



# Guarding her Gangster Girl

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

**Description:** The last thing I thought I'd be doing in Vegas was protecting some wannabe gangster girl. But as a rising star in the Consortium, an elite arms-trading organization, I do what I'm told. That's how I find myself gifted as a bodyguard to Brie "Breezy" Colombo, widow of a powerful Mafia Don, after someone takes a shot at her.

Everyone knows she's just a gold-digging trophy wife, her grief as fake as her long blonde hair, her perfect smile, and her...

Well, maybe they're real.

But as I shadow her through smoky backrooms and the glittering casino she now owns, I discover a Brie Colombo no one else sees—razor-sharp, ambitious, and intoxicatingly complex.

It's my job to keep her alive long enough to sign a lucrative contract with the Consortium on behalf of the Colombo Family. Instead, I find myself drawn into her quest for the truth about who really killed her late husband.

And each heated glance, each brush of her skin against mine, each forbidden moment we share, pulls me deeper into her world.

Soon I'm faced with an impossible choice: stay true to the Consortium and my life's ambitions, or risk everything for the woman who's rewritten every rule I thought I knew.

In Vegas, everything's a gamble...and Brie Colombo might just be the most dangerous bet I've ever made.

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## CHAPTER 1

Brie

I'm having a bad hair day. And this cat-eye is not going to cut it, so I wipe off the jagged line and start again. I've gotta get this handled.

I need my face on to face off with what's coming.

Looking back at me in the mirror with unfocused eyes is a pale ghost with irises that are startlingly green only because the whites are so red. My usually-bouncy blonde hair hangs limp around my face, enhancing the lifeless impression.

I'm a goddamn mess.

I dab concealer under my eyes, then reach for a sponge to blend. It helps a little. I need to look perfect, put-together. It's what's expected of me, especially now. But as I reach for the false lashes, I pause. Too much for a grieving widow?

The irony, of course, is that no one actually expects real grief from me. I know what they all thought about me. Gold-digger.

But I really am heartbroken.

Terry gave me security, safety, a life I never dreamed could be possible, not growing up where I did.

I'm never going back to that. Never. My fingers tighten around the sponge and I set it down, reminding myself that I'm strong. I'm smart. And I clawed my way up from nothing once before.

I'll do it again if I have to.

"Ooh." A suck of breath from behind me makes me look up into the reflected eyes of Holden Brooks. He's wincing. "Girl, you might need a little extra time."

Despite everything, I let out a small laugh. He smiles and leans over me, wrapping his arms around me as we regard ourselves in the mirror, his chin resting on the top of my head. His sandy-blond hair is perfectly styled, and his blue eyes are sad despite the smile.

He gives a slow sigh as the smile dies. "I miss him."

"Me, too."

A sharp knock at the bedroom door makes us both jump like we're guilty of something and Holden straightens up at once. I don't have time to even call out before the door swings open, revealing Frank Colombo's bulky frame.

"Jesus," he says, frowning as he steps into the room. "I walked right in here, Breezy."

"Yes, you did," I say coolly. Lucky for me I'm already dressed.

"Where are the guards?" he goes on, and only then does he notice there's someone in here with me, and he gets that look that he always gets when he sees Holden. "No offense, kid, but you ain't exactly the tough kind."

Holden gives his practiced smile, the one he reserves for difficult people. "Hello, Mr.

Colombo.”

“Yeah. Give us the room.” Holden leaves at once, though he pauses at the doorway to roll his eyes behind Frank Colombo’s back. But Frank has already forgotten about him. “I’m serious, Breezy. You can’t be alone right now. It’s not safe.”

Breezy. The nickname Terry bestowed on me the minute he learned my name. Hearing Frank say it now, his voice so similar to Terry’s—first cousins, but they could’ve been brothers—makes my throat tighten up. “Not safe? Those bastards already got their target. It’s not me they wanted.”

Frank’s face softens with genuine sorrow. “I know, sweetheart. I know.” He hesitates, then adds, “Listen, we need to talk. Do you have a minute?”

“I have all the minutes you need.” I push aside my makeup and follow him out to the sofa in my sitting area. Frank has switched to his “fatherly” attitude. It’s almost amusing how most men only ever see me in one of two ways: as an object of lust, or as some helpless little girl who needs protection. Sometimes both at the same time, which is its own special brand of creepy.

But at thirty-two, I’m getting tired of making myself small just so these Family men feel big.

“Is this about who killed Terry?” I ask, as Frank huffs and sighs and tries to find his words.

“Oh, no, honey. No.”

“But do you have an idea who?—”

“Now, Breezy, you shouldn’t be worrying yourself about that. You leave that to the

Family. We'll find the bastard who did this, and he'll get what's coming to him." I've gotten the same response every time I've asked, and it's going to make me snap one of these days. And now Frank takes my hand as we sit, patting it in what I'm sure he thinks is a comforting gesture. "Brie, honey...do you know what happened to Big Joe?"

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I blink at him, widening my eyes in a perfect picture of confusion. “Well, I haven’t seen him around lately. Is something wrong?”

Of course I know what happened to Big Joe Buccino, former Underboss of the Colombos. The entire state knows he’s cooling his heels in federal prison, waiting on his trial for several murders. But Frank doesn’t need to know that I pay close attention to the business. No one does.

Safer that way.

Frank sighs heavily. “Well, he’s, uh, he’s taking some time out. The thing is, Terry hadn’t appointed someone to take Big Joe’s place yet. And now with Big Joe unavailable and Terry...” he trails off, then clears his throat. “Well, we’ve got a bit of a succession problem on our hands.”

I nod slowly, keeping my expression slightly curious but very, very innocent. Because I know exactly what the problem is. Vince Sabatelli and Larry Caruso are both gunning for the top spot, and neither one is likely to back down without a fight. But I just blink at Frank, waiting for him to continue.

“Thing is, Brie,” Frank says, squeezing my hand. “The thing is, while we sort all this out, we need you to carry on as usual. You were always such a great face for the casino, and the Family, too, and we need you to keep on doing that, if you can. We need you to be a...a figurehead for the Colombos. Can you do that for us, sweetheart?”

A figurehead? What they want is a puppet, someone to smile and wave and distract while the men decide who gets to be king. But I paste on a bright smile and nod. “Of

course, Frank. Whatever the Family needs.”

“Thank you, sweetheart. I knew we could count on you.” He pauses, a flicker of concern crossing his face. “There is one thing, though. Your first duty...well, it might be difficult. Of course, I’ll be right there with you. You can let me do the talking.”

The Feds, I wonder? I can’t imagine so. The first call Frank made after finding his cousin’s body was to a lawyer. Frank’s no genius, but he knew enough to do that.

I lean forward. “What is it, Frank? What do you need me to do?”

“Terry was due to have a meeting tonight. We need you to attend for him. I’ll tell you what to say, of course?—”

“Of course,” I echo, then keep going, fast, when I sound more sarcastic than I meant to. “Of course I can do that for you, Frank. Anything for the Family.” I bat my lashes, as much as I can, anyway.

Should’ve gone for the falsies.

## CHAPTER 2

Nik

I’m five minutes early coming up to the penthouse suite in the hotel we’re staying in, but I’m still the last to arrive. Damn it. As soon as the door guards have patted me down, I hurry in as fast as I can without looking like I’m rushing. The Novak Consortium’s inner circle has gathered in the living room around its dark sun: Eva Novak.

I’ve trained hard to never let my face betray how I’m feeling, but Eva—about a foot

smaller than me and with a waist I think I could fit my hands around—is still as scary to me now as she was the first time I saw her. She’s still young—mid-thirties, maybe—and beautiful in a ferocious kind of way, with her clouds of black hair and hooded, amber eyes. When she speaks English, it’s with an accent that to me sounds upper-class, but with a European edge to some of the vowels and consonants. She’s tiny, even with the stiletto heels she favors, but her wealth, her status, her sheerpower—they make her a giant in this shadow world we all scurry around in.

Every year, Eva spends a few months Stateside from her European home to sell her wares as quickly as possible before getting back to her luxurious life. And ever since I can remember, my father would fly out here on the Consortium’s dime to act as guard detail—first for Eva’s father, Zoltan, and more recently for Eva herself, when she took over. And this year I’m here instead of my father, because the Kuseks have always worked for the Consortium.

And now it’s my turn to prove myself. To make my father proud.

I flew in a few days ago, just like Eva, and I’ve been making myself useful. I act in her guard detail when she needs an extra body, and I’ve kept my ears open as she met with the movers and shakers of the Las Vegas Underworld. And I’ve learned a whole hell of a lot in a very short time.

Enough to know that I want to be one of the chosen ones. Very occasionally, Eva Novak will hand-pick an American to return to Europe with her, to work closely with her, to become a part of her inner circle. And I want her to choose me.

Not just because of the opportunity, but because there’s nothing left for me here in America. The Kuseks of Philadelphia have dwindled to me alone. And I want to be useful. I don’t want to waste my talents, waste the grueling training that my father put me through as I pushed myself beyond my limits. I’m thankful to him for making me who I am.



And I hope I can make him proud of me, if he's still watching over me.

I take my place near the outside perimeter, close enough to respond if called on, but far away enough to observe the room. My father's advice comes back to me: you must be a silent guardian, always watching, always ready—and always listening.

I earn a nod from Leon, Eva's personal bodyguard. He's thrice her size, coming up on sixty, and he moves slow but unstoppable like a tank. He's taken more than one bullet for his charge, and he heads up security for the Consortium as well as personally protecting its leader.

And that leader, Eva, is impeccable as always in a tailored charcoal suit that probably cost more than the jet fuel it took to fly her over here in one of her private planes. She raises one dark, eyebrow at me, making my insides turn icy, before returning her attention to her phone, which I can see even from my seat is lighting up with messages.

"Since our friend Salvatore Colombo decided to take early retirement," she says, "I assumed that meeting would be canceled. And yet I am told we will meet with the Widow Colombo instead."

Markov, the Consortium's money man, shifts uncomfortably in his seat. "I'm sure things must be chaotic over there right now."

"Chaotic or not, business is business, and I won't waste my time with some non-entity. Get hold of them and cancel the meeting, since they did not have the manners to do it, and express my disappointment in their lack of professionalism."

I feel the words coming out before I can stop them. It's a risk, speaking up like this, but something tells me it's a risk worth taking. "Are you sure you want to do that, boss?"

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The room goes silent. All eyes turn to me, Eva's the most intense of all. "Dominika, isn't it? Dominika Kusek?"

She knows very well who I am, but it pleases her to pretend she doesn't. "Nik, ma'am, is what I prefer."

"And what do you suggest instead, Dominika?"

There's the slightest emphasis on my full name. But I keep going. "Meet with the widow today. But change the offer—see how much you can push them for. The Colombos won't be in a place to bargain, not with the Family in disarray."

Eva leans back, studying me, weighing my suggestion. Then, slowly, a smile spreads across her face. "Well, well. It seems our quiet Dominika has some bite after all." She turns to Markov. "You heard her. Increase the offer. Let's see how the Colombos handle a little—what do the Americans call it? Ah, yes. Hardball."

As Markov hurries off, the others are looking at me differently now. With respect, yes, but also wariness. They're not sure what to make of me yet. But I don't care, if I've succeeded in showing the boss that I can be useful.

Eva smiles her cat-that-got-the-cream smile. "Well. Let's see how things play out." Her gaze returns to me as she stands, smoothing her suit jacket. The movement is graceful, controlled. She doesn't need size or strength to lead. She has something much more important: power, and utter self-confidence. This is a woman who could rain down death on a whole city with a flicker of her eyelashes, and so in this moment, under her approval, I feel more alive than ever. "You're proving to be a

useful player in the Novak Consortium, Dominika. A fine replacement for your father Mikolaj, may he rest in peace. And I'm sure he does, thanks to you."

The mention of my father strikes hard, though I don't show it. For a moment, I'm back in our old training room, my father's voice in my ears. In this world, you're either predator or prey. And I didn't raise you to be prey, child.

I give a nod of thanks to Eva. I do hope that my father can see me from wherever he is.

Eva turns her attention to the rest of the room. "I will meet those attending with me in the lobby at ten this evening, when we will drive over to the Golden Sands. The rest of you can enjoy yourselves in Sin City—but not too much."

There are grins and chuckles of appreciation as the men stand to file out of the penthouse, but I wait until the room has emptied out. By then, Eva is heading toward her private rooms, shadowed by Leon, and I find myself hurrying after her. "Ms. Novak," I call out, and she pauses in surprise, turns to stare at me. "I'd like to be at that meeting, if you'll allow it."

"Why?"

"I want to get a look at the Colombos," I tell her truthfully. "I'm still learning, and?—"

She turns to keep walking. I fucked up by being late, I guess, even though I wasn't. But as she reaches the door to her bedroom, she calls back over her shoulder, "Be in the lobby on time, Dominika."

Grinning, I leave the penthouse and go back to my room to freshen up, looking over the Las Vegas Strip stretching out under my windows, a glittering snake as the sun

goes down.

I don't know that I like it here. This is a city built on dreams and desperation, where fortune lives side by side with failure. I don't like luck. The concept of it. I made myself, with my father's help, and I will continue to control my destiny—as I proved just now.

I can step up and seize that golden ring: power, prestige, wealth. All the things my father worked for that he never realized.

And for some reason I think of the Colombo widow, suddenly thrust into a role she can't be prepared for. Eva regards her as a pawn in someone else's game, a non-consideration.

I wonder...who really did kill her husband?

Still, that's not a question I need to worry about. The only question I need to ask is whether I'm ready for what comes next. And as I make my way down to the lobby twenty minutes before ten—I will never be caught coming late to a meeting again—I know the answer.

I was born ready.

## CHAPTER 3

Nik

The Golden Sands Casino is glamorous even by Vegas standards, although it contains the same slightly sickening sense of too-muchness that seeps into everything in this city. Crystal chandeliers are plentiful, along with the gilt edge on everything, and there's a faint, discordant jingle of slot machines in the distance.

I don't like it at all.

It's a world away from the gritty warehouses and back alleys where I grew up in Philadelphia, but danger and misery lurks behind all the glitz, and that's what I don't like about it.

It's dishonest.

The meeting room is thankfully more corporate in décor, darker in furnishings, with lights that are lower in intensity except for the downlights set over the long conference table, where the Consortium and I are sitting, arranged in two wings around Eva Novak at the foot of the table. My eyes have adjusted and I'm just starting to feel comfortable when the door opens again and a new burst of light floods into the room.

Not light, but a woman. A woman with a lot of shiny blonde hair and diamonds, huge diamonds flashing even in this dim light, diamonds clinging to a long, golden-tanned neck rising out of a body-hugging black dress—the color a nod to her recent widowhood, I assume.

She's taller than I expected. Statuesque, even. Most women I tower over, and I think I'd still have a head over this one if she weren't wearing those ludicrous heels—but she's no pocket package, not like Eva. She has an air of youthful vitality despite her somber face.

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And that face...it could launch a thousand ships, as they say.

Or sink them.

Her eyes meet mine. They're jade green, made up artfully, cold as stone. I give a respectful nod, which she makes no reaction to. But she keeps looking at me a little longer than seems polite.

I sit up a little straighter in my chair as Eva rises from the table. The widow has only one other person with her, and this must be Frank Colombo, the dead man's cousin. He favors the old Don in the face, so far as I can tell from the briefs we were provided, but according to gossip he lacks the drive, the intellect, and the forceful personality.

The Consortium is in a strong position for negotiation. Eva will be very pleased with me when this over-priced deal goes through. Might even offer me a seat on her plane back to Europe.

Eva's voice drips with false sympathy as she offers condolences for Don Colombo's death. "Mrs. Colombo," Eva laments, "I can't imagine how difficult this must be for you. To lose your husband so suddenly, and now to be thrust into such an unfamiliar setting over petty business concerns."

I watch the widow carefully, but her mask of polite grief never slips. She's good. "You're very kind, Ms. Novak. I'm doing my best to honor Terry's memory by keeping things running smoothly." She looks around the room and frowns. "But what a ridiculous table. We'll barely be able to hear each other, shouting down from

opposite ends. Please, come and sit up here.” She gestures to her end of the table and, after a moment, Eva follows her back down the room and takes a seat to the side of Brie Colombo, opposite Frank.

The rest of us follow, shuffling quickly to find new seats. The widow turns to Eva. “Isn’t this much better?” she asks. “I feel as though we can really talk now.”

Eva knows a power play when she sees one. “Indeed,” she says coolly. “But I don’t want to take up your time, Mrs. Colombo. Let’s deal with this business quickly.”

“Call me Brie, please,” Brie says.

Eva does not return the request for familiarity, offering only a chilly smile. But the real show begins when Markov leans forward to present the paperwork with our inflated offer. It’s well above our standard rate, and I can see Frank Colombo recognizes that from the surprise on his face. But what can he do?

The Colombos need arms, need weapons, need ammunition—especially at a time like this.

So with a sigh, he leans in to murmur in Brie’s ear.

Brie doesn’t seem to hear him as she closely studies the paperwork. Her brow furrows slightly as she pores over the numbers. I feel a twinge of sympathy; she’s clearly out of her depth, trying to make sense of figures that would confuse most people, let alone an ex-showgirl.

That’s all I know about her, from the dossier the Consortium provided on her. She was born in West Virginia, disappeared for a while, and reappeared in Vegas, where she worked her way into the chorus lines—and then found a wealthy man to pay her bills. She used her beauty and her charm to great effect, it must be acknowledged.

And she really is something, that golden-hued skin practically glowing?—

And then Brie looks up, flashing a dazzling smile that rivals the Vegas Strip. “I’m afraid I don’t have much of a head for numbers,” she says, her voice honey-sweet. “But this seems awfully expensive.” Frank tries to intervene, but Brie shrugs off his hand on her arm. “Ms. Novak,” she says to Eva. She’s still smiling warmly, but there’s a glint of steel there, too. “Terry always spoke highly of your fairness. So I can’t help but wonder if some papers might have gotten mixed up?”

The room goes dead silent.

And I find myself oddly impressed by the Widow Colombo.

“May I see that paper myself?” Eva asks, her tone carefully neutral. “I must confess I did not have a chance to proof the final copy.”

Brie slides it back across the table. Eva glances at it, then turns to berate Markov in rapid-fire Russian. Russian is the lingua franca, so to speak, within the Consortium, and the threats Eva levels at Markov now sound even worse than they would in English. The man is pale as death as he stammers out apologies to Brie, in English now.

“As you say, Mrs. Colombo—a few numbers not carried over as they should have been—entirely my fault—I will correct it at once?—”

“Oh, it’s no trouble at all,” Brie assures him, flicking back a lock of her hair with a perfectly manicured hand. The diamonds on her fingers glitter. “I’m happy for you to correct it.”

Gold digger. That’s the accusation that stuck to this woman, and it’s something Eva—no, something I—should have considered.



Gold diggers know money.

“That’s very good of you, Mrs. Colombo. Let us look at the figures again and we’ll get back to you.” Eva switches back to Russian, muttering to her bodyguard, Leon, “This is no sweet little widow. I want you to keep an eye on her.” When she turns back to Brie, she’s all smiles once more. “Mrs. Colombo—Brie—as a gesture of apology for this mix-up, and as a token of my goodwill, I’d like to offer you a gift: my personal bodyguard, to ensure your safety during this time of upheaval. I know the Colombo ranks have thinned in recent times, and I’d like to relieve some of the stress on your resources.”

Frank immediately starts spluttering, but Brie cuts him off smoothly.

“Now, Frank,” she chides gently, “Ms. Novak is making a very generous offer.” She turns back to Eva, her green eyes sparkling with something that might be amusement—or warning. “Thank you so much, Ms. Novak. It makes me feel much safer to know another woman has my back. But of course, we Colombos still have our own security measures. I appreciate the thought, though.”

Eva glances at me, raising an eyebrow. “Anything to add, little prodigy?” she asks in Russian. “Given that it’s your overreaching that has put me in this mess.”

Shit.

But practice allows me to maintain a neutral demeanor, and I reply in Russian as well. “No need to worry, boss. This—” I pause, trying to find the right way to phrase it “—this wannabe gangster girl will be replaced soon enough, and we can deal with whomever really holds the power in their Family.” The words leave a bad taste in my mouth, but it’s the cold calculus of our world that people, particularly women, are pawns to be moved around the board.

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“As you say,” Eva agrees slowly in Russian. “Yes, she’s a little girl playing at being a gangster. We can afford to wait.”

Brie stands abruptly, surprising us all, and we all follow suit. As she shakes Eva’s hand, she says, “Well, it’s been wonderful to meet you, Ms. Novak. Quite educational. I do hope we can be friends.” She switches to flawless Russian as she adds, “Up until the real man in power takes over, anyway. In the meantime, I’d be delighted to see a revised offer.”

I think it’s the first time I have ever seen Eva Novak speechless. And then she laughs, admiration to sweep over her face. “If you don’t mind my saying, Mrs. Colombo,” she says in Russian, “I’m not sure that mask you like to wear really suits you. Perhaps one day you will take it off and let the world see you as you really are.”

Brie gives the smallest of sneering smiles and sweeps out of the room, leaving a confused Frank Colombo to trail in her wake, calling back promises to set up another meeting. Eva and I and the rest of the Consortium stare after them.

Eva recovers first, letting out a scoff. “So the little widow proves more formidable than we thought.”

I feel heat creeping up my neck as I think back over every word I said, knowing that Brie Colombo must have understood them all. “She’s a snake,” I mutter softly. “We’ll need to watch out for her fangs.”

But for the rest of the evening, I find my mind wandering back to those pretty but piercing eyes—and the strange thrill I felt when they locked with mine.

## CHAPTER 4

Brie

Frank managesto keep his shit under wraps on the way up to the suite in the elevator, but he starts talking the moment we exit onto my floor.

“Breezy, you shoulda left that to me. Now we need to discuss the next steps. You gotta tell me exactly what they were saying with all that jibber-jabber they were doing, you hear? And what you said back to them. Because the Family’s interests...”

And on he goes. His words grate on my nerves, each one a reminder of the façade I’ve maintained for years. The airhead trophy wife, now the grieving widow. It’s exhausting at times, but the mask has kept me safe. Kept me wealthy.

And I know better than most how precarious the Family’s position actually is right now. If Eva Novak is aware of our dwindling numbers, that means our enemies here must be, too.

I cut Frank off as politely as I can, my Southern charm slipping through as always when I need it, though I’ve done my best over the years to take the edge off my accent. “Frank, honey, all they were doing was discussing how they could change up the deal. Make it better for us. Now, I appreciate your escorting me up here, but I really do need some time alone now. To grieve, you understand.”

His brow furrows, deepening the lines on his weathered face. “But Brie, what that woman said down there...you really do need protection. It’snotsafe for you to be alone right now.”

I’ve refused all attempts of Frank to load me up with cumbersome shadows, and now I wave a hand dismissively, the diamonds on my fingers catching the light. That tall

woman with dark hair and eyes who sat at the edge of the Novak Consortium group—she kept looking at them.

Kept looking at me, too.

She was completely neutral-faced, even when insulting me. Right up until she realized I understood every word. I should probably have kept my Russian language skills under wraps to see what else they planned to fuck the Colombos over on, but I couldn't resist.

“Frankie, I'll be fine,” I say. “I'm just going to take a bubble bath and turn in for the night, no guards needed. No one can get to this floor without a pass, anyway. Now, you go on and set up another appointment with the Novak Consortium for their revised offer. Next time I promise I'll be a good little girl and sign whatever you tell me to sign.”

Before he can protest further, I step into the suite and close the door in his face.

And just like I told him, I head off to a bubble bath as I think about the meeting again. Eva Novak had enough of her people with her to staff the damn casino. All of them glaring, burly, menacing...

Except for that one woman she had in her retinue.

I've never seen a female bodyguard before, if that's what she was. The Colombos are...well, traditional is a polite way of putting it. Misogynistic fucks is more accurate. I don't mind using their blind spots against them—none of them have ever been able to tell me what to do, Terry included—but I do wonder what it would be like to have more women around me.

Women like that one Eva Novak had with her. Tall, broad shouldered, with

dangerous and very blue eyes. It's rare for a woman to be taller than me. I'm on the short side for a showgirl, in fact—had to let my perfect tits do the talking back in the day—but I'm taller than the average woman.

And yet she had a few inches on me, that woman back there, with short black hair shaved on the sides in a badass style that would look ridiculous on me, make me look like?—

Like some wannabe gangster girl.

I snort at the memory. She was hot, no lie. But I don't kiss up to people who don't respect me. And she and her boss can get fucked with their overpriced offer. As if Terry hadn't run deals past me all the time to see what I thought.

I like numbers. They don't lie, not like people.

My hand has drifted between my thighs, and I resolutely remove it. Might as well wait for some eager tongue than get myself off. And with that thought, I get out of the bath and get myself ready.

I told Frank a little white lie. Bath, yes. Go to bed? Well...not alone. I need to unwind, to shed this skin for a while.

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To take off the mask, like that supercilious cow Eva Novak suggested.

And I know just where to go.

An hour later, I barely recognize myself in the mirror. A black bobbed wig frames my face, my eyes dramatically lined under the thick bangs, lips a deep blood red. I've altered the shape of my eyebrows, too, which I find is the key to the perfect disguise. I give myself a critical stare and allow my reflection a small smile. It's always a thrill, this reinvention. I'm not Brie Colombo, Mafia widow.

I'm whoever I want to be. And no one will know me.

I call an Uber and then slip out of my suite, heading for the staff service stairs, the lock of which opens to my pass card. Down in the lobby I catch sight of Holden, talking sharply to a member of staff who looks like she's about to cry. He has high standards, too high sometimes. His brow furrows when he sees me, and he tries to gesture at me to wait up, but I just wave a hand and head quickly out, walk a few streets away from the casino, and flag down a taxi. I turn off my phone, the only thing I took with me in my clutch apart from my keycards and my lipstick, and I lean forward to instruct the driver where to go.

The city pulses with energy as we drive through the city, and my heart lifts in anticipation. This is my element: the glitz, the danger, the potential for anything to happen. The car stops outside an unassuming building, no sign marking what lies within, and after paying with a generous tip, I practically run to the door, where I'm challenged for the password by a pair of unfriendly eyes.

“Nectar,” I say.

The door opens and the butch bouncer waves me in with an appreciative smile. I grin back and then make my way down a narrow staircase, the muffled sounds of music growing louder. It’s jazz tonight, appropriate for this hidden speakeasy reimagined for the modern age.

The Secret Garden is an underground club that has moved around more than once during my time here in Vegas, and it’s a bitch keeping up with the password, which changes monthly. But this private lesbian bar feels like the one place in the city where I can truly be myself. Even Terry didn’t know about this place.

I reach the bottom of the stairs and the atmosphere wraps around me, carrying me along. Velvet-coated booths line the walls and an art deco bar dominates one side. Women mingle, laughing, flirting, dancing. The air is heady with perfume and possibility.

And I feel my shoulders start to relax for the first time in days.

I make my way to the bar, slide onto a stool, and order a strong Cosmopolitan. The bartender, a punk with a shaved head and a friendly smile, mixes it up for me. The first sip goes down easy, and so does the second.

Here, I’m not a Mafia widow. Not a former showgirl. Not desperate trailer trash.

I’m just another woman looking for a good time.

I’m nearly finished when the bartender sets another Cosmo in front of me. “Compliments from the end of the bar.”

I look over, a smile already forming on my lips to thank my admirer. But the smile

freezes as I lock eyes with a familiar face.

It's...it's her. Tall, dark-haired, dangerous-eyed.

The woman from the meeting.

## CHAPTER 5

Nik

The tall brunette caught my attention from the moment she walked in, and I wasn't the only one dazzled. Dressed in shimmering gold with a fringed hem, she was an amusing homage to the flapper era that this place, the Secret Garden, also plays at. But it's only now, as she looks fully at me, that I recognize her. She's wearing a wig and she's done something to her face, made herself up differently, but those unique, jade-green eyes...I stared at them hard enough during the meeting that I'd know them anywhere.

Brie fucking Colombo.

For a moment, we just stare at each other as I watch fear bloom in those eyes, and a flicker of satisfaction courses through me. She's been caught. Whatever she's doing, she knows she's being a naughty girl.

Eva will reward me for this information. But as I try to keep my triumphant smile down, I see something else in the widow's face that gives me pause.

A vulnerability that wasn't present in the meeting room.

Better find out what she's doing here. Perhaps I'm making assumptions. Hell, maybe she's playing me. I make my way toward her slowly, like she's some skittish



animal, but she's unable to look away from me.

"I didn't expect to see you in a place like this," I say when I reach her.

Fear flashes full across her face, but she masks it quickly. "What the hell are you doing here?" she hisses, leaning in close. The scent of her perfume—something smoky and expensive—washes over me. "Did you follow me?"

"I was here before you arrived," I point out. "So did you follow me?" We regard each other warily for a moment. I'm acutely aware of how close she is, of the warmth emanating from her body, and I find myself thawing slightly. "Mrs. Colombo?"

"Keep your voice down," she says at once, glancing around uneasily. "And tell me why you're here."

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“I came here for a drink,” I tell her truthfully. “To relax after work. Ms. Novak suggested this place.” Surprise winds its way through her eyes, and then they widen as I offer her my hand. “We haven’t been formally introduced. Dominika Kusek. Most people call me Nik.”

She takes my hand. “Most people call me a wannabe gangster girl, but you can stick with Brie.” Ouch. And then she switches into Russian, just to twist the knife a little more. “So, has your boss sent you to kill me? She seemed to think I needed extra security.”

When I reply, it’s in slightly less perfect Russian, because I was taught by my father, who in turn learned it from his grandmother. “You should be careful. Playing around with EvaNovak is dangerous.” Then, switching back to English, I add, “Enjoy your drink.”

I turn to leave, but she grabs my arm. “Wait,” she’s saying, her fingers hard on my bicep. “This part of my life—I need to keep it secret.”

I turn back to study her for another moment before I shrug. “Sure.”

She still doesn’t let me go. “How do I know you won’t tell Eva Novak about this?”

I look down at her hand, then back up to her eyes, intense and captivating. “You don’t.” I pull my arm away.

I walk back to my seat with my mind whirling. Brie Colombo, hereof all places. Is she a lesbian? Bi? Eva told me to take the night off, mentioned this bar simply because

she—like me—prefers the company of women, and happened to know of it. I'm sure she never expected me to run into the Widow Colombo.

Or...did she?

Eva Novak is a very successful woman because she knows things that other people don't—and is careful never to let on that she knows.

I order a club soda to clear my head, though it's a poor substitute for the vodka I suddenly crave. My eyes never leave Brie for long. She's flustered, fidgeting with her drink, her disguise doing little to hide her natural grace. A leggy blonde approaches her, all curves. Then a tattooed butch. Brie turns them both away with a polite smile and a shake of the head.

I feel a flicker of...something. Satisfaction? Relief?

Why should I care who she chooses to spend her downtime with?

Across the bar, a cute femme keeps trying to catch my eye. Any other night, I might be interested. Her coy glances would be enough to draw me in. Tonight, my attention is elsewhere, trapped in the orbit of a woman I shouldn't want anything to do with. She's as phony as the city she calls her home.

And she's a client of the Consortium.

Our first rule is: don't get involved. Neutrality is the bedrock on which the Novak Consortium was founded. We sell to anyone who has the money to buy, and we are not swayed by politics or promises.

So even if I wanted to go back over there and flirt with Brie Colombo—which I don't—I couldn't.

Don't. Get. Involved.

Brie throws back her drink and stands. Guilt twinges in my gut. Did I chase her off? Before I think better of it, I'm following her up the stairs and out onto the street.

"Mrs. Colombo," I call out.

She whirls around, the gold fringe of her dress shaking around toned thighs, her eyes flashing. The small side street is deserted, dark, but she responds in a harsh whisper as though we're surrounded by people. "Stop calling me that. Are you following me?"

I'm about to retort when I see it—a motorcycle speeding toward us, too fast for this narrow street, and a telltale glint in the rider's hand.

My body moves faster than my mind. I jump at Brie, encircling her with my arms tight so she can't struggle, and take her down, twisting so that I'm the one who hits the hard concrete instead of her.

Three shots ring out.

I roll, drawing my own weapon from the holster at my ankle, but the bike is already speeding away, a black blur in the shadowed street. But then the motor changes, and I know what exactly what that fucker is doing.

He's coming back.

Cursing, I haul Brie to her feet. If it was just me, I'd stand my ground, take my chances. But with her?—

"Run!"

We sprint to the main street, and I find myself impressed by Brie's speed in three-inch heels. There—the parking lot where I left the Consortium SUV I'm driving during our time here. I yank her into it and we watch the bike zoom past. Soon enough he—or she—will turn around, though. We need to get out of here.

“Hurry,” I tell Brie, pulling her toward the black SUV. “Which way to the Golden Sands?” I ask as we come speeding out of the lot onto the street, my eyes flicking between the road and the rearview mirror. No sign of the bike yet, or cops, but that doesn't mean we're safe.

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“Forget the casino,” Brie says, her voice tight. She’s looking back out the rear window, scanning for trouble, then turns back to settle low in the seat. “Drive south.”

I do as she says and we drive in silence to some moneyed community in the desert, the kind of place where privacy can be bought and no one asks questions. It’s surrounded by a large, brushed-bronze wall that would be impossible to scale without a ladder and lends a sci-fi atmosphere to the place. Brie fishes in her clutch bag for a keycard, and hands it to me to wave at the flat, blank security panel set into a bronze pillar by the road.

“Nice place,” I grunt, as the gate in front of us slides noiselessly open, and I drive on past a huge sign that announces the community name: SOLARA.

“Nice” doesn’t even begin to cover it. This gated community sprawls around the sides of a rising rock crop, each section divided by meticulously-crafted stone riser walls, creating terraced levels that offer sweeping views of both the desert and Las Vegas.

And each tiered level holds a million-dollar-plus house, appropriately separated from each other to maintain privacy. Each is a masterpiece of architecture, blending Santa Fe style with glass and steel, and blending into the landscape.

Brie directs me around the circular streets until we reach the top of the hill, where a low-set house sprawls out across the flat peak. It’s single-story, but its vast footprint is palatial. The exterior is a mix of smooth stucco walls and textured stone, with any sharp lines softened by the warm earth tones. The roof is almost flat, slightly sloped to draw the eye into the rocks beyond, lined with terracotta tiles that must blend seamlessly with the desert beyond during the day. Massive dark-mirrored windows

line the front, reflecting a noir desert scene on this moonlit night.

So this is where Terry Colombo liked to keep his trophy wife. We knew there must be some offsite property as well as the Golden Sands suite, but we had no idea where it was.

Eva will reward me for this information. Just as she'll reward me for telling her all about tonight—the secret double life of Brie Colombo, the attempt on her life. Yes, I will be rewarded. If I choose to speak of it.

And I will, of course.

I'll tell Eva and the Consortium everything.

I turn off the engine though I don't intend to stay, even when Brie turns to me and flutters her fake lashes. "Come inside for a drink."

For a moment, I'm tempted. To see the inside, to unravel more of the mystery that is Brie Colombo. I squash down the impulse and say flatly, "I don't drink."

She raises an eyebrow at the obvious lie, a challenge in her eyes. "What were you doing at a bar, then?"

"Looking for company." For a moment, the air feels charged. Her perfume is stuffing itself into my nose again. I have a sudden, vivid image of pushing her back in her seat, of tasting that perfume where it nestles between her breasts. I clear my throat, breaking the spell. "Go get some rest."

"You can't tell anyone about this. About tonight. Swear to me."

I say nothing.

“Why did you protect me back there?” Brie asks suddenly, voice soft. “You don’t evenlikeme.”

I look away, not bothering to deny what she said. I don’t like her. I don’t like that she plays a part, that she’s a goddamn rattlesnake under all that makeup, that she uses her looks to get ahead. “It was instinct.”

But that’s not the whole truth. There’s something intriguing about her, something that’s gotten under my skin, something thatmademe want to protect her.

Even as another part of me wants to unravel her completely. Open her up for my own pleasure...

Brie gets out of the car, but she waits and watches as I drive away. And her question echoes in my mind. WhydidI risk my life for Brie Colombo, some gold-digging Mob widow who fakes her way through her life?

But there’s more to her than meets the eye. The Russian. The way she handled herself tonight, the intelligent eyes behind those false lashes.

She’s a puzzle.

I grip the steering wheel, pushing the car faster. The desert night blurs around me, as if I could outdrive my own thoughts. I must report all of this to Eva. It’s valuable information.

Eva will reward me for it.

## CHAPTER 6

Brie



I wake with a start, my body tangled in soft sheets that feel suffocating. The desert is glowing outside the window, suggesting a late morning hour. For a moment, I'm a blank slate, no memory of past or present.

I love it here. Time seems to rely not on a clock but on the changing tones of the desert: cold blues at dawn when the earth seems to merge with the sky, blinding whites and yellow in the brightest hours, deep purples and pinks under a setting sun, and in the night an inky blackness broken only by the stars above—or by the lights of Vegas in the distance.

This place was one of my conditions for marriage to Terry. I needed somewhere where I could get away, be myself. No one knows about this place, not even Holden. It was a secret project that Terry and I contracted out through various shell companies, and despite my exasperation, Terry saw to it that it was constructed with as many security features as he could think of: bulletproof glass, 24/7 cameras inside and out, even a safe room.

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Just in case.

I stretch in the bed, my mind wandering. I went out last night, didn't I?

Nik.

Staring at me across the bar. Buying me a drink. Following me out. Wrapping me up in her arms to keep me safe from?—

A bullet. Fuck.

That's the important thing here: the fact that someone took a shot at me last night. A Novak Consortium member's body pressing up against mine is not the detail I need to be focusing on. I press my face into the pillow, willing away the memory of her strong arms going around me.

It was probably a setup, anyway. A play from Eva Novak to make me feel grateful toward the Consortium, soften me up for that ridiculous lowball offer she tried to throw. Or a warning: sign the contract, or else.

It was pure instinct that made me have Nik drive to Solara. This is my safe place, but it got less safe the moment she knew about it. I bet she's already told Eva Novak all about last night. All about this place, and the Secret Garden, too.

With a sigh, I get up and fish out my burner phone from the underwear drawer, the one with VPN that hides my direct location, and turn it on. Predictably, a flood of texts from Holden show up, dated late into last night.

Where are you?

Bitch where are you???

Seriously Brie

Text me back or I swear to God I'll set Frank on you

You're getting laid aren't you

Seriously I'm getting worried

Where are you

I'll come to you

I don't want to tell him that he has a reason to be worried, so I text back a brief lie.

I'm fine. With someone rn. Catch up later.

And then I call Frank, because I definitely have to tell him about last night.

I won't tell him about Nik, obviously.

Just the shooter.

Frank reacts as I expected him to, demanding to know where I am. I tell him I'm staying with a friend for the night, sounding frosty enough to forestall further questions. And then he tells me to sit tight wherever I am and let him handle things.

I'm fucking delighted to let him, especially rescheduling that meeting with the

Consortium. The last thing I need today is to face off with Nik Kusek again after last night. I need a little distance between us. So I spend the day down at Clubhouse Solara, where a famous chef is giving a demonstration, and the poolside is inviting enough that I feel happy to lie out there for a while and improve my vitamin D levels.

There's only one point where I contemplate returning to my house. And that's when an "Oh, Mrs. Diamond!" exclamation reaches my ears. I pull back the sunhat I've had resting over my face to look into the eager smile of the cleaning manager of the community.

"Hi, Katy," I say, and try not to sigh.

Katy is something of an institution around Solara. She can't be more than my age, but she seems older somehow, one of those women who bustles rather than walks. She has cropped dark hair, inquisitive pale blue eyes, and I've never seen her in anything other than her uniform, a white zip-front dress, white socks, and white sneakers.

She only has one obsession: the cleaning schedule.

"I didn't realize you were onsite today," she says. She's holding fresh towels to restock the pool house. "It's just that the schedule said you wouldn't be in, so I'd organized for cleaners to?—"

"I'm sorry," I say quickly, before she can fully launch. "I'm here unexpectedly and I forgot to update central office."

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Terry had several conditions about my living here. One was that I couldn't use my real name—hence I'm "Mrs. Diamond," after my favorite rock. Another rule was that internal cameras should be installed in each room as well as the perimeter, and yet another was that none of the Solara staff would be allowed inside my home while I was there, which I thought was weird, until I realized he thought someone might try to hurt me.

Well, now someone has tried to hurt me, and Solara is my safe place precisely because of all those "annoying" precautions he wanted me to take.

"Can you give me an idea about when—" Katy starts again.

"Well, I'll be down here a few more hours," I break in. "Maybe you could send someone now?"

She hems and haws but eventually agrees that she can do that. And I can go back to relaxing.

For now.

I swap pleasantries with a few neighbors I recognize, watch their kids play Marco Polo in the pool, and ignore the loud-talkers on phones who like to make Very Important Business Decisions while they take in the sun.

And every time I think about a certain pair of strong arms wrapping me up, I turn my mind decisively away.

But by the evening, even surrounded by all these happy families and bragging billionaires, I have to admit...I'm a little lonely.

I'm an extrovert at heart. I don't do so good sitting around on my own. And frankly, I don't like to think I'm inhiding. I'm getting more and more embarrassed about the fact that some fucker took a shot at me, and my first reaction was to flee the city.

That ain't me.

Not anymore.

So when I call Frank from one of the co-working rooms at the clubhouse, and he tells me he hasn't made much progress on who attacked me, my heart sinks. I think he's going to advise me to stay away again tomorrow, and I don't know if I can do that. But then he surprises me.

"I'm sorry to ask this, Breezy," he sighs. "But we got to get this business with the Consortium settled. Can you come in tomorrow to sign off on the deal?"

I haven't looked forward so much to signing my own name in a long time.

But as soon as I set foot in the Golden Sands the next morning, I feel an undercurrent of nervous energy that sets my teeth on edge. Something's different. The floor staff move with an extra urgency, whispered conversations cutting off as I pass. I keep my face impassive, but internally, I'm all jumbled up. Do they know about the attempt on my life? I told Frank to keep it quiet.

Phil Reynolds, the casino manager, hurries over as I head to the corporate offices on a mission to find Frank, his usually immaculate appearance slightly disheveled. His hair isn't as perfectly smoothed down as usual, and his tie is slightly loose. It's so out of character that alarm bells immediately start ringing in my head.

“Mrs. Colombo,” he says, lowering his voice and leaning in close. “Juno Bianchi arrived an hour ago. She’s requesting to see you as soon as possible.”

My first response is to curse, even though I adore Juno, I really do. But friend or not, her presence complicates things. The Bianchi Family’s support here in Vegas could be crucial in the coming days. But Juno Bianchi is a fucking apex predator.

She’ll see an opportunity for herself, too.

“Has Frank seen her yet?” I ask.

“No, ma’am; she arrived just a half hour ago with no advance warning, but Mr. Brooks came down to meet her.” Holden. Thank God for Holden. “Mr. Brooks put Ms. Bianchi and her party in the usual suites,” Phil goes on, his eyes darting around nervously. He hesitates for a moment before adding, “There were also two women from Chicago who arrived with them. They were vouched for by Ms. Bianchi, so Mr. Brooks gave them a separate suite on the same floor.”

Two unknown variables in an already volatile situation.

Wonderful.

“Does Holden know them?”

Holden was Terry’s personal assistant in name, but his real job in the casino was to act as a special liaison for VIPs. The kind of VIPs who help make Family business run smooth. He’s kind of the Shadow Phil, working to keep our underworld guests happy the way Phil keeps the legitimate casino-hotel business running. So if these women are anyone important to the Family, Holden will know them.

But Phil shakes his head. “He didn’t know their faces. I think...I think Frank might

wanna get eyes on them, if you know what I mean.”

Idoknow what he means. Whoever these two women are, they’re not innocent little lambs, not if Juno is associating with them. “Anything else?” I prompt, sensing Phil has more to say.

His expression softens slightly, sympathy creeping into his eyes. It makes me want to scream. I don’t need pity; I need strength. “I’ve finalized the funeral arrangements for Mr. Colombo. Everything’s set for the day after tomorrow.”

The walls seem to close in, the noise of the slot machines becoming a deafening roar in my ears. I have to swallow before I manage to find my voice. “Thank you, Phil. Send some coffee up to my suite, will you? And let Juno Bianchi know I’m available.”



### CHAPTER 7

Brie

I barely make it through the door of my suite before there's a loud, insistent knocking at it. For a wild moment, I imagine it's Nik, that she's come to save me just like she did last night. But when I fling open the door, it's Frank Colombo who pushes his way inside, his craggy face a mask of concern.

"Breezy," he says, his voice gruff. "Now, listen, after what happened to you, you need protection, and I won't hear any arguments about it."

I open my mouth to argue, to insist that I can take care of myself. But the crack of gunfire, the sickening lurch as Nik frantically pulled me down—it all comes rushing back. As much as I hate the idea of being watched 24/7, of losing what little freedom I have left, I'd rather not end up dead in an alley.

"Fine," I concede.

Frank doesn't look as relieved as I thought he might. "Thing is, we're running low on manpower."

Just as Eva Novak pointed out, the Colombo Family has been shrinking over the last few years. But we have other options. "Send a few people from casino security to my floor, and station another couple outside my door."

Frank looks surprised for a moment. "That's a good idea, Breezy. Good idea."

“And Frank, did you know Juno Bianchi is here?”

He beams. “Sure I know. I called her up myself yesterday, one of your best girlfriends. She’ll take good care of you in your...” He drops his voice. “Well, your time of need.”

Juno is here because of Frank?

“But Frank,” I say slowly, exasperation threatening to knock aside my Poor Little Widow mask, “Juno Bianchi also happens to be a Mob Boss, so?—”

Before I can go on, there’s another knock at the door. Swallowing a sigh, I move to open it myself. Standing in the hallway is Juno herself in a perfectly tailored Armani suit. Her wife, Caitlin, stands slightly behind her in jeans and a flannel shirt, red curls just as wild as I remember them, and I can’t help but smile.

But it’s the two women flanking them that really catch my attention. One is tall and lithe, with a blonde ponytail and cold dark eyes that seem to take in everything at once. The other has shiny dark hair, pretty but haunted hazel eyes framed by thick bangs, and a stance that screams “try me.”

“Brie, darling,” Juno says, stepping forward to embrace me. “I’m so sorry for your loss. We came as soon as we could.”

I return the hug, grateful for her familiar presence despite my wariness. “Thank you for coming, Juno. I appreciate the support.”

But then Juno adds softly, “Frank told me that an attempt was made on your life, also.”

Frank needs to learn to keep his damn mouth shut where Juno is concerned, and I’ll have to find a way to firmly suggest that to him.

Speaking of Frank, he's clearing his throat and sidling to the door, clearly uncomfortable with amount of estrogen in the room. "I'll leave you ladies to your girl talk," he says, excusing himself with a respectful nod to Juno. But it's for show only—Frank has never really understood just how much power Juno Bianchi holds.

He never would have called her in at a time like this if he had understood.

The four women file in and Frank scurries out. As soon as the door closes behind him, I roll my eyes dramatically, earning a quiet chuckle from all present. The tension in the room eases slightly, but I can tell Juno and Caitlin are a little uncertain how to approach me.

And I still have no idea who these other two are.

"How are you really doing?" Caitlin asks, her voice soft with genuine concern. She guides me to the sofa, sitting close.

"I'm managing."

"Someone took a shot at you," Juno says bluntly. "And yet you have no guards posted outside the door. You aren't managing, Brie. And your people are failing you."

I bristle at that, but I bite my tongue and turn instead toward the two unfamiliar women, who are busy exchanging a loaded glance. "Hello," I say with meaning.

Juno makes quick introductions. "This is Lyssa and Scarlett Fletcher, representatives from the Styx Syndicate in Chicago. They're here as a show of solidarity, as are we."

The Styx Syndicate. I've heard of them, but Terry never did business with them. Still, their support could be useful.

Juno has paused for our handshakes, but now she dives back into business. “Do you know who killed Don Colombo?”

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I shake my head. “Frank is investigating.”

“Who...found him?” Juno asks delicately.

“Frank did.”

“Has Frank—” Juno begins again, but I hold up a hand.

“Come on,” I say, with a small smile. “You know the rules, Juno. Family business is Family business.”

It takes a second, but Juno accepts it. She can hardly argue with me about it. If I started questioning her about Bianchi business, she’d be outraged. But then Lyssa, the blonde Syndicate member, leans forward. “Mrs. Colombo?—”

“Brie.”

“Brie. Hadria Imperioli—Hades of the Styx Syndicate—sends her condolences. Now, unfortunately I don’t have time to be delicate, although I am sorry about your husband. But Scarlett and I are here on a particular mission. Juno suggested that it might be more useful to us to talk to you instead of—well, the new Don.”

I actually appreciate her upfront approach. I like practical women. But I should probably call Frank back in if they want to talk business. Still...if this mission they’re on is confidential, I don’t know if I can trust Frank to keep quiet about it. “What did you want to discuss?”

“We’re hunting a female assassin. We have reason to believe she may be connected to your husband’s death—and maybe the attempt on your life, too.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “An assassin?”

Scarlett speaks for the first time. “She works for a woman known as ‘Grandmother.’ Grandmother has been training female assassins for several decades, and we believe she may have been embedding them in organizations such as yours, all around the country—maybe the world. Your husband’s name was on a list we acquired.”

“And you think Terry was killed by one of these women?”

Lyssa shrugs. “We don’t know for certain. But we need to rule it out. How many women would have had access to Don Colombo during the last few years?”

The faces of the women who work in the casino flash through my mind—cocktail waitresses, dealers, a few pit bosses. But they’re all familiar, all vetted. “The women on our staff have all been here for years, vetted by the Family, and...” I spread my hands. “They’re loyal.”

“These assassins are very good at playing a part,” Scarlett says darkly.

“What about his lovers?” Lyssa asks bluntly, and I have to laugh, both at her frankness and at the question.

I glance at Juno, who gives me an almost imperceptible nod. Yes, these people can be trusted. “He had no female lovers.”

“You’re...sure about that?” Lyssa asks, cocking an eyebrow.

“Terry kept it quiet, but he was gay. As am I. We had an arrangement.”

Scarlett is the only one to react, an involuntary, understanding “Ohhh!” escaping her. Lyssa just shoves a pen and paper into my hands.

“We need a list of any women around him,” she says. “And any other women who could have had unquestioned access to your husband. Hairdressers. Stylists. Doctors.”

“Only women?”

“Only women.”

I’m already scribbling down a few names, but I glance up as something occurs to me. “Eva Novak is in town.”

“Eva Novak is not the person the Syndicate seeks,” Juno says. “I have known her for many years. We attended the same finishing school in the Alps.”

Finishing school? Okay. “Eva might be clear,” I say after a pause, “but she has a new bodyguard or associate or something—a woman named Nik. Dominika Kusek.”

“I’ll have Johnny de Luca run a background check on her immediately, along with all these other names.” I nod, grateful for Juno’s resources and connections. Then she asks the question I’ve been dreading: “So, Brie...whoisthe new Don? Joe Buccino is in custody, so...”

This is dangerous territory, but I wonder if Frank has already spilled to her. “Frank’s got me playing figurehead while they sortout the succession,” I tell her, without detailing the politics of it all.

Juno’s brow furrows. “That’s not ideal. Perhaps?—”

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“The Family will figure it out,” I cut her off, perhaps too quickly. As much as I appreciate Juno, as much as I trust her personally, I can’t ignore the fact that she’s not Family. NotmyFamily. I might just be the Don’s widow, but I still care about the survival of the Colombos, and letting Juno interfere would only make us seem weak. “Thank you,” I say more politely, “but we have everything in hand.” Time to steer the conversation to safer ground. “The funeral is tomorrow. I’d be honored if you would attend, Juno—and you, too, Caitlin, of course.”

“The honor would be ours.” Caitlin gives me a smile as warm as her hair and I find myself smiling back.

I turn to the interlopers. “And you, too, Lyssa and Scarlett—it would be very kind of you to show that the Colombos have support in Chicago as well as New York.”

They agree readily, and I know what they’re really thinking: that it will give them an opportunity to look at all the female guests. I try to ignore the frisson of worry washing over me, but it’s hard.

Because if Nik Kusek really is the assassin they’re seeking, now she knows about the house at Solara. And if she isn’t the assassin? She’ll still have told Eva Novak all about it.

I have nowhere left to hide.

## CHAPTER 8

Brie



My time as a showgirl was a while ago now and didn't last long, but it taught me never to falter. Ankle twists mid-routine? You suck it up or you get your butt offstage as discreetly as possible, make it look like part of the act. Can't find your headdress because one of those bitches has stolen it just to fuck with you? You damn well steal someone else's.

Every woman for herself, all while kicking and dancing in perfect time together. No problem was ever insurmountable, so long as you could think fast and keep that smile in place.

So today, as I walk into the funeral home and prepare myself for a day in the public eye, I choose a muted half-smile of appreciation as I nod to the funeral home staff and take my place to greet attendees. The scent of lilies and roses is overpowering; flower arrangements line the walls, a pale wash of white against dark wood paneling. Hushed voices and muffled sniffs fill the air. I catch sight of the next room, where Terry's open casket waits. Holden is standing there, looking down at him, caught in an unguarded moment. I see his shoulders shaking.

My heart breaks for him. He loved Terry so much, and I'm the only person who can really understand how he feels—and vice versa. Holden used to call us the Three Musketeers sometimes, and Terry always laughed that we were more like the Three Stooges, only two of us were much prettier than those old funnymen.

I never felt like the third wheel when we were hanging out. I was happy for them both—happy that they'd found love, found each other, because I had what I wanted, too.

I had safety, and I had money to continue ensuring that safety. These days, though, I'm not feeling so safe.

Holden straightens his shoulders and I see him subtly wiping his face with a

handkerchief. When he turns from the casket, he looks every inch the professional again, greeting new viewers as they approach. He stays in the viewing room while I greet people as they enter the funeral home, accepting condolences and memories alike. And my mind drifts back to the day I met the old bastard, God love him. I was all legs and tits and not much talent. But I had something else. Something more important than talent.

I had ambition.

And Terry? He had power. I was sent to wine and dine him one night, the show producers hoping I could squeeze an extra hundred thousand out of casino owner Terry Colombo, who'd already invested as much as any reasonable man could be expected to put into a dying art and an underperforming show. But I'd built a reputation for getting my way.

Legs, tits, and charm. Those were my weapons.

I'd been secretly pissed off when his private secretary was right there with him—harder to seduce when a man is around other men—but I played my part perfectly that night, laughing at Terry's jokes, touching his arm, leaning in close. The scent of his expensive cigars and whiskey clung to my hair when I sniffed at it in the ladies', a heady mix of wealth and influence. I was intoxicated by it, desperate for more.

And when I came back from powdering my nose, I decided to duck into the kitchen, ask for a special bottle of champagne to be served—but instead, I stumbled upon a scene I wasn't meant to see. I took a wrong turn into a back hallway, and there was Terry leaning up against the wall, pants around his ankles, with Holden on his knees before him.

Our eyes met, and for one long moment, I thought I was done for. But the fear in his

eyes mirrored my own, and then Holden stood up, wiping his mouth, and leaned in to murmur in Terry's ear.

"Is that right?" Terry asked me. "You prefer the ladies, huh?"

I stared at both of them until Holden's eye twitched, a tiny warning, and then I shrugged. "Yeah. Your buddy there, he clocked me."

"I thought she might be useful," Holden said. "For what we talked about."

The silence stretched for an eternity before Terry's face broke into a grin as he buttoned himself up, then stepped forward to extend a hand. "Well, sweetheart, I think this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

I had no idea what he meant. But I shook that hand. And three months of "dating" was followed by a quick engagement, followed by the most expensive wedding the city had seen for a decade. A marriage of convenience, he called it. Protection for him, and for Holden, too, who fully sanctioned the marriage.

I'd said yes because it was what I'd always wanted, the reason I'd come to Vegas in the first place: a golden ticket out of poverty.

Vince Sabatelli is making his way toward me, oozing false sympathy.

"Brie, sweetheart," he coos, his breath an off-putting combination of mint and whiskey. "Terry was like a father to me. I hope you know you can count on me during this difficult time. And I hope I can count on yours during the...transition period."

I can see the hunger in his eyes, the barely concealed ambition—and this isn't about the casino. This is about the Family. Vince wants the top job, badly, and he thinks

I'm his path to it. I fix him with an icy stare, channeling every ounce of the power  
I've observed Terry wielding over the years.

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“Today is about remembering my late husband, Vince. Let’s focus on that, shall we?”

He retreats, properly chastised, but Larry Caruso approaches next, his gruff exterior softened by genuine sadness. Unlike Vince, Larry’s grief seems real. He’s older, around Terry’s age, with iron-gray hair and hands that speak of a lifetime of dirty work.

“Terry was a good man,” he says, his voice gruff with emotion. “He loved you somethin’ fierce, Breezy, you know that?”

To my surprise, tears prick at my eyes, because he’s right. Despite our arrangement, despite the secrets, Terry had been kind, funny, respectful. He’d taught me about the business, confided in me. In his own way, I think he did love me, just like I loved him. He always said I was the greatest showgirl in Vegas, because I dazzled everyone, and that was what he needed. A dazzling distraction.

I hope I’m still putting on a good show for him. I hope he’s proud of me, wherever he is.

“Frankie says you had a scare the other night,” Larry goes on.

I turn my smile up another few watts and shake my head. “Oh, it was nothing, Larry. An attempted mugging, but they didn’t get anything they wanted.”

He’s not convinced, but I’m not in the mood to spend any more time discussing it, so I excuse myself, hoping to make a break for it, say goodbye to Terry. But before I make it to the viewing room, I’m cornered by Phil Reynolds. He takes my hand, his

grip firm but not overbearing.

“Mrs. Colombo, I hope the arrangements are to your liking.”

“Oh, it’s very...respectful,” I say vaguely.

“Terry was—well, he was more than just a boss to me. He saw potential where others didn’t. I owe him everything. I hope...” He hesitates. “I hope I can be of help in this difficult time as we all adjust.” Ah. He’s worried about his job, and he thinks I’m the new owner of the Golden Sands.

Wait.

I am the new owner. Terry made sure I would inherit his majority shares in the place. So I nod, squeezing his hand. “He always spoke highly of you, Phil. And I know how hard you work at the Golden Sands—even if you make it look easy.”

A flash of pleased surprise crosses Phil’s face. People do like being recognized. He leans in closer, his voice dropping to barely above a whisper. “Ma’am, I know this isn’t the time or place, but I need to speak with you about something as soon as you have a moment. There are some matters that require immediate attention.”

I meet his eyes, seeing the urgency there. “Well, perhaps Frank might be the better?—”

“No,” he says insistently. “I need to speak with you, Mrs. Colombo.”

“Of course, Phil. We’ll set something up.”

He nods, relief evident in the slight relaxation of his shoulders. And as he steps back, Sophie Johnson takes his place, her small frame made even tinier by her grief. Her

brown eyes are red-rimmed behind her glasses, and she clutches a handkerchief tightly in one hand. Her voice wavers as she speaks.

“Mrs. Colombo, I...I’m so sorry. Mr. Colombo was...” she pauses, swallowing hard. “He gave me a chance when no one else would. He trusted me with the finances, with everything. I don’t know what we’re going to do without him.”

I take both of Sophie’s hands in mine, touched by her genuine sorrow. God knows there are few enough people here who are really upset by Terry’s death. “We’re going to do exactly what he would want us to do, Sophie. We’re going to keep moving forward, keep growing stronger. He believed in you, and so do I.”

Sophie nods, a tear slipping down her cheek. “Thank you, Mrs. Colombo. If you need anything—anything at all—just say the word.”

And finally, I have a chance to enter the viewing room. The few people in there give me respectful nods and then Holden shepherds them out, allowing me time alone with Terry. I approach the casket, fearful at first, but then relaxing as he comes into view.

It’s not so bad. He doesn’t look entirely like himself, but he doesn’t look unfamiliar, either.

A drop splashes onto his lapel, and I realize that I’m crying. With a sniffle, I rub the drop into the cloth. “Can’t have you mussed up at your last appearance, huh?” All those times he asked me to help him with his tie, or adjust the handkerchief in his top pocket before he had dinner with Holden, or a meeting with other important Family heads. I do it one last time for him now, my heart swelling as I remember, with gratitude, all the things Terry did formein the time we had together.

“Iwasa lucky bitch,” I murmur, reciting the phrase he fondly used for me all the time. It’s true that lady luck seems to follow me around—on the casino floor, slot machines

tended to jackpot as I walked by, and I'd taken to wearing only gold when I wandered around the place. The Golden Lady of the Sands, people started calling me, and an appearance from me tended to fill up the floors as people flocked in to try their luck.

It never hurts to cultivate a personal mythology.

But my soft smile dies as a chill runs down my back. I turn quickly, looking back out the open door. No one seems to be staring at me. And yet...I get the feeling that someone, somewhere, is staring. Staring daggers, as the saying goes.

But I can't find those murderous eyes in the crowd, if they even exist.

When I go back into the main room, Eva Novak has arrived—and Nik Kusek is with her again, her watchful gaze sweeping the crowd. Our eyes meet for a brief moment, and I feel a pull low in my belly.

I turn away quickly and see Juno Bianchi gliding over, every inch the powerful Mob Queen. Her designer black dress and subtle jewelry speak not only of wealth and influence, but class, too. She always carries herself with an air of authority that commands respect.



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I envy her, sometimes. People do what I want them to, but only after I've convinced them into thinking they want it, too. No one is scared of Breezy Colombo, the ex-showgirl, the gold-digger.

"You're holding up beautifully," Juno murmurs as she embraces me. "Don Colombo would be proud."

Terry always spoke of Juno with respect, never once mentioning her gender as a weakness. For a fleeting moment, I wonder if he ever thought of me leading the Colombo Family, like Juno does the Bianchis.

I bet he'd just chuckle at my sheer audacity.

"By the way," Juno goes on quietly, "Johnny's background checks came back in. All clear, including Eva's new pet. Background is well documented. She does not appear to be the assassin that the Styx Syndicate is looking for."

I can't help glancing back over my shoulder, my eyes landing on Nik where she stands behind Eva Novak. She stares straight back at me, challenging. She might not be some sneaky trained assassin, but there's still a dangerous allure to her, a blend of strength and reserve that...

Well, it's like catnip to me. I'll have to watch myself.

Lyssa and Scarlett are passing by, and stop to give me a nod. "You told her about the background checks?" Lyssa asks Juno softly. Then she grins. "Did you tell her about Nik Kusek tracking down her father's killer and killing him right back?"

“She did that?” I ask.

“Hell yeah she did. Badass.” Lyssa glances across at her. “She’d be a good candidate for the Styx Syndicate if she’s ever looking for a new job. And we have way more fun than any arms dealer could possibly have. You tell her that from me.” She winks, takes Scarlett’s hand, and wanders off to the buffet.

Eva chooses that moment to approach. After appropriately-restrained greetings between the two of them, Juno leaves us tactfully alone.

“I hear you had a little difficulty the other night,” Eva says, after the niceties are out of the way. I shoot a look at Nik, standing there next to the big hulking guy who is always Eva’s shadow, but she looks blankly back at me. I suppose I couldn’t expect her to keep something like that from her boss, but—“Frank told us when he called to reschedule the contract signing again,” Eva goes on softly. “Please know that we are very happy to wait a few more days if need be.”

Frank told her?

So Nik actually did keep her mouth shut. Or it seems that way...

I find myself remembering the way Nik wrapped herself around me, shielded me, even making sure that I didn’t faceplant into the concrete as she did it. She made me feel safe, in the same way Terry did. Strange to think that in a city full of so-called friends, a stranger may be the only person I can trust.

And then I think about the fact that she tracked down her father’s killer.

“Thank you for your understanding,” I say, looking back to Eva. “And...if your offer of an extra bodyguard is still open, I’d appreciate it.”

Her face lights up. “But of course! Leon can be at your disposal?—”

“I’d prefer Ms. Kusek, here, if you can spare her.”

“Well, I...” Eva, to her credit, recovers quickly. “Yes. Yes, of course I can spare her. Dominika, you will watch over Mrs. Colombo and you will obey her as you obey me.”

Nik’s lips have parted, but that’s the only sign of surprise. She’s tall and imposing in a close-cut black suit, her frame a stark contrast to the soft curves of Eva Novak. Yes. There’s a quiet strength about Dominika Kusek that I like. Still, I can’t resist poking the bear.

“Well, Nik?” I ask, raising one eyebrow. “Are you willing to obey me?”

## CHAPTER 9

Nik

What a cheeky little...

I try to find an objection, stammering out, “Well, I—” before catching myself. I cannot refuse a direct order from Eva. “Yes, of course,” I force out. “I’d be...delighted.”

Brie’s flicker of a smirk makes my irritation burn hotter. I’ve always been very good at hiding my emotions, but this woman seems to read me like an open book.

“Thank you,” Brie says smoothly, her voice carrying a hint of a drawl. “And thank you, Eva, for your support. I feel quite loved today. Did you know even the Chicago Styx Syndicate sent representatives?” She nods toward a blonde and a brunette

standing across the other side of the room. Eva looks with interest toward them—another prospective buyer is always a good thing. “But if you’ll excuse me, I must greet the rest of my friends and family.”

“Of course,” Eva murmurs, and moves away.

Brie turns her back on me, glances over her shoulder, and says softly, “Heel.”

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I clench my teeth to prevent myself responding, and fall in line.

And just like that, I'm stuck playing guard dog to the Widow Colombo. I watch the room carefully as she greets a steady stream of mourners, her composure impressive, her sadness an undercurrent. She's either a hell of an actress or genuinely grieving.

I'm betting on the former. From everything I've seen of her so far, Brie Colombo has proven herself a manipulative little minx.

When there's finally a lull, Brie turns to me. "Do you want something to eat or drink?"

"Nope," I reply curtly.

She sighs. "Well, I need a break." She takes a step away, and with a stifled sigh, I follow. I want to ask her what the hell she's playing at, making me stick by her like this, demanding me of all people, when she could have had Eva's trained bodyguard—or hell, one of the Colombos' guards. Why accept Eva's offer at all? Brie must be aware that Eva just wanted eyes and ears in the Colombo Family.

I follow her to the buffet. The room is a sea of black suits and dresses, punctuated by the occasional flash of jewelry or a colorful pocket square. As Brie starts loading up two plates—one for her and one for me, despite my refusal—she leans in close.

"So you didn't tell Eva about what happened the other night?"

"I didn't have to," I respond, my tone clipped. "Since your boy Frank was happy to

spill all about it.”

But the truth is, I was as surprised as Brie when Eva came out with that comment before. Because I did keep my mouth shut, and now I’m wondering if Eva knows I was there with Brie at the time. She can’t know, I decide.

Because I’d be dead already if Eva Novak thought I was hiding information from her.

“I meant about the Secret Garden,” Brie says, even more softly.

She has me there. “I’m not in the business of outing people,” I tell her at last.

Before Brie can respond, a portly man in an expensive suit and slicked-down hair sidles up to her. Even without an introduction, I can smell the stink of mob boss all over him. His eyes are small and glittering, his smile oily.

“Mrs. Colombo,” he oozes. “Such a tragedy. If there’s anything I can do to comfort you in your time of need, don’t hesitate to ask.” He gives her a leering up-and-down, leaving little doubt about what kind of comfort he’s offering.

I step forward instantly, planting myself between Brie and the sleazeball. “Beat it,” I growl, my hand instinctively moving toward where my weapon is concealed.

To my surprise, Brie places a gentle hand on my arm. My skin tingles under her touch. Meanwhile, the guy is glowering at me, but he has nothing to say. “I’m sorry, Don Gatto,” Brie says. “As you can imagine, my friends are very protective of me at the moment. I’m sure you only wanted to show your support.”

“Respectfully,” I add.

He glares but gives a short nod before stalking off.

“It’s alright, Nik,” Brie says, a hint of amusement in her voice. “If there’s one thing I can handle, it’s lascivious old men.”

“Maybe, but you shouldn’t have to put up with that bullshit,” I mutter. “Especially not at your husband’s funeral.” The words come out more vehemently than I’d intended.

Brie gives an ironic little snort. “Come on. I know you don’t think I’m grieving,” she says, continuing to put food on our plates. Her chin raises, a little defiant. “But as it happens, Terry and I were very close. I miss him a lot.” She pauses, meeting my eyes. “Still...thank you for sticking up for me.”

I feel a glow of satisfaction in a job well done. It’s more than that, though—there’s a genuine warmth in her gratitude that catches me off guard. “It’s none of my business what kind of relationship you had with your late husband,” I tell her gruffly. “You focus on whatever you need to. I’ll handle the rest—including the lascivious old men.”

Brie actually smiles, but then changes the subject. “Do you know many of the people here?”

I scan the room, picking out familiar faces. The funeral home’s main room is packed, clearly showing Don Colombo’s influence. “I know of Juno Bianchi, of course. The Styx Syndicate’s become notorious since Hadria Imperioli unmasked herself as Hades. I’m familiar with you Colombos; less so with the other Vegas families. I was briefed about the Consortium’s customers before we arrived, but...well, we didn’t expect to be attending a funeral, of course.”

Brie begins a quiet rundown for me. She points out Vince Sabatelli, a shrewd-looking man with ambition practically oozing from his pores. There’s Larry Caruso, the respected Colombo enforcer, built like a brick wall and radiating an aura of violence.

She directs my attention to Phil Reynolds, the manager of the Golden Sands, all smooth charm as he works the room. Sophie Carter, the casino's Chief Financial Officer, looking lost and a little scared among all the mobsters. "And that's Holden Brooks," she says, nodding at a young, very attractive man about Brie's own height. "He was Terry's...private secretary." I notice a very slight hesitation in her tone.

And I wonder what it means.

I might as well start gathering intel for Eva. "May I ask if you have any idea who killed your husband?"

She says nothing for a moment, adding another spoonful of baked ziti to the two dishes. Then, in a hushed voice, she starts babbling. "I can't be sure, but I think it must be someone he knew, and so someone I know, because there's no way anyone could have gotten into his office to kill him otherwise, so that means it was an inside job. Frank, Terry's cousin—he's been with the Family forever, of course, but maybe he thought it was time he took charge, only he's not all that clever, so I can't see him pulling this off without help, maybe from Vince—Vince has always been ambitious—and then there's Larry, who has the muscle and the respect, but he's always been so loyal that I just can't believe he'd—" She breaks off with a sigh.

She's not just a pretty face. She's smart, too. "Maybe we shouldn't discuss this here," I murmur. "Someone did take a shot at you the other night, after all."



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But Brie is on a roll, paranoia sweeping over her. “And then there’s Phil,” she continues. “He runs the casino. Maybe he saw an opportunity to take a cut for himself and Terry found out about it. And Sophie...” She trails off, shaking her head. “Sophie looks after the money. But what if she’s not just an accountant. What if she’s...”

“What if she’s what?”

Her eyes dart to the Syndicate women before returning to me. She shakes her head emphatically. “You were right. I shouldn’t be talking about this here.”

I notice the slight tremor in her hands as she hands me a plate I don’t want.

But I take it. “Brie,” I say, surprising myself by using her first name. “Take a breath. You’re spinning out.”

She blinks, as if coming out of a trance. “You’re right,” she says, forcing a laugh. “I’m being ridiculous.” Her eyes dart around the room, and that’s when I finally get it. Finally understand the electric charge that seems to be coming off of her.

“You believe the killer is in this room.” It’s not a question.

She glances around the room again. “I feel like I’m going crazy,” she says at last. “But I can feel it here with us. Some kind of...malevolence.”

I find myself curious. “Then why trust me, of all people, to guard you? I’m a stranger. For all you know, Eva Novak isn’t above taking out inconvenient people when it suits her. Perhaps she authorized a hit.”

It's a little heartless, of me, sure. But Brie doesn't waver. "I trust you because the other night you protected me without a second thought. And you clearly had no idea who the shooter was." She pauses. "If it was a setup from your boss, it was a very good one. But I also prefer you to protect me because of our...shared interests. The Colombos don't know about—well, that side of my life."

A thrill runs through me at her words, even as I remind myself to stay professional. Just because we both prefer women doesn't make us loyal to each other.

But she's right about the shooter the other night. I had no clue who it was. Brie is looking across the room at Eva, and I can't help looking at my boss as well.

Looking and wondering.

Eva catches my eye, giving me a smile and a slight nod. She's pleased I'm in this position, no doubt expecting me to report back on all of Brie's doings and any juicy Colombo family secrets. For the first time, I feel a twinge of resentment. I've always prided myself on loyalty, on following orders, on protecting the Consortium.

Protecting Eva's interests.

But something about Brie makes me want to protect her. She may be the widow of a crime lord, she may be as big a fake as they come, but...there's a vulnerability about her that calls to something deep inside me.

The burial goes off without a hitch. Brie even conjures up a few tears. But as I watch the crowd, making sure my focus is on the surroundings and the people gathered, I think I feel it too, what Brie was talking about.

Something malevolent.

After the burial, and then the second gathering and more food that I don't want, I go with Brie back to her suite at the GoldenSands. It's dripping with the kind of luxury that would make most people's eyes pop. Me? I'm too busy cataloging entry points and potential hazards.

My bags have already been sent over from the hotel the Consortium was staying at, placed neatly in the living room. I don't like that someone in the Consortium packed up my things at the hotel, looked through them. But at least they thought to include a few extras—some trackers, a few extra handguns, even a rifle.

"I'm going to take a shower," Brie announces after I complete a sweep of the whole place, her voice carrying a hint of exhaustion that wasn't there before. "Make yourself comfortable. We can talk after."

The thought of this woman, naked and wet, just a couple of doors away...I shake my head. I'm here to protect her, not fantasize about her.

I'm halfway through my second prowling of the living room when I hear a keycard zipping open the main door lock again. I have a decision to make. Pull my gun? If it's one of the Colombos, and they're here for legitimate reasons, I don't want to start anything. But I make sure my holster is unobstructed and place my hand on the butt of the gun.

The door bursts open to reveal a whirlwind of designer suit and righteous fury, and the guy is ranting before he even clears the threshold.

"I swear to God, Brie, if I have to listen to one more—" He stops short when he sees me, his words dying in his throat. His hand moves fast, and suddenly I'm the one staring down the barrel of a gun as the door closes softly behind him.

"Who the fuck are you?" he demands, his voice shaking almost as much as his hands

around the 9mm. “Where’s Brie? What have you done with her?”

I know this guy. The private secretary, or whatever. So I keep my voice steady, take my hand off my own gun. No sudden movements. “Brie’s in the shower. I’m her new bodyguard on loan. Now, why don’t you put that gun down before you hurt yourself?”

His eyes widen, but the gun doesn’t waver. “Bodyguard? Since when does Brie have a?—”

“Holden!” Brie’s voice cuts through our little scene. She emerges from the bathroom, hair wet, body wrapped in nothing but a tiny towel that’s working hard over those generous curves. I force my eyes away, focusing on the still-armed intruder. “Put the gun down, honey,” Brie says with a sigh. “She’s telling the truth.”

The man—Holden—lowers the weapon slowly, confusion written all over his face. “What’s going on?”

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Brie runs a hand through her damp hair, pushing it back from her tired face. “Nik, you remember I told you about Holden, Terry’s private secretary. He’s also a close friend of mine. He’s always had a pass to my floor, and my suite, too.” She pauses, exchanging a loaded look with Holden. “And he’s always carried a gun. Terry’s orders.”

Something’s not adding up here. “What exactly is going on?” I ask suspiciously.

Holden and Brie stare at each other again, and I see his shoulders sag in acceptance. “Holden was more than just Terry’s secretary,” Brie tells me, her voice softening. “He was Terry’s lover.”

Well, shit. That’s not something you hear every day in Mafia circles.

“Terry and I...well, you know about me already. We had a marriage of convenience,” Brie explains. But Terry was always clear that Holden and I had to be careful who we let close. Me, I wasn’t so close to the day-to-day business. But Holden was—and still is. Hence the gun.” Her voice turns sharp. “I trust you’ll keep this information to yourself for now.”

I can’t help the scowl that crosses my face. “I told you before, I’m not in the business of outing people.”

Holden, seemingly recovered from his shock, gives me an appraising look. “And you’re really capable of keeping Brie safe?”

I fix him with a stare that has made tougher men than him cower. To his credit, he

only flinches a little.

“Pack your shit,” I tell Brie, turning away from Holden. “We’re moving you to Solara. It’s safer than being surrounded by potential killers.”

I realize my mistake too late, when Holden pipes up, “What’s Solara?”

Fuck.

Brie’s voice is carefully casual as she explains. “It’s a place where Terry built a house for me, out in the desert. A safe place. He swore me to secrecy about it.”

I catch a flash of something in Holden’s eyes. “I didn’t know.”

“He didn’t want anyone to know,” she assures him. “He was never there with me—it was my place. Is my place. Mine alone.”

“She knows.” Holden nods at me coldly.

“She’s protecting me.”

“She’s from the Consortium!”

“She is standing right here,” I say impatiently, and then say again. “Brie, pack your shit.”

“Terry always had your best interests at heart,” Holden says sadly, still stuck on this secret that he didn’t know.

Brie’s face softens. “And yours. He loved you very much. You know that, right?”

They embrace, and I feel like an intruder. But when Brie pulls back, her face is all business. “Holden, could you personally set up my guest room for tonight? Nik will be staying here, but I’d rather no one else knew for now.”

“I’m sorry,” I say coolly, “perhaps you didn’t hear me before. We’re not staying here.”

She doesn’t even glance my way. “I’m not leaving,” she tells me. “There’s too much to deal with after Terry’s death. Frank keeps asking me to make appearances for the Family, and I have a job to do.”

“A job to do?”

She doesn’t reply, but after she disappears to get dressed, Holden turns to me. His eyes are hard, his voice low. “You might be some tough-as-nails arms dealer, but if you hurt Brie, or let her get hurt, you’ll answer to me.”

I could take this pipsqueak out without breaking a sweat, but I respect loyalty. I give him a single nod, and he seems satisfied. He leaves, muttering about organizing the room next door.

Brie returns a few minutes later, dressed in a short, glittering gold cocktail dress that makes me want to put sunglasses on. It’s strapless and seems to be held up by willpower alone. And her ears look like chandeliers with the amount of diamonds hanging from them. “What the hell is this?” I ask. “Someone tries to kill you, so you turn a damn spotlight on yourself?”

“I have a job to do,” she says stubbornly. “And I’m not going to hide away.”

“What job?” I ask, exasperated.

She gets frosty as she draws herself up to her full height. We're almost at eye level. Almost. "I know you and everyone else thinks that I was just a pretty face and a trophy wife for Terry Colombo. But the truth is, I worked just as hard as he did for this Family. I'm the fucking face of the Golden Sands—andthe Colombo Family. And I'll be damned if I won't do my job just because you think it'd makeyourseasier to hide me away in the desert."



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She's not going to back down. And I'd be wasting my breath to argue any further. "Alright, alright. Don't get hysterical."

I stifle a grin as she huffs in irritation, and fall in behind her as she heads for the door.

### CHAPTER 10

Nik

I shadow Brie through the casino as she walks the floor, constantly scanning for threats, and listen carefully as Brie explains the place. The no-natural-light policy, combined with the labyrinthine setup designed to pull people in and keep them there, really does mess with the head.

"This is the main floor," Brie says to me, her voice carrying over the din. "We have the high roller rooms through there, invitation-only—where dreams can be made and broken in a few hours."

She points, and I take in the layout and try to figure out a mental floorplan. We weave through the sea of people, Brie nodding to regulars and greeting staff. I gauge each interaction, cataloging potential risks and allies.

I might be Consortium, as Holden Brooks so sneeringly pointed out, but I'll be damned if I don't do my job right.

"Phil," Brie calls out to a tall man in a well-cut suit. "A moment of your time?"

The man approaches, his smile not quite reaching his eyes as he takes me in. “Mrs. Colombo! I thought you’d be...”

“Mourning?” she asks, and there’s that twang of irony again, the one that makes me wonder just what is going on behind that mask she likes to wear. “I’m not a brooder, Phil. The funeral went off very well, I thought. Thank you for your help.”

He gives a cautious smile of acknowledgment. “Will you be dining in the restaurant later?”

“I’ll see how I feel. Phil, this is Nik Kusek, my new bodyguard. Nik, Phil Reynolds manages operations at the Golden Sands. The place wouldn’t run without him.”

He’s gaping at me, even as I shake his hand. “Pleasure,” I say.

“Bodyguard?” is his response.

“Frank thought it would be wise,” Brie says vaguely.

“But I thought—” He breaks off, giving a silly little laugh. “I’m sorry, I thought that—Ms. Kusek, was it?—I thought that Ms. Kusek worked for...” Brie doesn’t fill him in, and neither do I, both of us letting the moment stretch until Reynolds’ instincts as a host take over. “I hope you’ll enjoy your time at the Golden Sands, Ms. Kusek,” he says desperately.

I just nod.

We move away and Brie continues the tour, introducing me to various staff members. We reach a locked door, and Brie swipes her keycard again. “This is where the eyes gather,” she says, ushering me through a long corridor and into a high-tech security room. Screens line the walls, displaying feeds from hundreds of cameras to a team of

security officers watching over the casino.

As we make our way back to the main floor, my curiosity overcomes me. “Have you seen the security footage from...well, from the night your husband was killed?”

“No. Because there was no security footage. Terry allowed no cameras inside any of his offices. Said privacy was crucial for business.”

“But the outside?” I ask. “Footage from the corridors leading up to his rooms? Someone hanging around?—”

“No,” she says abruptly, then changes the subject. “Hungry?”

Time seems to have lost all meaning here, and when I check my phone, it’s much later than I realized. All that Italian funeral food was a while ago. “I could eat.”

“Perfect,” Brie says, leading me toward a secluded corner of the casino, through another door marked Staff Only. “But first, I need to change. Can’t have dinner without a show, right?”

“Hold up,” I say sharply, as she keycards open a door marked PRIVATE. “What’s in there?”

“All my secrets,” she says sarcastically, but she allows me to go in before her and scan the room for threats.

No threats. Just a dressing room: two rolling rails of clothes covered in plastic from the cleaners, and a brightly-lit makeup station to the side. I stand guard outside, and when Brie emerges again, my mouth drops open. Literally. That luscious body is draped in a form-fitting gold dress that hugs her tight in all the right places, with a long slit up the left leg, and neckline low enough to draw my eyes despite my best

efforts to remain professional.

“That’s not exactly widow’s weeds,” I manage to say, voice rougher than I meant it to be.

Brie’s laugh is sharp, tinged with something that might be bitterness. “The staff and our guests all need to see that nothing has changed. I’m a mascot for the Golden Sands, and I’m willing to play my part. Now heel, puppy.”

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My arm shoots out to stop her sauntering past me, and I lean in close, watching her watching me. “The ‘heel’ thing was cute the first time. Not the second. You’ve had your joke—but I’ve been nothing but respectful to you, and I don’t appreciate being called a dog.”

She flushes, a quick and deep mottling of her décolletage and neck. “Fine,” she says stiffly. “I’ll play nice.”

I drop my arm and she moves past me, the scent of her perfume beckoning me on. I follow, aware of the eyes that track our movement across the casino floor. She’s putting on a show, and every person in this place is her audience.

I get it, now. Brie was right. This is her job. That golden gown? Just a uniform. She’s playing a role here, just like any other service provider in this casino. Her role just looks a little more glamorous.

We enter the casino’s high-end rooftop restaurant and the maître d’ appears as if by magic, leading us to a booth set on a dais, with a view of the whole restaurant.

And the whole restaurant has a view of Brie Colombo.

My first instinct is to ask for somewhere more secluded, but at least here I’ll be able to see anyone approaching. As we settle into our seats, I can’t help but notice how her gold dress makes Brie’s green eyes pop, how it catches the light with every subtle movement, how it dips low between her breasts, beckoning my gaze in...

“See something you like?” Brie’s voice is teasing, a smirk playing on her lips.

What the—? I force my eyes away, reminding myself that I'm here as her bodyguard, not her date, and reach for the menu. "Just doing my job. Assessing potential threats."

"Are my tits a threat, Nik?" she asks, leaning forward slightly.

Before my brain can formulate a response, a waiter appears at our table. Brie orders "the usual" and I ask for the same, because I can't take in a single word of the menu.

My mind is on the golden goddess opposite me.

And it should be on our surroundings.

As we wait for our food, silence settles between us, but it's not entirely uncomfortable. I find myself studying Brie, trying to reconcile the shrewd woman I've seen go toe-to-toe with Eva Novak, with the vulnerable widow I saved from assassination, and now this glittering, larger-than-life figure before me.

"You have questions," Brie says suddenly, breaking the silence.

"A few."

She takes a sip of sparkling water, her lipstick leaving a perfect imprint on the glass. "Ask away. But for every question you ask, I get to ask one in return."

I weigh my options. Information is crucial, but so is maintaining professional distance. Still, Eva will reward me for anything I might glean. And besides all that, curiosity wins out. "How did you end up here? Married to a gay mob boss?"

"The short answer? Survival. I grew up with nothing, and I swore I'd never go back to that life." She swirls her water, lost in thought for a moment. "Your turn. Eva Novak's guard detail. That's quite a position for someone your age."

“I’m the lowest on the pole. Hell, I’m not even on the pole, not yet. This is the first time she called on me.”

“So why’d she pick you?”

I shrug, keeping my face neutral. “I’m good at what I do.”

“And what exactly is that? Besides insulting Mafia widows in Russian, of course.”

She’s really not going to let that go. “I enjoy taking bullets meant for other people. And what about you? What are your reasons for playing figurehead for a Family that’s not really yours?”

Her eyes flash. “Who says they’re not mine?” For a moment, I think I’ve pushed too far. Then she laughs. “Let’s just say I have my reasons. Just like you have yours for taking this job.”

The corner of my mouth twitches. “Okay.”

“Your father,” she says abruptly, and I go stiff all over. “I’m sorry about what happened to him. Juno Bianchi told me.” She pauses. “And I hear you got vengeance on his killer, too.”

“I did.” She opens her mouth to ask another question but I hold up my hand. The last thing I’m going to do is talk about my father with this woman. “My turn. What makes you think you can trust me?”

“I don’t trust you,” Brie says, pushing her barely-touched plate away. “So. Why did you take this job with me?”

“I was ordered to.”

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“Uh-huh. You could’ve gotten out of it if you really wanted, I bet.”

She has more faith in my manipulative skills than seems warranted. But I set down my fork, considering my answer. “Maybe I’m just a sucker for a damsel in distress.”

“I’m no damsel, honey. And I’m certainly not in distress.”

“Remind me again—who was getting shot at the other night?”

She leans forward, her gaze intense. “Why did you save me? You don’t even like me.”

The question, an echo of the time she asked before, still catches me off guard. Because I’ve been asking myself the same thing. “It’s not a matter of liking you,” I say, stilted. “It’d be bad for business for a Consortium member to be in the vicinity of a dead Colombo. Or—or maybe I just don’t like seeing innocent people get hurt.”

Brie’s laugh is soft, almost sad. “Oh, Nik. There are no innocent people in this world. Not anymore.” But her face hardens and she says, “I know Eva thinks you’ll be able to feed back intel to her. But you won’t have a chance to hear any Colombo Family business with me. I’m kept well out of the loop.”

“Then I guess we both know where we stand.”

“We do.”

We fall into silence again, but it’s different now. Charged. Heady. I find myself studying the curve of her neck, the way her lips part slightly as she breathes, the way



her nipples are hardened and clearly visible under the gold satin.

Fuck.

This is not good.

We've finished our meals, so I stand abruptly. "We should get back to your suite. I want to do another security sweep before you turn in for the night. You must be tired after the day you've had."

Brie rises gracefully, a knowing smile playing on her lips. "Sure. Let's head back to my suite."

I ignore the seductive way she says it, but I still can't shake the feeling that I'm in over my head. Eva wanted me to get close to Brie, to be her eyes and ears. But I'm starting to think that this assignment won't be as simple as I first thought.

And the worst part?

I don't dislike Brie Colombo quite as much as I used to.

## CHAPTER 11

Brie

I lie awake, staring at the ornate ceiling of my bedroom. The sheets are cool against my skin, but I can't shake the warmth that spreads through me at the thought of Nik just on the other side of the door. My new bodyguard. My protector.

What would it be like to go to bed with her?

I roll onto my side, but the thought persists, tantalizing and forbidden. I imagine her strong arms around me again, her intense blue eyes locked on mine. The way she leaned over me, commanding and sure as she told me to quit it with the “heel” stuff.

Ugh. She’s really hot.

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing sleep to come. It’s ridiculous to entertain these thoughts. Nik works for the Consortium. She’s useful to me right now for various reasons. That’s all.

Still, as I drift off, her face is the last thing I see.

In my dreams, I’m running, my bare feet slapping against the dusty ground. Someone’s chasing me, heavy footsteps getting closer and closer.

I cry out as I’m swept up in a tight embrace. But when I turn, it’s Nik. “I’ve got you,” she says, her voice low and sure. “You’re safe now.”

I wake with a start, my heart pounding, and I’m disoriented for a moment before realizing I’ve slept through the night. It’s been a while since I’ve felt this refreshed.

But the dream lingers and I think about it, about Nik protecting me from old nightmares. It’s a fantasy, I know. But isn’t that what I’ve always done? Turned my fantasies into reality?

After a quick shower, I dress in a gold silk blouse and body-hugging black pants. Power and elegance—exactly the image I need to project. I add a pair of diamond earrings—a gift from Terry—as a final touch.

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When I step out of my room, Nik is already there, alert and ready. Her dark hair is pulled back in a sleek ponytail, the close-shaved fade at the sides emphasizing the sharp angles of her face. She wears a fitted black suit that makes me want to stare.

“Good morning,” she says, her voice even.

“Good morning, Nik.” I aim for casual, land somewhere around a croak. I clear my voice and ask, “Shall we have breakfast?”

We make our way to the suite’s dining area, where as usual, there’s a knock at the door. “Room service,” I tell Nik, but she makes me let her answer the door. The kitchen hand wheels in a buffet of fresh fruit, pastries, and coffee. We eat in silence, but just as I’m searching for something to say, there’s another sharpknock at the door. Nik is on her feet instantly again, hand going to the gun at her hip. I wave her down.

“It’s just Frank,” I say, recognizing the impatient rapping. “He’s here to take me to that meeting with the Consortium this morning.”

Nik relaxes slightly but doesn’t sit back down. I go to answer the door, steeling myself for the conversation to come.

Frank bustles in, all business, but stops short when he sees Nik, his eyes going hard. “What’s she doing here? She’s Consortium.”

“Her name is Nik, and she’s my new bodyguard.”

Frank takes that in as his face goes red. “A word, Brie? In private.”

I turn to Nik. “Perhaps you could go down to the meeting room—your people will be there shortly, and Frank will walk me down.”

She hesitates for a moment, reluctant to leave me. But she obeys, closing the door quietly behind her.

As soon as we’re alone, Frank rounds on me. “Have you lost your mind?” he bellows. “You can’t have a bodyguard from the Consortium!”

I cross my arms. “And why not?”

He throws up his hands. “Because they’re outsiders! And we have perfectly good bodyguards in the Colombo Family! I woulda pulled someone from a crew somewhere if you weren’t happy with the casino security. There are plenty of men we can trust!”

“Trust?” I scoff. “Like we trusted the men who were supposed to protect Terry?”

Frank’s expression softens. “Brie, honey, I know you’re scared. But you don’t need to worry your pretty little head about?”

“Don’t.” My voice is ice. “Don’t you dare patronize me, Frank. Whoever killed Terry had to be one of ours. So forgive me if I don’t exactly trust the Family right now.”

Frank’s face hardens. “Now you listen here?”

“No,youlisten,” I cut him off. “How’s the investigation into Terry’s death going? Because from where I’m standing, it doesn’t look like anyone’s doing a damn thing about it.”

He takes a step closer, looming over me. “Your job is to sign what I tell you to sign.

To smile pretty for the guests and make them want to spend their money. Soon enough, you'll be free of all this. But until the succession is settled, you just have to do what you're told like a good little girl. Understand?"

The threat in his voice is unmistakable. Despite his fatherly act, Frank is just as much a killer as Terry was. Maybe more so. And for a moment, I'm back in that trailer park, cowering before another man's rage.

But I'm not that scared little girl anymore. I won't be intimidated now. "I won't sign a shitty deal just because I'm told to. Whatever else I am, Frank, I'm still a Colombo. And I want what's best for the Family."

He sighs at that, patting my shoulder. "I know, sweetheart. So do I. That's why I don't want that—that woman around. She's filling Eva Novak's ears with our business right now, I bet."

"Exactly like you did, telling Eva about the attempt on my life?" I snap, exasperated.

"That—I was just—that was different," he protests. But he does at least look a little embarrassed.

Still, I'm extremely glad he doesn't know Nik was the one who saved me...and that neither does Eva Novak, by all reports. "Frank, if we play this right, Nik can be a conduit for us," I go on. "We can feed any information to the Consortium that we want through her. Fake intel that helps us."

He pauses as though the idea is brand new to him. "That's true," he says thoughtfully, staring at me. "I guess that's true, Breezy."

I smile encouragingly. "So now we're on the same page. And we're late for the meeting, so let's go."

As we descend in the elevator, I think about Nik waiting for us there in the meeting room. Is she hissing into her boss's ear? Of course she must be.

But I'd like to think I can trust her with somethings, at least.

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We head into the room, where Eva sits with her Consortium members ranged behind her like vengeful shades.

And then there's Nik.

She stands off to the side in a surprisingly neutral position. Our eyes meet for a brief moment, and I feel a strange flutter in my chest. I push the feeling aside, focusing on the task at hand.

I choose a seat close to Eva, my movements deliberate and unhurried. As I settle in, Nik moves to stand closer behind me. Her presence at my back is oddly comforting.

"Get lost," Frank snaps at Nik. "We won't be intimidated by?—"

"Now, now, Frank," I cut in sweetly. "Nik was a gift from our honored guests, here. It would be very rude to send her away, don't you think?"

Frank's face flushes an ugly shade of crimson, but he bites back whatever retort was on the tip of his tongue.

Good boy. Even old dogs like him can be trained with the right methods.

Eva slides a folder across the table, her manicured nails tapping once, twice on the glossy surface. "The new agreement, as discussed."

Frank practically shoves a pen into my hand. I take my time, flipping through the pages, skimming the contents. It's practically the same bullshit deal as before, just

dressed up in prettier language and with a lower price on one or two things.

I hesitate, the pen hovering over the dotted line. Frank leans in, his breath hot on my ear. “Sign the damn thing,” he hisses.

Eva’s smile turns brittle. “Mrs. Colombo—Brie—I thought we had reached an understanding.”

I set the pen down with a soft click. “I’m sorry, but my husband’s funeral was just yesterday, after all. Perhaps we could revisit this when I’m feeling more myself?”

“Revisit?” Eva stands abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor.

Nik steps forward, her presence suddenly filling the room. “Mrs. Colombo has been under a great deal of stress,” she says, her voice low and soothing. “Surely we can all understand that.”

Eva’s gaze snaps to Nik, then back to me. “May I have a word with my employee?”

I nod, rising from my chair. “Of course. I’ll be in my suite when you’re finished, Nik.”

As soon as we’re out of the room, Frank’s hand clamps down on my elbow. He practically drags me into a nearby office, slamming the door behind us.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he snarls, spittle flying from his lips. “You were supposed to sign that agreement, not play games!”

I look up at him, letting my eyes fill with tears. Men never know what to do with a crying woman. “I’m doing the best I can,” I choke out. “Can’t you see that? I just buried my husband, for God’s sake!”



Frank's anger deflates like a punctured balloon. He runs a hand through his thinning hair, suddenly looking every one of his sixty-plus years. "Christ, Breezy, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

I sniffle, dabbing at my eyes with a tissue. "I know you didn't. It's just—it's all so overwhelming."

He pats my shoulder awkwardly. "Look, forget about it, the Consortium can wait. Okay? In the meantime, I'll push harder for a resolution on the succession issue. We'll get this sorted out."

I nod, giving him a watery smile. "Thank you, Frank. I knew I could count on you."

As soon as he's gone, I drop the act. My eyes are dry, my posture straight. I make my way back to my suite, settling onto the sofa to wait for Nik.

She enters a few minutes later, her face unreadable. I look up from my phone, arching an eyebrow. "Well?"

"Eva doesn't find your little game as amusing as you do," Nik says, her voice flat.

I toss my phone aside, stretching like a cat. "Eva can sit and spin. That deal was bullshit, and you both know it."

Something flickers in Nik's eyes. Respect, maybe? Or just surprise that I'm not the airhead widow everyone seems to think I am.

"Besides," I continue, "the agreement isn't important anyway. It's just a useful tool to keep you around for a while. Because I've decided I need your help with something."

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Nik crosses her arms. “And what might that be?”

I meet her gaze, all pretense gone. “Finding Terry’s killer.”

### CHAPTER 12

Nik

I don’t know what I was expecting from Brie Colombo, but it sure wasn’t that. “What are you talking about? Isn’t your Family taking care of the investigation?”

“I’ve realized I can’t trust anyone in the Family. And Frank—bless him—is useless, either by nature or by design. You’re the only person in this city who knows the real me these days, except Holden, and he’s dealing with his own grief. So you’re it, Nik. You need to help me find justice for Terry.”

I tilt my head, studying her. There’s so much more to this woman than meets the eye. “Justice? Or vengeance?”

A hard edge creeps into her voice. “They’re one and the same. Before I have to stand aside for the successor, I want to do right by Terry and find his killer. And I know you can help, because...well, because you did the same for your father.”

I ignore that, though it does explain why she kept bringing it up. “Frank won’t like me sniffing around and asking questions.”

Brie scoffs. “Frank is more interested in keeping the Family stable. He’d rather sweep

this under the rug than risk upsetting the balance of power, just like he'd rather I sign that agreement with the Consortium so we don't rock the boat." She takes a step closer, her perfume—expensive and intoxicating, just like her—filling my senses. "And it won't be you asking the questions. You'll just be there as backup. And here's the sweetener, Nik. If you'll help me, I'll sign the original agreement with the Consortium, inflated prices and all. I'll even tell Eva it's thanks to you that I'm signing."

The offer is tempting. Eva was pretty pissed off with me back in the meeting room, even as I tried to explain I was just playing along with Brie Colombo, making her trust me. But Eva would be delighted if I got Brie to sign that deal, and it could mean big things for me. But I can't let Brie know that, so I force a dismissive tone. "I don't need some Mob widow putting in a word for me. I'll earn my place on my own."

To my shock, Brie reaches out and takes my hands in hers. "Do you want me to get on my knees and beg? Because I will. Ineed you, Nik. I need your help. There's no one else I can ask. And if there's one thing I know about the Consortium, it's that they like to stay neutral. And you know what? You can tell your boss all about this if you like, because I know she'll leave it up to the Colombo Family to sort it out."

The image of her on her knees before me, those perfectly painted lips parting as she leans forward, flashes through my mind before I can stop it. I push it away, focusing on the task at hand. "What about Holden? Isn't he your bestie or something?"

"Holden wouldn't be able to ask the kind of questions we can without raising suspicion. You're part of the Consortium, and I'm Terry's widow. We have both access and excuses that he doesn't."

I weigh my options. On one hand, getting involved in this Colombo Family business could be dangerous for the Consortium—and for me.

Because Brie is right. Eva's number one rule for the Consortium is to stay neutral. No interference, no personal relationships with clients. She likes information, but only as it pertains to her own business affairs.

And if Brie does sign the agreement, that would impress Eva enough to make her forget everything else. That original deal is a fucking goldmine.

And if I'm being honest, there's a part of me that's intrigued by the mystery of who killed this powerful Don in his own casino...

And, okay, I'm also intrigued by Brie.

"Fine," I say. "Where do we start?"

Relief floods Brie's face, quickly replaced by determination. "We'll start with Phil Reynolds. At the funeral, he said he had something he wanted to talk to me about. I don't know if it has something to do with Terry's death, but maybe..."

"We'd better get to him before a hitman does, in that case. But after that, you need to tell me everything you know about your husband's murder."

We spot Phil Reynolds near the craps tables on the main floor, his tall frame and neatly-styled dark hair standing out among the crowd. He's talking to a pit boss, but his eyes are constantly moving, taking in every detail of his domain. As we approach, he notices us and excuses himself from the conversation.

"Mrs. Colombo," he greets Brie with a nod, then turns to me. "Ms. Kusek. What can I do for you?"

"It's what I can do for you, Phil. You said you wanted to talk to me. Is now a good time?"

Reynolds' expression doesn't change, but I catch the slight tightening of his jaw. "I wanted to speak in closest confidence to you, Mrs. Colombo. Alone," he adds, as though we didn't get it.

"You may consider me alone. Ms. Kusek here has been sworn to secrecy."

Reynolds looks skeptical, but I'm curious to note that he gives in to Brie's insistence. "Of course," he says. "My office?"

We follow him through the labyrinth of gaming tables and slot machines, the noise gradually fading as we enter the back corridors of the casino. Phil's office is a stark contrast to the casino floor, made up of sleek lines and muted colors. As soon as the door closes behind us, he moves to the windows, pulling the internal blinds shut.

I position myself near the door, my back to the wall, as Phil walks to his desk and switches on a small radio. The soft strains of jazz fill the room, providing a cover for our conversation.

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This guy is careful. I'm starting to see why he's lasted so long in this place despite not being a Family man.

Phil leans against his desk, his voice low, and gets straight to it. "I've noticed something off about the casino's books."

Brie's eyebrows draw together. "Off how?"

"Someone's gone to a lot of trouble to cover it up, but they're skimming off the top. I only caught it because I was cross-checking some specific numbers from the VIP expenses with the restaurant."

Skimming from a Mob-run casino? That's a death wish if ever I heard one.

"How long has this been going on?" Brie asks.

Phil shakes his head. "A couple of months, maybe. Not long."

"And who else knows about this?"

"That's the thing," Phil says, leaning in closer. "Sophie must have known something was going on. She's too sharp to miss this. Hell, if she didn't...then she's no good at her job. But that's why I wanted to talk to you, Mrs. Colombo. I'm worried that Frank and some of his buddies—they might act first and look at the facts later, if you see what I mean."

He doesn't want Sophie Johnson whacked if he's wrong, is what he means. And the

Colombo Family isn't exactly in a calm place right now.

"I'll look into it," Brie says decisively. "Keep this to yourself for now, Phil. We don't want to spook anyone."

Phil nods, relief evident in his eyes. He's glad to pass this hot potato to someone else. Can't say I blame him.

As we exit the office, I guide Brie toward the elevators, away from the prying eyes on the casino floor. Her steps are a little unsteady, and I have the urge to put an arm around her, but she slows for a moment, then seems to regain her poise.

"I'm not sure if that was casino business or Family business. A little of both, I guess. Is it worth asking you to keep it to yourself?"

"I will." For now. "So, who do you think it is?"

"Not here," she murmurs. "Let's go to my dressing room; it's close." I follow her to the room in the back corridors where she keeps her evening gowns and makeup supplies. It smells like powder and flowers and her, and I have to make sure I stay focused. "No cameras or bugs in here," she says as she shuts the door, but just like Reynolds, Brie is cautious. She pulls me into the half-bathroom that comes off the room, turns on the shower as hard as it'll go, and then leans in to whisper to me.

"The Styx Syndicate sent those representatives to Vegas specifically to track down a female assassin. What if it's Sophie?"

I blink, caught off guard by the sudden shift from theft to murder. "Slow down. What are you talking about?"

"Scarlett and Lyssa," Brie explains hurriedly. "They're hunting an assassin. Terry's

name was on some list—” She breaks off impatiently. “We should talk to them, tell them about Sophie.”

“Hold on. Before we go accusing anyone of anything, I want to know exactly what went down on the day of your husband’s murder.”

Brie takes a deep breath and then launches into a recap. She was out at the Secret Garden that night, too, she tells me, so she has limited information about what went on. She got back to the casino and was taken aside by Phil Reynolds, who broke the news to her. “No one in the Family thought to do it,” she adds bitterly. Frank Colombo had already called in a lawyer, who was getting together a strategy for calling the cops, and then Frank declared that he was going to find the killer himself.

“Has he got any investigatory experience?” I ask, a little bewildered. Frank Colombo didn’t seem like a modern-day Sherlock Holmes during the few times I’ve been around him.

“No, but he was the one who found Terry. And Frank was his cousin, they grew up together—really close. And Frank is Terry’s executor, for the will. So it seemed natural at the time...” She trails off.

“But now?” I prompt.

“Now...I don’t know.”

Nine times out of ten, the person who finds a victim is also the one who made them a victim. But I don’t say that. “So what, the cops were never informed?”

“Oh, of course they were,” Brie says vaguely. “But the lawyer kept them on a leash. And we have a few key allies in the right places,” she adds delicately. “So a little greasing of palms made them back off pretty fast. But since then, Frank will barely



tell me anything. I can't even get a sense of who he's questioned, of who was even herethat night..." She trails off.

"He was shot, wasn't he?" I ask gently. She nods. "Do you know where he was shot?"

"H-his heart. With...with his own gun. He kept one in the top drawer of his desk, for personal protection."

"And no one heard the shot?" I ask in disbelief.

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“Terry’s office was soundproofed. He wanted absolute privacy in there for business.” She grabs my arm. “Nik, you tracked down your father’s killer. You’re—you’re smart, and you know how these things work in the Family. Right?”

“I guess,” I say.

“So what do we do? How do we find out more information?”

I sigh. “We need to see the security footage from the corridors, see who was around at the right time. That’s our first move. And in the meantime, we should find out a little more about Sophie Johnson. What if she’s just a thief and not a killer? Hell, what if she’s completely innocent?”

Brie nods, biting at her lip. “You’re right,” she says at last. “Okay. I’ll have to somehow persuade Frank to hand over the security footage.”

“You can’t ask Frank,” I say firmly. “He’s one of our top suspects.”

She stares at me for a moment before closing her eyes and nodding. “I agree. But then how do we get the footage?”

“You go to the security room yourself and ask for it.”

Brie looks at me blankly. “I can’t just demand the security footage.”

I can’t help but snort. “Sure you can. You own this place now, don’t you?”

“I mean...I guess?”

“Besides, you won’t have to demand. Just flutter those fake eyelashes and ask them nicely.”

She considers this for a moment, then a slow smile spreads across her face. “I do have an inordinate amount of charm,” she says, with no modesty whatsoever. “Let’s give it a try.”

I like a woman with confidence.

You’re here to protect her, not fall for her, I scold myself as we head back out of her dressing room. But the thing is, she’s right.

She does have an inordinate amount of charm.

## CHAPTER 13

Brie

I won’t have to try hard with the man in the security office. I know it from the moment I walk in, watching him stare at me, open-mouthed. He’s astonished that I’m even talking to him.

“Hi,” I say, and smile. His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows, sends a quick glance around the room as if hoping his colleagues are seeing this. “I need the security footage of the backroom hallways from the night my husband was killed. Can you grab that for me real quick?”

He’s young, probably fresh out of college, with a nervous energy that makes him fidget in his chair. “Of course, Ms. Colombo, whatever you want. But, uh, Mr. Frank

already reviewed them. They don't show anything unusual."

"Well, I'd still like to see for myself. Can you compile all the footage from that night and send it up to my suite on a flash drive?"

He hesitates. "You know, I...I'm not sure if I'm authorized to?—"

"You are now," I cut him off with a wink. "How long will it take?"

"Uh, maybe a few hours," he croaks. "Transferring files of that size to a?—"

"Send it up as soon as you're done, please. And..." I lean down, making sure my cleavage is at his eye level. "Do me a favor? Keep it quiet."

As we leave the security area, Nik is almost smirking. But I'm not in the mood to smirk. I need a distraction, something to clear my head and help me think.

"I need to unwind," I tell Nik, massaging my temples. "I think better when I'm relaxed. Let's head to the spa."

"What about Sophie Johnson?"

I pause, considering. "If Sophie's just skimming from the casino, that's Family business. The Syndicate doesn't need to be involved in that." And neither does Nik, I remind myself, but she knows now. No point pretending she doesn't.

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Nik shrugs. “It’s your call, boss lady.”

I snort, but I weigh up the options. What would Terry have done? He was always open to sharing resources and making friends. If Sophie is embezzling, that’s one thing. But if she’s an assassin...

“You know what? Let’s extend an invitation to the spa to Lyssa and Scarlett as well. We can give them a heads up about Sophie there.”

Soothing scents greet us as we enter the spa, and I feel some of the tension leave my shoulders. I stop at reception to ask the staff member to call up with an invitation to the Syndicate women. And then I lead Nik toward the heated pool.

“I don’t have a costume,” she says, eyeing the water. And then she eyes me. “Neither do you.”

“No need,” I tell her. “Women only in this part of the spa. But if you want, you can use a wrap.” I point toward the Lycra wraps folded and stacked neatly in the open cabinetry at one side of the pool, designed to be worn like wrapped towels but made from fast-drying material. “Changing rooms are through here.”

Nik follows me in a moment later. I’ve already stripped off my gown and I’m peeling away the adhesive bra cups I wore under it. I see her eyes dart over my naked torso before resolutely coming back up to my face.

And then there’s a Lycra wrap flying straight at my head. “Hey, watch it!”

“Put that on,” she orders.

“I prefer to be naked,” I tell her with a grin.

“You won’t prefer it if there’s an attack and we need to run across the casino floor to escape.”

It’s a sobering thought—and image. “Fine,” I sigh, pulling on the wrap.

Nik turns away to strip and I try to politely avert my eyes, but it’s hard. Those shoulders are just as broad and toned as I’ve imagined, with a large, stylized snake tattoo running across her back, shifting with her muscles as she moves.

She glances over her shoulder as though feeling my stare, and I look quickly away.

In silence we head back out to the heated pool, empty at this hour apart from us, and slide in, letting the warm water ease the tension. But Nik stays perched on the edge of the pool a few feet away, feet dangling in the water, eyes constantly scanning our surroundings.

“You know,” I drawl, “the whole point of a spa is to relax.”

Nik’s jaw tightens. “I’m here to protect you, not pamper myself.”

I roll my eyes, splashing a little water her way. “Come on, bodyguard. Live a little. The water’s divine.”

With a resigned sigh, she slides into the pool. The water laps at her shoulders, and I find my gaze drawn to the defined muscles of her arms.

I wonder how it would feel to have them wrapped around me.

To have them pressing me into the bed underneath her?—

“Happy now?” she asks, but there’s a hint of amusement in her tone, as though she read my mind.

“Ecstatic,” I reply, flashing her a grin. “Now, how about we hit the cold dip?”

Nik’s eyebrows shoot up. “Cold dip? I thought you were all about relaxation.”

I laugh, the sound echoing off the tiled walls. “Oh, honey. You haven’t lived until you’ve done the hot-cold cycle. Trust me, it’s invigorating.”

With a skeptical look, Nik follows me to the edge of the cold pool. The water is crystal clear, a stark contrast to the steamy warmth we’ve just left behind. I dip a toe in and can’t suppress a small gasp at the shock of cold.

“Ladies first,” Nik says with a smirk, gesturing for me to go ahead.

I flip back my damp hair. “Scared, are you?”

Without waiting for a response, I take a deep breath and plunge myself in. The cold hits me like a brick wall, driving the air from my lungs. For a moment, everything goes quiet, the world reduced to the rush of blood in my ears and the icy embrace of the water.

I surface with a gasp. “Your turn,” I challenge with chattering teeth.

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Nik hesitates for just a moment before jumping in. When she breaks the surface again, her usually stoic expression has cracked.

“Holy shit,” she says in a strangled groan.

I can’t help laughing. Nik’s skin is flushed from the contrast of hot and cold, droplets of water clinging to her eyelashes. Her nipples are visibly hard beneath the soaked wrap, a physical reaction to the cold that sends a rush of contrary heat through me.

“See?” I say, my voice a little breathier than I intended. “Invigorating.”

Nik shakes her head, sending water droplets flying. “That’s one word for it,” she mutters, but there’s a new energy about her, an alertness that wasn’t there before.

“Ready for the sauna?” I ask, reluctantly tearing my eyes away from the droplets trailing down Nik’s neck.

She nods vigorously, pulling herself out of the pool quickly. I follow, acutely aware of her eyes on me as I emerge from the water.

And hell, maybe I shake my ass a little more than necessary as I walk ahead of her to the sauna area.

Something has shifted between us. Whether it’s just the rush from the hot-cold cycle or something more, I’m not sure. But as we step into the humid hug of the sauna, Nik’s hand brushes against my lower back as she holds the door open for me, and I have to swallow a moan.



The sauna is a small, cedar-lined room, and it smells pleasantly of humid wood. I sprawl on one of the benches, letting the warmth seep into my bones. Nik sits opposite me, her posture still alert.

I stare at her, watching beads of sweat form on her skin, tracing the lines of her collarbone, the curve of her lips.

I swear I see a faint blush creep up her neck that I bet has nothing to do with the heat of the sauna.

I'm about to speak—to say something flirty, maybe, or ask her a question—but the door opens, and Lyssa and Scarlett enter, each in their own wraps, and each looking grim.

“Ladies,” I greet them, sitting up straight. “Glad you could join us.”

As they settle in, I find my gaze darting between them and Nik, and with a shock I realize I'm searching for any sign of attraction. But Nik remains as impassive as ever, coolly assessing our new companions.

“So who's your friend?” Lyssa asks, cutting to the chase as always as she stares at Nik. “Novak Consortium, right?”

“This is Nik. She's with me,” I say.

Nik reaches out a hand and Lyssa, after a moment, shakes it. “Whatever,” she says, taking a seat. “Anyway, I doubt you invited us here for girl-talk. What's going on?”

I lean forward, lowering my voice despite the privacy of the sauna. The humidity and steam in here mean listening devices and cameras would have trouble picking up anything, and the soft nature sounds and strings playing over the audio system help

mask my voice. “I wanted to ask about those background checks Juno had done. Specifically the one on Sophie Johnson.”

“Your CFO?” Scarlett says sharply. I nod, and her dark eyebrows shoot up. “Any particular reason?”

I hesitate, weighing how much to reveal. “Let’s just say some things aren’t adding up. I don’t think Sophie is the woman you’re looking for, but as a professional courtesy, I’m telling you there might be...an issue there.”

Lyssa and Scarlett exchange a look, having one of those silent conversations that only people who truly know each other can have. Finally, Lyssa nods.

“Juno said nothing turned up on anyone. But we’ll take a second look. And Brie, I want to warn you again. If Grandmother does have an active in the Colombo Family, it’s dangerous for you to go poking your nose into things you shouldn’t be.”

“Mrs. Colombo is the current head of the Family,” Nik says, her voice as cold as the plunge pool we were in ten minutes ago. “She can put her nose wherever she chooses.”

Lyssa gets this wolfish grin. “That’s my point. If there’s an assassin here, they’ll either want to control Brie, or cash her in for someone they can control.”

“And right now it’s my job to make sure that doesn’t happen,” Nik says. “Whoever this assassin is, they won’t get past me.”

For the first time, Lyssa’s tone turns serious. “I really hope that’s true.”

The conversation wraps up shortly after that, Lyssa and Scarlett promising to dig into Sophie’s background and current finances, and report back. As they leave, I sink back

onto the bench, my mind whirling.

“You okay?”

I look over at Nik, suddenly feeling very exposed, and not just because I’ve done my best to be practically naked in front of her. “I’m fine,” I lie, then sigh. “No, actually, I’m not.”

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Nik moves to sit beside me, a clear invitation to spill. So I take a deep breath. “Despite what you said to them, I’m just a figurehead for the Colombos. Frank and the others, they’re the ones really running things for the Family. But I’m...worried about the direction the Family is headed. We have two main candidates to take over, and neither option is great.”

I pause, reminding myself that Nik is the enemy—or if not the enemy, certainly not an insider. She senses it, though. “You might as well just say what’s on your mind. Everyone knows the two top picks. Sabatelli and Caruso, right?”

In this case, I’m pretty sure it’s not just Frank’s big mouth to blame. Plenty of Colombos are talking about which man they’d prefer, and they’re not shy about sharing opinions.

“That’s right. Vince Sabatelli, late forties, been with the Family for over two decades. One of Terry’s most competent Capos. He’s shrewd, ruthless, always had his eye on the top spot. But he’s the kind of guy who’d sell his own mother if it meant more power, and I don’t know if that’s the kind of guy you want at the top.”

“And Caruso?”

“Larry Caruso is respected, feared even. Fair in his own way, but brutal when he needs to be. He’s great at maintaining order, but...he’s not exactly a strategic thinker. More brawn than brains, if you know what I mean.”

“Neither sounds ideal.”

“And the worst part is, I don’t know which one would be worse for the Family in the long run.”

We sit in silence for a moment, the only sound the hiss of steam. Finally, Nik speaks up. “So...what’s your play?”

“Myplay?”

“You might just be a figurehead, but you said yourself you have an important job here at the casino. I bet that extends to the Family side of things, too. Right?”

I shake my head with a laugh. “I’m no Juno Bianchi or Hadria Imperioli. Don’t get me wrong, I’m very good at what I do. But I’m not looking to crown myself.” I stand, stretching, and look down at Nik, who is still regarding me with thoughtful eyes. “Well, bodyguard, have a front-row seat to the Colombo Family politics tonight. There’s an event, and both Vince and Larry will be there. You can see for yourself what we’re dealing with.”

Nik raises an eyebrow. “An event? What kind of event?”

“Oh, you know,” I say, very aware of Nik’s eyes on me as I stretch again, “just a little poker game. Nothing too fancy. Just the who’s who of the Vegas criminal underworld, all dressed up and pretending to be respectable citizens.”

“Great,” Nik mutters.

I can’t help but laugh. “Welcome to my world, darling. Hope you brought something to wear.”

## CHAPTER 14

Brie

I smooth down the front of yet another gold dress, the fabric cool and slippery beneath my fingertips as I prepare for tonight's high-stakes poker game. It's a monthly ritual, one Terry used to oversee himself—a gathering of Vegas's criminal elite to align business interests over cards and whiskey.

As I fasten a pair of diamond earrings, I catch my reflection in the mirror. The woman staring back at me is a far cry from the trailer park girl I once was. I've reinvented myself, shedding my past like a snake sheds its skin. But underneath this gilded exterior, that scrappy survivor still lives, ready to fight tooth and nail for what's mine.

That's the thing, though.

What, exactly, is mine? I don't mean the will. Although I should probably ask Frank what's going on with that. But in Terry's absence, what will my role be in the Colombo Family?

What do I want it to be?

A soft knock at the bedroom door pulls me from my thoughts. "Come in," I call, expecting Holden with some last-minute information about the guest list tonight. As part of the less-legit side of the Golden Sands, the poker night is always under his purview.

But when the door swings open, my breath catches in my throat. Nik steps in, wearing a close-cut tailored black tux, her dark hair slicked back, and a gold waistcoat indicating her connection to me.

She looks...stunning.

Literally stunning. I feel like I've been thumped over the head.

“Ready?” Nik asks, seemingly oblivious to the effect she's had on me. But there's something in her gaze, a heat that makes my skin tingle.

I nod, collecting myself. “Let's go.”

As we make our way down to the high roller rooms, and the specially-secured poker table rooms for the night's entertainment, Nik's presence is both comforting and electrifying. I'm acutely aware of her every movement, the way she scans our surroundings, always alert, always protective.

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We're stopped at the doors by casino security, where we surrender our phones—and Nik, with some persuading from me, hands over her guns. But she refuses to give up the knife hidden at the small of her back.

"I'm her bodyguard," she snaps at security, thumbing at me. "Get it?Body. Guard."

"Everyone who attends the poker game comes unarmed and no one will have a phone," I tell her patiently. "We accept the rules or we don't go in. And we're going in."

"You're the boss here," she argues. "Tell these morons I'm an exception."

I smile. "But you're not an exception. And remember what Eva said—you're supposed to obey me." I flap my eyelashes, and she glowers even harder. But she gives up the knife, and finally, we're admitted.

The room is already thick with cigar smoke, the scent mingling with expensive male cologne and the tang of hard liquor. Faces turn our way—some curious, others calculating. I spot a few Triad men in one corner, while a drug cartel leader lounges by the bar, drink in hand. Representatives from a few Italian and Russian Families linger near the poker table, eyeing me with a mix of interest and skepticism.

I notice a few members of the Consortium, too. But Eva is conspicuously absent, although I know Holden Brooks sent out an invitation to her personally.

"Eva doesn't like games of chance," Nik murmurs close to my ear, her breath warm against my skin. "Only skill. She prefers to be in perfect control at all times."



She does that mind-reading trick of hers more often than I'd like. I don't bother to argue with her about whether poker is more skill or luck, because Larry Caruso has caught my eye and gestured for me to join him in a quiet corner. I glance at Nik, and hold up a hand. "You'll need to stay away for a minute. Family business. And none of yours."

She tilts her head to one side, but then shrugs. "Fine." And then she melts away, making sure she can keep an eye on me, but far enough away that I can speak in confidence. But as I make my way to Larry, I see Nik being approached by one of the Consortium members, who turns his back on me to speak to her, as though hiding what he's saying.

A note of suspicion sounds in my head. What are they doing? Is Nik reporting back about my activities, sharing information on the Colombo Family?

It's not that I don't expect it. I can buy just about anything I want, but trust is a luxury I can't afford. And there's nothing Nik has learned during her time with me that wouldn't become public knowledge soon enough, anyway.

So it doesn't really matter what she says to them.

She can spill her damn guts for all I care.

I reach Larry, who blinks at me. "You okay, Breezy? You look a little..." He scrunches up his face as he tries to find the word. "Upset."

"Of course I'm upset," I snap before I can stop myself, and then have to do a little fast-talk. "My husband just got murdered, Larry, and these poker nights were his favorite thing."

His weathered face is a mask of concern as he leans in close, bourbon on his breath.

“Of course, of course. I wasn’t thinking. And I hate seeing you put in this position,” he adds. “But soon the Family will be running smoothly again. You have my word on that. And you know we take care of our own. You got nothing to worry about.” He clasps my shoulder, his grip firm. “I hope I can count on your support, Breezy?”

The question catches me off guard, but I don’t let it show. I just offer him an enigmatic smile. “I guess we’ll see how things fall out.”

As Larry moves away, I get that same unnerving feeling that I got at the funeral, and I look around the room instinctively as the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Someone here...hatesme. Hates me with passionate malevolence.

I’m sure of it. I canfeelit?—

“What’s wrong?”

With a gasp of surprise, I sway into Nik, who has suddenly appeared. “I...”

CanI trust her? Do I have a choice?

“Let’s leave,” she says briskly, looking into my face. “You don’t have to be here.”

It makes me mad, hearing her suggest I turn tail and run. “Like hell I’m leaving. Anyway, look, there’s Holden—he wants to talk.”

“I’m so glad you’re here,” he gushes at me, his eyes a little damp. “You know how much Terry loved these nights. I feel like—like it’s our own little memorial to him.”

I nod, my throat suddenly tight.

“Cards will start in about a half hour,” he goes on. “But if you could work the room until then and get them to loosen up a little, I’d really appreciate it. Strained atmosphere tonight.”

“I’ve felt that way myself,” I agree, with a little shiver. “Maybe they’re missing Terry, too. Anyway, you got it, Holden. The Golden Lady of the Sands is here to dazzle.”

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I move through the room, falling easily into the role of gracious hostess, and showing respect by speaking with each VIP in their preferred language. I trade jokes in Mandarin with the Triad enforcer, commiserate in Spanish with a cartel lieutenant over shifts in territory, and trade veiled barbs in Italian with the Gatto Family Underboss. I even test my Japanese—a newer acquisition—with a polite Yakuza in Vegas for the first time, who smilingly corrects my grammar when I plead for help.

“All that and you know Russian, too,” Nik says when we have a moment alone.

I allow myself a half-smile at her ironic tone. “Terry was awful with everything except English and Italian,” she says. “This way, he had someone in the room who could keep an ear out for him.”

“It’s an impressive skill.”

“I’ve always been able to pick up the basics in most languages I’ve come across,” I say. “But that’s all it is—basic. Nothing special.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m starting to see how useful you must have been to your husband.”

I give a one-shouldered shrug, embarrassed by the compliment. It’s second nature to me now, all this schmoozing. But tonight feels different without Terry here. I feel on edge, hyper-aware of eyes following my every move. And every moment I expect to feel that horrible hatred again, directed my way.

I’m used to being looked at, so it’s not just the staring. But something unexpected

occurs to me as I move around the room. They're judging me, these men, yes—but there's also genuine respect in their faces. And then they seem to expect that I'll join in the poker game, treating me as an equal rather than a placeholder. It's a heady feeling, this respect. This power.

Is this how Terry felt all those years?

Holden offers to seat me at one of the tables when the game starts, and the group I've been chatting with all agree, loudly, that I need to play. But before I can dwell on this shift toward me, Vince Sabatelli strolls up to the group, all charm in his expensive suit, but I know better than to be fooled by appearances.

"Breezy," he says, voice dripping with false warmth. "You're looking radiant tonight." He leans in, but he doesn't lower his voice. "I hope I can count on your support in the coming days. With me at the helm, the Family would thrive. And you...well, you'd benefit greatly from the protection I can offer."

His message is not for me. It's for the men around him, making sure they know he's coming up in the world. I feel Nik tense behind me, and I remember her reaction at the funeral.

But I can handle a snake like Vince Sabatelli.

"That's very kind," I tell him, allowing the old accent to peek through a little. "But as you can see, Vince, I already have protection." I gesture to Nik. "So I don't need yours." I enjoy the flash of annoyance that goes through his eyes.

"Yeah, Frankie mentioned you had some Consortium lapdog running around after you. But she ain't a friend, Breezy. Not like I could be your friend." His gaze wanders slowly down from my face to my tits. "I can offer status. Power. You could be what you were before, Breezy. A wife, rather than a widow. What do you say?"

## CHAPTER 15

Nik

The implication in this asshole's words makes my temper rise sharply, but before I can step in, Brie is already responding to him in a hard, venomous voice.

"Listen carefully, Vince," she says, loud enough for those around to hear, just as he made sure they heard his offer. "If you think for one second that I need you or anyone else to give me status or power, you're mistaken. I take what I want. And I definitely don't want you."

His face darkens. "You wanna watch that mouth, Breezy. It's a pretty mouth, but one day some guy might take offense at what's coming out of it."

That's a direct threat. I'm not the only one who thinks so, either, judging by the sudden quiet in our immediate vicinity as people listen in.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings, Vince," Brie spits. "But hear me loud and clear: you have nothing I want or need. Now go nurse your bruised ego. I have a poker hand with the real players in this town."

She stalks off before he can respond, and I hurry after her.

But I'm proud of her. God, I'm so proud of her that I can't stifle the grin on my face.

Brie takes her place at one of the poker tables and I stand behind her, watching the other players, watching the room, watching Vince Sabatelli as he mutters and scowls with his cronies in a corner.

And she's good at poker, too. Brie Colombo is a very good player; her face is a mask,

giving nothing away as she raises, calls, or folds with practiced ease.

The game intensifies, and Brie goes head-to-head with a burly man I recognize as the head of a bratva group. Her hand is strong—I can see it in the way she shakes back her hair, a tell so subtle I doubt anyone else notices. She could take him for everything he's worth.

But she doesn't.

Instead, she folds gracefully, allowing him to win. She gives a rueful laugh as the bratva boss grins over his winnings, and leaves the table for a break. As she stands at the bar, I lean in close.

“Why'd you let him win? You had him.”

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“He’s an important ally to the Colombo Family,” she says offhandedly, as if explaining why she chose red wine over white. “It’s not worth a hand of poker to put that friendship in danger, not while our leadership is—well. In question.”

I’m about to respond when a commotion erupts nearby. Larry Caruso’s face is flushed with anger as he faces off against Vince Sabatelli. “You think you can just waltz up and take over?” Larrysnarls. “You ain’t got what it takes, Vince. You’re all talk and no action.”

Vince’s eyes narrow dangerously. “Watch your mouth, old man. Times have changed, and antiques like you ain’t worth so much these days.”

“At least I hold with tradition. You want to recruit a bunch of?—”

Before I can stop her, Brie is there already, inserting herself between the two men with a bright smile.

“Gentlemen,” she says, her voice carrying just the right mix of authority and charm. “I’m sure you’ll agree this isn’t the place for a squabble. Why don’t we kiss and make up, and then get back to the fun?”

The effect is immediate. Both men back down, muttering apologies and shooting each other dark looks. But the fire’s out, at least for now.

And Brie Colombo has shown again that she’s a force to be reckoned with.

“Don’t forget,” mutters a voice in my ear.



“I won’t,” I snap back, and move away from the Consortium messenger.

I’ve been summoned by Eva Novak tomorrow morning to report on what I’ve learned about Brie and the Colombos so far. And I can’t think of anything I’d rather do less.

As we make our way to the elevator later that night, Brie leans in close. “So now you see the kind of problems Frank is dealing with.”

I snort. “He doesn’t seem to be dealing with them—he’s leaving it up to you. Sabatelli’s a sleaze, and Caruso doesn’t think before he acts.”

“It’s more than that,” she sighs, giving me a side-eye. “Well,” she goes on, “I guess maybe it’s common knowledge, so it doesn’t matter if Eva Novak finds out. But before he was killed, Terry was looking to make some changes to the Family. Recruit from, uh, outside, if you get what I mean.”

“Non-Italians,” I say. “It was in the dossier the Consortium gave out,” I add, to make her feel better about me knowing.

Brie gives a grim smile of acknowledgment. “The Family hasn’t had any new blood for a while. Terry wanted to promote some of the associates we already have to full membership. Good and loyal men, but not necessarily of Italian blood. It wasn’t a popular initiative in some circles.”

“I bet Caruso threw a tantrum,” I say with a grin.

“He sure did. Vince Sabatelli seemed to like the idea, though. So you see, there’s a little more at stake here with the new Don. The Family could change forever—or die out, depending on which of them gets the job.”

We reach the private elevator, only to find an “Out of Order” sign plastered across its

gleaming doors. Brie ignores it, stabbing with frustration at the button.

“Guess it’s the stairs, princess,” I tell her.

“Not in these shoes,” she snorts. But just then, the next elevator along dings open. A waiter stands inside, a covered tray balanced on one hand.

“Going up, ma’am?” he asks Brie with a polite smile.

Brie steps forward, swiping her keycard automatically to allow access to her specially designated floor, and alarm bells start ringing in my head. Something’s off.

The waiter presses the Close Doors button, and I only just manage to slide in, staring at him.

“I’ll be glad to get to bed tonight,” Brie is saying as the doors slide shut. “It’s been a long?—”

That’s when it happens. Time slows to a crawl for me as the waiter drops his tray, the cloche clattering to the floor. In its place in his hand is a wicked-looking knife, aimed straight at Brie’s heart.

I thrust the heel of my hand out hard, catching the would-be assassin in the chest. He stumbles back but recovers quickly, slashing the knife through the air where Brie’s throat was a second ago—but I’ve already shoved her behind me into the corner of the elevator.

The assassin lunges forward again, and I barely manage to deflect the knife with my left forearm. I drive my right fist into his solar plexus, feeling the whoosh of air as it leaves his lungs, and then I twist as the blade whistles past my ear.

I use the movement to my advantage, grabbing his wrist as I duck and slamming it against the wall. The knife clatters to the floor. I bring my knee up, hard and fast, and he doubles over with a grunt of pain. My fist connects with his face, once, twice, three times—and he's out cold.

The elevator doors slide open with a cheerful ding that seems absurdly out of place. Frank Caruso is standing there, and he pulls his gun as fast as his eyes widen. I shout for Frank to hold, but it's too late.

He opens fire.

The assassin jerks as the bullets tear into him, then goes still. Anger surges through me. “Goddammit!” I snarl. “We needed him alive for questioning!”

“What the fuck happened?” he bellows, turning the gun on me.

I ignore him and turn to Brie, my anger dissipating as I take in her face. She’s pale except for a splatter of red on her cheek, her eyes wide, hands shaking where they cover her ears.

I wrap an arm around her shoulders, steering her quickly past Frank Colombo and toward the stairs.

“It’s okay,” I murmur. “I’ve got you. You’re safe now.” I take the keycard from her and open the door of her suite myself, and only then do I realize Frank Colombo isn’t following.

He’s standing there at the elevator with a foot in the door to keep it from closing, talking furiously on his cell phone. I assume he’s calling a fixer. Good.

But how convenient that he was standing there in the first place, waiting for the elevator. Waiting to see the result of his paid hit?

Or was it just coincidence?

“Nik,” Brie whispers, and she slumps against the wall. “I...”

I grab her and pull her into my arms. “I’ve got you,” I tell her fiercely. “I’ve got you.”

Her arms wind around my neck. She looks up into my face, and I’m relieved to see the fear give way to rationality as she comes back to her senses.

“Nik.” This time, when she says my name, there’s a whole new inflection to it. She sways forward a little, her lips inches from mine. “Kiss me,” she breathes. “Please?”

I want to kiss her more than I’ve wanted anything else in my whole life.

But from somewhere in the deepest region of my soul, I drag up my self-control and turn my face aside, before spinning Brie firmly by the shoulders and walking her into the living room of her suite. “Let’s get you sitting down,” I say diplomatically. “You’ve had...a shock.”

I’ve just got her on the sofa when the suite door lock makes its familiar zipping noise and then the door slams open. I instinctively step in front of Brie, gun in hand. Frank Colombo barges into the room, followed closely by Holden, Vince, and Larry. Their expressions are a mix of shock, anger, and confusion.

“What the fuck happened?” Frank booms, repeating the same question as before.

I don’t lower my guard as more Colombo men pour into the suite. Larry barks orders, and they start searching the place, overturning furniture and tearing through drawers.

“Everyone needs to calm down,” I call out. But I’m drowned out by the chaos erupting around us.

I glance at Brie. She’s still pale, her eyes wide, flinching as Frank starts shouting again. “We need to know what happened, now!”

Holden pushes past the others. “Brie, are you okay?”

She doesn’t answer, her gaze unfocused. I’ve seen that look before—it’s shock setting in. I need to get her out of here.

“Come on,” I murmur, gently guiding Brie toward the bedroom. Holden follows, but I don’t bother trying to kick him out. Brie could use a friend right now.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Caruso snarls. “Breezy stays right here where we can see her. We got questions need answering!”

Irritation makes my tone sharp. “I’ll get her cleaned up and calmed down. Then you can ask your questions.”

Vince steps forward, jabbing a finger in my direction. “This isn’t your fucking business, Consortium bitch. Get the fuck out!”

I feel my jaw clench, anger rising in my chest. This asshole has some nerve. “If anyone needs to get the fuck away from Brie, it’s you, Sabatelli.”

The room goes dead silent. All eyes are on me and Vince.

“The fuck you talking about?” Vince snarls. “Get outta here. This is Family business.”

“You threatened Brie tonight,” I say loudly. “I heard you, and I wasn’t the only one.”

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Vince pauses slightly before he regains his composure. “You’re full of shit. I didn’t?—”

“She’s right.” Larry’s gravelly voice cuts through the murmurs. “I heard you too, Vince. I was standing right there. You told Brie she’d better watch her mouth or she might regret it.”

The atmosphere in the room shifts instantly. Suspicion hangs heavy in the air as the other men eye Vince warily.

Larry’s expression hardens. “You know, I think we need to have a little chat, Vince. Privately.” He nods to two of his men. “Put him in a room. I’ll be there soon.”

“Fuck you,” Vince snarls. “Don’t fucking touch me,” he adds, as Larry’s men grab him. And then Vince’s cool facade cracks. “You can’t do this, Larry. You’ll regret this! He’s trying to stitch me up, you hear me?”

But Larry just waves his hand dismissively as his men drag Vince out, his threats echoing down the hallway.

Frank stands there, mouth agape, before seeming to remember why we’re all here. “We still need to talk to Brie.”

I step fully in front of the doorway and shake my head firmly. “Brie’s in shock. She needs a shower—she’s covered in blood, and her ears are probably ringing from you shooting into a confined space.” You fucking moron, I add in my own mind.

But is he a fucking moron? Or was silencing someone who could finger him after another failed assassination attempt?

Larry steps forward, his tone condescending now as Vince's shouts die away in the distance. "Listen, sweetheart, we appreciate your help, but we'll take care of Brie from here."

I feel my temper flaring again. Who the fuck does this guy think he is? "If you want to talk to Brie right now," I snarl, "you'll have to go through me."

"And me," comes a firm voice from behind. We all turn to see Holden in the bedroom doorway, arms folded across his chest. He's not that threatening, but I appreciate the backup.

Frank looks at Holden. "Is she alright? I came up to talk to her, see how she's holding up...and jeez, then all this happened."

Holden's gaze is steely. "Of course she's not alright, Frank. And right now, she only wants me with her—" he pauses, glancing at me "—and Nik."

It's not exactly a ringing endorsement, but it's enough for Frank. He nods to Larry. "We'll come back later. I need to deal with the cops downstairs anyway—they're already here, some damn guest called them about the gunfire."

Just as the Colombos finish filing out, a vaguely familiar young man appears in the doorway, looking shell-shocked. "Was that Mr. Sabatelli screaming?" he squeaks. "It sure sounded like?"

"Who the hell are you?" Frank snarls, hustling him back against the wall in the hallway.



The guy swallows hard, and that's how I recognize him, that bobbing throat. "I, uh, I work security for the casino," he squeaks. "And I have something for Mrs. Colombo." He sees Holden and holds it out toward him, but I move faster, snatching the object from his hand before Holden can reach it.

"Thanks," I say curtly, then slam the door in Frank's face.

Holden follows me back to the bedroom, and Brie looks up as we enter, her eyes focusing on the flash drive in my fingers that I hold up for her to see.

"What's that?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

"The security footage from the night of your husband's murder."

## CHAPTER 16

Nik

Holden gasps, loud and dramatic, and his hands fly to his mouth. "What the fuck—" he begins, but Brie winces, pressing a hand to her temple, and he rushes to fuss around her.

"First things first," I say, pocketing the flash drive. "Let's get you cleaned up and check for injuries. Then we'll take a look at what's on here."

Holden tuts as he takes in Brie's blood-splattered face. "I'll take out some fresh clothes for you," he says, already moving toward her closet.

I guide Brie to the bathroom, my hand steady on her lower back. She's trembling slightly, the adrenaline crash hitting her hard. As we reach the door, she turns to me, eyes searching mine.

“Nik,” she says, her voice barely audible. “Thank you for saving my life...again.”

For a moment, I’m at a loss for words. This version of Brie is so different from the sharp-tongued woman who stood up to that asshole Sabatelli just a few hours ago. Which one is the real her?

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I shove down an unexpected surge of emotion and just nod my acknowledgment. And then I stand there for a moment after she's disappeared into the bathroom, listening to the sound of running water. What the hell is happening to me? I'm supposed to be focused on the job, on keeping Brie safe. Not...whatever this is.

Holden returns with an armful of sweats, eyeing me suspiciously after he lays them down on the bed. "All good?" he asks.

I nod curtly. "Just thinking."

He doesn't look convinced, but thankfully, he doesn't push it. Instead, he makes a shooing gesture at me. "Off you go. I'll keep watch."

"I'm not going anywhere."

He looks me head to toe with a twist of his mouth, and for the first time, I realize I'm covered in...well, the kind of thing Brie was also covered in. I don't want her seeing me like this when she gets out of the shower.

"I'll be right back," I amend, and head off to shower and change.

I'm fast, but by the time I get back, Brie is out of the shower, though not the bathroom. Hudson makes a few gestures at me, and once I understand what it is I'm supposed to be doing, I knock softly on the bathroom door. "Brie? I've got some clean clothes for you here."

The door opens a crack, and a hand reaches out. I pass the sweats through, trying not

to imagine her naked body right there with only two inches of door between us.

Minutes tick by, but finally Brie emerges, looking much younger in a bare face, combed-back wet hair, and sweats that are a little oversized on her. I can see the toll the night has taken on her in the tightness around her eyes.

“So, Brie,” Holden says, in a casually-non-casual way. “Am I to take it that you’re looking into Terry’s death yourself?”

She looks at me and shrugs, then turns back to him. “Yes. I’ve asked Nik to help me out as well. Please don’t try to talk me out of it?—”

“Au contraire,” he says at once. “Frank has been less than useless. I’ve asked several times to speak to him about that night, and he just won’t make the time.”

“Have you?” I break in. “What did you want to tell him?”

Holden looks at me a little suspiciously, but Brie gives him an encouraging nod. “Well, the night of the murder, Terry had a meeting with someone—and he wouldn’t tell me who it was.”

“But how did you know he had a meeting at all?” Brie asks. “Did you see the person come in?”

Holden shakes his head. “I know because he sent me away, told me to entertain myself for the night.”

“That was unusual?” I ask.

“It was unheard of,” he says bluntly. “Terry liked me with him always, even in the most sensitive of meetings. I took notes for him and I—I gave him advice. I can’t

even imagine what kind of meeting he wouldn't want me sitting in on."

"And you think this person must be the killer?" Brie asks.

"I think it must have been," Holden says sadly. "I wish he'd told me about it."

It's interesting information, but not exactly useful unless we can figure out who this mysterious person was. But I let a beat pass where Holden and Brie both seem lost in their own thoughts, before holding up the flash drive again.

"Ready to see what's on this?" I ask them, adding to Brie, "Holden brought in a laptop so we can run the video."

She nods, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed. "Let's do this."

I sit on the side of the bed and Holden joins us too as I insert the flash drive. The screen flickers to life, revealing a 4-split view of security camera footage. The images switch every few seconds, cycling through different areas of the casino.

We all watch intently, but as the timestamp approaches the time of Terry's murder, we see...nothing. No suspicious activity, no sign of the killer.

"Wait!" Brie's finger shoots out, stabbing at the top corner. "I saw something."

Holden leans in, squinting at the small screen. "It's hard to make out details like this." He grabs the laptop, quickly casting the footage to the large, wall-mounted TV. "Where do you want to stop, Brie?"

"Just run it back and forth a few times," she says, her eyes fixed on the larger display. "Do you see it?"

I scan the footage, but nothing jumps out at me. Holden shakes his head, equally puzzled.

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Brie points to the top right quadrant. “The clock. It’s showing the same time each time the camera switches to it, even though it’s still moving. Someone’s looped the footage.”

“Well, damn,” I breathe. “Good catch.”

I move closer to the TV, something nagging at the edge of my vision. “Go back a minute,” I instruct Holden. “Now speed it up?”

As the footage goes by faster, it makes it easier to spot—a faint movement across the screen, almost imperceptible at normal speed.

Brie squints at it. “It almost looks like...a ghost.”

“That’s no ghost,” Holden says grimly. “That blur indicates something—or more likely someone—was removed from the video. Terry used to ask security to do an erase-pass of footage now and then, but in such a way that it didn’t destroy the original image. That blurring effect was the same on the ones I saw.”

“So if it doesn’t destroy the original image,” Brie repeats. “Does that mean...”

He nods. “With the right equipment, and the right knowledge, it should be possible to restore it.”

“Holden,” I say slowly. “Can you restore the image?”

He gives a grim smile. “I can try.”

“Get on it,” Brie tells him. “Right now. And keep it quiet—don’t let anyone else in security know what you’re doing.”

He makes a face. “I’ll have to sit in there with them—but I’ll make up some story.” He grabs the flash drive and gives Brie one last hug. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” he murmurs, and then he’s out the door.

As soon as he’s out of earshot, I turn to Brie. “Pack your bags. We’re leaving.”

Brie’s eyes widen in surprise. “But?—”

“No,” I say firmly. “This time, you do what I say. You can’t trust anyone right now; you said so yourself. My job is to keep you safe, and I can’t do that here, surrounded by Colombos and—and other potential threats.”

“Where will we go?” she asks, a hint of fear creeping into her voice.

I hesitate for a moment, then ask, “Are you sure no one knows about your house in the Solara community?”

Brie bites her lip, thinking. “No one but you—and Holden now, I guess—and...well, the women I’ve taken back there occasionally.”

I feel a flare of hot jealousy at her words, but choose to ignore it. “Then that’s where we’ll go,” I say after a moment. “We need to move fast. Grab what you need.”

“It won’t be much. Everything I need is there already. I can help you pack, if you like?”

“All I need is my go-bag.” I hurry back to my room to grab that, while I contemplate the wisdom of what I’m about to do. The smart play—as far as my career



goes—would be to call Eva, let her know exactly what’s happening. Explain why I won’t be kowtowing to her tomorrow morning and spilling everything I’ve learned about the Colombos. But something stops me.

Right now, this is bigger than the Consortium.

This is about keeping Brie alive.

The only trace we leave behind is a hastily scrawled note for Frank: “Brie is safe. Will call when we reach a secure location.”

The drive to Solara in one of Brie’s own SUVs is tense, both of us scanning for any signs of pursuit. But the roads are empty, the night calm and indifferent to our plight.

Brie’s house in the gated community is a masterpiece of modern luxury. As she gives me a quick tour of the place, I admire the way metal and glass are married with terracotta and stone, and the floor-to-ceiling windows that offer a breathtaking view of the cold, starlit desert.

Most of the places I spend my time are utilitarian. Eva lives in luxury, of course. But I’m still trying to prove myself.

Are you?

The thought comes unbidden. But of course I am. Taking off with Brie in contravention of a direct order from Eva notwithstanding. I plan to talk to Eva as soon as I can, but keeping the Colombo widow safe was her original direct order.

That’s what I plan to argue, anyway.

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“Nice place,” I mutter to Brie, trying not to sound too impressed as we arrive back in the foyer.

Brie gives me a small smile, the first I’ve seen since the attack. “Thanks. It’s my sanctuary.”

“You’ll be safe here. And you should get some sleep,” I tell her. “It’s been a hell of a night.”

She nods, but hesitates at the entrance to her bedroom. “Nik,” she says, her voice uncertain. “Would you—would you mind sleeping in here tonight? I’m still a little jumpy. I don’t know if I’d be able to sleep without...knowing you were right there.”

Every instinct tells me to refuse. To maintain professional distance. To maintain neutrality. To remember why I’m here. But when I look at Brie, vulnerable and shaken, I hear myself saying, “Sure.”

We change with our backs to each other, though I’m dying to know what Brie Colombo wears to bed. I find out soon enough: it’s a white satin slip that makes her look much younger than usual, more innocent. I’ve stripped to my boxer briefs and tank, and I’m about to pull my top off—but pause. I sleep naked usually, but I don’t want to make Brie uncomfortable.

So I leave my top on and climb into the massive bed, where Brie immediately curls into my arms. I stiffen for a moment, surprised by the intimacy, before slowly relaxing.

“Nik,” Brie whispers into the darkness, “I feel like I can’t trust anyone. Can I...can I really trust you?”

I’m acutely aware of her warm breath against my chest where she’s snuggling into me. “You can trust that I’ll keep you safe,” I say at last.

She shifts, lifting her head to look at me. In the cold desert moonlight spilling through the window, her face is just inches away.

And then she closes that small distance, pressing her lips to mine.

## CHAPTER 17

Brie

For a moment, Nik Kusek is kissing me back, her lips moving under mine, her hand trailing up my arm?—

And then she stops.

She presses me back from her mouth gently with a hand on my shoulder. “We should try to get some sleep,” she murmurs. “You went through a lot tonight.”

“But—”

“Brie. I’m not going to take advantage of you.”

“You think you’re taking advantage of me?” I give a short laugh. “I’ve wanted you since the moment you walked into that meeting room behind Eva Novak like some...dangerous darkwraith.”

There's a short silence, and I wonder what Nik is thinking. I find out pretty fast.

"I need you to do what I'm telling you, Brie, and go to sleep. In the morning..." She lets out a small breath. "Let's just wait until morning."

"The morning isn't going to make me want you less," I tell her stubbornly, but all she does is steadily turn me around until I'm the little spoon, and wrap an arm around me.

Staring into the darkness, my eyes sting with sudden tears. For the first time since Terry died, I feel...

I feel safe.

Even from myself.

I stir awake, momentarily disoriented. But then the events of the previous night come rushing back. The attack. The escape. The kiss.

Heat rises in my cheeks as I remember throwing myself at Nik last night, and her gentle rejection.

Oh, God.

The bedroom door creaks open, and Nik enters, balancing two steaming mugs of coffee. Her hair is damp from a shower, and she's dressed in fresh clothes—a simple black t-shirt and jeans that look effortlessly stylish on her, even though I bet she was only thinking about practicality when she picked them out.

"Morning," she says, her voice neutral as she hands me a mug. "Thought you could use this."

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I sit up, accepting the coffee gratefully and wrapping my hands around the just-right warmth of the mug. I take a sip and find it perfectly made, strong and smooth, with just a hint of sweetness.

She knows how I like my coffee.

“Thank you,” I say softly, my eyes meeting hers over the rim of the mug. “For everything. The coffee, keeping me safe last night, and...” I trail off, feeling heat rise to my cheeks again. “I’m so sorry about last night. I shouldn’t have put you in that position.”

Nik shakes her head, but I feel like a shutter has come down over her eyes. “You have nothing to apologize for. It was an intense night. Emotions were running high.”

She perches on the edge of the bed, her own mug cradled in her hands. The morning sunlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows catches the highlights in her dark hair, turning some of the strands to burnished copper. For a moment, I’m mesmerized by the play of light and shadow across her features, the strong line of her jaw, the curve of her neck.

“Still,” I insist, “I shouldn’t have put you in that position. You’re here to protect me, not...well, you know.”

Nik’s eyes meet mine, and for a moment, the intensity of her gaze takes my breath away. “It’s okay, Brie. Really.”

We fall into silence, sipping our coffee. I’m acutely aware of Nik’s presence, the

steady rise and fall of her chest as she breathes, the way her fingers curl around her mug, the cozy smell of the coffee.

Outside, the desert stretches off into the horizon, sand and scrub brush painted in shades of ochre and burnt sienna. It's beautiful in its own stark, unforgiving way.

Rather like Nik Kusek.

I shift slightly, and the silk of my nightgown whispers against my skin. Nik's eyes flick to the movement, then quickly away. "Nik?" I say.

"Yeah?"

"I'm not in shock anymore."

"Okay." She sounds cautious.

But also hopeful.

"So when I tell you now that I want you...will you believe me?" I set my cup down and watch her. All she does is give a slight nod. "And...will you do something about it?"

Nik's eyes darken as she sets her own mug aside. For a long moment, she just looks at me, her gaze intense and searching. I feel exposed under her scrutiny, but I don't look away. I want her to see the truth of my desire, my need.

Finally, she moves. She crawls up beside me on the bed, movements like a panther, and cups my cheek. "You sure about this?"

I lean into her touch. "One hundred percent certain."

That's all it takes. Her lips land on mine in a slow but searing kiss. It's nothing like the desperate, adrenaline-fueled encounter I tried to initiate last night. This is slow, deliberate, electric. Her tongue traces my lips as I open to her eagerly, teasing me. And then her hand slides down my side, over the curve of my waist, and down to my thigh. She rolls onto her side and pulls me close, so that I feel her warmth envelop me as the kiss changes, becomes more urgent.

She runs her hand up my leg while her mouth moves down, kissing me on the neck, biting softly. My body tingles all over and I'm so wet already I think I might slide off the damn bed. One of her hands finds its way between us, cupping my core, kneading the satin of my nightgown into my soaked pussy. I gasp into her lips, spreading my legs for her in a sign to go further.

She pulls the gown up and slides a finger over my bare, slippery seam as I arch against her. Her finger circles slowly, slowly, until I make a plaintive noise. And finally she takes pity on me, those maddening fingers finding my clit, and I gasp again.

Her lips brush against my ear. "You're all wet," she whispers, but her voice is rough. "Is this what I do to you?"

I nod, unable to speak. Her finger speeds up, rubbing against my clit in a rhythm that is driving me crazy. I pull away enough to look her in the eye. "Take off your clothes—please?—"

She moves away to strip off as fast as she can, though I reach after her, missing her warmth, but she's back again within moments, her small breasts pushing against mine under my satin slip when she leans in to kiss me again. Her tongue slides into my mouth, matching the rhythm of her fingers that are back teasing me again. I whimper, unable to contain the sounds that escape me.

And then those fingers are pushing into me, filling me up, the sensation intense—but still not enough. She starts moving her fingers in and out slowly, circling my clit with her thumb, and I moan. “You like this?” she asks.

“I need more,” I beg, and she gives that small, pleased smile that makes my heart skip. She adds another finger, and another, stretching me in the most exquisite way. My hips buck up to meet her touch, and I grip the sheets, the fabric bunching up in my sweaty palms.

Her breath is hot against my skin, her body pressed up against mine as her lips move down my neck. I rock my hips into her, fuck myself on her hand as she watches, encourages me with smiles and kisses. I’m lost in sensation, my body on fire as Nik works me closer and closer to the edge. Her fingers curl inside me, hitting that perfect spot, and I cry out, beyond caring how loud I am.

“That’s it,” Nik purrs in my ear. “Let me hear you, beautiful. I want to hear every sound you make.”

Her words send another jolt of arousal through me. I grab her ass, pulling her tight against me as I grind shamelessly on her hand. “Don’t stop,” I pant. “Please don’t fucking stop.”



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The heel of her hand is rubbing against my clit now with perfect pressure. I'm trembling, right on the precipice, when she pulls her fingers out of me, sucking on them while she looks into my eyes.

"Not fair," I gasp out.

She just smirks. "You taste just as good as you look. So good. But I think I need it from the source." She pushes me onto my back and yanks my nightgown right up so that she can fondle my tits for a moment. "Oh, God," she sighs. "These are...fucking perfect."

"I know, right?" I grin, and then giggle as she flicks my nipple in mock-punishment, sending a stab of need right to my throbbing, begging clit. She slips two fingers back into me and I arch and moan, dancing for her.

This is the kind of puppet I have no objections to being.

"You're so gorgeous," she breathes. "So fucking perfect."

"Not so bad yourself," I pant out. "Please—don't tease me anymore?—"

She slides down my body and lowers her mouth to my pussy, licking my slit from top to bottom and back, her fingers still inside me, seeking out my most sensitive places inside, her mouth finding my clit and sucking gently on it until I almost scream. I'm writhing under her, my thighs wrapped around her head, body begging for release.

But her firm hands wrench my legs open and she lifts her mouth from me, biting

bluntly down my inner thighs with hot, wet breaths. “I could drown down here and die happy,” she tells me. “You are delicious.”

“Oh, God, please...”

She laps at me again, her tongue flicking against my swollen clit, fingers working steadily inside me, until she wraps her lips around my clit again. I cry out at the intensity, reaching down to grip her hair so tightly that she grunts. But I can't let up; my whole body is shaking as my climax rips through me, wave after wave of pleasure.

She slows down her movements but doesn't stop until I gently push her away.

“Jesus,” I croak hoarsely. “That was...wow.”

“It sure was.” She wipes off her face on her arm and crawls back up in the bed, sliding next to me as though she plans to skip right to the cuddling part.

“Aren't you forgetting something?” I ask, turning around in her arms. She arches an eyebrow. “Don't you want to come?”

She strokes the hair back from my forehead. “I'm good. You must be wiped out.”

“Yeah, I am. But that's okay. You can do all the work.” I pull at her until she's on top of me and wrap my legs around her waist, letting her hot cunt nuzzle into mine. It feels amazing, her slick flesh sliding over my sensitive clit...makes me shiver.

“I can do the work, huh?” she teases, but her hips are rocking already.

“Well, you are supposed to obey me—remember?”

“Mm-hm. And what are your orders now, boss?”

“To make yourself come, of course.” I grip her ass, pulling her tight against me, her pussy sliding on mine, hot and hard and slick.

She gives up pretending to not need it, whispering, “God, that feels good,” as she grinds onto me. I can’t even move, she’s pinning me down so hard, but it’s fine, better than fine, because her grinding is making sparks dance through my molten core again. Her clit is so hard it feels like a diamond, fiery and demanding as she ruts into me.

“I wanna see you come,” I tell her. “Do it, Nik. Fuck me. Come all over me.”

She doesn’t respond except for the change in her breathing, the way her muscles tense under my hands on her ass. I can feel the tension building up in her body. She’s right there, hovering on the edge for a long moment, and then she comes with a stifled groan, her hips bucking hard, a spurt of warmth over my aching pussy that makes me spasm in sympathetic pleasure.

And then she collapses on me, heavy and panting. I hold her, stroking her hair, her shoulders, waiting for her to come backdown. She rolls off of me eventually, running a hand through her hair, sweeping it off her damp forehead.

“You,” she tells me, “are a damn hard taskmistress.”

I grin. “But what a reward for all that hard work.”

“Can’t argue with that,” she laughs.

And something inside me, something I didn’t even know was frozen, seems to melt, as I watch Nik Kusek chuckling in bed next to me, naked, buzzed, covered in my

juices...

This is how life should always be, I decide. It'd be worth getting shot at, insulted, patronized, if I could just have this to balance it all out.

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But it's not possible, of course. Nik is just with me on loan. Someday soon, Eva Novak will click her fingers and Nik will have to go running back.

And all I'll have is this memory of us together.

## CHAPTER 18

Nik

I stretch languidly, savoring the warmth of Brie's body next to mine. My fingertips trace lazy patterns on her skin, committing every curve to memory.

Most people don't notice me when I'm walking behind Eva. Hell, most people don't notice anything except Eva when she walks into a room.

But Brie Colombo noticed me. And she wasn't just saying that, either, about being obsessed since the first time she saw me in that meeting room. I saw how she looked at me, over Eva's perfect shoulder, those eyes that slid right past astonishing beauty and charisma, locking with mine instead.

Almost like...

Like we were meant to be.

"Tell me about yourself," I murmur, genuinely curious about the woman who's managed to captivate me so thoroughly. "What were you like as a kid?"

Brie's eyes cloud over for a moment before she answers. "I grew up in a trailer park in West Virginia. Not exactly a glamorous backstory."

I prop myself up on an elbow, giving her my full attention. "And how did you get from there to here?"

"Simple. I decided I was never going to be poor again." Her fingers play with a strand of her hair. "You know, up until recently, that was my only goal. Make sure I was safe and financially secure, and always would be, no matter what."

The raw honesty in her voice strikes a chord within me. I've seen my share of people clawing their way out of poverty, but there's something different about Brie, something that keeps her fighting, even now. A titanium core beneath that glittering exterior.

"And now?" I ask, genuinely curious. "What's your focus?"

Her eyes harden, replacing the vulnerability of moments ago. "Finding Terry's killer and making the bastard pay. Him or her."

It's a dark path, the path of vengeance, but one I've walked myself. So I can't judge her for it.

"And then...I'm not sure." Her voice has turned vague. "Anyway, what about you?" Brie turns the tables, her gaze sharp and inquisitive. "What made you join the Novak Consortium?"

I hesitate, weighing how much to reveal. But after her openness, I owe her some truth. "Family legacy," I say finally. "My father, and his father before him, had a long association with the Novaks and the Consortium. And I was trained from childhood to take his place someday. He never had a son, you see. But...that never mattered to

him.”

Brie’s eyebrows rise. “So it’s similar to Colombos, in a sense. A kind of family business.”

I shrug, aiming for nonchalance. “It’s all I’ve ever known. After my father...died, after that, I wanted to prove myself. Make him proud.”

“You didn’t prove yourself enough when you took out his killer?”

“That was different. Personal. The Consortium—it’s business.”

“And guarding me helps your position in the business?”

The words slip out before I can stop them. “I don’t know. But I could hardly refuse an order from Eva.”

The moment the sentence leaves my mouth, I know I’ve fucked up. Brie’s entire demeanor shifts, the warmth in her eyes cooling rapidly. She sits up, the sheet falling away to reveal her perfect body, but all I can focus on is the shutter I’ve accidentally slammed down between us.

“Well,” she says, her voice clipped. “I suppose we should get dressed. How about lunch at the clubhouse?”

Before I can apologize, she’s already heading for the shower, leaving me alone in the rumpled bed. I flop back onto the pillow, throwing an arm over my eyes.

“Fuck,” I mutter to the empty room.

I lie there, staring at the ceiling, wishing I could rewind time just a few minutes. One

minute we're sharing intimacies, the next I'm reminding her that I'm just here on orders.



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Real fuckin' smooth.

I roll to my side, punching the pillow in frustration. This job was supposed to be simple. Protect the widow, gather intel for Eva, prove myself in the Consortium.

But nothing about Brie Colombo is simple. She's a puzzle, layers upon layers of carefully constructed facade hiding...what? A scared girl from a trailer park? A ruthless woman determined to avenge her husband? Or something else entirely?

And why the hell do I care so much?

I'm not just breaking the Consortium rule, I'm obliterating it.

Don't. Get. Involved.

The shower cuts off and I tense, knowing she'll be out any moment. I should get up, get dressed, pretend nothing happened. But I'm rooted to the spot, caught between duty and desire.

The bathroom door opens, releasing a cloud of steam. Brie emerges, wrapped in a fluffy white towel, and another wrapped over her hair. She doesn't look at me as she moves to the closet, selecting an outfit with meticulous care.

I watch her, words of apology dying on my lips. What can I say? Sorry I reminded you that I have loyalties to another woman?

She drops the towel, and I turn away, giving her privacy. The rustle of fabric fills the

silence between us, heavy with unspoken words.

“I’ll meet you in the living room in ten,” Brie says coolly. “And then we’ll go to the clubhouse. We should discuss our next moves. Talking to Sophie Johnson, for example.”

And just like that, we’re back to business.

The so-called clubhouse at Solara is more like a whole damn resort, and holds everything I’d expect from a billionaire’s playground. As we walk in, a petite brunette with short-cropped hair and a megawatt smile rushes over to us.

“Mrs. Diamond!” she exclaims at Brie, her enthusiasm bordering on manic. “Why, your schedule’s just all over the place these days. I’ll rearrange the cleaner I planned to send over to your place today. But is everything alright?”

Brie’s mask of polite sociability slides into place seamlessly. “Everything’s fine, Katy. Just been busy.” She turns to me, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. “This is Nik, an...associate of mine.”

Katy’s gaze flicks between us, curiosity evident, which is probably not a useful trait in staff members of a place like this. “Pleasure to meet you, Nik. I’m Katy. I oversee maintenance, cleaning, and pretty much any other concerns our residents might have.”

I nod, filing away the information until she’s gone. And then I turn to Brie. “You allow random cleaning staff into your house? That stops now, until we find out who’s after you.”

Brie scoffs. “Terry had all the staff checked out when I moved in here—and they only ever come in when I’m out. They’re on camera the whole time they’re cleaning, and

Solara security reviews the footage regularly.”

“Still,” I say.

“I will not be reduced to dusting,” Brie snaps imperiously. “I have to draw a line somewhere, Nik.”

We’re seated at a secluded table on the restaurant terrace, the Las Vegas skyline shimmering in the distance like a mirage. I let the cleaning thing go, but as we peruse the menu, the air is still strained between us, unspoken words hanging in the air.

“So,” Brie says, her voice carefully neutral. “Sophie Johnson. How do you think we should play it?”

At least she’s still willing to listen to my ideas. I lean back, considering. “Direct approach might be best. She’s already spooked. If we come at her sideways, she might bolt.”

Brie nods, her fingers tapping a restless rhythm on the tablecloth. “Agreed. We’ll need to tread carefully, though. If she is the assassin the Syndicate seeks—or even just if she was involved in Terry’s murder...”

“She could be dangerous,” I finish. A waiter arrives with our food, and I wait until he’s gone before continuing. “Maybe we could head back tomorrow, once the heat has died down a little.”

“Fine,” Brie says curtly, and I can’t take it anymore.

“Look, about what I said—” I start, but she cuts me off.

“Don’t worry about it. I get it. You’re just doing your job.”

I lean forward, my voice low and intense. “That’s not what I meant, and I think you know it. I’m sorry I spoke so carelessly. The truth is...” I trail off, searching for the right words.

Brie’s eyebrow arches. “The truth is what? You can’t wait to get away from the wannabe gangster girl and get back to your real work with the Consortium?”

“For the love of God, when are you going to let that go?”

She just picks up her sparkling water and takes a sip.

I take a deep breath and decide to lay it all out. “The truth is, when you asked for me as your bodyguard, I was surprised. But I’m glad I’ve had a chance to get to know you.” I meet her gaze steadily. “I intend to keep you alive and help you get your vengeance. But I do work for the Consortium. That’s not something either of us should forget. This morning was amazing—but I don’t want to make you think it was something more than it was.”

To my surprise, the hard lines of Brie’s face soften slightly. “I’m sorry, Nik. I got a little intense earlier. It’s just...” She looks away. “Most women I sleep with, I send them on their way right after. To ensure their safety, you understand? So with you...I worry.”

That confession really takes me by surprise, but it makes sense. And I see now what a lonely life Brie must have been leading, despite all appearances. Unlike her husband, she never felt safe enough to invite a long-term lover into her life.

I reach over the table and put my hand on hers. “It’s not your job to worry about me. It’s the other way around.”

A ghost of a smile plays at her lips. “I suppose you’re right. Can we...just draw a line under what happened between us? Get back to playing detective?”

Ouch.

But what else was I expecting? At least Brie's taking it well. This attraction between us is inconvenient at best, and dangerous at worst. She's being practical.

"Sure, let's do that," I say, patting at my mouth with a napkin. "And maybe we should head back to the casino tonight. Catch whoever's behind these attacks on you off-guard. Talk to Sophie, and see if Caruso got anything out of Vince Sabatelli. Find out if Frank made any headway?—"

"Unlikely," she says with feeling.

"—and we can see if Holden's made any progress with that footage. If there's trouble, we can bail fast and come back here."

Brie nods, her eyes gleaming with renewed purpose. "Let's do it."

And maybe I can take a moment to catch up with Eva. Apologize for missing the meeting this morning. Find a way to appease her.

Because she's not going to be happy with me.

## CHAPTER 19

Nik

"Ready?" I ask, scanning the entrance of the Golden Sands casino for potential threats. Knowing that Brie's life is legitimately in danger is sharpening my senses, but it looks clear.

"As I'll ever be," she replies.

We step out of the car and I throw the keys to the valet. His eyes widen as he

recognizes Brie, clothed in yet another gold dress. I place a hand on the small of her back, guiding her through the sea of curious stares. Whispers ripple through the staff like a breeze.

We planned to come in the front door, make a splash. And we certainly have done that.

We head through to the casino floor, where players at the tables pause mid-bet, their eyes following our progress. The cocktail waitress nearby hesitates, tray wobbling slightly as we pass.

Brie leads me swiftly to a private elevator, and as the doors slide shut, I catch a glimpse of our reflection. Brie, resplendent in her deep gold dress, with me a dark shadow at her side.

We do make a striking pair.

The elevator opens directly into a conference room, a different one to the room the Consortium contracts were discussed, and this must be the inner sanctum of the Colombo Family, heavy and old fashioned in mahogany and leather. Frank and Larry are there already.

“Breezy,” Frank says, rushing over. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Safe,” she is all she says. “Come on, Frank, let’s sit down and get on with things. Nik doesn’t want me here any longer than necessary.”

Frank eyes me. “I’ll bet she doesn’t. I don’t like this Consortium member having your ear all the time, Breezy, it’s not?—”

“Frank,” Brie says firmly. “Sit.”

Brie takes a seat at the head of the table, and I position myself behind her, trying my best to fade into the woodwork.



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“What’s the situation with Sabatelli?” Brie asks, all business.

Larry slams a fist on the table, making the crystal glasses rattle. “That rat bastard isn’t talking. I’ve tried everything short of actually killing him.”

Frank grumbles under his breath, but he takes a seat. “Fuck Sabatelli. At least with him out of the question, we have a default solution to the succession.”

I can’t help glancing at Larry Caruso when Frank says that. Was this Caruso’s plan all along?

I wonder.

Brie, on the other hand, doesn’t seem interested in the succession issues for now. “I want to see him.”

The room goes dead silent. After a long pause, Larry scoffs. “Absolutely not! It’s too dangerous. And not the kind of thing you should be seeing, Breezy. You’re not?—”

“I wasn’t asking for permission, Larry.” This is the Brie Colombo I saw during the poker game. The Brie Colombo who can command the attention of a room. Command attention from men. “Frank, you’ll take me to Vince. Right now.”

Frank looks torn. “Listen, sweetheart, what Larry says—he’s not wrong. It ain’t pretty in there.”

“I don’t imagine it is. But if Vince Sabatelli killed my husband and took a shot at me,

too, I don't want it to be pretty. I want it to be very, very painful, in fact." She stands. "Let's go."

Larry shoots to his feet as well, grabbing at Frank with a glower. "You can't seriously be considering this. This is no business for a lady."

"I'm nolady, Larry," Brie says. She turns to him slowly, and I swear to God I see Caruso shrink back. "And I'm not some helpless widow. I was Salvatore Colombo's wife. I sat at his side for years, and I listened, and I learned. I will do whatever it takes to protect this Family."

"This is bullshit," Larry blusters. "She's not even a Colombo!"

"What's my name, Larry?" Brie asks, a dangerously soft note in her voice. "What. Is. My. Fucking. Name?"

Larry gapes, his voice rising high as he croaks, "But you're just a—just a?—"

My hand darts to my holster. "Choose your next words very carefully, Mr. Caruso," I tell him. He may be built like a brick wall, but I've taken down bigger men with less provocation for the Consortium.

And I will certainly do so again for Brie Colombo, unless she calls me off.

Which she hasn't.

It's up to Frank to hold up placating hands. "Let's all take a breath, eh? Brie, are you sure about this?"

"I am. I need to look him in the eye, Frank. I need to know what he knows, what he's hiding. For Terry's sake—and for the Family's."

“Alright,” he says finally, his voice heavy. “But one wrong move from Sabatelli, and we shut him down permanently. Understand?”

Brie nods. And then she turns to me, and for a split second, I see a flicker of regret cross her face. “I need to do this alone,” she tells me. “This is Family business, Nik. Frank and Larry will escort me. I’ll call you when I’m done.”

I want to argue, to insist on staying by her side. But I think I understand that look in her eyes. This is a test. Not just for me, but for herself. A chance to prove that she’s more than just some gold-digging widow, or whatever insults Caruso was about to sling at her.

“Of course,” I agree. “Whatever you say, Mrs. Colombo.”

In the meantime, there’s a difficult conversation I need to have.

As I walk toward the entrance of the upscale Japanese restaurant where Eva has agreed to meet me for dinner at such short notice, I catch my reflection in the tinted glass doors. The woman staring back at me is a far cry from the scrappy kid my father started training all those years ago. Well-cut suit, steel in my eyes, an air of danger that keeps people at arm’s length. This is who I am. Who I’ve always wanted to be.

Right?

This meeting with Eva could put me well ahead in my career, if I choose to share everything I’ve learned. And how much difference would it really make, anyway, if Eva Novak did know what I’ve learned about the Colombos? Nothing can hurt them more than they’ve already been hit. And Eva’s desire for information is not to trade it, or even undermine. All she wants is a good deal, and information is often a way to make that happen.

But then Brie's face flashes in my mind. Her real smile, not the megawatts that she turns on when she's playing a part. The curiosity in her eyes when she looks at me. The way she makes me feel...

And I hear myself telling her that she can trust me to keep her safe.

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Inside the restaurant, the hostess leads me through to a private dining room. The air is heavy with the sound and scent of grilling Wagyu. We enter a secluded room in a corner, hidden behind delicate screen doors painted with koi fish.

Eva is cross-legged on the floor at the low table, somehow looking as elegant as ever in bare feet, jeans, and a crisp white shirt. She smiles as I enter, and waves me down to sit. "I'm starving," she says. "Glad you're here. I've ordered for us both already," she adds in Russian, as I awkwardly pull off my boots as indicated by the hostess. "So we can have a nice, long, chat."

That does not bode well.

I pad over and sit, and then a waiter materializes, pouring us both glasses of sake. I don't touch mine.

"How are you finding your assignment?" Eva asks, swirling the clear liquid in her glass. "The widow Colombo seems to be keeping you on your toes. I haven't had a report from you since you started with her."

I choose my words carefully. "It's been an eventful time. The Family is still in flux after Don Colombo's death, as you can imagine."

"Mm." Eva leans forward, her voice dropping. "And who will be the successor?"

"They haven't chosen one yet." There, at least, I can be truthful.

But Eva won't let it rest. "Who is in the running? Caruso, I assume. Frank Colombo,

perhaps, the cousin?”

“No one has mentioned Frank Colombo as a potential.” I do take a sip of the sake now, to give myself time to think. Surely dropping Sabatelli’s name can’t hurt. He was already thought of as a front-runner, and there must have been chatter about what happened last night. “Vince Sabatelli was the only other serious contender, but as you might have heard?—”

“Yes,” Eva cuts me off, sounding bored. “He will be dead soon enough. Was he the Don’s killer, do you think?”

“I don’t know.” Once again, I can rely on truth. “Frank Colombo is supposed to be looking into things. My understanding is that only Vince Sabatelli is considered a serious suspect.”

“But why attempt a hit on the widow?” Eva muses. The door of the room slides open and the first round of food is brought in.

Once we’re alone again, I’ve had enough time to decide on a strategy. “Brie Colombo is not some defenseless widow, just as you suspected, boss. Perhaps someone thinks she knows too much, or that her influence in the Family is too great. Or...” I glance up at her. “Or perhaps an outside agency believes the same thing? That it would be simpler to deal with Frank than Brie Colombo.”

Eva sips at her sake. “It wasn’t me, if that’s what you’re asking. You know the rules—no involvement. No playing politics. Now, of course I’d rather deal with the genuine article, the new Don, but the Colombos will sign one way or another. And don’t forget, Dominika—” Finally she looks me in the eye. “—the inflated costs on that contract were your idea.”

I give a rueful smile. “Not my best one. But on that subject, boss, I have some news.”

“Finally,” she says coolly. “I was beginning to think I’d have to torture it out of you.”

Uh oh. At least what I’m about to say, I can say with Brie’s blessing. “Mrs. Colombo has asked for my help in discovering her husband’s killer. She says that if I help her, she will sign the original contract we offered.”

Eva’s eyes stay as cold as ever. “Why does she trust you so much?”

A pointed question. I never told her about the fact that I was there during the first attempt on Brie’s life. “I’m not sure that she does. But she sees me as enough of an outsider to have no motive for her death.”

It doesn’t satisfy Eva, that much is clear. But she moves on. “What else have you learned?”

“Not much.”

“I didn’t send you there to give me cheek.” Her tone sharpens. “What’s really going on inside the Colombo family? Who’s vying for power? And most importantly, what are the widow’s weaknesses, and how can you exploit her for the Consortium’s benefit?”

I take a sip of water, buying time. “Frank Colombo is trying to maintain order. The old Don...he had a lover. A young man.”

Eva rolls her eyes. “We all knew about his private secretary. So did the Colombos, they just chose to look away.”

Well, shit.

“And the gold-digging widow?” Eva presses me.

“She’s...smart, adaptable. The men underestimate her.”

Eva’s laugh is cold. “Don’t tell me you’re falling for her charms, Dominika. I thought your father taught you better than that.”

“I know my duty.”



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“Do you?” She leans back, studying me. “Because I wonder if you’re forgetting who you really work for.”

My jaw clenches. “I haven’t forgotten anything.”

Eva’s voice turns silky. “Then prove it. Tell me something useful. Something I can use.”

I hesitate, torn between loyalty to Eva and the growing urge to protect Brie. The woman across from me represents everything I thought I wanted: power, respect, a place in a world where strength is everything. But now, faced with betraying Brie’s trust, I’m not so sure.

“There’s some discrepancy in the casino’s books,” I finally offer. “Nothing major, but enough to raise eyebrows. The CFO, Sophie Johnson, might know more.”

“Now that’s interesting. I wonder what the widow knows about that.”

“I don’t think she’s involved,” I say quickly, then curse myself for the defensive tone.

Eva’s smile is razor-sharp. “My, my. You seem to have fallen under her golden spell.”

“Boss—”

She cuts me off with a wave of her hand. “Let me remind you of something, Dominika. Everything you are, everything you have, everything I can give you—it’s

because of the Consortium. Don't forget that."

I think of my father, of the legacy he left me. Of the place I wanted in the Consortium. But then Brie's face flashes in my mind again—her vulnerability, her strength, the way she looks at me like I'm more than just a weapon.

"I remember everything the Consortium has done for me, Eva," I say, my voice low. "And I know who I am."

Eva leans back on her hands, shaking back the dark waves of her hair. "So who are you, Dominika? The loyal soldier your father raised you to be? Or some lovesick fool ready to throw it all away for a pretty face?"

"I'm not—" I start indignantly, and then bite my tongue and make a decision. "The Colombos are worried about encroachment from the Triads. That's why Brie was so interested in our offer." The lie sounds plausible. Who knows, it might even be true.

And at least it seems to satisfy Eva, who raises an eyebrow. "Is that so? Well, that is useful information." She studies me for a long moment. "I do hope you're not holding anything back, Nik. You know how I feel about disloyalty."

"I know my place," I repeat.

"See that you remember it. You have my permission to help this widow find her vengeance, as long as she will sign the contract at the original price. And now I think you've had enough to eat. I know I have."

I stand, my legs a little unsteady. As I turn to leave, Eva's voice stops me.

"Oh, and Nik? Give my regards to Mrs. Colombo, won't you? Tell her I look forward to the day she signs that contract."

I give a quick nod, grab my boots, and then exit the little room as fast as I can without running. I head back on foot to the Golden Sands, just a few blocks away.

What the hell am I doing? I just lied to Eva Novak. My boss. One of the most powerful arms dealers in the world, who could squash me like a bug.

And for what? For a woman I barely know?

But the life I thought I wanted—the power, the respect, the sense of belonging to something bigger than myself—suddenly feels hollow compared to...

Compared to the way Brie makes me feel.

Like maybe there's more to life than being a perfect soldier for the Consortium.

## CHAPTER 20

Brie

I follow Frank and Larry to the room where they're holding Vince, Larry muttering under his breath now and then. I ignore him and force myself to stay composed.

I've always known these places existed in the casino. Soundproofed, steel-doored, inescapable. But I've never entered one myself. And as Frank pushes open the heavy door, the first thing that hits me is the smell—sweat, blood, desperation. My eyes take a moment to adjust to the darkness, one spotlight shining down harshly onto the man himself.

Vince Sabatelli.

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His suit is torn and stained, his hair matted with blood. One eye is swollen shut, but the other fixes on me with defiance.

“Well, well,” Vince rasps, his voice hoarse. “To what do I owe the pleasure, Mrs. Colombo?”

I turn to Frank and Larry. “Leave us.”

Larry gives a dark laugh, and Frank’s eyebrows shoot up. “Now, Breezy, I don’t think?—”

“I didn’t ask for your thoughts, Frank. I said leave us. That goes for the guards too.”

For a moment, I think he might protest further, but then he nods, ushering the others out. As the door closes behind them, I’m acutely aware that I’m alone with a man who, despite his current state, is still one of the most dangerous individuals in Las Vegas.

I pull up a chair, positioning myself just out of Vince’s reach, even though he’s tied down. His good eye follows my every move. I can feel him searching for weakness, for any sign that I’m out of my depth, any chance to grab hold of me.

“I have to say, I’m surprised to see you here,” Vince says, a hint of his usual charm peeking through the bruises. “Didn’t think Larry would let his new puppet out of his sight.”

I lean back, crossing my legs, letting the slit in my designer dress reveal just a hint of

thigh. It's a move I've used countless times to disarm men who underestimate me. "Is that what you think I am, Vince? A puppet? Is that why you tried to kill me when I turned down your ridiculous offer of marriage?"

"Look, I woulda got down on one knee if that's what you preferred," he chuckles, then winces at the pain it causes. "No offense, Breezy, but we both know you're in over your head. Terry kept you out of the Family business for a reason."

For years, I've played the role of the beautiful, slightly air-headed wife. It was safer that way, easier. Terry knew the real me under the act, even asked my advice from time to time. But with Terry gone and my life on the line, I can't afford to be that woman anymore.

"No offense to you, Vince, but right now I'm your only chance. So be smarter than you're being."

Vince's one good eye squints at me. "Let me guess, Larry's been filling your head with bullshit about how I'm the one who offed Terry?" I don't respond, but my silence seems to be answer enough. "Christ," Vince mutters. "Listen, Brie, I loved the old man. It wasn't me who took him out. But you want to know who's willing to do whatever it takes to get to the top, even if it means eliminating the competition?" He leans forward as much as his restraints allow. "Larry fucking Caruso. The man's a psychopath."

"And why should I believe you?"

"Look at me, sweetheart. You think I did this to myself? Larry's been itching for a reason to take me out, 'cuz I'm the only one who might challenge him for Don. And let me tell you, he's not planning on letting a widow stand in his way, neither. It's him. He's the guy. He offed the boss and he tried to hit you, too."

“But why should he care about me enough to want me dead?”

“He don’t like the influence you got in the Family. Thinks you’ll side against him and turn some of the other guys, too.”

That’s news to me. “Where was he the night of Terry’s murder?”

For the first time, Vince seems a little less certain of his accusation. “Well...he was in Phoenix. With me.”

“You were both in Phoenix together?”

With a sigh, Vince shifts in the chair. “The old man sent us away to do a deal together. Said we needed to spend time with each other. Make friends.”

I almost smile. I can just about hear Terry saying it to them, and I can certainly imagine their reactions.

“But that don’t mean nothing,” he goes on. “He could’ve hired someone, or got one of his crew to do it.”

Maybe. But whoever did it—if they were unknown to the Family or to casino security—wouldn’t have gotten far. Even one of Larry’s crew members would have been noticed by someone. Terry tried to have as little contact as possible with the lower levels, to make sure there was plausible deniability for legal purposes.

“You could have hired someone, too,” I point out, but then go on over his protests. “But let’s say I believe you. What then?”

He studies me for a long moment, judging whether he actually has a chance here. “You let me go,” he says slowly. “Reinstate me as Capo. I won’t even ask for a

chance at Larry—you can take care of him. And I know you will, eh?” He grins. “In return, I’ll swear loyalty to you until a new Don is chosen. You pick whoever you like, and I’ll fall in line.”

I raise an eyebrow. “How do I know you won’t just turn on Larry the moment you’re free?”

“Because unlikesomepeople, I know the value of loyalty,” he spits. “Terry was a good boss. He treated me fair. I respected that.” His voice softens slightly. “And I respect you, too. You’ve got more grit in you than most of these fuckers realize. So I’ll lay off Larry, until I’m ordered otherwise.”

His words catch me off guard. It’s not often that any man sees beyond the facade I put up. And every instinct I’ve honed over years of surviving in this world is screaming at me to be cautious.

But there’s another part of me, the part that’s been pushed aside and underestimated for too long, that sees an opportunity. I think of where I came from, the trailer park that feels like a lifetime ago.

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And I think of the man I left with a knife in his chest, bleeding out on the floor of the trailer with my mother crying and wailing over him.

I've reinvented myself countless times. Why not do it again? The Colombo Family power broker. I like the sound of that.

"Here's the deal, Vince. And it's the only one you'll get from me, so listen carefully. I'll have you released. I'll even have you reinstated as Capo. And you'll be my guy, like you say." He nods vigorously. "But if I so much as suspect you're playing me, I'll make sure what Larry did to you looks like a day at the spa. Are we clear?"

Vince's good eye widens slightly, a mix of surprise and respect. "Crystal clear, Mrs. Colombo."

"And you cut out the sleazy bullshit."

"Consider it cut."

I move to the door, then pause, looking back at him. "It might take me a few hours to talk Frank around. Make sure you stay alive until then."

He nods, a slow smile spreading across his battered face. "You got it, Girl Boss."

"I'm no girl, Vince."

He chuckles painfully. "Nah, you're a goddamn queen."



“You got that right,” I tell him, and then I open the door and step out.

Frank and Larry are waiting there with a few other low-ranked Colombo guards, and whatever conversation they were having stops as soon as I appear. “Was Vince with you in Phoenix the night of Terry’s murder?” I ask Larry without preamble.

“Yeah,” Larry says after a moment. “Yeah, he was.”

“And the other night, he was in the poker game the whole evening,” I go on. “Is that right?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Larry says. “He was there the whole time. Came up with me and Hudson Brooks after Frank sent down word.”

“So Vince had no access to his phone that night?”

Another pause. “No, I guess not,” Larry admits at last.

“The hitman who came after me was very well prepared. He had a casino uniform and he’d managed to disrupt the private elevator. Vince Sabatelli is a capable man, but even he wouldn’t have been able to set all that up during the game.”

“So he set it up before,” Larry argues. “Easy as pie.”

“But he had no reason to want to kill me then. Not until after I’d publicly humiliated him at the game.” Which means the previous attempt on my life probably wasn’t Vince either, but I don’t point that out. “Vince isn’t the guy,” I go on, when there’s no response from anyone. “Let him go.”

Larry’s face contorts with rage. “What the fuck? Breezy, you can’t be serious?—”

“Not only am I serious, but I’m also telling you, Frank, to reinstate Vince Sabatelli as Capo, effective immediately.”

The hallway erupts into chaos. Larry is shouting, his face turning an alarming shade of red. Frank is trying to calm him down, while simultaneously shooting me questioning looks.

“You got no rights here, lady,” Larry snarls, getting in my face. His breath is hot against my skin, and I can smell the expensive scotch he favors. “You haveno ideawho you’re dealing with!”

I think of all the times I’ve had to smile and nod at men like him, pretending to be less than I am. Not anymore. “I know exactly what I’m doing, Larry. I am protecting my husband’s legacy and I am protecting the Family—unlike you, whose only interest seems to be in gaining control. Vince Sabatelli did not kill my husband, but I’m starting to wonder aboutyou.”

The threat in my voice is clear, and the other men all drop into silence as they consider my words. And for a moment, I see a flicker of uncertainty in Larry’s eyes. But it’s quickly replaced by fury.

“This is bullshit,” he spits, before storming off.

As the men file uncertainly after him, Frank turns to me, shrugging. “I sure hope you know what you’re doing, Breezy. Larry has a whole lotta support in the Family.”

“Then he can take those fools with him if he chooses to leave.”

“Leave?” Frank blinks.

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I sigh, wondering how blind he can possibly be. “The Family cannot survive in its current form, Frank. Even if Larry and Vince kiss and make up—which they won’t—the cracks can’t bewallpapered over. We’re headed for an earthquake. And when it’s over, the landscape will be completely different.”

He just blinks at me. “Breezy, are you really serious about letting Vince go? Because the first thing he does, he’s gonna go after Larry, and that?—”

“He won’t go after Larry. Not if he knows what’s good for him.” I put a hand on Frank’s arm. “Vince didn’t kill Terry. He was in Phoenix that night, and there’s no way a hitman could have gotten into those back rooms without security noticing.” In fact, the only thing that Vince seems to be guilty of is an inadvisable public proposal and vague threat about me keeping my mouth shut. I almost chuckle, but swallow it down.

“I mean, when you say it all reasonable like that, it sounds okay,” Frank sighs. “Maybe Terry was onto something when he...” He trails off, and I see a look on his face that I don’t think I’ve ever seen before.

Guilt.

“When he what?” I ask sharply.

“When he—when he married you.”

I could swear that’s not what he was going to say originally, but I’ve got more important things to do than wheedle information out of Frank Colombo. So after I

make him promise he'll release Vince, I send a quick text to Holden, and then I call Nik. She sounds like she's outside, maybe walking along the Strip. "Where are you?"

"Close by. You done?"

"Yes. I'm heading to security. I asked Holden to meet me in there to go over the footage again."

She gives a huff that could be from relief. "Security room? Good idea. You need to eat?"

After the smell in that room where they were keeping Vince, I don't think I'll ever eat again. "Not hungry," I say. "And we still need to talk to Sophie Johnson, too."

"You don't go near her without me. Stay in security and I'll be there in ten."

I hang up and keep walking, hoping like hell that Holden has managed to get something from that footage.

## CHAPTER 21

Nik

I find Brie where she said she'd be, in one of the high-security rooms. It takes a while to convince the Golden Sands security guards around the private area that I've been summoned—and then only a call from Brie herself does the trick, and they escort me through. In the security room I find Holden and Brie hunched over a laptop computer in a corner, away from the security staff monitoring the casino.

Brie's hair is pulled up in a messy bun held together by what looks like a pen, an odd contrast to the glamorous dress she still wears. Beside her, Holden looks like death

warmed over—dark circles under his eyes, skin pale and clammy, his usually-styled hair in disarray.

“Any progress?” I ask, approaching cautiously. Holden jumps at the sound of my voice, his eyes wild for a moment before recognition sets in.

Brie looks up too, frustration in her eyes. “Nothing. Whoever tampered with this footage knew what they were doing. Holden’s been at it for hours, but...” She trails off, shaking her head.

I nod, studying Holden more closely. There’s something strange about him tonight, beyond the obvious exhaustion. A nervous energy radiates from him, setting my teeth on edge. “You okay, kid?”

Holden flinches, his eyes darting to Brie before dropping back to the keyboard. “I’m fine,” he mutters.

Brie gives me a look that tells me she’s asked him herself a few times, and got about this far.

I motion her aside, and she leaves Holden there scrolling fast then slow through the footage. “Things went okay with Sabatelli?” I ask, trying not to sound interested. I don’t actually want to know. If I don’t know, I can’t be forced to tell Eva.

“Things went about how I expected them to,” she sighs. “It wasn’t him. He didn’t kill Terry, and he didn’t hire the hitmen who came after me.” She says nothing more, and although I want to push, I don’t.

“Okay. Then—” Just as I’m about to suggest we pay a visit to Sophie Johnson, Holden lets out an involuntary shout of excitement, followed by slumping back in his seat.

“Sorry,” he says, as we stare over at him. “Thought I had something.” He goes back to listlessly fiddling with the computer.

“What’s up with him?” I ask Brie quietly.

Brie goes over to him and places a hand on his shoulder, her touch gentle, but he jumps in his seat. “Holden, seriously. What’s going on? And stop telling me it’s nothing. I’ll help you, whatever it is.”

His shoulders droop even lower, if that’s possible. “I’m scared, Brie,” he whispers, voice cracking. “Someone’s been leaving me threatening notes, and I swear to God, someone’s been following me. I can feel it, someone’s after me, just like they’re after you. I tried telling Frank, but he laughed it off. Said I was just trying to get attention.”

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Anger flashes in Brie's eyes. "Oh, he did, did he? I'll talk to him myself, have some guards put on your suite."

"No," Holden says at once. "No, Brie, please don't do that. I don't want him to know I've been talking to you about it. He already thinks I'm a useless coward."

"But—"

"No."

Brie flinches at the finality in Holden's voice, and looks back at me. "Then maybe..."

I can see exactly what she's thinking. Maybe we could take Holden with us to Solara.

I open my mouth to protest—bringing an outsider to her one secure location is a risk we can't afford—but Brie's face tells me it's pointless. When she sets her mind to something, there's no changing it. She'll bully, barter or wheedle her way to a win.

I've learned that much about her already.

"Fine," I concede.

"What?" Holden asks, glancing between us.

"You're coming to Solara with me," Brie says softly. "You'll be safe there."

Relief washes over his face. "Really? You'll really take me there?"

“Of course. You’re my best friend, silly. And you need to tell us about these threatening notes and this stalker, but you can do that when we get there.” Brie stands. “We’re not getting anywhere with this right now, and you’re exhausted. So let’s get out of here.”

“What about...” I raise an eyebrow.

Brie shakes her head a little, and once we’re in Holden’s own suite, helping him pack, she tells me in an undertone, “Sophie Johnson’s not in right now. We’ll have to come back. Besides, Holden is my main concern right now. If someone’s threatening him, we need to make sure he’s safe.”

“Then tell his lordship he’s not packing for a six-month cruise,” I reply. “He should just take what he needs for a few days.”

“This is what I need for a few days,” he says with a scowl at me, hair dryer in hand as he exits the bathroom.

Oops. Guess I spoke a little loud.

As I watch Brie and Holden move around the room together, I’m struck by the bond between them. It’s not romantic—anyone with eyes can see that—but there’s something strong there, born of shared experiences and secrets. It’s a stark contrast to how alone I’ve been. How I’ve kept everyone at arm’s length for so long.

Except for Brie Colombo. She’s the first person who seems to have so easily gotten through all my defenses and set up a space for herself.

The drive to Solara is longer than ever, because I take a circuitous route, doubling back several times to ensure we’re not being followed. Holden is huddled in the backseat, looking small and scared. It’s hard to reconcile this frightened kid with



what he actually is—or was, anyway: the lover of a powerful Mob Boss. He has none of Brie's spine about him, or not that I can see, anyway.

Frank Colombo might have been an asshole to laugh at Holden's fears, but I can kind of see how it happened.

As we pull up to the gated community, Holden's eyes widen. "Holy shit," he breathes, taking in the sprawling architectural masterpieces. "This is where Terry put you?"

Brie smirks as she turns from the front seat, a hint of her usual sass returning. "What, you thought I'd settle for some tacky McMansion?" She turns back to face forward and adds, "Beside, Terry didn't put me here. I'm the one who researched the community, approved all the architectural plans, oversaw the build. This is my house."

We pass through the gate with Brie's keycard and wind our way up to the house. Holden practically jumps out of the car, his mouth open in awe even though he can't see the full glory of the place since we've arrived in darkness.

"Jesus, Brie," he whispers. "Terry must have really cared about you."

A look of surprise passes over Brie's face, there and gone in an instant. "Of course he cared about me," she says softly, standing aside so that I can enter the house first for my security sweep. "But hello to you, Holden. You know that, right?"

Holden nods, blinking back tears. "Yeah, I know. It's just...all of this...it's overwhelming."

"And you'll be taken care of, too," Brie continues, her voice firm as we step into the cavernous living room. "Terry made sure of that in his will."

Holden shakes his head vehemently. “I don’t care about any of that. I loved him for who he was, not what he could give me.”

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“Hush up, now,” I say gently to them, as we step into the foyer. “Let me check the place out, and then you two can relax.”

But the place is exactly as we left it, minus some of the dust. Looks like Solara’s housekeeping came through in Brie’s absence. “Come on,” I say when I arrive back in the foyer. “Let’s get you settled, Holden. You look like you could use about a week of sleep.”

I want to ask him more about the threats he’s received. Hopefully it’ll be another clue toward whoever is doing all this. But now is not the time—the guy needs sleep. Brie leads him to a guest bedroom in the far wing of the house. It’s nicer than any hotel I’ve ever stayed in, with a view just as spectacular as the one from the master bedroom, even at night; the Milky Way threads through the midnight blue in a more spectacular show than even the Vegas Strip can offer. As Holden takes it all in, his eyes wide with wonder, I can’t help but feel a twinge of sympathy for him. Like Brie, his whole world has changed recently.

“Try to get some rest for now,” Brie tells him, squeezing his hand. “We’ll figure this out in the morning, I promise. But you’re safe here.”

Holden nods, already looking a little more relaxed now that he’s away from the casino. Back in the main living area, Brie collapses onto the leather couch, kicking off her heels with a groan. “What a fucking day,” she mutters, rubbing her temples.

I sit down next to her, close enough to feel the warmth radiating from her body. “You did good,” I say softly. “Taking care of Holden like that. Not everyone would stick their neck out when their own is on the line, too.”

“He’s family,” she says simply. “Maybe not by blood, but Terry loved him. That makes him my family, too. And family protect each other, no matter what.”

I nod, understanding all too well the bonds that form in this underworld life. They’re not always pretty, not always clean, but they’re strong as hell. It’s what’s kept me focused on the Consortium all these years, the fact that my father and my father’s father worked for them.

There’s history there that can’t be ignored.

And speaking of the Consortium, I still haven’t told Brie about my meeting with Eva. But before I can find a way to bring it up, Brie shifts closer, her hand finding mine. “Thank you,” she whispers, “for going along with this. I know it’s not exactly what you expected when you arrived in Vegas with the Consortium. And I know Eva’s orders are about protecting me, not anyone else. But I couldn’t leave Holden there at the Golden Sands, not if someone’s targeting him.”

I shrug, trying to ignore the way my fingers are tingling in hers. “It’s my job to keep you safe. If this is what it takes, then so be it.”

She laughs softly, shaking her head. “Always the professional, aren’t you, Nik? Don’t you ever let your guard down?”

There’s a challenge in her eyes, a heat that makes my breath catch. Before I can think better of it, I’m leaning in, tasting her lips. She responds instantly, her hands tangling in my hair as she pulls me closer. The kiss is desperate, hungry, filled with tension and fear and uncertainty.

This is a bad idea. A bad, bad idea.

And I’m willingly diving headfirst into it.

## CHAPTER 22

Nik

We stumble toward the bedroom, shedding clothes as soon as the door slams shut. There's an urgency to our movements, a desperate need to feel something real in the midst of all this chaos, or maybe it's just so that we don't stop and really think about what we're doing. As we fall onto the bed, I try to push away the guilt gnawing at the edges of my mind—the memory of Eva's words, the weight of my divided loyalties.

But Brie's hands are on me, trailing fire across my skin, and everything else fades away. There's only this—the softness of her body against mine and the driving, pulsing need I have for her.

And when I push her back against the pillows, the world narrows even further. All I can see is the beautiful, powerfully sexy woman underneath me, her bright hair spread across the pillow, eyes wide with desire.

I kiss her slow and deep, savoring the taste of her, the feel of her body against mine. Her hands wander down my body, tracing the lines of muscle, and a shiver of anticipation runs through me. Her touch is electric, and I can feel myself needing her more and more with every passing second. And then she says it.

“Hold me down. Be mean to me, Nik. Just a little.” She looks up at me through her lashes and smirks. “I know you want to.”

Thing is, I do. She fills me with a strange, fond cruelty at times, a desire to punish just so I can comfort afterward. So I take her wrists and push them firmly into the bed over her head. She struggles, just to test me, but I'm strong. Stronger than she is. And she likes it that way, I can tell by the soft sigh she gives, the way those glorious breasts quiver underneath me.

“Fuck me,” she says.

I lean in to kiss her. “You don’t get to tell me what to do right now. You’re not the boss here. Not anymore. Agreed?”

She nods, and I can see the excitement building in her eyes. I kiss her again, then trail my lips down her neck, her collarbone, to the sweet curve of her breast. Her skin is soft, warm, and I can’t help but sink my teeth into her, just a little, just to make her squirm. She does, moaning softly, and I keep going.

I move down her body, kissing and biting, marking her beautiful golden skin. I hope she’ll have faint bruises tomorrow, a reminder of our time here. I reach the swell of her hip and bite again, a little harder this time. She gasps, and her hips buck up against me. I can smell her now, the sweet scent of her arousal, and I can’t wait any longer.

I slide a hand between her thighs, urging her to open up her legs for me. She does, eagerly, and I run a finger along her glistening folds. She’s soaking wet, and it’s all I can do not to bury my face into her and devour her immediately. But I shift lower, spreading her legs wider, and kiss the inside of her thighs instead. She squirms, trying to push me where she wants me, but I’m not giving in that easily.

Instead, I reach up and give her nipple a firm twist. “Stop that,” I order. “You’re going to be still, and you’re going to do exactly as I say. Understand?”

She hums her assent, and I reward her with a gentle lick across her clit. I can hear the catch in her breath, feel the tension in her shaking body. But she stays still, so I keep going.

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My tongue dances across her hard clit, alternating slow, light strokes with hard, fast ones, and she responds beautifully, her breath coming faster, her hips twitching ever so slightly. And then I sink a finger into her, curling it just right, and she cries out in pleasure. “Yes—there?—”

I withdraw my finger at once. “Who’s in charge?” I ask her.

“You are.”

“That’s right. And you’re not going to come until I say you can. Got it?”

She nods impatiently, and I slide my finger back in, massaging that same spot that makes her tremble and moan. I take her closer and closer to the edge as I flick my tongue over her clit, then pause once more. She’s practically vibrating with need, her pupils blown wide, eyes dark and pleading.

I could do this all night, watch her come undone beneath me, but my own desire is building, and I can’t hold back any longer.

“Do you want to come, Brie?”

“Please.” Her voice is ragged, and the sound sends a bolt of pleasure straight to my core.

“Then this time you’ll have to work for it.” I roll right off her and pull her with me as I sit up against the bedhead. She straddles me and I look up into her face as I push my fingers back into her, thumb on her clit, and let my other hand drop between my own

thighs. “No coming until I say,” I remind her. “Now go on, gangster girl. I want to see you fuck yourself on my fingers, just like this. Give me a good show.”

She gives a breathy laugh and does as she’s told, rocking her hips forward and back, riding my hand, squeezing her own nipples into hard, pink bullets. Her breathing is ragged, the sight of her almost too much for me.

I tease myself slow and steady at the same time, keeping my pace about half of hers, and it’s like nothing else exists in the world. I want to watch this exact sight forever, watch Brie Colombo getting off on my hand, her beautiful breasts trembling and bouncing, her body glistening with sweat, her lips parted as she pants and gasps.

“I bet you’re close,” I say. “Are you close? Do you need to come?”

She can’t speak, only nod, and I know she’s telling the truth. Her movements are getting more frantic, and I can feel her inner walls tightening around my fingers.

“Make me come, and then you can, too,” I tell her. “Work for it. Show me you’ve earned it.”

She leans forward so her soft, perfumed breasts are swaying right into my face, her nipples grazing against my cheek, my lips?—

I’m only human. I catch her nipple with my mouth, sucking on it hard, lashing at it with my tongue.

“Oh, God,” she chants. “Oh God, oh God, oh God?—”

Hearing that is what puts me over the edge. It’s knowing that I can break her apart like this, have her whimpering and begging for me—that’s what I’m getting off on. And so I press my clit hard, let my orgasm hit, worrying her nipple with my teeth as it



does, making her squirm and plead all the more as I work myself through it. “Okay,” I gasp out at last. “Okay. Come for me.”

It takes only seconds, and then she’s shaking, shuddering, crying out my name as her climax overtakes her.

She’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

I hold her, stroking her back as her breathing slows, petting at her sweetly fluttering walls until the sensation dies away and her heartbeat returns to normal.

As she kisses me again, soft and sleepy, I know I’ve crossed a line I can never uncross.

I’m as involved with a client as it’s possible to be. But my loyalty to Eva, my duty to the Novak Consortium—it all seems distant and unimportant compared to the woman in my arms.

Brie, still in my lap, traces lazy patterns on my shoulder, her touch both soothing and electrifying. “What are you thinking?” she murmurs.

I hesitate, caught between honesty and self-preservation. “That this is dangerous,” I finally admit. “For both of us.”

She gives a wry smile. “Everything in our world is dangerous, Nik. That’s what makes it exciting.”

I can’t argue with that. The thrill of the forbidden, the knife’s edge between power and ruin—it’s a heady rush. But all the same...

“We need to be careful,” I say, running my fingers through her silky hair. “I’m

serious.”

“I know. Believe me, I know. But Nik...” She pauses, biting her lip. “I don’t want to trust you. And that actually scares me more than any threat out there.”

She wants to trust me. And I don’t deserve it. Not when I’m torn between my duty to Eva and...

And this strange new loyalty I feel toward Brie Colombo.

### CHAPTER 23

Brie

The Golden Sands never sleeps, but 8 a.m. is never its busiest time—not for our guests, anyway. But it is a good time to catch staff, such as Sophie Johnson. And that’s the time we pick the next morning, leaving Holden out at the Solara house working on the security footage. I’ve never used the tech in the security room much, except to check the cameras now and then, but now I’m glad Terry insisted on it, and had it filled with the kind of tools and software that Holden seems to need.

I’m intensely aware of Nik’s presence behind me as we walk through to the offices. Since last night, something’s shifted between us. It’s more than just the sex—though God knows that was amazing. It’s the way she looks at me now, like she sees right through the carefully crafted mask I spent years perfecting. It’s terrifying. Exhilarating.

I have no idea where things are going between us. It feels like I’m riding a rollercoaster into oblivion.

“You ready for this?” Nik’s voice is low, meant for my ears only.

“Sophie’s smart. She’ll cooperate if she knows we know about the missing money.”

“Or she might try to kill us,” Nik points out. “If she’s an assassin.”

I contacted Lyssa before we drove all the way in again, but got no answer. Still, I feel like the Syndicate would have alerted me to it if they'd found inconsistencies in Sophie's background. We pause outside Sophie's frosted glass office door. "Pretty sure she's not an assassin," I murmur.

"Prettysure," Nik says with meaning.

I push the door open without knocking, the element of surprise our first weapon. Sophie jumps in her chair, papers scattering across her desk like startled birds. Her eyes are wide, darting between Nik and me. And then she seems to relax.

"Oh, Mrs. Colombo! I...I wasn't expecting you." She hastily gathers the fallen documents.

"I'm sorry if we started you," I say, my voice cool as I gesture for Nik to close the door behind us. "We need to talk, Sophie."

She nods jerkily, smoothing her blouse with trembling hands. "Of course, of course. Please, have a seat."

I settle into one of the chairs facing her desk, while Nik remains standing by the door. "How are you holding up?" I ask, my voice deceptively gentle. "These past few days can't have been easy."

Sophie's laugh is surprised. "It's been...challenging. But we're managing. I'm sure it must have been much more difficult for you, Mrs. Colombo."

I lean forward, placing my elbows on her desk. The move is deliberately intimidating, invading her space. "Look, Sophie, I'll cut to the chase. We need to discuss the casino's finances."

She stares at me. “You know already?”

I nod slowly. “Yes. I know.”

But before I can continue, she collapses on her desk with a breathless laugh. “Oh, thank God, I’m so relieved to hear that. I’ve been wanting to talk to you, but with everything that’s happened, and given the delicacies involved?—”

“You’re relieved?” I echo, caught off guard. This isn’t how I expected things to go. I glance at Nik, who looks equally surprised.

Sophie makes an effort to seem more somber. “Well, of course, I’m shocked. Naturally. But also very relieved, I can’t deny it. As I said, I wanted to talk to you about it, but I couldn’t find the right moment.”

“Talk to me about what, Sophie?” Is this a confession? A plea for leniency?

She takes a shaky breath, and I’m struck by how young she looks in this moment. Sophie’s always carried herself with a maturity beyond her years, but right now, she seems barely out of college.

“About the missing money,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper, as though she’s worried someone will overhear. “I know you must have questions, but I’d like to go through everything with you first—the numbers.”

A memory surfaces, unbidden: Sophie, newly hired, nervously presenting her first financial report to Terry. I happened to be in the room, only because I was curious to see this young, female accountant that Terry had decided to hire. Her hands were shaking then, just like they are now as she shuffles her papers, but her numbers were utterly precise.

Terry had been impressed, said she had potential. “She’s got a good head on her shoulders,” he’d told me later. “And more importantly, she’s loyal. We need more people like her.”

He’d trusted her. Maybe I should, too.

“I’m listening,” I say, leaning back in my chair.

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Sophie's words come out in a rush, like a dam breaking. "Phil Reynolds has been skimming from the casino for the last few months. Small amounts at first, barely noticeable. But lately, it's gotten worse. I've been trying to track it, but he's good at covering his tracks."

I struggle to keep my face neutral, even as my head spins. Sophie and Phil—accusing each other. Who to believe?

"That's a serious accusation, Sophie," I say at last. "Do you have proof?"

Sophie nods frantically, her chair squeaking as she leans forward. "I noticed patterns at first. Discrepancies in the entertainment accounts that only a handful of people have access to, and then I traced the money into a few different areas of the casino, but it was eventually funneled out—and all of it was done under Phil's login."

I'm not sure what my face looks like, but Sophie's eyes get a little frightened.

"I wanted to tell someone," she goes on quickly. "But with Mr. Colombo gone, I didn't know who to go to. I was waiting...I hoped that they might have decided on, well, you know."

A new Don. She was waiting for the newly appointed Don.

I make a show of considering her words, even as doubt gnaws at me. Is she telling the truth? Or is this an elaborate act to throw us off her scent?

"Alright, Sophie," I say finally, my decision made. "I appreciate you bringing this to

my attention. I'll look into it. In the meantime, I need you to send me any evidence you can. Discreetly. Can you do that?"

She nods eagerly, relief washing over her face. "Of course. Thank you for believing me. I won't let you down."

As Sophie turns to her computer, already pulling up files, I rise from my chair, smoothing down my skirt.

"I'll be in touch," I tell Sophie, and then, injecting a note of warning into my tone, I add: "Remember, not a word of this to anyone. As far as anyone else is concerned, this meeting never happened. For your own safety, Sophie, as well as mine."

Sophie nods, her face serious. "I understand. You can count on me, Mrs. Colombo."

I lead Nik to my dressing room, which is nearby, and pull her into the bathroom again, turning on the shower.

"What do you think?" she asks me.

I can't afford to trust blindly. But something about Sophie's reactions felt genuine. "We'll play along for now," I decide. "But we keep a close eye on both Sophie and Phil. If she's lying, we'll find out soon enough."

"Whichever of them it is, they could also be a killer," Nik warns me. "You get that, right?"

"Of course I get it," I snap, and then sigh. "Sorry. I'm just on edge."

"You're allowed to be," Nik says with an ironic smile. Her hand floats out, and just when I think she's going to cup my cheek, she drops it again. "We should get



moving.”

We make our way back to the casino floor, my mind churning with possibilities. But as we head back to the lobby, I spot a familiar figure across the room. Phil Reynolds is charming a group of high rollers who seem to have just arrived from the airport. His laugh carries across the floor, smooth and practiced.

Our eyes meet across the room. Phil’s smile doesn’t waver, but something in his gaze seems harder. Speculative.

I force myself to smile back, to nod as if nothing’s wrong. It’s a smile I’ve perfected over the years—the ability to look a potential enemy in the eye and make them believe I’m not a threat.

But my heart is pounding, adrenaline coursing through my veins. Nik’s hand finds the small of my back, a silent promise of protection.

And one thing’s for certain: I’m done being a pawn in someone else’s game.

It’s time for this pawn to become a queen, damn it.

## CHAPTER 24

Nik

The desert stretches out before us, a vast expanse of color as the sun begins to dip lower in the sky. I stand at the floor-to-ceiling windows of the living room in Brie’s house at Solara, eyes scanning the horizon for threats out of sheer habit.

The silence is broken by the soft clink of ice against glass as Brie pours us both a drink.

“You plan to stand on duty 24/7?” Brie’s voice carries a hint of amusement, but I detect an undercurrent of exhaustion that has nothing to do with physical tiredness. Today’s revelations about Phil and Sophie have taken their toll on her. When we got back, we found Hudson fast asleep. I sent Brie to bed as well, and they both woke up about an hour ago. We went to the clubhouse to eat a late lunch, and Hudson finally opened up about this stalker of his, and the anonymous notes, though he admitted to having destroyed all of them.

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The fact that they were physical notes, rather than texts or emails, is interesting to me. Whoever the person is, they have enough access to the casino to be able to slide notes right under his suite's door. Maybe they don't have his phone number—or maybe they don't want to risk being traced.

But they were willing to be seen on security camera. Holden said he'd checked and seen nothing, but now that he's aware of the scrubbed footage from the night of the murder, he thinks he should check again.

Brie and I agreed. But for now, until we can get him a copy of the footage from those particular dates and times, he's getting back to work on the footage from the night of the murder. That's where he is right now, in the security room.

Brie has just been making private phone calls to Frank Colombo about Family business, but seems to be finished now. I turn, accepting the glass she offers. Our fingers brush, and I feel that increasingly-familiar jolt of electricity. "Things okay at the casino?" I ask before taking a sip.

Brie settles onto the sofa, her golden hair catching the light. She looks softer here, away from the harsh neon of the Strip. She smiles at me. "They're fine. And Holden's going to be busy for a while. So...we'll have to entertain ourselves for a while." Her smile turns into a wicked grin. "Any ideas?"

I still haven't told Brie that I met with Eva. But surely she must expect me to have spoken to my boss, even if she hasn't?—

"Hey, I was just kidding around," Brie says quickly.

“I’m sorry,” I say at once. “It’s not that I don’t want...I mean, I—I’m just processing everything.”

“Maybe you could use a nap, too?” she suggests

I’m about to answer, but a movement outside the front-facing windows catches my eye. I’m on my feet in an instant, tensed for action.

“Nik? What is it?” Brie’s voice is sharp with concern.

I hold up a hand, silencing her as I move closer to the window, and Brie follows behind me. A moment later, she gives a giggle. “It’s okay. It’s just Katy, the cleaning manager.”

Brie moves to answer the door, and I position myself just out of sight, close enough to intervene if necessary. The door opens, revealing Katy, who looks startled to see Brie.

“Oh, Ms. Colombo! I didn’t expect to see you here,” Katy says, her voice warm but curious. “The schedule said you’d be absent.”

Brie leans casually against the doorframe, the picture of nonchalance. “I forgot to update it—again. I’m sorry. Is everything alright?”

Katy nods, but her brow furrows slightly. “Yes, of course, ma’am. It’s just that your house is scheduled for cleaning today. I’ll leave you alone, but—well, while I’m here, I did want to check about the ongoing schedule. Maybe we need to look at shifting our cleaning times? You’ve been here more often lately, and I wanted to make sure the staff isn’t disturbing you.”

I tense at her words. Katy’s innocent observation that Brie is here more often could

be dangerous in the wrong hands.

Brie's laugh sounds forced to my trained ear, but I doubt Katy notices. "Well, you know how it is. Sometimes you just need to get away from the city lights."

"Of course, of course," Katy agrees. "So should we expect you to be here more regularly now? We can adjust our schedule accordingly."

Jesus, what is it with this woman and her damn schedule? I have to fight to swallow my huff of irritation.

"That won't be necessary," Brie says quickly. Maybe she heard me after all. "My schedule is unpredictable at best. Just keep to the usual routine. And you're welcome to come in now, if you like—there's no reason you can't do your work while we're here."

"Oh, my goodness, I don't think so," Katy gasps. "No, our instructions about this house are quite clear. Only during absences. I'll return another day."

Brie's posture softens slightly. "Thank you, Katy. That's very accommodating. Have a good afternoon."

As the door closes, Brie turns to me, sighing. "Terry insisted that none of the staff could ever come in while I was here. It was one of his conditions."

"He was right to be cautious," I say. "But I don't like that the staff here is keeping tabs on your movements. And I don't like that they have unfettered access when you're not here."

"They're filmed on the internal cameras while they're here."

“But if word gets out about this place...”

Brie runs a hand through her hair in frustration. “Damn it, this was supposed to be my sanctuary, the one place I could let my guard down.”

I move closer, resting a hand on her shoulder. “Hey, it still is. We’ll get the fucker behind all this, and then you can move on with your life.”

She leans into my touch, just for a moment, before a cleared throat makes us jump.

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“Sorry to interrupt,” Holden says, with a half-smile. “I just wondered who was at the door.”

“Katy, the cleaning manager,” Brie tells him.

“Oh, right. She came in earlier today, just after you left. I scared the hell out of her—she thought the place was empty.”

Brie groans. “I’ll just halt the cleaning schedule altogether for now,” she says. “That seems the easiest thing to do.” She looks at Holden. “How’s it going with the footage?”

He shakes his head. “I feel like my eyes are swimming. Honestly...I think I need more specific tech that only the casino would have. I was thinking I could head back there for the night.”

Brie shakes her head at once. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Holden. Not if someone’s gunning for you like they are for me.”

He looks torn. “I’m not excited about the idea, either,” he admits. “But this footage is the best chance we have.”

Brie seems to come to a decision. “How about you stay in my suite instead of your own? If there’s someone after you, they wouldn’t think to look there.” I don’t like that idea at all, but I can hardly tell Brie what to do with her own property. And at least it seems to comfort Holden, who looks a lot happier now.

“That’s a great idea,” he says. “And I’ll let you know as soon as I get anything off the tapes.”

We take him down to the clubhouse to call him an Uber, and then Brie and I walk back up to her house. “So,” she says, once the door is closed behind us again. “I guess we really will have to entertain ourselves tonight. Any movies you’ve been hanging out to see? Or is there...something else you feel like doing?”

I look at her, free of makeup after her earlier shower, her hair in a simple ponytail, her shoulders relaxed for once, and a wicked glint in her eyes. An insistent throbbing pulse starts running through my body, brain to clit.

“Yeah,” I tell her. “I can think of one thing I’d really like to do.” I push her back against the wall, and she lets out a gasp as I clamp my hands around her wrists, holding her hands above her head. “I’d like to tease you until you can’t remember your own name, and then make you come so hard you soak the floor with it. What do you say?”

“Yesplease,” she breathes, just before I claim her mouth with mine.

## CHAPTER 25

Brie

As soon as Nik lets me go, I’m heading to the bedroom, but she catches me by the wrist again and pulls me back.

“Oh, no you don’t,” she says, amused. “You don’t get to be a pillow princess today.”

“That is outrageous slander!” I say. “Last night you made me do all the work, so?—”



“Don’t worry.” She’s leading me determinedly to the living room. “I’ll do most of the work this time. All you’ll have to do is admire the view.”

I let her pull me to the middle of the room, where she turns me to face her. “This time is a gift,” she says. “So I’d better unwrap my present before time runs out.” I’m not dressed up today, wearing only a tank top and yoga pants, but the way Nik reverently undresses me, you’d think I was in one of those expensive designer gowns I wear around the Golden Sands. She strips me to my underwear and then takes off my bra, weighing each breast in her hands before thumbing at my nipples.

“Beautiful,” she murmurs. “Do you know how goddamn sexy you are, Brie? What am I saying, of course you do.” I grin, and then stop grinning as she runs a hand between my thighs, pushing them open. “Are you wet for me yet?”

I’m almost embarrassed by how turned on I am already. “Uh-huh.”

She rubs her fingers over my panties, encouraging the damp patch, and smirks. “Mm, I like it when you’re eager for it. And you taste so good...I don’t want you to miss out on that.” I’m not sure what she means, but she keeps fingering me until I forget all about it, working my pussy under the silk and lace of my panties until I can smell myself, hot and damp, rising up between us. “Let’s get these off of you,” she murmurs, tugging down my now-soaked panties. She balls them up carefully, then slides a hand around the back of my neck. “Open up.”

I do, but mostly from surprise, and she takes the opportunity to go ahead and press my own panties into my mouth. I gasp in surprise, inhaling the musky, salty scent of my own arousal.

“Now be a good girl and bend over that couch for me,” she orders. I go over on unsteady legs, and Nik helps position me kneeling over the padded arm of the small two-seater, so that I can see straight out the floor-to-ceiling window. “Now all you

have to do is relax,” she tells me, patting me on one ass cheek. “And let me work.”

I’m about to ask her what she’s planning, but the words die on my tongue as she drops to her knees and spreads my legs further apart. Then her fingers are tracing over my ass crack, pulling it wide, and I feel a stream of cool air against my soaked cunt and hot asshole as she blows gently over me.

I moan into my own panties, dropping my head as I feel her nosing into me. She licks right up and down, her tongue flicking over my tight hole and making me squirm, before pressing in. I can feel her tongue working inside me, and then her fingers find my clit, pinching and rubbing at it until I buck in protest, the sensation so intense that I groan. I arch my back, my breath coming in ragged gasps as Nik builds the pressure up in me. And right when I begin to really need it, she slides her fingers deep into my cunt, fucking me with a steady rhythm that matches her fingers on my clit, her tongue on my hole. I’m trembling, so wet and needy that I can feel it dripping down my thighs—soaking the floor, just like she said.

Just when I think I can’t take any more, Nik abruptly stops, leaving me on the edge of climax. She moves around to the couch and slides onto it herself, positioning herself so that her pussy is almost within my reach. “You can just watch if you can’t bring yourself to do any work,” she tells me teasingly, opening up her lips to show me the glistening, delicious flesh beneath.

I make a pleading noise around the lace and silk holding down my tongue and she smiles approvingly, moving further down so that my mouth is directly over her, then pulls the panties free from my mouth. “Come on, then,” she tells me. “Eat up.”

I happily take up the invitation, sliding my tongue into her folds, tasting her, exploring her. Nik’s hands move my head around wherever she prefers, guiding my movements, showing me the way she wants it, and I take to the task eagerly, my own orgasm forgotten. I don’t have the best angle here, but Nik is getting worked up

already, her breath coming faster as I lick at her, and I can see her abs tensing, her muscles bunching as she gets closer.

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“That’s it,” she pants. “Get your lips around it and then...yeah, just like that...” I suck her clit into my mouth and her entire body jerks. She groans, grinding her hips up into my face, and I keep working her until finally I feel her tense up all over, and she gives a hoarse shout.

I rest my face against her thigh, breathing hard, but she doesn’t take long to recover.

“What a talented little clit-sucker you are,” she tells me, pushing me back so she can stand again. “And now you deserve a reward.”

She returns to her previous position, on her knees between mine, her hand, fingers and tongue working in sync as she resumes pleasuring my throbbing core. My body responds as easily as always to her touch, muscles clenching around her fingers as she brings me to the brink of orgasm.

And then, in a moment of wonder, she pushes deeper into my cunt, stretching me to the limit, giving me the mind-blowing release she promised me. I can’t even cry out, the intensity is so overwhelming. I just go tight as a bow, quivering all over on her hand, until the peak dies away, leaving me worn out but ecstatic.

“You made such a mess,” she tuts once I’ve come back to my senses, and she’s withdrawn her hand.

“Maybe Katy can come clean up,” I say, and then giggle.

“That woman is not setting foot in this damn house,” Nik laughs.

And for the first time in a long time, I'm happy to clean up after myself. We spend the night locked close in each other's arms, and then the next day we don't leave the house at all, lost in each other, wearing each other out over and over again...

Until the burner phone in my underwear drawer starts up an angry buzzing.

"It's Frank," I sigh, once I've fished it out. I replay the voice message he left, which is strangely brief.

"You need to come back to the Golden Sands."

That's it. That's all he says. I replay it for Nik on speaker, and she frowns as she takes in my face. "What is it?"

"It just sounds...weird. For Frank, I mean. He's never this abrupt." A terrible fear clutches me. "Oh, God, Nik—what if something's happened to Holden?"

We rush back as soon as we can, but when I get into the casino lobby, Phil Reynolds' smiling face is one of the first to greet me. "Good evening, Mrs. Colombo. I believe Mr. Frank is waiting for you in the usual room."

"Is everything alright?" I demand, and he looks faintly surprised.

"As far as I'm aware," he replies.

Phil would definitely know if something had happened to Holden. So whatever this is, maybe it's Family business—or maybe Frank has finally found out who killed Terry.

I share this thought with Nik, who cautions me to temper my expectations, but we still hurry as we head to the conference room where the Family likes to hold

meetings.

But as soon as I step into the room, I stop abruptly as I take in the scene. Everyone has arrived before me. Frank's there, his craggy face etched with lines of worry. Larry stands in the corner, his bulky frame hunched and his eyes fixed on me.

Even Vince Sabatelli is there, lounging in a chair, feigning nonchalance, but the marks of Larry's torture are still fresh on him, and I can see the calculating gleam in the one eye of his that hasn't closed over.

But more strangely, Lyssa and Scarlett Fletcher stand in the shadows near the back of the room, their postures mirroring each other in their trained readiness. I catch Lyssa's eye for a moment, and there's a flicker of...something. Something dark. It's gone before I can really read it.

And then there's Holden, thank God. But the relief passes quickly when he won't look at me, intent on his laptop at the foot of the long table that takes up most of the room.

"What's going on?" I ask, injecting a cool confidence into my words that I don't entirely feel. "Why are the Styx Syndicate reps here?"

"Might as well ask why a Consortium member is here," Larry growls.

"Now, just hold on, everyone," Frank says loudly. "Just hold on. We got a few things to discuss. And Breezy, the fact is, these ladies came to us with...well, kind of a weird story."

"Oh?" I stare at the two Syndicate women. They stare back. There's no friendliness at all in their faces. "What story?"

“We told you we came here to find a female assassin,” Lyssa says. “And we’ve looked into every name you gave us. From your friend there, Nik—” she gestures “—through to Sophie Johnson. They’re all clear. Backgrounds solidly established with multiple confirmations from multiple sources.”

My eyebrows twitch together. I know I’m missing something. I just don’t know what. “Well...good. Perhaps this assassin you were looking for isn’t here after all.”

“Oh, she’s here,” Scarlett says softly. Her hand drifts to her hip, where I see she has something in a holster—a gun or a knife. Something deadly, either way.

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“I don’t understand,” I say.

“Here’s the thing, Mrs. Colombo,” Lyssa drawls. “The only woman in your husband’s inner circle with a background that couldn’t be independently verified...” She tips her head to one side. “Was you.”

For a moment, silence reigns, until I break it myself with a laugh. “You think—you think I’m the assassin?” But my giggles die away as no one else laughs with me.

In fact, if anything, they all look more suspicious.

“This is ridiculous,” I scoff. “If you want to know about my background, I’ll tell you. I was born in West Virginia. I was raised?—”

“In a trailer park, yes,” Lyssa says. “We know that story. No one could verify it.”

“For Christ’s sake!” I laugh, but I’m starting to feel a little desperate now. Even Nik, when I glance over my shoulder at her, looks perplexed. “Look, no one back there would know the name Brie Colombo, that’s for sure. And?—”

“There’s more,” Larry says darkly from the corner, and I don’t like the grim smile he’s giving. “Brooks! Show her.”

“Just a moment, Mr. Caruso,” Holden mutters, his fingers flying over the keyboard. I can see the sheen of sweat on his brow, the miserable look on his face. He looks at me and mouths I’m sorry.



Frank clears his throat, the sound like gravel crunching. “Mrs. Colombo,” he begins—not Breezy anymore, I note, and I can hear the strain in his voice, the effort it’s taking him. “Perhaps you’d like to explain what we’re about to see?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Okay, I think I’m connected to the screen over there,” Holden announces, his voice cracking slightly. He looks up at me, his eyes wide with a mix of fear and apology. “These files were pretty well covered, but I managed to recover some of the original picture. It’s not great quality, but...”

He trails off as the first images flicker to life on the screen. There’s that blur again, grainy, indistinct, but definitely there’s something familiar about it.

“This is the security footage from the night of Terry’s...of Don Colombo’s murder,” Holden explains, his voice small in the cavernous silence of the room. “If I pause it here—you can see, there’s the shape of a person there. The first thing I recovered was that the door actually opens.”

The room goes deathly quiet as we watch, a ghost-door opening and closing, just as Holden said.

“As for the figure, that was much more deeply erased. But...” He takes a breath, then goes on sadly, “but there’s a picture frame near the door, as the person walks by. When I added a high-contrast filter—” Suddenly the image switches, and a blurred-out figure walks past the picture, just as Holden said, opens the door, then closes it. “So then I wondered if there might be anything reflected in the glass of the picture frame.”

I can hear my own heartbeat thundering in my ears, drowning out everything else.

“I just needed to sharpen it up a little,” Holden murmurs. He rewinds the footage, zooms in, and then begins to change the lighting of the image so that the reflection begins to appear, details emerging from the digital murk like a photograph developing in a darkroom.

And then the image resolves into near-perfect clarity.

I feel the blood drain from my face. And I hear Nik gasp behind me, too, as the enhanced image comes into focus.

My own face stares back at me from the screen.

I feel like I’m falling, even though I’m standing perfectly still. This can’t be happening. This isn’t possible. But there it is, in stark black and white.

Damning evidence.

“How about now, Mrs. Colombo?” Frank’s voice cuts through the rushing noise in my ears, sharp and accusing. “Would you care to explain now?”

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out.

Larry is stalking closer, murder in his eyes. “I knew it!” he spits. “I fucking knew you were a poisonous little bitch! You killed him, didn’t you? You killed Don Colombo!”

Vince leans back in his chair, a wolfish grin spreading across his purple-and-blue face. “Well, well, well,” he drawls, his voice dripping with false concern. “Isn’t this interesting? Black Widow Breezy.”

Lyssa and Scarlett are already making their way around each side of the table, headed for me, weapons out. Lyssa casually twirls a knife in her hand.

I back up, knees trembling, until I bump into what feels like a solid wall.

It's Nik.

God, Nik.

I whirl to face her and see the struggle playing out behind her eyes. Does she believe it? Does she think I'm capable of this?

"This isn't what it looks like," I whisper, but the words sound hollow even to my own ears. They hang in the air, pathetic and unconvincing. I turn back to the room. "It's not me!"

"Not you?" Larry snarls, cutting me off. He takes another step closer, his bulk looming threateningly. "That's your face, right there on the screen! So why don't you explain it to us, huh? Explain how you murdered your own husband? How you've been playing us all for fools? How you've been pretending to grieve, pretending to give a shit about the Family, while all along you were the one who put a bullet in Don Colombo's head?"

"Now, now," Vince drawls, his voice a mockery of reason in the charged atmosphere. "Let's not jump to conclusions. I'm sure Mrs. Colombo has a perfectly reasonable explanation for why she was so close to her husband's office moments before he was shot dead. Don't you, honey?"

"And you can shut your goddamn mouth," Larry bellows, stabbing a finger toward Vince. "I bet you two were in on this together! Why else was she so eager to set you free?"

His words are like a match to gasoline. The room erupts into chaos. Accusations fly, voices raised in anger and disbelief.

Through it all, I can feel Nik's presence behind me, solid and unwavering. But for how long? How long before she, too, turns against me? The thought sends a spike of fear through my heart, colder than any threat of violence.

I take a deep breath, squaring my shoulders. I'll be damned if I'm going down without a fight.

"Enough!" I shout, my voice cutting through the din, and the room falls silent.

I lock eyes with each person in the room, one by one. Frank, his face a mask of disappointment and anger. Larry, practically vibrating with rage. Vince, his one good eye gleaming with opportunistic glee. Lyssa and Scarlett's expressions have hardened into professional masks, waiting to see what my next move will be.

I can't see Nik. She's behind me. I have no idea what she's thinking.

"I didn't do this," I say, trying to sound forceful. Convincing. But my voice comes out hoarse and wavering.

Larry's expression changes, and I can see he's made up his mind.

"You fucking bitch!" he bellows, and before anyone can say another thing, he's charging straight for me, strong hands reaching for my neck.

## CHAPTER 26

Nik

I move without conscious thought, reacting on pure instinct. In a heartbeat, I'm between Brie and the enraged Larry Caruso, my stance wide and steady, hands slightly raised in a threatening gesture that makes him stop short.

“Everyone needs to take a step back,” I say evenly. “There must be a reasonable explanation.”

Behind me, I hear Brie’s shaky intake of breath. I risk a glance back at her and my heart clenches at the sight. She’s pale as milk, her pallor visible even under her carefully applied makeup.

I’m not sure how we’re going to get out of this, not if the Colombo men team up with the Syndicate women, but I’ll do what I can.

An unexpected voice pipes up. “This is bullshit!”

Holden stands, his face flushed. I’ve always seen him as a bit of a lightweight, more concerned with appearances than substance. But as he faces down a room full of hardened criminals, I see a different side of him.

He’s got a backbone.

“Brie loved Terry,” he continues, his voice ringing with conviction. “She would never hurt him. You all know that, for Christ’s sake!”

His passionate defense seems to give Frank, at least, some pause, who frowns as he thinks it through. But Caruso isn’t having it. “Shut your mouth,” he snarls at Holden, his large hands clenching into powerful fists. “After I snap the blonde’s neck, I’ll come for you, too. You make me sick, you little?—”

“Enough!” Frank’s sharp shout cuts off whatever slur Larry Caruso was about to throw. He turns to Brie, his expression grave. The look on his face—a mixture of disappointment and resigned determination—tells me all I need to know about what’s coming next.

“I’m sorry, Breezy,” he says, and I believe he genuinely is. “But given this evidence, we need to at least take a look at things. You understand.” He nods to Vince. “Sabatelli, take her to?—”

“Not so fast,” Lyssa interrupts, her hand moving again to rest casually at her hip. The move is smooth, almost lazy, but I know better. She’s ready to draw a weapon in a fraction of a second if needed. She and Scarlett are the ones I really need to worry about—at least Larry Caruso telegraphs what he’s about to do. “If she’s one of Grandmother’s, we have a prior claim. She comes with us.”

The tension in the room ratchets up another notch. I can see hands inching toward weapons, eyes darting. We’re seconds away from a bloodbath.

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I reach behind me and give Brie a subtle push toward the door. To her credit, she takes a step back, even though I'm pretty sure she's close to collapse.

"Here's the thing, folks," I say loudly, pulling the attention of everyone. "Anyone who wants Brie Colombo will have to come through me. And as a member of the Novak Consortium, my boss would not like to hear that her representative has been...disrespected."

At this point in time, I'm not sure Eva Novak would care one way or the other what happens to me, but happily, the rest of the people in this room don't know that. Invoking her name has the effect I sought, giving everyone pause—even Lyssa, who initially rolls her eyes. But Scarlett says something quickly in her ear that makes her sigh and relax her stance.

"You want to leave, fine," Lyssa says to me with a sharp grin. "We'll just track her down later and kill her then."

"No one's killing anyone," Frank growls. "Not until we get to the bottom of this."

"No one is doing anything right now but allowing Brie and me to walk out of the casino unharmed," I say.

"And Holden." Brie's voice comes over my shoulder reed-thin at first, but with gathering strength. "Holden is coming with us, too."

I think that's probably a good idea. If Caruso is the one who's been sending him threatening notes—and felt comfortable enough to threaten Holden just now in front



of an audience—Holden will be safest far away from the Golden Sands.

“And Holden,” I say, jerking my head at him. He just about sprints across behind me. “We’ll say goodnight for now.”

We back out slowly.

No one moves to stop us.

“What now?” Brie asks breathlessly as we walk-run across the casino floor, heading for the lobby. “They’ve probably put a bomb under my car!”

“We’ll take mine,” Holden says. “Staff parking lot. This way!”

We get to the lot and Holden’s car is there where he gestures at it, a nondescript sedan that blends in with a dozen others. Not bad for a getaway vehicle. “Keys!” I snap, clicking at Holden as he hits the button to open the doors. He throws them to me and dives into the back with Brie, while I take the driver’s seat, gun the engine, and drive as fast as I dare away from the Golden Sands Casino.

Without anyone trying to stop us, I merge into the never-ending flow of Vegas traffic. The glittering hotels and casinos blur past us as I weave through, my mind racing about as fast as the car.

When I glance in the rearview I catch Brie’s eye. She’s starting to get a little color back, and she turns to look out the rear window, to make sure we’re not being followed. Holden, on the other hand, looks like he might throw up, his face pale green in the intermittent glow of passing streetlights.

“Did they really let us go?” Holden gasps, breaking the tense silence that has fallen over us.

I grip the steering wheel tightly, my knuckles white with the effort. “I don’t know,” I say grimly. “Maybe.” I look at him in the mirror. “You could’ve given us a heads up, Brooks.”

His face crumples. “I’m so sorry—Frank came in when I was fiddling with it in Security and he saw Brie’s face the same time as I did. He had me under surveillance from that second on.” And then he looks at Brie, begins to ask a question, and thinks better of it.

I turn my eyes back to the road, but as I navigate the turns my mind is running through everything that happened tonight.

Who the hell is Brie Colombo, really? Is she the vulnerable but clever woman I’ve come to care for, or is she something else entirely—a skilled actress playing us all for fools? One of these assassins the Syndicate is searching for?

What exactly have I gotten myself into?

I glance at Brie again, who still hasn’t said anything, studying her beautiful face in the shifting light. Her jaw is set, her eyes focused straight ahead. Despite everything, I can’t help but admire her strength, her ability to hold it together even now. But there’s a haunted quality there too, a hint of that scared little girl from the trailer park.

Or was her background just a story, too?

Does it even matter?

Because in this moment, speeding through the neon-lit streets of Las Vegas with a maybe-murderer and a terrified assistant, I realize I’m in way too deep. I’ve broken one of the most fundamental rules of the Consortium—business is business.

Never get involved.

Eva is not going to be happy about this. And while I'm happy enough to take on the Colombos, even the Syndicate...

I'm not sure I can protect Brie from Eva Novak, not if she decides to point the whole Consortium Brie's way and pull the trigger.

## CHAPTER 27

Brie

I slam the car door shut when I get out at the Solara house, and I'm grateful for the cool night air whispering across my skin, carrying with it the scent of desert sand. I'm so relieved to be back here.

I'm so relieved to be alive.

Nik was the only thing that kept me from completely losing it back there. Her warmth, her strength...

She's become such an important part of my life in so short a time.

And now Nik is the first to put herself in potential danger once more. She unlocks the door with the key she takes from me, and then she makes Holden and me wait there in the foyer while she does a sweep of the house.

I haven't said a word to Holden the whole drive over, and he hasn't spoken to me, either. But he does now. "Brie...what the hell is going on?" he asks, his voice trembling.

"Someone set me up. I guess maybe when they couldn't kill me via a hit-for-hire, they tried to get the Family to do it for them instead." I feel a pang of guilt for dragging Holden into this mess. But there's no time for coddling him.

Besides, Nik has returned, her face calm. "We're alone."

And then we stand there, the three of us, looking at each other. The silence stretches until I feel an overwhelming sense of guilt, despite the fact that...

"I'm innocent," I say, my voice sounding small.

Nik reaches out to put a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. "We know."

"Yeah," Holden says quickly. "Of course you're innocent. Someone must have set you up, like you said."

"That's exactly what must have happened," Nik says, but she's still looking at me so intently that I wonder what she's thinking.

But then she lets me go and turns to Holden. "Please tell me you took the footage with you."

For the first time, he grins. "Of course I did." He holds up a flash drive, tapping it against his temple. "I also stored all the different filter passes I made on the original file online. I can keep working on it, right from where I left off. In fact, if Frank hadn't jumped to conclusions, I'm pretty sure I would have found another layer under that picture of Brie."

I grab Holden's arm and drag him toward the home security office. "You need to get on it, right now. There has to be something we missed."

The security office is a testament to Terry's paranoia. Multiple screens line one wall, connected to a state-of-the-art computer system that would make most tech companies green with envy. As Holden boots the security footage up, I can't help but think of Terry. He might have been a bastard in many ways, but he knew how to prepare for the worst.

“Holden, you need to work your magic,” I say, gesturing to the main screen where the damning security footage is now cued up. “There has to be something you can do to prove I wasn’t there that night.”

Holden slides into the chair and gets to work. Nik leaves us there with a promise to keep the door locked, saying only that she’ll be right back. “So,” Holden says, oh-so-casually, after the door closes behind her. “You and the bodyguard. When exactly did that start?” I give a surprised, awkward laugh, and he shoots me a smile. “I’m happy for you,” he tells me. “We all deserve love.”

“Whoa,” I say, startled. “Let’s not, uh. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I’ve only known her a few days.” It only feels like forever.

“I knew it was love the second I met Terry,” he counters, his eyes misting over for a moment. He sniffs, blinks, and smiles again. “And I can see the way she looks at you, Brie, and the way you look at her. Maybe you’re not ready to admit it yet—but you’re on the way. I’m glad for both of you.”

I’m saved from having to reply by Nik’s return, and can only hope she doesn’t ask why I’ve turned bright pink since she left.

“I’ve added some booby traps to the external doors,” she says. “But we should stay alert. The Colombo goons might not be the sharpest, but the Syndicate have enough resources that they might be able to track us down.”

I nod, feeling a rush of gratitude toward her. “Thank you,” I say softly, meeting her eyes. For a moment, I see a flicker of something that makes my heart skip before her professional mask slips back into place. In this world of money and power, I think I’ve found something uniquely precious in Nik. And I can’t help thinking about what Holden said. The way she looks at me...

Nik clears her throat and moves to stand behind Holden. “So what have we got?”

“I was breaking it down frame by frame when Frank interrupted me back at the casino,” Holden mutters, his fingers flying over the keyboard. “And now I want to go deeper. If there’s anything hinky about this footage, I’ll find it.”

We watch in tense silence as Holden works, the image on the screen flickering as he isolates different sections of the video. My stomach churns as I watch my reflection appear in the glass of the picture frame again, and then Holden keeps layering and filtering, bringing in more and more detail.

It’s surreal, seeing this doppelgänger wearing my face, wearing my clothes. If I didn’t know for sure that I was at the Secret Garden that night, I might even be questioning my own innocence.

Is this how easily a life can be destroyed? With a few minutes of cleverly edited video?

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:47 pm*

“Wait,” Nik says suddenly, leaning closer to the screen. “Brie, before the murder, when was the last time you wore that particular dress? It’s the same one you wore at the Secret Garden.”

“What garden?” Holden asks, looking between us in confusion.

“It’s a lesbian club,” I tell him distractedly, trying to remember. It’s hard to think straight with Nik so close, with the weight of accusation hanging over my head, and with the fact that I have a lot of clothes. Terry liked me to be a symbol of his endless wealth. “I don’t know, I—” And then it hits me. “A few nights before Terry’s murder,” I say slowly. “I went in to remind him he had a meeting with the head of the Gatto Family that night. I remember then, he told me I looked like a flapper. Said it was...cute.”

My eyes well up with tears that I blink away in annoyance. This isn’t the time for sentimentality. And then it hits me, what it means.

“Son of abitch,” I breathe. “They must have spliced the footage in from that night.”

“That’s exactly what they did,” Holden says grimly. “Now that I know what I’m looking for, I can see where it’s not perfect,” Holden finishes, zooming in on a particular section. “See here? The lighting’s off. And the way she moves...it’s slightly jerky. Like they had to stitch together a few clips to make sure whoever they were covering up was covered.”

I feel a rush of relief so strong it makes me dizzy. “So I’m in the clear,” I say, sagging against the desk.



“Not quite,” Nik says, her voice grim. She places a hand on my shoulder, and I resist the urge to lean into her touch. “We still don’t know who was in the original video—or why they’re trying to frame you.”

The euphoria fades as quickly as it came, replaced by a cold dread that settles in my gut. “Who would have access to both sets of footage?” I wonder aloud, my mind whirling through possibilities, each more terrifying than the last.

“Anyone in casino security,” Holden suggests, his brow furrowed in concentration. “Or higher-level staff who wouldn’t be questioned if they went in there.”

“Like Phil or Sophie,” I say. “Or...anyone in the Family,” I finish, despair washing over me. “Any one of them could have said they were there on orders, and no one would question them.”

Nik straightens up, stretching her neck and back. “I think we’ve done all we can do tonight,” she says diplomatically. “Let’s call it here and get some shut-eye. Might as well sleep while we can. Tomorrow we’ll keep working on this.”

She’s right. I’m crashing hard after all the terror from before, and Holden’s eyes are drooping. “Let’s go to bed. Holden, seriously—just leave it for tonight.”

We leave Holden mumbling that he’ll just do a few more minutes, and Nik follows me to the bedroom after doing what she calls “a sweep of the perimeter.” I’m so exhausted I just nod and sink onto the bed. When Nik comes back a few minutes later and sees me sitting there in the same position I was when she left, something changes in her face.

“I don’t want you to worry—” she begins softly.

“—my pretty little head?” I finish bitterly. “You sound like Frank.” I glance up at her,

immediately regretting what I've just said. "Sorry. That wasn't fair."

She joins me on the bed and puts her hand in mine. "I'm sorry, too. I didn't mean to patronize you. I just meant—well, that you can trust that I have your back. You concentrate on everything else."

I lean into her and put my head on her shoulder. "This feels nice," I say in a small voice.

"Yeah."

For a few minutes we sit there, breathing together, and I try to allow myself to trust her. Let myself believe that she really will keep me safe from the Colombos and the Syndicate, just like she's kept me safe every other time.

I turn to face her. In this moment, stripped of all pretense, I feel naked under her gaze. "Can I really trust you?" I ask, echoing the question I posed to her what feels like a lifetime ago.

For a long moment, Nik is silent, her blue eyes unreadable. I hold my breath, suddenly certain that everything hinges on her answer. Then, slowly, deliberately, she nods. "Yes," she says simply. "You can trust me, Brie."

The weight of her words, the intensity of them, makes my breath catch. Maybe it's true. Maybe I'm not alone in this mess. Maybe in Nik, I've found not just a protector or a lover, but a true partner.

Someone who sees past the masks and the lies to the real me underneath.

I reach out, drawing her in for a soft, sensual kiss, need pulsing through me. And then I press my forehead to hers and whisper, "I want you."

For a long moment I think she's going to tell me we should get some rest, that I'm not making good choices, that I should see how I feel in the morning?—

And then she pushes me back on the bed and crawls over me. “I want you, too, Brie Colombo,” she tells me seriously. And then, with a wicked grin, she straddles me. “And I intend to have you.”

## CHAPTER 28

Nik

I straddle Brie on the bed, our bodies pressed close. Her soft blonde hair fans out and I want to bury my face in it, breathe her in. My hands slide possessively over her curves, mapping the dips and swells I've been craving. “You're so fucking gorgeous,” I murmur, my voice husky with want. “I plan to taste every inch of you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:47 pm*

Brie arches into my touch, a soft moan escaping her lips. “Then what are you waiting for?”

Spurred on by her words, I begin undressing her slowly, relishing each reveal of smooth, tan skin. I push the straps of her bra down her shoulders, kissing a trail from her collarbone to the swell of her breasts. Shivers run through her body and her back arches as she silently begs for more.

I peel the silky fabric down, exposing her nipples to the air, and my mouth waters at the sight. Moving lower, I pull her pants over the flare of her hips, down her long legs, tossing them aside. She’s left in only a scrap of black lace between her thighs.

“Nik...” Brie breathes my name like a prayer and a plea. I know she needs this as much as I do, this moment to just feel and forget everything else.

I hook my fingers in her panties, drawing them slowly down her legs, baring her completely to me. She’s glistening and swollen, her body primed and ready. I inhale deeply, the scent of her flooding my senses.

“Spread your legs for me,” I command as I strip off my own clothes hastily. “Let me see how much you want this.”

Brie complies eagerly, thighs falling open in wanton invitation. I settle between them, letting my hands stroke along her sensitive inner thighs. She trembles under my touch, those needy whimpers that drive me insane already starting up. And I need to taste her, drink her down. So I lean in and pull a long, slow line up her pussy with my tongue, her sweet flavor exploding in my mouth.

“Always so delicious.” My words are muffled into her folds, but Brie hears them anyway, her hand tangling in my hair, urging me on. I obey her, diving into her, devouring her. I feast on her like a starving woman, licking and sucking, my tongue delving into her tight, hot entrance, my nose grinding into her swollen clit until she’s moaning and writhing under me.

I need more. I need so much more. I mount her, straddling between her legs, get my cunt onto hers so that I can grind down on her. The heat and wetness and pressure is almost too intense, and I can’t hold back a groan of my own.

“Jesus, that’s good. Do you like that, my cunt all over yours?”

“Yes. Yes.” Her voice is broken, frantic, her fingers gripping my thighs hard enough to leave marks. I ride her faster, rubbing her clit with my own, the friction and pressure building and building.

“Don’t come yet,” I order her. “Don’t you dare.”

“I won’t,” she gasps, but her hips are bucking and her eyes are glassy. I reach down to grab her tits, squeeze at her nipples, and she throws her head back, eyes closing, jaw clenching.

“You’re doing good, baby,” I coo. “So good. I think you deserve a reward. Do you want to come? Tell me, and maybe I’ll let you.”

“God, please, Nik. Please. Let me come for you. Please!” Her words are desperate, delicious.

And I’m not going to let her come. Not yet.

I climb up her body, letting my soaked pussy drag over her tits, marking her, claiming

her. Her eyes fly wide open and she looks at me, pleading, hungry, her chest heaving. I squeeze her breasts together and let my clit slider over her hard nipples. "Not yet," I pant. "When I'm done, you can come. But not yet."

She cups my ass, squeezes it, her hips rising, trying to find her own relief, and it's such a turn-on, seeing her so frantic for me, so willing to let me use her however I want. I keep fucking her tits, working myself up, the pressure building in me. "I'm gonna come all over you," I promise her. "Mark you out as mine. You want that?"

"Yes! Please!"

"Then hold still," I order. "Stop trying to get yourself off, just wait. Just wait. I'll get you there."

And I'm going to get me there, too, riding her firm, round tits.

She stills, holding her breath as I take my pleasure, my hands kneading her tits, grinding, rocking, until the tension bursts inside me, and I'm coming hard, spilling all over her, a low groan wrenched from me as my whole body spasms.

And she's still frantic, still panting and pleading. I slide back down her body, making sure my cunt leaves a long, hot trail down her belly, until I'm nestled into the apex of her legs again, my pussy pressing hot against hers. "I think I'll take this next one nice and slow," I tell her. "Ride you smooth and easy. So you settle down, you hear me?"

"Y-yes."

"Good girl."

And then I'm on her again, riding her slick, wet pussy like we were made to do only this, made to fuck each other. I can feel her clit pulsing against mine, her

breath coming in short gasps, see her hands gripping the sheets. She's right on the edge, teetering there, and I'm not ready for her to come yet. So I slow down, draw out the strokes, until she's whimpering and trembling, her hips arching up, begging for more.

"Not yet. Not yet. You can be patient for me, can't you?"

"I don't know." Her voice is ragged, barely recognizable. "I can't—please, Nik. Please. I need to come. I can't take anymore."

"You can," I tell her, voice stern. "Because if you come, then this is over. And you don't want it to be over, do you? You want me to keep fucking you, making you beg, making you wait?"

She bites her lip and moans her assent. I speed up again, rocking against her, until the pressure builds in me once more, and I can't hold back any longer. I let myself tip over the edge, grunting as my climax hits, my pussy spasming, dripping against hers.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:47 pm*

As the aftershocks fade, I look down at her, flushed and desperate, and know exactly what I want to do next. “Your turn on top,” I tell her, and roll her over despite her protests, despite her squeaks, until she’s mounted on me like I was on her just seconds ago. “Come on. Show me what you got. Fuck yourself on me.”

“I can’t.”

“Oh yes, you can. And you’re going to make me come again while you do it.”

Her face is red, and she’s breathing hard, but she can’t help herself, and she’s already humping at me, her clit sliding over mine. I reach up and pinch her nipples, making her yelp.

“Faster,” I order her.

“Please,” she says. “Please, please, please.”

I’m not sure if she’s asking permission to come or wants me to push her further, but she’s already getting me there, my clit sparking and throbbing, almost protesting as her slick heat rubs me over and over and over. I feel her tense, quivering, and I know she’s about to lose control.

“Come for me,” I tell her, and she’s there, we’re both there, her orgasm much longer and harder and sweeter than mine, and I feel a deep sense of satisfaction that goes well beyond my own physical pleasure.

It takes us a few minutes to recover, but when I do, I grab her and pull her mouth to



mine, devouring her once more, kissing her with everything I have left?—

But the moment is shattered by a sharp beep from the monitor set into the wall near the door. My head snaps toward the sound, and I'm tensing like a coiled spring at once, even though I should be completely wrecked after all that fucking.

But just like that, I'm back in bodyguard mode. Because that beep is the security system. I roll away from Brie and start pulling my clothes on before I even get to the monitor.

"What is it?" Brie asks. She's also up and pulling on clothes, her face—so soft and open moments ago—now hard and worried again.

My fingers fly, bringing up the external camera feed. "A car just pulled up outside."

"Who?"

I watch as a blonde and a brunette emerge from the car. "Lyssa and Scarlett," I tell Brie. "The Syndicate. And they're armed."

I watch in horror as the security feed shows the two women giving a casual wave up at the camera. And then they split up, each moving to a different side of the house.

"We need to move," I tell Brie. "Now."

## CHAPTER 29

Nik

I rush Brie with me through the house to the guest room where Holden is sleeping, and give him the fright of his life in shaking him awake.

“They’re here,” I say grimly. “The Syndicate,” I add, as it occurs to me that there’s more than one organization with a target on Brie’s back right now.

“What do we do?” Holden whimpers, pulling on his shoes.

This is what I was born for, what I’ve trained my whole life to do. Protect. Defend. Survive.

“You and Brie will go to the safe room in the security office. No, don’t argue with me,” I sigh, as Brie starts to do just that. “You’re just going to let me do my damn job, Brie. The one you picked me for. Understand?”

“You better not get hurt,” she tells me, her voice wavering.

I scoff. “Not a chance.” I grab them each by a hand and drag them to the office, hustling them into the safe room hidden behind the wall panel. “Stay here, no matter what,” I order them, meeting Brie’s worried gaze. “And call Juno Bianchi. See if you can get her to talk some sense into the Syndicate. Do whatever you can to call them off.”

I don’t want to kill them, but I will if I have to. If it means keeping Brie safe.

Brie is already pulling out her phone, but reaches out to grab my arm as I turn to leave. Her fingers are warm against my skin, a contrast to the cold metal of my gun, already in my hand. “Promise you’ll come back to me.”

I nod, allowing myself one moment of weakness. I lean in, kissing her forehead. “I’ll come back to you,” I promise. “Always.”

With a final nod at them both, I step back so that Brie can seal the door. The heavy thunk of the locks engaging sounds too loud in the quiet house.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:47 pm*

I go quickly and silently back to the main living area. Have they found a way in yet, those Syndicate harpies? My training kicks in, sharpening my senses. The architectural interior of Brie's house fades away. Now, it's just terrain. Cover. Angles. Sight lines.

I do a sweep of the layout in my mind—single floor, limited entry points, large windows that should withstand a pretty heavy round of shots, even from high-powered rifles. I just hope those damn skylights here and there throughout the house are made from the same glass.

Anyway, I've turned worse odds in my favor before.

A smashing sound from above, a few rooms away, confirms my suspicions. The skylights were regular glass, and the Syndicate women are coming in through the roof. Damn it.

I move silently to position myself in a blind spot near the stairs. The house is dead silent around me, as though holding its breath in anticipation of the coming battle.

Footsteps, quick and light. My pulse quickens, a mix of adrenaline and—if I'm honest—excitement coursing through my veins.

"Clear," a woman's voice whispers. Lyssa. Which means the other one is probably?—

"Clear," comes another voice.

Yes. Scarlett is also close by. And they know I am, too. Killers so highly trained would use hand signals, not verbal confirmation.

They're playing with me.

I ghost through the shadows, using my knowledge of the house to stay one step ahead. They're good, I'll give them that. Every movement is precise, calculated. But this is my turf now, and I'll be damned if I let them get the upper hand.

I catch a glimpse of Lyssa's blonde ponytail disappearing round a corner. I peek around to see that she's alert, gun raised, every muscle coiled and ready to spring. Scarlett's doubling her movement on the opposite side of the room, and they move in perfect time.

For a moment, I feel a pang of something like jealousy. They're partners. And they don't hide their feelings, their connection. They don't care who knows it.

I shake off the feeling. That's great for them. But right now, they're partners who want to kill me and the woman I...

I can't go there. Not now. It's time to make my presence known, to try to draw them out. I deliberately step a little heavier, make sure my footstep is heard, and then I melt back into the darkness.

Their reaction is immediate. They split up, and now I see the subtle hand signals they exchange, the way they maintain visual contact even as they separate. This is a carefully choreographed dance.

"Nik?" Lyssa calls out, her voice echoing off the high ceilings. "We don't want to make this difficult for anyone."

“Come on, we’re all professionals here,” Scarlett adds, her voice coming from the other side of the room. “No need for this to get messy. We’re not here for you.”

I’m outnumbered and they’re skilled. Taking them both on directly would be foolhardy. But if I can separate them, truly separate them...

I move again, letting Scarlett catch a glimpse of me before disappearing around a corner. Footsteps follow—just one set.

“Look,” Lyssa’s voice is further away now, tense but controlled. “We know you’re just following Eva Novak’s orders. We get it. But there’s more going on here than you?—”

Suddenly, bright light floods the space where Lyssa stands, and I allow myself a small smile as she curses and retreats. Brie must be watching on the monitors, and is helping where she can via the smart house light functions.

Lyssa’s light-blindness buys me precious seconds, and I move faster, silent on the thick carpet. Scarlett’s still in front of me, just around the corner.

I raise my gun, but I’ll need to take a step away from the wall to get her in my sights. I step out cautiously, aim carefully at Scarlett’s head?—

From the right, Lyssa descends on me like a lightning strike, her fist grazing my cheek even as I dodge. We trade blows, disarming each other almost immediately so that we’re down to hand-to-hand combat. She’s fast, her technique flawless. Each strike is calculated, designed to incapacitate with brutal efficiency.

For a moment, I feel a grudging respect. It’s been a long time since I’ve faced an opponent of this caliber.

We break apart, both of us breathing hard.

Scarlett, who was standing back and watching like this was a show, moves to flank me. “We’re not here to hurt you,” she insists. “There’s a bigger picture you’re not seeing.”

“Enlighten me.”

“The list of names that we recovered from Grandmother—we’re not sure yet what they mean. We only want to talk to Brie, ask her?—”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:47 pm*

“She’s not a killer,” I snarl. “Don’t you think she’d be out here facing you with me if she was?”

They exchange a look, and I can see the idea gives them pause. Lyssa takes a breath to speak, but before she can, everything changes.

On the other side of the room, a strange, fiery light zooms toward the floor-to-ceiling windows with a whooshing noise, and then the world explodes in a hail of glass and concrete.

A fucking rocket launcher. Someone has fired right into the?—

Before I can finish the thought, high-powered rifle rounds thump through the house, punching holes into the walls as I dive for cover.

“Colombos?” Scarlett calls out her guess, already on the floor and scrambling for cover.

“If it is, then they followed you,” I snap.

“They didn’t,” Lyssa says coolly from a few feet away, where she’s tucked up behind a cabinet. “And an RPG doesn’t seem like the Colombos’ style.”

She’s not wrong. The list of ammunition the Colombos requested in the cache we’re haggling over didn’t include...

Wait. The Consortium. Has Eva sent someone after us? I suck in a breath and then

duck as another round of shots slam through the room. I look at Lyssa across the room after we've both scrambled for better cover, a silent understanding passing between us. Whatever brought the Syndicate here originally, it doesn't matter now.

We're all targets.

## CHAPTER 30

Brie

The safe room door slides shut with a pneumatic hiss, sealing Holden and me inside. My heart pounds against my ribs like it's trying to break free. I press my palm to the metal door, imagining I can feel Nik's presence on the other side. The thought of her out there, facing unknown dangers while I'm locked away, makes my skin crawl.

"I should be out there with her," I whisper, more to myself than to Holden. It doesn't seem fair that I'm safe in here while Nik risks her life for me.

Again.

Holden doesn't respond. When I turn, I catch him staring at me with an unreadable expression. "This place is...impressive," he says, gesturing around the safe room.

I look around with him, imagining how he must see it: the security monitors lining one wall, showing every angle of the house and grounds; the hum of the air scrubbers; the shelves stocked with enough supplies to last weeks if necessary. This room has an adjoining bathroom with water-recycling and purifying facilities, and the walls were built to be near-impenetrable with a hybrid Kevlar and carbon fiber construction.

The light from the bank of monitors is bathing us both in an eerie glow as each screen



flicks through a different view of the house and grounds.

“I had no idea you had all this,” Holden says. He sounds almost envious. He shouldn’t be. This room of supposed safety is only a reminder that we’re both in danger.

“Terry insisted on it,” I tell him wearily. “Said a woman in my position needed to be prepared for anything.” The irony isn’t lost on me. All this protection was available to him, too, and Terry still ended up dead.

I wonder if any amount of security can truly keep me safe in this world I’ve chosen.

Holden swallows hard. “He really cared about you, didn’t he? I mean, this house, let alone just this room...it’s incredible.”

For a moment, I’m back in that trailer park in West Virginia, dreaming of a life so far beyond my reach it might as well have been on another planet. Now here I am, surrounded by luxury that would make my younger self’s head spin.

But at what cost?

“All this—” I gesture around. “It’s just stuff, Holden. Terry kept me safe because we made a deal, and yeah, maybe he cared about me. But this house isn’t a reflection of how much he cared about me. It’s a reflection of how scared he was that someone would find out his secrets.”

Holden gives a sad smile. “I mean, you say that, Brie...but you were the one recognized as his partner. I loved him so much, but he never...” He cuts off with a catch in his throat.

My heart breaks for him. I’ve been so caught up in myself that I haven’t been there to

help Holden through his own grief—and it must be that much worse for him because he can't publicly display it. I go to him now and I hug him tight.

“He loved you,” I tell Holden fiercely. “Terry loved you with his whole soul. He talked about you all the time, how proud he was of you, how happy you made him. And you'll see—when Frank gets the will sorted out, they'll all see, the Family—just how much you meant to Terry.”

“I don't know,” Holden frets. “That's the thing, Brie—has Frank even spoken to you about the will?” He pulls away and looks at me.

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“What do you mean?”

“I mean, has he put anything in motion, started the transfer of assets? He’s supposed to notify any heirs. He hasn’t spoken to me. Has he spoken to you?”

“I...Frank has been a little distracted,” I say diplomatically. “But he’s a good guy; I’m sure he’s?—”

“Are you sure, though?” Holden asks, his voice so serious that I’m taken aback. “Because Frank Colombo is not a good guy, Brie.”

I want to laugh, but I can’t. Holden is right. Frank, just like everyone else in the Colombo Family, is not a good guy. “Trustworthy,” I amend. But that doesn’t feel quite right, either. “Honorable,” I try. “He’ll carry out Terry’s wishes. And Holden—even if he doesn’t, I’ll make sure you get your fair share of?—”

“I don’t care about that,” Holden says impatiently. “Brie, I think you’re putting way too much faith in Frank. He found Terry that night, didn’t he? What if he...” He trails off.

I glance at the monitors again, wondering if Nik is alright. Praying that she’s alright. “Nik and I have talked about Frank as a suspect, too,” I admit softly to Holden. “So it’s not that I’m blind to his faults. I just think he’s too...” I don’t want to call Frank dumb. “He doesn’t have the technical knowledge to erase that footage, for one thing,” I point out. “Anyway, right now we have other things to worry about.”

But Holden doesn’t seem ready to come back to the present. “Do you remember the

night you and Terry and I first met?” he asks wistfully.

“Of course I do. You’re the reason I’m still alive now.”

“What do you mean?”

I laugh sadly. “Don’t you remember, Holden? Terry was ready to kill me then and there when I saw him with you. It was only because of what you said that he didn’t.” I think about the Holden I’ve known these past years—sweet, smart, always eager to please. And like me, he has a way of influencing people. Convincing them to do things.

A less charitable way of describing us would be manipulative. But people like us wouldn’t survive in this world without that skill. People like Nik, on the other hand...she’s survived by being brave and taking action, just like she’s doing now.

And I’m the one who manipulated her into this whole situation. There’s no denying that. “Goddamn it,” I snap, angry with myself, and frustrated all over again by just sitting around. “Move over a sec. Let me get a look at the security cameras.”

Holden obligingly shifts over, and it’s easy enough to search through the cameras and find where the action is happening after I turn on the night vision. Fear clutches at my gut when I see Lyssa’s getting too close to Nik. Maybe I can help...

With a few taps on the control panel, I raise the downlights right over where Lyssa is standing, blinding and distracting her long enough for Nik to sneak away.

“But what are they doing now?” Holden asks, as transfixed as I am by the images. “They’re all just standing there. Turn on the microphones.”

I lean over and switch them on.

“—here to hurt you,” one of them is saying. “There’s a bigger picture you’re not seeing.”

“Enlighten me,” I hear Nik growl, and as she defends me again to them, my heart swells with relief.

The fear is still there. But Nik really *does* trust me, enough to have my back even when she doesn’t know I’m listening in. “She’s not a killer,” she’s saying. “Don’t you think she’d be out here facing you with me if she was?”

And then the scene is interrupted by a deafening crack that splits the air—and the house. The floor rumbles even here in the safe room as though an earthquake is passing through, and the monitors show the east side of the house exploding in a shower of glass and sparks before they go dark.

I lunge for the door, terror for Nik overriding everything else, but Holden’s hand clamps down on my arm, yanking me back with surprising strength. “Are you crazy?” he hisses, his fingers digging into my flesh. “Nik told us to stay put no matter what. We’re safe in here.”

“Let go of me.”

“Brie—”

“Let go of me,” I say again, my voice low and dangerous.

It’s the same voice I used that night my mother’s boyfriend cornered me in the trailer. I’ve never heard myself sound that way in all the years since, but now it comes naturally, as if fear for Nik has unlocked something in me.

Something malevolent.

Holden's grip loosens, and he steps back, hands raised and shaking slightly. "Seriously, Brie, you should stay right here. Nik told you?—"

He breaks off as I press my palm to the biometric panel, open the door, and bolt. My bare feet slap against the cool tile as I race toward the noise. This house that was meant to be my sanctuary now feels like one big trap, shadows lurking in every corner.

But I'll be damned if I let anyone keep me from Nik right now.

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And as I race through the house—stopping briefly in my bedroom to grab the revolver I keep in there and to shove sneakers onto my bare feet—I feel the last vestiges of all those carefully-constructed personas crumbling down.

The glamorous ex-showgirl, the gold-digger, the Mob wife...that Brie falls away. In her place stands someone I met a long time ago, someone I've been running from since I was sixteen years old.

Someone harder. Colder.

Someone ready to do whatever it takes to survive.

I hear the roaring sound of fire as I skid around a corner into the living room and stop dead in shock. Thick glass pebbles are scattered all over the floor from the bulletproof windows—no match for whatever weapon was used on them—and make a treacherous path for my bare feet. I pause for a heartbeat, my hand on the wall, and wonder if this is going to be a fatal mistake.

But Nik is out there, fighting for me. And I'm done being the damsel in the tower.

I creep through the shattered remains of my sanctuary, trying to pick a path between the glass. I pause, straining my ears. Faint footsteps echo from a nearby room, the sound of glass shifting under careful tread. My breath catches in my throat. "Nik?" I whisper, hoping against hope it's my protector and not one of the Syndicate women hunting us.

Did they do this? Destroy my home?

Silence is the only answer. I inch forward in air thick with smoke. As I get near the end of the hallway, a flicker of movement in my peripheral vision is my only warning. A hand clamps over my mouth, an arm like an iron band around me, yanking me backward. Panic surges through me. I kick out, struggling against my captor with every ounce of strength I possess.

“It’s me,” Nik’s voice hisses in my ear, barely audible.

I go limp with relief, sagging against her. Nik’s grip loosens slightly, but she doesn’t let go. Her breath is warm against my neck as she murmurs, “The other two don’t know who shot that rocket at the house either.”

Lyssa and Scarlett are dangerous enough on their own, but an unknown shooter adds a whole new level of threat. I turn my head slightly, meeting Nik’s eyes in the dim light filtering through the broken windows. Her face is a mask of concentration, eyes sharp as she scans our surroundings.

“What’s the plan?” I breathe, barely moving my lips.

Nik’s response is grim. “Let them shoot it out. Whoever’s left standing, we deal with.”

I think of Holden, still hidden in the safe room, and pray he stays put. We stand frozen, barely breathing, as the sounds of searching grow closer. Glass skips across the floor and I tense, pressing back against Nik. Her arms tighten around me, both protective and reassuring.

The moment stretches, taut as a bowstring. I can hear my own heartbeat, thundering in my ears. I’m terrified that even that small movement might give us away.

A shadow comes into view and I bite down on my lip to keep from gasping. Nik’s



arms press more firmly around me, a silent reminder to stay quiet. The shadow pauses, and for a terrifying moment, I'm sure we've been spotted.

Then, mercifully, it moves on. I let out a shaky breath, lightheaded with relief.

But the reprieve is short-lived. A voice calls out, shattering the tense silence. "Mrs. Diamond? Are you here?"

I go rigid.

And then the shadow reappears, slowly growing larger, until the owner of that shadow—of that voice—comes into view, holding a wicked-looking rifle.

It's Katy, the cleaning manager at Solara.

## CHAPTER 31

Nik

The moment Katy comes into view, time seems to slow down. I push Brie behind me, shielding her with my body as I level my weapon at the Solara cleaning manager.

"Well, isn't this a party," Katy drawls, her lips curving into a smile that does nothing to warm her eyes. But before I even need to make a move, Lyssa and Scarlett spring into action. They're a blur of coordinated movement, converging on Katy from different angles.

But Katy's not going down without a fight.

The air explodes with gunfire again. I duck, pulling Brie down to the ground with me as bullets whiz overhead, embedding themselves in the walls with dull thuds that rain

down chunks of plaster. “Stay low,” I hiss at her, although she’s flat on the floor as it is.

I spot an opening and take it, firing off two quick shots at Katy. She dives behind an overturned sofa, my bullets missing her by inches.

Damn it, she’s good.

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But Lyssa and Scarlett are equally formidable. They move with a synchronicity I've never seen before. Scarlett provides cover fire while Lyssa advances, then they switch roles seamlessly. But for a minute or two, Katy matches them move for move. She uses the house's layout to her advantage, ducking behind pillars and using doorways as cover. Each time I think she's cornered, she slips away like smoke.

But at least she's not able to get close to Brie.

There's a lull in the shooting, and for a moment I can hear my own ragged breathing, feel the thundering of my heart against my ribs. Then I hear the smallest of creaks.

I spin toward the sound, my finger tightening on the trigger. Katy emerges from the shadows, her gun trained on Brie. Our eyes lock, and I take a step to put myself between Katy's gun and Brie's heart.

But for the first time, maybe because she's so close to her goal, Katy has overstepped. In focusing on Brie, she left herself exposed. Lyssa and Scarlett emerge from their own positions, their weapons trained on Katy. She's surrounded, outgunned, with nowhere left to run.

The standoff feels like it lasts an eternity, though it's probably only seconds. I can see the moment Katy realizes she's done. She kneels to put down her gun, still smiling at me.

My trigger finger tightens.

"Don't kill her!" Scarlett shouts.

For fuck's sake. Now I'm supposed to do the Syndicate's work for them? But I allow Lyssa and Scarlett to advance.

Katy looks from one to the other of them as Lyssa restrains her hands behind her back with zip ties and Scarlett kicks her gun away, then searches her for more weapons, discarding them as she finds them. "Didshesend you here?" Katy asks eagerly. "Do you know where she is? Comms went dark."

"If you're talking about Grandmother, she didn't send us," Lyssa says. "But I'm glad you're in a talkative mood, because it's time for some answers."

But then we hear it.

Sirens.

"We need to get her out of here," Lyssa says to Scarlett, and then she looks at me and Brie. "How about you two. Interested?"

"I know where we can go," Brie says, and I've never heard her sound so fierce. "There's a place out in the desert where the Colombos like to bury their problems."

"Well, fuck me," Lyssa says with amusement, grinning at Brie. "You'd been an alright candidate for the Syndicate, too, along with your girlfriend. Lead the way."

Brie doesn't say anything about Lyssa calling me her girlfriend. All she does is look at me and say, "We'd better take Holden, too."

The desert night is cold as we gather around Katy, on her knees in the middle of our small circle. Brie insisted that Holden wait in the car, and he was only too happy to do so. I wanted to tell Brie to do the same, but...

She's changed. Sometime in the last few hours she seems to have found a new version of herself. I used to hate that she had so many faces, so many masks, but I find myself almost excited to see this new side to her.

She's fascinating in all her iterations.

But even though I can sense a new toughness about her, I stand with my body angled slightly to shield her if needed. She's still under my care, after all. And opposite us, Lyssa and Scarlett stare down at Katy.

Katy's eyes dart between us all, but they keep returning to Lyssa. There's a strange mix of fear and...admiration? in her gaze. When she speaks, her voice carries a hint of awe.

"You're Lyssa, aren't you? The Wolf?" Her voice trembles slightly. "You were a legend when I was training. We all wanted to be you—or kill you."

Lyssa just snorts. "Yeah? Well, better luck next time."

"Grandmother would have been so pleased with me," she says almost wistfully. "She hasn't been in contact for a while. I thought maybe I'd done something?"

"Grandmother's dead," Lyssa says bluntly.

Katy stares at her. "No."

"Yes."

"No," she says again, shaking her head in denial. "You're lying. Grandmother can't be dead."

“It’s true,” Scarlett confirms, her voice gentler than Lyssa’s. “You know it is. You’ve reached out to her and had no response. You know there’s only one reason that would happen.”

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The effect is immediate. Katy's face crumples, her bravado vanishing in an instant, and she slumps in her restraints, looking small and lost. "How did she die?" she asks, her voice barely audible.

Lyssa steps closer, her voice cold. "I killed her." She pauses, letting that sink in. "And now you're going to die, too. But how painful that death is...well, that's up to you."

I glance at Brie, wondering if this will be too much for her. But her beautiful face is still and unreadable.

"We have some questions," Scarlett says. "If you answer them, we'll grant you a merciful death."

"And if you don't, you'll die screaming," Brie says matter-of-factly. "So let's begin. Did you kill my husband, Salvatore Colombo?"

I'm blinking in surprise at Brie, but Katy says nothing.

Lyssa steps forward and grabs a handful of the short hair, yanking on it roughly. "If you know me," she says, "then you know the kind of pain I can inflict. Do you really want to go through all that for a woman who's already dead? Grandmother had a list of names. Salvatore Colombo. Juno Bianchi. Hadria Imperioli—should I go on?"

Katy gives a tiny half-smile. "I know the list you mean."

"Is it a hit list?"

A snort of laughter escapes Katy, catching us all off guard. “A hit list? Of course not. It was a problem list. The people she had the most difficulty embedding an operative with.”

I feel Brie stiffen beside me, her breath catching. I resist the urge to reach for her hand, keeping my focus on Katy. “What do you mean?” I press.

“Grandmother likes having insurance. She sent us out wherever she could. But that list...they were the tough nuts to crack, so to speak. I was initially sent to seduce Terry Colombo, but he was...resistant to my charms.” She shifts her gaze to Brie. “Guess he preferred the bimbo type.”

I raise a hand to slap the hell out of her, but Brie tugs it down. “Don’t bother,” she says, sounding amused. “Let her think what she wants. She’ll be dead soon enough.”

But the death threats don’t seem to have much effect on Katy. Lyssa and Scarlett have filled us in on a few of the things this Grandmother has done over the years, and I wondered privately if Eva knew of her.

Had traded with her.

Because it wouldn’t sit right with me if she had. This Grandmother—her tactics, her training through abuse—it disgusted me to hear about it. I hope it would disgust Eva Novak just as much.

“So that was your mission?” Scarlett asks, trying a softer tone. “Get close to the Don. But it didn’t work.”

“No.” Katy’s smile fades. “Plan B was to get close to Brie Colombo, find a way in through her. We found her house here at Solara, and I was embedded as a staff member for years, hoping she’d bring her husband out to the house, or give me a clue



about how to get closer to the man himself.”

“You’ve been watching me for years?” Brie sounds as shocked as I feel.

Katy’s laugh is hollow this time. “Grandmother is patient. And so am I.” Her eyes narrow as she looks back at Lyssa. “Maybe that’s why you were such a failure for her, Wolf. You lacked that patience.”

Lyssa just grins. “I was patient enough to kill her, in the end.”

Brie speaks up again. “Did you try to assassinate me in Las Vegas? In the alleyway and at the Golden Sands casino?”

Katy’s blank stare is answer enough, but she shakes her head for good measure. “My orders were to watch you, not kill you.”

The pieces aren’t fitting together. If Katy wasn’t behind the assassination attempts, then who was? And—“If that’s true,” I ask, “what the hell made you shoot a goddamn rocket launcher at Brie’s living room tonight?”

“I told you. When I recognized Lyssa, I thought...I thought I might be able to kill her. Gain Grandmother’s favor.”

Lyssa’s laugh is sharp and humorless. She turns to Brie. “Any more questions?”

Brie’s voice is cold, controlled. “Just one. And I want an answer this time. Did you kill Don Colombo?”

Katy shrugs. “No.” The simplicity of her answer, the lack of hesitation, tells me she’s speaking the truth.

But if Katy didn't kill Don Colombo, and she wasn't behind the attempts on Brie's life, then we're back to square one. The real danger is still out there, and we're no closer to finding them.

Scarlett breaks the tense silence. "So there are more like you? Hanging around the fringes of other organizations, like the Bianchi Family?"

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“You should know as well as I do—Grandmother’s operatives work alone for the most part. She keeps her cards close to her chest.” She looks down and adds bitterly, “Kept. She kept them close to her chest.”

Lyssa looks at Scarlett with meaning. “We need to alert everyone on that list about this, ASAP.” She turns to Brie. “We have no more use for her. Do you?”

Brie’s voice is ice. “I do not. You’re welcome to use the grounds here for disposal, as I said.”

I watch as Lyssa raises her weapon, ready to end this here and now. But Scarlett’s voice cuts in. “Wait.”

She draws Lyssa aside for a conversation, their voices low. I strain to hear, catching only snippets. Lyssa sounds frustrated. “Are you fucking kidding me? Hadria will lose it at me—again.”

When they return, Lyssa’s sigh is heavy with resignation. “We’re taking Katy back to Chicago. Scarlett wants to see if she can be...deprogrammed.”

Katy’s protest is immediate. “I don’t want to go to Chicago. Kill me now.”

Lyssa’s response is sharp. “You don’t get a say in the matter.”

As Lyssa and Scarlett load Katy into their car, I take Brie’s hand and squeeze it. “You OK?”

“Never better.” She gives me a closer look. “What is it?”

I try to find a way to explain it. “Well...let’s just say you’re definitely no ‘wannabe’ anymore.”

She grins. “Oh, really?” There’s a flash of the old Brie there, and it warms my heart. I love her in all her aspects, but I don’t want her to be so cold and merciless all the time, like she was tonight.

Wait.

Love?

“What is it?” Brie asks at once. “Nik, you look...weird. What’s wrong?”

I’m frantically turning my word choice over in my mind, but my thoughts are interrupted by the sudden appearance of headlights in the distance, cutting through the darkness of the desert night. We all freeze, watching as the lights grow closer.

Two cars. One a minute or so behind the other. Both high off the ground—SUVs, or similar.

“You expecting company?” I call over to Lyssa and Scarlett, my hand already reaching for my weapon.

“Nope,” Lyssa calls back, slamming the door on Katy. “Heads up, Scar.” Lyssa and Scarlett take up defensive positions on either side of their car, and I open the back door of ours to pull Holden out, before positioning myself in front of him and Brie.

“What’s going on?” he asks. “Who’s coming?”

“Shut your mouth and let me do the talking,” I snap, because the first car is close enough for me to recognize it now.

And we might all die here tonight if we’re not careful.

The car pulls up, and the driver gets out, a too-familiar, hulking figure, who heads around to open the other door. And then my worst nightmare comes to life as Eva Novak jumps out in jeans and a cashmere sweater.

“Eva?” I call out. “I?—”

“Get in the car, Dominika,” Eva orders. “Your job is done.”

I don’t move. My feet feel rooted to the ground, my loyalty to Brie warring with years of conditioned obedience to the Consortium.

To Eva.

“Why are you here?” I ask desperately.

“We are here because of you, naturally.” Me? “Thank you, by the way, for being so diligent,” she goes on. “I had my doubts about your loyalty, but the tracker signal you sent out worked perfectly. And so here we are, as you see.”

“What tracker?” Brie asks sharply. “What does she mean?”

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I shake my head. “I have no idea what she’s talking about.”

“Put the gun down, Dominika.” Eva is still eerily calm. “You don’t need to stay in character any longer. The play is done.”

“Nik?” Brie sounds wary now. “What does she mean?”

But the second SUV has just pulled up, and my blood runs cold as the occupants step out. Frank Colombo, Larry Caruso, and Vince Sabatelli.

They seem to have found a new alliance, rather like I did with the Syndicate women. And now I know what’s going on.

They’re here for Brie.

I swing my sights toward the Colombos, and Leon swings his toward me. Eva repeats much more sharply, “Put the gundown, Dominika.”

“Everyoneshould put their guns down,” Brie says, stepping forward.

Her voice is steady, her chin held high. I’m ashamed I ever called her a wannabe gangster girl. I was wrong,sowrong. Brie Colombo is every inch an underworld queen, power radiating from her just like it does from Eva.

And I’m terrified I’m about to lose her.

CHAPTER 32

Brie

“Come on home with us, now, Mrs. Colombo,” Frank calls over. “Let’s not make this any more difficult than it has to be.”

Nik turns her gun toward them. “Not a chance in hell.”

Things are going to get out of control fast. I step to the side quickly, putting myself between Nik’s gun and the Colombos.

“Get out of the way,” she says urgently, but drops the gun as soon as I turn and put my hand over her wrist. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going with them,” I tell her.

“Brie, come on! You don’t really think I put a tracker signal out to?—”

“Nik,” I say with a tiny smile, “I’m not an idiot. But for some reason, they really want me to think that you’ve betrayed me. For now, I’m going to play along.”

“If you go with them, they’ll kill you,” she hisses.

“And if I don’t, they’ll kill all of us.”

“They can try and fail,” Lyssa says in a low voice. “You’ve got backup. If you want it.”

“You heard her,” Nik says. “We can take these fuckers—you just need to trust me.”

“No,” I say softly. “You need to trust me. You’ve put yourself in harm’s way for me countless times, Nik. But this time, I need to step up. I will not run away from this

any longer.”

“But—”

“I’ll ask you again, Nik. Are you willing to obey me?”

She remembers. I can see it in her face, she remembers standing there with Eva Novak at my husband’s funeral, remembers me grinning at her when I asked her that question the first time.

This time her response is much faster. Much firmer.

“Yes,” she says simply, and throws her gun to the side, capitulating utterly.

“You need to take care of Holden,” I tell her quickly, quietly. “And Holden, you need to?—”



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“Work on the footage,” he whispers, nodding hard. It was the only stop we made on the way out of the house—we went to the security room to grab the flash drive and the laptop. “I will, Brie. And as soon as I have the proof of your innocence, I’ll...” He breaks off, rubbing a hand across his mouth as he looks over to the Colombos. “Don’t let them kill you before then, okay?” he asks, in a shaky attempt at a joke.

I smile. “You know me. I can wrap an old man around my finger with ease. But just in case, Nik, I?—”

“Don’t you dare say goodbye,” she warns me. “Just...promise you’ll come back to me.”

It’s what I said to her myself only a few hours ago. I want to kiss her so badly. But that would feel too much like a goodbye. So I just put my hand on hers and say, fiercely, what she said to me. “I’ll come back to you. Always.”

And then I walk over to Frank, Larry, and Vince with as much dignity as I can. Larry takes great delight in wrapping a vice-like hand around my bicep and shoving me into the car, where he gets in beside me.

“You be careful there,” Frank snaps, getting in the front driver’s seat and glaring at Larry in the rearview mirror. “We agreed we’d do this nice and easy.”

“Aw, this is Larry being nice and easy,” Vince says, getting into the front passenger seat. “Ain’t that right, Larry?”

Larry laughs. “That’s right.”

“Well, it seems like you two have laid aside your differences,” I say. “I’m glad I could help bring you closer.”

“You won’t be so glad when we get where we’re going,” Larry says ominously. And then he stares closer at me. “You look different than usual.”

“I’m not wearing any makeup, that’s all.”

He snorts. “So this is the real you, huh?”

I twist in my seat to watch in the back window as Nik and Holden and the rest of them fade away into the darkness, and I hope like hell that Nik can do what I asked, and trust me.

Trust me and wait for me.

“That’s right, Larry,” I say, turning back to stare straight at him without a smile. “This is the real me.”

He pulls away in the seat a little as though uncomfortable with my scrutiny of him, and looks pointedly out the window. But I know he’s nervous. I can tell by the way he’s drumming his fingers on his knee.

And I swear to God, when we get where we’re going?

I’ll make sure the whole damn Family sees the real me, too.