



# Seduced By the Mafia Don

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

**Description:** Sienna Vale paints people the way she sees their souls—raw, unfiltered, honest. She's commissioned to paint Dallas's most elusive philanthropist. She never expects the man behind the portrait to unravel her instead.

Nico Moretti embodies wealth, power, and control. To the world, he's a hedge fund mogul. To the shadows, he's something far more dangerous. His mother takes a sudden interest in Sienna's art. Their paths collide—and the chemistry is immediate. Intense. Unrelenting. Sienna knows better than to trust men who live behind masks. Especially men with secrets that echo the trauma she's spent years burying. The same secrets that shattered her family... and might have stolen her mother's last chance at life.

Still, she can't stay away. When Nico looks at her like, she's the only softness he's ever known. He strips down his armor, just opens up enough for her to enter.

Their connection is undeniable. But so are the lies. Sienna must choose between betraying the man she loves or becoming collateral damage. She's forced to spy on him, or risk everything.

Love was never part of the deal. Neither was heartbreak this deep.

He's the villain she wasn't supposed to love.

She's the weakness he can't afford to have.

And some truths? They ruin everything.

\* Seduced By The Don is a steamy age gap romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.

**Total Pages (Source):** 84

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## Prologue

### Sienna

The man of my dreams ruined my life. He was my lover, my universe, my everything. I promised myself I wouldn't be naïve. I promised myself I would remember the hatred I should feel for him.

Yet his kisses dissolved my resolve. This exquisite gown erased my convictions. I fell victim to his beguiling smile and the assurance that he was different from the others. The life he offered: distant dreams coming true, a genuine opportunity for love. He claimed no resemblance to those who killed my mother.

I stumble down the corridor, breathless, the damning paper clutched in my trembling hand, my chest constricting as though my heart might burst.

Person of Interest: Nico Moretti. Fleeing the scene. Witness statement redacted.

But I refuse to let his betrayal go unpunished. Before, I entertained the fantasy that we might forge a relationship worthy of a fairytale. We'd defy the odds: a mafia kingpin and a woman who'd eternally despised the underworld. What preposterous delusion.

I straighten my spine, inhaling deeply, composing myself.

I won't waste precious moments on tears when vengeance waits. Blood is what I seek now. Red has always been my favorite color.

Tonight, the Don will bleed, or I will.

## ChapterOne

Nico

Weeks Before

Marriage and true love are concepts I'd prefer to avoid contemplating, but my mother is in a persistent mood. Gianna Moretti resembles a wolf unwilling to relinquish her prey. "I'd be delighted to see you find a companion."

The Cattle and Vine exudes sophistication without ostentation. Secluded booths, leather upholstery redolent of Fort Worth craftsmanship, floors gleaming like freshly spilled oil. Their steaks are perfection here. Dry-aged, sourced locally.

Towering windows line one wall, capturing just enough of the downtown skyline to establish where you are. Reunion Tower twinkles in the distance. Palpable tension permeates the atmosphere, unfortunately, with Viktor Barinov and his entourage occupying the restaurant's opposite side. He's already raised his glass repeatedly, he and his Bratva cohorts growing increasingly boisterous, like untamed bulls asserting dominance.

I sip my whiskey deliberately, still nursing my first glass, though I claim no virtue in this restraint.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I heard," I respond. "But we should focus our attention on Adrian."

"Your new consigliere," Mother remarks with heavy sarcasm. "Fortuitously, Viktor

and his thugs' presence this evening serves a purpose. We'll be able to observe Adrian's conduct around them."

Mother's elegant attire and plentiful jewelry project her status as the Moretti Family matriarch, widow to the fallen patriarch. In reality, she functions as my partner, possessing intellect as formidable as her rhetoric.

"He'll assume authority. Power invariably reveals one's basest nature."

She knows what I'm referring to. My father governed this Family and city like a failed regime, emulating Cartel-controlled territories. Luka, my elder brother and designated successor, while he perished in a car crash, followed the same methods. My leadership differs fundamentally.

"Don't deflect." Mother nudges me playfully. "I'll have to resort to enrolling you in speed dating."

"My schedule doesn't allow for such indulgences."

"For a single evening? For a potential connection?"

For once, my cousin's arrival brings relief. Adrian is my uncle's offspring. Since my uncle's demise, Adrian has overseen several districts. Rumor has it he's been dealing, maybe even nastier shit. Hence Mother's strategy to offer him the position as my second-in-command.

Let's see who he really is. I harbor no desire to eliminate family, but if it prevents innocent overdoses or atrocities against women, merely attempting to exist peacefully...

He swaggers in, sporting a lustrous blue suit, slicked-back hair, and a gleaming silver

watch. In his late twenties, younger than me, he emanates restless energy. Not that my energy appears diminished at thirty-nine.

"You're late," Mother says.

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"Apologies, Aunty G." Adrian collapses into his seat and signals the waitstaff. He chuckles, gesturing toward the kitchen. "Apparently, someone else shares my punctuality issues."

A young woman walks in, hastily securing her apron. Momentary desire consumes me as she enters. I clench my fist beneath the table and regain my composure.

Something about her captivates me. Quirky. Voluptuous. Her light brown hair, though gathered in a bun, has a few rebellious strands refusing to cooperate. A notebook sticks out of her fitted black trousers' rear pocket—garments that accentuate her enticing curves. Most compelling is her gaze. She scans the place, her eyes vibrant, perceptive, absorbing every detail.

Or perhaps I'm projecting. I know nothing about her.

"Hello?" Adrian snaps his fingers. "Is service available here?—"

"My apologies, sir." The young male server attending to us approaches. "May I bring you something?"

"How perceptive," Adrian snorts, glancing at me expectantly, then frowning when his desire fails to materialize. "Whiskey. The bottle."

"A single glass will suffice," I interject with a dismissive gesture. "We don't require the bottle."

Adrian leans forward once the server leaves. "Are you ordering for me now?"

"My new consigliere should remain lucid and capable of productive conversation. You expressed enthusiasm for this position."

"You resembled a puppy discovering he can lick his own chops for the first time," my mother remarks.

"God, Auntie G, must you talk like that? I am excited. I simply fail to see what drinking has to do with it."

Across the restaurant, the Bratva erupts in raucous cheers, glasses clinking loudly.

"Perhaps you'd prefer their company."

Adrian narrows his eyes. "The Russians? I hope that's a joke."

"It is," I confirm, though uncertainty lingers. His defensiveness seems excessive. "I shouldn't need to explain that our Family operates differently. The last thing we need is to draw attention to ourselves. I recognize my uncle governed his territories with greater leniency, but he maintained principles. Preserved community welfare. Kept the streets clean."

Adrian nods. "Precisely why I accepted. Together, we'll uphold those standards. You and I, cousin." He grins, clasp my shoulder. "Lighten up."

"He's right, darling," Mother interjects. "Occasional relaxation would benefit you."

Mother's statement strategically suggests she's on his side. We can't alienate him prematurely during our surveillance. Yet sometimes I struggle to suppress my darkness. Father, Luka, the bloodshed, their mockery as they demanded more cruelty, increased evil. To emulate them.

The waitress glides across the restaurant. She taps her pen against her notepad as she goes. The professional pad for orders, distinct from the artistic one partially visible from her back pocket, shifting subtly with each movement of her exquisite fine round ass.

I avert my gaze promptly. Adrian's whiskey has arrived.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" Adrian asks, consuming nearly his entire drink in one large sip.

"We need to ensure all districts remain clean. Certain operations are acceptable." By 'certain operations,' Adrian and Mother understand I mean financial crimes, extortion, and laundering. "But surely you agree we oppose the Bratva's practices spilling onto our territory."

Adrian nods with excessive enthusiasm. "Absolutely, without question. It goes without saying."

Mother leans forward. Her scrutiny reducing Adrian to a shrinking child. I nearly sympathize. I know the feeling.

"Any revelations you feel compelled to disclose?"

"Regarding what specifically?"

"Anything potentially endangering your life. You have one opportunity, Adrian, for complete disclosure. We extend this chance to all new consiglieres."

"Nico's never had one."

He's wrong. Mother has consistently provided counsel. For her protection, we have



maintained public discretion.

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"Previously—under his father, during his brother's tenure—this opportunity was standard procedure."

"I have nothing to confess," Adrian says, followed by a forced laugh. "Aunty G, do you think I've got the stones to go against Nico? Please. I'm going to get another drink."

"Table service is available," Mother reminds him.

Adrian stands. "I'll hit the bar. Service seems inadequate here." His demeanor suggests how desperate he is to escape.

As he hastily walks away, the artistic, quirky waitress strides toward the kitchen. Adrian nearly collides with her. She deftly evades him. He continues, oblivious.

"Nico?" Mother's voice registers behind me.

Suddenly, I'm standing before the waitress, glaring angrily at my cousin's retreating figure. My mother's call finally makes sense. What am I doing? I can't hit my cousin for nearly bumping into a stranger.

The waitress smiles awkwardly yet defiantly. "Friend of yours?"

"My cousin. His manners occasionally desert him."

"And you were preparing to..." She arches an eyebrow, her lip twitching. Is she teasing me? Nervous? Perhaps both?

"I was going to catch the damsel when she inevitably stumbled."

She surveys the area. "I don't see any damsels here..."

"I'm sure I saw one named Sienna. I even overheard someone marveling over the beauty of that name."

She taps her name tag. "Clever observation. I don't suppose you know this mysterious commentator?"

I nearly confess I think her name is beautiful, but that would ruin the game. "I'm afraid not."

"You're actually smirking at me," she notes, then apparently recalls her professional obligations. "Um, anyway. Can I get you anything?"

"No—I merely wanted..." To make sure you were okay. "Thank you." I stride away before I can make an even bigger fool of myself.

"What was that about?" Mother asks upon my return.

"Nothing."

"Do you know her?"

"Why would you say that?"

She traces her fingertip around her wine glass rim, a habit she does when she's thinking. "It seemed like you might've met her before. The conversation seemed... intimate."

"You couldn't hear us."

"But your body language."

"I had my back to you."

She huffs. "Stop being so pedantic. I thought you were going to kill poor Adrian when he nearly collided with the girl."

"Sienna."

"Pardon?"

"Her name is Sienna."

"Sienna—reminiscent of Vienna. Did you notice the book she carries around? She seems quite..."

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"Artistic," I supply. "Quirky. Somewhat... unique?"

I drain my whiskey, regretting my characterization.

"Precisely," Mother confirms. "Someone else appears to have noticed."

"What?"

"Our courteous acquaintance, Mr. Barinov."

I look up. Sure enough, Viktor is glaring across the restaurant. Despite the intervening distance, with families and staff separating us, his anger remains clear. His desire for me to wed his daughter, Anya, is no secret.

"If I didn't abhor groveling to those bastards, I'd explain I don't even know her."

"Anya is charming," Mother says. "But throughout all your interactions, nothing has ever resembled that. You seemed genuinely interested."

"You don't have to say that like it's a miracle."

"Forgive me, my dear, but it is."

Viktor knocks his drink back, intensifying his glare.

"Let me know if you want me to wipe that look off his face," Adrian says upon returning, whiskey bottle in hand.

## ChapterTwo

### Sienna

I pull out my notebook and pencil, quickly sharpening it over the sink. I'm in the restroom, briefly pausing after an hour on my feet. My sketchbook contains a portrait of a man's face against a forest backdrop, though his features remain indistinct. I swiftly define his eyebrows and contour his mouth.

I'm transforming him into the tall, suited gentleman, his black hair flecked with silver—depicted by erasing minute slivers from the charcoal darkness—his effortless smirk, our verbal sparring, his penetrating gaze...

A knock interrupts me. Duty calls. His visage emerges like a shadow through the more defined lines. My phone vibrates.

Hastily tucking my notebook away, I call, "Just a minute."

I pull my phone from my pocket. Another message from my landlord. Rent is due in a week, while my first paycheck from this place arrives in four days. I need to hustle. I'm one late payment away from an eviction notice. Hell, I almost lost all my paintings because I can't even afford my storage unit.

My apartment is overflowing with paintings. Moving them last night from my storage unit was a nightmare, but losing all my work would have been worse. If only my artwork could sustain me financially. But reality demands pragmatism.

"Sorry, hon," Rachael says as I emerge. "I'm dying out there. Another family just arrived."

Rachael is the supervisor. She stares expectantly at me as if I'm getting on her last

nerve. She caught me sketching last night. Now I've done it again. I promised myself I wouldn't do it at work, but after the run-in with the tall man in the suit, I got that fuzzy, excited feeling. That 'let's do art!' feeling... which has lost me jobs in the past.

"I'm right on it."

I take two steps, then I hear, "You left your... pencil shavings in the sink?"

"Uh, they're not mine," I reply.

"I'll choose to believe that girl, but get your behind out there."

I get back to work, getting somewhat lost in the mayhem of it. I like to capture moments. The upscale restaurant, a man's Stetson resting on the stool next to his at the bar, or a mother feeding her child. That's how I can somehow link this job to art.

The Vine starts to get really busy, every table occupied, empties stacking up. Worse, Rachael just told me the bus boy has got food poisoning, so I'm going to need to help clear the tables. "No problem," I say, with a big, fake smile.

My stress levels are rising, but I need to be chill. No rent means nowhere to live, nowhere to store my art, nowhere to put as an address for payment if I do score any portrait gigs. I begin with the long table in the corner. A group of men in suits, maybe ex-military, perhaps businessmen. It's hard to tell. They speak in Russian as I pile up their empty glasses onto a black tray.

Then one of them speaks in gruff English at me. He's the oldest of the group, with hard features and even harder eyes. "Girl, can I ask you a question?"

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Suddenly, everyone goes quiet. There's a weird response. Power exudes from this man, and he frightens me. "Do you need a drink, sir?"

He smiles, but it doesn't reach his steely eyes. "I need an answer to a question, if you would be so kind as to oblige me."

"Uh, sure." What choice do I have?

"How long have you been working here?"

My belly drops and my pulse pounds. Is he going to complain about me? What did I even do? "A week."

"A week," he repeats, like he doesn't believe it.

"Yes."

"Seven days."

Sweat slides down my neck. "Yes. Do you need anything?"

He stares, seeming angry, but I can't figure out why. "No," he says stiffly.

I carry the tray from the table, wondering what the heck that was about. I've got enough to worry about. I don't need strange questions from intimidating men.

"Were you talking to Viktor Barinov?" A voice comes from behind me.



“You almost made me drop my tray! Springing up like a darn bucking bronco.”

I gasp when I realize what I’ve said... to my supervisor. I almost let out a prayer.

“It’s nice to know you’re human,” she says with a chuckle.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

I want to ask her why she’s suddenly being nice to me.

“I should get back to it,” I mutter.

“Wait – hold on a sec. How do you know Viktor Barinov?”

“I thought we were busy.”

“Hey, this is work related. Sorta.” She gets closer.

“I don’t know who he is. He only wanted to know how long I’ve worked here.”

“Huh, I wonder why,” she mumbles to herself,

“Who is he?” I ask.

“You don’t know what kind of restaurant this is, do ya, honey?”

“Maybe not,” I admit.

“Aw, you’re precious.Maybe. No, you’re lost. That man was Viktor Barinov, the

leader of the Bratva in this little town, and on the other side, you've got Nico Moretti." She makes air quotes. "He's a hedge fund manager if you can work that one out."

"Is he in the mob?"

"Bingo."

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I grind my teeth in frustration and a memory sucker punches me. I'm twelve years old, and Mom is tall, healthy, strong, and smiling as she brushes hair from my face. "Don't you grind those pearly whites or there will be nothing left but angel dust." I can hear my laughter in response almost feel the belly cramps from my incessant giggles. That was before they took her from me.

"Is this amobrestaurant?"

Rachael giggles. "Not as such. But we're friendly to them, and they're friendly to us. I just thought you should know. Now..."

She makes eyes at the door. Since it's clear I'm not connected to them, she seems less interested in me now. I suppose I'm not worth her respect since I'm not a friend of the oh-so-impressive Barinov's. And who else was it – Nico Moretti, that was it.

I almost turn away, tell her I quit, leave, and never come back. Amob bar. But Mom wouldn't want me to be homeless. It's not even the idea of sleeping on the street that terrifies me. It's knowing I'd lose all my hard work, with no money for a storage unit.

"I'll get back to work."

"Sounds like a plan."

As I cross the restaurant, I hear one of the Russians say, "We can always take him out."

Sure, he could be talking about arranging a surprise party for someone, but I doubt it.

I don't want to think about it. I just need to get through my shift, then figure out what to do. I could get a new job, but I'm determined to keep this one.

My path on the way back takes me past the tall stylish man's table. He smirks at me. And you know what? I make eyes back at him, too. I like that glint in his eyes, catching the light just so. I should've added that to the sketch.

"Nico," the man opposite him says.

I stop walking for a moment, before remembering the number one rule to waitressing: don't stop or somebody will give you something to do. But the shock is severe.

He's Nico.

Okay, that's easy, then. I just need to forget we ever spoke. He's a stranger, so no big deal.

But fate has other ideas. As I walk past his table, I trip on a toy some kid has helpfully left in the aisle. I suppose this is an extra clumsy day for me. I find my footing, but the movement causes my notebook to tumble out of my back pocket.

I quickly turn, look down... at Nico with it in his hands, looking down at his own face.

"Is that... you?" the woman beside him says, a glamorous older woman drenched in jewelry with an intelligent to her eyes.

"Me?" Nico says, chuckling nervously. "I'm sure it's not."

"I-I wouldn't have time to sketch on a busy night like this," I stutter.

Nico stares down at the sketch, his features staring through the charcoal. “The background is different,” he says. “That’s how you know it’s not me.”

“You know it’s not you because I told you so,” I say. “Please, give it back.”

“Feisty,” the other man mutters.

Nico turns to him with a cold look. “She’s fine. It’s her property.”

“Okay, Prince Charming.” The other man chuckles, pouring himself a whiskey.

“Would you like me to put it on the tray?” Nico asks with a smirk.

He’s got a real handsome, arrogant thing going on, like he’s playing the role of an A-hole just to tease, to bother me, and I like it. It’s fun. I want to banter back with him.

“Or maybe just slip it in your pocket?” he says.

A warmth blossoms across my body. He’s hinting at gliding his hand along my ass. “The tray is fine.”

He reaches up, places the book down.

“That really is fine work, dear,” the woman says. “I’m something of an art connoisseur myself, and that shading was exquisite.”

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I don't know why, but I laugh.

"I wasn't joking," she says.

"I just wasn't expecting a compliment."

"Don't laugh when you receive a compliment, dear. It makes people think you don't deserve it. And you do, Sienna."

"Uh, thank you."

"Do you often sketch?"

"Yes. I love the seductive, misleading simplicity of it."

The woman's face lights up. "What a wonderful way to describe it."

"Seductive, misleading," Nico says. "This is all above my head." He smiles self-deprecatingly at me. "My mother is the intellectual one. I'm one hundred percent brute."

"Why can I believe that?" I say, walking away. It was supposed to come out flat. But it sounds flirty. It sounds like I'm challenging him to be bad. To me. For me. With me.

All the way back to the kitchen, I tell myself, my cheeks aren't red on repeat. I don't want to flirt with a mafia boss. I don't need art critiques from his mother, though.

That comment about shading really hit a sweet spot for me. I've been focusing on that aspect a lot recently.

But no – I can't think like this.

If I were going to do the right thing and honor my mother, I'd charge out there with a steak knife.

Perhaps all mafia men aren't the same. Maybe this one is different. But I can't afford to take that risk.

### ChapterThree

Nico

"She seems nice," Mom says, when Adrian excuses himself for another bathroom break... he's probably doing coke in there, a discreet key to the nose, thinking it makes him more insightful, cleverer. But it just makes him easier to read.

"Who?" I say.

"Don't 'who' me," Mother retorts. "That sketch was you all over."

"As she mentioned, she didn't sketch anything tonight. I've never seen her before tonight, so how the hell would it be me?"

"Easy, Nico. I'm not trying to fight."

"I'm not fighting," I tell her. "I just don't see how or why a complete stranger would've sketched me."

“Didn’t you notice how the features, the smile especially, had been added later? She hadn’t filled it in. It was your smile.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re turning into a conspiracy theorist.”

“In any case, she’s far too talented to be working as a waitress.”

“You sound like you’ve got a plan.”

“Now who’s paranoid?”

I shrug. But I can’t pretend that I’m unbothered by any of this. When that notebook fell out of her pocket, and during the banter afterward, I felt like a normal man. She wasn’t afraid to challenge me, to give me some serious sass. She’s hilarious. Talking to her made me feel alive.

“Even if I were interested, it wouldn’t be fair.”

“Why?” Mother asks.



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“Viktor has seen her. He’s spoken with her. You know what that was when he called her over. It was a threat. Don’t embarrass Anya. His precious Anya... who I don’t want to marry.”

“An alliance is an alliance, some would say.”

“Are you with them now, too?”

She looks at me with an unflinching expression. “I’ve lost a husband and a son. I know how you feel. Neither of them was perfect, but they were mine, ours. Nico, dear child, I just want you to be happy.”

“You’re overreacting. It was just a short conversation.”

“Are you going to make me play matchmaker?”

My response is cut off when Adrian returns, a big grin on his face, powder still on his nose. I could’ve reprimanded him as soon as he brought the bottle of whiskey over. I could’ve put my foot down and ordered him to take it back. But that would’ve been counterproductive. A smart wolf is one who lets his prey bleed.

“Sorry, what were we talking about?”

I cut into my steak. “You were telling me what avenues you’ve made in the laundromats.” I want to know how he is making use of the money from our off brand electronics, and how it’s being laundered through local businesses. But I won’t say that openly.

“I’m getting there.”

“Getting there,” I repeat.

“It’s not as easy as...” He stops himself from going on, but what was he going to say? As running dope. As selling sex. “As you make it seem, Nico.”

Now he’s just kissing my ass. “As my consigliere, you have two jobs. Make money. Keep the filth out of the city. Others said it was impossible, Adrian. They said no one could clean up the mess the Brava and my father, and my brother made, the depravity, the evil. But I did. I did.”

Adrian pulls away, looking scared. He tries to hide it. But he can’t. There’s only one way to stop predators from killing the livestock. I have to become a demon even the devil would fear.

“I know.” Adrian swallows. “You okay, Nico?”

No. I want to know what Viktor said to Sienna. I have ever since he called her over to him. It’s a clear sign that he noticed something between us. Or maybe I need to relax. The Russians keep to their territories. But Viktor is getting older. Anya remains unmarried. He’s always wanted me for her.

When I don’t reply, Adrian sighs. “Is that asshole still staring?”

“Which asshole?”

“The Russian.” Adrian picks up his steak knife. “I’m telling you, just say the word.”

“And you’ll... what? Slit Viktor Barinov’s throat in public? With witnesses? For staring? When you want to kill a man, he should never know you were coming, and

after, people should either not know it's you. Or they should be too terrified to seek revenge."

My mother puts her hand lightly on my arm. It's a sign I know well. To everyone else, my doting mother is offering me comfort. But in reality, my consigliere, my true second-in-command, is advising me to regulate my emotions.

"Does anyone want coffee?" She asks.

"Sure," I say.

"I'll have an Irish coffee," Adrian replies.

She gestures to the staff... and Sienna walks over. She smiles with that alluring awkwardness that makes her instantly endearing. "The other waiter finished his shift," she informs us. "So, you've got me... if you'll have me. Ha, bad joke. There's not really a choice."

"Oh, Sienna," Mother says. "This is wonderful. I was going to ask you something."

"Yeah?"

"She's here to do her job, Mother."

But when Gianna has got her mind set on something, it'd take more than a Bratva army to stop her. "Just a quick little question, dear."

"You sound like the other guy," Sienna mutters.

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“Excuse me?”

Sienna indicates with her eyes that she means the Russians. “He wanted to know how long I’ve worked here. Are you going to ask to see my GED?”

“Barinov wanted to know how long you worked here?” Adrian asks.

Sienna nods. Something about Adrian talking to her, even looking at her, pisses me off. Does that make me a possessive lunatic? Do I give a fuck? Her pants clinging tightly to her hips, her determined expression. She’s young, but she gives an air about her of being self-reliant, tough.

Viktor was quizzing her about work. Was he fishing to see if we’d had time to get to know each other? He needs to back off.

“Curious,” my mother mutters. “But Sienna, do you sketch for commission?”

“I do portraits,” Sienna replies. “Charcoal and oil or acrylic. But that’s more a... side gig.”

“I’d like to hire you.”

“Don’t you want to see my website or something first?” Sienna looks unsure, as if she doesn’t want to take work from us. My gut tightens. Obviously. Someone must’ve told her I’m the big bad wolf.

She knows I’m a Don. Or, at least, in the mob. Her demeanor obviously suggests she

knows something.

“I’ve already seen what I need to,” my mother says.

“I’d have to check my schedule.”

“I’ll pay you five thousand dollars for a pencil portrait.”

Sienna gasps, her eyes going wide. I’m suddenly painfully aware of the differences in our means. To her, that is life-changing money. To us, it’s pennies. I feel guilty. And then I think of all our numerous charitable ventures, like I’m trying to justify it.

I give voluntarily. Sienna has no choice but to grind.

“Is that enough?” My mother goes on. “Or do you usually charge more?”

“Nuh...”No, is what she was going to say, but then stopped herself. She gets a wicked look in her eyes and nods. “Sorry, yes, I do. For a pencil, that’s usually seven thousand and five hundred dollars.”

“Done,” Mother says, standing and offering her hand.

Sienna still doesn’t look too happy about it, even when they shake hands. I want to tell my mother to quit whatever game this is. She’s going to bring me into Sienna’s orbit when it’s clear Sienna wants nothing to do with us. But she’ll do it for the money. It’ll turn into a seductive, misleading temptation. That was how she described sketching, wasn’t it? It applies to both.

“I should take your orders,” Sienna mutters.

“Wait a second,” my mother says. “Don’t you want to know who the portrait is for?”

“I assumed it was for you.”

“No.” My mother turns to me with a self-satisfied grin.

“Look who’s in the hot seat,” Adrian lets out, laughing.

“I’ve been wondering what to get you for your birthday,” my mother says.

“My birthday isn’t for ten months.”

“Your last birthday. I forgot to get you a gift.”

She didn’t. She bought me a watch made the very year I was born. I clearly remember, and so does she. I raise my eyebrows at her, but she doesn’t back down. I know what she’s trying to do.

“Is that going to be a problem?” She asks, turning to Sienna.

Sienna looks at me, this friendly stranger, this young woman who might’ve only bantered with me because it’s her job. I’ve become one of those deluded millionaires, thinking a service worker’s fake kindness is real.

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“Nope,” she says, popping the P resentfully, her lips puckering tightly like she’s holding back a scream. “That’s fine. A pencil portrait will only take an hour. I’ll touch it up later, on my own.”

“Perfect, dear.” My mother winks. “An hour is all we need. Let me give you my number. I’m Gianna, by the way.”

After exchanging numbers and taking our drink orders, Sienna leaves us. I run my hand through my hair in frustration. Mother, on the other hand, looks rather pleased with herself.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” I reprimand.

“Why?”

“Did you see the way she was looking at us? She wants nothing to do with the likes of us. But perhaps she’ll pretend to... for the money.”

“You can’t expect her to work for free. Unless you weren’t talking about the portrait?”

“What else would I be talking about? I just don’t want to force someone into a situation they’re uncomfortable with.”

I don’t want to be judged. I don’t want her looking at me like I’m some kind of monster. It doesn’t matter what she thinks of me. At least that’s what I try to tell myself. But it rings false. It rings like a screeching lie.

I care. My mother can plainly see it as well.

Sienna brings our coffees and then picks up empties from another table.

“They should have busboys to do that. They’re running her off her feet,” I grumble.

My mother smirks.

“Don’t look at me like that. Complaining about working conditions isn’t the same as a serenade. I might just buy the place, force them to get their acts together.”

“This is neutral ground,” Adrian jumps in. “Buying the Vine could be seen as a punch in the face to Viktor.”

My cousin seems very concerned about Viktor Barinov.

I watch as Sienna walks around the restaurant, smiling at customers, sharing a few words here and there. She’s doing her job, just like she was with me. I need to stop thinking about her charm, stop looking at the tempting fullness of her plump, round ass.

But I can’t look away when a Russian in a leather jacket and a scar on his forehead walks directly into her path. He waves a hand at her. In Russian, he says, “Silly woman. How did you not see me waving? Don’t you have eyes?”

I sincerely hope Sienna doesn’t speak Russian. I don’t want her to hear how this asshole is talking to her.

He slams a glass down on her tray, then grunts in English, “Beer.”

When he hits her tray, it causes the other glasses to tumble off. They smash loudly



against the floor. The Russian walks away without looking back. Sienna, flustered, puts her tray on a nearby table and kneels to pick up the glass.

“Leave it,” Adrian says. “Ignore it, Nico.”

“He’s right,” Mother whispers urgently. “Poor girl, but... Yes. You have to leave?—”

I don’t have to do anything. I’m the Don of this Family.

I march across the restaurant.

## ChapterFour

### Sienna

I won’t accept responsibility for this one. Maybe, earlier, I could’ve avoided that kid’s toy on the floor. And I possibly could’ve even dodged Nico’s friend, or whoever he is. But this is not my fault.

My head was still reeling from what had just occurred. I never wanted to work for the mob, not after what happened to my mother– not ever. But then Gianna played that slick move. I can’t turn down seven thousand dollars! I don’t have that luxury. But it’s mob money.

I wince as I pick up a large piece of glass, a customer walking by like I’m not even here. Can I justify mob money for rent? Or would I rather be homeless?

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“Let me do that.”

I look up at his deep, confident voice. Nico kneels down, seeming agile, strong.

If I were to sketch him now, I’d focus on the hard edges, his square jawline, his sharp eyes. He looks mad, but he’s softening himself for me. Could he tell how much I hate the mob?

“It’s fine.”

“You can get a dustpan and sweep the smaller pieces.”

“I’ll probably need to vacuum, too.”

He smiles tightly. “Sounds like a plan.”

I step into the back room, grabbing everything I need. There’s a picture on the wall: the owner, a wiry widow, riding a bull as the sunset bleeds over the hills toward the camera. It’s gorgeous. But I’m getting distracted. Likely I see myself in that wild woman, or who I wish I could be.

When I return, Nico has gathered all the large bits of glass on the tray. He carries it to the trash. The table of Russians all watch us, their eyes unreadable. Nico stands beside me like some sort of bodyguard, his hands crossed over his middle. For once, it’s nice to have somebody looking out for me.

As I clean up the smaller bits – wincing at the sound of the vacuum and doing that

part quickly – I try to ignore the electric tension. Nico glances at me every so often, his eyes hard. It's like he's silently saying, I'm here for you.

It's an undercurrent, a vibe beneath a vibe, something that an artist might dream up or might truly be happening. Either way, it doesn't matter to me. He's a mob monster. A stray bullet. He'd be the end of my happiness. He represents all the darker shades of my life.

"Please, let me help," a man says in a Russian accent, approaching me as I carry the vacuum back. It's the same man who knocked over my tray, with a broken nose, a scar on his forehead. A thin smile in place.

Nico strides into his path. "You forget yourself."

A moment later, Viktor Barinov stands and strides toward us. The restaurant goes quiet, the Pat Green record seeming louder in the silence. Viktor stands beside his man.

"Explain yourself, Sergei," he grunts.

"I was going to help, boss."

"The job is already done," Viktor snaps. "Nico, you must understand, some of my men are morons. Please, forgive him."

Viktor is a tall, thin man. If I were to draw him, he would look like an eagle. His age adds to the look, his facial structure pressing through his tired face like a faint pencil sketch through deep charcoal.

Nico's body is as tight as a bow. "I understand, Viktor. Sergei wanted to seem funny, so he asked if we needed help when we were clearly already done. Now, he should

head back to his table.” Nico’s voice grows volcanic.

I’ve sometimes dreamed of someone protecting me, sticking up for me, for a change. So when the flurrying feeling touches me, the undeniable appreciation, I try not to freak.

“He’s right,” Viktor says coldly. “Back to the table.”

“But,” Sergei protests.

“But?” Nico growls, curling his hand into a fist, his eyes hard.

I want to reach out, tell him he doesn’t need to do this for me. But I sense he can’t be stopped. I figure he’s doing this for himself somehow, maybe to justify who he is, what he is.

He’s a puzzle. I want to figure him out. Or waste time trying.

But this standoff proves it. What if one of them has a gun, starts shooting, and then just like Mom—I can’t think about that.

“Sergei,” Viktor says in an ice-cold tone.

“But... nothing,” Sergei grits out, shuffling back to the table.

“Who is your friend?” Viktor asks casually, but I feel the question is anything but innocent. “Can I say hello? I don’t bite.”

Nico moves aside slightly but stays close enough so that he’s shielding me with his body. I like it a little too much, but it’s gone far enough. I walk around Nico. “We spoke before, Mr. Barinov. You asked me how long I’ve worked here.”

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“Ah, yes, hello...” He looks down at my name tag, his gaze lingering for a moment longer than it needs to on my chest. “Sienna. That’s right. You’ve worked here a week.”

“Yes,” I say.

“When was the last time you visited the Vine, Nico?” Nico just stares at him. From this angle, I can see his blue eyes are practically glowing with rage. When Nico doesn’t answer, Viktor goes on, “I’m curious. How long has it taken Sienna here to make such a dazzling impression?”

“We met tonight,” Nico growls. “She’s here to do her job, not to be subjected to interrogations by you. You’re drunk. And you’ve overstepped.”

“I’m Russian, Mr. Moretti. Please don’t talk to me about drunk. But yes, I will leave you. I apologize, once again, for Sergei’s behavior. Oh, and Anya sends her love.”

“Okay.”

Viktor tears his eyes away from Nico to look at me. “Anya is my daughter, my jewel, my princess. She has been quite smitten with this one for a number of years.” Viktor laughs, waggling his finger at Nico. “But he has been as stubborn as a big American mule.”

He laughs, returning to his table. I’m shaking as I carry the vacuum and the brush into the back room. I don’t want to be overdramatic, but that was terrifying. It wasn’t anything that was said. It was the tightness in the air.

Rachael rushes over, positioning herself in the doorway of the supply closet. "Oh, my gawd. What wasthatabout?"

"I don't know. Nico stood up for me, I guess, and then it was... It wasn't anything that was said." I inhale deeply, close my eyes momentarily, then reopen them. "I'm going to forget about that incident entirely. Just focus on work. That's all I want to think about. Compartmentalize everything else."

"You're not going nutty on me, are you, hon?"

"I'm perfectly fine."

"You're my star waitress tonight."

"Even after all those blunders?"

She envelops me with her arm. "It's all thanks to your kick-ass attitude."

"Thanks, Rachael."

I return to the main floor of the restaurant, realizing the folly in hasty judgments. Initially, I thought her insufferable. Yet her words are comforting.

For fifteen minutes, I work diligently, acutely aware of the Russians' scrutiny and Nico's gaze as well. Nico ignites something within me—a spark I might acknowledge in another existence, not this one, not in a reality where the mob ended my mother's life.

They murdered her. Crushed her like an insignificant ant. They killed her as if she were inconsequential, not the woman who single-handedly raised a daughter after her father abandoned them. She was an angel. Now, she's gone forever.

Eventually, the Russians leave. Nico and his companions linger. I hate the sensation of his watchful eyes... despise it precisely because it captivates me so entirely. Try making sense of that contradiction.

Gianna gestures toward me. "Could you fetch me another coffee, dear?"

"Certainly," I reply, jotting it down. "Anything else?"

"Nico was mentioning something," Gianna says.

I glance at Nico, whose cheeks are flushed crimson. I've always been entranced by that color, its subtle variations. Crimson, carmine, alizarin. Or perhaps it's merely the ambient lighting. "My mother has an unfortunate tendency to speak far too freely," he says.

I smile genuinely. I nearly say, I like seeing you embarrassed. But I refrain. I simply wait expectantly.

"If you'd like transportation, we can provide it," Nico offers. "You might prefer not to go home unaccompanied this evening."

"I'm perfectly capable," I respond.

"It's absolutely no imposition, dear," Gianna insists.

"And I meant precisely what I said. I'm entirely self-sufficient."

I've been alone for four years. I don't need special considerations now.

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I'll accept their payment for my artistic services, just this one commission. That sum will suffice to potentially seek alternative employment or dedicate myself exclusively to my art for several months. Is that a sustainable lifestyle? I'm not sure. But it sounds appealing.

"Just the coffee, then, thank you," Gianna concedes.

That's what needs my concentration. One assignment with the Morettis, seven thousand dollars, and subsequently, a choice. Remain here, or immerse myself in my artistic pursuits temporarily? But what if she recommends me to a friend? Or requests additional pieces? Or commissions one for herself?

I'm getting ahead of myself, admittedly, but should that scenario present itself, I'll decline it firmly. Just one job. This singular occasion. Mom would understand my reasoning.

When I deliver her coffee, Gianna blows across its surface. For a disorienting moment, she embodies Mom's likeness, the identical contour of her lips, the same distinctive character. Gianna smiles warmly. "Everything okay?"

I clear my throat. "Yes, thank you. Enjoy your coffee."

Nico's gaze follows my every move as I walk away. I love it. I loathe it. I simultaneously wish it would end and go on forever.

ChapterFive



Nico

My office doesn't flaunt power. It implies it.

No ostentatious gold. No garish embellishments. Just pristine angles, supple leather, and understated, exquisite pieces. The environment silently communicates that I needn't prove anything. I inherently command the space.

The desk is walnut, grain resembling flowing river currents, meticulously organized, featuring only a pen worth more than most monthly mortgage payments. Floor-to-ceiling glass, fifty stories high, ensures visitors feel diminutive before even taking a seat. The panoramic view of the Dallas skyline showcases the city's dynamic energy, with modern skyscrapers gleaming in the sun, a bustling atmosphere hinting at its diverse economy, and the feeling of ambition in the air.

I don't necessarily relish this persona, but it fulfills expectations. My intercom buzzes on my desk. My assistant announces Adrian's arrival. He walks through the door, attempting to conceal his admiration.

"You look thoroughly hungover," I observe.

He chuckles, his voice raspy. "I ended up drinking with the Russians."

"Should I be concerned about your Bratva sympathies?"

Another laugh, excessively forceful, almost confrontational. "No, absolutely not, but Father always promoted cultivating Russian relationships. Preferable to conflict, right?"

"Preferable to conflict," I concur. "That's my paramount objective to avoid. In warfare, innocents die, civilians. We aspire to higher standards."

Father didn't. Luka didn't. But I will.

"I get you, cousin," Adrian says. "But Viktor was pissed last night."

"What grievances could he possibly have?" I dismiss.

"He sees last night as a display of dominance, as though you were diminishing his stature, his significance. You know how prickly he can get. He also mentioned another matter."

Adrian suddenly resembles a Bratva emissary. "Elaborate."

"He'd 'overlook the incident' – his phrasing – if you facilitated permits for warehouse construction in some minor district. Can't recall the location. He merely wants five or six warehouses. He wants you to leverage your connections."

"Absolutely not."

Adrian narrows his eyes suspiciously. "Just like that? Don't you want to consider it? Surely, accommodating six warehouses outweighs tension with the Russians."

"This isn't the first time he's mentioned these warehouses, but he's not getting them."

"I stand with you should this call for blood," Adrian declares. "But antagonizing Viktor unnecessarily seems unwise."

"Those warehouses are off-limits. That's the end of it. If he wants a discussion, he can arrange a formal meeting. We'll address it as equals."

"But why?—"

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"Viktor is a monster," I assert, stepping forward so the cityscape stretches beneath me, Adrian behind. That's what matters: the city, its people, security, sanity. "Shortly after the war, I discovered he was trafficking victims within his warehouses in the city. Consequently, I orchestrated their demolition. I made it impossible for him to build here afterwards. His activities elsewhere remain beyond my reach, but not this city. Not Dallas. Not while I draw breath."

I refuse to follow in my father's or brother's footsteps.

"I have to maintain cordiality with Viktor. Pretend he's a human being. But I will never disregard his true nature."

Adrian exhales heavily. "Damn."

I turn toward him. "What would you have done if you'd discovered a warehouse full of captive women?"

"I would've freed them... of course?" His response suggests uncertainty. "They deserved freedom."

His performance lacks conviction, though perhaps he's merely uncomfortable. That doesn't necessarily mean moral corruption.

"Inform Viktor, I'll meet with him."

"Should I mention the warehouses?"

"No. If he intends to beat his chest, at least let it be at the right person."

My intercom buzzes. My wealth management team awaits our conference call.

"See yourself out," I instruct Adrian, walking to my desk.

\* \* \*

My mother contacts me that afternoon. "I've arranged for a certain artist to visit my humble abode this evening, if you'd kindly make an appearance."

"Why your home?" I inquire.

"She mentioned she would be more comfortable with another woman present."

"Well, that portrays me favorably," I remark sardonically.

"You can't fault the poor girl. Last night undoubtedly proved stressful. I admire her self-assertion. That exemplifies daughter-in-law potential."

"I'll participate in this portrait session, but just this once. You can give me a belated birthday gift or keep it for yourself. But whatever scheme you're orchestrating, I'm checking out early."

"But... why?" She suddenly sounds wounded. "Would a mutual attraction be so catastrophic?"

"We're compensating her beyond months of her typical earnings, Mother. The power dynamic is entirely imbalanced. Moreover, you surely must've seen the look on her face last night. She wants nothing to do with... the Family."

"You're overanalyzing everything. Simply enjoy the portrait session. Let the future take care of itself."

"As if either of us has that luxury."

"Well, it sounded inspirational."

"Indeed, quite motivational. Anything further, my beloved mother?"

"Just that I love you," she says.

"I love you, too."

The rest of my day blurs into legitimate financial endeavors. I was studying finance when Luka's accident occurred. I completed my degree, then assumed leadership to prevent the Family from falling apart. Into civil war. Into carnage.

Soon, I'm navigating through Highland Park. Mother's residence stands behind fencing and towering hedges. I enter the security code, then drive along the narrow lane toward the limestone mansion. Sienna and Mother await in the entrance, Sienna in paint-spattered clothing with rolled sleeves, her pale brown wavy hair cascading to her shoulders.

She regards me with that same perplexing, conflicted expression.

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"What fortuitous timing," Mother says. "Sienna just arrived as well. I was just mentioning that I used to run an art gallery. Do you remember Nico?"

"Yes, I do. But where is Sienna's car? I didn't see one when I pulled in."

"I got the bus," she explains. "Don't worry yourself. People do it all the time."

"I wasn't worried," I reply with a smirk.

She rolls her eyes dismissively. I can't decipher our interaction, but it's charged with tension, attraction, and peculiar ease. That's the most dangerous allure.

"I'll let you two get started," Gianna announces. "Sienna, you can set yourself up in the living room, just through there. Don't hesitate to direct Nico as needed."

### ChapterSix

#### Sienna

"Thank you, Mother," Nico responds sarcastically... yet affectionately. His devotion to his mother is unmistakable. I could logically argue that even bad people can cherish their loved ones, but it feels more complex. My body yearns for Nico, the same impulse that compelled me to finally give his features to my faceless man.

That doesn't mean I have to surrender to such desires. I refused to let grief control me. I won't succumb to passion, either.

Nico gestures toward the living room. I proceed ahead, acutely conscious of his scrutiny. It's as though he's meticulously analyzing me, not judgmentally. Rather, he seems... ravenous. As if feasting visually upon me. My body responds involuntarily.

Nevertheless, I maintain self-control. I can tolerate this. He guides me into the living room. It's breathtaking. I feel like I've been transported into a museum.

The living room exudes subtle hints of lemon and old books.

Light filters delicately through the linen drapes, gentle as a whispered breath. The furniture sits low and expansive, upholstered in immaculate fabric that wouldn't dare wrinkle. The pale rug underfoot appears handwoven, likely older than me. I hesitate to step further. The air feels... deliberately curated.

Nothing appears ostentatious or disorganized.

"Are you going in?" Nico inquires from behind.

"Yes, of course."

Why did I stumble verbally?

"Sorry— you wouldn't happen to have a chair available? I need to set up my easel."

"I'll get you everything necessary," he assures, "and apologies aren't unnecessary."

He's right. I hadn't intended to apologize. But I don't need his help. I set up my easel. Nico leaves momentarily, returning with a chair. "You carried that on the bus?" he questions as I arrange my pencils, gradient selection, and blending tools.

"It's hardly a big deal," I reply.

He positions the chair. "It absolutely is, Sienna."

"Your southern accent intensifies when pronouncing my name."

He grins charmingly. "Sienn-ah, like that?"

I laugh despite myself, disregarding my reservations, knowing it contradicts my better judgment. "Precisely. You sound like some classic film star."

"Perhaps I was in an old movie."

Another involuntary laugh escapes me as I wave dismissively. "You're hardly ancient."

"It's reassuring to confirm I'm not that old, Sienna. I appreciate that."

"I didn't mean to imply..."



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Now he's got me tripping over my own words. This dangerously resembles flirtation, precisely what I should avoid with this mafia man.

"Is my attire appropriate?" he inquires, maintaining that self-deprecating smile I noticed before. When he looks at me like that, it's like we're both in on a secret, just me and him.

"Yes, a suit is ideal, classically appropriate."

The suit appears exceptional on his frame. It's impeccably tailored, dark blue, accentuating his powerful physique. While sketching my mystery man, I never contemplated his physical form. That oversight now seems inconceivable. I feel an overwhelming desire to remove that jacket, to paint my body with his.

"Should I position myself here?"

"You're directing yourself."

He reclines in the armchair. "Perhaps I should be asking if crossing my legs is acceptable. Or would you rather I growl like a tiger?"

If I surrender to my laughter once more, I'm sewing my lips shut. "Growl like a tiger?"

"Isn't that what photographers tell their models to do?"

"I'm not a photographer, and you're certainly not?—"

"A model? You're crushing my dreams, Sienna." His vulnerability appears when sincerity replaces humor. "But after last night's events, are you truly alright?"

"I'm perfectly fine," I respond tersely, almost grateful for the reminder of mafia entanglements. "You'll need to remain motionless soon. I need to focus entirely on you."

The light cuts beautifully across his features, casting striking shadows and highlighting the silver flecks in his hair. My pulse quickens—not with the familiar adrenaline of confronting the Bratva, but with the exhilaration that accompanies a new idea.

Whatever complications exist between us, he's got a great face for a portrait.

"I discovered online that portrait artists can accommodate conversations during sessions," he remarks.

"Some can, but I don't fall into that category."

He tilts his head, making direct eye contact. The connection feels disconcertingly natural. I've always wondered what it'd be like to find somebody I could effortlessly banter with like on TV—that instantaneous rapport I never imagined someone like me could achieve. Too awkward. Too intense. Too trapped in my own thoughts.

"Why do I sense you're being dishonest with me, Sienna?"

"Because if I revealed the truth, you'd want me gone," I whisper.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing."

"No." He leans forward. "What did you just say?"

"I said we need to get started, so please try to remain still."

I sketch his silhouette. In some ways, it would be simpler to preserve him like this—merely an outline of a man. I could envision him as my ideal match, though I've never gotten specifics when it comes to that. Yet even as I trace his contours, his presence permeates my consciousness—his protective stance at the restaurant, his effortless smiles.

"How's this?" he asks, barely moving his lips.

I can't suppress my smile. "That's perfect."

"Should I smile or..."

"No. Just maintain your natural expression. Which appears predominantly grumpy."

I work from bottom to top. The portrait will begin at his waist, with his legs dissolving through a blending technique—something I'll incorporate later—extending upward to encompass his head. I'm determined to capture the texture of his suit, to somehow convey the power it exudes.

He emanates affluence. It transcends the luxurious surroundings. It's embodied in his tailored suit, his polished brown shoes, his very essence.

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"When did you first begin drawing?" he asks, again with minimal lip movement.

"When I was a kid."

"With your father? Your mother?"

"My dad abandoned us," I reply stiffly, barely registering my voice. The sound of the 4B pencil shading his suit's texture suffices. Technically, this detailing could wait for the refinement stage, but I'm deliberately postponing work on his face... extending our time together.

It's almost as if I crave his company.

"I'm truly sorry to hear that."

"My mom consistently encouraged my art. She juggled two jobs yet somehow always found the money for new supplies. Pencils came first, because... Well..."

"Well?" he prompts, his tone suggesting genuine interest, even eagerness for me to continue. I simultaneously hate and adore his curiosity about me.

"They were more affordable," I explain. "Paint came with a higher price tag, so pencils became my medium. An entire universe of pencils. Of gradients. Of discovering light through precise pressure and angles. I sketched my mom hundreds of times. Even when?—"

I abruptly stop. I have to restrain myself. I nearly snap my pencil to release the

mounting tension. I hadn't anticipated losing my composure, but the contrast between his authentic self and his mob persona is maddening.

Focus on the money. Think of Mom. Two conflicting impulses surge through me.

"When?" he presses.

"Are you a parrot?"

"Are you a parrot?" he counters with a smirk that somehow, even now, elicits a smile from me.

Abandoning his jacket, I shift my pencil to his face, outlining its profile and capturing that smirk, wondering whether he'll come out looking mocking, encouraging, or somewhere between.

"We don't have to talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable," he offers.

"How magnanimous of you."

"Are you always this prickly?"

"Are you always this... you?" I retort.

"Unfortunately, some might say yes, I am," he admits.

"Just another prestigious hedge fund manager."

He leans forward slightly. The gesture lacking menace. Inexplicably, I feel safe in his presence. I only asked Gianna to meet us here solely to prevent opportunities for him to kiss me, touch me, make my body tingle and ache with his physical strength and

imposing stature. Am I delusional to believe he would even want that?

"Is something on your mind?"

"What could I possibly want to say? I already said silence is better for the portrait, anyway."

He leans back. His lips no longer form that smirk, yet that's how they materialize in my sketch as I transition to heavy gradients for his penetrating eyes and lighter strokes for his hair. We proceed in tense silence for ten excruciating minutes. I nearly want to scream simply to shatter it.

He watches me calculatingly, deciphering my thoughts.

"What happened to your mother?" he asks.

If the question weren't so painful, I might appreciate his breaking the silence.

"Excuse me?"

"You said you painted portraits of your mother... until—and then expressed anger toward my profession as a hedge fund manager."

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"I don't know what you're talking about."

"What happened to her?"

I set aside my pencil. "This is a professional setting. And you're being rude."

He smirks, seemingly appreciating my calling him out. He probably finds few others willing to challenge him. Perhaps Gianna. I can't imagine her tolerating any nonsense. But likely no one else. "Perhaps I am overstepping, but something feels distinctly amiss beneath the surface of this situation."

"So, you're determined to tear up the floorboards and scrutinize whatever lies beneath."

"I believe that's what you want," he says perceptively. "Since you arrived, you've appeared poised to confront me about something."

He's right. I've wanted to vent my rage for a long, long time. Four years. Since losing my mother.

"Do you seriously want to hear this?" I demand.

"Yes," he affirms.

I feel pathetic for even wanting to discuss this, as though his listening might somehow matter.

"We were sitting outside a café off Lower Greenville," I begin as I recall that moment. "She, my mom, my vibrant, witty mom, was in a linen blouse she reserved exclusively for cheery days. I had my sketchpad balanced on my knee.

"We had just split a rather pricey cinnamon roll, and I was trying to capture how her left eyebrow always arched higher than the right when feigning attention. Then came the shouting. Then the gunfire."

I watch for any sign of shock on his face, but his expression transforms into an unreadable mask.

"Three shots. Without warning. Without escalation. It wasn't movie violence. It was casual, like flicking a cigarette. A man in a gray blazer ducked behind the espresso cart. Someone collapsed. And my mother simply blinked at me, bewildered. Then she simply dropped her coffee and slumped in her seat. A stray bullet had penetrated her abdomen."

I remain dry-eyed, my face as impassive as Nico's. He's likely wondering whether I'm an undercover cop, an investigative journalist, or if I've hidden a gun among my art supplies.

"They said it was a turf thing. Two factions. One car got boxed in. Someone panicked. She was never a target. They never caught who did it. Too many names. Too many reasons to avoid questions. The cops classified it as 'gang-related'—Dallas's method of sanitizing anything messy that wears a suit."

At the mention of a suit, he flinches. "I deeply regret what happened to your mother."

"You regret it," I echo, my tone conveying just how little his sentiment means to me.

Unbidden, tears slide down my cheeks, my eyes burning, betraying my composure.



He notices. It transforms his entire demeanor. He transitions from mobster to compassionate supporter.

He stands protectively, reminiscent of his posture in the restaurant when that stranger nearly knocked me over. It seems instinctive for him... because it's me. Would people consider me irrational if I confessed how a man's stance and movement make me feel cherished?

Swiftly, he crosses the room, gazes down at me, and then, mirroring the restaurant incident, hesitates as if questioning his approach. He recognizes the impossibility of our situation.

"Sienna," he whispers.

"I'm fine. It happened four years ago. But can you comprehend that? The mob operates with impunity, harming whomever they choose."

I wait for his response, some acknowledgment. He looks at me with apparent anguish. Perhaps he wishes to confide in me, but recognizes he can't.

"There are certain matters that have to remain confidential," he states grimly. "But if you're curious about my employment, we can talk about how boring hedge funds are."

I wipe my cheek, resolving against further tears. "I didn't come here to discuss my mom." Or to listen to lies and deflection. "Would you please sit?"

"Sienna..."

Suddenly, his commanding hands are on my shoulders. When he applies pressure, I momentarily feel owned. A secret I'll never divulge... I want him to keep holding me

like this. I feel claimed. Protected. Wrapped in his authority.

But I quickly pull away, raising my hands defensively. He steps forward. My palms press against his shirt. I sense the radiating warmth of his skin, his heart pounding beneath solid muscle. I nearly clench my fingers, dragging my nails across his chest.

I take another step back. He halts.

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"Is 'sorry' the word you're looking for?" I snap, hoping my conflicted emotions remain hidden. I yearn to touch him again, to receive further comfort. Even if he might be responsible for my suffering.

He forces out his response. "I don't want to see you upset."

"Upset," I repeat, shaking my head incredulously.

"Devastated. Your life was shattered. I wish there was something I could do."

You could reveal the truth. I mentally paint the words in the space between us before they dissipate. If he insists on deception, then deception it shall be. This charade won't be for long, anyway.

"If you can sit down and let me finish, that will help."

He raises his hand. Hesitates. Then decisively takes mine. We remain connected for several bewildering moments before I pull my hand away. He's disrupting both my physical and emotional equilibrium. My very soul, if I want to frame it artistically... which, unsurprisingly, I do.

"Nico. Please sit so I can finish my work. Thank you."

But he remains immobile, continuing to gaze intently as though our very existence depends upon it. His familiarity exceeds propriety. Yet it feels... natural? Is that right? Interaction with him flows effortlessly than with most people. I feel authentically myself.

What am I even thinking?

"Nico." I put my hand against his chest again, urging him backward. "Please."

He captures my hand. He pulls me toward him.

## ChapterSeven

Nico

We move like dancers as she pivots within my embrace. Her curvaceous form presses against mine, her resilient, defiant heart pounding erratically. I can feel both her softness and her determination through her clothing. I long to embrace her. To possess her. To heal her wounds.

But she can't know the truth. I can't risk exposure. I am Don first, lover... never.

Except with her, apparently.

She presses against my torso. For a second, she clutches me, as if preparing to initiate a kiss. I inch toward her. My hand settles on her hip, eliciting a gasp from her... But then she forcefully distances herself.

"I'm serious, stop," she demands, raising her hand emphatically.

I retreat a step. My body rages with desire. Everything burns. I hadn't intended such intensity, but this sensation remains entirely unfamiliar, beyond my control. She runs pencil-smudged fingers through her hair. There's something provocative about her gesture. I recognize her desire. It matches my own.

I'm behaving like a savage. Like a Don. Taking as other powerful men take. If she

surrenders to me here, could I ever trust her actions to reflect genuine desire?

That realization jolts me back to the present. I distance myself to maintain clarity, to think with something beyond the primal desire straining against my pants. Yet simultaneously, my heart aches for her—for her mother, for her profound loss.

"Thank you," she says when I sit, momentarily flustered but quickly regaining focus. I admire that quality in her. "Let's just pretend none of that happened. I'm a stranger artist, and you're a stranger hedge fund manager. Deal? Great—good."

I remain motionless for the next several minutes. I can offer her this small courtesy, at least, if I can't provide the truth she so deserves.

"Your mom isn't thinking of commissioning any more portraits, is she?" Sienna asks after a while.

"I'm not sure," I reply, minimizing my mouth's movement.

"It's just—I might be occupied for the next few weeks. So, this will probably be my final assignment with her."

This disappoints me more profoundly than it should. It's probably for the best, though. Perhaps it means I can finally regain some self-control. I'm captivated by everything about her—physically, intellectually, her life experiences, her thought processes, and her personal history. I yearn to understand how she's navigated solitude since losing her mother, to learn about her art, to discover what drives her.

But my initial assessment remains valid. She despises the mob. She despises me. I could attempt to change her mind, deliver some eloquent speech about my redeeming qualities.

For what purpose? She's better without me in her life.

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She's better protected, even if that protection comes with her hatred.

\* \* \*

The following day, I converse with my mother via speakerphone while standing at my office window. I toss a baseball from hand to hand, contemplating what it would be like to manage my chaotic thoughts with the precision of the Texas Rangers—no panic, no extraneous noise, just calm, methodical execution like their finest performances.

"Sienna has forwarded a digital image of the portrait. She applied the finishing touches last night. She's made you seem very..."

My mother pauses. I mentally supply the descriptors.

Sinister. Angry. Predatory.

"Youthful," Mother concludes, surprising me. "She gave you a roguish sort of smile and a certain light in your eyes—perhaps that's how she perceives you, hmm?"

"Mother, you need to abandon this matchmaking endeavor."

"She's the one who interpreted you that way."

"I mean it. It's finished."

"Why are you determined to spoil my fun?"

I toss the baseball hard. "Yesterday, Sienna told me something devastating about her mother. Without divulging specifics, let's just say she lost a family member during the war."

Mother gasps but remains silent. She won't discuss the Bratva-mob conflict openly on the phone. But we both know how much people lost. We both recognize it provides people with legitimate reasons to despise organized crime—as if additional justification were needed.

But I'm different, aren't I? Better than Father, than Luka.

"People are complicated," Mother says after a long pause.

"This isn't. Her hatred for..." The mob. Us. "And I don't fault her for it."

"But certain situations are nuances," Mother counters.

"Why does this matter so much? You said yourself the portrait is good."

"It exceeds mere quality. It's... aspirational. Artist's dream of producing work of this caliber, and she accomplished it within an afternoon and evening."

"Is she truly that gifted?" I inquire.

"She strikes me as someone who has invested far beyond their ten thousand hours. I want her to create more."

"She informed me she's too busy for additional commissions. You have to let it go."

"I can't," Mother insists. "This started as a little matchmaking project, but Nico, it has transformed into something else entirely. I believe I've discovered genuine talent. I



believe I've discovered... the one."

I groan, throwing the ball with increased intensity. My palm throbs. "The gallery."

"Mydreamgallery," she confirms.

She's always dreamed of opening a gallery of her own. But she never found 'the one'—the perfect artist with the ideal vision to headline the grand opening. She nurtures numerous such aspirations: a gallery, a fashion exhibition, mastering Russian to 'experience the great novels in their original form.' At least the latter ambition resulted in our mutual fluency before our encounters with the Bratva.

"I'll commission portraits of our family, my associates, objects, sources of inspiration... perhaps one or two additional renderings of you."

"Mother—"

"Perhaps," she interjects. "But she'll have abundant projects, so it might not occur for some time."

"She might decline altogether," I point out.

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"I'll compensate her exceptionally well. She can even retain rights to the paintings and sketches if she wishes to sell prints at my event."

"It might not be about the money for her."

It might be about me specifically. The hatred. The resentment. The electricity she experienced when we touched—must have experienced, because it coursed through me like wildfire. She likely resents that attraction now, having allowed herself to feel it with a mob boss.

"You're correct. It's not about money. It's about vision. Her painting reveals someone with extraordinary vision—with tremendous ambition. She'll embrace this opportunity because she's an artist."

"You've deduced all this from a single portrait."

"I would discern this merely by examining how she's captured the sparkle in your eyes. It's as though they contain genuine vitality."

"Whereas in reality, I'm a dead-eyed psychopath," I remark dryly.

"It's refreshing to see you happy."

"Even if only in artistic representation."

She sighs.

"If you do this, Mother, I want her to be kept safe. You understand my meaning."

Mother will use her security personnel to ensure her protection. I refuse to let her become collateral in this lifestyle. Though violence has diminished recently, we remain perpetually prepared to assert dominance when necessary.

"Yes, yes, naturally. You worry too much."

"Perhaps you're right. I worry you don't worry enough."

"So, do I have your blessing to contact her?"

"I wouldn't characterize it as my 'blessing,' but the decision belongs to her, not me."

I could add that I want to see her again, despite recognizing it may not serve either of our best interests. After our near kiss, that intimate contact, I maintained silence. We parted awkwardly, avoiding eye contact. She clearly intended to establish that nothing would develop between us, yet I sensed her desire in those fleeting glances, those momentary lapses in her defenses.

We'd share that scorching connection before she remembered—before she withdrew again. Or attempted to.

I work for a while before receiving Adrian's call.

"Hey, Nico, how you doing, my man?"

My cousin's enthusiasm sounds forced. He exhibited the same forced cheerfulness when I appointed him as my consigliere. I explained it was because we'd observed his management of my uncle's businesses following my uncle's demise. We withheld that we required closer scrutiny of him—of his loyalty.

When I informed him, he grinned and hugged me."I thought you were going to operate solo forever."

"I believe it's time I accepted some help,"I'd replied.

If he demonstrates loyalty, he'll maintain his position as my public consigliere, and I'll expand my territory. If not, then...

I prefer not to contemplate that outcome. Adrian irritates me, but I've known he was a kid. Yet this lifestyle shows no mercy. Sienna understands that reality.

"Nico?"

"I'm here."

"Viktor is prepared to meet at the Vine."

"When?"

Adrian hesitates. "Now."

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"So, he expects me to come running," I observe.

"I know. It's inappropriate. Want me to tell him to go fuck himself?"

There's my cousin again, making everything sound forced.

"No. This is a minor concession to prevent something worse. I'll arrive shortly."

Of all the games risking bloodshed, posturing ranks as the worst. It yields nothing substantial. When a man has to prove himself, his only options are to fight or die. That's when his true character emerges. All the petty power dynamics and political maneuvering require a cool mind. A calculating mind. Like my legitimate profession, the underworld operates on facts and figures.

I meet Adrian and Viktor at the Vine. Viktor's solitary presence, without Bratva reinforcement, is a positive sign. We take our customary booth away from the windows in the room's corner. Call us cautious.

Viktor remains sober—another favorable indication. He shakes my hand with a surprisingly gentle smile. In certain instances, the slender man appears almost avuncular... nearly making me forget his true nature. Almost. Adrian fidgets restlessly beside me.

"Thank you for meeting," Viktor says in Russian.

"Why don't we converse in English so Adrian can participate?"

Adrian never mastered Russian. Maybe that contradicts my suspicions about his loyalty. Perhaps she is trustworthy. Or perhaps he's simply lazy and unconcerned, since the Bratva speaks English.

"Or perhaps you prefer he remain uninformed," I suggest when Viktor sits silently.

"What I wish to request... it is sensitive. If you reject this proposal, it will make me look very foolish. We both understand that humiliation, in our profession, necessitates retaliation."

He's correct. Posturing differs from outright disrespect. Certain affronts can be overlooked. But excessive power plays risk undermining a Don's authority, encouraging ambitious young pups to think they can take down the big bad wolf. That's when a man shows his teeth.

"Continue..."

"We're encountering difficulties with warehouse permits. This has persisted for some time. However, I'm willing to disregard the permit issues if you'll attend a party, I'm hosting... with Anya as your companion. Your official date. You'll arrive together. Have photographs taken with her. Treat her exceptionally well; ensure she experiences an unforgettable evening."

I nearly ask him to repeat himself. This arrangement seems suspiciously good... Surely, I can endure one evening with Anya? I've known her for years without any attraction developing. Meeting Sienna has only emphasized that absence of chemistry.

But could I feign interest for a single night? To resolve Viktor's warehouse complaints? It's my duty to do anything that makes the city safer.

"Just one date?" I confirm. "You won't spring additional conditions later?"

"Just one date," he affirms.

I nearly explain that I'm participating solely as part of our agreement, that there's no chance I'll feel anything real. But what purpose would that serve?

"Do we have an arrangement?" he asks, extending his hand.

I think of Sienna. For a brief, irrational moment, I wish I could take her instead. Then I shake his hand.

## ChapterEight

### Sienna

My WiFi's gone belly up, forcing me to use the West Branch Library's antique computers. The machine sounds perilously close to expelling a cloud of black smoke. Ostensibly, I'm searching for employment opportunities.

Office work, perhaps, something steady. But somewhere between browsing job boards and nursing half a cup of lukewarm coffee, I find myself researching Nico Moretti. I know I need to be strong, to stick to my plan: one assignment, one payment—Gianna transferred the money mere minutes after receiving the digital image—followed by a new chapter to my life.

Yet I need to know. Is he truly a bad man? Or am I deluding myself by believing the internet can tell me the truth?

The articles present a polished image. Hedge fund triumphs, numerous charitable foundations prominently displaying his name. He finances cancer treatment

initiatives, builds playgrounds in neighborhoods I avoid after nightfall.

One photograph shows him cutting a ribbon in Bishop Arts. Sunglasses, tieless, one hand casually pocketed as though he's not posing but simply existing in the right lighting. His attractiveness frustrates me. Even in still images, he appears attentive to something just beyond the frame. Perpetually strategizing, perhaps.

Another image captures him at a rooftop fundraiser, cufflinks gleaming, head turned toward a man I don't recognize. Though not smiling, his mouth softens at the corners, suggesting the possibility. I wonder if he ever looks like that when no one's watching.



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I tell myself I don't care. That our near kiss meant nothing. That I merely appreciate his observational style: composed, deliberate.

I close the browser before succumbing to rereading.

His online persona reveals nothing about his real life. He essentially confirmed his mob ties. He acknowledged certain topics remain off-limits. One needn't be exceptionally perceptive to deduce the implications.

My cell phone rings. I answer quickly when the librarian glares reproachfully.

"Hello?" I whisper.

"Sienna, my dear. Have I interrupted something important?"

"Give me two seconds."

I log out of the computer and step into the spring sunlight, not quite hot enough to render me instantly sticky, but sufficient enough to get a person sweating even in the shade. Across the street, a grocery cart lies overturned beneath a mesquite tree. A car creeps down the street, bass reverberating through the air, moving suspiciously slow. Probably a drug dealer.

"Hello?" I say, leaning against the railing. In the distance, a train rumbles past. It prompts thoughts of new beginnings. Cheesy? Undoubtedly. But it does.

"Sienna... your work, it's simply wonderful."

"Thank you," I respond.

"No, you don't understand. It's sublime. It's transcendental. You possess extraordinary talent. When did you begin drawing?"

My pulse quickens. If this lacked any mob connection, I'd be ecstatic right now. I've received compliments before, but nothing of this magnitude. And never with eight thousand dollars—she included extra as a tip—deposited in my account.

"When I was a little kid. Pencil sketches initially. They're cheaper. But Mom would save and buy paint for me."

"Oh—how lovely. And she, your mother..."

"She's gone."

"I'm so sorry, Sienna. Truly."

I swallow a knot of grief. I've kept it buried deep for years, but the conversation with her son has shaken it all up.

"She would be proud of you, I'm certain," Gianna continues. "Your work has rekindled my passion for art. I want—need—to commission you for a project. Portraits, pencil and paintings: of people, of objects, of moments. Can you do that?"

"I..." My dreams are materializing before my eyes. I've imagined conversations precisely like this in my wildest fantasies. I've rehearsed my response should a wealthy benefactor ever present such a life-altering opportunity.

"I..."

I'm faltering, knowing what the right choice is. My original plan. One job. But this represents the most tantalizing offer I've ever received.

"Do you need some time to consider it, Sienna?"

"No," I interject quickly, before my dreams can talk for me.

I cannot overstate how desperately I've yearned for this. I'd discuss with Mom not merely surviving as an artist, but thriving—establishing my own gallery, perhaps even teaching at seminars. She always encouraged me. Yet we both recognized these as distant fantasies, not practical foundations for my future.

Now, here it is.

"I don't need to think about it. The answer is no."

"Pardon me?"

Naturally, she didn't hear me. I whispered the words. I close my eyes.

"What sort of mood are you envisioning?"

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"I want a snapshot of my life, my friends, my hobbies, my outfits, my family... my son."

She pronounces 'son' as if testing me. Did Nico mention something to her? I don't like the thought of them talking about me behind my back. Yet, paradoxically, I'm somewhat flattered by the notion of occupying Nico's thoughts. A small voice inside wonders if she's extending this offer out of guilt.

But then I hear Mom's words, a memory I often replay: "You've got all the talent in the world, Sienna Vale, and don't you forget it. When your opportunity arrives, you'll deserve it."

I'm like everyone else. I have insecurities about certain things, but Mom ensured I never questioned my abilities—or my capacity to improve them.

"Are you there, Sienna?"

"Yes," I reply, my mouth dry. "That sounds interesting. We could even experiment with a portmanteau."

"A what, dear?"

"A portmanteau is a literary device. It occurs when you blend two words, like breakfast and lunch."

"Brunch."

I laugh softly. "Exactly. I was thinking perhaps we could experiment with integrating images within images, like a memory captured in someone's eyes, in several pieces. I've been exploring surrealism in my personal work."

"That's a brilliant concept. I'd like to begin with a portrait of myself. When are you available?"

I reach into my pocket and pull out Mom's pendant. It's one half of a heart. She lost the other piece but always wore this as a reminder to focus on the positive, to search for the missing half rather than dwelling on what was absent. Like my dad.

What would Mom want me to do?

I haven't committed to the job yet, I attempt to say, but the words remain trapped.

"I'm free all day," I tell her. "I resigned from my position when I discovered its connection to organized crime."

"Youquit?"

"Yes," I affirm. "Because my mom died in a mob conflict. I hate them, Gianna." My voice trembles. "Understand? Despise them."

A prolonged, excruciating silence follows. I bite my fingernails anxiously. I can hear her breathing on the line, but she remains silent. Finally, she says softly, "We're not who you believe us to be, sweet girl. I promise, if you accept this opportunity, you won't regret it. I approached you solely as an art enthusiast, nothing more. Nothing else needs interfere with that."

She wants me to compartmentalize, to disregard the mob element. I clutch Mom's pendant, closing my eyes, straining to hear her voice. "Follow your dreams. You

deserve this. You've grieved enough."

Gianna didn't deny her mob affiliation. Just 'we're not who you think we are.' Is that enough for me?

She's offering me the chance to explore artistic avenues previously unattainable. Grand locations, luxurious surroundings, a lifestyle I've never experienced. As someone who has lived in poverty my entire life, does that tempt me? Absolutely.

But the art—the opportunity to showcase my work... That's the genuine diamond in a city full of rhinestones.

"I will protect you, Sienna," Gianna promises. "You'll have the opportunity someone of your caliber deserves. To practice your art without distractions, without life's impediments."

I swallow hard. "I'll do it."

Am I making a pact with the devil?

## ChapterNine

Nico

The following afternoon, I arrive outside my mother's residence. She's been unreachable for two hours, which has heightened my anxiety since she's provided no explanation. She nearly always responds to texts.

My men are vetting Viktor's party. I doubt he'd be reckless enough to strike publicly, but I'd never underestimate a scumbag like him. Outside Mother's home, Bruno sits in a sedan with tinted windows. He rolls one down as I approach, chewing on a

toothpick.

"Sir," he acknowledges.

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"Everything secure here?"

He nods. "Yes, sir. Mrs. Moretti is completing her portrait session."

Which would explain her lack of communication. For once, she's been forced to sit still.

I return to my car, contemplating my next move. This confirms Sienna accepted the commission. Despite her protestations about being too occupied, and the hatred in her eyes, she consented. I'm increasingly intrigued by her. I want to understand her change of heart. I want to witness that defiant expression again, the fire in her eyes.

After deliberating briefly, I decide to enter. I ascend Mom's grand staircase and walk into her impressive home, closing the door quietly when I hear their conversation. Mother is speaking as I enter.

"...your ability to maintain concentration while I fidget about is truly remarkable, dear."

"I've captured the expression I want," Sienna replies, sounding absorbed and focused. I can easily envision her leaning toward the canvas with that spark of artistic intensity. "You return to it frequently, even while talking. Then I progressively incorporate additional details."

"Who taught you this technique?"

"Nobody. I simply love pencils. I once had a set, probably cheap and tacky, but Mom



purchased it for me, and I treasured it. I used to sketch alone during breaks because... well, it was sometimes easier."

"Oh, you poor thing."

"No, it was nothing like that," Sienna quickly clarifies. "I wasn't bullied, exactly. I just wasn't included. I didn't belong. All I craved was drawing and painting."

"It's certainly paid off, Sienna," Mom asserts confidently. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"You've reached a proficiency most artists don't achieve until their forties."

Sienna laughs with endearing awkwardness. "I suppose solitude has its advantages."

"And now that you've mastered your craft, you can afford to socialize with meddlesome old women like myself."

"Ha, indeed. It's not so bad to be older."

"Coming from the twenty-three-year-old!"

"You've got experience, wisdom, maturity," Sienna says.

Mom guffaws. "Me? Mature? Those are fighting words, missy."

Sienna laughs. I'm grinning like a fool listening to their exchange.

"Please, Gianna, I need to concentrate."

"Am I easier or more challenging to draw than my son?"

"Easier," Sienna admits. "But please."

My mother likely wants to inquire further—she always does—but Sienna falls silent. I decide it's time to announce my presence. I've eavesdropped long enough.

She glances at me as I enter the spacious living room, then maintains her position. "Hello, my boy."

I nod toward her cell phone on the adjacent table. She winces, then shoots me an apologetic look. She understands the protocol when high-ranking Family members become unreachable. We exist in the shadow of conflict, and I've implemented measures to prevent history from repeating itself.

"Hello, Sienna," I say.

She looks so beautiful in her conflicted state. Does that make me a monster for thinking that? She embodies artistic elegance today in her oversized sweater, sleeves rolled up, hair braided over one shoulder. "Hey."

"I didn't intend to interrupt your work."

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"Don't worry. I'm a professional." She smirks at me, then deliberately returns to her sketching.

I return her smirk. "It's reassuring to know I haven't permanently deterred you from portraiture."

"I must be more resilient than you thought."

"No—I recognized you were tough the day we met."

"Two days ago, then," she says, shaking her head. "Sorry—can I focus? I want to complete the primary piece and then compile my list of finishing touches for later."

"Certainly. Coffee, anyone?"

"Yes, please," Mom responds.

"Fine," Sienna concedes. She glances at me, her firm expression momentarily softening into a smile when she notices my smirk. Then she quickly suppresses it. She can't resist smiling at me. That feels like a victory, however inappropriate.

In the kitchen, I prepare coffee. By the time I'm done, Sienna walks in. "I'll compile my notes after coffee," she announces. "I need time to..." She twirls her finger near her temple, mimicking the universal gesture for going nuts.

"Mother tells me you're extraordinarily talented, even beyond her expectations."

I pull out her chair. She looks down, then smiles and sits. When I push her in, her back presses against my hands, where I grip the chair. A simple, possibly innocent gesture.

But I feel it. And so does she. She emits a soft moan. I softly rest my hand on her shoulder.

"I didn't say I wanted you to do that," she whispers, breathless and alluring.

"You didn't need to," I growl.

"Nico..."

I move to the edge of the table, leaning down until our eyes meet. With a smile, I say, "I'm almost tempted to simply kiss you so we can dispel this tension."

She laughs quietly. "I understand the sentiment."

I move toward her, grazing her lips for the briefest moment, not quite a kiss, almost a kiss. But she abruptly withdraws. My mother enters the kitchen. I straighten up.

Either my mother didn't notice or was pretending not to. My heart pounds. Sienna wraps her arms around herself. We're likely sharing the same thought. How did that nearly happen so effortlessly? Wanting a genuine relationship with her is complicated, wrong. It's impossible, given her animosity and my position.

But desiring her is another matter entirely. My body harbors no confusion. Every fiber of my being hungers to claim every inch of her.

"I had a little preview," Mom says, joining Sienna at the table. "Exceptional work. I'm eager to see what you accomplish with paints."

"That's where I've been experimenting with my surrealist concepts."

"Your... portmanteau?"

"Yes," Sienna confirms. "Incorporating elements from different paintings and transforming them into one entity... and many entities. Not to sound pretentious."

"It doesn't sound pretentious," I assure her.

She smiles at me briefly, then blows on her coffee.

"Just like life," Mother observes. "You take certain elements from various sources and hope everything fits together... that it becomes coherent, allowing you to relinquish control and embrace happiness."

Sienna stares at my mother for several moments. "Live in the moment, you mean?"

"What makes you say that?"

"The only way to find happiness when aspects of your painting cause misery is to live in the moment. Letting go essentially means forgetting. Or ignoring."

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"Is that such a bad thing?"

They're discussing more than painting. Mother's subtly encouraging Sienna to embrace the present... as if the moment won't inevitably shatter around us.

"Sooner or later, it has to end," Sienna says.

"You're young, dear. You needn't concern yourself with that."

"I'm not concerned about anything beyond my work," Sienna replies.

Mom gestures toward me. I'm leaning against the counter as though overseeing a board meeting. "Take my son. He presents as a stern businessman, yet you've captured the playfulness within him. A different dimension... without the severity."

"It began as stern," Sienna admits, studying me. "Because that's your default expression, sorry to tell you. But then you smirked and... well..." She shrugs. "I thought it suited you better. So I reworked it."

"You portrayed me as someone who knows how to have fun."

She flashes me a grin. She's an enigma I desperately want to solve. One moment melancholic, the next radiant. She allows all facets of her painting to flow through her. I remain perpetually the Don. Regardless of location or circumstance. Except with her.

"So, you don't, then?" she challenges. "Know how to have fun?"

"I'll have you know I am the champion of Greens and Gravy."

She laughs. "Greens and Gravy? I've never heard of it."

"You are missing out," I tell her. "They boast the finest mini golf this side of Fort Worth, and the most exquisite gravy nationwide."

"The gravy is absolutely divine," Mother confirms.

"You hold the record?" Sienna asks, her smile lingering.

"He's not exaggerating," Mother says. "We used to take the boys there regularly. Nico's maintained the record for..."

I puff my chest proudly, eliciting another laugh from Sienna. "Twenty-eight years."

"What?"

"He achieved four holes-in-one."

"This sounds like the origin story of some megalomaniacal dictator. Next, you'll claim you can walk on water."

"That was going to be my next trick."

Another laugh. "Yet you haven't surpassed your own record. How disappointing."

"I remain in contention, Sienna."

"Perhaps I'll challenge you someday."

"What about right now?" I propose stepping forward. "If you think you possess the skill."

Sienna chews on the inside of her cheek contemplatively. She glances at Mother. "I suppose he could drive me home instead?"

My mother appears caught off-guard... but unmistakably delighted. She looks proud too, as if attributing this development to her discourse on aspects.

Sienna turns to me. "Alright, I suppose I can unwind... for one night."

One night.

She emphasizes those words deliberately. She wants me to understand this can never evolve into something permanent. It's merely amusement. We'll ignore all other aspects, the background hues in our painting.



### ChapterTen

Sienna

Dallas has never seemed so distant. Through Nico's car windows, the city appears remote. I clutch Mom's pendant so tightly it bites into my palm, the cold metal reminding me how inappropriate this is. Yet I'm conflicted, knowing Mom would be thrilled if she knew I was dating an older man.

I once questioned her about it. "After your dad, I just want your happiness, regardless of whom you choose." She understood my preference for older men. Sophisticated. Experienced. Mature. That's why my faceless man always possessed those qualities. That's why Nico fits so perfectly.

Mom was killed in gang violence, though the perpetrators remained unidentified. If Nico is wealthy, a boss, surely, he wouldn't participate in street gunfights. Is that my twisted justification for this?

"Ready to face humiliating defeat?" he teases, winking playfully, drawing me back to the present.

"Ha, dream on," I mutter. "Nico..."

"Hmm?"

"Just one night," I emphasize. "I don't want to dampen the mood. But you understand my reasoning. I know you'd prefer I pretend otherwise?—"

"It's not that."

"Well, whatever it is, we don't need to talk about it. It's simply mini golf."

He rests his hand on my thigh. I bite my lip as sensations surge through my leg, teasing mercilessly. I press my thighs together. My body responds instinctively, desire urging me to guide his hand higher.

"Simply mini golf," he echoes huskily.

I should tell him to move his hand. But there are lots of things I should be doing, all of which I seem determined to ignore.

He turns into the golf center's driveway. A sign above the entrance declares, Restaurant closed until further notice. I'm secretly relieved. I'm already questioning whether even golf is a good idea.

He smiles down at me, gesturing me through the imposing double doors.

"Is there a leaderboard, or do you have a plaque on the wall or something?" I inquire.

Before he can respond, a man calls from behind the desk. "Nico! The prodigy returns!"

Nico laughs and approaches him. The man exudes a kindly uncle aura—older, sporting a braided brown beard and warm smile. I feel somewhat awkward beside Nico as they embrace. How will he introduce me? Surely not as his date?

He gestures toward me with sophisticated ease. "This is Sienna Vale, a local artist. My mother commissioned her to capture her life. She's remarkably talented... though hopefully not at putt-putt."

"Two admissions, then? Certainly. But don't even consider offering payment."

Nico smiles. "It's no trouble?—"

"Not after you solved that situation with those pesky troublemakers!"

"Charley," Nico interjects tensely. "Perhaps we could talk about this later."

I consider literally plugging my ears. The only way I can enjoy myself—if I even deserve enjoyment—is by forgetting this mob connection. Yet here's unmistakable evidence. What sort of "help" did Nico Moretti provide?

Charley glances at me, comprehension dawning. "Of course."

"Don't worry," I assure him. "I worked at the Cattle and Vine. I've heard rumors."

Charley hesitates before shaking his head. "I don't understand your meaning."

"Two, please," Nico says stiffly.

"Certainly, certainly."

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He hurries to the counter. I thrust my hands into my pockets and examine the wall of pictures. I'm attempting nonchalance, but memories of our near kiss, that tantalizing brush of lips, resonate through me. It's desire versus rationality. Integrity versus artistry. Far more complex than my typically straightforward existence.

Hard to be alone? Yes. But uncomplicated.

I suppress it all. The boy in the picture beneath the prominent "Record" sign is unmistakably Nico. Now I understand what Gianna meant. His smile mirrors the one I sketched.

"Look at him," Nico says, chuckling. "He doesn't know how lucky he is."

"That's my reaction whenever I look at pictures from before, Mom..."

He raises his hand, then lowers it. Tension crackles between us. His gaze suggests he wants to paint me with his tongue. He wants to caress me. He desires me. No one has ever looked at me this way before, and I've never wanted them to.

He turns away, seemingly frustrated by his lust overshadowing sympathy. But I think it's the opposite. Pretending we're merely primal creatures simplifies everything.

"I love this song," I murmur into the silence.

Leon Bridges plays through the speaker system.

"Yeah?"

"Mom was old school. She had a record player with his complete collection. Well... everything released before she?—"

I can't complete the thought.

"Perhaps we could listen together sometime."

"I had to sell both the player and records," I confess. "After Mom's passing, I needed to focus on surviving. I'm not proud of that."

He leans in closer. "You don't need to feel guilty about it, either."

I retreat before surrendering to his enticing embrace. "Shall we get started?"

He frowns. "Certainly."

We carry our clubs through the door onto the open-air course. The first hole features a gentle slope leading to a cup nestled within a depression. He hands me a paper and a pencil. "You should keep the score. Just resist your artistic impulses. When you lose, I don't want you claiming distraction by creative inspiration."

His compliment brightens my mood. Our hands touch as I accept the pencil, reminding me of his earlier statement. We should kiss to dissolve this tension.

"I'll try not to."

He positions his ball.

"Whoa, Mr. Millionaire, step back."

He chuckles. "Have I missed something?"

"Why did you automatically assume you're going first?"

"Ah."

"Precisely... ah. I believe you should forfeit going first for thinking you could butt in like that. Or should I say,puttin..." I quip with a grin.

He approaches, laughing. "And I believe you should forfeit for that atrocious wordplay."

"I almost agree," I admit. "I simply couldn't resist."

"Honestly, I liked it, Sienna. Just don't tell anyone."

"Wouldn't want to tarnish your reputation," I remark, bending to place my ball.

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I turn, catching him watching me. He makes no pretense otherwise. He checks out my ass, and it feels exhilarating. I never imagined feeling this desirable. I almost want to accentuate my movements. His attention intoxicates me. In this moment, forgetting everything else, highlighting this shade of ruby red desire, sparkling, tempting, begging us to surrender.

“There's always an advantage to going second.”

"Really?" I ask, lining up my shot.

"I can potentially hit your ball," he explains. "Ruining your score. Or we can do it the boring way—you complete your putt, then I begin."

"No, let's do it the fun way," I decide. "It won't matter, anyway. You can't hit my ball if I get a hole-in-one." When he laughs, I challenge, "You don't believe me?"

"I admire your confidence, piccola pittrice."

Shivers cascade over me like delicate finishing strokes. "What does that mean?"

"Little painter," he translates.

"Little. Not exactly. But I understand what you mean. You're the impressive hedge fund magnate..." Not to mention mob boss. No, focus, have fun, forget about that. I'm being selfish. "And I'm merely a humble artist."

"You enjoy teasing me, don't you, piccola pittrice? Fortunately, I appreciate your

playfulness."

My cheeks flush crimson before I turn away, taking aim. "You won't appreciate this."

I strike the ball. It rolls up the slope, then curves into the depression at precisely the right angle. I gasp as it glides effortlessly into the hole. Then I turn, feigning indifference, shrugging nonchalantly. "See?"

He grins, approaching. "When you gasp like that, you rather undermine the pretense that this wasn't entirely planned."

I playfully slap his chest, then leave my hand there. We go from laughter to intense eye contact. Like flipping a switch. One night, I told him and meant it. Can't I simply enjoy myself just this once? Not even dinner. Just miniature golf, and this: the undercurrent. Like how a line curves when you let your hand guide you instead of logic.

I press against his firm muscles. He reaches out, grasping my hip. Draws me closer. I have ample opportunity to prevent what's happening. Yet I melt effortlessly into his embrace, still making no attempt to stop it. One night. Burgundy visions cloud my mind as I recall Mom, then push her away.

Because I want this moment with him, beneath the amber sky melting into azure, yielding to inky darkness. I want my perfect mature man, the one I sketched, forgetting everything else.

He leans down, his lips inching closer. Time moves agonizingly slowly, offering countless opportunities to pull away. I don't take any of them.

He kisses me passionately. He kisses me—as if I wish to deflect responsibility—but we kiss each other. I glide my hands up his arms, feeling his strength, his power, the



experience, and a mature sense of security I've always craved.

When his hand slides across my back toward my ass, I pull away slightly. He repositions his hand on my back, steadying me. His eyes gleam with excitement. Gianna mentioned its rarity; perhaps he only has cause for it around me.

"I shouldn't push my vignette too hard."

"Vignette works better," I whisper. "A short snippet of something. Brief yet indelible. A moment or series of moments which matter... but which must inevitably end."

He looks momentarily annoyed but then captures my lips again. "Indelible is right," he groans, drawing me closer against his body. I pull back when I hear snickering and detect teenagers entering the course.

He makes the putt in two strokes. I cast him a look of pure triumph, the lingering kiss still electrifying my lips. We refrain from further embraces throughout the remainder of the course. Two families have joined our group, compelling us to maintain decorum.

But the way he gazes at me... I could paint an entire collection just of his eyes, the hunger, the glimmers of intelligence and wit. He fascinates me. Sue me. Is that truly so bad?

"Is that your good luck charm?" he inquires at hole twelve, featuring a rotating windmill. I drop the pendant, suddenly conscious that I've been fidgeting with it.

I position myself for the next shot. "It was my mom's," I reveal.

"Ah," he murmurs.

"Ah," I echo, tilting my head inquisitively. I raise a single finger.

"Another hole in one?" He smiles – then frowns. Then looks almost irate. "Oh, one night."

"If we break the one-night rule, the live-in-the-moment principle, I'll start asking uncomfortable questions. That would shatter the mood, wouldn't it?"

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He appears conflicted, jaw clenched. "It's not that. It's?—"

"No, Nico," I interject, affixing a smile to my face. Not entirely fake, yet not wholly genuine either. "I don't need your explanations. Perhaps they're your rules. Or you suspect I'm some covert spy. It's irrelevant, at least for now. Let's enjoy this. I'll feel guilty tomorrow."

"Guilty for being with me," he says fiercely, reclaiming my hip as if asserting ownership: this piece of me and my entirety. He draws me closer. "When you want to be with me."

"This version. This facet. This nuance." I pull away despite my reluctance, grateful for the other families' presence to maintain our propriety. "This moment."

He stares meaningfully as I turn to take my shot. I'm perplexed by his mounting frustration. I was transparent about this earlier. Besides, what does he expect from me? A relationship?

When I used to envision my ideal mystery man, of course, I'd contemplate what a relationship might be like. I'd imagine a vague yet bright future filled with painting, living, laughing, and loving like that clichéd poster—clichéd precisely because it epitomizes what authentic life should be like.

My ball strikes the rotating windmill blade and rolls back several inches. Nico grins, and I reciprocate. Somehow, it's that effortless. With the versions of ourselves capable of burying everything else.

"Let me help," he offers, positioning his ball.

"I doubt you can."

"Don't be so pessimistic, Vignette."

He strikes his ball, so it collides with mine, propelling it beneath the windmill and out the opposite side. I watch incredulously as it rolls into the hole. I rush to him, laughing, bouncing excitedly. "Does that qualify as a hole in one? What's your verdict?"

"I think if I don't kiss you immediately, I'll die."

He enfolds me in his arms. The kiss is swift and respectful yet simmering with desire.

The quickness of the kiss intensifies its illicit allure.

"And yes, Vignette, that was indeed a hole in one."

## ChapterEleven

Nico

My hand rests possessively on her hip as I lead her away from the miniature golf course. The one-night stipulation weighs on me, though it shouldn't. She's essentially a stranger. Why should I care? That ought to be my attitude. But can't a man be intrigued, curious, perhaps slightly obsessed?

"Are you hungry, Sienna?" I inquire.

She turns with a dazzling smile. The miniature golf awakened her adventurous spirit.

Yet occasionally, that look dissipated. As if reminded, she resented me or what I stand for. Now, her mask is firmly in place. A captivating mask.

"No," she replies. "I think you should take me home."

"Are you concerned you'll feel guilty for grabbing a bite with me?"

I speak without thinking. I only recognize how deeply I've wounded her when I notice her glaring across my car's roof. "I don't think you're in any position to use that against me."

"It wasn't us," I snap, slamming my palm against the roof. "It wasn't me. It was the old Family, the old Bratva. I wasn't at the helm then."

I get into the car, already lamenting my loss of composure. I typically maintain control, but not with Sienna, my vignette. She slides in and says, "So you know who it was, then."

"I know who was engaged in conflict, but not which specific crews were involved."

"You swear you weren't involved?"

I clench my teeth. "We're done speaking about this."

"Says who?"

I pivot, gripping her leg, and squeeze her voluptuous thigh with savage pressure to eliminate any question about dominance. She attempts nonchalance, but desire floods her face. I press my lips against hers with unparalleled conviction.

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"I want to believe you," she moans, gasping between fervent kisses.

"I've already told you. I've said enough."

I kiss her lips, then her cheek, then her neck. She surrenders, tilting her head to provide better access for my kisses. Though not an artist, desire guides my actions. I kiss, then gently bite her neck, sliding my hand higher along her thigh.

"Not here," she whimpers.

"But somewhere," I groan.

"Just take me home."

"Why don't you try saying that without moaning?"

"T-take me..."

She moans when I kiss down her neck, gliding my hand toward her enticing sex. Only the possibility of someone watching us deters me. Despite tinted windows, this is still reckless.

"Please." She adjusts her shirt. "I want to go home now."

"Okay. Let's go. Punch your address into the GPS." I pull away, winking. "And tough luck."

"Tough luck?" she retorts. "I kicked your ass."

"But failed to beat my record."

She laughs. "There's still time."

"No, there isn't. One night, remember?"

"Says the man who dropped a bombshell, then refused to elaborate."

"I can't."

"You're a mob boss. You maintain a facade. You weren't involved, but maybe you can identify who was. Stop me when I get something wrong."

I grind my teeth again. Discussing Family matters with outsiders violates my every instinct.

"I... strive for improvement," I growl. "But that's enough."

"You're not the Don ofme, Nico."

One hand on the wheel, I return the other to her leg. "Tell that to the sound you just made," I groan. "That exquisite moan, suggesting you yearn to belong to me, despite knowing you shouldn't."

She gasps as I ascend her leg. A moment of hesitation passes, her muscles tensing, before she sighs and relaxes. She's offering herself, perhaps because she believes me or simply can't resist.

I press my palm against her crotch, feeling her warmth through the fabric. She gasps

and shifts her hips, her moans like strokes of desire against my rigid arousal. Desire seeps from me as I intensify my ministrations.

"Tell me I'm not in control now, piccola pittrice."

"You're... not..." She gasps, synchronizing her movements with my hand's rhythm, seemingly involuntarily. I struggle to maintain focus on the road. This is reckless—not merely because of traffic, but because of us. How can I experience her perfect, responsive body, then forget her?

I need to keep this casual. One night.

She grips my wrist. Initially, I think she's going to push me away. We're driving down a quiet street, but she's still trying to be subtle. Her body trembles as her climax approaches. She subtly adjusts my hand, and I respond with increased fervor.

Her moans transform into gasps, as if oxygen eludes her. She turns aside, biting her shirt collar to suppress a scream. I continue relentlessly, only withdrawing when we run into traffic.

"That was... unexpected," she murmurs.



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"Indeed," I snarl.

"Don't apologize," she says.

"I had no intention to."

"Oh—good. Some men might."

"I don't care what your other men did."

"I didn't specify my men," she replies. "But yes, that was... satisfying. A memorable way to remember each other."

"We'll meet again."

She adjusts her clothing. "But not like this."

I touch her leg again, but at the knee. I don't want anyone else to witness her complete surrender to pleasure, her full-body tremors. My arousal rises at the mere thought.

"If you insist," I say fiercely. "But I suspect you'll miss being bad."

"Why this sudden tough act? Is this your Don routine?"

"This is who I am, Vignette, with everyone."

"I thought the nicknames were confined to miniature golf. You should probably drop them."

"I would if you didn't clearly relish them."

"Pfft. You flatter yourself." But she's lying. She can't hide it from me. Our minds may be adversaries, but our bodies communicate with perfect clarity. "So, you don't believe this one-night thing is real?"

"After kissing you, touching you, forgetting is impossible."

"You have to. This was just casual fun."

"Fine, maintain that pretense. But don't rule out more 'casual entertainment.'"

"No—rule it out."

"We'll see," I say, squeezing her leg. "But when I touch you thus, even at the knee, you quiver. Your body heats. For me, *piccola pittrice*."

"N-no," she stammers, convincing no one. She pushes my hand away. "If you're not going to be straight with me, at least acknowledge when I say we've gone back to square one. Just like that." She snaps her fingers. "Now, you're just the hedge fund executive, and I'm simply the artist."

"I refuse to go back. I won't forget what your perfect body feels like. Or how you light me up. I certainly won't tonight."

She regards me with intrigue, excitement, feigning indignation. "What do you mean—tonight?"

"Care to speculate, Vignette?"

"Are you saying you'll think of me and..."

"You've already driven me to distraction."

"Have I? Not that I care..."

"Sure," I say. "I mean it. From our first encounter, I was captivated, Sienna. Completely enthralled by you. You're beautiful, unique, artistic, quirky... and profoundly sensual. Incandescently sensual."

"Incandescent?" she murmurs.

"I think you know. You like it."

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She bites her lip, shaking her head. Either she's reading my mind and knows my triggers, or she's naturally this alluring. "Perhaps," she says softly. "I might have fantasized about discovering someone... and maybe, recently, since seeing you, I embellished those details. I might have entertained some silly notions because talking with you feels easier than it should. But that was before, Nico. Be. Fore."

Her expression hardens with resolve. " You know what I'm saying. You understand my reasoning."

"We should exercise restraint," I tell her.

Not solely due to her convictions. I'm escorting Anya to an upcoming gala. I can't risk offending the Russians, despite my growing weariness with appeasement. I feel my darker impulses surfacing.

"Weshould," I reiterate. "But your presence brings out a new side of me."

"That's flattering. Truly. But put that aside. One night—and it's over."

"The night hasn't yet ended."

She crosses her arms defiantly. "Yes, it has."

ChapterTwelve

Sienna

It's two days until my next portrait appointment. I dedicate the intervening time to my surrealist work, mundane errands, and deliberately not thinking about Nico. At least, that's my intention. I attempt to block him from my thoughts, focusing on anything else. But it proves challenging.

I continually anticipate his call, text, or unexpected appearance, despite explicitly communicating my disinterest. When he touched me in the car, it was like letting go for the first time in my life. I didn't need to think or feel.

His touch radiated heat. Something intoxicating permeated that fleeting moment of belonging to him. Just for that instant.

On the morning of my latest portrait – a painting of one of Gianna's friends – Gianna calls. "Honey, I'm so sorry."

"What's up?" I ask, eager to get to work.

Not eager to see Nico. Not eager to discover if he can unearth anything about Mom's death. Not eager to feel his touch against my skin again, to experience the electricity when our bodies connect.

"My friend cancelled, and I have to rush into town for a business meeting."

"Ah, so no work this morning, then?"

"I do need a painting of Nico in the garden. I think that would look absolutely magnificent. Perhaps you could do that instead?"

"Isn't he busy?"

"He can spare the morning for this."

I nibble my fingernail. Is Gianna doing this on purpose? Is her nickname Cupid, or is she merely being considerate?

"Have you asked him?" I say.

"No, but if I explain the circumstances, I'm sure he'd be delighted to assist."

"No – that's okay."

"If you're sure..."

"No – I mean yes. Call him. Let me know his response."

I end the call, toss the phone onto the bed, and stare vacantly like a fool. When anything involves Nico, my cognitive abilities seem to evaporate.

A minute later, my cell phone rings again.

"He said he's delighted to help."

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"He said that?" I ask, contemplating the fact that he hasn't attempted to contact me, even though I specifically told him not to, and have no legitimate reason to harbor resentment about it.

"Yes, then," I say hastily, because...

Well, I need the work. I'm going stir crazy without something to channel my energy into. It's hardly my fault Gianna's friend couldn't make it, and this is the next best alternative. I promised that one night was all it would be. He's honoring that.

I should be grateful.

Oh, the stories we tell ourselves.

"I'll arrange a car like last time," Gianna says.

"Thank you. Will they text me when they arrive? There's been some... stuff."

"Stuff?"

"Nothing crazy. Just people loitering, dealing, blasting music, intimidating passersby."

"Ah, I understand, that sort of trouble. Yes, they'll text. Thank you for being so accommodating."

I prepare my supplies, meticulously checking everything to ensure I'm ready for the

painting session. Am I thrilled to be painting Nico despite my resolution to sever all connections with him?

Absolutely not.

Or perhaps that's a big fat lie.

I concentrate on the immediate task. Paint tubes are organized into a sealed tin, sorted by hue for easy access later. Brushes – immaculately clean and dry – slide into a canvas roll I secure tightly. Palette wrapped in wax paper, nestled flat between sketch pads. I pour a measured amount of solvent into a screw-top jar, double-checking the seal. Rags, pristine and precisely folded, go into a side pouch.

Anticipation ripples through me as I contemplate seeing Nico. My body still aches with the aftermath of our encounter.

My cell phone rings. A call, not a text. An attentive driver, evidently.

It's Nico. My breath catches. Catches what, exactly? A severe case of holy heck, I can't wait to see him again.

Attempting to regain composure, I answer, "Hi, Nico. I'm waiting for the driver."

"And he's arrived."

"How would you know?"

I'm convinced I can detect his smirk through his tone. "Because I'm your chariot, Cinderella."

"You're giving me a ride?"



He hesitates. Perhaps he's contemplating my wording too, the implication of the word 'ride,' the tantalizing prospect of straddling his lap, feeling his desire pressing through his clothing, rather than traveling to his mother's home for a painting session.

"When Mother called and requested this, I figured I might as well commit completely. Is that a problem?"

I remember my promise. One night. That night is over, so now it's time to be good.

"No. Why would it?"

He chuckles softly.

I carry my bag of art supplies over my shoulder, clutching my easel against my side. Nico approaches from the opposite end of the street. A group of men at the corner, perched on their car hood with music blaring, watch us as Nico advances toward me.

"Let me help," he says.

Dashing? Undoubtedly. Striking? Without question.

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He's dressed in a shirt with sleeves meticulously rolled up, no jacket, showcasing his sculpted arms. His hair is slightly disheveled, as though he's been continuously running his fingers through it while awaiting my arrival.

He takes my bag and easel effortlessly, carrying them toward his car. Two men from the group saunter over, probably intrigued by his expensive-looking car. A flicker of apprehension touches me. That's a familiar sensation in this neighborhood.

"Nice wheels, old man," one remarks. He's young, with two sleeves of messy tattoos, grills on his teeth.

"Walk away," Nico says dispassionately.

The man coughs out a derisive laugh. "Say what?"

"Walk away," Nico reiterates, his tone unwavering.

The man is about to retort when a third approaches. He's older. When he catches sight of Nico, unmistakable terror floods his expression. He whispers something to the tattooed man, and instantly, the tattooed man's expression mirrors the same dread.

"We won't bother you again," he says, glancing between Nico and me. "Either of you. Uh, enjoy your day."

Nico replies through clenched teeth. "Likewise."

In the car, as Nico pulls away, I ask, "What do you think he said?"

Nico's hands grip the steering wheel tightly. He's reluctant to talk about it. "No idea."

"It must've been related to who you are. Don't you think? You are connected to the mob."

"I don't know, Vignette."

"Hey – none of that, remember? That chapter is closed."

"I have no way of knowing what he said."

"One second, he looked ready to rob us, then suddenly, he looked terrified. Did you see his fear?" When he remains silent, I keep going, "Or maybe you're accustomed to people looking at you with such terror. Maybe it doesn't even register."

"What do you want me to say?" he growls. "I thought you wanted to go back to our old dynamic. You're merely a painter. I'm simply a hedge fund manager. Remember?"

I fold my arms. He glances at me: my face, then my chest. My folded arms accentuate my chest, and he appears thoroughly captivated by that.

A spark of electricity dances across my skin. I maintain my position. I savor his attention, even while knowing I should pretend not to.

"They likely recognized me," Nico says after a pause. "They intended to start trouble, then wisely reconsidered."

"Because you would hurt them."

"That's their assumption."

"Is it wrong?"

At a red light, he doesn't merely glance at me. His gaze sears into my soul.

"What would you have me say, Vignette? That I would have beaten those men bloody had they tried to hurt you? That the thought of you living in such an environment sickens me? That I yearn to protect you? Or perhaps you need me to embody a monster so you can maintain your resolve; so, you can ensure nothing happens between us again."

A car behind us honks impatiently. The light has changed.

"I just want to focus on my work."

"Then quit with the interrogation."

His tone irritates me, primarily because I want to comfort him. The contradiction only compounds my... well, my confusion. I'm doubly perplexed.

"Have you heard anything about my mom? Have you investigated?"

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He looks at me incredulously. "I've done some light digging."

"But?"

"Are you sure you want to know? I thought we were pretending I'm merely a hedge fund guy."

"But?"

He exhales deeply. "I'm certain that the intended target was Italian, which suggests the gunmen were most likely Russian."

My mind revisits the restaurant, those Bratva men. Any of them could have pulled the trigger.

"Thank you," I murmur. "Will you let me know if you uncover anything else?"

"Certainly, but?—"

"Just because I want to know what happened to Mom, that doesn't mean anything can happen between us."

He rolls his eyes. His frustration is mounting. Can I fault him? He's probably contemplating how I'm selectively acknowledging aspects of his mob connections that serve my purposes.

"I mean it, Nico. Thank you."

"Sure," he says.

I watch the scenery transform through the window as we leave the neighborhood behind. Boarded-up windows yield to freshly painted storefronts. The fractured sidewalks become smooth, and the liquor stores and pawn shops give way to cafés adorned with string lights and expansive windows.

Guilt surfaces as the silence stretches. Perhaps it's unfair, but I can't help it. "And thanks for sacrificing your morning. I've been itching to work on something."

"It's no inconvenience."

"Truly? You must be busy."

He laughs gruffly. "I was being polite. It took some maneuvering, had to reschedule several meetings. But I'll catch up this evening. You're worth the effort."

That excites me more than it should. I attempt nonchalance but fail miserably.

I'm worth it.

## ChapterThirteen

Nico

Soon, we're situated in Mother's lavish garden. I sit on the fountain's edge as Sienna arranges her painting supplies. I love the concentration etched into her forehead, her narrowed eyes. The way she sticks her tongue slightly from the corner of her mouth.

"This is going to require multiple sessions," she tells me, extracting a canvas roll of brushes, untying it, and arranging them by size. "It's more intricate than sketching.

There are a lot more elements to play with."

"You sound excited."

She smiles. "Do I?"

"Yes. I appreciate that. I can sense your passion."

"You can sense it?" She removes the paint tubes, arranges them by color, and checks the caps.

"You say that as though you're surprised I have feelings."

"No, that wasn't my intention. I just meant... I'm not sure."

"Continue."

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"It's nothing."

"Now you have to elaborate."

"I simply never thought I'd meet someone who could sense my emotional states." She sets a glass jar of solvent beside a folded rag and unwraps a wooden palette, placing it flat. "It sounds kind of woo woo."

I smirk. "Didn't I tell you I'm a secret hippy? Chakras, horoscopes, healing crystals. They're all essential to my practice."

She laughs while adjusting the easel legs, ensuring stability, and securing the canvas. She evaluates the lighting, slightly repositions the setup.

"Why do I find that hard to believe?" She steps back momentarily, confirming everything's optimally positioned. "And why are you looking at me like that?"

"In what way, Vignette?"

She flinches, though not from discomfort. It's more as if the nickname sends a tremor of desire coursing through her. She attempts to hide it, to suppress it, but I can tell how desperately she craves another kiss, more intimate contact, more passion.

Presumably as intensely as I do.

"Do you always give strangers nicknames?" she asks.



"You didn't specify how I was looking at you."

"Yeah – and I won't. Because it's inappropriate."

"That indicates it was sexual, then."

"For this painting, I'll need you to do your best not to speak if possible. I need concentration. Pencils were my first love; painting takes more effort. Can you manage that?"

"If it means I can watch you, piccola pittrice, I could sit here indefinitely."

\* \* \*

After roughly an hour, she rises and stretches her arms overhead. The hem of her shirt shifts slightly, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of skin.

"You're looking at me in that way again."

I can't help it. I've likely had the same expression throughout the entire time.

"No – it's subtly different."

I stand, rolling my shoulders, stretching my neck from side to side. "How so?"

"Before, you resembled a caged animal. Now you look like you also appear... impressed."

"You read me like a book."

"I must need more classes, then, because I can only read some of your few pages."

"Maybe those fragments are the only significant ones."

"Am I supposed to know what that means?"

I approach her, conscious of her sharp intake of breath, the vibration that courses through her exquisite body. She gazes up at me with eyes brimming with restrained desire. She's trying to conceal it, combat it, but unsuccessfully.

"It means that, like everything between us, we can block out the rest of the world."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Stranger."

When I grip her hips, she emits a tempting gasp. Her luscious curves press against me as I pull her closer. My arousal intensifies.

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"Why do you keep saying that?"

"Because we are strangers."

She puts her hands on my chest, but she doesn't push me away. I lean down, staring into her eyes. "Just because we only met recently, that doesn't mean we can't have chemistry, passion, attraction... How do you think people get together at all, Vignette? They feel hard, and they give in to those feelings."

"I wouldn't know. My only love is art."

"I'm not asking you to love me. Just not to hate me."

"As annoying as it is, stranger, I don't think I could hate you even if I wanted. Are we done?"

"Done?" I counter.

She squeezes her hands against my chest, her fingernails digging through my shirt.

"Let... go."

"Say that like you mean it."

She shudders, then whispers something too quietly for me to hear.

"I don't think I can say it like I mean it," she snaps.

“Good.”

She talks a big game about stopping this, about us being strangers, blah blah blah, but when it comes to this pure uncontrollable passion, nothing can stop us. Our kiss is explosive. It shatters any ideas she might’ve had about keeping our distance.

One night? We can’t limit ourselves to that.

She opens her mouth, gasping as our tongues brush against each other. Lust erupts in the tiny space between our pressed-close bodies. There’s nothing but hunger. My length is solid as we stumble across the garden, toward the fountain.

I sit down and pull her into my lap. She straddles me, her warm crotch caressing my thickness through our clothes. Her hands smooth over my shoulders, down my back, as she rocks back and forth.

I growl with obsession as I rock back and forth, the tip of my hunger burning as it rubs against my pants. Her pussy presses against me, hinting at the pleasure we could share.

“What time is your mom home?” she asks, her lips red, her cheeks flushed.

“Why would you want to know a thing like that... stranger?”

She groans, half frustration, half pent-up pleasure, trying to find a vent. “Don’t be a jerk. Do you seriously want to tease your way out of this?”

“I don’t know when she’ll be back. But it sounds to me like you want to see the spare room.”

Her eyes glimmer with desire. She looks tipsy. I know the feeling. “What gave you

that impressi?—”

She laughs in delight when I stand and cradle her to my chest.

“How strong are you?” she says, giddy.

“Not strong enough. I can’t resist you.”

“Have you even tried?”

I carry her toward the house. “The whole time you were painting me, I was trying not to get rock solid. I was trying not to fall for you.”

“Fall for me and get rock solid, hmm?”

I kick open the door to the hallway and carry her up the stairs. “Your passion for your art would make even a cold bastard fall for you. And the way you narrow your eyes, bite your tongue, shift that curvy body...”

Carrying her up the stairs quickly, I almost run to the spare room. A cynical part of me wonders if I’m hurrying because I don’t want Sienna to go back to what seems to be her natural state: distancing herself, resenting me, fighting this.

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There's no sign of that when I drop her on the bed. She moans and claws at my shirt, pulling me on top of her. I climb atop her, kissing her again.

Our desire doesn't care if we're strangers, if she has every reason to hate me, fear me, because of what I am. She moans as I grind my manhood against her neediness through our clothes. She grips my shirt, pulls it up.

I lift my arms, and she pulls it over my head, then slides her hands all over my body. I take her shirt and tug on it. Buttons go flying. She half laughs, half moans.

Pulling her shirt off, I unclip her bra and free her curvaceous mounds. I caress them greedily, then suck one of her nipples, eliciting a ball-tingling moan from her. Massaging her breasts with one hand, I slip my other down her body, unbutton her jeans, and slide my hand inside her underwear.

“Oh, oh.”

Her lust-filled whimpers drive me wild as I find her wetness.

I slide my hand over her slickness, rubbing her folds and her clit, my head growing light with how soaked she already is. She can lie to me, to herself, but her body tells no tall tales. I move down toward her heat, gently smoothing my finger around it.

Kissing her breast, I move to her neck, then find her lips again.

“I'm getting your perfect body ready for me,” I groan.

She looks at me for a moment, seeming to debate, telling me no. But then I push down against her sweet slit, and she gasps, then nods.

“I’m ready,” she says. “But – uh, there’s something you need to know.”

“Tell me.”

“I... ah, ah.” Her speech is cut short when I push my finger gently into her. Her tunnel clings tightly to me, her tightness telling me how badly she needs this, needs us.

Slipping deeper, my balls sizzle with seed as I feel how tight she is. My shaft burns as I imagine her gripping my pole with that same tightness.

Pushing my palm against her clit at the same time, I shift my finger inside of her, moving it in scintillating circles as her hips move with all consuming hunger: the same hunger inside me.

“I’m... a....”

She bites down, wave after wave of pleasure caressing her, owning her. I lean back, enough so that I can watch her. She stares into my eyes like she can’t take it anymore. She’s going to erupt. And I’ve got the best seats in the house.

I pump my finger faster, sensing that her orgasm is close.

Her body makes slick wet noises as I finger fuck her. Her hips jerking faster, chasing the pleasure.

“I’m a virgin.” She gasps when the orgasm rocks her body, making her shiver all over. Her confession somehow makes me even more captivated. I fuck her with my

finger, slipping it in and out, making her tightness sing with wet, slick noises.

After, she sits back, breathing hard.

I remove my hand from her underwear. “Are you ready to lose your virginity?” I groan. “Is that what you meant when you said you were ready?”

She bites her lip. Opens her mouth. I’m sure, despite everything, she’s going to say yes. She’s going to tell me she wants me, this, us.

Even if she’ll regret it later. I don’t like thinking of her regretting this. But it’s not going to stop me. My body pumps with hot desire.

Before she can answer, my mother calls from downstairs. “Nico? Sienna? Are you home?”

Sienna wriggles away from me. “I should clean up.”

I almost tell her no, she doesn’t need to. We’ll lock the door. Ignore her.

“Adrian is here,” my mother calls up.

Dammit. That means there’s mob business to attend to.

“Okay,” I say after a pause. “But this isn’t over.”



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“It has to be,” Sienna replies, walking to the en-suite.

I stare at her thick ass, her wide sensual hips. She looks over her shoulder, and suddenly, the lust takes second place. First place is her face, the concern in her eyes, the humanity. No artist could capture the conflict in her expression. Except, maybe, Sienna herself.

“I’ll head downstairs,” I say.

She breathes a sigh of relief. “Okay, thank you.”

At the bottom of the stairs, Mother says quietly, “Adrian wants to speak with you in the kitchen. Is Sienna still here? Her paint supplies are in the garden.”

“She’s upstairs.”

“Oh...” My mother has a wicked smile on her face.

“I don’t want to hear any matchmaker nonsense,” I tell her sternly.

“Is something wrong?”

“No—yes. Everything. She doesn’t want me. No, that’s not right. She doesn’t want to want me. But I can’t stop.” My head feels hazy. I’m oversharing. “Forget I said that. I’m going to speak to our consigliere.”

Without waiting for a reply, I head into the kitchen. Adrian is leaning against the

counter. “Sup, cousin.” He seems nervous, but he’s trying to hide it.

“All good?”

“Got word from some of my guys. Apparently, Viktor has been buying warehouses through one of his legitimate contacts. I was thinking we should check them out.”

“We... meaning me and you?”

Adrian averts his gaze. “Yeah, why not? If we leave this to the men, they might make a mistake.”

The Don and the consigliere don’t usually handle business like this. This is work for capos and soldiers. Adrian must have another reason for wanting me to come personally. Is he planning a trap? Perhaps this is my chance to test his loyalty.

“Then let’s go,” I tell him. “We’ll take my car.”

Perhaps mafia work will distract me from Sienna, my Vignette, my piccola pittrice.

Unlikely.

## ChapterFourteen

Sienna

I walk into the kitchen to find Nico talking quietly with a familiar-looking young man. He wears a shiny silver suit with his hair slicked back.

Nico seems withdrawn, distant. Likely, he doesn’t want this man to know how he feels about me... if he feels anything. “Sienna, I’m sorry, but we have to leave.

Business.”

Also known as... mob stuff.

“Our painting session is done for today, anyway,” I say, like it’s no big deal.

“Uh, cousin?” The young man cuts in.

Nico frowns. “Sienna, this is Adrian, my cousin. You’ve met.”

Adrian swaggers over, grinning at me. “Sort of. Nice to meet you... officially. You’re the special lady who put a smile on my cousin’s face at the Vine, if I’m not mistaken?”

“Uh...”

“We’re leaving,” Nico says stiffly, almost dragging Adrian from the room.

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I watch Nico go, then stop when I realize Gianna is staring at me from the other side of the island. She's dressed glamorously, her hair in an intricate updo.

"I can arrange a ride home for you... Or, if you like, you could accompany me to the Majestic."

"The Majestic?"

"It's a theater. There's a one-woman show that's supposed to be simply divine. Unless you have plans?"

"My plans don't seem to be worth much lately."

"I'm sorry?"

"Nothing," I say. "I should collect my things. I don't want to leave the canvas in the sun for too long."

It would probably be fine to leave it outside, but I need some time to think. What I told Gianna is true. My plans aren't very sturdy as of late. One job... failed. One night... failed. And now I can't stop thinking about what we just did, the heat, the closeness of his hand down my pants.

When I return to the kitchen, Gianna asks, "So, what do you think about the play? It's about a woman who leaves her life in New York, her family, her job, and tries to start anew. Apparently, it has interesting things to say about living independently as a woman, finding true love, and the search for a family."

She's looking at me like there's a hint buried in there. I should tell her no. The last thing I need is to watch a play that sounds like it mirrors my life.

But I like Gianna, even if something as simple as liking her could lead me down the wrong road... a road I've already walked down too many times.

"Unless you have plans?" she says hesitantly.

"No, I don't have anything for the rest of the day. Your..." Money, I almost say, but it seems rude somehow. "Generosity has given me more free time than I know what to do with. I'd probably touch up the painting and then..."

And then sit around, pondering her son.

"So, is that a yes?"

"Yes!" I'm excited. Sue me. "But I should probably find something classier to wear, right? I feel underdressed." I look down at my partially torn shirt. Thankfully, as an artist, I can get away with dressing a little unconventionally.

"I think you look beautiful, but if you like, we can go on a quick shopping spree before the show. We'll make an afternoon of it."

"Are you sure? I don't want to eat up too much of your time."

"Don't be silly," she says. "I'd much rather go with you than alone."

"A woman like you, I thought you'd have lots of friends to go with."

"Appearances can be deceiving," she says.

\* \* \*

“Do you think it looks okay?” I ask, standing in front of the mirror, a strange, surreal feeling hitting me as I turn this way and that.

Gianna stands behind me, seeming much more at ease in the high-class store. “Okay? You look sublime, transcendental. You need to get this.”

“The entire outfit?”

Gianna pouts at me in the mirror. “Did you think we were playing dress up for fun?”

I study myself again. I’m wearing a matte black silk crepe midi dress. The shop assistant described the style as a ‘fit-and-flare silhouette’. Whatever it is, I love how it hugs the contours of my body without clinging. The neckline shows collarbone, no cleavage, and it cuts at my calves... but somehow, it’s still sexy.

Combined with the rest of the outfit – suede pointed heels, a dark oxblood clutch bag, and a thin gold chain to complement the cut of the dress – I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel exceptional.

"Maybe just the dress," I murmur.

Gianna gasps melodramatically. "I won't tolerate such sacrilege. You need the entire ensemble. It's beautiful... no, that's insufficient. This outfit, Sienna, accentuates your natural radiance."

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"The entire outfit is six thousand and twenty-three dollars," I say flatly. "I'm not getting it all."

"Then let me?—"

"No," I interject. "Thank you, Gianna. I appreciate your kindness. But I refuse handouts. You've already been exceptionally generous with your payments for my artwork."

"That is not generosity," she says fiercely. "You've earned every penny I paid you. I'm not speaking to hear my own voice or merely showering you with hollow compliments, sweet girl. You possess extraordinary talent."

"Either way, I don't accept handouts."

"Then purchase it yourself," Gianna says with a note of challenge in her voice. "You can afford it... and remember, you've got more substantial payments coming, dear. You should indulge yourself."

I examine my reflection again. I'd be lying to myself if I denied wanting it. It's effortless to envision Nico approaching from behind, encircling my waist, holding me close as he devours my reflection with his eyes.

I inhale deeply. Am I seriously contemplating this? This wasn't part of my plan.

It seems that abandoning the script has become my specialty.

"Okay, I'm doing it. I'm buying the whole outfit!"

\* \* \*

After the play, we venture to a bar called The Midnight Rambler. Yellow mood lighting enhances the ambiance... and the euphoric atmosphere of the afternoon. When I approach the bar with Gianna beside me, adorned in my brand-spanking-new outfit, I feel an undeniable sense of belonging.

We order two glasses of champagne and claim a corner seat. "Cheers," Gianna says, extending her glass.

I clink my glass against hers, feeling sophisticated, stubbornly anchored in the present moment.

"What did you think of the play?" Gianna inquires.

"It was perplexing," I murmur.

"Really? Which part?"

"The entire narrative seemed to revolve around her determination to adhere to the lessons and values her family instilled in New York, yet by the conclusion, she appears ecstatic to forge her own path, establish her independence. It's as though she abandons her family entirely."

"Or perhaps she decided she needn't remain enslaved to her family's values. She craves autonomy."

I reach into my clutch bag, squeeze the pendant, as if attempting to invoke Mom's presence and maintain my resolve. But the more time I spend with these people, the



more my conviction wavers.

"Did you relate to the play?" Gianna asks.

"Why would you ask that?" I reply, my tone excessively harsh.

"You seemed deeply engrossed in it."

"She was a compelling actor. And yes, perhaps I recognized myself in her. Sometimes I feel torn between prioritizing my mother's wishes and pursuing my happiness."

"Torn, how?"

I scoff. "You don't want to delve into that."

"I wouldn't have asked otherwise."

I regard her seriously. "You genuinely don't," I insist. "It involves you and Nico."

"Now I have to know."

"I'll offend you."

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"Pfft. I'm remarkably difficult to offend. It infuriated my late husband. He could hurl the most despicable insults at me, and they wouldn't penetrate."

"Why would he say anything despicable to you?"

"Because not every man possesses the gentleness of my Nico."

I take a large sip of champagne, then confess, "I'm unsure how much you know about your son's business."

"I know enough details," Gianna replies.

"My mom was killed in a mob confrontation. She wasn't even involved. She wasn't entangled in the conflict, the war, whatever it was. She was simply living her life – until she wasn't. And now..." The champagne has loosened my tongue, but unburdening myself feels almost therapeutic. "I'm trapped. Because Nico, he's... well, I'm attracted to him, okay?" When Gianna smiles, I snap, "You shouldn't look so pleased about that. I can't allow myself to like him. It feels morally wrong. He's embedded in the mob."

Gianna flinches, scanning our surroundings, then relaxes upon confirming our privacy. "It isn't what you might presume, dear."

"So he isn't entangled with the mob?"

Gianna's demeanor changes. She leans forward with intense seriousness. "If what you're suggesting is accurate, you understand there would be severe consequences if

you weren't who you claim to be..."

"Excuse me?"

"If you were an undercover agent, for instance."

I laugh. This conversation has suddenly veered into surreal territory. But Gianna remains solemn.

"Consequences?" I echo.

"In this world, certain matters elude even Nico's and my control. Betrayal is one of them."

"I'm not a rat," I assure her. "Wait – what do you mean, you and Nico control?"

Gianna sips her champagne deliberately. "I'm fond of you, Sienna. In fact, I'm genuinely drawn to you. I noticed something distinctive about you immediately. It transcended the portrait, your artistic prowess. It was... your luminosity. You captivated my son."

"I captivated him?"

"When I saw the way he gazed at you, I recognized something unprecedented. That's why I'm inclined to reveal the truth. But I need assurance that you'll maintain absolute confidentiality. With everyone. Permanently."

"Or face consequences," I state.

"I wouldn't let anyone harm you, dear, but you'd need to leave Dallas. You'd need to abandon Texas, possibly even the country."

"You still haven't articulated anything that makes sense."

"If you're attracted to Nico, don't let this mob perception deter you. He's not who you evidently believe him to be."

"He's not a Don?"

Gianna surveys the bar before continuing, "The fact I'm even contemplating sharing any of this with you shows how exceptional you are, Sienna. I'm not suggesting you should feel grateful or impressed, or... anything. But I want you to understand, despite our brief acquaintance, I value you. Your artistry, certainly, and you as an individual."

I resist the urge to let her words flatter or disarm me. I'm trying to remember who I am: the way my mother died. The blood. The agony, physical for her, psychological for me. But in this moment, Gianna exudes vulnerability and empathy.

"I like you too," I admit awkwardly.

"My son is the Don, and I serve as his consigliere... his second-in-command."

Fortunately, the music in the bar is loud enough, as my audible gasp would have attracted attention otherwise. "What?"

She nods. "It's difficult to explain?—"

"Try," I interject.

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"It would mean discussing our history somewhat."

"I have nowhere pressing to be."

Gianna nods. "Very well. The Family – that's with a capital F – was previously governed by my husband, and subsequently my late son, Luka. Both differed significantly from Nico."

"In what manner?"

"Nico has a compassionate heart. Don't misinterpret me – and I won't lie to you – Nico can summon the necessary fortitude when circumstances demand, but he takes no pleasure from inflicting pain. He doesn't harm innocents. He doesn't revel in saturating the streets with filth that virtually guarantees overdoses. He genuinely abhors the entire business, truthfully."

"Yet he remains involved, nonetheless."

"I'm getting to that," Gianna says.

I gesture for her to go on.

"When his father died," she continues, "Nico declined leadership of the Family. He wanted nothing to do with it. From an early age, he was like that. He dreamed of attending college, leading a normal life. And for years, he did just that. Luka was the heir; Nico was the spare. Nico established himself as a hedge fund manager. He maintained minimal communication with his father and brother."

"Why – because they differed from his principles?"

"Nico has a kind soul," Gianna says.

I suppress the urge to confess. I know. I've sensed that. I feel it when we kiss. I see it in the shadows and shades of his expressions.

Maybe all that online research and charitable activity is the real him.

"My late husband got his hooks in Luka early, molding him in his own image."

"What exactly were their activities?"

She stares at me bleakly, her mood darkening considerably. "You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do."

"Sienna, I must emphasize?—"

"Jeez. I'm not a cop. Or a spy. I'm nobody significant."

"Now that's not true."

"I simply want to understand who this man truly is," I say.

This stranger who doesn't feel like a stranger. This man who makes me consider that perhaps I was wrong when I thought flirting and fun, and relationships weren't for me.

"My late husband, and subsequently Luka upon assuming the Don position, flooded

the city with drugs, prostitution, and extortion rackets. Collaborating with the Russians, they transformed this city into a cesspool."

"But not Nico?"

She shakes her head. "Nico was disgusted by it all. He tried to dissuade them, but they remained obstinate. Once, when he threatened to report them, my late husband..." Gianna's eyes glisten. "He threatened my life if Nico persisted. After his passing, Luka perpetuated that threat: guards monitoring me constantly, ready to eliminate me."

"Oh my God," I whisper.

"Then Luka perished in a car accident. Nico had two options: allow the Family to fall into one of Luka's equally corrupt men's hands, or assume control himself. He opted for the latter. He worked harder than any man ever should, but he succeeded."

"Succeeded is what?"

"Purifying the city," Gianna says, awe resonating in her voice. Her pride in Nico overwhelms me, inexplicably inspiring my admiration for him. "He ended the mob conflict. He banished narcotics, human trafficking, and all similar enterprises. He redirected the Family toward white-collar crime. He legitimized as many operations as feasible. I've never disclosed any of this to a civilian."

"Yes, yes, I'm extraordinarily special," I mutter sarcastically.

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"You are," she replies with complete sincerity. "Nico cares about?—"

"We're practically strangers."

"Fine. But for the first time in years, Nico has the desire to connect with someone. That signifies something profound for him."

"It means something to me, too," I admit.

"Nico enlisted me to help him covertly – to maintain the city's positive trajectory. He's devoted himself entirely to safeguarding this city, preventing corruption from infiltrating his territory. He's not a bad man. I recognize true malevolence: my husband, God help me, my eldest son. But not Nico."

"Nico told me that Russians were responsible for my mother's death. He claims that during the gunfight where she was killed, Russians were targeting an Italian. Is that true?"

"I don't know specifics about the conflict," Gianna says somberly, "but if Nico claims it, it's indisputably true. After his brother's passing, when Nico assumed leadership, he would never sanction a hit in public. He would never harm an innocent."

The implication is hard to miss. He wouldn't harm civilians, but he would eliminate threats.

"You must think something big is going on if you've just divulged all that to a virtual stranger," I say.



She shrugs. "I can only speak for my son. And when I look at him lately, I glimpse the boy he was before discovering how twisted his father was."

I think back to the picture at the golf course, the smiling child, Nico lamenting his one-time ignorance of how lucky he was.

"What do you expect me to do regarding this information?" I ask.

"Nothing," Gianna replies. "Except... don't punish yourself. Live your own life."

More subtext. Live my life, not the one I think my mother would want for me.

I drain my champagne glass. "Since you've been so truthful, I'll reciprocate. I'm growing tired of fighting this... this connection with Nico. I can't even articulate it properly."

"Falling in love."

"Take it easy there!" I gasp, though I'm smiling.

Despite everything she's just revealed – mobsters, drugs, human trafficking – I'm smiling. Is something fundamentally wrong with me? Is my relief really so overwhelming?

"Then wipe that grin off your face, dear," Gianna says.

I try to, but it proves challenging.

"My life has improved immeasurably since Nico assumed control. The city is safer. I no longer live terrorized by threats from my husband or son. I've risked all that by speaking so candidly with you, Sienna."

"I won't betray your confidence," I murmur.

"Has it changed your perception of Nico?"

I sigh. "I don't know how to answer that."

But that's a lie. The truth is, I want to let go. Like the woman in the play, I want to immerse myself in this new life. But apprehension holds me back. What if Gianna is lying or misinterpreting? What if, when Nico and I cease our pretenses, we discover nothing substantial beneath?

Staying single, while lonely, has its benefits. For one thing, I don't have to answer questions like these.

"It's not like I'm going to throw myself at his feet and declare, Let's get married. Just because I like him, or because I'm interested, it doesn't make him any less of a stranger."

"When he looks at you, it's not like he's looking at a stranger. It's like he's looking at someone he's waited a long time to meet."

I stare down into my empty glass. "That's sort of how I feel, too. Like I've been alone all this time, and now this is my chance."

"Then take it," Gianna says passionately.

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I want to, but that doesn't mean the guilt is going to magically disappear.

### ChapterFifteen

Nico

Adrian is acting shifty, moving around in the passenger seat, wringing his hands as he looks at me. He keeps fiddling with his watch. He's been like this ever since we visited the previous warehouse. In total, we've investigated four... and each was fine, no reason for suspicion. But this time, it's different.

"Is something wrong?" I ask.

He looks across the street at the warehouse. This one is in a much quieter location. No cars pass us by, and the surrounding buildings look abandoned.

"I want to clear this last one out so we can hit the bottle," he says, forcing a laugh, but it sounds fake. "Shall we get moving?"

"I'm not so sure," I tell him.

"Huh?"

"I've been getting calls from a prominent client all afternoon. I've missed enough work as it is. I'm going to need to spend the next two days working from sunrise to sunset just to make up for today. Let's leave this one until then."

“Fortwo days?”

“Or we can have the men check it out.”

He swallows. Oh, Adrian. He couldn’t look more suspicious if he tried.

“No, we can’t do that,” he replies. “Think about it, cousin. We need to make sure that none of them are leaking crap. We can’t risk it.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm?” he says.

This is clearly a setup. It’s the whole reason I hired Adrian to begin with, to clarify if something like this was going on. There’s a real chance that when I walk in there, he will have men waiting for me, guns at the ready, either Russians or those loyal to him and my uncle. Perhaps these are men who want the old regime, Father and Luka’s filth, to return.

“I need to get to work,” I tell him. “Wait for my call.”

“It won’t take long,” Adrian says.

“I’ve made my decision. Is there a problem?”

“Nuh-no.”

“Good.”

\* \* \*

I'm not lying about the work part. For two and a half days, I haven't had time for anything else. I try to put Sienna out of my mind. That soon proves to be impossible, so instead, I settle for pushing her to the back of my thoughts... for as long as I can.

But she constantly pierces through. It's hardest at night when I drag myself from the shower to bed to grab a few hours' shuteye before doing it all again. The only way I can sleep is obsessively stroking my solid length, thinking of her, remembering the taste of her kisses, the sensation of her breath shimmering over me.

I lie awake, imagining her beside me, but also knowing that if she were here, I wouldn't want to go to work tomorrow. I'd just want to be with her. The best I can do is order her some gifts, hoping she likes them.

Once I've caught up with my mammoth pile of work, I drive to one of my armories and put on a bulletproof vest. I wear a heavy jacket to hide the extra bulk, then stow two pistols in concealed-carry holsters. Adrian doesn't notice anything suspicious when I pick him up.

I notice something, though. He's even more on edge than last time.

"Get all your work done?" he asks, seeming jittery.

"Yes," I say.

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“Had time for anything else? Anything fun?”

“No,” I tell him truthfully. “If I leave my work, it accumulates. I’ve worked almost all day, every day. Now, let’s handle this.”

Adrian nods far too eagerly. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

I return to the rundown district where the warehouse is located, looking for any sign of secret gunmen or anyone else. But there’s nothing except Adrian’s skittishness to make me think something is going on here. I listen to my instincts as we walk across the street together.

I should have backup with me, but that might tip Adrian off. Also, if I’m wrong – if he’s still on my side – I don’t want to risk causing a rift between us. A Don has to think of all angles.

As we walk across the empty parking lot, past broken bottles and graffiti, I find myself thinking about Sienna. Perhaps it’s the graffiti. It reminds me of her neighborhood. I quickly push her away.

I need to be savage, focused. She makes me feral, sure, but in an entirely different way. I know she’s doing well; she’s been spending time with my mother the past couple of days, even when they’re not painting. I like the fact they’re getting close.

Dammit. There I go, thinking about her again.

When we approach the entrance, I know something is wrong. Adrian bends down.

“Need to tie my laces.”

I jump on him. “What the fuck?” he yells.

I seize the gun from his ankle holster and toss it to the ground, then take him by the neck and spin, using him as a human shield as three men rush from the warehouse, each of them with guns in their hands, each of them wearing full balaclavas so I can’t see their faces.

“I knew this was a trap,” I growl in Adrian’s ear.

“It’s not,” he whines. “I don’t know what’s going on.”

“No?” I chuckle darkly. “Then these fine gentlemen should have no problem opening fire on us. Go ahead.” I look at the masked gunmen. “Unless you don’t want to hit Adrian, unless he lured me here. As if a pathetic plan like this would work on me.”

I take a gun from my holster, keeping one arm wrapped around Adrian, and aim it at the men.

“I’m going to make my way slowly to my car. If you shoot, you better be prepared not to miss, because I won’t.”

My suspicions are proven correct when the men don’t open fire the moment I drag Adrian toward my car. He whimpers and whines like a child, but he can’t deny the cold fact that he set this up. Otherwise, we’d both be dead.

The men halt at the edge of the parking lot, looking at each other.

“They’re waiting for you to give them orders, cousin,” I snap, shaking Adrian.

“Please,” he wheezes.

“I should shoot you on the spot for even thinking about doing this. Don’t say please.”

I’m almost at my car when one of the masked men jogs over. I keep my gun aimed at him the whole time, my grip on Adrian ironclad. From the whining noises he makes, I know I’m hurting him, but I don’t care. It’s better than he deserves.

“You let him go,” the masked man says in a Russian accent. “Or we have a gunfight. Perhaps kill you both. Let him go. Drive away.”

I grind my teeth, thinking about it. I could drag Adrian into my car and drive off without getting shot. But there’s also a chance that a bullet clips me and ends everything.

“Some friends you’ve got, cousin,” I snarl. “They’re willing to put you down.”

“I’m sorry,” Adrian moans.

“You’re only remorseful because I saw through your plan,” I snap.

“No more talking. Make a decision.”

The other two masked men still have their guns aimed in our direction. I want to snap Adrian’s neck, truthfully. Wring it and watch his body drop limply to the ground for daring to risk the safety of this city, safety I’ve worked so hard for.

I push Adrian hard, causing him to stumble toward the masked man.



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I don't wait to see how they react. Quickly, I dive into my car and screech away, calling my mother.

"Yes?" she answers.

"We were right about Adrian. He just tried to walk me into a trap. Three masked men were waiting for me. At least one of them was Russian. We're heightening security and surveilling the Russians. Sienna will need to stay at yours for the time being. She needs your security."

"What should I tell her?"

"The truth. She deserves that."

Mother sighs. "Good, because Nico... I may have already told her about us."

"How did she react?" I ask, even if my mind should be on other things.

"She's difficult to read. I don't think she knows how to feel about it, honestly. But I think she wants to take a chance. I think she wants to try."

"I won't get my hopes up," I groan. "If I did that, I'd go mad."

"You like her, don't you? More than like her?"

"I've got too many plates to spin, but yes, Mother, I like her. Go and get her. Now. Explain what's happening. Keep her safe. I need to go. More calls to make."

I hang up, then call one of my men, spitting out a list of orders.

My heart is pounding. The last thing this city needs is another mob conflict.

## ChapterSixteen

Sienna

“Are you sure you don’t prefer to watch a movie or something?” Gianna stands at the bedroom door to the guest room: the same room where Nico and I got steamy in recently.

Except, it feels like so long ago. Almost three days have passed. I’ve spent the time with Gianna, either painting her, other objects, or one of her friends. Or going shopping and visiting the cinema. It’s been surreal, and, honestly, I’ve felt a mother-daughter connection forming.

“Sienna?”

I snap back to the present moment. “I’m fine. I just want to read. To relax. Or try to.”

Gianna sighs. “I hope you’re not scared.”

“You told me that someone tried to kill Nico. You told me that Nico ordered you to bring me here because it might not be safe. If I wasn’t scared, I wouldn’t be normal.”

“Then perhaps it’s better if you’re not alone.”

“Please, Gianna. I’m okay.”

That’s a lie. I was confused even before Gianna and three cars filled with suited men

showed up at my door. Thinking about Nico has had my head spinning. At night, I close my eyes and think of him, and once or twice, my hand has slid between my legs to relieve the tension, making me ache.

It's only been two days, almost three, but I miss him more than I should.

I'm not sure how long I try to read my art history book, but I know I'm unsuccessful. I can't focus.

When a knock comes at the door, I say, "Gianna, seriously, I'm fi?—"

"It's me," Nico interrupts.

I rush to the door, then stop. I don't want to look too keen. I don't want him to sense how many times I've thought about him since learning he's a good guy, since trusting Gianna against my better judgment.

He pushes the door open when I hesitate to open it. He looks intense, a mixture of rage and relief dancing across his features. If I were painting his eyes now, they would be black with a hint of carmine-crushed longing.

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Without saying anything, he grabs me, kisses me. The suddenness takes me off guard. My body sinks into his like it remembers. He holds me more tightly than he has yet. His hands stray to my hips, and then he pushes me away slightly, creating a little space between us so he can smolder down at me.

“My mother told me she explained everything,” he says.

I nod.

“Everything,” he repeats heavily.

“She told me about your brother and your dad... and how you promised to do better when you took over. She told me you’re a good person.”

“Maybe I am,” he says fiercely. “But that doesn’t mean there’s not darkness in me, Sienna. That doesn’t mean I’m all good.”

“Nobody is black and white,” I murmur. “But if she told the truth, then maybe I could chill a little bit.”

“Chill?”

“With the judgment. Maybe we could... date?”

He’s understandably in a dark place. Somebody just tried to kill him. Maybe that’s why, when he smirks, it feels like winning a small victory. “I’ve never dated before.”

“Don’t say things like that. I was just starting to believe you could be honest.”

He shrugs. “It’s your choice if you want to believe me, but I mean it. I always knew that being with someone would mean bringing them into my world... with you, I’ve let my defenses down.”

“That’s because I’m special,” I say, trying to make my voice sarcastic.

“Yes,” he replies, not even a hint of sarcasm. “You are.”

He captures my lips with fervent passion, conveying how deeply he's longed for me these past three days—a sentiment I wholeheartedly reciprocate. I love how effortlessly he lifts me, my feet dangling above the floor. Our lips remain locked as I wrap my legs around his waist, allowing him to carry me toward the bed.

"Speaking of dating... I should give you your gifts before I get carried away."

"Gifts?"

"I craved your company desperately yesterday and the day before. I nearly reached out countless times, but knew I wouldn’t be able to focus on my business if I did. The best I could manage was to order you this..."

He retrieves a jewelry box from his pocket. In the recesses of my mind, I envision Mom smiling approvingly. She always hoped I would find an elegant, mature man—someone who would lavish me with thoughtful gifts.

Embracing this as a fresh beginning for us, I allow myself an unchecked smile as I accept the box. A genuine gasp escapes my lips when I reveal its contents: a bracelet adorned with a delicate paintbrush pendant.

"I initially considered a necklace," he confesses softly. "But nothing could possibly replace the one you already cherish."

"This is incredibly thoughtful." I lift the bracelet from its velvet home.

"Here—let me."

He handles the delicate piece with surprising dexterity as he secures it around my wrist.

"I wasn't referring solely to the gift when I called you thoughtful," I explain, lifting my arm to examine how the silver catches the light. "I meant your comment about the necklace as well."

"Your mother sounds like a remarkable woman," he responds. "She deserves respect. There's something else. Wait here."

He leaves the room. During those brief moments he's gone, my heart races with rising excitement as I surrender to this unfamiliar sensation. I'm seeing someone. I've never been able to articulate or even contemplate that reality before.

My smile grows when he returns, cradling a record player. He places it carefully on the counter. "Play the record," he instructs.

I notice one already positioned on the turntable. "Okay..." I lower the needle. "This is giving me some major nostalgia. Mom loved record players. She never cared if it labeled her a hipster."

When Leon Bridges' "Forgive You" plays, my heart swells with emotion.

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"You remembered," I whisper, recalling our miniature golf outing and the casual remark I'd made... though clearly, it wasn't casual to him.

"I saw the way your face lit up when you shared that memory," he explains, crossing to the curtains and drawing them closed. Shivers dance across my skin, the background music creating a very romantic setting. He approaches the door, closes it, and then turns to me with a smoldering look. "Would you think less of me if I admitted I want to temporarily forget about the city, my responsibilities, the looming conflict?"

In the background, Leon Bridges croons about looking foolish and enduring pain despite everything he's weathered. I don't want to seem foolish, but neither do I want to continue existing in cold isolation.

"No," I whisper.

"Good," he growls, suddenly fierce. He advances quickly, grasps my hips with a different energy—more intense than before. "I've missed you beyond what I can explain. Every hour, every second, yearning to be with my Vignette, yet knowing duty demands I stay away."

"When you have thoughts of me, what comes to mind?"

"Your smile. Your extraordinary talent."

I trace my fingertips delicately down his chest, attempting to appear seductive. Though I've got no experience in the matters, I commit wholeheartedly. "What else?"

His eyes burn. The hint of passion I'd previously detected erupts into an inferno of desire.

"Owning you," he declares huskily. "Possessing you. Every inch of your perfect, curvy form."

"Owning me?" I whisper. "What exactly does that entail?"

He leans down, bringing his face tantalizingly close to mine, allowing me to see his blazing desire. "I'll show you."

## ChapterSeventeen

Nico

She smiles with raised eyebrows, projecting nervous anticipation. I'm consumed with desire, my arousal throbbing with an urgent need I struggle to control.

"Show me?" she murmurs.

With the city teetering on chaos, betrayal, and assassins at my heels, my need to dominate my captivating painter erupts within me, surges through my veins, possesses me as completely as I need to have her.

"It's time you learned who's in charge."

She moans when I pivot her so her sweet voluptuous curves face me. I envelop her from behind, positioning myself to press against her luscious body. As I trail kisses along her neck, she undulates against me.

"So, you want to be my Don as well, huh?" she teases.



"Fuck," I groan, my arousal intensifying further.

"Yeah, Nico?"

"You're mine," I declare. "I own your curves, your magnificent ass, your exquisite thighs, your generous hips. Everything. Every inch. I can indulge my every whim with you."

I'm surrendering to passion, trembling throughout my body.

"What do you want to do?" she whispers.

Rather than responding verbally, I gently push her upper back forward. She grasps the bedframe, glancing over her shoulder, her hair cascading in beautiful disarray across her back.

"Have you ever been spanked before?" I growl.

"I've never done anything before," she confesses—then gasps when my hand connects with her softness.

Her eyes widen as an enticing smile spreads across her lips. "Oh my, Don Moretti."

I repeat the action several times. Her fitted pants reveal tantalizing outlines as she quivers with each spank.

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"No one else has the privilege of touching you like this." I strike again, then maintain contact. Grasping her waistband, I lower her pants. "Except me."

She moans with a complexity befitting her artistic nature. I detect nervousness beneath the predominant hunger, excitement, need... to be claimed, to be mine.

"Tell me who you belong to," I demand.

"You seem different," she whispers.

I pull her pants down, trapping her thighs together, framing her underwear where evidence of her arousal makes me increasingly feral. My desire reaches painful heights.

"I am." I press my hand against her sex, eliciting sounds that threaten my control. "You've been waiting for this moment. To be claimed by me. To become mine. As desperately as I've been waiting to claim you."

"Yes." She gasps as I caress her through the delicate fabric.

"Then tell me."

"I belong to you."

"Your skin has bloomed beautifully," I observe, kneeling behind her. I kiss her sumptuous body, savoring her shivers. I kiss the area I spanked, then carefully lower her underwear.

When I see her soaked sex, I nearly lose it. Yet I have to remember she's a virgin. Beyond that, I'm exercising restraint... with my city, with my painter. I pull her panties down until they tangle with her pants.

"You're going to do what your Don says," I state firmly.

She glances over her shoulder. "Is that so?"

"Indeed—you're going to wait until I tell you to cream for me."

I grasp her ass with both hands, bringing my face to her center. She pitches forward, reclining on the bed with her legs dangling over the edge. I hungrily caress her as I trace my tongue along her folds, tasting her essence, then circling her entrance teasingly.

"All my life," I groan between attentions, "I never craved control. Never aspired to become a Don. I accepted the mantle from necessity."

"N-Nico," she whimpers, beginning to tremble as if approaching climax.

"Now I understand the desire to possess someone completely. No one else is ever going to see you quiver like this, hear these precious moans..."

I explore her entrance with my tongue while simultaneously attending to her clit with my thumb, beginning with gentle pressure. The combination clearly overwhelms my perfect painter; her moans become breathless and urgent like they did when I brought her to orgasm in the car.

I lavish attention on her nub, savoring her essence, using my tongue with precision as I enter her. Her body responds enthusiastically as I find a rhythm, increasing pressure with each moment.

I sense the mounting urgency in her body, her desperate need for release.

"Nico," she whimpers. "I don't know if I can hold on."

"Not until I say so," I growl.

"Oh, God."

I trail kisses along her sensitive flesh, then take her clit into my mouth. I suckle her bud using my tongue, her moans nearly turning into cries of release. She sounds precariously balanced on the edge of control, moments from surrender. When she presses herself against my face, I know she's close.

Her hips move instinctively, uncontrollably.

I withdraw slightly, listening to her ragged breathing.

"Are you trying to drive me crazy?"

I gently circle her sensitive point with my thumb, causing her to shudder and press against me again.

"You're close."

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She laughs breathlessly. "How could you tell?"

"Your body feels like it's going to burst into flames, piccola pittrice. Your passion comes through, like it does in your work."

"Are you g-going to..." she falters when I resume my attentions.

"Put you out of your misery"

"Y-yes. Please, Nico."

"You need to understand that when you surrender completely to me, when your body responds so exquisitely, I won't be able to restrain myself. I claim every aspect of your perfection—every magnificent inch. Understood?"

"I understand completely. I'm ready."

"Prepared for what, precisely?" I growl.

"You know..."

"Tell me. Give me every dirty detail."

"Can't you put me out of my misery first?"

"Be a good girl and do what you're told."

"Nah-uh. Either continue as you intend, or this painter's mouth stays squeaky clean."

"So, you're negotiating now."

"If anyone can succeed, surely it's the painter whose passion makes you feral, right?"

I smirk before returning my attention to her sex. She shifts her ass rhythmically, pressing herself against my face. I trace her most sensitive area with my tongue before returning to her entrance, exploring her depths while simultaneously stroking her with my fingers, moving with increasing urgency.

Her release arrives swiftly. She trembles uncontrollably as waves of pleasure course through her curvy body, her essence flowing freely.

I deliver another gentle strike as she climaxes.

Afterward, I stand, tearing down my pants. She watches wide-eyed over her shoulder.

"Tell me what you're ready for," I demand, lowering my underwear, my arousal evident and ready.

"I'm ready for... your cock."

I smirk. "Don't get shy with me now. Be specific. Or have you forgotten who's in charge?"

She bites her lip before saying in a rush, "I'm ready for you to lie me on your bed, put me on my back, and strip off my clothes. And I'm ready for you to get naked and cover my body with yours..."

"So that's how you want it??" I growl.

"Mmm." She nods. "This is my first time, remember."

"Then obey your Don and strip. Completely."

She rises and turns toward me. Our hands move frantically. I tear away my shirt and kick off my remaining clothes. She discards her pants. The movement causing her breasts to sway enticingly.

I take her shoulders and guide her to the bed. She falls back, gazing up at me.

"You look so primal," she murmurs.

"Primal?" I echo.

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"Like a wild animal. As if you've been caged. Like you've been waiting."

"I have," I snarl. "Caged for too damned long, waiting for my perfect painter to come along and show me what it means to crave dominance. Open your thick, gorgeous legs for me."

She complies as I position myself over her. My tip brushes her inner thigh, making her shiver.

"You look both nervous and anticipatory. In equal measure."

"Maybe I am a little nervous," she admits. "But I'm ready. I've been ready since our night at the putt-putt place."

"Are you ready to be mine? To be claimed."

"Hmm." She moans as she nods. "You're the boss, Don Moretti."

"You're making me even harder. Reach down, grab my shaft, guide me to your virgin slit."

She slides her hand between our bodies, then wraps her fingers around my base. A shiver of intense desire ripples through me as she directs my tip to her sex, teasing it across her clit. Her eyelids flutter.

"Did you do that on purpose?"



"Maybe," she whimpers.

"Without my permission?"

She smiles. She relishes when I boss her around. I reach down, grasp her wrist, then guide it over her head. I take her other wrist so that I'm restraining both in mine, pinning them firmly.

"You own me," she whispers, deliberately provoking me. "I'm yours."

Securing her wrists with one hand, I grip my throbbing shaft with the other and position myself at her entrance.

She moans when I press against her tunnel, her tightness constricting around me, yielding slightly as I rock back and forth.

"You're ready," I groan. "You want this, Vignette. You've craved this since our first kiss. You wanted this the night I drove you home. You want this as desperately as I do."

## ChapterEighteen

Sienna

There's something intoxicatingly erotic about him restraining my arms above my head. I never would have anticipated feeling this way before experiencing it, but when he spanked me, I realized this power dynamic would become our jam.

He craves control, ownership. Typically, I'd recoil at the notion of someone possessing me, but with Nico, everything feels different. I love driving him wild... the more untamed he becomes, the more intense my responses grow.

He gazes down at me with such fervent passion that I half-expect steam to rise from his skin. He supports himself with his free hand— the other pinning me in place.

Simultaneously, he rocks against my entrance. His tip presses into me, stretching me open... then tantalizingly pulling away. Soon, my core is aching for him, warm waves of anticipation flooding through me.

"You don't just want this," he growls. "You need this."

His phrasing these as declarations rather than questions heightens my sense of surrender. That's precisely what this represents. For years, I've lived fiercely independently, stubbornly insisting I don't need anyone...

But I need this. He's right.

Finally, he eases himself into me. I've never experienced anything like it. It's entirely different from his tongue when he was thrusting that inside me. This is a deeper level of connection, and his cock feels big.

He stretches my lips as he glides deeper, causing only a little discomfort. I'm too aroused to truly register it. Manly, his cock radiates heat, sending electric pulses through me, my walls gripping him tightly as he thrust deeper.

The most arousing thing is his expression of absolute obsession. He's in physical control, my hands pinned, my body becoming his canvas to do with as he pleases. Yet the power dynamic transcends that.

As he sinks completely inside, holding himself there, I recognize I mean something to him. Perhaps this might seem foolish when my body isn't consumed by our passion, but here, now, fusing with him, we matter.

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He slips out, then plunges back in. His manhood presses against my walls, igniting every inch with sexual energy. Each subsequent thrust makes me feel poised on the precipice of another orgasm.

I moan instinctively, without inhibition. His expression embodies pure desire. Pure obsession. He gazes into my eyes like the timeless cliché, as though lost within them. With him, it feels genuine rather than cheesy. I stare back and lose myself equally in him.

Our pace quickens. After a minute— or more, or less, time is distorted — I rock my hips in rhythm with his. He groans approvingly. But words elude us both now. We can only communicate through moans and primal sounds of pleasure.

I adjust my hips again. His cock, impossibly hard, drives into me at the perfect angle. It glides upward, electrifying my sex with each intimate inch, until his massive tip presses against a pleasure point, I've never discovered before.

He's buried deep inside me, striking something that sets off exquisite sensations.

He moans, his lip quivering, his eyes registering the revelation. He recognizes the effect he's created. No questions necessary.

Finally, he lets go of my hands. I grasp his muscular shoulders, feeling his firmness, his strength, as he thrusts at that perfect angle again. The angle becomes our angle as we move in perfect harmony.

When he withdraws, I shift away oh-so slightly. When he drives his hot, slick cock

back inside me, I position myself precisely, so his tip strikes that sizzling spot again. His smirk widens.

"Yuh-yes," I barely manage to get out. "That's... the..."

"Spot," he growls, evidently struggling to speak as well.

"Uh, huh." I nod eagerly.

He accelerates, lavishing attention on my sweet spot. His muscles rippling, signaling his approaching climax. Our bodies create slick sounds that somehow heighten the eroticism.

It's just what I described to him: primal instinct. The raw physicality propels me closer to the edge, and I yearn to surrender. I don't want to hold on tight anymore: on life, on the past, on my grief. I want to let go. I want him to take control.

Perhaps he sensed that in my moans or my movements. He takes my hands again. No – it's not as simple as that. He takes one hand, and when his intention finally dawns on me, I offer the other.

He restrains both wrists in his grip, driving into me at that delicious angle. The bed creaks as he thrusts faster, harder, with Don-infused confidence.

"Come," he commands. "All—over—my—dick..."

I can't resist as he pounds into me with increasing intensity. The walls of my sizzling core contract around him. He pushes through the resistance, penetrating me fully again, thrusting repeatedly until I have no choice but to surrender completely to the desire.

The orgasm is unlike anything I've ever felt. If the climax from his tongue and fingers resembled a firework, this eruption feels like a volcano. I clench my legs around him, my walls gripping him, the friction so overwhelming I have to lean up and bite his bare chest to prevent from screaming loud enough to wake the entire house.

Then he gasps, veins bulging along his neck. His eyes blaze with intensity, making me marvel at how lucky I am. He collapses atop me, releasing my hands so I can wrap my arms around him. I feel his cock pulsing inside me, gradually softening after unleashing his seed.

Afterwards, he lies atop me for several intimate moments. I hold him tightly, kissing his cheek. He turns, finds my lips, and kisses me with the same tenderness.

"I never thought I'd say this," I whisper. "About you. About anybody. Especially not about a mob guy. But I'm ready to trust you, Nico."

"Good," he says fervently. "I won't let you down. I've never experienced anything like that before."

"Not even when you scored all those holes in one?"

"Thishole in one was the sweetest."

"Ew!" I exclaim, though I'm laughing uncontrollably, a ridiculous grin spreading across my face. "Did you seriously just say that?"

"I'm afraid I did," he replies, chuckling. "And I'm afraid my Vignette liked it."

"That's because you bring out the unexpected in me," I tell him. "Wanting to be owned – all that... That's not me. Not typically."

"It is now," he growls.

A previous version of me, one that existed not long ago, would have resented such a statement. I wouldn't have wanted to belong to him, or anything remotely similar. But hearing him say it, I recognize the truth in his words.

"Please don't make me regret it," I murmur.

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"I won't," he says. "I promise."

Am I a fool for believing him? Am I crazy for trusting him? Maybe.

### ChapterNineteen

Nico

I could get used to this. Lying beside Sienna feels natural... as natural as our lovemaking. Now that my passion has flared and subsided, I can hold her without succumbing to my primal urges.

"Owning you felt exquisite," I whisper, running my fingers through her hair.

"Being owned by you felt pretty great, too. But, for the record, we're talking figuratively, right?"

I chuckle. "Explain."

"You understand, you don't literally own me. Aware I'm not your property."

"I'm not that insane," I assure her.

"Notthatinsane – so you are a little?"

"Crazy about you..."

"Ugh. Cheesy."

I roll onto my side to meet her gaze. "Ugh? Say that like you mean it."

"You're layered like old paint, Don Moretti. One moment you're savage. The next, you're a... prince. What else will I find out if I continue peeling back those layers, hmm?"

"A prince?" I grin. "That's a new one. I've been called a king before, a mafia king, but never a prince."

She traces her fingertips down my chest, across my stomach. "You're simultaneously romantic and savage. It's a combination I never expected."

"It's a combination I wasn't aware of until you brought it out in me."

When my cell phone vibrates from my pants pocket on the floor, I sigh deeply.

"Do you have to check that?" she inquires.

"Unfortunately, yes, though I'd prefer not to. Not during..."

"Go on."

"No—"

She presses her hand into my chest. "Go ahead. You don't need to shield me like some fragile child. I can handle reality."

"I'd rather keep you distanced from mob affairs."



"I'd rather know what you're doing, so my imagination doesn't conjure up horrific scenarios."

I can't argue with that logic. I told her I owned her, that I was in charge, because it got us both heated. But when it comes to romance, I refuse to treat her as countless mobsters treat their women. She deserves respect.

Does that make me a hypocrite, multi-layered like she suggested? Or simply human, more nuanced than black and white?

Rising from the bed, I gaze down at her, entangled in the sheets, one breast exposed, her cheeks flushed, her hair disheveled as it fans across the pillows.

"I thought you were checking your phone?" she says breathlessly, still flushed from our intimacy.

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"Was I? It's difficult to remember."

She pulls the blanket up, covering her breast. "Better now?"

"No – worse, substantially worse."

She laughs as I cross the room to retrieve my phone. It's a message from Mother. She says she doesn't want to intrude, but she's received a text from Anya Barinov inquiring whether we still plan to attend Viktor's gala tomorrow. I close my eyes, inhaling deeply.

"Is something wrong?"

"I overlooked something," I admit honestly. "I don't know how it slipped my mind... Damn."

"What, Nico?"

I return to the bed, taking her hand, wishing I could avoid this discussion. "I've agreed to attend a Bratva party with Anya Barinov. She's Viktor's daughter, the leader of Bratva. The alternative was granting Viktor permission to transform the city into a considerably more dangerous place."

"You're attending as her... date?" Sienna questions.

"Technically, for appearance's sake, yes."

"Oh," she murmurs.

"But it means nothing," I insist.

"Does Anya know that?"

I run my fingers through my hair. "I don't know. I hope so. She's..."

"What?" Sienna snaps. "You repeatedly start, then start as though you think I'm some delicate flower. Well, I'm not, so what is it?"

"She's made several advances toward me over the years. Nothing serious, but both she and Viktor have persistently pushed for an alliance."

"Over the years," Sienna echoes. "We've known each other for a few weeks, while this woman has pursued you for years."

"It doesn't mean anything," I reassure her.

"Do you mind if I shower?" She stands... with the blanket wrapped around her nakedness.

"Sienna—"

"Please. It's fine. I'll meet you downstairs."

She walks into the en-suite and shuts the door loudly. I remain seated on the bed for several minutes, staring at the door, contemplating joining her. The shower runs. She'll be naked. I won't be able to think clearly, though. However, I doubt she's in an amorous mood at the moment.

I dress and descend to the kitchen, joining my mother.

"I informed Sienna about the party."

"Ah," Mother remarks, blowing across her herbal tea.

"She's not happy."

"Good."

"Good?"

"The fact that she's not happy means she cares about you. It means my instincts about the two of you were right."

"This isn't a game, Mother."

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“You’re right. I’m sorry. But I can’t help being happy for you both.”

“I wouldn’t like to think of her at a party with another man, so I can see why she’s upset.” I sit. “Viktor’s got some nerve, too, throwing this party after sending a pack of Russians after me.”

“We need to exercise some caution,” Mother says. “We don’t know if Viktor had anything to do with this. Perhaps Adrian hired some Russians, hoping to throw you off the scent.”

“Throw me off the scent? If I’d walked into that warehouse, I’d be dead right now.”

“We need to be sure before we take drastic action,” Mother says. After a pause, she murmurs, “Perhaps I’ll see if Sienna wants to attend the gala as my plus one so that she can see for herself that nothing is happening between you and Anya.”

The idea appeals to me, especially after what Sienna said upstairs about wanting me to tell her what’s going on, so she doesn’t have to use her imagination.

My mother must read the concern on my face. “He’s holding the party at The Adolphus Hotel. Even Viktor isn’t stupid enough to start a gunfight there. And, it will be standard mob rules, won’t it? No weapons allowed.”

“True,” I agree.

“I’m sure Sienna would prefer to be with us than sit around here, wondering what’s going on.”

“I’ll ask her.”

“Ask me what?” Sienna walks in, wearing a bathrobe, her hair wrapped in a towel. “I hope you don’t mind.” She pulls at the fabric of the robe.

“Not at all, dear,” Gianna says. “What’s mine is yours.”

“What were you talking about?”

“Mother wanted to ask if you’d like to attend the gala.”

“Is it safe?” Sienna asks.

“I wouldn’t even consider it if it wasn’t,” I tell her. “Keeping you safe is the most important thing.”

“It will give us a chance for a shopping trip tomorrow,” Mother says excitedly. “We’ll find you the perfect gown.”

“Do you want me there?” Sienna says, looking directly at me.

It would make my life easier if she didn’t come. That’s the truth. But I also suspect she’d torture herself if we left her behind. That’s the last thing I want.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t want you torturing yourself. And I did call you Cinderella the last time I gave you a ride, remember?”

She smiles. “Okay, then let’s do it! I can’t believe how crazy my life has become. A gala. But won’t Anya mind?”

“You’ll come as my plus-one, dear,” Mom says.

“Ah.” Her expression darkens for a moment, then she smiles. “I can handle that.”

“Just remember,” I say, approaching her and taking her hand. “No matter what happens, you’re the woman for me, Sienna. You’re my...” I search for a word, but none of them seem sufficient.

“Girlfriend?” Mother offers.

I chuckle. “Sounds strange for a man my age to say, but yes, Sienna. You’re my girlfriend.”

I wish I had one-tenth of her talent so I could capture the beauty of her smile. “Okay, boyfriend. I’ll try to keep the jealous genie in the bottle.”

ChapterTwenty

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Sienna

I should've known that I wouldn't be sitting in the limo with Nico. That should've been obvious when I agreed to this plan. It's not like they lied to me. They explained I was going to be a plus-one, nothing more.

Well, they didn't add thenothingmore part. That's all me. But the point is the same.

"How are you feeling?" Gianna asks. "Before you answer, let me tell you that you look absolutely stunning."

I plaster my most convincing smile onto my face, hoping that it looks somewhat convincing. "I feel great. This dress is going to take some getting used to, though."

"It must be worth it to know how absolutely delightful you look."

"I never imagined a person like me would go to a gala... especially not one run by the mob." I smooth my hands over my stomach, feeling a little sick. "Nico said it was the Russians, which means that it was their people, right?"

"Viktor took over toward the tail end of the war. There's no telling if he was involved."

"If he was, he deserves to pay."

Gianna smiles tightly. "It might be better to keep sentiments like that to yourself, dear."



“Don’t worry. I’m not going to blow up Nico’s date.”

“Sienna...”

When Gianna uses the chiding tone, weirdly, I sort of like it. “Mom used to say my name like that when I was in a mood.”

“It’s a good thing I’m here then, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t mean that – I know it’s not a date. But...”

“It hurts to think of him with someone else?”

I look out the window and happen to catch sight of a beggar with a cardboard sign and a ratty old hat turned upward to accept donations.

“That easily could’ve been me about a hundred times along the way of my journey. I should know better than to complain.”

Gianna looks at the homeless person. “The world can be a cruel place. But Nico is one of the good ones.”

“I believe you,” I say, and I mean it.

Yesterday, I went shopping with Gianna and then sketched a picture of Nico’s old crib, which Gianna has kept since he was a baby. It was an interesting piece with unique challenges. In the evening, Nico and I had sex, made love, or something in between.

He wasn’t as possessive as the first time, but he still took the lead, and I liked that.

“Just remember, tomorrow, I only want you.”

I told him I would do my best. And if it got too much, I’d make an excuse and have someone drive me home. It shocked me how easily I said the part about the driver, as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

Soon, the limo pulls up to The Adolphus. The building is all elegance, carved stone, and tall arched windows. The doorman opens the door before the car stops moving. I step out, and the air shifts. It smells like wealth, somehow.

Gianna smiles at me and takes my arm, and we walk toward the entrance together.

Inside, the lobby stretches wide and high, marble flooring, with gold detailing on the ceilings. Staff move silently like they’ve been trained not to make a sound. We follow the rush toward the ballroom.

It’s all light and space. The ceiling soars. Crystal chandeliers blaze overhead. The walls are pale and grand, lined with gold. Every table gleams. Every guest looks like money. It’s not just impressive. Honestly, it’s overwhelming.

“Are you okay, dear?” Gianna says, touching my arm.

I look around at the men in their suits, the women in their expensive gowns, feeling like the odd one out. That’s until I spot Nico looking at me from across the room. Even with the distance separating us and people walking back and forth, I can tell he likes the dress I’m in.

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It's his posture, the tilt of his head. It's his... aura.

"Yes," I say, but a moment later, a glamorous woman walks up beside him. She's tall, angelic, and wears her dress like it was made for her, jewelry that should count its blessings to adorn someone so beautiful.

"I'm fine," I mutter a moment later, when I feel Gianna staring at me.

"We should say hello," she replies, then moves close to me. "Try not to make it too obvious that you and Nico are in a relationship."

"He's hiding me," I mutter.

"No," Gianna says swiftly. "He wanted to tell the truth, but I persuaded him it wouldn't be in his, or the Family's, best interest. I'm sorry for asking you to play along with the charade."

"I get it," I say, hoping I'm telling the truth.

We walk across the room, joining the happy couple. Anya has dark black hair, with small crystals interwoven into her artfully placed braids. She looks like someone born into and accustomed to wealth.

"Anya, you know my mother," Nico says.

"Hello, Gianna. It's a pleasure to see you again."

Even the way Gianna and Anya shake hands makes me feel poor.

“This is Sienna,” Gianna says, introducing me. “An absolutely talented artist who is working on a series of pieces for me. You’ll be seeing her work very, very soon.”

“Charmed,” Anya says, offering me her hand.

“Hey.”

When she shakes my hand, I feel how clammy it is. Her eyes shine like she’s drunk, or on her way toward getting drunk. I’m not going to judge her. If I wasn’t afraid of what I’d say, I might get drunk too.

“Are you enjoying your evening so far?” I ask, finding the silence awkward.

“How could I not?” Anya puts her hand on Nico’s arm.

Nico pulls away – it’s rude, but I’m glad – but that doesn’t change the look on Anya’s face. She gazes at him adoringly. She looks deeply in love.

I’m shocked at how jealous this is making me. It hasn’t been long enough for me to feel this way. It was just under a week ago that I was telling him we were only going to have one night together.

But the truth? I’m absurdly jealous.

“Will you please excuse me?” I say. “I’m going to use the ladies’ room.”

“Would you like some company?” Gianna asks.

“No, thank you.”

I quickly step away. I feel like I want to scream. I need to calm down.

I'm glad I've got the bathroom to myself. I hardly recognize the girl in the mirror. She's far more glamorous than I've got any right to be.

I stand up straighter, try to own the outfit. The gown hugs every curve I usually keep covered. Deep green, off the shoulder, tight at the waist. It's beautiful. Expensive. I feel like I've borrowed someone else's life. I tug at the neckline, shift my weight. Too much skin. Too much me. The mirror says I look like I belong, but I'm not so sure.

I turn when the door crashes open.

It's... Adrian, the guy I first saw at the restaurant and then later at Gianna's house, his hair shines slickly in the light. He rushes across the room, a manic look in his eyes.

"Don't make a sound," he growls. "I don't have any weapons, but if I have to, I'll hurt you. I'll fucking hurt you. Get it?"

I'm too stunned to move or react. He grabs my arm and squeezes it hard enough to snap me out of the paralysis. He's strong. I'm alone, with nowhere to run. Terror grips me as I stare at him.

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“Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I whisper. Then, louder, “Let me go.”

“Keep your voice down.” He shakes me. Not hard, but hard enough for me to feel how much stronger he is than me. “Nico isn’t who you think he is. He was involved in the shooting that killed your mom.”

“Wait, what?”

Adrian reaches inside his jacket pocket and takes out a small plastic device with wires wrapped around it. He places it on the counter. “Shut up and listen. You’re going to record Nico. Get him to admit to anything about the mob, the Family, on tape. Otherwise, we will find you. You’ll become a plaything for the Bratva. These are very bad men, understand? The things they’d do to you...” He shudders, then takes a piece of paper from his pocket and lays it on the counter. “That’s proof Nico was involved.”

Adrian lets me go, glaring.

“I mean it. We need them on tape.”

“Them?”

“Nico and Gianna.”

“You only said Nico.”

“I said both of them.”

He didn't, but I'm not going to argue with him. His words, combined with his sheer presence, are enough to paralyze me.

“I've known for a while she's his consigliere. I just need proof. Understand?” When I hesitate, he darts his hand out and grabs me by the throat. “Understand?”

“Yes,” I say, hating the fear in my voice. “I get it. You don't have to do anything. Please.” He squeezes harder, making me gasp. “Puh-please.”

Finally, he lets go, looking over his shoulder to make sure that nobody is watching us. “Hide the bug. Hide the report. And just know, if you mess this up, we will find you. The Bratva will make you their little toy. Your life will become hell.”

He leaves the bathroom as quickly as he came. When he's gone, I lean against the wall, struggling to catch my breath. I grab the report and scan it through blurry eyes. I won't let myself devolve into frantic sobs, but I can't do anything about the mist filling my eyes.

The report has Nico Moretti's name in the 'person of interest' section, with two witnesses claiming they saw him fleeing the scene. There's even an arrest record, which I knew nothing about... and a note that the charges were later dropped because Nico intimidated the witnesses. There's also a note about a bullet matching a weapon apparently belonging to Nico.

I stuff the bug into my cleavage and then stumble into the hallway. I've still got the report clutched in my hand as I struggle to catch my breath. I stumble against the wall, almost falling.

Quickly, I fold up the report and stick that in my cleavage, too. I'm going to need to

be careful about having physical contact with Nico now.

Is that going to be a problem?

My man, my lover... it was only a couple of nights ago he promised he wouldn't make me regret trusting him.

## ChapterTwenty-One

Nico

Viktor sidles up to me as I approach the bar. I don't even want another drink. I'm nursing a glass of whiskey. But I need an excuse to leave Anya so I can look for Sienna. She disappeared to the bathroom and hasn't returned. Maybe seeing me with Anya was more difficult than she thought.

"Lovely evening?" Viktor asks.

"Not too bad, Viktor," I reply, knowing full well his shit-eating grin is fake. There's a large chance he was behind the hit Adrian tried to walk me into.

"Who are you looking for?"

"No one."

"You were scanning the room as I approached."

I smile tightly. "Occupational hazard."



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“You shouldn’t leave Anya waiting too long. She’s been looking forward to this evening.”

I grind my teeth. There’s a chance that Viktor wasn’t involved with the hit attempt. In that case, it’s in my best interest to play along with the charade. Part of the deal was giving Anya the best night of her life, and I’m not sure I’m going to be able to do that when it clearly means causing Sienna, the woman I actually care about, pain.

After getting Mother a glass of champagne – my excuse for going to the bar – I walk across the ballroom, looking for Sienna. I lean into my mother. “Find Sienna. She’s disappeared.”

Mother takes her glass of champagne and leaves me and Anya alone. Anya smiles shakily at me. “Anyone would think you’re trying to avoid me.”

“Not at all,” I say politely.

“Do you like my dress?”

“Uh, yes.” Even saying this feels like a betrayal. “Are you... having a good evening?”

“Why won’t you look at me, Nico?”

I turn to her. “I will.”

She rolls her eyes. “I shouldn’t have to ask.”

“I’m...”

“Sorry? Is that the word you’re looking for?”

Yeah, I’m sorry that she’s so desperate for attention her father had to make a deal for it. I want to tell her she can do better than wait around for scraps of attention from me, but that would mean risking the deal.

“I’m going to get another drink,” she says. “By the way, you could’ve offered to get me one when you saw I was almost out.”

She walks away with a toss of her head. From across the room, Viktor glares at me.

Mother returns with Sienna by her side. There’s something different about Sienna. She looks skittish, which is unusual for her. Even in the Cattle and Vine, when the Russians were trying to bully her, she seemed tough.

“Is everything okay?” I ask quietly.

She replies, but she doesn’t look at me. She glares into space as though thinking about something else. “I’m great.”

“Are you sure?”

“I just said that, didn’t I?”

Mother looks at me questioningly. I shake my head. She’s probably angry at seeing me with Anya. I can’t blame her. If the positions were reversed, I’d want to tear this entire hotel down.

\* \* \*

I hate parties, especially mob parties, when things spiral into drunkenness. Mother and Sienna sit in the corner, talking, observing. I spend some time with my men and a collection of Russians, pretending to be someone I'm not, just getting through it.

When someone touches my arm, I spin, my instincts ready for a fight. Anya laughs awkwardly. In the thirty minutes since she left for the bar, she's clearly consumed a lot of alcohol. She seems shaky on her feet.

"You need to listen," she says, slurring her words.

She almost stumbles. I've got no choice but to take her arm, steady her. Sienna is probably watching. When Anya seems like she's able to stand upright, I remove my hand.

"Listen to what?"

"To common sense," she snaps. Suddenly, she seems like a different woman. Still drunk, yes, but not the ditsy society girl I've always known her as. She seems... sharper, more aware. "I've tried doing it the nice way: the reasonable way."

Her words are slurred, but she speaks with more conviction than I've ever heard from her before.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I tell her.

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She moves closer, evidently not wanting anyone else to hear. “When I was younger, I won’t lie., I was interested in you, Nico. But I’ve got self-respect. I wouldn’t continue to pursue a man who clearly doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

I resist the urge to tell her that’s exactly what she seems to be doing.

She scoffs, most likely reading the thought on my face.

“I know it seems like I never got over my crush. But that’s because I understand something—something you seem utterly incapable of grasping.”

“Enlighten me,” I say stiffly.

“I’ve pushed so hard for so long to be with you because it’s best for both our organizations. It will make us both more money – it will give us greater control of Dallas. I’ve tried to be a woman you’d fall for, but it’s not working, so I’ve decided to be honest.”

“You’re seeking this as a political alliance. You’re not actually interested in me.”

“Are you offended?”

“No – I’m relieved.”

The words are out before I realize how rude they are. But she doesn’t seem offended. She smiles drunkenly. “So you see that what I’m saying makes sense, then?”

“Perhaps it does, but I still can’t be with you, Anya.”

“Why?” She narrows her eyes, looking calculating, scheming. I’ve never seen her like this. “With our marriage, we could rule this city, every single corner. The smaller organizations wouldn’t stand a chance against an Italian-Bratva alliance. I’m done playing games. If you kissed me here, everyone will know that we’ve crossed the line. We’ve put a plan into action.”

“You’re like a different person.”

“I’ve always been this person, but I thought it was better if you only saw what I wanted you to see. That’s the lot for a woman like me. I stick to the shadows, show the big, oh-so powerful men the laughing, silly girl they already think I am...” She throws her head back, laughs unconvincingly, then suddenly stops. “See? It’s all a show. You need to think, Nico. About the city. About the future.”

She reaches out to put her hand on me. I glide out of the way, wanting nothing to do with her.

She stumbles. It’s bad luck. Or maybe she leaned forward too far, thinking I would catch her. She almost falls before catching herself standing upright, glaring.

“You’re drunk, Anya,” I say.

“Drunk enough to finally tell you the truth. Just kiss me, Nico. We need to stop playing games. We need to make a show of it.”

“Do you want a loveless marriage?”

“Pfft. I want what every girl wants: true love, a real relationship. But mafia princesses don’t have that privilege.”

“I’m not going to kiss you,” I tell her. “Even if I wanted to, I refuse to take advantage of a drunk woman.”

“What a hero you are,” she says sarcastically.

“Mock me for it if you want, but it’s the truth.”

When she glares at me, I see the woman she’s always been, the person she’s been hiding behind her glitzy façade. “Our lives would be easier if we simply accepted, we’re not the masters of our own destinies.” She grabs a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and tosses it back. “If you’re too blind to see that, I can’t help you.”

“Anya, I don’t want to upset you, but?—”

“Upset me?” she snaps. “If we were together, it would stop my father and his vicious, ugly, unacceptable behavior. It would allow me to escape from his home.” She rocks from side to side, looking as if she might fall. “It would make it so I could be free – and maybe do some good in my life.”

“Wait, you don’t want to be with your father?” My mind ticks to future possibilities, contingencies layered upon what ifs.

“If you know my father, you shouldn’t even need to ask me that.”

She storms away, weaving from side to side as she tries to maintain her balance.

“What was that about?” Viktor snaps.

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I turn quickly. "I told her I wouldn't take advantage of a drunk woman. I never have, and I never will."

"I'd rather my daughter be drunk and happy, Nico, than drunk and sad."

I think about asking Viktor if he truly cares about Anya, knows about her secret side. She wants true love, but she's too calculating to believe she can have it.

"I meant what I said," I tell him bluntly.

"Some party," Viktor snaps. "Our deal was that you would make my Anya happy this evening. You've failed."

He walks away. I close my eyes for a brief moment, fury flashing across my vision. Opening my eyes, I look toward the corner where Mother and Sienna were, but they're no longer there.

Taking out my cell, I call Mother. "Where are you?"

"Sienna wasn't feeling well. She wanted to go home and get some sleep."

"I'll come by soon," I reply. "In fact, I think I may stay at your place this evening."

"That's a good idea, dear. Sienna seems very shaken up. I can't help but wonder if it had something to do with seeing you and Anya together."

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. If I saw her with another man, I'd be pissed

too. I don't care if it's only been a little while."

"Love doesn't work on a timeline, dear," Mom says.

"Love," I repeat. "Don't get ahead of yourself."

"Perhaps you're living in denial."

After ending the call, I see Viktor, Anya, and most of the Russians heading for the exit. Tonight, has been a colossal failure.

## ChapterTwenty-Two

Sienna

In the bedroom – notmybedroom,thebedroom – I read the report several more times. With each rereading, my heart feels like it's breaking. Dramatic? Sure, alert the press, I won't deny it.

Seeing Nico's name in the context of my mom's death is like a punch to the gut. Even worse, I still can't accept it. It's right there in black and white, but it's still difficult to accept. I can't match the person in the report with the man I've kissed, made love to, and obsessed over.

The knock at the door makes me flinch.

"Sienna?"

It's Nico. I stuff the report into the bedside drawer with the recording device.

"Yeah?"



“May I come in?”

“I just want to get some sleep.”

“I’m coming in.”

“Why even ask if you’re going to barge in anyway?”

He opens the door and walks across the room, standing over the bed. I wish he didn’t look so dashing in his tux. He sits on the bed and tries to touch my hand. I snatch it out of the way.

“I’m sorry you had to see me with another woman. For what it’s worth, Anya dropped a bombshell this evening. She hasn’t been interested in me for years. She’s just playing the role she stupidly thought I wanted from her. The ditzy Bratva princess. She doesn’t want me; she wants the alliance, just like her father.”

I almost scream at him that I don’t care. But it’s convenient if he thinks my mood has been about that instead of my world shattering into a million pieces.

“Okay,” I mutter.

“Seriously – nothing happened. Nothing has ever happened. And nothing is going to happen.”

“Thank you for telling me that,” I reply. “I’m tired. I want to get some sleep... alone.”

“Vignette—”

“All that about you owning me, possessing me, whatever, you understand that’s sex talk. I hope you get that. You don’t literally own me. You have to take my wishes into account sometimes.”

“I know,” he replies. “But I mean it?—”

“Nothing happened. I heard you the first time. Please, just let me sleep.”

He stands, looking hurt. Despite what I’ve learned, I almost apologize for upsetting him. What a joke that would be. “I’m staying here tonight. Mother has a few spare rooms. If you change your mind and want to see me, text me.”

“Okay. I’ll do that.”

“Piccola pittrice, I don’t want anyone except for you. Ever.”

The word ever bounces around my head, my soul, as he leaves the room. Once he’s

gone, I lock the door and strip off my dress, climb into the shower, and let the hot water flow over me, hoping it'll burn away my indecision and anxiety.

No such luck. Returning to the bed, I grab the recording device. The bulky part is a battery. The wires connect to several microphones, maybe in case one fails. I'm not a spy. I don't trust myself to wear it and guide Nico into saying something incriminating. I'll be too nervous.

Maybe I could plant it somewhere in the house. I've noticed that Gianna and Nico seem to talk in her kitchen quite often. Gianna is his second-in-command, which means that their conversations probably have something to do with the mob.

I take some slow breaths in a vain attempt to stop the frenetic beating of my heartbeat. I don't want to incriminate Nico. I don't want to hurt him, despite the report, the gunshot that tore my mom away from me.

I should ask him what he was thinking when he lied to me. What sort of sick game was he playing? He told me it was the Bratva, but it's right there in black and white.

Will Adrian and the Bratva be able to get to me with Nico's protection? Outside the walls of Gianna's large property, there are several cars filled with mafia men, presumably ready to start shooting if anyone approaches.

But I can't stay here forever. I can't commit to my mother's killer. Sooner or later, I'll have to leave. On the ride home, Gianna mentioned running to my place tomorrow to grab some of my things. I'm living in borrowed clothes, borrowed toiletries, borrowed everything.

A sudden, sick thought strikes me. What if Gianna only hired me out of guilt? Maybe she knows what her son did, and that's why she's been so kind to me.

It doesn't ring true. None of this does.

I sit up, smoothing my hands up and down my legs, my heart pounding heavily. It's been – I look at the clock – hours since Nico was here. All I've done is shower and sit here, thinking about what I should do.

They've been so, so kind to me. The portraits, the banter, the connection. The sex. The longing. The commitment. All of it seemed so real. Now, it's like my world is imploding again.

But if Nico killed my mom, the last thing I should do is protect him. I should hate him. It hasn't even been a long time. I'm not some ditsy, silly, misguided girl, am I?

I think about this logically. I've still got some cash even after I bought that absurdly expensive outfit. I rented the dress. Gianna offered to pay, but I didn't want to take a handout, so I saved money there. The most logical route for me to take is to plant the device, give the Bratva what they want, and then leave Dallas and never look back.

My heart hurts just thinking about that. I've always tried to be – and wanted to be – a woman who isn't led by her emotions. In my art, I'll let my feelings fly, but in real life, I've had to be focused, independent. But it's not like that now.

My heart screams for Nico. Nico is the one who hurt me, betrayed me, and yet he's the one I want to talk to about this.

I grab the device from the bedside drawer, sitting up. I have to do this. I don't want to, but that's nothing new. I didn't want to work a series of dead-end jobs. I didn't want Mom to die. I didn't want to be a weird loner in high school who spent all her time lost in a world of sketches and fantasies.

Leaving the bedroom in a baggy T-shirt, I sneak down the stairs. The device clutched

tightly in my hand. Nerves twist through me. I seriously have no desire to do this.

What will happen if Nico and Gianna are caught on tape?

I step into the kitchen. It's a large, luxurious space with three light switches. I turn on the mood lighting, the dimmest light they have, and then walk around the kitchen island, looking for a place to put the device.

“Sienna?”

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I freeze when Nico walks into the room. He's wearing nothing but a pair of workout shorts. His body looks huge, muscles bulging, expression severe, as if he knows what I'm doing somehow.

"What's wrong?"

"Nuh-nothing."

"Then why do you look so terrified? What are you doing down here so late?"

"Getting a glass of water."

He walks to the other side of the kitchen island. I hold the device under the island so that he can't see it.

"Try saying that like it's the truth," he says stiffly.

"Why would I lie about something like that?"

"I don't know, but when I heard you walk past my bedroom door, I knew something was wrong."

"How?"

"Instinct."

I roll my eyes. "Your instinct extends to creaking floorboards, does it?"

“In this case, it seems that it does. But there’s something else. When we spoke earlier, you had this look in your eye... it was like you genuinely hated me, Sienna. I’ve never seen you look at me like that before.”

“You say never like we’ve known each other for years.”

“It feels like that to me.”

“How romantic,” I reply sarcastically.

When he walks around the island, I move in the other direction, keeping the island between us at all times so he won’t see the recording device.

“Now you’re really making me suspicious. Show me your hands.”

“Do you think I’ve got a gun or something?”

“Show me your hands, Sienna. Now.”

Nerves constrict my throat. But even when his tone is dark, it’s difficult to believe he’s the man who killed my mom.

I raise my hands.

“What’s that?”

“A bug. A recording device.”

“What the fuck?” he growls, walking hurriedly around the island.

He grips my arms, his hurt expression even worse than before. “You’re spying on us?”

“Don’t take that tone with me.” I back away from him. “You’re the one who killed my mom.”

## ChapterTwenty-Three

Nico

When she says I killed her mom, it’s a struggle to accept what my ears are hearing. I grip her arms again, hold her in place. She stares at me with a confused expression, a hint of affection still in her eyes, but something else there, too. Rage. Hate. Pain.



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“Explain. Now.”

“You’re the one who needs to explain,” she snaps. “Did you or did you not kill my mom?”

“I had nothing to do with it. I wasn’t even involved in that hit – on either side. I had nothing to do with it. When that hit happened, I wasn’t the Don of the Family. My brother, Luka, was. Why would I be there? Listen to yourself. You think I would hurt an innocent woman?”

She blinks, her eyes growing glassy. Even wearing a baggy T, her hair damp and loose around her shoulders, with no makeup, she’s more beautiful than any woman at that party.

“No,” she whispers. “I can’t believe it, but I saw it... in, in black and white.”

She shudders, trying to move away from me again, but this time, I won’t let her. I pull her against me so she can feel my tense muscles. The outrage burning inside me. “You need to explain, Sienna.”

“Adrian found me in the bathroom. He hurt me. He grabbed my throat. Showed me a police report. Then gave me this bug to catch you and Gianna talking about anything mob related, but I knew I couldn’t wear it. It would feel...” She laughs humorlessly. “Too much like a betrayal. So, I was looking for somewhere to plant. But even then, I wasn’t sure I could do it.”

My rage takes a different shade when she tells me this.

“Adrian grabbed your throat?” I snarl. “He cornered you in the bathroom – alone?”

She nods. “He said I would be a Bratva plaything if I didn’t do what he said. They would make me their toy.”

I let her go as my hands curl into fists. I don’t want to hurt her. “I’m going to kill him. And I’m going to make it slow.”

“Nico,” Sienna whispers, staring at me as if she doesn’t recognize who I am.

“I know,” I tell her. “I don’t want you to see this side of me, but what he did is unacceptable. I don’t care what that police report says. I had nothing to do with your mother’s death. I wasn’t even in Dallas. I was in Austin for a work meeting.”

“Really?” she asks.

“Really. I can’t believe you think I would do something like that.”

“I didn’t,” she murmurs. “Well – I don’t know. He showed me a police report.”

“It was fake,” I tell her flatly. “Go to my website, go to the company blog, and you’ll see photos of me with several Chinese investors taken in Austin on the weekend your mother was killed. I’ve been looking into your mother’s death, digging deeper. I’m waiting to hear back from a contact. Hell, Sienna.”

She groans, gripping her hair like she’s going to rip chunks out.

Rage gives way to sympathy when I see the pain she’s in.

“Hey – calm down.” I take her hands, holding them tightly, holding her still. “Look at me, Vignette. I promise you. I had nothing to do with it. I’ll show you the website

right now.”

“Maybe I should show you the report, too.”

“He gave it to you, didn’t just show you?”

“It’s upstairs.”

“That amateur,” I growl. “Let’s take a look at this report, then.”

Holding her hand, we head upstairs together. She goes to the bedside table and opens the drawer, showing me a police report.

“While I look this over,” I tell her, “go to my website. Check the dates.”

She sits cross-legged on the bed. Even now, lust blooms when I see her thick thighs on display. I focus on the task at hand, scanning the report.

“Oh,” Sienna mutters. “There you are – that was the day it happened.”

“Yes,” I snarl. “Because I don’t kill women.”

Her shoulders slump. “I feel like an idiot.”

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“You were in shock. He threatened you. You can’t blame yourself.”

“I didn’t believe it. Deep down in my heart, I couldn’t believe it. I knew it wasn’t true... but I didn’t even think about the report being fake.”

I sit next to her, gesturing at the so-called police report. “The fonts are wrong. The header isn’t aligned properly. The language is too casual in places. Badge IDs are missing. There isn’t a clear chain of documentation. It’s a fake – and an insulting one at that.”

She shakes her head slowly. “I’m an idiot.”

“Look at me, Vignette.”

She does.

“Tell me you didn’t believe this, not deep down, not in your heart where it matters.”

“I didn’t,” she whispers.

I kiss her unexpectedly, even taking myself by surprise. She gasps and then gives herself over to me. She opens her mouth like she wants me to push my tongue scintillatingly into her mouth. I groan and slide my hand to her leg, squeezing hard, but then I stop myself.

“You were assaulted tonight,” I say, my voice trembling. “That bastard touched you, grabbed you, threatened you. I’ve known Adrian my whole life. He always seemed

jealous of my uncle's position. When I became Don, I saw the same hints of jealousy. But I never thought he'd take it this far."

"You can't blame yourself."

"I don't. I blame him. I blame Viktor. Adrian said you would be... a plaything for the Bratva?"

I can barely say it, my voice shaking, my commitment to Sienna making me savage.

"Yes," she whispers.

Standing, I pace the room. "You don't belong to anyone," I growl. "No one, Sienna, except me. Do you understand that?"

I need to calm down, but I can't. I return to the bed, grab her thick, tempting thigh, and kiss her again. She gasps and kisses me back, and then my lust takes over. Or maybe it's more than lust. My primal need for control.

"You should've come to me right away," I tell her.

"I'm sorry."

"And you didn't think I did it?"

"No. But I was confused. I've never seen a police report before." When I squeeze her leg harder, she places her hand on my chest. "How can I make it up to you?"

"Don't ask me that now," I snarl. "Not when my blood is boiling. Not when the Don is threatening to shatter my civilized veneer and transform me into a primal beast. Not now, piccola pittrice, when I need to possess you. To dominate you. To prove

that you belong to someone— not the Bratva, and certainly not Adrian. You belong to me."

"I'll do anything," she whispers.

"Don't say that," I groan, my manhood throbbing despite the emotional gravity of the situation.

"Don't you need to punish me?" she murmurs.

This is profoundly disturbing, but her words snap something inside me. Rising from the bed, I gesture toward the floor.

"On your knees, Vignette. Now."

She sinks to her knees, looking breathtakingly beautiful as she gazes up at me. Eagerness illuminates her expression, as if she wants to make amends.

I should hold her, console her, and treat her with tenderness. But the Don's darkness within me roars for possession. She's mine. I'm more convinced of that now that another has dared to touch her.

But I need to prove it.

I pull down my shorts and underwear, my cock springing free, the tip already glistening with precome. She whimpers, catching her lower lip between her teeth.

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"Put your hands behind your back," I growl, part of me recognizing this is a shade of darkness even my perfect painter couldn't capture on canvas. But another part, the savage Don within me, couldn't care less.

When she complies, placing her hands behind her back, my cock throbs violently.

I grip my base and guide myself to her mouth. She kisses the tip. "What do you want me to do?"

"Open your mouth for your Don. For the man who owns you—the only man who has the right to touch you."

She parts her lips. I guide myself inside, groaning when I feel the slick warmth of her tongue. The most intoxicating aspect is how she looks at me. She moans as I slide in and out, cradling her head in my hands, shifting my hips, claiming her mouth.

When she begins to match my rhythm, moving her mouth in perfect synchrony with my thrusts, I feel my release building. During our lovemaking, I restrained myself because I craved feeling her climax around me. I needed to experience her body trembling for me alone.

But this is about something else. Possession.

"I need to... own you because... no one else can," I groan, her mouth making wet sounds as I quicken my pace. She moans, nodding, encouraging me. "Just me. Only me. Just?—"

I groan as heat surges through me. Her eyes widen when I explode against the back of her throat. Watching her swallow, I nearly keep going, let my dick harden again and claim her beautiful mouth all night long.

Instead, I seize the moment of clarity and step back. "I didn't plan that."

She rises, wiping her mouth. "Don't apologize. Don't explain. I wanted that as badly as you. I wanted you to punish me— to own me. I can't believe I let that bastard poison my mind."

"Don't blame yourself. You've endured far more than anyone should ever have to."

"Do you forgive me?" she asks, a tentative smile touching her lips. "I mean—you punished me."

Somehow, I manage a smirk. "Does it count as punishment if you enjoyed it?"

"Who said I enjoyed it?"

I pull her into my arms. "Your moans gave you away..."

She wraps her arms around me, clutching my back tightly, digging her fingernails into my skin. "Perhaps we're both equally unhinged. If you'd told me earlier this evening that we would... do that, I wouldn't have believed you. But I desperately wanted to make amends."

"You've suffered tremendously, Sienna," I say. "You believed something reprehensible about me... but don't worry, you've atoned."

When she looks up at me, it's miraculous. Somehow, a playful glint illuminates her eyes despite everything that's happened. "It hardly felt like atonement. If anything, it's



left me more confused."

"How?"

"Being with you has been a rollercoaster from the beginning. I know, right? Cliché. Nauseating. But it's the truth. Tonight, though, it's been the wildest ride yet. Everything has become so complicated. Before you, I never imagined it possible to have my heart shattered and my world transformed in the same night."

"If I recall correctly, it was my world that was transformed..."

"I enjoyed it too," she confesses softly. "When you were looking down at me, I felt powerful. Like, I was your obsession. It felt exhilarating."

"You are my obsession. That's why I can't stand thinking about you believing I would harm an innocent woman. I've killed people, Sienna."

I expect a gasp, some indication of shock, but she merely nods. "I suspected as much."

"But those I've killed deserved their fate. Or I was defending myself. I've never harmed a woman or child. Nor would I." My tone darkens. "Adrian will pay."

"What will you do to him?" Sienna asks.

"String him up. Tear him apart. Make him scream for forty days and nights before finally allowing him to bleed out. But you shouldn't hear these things."

She digs her nails deeper into my skin. "I don't want you concealing anything from me. Your mother told me about the mob, about her position within it."

"She did?"

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"Yes," she confirms.

"She must trust you. She guards her secrets even more fiercely than I do."

"If I'm going to be part of this, I want to be fully included."

"What do you mean—be part of it?"

She looks at me as though I'm missing something obvious. "Adrian thinks I'm spying on you. Surely, you can use that somehow. You can use me to?—"

"No," I interrupt. "It's too dangerous."

"But—"

"Sienna," I groan. "You've suffered enough already. I won't allow you to risk your life."

"Who said that's your decision to make?"

"I own you, remember."

She shakes her head. "That's romantic. That's... erotic. That doesn't mean you control every aspect of my life."

I guide her to the bed. "It's been an exhausting day. We'll discuss this another time. We both need rest. I have a long day tomorrow."

"Doing what?"

"Trying to prevent a war."

Her demeanor softens slightly. "This conversation isn't over."

"Fair enough," I grunt. "But don't forget who your Don is, piccola pittrice."

I climb into bed and draw her into my arms. She rests her cheek against my chest. Within minutes, she's breathing softly in slumber. I watch over her, knowing sleep will elude me for hours, if it comes at all.

Protecting my woman takes precedence over rest.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Sienna

"You've forgiven me too easily," I murmur while setting up my easel. It's the afternoon following the party. While I slept, Nico informed Gianna about last night's events... omitting certain intimate details, hopefully. I ached for Nico when I woke to find him gone, but I understand he has a lot to deal with.

Gianna smiles at me from the armchair in her expansive library. I had the idea for a surrealist piece using the books as backdrop, with each volume containing a fragment of her essence: a penetrating eye here, a hand adorned with jewelry there. It's experimental, and I'm shocked and honored that she's willing to commission such an unconventional piece.

"My sweet girl, you weren't born into this life. And Nico explained how terrified you were about carrying out my depraved nephew's demands."

"That's true, but I was equally terrified of disobeying, so I'm not certain how much credit that merits."

"You're inherently good, Sienna. I consider myself fortunate to have met you— and my son even more so. If you were anyone else, he would banish you for what happened. When I inquired about his intentions, he said you'd already received your punishment."

My cheeks flush as I focus intently on arranging the easel. Last night encompassed countless emotional shades: desire, resentment, anger, confusion, connection. All intermingled like pigments on a palette.

"I didn't ask what he meant by that," Gianna remarks.

"I'm not entirely sure myself."

"Is that why you've turned crimson?"

"Gianna!"

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Her laughter dissipates the tension. "I know. I'm terrible. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I murmur.

"You look as though you've seen a ghost."

"When you laughed, it brought me back to all those moments, Mom, and I laughed together like this. Things are progressing quickly with Nico, and..." I hesitate, reluctant to sound sentimental or weird.

"You're like the daughter I never had," she says. "If you see me as a maternal figure, I won't object, sweet girl. In fact, I'll consider myself blessed."

"I can't believe how complicated everything has become," I murmur.

"Life is inherently complex. It never follows a linear path. I believed I would remain my husband's, then my son's, prisoner indefinitely. Nico thought he would forever remain silent while his father and brother committed atrocities— all to safeguard me. We could never have anticipated this. Sometimes surrendering to fortune or destiny proves wiser."

"I've never believed in destiny," I say. "The world has always seemed too cruel."

"And now?"

"I don't know about destiny. But with Nico—and with you—there seems to be something... something that goes beyond rational explanation."

"Something magical," Gianna suggests.

"I wouldn't go quite that far."

"When you envision the future, do you see Nico there?"

"Yes."

"You answered without hesitation. You didn't even think about it."

"He's a good person," I murmur. "Which sounds crazy after last night, but he truly is. I... I care deeply for him."

"Don't torment me like that. I thought you were about to confess your love."

"Life isn't a fairy tale, Gianna. People don't fall in love within days."

"They don't? Are you absolutely certain about that?"

"Mostly," I reply, unable to ignore the twinge in my heart. "Anyway, it's time to work. I need to paint; I need to silence my thoughts."

Gianna sits upright, tilts her head, and grins. "Proceed then. Make me beautiful."

\* \* \*

Gianna and I are relaxing on the back porch, sipping lemonade, when Nico returns. He's attired in an impeccable suit with a grim expression. When he catches sight of me, the severity in his features softens slightly. He kisses my cheek, then sits beside me, taking my hand.

Gianna beams at us, clearly delighted by how intimate we have become.

I grip his hand firmly. To say I've missed him would be an understatement. In the shadows of the night, it was difficult to know if his forgiveness was true. Now, with sunlight illuminating his intense features, I recognize his genuine forgiveness.

"I have news," he says. "About your mother."

"Tell me."

"I can hardly believe it myself," Nico mutters. "My contact in law enforcement was reluctant to divulge everything."

"Why?"

"Viktor. The Bratva."



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"I don't understand," I say.

He squeezes my hand reassuringly. "It appears Adrian has been working with the Russians for far longer than we suspected. Since before I became Don, since before the war. Police had surveillance on the Russians during the conflict. One device was monitoring Viktor. They recorded him instructing Adrian to target the Italian. He was the one who fired the shot. But they couldn't prosecute; the Russians exploited their connections to destroy the evidence."

"The stray bullet that killed my mom... it came from him?"

"The bastard has been against us for years. Perhaps he wanted more money, or Viktor promised him leadership within the Bratva. I believe my uncle's presence must have kept him in check. After my uncle's death, Adrian felt emboldened to expand his operations."

"That's why we feigned promoting him to consigliere," Gianna explains. "We wanted to test his loyalty—and discovered it severely lacking."

I inhale slowly. "What do we do? What's our strategy?"

"Our strategy," Nico echoes.

I glare at him. "These people killed my mother. Viktor is responsible because, without him, no shots would have been fired that day. And Adrian pulled the trigger."

"I'll handle Adrian, don't worry about that."

"I want him to face justice."

Nico hesitates. "What?"

"I want him to face justice," I reiterate firmly. "He doesn't deserve to get off easy. He deserves to rot in a prison cell for what he did. He needs to understand I sent him there. Not because he betrayed the mob... but because he murdered my beautiful, kind, witty, innocent mother."

Nico exchanges a meaningful glance with Gianna.

"It's the better tactical decision, too," I continue. "It means you won't have blood on your hands. And you'll avoid a murder charge altogether. I'm not just doing this solely for Mom's sake, Nico. I'm protecting you, too."

"You can't dismiss the logic here," Gianna interjects. "If the Family witnesses us executing one of our own—even one who deserves it—it could create ripples with devastating consequences. But if Adrian faces arrest for a murder charge, we simultaneously avert a war and eliminate Adrian in one decisive move."

"I'll meet him somewhere public." I squeeze Nico's hand reassuringly. "Before meeting you, I survived alone for nearly five years. I navigated from one dilapidated neighborhood to another. I have more resilience than you think."

"I know you're tough, but if I lost you, I wouldn't be able to take it."

"You won't lose me," I assure him. "I can handle this."

"Would our police contacts be capable of arranging such an operation?" Gianna contemplates aloud.

"Absolutely," Nico confirms. "They'd even let us monitor the meeting alongside them. But it's risky, Vignette. Adrian is unstable. Even in public, he might attempt something reckless. And if that happens, I'll lose it. Even with cops present, I'll snap. I'll eviscerate him before witnesses."

"I can handle this." When Nico regards me skeptically, I retort, "I lost my cool last night. I acknowledge that. I was terrified and confused. But fear can turn into rage. This man killed my mother. Then he tried to deceive me into thinking the only man I've ever cared for was the actual killer."

"I believe her," Gianna declares.

"As do I," Nico concedes. "But that doesn't mean I like it."

"Let me do it. You've both welcomed me into your inner circle. That wasn't necessary. But now that I'm here, I have to emphasize that Mom isn't the only one who deserves justice. Your Family does too."

"Our Family," Nico corrects. "If you do this, there's no going back. Even if you and I..."

Break up. The unspoken words hang in the air, like he can't say them.

"You'll still be tied to us. Forever. I wouldn't be able to take the risk of leaving you unguarded. What if someone—an ally of Adrian's—sought vengeance?"

"It's a good thing I'm not planning on going anywhere, then, isn't it?"

He gazes at me with raw emotion, displaying a vulnerability I never expected from him. "If anything happens, I'll be there, piccola pittrice. I won't let anyone harm you. Not now. Not ever. I... I care for you."

Was he about to say love? I think back on my conversation with Gianna. People don't fall in love within a week.

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When I look at my complex, intense, bright, yet dark man, I'm not so sure about that.

### ChapterTwenty-Five

Nico

I sit in the back of a police surveillance van with Detective Ramirez, a tough cop who has been an ally to the Family since I took leadership and began transforming the city. She revealed the true identity of the person behind my woman's mother's murder.

Now, we watch a security monitor displaying a live feed from the restaurant where the meeting is taking place. When I agreed to this plan, Sienna demonstrated remarkable initiative. "I'll message Adrian, claiming I got his number from your phone. I'll say I've got what he asked for, and I need to meet immediately to put this behind me. I saw his desperation. He'll take the bait."

Sienna appears on screen, traversing the bustling, upscale restaurant with surprising confidence. She berates herself for her reaction the night of the party, as though she should have maintained composure after that bastard blindsided her.

"She looks confident," Ramirez observes, then addresses the technicians monitoring the audio equipment. "Do we have audio?"

One technician increases the volume, allowing us to hear the restaurant's ambient noise and Sienna's breathing. Ramirez is right—Sienna appears self-assured, but her irregular breathing betrays her anxiety.

"If he tries anything with her," I growl menacingly.

Ramirez shakes her head. "Let's avoid that scenario. You made the right decision in approaching me. Adrian won't be able to use his Russian connections to evade consequences this time... will he?"

"Viktor Barinov won't interfere when you prosecute my cousin," I assert grimly.

"I'm not going to ask what you mean by that."

"That's undoubtedly for the best."

Sienna sits at a corner table, fully visible to the cameras. Despite the grainy quality of the feed and her distance from the lens, her beauty remains striking.

"Adrian confirmed his attendance?" Ramirez questions.

"You saw the text. He said he'll be here."

We wait for what feels like forever. All I want is to storm the restaurant and trade places with Sienna. My protective instinct has never been stronger, yet pride mingles with concern. She's overcoming her fear, rising magnificently to the challenge. Even she fails to see her extraordinary fortitude.

"Here we go," Ramirez announces.

Adrian struts across the restaurant with his usual bravado. He reaches Sienna, snorting derisively. "You could at least pretend to be happy to see me, doll. I'm doing you a favor—helping you put away the man who stole your mother from you."

"Are you planning to sit, or just stand there trying to act tough?"

Ramirez grins at me. "Tough gal."

"The toughest," I affirm proudly.

Adrian laughs harshly, taking a seat and adjusting his jacket.

"Is that gun supposed to scare me?" Sienna challenges.

I clench my fists, battling the impulse to rush out there and stop Adrian before he endangers my woman.

"We have agents positioned throughout the restaurant," Ramirez reminds me. "If he tries anything, we'll intervene." She snaps her fingers for emphasis.

"I must admit, doll, it's fascinating watching you attempt bravado after your performance the other night."

"I have what you want," Sienna retorts.

"Give it here, then."

"Not until you clear something up."

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"Perhaps I'll simply take it from you. Where is it—in your pocket? Did you bring a bag?"

"I'll create a scene if you try anything. You might get away. Or you might not. Are you willing to gamble?"

I smile maniacally. She consistently surprises me.

Noticing Ramirez watching me, I suppress my expression. I can't compromise my reputation for stoic severity.

"Whatever it is, spit it out," Adrian snaps.

"Before you showed me the police report, I asked Nico to investigate my mother's death. He told me something interesting. He told me you were the one who executed her. He explained the Russians ordered it. The cops even had you and Viktor Barinov on tape, but mysteriously, the evidence vanished, and the cop suddenly developed collective amnesia... well, almost all."

"Someone's been telling tales, then," Adrian muses.

"Is it true?" Sienna demands.

"That's not how this works, sweetheart," Adrian says sarcastically.

I tremble with the effort of holding myself back. The image of Adrian daring to touch my woman's throat haunts me relentlessly.



Sienna reaches beneath the table, presumably into her handbag, extracting the recording device. She holds it on her side of the table. "Same deal—if you take this, I scream. This recording contains Nico confessing to numerous crimes. Gianna, too. You could send them both to federal prison. But I need the truth. Or I'll die before I let you have this."

"You foolish slut," Adrian snarls. "What good will the truth do you now? What do you think will happen if I tell you the truth? It changes nothing. The past is the past. Soon, this city will belong to us."

"To you and Viktor."

"He deserves Dallas far more than my cousin ever did. Nico's stuck in the past. He's too soft. He believes in running the mob like a legit business. But this isn't business. It's our private corner of hell."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Look at me, Sienna Vale," Adrian says, weaponizing her full name. "I know who you are. I know where you live. Look into my eyes."

"I'm looking."

"If you don't give me that device, I'm going to kill you. I don't care. I'll do it here and skip town if I have to. Do you think I'm lying?"

"You'll have to kill me and take it if you don't give me the truth."

"Your mother was an inconsequential part of the fucking story," Adrian erupts. "She was nothing—a woman who happened to be present while I did what countless others lacked the courage to do. I killed your worthless mother, and I'll kill you too if you

don't give me that. Now!"

"That's enough," Ramirez declares, reaching for her radio. "Officers—grab him. Don't let him go for his gun."

Suddenly, three men from the table next to Sienna's stand and converge on Adrian. He roars and reaches for his gun, but they're on him quickly, tackling him and securing his arms behind his back. They drag him from the restaurant.

I vault from the van and sprint across the street. The officers and Adrian pass me in the hallway. Adrian bellows, "Viktor won't let you get away with this!"

I lunge at him, wrap my hand around his throat, and slam him against the wall. The officers back off, seemingly reluctant to get in the way. I hoist Adrian off his feet, constricting his slender neck, feeling the delicate muscles there ready to snap with just the right amount of pressure.

"If it were my decision, I'd squeeze until you had no breath left, cousin. But someone more compassionate and intelligent than me wants you to face justice."

"Nico," Ramirez calls, rushing into the lobby.

A moment later, Sienna appears. "Let him go, Nico," she urges.

"Like I said, cousin, fortune favors you."

When I release my grip, he collapses, gasping and staring up at me like a coward he is. I recall childhood moments—the laughter—mentally compartmentalizing those memories and sealing them away.

"Take him away," I command.

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The cops look at me as if they're debating not following my orders. Though I've cultivated a good relationship with law enforcement since initiating city improvements, they don't work for me.

"Do what he says," Ramirez directs them.

They drag him toward the exit.

"I'm shocked he's not ranting and raving," Sienna remarks.

"That might have something to do with me crushing his throat for daring to touch you, piccola pittrice."

I pull her into my arms. She hugs me tightly.

"I'm so proud of you," I say, kissing her forehead.

I'm trying to be respectful in front of Ramirez and her colleagues, but when my perfect painter presses her lips against mine, propriety evaporates. She kisses me passionately, then laughs.

"Is something funny?"

"After all this time, I got justice for my mother. And I did it during a police sting. It hardly feels real."

"It's entirely real, beautiful," I assure her. "You did it. But I need to do the next phase

alone."

"The next phase?"

I give her a meaningful look. We've discussed this privately: my intention to eliminate Viktor Barinov. We can't address it now while Sienna is still wired. Ramirez may sense my plans regarding Viktor, but an explicit declaration would be reckless.

"No," Sienna insists. "I want to be there. I want to finish this. Together."

## ChapterTwenty-Six

Sienna

When I first met Nico, I never would have believed him capable of being nervous. Yet now, the morning after the sting operation and questioning with Adrian, he shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

"Are you alright?" I inquire.

He takes my hand, squeezing it reassuringly. I love when he does that—the supportiveness, the warmth, the sense of solidarity. "You know what I'm thinking."

"You want me to stay here?"

"You know I do. I could make you stay behind."

"Before this ends, I need to look him in the eye. I want him to realize he didn't get away with killing my mom. Just give me that, please, then I'll leave. Then you... can do what's necessary."

"I'm going to execute him, piccola pittrice, for what he did to you and for what he's done to so many others. He's a bad man, and I should've taken him out long ago."

"You wanted to keep the city safe and prevent a war."

"Yes, and now Viktor has miscalculated badly. Before, the best way to prevent another war was to work with him... Now, the most effective way is putting a bullet through his skull."

A shiver cascades through me. Fear? Anticipation? Perhaps it's a combination of the two. I adjust the bulletproof vest Nico insisted I wear – he's similarly protected beneath his tailored suit.

I look across the street at the Cattle and Vine, watching as a couple emerges into the crystalline morning sunlight.

"Want me to call Rachael for an update?"

"Excellent idea," he says.

I call my old employer. "Hey, hon."

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"Hey – how's the situation looking inside?"

"Just one more table, then the only people in the house are Russians."

"Perfect. The final table. Do they look like they're going to be there for a while?"

"They're almost done with their desserts."

"Great."

"Great?" Rachael echoes incredulously. "One minute I'm your boss, yelling at you like, let's face it, the most unhinged woman this side of Fort Worth. The next you're calling me up saying you'll pay me a month's wages if I keep tabs on the restaurant and empty the place when 'it's time' – whatever that means."

"The less you know, the better," I explain. "But rest assured, you're doing a good thing. I guarantee it. Keep me posted."

"Consider it done, hon."

I disconnect. "Almost time."

"This was an excellent idea," Nico declares with unmistakable pride. "He would have detected any of my men surveilling him, but the Vine's staff isn't on his radar."

"The Vine is supposed to be neutral territory, right?" I contemplate aloud. "Will there be repercussions from this? What – why are you looking at me with that expression?"

"You're the most remarkably adaptable woman I've ever met. Mere weeks ago, you had no knowledge of organized crime, yet now you're speaking like a seasoned mafia queen."

"I wouldn't go that far."

He caresses my cheek with that disarming tenderness that consistently catches me off guard. "It's not. I know I keep saying it, but I'm genuinely proud of you. Your mother would be too."

Tears well in my eyes as I lean into his kiss. It's passionate, explosive, igniting a hunger within me that I struggle to ignore. "Thank you," I whisper against his lips.

"You're incredible, Sienna," he murmurs. "Before you entered my life, I thought myself incapable of forming genuine connections. I had resigned myself to being a cold, distant, grump forever."

"I like your grumpy face. Even if we fall..." In love. I stop myself. Too far, too fast... isn't it? "For each other, I still want to see that grumpy face occasionally. If only for artistic inspiration."

He smirks. "Agreed."

"And regarding my question earlier..."

He hesitates before nodding. "Will there be consequences from using the Vine?" He shakes his head, his demeanor becoming savage. "They forfeited any claim to decency the moment they trapped you in that bathroom within supposedly neutral territory. All bets are off now."

He gently smooths my hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear. Warm sensations

cascade throughout my body. "I'm profoundly grateful our paths crossed, Vignette."

"Me too," I respond sincerely.

"Are you sure? You had a normal life before I came along. Challenging, marked by tragedy and tribulations, but fundamentally normal. Civilian."

"I've experienced more during these few weeks with you – has it really only been a few weeks? – than throughout the last four years. You've awakened things inside me... aspects I never recognized existed."

I stop when I hear how emotional I'm getting. "Maybe we should save this conversation for later... when this is all over. When we can finally exhale."

As if on cue, additional patrons exit the Vine. My phone trills.

"Hon, it's me," Rachael announces, her breathing accelerated. "You want staff evacuated through the back exit, right?"

"Everyone," I confirm. "Make sure they're safe."

"As you should be," Nico growls when I end the call.

"Two people are responsible for my mom's death. I refuse to sit here passively while you do what needs to be done."



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He lowers his gaze. "Perhaps I don't want you to see me like that. Murderous. Savage. Untamed."

"If you're afraid I'm going to stop..." Again, that elusive L-word surfaces impossibly. "Caring about you because you're taking drastic measures against the man who ruined my life, you're profoundly mistaken. He deserves whatever is waiting for him."

"There's no argument there. He's a trafficker, a sadist, an irredeemable man."

"Then let's go."

We climb from the car together and cross the street. Simultaneously, dozens of suited men emerge from nearby vehicles and fall in behind us. Occasionally, I forget how powerful Nico is, but when his men form an army behind us, his power becomes undeniable.

"Stay behind me at all times," he instructs.

"Just like the first time you saved me here."

He laughs savagely before retrieving his gun from its holster. He advances into the restaurant, gun raised. I follow closely, maintaining my position behind him. The bulletproof vest provides less reassurance than I previously thought. A palpable atmosphere of impending violence permeates the air as his men file into the room, weapons drawn.

Viktor glances up, a thin smile distorting his features. Two additional men sit at his

table... one of whom, I realize, is the man who mocked me that first time. Anya is present as well, sporting a fresh bruise on her cheek. She appears smaller compared to her presence at the ball, less imposing. I realize I may have misjudged her.

"I must be mistaken," Viktor remarks. "I was under the impression this ground was neutral territory."

"You forfeited that privilege when you attempted to use my cousin against me, you bastard," Nico snarls, then gestures broadly. "Men – confiscate their weapons."

Nico's men approach the table, weapons trained. They strip the three Russian men of various knives and firearms before positioning them against the wall. Anya remains seated, regarding her father with the aura of a beaten puppy. Something in the resentment etched across her features suggests her father gave her that bruise.

"There's someone important who has something to say before this ends," Nico announces, aiming his words directly at Viktor. "Any movement, sound, or even a breath I find suspicious – and your end will be excruciating." He shifts slightly, creating space for me.

I glare at Viktor. "You likely don't even remember me." His vacant expression confirms my suspicion. "And you certainly don't remember my mother. But you killed her, Viktor Barinov. You ordered Adrian to attack someone in public... resulting in the death of the woman I cherished above all else, the woman who raised me." I suppress a sob. "There's no excuse for what you did. To my mother, this city, and by the look of it, your own daughter."

"Are you done, girl?" Viktor inquires dismissively.

"I didn't expect remorse given your character."

"Any last words, Viktor?" Nico demands.

"Anya... I've always loved you. I merely wanted what was best for you. You understand what must be done, sweet child."

"If you've given her instructions to carry out after your death, rest assured, they'll prove futile. This city doesn't belong to the Russians. Not entirely. Not even marginally."

"Who said anything about after my death? Anya!"

Suddenly, Anya lets out a cry and springs to her feet. She's been hiding a gun beneath the table, aiming directly at me – not at Nico or his men, but specifically at me.

"Good," Viktor says. "Yes – he won't let anything happen to her. Don't move, Nico." His tone darkens when Nico tries to shield me. "Or my daughter will splatter her brains across the floor."

"Anya, don't do anything foolish," Nico warns. "This won't end well for you."

"Ignore him," Viktor snaps. "Honorable Nico would never hurt a woman. Even if you put down his dog, he wouldn't retaliate against you."

Fear threatens to overwhelm me, but a stronger emotion prevails. Rage. First, this monster manipulated another to take my mother's life. Now he's exploiting his own daughter to extricate himself from the consequences of his actions.

"Who gave you that bruise, Anya?" I challenge. "I suspect your father. I think he's hit you before and will do it again. In fact, I think Nico isn't just doing the world a favor by getting rid of him. He's doing you a favor."

"Remember what you said to me at the party, Anya," Nico interjects. "You recognize your father isn't a good man. You know justice demands this outcome."

"Don't listen to him," Viktor growls.

"I've dreamed of this," Anya whispers.

"Hear that?" Viktor gloats. "She's fantasized about putting you down, Nico."

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"I've dreamed of the Italians taking over the city. I've dreamed of being more your prop, your ornament. I've dreamed of ending your abuse."

"With your father done, succession falls to you," Nico states. "I know you want to keep this city safe. You were never going to be my companion – my heart belongs exclusively to one woman. But as the Bratva queen, you could?—"

Anya unleashes a scream unlike anything I've heard. It tears through the air like a canvas shredding beneath a blade – not merely deafening, but multidimensional, as if layered repeatedly, each stroke representing another year of suppressed anguish. If sound could bleed, this would leave crimson streaks.

"Enough!" she exclaims, glaring at her father. "I refuse to hear anymore. I refuse to listen to your vicious lies. You've done unspeakable atrocities, Father... against those girls in the warehouses, the ones you brought home and forced me to witness as you, as you..."

"Now, Anya, compose yourself?—"

"No!"

She redirects her aim toward her father.

Instantaneously, Nico shields me behind him as additional men encircle us protectively.

"I'm not your plaything anymore."

My ears ring with the gunshot's reverberations. Viktor's body jerks as the bullet throws his head back. He slides down the wall, leaving a crimson trail behind.

Anya turns toward us, trembling violently. Deliberately, she lowers her weapon. "I'll never be happy again," she says tragically.

I push past Nico, cross the room, and extend my arms toward her. She looks at me with astonishment, seemingly bewildered by a stranger's compassion. Yet this experience has taught me that "stranger" doesn't always mean a lot.

After a momentary hesitation, she collapses into my arms like a lost little girl, erupting into uncontrollable sobs.

"It's over now," I whisper consolingly. "Whatever he did to you, it's over now. You're safe."

Two additional gunshots reverberate, followed by two thuds as the remaining men crumple to the floor, and then silence descends.

The city is safe.

My mother's killers have faced ultimate justice.

"Clean this mess up," Nico commands. "I'm taking my woman home."

ChapterTwenty-Seven

Nico

Three Weeks Later

"If you'd told me when I was in college, that one day I'd sit around a table with the woman of my dreams, my mother, and a former romantic prospect to strategize this city's security, I would have outright laughed you off."

Mother's smile radiates her characteristic calculating brilliance. We're gathered on my high-rise apartment's balcony... our apartment, I should clarify, not merely because Sienna has relocated here. Her artistic creations adorn every wall.

"Three formidable women to one man – the ratio seems impeccable." Mother adopts a serious expression as she addresses Anya. "In all sincerity, dear, you're demonstrating exceptional leadership."

"With the Italians' backing, they have no choice but to follow my orders. People want money, not war. It's going to take some time for the old guard to adjust to the new regime, but it will happen."

"Anyone determined to continue trafficking women or distributing drugs will meet their predecessor's fate."

"Nico," my woman interjects, unquestionably the city's most captivating woman, her hair elegantly styled following her recent salon appointment. As weeks have progressed, she's embraced her position in this transformed reality with increasing confidence. "Anya doesn't need such explicit reminders."

"Please, Sienna," Anya says. "I don't need you to protect me. I'm just as tough as you are."

"All three of you are tough, capable women," I say. "But Anya, Sienna was only trying to help."

"She's right." Sienna smiles tightly at me. "She's the queen of the Bratva. She

doesn't need my help."



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“You already helped me,” Anya replies. “That day at the Vine, what you said to me – it was like you looked into my soul. Like you saw my entire history in a single moment. It mattered.”

“She has that ability,” Mother says with a clear note of pride in her voice. “It’s the artist in her.”

“Guilty as charged,” Sienna says, with a big smile that lights up my heart, a sentiment that would’ve seemed impossible before my piccola pittrice came along.

“How long until the grand opening?” Anya asks. “Gianna has told me all about your work. I hear you’re almost at the end.”

“Soon,” Gianna says. “I’ve never met anyone who could work so fast while maintaining such a high quality of work. Yes, soon, the dream that started this entire adventure will come true. In the meantime, Anya, we should take the hint and make ourselves scarce.”

I chuckle. “What hint?”

Mother waves a hand. “You’ve been glaring at me ever since we sat down. It’s clear you want nothing more than to spend time with your lady.”

I roll my eyes, but then I notice that Sienna is smirking at me. “You too, huh, Vignette?”

“You have had a certain... smolder going on ever since Anya and Gianna arrived.”

“Okay, ladies, perhaps there is a savage part of me that wants to spend every second of every day with my woman. Is that such a bad thing?”

“Come on, Anya.” Mother touches her arm. “Let’s leave the lovebirds to do... whatever it is lovebirds do.”

“I’ll walk you out.”

I lead Anya and my mother through my apartment, hugging my mother and then offering Anya my hand. She takes it firmly. These past three weeks of meetings to discuss city logistics and outlawing the darkness have consistently proven my assessment of Anya wrong.

Once they’ve gone, I walk through my apartment, musing over the past month. Adrian is going to be in federal prison for the rest of his life. Viktor and his men lie in an unmarked grave. The Bratva have been forced to accept Anya’s rule... or face the full fury of the mob.

I stop in the living room, watching as my woman leans against the balcony railing and looks down at Dallas. She’s wearing a dress that outlines her curvy shape as it rests against her perfection.

The best part about the past three weeks has been spending time with her. We’ve gone on dates – mini golf, dinners, theater trips – and I’ve painted the canvas of her body countless times with my lust.

I haven’t wanted to push her too fast, but as I watch her, I almost roar, “I love you.” It’s been over a month since we met. I don’t care if some might think that’s too short a time. It’s the truth, and I’m done tiptoeing.

I walk onto the balcony. “Getting inspiration?”

“The city looks so small from up here, like a series of tiny portraits all stitched together. It looks more like canvas than reality.” She laughs gently. “I’m not even sure what I mean by that, but you can’t blame a girl for feeling artistic in these circumstances.”

“If you didn’t feel artistic, I’d be worried.” I wrap my arms around her from behind. She moans gently and shifts her body against mine. Leaning down, I whisper in her ear, “I love you, Sienna.”

She gasps, turns to me, her eyes glittering. “I love you, too,” she says, as if it’s obvious.

“I’ve loved you for weeks.”

She playfully slaps my chest. “Then why did you wait so long to tell me?”

“We’ve got the rest of our lives. What’s the rush? And I didn’t want to push you. I wanted to know you truly felt how you seemed, to me, to feel.”

“Newsflash. I’ve loved you for weeks, too.”

“Are you sure you don’t just love to paint me?” I tease.

Three times, once per week, she has painted or sketched me. Not for Mother’s project, either. “This is just for me,” is all she says.

“Can’t I love both?” she counters.

I kiss her with passion, gripping her hips. I’ll never get tired of sinking my touch into her curvy, perfect body. She moans when I push my throbbing erection against her.

“We’re trying something new.” She gasps. “Follow me.”

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“Yes, ma’am.”

She grins. “Don’t get sarcastic. I mean it. For the next little while... I’m the Don, understand?”

She takes my hand and leads me through the apartment, into our bedroom. When she pushes me onto the bed, I fall back, game as game can be. When she straddles me, my length aches and grows hard, my head swimming with desire.

She takes my hands and guides them over my head, grinding her crotch against mine, the sensation making my lust swell.

“Think of all the times you’ve spanked me, tortured me, owned me, Nico. Hmm? Now, it’s time for payback.”

“If this is how revenge tastes, I could get used to it.”

She grinds against me some more, then leans down and kisses me hard. I grip her luscious ass, but then she takes my wrists, guiding them back over my head.

“How foolish of me, I apologize,” I say ironically.

She pouts. “Don’t even think about making a joke about this.”

“Then maybe you should stop looking like you’re about to laugh.”

“Okay, I’ll admit, this does feel alittleweird.”

“You’re saying you want me to be in control? I’m your muse on the canvas – and you’re my muse in the sheets. Go on, Vignette, call me cheesy.”

“I can’t. I love you too much.”

“I love you more,” I growl, sitting up and wrapping my arms around her. I spin her around so that I’m lying atop her. I grind her needy sex through our clothes, shifting my hips so that she can feel me through the fabric.

She moans. “Impossible.”

That sends me over the edge. I grow like an animal, because that’s what my woman turns me into. I grip her pants and pull them down roughly, her underwear following suit. She gasps, staring at me with that expression I love so much.

She looks excited, curious... and just a tiny bit like she’s about to step on a rollercoaster. It’s not scared. But there’s something in her eyes that screams out for her Don.

When I see her naked sex, I lose it. Every single time, it’s the same.

“I’ll never tire of your body,” I growl, kneeling at the edge of the bed and pulling her toward me. She wriggles down the sheets. “I could spend hours kissing your perfect pussy, licking your luscious lips and lavishing your inflamed clit with attention. And your ass... fuck.”

I press my hands down on the round globes of her ass as I bring my mouth to her center. She grips my head and pushes me harder against her slickness.

“I’m the Don, remember?” she moans, a wicked smirk on her lips when I look up at her.

I'm not complaining. She grinds her sex against my face, owning her pleasure, chasing it. I squeeze her curves, taking possession of her sweet roundness as I lick and kiss and suck her sex. I devour her clit, pushing my tongue against it.

I could hear the sound of her releasing moans countless times and never grow bored. I could experience the sensation of her horny hole gushing with her juices and still want a taste of her over and over.

She grips my head with both her hands as she comes. Once her orgasm has rocked her body and rocked my world, she says, "Maybe I could get used to this 'being in charge' thing after all."

I tear off my pants and then lie on the bed. My manhood springs up solidly, throbbing with tension as it always does for my woman. "Prove it."

She climbs on top of me, propping her hands against my chest. "Grab your dick. Hold it in place for me."

"Yes, ma'am."

Her smile is electric. It makes me feel drunk, like the luckiest man alive.

When she slides down onto my length, I let out a shuddering moan. She sinks deeper, guiding her tight warmth to my base. Her body shudders. There's something sexy about us both being half-dressed. We can't wait until we're completely naked. We're too obsessed.

"Don't even think about telling me not to touch your sweet, voluptuous ass," I growl as I guide my hands to her roundness.

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She bucks up and down, making my length sear with unstoppable heat with each frantic motion. I move in time with her, up and down, matching her pace.

I know her body now. Not as well as she knows her pencils, but I'm getting there. As we give ourselves fully to the pleasure, I feel the tell-tell flutters of her approaching climax. Her walls massage my cock, coaxing my seed from me. Pleasure rushes through me as I thrust upward, driving into her perfection.

She digs her fingers into my chest, her mouth opening in a cry of near release. Unlike our first time, she doesn't have to be quiet. She bounces faster and harder, making my manhood feel like it's on fire with blazing hunger.

Her mouth has contorted into a shape of pleasure, her eyelids fluttering. I stare in awe, in appreciation, in disbelief that this woman belongs to me. I smooth my hands from her ass to her back, then sit up so we're rocking together, our bodies pressed close.

"I." She gasps. "Love." Her moans are addictive. "You."

"I—love—argh..."

I roar as I feel my lust rushing up my shaft, gathering at my tip in an eruption of need. She comes at the same time, the walls of her pussy pulsing around my dick, massaging my release from me.

I kiss her firmly on the lips. In the final moments of our shared pleasure, we fuse. And we do the impossible – we fall deeper in love.



When we're done, I fall onto the bed, guiding her with me. She nestles into my side and rests her cheek against my chest. "I love listening to your heartbeat after," she murmurs. "It's like a song."

I smooth my hand through her hair. "I love how poetic you get after."

"I can't help it. I just feel so warm and fuzzy."

"You know, Vignette, we haven't used a condom one single time."

She looks up at me with meaning in her eyes. "I know, and I'm completely fine with that."

## ChapterTwenty-Eight

Sienna

One Month Later

"This feels surreal," I murmur, clutching onto Nico's firm arm as we walk around the gallery together. "That's small-s surreal, not capital S Surreal like the art style."

"Speaking of surrealism..."

Nico stops in front of a painting of his mother. It's the piece of her in the library, the books showing snippets of her, a few of them with their pages open, showing small vignettes of her life. I smile... I can't even think of the word vignette anymore without thinking of Nico's nickname for me.

"You're so talented," Nico says, kissing me on the cheek. "Look at the detail in this piece. All these people: all here to see your talent."

He smooths his hand over my shoulder, turning me so that I can take in the room.

I never thought I'd see my art hanging somewhere like this: framed, lit just right, surrounded by people sipping wine that costs more than the rent on my old apartment. Gianna made sure everything looked perfect. I keep waiting for someone to point and say I don't belong. But that's not the case at all. They smile. They ask questions. They say things like 'moving' and 'striking' and 'you're so young'.

For the first time, I'm not faking it.

"It's amazing," I whisper.

"You're the amazing one," Nico says. "Mother gave you a nudge... but it's your talent that got you here."

"It was a sketch I drew of a man I thought I'd never have," I say. "It was a dream... and now it's come true. I feel drunk. I've only had one glass of champagne!"

He smiles, but there's an almost panicked look in his eyes. It's been there ever since we climbed into the limousine earlier this evening.

"Are you sure everything's okay?"

"Tonight's a big night."

"I know, but why are you nervous?"

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“Piccola pittrice, who said I was nervous?”

“Newsflash. I’ve spent long enough studying you to know when you’re nervous.”

Gianna glides into the center of the room, delicately tapping a spoon against her champagne glass. The crowd gradually quiets, all eyes turning toward her. She radiates elegance, exuding her characteristic sophistication.

"Excuse me," Nico murmurs, releasing my hand.

I'm about to question his departure when Gianna launches into her speech.

"Many of you know the serendipitous tale that led me to the extraordinarily gifted Sienna Vale. She was working as a waitress. Now, there is nothing demeaning about that profession, but it woefully underutilized Sienna's remarkable talents. When her notebook tumbled from her apron and I glimpsed the masterpiece she had sketched, the character and humanity captured in such a seemingly simple piece of art, I recognized immediately that I had discovered a woman who truly embodied the phrase 'diamond in the rough'. As all of you have now witnessed, Sienna is indeed a diamond."

She looks at me with a maternal warmth, and I savor every moment, despite Nico's mysterious disappearance. "All of you have been captivated and mesmerized by her work. Would it astonish you to learn that these masterpieces were created over a mere two and a half months?"

When collective gasps ripple through the room and all eyes shift to me, I feel spotlit.

But unlike previous moments in my life – at school, at my dead-end jobs – this attention feels validating.

"You are majestic, my sweet girl," Gianna declares. "You are sublime. You are... and forgive me if I'm causing you to blush, but I mean this with absolute sincerity. You are a generational talent."

As applause erupts, instead of shrinking away or instinctively deflecting the praise, I offer a graceful bow.

"My woman moves fast." Nico's voice booms throughout the room, commanding everyone's attention. The crowd parts as he strides toward me, something different in his demeanor.

His nervousness has vanished, replaced by unwavering determination.

"It only took one date for me to recognize she was extraordinary," he continues. "It only took one date, my perfect Vignette, to realize I craved a connection with you deeper than I believed possible for a man like me. You are the most talented, compassionate, wittiest, most enchanting, breathtakingly beautiful woman I have ever encountered. In two short months, you've completely changed my world. You've given me a fresh perspective. You've awakened me to life itself."

He crosses the room deliberately, taking my hands in his.

"That's why I wanted this moment to happen here, surrounded by your art, because it breathes life into me, too. When I gaze upon your paintings, I witness your passion, your dedication. I see... you. I love you, Sienna. I need you. When we're apart, I yearn for you, every moment of every day. You're my angel, my muse. You're my everything."

When he drops to one knee, another collective gasp fills the room. Realization finally dawns on me. Tears well in my eyes, blurring the canvas of my world. He reaches into his jacket pocket and extracts a ring box.

He opens it, allowing me a precious moment to admire the ring. It's exquisite... perfectly suited to me. His thoughtfulness is evident in every detail.

A sapphire of rose and dark orange, creating a painterly red, with an asymmetrical swirl in the setting reminiscent of a brushstroke or a graphite line.

"Sienna Vale," he says, "will you marry me?"

For an extended moment, I stare at him, acutely aware of the world spinning beneath my feet. I etch this moment into my memory, determined to preserve every line, every nuance, every shade.

"Yes," I exclaim, excitement finally bubbling out of me.

His face lights up with joy, igniting my own happiness. He slips the ring onto my finger. Around us, the crowd erupts in celebration. Springing to his feet, he pulls me into a passionate kiss. It's the most profound moment of the night, which speaks volumes, considering one of my greatest dreams has come true tonight.

"I've never seen you smile like this before," I say. "It's exactly as Gianna described when we first met. You've got that boyish, excited glint in your eye... magnified a thousandfold."

"That's because I've never experienced such profound happiness before."

He kisses me again.

## Epilogue

Nico

Two Weeks Later

I stand at my office window, casually tossing a baseball between my hands, surveying the city below with a contented smile. I acknowledge that circumstances may eventually necessitate unleashing the Don's darkness within me. But not today. Not now.

Life is better than good. It's sublime. Long, languorous Sunday mornings entwined with my woman, watching her immerse herself in project after project, witnessing her flourish as she diligently establishes her own gallery.

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The city is at peace. The Russians, under Anya's rule, maintain order. Should that change, I'll unleash my savage nature.

But not now. Not today.

I return home to discover Sienna standing in the hallway, clad in a white shirt adorned with graphite smudges... and nothing else. Her legs tantalize me, as do the unfastened top buttons, revealing a tempting glimpse of her cleavage. Yet her expression betrays something profound weighing on her mind.

"Evening, beautiful," I greet her, brushing my lips against her cheek.

"Will you come with me?"

"That sounds ominous."

"No, but – it is life-altering."

"Now you've truly piqued my curiosity."

She guides me into the living room, which frequently serves as her sanctuary. Though she has her own studio, she cherishes working from home, appreciating how light cascades through my towering windows.

She gestures toward the easel. "I want you to flip through these images. Everything will make sense then."

I approach the easel and turn the first blank page, revealing a sketch of the Cattle and Vine. Mother and I sit at the table. She's captured me in a somber mood, my eyes nearly obsidian.

The next sketch depicts us at putt-putt, with a nascent light in my eyes... and in hers. The graphite rendition of my woman gazes at me with unmistakable adoration.

The next portrays us in the car, my hand between her thighs.

She's sketched herself sketching me. She's sketched us intertwined in bed. She's sketched the restaurant confrontation where I gripped Adrian by the throat, emphasizing her terror that I might snap his neck and face imprisonment.

She's sketched us at Mother's exhibition, followed by our date the subsequent week, and our passionate encounter on the balcony several nights ago.

Finally, the last sketch shows her standing with a small object in her hands. I lean in closer to examine the cylindrical item. It looks like it has writing on it..

We're pregnant!

"I took some artistic liberties," she explains from behind me. "They don't actually say 'We're pregnant' but?—"

I turn, enveloping her in my arms, eliciting delighted giggles. "When did you find out?" I inquire.

"Earlier today. I've been sketching like a mad woman. I wanted this moment to be special."

"Mission accomplished."



"Now that we've got the cheesy part out of the way, I can jump your bones, right?"

I smirk. "I love you."

She launches herself at me, wrapping her legs around my waist. I carry her to the couch and gently lay her down. "A baby," I whisper.

"I know," she says. "A family, a future, a life together. Are you prepared, Don Moretti?"

"I've been ready for months," I confess, claiming her with a passionate kiss.

Epilogue

Sienna

Eight Years Later

"I love the way Angelo's forehead furrows when he concentrates," I murmur as we stand on the sidelines, watching Angelo align his putt-putt shot. I squeeze my husband's arm affectionately. "He reminds me of you."

*Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:13 am*

Nico smiles down at me, his silver hair glistening in the sunlight, his eyes considerably lighter than when we first met. He remains as captivating as ever, his muscles prominently defined beneath his loose white shirt.

On my other side, Isola squeezes my hand, her voice a hushed whisper. "Is he going to beat Daddy's record, Mommy?"

"He certainly has a chance," I reply.

"Is Daddy going to be mad?" Isola teases.

Nico grins. "I'll be immensely proud, little diva, just as I'm proud of you."

Isola beams radiantly. She treasures her father's endearment, "little diva." In truth, she adores everything about him—a quintessential daddy's girl—and I wouldn't want it any other way. Nearby, Gianna cradles Raffi in her arms, gently rocking him. No one possesses her grandmotherly magic for soothing our youngest's tantrums.

Angelo sinks the ball, then turns to us with his father's unmistakable smile. "One more hole, Dad, then it'll be my picture hanging in the lobby."

"Good luck, son."

We follow him to the final hole.

"I hope he makes it," Nico whispers. "It would mean everything to him. Do you remember the first time we brought him? Barely out of diapers, yet instantly

captivated by the club. He couldn't take his eyes off it."

"That was truly magical," I murmur.

But that's par for the course, because we've had a magical life. Between Nico's expanded control of the city, his relentless efforts to eliminate its darker elements, and my artistic exhibitions and classes—not to mention the profound joy derived daily from being a wife and mother—we've achieved something remarkable.

When Angelo completes his shot, he spins toward us, bouncing excitedly. "That's it, right, Dad? Mom? That's the record?"

Nico tallies the score on paper with a pencil, exchanging a knowing glance with me that transports me back years to our first visit here. One night, I had stipulated then. But one night transformed into one lifetime.

"You did it!" Nico exclaims.

"Yay, Angie!" Isola dashes onto the course, throwing her arms around her big brother. She takes his hand, thrusting it triumphantly in the air. "Mommy, Daddy, he did it, he really did it!"

THE END