



Merciless Oath

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: I was promised to him.

Until I vanished with his baby growing in my belly.

Now, a decade later, I'm locked in his penthouse...

Pregnant again.

Ten years ago, I was supposed to marry Enzo Cavalli—

The mafia's silent weapon. Calculated. Lethal.

Behind closed doors, he was all mine.

But loving Enzo meant sure death. So I ran...

And raised our daughter in secret, far from the world that would've caged us both.

I thought we were safe.

Then he found us—

Me and our little girl with his jade eyes.

We belong to him.

And he's claimed what's his.

His hands on my hips. His mouth on my skin.

His rage simmering just beneath the surface.

Every time he touches me, I remember what I gave up.

But Enzo doesn't want revenge.

He wants it all—me, our daughter, his second heir growing inside me.

He says he'll burn the world to keep us.

And God help me...

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Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am

Prologue

VALENTINA

Five years earlier.

My fingers tremble as I peek out from behind the heavy velvet curtain. My parents sit proudly in the front row, flanked by some of my aunts, uncles, and cousins. Ignoring them, I scan the room for a different face—the only face I want to see right now.

Movement toward the back of the darkened auditorium catches my eye, and my nervous breath stills. He's never looked more handsome than he does tonight, but then again, I think that every time I see him.

Enzo leans against the wall, lounging casually in the shadows by the emergency exit. His sandy-brown hair shimmers like gold in the atmospheric light. I almost convince myself I can see his eyes from my hiding spot behind the drapes—deep pools of jade green. Our eyes connect, and he flashes a crooked smile in my direction.

My golden boy. He came.

“Valentina!” the stagehand whisper-yells in my ear. “Position. Let’s go!”

A drop of sweat slides down my nose, and my fingers twitch uncontrollably, but I take a deep breath and center myself. As soon as the music starts, everything else slips away, and I perform the opening pas de deux lost in a daydream. My body feels weightless, my muscles pushing and pulling me as I chase the high that only a perfect

performance can give me.

By the time curtain call rolls around, I'm floating in a haze of shimmery happiness. I take my final curtsy as I watch Enzo slip out the door, and my heart drops. Of course, I didn't expect him to stay—that would cause too many complications.

All that matters is he came.

My family swarms me backstage, congratulating me and praising my performance. I plaster on a fake smile, accepting their hugs and flowers. I finally pull away, excusing myself from their clutches.

"I just need to pop back into the studio to grab my things," I lie, fidgeting with the hem of my costume. "I'll meet you at home."

"Don't be late," my father warns, suspicion creeping into his eyes. I nod obediently and high-tail it to the car.

Adam, my driver, takes his sweet time cruising under the speed limit, and I nearly bite his head off. Only the knowledge that he'll report my "high-strung mood," as my family often calls any type of emotion, to my father keeps my mouth shut.

I force myself to relax while I undo the tight bun from my hair and let it loose. When we pull up to the studio, I tell Adam I need to do some cool-down exercises and pack my things. He grunts and settles into his seat with a book.

I explode into the dark, silent studio and spin around, looking for Enzo. My heart flutters inside my ribcage, all chaotic and painfully fast. Maybe he didn't come. Maybe I'll never see him again.

"Bonjour, Lenny."

I whirl around as the studio door floats closed behind him. He stands in the middle of the room, grinning like a fool in love, and I mirror his expression. I catapult into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist and peppering his face with kisses.

“If I knew French turned you on so much,” he gasps under my attack, “I would have learned something sexier than ‘hello.’”

“Shut up, Enzo,” I warn. “And don’t call me Lenny.”

“But it suits you,” he teases, sliding me back down onto my toes. “Besides, Valentina is such a mouthful.”

“I’ll give you a mouthful.” I laugh and tackle him to the floor.

“God, I hope so.” He smirks at me and flips me onto my back, kissing me deeply. My body hums and sings beneath his, the euphoria taking me higher and higher. The good girl, prima ballerina Valentina, disappears, and my insatiable appetite for Enzo takes over.

I grind my hips into him, feeling him getting hard for me. Enzo moans, tracing his lips over my neck and collarbone as I slide my fingers into his hair. The hum of the air conditioner kicks in, sending a cool breeze across our bodies.

My body begs to feel his bare skin against mine, and my brain dutifully listens as I tug off his shirt. He struggles with my complicated performance costume, trying to find a way to get inside it. I giggle as I slide off his jeans, and he shoots me a devious little grin.

With one hard tug, he tears my costume apart, leaving me completely exposed to him. His eyes glaze over, and his breathing hitches.

“Enzo, you fucker,” I moan as his lips trail across my chest and down my stomach.

“Send me the bill, darling,” he quips, right before he nudges my thighs wide open and slips his hands under my ass. I land a solid smack on his shoulder, but he just flattens himself on the floor, innocently kissing my knee.

I relax on the cool, wooden floor with a smile on my face as he continues his teasing. Slowly, softly, he covers my kneecap with kisses while his strong fingers massage my ass cheeks. My thighs are spread, my pussy dripping and begging to be licked, but he feigns nonchalance and kisses my other knee.

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“Enzo,” I wail, thrusting my hips up none too subtly.

“Yes, Lenny? Can I help you with something?”

“You can stop calling me Lenny,” I huff, squirming as his fingers dig deeper into the delicate skin of my hips. “And you can fucking eat me out already.”

His rich, warm laugh booms around the studio, bouncing off the empty walls. I feel like I’m inside the core of Enzo’s soul when he laughs, and it feels safe—like home. I thrust my hips petulantly one more time for comedic effect, and he grins, disarming me with his dimples.

“Since you’ve made such an articulate argument, I shall oblige,” he says happily and dives between my thighs. Moans of pleasure escape my lips, so low and wild that I’m almost embarrassed. When I hear him match my feral noises, the shame easily slips away.

And that’s the way it always is with Enzo. He never makes me feel bad about any part of myself—whether that’s acting hysterical for his love or having an emotional outburst that’s decidedly not mafia style.

I come fully undone as his tongue explores every single inch of me, delving inside and circling my most sensitive spots. My orgasm builds even more quickly when I drop my head to the side and catch a glimpse of us in the full-length mirrors surrounding the room.

My pale, milky skin against Enzo’s glowing golden limbs looks so erotic that I can’t

take my eyes off the sight. I watch the muscles in his back ripple and tense as he pumps a finger, then two inside me. My hips rise off the floor, and he looks down at me proudly.

“Good girl, you’re so close,” he breathes, licking his lips. “Fuck, you’re delicious.”

I whimper as the euphoria swirls and twirls across my insides like a kaleidoscope of butterflies. I fucking love this man so much. How am I ever going to live without him?

“Come for me, love,” he whispers as his fingers stroke that glorious, sensitive spot inside me.

I bite my lip to keep from screaming and move my hips wildly, but Enzo holds on tight. When my insides feel like they’ve been lit on fire, I explode, falling limp onto the floor. Stars spin in my eyes as I gasp for breath. Enzo grins down at me and moves to rise.

“Where the hell,” I gasp, pulling him back toward me, “do you think you’re going?”

“I just came to make you come,” he whispers and tucks my hair behind my ear. I groan in frustration and tackle him with all my strength. He goes down pretty easily, his laugh reverberating around the room.

Even though I’m deeply exhausted, I slide down his length, straddling him as he moans in ecstasy.

I never know when I’ll see him next—or last. I’ll take everything I can get tonight.

CHAPTER ONE

Enzo

“You’re gonna be the fucking death of me, kid.”

I stare up at Rafael’s sweaty face, his mouth set in a grim line. I grimace, wondering for the millionth time why the hell I signed up for this. I’m more of a computers-and-fast-cars type of guy—not a crushing-random-strangers’-skulls-in-dank-basements guy.

“Try again,” Rafael mutters, toeing the line between encouraging and menacing.

Fuck. You got this. You need to do this.

I square my shoulders and puff out my chest, trying to fool myself into believing I have what it takes to rearrange this man’s face. The poor fool we picked up tonight sits in front of me, shaking and bleeding, tied to an old wooden chair.

I don’t even know his name, but Rafael assured me it’s better this way.

“Tell me who you work for,” I growl, imitating Rafael’s surly, gravelly voice. “Now.”

The man slowly opens one eye and trains it on my face. His other eye is barely attached to the rest of him. It takes all my strength not to throw up when I see it.

He opens his mouth, blood gushing from his split lip, and for a second, I think he’s going to answer me.

“Pathetic,” he whispers, dropping his head down onto his chest. I glance back at Rafael helplessly and catch sight of an angry vein throbbing in his forehead.

Am I going to inherit that ugly, angry, throbbing vein when I become a mafia don? I fucking hope not.

“Enzo.” Rafael spits out my name like a curse. “Hallway.”

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I sigh and trot after him like a puppy that got caught chewing on the sofa leg again. Please don't give me a lecture, please, please.

"So," I start as soon as the door slams closed, "time for burgers, or what?"

Rafael paces up and down the hallway, shooting daggers at me. That squirmy, uncomfortable feeling rises up again—the same feeling I always got when my father's cold words shot through me like hot bullets. The same feeling that made me nauseous when my mother shut me out and popped another Vicodin.

I fucking hate that feeling.

"Don't you have even an ounce of rage inside of you?" Rafael finally asks, stopping right in front of me. "I understand you're basically a golden retriever personified, but don't you hate anyone? At all?"

I trust Raf with my life. He's my best friend, even if he acts like I'm the most annoying person in the world. But right now, I kind of hate him.

"Sure." I shrug, gesturing to the door. "But I don't know that guy. How am I supposed to be... raging at him?"

"It doesn't matter," Rafael growls, throwing his arms up in frustration. "Violence, bloodshed, intimidation—it's part of the job, Enzo. You need to figure out a way to channel whatever rage you have into your job."

"Can't we use alternative methods?" I beg, knowing I sound whiny and not giving a

shit. “Like psychological manipulation or something? Isn't that why you picked me for this?”

“Kid,” Rafael says, placing his hands on my shoulders. The touch is weirdly comforting, and I relax a little.

“You know we’re literally the same age, right?”

“Not mentally, trust me.” He brushes me off. “Look, you’re the smartest guy I know. Smarter than me, and that’s hard to admit.”

“Sure,” I snicker, but Rafael shoots me another hard look.

“I know you’re going to figure this out and do it your way,” he continues. “That’s why I chose you over my own blood to replace me. You’re going to change the game, do it differently... better. But right now, I’m trying to give you all the tools I have so that you’re not floundering in the deep end when I leave you to it.”

I lean against the wall and think about why I’m doing this. I never wanted to be a mafia don; in fact, it never even crossed my mind.

Computers, hacking, tech stuff—that’s me. When Rafael offered me the position of leading the Romano family, I was both terrified and honored—I couldn’t say no.

I had to prove myself—for myself, but also for all the people who doubted I could become something.

I used to be can’t-take-life-seriously Enzo to my parents, my ex-girlfriends, and my old friends. Perfect in every way, until I wasn’t. The life of the party, until I wasn’t.

Being the golden boy sucks when you’re never good enough, even when you’re the

best. It sucks even more when the pressure makes you crack and withdraw from everything and everyone. Then people just pity you and wonder what happened to the smiley, all-American kid you used to be.

“Think about it,” Rafael pushes, his voice softer this time. “Think about all the people who have pissed you off. The people who thought you weren’t good enough. Build that rage inside you, then unleash it on your target.”

I take a deep breath and close my eyes, focusing on the memory of my father’s enraged face as he smashed the first computer I ever built myself. His voice echoes in my mind.

“You dropped the swim team for this shit? Sitting around in the basement like a lowlife loser? Building useless junk? You’ll never get that athletic scholarship now. You’re going to waste your life away in a cubicle, barely making minimum wage.”

A coil of rage swirls, tightening my insides and sending flames up my chest. I focus on a memory of my mother’s face, zonked out on pain pills, a bottle of vodka dangling from her fingers.

“Oh, Enzo, the imagination you have. Your father would never hit you. Why don’t you go do something useful instead of stirring up drama?”

The rage gets deeper and darker, sending sparks of electricity through my veins. My arms tense, fingers clenching themselves into fists.

“You’re getting it,” Rafael says, studying my face. “Now, get the hell back in there and prove yourself.”

I take a deep breath and nearly rip the door off its hinges as I stomp back inside the torture chamber. The man in the chair barely looks up when he realizes it’s me.

He's not the least bit scared of me. All that blood—that was Rafael.

I focus on the rage like Raf told me. It sizzles below my skin, frying my usual neural pathways and sending my brain into a blackout.

Everything around me slips away, and I focus on the man's face, sneering at me.

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It only takes two seconds for my hand to wrap around his throat. He coughs, sputtering blood all over my white shirt. His eyes bug out, and I squeeze harder. I lower my face as close to his as I dare, with all the bloodshed, and stare into his eyes.

It's not him I see anymore. It's my father. I grab onto that rage, protect it, keep it close to my chest.

"I'm going to ask one more time," I growl, my other hand expertly pulling a gun from my holster and sliding the cool metal against his temple. "Who do you work for?"

Something shifts in his eyes, and his skin pales beneath the dried blood. His lip trembles as my fingers relax a little, letting him take a shallow breath. When he doesn't speak, I cock the gun.

"The Aventuras," he chokes out, shrinking back from the barrel. "Please, I have a wife... and a son... please."

All of my built-up rage evaporates in an instant, and my shoulders lose their tension. He has a family. What the hell am I doing?

"Enzo," Rafael's voice warns behind me.

"Please don't shoot me," the man begs, sensing that my conscience just joined the chat.

I recall Rafael's first lesson in intimidation tactics. "Never, ever believe anything that comes out of their mouth right before you pull the trigger. They'll tell you anything to

get you to crack. Never crack.”

I gnash my teeth together so hard that a shot of pain slices through my jaw. My finger rests lightly on the trigger. I take a breath and count: one, two, three.

The shot goes off, and the man slumps in his bound position on the chair. I drop the gun, sinking to my knees as his blood seeps onto the cement floor around me.

Rafael’s warm hand lands gently on my shoulder as I struggle to take a full breath. “The first one is always the hardest.”

I nod and pull myself up off the floor, reeling the emotions back in. We’ve been in training mode for six months now, working hard to get me ready for the transition.

I’ve perfected my shooting and knife skills. I can also fight without a weapon fairly well now.

But killing someone? That wasn’t a test I’d been looking forward to passing.

“Burgers?” Rafael whispers lightly, and I choke out a laugh. He knows how difficult this is for me, how out of my nature killing is, but his unwavering belief in me brings tears to my eyes.

“You’re paying,” I remind him, following him out of the bloody room. Some of the younger Romano family members are already waiting in the hallway, ready to clean up our mess.

Later that night, after too many burgers and even more bourbon, I stumble into my penthouse, exhausted. I drag myself into the shower, desperate to wash the day off my skin, but the knowledge of what I did has seeped into my bones.

After far too much time scrubbing under the scalding water, my skin feels raw and tender. I towel dry in front of the mirror as my reflection stares back at me. It's the same me as this morning—before I killed a man.

Same unruly wavy brown hair, the same stupid diving board scar in my eyebrow. I flex my muscles, watching the watercolor-style tattoos across my chest and abdomen ripple. Tattoos that Rafael's wife, Lux, says make me look like I belong in the Louvre, not the gritty mafia underworld.

After briefly contemplating another drink, I make the wise decision to head to bed instead. I would never want my mother's downfall to become mine, so I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling.

Memories of that man's face right before I pulled the trigger claw their way into my brain. I groan with frustration, desperate to shut them out.

Think happy thoughts. Think happy thoughts.

Instantly, I remember the feeling of her slim, pale legs wrapped around my torso. If I try hard enough, I can smell her silky ebony hair as it tickles my nose and caresses my neck. The memory of her deep blue eyes locked on mine and half-lidded in pleasure sends a hot flush across my body.

Valentina. My forever favorite happy thought—and late-night fantasy.

Her sweet, tinkling laugh replays on a loop in my mind. The memory of my hands gripping her delicate hips makes me groan, and all thoughts of cold-blooded killing are replaced with images of Valentina's lips spreading soft kisses across my chest.

She's the reason I'm doing this. I'll kill a thousand more faceless, nameless men if it'll make me good enough for her.

CHAPTER TWO

Enzo

Six months later.

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“The Golden Ace, we finally meet.”

Yes, you finally ran out of disposable foot soldiers and showed up yourself. Might as well be done with this.

I smile ruefully, knowing I’m playing the part of the asshole perfectly. Jesse Aventura slumps in his seat, tapping his fingers against the splintering wood grain of the old table. An ancient bloodstain under his elbow catches my eye.

A foreshadowing of what’s to come.

“That’s what they call me,” I quip, circling the table languidly. “I prefer Enzo, honestly, but the fans have a mind of their own.”

“I see Romano trained his sick sense of humor into you as well,” he grumbles, his shoulders stiffening when I pause directly behind him.

I whip out my switchblade, and the noise makes him jump. He leans back casually, desperate not to show his cards.

He’s scared of me. That tiny rush of power never fails to confuse and delight me.

“As much as I love the flirtation we have going on here, how about you tell me what the hell you’re doing creeping around my warehouse again?”

I move to face him, and my palms come down hard onto the tabletop, putting me right in his face. His gaze remains impassive, but I catch his eye twitching wildly.

“Never even seen your warehouse, Cavalli.”

“Is that so?” I push myself off the table and cross my arms. I can feel him staring at my ink, and I flex my muscles to enhance the image.

“Because as your little friend Damian, may he rest in peace, revealed,” I continue, “you’ve had your guys monitoring my shit for months.”

He stares pointedly at the table, refusing to meet my gaze. I sense his rage growing, and my excitement balloons along with it.

“And then there was your little buddy Jorge.” I grin as his eyes shoot up to my face, anger coloring his vision. “Oh, I’m sorry... yourbrotherJorge. Such a shame about him, too.”

“What do you want from me?” he spits. His fingers twitch, and I worry for a second that we decided not to bind his wrists.

I hear Joe Romano cock his gun behind me and it settles my nerves—I’m good. I’m safe.

“You’ve ignored mywarningsto stay away from my business, my family, my city. And now?—”

“Now what? You’ll kill me?” he snickers. “I’m not saying shit.”

“Oh no, Jesse, I don’t need to kill you,” I drawl, smiling wickedly. “I know lowlifes like you don’t value your own existence much. Have you seen Catalina recently, by the way?”

I watch with deep satisfaction as every muscle in his body stiffens. He’s frozen to the

core, staring at the table with such intensity that I half-expect it to burst into flames.

“What’s the matter?” I chuckle. “Cat got your tongue?”

“How the fuck do you know that name?”

“You mean your adorable little daughter? The one who lives with her mother—whohatesyou, by the way—in Miami at...” I pull a paper out of my pocket, pretending to study it intensely. “Let’s see, 745 Palermo Avenue?”

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I wonder for a second if it’s another cryptic message, but that’ll have to wait. I have him right where I want him. I know it.

“Fine,” he spits. “We’ll pull out of your turf; you won’t hear from us again. Just leave Cat alone.”

Finally.

I groan and rub my burning eyes. A glance at my watch tells me I’ve been staring at this computer screen for four hours now. Probably without blinking, you dumbass, I chide myself.

I force my body out of the leather chair and walk around my office, trying to stretch my sore back.

The city glitters below me like a delicate jewel. I still can’t believe that it’s all mine—well, the gritty underground parts, anyway. I won’t be running for mayor any time soon, that’s for sure.

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I pour myself another coffee and pace back and forth as I chug the lukewarm liquid. Like a bad habit, I pull my phone out of my pocket and check the message again:

$$\frac{1}{\sqrt{\pi}} \int_0^{\infty} \frac{e^{-x^2}}{x^2} dx = \frac{1}{\sqrt{\pi}} \left(\frac{1}{x} - \frac{1}{x^3} + \frac{1}{x^5} - \dots \right) \Big|_0^{\infty}$$

Morse Code for “apologize or pay the price.” But why?

My brain scrolls through the mental Rolodex of enemies I've made over my lifetime. It's grown quite a bit in recent months, but I can't think of anyone who would threaten me in such an unusual way.

If it was the Aventuras or some other shitty little crime family trying to strike it big, they'd just attack. The mafia, I've learned, isn't really full of creatives and intellectuals.

I fall back into my chair, wracking my brain for what this might mean. When I come up with nothing, I stare blankly at the signature again: The8.

A byte has eight bits, but that's pretty meaningless. What else?

Eight is the only nonzero perfect power one less than another perfect power, according to Mihăilescu's Theorem. Literally, only nerds like me know that.

It's the second magic number in nuclear physics. Again, nerd knowledge.

Both the Chinese and Japanese cultures consider it a lucky number. And none of it means shit-all to me.

I spend the next hour searching for meanings, but I can't make a single connection. My phone vibrates and skitters across the desk, pulling me out of my insanity.

"What's up?" I answer, hoping Jack Romano is calling to chat and not for some more nefarious reason. I'm too exhausted to beat the shit out of anyone else tonight.

"Boss, you'd better get down to the warehouse on the waterfront," he says apologetically. "There's been an attack."

"Shit," I breathe, bolting out of my chair and grabbing my keys. "Tell me everything."

Jack Romano might be Rafael's youngest cousin, barely out of high school, but he's quickly become my right-hand man. I trust the older uncles' advice and guidance, but I trust Jack with my life.

"Vinny and I were at Lita's Bar having a few drinks when I got the alert," he explains. "Fire broke out in the east wing of the property. We got down here as fast as we could, beat the fire department even."

"Shit, you called the fire department?" I gasp, sprinting to the elevator.

"I think a kind neighborhood," he scoffs. "Don't worry, we moved all the product out earlier this week. The fire department didn't see anything."

"How bad is the damage?"

"It's not pretty, that's for sure."

"I'll be there in five minutes."

“Don’t kill yourself flying down the streets in your new toy,” Jack warns. “The fires are out. Now we’ve just got to deal with the mess.”

I shove the phone in my pocket as I reach my beautiful, brand-new Koenigsegg Regera. Rafael almost bit my head off when he heard how much I spent. Personally, I think two million dollars is a fair price for selling my soul to the mafia.

I slip inside and start her up, admiring the luxurious feel of the supple leather seats. True to my word, I reach the warehouse in a little over five minutes. Jack meets me out front, shaking his head but looking impressed all the same.

“I need you to stop tempting the Grim Reaper.” He chuckles, nodding at the car. “‘Cause if you kill yourself in that contraption, Rafael will have to take over again, and I can’t deal with him for more than five seconds.”

We head inside the smoky warehouse to survey the damage. Jack and Vinny lead me around, showing me where parts of the roof have collapsed as the older uncles join us.

“It’s pretty bad in the east wing,” Uncle Rocco comments, staring up at the caved-in roof. “We need to get our guys out here and start reconstruction, ASAP.”

“When’s the next shipment coming in?” I ask, trying to throw a plan together in real time. My brain feels about as useful as the gray slush covering the city right now.

“Next Monday,” Jack confirms, scrolling through his phone. “We might need to redirect it.”

“How’s our warehouse upstate looking?”

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“Enzo, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Uncle Joe cuts in. “Our crew up there is too small. They won’t be able to hold down a shipment of that size if someone tries to intercept it, and the chances of that?—”

“Are high, I know,” I stop him. “But we don’t have much of a choice right now. Jack can round up a crew from the city and head up there to run things while we figure this out.”

“On it,” Jack confirms, disappearing into the crisp winter air. I turn back to face the uncles, catching their silent displeasure at how I’ve chosen to handle this.

“Look,” I sigh, knowing I’m in for an uphill battle, as always, “it’s the pits of February. It’s either raining, or snowing, or both, every damn day. Even if we shell out for a bigger construction crew, we can’t have them working in those conditions. And until we fix this goddamn roof, we can’t be storing high-grade weapons in here either.”

Joe pulls his lips into a thin line and averts my gaze, refusing to acknowledge that I’m right. Rocco concedes, placing a warm hand on my shoulder.

“I know, son,” he says, trying to smooth things over. “We’re just worried we’ll lose another shipment. I’ll join Jack and his crew upstate. I think that’ll make everyone more comfortable.”

He glances pointedly at Joe, and we both nod, knowing that compromise is the only way to get things done these days. Raf’s uncles are both strong, competent leaders, but they generally don’t feel the same about me.

Even though I've worked my ass off to prove myself over the last few months, it's taking them longer to accept me than the younger members of the family.

I get it—I'm an outsider who took over as head of the family when everyone expected Rafael to lead. But Rafael wanted a different kind of life for himself and found his uncles too stodgy and his cousins too young for the responsibility.

The three of us exit the warehouse, leaving the mess for the cousins to deal with.

I feel kind of sorry for them, having to clean up ash and debris in freezing conditions all day. While Rocco and Joe admire my new ride, I place an emergency order for a bunch of space heaters to keep my guys warm.

"...Rossi."

The name catches my attention, and I glance at Rocco, wondering if I heard right.

"I heard they've been expanding the last few years." Joe shakes his head. "Can't be good for us."

"Did you say Rossi?"

"That's right," Rocco confirms. "Family from the West Coast. Don't know much about them, but I heard something about a big complex purchase on the pedestrian side of the waterfront." He waves his arm in the direction of the city, pointing out the area. "You know them?"

"I worked for them briefly." I hesitate, not wanting to reveal too much. "It didn't end well."

"Do you think they might be behind this? It was a clean job, too good for common

street-level muscle, so it has to be someone big,” Joe says, gazing up at our burned-out warehouse. “Maybe we pay them a little visit, yeah?”

“I don’t think we should do anything rash,” I counter. “They’ve only just arrived in the city, and they’ve never had any ill will toward us, as far as I know.”

“I agree,” Rocco backs me up. “Nothing physical, but I think a friendly meeting with the Rossis isn’t a bad idea... just so we can make sure he knows who calls the shots in this city.”

“I’ll set it up,” I confirm, my voice hard and gritty.

Lev fucking Rossi, the devil himself. The man who made sure I’d never get my happy ending. He took Valentina away from me—just like that—never to be seen again. Even after his death—if that’s to be believed—his brother made sure I’d never catch so much as a glimpse of her.

She can’t possibly know I’m here, right? All these years, she never made contact either—and now, she’s moving into my city.

I ruminate on the implications of Valentina’s family buying property here as I speed home, jittery at the thought of running into her. I’ve hardly settled into my role as head of the Romanos. I thought I’d have more time—be more ready—by the time I faced her again.

Back in my penthouse, I fire off a haphazard text to my assistant to set up a meeting with the Rossis as soon as possible and collapse into bed.

It feels like only a few seconds have gone by when my alarm jolts me awake. After confirming my meeting is scheduled for noon, I do a few laps in the rooftop pool to settle my nerves.

In the shower, I rehearse how the conversation will go, preparing my talking points. I refuse to look like a fool in front of them again.

My nerves rattle and shake on the drive to The Burned Bean, a quiet little coffee shop with private meeting rooms downtown. I stride inside, feigning confidence and self-importance. This time, I'll be the one setting ultimatums and flashing my power.

I expect to see Luigi—or even Lev himself, risen from the grave—but when I round the corner into the farthest meeting room, the sight of long ebony hair stops me in my tracks.

My mouth drops open as she turns her head and pins me with those bottomless blue eyes.

Valentina.

CHAPTER THREE

Valentina

“Dammit,” I mutter, hunching down to pick up my book. My nervous hands can’t stop fidgeting and shaking as the lines of print dance before my eyes.

I’m so wound up that even my trusty poetry book can’t calm me down. Probably because I’m about to meet Rafael Romano, the most terrifying fucking man in the country.

When my father insisted on expanding to the East Coast, I didn’t see any harm in it. We’ve been slowly spreading across the country, setting up warehouses and legitimate storefronts to build an easier pipeline for our less-than-legal products to move through.

The move made complete sense, but having the Romanos call a meeting on my first day in the city was pretty terrifying.

I’m sure they just want to cover their bases—find out what the Rossis are doing here, threaten me a little bit, normal mafia stuff.

I resolve to put my best foot forward and play nice with them. Trouble with the Romanos isn’t something we need right now.

As soon as I hear heavy footsteps pounding down the hallway, I tuck my book into my purse and suck in a deep breath.

Showtime.

Putting on my best sweet-but-will-kill-you smile, I turn to greet my lunch partner. Except instead of coming face-to-face with Rafael “The Wolf” Romano, I stare into Enzo’s shocked face.

“Lenny?”

The nickname instantly tumbles me backward into sweet memories of hot summer nights years ago. Back when I was happy and carefree.

Back when my only goals included becoming a prima ballerina and screwing Enzo in every secret, hidden place we could find.

“Don’t call me that,” I respond automatically. He grins, and I fall headfirst into those mossy green eyes and dimples. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m the head of the Romano family,” he answers, glancing around in confusion. “Where’s your uncle?”

"You're—how?"

"Rafael decided to retire. And who’s better to take over?" He gives me a half smile this time and asks about my uncle again.

“I’m... in charge now,” I say hesitantly, trying to wrap my mind around the prospect of Enzo as a don. My fingers rattle against the leather pants suffocating my thighs, and I subtly calm them into submission.

“So it’s true? Lev died?”

“No. Well, yes, but no.” I pause, not knowing how much to reveal.

As far as everyone knows, my father is dead. When his cancer started to spread aggressively, the doctors told him he only had a few weeks to live, so he promoted me.

He didn’t want our enemies to see a weak, sick man leading the Rossis. So, we held a closed-casket funeral for my dearly departed father and fake-cried for our loss while he watched TV upstairs.

I underwent the most rigorous training in the world, and within two months, I was leading the family. That was three years ago. Now, my father controls me like a little puppet from a private hospital bed in our home.

I guess he’s too tough for even cancer to take down.

“So then...?”

When I make zero moves to answer, Enzo eases the door closed and takes the seat opposite of me. I feel lightheaded. We haven’t been in the same room for over half a decade.

And the last time we were, he had me panting and screaming his name on the floor of a dance studio.

A blush creeps up my chest, and I pull my blazer closed, hoping he doesn’t notice. He does, of course.

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“Feeling a little hot, Lenny?” He smirks, pouring me a glass of ice water. Thankfully, the waitress shows up at the perfect moment to take our orders.

“Let’s get down to business,” I assert as soon as she leaves.

“Oh, but I enjoy pleasure so much more,” he croons, leaning back casually in his chair. I study him, marveling at how much and how little he’s changed.

The same sandy golden-brown hair, but he styles it now. His abysmal suburban dad uniform of khakis and polo shirts is long gone, replaced by a crisp, tailored suit. As he leans forward, I spot swaths of delicate color peeking out from his sleeves.

Tattoos! Enzo never had tattoos. I wonder how far down they go? Do they cover his chest? Do they trail down to where...

“Hello? Earth to Lenny?” he says, waving his hand in front of my face. “Here I thought you wanted to talk business, but you just wanted to check me out.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“You’re wondering how far down my tattoos go, aren’t you?”

“What?!” I choke on nothing. Oh god, I’m going to faint. “No, I didn’t even know you had tattoos.”

He opens his mouth to throw another smart-ass line at me, but I press my finger against his lips, effectively shutting him up.

“As you know, the Rossis have purchased a waterfront complex here in the city.” I launch into the spiel I stupidly practiced for Rafael Romano. “We’re not here to step on anyone’s toes or cause trouble. We’re just expanding our more legitimate ventures to diversify our portfolio.”

“Right, right, right,” he muses, staring up at the ceiling. “And that’s why you tried to burn down our warehouse yesterday, right? Camaraderie and all that?”

I stare at him, shocked. What the hell is he on about?

He should know that I’m too smart to blaze into a new city, with zero support and a skeleton crew, and start a turf war. That’s not how I would ever do something like this.

But I know who would.

“Are you saying that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree?”

“I’m saying you learned from the worst,” he replies nonchalantly. “Your father had no manners when it came to boundaries either.”

“My father is a complicated man,” I spit, but there’s no venom in my voice, and Enzo knows it. “Whatever, are we done here?”

I move to stand up, but he grabs my elbow, easing me back into my seat. We bore holes into each other’s eyes, neither of us willing to be the first to give. Finally, he closes his eyes and leans back in his seat.

“I’m just saying, maybe you didn’t burn down our warehouse,” he explains slowly as if I’m a child, “but maybe you should ask your maybe-dead-maybe-alive father about this.”

“He...we had nothing to do with this,” I seethe. Anger rises up in my throat instantly.

How dare he imply that the Rossis would do something shady like that? We’re an old, established family. We don’t play small-time games.

“Clearly, you have some enemies to see to,” I declare, standing up and gathering my things. “And Enzo? If you even so much as try to retaliate for something we didn’t do, believe me, you’re going to regret the day you were born.”

I throw my hair over my shoulder and stalk out of the room. My composure lasts two more minutes—enough for me to get into the backseat of my armored, chauffeured car. Safely ensconced in my luxurious leather bubble, I burst into the ugliest tears known to humanity.

After giving myself a few minutes to wallow, I pull it together as we glide into the courtyard of our new East Coast compound. Uncle Luigi flings the front door open before I can even touch the handle.

“How was it? What happened?” he demands, trying to hide his worry.

“It was completely fine.” I brush him off and head to the kitchen. He tails me, expecting details. “They accused us of setting fire to their warehouse last night.”

“That’s ridiculous. Where the hell did they get that idea? Were you crying?”

“I mean, we move in, and their warehouse burns down. Looks suspicious, doesn’t it?”

I busy myself with pouring fresh beans into the coffee machine so he doesn’t see I’m hiding something. Mentioning that Enzo now leads the Romano family would only set him off—and send him running to tattle to my father.

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Uncle Luigi is my ball and chain when I'm off the home base since my father can no longer travel. Funny how he's forced me to lead the family and yet refuses to trust me to actually do so.

"In their eyes, yes, I suppose," he agrees. "We need to have a call with the family."

"I know," I grit through my teeth as I watch the coffee drip painfully slowly.

"Valentina, don't get emotional," he tries to soothe, but it comes off condescending. "Everyone trusts your leadership and decision-making skills, but you're young and this is all so new for you."

"New?" I screech, whirling around to face him. "I've been doing this for three years now, thank you very much. And in those three years, not only have I expanded our business across the whole damn country, but I've created peace treaties with other families to allow us to do so. So, don't you dare insinuate that I'm incapable of doing anything without my father pulling the strings in the background."

He shakes his head, and my anger deflates. No doubt my father will hear about yet another high-strung, emotional outburst.

Like clockwork, my phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out, stabbing the "answer" button.

"Valentina, why didn't you call me after the meeting like I requested?"

"Dad, I literally just stepped into the house," I huff, putting him on speakerphone. "I

met them, they accused us of setting fire to their warehouse, and I told them we had nothing to do with it.”

“Hmm, and then?”

“Then...” I stutter. Then my brain went blank because the love of my life was sitting in front of me, smiling that crooked, dimpled smile. “I told them if they thought of retaliating for something we didn’t do, they would regret the day they were born.”

“That’s my girl.” Dad chuckles. I can hear the machines beeping in the background, and instantly feel bad for lying to him.

Technically, I’m not lying. I’m omitting an insignificant part of the truth.

“Dad, we had nothing to do with this, right?” I ask, forcing a hard edge into my voice.

While I don’t think my father would ever go after the Romanos, I can’t be sure. And I’m too smart to keep myself in the dark if I know it’ll bite me in the ass one day.

“No, we had nothing to do with it,” he says plainly, and there’s not a trace of a lie in his voice. “We’ve never had any contact with the Romanos, bad or good, and I’d like to think it’s best to keep it that way.”

“That’s basically what I told Enzo,” I agree, catching sight of Matilda running around the back garden like a bat out of hell. Uncle Alfonso chases her, throwing slushy snowballs at her legs while she shrieks with glee.

“Enzo?”

Shit. Fuck. Did I say that out loud?

“Right,” I confirm, refusing to elaborate.

“You didn’t meet with Rafael Romano?”

“Not exactly.”

“Who’s Enzo?”

I catch Uncle Luigi staring me down with a pensive look on his face. I shrug my shoulders like it’s no big deal.

Enzo is a common name. I have no idea why everyone is suddenly so concerned.

“He’s the new head of the Romano family,” I say vaguely. “Took over from Rafael, it seems.”

“Enzo Romano,” my father muses. “Never heard of him. Luigi? Look into that, would you? I want you to find everything you can about Enzo Romano.”

“It’s not Romano,” I whisper as Uncle Luigi confirms my father’s instructions. “It’s... Cavalli.”

“What?”

“No.”

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My uncle and father speak at the same time, and I shrink back against the counter, cursing myself for not lying.

But Uncle Luigi would have looked into it and figured it out anyway. Then I'd be caught in a lie, and it'd be even worse.

"Enzo Cavalli is the head of the Romano family," I clarify, but judging by the horrified look on Luigi's face, they definitely understood.

The silence stretches, slowly replacing the air in the room. By the time my father finally speaks, I feel like I'm suffocating.

"Valentina, I want you and Matilda to get on the first flight back to California," he commands, his voice low and laced with anger. "Your work there is done. Luigi and the rest of the crew can finish up."

"But—"

The call cuts off, signaling my father's unvoiced goodbye. I grab the stupid phone and hurl it against the wall with all my strength. Uncle Luigi sighs and leaves the room, giving me time to calm down.

Matilda spots me at the window from outside and grins, waving both mittened hands at me. I smile as Alfonso scoops her up and sends her flying into the air.

My fingers pick nervously at the dish towel, unraveling the loose threads while my foot taps against the marble floors of its own accord.

I ignore my body as it screams and begs to move, to stretch my muscles, to lose myself in music. My father's words echo in my mind.

Ballet isn't a priority anymore. Quit dreaming about a future that'll never happen.

I sink into a chair at the kitchen table with my coffee, my mind a jumble of confusion and regrets. The anger builds as I think about the horrific existence my family has trapped me in.

I can't build the future I want for myself because I need to lead the family. But I can't throw myself into leading the family because no one trusts me to make decisions.

And then, there's Enzo. I drift back to that sweltering day in August, after my final recital. We made love on the ballet studio floor for the last time, not knowing it would be the last.

He disappeared after that. For years, I beat myself up thinking it was my fault—I wasn't pretty enough, fun enough, or good enough for him.

Then I found the check receipt in my father's books.

When I took over the family, I went through all our accounts to find where we could tighten things up. Stuffed haphazardly into the back of an account book was a receipt for three million dollars made out to Enzo Cavalli, dated the day after my recital.

He traded our love for money.

I sure hope that three million dollars keeps his cold heart warm at night.

CHAPTER FOUR

Enzo

It might be convenient to believe the Rossis are behind the warehouse attack, but it doesn't make sense. The shocked look on Valentina's face when I walked in there today was enough for me to realize she had no idea.

That, and the simple fact that the Rossis wouldn't attack the Romanos unprovoked.

That leads me back to The8. Of course, it's possible it's another family or even some bored teenagers, but The8 is really getting on my nerves.

I finish up my last lap and pull myself out of the pool, shivering at the frosty air. Although the rooftop pool is heated, it's not enclosed, meaning I have to freeze my nips off getting in and out every morning.

I cocoon myself in a giant velvet robe and slide my feet into a pair of slippers. My brain is moving a mile a minute, trying to sort out all the new information.

As the elevator takes me back down to my penthouse, I check my messages. A few updates from Jack, telling me they've reached the warehouse upstate. A video message from Lux and her adorable daughter, Rosie, playing in the snow.

I freeze as the elevator pings open.

A new message from The8.

I click it open with excitement, hoping for something that might reveal their identity. My excitement deflates when I see it's a series of numbers that don't make any sense.

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89 111 117 32 98 117 114 110 101 100 32 105 116 32 100 111 119 110 32 116 104
101 110 46 32 73 32 98 117 114 110 32 105 116 32 100 111 119 110 32 110 111 119
46

Random numbers? No, nothing this person does is random.

I head to the shower and scour my brain, trying to remember different codes I might have learned. The only thing that might make sense is ASCII code—a standard format used to share files between computers on different devices and networks.

In my sudden enthusiasm to crack the code, I toss the towel on the floor and run butt-naked to my small home office. I plop down at the desk and boot up my laptop.

My ASCII knowledge is a bit rusty, but that’s what the internet is for. My fingers tingle with anticipation as I quickly find a conversion table and scribe down the letters.

You burned it down then. I burn it down now.

“What the hell?” I wonder out loud. That’s definitely a direct connection to the warehouse attack, which means the Rossis are innocent.

The first sentence confuses me—unless these messages are meant for Rafael? He’s been known to burn down a few things in the past. Maybe this entire time, The8 has unknowingly been sending me messages meant for him.

I think back to the tumultuous events that brought him and Lux together last year and

wonder if it might be connected to that.

Wandering back to the bathroom, I locate my phone and dial his number. He takes an annoyingly long time to answer.

“Enzo, didn’t I fire you?” he finally grumbles, sleep slurring his speech.

“No, in fact, you promoted me and bought me a two-million-dollar car,” I shoot back, grinning despite myself.

“You need to go read that contract again,” he huffs. “Each time you call me at five in the morning, I withdraw one million dollars from your bank account.”

“For what reason?”

“Emotional damage. Now what the hell do you want?”

“May I remind you how mean you were to me?—”

“I’m hanging up now, Enzo.”

“No, wait, fine, fine.” I laugh, trying to get back into professional mode. Rafael’s grumbling, grumpy vibe just brings out the worst in me sometimes. I can’t help but tease him. “Have you ever burned down a warehouse, business, home, or some such structure?”

“Are you kidding me?” he barks. I can hear sheets rustling. “That’s how I spent half my time in the mafia. What are you on about?”

“I’ve been getting weird messages almost every day this week,” I admit. “I thought they might be for you.”

“Tell me more,” he says, suddenly alert. I can imagine him sitting up in bed, that stoic this-means-business look on his face.

Technically, Rafael is still involved with the Romanos, but at his wife’s urging, he only handles the legal side of things. Although he’s still an infinite pool of knowledge whenever I’m stumped by something crime related.

“They’re being sent in code form,” I explain, putting him on speaker and tugging on some clean clothes. “First it was HEX, then Morse, and now it’s ASCII. The signature always says The8. Make any sense of that?”

“Have you told the uncles?”

“Honestly, no. There’s been a lot going on lately.”

“The warehouse attack?” he asks, his voice grim. I hear him wrestling with Lux’s fancy Smeg coffee maker, and his voice fades for a second, replaced by cursing and banging.

“Yeah, we thought it might be the new family in town... the Rossis.” I hesitate, knowing Rafael knows my entire history. “But the last message from The8 confirms it was their doing.”

The line is silent for a second, and I wonder if I lost him to his high-tech appliance hell. Finally, he clears his throat, and I brace myself for the question.

“Did you see her?”

“I did. She’s actually head of the Rossis now.”

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“And?”

“Well, she definitely hates me,” I say lightly, forcing myself to laugh. “Maybe even more now that I’ve accused her of attacking our shit.”

“That was pretty dumb,” he grumbles. “Listen, if you need any help with any of this...”

“I know, thanks.” I sigh, clicking off the call. I decide to check in at the office downtown and see if anyone has any more information.

Dragging Rafael into this when Lux is so against the mafia is the last thing I want to do.

A few of the younger cousins are hanging around the office, gossiping about the warehouse attack. I thoroughly interrogate them, but no one has any news.

The Romano offices take up an entire floor of an enormous skyscraper downtown. I never understood why they even bother with this place, but Rafael assures me it helps the family maintain a legitimate front.

I stroll into the giant corner office with my name on the door and head straight to the floor-to-ceiling windows. The weak February sunshine streams in, trying its best to brighten the place up, but my mood is in the dumps.

Seeing Valentina again has been a fantasy of mine for years. And now that it’s happened, I can’t get her off my mind.

I smile, remembering the day I first met her. I'd just finished my computer science degree, but I was already deep into the world of hacking and working with criminals.

They paid better, and the work was more entertaining, so when Lev Rossi reached out, I agreed to an interview.

He invited me to their Los Angeles compound one sunny afternoon in June. When I pulled up at the front door, it swung open to reveal the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my entire life.

Deep blue eyes, long dark waves falling over her shoulders, and that look in her eyes—delicate and hard at the same time. I fell in love with Valentina right then and there.

Her father hired me, of course, but one of his clauses was to avoid “developing personal relationships with his family.” We didn't care, though. I chuckle, remembering how we used to sneak around.

My reverie is broken by my assistant bustling into the room. I shake my head to clear it of these stupid nostalgic thoughts and sit down at my desk.

We spend the next hour in a conference call with Rafael, covering updates on the legal side of the business. When my assistant finally leaves, I immediately open my laptop and search for Valentina's name.

I fall into a black hole of research, learning everything the Rossis have been up to since Lev threatened me and forced me to keep away from her. And I've kept my distance, no matter how tempting it was to try to stay updated on her life.

I wanted to reach out to her when I was ready—strong enough that her father could do nothing about it. I also wanted to keep hope alive, to pretend she hadn't moved on

with her life while I was away.

But now she's here, and there's no reason to hold back. Within hours, I've hacked into the Rossis' servers and pored over every email I could get my hands on.

Her father is indeed faking his own death. Interesting.

I read a few more, cringing at how the family seems to talk down to Valentina and cheering when I see her secure a great business deal. When I finally snap out of my research wormhole, my eyes are burning. Since the emails are more business-related than anything, her personal life is still a mystery to me.

Is she married? Single? Does she have kids? Does she still practice ballet and read poetry books, and sing really badly when she's happy?

My fingers reach for my phone involuntarily, and before I know it, I'm dialing her number and pressing call.

One ring and I still don't realize what I'm doing. Two rings and I panic. Three rings and?—

“Hello?”

I freeze at the sound of her voice. She sounds husky, like she's been crying. The urge to destroy whoever or whatever made her sad claws at me.

“Lenny?” I whisper, not knowing what else to say. The line is silent for a second, but I can hear feet shuffling and a door closing softly.

“Why are you calling?” she whispers back. “How'd you get this number?”

“Oh, you know, the genius hacking thing...” I trail off lamely.

“Right.” Her voice is hard now. “So, you’ve probably hacked the, I don’t know, mainframe or something, and are now watching me through the security cameras, right?”

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“Yeah,” I snort, “can you flash some shoulder or something? Getting kind of bored over here.”

“This isn’t funny, Enzo.”

We sit in silence for a few seconds, all the things unsaid between us swirling through the line, threatening to burst out. I don’t even know why I called her.

“I can’t stop thinking about you,” I finally admit. She lets out a heavy sigh, and I can hear her fingers nervously tapping on some surface nearby.

“You made your decision six years ago,” she says, her voice tired and empty. “There’s no point in doing this now.”

“He threatened me, Lenny.”

“Yeah,” she scoffs, “with three million dollars. Must have been a tough choice.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know, the cool three million you accepted in exchange for staying away?” she grits out. “I waited for you, Enzo. I spent years wondering what the hell was wrong with me that you’d just disappear like that.”

“Lenny, I didn’t?—”

“You don’t have to pretend,” she snaps. “I found the check.”

The line goes dead, and I stare at my phone, open-mouthed. She thinks her father paid me off to leave her alone? What a sick, twisted bastard. If only she knew the truth.

I instantly redial the number, but it goes straight to voicemail. I try again and again and eventually give up, accepting that she probably blocked my number.

Heartbroken, angry, and no closer to figuring anything out than I was this morning, I eventually head down to the garage.

Even breaking the speed limit on my short drive home doesn't lift my spirits. As I get into the elevator, my phone lights up with a message. Nervously, I open the app, hoping it's not another brain twister from The8.

When I see it's just my doorman informing me he brought a package upstairs, I let go of the breath I'd been holding.

Lux has recently gotten into making jam and has been telling me she'd courier a box over to the penthouse for me to try. Well, at least I'll sail the high of a sugar rush before I pass out tonight.

I head straight for the small, unmarked package sitting on the entryway table and grab it on my way to the kitchen.

Weird, you'd think a bunch of jars would be heavier than this.

I place it on the marble kitchen island and study the package. No address, no markings—it's almost suspiciously clean.

Knowing Lux, she would have absolutely spilled something on the box by accident or covered it in little drawings and stickers. A wave of nausea cascades over me.

Something feels off about this.

I consider calling in reinforcements, but then decide I'll look like a madman if there really is a jar of homemade blackberry jam inside. Carefully, I pull off the twine wrapped around the box and lift up one flap.

Something black and plastic sits inside.

Curious, I pull open the other flap and stare at the device. I take in the wires, buttons, and empty timer and realize I'm looking at a bomb.

I almost panic and run out of the penthouse, but after a second look, I see it's defused. A small scrap of paper catches my eye, and I tug it free.

Her next birthday is sure to be a blast!

The letters are neatly scrawled in black ink above the signature I knew was bound to be there: The 8. But whose birthday?

I think hard, trying to remember the birth dates of every woman in my life. Truth be told, there's only Lux and Valentina, and neither of their birthdays are any time soon.

Still, this is a clear message. Whoever's targeting me is also targeting someone else I know, and I have no idea how to connect all this information before it's too late.

CHAPTER FIVE

Valentina

“Yes, Mother, of course, we’re going to have a second party in California,” I say, balancing the phone on my shoulder as I attempt to brush Matilda’s wild curls.

For the millionth time, I wonder where the hell she got this hair since neither her father nor I have curly hair.

“I don’t understand why you won’t just come home now. Is it because of that boy?”

“That boy has nothing to do with this,” I grit out, giving up on the brush and opting for a loose braid instead.

“What boy, Mama?” Matilda asks, looking up at me with the devilish smile she inherited from her father.

“No boy, sweetheart,” I whisper, patting her on the head to go play. “No boys allowed in this house.”

“But Uncle Alfonso...”

“That’s right, go play with Uncle Alfonso,” I croon, petting her hair and leading her out of the bathroom.

“Valentina, I sense you’re busy. Would you like me to call you another time?”

“No! God, please, don’t call... again,” I blurt out, belatedly realizing my mistake. “I mean, now is the perfect time. I’m listening.”

“Your father is very angry.” Mother launches into the same spiel she’s given me every day since I refused my father’s order to come home. “He doesn’t understand why you won’t listen to him. He’s very worried, and you know what stress does to people who have... poor health.”

“Cancer, Ma,” I correct her, tired of this little game. “He has cancer, and he’s had it for three years. Listen, I’m twenty-six years old and responsible enough to be put in charge of a billion-dollar empire and a whole heap of people that depend on us—why am I not responsible enough to make my own decisions?”

“Of course, we think you’re responsible.” She hesitates. I can see the wheels spinning in her brain, trying to figure out how to gaslight me into agreeing with their wishes. “We just think California is safer for both you and Matilda.”

“We’re completely safe here,” I assert, hoping my voice sounds confident. “And we’re staying at least until I get the new business set up and fully functioning. End of discussion.”

“Oh dear, your father won’t like that.”

“No, he probably won’t,” I agree. My second line clicks, and I beg off, saying goodbye to my mother.

I switch over to the other line and spring into mom mode, dealing with the catering company for Matilda’s East Coast birthday party. By the time I get off the call, my brain is exhausted.

Between planning bicoastal birthday parties for a soon-to-be six-year-old, dealing

with my ex coming back into my life, and running the mafia, I have zero brain power left. I'm on my way to take a much-needed hot shower when my phone pings again.

“Ugh, I swear if my mother is asking which fucking Disney princess she likes the most again...”

My grumbling stops immediately when I see it's a blocked number. Weird. Maybe Enzo found a new number to message me from after I blocked him?

I open the message with shaky fingers, exhilarated and irritated at the same time. The message contains a link to a song and a signature. I study the signature for a second, wondering what the hell The8 means, then click the link.

It pulls up a video of an orchestra performing *Songs and Dances of Death* by Modest Mussorgsky.

I watch the entire video, mulling over what this could possibly mean. A vague memory of the song's meaning bounces around in my brain—four deaths or something like that? But who would send this to me, and why?

My phone rings and I panic, dropping it on the floor. It clatters across the tiles, vibrating its way away from me. Feeling silly, I huff out a breath and snatch it up.

“Valentina, can you meet me at the complex?” Uncle Luigi's voice echoes through my smashed speaker. “We have an... interesting problem.”

“On my way,” I confirm. I guess my hot shower will have to wait, I think, waving longingly at the beautiful walk-in shower.

After double-checking that Matilda is playing under the watchful eye of Uncle Alfonso, also known as her favorite nanny, I make my way to the complex.

Early morning flurries swirl around, creating diamond-like patterns on the windows, and I smile happily. It's been years since I've seen snow—ever since my father got sick and we stopped going up to our ski lodge for Christmas.

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When I pull into the empty parking lot, I quickly remember why I loved living in Southern California. The beautiful, sparkly white snow is already turning into gross gray slush on the sidewalks. It seeps into my leather boots as I navigate around puddles to the front door.

I spot Uncle Luigi pacing in the lobby at the front of the building and pick up my pace. My breath comes out fast in small white clouds as I hurry up the wide concrete steps. Inside isn't much warmer, since the electricity isn't fully on yet, but at least it's dry.

"What's going on?" I ask as soon as I'm in the lobby. I stomp the slush off my boots and rub my poor frozen hands against my thighs to get some feeling back into them.

"It seems we had a break-in sometime in the early hours of the morning," Luigi says gravely and leads me to the back of the complex. We walk by large halls, past offices and bathrooms, and through an employee-only door into the warehouse.

This complex was a strategic purchase for our family. The front will function as a lifestyle space for the city—a combination of shops, restaurants, and cafés, plus a vintage arcade and movie theater.

The back warehouse juts out right into the marina, a perfect point for shipping and receiving products for our more illegal activities.

After Enzo's complaint of fire, I instantly start scanning the roof and sniffing the space. "A fire or what?"

“No, no, nothing like that,” Luigi assures me. “In fact, it’s really strange. They didn’t destroy or even steal anything. Just spray painted this.”

He gestures to a large expanse of empty wall featuring a new addition—a large red graffiti reading “lullaby is coming.”

“I told you it was strange,” he says, taking in my shocked face. “What do you suppose this means? We’ve been looking into the most well-known gangs and mafia families in the city, no one uses that as their calling card.”

“What the...” I move closer to the wall, running my fingers over the letters. The paint is still damp, and it streaks the pads of my fingers, covering them in blood red. “It’s fresh.”

“The system notified me an hour ago,” he confirms. “I thought it was a false alarm since... well, since this place iscompletely empty. I wondered what the hell anyone could want in here, but I drove down to check it out anyway.”

“Lullaby,” I read out loud again. As soon as the word leaves my mouth, panic takes hold.Lullaby, like the first of the four deaths inSongs and Dances of Death.

I sink to my knees, wondering what this connection means.

“Valentina?” Uncle Luigi asks, concern lining his face. He stoops down to grab a hold of my shoulder, peering into my face. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I got a strange message this morning,” I admit, my voice shaking more than it should. “I thought it was a prank or something, but then, this...”

“Show me,” he demands, sticking his hand out for my phone. I open the message and place it in his palm.

Mussorgsky's somber tones float over us, echoing in the empty warehouse, driving my heart rate up. I pull myself off the ground and grab the phone, shutting the video off.

"This is concerning," he says, eyeing me. "We need to tell your father immediately."

"No," I breathe, knowing that will only result in someone forcing me onto a flight to California. "Please, Uncle Luigi, just let me handle this. You know how he'll react."

"I can't hide this from him," he says, his voice apologetic and soft. "But... I'll do my best to make sure you can make your own decisions, regardless of what he says."

My teeth chatter from the cold, and my fear as Uncle Luigi calls my father and explains the situation. I listen to their back and forth, but my mind is far away, doing mental gymnastics.

We don't know anyone in this city, except Enzo. It wouldn't be him—this doesn't seem like his type of game.

Although he's the only one who knows my new number... and my love of classical music.

"Enzo Cavalli. Mark my words, he's the rat behind this." My father's angry voice brings me back down to earth.

"I'm not sure, Lev." Uncle Luigi hesitates. "This doesn't seem like something he'd do. Hacking our computers? Sure. But breaking and entering?"

"He has an entire crew working for him now," my father rages through the tiny speaker. "Of course he wouldn't do the dirty work. Luigi, find out what his game is."

“You want us to set up a meeting?”

“I want you to make sure he knows his place,” my father spits. “In whichever manner you choose. And Valentina?”

“Yes?” I squeak, terrified to get roped into this conversation. I can kill a man with my bare hands, but facing the wrath of my father is something else entirely.

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“Don’t you dare go anywhere near Cavalli, or I swear, I’ll charter a plane there and drag you home myself.”

“Yes, Father,” I whisper, suddenly feeling like I’m nineteen years old and terrified of my father’s rage again.

After he clicks off, Uncle Luigi wraps his arm around my shoulders and leads me out of the warehouse. We make our way through the sludge to our cars.

“I should be in this meeting,” I say, finding my voice again.

“I know,” he admits.

We stand in the cold, not knowing how to proceed. Uncle Luigi would never double-cross my father, but he’s well aware that I’m technically in charge.

“He wouldn’t do something like this,” I finally venture.

“I know that too.” Luigi agrees, the steam escaping his mouth and floating up in curling wafts of white. “Listen, how about we shelve this for now and focus on getting the business ready? If anything else strange happens, we’ll reach out to the Romanos.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, my eyes threatening to spill the tears I’ve been holding in.

As rare as it is, it’s painfully affirming to have someone acknowledge that my decision is the right one, even if it goes against my father.

As I head back home, desperate to have Matilda in my sight, I think about Mussorgsky's piece. The first death was a lullaby—the death of a young child.

The second? A woman, I think. A single woman. I wrack my brain trying to remember the third. An old man, maybe. And the last one? Men at war.

Four deaths. Lullaby is coming.

No, Enzo wouldn't do something like this. This is coming from a sick, sick individual, I realize as my brain starts putting things together.

Matilda is a child, I'm a single woman, my father is a sick man, and men at war? They're all around me in the dark underbelly of the city.

Someone is coming for everyone I know.

CHAPTER SIX

Enzo

"Well, it's definitely a bomb," Rafael confirms, placing it gently back on the counter.

"Thanks, Einstein," I snort, shaking my head at him. "I got that."

"I just don't understand it," he continues, eyeing the bomb and ignoring me. "The cryptic messages, the bomb, what is all this?"

"We've never really encountered... an attack like this," Uncle Joe confirms, glancing at Rafael desperately as if he's the one with all the answers.

"Can we have it tested for fingerprints or something?" Jack muses, rifling through my

pantry.

“You think we’re on an episode of CSI: Miami or something?” I ask, elbowing the younger cousin in the ribs. “We don’t have the skills for shit like that. Even if we got some prints, we can’t run them in the database unless we can somehow get access to it. Besides, the security footage showed nothing of use. Whoever did this knew how to place the package at the doorman’s post undetected.”

We mull the idea of hitting up some of our sources on the police force until Uncle Joe shuts it down. The core family members have gathered at my penthouse to debrief the situation, but we’re getting nowhere.

I guess there’s no chapter on defused bombs or coded messages in the mafia playbook.

“Enzo, you can’t do any of your hacker shit on this?”

“On a defused bomb?” I laugh. “What exactly do you want me to hack into?”

We silently stare at the tiny black box perched innocently on my kitchen counter. Everyone is stumped—and nervous.

I can feel the sizzling tension in the air, especially from the older family members who are used to playing by very defined, well-known rules.

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“Okay, well...” I start, but the elevator dings open, interrupting me, and Lux breezes into the kitchen. She’s balancing a slim paper package with baby Rosie, who’s happily perched on her hip.

I motion to Jack to move the package away from here.

“Hello, hello, my terrifying little family.” She grins, waving at the group of stone-faced men packed into my kitchen. “Can I have my husband back now?”

Rafael’s face lights up for the first time since he arrived this morning, and he swoops in to grab Rosie and place a soft kiss on Lux’s mouth.

I watch the exchange, feeling jealous like I sometimes do. What Rafael and Lux have is an unmistakable, undeniable soul bond—something I’ve always deeply craved.

They complement each other perfectly. Her sunny disposition softens his dark, brooding ways, while his logic and steadfastness balance her chaotic nature.

And then there’s Rosie, their darling one-year-old and my goddaughter—an immaculate mix of Lux’s infectious smiles and Rafael’s toughness.

Rafael tosses her into the air, making her squeal with laughter, and even Uncle Joe cracks a smile. As the family gathers around Rosie, teasing her and making her laugh, Lux sidles over to me.

“You okay, bestie?”

“It’s been a rough day,” I admit. “Lot of weird shit happening around here and I just don’t know if I’m capable of handling it all.”

I nearly whisper the last part, feeling like a failure in my new role. Lux slips her fingers into mine and gives my hand a couple of quick squeezes.

“You’re going to figure this out,” she says, keeping her voice low. “You’re the smartest man I know, but don’t tell my husband I said that.”

“It’s in the vault,” I confirm, pretending to lock my lips.

“Oh, this is for you!” she says, thrusting an envelope into my hands. “I started chatting with the doorman while I was waiting for the elevator, and he was bringing this up for you, so I grabbed it instead.”

Great, another unmarked mysterious package.

I stare at it, twisting it around in my hands. It’s a slim envelope, the kind people usually use to send legal documents. Well, at least it’s not another bomb.

While the rest of the family is distracted by Rosie’s antics, Rafael wanders over to us and cocks his eyebrow at the envelope.

“Another one?”

“I don’t even know anymore,” I mumble, tearing the seal open with shaky fingers.

I hold my breath, staring at the innocent-looking envelope, and then pull myself together and peek inside.

“It’s just a paper.” I sigh with relief, pulling it out.

“A photograph,” Lux corrects me, leaning over to get a glimpse. The three of us stare at the picture in confusion.

“Who is she?” Rafael wonders, leaning closer.

For a brief, hopeful second, I think it might be a mistake. This photograph of a little girl with dark curls and bright green eyes wasn’t meant for me. The doorman probably got the address confused. I need to talk to him about this and the previous package.

I almost laugh at the paranoid mess The8 have turned me into, until Lux flips the photo over.

Matilda Rossi got your eyes six years ago, but I always have my eye on you.

I read the message again. And then a third time. Then it clicks, and the room starts to spin. I sink onto my haunches, dry heaving into my hands.

“Get him some water!” I vaguely hear Lux call out. A warm hand comes down on my shoulder, but it does little to comfort me.

Matilda Rossi. Five years ago. My eyes.

I gingerly pick up the photo from where it fell to the floor and stare at the small child—my child. My daughter has my mossy green eyes and identical dimples, one deeper than the other.

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A glass of water is thrust into my hand, and I chug it without even thinking.

“I need to see Valentina,” I say, my voice sounding hoarse to my own ears. The urgency propels me upward, but my bones feel like jelly, and I collapse back down onto the cold, hard tiles.

“Easy, easy,” Rafael coaxes, grabbing me and helping me stand. I take a few deep breaths, feeling Lux’s slim fingers squeezing mine. “I don’t think you need to be going anywhere right now.”

“She didn’t even tell me. How could she not tell me?”

Rafael looks helplessly at Lux, who bites her lip with worry. Anger rushes through me, fueling the desire to destroy something, but I try to breathe through it. Rosie’s laughter echoes from the living room, and the last thing I want to do is scare her by turning into the Hulk.

“And someone’s after her,” I finally say after some deep, meditative breaths. “The8 knows who she is, and they’re using her as a threat against me.”

“That makes things tricky, for sure,” Rafael agrees. “Do you want to send a representative over to the Rossis to get them in the loop? I don’t think you should be the one to do it.”

“No,” I bark out, forcing myself to cool down again. “I have to do it.”

Lux and Rafael exchange worried glances, but I ignore them. This is my

problem—and a threat to my child. I nod at Rafael and slip the photograph into my pocket.

Lux looks like she wants to tackle me to the floor and stop me from leaving, but I sidestep her and head to the elevator.

I dial Valentina's number, but the automated message tells me it's been disconnected. I try again and again as I jog to my car, foolishly hoping I'll get through.

It takes me a second to find the Rossi compound and plug it into my map, but once I get on the road, my head finally clears.

The speed limit is just a suggestion at this point, and I ignore it altogether, winding through traffic, cutting people off. Car horns and angry shouts fly in my direction, but I couldn't care less.

I need to get to Valentina and warn her about this—whatever the hell this is.

When I finally pull up at the wrought-iron gate, the house looks dark and empty. I wonder if they've gone back to California. Just then, the security intercom buzzes, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

"Can I help you?" a disembodied voice drones from the speaker.

"I need to see Valentina Rossi," I gasp, desperately lowering my window. "It's urgent."

"Miss Rossi isn't accepting visitors."

"I don't give a flying fuck. Didn't you hear me? It's urgent!" I nearly scream. I know this butler or whoever is just doing his job, but doesn't anyone understand what

“urgent” means? “She’s in danger.”

“Stay in your vehicle, please.”

The gates don’t open, but a dark, armored car glides out of the garage and heads down the long, winding path toward me.

I wait, holding my breath, desperate to see Valentina. My fingers twitch nervously, tapping on my phone, praying it’s not too late.

But when the car pulls up to the gate, six Rossi men get out instead of Valentina.

“Shit,” I groan. “Why does it always have to be so fucking hard?”

I slide out of my car, slamming the door closed. Big mistake. Six loaded guns come up, pointed straight at me from the other side of the gate.

I raise my hands immediately, showing that I’m unarmed, and wait for instruction. I hate being vulnerable like this, but I’ll do whatever it takes to get inside this damn house and see her.

An older man finally lowers his weapon and walks over to the gate. I eye the men behind him, guns still trained at my head.

When I finally focus on his face, I realize it’s Luigi Rossi, Lev’s younger brother.

“Luigi, can you tell your guys to pull back?” I ask, aiming for politeness. “I’m unarmed and I need to talk to Valentina.”

“That simply won’t happen,” he says, staring me up and down. “You’re not allowed anywhere near her, remember?”

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“She’s in danger,” I growl, pissed off and ready to climb the damn gate. “Can we put this shit behind us so that I can explain?”

“How convenient that you suddenly have urgent information to share with her, now that she’s within your reach again.”

“Has she received any cryptic messages?” I ask, trying to get to my point. That gives him pause, and he stares at me with cold, calculated eyes.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because she’s in fucking danger!” I yell, throwing my hands up in frustration. The guns behind him promptly lock in on my face again. “Oh, relax, would you? I’m unarmed!”

“Have you been sending her cryptic messages?” Luigi asks, ignoring the firing squad behind him.

“No,” I spit out, barely holding my sanity together. “I’ve been receiving them as well. Today, I got this.”

I pull the photograph out of my pocket and smack it against the metal gate. Luigi’s face pales, and I have my answer. Matilda is mine.

“She’s in danger, too,” I add, a little more softly this time. I flip the photograph over for him to read the message.

“The8?” he gasps, pulling the paper out of my hands. “Valentina got a message from The8 as well.”

Fuck.

When I find the motherfuckers behind all this, I’m going to tear them from limb to limb.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Valentina

Through the kitchen window, I watch as Uncle Luigi, an unmoving mountain of old resentment and bitterness, faces off with Enzo at the front gate. I force myself to tear my eyes away from the scene—it’s probably better that I don’t watch.

I wonder why he’s here. To make excuses for leaving without even saying goodbye back then?

Or is he just desperate to see me again, as I am to see him?

I force that particularly annoying thought into the darkest recesses of my brain and distract myself with the budgets for the new building complex. The numbers dance before my eyes, transforming into a twisted version of Enzo’s face, mocking me.

Fuck, I miss him so much.

“Ugh, this is pointless,” I groan, slamming the laptop shut. I’m just about to check on Matilda and her tutor when Luigi storms into the kitchen.

Snowflakes tumble to the floor as he kicks the kitchen door closed. The fact that he

resembles an angry snowman makes me giggle internally, but I school my face into subdued professionalism.

“What was that about?” I ask as nonchalantly as I can manage. I’m dying to know why Enzo showed up here and how that conversation went, but I’ll never let Luigi know that.

He glares at me as if he’s about to launch into a lecture, but the fight drains out of him when Matilda runs into the room.

“Mama, I finished my lessons!” she yelps, racing around the island to throw her arms around me. “Can I play in the snow? Please?”

“Yes, darling, just take Uncle Alfonso with you,” I say, placing a kiss on the top of her head. “And dress warmly!”

She’s off like a shotgun, racing through the big, old mansion to find her favorite uncle. I smile, despite everything, wondering how my little California beach baby developed this obsession with snow.

Probably came from her father, I realize, and the thought makes me sad.

I always thought she’d never know her father—or what an amazing man he was, or is, or could have been. But now? My brain glitches at the thought of Enzo finding out about her. How would he react?

“Valentina?” Uncle Luigi clears his throat, bringing me back to the present. “We need to talk about Enzo.”

“I didn’t invite him here,” I say, settling into the chair opposite of him, ready to fight. “I have no idea how he found us ... Well, I mean, it’s probably not difficult for him,

but I didn't?—”

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“I know,” he cuts me off, placing his hands around mine. “You know I would never go against your father’s wishes, but I never understood his treatment of Enzo in the end.”

“I mean, he’s overprotective, overbearing, and wants to extinguish any ounce of joy I might ever experience,” I mumble, knowing I’m acting like a petulant teenager. I cross my arms and stare Luigi down. “Don’t you agree?”

“No, I don’t,” he says. “I think he was trying to protect you at the time. You were always meant to take over the family, and he didn’t want you ... distracted.”

“In love, you mean?”

“Pregnant at nineteen, I mean,” he says pointedly.

“Well, that might be the only thing my father’s ever failed at,” I scoff. “Besides, Matilda is the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and I regret nothing.”

“Of course, Tiny,” he says, using my childhood nickname. His eyes soften, and I instantly feel bad for taking my anger out on him. “We all love Matilda, but it did complicate life for you. Anyway, that’s something we need to talk about.”

“What?” I ask, moving to the edge of my chair. I’m instantly on alert, ready to eliminate any threat to my child.

“Enzo knows,” he says slowly. “About Matilda.”

My world comes crashing down. It's like I've been sucked into a vacuum, all the noise and light fading from my view. The hum of the coffeemaker, the whooshing of the wind, the kitchen walls—everything falls away, and I'm floating in complete darkness.

“Valentina!” an alarmed voice calls from somewhere in the distance. I feel rough, strong hands gripping my arms, pulling me out of the dark void.

Like breaking through ice after being trapped under, I gasp for air. Slowly, my surroundings come back into view, snapping together like puzzle pieces.

“Valentina?” Uncle Luigi calls, shaking me slightly. He's bent over me, his face inches from mine, concern stamped on every single wrinkle.

“What? What happened?”

“You fainted,” he explains, relief washing over him. “Drink this.”

I slowly sip the ice-cold water he thrusts into my hand and try to wrap my mind around this earth-shattering news.

Enzo knows about Matilda.

All these years, I've kept her from him—partly out of anger, but mostly because my father threatened to take her away if I ever revealed her identity to Enzo. He'd never allow his granddaughter to be raised close to a man like him, even if it meant keeping her away from me too. And now, Enzo knows.

And he probably thinks I'm a massive bitch for keeping her a secret.

I drop my face into my hands with a groan and furiously massage my temples. Uncle

Luigi watches me closely, his forehead creased with worry.

“There’s something else,” he says quietly.

“Oh god, what on earth could top that?” I cry, glaring up at him.

“Remember the spray paint? And the song?” he asks, nervously tapping his fingers against the table.

"How can I not?" The search for the culprit was fruitless since no one saw who snuck inside, and the security cameras didn’t capture anything.

“The8 have been targeting Enzo, too. That’s how he learned about Matilda. I think someone’s out to get him.”

“Or us,” I say worriedly. “Are we in danger? Is Matilda in danger?”

Uncle Luigi stares out the window quietly, a war playing out in his mind. Finally, he sighs and steeples his fingers in front of his face. His tired eyes meet mine, and I know we’re about to do something he doesn’t like.

"I think we should lay low and see what happens,” he finally says. “Enzo is looking into it and assured me he’ll keep us updated. If we bring this to your father, you know you’ll be on the first flight back to California, and... I can see that’s not what you want.”

“Thank you,” I breathe, flashing him a small smile of gratitude.

“We’re safe here,” he continues. “Matilda is safe. We’ll beef up our security for the next few weeks. But Valentina?”

“Yes?”

“Stay away from Enzo.”

I spend the next few days in hyper-vigilance mode, making sure Matilda is never alone.

We quietly hire a third-party security company to patrol the grounds at all times. When my father calls, Uncle Luigi casually talks business, never once mentioning the trouble brewing here. As for the spray paint incident, it’s been dismissed as random graffiti—nothing serious, just a prank.

Any space in my mind not occupied with Matilda’s safety is overtaken by thoughts of Enzo. I spend the week lost in a haze of nostalgia, remembering all the little ways he made me feel safe and loved that summer.

It was only a few months, but it was real. An undeniable soul connection, and even now, my soul yearns for him.

As I’m getting Matilda ready for her daily private lessons, I remember the day I found out I was pregnant. It was a month after that sizzling afternoon at the studio, the last time I saw Enzo.

Once I realized Enzo was gone, I spent a month in bed, crying and refusing to speak to anyone. I knew that what we had could end at any moment, but I never expected him to just ghost me.

When I started throwing up every morning, my mother was convinced that my depression had started manifesting in physical ways and dragged me to the doctor.

I'll never forget the bewildering combination of emotions I felt when I got the call from the doctor's office. I was six weeks pregnant, depressed, heartbroken, and completely alone.

But I had a glimmer of hope to hang on to—a tiny piece of Enzo that I could cherish forever.

“All done.” I grin down at her tiny, happy face and tug on a braid. “Ready for your lessons?”

“Yes, but I wish I got more computer time.” She pouts, hopping down from the little stool she uses to reach the bathroom sink. “And more Lego time.”

“Just like your dad.” I laugh and marvel at how similar her interests are to Enzo's. At nearly six years old, Matilda is already deeply interested in technology, math, and how everything works.

“Daddy?” she gasps, her eyes lighting up instantly.

Shit. Per my father's command, I rarely mention Matilda's father.

I know she's curious why all her friends back in California have daddies and she doesn't. It sometimes throws her into little melancholy moods, and she tries to question me, but I rarely reveal anything.

My phone rings, saving me from the conversation, and I shoo her out of the bathroom. Distracted, I answer it without checking the ID.

“Hello?”

A series of clicks and beeps assaults my eardrums. I instantly drop the call, annoyed at myself.

These blocked numbers have been calling all week, and I’ve started ignoring them. It’s always either these weird beeps or Mussorgsky’s *Songs and Dances of Death* playing eerily through the speakers.

I curse and text my tech guy, letting him know I got another one. He’s been trying to trace the calls but hasn’t had any luck so far.

Enzo would find the caller in a heartbeat. I mull over calling him for the millionth time, but force myself to uphold my end of Uncle Luigi’s deal.

Tucking my phone in my pocket, I wander downstairs and into the kitchen. I have about an hour before I need to meet the contractors at the waterfront complex to do the final design walkthrough.

Although this place is just another front for our cross-country drug trafficking empire, I’m pretty proud of it.

Not only will it give the residents of this city tons of new social places to gather, but I designed it all myself. From the living walls to the community rooftop garden and wellness studio, I’ve left little pieces of myself all over the complex.

A small package on the kitchen island catches my eye. I wander over and examine it, looking for an address, but it’s unmarked.

It’s perched on top of a pile of mail, so I figure Uncle Luigi or whoever brought it in must have checked to make sure it’s safe. I pull the ribbon off and pop the top open,

confused at what I see.

One by one, I pull out the four wooden blocks. Children's alphabet blocks.

I stare at the letters dumbly, trying to figure them out. There's only one option I realize, arranging the blocks in a neat line.

Stay.

Stay? What the hell?

I glance around the kitchen, feeling like I'm being watched.

The sight of security guards patrolling the grounds momentarily calms me down, but I call Uncle Luigi anyway. He confirms he hasn't been to the house all night and didn't bring in the mail this morning.

I check the security cameras, but there's nothing there. No sign of someone entering the house with a package.

With shaky hands, I tuck my phone away and head to the living room. A group of my associates has gathered to discuss business, but none of them brought the mail inside.

After tracking down Uncle Alfonso and instructing him to stick to Matilda like glue today, I head to the complex.

I'm nervous and jittery the entire way, turning the message over and over in my head. I check my rearview mirror, catching another glimpse of the dark sedan that was parked outside my house.

They've been following me the entire time, staying far enough away that I can't see their faces.

I pull into the giant, empty parking lot of the complex and park near the doors where

the contractors left their vans. Glancing back again, I don't see the sedan in the parking lot and breathe a sigh of relief. This shit is really making me paranoid.

After a successful walkthrough, I nearly sprint back to my car, desperate to get home to Matilda. Four wooden blocks placed carefully on my passenger's seat stop me in my tracks. My blood runs cold, but I force myself to get into the vehicle.

Away, the blocks read.

The message isn't "stay." It's "stay away."

I quickly check my backseat and when everything looks clear, throw my car into drive and peel out of the parking lot. On the way home, I call Uncle Luigi and give him the update. He agrees to meet me at the house immediately.

I'm checking over my shoulder and the rearview mirror the entire drive home, paranoid as hell. When I stop at a red light, the overwhelming reality of what happened fully hits me.

My car was locked. They got into my locked car to leave this message. And they got into my security-patrolled, locked house to leave the first package.

I nearly throw up from worry over Matilda, but force myself to speed home. When I start down the long, winding driveway to the house, I catch sight of Matilda running through the snow with Alfonso, and my heart settles.

She's safe.

I pull into the heated garage and make my way through the kitchen to check on Matilda. A large, unmarked box on my kitchen table stops me in my tracks.

A third part of the message?

With trembling fingers, I slip off the ribbon and open the box. Fear drains my body of blood, and I get light-headed. A pink princess cake, eerily similar to the one Matilda requested for her birthday, sits in the box.

Except the pink icing doesn't spell out "Happy Birthday." I read it again and again, until my vision blurs.

"You took what's mine. Now I take what's yours."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Enzo

I have a child. A daughter.

With Valentina.

And I find this out in the most messed up way possible.

Swimming laps is the only thing that can help me right now. I strip off the plush robe, shivering in the early morning February frost, and dive in. The second my fingertips touch the water, all thoughts and worries drift away.

I spend two hours practicing different strokes across the heated pool, refusing to get out and face the day. Finally, when my muscles are exhausted and my fingers prune, I pull myself out and head back down to my penthouse.

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The8 has really gotten under my skin, making me jump any time my phone goes off or something gets delivered. And yet, I wish it was only me they were toying with.

Like a paranoid mess, I scan my apartment, and I breathe a sigh of relief when I see nothing out of place.

I make myself a cup of coffee before heading to the shower, knowing I'm going to regret it. My body is already brimming with energy—coffee just makes it worse, but I feel like I need it today.

I call Uncle Rocco to check in on things upstate while my coffee brews. He informs me that all is well and the latest shipment arrived without a hitch. The second I hang up, my phone rings, showing his name again.

“You forget something?” I ask, sliding the phone between my ear and shoulder as I make my coffee. I add way too much sugar, ensuring that I'll not only be hopped up on caffeine and anxiety, but sugar too.

Silence.

“Rocco, you there?”

Silence.

“Weird,” I mutter to myself and hang up, but something doesn't sit right. I hit redial as my stomach flip-flops.

“Boss?”

“Rocco? What was that?”

“What do you mean?” he asks, sounding confused.

“You just called me back, didn’t you?”

“Noooo,” he draws out the word like he thinks I might be losing it. “You just called me.”

“No, no, before that,” I try to explain. “You called me as soon as we hung up, and it was silent. I was worried.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, kid,” he laughs. I hear a pallet jack beeping in the distance and wood being stacked on wood. “Just walked into the warehouse and went to find Jack.”

“Weird,” I mutter again, hanging up. The phone instantly rings back with Rocco’s name flashing across the screen. I snatch it up and answer immediately.

Silence.

“Who is this?” I ask, realizing that this isn’t a random tech glitch. The 8 is behind this. They want me to know they’re listening to my calls.

“What do you want?” I demand, frustration and anger pouring off me like steam.

The line clicks and goes dead. No heavy breathing, no scrambled voice, no cryptic message—just pure frustrating fucking silence.

I hurl my phone across the kitchen, fed up with this bullshit, but then think better of it and jog over to pick it up. It's surprisingly still intact, and I resolve to try to reverse-hack their calls again.

But first, a much-needed shower.

I stroll to the bathroom, stripping my robe and suit off as I go, but stop in my tracks when I enter the room. The giant mirror that stretches across one entire wall behind the double sinks is covered in lipstick kisses.

I whirl around, convinced there's a deranged axe murderer behind me wearing red lipstick, but I'm completely alone.

My first instinct is to get my gun and search the house, but the words on the mirror beckon me. I slowly make my way closer, noting that every pair of lips is the same shade and size. It must be one person, a woman?

The message, written in the same shade of lipstick, sends shivers of fear and shock through me. I'm frozen to the ground, naked and covered in goosebumps, in my bathroom. I read the message again, and my anxiety skyrockets.

Remember when I used to watch you swim laps? I still do.

They were watching me on the rooftop, they were listening to my phone conversations, and they were inside my house. Inside my fucking house!

I spin around and head straight to the bedroom where my gun rests. Throwing on the first items of clothing I pull out, I stick the gun in my holster and jog to the elevator. No phone calls, nothing is safe. Nowhere is safe.

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In the lobby, I question the doorman, probably scaring him half to death with my obvious rage.

“No, sir,” he mumbles again, concerned. “No one went upstairs.”

“Are you sure? Change the penthouse codes again,” I tell him, trying to keep some level of civility in my voice. Why the hell am I paying thousands of dollars a month for a doorman and a penthouse if the security is so easy to breach?

“Of course, sir.”

I watch him log into the system to change the codes, wondering how secure the system actually is. I could probably hack it in five minutes if I tried, but I patiently wait until he produces a new set of codes.

I’m much too aware of my surroundings as I make my way to the office.

Every vehicle that gets too close or stays behind me a little too long is suspicious. Every notification on my phone makes my chest twitch.

I need to get to my secure laptop at the office and figure out who’s behind this.

The lipstick, though—and the message.

“Remember when I used to watch you swim laps?” I repeat softly to myself as I pull into the office parking garage. That could be anyone from high school, any girlfriend or friend I’ve ever had.

The fact that it's someone from my past, someone who knows the ins and outs of my life, is terrifying but also confusing.

Before taking this promotion from Rafael, I had no enemies apart from Lev Rossi. There's not a single person in my past that would want to hurt me to this level.

I was Enzo Cavalli—goofy, fun, golden-retriever nerd with a penchant for big laughs and computer shit.

I slip into my darkened office and lean back in my leather chair. It's much too early for anyone to be here, not even my assistant who wakes up at 4 a.m. every day.

An eerie feeling like I'm being watched floats over me, and I hold my breath, clutching my gun protectively. Minutes of silence pass, like waves of peace washing over me, and I relax.

I'm alone. I'm safe.

The laptop whirs to life as I type in my password, and I dive into my research, checking the cameras first—nothing there. No one seems to get in or out of my apartment. They've looped the footage to hide whoever would have appeared.

Just as I begin to hyperfocus on rows and lines of code, my phone rings and I jump out of my seat. The screen tells me it's an unknown number, and my heart stills.

"Who are you?" I demand, my voice low and menacing. A few seconds of silence tick by, and I'm about to hang up when a small cough comes from the other end.

"It's Lenny."

"Lenny," I breathe, instantly shifting from aggressive I'll-fuck-your-shit-up Enzo to

my real self. “Are you alright?”

“No... yes? No.” She laughs, a frustrated little chuckle. “I don’t know Enzo, am I alright?”

“They’ve been in contact again?”

“The8? Oh yeah, they’re real big fans of me,” she huffs, but fear drowns out her sarcasm. My heart swells with worry, surprising even me.

All I want to do is keep her safe. The urge to protect her is so strong that my own fears dissipate. I can’t contain myself. All I want is to destroy everyone in my path to get to Valentina.

“It’s not safe to talk on the phone,” I say, keeping my voice low. “They tapped my phone, probably yours too.”

“Can we meet somewhere?” she breathes. I know how much of a risk she’s taking, meeting me in secret. But my concerns for her safety outweigh my fear of her father, so I agree.

“I’ll pick you up tonight,” I say, trying to devise a plan. “Meet me at the corner of 23rd and Mavis. When can you come?”

“After I deal with Matilda.” She pauses and curses. “Never mind, we’ll talk about that later. Nine p.m.?”

“Where are we going?” Valentina asks, buckling her seatbelt. I briefly wonder if she’s impressed by the car but then remember that she doesn’t give a shit about these things.

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“Lita’s. It’s a bar on the east side of town that has very secure, very private back rooms,” I answer, keeping my eyes on the road. I know if I look at her, we’ll probably end up dead in a ditch.

Even now, her energy is pulling me in. Her intoxicating, fruity, jasmine scent wraps around my throat like a noose.

“Enzo?” she breathes, and I can’t resist sneaking a peek at her. She’s dressed head to toe in black—black wool coat, black leather pants, shiny black boots, topped off with her glistening black waves.

Fuck. I’m a dead man.

There’s no way I’ll survive round two of getting my heart broken by Valentina.

“Thanks for this,” she finally says when I don’t respond. “We have a lot to talk about.”

“Yep.” I had so many things I wanted to ask her, but now, the only thing on my mind is her.

“I know, I know. You think I’m a major bitch, don’t you?”

"What? No," I say, though my first reaction to learning about my daughter was a storm of anger, frustration, and pain. But I get it. I disappeared without a word, and she thought I was paid off by her father. Why would she try to find me—or tell me about our baby? Would her father even let her?

We drive in silence for a few minutes, mulling our predicament over, until I pull into Lita's parking lot. The snow is coming down hard tonight, making the roads slippery. I grab one of her gloved hands and lead her carefully to the secret back entrance.

The hostess instantly recognizes me and guides us to my favorite room.

"Whiskey, please," I tell her before she scurries away. We settle into the velvet armchairs and face each other awkwardly.

Although Lita's back rooms are comfortable and homey, with fireplaces, plush chairs, and low lighting, a chill lingers in my bones.

"So ..." I start, but she cuts me off right away—frank and direct, as always.

"She's yours, Enzo," she says, not taking her eyes off mine. "About a month after you left, I found out I was pregnant. I had no idea where you went. I couldn't contact you, and... I was pissed as hell."

"I get that," I mumble, nervously rubbing the back of my neck. "Does she know about me?"

"No." She hesitates. "My father thought it would be better if she didn't."

"Of course he did," I growl. The urge to punch Lev Rossi in his stupid, meddling face is so intense that I'm grateful when our bottle of whiskey arrives. I busy myself pouring us both a glass.

"He was just trying to protect me," she whispers, but I know she doesn't fully believe it.

"Doubtful," I scoff, taking a deep gulp of the amber liquid. It burns its way down my

throat, giving me the courage to have this conversation.

“What happened that summer? Why did you disappear like that?” she asks. “You said you didn’t leave because he paid you off, like I thought all these years.”

“Lenny, no,” I whisper, sliding my hand over hers. She stills but doesn’t pull away, so I keep it there, savoring the warmth and feel of her. “Listen, I want to tell you, but it’s going to cause a lot of emotions for you.”

“Just fucking tell me, Enzo. I’ve had plenty of emotions all these years, might as well have the truth too.”

“It’s going to make you hate your father,” I warn, still unsure of the right thing to do. She stares me down, her eyes already shining with anger. But behind the anger, I see determination.

“Fine,” I say. “He tried to offer me three million dollars to disappear, even wrote the check right in front of my eyes. I refused, of course. I never wanted money; I only wanted you. Then he threatened to fire me, and I didn’t give a shit. Then he threatened to kill me...”

“Fuck, I knew it.”

“...but I didn’t give a shit about that either,” I continue, and her eyes turn soft and watery.

“So, what made you finally... give a shit?” she asks, sniffing subtly.

I watch her entire world crashing down—every truth, every protection she had built for herself over the years, crumbles. She really convinced herself that I left for money.

“He threatened to kill you,” I finally say, keeping my eyes trained on my half-empty glass. Silence stretches across the room, but I’m too terrified to look up.

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“What do you mean?” Her cold voice cuts into me, making me feel small and shitty for doing this to her.

I finally raise my eyes to meet hers, and my heart breaks. I can see her insides shattering, disbelief battling with understanding in her mind.

“He knew all I cared about was you,” I explain softly. “To the point where nothing mattered to me but you. He used that to make me disappear.”

“You actually believed he was going to kill me?” she cries, anger flooding her face. “His own daughter?”

“I knew you wouldn’t believe me,” I say, trying to keep the accusation out of my voice. “But I knew what your father was capable of and how his pride and stubbornness engulfed everything else. If he didn’t see you as a suitable heir, he made it clear he’d find another one. That’s partly why I left without saying goodbye.”

Valentina shakes her head. “He’d never—” A flicker of realization crosses her face, but she shakes it away. “My father can be very convincing, especially with his threats, but he’d never harm me for such a petty reason.”

“You are his heir, the head of the Rossi family. A weak man by your side would mean you are weak too. And so is the rest of the family. I couldn’t come to you without making a name for myself—proving to him that I wasn’t a weakling he could toss away.”

She looks at me, her eyes glassy with tears, and opens her mouth—perhaps to deny

what I said again, or maybe to ask if I took over the Romanos just to prove her father wrong.

But she doesn't say anything.

I want to hug her.

I want to stroke her hair and whisper soft, kind words into her ear while she cries on my chest, but I don't. I just sit in my chair and sip my whiskey like a damn coward.

Because I know that if I touch her tonight, I won't be able to let go again.

CHAPTER NINE

Valentina

"Remember when you had to hide under my bed that time the maid busted in on us?" I ask, choking on laughter as I stumble out the back door at Lita's, my head a little woozy from the whiskey.

"I'll do you one better." Enzo chuckles, holding me steady. "Remember when I camped in your treehouse because your dog caught me trying to climb into your window and chased me across the lawn?"

"You're so fucking ridiculous," I say with a grin. He laughs, his dimples deepening and making me melt. The whiskey runs through my blood, making me bold and carefree. "But I love it."

I lean in, pulling him closer by the lapel. His breath ghosts mine, and my insides shimmy and vibrate at the thought of kissing Enzo again after all these years.

“What the...”

I pull away, my face flushed with embarrassment. I’ve misread all of this—he doesn’t want me anymore.

“I’m sorry, Enzo,” I stammer. “I thought?—”

“No, Lenny, look.”

I follow the line of his finger to his car. It’s covered in a fine layer of snow from the storm we encountered driving to Lita’s. But the snow isn’t what he’s pointing at.

I gasp and rush forward, pulling him along with me. Someone’s drawn a heart on the windshield of Enzo’s car.

“What the fuck?” he growls, glancing around.

“E + 8,” I read. “Enzo + 8? Like The8?”

My hand immediately slides to my holster, and I slip my gun out. We cover each other’s backs as we scope out the parking lot, our guns ready, but we’re alone out here.

Enzo checks the backseat and the trunk before we climb inside his ridiculously overpriced car.

“They must have followed us,” I say, glancing nervously out the window.

“Or there’s a tracker on the car,” he counters.

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We pull over so fast that I almost get whiplash. I watch with bated breath as Enzo whips out his phone and logs into some sort of database.

“What is this?”

“I spent a few years compiling and automatically updating every tracking device sold in this state,” he explains as he punches in some code. “Fuck.”

He shoots out of the car, and I rush to follow. We circle the vehicle, desperately trying to find the device. When Enzo tugs a tiny plastic box out of the wheel well, fear seeps into my bones.

Does my car have a tracker? Can they put trackers on people? I never learned about this tech shit.

The drive back to my car, still parked at 23rd and Mavis, is silent. Whatever slightly joyful, nostalgic mood we were in earlier has dissipated like smoke. When we pull up to my car, a bout of shivers hits me and my skin breaks out in goosebumps.

“Let me check yours,” Enzo says, pulling out his phone and studying the database. After he confirms that my vehicle is clear, I move to get out, but something stops me.

“Enzo? I...” I pause, wondering if I’m overstepping.

“What is it?”

His look of concern floods my heart with warmth, and I know that if nothing else, he

still cares for me in some way. So, I lay my cards on the table.

“Alfonso took Matilda back to California tonight to visit my parents for a few days,” I start, playing with my rings nervously. “And I have guards and stuff, but I just...”

“Get to the point, will ya?” he jokes, smiling softly at me. “I’m already dying to say yes.”

“I just don’t want to be alone tonight.”

“Lenny, I thought you’d never ask.” He grins. “Let’s switch cars, though, since yours is clear. I’ll get one of my guys to do a second sweep of mine and deliver it to my place.”

We speed down the darkened streets as my cheeks turn to fire. He knows what I want. This isn’t an innocent sleepover.

In the elevator, I marvel at the beautiful Art Deco design and gold filigree climbing up the mirrors. I’m talking a million miles a minute, trying to fill the empty space between us. Enzo just watches me with a smirk, his gaze moving from my lips to my eyes and back.

I fluster, remembering this is how he always made me feel back then—like I’m all-powerful yet powerless in his presence. Finally, as the elevator dings open on the penthouse floor, Enzo slides his finger across my lips and shushes me.

I take a grateful breath and step into his luxurious apartment. Before I can joke about his standard-issue bachelor pad, he slams me against the wall and crushes his lips to mine. I gasp, overwhelmed and intoxicated by the smell and feel of him on me.

“Wait, Enzo...” I try to protest. My brain speeds through a million excuses I could

use to nip this in the bud, but I come up short.

I don't want this to stop. I need this—need him.

His ragged breathing on my neck brings me back to the present. He's stopped kissing me, but holds me pressed against the wall with his body.

"Tell me what you want," he begs, and I know I'm driving him wild, sending mixed signals.

What do I want? I want him, every single inch of him. I want his taste, his mouth, his hands—I want to feel it all again.

"You," I whisper. "I want you."

He groans and slips his ice-cold hands under my sweater, sliding them up slowly as he kisses his way down my neck.

My skin breaks out in goosebumps at the frigid touch and sends shivers down my body. His hot mouth quickly replaces his fingers, trailing across my ribs and warming up the frozen parts of me.

This combination of cold and hot sends my body into a flurry of excitement and confusion. I tug at his jacket, quickly stripping off his shirt. For a second, I just stare at the beauty in front of me—Enzo, with those gorgeous watercolor tattoos splashed across his chest and arms, on his knees.

He shoots me a wicked smile that knocks the air out of my lungs. My pants disappear in seconds and then he's parting my legs, looking like he's desperate to taste me.

"You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this," he moans. "How many times

I fantasized about this.”

I eye the elevator, realizing it could open at any time, and I’ll be caught here with my pants down. Pleasure quickly replaces panic as Enzo’s tongue slips between my legs.

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I moan, pressing myself flush against the wall. He slides his hands under my ass, hoisting my knees over his shoulders, and I'm suddenly suspended in the air, legs wide open.

"Fuck," I breathe out as my eyes flutter closed. "Please, Enzo."

I watch our reflection in the floor-to-ceiling hallway mirror with fascination and lust, just like the last time I touched him.

Enzo's back muscles ripple with the exertion of holding me up while he buries his face between my legs. I trail my fingers through his silky sun-kissed hair and close my eyes, savoring the feeling of him.

His tongue swirls and licks, exploring every single inch of me. When he settles into a pattern and rhythm I like, I lose control.

"That's it." I find my voice again and use it to beg for what I want. "Right there, don't stop."

My orgasm hits me so hard I nearly topple us both onto the floor, but Enzo hangs on for dear life, letting me go wild. He moans through my orgasm, the vibrations on my pussy sending me straight into a state of pure bliss.

When I slump in his arms, spent and satisfied, he grins up at me and licks his lips.

"It's been too long since I've tasted heaven," he says with mock sadness. I give him a playful shove and hop down to the floor.

“So cheesy, Enzo,” I tease. “Cheesecake Factory-level cheesy.”

He bounces up, shoving me against the wall again, and dips his tongue into my mouth. I can taste myself on his lips, and my body instantly begs for round two.

His hard length presses into me through his pants, and I curl my fingers around it. He moans, throwing his head back.

“Come,” I purr, leading him down the hallway to what I assume is the bedroom, still holding onto his pulsing cock. “Time for something a little more respectable.”

“Missionary with the lights off?” he groans, dutifully following me.

“Me riding you properly,” I snort, letting the giggles come out in full force. “In bed, like a lady.”

It feels so good, so safe, to be with him again. That’s something I’ve never been able to achieve with anyone else—not that I dated much after Enzo.

Any casual hookups I had over the last couple of years were fraught with anxiety and feelings of discomfort, but not with Enzo.

With him, I can completely be my stupid, silly self.

He falls onto the bed, jostling himself out of his pants, and beckons me with one finger, winking like a sleazy car salesman.

“Cheesy,” I remind him, climbing onto the bed to join him. “I thought you’d have grown out of this by now.”

“You do something to me, baby,” he whispers into my neck, nipping the delicate skin

there. “Be a good girl now and sit that beautiful pussy on my face, will you?”

And just like that, he goes from cheesy and goofy to melt-your-guts sexy.

“I’ll do you one better,” I murmur, licking my lips and sliding the length of him into my waiting mouth.

I wake not with a start, but with a low moan. My hips are sore, my thighs burn, and for a second, I have no idea where I am.

When I hear Enzo’s soft snores beside me, I squeeze my eyes shut, remembering everything that happened last night.

Fuck. It was so good, but probably so bad for me and my stupid, tender heart.

Even though we hashed everything out last night, I need to play it cool. I can’t have him ripped out of my life after I’ve placed all my chips on him again—it’ll destroy me.

Turmoil swirls around my mind, and I’m trapped in his bed, wondering if I should stay or go.

On one hand, this is everything I’ve been dreaming of since he disappeared. On the other? We’re different people now, with bigger responsibilities, more liabilities, and a child who needs constant protection from the world she’s growing up in.

I make up my mind and carefully slip out of bed.

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Glancing around the bedroom, I don't see my clothes anywhere, but quickly remember how Enzo stripped me in the hallway last night. I steal one last glimpse of his peaceful sleeping face and make my way out of the bedroom.

Tiptoeing down the hallway, I spot my clothes scattered around and blush at the memory. My blush is quickly replaced by horror when a flash of red catches my attention.

There, right where Enzo pressed me up against the wall last night, is a coat of fresh red spray paint. I watch a single drip slowly slide down the wall and onto the shiny marble tiles.

I'm always watching, Enzo.

I scream—the type of blood-curdling scream you hear in horror movies. Enzo flies out of the bedroom and down the hall, sliding to a stop beside me.

We stand together, completely nude, staring at the large red letters.

“What the fuck...”

“They were here, Enzo,” I whisper, trying not to vomit. The nausea rises inside me, but I force it back down. “Watching us.”

My phone pings from somewhere in my pile of clothes, and I crouch down to find it. Desperately, I rifle through my pockets and finally pull it out—another message from a blocked number.

You too, Valentina.

CHAPTER TEN

Enzo

“Nowhere is safe, don’t you understand?” Valentina huffs at me across the kitchen island. “These people were in my house, in your house, in my car... Enzo, this is bigger than the mafia.”

“I don’t care,” I say, pacing the length of the kitchen in my bathrobe. I have been dreaming about this for so long that even the threat of The8 seems insignificant compared to her looking so delicious perched on the island in a matching robe, sipping her coffee.

We cleared the apartment earlier, making sure we were alone in here, and even then, I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“The smartest thing to do would be to stay in the city,” she starts to reason, “so we can work together and figure out who the hell is behind this. Running won’t make a difference now.”

“Correction,” I say, stabbing a finger in her direction. “You run away; I figure this out.”

“Why the hell would I do that?”

“Because this is my job!”

“It’s my job, too!” she cries, hopping down from the stool and coming to circle her arms around my waist.

She presses her face against my chest, and all the frustration drains out of my bones. I stroke her head gently, debating what to do next.

“I know,” I finally admit. “I’m just worried about you... and Matilda. If anything was to happen to either of you, I don’t know what I’d do.”

“We’ll figure this out together,” she responds firmly, glancing up at me. “Anyway, it sounds like a jealous stalker or something... I mean, the lipstick, the messages. I don’t actually think any harm will come of this.”

“Why are you being so flippant about this all of a sudden?”

“Because it seems like a tantrum of a jealous woman,” she scoffs, studying her nails.

“You think getting into your completely locked-down compound without anyone noticing is just the work of a jealous ex?” I ask, the anger flaring up again. “I’d like to see what you think a professional mafia job would look like.”

“And you will,” she huffs, pushing away from me. “When I find this fucker, and destroy them, you’ll see how a professional handles it.”

“Are you saying I’m not being professional?” I ask, following her to the bedroom. She strips off her robe and starts throwing her clothes on haphazardly.

“Oh, run away, you delicate little female,” she mocks, imitating my voice. “You can’t handle the big bad baddie.”

“Lenny, that’s not what?—”

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“No! I know what you meant,” she growls, whirling around to face me. Her cheeks are flushed with anger, but her eyes are watery, ready to spill at any moment. “Everyone, and I mean everyone, thinks I’m incapable of handling anything. But it’s my fault. I keep tiptoeing around everyone. I’ll fucking show all of you.

She storms down the hallway, calling the elevator repeatedly. I throw my hands up in frustration and run after her, grabbing her elbow just as she steps into the elevator.

“Lenny, stop,” I say softly, biting back the urge to explode on her or make a joke out of this. “Please, I’m just worried for your safety...”

“Worry about your own damn safety, Enzo,” she growls, shrugging out of my grasp and closing the doors. I stand in front of the elevator for far too long, staring dumbly at the numbers going down.

That’s not how I wanted it to go at all.

I spend the next few days practically locked in my office, my eyes glued to my laptop. Valentina refuses to speak to me, but I call every day, hoping she’ll change her mind.

Why can’t she just listen to me for once in her life?

My phone rings and I snatch it up, convinced it’s her. A series of beeps and clicks come through the speaker, and my first instinct is to hurl my phone across the room, but an idea strikes me.

I put the phone on speaker and place it gently on my desk so as not to disconnect the call. My fingers fly across the keyboard as I hack into every cell tower in the city.

Please don't disconnect, please don't disconnect—not until I find you.

I watch the screen impatiently as it runs through every connection and signal in the city. Finally, the screen flashes with the located connection, and I have an address.

457 West Street, I found you.

I disconnect the call and burst into the main office. I need to call for backup, but I don't want to tip these fuckers off if they've tapped my phone.

When I see a couple of my associates lounging, I gather the group and get them up to speed. We pile into a couple of unmarked cars we keep in our garage and head to the address.

My head buzzes with excitement. My body is so jittery I nearly steer us off the road, much to the protests of my guys in the backseat, but we make it to the location in one piece.

It's a shitty low-rise apartment building on the east side of town—all crumbling brick, bars on the windows, and burned-out bulbs. I send a small team to case the place and position themselves at each exit.

“I don't know which unit it is exactly,” I whisper breathlessly. “But it looks like there are only two occupied at the moment.”

I scroll through the information I've pulled up on my phone after I hacked the building owner's emails.

“Basement unit and one on the second floor,” I continue. “You two take the second floor, Marco and I take the basement.”

We slink out of the car in the cover of darkness and make our way into the building. Marco, one of the younger cousins, tails me, watching my back as we head to the basement unit.

This could be nothing, or it could finally be the end of this annoying little problem.

I hold my breath and knock, making sure to block the peephole with my finger. Faint shuffling sounds come from the other side of the door, but it doesn't open. Marco meets my eyes, and I nod. Without hesitation, he aims and shoots the lock off.

Everything happens in hyper speed. The door flies open and a figure emerges, moving at full speed toward me.

He tackles me to the ground, knocking the air out of my lungs, and I helplessly watch my gun slip away, sliding across the dirty tile floor. The cold tip of a blade presses against my temple as I attempt to throw the guy off me.

Luckily, he's not expecting two of us. Marco emerges from the shadows and kicks him off me, shooting him expertly in the shoulder—enough to disarm, but not enough to kill.

I catch my breath as the guy rolls around the floor, moaning and clutching his shoulder.

Heavy footsteps pound down the stairs, and I'm surrounded by my guys, guns drawn.

“He's disarmed,” I say, finally getting my breath under control. “Throw him in the trunk.”

While they deal with the fucker who tackled me, I slip into the apartment. Just as I thought. He's the hacker.

I take in the rows and rows of screens and laptops propped on a large meeting desk. The apartment is bare except for surveillance and tech equipment.

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But who the hell is this guy?

“Marco,” I call, as he storms into the apartment, ready to save my ass again. “Pull all this equipment, especially the laptops. I need to see what he’s got on me.”

Twenty minutes later, the guy’s bound and tied to a chair in our torture chamber, as Rafael so lovingly calls it. Really, it’s just a soundproof basement in our warehouse, but it sure feels like a torture chamber sometimes.

I watch him through the one-way mirror as I roll up my shirtsleeves.

“Never seen him before,” I comment when Uncle Joe joins me. Someone must have called him and pulled him out of bed for this. “Have you?”

“Looks too skinny and clean-cut to be mafia.” He smirks, squinting at the guy.

He’s right. This guy looks like he could have been one of my classmates at Yale.

“Well, let’s see if he talks,” I growl, throwing the door open and stomping inside. He doesn’t even look at me, choosing to keep his gaze trained on the bloody floor instead.

I pull in a deep breath and step into my alter-ego—Enzo “Golden Ace” Cavalli.

“What’s your name?” I try first, circling him slowly.

He’s quiet, as I expected. I grip his shoulder, gouging my finger into the bullet

wound, and he screams in agony, writhing on the wooden chair.

“What about now? Feel like sharing your name?” I ask, grinning in his face like a maniac. “Or should I try to pull it out of you again?”

“Fuck,” he moans, low and animalistic as my finger slides out of the bullet hole. “Arkadiy.”

I note the accent and the foreign-sounding name. Joe meets my eyes across the room, noticing it as well.

“Full name,” I command. When he doesn’t speak, I reach for his shoulder again.

“Arkadiy Chernekov,” he spits at me.

“And what the hell do you want from me?”

“I don’t know you,” he grinds out.

“I think you do, Mr. Chernekov,” I drawl, placing myself casually in the chair across from him. “You’ve been calling me, sending me strange messages, breaking into my house, haven’t you?”

He smirks, his eyes filled with disgust and a glimmer of fear.

“I’ll give you a choice today.” I grin, leaning over to get in his face. “If you tell me what the hell you want, I’ll give you mercy and put a bullet between your eyes right now, nice and quick.”

“And if I don’t?” he growls at me.

“Well, then we’ll have to do it the old-fashioned way.” I snap my fingers.

Marco takes his cue and walks over to the empty metal pool in the corner of the basement. He cranks the cold water and starts filling it up nonchalantly. A few of the cousins walk in, holding bags of ice.

He stares as they dump the ice into the pool, a mixture of fascination and fear in his eyes.

“So, what’ll it be?” I ask, affectionately slapping his knee with my hand as if we’re old friends.

“Like I said,” he grinds out through gritted teeth, “I don’t know you. I don’t give a fuck about you. I’m just doing a job.”

“Well, well, well, we’re getting somewhere now,” I exclaim, hopping up from the chair. I circle around him, leaning close to his ear. My finger slides gently across his shoulder, hovering near the bullet wound again, and he twitches wildly with fear. “Who do you work for?”

“The8.”

“No shit, asshole,” I growl into his ear. “Who is The8?”

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He laughs—a deep, rich laugh that grates on my nerves. I winch his shoulder back, putting extra pressure into the wound, and his laughter turns to screams. When I pull back, he laughs again, and it fuels my rage, fanning the flames of anger in my gut.

“Marco, the kneecap,” I command.

Marco looks up from his post near the waterboarding station and shoots out the guy’s kneecap without a second thought. Chernekov screams, trying to rock back and forth, trying to straighten out his fucked-up leg, but he’s tied up.

“Care to tell me now?”

“Enzo Cavalli,” he sneers, laughing through the pain. “The most brilliant guy at Yale. The best hacker in the world... I thought you’d be smarter than this.”

His refusal to reveal anything is getting to me. Usually, I’m much calmer and cooler in the face of this type of bravado, but tonight, I’m too frustrated.

And these attacks are too close to my heart.

This isn’t a fire in my warehouse. This is a direct threat to my child and Lenny.

“She said you’d figure it out,” he scoffs, groaning in pain. “But you’re adurak, just as I thought.”

The fact that he called me a dumbass in Russian doesn’t get past me, but I’m more focused on the she part of his little speech.

“Who is she?”

“Eight,” he cries, hysteria starting to set in. “She’s eight, you fucking fool... and she’s going to get your little girlfriend, and your daughter, too.”

I shoot him in the head without a second thought. Joe groans and curses my name across the room, but I don’t give a shit. This fucker deserved to die.

“Enzo,” Joe scolds. “Too soon. He could have told us more.”

“I know his type,” I grunt, wiping my bloody hand on the dead man’s shirt. “He doesn’t care about his own life. He wouldn’t have helped.”

I stroll out of the room, reflecting on what I just learned. The Russian name threw me off. That the person behind this is a woman threw me off even more.

“She’s eight,” replays on a loop in my head.

There has to be significance behind that number, and I need to figure it out before Lenny and Matilda get caught in the crossfire.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Valentina

“Good girl, tell me what you want,” he commands. “I need to hear it.”

I moan, low and desperate, pulling him closer.

“No, Lenny, you have to tell me what you want,” he whispers, nipping my ear lobe. His fingers gently stroke my inner thigh, so close yet much too far. “Learn to speak

for yourself.”

“You,” I groan. “I only want you.”

I wake with a start, my breath coming in fast and hot. My body is drenched in sweat, even though it’s a bitterly cold morning.

I’m uncomfortably turned on, I realize, as I slide my hands down my body. Gently, I stroke my rock-hard nipples, willing them to calm down.

I need to stop having these dreams about him.

Although they’re not just dreams. Ever since the night at his apartment, long-forgotten memories have been resurfacing as dreams, haunting my soul. Every morning, I wake up either aggressively horny or completely despondent.

I roll over and check my phone—five missed calls from Enzo and one from my father. Two people that have a strong pull on me, in very different ways. Deciding I don’t want to speak to either of them, I force myself out of my warm bed and into the shower.

When I stumble down the stairs in search of coffee, Uncle Luigi is already there. He slides a full, steaming cup toward me and raises his eyebrows.

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“You look like hell.”

“Thanks,” I reply bitterly, taking a sip. “Been trying out a new skincare routine.”

“Go back to the old one.” He smirks, looking back down at his phone. “Still pining over that boy?”

“Luigi, I’m not a fourteen-year-old girl in a YA novel, and he’s not a boy.” I sigh.

“So you are pining, then?”

Well, he’s got me there. I can’t stop thinking about Enzo, and it’s even harder to push him out of my mind when he calls me twenty times a day—not that I ever pick up.

“Any fun new surprises from The8?” I ask, changing the subject. Luigi puts his phone down, rubbing his temples.

“They’re creative, I’ll give them that,” he finally says. “Creative and so very frustrating.”

“What happened now?”

“Come on,” he says, pulling me up from the table. “You need to see it to believe it.”

We head through the house to the front door, which we rarely use. I’m fully expecting it to be spray-painted again, high-school-prank style.

At first, I don't see. The front lawn is covered in a thick layer of pristine, glistening snow, tall pines line the fence, the driveway is full of blood—wait, what?

“What the hell ...”

I hop down from the porch and make my way to the stone driveway in front of the garage. Red liquid covers the area in large splatters, but when I spot the clothes, my heart fills with dread.

My black wool jacket, leather pants, sweater, and boots are laid out on the driveway in the shape of a body, covered in red liquid.

The outfit I wore the night I ended up in Enzo's bed.

I stare, open-mouthed and in shock, at the gruesome scene. The message is clear—these people are out to kill me.

“And you didn't tell me about this?”

“I mean, how do you explain this?” Luigi gestures to the mess. “I'm still trying to wrap my brain around it myself. Imagine the shock I had driving up here this morning. And there was no trace of someone breaking in.”

“This is fucked up.”

“I think it's time we fill your father in, Valentina,” he pleads, eyeing me. “I don't like where this is heading.”

“No!” I whirl around, pointing my finger at his chest. “You said we were going to lay low and?—”

“And see how it goes, yes, but it’s not going well, is it?”

“I need to talk to Enzo,” I say absent-mindedly, heading back to the house. This is far more serious than I thought.

“Valentina, we talked about this,” Luigi warns, tailing me. I stop in my tracks as my dream from this morning pops into my head again—not the sexy part, the motivational part.

Learn to speak for yourself.

Fine, Enzo, I will.

“Luigi, enough of this nonsense.” I spin around and stare him down. “I’m a full-grown adult capable of making my own decisions. Nothing you or my father say or do will convince me this is the wrong move. Enzo’s in this mess as well. They’re targeting him, too. We’ve tried to find out who’s behind this but have come up empty.”

Luigi watches me quietly, deeply considering my words. Unlike my father, at least Uncle Luigi has some sense of logic and reason.

“The best thing we can do right now is work with him,” I continue, desperate to be heard. “My father isn’t going to solve this by locking me away in a beach house like I’m Malibu Barbie.”

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When he doesn't respond, I storm into the house in search of my phone. I dial Enzo's number, and it goes straight to voicemail.

I try again and again, then remember the sun's barely risen yet, and normal people might still be sleeping.

"Tiny," Uncle Luigi calls, coming up behind me. "I'm with you on this."

"You are?" I ask, surprised.

"Yes. Cavalli might be the only way out of this, although your father will hate it. I'll talk to Lev and explain everything, but you might have to sit down with him one-on-one and finally address this issue soon."

I nod, knowing that he's right but too grateful to say anything else. My phone rings and Enzo's name flashes across the screen.

"Enzo?" I gasp, answering immediately. Mussorgsky's somber tones float through the speaker, and I scream in frustration.

I'm really starting to hate that fucking song.

I hang up and call right back, but a series of beeps and clicks are the only thing I hear. Okay, okay, I get it. You little bitches tapped my phone.

"I need to go see him," I finally tell Luigi, shoving my useless phone in my pocket. "I'll catch him at his office after I meet with the designers at the complex."

“Be careful, will you?” he warns, giving me a light kiss on the forehead.

With a nod, I run upstairs to get ready for my meeting with the designer, but not before I shed a few tears at Luigi’s faith in me.

My meeting with the designers takes so long that the sky is already darkening as I step out of the complex. I scan the parking lot quickly—my new habit—and jog to my car.

Wanting to avoid Enzo’s apartment and the memories it holds, I speed through the hazy twilight to his office.

After getting lost a few times in the maze of one-way streets around his building, I finally find the parking garage entrance and head into the lobby. The clerk lets me know the Romano offices are on the top floor, and I sign in using a fake name, just in case.

My fingers drum restlessly against my thigh during the endless elevator ride to the top. I have no idea how he’s going to react to seeing me again.

He’s been calling every day, but I did storm out of his apartment like an asshole when he was just trying to help. I lean into the mirror, checking my lip gloss and fluffing up my hair a bit.

The doors finally slide open, and I slip into a cozy little waiting room. A large empty desk sits against one wall while comfortable sofas line the other.

Not knowing what to do, I sink into one of the sofas and hope someone emerges from the huge, imposing doors behind the desk.

I’m too nervous to even touch my phone, so I busy myself with inspecting every inch

of the reception area. It's bland, very beige, and not what I'd ever imagined for Enzo, but I guess it's just a front anyway. Finally, a woman bustles out.

"Oh, did you have an appointment?" she asks, tugging her glasses down her nose.

"No, I just need to see Enzo," I answer, peeling myself off the sofa. "Is he here?"

"Afraid you just missed him," she says. "Would you like to leave a message?"

"No, that's fine." I sigh, heading to the elevator. This was a stupid idea—a waste of time, really.

I ride the elevator down feeling less nervous and more exhausted. I trudge through the parking garage, dialing Enzo once more, hoping it'll connect. The clicks and beeps come through the line again, and I groan, shoving my phone into my purse.

A flash of red catches my attention, and I squint into the distance, trying to figure out what I'm seeing. A dark figure with long, shiny red hair stands near my car, seemingly unaware of my presence.

"Hey!" I call, confused. "What are you doing?"

The woman turns her head slightly—not enough for me to catch a good look at her face—and bolts. I take off after her, but come to a standstill when I reach my car.

She fucking slashed my tires! All four of them!

"Enough of this shit," I growl, sprinting after the figure.

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She seems to know the parking garage better than I, disappearing into shadows only to emerge farther away in a different lane. I try my best to keep up, yelling at her to stop the entire time.

When I finally burst outside, after a treacherous sprint up the steep drive, she seems to have disappeared into thin air. I lean down, hands on my knees, gasping for air.

Finally, when I've gotten some oxygen back in my lungs, I glance around wildly, trying to find that bright red hair.

A flash to my left catches my eye, and I watch her round the corner of the block, disappearing again. Not knowing what else to do, I break into a run after her.

I wish I had chosen more sensible footwear this morning, but my stupid, traitorous ego wanted to look good for Enzo. I slip and slide down the street in spiky stiletto boots, praying I can catch up with her.

I don't know how I know it, but deep in my core, I'm convinced this is the woman behind everything.

She's The8.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Enzo

"There has to be a connection with the Russian guy, right?" Uncle Joe asks, leaning

forward to check his notes again.

“Maybe,” I say, rubbing my bloodshot eyes. “But it could be nothing. He might just be a hired hacker who has nothing to do with The8.”

“I don’t know, Enzo. He seemed pretty familiar with her.”

“Her,” I repeat, puzzling it over in my mind again. “That’s the part that gets me. Let’s go through the families again. Maybe we missed something.”

Joe and I spend the next few minutes running through every mafia family in the country, trying to find the ones headed by women. There aren’t many, honestly—the Rossis are one of the few, but we instantly cross them off the list.

“Looking at this,” Joe squints at our list, his brow etched with frustration, “I can’t imagine any of them doing this. Maybe it’s an international family?”

“That would take ages to cross-reference,” I groan, pushing away from the dining room table.

A glass of whiskey sounds really nice right about now, so I go explore Joe’s fancy bar. We’ve been holed up in his dining room for hours, trying to make sense of things.

Even my office doesn’t feel safe anymore.

“Should I just stand naked and unarmed in the middle of downtown and offer myself up to these mysterious assholes?” I joke once the first sip hits my tongue.

Joe snorts, shaking his head at me, but doesn’t rule it out. I glance at the CSI-style board we set up again. It contains every piece of evidence, every clue, and a complete

timeline of events, starting with the warehouse fire.

Nothing makes sense, except what everyone has been suggesting recently—a jealous ex or a crazy stalker.

“Let’s go through your list of exes again,” Joe suggests, pushing the laptop away with annoyance.

“There really haven’t been that many.”

I head back to the desk with my glass and slide a notepad over to Joe. A list of exes, think, think. But all I see is Valentina’s face, angry and disappointed, storming out of my penthouse.

“Enzo?”

“Okay, okay.” I think, rubbing my temples. “Marley Lowenstein, sophomore year of high school. She was a cheerleader, straight-A student, now married with three kids, still living in that tiny-ass town.”

Joe scratches her name down and promptly crosses it out. “Who else?”

“Sabrina Shue,” I continue. “Senior year... she was a big pothead then, no idea what she’s up to now.”

“Let’s look into her.” Joe scrawls her name down on the list and adds a big star. “What about college?”

“I didn’t really date much in college,” I admit. “I was too focused on my classes. I did have a little summer fling with Alexandra Tavinsky, she was...”

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My phone rings, cutting me off—the caller ID shows “The Gilded Top.” Weird. Who the hell would call me from that divey place?

“Yeah?”

“Enzo, it’s me.” Lenny’s exhausted voice pours through the speakers. “I need to see you... now, preferably.”

“Lenny?” I gasp, standing up immediately and feeling around for my keys. “What happened? Are you okay or this your fucked up way of asking me out for drinks?”

“Shut up,” she groans. “I just spent the last hour running through the streets of midtown in stilettos, chasing The8. Get your ass down here.”

The call clicks off, and I stare at my phone, wide-eyed and confused.

“Well?” Joe grumbles. “What is it?”

“She said she was tailing The8,” I say slowly, not entirely sure I understood correctly. “I need to go see her.”

“Need backup?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Keep going through the laptops. Call me if anything pops up.”

The Gilded Top is a tiny bar on the west side of town, known for excellent whiskey

and live jazz. When I stroll inside, I immediately spot Valentina tucked away at one of the back tables. She's fully engrossed in the music, her chin perched on her hand, tapping her foot to the beat.

I take a moment to study her—the finely chiseled features, long flowing hair, a dreamy look in her eyes. For a second, she looks like the carefree girl she was when I met her, and I fall in love all over again.

As if she feels my gaze on her, she turns, and our eyes meet.

Pure relief washes over her face, and I hurry to the table, dropping into the chair beside her. Her hand sneaks into mine, and I savor the moment, accepting this tiny action as an apology for storming out of my apartment.

We watch the band for a few minutes, pretending we're here for pleasure, not business. When the waitress arrives, producing a nice bottle of Scotch, Valentina sighs and pours us each a glass.

“What happened?” I ask, dying to know the details so I can add them to the timeline in my mind.

“I went to your office,” she croaks, fear and exhaustion making her hoarse. She gulps down some Scotch and clears her throat. “Your assistant said you'd just left, so I decided to check your penthouse. When I got to the parking garage, there was a woman near my car.”

“What did she look like?”

“I didn't get a good look at her face,” she says. “But she had fiery red hair, that I know for sure.”

Red hair? I try to scan my mind for any mafia families headed by red-haired women and come up short.

“She bolted, and I ran after her.” She laughs, shaking her head. “It was quite a scene, slipping and sliding down the icy streets in these fucking shoes.”

She sticks out her foot, showing me the shoes in question. I’m already pissed at her willingness to put herself in such a dangerous situation. The impractical boots fan the flames of anger even more.

“Lenny—”

“Listen,” she stops me, her tone hard and unyielding. “She slashed my fucking tires and ran away. I’m sick of this shit. You want to know what I found in my driveway this morning?”

When she describes the bloody mess she stumbled onto on her own damn property, my blood runs cold as rage boils in my stomach. This bitch is going down. No matter what, I’ll find her.

“So, what happened?” I ask, glancing around. “I don’t see a bound and gagged redhead anywhere. I’m assuming you lost her?”

“She managed to slip into a waiting car.” She nods. “No plates, no distinguishing features other than it was a generic-looking sedan. That was right after I chased her down the alley next to this place. I was so fucking demoralized, I just stumbled inside, called you, and ordered a double shot of vodka.”

“You can’t place her, can you?” I ask hopefully. “She’s not someone tied to you in some way? Maybe from out West or one of the cities you’ve been expanding in recently?”

“No, Enzo.” She shakes her head sadly. “I wish it was that easy, but I’m almost certain this is about you.”

When I protest, she shushes me.

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“Look at all the facts. The lipstick notes on your door, the threatening notes to me only... why hasn’t she ever threatened to kill you?”

“I’m not sure.” I shrug, considering her question. I never thought about it, but it’s true—Valentina’s threats are always directly violent, whereas mine are more... flirtatious.

“Because she wants you!” Valentina practically yells.

People around us throw dirty looks over their shoulders, and we slink lower in our seats. A couple next to us perks up, interested in what looks like a lovers’ quarrel.

“She wants you,” she whispers again, “and she wants me out of the picture.”

“All of this started when you showed up in town,” I say slowly, putting the pieces together.

The woman next to us leans over, almost as if magnetically pulled toward our gossip. Her husband sneaks a few glances, equally as invested.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say, motioning subtly to the couple next to us. Valentina nods, and we head out the door.

Snow flurries swirl around, blinding us as we pick our way through the drifts to my car. We drive in silence, and Valentina doesn’t even ask where we’re going, as if The8 can hear our conversations.

Fuck, maybe they can. I have no idea what we're up against.

We pull up to a stately townhouse on the west side, and I slip my car into the reserved parking spot. The house is dark except for a single light in the kitchen. I breathe a sigh of relief that Rafael keeps this place staffed all year round.

"What is this place?" she questions, marveling at the ornate architecture and modern, designer updates.

"My friend's house," I say, pulling her up the stairs. The feeling of being watched is making me paranoid, and all I want to do is get inside as quickly as possible. "I've been avoiding the penthouse lately, but I didn't think you'd want to sleep on the sofa in my office."

I punch in the security code and we troop inside, shaking snow off our hair and jackets. Rafael's butler breezes into the entryway, completely unsurprised at our arrival.

"Mr. Cavalli," he announces. "Pleasure to see you, sir. Will you be staying the night?"

"Yeah, Roger, we will." I gesture to Valentina. "This is Valentina Rossi."

"Ms. Rossi, welcome," he drones, stooping slightly to show respect. "Any dinner tonight?"

"No, thank you," Valentina chimes in. "We're pretty exhausted."

After we assure Roger we're set for the night, I guide Lenny up the stairs to Rafael's guest room. As much as he claims this house is now equally mine, I feel weird sleeping in the main bedroom.

The guest room is equally luxurious and comfortable, with a private bathroom and a large king-size bed. As soon as we're in the room, Valentina flops onto the bed and wiggles her feet at me.

"Please?" she begs, putting on a puppy-dog face. I chuckle and strip off her stupid, inappropriate boots as she moans with pleasure and wiggles her toes. "Much better, thank you."

"You're welcome," I joke, bowing down somberly. "Your wish is my command. I live to serve you."

"Stop flirting with me, Enzo," she mutters, but a smile plays at the corner of her mouth.

"So straight to the sex, then?"

"Shut up," she groans, drawing out the words. "Can you be serious for a second, like ever? There's a crazed redhead on the loose trying to kill me and marry you."

"Well, that rules out the ex-girlfriend theory," I say, flopping down beside her.

"Why's that?"

"I've definitely never dated a redhead," I laugh. "Pretty sure I would remember that."

We lay side-by-side, staring up at the vaulted ceiling. Her hand sneaks into mine, and I give it a couple of good squeezes. We may have been brought back together under the shittiest circumstances, but I regret nothing.

The8 can destroy my entire life if it means having Valentina in it again.

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“You know that men are pretty oblivious when it comes to things like that,” she finally says. “What if she wasn’t a redhead when you were dating her?”

“I guess that’s possible,” I agree. “But honestly? I can’t imagine a woman being so obsessed with me that she’d pull all these stunts to get me back years later.”

“I would have,” she says softly, laughing to cover her awkwardness. She leans up on her elbow and gives me the softest brush of a kiss. Her hair hangs over us like a canopy, shielding us from the big, bad world.

“But you didn’t,” I whisper, brushing her lower lip with my thumb.

“And I live with that every day.”

Tears slide down her face, and she brushes them away angrily, frustrated at having shown emotion.

I know what her father is like. I know what that entire family is like. She’s had to keep it locked up for years, festering inside her, making her bitter.

“It’s okay, Lenny,” I whisper gently, pulling her down to my chest. “You can cry.”

She fights it for a few seconds, assuring me she’s fine, but eventually gives in. Her sobs echo through the silent room, and my heart breaks for her.

Our “breakup” was difficult for me too, but at least I knew why I left—she’s been living in the dark for almost six years.

“I’m sorry,” she finally groans, wiping her glistening face. “It’s just so much happening at once... you, and then The8, and I’m so worried about Matilda... and just overwhelmed.”

“I get it, Lenny,” I soothe, stroking her hair. “Besides, tears turn me on.”

I wiggle my eyebrows at her, and she snorts out a laugh, punching me in the shoulder.

“Stop,” she wails, flopping back down on the bed.

“Something about a father who never let me cry,” I start philosophizing. “Daddy issues, Freud would say. Or is it mommy issues?”

“Enzo, I swear to?—”

I don’t let her finish that sentence. With one smooth move, I lean over and capture her lips, soft at first. When she moans and grinds her hips into me, I let go of all control.

I’ve waited six years to see her again. No redhead, bastard mafia father, or whatever else the universe throws at us will take her from me now.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Valentina

There’s no better feeling in the world than being pinned under Enzo Cavalli’s strong, hard body as he trails kisses down your neck. Okay, no wait, maybe when he does that tongue thing to my nipples.

I melt as he runs his hands and lips over every inch of my body. With the stress of

everything going on, this deep feeling of relaxation—of every trouble floating away—is so tempting.

Just as Enzo's tongue finally snakes between my thighs, a wave of guilt hits me, and I sit up.

Confused, he moves aside and peers into my face, his breathing ragged. I study his face, so familiar yet so foreign to me now.

What am I even doing right now? Crazy people are threatening my life, and my daughter's, and I'm here trying to get kicks with my ex?

"Enzo, I can't," I whisper, feeling even more guilty because I can, and I want to, but something's blocking me.

"Lenny, it's okay," he whispers, sitting up and pulling me against his chest. I nuzzle into it, feeling his heart hammer like he's running a marathon. "You had a rough day. I shouldn't have started this. I'm sorry."

Something about his genuine care and concern lights a fire under me, and I glance up, angry. "Don't you dare apologize, Enzo Cavalli!"

"Wait, what?" he sits up, confused. "I'm sorry? Or I'm not sorry? I mean, I am sorry, genuinely?—"

"Shut up," I cry, straddling him and crushing his lips in a deranged, passionate kiss. When I pull away, Enzo looks like he might make a run for it.

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I'm acting so crazy. What's wrong with me?

"You seem... confused," he finally comments, trying to keep his voice neutral.

"I'm not confused, you buffoon!"

"Okay, okay, calm down." He smirks, trying to hide his laughter. "No need for such harsh names."

"I want you," I try again, wondering why my brain is trying to sabotage me. "All I ever wanted was you."

"Great." He laughs, giving me two thumbs up. "I think that's what I was trying to get across with the kissing and the going down on you, but maybe it got lost in translation?"

"Ugh," I groan, flopping back onto the bed. "My mind is in a tailspin."

"Tell me what you need," he says gently, trying not to pressure me.

"I think I need..."

"Yes?"

"I need..."

"Say it, Lenny," he whispers, his eyes growing dark and dangerous. A shiver runs

through me and my pussy involuntarily clenches, sending tingles throughout my nervous system.

“I want to be fucked hard and fast,” I whisper softly. “No more emotions tonight.”

“Hmmm, I didn’t quite hear you.” He laughs, grinning like the devil. “Can you repeat that louder?”

“Enzo,” I whine, but he doesn’t budge. “I want to be fucked hard and fast!”

He cracks up laughing and heat creeps into my face, knowing I just screamed that loud enough for the entire house to hear.

“Okay, okay, quiet down. We don’t need everyone to hear.”

“You’re going to be the death of me, you know that?” I pout, turning away from him and his merciless teasing.

“You wouldn’t believe how many people tell me that,” he whispers, suddenly pressed up against my back. I arch my back into him, feeling him hard and ready behind me.

Tonight, I don’t want emotions. I don’t want to think about what this means or feel guilty for using Enzo as a means to escape reality for a bit. I just want to be fucked.

He moans, and it spurs me on. His fingers curl into my hair, pulling me closer. I gasp when he bites my shoulder, dragging his teeth against my skin to my neck.

“Is this what you want?”

“Yes,” I breathe. “Just take me.”

In one smooth motion, I'm on my back and Enzo's sinking into me. No time for formalities or niceties tonight.

His breath is coming hard and fast as his hips thrust at a punishing pace. I cry out from the intense pleasure, and he stills for a moment, concerned.

"Are you..."

I sink my nails into his ass cheeks, pulling him as close as physically possible. He grunts, sinking deeper inside as I moan.

"I need you to not stop," I pant, silently begging for him to wipe the concern from his face. I don't want to be delicate right now.

He nods, understanding or at least trying to, and picks up the pace again. The feeling is delicious, exquisite, and I try to commit it all to memory—just in case he disappears from my life again.

His moans mix with mine as we find a steady rhythm. I try to meet each of his thrusts just as aggressively until we're both riding the same wave of pleasure, searching for the high that only our bodies intertwined can give us.

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I break first, chanting his name over and over like a sacred prayer. Stars explode in my field of vision, lighting up the dark room around us.

His voice seems so far away, like it's moving through water, but I hear him call my name.

And then a quietly whispered "I love you" follows it, but I block that out as best I can.

It's better not to go down that path again.

My eyes flutter open, blinking lazily at the sunshine streaming in. Strong arms reach out and pull me in. I smile, remembering where I am.

I settle against Enzo's warm, hard body, feeling safe and secure for the first time in months. Years, if I'm being honest.

This time, I make no move to sneak out quietly. I'll fight tooth and nail to stay right here, breathing in that quintessential Enzo scent—clean, manly, straight out of the shower.

My phone beeps from somewhere across the room, and I groan, remembering Matilda has an early morning flight. I wonder what time it is. There's no way I missed it, right?

I roll out of bed, much to Enzo's sleepy protests, and root around in my bag. I'm surprised when I see a barrage of missed calls and messages from my family.

Fear curls around my throat, making my breaths shallow like I'm inhaling through a straw.

Matilda.

I hit Uncle Luigi's name and hold my breath, praying nothing terrible happened to her.

"Valentina," he greets me. I can hear a flurry of activity behind him, and the panic levels ratchet up.

"Is Matilda okay?"

"Matilda?" he asks, sounding confused. "Her flight's not until lunchtime. Didn't you see the messages I sent about the delay? Where are you?"

"I'm sorry," I apologize, breathing for the first time. "A lot happened, and I'll fill you in when I'm home."

"A lot happened here, too," he grumbles. "The security system was disabled last night, and they got inside the house."

My breathing stills, and tension seeps into my muscles. Enzo must have finally noticed because he comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and holding me tight.

"We're just lucky Matilda was in California and you were out all night," he continues. "They completely destroyed your bedroom."

"There was no one else in the house?" I breathe, not believing what I'm hearing.

“Some of your cousins were here, but...” he trails off. “It was too late by the time they smelled fire.”

“Fire?” I screech, my voice going shrill. “Is everyone alright? Did the house burn down?”

“Valentina,” he whispers, his voice dark. “The fire was contained, but you need to realize... this was aimed directly at you. They didn’t touch anything else in the house except your room.”

“I’ll be home soon,” I choke out, ending the call. Enzo gives me a questioning look, but before I can fill him in, my phone chimes again.

A message from The8.I hit open and slump to the floor when I see the photo.

A woman lies on my bed, wearing my nicest La Perla lingerie. Her red hair is spread artfully around her, but the photo cuts off at her chin.

I read the attached message and start to shake.

It looks better on me. He looks better on me, too.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Enzo

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I sink down to the floor with Valentina, prying the phone out of her hands, and read the message. As much as I've been trying to fight it, the message is clear.

This sick individual is somehow obsessed with me and sees Valentina as a threat.

The red hair is throwing me off—the crazy antics, too. I've never dated anyone that might stoop to such ballsy threats or have the skills to pull them off.

“Maybe it's some kind of stalker,” I muse, zooming in to check for any identifying marks. But all I see are clear stretches of milky white skin—no tattoos, no piercings, not even a unique birthmark that might single someone out.

“I can't believe I'm saying this,” Valentina shudders, taking a deep breath, “but at what point do we get the police involved?”

“We have some contacts in the police department.” I hesitate. “But I think we both know it's better if we don't get them involved.”

“You're right,” she says, shaking the nervous tension out of her body. “I should go clean this mess up before Matilda gets back from California.”

“I'll help.” I spring up, heading for my walk-in closet to avoid her inevitable protestations. I bypass the rows of perfectly tailored suits and throw on an old pair of jeans and a hoodie, happy to be in a more low-key outfit.

“Enzo.” Valentina appears in the doorway, looking uncomfortable. “I don't think I need your help, but thank you for offering.”

She slips into the closet and wraps her arms around me, giving me a soft kiss on the cheek. I gaze into her deep blue eyes, usually glittering pools of emotion, but they seem haunted lately.

“I know.” I kiss the three freckles on her nose. “It’s not an offer. In fact, it’s non-negotiable. I’m not letting you out of my sight, Lenny.”

“I was worried you’d say that,” she purrs, snuggling her face into my chest.

“Worried or hoping?”

“Just don’t get into a wild-west-style gun fight with my uncles, okay?”

I make no promises.

As we speed across the city to Valentina’s more suburban neighborhood, she grows increasingly tense. I see her fingers wildly fidgeting with her purse out of the corner of my eye, so I slide my hand onto her knee.

She interlaces her shaky fingers with mine and flashes me a grateful look. “Thanks for forcing me to take you along,” she whispers, staring at her feet.

“Nothing could stop me.” I smile at her.

We drive in silence through quiet streets. Large, stately homes from generations gone by line the wide, tree-lined streets. Most homes here have tall wrought-iron gates and high-tech security systems.

“I wonder if your neighbors’ cameras caught anything?” I muse as we breeze through the gates and follow the winding driveway to the home. Ours have clearly been tampered with, but I doubt The8 has hacked the cameras across the rest of the

neighborhood.

“That’s an idea,” she agrees, looking hopeful for the first time today. “We could ask around.”

We pull up to the house, an army of Rossi men already assembled on the porch. Some are smoking and lounging on the outdoor furniture, others are checking out my car.

Luigi Rossi stands in the middle, giving me a stare cold enough to freeze my blood.

“Look, it’s my biggest fan,” I whisper in Lenny’s ear as we climb over a forgotten snowdrift to the front steps. She breaks into a hacking cough to cover her laugh, and I pet her back gently, a model of innocence.

“Valentina, can I speak to you alone for a moment?” Luigi grumbles, not even acknowledging me. She eyes me guiltily and ducks into the house, leaving me alone with the Rossi men.

For a minute or two, awkward silence stretches between us.

“Hey, I’m Enzo,” I finally say, waving lamely. I pray that most of these guys are too young to know the drama that happened six years ago.

“Dude, your car is sick,” one of the younger ones finally pipes up. “Can I see it?”

“Yeah, sure,” I tell him, gesturing to the car. “You can drive it for all I care.”

Surprised shouts echo from the porch, and a handful of Rossi boys run over to my beautiful Koenigsegg Regera. I toss one of them the keys, absent-mindedly praying they’ll give it back to me in one piece.

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Which reminds me. I pull out my phone and quickly dial our usual tow guy, giving him Valentina's car details and location. Then I call the auto shop and ask them to squeeze her car in today for a set of new tires.

Feeling a little more accomplished and a little less like a useless kid, I stride into the house. Valentina and Luigi look like they've come to an impasse, silently staring at each other. I stand awkwardly in the entryway, unsure how to proceed.

"Cavalli," Luigi finally says. "Thank you for taking care of Valentina last night."

Valentina's frown transforms into a beautiful, beaming smile, and I choke out a shocked, "You're welcome."

"Are you ready to see the damage?" Luigi asks, already heading up the grand marble staircase. We follow behind him, shooting shocked expressions at each other behind his back. At the top, he spins around and eyes us gravely.

"It will be quite shocking for you, Valentina," he says, clearing his throat. He looks like he'd like to be anywhere but here at this very moment. "It's... pretty bad."

"I can handle it," she says, determination painted across her face. I grab her hand and squeeze, which doesn't escape Luigi's notice, but he doesn't react. When we reach the door at the end of the hall, Luigi pushes it open, and we gasp in unison.

The room can only be described as a crime scene of the worst kind.

Every surface is covered in red paint. All of Valentina's clothing and personal items

have been dumped onto the bed and set on fire. The charred remains of her bed are still smoking lightly, doused in fire extinguishing agent.

“Shit,” I breathe, not knowing what else to say.

“They set my bed on fire.”

“They also left a message.” Luigi hesitates, pointing to the en-suite bathroom.

Valentina and I exchange nervous glances and head to the doorway. I peek inside first, noting the smashed mirrors and more red paint.

“At least it’s not real blood,” I quip, but I choke on my own words when I see the message scrawled onto the wall.

Next time, it’s your blood.

I try to push Valentina back into the bedroom, not wanting her to see, but she shoves past me and stops dead in her tracks.

I glance back at Luigi, who is pacing the bedroom worriedly, and for once, we’re on the same page.

Find this bitch.

Valentine bursts into tears, and I pull her into a tight hug. She sobs against my chest until Luigi clears his throat. We break apart, and I gently lead her out of the room.

“Come on,” Luigi calls, his voice softer than I’ve ever heard. “I’ll make you some coffee.”

“You go.” I nudge Valentina toward him. “I need some air.”

She nods and follows her uncle down the stairs while I slip out the front door. My car is back in its place, surrounded by Rossi men, but I barely glance at it. I jog down the steps and veer around the house, looking for a quiet place to think.

There’s a small stone patio on the side of the house with a tarp-covered barbecue and a place for seating. The snow has been mostly cleared away here, so I stop and pull out my phone. I need to call the uncles and tell them about this.

I almost press Uncle Joe’s name, but I remember that my phone is probably bugged. Instead, I shove it back in my pocket and pace around the patio.

I need to get them both to a more secure place where The8 can’t reach them. I wrack my brain, trying hard to come up with a solution when it suddenly hits me.

We need to get out of the city, and we need to do it without The8 noticing.

Valentina would never agree to go into hiding, though. Unless I kidnap her?

I shake my head at my own stupidity. Kidnapping isn’t in my nature, and besides, I doubt she’d ever forgive me for that. A plan begins to form in my mind, one that might result in her getting only mildly angry at me.

That’s okay. Anger I can handle.

I head back inside and find her mindlessly stirring sugar into her coffee, staring out the window. She looks shell-shocked and empty, and it breaks my heart.

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“Lenny,” I say softly so as not to startle her. “Can we talk?”

She nods and sits down at the kitchen table. Her tear-streaked face makes me want to burn down the entire world, but I need to focus on one thing at a time. Safety first.

“I don’t think this house is safe,” I start. She nods, agreeing with me. “I don’t think this city is safe, actually.”

“Do you think I should go back to California?” Her voice cracks with fear and emotion. “It’s selfish, I know, but I don’t want to leave you.”

“I don’t think leaving is the best idea either,” I agree, and her eyes snap to mine, shocked. “I need you close, so that I can keep you safe. I can’t help if you’re on the other side of the country.”

“So, what do you have in mind?”

“My friend Rafael lives out in the countryside,” I start, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice. “I think we should pick Matilda up from the airport and head out there, maybe for the weekend. At least while they amp up security here and clean up the mess.”

She stares thoughtfully into her cup, considering it. I can see the wheels spinning, the battle between leaving her family and keeping Matilda safe raging on.

“Rafael Romano?” she finally asks. I nod, terrified to speak when she’s actually considering my plan.

She lets out a deep, heavy breath that seems to re-focus her and takes a big gulp of coffee.

“Okay, that might be a good idea,” she finally concedes. “I’m assuming he’s got a state-of-the-art security system, considering who he is. But only for the weekend, right?”

“We’ll be safe there,” I answer, skirting around her last question. It’s not lying if I just don’t answer, right?

“What am I going to tell Matilda?”

“Just tell her we’re visiting friends in the country.” I smile, elated that she agreed. “They have a baby girl, and tons of farm animals and big, beautiful gardens. She’ll have fun.”

“No,” she says slowly, refusing to meet my eyes. “I mean, about you?”

I suck in a breath, holding it deep in my chest. This is the first time we’ve ever even slightly broached the subject, and I don’t want to push her too far. Inside, my mind is screaming, “Tell her I’m her father!”

“Whatever you decide, I support you,” I finally manage to say. “We can tell her the truth. Or if you don’t think that’s the right thing to do, we’ll say I’m an old friend.”

“An old friend.” She smiles, pacified for the moment.

“A dear, old friend,” I agree, trying to push the hurt away.

One day, Matilda will know I’m her father. And I’ll be the best goddamn father she could have to make up for these lost years.

But not today. Today, all that matters is getting my girls to safety.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Valentina

With shaking hands, I pack a small duffle bag of Matilda's winter clothing. I have absolutely nothing left of my own, but Enzo assures me we can stop and pick up a few things.

I dig around in the front hall closet for a pair of sturdier winter boots while Enzo and Luigi discuss the plan.

"You're sure this location is secure?" I hear Luigi's rough voice float from the kitchen.

"More secure than anywhere in the city," Enzo confidently confirms. "Luigi, look... I know you don't like me, but we have the same end goal right now. To keep Matilda and Valentina safe."

Silence echoes from the kitchen, and I pause in my rifling, holding my breath.

"You're right," Luigi acknowledges. I let go of the breath, and my hands land on an old pair of hiking boots I'd shoved back there. Perfect.

I slip them on and breeze into the kitchen like I wasn't just eavesdropping on their conversation. Never in my life did I think I'd see Enzo and Uncle Luigi sitting at the same table, quietly sipping coffee.

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“You’ll need burner phones,” Luigi says, glancing up at me. “What are you doing about vehicles?”

“One of your guys is getting us phones,” Enzo assures him. “Talked to him earlier. And we’ll be switching vehicles at least once to throw them off our trail.”

Uncle Luigi nods and unfolds his tall, lanky frame from the dining chair. Our eyes meet, and he shoots me a hesitant smile.

“You’ll keep me updated on that plan, then?” he finally asks, placing a hand on Enzo’s shoulder. My heart nearly melts at this brief display of trust.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Luigi nods. “Good luck to you both, then.”

He makes his way outside to meet the cleaning crew he called over. I slip into the seat beside Enzo and lean my head on his shoulder.

“What a morning, huh?” I ask, chuckling despite everything.

“Best morning of my life.” He grins. “Wanna know why?”

“Oh Lord, do I?” I hide my face, pretending to be sick of Enzo’s cheesy lines.

“You do.” He nods assertively. “It’s because I woke up next to the most beautiful woman on earth, and she didn’t storm out of my house this time.”

“I tried, Enzo, I tried.” I laugh, pinching his chin. “You just happened to storm out after me.”

“Nah, all I remember are sweet hugs and kisses in my closet,” he says, smiling down at me.

My cousin bustles into the kitchen, interrupting us with an armful of gadgets. After discussing the devices, we finally set out on the road to a small, private airstrip to meet Matilda.

My heart hammers in my chest while we watch the plane touch down. My little girl is about to meet her father, and she doesn’t even know it.

“You don’t look like a pine tree,” Matilda says thoughtfully, studying Enzo. My heart sinks as soon as I realize where she’s going with this.

“You’d think so, but I’m actually taller than I look,” he jokes, shooting me a confused look and shrugging.

I’m grateful that he rolls with the punches so easily, but Matilda is about to embarrass the crap out of me, and I need to put a stop to it.

“Okay, honeybee,” I try to divert her attention. “Let’s go.”

“Uncle Alfonso and Uncle Luigi always talk about Mama pining over someone,” she continues undeterred. “But pine trees are green.”

He chokes back a laugh and wiggles his eyebrows at me while I nearly melt into the floor. Alfonso bites his lip so hard I’m surprised he doesn’t draw blood.

I shoot him a menacing growl, and he scurries away to grab Matilda’s luggage.

“Ah, you got me,” Enzo says, crouching down to meet her at eye level. He slowly rolls up his sleeve, extending his arm. “See? Green.”

Matilda cracks a smile and gently traces the green watercolor tattoos on his arm.

I watch their interaction with apprehension, trying to decipher how Matilda feels, but she seems surprisingly fine. The initial meeting went smoothly, and she readily accepted the story of “Mama’s friend Enzo.”

I glance around the tiny waiting room in the hangar, keeping an eye out for any sign of danger. Enzo’s right, this is a good idea. I’m too paranoid now that Matilda’s back in the same city as The8.

“Ready to go?” Alfonso asks with a sheepish smile. I glare at him, shaking my head, and he shrugs.

“Pine trees?” I mouth to him, and he chuckles deeply. As embarrassed as I am, a feeling of relief washed over me when he agreed to join us this weekend.

Another practiced shooter and fighter to add to our entourage.

A technician drives a black Cadillac into the hangar, complete with heavily tinted windows and out-of-state license plates.

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I gaze questioningly at Enzo, and he nods, letting me know this is our new ride. We load our bags into the trunk and pile into the SUV.

Matilda chatters for the first half of the ride, regaling us with stories of her visit home and asking questions about our destination. Alfonso and Enzo keep her talking, creating a nice distraction for the danger we're all secretly thinking about.

I'm too nervous to join the conversation, wholly focused on scanning the road and making sure we're not being followed.

I'm keeping my eye on a black sedan that's been lingering around us for far too long. When I catch Enzo's gaze flitting nervously between the rearview mirror and the road ahead, I know we're being tailed.

"How did they know?" I whisper, trying to keep it between us. Matilda's distracted by the bridge we're crossing, but Alfonso leans in, clearly understanding what I'm saying.

"Not sure," Enzo grits out. "Must have had eyes in the airport."

"Airports don't have eyes," Matilda chimes in, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

"And I sometimes wish you didn't have ears," I grumble, leaning back into the seat and trying to relax my restless hands.

Enzo whips out his burner phone and makes a call. I strain to hear his quiet conversation as Alfonso distracts Matilda in the back.

“Yeah,” he mumbles. “We need it... Off I-87? Got it.”

Twenty minutes later, we pull into a truck stop and stop at a pump. I check the gas meter, noting that it’s not nearly time for a fill-up, and give him a confused look.

“It’s okay,” he mouths.

The attendant never approaches our vehicle, but I spot the sedan sliding into a parking spot near the main building. Enzo turns around and pastes on a happy smile.

“You know what? I don’t like this car,” he says, trying to sound casual. “What do you say we try a new one?”

“Change cars?” Matilda asks, suddenly interested in the conversation. “We can do that?”

“Sure.” He laughs. “As long as we do it in the magic portal.”

“Mama, I want to go in the magic portal,” she says, eyeing me seriously. I have no idea where Enzo’s going with this, but I play along.

“Is the portal safe?”

“Very safe.” He nods. “But we have to move really quickly, because the portal closes pretty fast.”

“Where is this... portal?” Alfonso asks, trying to get onto the same page.

“Here’s the weird thing,” he says in wonder. “It’s in the car wash.”

“I’ve never been in the car wash!” Matilda announces happily.

“Then let’s go.” Enzo grins.

I catch him checking the rearview mirror and spot a red pickup truck pulling into the rest stop. It lingers near the car wash, and I realize what’s about to happen.

We drive toward the car wash, passing right by the dark sedan that’s been following us. I sneak a peek inside, but even with the tinted windows, I can see it’s empty.

They must be inside or slouched down in their seats.

As we approach, the red pickup enters the industrial-style car wash, big enough to accommodate cargo trucks. We wait at the light and follow the guide when it turns green.

Everything happens so quickly that I barely have time to process.

Enzo swings his door open, swapping places with the man in the truck. Alfonso throws Matilda over his shoulder and slips into the backseat.

I glance at the trunk with our suitcases, but when I hear Enzo start the truck up, I sprint to the passenger side and slide in.

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In under a minute, we've switched vehicles and are on the road in our brand-new pickup. Although "brand new" might be a stretch—this thing is rusty and decades old, with patchwork leather seats and a hula girl bolted to the dash.

"Where the hell did you get this thing?" I laugh as Enzo cruises back onto the highway. He chuckles and shoots me a wink but refuses to answer.

I confirm the sedan is no longer following us as we speed down the interstate toward our secret haven.

After a few miles, I finally spot signs for the town of Willowdale. Enzo turns off the main road, and we drive through the small town center.

I can't help but smile when I see the pastel homes, flower boxes in every window, large oak trees lining the streets, and cutesy businesses. This is exactly the type of place where I've always wanted to live—and raise my daughter.

"Welcome to small-town Americana," Enzo jokes.

"It's cute!" I say defensively, even though I have no attachment to this place.

"Sure," he snickers, "if you like that 1950s-nuclear-family, white-picket-fence thing."

"Some people do," I sniff haughtily and plaster my nose to the window. He shoots me a confused glance but doesn't push the subject.

We turn off Main Street and head down a long driveway, pastures on either side of it.

I imagine what this place must look like in the summer when it's in full bloom.

When we finally pull up to the house, my jaw nearly unhinges. In front of me sits a pastel fucking pink gingerbread house, complete with a shingled roof and wraparound porch.

"Mama, it's pink!" Matilda screeches from the backseat, bouncing up and down.

"I see that," I say in wonder, jealous that people actually get to live in places like this.

"There's Lux," Enzo points out as a drop-dead beautiful woman walks out onto the porch with a baby perched on her hip.

We climb out of the car and head to the front door. The woman, Lux, breaks into a huge grin when she spots us and I swear, it's like she summoned the sun right out of hiding.

"Bestie!" she whoops when she spots Enzo. "And bestie's friends! Welcome!"

Enzo tackles her in a giant bear hug, and for a second, pure, vile jealousy tightens around my wretched heart. This beautiful blonde goddess is Enzo's best friend?

When Enzo shyly introduces me, Lux nods and shoots me a warm, knowing smile, and the jealous tension begins to melt away.

"I've heard so much about you." She grins, and I instantly know we're going to be friends.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Enzo

I watch Matilda happily coloring, sprawled out on the floor. Baby Rosie sits beside her, joyfully tearing another paper into tiny shreds.

The fire roars behind them, making the living room cozy and warm, and for the first time in weeks, I let myself relax just a little.

Rafael passes Alfonso and me a glass of whiskey each and settles into an armchair.

Peals of laughter echo from the kitchen, and I smile, happy that Lenny and Lux seem to be getting along. My closeness with Lux was a small source of worry initially—I didn't want Lenny to get the wrong idea.

They emerge from the kitchen, each holding a full bottle of wine with swirly straws sticking out of them. I raise my eyebrows at the scene.

"Don't even say a word," Lux scolds me. "It's been a hard day for Valentina."

"And what about you?"

"Women supporting women." She shrugs and bounds over to Rafael, squeezing herself into the armchair with him. Valentina takes a more ladylike approach and sits in the remaining empty armchair. We sip our drinks as Lux launches into the harrowing story of how she and Rafael met.

"You're a fantastic storyteller." Valentina laughs as Lux describes their escapades.

"Our story's not nearly as exciting."

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“It was for me,” I say softly. I glance at her and catch her blushing, clutching her half-empty bottle.

“And I want to hear all the gory details,” Lux announces. “As soon as I get this little monster into bed.”

Alfonso volunteers to put Matilda to bed as well, much to her protests. When Lux declares she has the perfect pink princess room ready for her, she quickly reconsiders and sprints for the stairs.

“She’s a lot like you.” Rafael laughs as they head upstairs, leaving the three of us alone.

“The pink princess thing really sold it for you, huh?”

“I mean,” he pauses, throwing back the rest of his drink, “her mannerisms, her eyes, the way she talks like a little poindexter... it’s all you.”

“She’s a mini-Enzo,” Valentina confirms, her cheeks fully flushed now. “Too damn smart for her own good.”

“Have you told her the truth?” Rafael asks.

“No—” I start, ready to defend Valentina’s choices.

“Not yet,” she cuts me off, giving me a meaningful look. “But it’s going to happen a lot sooner than I planned.”

I grin into my glass like an idiot, filled with joy for the first time in too long. Somehow, over the course of the last few weeks, my walls have broken down—Valentina's, too.

I can feel us growing closer as that inevitable bond tightens again and we allow emotion back into our lives. Nothing will tear us apart this time.

After a few more hours of stories, laughter, and far too many drinks, we decide to call it a night.

“Unfortunately, there are no more bedrooms in the main house,” Lux apologizes, stumbling to the kitchen with her empty bottle. “But we have the cottage!”

She points out the window to a miniature version of her home perched just a few feet away.

“I’ll show you the way,” Rafael volunteers. “It has its own security system, in addition to the general property system. You’ll be safe there.”

We wave goodnight to Lux and head out into the blustery winter night.

Inside the cottage, it’s warm and dry. A simple kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom frame a tiny living room with an electric fireplace. Perfect.

“Thank you for letting us stay here for the weekend.” Valentina smiles, glancing around the little gingerbread cottage. “It’s lovely.”

“Of course,” Rafael says, heading out the door. “Stay as long as you like.”

Right. Shit. I have to somehow tell Valentina that I’ve effectively kidnapped her and Matilda, and I’m holding them hostage here until this mess is sorted out.

“Enzo,” Valentina calls from the bedroom, breaking me out of my miserable realization. “I need cuddles.”

I laugh at her drunk state and catapult myself onto the bed, pinning her down and covering her face with kisses. When she begs for mercy, I force myself to pull back—although I could spend all day and night kissing her.

“That’s so sweet,” she slurs, pointing to the wardrobe. “Lux left us pajamas and toiletries.”

“Yep, that’s Lux.” I smile, glancing at the beautifully arranged basket of goodies. “She was born to care for others.”

“I see why Rafael became so obsessed with her.”

“Not nearly as obsessed as I am with you,” I whisper, pulling her into a deep kiss. She sighs dreamily and drapes her body over me.

We roll around, making out like teenagers until we’re both breathing heavily. She slides her hand down my body, landing on my very hard dick.

“We don’t have to,” I groan, savoring the warmth and pressure of her hand. “If you don’t want to.”

“What gave you that idea?” she whispers huskily, leaning into nip at my ear. “Was it my hand on your cock or that fact that I’m soaking wet for you?”

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“You did drink an entire bottle of wine,” I whisper, pretending I didn’t hear her dirty little question. “I just want to make sure you’re making level-headed decisions.”

“Oh, Enzo.” She laughs, straddling me and whipping off her sweater. “Shut the fuck up, will you?”

“Roger that,” I moan as she grinds her hips against me. “Roger fucking that.”

I move to flip her over so I can worship her like she deserves, but she stops me. A devious little smile ghosts her lips, and she leans in close.

“Tonight is all about you,” she whispers, grinding on my cock again for good measure.

I start to protest, but Valentina is surprisingly strong. She pushes me back down and slowly slides her body lower, whipping my throbbing cock out of my sweatpants.

My eyes widen as she licks her lips, eyeing it with nothing but pure lust. Okay, maybe just for tonight, it can be all about me.

She keeps her fingers loosely wrapped around it as she kisses my abdomen, tickles my inner thighs, and generally drives me insane. By the time her lips have circled back to my belly button, I’m a tortured man begging for sweet release.

“Please, baby,” I plead. “I’m dying to feel you.”

“Mmhmm.” She smirks, stroking one finger up and down my cock gently. “Now you

see how it feels? Being tortured like that?”

“Oh, it’s payback, is it?” I laugh, letting out a strangled breath.

“Yes.” She winks, smiling slyly. “But I’m much kinder than you.”

And with that, she wraps her lips around me, finally giving me the warmth and wetness I was craving so badly. I force myself to think of baseball and toboggans so that I don’t instantly explode in her mouth like a sex-crazed teenager.

She catches on to my pathetic plan and ramps up her game, moaning while pulling me in deeper and deeper. The vibrations of her throat set me ablaze, and I thrust my hips involuntarily, causing her to choke.

For a second, I panic, but then she moans a deep, sensual, feral sound and takes me all the way down. I close my eyes, the sensations so strong and potent.

My fingers wind into her hair, controlling her lightly, and she moans again, letting me know she’s enjoying it as much as I am.

“Lenny, Lenny,” I gasp, sensing the feeling building too quickly. “I’m almost there, let me...”

She grips my hips firmly, telling me that I’m not going anywhere, and meets my eyes. Her deep blue eyes sparkle with lust and desire and all things unsaid between us.

I let go, pumping into her mouth and emptying myself down her throat, and she takes it all.

“Like a good girl,” I moan as her lips finally let me go. Everything feels warm and fuzzy, the emotions so heady that I can’t tell the difference between what I’m saying

and what I'm thinking.

"I'm not a good girl." She smirks, working her way up to straddle me again. "I'm a very, very bad girl."

My cock twitches, and I wonder how that's even scientifically possible. I've never seen Valentina like this, and it's doing something to me.

"If that's how we're gonna play this," I growl, "get on top and start riding, bad girl."

She laughs, a deep blush creeping into her cheeks, but does what I tell her to. I can tell she's a little uncomfortable with the dirty talk, and honestly, so am I, but that's not going to stop me.

Feeling that I'm only semi-hard, she pauses, glancing at me for guidance. I lean back, arms crossed behind my head, and decide I'm going to savor every single second of this.

"Touch yourself for me," I command, and her blush gets deeper. "I want to hear how wet the thought of me makes you."

She bites her lip and the blush spreads to her chest, but in true Lenny fashion, she throws her shoulders back and slides her hand down her body. When her fingers connect with that sensitive spot, she moans and starts letting go of her hangups.

What a sight.

I was a fool to let her go once, and that's not a mistake I'm willing to make again.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Valentina

“Wanna hear a secret?”

“Tell me. I’m a good secret-keeper,” he says firmly, kissing my shoulder. I stretch against his warm body, savoring the joy of a lazy early morning in bed together.

We’ve never once had this. Our entire history is filled with sneaking around, rushed meetings in hidden places, and the fear of being found out.

“I’ve always dreamed of this.”

“Lenny, that’s not a secret,” he lectures me. “It’s all I’ve dreamed about for the last six years, too.”

“No, not us,” I correct him, turning around to see his face.

His eyes, so green and warm, are relaxed and half-lidded. A happy, satisfied smile stretches across his face as my fingers trace hearts across his chest.

“I mean this type of life. The type of life Lux has... the beautiful pink house, the farm, the orange groves, the gardens, the small town. I want all of it.”

“Oh no.” He grimaces, smacking his head. “She got you. Don’t listen to her. She could probably start a cult and lead everyone off the edge of a cliff, and they’d do it with a smile.”

“It’s not her fault.” I laugh, picturing Lux leading a cult. Honestly, I see it.

“So, you just suddenly decided you want to be barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen?” he wonders, snuggling into my neck.

“Yes. Well, no, but yes,” I say, blowing out a frustrated breath. “I mean, I want the quiet kind of life. I... I never wanted this...”

“The mafia life?” he asks, gazing up at me. “Me too.”

“What if we just... ditch it?” I ask, knowing full well we could never do that.

“Ma’am, you’re officially hired for the position of mayor of Delusion City.” He laughs. “You were the only applicant, but we feel strongly that you’re the perfect fit.”

“I know,” I groan, flopping onto my back. “It could never work.”

He props himself on one elbow, gazing down at me. Soft sunlight streams in through the flimsy white curtains on the windows and lights his face. He strokes my cheekbone, running his thumb down over my lips, and I give it a soft kiss.

I love him like I’ve never loved anyone before, I suddenly realize, and it scares the shit out of me. He must feel me tense up because he leans down and places a smoldering kiss on my mouth.

“I promise you,” he whispers, slipping his hand under the blanket and running it along my naked curves, “I’ll give you all this and more one day. You just need to be patient with me.”

“Enzo, no...” I whisper, knowing how hard he worked to get to where he is now.

I didn't mean he has to give up his lifestyle for me. Although when I imagine my future, it most definitely includes him.

"Promise me?" he begs, kissing his way down my neck and chest. "I want to give you the life you deserve, the one you always dreamed of, not the life you were forced into. Promise me you'll be patient?"

"I promise," I say happily, settling into his touch.

I don't deserve this man, but somehow the universe made a mistake and connected us, so I'll take it and run with it.

After a sweaty, lust-filled morning where we almost broke the kitchen table, we finally make our way to the main house for breakfast.

Lux is perched at the wooden dining table, cutting up pancakes for Rosie. Matilda is happily shoveling pancakes into her mouth like she hasn't eaten in weeks.

"Morning, lovebirds!" Lux sings when we troop inside, shaking the snow off our hair.

"Love birds?" Matilda pipes up with a mouth full of pancake.

"Remember we discussed 'figurative' and 'literal' this morning?" Lux reminds her.

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Alfonso chuckles behind a two-week-old newspaper he managed to dig up somewhere.

“We also had a grand old time talking about pine trees today.” Lux grins, spinning around to wink at us. My face flushes with horror again, but I force myself to move on and pour a cup of coffee. “And Matilda’s birthday!”

I groan internally. With all the shit The8 has been throwing at us, I completely gave up on planning Matilda’s birthday.

Thankfully, my parents managed to throw her an early West Coast birthday party while she was visiting. I was hoping that might be enough to tide her over, but seeing her happy little face now, I quickly realize I failed at mom duty.

“I’m gonna be six,” she proudly announces. “And Mama said we can ride a pony, watch princess movies, and eat a pink cake for my birthday.”

“Oh, honeybee,” I start, walking over to the table. I’m about to give you the saddest news ever. Lux catches my eye and nods gently to the living room.

“Bestie?” she calls, whirling around to search for Enzo. He looks up from a giant stack of pancakes he’s been quietly eating at the kitchen counter. “Feed Rosie, will you?”

She shoves the fork at him, gives her baby girl a kiss on the cheek, and drags me out of the kitchen. I feel like I’m about to get “Lux’ed,” as Enzo lovingly calls it.

“Listen, I know you’ve had a lot going on, so a birthday party is probably the last thing on your mind, right?”

I sink into the overstuffed sofa and let out a deep breath. I’m such a bad mother.

“I mean, I started planning it,” I say quietly, waving my hands around helplessly. “Before all this shit happened.”

“I know.” She plops down beside me, grabbing my hand and giving it a squeeze. “And you’re probably thinking you’re a bad mother, and if that’s the case, stop it right now or I’m withholding wine and swirly straws for the foreseeable future.”

“Thanks.” I laugh, shaking the gloomy thoughts away. “Maybe we can do something small for her here?”

“Small?” Lux asks, her voice dripping with shock. The gleeful twinkle in her eyes scares me for a second. “We don’t do things small in the Romano household. Listen, we’ve got three horses, a projector, and I’m a Michelin-star baker. We can do this.”

“Are you really?”

“No, but I once dreamed I was.” She laughs. “So, if I can just channel that energy...”

Enzo busts into the room at that moment, interrupting us. Rosie waddles behind him, laughing and clapping her hands.

“She got me in the eye!” he screeches in fake horror. “Watch out, we have a sniper-in-training on our hands!”

Matilda skips in after them, giggling maniacally, holding a spoon full of strawberry jam. She cocks the spoon back like a catapult and Enzo drops to the floor.

“Duck! Everyone duck!” he yells, making her laugh so hard she drops the spoon on the floor. As much as I’m enjoying the cute little father-daughter scene, I’m also acutely aware just how much jam is ending up on Lux’s polished hardwood floors.

I lean in to apologize, but to my surprise, Lux springs up and bolts across the room. Her golden hair trails behind her, making her look like a Disney princess.

“I’ve got her!” she cries, fake-tackling Matilda to the floor. They roll around giggling, getting jam all over their clothes and in their hair. “The suspect has been apprehended!”

Rafael wanders in to see what all the fuss is about and simply shakes his head. He picks his way across the living room, stepping over bodies and avoiding jam puddles.

“It’s hard being the serious one sometimes,” he says with a long-suffering sigh, nodding at the scene. “Especially when the two golden retrievers get together.”

I can’t help but laugh, partly because Enzo and Lux do have golden-retriever-like tendencies, but mostly because I haven’t felt this happy and carefree in ages.

This is it. This is the life I want for my daughter. Peace, laughter, magic—I may not have half the whimsy of Lux or the childlike wonder of Enzo, but I can make that happen for her.

“Hey,” Rafael clears his throat, shifting into business mode. “Valentina, Enzo, can I speak to you in my office?”

Lux immediately understands and rounds up the kids, herding them upstairs with promises of magical bubble baths.

The three of us head to Rafael’s office, a perfect antithesis to the rest of the house.

While the main living spaces are soft,pastel, and full of oversized furniture and plants, the office is dark, moody, and manly.

“I just got some news,” he declares, ushering us inside and shutting the door. Alfonso is already inside, his fingers steeped, a thoughtful look on his face.

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Enzo and I share a glance, and I wonder if they have located The8.

“I’ve been keeping tabs on everything,” Rafael announces, settling in at his desk. “When you switched cars at the truck stop, the sedan kept tracking the Cadillac. Our guys managed to lead them to a secluded location and get them all turned around. When they inevitably stopped, we were able to capture them.”

“No fucking way,” Enzo breathes, jumping up from his seat. “Was it the redhead?”

“No, two men,” Rafael says, pulling out his phone and passing it over. “Russians.”

We flip through the photos, staring at the strangers. They don’t look like regular mafia. In fact, they look like college students.

“These guys?” I ask, shocked. “They look like kids.”

“They’re not,” Rafael confirms. “But they’re not mafia either. Absolutely no defense skills or anything. We got them without a fight. Our guys are keeping them at the warehouse upstate right now.”

“Have they been questioned?” Alfonso asks. My eyes snap back to Rafael as my breath sticks in my throat.

Information. Maybe they don’t have the redhead, but they might have information.

“Not yet.” He chuckles. “Thought you three would like to do the honors. I’ll come as backup, of course, but my wife will divorce me if I come home with even a drop of

blood on me.”

“Let’s fucking go,” Enzo whoops, pumping his fist in the air. I stifle a laugh, even though I’m terrified of what we’re about to find out.

Although I’m more terrified we won’t find anything and end up back at square one.

“This guy.” Rafael grins, pointing at Enzo. “How far you’ve come. I’m so proud.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Enzo throws a grin over his shoulder, jogging out of the room.

“Are you sure this man is capable of leading your family?” Alfonso asks, shaking his head, even though I spot laughter in his eyes.

We pull away from the house just as a car of the Romano boys pulls up. Although Rafael assured us the house is secure, he called in extra hands as a safeguard.

I breathe a sigh of relief and relax into the plush leather backseat. Knowing the house is being patrolled by some of the toughest men in the country settles my nerves about leaving Matilda.

The drive to the upstate warehouse takes us back along the coast, and we spend the next few hours discussing who The8 might be. Rafael and I are convinced it’s an ex-girlfriend but Enzo’s still torn. Either way, we’re finally one step closer to finding out her identity.

By the time we reach the abandoned-looking building, I’m a bundle of nerves. Enzo notices my twitchy hands and rests his on top. I flash him a grateful smile.

“Where’s your little poetry book, Lenny?” he whispers, laughing silently at me.

“Shut up,” I huff. “It’s very grounding. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Yeah, he’s a space case,” Rafael interjects as he parks the car. “He knows nothing about the ground in general.”

“Ha ha ha,” Enzo mocks, punching him hard in the shoulder. “Dad made a funny. Did you hear that, Lenny? Rafael decided to grace us with his sense of humor today.”

“Shut up, both of you,” Alfonso moans, rubbing his temple. “Get your head in the game and let’s do this.”

We instantly sober up and climb out of the car. We need to present a united front and intimidate these assholes until they give us what we need. We form a rough game plan before strolling into the empty warehouse.

One of the Romano men hauls himself up from a stack of pallets and greets us.

“Jack.” Enzo nods at him. “Where are they?”

“In the freezer.” Jack grins, gesturing over his shoulder. “We thought they needed to cool down a bit.”

A few of the Romano men loitering around the freezer door chuckle. That’s pretty fucked up, honestly. I’d never think to shove my victims in a freezer before interrogating them.

Enzo takes a deep breath, puffs out his chest, and flings the door open. I watch in fascination as he slips into a character so unlike him that it’s almost like watching a stranger. I plaster on my bitchiest face and follow him inside.

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Two scrawny guys huddle in the center of the freezer on a pile of pallets. They sit up straighter when we enter, putting on a brave face.

Enzo stops in his tracks so suddenly that I almost slam into him. Alfonso manages to catch me from behind, saving me from face-planting on the cold floor.

“Ivan?” Enzo says, shock and confusion dripping from his voice. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Ivan? He knows this guy?

What the hell did we just walk into?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Enzo

Ivan Ratchekovsky pins me with his gaze, fury and resentment flashing in his eyes. For a moment, I’m so shocked I forget why we’re all here.

“You know him?” Rafael asks from somewhere behind me, bringing me back to the present. Ivan spits on the floor, and his buddy laughs, despite the fact that they both look like they’re three seconds away from hypothermia.

Shit. This is not good, not good at all. He’s got the upper hand with shock factor, and now I look weak and stupid.

I spin around and stride out of the room. Rafael storms out after me, Valentina hot on his heels. Alfonso shuts the door behind them after giving me the briefest nod.

Good. Let him take the first round because I'll probably kill that fucker before he can speak a word.

"Enzo, what the hell is going on here?" Rafael growls, grabbing me by the shoulder. I can't stop pacing the length of the warehouse, my mind moving a mile a minute.

"How do you know that guy?" Valentina pipes up, struggling to keep up with my long strides. I take pity on her and stop moving.

"We went to Yale together, same program," I explain. "We weren't friendly. In fact, I always got the feeling he didn't like me, but we somehow ended up in the same circle of friends."

"He's a hacker?"

"Probably," I scoff, shaking my head. "He's good, Rafael. He's damn good at what he does... or at least he was in school."

"So, he's our guy then?" Valentina muses. "But what about the redhead?"

"I have no idea anymore," I confess. A scream echoes from the freezer, and we whip our heads around to see Alfonso slipping out the door, cracking his knuckles.

"The other guy wouldn't talk," he announces, fuming with rage. "But your buddy Ivan asked me to deliver a message to you. He says to tell you that she was never good enough for you anyway."

I glance at Valentina, assuming he means her—but how does Ivan know Valentina?

She stares at Alfonso, equally confused.

“Not you, apparently,” Alfonso clarifies. “He was talking about the redhead.”

“Who the fuck is the redhead?” I demand, storming back inside the freezer. Ivan’s buddy cowers on the pallets, blood oozing from his skull. He’s not laughing now, is he?

I march straight up to Ivan and get in his face. His nose has been dislocated, and it’s gushing bright red blood down the front of his jacket. His arm sits at an odd angle, and I admire the quick and tidy work Alfonso managed to do in such a short time.

“Who?” I demand, my voice dripping with venom. My entire being is consumed with so much rage and frustration it feels like I’m being boiled alive. I focus on my fingers, willing them to stop shaking.

Rafael quietly enters the room, catching my eye.

“You know who,” Ivan spits, blood gurgling through his busted teeth.

“Tell me again,” I grit through clenched teeth. “What’s her name?”

“You took her for granted.” He shakes his head, enraged over some slight I don’t even know about. “You didn’t deserve her then, and you don’t deserve her now. But I?”

“What?” I laugh in his face. “You love her? Is that why you’re here, helping her destroy my life?”

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I realize I hit a sore spot and grin triumphantly. That's the winning ticket. This kid is in love with the redhead.

"Guess what, asshole?" I growl, laughing cruelly in his face. "She doesn't want you. She wants me. That's why you're just a lowly thug on her payroll and I'm the one she's desperate for."

"Fuck you," he grunts, trying to spit in my face but failing with his busted mouth. Valentina appears at my side, ready to play good cop like we planned.

"Enzo, you're being cruel," she whines. "Let the boy speak, will you?"

She slinks over to Ivan, getting entirely too close to him. I shift a few inches, ready to grab her if I need to. I trust her, but I don't fucking trust him.

"Come on now, let's get her name out in the open," she cajoles him. "You want that, don't you? You want everyone to know her name because she deserves the glory?"

Ivan's eyebrow twitches, and his eyes dart back and forth between us as he tries to decide which card to play. For a second, I think he's going to spill the truth, but then he goes rogue and grabs Valentina. Her body slams down onto the pallet beside him, as she yelps in shock.

I don't think. I don't exist. In fact, in that second, nothing exists. I raise my gun and shoot him square in the chest.

"Enzo!" someone yells behind me.

“Fuck,” Valentina growls, extricating herself from his grasp.

“Alexandra,” Ivan whispers, choking on his own blood. “You never deserved... Alexandra.”

Rafael pulls me out of the room as a second shot rings out. Alfonso leads a pissed-off Valentina out of the freezer, his gun dangling from his hand.

“Never,” Rafael growls, getting into my face, “let emotions control your actions in interrogation. We use our emotions to give us power, not to make decisions. Never again, do you hear me?”

I pull away from him and storm outside, desperate for some air. I know I shot him too soon, I know I did it because I lost my control, but what does it matter? We got the name—Alexandra.

“Eight!” I yell as everyone pours out of the warehouse in search of me. “Fucking eight!”

“Yes, yes, we know, The8,” Alfonso grumbles. “Calm down, Cavalli.”

“No, you don’t understand.” I stop pacing. Everyone stops as well, waiting for my revelation. I suck in a deep, slow breath and let it out. “We’ve had the answer the whole time. Eight. It sounds out the initials A.T.—Alexandra Tavinsky.”

“We need the long version of this story, stat,” Rafael announces, leading us to the car. We pile inside and he pulls out of the lot, leaving his men to deal with the bodies.

“I dated her in college.” I launch into the story as we merge onto the freeway. “Dated is a strong word, honestly. We hooked up for a few months, five or six, not sure exactly.”

“What happened?” Rafael asks, glancing over his shoulder at me.

“Nothing, really,” I confess. “At least, that’s how I felt about it. Things just fizzled out.”

I explain how I met Alexandra at a party the summer before my final year. We danced around our attraction for a few months, finally gave in, had some fun, and by Christmas, I’d broken up with her to focus on my last semester.

Once I graduated, I moved out to California right away, and then I met Valentina. I never even thought about Alexandra after things ended.

“What was she like back then?” Valentina asks, her brow creased in confusion. “I mean, was she this insane?”

“Hell no.” I almost laugh. “She was totally normal. I mean, okay, no one’s totally normal, right? She had some interesting quirks, and she was kind of... what do you call it? Intense, I guess.”

“Intense?”

“Yeah,” I say slowly, suddenly seeing red flags I never noticed before. “Things with her seemed somewhat premeditated, as if she’d secretly planned every accidental encounter, and?—”

“She stalked you?” Rafael clarifies.

“Okay, now that we’re talking about it, maybe,” I admit. “At the time, it seemed kind of accidental and fated. Like she’d run into me at a coffee shop holding the same book I was reading, and we’d get to talking, but that kind of stuff happened way too often to be a coincidence.”

“Was she a redhead?” Alfonso asks dryly. “Because if she was and you forgot, I’m going to have to kill you.”

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“Nah, she was a brunette,” I say confidently. “Wait, at least I think she was.”

“Enzo,” the entire car groans.

“Wanna check out the orange orchard?” I ask, trying to steal Lenny away from the group after dinner.

“I think it’s called a grove,” Lux chimes in.

No time for your nonsense right now, Lux. “Whatever,” I snort. “Lenny?”

I need her so bad right now. I haven’t been able to stop looking at her all afternoon—no, wanting her, desiring her, obsessing over her. Having Lenny in my life again is dangerous.

“Fine.” She shrugs, putting her plate away and pulling on her coat. “Just don’t get us lost, okay? I’m not made to survive in the woods.”

“Noted.” I grin, tugging on my own jacket. We step outside into the frosty February air, and I inhale deeply. “The snow smells so crunchy, don’t you think?”

She laughs in confusion, eyeing me like I’m an alien or something, but I don’t even care. I grab her hand and pull her down the steps and into the snowbanks.

We giggle like little kids as we run and trip through the snow, throwing snowballs at each other and slipping on ice.

By the time we make it to the orange grove, we're both breathless and flushed, gasping for air. I spin her around and press her back up against the wooden fence. She arches completely, leaning back to look at the night sky, and I follow her lead.

"The stars are dizzying," she announces in wonder. "There are so many! You never see this in the city."

"Fine," I grumble. "I'll admit it's the one good thing about country living."

"Don't be such a city mouse, Enzo." She laughs, beaming at me and taking my breath away. Here, under the inky night sky filled with millions of stars, she's the most beautiful version of herself—carefree, glowing, and happy.

"Come on," I gasp, pulling her under the fence and daring her to race me through the grove.

Running through such tall snowbanks is a grueling ordeal, even for someone like me who swims laps every day. We collapse onto a mound of snow under a scraggly orange tree, gasping for air.

"You're... insane," Lenny pants out, clutching her chest.

"Yep," I breathe before rolling over and pinning her down. Her mouth is open, hot puffs of air coming hard and fast. I kiss her flushed cheeks lightly and then her lips. She moans into my kiss, pulling me closer.

I want to feel her, to touch and lick and kiss every single inch of her, but the snow is making things difficult. It's seeping through our clothes, weighing us down, and probably causing pneumonia. I break away, and she whines, pouting at me.

"The snow, baby," I say, scooping her up and glancing around. We're surrounded by

orange trees and snow—nothing else.

I press her up against the tree nearest to us, urging her to wrap her legs around me. She's kissing me feverishly, like nothing else in the world matters at this moment.

I slip my hands under her ass to support her while she moves her hands between us, desperately trying to shift our clothes aside enough to feel me.

"We're going to have to move fast." I grin, eyeing her half-lidded eyes and rosy cheeks. "I personally don't want frostbite on my balls."

"No, we definitely don't want that," she purrs, trapping my mouth with another kiss. I let go and lean fully into the kiss, feeling every single brush of her tongue on mine, tasting the wine on her lips, drowning in the warmth of her.

I gasp when I feel her ice-cold fingers circle around my cock. She gives it one stroke but takes pity on me and guides it inside her.

As soon as I sink in, my head spins. What a heady feeling it is—sliding into a warm, wet pussy in sub-zero temperatures under a blanket of sparkling stars.

We start off nice and slow but quickly realize we'll have to adjust to a much more aggressive rhythm. This is why people have sex on the beach, not in the snow.

The cold seeps in through my jacket, creating an intoxicating combination of goosebumps mixed with Lenny's hot breath on my face.

"Yes, yes, yes," she urges me as I thrust deeper and harder with each movement. "I'm so close, Enzo, don't stop."

"Good girl," I encourage her. "Get your pleasure."

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She grinds her hips into me, meeting me at every thrust, and the added sensation sends both of us over the edge. I throw my head back, spinning in a world of stars, while my body is firmly lost in Lenny's touch.

She screams my name, biting down on my neck, and it pushes me to climax.

We lean into each other, trying to get our ragged breathing under control. When I pull out, I feel the rush of cold air against me and gasp.

We quickly adjust our clothing and wander back through the grove hand in hand.

"I wish we could do this every day," Lenny says dreamily as we approach the house.

"I don't think the frostbite on my ass agrees."

"So that was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, then?"

I nod vehemently, pulling her into the main house and toward the fireplace. I mean, it was fun and hot and new, but I prefer the comfort of the indoors.

"I want a lifetime of once-in-a-lifetime experiences with you," she whispers, pulling me against her.

I couldn't agree more.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Valentina

A buzzing near my head tears me out of my sleep, and I swat at the nightstand aimlessly. Instead of hitting a bug, my hand connects with Enzo's phone, and it clatters to the ground.

He rolls over, groaning, and pulls me into his body, holding me tight.

"Enzo," I protest, pulling away even though all I want is to stay. "Wait, your phone."

"I don't care," he mumbles. "Too early."

"But it might be her," I say, dangling my body off the bed and feeling around for his phone on the floor.

Goosebumps break out over my skin as the chill of the room hits me. Nope, don't wanna get out of bed. Wanna stay here all day.

Finally, my fingers curl around his phone, and I tumble back into bed, holding it up triumphantly. I wave it in front of his face, but he squeezes his eyes shut and snuggles harder into my body.

"Enzo..."

"Fiiiiine," he moans, holding his palm out. "Let's see what our biggest fan has to say today."

He flops onto his back and unlocks his phone as I bury into his chest, steeling myself for another threat from The8—Alexandra, I remind myself. The phone drops onto the bed, narrowly missing my head.

“What the hell...” I start, about to scold him.

“Jesus Christ, she’s insane,” Enzo whispers.

“What is it?” I ask, barely breathing. He silently hands me the phone, and my mouth falls open.

I stare at Alexandra, every single naked inch of her, stretched out on Enzo’s bed in his penthouse. I can even see the view of the city behind her through the windows.

“She’s sending you nudes from your own bedroom?” I whisper. “That’s pretty fucked up.”

“I don’t want this,” he groans. “I don’t want to see this. Ugh, she’s in my bed, Lenny.”

“Well, it’s official.” I laugh, propping myself up on one elbow. “You’re moving... and burning that bed.”

“Definitely,” he agrees glumly. “I think that penthouse is cursed anyway.”

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I pick the phone up again and study the photo intently. Her long, pale limbs, her fiery red hair, perfect breasts, tiny waist—she’s gorgeous. Too bad she’s fucking evil.

“Hey, she has a tattoo,” I say, zooming in on her hip. “We didn’t notice that when she sent me the lingerie photos.”

Enzo sneaks a one-eyed peek at the photo and nods his head. “That’s definitely her. I remember that butterfly tattoo.”

For a second, I’m consumed with jealousy. He remembers that tattoo? He probably kissed her there, whispered sweet words to her, made love to her.

“Did you love her?” I ask quietly, putting the phone away. His eyes pop open and he bursts into laughter. “It’s a serious question,” I huff.

“No, Lenny,” he says solemnly, trying to hide his laughter. When he sees my eyes watering, he instantly sobers up. “I never loved anyone except you, promise.”

“It’s okay if you did,” I whisper, trying to push the jealousy out. “She must have loved you.”

“I don’t think love has anything to do with this,” he says, serious now. “You don’t do this to someone you love. This is about obsession and control.”

“So, what next?”

“I think I might just call her up,” he muses. “Is that stupid? After all of this, to just...

call her?”

“We have no other ideas,” I say, but my heart beats nervously inside my chest.

Up until now, The8 has been a nameless, faceless threat. Now, knowing who she is and seeing every single part of her makes me even more terrified.

That what? He’s going to leave you for her? After all this?

I shake my head, shoving my evil inner voice away. Pushing myself off Enzo’s chest, I slip out of the warm, inviting bed and throw on some clothes.

He sits up, resting against the headboard and watching me. I know I’m being weird, giving these baseless insecurities too much control, but I can’t help it.

“Lenny,” he calls me softly. “Come here.”

“No,” I huff, busying myself with my jacket. The zipper gets stuck, and I jerk it up and down, my frustration growing. Enzo comes up behind me, softly encircling my hands with his, and I let the jacket fall to the floor.

“Lenny, stop,” he whispers, pulling me into his chest. “What’s going on in your head right now?”

“It’s stupid,” I mutter into his naked chest. Hot, painful tears prickle against my eyelids, threatening to spill.

“Your feelings are never stupid,” he asserts, stroking my hair. “Talk to me.”

I suck in a deep breath, trying to ground myself and my silly emotions.

It's like opening myself up to Enzo again opened the floodgate of tears I hoarded over the last few years. I didn't allow myself to feel anything, so now I'm feeling everything.

"I'm worried you're going to see her again," I start, my voice shaky and muffled by his chest hair, "and you'll decide she's the better option."

He's quiet for a second, stroking my hair and swaying us slightly in the frosty air. I run my hands up his back, feeling goosebumps popping up under my touch.

Finally, he sighs deeply and kisses the top of my head. "You remember the day we met?"

"Of course." I laugh, choking on my stuffy nose. "You spilled coffee all over my dad because you were checking me out."

"Well, Lenny," he whispers, pulling me in even tighter, "that was the moment I decided I'll never be able to choose anyone over you. I was yours, forever, whether you wanted me or not."

"Okay, okay." I sniffle and sneak a peek at him. He looks so serious, and it feels very non-Enzo, so I decide to break the moment for once. "Stop being a cheeseball. I get it."

An hour later, with our bellies full and the caffeine hitting us, we pile into Rafael's office.

Lux has bundled the kids up and forced them outside. I hear peals of laughter coming from the snowy garden outside the window and smile at how carefree life is here.

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Rafael has gone to the city to negotiate a business deal for the Romano empire today, so we've taken over his space.

Alfonso has the phone glued to his ear, pacing the length of the room, as he explains the entire situation to my father. I graciously excused myself from that conversation to help Enzo search through the files he's pulled about Alexandra.

"It says here that she owns a townhouse in midtown," I say, studying the address.

"I'll have someone check it out." He nods, shooting off a text on Rafael's burner phone.

We still have no idea how Alexandra managed to track our burner phones and send that message this morning, but it's worrying the crap out of me.

"You're sure she can't find our location through the phones?" I ask for the millionth time.

"Trust me." He smiles, never annoyed with me, never harsh. "I scrambled the lines so she'll end up at a dead end if she tries."

It should make me feel better, but it doesn't. In my mind, if she's able to contact Enzo on his burner phone, she can do anything.

We spend hours poring over her files and information, chasing leads that take us nowhere. By the time the sun moves low in the sky, my eyes are burning and my head's a mess.

Lux bustles into the office and forcefully drags us out to eat lunch. We sit down for a meal of soup and sandwiches, but I barely taste the food.

“You both look like someone stole your dog and peed on your lawn,” she finally says. Peed on my lawn?

“Ugh, we can’t find a way to get to her,” I groan, pushing away the remains of my soup. Enzo swoops up my bowl and downs it in seconds.

“We’ve got Romanos and Rossis combing the entire city,” Alfonso explains. “Nothing. Not one single sighting.”

“And I can’t trace anything back to an active phone number,” Enzo mumbles, shoving the rest of my sandwich in his mouth.

“What about the Russian guys you picked up?” Lux asks.

“They’re...” I pause, eyeing Matilda. She’s sipping on her soup, but I can tell she’s listening to our conversation. “No longer with us.”

“But they had phones, right?” Lux asks, suddenly excited. “I mean, they had to communicate with her somehow. Did anyone search the car? Or their pockets?”

“Fu—”

“Language, Enzo,” Lux threatens.

“—unky fresh fly boy,” he stutters, glancing at Matilda. I roll my eyes at him, but I’m suddenly excited, too.

Of course, how did no one think of this earlier? They must have a connection.

“We checked them before we left,” Alfonso confirms. “No phones on them.”

“The car, then,” I say, ready to run there if I have to. “How do we find it?”

“Give me a minute,” Enzo tells me, already digging out Rafael’s burner and walking out of the room.

“Funky fresh fly boy,” Matilda whispers under her breath, breaking into a fit of giggles. A moment later, Rosie joins her, not knowing what she’s laughing at but happy to be included.

Lux cracks up, and that gets me going. Even Alfonso chuckles along.

“What’s so funny?” Enzo demands, walking back into the kitchen with a paper in his hands. That sets us off again, and we’re crying with laughter at a bewildered Enzo.

If we weren’t on a manhunt for a psychopathic redhead right now, life would be perfect.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Enzo

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I know I'm speeding too much when I notice Lenny's white-knuckle grip on the door handle. I glance in the rearview mirror, and even Alfonso looks a bit pale.

"Sorry." I chuckle, playing off my nervousness. I ease my foot off the gas a bit. "Just excited to see what we find."

"Let's make it there alive first," Alfonso mutters, but he goes back to studying the map we marked up with the directions. "The turnoff is soon. Look for a sign that says Sevilla Cabins and Camp."

Lenny spots it first, pointing it out amid the dense pine trees lining the country road. I swing the truck off the pavement, and we bump and rattle down a rocky dirt path.

We pull into a clearing that likely doubles as a parking area in the summer.

We stop at the giant welcome sign and spot the sedan hidden behind it, just like Jack said it would be. I suck in a breath and slip my gun out of the holster, just in case.

"Careful," I warn. "There might have been a tracker on it. Keep an eye out for anyone coming back to claim the evidence."

We climb out and fan out across the clearing, checking every nook and cranny. When we confirm we're alone, Lenny show off her impressive skills and breaks into the car using just a bobby pin she pulls out of her hair.

"Nice job, kid." I smile at her. She winks at me, throwing her hair over her shoulder saucily.

“Sorry to interrupt your flirting,” Alfonso calls, crawling out of the backseat, “but we have a phone.”

“A phone!” Valentina cheers, throwing her arms around him. “It’s really happening! We’re going to find her!”

“The phone is probably being tracked,” I say, trying to stay focused. Valentina’s beaming smile is very distracting, though. “I don’t want to risk bringing it back to Rafael’s place, but let’s see if we can reach her here.”

Alfonso passes it over, and I scroll through the call log, noticing the same repeating number. It can only be her. It has to be her.

My thumb shakes as I press the number and put it on speaker. We stand huddled in a circle, staring at the ringing phone, holding our breaths.

After a few rings, I almost give up, when suddenly, Alexandra’s rich melodic voice breaks the silence.

You finally found me, Enzo. Just wait till I find you.

The pre-recorded message beeps and clicks off. I instantly redial.

You finally found me, Enzo. Just wait till I find you.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I growl, launching the phone into a snowbank. Lenny slumps against the car, sinking into the front seat.

“Looks like she won’t be found until she wants to be,” Alfonso mutters, stalking back to our car.

I glance at Valentina and extend my hand. She grabs it, and I pull her out of the car. She gets caught on the door and curses.

“What’s wrong?” I call, already halfway to our car.

“Ugh, probably just this stupid zipper again,” she calls back, yanking her jacket and slamming the car door closed.

She climbs in beside me and we head back to the house, much quieter on the journey back than we were coming here.

She won’t be found until she wants to be. That’s what I’m afraid of—how far will she go before she reveals herself?

As we near Rafael’s house, I slow down and glance around, double-checking.

“No one took anything from the car, right?” I ask. Alfonso and Valentina both shake their heads, and I breathe a little easier.

The last thing I want is that crazy bitch finding us here.

I peek into the bathroom to see if Valentina is almost ready, but the vision in front of me grounds me in my spot. She’s brushing out her long, silky hair in front of the bathroom mirror, a towel wrapped loosely around her.

I step into the steamy little room, and her eyes meet mine in the mirror.

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“Hey, you.” She smiles. “I’m almost ready.”

I slide in behind her, wrapping my arms around her middle. She tries to squirm out of my grip, laughing and complaining about being late.

On Matilda’s request, Lux threw together a “fairy garden dinner party” tonight ahead of her real birthday celebrations tomorrow.

“We can be fashionably late,” I growl into her ear, pressing her against the sink with my hips.

She smirks at me in the mirror and continues brushing her hair, feigning indifference. I grind my quickly hardening cock into her and a soft moan escapes her lips.

“Enzo, there’s no time.” She tries to brush me off, but her eyes burn in the reflection.

“Someone’s a little wet for me.” I laugh darkly, licking a stray drop of water from her shoulder. She smacks my arm but my fingers find their way under her towel, and I smack her ass harder.

“I’m busy,” she protests, but her back arches, pushing her ass harder into me. “Can’t you see?”

“Nope,” I say, whipping off her towel and grinning. “But now I can.”

I trail soft kisses down her neck, biting gently on her shoulder. My hands rove over her curves, unable to ever get enough of her.

She moans softly, leaning into my body and letting her head fall back. I keep my eyes on the steamy mirror—a perfect view.

She watches as my hand slides down her body, slipping between her legs.

“Do what you need to do,” I whisper in her ear. “But keep those legs open for me.”

“Enzo, what...”

Before she can finish her question, I drop to my knees behind her. She stares down at me over her shoulder, a devious little smile spreading across her face.

“Well?” she huffs when I make no move to touch her.

“Well?” I repeat, grinning like the devil. “I thought you were so busy.”

She scoffs and picks up the little makeup bag Lux lent her. “Happy?”

“That’s my good girl.” I smirk at her. “Let’s not be late now.”

She shakes her head and leans forward to apply her makeup, giving me the most beautiful view of her glistening pussy. All I want to do is bury my face in it, but teasing Lenny is the best part of being with her.

When she gets desperate and she’s begging me for release, that’s what sets my soul on fire.

I slowly slide my hands up her legs, stopping to massage her inner thighs. She squirms against my touch, leaning forward more.

Her forehead’s nearly pressed against the mirror, I notice, chuckling quietly to

myself.Desperate.

With the lightest feather-soft touch, I slide my finger through her folds, and she whimpers a needy little whimper.

“All done with your makeup?” I ask, slipping the finger between my lips and sucking it as she glares down at me.

“Enzo,” she moans. “Why are you the biggest tease in the world?”

I laugh at her desperation and repeat the action. This time, when she glares down at me, I slide my fingers inside her, and she moans, deep and low, falling forward onto the sink. I start up a steady rhythm as my other hand reaches around her and finds her clit, circling it slowly.

She’s trapped between my hands, writhing with pleasure against the sink, and it’s the most beautiful thing I think I’ve ever seen. My lips trail across her hips, thighs, and ass as she gets closer to finishing.

“Faster,” she begs, meeting my eyes in the mirror. Her cheeks are flushed, her neatly brushed hair curling around her face now from the heat. “Harder, please.”

I pick up my pace as her moans get louder. She’s screaming my name, moaning and thrashing against the counter, and I can’t take it anymore.

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I pull my hands away and she curses my name, but my fingers are quickly replaced by my cock slipping into her.

She's so sensitive now, teetering on the edge, and I'm drowning in a lust-filled haze. It doesn't take long for both of us to finish, collapsing on the counter together.

"You fucker," she gasps, her pussy spasming and clenching around me still. "We're definitely late."

"You get to explain why," I cackle, pulling out of her and covering her back with kisses. "Wanna cuddle?"

"Enzo, get the hell out of here," she hollers, but there's laughter in her eyes.

"Funny," I say, my voice dripping with false misery. "Just two seconds ago, it was 'Enzo, harder' and 'Enzo, more.'"

"God, I love you." She laughs, spinning around to throw her arms around me.

We both freeze, unsure of how to handle this. It's not like it's the first time—we said our I love yous six years ago.

"I love you, too," I whisper shyly, burying my face in her hair. "Always have, always will."

She squeezes me extra-hard, grateful that I didn't make it weird, I'm sure.

“Now, will you please, for the love of god, get out of here?” she begs, shaking me and trying not to laugh.

“Aye-aye, captain,” I whisper, planting a final tiny kiss on her nose and slipping out of the bathroom. I hear her sigh heavily, but when I glance over my shoulder, she has a dreamy, happy look on her face.

Lux intercepts us on the way to the main house. She’s balancing a gigantic tray of cupcakes decorated beautifully with icing flowers.

“This way!” she calls, pointing to the greenhouse. We change our course and climb through the wet snow, following in Lux’s footsteps.

When we step inside, I’m shocked—and a little jealous that I was never a six-year-old girl getting a fairy garden birthday dinner.

“This is insane,” I whisper as Valentina gazes around starry-eyed. Lux managed to transform the greenhouse into a magical place.

Steam covers the windows, giving the structure a cozy feeling. String lights hang from the ceiling, sparkling and swaying slightly above the army of exotic plants Lux has gathered.

In the middle stands a long table that Rafael undoubtedly hauled through the snow from the big house. The table is scattered with candles, flowers, plates of colorful pastel desserts, and mismatched glasses full of something pink and fizzy.

Matilda sits at the head of the table, a tiara on her head, grinning from ear to ear.

“Lux, this is too much,” Valentina whispers, her voice cracking with emotion.

I squeeze her hand a few times and lead her to the table. Alfonso and Rafael are already there, tiaras on their heads, looking unimpressed—okay, secretly impressed.

“This?” Lux laughs, scooping rainbow ice cream into tiny bowls full of edible glitter. “It’s only the beginning.”

We spend the night eating way too much sugar, playing games, and giggling like kids. Valentina’s happiness shows on her face, her eyes shining and dancing every time I look at her. She looks so alive again, like she did back when I first met her.

This is the life she deserves. The life I need to give her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Valentina

I wake before the sun comes up and slip out of bed quietly. Enzo stirs but snuggles against my pillow and falls back asleep, allowing me to quietly sneak out the door.

The brisk morning air hits me like a punch, and by the time I reach the main house, I’m huffing and puffing.

Inside, the house is quiet and dark—everyone’s still cozied up in their beds, but I have a mission. I creep up the stairs and find Matilda’s borrowed bedroom. I slip inside and watch her peacefully sleeping for a few moments.

I can’t believe my baby is six years old today.

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For a second, I'm shocked, realizing how long we've been here. Weren't we only coming for a weekend? How long have we been here now?

Between the search for Alexandra and the whimsical magic of this house, I've completely lost track of time.

One more day, I decide. Enough time for Matilda to have her pony-riding, princess-marathon birthday celebration, and then we're heading back to reality.

I push those thoughts out of my head for now and gently rub her arm. She stirs, and a sleepy little smile lights up her face when she sees me.

"Good morning," I whisper, giving her a kiss. "Guess who's six today?"

"Me," she whispers back. "It's me!"

"And what's your birthday wish this year?"

She wrinkles her brow, thinking deeply.

Matilda's never been one to ask for toys or presents—every year on her birthday, she thinks long and hard about her wish and chooses something that always surprises me. Last year, it was time alone with me, so we spent a day at the beach, just the two of us.

"I don't wanna say it," she finally whispers, her mood shifting.

I nod, knowing exactly what she's thinking. She wants to meet her dad—a request she used to make often, but has given up on after being disappointed with my answer too many times.

“Is it about a person?” I ask, trying to weasel it out of her. She nods, turning her head away. “Is it about your daddy?”

“Yes.”

Her voice is so tiny and sad that my heart shatters into pieces.

I've hated hiding the truth from her, but at the time, I truly thought it was the best option. As far as I knew, Enzo was a scumbag who sold our love away, but now...

“You want to meet him?” I ask gently. She nods, one tiny little nod. “What if I told you that you can?”

She freezes, processing this new information. I watch intently as her face transforms into pure joy.

“Now?”

“Soon,” I promise.

“Today? Is he coming to my birthday?” she asks, bouncing up and down on the bed, full of giddy delight. I suck in a deep breath, trying account for every possible outcome.

What if Enzo doesn't want her to know? What if she finds out it's him and is disappointed? What if they bond and he leaves again? What if this thing between him and me is just a nostalgia-fueled hookup? What if... what if... what if?

“Yes,” I finally breathe, because I can’t say no to that face. I’ve never seen Matilda look so at peace before. “Yes, he’s coming.”

“Enzo,” I say quietly when he bursts into the kitchen, “I need to talk to you.”

I stack up Matilda’s pink heart-shaped pancakes and deliver them to her at the table with a flourish. Rafael cuts up tiny pink pieces for Rosie as Lux devours a stack of her own.

Enzo glances fondly at the pancakes but nods and follows me into the living room.

“Listen ...”

Before I can launch into my speech, he grabs me and kisses me so deeply that we sink into the oversized sofa. When he finally breaks our kiss, I’m actually a little dizzy.

He leans back against the cushions, still bundled in Rafael’s old puffy winter coat, grinning adorably.

“You need to stop kissing me so I don’t lose any more brain cells,” I warn, placing my hand on his chest to steady myself and realize I’m straddling him.

How the hell did I get in this position?

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“It’s okay.” He smiles lovingly. “I’ll share my last brain cell with you.”

“Sweet,” I agree. “But this is serious talk. Can you be serious now, or do we need to fill you up with pancakes first?”

“Serious first, pancakes after,” he answers immediately, gently lifting me off him and placing me on the cushion beside him.

“I’m going to tell Matilda the truth,” I manage to say, sucking in a breath and letting it out. “Today.”

He’s quiet for a second, his face bare of any emotion or reaction, and I start to panic.

Oh shit. He didn’t want this, but he’s too nice to say otherwise, and he’s probably thinking of a kind way to let me down...

“Stop overthinking.” He grins, grabbing my hand. “That one brain cell is bouncing around too loudly. I can’t think.”

I turn my brain off and stare at him, willing myself not to think anything. Finally, he nods to himself and turns to face me.

“I want her to know the truth,” he says slowly. “But I want to make sure you’re fully ready for what this will mean.”

“I’m going to let you decide how involved you want to be,” I rush to explain myself. “I’m not saying you have to come to father-daughter dances and carve pumpkins or

anything.”

“Lenny,” he smiles, kissing me so softly it takes my breath away, “I would love to come to father-daughter dances and carve pumpkins. In fact, I’d love to put a ring on that finger, move us to the country, and give Matilda a little baby brother or sister, but...”

But. But! I think I’m about to have a stroke. There’s a “but”...?

“But your father’s threat six years ago,” he reminds me. “If we’re going to do this, I want to make sure it’s safe for us to be open about it. I’m not going to live my life sneaking around your family.”

“I’ll talk to him.” I breathe a sigh of relief. Seeing how much Uncle Alfonso has taken to Enzo, I’m fairly sure I can convince the rest of my family to accept him. My father will be the most difficult part of the equation, but I’m up for the challenge. “Any other objections?”

“Nope.” He laughs, tackling me onto my back and kissing my neck. “Time to make me a daddy.”

“No boys in the house, Mama?” a tiny voice declares behind me. We shoot up from the couch, red-faced and ashamed as Matilda smirks at us from the doorway. Really, this child is six going on sixteen.

“Honeybee, come here,” I call her, sinking down to the couch again. Enzo moves a respectable distance away and perches on the armchair, his foot tapping nervously against the wooden floor.

Matilda waltzes over, shooting Enzo a suspicious look, and climbs up beside me.

“Is he your boyfriend?” she asks plainly, and I nod. I see her doing the mental gymnastics, trying to figure out what all of this means.

“He is,” I start, my voice shaking. I clear my throat and catch Enzo’s eyes. He gives me a reassuring nod, and I continue. “But he’s more than that. Actually, I’ve known Enzo for a long, long time. We were in love, but something bad happened and we couldn’t be together for many years.”

She glances wildly at Enzo, starting to put the pieces together. Her mouth opens into a tiny O, and I hold my breath, waiting for the question.

“And now?” she asks. “Can you be together now?”

“Yes,” he answers for me. “What do you think about that, Jimmy Jam?”

Jimmy Jam? I didn’t realize they were at a nickname level of friendship. I grin at him and mouth a silent thank-you for taking over.

Matilda’s forehead creases as she thinks deeply about the question. She eyes me, then him, then me again, and she leans into me.

“Mama, is he my daddy?” she whispers in my ear, side-eyeing him. A surprised laugh slips out, and I cover my mouth with my hand, forcing it back in.

“Yes,” I finally manage to croak out. She peeks around me, appraising Enzo as if seeing him for the first time.

Matilda’s such a funny kid that I have no idea what’s about to happen, but I let her take the lead here.

“This guy?” She points at him subtly, wrinkling her brow again, and I burst out

laughing this time. Enzo stares at us in bewilderment.

“What’s happening?” he mock-whispers. “Am I being judged? Should I be doing something more impressive?”

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Matilda hops off the couch and slowly walks over to him, pretending to inspect him from every angle. She's really making him sweat, and I can't believe how proud I am of her. What a tough little lady.

"Hi, Dad," she finally says, extending her hand. Enzo accepts it and shakes it.

"I think I just made a business deal," he moans, twisting his face into comedic horror. "And I don't even know what it was."

Hours later, as Matilda's being led around the snowy field on a horse, I watch her and reflect on the entire day. After we told her the story of how we met and fell in love, she questioned Enzo like a little interrogator, but he took it well.

I laugh to myself as I remember their voices floating in from the living room while Lux and I were baking.

"Favorite food?"

"Sushi."

"Ew, that's gross. Choose again."

"Okay, princess cupcakes."

"Wow, you really are my daddy. Favorite color?"

"Gotta be pink."

“Me too!”

“High-five, girl!”

I glance back at Enzo, relaxed and happy by the fire, chatting with Rafael. Lux is telling Alfonso some insane story while bouncing Rosie on her knee.

I crack a smile at Alfonso’s horrified face, knowing that Lux is probably going into way too much detail for him.

The horse trainer leads Matilda back over to me, and I push away from the wooden fence, walking to meet them.

“Again, Mama!” she screams with delight. “Can I go again?”

“I think it’s time for princess movies,” I cajole her, apologizing silently to the poor trainer who’s been walking in circles for the last hour. “What do you think?”

The girls only make it through half a princess movie before they’re both snoring, snuggled against each other on the couch. Lux and Alfonso gather them up gently and take them upstairs to their bedrooms while we crack open the whiskey.

Rafael wanders in from the kitchen holding two wine bottles with swirly straws and shakes his head.

“I’m simply the delivery boy,” he apologizes, handing me a bottle. “Send any complaints to the general.”

I laugh and gratefully accept the bottle. We spend another cozy evening gathered around the fireplace, trading stories and playing cards.

By the time everyone starts yawning and suggesting sleep, I'm so deeply happy that I'm pretty sure I'm vibrating.

I have Enzo back. Matilda has a father. We have new friends. Life is good.

"I'll check on Matilda before I go to sleep," Alfonso says with a yawn, pulling himself out of the armchair.

"Oh no." I jump up, dragging Enzo with me. "Let us do it!"

We tiptoe upstairs so we don't disturb the kids and sneak down the hall to her doorway. Enzo presses a soft, drunk kiss against my temple, and I smile up at him.

Together, we push open the door and slip inside.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. Enzo manages before I do, and when I feel him tense beneath my touch, I know something's wrong.

"Lenny?" he whispers, his voice strained. "Get the lights."

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I hurry to the door and flip on the lights. We stare at Matilda's empty bed, blanket thrown back, her pillow on the floor.

"Maybe she went to the bathroom?" I suggest hopefully, already rushing out to the hallway. Enzo's hot on my heels, heading to Alfonso's room and banging on the door.

When I find the bathroom empty, I spin around, almost knocking into Rafael.

"What's going on?"

"Matilda's not in her room," I manage to breathe out.

My throat is closing up. Terror is sinking its sharp, nasty claws into me. My brain is spinning like it's inside a washing machine. Nothing makes sense.

Alfonso and Enzo stumble down the stairs, tugging on their boots and running out the door. I hear them screaming Matilda's name outside.

Lux bolts up the stairs, briefly touching my shoulder with fear in her eyes, and runs to Rosie's room. She emerges a second later, clutching her baby and shaking her head.

"She's not in there either," she whispers.

I sink to the floor, ugly sobbing and hugging myself. I don't need any messages, texts, or clues this time.

I know who has my child.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Enzo

We fanout across the property, searching every single room and building from top to bottom. I call Uncle Joe as I'm running around the greenhouse, checking behind plants and under tables.

"I'm on it, Enzo," he assures me. "We'll have eyes across the city."

"Get a hold of Jack and Rocco," I grunt, stepping into the chilly air again. "Get a group up here to Rafael's house. We need backup."

"Got it," he says, clicking off. I take a deep breath and try to still my insane heartbeat. I swear, if Alexandra's behind this, I'm going to destroy her. But I already know the answer. I know we're searching in vain.

I bump into Valentina near the house, and she collapses in my arms. She's no longer crying, but I see the terror and anguish in her tear-streaked face.

"Nothing?" she whispers into my chest. I stroke her back, giving her a second of comfort amid the chaos.

"I have my guys keeping an eye on the city," I tell her. "They're tracking every car coming in from this direction. They're also sending a group up here to help with the search."

"She took her, didn't she?" she says, her voice barely above a whisper. "She told us she would, and we didn't listen. She warned us."

“We’ll get her back,” I try to soothe her, but underneath my bravado, I’m terrified.

“Enzo!” Rafael calls from inside the house. We duck inside and join the rest of our tiny crew in the living room.

Everyone looks hollow-eyed and tense. Even Rosie looks concerned despite the fact that she’s passed out in Lux’s arms.

“Let’s head to town and look around,” he instructs, his breathing coming in fast. I know he just sprinted around the entire property line, confirming that the security system had been disabled. “Valentina, stay here with Lux, would you?”

Valentina looks like she’s about to protest, but I pull her in close and place a kiss on her temple.

“He doesn’t want to leave Lux alone,” I whisper. “And you have the skills to destroy anyone who decides to pay an unwanted visit. Please stay with her?”

She sucks in a shallow breath and nods. I know it’s killing her to stay here instead of throwing herself into the search.

“When the Romano boys get here,” Rafael says apologetically, “you and Jack will meet us in town, okay?”

With Valentina’s blessing, the three of us head to the car. Rafael tosses me the keys, nominating me the driver.

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“Just try not to kill us, okay?” He grimaces and climbs into the passenger seat.

Alfonso slips into the back, and I throw the car into drive, flying down the windy driveway. We make it to town in record time and slow to a stop in the main square.

It’s after midnight, and the sleepy town is dark and quiet. Every store window is shuttered, and every resident is long asleep.

“Ideas?” I ask, pulling up beside the little gazebo in the center. My fingers nervously tap on the steering wheel as I scan the dark, silent streets.

“Fuck, I don’t know,” Rafael growls, squinting into the starless night. “We get out and canvas the streets?”

Alfonso’s the first one out of the car. Rafael and I follow suit and convene in the gazebo, spinning around to get a better look at the town.

“Alfonso, take the main road,” Rafael finally decides, slipping into leadership mode. “Enzo, you search the south side—go into the small streets and alleys, too. I’ll take the north side. Meet back here in an hour.”

We nod and split up, determined to find a missing little girl in a dark, sleepy town. We don’t even know if she brought her here—she could be anywhere.

She could be halfway to the city by now. Or on a plane to another country, for all I know.

Despite my hesitations, I make my way through every street, alley, and backyard on the south side of town. After being chased by several dogs and accidentally breaking a mailbox, I end up popping out of the quiet neighborhood on the opposite end of Main Street.

By the time I reach the car, I'm exhausted and demoralized. I lean on the hood, waiting for the others, really wishing I had picked up smoking so I'd at least have some form of stress relief right now.

Rafael's burner phone vibrates in my pocket, and I yank it out, answering immediately.

"Enzo," Lenny's stressed-out voice comes through. "Jack and I are on our way to town. Where are you?"

"Main square," I say. "We searched the whole place, top to bottom. Nothing."

"Fuck," she breathes. "We're coming anyway. Stay there."

Alfonso emerges from an alley and spots me. He looks just as distraught and worn out as I feel.

"Nothing," he says, slumping onto the car and pulling out a cigarette. I stare at it, tempted to ask him for one.

"Same," I answer, after a long battle with my brain. Rafael's the last to join us, crossing the street just as a big Cadillac pulls up and Lenny throws herself out of the passenger door.

"Jesus Christ, woman," Jack screeches from the driver's seat, slamming on the brakes. "Let me stop the car first!"

“We found nothing,” Alfonso tells her sadly. Jack joins us, and we stand under the streetlight, unsure of our next move.

“Then I guess we go to the city next?” Lenny says, rubbing her face.

“Our men are watching the city, and they’re much better equipped than we are,” Rafael gently reminds her. It once again hits me how much he’s changed since falling in love with Lux.

The big oaf actually learned how to talk to people, how to be empathetic and gentle. Wonders never cease.

“I can’t just sit at home and do nothing,” Valentina says, desperation creeping into her voice. I pull out Rafael’s phone again and dial the numbers ingrained in my brain.

This time there’s no creepy pre-recorded message, just endless rings.

I hang up and try again. Everyone watches me, holding their breath—even Jack, who’s probably the least invested in this, stares at me expectantly.

“She’s not picking up,” I scoff. “Not that I expected her to answer and tell us where she is, but still...”

“Can we track that number somehow?” Rafael asks.

“We tried.” I shake my head. “It’s not assigned to anyone, apparently. She’s done a number on the communication towers around here.”

“Let’s head back home and regroup,” Alfonso suggests. “Better than standing here in the cold. Anyway, I think the consensus is that she’s probably taken her to the city, right?”

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Everyone agrees, and even though going home feels like giving up, I don't have anything else to suggest. We pile back into our cars, driving slower this time, keeping an eye out for unmarked vehicles or anything else suspicious.

We troop inside the house, dejected, frozen to the core, and exhausted. Everyone finds a place to sit in the cozy, warm living room, but I still feel the bone-chilling terror of my daughter missing.

"Let me try a few things," I mutter, pulling out my laptop.

As I try to hack into communication systems and traffic cameras, the others try to form a plan. I pull up a live feed of the interstate heading into the city from our direction and let it play on the wide-screen TV.

At least there's that. At least it feels like I'm doing something.

"How did they even find us?" Lux wonders, looking exhausted.

"Maybe a tracker?" Jack suggests.

"Let me see," I muse. My fingers fly across the keyboard, even as I hope I come up with nothing. If they managed to get a tracking device on us here, they're more experienced than we thought.

I log into my tracker database, narrow down our location, and a serial number pops up.

“No way,” I breathe, as everyone gathers around me, jostling for space. “There’s a device in this house.”

“Inside?” Rafael clarifies. “Not outside on the car or something?”

“No, it’s in here,” I confirm, looking around. I enter the number into the system, programming my phone to track it, and follow it straight to Valentina.

Confused, I stare at her, and she stares back, open-mouthed and in shock.

“Me?” she squeaks. “It’s on me?”

I crouch down, inspecting every part of her, and then I see it—a tiny tracking device caught in the broken zipper of her jacket. I pry it out from between the metal teeth and hold it up. The room is silent, no one knowing how to react.

Suddenly, the silence is broken by a strange sound. Classical music? What the hell?

Everyone flies into motion, spreading out to find the source of the sound. But I only see Valentina.

Her face pales, and her hands rise to her mouth, open in horror.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Valentina

“Mussorgsky’s Songs and Dances of Death,” I whisper. Everything starts spinning, and I sway gently. Enzo grabs me, scooping me up and draping my body across the couch.

“What is that?” he demands, his voice rising as the somber tune grows louder. “What does it mean?”

“Found it,” Jack announces, jogging in from the kitchen. He’s holding a cell phone in his hand. The song stops, and everyone looks around, confused.

“Whose phone is this?” Enzo yells, but no one claims it. He snatches it from Jack’s hands and opens the message flashing on the screen.

A photo.

I pry it out of his grasp and open it. When I see Matilda’s small frame huddled in a dark room, I gasp, unable to do anything else.

Another message immediately comes in. A string of coordinates.

I look at the picture of Matilda one more time, confirming it’s actually her, and read the message.

Looking for something? Come and find me.

“This is madness,” I say, shaking my head.

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Enzo shouts out instructions, and everyone flies into motion. Someone pulls me off the couch, and I stumble to a car, dazed and confused.

By the time I finally start to recover from the shock, we're halfway to the city. I clutch the unclaimed phone in my trembling hands, staring at the photo of Matilda.

Enzo's flying down the interstate toward the city, and I pray that we arrive alive. The rest of the crew is behind us, moving at a slightly more acceptable pace, but we're definitely breaking all the speed limits.

"Enzo," I caution him as he swings violently onto the off-ramp. I clutch the handle for dear life. "We can't save her if you kill us."

"I'm trying, I'm trying," he moans, letting the speedometer fall a few ticks. "I can't help it. I'm used to sports cars."

"Well, we're in a fucking pickup truck from 1977." I snap.

He grits his teeth, switching to the map to track our progress again.

"I'm sorry," I say lamely. "It's a lot."

"I know."

"I didn't mean to yell at you."

"You weren't yelling," he assures, throwing me a small smile. "Sometimes we just

talk loud, it's okay."

We're five minutes away from the docks. It looks like the location is on the warehouse side of the river, a place I'm not fully familiar with. Enzo maneuvers it like a professional, though, and pulls up near a large metal warehouse.

"What is this place?" I ask, hopping out.

"It's my warehouse," he says, giving me a confused glance. "She's keeping her here?"

"No, wait." I check the map. "It's closer to the water, around the back of the building."

"Let's check it out." He nods, pulling me along.

We press ourselves flush against the cold metal walls as we near the corner and stick to the shadows. Enzo rounds the corner first and stops in his tracks.

"What is it?" I ask, peeking around him. A large white luxury yacht sits docked near the warehouse, blazing with lights. I double-check the map and gasp.

That's the location?

Enzo shoots me a questioning look, and I nod, confirming this is it. He shakes his head and pulls me back around the corner, away from the yacht's view.

"I don't like this," he says nervously. "This could be a setup."

"We have nothing else," I plead. "We need to check it out."

“We will,” he agrees, gritting his teeth. I see the muscle in his jaw twitch and know he’s trying to assess the likelihood of this ending well for us. “But we wait for the others.”

“Fine,” I agree, even though I’m ready to bolt onto that yacht alone.

We rest against the wall, nervously scouring the parking lot for approaching headlights. I keep my gun pressed flush against my thigh, ready to defend Enzo with all I’ve got if it comes down to that.

“Where are they?” I whisper anxiously. “They were right behind us when we left the house.”

“Lenny,” he whispers, his voice low and gruff. “That was an hour ago, and you know how fast I drive. It might be a few more minutes.”

His hand finds mine in the darkness, and I grab it, holding on for dear life. Silence stretches between us, no sounds around us except late-night traffic and tugboats.

“Enzo,” I beg, itching to go. A minute out here is a minute I’m away from Matilda.

A piercing shriek throws us into action. Enzo’s around the corner in seconds, and I blindly run after him, using the wall as my guide.

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Another scream and we pick up our pace.

“It’s coming from the boat,” I gasp, struggling to keep up with his long legs and athletic body. “It’s Matilda.”

We reach the boat in seconds, and he pauses, glancing down at me. I nod, ready to go. I don’t care what happens from now on—I need to find my baby.

“There’s no time to wait,” he says sadly as another scream floats toward us from the yacht. “Fuck.”

He grabs my hand tight, throwing one last glance over his shoulder at the parking lot, and pulls me up onto the plank with him.

We jump onto the boat, guns drawn and ready. I fly toward the cabin door, but Enzo grabs me by the jacket and hauls me back to him.

“Lenny,” he scolds. “We stay together, got it?”

I nod, tears already forming in the corners of my eyes. I’m trying to follow his lead, but he’s too slow, too intentional. I’m ready to run in there, guns blazing, and shoot anyone who stands between me and Matilda.

Suddenly, the floor lurches under us, and I stumble, falling into Enzo.

All the lights turn off, and we’re blinded by the darkness around us. I spin around, glancing back at the docks, and realize the one streetlight near the warehouse is

growing smaller and smaller.

“We’re moving,” I whisper. I hear Enzo cursing under his breath and attempting to find me in the darkness.

“I know,” he finally whispers back, his fingers tightening around my jacket. “This is bad, Lenny. Really fucking bad.”

A door creaks open, and my heart jumps into my throat. I hold my gun in front of my chest with shaking hands, not knowing what I’m pointing it at.

I hear Enzo suck in a breath as the lights flip back on. I realize I’m still staring at the shore.

The streetlight is so tiny. I see cars pulling up and figures scrambling out. Too late now.

I feel Enzo lower his gun behind me and slowly turn around, knowing full well what he’s looking at. I blink at the blinding light pouring out of the cabin below and finally see her.

Flowing red waves glisten in the weak moonlight. She’s wearing a sheer white gown—like a fucked-up version of a sleazy wedding dress. Red lipstick lines her mouth, and she’s smiling.

A chill crawls up my back. That’s not a welcoming smile.

That’s an “I’m going to kill you” smile.

“Alexandra, put the gun down,” I hear Enzo say. I see figures lurking in the shadows, blinded to what they are because of the bright lights beaming out from below.

The light encircles Alexandra, making her look like some twisted, unholy angel.

“Alexandra,” Enzo warns again, his voice low and thick. “Put. It. Down.”

The figures emerge from the darkness.

I swing my head around, feeling someone grab my arm, and scream.

Then everything goes black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Enzo

“Fuck,” I groan, trying to raise my spinning head.

There’s blinding light coming from every direction, and I have no idea where I am.

Slowly, the memories rush back. Matilda missing, the drive to the city, the yacht—and Alexandra, grinning maniacally as she pointed her gun at Valentina.

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“Lenny!” I gasp, struggling harder to open my eyes. It feels like that time a kid lost control of his baseball bat in middle-school gym class and it soared through the air, hitting me square in the head.

“Slowly, Enzo,” a female voice floats over from my right. “Leo lost control of the baseball bat, that fucking fool... it might hurt for a while.”

A baseball bat, huh? Twice in one lifetime is pretty shitty luck considering I’m not a baseball player.

I finally manage to open my eyes and drag my face from the smooth wood below it. My body feels like it’s swaying, which only makes me dizzier when things start to come into focus. Alexandra hovers near me, lightly stroking my hair.

I try to pull away from her, but my body is stuck in slow motion, refusing to move with its usual agility. Ignoring her, I glance wildly around the room for a sign of Valentina.

I finally spot her slumped on the opposite side of the wooden table, her face resting on the plate in front of her.

Before I can breathe a sigh of relief, my brain fully processes the scene in front of me. We seem to be the grand dining room of this insane yacht, sitting at a table set for a feast.

White flowers and candles line the center of the table, resembling a twisted wedding scene. The room is filled with flowers as well—and big, rough-looking dudes with

guns.

My hand slides covertly down my body to feel for my holster, and I realize I'm naked except for my briefs. A look at Lenny confirms they stripped her down to her undergarments as well.

I watch the rise and fall of her back, trying to plan out a scenario where we escape this alive.

"I'm so happy you finally found me, Enzo," Alexandra announces with glee. "It took you a little too long, so I had to take matters into my own hands. But no matter, you're here now."

"Where's my daughter?" I growl, ignoring her wolfish smile. "Give me my daughter."

"All in good time, my love," she sings, twirling around the room away from me. "We're about to have the party of the century here tonight, isn't that right, boys?"

I eye the "boys" she's talking to—three large, tattooed men with unimpressed faces.

Guns for hire, probably; definitely not the scrawny hacker guys we've been picking up. That's good. That means they have no loyalty to her other than money.

I nod to myself, but Alexandra takes it as confirmation of her plan. She prances over to me in that ridiculous skimpy white lingerie and forces herself into my lap.

I use what little strength I have left to push her off, but she just laughs and beckons one of the men over.

The cold nose of a gun rubs against my temple, and I inhale sharply, realizing that I

have to play her little game if I want to see my daughter again. Another man appears behind me, grabbing my hands roughly and binding them behind my back.

Fuck, that's going to make everything more difficult.

Alexandra arranges herself in my lap again, lounging against my chest and stroking my face softly. Revulsion spreads through me as her hands run lower and trace the band of my briefs.

My brain is screaming at me to spit in her face and throw her off, but I ignore it. Play nice, I remind myself, until it's safe to destroy this bitch.

"Why am I here?" I grit through my teeth as her fingers skate over my body. "What do you want?"

"All I've ever wanted was you, darling," she purrs, nestling harder into my chest. "Don't you get it?"

Her fingers tighten around my flaccid cock, and I bite my lip to stop myself from screaming at her. Valentina moans, trying to raise her head.

I watch her stir, silently pleading for her to pretend to be out cold for a little longer. Alexandra notices the movement and hops off my lap, sashaying over to her.

"And her?" I ask, desperate to keep her talking. "What do you want with her?"

"Oh, this one?" Alexandra laughs, gripping Lenny tightly by the hair and forcing her to sit up. "She's fish food for all I care."

Lenny moans, squinting into the brightness of the room. Her eyes instantly meet mine, her brain moving much faster than mine did.

I see her process everything, from the table to our lack of clothes and weapons. The color drains from her face, and her eyes grow desperate, searing into my soul.

“Where’s my daughter?” she manages to gasp. Blood trickles from her nose, landing delicately on the white napkin folded in front of her, but she doesn’t seem to notice. “Where is she?”

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“My daughter, my daughter,” Alexandra groans, violently pulling her fingers from Lenny’s head. I see her wince, knowing Alexandra purposely pulled out a chunk of hair. “Why does everyone care so much about that whiny little bitch?”

Neither of us responds. My eyes are glued to Valentina’s, trying to silently communicate love, reassurance, and hope.

She gives me the tiniest, indiscernible nod, letting me know she’s following my lead—not that I have one yet.

I need to figure out more. I need to get inside Alexandra’s head.

“Alexandra,” I try again. “Why? After all these years? We broke up in college... I don’t understand this.”

“Oh, we didn’t break up.” She whirls around, shooting me a dark look. “No, Enzo, some little bitch got in the way, didn’t she?”

She shoots Valentina a withering glare, and my mind spins. I broke up with Alexandra at least six months before I even met Lenny, and that was over six years ago.

My brain hurts from these insane mental gymnastics, but I try again.

“So, you think Valentina is the reason I broke up with you?”

“You didn’t break up with me,” Alexandra screeches and slams her fists down in frustration. “She seduced you; she’s the reason. She muddled your brain... I know it,

Enzo. You never wanted to leave me. We were in love!”

In love? Okay, she’s definitely struggling with reality.

“Alexandra,” I say softly, trying to switch tactics. “We weren’t in love. We were hooking up for a few months, that’s it. We?—”

I stutter, noticing Valentina’s eyes get rounder. She shakes her head subtly, warning me to stop now, but it’s too late.

Alexandra’s nostrils flare, the color rising to her neck and chest. She pulls herself up to her full height, throwing her shoulders back, and circles Valentina like a vulture.

“I mean, it’s not that I didn’t like you at the time, but...” I plead, trying to correct my mistake. Fuck, I shouldn’t have said anything.

“But what?” she cries, her eyes moving wildly across my face. “See? She’s got you brainwashed! You did love me, Enzo! All those little notes you left for me, the letters, the flowers... don’t deny it.”

What the fuck is she talking about?

I wrack my brain for any memory of having sent her flowers or love notes and come up with nothing. It was literally just casual, meaningless sex.

I open my mouth to speak, but it quickly turns into a scream as she grabs a thick candlestick and smashes Valentina across the cheek with it. Valentina gasps, lurching forward in her chair as tears spring from her eyes.

Alexandra tosses the candlestick carelessly onto the floor and storms up the stairs, leaving us alone with a room full of silent, dangerous-looking men.

“Lenny,” I whisper, my voice urgent and raw. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she chokes out, rubbing her quickly bruising cheekbone. That’s when it hits me—Lenny is unbound and none of these guys are going to take the initiative to tie her up without command.

She realizes it at the same time as me and we sit, staring at each other silently.

“Enzo, we need to—” Valentina’s rushed words cut out as the door swings back open and Alexandra troops down the stairs, followed by a row of maids in skimpy uniforms.

They circle the table, setting down dishes and opening serving trays. My eyes follow their movements, wondering what fresh hell this is.

“Time to eat!” Alexandra announces, her foul mood from two minutes ago long gone. She prances over to me, lodging herself in my lap again, and motions for the maids to serve us.

As they scoop potatoes, chicken, and vegetables onto our plates, Alexandra pours herself a glass of wine.

“This smells good,” I say, keeping my voice neutral. Maybe the only way out is to play along with this madness?

“Doesn’t it?” She grins into my face. I wince as she licks my cheek, pressing a kiss to my temple. “Not as good as you, though.”

“What’s the occasion?” Valentina asks quietly.

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“It’s our wedding night,” Alexandra announces, grinning at Valentina with vengeance. “And your funeral, I guess, so dig in. It’s probably going to be your last meal.”

She turns back to me, softly nuzzling into my neck. I grit my teeth and flash an apologetic look at Lenny, who stares back in shock.

“Alexandra,” I whisper, my voice low and steely, “I don’t want to marry you. This is insane. You need help, the type of help I can’t give you, and this... this isn’t the way to do it.”

Valentina sighs deeply across the table, shaking her head slightly. Alexandra’s head whips up from my chest, her eyes boring into mine. The look is unhinged, deadly—I can tell she’s deeply disconnected with reality, and for once in my life, I’m frightened.

“Alexandra!” Valentina’s voice rings out from across the room. It’s dripping with faux sadness and defeat. “You win. He’s yours. You deserve him more than I ever did.”

Alexandra’s rage deflates, and a triumphant smile replaces her scowl. She rises from my lap and wanders over to Valentina, her wine glass dangling from her fingers.

I hold my breath as she gently strokes Valentina’s hair.

“Finally,” she whispers, leaning down to her. “You finally admit it. Tell me you stole him. Tell the truth.”

“It’s true,” Valentina chokes out, shaking slightly as Alexandra’s fingers curl into her hair again. “It’s all true... I brainwashed him. I took him from you because I was... jealous. You’re perfect, you’re everything he’s ever wanted.”

“Bravo,” Alexandra says happily, unwinding her fingers out of Lenny’s hair to clap. Wine splashes onto the ground, and I realize that’s not her first glass.

“Get her drunk,” Valentina mouths in my direction. “Play along.”

“Since the truth is out in the open now,” I rush to play along, “let’s toast to... second chances!”

“Excellent idea!” Alexandra proclaims. She grabs a bottle and pours a glass for Valentina, pushing it at her, none too gently.

She pours a second glass for me, but when she notices my hands are bound, she pauses. I shrug helplessly, flashing her as charming of a smile as I can manage.

“Untie him!” she commands no one in particular.

I feel the cold blade of a knife glide between my wrists, snapping the ropes that bind me. When my hands are free, she thrusts a full glass of wine at me and raises hers in a toast.

“To second chances!” she cheers, smiling at me. Her eyes are glazed and her movements slow, making me wonder if she’s mixing her wine with something a little stronger. She spins and glares at Valentina. “And untimely deaths!”

I raise mine in the air, nodding at Valentina, who follows suit. As Alexandra throws her drink back, Valentina and I take fake sips, quietly letting the liquid drip onto the floor.

“And my daughter?” I ask Alexandra as she straddles my knee. She wraps her arms around my neck and pulls herself closer, moaning lightly. I grit my teeth but force myself to stay still. “Can I see her one last time?”

She acts like she hasn’t heard me, picking up her pace, moving her hips against me and grinding her pussy against my thigh. Her breathing picks up, and her face flushes. I glance helplessly at Valentina, my eyes widening as I realize what’s happening.

I swear if she makes herself cum on my thigh, I’m going to lose my cool. There’s no way I can sit here and let her do this.

“Alexandra!” Valentina’s voice rings out again. That seems to get her attention, and she slows down, the veil lifting from her hazy, alcohol-fueled movements. “He wants to see his daughter! Please?”

“Ugh, you’re so fucking needy,” Alexandra moans, pulling herself off me.

I discreetly use the tablecloth to wipe my thigh, but I don’t think I’ll ever be able to erase the memory of that deranged scene from my mind.

“Let’s have a family dinner,” I plead, knowing that I’m making no sense but grasping for straws.

“A family dinner,” Alexandra repeats slowly, stumbling around the room and searching for a full wine bottle. “That’s a brilliant idea.”

She staggers to the stairs, and a plan hatches in my mind. I eye the big, hired guns she’s got posted at the door and call out to her.

“Without the security detail, sweetie,” I say lovingly, smiling at her. She melts at my sudden change in mood, grinning happily. “I want it to be intimate.”

“You’re right, darling,” she calls out, motioning for the security guards to follow her up onto the deck. “I’ll be right back! Don’t miss me too much.”

“Already dreaming of you,” I call out as Valentina stifles a laugh. “We may be able to get out of this,” I whisper to her as soon as the doors slam closed, hope soaring in my chest for the first time tonight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Valentina

“As requested,” Alexandra drawls, tripping down the stairs. “Family dinner time with your daughter!”

My eyes snap to the stairs in search of Matilda’s dark curls. Every muscle in my body tenses, ready to run and scoop her into my arms.

I’ll fucking jump off this boat and swim us both to shore if I have to.

For a second, I think I’m hallucinating. Behind Alexandra stands a little girl, no older than Matilda, but her hair is long, straight, and blonde.

Her face is tear-streaked, and her nose drips down her chin, giving her a pitiful look. She’s clutching a little dirty teddy bear, picking at the loose threads with her fingers.

“Alessia, sit down,” Alexandra commands. When the girl makes no motion to move, Alexandra shoves her roughly in Enzo’s direction. “Sit with your daddy!”

I don’t even know this child, but my motherly instincts spring into defense mode. I push myself out of my chair, but one deadly look from Alexandra and I slowly lower myself back down.

“This... isn’t Matilda,” Enzo says carefully. I can see his brain moving a mile a minute, wondering where the hell Alexandra got this girl.

Kidnapped, probably. I'd put nothing past her.

"This is your daughter," Alexandra explains, waving vaguely at the little girl. "Go sit with daddy, I said!"

The little girl scampers toward Enzo, pausing at the corner of the table, unsure of what to do. Enzo's eyes fill with pity, and he gestures to the chair next to him.

"That looks like a good place to sit," he whispers gently. The little girl eyes him suspiciously. "Best chair in the house, I heard."

I watch her slip quietly into the chair and stare at the empty plate in front of her. She looks so hungry.

My heart breaks, and even though I'm still confused and terrified, I slowly rise out of my chair. Alexandra, once again perched on Enzo's lap, watches with interest.

My movements are intentional, soft. I hold my hands up slightly in front of me, conveying that I'm not a threat as I make my way around the table to the girl.

Ever so slowly, I reach for the potatoes and scoop some onto her plate. Alexandra snorts with amusement, her eyes dancing.

"Maybe she can be our maid," she goads, rubbing herself on Enzo's chest like a cat marking its territory. Enzo grits his teeth but forces out a fake laugh, nodding along.

I ignore them, focused on feeding this starving child in front of me. Once her plate is full, I slowly back away, moving to my assigned seat again.

The door catches my eye—it's so close, I could make it there in less than two seconds. It's open, swinging slightly in the breeze.

I see nothing but pitch-black darkness outside.

Enzo meets my eyes, shaking his head slightly. I fall back into my seat with defeat. Where the hell is Matilda?

For a second, I think that Alexandra never got to Matilda, and this was all a setup. I stare at the tiny thing as she picks at her chicken, noting her bright green eyes and strawberry-blonde hair.

“Darling,” Enzo’s voice cuts into my thoughts. “I thought you were going to bring Matilda down here for family dinner. This isn’t Matilda.”

“I brought you your daughter like you asked,” Alexandra purrs from his arms. “Oops, I mean our daughter. I’m so happy you can finally meet her!”

“Our... daughter?” Enzo pales. He looks like he’s about to be sick, but I feel nothing.

I figured it out the second that little girl smiled at me after I served her food—those dimples, that crooked little smile, that’s all Enzo.

“Alessia!” Alexandra snaps, her voice mean and cold. “Say hello to your father.”

“Hi, Father,” Alessia whispers, not raising her eyes from the table.

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“But... Alexandra,” Enzo stammers. His fingers grip her arms, turning her to face him directly. “How could this be? And you never told me?”

With Alexandra’s full attention on him, I take my chances. I know it’s stupid, I know they’re probably going to shoot me the second I step outside, but I can’t sit here playing games until she decides to shoot me.

I need to find my daughter.

I slip out of my seat and bolt, taking the stairs two at a time. I hear Alexandra’s angry voice behind me, yelling for me, but I don’t stop. I burst into the cold night air, looking around wildly.

“Hey...” one of the thugs she hired drawls, noticing me. I elbow him in the ribs, knocking the air from his lungs, and punch him in the throat. He goes down smoothly, and I land a hard kick in his groin.

“Matilda!” I call wildly, racing around the deck. My legs are shaky and my head is throbbing, but I don’t care.

Another one of the goons pops out from a different set of doors, and I duck into the shadows as he fires a shot at me.

“Mama!” I hear a tiny voice call from somewhere beyond him.

She’s here. My baby is here.

“Valentina!” Alexandra screeches as thick, strong arms wrap around my waist, hauling me back.

I kick and flail wildly as my body is thrown into the air by the guy I took down near the door. He outmaneuvers me, dragging me back to the dining room entrance and tossing me down the stairs.

I land in a twisted heap of limbs, but I’m okay—no broken bones, no head trauma.

Alexandra steps over my body, shaking her head angrily at me. She adds a kick to my ribs for good measure and finds her way back to Enzo.

I pull myself off the floor and limp back to my chair.

“See, Enzo? I told you we can’t trust her,” Alexandra whines. “She’s insane, unhinged. She tried to kill my security guard out there. How could you ever leave me for her?”

“I’m so sorry, my love,” Enzo apologizes. “But that’s in the past, isn’t it? Now it’s you and me, forever.”

Alexandra gazes at him adoringly, smiling like the Cheshire cat. When a security guard stomps down the stairs, she barely turns her head.

“Get the other girl,” she mutters to him, snapping her fingers.

The other girl. My girl.

I hold my breath, my eyes trained on the doorway, waiting for Matilda to emerge. Alexandra’s blabbing to Enzo about their love, the future, and all kinds of batshit-crazy nonsense, but I ignore her.

Finally, a set of tiny feet appear at the top of the stairs, and Matilda hesitantly descends.

“Mama!” she cries when she spots me, and I explode out of my seat to scoop her up into a hug. I hear Enzo breathe a sigh of relief, seeing that she’s relatively unharmed.

“Tie her up,” Alexandra commands to the thug hovering over us. “Both of them, sneaky little bitches.”

“It’s going to be okay,” I whisper into Matilda’s ear as I’m forcibly pulled away from her and tied to my chair.

Her eyes water, but she bites her lip and holds her head up high, refusing to cry. My brave girl.

“More wine!” Alexandra calls, her speech heavily slurred, to the guard’s retreating form. She stands up shakily and stumbles over to Matilda, leaning in close to inspect her.

I watch with hawk eyes, knowing I’ll kill this woman with my bare hands if she touches my child again.

“Too bad she’s half hers,” Alexandra muses, bringing the bottle to her lips for a big slug. “She has your eyes. But then, so does Alessia.”

She glares at her own daughter, and my heart drowns in empathy for the little girl whose own mother despises her. Suddenly, Alexandra’s demeanor changes, and she claps her hands happily, squealing with delight.

This can’t be good.

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“Enzo! I have a wonderful idea!” she announces. “Let’s play a little game! I’ll let you choose which girl lives and which one dies.”

Enzo gasps, locking his eyes with mine. I hold his gaze. This is going to end badly.

“But every choice has consequences, doesn’t it?” Alexandra muses, pulling a gun out of the holster on her thigh and spinning it wildly. “You choose the right girl, and you live. The wrong girl? Well, I guess it’ll be a double funeral tonight.”

My eyes are locked on the gun and the casual way Alexandra’s spinning it. This bitch is going to kill us all.

“Alexandra, please,” I plead, trying to appeal to her human side. “You’re a mother, you must understand how dangerous it is to play with a loaded gun like that. Please, for the sake of your child, put it down on the table.”

“Shut up,” she screams, not even looking at me. She’s staring madly at Matilda, grinning like a devil. Matilda holds her gaze, not shrinking back, just like I taught her.

“You must have some sense of decency and humanity,” I beg, watching her drunk, shaky movements with the gun. “Put it down, please.”

“You!” she growls, stumbling wildly over to me. “Talk, talk, talk. You talk too much! I said shut up!”

She’s got one hand curled around a wine bottle, the other by her side, clutching the

gun. I can see the weight of both of these objects making her slower and weaker.

“The girls have done nothing to deserve this,” I cry, egging her on. I see Enzo slowly rising out of his chair, making a shushing movement to the girls to keep quiet.

Alexandra’s eyes are wild, her face flushed with fury. She sets the gun on the table and uses her free hand to slap me hard across the cheek.

Perfect. Do it again.

Before I can goad her into it, she spots Enzo’s movements out of the corner of her eye and grabs the gun again.

“What are you doing?” she shrieks, whirling to point the gun at him.

“Whoa, whoa, sweetie,” he says calmly, raising his palms up innocently. “I thought you might need some backup. I just came to help you.”

Some of her anger deflates, but her eyes are full of suspicion. I nod slightly at the gun, and Enzo blinks, letting me know he’s on the same page as me.

I have to make her put it down again. It’s our only chance. This might get me killed, but I take a deep breath and call her name.

“Enzo never loved you,” I say, smiling cruelly at her. “He told me horrible things about you. He said he just used you to get off when he needed to. He said?—”

“Shut the fuck up!” she screeches, dropping the bottle on the floor and slapping me with her free hand. The glass smashes, littering the ground.

Matilda chokes back a scream, and I hate that she’s here, seeing this all happen.

She dropped the wrong fucking item. Of course.

“Enzo! Pick a child!” Alexandra says. “I’m tired of this.”

“I can’t,” he says softly, and my heart breaks for him and the position she’s forced him into. Deep down, I know Enzo won’t ever be able to make a choice as horrific as what she’s proposing, but I also don’t see a way out of this.

“Pick one or I do it for you,” Alexandra grits through her teeth, aiming the gun straight at Matilda’s forehead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Enzo

“Alexandra,” I choke out in a panic.

My insides are twisting and writhing with fear—fear for the girls’ lives, for Valentina’s, for mine. It clouds my judgment and makes it difficult to think clearly.

“Sasha,” I try again, recalling the nickname she liked me to use back in college. Her eyes snap to mine, wild and intense, but the name gets her attention. “Sasha, baby, put the gun down.”

Slowly, she lowers the pistol, and I hear Matilda hiccup with fear, but I don’t dare take my attention off Alexandra right now.

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“You remember,” she says softly.

“Of course.” I smile and open my arms welcomingly. She stumbles over and falls into my embrace, still clutching the gun.

Her whole body is vibrating, shaking against me like a leaf in the wind, and I know she’ll snap soon if I don’t act fast.

“I pick you, baby,” I whisper into her hair as she nuzzles into my chest. My eyes meet Valentina’s, and the tiniest shadow of hope seeps into her face. She nods gently, encouraging me to ramp up this little act. “I’ll always pick you. I’m sorry for what happened back then; it’s not how things should have gone.”

“You love me?” Alexandra sniffles, glancing up at me with red-rimmed eyes. “Say you love me.”

“Of course I love you,” I purr, trying to radiate warmth and calm her down. I place a small kiss on her forehead, pulling her close. Now if you’d just drop the fucking gun.

“I love you too, Enzo,” she sobs, peppering my chest with kisses and leaving harsh red lipstick marks all over me.

Her makeup is smeared now. The mascara dripping down her face gives her a haunted look, and I almost feel bad for her.

Still won’t stop me from destroying her the second I get the chance.

“So, let’s end this then,” I plead, gazing into her wild eyes. “We don’t need them. We can just dump them back at the port and sail off into the sunset, together... you, me, and Alessia. A family, finally.”

She stares into my eyes, considering the idea, and for a second, my hope inflates. But then suspicion creeps back into her face, and she shakes her head firmly.

“No, I need them gone,” she says firmly. Her muscles tense, and I run my hands up and down her arms, trying to soothe her.

“We don’t need to start our beautiful life together with murder, do we?” I joke softly. “Let this go, Sasha.”

She hesitates, and I can see the battle being waged in her mind. Maybe she actually wants to kill Valentina and Matilda, or maybe she’s just under extreme psychosis and has no idea what she’s doing, but I’m not about to take my chances.

When she swings her arm up again, pointing the gun in Matilda’s direction, I gently grab her arm and lower it down.

With a deep breath and silent apologies to Valentina, I press my lips against hers. She melts into my kiss, her body going limp and pliable in my arms.

She sneaks her tongue into my mouth, moaning lightly, and it’s all I can do not to push her away. Instead, I hold her close, giving her the intimacy she so craves.

“Okay, fine.” She laughs, shoving the gun into my hands. “I won’t kill them.”

“Baby,” I breathe, internally thanking every deity I’ve ever heard of. “That’s a wise decision.”

“You will.” She grins and steps back.

Confused, I glance at Valentina, who closes her eyes like it’s all too much for her. Alexandra catches my attention slipping away, and fury crosses her face again.

“See, Enzo?” she demands angrily. “You can’t go a second without looking at that bitch. That’s why I need her gone... she’s brainwashing you; she has some sort of evil hold on you. Her and her spawn. Kill them or I will, I swear to God.”

“Okay, okay.” I hold up my hands in mock surrender, but inside I’m soaring. I have the gun. We’re one step closer to safety. Now think of a fucking plan.

“Matilda,” I spin around, catching her worried gaze. She’s gnawing on her thumbnail, watching the entire interaction intently. “Let’s go.”

“The little one first?” Alexandra asks, laughing like a loon. “Perfect, that’ll give me some time alone with Valentina.”

Her voice drips with hatred when she says her name, and I tense up, but I need to get Matilda out of this situation first. Lenny can defend herself if she needs to, especially with Matilda out of the way of danger.

“That’s right,” I agree with her madness. “I’ll take care of her outside, then come back for the bitch.”

It almost physically pains me to call Valentina a bitch, but it seems to resolve Alexandra’s suspicion. She falls into an empty chair and grapples with an empty bottle, looking for more wine.

When she finds it empty, she chucks it straight at Valentina, who ducks at the last second. The bottle explodes against the wall, spending tiny shards of glass

everywhere.

“Matilda,” I holler, half-terrified. “Get over here!”

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Matilda shoots Valentina a questioning look, but whatever she sees seems to pacify her because she quietly slips out of her seat and floats to my side like a little ghost.

I grab her hand and give it a little squeeze, praying she understands that she's safe. She stares up at me, her eyes full of questions and concerns.

"I'll be right back, my love," I say, trying to sell this twisted little act. I bend down and place a kiss on Alexandra's cheek, and she relaxes at my touch. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she trills happily, raising her eyebrows at Valentina with a shit-eating grin. Valentina slumps in her chair, her gaze downcast and defeated.

I know she's playing her own part right now, but the desire to scoop her up and take her away from all this madness is too strong. Instead, I grab Matilda's hand and haul her up the stairs.

I push her out the door and let it swing closed gently behind us. She stares at me expectantly, her fear taking away her ability to speak.

"Honey, I need to do something scary right now," I whisper, squatting down to her height. I glance around for the hired thugs, but they're nowhere to be found. "I need to shoot the bad guys to save you and your mama, but I need you to help me. Can you do that?"

She nods slightly, unsure of what I'm asking, and I curse the PTSD that I'm about to give my own daughter. Both of these girls will need a lifetime of therapy after this—that's non-negotiable.

“Okay, can you tell me where the bad guys were keeping you?” I ask, desperate to hurry this along but not wanting to rush her in such a delicate moment.

She nods, pointing to another door on the other side of the boat.

“In there? What’s in there?” I ask, trying to gather as much intel as I can to protect myself. “How many bad guys were there, do you remember?”

“Ummmm, three,” she whispers, holding up three tiny fingers. “They play games.”

“Games?”

“Yes, like card games,” she answers, unsure of herself.

Okay, so the hired guns are playing poker to pass the time, probably drinking too—that’s going to make life easier.

“Perfect, you’re doing great, Matilda,” I assure her, smoothing down her hair. I place a quick kiss on her forehead, and her eyes water at this show of affection. “I need you to be brave. Can you do that?”

She nods vehemently, twisting her pajama top in her tiny hands. She looks like a mini version of Valentina right now, so determined and fierce.

I point toward the helm, motioning for her to run to the little cabin. “Go hide in there and don’t come out until you hear your mama calling you, okay?”

She nods and bolts to the cabin. I give her a few seconds to find a hiding place and straighten up. The only thing I have on my side is the element of surprise. There are three of them and one of me.

I check Alexandra's gun. Three bullets.

I only have one shot to get this right.

I close my eyes and ask the universe to guide me. I promise to be the best father to both of these little girls if we manage to get off this yacht. I promise to never take life for granted again.

I promise to love Valentina until my dying day.

With this list of promises and a gun, I march slowly to the other door. It's open a crack and I peek inside. Raucous laughter and cigarette smoke float toward me.

I see the three of them at the table playing cards, just like Matilda said.

Here goes nothing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Valentina

Watching Enzo lead Matilda out of this dark, depressing sideshow lifts my spirits. I don't know how this will pan out, but I know Enzo will do everything in his power to make this right.

I breathe a sigh of relief, and Alexandra eyes me suspiciously.

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It's just the three of us in the room now, but Alessia has been sitting in dead silence the entire time, not taking her eyes off the tablecloth in front of her.

The poor baby. I wonder what she's had to endure with Alexandra as her mother.

"So, were you always insane, or did you just forget to take your meds recently?" I ask, not even realizing I'm speaking. Her gaze drifts from the doorway back to my face, and I stare back, prepared to do everything in my power to keep her from running out there and checking on Enzo's "progress."

"Actually, I've been watching you for years, Valentina," she spits, slumping onto the table and resting her chin in her hand. "You're the one that's delusional... running around the country, thinking you're such a big, tough mafia boss. Look at you now, huh?"

"Right," I agree. "Look at me now. You finally got what you wanted. Was it worth it?"

"Worth it?" she hollers. "It's not just worth it. It's what's right. Everything is in balance again."

"You really think you deserve Enzo?" I ask, genuinely interested. My fingers cramp up from picking at the bindings around my wrists, but I stretch them and keep going. "What makes you think so?"

"Because it's meant to be." She shrugs. "The witch told me."

“The witch?” I pause. That’s unexpected. I need to know more.

“Yeah, yeah, when I was a little girl.” She stops, eyeing me, wondering how much to share. “Ugh, no matter. You’ll be dead soon, might as well tell you. My mother took me to the village witch, you know, a fortune teller, you might say.”

“Uh-huh,” I encourage her to keep talking. My gaze slips to the door, but all seems calm and quiet up there.

“She told me that when I’d move to America, I’d meet a man who’d change my entire life,” she recalls, smiling dreamily to herself. “He’d chase me first, sending flowers and writing love notes and poetry. And that man is the one I’ll marry.”

“And you think Enzo’s the one?” I snort, thinking about how Enzo never understood poetry.

“He is,” she says definitively. “He did all that when we first started dating. He just used a fake signature to throw me off, to make it more fun.”

“What?”

“He would sign the love letters as Ivan, of all names.” She laughs, her wild eyes twinkling with insanity. “Isn’t that funny? But I knew it was him. He just likes to have fun with these things.”

Ivan. Ivan Ratchekovsky. The guy from the freezer.

“Why would you assume they were from Enzo?”

“Because,” she says, stretching out the word, “we were together at the time. Who else would it be? He would see the flowers or notes displayed in my room and comment

on them like it wasn't him, but I knew it was him. He's so sweet and playful."

"Alexandra," I breathe, putting the puzzle pieces together. "That wasn't Enzo."

"You're so annoying, Valentina," she chastises, pulling herself out of the seat. "You're not going to convince me he didn't love me. Didn't you see how he kissed me? Me. Not you."

She glances at the doorway, making a move toward it. "What's taking him so long?"

"Alexandra!" I call, desperate to distract her.

Just then, a gunshot rings out, and I jump in my seat. One of the ropes snaps, loosening my bindings just a bit. She spins around, a maniacal smile on her face.

"See? He chose me. He'll always choose me," she gloats. Another gunshot stops her in her tracks, and she cocks her head, listening intently.

"You know what he told me?" I yell, trying to get her attention again. "That he's never loved anyone except me. I'm the love of his life."

She glances at me, ready to brush me off, but my smile floods her face with rage. Another gunshot rings out, and she rushes at me, slapping me so hard I'm knocked back onto the floor.

"Take it back!" she screeches. I flail wildly with my arms and hands crushed underneath me.

Somehow, I manage to roll over onto my side, still attached to the chair. Alexandra dives at me, slapping and kicking as I try to shield myself.

“Take it back! Take it back!” she screams, wrapping her fingers around my neck.

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I summon what little strength I have and pull my wrists apart, begging for the ties to come undone. They loosen just enough for me to slip one hand out, but Alexandra's fingers tighten around my throat.

I gasp for breath, scratching wildly at her skin. My nails dig into her face, leaving angry red crescent marks, but she doesn't pull back.

She's snarling at me like a rabid dog. Her eyes are wild and black—all pupil. She's so out of it. Oh my god, I'm going to die.

With my last wheeze of breath, I manage to kick her off me.

"Stop," I gasp, trying to get a full breath. "Stop."

She launches at me again, but I block her, sending her flying across the room. She slams into the wall but jumps back up, running at me.

Glass shards from the broken bottle embed into her legs and feet, but it doesn't stop her. She's possessed by some psychotic spirit now, and nothing will slow her down.

I fight her off as best as I can, using the fact that I'm sober and quicker than her to my advantage. I duck under the table, popping up near Alessia's chair.

"Go," I whisper, nodding to the door. "Get outside. Go hide!"

She's frozen in place, staring at the tablecloth still. I don't want her to see this, but I can't get her to move. Alexandra grabs for my ankle under the table, dragging me

back under. We roll around under the table, fighting for dominance. The tablecloth gets ripped down at one point, sending dishes and plates of food onto the ground.

Glass shatters all around, water and wine dripping down the table onto the floor, but I finally manage to pin Alexandra down. I glance at Alessia's little feet dangling from the chair, frozen in place.

Oh god, I can't do it. I can't kill her mother in front of her.

"Alexandra," I growl into her ear as she fights me. "Calm down, and I won't kill you."

"Why?" She spits at me—actually spits. A disgusting wad of saliva drips down my cheek, and I shudder with revulsion. "I'd kill you. I'd kill you in front of the world. I don't care who sees."

"That's the difference between you and me... I don't wish you any harm," I plead. "Let me properly restrain you so we can get you some help."

I know my begging and pleading is accomplishing nothing when she starts laughing. That laugh—so depraved and dark—sears into my chest, sending shivers of fear through my veins. It's a laugh I'll remember as long as I live.

"You think I need help?" she growls, bucking me off. "I need you dead, that's what I need."

I see her thought pattern and act before she does, rolling off her and slipping out from under the table. She lunges after me, uncoordinated and clunky. I almost reach the first step when she tackles me back to the ground.

I ignore the sickening thud of my head slamming against the metal step and try my

best to keep her hands away from my neck.

“Die!” she screams, trying to suffocate me.

“For fuck’s sake!” Enzo yells as the door flies open. I glance up at him, covered in blood, gun still in his hand.

“Help,” I breathe as her fingers wrap tightly around my throat again. The world starts to go dark, and I settle into the cozy blankness of nothing.

“Oh no you don’t,” a warm voice calls from somewhere in the distance.

Suddenly, Alexandra’s body is lifted off me and I suck in a deep breath, bringing me back. The room spins and I’m dizzy, but I force myself to power through it.

I see Enzo pinning her to the ground, shouting at me. His voice sounds like it’s moving through water, and I shake my head to clear it.

“Take the girl!” he’s yelling madly at me. “Take her and go up to the helm!”

I force myself up off the stairs, trying my best to avoid glass, and stumble over to Alessia. Her body is stiff, frozen in place, and I pry her out of her chair.

Sounds of struggle come from the other side of the room, and I desperately want to help Enzo, but I’m also pretty sure I’m concussed.

“Alessia,” I whisper urgently. “We need to go. Please?”

She finally relaxes the tiniest amount, but it’s enough for me to lift her up in my arms and run to safety. She never looks back at her mother, but I do.

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I see Enzo speaking calmly, trying to pacify Alexandra while she's screaming and spitting.

A length of rope is looped around his arm, ready to be used as a restraint. The gun is tucked into the back of his briefs, and I thank my lucky stars he was able to get it away from her.

We slip out into the chilly early morning air, and I close the door behind us. No need for Alessia to hear what's about to happen down there.

We run to the helm as I half-pull, half-drag her with me. Once we climb inside, I shut the door and take the first deep, hopeful breath I have all night.

Adrenaline rolls off my body like steam, and my heart thuds so loudly in my chest that I'm sure they can hear it downstairs.

"Alessia, stay here," I whisper once I'm able to speak. "I need to go find Matilda."

Alessia doesn't answer, but she nods gently. Heartbreak washes over me when I see her curled up on the floor like a tiny kitten.

I'm just about to pull myself off the floor and go search for Matilda when a pair of bright green eyes peer out from behind the captain's chair.

"Mama?" she whispers, disbelief clouding her face. I realize how terrifying I must look right now, with cuts and bruises all over me, but I smile anyway.

“Come here, honeybee,” I whisper back, opening my arms. She glances around and carefully picks her way over to me, falling into my embrace.

“Mama,” she whispers again and breaks into tears. My strong girl. She held it in for so long.

I stroke her hair gently as she cries into my chest, clinging onto me for dear life. My eyes meet Alessia’s as she watches us intently.

I beckon for her to join the hug, but she glances back at the floor quickly, refusing to move.

“It’ll take time,” I say to myself, kissing Matilda’s head firmly.

“What will?” she whispers, confused.

“Everything.”

She studies me with her tear-streaked face, as if searching for the hidden deeper meaning of this revelation. Finally, she nods and buries her head in my chest, safe again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Enzo

Alexandra’s got one hand free as I pin her down. Her legs are flailing, trying to buck me off, but I refuse to let go.

A rush of strength helps me overpower her, but she’s too quick. In one smooth motion, she pulls the gun out from the back of my briefs and presses it to my

forehead.

“I’ll shoot,” she warns. Her hand is shaking dangerously as her eyes dart from my face to the gun. “Let me go.”

“No,” I tell her calmly, moving the gun away from my face.

“Enzo,” she screams, waving the gun around. “I’m not joking, I’ll kill you right now. Then I’ll go find that bitch and her kid and kill them too.”

“No,” I repeat, refusing to give in to her sick little games. “No, you won’t.”

She cocks the gun, aiming it straight at my chest. Her pupils vibrate as her jaw hinges open and closed. Definitely consumed something stronger than just wine tonight.

“I’ll kill you,” she growls, attempting to throw me off one more time.

“How are you gonna do that?” I ask gamely, prying the gun out of her shaky hand. “With no bullets? Thanks for leaving just the right amount for me to get rid of your hired thugs.”

Her eyes widen, and her body goes slack beneath mine. I smile tightly, enjoying having the upper hand after feeling terrified of this tiny woman for hours.

“You’ve been ruining my life for weeks,” I hiss at her, getting in her face. “It’s time for that to stop. I need to move on, and you need to move on. It’s time.”

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“I’ll never move on,” she hisses right back at me. I nod, expecting her answer, and unroll the length of rope I curled around my forearm before I came back down here. Her eyes widen again, and she tries to scamper away from me.

“Enzo, no, please,” she begs, twisting and pulling her limbs against mine. “Don’t kill me.”

“Relax, would you?” I brush her off, not understanding her concern.

My lack of care sets her off, lighting a fire of rage and fear under her. She sinks her teeth into my hand and manages to knee me away from her.

“What the hell, Alexandra?” I yell, trying to get my bearings. I grab the rope, and it makes sense. Shit, she thought I was going to kill her with this.

I lunge after her as she stumbles through the cabin, smashing into things and stepping on broken glass. She’s barely functional, moving at a snail’s pace, and I quickly catch up to her, hauling her down to the floor.

“I’m trying to help you, dammit,” I curse as she bites my arm again. “Work with me here.”

She screams obscenities at me, half in English, half in Russian, but it comes out sounding garbled and unnatural. I grab at her thrashing arms, trying to stabilize myself and calm her down at the same time.

Jesus Christ, when did I develop a conscience again? I could kill her in three seconds

and not bother with any of this.

But I wouldn't. And I always had a conscience. Even when I'm shooting men at point-blank range in my torture basement, I still have a conscience.

"You need help, Alexandra," I repeat, trying to stop her from clawing at me. "Professional mental help."

"Oh please," she growls, flashing an angry glare at me. "You're going to kill me, let's not play these little games. Big, bad Enzo, head of the mafia now. I remember when you were just a kid who loved computers."

"I'm still that kid," I whisper, loosening my grip on her arms a bit. My fingers leave angry red marks across her skin, and I feel guilty for being so forceful. "But things change. People change. Everyone needs to grow up and move on."

"Just like you did when you met her?"

"I moved on way before I met her," I say, hoping it doesn't unleash a new wave of anger. "You and I had fun, sure, but it wasn't serious. You need to understand that."

"It was to me," she pouts as her eyes well up with tears. "It was to me."

"I'm sorry I didn't feel the same," I apologize, sadness and exhaustion seeping out of me. For weeks now, the only goal I had was to destroy The8. Now, all I want to do is help her get through this.

Rafael taught me to gather my rage and channel it at my target, but Alexandra isn't the enemy. She's just a lost, confused woman who needs some help, and I can't possibly end her life because of it.

I stare down at her tear-streaked face, smeared with dripping makeup.

“I loved you so much,” she whispers, her glassy gaze dropping from my face to some point in the distance. Feeling like she’s gone to another world, I take my chances and use her temporary distraction to bind her wrists together.

“I’m sorry,” I say, helping her sit up against the wall. “But once you get the help you need, you’ll realize you probably didn’t love me. You’ll get healthy and go on to live a much more fulfilling life. Maybe find someone you truly love.”

“What about the love notes?” she asks again, seeming genuinely confused. “And the flowers? All these years, you’ve been sending them to me. I don’t understand.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I always knew they were from you.” She shakes her head, laughing sadly. “Even back then. You don’t remember coming to my room after class and seeing all the gifts? You’d ask who they were from, and I’d always tell you it was a secret admirer, but I knew it was you.”

“Right,” I say slowly, putting the pieces together. “Alexandra, they weren’t from me. I always thought you were seeing several people, you know... that we weren’t exclusive.”

“But you signed them, Ivan,” she laments. “Don’t you remember that discussion we had about Ivan the Fool one evening? You thought he’s smarter than anyone gave him credit for?”

I freeze, wondering what the hell she’s talking about. How could anyone remember a random two-minute conversation they had over half a decade ago?

Insanity, that's how.

"I didn't... I mean, I barely remember that conversation," I stumble over my words, trying to find a way to explain that it wasn't me. "I would never do that... write poetry and all that, that's not me."

"But you did," she pushes, fully convinced. "You did for me!"

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“You were getting love letters and flowers signed Ivan and thought it was me?” I ask again in disbelief. The connection comes so quickly that I almost laugh.

Ivan Ratchekovsky—he really was in love with her, but there’s no point in telling her now.

“I’m sorry you misunderstood,” I say with finality and leave her to sort out the mess in her head.

I head to the stairs, desperate to find my girls and make sure they’re safe. Behind me, Alexandra starts weeping, but I refuse to turn around.

Whatever she’s dealing with, it has nothing to do with me anymore. The only thing I’m going to do now is hand her over to a nice psychiatric facility.

“Enzo!” she calls, forcing me to stop. I’m halfway up the stairs, so close to the exit now, but I turn around. She’s slumped against the wall, eyeing me sadly.

“I’ll always love you,” she whispers. I can’t bring myself to break her heart again, so I just nod and turn my back on her.

As soon as I step out of the cabin, a sense of peace hits me. Having gone through that horrible ordeal really showed me what matters—my girls.

And that includes Alessia as well, whether or not Alexandra was telling the truth about her being mine.

The helm looks empty when I peek through the windows, but I know they're in there. I can hear Valentina softly humming a song through the open door.

I quietly peek inside to find Matilda curled up in her arms as Lenny strokes her back. Alessia lies on the floor next to them, keeping her distance.

That poor girl. What have the first seven years of her life been like?

I shudder at the thought, resolving to find a way to help her through it.

Whatever it takes, my girls will be taken care of.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Valentina

I hum a pop song softly, rocking Matilda in my arms. Her crying has died down now, and she's staring blankly at the wall, processing everything she witnessed tonight.

The sun has started to rise, illuminating the tiny cabin we're hiding out in, and my gaze drifts toward Alessia again.

I can't take my eyes off her. She's so delicate and tiny, even being a year older than Matilda by my calculations.

Like a little bird.

"Alessia," I whisper, and her eyes meet mine. "Would you like a hug?"

She closes her eyes again, not answering me, and I wonder if she might not speak English. Alexandra went to school in America, though, so that's probably not the

case.

I sigh, accepting the fact that it's going to take more than the offer of a hug for her to open up.

“Mama,” Matilda whispers, glancing up at me.

“Yes, honeybee?”

“Can Alessia come stay with us?” she asks innocently, glancing at the girl. “She told me her mama isn't very nice to her.”

So she does talk—just not to me.

“We'll see about that when we get home, okay?”

The door creaks open, and all three of us tense, ready for the next layer of hell, but Enzo's exhausted face appears in the doorway instead.

“Hi, girls,” he breathes, slipping into the cabin and falling onto the floor. He's covered in scratches, bruises, and bite marks like I am.

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I beam at him, convinced that I've never seen him look as beautiful as he does now.

He saved us. My golden boy.

"Hi," I whisper back, grinning at him.

"Everyone okay?" he asks, appraising us for immediate injuries. When he's satisfied that everyone is relatively still intact, he settles in beside me on the floor.

I lean into his warm chest, savoring how safe and precious he makes me feel, even when I'm half-naked and covered in blood.

I turn around and sneak a quick kiss onto his chin to show him how much I appreciate him. He smiles, nuzzling into my hair.

"I should find a working phone," he says quietly. "Apparently, one of those goons was also maneuvering this thing, and with him... gone, we're just free floating in the ocean right now."

"You mean the great Golden Ace doesn't know how to drive a yacht?" I joke, biting back a giggle. It feels wrong to laugh after everything we went through, and my eyes instantly well up with tears.

"A man can't be good at everything." He laughs, winking at me. "Good thing I'm good at the important stuff, huh?"

"When we get off this damn boat, you'll have to remind me." I wink back, blushing

at our outrageous flirtation in the face of what happened here tonight.

“Let me find a way to make that come true faster then,” he says, gently scooching away from me and heading back onto the deck.

Although I don’t want to let him out of my sight ever again, I nod and pull Matilda closer. He disappears down the deck, and I can’t help thinking about how funny life is sometimes.

Years ago, he was pulled from my life, shrouded in secrets and mysteries I never thought I’d figure out. And now, just like that, he’s back, and it’s like no time has passed.

Matilda sits up, surprising me, and eyes Alessia. I can see the thoughts churning in her mind, trying to make sense of this.

“Mama?” she asks, still staring at Alessia. “The lady said Alessia is Enzo’s daughter, didn’t she?”

“Mmhmm, that’s right,” I agree, eyeing the girl myself. I’m still in complete shock that Enzo had not one, but two secret daughters he never knew about.

What a mess his mind must be right now.

“So, if Enzo is my dad,” she continues, drawing connections in the air with her finger, “that means... Alessia is my sister?”

“Yes, honeybee,” I say gently. “She’s your half-sister, which means one of your parents is the same.”

“So, since we’re sisters,” she asks, her eyes widening in wonder, “are we gonna all

live together? With Enzo, too?”

“Would you like that?” I ask softly, stroking her tiny nose. Her bright green eyes light up, and she clutches her hands to her chest, nodding emphatically.

“I always wanted a sister!” she cries, a smile spreading across her face.

Like a bullet, she’s off my lap and nudging Alessia gently.

“We’re sisters! Did you know that?” she says, plopping down near Alessia’s curled-up body. I watch their interaction intently, praying that Alessia might at least open up to someone her own age.

She slowly opens her eyes and pulls herself into a cross-legged pose across from Matilda. “We are?”

“Yes!” Matilda grins. “Do you want that?”

Alessia hesitates, glancing at me, and I smile encouragingly. Before she can reveal her answer, a piercing shriek makes me leap into the air. I study the deck, seeing no movement around us.

Shit. Alexandra.

“Girls,” I rush to explain, already backing out of the cabin, “I need to go see if everything’s okay. Matilda, lock this door and don’t open for anyone except me or Enzo, got it?”

She nods firmly, trying to be brave, but I see the fear flooding into her face again. I quickly swoop down and kiss her forehead, assuring her that everything will be fine.

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Once I slip out, I stop to hear the click of the lock and then hightail it down the stairs to the main cabin.

My mind is racing as fast as my heart, terrified of what I'm about to stumble into. I don't know where Enzo ended up, but I hope it's nowhere near Alexandra and that shriek.

He might not have been able to kill her, but I sure will if she lays another hand on someone I love.

I burst into the dining room. My skyrocketing panic levels, and the frigid winter air has me gasping for air before I even realize what I'm looking at.

I sink down onto the steps, dropping my head in my hands, and for the first time tonight, I allow myself to cry real tears.

They stream down my face, springing from my eyes in big, fat, salty drops. My entire body shakes with grief as I give in to a moment of weakness.

A commotion at the top of the stairs grabs my attention, and I whip around to see Enzo struggling with the door while trying to load a gun.

He spots me sobbing on the stairs, and the blood drains from his face. Slowly, he finishes loading the gun and closes the door behind him.

“The girls?”

“They’re still up at the helm,” I breathe, wiping my snotty nose on the back of my hand. “Thank god.”

“Lenny, come on,” he urges, pulling me up from the step. “You don’t need to see this.”

“I do, though,” I say firmly. “I’m the reason she did all of this.”

“You’re not,” he growls, pulling me to him roughly.

I bury my face in his chest hair, grateful to have something to block my view of Alexandra’s lifeless body bleeding out onto the floor.

“She had problems. She was very, very sick. I won’t have you blaming yourself for any of this, do you understand? It’s enough that she almost killed us—I won’t have her haunting you for the rest of your life.”

I nod softly against his skin, my tears making it feel slick and hot. He pulls away a bit, trying to see around me, but I can’t let him go.

“Lenny,” he whispers, “let me just confirm that she’s dead. Go back up to the girls.”

“No, I’m staying with you.”

“Fine.” He shakes his head, mumbling into my hair. “Always so damn fucking stubborn.”

“I’m a Taurus,” I retort, not knowing why that even matters at this moment.

“I figured.” He snorts and gently pushes me aside.

I climb to the top step and sink down, watching him approach Alexandra's lifeless body. The scene is so gruesome that I struggle to look.

Good thing I haven't eaten in forever, or I'd be throwing up.

Alexandra's arms and legs are covered in shallow, bloody cuts at strange angles. Several smashed wine bottles around her share the same blood.

Pieces of glass litter her body, sparkling like jewels in the morning sun.

"She must have tried to stab herself but couldn't," Enzo explains, slowly approaching her body. "Her arms were bound."

He kneels beside her, placing his fingers on her throat to check for a pulse, but it's useless. She's very much dead, her neck bent at an unnatural angle and her eyes wide open.

"She jumped, didn't she?" I wonder, glancing around the room. "From the table?"

Enzo clears his throat and straightens up. I watch as he gathers the wine-soaked tablecloth, wincing at the broken glass under his feet, and drapes it over her body.

"I don't know if death was her end goal," he says, resigned and exhausted. "Maybe she just wanted to cause a scene, maybe she wanted to lure us back here, who knows."

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I bury my head in my hands, unable to take any more. I just want to get off this fucking boat and away from this horror show.

“The maids are still here,” Enzo says, appearing in front of me. His heavy, warm hand strokes my hair absentmindedly, and I sink into his touch. “They hid down in the kitchen when they heard the gunshots. They have nothing to do with her, just employees for whoever rents out these yachts, but thankfully, they all had phones.”

“So, someone’s coming for us?” I ask with relief.

“Yeah, Lenny.” He smiles down at me, his eyes so full of love and hope. “My girls are safe now.”

“All of them,” I whisper back with a small, hopeful smile of my own.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Enzo

A month later.

“Everyone’s going to be late for school if we don’t find Mama’s car keys!”

I chuckle at the commotion downstairs as Matilda races past the bedroom, eyeing me suspiciously. I shrug my shoulders at her, the picture of innocence.

“Ugh, it’s Dad!” she shrieks, racing into the bedroom and catapulting herself at me.

Alessia's face pops out of the doorway seconds later. A long-suffering sigh escapes as her face drops in realization, but her eyes dance with laughter.

"Enzo!" she pleads, grabbing Matilda by the foot and hauling her off the bed. "Please give the keys back."

I grin at my girls, one who calls me "dad" exclusively and one who can only bring herself to use my name, for now. They're so different, so unique.

Matilda, with her rambunctious nature and restless energy, is all Valentina, while Alessia is more serious and intense. She also has the driest sense of humor, just like Alexandra did. Yet, they're mine.

Valentina appears in the doorway, slanting her eyes at me in mock annoyance. She juts her hip out, resting her hand there, and taps her foot impatiently.

"Enzo, I swear if you have?—"

"Oh, these?" I ask innocently, pulling the keys from Matilda's jacket pocket. "How'd they get there?"

"What?" Matilda screeches, checking her pockets for more magical items. "How, Dad? How?"

"Girls," Valentina laughs, striding over and snatching the keys from my hand. "Let's go. We're super late for school again... thanks, Enzo."

"No one appreciates my humor around here," I yell as they hurry out of the house. "No one!"

Luigi walks by at that exact moment, raising his eyebrows at me, and I grin

sheepishly. He pauses in the doorway, studying my lazy, pajama-clad pose on the bed, and shakes his head.

“You need to work on your delivery,” he finally says with a smirk and turns his attention back to his phone.

Oh sure, now that his brother doesn’t want to murder me anymore, it’s all let’s-bully-Enzo-but-with-love around here.

I close my eyes and think about how much life has changed in the last month.

Ever since the yacht incident, Valentina, the girls, and I have been inseparable. I even moved onto the Rossis’ compound to spend more time with them, much to Luigi’s annoyance.

As for Lev Rossi, well, whatever Valentina said to him must have opened his eyes. She drank half a bottle of wine, locked herself in the bathroom, and called him one night, intent on setting everything straight.

Somehow, that prompted Rossi to reach out to me.

“Enzo.”

“Lev, it’s been a while.”

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“Let’s just say the past is in the past and leave it at that, shall we?”

“Sounds good to me, Dad.”

“Don’t ever call me that again.”

It wasn’t an emotional conversation, but it was something. I leap out of bed, excited to get my day started. By the time Lenny comes home from dropping the girls off at school, I’m a ball of nervous energy.

My shaky hands encircle her waist, and I pull her into a deep, long kiss.

“Enzo,” she pants, pulling away. “What are you doing? I thought you had that meeting today?”

“Nope.” I grin, pulling her back to me. “I have much, much better things to do today than sit in an office with ten stinky dudes talking about murder.”

“I can’t imagine anything better than that.” She laughs, burying her nose in my sweater. I’m wearing my most embarrassing Christmas sweater, even though it’s almost April, and I can see Lenny eyeing it.

“You like this?” I ask, modeling the sweater as if it’s a bespoke suit.

“I hate it,” she says. “But it suits you.”

“I don’t know how to feel about that,” I say, shooting her a wounded puppy dog look.

“Oh my god, Enzo, just tell me what we’re doing today before you drive me insane!”

“We’re...” I stop, pausing for dramatic effect. Lenny groans, running her hands down her face in annoyance. I lean in close, pressing my lips to her ear. “...hanging out.”

“I want a divorce.”

“We’re not even married.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She brushes me off, ducking under my arm and heading to the coffeemaker. “I’ll marry you, then divorce you. It’s what you deserve for getting my hopes up like that.”

“What’d you think I’d say?” I waggle my eyebrows at her. “We’re going house-hunting?”

She makes an angry little sound and ignores me, busying herself with grinding the coffee beans. I know Lenny is dying for us to buy our own place and start a new life, but I don’t want to rush into it.

Well, I didn’t—until Lux sent me a listing for a beautiful powder-blue Victorian house for sale in an amazing suburb just across the bridge.

That kind of sold it for me. But Lenny doesn’t know that.

I chuckle happily and pull the beans out of her hands.

“Come on,” I tease. “I’ll buy you a coffee. Don’t be mad at me. You love me, remember?”

“Sometimes I question it, honestly,” she grumbles, but I can hear the laughter in her

voice. I drag her outside and we slip into my new family-friend vehicle.

We're both quiet as we drive through the city, lost in our own thoughts, dreams, and hopes. After almost losing everything, life feels wonderfully abundant with possibilities.

As we drive into Redmill, a quirky, lively suburb close to downtown, Lenny relaxes. She's not the biggest fan of surprises, so seeing our favorite neighborhood probably makes her feel more comfortable.

Little does she know, she's in for a huge surprise.

I park at Etta's Diner, our favorite breakfast spot, and she's out of the car before me, bounding up the stairs. When I duck inside, trying to avoid the early spring rain, she's already seated at a table, browsing the menu.

"Hungry little monster today, aren't you?" I muse, sliding in across from her.

"Someone kept me up all night, if you remember," she answers, not even looking at me.

Oh, I remember. The intense, vivid memory of Lenny on her hands and knees in front of me, trying desperately not to scream in pleasure and wake the whole house, knocks the wind out of me.

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I try to control the desperate, unhinged urge to bend her over right here on top of the pancakes, but I refrain.

“What are you thinking about there, my love?” she asks innocently, batting her eyelashes at me.

“Sausage or bacon?” I ask. She nods at me, completely unconvinced.

After we’ve filled up on too much greasy breakfast food, I suggest a walk, and Lenny readily agrees. The light morning showers have died down, and the sun is back out, making it feel more like spring.

We stroll down the streets, hand in hand, admiring the colorful vintage homes. When we get to the adorable blue one on Maple Lane, I stop and check out the For Sale sign stuck in the front lawn.

“Look, Lenny,” I point it out. “This one’s for sale!”

“It’s dreamy,” she breathes, checking out the ornate wooden details and perfectly eclectic landscaping. “But it’s probably a bajillion dollars.”

“I don’t know,” I say, flicking the wooden sign. “Says they’re having an open house today. Should we check it out?”

“Enzo, don’t tempt me.”

“Come on.” I pull her down the brick path, my heart already soaring. She loves it.

When we get to the front door, I make a big show of ringing the doorbell as Valentina peers into the windows.

“It’s empty,” she muses, leaning back into me. “They must have moved out already. Maybe we missed the open house?”

“Oh, rats,” I say, acting disappointed. “We probably did.”

“Oh well.” She sighs. “If it was meant to be...”

“It was,” I whisper, pulling the keys from her jacket pocket.

“How do you keep doing that?” She laughs, shaking her head, but not fully understanding.

I slide the key into the door, and she panics for a second until the lock clicks and the door floats open.

“No,” she breathes, whipping her head around to stare at me, mouth open, eyes wide.

“Welcome home, Lenny.”

“Enzo, you asshole!”

“Not how I want to be thanked, but from you, I’ll take it.” I laugh.

She races through the house, checking out the floor plan, marveling at the historical accuracy, and opening every closet. When we step into the backyard, she bursts into tears, and I have to pull her up into my arms.

“It’s perfect,” she sniffles against my chest. “The chicken coop, the rose garden,

Enzo... it's perfect."

"You're perfect," I say softly.

"Please don't tell me you're going to propose right now too," she jokes. "My heart won't be able to take it."

My hand instinctively floats to the little round velvet box in my pocket, and she catches my movement. I burst into laughter and pull it out, sinking to one knee.

"Lenny, I don't think I need to recite a poem for you to understand what I'm doing here," I say, trying to keep the nerves out of my voice. "And you know I don't get poetry anyway."

She laughs through her tears, nodding along and sinking to her knees to join me. We probably look insane, down on our knees in the wet grass.

"But I get you," I continue, searching her eyes for her answer. "And I think that's all that matters. Can we do this? Finally?"

"Yes," she breathes, falling into me and crushing her lips to mine. "Yes, yes, yes."

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We roll around in the grass, lost in the headiness of finally being able to live out our happily ever after. She straddles me, leaning in to kiss me again, and I almost rip her clothes off right then and there.

Thinking better about giving our new neighbors a show, I scoop her up and head to the house instead.

“The ring!”

“Oh shit,” I laugh, setting her down. I dash back to the grass and grab the little box.

Lenny stands on our new porch. The sun streams down, making her eyes sparkle even brighter, and I fall a little bit in love all over again.

“Get your married ass inside, woman,” I command, my voice low and dangerous.

“Engaged,” she calls back, skipping into the kitchen. I watch her retreating form, knowing I’ve condemned myself to a lifetime of insatiable lust.

If I don’t have her right now, I’ll probably implode.

She’s studying the kitchen counters when I meet her inside, examining the intricately carved wooden drawers.

“You understood the assignment,” I whisper hoarsely, sliding up behind her and pinning her to the counter. Her arms fall forward, bending her body in half, and she tries to swat me, but I grab her wrist, taking away control.

“Enzo,” she whispers, desire seeping into her voice. “We can’t do this here.”

“Why not? We own it.”

“There’s not furniture,” she groans as I press my raging hard cock against her. Too many clothes, too many layers. Need skin. Now.

“When has that ever stopped us before?” I laugh darkly, slipping my hand around to unfasten her jeans.

“You’re insane.” She shakes her head, whipping me with her hair. I inhale deeply, savoring that familiar, exotic scent of Valentina.

“Do you enjoy it?” I growl into her ear, shoving her jeans down. Mine quickly follow suit and she gasps as my cock nudges against her, throbbing and ready.

“Enzo, stop talking,” she moans, sliding herself back and forth on me. I let my head drop back, savoring the feeling of being desired by Valentina, of being loved so deeply.

When we’re both shaking from need, I slide inside her, groaning at the warmth and wetness that greets me. She slumps against the counter, breathing hard.

I pick up the rhythm, going slow and deep, stretching out the pleasure. My phone rings, lost somewhere on the floor, and she moans, turning back to look at me.

“Don’t worry about it,” I grunt, pushing in deeper. She starts to protest, and I know her mind just jumped into mom mode, worrying that something’s wrong with the girls.

“Fuck me hard and fast, Enzo Cavalli,” she cries. “Or I’ll do it for you.”

No need to tell me twice, I think as I slam into her. She cries out with pleasure and begs for more, urging me on by meeting my movements.

We go wild, feral, hoarsely whispering platitudes of love and pleasure. She screams my name when I sink deeper.

I feel her tightening around me, gripping my cock as her own pleasure cascades down into something more intense and euphoric. The smell of her sweet perfume and the feel of her soft skin on mine push me over the edge.

“Lenny, I can’t hold on...” I manage to choke out before I feel her exploding around me, cruising that high that I need so badly.

I let go as well, slumping on top of her and covering her shoulders with kisses.

“Well, that was unexpected,” she finally mumbles, laughing to herself.

“Which part, exactly?”

“All of it.” She grins, elbowing me off. When she spins around, she pulls me into a deep, tender kiss. “You’re my favorite person, you know that?”

“Good thing you just agreed to marry me then.” I smile back, bringing her fingers to my lips. She watches the movement, admiring the sparkling vintage cushion-cut emerald on her finger. “Did I do good?”

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“So good,” she breathes, tugging me in for another kiss.

I don’t know what I did in my past life to deserve this woman—this life, honestly—but I’ll take it.

Epilogue

VALENTINA

One year later.

“Goodnight, honeybee,” I whisper, leaning down to kiss Matilda’s forehead. She snuggles into her blankets, a sleepy smile spreading across her face.

Five hours on the jungle gym will do that to you.

“Goodnight, birdy,” I sing, crossing the room to Alessia’s bed.

She’s got a new mystery book tightly clenched in her little hands, totally engrossed. I slip off her new glasses and gently tug the book away as she groans.

“Please, Mom,” she pleads, giving me her best pouty face. “One more chapter?”

“It’s past your bedtime already.” I shake my head, taking on the role of the tough cop. Enzo watches me from the doorway, grinning.

I pretend not to notice their covert little glances and winks. I know that book will be

in her hands again as soon as I leave the room.

“Ladies,” Enzo announces, flashing them both a cheesy grin, “it’s my highest pleasure to bid both of you good night. We’ve got a big weekend ahead of us, so you need to be in tip-top shape tomorrow!”

I smile at him as he gives both of them wet, sloppy forehead kisses. Their little squeals and giggles warm my heart, and I melt inside.

I can’t ever imagine being happier than I am at this exact moment, with my husband, my girls, and my little secret.

“Adoption day, right?” Matilda calls from her little burrow of blankets. “We’re gonna make it official.”

“Righty-o,” Enzo agrees, joining me in the doorway.

We had explained earlier this month that even though Alessia has been living with us for over a year, it isn’t official. They’ve been counting down the days until tomorrow, when we sign the official papers making her our daughter.

“Okay, it’s officially bedtime for everyone,” I say, clapping my hands and looking at Enzo pointedly. “Even you.”

“I think we can postpone bedtime a bit, can’t we?” he whispers in my ear, looking as devious as ever. I shrug casually and flip the lights off, leading him down the hallway.

“The girls are happy,” Enzo says, his face glowing with the ease and happiness of a man whose life turned out exactly as he’d planned—even though it took a while to get here.

“They are,” I agree, climbing into bed. “You know what Matilda told me today? She said Alessia was her karmic twin... where the hell did she even learn that phrase?”

“Been spending too much time with Auntie Lux.” He laughs, snuggling against my chest.

The room is awash with the soft glow of his bedside lamp and filled with the crackle of firewood. I stroke his hair gently, breathing in that classic Enzo smell.

“Can you believe everything that’s happened to us?” I say, cracking up. It’s funny to look back on now, but God—there were some tough days.

Putting Alessia, and Matilda to a lesser extent, through intense therapy and watching their sisterhood grow was the toughest, most rewarding thing I’ve ever witnessed.

“Do you ever regret stepping away from the mafia?” Enzo asks, glancing up at me with genuine curiosity.

“Not even for a second.” I smile, placing a light kiss on the tip of his nose. “This is everything I’ve ever wanted... a husband, children, chickens, a garden, even those smelly goats. I have my ballet studio and the girls’ after-school activities to keep me busy. Enzo, I’m a happy woman.”

“Phew,” he breathes, blowing hot air across my neck. “I was worried you missed the shady back rooms and breaking knuckles.”

“I’ll leave that all up to you,” I say, scrunching my nose.

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am

The greatest gift my father could have ever given me before he finally succumbed to his cancer was releasing me from the grip of the family.

It didn't happen easily. For a while, I thought I might have to run away and change my identity, but eventually, he came to terms with it.

"I finally feel free," I whisper, cursing my raging hormones for getting me teary-eyed again. "You made that happen for me."

"Lenny," he gasps, sitting up beside me. "Don't cry. Are these happy tears? I hope they are. Only happy tears allowed in this house—don't make me kick you out."

I laugh, choking back a hiccup. His beautiful jade green eyes search my face, trying to figure out why I'm crying again.

He probably thinks I've been on my period for the past three months.

"Happy tears," I assure, wiping my nose. He relaxes, stretching out beside me, and pulls me close. I snuggle into his flannel pajamas, savoring the safety he provides.

"I have a secret," he whispers. "But you can't tell anyone."

"Funny, I have a secret, too!"

"No way! You first."

"Nope." I laugh. "You brought it up. I double-dare you to go first."

“Fine,” he agrees, rubbing his temple in mock annoyance. “Fucking stubborn Taurus. Okay, so get this, Lux is pregnant again. Rafael said three months along, but they’re not telling people until next month. Can you believe it?”

Lux! I can’t believe it! I just spent the entire day with her and the kids, and she didn’t say a word.

Good thing Rafael is such a gossip, because this gives me the perfect opportunity to share my secret.

For a second, I worry about telling Enzo. We already have our hands full with the girls and their therapy sessions, after-school activities, my ballet studio, Enzo’s criminal empire—it’s a lot.

What if he’s not happy about it? What if he doesn’t want it?

“Helloooooo,” he drones, waving his hand in front of my face. “Earth to Lenny? Come back to me, please. I’m dying to hear your secret.”

Lux and I are pregnant at the same time.

I break into laughter even as I struggle to get a hold of myself. I think back over the last few months and realize that neither of us has ordered any alcohol.

We also both keep suggesting alternatives for our weekly sushi nights—and neither of us has realized what we’re hiding from each other.

“Okay, I’m officially terrified,” Enzo says lightly, but I see worry in his eyes. “Do I need to call a priest?”

“Oh, stop,” I wheeze, trying to control my laughter. “It’s just so funny.”

“That she’s pregnant?”

“That she’s pregnant,” I confirm. “Because I’m also pregnant.”

Shocked silence stretches between us, and I quickly sober up. Maybe that was a terrible way to tell him.

I glance over at him, trying to figure out his thought process. He stares back at me, open-mouthed and in shock.

Panic swells up in my chest, and my breathing gets shallow. Oh god, he doesn’t want this. He doesn’t want a baby.

I jump to explain, to tell him we can discuss it, but he cuts me off with a loud whoop.

What the...

I watch as he propels out of bed and jumps around, cheering. He’s acting like a cheesy athlete who’s just won a game, pumping his arm and whooping so loud I’m sure he’s going to wake the girls.

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am

“Enzo, calm down.” I laugh. “I take it you’re happy?”

“Elated,” he sings in a loud opera voice.

“Shhhh,” I warn. “You’re going to wake the monsters.”

“We have to tell them!” he announces, already running out of the room.

Sometimes I forget that when he gets like this, having Enzo around is like having a third child, but his joy is infectious. I run out to the hallway and yank him back by the shirt.

“Oh no, you don’t,” I whisper, dragging him back to the bed. “Tomorrow is Alessia’s day, and I don’t want anything to overshadow it.”

“You’re right.” He instantly quiets down. “This is why I married you, you brilliant, amazing, wonderful woman.”

We climb back into bed, both of us giddy with our little secret. He snuggles up to me again, placing his warm hand across my tiny, growing belly.

“How long?”

“Three months.” I chuckle. “Just like Lux.”

“So funny.” He smiles. “Maybe it’ll be a boy. Enzo Jr.”

“We’re not naming him Enzo Jr.,” I laugh, smacking his shoulder.

“You’re right, Enzo the Second, it is.”

“Stoooooop,” I groan, but he takes the rest of my words away with a deep, hot kiss.

I sink into his arms, letting go of the world around me. He slips my shirt off, working his hungry mouth down my chest, skimming over my belly button, going lower and lower.

I moan softly, threading my fingers through his hair, and relax into his touch. Valentina, the mother, the ballet teacher, the daughter, the friend—all those versions of me disappear.

And for a little while, I become just Valentina.

The truest version of myself.

The one I can only be with Enzo.

The end.