



Forced Bratva Bride

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: A ruthless Bratva brute 20 years older than me just forced me into marriage...

I'd just aced my first job interview when he took me.

He says I need to pay for my secret Bratva family's debts.

He says that the only way to do this is by becoming his forced bride.

I was adopted as a baby. I didn't know my biological family is part of the Bratva.

Until he drags me to his car and wrestles me to keep me under control.

Until he forces me to sign the marriage papers.

And suddenly, I'm tied to a Bratva brute until death do us part.

The scars on his body prove what he's willing to do to get his way.

His cold, manipulative touch changes to a soothing one when he wants it to.

My curves are his payment, responding to him alone.

My body is his possession, his personal toy.

Will the Bratva brute ever release me from his chains?

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Chapter 1 - Gio

“Bring out the crane,” I yelled across the chaotic warehouse floor, motioning at the distribution manager to bring down the crates from the top. “The shipment is due to be collected within the hour.”

Rurik nodded and turned to a trio of rowdy young men, instructing two to climb the ladders and the third to operate the forklift.

One by one, I watched the crates being guided out, each weighing more than a thousand kilos. The warehouse, filled with dozens of men, was a collection of roaring noises and suited the occasion.

This was our first joint venture with the Ustinovs, and by extension, the Vadims. Both Bratva families wanted us—the Lebedevs—to be in charge as a show of faith since Kate Ustinov married my brother. With Caspian and Kate off enjoying the white sands of Mexico for their honeymoon, that left me to play goddamn referee.

After years of enmity, the Lebedevs and Ustinovs were finally allies and I wanted to make sure everything went off perfectly. From New York, I was to see off our latest shipment of arms, bound for Russia. From there, the Ustinovs’ and Vadims’ network was to collect and distribute these weapons to the highest bidders across Europe.

The money to be made was in the tens of millions, and I had been at the warehouse all day, making sure nothing went wrong.

Just then, I heard an explosion so loud that I barely registered the flash of light. The

force of the blast sent me flying, crashing into crates and debris. All around me, I heard screams.

I fell to the ground in panic, covering my eyes and head, trying to take deep breaths to ease the pain that roared in my ears. I oriented myself and when I looked up to see what was happening, the left quadrant of the warehouse was in flames.

I pushed myself off the ground, despite the ringing in my ears, and scanned the area. Some of our men were scrambling in fear, rushing toward the exit.

Fuck. We'd been bombed.

Through the haze, I spotted Rurik, blood trickling down his forehead as he helped a couple of injured men to safety. I rushed to his side, sliding an arm under the other side of the injured man Rurik was trying to take out of the warehouse.

Rurik looked over at me, his face ashen-white. "Boss," he said. "Who could have done this?"

"Let's make sure everyone's safe first, then we'll figure out the rest," I said, through gritted teeth. All around me, I saw destruction. Our pristine warehouse was now a graveyard of fallen beams, broken crates and ashen walls. The extent of the damage made me feel so damn angry, I could have punched a hole through a wall.

This wasn't just an attack on our business; it was personal. Whoever planted this bomb could have killed any of us. I shuddered at the thought. What if Caspian had been here? What if he'd been standing next to the bomb? A few more feet, and I might not have walked out of here.

In that moment, I wanted nothing more than revenge.

Once outside, I gathered the managers. “Do a head count,” I instructed, watching as a few men ran to douse out the flames before they spread.

Ten minutes later, Rurik returned. “Boss,” he said with a look of relief. “No casualties. Nine injured. Two are being taken to the hospital as we speak.”

I clamped Rurik on his back. “You’ve brought good news,” I said, finally allowing myself a small smile. But, that didn’t mean all was forgotten. There might have been no casualties, but they did injure my men, they did ruin our plans.

The message behind the attack was crystal clear. Someone wanted to rattle us and probably wished to crack this fragile new alliance we’ve formed with the Bratva families.

“Make sure the fire is out,” I told Rurik. “Ensure everyone gets back safely, and call for back-up. Divert a shipment to a safe house for today, and inform the receivers to expect a delay of a few days. Call logistics to create a new shipping route in case our current one has been compromised. Don’t leave the goods unguarded tonight. Call for back-up and then go home. After that, get some rest, Rurik.”

“Understood, Boss,” Rurik nodded, not prying any further. I needed to get out of here and find some goddamn answers.

Who the hell was responsible for this attack?

I walked through the wreckage, feeling angrier with each injured man still working to keep us strong. Upon reaching the car, I spotted a dart stuck to the door handle. It had a piece of paper attached with a message scrawled in bold black letters: “traitors.”

I froze in place as I read the word again. At the back of my mind, I knew then just who was responsible for this attack. The Italians. It had to be one of them.

With our new alliance in place, Caspian had warned me that the Italians weren't happy with our family. There were rumors amongst the families, he had said in passing once, that we'd betrayed our Italian heritage by shaking hands with the Russians.

Those wretched, emotional bastards, I thought to myself in anger. It was just like them to forget that while the Lebedevs were half Italian, we were also half Russian.

But of course, where matters of power were concerned, some of the clans chose to go down an unprecedented route. They used this alliance as an excuse to finally do what they always wished—usurp us from our apex position. I could only imagine the smaller families holding meetings to unite against us, planning and plotting to use this opportunity to get ahead.

They were so short-sighted in their quest to prove themselves stronger than we were, that they forgot the one rule we had amongst each other—we may compete, but never tear another down.

They saw an opportunity to tear us down and took it by breaking the silent agreement between Italian Mafia families not to interfere with each other's businesses.

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Now that they'd broken the code, my anger beckoned at me to find the culprit and show them a vengeance they'd remember for generations to come.

I crumpled the note in my hand and shoved it far away, getting into my car and slamming the door shut behind me. Immediately, I called the men in charge of my spying network. Though they weren't a part of our regular payroll, they did their odd jobs in keeping our family updated on the goings and comings of the other Mafia families. If anyone would know which family was responsible for today's attack, it would be these guys.

I drove away from the warehouse, my eyes periodically scanning the side and rearview mirrors. My hands shook as I drove, the fear of what could have happened still resting like embers in my nervous system.

Men could have been killed. I could have been killed. Had I not been there, my brothers could have been killed. The bomb blast was such a grave threat, that I wasn't stupid enough to believe there wouldn't be more.

Behind me, in the distance, I saw the headlights of a car. At first, I ignored it, but as I passed one mile, then two, and finally three, and I took a turn yet the headlights remained, I tensed up.

Was I being followed? Who the hell would follow me?

I pulled out my gun and held it between my fingers while I drove, slowing down to

allow the car to catch up, just so I could catch a glimpse, a clue. But on slowing, the car slowed too.

I slammed my foot on the accelerator, trying to lose him, but the car behind me did the same. I watched for the turn onto the high street to come into sight and allowed it to be just by my side as I took the unexpected turn, my car swerving in the process. The car following me overshot the turn, giving me space to breathe.

I parked my car in an alleyway to avoid being detected on the main streets and walked a distance to our meeting spot. Twenty minutes later, I was heading down a crowded high street, with early night shoppers and diners providing exactly the kind of cover I needed. I slipped into an alleyway between a high-end boutique and a coffee shop, the passage so narrow that my shoulders nearly brushed both walls.

At the end of the alley stood two men, both leaning against a brick wall. Though they were twins, and most people couldn't tell them apart, from the years we'd worked together, I had no trouble identifying Marco from Paulo. They'd been our eyes and ears, loyal to our family, as long as they were paid above market rates.

And we made sure to do that.

"We've been waiting here a while," Marco said, kicking off the wall and approaching me.

"I had a warehouse to sweep up," I frowned. "Someone planted explosives."

The twins exchanged surprised glances. "When?"

"Just before I called you to meet me. You didn't hear of any attacks planned against us, did you?" I asked, my voice lowering with a caution, and a warning on how they wished to approach this.

“No,” Paulo said adamantly, without skipping a beat.

“We'd have told you if we had,” said Marco.

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair, knowing that they spoke the truth.

That was an interesting turn of events, though.

The twins knew everything that happened within the Italian families—every grudge, every plan, every alliance. If they hadn't heard about the bombing, it meant either the perpetrators were exceptionally secretive.

“Who do you think it was?” asked Paulo.

“The Italians,” I said.

“How do you know?” frowned Marco.

“They left a message. Called us traitors.”

Marco's eyes narrowed. “The old families have been talking. They don't like the Russian alliance. They say the Lebedevs have forgotten where you came from.”

“We remember exactly where we came from,” I said, my voice hardening. “And where we're going. Who's been the loudest?”

The twins exchanged another look. “The Ajellos,” Paulo said finally. “Gastone has been hosting dinners, inviting the smaller families. There's been big talk about traditions and unity.”

I crossed my arms and gritted my teeth. Of course the Ajellos had to go around

barking against us. They've had it out for our family for years, ever since they claimed our great-grandfather wronged theirs three generations ago.

To date, they carried an ancient grudge for an event none of us knew the details of.

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“We'll look into the bombing,” Marco said, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Is there anything else?”

I shook my head. “Let me know if Gastone schedules any more dinners, and I expect a full report on the guest list.”

After parting ways, I slipped back onto the main street. The crowds were still thick, many people getting ice cream with their kids, some walking into theatres, others sitting around and watching the buskers hard at work.

I reached the walkway opposite the alley where I had been passed and waited for the pedestrian light to turn green. When it changed, I was about to cross over when I caught sight of a large man at the entrance of the alley where my car was parked, his head darting around as if he were surveying something.

I paused, watching his movements, and ducked behind a group of people to go unnoticed. Just then, a woman in a navy-blue dress, with thick blonde hair cascading down her neck, turned on her heels and gestured to him. He quickly followed as she turned and walked away.

I kept my eyes on his face, feeling on edge after the day I'd had. Then, I caught sight of his side profile.

My heart roared in my chest, wanting to rip open another.His.

I recognized him immediately: Dom, the Ajello family's favorite muscle. He was utterly loyal to the family.

From how he walked a respectful distance behind the woman, never beside her in stride, I knew exactly what he was doing here. He was acting as her bodyguard, which made her an imminent member of the Ajello family.

An Ajello woman? Could be their sister, a cousin, perhaps even a girlfriend. Whoever she was, she was important enough to warrant Dom's protection while she was out here doing god knows what.

There was only one reason why she and that brute Dom were at the same place as I was. Only one reason why they were near where my car was parked.

I remembered what the twins said. The Ajellos had been hosting dinners without any of our family representatives, talking of tradition and loyalty.

It couldn't have been a coincidence to see an Ajello here, right after we were bombed. They must have followed me out, were probably the ones in the car tailing me on the way over.

The Ajellos had been, without a doubt, responsible for the attack on our warehouse.

I had found my perpetrators.

I made my decision in an instant. If the Ajellos wanted to play games, I would oblige them. But I would be the one to dictate the rules.

Without hesitation, I crossed the street, maintaining a careful distance behind Dom, who in turn followed the blonde woman.

I had no idea of what my grand plan was, but knew one thing for certain. I wanted to see how I could use her to send a message back to Gastone Ajello.

The blonde entered a café at the corner of the street. I couldn't hear her, but I saw her turn in my direction. I ducked behind a cart and watched her point at a store in the distance behind me. He nodded as she handed him a slip of paper, leaving her to enter the café alone.

Chapter 2 - Larissa

Dom stood outside the café. "I'll be waiting right here," he said, his eyes scanning the crowds with such intense focus that I worried for him. I didn't know why my brothers insisted he accompany me everywhere. In my twenty-five years of existence, I'd never faced any danger in public, or elsewhere.

"Would you like some coffee? A snack?" I asked. Dom had been with our family for longer than I could remember, a looming sentinel, and often accompanied me on errands. Though he was a quiet man, we'd formed a friendship of sorts, and I sometimes forced him to join me for a meal or a coffee.

Today, however, he shook his head. "Won't be able to sleep at night," he said gruffly.

"You're such an oldie," I laughed, and he tried to keep his face neutral, though I did see the corners of his mouth turn upward.

"Alright then," I added. "I'm going to get a takeaway and then head to the grocery store. Meanwhile," I pulled out a receipt from my bag and handed it to him. "Would you mind going to grab the dry cleaning?"

Dom crossed his arms across his chest and shook his head vehemently. "You know I can't, Miss. Your brothers would be furious."

I sighed dramatically. “Look,” I waved at the dry cleaners down the block. “The store is right there, Dom. Right there! All I’m going to do is grab my coffee and walk that way,” I pointed to the grocery store. “It’s a two-minute walk, Dom. I can have my coffee and the groceries done in twenty minutes.”

He hesitated, knowing his orders. “Miss Ajello, I don't think—”

“Gastone wants everything ready for tonight in time,” I reminded him, playing my trump card. “His important guests arrive at eight. Do you want to explain why we didn't manage two simple errands? Besides, he expects me home soon. Now, he won’t care if we met with traffic on the way here, will he?”

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“Twenty minutes,” he finally conceded gruffly. “But you’ll promise me you have to go straight to the grocery store. Nowhere else.”

I broke into the largest smile and felt an unexpected rush of joy at this small freedom. “I promise! See? Problem solved.”

With a tense sigh, he took the receipt and gave me one small nod, opening the door to let me pass. I entered but turned to watch him walk off in the direction of the dry cleaners.

Just to be sure I had actually managed to send him away. Here I was, all by myself in the big, bad world, and the roof didn’t come crashing down. If only someone could explain this to my brothers.

To accomplish this impossible task, I used the oldest trick in the book: the threat of repercussions from my brothers. Being the only sister in an Italian Mafia family had its disadvantages, but it also taught me to keep a few tricks up my sleeve.

Sometimes having a bodyguard was reassuring, but at times like this, when we were in the middle of a busy high street where there was obviously no danger, it was suffocating.

I ordered my coffee, and a pang of yearning washed over me as I waited for it to be made and packed. I wanted more days like this.

Today was a rare occasion for me to be allowed out for something as mundane as a grocery and dry-cleaning run, which our housekeeper usually handled. But, Mrs.

Bellini was unwell and had the day off, and we had guests arriving for dinner. My brothers tasked me with these chores and expected me back soon.

While I enjoyed this small freedom, since every freedom was one I often fought for, given how my brothers believed our fortress of a home was all I needed to experience in life to stay safe, I also knew that we were on a tight deadline.

If I could have had it my way, I would have spent hours here, browsing the stores, getting my hair done, and maybe catching a movie. But those were luxuries I had never experienced. If I needed clothes, a personal shopper would be at our doorstep. If I needed my hair cut, the salon would be set up in the basement.

I remembered Gastone's instructions from this morning. "Nothing complicated, Larissa. Just pick up my suits from Bernardo's, get the ingredients Mrs. Bellini needs, and come straight home. Dom will accompany you."

Gastone, my oldest brother at thirty-eight, had been running both the family business and the family itself since our father died seven years ago. The "family business" was something we didn't discuss openly, but I wasn't naive. I knew what it meant when my three brothers disappeared for late-night meetings, why our house had more security than most banks, and why I was never, ever allowed to go anywhere alone.

The barista called my name, and I collected my coffee, taking that delicious first sip as I headed out of the door.

I took my time walking toward the grocery store, watching the people passing by, sipping my coffee. No Dom, no brothers. It was just me and my thoughts, and I was loving every minute of it. I felt mildly naughty, like a teenager who had snuck out in the middle of the night.

The street was busy but not crowded. It was truly a beautiful evening. I passed a

flower shop, a newspaper and magazine stand, and a beautiful boutique for dresses. Maybe if I was quick with the groceries, I could convince Dom to let me browse there for a few minutes.

Lost in these thoughts, I didn't immediately register the footsteps behind me. But then, the steps got closer, faster. I felt a prickle of awareness creep down my spine, warning me to be alert. I walked faster, but the footsteps sped up.

I felt like someone was following me. Instinctively, I thought to turn, but before I could, a hand clamped around my arm.

“What the f—?” I said loudly, my heart racing as I felt pure, unadulterated fear. I froze, knowing I should scream, but before my brain could send a signal to my throat, I was yanked into an alley I hadn't even noticed I was passing.

My coffee fell to the ground as I stumbled, off-balance. A tall man was yanking me further into the alley.

“Help!” I screamed, craning my neck toward the street, hoping to catch a passerby's attention. “Someo—”

A hand yanked around my mouth, and an arm slid around my stomach, his hand splayed across it, digging into my skin. He literally lifted me off the ground, my back against his chest, and carried me toward a black car parked at the end of the alley. I tried to kick back at him, tried to grab his hand around my mouth, tried to dig my nails into his skin to make him lose his grip on me, but nothing seemed to work. He was strong. Far too strong.

The blood rushed to my ears, and my vision became a blur of disorienting sights. An empty alley, a waiting car, an overturned trash can. No one knew where I was, and I was powerless against this brute.

Suddenly, I felt a fear unlike any I'd ever felt before. The man moved fast, releasing the grip on my mouth to pull open the car.

I screamed, as loud as I could, but he threw me in the car and slammed the door shut behind me, muffling out my screams. I reached for the handle and tried to open it, but it didn't budge.

Fuck.

He got into the driver's seat, and for the first time, I had a clear look at my attacker. He was tall—taller than Dom, even—with broad shoulders silhouetted under a tailored, expensive suit. Italian, no less.

Under different circumstances, I might have considered him handsome with those sharp cheekbones, flawless complexion, ocean blue eyes, and that strong jaw carved over by a manicured stubble.

But under these circumstances, I hated him with a vengeance and shunned those thoughts side.

“What's your name?” he asked, leaning closer. My breath hitched in my throat, and he grabbed both my hands as his face came dangerously close to mine, until I could see nothing but his face.

“No!” I tried to twist away. “Let me go! Help!” I screamed, looking desperately out of the window, but we were hidden from view in this alley.

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He let go of my hand and sat back in his seat. Hot tears welled in my eyes, but I refused to let them fall because I did not want to give him that power over me.

“Stop,” he said, his tone oddly calm as he settled behind the wheel. “You’ll only hurt yourself.”

“Let me go!” I screamed, my voice breaking. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with. My brothers will—”

“The Ajellos,” he interrupted, putting the car in gear and reversing into the street.

“How...how do you know?” I asked in a trembling voice.

“So I was right,” he whispered, half to himself, a smile carving into his face. “Gastone, Carlo, and Dino. I know exactly who your brothers are.”

Fuck. Did he kidnap me on a hunch? I knew then I shouldn’t say more. I needed to gain information, not pass it around.

The situation started to form clearly in my mind. Here was a man who knew my brothers. Which meant, he knew what our family did. Which meant he was from our world. An enemy.

And I had fallen right into his trap. Suddenly, I felt like an utter, naïve fool. I should have listened to my brothers. I should have been grateful for their constant protection.

Why the hell did I let Dom leave me alone?

“You must be Larissa,” he said, coldly.

The sound of my name on his lips sent a chill through me.

Time stood still. I had given away the one piece of information I could have kept from him. I tried to threaten him with the knowledge that my brothers were to be feared, and with that, confirmed my identity.

If I had only kept quiet, I could have pretended this was a case of false identity. I could have tried my luck, but I messed up.

My thoughts churned in my head, and I realized then that we had pulled out the high street already. I had gotten so scared, that I’d wasted time when I could have pummeled at the windows, tried to get someone—anyone’s attention.

I’d read once that if kidnapped, the first day or two are the most critical in being found alive and safe. What the hell was he planning to do with me?

He’d taken me in broad public, and no one saw a thing. He was good, and I was utterly helpless.

I was choking on the air around me, the panic overwhelming all senses. “Are you going to kill me?” I asked, my voice coming out like a squeaky, frightened bird.

To my surprise, he laughed. “If I wanted you dead, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. Killing you wouldn’t get me what I want.”

A strange relief washed over me, only to be immediately followed by a deeper fear. Not death, then. But what? Torture? Ransom? Information? Leverage against my brothers? Whatever he wanted, the fact remained that I had been kidnapped by a dangerous stranger who knew far too much about my family.

“Who are you?” I demanded, trying to sound braver than I felt.

He didn't answer, his eyes fixed on the road. I tried to memorize our route, but he made so many turns. Sometimes, I felt as though he was trying to confuse me on purpose.

“Listen,” I said, trying to find another way out. “If you could just tell me what I want, maybe you’d realize it doesn’t have to be this way.”

“Be this way?” he growled, his blue eyes piercing straight at me.

“M...maybe it can be resolved without you kidnapping me.”

“You really don’t know your brothers, do you?” he said, rather loudly. I shrank back in my chair, sensing the rage in his voice and the unspoken accusations I had no idea about. I knew I should remain quiet because I didn’t know how far he could be pushed.

I took the opportunity to study him more carefully. He was younger than I initially thought—mid-thirties, perhaps. He wore a Patek Philippe, which told me he wasn’t a local goon. He was someone with money, resources, and power. Someone like my brothers.

He was an equal, and that made him all the more dangerous. I thought of Dom, who had probably discovered I was missing. He would have called my brothers, would have faced their wrath.

“My brothers will find me,” I said, more to reassure myself than to give a threat.

“I’m counting on it,” he replied cryptically. I hadn’t realized my voice had traveled to him. “Though perhaps not as quickly as you might hope.”

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My brothers would mobilize every resource they had to find me. It was just a matter of time.

But how much time? And what would happen to me in the meantime?

We finally reached winding roads lined with trees. The houses grew larger, farther apart, each hidden behind gates and hedges. At, we turned into a gate manned by armed men and drove down a long driveway, finally pulling up to a modern mansion made of glass and stone.

When the car came to a stop, my fear returned full force. There were armed guards everywhere. Running from here seemed near impossible. Not to mention, I was completely isolated. Even if I screamed, the grounds were so large I knew my voice wouldn't travel to any of the neighbors.

He cut the engine and turned to me. "We're going inside now. Don't try to run—there's nowhere to go, and you'll only make this harder on yourself."

I glared at him, anger temporarily overcoming fear. Of course I knew that, but I didn't want him to think so.

He exited the car and came to my side, opening the door for me. When I didn't move, he leaned down and gripped my arm, pulling me out to him. His grip didn't hurt, exactly, but it was firm enough for me to know there was no point fighting it.

He guided me through a door that led directly into the house. Inside, I noticed, it was just like him: cold, expensive, and minimalistic. It looked more like a hotel than a

home.

He led me to the living room, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking manicured grounds. “Sit,” he instructed, gesturing to a sleek sofa.

I remained standing, crossing my arms. Small acts of defiance were all I had left. “Tell me why I’m here.”

He studied me for a moment, his blue eyes unreadable. “Interesting. You’re in my house, at my mercy, and still trying to protect your precious brothers?”

I felt a flicker of indignation. I knew what our family did, but my brothers had chosen not to follow in our father’s footsteps. They kept to themselves and played things by the book. In fact, as far as I remember, they never crossed a line.

So what the hell could I be protecting them from?

This whole thing was a mistake.

“My brothers mind their own business,” I said defensively. “If you have some kind of vendetta because you’re jealous—”

He moved suddenly, and the next thing I knew, he stood inches away from my face, glaring down at me. I flinched but stood my ground.

“Mind their own business?” He laughed, the sound harsh and bitter. “Is that what you’re going to do now? If you think you can lie your way out of this, you’re delusional.”

My cheeks burned. “I’m not naive,” I snapped. “I know what my family does, yet have no reason to lie. What would I be lying about anyway?”

“What would you be lying about?” His eyes flashed dangerously. “How about you start by explaining why you were following me today? You and that dog of yours, Dom. You had surveillance on me, didn’t you? Did your brothers put you up to it?”

I stared at him, genuinely confused. “Spy on you? I don't even know who you are!”

“Stop lying,” he screamed. “Did Gastone think he could put you up to it because you aren’t on my radar? Did he think I would hesitate to act because you're a woman?”

My mouth fell open in genuine shock. “I have no idea what you're talking about. I've never spied on anyone in my life!”

“We'll see how long you maintain this act,” he said quietly. “But you won’t win. One way or another, you will tell me everything you know about your brothers' plans for my territory.”

I stood there frozen in shock, my jaw half-hanging as I tried to process this unbelievable situation. He thought I was spying on him, that my brothers had put me up to it, that somehow they wanted his... territory? None of it made sense to me, but the one thing I knew from the look on his face was that he believed it.

And that made him all the more dangerous. Especially since I was alone with him, in his house, and no one knew where he’d taken me, let alone who he was.

For that matter, neither did I.

At last, I sank, and dropped my head in my hands, the fatigue overcoming whatever fight I had left in my body.

Chapter 3 - Gio

I watched Larissa gravitate to the couch, dropping her head into her hands. Her blonde hair cascaded down her face, twined through her dainty fingers, and for a second, she looked like a fallen angel.

In that moment, I felt myself weaken at the sight of this delicate woman struggling to make sense of her situation. Had she been anyone else, I might have been more inclined to give her the benefit of the doubt.

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But she was an Ajello, and every Ajello I'd known was a snake. She was a beautiful woman, one who had this siren around her calling to be protected and safeguarded, but as they said, never judge a book by its cover, and I knew there was more to her than she let on.

After all, she'd been following me with that dog, Dom.

"Let's try this again," I said, walking closer until I stood over her. "What did your brother send you to find out?"

She dropped her hands and looked at me wide-eyed with a trembling lower lip. "Please..." she said in a choked voice, shaking her head as though she had no answers.

It might have convinced a lesser man. But I was certain this was a part of her game, that she underestimated just how shrewd I could be.

She played well, I'd given her that.

"Larissa..." I sang her voice in warning, a technique I used on men in the torture chamber, to tell them I was here and I held the cards.

Her aquamarine eyes fluttered and she let out a choked breath, wrangling her hands on her lap in nervousness. "Please, I don't know what to do. I don't know anything, and unless if you want me to lie—"

"Drop it," I said, in a cold voice. She froze and watched as I began to pace in front of

her, my eyes always fixed on hers. “Today wasn’t a coincidence, was it? You were following me.”

“I...I wasn’t following you!” she shrieked like a desperate woman tired of speaking her truth. Or at least, that’s what it sounded like. An act, I reminded myself. “I was only out doing some chores. That’s all.”

“Chores?”

“I was buying groceries and picking up some dry-cleaning,” she said in a calmer voice now.

There was a silence, and I watched her shoulders fall in relief, as though that explanation was good enough.

“Really?” I said, in an icy tone. “Where were the groceries? Where were the clothes? When I took you, you were empty-handed.”

Her mouth hung open in shock so genuine that I had to wonder if she had ever taken acting classes. She jumped off the couch and walked over to me with her hands outstretched as though pleading. “I was on my way to the grocery store, I swear. My bodyguard Dom was picking up the dry cleaning while I got a coffee.”

I frowned, remembering the coffee she’d dropped when I’d grabbed her. She made a good argument, I’d give her that, but at the same time, it could have been a concocted story.

She took advantage of my silence and confused thoughts. “Whatever you’re thinking, it’s not like that. My brothers, they...” her voice quivered. “They never involve me in their business. Dom was only there to protect me while I was out. Whatever it is you think they did, I would know nothing of it.”

Then she looked up at me, a defiant look coming over her face. She stood taller, and through the curtain of innocent on her face, I saw mild rage. “Besides, I know my brothers. They never cross a line, so I don’t know what it is you’re so angry about. Maybe before holding on to this anger, you need to cross-check your facts. I’m telling you, you’ve got the wrong person.”

I cocked an eyebrow in her direction, surprised at how despite her precarious situation, her loyalty shone through.

“Larissa,” I said, clicking my tongue as I slowly circled her standing frame. “On one hand, you tell me your brothers don’t involve you in the family business. On the other, you claim they’re incapable of having crossed me. Which is it? You know enough about the business to consider them innocent, or you don’t know, and your trust in your brothers is just an illusion.”

I watched her chest heave as I stood before her again, and her lashes dazzled with wetness, from tears she was trying to hold back. She hurtled out choked words. “They’re my brothers. I know them in my bones. I know they’re good. There’s nothing more I can say,” and then, the silent tears fell down her cheeks.

I watched her face and felt a small clamp in my heart, twisting the truth enough to make me question myself. Then I remembered my conversation with the twins. My spies had told me that the Ajellos were holding secret dinners without us and involving the smaller families to return to ‘traditions’. They were essentially stating that we had betrayed our Italian heritage by colluding with the Russians.

All the evidence I had pointed to the Ajellos. It pointed to her. The way I saw it, the Ajellos were the loudest to speak against us. We were attacked, and I had a car following me from the warehouse after the attack. Somehow, an Ajello and their most trusted man were at the same place where I held a meeting with my spies.

There were too many moving pieces at the right place, at the right time, for it all to have been a coincidence. No matter how truly petrified and innocent Larissa looked, I couldn't completely buy her act.

I had to remind myself to remember that families like ours were trained to maintain innocence when caught by an enemy. Chances were, Larissa knew just how to throw wool over my eyes, and she'd chosen to train in the whole innocent act.

I had to remind myself to not get caught up in her trap.

"Gastone wouldn't send his precious sister into the wolf's den without a purpose." I stepped toward her, towering over her. The movement made her flinch. Good. I wanted her to be afraid. "Did he think I wouldn't notice? Has he kept you from the world to spy when needed? Who else are you spying on? Are you following the Vadims? The Ustinovs?"

She averted her gaze and whispered into nothingness, her gaze fixed on a spot in the floor. "I don't know who they are," she insisted in a flat tone, as though she was slowly giving up on explaining even. "And I wasn't sent by anyone. I told you, I was there for chores."

My laugh was dry, humorless. "A coincidence, then?"

She furrowed her brows and looked up at me like a desperate, feral cat. When she spoke, her voice came out in nearly a scream, filled with frustration. "I don't know what you want me to say! Yes, it was a coincidence. But you don't want to believe that, do you? So go ahead, do what you want and get this over with."

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A tear trickled down her cheek, and she wiped it away with the back of her hand, staring up at me defiantly.

God, she was good. I watched her face, studying the stubborn set of her jaw. Either she was the most accomplished liar I'd ever encountered, or she was telling a partial truth. Neither possibility changed my plans.

She must know something. She was the only sister to Gastone, Carlo, and Dino. She was a valuable tool, a trove of information waiting to be discovered. I knew what I had to do.

I would need to keep her around indefinitely. Day by day, second by second, I had to push her until she grew tired and broke. She was the key to uncovering her family's plans, and there was no way I could let her go before I had all the answers, or at least some satisfactory ones.

I watched her nervously flicker her gaze to me and avert it again. I watched as she hunched into herself, her arms wrapped tight against her stomach. I watched every heave of her chest, every sign of her distress.

And I felt bad, I did. But not enough. "Your answers are of no use to me," I said, coldly, as the detachment set into me.

Her breath caught. "What does that mean? What are you going to do?"

I didn't answer. Instead, I grabbed her arm, my decision having been made.

“You had your chance to talk,” I said. “Now we do this the hard way and will keep doing it the hard way until you give me what I want.”

I yanked her toward me. She gasped, immediately struggling against my grip.

“Let go of me!” She twisted, her free hand coming up to claw at my face.

I caught her wrist before her nails could make contact, squeezing just hard enough to make her wince. “Don't make this worse for yourself,” I warned.

“You're insane,” she hissed, her earlier composure fracturing. “My brothers will kill you for this!”

“They can try.” I began dragging her across the living room, toward the hallway that led deeper into the mansion. “Many have tried before them, and frankly, they're the ones dead.”

She fought me every step of the way. She was kicking and pulling. She even attempted to bite my arm at one point. I growled and jumped back to save my skin, but kept my grip on her tight.

God, she fought like a wildcat. Her hair whipped across both our faces, and her voice echoed threats she would never fulfill. She lashed and thrashed with all her might to get free, but I was stronger.

“Please,” she begged me when she lost her strength to fight me as I forced her down the corridor. “Whatever you think I know, I don't. I swear on my mother's grave.”

“Don't,” I growled. “Don't bring your dead into this. It won't help you.”

We passed through the kitchen, where two of my men stood guard and watched me

drag a woman through the house without giving out a reaction. One opened the heavy door that led to the basement stairs without being asked.

Larissa's struggles intensified when she saw the darkness beyond. "No," she gasped. "No, please, not down there."

There was something in her voice, a vulnerability that shone through. She seemed truly petrified, and for a moment, I weakened and let my mind consider alternatives. But then I thought of my family. I needed the best fighting chance to protect them, and if she feared the basement, perhaps she'd break faster.

I pushed my doubts away. "Last chance to tell me what your family is planning."

"I told you, I don't know!" Her voice broke on the last word, tears finally spilling onto her cheeks.

I hardened my heart against the sight. "Then you leave me no choice."

The stairs were steep, forcing me to half-carry her down them to keep us both from falling. At the bottom, I flipped a switch that illuminated the converted space from basement to prison. There were metal bars to hold her in a cell, which contained a cot, a sink, and a small enclosed toilet.

Larissa went rigid when she saw it. "You can't keep me here," she whispered, her voice hollow with disbelief. "People will look for me."

"Let them look." I propelled her toward the cell, fishing the key from my pocket. "By the time anyone traces you to me—if they ever do—you could be here for years."

I unlocked the door and shoved her in. She grabbed the bars, trying to hold the door open, but I was stronger and pulled it shut. Her feet slid against the floor as she clung

to the door with every dying hope.

At last, I managed to shut the cell door, and it locked automatically. She stumbled, steadied herself against the wall, and then whirled to face me, her hands wrapping around the bars.

“You won't get away with this!” she said with pure fury. “My brothers will tear this city apart looking for me and when they do, you'll realize what a mistake you made, you hear me?”

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“Good,” I said quietly. “Let them come. Perhaps I could then use you as leverage. There’s no way I’m letting you go without knowing their plans. I don’t care who delivers them to me.”

“There is no plan!” She rattled the bars fruitlessly, her knuckles white with exertion.

I shrugged.

Her eyes glazed over with rage. “I’m going to make your life hell!” she shrieked.

Despite the situation, I couldn’t prevent my lips from turning upward. I simply motioned at the space around us, as though to remind her of where she was.

She huffed and crossed her arms. “You underestimate me.”

I quirked an eyebrow. She didn’t have a shred of fear in her, did she? Even now, she fought.

“I...I’ll break out of this cell. And when I do, I’ll...”

“-You’ll what?” I cut her off, curious to see where she was going with this.

She simmered down, watching me with narrowed eyes. I turned away and moved toward the stairs. Behind me, I heard her scream expletives in my direction—in English and Italian.

God, she had a dirty mouth if she wanted. And I didn’t bother holding back a smile as

I walked away. She was... entertaining.

“You can't just leave me here!” she cried as I reached the top of the stairs. “I'm innocent! Is this how you treat—”

I paused, looking back at her over my shoulder. “Everyone knows something, Larissa. Even if they don't realize it.” I studied her for a moment longer. “I'll return in the morning. Perhaps a night alone with your thoughts will improve your memory.”

Her face crumpled then, the last of her composure fracturing. “Please,” she whispered. “I'm begging you. Don't do this.”

For a heartbeat, I wavered. But I wasn't a fool. She had been trained for this, I reminded myself.

“Goodnight, Ms. Ajello.” I turned and stepped out of the basement, closing the door behind me to muffle her final desperate plea.

In the kitchen, one of my men waited for me. “Boss?”

“Dmitri, keep an eye on her and do not let her out for even a moment, no matter what she says. Pass her food, water, and a blanket. She needs nothing else. No one speaks to her, but me,” I told him.

He nodded once. “Security?”

“Double it. If someone knows we took her, there could be trouble,” I checked my watch—nearly ten at night. “Where's Pavel?”

“I can have him with you in your office.”

I nodded, needing to speak to my right-hand man.

Ten minutes later, Pavel knocked and entered my office. “Boss?”

“Pavel,” I swung my chair in his direction. “The car I drove today, I need it burned.”

“Burned?”

“I took a girl today.”

“Who?” His eyes widened.

I didn’t reply, and he remembered himself, realizing it wasn’t for him to ask for details I didn’t offer.

“Crush and burn the car. If we were caught on CCTV, I don’t want it traced back to us. That car will never hit the road again. Can never be seen again. You understand?”

“Yes, Boss,” he said. “We’ll cover all tracks. You will need a new vehicle, I assume?”

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I nodded. “Make it a different model, a different color.”

“Certainly, Boss,” he nodded, and walked out.

Chapter 4 - Larissa

I sat with my back against the wall, staring at the floor, frozen in time. It could have been minutes, or maybe even hours; I couldn't care to count down the seconds because even breathing was a concentrated effort to avoid falling apart.

It was dark in the basement cell that felt more like a dungeon. Not that I'd ever seen a dungeon, but then again, I'd never seen a prison cell before, either.

The precariousness of my situation wasn't lost on me. I had been taken from the middle of a busy street and brought to what was clearly a madman's house, and no one knew where I was. My vision tunneled in on a mark on the floor as I tried to note its pattern and color, imagining how it had gotten there. This focus was to keep me sane; if I didn't do that, the nervous pain crushing my chest would have escalated into a full-fledged panic attack.

I named five things in the cell and took some breaths. I tried to note five sounds. I heard the buzz from a flickering lone bulb somewhere in the distance, the sound of an overhead fan, and that was that. No other noises, no voices, no footsteps overhead.

It was utterly lonely.

I couldn't name five sounds, and the panic from that revelation reached for my

fingers, causing them to tingle. I stood, finding I might be going insane, and shook my legs and hands to rid myself of the wretched sensation of pins and needles.

Sitting there wasn't helping in any way whatsoever. If I wanted out, I'd have to fight for it, and while doing so, it was important for me to keep my wits around.

I had already tried to scream and yell, even after my captor had left. I had pounded against the metal bars, pulled and clanged them hard enough to know the sound must have reached upstairs, and yet no one paid me any heed. I had mapped my hands inch by inch across the cement walls, feeling for a crack, a concealed door, something, anything but found nothing. I had then looked upward, hoping to find an exhaust or a vent to crack open and crawl out from, but the walls gave no hope for escape. There wasn't even a window in sight, let alone a vent.

I walked through my small cell once more and reached the same conclusion. There were no exits. Frustrated, I decided to try something different. I was about to remove the sheets from my bed, which was more than necessary for what was essentially a camping cot, when I heard the basement door open.

Plans abandoned, I rushed to the bars and clung to them, peering out toward the stairs to see who was coming. Maybe I could find a way out through the power of persuasion.

A guard walked up to my cell with a tray in his hand. I stepped aside with a racing heart to stand behind where he would open the door to my cell. He would have to open the door to give me my food, wouldn't he? And when he did, I could push past him and escape, locking him up in here instead.

But to my shock, he accessed a food slot, the smallest bars popping open to create enough space near the floor for him to bend down and slide the tray over to me. I watched, harrowed and disappointed, as the doors to my cell never opened.

“Eat,” he said in a robotic, monotone voice and began to walk away.

“No, please,” I begged, grabbing the cells. “Listen. Just...listen.”

He paused momentarily, but never turned to face me. This was my chance, I knew, to have a chance at freedom.

“I’ve been taken for something I never did,” I tried to coax him. “I don’t belong here.”

I saw his spine straighten, but he never turned to face me. He took one step forward.

“My brothers,” I said, with more urgency now. “They’ll do anything to have me by their side. Anything. You’d be handsomely paid for returning me to them. Please, take me to them.”

With bated breath, I waited for his response, my heart thudding in my chest as the silence stretched between us. But just as I was about to speak again, the guard stiffened and turned to me.

“Eat,” he said, one more time, shaking his head to my request, before he turned back and retreated up those steps again.

I pressed myself against the wall and fell to the ground, curling my arms around my stomach. For the first time in hours, I cried. The crying lulled me into a calm that once again brought me courage.

After half an hour or so, I got off the floor and walked over the plate of food. In a fit of rage, I kicked it away, watching as the food splattered all over the place.

There’s no way in hell I was eating a thing they gave me. For all I knew, it could

have been poisoned. Besides, I thought to myself, someone would have to clean this mess up, and when they came to do that, I'd try to make a run for it.

But, until then, I didn't stop fighting. I had tried almost every avenue for escape and would continue to do so. Any guard that came, I'd plead for their help. Any food that came, I would avoid. In the meantime, I had to keep trying.

Out of ideas, I ran a frustrated hand through my hair, and then, there, I felt it. The pins in my hair I'd forgotten about.

An idea dawned.

I quickly pulled out a small bobby pin and carefully inspected it in my hand. This small, seemingly insignificant object was now my only hope.

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I had never been in such a situation before, but remembered watching a TV show once where a prisoner escaped by picking a lock. Not that I knew how to do that, but I prayed and hoped I could figure it out.

With trembling fingers, I straightened out the pin and started to work on the lock of the cell door. Tens of minutes passed in a blur as I tried to break past the mechanism, but nothing worked and at last impatience took over. With desperate fury to get out, I jammed the pin a little too hard. To my horror, the pin broke off in the lock.

“Shit,” I cursed, and quickly extracted the stuck bit. I had lost a pin and was nowhere closer to escaping.

I went back and slumped down onto the thin mattress, fighting back tears of frustration. There was nothing else I could do. I had tried everything but clearly had no useful skills to help me out of such a situation. I felt angry at the world, at my brothers who spent a lifetime protecting me, but never taught me how to save myself.

I woke up the next morning to the sound of the food slot opening. I sprang out of bed, to my feet, adrenaline rushing through my veins.

I walked over to the tray, where it had been put, and dropped the contents on the floor.

The guard glanced at the food, then at me, eyes narrowing.

“Not hungry?”

“I don't eat poison,” I spat.

He shrugged, before walking off. “Starve then. Boss says to feed you, not make you eat.”

Before he could turn to leave, I angled the tray in my hands to slip out through the bars. If I could knock him out by the cell, perhaps I could reach over and grab his keys.

To my shock, he dodged with practiced ease, grabbed my wrist, and twisted until I dropped the tray with a clatter.

“Nice try, princess,” he said with a whistle. “I’ll make sure to tell the kitchen you’re to not have a tray, or any cutlery starting tomorrow.”

And then, he walked out with his hands in his pockets. His pockets.

And I was out of any and all ideas.

I screamed in frustration, kicking the wall until my foot throbbed. The water they'd left remained untouched as well. Thirst clawed at my throat, but paranoia kept me from drinking. For all I knew, they'd drugged it to make me compliant for... whatever they had planned.

Hours passed in miserable monotony. I had no sense of time and tried to sleep, but my churning mind conspired against rest, and for all I knew, it might still have been daylight outside. Instead, I returned to examining the door lock and then squatted

down to see if I could break through the food slot instead.

I was on my knees, hopelessly feeling the lock's exterior with another pin from my hair when I heard footsteps.

“Interesting approach,” my captor said as I looked up to see him appear into view, towering over me. “Though I've yet to meet anyone who can pick a prison-grade lock with a hairpin.”

I got to my feet and dusted the dirt off me. His eyes traveled the length of my cell before they met mine. Those same, piercing brown whiskey eyes.

“You could just let me go,” I suggested, affecting a casual tone I didn't feel. “Save us both the trouble.”

His lips quirked—not quite a smile, more like an acknowledgment of an amusing but futile effort. “I see you've been refusing meals.”

“I'm not stupid enough to eat something you've given me.”

“If I wanted to kill you, Larissa, I wouldn't waste food in the process. The hunger strike is unnecessary. Drop the act.”

My temper flared. “Act? You kidnap me, throw me in this hole, and have the audacity to accuse me of acting?”

“You know what you did.” His voice remained level, conversational almost. “And I will get to the why. The innocent routine is wasted on me.”

“It's not an act,” I protested, crossing my arms in front of me. “And you know what? You've given me so much time in here—”

“It’s been less than a day,” he clarified.

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“I wouldn’t know, would I?” I shot back, frowning in his direction. “No clocks. Not a window in sight. You’ve let me fester in here with lots of time to think, and I’m warning you now that when I get out, I’m going to make sure my brothers burn this place to hell, with you in it.”

“Your family sent you,” he stated as he ignored my empty threats, so confident that for a moment, I wondered if I was missing something. “You’re their eyes and ears. Their little spy. I want the truth.”

“You’re delusional,” I snapped, anger temporarily overwhelming fear. “I’ve always been protected. My brothers wouldn’t use me for... whatever this conspiracy is in your head.”

He stepped closer to the bars, and the air between us seemed to crackle with tension. “They’ve trained you well. The wide-eyed innocence is almost convincing.”

“Fuck you,” I spat, my composure cracking. “I have nothing more to say to you. Why don’t you go back crawling to whatever part of hell you came from?”

For once, I spoke the truth. I didn’t wish to see his face for a moment longer and hoped my insults would be enough to make him go back up.

To my surprise, he broke into a half-grin, the kind that made me stop in my tracks. “Oh, sweetheart,” he growled in a low voice, stepping closer as he wrapped a hand around the bars, his face inches away from mine, rendering my heart to flutter from god knows what. “It won’t be me going to hell.”

His sudden proximity sent a shiver down my spine, but I refused to let it show. I squared my shoulders, meeting his intense gaze with defiance. “Are you threatening me?”

He cocked his head, and I watched his jaw clench. That perfect, sculpted jaw. What a waste of good looks, I thought to myself, on a man that evil.

“No,” he clicked his tongue at last. “I’m threatening your brothers for what they did to me. Your role is yet to be ascertained.”

“That’s what you do, isn’t it?” I said without thinking. “Make up stories in your head? Fall in love with a truth that doesn’t exist just to serve your agenda? This organization you’re so proud of—it’s going to fall into the hands of someone like you.”

Then, I saw it. The momentary lapse in his composure. I had struck a nerve, and I realized it. He was trying to prove something. To himself, or someone else, and I rode the coattails of this opportunity to be rid of him.

“That’s right,” I continued. “Just wait until everyone finds out you made a fool of yourself by kidnapping the wrong person. Wait until they all laugh themselves silly when they think of your name.”

That, I thought, was the final blow. I had made it perfectly clear that he’d get nothing more than an argument out of me, and I expected him to walk away.

Needless to say, I scrambled back as the door swung open, and he stepped inside, his presence too large for the cramped cell.

He stopped directly in front of me, so close I could smell his cologne. It made me all heady and shouldn’t have been appealing in my current state, but somehow was.

With deliberate slowness, he pulled the door closed—and it automatically clicked shut from the inside.

With both of us trapped in the cell together.

My breath caught. “What are you doing?”

“Getting comfortable.” He removed his suit jacket, folded it with meticulous care, and set it on the edge of my cot. His shirt, I noticed, clung to his frame like water, highlighting the planes across his broad chest and the hills of his muscular arms. I swallowed hard at the brute strength I knew he was capable of deploying.

He whispered, “We're going to have a long talk, you and I.”

I backed away until I hit the wall. “There's nothing to talk about.”

“There's everything to talk about.” He loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar. The casualness of the gesture felt somehow more threatening than overt aggression. “Starting with why the Ajello family planted their sister at my heels, coincidentally right after the attack on our operation.”

“I was out doing chores,” I insisted, hating the defensive note in my voice. “It's not my fault your 'business fronts' are nearby.”

“With Dom by your side?” He raised an eyebrow as he stepped closer, and I inched to the side, stepping away from him. He followed, a predator on a hunt.

“I told you. He’s my bodyguard. Now, if only you could stop asking the same questions over and over again.”

“I’ve done enough research on your family to know that Dom is a precious resource.

Why waste him on you?”

I bristled at his tone and my voice came sharp. “My brothers love me,” I said defiantly. “To them, nothing matters more than my safety.”

“Of course,” he clicked his tongue as he drew closer, attempting to plant his arms on either side of me while I pressed my back against the wall. I bent and ducked underneath him, my heart racing as I fled to the opposite side of the room. He turned with a small smile.

“Of course they’d protect you. Their weapon.”

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“Never,” I said, hoarsely, feeling tired of the chase. He walked toward me again, and we circled one another. “Like I told you a million times already, my brothers have never involved me in their business.”

He stalked toward me then, moving with the fluid grace of someone who knew exactly how dangerous they were. This time around, I was done running. The cell was only that big, and I was growing tired. I crossed my arms and walked back to my cot, sitting on the edge as I stared up at him.

He looked down at me, glowering.

“Let me explain something,” he said, his voice dangerously soft. “Your brothers crossed some lines. I know you did, too.”

“I don’t even know your name,” I snarled in his direction.

He blinked momentarily, confusion spreading across his face.

“One hell of a spy I must have been, huh?” I said with growing confidence. “Spying on a man whose name I don’t even know?”

“Liar,” he growled, shaking his head as his fists clenched slowly, purposefully, by his side, right in my line of sight. He could have tried to intimidate me all he wanted, but it wouldn’t have worked. I was used to my brothers acting this way, and I’d grown a rather thick skin. But there was something about him...that still unnerved me. Something different.

“Think I’m lying all you want. Just make sure your brains don’t fall out from that thinking you’re so busy doing,” I snarled.

“Everyone in your family is involved in the business.” He was close enough now that I had to crane my neck up to meet his gaze. “Some just pretend better than others.”

I wanted to push him away, to create space between us, but instinct told me touching him would be a mistake. “My brothers protect me from that world.”

“Do they?” His whiskey-colored eyes studied me with unsettling intensity. “Or do they use your apparent innocence as a weapon?”

The accusation stung because it touched on a familiar insecurity—that my brothers saw me as nothing more than a liability, a possession to be sheltered and controlled. But I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing that.

“You don’t know my family,” I said coldly. “And you certainly don’t know me.”

“Then enlighten me, Larissa.” My name in his mouth sounded sweet, like nectar I shouldn’t touch. “Tell me what I’ve misunderstood.”

I lifted my chin. “Release me, and I’ll have my brothers explain it to you. Probably with bullets.”

His laugh wasn’t amused but appreciative, as if he liked it when I played clever. “I’ve met women from families like yours before. Trained from birth to appear harmless while being anything but.”

“Is that what happened?” I couldn’t resist asking. “Some Mafia princess broke your heart?”

Something dark flashed in his eyes, and he stepped closer, but then realized just how close he was, his hips inches away from my face. My heart raced as I looked up and saw his throat bob. And then, he stepped back, as though he hadn't realized how close he'd gotten. Good.

"I'm not leaving until you drop the act," he said, ignoring my question. "Tell me what your brothers are planning, and this can end today."

"You can stay here all night, and I won't say a word."

"Maybe I will."

I watched in shock as he proceeded to do just that. Hours passed in tense silence. He sat down against the wall opposite my cot and watched me with unnerving patience.

We remained locked in our stubborn standoff. I sat with my back against the backrest and watched him right back, refusing to let him know how unnerved I was. My legs ached from the hardness of the mattress. My stomach growled audibly. Thirst made my tongue feel swollen.

As if reading my mind, he stood and picked up the untouched water bottle and broke the seal. He took a small sip, then offered it to me. "See? Not poisoned."

My throat constricted with need, but I shook my head. He sighed and shrugged, before settling back against the wall.

"My name's Gio. Giovanni," he said after another hour of silence.

His name. He offered me his name. Why? Our eyes met, and I gave the briefest nod, acknowledging the kindness, though did not question it further.

But he ruined it when he said. “You knew that, though, didn’t you? It had to be a lie when you said you didn’t know my name.”

I rolled my eyes and looked away, not dignifying his words with a response. When I caught his eye again, I thought I caught him half-smiling.

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The silence stretched between us, thick with hostility. But also, a current of awareness that made the small cell feel even more confining. When my brothers tried to intimidate me, it never felt like this. This was different. Charged. Dangerous in ways that had nothing to do with the threat of physical harm.

My eyelids grew heavy as exhaustion overtook adrenaline. I fought it, pinching my arm, blinking away the sleep. I wouldn't sleep with him here.

He noticed my struggle. "Stubbornness won't change your situation."

"Neither will cooperation, I suspect," I muttered.

Another hour passed. My body betrayed me with a jaw-cracking yawn.

"Sleep," he said, his voice softer than before. "I'll still be here when you wake."

That was precisely what I feared. I didn't respond and tried to stay awake.

My head nodded, jerking up again as I caught myself drifting. Maybe if I lay down, I could stay awake, but it could help with the fatigue. I stretched out on the thin mattress, my body betraying me with relief at finally lying down. I told myself I would just rest my eyes for a moment. Just a moment...

I woke to absolute darkness. The soft lightbulb that had tormented me with its constant flickering was off, plunging the cell into a blackness so complete I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. Panic seized my chest, squeezing the air from my lungs, and I sat up in bed.

“Hello?” My voice emerged as a frightened whisper.

“I’m still here.” Giovanni’s voice came from somewhere to my right, steady and calm.

I hated that his presence reassured me. “The light—”

“Power fluctuation. It happens in basements this old.”

I sat up, drawing my knees to my chest, trying to control my breathing. In the darkness, memories crowded close—memories I never wanted.

“You’re afraid.” It wasn’t a question.

“I’m not.” The denial was automatic, but my voice shook, betraying me.

I heard him move, felt the cot dip as he sat beside me. Not touching, but close enough that I could feel his body heat.

“Everyone fears something,” he said quietly.

“I said I’m not afraid,” I said, moving to the other edge of the bed, away from him.

“Right,” he said, in a tone that told me he thought otherwise.

Chapter 5 - Gio

The darkness in the basement was absolute when the power cut out. I allowed my eyes to adjust and when I heard Larissa taking panicked, short breaths, I made my way to her.

She said she wasn’t afraid, but she was acting like she was as I sat beside her on the

bed. What was her end game here? Did she hope to weaken me by taking this opportunity to play damsel in distress?

“Lights can take time to come back,” I said, my voice echoing against the concrete walls. “Unless you'd like to tell me what I want to know so you can be out of here.”

Another sound escaped her, higher-pitched this time. I could hear the sheets ruffle as she shifted.

“Playing frightened won't work on me,” I said, reaching for the phone in my pocket, using its faint glow to look at her face. “I've seen better performances.”

“Please,” she whispered, and something in her voice caught me off guard—a raw edge I hadn't noticed before. Her eyes flickered to the bulb and then toward the corridor. Under the beam of my flashlight, she appeared like a deer caught in headlights. Her eyes were wide, pupils dilated, and her skin ashen beneath her creamy complexion. Her hands gripped the sheets so tightly.

“Turn on the lights,” she said, her voice trembling.

I leaned back on my elbows, getting comfortable. She had tried to be afraid and I'd been gentle, but she was still quiet when spoken to. Perhaps, if she was truly afraid, I could play into it.

“What, are you afraid of the dark? Don't expect me to believe that,” I meant it as mockery, but the flinch that rippled through her body was unmistakable.

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“How long will they be out?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady and failing completely.

I should have told her the truth that it was probably just a circuit breaker, easily fixed. Instead, a cruel impulse made me say, “Could be days. Last time the power went out here, the basement was in the dark for nearly a week.” I watched her face crumple, feeling a glimmer of satisfaction at breaking through her stubborn silence.

Then, I turned off the light from my phone. “If you aren’t willing to speak,” I said, standing from the bed. “Then I might as well leave.”

I felt the bed shake as she jumped off of it. “No... No, please...” she whimpered.

She grabbed my hand in the dark, pulling it toward her.

Then she started to shake. It no longer felt like a performance of a woman acting frightened. She was trembling uncontrollably, and her breath came in sharp, painful gasps.

“The closets,” she rumbled. “I can’t do this. Not again. When I was bad, there would be no light for hours in there... if Father thought I deserved it. Don’t leave me here. Please. Please.”

I turned on the light on my phone once again and saw her eyes had welled with tears. A weird guilt crumbled my resolve. Making her this afraid by something she was truly triggered by wasn't part of my interrogation strategy. This wasn't useful.

“They'd tell me the monsters could smell fear,” she continued, her eyes now on the light from my phone. “That if I cried, they'd come for me. That the darkness was a punishment, and I had to learn to—” She broke off, her breathing coming too fast now.

“Stop,” I said, stepping closer. “There are no monsters here.”

She whimpered with a trembling lower lip, then looked up at me with defiance, but I could see she was masking an embarrassment. “I know that,” she said, jutting out her chin. “But still...don't.”

It was a simple ask. Bring back the lights, or don't leave her here. Her eyes trailed to where her hand held mine, and she removed hers as though she'd been burned. The look she gave me though, a pure plea for something as basic as light, made me pause.

I ran my hand through my hair, feeling the skin still simmering where she had touched me. I had interrogated dozens of people in this basement, but this wasn't an interrogation. This was a kind of torture I hadn't intended, and she was a woman.

I had never questioned or tortured a woman before, and if I left her here, I knew I would be crossing an internal boundary I couldn't make peace with.

Her breathing had become erratic. I could see her chest heaving, struggling to draw air.

“Fuck,” I muttered, making a decision that I knew would probably come back to haunt me. I took her hand on impulse. “Come on. We're leaving.”

She didn't move, frozen in the grip of her panic. I gently tugged at her hand, forcing her to look at me.

“Come. Now,” I insisted, knowing if I didn’t get her out now, she could be on her way to a full-blown panic attack, and this was no place to treat one should it arrive.

“I’m taking you upstairs,” I said, keeping my voice steady, neutral. “Away from the dark. Understand?”

Her only response was to nod. I could see her tears silently drip down her face as she stumbled by my side, fearful of the dark, up the narrow basement stairs, I navigated by flashlight.

We reached the top and I swung the doors open, bringing with it some light. She rushed out of the door into the kitchen, taking deep breaths as she joyfully took in the light, as though the darkness had crushed the air from her lungs.

In that moment, I knew I made the right call bringing her up. Had she remained down there, she would have gone mad from fear. I needed answers, but no one knew where she was, which meant I had all the time in the world to get them. I didn’t need to damage her in the process.

She turned to me then with a silent question in her eyes. “From now on, you’ll stay in the guest room,” I explained as I gripped her arm gently and walked her through the house.

I let her enter her bedroom first, before following. She immediately went to the bed and lay down, curling into herself. Her panic seemed to be receding.

“There’s water at your bedside. The maids will come in the mornings to clean, and they’ll bring you your meals. Feel free to call the housekeeping using that phone,” I pointed at the intercom.

She didn't respond, nor did she lift her head. Her fear was replaced by wariness and the return of her earlier silence.

"There are no power cuts here," I said, stepping back toward the door to give her space. "There's a bathroom through that door. Clean clothes in the wardrobe."

Her eyes, still wet with tears, moved from my face to the door and back, calculating.

"Don't," I warned, reading her thoughts. "The door will be locked from the outside. The windows don't open and can't be broken. This room is more comfortable than the basement, but it's still a cell."

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She said nothing, but the silence now had a confidence to it that hadn't been there before. She watched me like a clever hawk with a new kind of awareness. I'd shown weakness by bringing her up here, and she knew it.

“Rest,” I said, moving toward the door. “We'll continue our conversation tomorrow.”

No nod, no acknowledgment. She simply treated me as though I didn't exist. I sighed at how quickly she had withdrawn into silence again, but then again, what did I expect? What was I thinking? That I had brought her up here and she would be compliant?

Something told me Larissa Ajello wasn't the kind of woman who could be bought. I could treat her as well as I damned wish, but it would change nothing. She'd talk only when she was ready.

But, I'd make sure to push her enough for her to be willing. Over the next few days, weeks or more, if needed, I'd be back. Day after day, hour after hour. She'll see.

“Bye,” I said, turning back. She said nothing in return, just watched as I left, locking the door securely behind me.

I leaned against the hallway wall, pressing the palms of my hands against my eyes. What the hell was I doing? Any other man in my position would have left her in the basement, panic attack or not. Information was what mattered, not comfort. Not compassion.

But I wasn't any other man. And whatever this woman knew about her family's

intentions against mine, it wasn't worth watching her unravel before my eyes.

I walked away from her room, knowing that for today, we were done. I'd used her as an excuse to push off vital communication, and now, with her in my guest room, I knew it was time to update my brothers on how the business was going.

I hadn't told any of them about the attack at our warehouse. With Caspian still away, I didn't want to worry him on his honeymoon. As for my younger siblings, I wanted to protect them from the truth. If I told them what happened and by error, they let the news slip to the wrong person, the Vadims and Ustinovs might stop trusting our family.

For their safety, I had to give just enough information, but not all of it.

I made my way to my office, sending a quick text to one of the household staff to bring food to the guest room. Then I placed a call to my brothers to let them know that the shipment would have to be delayed.

Federico was the first to speak as the conference call connected. "Gio. What's happening? I was about to call you. The merchant officer said we have to pay for docking fee for a few extra days."

"Has there been a delay, Brother?" Dante asked.

"Yes," I said, keeping my voice even. "We have a complication."

"What kind of complication?" Luca asked.

"Some crates for packing the weapons fell short," I lied smoothly. "Quality control issue. I need another day, maybe two."

“Caspian won't like this,” Federico said. “He wants this shipment landed before competitors learn of our plans and infiltrate Europe with their own weapons. He hopes to move fast and be a monopoly.”

“I know what Caspian wants,” I said, an edge creeping into my voice. “I'll handle it.”

What I didn't say was that we had been attacked and that some of our men could have died. I'd kept that information to myself, not wanting to implicate Caspian and my brothers in what could become a diplomatic nightmare with our allies if handled poorly.

Considering how I'd kidnapped a girl and all that. I needed to fix this problem fast before the Italians realized I was behind taking an Ajello woman, and hopefully before Caspian returned.

“Fine,” Federico conceded.

I ended the call, knowing there was no point in troubling Caspian about the matter. He was still on his honeymoon and would see through the call. A shipment delay due to packaging issues was a simple problem—one he wouldn't expect me to call him about, so I refrained.

I sat back in my chair and my mind wandered once more to Larissa.

I thought of her face in the darkness, the naked terror there, and something turned over in my chest. I stood up, deciding to check on her one more time. I remembered all the trays of food she'd left untouched in the basement. I had to make sure she'd eat, at least.

I reached the guest room and unlocked it, knowing immediately that something was wrong when the door swung open to reveal an empty room. The food tray sat

untouched on a side table. The bathroom door stood open, revealing no one inside.

“Son of a bitch,” I muttered, turning for the door. She’d made a run for it. How?

Then my eyes caught on something by the door—small scratches in the metal around the lock. She’d picked it somehow, probably with something as simple as a hairpin.

Of course she did. She must have tried the same tactic in the basement, but those locks were escape-proof against such tactics. The bedroom locks, on the other hand, were simply for privacy, not imprisoning.

Shit.

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I moved quickly and pulled out my phone, alerting security to keep an eye out for her. Within moments, I heard an alarm sound along the perimeter wall to the right of the house. Some guards must have spotted her and were sending out a signal.

I raced through the house and out the back door, scanning the grounds. In the distance, a small figure was sliding through the back gate—a gate that was monitored hourly, but not around the clock.

I sprinted across the lawn, closing the distance with each stride. She heard me coming and tried to run faster, but I caught her just as she cleared the gate, my arms wrapping around her waist.

“No!” she screamed, kicking backward, her foot connecting painfully with my shin. “Let me go!”

I lifted her bodily off the ground, slinging her over my shoulder like a sack of flour. She weighed near nothing. “Not a chance.”

She pounded her fists against my back, twisting and struggling as I carried her back through the gate, securing it behind us. One of her hands slipped lower, clawing at my side, and I adjusted my grip, my hand accidentally skimming the curve of her ass in the process.

A jolt of awareness shot through me, and I knew the contact had been inappropriate—accidental, yet clearly unwelcome. I slid my hands down immediately to hold her behind her knees and felt her body stiffen at the prior contact, a moment of stillness before she resumed her struggle with even greater ferocity.

“Put me down, you bastard,” she hissed, trying to knee me in the chest.

I tightened my grip on her legs. “Stop fighting or I'll drop you on your head.”

“I'd rather have a concussion than go back in that house with you.”

We were halfway back to the mansion now, and I was growing tired of her squirming. I stopped and set her down, but before she could make another run for it, I pushed her against the stone wall that lined the garden path, pinning her there with my body.

“Listen to me,” I said, my face inches from hers. “You have two choices. Come back inside and cooperate, or go back to the basement. Without lights.”

Her breath hitched, but the fear in her eyes was quickly replaced by fury. “You're a monster,” she spat.

“I'm a man doing his job,” I corrected, suddenly aware of how close we were. Her chest rose and fell rapidly against mine. Her lips, full and cracked from nervous biting, parted slightly as she drew breath to argue further.

“Your job is kidnapping women?” she challenged, tilting her chin up defiantly.

“My job is protecting my family's interests,” I said, my voice dropping lower. “And right now, you're a threat to those interests.”

“I'm not telling you anything.”

“We'll see.”

Her eyes dropped to my mouth for a fraction of a second, then back to my eyes. The

air between us seemed to thicken, charged with an undercurrent that made no sense. I became intensely aware of the softness of her body against mine, the way she swallowed at the base of her throat.

God, that throat. It was beautiful, long, and I thought of all the things I wanted to do with it that didn't involve wrangling it.

I should have stepped back. I should have maintained distance and control. But instead, I found myself leaning closer, drawn by a gravity that was difficult to fight.

“Boss!”

The voice shattered the moment. I pulled away from her, turning to see two of my men approaching along the garden path.

“What?” I growled in their direction, stepping away from Larissa. I thought I heard her sigh. It wasn't one of relief, but something different. Exasperation.

“Your brothers are here,” one of them said.

What the hell were my brothers doing here without any warning? I felt my pulse quicken as I looked over at Larissa.

And how the hell was I going to explain her presence?

Chapter 6 - Larissa

“Offer them some drinks,” Gio growled at his men. “We'll be right in.”

His men nodded and walked back to the main house. We both watched their retreating backs and then Gio turned to me. “You're coming with me,” he said in a

tone that allowed for no argument.

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He gave me his arm, and when I looked reluctant to take it, he leaned closer and whispered: “Unless you’d prefer the basement again?”

The air from his voice skimmed my ear, and I shivered at the contact. I didn’t entirely hate the proximity. My brain turned into a jumbled mess. One part chided me for liking how good it felt to have him whisper in my ear, while the other told me to do whatever was necessary to avoid the basement.

Without another word, I took his arm.

He led me back into the mansion, and my heart hammered against my ribs as we made our way through the hallway. Gio was a dangerous and powerful man. I gauged that from his treatment of me and the dozens of armed men in this oversized prison he liked to call home.

His brothers would be just as dangerous. I tried to calm my mind as it raced in petrified terror of these men I was about to meet. I imagined them as cunning, dangerous, and out for my brothers’ blood.

What if they convinced Gio to take it further in his interrogation? My knees nearly buckled in fear of that thought.

“Walk,” Gio said impatiently.

“I am walking,” I snapped back, though my legs felt a little like jelly.

One moment, I was running so close to freedom, and now, I was being marched into

a roomful of his family members.

We paused outside the large double-sided doors for the living room. “You will behave in front of my brothers,” he looked down at me through furrowed brows as his hand reached to push open the door.

It wasn't a request. I nodded nervously.

The thought of meeting more men like him made my throat constrict.

I braced myself for whatever was to come as we entered the sprawling living room. Four men looked up at us. The family resemblance was unmistakable, and I had to force myself to remain standing instead of running out the door.

My gaze darted from one to the next, and I didn't know what to do. Should I have smiled? Should I have averted my gaze?

I didn't want to get on the wrong side of the group. My life kind of depended on it.

A tall, lanky man grinned in my direction. “Finally decided to join us,” he said to Gio, and then his gaze slid to me. I forced myself not to shrink back.

“What brought you here?” Gio asked.

“We were bored,” said another. He looked younger than Gio, and he shrugged playfully in my direction in a way of saying what's Gio going to do about it? Instinctively, I smiled at his playful motion.

“This is Larissa,” Gio said, nodding in my direction. “She's my guest for a while.”

My head snapped toward him. Just Larissa? Not Larissa Ajello, sister of our

enemies? Not the prisoner I've taken?

The tall brother stepped forward, extending a hand. "Hello, Larissa. We hope the Lebedev treatment is to your liking."

I hesitated before taking it, half-expecting some sort of trap. "Thank you," I managed, the words feeling foreign on my tongue.

I tried to rack my brain for if that last name Lebedev meant something, but came up empty. I'd never heard of the Lebedevs.

"These are my brothers," Gio made introductions around the room. "Federico, Dante, Luca, and Achille."

Each nodded in acknowledgment. Federico, tall and lean with calculating eyes; Dante, whose smile didn't quite reach his gaze; Luca, younger with a restless energy about him; and Achille, who regarded me with open curiosity.

None of them looked at me with the cold contempt I'd expected. There was more than a little curiosity, yes, but not the straight-out aggression I'd braced for. In fact, they were friendly.

My mind raced, piecing together the facts. Gio hadn't revealed my last name. He simply called me Larissa. Why? What game was he playing?

And then it clicked—he didn't want them to know he'd kidnapped me. For whatever reason, he was keeping my identity a secret, even from his own family.

Which meant I had leverage.

I forced my shoulders to relax, my lips to curve into something resembling a smile. If

Gio wanted to pretend I was a guest, then I'd be the most inquisitive guest they'd ever encountered, understanding that I could use this opportunity to gain information.

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“Gio’s home is beautiful, and he’s a lovely host,” I said, letting my gaze wander appreciatively around the room. “I wasn't expecting something so...warm.”

“What were you expecting?” Luca asked, leaning forward with interest. “A dungeon?”

I laughed whole-heartedly. Beside me, I felt Gio stiffen.

“Besides, the whole dungeon thing is more Dante’s style,” Achille said with a smirk. “The rest of us prefer being civil.”

Dante rolled his eyes but didn't contradict him.

“Now,” I said in an overly casual tone. “Where are those drinks?”

“Tsk,” Federico shook his head at Gio. “Some host!” His brother came over and gave me his arm. I left Gio’s and took his as he walked me to the bar. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw Gio frowning at me in warning, as though asking what it was I was playing at.

I gave him an innocent smile and turned my attention back to Federico.

“Red or white?” he asked as I reached for a wine glass.

“White, please.”

He poured me a drink, and we walked back to join the rest. “So... how long are you

staying here for?" he asked.

Around me, I saw the others pause in conversation, eager to learn more about their brother's guest.

"I plan to play it by the ear," I said, non-committal in answer.

"And what brings you to New York?" asked Dante, without a smile. Something told me he was the one I needed to watch out for. The one who didn't trust.

"Never been before," I shrugged.

"And where is it that you are from?" he fired back immediately.

Beside me, I felt Gio stand straighter, his nervous energy rubbing off on me. "She's—" he tried to intervene, but I cut him off, taking control of this situation. For some reason, I knew that if I allowed him to speak for me, I wouldn't be able to bond enough with the brothers to get a foot in for an invite to the rest of the evening.

"I've lived in plenty of places," I said with a smile. "My family moved a lot, but mostly we've been in the US."

"You've spent time overseas?" Achille asked excitedly.

"My childhood in Russia," I explained with a warm smile. There was nothing wrong with dangling that one truth in front of them. I knew they were part of a crime unit of some sort, and their last name told me they had Russian blood. I could be anyone from their world.

Gio watched every exchange with bated breath, but by now, he had realized I wasn't going to give up his dirty secret. Yet, he hovered over me, his presence like a cloud.

“Will you be joining us for dinner, Larissa?” Luca asked, and I felt Gio stiffen beside me.

Before he could answer for me, I smiled brightly. “I’d love to, if it’s not too much trouble. I’m absolutely famished.”

Gio’s fingers twitched against my arm—a warning. I ignored it.

Luca’s eyes fell on Gio. “You might get bored...with talk of shop.”

I pretended to look disappointed when Achille scoffed. “We have no work to talk of tonight. Don’t be a bore, Brother. Or are you afraid we’ll run her off?” he wiggled his eyebrows at Gio.

I knew then that Gio was caught in a trap. His brothers had invited me for dinner and had made it clear they’d like my company. If he said no now, it would look strange.

As I predicted, Gio turned to me with a pained smile. “Join us, please.”

And just like that, I was in charge of the evening. I could now learn so much about Gio and his family—information I knew I would later use for leverage. A small, petty side of me wanted to flaunt it in Gio’s face, and without a second thought, I linked my arm through his and gave him a big, cheery smile. “Lead the way!”

He paused for a moment, his eyes traveling from my face to where our arms were interlinked. Just then, I realized what I’d done. I felt the heat of his skin crawl through my clothes, but I couldn’t exactly extract myself from the touch now without raising suspicion. I felt my ears redden, my cheeks flush and then, Gio smiled sweetly, as though he saw right through the racing of my heart.

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“Of course,” he said with a smile of his own, telling me game on, as he led me to the dining room. I could feel his gaze on me throughout the entire walk, and once we reached the table, he placed a hand on the small of my back, causing me to nearly jump at the current that traveled up my spine while he pulled out a chair and helped me get settled.

I finally found myself seated between Dante and Luca, with Gio directly across from me. His gaze never left me as servants brought out the chowder.

“So, Larissa,” Federico said as we began to eat, “how did you and Giovanni meet?”

Gio's eyes narrowed. I took a deliberate sip of my soup before answering.

“It was quite unexpected,” I said honestly, just enough to deflect a follow up. “He showed up when I least expected it.”

“That sounds like Gio,” Luca laughed. “Always where you least expect him.”

I nodded, my smile tight. “He's full of surprises.”

“And what do you do, Larissa?” Dante asked, his tone casual, but his eyes sharp; I didn't miss that.

“I work with my family,” I answered vaguely. “We're in...imports and exports, mainly.”

“Imports from where?” Dante pressed.

I twirled my spoon in my soup. “Russia, primarily. We have...connections there.”

“And your family name?” Federico asked, his tone deceptively light.

I felt Gio's foot nudge mine under the table—a warning. Without wasting a moment, I accidentally spilled my wine all over the table.

“Oh dear!” I gushed, jumping out of my chair as Luca handed me some napkins. “How clumsy of me!”

A few minutes passed by as a new plate was brought out for me. I used this time to dab the tablecloth clean.

The conversation shifted as the next course arrived. I dug into the meatloaf and chewed slowly, thinking of ways to learn more without raising an alarm.

“This house must have quite a history,” I said, putting down my fork. “How long have you owned it, Gio?”

“It’s been our family for three generations,” Federico answered on behalf of his brother. “Our grandfather acquired it when he first came to America.”

“From Russia?” I asked innocently.

“Our maternal family came from Italy,” Dante nodded. “While our paternal has roots in Russia, as you must know already.”

“Of course,” I nodded.

Lebedev. I turned the name over in my mind again. My brothers had mentioned many crime families over the years, but couldn’t recall them mentioning this family.

“And now you've brought those roots here,” I continued, keeping my tone conversational. “Building an empire of your own, I imagine.”

“Something like that,” Dante replied, his gaze suddenly more penetrating. “We've established ourselves in various...industries.”

“Shipping,” Luca offered.

“Real estate,” added Federico.

“Security,” Achille said with a smirk that suggested 'security' meant something entirely different.

I nodded as if this was all perfectly normal dinner conversation. “Diversification is important in business.”

“Indeed,” Caspian agreed. “And what does your family specialize in, Larissa?”

I felt Gio's gaze boring into me. “Protection, mainly,” I said, thinking of my brothers. “Ensuring that those under our care remain...unmolested by outside interests.”

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By the time dessert arrived, I had pieced together some information about the Lebedevs. They controlled shipping routes along the eastern seaboard. They had connections in high places. They were expanding their territory.

All useful information that my brothers would want to know—if I ever got back to them.

As dinner concluded, Federico rose from his seat first. “I’m afraid we should get going. It was a pleasure meeting you, Larissa. I hope we’ll see more of you during your stay.”

The others followed suit, offering polite goodbyes that felt surreal given the circumstances. Within minutes, Gio and I were alone in the dining room, the silence stretching between us like a taut wire.

“What the hell was that?” he finally asked, his voice low and dangerous.

I raised an eyebrow. “Dinner? I believe it’s a common evening ritual among civilized people.”

His hand slammed onto the table, making the crystal glasses jump. “You know what I mean. The questions. The probing. What game are you playing?”

“Me?” I laughed, the sound sharp and brittle. “That’s rich coming from the man who kidnapped me, then introduced me to his family like I was some girlfriend he’d brought home.”

He stood, circling the table toward me. "You're gathering information. I saw it."

I rose to meet him, refusing to be intimidated despite the way my heart raced. "And you're hiding the fact that you kidnapped me. Why is that, Giovanni?"

He moved closer, crowding my space as he slammed his fists on the table on either side of me, his body bracing over mine as I was half-forced on the edge of the table. I could smell his cologne, and beneath it, the heady remnants of heat on his skin. His eyes simmered on mine, burning right through me.

"I still think you're a spy," he whispered, sending a shiver down my spine. "Tonight, you proved just as much with your line of questioning."

"And I still think you're paranoid," I whispered back, tilting my head up at him until our lips were mere inches away. "And clearly keeping secrets from your own brothers."

His eyes darkened, and for a moment, I thought he might kiss me. For a moment, I forgot everything, including who he was. Who I was.

We stood perilously close to making a mistake, and my trembling knees urged me to stop denying it. The realization that part of me wanted him to was more terrifying than any threat he'd made, so I instantly averted my gaze and tucked my shoulders down.

I heard him release a breathy sigh, the remnants of which I swear I felt on my lips, and then he stepped away.

"You're going to cause trouble, Ajello," he said as I walked past him.

"I've never been afraid of a little trouble," I shot back, and when I did, I saw him give

me a smoldering, dazed look.

The next thing I knew, I was walking to my room, and he was at my heels. “What is it you plan to do with this information you seek on my family?”

“Nothing if you let me go,” I hissed at him as we climbed up the stairs.

“Were you sent to spy on just me, or my entire family?” he asked.

“Do you even hear yourself?” I shrieked in near annoyance as we reached my door. “I told you already. I. Am. Not. A. Spy.”

And just like that, the moment was gone. Just like that, anything I felt for him burned away in the face of my anger, and I turned away from him.

I made it three steps away from my room door before his hand closed around my wrist, spinning me back to face him. “This isn't over,” he warned.

“Like you'd ever let me forget,” I replied. Then I yanked my arm free and strode for the room, my head high despite the trembling in my legs.

He followed me to the door, watching as I turned the handle. “We'll continue this conversation tomorrow,” he said, his tone making it clear it wasn't a suggestion.

I looked at him over my shoulder, taking in his powerful frame, the intensity of his gaze, the way his presence seemed to fill the hallway.

“No,” I said simply. “We won't.”

And then I stepped inside and slammed the door in his face, the heavy thud echoing with finality.

Alone at last, I leaned against the door, my breath coming in short gasps. Lebedev. The name still meant little to me, but I knew one thing for certain—these people were dangerous, and Gio most of all.

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Not just because he'd kidnapped me or because he was clearly Bratva from the nature of their business and conversations. But because when he'd stood so close, looking at me with those whiskey eyes, I'd forgotten to be afraid.

Chapter 7 - Gio

The next morning, I knocked lightly on Larissa's door, balancing the tray of breakfast in my other hand. By no means had I forgiven her for her inquisition into my family last night, but rather, this was my way of wearing her down. I'd asked the maid to let me bring her breakfast since I wanted any opportunity I could have to question her.

"Come in!" I heard her say, and when I entered, I paused. She had her back to me as she dried her hair over the bureau. I felt rooted to the ground as my eyes lingered over her—she was in nothing but a towel, the planes of her shoulders and curves of her legs branching out like a sculpture.

I felt my breath hitch. God. She was beautiful.

I cleared my throat to announce my presence and averted my gaze. She turned, gasping. "Oh my god," I heard her muffled voice over the sound of the hairdryer before she unplugged it. "I thought you were the maid!"

"Surprise," I said, meeting her eyes and giving her a little shrug.

She looked mortified, her embarrassment coloring a pretty pink across her cheeks.

"Excuse me," she said hoarsely, as she ran into the bathroom.

When she emerged fully dressed, I saw the look of disappointment on her face. “You’re still here?” she questioned accusatorially and crossed her arms in front of her chest, giving me a glare that could melt a man on the spot.

I leaned back against the wall, my hands in my pocket. “A thank you for bringing breakfast would suffice.”

“The maids finally quit, huh? Realized how crazy you were as a boss?”

Oh, she was sassy, all right. That mouth of hers could fire off insults, and I was all for it.

“Rather, they didn’t wish to serve a spy,” I said right back.

Her eyes narrowed as she eyed the food on the bed, then reached for mine. Of course, she didn’t reach for the food. Probably thought I’d poisoned it or something.

She then turned to me, “I told you I’m not a spy.”

“Oh, we’re taking that route again, Larissa?” I asked, anger rising in my chest. What was I doing? Admiring her beauty, her sass, her wit, when she was my enemy. God forbid that instead of tearing her down, I ended up shattered. I had to be more careful around her tricks.

“And what route is that, Gio?” Her voice rose an octave.

“The lying. If you weren’t a spy, then why the hell did you ask all those questions last night? About my family, our home, our business, and security measures?”

“Fine. You want to know the truth?” she declared, raising her hands in the air in frustration. “I wanted to gather all the information I could. I wanted to use anything I

could to get out of here. You have no reason to keep me here!”

“I have every reason!” I clenched my fist and punched the air in frustration.

Larissa flinched, backing into the corner of the room, her eyes never leaving my face. For a brief moment, I felt bad for my display of rage, for scaring her, but then I remembered what her brothers did.

“Stop playing the innocent Mafia princess. I’ve had it with you. It’s bad enough your brothers bombed my operation just two weeks ago. You realize that they could have killed my men? My brothers? Me?”

Her mouth hung half-open and she shook her head in denial, her face going pale as she extended her hands toward me in shocked appeasement and disbelief.

“What? What are you saying? My brothers are in the Mafia, yes,” she began, her voice barely a whisper, “but they are not cruel. They would never hurt people, let alone kill anyone. They... they couldn’t have bombed your place. They...couldn’t.”

“Stop it,” I growled, my voice low. “Just stop with the act. My men were innocent. We were innocent. We never deserved their wrath.”

“They didn’t do it,” she insisted in a quiet whisper, more to herself than to me, and as I watched, tears welled in her eyes. “They would never bomb innocent people. They wouldn’t.”

“You’re protecting them!” I roared, and she flinched once more. Her eyes returned to the moment as if she had been lost in thought.

“I’m not!” Larissa's voice trembled, but there was steel beneath it as she raised her chin at me defiantly, looking like a true queen. Even dressed in those jeans and a

plain black sweater, she somehow maintained an aristocratic bearing, as if captivity was beneath her dignity. “I've told you a hundred times, I don't know why you're keeping me here! You've got it all wrong.”

The anger was now rising to an eruption. I had been there that wretched day, and to hear its existence being denied burned within me. Memories of the blast resurfaced: the screams, the shattered glass, the blood, and the cries.

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“Your brothers,” I bellowed, “bombed my warehouse on the east side. Two weeks ago. Nearly killed fifteen of my men.”

“I don't...” she started.

“Don't give me that bullshit!” My voice rose, and I saw her shoulders tense. “Your family has been eyeing our family's position since you were born. Your brothers have always been jealous.”

Her chin lifted. “My brothers don't hurt people.”

A laugh tore from my throat, bitter and sharp. “There's three ways I see this, Larissa. Either you're lying to yourself, you're lying to me, or it's a truth you know and don't want to face. There's only one way I see now to make you acknowledge the truth to me. It's to show you who your brothers truly are.”

Something flickered across her face—doubt, maybe—but she shook her head. “Whatever do you mean? It's none of those things. I told you, they wouldn't—“

“They wouldn't what? Kill? Torture? Traffic?” She shook her head as I continued to speak. “What fantasy world do you live in, Larissa? Do you think the Italian Mafia made their fortune selling pasta and good wine?”

“They're not like that,” she insisted, but her voice had lost some of its conviction. “They protect our community. They help people who need it.”

I studied her face, searching for the tell—the micro expression that would give away

her act. But all I saw was genuine belief. Either she was the best actress I'd ever encountered, or...

No. It wasn't possible. No one in our world stayed innocent past childhood.

“You know what?” I said, a plan already formed as my temper cooled. “I'm done arguing. You want to believe your brothers are saints? Fine. I'll show you exactly what kind of men they are.”

Fear sharpened her features. “What does that mean?”

I didn't answer, just pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed. “Dmitri. Bring the car around.”

“What are you doing?” Larissa's voice had risen, panic edging into it.

I tucked the phone away and moved to the closet, pulling out a dark jacket. “We're going for a drive.”

“I'm not going anywhere with you.” She planted her feet, arms crossed.

Her defiance that I so admired now grated at my nerves. “You don't have a choice. But if it makes you feel better, I'm not taking you to hurt you. I'm taking you to see the truth about your precious brothers, about you, or perhaps my delusions as you call it.” I tossed her the jacket. “Put this on. After this, one of us is going to be proven wrong.”

She caught it reflexively but didn't move to put it on.

I stepped closer, lowering my voice. “I'll drag you from here if I have to.”

Something in my tone must have convinced her I meant it. With trembling fingers, she pulled on the jacket. It swallowed her frame, making her look even smaller, more vulnerable.

The thought sent an unwelcome pang through my chest. I pushed it aside.

“When we go out there, for God's sake, don't try to run.” I motioned for her to walk through the door. “My men will be everywhere, and they won't be as gentle as I am if they have to chase you down.”

Her eyes flashed with indignation. “Gentle? You kidnapped me!”

“And you're still breathing, walking, and unharmed. In my world, that counts as gentle.” I steered her toward the door. “Now move.”

I ushered Larissa into the backseat of the car and slid in beside her.

“The pier,” I told the driver. “Find us a vantage point with cover. I want to see the Ajello loading dock without being seen.”

The driver nodded and took off. Our security convoy was distributed in front of us and behind to protect us from any attacks.

Larissa sat rigidly beside me, her hands folded neatly in her lap. She remained quiet, choosing the silent treatment as a weapon of rebellion. I let her have it, as I had nothing to say to her either. I was so sick and tired of her lies, feeling as though every inquiry I made into her intentions was met by a dead wall.

But once she saw the violence that occurred in her brothers' operations and realized I

had seen it too, the pretenses would have to fall. I knew the Ajellos well enough to sense that trouble was always present when they were involved.

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We reached closer to the pier, and, to eliminate any counter-arguments that might arise down the line, gave her some background. “Your brothers run an import operation at the pier. Very profitable. Very illegal. We’re going to watch them work.”

She shook her head. “They import furniture and art. It’s legitimate, but the only illegal thing they do is take a back-door and avoid import duty.”

I smiled incredulously. “Is that what they told you? And you believed them?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Her fingers twisted together. “They never lie to me.”

The certainty in her voice made me laugh. She frowned in my direction, but, again, chose to ignore me moving forward.

The rest of the drive passed in silence. I could feel her tension growing as we approached the industrial section of the city, the buildings growing more dilapidated, the streets emptier.

My driver pulled into an alley two blocks from the pier, cutting the engine. “Warehouse 7,” he said quietly. “If I drive any further, we could risk being discovered. They’re moving product today. Dmitri says at least twenty men are on site.”

I nodded. “We’re going on foot from here. East side has the best view.”

We left the car hidden in the shadows and proceeded on foot. I kept Larissa between my driver and myself, one hand firmly on her arm.

“If you scream,” I murmured against her ear, “you’ll get us all killed. Including yourself. Understand? They won’t recognize you from a distance.”

She nodded, her soft hair brushing my jaw with the movement. I caught a whiff of her shampoo, fresh and floral, and I felt my heart stammer in my chest.

It was just the adrenaline from our expedition, or so I told myself.

We approached the warehouse cautiously, staying under cover. The loading dock was busy as hell. Men moved back and forth, carrying crates from a truck into the warehouse. From this distance, it looked like ordinary work—just another mid-afternoon delivery.

This was their trick, I knew. They moved shipments in broad daylight because the authorities wouldn’t believe anyone would have the courage to break the law while the world was wide awake.

Guts. It took guts.

I guided Larissa to a stack of shipping containers that provided cover while offering a clear view of the operation. We crouched behind them, close enough to see but far enough to remain hidden.

“Watch,” I whispered.

For several minutes, nothing happened that would seem out of place. Men unloaded crates. Others checked papers and shouted orders. Ordinary dock work, except for the armed guards positioned at strategic points around the perimeter.

Larissa shifted beside me. “I don’t see anything wrong. They’re just—”

“Wait,” I cut her off, my eyes fixed on a new arrival—a tall man with silver at his temples. Larissa must have recognized him, too, because she tensed, leaning forward slightly.

“You know him?” I asked.

“He... yes. He’s some sort of manager. He drops by the house sometimes, though we’ve never spoken.”

Good, I thought to myself. This was confirmation enough for her that I had indeed brought her to Gastone’s operation.

We watched as the manager spoke to the foreman, his gestures sharp and angry. Something had clearly gone wrong.

The foreman called over one of the workers, a thin man who looked like he wanted nothing more than to avoid the manager’s attention. There was an argument taking place, with workers all around watching. Then, the thin man raised his hands in supplication.

“What’s happening?” Larissa whispered. “Why is the manager angry?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered back. “Just watch.”

The manager nodded to one of his men, who stepped forward and grabbed the thin worker by the arm. Another worker tried to intervene, only to be restrained by a second guard.

“No,” Larissa breathed, seeming to sense what was coming.

The manager raised his hand, and the dock fell silent. He spoke again to the first

worker, who was now on his knees. Whatever the man said, it wasn't what he wanted to hear. He nodded to one of the guards, and a gun came into view. Beside me, Larissa gasped and moved as though she wanted to intervene from all the way over here, but I held her in place.

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The gunshot cracked across the area, followed an instant later by a second. Both workers collapsed, dark pools spreading beneath them.

Larissa made a choked sound beside me, her hand flying to her mouth. I clamped my arm around her waist, pulling her back against me to keep her from bolting or making noise. Her body convulsed in a silent sob, her eyes fixed on the scene below.

On the dock, work resumed as if nothing had happened. Two men dragged the bodies away while others continued unloading crates. The manager walked away.

“Now,” I said quietly, my mouth close to her ear, “tell me again how your brothers don't hurt people.”

But when I looked down at her face, I saw something I hadn't expected. Not denial. Not anger. But rather pure, unadulterated shock—her skin was devoid of color, her eyes wide and glassy, and her entire body trembling against mine. This wasn't the reaction of someone confronted with a truth they already knew. This was the reaction of someone whose world had just been shattered.

“Larissa,” I said, my voice sharper than I intended. “Larissa, look at me.”

She didn't respond, her gaze still fixed on the dock where her brother's manager stood casually smoking now while men cleaned up the blood of his victims.

Something cold settled in my stomach—realization, soon followed by a peculiar sort of dread. She hadn't known. She truly hadn't known, and from the way she was breathing—gasping and panting for air—I could tell she was experiencing a deep,

worrying panic.

“We need to go,” I murmured to my driver, who nodded and began moving back toward our exit point.

I tried to help Larissa to her feet, but her legs seemed to have lost all strength. Without thinking, I lifted her into my arms. She was light, I thought to myself. Had she been eating? Why the hell didn’t I check on her more? Her eyes remained vacant and shocked as I carried her off. For once, she didn’t put up a fight, and for once, I wished she would have.

That would have meant that today didn’t entirely break her. I was responsible for this, and a strong wave of guilt washed over me.

“I’ve got you,” I said, the words coming without conscious thought. “Don’t look back. Just breathe.”

I carried her to the car, keeping in the shadows and when the driver opened the door, I placed her in the back seat. She adjusted herself to sit, but looked away from me. I got in on the other side, my chest constricting as I saw her trembling form.

As the car pulled away from the alley, Larissa finally moved, turning her head to look at me. Her face remained bloodless, but her eyes were red.

“They killed them,” she whispered. “Shot them like... like they were nothing.”

I didn’t answer. What could I say? It was what it was in our world.

“You knew,” she continued, her voice hollow. “You knew what they were.”

“Yes.” There was no point in lying. Not now.

A shudder ran through her, and suddenly tears streamed down her face. My chest tightened with an unfamiliar sensation: worry for her, a feeling I had never felt before.

When I should have been satisfied for proving my point and showing her the truth about her precious brothers, I felt guilt.

Chapter 8 - Larissa

I couldn't stop shaking. My hands trembled uncontrollably, and no amount of clenching my fists could conceal it. Gio guided me into the house with a steady hand on the small of my back. I should have hated that touch from my kidnapper, but in that moment, it was the only thing grounding me to reality after what I'd just witnessed.

I'd never seen a man be killed before. Let alone two. The memory gushed back of the bodies falling to the ground, the blood pooling around them, and I let out a choked sob.

Beside me, Gio snapped his head in my direction with worry. "Come, Larissa," he said gently, guiding me into the living room. "You need a drink."

No. I didn't need a drink. What I needed was to unsee what I'd seen, but I didn't even have the energy to put my thoughts into words. I was so tired and prayed this was all a dream. Or rather, a nightmare I could wake from.

I sank into a leather armchair, my legs finally giving out, and I tried to take a few deep breaths to calm myself while Gio rummaged around at the bar.

"Drink this," Gio said when he returned to my side. He pressed a glass of scotch in my hand.

I didn't care that it was neat. I brought it to my lips and knocked it back in one go, welcoming the burn as it scorched down my throat.

Gio towered over me, watching me carefully. In some strange way, he reminded me of a mother hen. He took the empty glass from my hands and set it on the marble side table.

“Better?” he asked.

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The question lit the fuse to my anger. Better? How could anything be better after what I'd seen?

“That wasn't my brother's doing,” I said, my voice steadier than I expected as I looked up at him, seeped in conviction. “Gastone wouldn't—he couldn't have ordered that. It must have been his men, acting without permission.” I stood up, needing to move, to do something with the energy suddenly coursing through me. “We need to tell him. He needs to know what's happening behind his back.”

Gio remained still, his face softening with something that looked too much like pity. “Larissa—”

“Don't,” I snapped. “Don't look at me like that. You don't know my brother. Those men, those executions—that's not how he operates. Gastone has rules. He has principles.”

“Your brother knows everything that happens under his roof, Larissa,” he said, voice gentle but unyielding. “The same way we know everything in ours. Nothing happens without their knowledge. Nothing.”

“Stop it.” I slammed my fists into his chest in anger. “Just because you all run your operation like a butcher shop doesn't mean Gastone does the same.”

It was a low blow, comparing his family to a butcher. I braced myself for another fight, but Gio didn't flinch, didn't react.

When I met his gaze, all I saw was pity. I hated that. I didn't deserve it.

“Stop looking at me like that,” my voice rose into a hysterical pitch. “Gastone protects people. He's not a monster. He wouldn't sanction that—that slaughter. Those men had families! He'll have the manager killed for this. He will!”

Gio stepped closer, and I was now trembling with rage. I couldn't move. I was rooted in my spot, my space.

“I know this is difficult to accept,” he said, “but denying reality won't protect you anymore.”

“Because you put me there!” The accusation burst from me. “You kidnapped me and dragged me into this nightmare! Did you plan it? Was that entire warehouse scene staged for my benefit? Some twisted way to turn me against my own blood?”

I shoved at his chest, needing him to react, to show anger, to confirm he was the villain I needed him to be. His body was like hitting a wall—solid, unmovable. He caught my wrists in his hands, his grip firm but not painful.

“Is that what you think of me?” he asked quietly. “That I would traumatize you for tactical advantage?”

“I don't know what to think anymore!” my voice broke out in a choked sob. I felt the tears burn behind my eyes. I hated them, hated the weakness they revealed. “You're just like all the rest—keeping me in the dark, deciding what I should know, what I should see. Poor, naive Larissa, too delicate for the real world.”

Gio's thumb brushed over my pulse point, the unexpected tenderness of it stopping my rant cold in its track. Why wasn't he reacting? Why wasn't he angry?

“You're not a delicate flower to be sheltered, Larissa. You're... anything but.” He released one of my wrists to brush a strand of hair from my face. “I see a woman

who's stronger than she knows.”

The kindness in his voice undid me more effectively than any harshness could have. My shoulders slumped, the anger dissipating like smoke, leaving only the raw wound beneath. A sob caught in my throat, and I pressed my lips together to hold it back.

“They’re my family,” I whispered. “They couldn’t have... they didn’t...”

Gio's arms came around me then, and I should have resisted. I should have pushed him away and remembered the fact that he was my kidnapper. Instead, I found myself collapsing against his chest, my hands clutching at the fine fabric of his suit as if it were a lifeline.

“I'm sorry,” he murmured against my hair. “I'm sorry you had to see that. I'm sorry you're caught in this mess.”

His heartbeat was steady under my ear, and his body was a warm comfort, melting away the numbness in my bones. There, standing in his arms, I felt my heart begin to settle. One of his hands traced slow, soothing circles on my back, while the other cradled the back of my head. The gesture was so protective, so caring, that it made my throat tighten.

I forced myself to remember who he was, the man who was using me as leverage against my family. But in that moment, all I could feel was the comfort he offered, and my body betrayed me by accepting it.

“Why are you being kind to me?” I asked, my voice muffled against his chest.

His hand paused briefly on my back before resuming its motion. “Not everything is a means to an end, Larissa.”

I pulled back just enough to look up at him, searching his face for deception. His expression was soft and worried, those whiskey eyes warm on mine. A small crease formed between his brows as he studied me in return.

That was when I became acutely aware of him—not as my captor, but as a man; the solid wall of his chest under my palms, the subtle scent of his cologne, the strength in the arms that held me. I remembered the moment I first saw him and recalled the thought that had passed through my mind—how handsome he was and how I didn't allow myself to think about it, given what he'd done.

Time stood still as warmth crept up my arms and down my spine, making me acutely aware of every spot on my skin where he touched me. I stood a little straighter and watched as his gaze dropped to my lips, and then mine fell to his.

His lips were fuller than I'd noticed before, the bottom one slightly more so than the top. I wondered with a shock of heat what they might feel like against mine.

The thought should have horrified me. Instead, it sank through me like hot honey, pooling low in my belly. I tried to ignore it, to focus on anything else, but my body had become a traitor, hyperaware of every point of contact between us.

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“Larissa,” he said, my name a question in his mouth.

I looked up, and the air between us changed, charged suddenly with something electric. His gaze had darkened. His hands on my back seemed to burn through the thin fabric of my blouse.

We stood frozen, neither advancing nor retreating, suspended in a moment of possibility. I watched his throat work as he swallowed and noticed the slight flare of his nostrils as he inhaled. He was affected too, I realized with a jolt.

I don't know which of us moved first. One moment we were staring at each other, and the next his mouth was on mine, soft and questioning. The gentleness of it stunned me. I never thought a man like Gio Lebedev could kiss so softly.

My hands slid up to his shoulders, feeling the coiled strength beneath the fine fabric of his suit. His lips moved against mine, patient, waiting for me to decide.

And my blood flowed straight to my core, telling me what I needed.

The next thing I knew, my lips parted beneath his, and his arms tightened around me, pulling me close as the kiss deepened. I felt every inch of his body, my legs trembling from how intoxicating he was making me. His tongue traced the seam of my lips before dipping in again, warring with mine.

Heat flashed through me, setting every nerve ending alight. My fingers slid into his hair, thick and silky between my fingers, and I tugged him closer, needing more. A sound rumbled from his chest, half growl, half groan, and it sent a shiver down my

spine.

This was madness. Yet, I felt so damn alive.

Gio backed me against the bookshelf, one hand cupping my face, the other at my waist, his thumb stroking the strip of bare skin where my blouse had ridden up. The cool wood pressed against my back, and his kisses grew hungrier, deeper. I matched him beat for beat, lost in the sensations cascading through me.

His mouth left mine to trail along my jaw, down the column of my throat. I gasped when he found the sensitive spot beneath my ear, my head falling back to give him better access. His teeth grazed my skin, followed by the soothing heat of his tongue, and my knees nearly buckled.

“Gio,” I breathed, not sure if I was asking him to stop or begging him to continue.

He returned to my mouth, the kiss now almost desperate in its intensity. His hands were everywhere—cupping my face, tangling in my hair, sliding down to my hip to pull me tighter against him. I could feel my panties get wet and thought of what I wanted to come next, and the realization of how far things had gone, how quickly, hit me like a bucket of ice water.

What was I doing? This man was holding me prisoner, and I was melting in his arms like snow in the spring sun.

I tore my mouth from his, pushing at his chest. He released me immediately, stepping back to give me space, though his breathing was as ragged as my own.

“Larissa—” he started, his voice deeper, rougher than I'd ever heard it.

“No.” I shook my head, pressing my fingers to my swollen lips. “This is wrong. This

can't happen.”

His face shuttered, but then he covered it with instant control, though his eyes still burned.

“I'm your prisoner,” I continued, my voice shaking. “I'm here because you took me. This... no.”

Before he could respond, before I could weaken again at the sight of him, I pushed past him and fled the room. I didn't stop until I reached my bedroom door, fumbling with the handle before practically falling inside.

I slammed the door behind me and leaned against it, my heart hammering so hard that I thought it might break through my ribs. My body still hummed with desire, and my lips tingled from the pressure of his. I slid down to the floor, wrapping my arms around my knees, and thought about how I had kissed Giovanni Lebedev and liked it.

Chapter 9 - Gio

I poured myself a second cup of coffee to wean off the fatigue and reluctantly dived right back into the paperwork scattered across my desk. I hadn't slept well last night. How could I, when the ghost of our kiss still lingered on my lips? All night, I thought of Larissa. She was an unwelcome guest in my dreams, but how I hated to see her go when I woke.

Once again, I found myself thinking of her. At forty-two, I should have known better than to let Larissa Ajello, the sister of a man who had it out against our family, get under my skin. But there she was, twenty-five years old and so full of life, of sass, of fire.

She reeked of trouble, I knew that. But why couldn't I get her out of my mind?

I sighed and looked at the clock. I was running behind schedule and found it hard to work. But time waited for no man, and so, I forced myself to focus. I had barely regained my flow when I heard a knock at my door.

“Come in,” I said, in a somewhat annoyed tone. I looked up, expecting to see one of my men, but to my surprise, I saw Larissa. She walked in wearing those tight, gorgeous jeans that make me go wild, along with a large, chunky sweater that left much to the imagination. Her hair, beautifully blown out, shone in the light as she flicked it over her shoulder.

Her gaze met mine, and for a second, mine lingered away to the gloss on her lips, before I focused back on those beautiful blue-green eyes that drew me right in like a flame. Did she know? Did she know how beautiful she was?

She stood before me, shifting her weight between her legs.

“Larissa?” I asked, sensing this might be a long conversation from the stance she stood in.

“We need to talk,” she said.

“Good morning to you, too,” I said, keeping my voice even as I tried to hold back a smile at her matter-of-fact tone. “Sleep well?”

“Wonderfully. Nothing like being held against my will to guarantee sweet dreams.” Her sarcasm was sharp, and how I’d grown to love it.

I motioned at the chair. She sat and without asking, I poured her a cup of coffee and slid it over to her. Larissa wrapped her hands around the warm coffee mug and took a sip. She closed her eyes, and I saw the corners of her lips turn as she savored it. When she opened her eyes again and met mine, I chuckled. “You Italians and your coffee.”

“You know us,” she shrugged and, this time, smiled wholly.

“Spoilt brats,” I chuckled.

“Wait till you see us around our pasta,” she shook her eyebrows in my direction. The moment wasn’t lost on me. We were...playing. Like friends, almost. Almost.

I leaned back in, amused. But of course she didn’t let me enjoy the moment.

“Now that you know I’m innocent and can’t give you any information about... whatever it is you think my brother did, you can take me back to him.”

I shook my head once, a clean, decisive motion. “That’s not happening.”

“Why the hell not?” All five-foot-seven of her vibrated with indignation. “You said yourself deemed me innocent last night and apologized for making me see what went down.”

“I said you might not know anything consciously,” I corrected her. “There's a difference.”

“So what am I supposed to be, your prisoner until... when exactly?”

I stood, circling my desk until I reached the other side of the desk. She looked up at me through those curled lashes as I perched myself on the table right in front of her. “Until I'm certain your brother had nothing to do with the attack on our Vadim-Ustinov-Lebedev operation.”

Her brow furrowed. “The what?”

“We have an alliance now with the Vadims and Ustinovs. They're powerful in the Bratva, and important to us. Until I know your brother won't hurt our alliance, you stay here.”

“That's bullshit,” she spat. “Gastone wouldn't care about any Bratva. We're the Mafia for—”

I raised an eyebrow. “You sure about that?”

Her cheeks flushed pink. “Yes, I'm sure. My brother isn't stupid enough to start a war with you people.”

“You people,” I repeated, the corner of my mouth lifting. “Such diplomacy.”

“You're the ones who kidnapped me! My brother has never kidnapped anyone. That

speaks volumes, doesn't it?"

"I prefer to think of it as an involuntary protective custody arrangement."

She made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a growl. "Are you always this insufferable, or am I getting special treatment?"

"I save my best material for Italian Mafia princesses with attitude problems."

"I don't have an attitude problem," she said, glaring up at me. "I have a problem with being held hostage by a man old enough to be my—"

"Careful," I warned, although the age gap barb struck precisely where she intended it. "I might be seventeen years your senior, but I'm not decrepit yet."

"I noticed." The words slipped out before she could catch them, and I watched with satisfaction as her eyes widened slightly at her admission.

The tension in the room shifted, electric and dangerous. I cleared my throat. Suddenly, even the thought of this house being devoid of her stung my chest. Either way, it wasn't so much that, as the simple fact that she was still my leverage, indicating I couldn't give her what she wanted.

"Here's the deal, Larissa. I can't let you go until I know for certain that your brother isn't gunning for my family. But I'm willing to make you a deal."

She eyed me warily. "What kind of deal?"

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“If you can prove that Gastone is innocent—concrete proof, not just sisterly faith—I'll set you free.” I held her gaze. “Otherwise, you cooperate with me until we find who's really responsible, or until your brothers find you and we set the terms for our security before I give you back.”

“And how exactly am I supposed to prove anything while I'm stuck here with you?”

“You'll have contact with your family—supervised, of course. There's a party coming up. That would be a wonderful time for them to realize where you've been, and that's when you can play whatever part you want in asking them for information. Their reaction to your being taken by us can speak volumes, don't you think?”

Larissa paced a small circle on the table with her forefinger, coming dangerously close to my thumb. “My family... have they...”

“They've been looking for you. Yes,” I said, and her finger stopped so darn close to my thigh, that I swear I thought it grazed me. She stared up at me, dumbfounded, with those big doe-eyes and my breath hitched in my throat, my thigh burning for her to come closer.

“Didn't think to tell me?” she hissed.

“Didn't want you getting any ideas for a grand escape,” I shrugged.

“Do they know where I am?” she asked now.

“They're nowhere close to finding where you are,” I scoffed.

“This deal you offer. What if I refuse?”

“Then you stay here as my guest until this matter resolves itself. Could be days. Could be weeks.” I shrugged. “Could be months.”

She pulled her finger away from the desk and narrowed her eyes at me. “Fine. I’ll help you find out who’s really behind the attack, because it wasn’t Gastone. But I want something else in return.”

“You’re not exactly in a position to negotiate.”

“And yet, here I am, negotiating.” There was something admirable about her nerve. “I want more freedom around here. If I want to go out for a coffee, or to the shops, I have to be allowed.”

I considered her request. It wasn’t unreasonable, given that she’d been here for weeks already and could remain longer. Being indoors all the time was impossible. “Agreed. But only if your cooperation is genuine and you allow my men to follow you.”

Larissa nodded and rose, extending her hand. “Do we have a deal?”

I took her hand, feeling the smallness of it in mine. She stood so close, that I saw her body turn inward, to protect her chest from grazing mine.

“Deal,” I agreed, holding her hand a moment longer than necessary. “But if I find out you’re playing me—”

“Save the threats.” She pulled her hand back. “You’re not the only one with something to lose here.”

A silence fell between us. In the quiet, I noticed the way she chewed her lower lip, a

nervous tell she probably wasn't aware of.

“I should thank you,” she said suddenly, the words coming out stiff and grudging.

I raised an eyebrow. “For what?”

“For getting me out of that... place yesterday. Before I lost myself.” She swallowed hard, the memory clearly still raw.

“Of course,” I said, softly. “I couldn’t just leave you there now, could I?”

“Right.” She nodded, not quite meeting my eyes. “Still. You helped me out, you talked me through my panic. You ...took care of me. Thanks.”

The admission seemed to cost her something, and I found myself wanting to ease that burden. “You're welcome.”

Her eyes flicked up to mine, and suddenly we were back in that moment from yesterday—her pressed against the wall, my mouth on hers, that inexplicable hunger that had overtaken us both. I felt it now, a current running beneath my skin, urging me forward.

She must have felt it too, because her lips parted slightly, her breath catching. The distance between us seemed both vast and negligible. I could close it in a single step.

I thought about how she'd tasted and how her body had fit against mine. My gaze dropped to her mouth, and I caught the slight tremble there. Twenty-five, I reminded myself. Sister to a potential enemy. Leverage, not desire.

The words felt hollow even as I thought them.

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I slid off the desk, pushing her back to create space between us. “You're free to go out, but don't attempt to leave the compound without informing me so I can have your car, driver, and guards prepared.”

She blinked, the spell broken. “Sure.”

“Good.” I moved back behind my desk, putting the solid mahogany between us. She gave me a lingering glance as though she wanted to say something, but I pretended to be busy. I had no other choice, or I would have lost all control.

Without another word, she marched out.

Chapter 10 - Larissa

I felt nervous as we drove toward an expedition I wanted no part in. But, it was something I had to do to prove Gastone's innocence and win my escape, and so I sucked it up.

Tonight, Gio said we had to go to a party where my brothers would be visiting. I would finally have the chance to see them, to speak to them, and to help them understand that they were being blamed for something they had never done, as well as to obtain the evidence I needed to prove their innocence.

On one hand, I knew how relieved my brothers would be to see me safe. On the other, I couldn't bear to think of their agony when they saw me leave to go back with Gio. I was his prisoner in every sense, unless I could prove Gastone innocent.

Gio insisted I needed a new dress for the party tonight. If shopping for a dress was what it took to convince Gio I meant what I said about holding up my end of the bargain, then so be it. Though, I wasn't prepared to accept my fate without giving him hell.

If I suffered, why shouldn't he?

"I don't see why this is necessary," I said, staring out the window of the car. The buildings of New York blurred past.

Gio turned to me. "The party is very important. You need something appropriate to wear."

"I have dresses."

"Not for this."

"My brothers must be worried sick looking all over the place for me, and you're concerned about my wardrobe?" I crossed my arms over my chest. "Forgive me if I'm not excited about playing dress-up."

The corner of his mouth twitched. For some reason, I sensed that he enjoyed my little tantrums. "Your cooperation will significantly help your brothers' situation."

I bit back the curse words that threatened to spill from my lips.

"Fine," I muttered.

The car pulled up to an understated boutique storefront, with only a small golden plaque beside the door. It looked fancy. Expensive.

Gio helped me out of the car and led me inside.

I noticed the boutique was empty of other customers. A woman with sleek dark hair approached and nodded respectfully to Gio. “We've pulled several options, as you requested in advance,” she said to Gio.

“Miss,” she then turned to me and motioned to a door at the back. “If you'd follow me to the dressing room, please.”

I glanced at Gio, who nodded at me to carry on. Clearly, he'd planned this in advance.

The dressing room was huge, with plush velvet chairs, champagne on ice, and an array of dresses already hanging on a rack. I felt petrified to even imagine the cost of some of these dresses. Just how much was Gio willing to drop on a single dress?

“I'll leave you to browse,” the woman said kindly. “Call if you need assistance.”

When she left, I stared at the selection only to feel overwhelmed by the choice. I rarely shopped at such places, especially not for formal events, since my brothers never took me anywhere.

I touched the fabric of a midnight blue gown, then quickly pulled my hand away when I heard movement.

Gio walked into the room, looking completely at ease. He'd removed his suit jacket, and his crisp white shirt stretched across his broad shoulders. And right about now, he looked annoyingly attractive.

“All okay?” he asked, probably noticing the flustered expression on my face.

“I didn't realize you'd be joining me in the dressing room,” I said dryly. “How

progressive of you.”

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He chuckled, the sound surprisingly warm. "I thought I'd check in to see if you needed any help."

I hated that he'd noticed how unsure I'd seemed when we'd walked into the store. "I'm fine."

"What do you like?" he asked, ignoring me entirely, moving to the rack and fingering through the options. "Colors, styles, fabrics?"

I shrugged, trying to appear indifferent rather than clueless. "I don't know. Something that fits, I guess."

His eyes met mine, and I had the uncomfortable feeling he saw through my act. "You've never chosen your own dress for an event like this, have you?"

Heat crept up my neck. "Is that a crime?"

"No." He pulled out a deep burgundy dress with a sweetheart neckline. "What about this one? The color would look good on you."

I blinked, surprised by his taste. "Since when do Bratva thugs know about complementary colors?"

A ghost of a smile played at his lips. "Since this particular thug invested in several fashion houses ten years ago." He held the dress against me, his eyes critical but not unkind. "I'm half-Italian, Larissa. Fashion is a lucrative industry and I invested in a few clothing lines started by people within the Mafia."

“Is that why you dress like you've stepped out of a men's magazine?” The question slipped out before I could stop it.

He actually smiled then, a genuine expression that transformed his face from merely handsome to devastating. “Partly. Though I've always appreciated quality.”

I took the burgundy dress from his hands, our fingers brushing briefly. A jolt went through me that I immediately tried to suppress.

“Try it,” he said, stepping back. “Along with anything else that catches your eye.”

I retreated to the changing area, drawing the curtain tightly between us. As I slipped off my clothes, I couldn't help but smile at the thought of Giovanni Lebedev sitting in the front row of a fashion show. He never ceased to surprise me.

The burgundy dress fit well, but felt too mature for my taste. When I emerged, Gio's expression confirmed my thoughts.

“No,” he said simply.

“No?” I raised an eyebrow. “I thought you were letting me choose.”

“I am. But that one doesn't suit you.”

“Maybe I like it.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Do you?”

I held his gaze for a moment before sighing. “No. It makes me look like I'm playing dress-up in my mother's clothes.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “Try the green one.”

The green dress was better—an emerald color that made my eyes look more green than blue. It had a slit up the side that was daring without being scandalous.

When I stepped out, Gio was pouring two glasses of champagne. He handed me one, his eyes sweeping over me in a way that made my skin warm.

“Better,” he said. “But still not right.”

I took a sip of champagne, the bubbles sharp on my tongue. “What exactly am I dressing for? You never specified.”

“A charity gala.”

“And I'm attending as...?”

“My guest.”

I nearly choked on my champagne. “Your date? That wasn't part of our agreement.”

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“Not my date.” His voice was patient, as if he were explaining something to a child. “My guest. There's a difference.”

“Not to anyone who'll be there.” I crossed my arms, aware of how the gesture pushed up my cleavage in the dress. Gio's eyes didn't waver from my face, which somehow made me more self-conscious than if he'd looked. It was almost as though he was forcing himself to keep his eyes on mine, as though he couldn't bear to hold himself back if he swept over my body. “I agreed to cooperate, not to parade around as arm candy.”

“You'll be attending in an observer capacity,” he said. “Apart from your brothers' presence, several people who might have information about your brother's situation will be there.”

That got my attention. “What kind of information?”

“The kind that might help clear his name, if he's innocent as you claim.”

I bit my lip, considering. If there was even a chance to help Gastone, I had to take it. “Fine. But I'm not wearing this dress.”

“Try the black one,” he suggested, gesturing to a sleek gown with subtle beading. “And the silver.”

For the next hour, I tried on dress after dress, emerging each time to Gio's thoughtful consideration. To my surprise, he never dictated what I should wear, only offered suggestions and asked what I thought. It was... almost fun.

“What about this one?” I asked, holding up a dress with an explosion of ruffles and bright pink sequins.

His expression was so horrified, I laughed out loud. “You can't be serious.”

“What's wrong with a little pizzazz?” I twirled the monstrosity.

“That's not pizzazz, it's a visual assault.”

“Maybe I like making an entrance.”

He took the dress from my hands, his fingers brushing mine, and that simple innocent gesture sent a wave of sparks shooting up my arm. “There are better ways to be memorable.”

The intensity in his eyes made me swallow hard. “Like what?”

“Like this.” He reached behind me and pulled out a dress I hadn't noticed before. It was a deep midnight blue, almost black, with small crystals scattered across it like stars.

I took it hesitantly. “It's beautiful.”

“Try it,” he said, his voice lower than before.

Behind the curtain, I slipped into the dress, immediately aware that it was different from the others. The fabric felt like water against my skin, cool and fluid. It hugged my curves in a way that was both modest and sensual. The neckline dipped just enough to hint at cleavage without revealing too much, and the back was open to my mid-spine.

When I stepped out, Gio was standing with his back to me, looking at his phone. He turned, and the change in his expression was immediate. Something darkened in his eyes, and for a moment, neither of us spoke.

“Well?” I finally asked, my voice coming out huskier than I intended.

He set his phone down and walked toward me slowly and deliberately. I resisted the urge to step back.

“Turn around,” he said.

I complied, feeling oddly vulnerable with my back exposed to him. In the mirror, I watched him approach, his expression intent. He stopped just behind me, close enough that I could feel the heat from his body.

“It's too loose here,” he said, his hands coming to rest lightly on my waist. I froze at his touch, not wanting to move away, needing him close. My breath hitched in my throat as his fingers pinched the fabric at my sides. “And here.”

I couldn't speak. His hands were large against my waist, his fingers sure as they showed where the dress needed adjusting. In the mirror, I couldn't help but think we made a striking pair.

“A simple alteration,” he continued, his voice steady even as his eyes met mine in the mirror. “It should fit you like a second skin.”

I could feel my heart pounding and wondered if he could sense it too through the thin fabric. I gulped with nervous energy and nodded as his gaze met mine in the mirror. The way he looked at me then, as if I were the most beautiful woman in the world, made my heart race so hard I thought my ribs would break.

His fingers tightened fractionally on my waist, and for a moment, I thought he might pull me back against him. I wished hewould.Instead, he adjusted the fabric once more, professionally, before stepping away.

The loss of his heat behind me left me feeling strangely bereft. I turned to face him, searching his face for some sign of the tension I'd felt between us. He stared down at me, and for the briefest moment, his eyes wandered to my lips.

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I stepped forward and he whispered. “We’ll take this one then,” before turning away from me, breaking the moment.

I hadn’t even realized the store assistant had walked up to us. Disappointed, I hid it by giving her a smile and nodding in agreement.

Chapter 11 - Gio

I couldn't take my eyes off her. Larissa stood beside me in that midnight blue dress and she was a vision to behold. From the moment we had entered the gala, I had seen heads turn. Women, with envy. Men, with desire.

The fabric clung to those curves I had spent too many nights imagining. That slit, riding up that smooth skin, made me lose myself in a daydream for the briefest second, wondering what it would be like to run my hands up those legs.

We walked through the room, and I waved and nodded at a few people. Every time I did, I sensed her tension as she moved to adjust her dress or flicked her hair behind her ear. I could tell she was nervous from her small tells. Not to mention, her hands were trembling, yet she worked hard to conceal it by clenching them tightly across her clutch.

“Relax,” I whispered, my lips brushing the shell of her ear. “You look like you're about to bolt.”

She turned those aquamarine eyes on me, wide and alert. “I'm not used to... this.” Her gesture encompassed the opulent ballroom, but I knew what she meant was the

gathering of the most dangerous people in the city.

“You need a drink.” I caught a passing waiter by the elbow, plucked two flutes of champagne from his tray, and handed one to Larissa. “Liquid courage.”

Her fingers grazed mine as she took the glass, and that small contact sent a current up my arm. At forty-two, I'd thought myself immune to such schoolboy reactions. Apparently not.

“Thank you,” she said, taking a sip. The champagne left a slight glisten on her lower lip that I wanted to taste.

The alterations to her dress had been worth every penny. What had been merely beautiful in the shop was now devastating—the neckline dipping just low enough to hint at the swell of her breasts, the waist taken in to emphasize the hourglass of her figure. Her blonde hair fell in loose waves over one shoulder, and the emerald earrings I'd given her that morning caught the light whenever she moved, making her look like some fantasy creature, too exquisite to be real.

“The earrings suit you,” I said, my voice rougher than I'd intended.

A blush colored her cheeks. “They're the most beautiful things I've ever owned. I still can't believe you gave them to me.”

I shrugged, uncomfortable with her gratitude. “Green is your color.”

Her eyes scanned the crowd again, that hopeful expression making my jaw clench. I knew who she was looking for. The very same people I was, only except we both had different intentions.

“Do you see them?” she asked, standing on tiptoe to peer over the crowd.

I placed my hand on the small of her back, steadying her. “Your brothers won't come, Larissa.”

Her face fell. “But, how can you know?”

“We’ve been here for a while, and my men reported that they did some digging. It turns out your brothers canceled at the last moment.”

A look of disappointment fell over her face, and to be honest, I felt it too. I had planned for tonight weeks in advance. I had shown up knowing that the Ajellos would be here. How I longed to see their faces when they realized they had been hunting for their sister high and low, only to learn I had had her the whole time. How I longed to witness the shock when they discovered she was happy and safe at my side, and would be heading back home with me.

I wanted my revenge. But more than my plans falling apart because of their no-show, I was furious by the disappointment Larissa felt.

A sadness dimmed the light in her eyes, and I felt a twist of something unpleasant in my chest. I didn't want her upset. I hated seeing her upset.

“Come on,” I said, guiding her toward a group of guests, hoping to show her a good time regardless. “I'll introduce you to a few people. We might as well have fun while we're here.”

She hesitated. “Should I use my real name?”

I smiled at her intelligence. By now, she knew how sheltered her brothers had kept her. They had never introduced her to other crime families and had kept her identity a secret. To most of the criminal world, she was just a faceless rumor—the pampered princess of the Ajello crime family. I intended to keep it that way.

“First name only,” I confirmed.

She nodded.

We started making the rounds, and what I hadn't anticipated was how thoroughly she would charm everyone she met. Within minutes, she had an elderly weapons dealer eating out of her hand, laughing at his war stories and asking him questions that made him puff up with pride. She conversed in perfect Italian with the head of a smuggling operation, discussed art with his wife, and even managed to elicit a rare smile from my perpetually serious head of security.

“Where did you find her?” a voice murmured at my shoulder. An acquaintance from a long time ago stood by my side.

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“It's a long story.” I kept my eyes on Larissa and tried to get him to go away.

“I bet it is,” he sipped his whiskey. “You know who she is?”

“Yes.”

I didn't offer any more information, for I knew he was digging for it. Bruno was an acquaintance, capable of being either an ally or an enemy. I had never seen his true colors and didn't trust him with Larissa's name.

He frowned when he noted the cold shoulder I gave him, and with one last lingering look at Larissa, walked away. I then felt the tension ease from my shoulders.

But... I wondered, would Bruno try to pry into her background? Was his interest in her dangerous for Larissa?

I was so lost in thought with my paranoia that I almost missed it when Diego Abate, the young, ambitious head of one of our allied families, approached Larissa. His hand touched her elbow, his body leaning in too close as he whispered something that made her laugh.

Heat flared in my chest, spreading outward until my fingertips tingled with it. I knew that look in Abate's eyes. I'd worn it myself often enough around a pretty young thing in my younger years. To see him deliver that look on her had my blood boiling hot.

Larissa smiled up at him, twirling a strand of hair around one finger. Her body language was open and inviting. She had no idea who she was flirting with, and I

wondered if she even realized she was flirting. She was just so nice—too nice. Diego, however, would perceive it as more than just her being nice.

I was over by her side before I consciously decided to move.

“Diego,” I said, sliding a possessive arm around Larissa's waist. “I see you've met my date.”

I watched Larissa's head whip in my direction, surprise etched on her face.

Abate's eyes flicked between us. “She's delightful, Lebedev. You've been holding out on us.”

“I don't share what's mine.” The words came out like ice. Abate raised a single eyebrow, entertained, I was sure by my display of jealousy.

Larissa stiffened beside me. “I need some air,” she said, pulling away from my grasp.

“Feisty,” Abate commented, watching her retreat with a smirk.

I brushed past him and followed Larissa out. She weaved through the crowd, her back straight and head held high. She moved so quickly, so swiftly, that I knew anger was what urged her on.

I followed Larissa onto the terrace, where she stood gripping the stone balustrade, her back to me. She heard me behind her, for she turned to face me with fire in her eyes.

“What was that about?” she demanded, crossing her arms in front of her.

“What was what about?”

She scoffed and narrowed her eyes with disbelief. “That caveman display. I don't share what's mine? I'm not yours, Gio. And we aren't on a date!”

God, she was even more beautiful when she was furious.

“Abate isn't someone you want to encourage,” I tried to say placatingly.

“We were just talking! Having fun! I wasn't encouraging anyone!”

“He wasn't looking at you like he wanted to talk.” I stepped closer. She scoffed, and for some reason, that pissed me off. Couldn't she understand I wasn't the type of man to get worried over nothing?

I raised my voice, and before I could think, I said something I shouldn't have: “He was looking at you as if he wanted to bend you over the nearest surface.”

She reddened in the face, shocked by what I'd said. “How dare you? I was just having some harmless fun. We're at a party, for god's sake. Are you even listening to yourself?”

A growl built in my throat. Harmless fun? For some reason, those two words jarred at my consciousness. “What else for you is harmless fun?” I spat out. “Was kissing me also harmless fun?”

The question hung between us, and for once, she had no instant answer.

Her eyes widened, caught off guard by the change in direction. “I... That's not...”

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“Because it wasn't harmless for me.” I moved closer, backing her against the balustrade. “It wasn't fun, either. It was torture.”

I didn't know what it was, the heat of the moment or the pure jealousy and anger coursing through me, but in that moment, I needed to know. I needed her to know.

Her breath hitched. “Gio—”

“Torture,” I continued, “because I've thought about nothing else since. Because I want to do it again, and more. Because when I see you look at another man, I want to tear his eyes out.”

“That's not fair,” she whispered.

“No,” I agreed. “It's not. None of this is fair. You're twenty-five. You're an Ajello. You're everything I should stay away from.”

“Then why don't you?” Her chin tilted up, defiant.

“I've tried. But I need you to tell me the same, Larissa. That this is the worst idea you've ever heard of, and I'll back off. I need to hear it from your lips.”

“Gio...” her eyelashes flickered against her cheeks nervously as she parted her lips, finding words. “I can't...”

And that was it. My heart soared as I watched her face break out into a smile. “I can't say that. I can't,” she repeated as she interlaced her fingers through mine.

The tension between us had been building for longer than I cared to acknowledge, and now it snapped. I'm not sure who moved first, maybe we both did at the same time, but suddenly her mouth was on mine, hot and desperate. Her hands clutched at my shoulders, nails digging in even through the fabric of my suit. I groaned, backing her further against the balustrade, one hand sliding into her hair while the other gripped her waist.

She tasted like champagne, her mouth opening eagerly under mine. I deepened the kiss, exploring her with my tongue, savoring the small, needy sounds she made in the back of her throat. My hand slid down to cup her ass, lifting her slightly, pressing our bodies together.

“Inside,” I managed between kisses. “Somewhere private.”

She nodded, breathless, and I took her hand, leading her back through the ballroom. We skirted the edge of the crowd, avoiding eye contact with anyone who might try to engage us. Down a corridor, up a flight of stairs to the private areas of the mansion. I pulled her into a small study, locked the door behind us, and then she was in my arms again.

I backed her against the desk and lifted her onto it. Her legs parted, allowing me to step between them, the silky fabric of her dress riding up her thighs. My hands slid up her bare legs, savoring the softness of her skin and the tremble of her legs.

“You've been driving me crazy,” I murmured against her neck, nipping at the sensitive spot just below her ear. She gasped, her head falling back to give me better access. “And this dress is torture. All I've done all night is think of taking it off.”

“So do it,” she challenged me, her hands fumbling with my tie, tugging it loose.

I kissed my way down her throat to the swell of her breasts, my fingers finding the

zipper at the back of her dress and lowering it just enough to expose more skin to my mouth. Her hands tangled in my hair, encouraging, leaving my blood to simmer at her touch. I still couldn't believe she was mine.

"Gio," she moaned as I sucked a mark onto the top of her breast, just low enough that her dress would cover it. "Please."

My hand slid higher up her thigh, finding the edge of her underwear. I teased her through the fabric, feeling the dampness there, and she whimpered, hips bucking.

"Is this what you want?" I asked, my voice rough with need.

"Yes," she gasped. "Don't stop."

I pushed the fabric aside and slid a finger along her slickness, circling her clit. Her whole body shuddered, and I captured her mouth again, swallowing her moans as I began to stroke her in earnest. She was so responsive, so wet already. I slipped one finger inside her, and when I found some resistance, I circled my thumb over her clit until she loosened, before going in deeper. I curled it to find that spot that made her cry out against my mouth.

"That's it," I encouraged, setting a rhythm with my finger while my thumb continued to circle her clit. I tried to put in another finger, but she was too tight. I frowned and decided that perhaps one was enough, and then, she mewled. I curled the finger in her tighter, tapping it against that sweet inner spot.

"Let go for me, Larissa," I leaned in and whispered in her ear, giving her a little nib.

Her eyes flew open, locking with mine, and the vulnerability I saw there made my chest ache. She was close, her inner muscles fluttering around my fingers, her breathing ragged.

“Gio,” she panted, “This feels amazing. I’ve never—I mean, no one has ever—”

It took a moment for her meaning to register. When it did, my hand stilled.

“You’re a virgin?” I asked, disbelief coloring my tone.

She bit her lip, nodding, her eyes still dark with desire despite the embarrassment creeping into her expression.

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“Christ, Larissa.” I started to withdraw my hand, but she grabbed my wrist.

“Don't stop,” she pleaded. “Please.”

I hesitated, torn between desire and something that felt dangerously like responsibility. “You’re—”

That's when we heard it—the sharp crack of gunfire from outside, followed by shouting.

I jerked back, instinctively reaching for the gun holstered beneath my jacket. Larissa's eyes went wide with fear as she started fixing her clothes.

More shouting echoed up from the grounds, and I recognized the voice of my brother Federico among them. Shit. If Federico was involved, this wasn't a minor altercation.

“Come,” I urged Larissa, giving her my hand. “We have to get out now. Stay by my side.”

She nodded, fear etched on her face as she took my hand. Together, we wove through a panicked crowd and made our way outside.

My security chief intercepted me at the stairs.

“Sir, there's a situation outside.”

“Tell me.”

“Your brothers arrived at the same time as the Moretti family. Words were exchanged. Accusations about betrayal.” He hesitated. “Shots were fired.”

I cursed under my breath. “Who all?”

“All four, Sir.”

Of course. My four brothers, confronting another Mafia family with all of the parties armed and some of them likely drunk. Exactly what we needed tonight.

Chapter 12 - Larissa

It all happened so fast. One minute, his fingers were inside me, and now, he had my arm in his grip and was rushing me toward the waiting SUV at the curb.

All around us, we heard gunfire so loud that my heart hammered against my ribs. So much for a typical Tuesday evening, I thought to myself to ease off the anxiety. Then again, typical had flown right out of the window since Gio Lebedev rewrote the script to my life.

“Get in!” Gio screamed over the chaos as he pulled open the passenger door and practically threw me inside.

I landed with an ungraceful thud before Gio slammed the door and raced around to the driver's side, taking the place of the driver who had unceremoniously been asked to get down. Gio rolled down the window and instructed the driver to rally the security convoy.

“They better be at our heels!” he roared as we squealed away with the already running car.

Moments later, he slammed on the brakes, and that was when I saw his brothers taking cover between cars. Two of them, I noticed, were stumbling badly. “Shit,” I whispered to myself with fear. “Dante and Luca.”

Gio rolled down his window and bellowed at them with desperation. “GET IN NOW!”

The men jerked their heads in the direction of the vehicle and started running toward us, Achille and Federico supporting Dante and Luca as they did.

Federico and Achille half-carried their brothers into the vehicle.

“Drive, Gio!” Federico shouted and slammed the door shut behind them. “Before they follow!”

Gio floored the accelerator and I gripped the door handle, thrown back against my seat by the force.

“How bad?” Gio asked, both words laced with worry. When I turned to check on him, Gio was pale. In that moment, I knew just how much his brothers meant to him and for his sake, I prayed they were okay.

“Dante took one in the shoulder,” Federico answered breathlessly. “Luca was attacked by a blade to his face and ribs.”

My head swam from the speed we were driving at. I turned to check on Dante and Luca. Both of them looked like they’d faced literal hell, and I counted down the seconds till we would reach home.

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“Those Marotti bastards,” Achille spat in anger. “I’m going to get them.”

“We’ll get to that,” Gio said, trying to calm the situation, but then he took another sharp swerve, telling me he was anything but calm. “First, we get to mine. It’s the closest and safest.”

We sped through the streets, and every minute felt like an hour. At last, we arrived at Gio’s.

Gio pulled up to the porch. “Get them inside,” he ordered to his two able brothers before making his way to my side, even though I had already opened my door. When I stepped out, he sighed and furrowed his brows, running a hand through his hair. “If anything happens to them...” his voice trailed off.

In that moment, I saw just how affected he was. Just how much he loved his brothers. I took his hand and quickly rushed him through the doors of his house. “Don’t worry,” I tried to calm him. “We’ll figure it out. Together.”

He nodded, a look of gratefulness washing over his face.

Inside was another level of chaos altogether, one seeped in panic. The brothers laid Dante and Luca on two separate couches in the living room. Federico immediately pulled out his phone while Achille disappeared down a hallway, returning with a black medical bag.

“We need to get them to a hospital,” Federico insisted, dialing some numbers.

Gio walked over and took the phone from his hand. “That’s too risky. If the Marottis are as hurt as you are, they’d be mad. It’s only a matter of time before they have their cars on the streets, waiting to ambush us.”

“Are they?” I asked Federico. When he looked at me quizzically, I followed up with my question. “Hurt as bad as you?”

“Worse,” Federico grimaced.

“Then we have to handle it here,” Gio said, just as Achille began opening the medical kit.

“So what's your plan? They can’t just bleed out to death here!” Federico's voice rose with panic.

“I'll call our doctor,” Gio offered, and I watched Achille pale as he tried to work through the contents of the medical kit, clearly looking out of his element.

“That'll take hours! Dante needs that bullet out now!” Federico insisted.

Gio let out a sigh of panic and exasperation. “You think I don’t know that?” Gio screamed at Federico.

I had never seen Gio like this. He was a man who always maintained his composure, but he was unraveling right in front of us all. It made him seem more human, and for some reason, I had this strange urge to help him feel less of the panic he was experiencing.

I cleared my throat and declared I had an idea, and all three standing men whipped around to face me, as if they'd forgotten I was there.

“I can help,” I said quietly. “I was a first aid volunteer throughout college. I’m not a doctor, but I can stop the bleeding and clean the wounds until your doctor arrives.”

Gio’s eyes flashed with surprise, and he gave me a small, single nod as I saw respect flicker across his face. He exchanged a glance with Federico, who returned a reluctant nod.

“What do you need?” Gio asked.

“Hot water, clean towels, alcohol—the stronger the better—and that med kit,” I answered, already rolling up my sleeves. “And someone needs to cut away Dante’s shirt to expose the wound.”

To my surprise, Gio was the one who moved first, heading to the kitchen. Federico approached his younger brother on the couch, murmuring something in Russian as he carefully peeled back Dante’s bloodied jacket.

I knelt beside Luca first, whose facial wound was still bleeding freely. Achille hovered nearby, ready to help.

“Hey,” I said softly to Luca. “I’m going to clean this up, okay? It’s going to sting.”

He gave a weak nod and closed his eyes.

Gio returned with everything I’d asked for. Our fingers brushed as he handed me a stack of clean white towels, and I felt a jolt travel up my arm that had nothing to do with the tension of the moment.

“Tell me what to do,” he asked, wanting to help and I could tell it would kill him if he couldn’t.

“Pressure on the wound on his side,” I instructed, dipping a towel in the hot water and beginning to gently clean the blood from Luca's face. The cut was long but not too deep. At most, it would leave a scar.

Gio followed my instructions carefully, his touch surprisingly gentle as he applied pressure to his brother's ribs. The room fell into a strange rhythm of activity—me cleaning, bandaging, and instructing while Gio followed my lead.

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Federico and Achille stood at a helpful distance, watching over Dante and passing me things I asked for.

When we moved to Dante, the injury was more serious. The bullet had indeed gone through his shoulder, leaving an exit wound that was still seeping blood.

“This is going to hurt,” I warned him, taking the cloth soaked in vodka that Federico passed me...

“Just do it,” Dante growled with a wince.

I did what I’d been taught, cleaning both wounds thoroughly before packing them with gauze. Gio stood beside me the entire time, but I knew it wasn’t me he stood for tonight. He was with his brother.

By the time I’d finished with both the patients, exhaustion pulled at my limbs. Luca had already drifted into a fitful sleep, while Dante stared at the ceiling, his breathing more even.

“If they’re in too much pain,” I told Achille. “You can give them another painkiller. But that’s it. No more. Wait for the doctor to arrive and do what he needs to next.”

Federico nodded, and to my surprise, he pulled me into a hug. “Thank you,” he said before pulling back. He looked at Gio and Achille. “I’ll take the first watch. You two should clean up.”

“And I—” I offered.

“Have done enough already,” Achille clicked his tongue. “You need some food and rest.”

“You’re right about that, Brother,” Gio said, sliding a hand around me to lead me out of the room. When I looked up, I saw nothing but pride. Pride and such immense gratitude, that it humbled me to my soul.

Gio guided me up to my room. I was too tired to resist as he opened the door and led me by the hand to sit on the couch.

“I’ll have the maid bring you some hot tea and food,” he said, then his voice softened, shifting from matter-of-fact to gentle. “For tonight, Larissa,” he said softly. “Words aren’t enough.”

“Words aren’t necessary,” I said with a small smile. “They’re your brothers. You love them. They’re important to you and your relationship... to me.”

“Thank you,” he said gently.

“They’ll be okay,” I said softly.

He nodded, but a shadow crossed his face. I saw raw emotion, a fear of the what-ifs.

“Yes,” he agreed, putting his mask back in place. “Because of you.”

I shrugged, uncomfortable with his gratitude. “I just did what anyone would do.”

“No,” he said, and the next thing I knew, he was on his knees right in front of me. “Not anyone. Certainly not someone we’ve been holding against her will.” His eyes searched mine, as if looking for answers to questions he hadn’t asked. “I owe you, Larissa.”

A strange thrill ran through me at the sound of my name on his lips, at the sight of him before me on his knees. “Do you?” I asked, testing the waters. “Enough to let me go?”

The shift was immediate, and his posture straightened. He stood, towering over me—dangerously close, but not threatening; just in a way that made it clear he was trying to reestablish boundaries and was taken aback by my request.

“Don't push your luck,” he murmured firmly, but kindly. “I can't do that. Not until I know your brother wasn't behind the attack on my warehouse.”

“Gastone wouldn't—”

“You don't know what your brother would or wouldn't do,” Gio interrupted. “You see the best in him because that's what family does. Just like I protect mine.”

I wanted to argue and defend Gastone with the fire I usually felt when anyone maligned my loved ones. But the words died in my throat as I looked past Gio to the door, thinking of his brothers in the other room—the way he'd rushed to save them, the gentle way he'd tended to their wounds beside me, the fear I'd glimpsed behind his stoic facade.

He was right. Of course I saw the best in Gastone because he was my family. What kind of a sister would I have been if I didn't? And tonight, I understood something fundamental about Giovanni Lebedev: everything he did, he did for his family.

Just like me.

“I'm going to prove it wasn't him,” I said quietly. “I'm going to find who really attacked your warehouse.”

A quiet, respectful challenge flickered in his eyes. “Oh, Larissa,” he murmured, reaching out to tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear. “I have no doubt you will.”

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The way he looked at me, as if I were a force to be reckoned with, made me sit up straighter with confidence. Tonight, I saw him in a new light, and he saw me in the same way. For the first time ever, I wanted to learn more about this mysterious and incredibly challenging man with a heart of gold.

I bit my lip, an idea forming. “I want to meet the rest of your family.”

Surprise registered on his face. “Why?”

“Because,” I said, the plan settling as I spoke, “I might be around for a while. Might as well find myself some company.”

Gio studied me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then, to my surprise, the corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile that transformed his face.

“Careful, Larissa,” he teased. “I might start to think you're getting Stockholm syndrome.”

Before I could formulate a suitably cutting response, he turned away, moving toward the door. “Get some rest. You've earned it.”

Chapter 13 - Gio

We pulled up to Dante's estate and Larissa craned her neck to look out of her window, her eyes widening at the sight of it.

“Wow,” she murmured. “Your brother's house is beautiful,” she reflected on the

Mediterranean-style mansion.

“Oh yeah?” I couldn’t help but grin at her. An infectious energy surrounded her, washing away the nervousness I’d felt about tonight. “Want to move in?”

She turned to me and rolled her eyes. “No chance. This place...it’s intimidating.”

“And mine isn’t?” I scowled, trying to act offended.

“It used to be,” she teased back. “Until I learned you’re a softy at heart.” She playfully banged her shoulder against mine.

I laughed a deep, rumbling laugh. Things between Larissa and I had grown easier, in the best sense of the term. Ever since she realized that I hadn’t kidnapped her out of a personal vendetta, but rather to protect my family, she’d loosened up with those walls that she maintained around her. She might not have agreed with how I did things, but she certainly tried to understand.

So, of course, when she asked if she could meet my whole family, I had to set aside my reservations. She had already met my brothers and helped heal Dante and Luca as well. I had no reason to keep her away from my sisters.

The worst part wasn’t that I’d brought her because I couldn’t say no; it was that I wanted her here, wanted to see her laugh with my sisters and spar with my brothers. I wanted to watch her exist in my world as if she belonged in it, though I never allowed that thought to surface in a conscious manner.

The driver pulled up to the house, and I stepped out, walking over to Larissa’s side to help her out. As I opened her door, I reflected on our location and purpose. To any reasonable bystander, bringing the sister of a rival Italian crime family—especially one I had abducted two months ago—to a family gathering would have seemed like a

foolish move.

Then again, no one in my family knew who she was exactly, or what I'd done. If they caught wind of the fact that I'd kidnapped an Ajello, and news reached Caspian, there would be hell.

But as long as we could keep it a secret, there was no reason she couldn't indulge in an evening with all of us.

Yet once again, my heart began to race. If something went wrong, if my family tried to pry into her background, I feared what Larissa might say. I knew she still wanted her freedom, and a small part of me wondered if she'd try to take it. She knew by now that her true identity was a secret I'd kept to myself. If probed, she might reveal who she was just to cause me trouble.

Any reasonable person would.

I prayed for this entire evening to be casual, with personal questions kept to a minimum.

"Hey, listen," I started as I extended a hand out to her. She stepped out, and her gorgeous blue-green eyes shifted colors as they met mine. And in that cream and gold dress, she looked like a divine angel. Time lost all meaning as we stood there, her beauty all I could focus on.

She cocked an eyebrow in my direction, and that was when I realized I'd lost my train of thought.

"Never mind," I shook my head, knowing it was too late to ask her for what I truly needed of her. Also, the guilt gnawed at me. I was this close to begging her not to tell them she was an Ajello, but I had been the one who had kidnapped her. It didn't seem

fair to put her in that position.

For once, I needed to let the evening play out.

“Come,” I said, giving her my hand. She landed a quizzical look in my direction but didn’t question me further. Her fingers slid against mine, and I felt a jolt. I squeezed harder as we walked.

The front door swung open before we reached it, and my youngest brother Achille bounded out, dark hair wild and the same whiskey eyes as mine filled with mischief.

“There you are!” He practically skidded to a halt in front of Larissa, pulling her into a hug. “Oh, you worked magic. Dante and Luca are back to their overconfident, assholish selves.”

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“Ignore him,” I muttered. “He's twelve.”

“I'm twenty-eight, you fossil,” Achille corrected, grinning at Larissa. “But you are a sight for sore eyes!”

Larissa blushed. Actually blushed.

Achille walked ahead of us, leading us into the house. Without thought, I wrapped an arm around Larissa's shoulder and pulled her closer. “Be careful. He's a sweet talker.”

Larissa looked up at me and giggled as she rose onto her toes. Her mouth approached my ear, and I felt a tingle down my spine as she whispered, “I figured.”

This moment transported me to another time and dimension. If anyone saw us, we could have passed for a couple, and a deep nostalgia came over me, for a thing that never existed in the first place.

The realization was confusing and messed with my head. I pulled away with a polite smile just as we entered the living room.

“Look who just came!” Achille announced proudly.

“Hello, hello!” Federico said, coming over to greet us.

Inside, Dante's house buzzed with the familiar chaos of a Lebedev gathering. Luca was arguing with Dante over something at the drinks table, both gesturing wildly at

each other as they drank. In the corner, my sisters Elena and Beatrice were picking at the cheese from the grazing table, their heads bent together as they gossiped over their wine.

Dante handed us some drinks, and I rolled my eyes as I led Larissa to introduce her to my sisters, the only two people she hadn't met, besides Caspian and Kate, who were still on their honeymoon.

"They're so engrossed in their little gossip, they haven't even noticed we've arrived," I complained to Larissa.

Larissa just giggled. "I always wanted sisters," she said sweetly, not minding their lack of attention. "They're lucky to have one another."

"Ladies," I said loudly as we reached the grazing table, "I've brought someone for you to meet. A guest. This here is Larissa."

Both women turned, their expressions shifting curiosity as they eyed Larissa. Elena was dressed in a simple, elegant dress. Beatrice, on the other hand, was a riot. Five years younger to her, she was our family's firecracker, currently sporting electric blue highlights in her black hair and a sparkly dress that probably cost more than my gardener's salary.

"So this is why Gio's been missing family dinners," Beatrice said kindly, approaching with her hand outstretched. "I'm Bea. The cool sister."

"Stop kidding yourself," Elena countered with a smirk. "I'm Elena."

Larissa smiled. "It's lovely to meet you both. Your brother's told me such lovely things about you."

I looked at her with surprise. That was a sweet white lie. I'd hardly mentioned my family to her, and all she knew of them was from their first-hand interactions, and that too only with my brothers.

"All lies," Bea said cheerfully. "We are the thorns in our brother's side."

"That's true," Elena countered. She then motioned to the grazing table. "Hungry?"

"Yes, actually," Larissa said. Once again, I was dumbfounded. She had just told me in the car how full she felt from all the cake she had eaten with her coffee that evening. She picked up a plate and began to serve herself.

Then, I realized what she was doing. She was finding a conversation starter with my sisters. An opening of sorts.

"This looks delicious," Larissa commented as she picked up some canapes.

"Tiny, though. Don't you think?" Bea frowned at the appetizer. "Dante's new chef is French and has no concept of portion sizes for Italian appetites."

"Everything French is always so fancy," Larissa giggled. "But we can forgive them for making us feel like outright bumpkins, considering how they've given us Paris."

"Have you ever been?" Elena asked curiously. Before I knew it, they were discussing their travels.

I watched, transfixed, as my sisters and Larissa became fast friends. They were simply three women laughing together as if they had known each other for years. It was disarming to see, especially knowing how guarded my sisters typically were around newcomers, as most either sought favor or viewed them as a threat.

Yet there was Larissa, helping Elena arrange stuffed mushrooms on a platter while Bea kept them entertained with a story that had them all laughing in stitches. Not once did Larissa glance over her shoulder at me as though asking to be saved. She moved like she belonged, like this was her world and she'd forgotten all about me.

“So,” Federico's voice reached my ears as he appeared by Larissa's side. “It's been weeks since that night you helped our brothers. How have you been?”

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Larissa turned to face him warmly and told him she was doing well. I watched as they exchanged some polite conversation where Federico thanked her again and Larissa politely waved him off, asking him not to mention it.

But there was something in his tone I caught on to. A sense of inquiry. When I averted my gaze from them, I noticed the rest of my siblings hovering, holding on to every word she said.

My worst fears were becoming a reality. My siblings were more than curious about her role in my life. I sensed it from the way they lingered nearby and made her the center of attention.

Dante walked up to me and handed me a whiskey. I took a measured sip as he turned to Larissa. “So what’s the plan? How long do you plan to stay...with Gio?”

My sisters’ heads whipped in my direction, followed by Larissa’s. I watched Larissa blush as she sipped her wine. “Oh, I don’t know just yet.”

“It’s been what?” Luca asked. “Two months now?”

“Two months?” Bea’s eyes widened as she exchanged a look with Elena. “Really?”

I felt a knot tighten in my stomach as I observed the exchange between my siblings and Larissa. Their prying questions and knowing glances set me on edge. I knew what they were thinking—that there was more to my relationship with Larissa than I had let on.

“Won’t your family miss you, Larissa? I recall you mentioned living in Russia. Where are they based now, again?” Dante asked, his piercing gaze fixed on me, waiting to see how I would react.

But before I could step in with a cover-up answer, Larissa smoothly intervened, placing a hand on my arm as she smiled at Dante.

“It’s complicated, you know how it is,” she said with a casual shrug, her eyes meeting each of my siblings in turn. “Gio’s been nothing but a gentleman to me. Just a friend helping me out when I needed it.”

“A friend,” Achille wiggled his eyebrows at her. “Or is it something... more complicated?” he used her own words on her.

“It’s just that,” Dante added in a polite tone. “You’re unusual company for Gio.”

“He’s usually not the kind to enjoy house guests,” Luca remarked.

“In fact,” Elena’s eyes widened. “I don’t think anyone’s stayed in his house for two months.”

“What my tactful siblings are trying to say,” Achille chimed in, arriving with a plate piled high with food, “is that he’s never brought a woman to family dinner before. So, either you’re sleeping with him or you’re very important. Or both.”

I felt my blood turn cold as I turned to Achille and growled in warning. I fought the urge to loosen my collar. The room suddenly felt too warm, too crowded, and I was furious at Achille for bringing up the suggestion that we might be sleeping together.

“Achille,” I took a step toward him, to warn him off in private, but Larissa stepped right in between her. Her eyes, I noticed, were wide, and her cheeks flushed, but she

smiled politely at the room.

“Giovanni's been kind enough to show me around the city,” Larissa's voice cut through the tension. “I'm just visiting, and he's been the perfect tour guide.”

The lies fell from her lips so naturally that, for a moment, even I believed them. She slid to my side, her shoulder brushing mine in solidarity.

“A tour guide,” Federico snorted. “Is that what they're calling it these days?”

Larissa's smile didn't falter. “Your brother and I are friends. Nothing more complicated than that.”

“If you say so,” he shrugged resignedly.

“Oh, stop bothering her now, will you?” Bea commented, trying to simmer down the tension.

“Yes, let's eat, before Achille finishes it all up,” Elena said, eyeing her brother's plate warily.

Larissa giggled, and Achille shrugged, mouthing a what through a full mouth. The company broke out into corners, some going to refill plates, my sisters now teasing Achille on his appetite. I took this moment to grab Larissa by her arm and whispered to her, “Can I talk to you? Alone?”

“Of course,” Larissa gushed, picking up her glass of wine to follow me out. If eyes lingered at our movement, I didn't care.

“They're wonderful,” Larissa said as we stepped into the hallway. “You're lucky to have such a close family.”

I didn't acknowledge her statement as I led her toward the terrace doors overlooking the gardens. I led her to a secluded corner, away from the windows, where no one could see us.

"What's your angle?" I asked without wasting a word.

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Larissa blinked, her expression shifting from relaxed to confused. “What?”

“With my family. The charm offensive. What's your game?”

Her confusion hardened into something colder. “My game,” she repeated. “You think I'm playing a game?”

“You covered for me in there. Made me sound like just a friend.”

“Would you have preferred I told them the truth? That you kept me against my will for months before deciding I wasn't actually a threat?” Her voice remained low, but the edge in it could have cut glass. “I was trying to help you, you ungrateful ass.”

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration building. “That's what I don't understand. Why help me? Why be so... real with my sisters? Why not use this opportunity to turn them against me and fight your way out?”

Larissa stared at me like I'd grown a second head. “Is that what you think of me? After all this time? That I'm just waiting for the right moment to stab you in the back?”

“It would make sense,” I insisted, even as I felt the ground crumbling beneath my argument. “I'm the enemy. Your brothers—”

“Must we bring my brothers into everything?” she snapped loudly. “Is that how it's always going to be, Giovanni? Haven't you understood that I'm not them?” She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly looking smaller. “Must I always think of

playing a part that fits your narrative? I was just being myself, but clearly, I made a mistake.”

My throat tightened, guilt spreading through my chest. She wasn't playing a game. She'd simply been herself, and my family had responded to that authenticity in kind.

“I'm sorry,” I said, the words feeling inadequate. “I shouldn't have accused you.”

“No, you shouldn't have.” Her eyes glistened with unshed tears in the dim light. “Not everything is a scheme, Giovanni. Sometimes people just... connect.”

I moved closer, drawn by the hurt in her voice. “You're right. I was wrong.”

“Again,” she added, but the corner of her mouth lifted slightly.

“Again,” I conceded, reaching out to brush a strand of hair from her face. “Forgive me?”

Her eyes met mine, holding a depth I could drown in. “You keep asking for forgiveness and then doing things that need forgiving.”

“I'm trying to...be better,” I said softly.

She stepped closer, close enough for me to smell her perfume. She invaded my senses, making me feel worse for how I'd wronged her... again. “Try harder.”

I reached out for her as she shuddered with pain, my hands gently clasping her shoulders. The next thing I knew, her exhausted body leaned into mine, her face buried in my chest. When she looked up, her eyes were woeful, tired. “Is it so easy for you, Gio, to believe the worst in people?”

I struggled to find the right words, the guilt of doubting her gnawing at me.

“It's never been easy for me to trust,” I began, my voice soft. “But I’m sorry I made you the brunt of that. I’m sorry, Larissa. I truly am. I’ve just never had someone like you in my life.”

She reached up to cup my cheek gently, her touch sending a jolt of warmth through me. “Someone like me?”

I wrapped my arms around her, nuzzling my nose in her hair as I spoke. “Someone so pure. Someone who can see the good behind an act of evil. Someone who views the world in shades of grey, not just black and white.”

“You’re not evil,” she pulled back and wrapped her arms around my waist. “You’re not,” she said more insistently. “You’ve just got...”

“Trust issues?” I offered with a chuckle.

“Trust issues,” she smiled and dipped her chin, before looking back up. “But you’ve got to stop.”

“I know,” I murmured, my finger now reaching for her chin, caressing it. Larissa's gaze softened, her breath hitching as my touch lingered on her skin. The tension between us crackled in the air, stretched across our skin, drawing us closer.

Her gaze flickered down to my lips, then back up, a silent plea in her eyes. Her nearness was intoxicating, making me forget everything but her.

I needed to savor her, to feel alive in the way only she could make me feel. I leaned down just as she reached up, and my lips teased hers, testing. But then her fingers clenched my shirt, digging into my skin as I flicked my tongue across her lips. She

opened for me, and as I entered, I nipped her lower lip before my tongue grazed her teeth, slid over the roof of her mouth, and she moaned softly. She thrust her hips into me, and I felt my blood and bones turn to molten lava, crawling toward my skin as every inch of me ached to feel every inch of her.

I was high. Higher than I'd ever been, all because of her.

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She answered by pressing closer, her hands sliding to curl around my neck. My hands spanned her waist, feeling the warmth of her through the thin fabric of her dress. She made a small sound against my mouth, something between a sigh and a moan, and rationality began to slip away.

I backed her against the stone balustrade, my body caging hers as the kiss grew hungrier, more desperate. Her fingers threaded through my hair, nails scraping lightly against my scalp in a way that sent electricity down my spine. I trailed kisses along her jaw, down the column of her throat, feeling her pulse race beneath my lips.

“Giovanni,” she breathed and the sound of my name in her voice was nearly undoing me.

Reality crashed back as I remembered where we were—on my brother's terrace, with my entire family just inside. I pulled back slightly, resting my forehead against hers as we both caught our breath.

“We should stop,” I said, the words painful to voice.

“Why?” Her eyes were dark, pupils dilated with desire. “You always do this—get me wound up and then pull away.”

I swallowed hard. “Because you deserve better than being taken against a stone railing in full view of the garden staff.”

What I didn't say was, you're also a virgin.

“I don’t want you to regret anything,” I added, softly.

She laughed, the sound slightly breathless. “Stop treating me like I’ll break,” her hands tightened in my shirt. “I know what I want, Giovanni. I’m twenty-five, not fifteen. The virgin thing isn’t a big deal.”

My breath caught. “It is a big deal. To me.”

She studied my face, her expression softening. “Because you respect me, or because you’re afraid?”

“Both,” I admitted. “I’ve taken enough from you already.”

“You haven’t taken anything I haven’t given,” she said quietly. “And I’m tired of you deciding what I can handle.”

I brushed my knuckles against her cheek, marveling at the softness of her skin and the determination in her eyes. “What do you want from me, Larissa?”

“I want you to finish what we’ve started,” she said, her voice steady despite the flush on her cheeks, “and not leave me hanging this time.”

The boldness of her request sent heat coursing through me. This was madness—she was the sister of men who would kill me if they knew I’d touched her, let alone taken her virginity. She was younger, innocent in ways I’d never been, and somehow still saw something in me worth wanting.

“Your brothers would have me gutted,” I said, a last, weak protest.

“Oh, they’re probably going to do that either way,” she said, in that sassy way of hers with a roll of her eyes. And then, she pulled me back into a searing kiss.

Chapter 14 - Larissa

His mouth claimed mine with a hunger that left me breathless, my back pressed against the cold stone balustrade of the balcony. The night air kissed my bare shoulders, but I barely noticed the chill; not when I was wrapped up in Giovanni Lebedev's arms and he cupped my face like I was something precious.

I felt the hard evidence of his desire against my hip, and a girlish giggle escaped my lips before I could stop it, my inexperience showing through the cracks of my attempted sophistication.

Gio pulled back slightly, his whiskey-colored eyes dark with want. "Oh, you want to play, Larissa?"

His voice made me curl my toes, and I bit my lower lip. "As I said, I want you to finish what we've started."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Here?"

I gave him a single nod of my head.

A slow smile spread across his face, transforming his handsome features into something boyishly charming. "In a house full of my family? You're braver than I thought."

The next thing I knew, he took me by the hand and we were rushing through the corridors, our hurried footsteps echoing off the walls. My heart hammered in my chest, and the anticipation of what was to come was making my entire body tremble.

"Gio!" I whispered as loudly as I could, without us being overheard. "Where are we going?"

Gio turned and slammed into me until my back hit the wall, nipping at my ear. “To my old bedroom in the East Wing. This used to be our family home before Dante inherited it.”

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He slung his arm around my waist, and we continued to run, pausing every few steps to steal kisses that grew increasingly desperate.

“Gio,” I gasped as his lips found the sensitive spot in my throat at our fourth stop. “The room...”

“Yes,” he agreed, pulling away with visible effort. “This way.”

We climbed a narrow staircase, and the sounds of conversation from the living room vanished completely. When we reached his bedroom door, I felt like the happiest, giddiest girl in the world. With his hand on the small of my back, he let me go through first before locking the door shut behind him.

I turned to face him and saw him leaning against the door, one leg propped up on the wall as if he were afraid that if he let go, he wouldn’t be able to control himself.

I parted my lips, my chest heaving for air as I made my way over to me. His face twisted into pure agony as he met me halfway, his hands already twisting through my hair as he dipped my head back and pulled me into a kiss. He walked me back toward the bed, gently, yet so in control, and I felt my core heat from the fact that I was in Gio Lebedev’s bedroom and he had eyes only for me.

He guided me to the edge of the bed, his hands sending a trail of fire across my waist. My knees hit the wood, and I fell back. The next thing I knew, he crawled into bed over me and ran his fingers down the entire length of my right arm. I shivered in response, watching this incredibly handsome, beautiful man hover over me.

“Nervous?” he asked with concern in his eyes.

“Never,” I whispered.

“At any point, if you want to—”

“Gio,” I shushed him with a kiss.

One hand slid down beneath my spine, traveling down the curves of my ass, and I jerked. He grinned as he left his hand there, let me rest on it while he took his other and ever so slowly, slid up my dress.

“Are you certain?” he asked, his breath warm against my lips.

I nodded, unable to find my voice, a strange mixture of nervousness and desire turning my knees to water.

He slid to the floor, and I propped myself on my elbows to see what he was doing. His hands now parted my thighs, and I gasped when his fingers found the elastic of my panties. Slowly, he slid them down, his knuckles grazing my thighs to my ankles before he slid them off.

My breath caught in my throat, and I lay back down, closing my eyes for what was to come. To my surprise, he slid up to me, bringing the dress up with him.

My eyes fluttered open to see him watch me with a smile. “I want to do such filthy things to you, Larissa. And I want you naked for it.”

I nodded with a gulp and gave him space to reach behind me. His hands were gentle as they found the zipper of my dress, pausing.

“God, if you’re this slow,” I murmured, “we’ll be here until tomorrow.”

He growled, biting into my neck, and I heard the satisfyingzzzip.

“Greedy,” he murmured as he slid the dress right off, leaving me in nothing but a delicate bra that suddenly seemed painfully inadequate.

Gio stepped back, his gaze traveling over my exposed skin with such naked appreciation that a blush bloomed across my chest and climbed to my cheeks. Yet I didn't cover myself. There was something empowering in his admiration, something that made me feel powerful.

“You are a vision,” he murmured, shrugging out of his suit jacket and loosening his tie. “Any man would kill to be where I am right now.”

“I don't care about any man,” I said, finding my courage. I stepped forward to help with his buttons, my fingers trembling slightly. “Just you.”

His smile turned predatory. “Good.”

When he was down to his boxer briefs, I allowed myself to look—really look—at him. Gio’s body was all lean muscle and smooth skin, interrupted by intricate tattoos that mapped territories I longed to explore. A massive black bird spread its wings across his right pectoral, while some ancient script I couldn't read curled around his left bicep.

He grinned as he watched my face, before making his way between my legs again. His head dipped, and the next thing I knew, I felt his delicious tongue slide across my slit. It took everything in me to not burst from the pleasure I felt in that moment, something I’d never felt before.

He lapped at me like I was water, and he, thirsty. He drove into my clit, hard until a small bubble of pleasure became unbearable to contain.

“Gio,” I moaned, my entire body trembling as I slid my hands through his soft hair. When he slid his tongue into me like a spear, I swear I rocked off the bed and dug into his scalp.

He chuckled into me, the vibration going into my core.

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“Gio,” I almost cried in pleasure. “I can’t...I can’t...”

He ignored me, and then I felt his finger plunge into me. Slow at first, testing the waters, before he drove it all the way in. I clenched my muscles, trying to contain this absolute sensation that was rippling through me like an incoming storm.

And when he curled it, dear god, I saw stars. I swept off the bed, screaming his name as every muscle contracted, my skin tightened around my muscles, and I felt every inch of his finger.

“Fuck,” he whispered, inching up to the bed, but his finger stayed in me as I rode out the last of my orgasm.

At last, he covered my body with his own. The weight of him was delicious, grounding, like an anchor. He reached over to kiss me, and his hands roamed my body as though he was trying to learn the geography of it—the dip of my waist, the curve of my hips, the swell of my breasts, the sensitive hollow of my throat.

“Tell me what you like,” he whispered against my collarbone.

“I-I don't know,” I admitted, feeling my inexperience like a physical thing between us.

He stilled above me, lifting his head to meet my eyes. He kissed each lid, then gave me a look in question.

“I trust you,” I whispered.

He smiled as though a weight had been lifted. I felt his hands between us, and then heard the cotton rustle. It was only when I felt a hard length press against my thigh that I realized he was now naked. A delicious thrill lapped down my spine.

I licked my lips, my eyes darting to where our bodies met below our waist. Something shifted in his expression—a softening around the eyes, a tender curl to the corner of his mouth.

“We’ll go slow,” he said, brushing his thumb across my lower lip. “And you tell me if anything doesn’t feel good. Promise me.”

“I promise.”

His mouth returned to mine, but now his kisses were different—deliberately unhurried, as if we had all the time in the world. His hands moved with exquisite care, finding places I hadn’t known could bring such pleasure. When he finally removed my bra, his appreciative groan sent a shiver of pride through me. He worshipped my breasts with his mouth until I was arching beneath him, seeking more of a pleasure I couldn’t quite define.

His fingers slipped between my legs again, and this time, he slid them in out and fast, finding me wet and ready. The sensation stole away my breath, promising more to come.

“You’re so responsive,” he murmured, his voice strained. “So perfect.”

He adjusted himself right between my legs but didn’t move any further, watching me carefully.

By now, I was desperate.

“Gio,” I breathed, not recognizing my own voice, husky with need as I touched his chest. “Please.”

“We can stop here,” he offered, though I could see the effort it cost him to say it.

I shook my head. “No. I want you. All of you.”

He nodded with understanding and broke into a small smile as he slid a finger down my throat, between my breasts, down my naval until it was at my clit. I shuddered with nervous energy, needing it to be expelled.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, and his eyes darkened.

His eyes locked with mine as he put his weight on his forearms, positioning himself over me.

“Breathe,” he instructed softly, and I did, inhaling as he began to press forward.

The stretching discomfort was immediately apparent, my body resisting the unfamiliar intrusion. He paused, brushing hair from my forehead with unexpected tenderness.

I adjusted to the feeling before murmuring, “More.”

He pushed forward incrementally, stopping whenever I tensed, resuming only when I gave him permission. The sharp pain I'd expected came as a mild sting, and the next thing I knew, he was all the way into me.

And when he moved, I clutched at his shoulders, overwhelmed by the intrusion that was somehow both foreign and exactly what I needed. He worked me carefully, his thumb circling my clit in a rhythm that had me soaking wet.

Gio began to move faster, though with care, taking measured thrusts that gradually increased in tempo as my body acclimated. What started as strange soon transformed into something indescribably good, a building pleasure that had me wrapping my legs around his waist, urging him deeper.

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“You feel incredible,” he groaned, his control visibly slipping. “So tight, so perfect around me.”

My fingers twisted in the sheets as his words sent a thrill through me. I felt a surge of confidence, lifting my hips to meet his thrusts, drawing a harsh curse from his lips.

“That's it,” he encouraged, shifting slightly to hit a spot inside me that made my feet stretch outward. “Let go for me, Larissa. I want to watch you come apart again.”

He pressed down on my clit, circling it tighter, building a pressure within me that was cresting, and I threw back my head at the pleasure as it rose in intensity. When he angled his hips differently, I saw stars as the pressure broke over me.

This time, the climax was different—more intense, spreading outward from where we were joined until my entire body was engulfed in pleasure so acute it bordered on pain.

I cried out his name as the waves crashed over me, dimly aware that he was following me over the edge, his rhythm faltering as he pressed deep and shuddered against me. For several moments, we remained locked together, our breathing ragged, our skin damp with exertion.

As I floated back to awareness, he finally withdrew, and I felt the loss keenly. But he pulled me right in against his chest, his heartbeat gradually slowing beneath my cheek.

“Are you alright?” he asked, his fingers tracing idle patterns on my bare shoulder.

“More than alright,” I answered honestly, surveying the pleasant ache between my thighs and the lingering tremors of satisfaction in my limbs. “I didn't know it could be like that.”

His chuckle rumbled through his chest. “That's just the beginning, sweetheart. There's so much more I want to show you.”

We lay in comfortable silence for a while, his hand stroking my hair, my fingers tracing the outlines of muscles. In that moment, wrapped in the warmth of his arms, it was easy to forget the complications waiting outside this room, but the real world couldn't wait forever.

“They must be wondering where are,” Gio said at last. “My siblings.”

Reluctantly, we began to get dressed.

On the drive back to Gio's, doubt crept in like an uninvited guest. The music played on the radio, but my mind was busy replaying our encounter over and over. The physical memory was sweet, but I felt unsettled.

The man who had touched me with such reverence was the same man who believed my brothers were monsters. How could I reconcile these two truths?

By being with him, I betrayed my brothers. For once, I felt my loyalties divide.

We pulled up to the porch, and I didn't even notice until Gio opened the door for me. I stepped out and saw him watching me with concern. “Penny for your thoughts?” he asked.

I paused, wondering if I should say something, but I also knew if I didn't, he'd overthink the night and believe what happened between us was the cause of discomfort.

"It's just," I looked up at him, a plea in my eyes. "I need to prove my brother's innocence. I haven't done anything about it, and you said..."

A shadow flickered across his face. "I know what I said," he nodded.

I gulped.

I felt a strange heaviness, a weight pressing down on my conscience. My brothers weren't angels—I knew that much. Still, they were my blood, my protectors since our parents' deaths. The idea that they might be involved in something as heinous as Gio suggested... I couldn't accept it.

"What do you need?" Gio asked, as though he could see the pain in my face.

"If it's not too much," I braved. "Can I have access to your computer?"

Two hours later, I was in the kitchen, pouring over all the information I could access on my family. I scanned the documents on screen. Gio had gathered various financial records over the years on my family, but I couldn't tell what the transfers were for.

I clicked through several folders, memorizing what I could, searching for anything that might help me understand the true nature of the conflict between our families. But the more I read, the more confused I became. The evidence was circumstantial at best. Not once was there an outright attack against the Lebedevs that had been recorded.

All the mentions were from third parties; none directly involved my brothers. By the end of it, from what I had gathered on the internet and from Gio's research, I knew one thing for sure: my brothers were good at maintaining our privacy.

"Finding what you're looking for?" Gio asked, surprising me with his presence as he slid a mug of coffee toward me.

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The question carried no accusation, but I felt exposed nonetheless at his intrusion. “Just trying to understand.”

“There’s years of history, Larissa,” he murmured gently. When I looked up, he cocked his head at me. “Why don’t we take a break?”

I was making no progress as it was and so I nodded, putting aside the computer.

“Found anything?” he asked casually, though I saw the interest glimmer in his eyes.

“Nothing so far,” I shrugged.

To my surprise, he looked disappointed. I realized then that Gio would always be searching for a needle in the haystack, convinced it was there even if it wasn’t. I couldn’t prove to him their innocence because even though there was no evidence against my brothers, he had already deemed them guilty.

It would take something else, something different, to show him what my brothers were. And then, an idea struck. An idea I chose, for now, to keep to myself.

Chapter 15 - Gio

I watched Larissa's face as she took in the quaint storefronts of Cold Spring, her eyes bright with such sheer joy, that I knew coming here had been the right decision.

Just last night, a wistful look crossed her face over dinner. When I asked what was on her mind, she expressed her discontent with being cooped up in the city for so long.

I realized how difficult all this had been for her. Her freedom, however little of it, had been taken away from her because of me. When I suggested a day trip somewhere outside of New York City for a change, I was thrilled when her eyes lit up and she asked if we could drive to Cold Spring.

The morning sun caught in her blonde hair, and she glimmered with such life that, for a moment, I stopped to consider she might have been the most beautiful woman I'd ever laid eyes on.

"You're staring, Gio," Larissa said without looking at me, a smile playing at the corners of her lips.

"Just making sure you don't run." I kept my voice steady, though the truth was more complex. The sight of her, relaxed and so happy, was strangely mesmerizing. Today, I was seeing the real Larissa—carefree and bright, and I was completely smitten by this version.

"Where would I run to?" She gestured around at the Hudson Valley landscape that framed the small town. "Besides, you'd catch me."

There was something in her tone, a teasing challenge that made my skin prickle. "Yes," I said simply. "I would."

She winked at me and nudged my shoulder, wiggling her eyebrows comically. I groaned, rolled my eyes, and then she laughed—a loud, whimsical laugh that fit right in with the red leaves of autumn. She lit up the room and my day with that laugh.

We walked along Main Street, our footsteps falling into an easy rhythm.

"Oh, look!" She grabbed my arm suddenly, her fingers warm through the fabric of my shirt. She pointed to a window display of antiques. "Can we go in?"

I nodded, trying to ignore the slight pressure of her hand, which she'd yet to remove. Inside, the shop smelled of furniture polish and old books. Larissa wandered from shelf to shelf, picking up small items and examining them with genuine curiosity.

She stopped at a glass case containing vintage jewelry. "That's beautiful," she murmured, pointing to a delicate silver bracelet with tiny blue stones.

The shopkeeper, a gray-haired woman with glasses hanging from a chain around her neck, approached. "That's from the 1920s. The stones are aquamarine—match your eyes perfectly."

I glanced between the bracelet and Larissa's eyes. The woman wasn't wrong.

"How much is it?" Larissa asked.

The shopkeeper named a figure that made Larissa's eyebrows shoot up. "That's... steep," she said.

"It's an antique, dear."

"What if I buy something else too?" Larissa grabbed a nearby porcelain figure—a ballerina with a chipped tutu. "Could you do a package deal?"

I bit back a smile as the shopkeeper shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

"But the bracelet has a small scratch on the clasp," Larissa pointed out, leaning closer to the case. "And I noticed your 'sale' sign outside."

"That's for selected items only."

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“Which items? Maybe I'd be interested in those instead.”

The back-and-forth continued for several minutes, with Larissa employing increasingly creative arguments that the shopkeeper deflected with practiced ease. It was obvious that Larissa had no experience with real bargaining, but her earnest attempts were thrilling to watch. Her childlike innocence was so sincere.

I hated seeing her dig her own grave and noted that the shopkeeper was frustrated, and moments away from ignoring us altogether.

I gently placed an arm around a still-arguing Larissa and smiled at the shopkeeper.

“I'll take it,” I said finally, interrupting what was becoming an increasingly desperate negotiation.

Both women turned to me with surprise.

“The bracelet,” I clarified. “And whatever else she wants.”

Larissa's eyes widened. “Gio, you don't have to—”

“I know.” I pulled out my wallet and handed the shopkeeper my credit card.

Five minutes later, we were back on the street, Larissa clutching a small bag with her new bracelet and a vintage hair clip she'd added at the last minute. The ballerina doll, she decided, wasn't worth it with the chip.

“You didn't have to do that,” she said again, looking up at me with something like confusion.

“Consider it an investment in peace. Your bargaining was becoming painful to watch.”

She laughed, the sound unexpectedly light. “I'm not very good at it, am I?”

“No.” I smiled, surprising myself. “Your brothers never taught you?”

Her smile faded slightly. “They tried to keep me away from the family business as much as possible.”

“Yet here you are with me.”

“Yes,” she said, her aquamarine eyes meeting mine. “Here I am.”

We continued walking, stopping occasionally to gaze into shop windows or sample something from the street vendors—local honey, artisanal bread. I watched her face with each new discovery, strangely satisfied by her delight.

“Let's get coffee,” I suggested when I noticed her suppressing a shiver as a cool breeze swept down from the hills.

She took a corner table, and I ordered for the both of us at the counter before making my way over to her. Black coffee for me and a hazelnut coffee for her.

“How did you know?” she asked when the server placed the frothy drink before her.

I shrugged. “Lucky guess.”

“No,” she said, stirring in a packet of sugar. “You've been watching me.”

It wasn't a question, and I didn't deny it. “Force of habit.”

“Is it hard? Always having to watch people?” she asked as though she could tell where the habit came from—my dangerous word. “Your family. Are they all like this?”

I leaned back in my chair, studying her. “We're talking about your family today, not mine. You've met most of mine, and know more than most.”

She wrapped her hands around her cup, her new bracelet catching the light. I hadn't realized she'd put it on already, and the sight of it gave me joy.

“What do you want to know?” she asked.

“Whatever you want to tell me.”

She was quiet for a moment, tracing the rim of her cup with one finger. “I know you're not on good terms with them, but my family is my world. Without them, I wouldn't be half the woman I am. My oldest brother, Gastone, took over when my father got sick. He was only twenty-two.”

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I nodded, though the information wasn't new to me. The Ajello family's structure was something I'd memorized years ago, as I had with all our enemies and allies.

“He practically raised us after our mother died,” she continued. “Gastone, Carlo, and Dino were just kids, and I was a little baby. My father...” She paused, a shadow passing behind her eyes. “He wasn't always kind.”

I leaned forward slightly. “In what way?”

She took a sip of her cappuccino, leaving a small dot of foam on her upper lip that she didn't notice. Without thinking, I reached across and wiped it away with my thumb. She froze at my touch, her eyes widening.

“Sorry,” I murmured, withdrawing my hand.

She shook her head, as if clearing away a thought. “My father believed in discipline. When I misbehaved, or when he thought I'd misbehaved, he had... methods.”

“Methods,” I repeated, my hand clenching into fists already at the tone she used, laced with such pain.

“He used to lock me in dark closets,” she said, her voice suddenly smaller. “For hours sometimes. Once, for a whole day without food or water when I spilled wine on a guest's suit by accident. I was seven.”

My chest turned cold, and my heart stopped. The image of a small girl, Larissa, locked in darkness, made my jaw clench.

“I developed a fear of small spaces and the dark,” she continued, her gaze distant now. “I still can't ride in elevators. Gastone would sometimes slip notes under the door to me, or whisper stories through the keyhole to keep me calm. Once, he even got locked in with me on purpose so I wouldn't be alone.”

“And your other brothers?”

“They didn't know how to stand up to him then. They were scared too.” She blinked, refocusing on me. “Gastone protected all of us as much as he could. When he took over, he promised things would be different. And they were.”

I nodded, understanding what she meant. Gastone Ajello, the man I had it out for, was also the boy who'd whispered stories through a keyhole to comfort his terrified sister.

“What about you?” she asked suddenly. “What was it like growing up with Caspian?”

I wasn't prepared for the question, and I wasn't finished with this conversation. The sheer anger I felt toward her father and myself was spilling over.

“Larissa,” I shook my head, needing to say what I did. “You didn't deserve that, and I'm sorry.”

“Hey,” she whispered, reaching over and clasping her hand over mine. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“I do,” I said, briskly. “When I first took you, I hadn't realized... didn't know...”

I couldn't bring myself to say it. I'd kept her in the dark, in a small cell. I'd made her relive her worst nightmares, and I didn't know how to undo it.

But, I didn't need to say a word, because she squeezed my hand tight and gently. "I know," she said simply, with a tender smile that melted my heart. "You weren't to know."

In that moment, I realized just how precious Larissa Ajello was. The girl had a heart of gold.

Soon, she went back to her original question and I didn't bother to stay fixated on her family life. Something told me she needed to change the topic, and I was more than happy to ease those painful memories from her mind.

"About Caspian," I said. "He was always... intense, different. But he looked out for me, for all of us. In his own way."

"And your parents?"

"Dead before I really knew them." I surprised myself with the honesty. "Caspian remembers, but I don't."

She reached across the table again and laced her fingers through mine. "I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago."

"Still. To grow up without parents..."

"We had family," I said, thinking of my uncle who had raised us, who later turned out to not be the man we thought he was. "We survived."

"More than survived," she said, her eyes meeting mine with conviction. "You thrived. Built something powerful."

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“Built on blood,” I replied, not sure why I was saying these things to her, of all people.

Her voice was quiet but certain. “You did what you had to, right?”

We sat in silence for a moment, thinking of our families. I looked at her, really looked, and saw resilience shaped by pain. For a brief, dangerous moment, I allowed myself to imagine a different world where our last names didn't matter.

“I know a place I'd like to show you,” she said suddenly, breaking the spell. “If you don't mind.”

“Lead the way.”

Twenty minutes later, I pulled the car up to a large Victorian house set back from the road. A sign out front read “Hudson Valley Children's Home.”

“An orphanage?” I asked, confused.

Larissa nodded, a strange intensity in her expression. “I come here sometimes. The children... they are amazing.”

Inside, we were greeted by the sound of laughter and the sight of children playing in a large common room. A middle-aged woman approached us, her face lighting up when she saw Larissa.

“Miss Ajello! We weren't expecting you today.”

“It was a spontaneous visit, Mrs. Bennett. This is my friend, Gio.”

Friend. The word felt both inadequate and wildly optimistic.

“Any friend of Larissa's is welcome here,” Mrs. Bennett said warmly. “The children are just finishing their art projects. Would you like to see them?”

Before I could respond, a small boy with dark curls spotted Larissa and came running over. “Miss Larissa! Did you bring Mr. Gastone?”

I stilled, suddenly feeling as though I was being trapped in a situation for which I hadn't been warned. She didn't bring me here out of innocent motives; that much I realized instantly.

Larissa crouched down to his level. “Not today, Tommy. But I brought a new friend.”

The boy looked up at me suspiciously, and I felt oddly exposed under his tiny, scrutinizing gaze. “Is he nice?”

Larissa glanced up at me, her expression unreadable. “Yes, Tommy. He is.”

For the next hour, I watched Larissa move among the children with practiced ease, knowing many by name and asking about their projects and lessons. They adored her; that much was clear. Something in me shifted as I observed this side of her—this gentle, nurturing aspect I hadn't expected.

I found myself drawn into their activities despite my initial discomfort at being thrust into this plan. A little girl with braids insisted on showing me her drawing, and I crouched beside her, nodding seriously as she explained the purple blob that was apparently a dragon. A boy asked if I was strong enough to lift him, and before I knew it, I was hoisting squealing children into the air, their small bodies light in my

hands that had done such different work.

Later, as Larissa helped the staff distribute snacks, I stepped into the hallway for a moment's peace and noticed a plaque on the wall. I moved closer, reading the names of donors. My eyes stopped on one: "The Ajello Foundation."

"Your family funds this place," I said when Larissa joined me a few minutes later.

She nodded. "For the past five years. Gastone started it after we found out that one of his men had been raised here."

For some reason, hearing that made me angry. It was as though she was trying to prove to me how innocent her brothers were, how good, and I was the one who had been in the wrong.

I stared at her, something cold forming in my stomach. "Is that why you brought me here? To show me what a saint your brother is?"

Her eyes widened. "No, I—"

"This whole day," I said, the pieces falling into place, "was just a strategy, wasn't it? The shops, the café, the stories about your childhood—all leading up to this moment where I'm supposed to see Gastone Ajello as some kind of humanitarian instead of the man who's trying to push us out of our territory."

"That's not fair," she protested, her cheeks flushing. "I wanted to show you a part of my life that matters to me. A part most people don't see."

"Most people don't need to be convinced to spare your brother's life," I replied coldly.

Her face paled. "What?"

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“You knew exactly what you were doing.” I turned away from her, anger and something like disappointment washing through me. “We're leaving.”

“Gio, please—”

“Now, Larissa.” I walked toward the exit. I heard her quick footsteps behind me, heard her making hurried goodbyes to the staff.

In the car, the silence was heavy and charged. I gripped the steering wheel too tightly, focusing on the road ahead. The day that had started with unexpected pleasure had soured completely.

“It wasn't like that,” she said finally, her voice small.

“Save it.” I kept my eyes on the road. “I'm taking you home.”

Chapter 16 - Larissa

The boat rocked beneath my feet, salt spray stinging my face as we cut through the dark water. I knew Gio was still reluctant to have me here observing his operations, evident from the tight line drawn across his jaw. Not to mention, it seemed as though he was refusing to meet my gaze from across the boat.

The only reason he brought me along, I knew, was because I had presented a strong argument. I had convinced Gio that understanding his reality might somehow illuminate the truth about my brothers.

It had taken me three days to wear him down. Three days since our fight in Cold Spring.

“If I'm going to understand my brothers, to know whether they're innocent or guilty, I need to see what this world is really like,” I had told him, standing in his office with my arms crossed, refusing to be dismissed. “You're in the same business. Who better to show me?”

Gio had looked at me with steel. “You know all there is to know.”

“By what? Seeing that one operation you took me to?” I'd countered. “That's like reading a page and claiming you know the book.”

“It's dangerous,” he'd tried another approach, but I could see the resolve weakening in his expression.

“So is being ignorant,” I had replied. “How can I be objective about my brothers' world if I've never seen it?”

He'd sighed then, a deep, weary sound. “Fine. I'll take you for one operation. Just one. But you have to promise to stay by my side and do as I say.”

I had agreed without wasting a breath. Now, as the mainland lights faded behind us and the boat sliced through the black water toward an unknown island destination, I suddenly felt nervous.

Gio stood at the bow, very far from me, his broad shoulders squared against the wind, his black hair ruffled by the breeze. He was still angry with me, still hurt by my attempts to prove my brothers' innocence despite his saying I could do so. But with him this angry, I felt it wasn't the right time to remind him of our deal.

Let him simmer down, I thought, before I broach the subject of what happened that day.

On the other hand, I knew I had used our date for my personal agenda and understood how that could have hurt him. His pain, his hurt, it came from someplace deep. I shouldn't have tried to prove a point that specific day, of all the days we had. I knew I ruined the lovely time we'd been having. But what choice did I have? Family was everything.

I made my way carefully toward him, balancing against the boat's persistent rocking. The five other men on board, Gio's men, watched me with curious eyes.

"I appreciate this," I said when I reached Gio's side. The wind whipped my hair across my face, and I tucked it behind my ear. "I know you didn't want me here."

He didn't look at me. "No, I didn't."

His coldness stung more than it should have. By now, I had grown fond of his warmth, one he reserved just for me.

"Are you going to be angry the entire night?" I asked in frustration..

His jaw tightened. "I'm not angry, Larissa. I'm concentrating. This isn't a field trip. We're making our way in the dark, through patrolled waters. If we're caught..."

I swallowed hard, recognizing the truth in his words. "I understand."

Half an hour later, the island emerged from the darkness ahead of us, a darker shadow rising from the water and stretching across the night sky. There wasn't a single light to beckon us, and it was clear that this place was meant to be hidden, to appear untouched.

“We're here,” Gio announced before turning to his men. “We follow the standard protocol. I need two of you on the perimeter,” he nodded at two armed men. “Vito, you stay with the merchandise, and you two,” he pointed at the remaining men, “come with me.”

The men nodded and checked their weapons before moving. I noticed how they moved around Gio with a respectful ease. There was no fear in his presence. It was different from how I'd seen men behave around my brothers.

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As we approached the shoreline, Gio turned to me. “Stay behind me. Don't speak unless spoken to, and even then, say as little as possible. If anything happens, anything at all that feels wrong, you get back to the boat immediately. Understand?”

I nodded, my throat suddenly dry.

The boat slowed as we approached a small, dilapidated dock. Figures appeared from behind the trees, and I gathered these were the men we were here to trade with. Each man, I noticed, was armed. They were more than we were, and suddenly, I was afraid.

But there was no going back now.

“Ready?” Gio asked, but he was looking into the darkness, not at me.

We got off the boat. I stumbled slightly on the uneven dock, and Gio's hand reached out for me instinctively. Even angry, he couldn't help but watch out for me.

The men from the tree line approached, speaking in rapid Russian that I couldn't understand. Gio responded in Russian right back. For some reason, heat pooled in my belly. God, he sounded sexy.

The men led us down a narrow path through dense vegetation. The ground was uneven, and I often found Gio's steadying hand at my elbow, on the rougher terrains.

We emerged into a clearing where several shipping containers stood in eerie silence. More armed men waited and watched her approach. My heart hammered against my

ribs, and I tried to blend into the shadows behind Gio.

I watched the trade take place. Gio had told me we were visiting dangerous men, that I wasn't to draw attention to myself and so I stood behind him, not asking a single question, trying to ascertain what was happening.

Gio passed them the suitcases, and when the men opened them, I nearly balked at the sight. They were full of cash.

When the cases arrived at our side, Gio nodded at his men. "Would you mind checking that, gentlemen?" he asked politely. His two associates opened the cases, and I peered over Gio's shoulder, surprised by what I saw: pharmaceuticals.

Cancer drugs, insulin, and treatments for rare diseases, all packaged from foreign countries. This was not the weapons or hard drugs I had expected.

"Why these?" I whispered to Gio during a moment when the others were occupied with finalizing the trade.

His eyes never left the transaction, but he answered, "Because people need them to survive, and the official channels charge ten times what they're worth. Some parents can't afford to keep their children alive."

Something in my heart blossomed. Even amongst criminals, I realized, there was honor.

I watched as he negotiated terms for the next exchange. Gio was polite and cool. He never flexed his muscles; he was humble. When one of his younger men made a mistake in the currency exchange rate, Gio corrected him gently, away from prying ears. The young man nodded his thanks, and Gio let him continue with the price setting for the next time around.

He operated differently than my brothers, who usually had a tendency to intimidate. I knew this from the conversations that sometimes took place at our home. Gio was... different. Kinder.

Something shifted inside me as I observed him. For the first time, I truly started to respect him. The attraction I felt for him was something different. Tonight, I saw him as much more. I saw the man he was beyond what he presented to me.

And in that moment, I knew Gio had never been someone he wasn't. He'd never pretended, never manipulated. This was the man he was. Loyal, protective, a criminal but also kind and true.

A lump formed in my throat, and I wished, wished we could return to how things were between us—before we went to Cold Spring, before I made the mistake that cost us the perfect day.

A while later, Gio guided me back toward the boat with a gentle hand at the small of my back. The contact felt different now. More reserved. And I hated it.

The return journey began in silence. The other men dozed or spoke quietly among themselves, but Gio and I sat side by side, with inches between us. It was getting late.

I stared at the dark water, replaying the night's events.

"I've been unfair to you," I said suddenly, breaking the silence.

Gio looked at me, and to my surprise, he said something I hadn't expected: "No, Larissa. It's me who should apologize."

I stared at him, wide-eyed.

“Okay,” I murmured, nearly singing with joy that we were at least talking again. “I was not expecting that.”

A ghost of a smile touched his lips, the first I'd seen all night, but he said nothing more.

I took a deep breath. “I've been unfair. I was so fixated on proving my brothers' innocence that I haven't really listened to what you've been trying to communicate. Tonight showed me that things aren't as black and white as I wanted them to be. That day, I ruined an innocent, fun day and turned it into an agenda. I shouldn't have.”

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He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “And I've been acting like a sulking child because you wounded my pride. You have every right to question, to investigate, to seek the truth about your family. I shouldn't have expected blind trust when I haven't earned it.”

“I think you're earning it now,” I said softly.

Gio shook his head. “I let my feelings for you cloud my judgment. I was hurt that you would use our date to gather information, but of course you would. Your brothers are your family, and I would do the same for mine. I've been salty and difficult because you were simply trying to do what you believed was right.”

His honesty disarmed me completely. Without thinking, I reached out and laced my fingers through his. When he squeezed in response, the warmth inside me for him surged into a fiery heat.

Three days. Three whole days we had fought, and just now I realized how much I missed him. I missed his touch, the way he gathered me in his arms, how he nuzzled in my neck, the way he smiled at my good jokes, and frowned at the bad ones.

And without thinking, I leaned in, closing the distance between us, my fingers tracing the sharp line of his jaw as I pressed my lips to his. For the briefest second, I felt him freeze at my boldness, but the next moment, he turned to me and gripped my waist, tugging me closer.

Seems like he missed me too.

Chapter 17 - Gio

I could taste the sea salt on her lips as her body pressed against mine on the narrow bench of the boat we sat on. She inched closer, and my fingers tangled in her blonde hair, pulling and tugging, digging like a man starved for more.

“I can't believe I wasted three whole days being mad at you,” I murmured against her mouth, my teeth grazing her lower lip.

Larissa laughed and nipped at my tongue playfully. “Why waste more time, then?” She moved to sit on my lap, and her ass pressed against my cock in a way that made me lose all my senses.

Her boldness drove me fucking wild. I needed her somewhere I could hear every gasp, every moan without the fear of my men overhearing us on the boat deck.

“Come here,” I growled, hooking my arms beneath her thighs and lifting her off the bench in one smooth motion. She weighed nothing to me, her body fitting perfectly against my chest as I carried her below deck.

“Where are we going?” she asked, her lips trailing fire along my jaw as she kept landing kiss after kiss, moving down my neck.

I groaned as I felt it right in my core, my body heating for a release.

“Somewhere you can scream my name out loud,” I answered, heading down the narrow staircase.

“Oh, I might just scream a lot more,” she whispered, biting into my neck. I growled and tugged at her neck with my own teeth, showing her I was ready to play. The private cabin was perfect with its large plush bed and, most importantly, a door that

locked.

I kicked the door shut behind us and heard it auto-lock. The room was dark, but had enough moonlight for me to not bother with any lights.

Larissa's back hit the wall with a gentle thud as I pressed her against it, and my mouth found hers again, hungrier this time. Her fingers were already moving from button to button in her quest to get me naked. I helped her with the last buttons before shrugging the shirt off my shoulders.

“You’re eager, aren’t you?” I chuckled into her throat.

“Says the man who just carried me down here like his boat was on fire,” she said huskily.

“Yeah, well...” I reached for the hem of her dress and inched it up, revealing inch after tantalizing inch of her creamy skin until it was completely off.

She stood before me in nothing but lacy underwear, the soft curves of her body illuminated by the moonlight. Her body ran like a racetrack, and I felt my mouth go dry. In my forty-two years of existence, I hadn’t seen a beauty like hers.

“You're staring,” she whispered and flicked my nose playfully.

“I'm appreciating,” I corrected, running my hands from the hollow of her throat to the edge of her panties. She arched her back into me as I did. “There's a difference.”

Her breath hitched at my touch, and she moved to my belt, removing it quickly. My pants followed right after, and then I lifted her again, her lace-covered breasts pressing against my chest.

I carried her to the bed and tossed her down with playful roughness. She bounced once on the mattress, her hair spreading out like a golden fan against the sheets. The sight nearly undid me.

I crawled over her, my body caging her beneath me. “Do you know how fucking beautiful you are?” I asked, lowering my head to press my lips to the soft skin between her breasts.

She arched up, seeking more contact. “I bet you say that to every woman,” she teased.

I stopped and grabbed her chin, forcing her to look into my eyes. “Never,” I growled.

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She smiled and leaned up, kissing me again.

My hands slid behind her back, and in one move, I had her bra off, sliding it off her arms, feeling her shudder beneath me.

Her breasts now danced free, and my eyes glazed over at the sight of those perfect, pebbled nipples. I reached for one, swirling my tongue around the sensitive peak before sucking gently.

Larissa moaned, her hands flying to my hair as she held me against her chest. I shifted between both until she was squirming beneath me, her legs wrapping around my waist with a force driven by what could only be hunger.

I moved lower, trailing open-mouthed kisses down her stomach.

Her panties were such a flimsy piece of lace that I felt her wetness without even needing to take them off. I dragged them down her legs with agonizing slowness, drinking in every inch of her nakedness.

“Gio,” she breathed and clutched at my hair, urging me to move faster.

I settled between her thighs and watched her part for me. “I want to taste you,” I told her, maintaining eye contact as I lowered my mouth to that sensitive bundle of nerves.

The first swipe of my tongue had her back arching off the bed, a startled gasp escaping her lips. I chuckled against her, the vibration making her shudder. I took my

time exploring her with my mouth, learning what made her moan, what made her fingers tighten in my hair, and what made her thighs tremble against my cheeks.

I slipped one finger inside her, then two, curling them forward to find the spot that would drive her wild. When I found it, her reaction was immediate—a sharp cry, her body tensing beneath me.

“That's it,” I encouraged, continuing my assault with fingers and tongue until she was writhing on the sheets, unintelligible pleas falling from her lips. Her wetness coated my chin and my fingers, the scent of her arousal filling my senses.

When I felt her begin to tighten around my fingers, I increased the pressure, the speed. “Come for me,” I commanded against her flesh, and as if she'd been waiting for permission, she shattered. Her thighs clamped around my head, her body convulsing as pleasure swept through her.

I eased her through it, gentling my touch as the waves subsided, pressing soft kisses to her inner thighs as she caught her breath. But I wasn't nearly done with her.

I moved back up her body, taking her in a deep kiss that let her taste herself on my tongue. My cock throbbed painfully between us.

“I need to be inside you,” I growled, reaching down to guide myself to her entrance.

Larissa nodded eagerly, her hands clutching at my shoulders. “Yes, please,” she whispered, and those simple words nearly broke my control.

I pushed into her slowly at first, giving her time to adjust to my size. She was impossibly tight, gripping me so tight that it was a delicious pain. When I was fully seated inside her, I paused, forehead pressed to hers, our breaths mingling in the small space between us.

“Move,” she urged, her nails digging into the muscles of my back.

I didn't need to be told twice. I began to thrust, setting a rhythm that had the bed rocking beneath us. Each stroke drove me deeper, her legs wrapping around my waist to take me further.

“Fuck, Larissa,” I panted, the pressure building at the base of my spine already. It felt like it had been too long since I'd had her, and my body remembered exactly how perfect she felt around me.

Her hands traced the sweat-slicked muscles of my back, and then she clutched into my skin, her nails digging in. “Harder,” she demanded, and I complied, driving into her with increased force.

The sound of flesh meeting flesh filled the cabin, interrupted by our shared gasps and moans. I reached between us to touch her where we were joined, my thumb circling her clit in time with my thrusts.

Something shifted in her expression—a new confidence blooming behind her eyes. With surprising strength, she pushed against my chest.

“I want to try something,” she said, and I allowed her to guide me onto my back.

She straddled me, her thighs bracketing my hips, and slowly lowered herself onto my length. The new angle had me seeing stars, going even deeper than before.

“Christ,” I muttered, my hands automatically flying to her hips.

Larissa smiled down at me, taking her pleasure from my body. She began to move, finding her own rhythm, her breasts bouncing enticingly with each rise and fall.

I reached up to cup them, rolling her nipples between my fingers as she rode me. With my other hand, I gripped the firm curve of her ass, helping guide her movements.

“You feel so good,” she moaned, her head tipping back.

I thrust up to meet her downward movements, creating a perfect counterpoint that had us both gasping. The pressure was building again, more intensely this time, and I knew I wouldn't last much longer.

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“I’m close,” I warned her, my fingers moving to where we were joined, finding her clit again.

“Me too,” she breathed, her movements becoming more erratic as she chased her release.

I felt it when she came—the fluttering of her inner walls around me, the way her thighs tensed against my sides, a broken, breathless cry on her lips. It was enough to send me over the edge after her, my release tearing through me like a hurricane.

I pulled her down against my chest as we both came down from our high, our hearts racing in tandem. For several minutes, we simply breathed together, her cheek pressed to my sweat-dampened chest, my fingers lazily tracing patterns on her back.

“That was...” she began, trailing off as if words failed her.

“Yeah,” I agreed, understanding perfectly.

Eventually, she shifted to lie beside me, her head pillowed on my shoulder, one leg thrown over mine. The intimacy of the moment struck me harder than I expected. This didn’t feel like just sex anymore.

“I should probably be getting you back,” I said reluctantly, though I made no move to leave the bed.

Larissa burrowed deeper into my chest. “Five more minutes,” she negotiated, pressing a soft kiss to my skin.

I chuckled, wrapping my arm tighter around her. “Five more minutes,” I conceded.

Those five minutes stretched to fifteen, then thirty, then hours as we lay tangled together in comfortable silence, dozing on and off.

My phone shattered the spell, the harsh buzz against the wooden nightstand making us both jump. Caspian's name flashed on the screen, and reality came crashing back as I gazed out the window and noticed that the sun was out in full glare. That was when I realized the boat wasn't rocking. We'd probably been docked for hours.

“Fuck,” I muttered, reaching for the phone.

“Hello?”

“Gio,” my brother's voice was clipped. “Where the hell are you? We have something to discuss.”

“I'm on my way back,” I said, sitting up and running a hand through my disheveled hair. “Give me an hour.”

“Make it quick. I'll meet you at yours,” he commanded before hanging up.

I stared at the phone for a moment before setting it down. “We need to go,” I told Larissa, already reaching for my discarded clothes.

She nodded, slipping from the bed to gather her own items.

On the drive back home, my mind raced ahead to what Caspian could want. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be good—it never was when he used that tone.

We pulled into the driveway of my home, and the sight of Caspian's black Bentley sent a chill down my spine. Something was wrong if he had come to my place as soon as he landed back from his honeymoon.

Larissa looked up at me with worry. She had figured from the silence during our drive back that something was wrong.

“Whose car is that?” she asked, softly.

“My brother, Caspian,” I explained and placed a hand on her lower back. “Come.”

On entering the house, we found my brother already waiting in the living room. He faced us with an unreadable expression.

“Caspian,” I said, my heart pounding in my chest as I thought of ways to explain Larissa’s presence. “How was the honeymoon?”

“It was fine,” he said, his eyes flickering briefly to Larissa before returning to my face. “Nice evening yesterday for a boat ride?”

There was something in his tone that put me immediately on edge. Caspian was always someone to mind, but never more so than when he was being polite.

“We went on an operation,” I explained, keeping Larissa slightly behind me as we moved into the room.

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“We?” he asked quietly, with an edge that sliced through the air.

I didn’t answer and he took one step forward.

“I wanted to meet your houseguest,” he said, his gaze shifting to Larissa again. “The one you've been keeping secret for, what is it now, two months?”

My blood ran cold. “It wasn’t a secret—”

“Please, Giovanni,” he scoffed, using my full name the way he did when he was truly angry. “Did you really think I wouldn't notice? Wouldn't investigate why my brother was suddenly bringing a woman to family gatherings? Reporting late with updates?”

Larissa shifted uncomfortably beside me, sensing the tension.

“I was handling it all,” I said carefully.

Caspian's laugh was sharp. “Personal, indeed.” He turned his attention fully to Larissa now, giving her a smile that didn't reach his eyes. “Larissa Ajello. Sister to Gastone, Carlo, and Dino Ajello.”

Larissa froze behind me. “How do you know who I am?” she whispered.

“Unlike the rest of my family, I don't allow a pretty face to distract me from conducting proper research,” Caspian replied. He pulled out his phone, swiping to display a photo before turning it toward us. “Family gathering two weeks ago. You were there, and I had to find out who you were when I learned you’ve been living

here.”

“I...I...” Larissa was at a loss for words, and I took another step forward, shielding her from view. This explanation wasn’t for her to bear.

“Have you lost your fucking mind?” Caspian's voice rose as he turned back to me, his mask of politeness dropping entirely. “Playing house with an enemy's sister? What exactly was your plan here, Gio?”

“It's not what you think,” I started, though I wasn't entirely sure what he thought.

“No? Then explain why Gastone’s sister is living in your home when her family has been trying to undermine our operations for years!” He was shouting now, losing his grip. “Have you forgotten who you are? What we stand for?”

“I haven't forgotten anything,” I snapped back, my own temper rising to meet his. “But there are things you don't know.”

“Then enlighten me,” he hissed, stepping closer. “Because from where I'm standing, this looks like a foolish mistake.”

The accusation stung, all the more because Caspian and I had never been at odds like this before.

“Do you remember the arms shipment to Europe that was delayed?” I asked, choosing my words carefully. “It wasn't an operational mistake; the Ajellos planted a bomb.”

Caspian's eyes narrowed. “And you kept this from me?”

I took a deep breath. “I didn’t want to bother you on your honeymoon. I handled it,

and then I saw Larissa following me.”

“And you did what exactly?”

“I handled it,” I said firmly.

“Handled it how?”

I hesitated, then decided the full truth was the only way forward. “I took her.”

Caspian's eyes widened. “You kidnapped an Ajello,” he repeated slowly. “And you... what? Decided to make her your live-in girlfriend?”

Put like that, it sounded insane even to my own ears. But it wasn't that simple now, was it?

“It's complicated,” I said finally.

“Complicated,” Caspian echoed, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “Well, Brother, you've certainly made things complicated now. Do you have any idea what will happen when the Ajellos discover their precious daughter is in the hands of the Lebedevs?”

Chapter 18 - Larissa

I stood behind Gio, watching Caspian and him argue. The fact that the brothers were fighting over me tugged at my chest like a suffocating rope. I hovered in the doorway, watching Caspian lash out at Gio, and the way they spoke was enough to let me know they'd forgotten I was even there.

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In fact, I realized I shouldn't even be there. I wanted Gio to have his right to privacy, and if he knew I had heard every word spoken and that I stayed until the very end of this drawn-out argument, he would be overwhelmed with guilt because of what I overheard.

To give them privacy, I settled on an impulsive plan. My presence would only make things worse, or so I told myself as I retreated from the living room. The best thing I could do for them would be to give them space.

Would it be so wrong if I took this opportunity to step out? Perhaps to hit the stores?

By now, I had started to feel more like a guest and less like a prisoner in Gio's home. The line blurred more each day, and I convinced myself that yes, I could get out of the house for a while and let the brothers sort out their mess.

In the hallway, something caught my eye—two phones lying on the mantelpiece. Gio must have left them in his haste to meet Caspian. I knew he always carried an extra, and without giving myself time to reconsider, I swiped the black one and slipped it into my handbag. Just in case, I told myself. Just so I could call him if needed.

I made my way to the side door, the one the housekeepers used for smoke breaks. The guard who usually stood there was missing. The mid-afternoon sun was so hot that I figured he'd snuck out for a little rest in the shade. Their distraction was my opportunity. I slipped out, my heart beating frantically against my ribs.

I walked without looking back, right out of the mansion, down the tree-lined avenue. Gio's house disappeared in the background and it was then that I realized that this

was the first time in a long, long time that I was out alone in the world. Only when I reached the main road did I allow myself to celebrate that fact. I waited for a taxi with utter excitement, and I directed the driver to the nearest shopping center. I pulled out some cash from my purse, saved from the money Gio occasionally gave me for ordering things I might need around the house.

At the mall, I tried on dresses I couldn't afford, sprayed perfume on my wrists, and bought a warm coffee. All the while, my mind raced with possibilities. I could keep walking, find a bus station, disappear. The thought should have filled me with desperate hope, but instead, a hollow ache spread through my chest.

Two months ago, I would have run without looking back. Now, the thought of never seeing Gio again made my throat tighten painfully. It wasn't Stockholm syndrome—I wasn't that far gone. But something had changed between us. We both wanted to prove something different to one another, yet somehow, had become a team.

I sat on a bench near the fountain, watching couples pass by. And the whole entire time, I had a soft smile playing on my lips as all the memories from last night rushed by. No. I didn't want to run. I could. But I didn't.

It was confusing, this revelation. For a moment, I felt guilty all over again. My brothers must be worried sick. But now I knew there was another way. I could go back and in time, convince Gio to tell my brothers I was alright. I could convince him to work with me and ask for my brothers to prove their innocence or guilt. He'd work with me on this, I knew, if I returned.

When I returned.

Just then, I was brought back to the present when I saw a hulk of a man in an Italian suit walk by.

A familiar Italian suit.

That's when I saw him—Dom, my bodyguard.

My blood turned to ice. What the hell was he doing here? Did he see me? What if he called my brothers and they took me back right here and now? Panic surged through my chest at the thought of disappearing from Gio's life without a word. He'd think I betrayed him, and I couldn't bear the thought.

My brothers would bring hell on him when they discovered he took me, and that thought alone was enough to make me jump to my feet and rush after Dom.

I had to check he wasn't making any calls. I had to make sure he didn't misunderstand and cause Gio trouble.

But as I followed an unsuspecting Dom, I realized he hadn't seen me. I could walk out of here.

Yet, as I was about to do so, I felt an instinctive tug to hold that thought. This was an opportunity in disguise to finally find peace for Gio.

Dom was close to my brothers, almost in on everything. I knew from experience that I couldn't exactly ask my brothers the truth about their involvement in bombing Gio's operation. They'd tell me it was none of my business, and if they even got a hint that Gio and I had gotten...involved, they'd lock me in a room and throw away the key.

But Dom. Dom was different. He'd always had a soft spot for me. If I could use Dom to gauge the truth about my brothers' involvement, or lack thereof, in the attack on the operation without being forced back home, then Gio and I could put this matter to rest.

I moved through the crowd carefully, making sure I stayed within sight of security cameras and large groups of shoppers. Safety in numbers. Dom couldn't exactly throw me over his shoulder while I screamed and carry me back home without alerting security. In this crowded space, I felt a sense of peace knowing he couldn't force me out of here.

I could go back to Gio.

When I was close enough, I deliberately bumped into a teenage girl, loudly apologizing for my clumsiness as she spilled her bubble tea all over herself and shouted expletives. The commotion caught Dom's attention. Our eyes met across the sea of people.

His face registered shock, then something I couldn't quite read. Relief? Guilt? He pushed through the crowd toward me, and I led him on a short chase, just enough to reach the food court—crowded enough for safety, loud enough for privacy.

“Larissa,” he gasped, catching up to me and grabbing me by the arm, forcing me to turn and face him. “Where the hell have you been? We've been looking everywhere for you.”

I allowed confusion to wash over my features. “I'm fine, Dom. What are you doing here?”

Dom glanced around nervously. “Not here. We need to get you out of here. Your brothers—”

“My brothers sent you to find me?” I interrupted, trying to confuse him because I didn't want to tell him Gio had kidnapped me. I couldn't, without causing repercussions for him.

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Dom's jaw tightened. "Of course they've been looking, Larissa. Where have you been? Who hurt you?"

I used this time as he spoke to slide my hand into my pocket and activate the camera recording on Gio's phone. It would pick up all the noise.

"I'm in danger everywhere, Dom. There are people angry out there at our family."

Dom's eyes scanned the crowd as he leaned in. "Are you being followed?"

"Maybe," I lied through my teeth. "Dom, I need to know what happened that day when we went for errands. Why did my brothers send you and me for errands when they never do? Was it genuinely necessary, or did they...need us for something else?"

I tried to get him to admit the truth to me. If he suspected my brothers' actions had something to do with me being taken, now would be as good a time as any to have told me. If he gave me a clue, any clue, that our visit wasn't innocent, perhaps I could get him to tell me if they'd planned an attack that day. I needed to prolong this conversation, for just a few more minutes before I made my escape.

"It's more complicated than that," Dom started, but his eyes suddenly focused on something over my shoulder. His face hardened. "We need to go. Now."

Before I could react, a familiar scent enveloped my senses. It was his perfume I smelled before I turned and saw a furious Gio storming toward us.

And from that look on his face, my knees turned to jelly. His eyes were glazed over

with pure rage as he eyed Dom. Not once did he look in my direction.

“Dominic,” he hissed. “What an unexpected surprise.”

“Lebedev.” Dom's hand disappeared beneath his jacket, and my breath caught. I knew what lay there.

“I wouldn't,” Gio warned softly. “There are at least four of my men in this crowd, and none of them are as patient as I am.”

I glanced around, suddenly noticing the strategically placed men in casual clothes, their attentive eyes and tense postures giving them away. How had Gio found me so quickly?

Dom's hand reappeared empty. “This doesn't concern you. I'm taking her back to her home.”

“That's not happening.” Gio's eyes never left Dom's face as he slid his hand through mine. It wasn't a comforting touch—it was possessive, a warning. “Larissa is under my protection now.”

“Protection?” Dom laughed harshly. “You took her, didn't you, bastard? You kidnapped her. I'm not letting her get away.”

Dom reached for me, but Gio pulled me behind his back, his eyes flashing with fury. “Careful, Dominic. The next words out of your mouth may be your last.”

I felt the tension building, saw the potential for violence. Mall security would be powerless to stop what was coming. Innocent people would inevitably be caught in the crossfire.

“Gio,” I said with worry, tugging at his arm.

“Larissa.” Dom's voice was urgent. “Think about what you're doing. Gastone—”

But before I could say another word, Gio's men flanked our side, two of them standing with their backs to us. From the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of metal and realized they were holding a gun to Dom's abdomen.

“Gio, please,” I begged, my eyes traveling to the gun, then to Dom. “Don't hurt him.”

“Let's go,” he growled, pulling me away, ignoring my words. He guided me through the crowd, his body a shield between me and anyone else. His men moved all around us.

Outside, a black SUV idled at the curb. Gio opened the door and practically shoved me inside, his movements radiating anger. He slid in beside me, and the car pulled away from the curb before he'd even closed the door.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he demanded once we were moving.

I met his glare with one of my own. “I was getting answers.”

“Like hell you were! Without backup? Without telling anyone where you were going? If any other enemy had found you, do you know what they could have done to you?” Each question was sharp and rapid, not giving me time to answer.

“How did you find me so quickly?” I asked, trying to deflect just so I could think.

“You took my personal phone. All my devices have tracking enabled.”

Of course. Of course he would have tracking on his devices.

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Gio held out his hand, palm up. “Give it back.”

I reached into my pocket and placed the phone in his hand, our fingers brushing. But this time, the touch felt cold.

Chapter 19 - Gio

I pulled the door open. “Get out,” I growled at Larissa. She paled as she exited the car and, for some reason, stumbled. Without thinking, I reached out, steadying her by the arm.

She looked up at me and blinked with a flicker of hope that I wasn’t angry. But I was, and I pulled my hand away.

“Inside, now.”

She walked weakly beside me. Good. I wanted her to feel afraid, wanted her to repent and see my anger. Inside, I let her straight to her bedroom and made sure she entered first, before closing the door behind me.

“You ran!” I said, watching as she backed against a wall.

“Gio, listen—”

“Last night, you were all cozied up in my arms. This morning, you took the first chance you could get and ran. I should have known. I should have known.”

I paced up and down as I spoke, my thoughts a conflicted mess.

“Gio, known what?” she asked, in a near whisper.

I whirled to face her. “Three hours you’ve been gone. Three fucking hours to plan your escape back to your brothers, no doubt. I trusted you, Larissa. I trusted you so much that when Caspian left, I thought you were reading around the house somewhere, taking some alone time. But, you betrayed me!”

Larissa wrapped her arms around herself, the color washing from her face.

“Tell me,” I asked. “Did you have a nice meeting with Dom? Did you share all my family’s little secrets with him?”

She froze, those ocean eyes widening. “What? I would nev—”

“Don't play stupid, Larissa. It doesn't suit you. What did you tell him? How long have you been planning to run back to your brothers? When did you plan for him to meet you at the mall? Did you call him using my phone?”

“I didn't—”

“Don't lie to me!” I rarely raised my voice, but it thundered now. “For weeks you've been here, playing the part, making me believe we were...” I couldn't finish. What exactly had I believed we were? “Was it all an act? Waiting for the right moment to betray me?”

Larissa's face hardened with anger. “If I wanted to escape, I would be gone already. I've had dozens of opportunities.”

I sniggered with anger. “And waste all the information you've been gathering? No,

you're smarter than that. You needed time.”

“Information?” She stepped toward me with her arms outstretched. “What could I possibly tell my family that they don't already know about you? Your business isn't exactly a mystery to them. Neither is your family.”

“You’ve always been a liar,” I snarled. “I should have known the whole innocent thing was an act the whole wretched time. But to imagine you’d stoop so low as to share my bed to convince me otherwise...” I spoke before I thought, my heart entangled with the hurt of betrayal.

But then, pain flashed across her face, and even in my fury, I knew I’d crossed a line. But something within me held me back from apologizing—not after what she’d done.

“Fuck you,” she hissed, tears gathering in her eyes. “You know nothing about me if you think I'd use... that... to spy for my brothers.” A tremor ran through her voice.

I grabbed her wrist when she tried to push past me. “And I'm supposed to believe that? After everything your family has done to mine?”

“Let go of me.” Her voice lowered dangerously.

“Not until you tell me the truth.”

“I am telling you the truth!” she shouted, yanking against my grip. “But you're too blinded by your own paranoia to see it! You think everyone is as calculating and cold as you are. “

That cut deep.

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“I know you'd sacrifice anyone if Caspian asked you to.” Her eyes flashed with something like disappointment. “Including me. That’s why you think I’d do the same, isn’t it?”

“And you wouldn't do the same for Gastone?” I countered, releasing her wrist but not backing away. “We're not so different, you and I.”

“The difference is I would stand for the right, the truth.” She stabbed a finger against my chest. “You act like you're better than them, more civilized, but you're just as brutal.”

My temper. “You think I'm pretending? Everything I've done is true to myself. Including how I've treated you.”

“By keeping me prisoner? By following me? By accusing me of betrayal the moment you see me doing something you don’t like?” Larissa's cheeks flushed crimson with anger. “That's not how you treat someone you care about, Giovanni.”

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration making my movements jerky. “What was I supposed to think? You disappear for hours, meet with a man who works for your brother, and come back acting like nothing happened.”

“You were supposed to trust me!” Her voice cracked on the last word. “After everything we've...” She swallowed hard. “I thought we were beyond this.”

“Trust is earned.” The words tasted bitter.

“And I haven't earned it?” She looked wounded now, the fight draining from her.
“What more do you want from me, Gio?”

“I want—” I began, but stopped when I noticed her sway slightly. “Larissa?”

She blinked rapidly, one hand reaching for the back of the sofa. “I'm fine. Don't change the subject.”

But she wasn't fine. The flush of anger had drained from her face, leaving her unnaturally pale. A sheen of sweat had broken out across her forehead.

“You don't look fine,” I said, anger giving way to immediate concern.

“I said I'm fine.” She tried to straighten, to continue our argument, but her knees buckled.

I caught her before she hit the floor, my hands gripping her waist. She felt small and fragile against me, despite the fire in her eyes. “You're not fine. Sit down.”

“Don't tell me what to do,” she mumbled, yet she didn't resist as I guided her to the couch.

I pressed the back of my hand to her forehead. She didn't have a fever, but she was weak. Very weak.

“I'm just angry,” she protested weakly and tried to stand, but she became dizzy, so I had to force her to sit again.

“Angry doesn't make you collapse.” I walked to her bedside table and brought back a glass of water. “Drink this.”

She took the glass with trembling hands, and I had to help her steady it. When had she last eaten? Had she been feeling ill before our fight?

“How long have you felt sick?”

Larissa sipped the water but avoided my eyes. “It came on suddenly. But... I was a little tired this morning.”

Could it be the stress that brought this on? I'd been bellowing at her, accusing her, when she might already have been unwell. My hands shook with the guilt of it.

“Let me help you to bed,” I said, setting the glass aside.

She looked about to argue, but closed her mouth when another wave of dizziness visibly washed over her. I didn't wait for permission, just scooped her into my arms and carried her over.

“I can walk,” she protested.

“I know you can,” I murmured into her hair. “But you don't have to.”

I gently placed her on the mattress and helped her out of her shoes. She shivered, and I pulled the comforter over her.

“Why are you being nice to me?” she asked, softly like a confused child. “You were just accusing me of betraying you.”

I sat on the edge of the bed, studying the defiance still lingering in her eyes even as exhaustion claimed her.

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“Because...” I started, uncertain how to articulate all the mixed feelings. “Because even if you did meet with Dom to betray me, you're still...” Mine. That’s what I wanted to say, but it didn’t feel right under these circumstances. “You're still under my protection.”

Her laugh was weak but genuine. “That's the most backward apology I've ever heard.”

“It wasn't an apology.” But I found myself smiling slightly, the tension between us shifting.

“Liar.” Her eyes drifted closed. “You're terrible at being the bad guy, Giovanni Lebedev.”

I brushed a strand of damp hair from her face, taken aback by her kindness after all the ugliness that had spewed between us. “Rest now,” I said, moving to stand, but her hand caught mine.

“Stay.” It wasn't a question, but it wasn't a demand either. It was a request.

I hesitated for only a moment before slipping off my shoes and stretching out beside her on the bed, on top of the covers while she remained beneath them.

“I did meet Dom,” she whispered, eyes still closed. “But not to betray you. Never that.”

“We'll talk about it tomorrow,” I said, my voice rougher than intended.

Chapter 20 - Larissa

I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling as post-breakfast nausea returned for the third morning in a row. I grabbed a pillow and turned to my side, placing it between my legs and throwing one foot out to cool my body.

For three days now, I'd been stuck in my room with nothing to do but oscillate between feeling sick and feeling hurt. Gio's hurtful words and accusations always lingered at the back of my mind. He thought I wasn't trustworthy. He thought I'd betrayed him.

We needed to talk, I knew that. But I was so tired from all that had happened, that I allowed myself to ignore the inevitable for as long as I could. The truth was, I feared what more he could have said. I feared reliving that pain and hurt.

No matter what I did, it seemed he was intent on believing the worse of me.

Yet, at the same time, I knew he didn't entirely hate me. Something still lingered within him, a rope of affection. It was that pull that caused him to come and go a few times a day as he checked on me between work, meetings, and calls. He always ensured that I ate. He offered to call the doctor.

He was doing everything in being supportive, but lacking the one thing I needed from him: trust.

For some reason, he too hadn't brought up our argument. I knew he was waiting for when I'd feel better.

I tried to sleep, but sleep evaded me. My stomach was churning like a complete bender. I sighed and tried to sit up, but the dizziness washed over me again.

Just then, I heard a knock on the door.

“Come in,” my voice sounded weak.

Gio poked his head through the door, and upon seeing that I was presentable, walked over. He adjusted my pillow without me asking, and when his fingers brushed the back of my neck, I felt that familiar current.

But with it came a tight knot in my throat. I averted my gaze from his and for some reason, found nothing better than to stare at my hands.

“You need to drink more water,” he said, placing a glass on my nightstand.

“Mm-hmm,” I nodded.

“The maid said you threw up last night.”

“This morning too,” I said.

When I looked back at him, he frowned and reached to test my forehead. “No fever. You sure I shouldn’t call the doctor?”

“Maybe if I feel the same in a few more days,” I offered.

He nodded. “I’m heading into work now. See you in the evening.”

“Have a good day,” I said, lying back down as he left. He paused at the doorway and gave me one lingering look, as though there was so much more he needed to say, but walked out without another word.

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It had become like that between us now: polite and distant. Both our minds, I knew, were reliving that fight every single waking moment.

Things remained the same, but I didn't have the energy to confront him about his accusations. Not when my body was continuing to betray me. Even the smell of eggs sent me rushing to the bathroom and left me retching in the pot.

On the fifth or sixth morning, the maid appeared with my usual eggs, toast, and bacon. I tried to eat a bit, but threw it all up.

“Screw this shit,” I groaned as I made my way back to bed. And that’s when it hit me.

The sickness came at the smell of food. Always, food. At other times, I was fine. Weak and dizzy, but fine.

Just then, a nagging suspicion began to form in my mind. I'd been too caught up in our fight and then my illness to notice what should have been obvious: I couldn't remember my last period. I'd lost track of time in this house.

My mind raced with possibilities as I lay in bed, the realization sinking in. The pieces were starting to come together in a way that I couldn't ignore.

Could it be? Was it even possible?

What was I going to do? I needed...help.

In that moment, I knew I couldn't just walk out and buy what I needed. I also didn't want to risk having it delivered. What if someone saw? What if I had to involve others before I knew for certain?

There was only one feasible possibility.

With shaky hands, I reached for my phone and dialed Elena's number.

"Elena? It's Larissa." My voice sounded strange to my own ears. "I need your help."

"Larissa?" She sounded confused by my call. Of course she did; she was Gio's sister. But as I explained, her eagerness to help was all I needed to know I'd made the right call.

Over an hour later, Elena slipped into my bedroom, her eyes widening at my appearance.

"You look like death warmed over," she said as she leaned in for a hug.

"Thanks. Always good for my ego." I managed a weak smile, and then she pulled out a paper bag and handed it to me.

"I got what you asked for," she said carefully, kindly.

"Thank you, Elena. I'm so sorry to have bothered you."

"Hush now," she grasped my hand and shook her head. "There's no need to apologize."

I nodded and peered into the bag, my heart stuttering at the sight of the pregnancy test inside.

“You sure you're...?” Elena trailed off, perching at the edge of my bed.

I shrugged, afraid to say it aloud. “I don’t know for certain. I’ve been sick every morning. I’m late. And I just—I have this feeling.”

Elena squeezed my hand. “No matter what, I’m here. Let me know if there’s anything else I can do for you.”

Elena helped me to the bathroom, opening the door for me. “I’ll be right out here,” she said with a gentle smile. I nodded, too nervous to say anything, and closed the door behind me.

I peeled open the box and followed the test instructions with shaking hands. As the minutes ticked by, the seconds dragged on like an eternity, and I felt my heart pounding in my chest. The anticipation was suffocating, and I knew my life could change in three whole minutes.

At last, the time was up. I drew in a shaky breath and glanced down at the test in my trembling hands.

Two pink lines.

My heart stopped. Everything around me seemed to fade into the background, leaving only me and that undeniable confirmation that things would never be the same again. Life, as I knew it, had changed.

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I was pregnant.

A rush of emotions flooded through me—fear, uncertainty, but also a glimmer of something else. A sliver of hope and joy. The smallest, but fighting with every passing second to be heard.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, Elena's eyes searched mine for answers even before I uttered a word. I walked over to where she sat on the sofa, and took a seat beside her, placing the test between us.

“Holy shit,” Elena whispered, eyes fixed on the test. “You're having my brother's baby.”

I was pregnant. With Gio's child. While he still thought I might have betrayed him. While I was still hurt by his lack of faith in me. While we were broken in ways I wasn't sure could be repaired.

Would he even want a baby? A baby with me?

A nervous knot formed in my chest and I grabbed Elena's wrist. “You can't tell him. Promise me, Elena. I need to be the one to tell him when the time is right.”

“Of course,” she assured me without skipping a beat. “I wouldn't dare take this away from you.”

She misunderstood. I didn't want to surprise him. I needed time to think, but I knew I couldn't tell her that.

“Thank you,” I whispered as she leaned in to give me a hug. She held me tightly, and I allowed myself a moment of respite, the touch soothing me.

“Congratulations,” she whispered again as she pulled away.

“Thank you,” I said again, this time daring to break out into the smallest smile.

After Elena left, I curled up in bed. My heart raced at various speeds. It calmed when I thought of a tiny being in my arms at some point in the future. I panicked when I thought of Gio, terrified that he might not want this baby.

What if he still couldn't trust me? What kind of life would our child have, caught between parents who couldn't bridge their differences?

What should I do, I wondered. Would it be better for my child if I kept this a secret? How long could I have kept this secret?

The sound of the door opening startled me from my thoughts. I looked up to see it was Gio, back from work.

“Hey,” he said softly, entering and closing the door behind him. “How are you?”

“On the mend,” I said in an equally soft voice. That was true. Now that I knew I was pregnant, I realized I needed to change my diet, and I would be fine. But, I didn't tell him that.

“I'm glad to hear it,” he said. To my surprise, rather than leaving as he usually did after our polite exchanges of the past few days, he walked up to me and perched himself on the side of my bed. I scooted over, giving him some space and when I

looked back at him, frowned at the dark circles bruising under his eyes.

“You haven’t been sleeping well,” I observed. He looked up in surprise that I hadn’t masked my concern or my judgment.

“No,” he shook his head in admittance. “I haven’t.”

“Something on your mind?”

“Larissa,” he sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve been an idiot.”

“That’s not news,” I said, though my attempt at humor fell flat. The pain still lingered and shone through.

“I should have trusted you,” he sighed and reached for my hand, but I was still so hurt that I couldn’t help but pull it away. I saw a flash of hurt in his eyes and for a moment, felt guilty as hell for being the cause of it, but he owed me a better explanation before I pretended all was fine.

“You should have,” I whispered, clasping my hands in my lap as I waited for him to explain. “What changed?”

“I’ve been thinking of all the times I was wrong. You’ve never given me a reason to not trust you, but I thought otherwise from the start. What happened that day... I should have given you a chance to explain before accusing you. I let my fears cloud my judgment.”

“Your fear?” I asked. “Fear of what, Gio?”

Pain flashed in his eyes, and when he looked at me, he seemed positively haunted. “Fear that I let myself imagine you wanted the same things I wanted. Fear that I’d

dug myself in too deep and I couldn't imagine the pain of losing you, Larissa.”

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I wanted to cling to my anger, to make him suffer a little longer for doubting me, but the sincerity in his eyes broke through my defenses. I reached out now and took his hand in mine. His eyes widened, and I saw the relief in them when his gaze met mine.

“You saw me with Dominic and assumed the worst,” I said quietly. “After everything we've shared, you thought I would betray you to him.”

Gio's fingers tightened around mine. “When I saw you with him, I thought you didn't want to be with me. I couldn't see anything beyond that sense of abandonment. But that's no excuse.”

His vulnerability cracked open something inside me.

“Give me your phone,” I said. “The one I stole.”

With a curious look, he pulled it out of his pocket and handed it to me without question.

That in itself, was progress enough for me, a sign of trust.

“I went to the mall that day to give you and Caspian privacy during your argument,” I explained, navigating to the video recording from the mall. “I ran into Dominic by accident. When he started asking questions about where I'd been, I thought I could help by influencing him to slip up and see if he knew anything about the attack on your operation that day.”

I pressed play, and Dominic's voice filled the room.

“I could never get him to finish what he was saying,” I said as the video ended. “You came before I could. I spoke to him in a public space, Gio. I lured him into the food court because I didn’t want to risk him grabbing me to take back to my brothers.”

Gio looked positively astonished. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, his voice thick with regret. I knew then he wanted to say more, but he first needed to work through the guilt he was facing, clearly etched across his face.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this recording right away? It would have proven your innocence.”

I shook my head softly. “Because I wanted you to trust me without proof. I wanted your faith, Gio, not your validation after evidence. Trust isn’t real if you need proof.”

He hung his head, his forehead pressing against our joined hands. “I don’t deserve you.”

“No, you don’t,” I agreed, but I reached out to cup his face, tilting it up to meet my eyes. “But I choose you anyway. Just like you chose me. We both said things we regret.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, voice rough with emotion. “For not trusting you.”

“And I’m sorry for lashing out instead of explaining,” I admitted. “We both have work to do.”

He leaned forward, pressing his lips to mine. I felt the broken pieces between us beginning to heal. But then, I remembered what I was doing. I was keeping yet another secret, and this time, the guilt played at my heart.

I pulled away and leaned back into the pillows, suddenly needing space to think.

“You tired?” Gio asked, concerned.

“A little,” I said. I was tired. So much had happened today, but with us having talked, I knew I could finally get some sleep. A few days of rest, and then I’ll decide what to say, if at all, about the baby. Just some rest.

The next day, I finally felt better, especially after I canceled all eggs for breakfast. After enjoying some watermelon, which felt so right, and a slice of toast, I showered for the first time in days. Aware that the morning sickness might return at any moment, I cherished the temporary relief and decided to take a relaxing day.

I stepped out of the shower in my towel and took my time blow-drying my hair. Then, I pulled out some nail polish and chose a pretty pink color.

When Gio returned from an afternoon meeting, I was sitting on the bed in nothing but a towel, music playing softly from my phone as I applied a second coat of polish to my toenails.

I heard the knock and delivered the customary “Come in.” By now, I knew his knock, knew it was him.

When I looked up with a smile, I saw him frozen in the doorway. His eyes literally darkened as they traveled down to my bare shoulders to the precarious edge of the towel at my thighs.

“You’re looking better,” he said, voice dropping to a low register that instantly made heat pool between my legs.

“I’m feeling better.” I capped the nail polish and set it aside, turning to him with a

playful grin.

He approached slowly with a devilish grin of his own. “That towel looks good on you.”

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“Does it?” I smiled, leaning back on my elbows in a deliberate display. “I was thinking of taking it off.”

“You’re positively evil,” he growled as he reached out and made space for himself on the bed. His fingers then traced the edge of the towel where it crossed my chest. “I’ve missed you. God, how I’ve missed you.”

“Really? I couldn’t tell,” I said nonchalantly, purposely acting haughty in the way I knew he liked.

“Larissaaa...” he sang, and his hand cupped my cheek. When I looked over, he shook his head once in warning, telling me not to push him.

But that’s what I wanted. Needed. After days of cold war, I wanted to put it behind us. Without wasting a second, I parted my lips and his eyes traveled down.

He didn’t need more encouragement. Gio’s lips crashed onto mine and I kissed him back hard, my lips moving at a feverish pace as I slid them across his lips. He parted for me, and I drove right in, tasting the roof of his mouth, feeling the curl of his tongue and then he fought back, pushing my tongue and his back into my mouth.

Days of tension and hurt dissolved under the heat of his mouth, the press of his body against mine. His hands slid beneath the towel, thumbs brushing the undersides of my breasts, and I gasped into his mouth.

“Too much?” he asked, pulling back slightly with concern.

“Not enough,” I answered, reaching for his tie and loosening it with a single tug. “I need to feel you.”

He tugged at the towel until it whooshed off my body and I heard his breath catch at the sight and feel of my naked body. “Beautiful,” he murmured, tracing a reverent path from my throat to my navel. “So fucking beautiful.”

I worked at his shirt buttons while he kissed his way down my neck and across my collarbones. When his mouth closed over my nipple, I arched into him with a sharp cry, suddenly oversensitive—a side effect of pregnancy I hadn't anticipated. Though of course he didn't know that.

“Sensitive?” He looked up, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“Shut up and take your clothes off,” I growled, pushing his shirt off his shoulders.

He chuckled as he rose and stripped off all his clothes in a matter of seconds.

“Impressive,” I smirked.

“Oh, you haven't seen the half of it,” he growled as I slid over and he got into bed. I stopped thinking, stopped feeling anything but a fire for him as he lay there naked within inches. I ran a hand down the hard planes of that gorgeous, impossible chest, all the way down to the muscles leading between his legs and when I slid down and crouched on my knees before him, his eyes widened with surprise.

“What?” I whispered. “Girls can't have fun?”

He looked positively feverish when I reached for him and wrapped my fingers around his length, feeling his skin stretch over the hardness. His groan of pleasure sent a thrill through me, a rush of power at knowing I could reduce this dangerous man to

trembling need.

“I want to taste you,” I said, positioning myself on my knees and forearms and dipping my head low. Before he could respond, I took him into my mouth, relishing his sharp intake of breath.

I worked him slowly at first, tongue circling the sensitive head, hand gripping the base where my mouth couldn't reach. His fingers tangled in my hair, not forcing, just holding, connecting us as I took him deeper.

“Fuck, Larissa,” he hissed. “Your mouth...”

I hollowed my cheeks, sucking harder, feeling drunk on his responses—the tightening of his grip, the tensing of his thighs, the way his breathing grew ragged. I felt pure, unadulterated power at his weakening.

When I glanced up, Gio's head was thrown back. His eyes opened just then, meeting mine, and the raw hunger I saw there got me wet between my legs.

His hands tightened in my hair, guiding me deeper until he hit the back of my throat. I felt the tears spring to my eyes from the pressure, but it felt too damn hot to stop and sucked harder. Just as his breathing became erratic, signaling he was close, he pulled away, leaving himself unfinished.

“Not yet,” he growled, reaching to grab me by the waist as he turned and pulled me beneath him. “I need to feel you now.”

His fingers found me slick and ready, testing my wetness with a satisfied hum as he pulled out. “So wet for me already.”

He was now above me, positioning himself at my entrance. But, he paused and

waited for the usual command. I nodded, wrapping my legs around his waist, pulling him closer.

He entered me in one smooth thrust that had both of us gasping. For a moment, we stayed perfectly still, savoring the sweetness of being joined like this.

“God, you feel so good,” he whispered against my lips.

“Make me feel good,” I answered, rocking my hips.

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“Demanding,” he chuckled, leaning in for a kiss.

He began to move with deep, deliberate strokes that hit exactly where I needed him. My nails dug into his back as the pleasure built inside me, tension coiling tighter with each thrust. When his thumb found my clit, circling with just the right pressure, I lurched off the bed.

“That's it,” he encouraged, increasing his pace. “Let go for me, sweetheart.”

I mewled as I met his thrust with one of my own. Then, another. The next thing I knew, he was pounding into me, and my entire body shook from the strength of his cock. I reached down and clutched the sheets, throwing my head back, and when he slid his hand beneath my ass and tilted me up toward him until his cock hit just beneath my clit from the inside, I felt the tension ready to uncoil.

“Gio,” I moaned. “I’m close.”

“Mm-hmm,” was all the response he could muster and when I felt his cock throb, I knew why. He was close too. He then rammed into me, his balls pressing into me and that was when the coil snapped, spreading through me like wildfire.

I screamed out his name and then moaned when words lost all meaning. I shuddered and focused on the pleasure swimming through every nerve, every vein, every drop of my blood, and he followed right after, pulsing into me with a grunt just as I rode out the last of my waves.

We lay tangled together afterward, our breathing slowly returning to normal as my

fingers traced lazy patterns on his chest. The secret of our child still hovered unspoken between us, but in that moment, I felt hope blooming alongside the life growing within me. We had broken, but we had begun to mend. And perhaps, when the time was right, I could share the news I carried and pray he found it good.

Chapter 21 - Gio

I was in my office, trying to focus on my paperwork. But, it seemed to be a difficult thing to do, with Larissa running through my mind. For the past four nights, we'd made our way to each other's beds and every moment I wasn't with her was an aching pain in my bones.

Just then, the phone rang and my heart lurched as I reached for it, allowing myself for a brief second to believe it was Larissa.

But then, I saw the caller ID. All my daydreams vanished at the number I saw, and my heart turned cold.

No, I thought to myself. Not now. Panic clung to me, not at having been discovered, but at the fact that she might be taken away from me.

This call had been inevitable from the moment Larissa's bodyguard, Dom, saw me take her away from the mall.

It's okay, I released a breath. Whatever it is, I'll handle it. With a firm hand, I accepted the call.

"Lebedev."

"You fucking bastard." Gastone's voice trembled with rage. "My bodyguard saw you. He saw everything."

I leaned back in my leather chair, eyes drifting to the closed door beyond which Larissa was reading in the sunroom. “Did he now? And what exactly does he think he saw?”

“Don't play games with me. Dom was with her when you took her. You fucking kidnapped my sister and I'm going to—”

A smile curled my lips. “Kidnapped? That's a strong word for someone who was wandering around the mall, don't you think?”

“How dare you insinuate what you do?” he roared into the phone.

“I'm not insinuating a thing. I'm simply telling you Larissa is well looked after.”

“Return her. Now. Or I swear to God, I will burn everything you love to ash. Your brothers. Your sisters. Your entire fucking organization.”

The threat slithered down my spine, but I'd spent decades in this world and knew when I heard a dog bark. “Gastone, you seem upset. Perhaps we should discuss this when you're thinking more...rationally.”

“You have twenty-four hours.”

“I don't respond well to ultimatums.” My voice dropped an octave. “And you should know better than to threaten a Lebedev. Your sister is unharmed and comfortable. More than comfortable, actually.”

A pause stretched between us. “What does that mean?”

“It means you should tread carefully. Your men come near my family, and I'll mail Larissa back to you in pieces.” The words tasted bitter. They were a lie, and I

obviously had no intention of harming her, but Gastone didn't need to know the truth of what we were. It would only make him angrier, more powerful. But if I scared him enough, he'd be more careful. "We clear?"

"Like hell," he spat. "This isn't over."

"It never is with our families, is it?" I hung up before he could respond.

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I stared at the phone in shock as the silence clung over me. When I first took Larissa, I thought it would be a matter of days, or weeks, before Gastone discovered I had her. But when we flew under his radar and weeks turned to months, everything changed. I stopped thinking of Gastone. I only ever thought of her.

My hands trembled from the knowledge that I couldn't treat her as merely collateral anymore. To not have her around was an impossible idea. This house, without her, my life, without her, all of it seemed too painful to comprehend.

I heard her laugh drift through the door—a light, musical sound that filled my halls with joy. The smart move would be to tell her about the call, to remind her of the reality of our situation. But for some reason, the idea pulled at my heart, nearly crushing it. She sometimes asked if her brothers knew where she was, and when she did, her question was always laced with hope. If I told her Gastone called, she might wish to leave.

My heart pounded as I realized a nerve-wracking truth: I didn't want Larissa to leave. I wanted her to stay. I wanted her by my side.

The guilt washed over me. I was keeping a secret by not telling her Gastone called. This time around, I was the one who didn't deserve her truth.

I needed to clear my head. I knew what the right thing to do was, but somehow, couldn't muster the courage to do it. Instead, like a coward, I grabbed my keys.

"I'm stepping out for a bit," I called to her as I passed the sunroom. She looked up from her book, those gorgeous aquamarine eyes catching the light. "Business. Won't

be long.”

She nodded, a slight furrow between her brows. “Everything okay?”

“Everything's fine.” The lie came easily, though something in her expression suggested she didn't believe me. In just a few weeks, she'd learned to read me better than people who'd known me for years.

I needed air. Needed to think. And there was only one place where I could do that properly.

I parked my Aston Martin in Caspian's circular drive, the home that also acted as a family home for our younger siblings on and off, when they were between places, and took a moment to collect my thoughts before heading inside.

The security detail nodded respectfully as I passed. Inside, I found Elena in the library, curled in a window seat with a glass of red wine, her dark hair piled messily atop her head.

“The prodigal son returns,” she said with surprise as she looked up from her book. “To what do we owe the pleasure? Caspian's not here.”

“I'm not here to see him,” I said.

“Of course you aren't,” she sighed. “He's mad at you, you know?”

I ignored her statement. Of course I knew. “I came to see you, actually.”

That got her attention. Elena marked her page and set the book aside, studying me

carefully. “What's wrong?”

“Why would something be wrong?”

“Because you only seek me out when you need to talk, and you only need to talk when something's wrong. You're many things, big brother, but complicated isn't one of them.” She patted the seat beside her. “So. Talk.”

I sighed and joined her, accepting the glass of wine she poured from the decanter. “Gastone Ajello called me.”

Elena's eyebrows shot up. “About his sister?”

I stared at her. “You know?”

“Gio, please. Give me some credit. Of course I know. Everyone knows now. Caspian told us who she truly is.” She swirled her wine.

I took a long swallow of wine. “It wasn't supposed to be like this.”

“Like what?”

The words stuck in my throat. I wasn't accustomed to vulnerability, even with Elena. “She was supposed to be leverage. A business move.”

“And now?”

“Now I don't know what she is.” I rubbed my face in frustration. “I have... feelings for her.”

Elena's expression softened. “Oh, Gio.”

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“Don't look at me like that. Like I'm some lovesick teenager.”

“Aren't you, though?” A smile danced on her lips. “The steadiest of the Lebedev brothers, smitten by a girl half his age.”

“Seventeen years isn't half,” I grumbled.

Elena set her glass down. “So what's the problem? Besides the obvious family feud, of course.”

“The problem is that she's still technically my prisoner and that she's with me because I kidnapped her. The problem is her brother just threatened to destroy our entire family if I don't return her.”

“And will you?”

“No.” The word came out more forcefully than I'd intended. “I mean... not unless she wants to go.”

Elena's eyes widened slightly. “That's new.”

“What is?”

“You caring what someone else wants.” She studied me for a moment. “You know, she looks at you.”

I stopped pacing. “What do you mean?”

“When you're not watching. When you're focused on something else. She looks at you like...” Elena tilted her head, searching for the words. “Like you look at her. With fascination and admiration.”

Something in my chest tightened. “You've only met her once.”

Something in Elena’s face fell flat, but I didn’t think much of it when she shrugged.

“Once was enough. I know that look.”

“So what are you saying, Elena?”

“What I’m saying is don’t lose a happiness you can gain down the line to get what you want now. I don’t know if that makes sense. I’m saying trust yourself. Trust her.”

In that moment, I knew exactly what she meant. I realized how wrong I’d been. I didn’t want to keep Larissa in my house; I wanted to keep her in my life.

I caught her hand and squeezed it gently. “Thank you.”

When I returned, I found Larissa in the kitchen, attempting to cook something that filled the house with the scent of garlic and tomatoes. She turned when she heard me, a cute little smudge of sauce on her cheek. I walked over and quickly wiped it from her cheek, licking it off my finger.

She giggled as she swatted at her cheek. “You’re back!” she squealed and then pulled me into a hug once she had made sure she didn’t have anything else on her face.

“I’m back,” I said, moving away from her and inspecting the pot. “What are you

making?”

“Pasta arrabbiata. It's probably terrible.”

I cocked an eyebrow.

“Hey, I might be Italian, but no one said I was a good cook,” she protested.

I laughed as she tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. “I thought... well, you seemed tense before you left.”

The thought that she would cook for me, or at least try to, disarmed me completely. In the time she'd been here, she'd noticed my moods and carved out a space for herself in my life with such subtle persistence that I'd barely noticed until now. And here she was, cooking for me after I'd threatened to dismember her in a conversation with her brother.

“Come!” she said as she pulled me to the informal kitchen table where there was already a setting for two. “We should eat. I'm starving.”

I poured us some wine while she served pasta and salad. For a brief moment, I wondered if I should tell her now. But something in my heart tugged at me to let this moment remain untainted, to remember this night, in case we didn't have more time together.

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We ate, drank, and talked about nothing important; a book she had read, a call I needed to make tomorrow—normal things that felt extraordinary in their ordinariness.

But after we cleared the plates and I watched her ready herself for bed, I took her by the hand and motioned to the table with my eyes. She frowned, instantly tensing, but something in my expression must have made her pause, made her stay.

“Larissa,” I said once we settled around the table. “We need to talk.”

Her expression was immediately guarded. “About what?”

“About your situation here.” I chose my words carefully. “I don't want you to feel like a prisoner anymore.”

She set down her fork. “I haven't felt like a prisoner for a while now, Gio.”

“You haven't tried to run.”

“No. I haven't.” Her eyes held mine steadily.

“Why not?”

She considered the question, her eyes distant. “At first, because I was scared. Then because I was curious. Now... I don't know. It's complicated.”

“There will come a point,” I said, the words scraping my throat, “when you'll want to

go home. When your family and your life will call to you. That's natural.”

Her lips curved slightly. “Are you trying to get rid of me, Giovanni Lebedev?”

“No.” The answer came too quickly, too honestly. “The opposite, actually. I'm trying to say that whatever's happening between us—and something is happening, isn't it?—I don't want it to end when that day comes.”

She was quiet for so long that I thought I had misread everything. Then her hand moved across the counter to cover mine, her skin warm and soft against my calloused palm.

“I want to stay,” she said, each word deliberate. “For now. Not because I'm forced to, but because I choose to.”

The relief that flooded through me was staggering, but the reality had to be faced. “Your brother won't understand. You'll have to return to them.”

“Perhaps someday I will, and when that day comes, my brothers will cause trouble. Then again, they never understand anything I do. But I promise, they won't be the reason things change between us.”

She smiled, and that smile, one full of mischief, loosened something that had been knotted inside me all day. “Besides, I'm a grown woman. I make my own choices.”

I turned my hand beneath hers, lacing our fingers together. “And what are you choosing, exactly?”

She leaned forward, close enough that I could reach out and lick her lips. “To find out where this goes.”

In that moment, I realized some risks couldn't be calculated, only taken.

“I can work with that,” I said softly, and finally leaned in for that kiss.

Chapter 22 - Larissa

I couldn't have been happier. The wind whipped in my hair and the seawater sprinkled across my face as Gio's boat whipped through the waters.

Gio and I'd gotten closer over the last week, to a level where even a moment away from him felt like agony. So when I was bored and asked if I could come with him for tonight's operation, he'd only laughed and asked if I was planning on joining the family business.

My heart, I swear, lurched with joy at the thought. To imagine a situation where Gio and I worked side by side together felt like a dream, but I didn't say so as I was still trying to sort through my feelings. His acceptance of my request to join meant the world to me, simply because had I asked any of my brothers, I'd have been dismissed straight away.

Gio, however, truly listened when I spoke. He saw me. Not just who I was and am, but who I could be. He made me believe in the possibility that anything could happen. That I could be anyone.

Beside Gio's boat, Caspian steered a second vessel. At the dock, he had barely grunted a hello in my direction, and I knew he was still mad at Gio, but he didn't take it out on me. Tonight's operation, given Caspian's presence, told me was larger than the previous one.

Last time, I'd been afraid. Tonight, however, I was excited. For some reason, the thrill of the deal was one I wanted to chase.

“Stay close,” he'd murmured before we boarded in his usual protective way, his lips brushing my ear. “If anything happens—”

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“Nothing will happen,” I’d interrupted with a furrow of my brow as I turned to him and cupped his cheeks between my hands. “Not when you’re there.”

He had smiled and sneaked in a quick kiss before Caspian saw. Our situation was no longer a secret among his family, but we were giving them time to adjust to the change.

Just then, I heard some shouts and heard something crack. When I turned, I saw one of the men had stumbled with a heavy crate. Within moments, Gio was by his side, his shoulder braced against the weight from the other end.

“Steady,” he said, his voice carrying to where I stood. “No rush. We do this right.”

The kindness surprised me still, after all these months. There were half a dozen other men who could have helped. But Gio always got into the dirty work with his men. He was their teammate and not someone to be feared.

Perhaps that was why his men cherished the ground they walked on. From the moment I stepped onto this boat, big, burly, scary-looking men smiled at me sweetly, offered me lemonade, and asked if I needed anything. I knew they didn’t do this for me, someone they hardly knew, but rather for Gio. I was special to him, so important to them.

Only a good man, a kind man could garner such loyalty. My heart swelled with pride at the sight of my man as he now joked and laughed with his crew. When one of them stumbled over a rough wave, Gio immediately reached out, balancing him.

I pressed my palm against my stomach, still flat. Eight weeks, the doctor had confirmed yesterday when I went under the guise of a general check-up. I hadn't told Gio yet.

I hadn't earlier because I had been afraid he didn't trust me, that he might not want the baby. But now, I knew without a doubt that he was willing to fight for me, for us. That was enough for me to know he'd love this baby, our little unit, beyond measure.

Tonight, I'd decided. After the shipment, when we found ourselves alone, I would tell him then. I rehearsed multiple ways to break the news to him, oscillating between jokes and simply laying it out there. I still didn't know exactly how I'd tell him, but knew without a doubt that I would tonight. I felt a flutter in my heart at the thought of catching that exact moment when his face would transform with joy at the news.

The moon hung low over the water, making it a beautiful, perfect night and I felt a strange peace settle over me. I was fine. Gio was fine. We were together.

I moved closer to where Gio stood at the helm and he sensed me before I spoke, turning with that same small smile that still made my heart stutter.

"Bored yet?" he asked, taking one hand off the wheel to pull me against his side.

"Fascinated," I corrected, leaning into his warmth.

His thumb traced circles on my hip. "Someday, I'm going to buy you your own boat, since you love it out here so much."

I opened my mouth to respond, to tell him I would never let him justify such an unnecessary purchase, perhaps even to tell him right then about the baby, when his body tensed beside me.

“What’s happening?” I asked when his hand moved away from the hip.

“Get down,” he hissed, leading me toward the cabin door. “Inside. Now.”

I stumbled, catching myself on the railing. “What—”

The words died in my throat as I saw what he had noticed: small boats emerging from the darkness, their engines cutting through the night's silence. There were too many for these boats to be a coincidence, and from the way they surrounded the boat, it was clear they had come with an intent that was anything but friendly.

“Ambush!” One of Gio's men shouted, and then everything dissolved into chaos.

Gunfire shattered the night. I froze as Gio turned for a moment to shoot at some of the engines to halt them in their tracks. “Get in, Larissa,” he screamed over the gunfire, but I was paralyzed, unable to move. Panic clawed at my throat, and my hand instantly reached for my stomach. If anything happened tonight...no. I couldn't let my thoughts go there.

Instead, I focused on the present, wondering how I could be of help, and watched in horror as the smaller boats surrounded us. Soon, there were men climbing aboard where they weren't welcomed.

Gio moved like lightning, raising his gun and taking down two attackers in quick succession. His voice cut through the mayhem, ordering his men into defensive positions. For a moment, I thought they might repel the attack.

Then I saw him, Dom, among the attackers. The shock of recognition paralyzed me. Dom, my brother's most trusted bodyguard. Dom, who always watched out for me.

Our eyes locked across the chaos. His widened at the sight of me and then, to my

horror, he broke into a smile. He shouted something I couldn't hear over the gunfire and pointed in my direction.

Two men broke away from the fight, heading straight for me. I finally found my legs then, turning to run, but the deck was slick with blood and saltwater. I slipped, scraping my palms on the rough surface, but caught myself in time on the railing.

A scream tore from my throat as I watched three men corner Gio. He fought hard, but they overwhelmed him when he was distracted by the men heading in my direction. A blow to the head sent him to his knees. Another to his ribs doubled him over.

“Stop!” I screamed, lunging toward him, but strong arms caught me from behind, lifting me off my feet.

Right in front of my eyes, I saw those men continue to beat Gio, even though he wasn't moving. The rage, the agony I felt at seeing him be treated that way threatened to tear through me. I whipped around and tried to grab my holder's hair with my fists, but he stepped back.

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I kicked and clawed as they dragged me backward. But then, from a distance, I saw Caspian's boat approaching. They weren't shooting? Why weren't they shooting? Dom and the others hadn't noticed the boat, and that was when I realized what was happening. Caspian was waiting to get on board undetected. I whipped my head and screamed, "There," pointing in the opposite direction. "Boats. Dozens!"

Dom and the others rushed to where I was and stared into the sea, but my assailants held on to me.

"I see nothing," Dom groaned and motioned at another to hand him some binoculars. This was enough of a distraction and the next thing I knew, Caspian and his men were on board, firing. But their shots didn't reach close to us, and I knew why. Caspian was afraid of hurting me.

"Retreat," Dom shouted over the fire. "Retreat."

The attackers took me with them.

The last thing I saw before they threw me into one of the smaller boats was Gio's body, crumpled on the deck, blood darkening his shirt. Caspian ran through the boat, desperate to reach his fallen brother.

As our boats sped away, Dom turned to me, furious. "Why the hell did you do that? We almost had him?"

I ignored him and instead, let the tears fall down my cheeks.

Being back home felt strange and unfamiliar. Dom led me straight to my room and left me there. My old nursemaid Maria came soon after with some tea and cake. When I looked at her, I must have appeared ghastly, for she murmured and reached over, giving me a wordless hug before she left.

My bedroom remained unchanged—the same silk sheets, the same crystal perfume bottles arranged on the vanity, but it no longer felt like mine. I sat on the edge of my bed, still wearing the clothes I'd been rescued in. My hands wouldn't stop shaking. Behind my closed eyelids, I kept seeing Gio's body on that deck, being battered and bruised.

I looked up when the door opened without a knock. My eldest brother Gastone strode right in, and his face washed with relief at the sight of me.

“Larissa,” he said, and crossed the room in three strides.

The hug caught me off guard. My brother wasn't usually an expressive man, but this one felt desperate, genuine.

“Carlo and Dino are taking the first flight back,” he whispered as he stepped back, but not before planting a kiss on my forehead. “

I stepped away and concern etched into the lines around his eyes as he wandered over my body, wondering if I was truly safe.

“Thank God you're safe,” he said. “When I heard—”

“I'm fine, Gastone,” I said stiffly.

“Did he—?” Dom growled, unable to finish his sentence as his throat tightened. I knew he was thinking the worst of Gio, even though Gio had been nothing but wonderful. However, for Gio’s safety and for what I wanted, I knew I couldn’t let Dom know.

I shook my head. “They treated me well. I had my own bedroom, anything I wanted.”

His eyes widened with surprise, but he nodded. “Thank God. Thank God you’re back. I can’t believe they would-”

“Why wouldn’t they, Gastone?” I blurted out, stopping him in his tracks. “Don’t you know what’s been happening? Of course the Lebedevs hate us, even though I know,” I stepped forward and took my brother’s hands in mine. “I know you didn’t do those things.”

“What are you talking about?” Gastone furrowed his brows. “Stop talking in riddles, sister.”

“Gastone, your men have been acting behind your back. Dom—he’s been leading attacks against the Lebedev operations. They... he... bombed one of their warehouses. People could have died,” I paled as I gave my brother this information. “Not only that, Gastone. I’ve seen things. Your men, they kill their subordinates. Shoot them right dead. You must do something.”

Gastone’s face hardened, and for a moment, a stretched silence lingered between us. I couldn’t imagine how shocked he must be by all this, so I gave him time to process it, waiting patiently.

But then, he let out a sound. A laugh. My world twisted on its axis as he looked at me with scorn. “And you think Dom and the others did those things without me knowing? How weak a leader do you think I am, Larissa?”

“What?” I choked out the question, not understanding what he meant. It couldn’t be. It was impossible that my brother knew the whole time.

“The bombing at the warehouse three months ago,” he said conversationally. “That was me.”

I felt the air suck out of my lungs.

“The attack on their shipment in April. Also me.” He adjusted his cufflinks. “The men being killed on our sites. They’re traitors. Useless.”

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Each confession hit like a physical blow. The bombing could have killed people, killed Gio, killed his lovely family.

My knees weakened. I sank back onto the bed. “Why?” The word emerged as barely a whisper.

“Business,” he said simply. “The Lebedevs were expanding too rapidly. Taking contracts that should have been ours. Recruiting men from our territory.”

“So you risked open war? For business?”

He shrugged. “War is business, Larissa. Your grandfather understood that. Your brothers understand that. We kept you safe from this world.”

I thought of all that time I wasted trying to gather evidence to prove to Gio that my brother wasn't behind the escalating violence between our families. All lies. I'd been defending a monster.

“So, that day,” I asked, for myself more than anything. “When you sent Dom with me for those chores...”

“He wasn't there to help you with chores. You were sent as a cover. I needed him to spy on Giovanni Lebedev, but Dom made a mistake by leaving you alone. Lebedev covered his tracks so well that day that we were chasing false leads for months. Months.”

“And here I was,” I said, with anger in my voice as I met his gaze. “Trying to prove

you innocent. Trying to convince Gio that you wouldn't do such a thing! You used me. You used me, Gastone!"

That was when the tears began to fall. I held back sobs and curled my arms around my body, but I didn't want to cry. Not after what Gastone had just told me. He was cold and cruel, and I knew my tears would mean nothing.

"Gio?" I heard him ask, softly.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I looked up and saw his scrutinizing gaze directed at me. "You were working with him, trying to prove my innocence?"

I shouldn't have told him that, I felt it in my bones before I understood the full context of why he'd asked. But I also knew there was no point lying when the truth had already been laid out. I gave him a single nod.

"And he let you work with him, didn't he?" It wasn't a question, just an observation. I said nothing.

He walked closer until he towered over me. But unlike when Gio did so, I felt afraid. I looked up and met his cold, blue eyes.

"You know, I always wondered, Larissa. That day at the mall, when Dom found you, why you didn't go with him straight away. Now I know. You were with Gio. You betrayed me."

The way Gastone used the word with, tinged with disgust, told me I was too late. He'd figured it out. He knew what Gio meant to me.

“You went soft on him,” the accusation hung in the air.

“I never betrayed you,” I whispered. “I was trying to—”

“To what? Make peace?” He spat the word. “Let me explain how this works now. You will end your relationship with Giovanni Lebedev. You will remember that you are an Ajello.”

My hand instinctively moved to my stomach. The baby. Our baby. But I quickly removed it, before Gastone caught on. “And if I refuse?”

“If you refuse,” he said softly, “I will destroy him. Not quickly. Not cleanly. I will take everything he loves, piece by piece. And when he has nothing left, when he is broken and begging for death, then—only then—will I tell him why.”

Chapter 23 - Gio

The first thing I felt, before I managed to open my eyes was the sharp pain shooting all over my skull, my brain. I winced as I opened my eyes, and at the first hint of light, the pain crept down my vision until I had to blink it off.

It felt as though a truck had turned my skull into its personal racetrack. My mouth was so dry, my tongue stuck to my roof, and I peeled it off as I tried to sit up with a groan.

“Hey, hey,” I heard footsteps rushing toward me and felt a sturdy hand support my back. “I’m right here.”

Caspian helped me sit up on the couch and settled some pillows around me. My vision was still blurry in my left eye, and when I reached for my face, I felt the swelling that left it half-shut. My ribs hurt, my abdomen felt like pulp, and every

single muscle, bone, and tendon in my body screamed at me to lie back down and go to sleep.

“What happened?” I ask, piecing together the memories. “Wait,” I said, suddenly gripping Caspian’s hand with urgency. “Where’s Larissa? The boat... they attacked...she—”

“Easy, Brother.” Caspian's hand pressed against my shoulder, trying to guide me back down to the leather couch. I shoved it away.

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“Where is she?” The room tilted dangerously, but I locked my eyes on my brother's face. The grim set of his jaw told me everything before he opened his mouth.

“They took her,” he said with a sigh. “The Ajellos. We couldn't stop them. They were pounding on you, and you lost consciousness. She distracted them so I could reach you, but we were so focused on getting you off the boat that by the time we searched for her, they were sailing away with her.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Larissa had distracted her brother's men to get me to safety. It was a sacrifice, and I remembered when I told her she was free to go, yet she chose not to. She had given up the little freedom she'd found with me...for me. Every fiber of my being rebelled against the thought of her being back with her brothers, those bastards who kept her like a precious little doll, never caring for what brought her joy. They would strip away her independence, strip away her soul.

“No,” I whispered hoarsely, trying to push myself up to my feet despite the agony coursing through me. I couldn't do it, but I tried. “We have to find her. We have to get her back.”

“Gio, listen to me,” Caspian said gently as he laced his arms around my chest and physically made me sit back down when I nearly fell face forward from the pain of standing. “We will find her. But you need to rest now. You're in no condition to go after them.”

“How long have I been out?” I closed my eyes as Larissa's face swam before me, fighting off the wave of nausea that followed my attempt to get off the couch.

“Four hours.”

“Four hours?” my eyes flashed open. “And what the fuck have you been doing for four hours while she's with them?”

My brother gave me a look that could have killed. “Taking care of you, you idiot. I know how much you care for Larissa. But you are my priority first.”

My throat felt raw, as if I had been screaming. Maybe I had been. “This is my fault. I should have—”

“Should have what? None of us saw this coming, Gio,” Caspian said now in a tone fiercely protective, in a tone warning me to not go down that chain of thought. “It was only a matter of time before they took her back. If not from the boat, then from your home itself. You can't think like that.”

I looked at my brother. A deep pain haunted him, and I knew it was because he sensed my sadness and my guilt. In that moment, I nodded because I didn't want my brother to suffer on my behalf or to carry this guilt for me, as was his way when it came to our family.

Caspian understood from the way I went silent. He gave me a forlorn half-smile and clasped my shoulder gently. “I'm glad you're safe.”

“All because of you, Brother,” I said, stoically. I'd find a way to get Larissa back. I would. But in time. At least she was with her brothers, and not an enemy that would hurt her. That little fact gave me some element of comfort.

“And Larissa,” said Caspian, surprising me. Was that respect in his tone, for the woman he'd been so against me seeing? I smiled as I thought of Larissa, thinking of the moment I'd be able to tell she charmed the socks off my brother by distracting my

attackers so he could save me. Caspian was complicated, yet simple. When he saw loyalty, he trusted. And based on what he said, Larissa had shown courage to help my rescue.

Just then, my phone rang. I tried to feel for it, but Caspian pulled it out of his pocket and in his motion to pass it to me, glanced at the screen. His expression shifted to fury as he froze and met my gaze. “Gastone Ajello.”

My heart pounded in my chest with a mix of hope and dread. I knew nothing Gastone would say to me would consist of kindness or understanding. But still, perhaps if he saw how much Larissa cared for me and I her, this could be a chance to negotiate her release. I was prepared to do anything, to give anything, to plead and beg if needed with that bastard, to simply have her back.

“Put it on speaker,” I told Caspian urgently before the call ended.

Caspian held my gaze for less than a beat before answering as I asked. “Lebedev,” I said.

My breath caught as I heard rustling on the line, and I focused my mind, reminded it to stay calm for I couldn’t risk allowing Gastone to rile me up when I needed nothing more than for him to let Larissa back here, when—

“Gio?” Her voice, softer than usual, but it was her.

She sounded scared, worried, and glad to hear from me. I couldn’t imagine the hell she’d been through when she was taken. Sheer joy flooded over me at the sound of her voice, knowing she was being allowed to speak to me, unless she stole a phone, unless...

“Are you okay?” I asked, needing to know how she was. “Are you hurt? Larissa, did

they—”

“I’m fine,” she interrupted. “Gastone was glad to see me. He’s so thrilled, Gio, and everyone was worried sick. I’m happy to have seen them.”

Something in her tone made the relief turn to claws in my stomach. She sounded unlike herself, as though she was reciting something from a speech she’d written down.

“Larissa,” I said. “We’re coming for you. Whatever they want—”

“No,” she said abruptly, slapping me into silence. “Don’t do that.”

I frowned, glancing at Caspian, who had gone very still. “What do you mean, ‘no’?”

A sigh filtered through the speaker. “This... what happened... it’s for the best.”

“For the best?” I repeated, certain I’d misheard. “Larissa, they kidnapped you.”

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“They brought me home,” she corrected, her voice gaining strength. “Where I belong. You were the one who kidnapped me, remember?”

The floor seemed to tilt beneath me as I realized she sounded angry. “I thought we had come to understand one another. You can't be serious.”

“I am,” she said firmly. “These past weeks, I've been... confused. I've been living in a fantasy. But now I see clearly. This life—your life—it was never going to work for me.”

“That's bullshit.” I clenched my knuckles tight as I understood what she was trying to say. “They're forcing you to say this.”

There was a brief silence, and then a scoff.

“No one's forcing me to do anything.” There was an edge to her voice now. “For once, I'm making my own choice. I'm choosing to go back to my old life, my life. I'm choosing to be with my family. Don't you dare try to turn that into something it's not.”

I felt my breaths grow sharper, fiercer, stabbing at my chest. The pain of her words lodged in my heart, and I felt my world crumble around me. I couldn't live without her, couldn't imagine life without her, and what I said next was as close to groveling as I'd ever come in my life.

“Why can't you have both?” I asked with desperation. “You promised, Larissa. You promised that when this day came, you'd choose me too.”

I heard her suck in air, her breath hitching as she did. But she soon spoke, almost as though she didn't want to ponder my words. "I didn't know what I was getting into."

"We can protect you," I insisted, paranoia creeping in. "I know this isn't you talking. I know it in my bones. What we had, it was real. You can't convince me otherwise. Please, Larissa, give me a sign."

She laughed hollowly, as if it were the right thing to do in that moment. "Protect me? Like you did on the boat? You and your family will always bring trouble to my door. I can't live like that anymore. You've made enemies all around, and I want no part in dealing with it. With my brothers, I'm safe. I'm...happy," she took such time to find that word, happy, that I couldn't believe she truly meant it.

But still, her words cracked my heart, filling me with a sense of abandonment, rage, and disbelief. "You don't mean that."

"I do." Her voice softened, not in tenderness but in finality. "What we had... it wasn't real. It was exciting because it was forbidden. But it wasn't anything close to love, not really. Look, we tried it and it isn't working for me now."

My throat tightened. We had shared three glorious months together, fighting, understanding, and bridging barriers. We'd gone on adventures and made love until morning. I didn't know what love was, but she was the first thought I had when I woke and the last before I slept. Despite moments of anger toward her, the idea of something happening to her was enough to make me forget. I didn't know what love was, but in that moment, what we shared came dangerously close to it.

I needed to remind her of that, needed to show her she'd still remember those moments if she cared enough to. "You want to end this? Fine. But you have to meet me, you have to look me in the eye and tell me that."

If I could just see her one more time, just once more, I could show her what we were. One chance... that's all I needed.

"I don't need to do that," she said flatly. "And that's the point. We're done, Gio. I don't want any connection to you or your family anymore. It's over."

"Larissa," I pleaded with a rawness in my voice that made Caspian inch forward and place a comforting hand on my shoulder. "I need to see you. Talk to you face to face. You owe me that much."

"I owe you nothing," she said, in a voice so cold I believed this conversation must have been my imagination.

"Larissa," I tried again, my voice barely a whisper. "This isn't you talking."

"It is me. The real me. The one who finally woke up." Her voice cracked, just slightly. "Don't call again. Don't try to find me. We're both better off this way."

The line went dead.

I stood frozen, staring at the phone, desperately hoping that she'd call back and tell me it was a sick joke or that someone was in the room.

My hands shook as I sat there and moments slipped by. I heard nothing but the rush of sound gushing to my ears from how my blood heated. The helplessness, the rage, all of it stopped me from thinking.

"Gio." Caspian's voice seemed to come from miles away.

I didn't say anything, until I felt his hand on mine, grabbing the phone away. "No," I roared, trying to lunge for it, but the pain made me fall right back down.

“Gio, I’m so sorry,” Caspian said in a tone that seemed final, a tone that grieved, a tone I didn’t think he needed to use because this wasn’t happening.

I glared at Gio, shaking my head. “She's lying. They've threatened her, or drugged her, or—”

“Or she's telling the truth,” Caspian said quietly. “Sometimes the simplest explanation is the right one.”

I scowled. “You think she meant that? That everything between us was just a game to her?”

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My brother's face was carefully composed. “I think she's a twenty-five-year-old woman who got in over her head. And I think this might be for the best.”

“For the best,” I echoed incredulously.

“Yes.” Caspian straightened, slipping back into his role as the head of our household. “Her family was never going to accept this relationship, Gio. We're looking at all-out war with the Italians if this continues. How many lives are you willing to sacrifice for this girl?”

“Don't call her 'this girl,’” I snapped. “Her name is Larissa.”

Caspian sighed. “Fine. Larissa. The point stands. She's made her choice, and it's the smart one. You need to prepare yourself for what comes next. The Ajellos won't be satisfied with just taking her back—they'll want blood for this insult.”

I shook my head, refusing to believe a word he said as I thought of Larissa. There was something in her voice, her tone, and her choice of words that set off alarms in my head. Beside me, Caspian continued talking, but I wasn't really listening. His voice became a meaningless drone against the roar in my head because I knew this wasn't the last time I would talk to or hear from Larissa.

That conversation, whatever it had been, wasn't by her choosing.

In time, I'd prove it to them all, when I had her back by my side.

For the past four whole days, I'd barely managed to get out of bed, forcing myself to exit my room only when Gastone was home. My nights were haunted by dreams so dark that I'd wake up crying. In my dreams, we were on Gio's boat, but they weren't just punching him. They were ripping out his eyes, cutting off his tongue, killing him in ways that nightmares were made of.

In the mornings, after nights like these, I'd wake up and reach out my hand to find an empty bed. On finding it empty and remiss of his scent, I'd then remember what I'd done, or rather, been forced to have done.

Loneliness was my only constant friend. I'd sit alone, pretending to read, as otherwise Gastone would erupt in fits of rage, reminding me of my foolish ways.

I never said it. But Gio was not a mistake. It had felt like poison on my tongue when I told him he was. I sometimes replayed the conversation in my mind, over and over again, hearing the hurt in his voice.

You'd promised, Larissa.

I had. I'd promised that when the day came for me to return, nothing would change between us. I truly meant it back then, but we had never planned for external forces at play.

For a day or two, I waited for the phone to ring, to hear Gio asking for the truth, reminding me of past promises made. He never called.

Thank god.

Something told me he'd believed every painful word I'd slapped across his heart. It hurt to think he saw my words for the truth. But the alternative of seeing him hurt in his quest to fight for us was worse, so I tried to be grateful for this one silver lining.

He believed me, and that's why he was safe.

My brother's threat loomed in my mind at all times. I often found myself lingering in the hallway outside his office for news that he'd attacked Gio.

I never heard a thing, but was living in fear for the day when that ball would drop.

My bedroom felt like a prison cell, but I tried to stay in as much as I could, simply to avoid Gastone's pompous smirks. He believed he'd won, that I'd chosen family loyalty over the enemy. He didn't once see that I was slowly dying within.

My room was a place of comfort once, but as I'd sit and cry and cry and cry until the tears became a permanent fixture down my cheeks, I also knew that it was empty of the one person who belonged in it.

"This is for the best, Larissa," I whispered to myself over and over like a mantra when the pain clawed at my chest and panic filled my senses. "It's better Gio hates you than dies because of you."

That night, the sound of car doors slamming interrupted my thoughts. I glanced down from my window at the driveway and spotted Carlo and Dino rushing out of a car. My heart lifted for the first time in days. I hadn't seen my brothers since my return. Although they had hurried back, their flight experienced some engine problems along the way.

I rushed downstairs, my bare feet slapping against the marble floors. By the time I reached the foyer, my brothers were already inside, dropping their overnight bags on the floor.

“There she is!” Carlo's face broke into a warm smile as he spread his arms wide.

I crashed into his embrace. “I didn't know you were coming back today.”

“We wrapped up early in Milan.” He planted a kiss on the top of my head. “Couldn't wait to see our baby sister.”

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Dino, the quieter of my brothers, waited his turn before pulling me into a gentler hug. “You look tired, Lari.”

“Do I?” I said, forcing a smile.

“Come, come. A good cup of coffee for all of us would help us, won’t it?” Dino suggested.

We settled in the kitchen where I made coffee while they unpacked little gifts they bought for me from the airport. It felt almost normal, this routine of ours. But nothing seemed the same. Not even when I thanked them for the gifts. It felt like I was simply moving through the motions.

Carlo ruffled my hair. “Where’s Gastone?”

“Meeting with the Bianchi family. Won’t be back until tonight.”

A look passed between my brothers.

“What?” I asked, feeling like the look had been more about me than Gastone.

“He told us about...your involvement,” Carlo offered.

“With that Lebedev fellow,” Dino growled.

“He was furious, but of course we told him you weren’t to blame,” Carlo explained, a look of protectiveness etched over his face.

“He manipulated you, we knew that from the start. God, Larissa,” Dino went in for a hug again from the chair beside me. “We can’t imagine how much he traumatized you for you to think you... you cared for him.”

I couldn’t believe this. My brothers were painting Gio as a monster, which was so far from the truth that I could have laughed.

I pulled out of Dino’s hug and couldn’t help the anger that flashed across my face. “Gio was nothing like that. I wasn’t manipulated in any shape or form.”

“Gio?” Carlo’s eyes narrowed. “What’s going on, Larissa? Don’t tell me you willingly got mixed up with one of the Lebedev men.”

The moment had arrived sooner than I’d expected. But for some reason, I didn’t feel the need to hide or scare away. They weren’t Gastone, which meant they might actually listen.

“His name is Giovanni,” I said, straightening my shoulders.

Dino’s knuckles whitened around his mug. “Jesus, Larissa.”

“It’s not what you think,” I continued quickly. “Yes, he kidnapped me, but he never held me as a prisoner.” I chose to omit the minor detail of being locked in the basement cell during my first two days there.

“What does that mean? He kidnapped you. You were a prisoner,” Carlo’s voice remained calm, but I could see the tension in his jaw.

“I should have walked away, but...” I paused, searching for words that wouldn’t trigger their protective instincts. “He was kind to me, Carlo. Different than what we’ve been told about them. His entire family was lovely and his sister Elena, she

showed up for me when I needed her to.”

“Kind?” Dino echoed skeptically. “These are the same people who bring battles to the streets.”

“Did he touch you?” Carlo asked, his tone deceptively mild.

“No,” I lied. I couldn't bear to see the rage that would follow the truth. “That's what I've been trying to tell Gastone. Nothing happened.”

“Then what's the problem?” Carlo asked.

I fidgeted with my coffee cup. “I think... I started to have feelings for him. And Gastone found and was furious. But I'm telling you, Gio is the kindest man I've met.”

“Fuck,” Dino muttered, running a hand through his dark hair.

Carlo's expression remained carefully neutral. “And what did Gastone do?”

“He threatened to kill him.” The words fell between us like stones. “So I ended it. I told Gio it was all a mistake.”

My brothers exchanged another look, a silent conversation passing between them. Carlo sighed, reaching across the counter to take my hand.

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“I know you don't want to hear this, but Gastone was right to separate you. The Lebedevs aren't people we can trust. Whatever this Giovanni showed you—it wasn't real.”

“You don't know him,” I protested.

“No, but I know what his family has done,” Carlo insisted.

Dino nodded in agreement, but his expression was softer than Gastone's had been. “Did he hurt you when you ended things?”

“No,” I whispered. “He just... accepted it.”

This detail seemed to surprise them both.

“Well,” Dino said at last, “at least he had the decency to let you walk away cleanly.”

It wasn't the defense of Gio I'd hoped for, but it wasn't the condemnation Gastone had delivered either. A tiny opening I could work with.

Over the next few days, I implemented my plan. I had noticed that, even though Gastone couldn't be reasoned with, Dino and Carlo were a different story altogether. Perhaps if I could bring them under my wing, we could present a united front, forcing Gastone to acknowledge the truth.

That is, when I delivered it to them.

The fact that I was pregnant with Gio's child and loved him with all my heart.

The plan wasn't confrontational. It simply involved leaving little breadcrumbs that might challenge my brothers' preconceptions of the Lebedevs.

I started with the emerald earrings Gio had given me, casually leaving them on the dining table one night.

"These are beautiful," Carlo remarked at breakfast, lifting one to examine it. "New?"

I nodded, buttering my toast. "A gift."

"From who?" Gastone demanded, his focus on me now.

"Giovanni Lebedev," I answered, meeting his gaze steadily.

The silence that followed was brittle.

"You accepted jewelry from him?" Gastone's voice was dangerously quiet.

"He was generous," I lied smoothly. "I was going to return them, but..."

"But what?" Gastone pressed.

I shrugged. "They're too pretty to give back."

Carlo chuckled, diffusing some of the tension. "She's got you there."

Gastone scowled but said nothing more.

Next came the photographs. I had printed several from my phone—pictures from the day I took Gio to the orphanage supported by my family. Children climbing all over him, his concentrated expression as he helped a boy with homework. I left them mixed with the mail on the hallway table.

Dino found them first. “What's this?”

“Oh, just some photos from the orphanage we support,” I said casually as I passed by.

“Gio came along with me when I visited.

He flipped through them with a frown. “The Lebedevs visiting an orphanage? That's rich.”

“Actually, they fund many charitable causes,” I corrected.

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Dino handed the photos back without comment, but I caught him looking at them again later.

My final piece of evidence was the most direct: news clippings about safety initiatives in low-income areas under Lebedev control. Improved street lighting, security patrols, and women's self-defense classes sponsored by the local business community—all Lebedev work. I left them on Carlo's desk, knowing he'd read anything that resembled news.

“Interesting tactics,” he said that evening, finding me in the library. “The Lebedevs playing community heroes.”

“It's not play-acting if it actually helps people,” I pointed out.

Carlo studied me for a long moment. “You really care about him, don't you?”

I didn't answer, which was answer enough.

He sighed. “Larissa, even if this Giovanni has some redeeming qualities, he's still our enemy. There's blood on his hands, just like there's blood on ours. That's the world we live in.”

“Maybe it doesn't have to be,” I ventured. “Maybe there's a way our families could—”

“No,” Carlo cut me off firmly. “Some rivalries run too deep. I'm sorry.”

A week passed, and the hole in my chest only grew larger. My little campaign had softened Carlo and Dino somewhat, they no longer spat the Lebedev name like a curse, but they remained unconvinced that any real peace was possible. And Gastone only seemed to grow more hostile, as if sensing my silent rebellion.

But it was the lie that weighed heaviest on me. Every time I remembered Gio's face as I told him he meant nothing, I felt sick. He deserved the truth, even if nothing could come of us.

He had asked that we meet face-to-face. I had turned him down, but the truth was I needed to see him as much as I needed to breathe. I'd been without him for two weeks now, and I couldn't take it any longer.

It was almost like I was a woman addicted, and he was my drug somewhere out there in the world, waiting to be found.

That night, I lay awake until everyone was in bed. Sometime past midnight, I slipped out of bed and changed into black jeans and a dark sweater that could blend into shadows.

I didn't have a concrete plan, but whatever plan I had was simple. I would go to Gio's, tell him the truth so we could both heal with love, and then come back home. I knew he'd fight me, insisting on bringing an army to get me back, but somehow I had to convince him not to do that.

No matter how angry I felt at my brothers, I didn't want to see them injured in battle, or worse.

My only agenda was to see Gio and kiss him goodbye, to tell him I hadn't meant those cruel words. That I ended things to protect him, not because I didn't care.

The memory of that last kiss alone, I thought to myself with tearful eyes as I cradled my belly, would be enough to get us through the pain of not having him in the future.

Getting past the security system was easy. I'd watched Carlo reset it enough times to figure out the code, which he usually rotated every four months. The guards at this hour were usually scarce and mostly slept. The night air hit my face as I slid into the lawn and ran to the side gate, sliding out. The street was empty, eerily quiet.

I'd made it to the end of our block when the black van appeared. It pulled alongside me so suddenly I didn't have time to run. The side door slid open, and hands reached for me.

I fought, kicked, and tried to scream, but a cloth pressed over my mouth silenced my voice. As consciousness faded, my last thought was not of my brothers or myself, but of Gio.

He would never know I loved him.

Chapter 25 - Gio

I parked my car a hundred meters down the road from the Ajello compound, but didn't get out immediately. I watched the house with a pounding heart as I considered my options. The last time I spoke to Larissa, she said things I refused to believe.

Two weeks had passed, yet her words still left me sleepless and distracted. I couldn't get her out of my mind, nor could I believe that we meant nothing to her. Somewhere in my heart, I had this inkling of doubt about whether she truly believed that, or if someone else had put those words in her mouth.

If I had to place a winning bet, I'd bet on the latter having happened.

The house was so close. She was so close. I could feel her calling to me, a moth to a flame, and when that call became louder, I could no longer sit here and wonder if I was making a mistake.

I stepped out of the car and inched along the wall to the compound. If she told me to my face that she wanted to leave me in the past, then I wouldn't fight her. But even as I considered that option, I knew that wouldn't be the outcome.

To truly know what happened, I'd have to get her alone.

The security around the Ajello estate was tight, but it was nothing I couldn't handle. I placed my hand on the small of my back and checked to see if the gun was there. It was.

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At last, I saw a small gate on the boundary wall, unmanned at this hour. Without thinking, I scaled it and dropped to the ground. Before me lay a vast expanse of green, and right at the center was the mansion.

Larissa.

I was almost there.

I bent low and ran through the garden toward the house, knowing this was a game of speed. Before the patrol came this way, I had to be pressed against the house walls and then I'd have to check for open doors, open windows.

I was almost at the wall at the back of the house when I sensed loud movement to my left, coming from behind a shed that happened to be my blind spot.

I pulled out my gun and whirled around just as four men were ready to jump me, then froze when I noticed who they were. Gastone, Carlo, and Dino—Larissa's brothers. Behind them, Dom stood watch.

They all had their guns pointed right at me, my back cornered against the wall. There was no escape, and seeing how I was outnumbered, I lowered my gun to buy myself time.

"Gentlemen," I said coolly, even though my heart hammered in my ribs. If they wanted, they could kill me right here and now, and I knew it.

For a brief moment, I allowed myself to regret my decision to come.

“You have exactly three seconds to explain why I shouldn't put a bullet between your eyes, Lebedev,” Gastone spat on the floor beside him.

I raised my hands slowly, calculating my chances against four armed men. “I came to see Larissa.”

“You fucking bastard,” Carlo lunged forward, only held back by Dino's grip on his shoulder. “You know exactly where she is!”

My stomach dropped. “What are you talking about?”

Dom stepped closer. “Stop playing games. Where is she?”

The confusion must have shown on my face because Gastone studied me with narrowed eyes. “You didn't take her?”

“Take her? What the hell happened to Larissa?” My voice came out rough and cracked as fear clawed at my throat. “I was trying to sneak in, to get a chance to talk to her.”

The brothers exchanged glances, and then Dom received a message on his walkie-talkie. “Boss,” he said to Gastone, “the guards checked. Lebedev came alone, and the car is empty.”

“Of course it's empty!” I bellowed as the panic surged through me. “If I had her, I'd be out of here within seconds. If I had her, I wouldn't be lingering here like a fool. Now, tell me. Where is Larissa?”

My voice had an edge to it, like an animal gone mad at the thought of losing its mate.

Dino was the first to put down his gun. “She's been missing for two hours. Her

bedroom window was open, but no sign of trouble.”

My blood turned to ice. I shook my head slowly. “I had nothing to do with this. I came here tonight because...” I paused, unwilling to let them see just how much she meant to me. To see the depths of my love. I didn’t owe them the truth, not before I knew she felt the same for me.

Instead, I looked at them and met each gaze. “We have to get her back.”

“Let’s go inside,” Gastone said after a moment of tense silence. “We need to figure this out.”

In Gastone’s study, security footage played across multiple screens.

“This is from the street cameras,” Dino explained, pointing to a timestamp from earlier that night. A convoy of black SUVs passed slowly in front of the compound. The front vehicle bore a familiar insignia on its door.

“Casellis,” I murmured, recognizing the rival family’s mark.

“What would the Casellis want with my sister?” Carlo demanded.

Gastone shifted uncomfortably, exchanging a glance with Dino that didn’t escape my notice.

“What did you do?” I asked, my voice dangerously low.

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“I might have...” Gastone cleared his throat. “When I found out about you and Larissa, I was furious. I made some calls, put out some feelers about potential retaliation against the Lebedevs.”

My vision blurred with rage. I acted before I could think, pinning Gastone against the wall with my forearm pressed to his throat. “You put a target on your own sister's back because you couldn't stand the thought of her being with me?”

Dom and the other brothers moved to intervene, but Gastone waved them off, his face reddening under the pressure of my arm.

“I never thought they'd go after her,” he choked out. “I was aiming for you or your brothers.”

I released him with a disgusted shove. “And now the Casellis have her to get to both our families. You know what they're capable of.”

The room fell silent as the implications sank in. The Casellis were notorious for their brutality, especially toward women.

“We need to move now,” I said, already pulling out my phone. “I'm calling my brothers.”

“We don't need Bratva help—” Carlo began, but Dino cut him off.

“Yes, we do. This is Larissa's life we're talking about.”

Without wasting a second, I was on a call with Caspian.

“Larissa’s missing,” I said, giving him the background of all that happened. “The Casellis have her. I need-”

“I’m gathering our brothers and our men,” Caspian said, without wasting a second. I felt instant relief, his support so unconditional in that moment, that I felt as though my brother was carrying me in my pain. He knew how much she meant to me. Not once did he reprimand me for getting involved, for trying to meet her.

“Keep us informed,” Caspian said with urgency as he ended the call.

“The Casellis have a warehouse by the harbor,” Gastone said when I hung up. “It’s their most likely holding spot.”

“My brothers will meet us there,” I told them as I sent Caspian the location.

“We leave in five minutes,” said Dom. “The convoy’s coming up front.”

In that moment, a strange sense of calm washed over me. It wasn’t because I thought all was well. It was because Larissa had us all rallying for her, and I knew that her brothers and my family would do whatever it took to get her back.

The sun hadn’t risen yet, and it was still quite dark when we arrived at the warehouse. Our convoy had only pulled up outside when another arrived. We piled out of the Ajello cars as my brothers followed from theirs. Caspian, Federico, Dante, and Achille—they had all shown up with their own little army in place.

“We sent some men on surveillance up ahead. East and west entrances covered,”

Caspian informed us when he walked up to us, his voice barely above a whisper. “At least eight guards visible from our vantage points.”

“Any sign of Larissa?” I asked, filling up the chamber on my second gun.

Federico shook his head. “Not from the outside. But there's light coming from a room on the second floor.”

We divided quickly, Dante and Achille taking point with Carlo and Dom, while Caspian paired with Dino. I found myself with Gastone, a partnership neither of us was comfortable with.

“If anything happens to her because of your stupidity,” I told him as we moved toward our entry point, “I will make sure you live long enough to regret it.”

His jaw tightened, but he said nothing, acknowledging the truth of my words. I could sense the guilt spreading through him. He had riled up the other families and, for revenge against me, had unwittingly sacrificed his own sister.

Yet, at the same time, I knew I had crossed a line. I knew Gastone loved her, in his own way. Just before we took our positions, I felt the need to give him a nod. “She’ll be okay.”

“By god,” he nodded back.

And just like that, a small understanding formed. Despite our differences, we shared a common interest: Larissa’s well-being.

The first shots rang out near the east entrance, which meant Caspian had engaged. Gastone and I moved fast, taking advantage of the distraction. We kicked open the door and entered. Two guards came rushing toward us, and we each took one down

with a single bullet.

Crew members entered through other entrances. Gunfire erupted everywhere. Crates tumbled in confusion, and containers were used as weapons.

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But Gastone and I left the fighting to the others. We needed to get to Larissa first.

“Larissa?” I screamed as we made our way through the maze of crates and containers.
“Are you here? Can you hear me?”

We navigated and screamed up the stairway, down the halls to the left first and then right, over and over again, trying to hear her through the gunfire.

Then I heard her. “Gio?” Her voice, filled with panic, echoed nearby. “Gio?”

My blood boiled as we raced down the hall toward the source of the sound. A Caselli guard appeared in our path, and Gastone shot him right in the head, not even giving him a moment to pull out his own weapon.

The office door splintered as we both kicked it open at the same time. Four men turned in surprise: three guards and Antonio Caselli himself. Larissa sat tied to a chair, a bruise forming on her left cheek, but her eyes blazed with fury instead of fear. When she saw me, I swear I felt her shoulders relax and saw her lips turn upward.

“Told you you’d face hell,” she sniggered, turning to Antonio.

Antonio glowered at her, before turning to us.

“Lebedev and Ajello working together,” Antonio drawled, reaching for his gun.
“How touching.”

“You took my sister!” Gastone roared, lunging for him, but the guards surrounding us

raised their weapons at him, forcing him to stop.

Antonio grinned. "It was your idea."

"You bastard," Gastone growled. "You know that's not what I meant."

"You're going to pay, Antonio," I hissed. Slowly, ever so slowly, while everyone was focused on the guns in our hands, I slid my other behind my back and pulled out the second one. Gastone caught my gaze, and that's when I nodded.

Just as he ran and used the momentum to slide on the floor and kick out Antonio from his feet, I turned both guns on two guards and killed them at the same time. Beside me, Gastone and Antonio struggled for Antonio's fallen gun while I shot down the third. The fourth, to my surprise, paled and ran out.

Before he could bring back-up, I turned to help Gastone. Gastone took a bullet to the shoulder but kept fighting. I couldn't risk shooting without losing Gastone. I lunged toward them and grabbed Antonio by his hair, wrapped a hand across his face, pulling him back. I watched as Gastone slit his throat, before falling back to the ground to catch his breath.

I left him there and only had one singular intention: Larissa. I reached and kneeled in front of her, and when I saw those gorgeous aquamarine eyes, my world suddenly found its axis. "Larissa," I whispered, clutching her cheeks for just a moment, before turning to Gastone. Despite his injury, he noticed and threw me his knife. I cut through Larissa's restraints with trembling hands.

"You came for me," she whispered once free, grabbing my hands. The way she stared at me, as if I were the light of her existence, filled my heart with warmth.

"Always," I replied, kissing her forehead as I helped her to her feet. Her body swayed

against mine, and I pulled her close, breathing in the scent of her hair, reassuring myself that she was real and alive.

The warehouse echoed with the sounds of the fight winding down. Caspian's voice called the all-clear from below. Gastone pressed a hand to his bleeding shoulder, watching us with unreadable eyes.

“We need to get out of here,” he said finally. “Police will be coming soon.”

We made our way down to find most of the Caselli men dead or incapacitated. My brothers stood victorious but wary, eyes darting between me and Larissa, assessing the way she clung to my arm.

Outside, as we regrouped by the vehicles, the temporary alliance began to fray.

“Larissa,” said Gastone to her trembling form beside me. “Come.”

Beside him, Dom opened the door to his car.

“But—” I protested just as Larissa’s eyes blasted wide and she stepped behind me.

“This changes nothing between our families,” Gastone said coldly. “And you”—he looked directly at me—“you stay away from my sister.”

“Gastone,” beside me, Caspian stepped up. “You know my brothers won’t hurt her.”

“I don’t know shit,” Gastone snarled, taking a step toward Caspian. “They’ve known each other for three months. From what I recall, the Lebedevs change colors like seasons.”

“You know that’s not true,” Federico snarled just as Dino and Carlo flanked Gastone

for back-up.

Things would get dangerous, I knew that, if I didn't stop it now.

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“Look, Gastone,” I said as I felt Larissa huddle behind me. “I’ll do anything to prove you wrong. Anything.”

“Anything?” Gastone smiled.

“Yes. Anything,” I said, with such intent, such meaning, that I knew I’d give an arm if needed.

“Give her freedom. Ensure her safety. She’s better off with us. The Lebedevs have enemies everywhere.”

There was something in the way he said it, with such care for his sister, that for a moment, I froze. Was I being selfish bringing in a woman I loved to death into this dark world? Was she safer with Gastone? I was lost, afraid to say something wrong, afraid to know what was right.

In that moment of hesitation, I felt Larissa move. I turned, thinking she had chosen to walk away, feeling a strange, hard lump in my throat that restricted my breath as she walked past me and stopped halfway between her brothers and me.

“Enough,” she said, her voice stronger than I expected as she moved her eyes to each one of us. “No more of this.”

“Larissa, get in the car,” Dino ordered gently. “We’re taking you home.”

She shook her head and when she turned to Dino, I swear I saw teeth. “I’m not going anywhere without Gio.”

“This isn't the time for your rebellion,” Gastone snapped. “That man is seventeen years older than you and our enemy.”

“That man,” she replied, her chin lifting defiantly, “is the father of my child.”

The words hung in the air like suspended glass, fragile and sharp. I felt as though I'd been struck by lightning, electricity replacing the blood in my veins.

Larissa was pregnant. With my child.

“What did you just say?” Carlo's voice was dangerously quiet.

Larissa turned to face me, her eyes searching mine. “I'm pregnant, Gio. That's why I told you to stay away. I was scared—of my brothers, of the future, of how they'd hurt you and how you'd react. But when I saw you tonight, I knew I couldn't keep lying.”

My throat tightened with emotion. “How long have you known?”

“Ten weeks now,” she admitted. “I found out just before our fight from the day we got back from the mall.”

The pieces fell into place—her sudden distance, the harsh words meant to push me away. She'd been protecting our child, uncertain of her brother's reaction. And on one level, mine.

I stepped forward, ignoring the warning looks from her brothers and mine. Taking her hands in mine, I searched for the right words, ones that could tell her how I felt, though it seemed impossible. How could I? When there were no words to describe the volcano of love I couldn't contain.

“I've spent two weeks thinking I couldn't live without you,” I told her softly. “I was

wrong.”

Her aquamarine eyes widened. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I was wrong because if you aren’t in my life, Larissa, I’d choose death. It’s beyond living, the way I feel about you. Beyond death, beyond time, beyond history, beyond anything. What I feel for you is everything, all-consuming. I love you, Larissa Ajello. I have from the first moment, though I was too stubborn to admit it. And I already love this child—our child.”

A tear slipped down her cheek. “I love you, too. So much it terrifies me. I thought I could let you believe I wanted nothing to do with you, but I couldn’t. Tonight, I snuck out to seek you out.”

“You did what?” Gastone bellowed from where he stood, took away this wonderful moment, but something in Larissa’s eyes told me that moments like these were plenty to come. She’d decided that I was the one for her, and I knew she was the one for me. She carried my child—our child—and she was now my family.

I would never allow anyone to take her from me again. I would protect her because she was mine. I turned to Gastone, ready to tell him so, to warn him not to mess with the future Mrs. Lebedev when, to my surprise, I heard Larissa speak first.

“No one will love this baby fiercer than Gio,” she said, turning to face her brothers, her hand still clutched in mine. “No one will protect us better. This isn’t just about our families anymore. I carry a baby in my womb. A child who deserves his or her father.”

Gastone stared at us, the conflict evident on his face. Behind him, Caspian and my brothers stood silently. I knew they would back my decision, whatever it might be.

Gastone stepped forward, and I watched as his hand reached behind him. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” I growled. Beside me, Larissa shook her head and bellowed—“Gastone!No!”

He paused and his eyes travelled between us, before they finally rested and remained on Larissa. “There are other ways to handle this, you know? This situation you’re in with this...baby.”

What he insinuated has me clenching my fists and I feel Larissa tremble beside me.

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Behind me, Caspian hissed. “How dare you?”

“Gastone,” Dino was the first to speak. “What you suggest, it’s...it’s Larissa. We can’t.”

“We can and we will,” Gastone turned and glowered at his brothers before turning back to face Larissa. “Come with me. You want to keep the child? Fine. Keep it. We’ll raise it. But you can’t stay with him.”

Larissa’s grip on my hand tightened. “I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life when I say I love Gio. My child deserves his father’s love, and I deserve to build the family I want. Please, Gastone. It’s him or... no one.”

“You’re young,” he shook his head. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know enough to say I’ll die if I can’t be with Gio. You hear me, Gastone?” Larissa now screamed as tears started pouring down her face. I turned to her, to see her heart laid out so raw for this world, and couldn’t bear to see her in pain. I reached out and gently wiped her tears away.

“No, sweetheart, no. Don’t say that,” I pleaded, as a lump formed in my throat. I caressed her cheek and she leaned into it, closing her eyes.

“Gastone,” I heard Dino. “We should leave.”

Larissa and I both looked over at Dino in surprise and noticed how Dino and Carlo were no standing on either side of Gastone.

“But—” Gastone tried speaking, but Carlo shook his head.

“We always follow you, brother. But this time, you ask too much of your sister. Dino and I both feel,” and then, Carlo looked at us and smiled, “that we have no other choice but to accept this.”

Gastone sighed deeply and a frown formed across his forehead. “I will never accept this, you all hear me? But clearly, I’m outnumbered today. But you will come to regret this choice. All of you,” he hissed at Larissa, at my brothers, at me and his.

And then he turned and walked to his car, slamming the door shut behind him. Dino and Carlo stepped forward, as though they wanted to pull their little sister into a hug, but with Gastone so furious, now obviously wasn’t the time.

“We wish you well, sister,” Dino said at last and Carlo nodded. Then, the two men were gone just as fast.

I felt a weight lift from my chest, replaced by a new one—the responsibility of a future I’d never imagined for myself. A woman I loved. A child on the way. A bridge between two warring families.

“Don’t worry,” I said, pulling Larissa close to my side. “You and I are a family now, and we’ll figure this all out.”

Chapter 26 - Larissa

Casian’s home, which also happened to be the Lebedev family estate, sprawled before me like a fortress. Despite having been a part of Gio’s family for months, I still felt intimidated by it.

I smoothed my hand over my swollen belly, six months along now, and went back in

from the balcony I'd gone out to for some fresh air.

When I entered the living room, Caspian's wife Kate walked up to me with an iced tea. Gently, she pressed it into my hands. "You feeling okay?" she asked.

I cradled by belly again and took a sip of the cool, refreshing drink. "This baby is always energetic," I smiled. "But yes. I'm feeling fine. Just a bit tired."

"You poor thing," Bea said, sliding up to us and linking an around through mine. "I don't know how you do it!"

"When you have your own," Kate smiled at her. "You'd understand."

We walked through the room to see what everyone else was up to. My brothers stood awkwardly near the bar, feeling out of place. Gastone's absence hung in the air, but I forced it aside and focused on feeling grateful for the fact that Carlo and Dino showed. I knew that Gastone wanted them to cut me off. I knew how angry he still was and how he must view Carlo and Dino's relationship with me as a betrayal. And yet, they were making an effort, all for me. I knew they still didn't care for the Lebedevs.

I excused myself and walked up to them with a smile.

"More water, angel?" Gio appeared at my side, his whiskey-colored eyes warm as he offered me a glass. I raised my cup of iced tea, and he shook his head, knowing what I meant. Our families were spoiling me rotten.

He put aside the water and clinked his glass against mine, before turning to my brothers with a polite smile. To my surprise, they raised their own glasses and met Gio's halfway.

Caspian watched us from across the room. His expression remained unreadable, but at least he had stopped referring to me as “the Italian problem. “ I supposed that was progress. Federico and Dante argued about something in hushed tones while Luca was off on his phone, doing God knows what.

Just then, Achille pulled up. “So, Carlo, Dino, if I were to buy an Italian car that the ladies would love, what would you suggest?”

I swear I saw Carlo try hard not to roll his eyes. I motioned at Gio and we made our exit from the group. I wanted to give Carlo and Dino an opportunity to get to know Gio’s family without me lingering by.

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We walked to the corner of the room and watched the exchange with Achille play out. Achille was motioning with his hands, more Italian than my brothers, who stood politely, trying to understand if he was for real.

I didn't bother suppressing my laugh.

"Your brothers seem uncomfortable," Gio murmured, his lips close to my ear. "Should I go rescue them?"

I shook my head. "They need to learn to adapt. This is our family now." I rested my hand on my belly, making my point.

Gio's fingers tangled with mine, squeezing gently. "You're right. Though I think Dino might break that glass if he grips it any tighter. I wonder what Achille's talking about now."

"Probably hotels in Italy for those ladies," I grinned, and beside me, Gio laughed.

The sound traveled across the room, and Carlo caught my eye. He smiled at me, although it looked more like a grimace.

"They're trying," I said after mouthing play nicely to Carlo. "That's more than Gastone is doing."

The mention of my oldest brother made Gio's jaw tighten. Gastone's refusal to acknowledge our relationship, let alone the pregnancy, was a wound that hadn't healed.

“He'll come around,” Gio said, but we both knew it might be a lie.

“I'm not holding my breath.” I sipped my iced tea, watching as Elena approached Dino with a plate of food. My brother stiffened but accepted it with a nod.

“They love you,” Gio corrected, his hand sliding to the small of my back. “The fact that they're here means they love you more than they hate me. Gastone knows they visit. He's allowing it, which means he knows you're his family.”

I leaned into his touch. “No one could hate you for long.”

“You did a pretty good job of it for a while,” he teased, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“That was before I knew how good you are with your hands,” I whispered, and was rewarded with a darkening of his eyes.

“Speaking of which...” His fingers traced small circles at the base of my spine. “Want to see something?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Now? With all your siblings and my brothers here?”

“Trust me.” He took my hand and began guiding me toward the grand staircase.

“We're going to get food,” he called to no one in particular as we slipped away. Beatrice caught my eye and winked knowingly, but no one else seemed to notice our escape.

The upper floor of the Lebedev house was quieter, the sounds of the gathering fading as Gio led me down the hallway.

“Welcome back,” he said, stopping at a door and pushing it open.

I gasped when I entered. “Your childhood bedroom!”

“If I recall right, you didn’t get to see much of it the last time around,” he said as he noticed me take a look around, my eyes traveling from the trophies on the shelves to all the books and old trains.

“Little Gio,” I said, running my fingers over the spine of a well-worn copy of “Crime and Punishment.” “Were you always so serious?”

“Not always.” He closed the door behind us. “I was known to smile on occasion.”

I turned to face him. “And what about now? Do you have reason to smile?”

His eyes dropped to my belly, and the tenderness in his expression made my throat tight. “More reason than I ever thought possible.”

He crossed to me in two strides, his hand warm as it rested against the curve where our child grew. “Do you remember the first time I brought you here?”

“How could I forget? My first family gathering, though they believed we were friends,” I smirked.

“I preferred to think of it as keeping a secret for our sanity.” His lips quirked up.

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“Is that so?” I laughed softly, resting my hands on his chest, feeling the steady thump of his heart. “Wait... you don't think this is where—”

“Where what?”

I nodded toward my belly. “Where we created this little one?”

His laughter was deep, genuine. “It's possible. We weren't exactly careful those first few times.”

“Or the times after that,” I added. “Maybe we should make sure, though. For scientific purposes.”

“Scientific, huh?” The rumble of his voice sent shivers down my spine. “I've always been a supporter of thorough research.”

His mouth found mine, tasting of the whiskey he'd been drinking downstairs. His kisses were still intoxicating, even after months of having him. I'd never tire of this—the way he held me like I was precious, how he seemed to know exactly when to be gentle and when I needed more.

“You're wearing too many clothes for proper science,” I murmured against his lips.

“A problem easily solved.” He stepped back, unbuttoning his shirt. Each inch of naked skin made my mouth go dry. There was a new tattoo on his arm—my name, in Russian. I traced the outline of it before he grabbed my wrist.

“Your turn,” his eyes inched over my body in a playful manner.

I stepped back and unzipped my dress, letting it pool at my feet. Pregnancy had changed my body, made my breasts fuller and my hips wider, but the hunger in Gio's eyes never dimmed.

“You get more beautiful every day,” he said, his voice rough. “Carrying my child suits you.”

“Does it?” I stood before him in just my underwear, suddenly shy despite everything we'd done together.

“You have no idea.” He stepped out of his pants, his arousal evident through his boxers. “Come here.”

I went to him willingly, letting him guide me to the narrow bed. It creaked under our combined weight, making me giggle.

“I hope this thing holds,” I said as he lowered me onto the mattress.

“If it breaks, I'll buy a new one.” His hands were warm as they skimmed over my skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake. “But I kind of like the idea of breaking my childhood bed with you.”

His fingers traced the elastic of my underwear before slipping beneath, finding me already wet for him. I gasped as he circled my clit with pressure.

“Gio,” I breathed, arching into his touch.

“Patience, sweetheart,” He slid one finger inside me, then another, his thumb maintaining that maddening circular motion. “I want you to enjoy this.”

My body responded to him with embarrassing ease. The tension built quickly, my hips moving of their own accord against his hand. Just as I felt myself approaching the edge, he withdrew his fingers.

“Not yet,” he said, his voice dark with promise. “I want to be inside you when you come.”

I whimpered at the loss, but the complaint died in my throat as he removed his boxers. His cock sprang free, hard and ready. The sight of him made me dizzy with want.

He positioned himself between my thighs, careful not to put weight on my belly. “Tell me if anything hurts,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to my collarbone.

“I’m pregnant, not broken,” I reminded him, wrapping my legs around his waist to pull him closer.

The first push inside made us both groan. He filled me completely, stretching me in a way that bordered on too much but never crossed that line. He began to move, slow and deliberate at first, his eyes never leaving mine.

“You feel like heaven,” he said, his accent thicker with arousal. “Like you were made for me.”

“Maybe I was.” I ran my nails lightly down his back, knowing it drove him wild. “Maybe this was always meant to be.”

The idea seemed impossible, the sister of an Italian Mafia don and the brother of a Russian Bratva leader, but here we were.

His thrusts grew more insistent, and I felt the familiar pressure building again. One of

his hands slipped between us, finding my clit.

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“Let me feel you, Larissa,” he commanded, his voice strained with the effort of holding back.

The combination of his voice, his touch, and the relentless pressure of him inside me was too much. I came with a cry that he muffled with his mouth, swallowing the sound as my body clenched around him. My release triggered his own, and he buried himself deep inside me with a groan, his body shuddering against mine.

For a moment, we lay tangled together, catching our breath. His weight was carefully distributed to the side, one hand still protectively curved over my stomach. I felt the baby flutter beneath his palm, as if acknowledging his presence.

“I felt that,” he whispered, wonder in his voice.

“She knows her father,” I said, placing my hand over his.

“She?” His eyebrow arched. “You sound certain.”

I shrugged. “Just a feeling.”

He pressed his lips to my temple, then my cheek, and finally to my mouth. “Boy or girl, it doesn't matter. This child is a miracle. You've made me the happiest man in the world, Larissa Ajello.”

“Soon to be Lebedev,” I reminded him, nodding toward the engagement ring on my finger.

His smile was slow, satisfied. “The best decision I ever made was bringing you here.”

“Kidnapping me, you mean.”

“Semantics.” He laughed against my skin. “The result is the same. You're mine, and I'm yours, and not even your stubborn brother can change that.”

I curled into him, listening to the distant sounds of our families downstairs. Maybe Gastone would never accept us, but we had built something worth fighting for.

“We should go back down before they send a search party,” I said reluctantly.

“Five more minutes,” Gio murmured, tightening his arms around me. “The world can wait.”

THE END