



Her Brutal First Love

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Description: He broke her heart once. And he'll break it again if that's what it takes to keep her safe.

Giancarlo Marchetti no longer exists—or at least that's what the world needs to believe. Protecting his famiglia means staying in the shadows, even if it costs him the woman he loves.

But when he discovers Sarica is about to belong to another man, jealousy ignites a rage he can't control. She forgot who owns her. And now, she'll pay for it.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

Prologue

"Ido regret it, Nonna. Because I have come to realize that when you start with the wrong thing, everything else that follows is wrong. I should've just told her outright that I knew she was the one for me. And when it became clear to me, I should have also told her that I was in love with her. Had been so for a long time. And that she was the one who kept me sane until we were both saved."

Sarica was still listening to the footage and playing it back again and again when Potenziana returned to her study. While this did not surprise her, the knowledge did not keep her heart from breaking. They all missed Giancarlo. But Potenziana also knew their pain was only a fraction of what the girl felt.

"I think that's enough,bambina."

Giancarlo'sfidanzataonly stared at her as Potenziana reached for the laptop and folded it close. Her eyes were red and swollen, her nose running, and her hair looked as if it hadn't been washed for days.

"G-Giancarlo and I f-fought," Sarica suddenly choked out. "The d-day before he left. I asked him to let me go. I d-didn't want to listen to him, and nowh-he's..."

"Control yourself." Potenziana's tone was firm but not unkind. Her own painful mistakes throughout the years had taught the Boston matriarch when a certain toughness was required, for certain kinds of people.

"Your emotions will deceive you into thinking we are without hope."

And Sarica, for better or worse, had always been the type to respond more effectively to pragmatic commands than sympathy.

"But we know better than that."

Potenziana could already see Sarica determinedly battling against said emotions even before she finished speaking, and the way the younger woman wiped her tears with the back of her hand was both endearing and heartbreaking.

The poor bambino never had a chance to be a child. Never knew it was to be loved by one's parent. And this was likely why Sarica had found it so hard to depend on anyone, not even Giancarlo, for comfort.

"When he comes back," Potenziana stressed, "you can make it up to him. We can all make it up to him. Because you are not the only one with regrets. Giancarlo made it so easy for the entire family to sit back and have him shoulder everything. We had all taken him for granted without knowing it. And as much as it pains me to say this..."

Potenziana's own voice cracked under the weight of her remorse.

"God had to take Giancarlo away for us to see the truth."

Sarica's shoulders shook as she began to weep. She covered her face, but it was not enough. The sound of her weeping was almost ugly in its rawness. And even when it was becoming impossible for her to breathe, and her chest felt as if it was about to explode—

Sarica couldn't stop crying.

Couldn't stop hurting.

Couldn't stop begging and praying to God.

I'm so sorry.

So, so sorry.

Please give him back to me.

Please.

And I promise it won't be like before.

No more pride.

No more lies.

I will love him, the way I have always wanted to.

I will love him, the way You always wanted me to.

So please.

Please, God, please.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

Please give Giancarlo back to us.

Chapter One

Sixteen months after Giancarlo's disappearance

Steam added a layer of mystery as Giancarlo stood under the shower, and cascading hot water added a sleek sheen to the muscled panes of his body. His hands were braced against the wall, his powerful back rigid as Sarica pressed her slender body against his. Her touch was shy at first as she explored the naked hardness of his chest, but everything changed when she heard him suck his breath as her fingers brushed against his nipples.

A soft laugh, followed by a more confident exploration of the rest of his body. Her hands dipped lower, but just as she was about to take his length in her hands—

He turned around without warning, her gasp melting into his kiss as he hauled her close, his fingers digging into the tender flesh of her hips.

"Giancarlo..."

The sound of his Sarica moaning his name drove him crazy, hunger consuming him as he pushed her up against the wall. But just as he was about to enter her and lose himself in the tight little channel of her womanhood—

GIANCARLO'S HEART WASstill pounding as he stared at his surroundings in disbelief.

No steam.

No shower.

And worst of all, no Sarica.

The old him would've cursed up a storm at this point. But all he could do now was drag breath into his lungs as he struggled to regain control over his emotions.

It was always like this.

Night after night after night.

Sarica haunting his dreams...the way she shadowed his every waking moment.

How long, God?

How long?

A king who went by the name of David had groaned these words out in his pain, thinking that God had forgotten him.

But what Giancarlo wanted was the opposite.

How long, God?

How long before he could forget Sarica existed?

He stepped out onto the balcony. Breathed the desert air of Kivr. But unlike before, its mix of sun and sand was no longer enough to wipe out lingering memories of his old life from his mind. Before him stretched the capital of Kivr, one of the most

ancient and greatest jewels of the Arabian peninsula.

But all he could see was her.

And all he could feel was a dull ache in that space which she used to occupy in his heart.

He turned away as the city came to life.

Even for a man like him whom the whole world believed was dead—

There were still things he had to do.

Royal balls that he had to attend.

And battles that he had to fight, with his own bare hands if need be.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

GOLDEN LIGHT SPILLED from crystal chandeliers, casting a soft, luxurious glow that belied the room's deadly purpose. One-meter-thick titanium walls encased shelves stocked with the newest and deadliest weapons while bespoke combat gear gleamed behind glass-door closets. It was a place where elegance met lethality, but it was also a room that only those able to withstand the triple threats of power, peril, and pressure were able to enter.

The fifty-something retired major nearly smiled as Giancarlo Marchetti entered the changing room in a tuxedo and emerged less than a minute later, still dressed to kill—but this time, literally.

It reminded him of vigilante superheroes, those who shed their daytime personas in a flash to become something darker, more violent.

Bruce to Batman? Only if Giancarlo was a womanizer, which he never was.

Oliver Queen to Arrow? Possibly, but for this Giancarlo would have to be a womanizer still.

Clark Kent to Superman? Only someone terribly foolish would assume Giancarlo's soft-spoken ways also meant he was mild-mannered...and an idiot, Naaman certainly was not.

Naaman tried to think of other comparisons, but he realized in the end that it was the good people of Boston, whose city Giancarlo's family still ruled, that put it best.

Giancarlo Marchetti was the mafia's modern-day white knight, and even in the

darkest of times, his honor would never be sacrificed on the altar of necessity, regardless of the cost.

The door to the armory slid open, and Naaman immediately bowed as Sheikh Nassif Al-Mansouri strode in. The sheikh was the creative and business force behind Insihaam, a billion-dollar atelier that clothed the world's elite in wearable art. To the public, he was a tyrant and a genius, his sharp tongue leaving models and clients in tears. But few knew of his secret collaboration with the royal army of Kivr—or his decades-long friendship with the former heir of New England's most powerful famiglia.

"You've done it again, Giancarlo," Nassif drawled. "Caused a stir at the royal ball even without showing your face...or uttering a single word."

Giancarlo only shrugged. He had attended the ball to show his gratitude to the royal family. It was because of them he was able to hide in plain sight, and in return, he had been more than willing to lend both his skills and resources in fighting their shared enemies. "I wasn't being deliberately mysterious."

"And that," Nassif said with a cynical smile, "is exactly why people find you so intriguing."

Giancarlo grunted, his attention fixed on the array of combat equipment laid out before him. He needed something destructive yet compact, but at the same time, something that could be easily concealed and cause minimal disturbance.

Nassif raised a brow. "I was under the impression tonight was about the mysterious Seijcut."

"It is."

"And yet you're only considering weapons for disarming your enemy?"

"My curiosity has gotten the better of me," Giancarlo admitted with a shrug. "I want to know why this person placed a bounty on my head—"

"Even though the world thinks you're dead?"

A humorless smile touched Giancarlo's lips. "Doesn't that make you curious too?"

"It depends. You have yet to tell me who helped arrange this meeting."

"We both know there's no need. Nothing happens in this kingdom without you or your brothers knowing."

"Then the reports are true? You're working with the informant caught at the border last week?"

"To call it a working relationship would be generous."

"Ah." Nassif's emerald-green eyes glittered. "Were the usual methods applied to ensure his cooperation?"

"Your men were effectively persuasive."

"I assume the same methods convinced him to set up this meeting?"

Giancarlo inclined his head. "He was very cooperative after that."

"And that's why you're finally putting my newest creation to the test," Nassif said, gesturing to the bulletproof vest Giancarlo wore.

"I'm counting on it to be everything you promised."

"No other laboratory has come close to replicating this," Nassif stated matter-of-factly. "It's lightweight, nearly invisible under even the finest silk, and—" He abruptly reached for a handheld gun and fired at a mannequin wearing the same vest.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

Giancarlo removed the vest from the mannequin, inspecting it for damage. There was none.

"See for yourself, signore," Nassif invited mockingly before turning to Naaman with a new set of instructions. "Keep an eye on our friend tonight. The royal army will want a full report. If he survives, we'll begin mass production. If not..." He gave Giancarlo a courteous bow. "No expense will be spared for your funeral. Thank you for your service to our beloved kingdom."

AS GIANCARLO STEPPED into the night, the city of Cayed awaited—a slumbering beast by day, its windows shuttered, its streets empty and silent. But when the moon rose, the city came alive. Iron lanterns flickered to life, casting golden pools of light on cobblestone streets. Sandstone-walled alleys buzzed with activity as the night unlocked the hearts of its residents, freeing them to break every rule.

Cayed was a place beyond the reach of the royal army, a stronghold for the lords of crime. It was where the wicked thrived, where shadows whispered secrets, and where deals were struck in the dark. If you sought to do evil, there was only one place to go.

Cayed.

And Cayed alone.

DESERT-FACING MOSQUE Schimed midnight as Giancarlo came face to face with the entity that had shaken the criminal underworld.

Why offer a hundred mil just for information about him?

And why offer another hundred if he were captured alive?

The name "Seijcut" seemed to hint at Japanese ancestry, but it was only after weeks' worth of studying the entity's every move did Giancarlo realize the name was a play on the word 'justice'...which consequently led to even more unanswered questions.

Was all of this retribution for a past wrong?

A vendetta against his famiglia?

Or could Giancarlo represent unfinished business... since it was Seijcut who had attempted but failed to kill him the first time around?

The questions burned in Giancarlo's mind as he studied the masked figure before him. They stared at each other...and then—

Now!

Giancarlo lunged first, gaining a fleeting advantage.

But Seijcut recovered quickly, and what followed was a brutal dance of fists, blades, and kicks.

Each move was anticipated, every strike countered with precision.

It was as if they were reading each other's minds, their movements mirroring one another in a deadly rhythm.

Finally, Giancarlo seized his moment.

He ripped the mask from Seijcut's face, and even the darkness of the night held its

breath as if even it dared not disturb the moment.

Why must it be you?

Chapter Two

The best time to learn about pain was when you were hurting too much to feel anything.

When your heart was torn out of your chest, there was nothing else for the enemy to target.

Nothing in your body that knew what it meant to fear.

All you had left was a brain that calculated the odds...plus a body that had been trained nonstop in the past three months by none other than the Prince of Killers himself.

The man had been merciless even as she had cried and screamed in front of him. But she realized now that all those seemingly endless hours of combat training were worth every second. If not for his brutal conditioning (and reconditioning), she would have been dead a long, long time ago.

Then again, maybe death was already knocking on her door, with how tonight was currently shaping up.

Every strike of her opponent was like an echo from the past—frustratingly fluid, eerily precise, and devastatingly familiar.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

The way this person anticipated her every move, even the way he deflected her attacks with an almost taunting style of grace—

She had seen someone move like this just once, when she had snuck inside the Marchettis' warehouse in downtown Boston. Her sole purpose at that time had been to cause trouble. She had wanted to give them another reason to admit they had made a mistake in taking her in.

But instead, it was the opposite, and what she had seen that day made her realize she and Giancarlo had more in common than she was willing to admit.

That was the only time she had seen Giancarlo fight.

The only time she had seen him draw and shed blood.

But instead of fearing him, she had wanted to copy his every move—possess the same icy composure he had displayed even when the odds were stacked against him.

Once was all it took, and Sarica knew she wanted to be exactly like Giancarlo when facing death.

And what she had seen that day—

No.

Don't go there.

Just don't.

This had to be someone who knew him well and long enough to mimic the way he fought.

But why, though?

Was it to simply mess with her mind?

Or could it be this person didn't even realize what they revealed with every swing of their fist?

Viktor Biancardi.

Her body shook with rage as soon as the name flashed in her mind, and the more she thought of it, the more it made terrible sense.

The Marchettis had all treated Viktor as one of them.

She herself had looked upon him as a brother.

All of them had seen him as famiglia.

But in exchange for their loyalty, Viktor had done the one thing none of them ever saw coming.

And because of him—

Giancarlo was no longer with them.

Why, damn you? Why?

If this was truly Viktor she was now fighting against—

I just want to know why!

Sarica knew it was foolish of her to lose control of her temper now of all times—

Why?

But pain and grief had already consumed her sanity, and all she wanted now was to know the truth.

How could you do that?

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

Her fingers tightened around the knife concealed in her sleeve, its blade laced with poison.

I'm sorry, God.

She knew she was hurting Him by letting rage take over.

She knew she was slipping away farther and farther from Him as she considered doing the unthinkable.

She knew what she was doing was wrong, but—

Help me, God.

She didn't want to kill anyone, but when she thought about how this man she was fighting against could be the same person who was responsible for Giancarlo's disappearance—

Please.

Because all she could see was red even as her heart started to bleed tears.

This is not the way to avenge me, dolcezza.

Shock blazed through Sarica's body as she heard the unmistakable sound of Giancarlo's voice whispering inside of her mind.

And even though she knew this was nothing but a hallucination—

She also knew it was God answering her prayers as her mind broke free from the chains of vengeance.

Thank You.

The knife slipped from her fingers just as her opponent's full force slammed into her, sending her crashing to the ground. The impact drove the air from her lungs, stars exploding behind her eyes. She waited for her life to end, but something rough scraped against her face instead.

A blindfold?

Her captor's touch was oddly careful—and that worried her more than brutality would have. Was this because her face was no longer hidden? Had her opponent recognized her—and intended to ransom Sarica back to the Marchettis?

Every instinct screamed at her to stay alert as her captor bound her hands, the restraints firm but not cruel.

She struggled to keep track of her surroundings as her captor led her to the back of a vehicle. But memories of the past three months persisted in distracting her.

Only hisfamigliaknew the truth of what she had been doing, and because the Marchettis had agreed to play their role as coldly furious almost-in-laws to perfection, the entire world was happy to hate on her alongside them.

Night after night, all eyes were on her, a girl who shamelessly painted the town red using her missing fiancé's money.

And that was why...

None of them ever cared enough to look beyond the surface.

None of them ever cared to know what exactly she was doing inside the clubs owned by the Prince of Killers.

Because if they had—

Then her secret would have long been exposed.

They would have known Sarica Nuñez and Seijcut were one.

And that she had completely lied about her reasons for placing a bounty on Giancarlo Marchetti's head.

The people she had met as Seijcut were exactly as she imagined. People who actually had no information to give—but because they hated the man she loved, they had wanted to work "with" Seijcut in finding Giancarlo.

They had wanted to exact revenge on him if he were ever found...

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

And that was why Sarica had passed them on to the Prince of Killers, and they, too, went missing the way Giancarlo did.

The vehicle hit a bump, her body swaying as her unseen driver made a turn, and with it, her thoughts swerved similarly. Viktor Biancardi's face flashed in her mind, and her fingers curled into fists behind her back.

Please, God.

Please.

Please keep me from killing him.

Tears burned her eyes as she thought of Viktor still walking around a free man while her Giancarlo, oh God...

She squeezed her eyes shut, and that was when she heard it.

This is not the way, dolcezza.

Giancarlo's beloved voice.

You cannot kill him.

Must not.

Because I cannot keep my promise to you if you're behind bars.

GIANCARLO STOOD AT the floor-to-ceiling windows of his office, the city of Kivr's capital spread before him, and beyond it, the vast desert. His reflection stared back at him: still in tactical gear, mask discarded on his desk, the silver streak in his hair gleaming under the moonlight.

For sixteen months, he had walked the razor's edge between life and death. Had done things that would haunt him until his last breath. But nothing—not the fall, not the months of rehabilitation, not even the choices that had led him here—nothing had prepared him for tonight.

Seijcut.

The name had been all everyone in the underworld could talk about for the past three months. A mysterious entity offering obscene amounts of money for information about him—dead or alive. Two hundred million dollars total, sourced from his own inheritance to her.

He had spent weeks analyzing Seijcut's every move, every decision. The careful wording of the bounty. The way targets were chosen. How those who claimed to have killed him mysteriously disappeared, while those who offered genuine information about his survival were left unharmed.

No wonder the moves had felt familiar.

No wonder each strike had carried echoes of his own training.

Because it was her.

Sarica.

A part of him still had a hard time believing that after sixteen months of thinking they

would never cross paths again——

She was now within reach.

Locked in a room that only he could open.

And his to do however she wished.

In the sixteen months he had been away, his contact at the FBI had regularly sent reports to him about Sarica and his famiglia. It was the only thing that kept him sane. To know that they were safe. But while he was able to read the reports on his kin, everything about Sarica went straight to the file cabinet...until now.

Per che, dolcezza?

Why?

How?

The newspaper clippings scattered across his desk taunted him with glimpses of her life in the past months.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

I'll make sure to wear red at your funeral so everyone knows I'm on the lookout for another sugar daddy.

Those had been her exact words.

But never had Giancarlo imagined, not even then, that she would actually be able to do it.

Until now.

He took the last unopened envelope. A collection of photos tumbled out, one of them causing Giancarlo to clench his fist until his knuckles started to whiten.

Her cheeks were flushed pink as she left the club.

But because he knew she didn't have it in her to still walk a straight line after drinking—

Damn her.

Damn her.

Damn her.

Since Sarica had been cursed with two left feet, dancing was immediately out of the question, and so there was only one other way he could think of.

Only one way to make her heart pumping and her cheeks turning that rosy.

Only one way.

And the thought alone made him want to kill...or get himself killed.

Per che, dolcezza?

His phone buzzed, and the sound brought him back to his senses.

Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that it was God's perfect timing at work, God wanting Giancarlo to remember that neither vengeance nor anger could be of any help to him in the long run.

His phone buzzed again, and Giancarlo finally answered the call.

"I heard there was quite a plot twist in tonight's mission," Nassif drawled.

"I'll take care of her."

"And your wife?" the sheikh asked in sardonic amusement.

"I'll take care of that, too."

Chapter Three

The water was warm, almost too warm.

Steam filled the bathroom, curling around her like a lover's embrace, and Sarica leaned back against the tiled wall, her eyes closed as she let the heat seep into her bones. But she wasn't alone.

Strong hands gripped her hips, pulling her closer, and she gasped as a body pressed against hers. She didn't need to open her eyes to know who it was. The feel of him, the scent of him—it was all so familiar, so achingly right. Her hands slid up his chest, her fingers tracing the hard planes of muscle as she leaned in to kiss him, her lips parting under his.

“Giancarlo,” she whispered, her voice trembling with need. “I’ve missed you.”

He didn't answer, but his hands moved over her body with a possessiveness that left her trembling. His touch was everywhere, his mouth hot against her skin as he kissed her neck, her shoulders, her collarbone. She arched into him, her body responding to his every move, every touch, until she was trembling on the edge.

“Giancarlo,” she moaned, her fingers tangling in his hair as she pulled him closer. “Please...”

But something was wrong. The hands on her hips felt different—rougher, more demanding. The body pressed against hers was unfamiliar, the scent not his. Her eyes flew open, and her breath caught in her throat.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

It wasn't Giancarlo.

The man in the shower with her was a stranger, his face shadowed but his eyes burning with an intensity that made her stomach twist. She tried to pull away, but his grip tightened, holding her in place as he leaned in to kiss her. She turned her head, but it was too late. His lips brushed against hers, and she felt a surge of something she didn't want to feel—pleasure, hot and undeniable, coursing through her.

“No,” she whispered, her voice breaking. “This isn't right...”

But her body betrayed her, arching into his touch as his hands moved lower, his fingers sliding between her legs. She gasped, her hands gripping his shoulders as the pleasure built inside her, hot and relentless. She tried to fight it, tried to pull away, but it was too much. The heat, the pressure, the way his body moved against hers—it was all too much.

“Dauphin...”

Excruciating agony ripped through Giancarlo at the sound of Sarica moaning another man's name. He lunged forward, but the chains binding his limbs held him back, and there was nothing he could do but watch in a mixture of rage and betrayal as Sarica's moans filled the air.

No, stop, no!

Steam from the shower blocked his view as Sarica and her lover came together. He could no longer see anything but he could hear everything.

The couple's bodies slapping against each other——

The breathless panting——

And Sarica crying it out again——

Dauphin.

It was the sound of a woman who was about to come.

GIANCARLO'S RAGGEDbreath destroyed the silence as soon as he was released from his nightmare.

Even though he knew now none of it was real——

He was still unable to make himself forget.

And that was when he felt it.

Something that he hadn't felt since his father and grandfather were massacred.

Something he thought he had long taken control of.

Rage.

Because right or wrong——

Sarica needed to pay for forgetting she belonged to him.

AN ELEVATOR RIDE TOa secret floor.

And at the end of the hallway, a luxurious room that was now a cage.

Hercage.

He stood in the doorway, his gaze brooding as he surveyed his prisoner.

Sarica.

Her posture was rigid with tension, her hands cuffed behind her back. The blindfold over her eyes was stark against her pale skin, and her violet hair fell in disheveled waves around her shoulders. She was still wearing the outfit she had been taken in—a tight-fitted dark shirt that clung to the swell of her breasts, which were now noticeably and rapidly heaving.

Giancarlo had convinced himself three nights ago that keeping her trapped was for her protection. But that was a lie, of course. After finding out what she had been up to in the past three months?

Giancarlo knew she was scared, but he could not make himself regret this.

He wanted her scared.

Because fear would help Sarica remember the lesson he didn't want her to forget again.

She belonged to him.

And him alone.

Always.

He stepped into the room, the sound of his footsteps muffled by the thick rug. Sarica's head snapped up at the noise, her body stiffening. She tilted her head as if trying to discern his presence. She was completely at his mercy, and a thrill of power rushed through his bloodstream at the knowledge.

He reached for her, his touch making Sarica flinch. She tried to recoil away but he gave her no chance to escape. Giancarlo pulled her to his feet, and even as guilt slashed at his conscience—

I need you to remember you're mine, dolcezza.

He cupped her face in his hands and crushed his mouth to hers.

The kiss was fierce and desperate, a clash of teeth and tongues that left no room for gentleness. He only meant to punish her with a single kiss, but then something changed.

And his world turned upside down—

Per che, dolcezza?

—the moment she started kissing him back.

No. No. No.

He hated her for wanting him.

But at the same time, feeling her hunger for him fed his own desire.

Her lips were soft and yielding, and the taste of her intoxicating. Giancarlo groaned, his hands sliding down to her hips, pulling her closer until there was no space left between them.

She started grinding her mound against him, and it was the last straw.

He carried her to the bed.

Tore her clothes off her body.

But still she didn't resist him.

In mere moments, she was completely bare to his gaze.

His beautiful Sarica.

Who should only be his.

So why, dolcezza?

Why?

He knew her first time should not be like this.

But he could no longer stop himself.

I'm sorry, my love.

Giancarlo knelt between her legs, his hands gripping her thighs as he spread them wider. She gasped, her body arching off the bed, but she didn't resist. Her blindfolded face turned toward him, her lips parted in a silent plea, and Giancarlo felt a surge of possessiveness unlike anything he had ever known.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

He leaned down, his breath hot against her skin, and pressed his mouth to her. She cried out, her hands twisting in the cuffs, but he didn't stop. He couldn't. The taste of her was intoxicating, and the sounds she made—soft, desperate moans that sent shivers down his spine—only fueled his hunger. He licked and teased, his tongue working her until she was writhing beneath him, her body trembling on the edge of release.

“Please,” she whispered, her voice breaking. “Please...”

Her plea was his undoing.

He increased the pressure, his hands gripping her hips as he drove her over the edge. Her body convulsed, her back arching off the bed, and she cried out, a sound so raw and primal it sent a jolt of pleasure through him. He didn't stop until the last tremor had faded and she was lying limp and breathless beneath him.

For a moment, he just stared at her, his chest heaving, his mind reeling.

She was his.

Completely, utterly his.

And yet, as he looked at her—blindfolded, bound, and trembling—he couldn't shake the feeling that he had crossed a line he could never come back from.

Chapter Four

The darkness was suffocating. Sarica sat on the edge of the bed, her wrists bound behind her back, the cold metal of the handcuffs digging into her skin. The blindfold over her eyes was tight, plunging her into a void where sight was impossible and every other sense was heightened.

For the past three days, she had been free to do as she wished inside of her room. Food and water had been given to her through a window. She had tried asking for a newspaper, and they had given that, too. But just when she had started to think that the reason they were treating her well was because they wanted to ransom her back to the Marchettis—

Masked men had come in to blindfold and cuff her again, and Sarica knew she was back to square one as soon as she sensed someone enter her room.

Her body went rigid, her breath catching in her throat.

Rage filled the other person, and she fought against the instinctive urge to scream and beg for mercy.

Think of Viktor.

Think of Giancarlo.

Are you sure you really want to beg mercy from the man who caused Giancarlo to disappear?

The thought was enough to strengthen her resolve. And it helped her stay still even as she could feel him coming closer and closer. Her stomach churned as unseen hands gripped her shoulders to pull her up to his feet. Her mind begged her to fight and run, but all her heart wanted was to make her Giancarlo proud.

His mouth crashed on her, and just like that—she knew.

Oh God.

The fear gripping her heart disappeared, and she felt as if she was about to explode.

Relief.

Joy.

Love.

Everything about this kiss was exquisitely familiar, and as soon as she realized it was him—

My love, oh my love, my love.

She no longer cared to think.

All she wanted was to burn.

And that was exactly what was happening, with Giancarlo now kneeling between her legs as he spread them wide open.

She gasped, her body arching off the bed, but she didn't resist. Her blindfolded face turned toward him, her lips parting in a silent cry as he thrust his tongue past her swollen folds. Every stroke of his tongue was possessive and demanding, and it only took moments before her body started to convulse in pleasure.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

For a moment, Sarica just lay there, her chest heaving, her mind reeling.

She thought it was all over until...

Aaaaah.

He was thrusting inside of her, the pain sharp and fleeting but completely welcomed because this...

This was Giancarlo keeping his promise from years ago.

In time, Sarica.

You'll fuck me.

In time.

He plunged inside of her again and again, and she gave herself without restraint. Every thrust made her feel alive in a way that she had not felt for over sixteen unbearably long months, and even though she was not the right time—

"I love you, Giancarlo," she whispered.

His powerful body shuddered at the shock of her words, and her tears were no longer possible to hold back.

"I love—"

Giancarlo abruptly cut her off with a kiss, his tongue slipping past her lips as if to silence her. It was almost as if he didn't want to hear the words, but why?

Sarica wanted to ask him this but she could no longer do so, with Giancarlo pumping into her faster and faster, the force of his every thrust making her mind spin until all she could do was hold on to him.

I won't let you go.

I won't.

I won't.

Sarica was still sobbing the words in her mind as orgasm swept both of them away at the same time, and all she could do was lock her legs tightly around his waist as he began to fill her with his seed.

Please don't go.

Don't go.

Please.

But as the waves of pleasure faded, what she feared the worst still happened.

He was pulling away, and this time, the rest of her words came out in a rush.

"I f-fell in love with you from the start," Sarica choked out. "That day you saved me...I didn't know it then, but my heart did. You walked into that restaurant and heard those men talking about hurting me, and you didn't even know me, but you—" She had to pause, memories threatening to overwhelm her. "You were everything my

father wasn't. Everything I'd been taught not to believe in."

She waited for him to speak. But she also dreaded that he would because she feared he would ask her to go.

"I love you, Giancarlo. Always. Even when I was trying so hard to prove I didn't need anyone. Even when I was pushing you away with ridiculous hair colors and outrageous clothes. Even when I pretended your kindness meant nothing and the world said you were gone."

GIANCARLO'S HEART THUNDERED against his ribs as he listened to her words.

"I'm s-sorry for only saying it now."

His Sarica was crying.

"I'm so sorry for waiting until I almost lost you forever."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

Everything in him wanted to believe her. And that her actions in the past three months had been nothing but a terrible misunderstanding. He wanted to believe it was all a lie. But how could he...when she also turned out to be Seijcut?

Why say she loved him when she had also used his own money to place a bounty on his head?

"At least tell me," Sarica was asking him brokenly. "Tell me why didn't you come back?"

The question struck too close to secrets he couldn't reveal, and Giancarlo could feel her hope fading as silence stretched between them.

"Why didn't you at least let us know that you're alive?"

He knew what she wanted him to say.

But because he also knew what was at stake——

"Because that part of my life is over."

Giancarlo could only give her the truth she needed to hear.

Chapter Five

Four days.

He had forced himself to stay away for four days, each hour a test of will he wasn't sure he was passing. The security feeds taunted him with glimpses of Sarica, and it didn't matter what she was doing; anything she did, he wanted to do with her. For her. Or to her.

He would catch her having lunch, and he would remember the years when mealtimes were the only moments he had allowed himself to sit close to her, talking, and having a world of their own even though the rest of their families surrounded them.

He would see her enter the en-suite to shower and he wanted to be the one soaping her body. He would see her asleep in bed, and it was all he could do not to join her and have her curl up next to him.

It was insanity to watch her all the time. But it was an addiction he could not control.

It killed him to keep his distance, but Giancarlo also knew the more often he visited her, the closer he could succumb to playing with fire.

In their world, all it would take was one spark.

One moment of weakness.

And everything he'd sacrificed these past sixteen months would burn to ashes.

So just stay away, Marchetti.

Go back to how you had lived your life in the past sixteen months, and all you had then were dreams of her.

Forget she ever existed, for both your sake.

But this was easier said than done, and when work brought Giancarlo back to the same office building where Sarica was kept hidden in a basement suite, the temptation proved too strong to resist.

Just one look.

He promised himself that was all he'd allow. One glimpse to satiate the need that clawed at his chest day and night. His fingers found the light switch outside her door, hesitating for just a moment. Total darkness would be safer. Would let him see without being seen. Would let him maintain the control that seemed to slip through his fingers whenever she was near.

The lock disengaged with a soft click, and he entered silently, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness. The sound reached him first—quiet, broken sounds that made his heart clench. Moonlight filtered through the high windows, casting just enough light to show him her silhouette.

She was crying.

The realization shattered his resolve like glass. Before he could stop himself, he was moving toward her, drawn by an instinct deeper than reason or duty or obligation. His feet carried him across the Persian carpet, past the untouched dinner tray on the marble coffee table, through the shadows that seemed to mock his attempt at restraint.

Sarica threw herself at him the moment he was close enough to touch, her arms wrapping around his neck, her legs locked around his waist.

"Gotcha."

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

One breathlessly spoken word, and he realized that this was all a trap.

Tears had been her bait, and he had fallen for it, hook, line, and sinker.

But before he could pull away, she was already rubbing herself against him, and he hungered for her far too much to even think of denying himself.

He had her up against the wall in moments, her dress bunched around her waist, his pants unzipped, in another. While it took everything in him not to groan Sarica's name as he sank his length inside of her, the same constraints did not apply to her. She moaned his name with complete abandon—

Giancarlo.

Please...

Please don't stop...

Would she still be this vocal if she realized that the guards stationed by the elevator could likely hear her?

A fierce rush of satisfaction filled Giancarlo at the thought of people knowing how much his Sarica wanted him, and his thrusts took on a roughness that had Sarica clawing his back.

Yes, yes, yes.

Her desire for him was his undoing.

I'm so close, Giancarlo.

I'm so——

Aaaaaah.

They came at the same time, Sarica crying out as he suckled hard on her neck.

If only.

If only this moment could last forever.

If only.

But time was unstoppable, and Sarica's tremulous words were the first to break the silence between them.

"I already know it's you, Giancarlo."

Sarica's voice shook as her fingers found his face in the darkness, tracing the new scars, memorizing the changes sixteen months had wrought. "So p-please let me see you. And I p-promise. I won't ask any questions you don't want to answer. It doesn't matter what you say or don't say." Her voice broke, the sound piercing his heart. "I'm going to wait for you the way you waited for me all those years."

Sarica waited for Giancarlo to speak with desperate hope. But instead of words, he chose to answer her with a simple little click of a light switch, and the sound waseverything.

She started to sob as she finally saw him clearly, her trembling fingers tracing the chiseled lines of the face that had consumed her thoughts and dreams for the past six months.

Thank You, God.

Thank You.

She couldn't stop staring, couldn't stop crying, couldn't stop thanking God enough because she knew this would have been impossible without Him.

The silver in Giancarlo's hair had spread slightly; a wider streak that made him look even more distinguished despite his leaner and harder frame. But what broke her heart the most was his eyes, oh God.

His eyes were still the most precious windows to his soul, and in it, she already knew just how much he had suffered in the sixteen months that he was gone.

She traced his lips with care, a part of her still in shock that the Giancarlo before her was no longer an illusion. "It's really you," she couldn't help but whisper, and a sardonic smile twisted over the lips she had just touched.

"Now, you have doubts?" His tone was mocking, but she could hear the strain beneath it, could see the muscle ticking in his jaw.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

"I love you." Sarica felt foolish for how desperately she needed to say them. But this time she could see his beautiful face, and her heart hurt at how his features hardened at her words.

"It seems I need to make myself clear."

"Giancarlo——"

Sarica's voice faltered as he disentangled her limbs and put her down on her feet.

"The only reason I've shown myself is for you to understand that this has to end now." Each word seemed to cost him, seemed to carve new lines of pain around his mouth. "I want you to leave——"

"Why?"

His jaw clenched. "What happened to not asking questions I don't want to answer?"

"Because I'm sure that's not one of them." She stepped closer, heart pounding against her ribs. "Your mind says you don't want to, but your heart——"

"Don't."

"But I lo——"

Giancarlo was gone before she could finish, the door closing behind him with terrible finality.

But this time, the sound didn't break her.

This time, it made her think.

Because she knew her Giancarlo—knew him in ways that sixteen months couldn't erase. Knew the man who had once moved heaven and earth to protect her would never cause her this kind of pain without reason.

And as she stood there, surrounded by the lingering scent of him, pieces started falling into place. The careful way he touched her, even when trying to push her away.

The pain in his eyes when she said she loved him.

The way his hands shook when she got too close to whatever truth he was hiding.

No, her white knight hadn't changed—not where it mattered.

And the only thing clear to Sarica now was that this time...

It was her turn to wait.

Her turn to hope.

Her turn to have faith for both of them.

Chapter Six

When Giancarlo returned the next day, they fell into an unspoken truce. She didn't speak of her feelings, he didn't ask her to leave. Every second was precious...because neither of them knew how long it would last.

Sarica couldn't help but notice how thoroughly she still had him wrapped around her finger. She would absently mention something she craved, and it would be handed to her on a silver platter, literally. He would notice her shiver, and she didn't have to say a word after that. He would pull her into his arms and warm her up in the way only he could do so. Maybe one day he would figure out that she was not as sensitive to the cold as she used to?

But the thing that gave Sarica the most hope was how he kept finding excuses to touch her—which was the exact opposite of the old Giancarlo, who had taken pains not to even be alone in the same room with her for years.

From the moment he entered their room, he would be holding and touching her in some way. Not a second would pass that they were not in contact. If she were to read a book, he wanted her to do so while curled up on his lap. If he caught her yawning, he would insist that she sleep in his arms and nowhere else. He insisted on bathing her and drying her hair. Dressing and feeding her. He insisted on doing everything for her and with her.

Everything could've been perfect.

She just had to remember not to look in his eyes.

Because in his gaze was the truth.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am

Giancarlo still had not changed his mind about her needing to leave, and why that was, she still had no idea.

Since it was pretty obvious that he loved her, could it be that her love was what he questioned? She wished she could ask him, but she also knew one wrong word would be more than enough to have him send her packing.

Patience, Sarica.

She never had much of it even as a kid, but it was never too late to learn.

Right?

God would let her know about His perfect timing. But until then, there was one last thing that she did want...

Giancarlo stared at her in disbelief. "You want a photo of me bare-chested? What for?"

The afternoon sun caught the silver in his hair, making him look like some kind of modern-day fairy tale prince. If princes wore thousand-dollar suits and carried concealed weapons, that is.

"Are you going to let me take a photo of you or not?"

"You must at least tell me why—"

"Because I'll be the only person in this world to—" Sarica's gaze narrowed at the flash of guilt that crossed his handsome face. "Are you telling me I'm wrong? Is there already someone else who has a photo of you...barechested?"

Oh, the very idea had Sarica gnashing her teeth, and more so when Giancarlo only continued to stare at her.

"Are you jealous?"

Dear God, I wish I could ask You to cover Your ears and pretend that you don't hear me. Because right now, I really, really want to ask Giancarlo if he's dumb.

"Of course I'm jealous," Sarica burst out. "I know you don't want to hear this, but too bad for you, I'm going to say it right now. I! Love! You! So of course I'm going to befucking—"

"STOP CURSING."

"I wish I could," Sarica said sweetly, "but since the day you went missing, I swore that I'll only stop swearing once you come back to me." She crossed her arms over her chest and stared up at him challengingly. "Have you come back to me, Giancarlo?"

The tension between them crackled like lightning about to strike. His gaze dropped to her lips, and for a moment she thought he might—

The sharp trill of his phone shattered the moment.

"I have to take this one, dolcezza. I'm sorry." Giancarlo was already backing away, his expression a mix of relief and regret.

Sarica stared at him in frustration. "But we——"

"This would only take a few minutes. I'll be right back."

Giancarlo was gone before she could answer him, and contrary to his promise of a few minutes, half an hour had already passed with no sign of his return.

Aaaargh.

Sarica wished she still had it in her to drop an F-bomb, but she didn't really want to.

I'm sorry, God.

She had known even then that the promise she had made was pointless and stupid. But at that time, she herself had been made stupid by grief and despair, and falling back on her old bad habits was all she could think of.

Since rebelling in her younger years had been her way of grabbing Giancarlo's attention, she had decided to start swearing in hopes that a still-missing Giancarlo would hear of it and he'd be so incensed that he'd come right back to scold her.

Ugh.

God might as well take back her brains if she were to ever act that stupid again. And besides, even if Giancarlo didn't want to admit it just yet——

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

They both knew he was hers.

Always was.

Always would be.

But—

Sarica struggled against the urge to seethe in jealousy.

Was there really someone else who had Giancarlo's one and only bare-chested photo?

The thought nagged at Sarica as afternoon bled into evening with no sign of his return. She paced the luxurious prison, remembering how careful he'd been with his answers, how guilt had flashed across his face at her assumption.

Hmm.

There was only one way to get him back to the room, and Sarica put her plan into motion first thing the next morning.

"I'm sorry," she told the attendant who regularly brought her breakfast, making sure her voice carried to the others hovering nearby. "But I'm going on a hunger strike."

The effect was immediate. The staff started to panic, speaking rapidly among themselves in Arabic, and thank God for Dauphin's insistence on language training, which allowed Sarica to catch fragments of their conversation.

The master will kill us...

But we're not supposed to disturb him...

What about his wife?

Sarica's knees buckled, and she grabbed the back of a chair just in time to keep herself from crashing.

His wife?

Surely they could not be talking about her Giancarlo.

Right?

The room suddenly felt too small, the air too thin, and Sarica could feel her face lose color as memories assaulted her heart.

Was this why he wanted her to leave?

Was this why he had tried to keep his distance?

Was this why he did not want to hear her speak about her feelings?

Chapter Seven

The head of security made his call and sent his report to his superior, who also made his own call as he sent an envoy to Cayed, in which a closed-door top-secret meeting was ongoing. The envoy delivered the handwritten message to the concierge, who then passed it on to an executive assistant. The older woman folded the piece of paper after reading the message and knocked on the door before handing it to her employer.

Sheikh Nassif read the note with a raised brow before passing it to the man seated next to him.

"I think this is for you, my friend."

Giancarlo frowned as he unfolded the piece of paper—

She has stopped eating.

—and got to his feet as soon as he read its contents. "Please excuse me," he said tightly before walking out of the room.

"Please accept my apologies on my husband's behalf. Both of us love how fieldwork adds spice to our marriage. But even I have to admit that it does have its drawbacks—" The woman's cherry-red lips curved in an appreciative smile as the restaurant staff came in with their entrées. "This is one of them, for sure. Don't you think it's unfortunate that Giancarlo has to miss this gorgeous piece of lamb?"

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

Her words released the tension in the room, and the others laughingly agreed at Giancarlo's misfortune. His abrupt departure was all but forgotten, or at least it was except for Sheikh Nassif, whose amused smile effectively concealed his thoughts, and Giancarlo's wife herself, whose gaze turned calculating whenever it lingered on the doorway.

The time it took to drive from Cayed and back to the capital was cut in half with Giancarlo himself taking the wheel. But two steps into the room, and he knew right away he had walked into another trap. This time, her hunger strike was her bait of choice, and he had fallen for it again. Hook. Line. Sinker.

"Are you really married?"

Her face was pale, her gaze blank, her tone steady.

But even so.

He heard her heart crying out loud and clear, and while he had never intended her to know about his marriage—

"Yes."

He felt her shatter even when all she did was stare at him. Her gaze searched him wildly, and he knew she was begging him without words to say something else. Anything that would help her make sense of his marriage and allow her to stay.

Forgiveness wasn't even a question.

She had already forgiven him.

And continued to love him.

But when all he did was gaze back at her without any intention of saying anything else—

"You win."

The quietly spoken words were an admission of defeat. So why did it feel like he was the one who had lost?

Giancarlo opened the door and stepped back. "You're free to go then."

Sarica didn't deign to answer.

Didn't even look his way as she walked past him.

He clenched his hands against the urge to pull her back and stop her from leaving.

Told himself that it was better this way as he watched her go.

This was for the best.

And if he repeated the words to himself often enough, maybe he would start believing it, too.

A call from security came in soon enough, and he gave them the green light to let Sarica walk free. "Have someone follow her," Giancarlo said curtly. "Discreetly."

He was still in his room when the first report landed in his box.

Subject booked a suite at the Desert Royale under the name of Dauphin Tueur.

The next thing he knew, his hands were bruised, his knuckles bloodied, and there were fist-sized holes in the wall. The last time he had blacked out like this, he had killed a lot of men without remembering anything. Because back then, he believed that vengeance was his, and never God's.

Giancarlo wanted to think tonight was a vast improvement.

Wanted to believe that it was better that he had hurt himself instead of others.

Those were the lies he wanted to believe.

But all he could hear was God's voice as he stared at his bloodied fists.

Hurting yourself hurts Me, too, son.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

This is not the way.

This is not My way.

Giancarlo knew what God was asking of Him.

I'm sorry.

But the past sixteen months had changed him.

And it was as if he was back in square one.

Giancarlo was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders again.

And even though he knew this wasn't true——

The hell he was in felt so damn deep...it just didn't seem possible that even God could save him.

Chapter Eight

Every hour brought a new report to Giancarlo's desk.

Guest manifests.

Security footage.

Staff interviews.

Credit card transactions.

Room service orders.

Elevator usage logs.

With Sheif Nassif's royal clearance to back him up, there was nothing Sarica could do that Giancarlo wouldn't know.

But even though he had yet to come across any indication of Sarica being in contact with Dauphin Tueur in any way—

The total silence only grated on him and set Giancarlo on edge. Ezio, his youngest brother, was the only one who usually managed to get past his security measures. But perhaps Tueur was just as good as staying invisible?

Jealousy clawed at his chest as sickening images from Giancarlo's nightmares started playing back in his mind.

Sarica in a shower with Tueur—

Sarica moaning the other man's name—

And Tueur smiling at him as he made Giancarlo's girl come.

He wanted to smash his fist against the desk.

Punch another hole in the wall.

Anything to unleash the violence inside of him.

But this time...Giancarlo did none of it.

This time, even though despair and hopelessness still held him back—

He was able to hear God's voice a little more clearly this time.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

And it was enough to help Giancarlo hold back and stay still.

One day at a time.

That was the only kind of hope Giancarlo could give himself.

One day, he would learn to forget her again.

And then he could go back to simply...existing.

"Sir?"

His security chief had entered his office.

"Should we continue surveillance?"

"Yes."

Because it would always be Giancarlo's responsibility to keep Sarica safe...even when she was no longer his.

His security chief left, and he was alone again in his office. He rose to his feet and gazed out of his window. The earthy splendor of Kivr's capital was impossible to deny, but it was the wintry beauty of Boston that his heart bled for. The people of this kingdom had been good to him, but it was his people—his famiglia—that his soul longed for.

I want to go back, God.

You can.

But how?

How can I go back when I'll never be whole again?

SARICA TILTED HER FACE toward the sun, letting the warmth sink into her skin. Kivr's capital was a fascinating blend of old and new. Skyscrapers rising behind ancient stone walls. Wide streets shared by both camel caravans and sports cars. And women in either traditional robes or dresses launched in the most recently concluded Fashion Week in Paris.

There was so much to look at and admire, but because she was now an adult in her mid-twenties—

Grrrr.

Her mind only had space for the Prince of Killers, who had not refrained from biting her head off in the video message he had sent her this morning.

To my most pathetic student to date.

Just recalling her fighting coach's first line had Sarica's teeth gnashing against each other. Since it was Maryse who had referred her to the Prince of Killers, she should have expected Dauphin to be just as "tactful" as the former Angel of Death.

Not.

The video message had lasted for only two minutes, but to Sarica, it had seemed like

eternity, with the Prince of Killers spending every second pinpointing her every flaw.

You should head out to the nearest Lost and Found office in your area.

Because your self-worth has gone missing.

My wife is a saint. So of course she would give you permission to book a suite under my name.

She will think you are doing so for your safety, but we both know the truth.

You want to make your man jealous...because you have become a coward.

I expect more from you, Sarica.

I taught you better than this.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

You are to face your problems head on and not hide or run away.

You must fight with the truth, even if it is only your heart - and not your life - at stake.

Sarica's phone buzzed at that moment, and a grimace touched her lips when she saw it was another video message, this time from Maryse. Since she was sure it would have the same browbeating content as Dauphin's—

Never mind.

She would just listen to it later.

Like, maybe 5,000 years later.

She had better things to do with her time, such as moping and moping and...oh, coffee!

It was the scent that distracted her first, which eventually drew her to a boutique café tucked between a bridal dress shop and a mom-and-pop business selling handmade nougats. Its covered terrace offered a picturesque view of Kivr's most exclusive shopping district while delicate brass ceiling fans spun out a subtle beat that was almost hypnotic.

While searching for a vacant table, a movement caught her eye, and Sarica wondered if she had started to hallucinate.

She blinked several times, but the illusion didn't go away.

It really was her, Sarica realized in shock.

Her dark hair was now corn wheat gold. Her near-black eyes were now blue. Her lightly tanned skin was now like ivory. But despite all of these superficial differences, Sarica knew she could not be mistaken.

The woman in front of her could only be Justina Ruiz, whose disappearance almost seven years ago had many in the world accusing Giancarlo of murder.

Sarica managed to find a vacant seat three tables behind the other woman. Missing: Boston's Dancing Queen was the title of the documentary about the unsolved mystery of Justina's disappearance. While the sleeper hit had been smart enough not to make any direct accusations against Giancarlo, the leading questions it asked were enough to turn the public into a lynch mob.

La Strega and the rest of the Marchettis had never made any comment about the show, and since Sarica was his grandmother's ward, she was forced to play nice and feign ignorance when asked about the documentary.

But Sarica in front of her laptop was a completely different matter, and she could still remember the countless nights she had spent in those years, creating multiple anonymous accounts just so she could demolish every wild theory that trolls had posted about Justina and Giancarlo online.

Sarica's hands trembled as she studied the other woman over the lid of her coffee cup. Justina looked really, really good for someone the whole world believed to be assaulted, raped, and murdered. The documentary portrayed her as a country girl whose dreams of a bright future were destroyed by one of New England's less honorable families.

In those days, Justina's wardrobe consisted mostly of plaid shirts and denims. But the woman in front of her now looked posh and self-assured, her dress worth well over several thousand dollars, and her bag twice as much.

Was it coincidence that Justina was in the same country as the one Giancarlo was in?

No.

She felt stupid even for asking such a thing. Coincidences ceased to exist the moment she believed God existed. And if that was the case, then—

Oh no.

There was no longer any point figuring out how to introduce herself to the other woman—

"Hello, Sarica. Would you like to join me for coffee?"

—since Justina had turned around in her chair to look straight at her with a smile.

"Hello, and yes, I would absolutely love to." Sarica greeted the other woman back without missing a beat...even as she mentally kicked herself in the head for forgetting every lesson about stealth. Her mind raced as she joined Justina at the other table, and she bit back a sigh of relief when the other woman asked for menus.

Oh, good.

Studying the menu gave Sarica a chance to regain her composure. To think of the questions she could ask of Justina. To figure out the real deal between the other woman and—

"The menu is hardly complex enough to warrant such intense study."

Sarica lowered her menu and managed a smile despite her skin prickling at Justina's amused drawl.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

"Shall I order for you?" Justina offered. "Maybe something iced? Giancarlo mentioned your sensitive tongue, which is very like him."

"Oh?"

"Giancarlo has a talent for discovering people's vulnerabilities...and going out of his way to protect them from it."

Did this woman just make a dig about her?

"Oh, but before I forget...thank you, by the way. And I'm saying that with complete sincerity."

"For what?"

"Your passionate defense for Giancarlo online."

Sarica's expression turned blank. "I'm not sure——"

"I used to work at a salon," Justin cut her off gently. "Hair colors were a specialty of mine, and your usernames..."

Sarica could only wince at this point.

"Item codes of a popular beauty company, and they just so happen to match the shade of your hair during time of posting."

Sarica forced herself to smile. "You got me."

"No, Sarica. You got him. While everyone was happy to drag Giancarlo down, you worked twice as hard in putting the truth out there. You didn't allow anyone to get away with painting him a monster online. Every loser in Boston wanted to feel good at his expense, but you single-handedly destroyed all of them. And as his wife——"

Sarica's world crashed as Justina reached across the table to take her hand.

"I know it's several years too late, but I can't thank you enough for it."

Chapter Nine

Justina ended the call with practiced grace, her French-manicured nails gleaming as she set her phone down. "Giancarlo asks that we wait here. My husband will join us."

Bile rose to Sarica's throat at the way Justina uttered Giancarlo's name with affectionate possessiveness, and her mind, unbidden, conjured images she didn't want to see.

Giancarlo and Justina together, their bodies entwined, their breaths mingling in the dark.

But since it was Giancarlo and Justina who were married——

Didn't that make her the villain in this story instead of the other way around?

Justina indicated Sarica's already-empty glass. "Would you like another one?"

What I'd like, Sarica thought, is Giancarlo back, and for you to disappear.

Shame ate her alive as soon as the thought popped into her mind, and Sarica managed to shake her head with a polite smile. "I'm fine, thanks."

Sarica made a show of texting someone on her phone, but it was all for show. She just didn't have it in her to indulge in small talk with a woman who professed to be Giancarlo's wife.

What now, God?

What do I do?

What do You want me to do?

The Giancarlo she knew would never have made love to her if he was truly married. But what if she was wrong? What if he had really changed that much?

And if Giancarlo was married, then—

Help me, God.

Please.

Because she loved Giancarlo so, so much that only a miracle would enable her to walk away from him for good.

GIANCARLO FELT THE weight of both women's gazes as they watched him approach. The silence stretched taut between them, laden with unspoken questions and painful truths. Justina was a picture of confidence and ease, her lithe and slender form perfectly accentuated by the designer dress she wore.

He took the chair next to Justina and heard Sarica suck her breath as he did. He didn't want to look at her but forced himself to.

Dio mio.

He had been hoping the photos his security sent to her had exaggerated her loss of weight. But it had not. She had also changed her hair color to periwinkle, but that only made things worse. Such changes always meant she was not okay.

And this time, Giancarlo knew he had only himself to blame for her troubles.

"I've heard a lot of rumors about you two," Justina murmured. "The people from your world—they made it sound like neither of you were in favor of being married to each other. That you were only doing it to obey Signora Marchetti. Were they wrong?"

"No."

"Yes."

It was Sarica who had said 'no'...in a pathetic attempt to save her pride. But when Giancarlo had actually said the truth at the same time, and she saw the way his lips tightened when he realized what he had revealed...

Puzzle pieces started falling into place as Sarica finally got past the veil of her heartbreak, and her mind began to work like it was supposed to.

"I think I should rephrase my answer," Sarica heard herself say. "I fell in love with Giancarlo right away—" She saw Giancarlo's jaw clench at this, but she told herself to ignore this. "But I didn't want us to marry if he was only making me his wife out of duty." She looked at Justina then, asking softly, "Does that sound familiar to you?"

Sarica was hoping to catch the other woman off guard, but the words only made Justina smile. "It does, actually. Very much so. And come to think of it, the three of us have that in common. People say 'thank you' when someone lends them a helping hand—and leave it at that. But the three of us?" Justina shook her head with a laugh. "We always want to go the extra mile, regardless of whether we're returning the favor or paying it forward."

Sarica's heart started pounding. Was this the other woman's way of acknowledging the truth about her marriage?

"Do you know what I owe Giancarlo?" Justina asked.

Sarica slowly shook her head.

"I was abducted on my way to an event I was hired to host. I caught the eye of the

wrong man, my abductor had told me. And that was why I became their target."

Even though Justina's voice was clinical as she recounted her ordeal, the pain in her words was all too easy to imagine, and because Sarica herself knew what it was to be surrounded by evil—she also knew there was so, so much that Justina was leaving out.

"I was about to be auctioned off when Giancarlo came to rescue me. But because he was unable to find the people behind my abduction, he arranged for my disappearance instead. He gave me enough to start fresh, but all I wanted was revenge. And Giancarlo, he, too, did not stop looking. Because he knew I wouldn't be the last girl whose life they would destroy. We pursued every lead. We didn't leave anything to chance. And then one day, Giancarlo told me he was getting close to discovering the truth..."

The truth dawned on Sarica with painful clarity. "It was Viktor...wasn't it?"

"To be fair to Giancarlo's friend, subsequent evidence we've collected suggests that his involvement isn't...voluntary. Someone had something on him. And whoever it was...had also ordered Viktor to kill Giancarlo when they realized he was on their trail."

Chapter Ten

Seven years ago

The border crossing into Moskra was exactly what Giancarlo had promised: quick, discreet, and surprisingly mundane. No dramatic chase scenes. No gunfire. Just a quiet exchange of papers, a knowing nod from a guard whose silence had been bought with more money than Justina had ever seen, and finally, freedom.

Giancarlo had given her more than what she needed to start a brand new life anywhere in the world. And while the whole world believed her missing, Giancarlo had arranged to leave behind fabricated clues that only people like her abductors would recognize.

And those clues would suggest she had died an accidental death, in order to prevent them from going after the loved ones she had left behind in America.

Keep going, and never look back.

Because the people who had almost succeeded in selling her off were still out there somewhere, doing what they do best, and that was to steal and ruin other people's lives.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

But as much as she appreciated Giancarlo's warning—

The money he'd given her didn't go toward a new life in some distant paradise. Instead, it bought Justina training. Weapons. Information.

In a country where criminal families held more power than the government, everything was for sale—including the skills she needed to ensure she would never be a victim again.

In Moskra, she forged for herself a new identity, and the old Justina was buried permanently in the past. The girl who used to work in a salon was gone and never to be seen again. In her place was a faceless spy who now used scissors for cutting body parts other than hair. And one whose loyalty only belonged to the highest bidder.

The jobs she accepted might seem random to most. But in truth, every job she completed also gave her a new clue about the people she was after. Every day was either an opportunity to learn something new—or apply what she learned with bloody efficiency. And at night, she found it strangely entertaining and relaxing at the same time to read about people's reactions to the documentary that had made her name - once upon a time - trend higher than all the juiciest scandals from Hollywood.

When news of Giancarlo's disappearance reached Justina years later, she had wasted no time in heading to the crash site and barely managed to beat Viktor Biancardi's men in finding him. She owed Giancarlo Marchetti everything, and if she had to die protecting him so be it.

Whatever he needed, she would make it happen, and with Giancarlo's fall from a cliff

leaving him severely injured and comatose——

"I'd like to speak to Sheikh Nassif Al-Mansouri, please. I'd like to collect a debt on my friend's behalf."

JUSTINA REALIZED SHE had lost herself in the past once more and forced her thoughts back to the present with some effort. Giancarlo was the one talking this time, his voice stiff, his accent stronger than usual.

As expected, Justina thought, since Giancarlo was now explaining to his former fiancée the reason behind their marriage.

"Justina's network of contacts will never work with me in uncovering who was pulling Viktor's strings from the shadows. All of them were too well aware of my reputation. They would never trust me even if I were to tell them I was willing to break the rules to get what I wanted. But if, on the other hand, the two of us were to marry..."

"She would become famiglia," Sarica finished for him in a strained voice. "And of course everyone knows the lengths you would go to protect the people you consider your responsibility."

"Yes."

Sarica gnawed on her lip. "May I ask one more thing?"

Giancarlo nodded.

"How bad were your injuries?"

Sarica's question was all Justina had to hear to know the truth between the two.

Sarica's mind had to be reeling from the extent to which Giancarlo had deceived her. But instead of lashing out...all the girl cared about was Giancarlo's injuries.

It almost made Justina feel bad about what she intended to do next.

"Sarica?"

Almost being the operative word, but because Justina no longer had any softness left inside of her—

"May I have a moment with my husband?" She waited until Sarica turned to her before placing her hand over Giancarlo's in a casual claim of possession.

"O-Of c-course."

Sarica's stammer had Giancarlo stiffening next to Justina, and she squeezed his hand in warning.

Let this play out.

She turned to him, her gaze meeting his unflinchingly.

Or I'm going to make you regret it.

Sarica was now on her feet, but she was unable to look at either of them as she spoke in a rush. "I should...I, um, I actually have somewhere to go. And I t-think we discussed everything we had to."

Justina waited for Sarica to turn away before speaking again.

"I don't understand, Giancarlo."

And of course, she made sure that Sarica was still near enough to hear her every word.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

"Why did you make it sound like nothing happened between us?"

Giancarlo's chest tightened at the way Justina's words made Sarica stumble. While he knew it could only be a good thing for Sarica to have more reasons to hate and forget him—

He waited until Sarica was completely out of sight before turning to Justina. "What do you think you're doing?" It was one thing for him to hurt Sarica for her sake, but he had never asked Justina to do the same.

"You told me before you didn't want to be a brick around their neck and would never go back after it. Has that changed?"

A muscle started ticking in his jaw, but Giancarlo could not make himself deny the truth. "No."

"Then don't you think I've acted as you needed me to?" Justina asked with a shrug. "And besides, don't forget you have another mystery to solve. Or should I say who?"

Justina saw the shift in his expression, the way his jaw tightened at the reminder. Her next words came out more soberly: "I tried looking for information about Tueur, too, but he's like a ghost." Her fingers drummed against the table, a rare display of frustration. "I can't even figure out how Sarica got to know someone like him...unless, of course, it's the other way around."

Giancarlo knew what Justina was suggesting in not so many words, and as much as he despised acknowledging such a possibility—

Of course it was possible that Dauphin Teuer had been the one to approach Sarica first.

Of course it was possible for another man to fall in love with Sarica...and be as obsessed with her as Giancarlo still was.

But regardless of who approached whom first—

"Tueur has nothing to do with either of us," Giancarlo said flatly, "and as long as he doesn't do anything to hurt Sarica or my famiglia, it's a waste of time to even think—"

The buzz of his phone inside his pocket interrupted him, and Giancarlo answered the call when he saw Nassif's name on the screen.

"Your target has taken the bait. He'll be flying in tomorrow." A pause. "Maybe this time, my new vest will be of some help."

"I doubt it." Kivr's airport was recently declared a no-firearms zone and employed a comprehensive security system to ensure the rule applied to everyone flying in and out of their territory.

"One can always hope," Nassif murmured.

"Your concern for my well-being is unmatched."

"Just making the most out of a situation, my friend."

Giancarlo turned to Justina after dropping his phone back in his pocket. He considered telling her about Viktor but decided not to. The fact that she didn't like talking about her past was telling, and there were times when it was better for one's demons to simply disappear without having to face them.

"I need your help with something," Giancarlo said finally. "Nassif needs me at the palace tomorrow." Justina would demand to be involved if she knew what was going down tomorrow, and this was the best way to distract her from thinking anything was amiss. "And I'm starting to think you're right about being suspicious towards Tueur. Do you think you can keep an eye on Sarica while I'm away?"

Chapter Eleven

The labneh at the Desert Royale was perfectly creamy, served with warm pita bread and a drizzle of local olive oil. But Sarica barely tasted any of it, with her mind still spinning from yesterday's revelations.

A commotion at the restaurant's entrance drew her out of her thoughts, and Sarica stiffened in her seat when she saw two uniformed officers heading her way.

They gave her the usual spiel, but Sarica only nodded without hearing anything. She knew exactly who was behind all of this, and she didn't put up any resistance as they escorted her out of her hotel.

A car was waiting for them by the driveway, an unmarked car with a government license plate, and Sarica was unsurprised to see Justina already inside.

"I'm sorry for the fuss."

And yet she didn't sound sorry at all, Sarica couldn't help but notice.

"But I'm afraid I couldn't afford to waste any time."

"For what?" Sarica looked outside the window as she asked this. Where were they going?

"Please don't take it personally, but I need to get you as far away as possible from Giancarlo."

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

Sarica fought to keep her expression blank, but the way Justina looked at her with pity made it clear that she was doing a really bad job at hiding her feelings.

"I know you still have feelings for my husband—"

"In name," Sarica heard herself say.

"Excuse me?"

"I have my own ways of finding information, too," Sarica said evenly. "And although I already knew yesterday you were lying about your marriage—I can't say I didn't welcome actual proof about the real state of your marriage."

"It seems I've underestimated you."

Both of them did, Sarica thought.

Justina obviously saw her as too young to see past her charade while Giancarlo...

I just don't know what to do, God.

The marriage between Giancarlo and Justina had been conducted by a Kivran minister. This might have made it official in most people's eyes, but when one did enough digging, they would soon come to realize that such marriages could only be consummated after a year of courtship...and terminated by something as simple as the husband declaring the whole thing null and void in front of two witnesses.

"But I'm afraid that won't change anything."

Sarica's head jerked up at the sudden coolness of Justina's tone.

"I owe it to Giancarlo to do what's right for him, and while you may not believe me—what's right for him is to not have you around.Ever."

Sarica had every intention of challenging this.

But she wasn't given a chance, with the car already slowing to a stop, and what she saw outside made her heart nearly stop beating.

"You're putting me on a plane."

"I'm also adding your name to Kivr's blacklist," Justina said calmly, "in case you're thinking of flying back."

"Does Giancarlo know you're doing this?"

Justina met her gaze unflinchingly. "He entrusted you to my care."

No. No. No.

"What do you think that means?"

It was so easy to tell that Justina was not lying, and Sarica could only follow Justina out of the car in a daze.

Why did Giancarlo still want her to leave?

Why?

Security let them pass through one of the private entrances at the side of the airport, and Justina motioned for Sarica to take a seat. "Wait here, please." She needed to look for the immigration officer she had spoken to earlier. The sooner she had Sarica aboard a plane, the sooner it would be better for all—

No.

Fuck.

No.

Justina saw her worst nightmare come back to life at about the same time Sarica spotted Viktor Biancardi enter the same holding office from another door.

Sarica's mind urged her to run.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

Because this was not her fight, and she was better off playing it safe.

But all she could do was stare as he walked closer and closer.

He was exactly as she remembered.

Tall and golden-haired.

Breathtakingly handsome like an angel.

The kind of man that no one would ever suspect of abducting women to sell them off as slaves. The kind of man who would arrange for his friend's murder if that was what it took to save his own neck.

Justina and Sarica turned to look at each other.

But when they looked back at Viktor at the same time—

It was too late.

He had seen them, too, and the wild look in his eyes was that of a man who believed he had nothing to lose.

GIANCARLO AND HIS MEN were already at the airport when he received an urgent message from his security, telling him that both Justina and Sarica were at the same place he was.

No. God. No.

He ran as fast as he could.

But this, too, was exactly what he feared.

Viktor. Justina. And his Sarica.

They all saw him coming.

And falling.

His injury betraying him at the worst possible moment—

Because he was no longer the same Giancarlo he once was.

Save her, God.

While one look at Justina showed that her own fears had also gotten the best of her—

Please.

And this left Viktor and Sarica in a standoff—

We only have You.

A SENSE OF CALMNESSlike Sarica had never known before settled over her as Viktor lunged toward her with shocking speed.

In the corner of her eye, she saw that Justina had frozen up in terror. The other

woman had lost herself in the past, unresolved trauma turning her into a sitting duck.

And finally, she saw him.

Giancarlo.

And in his dark eyes, she saw desperation and defeat.

They both knew he wouldn't make it in time.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

Because Viktor's blade had already slid between her ribs.

"Sarica!"

Her name on his lips was the sound of agony and despair, and oh, how she wished she had the time to tell him it was okay.

It was completely okay because this was what she wanted.

What she had trained and sweated blood and tears for.

This was what she had prayed for.

It's alright, my love.

Because she had shifted just as Viktor stabbed her, and while the pain was vicious and immediate, the knife had also missed anything vital.

We're going to be okay.

All Viktor wanted was to kill her and hurt Giancarlo one last time before he was made to pay for his crimes.

But that was where he miscalculated.

Because as soon as Viktor pulled back, Sarica also made her move.

Just one moment to pull the knife out of her side.

And another moment to return the favor.

Viktor's stunned eyes clashed with his as he stumbled back and lost his balance.

Gotcha.

Dauphin's lessons had come in very handy, and Viktor was now pinned on the floor under Sarica, both of them bleeding but neither in danger of dying.

In the incident report the police would submit later on, Sarica had only one thing to say when describing the altercation that could've easily resulted in multiple deaths.

I know all of it happened in mere seconds.

But at the same time, it was as if everything was happening in slow motion.

I didn't feel scared at all.

Because of Him.

Chapter Twelve

As with all things in the kingdom of Kivr, luxury met lethality in the Department of Defense's interrogation room. Marble walls and floors, steel-legged chairs with built-in shackles, and metal doors with automated retina-scanning locks.

On one side of the table was Viktor, his knife wound now expertly bandaged, his clothes still bloodstained. And seated across him was Giancarlo, whose dark good looks were still the perfect foil for Viktor's angelic blondness.

One of the department officials came in to ask for Viktor's written confession, and it was as if Giancarlo was looking at a complete stranger as he read some of the things Viktor was writing. He could never have imagined that someone he considered his closest friend was capable of such vileness. And an equally painful pill to swallow was how he had been completely unaware of such things happening.

The department official presented another document, which required Viktor to identify all the other individuals involved in the human trafficking ring he had been a part of. The other man did so without question, and it was only when they were alone again that Viktor finally looked up to meet Giancarlo's gaze.

"I'm sorry it came to this."

Viktor's words made it seem as if he was only guilty of tripping Giancarlo up instead of arranging for his murder. But for somereason, Giancarlo knew his friend's apology - albeit inadequately worded - was sincere.

But even so.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

"You were a good man once." Giancarlo's tone was more weary than furious. "So what went wrong?"

A humorless smile twisted over Viktor's lips. "The thing about sin? It starts with good intentions."

And because Giancarlo had known the other man his entire life, it was painfully easy for him to deduce what Viktor was referring to.

"Someone found out about your half-sisters."

"You understand then...why I had to do what I did."

"You should've come to me," Giancarlo exploded.

"I didn't want you involved—"

"But you saw nothing wrong in having me murdered?"

"That's another thing about sin that you only learn when it's too late," Viktor said tonelessly. "You start with little half-truths that you use to convince yourself you're doing nothing wrong. You tell yourself there's a line you won't cross. But that line keeps moving until the next you know, there's no way out."

Giancarlo searched his heart for any sign of bitterness or anger. But all he felt was the weight of remorse. It didn't have to be this way, and they both knew it. All Viktor had to do was ask for his help. And everything would've changed. But now it was too late

to simply forgive and forget...since so many other lives had been lost and ruined.

"You know what your choices are," Giancarlo said grimly. "And regardless of what your choice may be...I'll take care of your sisters."

"Their lives would have been better off if they had you as a brother instead of me."

Giancarlo shook his head. "You know that's not—"

"We both know I was never honorable like you," Viktor gritted out. "I only pretended to be because I wanted to stay as your friend. This—" Viktor's lip curled with self-contempt. "This is the real me, Giancarlo. Sarica's like a fucking sister to me, but all I could think about was hurting her to hurt you. I just took one look at you, and I hated you for always having the balls to do what's good. I blamed you for how my life turned out even when you had nothing to do with my choices."

Viktor's gaze fell on the small vial on the table.

"I fucked up. And fucked up other people's lives as well. And I'm feeling surprisingly relieved that I have no choice but to pay for it now."

Viktor had already made his move before he had even finished speaking. He had drunk the entire vial in one go, and with this, he had made his choice.

Giancarlo slowly rose to his feet. Viktor was now slumped in his chair, unconscious. The next time he woke up, he would not be behind bars. Instead, as his choice indicated, he would find himself without any memories of his old life...and on a remote island whose population of deadly beasts was no accident.

Giancarlo left the room without conscious direction, his mind tormented by his childhood days with Viktor and what could have been...if the other man had simply

gotten past his pride to ask for help. By the time his steps came to a halt, it was only then that Giancarlo realized how his subconscious had taken him back to Sarica's suite. He considered knocking but changed his mind at the last second. But just as he was about to turn away, the door opened, and Giancarlo found himself staring straight into Sarica's eyes.

She had changed out of her clothes from earlier and looked fresh out of the shower. And even though she had almost lost her life, Giancarlo couldn't remember seeing her more beautiful, courageous, and at peace...despite the sadness in her eyes.

"May I come in?" he heard himself ask.

She nodded and stepped back, and Giancarlo closed the door behind him. But when he turned to face her again, it seemed as if she already knew why he had come.

"You've come to say goodbye...haven't you?"

Her voice was quiet and strained.

Giancarlo's jaw clenched. "You know I have to——"

"Don't lie," Sarica rejected fiercely. "Just don't. No one is forcing you to leave. No one is asking you to. No one wants you to——"

"I can't be the head of our famiglia——"

"Because of your limp?" Sarica challenged tremulously.

"Yes!"

"Can you hear yourself, Giancarlo? Can you, really? Wouldn't that also mean we only

wanted you as our leader because you can walk a straight line——"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

"Don't twist my words, Sarica. You know what I mean. I couldn't even save you, Sarica. I promised to save you. Just like I promised and failed my own father and grandfather——"

"Why do you keep blaming yourself whenever bad things happen?" Sarica choked out. "Don't we know better by now? Shouldn't we know better? It's not your job to save everyone——"

"I just wanted to save you," he said bitterly, "and I couldn't even do it——"

"Because you weren't meant to save me," Sarica cried out, "and I wasn't meant to save myself!" Frustration colored her words. "You know the truth, Giancarlo. You were the one who helped me see this, remember?"

All Giancarlo did was stare at her, and Sarica could feel her heart start to break when she realized she wasn't reaching him at all.

"You're not God, Giancarlo," Sarica whispered. "So stop trying to do the impossible. Stop trying to c-carry everyone's b-burdens on your shoulders. All you're supposed to do is l-love me. Love me, Giancarlo. Just l-love me——"

But the man in front of her seemed to be made of unyielding stone, unable to hear a single word she was saying.

"Please, Giancarlo."

"I'm sorry."

Her heart shattered anew at the finality of his voice, and she couldn't stop herself from stumbling forward as she clutched his shirt to keep him from leaving. "P-Please——"

But her words continued to fall on deaf ears as Giancarlo pulled away from her hold.

"I can't bear having another death on my conscience, Sarica. I'm sorry."

The last thing Giancarlo saw was Sarica falling to her knees as he forced himself to walk away.

He tried to convince himself that this was the last time he would have anything to do with his old life...only to find himself face to face with his grandmother, whose expression made clear she had heard every word.

"Oh,bambino." Potenziana's voice shook. "Are you going to walk away from us, too? Do you really think we will only want you back if you are capable of protecting us? We love you, Giancarlo. That is why we want you back. And we all m-missed you s-so much."

It was his first time hearing his grandmother's voice crack, and Giancarlo could not have stopped himself from pulling her into his arms no more than he could stop himself from breathing.

"You are one of us,bambino," she whispered against his chest. "Always are, always will be."

Chapter Thirteen

Night had fallen over Kivr, painting the desert kingdom in shades of indigo and silver. From the penthouse windows, the city's lights mimicked the sea of stars above,

but the emptiness in his heart made him blind to its splendor.

Potenziana joined her eldest grandson in the balcony, but her gaze was lost in memories of the past. "Just you and I again, bambino. There was a time it was like this before, do you remember?"

Giancarlo nodded, the silver streak in his hair catching the lamplight as he moved. How could he forget? Those were the bloodiest years in both their lives, a time when survival was all that mattered, regardless of the cost to their souls.

"Fear made us do terrible things then," Potenziana reminisced, a sad smile touching her lips. "And I thought it wouldn't come to that again, when we all made that promise." She paused, her words deliberate and heavy. "But here we are again. Your hands may no longer bear the blood of others. But they remain tainted. By Sarica's tears."

Giancarlo's fists clenched at his sides. Sarica had taken the first flight out of Kivr that morning, and he had chosen not to see her off. For both of their sakes.

"She deserves someone better," he said, his jaw tightening. "And that someone is already in her life."

"Are you talking about Dauphin Tueur?"

His gaze narrowed. "You know about him as well?"

"What a foolish question to ask," his grandmother admonished, her lip curling.

"If you know of him but he's still alive, then I don't foresee any problem. Sarica is apparently in good hands——"

"But not the best."

"You know I have no choice——"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

"Stop that," Potenziana cut him off sharply. "I did not raise you to be a liar, bambino. Everyone has a choice." Her voice softened, but her words cut deeper for it. "And you chose to have faith in yourself...even though you should know better by now."

Bitterness flashed over Giancarlo's taut features. "What more can I do? I have already given her up——"

"And that is your choice, not hers, not anyone else's, and certainly not God's." Potenziana's heart ached at the despair in her grandson's eyes. "Why must you isolate yourself so, Giancarlo?"

"Because it's safer for everyone that I remain dead."

His stubbornness frustrated her, but Potenziana did not reach her age by wasting her time fighting battles that were not hers to fight.

"I've told your brothers and Gazelle not to come here," she said finally. "And they want you to know that they're respecting your wishes because it's the same for them as it is for me. Nothing has changed, and we are content to wait until you are ready to come back to us. You are my heir, and you will always be so."

Giancarlo remained alone on the balcony, his gaze unseeing even as the kingdom's capital glittered below him. Tomorrow, his grandmother would return to Boston, while he had chosen to stay behind. Viktor would never cause trouble again, and authorities were hunting down the others involved in his crimes.

It was time for his famiglia to have a new leader.

And time for Sarica to move on with Dauphin Tueur.

A NEW MONTH BEGAN, and life continued. Work required Giancarlo to revisit his estate in Moskra, accompanied by Justina and Sheikh Nassif Al-Mansouri. Information was traded at agreed prices, each of them pursuing their own motives. The sheikh sought the traitor attempting to build Kivr's first drug cartel. Justina aimed for a high position in Moskra's intelligence agency. And Giancarlo...

"Why do you want to know more about Dauphin Tueur again?" Justina asked, raising an eyebrow. "Classified."

"That line only works if you have a position in government," Nassif drawled, "which you don't."

"If this is still about Sarica—"

"It's not," Giancarlo denied, his tone clipped.

Nassif gazed at his friend in amusement. "If you truly mean that, perhaps now is a good time to let you know about a mutual acquaintance of ours. He wishes to know if he can ask your ex out—"

The slim gold pen Giancarlo held snapped in two.

The sheikh's lips curved. "I rest my case."

"Are you keeping up with news from Boston?" Justina asked, pulling out her phone. "Because if you have, then you wouldn't need to ask—"

Giancarlo snatched the phone from her before she could finish. His jaw locked as he scrolled through the latest photos posted by a tabloid account. Sarica, visiting

Dauphin's club night after night, her outfits growing more revealing each time.

He called his grandmother, and Potenziana answered after a single ring. "Buongiorno, bambino."

"Why are you letting Sarica run wild?" he demanded.

"Why do you think that is any of your business?"

"If this is another dig about my marriage—"

"It is," Potenziana acknowledged without shame.

"Justina and I are already divorced," he grated out. "And even Sarica knows it was not a real marriage—"

"And if I told you that Sarica and I have made a similar deal, will that be a good enough reason for you? She has agreed to marry whoever I choose for her next—"

Giancarlo hung up on his grandmother for the first time. Justina and Nassif exchanged glances as he walked out of the conference room without a word.

"How much are you willing to bet he's on his way to Boston now?" Justina asked, amused.

"I'm afraid I have to decline," the sheikh said politely. "I don't take bets I'm guaranteed to lose."

DAUPHIN TUEUR'S CLUB in New York was everything Giancarlo expected and disliked. Crowded. Loud. Chaotic. Women threw themselves at him, but his attention was fixed on one person.

Sarica.

She was on the VIP floor, beams of colorful light illuminating her face. Her hands clasped the railing as she watched the crowd below. Her hair was the shade of the sea this time, her dress a scrap of gold silk that exposed the creamy swell of her breasts and the silken length of her legs.

Giancarlo took the steps three at a time. His fingers curled around her wrist, and he dragged her to the nearest room. The door had barely shut when Sarica was in his arms, her mouth finding his with desperate hunger. He backed her against the wall, drowning in the taste of her.

But just as his hands slid beneath her dress—

“S-Stop.” Her voice trembled.

Giancarlo froze, forehead pressed against hers, hearts racing.

“Why are you here?”

“You know why,” he growled.

“Tell me anyway—”

“Nonna,” he bit out. “She told me you’ve agreed to marry someone else—”

“And you don’t want me to?”

He already knew her answer by the look in her eyes. His chest tightened.

“I can’t, Sarica.”

Her face paled. “I haven’t asked anything yet—”

“I can’t marry you.”

Sarica stumbled back, the pain in her eyes nearly destroying him. He reached for her, but she pushed his hands away.

She took another step back. And another. One more, and she’d be out of the room.

Out of his life.

And into another man's arms.

The thought had Giancarlo moving instinctively and urgently, his fingers wrapping around her wrist as he hauled her back and pulled Sarica down to the couch with him. She landed on his lap, her breath hitching as his arousal throbbed against her belly.

“You’re mine,” he growled.

She shook her head, and anger flashed in his eyes.

“Do you need reminding who you belong to?”

Sarica had no chance to answer, with Giancarlo turning her around as he lied down on his back. His hands were under her dress in the next moment, and all she could do was gasp as he tore her panties off her body. He parted her folds open, and a moan slipped past her lips.

She knew she should be thinking of escaping, but instead she found herself fumbling with the buckle of his belt and unzipping his pants—

Aaaaaaaah.

His mouth latched on to her tiny nub of pleasure, and the moment he started to suck, she could no longer help herself.

Her fingers wrapped around his pulsing length, her lips closing around him as she, too, started to suck.

Sarica heard Giancarlo groan as she took him deeper into her throat, but it was also her turn to moan right after as he thrust his fingers inside of her.

Their pants filled the room as they pleased each other. Both of them sucking harder and harder. The movements of their bodies becoming less and less controlled until finally, oh, finally, they were coming at the same time.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

Time passed, and as much as she wanted to delay having to think—

Reality came all too soon, and Sarica could already feel her eyes start to sting as she pulled away. She could feel his gaze on him as she rearranged her dress and clumsily rose to her feet.

"I love you, Giancarlo," she said jerkily.

"Sarica—"

"B-But if you insist on making it seem like I n-need you to be s-something in order to love you—" Her voice faltered. "You'llmake me think that it's the same for you. Do you need me to be something for you to keep loving me? Will you stop loving me if I'm no longer what you need?"

Chapter Fourteen

Please, please, please.

Please come after me.

Please say you don't want me to go.

Please stop me from leaving.

But none of these things happened as she ran out of the room, past the crowds in the club, and into the endless night.

She ran without knowing where she was going, and she would have kept running if not for someone suddenly blocking her way—

Justina?

In Sarica's desperate attempt to avoid collision, she ended up stumbling backward and straight into a mountain of garbage bags stacked against the alley wall. One of the bags burst, and the stench of something unmistakably fecal assaulted her noses.

"Oops."

Sarica's heartbreak turned into annoyance in a flash at Justina's tone of sham sympathy.

The other woman made a show of wrinkling her nose even as she offered Sarica a hand, and even though Sarica knew she should just be thankful—

I'm so sorry, God.

Sarica allowed Justina to pull her up before stumbling forward and wrapping her arms around the other woman as tightly as she could.

Sarica pretended not to notice Justina struggling to be free.

One more second...

There.

Sarica made sure to properly share her new fragrance, Eau de Garbage, with Justina before taking a step back. The other woman looked as if she was about to throw up, but Sarica pretended not to see this as well.

"Are you okay?" It was Sarica's turn to feign sympathy. "I'm so sorry for crashing into you...like...that." Her voice trailed off as her mind started working again.

Wait a minute.

She looked at Justina suspiciously. "What are you doing in New York?" More importantly, did Justina come here with Giancarlo, and oh dear God, did these two marry again for another stupid reason—

"I never got around to apologizing for what happened that day."

Sarica sobered up at Justina's unexpectedly tight tone. "You don't have to say sorry—"

"Then I won't."

"But if you insist—"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

"I'm not."

"Please, be my guest." Sarica looked at the other woman expectantly.

Justina was starting to look green again, and Sarica was feeling better and better.

"Sorry."

Sarica shook her head. "What was that? I didn't quite hear—"

Justina glared at her. "Do you want to know why I'm here or not?"

"But honestly, you don't owe me an apology at all," Sarica continued without missing a beat. "I know I look like a sweet fragile princess—"

"Said no one ever," Justina snapped.

"But I'm actually very tough," Sarica went on, "and I can totally protect myself. So let's consider the slate clean between us, and we can get to discussing why—"

"Giancarlo's in trouble—"

Sarica jerked in shock. "W-Why—"

"Or perhaps I should say he's still in trouble because someone forgot to rescind her offer for a million dollars on whoever—"

Justina stopped speaking since Sarica had already gone running back to Giancarlo.

I hope I'm hearing You right, God.

That day in the airport had humbled Justina. It had forced her to take a good, hard look at herself, and what she saw had made her weep. She had been so proud...for nothing. She had thought herself stronger than Sarica...but instead it was the opposite. She had acted like God had abandoned her all these years, but in reality, she was the one who had run away from Him.

Her life had changed since then, and while she was still new to talking to her Father in Heaven—

I think...I just made You smile.

Didn't I?

Her phone buzzed. It was a text from one of Giancarlo's brothers, confirming that they had received their urgent call for help and was on their way to rescue him. Her lips cracked a smile as she read their message. Mission accomplished. And as she dropped her phone back in the inner pocket of her jacket, that was when she heard it—

Yes, child, you did.

IT TOOK MERE SECONDS for Giancarlo to realize he couldn't let things end this way between Sarica and him. Making her feel she had to earn his love was the last thing he wanted. He needed Sarica to understand that she was wrong. He loved her. Would always love her. But she also had to understand...it was because of how much he loved her and his family that he had to let all of them go.

Finding no sign of her outside the VIP room was already to be expected. Their first fight in Cayed, and later on, how she had defended herself in the airport, had forced Giancarlo to accept that she was no longer the helpless girl who once needed his protection. She was strong now—and that was yet another reason she no longer needed an imperfect being like him.

Once he was out of the club, Giancarlo only had seconds to scan the streets before a group of hired muscles blocked his way—and not a single onlooker cared to interfere as they immediately hauled Giancarlo to a nearby alley.

This was New York, after all.

And one thing everyone did exceptionally well here was minding their own business.

The men shoved Giancarlo down on his knees, but he made no move to resist or flee. A part of him was already wondering if God would still allow him in Heaven...if he chose not to fight back.

The first punch caught Giancarlo in the jaw, but he remained silent, his stoic facade unbreakable. They dragged him to his feet, a pair of men holding him back by the arms while another fist pounded his ribs. But the pain remained negligible. Was it because he was ready to die?

From just a block away, the night rang with the usual noise of revelry. The heart-thumping beats of whatever song it was that the DJ in Dauphin Tueur club's was spinning. The drunken cheers mingling with laughter. The roar of powerful car engines speeding past.

But despite world doing its best to drown Giancarlo in its mind-numbing cacophony, a quiet voice inside of his head was still clearly audible, and His every word underscored by sadness.

Why are you throwing your life away?

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

His Son was sad. For him.

Does My death on the cross mean that little to you?

Giancarlo's eyes squeezed shut. It meant everything. Everything. But how could he still live, knowing that he would be a burden to the people he loved?

I didn't die for You to replace me as someone else's savior.

I died to save you.

I died in order for you to live.

Giancarlo's powerful body began to shake, and his attackers laughed. They all thought fear had finally overcome him, but on this they could not be more wrong. For it was understanding that crashed through Giancarlo like a tidal wave.

When you are weak, you are strong.

Because of Me.

Remember?

What Sarica and La Strega had been trying to tell him—but what Giancarlo had been too lost in his own self-pity to comprehend—suddenly became blindingly clear.

Fear had made Giancarlo see himself in one of his father's men, a man whose limp

had prevented him from protecting his master.

Just as Giancarlo's injury had kept him from reaching Sarica in time.

Self-pity and stupid pride had made Giancarlo see his injury as a physical weakness.

But what it truly exposed was the weakness of his faith.

Giancarlo had thought himself strong because of his own abilities.

But such strength had limits and imperfections.

Human strength failed and expired...while God's strength was infallible and infinite.

Giancarlo had forgotten that with Him by his side, he had more than enough, and there was nothing for him to fear.

He had God.

God.

And just as this truth united Giancarlo's mind and heart, body and soul—

That was when Cesare burst into the alley like an avenging angel, his massively lethal frame filling the narrow space, and his signature brutality on full display as he carved a path with calculated swings of his powerful fists.

In his wake emerged Massimo, his coldly charming smile never slipping as he easily sidestepped the enemy's blade. His every move was taunting but precise, and one stab was all it took for his opponents to crumple. Sedated but not poisoned, and they had God to thank for Massimo's changed heart.

From the shadows came two more: Ezio, whose stealthy ways made him seem one with darkness, and Lorenzo, his sister's husband, who was not called the Beast of New York for nothing.

Their eyes met across the violence, his brothers' gazes fierce with meaning. It was their turn to prove to Giancarlo that they were no longer defenseless and reliant on him for protection. Their chance to let their eldest brother know that it did not matter if Giancarlo had briefly lost his way.

God is on our side, fratello.

That is our strength.

So come back and lead us again.

Strength like he had never known blazed through him, and Giancarlo was able to overthrow the men holding him back with a roar. He turned around, intending to help his brothers—

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

Sarica.

HER LUNGS WERE ON FIRE, but not once did she even think to stop running. The devil taunted her with images of Giancarlo dying because of her, but Sarica shoved away every silly thought as soon as it attempted to take root.

Get. Behind. Me. Satan.

A familiar sight in a darkened alley caught her eye, and Sarica skidded to a halt.

Cesare?

Ezio?

Massimo?

And even Lorenzo?

Relief thundered through her even as she charged toward them. Individually, the Marchettis were nearly unstoppable in any kind of fight. But when the brothers fought together as one in accordance to His will? They were undefeatable, and—oomph.

Sarica collided with something solid, but she was already lifting her knee up even as she fought to regain her balance. Fingers gripped her arm while one strong hand pushed her knee back down with firm gentleness before it could do any damage.

"It's me, Sarica."

That voice.

Her head jerked up, her heart in her throat.

Giancarlo.

It really was him, and he looked absolutely terrible.

Oh God.

This was all her fault. Her fault. And it was while Sarica was struggling to come into term with her guilt that Giancarlo suddenly went crashing down, and her lips parted in silent horror.

NOOOOOO!

For one terrifying moment, Sarica could only look around them wildly, wondering who it was that had shot him from behind—

No, God, please.

—until she realized Giancarlo was simply down on one knee, and he was holding out his signet ring.

To her.

Was he seriously proposing to her while his brothers were still fighting off the bounty hunters that she had accidentally forgotten to call off?

It wasn't hard at all to understand what he was telling her without words, and it was just so like the Giancarlo she knew, loved, and sometimes wanted to strangle. Just so like him to propose marriage amidst danger, and all so he could prove to Sarica and his family that he finally understood what all of them had prayed he would remember.

He no longer had to be in control.

He never had to.

Because he never was in control.

God was the one who had been keeping them safe all this time, and it was the only reason why - even though they were the first and only family to completely turn their back on crime and embrace a life that upheld righteousness and mercy - the Marchettis remained in power, undefeated and unrivaled.

But even so.

"You—" Words failed her completely. Sarica was overcome with the urge to simultaneously laugh, cry, and crush a pair of a certain gentleman's balls with the way Giancarlo's eyes were now gleaming up at her in amusement.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

"Is that a yes?" How so, so like Giancarlo to ask this like he hadn't done his best to break her heart in the past several weeks.

Everyone thought he was an angel, and she his personal devil, but surely, with the whole of New York watching, they could finally see the truth he had revealed only to her in the past?

Even though he looked as if he had been beaten within an inch of his life, Giancarlo remained the annoyingly gorgeous embodiment of pure unapologetic cockiness, and even though a part of her was childishly tempted to make him pay—

The other part of her remembered when it was once the other way around, and Giancarlo had never ever given up on her—

It remembered how his love had anchored her in the years she was lost, and how his disappearance had been the reason she had come to truly understand what it meant to depend on God—

It was because of this that had Sarica throwing herself in his arms—

"You had my answer years ago," she choked out, "but you didn't come back to hear it."

—and she realized that she didn't want to waste another day without him.

Giancarlo swallowed hard as Sarica started to cry in her arms.

Thank You, God.

Thank You.

And because he truly was grateful, he paid no attention to Sarica's newly acquired scent as he cupped her face and took her mouth in a kiss.

He loved her, Eau de Garbage and all.

Epilogue

An invitation had been issued and accepted, and the Marchettis' sprawling manor had thrown its gates open to welcome the people over whom Giancarlo's famiglia had ruled for the past few decades.

Cheers rose from the crowd as Potenziana stepped out into view. "Thank you all for coming." Her cultured voice was a force of power in itself. She was and would always be their first queen, a silver-haired woman whose pearls were as iconic as the way she had defeated all of her enemies with cunning and strength and, later on, with grace and faith.

"The future is near. But we have nothing to fear. If God is with us, who can be against us?"

Wild applause broke out even as the older ones remembered and honored in their hearts all the blood that had been shed for this day to come.

She presented her grandchildren and their other halves the order in which they had obeyed her decree.

First was her beloved Cesare, once the unforgiving executioner of her famiglia, but

whose icy heart melted under the innocent warmth of his once-lost bride Penelope.

Next was her charming Massimo, whose wicked smile hid a cruel streak. But in Ysabella, he had met his match, and nearly losing her for good had made this grandson of hers a changed man.

Third was her precious Ezio, who, until now, was a mystery to many, and the same could be said with his wife, Cattleya, who once worked as Potenziana's most dutiful secretary.

Her only granddaughter, Gazelle, was the fourth to be presented, her quiet loveliness a perfect mask for her equally quiet resilience; she was the princess who had tamed the Beast of New York by not wanting to tame him at all.

And finally, it was her eldest grandchild's turn, and even Potenziana found it impossible to keep her voice from breaking as she introduced the two people whose wedding they were celebrating today.

"Ladies and gentlemen, without further ado, I present to you Giancarlo and Sarica..."

The newly married couple stepped out into view on another balcony, and the reaction from their audience was thunderous.

Sarica did her best to smile and wave like La Stregahad told her to do even as feelings of every kind threatened her composure. For so many years of her life, she had felt as if there was no place she could be safe, no person she could belong to.

But now, more than ever, she understood how all the things she had to suffer were part of His perfect plan, and even though there were times her hope and trust in Him had faltered—

Thank You, God.

Not once did He leave her side.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

He was always there for her and Giancarlo.

And always would be.

The crowd erupted into cheers as Giancarlo drew his wife close for a kiss. They waved one last time before retreating from view, and as soon as the balcony doors slid closed, Giancarlo wasted no time in reaching for the girl he had loved from the moment he laid his eyes on her.

They didn't even make it to the bed and didn't even manage to undress, with Giancarlo simply bending his wife over the console as he plunged into her from behind.

Sarica's head fell back at the first thrust. He was so, so deep inside of her, and the way he moved oh so slowly was driving her out of his mind.

"P-Please..."

She wanted him to move faster and harder.

She wanted him to...close the blinds!

Because was that an actual drone outside the balcony windows?

Giancarlo froze at his wife's sudden cry. "What's wrong?"

"Drone," Sarica gasped. "Outside! We forgot to—"

Her cry of protest was short-lived, her embarrassment wholly forgotten as he began moving again, his hands tightening on her hips. Sarica wanted to argue, to push him away and close the blinds, but the pleasure coursing through her was too intense, too overwhelming to resist.

She could only cling to the edges of the console as her husband moved in a punishingly slow rhythm while his hands dipped inside her wedding dress to start playing with her nipples.

“Giancarlo,” she pleaded, her voice breaking. "P-Please."

"Beg for it."

A dark and possessive whisper, and the sound had Sarica writhing under him in uncontrollable need.

"P-Please..."

Her husband obliged with a chuckle, and even though his arrogance made her want to kick him—

Aaaah.

Giancarlo was finally moving as she wanted.

Faster. Harder. Deeper.

And so, so roughly that she was soon convulsing with a cry of surrender, and Giancarlo was right behind her, his hands gripping Sarica's hips as he filled her with his seed.

When it was over, they collapsed onto the bed, their bodies still entwined, and Sarica doing her best to catch her breath. She shifted a little, and her husband rolled to his back while Sarica landed on top of him.

She touched his face, which bore only the faintest scars of the beating he had taken. So much had happened. So much had changed. And speaking of such changes...

Sarica glanced up curiously at her husband. "Do you really not mind...about the drone?" Because the Giancarlo she knew was extremely conservative.

"This is an exception," Giancarlo murmured. "I want our wedding to make it clear to everyone that you are mine."

Sarica rolled her eyes. "Everyone knows I've been yours since I was fifteen——"

"Even Dauphin Tueur?"

Oh.

Right.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

Sarica shook her head. "The thing is..." She was about to explain to Giancarlo how Dauphin was her new Mr. Miyagi when something clicked in her mind, and she quickly reached for the covers to wrap around her naked body before pushing herself up.

"How about we make a deal?"

Giancarlo raised a brow. "About Dauphin Teuer?"

"I'll tell you who he is...if you tell me who has a photo of you bare-chested."

Giancarlo's mind raced back to that mortifying bet he'd lost in his teenage years. The magazine spread that still haunted his nightmares: him in a blond wig, posing as a Viking invader, complete with historically inaccurate helmet and flexed muscles that had made him look more like a romance novel cover model than a Norse warrior.

He had bought the publishing company the moment he could access his inheritance. Had personally overseen the burning of every copy he could find, along with the original negatives and drafts.

But he knew how these things worked. Somewhere out there, a copy could still exist. And if Sarica ever got her hands on it—

The thought alone made him shudder.

"Forget it," Giancarlo said curtly.

"But——"

Another drone showed up outside the window, and Giancarlo hauled his wife to him so he could whip up the covers over both of them.

Sarica stared at him in confusion. "What are you——"

"We've got company again."

Sarica immediately reached for the remote control to close the blinds...only to have her husband take it out of her hold and toss it away.

"Giancarlo!"

"Let's not be selfish," he purred. "We can give them what they want without actually showing anything, sì?"

"No!"

"I knew you'd see it in my way."

It was her only warning before Giancarlo was positioning her over his length, and Sarica could only gasp as she found himself riding him.

But whether it was for show or pleasure, she didn't really know at this point.

All she knew was that he was...aaaah.

MEANWHILE, ON THE OTHERside of the world, the first of Viktor Biancardi's letters had landed in the hands of its intended recipient.

Keiran de Laigny sat in the dimly lit study of his estate, the flickering light of the fireplace casting long shadows across the room. The letter lay open on his desk, its contents burning in his mind as if the words themselves were aflame. Viktor's handwriting was precise, almost clinical, but the message was anything but.

He moved to the window, his gaze sweeping over the sprawling gardens of his estate. It was a scene of peace, of beauty—a stark contrast to the storm raging inside him.

His jaw tightened as he recalled the other man's brutally short message.

You owe me.

Keiran crumpled the letter into a ball before casting it into the fire. If only it was just as easy, he thought bitterly, to turn his memories of Cadence into ashes.

Her name alone had Keiran wanting to lash out, but she was like a plague on his soul. Inescapable. Irredeemable. And incurable.

It seemed like a lifetime ago when he had married her.

But a lifetime still wasn't enough to make him take her back.

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am

There was a time when she was the only girl he had ever loved.

But because Cadence was also the same girl who had believed everyone except her own husband—

There was no one in this world that Keiran despised more.

Damn her.

A blood debt was a blood debt, and while Keiran would honor what he promised and pay what he owed—

This time, he would make sure that it was Cadence who would suffer and bleed.

The End