



# Tormented Oath

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

**Description:** She's not my wife. Yet.

But she will be.

And the heir growing in her belly will be my little king.

Fourteen years ago, Ava D'Amato kissed me like I was her future—

Then vanished into the dead of the night.

I searched for her. She haunted me.

But when I stopped hoping, I started building—

An empire carved from Chicago's shadows.

Then her ghost walked into my club with red stilettos and a fake name—

Working for my enemy.

Looking at me like I'm a stranger.

She doesn't think I recognize her.

And she sure as hell doesn't realize what I'll do to keep her this time.

I drag her into my penthouse.

Into my bed.

Into a marriage she never agreed to.

She thinks she's playing me.

Thinks I'm just another "job."

But Ava's about to learn—I'm the king of this city.

And she's mine.

When I find out the truth—why she came back, who sent her...

I'll make them regret it.

And when I learn she's pregnant?

I'll bury every lie she told—right beside my enemy.

**Total Pages (Source):** 114

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

Stefano

## PROLOGUE

The bass thrumsthrough my bones as I watch another nameless dancer slide down the pole at The Silk Rose.

From my shadowed corner of the VIP section, I can see everything—the way the men's eyes follow her movements, the careful distance my security maintains, the precise choreography of my legitimate business running like clockwork.

As it always does.

I take a slow sip of whiskey, letting the burn ground me in the present.

The dancer is skilled, her movements fluid and practiced.

Technically perfect. Yet something's missing.

Not the dance. The person.

They're all missing it—that fire, that defiance, that untamable spirit that made me fall in?—

"Boss." Tomasso materializes at my shoulder, his presence breaking through my thoughts. "They are here."

I glance at the men approaching my table and gesture to one of the booths as I head there. The club is full of people and our meeting requires privacy.

"Another whiskey, sir?"

Maria, one of my newer waitresses, approaches the private table with practiced grace. She's young, probably putting herself through college like much of my staff.

I give her a slight nod, watching how carefully she maintains her professional mask despite the predatory stares from my "business associates".

Viktor Petrov, my least favorite arms dealer, sprawls across the leather booth like he owns the place. His reputation for quality weapons is the only reason I tolerate his presence in my club. That, and the fact that the Bratva's support has been useful during Chicago's recent...territorial redistributions.

"So, we agree then, Rega? Two shipments per month, routed through my contacts in Miami?" Viktor's accent thickens when he drinks, and he's had plenty tonight.

I examine the ice in my glass, letting the silence stretch. "One shipment. Quality over quantity, Viktor. I won't flood my territory with subpar merchandise."

One of Viktor's men—Dmitri, I think—snorts derisively. "Careful, little prince. You're not your father."

The temperature in the room seems to drop ten degrees. Tomasso shifts almost imperceptibly at my shoulder, hand moving toward his jacket. I stop him with a glance.

"You're right," I say softly, deadly calm. "I'm not my father. He would have already had your tongue cut out for the disrespect."

Before Dmitri can respond, Maria returns with my whiskey. As she leans to set it down, Dmitri grabs her wrist, yanking her against him.

"How about some private entertainment, pretty thing?" His meaty hand slides up her thigh.

The girl freezes, terror flashing across her face. I set my glass down with deliberate care.

"Remove your hand."

Dmitri looks at me, drunk and stupid enough to smirk. "Come on, Rega. Learn to share your toys?—"

The crack of his nose breaking under my fist cuts off his words. Before his friends can react, I have him face-down on the table, arm twisted at an angle nature never intended.

The others reach for their weapons but freeze when they hear the distinctive sound of my security team chambering rounds.

"Maria," I say calmly, increasing the pressure on Dmitri's arm until he whimpers. "Are you all right?"

"Y-yes, Mr. Rega." She's shaking but holding it together.

## Page 2

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"Good. Take the rest of the night off. Full pay." I look at Tomasso. "Make sure she gets home safely."

She hurries away, and I return my attention to the squirming man beneath me. "Now then. There seem to be some misconceptions about how things work in my establishment."

I lean down, speaking directly into his ear. "Every person who works for me is under my protection. Touch one of them again, and I'll send you back to Moscow in very small boxes." A slight twist of his arm produces a satisfying scream. "Nod if you understand."

He nods frantically. I release him, straightening my cuffs as he collapses to the floor.

Viktor, wisely silent until now, clears his throat. "Perhaps we should continue this discussion another time?"

"Perhaps." I retake my seat, gesturing for a fresh whiskey. "One shipment per month. Premium quality only. And you'll find new representation for our future meetings." I glance meaningfully at Dmitri, who's being helped to his feet. "I don't enjoy repeating myself."

They scramble out, just as my phone lights up, Angela's ringtone following. A smile tugs at my lips before I can stop it.

"Piccola, isn't it way past your bedtime? You should be resting."

"I'm fourteen, not four." Her laugh, though slightly breathless from her recent treatments, still sounds like sunshine. "And I've been resting all day. Besides, Violeta let me watch that new vampire show everyone's talking about and?—"

"Violeta?" I arch an eyebrow even though she can't see it. "The nurse I specifically instructed to maintain your sleep schedule?"

"Oh, don't be mad at her. You know I can be very persuasive." There's a smile in her voice that reminds me too much of myself. "Must run in the family."

I lean back in my seat, tension easing from my shoulders. "Angela..."

"And I was thinking," she continues, ignoring my warning tone, "Maybe I could come visit the club sometime? Just to see what it's like? I promise I'll stay in your office?—"

"Absolutely not." The words come out sharper than intended.

"But Stefano?—"

"No." I soften my voice. "The club isn't a place for you, tesoro. When you're feeling better, we'll go anywhere else you want."

She's quiet for a moment. "Promise?"

"Have I ever broken a promise to you?"

"No." Another pause. "Will you come see me tomorrow?"

My heart clenches. "Nothing would keep me away."

After we hang up, I gesture to Tomasso. "Get another nurse for Angela. Someone who won't cave to puppy dog eyes and Netflix requests."

"She convinced Violeta to do something that wasn't allowed again?" He tries to hide his amusement and fails.

"Sometimes I think she's more dangerous than all of us put?—"

The words die in my throat. Across the club, a woman moves through the crowd—long raven hair, athletic build, the same confident stride that's haunted my dreams for years.

Ava.

My body moves before my brain can catch up, stalking through the crowd that parts instinctively before me.

I catch her arm, perhaps too roughly, spinning her to face me. But the eyes that meet mine are green, not the deep brown I've been searching for.

Not her.

"Mr. Rega!" The woman's face lights up with recognition, her body language shifting to something more inviting. "I was hoping to run into you tonight. Maybe we could?—"

"No." I release her arm, already turning away, ignoring her disappointed pout.

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I head back to my table, a hollow sensation spreading, my mind already drifting away.

Somewhere in the club, glass shatters. My head snaps toward the sound, my body tensing. But it's just some drunk fool dropping his drink. I catch the eye of Matteo, one of my security team members, and nod once. He moves smoothly through the crowd to handle it.

Everything in my world runs on precision and control now. The wild boy who once promised to chase a girl to the ends of the earth is gone, replaced by a man who rules Chicago's underworld with ruthless efficiency. I've built an empire on the foundations of that control.

But she...she made me want to burn it all down. Even if it's just to see her one more time.

The lights blur as the memory takes hold, dragging me back to that last summer, before everything changed. Before she vanished like smoke through my fingers.

Ava.

Even thinking her name feels dangerous, like playing with fire. Like inviting chaos back into my carefully ordered world.

I welcome the burn.

The memory sweeps over me like a tide, drowning out the pulsing music of the club.



\* \* \*

## FOURTEEN YEARS AGO

The summer air hangs heavy with the scent of jasmine as I pull her deeper into the shadows of the Venere gardens. Ava's hand is small in mine, but there's nothing delicate about her grip. Even at sixteen, she moves like a predator—graceful, dangerous, completely aware of her own power.

"We shouldn't be here, Stefano." Her whisper carries a hint of that smart mouth that drives me crazy. "Your father would kill you if he knew you were sneaking around with a D'Amato."

I back her against the aged stone wall, caging her between my arms. "Let him try."

The moonlight catches in her eyes—dark as sin and twice as tempting. I'd started noticing her that spring, watching the way she'd changed from the scrappy kid who used to follow me around into something wild and beautiful. She is the daughter of con artists, raised on secrets and lies, but God help me, I'd never wanted anything more.

"Always so sure of yourself," she teases, but there's an edge to her tone. Her fingers trace the collar of my shirt, and the simple touch sets my blood on fire. "The great Stefano Rega, third son of the family. What would you do if someone tried to stop you from getting what you want?"

I lean in close enough to feel her breath catch. "Burn the whole fucking world down."

I kiss her and her hands fist in my hair, pulling me closer with a need that matches my own. I've kissed other girls before, but this—this is different. This is gasoline meeting flame.

"I'll follow you anywhere," I promise against her mouth. "To the ends of the earth, Ava. Just say the word."

She goes still in my arms, and something dark flickers across her face. For a moment, she looks older, weighed down by secrets I don't understand. Her hand comes up to cup my cheek, and the tenderness in the gesture makes my chest ache.

"Oh, Stefano." Her smile is sad now, full of shadows. "You should run as far from me and my family as you can. We destroy everything we touch. It's what we do."

I try to argue, to tell her I don't care about our families or their rules, but she silences me with another kiss. This one tastes like a goodbye, though I don't know it yet.

Her body melds against mine, her soft curves and sharp edges fitting perfectly in my arms. When she pulls away, there are tears in her eyes that she won't let fall.

"Promise me something?" she whispers.

"Anything."

"Remember me like this—just like this."

A week later, she disappears. No goodbye, no explanation. The D'Amatos vanish into thin air, leaving nothing but whispers and speculation behind.

I spend months searching, calling in every favor I can, but it's like she never existed.

And soon, my whole world changed, too.

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## Page 4

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The man I've become bears little resemblance to the boy who made passionate promises in a moonlit garden.

But some things haven't changed.

I still protect what's mine. And Ava...Ava has always been mine.

The last PI I hired found nothing but old school records and a death certificate for her parents from seven years ago. Car accident. No foul play. No trace of Ava and her brother.

"Another whiskey, Boss?" Tomasso asks quietly.

I shake my head, exhaustion creeping in. "Clear my schedule for the morning," I tell Tomasso, rising from my seat. "I'll be with Angela."

He nods, already typing on his phone. "The Colombians wanted to meet about the dock situation?—"

"Push it to next week." I straighten my cuffs, a tic I display when I need to focus, to calm down. "Family first."

The irony of those words isn't lost on me. Family first—it's what my father always preached, and what got him killed in the end.

Now here I am, running an empire I never wanted, protecting a sister who deserves better than this life, and chasing the ghost of a girl who was never really mine to

keep.

As I move through the club, my employees nod respectfully, their fear mixed with something like reverence. They know what I'm capable of—they've seen the monster I can be. But they also know I protect my own.

It's a delicate balance; one I've spent years perfecting.

In my office, I pour one final drink, standing at the window that overlooks Chicago's glittering skyline.

This city belongs to me now; every shadow and secret, every deal and death.

I've built something my father never could: an empire run on precision instead of passion, on strategy instead of strength alone.

But for what? Power means nothing when the one thing I truly want remains out of reach.

My reflection stares back at me in the dark glass—expensive suit, carefully styled hair, the mask of control I wear so well. I'm nothing like the wild boy who kissed a girl in a garden and promised her forever. But underneath this polished and controlled veneer, that boy still burns, still hungers, still dreams of dark eyes and defiant smiles.

I pick up a picture of Ava from all those years ago that I've always kept tucked in my wallet. I wonder what she looks like now, all grown.

"I told you I'd follow you to the ends of the earth, Ava," I whisper to the night. "Did you think I was lying?"

The monster in me stirs, awakening from its restless slumber. Soon, very soon, I'll

find her. And this time, I won't let her disappear.

This time, she'll stay exactly where she belongs.

With me.

## CHAPTER ONE

Ava

The first thing that everyone notices about me is that I'm beautiful. This is good, because it helps me to swindle them out of money and information.

I'm a con artist, by birth and trade, so being pretty is a very helpful addendum to my other skills. That doesn't mean, however, that I don't often wish that I was average-looking and from a normal family.

Standing in front of the dingy motel mirror, I line my eyes with practiced precision. Every stroke is deliberate—my makeup is another weapon in my arsenal. My hands don't shake anymore when I prep for a job. They haven't done that since I was seventeen.

Tonight's role: an aspiring exotic dancer.

It's not exactly a stretch. I actually worked as one in Miami last year, though the Fiori family doesn't know that particular detail about my past.

"You better not be bailing on me!" Tony shouts through the bathroom door, his teenage angst bleeding through the cheap wood. My little brother, perpetually pissed at the world. Can't really blame him.

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"I told you; I'm working." I blend the edges of my smoky eye, studying my reflection. Dark eyes, darker hair, and olive skin that marks me as my father's daughter.

His favorite saying echoes in my head. "Use what God gave you, piccola. Beauty opens doors that strength can't break down."

Too bad those doors led him straight to an early grave.

I step out of the bathroom to find Tony sprawled across one of the beds, phone in hand, shoulders tense with his bad attitude. "Working," he scoffs. "You mean lying. Again."

"And you've been drinking. Again." I snatch the poorly hidden flask from beside his leg. "Really?"

His face darkens. "Like you're one to talk about life choices."

The words sting, but I swallow the hurt. He's not wrong.

Here I am, about to con my way into another job, to spy on another mark. But this is the last job—given our situation, I didn't really have a choice. Besides, the Fiori payout for this will be enough to get us out of Chicago, away from all of this.

Montana's waiting—big sky country where no one knows the D'Amato name or what it means.

I check my dance bag again: heels, makeup kit, a tiny recording device disguised as a

compact mirror. Professional enough to look legit, not so professional it seems suspicious.

The Silk Rose is high-end, they'll be looking for class.

"I'm doing this for us," I tell Tony's turned back. "Two weeks, maybe three. Then we're gone. Clean slate."

He doesn't answer, but I see his shoulders drop slightly. Beneath the anger, he's just as tired as I am. Tired of running, of pretending, of carrying our parents' legacy like a curse.

I slip on my coat, hiding the audition outfit underneath. One last glance in the mirror—not at my face this time, but at my eyes. Making sure the mask is firmly in place. The pretty girl with the sad story, looking for a fresh start.

It's not a lie. It's just not the whole truth.

"Don't wait up," I tell Tony, though we both know he will. "And lay off the booze. I mean it."

As I close the door behind me, I mutter a quick prayer—not for the job to go well, but for it to be over quickly. For this to really be the last time.

God, or whoever's listening, hasn't answered any of my prayers yet. But maybe this time will be different.

Maybe this time, I'll finally set us free.

The Silk Rose isn't what I expected from a mob-owned strip club.

No neon signs, or sticky floors, or sleazy bouncers.

Instead, I'm greeted by a polished marble foyer and genuine crystal chandeliers that probably cost more than everything I own.

I press my dance bag closer to my side as I look around the entrance area, my heels clicking against the immaculate floor. Two security guards flank the entrance to the club—both wearing suits that cost more than my monthly rent. The taller one gives me a once-over—a professional assessment, not a leer. Interesting.

"Audition?" he asks.

I nod, letting a hint of my nerves show. Not too much—desperate isn't a good look anywhere, especially here.

"I'm on the list. Ava Milano." The fake surname rolls off my tongue easily. I've been lying about my name for so long, sometimes D'Amato feels like the fake one.

He checks his tablet, then nods toward the door. "Through the lobby, down the hall to your right. Someone will meet you."

Further into the building, the air smells like expensive cologne and something that is subtle and floral. There is no sign of the stale beer and sweat stench I remember from the club in Miami.

The lighting is soft and amber in tone, making everyone look airbrushed and expensive. My trained eye catches at least six security cameras in the lobby alone, their angles providing complete coverage without being obvious about it.

Damn good setup, my father's voice whispers in my head. Always case the escape routes first, piccola.



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I do it automatically now—service entrance through the kitchens, the emergency exit behind the bar, a staff-only door near the stage. Old habits die hard, especially the ones beaten into you since childhood.

A hostess appears, all legs and perfect smiles. "This way, please."

I follow her through the main floor, registering details for my report. The layout is smart—raised VIP sections with privacy screens, strategic blind spots for discrete conversations.

The main stage is a work of art, all gleaming poles and subtle lighting. This place isn't just legitimate on the surface—it's elegant.

Which makes no sense if it's being used to launder money or move product.

The backstage area is just as impressive. Clean, well-lit dressing rooms with good security and actual functioning locks on the doors. Fresh flowers on the makeup stations. A proper dance studio for rehearsals.

"You can change in here," the hostess says, gesturing to an empty dressing room. "The other girls auditioning are in the green room down the hall when you're ready."

I wait until she's gone before letting out a slow breath. Everything about this place feels off. It's too professional, too well-run. The Fiori family was convinced the Rega family was using it as a front, but my instincts are screaming otherwise.

Thinking of the Rega Family brings back memories of ... I quickly shake them away.

It's never wise to think of him for too long.

Focus, I tell myself. Get in, get proof either way, get out. Then... Montana.

But as I unzip my bag, I can't shake the feeling that I'm missing something obvious, something important.

I just hope I figure out what it is before it's too late.

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The green room is exactly what you'd expect from a place like The Silk Rose, with plush velvet couches and vintage theatre posters. Five other girls are scattered around, some stretching, others checking their makeup for the hundredth time.

The nervous energy is thick enough to choke on.

"If you stand in the doorway any longer, you're gonna grow roots."

I turn toward the voice. It's coming from a blonde perched on one of the couches, leg wrapped around her head like it's the most natural position in the world.

Her smile is genuine, which is rare enough in this business to make me curious.

"Kira," she says, unwinding herself with casual grace, "and you're either a professional dancer or an undercover cop." She motions at my legs. "You actually have proper pole shoes."

I can't help but laugh, even though the word "cop" makes my heart race for a moment. "That obvious?"

"Honey, half these girls showed up in plastic stripper heels from Amazon. Please tell me you're auditioning. I need someone else here who knows what they're doing."

I drop my bag and start my warmup stretches, letting my body fall into the familiar routine. "That bad?"

"Last girl nearly concussed herself." Kira demonstrates a dramatically awful spin that makes me wince. "I swear she'd never even seen a pole before today."

As I move through my stretches, I study her in the mirror. She's good—really good—based on her muscle control alone. But there's something else about her, something that doesn't quite fit the usual dancer profile. Her eyes are too sharp, too aware.

"So, what's your story?" she asks, helping me with a back stretch. "You don't seem like the typical 'trying to pay for college' type."

If only you knew. "Just looking for a fresh start." Close enough to the truth to sound genuine. "You?"

"Oh, you know. Small town girl, big city dreams, all that cliché bullshit." She grins, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "The money here is insane. Like, 'maybe I can actually retire before I'm seventy' insane. Plus, the boss is fine as fuck!"

A guy in a sleek suit appears in the doorway. "Ladies. Five minutes till the first audition."

The nervous energy in the room ratchets up about ten notches. Two girls immediately dash to the bathroom. Another looks like she might throw up.

"Deep breaths," Kira says, squeezing my shoulder. "You've got this. Just..." She

hesitates. "I hear that the owner likes to watch the auditions sometimes. Don't let it throw you if he shows up."

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I want to probe further, but she's already moving away, helping one of the nervous girls with her costume.

Familiar pre-performance jitters settle in my stomach, but underneath there's something else—a nagging feeling that I'm walking into something...

No, it can't be. My instructions were clear.

I roll my shoulders, centering myself.

Nerves keep you sharp, keep you alive, my mother's voice whispers.

I check my reflection one last time. The dancer looking back at me is confident, professional, just hungry enough for the job to be believable. Perfect costume, perfect makeup, perfect mask.

"Ava Milano?" The suit is back. "You're up first."

I grab my USB and follow him, smiling softly at the good luck wishes from the other girls. As we walk down the hallway, I run through the steps in my head one last time.

Get the job. Gather intel. Get out.

Simple.

So why does it feel like I'm walking into a trap?

The main floor is different in the harsh overhead lights, all the mystery stripped away, leaving nothing but reality. Just me, the pole, and way too many eyes watching from the shadows.

"Music?" The sound guy barely glances up from his booth.

I hand over my USB, trying to ignore how my heartbeat has synced with the clicking of my heels. "Track three."

The opening notes of my audition piece fill the space. I chose something slow and sultry with a heavy bass line. I've done this routine dozens of times, but something feels different today. The air is heavier, charged with something I can't quite name.

Focus. You're a dancer. This is just another audition.

I start simple, with a slow walk around the pole, letting my body flow with the music. Every movement is calculated, precise.

This isn't about being sexy. It's about control and command of the audience. It's about power.

I learned early on that men don't just want beauty—they want to watch something they can't have.

The first spin comes naturally, my body remembering what my mind wants to forget. Up, around, extend, hold. The cool metal against my skin feels familiar, grounding.

For a moment, I let myself get lost in the pure physicality of the dance, in the way my muscles know exactly what to do.

A figure moves in the VIP section, drawing my attention. Male, expensive suit,

radiating authority. The boss, probably. I adjust my angle slightly, making sure he gets a good view of the next combination.

The music builds, and I move with it. Each trick flows into the next—climbs, spins, inversions. My body tells a story of strength wrapped in silk, of danger masquerading as grace. I can feel the energy in the room shifting, the quality of attention changing from clinical to captivated.

Good. Keep them watching. Keep them?—

The music cuts off mid-beat, leaving me suspended in an inversion. The silence rings in my ears, heavy with possibility.

Heat creeps up my neck as I lower myself gracefully to the ground. This is it—the moment they tell me I'm not what they're looking for. I've been through enough auditions to know what a music cut usually means.

But something's wrong. The energy in the room has shifted again, turning sharp and electric. The figure in the VIP section stands and my heart stutters.

No.

No, no, no.

I know those eyes, that walk, that barely contained power. I've spent years trying to forget them.

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The universe, it seems, has a sick sense of humor.

Because Stefano Rega is walking toward me.

And he's looking at me like he's seen a ghost.

Time stops, or maybe my brain does. Kira words are now registering.

This can't be happening. They were adamant that Stefano had one of his men run the club. A Mafia don can't afford to expose himself so publicly on a regular basis. Why is Stefano willing to do so?

Stefano.

Stefano is here. He's not just the owner of the club, he apparently manages it.

The Fiori family played me perfectly. They omitted this fact because they knew I would definitely be hired once Stefano saw me. And they also knew I would never have agreed to this job if I knew he would actually be at the club.

He's standing in the shadows of the VIP section, and even from here, I can feel the weight of his stare.

Gone is the wild-haired boy who kissed me in moonlit gardens. This Stefano is all sharp edges and controlled power.

Run, every instinct screams. But my feet won't move.



I force myself to breathe, to think. My heart is pounding so hard I'm sure everyone can hear it echoing through the silence that followed my music cut. The Fioris knew exactly what I'd be walking into.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I straighten, willing my hands not to shake. A decade of running cons has taught me how to keep my face neutral, my body language controlled, even when I'm worried or scared. But all that training burns away under his gaze.

From the corner of my eye, I see one of the security guards approaching him, papers in hand. Probably about the next audition.

But Stefano doesn't move. Doesn't speak. He just watches me with an intensity that makes my knees go weak.

I've done enough cons to know when I'm in over my head, and right now I'm drowning.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

## CHAPTERTWO

Stefano

The music cutoff mid-beat at my command, and my world stops turning.

I can't breathe.

The woman on my stage—it can't be her. But I'd recognize that face anywhere. Those eyes have haunted my dreams for a decade. My heart pounds against my ribs like it's

trying to break free.

Ava.

Fucking hell. Ava.

Time stretches like heated glass as she straightens from her final pose, chest rising sharply with each breath, dark hair spilling over bare shoulders.

Why has she resurfaced now? And why the hell is she dancing in my club?

The Ava I knew spent her free time reading Nietzsche and arguing about philosophy, while dreaming of college and a life beyond our families' bloody legacies. She was brilliant, fierce, and destined for more than this.

The rational part of my brain registers the changes in her—the lean muscle that wasn't there at sixteen, the graceful confidence in her movements, the sharp edge of wariness in her stance.

But the rest of me is drowning in recognition, in hunger, in a possessive need so fierce, it threatens to shatter my carefully maintained control.

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“Boss?” Matteo's voice sounds distant. “The next applicant?—”

I move slowly, aware of all eyes in the club tracking my movement. Let them watch. Let them see exactly what happens when Stefano Rega claims something as his own.

“You, stay.” I point at her and then turn to Matteo. “Everyone else...” My voice is barely recognizable. “Get out. Now.”

The room clears instantly, my people trained to recognize the danger in my tone. But I can't tear my eyes from her. A thousand questions war in my mind.

Where has she been? What happened to the sweet girl who blushed at her first kiss? Who taught her to move like sin incarnate?

And most importantly—who the fuck do I have to kill for putting her on this stage?

She hasn't moved at all, her expression carefully neutral, but I know her tells. The slight lift of her chin, the almost imperceptible shift of her weight—she's preparing to run.

Not this time.

I force myself to move slowly, though every instinct screams at me to grab her, to demand answers for ten years of searching. Most of all, I want to claim her, make sure everyone knows she's mine.

But I can't. Not yet. She's like a wild creature. One wrong move, and she'll bolt.

"Ava D'Amato, I must say I'm shocked. A smart girl like you," I drawl, stalking toward the stage, "dancing in a place like this. Times must be hard."

Her eyes meet mine, and the look of recognition I see in her gaze nearly brings me to my knees. Then a flash of something—memory, shock, fear—crosses her face before she masks it. There's also wariness there now, shadows that weren't there at sixteen.

What put those shadows there? Who hurt her?

The need to know claws at my insides.

"A girl's got to eat," she says, not breaking eye contact.

Her voice. Christ. It's deeper than I remember, with an edge that speaks of years lived hard and fast. It shoots straight to my gut, awakening the monster I've spent years trying to cage.

I maintain a careful distance as I circle her, drinking in every detail. The sweet girl who used to read philosophy books under the oak tree is gone, replaced by this magnificent female.

"You were always the clever one," I continue, each word measured. "You could have been anything. A doctor, A lawyer." I pause, letting my next words draw blood. "Instead, you're dancing?"

Her spine stiffens. "You don't know anything about me anymore."

I want to shake her, to demand where she's been, why she left, why she never looked back. The questions burn in my throat, but I swallow them down.

"I know that you look like you're running from something." I move closer, drawn by

the magnetic pull she's always had on me.

Her perfume hits me—expensive, exotic, nothing like the sweet vanilla she used to wear.

"I know it looks like you need money fast."

My eyes trace her body, noting the tension in her muscles, the way she holds herself like a weapon.

"I know you're better than this."

The overhead lights catch the sheen of sweat on her collarbone, and my hands itch to trace the path it takes down her chest. The attraction between us has always been magnetic, inevitable as gravity, but now it's edged with something darker. Something dangerous.

She meets my gaze unflinchingly, and Christ, there she is—my Ava, defiant and fearless, even now. The need to possess her, to never let her out of my sight again, threatens to overwhelm me.

"Are you going to give me the job or not?"

Still, she's challenging me. She's still acting like this is just another audition, like we're strangers, like she hasn't been the ghost haunting my every moment for a decade.

I step closer, claiming her space, pleased when she doesn't retreat. "That depends." I pitch my voice low, intimate. "Are you planning to disappear again?"

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Her breath hitches in the smallest of tells, but the sound sets my blood on fire. She remembers. She has to remember what we were, what we could have been.

"I go where the work takes me."

A lie, but an artful one. I wonder how many men she's convinced with that cool voice and steady stare. How many marks has she taken down with those eyes and that body?

The thought makes the monster in me snarl.

Behind us, the club hums with muted activity—glasses clinking, music from the main floor bleeding through the walls, my people waiting for orders. But here, at this moment, there's only her. Only us.

Mine. She was always meant to be mine.

"The job's yours." I watch surprise flicker across her face. "If you want it."

"Just like that?"

I smile, slow and predatory. "Just like that."

We both know it's not that simple. Nothing between us ever has been.

She searches my face for the trap, and God help me, I want to tell her the truth: there's no escape this time, no running, no vanishing, no more years of endless

searching.

I've found her, and I'll burn down heaven and earth before I let her slip away again.

But for now, I'll play her game. I'll let her think this is just a job, just another club, just another chance encounter.

For now, I'll let her pretend she has a choice.

"Let me show you around." I motion to the wings of the stage, watching her hesitate. "Unless you've changed your mind?"

The challenge works. She moves toward me with a fluid grace that makes my mouth go dry.

The other dancers peer from the shadows, their curiosity warring with shock. They've never seen me like this—personally conducting a tour, focused so intently on one person.

"I never thought I'd find you here," she says, maintaining a careful distance between us. "Running the family business now?"

There's a bite in her words that makes me smile. "Disappointed?"

"Surprised." She glances sideways at me. "If anything, I thought you would be somewhere in Thailand, living in hostels."

Of course—she'd known me as the rebellious third son, the one who dreamed of freedom. The one who'd sworn he'd never be trapped by family obligations.

I notice how her eyes track every exit, every security camera. Always planning

escape routes.

The predator in me wants to block them all, to trap her here, but I force myself to be patient.

"Life had other plans." I guide her down a private corridor, aware of how the air charges between us in the confined space. "My father and brothers' deaths required...adjustments to my priorities." Which is why it took me so long to start looking for her.

She stiffens slightly. "I heard about that. I'm sorry."

The sympathy in her voice sounds genuine, and something in my chest tightens. Even now, even after everything, she can still reach past my defenses with a few soft words.

"The club is legitimate," I say, redirecting. "I take care of my people here. Good security, health insurance, strict rules about client behavior." I pause at the door to my office, turning to face her. "No one touches my dancers without consent."

Her eyes narrow. "And what do you get out of this...benevolence?"

"Loyalty." I step closer, backing her against the wall without touching her. "Trust." I move closer still, until I can see the pulse jumping in her throat. "Things more valuable than a quick profit."

She doesn't retreat, but her breathing quickens. "And where do I fit into this arrangement?"



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God, the things I want to tell her. How she fits into every dark dream, every future plan, every possessive impulse I've ever had. Instead, I reach past her to open my office door, letting my arm brush her shoulder.

"That depends on you, doesn't it?"

The office is my sanctuary, all dark wood and leather, and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. I watch her take it in, noting how her eyes linger on the security features again.

"All dancers get private changing rooms," I continue, moving to my desk. "Access to the gym, the spa facilities. Housing, if needed." I look up, catching her gaze. "The building next door has secure apartments. Unless you'd prefer...other arrangements."

Her laugh is sharp, practiced. "Are you offering to be my landlord, Stefano?"

The sound of my name on her lips nearly undoes me. "I'm offering whatever you need."

"Careful." She prowls closer, all feline grace and deadly beauty. "A girl might get the wrong idea."

Wrong idea? Every idea she could have would be right. I want her in my bed, in my life, under my protection and my control. But first I need to know why she's here.

"The real estate discussion can wait. Let me show you the rest."

I move toward the door, and she follows me back to the corridor. We move through the VIP rooms, the secure areas, the places where business meetings—legitimate and otherwise—take place.

I explain security protocols, dancer protections, payment structures. All the while, I watch her from the corner of my eye, assessing her reactions, searching for clues to her true purpose here.

The tour brings us to the heart of the club—the main floor, currently empty, but humming with potential energy. Music throbs through hidden speakers, and lights paint patterns across the walls. Here, in my domain, I feel more in control.

"Impressed?" I ask, noting how she runs her hand along the polished bar.

"It's not what I expected." She turns to face me, backlit by purple neon. "You're not what I expected."

"No?" I step closer, drawn by the challenge in her voice. "What did you expect, Ava?"

She leans back against the bar, a move that does sinful things to her silhouette.

"The Stefano I knew couldn't wait to escape all this."

"And now I run the family business." I close the distance between us, resting my hands on the bar on either side of her. Not touching, but close enough to feel the heat radiating from her skin. "Like I said, life has a way of changing our plans."

Her eyes search my face. "Do you hate it? Being trapped?"

The question catches me off guard—it's so genuinely Ava, cutting straight to the

heart of things. For a moment, I see another flash of the girl who used to read my soul like an open book.

"I've made peace with it." I lean closer, breathing in her scent. "Found ways to make it my own."

"Like this club?" Her voice has gone slightly breathless, but she holds her ground.

"Among other things." I reach up, unable to resist touching her face, brushing back a strand of hair. She trembles slightly. "The apartments next door, for instance."

A smile tugs at her lips. "Right...about the living arrangements..."

"The apartment is yours if you want it." I move closer, ostensibly to pour both of us a drink. My arm brushes hers as I reach for the whiskey, and I feel her shiver slightly. "Though I meant what I said about...other options."

"Careful, Stefano." She straightens, bringing our bodies dangerously close. "A girl might think you're propositioning her."

"And if I am?"

Her breath catches, but she meets my gaze steadily. This close, I can count her eyelashes, see the gold flecks in her dark eyes, taste her breath on my tongue.

"That would be highly inappropriate," she murmurs, but she doesn't move away. "Employer-employee relations and all that."

I let my hand trail down her arm, feeling goosebumps rise in its wake. "When have we ever been appropriate, Ava?"

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She wets her lips, and the simple gesture nearly breaks me. "That was a long time ago."

"Was it?" I lean in, my lips nearly brushing her ear. "Because I remember everything. Every touch. Every kiss. Every promise."

Her hands come up to my chest, whether to push me away or pull me closer, I'm not sure. But the contact burns through my shirt like a brand.

"Stefano..." It might be a warning or a plea.

I pull back just enough to meet her eyes, letting her see everything I've kept caged for ten years. The hunger. The obsession. The need to possess her.

She swallows hard. "This isn't why I came here."

"No?" I reach up, brushing another strand of hair from her face. "Why did you come here, Ava?"

Instead of answering, she ducks under my arm, putting distance between us.

"I should go." Her voice is husky. "It's late."

"Have dinner with me."

The words surprise us both. She turns, eyes wide.

"What?"

"Dinner." I straighten, adjusting my cuffs to hide how much I want to grab her, to stop her from leaving. "You always said a gentleman should feed his guests, didn't you?"

A smile plays on her lips. "I did, didn't I?"

"Then let me do this right." I offer my hand, knowing we're both pretending this is more casual than it is. "Just two old friends catching up."

She places her hand in mine, and triumph surges through me.

"My car's out back." I guide her toward the private exit, my hand on the small of her back. "Unless you need to change first?"

She glances down at her dance outfit, then back at me with a hint of her old mischief. "Afraid to be seen with a dancer, boss?"

The title on her lips does things to me that should be illegal.

"Sweetheart, I'm afraid of a lot of things when it comes to you." I press my hand more firmly against her back, steering her toward the door. "But that's not one of them."

She shivers at the contact, and I know she feels this too—this magnetic pull that's only growing stronger.

Whatever game she's playing, whatever secrets she's keeping, this thing between us is still as powerful as ever.

And I intend to use every second of our dinner to remind her exactly what she's been running from.

## CHAPTER THREE

Ava

The restaurant screams old money Chicago, where the silverware is real, and a crystal chandelier throws diamonds of light across white tablecloths. The maître practically bows when Stefano walks in.

His hand hasn't moved from my lower back since we left the club—like he's afraid I'll disappear if he pulls away. I'm grateful that we did return to get my coat before we left. His touch is burning my skin even through the thick fabric, and I have to fight not to lean into it.

Into him.

"The wine list, sir?" The sommelier appears, but Stefano doesn't even glance his way. His eyes haven't left me since we sat down, tracking every movement like a predator studying its prey.

It should make me uncomfortable. Instead, it makes my skin hum with awareness.

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He orders something expensive in perfect Italian, and I pretend to study the menu, using it as a shield against the intensity of his stare. But I can feel his gaze like a physical caress, heavy with ten years of hunger.

"You haven't changed," he says softly, voice rough with something that makes heat pool in my stomach. "You're still beautiful enough to stop a man's heart."

I look up, meeting those dangerous blue eyes. "Everything's changed."

"Not the important things."

He leans forward, invading my space like he has every right to do so. His cologne hits me—expensive and masculine and him.

"You still bite your lip when you're nervous, still tap your fingers when you're planning something, still make me want to lock you away where no one else can see you."

The last part is said so quietly I almost miss it. Almost.

I force my fingers to stay still against the menu. Damn. I'd forgotten he could do this—turn the air electric with just a look, just a word.

"And you're still intense to a fault." I set the menu down, letting some of my old attitude show despite how my pulse is racing. "Tell me, do you stare at all your dancers like you want to devour them, or am I special?"

"You know exactly how special you are, Ava." The way he says my name sounds like a prayer and a curse. "You always have."

The wine arrives before I can respond, and I'm grateful for the interruption. I watch him go through the tasting ritual, his hands moving with precise grace. Every gesture screams controlled power, but there's something else there now—barely leashed hunger. It makes me shiver again.

"To unexpected reunions," he says, raising his glass, his eyes burning into mine.

I clink my glass against his, careful not to let our fingers brush. "To new beginnings."

The wine is excellent, of course. Everything about this evening is excellent, which makes what I have to do even harder. I take another sip, letting the alcohol warm my blood, trying to ignore how he watches my throat as I swallow.

"So," he says, voice dropping to an intimate register, "are we going to talk about why you're really here?"

My heart skips, but I keep my face neutral. "I told you. I need a job."

"In my club?" His eyes pin me in place, possessive enough to make my breath hitch. "In my city? After ten years of nothing?"

"Chicago's a big place." I shrug, aiming for casual despite the electricity crackling between us. "I didn't know it was your club until today."

"Liar." He reaches across the table, trailing one finger down my wrist. The simple touch sends sparks shooting up my arm. "You always were good at that—telling just enough truth to make the lies believable. But your body could never lie to me, could it?"



If he only knew.

I lean forward, letting my coat slip slightly. His eyes darken as they track the movement. "Maybe I just wanted to dance."

"Maybe." His voice rough. "Or maybe fate finally brought you back where you belong. With me."

The possessiveness in his tone should terrify me. Instead, it awakens something primal in me, something that reminds me of how it felt to be his. I reach for my wine glass to steady my hands. "Aren't we all just searching for somewhere to belong?"

His laugh is low, dangerous. "Not anymore." He leans forward too, close enough that I can feel his breath on my lips. "I found what I was searching for. And this time, I'm not letting you run away."

I meet his gaze across the candlelight, feeling like I'm drowning. Because this—this intensity, this magnetic pull between us—this is exactly what I was afraid of. This is what the Fiori family was counting on.

And God help me, but I'm already falling.

The sommelier brings a second bottle of wine, and I watch Stefano's expression darken slightly as he waves him away. There's a new tension in his shoulders that wasn't there before, like he's bracing himself for something.

"Tell me what happened," I say softly, surprising myself with how much I want to know. "With your family."

His jaw tightens, and for a moment I see a flash of raw pain before it's buried again. "It was quick. Professional." His fingers tighten around his glass. "One night, my

father and brothers were at a business meeting. The next morning, Chicago had a new crime family in power."

The clinical way he describes it makes my heart ache. I remember his brothers—Darren with his easy laugh, Antonio with his quick temper. Both of them had treated me kindly, even though I was just the daughter of con artists.

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"I was in Thailand when it happened," he continues, his voice dropping even lower. "Living my dream of hostels and adventure, just like you said." His laugh is bitter. "Tomasso called me at four in the morning. By noon, I was on a plane home."

"To take over," I murmur, understanding flooding through me. The wild, free-spirited boy I knew, suddenly chained to a legacy he had never wanted.

"To survive." His eyes meet mine, and the pain in them steals my breath. "To protect what was left of my family. My mother...she hasn't been the same since. And Angela..."

"Your sister?" I remember her as a tiny thing, always trailing after Stefano with worship in her eyes.

"She got sick right after. Leukemia. The doctors say she's in remission now, but keeping her alive wasn't easy or cheap..." He takes a long sip of wine. "Let's just say I needed resources. Power. The ability to get her the best care money could buy."

My chest feels tight. The Fiori family didn't mention any of this—his sister's illness, his mother's grief. They just painted him as another cruel don. But looking at him now, I see how the weight of responsibility crushed the free spirit I once knew.

"So you became what your father always wanted," I say, unable to keep the sadness from my voice.

His hand shoots out, catching my wrist again.

"I became what I needed to be." His thumb traces my pulse point, sending shivers down my spine. "What about you, Ava? Did you become what your parents wanted?"

The question hits too close to home. Here I am, running another con, just like they taught me. "My parents are dead," I say flatly.

His grip tightens fractionally. "I know."

When I look up sharply, his eyes are intense, possessive. "Did you think I wasn't keeping tabs on you? That I wasn't looking for you?"

The admission makes my heart race. All these years, while I was running, he was searching. The thought makes my insides melt.

"Why?" I whisper, though I'm not sure I want to know the answer.

"You know why." His other hand comes up to brush a strand of hair from my face. "I told you once that I'd follow you to the ends of the earth. Did you think I was lying?"

I can't breathe. Can't think. Not with him looking at me like that, touching me like that. Not with the weight of everything between us pressing down on me.

And definitely not with the guilt of my mission sitting like lead in my stomach.

How can I betray him now, knowing what he's survived, knowing he was only trying to protect his family?

But then I think of Tony, waiting in our dingy motel room, drinking himself into oblivion. My own family needs protection, too.

I just wish it didn't feel like I was selling my soul to do it.

"So, what about you?" Stefano's voice pulls me from my dark thoughts. "What's your dream now? Still planning to change the world, one philosophy book at a time?"

I laugh, and it comes out more genuine than I expected. "Not exactly." I trace the rim of my wineglass, feeling his eyes follow the movement. "Would you believe me if I said Montana?"

"Montana?" His eyebrow arches. "The girl who used to quote Nietzsche wants to be a cowgirl?"

"A ranch owner, actually." I let myself indulge in the fantasy that keeps me going on the darkest nights. "Wide open spaces. Horses. Maybe some cattle. Somewhere so far from Chicago that no one's ever heard the D'Amato name."

His expression shifts, something dark flashing across his face. "Running again?"

"Starting over," I correct, but we both hear the lie. "There's something appealing about simplicity, don't you think? No family obligations, no looking over your shoulder..." I gesture around at the opulent restaurant, at his expensive suit, at everything here that screams power and control. "No complications."

"Complications?" Suddenly, the space between us feels charged, dangerous. "Is that what I am to you?"

My heart hammers against my ribs. "You're the definition of complicated, Stefano."

"And yet, here you are."

"Here I am," I whisper, hating how breathless I sound. The wine must be getting to me, because I add, "Maybe I missed complicated."

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The look he gives me is pure heat. "Tell me more about this ranch fantasy of yours." His thumb traces circles on my wrist, making it hard to think. "Paint me a picture."

"A big house," I say, trying to ignore how his touch affects me. "The kind with a wraparound porch and rocking chairs. Somewhere my brother could heal, could become someone new."

"Your brother." His expression shifts again. "Tony, right? He'd be what, sixteen now?"

The fact that he knows this—has kept track of us somehow—makes my stomach flip. "Seventeen. And struggling."

"Like you struggled?" His voice is soft but intent, like he's piecing together a puzzle. "Is that why you're here, Ava? For him?"

If only you knew.

"Everything I do is for him," I admit, and at least that's not a lie. "He's all I have left."

Stefano's hand tightens on my wrist. "That's not true anymore."

His words send heat pooling low in my belly. I need to pull away, to remember why I'm here, to focus on actual my job.

But then he starts talking about making my Montana dreams come true, about how he has connections out west, about how he could help make it happen. And for one

dangerous moment, I let myself imagine it: a life where I don't have to run, where Tony is safe, where Stefano is...

No. I can't think like that. I can't let myself believe in fairy tales.

I look around at the glittering restaurant, at the city lights beyond the windows, at the man watching me like I'm something precious he thought he'd lost forever, and I can't help but wonder.

What if there was another way?

The thought is dangerous. Deadly. The Fiori family doesn't take kindly to betrayal.

But neither, I suspect, does Stefano Rega.

The wine has turned everything soft around the edges, but Stefano remains in sharp focus. Maybe that's why I can't stop watching his hands—the way he holds his glass, how his fingers drum lightly against the table when he's thinking. Those hands used to make me feel safe. Now they make me feel...something else entirely.

"You're staring," he says, voice rough with something that makes heat curl in my stomach.

"You're staring back."

His lips curve into that dangerous smile of his. "I've earned the right. Ten years of looking for you..." He takes a slow sip of wine, eyes never leaving mine. "I have a lot of catching up to do."

His intense gaze makes me reach for my own glass. "And what do you see?"

"Everything." He leans forward again, close enough that I can smell his cologne. "The mask you wear. The walls you've built. The way you're fighting this thing between us." His finger traces the rim of my glass. "But underneath it all, you're still my Ava."

HisAva. The words sink into my skin.

"You don't know me anymore," I whisper, but even I can hear the uncertainty in my voice.

"No?" He catches my hand as I reach for my wine. "Then why does your pulse jump when I touch you? Why do you keep looking at my mouth? Why haven't you pulled away?"

He's right. I haven't moved my hand from his grip. Can't seem to remember why I should.

"This is a bad idea." But I'm already leaning closer.

"You were always my favorite bad idea." His thumb strokes my wrist, proving his point. "Do you remember that summer, Ava? The garden? The promises?"

God, yes. I remember everything. The way he kissed me. The wild dreams we shared. The look in his eyes when I told him to run from my family.

It's the same look he's giving me now.

"We were kids," I manage, though my voice shakes.



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"Were we?" His other hand comes up to brush my cheek, and I can't help leaning into the touch. "Because I remember knowing exactly what I wanted...who I wanted."

The wine, the memories, his touch—it's all too much. I'm supposed to be gathering intel, maintaining distance. Instead, I'm drowning in him.

"Stefano..."

"Say it again," he whispers. "My name. Say it."

"We shouldn't?—"

"Say it."

"Stefano."

He makes a sound low in his throat that sends heat spiraling through me. "Come home with me."

Four simple words that could destroy everything. My mission. My brother's safety. My heart.

But as I look into his eyes, burning with ten years of hunger, I realize I've already lost this battle.

Maybe I lost it the moment I walked into his club.

I should say no. Should remember why I'm here. Should think about the consequences.

Instead, I hear myself whisper, "Yes."

His smile is pure sin, and I know I'm in trouble.

Delicious trouble.

Stefano doesn't wait for the check. He just pulls out a black card and hands it to the hovering waiter without taking his eyes off me. His stare makes my skin feel too tight, too hot.

"Having second thoughts?" His voice is low, knowing.

I should be. God, I should be running as fast and far as I can. Instead, I watch his hands as he signs the receipt, remembering how they felt on my skin all those years ago. Wondering if they'll feel the same now.

"No thoughts at all," I murmur, and it's almost true. The wine has turned everything hazy except him. He's in crystal clear focus—the way his jaw clenches when I shift in my seat, how his eyes track every movement like he's memorizing me.

He stands, offering his hand. Such a gentlemanly gesture, but there's nothing gentle about the look in his eyes.

I place my hand in his, and the contact sends another shock through my body. His fingers close around mine possessively, thumb brushing over my knuckles.

"Still the Ava who jumps without looking?" he asks as we walk through the restaurant. His hand has found its way to my lower back again.

"Still the Stefano who thinks he can catch me?" I counter, but my voice comes out breathier than intended.

His laugh is dark, promising. "Oh,tesoro." He leans close, lips brushing my ear. "I already have."

The cool night air hits us as we step outside, but I barely notice. Everything is Stefano—his hand on my back, his cologne in my lungs, his presence overwhelming my senses.

His car pulls up, sleek and black and expensive. Of course it is. Everything about him screams power and money now. He's so different from the wild boy I knew.

But as he opens the door for me, his fingers brush my hip, and that touch is exactly the same. It still sets my blood on fire. Still makes me want things I shouldn't.

I should think about my mission. About Tony. About all the reasons this is the worst possible idea.

As we pull away from the curb, his hand finds my thigh. Heat courses through me. It should feel like a trap closing.

Instead, it feels like falling.

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I'm starting to forget why I should care. What I'm letting myself walk into. What I'm choosing, despite every reason not to.

Forgive me, Tony, I think as Stefano's hand tightens on my thigh. I'll find another way to save us both.

But as we drive through the glittering Chicago night, I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince anymore. Right now, with wine in my blood and Stefano's touch burning through me, saving anyone feels like a distant concern.

Right now, there's only this.

Only him.

### CHAPTERFOUR

Stefano

The Bentley purrsto a stop at the gate, and I catch the slight widening of Ava's eyes in the dim light.

My security team melts from the shadows—Matteo and Luca positioned at strategic points, weapons visible enough to make a statement.

Professional. Lethal. Exactly as I've trained them.

"Impressed?"

"More like searching for escape routes." Her honesty startles a laugh from me. Still my clever girl, always assessing, always planning.

"Old habits, huh?" I murmur as the gate swings open silently. Her body tenses slightly beside me as we pull into the circular drive, and I know she's counting cameras, marking defensive positions. The con artist's daughter, seeing the world through eyes trained for survival.

That thought makes the monster in me purr. Let her look. Let her see exactly what I've built, what I can offer her.

What I can use to keep her.

"You've done well for yourself." Her voice is carefully neutral, but I catch the slight tremor beneath her words. "The Stefano I knew would have hated all this."

"The Stefano you knew didn't understand power." I rest my hand on her thigh again, feeling the heat of her skin through the silk dress. "Now I know exactly how to use it."

Giovanni waits at the grand entrance, his weathered face lighting up with recognition. "Signorina D'Amato." He bows slightly. "It has been many years."

Ava's surprise is genuine. "Giovanni? You're still here?"

"The Rega family takes care of its own," he says with a warm smile and steps back slightly.

My hand reaches for her lower back as I guide her inside. The entry hall gleams, Italian marble and crystal chandeliers casting rainbows across the polished floor.

Ava moves through my domain with a subtle grace in her steps. She takes in all that I have to offer but I know it's not the wealth that she finds interesting. Her eyes dart to the security cameras around us.

"Your father preferred a more...traditional style."

"My father preferred to rule through fear alone."

I step closer, caging her against the wall. Not touching, but close enough to feel the heat radiating from her skin.

"I've learned there are more effective methods."

Her breath catches as I lean in, my lips brushing her ear.

"Like showing someone exactly what they could have. What they could be part of. What they're missing by running away."

"Is that what this tour is about?" There's defiance in her voice. "Showing me what I've been missing?"

I trace one finger down her throat, feeling her pulse jump beneath my touch.  
"No, tesoro. This is about showing you where you belong."

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I pull away as the elevator opens silently next to us. Inside, the space feels charged. Ava stands perfectly still as we ascend, but I can see how her hands clench at her sides. Wanting to touch. Wanting to shove me away and run.

My penthouse suite takes up the entire top floor—a fortress disguised as luxury. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer a panoramic view of the city, while subtle security measures ensure total privacy.

"Drink?" I move to the private bar, watching her reflection on the polished surface. She drapes her coat on the sofa and moves to the windows, drawn by the glittering skyline. The lights paint patterns across her skin, making her look otherworldly.

"You really have changed." She accepts the crystal tumbler, but her eyes never leave the view. "That wild boy is gone."

"Not gone." I step behind her, close enough that she must feel the heat of me against her back. "Just evolved. I've learned what it takes to keep what's mine."

She turns, and the look in her eyes makes my blood burn. "And is that what I am? Yours?"

"You always were." I take the glass from her hand, setting it aside. "You just didn't know it."

"Stefano..." My name on her lips is both a warning and an invitation.

And I've never been good at resisting either.

"Do you remember our last night in the garden?" I murmur, letting my lips brush her temple. Her perfume fills my lungs—exotic and expensive— but I miss the sweet vanilla scent that she wore back then. "You told me to run from you."

"I meant it." Her voice wavers as I trail one finger down her throat. "I still do."

"Liar." I catch her chin, tilting her face up to mine. "You wanted me to chase you. To prove I would keep my promise." I lean closer, drinking in the way her pupils dilate, how her breath catches. "And I did. For ten years, I searched. Now you're here, in my home, in my world."

"Stefano..."

"Say it again."

Instead, she kisses me.

The taste of her detonates something primal in me. One hand fists in her hair, while the other pulls her hard against me, claiming her. She matches my hunger with her own, nails scraping my skin as she arches into me.

"Beautiful," I growl against her mouth. "Dangerous." Each word is punctuated with a kiss that edges toward violence. "Mine."

She bites my lower lip in response, sharp enough to draw blood. The pain shoots straight to my groin, and I grunt, spinning her to press her against the cool glass. The city spreads out below us, watching us as I pin her wrists above her head with one hand.

"Still fighting me?" I drag my lips down her throat. "After all these years?"



"Always." But her head falls back, offering more of her throat. The submission in the gesture makes the monster in me growl with pleasure.

"Look at my city," I command, turning her to face the window. My chest presses against her back as I hold her there, one hand splayed possessively across her stomach.

"Everything you see down there belongs to me. The streets, the shadows, every deal, and every death." My teeth graze her ear. "And now you're back in my world."

"Your world." She laughs, but it catches on a gasp as I slide my hand higher. I roll my hips against her, letting her feel exactly what she does to me.

She starts to turn, but I hold her still, watching our reflection in the glass. The sight of her in my arms, trapped between my body and the window overlooking my domain, makes something dark roar to life in my chest.

"Do you know what I thought about all those years searching for you?" I murmur, my free hand skimming down her side. "I imagined every scenario. Every way I'd make you mine again." My fingers find the slit in her dress, tracing bare skin. "Every way I'd make sure you never left."

Her breath fogs the glass as she presses back against me. "And now?"

"Now?" I spin her to face me, lifting her easily. Her legs wrap around my waist instinctively as I carry her toward the bedroom. "Now I will show you exactly what you've been running from."

"I wasn't running from you." Her voice shakes as I lay her on the silk sheets, my body covering hers.

"No?" I brace myself above her, drinking in how beautiful she looks spread across my bed. How right. "Then prove it. Stay still. Let me have you." I drag my teeth down her throat. "Let me own you."

Her only answer is to pull me down into a kiss that tastes like surrender. And sin.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

"Ti ho cercato ovunque," I growl against her mouth, switching to Italian as my control slips. I searched everywhere for you. "Sei mia. Solo mia." You're mine. Only mine.

My hands move to her waist, gripping her hard enough to leave marks. She whimpers, a sound that sends a jolt of heat straight to my cock, and her fingers fumble with the buttons of my shirt.

I don't stop her. I let her undress me, let her touch me, because every brush of her skin against mine is a reminder of what I've been missing.

Her nails scrape against my chest as she pushes the fabric off my shoulders, and I groan, my lips trailing down her throat.

She's wearing a ridiculous little dress that's way too easy to peel off, and I make quick work of it, yanking the straps down her arms until it pools at her feet. She's naked now, standing in front of me, and I can't help but stare.

Ten years. Ten fucking years. And she's still the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Her body is a map I've memorized, right down to every curve, every dip, and every scar. My hands move over her, possessive, demanding, and she shivers under my touch.

"Stefano," she whispers, her voice trembling. I pick her up and press her against the window in my bedroom, my mouth capturing hers again. "Someone could see," she gasps, but her hands are pulling me closer, her nails digging into my back.

I laugh against her skin, my lips moving to her ear. “Let them. Let them all see who you belong to.”

Her breath hitches as my teeth graze her earlobe, and I feel her thighs squeeze together, the scent of her arousal already thick in the air. I slide my hand between her legs, my fingers brushing against her wetness, and she moans, her head falling back against the glass.

“Fuck,” I whisper, my voice rough, as I slip a finger inside her. She’s so tight, so warm, and I can’t stop myself from adding a second one, stretching her, feeling her clench around me.

“Stefano,” she gasps, her hands gripping my shoulders, her nails sinking into my skin. I love the way she says my name, like it’s the only word she knows.

“Tell me you missed me,” I demand, my lips moving to her collarbone.

“I—I missed you,” she stammers, her hips rocking against my hand. “God, I missed you.”

She’s panting, her chest rising and falling rapidly as I pull back, my hands sliding down her body. Her skin is warm, flushed, and I can feel the tremble in her thighs as I kneel before her. I look up at her, hungry.

She says my name again, her hands gripping the edge of the window behind her for support.

“Open for me,” I command, my voice a growl that leaves no room for argument. Her breath hitches, but she obeys, her legs parting slowly, revealing the slick, glistening heat between her thighs.

I lean in, my breath hot against her skin. My lips trail up her thigh, slowly, deliberately, savoring the way her muscles tense under my touch.

When I reach the apex of her thighs, I pause, hovering just above her, teasing her, torturing her.

“Stefano, please,” she gasps, her hips arching toward me, desperate for contact.

I chuckle as she whimpers. “So eager,” I murmur, my lips brushing against her folds, and she moans, hips bucking. I grip her thighs, holding her still, and she cries out, her nails scratching at the surface behind her.

And then I dive in.

My tongue licks a slow, deliberate stripe up her slit, and she gasps. I savor the taste of her, the way she clenches around nothing, desperate for more. I lick her again, this time swirling my tongue around her clit, and she moans, her hips jerking against me.

“Stefano, please,” she begs, her voice desperate. My tongue flicks over her clit in quick, firm strokes. She cries out, her hands tangling in my hair, pulling me closer, and I groan, the sensation sending a jolt of pleasure through me.

“You taste so fucking good.” My tongue delves into her, laving her with long, slow strokes, and then I pull back slightly, blowing cool air against her wet, sensitive skin.

“Stefano, please,” she sobs again, her nails digging into my scalp, and I growl, my tongue returning to her clit, flicking it rapidly.

She cries out, her body arching, and I feel her tightening around my tongue, her orgasm building. I slide a finger into her, curling it against her inner walls, and she screams, her body shuddering as she comes hard, her juices spilling over my tongue.

I lick her through her orgasm, savoring her taste, her scent, her sounds. She's panting, her body limp, but I'm not done. I pull back slightly, looking up at her—her gaze is hazy, her lips parted as she struggles to catch her breath.

“You're not done yet.” I return to her, my tongue circling her clit, and she gasps, her hips jerking once more. I add a second finger, thrusting into her hard, and she cries out.

“Stefano, I can't,” she gasps, her hands gripping my shoulders, but I ignore her, my tongue working her clit, my fingers thrusting into her. I can feel her tightening and I know she's close again.

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“Come for me,” I command and she obeys. I lick her through her orgasm but it’s not enough. I need more. I need to hear her scream my name, need to feel her come apart in my arms. I pull my fingers out of her, and she whimpers, her eyes pleading with me.

I get up, and fumble with my belt, my cock straining against my pants.

“Stefano, I need you,” she begs, her voice desperate.

I smirk, finally freeing myself from my clothes. As I press the tip of my cock against her entrance, she gasps, wrapping her legs around me.

“Tell me you’re mine,” I growl, my voice low and dangerous.

“I’m yours. Only yours.”

That’s all I need to hear. I thrust into her, hard and deep, and she screams, her nails raking down my back.

Fuck. She’s so tight, so warm, and I can’t stop myself from moving, my hips slamming into hers as I drive myself deeper and deeper. Her moans are music to my ears, her body trembling as I fuck her against the window.

“Tell me you love it,” I demand, my lips moving to her ear.

“God, Stefano, I love it.”

I can feel her clenching around me, her body tightening as she gets closer to the edge. I reach between us, my thumb brushing against her clit, and she cries out, her back arching off the glass.

“Now,tesoro.”

She obeys again, her body shaking as she falls apart in my arms.

Fuck, she’s beautiful.Her face is flushed, her lips parted as she gasps for air, and I can’t stop myself from kissing her, my lips capturing hers as I continue to move inside her.

It’s been ten years, but it feels like yesterday. She’s mine. Always has been. And this time, I’m never letting her go.

I grip her hips tighter, my pace quickening as I feel myself getting closer. Her moans are getting louder, her body writhing against mine, and I know she’s close again as well.

“Stefano,” she gasps as she falls apart again.

Fuck.It’s too much. I thrust into her one last time, my cock pulsing as I come inside her, my vision blurring as pleasure washes over me.

For a moment, all I can hear is the sound of our breathing, our hearts pounding in sync. I press my forehead against hers, my lips brushing against hers. “Sei mia. Solo mia,” I whisper.

\* \* \*

Moonlight spills across my bed, painting Ava's skin silver as she sleeps beside me.



I trace my fingers along her spine, memorizing every inch of her. She's changed in the years we were apart—new scars tell stories I don't know, new muscles speak of a life spent staying one step ahead. But underneath all that, she's still my Ava. She's still the girl who has haunted my dreams for a decade.

She shifts in her sleep, curling closer to my warmth. This is how she should always be—safe in my bed, wrapped in silk sheets that cost more than most cars, guards posted at every entrance ensuring nothing can touch her.

"Stefano..." she murmurs in her sleep, and the sound of my name on her lips makes the monster in me purr. Even unconscious, she knows who she belongs to.

My hand stills on a thin scar beneath her ribs. It's new, still pink at the edges. A knife wound, from the look of it.

Anger coils in my gut at the thought of someone hurting her. I make a mental note to have Tomasso dig deeper into the years she was missing.

Anyone who touched her will pay. Dearly.

The city glitters beyond my windows, but I see only her. The way her dark hair spills across my pillows, how her lashes cast shadows on her cheeks.

She looks softer in sleep, more like the girl I knew. But I'm not fooled. My Ava has always hidden knives behind her smile.

That's what makes her perfect. She's not some innocent girl caught in my world. She was born to it, shaped by it, just like me.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

The daughter of con artists, raised on secrets and lies. She knows the game and she plays it beautifully. She's...

She's playing it right now as well, isn't she?

I'm not blind to the calculation behind her sudden appearance, the careful way she watches everything. She's here for a reason beyond dancing in my club.

The thought should anger me, should wake the ruthless boss who's built an empire by controlling every variable around him.

Instead, I find myself fascinated. Let her play her games. Let her think she's in control. In the end, it doesn't matter why she came.

She's not leaving.

## CHAPTERFIVE

Ava

The buzzing of my phone drags me from sleep, harsh and insistent against the nightstand.

My first thought is that this isn't my nightstand. The smooth marble surface feels foreign under my fumbling fingers.

My second thought is that I'm not wearing anything.

And my third thought, as memories of last night flood back, isshit.

Stefano.

Stefano's arm is heavy across my waist, his breath warm against my neck. In the dim light filtering through the expensive curtains, I can make out the tattoos trailing down his bicep—Italian script mixed with darker symbols of power.

Even in sleep, he radiates that dangerous energy that drew me in last night. That's still drawing me in if I'm being honest with myself.

Which I'm not. Can't be. Not when?—

My phone buzzes again. Tony's name flashes on the screen, along with the time. Almost four in the morning. My stomach drops before I even read the message.

>> Need pickup. @ Murphy's. 2 drunk 2 drive.

"Fuck," I mutter, then freeze as Stefano stirs behind me. The car. I'd let Tony take our piece of shit car because I thought he'd go to a friend's house to play video games.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Another text comes in.

>> Plz dont b mad. Rly need help.

I ease out from under Stefano's arm, trying to ignore how much my body protests the loss of his warmth.

My dress from last night is somewhere...there...draped over what looks like a

genuine Eames chair. Because of course, Stefano has the kind of penthouse where you casually toss clothes onto furniture worth more than my entire wardrobe.

My hands shake slightly as I pull the dress on, and I tell myself it's just the lingering effects of the wine. Not the memory of Stefano's fingers tracing every inch of my skin. Not the guilt churning in my stomach as I think about the Fioris waiting for my report.

Not the way my heart clenches when I glance back at him, dark hair mussed against white sheets, looking more vulnerable than a man like him has any right to.

"Going somewhere?"

His voice, rough with sleep, freezes me mid-step. I turn slowly, finding him propped up on one elbow, sheet riding low on his hips. The sight does things to my insides that I really don't need right now.

"Tony...my brother, needs pickup," I say, aiming for casual despite how my pulse races. "He's at Murphy's."

"The dive bar on Halsted?" Stefano's eyes sharpen, all traces of sleep vanishing. "It's not a safe neighborhood at this hour."

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"I can handle myself." I spot my underwear near the foot of the bed and snag them, trying not to think about how they got there. "I've been handling things on my own just fine for years."

He sits up fully, and I have to force myself not to stare at the way his muscles move under his tanned skin. "You're not going alone."

"Stefano—"

"Give me two minutes to dress." It's not a request. The softness from last night is gone, replaced by the man who runs Chicago's underworld. "We'll take my car."

I should argue. Should insist on handling this myself. Should definitely not let him anywhere near my drunk, loose-lipped brother when I'm supposed to be spying on him.

But something in his voice—that mix of command and concern—makes my protests die in my throat.

Or maybe I'm just tired of handling everything alone.

"Fine," I say, but add some bite to my tone to maintain at least the illusion of control. "Two minutes."

He moves with efficient grace, and I find myself observing the way he checks his phone first thing, the gun he straps to his ankle with practiced ease, how he seems to fill the room with his presence even before he's fully dressed.

The most dangerous mark is the one who makes you forget they're a mark at all.

I just wish my heart would remember that.

The elevator ride down to Stefano's private garage feels endless. I keep my arms crossed, maintaining careful distance despite how every cell in my body gravitates toward him. His cologne fills the small space, mixing with memories of last night that I really don't need right now.

"You're angry," he observes, breaking the silence. It's not a question.

"Not at you." I stare at our reflections in the polished elevator doors. He's in another impeccable suit despite the hour, while I'm in last night's dress, coat wrapped around me, my hair a dead giveaway for exactly what we've been doing.

We look like a cliché, but this feels like destiny. Both thoughts terrify me.

"Your brother's young," he says carefully. "Making mistakes is part of growing up."

I bite back a harsh laugh. "Getting drunk at a dive bar isn't just a mistake. He took our only car, Stefano. And now he's in one of the worst neighborhoods in Chicago, probably with people who—" I cut myself off, remembering who I'm talking to.

But Stefano catches it. Of course he does. "People who what, Ava?"

The elevator doors open to his garage, saving me from answering. A sleek black Audi chirps as he hits the key fob. Any other time, I'd appreciate the machine's quiet power and its elegance. Now I just want to get to Tony before he can do any more damage.

Stefano opens my door, ever the gentleman, even in the wee hours of the morning, but catches my arm before I can slide in. "People who what?" he repeats softly.

I meet his eyes, seeing the barely leashed power. "People who might recognize the D'Amato name," I admit. "Who might think a drunk teenager with connections to old Chicago families could be useful."

Or dangerous. Or a good way to send a message.

These are all the things I don't say, but Stefano hears them anyway. I see it in the way his jaw tightens, how his hand flexes on my arm.

"Get in," he says, voice clipped. "We'll be there in ten minutes."

It should take twenty, even with no traffic. I don't argue.

The car purrs to life, and Stefano navigates through empty streets like he owns them. Which, I suppose, he does, in a way. My mind registers every turn, every shortcut, building a mental map of his territory.

"Tell me about Tony," he says after a few minutes. "Beyond what I remember of him as a kid."

I stare out the window, watching Chicago's glittering façade give way to grittier neighborhoods.

"He's smart. Too smart sometimes. Gets bored easily. Angry about..." Everything. Our parents. Our life. The weight of expectations he never asked for. "He needs structure. Stability. Things I can't seem to give him."

"You're doing the best you can."

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"Am I?" The words come out bitter. "Because from where I'm sitting, I'm failing spectacularly. He's drinking more, hanging out with people who remind me way too much of our parents' old crowd. I was supposed to protect him from all that, give him a normal life, but instead?—"

Stefano's hand finds mine in the darkness, warm and solid. "Instead, you're carrying a weight that should never have been yours to begin with."

The simple touch, the understanding in his voice—it's too much. I pull my hand away, needing space. I need distance from his warmth, his insight, the way he sees right through my carefully constructed walls.

"Tony's my responsibility," I say firmly. "Has been since our parents died. Everything I do, every choice I make..." I swallow hard, guilt threatening to choke me. "It's all for him."

Stefano is quiet for a long moment, guiding the car through streets that get progressively darker, emptier. Finally, he says, "It doesn't have to be just you anymore, Ava."

My heart stutters. Because he means it. I can hear it in his voice, see it in the way his hands tighten on the steering wheel. He's offering something I've always dreamed of; support, stability, someone to share the burden.

And I have to betray him.

Murphy's neon sign appears ahead, a garish splash of color in the pre-dawn darkness.



A few motorcycles crowd the curb, their owners probably inside losing this week's paychecks. No sign of our car.

"There," I spot it finally, parked crooked in the back lot. No Tony in sight.

Stefano pulls in smoothly, positioning the Audi for a quick exit if needed. Always tactical, even now. "Stay in the car," he starts to say.

I'm already opening my door. "Like hell."

His laugh is soft, dangerous. "Some things never change." He's out and moving before I can respond, all coiled power and lethal grace. "Stay close, then."

I follow him toward the bar's entrance, heels clicking against cracked pavement, trying to ignore how natural it feels to fall into step beside him. I'm trying even harder to ignore how much I wish this was real—his protection, his support, his care.

But it's not. It can't be.

And the sooner I remember that, the better chance I have of keeping us both alive.

Murphy's reeks of stale beer and bad decisions. The kind of place that attracts people looking to forget or be forgotten. Right now, it's mostly empty with just a few regulars slouched at the bar, some guys playing pool in the corner, and?—

"Tony!" He's at a back table, surrounded by empty glasses and even emptier company. Three guys I don't recognize, all older, all giving off that predatory vibe that makes my skin crawl. One has his hand on Tony's shoulder, speaking low in his ear.

I start forward, but Stefano's hand catches my waist. "Let me," he says quietly.

"He's my brother."

"And those are Marchetti's men." His voice is tight. "Low-level enforcers looking to make a name for themselves. Let me handle this."

The name hits like a punch to the gut. The Marchettis are barely more than street thugs, but they're ambitious. Hungry. The kind who'd love to use a drunk D'Amato kid as leverage.

I should have known Tony would find trouble. It's practically our family motto.

Stefano moves ahead of me, his presence filling the dingy space like smoke. The change is subtle but instant, backs straightening, conversations dying, eyes dropping. Even drunk, people recognize a predator in their midst.

The guy with his hand on Tony notices last. "Mind your own business," he starts to say, then looks up. The color drains from his face. "Mr. Rega, I?—"

"Remove your hand from the boy." Stefano's voice is soft. Deadly.

The hand disappears. Tony blinks up at us, glassy-eyed and swaying. "Ava? What's...why's he here?"

"Making sure you get home safe," I say, moving to his side. He reeks of cheap whiskey and cigarettes. "Come on, time to go."

"But Aldo said...said they knew Dad." Tony's words slur together. "Said they could tell me stuff about him and Mom. About what really happened?—"

"Lying to a minor," Stefano cuts in, still in that dangerous silk voice. "Buying him alcohol. Trying to pump him for information about his family." His smile is all teeth.

"Tomasso will be very interested to hear about this."

The name drops like a bomb. Two of the guys actually flinch. The third, Aldo, apparently, tries to salvage something from the conversation. "We were just talking, Mr. Rega. No harm meant."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

"No?" Stefano steps closer. Even in the bar's dim light, I can see how his eyes have gone cold. "Then you won't mind explaining exactly what you were discussing. In detail. At my club. Tomorrow morning."

It's not a request. All three men scramble to their feet, mumbling apologies and practically tripping over each other to get away. In any other situation, it would almost be funny.

Tony tries to stand and nearly falls. I catch him, staggering under his weight. He's grown so much lately. He's not my little brother anymore, but not quite a man either. He's caught in between, just like me.

"Easy," Stefano says, moving to Tony's other side. Together, we get him mostly upright. "Car's right outside."

"Don't need help," Tony mutters, but he's leaning heavily on us both. "Don't need anything. Just wanted...wanted to know..."

"I know," I say softly, heart breaking. Because I do know. I know what it's like to have questions that keep you up at night. To wonder if there was more to our parents' accident than we were told. To feel like the answers are just out of reach.

But I also know the price of asking the wrong people those questions.

We manage to get Tony outside, the cool air making him shiver. Or maybe that's the alcohol leaving his system, and reality starting to creep in. Either way, he seems smaller suddenly. Younger.

"I'm sorry," he mumbles as we reach the car. Then his eyes widen like he's just remembered something important. "Oh! And I'm sorry 'bout the other thing too. Y'know, the thing with the Fi?—"

I clamp my hand over his mouth so fast I nearly smack him. "The fitness center! Yes, Tony, I know you skipped your gym sessions this week. We'll definitely talk about your...exercise habits... tomorrow."

Stefano raises an eyebrow at the obvious save, but Tony's already distracted by trying to count the stars, crisis narrowly averted.

"Pretty stars," he slurs, slumping against the car door. "Spinning stars."

"It's okay," I say, smoothing his hair back while my heart races. "We'll talk about everything tomorrow."

Stefano opens the back door, helping me get Tony situated. As I'm buckling him in, because he's definitely not coordinated enough right now, he grabs my hand.

"They said...said Dad was working on something big. Before. Said maybe that's why—" His voice cracks.

"Shh." I squeeze his hand, fighting back tears. "Not now. Sleep."

He's out before I close the door, exhaustion and alcohol finally winning. I stay there for a moment, forehead pressed against the cool metal, trying to breathe through the tightness in my chest.

A warm hand settles on my back. "Ava."

"Don't." My voice shakes. "Please. I can't...I can't do this right now."

Stefano doesn't push, just guides me around to the passenger side. But I feel his eyes on me, see the questions building. Questions I can't answer without bringing everything crashing down.

Tony's not the only one being used to dig up old secrets. Maybe the Fioris knew exactly what they were doing, sending me to spy on Stefano.

Maybe we're all just pawns in a game I'm starting to realize I never understood at all.

The drive back is silent except for Tony's occasional mumbling in his sleep. I keep twisting in my seat to check on him, though I'm not sure what I'm looking for.

Signs of alcohol poisoning? Proof he's still breathing? Evidence that my little brother is still in there somewhere, under all the anger and hurt?

"He'll be fine," Stefano says quietly, reading my thoughts. "Just needs to sleep it off."

"Will he?" I turn around, staring out at the passing streets. Everything looks different in these pre-dawn hours—softer but somehow more dangerous. Like the city is holding its breath. "Because from where I'm sitting, nothing about this is fine."

Stefano's hand finds mine again, and this time I don't pull away. Can't. I need the anchor too much. "Talk to me, Ava."

"About what?" Bitter laugh. "About how I'm failing him? About how he's turning into exactly what our parents were—reckless, self-destructive, too smart for his own good?" My voice cracks. "About how I promised to give him a normal life, and instead he's getting drunk with mob enforcers?"

"You're not failing him." Stefano's thumb traces circles on my palm, the touch grounding me. "You're keeping him alive. Safe."

"Am I?" The tears I've been fighting start to fall. "Because it feels like I'm just...treading water. Barely keeping our heads above the surface while everything tries to drag us under."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

The city lights blur through my tears, turning Chicago into a watercolor painting of neon and shadow. After telling him our address, Stefano doesn't speak again. He just holds my hand tighter as we wind through empty streets toward our motel.

The contrast between his world and mine has never felt starker, his sleek Audi pulling into a parking lot where most of the cars are held together with duct tape and prayers.

Tony stirs as we park, muttering something that sounds like "dad" before falling silent again. My heart clenches.

"Let me help get him inside," Stefano says, already moving to open the back door.

I should maintain some boundaries, keep some distance, but Tony's dead weight between us feels like a metaphor for everything I can't handle alone anymore.

We manage to get him up the stairs and into our room without incident. The fluorescent lights are harsh after the darkness, highlighting every water stain on the ceiling, every crack in the walls. I try not to think about what Stefano must think of this place.

Tony flops onto his bed fully clothed. I start to remove his shoes, an echo of countless other nights like this, but Stefano beats me to it.

"Get him some water," he says, efficiently unlacing Tony's boots. "And aspirin if you have it. He'll need it soon."

The simple competence in his voice, the way he handles my brother with careful



dignity despite the circumstances—it does something to my chest that I can't examine too closely.

I busy myself getting water and pills, setting them on the nightstand. When I turn back, Stefano is studying me with an intensity that makes my skin prickle.

"What?" I ask, suddenly self-conscious about my smeared makeup, my wrinkled dress, the general disaster that is my life right now.

"You don't have to do this alone anymore." He steps closer, and the air charges between us. "Let me help."

Three simple words that could change everything. Fix everything.

Destroy everything.

"I can't," I whisper, though everything in me screams to accept. To let him in. To believe that maybe, just maybe, there's a way out of this maze that doesn't end in betrayal.

Instead of arguing, he pulls something from his pocket. Car keys. His car keys.

"Take it," he says, pressing them into my hand. "You need reliable transportation. Something safe."

I stare at the keys, then at him. "Stefano, I can't?—"

"You can and you will." His voice brooks no argument. "I'll have Tommaso pick me up. And I'll send someone tomorrow to look at your car, get it running properly."

"Why?" The question comes out small, vulnerable. "Why are you doing this?"

He catches my chin, tilting my face up to his. The intensity in his eyes steals my breath. "You know why."

And I do. That's what terrifies me.

Because how am I supposed to betray someone who looks at me like I'm everything he's been searching for? Who helps my drunk brother without judgment? Who offers support without demanding anything in return?

Who might actually be exactly what Tony and I need to survive?

I stand in the doorway of our motel room, watching Stefano make a call, presumably to Tommaso. His figure cuts a sharp silhouette against the pre-dawn sky, power and authority evident in every line of his body.

Even here, in this rundown place that smells like old cigarettes and broken dreams, he looks untouchable.

Except he's not. Not really. Because I'm supposed to be finding his weak points, gathering intel that could destroy everything he's built.

The weight of his car keys burns in my palm.

Tony's soft snores drift from behind me, punctuated by occasional mumbles. At least he's sleeping it off safely, not passed out in some mob-connected bar or worse. All thanks to the man I'm supposed to betray.

Stefano ends the call and turns back to me. Even in the harsh fluorescent lighting, he's beautiful.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

"Tommaso will be here in ten," he says, moving closer. "You should get some rest."

"Thank you," I say, meaning it for more than just tonight. "For everything. The car, Tony, all of it. I?—"

He catches my hand, pressing the car keys more firmly into my palm. "Don't thank me yet." His thumb traces my pulse point, sending shivers down my spine. "This isn't charity, Ava. This is me making sure you're safe. That you have what you need."

My heart twists. Because he means it. I can see it in his eyes, feel it in the possessive way he touches me. And God help me, but part of me wants to believe it, wants to lean into his strength, his protection, his care.

But I can't. The Fiori family doesn't forgive betrayals. And if they found out about Tony almost spilling their name tonight...

"You should go," I whisper, even as my body screams to pull him closer. "Your ride will be here soon."

Instead of moving away, he leans in, resting his forehead against mine. For a moment, we just breathe the same air, existing in this fragile space between what is and what could be.

"Come stay with me," he says suddenly. "You and Tony. The penthouse has plenty of room. He'd be safer there, away from people who might try to use him."

The offer steals my breath.

"I can't," I say, the words physically painful. "Not...not yet. There's too much..."

"Too much what?" His voice is gentle. "Too much history? Too much pride? Too much fear?"

All of it. None of it. Too much truth I can't tell him.

A car's headlights sweep the parking lot, Tommaso arriving right on time. Stefano sighs, pressing a kiss on my forehead.

"Think about it," he says, stepping back. "The offer stands. For both of you."

I watch him walk away, every step increasing the distance between what I want and what I have to do. He pauses at Tommaso's car, looking back at me. "Sweet dreams, tesoro."

Then he's gone, leaving me clutching his car keys and fighting tears. I go back inside, my vision blurred. Behind me, Tony mumbles something in his sleep, reminding me why I'm doing all this, why I have to see it through.

But as I close the door and slide down against it, I wonder if I'm not just trading one kind of danger for another. Because betraying Stefano Rega might keep us alive, but the look in his eyes when he called me his—that's the kind of thing that could destroy me in entirely different ways.

I curl my fingers around his car keys, feeling the metal bite into my palm. A gift freely given. Protection freely offered. Trust I haven't earned and can't keep.

Somewhere in the distance, a siren wails, part of Chicago's lullaby. I close my eyes, exhaustion, guilt, and want warring in my chest.

Tomorrow, I'll have to contact my Fiori handler. I have to figure out how to play this game without getting us all killed. I'll have to be smart, calculating, worthy of my heritage.

But tonight...tonight I let myself feel the weight of Stefano's keys in my hand and pretend, just for a moment, that I'm worthy of his trust after all.

## CHAPTER SIX

Stefano

Tomasso's black SUV idles in the motel parking lot, a machine too sleek for its surroundings.

I watch Ava through the rearview mirror until she disappears inside her room, my keys still clutched in her hand. The sight causes something possessive to cramp in my chest—she's keeping something of mine.

"Boss." Tomasso's voice cuts through my thoughts. "We've got trouble at the docks."

The words should snap me to attention, but I'm still caught in the memory of how Ava felt in my arms, how she leaned into me despite her protests. The way she looked at her brother—fierce, protective, ready to burn the world down to keep him safe.

Just like me with Angela.

"Someone's been poking around the shipments," Tomasso continues, pulling onto the empty street. His tone carries the weight of worse news to come. "Security caught three men an hour ago. Not locals."

That gets my attention. I force myself to shift mindsets, from the man who just held

Ava to the one they call Monster. "Caught them how?"

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"Camera sweep picked them up near Container B7." He takes a sharp turn, heading toward the waterfront. "They were photographing manifests, tracking shipment patterns. Professional job, except they didn't account for the new motion sensors."

My mind calculates possibilities, threats, reactions. This is what I'm good at: the chess game of power and control. So why do my thoughts keep drifting to dark eyes and defiant smiles?

"The men?" I ask, shoving thoughts of Ava aside. Business now. Always business.

"Detained in the warehouse office. No IDs, but their equipment's high-end. Someone's bankrolling this operation."

I check my phone—messages from my dock supervisor, the security chief, and three missed calls from my sister. The last makes me frown. Angela should be asleep at this hour.

"Your sister's fine," Tomasso says, reading my expression. "Called to ask if she could go to the theatre to watch some werewolf movie with Violeta. I handled it."

The tension in my shoulders eases slightly. At least one vulnerability is secure tonight.

"The men's equipment? Anything traceable?"

"Clean. Too clean." Tomasso's hands tighten on the wheel. "Boss? How do you want to handle this?"

I stare out at my city, at the empire I've built through blood and calculation. At the power I've amassed to protect what's mine.

What's mine.

The words echo in my head, along with the thought of Ava's face, her brother's vulnerability, the weight of everything I've promised to protect.

"Take me to them," I say, letting the Monster rise. "Let's find out exactly what game they think they're playing."

\* \* \*

The warehouse looms ahead, security lights cutting through the fog, my men standing at attention as we approach. Here, in my domain, I know exactly who I am. What I'm capable of.

What I'll do to anyone who threatens what I've built.

"Have them ready for questioning," I tell Tomasso as we park. "Let's find out what these men know."

The warehouse door closes behind me with a sound like fate. Or maybe that's just the Monster, hungry for blood.

Either way, someone's about to learn exactly why they shouldn't play games in my city.

\* \* \*

The warehouse office has been converted into an impromptu interrogation room.



Three men are zip-tied to chairs, heads bowed, expensive camera equipment laid out on the table before them. Professional gear. Professional idiots.

I take my time studying the equipment, letting their fear build. The room smells of rust and saltwater, of desperation and sweat. One of the men—the youngest and shakiest—keeps glancing at the dark stains on the concrete floor. Smart boy. Those stains tell stories he doesn't want to be part of.

"Nikon D850," I muse, picking up one of the cameras. "Excellent choice for night photography. Expensive, though." I turn it over in my hands. "The kind of equipment that requires significant funding. The kind that raises questions about who's paying your bills."

None of them speak. But the middle one who is older and harder, with prison tattoos peeking from his collar, shifts slightly. He's testing his restraints.

"I wouldn't," I say softly, not looking up from the camera. "The zip ties are reinforced. The more you struggle, the deeper they cut. Makes quite a mess, actually." I smile, remembering. "Though I suppose the floor's already stained."

The young one whimpers. Music to my ears.

"Now then." I set the camera down carefully. Everything I do is precise. It's part of why they fear me. The Monster who never loses control is far more frightening than one who rages. "Let's discuss what brings you to my docks at this unfortunate hour."

Silence. I didn't expect anything else. Not yet.

I move behind them, footsteps echoing. I let them wonder where I am and what's coming. The young one's breathing quickens. The harsh, panicked gasps sound obscenely loud in the quiet.

"Your equipment tells an interesting story," I continue, circling them slowly. "Professional gear. Detailed maps of my shipping routes. Security rotation schedules." I pause behind the prison-tattooed one. "The kind of intelligence that suggests inside help. The kind that makes me very...curious about who's been talking to whom."

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"We don't know anything," the third man bursts out. American accent, trying too hard to sound tough. "We were just hired to take pictures?—"

The sound of my hand connecting with his face cracks through the room like a gunshot. I didn't even consciously decide to move. The Monster simply...responded.

"Interrupting is rude," I say mildly, straightening my cuffs. Blood trickles from the man's split lip. "And lying to me is...inadvisable."

The young one starts to cry silently. The tattooed one remains stoic, but I catch the slight tremor in his hands. They're breaking. It's just a matter of time.

I lean against the table, selecting another piece of their equipment. A satellite phone, expensive and untraceable. Or so they thought.

"Here's what I know," I say, keeping my voice conversational. Pleasant even. "I know you were hired to photograph specific containers. I know you have a contact point in the park three blocks east. And I know—" I snap the phone in half with my bare hands, making them all flinch, "—that you're not the only team in play."

The tattooed one's head snaps up at that. Interesting.

"Oh yes," I smile, all teeth. "We're aware of your...colleagues. The question is, how much pain are you willing to endure to protect people who clearly didn't think enough of you to warn you about my new security measures?"

I move back behind them, letting the words sink in. The young one breaks first, as I

knew he would.

"It was a phone call," he sobs. "Disguised voice. Said to document shipment patterns, take photos of manifests. Easy money, they said. Just drop the intel at the dead drop and?—"

"Shut up!" Prison-tattoos snarls, but the dam has broken.

"They said other people were already in place!" The words tumble out between hitching breaths. "That we just had to worry about the docks because they had someone in the club already. We didn't?—"

The sound of my hand slamming onto the metal table silences him. The Monster roars in my chest, hungry for blood, but I keep my voice deadly calm.

"What club?"

Silence falls again, heavier this time. Even the young one seems to realize he's said too much.

I move to stand before them, letting them see exactly what they're dealing with.

"Let me be very clear," I say softly. "You have two options. Tell me everything you know about this other operative, or find out exactly why they call me Monster. And trust me," I lean down, meeting each of their terrified gazes in turn, "the stories don't do me justice."

Prison-tattoos is the one who breaks this time. "We don't know details. Just...just heard them say the club infiltration was successful. That someone was already close to you. That's all, I swear to God."

The words hit like bullets, but I don't let it show. Can't let it show. Because they're wrong.

No one is getting close to me.

"Names," I demand. "Descriptions. Every detail you remember about this...infiltration."

"We don't know!" The American again, desperate now. "Everything was compartmentalized. We just know it's someone you'd never suspect?—"

My hand closes around his throat, cutting off his words. "Choose your next statement very carefully."

But he's said enough. They've all said enough.

I straighten, adjusting my cuffs again. My old habit when I need to cage the Monster, to maintain control.

"Tommaso," I call, knowing he's waiting just outside. He appears instantly, efficient as always. "Get everything they know. Every detail, no matter how small." I glance at the three men, letting them see the promise of violence in my eyes. "Make it memorable."

"And you, boss?"

I'm already moving toward the door, mind racing. "I have a club to check on."

\* \* \*

The drive back to the club feels endless. Dawn bleeds across the sky, painting

Chicago in shades of gold and shadow. My city is stirring to life, unaware of the games being played in its depths.

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Someone has infiltrated my organization. Someone is feeding information to my enemies. The thought makes the Monster snarl, hungry for blood.

But I know who it isn't.

“Boss, there’s nothing left to hear from them,” Tomasso’s says over the phone.

“Get me everything we have on recent hiring across all operations. Every new employee, every contract, every cleaning service.”

He grunts. "And Ava?"

My jaw clenches. "She’s not a suspect."

"Boss—"

"Start with the bartenders," I cut him off. "The new cleaning service, too. Anyone with access to private areas."

"But what about?—"

"I said not Ava." The words come out sharp, final. "Don't waste time investigating what we already have looked into. I know her situation well enough."

Because I do know. I know her down to my bones, even after ten years apart.

I pull up the employee records he sends to me half an hour later. Six new hires in the

past month alone. The club's success means constant expansion, and constant vulnerabilities. Any one of them could be the leak.

My phone buzzes again. Tomasso.

"The young one broke further," he says without preamble. "Says someone powerful is behind this. Multiple organizations involved."

"Names," I demand. "I want every contact, every handler, every piece of shit involved in this operation."

"Working on it. But boss, they mentioned the infiltrator was chosen specifically to?—"

"Then find out who it is," I cut him off again, already pulling up security footage. "Check the new bartender. He's been asking questions about shipping schedules. And that waitress who keeps volunteering for VIP service."

They're the real threats, the ones trying to worm their way into my organization, thinking I wouldn't notice. Thinking they could use my club, my legitimate business, my pride, as a front for their games.

"Increase security at all our properties," I tell Tomasso. "Full background checks on the recent hires. I want to know every breath they've taken since birth."

After I hang up, I stand at my office window, watching the sun rise over my city. Somewhere out there, someone thinks they're clever enough to infiltrate my world. To threaten what's mine.

They'll learn.



## CHAPTERSEVEN

Ava

It's been a week into my new "job" at The Silk Rose, and I've already gotten my routine down to an art.

That's the thing about being a con artist—you learn to adapt fast, to make any role feel natural. Though I have to admit, this one's more fun than most.

"Heads up, Harvard Law just rolled in," Kira calls from her makeup station, voice dripping with amusement. "Three of them, all wearing the same tie. Like a prep school reunion gone wrong."

I catch her eye in the mirror as I stretch, warming up for my set. "Let me guess—they've already mentioned their LSAT scores?"

"Twice." She rolls her eyes, fixing her lipstick. "And Chad, because of course one of them is named Chad, wants to explain cryptocurrency to anyone who'll listen."

"Amateur hour." I smirk, adjusting my outfit. "Watch this...I bet I can work Aristotle into my lap dance and make them think it was their idea."

"Oh honey, no. The last time you started quoting philosophy, that finance bro followed you around all night trying to debate moral relativism." Kira tosses a sparkly hair tie my way.

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"Made great tips though." I wink, catching the hair tie. "Never underestimate the power of making men think they're smart. Everything's a performance," I say, more to myself than to her. It's my mother's old saying, one of the few useful things she taught me.

The dressing room bustles with its usual pre-show energy. Girls touching up makeup, adjusting costumes, trading intel about which customers to charm and which to avoid. In just a week, I've learned more about Chicago's power players from the dancers than the Fiori family ever told me.

Speaking of which...

I check my phone, finding another terse message from my handler.

>> Need progress report. Meet tonight.

"Earth to Ava!" Kira throws another sparkly hair tie at my head. "You're up in five. Unless you're too busy sexting the boss."

I arch an eyebrow at her. "Jealous?"

"Please." She snorts, but there's genuine affection in it. "I just can't believe you got Stefano fucking Rega to look at you more than once. Do you know how many girls have tried?"

Yes, everyone saw Stefano staring at me, and ever since then, I've been the hot topic among the other dancers.

If they only knew the history there.

Instead of answering, I finish my stretches and check my reflection. The stage outfit I've chosen shows enough skin to draw attention but has enough class to maintain mystique. Just like everything else in my life lately, it's a careful balance between opposites.

"Time to earn my keep," I say, heading for the stage.

Kira catches my arm, voice dropping. "Seriously though...you're good for him. He actually smiled yesterday. The bouncers nearly had heart attacks."

The simple observation shouldn't hurt this much. It shouldn't make guilt twist in my stomach like a knife.

But as I step onto the stage, letting the music wash over me, I push it all away. Right now, I'm not Ava the spy, or Ava the con artist, or even Ava the girl drowning in complications.

Right now, I'm just a dancer. And damn if I'm not good at it.

The routine starts slow: a deliberate walk around the pole, letting the bass guide my movements. This part is pure performance, but there's freedom in it as well. The freedom of knowing exactly who I am and what I'm doing, even if it's just for these few minutes.

Money starts appearing on the stage, the trust fund babies living up to Kira's prediction. I collect it with practiced grace, adding extra flair to my moves just because I can. Just because it feels good to be in complete control of something for once.

Then I feel it—that electric awareness that means one particular set of eyes is on me. I don't have to look to know Stefano's at the bar, watching. His presence changes the air in the room, makes my skin prickle.

Well then. Might as well give him a show.

I transition into a more complex sequence, letting my body do what it does best. Each spin, each pose is technically perfect, but now there's an edge to it. A heat. Every movement becomes a promise, a tease, a reminder of other ways my body can move.

When I finally do glance his way, the look in his eyes nearly stops my heart. Because this isn't just lust or possession, though there's plenty of both on his face. This is something deeper. Something that looks dangerously like worship.

\* \* \*

Backstage, the high from performing fades into something darker, more complicated. My burner phone buzzes in my locker with another message from the Fioris, no doubt wondering why I haven't found anything incriminating yet.

But it's because there's nothing to find. The Silk Rose is exactly what it appears to be: a high-end club run with military precision and surprising heart. The books are clean, the girls are protected, and the only thing being laundered is the endless supply of silky robes in the dressing room.

Kira snaps her fingers in front of my face. "You're doing that thing again where you zone out and look like you're plotting world domination."

I force a laugh. "Just thinking about those law students. Think they'd notice if I worked some Machiavelli into my next set?"

"Girl, you are—" She stops mid-sentence, eyes widening at something over my shoulder. The air changes, and I know he's here.

Stefano.

"Taking a break?" His voice slides down my spine like warm honey. When I turn, he's leaning against the doorframe in a deceptively casual way.

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"Just plotting the philosophical corruption of law students," I say, watching his lips twitch. "The usual."

Kira makes a strategic retreat, throwing me a look that clearly says we'll be gossiping about this later. I barely notice, too caught up in the way Stefano's moving toward me, like a predator who's spotted his prey.

"You were incredible out there," he says, backing me against the makeup counter. His hands settle on either side of me, caging me in. "You're so good at driving me crazy."

"That's kind of the point." I trace a finger down his tie, enjoying the way his breath catches. "It's called a performance for a reason."

"Is it?" His lips brush my ear. "Because some of those moves seemed...personally targeted."

He's not wrong. Half my routine had been choreographed just for him—a private show in plain sight. Another line blurred between reality and performance.

But before I can respond, his phone buzzes. The change is instant, tension replacing desire as he checks the message.

"Problem?" I ask, though my heart's already racing. I know that look. It's the same one my father would get when a job was about to go sideways.

"Maybe." He runs a hand through his hair in a rare tell. "There's been some...activity at the docks. People asking questions they shouldn't."

Docks? My mouth goes dry. "What kind of questions?"

"The kind that get people hurt." His eyes meet mine, and for a moment I see past the controlled façade to something raw. "Someone's trying to get inside my organization. The docks, the club..." He laughs without humor. "Hell, they probably want to infiltrate my coffee shop next."

You have no idea how close they already are.

"The club?" I keep my voice casual, though my pulse is thundering. "But it's legitimate. Clean."

"Which makes it the perfect cover." He starts pacing, all contained energy and lethal grace. "Put eyes inside, watch the operation, look for weak points..." He stops suddenly, turning to me. "I need your help."

I blink. "My help?"

"You see everything from that stage. Notice things others miss." His hands cup my face, and the tender gesture nearly breaks me. "Help me find whoever's trying to destroy what I've built. Please."

The last word is soft, almost vulnerable. It would be so easy to say yes. To actually help him. To choose him over the Fiori family and their threats.

So easy to forget that I'm exactly what he's hunting.

"Of course," I hear myself say, the lie tasting like ashes. "Anything you need."

His kiss is fierce, grateful, full of trust I haven't earned and can't keep. I kiss him back just as desperately, trying to memorize how this feels before it all falls apart.

Because it will fall apart. The only question is who'll be left standing in the wreckage.

His phone buzzes again—Tommaso, probably with more news about the docks. But Stefano just silences it, his attention entirely on me.

His mouth crashes into mine again, hungry and demanding. All thoughts of spies and infiltrators disappear as he presses me harder against the makeup counter, sending brushes and compacts scattering. My fingers tangle in his hair, pulling him closer as his hands grip my hips.

"Security camera," I gasp as his lips trail down my neck.

He growls something that might be Italian, then suddenly I'm being lifted, wrapped around him as he carries me into one of the private dressing rooms. The door slams behind us and I'm pressed against it, his body pinning me in place.

"Come home with me," he demands between kisses. "Now."

"I have another set?—"

"Cancel it." His teeth graze my pulse point. "I need you in my bed. I need to watch you fall apart where no one else can see."

The possessiveness sends heat pooling low in my belly. "Your place then," I agree, already starting to shimmy out of my costume so I can put on my street clothes.

His eyes darken as he watches me change. "Ten minutes. Meet me at the back entrance."



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Then he's gone, leaving me trembling, aching, and wondering if I'm about to make the biggest mistake of my life.

Or maybe I already have.

\* \* \*

The elevator doors slide open, and I'm already halfway out before they've fully parted. Stefano's hand is on the small of my back, guiding me forward with an urgency that matches the pounding of my heart.

The penthouse is vast, all glass and steel, with the city lights spilling in like a thousand tiny stars. I don't have time to admire it. His lips are on mine before the elevator even dings closed behind us.

Kiss isn't the right word for it. This is something feral, something primal.

His mouth claims mine with a hunger that leaves me breathless, his tongue sliding against mine in a rhythm that sends sparks shooting through my veins.

I gasp into him, my hands clutching at his shoulders as he walks me backward, deeper into the penthouse. My back hits a wall, and he pins me there, his body hard and unyielding against mine.

"You're trembling," he murmurs against my lips, his voice low and rough. His hands slide down my sides, fingers digging into my hips as if he's afraid I'll vanish if he doesn't hold on tight.

Maybe I will. The thought flickers through my mind, but it's gone just as quickly, drowned out by the heat of his touch.

His lips move to my neck, teeth grazing the sensitive skin there, and I gasp, arching into him. My fingers tangle in his hair, pulling him closer, and he growls—a sound so visceral it makes my core clench.

“I told you,” he says, nipping at my earlobe, “I need to watch you fall apart.”

His words send a shiver down my spine, and all my doubts wash away. There's only anticipation, a deep, throbbing ache that's been building since the moment he backed me against that makeup counter.

His hands slide up under my shirt, calloused fingers brushing against my skin, and I whimper, my hips rocking against his of their own accord.

He pulls back just enough to look at me, his eyes dark and burning with need.

“Bed,” he says, and it's not a request. It's a command. And I obey without hesitation.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Stefano

“You're mine,” I growl into her ear, my hands gripping her hips hard enough to leave marks. “Every inch of you. Every sound. Every fucking shiver. You're mine, Ava.”

She moans, her head tipping back, her body arching into mine. Her lips are swollen from my kisses, her cheeks flushed, her eyes half-lidded with desire.

She's so fucking beautiful like this, having completely surrendered to me. I can't wait

to have her.

I push her down onto the bed, my eyes raking over her as I strip off my shirt and toss it aside. She's trembling, her chest rising and falling with each quick breath, her eyes locked on mine. I crawl over her, pinning her wrists above her head, my lips hovering just above hers.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I whisper, my breath hot against her skin. "Ethereal."

I kiss her hard, my tongue tangling with hers, my body pressing her into the mattress. Her whimpers are music to my ears, and I grind my hips against hers, letting her feel just how much I want her. She's already wet, her arousal soaking through her panties, and I can't wait to taste her.

I release her wrists only to yank off her blouse and bra, leaving her chest bare. Her breasts are perfect, her nipples hard and begging for my mouth. I don't make her wait.

I suck one into my mouth, my tongue swirling around it, my teeth grazing the sensitive flesh. She cries out, her hands tangling in my hair, her hips bucking against mine.

"Stefano," she gasps, her voice trembling, "please."

"I've got you, baby," I murmur against her skin, moving to her other breast. I lavish her with attention, sucking and biting until she's writhing beneath me, her moans growing louder, more desperate.

I trail kisses down her stomach, my hands sliding her skirt and panties down her legs. She's completely exposed now, and the sight of her has me throbbing with need. I spread her legs wide, my eyes devouring the sight of her glistening pussy.

“So fucking beautiful.” I trace her folds. She’s so wet, so ready for me. I push two fingers inside her without warning. She gasps, her back arching, her hands fisting the sheets.

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“Yes,” she moans, her hips rocking against my hand. “God, yes.”

I curl my fingers, finding that spot inside her that makes her scream. Her orgasm builds quickly, her body tightening around my fingers, her breaths coming in short, ragged gasps. I watch her closely, memorizing every expression, every sound, as she falls apart.

“Come for me, Ava,” I command, my voice rough, my fingers moving faster. “Let go.”

And she does. Her body convulses, her eyes squeezing shut, her mouth open in a silent scream. I feel her clench around my fingers, her release washing over her in waves. I don’t stop until she’s whimpering, oversensitive, her body wrung out.

“Good girl,” I murmur, pulling my fingers out and bringing them to my lips. She watches me as I lick them clean, her eyes dark with desire. “But we’re not done yet.”

I reach into the nightstand and pull out a silk tie. Her eyes widen, but she doesn’t protest. I tie her wrists to the headboard, her arms stretched above her head, completely at my mercy. She’s vulnerable, exposed, and I can’t wait to have her all over again.

“I’m going to make you come so hard you forget your own name,” I promise, my hands sliding down her body, spreading her legs wide. I lower my head, my tongue dragging through her folds, and she cries out.

“Stefano!” she gasps, her hands pulling against the restraints. I don’t let up.

I lick and suck, my tongue flicking her clit, my fingers pushing inside her again. She's already close, her body trembling, her moans growing louder.

"Come for me," I growl, my mouth moving faster, my fingers pressing harder. "Now, Ava."

Her orgasm hits her like a tidal wave, her body convulsing, her cries echoing through the room. I don't stop until she's completely spent, her body limp, her breaths ragged.

I untie her wrists, my hands gentle as I free her. She looks up at me, her eyes almost closed, her lips parted. I lean down, capturing her lips in a searing kiss, my body pressing into hers.

"I'm not done with you yet," I whisper against her lips, my hands sliding down her body, my fingers teasing her entrance. She whimpers, her hips rocking against my hand, her body begging for more.

I push her legs apart, positioning myself between them. I'm so fucking hard, my cock throbbing with need. I guide myself inside her, my eyes locked on hers as I push in, inch by inch.

She's so tight, so wet, and I groan as I sink all the way in.

"You feel so fucking good." My hands grip her hips, pulling her closer. I start to move, my thrusts slow and deliberate, driving her wild. Her nails dig into my back, her legs wrapping around my waist, pulling me deeper.

"Stefano," she gasps, her head tipping back, her body arching into mine. Her pussy clenches around me, driving me closer to the edge. I fuck her harder, faster, my hands roaming over her body, my lips leaving marks on her skin.

“Come with me,” I command, my voice rough, my thrusts relentless.

Her orgasm hits her hard, her pussy clamping down on me. I groan, my own release crashing over me, my cock pulsing as I fill her.

I collapse on top of her, our breaths mingling, our bodies still connected.

But I’m not done with her yet.

I’m still buried deep inside her, my cock throbbing as I feel her pussy quiver around me, drawing every last drop of my release.

Ava’s breath is ragged, her chest rising and falling as she tries to catch it, her body trembling beneath mine. I press my lips to the curve of her neck, tasting the salt of her skin, and she lets out a soft sigh.

“That’s it,” I murmur against her skin, my hand moving to cup her face. “You’re mine, Ava. All mine.”

Her eyes flutter open, dark and dazed, and she nods, her lips parting as she whispers, “Yours.”

But I’m not really done. I can’t be. Not when she’s this beautiful, this perfect. I shift my weight, pulling out of her slowly, watching as she winces at the loss.

Her pussy is swollen, glistening with my cum, and I drag my fingers through it, spreading her wetness over her thighs.

“Turn over,” I command, my voice low and firm. She hesitates for a moment, her body still trembling from her release, but then she obeys, rolling onto her stomach. Her ass is perfect, round and high. I grip her hips, pulling her up onto her knees.

“Good girl.”

My hands slide up her back, tracing the curve of her spine, and she shivers beneath my touch. I lean down, nipping at her shoulder, and she lets out a soft gasp.

“Stefano...”

“I told you.” My lips brush against her ear, “I need to watch you fall apart over and over again.”



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

My fingers trail down her back, over the curve of her ass, and then between her legs. She's still so wet, still so ready for me. I slide two fingers inside her, curling them just right. She moans, her hips pushing back against my hand, and I growl, "That's it. Take it."

I pump my fingers in and out of her, slow and deliberate, my thumb circling her clit. She's shaking beneath me, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps, and I lean down, biting her shoulder as I whisper, "So fucking perfect."

Her body tenses, her pussy clenching around my fingers, and then she's coming, her voice breaking as she screams my name. I don't let up, driving her through her orgasm, until she's trembling, her body slick with sweat.

I pull my fingers out of her, bringing them to my lips and sucking her taste off them. She watches me over her shoulder, her eyes heavy with lust, and I smirk, "You taste perfect."

My hands move to her hips, and I pull her back, my cock sliding into her pussy in one smooth thrust. She cries out, her body arching. "You're going to take every inch of me, aren't you, Ava?"

"Y-Yes," she gasps, her voice breaking as her pussy clenches around me again.

I suddenly spin her till she's underneath me again and continue to fuck her hard, my hips slamming into hers, the sound of our skin meeting filling the room.

Her cries are music to my ears, her body writhing beneath me as I drive her closer to

the edge. I reach around, my fingers finding her clit, and I rub it in tight, fast circles.

Ava arches beneath me, her hands gripping my shoulders, and my world narrows to this single moment. Her skin glows golden in the dim light, her dark hair spread across my pillows like spilled ink. Beautiful. Dangerous. Mine.

"Stefano..." My name on her lips sounds like surrender.

I try to be gentle, to maintain some semblance of control. She deserves tenderness, deserves a lover who can give her pleasure without possession. But when she moves against me like this, every careful plan shatters.

I capture her mouth with mine, swallowing her gasp. Her taste, her scent, the way she responds to my touch—it's addictive. Maddening. I could spend lifetimes learning every sound she makes, every way her body moves with mine.

She trembles beneath me, and I force myself to slow down. To be the man she needs rather than the monster who wants to devour her whole. My fingers trace her cheek, surprisingly gentle given how my heart thunders.

"Beautiful," I murmur against her throat. "Perfect."

But even as I worship her with careful touches, my mind races with darker thoughts. I want to mark her, claim her, ensure no one else will ever see her like this. I want to keep her locked away in this penthouse where she'll be safe, protected, mine forever.

The intensity of my need should frighten me. Instead, it feels inevitable. As natural as breathing. Isn't this what I have been dreaming of for so long?

Her body tenses, back arching as pleasure overtakes her. The sight of her coming undone beneath me yet again, trusting me with her vulnerability, feeds something

dark in my soul.

I follow her over the edge, her name a prayer and a curse on my lips. For a moment, there's nothing but this—our ragged breaths, our racing hearts, the perfect symmetry of our bodies joined.

Reality creeps back slowly. I gather her close, unwilling to break contact even for a moment. She curls into me instinctively, seeking my warmth, and satisfaction purrs through my veins. Even her unconscious movements prove she belongs to me.

"Stay," I whisper into her hair, meaning so much more than just tonight.

Stay in my bed. Stay in my life. Stay mine forever.

She hums with content, already drifting asleep. I should let her rest, should focus on business, on the hundreds of threats waiting beyond these walls. Instead, I watch her breathe, taking in every detail of this moment.

\* \* \*

Moonlight spills through the floor-to-ceiling windows as Ava nestles against my chest, her breathing soft and steady. The question burns on my tongue, carefully planned yet still dangerous. Timing is everything—in business, in war, in love.

"That motel isn't safe for you," I say, keeping my voice casual while my fingers trace patterns on her bare shoulder. "Especially not in that neighborhood."

She tenses slightly, weighing my words. Always calculating, my clever girl. "I've survived worse."

"You shouldn't have to." I shift to look at her. "The penthouse has three empty

bedrooms. More space than I know what to do with."

I could suggest an apartment near the club again, an idea she toyed with the first time she walked into the club, but I don't want her to accept that offer. I want her here.

"Stefano..." There's a warning in her tone, but also consideration. I press my advantage.

"Think about it logically. Better security. Central location. Plus, you'd save money. Put more aside for that Montana dream of yours."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

Her eyes narrow at my mention of Montana. Good. Let her think I'm resigned to her eventual departure. Let her believe I'd ever let her leave.

"And my brother?" she asks, testing me. "I won't leave him alone in that motel."

I bite back a smile. She's handed me the perfect opening. "Tony's welcome here. Might do him good to get away from those low-lives he calls friends. Get him into a better school district."

"You'd do that? Take us both in?"

"The boy needs structure. Guidance." My lips brush her temple. "And you need someone watching your back."

She shifts to study my face, searching for deception. I meet her gaze steadily, letting her see only what I want her to see—concern, generosity, desire. Not the desperation to keep her close. Not the plans already forming to make this arrangement permanent.

"It's a lot to consider," she hedges, but I hear the temptation in her voice.

"Consider this." I wrap a strand of her hair around my finger. "No more midnight rescues from sketchy bars. No more wondering if he's safe while you're at work. I have connections with the best private schools in Chicago. Could open doors for him."

Her breath catches. I've struck the right nerve—her fierce protectiveness of her brother, her dreams of giving him a better life.

"And what's in it for you?" she challenges, ever sharp.

I laugh softly against her skin. She still doesn't realize how much I want her. It's better this way. If she did, she'd have bolted out of here already. "Maybe I'm tired of rattling around this place alone. Maybe I want to come home to more than empty rooms and cold sheets." Each word is calculated, a blend of truth and tactical vulnerability.

She's quiet for a long moment. I wait, patient as a snake about to strike. Finally, she asks, "When?"

Victory surges through me, but I keep my voice level. "Tonight, if you want. I'll send Tomasso with a car and have the guest rooms made up." I press a kiss on her shoulder. "Let me take care of you both."

"Just until we find our feet," she says, but the words lack conviction.

I hide my smile against her skin. "Of course."

Because by the time she thinks about leaving again, she'll be so entangled in my world, so dependent on my protection, that escape will be impossible. I'll weave myself into every aspect of her life, become as essential as breathing.

"Yes," she says with a slight nod, more to herself than me.

"Practical choice," I say calmly, as if I haven't already instructed my security team to prepare for new residents.

Ava slides from the bed, gathering her clothes, and the sight makes me euphoric. Soon, she'll dress like this in our room, in our home.

"I should head back to the club," she says, reaching for her dance outfit. "My next set?—"

"That was your last number." The words come out sharper than intended. The thought of other men watching her makes me furious. If this job hadn't been the reason she came into my club, I'd have never let her be on that stage. "Unless you'd prefer to keep dancing?"

She pauses, studying me. "Eager to get me moved in?"

I stand, reaching for my suit pants. "Eager to get you both somewhere secure." My fingers brush her waist as I pass. "I'll have Tomasso bring the car around."

"We don't have much," she warns, and I catch a hint of shame in her voice.

"Good." I button my shirt, mind already assessing what she'll need. "Means we can start fresh. Though if you have any sentimental items..."

"Just some photos. Books." She bites her lip. "Tony's school things."

I send a quick text to my staff. Within hours, both guest rooms will be fully prepared, stocked with everything they could need. "Leave the furniture. I'll have someone clear it out later."

She starts to protest, but I silence her with a kiss. "Let me do this, tesoro. Let me take care of you both."

My phone buzzes. It's Tomasso confirming the car is ready. Perfect timing, as always.

I help Ava into her coat, using the motion as an excuse to pull her closer.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

"Stefano?" Her voice pulls me back. "Are you sure about this?"

I meet her eyes in the mirror, letting her see just enough of my hunger to make her breath catch. "I've never been more certain of anything."

Because how can I tell her that every moment she's away feels like bleeding? That the thought of her in that decrepit motel makes the monster in me rage? That I've already memorized how she takes her coffee, which side of the bed she prefers, every small detail that will help me bind her to me permanently?

Instead, I guide her toward the door, my hand possessive on her lower back. "Let's go collect your brother. Start building something new."

Something unbreakable.

Something she'll never want to escape.

"Okay," she whispers, and I taste victory on her lips when I kiss her.

Soon she'll understand—this isn't just about giving her a better life or protecting her brother. This is about claiming what's mine. About ensuring she never disappears again.

After all, every monster needs someone to love.

And I've finally caught mine.



## CHAPTER NINE

Ava

Sunlight spills across Stefano's sheets. I stretch, noting sensations with the automatic precision my parents drilled into me. The silk against my skin, the lingering ache in my muscles from last night, the weight of Stefano's arm draped possessively across my waist.

Three weeks in this bed, and I still can't quite believe I'm here.

I turn my head carefully, studying his sleeping face. He looks younger like this, the sharp edges of power and control softened by sleep.

A lock of dark hair falls across his forehead, and my fingers itch to brush it back. I don't.

Can't risk waking him, can't let myself get any more tangled in this man than I already am.

But God, he's beautiful. Not in that polished, manufactured way most powerful men cultivate, but in the raw, dangerous way of predators. Even in sleep, his body radiates that contained energy that first drew me in.

That still draws me in, if I'm being honest with myself.

Which I'm not. Can't be. Not when everything about this situation is built on lies.

The morning light catches on his tattoos. I've memorized every line, every shadow. Not because I want to, but because that's what I was trained to do. Notice everything. Remember everything. Use everything.

The thought sits heavy in my chest, mixing with guilt and something else I refuse to name.

He shifts slightly, arm tightening around my waist, and I freeze. But his breathing stays deep and even.

Still asleep. Still trusting me completely.

The city is already humming with morning traffic. My world and his, separated by glass and wealth and choices I never wanted to make.

Somewhere out there, the Fioris are waiting for intel I can't bring myself to provide, one way or another.

I allow myself two more minutes of watching him sleep.

That's my rule lately—strict time limits on any behavior that feels too real, too dangerous.

Like how I only let myself kiss him first when we're alone, or how I count backward from sixty whenever he looks at me with that intensity that makes me forget why I'm here.

Two minutes. One hundred and twenty seconds of pretending this could be my life.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

The heat of his body next to mine is familiar now, which is exactly the kind of thought that should send me running.

"You think too loud," Stefano mumbles, voice rough with sleep, his eyes still closed.

"Just planning my day," I lie, the words coming out naturally.

His eyes open. They are that startling blue that never fails to catch me off guard.

"Anything interesting planned?"

"Oh, you know. The usual. Dancing. Making money." Stefano was adamant that I don't need to work at the club anymore, but quitting my job was out of the question—the Fioris expect me to be there, like planned. Besides, I'm supposed to be saving money by moving in with him.

"Maybe planning my great escape to Montana." I keep my tone light, teasing, like it's all just a fun fantasy rather than the desperate plan it really is.

"Mmm." His hand slides up my side, leaving heat in its wake. "Still determined to become a cowgirl?"

The gentle mockery in his voice makes me smile despite myself. It's these moments that are the most dangerous—when he's soft and playful and so different from the ruthless boss everyone else sees.

These are glimpses of the boy he used to be before Chicago's underworld forced him to become something else.

"Maybe I just like the idea of wide-open spaces," I say, avoiding his eyes. "No complications. No history. Just...freedom."

His arm tightens around my waist, and something dark flashes across his face. It's there and gone so quickly I might have imagined it.

"Freedom's overrated," he murmurs, nuzzling my neck. "Sometimes the best things in life are the ones that tie us down."

The words send a shiver down my spine—half desire, half warning. He has no idea how right he is or how tangled up in him I'm becoming. Each day makes it harder to remember that this isn't real.

"Let me give you something else to think about," he whispers, and God help me, but I let him.

\* \* \*

Later, dressed in one of Stefano's silk robes, I stand at the window nursing a coffee and facing facts. Three weeks of careful observation, and I've got nothing to report to the Fioris. Nothing real, anyway.

The Silk Rose is exactly what it appears to be. The books are clean, I've checked multiple times.

The security is professional but not excessive. The girls are protected, respected, and paid well. Even the alcohol deliveries come from proper distributors with perfect paperwork.

Stefano has mentioned that the club is the perfect cover, but I haven't come across anything incriminating yet.

My coffee has gone cold while I've been lost in thought. Just like my leads.

I befriended the staff, I memorized delivery schedules, I studied the camera layouts and security rotations. I even sweet-talked the accountant during our smoke breaks.

And the only thing I found is a man who pays above market rate, provides health insurance, and security escorts home the staff after late shifts. He's a boss who banned a wealthy regular last week for getting handsy with one of the new girls.

The memory makes me smile despite myself. Stefano had been terrifying that night, all cold fury and lethal grace as he personally threw the guy out. But it was what he did after that really got me.

He'd made sure the girl was okay, offered her the night off with pay, and then had his lawyer draw up restraining order paperwork right there.

"Dammit," I mutter, pressing my forehead against the cool glass. This would be so much easier if he was the monster everyone thinks he is.

But he's not.

He's running legitimate businesses alongside the less legitimate ones. He's creating safe spaces in a world that offers precious few of them.

The truth hits me like a punch to the gut: I can't do this to him.

I can't fabricate evidence that might bring down one of the few safe harbors in Chicago's underworld. I can't betray someone who's shown more genuine care for others than any "legitimate" businessman I've ever conned.

But if I don't give the Fioris something soon...

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

My regular phone buzzes with a text from Kira asking if I'm working tonight. Sweet, funny Kira who's become a real friend—as real as the circumstances allow.

More than anyone else, she tries to hang out with me outside of work, but there's always an excuse at the tip of my tongue. She's just another person I'll have to leave behind when this all goes sideways.

Because it will go sideways. That's the thing about cons—they always end.

I slip into the bedroom to get dressed, my movements silent from years of practice.

Stefano's in his home office now, handling whatever business keeps Chicago's underworld running smoothly. I can hear his muffled voice through the walls. He's saying something about dock schedules and security rotations.

The sound makes my chest tight. He trusts me enough to let me overhear these conversations. Trusts me in his home, his bed, his life.

And I'm about to prove exactly why he shouldn't.

My fingers hover over the keypad of my burner phone. What exactly am I planning to say?

Sorry, your intel was wrong. The club's clean. Please give me my payout anyway?

The Fioris don't work that way. They'll want something for their investment in me.

But maybe I can give them just enough to satisfy them without destroying everything Stefano's built.

I type out a message.

>> Need to meet. Have information about Wednesday deliveries.

It's not exactly a lie. There are deliveries every Wednesday—completely legitimate alcohol shipments that keep the club running. The Fioris don't need to know that part.

I just need them to think I'm delivering on our deal.

Buy time.

That's what my mother always said—when a con goes sideways, buy time and look for exits.

The response comes faster than I expected.

>> Usual place. One hour.

My heart pounds against my ribs. One hour.

Sixty minutes to figure out how to play this without getting anyone killed. Without losing everything.

Including Stefano? a traitorous voice whispers in my head.

I push the thought away, focusing on logistics. I'll need an excuse to leave the penthouse. Something that won't make Stefano suspicious. Something that...

The bathroom door has never looked so inviting.

I barely make it in time.

The nausea hits like a tidal wave—sudden, violent, and completely unavoidable.

One moment, I'm planning my meet with the Fioris, the next, I'm on my knees in Stefano's ridiculously expensive bathroom, reacquainting myself with this morning's coffee.

The marble floor is cold against my legs as I grip the toilet bowl, my knuckles white.

"This isn't happening," I mutter between heaves. "This can't be happening."

I rest my forehead against the cool porcelain, trying to steady my breathing, thinking of all those first nights with Stefano, when we were too caught up in each other to think about protection.



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

The bathroom's subtle floral scent, usually so pleasant, now makes my stomach roll threateningly.

"Fuck," I whisper. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

My whole body trembles as I push myself up, legs unsteady as I make my way to the sink. The woman in the mirror looks like a stranger—pale face, wide eyes, absolute terror barely contained.

Think, I order myself, splashing cold water on my face. Think like a professional.

But for once, my training fails me. There's no con artist manual for this situation. There's no chapter on what to do when you're pregnant with your mark's baby while working for people who might want him dead.

The Fioris. My hand flies to my still-flat stomach.

I slide down the bathroom wall, drawing my knees to my chest. The cold marble grounds me as I try to think past the panic clawing at my throat.

The meeting is in less than an hour. I should be figuring out what to tell them, how to play this to keep everyone safe.

Instead, all I can think about is a baby with Stefano's blue eyes and my dark hair. A child born into this world of shadows and secrets. Born into a life I swore I'd never pass on to another generation.

My phone buzzes in my pocket—the regular one, not the burner. It's another text from Kira.

>> You ok for tonight's shift? New routine rehearsal at 6.

I haul myself up, legs steadier now. The nausea has subsided to a dull roil, manageable if I breathe carefully.

In the mirror, I watch my face transform, color returning, fear carefully masked, walls rebuilding. The scared woman disappears, replaced by the professional I was trained to be.

But my hand stays on my stomach, a silent promise to the future I never planned.

I need more time.

My hand reaches for the burner phone once more and I type a convincing excuse for postponing the meet. It takes a full minute before I get a response, but they accept the change.

Relieved, I take one step toward the door, and that's when the second wave hits—this one stronger than the first, a violent reminder that my body isn't my own anymore.

The room spins, marble tiles sliding in and out of focus as I stumble.

My knees buckle. I try to catch myself on the counter, but my fingers slip against the polished surface. The floor rushes up to meet me, and I barely manage to turn my head before everything in my stomach makes a reappearance.

Get up, I tell myself. Get up before he hears.

But my body has other plans. The cool marble presses against my cheek as another wave of nausea rolls through me. My hair falls around my face like a dark curtain, and I can't even find the strength to push it back.

Somewhere in the penthouse, a door opens. Footsteps approach.

But I can't move. Can't think. I can only press my burning face against the cold marble and pray for the room to stop spinning.

## CHAPTERTEN

Stefano

The sound of retching makes me walk faster into the room. It's a harsh and desperate noise echoing from the master bathroom.

My body moves before my mind fully understands, years of threat assessment turning into something else entirely when I find Ava curled against the marble floor.

She looks small there, vulnerable in a way that makes something twist in my chest. Her skin has gone pale, dark hair sticking to her sweat-dampened neck.

"Don't," she manages when I step closer, trying to wave me away. "I'm fine."

Stubborn, beautiful fool.

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I ignore her protest, moving to the sink. The crystal water glass, because everything in my world must reflect power, even the simple act of drinking, fills with cool water. I grab a hand towel, dampening it before kneeling beside her.

"Here." My voice is soft as I press the glass into her trembling hands. My other hand gathers her hair back, fingers gentle against her neck. "Small sips."

She obeys, and I track every detail with precision. The way her hands shake slightly. How she can't quite meet my eyes. The lingering scent of sickness that makes my jaw clench.

"Must've been the leftovers," she mumbles, attempting a weak smile. "From the club's kitchen last night."

My mind immediately starts calculating. Which supplies should I replace? Which staff should I question? How should I ensure this never happens again?

But beneath the practical concerns, suspicion stirs.

"I'll have everything from last night disposed of," I say, choosing my words carefully while I brush the cool cloth across her forehead. "Can't risk the club's reputation."

Or your health, I don't add. I don't tell her how seeing her like this makes the monster in me snarl with helpless rage.

She leans into my touch despite herself, eyes fluttering closed. Trust. It looks beautiful on her.

"You don't have to stay," she whispers. "I know you have meetings..."

"They can wait." My thumb traces her cheekbone, feeling the heat of fever or shame beneath her skin. Everything can wait. The empire, the threats, the endless games of power—none of it matters compared to this.

I gather her closer, letting her rest against my chest as the nausea seemingly passes. Her breath evens out, but I notice how one hand stays pressed against her stomach.

"Let's get you back to bed," I murmur, helping her to her feet. She sways slightly, and my arm tightens around her waist. "I'll have Maria bring you some ginger tea."

"We're supposed to visit your sister later today," she protests weakly. "I don't want to disappoint Angela."

The mention of my sister softens me a bit. "She'll understand. Besides?—"

A sharp knock interrupts, quickly followed by two more—Tomasso's pattern to indicate urgent business.

"Boss." His voice carries through the door. "We found them. The ones using your name to push product near St. Mary's."

I feel Ava tense against me. Of course. The high school near her brother's usual haunts. My jaw tightens as pieces click into place.

"Give me two minutes," I call back, then turn to Ava. "Rest. I'll handle this."

She studies my face, reading the shift in my demeanor. "Stefano..."

"Two minutes," I repeat, helping her to the bed. My touch remains gentle even as ice

fills my veins. "Then we'll discuss visiting Angela."

In the living room, Tomasso waits with Matteo and two of our enforcers. Between them kneel three boys, all in their late teens. Their private school uniforms are stained with blood and dirt.

Good. They're already learning consequences.

"Found them selling to eighth graders," Matteo reports, disgust evident. "Using your reputation to scare off competition."

I adjust my cuffs. The monster is stirring. "Is that so?"

The middle one—designer watch, manicured nails, daddy's credit card practically visible in his pocket—starts blubbering. "Mr. Rega, please, we didn't?—"

My backhand silences him. The crack echoes through the penthouse.

"First rule of business," I say conversationally, crouching down to meet his terrified gaze. "Never invoke a name you haven't earned the right to use."

"It was just—" the one on the left starts.

"Second rule." I straighten, nodding to Matteo. He drives his fist into the boy's stomach. "Don't interrupt."

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I hear footsteps behind me. It's Ava, watching from the bedroom doorway. I don't turn, don't acknowledge her presence.

She needs to see this side of me. She needs to understand exactly who she's dealing with.

"Please," the third one whimpers. "Our parents will pay?—"

"Your parents." I laugh softly, deadly. "Yes, let's discuss them. Your father's on the city council, isn't he?" I look at the middle one. "And yours runs that investment firm downtown." My smile shows teeth. "How do you think they'll react to learning their sons are dealing to children?"

Silence, broken only by quiet sobs.

"Here's what's going to happen." I pace before them, each step measured. "You're going to donate every cent from your dealings to St. Mary's scholarship program. You're going to disappear from the Chicago drug scene. And you're going to pray I never hear your names again."

"But that's thousands—" the middle one protests.

I grab his chin, fingers digging in. "Or I can tell your fathers exactly what their heirs have been up to. After I break every bone in your privileged bodies."

The threat hangs in the air. Then, almost in unison, they nod.

"Tomasso." I step back, straightening my jacket. "Escort these gentlemen to their respective banks. Ensure the transfers are completed properly."

"And if they refuse?"

I smile, all teeth and promise. "Then we do this the painful way."

They're dragged out sobbing, leaving only the lingering scent of fear and expensive cologne. I turn to find Ava watching me, her expression unreadable.

"Still want to make that visit to my sister?" I ask, my voice deliberately lighter.

She studies me for a long moment. "Yes," she says finally. "But I'm driving."

I laugh, letting the darkness recede. "Not a chance, tesoro."

\* \* \*

The family estate looms ahead, its iron gates a stark reminder of everything I've become. Everything I never wanted to be.

Ava's quiet beside me as we drive through, her earlier sickness seemingly forgotten as she takes in the sprawling grounds.

"It's exactly like I remember," she murmurs, studying the gardens where we once stole kisses as teenagers. "Though maybe it was bigger before."

"Everything seems bigger when you're young." I park near the side entrance, closer to Angela's wing. "Ready?"

She nods, but I catch her slight hesitation. Understanding hits me. She's nervous



about meeting my family properly. The thought spreads warmth through my chest.

Inside, the house echoes with emptiness. Once, these halls rang with life—my brothers' laughter, my father's booming voice, my mother's music.

Now there's only silence, broken occasionally by the sound of medical equipment and quiet footsteps.

"Stefano!" Angela's voice carries from her sitting room, bright despite everything. "Did you bring her? Is she really here?"

I feel Ava tense beside me, surprised by my sister's enthusiasm. I squeeze her hand once.

"Mask," I say, offering her a medical-grade mask. I don't think she needs it, but it's better to be safe than sorry when it comes to Angela.

Angela sits surrounded by books and medical monitors as she gets her infusion, her face lit by genuine excitement. The treatments have taken her hair, but nothing dims those eyes. They are so like our mother's, that is, before grief dulled them.

"You're Ava," she says immediately, beaming. "Stefano's been afraid to bring you, but I knew you'd come eventually. He never shuts up about you."

"Angela," I warn, but there's no heat in it. She's the only person who can tease me without any consequences.

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"What? It's true." She waves us closer. "Come, sit. Tell me everything. Are you really a dancer? Do you like books? What's your favorite?—"

"Breathe, piccola," I interrupt, noting how the questions have brought color to her cheeks. Too much excitement isn't good for her. "Let Ava at least sit down first."

But Ava's already moving toward her, a soft expression in her eyes that makes my breath catch. She settles gracefully beside Angela's bed, asking about the book in her lap.

"Pride and Prejudice," my sister answers, lighting up further. "Again. Stefano says I should branch out, but?—"

"But sometimes you need the comfort of a familiar story," Ava finishes, and just like that, they're lost in a discussion about literature and romance and all the things I pretend not to understand for Angela's amusement.

They fit together so naturally—my fierce, beautiful Ava and my sweet sister. It's like missing pieces sliding into place.

A shadow in the doorway draws my attention. My mother stands there, elegant as always in expensive silk, but her eyes are distant. She's clearly lost in memories or grief. It's hard to tell anymore.

"Mama," I say softly, moving to her side. "Come meet Ava properly."

She focuses slowly, like emerging from deep water. "The D'Amato girl?" Her voice

carries that familiar confusion. "But they left. They all left."

"She's back now." I guide her gently into the room. "And she's staying."

The last part makes Ava's head snap up, but I hold her gaze steadily.

"Ava." She stands smoothly, offering my mother a warm smile. "It's so good to see you again."

Something flickers in my mother's eyes—recognition, maybe. "You used to read in the garden. With Stefano."

"Yes," Ava says softly. "Under the oak tree."

"He was different then. Before..." My mother trails off, her hand fluttering vaguely.

Before the murders. Before I became the monster. Before everything changed.

"Mama," Angela calls, diffusing the tension. "Come hear what Ava thinks about Mr. Darcy. She agrees with me that he's misunderstood."

Just like that, they're all talking, my mother occasionally drifting away from the topic, but always drawn back by Ava's gentle questions or Angela's enthusiasm.

I stand back, watching how naturally Ava handles them both. I note how she adjusts her approach for my mother's confusion while still matching my sister's excitement. She seems to know instinctively what each of them needs.

"Your white blood cell count is better," I hear her say to Angela. "That's fantastic news."

My sister beams. "The new treatment's working. And Violeta—that's my nurse—says I might be able to start dance classes soon. Light ones, but still."

"Dancing?" Ava's eyes light up. "I could teach you, if your doctors approve. Something gentle to start."

The way Angela's face glows makes my chest tight. She hasn't looked this animated in months.

Even my mother seems more present, watching their interaction with something almost like her old awareness. She reaches for my hand, an increasingly rare gesture.

"She's good with her," she murmurs, nodding toward Ava and Angela. "Like she belongs."

"She does belong," I say quietly. "She just doesn't know it yet."

My mother studies my face, one of her lucid moments sharpening her gaze. "You'll keep her this time?"

"Yes." The word carries all the weight of a vow. And all the darkness of a threat.

"Good." She squeezes my hand once before drifting back to her own world. "The house needs life again."

I watch as Ava helps Angela with her afternoon medication, handling the awkward moment with grace when my mother's hands shake too much to hold the glass. I watch how she naturally positions herself to support my mother when she sways slightly, making it look casual rather than protective.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

She fits so perfectly into every broken piece of my world. She makes my sister laugh, and my mother remember, and my cold empire feel like home.

"Stefano?" Ava calls, drawing me from my thoughts. "Angela wants to show me the garden. Will you help her with the chair?"

I move to assist, careful of my sister's IV lines as we navigate toward the French doors. Ava walks ahead, asking Angela about the roses our mother used to tend.

The sunlight catches her profile, and for a moment, I see our future: Ava permanently by my side, our children playing in these gardens, my sister growing stronger, my mother finding her way back to herself. A family restored.

The monster in me purrs at the image. Yes, I'll keep her. Whatever it takes. Whatever masks I have to wear or games I have to play.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ava

The city lights blur past the car window as I drift in and out of sleep, still exhausted from this morning's drama. Amazing how quickly your mind can jump to the worst conclusions when you're stressed.

One bout of nausea and I convinced myself I was pregnant. Surely, it's just classic paranoid overthinking.

Stefano's hand rests on my thigh as he drives, warm and steady. The gesture should make me nervous, should remind me of everything I'm risking, but right now, it just makes me feel...safe.

After spending the day with his family, seeing this other side of him, it's getting harder to maintain a professional distance. For a few hours, I let myself pretend I was part of a real family.

Angela seemed to like me, showing me her art projects and telling me stories about Stefano that made him actually blush. Even his mother, lost in her grief as she is, seemed to focus a bit more.

"Almost home," Stefano murmurs, squeezing my leg gently. "Feeling okay?"

I manage a sleepy nod. The nausea from this morning is mostly gone. All that's left is a lingering queasiness that I blame entirely on whatever was in that staff meal last night.

Note to self: never eat lukewarm pasta from the club kitchen again, no matter how hungry I am after a shift.

"Maybe I should still take tonight off though," I say, fighting back a yawn. "Just to be safe."

He hums in agreement, and I close my eyes again, letting the motion of the car lull me. I should be planning my next move with the Fioris, should be figuring out how to play this situation to everyone's advantage.

Instead, I find myself thinking about the way Angela's face lit up when she talked about her art therapy, and how Stefano looked at her with such fierce protectiveness.

It's the same way I look at Tony.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's probably Kira wondering where I am. I'll deal with that later.

Right now, I just want to hold onto this feeling a little longer.

This is a glimpse of what life could be like if I wasn't who I am. But guilt follows me into uneasy dreams, where I run through endless corridors trying to find something I've lost, never quite sure what it is that I'm missing.

\* \* \*

The penthouse bedroom is dark and cool when I wake again. Stefano's already gone to handle whatever needs his attention tonight.

I curl deeper into his ridiculously expensive sheets, trying to ignore how the room seems to tilt slightly when I move.

Just leftover food poisoning. Nothing more.

I repeat this to myself as I drift in and out of consciousness, too tired to even change out of my clothes from visiting his family. The memory of Angela's smile follows me into half-dreams. She's so young, so full of life despite everything she's been through. She's so different from Tony, who wears his suffering like armor.

My phone buzzes again, more insistent this time. Probably the club wondering where I am. Or worse—my Fiori handler wondering why I haven't arranged for a new meet.

"Five more minutes," I mutter into the pillow, sounding exactly like Tony on school mornings. The thought makes me smile, then wince as another wave of queasiness

rolls through me.

Definitely should have skipped those leftovers.



## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

The persistent buzz of my phone finally forces me to move. Three messages from Kira light up the screen:

>> Girl, where are you??? Matteo said you're sick?

>> These stomach bugs going around are the worst. Half the girls thought they were knocked up last month lol. At least you know you're not pregnant!

The last message hits me like a bucket of ice water.

>> Pregnant.

The word echoes in my mind, setting off alarms I've been trying to silence all day.

"No," I say out loud to the empty room. "No, it was just bad pasta. Just stress. Just..."

I close my eyes, a single, shaky breath escaping my lips. There's no point in pretending anymore.

Deep down, I already know.

\* \* \*

I don't remember getting dressed or leaving the penthouse. One moment, I was staring at Kira's text, the next, I'm in the car Stefano gave me, hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel as I navigate Chicago's streets.

The 24-hour Walgreens glows like a beacon, a harsh fluorescent truth waiting to shatter my carefully constructed lies.

I park in the back, habit making me check sight lines and escape routes even now. Especially now.

Inside, the store is empty except for a bored cashier scrolling through his phone. The family planning aisle might as well be marked with neon arrows and alarm bells for how conspicuous I feel walking down it.

Keeping my face neutral, my movements casual, I grab three different brands of pregnancy tests. Always verify intel from multiple sources. That's what my father had taught me, though I doubt this is what he had in mind.

I add random items to my basket as well: shampoo, magazines, candy bars. Anything to make this look like a regular late-night shopping trip.

The cashier barely glances up as he rings me through, probably assuming I'm just another dancer from one of the nearby clubs.

If he only knew.

I consider going to the motel, to my brother.

He refused to come with me to the penthouse, and while it made me uneasy to let him live there on his own, Stefano assured me of his safety. And it's for the best. My new living arrangement is part of the con, I can't risk getting Tony more involved than he already is.

So I go home instead. To Stefano's home.

The drive back feels endless. Every red light is an opportunity for panic to creep in. Every turn brings new possibilities I'm not ready to face.

My thoughts are a mess by the time I'm finally in the bathroom. Three tests are lined up on the counter like soldiers facing execution. Three chances to prove this is all just paranoia.

Three minutes that feel like three years.

I pace the small space, mind racing. If I am... What then? Run anyway? Stay? Tell Stefano? The Fioris?

The timer on my phone chimes, soft but devastating in the quiet bathroom.

Time to face the music.

I turn toward the counter and there they are.

Three tests.

Three positive lines.

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Three impossible harbingers of a new reality.

"Well," I whisper to my reflection and to the life growing inside me, "I guess we're really doing this."

Options. I need options.

Stay with Stefano? Tell him the truth? Watch his face change when he realizes I've been spying on him—that I was the one hired to help destroy everything he's built?

No. He might love me, or think he does, but he's still Chicago's most dangerous crime boss. This is the man who destroyed the last family that betrayed him. I've seen first-hand how he treats his enemies, especially those who try to tarnish his reputation.

Run then. Take Tony and disappear. Use my connections to get new identities for us, and to start fresh somewhere the Fioris can't find us.

Except they will find us. They always do. And now there's a baby to consider. Stefano's baby. He'd never stop looking for us.

My burner phone feels heavy in my pocket, a reminder of debts owed. The Fioris are waiting for information. Waiting to strike.

Unless I go with my previous plan—the Wednesday deliveries.

If I report them as suspicious, hint at something bigger... I could get my payout, get Tony to safety, and warn Stefano before anything happens. A few days' head start is

all I need.

I see the missed messages from my handler about failing to reschedule.

>> Sorry about before. Meet me tomorrow?

The response is immediate this time.

>> You're walking on thin ice. Tomorrow. 2AM. Don't be late.

One last con. One last lie. Then we're out.

I just hope I'm making the right choice.

Because if I'm wrong, we all end up dead.

But first, I need a plan. A real one. Something that gives us all a fighting chance.

\* \* \*

I hide the burner phone in my bag and start planning. The Wednesday deliveries are perfect; regular enough to seem suspicious, far away to give me time. Three days to get my payout, warn Stefano, and get us all to safety.

I pull out a notebook, starting to map out the details. The timing of the trucks. The regular security rotations.

All true information that means absolutely nothing because the deliveries are legitimate and are just alcohol for the club. But with the right spin...

"Keep it simple," I mutter to myself, my father's first rule echoing in my head. "The

more complicated the lie, the easier it falls apart."

My hand drifts to my stomach again. It's becoming a habit already, this unconscious need to protect what's growing inside me. What would my parents think, knowing their grandchild will be a Rega? That their careful plans to infiltrate Stefano's organization led to this?

Maybe they wouldn't mind. They chose to abandon their plans when it came to the Regas—to focus on something bigger, but still. I can't help but wonder what my life would look like if we hadn't left so abruptly back then.

I shake the thought away, focusing on the key points I need to memorize. I'll feed the Fioris just enough truth to sound convincing, just enough details to get my payout.

I tear out the pages I've written, burning them in the bathroom sink. Can't leave evidence.

The nausea rolls through me again, gentler this time, like my body reminding me what's at stake. I close my eyes, letting the reality of it all sink in.

I'm pregnant.

With Stefano Rega's baby.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

And I'm about to betray both the Fioris and the father of my child in one spectacular move.

God help us all.

### CHAPTERTWELVE

Stefano

The salt airburns my lungs as I walk the docks.

Even at this hour, my territory hums with activity—containers being loaded, workers moving with practiced efficiency, everyone careful to acknowledge my presence without making direct eye contact.

Fear is a currency I trade in well.

"Third suspicious incident this week," Tomasso reports, matching my stride. "Security caught movement on the cameras near B7, but whoever it was knew our blind spots."

I stop at the edge of the pier, studying the dark water. The investigation at the club has proven futile so far. Yet someone's getting bolder, pushing boundaries, testing defenses. The thought makes the monster in me stir restlessly.

"Show me," I command, following him to the security office. The cameras paint a fragmented story—shadows moving with purpose, clearly familiar with our routines.

Professional. Strategic.

Not random thieves, then. Something worse.

"They're learning our patterns," I observe, watching the footage again. "The guard rotations, the camera sweeps." My fingers drum against the metal desk. "Which means we have a leak."

Tomasso shifts beside me, clearing his throat. "Boss, about that. The timing of these incidents?—"

"Not now." I silence him with a look. I know what he's thinking—how these problems started around the time Ava appeared. But he's wrong. He has to be wrong.

"The Russians have been quiet lately," he says instead, wisely changing topics. "Too quiet."

"The Russians are always quiet before they strike." I straighten, mind already calculating possibilities. "We need to move operations. Temporarily."

"The Moretti family has warehouse space in the south district," he offers. "They might be amenable to an arrangement."

I consider it, weighing risks against advantages. The Morettis are small compared to us, but they're reliable. Predictable. "Make contact. Discreetly. See what kind of fee they'd want for a month's usage."

"And our current shipments?"

"Reroute everything through legitimate channels for now." I move to the window, watching my empire operate below. "Let whoever's watching think they've spooked



us into going clean."

Tomasso makes notes on his phone, efficient as always. "Should we increase security at other locations? The club?—"

"The club stays as is." My voice carries an edge that makes him step back slightly. "Nothing changes there."

Because that's where Ava is. Where I can watch her, protect her, keep her close while I figure out what's really happening in my city.

"Of course." Tomasso hesitates, then adds, "She seemed unwell yesterday morning."

My jaw tightens. She wasn't much better today. I'd left her sleeping, pale and quiet in our bed.

"Handle the Morettis," I say instead of acknowledging his observation. "I want options by tomorrow night."

He nods, already moving to execute my orders. But I remain at the window, watching the water, my mind split between business and something far more dangerous.

Because someone's trying to destabilize my operation. Someone with inside knowledge and professional backing. Someone who?—

"Boss?" Tomasso calls from the doorway. "About those options..."

"Tomorrow," I cut him off. "Take me home," I tell Tomasso, watching Chicago's skyline blur past the window. The city never sleeps, much like the obligations that weigh on my shoulders.

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My father's voice echoes in my memory.

The Rega name is everything. Our legacy must endure.

But what legacy? Violence? Fear? The constant dance of power and control that killed my brothers and destroyed my mother's spirit?

I laugh bitterly, earning a concerned glance from Tomasso. If my father could see me now, the wild son who swore he'd never be caught in this life, now carrying the whole weight of everything. Running legitimate businesses alongside the darker ones, trying to build something cleaner than what he inherited.

When I arrive at the penthouse, I find it eerie quiet. Ava's curled in our bed, still wearing her street clothes, like she collapsed the moment she came home. Her face is troubled even in sleep, brow furrowed, lips turned down.

I shed my jacket, my weapons, the armor I wear to face the world. Here, in this space, I can be something else. Someone else.

She shifts as I slide into bed beside her, instinctively turning toward my warmth. Even unconscious, her body recognizes mine. Claims me as I claim her.

"Stefano?" she murmurs, barely awake as I gather her close.

"Sleep, tesoro," I whisper, but my lips find her temple, her cheek, the curve of her throat. I know I should let her rest, she's been tired lately, quiet in a way that makes me wonder what she's hiding. But having her this close, soft and warm and mine...

“I thought you had business...” Ava murmurs, her voice still heavy with sleep, her hands tangling in my hair, pulling me closer. Her body arches against mine, warm and soft, and I can feel the heat radiating from her, the way her breath hitches as my lips graze her neck.

“You’re my business,” I say, my voice rough with want.

Her skin is smooth under my lips, and I taste her like she’s the only thing I’ve ever needed. My teeth sink into the curve of her shoulder, and she gasps, her fingers tightening in my hair.

Fuck, I love the way she reacts to me, like every touch is electric, like she can’t get enough.

I pull back just enough to look at her, her eyes dark and hazy with desire, her lips parted, breathing shallow. “Stefano,” she whispers, and I can hear the need in her voice, the way it trembles just slightly.

My hands slide up her sides, feeling the curve of her waist, the softness of her skin.

I can feel her shiver under my touch, and I don’t stop until my fingers brush against the swell of her breasts. She’s wearing a thin silk camisole, and I can see the hard peaks of her nipples pressing against the fabric.

Fuck, she’s beautiful.

“Look at you,” I murmur, my voice thick with desire. “So fucking perfect.”

My hands cup her breasts, squeezing gently, and she moans, her head falling back against the pillows. I can’t wait any longer.

I lean down, my lips closing around one of her nipples through the fabric, sucking hard, and she cries out, her back arching off the bed.

“Stefano, please,” she gasps, and I don’t need to be told twice.

My hands move to the hem of her camisole, pulling it up and over her head, tossing it aside. I take a moment to appreciate the sight—her breasts perfect and full, her skin flushed with arousal, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she watches me with hungry eyes.

I lower my head again, this time taking her nipple into my mouth directly, my tongue swirling around the hard peak.

She moans, her hands gripping my shoulders, her nails digging into my skin. I suck harder, flicking my tongue against her, and she writhes beneath me, her hips shifting restlessly.

“God, you’re so fucking responsive,” I mutter against her skin, moving to her other breast, giving it the same attention.

My hand slides down her body, over the curve of her hip, down her thigh, and then back up, brushing against the heat of her core.

She gasps, her legs parting instinctively, and I can feel how wet she is, even through the thin fabric of her panties.

“You’re so fucking wet for me, aren’t you, Ava?” I ask, my voice rough, and she nods, her eyes wide and pleading.

“Yes,” she whimpers.

My fingers hook into the waistband of her panties, pulling them down her legs and tossing them aside. Now she's completely bare, completely exposed, and I can't take my eyes off her.

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I settle between her legs, my hands spreading her thighs wider, and I can see the glistening evidence of her arousal, the way she's already swollen and ready for me. I lean down, my breath hot against her core, and she shudders, her hands gripping the sheets.

"Stefano, please, don't tease," she begs, but I can't help myself.

I need to taste her, to feel her come apart under my tongue. My tongue flicks out, brushing against her clit, and she cries out, her hips jerking off the bed. I do it again, harder this time, and she moans, her hands moving to grip my hair.

I lick her slowly, dragging my tongue through her folds, savoring the taste of her.

She's so fucking sweet, so fucking perfect—I can't get enough of her. I press my tongue against her clit, circling it, and she's a writhing mess beneath me, her moans filling the room.

"Oh God, Stefano, yes," she gasps, her body tightening, her hips moving against my face as she chases her release.

I slide a finger into her, feeling her clench around me, and she cries out, her back arching off the bed.

"You're so fucking tight," I growl, adding another finger, thrusting them into her as my tongue continues to work her clit.

She's so close, I can feel it, the way her body is trembling, the way her breathing is

coming in short, shallow gasps.

“I’m going to come,” she says, gasping, and I curl my fingers inside her, hitting that spot that makes her scream.

Her orgasm crashes over her, and she’s shaking, her thighs clamping around my head as she rides it out, her moans turning into a long, keening wail.

I don’t stop until she’s completely spent, her body limp on the bed, her chest heaving. I pull back, licking my lips, and she looks at me with wide, dazed eyes.

“Jesus, Stefano,” she breathes, and I smirk, climbing up her body, my cock pressing against her stomach.

I’m so fucking hard, I can barely think straight, but I want her to know who she belongs to.

“You’re mine, Ava.”

She nods, her eyes dark with desire.

I shift, positioning myself at her entrance, and I can feel how wet she is, how ready she is for me.

“Take me,” she whispers, and I don’t need to be told twice.

I push into her slowly, feeling her stretch around me, her body welcoming me in. She’s so fucking tight, so fucking perfect, and I groan, my hips pushing forward until I’m fully sheathed inside her.

“Fuck, Ava,” I mutter, my hands gripping her hips, and she moans, her legs wrapping

around my waist.

I start to move, my thrusts slow and deliberate, and she gasps, her nails digging into my back.

“Harder,” she begs, and I oblige, my hips picking up speed, my cock slamming into her with enough force to make the bed shake.

Her moans are driving me wild, and I can feel my own release building, but I’m not ready to let go yet.

I want to make her come again, to feel her clench around me as she falls apart.

I reach between us, my fingers finding her clit, and I rub it in quick, tight circles. She screams, her body tightening around me, and I know she’s close.

“Come for me, Ava,” I growl, and she does, her orgasm crashing over her as she clenches around me, her body shaking with the force of it.

I can’t hold back anymore, and with a few more thrusts, I’m coming with her, my release spilling deep inside her.

We’re both breathing heavily, our bodies slick with sweat, and I collapse on top of her, my head resting on her chest. She’s still trembling, her fingers running through my hair, and I know I’ve done exactly what I set out to do.

I pull back just enough to look into her eyes, dark with desire. “Let’s get you cleaned up,” I say, my voice rough with emotion I’m trying to hide.

I sweep her into my arms, her legs wrapping around my waist instinctively. She’s light, but the way she clings to me feels like she’s anchoring me to the earth.



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I carry her to the bathroom, her lips trailing soft kisses along my jawline, her breath warm against my skin.

I turn on the shower, steam curling in the air. I set her down gently, her feet touching the cool tile. She looks up at me, her eyes wide, her lips slightly parted, and I can't resist kissing her again.

This time, it's slower, deeper, more deliberate, my tongue exploring every inch of her mouth. Her hands slide up my chest, her nails lightly scratching my skin, and I groan into her lips.

"Turn around," I command, my voice leaving no room for argument. She turns her back to me, and I press my body against hers, my hands roaming her curves.

I kiss the nape of her neck, my teeth nipping gently, and she lets out a soft moan. My hands find her breasts, cupping them, my thumbs brushing over her nipples until they harden under my touch.

I guide her under the warm spray of water, the droplets cascading over her skin. My hands slide down her sides, over her hips, and she leans back into me, her ass pressing against my hardness.

I can't help but grind against her, the friction making both of us gasp.

"You're amazing," I murmur, my lips brushing against her ear.

My hands continue their exploration, sliding between her legs, my fingers finding her

wetness. She's so ready for me again, but I can't resist the urge to tease her.

I circle her clit with one finger, slow and deliberate, and she lets out a moan that sends a jolt of heat straight to my cock.

"Stefano...I" she breathes, her voice trembling.

"What do you want?" I ask, my voice a low whisper, my fingers still teasing her.

"You," she gasps, her hands gripping the wall in front of her. "I want you."

I slip a finger inside her, slowly, feeling her clench around me. "Tell me how much," I demand.

"So much," she moans, her hips rocking back against my hand. "Please. Again."

I add another finger, curling them inside her, and she cries out, her body trembling.

My other hand grips her hip, holding her steady as I pump my fingers in and out of her, the sound of her wetness mixing with the rush of the water. Her moans grow louder, her breath coming in short, desperate gasps, and I know she's close.

"I want to see you. Show me how good it is for you." My fingers move faster, harder, and she does, her body convulsing as her orgasm crashes over her.

I feel her walls clench around my fingers, and I don't stop until her legs are shaking, until she's panting and leaning heavily against the wall.

Then, I turn her around, my hands gripping her ass as I lift her up, her legs wrapping around my waist. Her lips find mine, hungry and demanding, and I kiss her back just as fiercely. My cock presses against her entrance, and I pause, looking into her eyes.

“You’re mine,” I say, my voice a low growl.

She looks at me, her eyes dark with need, then turns away, as if she can’t stand to hear the words. As if she doesn’t know what to say back.

I thrust into her, slowly at first, savoring the way she feels around me.

She’s so tight, so wet, and the sensation is overwhelming. Her nails dig into my shoulders, and she lets out a moan that makes me want to claim her all over again.

I move faster, harder, the sound of our bodies slapping together mixing with the rush of the water.

“You feel so good,” she gasps, her head falling back, and I take the opportunity to suck on her neck, leaving another mark on her skin. I can’t get enough of her, and I know I never will.

Her hands slide down my chest, her fingers brushing over my abs, and she looks up at me with a mischievous glint in her eye.

She surprises me by sliding down my body, her knees hitting the tile, and before I can react, her mouth is on me, taking me in.

“Fuck,” I groan, my hands tangling in her hair as she sucks me with a boldness that drives me wild. Her tongue swirls around the tip, her lips sliding up and down my length, and I can’t believe how good she feels.

She’s eager, hungry, and the sight of her on her knees, her mouth worshipping me, is almost too much to handle.

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“That’s right, baby,” I say, my hips thrusting slightly into her mouth. She moans around me, the vibration sending shivers down my spine, and I know I’m close. But I’m not ready to let this end just yet.

I pull her up, her lips swollen from my cock, and I kiss her fiercely, my tongue claiming hers. I lift her again, pressing her against the wall, and I enter her in one swift motion. She gasps, her nails digging into my back, and I start to move, my thrusts hard and unrelenting.

“You’re mine,” I growl, my voice rough with desire. “Say it.”

“Yours,” she moans, her body trembling with every thrust. “Only yours.”

I can feel her tightening around me, her body on the edge once again, and I know I’m close, too. I reach between us, my fingers finding her clit, and I rub it in quick, tight circles. She screams, her body clenching around me, and I can’t hold back anymore. With a few more thrusts, I’m coming with her, my release spilling deep inside her.

We’re both breathing heavily, our bodies slick with water and sweat, and I press my forehead against hers, our eyes locked. She’s still trembling, her arms wrapped around my neck, and this time, I know she’s mine.

\* \* \*

Later, watching her drift back to sleep, I trace patterns on her bare shoulder and think about legacies. About what we inherit and what we choose. About the life I want to build—something stronger than fear, cleaner than blood.

I think about the woman in my arms who makes me want to be more than just my father's son.

"Ti amo," I whisper into her hair, the words dangerous in their truth. Because love is a weakness in this world, and I've given her so many weapons to destroy me.

But as she curls closer in her sleep, I find I don't care. Let her be my weakness. Let her be my strength.

Let her be the reason I build a legacy worth having.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ava

"Ti amo."

The words hang in the darkness between us, unexpected and devastating. Stefano's breathing is already evening out into sleep, like he hasn't just shattered every wall I've carefully built. Like he hasn't just made everything infinitely more complicated.

I lie perfectly still beside him, years of training keeping my own breathing steady despite how my heart pounds. His arm is heavy across my waist, warm and possessive even in his sleep. Protecting what he thinks is his.

If only he knew.

I shouldn't be here. I should have stuck to the plan—get intel, get paid, get out. Simple. Clean. Professional.

Instead, I'm lying in Stefano Rega's bed, carrying his child, listening to him murmur

"I love you" in his sleep like it's the most natural thing in the world.

God, what a mess.

My training kicks in automatically, analyzing my options. The Fiori meet is in two hours. They're expecting information about the Wednesday deliveries.

Information that could harm the father of my child. The man who just said he loves me.

The man I might love back.

The thought hits like a physical blow, making me bite back a sound that might be a laugh or a sob. Because of course this would happen. Of course I'd fall for my mark. Of course the universe would have this cosmic joke planned for me.

Stefano shifts in his sleep, pulling me closer. His skin is warm against mine, familiar now in ways that terrify me. I know the rhythm of his breathing, the cadence of his heartbeat, the way he unconsciously seeks contact even in sleep.

I know him.

And that's exactly why I can't go through with any of this.

I can't betray him to the Fioris, even if there's little chance the intel I'll give them might harm him. I can't risk his empire crumbling. I can't let our child grow up with that legacy.

I can't keep pretending this is just another con.

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My fingers shake slightly as I reach for my phone on the nightstand. The screen's glow feels harsh in the darkness, but I force myself to focus. Time to be professional. Time to do what needs to be done.

I text Tony to check where he is and, unsurprisingly, he's not at the motel.

>> Meet me at the club in one hour. Non-negotiable.

His response is immediate, full of teenage attitude.

>> WTF? It's the middle of the night.

>> One hour. Or I leave without you.

I turn the phone face-down before he can argue further. The guilt of threatening him sits heavy in my chest, but it's nothing compared to what I'd feel if I let the Fioris anywhere close to Stefano.

Beside me, Stefano murmurs something in Italian, his arm tightening around my waist. For a moment, I let myself imagine staying.

I imagine telling him everything, trusting that his love will be stronger than my betrayal.

But I've seen what happens to people who betray Stefano Rega. They call him the Monster. It isn't just a nickname.

You're protecting him,I remind myself.Him and the baby. Better he hate me for running than destroying himself trying to save me from the Fioris.

I start my exit with the precision of a master thief. First, carefully sliding out from under his arm, replacing my body with a pillow in one smooth motion. Then, gathering my clothes from where they landed earlier, each movement silent and deliberate.

The moonlight catches on his face as I dress, and I allow myself one moment of weakness. One moment to memorize the curve of his jaw, the scatter of stubble, the way his dark hair falls across his forehead.

One moment to remember him like this—peaceful, vulnerable.Mine.

Then I shut it all down. I lock away the emotions threatening to overwhelm me, focusing on the practical.

Money. Documents. Escape routes.

Time to be the professional my parents trained me to be.

Even if it kills me.

\* \* \*

The penthouse feels different in these pre-dawn hours, all shadows and sharp edges where there was warmth before. I move through it like a ghost, gathering only what's essential.

My real ID. The cash I've saved from dancing. The small knife my father gave me, inscribed with our family motto.Survive first, feel later.



Irony, considering how much my feelings are threatening to choke me right now.

My hand catches on the doorframe of his closet as a wave of dizziness hits. Morning sickness or guilt, I'm not sure anymore. The suits hanging there mock me with their perfect order. Everything about Stefano is ordered, controlled.

Except how he loves. That's as wild and dangerous as he is.

Slowly, I grab my clothes and head back to the living room.

The keys to his car, the one he gave me without hesitation, without demands, sit heavy in my palm. I place them carefully on his dresser, next to his watch and wallet.

I can't take anything he gave me. I can't leave any threads that might lead back to us.

In their place, I take the keys to my old clunker from my bag. The car's probably barely roadworthy, but it's mine. Clean. Untraceable.

My dance bag is still by the door where I left it earlier, before everything changed. Before the "I love you" and impossible choices. I check its contents automatically—clothes, makeup, the bare essentials I'll need until we can get somewhere safe.

I stuff the rest of my clothes inside and notice the burner phone protruding from the side pocket of the bag.

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*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

I should destroy it, but something makes me hesitate. One last lifeline, maybe. Or one last mistake waiting to happen.

In the kitchen, I start to write a note, then stop. What could I possibly say?

Sorry I lied about everything? Sorry I'm running? Sorry I'm carrying your child but I can't trust that you'd choose us over revenge?

Better to say nothing. Cleaner that way. Professional.

My father would be proud. My mother would understand. They had taught me well—how to slip away in the night, how to cauterize wounds before they can bleed you dry.

They just never taught me how to do it while carrying someone's heart in my hands.

Or their child in my body.

I press my palm flat against my stomach that is still unchanged but somehow different now that I know for sure. Now that I'm choosing this path for all of us.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to the silent penthouse, to the man sleeping in the other room, to the life growing inside me. "I'm so sorry."

But sorry doesn't change what needs to be done.

The elevator waits, but my feet carry me back to the bedroom doorway. One last

look. One last moment of weakness.

Stefano sleeps peacefully, unaware that his world is about to shift, that everything he thinks he knows about me is a lie. That somewhere inside me, his child is growing.

"I love you," I whisper into the darkness, the words catching in my throat. "God help me, but I do."

He doesn't stir. Of course he doesn't.

I slip from the room.

The elevator doors slide open silently, ready to take me away from everything I never meant to want.

Everything I can't keep.

It's better this way, I tell myself as I step inside. Better to leave him with anger than destroy him with truth.

Even if it means destroying myself in the process.

\* \* \*

The elevator descends smoothly, each floor marking another step away from the life I could have had. Forty-two floors to second-guess everything. Forty-two chances to turn back.

I don't.

My reflection in the polished elevator walls shows a woman I barely recognize, hair

slightly mussed from Stefano's hands. Lips still swollen from his kisses. Eyes harder than they should be, considering what just happened in his bed.

Professional. Keep it professional.

The mantra steadies me as I count security cameras, note guard positions, track the gaps in coverage I've spent weeks memorizing. The night shift is lighter, something I'd filed away automatically, never thinking I'd use it against him like this.

Floor twenty-eight. The cameras in the east stairwell will be switching feeds.

Floor fifteen. Matteo starts his rounds, always clockwise.

Floor seven. The service entrance will be unlocked for the early deliveries.

I know every detail of Stefano's security because he trusted me enough to let me see it. He trusted me in his home, his bed, his life.

And I'm using it all against him.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

My hand drifts to my stomach again.

"We're doing the right thing," I whisper, though I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince—myself or this tiny life that's changed everything.

The lobby is empty except for the night security guard, Joey, who always sneaks cigarettes by the loading dock at three a.m. He doesn't notice me as I pass right behind him.

Outside, the night air hits me like a slap. Chicago sprawls around me, all glittering lights and dark promises. Somewhere out there, Tony's waiting, probably cursing my name. Somewhere out there, the Fioris are expecting information I'll never deliver.

And forty-two floors above me, Stefano sleeps, unaware that his world is about to change.

My old car sits in the far corner of the garage, looking even more pathetic next to the luxury vehicles surrounding it. But it's mine. Clean. Safe.

The key slides into the ignition, and for one terrifying moment, I think it won't start—that fate or karma or just bad timing will trap me here.

But the engine turns over, coughing to life like it knows what's at stake.

Time to go.

Time to run.

Time to save everyone by leaving everything behind.

I just hope someday, somehow, Stefano will understand why I had to go.

Even if I don't quite understand it myself.

\* \* \*

The club's neon sign cuts through the fog, painting The Silk Rose in shades of purple and blue.

Tony's hunched figure paces near the service entrance, hands shoved deep in his pockets. Even from here, I can read the tension in his shoulders, the angry set of his jaw.

I pull up beside him, rolling down the window. "Get in."

"What the hell, Ava?" He yanks the door open but doesn't get in. "It's the middle of the night. I was hanging with?—"

"Now." My voice comes out harder than intended, making him flinch. "We're leaving. All of it. Tonight."

Something in my tone must reach him because he slides into the passenger seat without further argument. The car dips with his weight, the suspension groaning in protest.

"Where's the fancy car?" he asks as I pull away from the curb. "The one your sugar daddy gave you?"

"Don't." The word comes out sharp, dangerous. "Don't talk about him like that."

Tony turns to study me, and sometimes I forget how perceptive he can be when he's not lost in his own problems. "Holy shit. You actually care about him."

I keep my eyes on the road, knuckles white on the steering wheel. "We need to stop at the motel. Get our things. Then we're gone."

"Just like that? No explanation? No?—"

"Yes, just like that." I take a corner too fast, making us both grab for support. "It's what we do, isn't it? Run before things get messy. Before people get hurt."

"Before you get hurt, you mean."

The words hit hard. Because he's right, isn't he? I'm running to protect Stefano, to protect our baby, but also to protect myself. From love. From trust. From everything I've spent my life avoiding.

We ride in silence until we reach the motel. Tony follows me up to our room, watching as I gather our meager belongings with mechanical efficiency.

I'm glad I didn't get much of my stuff to Stefano's apartment when Tony decided to stay here. Makes my escape just a bit easier.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

"What about school?" he asks quietly.

I pause in the middle of shoving clothes into a duffel bag. "Since when do you care about school?"

"Since I started actually showing up." He sits on the bed, suddenly looking very young. "I'm getting better grades. Made some real friends. Not just...you know."

The guilt threatens to choke me. Because he's right, he has been doing better lately. While I've been losing myself in Stefano, my brother's been quietly putting his life together.

"We can't stay." I zip the bag closed with more force than necessary. "It's not safe anymore."

"Because of the Fioris?"

The bag slips from my hands, hitting the floor with a thud. I turn to face him slowly. He needs to know the truth.

I take a need breath and blurt it out. After the initial shock, he says, "It's his, isn't it? Stefano's?"

I nod, unable to speak past the lump in my throat.

"Then why are we running? He's got money, power. He could protect us..."



"He could kill us," I cut in. "Once he finds out what I was really doing at the club, and who I was working for."

Understanding dawns in his eyes. "The Fioris. Shit, Ava."

"Yeah." I sink down beside him on the bed. "Shit."

For a long moment, we just sit there, shoulders touching like when we were kids. Back when all we had was each other.

"Montana?" he asks finally.

"Montana," I confirm. "Wide open spaces. Fresh air. A chance to start over."

"With my niece or nephew." His hand finds mine, squeezing gently. "We'll figure it out, sis. We always do."

The simple acceptance in his voice nearly breaks me. Because this is why I do everything—for him, and now for this baby, and for a chance at something better than what we were born into.

"We need to go," I say, standing before the tears can fall. "Long drive ahead."

Tony grabs the bags while I do one final sweep of the room. No traces. No trails. Nothing to lead back to us.

Outside, the sky is starting to lighten, Chicago's endless night giving way to dawn. As we pull onto the highway, I allow myself one glance in the rearview mirror. At the city skyline. At the life I'm leaving behind.

At the man who's probably still sleeping, unaware that his world is about to shatter.

"I'm sorry," I whisper one last time.

Then I turn my eyes forward, toward Montana, toward freedom.

Toward whatever future we can carve out for ourselves.

If we make it that far.

## CHAPTERFOURTEEN

Stefano

Cold sheets where warmth should be. The wrongness of it drags me from sleep, instincts firing before consciousness fully returns.

My hand reaches for Ava automatically, finding only empty space.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

The silence in the penthouse screams danger.

"Ava?" My voice echoes through rooms that suddenly feel too large, too empty. No response. No sounds of her morning routine, no coffee brewing, no shower running.

Nothing.

I'm moving before my mind fully processes what's happening, checking each room with increasing urgency. Her clothes gone from the closet. Dance bag missing from its spot by the door. My car keys placed precisely on the dresser, a clear message if I've ever seen one.

Gone.

The realization hits me hard, making the monster in me roar to life. Because this isn't just absence, this is calculated escape. This is a professional disappearance.

My phone's already in my hand, Tomasso's number on the screen. He answers on the first ring, trained to recognize emergency.

"Find her," I snarl, not bothering with greetings. "Now."

"Boss?" His voice sharpens instantly. "What's happened?"

"She's gone. I want everything: traffic cameras, account activity, known associates. Every breath she's taken since she walked into my club."

A pause. Too long. "About that, Boss...there's something you should know."

Ice spreads through my veins. "Talk."

"I started digging after those dock incidents. Wanted to rule her out, you know?" His hesitation carries weight. "Her employment history before the club...with the other surname...there are gaps. Inconsistencies."

The crystal tumbler in my free hand shatters, sending shards and expensive whiskey across the marble floors.

"What kind of inconsistencies?"

"The kind that suggest professional training. And there were calls, traced to numbers associated with?—"

"With who?" But I already know. The monster in me has already pieced it together, has been trying to warn me while I ignored every sign.

"The Fiori family."

The name drops like a bomb. My vision bleeds red as pieces click into place—her sudden appearance, her careful questions, her interest in the Wednesday deliveries.

"Boss?" Tomasso's voice sounds distant beneath the roaring in my ears. "What do you want me to do?"

What do I want? I want to burn Chicago to the ground until I find her. I want to tear apart everyone who helped her deceive me. I want to show her exactly why they call me Monster.

I want to drag her back and cage her so completely she'll never think of leaving again.

The last thought brings me up short, clearing some of the rage. Because beneath the fury, beneath the betrayal, something else lurks: fear. Not of what she might have learned or who she might tell.

Fear of losing her. Again.

"Boss?" Tomasso prompts. "Should I put out the word? Standard protocol for traitors?—"

"No." The word comes out sharp, final. "This stays between us. Get me everything on her movements since last night. And Tomasso?" I pause. "Find out exactly what the Fioris promised her."

"You think she was coerced?"

I look down at the keys she left, remembering how she trembled in my arms just hours ago, how she whispered my name like a prayer, how something in her eyes always seemed to be fighting between staying and running.

"I think," I say carefully, "that Ava D'Amato is about to learn exactly what happens when you try to con a monster."

I end the call, moving to the window where she stood just last night. My city spreads out below, and somewhere in its shadows, she's running. Planning. Maybe even thinking she's protecting me by leaving.

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*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

"Run all you want,tesoro," I whisper to the dawn. "But remember, I told you once I'd follow you to the ends of the earth."

This time, I'll make sure she doesn't slip through my fingers again.

\* \* \*

My footsteps echo through the penthouse as I pace, each circuit marking another moment she's slipping further away.

The morning sun paints mockingly cheerful patterns across floors that still hold traces of her—a forgotten hair tie, the lingering scent of her perfume, the ghost of her laughter.

"Ti amo," I'd whispered to her last night, letting my walls down like a fool, thinking I could trust the warmth in her eyes, the way she fit against me, the future I saw stretching out before us.

An amateur mistake. The kind of error that gets men like me killed.

My fist connects with the wall, sending spiderweb cracks through imported plaster. The pain centers me, reminds me who I am. What I am.

The Monster of Chicago, brought low by a con artist's smile.

I force myself to breathe, to think like the strategist who built an empire rather than the lovesick boy who lost her. There has to be something, some clue as to?—

The overflowing bathroom trash catches my eye. Strange. The cleaning service came yesterday.

I dig through it mechanically, training overtaking emotion, and?—

Three pregnancy tests. All positive.

The world stops spinning.

"No," I whisper, but the evidence is undeniable. Multiple brands, all showing the same result.

My knees hit marble as understanding crashes through me. The morning sickness. Her exhaustion. My initial instinct was right.

She's carrying my child.

The knowledge detonates something primal in my chest, triumph and terror warring for dominance. Because she's not just running from me now. She's running with my heir. My blood. My future.

My phone buzzes.

"Boss?" Tomasso's voice crackles through. "We've got movement on her accounts?—"

"She's pregnant." The words come out raw, dangerous.

Silence stretches across the line. Then, carefully, "You're sure?"

I laugh, the sound edged with hysteria. "Found the tests. Multiple positives. She

knows, Tomasso. She knows and she still?—"

Still ran. Still chose the Fioris over me. Over us.

The rage surges back, stronger now. Because this isn't just betrayal anymore. This is theft of the highest order.

"Change of plans," I growl, pushing to my feet. "I want every medical facility in a hundred-mile radius monitored. She'll need prenatal care eventually. And get me everything on her brother's known associates. She won't leave him behind."

"Boss..." Tomasso hesitates. "If she's working for the Fioris and carrying your child..."

More pieces click into place. "Unless..."

Unless she's running from them too.

The thought snags something in my memory, her tension lately, the way she watched shadows, how she flinched at certain names. Not guilt, maybe.



Fear.

"Find out what the Fioris had on her," I order, mind racing with new possibilities.

"What they used to control her. And Tomasso?"

"Sir?"

"When you find her—and you will find her—she comes to me unharmed. Anyone who touches her answers to me personally."

I end the call, staring at the pregnancy tests still clutched in my hand. My child. My Ava. Both out there somewhere, unprotected, while threats circle like vultures.

"I'll find you," I promise the empty air, letting the monster rise fully. "Both of you."

And God help anyone who tries to stop me.

Because she might have stolen my heart, might be carrying my heir, but she's forgotten one crucial detail.

I am not the man she knew at sixteen. I am not the love-struck boy who let her slip away once before.

I am the Monster of Chicago.

I open my phone, looking at traffic feeds. She can't have gone far.

My phone vibrates against the marble counter. Tomasso's name flashes on the screen again.

"Tell me you found her."

"Boss..." His hesitation carries weight. "You might want to sit down for this."

Ice creeps through my veins. In our fifteen years of partnership, Tomasso has never suggested I sit for bad news. "Talk."

"We traced her initial contact before she came to the club. The money trail, the meetings..." He takes a breath. "She was hired by the Fioris. Specifically to infiltrate your organization."

"Keep talking."

"They approached her three months ago. Used her brother's safety as leverage. She was supposed to gather intel on your legitimate businesses, find proof of money laundering through the club."

A laugh tears from my throat, bitter and sharp. "The club. My legitimate business. The one fucking clean thing I built."

"There's more." Tomasso's voice drops lower. "She had a meet scheduled with her handler last night. Two am. She never showed."

The implication hits like a bullet. If she was working for the Fioris and failed to deliver...if she's running from them too...

"She's carrying my child," I say, the words tasting like ash and iron. "And now she's out there alone, pregnant, with the Fioris hunting her."

Silence stretches across the line as Tomasso processes this. Then, carefully: "What do you want me to do?"

What do I want? I want to tear Chicago apart brick by brick until I find her. I want to cage her in luxury that's so lavish that she'll never think of leaving. I want to make her pay for every lie, every manipulation, every moment I let myself believe in something real.

I want to protect her from everything, including myself.

"She'll run somewhere isolated," I say, forcing myself to think strategically past the rage and betrayal burning in my chest. "Somewhere she thinks we won't look. Check property records in Montana."

"Montana?"

"She talked about it sometimes. Wide open spaces. Fresh air. A chance to start over." The memory of her voice describing her dreams twists something in my chest. "She wouldn't have shared that detail if it wasn't real."

Real. Like her smiles in the morning light. Like the way she held my sister's hand. Like the sound of her laugh when she thought I was being ridiculous.

Like the child growing inside her.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

"Find her. Before they do. No one touches her but me. No one."

"You know this changes everything," Tomasso says quietly. "A baby. Your heir. The Fioris won't just kill her now. They'll use the child against you."

He's right. This isn't just about Ava anymore. This is about my blood. My legacy. My child who deserves better than being born into a war.

"Put everyone on it," I order, already moving toward my weapons safe. "I want eyes at every bus station, train depot, and highway heading west. Track her brother's phone, his gaming accounts, anything that might give us a direction. And Tomasso?"

"Sir?"

"Call our friends in the Montana territory. Tell them I'm calling in every favor they owe me. I want to know the second anyone matching their descriptions crosses the state line."

I end the call, staring out at my city as dawn paints it in shades of blood and gold. Somewhere out there, Ava's running, thinking she's protecting everyone by leaving, thinking she can outrun the Monster of Chicago.

Thinking she has a choice in any of this anymore.

"Run all you want, tesoro," I whisper. "But you're carrying my heir now. And I'll burn down heaven and earth before I let anyone take what's mine."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ava

The heater died somewhere between Illinois and Iowa, turning my ancient car into a mobile ice box.

Tony hasn't stopped complaining for the last hundred miles, but I barely hear him over the endless calculations running through my head. Distance covered. Gas remaining. Hours until someone realizes we've crossed state lines.

"I'm starving," Tony whines, cutting through my thoughts. "And I can't feel my toes. Can we please stop? Just for a few minutes?"

I glance at him, really look at him for the first time in hours. His face is pale, lips slightly blue from the cold. Guilt twists in my stomach. I'm supposed to be protecting him, not freezing him to death in a getaway car.

"Fine," I concede, spotting a sign for an upcoming truck stop. "Quick dinner. Then we keep moving."

The diner appears through the twilight haze. It's one of those timeless roadside places that could exist anywhere in America. Lucy's is the name of the place, according to the neon sign that flickers weakly.

My instincts start humming the moment we pull into the parking lot. There's nothing obvious to make me worry, but there are little things that make the hair on the back of my neck stand up. The way that black SUV is parked at an angle that is perfect for watching the entrance. How the trucker by the door seems too well-dressed for a long-haul driver.

But Tony's already out of the car, drawn by the promise of warmth and food. And maybe I'm just being paranoid. Running makes you see threats everywhere.

The bell chimes as we enter, and every eye in the place seems to land on us for too long before turning away. The waitress' smile is plastic-perfect as she leads us to a booth by the window.

"Just passing through?" she asks, setting down menus that have seen better days.

"Long drive," I say vaguely, positioning myself to see both exits. "Need to warm up."

Tony orders half the menu, but my stomach churns at the thought of food. Morning sickness or instinct, I'm not sure anymore. Everything feels wrong, the angles of the room, the way that man at the counter keeps adjusting his jacket, how the trucker from outside has positioned himself between us and the door.

"I need to pee," Tony announces, sliding out of the booth. "Order me those cheese fries too if she comes back."

I grab his wrist. "Wait?—"

But he's already heading for the bathroom, shoulders set in that teenage swagger that screams I'm-not-listening.

And the tall, skinny man at the counter stands up to follow him.

Every alarm in my head starts screaming. The tall man's movements are too deliberate, too practiced. Not a random trucker or road-weary traveler. A hunter.

And we're the prey.

My phone is in my hand before I consciously decide to move.

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*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

I text Tony, watching the bathroom door like it might give me answers.

>> We need to leave NOW. Get out here.

No response.

Another man enters the diner, the bell chiming cheerfully as he slides onto a stool at the counter. His eyes meet mine in the mirror behind the bar. They are cold, assessing. Professional.

My heart pounds against my ribs as I count the seconds. One minute since Tony left. Two minutes. The bathroom door remains closed.

"Can I get the food to go?" I ask the waitress as she passes. My voice comes out steady. Thank God for years of training.

She nods, but there's something off about her smile now. Like she knows something I don't.

Three minutes. Four.

The man at the counter hasn't touched his coffee, hasn't even pretended to look at a menu. He just keeps watching me in that mirror, patient as a snake.

I text Tony again.

>> GET OUT HERE. EMERGENCY.



Still nothing.

Five minutes.

My fingers drum against the table, a tell I've never quite managed to eliminate. The sound draws the counter man's attention. His hand shifts slightly, and I catch the glint of metal beneath his jacket.

Gun.

Everything in me screams to run, to grab Tony and get out. But I can't move without knowing where he is, can't leave without?—

The bathroom door opens, but it's just the tall man. No Tony.

And he's smiling.

That's when I know with bone-deep certainty—we've been made. They've got my brother. And I'm about to be cornered like a rat in a trap.

Unless I move. Now.

The waitress appears with Styrofoam containers, and I use the moment of distraction to slide from the booth. "Just remembered we left something in the car," I say brightly, already moving toward the door. "Be right back!"

I'm not sure they buy it, but it doesn't matter. All I need is a head start.

The bell chimes behind me as I burst into the parking lot, cold air hitting my lungs like knives. Behind me, I hear shouts, footsteps, the beginning of pursuit.

I dive into the driver's seat, hands shaking as I jam the key into the ignition.

Please start, please start, please?—

The engine roars to life as figures burst through the diner door. My heart hammers so hard all I can hear is the thundering of blood in my ears and the desperate prayer that We'll make it circling in my mind.

I throw the car into reverse, tires screaming against wet asphalt. The men's mouths are moving, shouting something I can't hear over my panic. Their faces twist with rage as I accelerate backward, my hands shaking so badly I nearly lose control.

A gun appears—black metal gleaming. Training kicks in and I swerve erratically, making myself a harder target to hit. The sharp movement sends my stomach rolling, morning sickness mixing with terror.

More men pour from the diner's entrance. Four, five, six of them. Too many. Too professional. And Tony's still inside.

Tony.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

My baby brother.

The thought nearly breaks me. It nearly makes me stop, turn around, try something stupid and desperate.

But the child growing inside me changes everything. I can't save Tony if I'm dead. Can't protect either of them by martyring myself.

The exit is ahead—freedom, escape, safety. My tires hit the highway entrance and I slam my foot to the floor, the engine protesting. In my rearview mirror, I see them sprinting toward their vehicles. See the gun raised again.

"I'll come back," I promise, voice cracking as tears blur my vision. "I'll find you. I'll fix this."

The words taste like ash and desperation. Because we both know there's only one way to fix this. Only one person is powerful enough to take on the Fioris.

If he doesn't kill me himself first.

The highway stretches ahead, endless. Behind me, cars follow.

I drive faster, hands on the wheel, mind racing with plans and prayers and promises I don't know if I can keep.

\* \* \*

I drive for twenty minutes before my hands stop shaking enough to pull over. The shoulder of the highway feels exposed, but I need to think. Need to plan. Need to figure out how the hell they found us so fast.

More importantly, I need to reach Tony.

My finger hovers over his contact, fear making my stomach roll. I swallow hard before I hit dial.

One ring. Two.

"Hello, Ava."

The voice that answers isn't Tony's. It's older, cultured, with that particular Fiori family accent that haunted my childhood.

"Where's my brother?"

"Safe. For now." A pause, perfectly calculated to maximize my terror. "Though his continued well-being depends entirely on your cooperation."

I press my forehead against the steering wheel, trying to breathe through the panic threatening to choke me. "Let me talk to him."

"I'm afraid Tony's a bit...indisposed at the moment."

The implication makes bile rise in my throat. "If you hurt him?—"

"That depends entirely on you, *piccola*." The old nickname feels like acid on my skin. "Return to the diner. Tell us everything you know about Rega's operation. Then you and your brother can leave—no harm, no foul."

Lies. All lies. The Fioris don't let people walk away. Ever.

But Tony...

"How do I know he's alive?" My voice cracks despite my best efforts.

There's movement on the other end, then Tony's voice, slurred but unmistakable:  
"Ava? Don't...don't come back. They want to..."

The sound of flesh hitting flesh makes me flinch.

"One hour," the Fiori voice returns, smooth as silk. "Or we start sending pieces of him back to Chicago. I wonder how Stefano would react to that? Finding out his pregnant girlfriend got her brother killed?"

How do they know?

The call ends before I can respond.

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*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

I sit there, staring at my dark phone screen, as snow begins to fall outside. Tiny flakes catching in the headlights of passing cars, each one a reminder of how far we are from home. From safety.

From Stefano.

"Think," I order myself, pressing my hands flat against my thighs to stop their shaking. "Think like a professional."

But all I can think about is Tony's voice, the sound of him being hurt, the absolute certainty that the Fioris will kill us both if I go back there.

Unless...

My fingers move to my other phone, my personal one. Stefano's number is still there, though I've never used it. Never needed to.

Until now.

One call could change everything. Save us or destroy us.

But what choice do I have?

The snow falls harder, turning the world outside into a blur of white. Somewhere out there, my brother is counting on me to save him.

Thicker flakes are falling now, creating a cocoon of white around my car. I've been

staring at Stefano's number for what feels like hours, though my phone tells me only minutes have passed, each one precious. Each one bringing Tony closer to whatever the Fioris have planned.

My hand drifts to my stomach. It's a habit now, this unconscious need to protect. "What do you think, little one? Should we trust your father to save us?"

The question hangs in the frigid air of my car. Because that's the real fear, isn't it? Not that Stefano won't help, but that he will, and, afterward, he'll make me pay for my betrayal.

I close my eyes, remembering how he looked just hours ago. The way he'd pulled me close in his sleep, whispered "love you" like a secret. The tenderness in his touch, even as he expressed his need to possess me.

But I also remember other stories. What happened to the last family that betrayed him. The whispers about why they call him Monster.

My phone shows forty-seven minutes until the Fioris' deadline. Forty-seven minutes to decide who I trust more: the devil I know, or the devil I might love.

"They'll kill him anyway," I say aloud, needing to hear the truth. "If I go back there, they'll kill us both. And the baby."

The sound of an engine makes me shrink lower in my seat, but it's just a passing truck, its headlights briefly illuminating the snow-covered landscape. I'm exposed out here. Vulnerable.

Just like Tony.

My brother, who only got dragged into this because of my choices. My brother, who

was finally starting to put his life together before I yanked him away from everything.

My brother, who the Fioris will torture and kill just to prove they can.

"Fuck."

The curse comes out like a prayer as I hit dial before I can second-guess myself again. Each ring feels like an eternity, each second of silence another moment Tony suffers.

What will I say? How do you tell someone you're carrying their child while admitting you were sent to destroy them?

How do you ask for help from the man whose heart you just broke?

The line connects.

And suddenly all my carefully planned words disappear at the sound of his voice, hard and cold and nothing like the man who held me hours ago.

"Ava."

It's just my name, but it contains multitudes. Anger. Hurt. And something darker that makes my skin prickle with awareness.

Time to face the music.



### CHAPTERSIXTEEN

Stefano

The phone vibrates against the marble, her name lighting up the screen like an accusation. Like a promise. Like everything I've been waiting for since finding those pregnancy tests discarded in my bathroom.

My fingers hover over the device, the monster in me savoring each ring. Let her wait. Let her feel the weight of every second, every choice that led her to this moment.

I've been staring at traffic camera feeds for hours, searching for any trace of her old car. The crystal tumbler beside my hand is half-empty, the expensive whiskey doing nothing to dull the rage or the want coursing through my veins.

The phone keeps ringing. Insistent. Desperate.

Like she was desperate the night we met again. The night she danced on my stage, pretending to be just another girl looking for work. Just another stranger, not the woman who's haunted my dreams for a decade.

Not the mother of my child.

Not the woman working with an enemy.

The thought makes my hand clench. The design cut into the crystal hurts my fingers, but I barely notice. Physical pain is nothing compared to the war raging inside me.

"Boss?" Tomasso appears in the doorway, ever vigilant. "Our men spotted her near the state line. Should we?—"

I silence him with a look, finally reaching for the phone. My voice, when I answer, comes out cold.

"Ava."

I speak the syllables that have carved themselves into my soul. I let them carry everything—my rage, my hurt, the darkness that's made Chicago whisper my name in fear.

Her breath catches on the other end. I can picture her perfect lips parting, her pulse racing beneath olive skin that still bears marks from my teeth. My possessiveness is written on her body even as she ran from me.

"Stefano..." Her voice breaks on my name. "I...I need?—"

"Help?" The laugh that tears from my throat holds no warmth. "The great Ava D'Amato, asking for help? What would your Fiori masters think?"

Silence stretches between us, heavy with unspoken truths, with betrayal and desire.

"They have Tony." The words come out raw, desperate. Real in a way nothing else has been between us. "Please, I don't know what to do. I didn't tell them anything about the club, I swear. I couldn't?—"

"Couldn't betray me?" Ice fills my tone. "But you could fuck me. Could carry my child while plotting my destruction."

Her sharp inhale tells me she didn't know I'd found the tests. Good. Let her feel off-

balance. Let her remember exactly who she's dealing with.

"You know?" she whispers.

I lean back, signaling Tomasso to trace the call. "I know the mother of my heir is either very brave or very stupid, running from my protection."

"I was trying to protect you." The words burst from her like she can't hold them back. "The Fioris, they wanted?—"

"I know what they wanted." My voice drops lower. "Just like I know exactly where you are right now. Did you really think I'd let you slip away again? That I wouldn't have eyes on you the moment you left my bed?"

Another silence, this one charged with understanding. Charged with the realization that she's been playing a game she never had a chance of winning.

"Stay where you are," I order. "Tomasso will collect you. And Ava?" I pause, letting the monster show in my voice. "Try to run again, and I won't be nearly this understanding."

I end the call before she can respond, turning to find Tomasso watching me carefully.

My heart beats hard in my chest. I meant the words. They were a promise. A prayer. And a preview of what's to come.

Because Ava might have stolen my heart, might be carrying my heir, but she's forgotten one crucial detail: I am not the man she knew at sixteen. I am not the boy who let her slip away.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

I am the thing that makes Chicago's darkness tremble.

"Boss." Tomasso's voice cuts through the red haze of my thoughts. "Three of our teams are already in position. What's our play?"

I move to the wall of security monitors, studying the blinking dots that mark Ava's location. She hasn't moved since the call ended. Smart girl. Or maybe she finally understands that there's nowhere to run that I won't find her.

"Send Matteo's team to secure the perimeter." My voice comes out steady despite the chaos raging beneath my skin. "No one approaches without my express permission."

"And the Fiori compound?"

"Keep surveillance tight." I pull up thermal imaging of their property, searching for any sign of her brother. "The moment they move Tony, I want to know."

Years of running Chicago's underworld have taught me patience. Strategy. The careful calculation of when to strike and when to wait. But watching Ava's GPS signal pulse on my screens, knowing she's out there, pregnant, vulnerable, makes the monster in me snarl.

Mine, it whispers. Always mine.

"Sir?" Tomasso clears his throat. "About the wedding arrangements..."

"Everything stays on schedule." I trace Ava's location with one finger, remembering

how her skin felt under my touch just hours ago. "Have Giuseppe bring the documents to the safe house. And make sure the priest understands the...gravity of the situation."

A marriage certificate. A baby. The perfect chains to bind her to me forever.

The part of me that still remembers love—still remembers the wild boy who kissed her in moonlit gardens—wants to hate myself for this. For using her brother, her child, her desperation against her.

But that boy died with my father and brothers. Now there's only the Monster of Chicago, and he will do whatever necessary to keep what's his.

My phone buzzes as I receive the satellite photos from the Fiori compound. I study them with the detachment that's kept me alive in this business, registering entry points and security rotations. Beside me, Tomasso makes notes in his ever-present phone.

"Their west gate is light," he observes. "Could be an opening."

"Or a trap." I zoom in on the guardhouse. "They'll be expecting us to come for the boy."

"And Ava? She'll want to help?—"

"She'll do exactly as she's told. For once."

The words taste bitter at the memory of how beautifully she played me. How perfectly she slipped past my defenses with those dark eyes and clever lies. Part of me still burns to punish her for that, to show her exactly what happens to people who betray Stefano Rega.

But the bigger part, the part that's been searching for her for ten years, just needs her safe. Needs her close. Needs to make sure she'll never think of leaving again.

"Get me everything on the Fiori brothers' movements for the past month." I straighten my cuffs. "Bank records, phone logs, mistresses, anything we can use."

"Already compiling." Tomasso hesitates. "And if she runs again?"

My heart cramps with pain. Again. No, she will never run again. I can't stand the loss. I won't allow it.

"She won't." My voice is steely. "Because this time, she's going to learn exactly why they call me Monster."

My phone lights up with another text from our surveillance team. Ava's still waiting, exactly where I ordered her to be. The sight sends satisfaction purring through my chest.

Soon, tesoro.

Soon she'll understand—every lie, every betrayal, every moment she thought she was playing me has only led her exactly where she was always meant to be.

In my bed. In my life.

Forever.

"Make the calls," I tell Tomasso, moving toward my weapons safe again. "It's time to remind Chicago what happens when someone takes what's mine."

## Page 64

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

The monster in me roars with approval, tasting victory and violence on the horizon. But beneath the bloodlust, beneath the rage and betrayal, something else stirs.

Hope.

Because maybe, just maybe, trapping her will finally silence the wild boy who's been searching for her all these years. Maybe possessing her completely will heal the wound she left when she disappeared.

This time, she'll stay.

Whether she wants to or not.

\* \* \*

The weapons safe opens silently, well-oiled hinges a testament to frequent use. Each gun, each blade represents a piece of the empire I never wanted, each thing part of the legacy that killed my brothers and broke my mother's spirit.

The legacy I'll pass to the child growing in Ava's womb.

My hands move with practiced efficiency, selecting artillery with the same precision I once used to plan backpacking routes through Thailand. Funny how life works.

"The priest will be ready in three hours," Tomasso reports from the doorway. "Says he can have the paperwork rushed through by morning."

I slide a ceramic blade into my ankle holster. "Have our lawyer draw up the contracts." My voice carries no trace of turmoil. "Full legal custody of the child. All assets in my name. No room for...misunderstandings."

"She won't sign willingly."

"She will." I check my shoulder holster, muscle memory from years of violence guiding each movement. "Once she understands the alternative."

The alternative. Such a civilized way to describe what awaits her if she refuses, if she tries to take my child and run again.

My phone buzzes. Matteo confirming his team's position around Ava's location.

"The southeast warehouse is ready," Tomasso continues. "Private, secure. Giuseppe's bringing the marriage license himself."

Marriage. The word tastes strange on my tongue. Once, in another life, I dreamed of proposing to Ava properly. Of getting down on one knee in that garden where we first kissed, promising her adventure and freedom and love.

Instead, I'm arranging what amounts to a hostage ceremony. Forcing her to choose between my protection and whatever fate the Fioris have planned for her.

"Your sister's been asking about her." Tomasso's voice softens slightly. "Says Ava was kind to her."

This memory hits me even harder. Ava sitting with Angela, discussing books and dreams while my mother looked on with actual awareness in her eyes. For a moment, I can see the future I wanted and the family we could have been.



The fantasy shatters as another report comes in. Tony's location confirmed at the Fiori compound. They've arrived. Time to move.

"Call Father Antonio." I straighten my cuffs, adjusting my sleeve to hide the ceramic blade. "Tell him I need his specialty services. The kind that leave no paper trail."

A second ceremony. A backup plan. Because one way or another, Ava will be mine. Legally. Irrevocably. Completely.

"Stefano..." Tomasso hesitates. "Your father always said marriage should be?—"

"My father is dead." The words come out sharp enough to make him step back. "Along with every soft, weak part of me that might have cared about things like choice or romance."

But even as I say it, something in my chest aches. Because I do care. I care enough to become the very monster I swore I'd never be. I care enough to trap her in a cage of legal documents and wedding rings, just to keep her safe.

I care enough to destroy anyone who tries to take her from me again.

The last weapon slides into place – a garrote wire thin enough to pass any security check. My reflection in the gun safe's mirror shows a man I barely recognize. Expensive suit. Controlled power. Eyes cold enough to make Chicago's underworld tremble.

Nothing like the boy who once promised Ava freedom.

"Everything's in position, Boss." Tomasso's voice pulls me back to the present. "Just waiting on your word."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

I close the safe, each lock clicking into place like fate. Like chains. Like wedding bells.

"Call our friends in law enforcement." My voice carries no trace of the war inside me. "Make sure any...disturbances at the warehouse go unreported. And Tomasso?"

"Sir?"

"If she tries to run..." I pause, letting him see exactly what I've become. "Shoot her in the leg. Non-lethal wounds only. She's carrying my heir, after all."

The monster in me purrs at the words. My heir. My child. My Ava.

Mine forever, whether she wants to be or not.

Soon she'll learn everything else – how completely I own her, how futile running is, how desperately I'll destroy anyone who threatens what's mine.

Soon she'll understand exactly who I've become.

And why they call me Monster.

\* \* \*

My overnight bag sits open on the bed where Ava slept just hours ago.

Her scent still lingers on the sheets—jasmine and fear and something uniquely her

that makes the monster in me pace restlessly. I add a change of clothes methodically, each movement precise despite the rage and need churning beneath my skin.

A text from Matteo lights up my phone.

>> Target secured. No resistance.

Good. At least she's learned that much. She's learned when to surrender to the inevitable.

"The safe house is ready," Tomasso reports from the doorway. "Giuseppe delivered the papers personally. They just need signatures."

I zip the bag closed with more force than necessary. "And the priest?"

"Father Antonio's waiting for your call. Says he can perform the ceremony whenever you're ready."

The word "ceremony" almost makes me laugh. Nothing about this will be ceremonial. No white dress. No flower petals. No soft music or gentle vows.

Just iron-clad contracts and unbreakable chains disguised as wedding rings.

My phone feels heavy as I pull up the contact—not Father Antonio's number, but another. Someone who specializes in making problems disappear. In ensuring compliance when gentler methods fail.

The line connects on the first ring.

"It's me." I keep my voice neutral. "I need the package we discussed. Full set. Three hours."

A pause, then they say, "Wedding rings included?"

"Yes." My fingers trace the edge of my desk where Ava once sat, laughing at something I said. Before the lies unraveled. Before I found those pregnancy tests.

"Make them impossible to remove without tools."

Another pause. Understanding. "Like handcuffs with diamonds."

"Exactly." I check my watch. Time is ticking down until I have her completely in my grasp. "The usual price. Plus extra for discretion."

"Always a pleasure, Mr. Rega."

The call ends and I turn to find Tomasso watching me carefully. He's been by my side since we were children, seen every part of the transformation I made from wild boy to ruthless boss. He's the only one who might understand why I have to do this.

"She'll fight it," he says quietly.

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*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

"Let her. She can hate me all she wants as long as she's alive to do it."

Alive and mine. Forever.

The security feed shows her huddled in the back of Matteo's car, one hand pressed protectively over her still-flat stomach. The sight makes something unfurl in my chest.

My child. My heir. My Ava.

"Send word to the Fioris." I shoulder my bag, already moving toward the door. "Let them know I will be coming for the boy soon. And Tomasso?"

"Sir?"

"Make sure they understand exactly what happens to people who touch what's mine."

He nods, already typing on his phone. We both know what comes next: violence and blood and all the darkness I've tried to keep separate from Ava.

But she made her choice when she ran. When she lied. When she tried to take my child and disappear into the night like smoke.

Now she'll learn what it means to belong to the Monster of Chicago.

"Time to go." I check my weapons one final time, each movement automatic after years of practice. "Let's get my bride."

The word tastes like victory and violence on my tongue. Like possession and punishment and everything I've become.

Everything I'll gladly do to keep her safe.

To keep her.

Forever.

## CHAPTERSEVENTEEN

Ava

A black SUV stops next to my car. Tinted windows, a slight suspension lift that marks it as armored—It's Matteo's preferred vehicle for 'special' situations.

He steps out like a shadow coming to life, all efficient movement and contained purpose. His eyes scan the area before landing on me, and while the usual warmth is gone, there's still respect in his gaze. He offers me professional courtesy, even now.

"Ms. D'Amato." He gestures toward the SUV. "If you would, please."

I appreciate that he's maintaining civility, even though we both know it's not really a request. My training catches more details as I move: his stance, his sight lines, the way his jacket sits. Armed, obviously. Ready for trouble.

Ready for me.

"Matteo..." I start, but he shakes his head slightly.

"Please." Just one word, but it carries weight. "Let's not make this more difficult than

it needs to be."

Fair enough. I let him guide me toward the SUV, his hand on my elbow firm but not rough. Meanwhile, my mind notes which of his men are positioned where.

Three vehicles, I count automatically. Eight men minimum, by the shadows I can make out. Heavy response for one pregnant woman.

Unless they know about the Fioris. Unless they're expecting company.

"My brother..." I try again as he opens the passenger door.

"Will be taken care of," he assures me, and there's genuine sympathy in his voice now. "But first, we need to move."

The door closes with quiet finality, and I catch my reflection in the tinted window—pale face, dark eyes huge with fear I can't quite hide. I look exactly like what I am: a con artist whose game just went terribly wrong.

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*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

Matteo slides into the driver's seat, and I notice his knuckles are scraped. Fresh marks. Someone's already paid for what happened today.

I pray it wasn't Tony.

The engine purrs to life, and we pull onto the empty highway. Away from the Fioris. Away from Tony. Away from any chance of controlling what happens next.

"Where are we going?" I ask, though I know he won't answer.

He glances at me, expression carefully neutral. "You'll understand soon enough."

So, I watch the road signs instead, memorizing our route out of habit. West, then south. Back toward Chicago. Back toward Stefano.

Back toward whatever punishment he's planned for my betrayal.

My hand drifts to my stomach. It's still flat.

But this child is the reason I can't run anymore.

\* \* \*

Hours blur passed in silence, broken only by the quiet hum of the engine and occasional murmurs from Matteo's earpiece. Each time it crackles to life, my heart jumps, waiting for news about Tony, about the Fioris, about whatever fate Stefano has planned for us.



The highway gives way to city streets, though not Chicago's. Different skyline. Different rhythm. My mind automatically identifies cross streets and landmarks, building a mental map I hope I won't need.

"You should try to rest," Matteo says, the first words he's spoken in over an hour. "It's been a long day."

A hysterical laugh threatens to bubble up. Rest? When my brother's being held by the Fioris? When I'm being driven to God knows where by Stefano's right-hand man?

When my whole world is collapsing around me?

Instead, I say, "I'm fine," and keep watching the city scroll past us. More black SUVs have joined our convoy—three ahead, two behind. Whatever's waiting for us, it's big enough to warrant serious security.

My stomach rolls, and this time it's not morning sickness. It's pure, primal fear.

We pull up to a hotel. It's one of those old-money places where the doormen wear suits. Black vehicles line the circular drive, their drivers standing at perfect parade rest beside their doors. Waiting.

"Matteo." My voice comes out steadier than I feel. "What is this?"

He puts the SUV in park but doesn't turn off the engine. For a moment, he just sits there, hands still on the wheel, like he's choosing his words carefully.

"You made your choices," he says finally. "Now Stefano's making his."

"That's not an answer."

"No." He meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. "It's a warning."

The simple statement sends chills down my spine. Because Matteo has always been kind to me, even after everything. For him to be this serious, this formal...

"Is he going to kill me?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

Something flickers across his face, surprise, maybe even hurt. "You really think he could?"

Before I can answer, my door opens. Another of Stefano's men stands at perfect attention, hand extended to help me out, like I'm a guest rather than a prisoner.

But the gun at his hip tells a different story.

Matteo appears on my other side, his presence both reassuring and terrifying. "Time to face the music, Ms. D'Amato."

The hotel lobby gleams with old-world luxury, but I barely notice. My attention is fixed on the men positioned at every exit, the cameras tracking our movement, the way the regular guests seem to instinctively shy away from our group.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

They know predators when they see them.

And right now, I'm being led straight to the alpha.

The hotel's grandeur feels like a slap in the face—all gilt and crystal, old money and power. Black-suited men are everywhere, their presence turning the elegant lobby into something more ominous. Every exit is covered. Every angle is watched.

"What is this place?" I ask again, but Matteo just steers me toward a side hallway, his hand firm on my elbow.

More security appears as we move deeper into the hotel. These people I recognize. They are Stefano's inner circle, the ones who handle his most sensitive business. The ones who clean up messes.

Like me.

We pass what looks like a bridal party, their laughter jarring against the tension in the air. The sight of white lace and flowers makes something twist in my chest. Such a normal celebration in the middle of whatever this is that's happening to me.

Matteo guides me around another corner, and my heart nearly stops. A conference room door stands open, flanked by more security. Inside, I catch a glimpse of dark suits, serious faces, and at the center of it all...

Stefano.

He stands with his back to the door, but I'd know him anywhere. The set of his shoulders. The controlled power in his stance. The way everyone else in the room orbits around him like planets around the sun.

Or moths around a flame.

"Please," I start, digging my heels in slightly. "Just tell me what's happening."

"Not my place to say." Matteo's voice is gentle but implacable as he urges me forward. "You need to hear it from him."

The conference room feels like a trap closing as we enter. It boasts clean lines and expensive furniture. It's the kind of room where billion-dollar deals are made. Or maybe where death sentences are handed down.

Stefano turns, and the sight of his face steals my breath. Not because he looks angry, though there's plenty of that simmering beneath the surface. But because he looks...resolute. Like a man who's made an impossible decision and won't be swayed from it.

I open my mouth to speak, to explain, to beg for Tony's life, if nothing else.

But he holds up one hand, the gesture silencing me more effectively than a shout.

"When were you going to tell me about the baby?"

The question hits like a physical blow. Of all the things I expected him to say, this wasn't it. The room suddenly feels too small, too warm, too full of prying eyes.

And Stefano's gaze never wavers from mine, waiting for an answer I'm not sure how to give.

The words feel like ice water. My hand moves instinctively to my stomach before I can stop it, a tell I can't afford right now.

"I—" But what can I say? That I was planning to disappear with his child? That I thought I could outrun both him and the Fioris? That I was trying to protect everyone and managed to destroy everything instead?

Stefano's eyes track my movement, something dark and possessive flashing across his face. He steps closer, and despite all my training, I have to fight not to back away.

"The pregnancy tests in the bathroom," he continues, voice deceptively soft. "When did you find out?"

Around us, men in dark suits shift uncomfortably. This isn't the kind of conversation that should have an audience. Yet no one moves to leave.

Because this isn't just about the baby. This is about power. Control. Consequences.

"Yesterday," I manage finally. "I found out yesterday."

"And you ran." Not a question. An accusation.

"The Fioris?—"

"Were always going to be a problem." He moves closer still, until I can smell his cologne and feel the heat radiating from his body. "One I could have handled if you'd trusted me. If you'd been honest."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

Guilt threatens to choke me. Because he's right. If I'd just told him the truth from the beginning...

But I didn't. And now Tony's paying the price.

"My brother," I start, but again he cuts me off.

"Will be handled." His voice carries absolute certainty. "But first, we're going to handle this."

Something in his tone makes my skin prickle. I look around the room again, really look this time. The formal suits. The air of ceremony. The way everyone seems to be waiting for something.

Oh God.

"Stefano," I whisper, realization dawning. "What are you planning?"

His smile is predatory. "I'm protecting what's mine."

The words hang in the air between us, heavy with promise and threat. Because this—the hotel, the security, the formality—this isn't just about keeping me safe.

This is about making sure I can never run again.

\* \* \*

"Marriage." The word comes out barely above a whisper. "You're talking about marriage."

"A simple solution, really." Stefano's voice sounds reasonable now. Like he's discussing a business transaction rather than the rest of our lives.

"You need protection. The child needs legitimacy. I need..." He pauses, something raw flickering across his face. "Insurance that you won't disappear again."

"There are other ways..."

"Are there?" His calm façade cracks slightly. "Because from where I'm standing, you've left me very few options, Ava. You infiltrated my organization. Betrayed my trust. Carried my child while working for my enemies." Each accusation lands hard. "And then you ran, taking everything that matters to me in one neat little package."

The guilt is crushing, but I force myself to meet his eyes. "I was trying to protect everyone."

"By lying? By running?" He laughs, but there's no humor in it. "By making deals with people who would kill you and our child without hesitation?"

"I never made any deals!" The words burst out before I can stop them. "I never told them anything! The club is clean, you know it's clean. I was just trying to get enough money to leave Chicago, to get Tony somewhere safe?—"

"And how did that work out?"

The question hits like a slap. Because he's right. My brilliant plan has left my brother in the Fioris' hands and me at Stefano's mercy.

My eyes dart to the door, calculating distances, angles, odds. It's stupid. I know it's stupid. But panic makes you do crazy things.

I make it three steps before hands catch me, gentle but implacable. Not Stefano's men. This time, it's Matteo himself. Like he knew I'd try.

"Don't," he says softly. "You'll only make it worse."

"Worse than a forced marriage?" I struggle anyway, more out of principle than hope.

"Worse than being trapped in this life forever?"

"Worse than being dead?" Stefano's voice cuts through my panic. "Because that's the alternative, Ava. The Fioris won't stop. Won't show mercy. Not to you, not to Tony, and certainly not to my child."

The simple truth of it steals my breath. Because he's right again. There is no running from this. No clever con or quick escape that ends with everyone safe.

"I just wanted something different," I whisper, tears finally spilling over. "For Tony. For the baby. A normal life, away from all this darkness."

Stefano's expression softens. He moves closer, reaching up to brush away a tear with his thumb. The gesture is achingly gentle, at odds with the steel in his voice.

"I know," he says quietly. "But this is the life we were born into. The only way to survive it is to face it. Together."



"As your prisoner?"

"As my wife." His hand slides to my neck, thumb resting over my pulse. "Protected. Provided for. Free to build whatever life you want—within reason." His grip tightens slightly. "But you'll never run from me again. Never take my child away. Those are my terms."

I close my eyes, feeling the trap close around me. Around us. "And Tony?"

"He'll be retrieved. Protected. Given the same chances you're being offered."

"If I marry you."

"You're marrying me regardless." The steel returns to his voice. "I'm just being polite by pretending you have a choice."

More tears fall, but I barely notice them now. Because underneath the fear and guilt and resignation, there's something else. Something that feels dangerously like relief.

Relief that I don't have to run anymore. Relief that I don't have to lie or scheme or play both sides against the middle.

Relief that, for better or worse, someone else is taking control.

Even if that someone is Stefano Rega.

"Okay," I whisper, opening my eyes to meet his gaze. "I'll marry you. Just...please."

Save my brother."

His kiss tastes like victory and possession, like promises I can't take back. Around us, men move with renewed purpose, the machinery of power spinning into action.

But all I can focus on is Stefano's hand, still curved around my neck. Claiming. Protecting. Trapping.

"It could be worse," Matteo murmurs as he leads me toward whatever comes next. "He does love you, you know. Even after everything."

I think of the way Stefano looked at me this morning, soft with sleep and trust I hadn't earned. The gentle way he'd touched me, whispered "I love you".

The way he's turning the world upside down now, just to keep me.

"I know," I whisper back. "That's what terrifies me."

Because love like that, possessive, obsessive, absolute, is its own kind of prison.

And I just agreed to a life sentence.

## CHAPTEREIGHTEEN

Stefano

The priest's flawless Latin during the recital of the marriage ceremony echoes through the conference room, transforming the sterile corporate space into something almost sacred. Almost. If you ignore the armed men at every exit and the way Ava's hands tremble in mine. The steel bands we're calling wedding rings glint in the light.

She won't look at me. She hasn't since Matteo brought her in. She's beautiful and broken in a cream dress someone procured at my command. Her skin is pale, with dark circles under her eyes, betraying how little she's slept. My doing. My punishment. My protection.

"I do." The words fall from her lips like stones, heavy with resignation. No joy. No love. Just surrender.

It should satisfy the monster in me. It should feel like victory, watching her bow to inevitability. Instead, something twists in my chest, sharp and bitter.

This isn't how I imagined marrying her. Even in my darkest fantasies, there was always fire in her eyes. Defiance. In my dreams, I would stare at the spark of fierce strength that made me fall for her all those years ago as we were married.

Now this hollow compliance tastes like ash.

"I do," I echo when prompted, letting my grip tighten on her fingers, letting her feel the strength that could crush or protect.

The priest pronounces us man and wife, his voice carrying no judgment. Smart man. I pay well for discretion, for understanding that sometimes monsters need legitimacy too.

Ava's pulse races beneath my thumb where it rests against her wrist. From fear? Anger? The child making her heart work harder? I observe each flutter, each tremor, storing them away with all the other details that make her mine.

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*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

"It's done," I murmur as the priest gathers his things. Security begins clearing the room with practiced efficiency. "Legal. Binding. Irreversible."

She says nothing, but her fingers clench slightly in mine. It's the first real reaction I've gotten from her since this began.

"Shall we?" I gesture toward the door, toward the suite waiting upstairs. Toward our future, whether she wants it or not.

The elevator ride is silent, heavy with words we won't say. She stands as far from me as the small space allows, one hand pressed protectively over her stomach. Over our child. The sight makes possession roar through my blood.

Mine. All mine.

The suite door closes behind us with quiet finality. Ava moves immediately to the window, putting distance between us. The city sparkles beyond the glass, lights blurring in the gathering dusk.

"Your brother will be retrieved tonight," I say, watching her reflection tense at my voice. "Tomasso has a team in position. By morning, this will all be settled."

"Nothing about this is settled." Her voice comes out raw with the first words she's spoken since her vows. "You've just made it more complicated."

"Have I?" I move closer, letting her feel my presence at her back. "Seems simple to me. You're my wife. That child is my heir. Everything else is just..." I lean in, lips

brushing her ear. "Details."

She shivers, though whether from fear or something else, I can't tell. "And what happens when the Fioris retaliate? When they come after all of us?"

"Let them try." The words come out dark, promising violence. "I'll paint Chicago red with their blood before I let them touch what's mine."

"Yours." She laughs, the sound edged with hysteria. "Is that all I am now? Just another possession for the great Stefano Rega to lock away?"

The question hits harder than it should. Because she's wrong—she's never been just anything to me. Even now, after her betrayal, after forcing this ceremony, after everything...

She's still the girl who haunts my dreams. Still the woman who makes the monster in me purr. Still the only person who's ever made me want something more than power and control.

"You could have been so much more," I admit, the words tasting like regret. "If you'd trusted me. If you'd been honest."

"Honest?" She turns finally, dark eyes flashing with the first real emotion I've seen since this began. "Like you were honest about having me followed? About planning this whole thing the moment I left?"

"I've never lied to you." I catch her chin, holding her gaze. "Never pretended to be anything other than what I am: a monster, a possessive, obsessive bastard who's spent ten years searching for you." My grip tightens slightly. "A monster who would burn down heaven and earth to keep you now that I've found you again."

Tears gather in her eyes, but she blinks them back. Still fighting, even now. "I never asked for any of this."

"No?" I trace her lower lip with my thumb. "You never wanted the protection I could offer? The safety? The chance to give our child a future secured by blood and violence instead of cons and running?"

She tries to pull away, but I hold firm. "I wanted freedom."

"And I wanted you." The confession burns like whiskey, like blood, like everything dark and dangerous between us. "I've experienced years of wanting you, Ava, dreaming of you, searching for you." I lean closer, until our breaths mingle. "Did you really think I'd let you slip away again? Let you take my child and disappear into the night?"

"I thought..." Her voice cracks. "I thought I was protecting everyone."

"By lying? By running?" Anger rises again, hot and familiar. "By working for people who would kill you without hesitation?"

"I never gave them anything!" The words burst from her like she can't hold them back. "Never betrayed your secrets. Never?—"

I silence her with a kiss, swallowing her protests with my mouth. She fights for a moment, hands pushing against my chest, before surrendering with a sob that tastes like defeat. Like submission.

I don't just want her body. Her obedience. Her resignation to this cage I've built.

I want her fire. Her defiance. Her love.

But for now, I'll take what I can get. Keep her close. Keep her safe. Keep her mine in every way that matters.

Even if she hates me for it.

Even if part of me hates myself.

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"Get some rest," I say, pulling away before I do something we'll both regret. "Tomorrow will be...eventful."

She nods once, the gesture mechanical and empty, before retreating to the bedroom, leaving me alone with the weight of choices that feel both absolutely right and terribly wrong.

But watching her curl protectively around her stomach, around our child, I know I'd make the same choice again to keep her safe. A thousand times.

\* \* \*

The sound of running water is driving me insane.

I pace the hotel suite like a caged animal, each step measured against the quiet splash of Ava bathing in the next room. My wife.

The monster in me pictures her in there, water sliding over olive skin, belly still flat but carrying my child. Mine. The word pounds through my blood with each step.

"Status update," I bark into my phone, needing distraction.

"Team's in position," Tomasso reports. "Waiting for your word to move on the Fiori compound."

I should be focused on the mission. On rescuing her brother. On all the chess pieces I need to move to keep everyone safe.



Instead, all I can think about is her on the other side of that door.

My control snaps like a wire pulled too tight.

The bathroom door opens silently under my hand, releasing a cloud of steam into the suite. Ava stands in the massive tub, water sluicing down her back, dark hair clinging to wet skin.

She freezes at the sound of my entrance, spine going rigid. For a moment, she doesn't move—doesn't even seem to breathe.

Neither do I.

The air is thick, humid, and it clings to my lungs as I take her in. The curve of her spine, the dip of her waist, the swell of her hips.

Water cascades down her body, catching the light from the overhead fixture, glistening like liquid gold. My pulse quickens, a raw, primal hunger surging through me. I don't move. I don't speak. I just stare.

Her shoulders tense, and I can see the subtle shift in her breathing, the way her ribcage expands and contracts with slow, deliberate breaths.

The moment stretches, taut and electric, like a bowstring pulled to its limit. My eyes trace every inch of her, memorizing the way the water clings to her skin, the way her hair falls in damp tendrils down her back.

God, I want her.

I want to push her against the wall, to pin her there and claim her mouth with mine. I want to feel her body pressed against me, to hear her moan when I touch her, to taste

the salt of her skin as I trail kisses down her neck.

I want to consume her, to make her mine in every possible way

My fingers twitch at my side, itching to reach out, to bridge the distance between us. But I don't. I can't.

Then she whirls, eyes wide with shock that quickly blazes into fury.

"What the hell?" She scrambles to cover herself, though we both know it's pointless. Every inch of her body is already mapped in my memory. "Get out!"

"My wife." The words come out rough as I stalk closer. "In my tub. In my hotel." My eyes trace the water droplets running down her throat, between her breasts, over the slight curve of her stomach where our child grows. "Everything exactly as it should be."

"There is nothing about this that's how it should be." Rage makes her voice shake as she wraps her arms around herself. It's not modesty. It's defiance. "This isn't a marriage. It's kidnapping with paperwork."

"It's protection." I reach the tub, close enough to feel the steam rising between us. "The only way to keep you both safe."

"Safe?" She laughs bitterly. "Like Tony is safe right now? Being tortured by the Fioris while you play house?"

The accusation stings, but I push past it. "He's not being tortured. We're in discussions with them about— Like I said, Tomasso's team moves tonight. By morning, your brother will be secured, one way or another." My hand finds her shoulder, skin slick beneath my palm. "Everything I do is to protect you."

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She tries to jerk away, but there's nowhere to go. "And once he's safe? Will you let us go then? Let us have the normal life we deserve?"

"Never." The word comes out like a growl. "You're carrying my heir, Ava. There is no normal life. No running. No escape." I cup her face, forcing her to meet my gaze. "The sooner you accept that, the happier we'll all be."

Tears spill down her cheeks, mingling with water. "I wanted to be happy about the baby," she whispers, anger cracking to reveal raw pain beneath. "Wanted to dream about nurseries and names and first steps. But you've turned it into a chain, into a reason to cage me."

The words hit like bullets, making something in my chest ache. Because I understand, God help me, I do. In another life, this could have been different. Should have been different.

"It doesn't have to be a cage." I brush away her tears with my thumb. "Stay willingly. Be my wife, really be my wife. Let me give you and our child everything."

"Everything except freedom."

"Freedom is an illusion." I lean closer, our breaths mingling. "The Fioris would hunt you forever. Other families would see you as leverage against me. The only safety is here. With me. Under my protection."

She shakes her head, more tears falling. "I can't. I can't just accept this. I can't accept you forcing me?—"

"Forcing you to live?" My voice rises slightly. "Forcing you to let me protect you? Yes, Ava. That's exactly what I'm doing. Because you've proven you can't be trusted to make smart choices."

"And you're so much better?" She shoves against my chest, water splashing between us. "The great Stefano Rega, so obsessed with a girl from his past that he'd force her to marry him? Trap her? Control her every move?"

"Yes." I catch her wrists, pulling her closer despite her struggles. "Because that obsession keeps you alive. That control keeps our child safe. That trap..." I rest my forehead against hers. "That trap is the only thing standing between you and a world that would destroy everything I love."

The admission hangs between us, heavy with implications neither of us is ready to face. Because despite everything—the betrayal, the lies, the forced marriage—there's still this, this gravitational pull that makes resistance impossible.

This love that tastes like violence and redemption all at once.

"Please," she whispers, but I'm not sure what she's asking for anymore. Freedom? Understanding? Something even she can't name?

"I can't let you go." My voice comes out softer than intended. "Not now. Not ever. But I can try to make this cage gilded. Make it feel less like punishment and more like protection." I brush my lips across her forehead. "If you let me."

She shudders, tears still falling, but doesn't pull away. Progress, maybe. Or just exhaustion.

The sight of her tears undoes me.

I surge forward, capturing her mouth with mine, swallowing her gasp of surprise. For one perfect moment, she melts against me, all soft curves and wet skin and instinctive surrender.

My hands slide into her hair, holding her exactly where I want her as I pour every ounce of rage and possession and desperate need into the kiss.

This. This is what I want. What I need. What keeps me awake at night—her body yielding to mine, her defenses crumbling, everything between us reduced to pure sensation and chemistry.

Her lips part, and I take full advantage, my tongue sweeping into her mouth, claiming her. She tastes like mint and something sweet, something uniquely her. Her hands are on my chest, but they're not pushing me away. No, they're gripping me, her fingers digging into my shirt like she's trying to hold on.

I groan against her mouth, the sound harsh and needy. My hands roam her body, mapping every curve, every dip.

My lips trail down her jaw, her neck, sucking at the sensitive skin just below her ear. She gasps, her head tilting back to give me better access, and I take it, my teeth grazing her pulse point. She's trembling, her hands gripping my shoulders like she's afraid she'll fall.

I kiss my way down her neck, over her collarbone, and then, my mouth is on her breast, sucking hard. She cries out, her fingers tangling in my hair, pulling me closer.

I groan, licking, sucking, biting just hard enough to make her gasp. She's panting now, her body arching into me, her hands still in my hair, holding me there.

“You taste so fucking good,” I mutter against her skin, my breath hot, and she

whimpers, her hips rocking against mine.

I drop to my knees in front of her, my hands sliding up her thighs, and I waste no time burying my face between her legs.

She's perfect. She's wet and hot, and I can't get enough of her. My tongue flicks over her clit, and she cries out, her hands fisting in my hair. I do it again, harder this time, and she's trembling, her knees buckling.

She makes a sudden harsh noise in her throat and her hands come up hard against my shoulders, shoving me back with unexpected strength.

Water splashes between us as she puts distance between our bodies, almost falling into the tub, her eyes blazing with renewed fury and barely restrained desire.

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"Don't." Her voice shakes. "Don't you dare touch me like that. Like nothing's changed. Like you haven't turned everything into this...this prison."

The rejection hits harder than it should. It makes the monster in me want to grab her, force her to acknowledge what's still between us. I want to force her to admit that her body betrays her every time I'm near.

Instead, I let ice replace fire in my veins. Let the mask of control slide back into place.

"You're right." My voice comes out cold, clinical. "This was a mistake. You're nothing but a distraction now, one I can't afford when I have the Fioris to deal with."

She flinches like I've struck her.

Fuck.

"Perfect." Her laugh holds no humor. "Go be the big bad Monster of Chicago. That's all you're good for anyway, right? Violence and control and making everyone around you miserable?"

The words are designed to wound, and they do. But I don't let it show. Can't let it show. Not when there's still so much at stake.

"Get some rest, Mrs. Rega. You'll be a widow by morning if I don't focus on what matters."

"And what matters?" She wraps her arms around herself, suddenly looking very young and vulnerable despite her anger. "Your empire? Your reputation? Your need to own everything and everyone around you?"

"Keeping you alive." The words come out sharp. "Keeping our child safe. Keeping your brother from being carved into pieces by people who'd kill us all without hesitation." I move toward the door, needing distance before I do something we'll both regret. "Even if it means being exactly the monster you think I am."

"Stefano..."

But I'm already gone, slamming the door with enough force to rattle the frame.

Fucking hell!

My phone buzzes. Tomasso with another update—they've moved the boy to another location.

Shit.

Time to focus on what I can control. What I can fix. What I can protect through violence and money and all the other tools at my disposal.

Because love clearly isn't enough. Never has been. Never will be.

And I have a war to win.

Even if it means losing the only battle that ever really mattered.

CHAPTERNINETEEN



Ava

The hotel room could be beautiful, if I bothered to notice. Floor-to-ceiling windows, designer furniture, views that go on and on, much like Stefano's penthouse. But all I see are the exits I can't use, the doors I'm not allowed to open.

It's a cage, no matter how gilded.

My wedding ring catches in the light, mocking me. The ceremony was hours ago, but it feels like another lifetime. Like something that happened to someone else.

Maybe it did. Maybe that girl who dreamed of Montana and freedom died somewhere between the diner and this room.

I pace the perimeter again, registering details out of habit. There are two guards outside the door. I can hear their quiet movements. There's another team on the floor below, watching the windows. The ventilation system is too small for even my slender frame. The balcony is tempting, but the drop would...

I stop that thought cold. Potential suicide isn't my style. Never has been. The D'Amatos are survivors, if nothing else. We adapt. We plan. We find solutions others miss.

But right now, all my available options lead nowhere.

Tony's silence eats at me worse than any physical pain. Is he hurt? Scared? Does he hate me for getting him into this mess? The Fioris aren't known for their gentle handling of hostages.

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My hand drifts to my stomach, the center of everything now. It's the reason I can't run. The reason Stefano won't let me go. The reason everything's falling apart.

No. Not the reason. Just the final complication in a game I played badly from the start.

The room's phone sits silent on the desk. I check it anyway, for the hundredth time. Nothing from my Fiori contact. Nothing from Tony. Nothing from anyone.

Just silence and guilt and the weight of choices I can't take back.

A wave of nausea hits again but I make it to the bathroom just in time, heaving up whatever's left in my stomach. The marble wall is cool against my forehead as I sit there, trying to breathe through it.

"Some con artist you turned out to be," I mutter to my reflection. The woman in the mirror looks like a stranger—pale face, red eyes, designer clothes that feel like a costume.

Mrs. Rega. The title sits wrong, like shoes that don't quite fit.

But it's who I am now. Who I'll always be.

Unless I can find a way to fix this mess. To save everyone without destroying everything.

My father's voice echoes in my head: "There's always another angle, piccola. Always

a way out. You just have to be willing to see it."

I stand up, splashing water on my face. Time to think like a professional. Time to find that angle.

I have a lot to make up for.

\* \* \*

Hours pass, as shadows lengthen across the hotel room floor. I've counted every ceiling tile, noted every security camera angle, memorized the patrol patterns of the guards outside my door.

The windows draw me like a magnet. Chicago spreads out below me, glittering and indifferent. Somewhere out there, Tony's being held by people who think nothing of breaking bones and murdering to make a point. Somewhere out there, the Fiori family is planning their next move.

And here I am, wearing a wedding ring that feels like handcuffs.

I start pacing again.

What do I know? What can I use?

The club is clean. That's why I couldn't find anything to report to the Fioris. Stefano runs it legitimately, protects his girls, keeps everything above board.

The girls. God, what will happen to them if Stefano hands over the club? The Fioris aren't known for their ethical treatment of employees. Kira, Mattina, all of them—they don't deserve to pay for my mistakes.

My pacing takes me past the bathroom, and I catch another glimpse of myself before returning to the bedroom.

"Think," I mutter, pulling a hotel notepad toward me. "Professional. Strategic."

My hands shake slightly as I start mapping out what I know.

The Fioris want the club. The girls will suffer. They have Tony. From what I've heard so far, they've moved him to a new location, to prevent an attack at their base from Stefano.

But Stefano had already decided against it. He's willing to trade. More than the club.

The baby changes everything.

I think about the last point longer than the others. Because it does change everything, doesn't it? Not just my ability to run, but Stefano's choices too. He's not just protecting me anymore—he's protecting his heir.

The thought makes me pause, pen hovering over my notes.

Stefano Rega, third son turned empire builder, about to give up part of his territory. For what? A woman who betrayed him? A brother-in-law he barely knows?

No. For his child.

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*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

The realization hits hard. He's not just making a trade. He's dismantling everything he's built to protect our baby's future. To keep us safe.

To give us what we need, even if it costs him everything.

"Dammit, Stefano," I whisper, crumpling the paper in my fist. Because this is exactly what I was trying to prevent by running. This sacrifice. This destruction of everything he's worked for.

I press my hands flat against the desk to stop their shaking. Options. I need options.

The Fioris want power. Territory. Control.

Stefano wants me safe. The baby safe. Tony alive.

I want...

What do I want?

Freedom seems like such a simple answer now. Such a childish dream compared to the reality we're facing.

Because the truth is, I want more than that. I want Tony safe. I want the club girls protected. I want my child to have a future that isn't built on their father's ruined empire.

I want Stefano to stop looking at me like I broke something precious between us.

Any moment now, Stefano will make that trade to save my brother. To protect me, even though I've given him every reason not to.

And I'm sitting here, using all my training to what? Write lists? Feel sorry for myself?

My father would be ashamed. My mother would be laughing.

Because they taught me better than this. Taught me that when the game changes, you adapt. When the rules don't work, you make new ones.

When everything's falling apart, you find a way to put it back together.

Even if it means sacrificing pieces of yourself in the process.

Through the walls, I hear muted activity, guards changing shifts, phones buzzing, the machinery of Stefano's organization preparing for the exchange.

I force myself to really look at what Stefano's offering to sacrifice. The club is just the beginning.

For my safety.

For our child.

My hands shake as I pour a glass of water, trying to steady myself. This isn't the Stefano I thought I knew, the ruthless boss, the man they call Monster. This is someone else.

This is the boy who promised to follow me to the ends of the earth.

The man who said he loved me just yesterday.

This is a father willing to burn his empire to protect his child.

"Oh God," I whisper, the glass slipping from my fingers to shatter on the floor.  
Because I've been so wrong. So blind.

I wasn't the only one trying to protect people. Wasn't the only one making impossible choices.

While I was running, he was planning to sacrifice everything to keep us safe. While I was lying, he was preparing to give up his life's work for a child he just found out about.

While I was breaking his heart, he was finding ways to save us all.

Even if it meant destroying himself in the process.

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*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:44 am*

The pieces of broken glass glitter, reflecting truths I've been too scared to face. About him. About us. About what love really means in this dark world we inhabit.

And suddenly, sitting here in this beautiful prison, watching the man I love prepare to destroy himself to save me, I realize I can't let him do this.

I won't.

Minutes pass with no word from anyone. No threatening calls from the Fioris. No word from my husband and his team. Just silence that weighs heavier by the minute.

I start pacing, running through old cons in my head, looking for anything that might help us now.

The sound of the door opening makes me freeze. Stefano stands in the doorway, his silhouette sharp against the hallway lights. Even exhausted, even hurting, he radiates that controlled power that drew me to him from the start.

"The exchange is set," he says without preamble. "Two hours. The club and half the southern routes for your brother."

The clinical way he describes giving up his empire makes my chest ache. "You can't."

"It's done." He steps into the room but maintains his distance. Always so careful now, where once he couldn't keep his hands off me. "The paperwork is being drawn up."

"The girls?—"



"Will be given severance packages. Enough to start over somewhere else." His voice is flat, emotionless. "I take care of my people, Ava. Even when I'm being forced to let them go."

The guilt threatens to choke me. Because this is my fault. All of it.

"There has to be another way." I step toward him, glass crunching under my feet. "Something we haven't thought of?—"

"The Fioris won't negotiate and if we attack them, I can't guarantee your brother's safety." Finally, a crack in his control, the frustration bleeding through. "They want territory. Power. A foothold in Chicago that buying the club legitimately would never give them."

"And you're just going to give it to them?"

"For Tony's life? For your safety?" His laugh is bitter. "In a heartbeat."

"I never asked for this." The words come out small, broken. "I never wanted you to destroy everything you've built."

"No." He moves closer, close enough that I can see the exhaustion on his face, the worry lines around his eyes. "You just wanted to run. To take my child and disappear. To decide all our fates without giving me a chance to protect you."

Each accusation lands hard. Because he's right. I did try to control everything. I did try to make all the choices myself. Just like I've accused him of doing.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, and mean it more than I've ever meant anything. "I was so focused on protecting everyone that I couldn't see you were trying to do the same thing."

Something shifts in his expression—surprise, maybe. Or hope. "And now?"

"Now..." I take a deep breath, squaring my shoulders. "Now I think it's time we started working together instead of against each other."

"It's too late for that." But he doesn't move away when I step closer. "The deal is made."

"Then unmake it." Another step. "You're Stefano fucking Rega. The man they call Monster. Since when do you let anyone dictate terms to you?"

"Since they took my wife's brother. Since they threatened my child."

I flinch, because he's right. This is my fault. All of it.

"There has to be another way," I try, but the words sound hollow even to me.

"There isn't." He turns to leave, then pauses in the doorway. "The exchange is at midnight. Try to get some rest before then."

I watch him go, unable to find words to stop him. Unable to fix what I've broken.

The silence returns, heavier than before, and I have to face the consequences of all my choices.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

And for the first time in my life, I have no plan. No angle. No clever con to make it all better.

Just the crushing weight of knowing I've destroyed everything I touched.

Including the one man who might have actually loved me.

### CHAPTERTWENTY

Stefano

The abandoned warehouse looms against the midnight sky, its broken windows reflecting moonlight like shattered dreams. Fitting place for what I'm about to do. For the empire I'm about to break.

"Perimeter's secure," Tomasso murmurs beside me as we approach the entrance. "Our men are in position if this goes south."

If. Such a small word for such a massive risk.

I adjust my cuffs. The monster is stirring and I need to control it for now. I push through the rusted doors.

The space inside is vast, empty except for the group waiting in the center. Dramatic staging, meant to intimidate.

Amateur hour.

The Fiori brothers stand like mirror images in their expensive suits, flanked by their soldiers. But my attention catches on the figure kneeling between them.

Tony.

The boy looks like hell, his face bruised, his clothes torn, trembling visibly even from this distance. They've worked him over thoroughly, though nothing appears permanently damaged.

Smart. They knew I'd check.

"Rega." Carlo Fiori's voice echoes in the empty space. "Right on time."

I move forward with measured steps, Tomasso a shadow at my shoulder. Every movement is calculated to project power, control, absolute certainty.

Even if I'm about to give away half my world.

"Let's skip the pleasantries." I stop ten feet away, close enough to see the fear in Tony's eyes. The confusion. The desperate plea for help he's trying to hide. "You have something that belongs to my family."

Marco Fiori smirks. "Family? The boy's just leverage. Like his sister." He nudges Tony with his foot, making him flinch. "Though I must say, she played her part beautifully. Almost had us convinced she was really working for us."

The casual mention of Ava makes the monster in me snarl, but I keep my face neutral. "The deal. State your terms."

"Simple enough." Carlo pulls out a manila envelope. "Sign over the club. Half your southern shipping routes. A few other...considerations we can discuss later."

"In exchange?"

Marco yanks Tony's head back by his hair. "In exchange, baby brother here gets to keep all his fingers. Gets to go home to big sister and your little heir."

The threat lands exactly as intended, making my blood burn with the need for violence. But I can't. Not yet. Not with Tony's life in the balance.

Not with my child's future at stake.

"Show me the paperwork."

Carlo tosses the envelope. I catch it one-handed and examine the contents. Everything appears straightforward—property deeds, transfer documents, all the bureaucratic documentation needed to dismantle my empire legally.

"Please," Tony whispers, voice cracking. "I don't know anything. I swear, I don't?—"

Marco backhands him, the sound echoing like a gunshot. "Shut up."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

My fingers tighten on the papers, leaving creases in the expensive stock. The monster in me takes note of every bruise, every mark they've left on my brother-in-law. Every debt that will need to be repaid.

With interest.

"The documents are in order." I pull out a pen, a matte black Mont Blanc, because appearances matter, even now. "Release him first."

"Sign first." Carlo's smile shows too many teeth. "Then maybe we will discuss terms for your wife's continued safety as well."

The threat hangs in the air between us. They know about the baby, know exactly which buttons to push.

Think they have all the power.

"Very well." I uncap the pen. "Let's make this official."

Because what they don't know, what Ava never understood, is that sometimes the biggest cons are the ones hiding in plain sight.

And I didn't become the Monster of Chicago by playing fair.

But then everything falls apart.

I see it in Carlo's eyes a split second before everything goes to shit.

The slight shift in his stance. The almost imperceptible nod to his men. The way his smile turns predatory in a way that has nothing to do with business.

"Run!" I roar at Tomasso, already moving as the first gun appears. My shoulder slams into Tony, sending him rolling away from Marco's grasp just as bullets tear through the space where we stood.

Years of violence have taught my body to react without thinking. I drive my elbow up into the nearest guard's throat while simultaneously drawing the ceramic blade from my sleeve. The guard drops, clutching his neck, as two more rush toward me.

"Get him out!" I shout to Tomasso over the chaos, seeing him grab Tony. A bullet grazes my arm, causing hot pain that I barely register. The monster in me is fully awake now, turning every movement into lethal poetry.

The first attacker reaches me with a wild haymaker, an amateur mistake. I duck under his swing, blade opening his femoral artery in one smooth motion. He goes down screaming as I pivot to meet the second man.

This one's better trained. He comes in low, trying to grapple me. I let him close the distance, using his momentum to drive my knee into his solar plexus. The crack of ribs is satisfying, but I don't have time to finish him.

Because Carlo Fiori is drawing a gun.

I dive behind a concrete pillar as shots explode around me, chips of stone stinging my face. Four hostiles down. At least six more, plus the brothers. And my ceramic blade won't do much good against firearms.

Unless...

A figure appears to my left, and muscle memory takes over. I catch his gun hand, forcing it up as his shot goes wide. My forehead smashes into his nose, the crunch lost under more gunfire. But now I have what I need.

His weapon.

"You really think we'd let you walk away?" Carlo's voice echoes through the warehouse. "Let you keep that pretty wife and her brother? Your empire? Your heir?"

I check the gun's magazine. It's half full. Not great, but it'll have to do.

"Stefano!" Marco's voice drips false concern. "Be reasonable. We can still make a deal. Just you and me, like the old days."

The words are meant to draw me out, make me react. Instead, I use the sound to pinpoint his location. Three pillars over, slightly to the right.

Time slows as I center myself, letting the monster take full control. Every sense heightens. I notice it all—the coppery smell of blood, the echo of footsteps, the subtle shift of shadows that betrays movement.

A guard peers around the pillar to my right. My first shot takes him in the throat before he can cry out. The second catches his partner in the knee as he moves to help.

Five down.

"Kill him!" Carlo's composure finally cracks. "Kill him now!"



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I roll as bullets pepper my position, coming up behind another pillar. Two more guards rush to my previous hiding spot, and I take both of them out with ruthless efficiency. Headshot. Center mass. No wasted ammunition.

Seven down.

But I'm running out of time. And options.

Movement above catches my eye—catwalks spanning the warehouse ceiling. Perfect angles for snipers. Which means...

I dive forward just as shots rain down from above. Pain explodes in my shoulder as one finds its mark, but I don't slow down. Can't slow down.

Because this isn't just about survival anymore. This is about Ava. About our child. About making sure these bastards never threaten my family again.

"You're dead, Rega!" Marco's voice is closer now. Confident. "Just like your father. Your brothers. Everyone who ever thought they could stand against us!"

The taunt is aimed to enrage me. Instead, it brings perfect clarity.

I see the whole space in my mind, support pillars, catwalks, exit points. I see the pattern in their movements, the fatal flaw in their strategy.

They think they're hunting me.

Time to show them exactly why they call me Monster.

I move like a shadow, using the pillars for cover as I work my way around the perimeter. Each step is calculated, each breath measured. The pain in my shoulder fades to background noise as I track my targets.

One sniper on the catwalk. Three guards on the ground. The Fiori brothers.

The sniper goes first, dropped by a single shot through the scaffolding, catching him as he tries to track my movement. His rifle clatters to the floor, the sound masking my approach to the next target.

Two more guards go down before they realize I'm behind them. The third manages to turn, eyes widening in recognition before my bullet finds his heart.

Now it's just me and the brothers.

"Marco!" Carlo's voice holds real fear now. "Where is he? Where?—"

I step out from behind the last pillar, gun trained on his head. "Right here."

They spin toward me, weapons raised, but we all know they're too late. Blood runs down my arm, drips from my fingers onto the concrete.

It's also too late for me. I see it in the devilish smirk in Dante's eyes just a second before something hits the back of my head.

The blood loss hits like a tide, dragging me down. My knees hit concrete as shapes move around me, voices calling my name from what feels like miles away.

The gunfire becomes a distant buzz, my vision blurring as multiple hands grab me.

My body fights—muscle memory, training, the monster inside me refusing to go down easily—but there are too many of them. Too many bodies pressing against me, crushing my wounded shoulder, driving me to my knees.

Pain explodes through my system. Not just from the bullet wound, but from every punch, every brutal strike designed to break my spirit before breaking my body.

I catch glimpses between the blur of bodies—Tomasso moving with Tony, a flash of movement toward the exit. Good. At least they'll be safe. At least my last act will protect them.

"Fucking Rega," someone spits, a boot connecting with my ribs. I taste blood, feel something crack inside me. Probably a rib. Maybe two.

But I'm still watching. Still calculating.

My last thought before darkness takes me is of Ava. Of our child. Of the promise I made to keep them safe.

I hope Tomasso understands. I hope he gets them away from here.

The blows keep coming, each one driving me closer to unconsciousness. The monster in me growls, refuses to surrender completely. But physics has other plans.

One final strike.

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And then nothing.

The last image burned into my fading consciousness is Tomasso's back, Tony stumbling beside him, escaping into the warehouse's shadows.

Mission accomplished.

But...not exactly

### CHAPTERTWENTY-ONE

Ava

The hotel roomdoor bursts open, making me jump from where I've been pacing. Tomasso stumbles in first, supporting Tony who looks...

My heart stops.

Blood. Bruises. The way he can barely stand. But alive. Breathing.

No Stefano.

"Where is he?" The words come out sharp, desperate. "Tomasso, where is he?"

But I already know. I can read it in the defeat in Tomasso's stance, the way he won't meet my eyes, the tremor in his usually steady hands as he helps Tony to a chair.

"They double-crossed us." His voice is rough, like he's been shouting. "It was never about the club. Never about the routes."

"Tell me." I move closer, tracking details through the panic—the fresh scrapes on Tomasso's knuckles, the tear in his suit jacket, the gun missing from his shoulder holster. "Tell me everything."

Tony makes a sound between a sob and a laugh. "They just wanted him. The whole time. Used me as bait..."

"The exchange seemed legitimate," Tomasso continues, still not meeting my eyes. "They brought Tony out. We verified the paperwork. But when Stefano was about to sign..."

He trails off, and the silence screams with everything he's not saying.

"How many?" My voice comes out steady despite the fear clawing at my throat.

"Too many. They had men hidden everywhere. Professional hit squad mixed with their regular muscle." Finally, he looks at me. "They were never going to let him walk out."

The world tilts dangerously, but I force myself to focus. "And you just left him?"

"We barely made it out. He ordered us to run." Tomasso's hands clench into fists. "Screamed at us to get out while he held them off. I've never...I've never heard him sound like that."

Ice floods my veins as the full picture emerges. This wasn't just a double-cross. This was a carefully planned trap. The Fioris never wanted territory or money.

They wanted Stefano himself.

And now they have him.

"You left him." It's an accusation this time. "You, his most trusted man, his right hand. You ran."

"He ordered?—"

The crack of my palm against his cheek echoes in the hotel room. Tony makes a startled sound, but I barely hear it over the roaring in my ears.

"He was outnumbered! Fighting for his life! And you just—" Another slap, which he takes without flinching. "You abandoned him!"

"Ava," Tony tries to intervene, but I wave him off.

My hands shake as I step back from Tomasso, mind already racing ahead. Because this anger, while real, isn't productive. It isn't going to save Stefano.

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"How long?" I ask, already moving toward the door.

"Ava—"

"How long since you left him?"

Tomasso glances at his watch. "Twenty minutes. Maybe twenty-five."

Twenty-five minutes of what? Torture? Interrogation? Is he even still...

No. Can't think like that. Can't let fear paralyze me.

Time to be the daughter my parents raised.

Time to save the father of my child.

Even if it kills me.

I force myself to focus on Tony first, examining his injuries with hands that I refuse to let shake. Split lip. Black eye. Bruised ribs from the way he's holding himself. But alive. Breathing. Here.

"They kept asking what I knew," he mumbles as I clean the blood from his face.  
"About the club. About you."

"Save your strength," I tell him, but my mind races. The Fioris think Tony knows something. Think I told him details about my mission that I never shared.

Which means they'll keep hurting Stefano trying to verify information that doesn't exist.

"Tell me exactly what happened," I say to Tomasso, who's pacing like a caged animal. "Every detail."

"The exchange point was an old warehouse." His voice is clipped, professional despite the tension radiating from him. "We verified their numbers—twelve visible guards, nothing we couldn't handle. They brought Tony out, let us check he was alive. Everything seemed standard."

"Until?" I press antiseptic against Tony's split lip, making him hiss.

"Until Stefano was about to sign the transfer papers."

"What happened next?"

"It was like they materialized from the walls. Twenty, maybe thirty more men. All armed. All professional." He runs a hand through his hair, messing up his usually perfect appearance. "Stefano realized what was happening first. Started fighting before they could completely surround him."

Tony makes a sound like a wounded animal. "My fault. All my fault."

"No." I grip his shoulder, probably harder than I should. "The Fioris did this. Not you."

"He fought like a demon," Tomasso continues. "Took down four of them before they could react. Screamed at us to run while he kept them busy. I tried to get to him, but there were too many..."



I can almost see Stefano fighting impossible odds, sacrificing himself to save my brother. To give us time to escape.

To protect what's his, like always.

"They weren't even trying to kill him," Tomasso adds quietly. "They wanted him alive. Which means..."

"Which means they have plans." I finish cleaning Tony's face, mind already spinning with ways to turn this nightmare to our advantage.

Because that's what con artists do, isn't it? Find leverage. Create opportunities. Turn bad situations into winning hands.

And right now, I have something the Fioris want more than territory or money or even Stefano himself.

His heir.

The thought barely has time to form before I'm moving, reaching for my phone. Tomasso starts to say something, probably trying to stop me.

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Time to play my final card.

Time to save the man I love.

Even if he hates me for it afterward.

"You were trained better than this," I tell Tomasso, voice steadier now. "We all were. And now you're going to help me fix it."

He straightens his tie, composed even with the red marks blooming on his cheeks. "Whatever you're thinking?—"

"The Fioris want power." I'm already pulling out my phone, fingers moving with purpose. "They want control. They want Stefano's empire. All of it."

"Which they'll get by controlling him," Tomasso points out.

"No." A cold smile crosses my face. "They'll get it by controlling his heir."

Understanding dawns in his eyes. "Ava, no. He'd never forgive me if I let you?—"

"You lost the right to protect his wishes when you left him behind." The words are cruel but necessary. "Now you're going to help me save him, or I swear to God I'll tell every family in Chicago how the great Tomasso ran while his boss fought alone."

Low blow, but it works. I see the moment he surrenders, shoulders slumping slightly.

"What's your play?"

"Simple." I dial my Fiori contact's number. "I offer them something more valuable than Stefano himself. Something that will give them control of his empire for generations."

"The baby," Tony whispers, horror in his voice.

"His heir." I correct. "The future of the Rega family. Along with every piece of intelligence I gathered while working at the club."

"They'll kill you both," Tomasso warns.

"No." My voice certain now. "They'll negotiate. Because that's what the Fioris do. They'll want to control us, not destroy us."

Even if I'm wrong, even if they just want to kill us all, it'll still give me a way in. A chance to turn their game against them.

One last con.

One final play.

"Keep my brother safe," I tell Tomasso as I hit dial. "That's an order from your boss's wife."

The phone rings once, twice. I catch my reflection in the window—pale but determined. The face of a woman about to risk everything.

The face of someone with nothing left to lose.

The line connects, and a familiar voice answers—smooth, cultured, dangerous. "Ava. I was wondering when you'd call."

"Put him on." My voice comes out steady despite my racing heart. "I want proof he's alive."

"Demanding, for someone in your position." But I hear movement, muffled voices. Then, "Say hello to your wife, Stefano."

"Ava, don't." His voice is rough, pained, but alive. "Whatever they want, don't?—"

The sound of flesh hitting flesh makes me flinch, but I keep my voice level. "That's enough. Now listen carefully, because I'm about to offer you something much more valuable than just Stefano Rega."

"Oh?" The Fiori voice returns, interested despite its attempt at casualness. "And what might that be?"

"His heir."

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The silence that follows is deafening. In the background, I hear Stefano cursing, fighting. There are more sounds of struggle.

"Explain." Just one word, but it's loaded.

"You know I'm pregnant." The words come out clear, firm. "Carrying the next generation of the Rega family. The future of his empire."

More silence, but I know what they are thinking.

"I can offer you this leverage, along with everything I know about his operation," I continue. "Every route, every contact, every piece of intelligence I've gathered while working at the club. Things even Stefano doesn't know I found out."

"Ava, NO!" Stefano's voice, desperate now. "Don't you dare!"

"Interesting." The Fiori voice cuts him off. "Very interesting. And what do you want in exchange?"

"A trade. Me for him. Simple, clean." I pace as I talk, the movement helping me think. "You get his heir, his secrets, and a way to control his empire for a long, long time. All he gets is his life—kind of."

"And why would you offer this?"

"Because I'm a survivor." The truth slips into my lie, making it stronger. "Because I know which way the wind is blowing. Because I'd rather be on the winning side."

There are more struggling sounds in the background and more cursing in Italian.

"You realize," the voice says carefully, "that once you're here, there's no leaving. No running. No games."

"I understand perfectly." My free hand rests on my stomach, protecting our child even now. "Do we have a deal?"

The pause feels endless. In the corner of my eye, I see Tomasso shaking his head, Tony crying silently.

"Deal," the voice finally says. "Come alone. I'll text you the location."

"Ava!" Stefano's voice, more desperate than I've ever heard it. "Don't do this! Please!"

I end the call before his pleas can break my resolve.

Time to move.

I grab Tomasso's car keys. They're heavy in my hand. They weigh more than just metal. They are heavy with fate.

"Keep him safe," I tell Tomasso. Not a request. A command.

"You can't go alone. We don't know where they've moved him. Let me?—"

"Your team was of no use, Tomasso." I sigh. "Besides, they will know if I'm being followed. But be ready in case I need backup. I'll find a way to contact you."

Tony looks shell-shocked, tears tracking through the dirt and bruises on his face.

"Ava, no. You can't?—"

"I can." My voice doesn't waver. It's a con artist's trick. Confidence is its own weapon. "And I will."

Tommaso steps forward, something like respect and terror mixing in his eyes. "This is suicide."

I laugh, but there's no humor in it. "Been practicing that my whole life."

The hallway stretches before me, hotel luxury feeling like a prison more than ever before. Each step feels like a countdown, like I'm walking toward something that will change everything.

Which, I suppose, I am.

My fingers trace the wedding ring Stefano forced on me today. Gilded cage, he called it. Protection disguised as possession. But right now? It feels like my only connection to something real.

To him.

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The elevator mirrors reflect back yet another version of myself. Dark hair pulled back ruthlessly. Eyes sharper than any blade. Cream dress from our wedding that now feels like armor.

My mother would be proud. My father would be taking notes.

I'm doing exactly what they taught me to do. Create the escape. Survive.

But this time, I'm not just saving myself.

I'm saving everyone.

The hotel lobby blurs around me. Doormen. Guests. Security. All potential threats. All potential opportunities. Old habits die hard, and my brain is working overtime.

Outside, Chicago's night swallows me whole. Cold wind cuts through my dress. It reminds me I'm alive. For now.

My phone buzzes. The Fiori's location. Another abandoned warehouse. Of course.

Typical mob men. Some things never change.

The car starts with a purr. Tomasso keeps his vehicles in perfect condition. I smile at his professional pride, even in the midst of chaos.

Then I drive into the night. Toward whatever comes next.



Toward a war I intend to win.

## CHAPTERTWENTY-TWO

Ava

The warehouse looms like a forgotten promise—Chicago's industrial wasteland and my new stage.

I ease Tomasso's car to a stop, the engine's purr fading into absolute silence. My fingers grip the steering wheel, knuckles white. One last moment to breathe. One last moment before everything changes.

The location couldn't be more perfect for a mob hit if a Hollywood director had designed it. Abandoned. Isolated. No witnesses. No escape routes.

Perfect for them. Potentially perfect for me.

My hand drifts to my stomach. The reason I'm here. The lever I'm about to use in the most dangerous negotiation of my life.

"We're going to be okay," I whisper again. The words sound less like a promise and more like a prayer.

I take inventory, the way my parents taught me.

Phone charged. Check.

Hairpin weapon secured. Check.

Message to Kira sent, protecting the club girls and telling them to get out. Check.

Absolutely terrified but determined. Double-check.

The warehouse sits like a predator, waiting. The industrial metal walls are covered in graffiti, the high windows damaged, like broken teeth. It's a normal and routine part of the world I'm trapped in, the life I never wanted but can't seem to escape.

I feel a dizzying sense of coming full circle.

Montana feels like a dream now, a fantasy I conjured during quiet moments between cons, between survival. Ranch life. Open skies. Peaceful anonymity.

Instead, I'm here. Pregnant. Married to a mob boss. About to trade myself to save the man I love.

Some fairy tale.

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My fingers trace the wedding ring. Stefano's claim. His protection. His prison.

I pull the hairpin from my hair, examining it carefully. A gift from my mother years ago, ornate, deadly. Disguised as something beautiful. Just like me.

"Time to work," I murmur.

The Fiori brothers aren't stupid. They'll be watching every move, looking for any sign of deception.

Which means my performance needs to be flawless.

I take a deep breath. Center myself. Become exactly who they expect me to be.

The desperate wife. The betrayer. The woman willing to sell out her husband to save herself.

Just another role. Just another con.

Except this time, everything actually matters.

I check my reflection in the rearview mirror. Pale skin. Dark eyes. I look like someone who has nothing left to lose.

Perfect.

Time to go to war.

The gravel crunches beneath my shoes, each step deliberate. My hand nestles the hairpin deeper into my hair, a weapon hidden in plain sight.

Abandoned warehouses always smell the same, stale dust and rusted metal. This one breathes decay. Industrial grime coats every surface, telling stories of neglect and abandoned dreams. Just like mine.

I scan the perimeter instinctively. Three potential entry points. Two shadowy corners that are perfect for an ambush. A stack of old pallets that could provide temporary cover if things go sideways.

The massive metal doors look like they've weathered a hundred battles. Rust-eaten hinges. Faded graffiti. Paint peeling like old skin. I run my fingers along the edge, feeling the texture.

I'm not just walking into a trap. I'm walking into the most dangerous performance of my life.

Time to remind the Fiori brothers why they should never underestimate a woman with nothing left to lose.

I place my hand on the warehouse door.

And push.

The warehouse interior swallows me whole. Shadows stretch like hungry fingers across concrete floors stained with decades of industrial secrets. My eyes adjust quickly—another survival skill honed through years of practice, of always needing to read a room faster than anyone else.

Four men. No, five. Their positions are etched into my mind before they can fully

register my presence.

Two are near the far wall, trying to look casual but hands too close to their waistbands. Classic concealed carry. One is by a rusted support column, and another is near what looks like an old office doorway. And Stefano.

God, Stefano.

He's barely recognizable. Beaten. Broken. A shadow of the powerful man who forced a wedding ring onto my finger just hours ago. The sight hits me like a physical blow, but I can't, won't, let it show.

My face becomes a mask. Cold. Calculating. Exactly what the Fiori brothers expect from a woman about to betray her husband.

The Fiori brothers, Carlo and Marco, watch me with predatory intensity. Their expensive shoes stand out in stark contrast to the warehouse's decay. They are vultures in thousand-dollar suits, waiting to pick apart what remains of Stefano's empire.

I've been underestimated my entire life. By my own parents. By marks. By entire criminal networks.

Today I hope it is the same. Today the Fioris mistake will cost them everything.

"Gentlemen," I say, my voice cutting through the silence.

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Marco steps forward, a smirk playing across his lips. "Miss D'Amato. Or should I say, Mrs. Rega?"

The double meaning hangs in the air. A taunt. A challenge.

I match his smirk. "I'm here to make a deal."

Stefano's broken form catches my peripheral vision. I know he's watching. Listening. I send a silent prayer that he understands what's coming.

Trust me, I think. They are the words we've spoken to one another a thousand times since we were young.

"Your husband's empire," Carlo says, circling me like a predator. "Interesting negotiation strategy."

I laugh. Sharp. Cold. "Not a negotiation. A transfer of power."

My hand drifts to my stomach—a deliberate gesture. A reminder of everything at stake.

"I'm carrying the Rega heir," I continue. "Which means I'm carrying the future. And I'm willing to give you that future. On my terms."

The warehouse goes absolutely silent. Even the wind seems to hold its breath.

The Fiori brothers exchange a look, calculation, replacing their initial confidence.

They know they can't take over the Rega empire by killing Stefano and his heir. Networks, connections, loyalty— they are not easily transferred. Killing us, putting an end to the empire Stefano has built. Though they might get some satisfaction from that, I know money and power are even higher on their list.

Time to make them an offer they can't refuse.

## CHAPTERTWENTY-THREE

Stefano

Fuck...I can't feel my arms.

I can't feel anything.

Pain is no longer a sensation. It's a living thing that inhabits every cell of my body, a constant companion that throbs and pulses with each ragged breath.

I don't know how long I've been here. Hours. Days. Time becomes meaningless when you're reduced to nothing but meat and bone and defiance.

And pain. Unbridled pain.

The concrete floor is stained dark—maybe with blood.

My blood. Their blood. Does it matter anymore?

Another blow crashes into my already swollen face, and my head snaps to the side, a low groan leaving my lips.

I've long since stopped trying to protect myself. My hands are zip-tied behind me, my

body slumped in a way that tells of multiple broken bones. Ribs, definitely. Possibly my left arm. Maybe my jaw.

Maybe my head.

"Tell us about the routes," Marco Fiori says, or maybe it's Carlo. They've become interchangeable blurs.

It's so funny the way their ugly faces merge.

It makes them even uglier.

I laugh. Or try to. It comes out as a wet, broken sound that's more like a gurgle.

The laugh earns me another punch. This one lands just beneath my eye, and I feel something pop. Cartilage, maybe. Or the last remnant of hope that I might walk away from this.



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I don't care, though.

She's safe. Ava is safe, and that's all that matters.

"You think you're strong," the voice continues. Definitely Marco. I can tell by the slight lisp that enters his speech when he's truly furious. "You think the Monster of Chicago can't be broken?"

I want to tell him that breaking isn't the same as surrendering. That pain is just another language I've become fluent in over the years.

But speaking would require more energy than I currently possess.

And I have no wish to teach Marco shit anyways.

He's a dummy, explaining things to him will take a lot of strength.

My mind drifts to Ava again. To our child. The baby I won't get to meet. That thought is both my weakness and my greatest strength.

They keep asking about shipping routes. About my businesses. About the network that could protect my family.

They'll get nothing from me.

Fools.

Another blow. This time to my kidneys. I can't help the sound that escapes, part grunt, part sob. My body betrays me even as my mind remains unbroken.

"Look at him," Carlo says, stepping closer. I can smell his expensive aftershave mixed with the metallic tang of my own blood. "The great Stefano Rega. Reduced to this."

I focus on a crack in the concrete floor. Memorize its jagged edges. Anything to stay present. Anything to avoid slipping into unconsciousness where they might gain an advantage.

My tattoos, those symbols of power and heritage that once meant everything, are now just roadmaps of bruises, dark ink blending with fresh wounds.

"One name," Marco says. "Just give us one connection. One weak point in your network."

I meet his eyes. Mine are swollen, but the message is clear. Go to hell.

Coño.

The next blow feels different. Calculated. Like they're finally realizing that physical pain won't break me.

They're right to be worried.

Because the monster inside me isn't dead. He's just waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting.

\* \* \*

Footsteps approach, then pass by, fading into the distance. Voices become distant echoes.

The Fiori men are leaving. I try to make out what they are saying but sounds blend into a meaningless symphony of pain. My body feels like broken glass held together by nothing more than willpower and rage.

Then—her voice, cutting through the fog of near-unconsciousness.

Ava.

My head lifts, or tries to. The movement sends knives of pain through my skull, and I manage only the slightest twitch. Blood and sweat blur my vision, but I'd recognize her voice anywhere.

Fuck, what is she doing here? Or is my mind playing tricks on me now?

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"...take over his legacy," she's saying, cold and clinical.

No.

NO.

She can't be here.

I can't let her get hurt and —

"Ava," I croak. The sound is barely human, more a wounded animal's whimper than a man's voice. "Run. Please. Run."

Each word is agony. My split lips crack, fresh blood trickling down my chin. I try to lift my head, to see her, to warn her. But my body is a traitor, barely responding to my commands.

The floor feels like it's spinning. Concrete and blood and broken dreams swirling together.

"If it isn't Stefano Rega." She tuts, her voice cold. But there's something underneath the coldness. Something I recognize.

Is this a trap? A con?

Is this me trying to hope against hope?

I laugh.Pathetic.

My broken mind struggles to piece together what's happening. The Fiori brothers are watching. Waiting. Their eyes gleam with a predatory anticipation that makes my blood run cold—what little blood I have left.

"I'll definitely enjoy finishing this," Ava continues, her voice carrying that clever edge I've always known. The sound of a con artist at work. Of someone playing a deeper game.

I want to scream. To warn her. To protect her.

But I can barely breathe.

"Stefano," she whispers, suddenly close. So close I can smell her familiar scent beneath the warehouse's metallic stench. "You're at my mercy now. How does it feel?"

Her hand touches my face, so gentle against the brutal landscape of my wounds. It's a contrast so sharp it makes me want to weep.

And then she slaps me.

The sound cracks through the warehouse like a gunshot.

Pain explodes.

“How does it feel now, huh?”

Her words are more devastating than any punch the Fiori brothers have landed.

I try to talk again.

"Shut up," Ava says, her voice razor-sharp. Cold. Calculating. "I've made a deal with them. I'm going to kill you and take over your legacy. Run the family the way it always should have been run."

The world tilts. Stops. Shatters.

My broken body goes still, not from pain, but from something far worse. Betrayal cuts deeper than any physical wound. Deeper than the broken ribs, the swollen eyes, the blood pooling beneath me.

She's going to kill me.

The woman I love. The mother of my child. The one person I hoped would never?—

A hysterical laugh tries to escape my throat, but it comes out as a wet, broken sound. Blood bubbles between my lips.

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Is this how it ends? Everything I've built. Everything I've fought for. Everything I've protected.

Gone.

I look at her, really look at her, searching for a hint of the woman I knew. The woman who curled against me in the night. The woman who whispered softly to me. The woman who carries my child.

But there's nothing. Just a stranger with my Ava's face.

The Fiori brothers laugh. It's not a sound of humor, but of pure cruelty.

"Look at the great Monster of Chicago now," Carlo sneers, his polished shoe pushing against my already broken ribs. The pain explodes, white-hot and consuming.

Marco joins in, his voice dripping with contempt. "All that power. All those threats. Reduced to this. Betrayed by your own wife."

Another kick. Another wave of pain.

"Always thought you were so tough," Carlo continues, circling like a predator. "Stefano Rega. The man who controlled Chicago. Now you're nothing. Less than nothing."

I try to focus. To breathe. To find some trace of humanity in Ava's eyes. But she stands there, statue-still, watching. Her face is a mask of cold indifference.

"She played you perfectly," Marco says, grabbing my chin, forcing me to look at him.  
"Months of planning. And you never saw it coming."

The laughter becomes a chorus. A symphony of mockery.

"Your empire," Carlo whispers, "gone. Your reputation? Destroyed. Your family?  
Broken."

My eyes drift to Ava. Searching. Hoping. Pleading.

She meets my gaze. Nothing. No remorse. No emotion.

Just calculation.

The way a con artist looks at a mark.

The way she must have looked at me all along.

The rage that should consume me never comes.

Instead, there's only an overwhelming, crushing sadness, a grief so deep it feels like  
drowning.

How did it come to this?

I look at Ava, this woman I love, this woman who is carrying my child, and feel  
nothing but an infinite, bottomless sorrow. Not anger. Not hatred. Just a soul-crushing  
disappointment that feels like it could swallow me whole.

All those years of searching for her. All those dreams of finding her again. The wild  
promises we made as children in the garden. The stolen moments. The passion. The



belief that we were something special.

Reduced to this.

A con. A betrayal. A moment of cold calculation.

"How?" The word escapes me, barely a whisper. Not an accusation. Just pure, raw confusion.

The Fiori brothers continue their mockery, but their voices become distant. Meaningless.

I'm lost in the memory of Ava. The girl who used to quote philosophy. Who dreamed of escape. Who promised to follow me anywhere.

Who is now standing here, preparing to end me.

My eyes drift to her stomach. I think of the life growing inside her. Our child. The heir I'd dreamed of protecting.

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And I realize the most painful truth of all.

I would still choose her. Even now. Even like this.

The sadness becomes a living thing, consuming everything. Replacing blood. Replacing hope.

How could I have been so wrong about her?

How could love have been such a perfect weapon?

Before I can stop it, the warehouse fades. The Fiori brothers' voices become distant. Pain recedes.

I'm back in time, to thirteen summers ago in the Venere compound's garden, all manicured hedges, and stolen sunlight. I'm standing near the oak tree, trying to look bored, trying to seem older than my thirteen years. The adults are talking business inside. The kids are supposed to stay outside.

But I'm practicing knife throws behind the guest house, something my older brothers taught me to do when no adults were watching. Each throw is precise. This is not a game, it's training.

My father would be furious if he knew. "A Rega heir doesn't play with knives like some street thug," he'd say. But Darren and Antonio showed me, and I'm determined to be better than anyone expects.

The last knife spins through the air, embedding perfectly into the wooden target. Twelve throws. Twelve bullseyes.

A slow clap breaks my concentration.

I spin, another knife already half-drawn from my belt. It's a reflexive movement that would make my brothers proud.

That's when I see her.

Ava D'Amato. Nine years old. Wild hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, grass stains on her white dress, a book clutched so tightly to her chest it might as well be armor.

She doesn't walk. She moves like something untamed. Like wind given human form.

Our eyes meet.

And something inside me, something I'm too young to understand, shifts. Locks. Becomes irrevocably changed.

She doesn't smile. Doesn't wave. Just looks at me with eyes that are already too old for her age. Dark. Knowing. Like she can see every thought before it forms.

"You're staring," she says. Not a question. A statement.

I should look away. Should pretend I wasn't watching. But I can't.

"So are you," I respond.

A hint of a smile. Gone so fast I might have imagined it.

"Impressive," she says, not intimidated by the knife still half-drawn in my hand.  
"Most kids would have dropped the blade when they were surprised."

I should lower the knife. Should act my age. Instead, I'm fascinated.

"You're not most kids," I respond.

Her laugh is sharp. Unexpected. "Neither are you, Stefano Rega."

How does she know my name? How does she stand there so fearlessly while I'm holding a weapon?

She takes a step closer. I should move back. Should seem cautious. Instead, I'm rooted in place, studying her like she's some rare, dangerous creature.

"Want to see something?" she asks, pulling a small, ornate knife from behind her back. The handle looks old. Expensive. Definitely not a child's toy.

Before I can respond, she flips it, once, twice, with a precision that would make my brothers jealous.

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"Who taught you that?" I ask, genuinely impressed.

Her smile is knowing. Dangerous. "Everyone underestimates a girl with a book."

"Stefano!" My father's voice breaks the moment. "Come inside!"

But I can't look away from her. Can't stop seeing how different she is. How she doesn't fit. How she looks like she's already planning her escape.

"You are very good," she says to me, glancing at me coyly, and then throwing the knife at the target, hitting the bullseye dead center. "But I'm better."

Even then, I knew.

She would change everything.

I just didn't know how.

The memory dissolves like smoke, pulling me back to the brutal reality of the warehouse. Ava stands before me, a stranger wearing the face of the girl I once knew.

My broken body trembles, from pain, from cold, from something deeper and more devastating than physical suffering.

She moves closer. Each step calculated. Precise. The way she used to plan her philosophical arguments as a child now transformed into something more dangerous.

"Stefano," she says, and for a moment, just a fraction of a second, I hear something underneath the coldness. A tremor. A hint of the woman I love.

The Fiori brothers watch, hungry for blood. For destruction.

I tune them out and look at Ava. There is something in her gaze that isn't the hate she professed to earlier. My heart beats faster in my chest.

She tilts her chin down slightly. A tell. A signal.

"You're going to die," Carlo says, almost conversationally. "And she's going to be the one to do it."

I can't look away from her. Can't stop searching her face for some trace of the girl who promised to follow me to the ends of the earth. The woman who carries our child.

Her hand reaches out. Touches my face again.

So gentle. So familiar.

And yet completely, terrifyingly foreign.

My mind struggles with the dissonance. Did I imagine the softness I saw in her gaze, the way she dropped her chin?

"I'm sorry," she whispers so softly I'm not sure the Fiori brothers even hear it.

But I do.

Her lips move close to my ear, barely a whisper. "Trust me."

Those two simple, magical words. Something in her tone, a vibration, a depth beneath the cold surface, makes something inside me pause.

Her hand connects with my already bruised face again.

The slap cracks through the warehouse like a gunshot. Pain explodes across my already battered cheek, my head snapping to the side from the force.

I blink. Slowly. Painfully.

Not understanding.

Trust her?

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Is this another layer of her betrayal? Another twist in whatever game she's playing?  
Or something else entirely?

Her eyes meet mine. Brief. Intense.

Something flickers there. Something that doesn't match her cold words. A depth. A warning. A message.

The Fiori brothers are watching, waiting. Their anticipation is thick in the air like smoke.

But all I can see is Ava.

Not the woman planning to kill me.

The woman who might, just might, be trying to save me.

But...how?

Her eyes.

That's what breaks through my confusion. That's what makes me realize something deeper is happening.

I catch the glint. It's just a millisecond of pure, raw emotion. Something beneath the cold performance, a vulnerability, a desperation that speaks volumes. The microscopic tremor in her hand after the slap. The way her breath catches for just a



moment.

She's trying to save me.

Save us all.

She has a plan.

Trust me.

So, I do something completely counterintuitive.

I play along.

My broken body goes limp. My eyes, swollen nearly shut, become vacant. I become exactly what they want me to be: a defeated man about to be executed.

A subtle shift in my breathing tells Ava I'm with her. That I understand.

Whatever comes next, we're in this together.

## CHAPTERTWENTY-FOUR

Ava

Stefano looks so broken.

His face is barely recognizable beneath the bruises and dried blood, one eye swollen completely shut, his lip split in multiple places.

Every time he breathes, I can see the pain ripple across his features—broken ribs,

probably. Maybe worse. The sight of him like this—bound, beaten, yet somehow still defiant—makes my heart feel like it's being torn in two.

I did this to him.

My decisions. My lies. My desperate attempt to outrun a life I never chose.

And now I'm his only hope.

The Fiori brothers watch me with predatory eyes. Guards with dead eyes and bulges beneath their jackets hover at strategic points around the room. All waiting to see the great Stefano Rega brought low by the woman carrying his child.

By me.

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I take a deep breath, steadying myself. The hairpin sits heavy against my scalp, tucked securely in place. My only weapon. My only chance.

"Trust me," I whispered to him moments ago.

Now I need to earn that trust.

"You actually thought I loved you?" I force a laugh, making it sound as cruel as I can while I stalk toward Stefano's prone form. Every word feels like swallowing glass, but I make myself continue.

"You thought that I cared about your pathetic empire? Your precious legacy?" I circle him like a predator. "You were just a job. A mark. The biggest con of my career."

His one good eye follows me, understanding flickering behind the pain. He's playing along, making himself look defeated despite the monster I know lives inside him.

The monster that would tear this place apart to protect what's his if he weren't bound and broken.

I raise my hand and slap him hard across the face, the sound echoing through the warehouse. His head snaps to the side, fresh blood blossoming on his already split lip.

"I'm sorry," I mouth silently when the Fiori brothers can't see my face, my heart breaking at the pain I'm causing.

Carlo Fiori laughs—that rich, entitled sound I've always hated.

"Look at the mighty Stefano Rega now," he taunts, stepping closer to kick Stefano's side. I flinch as Stefano grunts in pain, but I can't show weakness. Not now.

"The Monster of Chicago," I continue, grabbing Stefano's hair and yanking his head back. "That's what they call you, right? Not so monstrous now." My voice drips with contempt, but I let my thumb brush gently against his scalp—a hidden caress, a silent apology. I feel him lean almost imperceptibly into my touch despite everything.

Marco Fiori steps forward, a smirk playing across his features. "You played him beautifully, Ava. Your parents would have been proud."

The mention of my parents makes something twist inside me. They raised me to be this—a liar, a thief, someone who could slip into any role necessary to survive. But they never taught me how to handle falling in love with a mark.

They never warned me that I might find myself standing in a warehouse with a hairpin weapon, desperate to save the father of my child.

"My parents knew that power is the only thing that matters in this world," I say, letting genuine bitterness flavor my words. "And thanks to Stefano, I'm about to have plenty of it."

I turn to the Fiori brothers, stepping away from Stefano with deliberate confidence. "He's given me everything I need to take over. Accounts. Passcodes. The names of his suppliers." I rest a hand on my still-flat stomach. "Plus his heir. The perfect leverage to control everyone loyal to the Rega name."

Carlo studies me. "And why should we trust you? The D'Amatos were never known for their loyalty."

I laugh, the sound sharp and cold. "Loyalty? To what—the family that used me as a

tool since I was a child? That got my parents killed?" I step closer to him, letting him see the hardness I've cultivated over years of survival. "I'm loyal to power. To security. To making sure my child never lives the life I did." Another step. "You offered me a chance to take what Stefano has. I'm just improving the terms."

Behind me, I hear Stefano growl something in Italian—a curse, a threat. Good. The more he fights, the more convincing this will seem.

"She's lying," he spits, voice rough with pain. "She'll betray you just like she betrayed me."

I whirl on him, letting real anger fuel my performance. Anger at the Fioris. At my parents. At the whole fucked-up world that brought us to this moment.

"Shut up," I hiss, slapping him again. This time, I let my nails rake across his cheek, leaving red welts in their wake. His eye meets mine—a flash of understanding, then back to rage. We're dancing this deadly dance together now.

The slap echoes through the cavernous space, punctuating the silence that follows. I can feel everyone watching—the Fiori brothers with their prying stares, the guards with their dead eyes, Stefano with his desperate, knowing gaze.

The air feels thick with tension, with the weight of decisions that can't be undone.

I force myself to breathe evenly, to maintain the cold mask of betrayal despite the fear clawing at my insides. One wrong move, one misplaced word, and we're both dead.

"I'd like to finish him myself," I state again, turning back to the Fiori brothers. I let my lips curve into a smile I've practiced since childhood—cold, calculating, heartless.

Marco exchanges a look with Carlo. Something passes between them—a silent communication born of lifelong connection. My stomach tightens with anticipation, with the certainty that this is the moment everything changes.

"By all means," Marco finally says, reaching for the gun at his waist. "I think you've earned the privilege."

He extends the weapon toward me, grip first. The black metal gleams under the harsh warehouse lights. My heart hammers against my ribs as I reach for it, maintaining the mask of calm cruelty I've perfected over years of running cons.

Too easy.

Every instinct honed from childhood screams a warning. The offer is too simple, too straightforward. Carlo watches intensely, his smile never reaching his eyes. Marco's grip on the gun is too loose, his stance too casual. I've seen enough double-crosses to recognize one unfolding.

But I have to play along. Have to get close enough to use the only advantage I have—the element of surprise.

My hand extends toward the weapon, fingers careful not to tremble despite the adrenaline coursing through my veins. I can feel Stefano's gaze burning into my back, can almost sense his desperate need to protect me, to stop whatever's about to happen. But he can't help me now. No one can.

This moment—this one desperate chance—is all mine.

The warehouse feels unnaturally quiet as my fingers close around the gun's grip. I can hear my own heartbeat, the soft shuffle of expensive shoes on concrete, the labored rhythm of Stefano's breathing. Time seems to slow, stretching like heated glass about to break.

Then everything happens at once.

Marco's other hand snaps forward, grabbing my wrist in a crushing grip. The gun remains in his control as he yanks me closer, his smile transforming into something ugly and triumphant.

"You really thought we'd give you control?" Marco laughs, his breath hot against my face. "The D'Amato whore who spread her legs for Rega? You'll be lucky if we let you live long enough to birth that brat."

Behind me, Stefano roars, the sound of a man who would tear the world apart if he could move. The raw fury in his voice sends chills down my spine, but I don't let it distract me. Can't let it distract me.

Because this is exactly what I was counting on.

Marco's focus is on Stefano now, on enjoying the moment of power over Chicago's most feared man. His grip on my wrist remains tight, painful, but his attention has shifted.

In one fluid motion—the kind my mother drilled into me since I was old enough to walk—I reach up with my free hand, fingers finding the ornate hairpin tucked into my updo. The metal slides free silently, its edge razor-sharp against my palm.

Everything my parents taught me, every skill honed through years of cons and survival, narrows to this single, perfect moment. The weight of the hairpin in my hand. The exposed flesh of Marco's throat. The seconds ticking down before the guards react.

I don't hesitate. Can't afford to.

The hairpin slashes across his throat in a single, precise sweep. For a moment, nothing happens—just his eyes widening in shock, his grip on my wrist loosening. Time suspends as we stare at each other, both equally surprised by what I've just done.

Then blood blooms, a horrifying fountain of crimson that sprays across my face, my



dress, the concrete floor. The warm wetness of it shocks me, so different from the clinical descriptions my father once gave of arterial wounds. So much more...real.

Marco's mouth works soundlessly, his free hand clutching at his throat as if he could somehow stop the life pouring from him. The gun drops from his fingers, clattering against the concrete with a sound that seems to echo endlessly through the warehouse.

Carlo shouts something—a name, a curse, I can't tell. The guards surge forward, weapons appearing in their hands. Stefano's voice rises above the chaos, warning me, urging me to move, to run, to do something.

But I'm frozen, watching as Marco's body begins to crumple, as his knees give way beneath him. He falls against me, sudden deadweight, his blood soaking through my clothes. The metallic smell of it fills my lungs, making me gag as I stumble backward, trying to get away from what I've done.

I've hurt people before. Broken bones. Left scars. But I've never watched someone die by my hand. Never seen the light leave someone's eyes. Never felt the warm spray of lifeblood across my skin.

The reality of it hits harder than any physical blow, momentarily paralyzing me with the enormity of what I've just done. In that suspended moment of shock, everything else fades away—the warehouse, the guards, even Stefano.

There's only me and the dying man at my feet, both of us equally surprised by how quickly everything can end.

The moment of shock costs me.

Carlo's voice cuts through my stunned horror, his words lost in the roaring of blood in

my ears. But his intent is clear as he lunges toward me, face contorted with rage and grief.

I try to move, to raise my hands in defense, to do anything but stand there covered in his brother's blood. But my body responds too slowly, muscles stiff with horror and disbelief.

Carlo's fist connects with my face before I can recover, pain exploding across my cheekbone as I crash to the floor. The concrete is cold and wet beneath me—Marco's blood, I realize distantly, already pooling around me like some macabre halo.

The coppery taste of my own blood fills my mouth as darkness edges my vision. Through the ringing in my ears, I hear Stefano shouting my name, the sound desperate and raw. I try to respond, to move, to do anything but lie here stunned and vulnerable.

But the force of Carlo's blow has left me dazed, my limbs uncooperative, my thoughts scattered. The concrete floor presses cold against my cheek, Marco's blood soaking into my hair, my clothes, my skin.

In the distance, through blurred vision, I see Carlo reaching for his gun, his expensive shoes stepping carelessly through his brother's blood as he moves toward me. His face is transformed with hate, with the promise of violence to come.

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This is it. I've failed. Failed Stefano. Failed our child. Failed the future I never thought I wanted until it was within reach.

I close my eyes, waiting for the gunshot that will end everything.

Instead, I hear a roar—primal, inhuman, filled with a rage so pure it transcends language. The sound of restraints breaking. Of a monster being unleashed.

Stefano.

### CHAPTERTWENTY-FIVE

Stefano

Blood roars in my ears, a thundering rhythm that almost drowns out the chaotic scene unfolding before me.

My vision blurs at the edges, the entire warehouse tilting like a ship caught in a storm. The concrete floor beneath me feels unsteady, my limbs heavy and uncoordinated.

But then I see it.

In one fluid motion—too fast for the Fiori brothers to anticipate—Ava's hand darts to her hair. The ornate hairpin I've seen a hundred times transforms into something deadly as she slashes Marco Fiori's throat with terrifying precision.

The shock of the moment electrifies my system, a surge of adrenaline breaking through the fog of my injuries. Blood sprays in an arc as Marco stumbles, his hands futilely clutching at his neck. His expensive shoes squeak against the concrete as he falls, eyes wide with disbelief.

Carlo reacts instantly, his fist connecting with Ava's face with a sickening crack. The sound triggers something primal in me—a surge of rage so intense it burns through the pain, the exhaustion, everything.

No one touches what's mine!

She falls, a blur of dark hair and cream-colored dress against the filthy warehouse floor. For a terrible second, she doesn't move.

"AVA!" Her name tears from my throat, guttural and raw.

My body moves before my brain can process what's happening. I lunge forward, ignoring the white-hot agony that tears through my ribs, my shoulders, every battered inch of my broken form. The zip ties cut into my wrists, but the plastic gives way under the force of my desperation.

Carlo turns toward her, murder in his eyes, his hand already reaching for his weapon. But I'm on him before his fingers can close around the grip, tackling him with the last reserves of my strength. We crash to the floor in a tangle of limbs, my momentum carrying us away from where Ava lies.

"You're fucking dead," Carlo hisses, his breath hot against my face. His knee drives up between us, catching me in my already fractured ribs. Stars explode behind my eyes as pain lances through me.

I can't breathe. Can't think. Can only fight.

"I should've killed you years ago," he spits, struggling beneath me. "Your whole fucking family. Should've finished the job when we took out your brothers."

The confession barely registers even though it's been something I've been trying to find out for years. Now it's just one more sin to add to the Fiori ledger. One more debt that will be paid in blood.

From the corner of my eye, I see Ava moving, crawling toward us. Her face is streaked with blood—Marco's or hers, I can't tell—but her eyes are clear. Focused. The tiny weapon still clutched in her hand gleams in the dim light.

Carlo sees her too. His struggle intensifies, one hand breaking free to reach for his gun. I grab his wrist, crushing it in my grip, but he's strong. I'm running on nothing but fury and fear.

"Ava, run!" I order, though the words come out as little more than a rasp. She ignores me, of course. Always so stubborn. Always so fucking brave.

Instead, she lunges forward, driving the hairpin blade into Carlo's shoulder. He roars in pain, bucking beneath me with renewed strength. His free hand grabs the knife, tearing it from his flesh and from Ava's grip in one violent motion.

Blood wells from the wound, soaking through his expensive suit. The smell of it fills the air—metallic, primal, triggering that dark thing inside me that Chicago's underworld has learned to fear.

I use his moment of distraction to pin him more securely, though every movement sends fresh waves of agony through my abused body. In the distance, I hear shouting. Heavy footsteps. The Fiori soldiers, responding to the commotion.

"The door!" I gasp at Ava, struggling to keep Carlo contained. "Lock it!"

She scrambles to her feet, rushing to the heavy warehouse door. The sound of it slamming echoes through the space, followed by the scrape of metal as she slides something—a pipe, maybe—through the handles to bar it shut.

It won't hold them for long, but we don't need long.

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Just enough time to finish this. Once and for all.

Carlo and I grapple across the concrete, rolling perilously close to his brother's still-twitching body. The warehouse floor is slick with blood now, making it hard to maintain any grip or leverage. My hands slip against his arms as he twists beneath me, reaching again for his weapon.

This time, his fingers close around the grip.

I grab his wrist with both hands, using my entire weight to slam his arm against the floor. Once. Twice. His knuckles scrape against concrete, but his fingers refuse to release the gun.

"You're nothing," he snarls, face contorted with hate. "Your father was nothing. Your brothers were nothing. Just pretenders playing at power."

The gun wavers between us as we struggle for control. Every muscle in my body screams in protest. Blood and sweat sting my eyes, blurring my vision further. The edges of consciousness begin to fray, darkness threatening to pull me under.

No. Not now. Not when Ava's life hangs in the balance.

With strength born of sheer desperation, I manage to twist Carlo's arm at an unnatural angle. The tendons in his wrist stretch to their limit. Something snaps—a bone, maybe—and the gun clatters to the floor, spinning away from both of us.

Carlo howls in pain, but it transforms quickly into a manic laugh. "They're coming,

Rega," he gasps, eyes darting to the door where the pounding has already begun. "You're trapped. We're all trapped. How does it feel, knowing you brought her here to die?"

The words slice deeper than any blade. Because he's right. This is my fault. All of it. The bruises on Ava's face. The danger to our child. The impossible situation we're now trapped in.

I should have protected her better. Should have seen the Fiori trap coming. Should have been smarter, faster, stronger.

Behind us, the door groans under the assault. Wood splinters. Metal bends.

Carlo's eyes gleam with triumph. "You lose, Monster."

Something dark and ancient surges through me then. It's a rage so pure it transcends pain, transcends exhaustion, transcends the limitations of my broken body. I pin him fully beneath me, my hands finding his throat as easily as if they were made for this purpose.

"My name," I growl, tightening my grip, "is Stefano Rega."

His eyes bulge as his oxygen cuts off. His good hand claws at my face, my arms, my chest—finding every wound, every bruise, every broken rib. Pain explodes through me, but I don't relent. Can't relent.

Not when Ava's life is on the line. Not when our child's future hangs in the balance.

Carlo's struggles grow more desperate, more frantic. His face darkens as his lungs scream for air. I lean my full weight into my hands, staring into his eyes, watching the moment he realizes this warehouse will become his tomb.



"You took my family from me once," I say, voice steady despite the chaos within me. "Never again."

The sounds of the door giving way barely register. Ava's voice calling my name feels distant, underwater. All that exists is this moment. This kill. This revenge for every wound, every betrayal, every threat to what's mine.

Carlo's struggles weaken. His eyes begin to roll back. Victory is so close I can taste it.

Then a sudden, sharp movement catches me off guard. Carlo bucks beneath me with his last reserves of strength, using his legs to push off from the ground. We roll, positions reversed, his weight now crushing me into the concrete.

The sudden shift sends waves of dizziness and nausea through me. My grip loosens just enough for him to gulp a desperate breath.

"You first," he rasps, hands finding my throat now. "Then her. Then your heir."

The threat against Ava, against our child, ignites that primal, unstoppable force again.

With strength I didn't know I still possessed, I slam my forehead into the bridge of his nose. Cartilage gives way with a sickening crunch, blood pouring down his face. The blow stuns him just long enough for me to heave him off me.

We roll again, a deadly dance across concrete and blood. The warehouse tilts and sways around us as my concussion worsens, but I focus on one thing only: ending this threat. Permanently.

I manage to position myself above him once more, but my strength is fading fast. My body, pushed well beyond its limits, threatens to give out entirely. Blackness creeps

in at the edges of my vision, my consciousness slipping away in slow pulses.

No. Not yet. Not until he's gone. Not until Ava is safe.

With the last of my strength, I lift Carlo's head by his hair and slam it against the concrete floor. The sound is sickening—wet, heavy, final. His eyes glaze, but I can't stop. Won't stop.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

Again. Again. Again.

Until there's no possibility he'll ever rise again. Until the threat he poses is permanently eliminated.

Until Ava and our child are safe.

The door sounds like it might give in to the assault of the Fiori's men. Voices fill the warehouse, shouting orders, positions, threats. But they're too late.

Carlo Fiori lies still beneath me, eyes fixed on the warehouse ceiling, seeing nothing. The Monster of Chicago has lived up to his name.

I try to push myself up, to turn toward Ava, to protect her from whatever comes next, but my body refuses to obey. The darkness at the edge of my vision rushes in like a tide, unstoppable now that my task is complete.

"Ava," I whisper, though I'm not sure if the sound actually leaves my lips. "I'm sorry. So sorry."

For getting her involved in this life. For forcing her into this marriage. For failing to protect her properly.

For everything.

The last thing I see before consciousness leaves me is her face, hovering above mine. Blood-streaked and bruised, but alive. Beautiful. Mine.

Then there's nothing but darkness, swallowing me whole.

The taste of blood fills my mouth, metallic and warm. Something wet trickles down my face—sweat or blood, I can't tell anymore. Every breath feels like fire, each rib a separate torment. My head throbs in time with my heartbeat, a bass drum of pain that makes thinking nearly impossible.

But still, Ava's voice reaches me through the encroaching darkness.

"Stefano! Stay with me!"

I try to respond, to reassure her, but my lips won't form the words. My body feels impossibly heavy, anchored to the concrete by exhaustion and injury. The warehouse spins around me, walls and ceiling trading places in a nauseating carousel.

Footsteps thunder toward the room we are in—Fiori soldiers come to avenge their fallen bosses. Time has run out.

With tremendous effort, I manage to turn my head toward the sound, placing myself between the approaching threat and Ava. One last protection, futile as it may be.

But it doesn't work at all. My eyes close and the darkness claims me harshly.

I am so sorry, my Ava.

## CHAPTERTWENTY-SIX

Ava

I can't breathe. Can't think. Can barely move.

Stefano lies motionless on the concrete floor, blood pooling beneath him in an ever-widening circle. So much blood. Too much blood.

His face is deathly pale beneath the bruises and cuts, his chest barely rising with each shallow breath.

"Stefano," I whisper, my voice breaking. My hands hover over him, afraid to touch, afraid to make things worse. "Please. Stay with me."

He doesn't respond. Doesn't move. Just lies there, broken and still, while chaos erupts around us.

The warehouse door splinters as the Fiori men continue their assault. We have minutes, maybe seconds, before they break through. I need to do something. Need to get help. Need to save him.

My phone. Where is my phone?

I pat my pockets frantically, wincing at the pain that shoots through my face where Carlo's fist connected. My fingers close around the familiar shape, pulling it out with trembling hands. The screen is cracked, spiderwebbed with fractures that make the display difficult to read.

Please work. Please, please work.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

I punch in Tomasso's number from memory, pressing the phone to my ear as I cradle Stefano's head in my lap. The connection crackles, static filling the line, and I bite back a sob of frustration.

"Come on," I plead to no one and everyone. "Please connect."

The ringing finally gives way to a voice. It's Tomasso's, sharp with urgency.

"Where are you?" he demands without preamble.

"The warehouse," I gasp, relief making my voice shake. "East side industrial district. Stefano's hurt—badly. The Fiori brothers are dead, but their men are trying to break in and?—"

The sound of splintering wood punctuates my words as the warehouse door gives way another inch.

"We're already on our way," Tomasso says, his voice nearly drowned out by the roar of an engine. "Five minutes, maybe less. There's a back exit through the loading bay. Can you get there?"

I look at Stefano, at the blood soaking through his clothes, at the unnatural pallor of his skin. "He's unconscious. I can't move him by myself."

"Try to barricade to door. We're coming."

The sound of screeching tires comes through the line, followed by muffled shouting.

Then, clearer, "Just hold on. Both of you."

The call ends abruptly, leaving me alone with the silence and the growing pool of blood beneath the man I love. The man I might lose.

"Tomasso's coming," I tell Stefano, brushing a strand of hair from his forehead. His skin feels clammy, cold. "He's bringing help. You just need to hold on a little longer."

I glance at the door, where the pounding has momentarily ceased. They're regrouping, probably planning a more coordinated assault. Do they know about the loading bay?

I need to buy us time.

I force myself to stand on shaky legs. The room spins briefly, my body protesting every movement after the fight. But there's no time for weakness. Not now.

I scan the warehouse for anything I can use to barricade the door. A stack of pallets stands against one wall. They're heavy, awkward, but might buy us precious minutes. I drag them one by one, piling them against the entrance, ignoring the screaming pain in my muscles and the warm trickle of blood from where Carlo's ring cut my cheek.

The Fiori brothers lie where they fell, Marco with his throat cut open, Carlo with his head caved in from Stefano's relentless assault.

I try not to look at them as I work, but it's impossible to ignore the coppery smell of blood that permeates the air, or the way my shoes leave crimson footprints across the concrete.

I did this. I killed a man.

The thought feels distant, detached, like it belongs to someone else. There will be

time for horror later. Time for regret, for nightmares, for processing what I've become in this moment of desperation.

But not now. Now there is only survival.

When the last pallet is in place, I grab a length of rusty chain hanging from a nearby hook and thread it through the makeshift barricade. It won't hold forever, but it might give Tomasso enough time to reach us.

I return to Stefano, kneeling beside him, pressing my hands over the worst of his wounds to slow the bleeding. His skin is ashen, his breathing increasingly shallow and irregular.

"Don't you dare die on me," I whisper fiercely. "Not after everything we went through. Not when I finally admitted I love you."

The words hang in the air between us, more honest than anything I've said in years. Maybe ever.

I do love him. Despite the lies, the manipulation, the forced marriage. Despite everything. Or maybe because of it. Because beneath the monster everyone fears, there's a man who would tear the world apart to protect what's his. A man who saw me, really saw me, when everyone else just saw a pretty face or a useful tool.

I press harder on his wound, willing the bleeding to stop. "You have to live, Stefano. We're having a baby, remember? Your heir. The next generation of the great Rega family."

My voice cracks on the last words, tears spilling down my cheeks, mixing with the blood and grime. I lean closer, my lips brushing his ear.



"I'll even let you build me that ranch in Montana. The one with the wraparound porch. But you have to live, you hear me? You have to fight."

For a moment, I think I see his eyelids flutter, but it might be wishful thinking. He remains still, his life literally seeping away between my fingers.

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*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

Outside, engines roar in the distance, getting closer. Tomasso, hopefully. But the Fiori men have returned to the door as well, their renewed assault making the pallets shift ominously.

I glance around frantically, looking for anything else I can use to fortify our position. My eyes land on Carlo's gun, lying forgotten where it fell during the struggle. I hesitate for a split second. I've never been comfortable with firearms, then lunge for it.

The weight is unfamiliar in my hand as I check the magazine. Three bullets left. Not much, but better than nothing.

I position myself between Stefano and the door, gun raised, prepared to do whatever it takes to keep him safe. To keep our child safe. To give us both a chance for a future I never thought possible.

The barricade shudders as something heavy rams against it from the other side. A voice shouts orders in Italian. It's too muffled to make out the words, but the intent is clear.

They want blood. Revenge for their fallen bosses.

I click off the safety, steeling myself for what's coming. Three bullets. Make them count.

The chain groans, links straining under the repeated assault. One of the pallets shifts, creating a gap. I see movement beyond, dark shapes, the glint of weapons.

I take aim, finger tensing on the trigger?—

"AVA! STEFANO!" Tomasso's voice cuts through the chaos. "WE'RE HERE!"

The sound of gunfire erupts outside, followed by shouting and the screech of tires. The assault on our barricade abruptly ceases as the Fiori men turn to face the new threat.

Relief makes my hands shake so badly that I nearly drop the gun. I crawl back to Stefano, pressing my fingers to his neck, searching for a pulse. It's there, weak, thready, but present.

"Did you hear that?" I say, smoothing his hair back with trembling fingers. "Help is here. You just need to hold on a little longer."

The sounds of fighting continue outside, sharp bursts of gunfire, shouts in Italian, the crash of metal on metal. I keep pressure on Stefano's wound with one hand, the gun clutched in the other, watching the barricade for any sign of breakthrough.

Minutes feel like hours, each second marked by Stefano's increasingly labored breathing. The bleeding has slowed, but he's lost so much already. Too much.

"Please," I whisper, not sure who I'm pleading with—Stefano, God, the universe?  
"Please don't take him from me. Not now. Not like this."

As if in response, the warehouse falls eerily silent. The gunfire stops. The shouting ceases. All I can hear is my own heartbeat thundering in my ears and Stefano's ragged breathing beside me.

Then, cautiously: "Ava? It's Tomasso. We've secured the perimeter. It's safe to come out."

I don't move, don't lower the gun. It sounds like Tomasso, but I can't be sure. Trust doesn't come easily in this world, and the past few hours have taught me just how quickly situations can turn deadly.

"How do I know it's really you?" I call back, voice steadier than I feel.

A pause, then, "Stefano keeps a photo of you from when you were sixteen in his wallet. Has for years. Says it's to remind him what he's searching for."

The simple truth of it brings fresh tears to my eyes. Of course he does. Obsessive, possessive man. My man.

"He needs medical attention," I say, finally lowering the gun. "Right now. He's lost too much blood."

"We have paramedics. Move the barricade if you can."

With renewed strength born of desperate hope, I pull away the chain and drag the pallets aside. The door swings open to reveal Tomasso, flanked by Stefano's men, all armed, all radiating lethal purpose. Behind them, I glimpse black SUVs and what looks like a mobile medical unit.

Tomasso takes one look at Stefano and barks orders in rapid Italian. Men rush forward with a stretcher, medical equipment at the ready. I try to stay close as they work on him, but Tomasso gently pulls me aside.

"Let them help him," he says, his eyes taking in my blood-soaked clothes, the cut on my cheek, the way I'm cradling my ribs where Carlo's kick landed. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," I say automatically, my eyes never leaving Stefano as the medics insert IVs, apply pressure dressings, check his vitals. "The baby?"

"We'll have you checked too," he promises. "But Stefano first. He's the priority."

I nod, unable to argue with that. My own injuries seem inconsequential compared to the gaping wound in Stefano's side, the unnatural pallor of his skin, the way the medics exchange concerned glances as they work.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

"The Fiori brothers?" Tomasso asks quietly.

I gesture vaguely toward the bodies, suddenly exhausted beyond words. "Dead."

He nods, unsurprised. "Good."

We watch in silence as the medics stabilize Stefano enough to transfer him to the stretcher. His face is obscured by an oxygen mask now, tubes and wires connecting him to portable monitors that beep with concerning irregularity.

"Will he survive?" I ask, my voice small, broken.

Tomasso doesn't answer immediately, his gaze fixed on the man who is both his boss and his friend. "He's strong," he says finally. "A fighter."

It's not the reassurance I was hoping for, but it's honest. And in a world built on lies, honesty is its own kind of kindness.

As they lift the stretcher, I move forward, needing to touch Stefano one last time before they take him away. Needing him to know I'm here. That I'm not running. Not anymore.

"Sorry about the mess," I say, attempting humor through my tears as I take his limp hand in mine. "But you're going to be okay. Do you hear me, Stefano Rega? You're going to live through this because I'm not done yelling at you yet."

For just a moment, I think I feel his fingers tighten around mine, the faintest pressure,

a whisper of response. Hope blooms in my chest, fragile but persistent.

"I love you," I whisper, my lips brushing his ear. "I have for longer than I want to admit. So you have to fight. For me. For our baby. For that damn ranch in Montana you promised to build."

They begin to wheel him away, but I keep hold of his hand until the very last moment, until distance forces our fingers to separate. The loss of contact hits like physical pain.

"I'll ride with him," Tomasso says, gesturing for me to follow another of Stefano's men to a waiting SUV. "Meet us at the private clinic."

I nod, too exhausted to argue, too numb to do anything but comply. As I walk away from the warehouse, from the bodies, from the blood, from the evidence of what I've become capable of, I catch sight of the Fiori brothers one last time.

They look smaller in death. Less powerful. Just men, in the end. Men who underestimated what a woman would do to protect those she loves.

Outside, the night air feels shockingly clean after the warehouse's copper-and-fear stench. I gulp it down, letting it clear my head as I'm guided to one of the waiting vehicles.

The city sprawls around us, oblivious to the power vacuum we've just created, to the blood that's been spilled, to the fact that my entire world hangs in the balance along with Stefano's life.

As the SUV pulls away, following the medical transport carrying Stefano, I rest my hand on my stomach. Our child. The heir to an empire built on blood and power. A legacy I never wanted, never asked for, but somehow find myself fighting to protect.

"Your father's a stubborn, impossible man," I whisper to the life growing inside me.  
"But he loves us. And he's going to fight to come back to us. I know it."

The certainty in my voice surprises me. After a lifetime of lies, of cons, I find myself confronted with a truth so profound, it shakes the foundations of everything I thought I knew about myself.

I believe in him. In us.

In the future we might build from the ashes of today's violence.

And as the lights of the city blur past, as we race toward whatever comes next, I hold that belief close, a talisman against fear, against doubt, against the darkness that threatens to swallow us whole.

Stefano will survive.

He has to.

Because I'm not letting him go.

Not now.

Not ever.

CHAPTERTWENTY-SEVEN

Ava



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

"Ms. D'Amato, you need to be examined."

The nurse's voice is gentle but insistent, her hand on my arm trying to guide me away from Stefano's bed. I tighten my grip on his limp fingers, unwilling to let go.

They've just wheeled him back from surgery, his face even paler than before beneath the bruises, tubes and wires connecting him to machines that beep with steady reassurance. He's alive. For now.

"I'm fine," I say automatically, though the throbbing in my cheek and the ache in my ribs tell a different story. "I need to stay with him."

Tomasso steps forward, his normally impassive face showing rare concern. "Ava, let the medical team do their job. For the baby, if nothing else."

The mention of my child—our child—breaks through my stubborn resolve. I glance down at my blood-soaked clothes, suddenly aware of how reckless I'm being.

The baby. I have to protect the baby. It's the only piece of Stefano I might have left if...

I can't finish the thought.

"Ten minutes," I concede, reluctantly releasing Stefano's hand. "Then I'm coming right back."

The nurse nods, relief evident in her expression as she leads me to an adjacent

examination room. The private clinic is nothing like a regular hospital. It's all soft lighting and expensive furnishings, more like a luxury hotel than a medical facility.

It's the kind of place where Chicago's elite comes to handle their medical emergencies away from public scrutiny. The kind of place where bullet wounds don't raise questions and privacy is guaranteed for the right price.

I sit numbly as the nurse helps me out of my ruined dress, assessing my injuries with professional efficiency. The cut on my cheek needs stitches.

My ribs are bruised, possibly cracked. There are contusions on my wrists from Marco's grip. I have minor lacerations on my palms and knees from the warehouse floor.

But the baby, miraculously, appears to be fine.

"Heart rate is strong," the obstetrician confirms after examining me. Her eyes are kind, her movements gentle as she runs the ultrasound wand across my stomach. "No signs of distress or trauma that I can detect. You're very lucky, Ms. D'Amato."

Lucky. The word feels absurd given everything that's happened. It feels ridiculous that anything could be right in the world with the man I love fighting for his life just one room away.

"What about Stefano?" I ask, my voice cracking. "Is he going to survive?"

The doctor's expression softens further. "Mr. Rega lost a significant amount of blood, and the internal damage was extensive. The surgical team did everything they could. The next twenty-four hours will be critical." She squeezes my hand. "But he's young and strong. He has every chance."

Every chance. Not certainty. Not even probability. Just chance.

I nod, unable to speak past the lump in my throat.

"You should rest," the nurse says, helping me into a clean hospital gown. My clothes are beyond salvaging—Marco Fiori's blood has soaked through every fiber, turning the cream dress almost burgundy. "We can bring a cot into Mr. Rega's room if you'd prefer to stay close."

"Yes," I manage. "Please."

After cleaning and stitching the cut on my face and giving me some scrubs to change into, they lead me back to Stefano's room. He hasn't moved, hasn't changed.

He's still pale. Still unconscious. Still fighting for every breath.

Tomasso stands guard at the door, his posture alert despite the exhaustion evident in his face. Two more of Stefano's men flank the entrance to the private wing, and I have no doubt others are positioned strategically throughout the clinic.

The Fiori organization has been destabilized but not destroyed. Until the power vacuum is filled, we're all vulnerable.

"Any change?" I ask Tomasso as I approach.

He shakes his head, his expression grim. "The doctors say it's up to him now."

I nod, moving past him to reclaim my place at Stefano's bedside. The chair is uncomfortable, but I barely notice as I take his hand in mine once more.

His skin is cool to the touch, his fingers unresponsive.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

"I'm back," I whisper, though I don't know if he can hear me. "The baby's fine. Everything's fine. You just need to wake up now."

Machines continue their steady rhythm of beeps and hums. An IV drips clear fluid into his veins.

The oxygen mask fogs slightly with each shallow breath. But there's no response, no recognition, no change in his lifeless expression.

Time blurs as I sit there, holding his hand, willing him to open his eyes. The doctors come and go, checking vitals, adjusting medications, making notes on charts. Nurses change IV bags and monitor readings.

Through it all, I don't move. Can't move. I feel as if my presence, my touch, my stubborn refusal to leave might somehow tether him to this world. Keep him from slipping away to wherever the dying go.

"You should eat something," Tomasso says from the doorway. I hadn't even noticed him enter. "It's been hours."

I shake my head. "I'm not hungry."

"The baby needs nourishment," he counters, his voice uncharacteristically gentle. "Stefano would want you to take care of yourself. Of his heir."

The reminder hits its mark again. With reluctance, I accept the sandwich and water he offers, though each bite tastes like ash in my mouth.

As I eat, I study Tomasso properly for the first time since this nightmare began. His usually impeccable appearance is disheveled—tie loosened, shirt wrinkled, stubble darkening his jaw.

There's dried blood on his shirt cuffs, though I can't tell if it's his or someone else's. His eyes are bloodshot, haunted by something that looks like guilt.

"I'm sorry," I say suddenly, the words spilling out before I can stop them. "For what I said before. For calling you a coward. You were just following his orders."

Tomasso's expression shifts, surprise quickly masked by his professional façade. "You were right," he says after a moment. "I should have stayed with him. Should have found a way to protect him." His gaze moves to Stefano's unconscious form. "You're the brave one. Going in alone. Facing the Fioris. Saving him when I couldn't."

The simple admission stuns me into silence. This man—Stefano's right hand, his most trusted lieutenant—is thanking me. Me, the con artist who infiltrated their world under false pretenses. Who lied and manipulated and nearly got Stefano killed.

"I love him," I whisper, the truth of it settling deep in my bones. "I didn't mean to, didn't want to. But I do."

Tomasso nods, unsurprised. "He's loved you since you were children. Never stopped looking for you." A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "Even when I told him it was hopeless, that you were probably dead or had changed your identity so completely you'd never be found."

"I wish he'd found me sooner," I admit, my thumb tracing circles on Stefano's knuckles. "Before all this. Before the Fioris and the club and the lies between us."

"He found you exactly when he was meant to." Tomasso's certainty is almost comforting. "And you found your way back to him, despite everything. That's what matters now."

He excuses himself then, returning to his post outside. I'm left alone with Stefano and the weight of everything unsaid between us. Everything I need him to know.

That I love him. That I'm done running. That I want the future he's offered me—not because I have no choice, but because I choose him. Choose us.

"You have to wake up," I tell him, leaning close enough that my lips brush his ear. "You can't die, Stefano. Not now. Not when we've only just begun."

The machines continue their steady rhythm. More hours pass. And still, he doesn't stir.

A soft knock at the door draws my attention.

Tony stands awkwardly in the doorway, his face pale and drawn, eyes red-rimmed from crying or exhaustion or both. He looks so young suddenly—not the surly teenager who's been making my life difficult, but the little boy I practically raised after our parents died.

"Hey," he says, voice rough. "Can I come in?"

I nod, and he shuffles into the room, taking the chair opposite me on Stefano's other side. For a long moment, he just stares at the man in the bed—at the bruises, the tubes, the evidence of violence.

"This is my fault," he finally says, so quietly I almost miss it. "All of it. If I hadn't gotten caught, you wouldn't have had to—" His voice cracks. "People died because of

me. Because I was stupid and reckless and?—"

"Tony, stop." I cut him off, reaching across Stefano to grasp my brother's hand. "The Fioris did this. Not you. They're the ones who used us, who lied, who tried to destroy everything."

"But if I hadn't been drunk at that bar?—"

"Then they would have found another way to get to us," I say firmly. "They always meant to use us against each other. To use me against Stefano. We were just pieces in their game."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

Tony wipes his eyes with his sleeve, trying to hide the tears that have started to fall. "I'm sorry, Ava. For everything. For making things harder when you were just trying to protect me. For not listening. For being such a selfish jerk all the time. I just wanted to find out what really happened to Mom and Dad."

"I know, I know." I squeeze his hand, unable to speak past the tightness in my throat. The simple apology breaks something open inside me—relief and love and hope all tangled together.

I want to tell him that it was just an accident, not payback for the things our parents had done, but the reality is that I don't know. And I don't know if I'll ever find out. Or if I want to.

"I'm going to do better," he continues, his gaze moving between me and Stefano. "I'm going to be the brother you deserve. The person he," he nods toward Stefano, "thought was worth saving."

I swallow hard, fighting back my own tears. "I'm holding you to that promise, Anthony D'Amato."

He attempts a smile, though it wobbles at the edges. "Is he...is he going to make it?"

I look at Stefano—the man who faced down the Fiori brothers for us, who fought beyond human endurance to keep us safe. Who loved me enough to let me go and loved me enough to bring me back.

"He has to," I say, willing it to be true. "He's too stubborn to die."



Tony nods, his expression solemn as he studies Stefano's still form. "I owe him my life. We both do."

We sit in silence for a while, the magnitude of everything that's happened settling around us. The family we've lost. The family we've found. The uncertain future that hangs in the balance with each beep of the heart monitor.

"You should eat something," Tony says eventually, sounding more like the protective older brother he's never quite managed to be. "I can go find some food if you want."

"That would be good," I admit, suddenly aware of the hollow feeling in my stomach. How long has it been since I had that sandwich? The baby needs nourishment, even if I have no appetite. "Maybe something simple. Soup, if they have it."

He nods, eager to be useful. "I'll find something. Anything else you need?"

"Just come back," I tell him, meaning it more than he probably realizes. "We need to stick together now."

After he leaves, I turn my full attention back to Stefano. The room feels too quiet without Tony's presence, the beeping of the machines too loud. Too ominous.

"See that?" I say to Stefano, stroking his hand. "Tony's finally growing up. Finally becoming the man I always knew he could be. All because of you."

I study his face, memorizing each line, each angle, the evidence of the life he's lived. The slight scar on his temple from some childhood accident. The faint laugh lines around his eyes that only show when he truly smiles. The stubborn set of his jaw, evident even in unconsciousness.

"You need to wake up and see it for yourself," I continue, my voice breaking. "You

need to be here when the baby comes. You need to teach our child how to be strong and brave and impossibly stubborn, just like their father."

My hand drifts to my stomach, to the tiny life growing there—a miracle amid so much destruction.

"I never wanted this, you know," I confess quietly. "A baby. A family. I thought I'd just get Tony to safety, start over somewhere new, be free of all the complications and dangers of this life."

The monitors beep steadily, the only response to my admission.

"But now I can't imagine any other future. Can't imagine raising this child without you. Can't imagine walking away from whatever this is between us."

Tears spill down my cheeks, falling onto our joined hands. "I love you, Stefano Rega. I think I've loved you since we were kids, and you showed me that ridiculous knife trick behind the guest house. I definitely loved you the first time you kissed me in the garden, even though I was too young and scared to admit it. And I love you now—the man you've become, not just the boy I remember."

I lean closer, pressing my forehead gently against his. "So, you have to wake up. You have to fight. Because I've spent my whole life running, and I'm finally ready to stay. Ready to be yours, just like you always wanted."

My tears fall freely now, dampening his pillow, his cheek, his hair. All the emotions I've been holding back—fear, grief, love, hope—rush through me.

"Please," I whisper, the word a prayer and a promise. "Come back to me."

I press my lips softly to his, tasting salt and antiseptic and the faint metallic hint of

blood still lingering. His lips are cool, unresponsive, but I pour everything I am, everything I feel, into that gentle kiss.

When I pull back, nothing has changed. The machines continue their rhythm. His chest rises and falls with each shallow breath. His eyes remain closed, his expression peaceful but vacant.

I settle back into my chair, never releasing his hand, determined to be here when—if—he wakes.

Minutes stretch into hours, marked only by the mechanical sounds of the life support equipment and the occasional footsteps of medical staff outside the door.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

Tony returns with soup and bread, hovering anxiously until I manage to eat most of it. He takes the chair across from me again, and together we keep vigil through the night, sometimes talking softly about memories or about the future, sometimes talking about nothing at all.

As dawn approaches, my exhaustion becomes impossible to fight. My eyes grow heavy, my thoughts fuzzy with fatigue. The nurse brings a cot as promised, setting it up beside Stefano's bed, but I can't bring myself to use it. I can't bear to let go of his hand, even for a moment.

Instead, I rest my head on the edge of his mattress, his fingers still entwined with mine. The position is uncomfortable, but comfort seems like such a trivial concern right now.

"I'll be right here," I promise him, my voice slurred with exhaustion. "As long as it takes. Just come back to me."

As sleep finally claims me, I imagine I feel the slightest pressure against my palm—a twitch, a squeeze, a sign that somewhere in the darkness, he hears me. That he's fighting his way back.

That he's not ready to let go either.

## CHAPTERTWENTY-EIGHT

Stefano

I'm swimming through darkness.Or maybe floating. Everything feels weightless, distant, as if my body has been replaced with something lighter than air.

Pain hovers at the edges of my awareness, but it can't quite reach me here in this in-between place.

Is this death? This peaceful nothingness? This absence of the constant weight of violence and responsibility?

There's a light somewhere above me. Golden and warm, beckoning.

I drift toward it, pulled by some force I don't understand. As I get closer, sounds begin to filter through—a steady electronic beeping, hushed voices, the rustle of fabric.

Familiar scents reach me next. Antiseptic. Coffee. And beneath those, something flowery and distinctly female.

Ava.

Her name anchors me, gives me a reason to fight against the comfortable void. I push toward the light with renewed purpose, toward her scent, toward the promise of seeing her again.

My eyelids feel impossibly heavy, but I force them open, just a fraction at first. The world is blurry, too bright, making me want to retreat back into darkness. But then I see her.

Ava's head rests on the edge of what I now realize is a hospital bed, her dark hair spilling across the white sheets.

Her hand holds mine, warm and real, the most solid thing in this hazy reality. She appears to be sleeping, her face turned toward me, lashes casting delicate shadows on her cheeks.

Even with bruises marring her skin, even in this sterile hospital setting, she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I try to piece together how we got here. Fragments of memories flash through my mind—the warehouse, the confession about my family, Carlo Fiori's face contorted with hatred, the feeling of his skull giving way beneath my hands. Ava slashing Marco's throat with her hairpin.

Blood. So much blood.

Then her voice, desperate and breaking, pleading with me not to die.

I must have almost died. Maybe I did die, for a moment. The thought should frighten me, but all I feel is an overwhelming gratitude that I'm here now, with her hand in mine, both of us breathing.

"Ava." Her name comes out as barely a whisper, my throat raw and painful. Even that small effort leaves me exhausted.

She stirs immediately, as if some part of her has been waiting, vigilant even in sleep. Her eyes flutter open, momentarily unfocused, then widen as she realizes I'm awake.

"Stefano?" Her voice breaks on my name, disbelief and hope warring in her expression. "You're awake. You're really awake."

I try to squeeze her hand but can't tell if my muscles obey. Everything feels disconnected, distant, like I'm trying to operate my body through layers of cotton.

"Water," I manage to croak.

She's instantly in motion, reaching for a plastic cup with a straw, helping me lift my head just enough to take a sip. The water soothes my raw throat, though the movement sends pulses of pain through my skull.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

When I'm settled back against the pillows, she doesn't return to her chair. Instead, she perches carefully on the edge of the bed, as if she's afraid I might shatter if she gets too close. Her hands hover uncertainly before one settles on my cheek, feather-light.

"I thought I'd lost you," she whispers, tears gathering in her eyes. "They said...the doctors said..."

She doesn't finish the sentence, but she doesn't need to. I can read the fear on her face, the exhaustion etched into every line of her body. She looks like she hasn't slept properly in days.

"You can't get rid of me that easily," I say, attempting humor despite the situation.

She laughs, the sound watery and fragile, before leaning forward to press her lips against my forehead. Then my cheeks. My nose. The corner of my mouth. Each kiss gentle, reverent, as if she's relearning the landscape of my face.

"I love you," she says between kisses. "I'm so sorry. For everything. For running. For not trusting you. For almost getting you killed."

"How long?" I ask, struggling to focus through the fog of what must be serious painkillers.

She pulls back slightly, one hand still cradling my face. "Three days. You've been unconscious for three days." Her voice catches. "I was starting to lose hope."

Three days. It feels like minutes and eternity simultaneously.



"The baby?" The question is urgent, suddenly the only thing that matters.

Her free hand moves to her stomach, a smile breaking through her tears. "Fine. We're both fine. Tomasso got us to the hospital in time."

Relief floods through me, so intense it's almost painful. My wife and child are safe. Everything else—my injuries, the Fiori brothers, the aftermath of what happened at the warehouse—can be dealt with later.

"I dreamed," I say, the words coming slower now as exhaustion pulls at me again. "About us."

"What kind of dream?" She strokes my hair back from my forehead, careful to avoid the bandages I can now feel wrapped around my head.

"Our wedding. Not the hotel one. A real one." The memory of it glows in my mind, surprisingly vivid. "Somewhere sunny. By the ocean. You were wearing white, but not—not like a prisoner. Like a bride. A real bride."

Her smile widens, though tears still track down her cheeks. "That sounds beautiful."

"It was. You were." I fight against the heaviness of my eyelids, needing to see her face just a little longer. "Happiest I've ever been."

She's quiet for a moment, her eyes searching mine with an intensity that cuts through the medication haze. "We could have that, you know," she says finally. "A real wedding. Somewhere sunny. Once you're better."

The offer hangs between us, weighted with everything we've been through. With everything we've done to each other. The lies, the manipulation, the forced marriage, the desperate attempts to save each other.

"You'd marry me again?" I ask, genuinely surprised. "After everything?"

"I would." Her voice is steady now, certain in a way I've rarely heard from her. "I'd marry you a hundred times, Stefano Rega. The right way. Because I choose to, not because I have to."

Something warm unfurls in my chest, something that feels dangerously like hope. After years of searching for her, of obsessing over her, of forcing her into my life—she's choosing to stay. Choosing me.

"I might hold you to that," I murmur, feeling myself drifting despite my efforts to stay awake.

She laughs softly, pressing another kiss to my forehead. "Rest now. I'll be here when you wake up."

"Promise?" I ask, unable to stop the word from slipping out. After a lifetime of people leaving—my brothers to death, my father to his empire, my mother to her grief—I need the reassurance more than I care to admit.

"I promise." She squeezes my hand, her eyes never leaving mine. "No more running. No more lies. Just us, figuring this out together."

I want to tell her that I love her. That I'm sorry too, for the fear and pain I caused her. That I'll spend the rest of my life trying to be worthy of this second chance.

But the darkness is pulling me under again, gentler this time. Not the cold void of near-death, but the warm embrace of healing sleep.

The last thing I'm aware of is Ava's hand in mine, her thumb tracing small circles on my skin. An anchor. A promise.

A future I never thought I'd have.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

As consciousness slips away, I don't fight it. Because I know now that she'll be there when I return. That we have time—a lifetime—to say all the things that need saying. To heal all the wounds we've inflicted on each other. To build something new from the ashes of our mistakes.

Something real. Something chosen.

Something that might even be called love.

I drift off to dreams of white sand and clear blue water. Of Ava in a flowing dress, her face tilted toward the sun. Of a life beyond the blood and violence of Chicago. Beyond the legacy that has nearly destroyed us both.

A life we might actually get to live.

Together.

## CHAPTERTWENTY-NINE

Ava

The waves kiss the shore in a gentle rhythm, foam-edged and perfect. I stand at the window of our beachfront villa, watching palm trees sway in the tropical breeze, hardly believing this moment is real.

"Are you ready?" Angela asks, her voice stronger than I've ever heard it. These last few months of recovery have done wonders for both her and Stefano. Her hair is

growing back in soft curls, and today she's radiant in the pale blue bridesmaid dress we chose together.

"Almost," I say, turning to face her. The simple white dress I'm wearing catches the light, making the delicate lace overlay shimmer. Nothing extravagant or princess-like—just elegant, comfortable, and entirely my choice. The complete opposite of the cream-colored prison uniform from our first "wedding".

Angela smiles, her eyes suspiciously bright. "You look beautiful. Stefano's going to lose his mind when he sees you."

I laugh, smoothing my hands over the gentle curve of my stomach. The pregnancy weight is coming off slower than I had hoped. We had to adjust my dress a little. "I think your brother's seen me in more flattering states."

"You look beautiful," she says again. She reaches up to adjust the single white hibiscus flower tucked into my hair. "This time you're choosing him. That means everything to him."

Her words hit me with unexpected force. She's right, of course. The first time, there was no choice—just desperation, fear, and the cold calculation of survival. This time, standing on a perfect beach in the Bahamas with no threat hanging over our heads, it's entirely my decision. My choice. My heart leading instead of my fears.

A soft knock at the door interrupts my thoughts.

"Come in," I call, expecting the wedding coordinator or perhaps Tony.

Instead, Alessia Rega enters, looking more present and alive than I've seen her since we met. Island life has been good for her—the sunshine bringing color to her cheeks, the slower pace helping her find her way back from grief's shadow.

"Oh, Ava," she breathes, eyes widening as she takes me in. "You're a vision."

She crosses the room to take my hands in hers, squeezing gently. "I brought something. If you'd like to wear it, that is." From her pocket, she produces a delicate gold bracelet, tiny charms gleaming in the sunlight. "It was given to me on my wedding day. And my mother's before me."

"Alessia, I..." Emotion clogs my throat as she fastens it around my wrist. This woman, who has lost so much, offering me a piece of her history, of her family legacy. "Thank you."

"My son has loved you since you were children," she says simply. "I'm grateful I lived to see you become his wife. His real wife." Her smile turns mischievous. "And the mother of my perfect grandson."

The mention of Gianni makes my heart swell. Our beautiful baby boy, born seven weeks ago, with Stefano's shocking blue eyes and my dark hair. The most perfect thing I've ever seen—and miraculous for having survived everything we went through.

"Where is the little prince?" I ask, suddenly needing to see him.

"With his father." Alessia's smile softens. "He's teaching him important wedding duties, I believe."

The mental image of fierce, dangerous Stefano Rega carefully instructing our infant son makes me laugh. He's taken to fatherhood with the same intensity he brings to everything—completely, obsessively, with every ounce of his being.

"It's time," Angela says, checking her watch. "Tony's waiting to walk you down the aisle."

I take a moment for one final glance in the mirror. The woman looking back at me is so different from the one who walked into The Silk Rose all those months ago.

No longer running. No longer afraid. No longer alone.

"I'm ready," I say, and I mean it with every fiber of my being.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

The beach has been transformed. White chairs are set up on either side of a simple aisle strewn with flower petals. An arch of tropical blooms frames the endless blue of the ocean. Nothing extravagant—we both wanted simplicity—but it's perfect in every way that matters.

Tony stands at the path leading from our villa to the beach, dressed in a light linen suit, looking so grown up that my breath catches. The past few months have changed him too. Sobriety looks good on him. So does the acceptance letter to the architectural school that came last week.

"Wow, sis," he says, eyes widening as I approach. "You're gonna give the old man a heart attack."

I swat his arm playfully. "The 'old man' is only thirty-five."

"Ancient," he teases, then his expression turns serious. "You're happy, right? This is really what you want?"

I take his arm, squeezing it gently. "More than anything I've ever wanted in my life."

He studies my face, then nods. "Good. Because if he ever hurts you?—"

"You'll what?" I arch an eyebrow. "Take on the Monster of Chicago?"

"If I have to." The response is immediate, without a trace of the fear that would have colored it months ago.



I lean up to kiss his cheek. "I love you, Tony."

"Love you too, sis." He clears his throat, clearly embarrassed by the emotion. "Now let's go before your fiancé sends out a search party."

The soft strains of music reach us as we approach the aisle. Not the traditional wedding march—nothing about our relationship has been traditional—but a gentle acoustic melody that reminds me of waves and wind and new beginnings.

And then I see him.

Stefano stands beneath the flower arch, tall and imposing even in the casual elegance of his linen suit. His hair has grown longer during his recovery, curling slightly in the humid air. The scars from the warehouse fight are barely visible now, just a thin white line at his temple, another peeking from his collar.

He keeps saying he's going to cover the scars with new tattoos, commemorating his survival. We decided last night that I will get some art to cover my own scars that will help me remember that we survived, that we are so lucky to be here.

His expression as he sees me steals my breath. Raw emotion transforms his features—love, wonder, disbelief—all the carefully maintained control stripped away, leaving only the man. My man.

And in his arms, dressed in a tiny white outfit, is our son. Gianni's little face turns toward me as if he senses his mother, his perfect rosebud mouth forming what might be a smile or just gas, but it doesn't matter.

The sight of them together—the two most important people in my world—makes my heart feel like it might burst.

Each step down the aisle feels significant. Meaningful. A journey I'm making by choice rather than necessity. A path toward the future I never dared to dream of.

When we reach the altar, Tony places my hand in Stefano's, his expression serious as he says, "Take care of her."

Stefano nods, the simple gesture carrying the weight of a solemn vow. "With my life."

The officiant—a cheerful local woman with kind eyes—begins the ceremony, but I barely hear the lilt of her words. I'm lost in Stefano's gaze, in the solid warmth of his hand holding mine, in the precious weight of our son nestled between us.

This small gathering is our family now. Tomasso stands as best man, his usual stoic expression softened with rare emotion. Angela and Tony flank us like bookends, the siblings who have been through so much. Alessia watches from the front row, tears tracking silently down her cheeks.

No Fiori family. No criminal empire. No guns or threats or fear. Just love, binding us together more securely than any forced vows or legal documents ever could.

When it's time for our vows, Stefano hands Gianni to his grandmother and takes both my hands in his.

"Ava," he begins, his voice rough with emotion. "I have loved you since we were children, since you showed me your knife trick behind the Venere gardens and made me believe in magic." A smile touches his lips at the memory. "I searched for you for ten years, never knowing if I'd find you again. And when I did, I made every mistake possible trying to keep you."

He takes a deep breath, his thumbs tracing circles on my knuckles. "I tried to cage

you, to control you, to force you to be mine. And in doing so, I nearly lost you forever."

I blink back tears, remembering those desperate days—the forced wedding, my attempts to run away, the warehouse showdown that nearly cost us everything.

"I promise you now," he continues, "that I will never cage you again. That I will earn your love every day for the rest of our lives. That I will protect you and our son without suffocating you." His voice drops lower, meant only for me. "That I will follow you anywhere, just like I promised all those years ago."

Tears spill freely down my cheeks now. I start to speak, but it takes a moment to find my voice.

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"Stefano," I finally manage, "I have spent most of my life running. From my family legacy, from connections, from anything that felt like it could trap me." I squeeze his hands, drawing strength from his solid presence. "I ran from you too. From what I felt for you. From the life I was afraid to want."

The ocean breeze carries my words, lifting them like prayers. "I'm done running. Today, I choose to stay. To build a life with you. To love you through the darkness and the light." My lips curve into a smile. "To even love the Monster of Chicago, because he's part of the man I adore."

Soft laughter ripples through our small gathering.

"I promise to be honest, even when it's hard. To trust you with my heart, my fears, and our future. To raise our son with love rather than fear." I take a shaky breath. "And I promise that no matter where life takes us, I'll always find my way back to you."

The rest of the ceremony passes in a blur of rings and promises and finally, finally, a kiss that feels like sealing our fate. Not the desperate, claiming kisses of our earlier days, but something deeper. Sweeter. A promise of the life we're choosing together.

As we turn to face our family—our small, unlikely, precious family—Gianni lets out a delighted squeal from his grandmother's arms, as if adding his approval to the proceedings.

"Mrs. Rega," Stefano murmurs against my ear as we walk back down the aisle, "at last."

I lean into him, savoring the solid strength of his arm around my waist. "Second time's the charm," I tease.

His laughter is light, free in a way I rarely hear. "I'd marry you a thousand times if that's what it took."

The beach villa has also been transformed for our reception—simple elegance with tropical flowers, fairy lights, and tables set for an intimate dinner. As Stefano and I take our seats at the main table, Alessia approaches with Gianni in her arms.

"I believe this little gentleman would like to congratulate his parents," she says, gently transferring my son into my waiting arms.

Gianni blinks up at me with those startling blue eyes—Stefano's eyes—his tiny hands reaching for my face with perfect infant curiosity. My heart clenches with love so fierce it's almost painful. This miracle we created, against all odds. This perfect blend of us both.

"He's getting so big," Angela says, leaning over to tickle her nephew's cheek. "And more handsome every day."

"Takes after his father," I say, glancing at Stefano with a smile.

"His mother's nose, though," Stefano counters, one finger gently tracing the tiny feature in question. "Thank God."

The casual banter, the easy affection, the sense of family—it all feels foreign yet somehow right. Like stepping into a role I was always meant to play, if only I'd allowed myself to believe it possible.

Dinner unfolds with laughter and stories, toasts and tears. Tomasso surprises

everyone with uncharacteristic emotion in his best man speech. Tony teases me mercilessly about my "criminal-to-soccer-mom transformation". Angela presents us with a scrapbook she's been secretly creating, documenting Gianni's first weeks.

As the evening progresses, Alessia corners me during a quiet moment, her expression thoughtful.

"I've been thinking," she says, looking out at the pristine beach, the endless horizon. "About staying here on the island."

I blink in surprise. "Permanently?"

She nods, a serene smile softening her features. "I feel...lighter here. Like I can breathe again." Her eyes find Stefano across the room, holding court with Tomasso and Tony. "My son has his own family now. His own life to live. And I think...I think I might be ready to find mine again."

"Have you told him?" I ask gently.

"Not yet." She sighs. "He'll worry. Try to protect me, even from happiness."

I laugh softly, knowing she's right. "I'll help you tell him. He just wants you to be happy, Alessia."

"I know." She squeezes my hand. "You make him happy, Ava. Happier than I've seen him since he was a boy. That's all a mother wants for her son."

Before I can respond, Stefano appears at my side, his hand finding the small of my back in that possessive yet gentle way that's become so familiar.

"Stealing my wife, Mother?" he teases, though the word "wife" holds a reverence that

makes my heart skip.

"Just sharing mother-in-law secrets," Alessia replies smoothly. "Very classified information."

He arches an eyebrow. "Should I be worried?"

"Always," I quip, leaning into his side. "Keeps you on your toes."

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His laugh rumbles through his chest, vibrating against me. "I have something for you," he says, suddenly serious. "A wedding gift."

Alessia slips away discreetly as Stefano guides me to a quiet corner of the veranda. Gianni has been passed to Angela, who's showing him the twinkling lights strung across the palm trees with all the enthusiasm of a devoted aunt.

"A gift?" I ask, surprised. "Stefano, this whole wedding—the island, the villa—it's already too much."

"Nothing is too much for you." He pulls out his phone, tapping the screen a few times before passing it to me. "For us."

I look down at the image displayed, uncomprehending at first. A sprawling ranch house with a wraparound porch. Rolling hills stretching to distant mountains. A barn and acres of open land.

Montana.

"Is this..." My voice fails me as understanding dawns.

"Yours," he says simply. "Ours. If you want it."

My hands tremble as I scroll through more photos. The interior of the house is rustic yet modern. A nursery is already set up with a crib and rocking chair. There are views of mountains and meadows and endless sky.



"You remembered?" I whisper, thinking of the handful of times I'd mentioned my dream of Montana all those months ago.

"I remember everything you've ever told me, Ava." His voice is low, intense. "Every dream. Every hope. Every fear."

Tears blur the images as I continue to scroll. This is it—exactly the life I'd described. The fantasy I never thought possible. The escape I've been chasing for years.

"Can we..." I swallow hard, afraid to hope. "Can we actually live there? Full-time? What about the family business? Chicago?"

Stefano takes the phone gently from my shaking hands, setting it aside to cup my face. "Tomasso's been handling most of the legitimate operations for months. The rest..." He shrugs, as if the empire he's built means nothing. "I'm ready to walk away. To be the man you and Gianni deserve, not the monster Chicago created."

I can't speak, can't find words adequate to describe the emotion overwhelming me. This man—this fierce, possessive, impossible man—is offering to give up everything he's built. For me. For our son. For the chance at a normal life together.

"Say something," he murmurs, a hint of vulnerability in his expression.

"Yes," I manage through my tears. "Yes to Montana. Yes to our ranch. Yes to everything with you."

The smile that breaks across his face is like sunrise—brilliant and transformative. He pulls me into his arms, lifting me off my feet in a kiss that tastes like promise, like future, like dreams I never dared believe could come true.

Our family cheers in the background, but I barely hear them. In this moment, there's

only Stefano and me and the life we're choosing together. A life beyond violence and fear. A life where our son can grow up free from the shadows that haunted both our childhoods.

As Stefano sets me back on my feet, his hands linger at my waist, reluctant to let go even for a moment. "I have one condition," he says, his voice pitched low for my ears only.

"What's that?" I ask, breathless from his kiss and the future unfurling before us.

"Our bedroom needs to have a very large, very comfortable bed." His eyes darken with intent that sends heat spiraling through me. "For all the making up we still have to do."

I laugh, leaning into him, into the safety and heat and promise of his embrace. "I think that can be arranged, Mr. Rega."

"Good." His lips brush my ear, sending shivers down my spine. "Because I plan to thoroughly enjoy my wedding night with my real wife."

The rest of the evening passes in a blur of celebration. There are toasts and cake and dancing under the stars. Gianni being passed from one embrace to another, soaking up the love of his unconventional extended family. Promises for visits and plans for the future.

Eventually, our guests begin to disperse. Tomasso takes charge of getting a sleepy Angela back to her villa. Tony heads out with assurances that he'll be fine and we should enjoy our night. Alessia retires with Gianni, insisting that new parents deserve at least one night to themselves.

And then we're alone—really alone—for the first time since saying our vows.

Stefano's eyes find mine across the now-empty veranda, dark with intent that makes my heart race and my body warm in anticipation.

"So, Mrs. Rega," he says, stalking toward me with predatory grace. "Ready to begin our honeymoon?"

The moment Stefano's hands land on my waist, I feel the heat of his touch sear through the thin fabric of my wedding dress. His fingers tighten, pulling me closer until there's no space between us, just the electric hum of anticipation. His breath is warm against my ear as he murmurs, "You've been driving me insane all day, Ava."

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I shiver, my body reacting instantly to the low, gravelly tone of his voice. “Is that so?” I tease, tilting my head to meet his gaze. His eyes are dark, locking onto mine with an intensity that makes my heart race.

“You know exactly what you’ve been doing,” he growls, his hands sliding down to grip my hips. “The dress. The way you’ve been moving. Every second, I’ve been imagining what I’d do to you when we were finally alone.”

His words send a jolt of desire straight to my core, and I can’t help but bite my lip in response. He notices, of course, and his lips curve into a slow, dangerous smile. “Don’t do that,” he warns, his voice dropping even lower. “Unless you want this to be over before it’s even started.”

I laugh softly, but the sound catches in my throat as he suddenly lifts me off my feet, his hands gripping me firmly as he carries me toward the bedroom. My arms instinctively wrap around his neck, and I press my lips to the pulse point just below his jaw, savoring the way his breath hitches in response.

He kicks the door shut behind us, the sound echoing in the quiet room, before setting me down gently on the edge of the bed. His hands are everywhere at once—tugging at the straps of my dress, tangling in my hair—and I can’t help but arch into his touch, craving more.

“Stefano,” I breathe, my voice barely above a whisper.

He pauses for a moment, his eyes searching for mine, before leaning in to capture my lips in a searing kiss. It’s not soft or gentle; it’s hungry, possessive, and it leaves me

breathless. His tongue slips past my lips, claiming me in a way that sends sparks of pleasure through my body.

His hands move to the zipper at the back of my dress, and I feel the cool air against my skin as he slowly pulls it down. The fabric slides off my shoulders, pooling at my waist, and his gaze rakes over me with undisguised desire. “You get more and more beautiful every day,” he murmurs, his voice rough with need.

I reach for the buttons of his shirt, my fingers trembling slightly as I work to undo them. When I finally push the fabric aside, revealing the hard planes of his chest, I can’t resist running my hands over his skin, tracing his scars. Each one is a reminder of the man he is—the man I’ve chosen to spend my life with.

His hands move to my hips again, and he tugs me forward until I’m pressed against him, the heat of his body searing into mine. “Ava,” he growls, his voice thick with desire. “Tell me what you want.”

I don’t hesitate. “You. Always you.”

That’s all it takes. In one swift motion, he lays me back on the bed, his body covering mine completely. His lips trail down my neck, nipping and sucking at the sensitive skin, and I can’t help but moan softly in response. Every touch, every kiss, is electric, and I feel myself unraveling beneath him.

His hands move to the hem of my dress, and he pulls it the rest of the way off, tossing it aside without a second thought. His gaze rakes over me, and for a moment, I feel exposed, vulnerable, but the heat in his eyes reassures me. He’s not just looking—he’s worshipping.

“You’re perfect,” he murmurs, his hands sliding up my thighs, spreading them gently as he settles between them. His lips follow the path his hands had taken, kissing and

nipping at the sensitive skin, and I can feel the tension building inside me with each passing moment.

When his lips finally find their way to my core, I gasp, my hands tangling in his hair as he begins to explore me with slow, deliberate strokes of his tongue. The pleasure is overwhelming, and I can feel myself teetering on the edge, my body trembling with need.

“Stefano,” I moan, my voice breaking as the sensations become too much to bear. “Please, I need you.”

He doesn’t make me wait. With a growl of satisfaction, he moves back up my body, his hands gripping my hips as he positions himself at my entrance. His eyes meet mine, and in that moment, I see everything—the love, the desire, the promise of forever.

And then he’s inside me, filling me completely, and I can’t hold back the cry that escapes my lips. He moves slowly at first, savoring every inch of me, but it doesn’t take long before the pace quickens, the rhythm becoming more urgent, more demanding.

My hands grip the sheets as the pleasure builds, each thrust sending wave after wave of ecstasy crashing through me. His name is a chant on my lips, a prayer, and when I finally shatter, it’s with a cry that echoes through the room.

He follows me over the edge, his body tensing as he spills himself inside me, his lips pressed to my neck in a silent vow. For a moment, we’re both lost in the aftermath, our bodies still joined, our breaths mingling in the air between us.

When he finally pulls away, he gathers me in his arms, holding me close as if he never wants to let me go. “I love you, Ava,” he murmurs, his voice soft but filled

with conviction.

“I love you too,” I whisper, my heart swelling with emotion. “Forever.”

And as I lay there in his arms, I know that this is just the beginning. The promise of forever is ours, and I can’t wait to see what comes next.

## Epilogue

### STEFANO

Montana mornings tastedifferent than Chicago's. Cleaner. Sharper. Like possibility itself has a flavor, and it's mountain air and pine and endless sky.

I stand on the wraparound porch of our ranch house, watching the sunrise paint the distant mountains gold. Coffee steam rises from my mug, mingling with my breath in the cool morning air. After almost two years, and I still haven't tired of this view. Of this peace.

Of this life I never thought I'd have.

"Papà!Papà! Look!"

Gianni's excited shout draws my attention to where my son toddles across the yard, bundled in a tiny puffy jacket against the autumn chill.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

At eighteen months, he's a force of nature—all determined energy and boundless curiosity. His dark curls bounce with each step, his chubby cheeks flushed with excitement as he points to something in the grass.

Ava follows a few steps behind him, her smile tender as she watches our son's discovery. She's wrapped in one of my old flannels, her growing belly just starting to show beneath the fabric. Four months along with our second child, and somehow even more beautiful than the day I found her again.

"Be careful, piccolo," she calls, though there's no real worry in her voice. Not here, where the greatest danger is a scraped knee or a splinter.

How far we've come from that warehouse in Chicago. From blood and violence and desperate gambles. From mistrust and forced vows and obsession that bordered on madness.

I set my coffee down and descend the porch steps, crossing the yard to join my family. Gianni looks up at me, his face—so like mine but softened by Ava's features—splitting into a delighted grin.

"Frog, Papà!" he exclaims, pointing to a small green amphibian making its unhurried way across our lawn. "Big frog!"

I crouch beside him, feeling the familiar twinge in my left knee—a souvenir from the Fiori warehouse that the Montana winters don't let me forget. "That's right, campione. A very big frog."



His blue eyes—exact replicas of mine—widen with wonder. "Take home?"

Ava laughs, the sound still my favorite melody after all this time. "I think Mr. Frog would rather stay outside with his family, don't you?"

Gianni considers this with adorable seriousness before nodding. "Okay. Bye-bye, frog." He waves solemnly as the creature disappears into the tall grass.

I scoop him up, settling him on my hip with practiced ease. His weight against my chest, solid and warm, still feels like a miracle some days. A gift I never thought I'd deserve.

"Did you call Tony?" Ava asks, coming to stand beside us. Her hand finds mine, our fingers intertwining automatically.

"This morning. He's finishing a big project, but he'll be here next weekend."

Her smile widens. "Good. He needs a break from all that studying."

Tony's transformation has been almost as dramatic as our own. Two years sober now, he's thriving in his third year of architecture school.

The angry, scared teenager who once stole our car and got drunk at parties now calls every Sunday, sends Gianni little models he's built, and has a girlfriend who seems to be smoothing his remaining rough edges.

"He said to tell you he's bringing the plans for that greenhouse you wanted." I press a kiss to her temple, breathing in the scent of her shampoo. "Still trying to grow those Italian tomatoes?"

"Some of us weren't raised importing everything we want," she teases, bumping her

hip against mine. "Besides, Gianni loves tomatoes."

"Matoes!" our son confirms enthusiastically, though I suspect he'd declare his love for anything Ava suggested.

The ranch spreads out around us, three hundred acres of Montana wilderness that's become more home than anywhere I've ever lived.

The main house—all timber and stone and massive windows—sits nestled against the mountains like it grew there naturally. The barn is to the east. The clear lake to the west is where Gianni had his first swim this summer.

All of it was purchased with legitimate money, through legitimate channels. The final step in my extraction from "the life", as Ava calls it.

Tomasso runs things back in Chicago now. We speak weekly, his updates becoming increasingly business-like as the Rega empire transitions into something more corporate, more above-board.

He never mentions the other aspects of the organization—the ones that still operate in shadows—and I never ask.

Some knowledge is better left behind.

The girls are still taken care of, still working at The Silk Rose. Kira came to visit last week and threatened to make Ava hire her as a nanny so that she could stay in the beauty of our home. I wouldn't be surprised if my wife actually takes her up on the offer.

My only other connection to Chicago—my mother and sister—moved to the island a few months after our wedding. It was hard to accept the change at first, especially

being away from Angela. They also visit us at least twice a month, but much like Tony, they've settled into a routine that brings them peace—at least when it comes to my mother. Angela is getting restless the older she gets.

"Breakfast?" Ava asks, reaching up to smooth a wild curl from Gianni's forehead. "I made those blueberry pancakes you love."

Our son squirms to be let down, already racing toward the house at the promise of his favorite food. I keep hold of Ava's hand, pulling her back gently when she moves to follow him.

"Hey." I tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear, allowing my fingers to linger against her cheek. "Have I told you today?"

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

Her smile turns soft, knowing exactly what I'm asking. "Told me what, Mr. Rega?"

"That I love you." The words still feel new sometimes, despite how often I say them now. Like a gift I'm constantly unwrapping. "That you're everything."

She rises on her toes to press her lips to mine, a gentle kiss that promises more later when little eyes aren't watching. "You might have mentioned it this morning. But I never get tired of hearing it."

I rest my free hand on her stomach, feeling the slight swell there. Our daughter, according to the ultrasound last week. Another miracle I never thought I'd witness.

"I had a call from the realtor yesterday," I tell her as we walk toward the house, following the path of our impatient son. "That property next to the lake is available. The one with the good southern exposure."

Ava glances at me, eyebrow raised. "The one you said was 'ridiculously overpriced' last month?"

I shrug, unable to contain my smile. "Maybe I've reconsidered its value. It would make a good location for that wellness retreat center you've been talking about."

Her eyes widen. "Stefano, are you serious? That's...that's a huge investment."

"In you. In your dream." I squeeze her hand. "You've supported mine. Let me support yours."

The wellness retreat has been Ava's passion project for months now—a place for people to come to heal, reconnect with nature, and learn yoga and meditation from her personally. It's a far cry from her days as a con artist or a reluctant exotic dancer, but I know she wants this.

"I don't know what to say." Her eyes shine with unshed tears, pregnancy hormones making her more emotional than usual.

"Say yes." I stop us at the foot of the porch steps, turning to face her fully. "Say you'll build something amazing. Say our children will grow up watching their mother create beauty and healing in the world."

She laughs, the sound catching on a sob. "When did you become such a poet, Stefano Rega?"

"When I finally had something worth writing poetry about."

We're interrupted by the screen door banging open as Gianni reappears, face sticky with what appears to be prematurely sampled maple syrup.

"Pancakes!" he announces imperiously. "Now!"

Ava and I exchange amused glances. Some aspects of the Rega temperament are clearly genetic.

"Your son," she murmurs, eyes dancing with mischief.

"Definitely my son at this moment," I agree, scooping him up again. "Come on, campione. Let's get you cleaned up before breakfast."

Inside, our home is warm and filled with morning light. It's so different from the

cold, modern penthouse in Chicago or the sterile hotel room where I once forced Ava to become my wife. This place, we've built together—choosing every beam, every stone, every piece of furniture as a team.

As we move through our morning routine—wiping sticky fingers, serving pancakes, drinking coffee between attending to a toddler's endless needs—I'm struck again by how ordinary it all is. How wonderfully, beautifully normal.

No weapons hidden throughout the house. No security teams watching our every move. No enemies plotting our downfall.

Just a family. Building a life.

Later, when Gianni is down for his nap, and the house is quiet, I find Ava on the back deck. She's sketching something in the notebook she carries everywhere these days—floor plans for her retreat center this time.

I wrap my arms around her from behind, resting my chin on her shoulder to peek at her work. "Looks good."

She relaxes against me, tilting her head to rest against mine. "It's still just a dream."

"All the best things start that way." I press a kiss to her neck, feeling her pulse beneath my lips. Strong. Steady. "Like us."

She turns in my arms, setting the notebook aside. "Is that what we were? A dream?"

"A dream. A nightmare. An obsession." I trace the curve of her jaw, still marveling that I can touch her like this—freely, lovingly, without fear or manipulation between us. "Now we're just reality. The best kind."

Her smile is slow, knowing. "And you don't miss it? The power? The fear in people's eyes when they hear your name?"

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:45 am*

I consider the question seriously, knowing she deserves honesty. "Sometimes I miss certain parts. The adrenaline. The certainty of purpose." I meet her gaze directly. "But I'd trade it all again in a heartbeat for this. For you. For our family."

She searches my face, finding whatever reassurance she needs there. "Good. Because I have news."

"News?" My hands settle on her hips, holding her close.

"Mmm." Her eyes sparkle with that mischievous glint I've come to adore. "Dr. Ramirez called while you were putting Gianni down."

My heart skips a beat. "Everything okay with the baby?"

"Perfect." She takes my hand, guiding it to her belly. "So perfect that there are two of them."

The world stops. Restarts. Stops again.

"Two?" My voice sounds distant to my own ears. "Twins?"

She nods, watching my reaction carefully. "Identical girls, apparently. Are you...is that okay?"

A laugh bubbles up from somewhere deep inside me, joyous and disbelieving. "Okay? Ava, that's..." Words fail me, so I lift her instead, spinning her in a careful circle that pulls a surprised laugh from her throat.



When I set her down, we're both breathless, grinning like fools.

"Three children," I murmur, shaking my head in wonder. "If someone had told me three years ago that I'd be here, a rancher in Montana with three children and the most beautiful wife in the world..."

"You'd have had them killed for insulting your intelligence?" she suggests dryly.

I laugh, the sound echoing across our land. Our home. Our future.

"Probably. But they'd have been right all along."

I draw her close again, marveling at how perfectly she fits against me. How completely my life has transformed from darkness to light.

From monster to man.

From obsession to love.

"Ti amo, tesoro," I whisper against her hair. "With everything I am."

Her arms tighten around me, her voice soft but certain. "I love you too, Stefano. Always."

The end.

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