feral beneath it.

"What?" she stammers, voice low and melodic, dripping with a dangerous edge. "Do you want me to stop? Did I fuck it up?"

"God, no!" The words pour out of me, barely coherent through the haze of need frying my brain. I don't hesitate, this one truth cuts through the chaos. I can't let her

stop. Hell, she's too damn good at this; it'd be a sin if she pulled away now. I'd unravel, collapse, fucking die if she left me hanging.

“You didn't do a damn thing wrong. Just... go slower. I've missed you too much. If you move too fast, I'll explode in that pretty mouth.”

“I want you to come in my mouth this time,” she purrs, voice soft but dripping with a filthy, eager edge. Her eyes lock on mine, molten brown, blazing with raw want as she licks her lips, slow and deliberate. “Fuck my mouth so hard and then come inside it?”

“Yes,” I growl, my pulse thumping wild, echoing in my ears. “I'm gonna fuck your mouth. Rough, Pen—real fucking rough. You're swallowing it all when I'm done.”

Her smile twists, feverish and dripping with sin. “Like I said, tonight's all yours, Adriano. Whatever gets you off... I'll do it. I'm your goddamn plaything.”

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Her words hit like a match to gasoline, scorching hot, especially with her still kneeling there, bare and devoted. “Then put my cock back in your mouth.”

She dives in, kissing the tip with a wet, sloppy suck, her lips smearing the precum before she swallows me deep. I grab the back of her head, fingers knotting in her messy hair, tugging at the roots, and thrust hard, slamming into her throat. She gags loud, a choked, wet sound, her eyes watering fast, tears streaking down her cheeks, but I don’t ease up. I told her it’d be rough.

I pump faster, brutal, the slick, obscene slurp of me fucking her mouth filling the room, loud and primal, bouncing off the cracked walls.

I’m gone. My hands hold the back of her head, pumping into her like a man possessed.

“Open wider, baby... oh, fucking hell... that’s it... take it all,” I rasp and press her head down firm with both hands, forcing her lips to stretch around me, her jaw trembling. “Fuck, yes... oh, Penelope...” Her name rips out, desperately, the head of my cock jamming against the back of her throat, over and over, relentless.

She moans around me, the sound buzzing hot through my shaft, vibrating up my spine, and I feel it swell. A thick vein pulsing hard along my length.

“You’re so fucking good at this, Pen,” I snarl, my hand holding tight strands of her hair as I shove her down harder, her nose brushing my pelvis, spit dripping thick down her chin, pooling downwards. Her hands clutch my thighs, nails sinking into the denim, leaving crescent marks I’ll feel later, and she hums again, a low, needy

sound, her eyes fluttering half-shut, lashes clumped with tears, like she's drowning in it and loving every second.

I lose it, thrusting savage and fast, my hips snapping, the wet smack of her lips and the choke of her breath driving me insane.

“Penelope—fuck, Penelope!” I sing her name loud, echoing rough as the heat explodes, and I come hard, spilling thick and hot down her throat. I press her head down tight, locking her there, my cock pulsing as she chokes, her throat working fast to swallow, gulping it all down. Her body jerks, a muffled whimper escaping, spit and cum leaking from the corners of her mouth, and I groan deep, shuddering, riding it out until my legs shake and I'm empty.

I pull out slowly, her lips red and swollen, glistening wet, a thin, sticky strand of spit and cum stretching between us as she gasps, inhaling hard. She stares up at me, wrecked and wild, tears streaking her flushed face, her tongue darting out to lick the mess off her lips, those fierce brown eyes never leaving mine.

“Get up!”

I drag her to her feet, spin her around, and slam my still hard dick inside her pussy with no warning. She cries out, a sharp yelp of pain at the brutal force, but soon she melts, matching my rhythm.

She's soaked, her slick heat coating me, and it's like a switch flips. I don't just come alive, I fucking burn for her, a fire that could torch everything we've built.

“Faster,” she begs, trembling in my arms, voice cracking with desperation. “Please, go faster... deeper.”

“You feel incredible,” I rasp, my breath hot against her skin.

“Say it again... please...”

I pound into her harder, faster, shoving us both toward the abyss. “You are incredible. I want to be near you, inside you, every goddamn second, Pen. You’re fucking delicious—my own personal drug.”

“Oh... oh... harder, baby... right there... you fuck me so good...”

Her words snap me apart. I spill deep inside her, grunting as I bury my face in her neck, kissing and sucking the sweat-slicked skin. She screams out, her own release crashing through her, our bodies locked in a twisted, ecstatic mess. I bite her neck again, harder this time, knowing it’ll bloom into a hickey by morning.

I don’t care. I need to mark her, claim her as mine, forever etched into her flesh. A quiet part of me wonders if that mark will mean more than either of us can handle come daylight.

Chapter 20

Adriano

I jam my fist into the bastard’s jaw, feeling the crack of bone under my knuckles. Blood sprays across the concrete floor, mixing with the stink of sweat and gunpowder. Ricci’s crew scatters, some running, some dropping dead where they stand. My guys move fast and hunt them down with bullets and blades. Chaos erupts but I keep my eyes locked on Ricci. He’s the prize. The fucker who dared send his son after Penelope. My Penelope.

He’s cornered now, his back pressed against a stack of crates. His face twists with rage, spit flying as he snarls, “You killed my boy, Vieri. My fucking blood! Did you just expect me to look past it?”

I stalk closer, holding my knife tighter. “Your boy came for what’s mine. He paid the price.” My voice stays calm but inside I’m boiling. I see her face again—Penelope’s wide eyes, her trembling hands when I found her with that piece of shit. Ricci’s son got what he deserved. Now it’s his turn.

He lunges, swinging a rusty pipe he snatched off the ground. I sidestep, grabbing his wrist and twisting until it snaps. He screams, dropping to his knees. I don’t hesitate. Shoving him flat on his back, I pin him under my boot, pressing hard into his neck. His eyes bulge, veins popping in his neck. I pull my gun from my waistband, cock it, and stare down at him.

“This is for her,” I say, pressing the barrel to his forehead. He doesn’t get another word out. I pull the trigger. Blood and brains splatter across the floor, and his body goes limp.

I stand there, breathing heavily, staring at the mess. The war’s over. I won. But victory tastes sour when I turn around and see the cost—bodies everywhere, my men bloodied, the space is thick with death. I wipe my hands on my pants, smearing red across the black fabric, and walk out. There’s work to do.

Back at the house, I sit at my desk, pouring over ledgers, when Henry stumbles in. His face is pale, eyes darting like a trapped rat. He drops to his knees, hands clasped.

“Adriano, please. Forgive me. I fucked up, I know it. I’ll make it right.”

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Good thing the fucker delivered himself to me before I found him. I'm sure he had heard about Ricci's death and wanted to make himself available.

I lean back in my chair, staring at him. Forgiveness? After he sold me out to Ricci's crew? His freaking daughter attacked the woman I loved. Rage bubbles up, then I stand, grabbing him by the collar and dragging him to the basement. He's begging the whole way, voice cracking. I don't listen. I chain him to the wall, letting my fists do the talking. Punch after punch, his nose breaks, his lip splits. Blood drips onto the floor, pooling under him. He's sobbing now, barely conscious. I draw my gun out and aim.

"You come near me again, I'll gut you like a fucking pig. Get out."

I cut him loose, watching him crawl away before my guys toss him into the street like trash. I don't feel better. Just tired. Bone-deep tired.

Later, I drive to the cemetery. The sky's gray, heavy with rain that won't fall. I stop at Tommy's grave, my best friend, the one who always had my back until a bullet took him out. I kneel, brushing dirt off the stone.

"Miss you, brother," I mutter. This is the price paid for this life, and I'm done with all of it.

My mind drifts to Penelope. I want her so bad it hurts. I promised her we would take things slowly even after the lasttime in her apartment, but every fiber of me screams to hunt her down, drag her back to me. I stand, dusting off my knees, and decide I can't wait anymore.

I pull up to Penelope's place, my heart thudding hard. Feels like I'm some dumb kid chasing his first crush, not a man who's just painted a warehouse red with blood. I step out of the car, my boots crunching on gravel. She's not here. Gianna is. Her pregnant sister stands on the porch, her arms crossed tight, and eyes narrowing as I walk up.

"What the hell do you want, Adriano?" From her tone, I am sure she has already caught up with our relationship status now.

I stop a few feet away, hands shoved in my pockets to keep them still. "I need to see her."

She steps forward, closing the gap, her glare digging into me. "She's not here. And even if she was, I'd tell you to fuck off."

I swallow hard, keeping my tone level. "I'm not here to cause trouble, Gianna. I just want to talk to her."

Her lips twitch, not quite a smile, more like a sneer. "Talk? You don't talk, Adriano. You control. You take. That's what you do." She jabs a finger towards me, stopping short of touching me. "She's my sister. My only family. And I don't trust you with her."

I clench my jaw. "I'd never hurt her. You know that."

"Do I?" She tilts her head, studying me like I'm a puzzle she can't solve. "You're old enough to be her damn father. You live in a world full of guns and bodies. What happens when that shit spills over onto her? Because it will. It always does. How can you guys even do this to Sophia?"

Her words hit hard. Sophia. God it still hurts to think of her out loud.

“It wasn’t her fault,” I say, voice gravelly.

“Yes, but it was yours.” Gianna jabs a finger at me, stepping even closer. “You should have known better. I kept my mouth shut all this time because I figured Penelope would come to her senses. But it doesn’t look like that’s happening.”

“I love her. That’s not some line. It’s the truth.”

Gianna’s quiet for a second, her eyes softening just a fraction. Then she shakes her head. “Love’s not enough. Not with you. She’s happy now, you know? Sophia died because of you. I watched you fall apart after. And now you’re pulling my sister into the same damn fire. For the first time in years, she’s not looking over her shoulder or crying herself to sleep.” Her voice cracks, barely, but I catch it. “I used to find her curled up on the bathroom floor, shaking, scared of everything. You didn’t see that. I did.”

I look away, staring at the chipped paint on the porch railing. “I’d die before I let anything touch her.”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” she snaps, stepping closer. “You’d die, sure. But what about her living? What about the day she wakes up and realizes she’s stuck in your war zone? You think she wants that? You think I want that for her?” She continues, unblinking. “You say that now. But you’re a magnet for death, Adriano. Always have been. Penelope’s blind to it, but I’m not. She’s all I’ve got left. You get that? I can’t lose her to your fucking war.”

“I don’t want to lose her either,” I admit, quieter now. “She’s the only thing keeping me from turning into a complete monster.”

“Then why drag her down with you? Sophia loved you too, and look where it got her—in the ground. Penelope’s still breathing. Let her stay that way.”

“I’d give it all up for her,” I mutter, half to myself.

“Would you? Or would you just drag her down with you? I’m not saying you don’t care. I see it in your face, you’re wrecked over her. But caring doesn’t erase what you are.”

I stand there, letting her words sink in. The wind picks up, rattling the trees behind the house. I think about Penelope laughing, her head thrown back, free in a way I’ll never be. Then I think about the blood on my hands, the bodies I left behind today.

“I don’t want to lose her,” I say, quietly, like admitting it might make it real.

Gianna’s shoulders slump, just a little. “I don’t want her to lose herself. That’s the difference between us.” She steps back, leaning against the porch rail. “She’s all I’ve got left. You get that, right? If you fuck this up, if you hurt her, I’ll come for you myself. No gun, no crew. Just me.”

I nod. “Fair enough.”

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She stares at me a moment longer, then turns toward the door. “Go home, Adriano. She’s fine without you tonight.” The screen creaks as she pushes it open, leaving me standing there, alone with the weight of everything she said.

I climb back into my car and drive away. Gianna’s right about one thing, Penelope’s better than me, purer somehow. But I’m selfish. Always have been. I want her anyway, even if it’s wrong. Even if it costs us both. I start the engine, the roar drowning out the silence, but not the gnawing it brings. What if love isn’t enough? What if I’m the storm she can’t survive? I drive off, the question gnawing at me, unanswered.

Chapter 21

Penelope

I sit on the edge of my bed, staring at the cracked paint on the wall. My heart aches, a dull, nagging pain that won’t quit. I miss him. Adriano. His rough hands, his voice, the way he looks at me like I’m the only thing keeping him sane. We have been apart a few days, him taking care of Henry and Ricci mess and me trying to find some normalcy in my life. We are together but we agreed to take this slow and see how it goes.

But damn, I’m a wreck without him.

The door creaks open. Gianna steps in, her arms crossed, eyes sharp. She flops onto the chair by my desk, kicking her boots up on the edge. Her bump is now very visible, and she and Gerald are still arguing about baby names but she is very excited.

“You look like shit,” she says, crossing her arms.

“Thanks,” I mutter, slumping back. “You’re a ray of sunshine too.”

Her mouth tugs into something like a smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Adriano came by today.”

My heart stumbles, a hard thud against my ribs. I sit up and grab the cushion. “What? When?”

“Yeah a few hours ago while you were helping me with Gerald at the market.” She runs a hand through her hair, tugging at the ends. “Showed up all brooding and pissed off, asking for you. I told him to get lost.”

Anger flares hot in my throat. “Why the hell would you do that?”

“Because I don’t trust him with you!” She stands, pacing the room, her bare feet slapping the floor. “I’ve always known something was going on. Back when you were kids, you’d stare at him like he hung the moon. Those weird questions about him to Sophia, the way you’d blush when he walked in. I saw it, Pen. I just hoped you’d grow out of it.”

I shoot to my feet, fists balled. “You don’t get to decide who I see. He’s not some monster out to ruin me.”

“Isn’t he?” She stops, facing me, eyes blazing. “He’s a killer, Pen. A fucking drug lord. You think I don’t hear the stories? Guys strung up, bleeding out because they crossed him? And you’re over here pining like he’s some prince charming.”

“He’s more than that,” I snap, stepping closer. “You don’t know him like I do.”

“I know enough.” Her voice dips. “I saw what losing Sophia did to him. To you. He’s a wreck, and you’re my sister. My only damn family left. I can’t watch you drown in his mess.”

Sophia’s face flashes in my mind and I swallow hard, shoving it down. “I’m not drowning. I’m choosing him.”

Gianna’s eyes glisten. “Choosing him? After everything? I was there, Pen. That night she died, I held you while you screamed her name. You think I don’t see how you blame yourself? How he does too? You’re both so fucked up over her, and now you’re screwing each other like it’ll fix it.”

“Stop it,” I hiss, my voice trembling. “You don’t get it. He’s the only one who makes it hurt less.”

She steps closer, grabbing my shoulders, fingers digging in. “And what about the history between you guys? Everything that’s happened to us because you both crossed lines you weren’t supposed to? Dad, Mom, Sophia?”

Dad’s screams echo in my skull, the prison bars, blood on concrete, him gone because of my mess with the neighbor’s son. Mom’s blank stare, lost to dementia, blaming me in silence. Sophia’s broken body on the road, her eyes empty because I pushed her too far that night. I stagger back, my legs shaky.

“Don’t you dare throw that at me,” I choke out, voice splintering.

“I have to! Shit, Pen. You’re my sister. I just want you safe. Happy. Not tangled up with some guy who leaves bodies in his wake. You think Dad would’ve wanted this? Mom’s losing her mind because of the chaos you dragged us into, and Sophia—she died hating you. You’re both cursed, and I’m scared it’ll take you too.”

Tears burn my eyes, spilling hot down my cheeks. “I didn’t mean for any of it. You think I don’t carry that? Every fucking day, I see her bleeding out, hear her voice calling me a slut. Dad’s dead because I screwed up, Mom’s gone because I broke her. But Adriano—he’s the only thing that makes it bearable.”

Gianna’s face crumples, her hands dropping to her sides. “Fuck, Pen. I know you’re hurting. I feel it too. But he’s not the fix. He’s the fire that keeps burning us down.”

“No,” I say, voice raw, stepping closer. “He’s the only one who gets it. The guilt, the pain and he carries it too. I love him, Gianna. That’s why I’m falling apart. Not because he’s ruining me, but because I need him to breathe.”

She stares at me with wet eyes. “He said he loves you too. Kept talking about how he’d die for you. I didn’t believe him at first, but the way he stood there, like he’d do anything to get to you, it looked real. And it terrified me.”

My breath catches, a sob tearing free. “He said that?”

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“He came here begging to see you, and I sent him away because I’m terrified he’ll break you. I’ve always suspected you wanted him. And now look at you. You’re a mess without him, and it kills me.”

Tears sting my eyes, hot and stubborn. I shove her hands off me. “I love him, Gianna. That’s why I’m a mess. Not because he’s breaking me, but because I can’t breathe without him.”

Her face softens, just a little, and she wipes her cheek with a shaky hand. “Fuck, Pen. You’re really in deep, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” I whisper, sinking back onto the couch, my legs giving out. “I tried to stay away. Didn’t work.”

She sits beside me, close but not touching, staring at the floor. “I don’t trust him, Pen. Never will. But I trust you. If your heart’s telling you to go to him, then go. Just don’t expect me to cheer while you jump into that fire.”

I nod, tears spilling now, and she pulls me into a hug, tight and fierce. Her shirt smells like coffee and her shampoo, grounding me. “You’re an idiot. So is he,” she mutters into my hair.

“I know,” I choke out, clinging to her. “But he’s my idiot.”

She laughs, rough and quiet, and lets me go. “Then get your ass over there. Don’t make me regret this.”

I stand, wiping my face, my heart pounding with something wild and alive. I grab my keys, my jacket, and head for the door, her words echoing in my head. He loves me. He came for me.

I climb into Gianna's car and drive off. My mind races, Gianna's fear, Sophia's ghost, Adriano's text before the accident. He said I'm his soul, his everything. I feel it too, this pull that's more than lust, more than guilt. It's a lifeline we both hang on to.

Years ago, when my crush on Adriano first struck, I never questioned it. I wallowed in the filthy, forbidden heat of it, knowing full well it was a dead-end ache that would rot inside me. I could stare at him, trace his every move with my eyes, worship him from the shadows, but crossing that line? Never. Not with him. When I finally tore myself away and moved, I thought I could bury it, let it fester and die. Good riddance, I told myself, about damn time.

Then I saw him again, after all those years apart, and the truth hit me like a fist to the gut. I never got over him. Not for a second. Those feelings had just burrowed deeper, festering in some neglected corner of my soul I'd been too busy to scrub clean. Time had piled filth between us, but I knew then I'd never shake him. It was carved into my bones, inevitable, this sick, twisted thread binding us. Adriano had dragged me through pain, through hurt, through rage so thick it choked me. His world is a jagged, war-torn hell, dripping with blood and danger, a place he'll never escape. But God help me, he'd also shown me love so fierce it burned, pleasure so deep it stained me, the kind that hooks into your marrow and never lets go. I wanted to claw it out of me, but I couldn't. I wouldn't.

Riding the elevator up to his penthouse, my mind swims back to him, thick with the grime of memory. He probably doesn't want me here, not after the way we last tore into each other, all spit and venom. Hell, I don't even know if that savage pull between us still lingers, but keeping my distance? It's not working anymore. He's in my head every damn day, every night, a relentless itch under my skin. I see the hard

planes of his face, sharp and unyielding, softened only by those eyes that could devour me whole. I feel his arms, his body, the brutal ease with which he lifts me, fills me, owns me. Staying away just makes the hunger worse, a gnawing, depraved need I can't starve out.

I tried giving him space, thinking it might purge him from my blood. He's dangerous, always has been, a truth I've carried like a bruise. It's why I walked away, why I forced the distance. But lately, I wonder if that was a mistake. What's the point of fighting when every thought, every pulse, drags me back to him?

The elevator doors slide open, and I step out, only to freeze. Two strangers block my path. One's got a scar snaking up his face, ugly and jagged, his glare dripping with menace. The other stands by the door, legs spread wide, face blank as stone. I've been tangled up with Adriano long enough to know his men, their faces burned into my memory, but these two? They're new. Foreign. It sends a shiver crawling up my spine, a whisper of something sour in the air. What else has shifted in this filthy kingdom of his?

One steps forward, hand raised.

"Turn around, Rosetti," Scarface spits, his hand twitching toward his belt. "Boss ain't seeing nobody. We lost Tommy today."

"Oh my god. Is Adriano okay? Ralph? Sal?"

"Everyone's pretty bummed about it but we just had the funeral, so boss is alone and demanded not to see anyone."

Normally, I'd run, tail between my legs like some kicked dog. But I've spent a lifetime choking down cowardice, and I'm done. In the car over here, I wrestled with the what-ifs, the maybes, every piece of doubt. They all led me back to him. I can't

leave

“Move. I’m here for Adriano.”

He crosses his arms. “Heard you loud and clear. Answer’s still no.”

“Tell him it’s me. Now.”

The other guy chuckles. “You deaf? Get lost.”

“Adriano! Adriano! I’m here! Please, I need you!”

“That’s it!” the stoic one roars, lunging forward. His meaty hand clamps around my arm, pulling so hard I yelp, pain searing up to my stomach in a hot, sick wave. “Get the fuck out!”

I’m about to scream again when the door flies open, and there he is. Adriano, shirtless, bandaged, his arm a mess of blood and stitches. He is barefoot like some untamed king. His eyes lock on mine, then drop to the hand bruising my arm. His face twists from shock to molten fury in a heartbeat. I brace for him to turn that rage on me, to spit me out like trash. But he doesn’t.

“Get your fucking hands off my woman!” he bellows, voice a guttural snarl. His knuckles white like he is ready to smash bone. The man drops my arm fast, steps back, and bows his head.

“Sorry, Don—”

He stalks toward me, all predator and heat, and before I can breathe, his hands cup my face, and his lips crash into mine, a brutal, consuming kiss that stops the world dead. I’d forgotten the sheer force of him, the way his tongue claims mine, so filthy

and desperate. I unravel, my legs trembling, my core aching.

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“Woman, you taste like heaven,” he rasps. “I’ll be right back.”

Then his glare snaps to his men, and he stalks past me, his bare feet hitting the ground hard, and stops in front of the first guy, towering over him.

“What the fuck did you just say to her?”

The guy shrinks, shoulders hunching. “Boss, we didn’t know—”

“Didn’t know?” Adriano grabs him by the collar, jerking him up so fast his boots leave the floor. “I said I don’t want to see anyone. She’s not anyone, you fucking idiot. She will never be just anyone to me, is that clear? The next time she says she wants to see me, you let her see me. I don’t care if I am with the freaking president, you let her through. And don’t you ever treat her like that again.”

The second guy shifts, smirking like it’s a joke, and that’s a mistake. Adriano releases the first one, letting him stumble back, and turns on the other. He moves fast, grabbing the guy’s throat with his good hand, and slams him against the wall.

“You think this is funny? You laugh at her again, I’ll rip your tongue out and shove it down your throat.”

The guy chokes, hands clawing at Adriano’s iron hold, face turning red. “Sorry, boss,” he wheezes.

Adriano squeezes harder, his knuckles whitening, then shoves him down. The guy hits the ground, coughing. Adriano steps back, blood seeping through his bandages,

staining his skin red. He points at them both, voice a snarl.

“Next time you disrespect her, I’ll bury you alive. No warning. No mercy. You touch her, you die. Got it?”

They nod quickly, heads down, muttering, “Yes, boss,” like scared dogs. He then turns to me. His eyes soften, just a flash, but the fury’s still there, simmering under his skin.

“Come here,” he says, rough but steady, holding out his good hand.

I run to him now, legs shaking but sure, and crash into him. His arm wraps around me, tight and possessive, pulling me against his bare skin. Blood smears onto my jacket but I don’t care.

“You’re here,” he murmurs, voice raw, his breath hot against my hair.

“I had to,” I whisper, fisting his skin, my nails digging in. “Gianna told me you came. She sent you away, but I couldn’t stay away.”

His thumb brushes my cheek, smearing a tear I didn’t know was there.

I kiss him, hard and desperate, tasting salt and him, my body pressed tight against his. He groans, pulling me inside, slamming the door shut. We stumble to the couch, his hands everywhere, mine tearing at him like I can crawl inside him.

“I love you,” I gasp between kisses, raw and unfiltered. “I’m done fighting it.”

He stops then straightens. “You can still walk away. I’m not good for you. You know that.”

I shake my head, closing the gap until our boots nearly touch. “I don’t want to walk away. I tried. It sucks.”

A rough laugh escapes him. He reaches out, brushing his knuckles along my jaw. “I haven’t been myself since I’ve been away from you. I want you. All of you.”

My breath hitches. His touch sends sparks down my spine, but it’s his words that gut me. “Then take me,” I whisper, grabbing his shirt and pulling him closer.

He hesitates, eyes searching mine. Then he crashes his mouth against mine, hard and desperate. I kiss him back, just as fiercely. He groans, backing me against the wall, pinning me there with his body. His lips move to my neck, teeth grazing my skin, and I gasp, digging my nails into his shoulders.

“You sure about this?” he murmurs, voice low, rough with need.

“Shut up and fuck me,” I say.

He growls, lifting me off the floor. I wrap my legs around his waist as we stride through the penthouse and he takes me to his private office. There, he plants me on the edge of his desk. Papers scatter, a glass tips and shatters. He doesn’t care. Neither do I.

He’s on me in a second, hands tearing at my shirt, buttons popping loose. I arch into him, skin burning where he touches. It’s messy, frantic, perfect.

But then he slows, pulling back to look at me. His eyes soften, just for a moment. “You’re my everything, you know that?”

I freeze. “Don’t get soft on me now.”

His lips curl, but there's warmth in it. "Too late."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:39 am

I pull him down again, kissing him deep, letting the world fall away.

“He touched you, Pen,” he growls. “No one touches you.”

“I know...” I kiss his jaw, his stubble scraping my lips as my shaking fingers fumble with his shirt buttons. I can’t breathe, can’t think, not until he’s buried inside me, filling the void that’s been clawing at me anytime he is away. “But they didn’t know, right?”

He tugs my skirt down, hoisting me up with one rough tug so it peels off my hips and pools on the floor. No panties. His eyes catch it, and the grin that splits his face is pure animal, teeth bared like he’s ready to devour me whole.

“Nothing underneath. Jesus Christ, you’ve got me by the throat, don’t you?”

My finger drags down, tracing the hard ridges of muscle, those tattoos sprawling across him like a map of sin. My skin prickles, hypersensitive, drinking him in.

“You’re perfect,” I rasp, voice trembling with need.

Adriano grabs my shirt, tears it over my head, and tosses it to the floor like trash. His mouth dives for my nipple, hot and wet, tongue swirling rough around the stiff peak. I arch into him, spine bowing as electric jolts sear through me, but he freezes, and I choke down a frustrated growl, feral and needy.

“You smell so damn good, sweetheart,” he murmurs, voice thick with hunger.

“Adriano...”

He slams into me without warning, and my vision explodes into a haze of colors.

“Fuck, yeah,” he snarls, grabbing my ass to pull me closer, driving deeper until I feel him in my bones.

His moan rips through the room, raw and primal, and my body answers with a matching desperation, a filthy ache I can’t shake.

“I’ve thought about this pussy every damn night. You don’t know how many times I’ve fucked my hand to the memory, Pen. I’m a grown man, and you’ve got me begging. Put me out of my misery.”

“Fuck me,” I plead.

He shifts, his cock hitting that sweet spot, and I cry out, loud and shameless. Then he stops, pinning me with his stare.

“Look at me, Pen.”

It’s a command, hard and unyielding, not some soft request, and it sets me ablaze. I crave every piece he gives me, and lately, it’s more—more skin, more heat, more of his soul bleeding into mine.

I lock eyes with him.

“Keep looking,” he growls, thrusting again, slowly and so harshly. “See how we fit. Feel my cock stretching you. Tell me you love it.”

“I love it,” I scream, voice breaking as he pounds into me. “Don’t stop. Never stop fucking me like this...”

Sweat glistens on his forehead, his chest, dripping as he hammers into me. His groans are loud, deep and guttural, swallowed by the depraved rhythm of our bodies. I'm lost in it, drowning in the slick, messy heat of us.

"No one else," he rasps, his onslaught merciless, splitting me open. "You're the only woman. The only one."

This isn't tender. It's not sweet. His thrusts are brutal, animalistic, ripping screams from his throat that echo off the walls. I don't care who's outside, who might hear the wet slap of skin, the raw cries. Neither does he. He doesn't slow, doesn't ease up, and I don't want him to. My nails rake down his back, digging in, drawing red lines I know he'll wear like a badge.

"I want to come," I whimper, teetering on the edge, body coiled tight.

He slides a rough finger between us, rubbing my clit with bruising pressure. "Come for me, sweetheart," he grinds out, voice strained, dripping with effort. "Drench this cock. It's yours. All fucking yours."

I shatter, screaming, shaking beneath him as the orgasm rips me apart. "Oh my God!"

He stiffens, grunting loud and ragged, and I clutch him tighter. He spills inside me, shuddering, his release a hot flood that leaves him trembling. I kiss his neck, tasting the salt of his sweat, sharp and addictive, and let out a breathless giggle.

"You're so good to me. Have I told you that?"

A soft but wicked grin spreads across his face. "Yeah, but I'll spend my whole damn life waiting to hear it again. That's how deep you've got me hooked."

"I love you," I whisper.

“I love you too,” he says, claiming my mouth again, his kiss a promise laced with something I’m not sure of but is bound to be exciting.

Outside, his life is chaos, filled with blood, power, death. In here, it’s just us. And I know, staring into his eyes as he starts to move inside me again, that I’m fucked. Not just now, but for good. I’ve accepted that love is a cage, and I’ve locked myself in willingly. No idea where the damn key is and no regrets. Just him.

THE END