



Unwanted Marriage with the Mafia Boss

Author: *Ivy Prince*

Category: Romance, Adult, Classics

Description: I swore I'd never trust a man again. Then he comes into my life.

Mysterious and dangerously handsome, he's the guy who makes my heart beat faster and my body quiver in anticipation of his commanding touch.

I finally feel safe.... until he barges into my home with armed men in the middle of the night and whisks me away with him.

It turns out he's the notorious mafia boss everyone is talking about, and he intends to destroy my neighborhood and take my home for his own gain. Worse, now I'm married to him because of a deal my dad unwittingly signed.

My unwanted husband wants to use me as a pawn, but can the burning attraction between us ruin his plans?

Mature themes, language, and content with potential triggers. This is the first installment in Mob Boss's Unexpected Twins Duet.

Total Pages (Source): 59

CHAPTER 1

Chiara

I lookup at the computer screen as I trace my finger over a line in the notebook. Everything checks out. Good.

The door swishing open startles me, and I let out a small gasp. My shoulders relax a moment later. It's just my dad. He's still wearing an apron. His graying dark brown hair is slicked back.

"Honey, what are you still doing here?" he asks, his hazel eyes narrowed at me.

"Not much. Just checking some things." I give him a small smile. "But you should really get a new computer. This one is super slow and freezes all the time. I bet I could finish things faster if—"

"But I like this one. It's not that slow, and you should be out having fun with your friends and not be stuck here in my office."

"Dad, you already work hard enough. I only want to help."

"And you're helping enough." He takes off his apron. "It's Friday night. You can't spend your days going to the university, studying, working here... When do you plan to relax?"

"Well, you're here all the time too. You help the staff, even when you don't have to."

He shakes his head at me. “That’s because the restaurant is my responsibility now. When I was your age, I wouldn’t even think about being stuck in here with my old man.”

“Fine. I’ll go out.” I sigh as I close the notebook and get to my feet.

Fighting with my dad about anything is pointless. He’ll only keep talking until he convinces me to agree with him. But maybe he’s right.

When I’m not studying or going to my economics classes, I’m usually here. This restaurant, Rosa Bianca, has been in my family for decades, and one day, it’s going to be mine. It’s a nice, cozy little place just across from our house. I love it here. Despite all the chatter and hecticness, especially during the summer months, it makes me feel peaceful and calm.

I love to watch and learn from my dad as he gives instructions to the staff, or when he approaches tourists and tries to make them laugh and feel comfortable, even though he doesn’t speak a word of their language.

When his friends come over, a party is guaranteed. Then my mom joins too, and we all end up talking and singing long after the closing hours. Sometimes, I’ll find my dad sweeping after he sends everyone home, and he won’t let me take over, even if his back hurts.

But I think I understand why. He loves this place, just as I do, and I don’t think he’s looking forward to retiring. And maybe he’s a tiny bit of a control freak and sees the restaurant as his baby that he refuses to give up or let anyone else take care of.

Even once I take over, I don’t think he’ll go anywhere too far or get a hobby. He’ll be here all the time. His excuse will be that he only wants to make sure things are running smoothly, especially because our house is so close.

But I wouldn't want it any other way. It's perfect. I love having my family close because that one time when I didn't...

I swallow hard. I won't think about my ex-boyfriend now. It's better to forget all about my little adventure into independence when I turned eighteen that ended up in a disaster. Not even my mom and dad know all the details. They were just happy to have me back. Our house is big enough for all of us anyway.

"Have fun!" My dad lightly claps me on the shoulder as I go past him.

"I will." I flash him a smile.

"Oh, and if you see Mom, tell her I'm in here."

"Sure." I bet she already knows it, because if she can't see him in the dining area of the restaurant, he's either in the kitchen or in his office.

Just as I'm out in the hallway, my phone rings. The number of my best friend, Elena, shows up on the screen.

"Hey, what's up?" I say as I answer.

Elena and I met at the university. We pretty much go to the same classes. None of my friends from high school chose to study economics, so we drifted apart. Elena was just sitting there in class all alone, and from the moment I sat down next to her, we became good friends.

She's from Savona, so she didn't know anyone here. But her cheerful and outgoing personality helps her make friends very quickly. Sometimes, I envy her that.

"Chiara, are you free? Because if you are, I know just the perfect place for us tonight!"

There's a new nightclub, and I hear it's going to be awesome. You're coming, right?"

"Um..." I'm not a fan of nightclubs or hanging out with drunk people, especially after my ex.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“Come on! It’s going to be fun! I promise. I invited the girls from our—”

“I actually have something planned.”

“Oh.” Surprise flickers through Elena’s voice. “With a guy? Wait, did you finally find a boyfriend? Who is he? Tell me!”

I haven’t found anyone, and I haven’t been looking either. After Filippo, I don’t think I’ll ever trust a man again. No matter how much I don’t want to think about him, I can’t help it. I was young and naive, and I fell for his sweet lies. He made me feel like the luckiest girl in the world. But then we moved in together, and he showed me his real face.

His ugly face.

I wince because I can still feel his fist connecting with my cheekbone.

“Chiara, are you still there?” Elena asks.

“Yeah, no. I mean, I don’t have a boyfriend. It’s just something I have to do with my family.” I need to get Filippo out of my head, and that’s not going to happen if I go to a nightclub like the one where I met him.

I would just be on edge all the time, and I’d study every guy carefully for any signs that he’s up to no good. I would compare every single one of them to Filippo. I would wonder if he’s smiling at me because he likes me or because he’s imagining slamming my head against the wall.

“Okay,” Elena says. “But if you change your mind, just text me.”

“Sure.” I’m glad she doesn’t insist or bring up Filippo.

It’s been a year since I managed to escape him, but only physically. He’s still very present in my mind, and I have no idea when I’ll finally forget him. I’m glad Elena stuck with me and didn’t end our friendship while I was helplessly ensnared in Filippo’s trap.

There’s only one place where I can go to relax and forget about everything, even my ex. No one knows I go there, and, hopefully, no one ever will. They’d never understand it, especially if they knew about Filippo.

Everyone deals with trauma in different ways, and mine is potentially problematic, but it at least gives me some peace. It’s crazy how much I can crave things that I shouldn’t, but Amore Bruciante is just the right kind of club for me.

It’s a pleasure club, but it’s members-only with a hefty fee, and getting a membership isn’t easy at all. I don’t know what the hell got me to start the process, but I remember aimlessly walking down the street and thinking about Filippo when I spotted an ad for the club.

It sounded exactly like what I wanted and needed at that time. A safe place to be free and forget about everything. I applied on a whim, and when I was called in for an interview and some tests, I didn’t back down.

I was ready to do anything to get Filippo out of my head without resorting to alcohol, drugs, or some other vice. I didn’t want to risk hooking up with random men either, because that sounded way too dangerous.

Amore Bruciante has guards everywhere. I don’t have to worry someone there is

going to judge me for wanting a one-time thing without any strings attached because the club is all about that. Nothing is without risks, but there I feel as safe as I can be.

It's less likely someone will become so obsessed with me as to follow me home. No one at Amore Bruciante wants the club to get a bad reputation, so even if some creeps slip through the cracks, they get kicked out as soon as they make a suspicious move.

All I want tonight is to find a good-looking guy who won't ask for my name or number, and who wants the same thing as me—pleasure. Amore Bruciante has many rooms, which is great because I want privacy. Some people like to have sex in the main room, but that's not for me. At least not yet.

The membership fee includes the room and drink costs, so there's no worry about who is paying for what. No excuse for someone to try to blackmail me into doing something to pay them back. All we need to do is find a room with a green light above the door to indicate it's empty and ready to use.

The club's staff does an amazing job of keeping the rooms clean and fresh. There are VIP rooms too, but they're too expensive for me. I don't need a special room just for me. It's not like I go there all that often either.

Sometimes I just end up watching those who don't mind being watched. It still gets some of the tension out of my shoulders every time, and I don't think about Filippo as much because I'm not there to find a potential date.

I don't know why it relaxes me. Having sex with a guy outside the club would feel different, and I would worry about him turning out to be like Filippo. But in Amore Bruciante, it's the opposite.

I don't expect someone will turn out to be a monster. Maybe because Filippo would never go to a club like that. He'd say it would be insane and pathetic to pay for

something he could get anywhere for free. But it's not like that for me. Not that he'd ever care or understand.

I inwardly groan. How many times have I thought about that asshole? Mentioned his name in my mind? I have to get to Amore Bruciante before he overtakes my thoughts and sends me spiraling.

CHAPTER 2

Adriano

A smile spreads across my lips as I look at the maquette on the table. It's a miniature of my project. Rocco, my advisor, painted another one of the houses green on the map on the wall, which means that particular property is now mine.

Soon, I will own the whole neighborhood, and once that happens, I can mow everything down and build the Gaviani Resort—the perfect place for adults to have fun all day long. Hotels, bars, restaurants, casinos, nightclubs, sex clubs... I'll have it all. People won't want to leave.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

Since everything will be in my territory, it'll be easy to control and watch over. I'll no longer have to deal with lowlifes trying to sell my drugs and messing everything up. My loyal people will be the only ones working at the Gaviani Resort, and everything sold and available there will be mine and of the best quality.

The resort will be perfect for money laundering too. With thousands of people visiting, it'll be hard to keep track of things. And since everyone will be talking about it, my enemies or the cops won't dare to come anywhere near it because they'd have all the attention on them in an instant.

My enemies launching an attack and innocent tourists die? All the cops in the world would be after the attackers and all the headlines would be talking about it. Even the cops themselves would have to be careful if they wanted to sniff around.

The info about all the visitors will be on my servers because I won't let just anyone sneak in. I'll even have an excuse to have my guards out in the open and patrolling the area. My resort is going to be exclusive, and my guests need to feel safe all the time, especially if any famous people show up—and they will.

It'll be paradise on earth. A place to get away from the world, with a little something to make everyone happy and keep them entertained. Everyone will be envious of my success, including the man who gave me my last name.

But Rocco stares at the remaining white houses on the map with a frown on his face. His brown eyes are narrowed as he runs his hand through his short, curly brown hair.

“What's wrong?” I ask.

Rocco is my advisor for a reason. He sometimes sees things that I don't because I'm too focused on my project. He thinks about things that don't even occur to anyone, and he's very detail-oriented.

"Nothing. I'm not sure expanding to the south is a good idea. Maybe if we moved to the west instead—"

"No. We need the south." I point at two houses. "If we move these, we can offer the perfect view of the sea. It's what people want. No one wants to stare at more buildings. They want to swim in the pool and pretend they're at the beach."

"But this area is very old. These houses have been here for decades."

"So what? Even if something is under special protection, we have our guy who'll override it and sign all the necessary paperwork. Once everything is done, no one will care. And if they do and they're someone who matters, we'll offer them a free stay at the resort."

"It's not that. It won't be easy to convince the people who live there to sell. They see their homes as their legacy, and some of them have small stores and restaurants that they won't want to give up. They've lived there their whole lives, and their ancestors before them too."

"So they'll ask for a lot of money. I get it. When we approach them, we'll offer them a little below the fair price, and then we'll up it to whatever they want if it's within reason." I'll get my investments back very quickly once the resort is done anyway.

"I don't think it's about money. It's more than that. Even before you took control of this area, gangs and the mafia stayed away from this particular neighborhood. We don't have our dealers or any of our men there either."

“Yet. That’s about to change.”

“Yeah, but there’s a reason for that. Anyone who’s not from that neighborhood and isn’t a tourist sticks out. They’re all very tight-knit, and there’s a chance that, if we approach them about buying their homes, they’ll come together and make a decision together. They could decide not to sell.”

“I know how to deal with stubborn people.” Everyone has someone they love or some skeletons in their closet.

All I have to do is have my men do some digging. And I have a secret ace up my sleeve when it comes to one of the families. If everything else fails, I’ll resort to plan B.

“They could prove to be more difficult than you expect. Louder about it too. You could end up in the news as the villain who wants to chase the hardworking people out of their beautiful, old neighborhood and destroy it for some modern atrocity. You would be taking away their livelihoods too, since they’ll have to close their stores and restaurants.”

“I’ll pay them enough to reopen somewhere else.”

“Yeah, but the bad publicity could kill your project. Everyone could turn against you. How are influencers going to promote your resort if tons of people come under their posts and insult them and you over what happened?”

“I get that, but it’s not going to happen because I’m going to stop it. If someone turns out to be obstinate, I’m going to make sure they change their mind and never say a word about what happened. Or maybe I’ll just become one of them first.”

If people want to think of me as a villain, they can. But they better keep it to

themselves or bad things will happen to them. No one has ever cared about what I wanted or needed, so I'm not going to care about their desires either.

Rocco bows his head, but I can see his eyes are still troubled.

I know what bothers him. He's a good guy, and he's always had trouble with the darker side of the mafia business. But that's why he's here with me. He doesn't have it in him to be out there and put a bullet in someone's head, so he's not a guard or a soldier. Another thing he doesn't have in him is to make hard decisions, so he's never going to be a leader.

But he has another fault—one that I don't mind exploiting—and it's his loyalty. Even if he doesn't agree with something or if he's not willing to do something, he still knows what I'm paying him for. He's not going to get in my way or lie to me, and that's what makes him the perfect advisor.

I met him in juvie when we were just teens. He was there for something he hadn't even done, of course, and he looked like he was about to have a mental breakdown until I calmed him down.

Everyone, including the people he was protecting, abandoned him, and even then, he refused to betray them. Once I was out, I helped him get free. I saw just how useful he could be when he drew the whole layout of a building from memory, without having to think too hard about it.

"Is there anything else you're worried about?" I ask.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“No,” Rocco says. “Not at the moment.”

“Good. Then tell our guy to approach the families, one by one. We don’t want to raise any alarms. Just send him to the family that’s most likely to sell first.”

Once all their neighbors start selling, the rest will follow, especially when they hear there’s good money involved.

“I will.”

“You should come with me to Amore Bruciante. Blow off some steam.” I clap him on the back. “I could show you why I want to open a club like that.”

“I’ve only seen the photos and some videos, and I’m not a member. They wouldn’t let me in.”

“They would if I vouched for you. But you just don’t know what having fun means, do you?” I shake my head at him.

“If you need me to come take a look around for your project, I’ll do it, but I don’t want to go there for nothing.”

I exhale loudly. “Fine, you don’t have to, but I’m going, and tell everyone to call me only if there’s an emergency because I don’t want to be disturbed.”

“Of course.” He gives me a smile.

I head to the door.

Amore Bruciante is probably the only place in my territory that I don't take protection money from. They don't try to mess with my business, and I don't mess with theirs.

I even pay a nice membership fee, and in exchange, they don't let any of my enemies or paid assassins anywhere near the club. Not many people would dare to trespass anyway, because my men are good at keeping an eye on my territory.

I hop on my bike and rev the engine. As I speed down the street, my guards follow me, but they stay at a safe distance. I always like to have a backup plan in case something happens, but I don't want or need them breathing down my neck all the time.

As I pull over in front of Amore Bruciante, my gaze falls on a woman who's striding to the club's entrance. I don't think I've seen her before. I would've remembered her, and I would've fucked her already.

Her black cocktail dress hugs her slender yet curvy body just perfectly. Her long dark brown hair fans around her shoulders, and her dark brown eyes briefly focus on me before she looks at the club's guard.

I take off my helmet and watch her plump ass and long legs as she climbs the stairs in her high heels.

A smile stretches across my lips.

She's going to be mine tonight.

CHAPTER 3

Chiara

I make my way through the room, looking around. The light is dim and gives everything a soft blue glow. I don't know why, but when I'm here, everything is different. It's like I'm not me anymore, or well, I am still me, but more confident and free. No one really knows me.

This place gives me a special kind of energy. I never thought I could feel this way, especially after Filippo. I thought I'd never get out of my house—my real sanctuary—but this club is different for me.

I see a few familiar faces, but I'm not here for familiar. I need someone new. Someone who'll make me forget everything for a moment. I just want to feel like I'm floating on a different plane of existence.

I want someone to give me what I need without asking for anything in return over and over again. If Elena knew about this, she'd say I'm just terrified of falling in love and being in a relationship.

And maybe I am. Maybe this is me just running away from all my problems, but I don't care. I don't think I can ever trust anyone with my heart again.

I spot a guy striding toward me, and my lips part in surprise. Whoa. I don't think I've ever seen him before because there's no way I wouldn't remember him. Everyone's gazes instantly turn to him.

It's like there's a special aura around him—a commanding presence, and it's not just because he's tall and has broad shoulders. It's something about the way he carries himself. Like he owns this club, or maybe the whole damn world.

His hair is jet-black and slightly ruffled. The big muscles in his arms push against his

leather jacket. His white dress shirt underneath is unbuttoned at the top, offering a glimpse of his strong chest. As he gets closer, I look into his eyes—mesmerizing blue.

This guy shouldn't be real, but he somehow is. Is he a model? An actor? An athlete? Or all in one? I have no idea, but it's impossible to look away from him.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

His gaze is trained on mine, and a little gasp gets stuck in my throat when he approaches me. Really? Me? Out of all the gorgeous women in the room who are ogling him? I fight the urge to look behind me.

It's not that I think I'm ugly—if I did, I wouldn't be here at all—but I don't expect a guy like him to go for someone like me. I'm just not tall enough and don't have the perfect supermodel body.

Maybe it's just his expensive-looking jacket, but I have a feeling he only appreciates and wants absolute perfection. It's weird to judge anyone based on their looks, but he's just giving me that vibe. Maybe I'm wrong.

“Hi,” he says as he stops right in front of me, his full lips spreading into an irresistible smile.

I bet this guy has never heard anoin his life.

“Um, hi.” I return his smile, trying not to gape at him like an idiot.

Maybe he just wants to ask me something related to the club.

He leans forward, and I find myself enveloped in the refreshing scent of his cologne. Wild and free—it's how I'd name that scent.

His lips almost brush my skin as he whispers into my ear. A zap of electricity runs through me as he lists exactly what he'd like to do to me. Heat spreads all over me. Oh hell. It would be like a dream come true, but can I trust him? Sure, the club has

rules and all, but it's not foolproof and I'm sure this guy has enough money to get everything he wants.

"What do you say? Would you like that?" he asks as our gazes meet again.

"Yes." I have no doubts about that.

Is today my lucky day or what? Something like this only used to happen in my fantasies, and never in real life.

A smile curves his lips. "Perfect. Safe word?"

"Sunset."

"Sunset," he repeats the word.

I give him a small nod.

"Come with me." He offers me his hand, and I take it.

People are staring at us. Is that what it feels like to be popular? To be a star? One part of me likes the attention, just because I know it's not going to last long.

He keeps glancing at me.

"Screw it. I can't wait to kiss you. You're just so fucking beautiful." He shoves me against the wall in the hallway, his lips crashing against mine.

Fire spreads through my veins as his mouth presses hard against mine, his tongue slipping past my lips. His hand slides under my dress and tightly grips my thigh. His mouth ravages mine as his warm body leans into me. It's like being trapped between

two walls, but I like it. I like the intensity with which he's kissing me. He's not afraid I'm going to break.

"What is it about you?" he whispers as his lips shift to my neck.

A moan escapes my throat as his hand briefly dips to my already wet panties. I don't know if anyone's watching us, but I couldn't care less right now. He's intoxicating.

"Look what you're doing to me." He catches my hand and places it over the bulge in his pants.

Oh hell. He's rock hard and huge. Should I be worried? But I'm not. I'm burning stronger than ever.

He tugs me with him, and when the door to one of the rooms opens, my eyes widen. It's one of those private VIP rooms, and it's enormous. Soft music starts playing the moment we enter. It's probably bigger than the apartment where I used to live with—

He grabs me from behind, his lips fastening to my neck. My thoughts scatter as I hear the door close with a click and he runs his hands down my stomach. I know what's going to happen because he told me, but my body is still tense with anticipation. Will it be as good as it sounded? Better? Worse? Can he deliver what he promised?

He rubs himself against my ass, sending another jolt of heat through me, as he cups my breasts. Then he tugs on my dress, and the sound of ripping material cuts through the air. I let out a surprised gasp.

Just how strong is he? Luckily, it's just a random dress I found in my closet. As it falls to the floor, I hope there's enough left to tie around me after, or I'm not sure how I'll get home. My heels are easy to slip off, and I kick them toward the corner where they won't get in the way.

He traces his fingers over my skin, and I forget what I was even thinking about a moment ago. After unclasping my bra with ease, he yanks it off me and tosses it somewhere across the room. His jacket flies through the air next.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

He squeezes my breasts and toys with my nipples, giving me a few sharp pinches that only excite me more. His hands explore my body, caressing and groping.

“Get down on your knees,” he commands.

I face him and lower myself down, keeping my eyes on him. My insides are a quivery mix of excitement and a little bit of fear. My ex was never satisfied with my technique. Will this guy be different?

His eyes are brimming with desire and hunger. I don't think anyone has ever watched me like that, as if he sees me as more than just a way to get off. But I must be imagining all that. Why would a random guy like him care about anything other than his own pleasure?

“Open your mouth,” he says as he pushes the sleeves of his dress shirt up to his elbows.

Even his veiny arms are hot like hell.

I obey, and he unzips his pants. My eyes go wide as his thick length springs out. I've never been with anyone so big.

“Put your hands behind your back,” he says. “If you want me to stop, lift your hand up, okay?”

“Yeah.” I do as he asks.

He slowly pushes his cock past my lips and sighs. I try to take as much of him in as possible as I gently suck on his sensitive flesh. He groans, rocking his hips. His movements gain speed, and I struggle a little. When I think I'm about to choke, I raise my hand.

My heart beats faster. I shouldn't be scared. I'm just doing what he told me to do, but what if he reacts like Filippo?

He immediately backs away from me. "Sorry, I got carried away. Are you okay?"

I just stare at him, unblinking. Why am I even surprised? He's not Filippo. I can trust him.

Blue. I think I'm going to call him Blue, because his eyes are so damn blue as he looks at me with concern in his eyes.

"I'm fine," I say. "I was just a little out of air. That's all."

"Come here." He extends his hand to me and pulls me up to my feet.

His arms wrap around me and I end up pressed against his chest. Safe. I feel safe, and I haven't felt that with a man in, like...

Never, I guess. Even when they were nice to me, I expected their tense shoulders, mouths curved in annoyance, and eyes flashing with disdain. I didn't get any of that with Blue.

His fingers trail up and down my back, and then he places his hand on my cheek. When our gazes lock, he presses his lips against mine. More warmth and need fills my body.

He keeps kissing me, his mouth getting rougher against mine, and I like it. I'm glad he hasn't changed his mind about me and that he doesn't think he needs to be more gentle. We stumble to the left, and I let out a surprised yelp when he pushes me onto the bed, which is way softer and more comfortable than the one in a regular room. The sheets are dark blue and silky, and so damn nice.

Blue flips me over and pulls my hips up, so I find myself facedown on the bed and with my ass in the air. His fingers hook into the waistband of my panties. I gasp as he yanks them down my legs. His hands travel up my legs, massaging lightly and making me moan. He kneads my skin and then his fingers slip between my legs.

He runs his hand over my wetness, forcing my legs farther apart. I push against his hand, hungry for more of his touch. Needy for him.

His thumb briefly presses against my clit, and then without warning, he brings his palm hard down on my bottom. And then again. And again.

The smacks are sharp and swift and echo through the room. My skin stings and tingles, and the throbbing between my legs gets even stronger.

Blue caresses my bottom and gives me a couple of more smacks. The bed shifts and he grasps my thighs. A loud moan tears its way out of my throat when I feel his tongue gliding over my pussy. He spreads my folds, licking and flicking his tongue over my clit. I'm having trouble staying still as he laps at me, finding just the right pace.

When he hits the right spot, my release rolls through me with so much force that it leaves me breathless. My whole body tingles and pulses with pleasure, and I can't focus on anything other than the crazy need to have him inside me.

He moves to the nightstand, and I catch a glimpse of a condom wrapper. I close my

eyes, trying to catch my breath. I hear something that sounds like Blue taking off his clothes. That's good. I need a break.

But Blue is quick. He doesn't give me much chance to recover because he positions himself behind me and shoves himself so deep and so fast inside me that I cry out. It only takes me a moment to adjust because the raging desire in me completely overtakes me.

Blue mercilessly pumps his hips as he holds onto me, and every stroke is like adding gasoline to a fire. I'm floating on a cloud of pleasure, and it's as if no one and nothing can touch me.

What was it again that was worrying me? I don't know, and I don't care. It's just Blue and me here, and I don't have to know anything about him to feel bliss.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

When his forceful thrusts spill me over the edge, I let out a loud cry that mixes with Blue's grunts. I hide my face in the sheets, and my whole body feels like jelly.

Why does this feel so damn good? I'm tired and spent, and yet, every inch of my body is tingling with joy. I don't want to ever leave this room. I don't want to think about anything or do anything.

Blue rolls over onto the bed next to me, and I turn around so I can stare at the ceiling as I pant for breath. Then I glance at him. He's staring at me with those impossibly blue eyes, which are now calm and sated.

Is any of this even real or is it all just a dream? Because it seems too good to be true. Why do I feel like I have a connection with a complete stranger? Why do our bodies fit together so well? Why does he know exactly what to do to make my body sing without even knowing anything about me?

It shouldn't be possible. I said I wouldn't be thinking, but my mind is running relentlessly. At least I'm not thinking about anything bad. Just about Blue. I wish I knew his real name, but I can't. We're here for pleasure. This isn't a dating club.

I'll probably never see him again. And even if I do, this can't happen again. It would break my one-time-thing rule. I can't risk catching feelings for the guys I hook up with. No matter how great it is or how much I want it, I have to resist.

Blue's lips spread into a smile, and I immediately think about breaking my own rule. But I can't. I shouldn't. Blue probably isn't as nice as I think he is, and he wouldn't even like the real me. Who knows what his life is like? I'd never fit in, and I'm not

looking for a boyfriend. I don't think I'm ready.

Besides, everything is always nice in the beginning, until enough time passes, everyone relaxes, and things go to hell. This just needs to be a beginning and an end, with nothing in between.

Something buzzes somewhere, probably Blue's phone. He groans as he lifts himself up. I stare at his perfectly toned body as he gets dressed, and I'm almost drooling. Why can't he be my boyfriend? Like in some nice story where everyone is happy and everything's perfect.

"I have to go," he says, breaking me out of my thoughts. "You can stay for as long as you need. There's a shower behind that door." He nods his head toward it as he picks up his clothes off the floor. "And there's some clothes in the closet. The door locks itself automatically, so you don't have to worry about that."

"Thanks." I give him a small smile.

Wow, that's really, really nice of him, and yeah, it makes me wish even more that this was something different.

With a sigh, I gaze at the ceiling. Maybe if I don't look at him again, I'll be able to forget him. He's just a nice stranger who gave me one of the best nights of my life. I guess I've just been disappointed so many times that this seems like absolute perfection in comparison.

Maybe I don't have to forget Blue. I need to treasure this night forever and never settle for anything less.

CHAPTER 4

Adriano

I approach the guard. “A woman will come out of my room. Let me know when she shows up in the club again.”

He nods.

I shouldn’t be doing this. It’s better to fuck and forget. I don’t want to risk any attachment—from the woman’s side, of course, and not mine.

I don’t do relationships or feelings. They’re complicated, messy, and pointless. And they don’t earn you any money or prestige. They only make you suffer. There’s no reason for me to want that in my life. I prefer simple.

But the woman I just fucked surprised me. Everywhere I go, people tend to know who I am. They either know me as a mafia boss or a rich businessman. But I didn’t see any recognition in her eyes. She has no idea who I am. It’s refreshing.

And she hasn’t come my way or started to, like some other women who keep thinking I’ll change my mind and just date one of them. It’s true I haven’t given her enough time because, as soon as I spot something I want, I go for it. She was new to me and really hot, and I wanted her. Strangely enough, I still want her, despite having her.

It’s because she has a lot of potential. She has a sweet and innocent look about her, but she’s also full of fire and not afraid to get a little rough. I wouldn’t mind trying out some other things with her because she gives me the impression of someone adventurous enough and not afraid of trying new things. If they’d even be new to her...

She somehow pulls off the nice and naughty look all in one. I like that about her. But would she turn into every other girl who tried to become my girlfriend? Maybe not,

unless she figures out who I am and she wants my money.

But I don't have to make any decisions right now. She's given me what I needed. Peace. Calmness. Enough energy to keep going with my work. I'll figure out what to do about her some other time.

I open the door to my apartment. It's cold and empty of people. Just how I like it. I own the whole building, and my guards, cooks, and everyone else I need live here too. Still, I don't want anyone in my apartment, unless I tell them to bring me something.

I pad through the silence, my shoes quiet on the carpet. If anything makes a noise, I'll know I have an intruder. My enemies shouldn't be able to get to me through all the security, but unexpected surprises happen. It's better to always be careful.

A floorboard creaks as I open the door to my office, and I freeze on the spot. For a second, I don't breathe. It's just me, and the damn floorboard has to be replaced. I sigh.

It's a good thing I'm my own boss now. If this had happened when I was a child, I would've had my head slammed into the wall for making noise, and it wouldn't matter if the floorboards were squeaky and old.

I shake my head and enter the office. It's always better not to reminisce about the past. It brings nothing good, and only the present and the future matter. Like my plan on the huge map that covers one of the walls. The Gaviani Resort project is the only thing that matters in my life. Once it's complete, it'll bring me even more money, prestige, and fame.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

A smile spreads across my lips as I watch the map. I almost wish it was digital so it would update automatically in all my offices, but I don't want it to get into the wrong hands. Anything digital is hackable, and my plans need to remain secret.

Many areas are now mine, and I grab a green marker to add the latest ones. Which one of the white ones should I target next?

I pick up a dart off the desk and throw it. It gets stuck on one particular property. I chose it, of course. I never miss when I throw darts. Even though I could have someone else handle all this, I want to do something on my own.

Sometimes it's just easier, and I don't like to be idle and wait. The house and that property belong to an old woman named Nora. She's in her eighties and refuses to abandon her home.

It's not a surprise. She's still able to live on her own, and it's the only home she's ever known. If I'd ever had a home like that, maybe I would want to keep it too. But Nora is in my way, and her house has to go. First, I need to get a shower, and then I'll take care of Nora.

Nora's house is tiny. Just one floor, with nothing much there. Her windows are open and there are no curtains to block my view. It's dark, and there aren't any houses close by or any nosy neighbors who might see me sneaking around. It's the perfect setup.

Nora is asleep in an armchair in front of a TV. The house has a back door, so I head there. The lock is old and it takes me a few moments to pick it. I slowly open the

door. It creaks, so I wait and listen carefully. Nothing. I don't think she'll hear me even if I make a bit more noise, but I'm still as quiet as possible as I enter the kitchen.

I grab a pot smeared with grease and oil and a kitchen towel, and place them on the stove. After turning on the stove, I get my lighter and set the kitchen towel on fire. Then I drop it into the pot. Taking a quick look around, I get out of the kitchen.

Nora must be still asleep. The hallway is empty and I hurry to the door. Once I'm out, I lurk in the shadows. It shouldn't take long for the fire to spread. There's a lot of plastic and burnable stuff in the kitchen.

I dart toward the trees just as the fire catches the window. Keeping the house in sight, I glance at my watch. It'll take the firefighters about ten minutes to get here. If Nora doesn't get out soon, I'll go get her myself.

If anything happens to her, it'll complicate things, and I can't have that. Besides, she has nothing to do with any of my business. Killing innocent people is not what I do, and not just because it's inconvenient.

Nora trudges out of the house through the front door, staring at her house in dismay. I pull deeper into the trees so she doesn't see me, but I don't think she will. She's too busy watching her home burn to ashes.

I hear the sirens of the firefighters and voices in the distance. Someone must've noticed the fire. It's my time to go. Nora will be safe, but her house won't. She'll have to find some other place to live, and I bet her family won't leave her on her own again.

Actually, they'll probably be happy to sell whatever the hell remains of the house. Nora won't need it, and they won't either. It would be too expensive to renovate it.

I have to send the offer to Nora's family as soon as possible, maybe even in a couple of days. Rocco and I have to make it sound like we're helping the family in their time of need. Helping them get rid of something they don't need, and at the same time, they can earn enough money for Nora's new home or whatever she needs.

Even if she's stubborn, she'll have to realize that renewing the house would require too much time and money. She might even be afraid to live alone, so there'll be no obstacles in my path. Whatever happens, I'm sure it'll all work out in my favor.

"You did what?" Rocco gapes at me.

"Nora has lived there her whole life. She wouldn't have agreed to move unless something like this happened," I say calmly.

"But now her whole life is gone! All the memories, and photos, and... everything!"

I tilt my head. What has gotten into him?

"She's alive," I say. "She'll live somewhere else."

"Yeah, but... we could've convinced her to sell in a different way. She didn't have to lose everything."

I furrow my brow. "She'll get enough money to buy whatever she needs."

Rocco groans in frustration.

"What's the matter with you?"

He's usually not like this, even when he disagrees with my methods.

“I lost a lot of my things when a hurricane destroyed my family home. Irreplaceable things. Like, the ring that was passed down through my family for decades. The rare edition of my favorite comic that my grandma gifted me for my birthday. So many things...”

“Do you really need those? Just get a new ring if you want to wear one. Someone probably has that same comic edition somewhere.”

“But it’s not the same. You just don’t get it.”

“I get that you’re too attached to your things.” When I was younger, I never had anything like that.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

Nothing was really mine to keep, and Gennaro always said I didn't need anything. My only possession was a necklace that probably belonged to my mother, but Gennaro threw it away and told me that getting attached to anyone or anything was a weakness.

Now I have a lot of things, but nothing guarantees that I won't lose them. I might have to ditch everything to move or my apartment might be under attack. All I need is easily replaceable, so it doesn't matter. Gennaro was right when he said that getting attached was a bad idea. Rocco is proof of that.

"Look, Nora will be fine, and that's all that matters," I say. "Prepare the offer for her family and send it as quickly as possible, once the investigation and all is done. It shouldn't take long. Nora is old and the fire came from the stove. No one will dwell on it too much."

"Okay." Rocco presses his lips into a tight line.

"Have you sent those offers I told you about?"

He nods. "We're waiting for their answer."

"Good." I smack my lips together.

Now all we have to do is wait.

CHAPTER 5

Chiara

I sweep the broom over the floor, getting the last of the crumbs. It's time to close the restaurant, but my dad is still talking to some neighbors. Judging by the expressions on their faces, it's a heated discussion. I can only catch a few words here and there, so I inch closer.

"He's crazy if he thinks we're going to sell," Pietro—my dad's best friend and our closest neighbor—says. "I don't know what's up with the guys who agreed."

"He's just another one of those businessmen who think money buys everything. If someone wants to sell, let them. We won't, and we're not going anywhere."

"I heard some even agreed to sell at a lower price!" Pietro waves his hands in annoyance. "They didn't want to deal with the guy. They say he's a mafia boss."

"Hmm." My dad scratches his chin. "Who knows? It's all just rumors."

"Yeah, but it's bad. Trust me. It's like he's buying properties one by one, and he's planning to build some kind of resort here. We can't let that happen. Would you sell your house and restaurant and go somewhere else? I can't imagine it. I can't." Pietro shakes his head. "My grandfather lived here, and I want my grandchildren to live here one day too. We don't need another huge hotel or whatever the hell that asshole plans to build."

"I agree."

"But what if everyone around us sells, huh? We'll end up looking at some monstrous building. I'm telling you, it's not going to end well."

I furrow my brow. Many old houses in town have been mowed down, only for hotels

and apartments to sprout. But our neighborhood has always been special. Different. People here love our little community and our history. I can't imagine any of it gone, let alone all of it.

But rich people always get some crazy ideas. They want to erect the tallest—and usually the ugliest—building in town to show off their wealth. It's ridiculous, and it shouldn't even be allowed here. Our neighborhood needs to be protected and cherished, not destroyed.

There are plenty of other places for another hotel or whatever. It doesn't have to be here. I'm sure the idiot rich guy will realize that and leave us alone. People who sold their houses to him made a mistake, and they'll probably have regrets. I know my family and I aren't going anywhere. It would be crazy.

"Hey, honey." My dad waves at me. "Can you bring us another bottle of wine?"

"Sure!" I give him a small smile.

Yeah, we're definitely not going anywhere. Our life is here and always has been. No one and nothing is going to change that.

It's been a few weeks since I went to Amore Bruciante. I'm always busy with something, either with college or the restaurant, but today, I have some spare time. And I need to relax. Has going to the club become an addiction or is it just the only way for me to release all the pent-up tension? I don't know, but it doesn't matter.

As I enter the club, I look around. Where is he? Where is Blue? I'd have to be very lucky to show up here at the same time as him. Would that even be luck? I don't know why I want to see him. He and I are over. I only do one-night stands for a reason, and I don't need things to get complicated. Besides, Blue probably doesn't want me anymore.

After some walking around, I lean against the wall next to the bar. It's one of those nights when I just don't feel like hooking up with anyone here. Sure, I've spotted some safe options, but I don't find them attractive.

What if Blue has ruined me for everyone else? I've never felt anything like that with anyone, even if it sounds crazy, but I really wish I were here to meet with him and not anyone else. I don't want a new guy. Maybe I should just leave.

"Hello, beautiful." A guy with dark brown hair and brown eyes places his hand against the wall next to me.

"Sorry, I'm not interested." I don't remember ever seeing him, and I really don't feel like hooking up with anyone.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“Why not?” He cocks his head. “Are you waiting for someone?”

He shifts closer to me, and my heart skips a beat. The way he’s leaning closer reminds me of Filippo, and my chest suddenly feels heavy.

I can’t breathe. I can’t say anything. I can’t wave at the guards for help. It’s as if my body isn’t working anymore.

“She is,” a familiar voice says behind the guy’s back.

Blue!

The guy pulls away from me and lifts an eyebrow at Blue, who just glares at him.

“Fine then.” The guy must’ve decided that he doesn’t want to confront Blue, so he struts away.

“Everything okay, Sunset?” Blue asks, looking me up and down.

“Yeah.” I give him a small smile, my shoulders relaxing. “Thanks.”

Sunset? He’s calling me by my safe word? That’s kind of cute.

Blue looks huge and menacing when he comes to stand right next to me, but I know he’s not going to hurt me. He’s like my guardian angel or something. I glance down at his exposed arms, and a thrill surges through me. Memories of his hands caressing me fill my head. I should stick to my own rules and walk away from him, but I don’t

want to.

“How about something different tonight?” Blue whispers, and goosebumps appear on my skin as his lips brush against my ear.

His voice turns even lower and more seductive as he tells me all about his idea. My insides clench. Oh hell, that sounds so hot.

“What do you think?” he asks.

“Perfect, but without the second and third thing.” I’m up for a lot of things, but not everything.

“Sure.” He gives me a smile, and his hand snakes around my waist. “Let’s go.”

We head to his room, and as soon as we’re through the door, Blue grabs me and presses me against the wall. His hand caresses my cheek, his eyes gazing into mine.

“I missed you,” he says.

I bite down on my lip, but I can’t fight off a smile. His words make me so happy and warm inside. But this is just sex. It’s only mindless fun. I can’t let it be anything else, and besides, it would be crazy.

I don’t know anything about this guy. Not his name. Not what he does for a living. Not what he likes and dislikes. Just because I love the way he touches me and makes me feel doesn’t mean anything.

Blue’s lips find mine, and I get lost in his hard kiss. His mouth pushes against mine as his fingers curl in my dress. I let out a gasp as he yanks my sleeveless dress down my body. His lips are on mine again, and his hands explore my body.

He tugs and pulls at my underwear until I'm completely naked. His hand slides between my legs, gliding over my pussy and teasing me. Then he steps away from me and looks me up and down as if he's studying a piece of art.

I should feel vulnerable because he's still fully dressed, but I don't. Another thrill rushes through me as his hungry gaze takes me in. He removes his tie, which I haven't even noticed, because I was just too busy being overwhelmed by his presence.

Then he pulls me to him and places the tie over my eyes. My heart rate quickens in excitement as he lifts me into his arms and lowers me onto the bed. The tie is very thick and I can't see a thing. All I can do is lie there, with my head on a soft pillow, and listen.

Blue moves around. With anyone else, I'd be worried they were planning something unsavory. But not with him. He'd never hurt me. I don't know why I'm so sure, but he just seems like that kind of guy. Or maybe I have really low standards.

Blue catches my wrist and attaches a padded cuff to it, his grip gentle. Very quickly, my wrists and ankles are tied up and I'm spread-eagled on the bed.

Blue runs his fingers over my breasts and down my stomach. He keeps exploring my body, touching and feeling. My soft moans fill the room as my body gets hotter. Blue moves away from me, and I'm not sure what he's doing. Something rustles here and there. A cabinet door opens and closes. Then silence.

I strain my ears, but I can only hear my labored breathing. Where is he? What is he doing? Is he just watching me? Why does the idea of him just staring at me in silence turn me on so much?

A cold splash of liquid hits my stomach and breasts, making me yelp in surprise. A

shiver runs through me just as the bed shifts under Blue's weight. I groan as he leaves a featherlike kiss just under my belly button, and then he licks a path up my skin, lapping up the liquid.

His tongue keeps trailing up until his mouth closes around my nipple. He gently sucks on my hard bud, teasing and tugging. Then his tongue swirls to my other breast. I writhe and gasp in pleasure as his teeth graze my skin.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

He kisses his way up my neck and finally presses his lips against mine. He tastes like wine. Was that what he spilled over me? Wine? Oh hell. That's just so damn hot.

He lowers himself down my body, leaving a kiss here and there. His fingers dip between my legs, spreading my folds. I groan and moan as he gently rubs my clit.

My pleasure keeps building and building, but just as I get closer to the edge, he pulls his hand away. I grunt with impatience, bucking my hips. Blue laughs softly. He's enjoying this maybe even more than I am, if that's possible.

A sharp smack of a crop against my thigh makes me jump. The sting takes my breath away, but the tingling that follows just shoots up to my core. Blue traces the crop over my skin and gently taps the underside of my breast.

Every inch of my body is on fire as he keeps switching between gentle taps and harder smacks that land in unexpected places. When he trails the crop between my legs, I groan. He taps it against my pussy faster and faster, and my restraints clink as I can't stay still.

"Please," I whisper, because I don't think I can take it anymore.

It's all just too much. All the sensations are rushing through my body and creating a wonderful mix.

"You need a break?" Blue asks, his voice teasing.

"I need... more."

“Open your mouth,” he says, and I do it.

The bed shifts again, and I feel his presence over me. When the tip of his cock pushes past my lips, a groan forms low in my throat. I want to make him feel as good as he’s making me feel, so I wrap my mouth around him.

He grunts as he pushes in and out of my mouth, gliding over my tongue. I suck and lick, and his groans of pleasure get louder. Now I wish I could see his face. His eyes. But I can picture them in my mind.

I can imagine his face contorted with pleasure as he tries not to push his hips harder than I can take. I suck faster, and he lets out a hiss as he spills himself into my mouth. A satisfied smile spreads across my lips after he pulls away and I swallow.

Blue mutters a curse under his breath.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

Have I done something wrong? I don’t think I could’ve hurt him.

“No.” He traces his finger over my lips. “You make me lose control. That’s all. It wasn’t my plan to come, but you and your wicked little mouth...”

Why does that make me want to grin at him with pride?

“I’m not sure if I should reward you or punish you for that,” he says.

“How about both?” I’m brave tonight, and very, very needy.

With anyone else, I wouldn’t have dared to make such a suggestion because I’d be worried what he’d think about me. But I don’t think Blue will judge me for wanting

what I want.

He chuckles as he removes my makeshift blindfold. "Perfect idea."

After tonight, I really need to say goodbye to him. Forever. Because if I don't, I'll get addicted to him. I'll want to see him and only him. I'll only crave his touch. I'll compare everyone to him.

But what if he could be my boyfriend? No, I can't even think about it. It's just not right, and this is definitely the last place where I should be looking for a permanent relationship. Except, things happen. Sometimes you meet someone special in a completely unexpected place, and this would totally be it. It would be fate.

Blue releases the cuffs on my ankles and pushes my knees up against my stomach. He rubs his fingers against my center, making me moan again. He gives my pussy a light slap, and then he brings his palm down on my ass.

I groan as he leaves a flurry of smacks on my bottom, and the tingling on my skin spreads all over me. Blue lowers himself between my spread legs, and as his tongue finds my clit, his finger slides inside me.

I can barely catch my breath as he deliciously torments me with his tongue and his fingers. My release builds until I can't take it anymore, and then it spills through me like a wave. My cry is so loud it echoes off the walls, and Blue lifts himself up and looks at me with a smirk on his face.

How does he do that? How does he know exactly what buttons to push? It shouldn't be possible, but I think he's just paying attention to me. To every small reaction of my body. Even now, his eyes are glued to me.

I want him inside me so bad I can't even say it, but Blue knows. After grabbing a

condom, he positions himself between my legs and then plunges himself inside me. My body throbs around him as he pumps his hips, hard and fast.

Our gasps, moans, and grunts mix in the air, and the bed shakes with the force of his powerful thrusts. Our gazes meet as he pounds into me, and I can almost feel the connection between us sizzling.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

Is this really just sex? Is that all? Or could this be the beginning of something more? Something nice.

My thoughts dissolve because Blue's hard strokes send me over the edge. His fingers dig into my thighs as he lets out a soft roar. We both cry out, and he collapses on top of me.

With a groan, he lifts himself up just enough to brush his nose against mine. He plants a kiss on my lips before rolling off me.

What are we doing? Does he think the same thing as I am? Would he want something more or is he just looking that way at me because he enjoys fucking me? Am I enjoying the whole thing so much that I want this to last?

Ugh, I have so many questions floating in my mind as my body still pulsates with pleasure. I can't let anything cloud my judgment. Sure, having great chemistry in bed is great for a relationship, but it's just one small part.

Blue is a complete stranger to me, and just because he's looking at me—oh hell, he's doing it again—like I'm special to him doesn't mean anything. He wants pleasure, and we happen to be compatible in that field. It doesn't mean we'd be like that in any other sphere of life.

The fact that he's here, in this club, with a VIP room means he's not someone who's looking for a relationship or love. If he was, he would've already found someone. A guy like him probably has tons of women vying for his attention.

I got lucky. That's all. But it's just sex, and it will end, like all the other passable things. Blue will just be a good memory I'll reminisce about once in a while.

I let out a loud sigh.

CHAPTER 6

Adriano

"I have some bad news," Rocco says as soon as he enters my office.

I narrow my eyes at him. "What is it?"

"Remember that offer I sent this morning? Well, it was insta-rejected. It looks like one of the neighbors started some sort of protest group, and a lot of the others joined him. It's basically the whole street, and once the word spreads, there will be more of them."

I lean back in my chair. "That's only a small setback. Who's the guy who started it all?"

If we get the guy to back down, the rest will follow. They might feel brave right now, but it won't last long.

"Paradossi."

I tilt my head. That name rings a bell. I have a feeling I've dealt with him before.

"Is that the Paradossi who owns that restaurant...? Rosa Bianca?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's him."

I laugh. “He took a loan from me, and he’s still paying it off.”

“True, but he doesn’t know the business guy everyone is talking about is the same guy he signed the deal with.”

“Then we should inform him of that little detail.”

Rocco presses his lips into a tight line.

“What now? What are you thinking about that I’m not?”

“The Paradossis are one of the first families that moved into that neighborhood. Their house and the restaurant were the first buildings in that area. Sure, they looked different back then, but the current buildings are old too. Even when they renovate, they make sure it all keeps its original look.”

“So? Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Paradossi can react in a different way from what you expect. He only owes you about five thousand euros, and he’s never been late with his payments. If he finds out who you really are, he’ll probably find a way to pay off the debt completely and keep going against you, maybe even harder.”

“I helped him save his restaurant when no one else would have. He was drowning in debt, and I was the only one who offered him a loan in his situation. He should be beyond grateful to me and get out of my way.”

“But he’s also the kind of guy who never would’ve gone to someone like us unless he was completely desperate. He’s willing to do anything for his home and his restaurant, even things that go against his beliefs. We can’t expect him to just walk away from all of it. He’s going to be our hardest target.”

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“Do you think he’d risk death too?” Staying alive should always mean more than some building.

“Probably, and if anything happens to him, the rest of the neighbors will go wild. The whole thing will make all the headlines. Actually, I got information that they’re planning to contact the local newspaper. I reached out to some of my contacts, but it’ll be difficult to contain them. They could contact some bigger newspaper or someone hungry for blood, and—”

“The whole project would be in jeopardy.”

Rocco nods.

“Does Paradossi have children?”

“He has a daughter. She’s in college.”

“Right.” I spread my lips into a smile. “Find me the contract he signed and bring it to me.”

Usually, when people are so desperate that they need a loan from the mafia, they don’t read the fine print. Those who do either don’t have a choice, so they sign anyway, or they run away screaming. I don’t know which one of my men closed the deal with Paradossi for me—I never deal with trivial stuff like that myself, except approving the deal before it’s done—but I know my contracts.

If it’s anything like I think it is, I’ll solve my Paradossi problem easily. Paradossi will

have to choose what he wants more—his precious home or his daughter. Even if he doesn't make the choice I want, I'll still have a way to get him out of my way. His daughter is the key to everything.

“Why are you still here?” I raise my eyebrows as Rocco hesitates in front of the door.

“There's something else. Your... um... Matteo was seen close to your territory.”

My ex-adoptive brother, or I'm not even sure what I should call him, lurking close to me is never good. He probably suspects I'm up to something, and he wants to figure out a way to stop me. I'm sure he heard about the Gaviani Resort, and he's pissed.

But he's not going to stop me either. No one will. I'll use his father's last name and be the only Gaviani worth mentioning.

Better than Matteo, and better than his father.

“Have someone keep an eye on him. I want to know right away if he comes any closer,” I say.

I could take care of Matteo once and for all, but I just want him and his father to watch my road to success from the front row, and they can't do that if they're both dead. They better not get in my way, though, because I'll be merciless if they do. It wouldn't be a smart move for them, but Matteo has always been reckless.

Rocco dips his head and rushes out of the office. I stare through the window. The sun is about to go down behind the horizon.

Sunset.

The woman who shines brighter than the sun when she smiles. I shouldn't be thinking

about her at all, but here I am. What is she doing now? Where is she? Is she going to be at the club tonight?

I could send someone to track her down, or I could do it myself. Follow her home. Find out all about her and satisfy my curiosity. Maybe then I would get her out of my head.

But now's not the time to get distracted. She makes me lose control in bed. But she can't affect my life outside of Amore Bruciante. I won't let her.

I'm in a familiar car. A black sleek car that I haven't seen in years. It's moving fast and everything is blurry... until a red car appears right next to mine. I grip the steering wheel, but I already know what's coming.

There's a bump in the road that I don't see as I try to pass by the red car. I lose control and we collide. The red car skids off the road as I try to regain control of my own car. Somehow, I manage to stay on the road and stop just in front of my adoptive father—Gennaro—and his men.

I stumble out of the car, looking for Matteo. He was in the red car. Before I can go find him, Gennaro grabs me by the shoulders.

“How the fuck did you do that?” he asks.

I open my mouth, but words don't come out. I'm slightly dizzy, and my heart is still pounding in my chest. All I can think about is Matteo. Is he okay?

Gennaro narrows his eyes at me, and fear washes over me. I hurt his son. His heir. His biological child.

“You want to keep your secret, eh?” Gennaro laughs, clapping me on the back. “Well

done, son. You passed your test. Now you're a true Gaviani."

His laughter gets louder, and my eyes fly open. I'm back in my room in my apartment. The stupid dream is over. It's been a while since I dreamed about my old family. It must be because Rocco mentioned Matteo.

I sit up and run my hand over my face. Matteo was lucky enough to have come out of that accident alive, with barely a scratch. The car was totaled, though, and Matteo has never forgiven me for that, or for making him look bad in front of his father. That night changed our relationship forever. It started the beginning of our end.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

But I don't want to think about my past. What happened, happened. There's no reason to go back there. The Gavianis are my enemy now, a little bit different from others because of our history, but it doesn't change things much. I'm willing to go against them if I have to, and one day, I will, but for now, I want them to witness what Icando and they can't.

I get to my feet and get dressed because I need a distraction. It would be nice if I knew where Sunset lives. I would love to bend her over, bury myself deep inside her, and make her moan.

My cock instantly goes hard. It's crazy what she can do to me, even when she's not with me. It might be better to avoid her and find someone else, but I don't want anyone else. I'll get bored of her eventually.

I head out, looking for the first guard that I find.

"Fight me," I say.

Sometimes, when I'm bored or I just want some more practice, I engage in some hand-to-hand combat with the guards. It's usually easy for me to beat them, either because they're holding back since I'm their boss—and no, telling them not to doesn't change anything when they can't help it—or because they just haven't had the kind of training that I did.

As the guard throws a punch at my head, I evade and want to groan in frustration. This is going to be more annoying than anything else, but at least it will distract me for a bit.

CHAPTER 7

Chiara

I take a peek through the window. My dad is in the middle of the group formed by our neighbors and he makes a lot of angry gestures as he speaks. Is it all about that billionaire who wants to destroy our neighborhood?

I get out of my room. As I'm passing through the hallway, I spot my mom in the master bedroom. She's putting her things into a big suitcase. I furrow my brow as I enter.

"Mom, what's going on?" I ask as I cross my arms.

"Oh honey, it's a good thing you're here. Your dad and I are going to visit your uncle Nico."

"Why? Is everything okay?" It's got to be something important because my parents rarely go for unplanned visits or trips. My uncle is a lawyer, and if anything had happened to him, I'm sure my mom and dad would've already told me.

"Yeah, everything's fine." My mom's gaze meets mine as she places another shirt in the suitcase. "It's because of Adriano Gaviani... That billionaire who wants to buy our neighborhood and mow it all down for his project. We now know a little bit more about him and his plans, so we think Nico can help us. Your dad will collect all the paperwork and information, and together with Nico, we can figure out how to stop Gaviani."

"Do you think there's something that can be done about that? I mean, that Gaviani guy can't force anyone to sell their property to him."

“No, he can’t, but there are other ways he can make things difficult for us. He’s already bought some properties and some people will sell for the right price, so—”

“Gaviani could end up building something right across from our home and ruin everything,” I finish for her.

“Exactly.” She nods. “But this neighborhood is very old, and Nico said that there might be a way to protect the whole area so that Gaviani can’t build whatever he wants here. Some types of buildings or activities might not be acceptable. Then he’d have to find some other place for his project and we’d be free of him. We have to protect our history and culture.”

“The guy’s a billionaire. People like him find their way around all the laws.” It wouldn’t be the first time that the people in charge looked the other way or tweaked the laws just to suit the needs of the rich.

“Sure, but we can go to the press. Catch everyone’s attention. The whole country will know about this, and people won’t be happy. But first we need to check and know all our options. It might be easier than we think. Maybe we only need to make a small move that will make Gaviani realize we’re serious about staying and preserving our neighborhood the way it is. If he doesn’t want any trouble or bad press, he’ll change his plans.”

“Should I go with you? Maybe there’s something I can help with.” This is about my future too. I can’t just sit back and wait.

“No. You shouldn’t skip your classes, and we need someone to keep an eye on the house and the restaurant.”

“Right. Of course.” I give her a small smile. “I hope it works out.”

It would suck to have a huge hotel or something just down the street. It would completely change the look and feel of our neighborhood.

“Me too.” My mom sighs. “We’ll put up one hell of a fight.”

“Oh, we will.” Gaviani will regret ever choosing our neighborhood as his target.

I sit on the stairs that lead to the restaurant as I watch the sun disappear behind the houses. The whole street is bathed in a reddish glow, and the sky is impossibly beautiful.

Bianca, my neighbor, walks up to me and sits down next to me.

“Hey,” she says with a smile on her face. Her blonde hair is tied into a ponytail and her hazel eyes sparkle in the last rays of the sun.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“It’s awesome what your dad’s doing,” she says.

“Yeah. We all just want to protect our neighborhood.”

She bobs her head. “But my mom and dad think we’re going to have to move in the end.”

“We won’t,” I say confidently. “No one can force us out of here.”

“My dad doesn’t agree. He heard that Gaviani is a mafia boss, or that his family is the mafia or something like that.”

“A mafia boss? Yeah, I heard that before. But are you sure that’s not just a rumor?” We hear about the mafia and their wars all the time, but we’ve never had any contact with them, or at least I haven’t.

If they were out in the open, it would be easy for the cops to catch them. Some people think that any super-rich person is in the mafia, and maybe they do have some similarities in the way they operate, but I doubt Gaviani is a mafia boss.

Bianca shrugs. “I don’t know. I’m just telling you what I heard. I don’t want to have to move either, but you never know. People like Gaviani are shady as hell.”

“I get that, but why would he want all the attention on him? If he’s a mafia boss, surely he won’t want to deal with the outrage.”

The mafia has its hands in everything, but they usually do it so that most people don’t

know about it or don't realize it. Mowing down a historical neighborhood for money laundering or some other criminal activities seems a bit too much. Too flashy. Too in everyone's faces.

"Maybe he's already bribed or threatened everyone to keep quiet about him. You know that house that burned in a fire recently?"

"Nora's house?"

"Yeah. People are saying Gaviani did that."

"Caused a fire?" I raise an eyebrow at her. "Why would he do that? How?"

"Her family sold the property to him."

"Okay, but that doesn't prove he was behind it all. Nora left something on the stove and fell asleep. It happens."

"So you're saying Gaviani just got lucky?" She narrows her eyes at me.

"Probably, yeah."

"Well, I'm suspicious about it all. Remember Agnelli? He said he wouldn't sell and then he did and disappeared without a trace. People say Gaviani had something on him or threatened him somehow."

"People say a lot of things." Some of them true, and some of them pure invention. "And Agnelli maybe intended to sell all along, but he didn't want to admit it because he knew a lot of his friends would be jumping down his throat for his decision. Maybe he didn't want anyone to try to change his mind."

“Maybe you’re right, but we don’t know. I think Gaviani is a threat.”

“My mom and dad will figure something out. If we have to go public about it, we will, but no one can take our homes. My family and I aren’t going anywhere. My home is here and always will be.”

“You already moved out once.”

“Yeah, and it was a mistake.” My house is the only place I’ll ever feel safe.

“It was a mistake only because you moved in with the wrong person. If it weren’t for that guy, maybe you would’ve liked your life in your new apartment.”

“It’s not only that. I never intended to stay in that apartment forever. I planned to eventually return here and run the restaurant.” Marry Filippo and build a house for us right next to my parents’.

Filippo even agreed to it. We had so many plans. But then it all turned out to be a lie. He wanted me to be his and only his, no matter what I wanted. He was only saying things he thought I wanted to hear.

“I’m sorry,” Bianca says. “I shouldn’t have brought that up.”

“It’s okay.”

She places her hand over mine. “I can see it in your eyes that it still hurts you. That wasn’t my intention. I hope you’re right, and nothing will change here. Actually, do you think we could hire the mafia to chase Gaviani out of here?”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“Terrible idea. If they get you entangled in their world, they’ll never let you go. Our neighborhood would become theirs, and that’s even worse than Gaviani.”

Bianca laughs. “I was joking.”

A smile spreads across my lips. “I know, but I still don’t want any mafia anywhere near us.”

“Agreed.” Bianca gets to her feet. “I have to go. My mom wants me to look at some apartments with her, just in case.”

I sigh. Many people said they were willing to fight for our neighborhood, but what if they change their minds? We can’t let Gaviani win and get what he wants. We came here first, and he’s an intruder. He doesn’t belong here, and it’s not like he intends to live here himself.

All he wants is to get richer and richer, which is ridiculous, considering he’s already a billionaire. Why does he need more money? More projects? Why doesn’t he care about anyone other than himself? Has he even seen how beautiful our neighborhood is? Does he know any of the people who live here? Like, really know them? I’m sure he doesn’t.

He’s a villain, and villains don’t win in the end. I just know it. Gaviani isn’t going to get what he wants. We all need to stick together. Then we’ll be unbeatable.

CHAPTER 8

Matteo

“What the fuck is he doing?” I whisper under my breath as I study the latest reports on Adriano’s movements.

He’s up to something, and it’s not anything good. He’s been buying properties in all the wrong areas, and there are strong whispers about his special Gaviani project, or whatever the fuck he calls it.

I don’t know what he intends to do. The area he’s focused on is close to the sea and right next to his territory. Building anything there would be great because of the view and closeness of the city center.

It’s perfect, but it’s also highly problematic and that’s why no one has ever tried to control that area. The neighborhood is very peaceful, quiet, and old, and everyone knows everyone there.

Trying to send someone to spy on Adriano and his men would be complicated—although not impossible—and he’s making his moves right from his territory. He’s only crossed over a little bit so far, but I’m sure he’s going to expand.

Will people sell their homes to him? It’s a risky investment and it could catch a lot of attention, but that’s exactly why Adriano wants it. If he has his way, he’ll get richer and more powerful, maybe even become the biggest boss in town. I can’t let that happen.

I grit my teeth. I shouldn’t have let Adriano keep his territory and my family name. Now I’ll have to go through his territory to find out exactly what his plan is.

Maybe I should let him handle the complicated neighborhood and set it up for business. Once all the pesky people are gone, I’ll defeat Adriano and take everything

that's his. Let him do the dirty work for me.

A soft sound in the hallway makes me close the laptop on my desk and turn around. My father enters the room. His gray eyes are narrowed, and his gray hair is starting to peek out from under the dyed black strands.

"Why are you still here?" he asks, raising his eyebrows at me.

"And where am I supposed to be?"

"I don't know. Out there. Doing something!"

"Maybe I would be... if you finally let me take control of things." I push my lips up into a smile that I don't feel.

My father is getting old, but he still wants to be the one to rule the Gaviani territory on his own. He keeps saying I have to wait for him to retire or die to become the boss, but I'm running out of patience.

At first, I thought that working for him and doing what he wanted would make him see that I was ready, but now, I no longer want to jump every time he barks. His decisions are stupid anyway. He didn't let me go after Adriano, and that was his biggest mistake.

Now things are more difficult for us, but there's still time to salvage the situation. The only question is, does my father want that? He's always had a soft spot for that street rat he found. I can't believe that he used to call Adriano his son, even though Adriano has zero Gaviani blood.

"You? Take over?" My father laughs. "Not with that again. You haven't shown me a single thing that would make me think you're worthy of taking my place."

I scoff and start for the door, but he gets in my way. We're face-to-face as he stares into my eyes. It used to terrify me when he'd do that because I knew bad things were coming, but not anymore. I'm taller and stronger than him. If he thinks he can scare me, he's wrong.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asks.

"Didn't you just say I should be out there? If you don't think I'm worthy, then maybe I should leave, and you won't just have Adriano as your enemy." I glare at him.

"Don't be dramatic. You don't even have your own territory."

Page 17

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

I tilt my head. “What makes you think I wouldn’t just take yours?”

“Because you’re not Adriano.”

I curl my fingers into fists. It takes all my willpower not to punch him. “If you love that asshole so fucking much, then why don’t you help him with his new project? Ah, wait, you can’t. He would put a bullet in your head because, despite what you think, he’s not your real son.”

He presses his lips into a tight line. That’s it. My father can’t handle the fact that I’m his heir and not his precious Adriano.

“I want you to go there,” he suddenly says.

“Go where?”

“Check out the neighborhood he’s planning to buy. Find out what people there think and what they know.”

“If I want to get there, I’ll have to go through Adriano’s territory... or the Ciprianis’.”

The Ciprianis are a strange family, but they stick to their territory and don’t deal much with anyone else. They’re not a threat, unless you enter their territory without permission. We don’t need a war with the Ciprianis, which only leaves us with one possible path.

“Yes, you’ll have to go through Adriano’s territory. Is that a problem?” My father

stares at me. “Are you so incompetent that you and your men will get caught?”

“No, but you know what that neighborhood is like. Everyone will know I asked around, including Adriano, and I don’t think those people will tell us anything useful. We already know many of them are not happy about Adriano’s plan and they’ll refuse to sell, unless he finds a way to convince them.”

“I want him to know we’re on to his plan.”

I furrow my brow. “Then fucking send him a letter.”

“No. He needs to know we can pass through his territory whenever we want and that we’re ready to interfere with his business.”

“You want to put some pressure on him?” Adriano works best under pressure, and my father knows that. Great. It looks like he wants to help Adriano.

“Stop asking so many stupid questions and just do it. Go. I don’t want to see you here until it’s done.”

He doesn’t want to see me in our home until it’s done? Wow. He’s going to bring over some women to fuck while I’m gone, like he always does.

“Fine.” I’m not going to argue with him this time.

It’s a waste of my time and breath. I’ll do what he wants me to do, but I need to come up with my own plan. There has to be a way to get rid of Adriano and my father at the same time. I just need to be careful about what I do.

Then I won’t only defeat Adriano and have his territory but I’ll also take my birthright. Before the life drains out of my father’s eyes, he’ll realize Adriano is weak

and should've never been given the Gaviani name. He'll realize he's been underestimating me my whole damn life, and he'll have regrets.

But that's not my problem. I'll laugh last.

CHAPTER 9

Adriano

"Something weird happened," Rocco says, his brow furrowed as he stares at his phone screen.

"What?" I don't need anything weird now, whatever the fuck that means.

"Um, Matteo. Some of his men slipped through somehow. They went to talk to the people we're currently negotiating with and those we were about to contact."

"What the fuck? How did that happen? And they got there through our territory or the Ciprianis'?"

"Ours." Rocco's face is serious.

"Now that's just fucking great! Where are they now? What did they want? Are they trying to buy too or just messing with my plan?" I expected it, especially because Matteo had already been sniffing around, but my men shouldn't have let it happen.

Matteo and Gennaro must've been watching my territory more carefully than everyone thought, and they somehow figured out a way to sneak around without getting seen.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“Actually, they pretended to be reporters and were fishing for information.”

I blink at Rocco. Pretending to be reporters, but why? I thought Gennaro and Matteo would try to get in the middle. Offer more money to people, so I'd have to pay more. Or try to find a way to buy some houses on their own, so they could either try to negotiate with me or take over as much of that area as possible to make mine smaller.

But they have to know I'd go to war with them over it, even if it caught some attention. I'd have to be careful and it would all have to be done as quietly as possible, but it would be doable. Would they try something else to sabotage me? Bring even more attention to that area?

“There's nothing much they can find out by talking to people.” It's not like I've given anyone any information about what I intend to do. “And they must've heard all the rumors. So what then? Are they trying to figure out how many people are willing to go against me? How many aren't willing to sell?”

“Maybe.” Rocco shrugs. “Like I said, it's a weird move. They haven't done any damage yet, and now that we know they slipped through once, we need to up our security so that it doesn't happen twice. If they planned to do something there, they missed their chance.”

“Or they wanted to show off. Demonstrate that they can get through my territory without a problem. And now they probably know who is more likely to sell. They can send a random lawyer to negotiate their own deal and we won't know about it until it's too late. While we're busy looking for holes and upping our security, they could be plotting something else. They don't even need to go anywhere anymore.”

“But they could’ve done that without breaching our territory and letting you know that they’re up to something.”

“It’s Gennaro. He’s... He’s like that. Sometimes he does things that no one else would. It’s probably some kind of weird challenge in his head. He wants me to know they’re about to do something, and he wants me to make a move.”

“Even if it ruins his plan?” Rocco frowns. “Even if he’s risking war?”

“Yeah. Maybe all he wants is to pit Matteo and me against each other. Force us into a war.”

After all, that’s what Gennaro was always doing when I lived with him and Matteo. Maybe he misses it, or he thinks I’ve become too much of a threat. Whatever happens, I won’t let them steal or stop my project.

“But why now?” Rocco asks.

I shrug. “Maybe he thinks Matteo and I are both ready to face each other, but I don’t have time for that. Watch the borders of our territory more closely and offer more money to those who are on the verge of selling but haven’t made up their mind.” I hate wasting money, and if people hear I’m now offering more, they’ll try to bargain.

But I don’t want Gennaro or Matteo to get to those people first. Maybe that’s not their plan, but I can’t be sure.

“What about Paradossi and the rest like him?”

I meet Rocco’s gaze. “Where’s that contract he signed?”

“Right here.” Rocco looks through some papers on the desk and offers me the

contract.

I find the page with the fine print and smile. “He’s not going to be a problem anymore. We’re going to pay him a visit. Tonight. If he doesn’t want to lose his precious daughter, he’ll sell everything to me for an acceptable price. And then he’ll have to be the one to convince his idiot neighbors to sell before they all lose their heads.”

“What if someone talks? What if Matteo’s men really collect some stories and publish them?”

“No one’s going to believe them. It’s all just rumors, and they’ll all sign perfectly legal contracts and I’ll pay them a fair price. Then everyone will think they heard of those who got more money and have regrets because they didn’t ask for more or try to bargain. And we’ll come up with some lies about the neighborhood. The water being unclean or something, and if Paradossi is the one to tell those stories, they’ll believe him. Even if they find out that’s not true later, who cares? It’s their own fault for believing their friend.”

“What if Paradossi refuses?”

“He won’t, and if he does or anyone else causes a problem that I can’t easily resolve, I’ll just burn everything to the ground.” If I can’t have it, no one else can. I don’t give a fuck.

“I’ll get everything ready then,” Rocco says.

I place the contract on the desk and look through the window. I haven’t seen Gennaro and Matteo in person since I ended up in juvie. No one came to visit me, and they’ve never tried to contact me.

At first I thought they didn't want to deal with the cops or risk getting close. Then I thought Gennaro was furious with me for getting arrested for a completely stupid thing Matteo and I had done, and the lack of contact was to punish me and teach me a lesson.

But when I got out, any number I called was disconnected. I was all on my own on the streets until I realized Gennaro had forgotten to cancel my bank account. There was even more money in it than I thought there'd be.

It helped me get on my feet and start my own business. With all I learned from Gennaro, I quickly set everything up. Sometimes, I believed it was all a test. I wanted Gennaro to show up and congratulate me for making it on my own and for not wasting his money.

But that never happened. Has Gennaro really forgotten about that bank account? Was that his parting gift to me? I don't know. He must've been disappointed in me, and who knows what Matteo told him about what happened on the night I was arrested.

I took a risk for Matteo and helped him get away, but he clearly didn't appreciate any of it. Maybe I should've dragged him to juvie with me, but that's not who I am. Gennaro did a lot for me, and I'll forever be grateful to him for that.

But if he thinks anything that happened in the past will affect our current relationship, he's wrong. I'm on my own, just like I've always been. Matteo thinks he's better than me because he's a real Gaviani, but he's wrong.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

And whatever game Gennaro is playing, I don't care. I'm going to beat him at it. Whether they like it or not, they've turned me into a true Gaviani, and I won't mind if I remain the only one.

I pull out my phone and glance at the screen. There haven't been any alerts about Sunset recently, but it's for the best. Maybe she'll be at the club tomorrow night. That would be perfect because I'll be celebrating my win. And what better way to celebrate than with her sweet body under mine?

CHAPTER 10

Chiara

I take a look around the restaurant and turn off the lights. It's late, but everything is in its place. After locking the door, I race to the house. It took me longer to lock up than it should have, so I have to take a shower and get ready for bed as quickly as possible.

If I'm lucky, I'll get maybe four hours of sleep before I have to get up again and open the restaurant. My dad said I could give the key to one of the waiters instead, but I was convinced I'd have enough time to do it myself before going to my morning classes.

I was clearly wrong because I haven't realized how many things have to be done before closing since my dad usually does most of it. Cleaning up took longer than usual too because someone spilled wine all over the floor, and yeah, I stupidly refused help.

It's all good practice, though. One day, the restaurant will be mine, and I'll have to know how to run it on my own. My dad has spent many late hours there, and so will I.

I reach for the door handle and freeze. Why is the front door of the house cracked open? I glance at the key in my hand. Have I opened it without realizing it? It's too dark to see. I always open the door almost automatically and most of the time I don't even remember doing it.

Why does this time feel different? Like I haven't unlocked it and pushed it open myself? I frown. No one else could've opened the door but me. I'm just tired and sleepy. My brain simply can't keep up with it all anymore.

This is a safe neighborhood. We haven't had a robbery in this area in, like, forever. My dad accidentally left the restaurant unlocked one night and absolutely nothing happened. Our neighbor doesn't even lock his front door because there's no need.

Still, I listen carefully for any noise coming from inside the house. Nothing. Only silence. I push the door wide open and step inside. It must've been me who unlocked the door. There's no one else in—

Someone grabs me from behind and clamps a hand over my mouth before I can scream. I thrash and kick, but I can't get free. Something crashes against the floor, probably a vase. I catch a glimpse of a shadow standing in the living room.

There are more of them! More of my attackers! I want to scream for help, but I can't. My heart pounds so loudly in my chest I can barely focus. My brain is in overdrive, and my head is spinning. No!

The lights come on, blinding me. The hand vanishes from my mouth. Someone traps my wrists behind my back in a tight grip. I'm about to try to break into a run when I

realize I'm surrounded.

The living room is full of armed, masked men. I gasp for breath, my whole body shaking in terror. There's one guy who's not dressed like the others and he's not holding a weapon pointed at me. Instead, he's looking away from all of us, probably taking a peek through the window.

He turns around.

"You," he says, his widening for a moment before a smile spreads across his lips.

My breath catches. It's Blue. It's him. Oh hell. It's him! What does he want from me? Why is he here? Who is he?

"You're Chiara Paradossi?" he asks, strolling toward me.

Is that a trick question? Isn't he here for me? I made another huge mistake. I thought I was finally safe, but yet again, I chose wrong. What is it with me and falling for the wrong guys every single damn time?

Tears well up in my eyes. Blue is worse than Filippo. At least Filippo didn't have an army with him. I should've never gone to that club. I should've never gone anywhere with Blue. How could I have been so stupid yet again?

Men can't be trusted.

Ever.

"Where's your father?" He reaches out toward my face, and I turn my head away from him.

“Why?”

“I have some unfinished business with him.”

I don't understand what he's saying. “My parents aren't here. Leave them out of this. Whatever it is that you want...”

I'd never let anything happen to my mom and dad because of me. And there's no way my dad would be in business with a guy like Blue, or anyone who goes around with armed men.

“Then why don't you call them and tell them to get here?”

“No.” I glare at him.

“No?” His eyebrows shoot up. “Can’t you see that this is about something serious? This isn’t the time for bravery. Nothing will happen to you or your parents if you cooperate.”

“What do you want?”

“Your father signed a contract when he took a loan from me. It’s time to pay me back... one way or another.”

“What loan?” I gape at him.

“Didn’t he tell you? He was about to lose the restaurant, and maybe even this beautiful home.” Blue looks around.

“You’re lying.”

My dad would never go to a criminal for money. He would’ve found another solution. And there’s no way my mom and I wouldn’t even know about it.

“Why don’t you call your dear old dad and ask him?”

I shake my head. What if it’s true? It’s a good thing my parents are safe at my uncle’s.

“Fine. I’ll track him down myself, and in the meantime... you and I are getting

married.” He grins.

“What?” My voice is high-pitched as my throat constricts.

“When your father signed that deal, he also gave you to me as my wife. It has all been arranged. I was waiting for the right moment to activate that clause.”

“My dad would’ve never agreed to that!” I can’t imagine my dad ever signing a contract like that, unless he was forced to do it.

But then he would’ve gotten us all away from here a long time ago. My dad adores his restaurant, but he would never give up his family for it. I’m sure of it.

“Do you want to see his signature on the contract where it says so? It’s all on the same page too.”

“You tricked him! Such a contract can’t be legally binding!” It’s pure nonsense. It has to be.

“Legal. Illegal. Those are just words. I’m Adriano Gaviani and I don’t care about such things. You either comply or you die.”

“Adriano...”

It’s him. He’s the guy who wants to destroy my neighborhood. I slept with the monster who... Nausea rises at the back of my throat.

“You can’t do this! You’ll gain nothing if we’re married! Just leave and I won’t tell anyone about anything, okay?” I give him a pleading look. “We’ll pretend this never happened.”

“We’ll see about that. I need you, so you’re coming with me, and your father will have to make a hard choice. But first...” Adriano smiles as he looks at one of his men. “Rocco, the paperwork.”

Rocco steps forward with a piece of paper and a pen, and the guy holding my wrists lets go. But even though I’m free, there’s nowhere to go. Nowhere to run. They’ll just grab me again, or worse, shoot me.

“Sign this,” Rocco says.

I stare down at the paper. Marriage papers? Hell, I don’t want to sign anything. This isn’t how things are supposed to go.

But as I look up into Adriano’s cold eyes, he moves his hand toward his gun that’s in the holster at his hip. If I don’t sign, he’ll make me. Does it even matter if I sign a piece of paper confirming I want to marry him? No, it doesn’t. It’s not even on the list of my problems.

I take the pen and place the paper on the glass table, and then I sign whatever he wants me to.

Adriano turns to his men. “Take her.”

“No!” I scream, but the men surround me and I feel a pinch of a needle. Things start to go blurry around me, my movements slow and uncoordinated as I try to fight. My eyelids droop.

“No. I’ll do it,” Adriano says, but I have no idea what he’s talking about.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

Someone picks me up in their arms. Blue? No, there's no Blue. Blue was a happy dream. A person who doesn't exist.

Now there's only Adriano, and he's pure evil. I'm a magnet for bad guys. If I ever survive this, I'm never, ever going near a man again.

Darkness falls down on me, and I can only hope that Adriano won't be the end of my family.

CHAPTER 11

Adriano

As soon as I enter the building with Chiara in my arms, I frown. There are plenty of apartments and rooms where I could keep her, but I want her in mine. I want to keep an eye on her, and I don't want my men around her.

They might be good and reliable guards, but I don't trust them with her safety. She should be less afraid around me because of our time at the club. I don't have any spare rooms in my apartment, though, so she'll have to be in the only bedroom. Mine.

I glance down at her beautiful face. She looks like an angel when she's asleep, and I have a strong feeling that she shouldn't be here in this place. It's like bringing a torch into a cave. It'll lighten up the place, but it'll eventually extinguish and get swallowed by darkness.

But what the hell am I thinking? As soon as I get in touch with Paradossi and tell him

I have his daughter, he'll rush to give me whatever the hell I want. Chiara will only be my wife for a short while.

I still can't believe it's her. My Sunset. It would be much better if she were here under different circumstances. Now I'll have her in my bed. So close, and yet so far away. Maybe she'll remember all the good times we had together, and she'll forget all about who I am and how I brought her here.

She was in shock, and I was surprised myself too. I should've taken a look at Chiara's photo. Rocco even offered it to me, but I waved my hand. It didn't matter to me what she looked like. She was just a means to an end, and she still is.

Maybe this is the universe's twisted way of toying with me. Chiara got into my life and made me crave her more than anything else. And now I have to choose. Her or my plan. The answer is obvious.

I want both, but I'll satisfy myself with only one. I'm not giving up my project for a woman, no matter how sweet and seductive she is. She's distracted me enough. Actually, the universe might have rewarded me. Once this is all done, Chiara will be out of my mind too.

She won't want to have anything to do with me, and that will be it. The betrayed look in her eyes... It was so damn intense. No one has ever looked at me like that, or at least I didn't care enough. I don't care about her either. She was just fun.

Once I enter my apartment, I head straight to my room. I lower Chiara onto my bed. She's still so fucking hot. I find some padded cuffs in another room and then return to tie her left wrist to the headboard.

It'll be enough to keep her in place. She won't be able to get too far, but she won't hurt herself either. As I grab all the weapons I have hidden all over the room, my

gaze keeps going to Chiara.

Fuck. Having her like this is distracting. Impossible to ignore. I want her to open her eyes and look at me with a smile on her face and fire in her eyes. Then I want to fill the room with her moans. I grab the bag with the weapons and toss it into the closet that's actually like a big safe. No one can open it except for me.

“Adriano?” Rocco’s voice behind my back makes me jump.

What the fuck? How has he managed to sneak up on me? That should be impossible. Everything was perfectly quiet. I was just lost in my thoughts because of Chiara. Something like that has never happened to me.

“What?” I snap.

His gaze goes toward Chiara and I step into his line of vision. He shouldn’t be watching her like this. She’s mine. I lead him out of the room and into the hallway.

“We found out that her parents are visiting her uncle. Different town. Four different mafia families in our way.”

“Then I’ll have to call Paradossi.” It would’ve been better if I had the whole family here under my control.

Then Paradossi would sign all that needs to be signed and that would be it. Deal done. With them being away and out of our reach, things could get complicated.

Paradossi might get stupid ideas, like trying to go to the cops or getting in touch with Gennaro or Matteo. There’s no way for him to contact them, but they could reach out to him and promise him crazy things.

“Do you want me to make an announcement or something about your and Chiara’s marriage?”

“Not yet.” I’ll need everyone to know I married Chiara eventually.

It’s another part of my plan. I could’ve done all of this before, but no one would’ve believed she’d gotten married without leaving her home. Now that she’ll be gone for a while and her parents too... it’ll be easier to spin a story if I need it.

Chiara marrying me—the neighborhood’s enemy—will cause everyone to distrust Paradossi. It’ll be easier if he cooperates and does what I need him to, but if I have to use my marriage with Chiara, I will. It’s always good to have multiple plans and backups because things never go the way you expect them to.

“There’s also another thing. Matteo has been attacking our network. Trying to get into our secure line and mess up our internet connection,” Rocco says.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

It's a futile task. My tech team is one of the best in the country. It's just a minor annoyance. Matteo probably thinks it'll keep me occupied and worrying about his next move, but that's not going to happen.

"It looks like he got some people from overseas. Better hackers," Rocco adds.

I groan. "Just tell the team to do everything to keep Matteo's men out. We can't have a breach." I don't want Matteo to achieve any wins against me, no matter how small. "If you need to bring everything down, do it."

But it shouldn't come to that.

"Okay." Rocco inclines his head. "What are you going to do with Chiara?"

"Why?"

"Well, it seems like you know her from before."

"Yeah, from Amore Bruciante."

"Are you sure you don't want to take her somewhere else? Isn't it inconvenient to have her in your room?"

I step closer to him, eyeing him carefully. "She's my wife. I can't have her anywhere else."

"Okay, but that's all fake. I get that you don't want her in the dungeon, but there are

empty apartments. If you don't trust anyone else, I'll keep watch outside."

"No."

"All right." Rocco lifts his hands up. "You don't have to glare at me like that. I just think that you'd be more comfortable with her somewhere else, and she might be too. She'll be a distraction, and if you're alone with her—"

"Are you saying I can't handle one woman on my own?"

"No, of course not." He sighs. "Whatever. If you change your mind, let me know and we'll figure out something."

"That won't be necessary. I'll just sleep on the sofa. Now go and make sure things keep running smoothly." I wave my hand at him.

There's something bugging me at the back of my mind. I'm forgetting something, but I'm not sure what it is. Rocco would've already reminded me of it, unless it's something only I know about. Is it about Chiara?

I furrow my brow.

Fuck! Of course she's made me forget about something. The knife hidden under my pillow. I need to go grab it before she wakes up and finds it.

Maybe Rocco is right. Maybe I should send Chiara somewhere else, but I don't want her to be so far away from me. I need to be able to keep an eye on her at all times.

Someone else, like Rocco, might be too nice to her and let himself get tricked into letting her go. She's the key to my plan, and that's why it has to be me who guards her. No one else is good enough for that job.

CHAPTER 12

Chiara

I can't breathe—it's the first thought that flashes through my head as soon as I open my eyes. Panic grips my insides as I try to sit up, but my wrist is cuffed to something. My heart keeps pounding in my chest as I take in the room around me.

I'm in someone's bedroom. The bed is big and strangely comfortable, and the sheets under me are dark green and soft. Is this Adriano's room? But why would he take me to his room? It makes no sense, but nothing does anymore.

Someone's definitely been using this room because the closet door is slightly ajar, and I can see some clothes in there. A jacket is draped over a chair. It looks like Adriano's. The drawer of the nightstand is cracked open too, and there's something colorful inside. Like wrappers?

I'm lucky my other hand is free, so I move to pull the drawer open. Condoms. Those wrappers are condoms. Oh hell. I shut the drawer and lie back down on the bed.

Oh hell, no.

I'm his wife now, but I thought that was just... I don't know, probably a tactic to scare the hell out of me. Make me see that he can do whatever he wants. I don't think he really wants me to be his wife. Why would he? What happened between us was so nice, but it was just sex to him.

I was stupid enough to think he was a good guy. He doesn't care about me at all, or I wouldn't be here right now like this. Does he plan to toy with me? Use me, as if I was actually his wife until he gets what he really wants? He wants to mess with my mind and make me terrified of him, and it's working.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

I try to take slow, deep breaths so I don't get dizzy again. Freaking out right now isn't going to help me get free.

I close my eyes for a moment because Filippo's face appears in my mind. He sneers at me and laughs.

"I win," his voice whispers.

But I can't think about him and how I'm again someone's prisoner. I don't want to remember how he placed a chair under the door handle to keep me from getting out. How he screamed at me to calm the fuck down and banged on the door while telling me he loved me.

I groan, focusing on the cuff on my wrist. It's impossible to get it off without a key, and it's too tight to find a way to slip it off. In movies, people would just dislocate their wrists or cut off a finger or something, but I don't think I can do any of that.

I don't even know where I am. There's a window, but it's hidden by heavy drapes. This room could be anywhere, even at the top of a building. Armed men are probably right outside the door. But I can't give up.

Adriano wants to take my home and the restaurant. It's all he cares about. Will he really free me once he gets what he wants? Once my dad finds out about this, he'll do anything he can to set me free.

But then what? Adriano will take everything we own, but what will he really do with us? Kill us, I guess. He's clearly a heartless mafia boss who doesn't give a damn

about anything and anyone other than himself.

I grab the pillow from the other side of the bed in frustration. My gaze falls on something dark that has been hiding under it, and I reach out for it. A knife! I stare at it with wide eyes.

Could I somehow use it to cut through my cuff? But I hear footsteps somewhere outside. Someone's coming, and I don't have enough time. I place the pillow over my face and press the knife tightly to myself so that no one can see it.

If I'm lucky enough Adriano will come through that door. When he approaches to remove the pillow, I'll stab him and hopefully... I honestly don't know what I'm hoping for, but I hear the door open and I hold my breath. If he thinks I'm dead, I have a chance.

"Chiara!" His shout cuts through the air, and for a second, I think I hear worry.

But I must be imagining it or he's just worried I'm actually dead and my dad won't sign anything without me alive.

I feel the bed shift and his legs brushing mine as he gets on top of me. As he grabs the pillow and tosses it aside, I stare into his turbulent eyes. I strike straight at his head. His hand shoots out and grips my wrist so hard that I wince. The knife nicks him on the cheek, leaving a tiny trail of blood.

I fight against his hold, but if I don't let go, he's going to crush my wrist. He's way too strong, and pain shoots through my arm. Adriano takes the knife out of my fingers with his other hand and lifts it.

He's going to stab me, isn't he? I stop breathing, my whole body shivering. He throws the knife across the room. It embeds into the closet as if he aimed right at it.

He pins my hand next to my head, his face serious, his eyes flashing with danger, but there's also something else... As if he's conflicted about something, but I don't know what it is.

I can't get my gaze off his face. He's the same guy who made me feel so happy, and now... It's like Filippo over again. It was all fake.

All fake. All fake.

"I should punish you for this, but you'd enjoy that, wouldn't you?" He tilts his head at me.

His body is still pressed against mine, and my mind wants to take me to that time when we kissed. When his touch made me cry in pleasure.

A tingling starts low in my stomach, but I can't. I can't do this right now. He's not the man who I thought he was. He's evil. My eyes fill with tears.

Adriano lets go of me and gets to his feet. "It's my fault for leaving that, not yours anyway. I'll forgive you this time."

"I... um, I need to go to the bathroom," I say, my voice shaky.

If I keep lying here, tied up like this, after what's just happened, I'm going to lose it and burst into tears. And I don't want Adriano to have the pleasure of seeing me fall apart. This was probably my best and only attempt at freedom that I was going to get, and I failed. My body still reacting to him... It's too much.

"Want to try to kill me again so soon?" The corners of his mouth lift up.

"No... I... I really need to go." It's not even a lie.

Now that I think of it, I really feel like I have to pee.

“Okay, but no stupid moves, or I’ll just throw you in the basement and my men will watch over you. And I assure you, you don’t want that. Actually, killing me is a terrible idea because I’m the only one keeping you safe. Others, who are just outside, wouldn’t be this good to you, and I’m only this nice to you because you and I had a really great time at Amore Bruciante.”

I hate him. I hate him for reminding me of that again. He’s not nice. There’s nothing nice about him. He’s messed up in the head if he thinks he’s being nice, but I bite my tongue. I don’t want to antagonize him now, no matter how much I’d like to. Filippo taught me arguing with crazy is always a bad idea.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“Close your eyes,” he says. “If you open them before I tell you to, you’re not going anywhere.”

I do it. He moves so quietly that the chain attached to my cuff barely clinks. I just feel the pressure around my wrist disappearing. Trying something now would be pointless. I don’t have a weapon anymore, the element of surprise is gone, and Adriano is stronger than me and probably armed. I’ll have to come up with a different plan later. For now, I’m grateful that I’m still alive and breathing.

“Open your eyes.” Adriano lounges against the wall, his hand hovering over his gun. “The bathroom is right through that door across from you. Run for the wrong one, and you’ll regret it.”

I make my way to the bathroom, keeping an eye on him. As I shut the door behind me, I let out a sound that’s a mix of a cry and a sigh. I slump down to the floor, my back against the door.

The bathroom is so damn nice and modern, but I can’t stay in here forever. There aren’t any windows either, just a small vent. If I take too long, Adriano might come looking for me, and I don’t want that. I give myself a moment to let the tears run down my face, and then I get to my feet.

This isn’t over. I’ll find a way to get free. I have to. Despair has never helped anyone, and it won’t help me either. I’ve been through something like this before, except this is a whole new level of crazy. All I have to do is find my inner strength and let it guide me.

CHAPTER 13

Adriano

I watch the bathroom door. As I touch my cheek, I see a little bit of blood on my fingers. Who would've thought Chiara would try to kill me? I should have considered that possibility, especially because she had the pillow over her face.

Hell, only a blind idiot wouldn't figure out that the knife was gone. One quick glance. It was all I needed to figure out her plan. But all I saw was Chiara's unmoving body. At that moment, I only wanted to make sure she was still alive. Nothing else mattered.

My mistake could've been fatal. I don't know why it's so easy to lower my guard around her. Maybe I'm too used to her presence. Our situation has changed since Amore Bruciante, but it doesn't feel that way to me.

When I had her pinned under me, I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to forget everything else and just take her right then and there. Satisfy the hunger inside me. Even now, my cock is still hard. Fuck.

Rocco was definitely right. She's a distraction, and this isn't going to be easy, but I like a challenge. If I can't handle Chiara, then what the fuck am I even doing? I've always put business over pleasure, and I'm going to do so now.

As Chiara strolls out of the bathroom, her a-little-too-wide eyes meet mine. I want to go over to her and wrap her in my arms. Tell her everything's going to be okay and that she's safe with me.

But it would be a lie, wouldn't it?

I dial Paradossi's number and it goes straight to voicemail. Just fucking great. Did he really turn off his phone? It's still early, and he hasn't heard from his daughter. Was I wrong and he actually doesn't care about her? It's too early to make any conclusions. It hasn't been all that long since I took Chiara with me.

I try to call Chiara's uncle since Rocco found his number too, but the line just rings and no one picks up. Maybe I should make a call from Chiara's phone, in case the uncle doesn't answer unknown numbers.

I call Rocco instead.

"No one's picking up," I say. "Do you have the number of Chiara's mother?"

"Yeah, I'll send it to you," he says. "But the uncle apparently has a cabin in the mountains and the signal is spotty there."

"Why the fuck would they go to the mountains?"

"For some peace and quiet, I guess."

"Great," I mutter.

They'll have to go somewhere with a signal eventually, or they won't hear from Chiara. I can't imagine they wouldn't call to make sure everything's okay. I just have to be patient and wait for tomorrow. They'll call her, or they'll pick up the damn phone.

I adjust my pillow and lie down on the sofa. A moment later, I groan in annoyance. It's fucking uncomfortable. Too soft in certain places and too hard in others. I roll onto my side, but it doesn't help.

With a sigh, I get to my feet. I grab the blanket and the pillow and toss them on the floor behind the sofa. It's been a while since I slept on the floor, but at least I'm used to it and won't be tossing and turning all night.

I sprawl on the blanket and stare at the ceiling. Is Chiara asleep? I opened the drapes so there'd be some light in the room, so she wouldn't be too afraid to sleep. Gennaro would lock me up in the basement as punishment when I messed up, and I always hated the complete darkness around me. A sliver of light would've helped, but it was always pitch black.

Maybe I should have checked to make sure Chiara wouldn't hurt herself too. It's funny. She's the one who tried to stab me with a knife, and I'm thinking about whether the cuff will hurt her arm or if she'll be able to sleep.

But while she's here, she's my responsibility. I don't want to hurt her. It's not her fault she got caught up in the middle of all this.

Chiara watches me with her doe eyes as her lips spread into a smile. She goes down on her knees in front of me and unzips my pants. Everything around us is hazy enough to let me know this is a dream, but I don't want it to stop.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

She strokes my cock and then wraps her mouth around it. I push my hips, shoving myself as deep as I can go. Her tongue glides over—

A creak somewhere cuts through the dream. I open my eyes, cursing my training and skills that make me wake up at the slightest noise. It's probably nothing. If someone had gotten through all the security and guards, there would be way more noise and the alarms would be blaring.

But there's another creak. And another. Someone's here. In the hallway. I slowly lift myself up, hiding behind the sofa, and get out my gun.

I pad through the darkness, keeping close to the wall. When I take a peek into the hallway, I spot a shadow entering my bedroom. What the fuck? I press the emergency button on my phone as I go after the intruder.

“Don't be afraid,” the man whispers to Chiara loud enough for me to hear him. “I'm here to help you. Don't make a sound.”

I recognize his voice. He's one of my guards. Domenico. What the fuck does he think he's doing? I could kill him. He doesn't even realize I'm standing right behind him. But if I put a bullet in him, then I won't find out why he's here.

Is it just for Chiara? Is he actually a twisted and sick fuck who wants to trick Chiara into thinking he's a good guy and do who knows what to her? Or is he a mole? Working for someone else? Did someone bribe him? Threaten him? Everyone near me is carefully vetted. Did he slip through the cracks or did something else happen to change where his loyalties lie?

I should've left the drapes over the windows. Another mistake. Now there's enough light coming from outside, so I can see Chiara's eyes when they look at me. Domenico sees it too. Fuck.

He spins around, lunging at me. I jump aside, slamming my hand against the light switch. The lights come on, and I punch Domenico while he's disoriented. This is my bedroom, and he's never been in here before.

I grab the lamp off the nightstand and slam it against his head. Rocco and my men burst into the room. They easily overpower Domenico.

"Take him to the basement," I say.

"You're not a real Gaviani!" Domenico shouts at the top of his lungs while he's being dragged away.

I should put a bullet in him just for saying that, but that might be exactly what he wants. I need information, and he won't be able to give it to me if he's dead.

Once everyone's gone, it's just Chiara and me. She's watching me carefully, but her face is expressionless. What does she think about all this? Domenico didn't manage to get close enough to her, which is good.

I turn off the lights and find the key so I can lock the door. No one else is getting into this room. No one. I'll have to be quick too because I don't want to leave Chiara on her own for too long.

I don't even know which ones of my men I can trust, but I'll lock the apartment and turn on all the security measures that I don't normally use. I should've done it before, but it seemed like overkill.

I didn't think anything would change with Chiara's presence here, but I was wrong. If Domenico's a mole, why try something now? Why go for Chiara? I'm going to beat the answers out of him.

Domenico's left eye is swollen shut, blood dripping from his nose and mouth. And yet, he just keeps glaring at me.

"Who do you work for? Gennaro? Matteo?" I ask. "Come on, you've been with me for years. You know what I do to people who refuse to talk and won't give me what I want."

He's been with me when I cut off a guy's fingers one by one. Why would he want to die like that just for Gennaro and Matteo? He's not related to them, so he shouldn't care who's a real Gaviani and who's not. I would've known if he was. It doesn't make any sense.

No one is that loyal for no good reason. I'm not threatening his family because he doesn't have any. It's unlikely he could've gotten attached or gotten something super valuable from Gennaro or Matteo. Unless Matteo made him believe he was his friend, but how could he have pretended all this time? Why not just attack me or kill me when he had a chance?

"I won't tell you anything," Domenico spits out.

I take a knife from the table in the corner of the room and wave it in front of his face. "Do you want to bleed for them? What did you want to do with Chiara?"

He clenches his jaw.

"Is someone threatening someone you care about?" Maybe Domenico has fallen in love, and we don't know anything about it.

Maybe there's someone he's willing to die to protect, and that's why he's talking nonsense.

"You're a fraud. You're not a Gaviani," he says, staring into my eyes.

"And what is that to you? Why do you give a fuck? You're not a Gaviani either."

"No one would support someone like you. They're all pretending. All of them. Even your dear Rocco."

I cock my head at him. What the fuck is he talking about? Is he trying to convince me that everyone around me is a traitor?

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“Should I do a toxicology test on you? Because you’re not yourself.” I can’t let him provoke me into killing him because I still don’t know anything.

But Domenico will get tired. He’ll get hungry and thirsty. He’ll beg me to finish him off, and then I’ll ask him again. If he chooses to suffer until then, that’s his choice.

I lower the knife and just punch Domenico again. And again. And again. Blood coats my fingers and my clothes are stained with it as I exit the room.

“Did he tell you anything?” Rocco asks.

“No. He’s babbling nonsense.”

“Some of the guys have seen him in the park a few days ago with a woman. They don’t really remember enough to describe her, but maybe she’s a spy or working for Matteo. He could’ve gotten his orders then. She might have offered him a lot of money.”

“Or he fell in love with her, and Matteo or Gennaro threatened her life or kidnapped her. Money just doesn’t seem like a powerful enough motivator for something like this.”

“But why won’t he tell us then?”

“When someone you care about is in danger, you don’t think rationally.” And it’s the main reason why I can never allow myself to care for someone like that. “They might have told him they have spies among us, and if he says anything, they’ll kill her. So

he'd rather die than put her life at risk."

"Wouldn't they kill her anyway?"

I shrug. "Depends on how complicated it would be for them to cover it up. Sometimes it's not worth the effort, and if she hasn't seen or heard anything important, you can let her go."

"Will you let Chiara go? She's now seen and heard a lot."

"This isn't about Chiara." I'll decide what to do about her later.

She'll probably be too terrified to talk to anyone, and she and her family will know I can just kill them if they don't make things easy for me. And once I have everything I need to start building the Gaviani Resort, I'll get myself a new apartment. It's good to change buildings and apartments often anyway. If you're in one place for too long, people can learn things about you and study your movements. It's easier to get a new building.

"Keep an eye on Domenico," I say. "And don't leave anyone alone with him."

He frowns. "Do you think there might be someone else like him?"

"There better not be, because it'll seriously piss me off."

The whole thing might be about Gennaro trying to unsettle me further. Or it's Matteo. Matteo always used to brag that he was Gennaro's real son. He would constantly try to rub it in my face and say that I'd never be like him.

Even in school, whenever someone called me his brother or just by my last name, he'd tell them we were not related. It bugged me for a while, and once we were alone,

Matteo would sometimes say he was only joking. But I'm not a kid anymore, and Iama Gaviani, whether Matteo likes it or not.

I curse under my breath as I unlock the door to my room. There's blood all over the handle and the key. I'll have to clean it up later. After I enter, I lock the door again. No one's going to just waltz in here.

I yank my shirt over my head, and just as I let it drop to the floor, I look straight at Chiara. She's staring at me and at all the blood. Her lips are parted in shock, her eyes bulging.

It's insane how distracted I am lately. But I don't want to go to another bathroom, and Chiara has seen everything. She already thinks I'm a monster. A little bit of blood won't change anything. I slam the bathroom door behind me.

CHAPTER 14

Chiara

I swallow past the lump in my throat. If the idea of Adriano as a villain wasn't clear enough to me, well, it is now. He showed up all covered in blood, and now he's in the bathroom.

Whose blood is it? That guy's? Is he dead? I don't even know who the guy was, and why he wanted to free me. What did he mean when he shouted that Adriano wasn't a real Gaviani? Asking Adriano is obviously out of the question.

Have my mom and dad realized what's going on with me? The fact that I know nothing and have no way to find out drives me crazy. I only have to hope they're all right and safe, maybe still at my uncle's place.

The sheer amount of men who stormed the room to take that guy away was scary. They have to be very close nearby all the time. Always ready. Even if I get out of this room, I'll run into them.

I chew on the inside of my cheek. Coming up with a plan is hard when I don't have any weapons or anything within my reach. Adriano will always overpower me, and he has a gun. I haven't even gotten any sleep. Even before the guy showed up, I was too restless.

The bathroom door swishes open, and I gape at Adriano. He's only wearing a towel. Drops of water are still gliding down his strong body as he runs a hand through his wet hair. He glances at me and heads toward the closet.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

I should look away. There's no reason for me to keep staring at him while he... drops the towel to the floor. But I don't look away. I can't. Warmth spreads through me, and I hate it.

Adriano isn't Blue. I have to remind myself of that. I tear my gaze away from him just as he looks over his shoulder. As I close my eyes, I take a deep breath. If I pretend I'm asleep, maybe he'll go away. I just need him as far away as possible from me right now. I hear his footsteps coming closer, and I tense. But then I hear the door open and close. I open my eyes. He's gone. I breathe out a sigh of relief.

At some point, I must've dozed off because when I wake up Adriano and Rocco are in the room. Adriano removes my cuff.

"If she tries anything, just shoot her," he says to Rocco, who has his gun out.

"Go to the bathroom and get ready," Adriano says to me. "And hurry."

Hurry for what? Is he taking me somewhere? Rocco's gun is pointed at me as I get to my feet, and Adriano is already halfway across the room and out of the door before I can ask anything.

Should I try to talk to Rocco? Get him on my side and beg him to help me? I don't think he'd do that. If he's here, that means Adriano trusts him. Rocco must be one of his most loyal men.

As I close the bathroom door behind me, I catch Rocco's gaze. I hope he's as trustworthy as Adriano believes him to be.

Once I'm out of the bathroom, Rocco trains his gun on me again.

"Walk," he says. "Through the door."

I step outside into the hallway.

"Right," Rocco barks.

I enter a big room to our right. There's a huge table for maybe a dozen people, and Adriano is sitting in one of the chairs. The table is filled with food, and there are two empty plates.

"Take a seat," Adriano says.

I glance at the windows. They're huge too, and I can see some buildings through them. We're somewhere in the city. Somewhere high up. Jumping out of the window is out of the question then, unless I want to die.

As I sit down across from Adriano, the whiff of food makes my stomach rumble. It suddenly seems like ages since I last ate something. My stomach is a hollow pit, and everything on the table looks appetizing. But I don't move. Filippo's face fills my mind.

"Don't touch it! I fucking paid for it! You eat when I tell you you can!" he screams at me, the artery in his neck pulsing.

A shiver runs down my spine as I return back to the present. Adriano watches me with interest as he gets some food on his plate.

"I hope there's something on this table that you like," he says. "You must be hungry."

Starving, more like it. I'm going to need my energy, so I fill my plate with a little bit of everything. Adriano chews his food, but he keeps staring at me as if I'm some kind of exhibit, or a puzzle that he has to solve.

"What do you want from me?" I dare to ask after I've eaten half of my food.

If he gets mad at me and sends me back to his room, at least I won't be hungry.

"I'm sorry about all this. I know it must be frustrating and scary, but I need you to get what I want. You're just a pawn on a big chessboard."

"Then why don't you let me go? I'm no one important. I'm sure you can get everything you want without me."

"Your father is in an area without phone service, so until he answers my call, you're stuck with me."

"You want to get your hands on my house and my dad's restaurant?"

"Don't take it personally." He smiles. "I want to build something bigger and better there. Why would you want to live the rest of your life in that old, boring neighborhood?"

"Because it's my home!" I raise my voice without meaning to.

"You can get a new home somewhere else. Your father should've just agreed to sell. With the money—"

"You don't understand. Not everything is about money!"

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“That’s what delusional people tell themselves, but no, it’s not true. Everything has always been about money and always will be.”

I furrow my brow. “Is this your home?”

“Yes, why?”

“What if someone wanted to chase you out of here? What if they destroyed everything?”

He shrugs. “I’d move somewhere else.”

“Isn’t there anything you like about this place? Really like?”

He tilts his head as if he’s thinking hard about it. “Good location. Far enough away from the cops. Nice layout. Mostly soundproof. But I can get that somewhere else too for the right price.”

“No, I mean something personal. Do you watch the sunrise every morning? Or is there anything special about this building that you just can’t get anywhere else? Maybe your parents spent their days here, or gotten married, or—”

He shakes his head. “I couldn’t care less about things like that.”

“And people you care about? Are they all here? Your friends? Or you don’t have any?”

“Care about?” He laughs. “Caring about anyone or anything will only get you in trouble. Your family is an example of that. You can move anywhere you want, but you’re too stubborn. Gaviani Resort will make thousands of people happy. Money will flow like crazy. Your restaurant is dying anyway. Your father is barely keeping it afloat. I’m actually doing you a favor. You need to let go.”

“Soulless fun is not what I’m looking for, and no place is like home, but it looks like you don’t really have one. If you did, you’d know that your fancy resort is completely pointless. Why did that man say you weren’t a real Gaviani? Are you trying to prove something to someone so you want my neighborhood so bad?”

His eyes flash with fury, his jaw clenching. I should just keep my mouth shut, but I want to understand why he’s doing all this.

“I’m a successful businessman. That’s all,” he says. “Your neighborhood currently doesn’t belong to anyone, and it’s right next to my territory. So no, I can’t just build somewhere else, because yours is the easiest area to keep and protect. You and your neighbors can buy houses with a view of the sea somewhere else. No one will stop you. And if you love your family so much, then you’ll be happy that you’re with them. Alive.” His lips spread into a smile.

“Have you even visited my neighborhood, aside from coming to my house in the middle of the night? Have you seen how charming it is? Have you breathed in that special mix of trees, flowers, and the sea in the air? If you mow it all down, it’ll disappear. It’ll be sterile. It’ll lose its life. It’ll be just another huge block of ugly concrete. Your clientele will probably be as shady as you and they’ll come and go. Some people have been coming to my dad’s restaurant for decades. They brought their families, who then continued to bring their children. Traditions were created. And my neighbors... They’re all nice, kind, hardworking people. Many of them have jobs close by, and they can’t just move somewhere else because it would be too far. Their kids go to a nearby school. Should they lose their friends? Do you want to

uproot their lives? Take away their happy childhood?"

"And why should I give a fuck? They don't have enough power or money to stop me, so they can fuck off. Find new friends. Create new traditions if that's something they need in their lives. People didn't mind leaving me on the street when I had nothing, so I'm actually being really nice and offering to buy their houses instead of letting my men burn it all to the ground. Although, yeah, I admit burning it down would slow down my project and taking over the area would be a lot messier, so... I'm just not a nice man, Chiara. Accept it and move on. You either want to live or you don't. The rest is just bullshit."

My breath catches because there's so much hate in his eyes. What has happened to him that his heart is so cold and shriveled?

"It's not bullshit to me. I've always dreamed about taking over my dad's restaurant," I say.

"Taking over, what exactly? His debt? It's unlikely you'll be able to expand your business or earn any real money."

"I'll be happy to keep it the way it is. I don't need much. I just want to be surrounded by people who I love and who love me. I want to have that warm feeling of happiness whenever I walk down my street. I want to feel safe. You already have a ton of money, don't you? Why do you need more? Aren't you just trying to fill the void inside you? Do you think you'll be happy even after you get what you want?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. You live in some pink bubble that's eventually going to burst."

"I invite you to stay in my neighborhood for a few days. Just experience it all for a little bit. It might change your mind. And yeah, things aren't always ideal, and they're

far from perfect. Not every day is happy and people argue and fight over nonsense, but then there are days when you just sit in front of your house and... you're happy to be there. You should meet a few people. Talk to them. Forget the hecticness of your life and just enjoy peace and quiet, and children's laughter."

"Sounds like a fucking nightmare," he says through his teeth.

"Don't you want kids? Don't you care what kind of environment they'll grow up in?"

He scoffs.

"Ah, right. You arrange your marriages to women you don't even know because no one actually wants to be with someone like you. That's why you don't want anyone to be happy, especially so close to you, because you'll never be happy."

When his gaze finds mine, I'm sure he's going to kill me. I lick my dry lips. Why did I have to say that to him? What the hell possessed me to provoke him like that? As if I didn't know any better...

"Take her away," Adriano says to Rocco. "I don't have time for this shit."

Rocco has witnessed our whole exchange? Oh crap. I forgot all about him. I get to my feet and snatch a croissant off the table. Who knows when Adriano will give me something to eat after this, and maybe he won't take the croissant from me.

Adriano notices, but he doesn't say anything. His lips are pressed into a tight line as he leans back in his chair.

Is there any humanity left in him? Or has someone irrevocably taken it away from him?

CHAPTER 15

Adriano

I keep my gaze on Chiara as Rocco escorts her back to my room. What the fuck was that? She's so surprisingly naive when it comes to life. I bet her neighbors don't feel like she does. They're on Paradossi's side for now only because they want to get more money out of me.

I know what small communities can be like. They pretend to be nice to you and then gossip behind your back. They want you to think they care about you, but they'd toss you to the sharks if they could benefit from it.

After all, everyone is your friend and family as long as they get something from you. Once that's gone, you're on your own. I doubt Chiara's neighborhood is as awesome as she wants to make it sound to me.

She just wants to keep her house and her family restaurant because she's afraid of change. She's afraid of wanting something more. Many people prefer to keep the status quo rather than go after their dreams or try out something else, just because it's risky.

She could have a bigger and better restaurant somewhere else, and I bet she wouldn't miss any of her neighbors. But she doesn't see that. She's gotten too attached. Too

comfortable.

There's at least one good thing in all this. Obviously, Chiara's family is the most important thing to her. They are her weakness, and we'll soon see if she's her dad's weakness too. I'll exploit that weakness to get what I need from them.

After that, I don't give a fuck what they do and how they rearrange their lives, as long as they're not a threat to me. Love really ruins everything. Chiara thinks I have a void inside me. That's ridiculous. Not loving anyone is my advantage, and for people like her, love is an addiction. They just have the weird need to be loved that I don't understand, or they want a different name for the benefits they receive from the people they claim to love.

I get my phone and order my men to get some cameras. If I want to be sure Chiara is where she's supposed to be and no one's touching her, I need to be able to watch her whenever I want.

I can't be stuck in my apartment all the time. Maybe some time away from her will help me stop thinking about her. She doesn't really know anything about me, and anything she says doesn't matter.

"The lines should be working now," Rocco says. "Paradossi and his wife are on their way home, probably because Chiara isn't answering her phone. We blocked their calls to the restaurant staff too so they'd come straight home in panic. They should be here in a few hours. Should I form a team to get them?"

"Actually, do you know which road they're taking?"

Everyone's wondering where the Paradossis are. The restaurant staff too. I had my men leave a message that the restaurant is closed, but those people are used to getting explanations in person for everything.

Some of them might be lurking around or are worried. If someone sees my men close to the house or catches us there, we're going to have a problem. People will be paying more attention to anything weird happening or any new people showing up.

If we were in the middle of the tourist season, things would be easier, but we're not. Going there now is too much of a risk, especially since we'd have to get there right at the time the Paradossis show up.

"Yeah, there's only one road from the mountains. Why?" Rocco asks.

"Do you have a map?"

He taps the screen of his phone and shows it to me. "They're somewhere around here. Our drone will be able to spot their car once they're about here." He moves his finger over the screen.

"This area." I point at it. "It's all trees? No houses or anything?"

Rocco nods. "Nothing."

"How fast can we get there? In time to intercept them?"

"Um, maybe if we use your chopper and rent a car somewhere in this area over here." He scrolls down the map. "Do you think we should arrange an accident for them? If they're dead, everything goes to Chiara and—"

"No. If her parents die, Chiara will lose her mind, and it all takes too long. It's not what I planned. We snatch them there and take them to my safe house. No worrying about any witnesses."

"I thought you wanted to bring them here so it would be easier to watch them."

“It’s better not to keep them all in the same place.” I don’t want anyone to get brave or plot something.

If Paradossi can’t see his daughter in person, he’ll be more desperate to save her and more likely to do whatever I ask of him.

“But that’s a lot of work in a short time span, and I still haven’t checked everyone to make sure there isn’t anyone else like Domenico. We can’t locate his supposed girlfriend either.”

“I’ll take that risk. Send someone trustworthy to get the parents. Have one of our women pretend her car broke down in the middle of nowhere. When they stop to help her, others will come out of hiding and grab them. Use the drone to make sure there are no witnesses.”

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

I don't have a lot of women working for me, but I know that those who do can get the job done.

“Why do you think they'll stop? They'll be in a hurry to get home.”

“A young girl like their daughter alone in the middle of nowhere with a broken-down car? Yeah, they'll stop. Trust me.”

“Okay. I'll set everything up. We don't have much time.”

I clap him on the shoulder. My plan will work. I just know it.

My phone screenshows the direct feed from the camera in my room, but I'm driving, so I have to keep my eyes off Chiara. Nothing's happening anyway. Rocco is keeping watch, and she can't go anywhere while she's cuffed to the bed.

Her parents are in the basement of my safe house, and I'm on my way there. Some things are better done in person, and I want Paradossi to finally meet me.

As I pass next to a pizzeria, I see a man with two young boys at one of the tables. It reminds me of my life with Gennaro. He used to take Matteo and me for pizza when he was pleased with us or for our birthdays.

Once, he even gave me a gun for my birthday, which was the first and only gift I'd ever gotten. When we were all together at a pizzeria, we had a good time. Gennaro would even be smiling, laughing, and joking.

For an hour or so, we seemed like a normal family. Maybe the kind of seemingly perfect family that Chiara would like to see. It was nice. I used to think Gennaro and Matteo were my family then, but I was wrong.

Matteo was my best friend at one point. One time, he and I got into a fight with some boys after a soccer game. We thought Gennaro would lose his mind, but he looked so proud of us. He took us to a pizzeria as a reward.

But things quickly changed once I was arrested. My so-called family dissolved into ether, just like my friendship and brotherhood with Matteo.

Will Paradossi change his mind about his daughter? I don't think so, but we'll see. He doesn't have any true wealth or power, so he has to satisfy himself with the only thing he can get—love from his family.

As soon as my men open the door to the cell where Paradossi and his wife are, I inwardly groan. Chiara's parents are a sniveling, crying mess on the floor. It's beyond pathetic.

"Please let us go!" Paradossi's gaze lifts to me.

He's all chained up, so he can only push himself up to his knees.

"Quiet!" My voice booms through the cell. "Do you know who I am?"

"I..." Paradossi mutters.

"Adriano Gaviani. Nice to meet you." I flash them a smile.

"You..." Chiara's mother utters, but Paradossi shushes her.

Smart move. She's irrelevant to me anyway.

"If this is about selling my—" Paradossi starts.

"Yeah, it's about that, but it's also about something else. Do you remember a loan you took?" I pull a copy of our contract out of the pocket of my jacket and hand it to him. "Remember this?"

"You... I took a loan from you?" Surprise fills Paradossi's eyes.

"Yeah, you did."

"But I'm paying you back, as we agreed!"

"You are, but there's also something in the contract that you didn't quite read, or maybe you did." I spread my arms. "It's about your daughter. Go on. Read those tiny letters before the last paragraph."

"What about Chiara?" her mother asks.

Paradossi stares at the contract. The chains clink as he flips to the last page.

"I agree that my daughter will marry—" His mouth falls open, his eyes going wide.

"No, that can't be!"

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“Oh, but it can. You just didn’t read the whole thing, did you? You wanted money. And I’m all for putting money first, but you have to be careful with your contracts and deals you make.”

“But that’s illegal—” Chiara’s mother says.

“Your daughter said the same thing, but you see, the loan wasn’t exactly legal either. And I have your daughter.” I get my phone and turn the screen with the camera feed to them. “She’s mine now. See?”

The mother bursts into tears. Paradossi gapes at me like a fish.

“I’ll give you everything!” he says. “Take the house! Take the restaurant! Take everything, but not my daughter! Please! I’m begging you!”

“I like the way you’re thinking.” I grin and wave over one of my men, who offers a new contract and a pen to Paradossi. “Sign this, and it’s all over.”

“No,” he says. “I only sign once Chiara and my wife are free, or you’ll just kill us all.”

Paradossi isn’t as stupid as he looks. But the more time passes, the more people will be suspicious. Nico also knows the Paradossis were on their way home, and he’ll surely check to make sure everything’s fine.

“All right. You’ll get what you want, but first, you’ll make a lot of calls, and if you utter one wrong word, your precious daughter will suffer. Do you understand?” I

need to keep suspicious people at bay.

Paradossi better have excellent acting skills because I don't want his voice to tremble or give away that something's wrong.

He bobs his head. "I'll do it."

"Give me your wedding ring." I have a little plan with Chiara.

Releasing her immediately might get me the signatures I want and the Paradossis' silence, but I'm not willing to let her go just yet.

"Why?"

"Just give it to me." I need it, and the reason why is none of his business.

Domenico will hate my plan, but that only makes me happier. He should've confided in me instead of going behind my back.

Paradossi takes off his ring and gives it to me. Perfect. With a little bit of deception, Chiara will do anything I want her to and she won't try to run away. That's exactly what I need for my plan.

CHAPTER 16

Chiara

It's Rocco who brings me some water and a sandwich and lets me go to the bathroom. He just stands at the door, watching me. It's unnerving. I don't have anything to do. There's nothing I can occupy my mind with.

Maybe I should ask Rocco to give me a book or something. But where is Adriano? I haven't seen him in a while. What is he doing? What is he up to?

I don't even know if my mom and dad are still at Nico's or if they returned home. Either way, they must be worried sick. Unless Adriano is sending them texts from my phone. But my parents would never believe I just disappeared without telling them anything about it in person or at least over the phone.

I stare at the ceiling. No matter how much I try to think of something to escape, I don't come up with anything. And how can I? I'm on my own in a huge building full of armed men.

My only option is to run for the window once I'm untied and jump through it to my death, and I don't like that idea at all. I don't want to die, but I don't know if Adriano will let me live, even after he gets what he wants.

After I don't know how long, the door opens and Adriano strides in. The corners of his lips are quirked up. He's happy about something, and I have no clue if that's good or bad for me. Probably bad.

"You can go," Adriano says to Rocco, and his gaze lands on me. "Missed me?"

I don't respond.

He pulls his shirt over his head, revealing his strong muscles. I don't look away, even though I should. Why is someone so evil so good-looking? Why did my path have to cross with his?

He disappears in the bathroom, and I glance up at the cameras that Rocco set up in the corners of the room. There was a small red light that was on while the cameras were filming. I don't see that light anymore.

My pulse speeds up. What does that mean? Maybe it's just because Adriano wants some privacy or he doesn't have the need for the cameras any longer. I have no idea why they were even installed.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

Adriano might have wanted to keep an eye on me himself, especially if he didn't think he could trust his men after one of them tried to help me. Or he showed the feed to someone. My mom and dad? I'll have to take a risk and ask him because I can't stand the uncertainty. It's driving me crazy.

When Adriano walks out of the bathroom, I force my gaze away and stare at the wall. Once I hear the closet door close, I look at him. He's fully dressed, and he tosses a key on the bed next to me.

"Take off your cuff," he says. "Let's eat something."

He has his gun out. I push myself up and unlock the cuff. As I place the cuff and the key on the nightstand, he nods toward the door.

"You know where the dining room is," he says.

I do, and he's right behind me, with his gun. Rocco is right in the hallway too. Again no chance for me to try something or grab a weapon.

If I'm going to die anyway, I should at least try to take Adriano with me, right? But I don't think he's going to give me another chance.

The table is full of food again, and we take our seats just like last time.

"Can I talk to my parents?" I ask.

"Not yet."

I eye him carefully. Does that mean they're still at Nico's? Probably. Why else would Adriano be dragging this out?

"Do you think your project is worth going to prison for?" I catch his gaze.

If I can't do anything else, maybe I can talk him out of going after my neighborhood.

"You say that as if you think I can actually end up there. Funny." He smiles.

"Do you really believe that's impossible? You can sign as many contracts as you want, but everyone will know how you got those signatures. People will talk, and one day, someone will be brave enough to speak out. Or you'll go too far. My neighbor said you burned a woman's house down to get what you wanted. One person is enough to start a domino effect. People will put two and two together and realize what you've done. They'll want you to pay, and the whole thing will be so big not even you will be able to stop it."

"Are you here to eat or talk? Because if you're not hungry, you can leave." Adriano makes a shooing motion with his fingers.

"You're avoiding the conversation. Got it. That means I'm right." I spread my lips into a smile.

"I've already been to prison. Well, juvie, to be exact." He leans across the table. "What makes you think that would scare me?"

"What did you do?" I read somewhere that people who were imprisoned young had way bigger chances of sticking to a life of crime.

"Does it matter?"

“I’m just curious.”

“My bro—” He pauses. “I stole a car. Really expensive one. Well, I wasn’t alone. It was the other guy’s idea, and I went along with it. He was driving and crashed the car. I told him to run and stayed behind to try to clean it up a bit, get our prints off, but... I wasn’t fast enough. Got caught. Told the cops I did it all on my own. They somehow pinned a few other crimes—thefts—on me that I didn’t do, but no one cared.”

“Your brother? Is that what you were about to say?”

Adriano rolls his eyes. “He’s not my brother. Well, he technically is, because his father adopted me.”

I furrow my brow. “So that’s why that guy said you weren’t a real Gaviani.”

“I still have their last name, so I am. If they wanted it back, they could’ve come and told me so. But they haven’t. I haven’t spoken to them since that night.”

My mouth falls open. “Wait, you’re saying your adoptive family hasn’t spoken to you since you were arrested?”

He nods.

“But...” I don’t even know what to say.

It’s incomprehensible to me.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“I turned eighteen in there anyway, so I didn’t need anyone anymore.”

The way he says it... as if it makes the whole thing better.

“Your family abandoned you just because of that?” I’ve never done anything stupid like that, but there’s no way my parents would’ve abandoned me. “They didn’t even visit you to hear your side of the story? And your brother didn’t feel guilty?”

Hell, I’m pretty sure I read stories in the news about the mafia breaking their members out of prison or getting the best lawyers and whatnot. I thought they were all about not abandoning their own, especially actual family members.

He presses his lips into a white line. “In the Gaviani family getting caught is one of the biggest mistakes you can make.”

“Where are they now?”

“Close by. Their territory is right next to mine.”

I’m speechless. How could someone do that? And there I thought Adriano was heartless.

“Don’t look at me like that, like you pity me. I have everything I want, and being on my own has made me better and stronger. They could’ve canceled my bank account, but they didn’t. My adoptive father—Gennaro—he knew I could make it on my own.”

“When did he adopt you?” Maybe Adriano’s time with the family was short, so they hadn’t really gotten attached.

“When I was about five.”

“So he raised you? Like his son?”

“Yeah.”

Nope, I can’t find any excuses for the Gaviani family. No wonder Adriano gets pissed off when someone mentions family.

“What about your birth parents?”

“Who knows? I was left at someone’s doorstep shortly after being born with a necklace around my hand. Then I was placed in a home with a family of alcoholics and drug addicts. I got out of there and was roaming the streets. One day, I was so hungry I stole a bag that was left in the middle of a dark alley because I thought I’d find money or food. Armed men ran out of a garage after me. They chased me for a while until they finally caught me. I thought they’d kill me, but Gennaro saw me and he was impressed. He shot the guy who left that bag, which was actually full of drugs, and he asked me if I wanted to join his family. I said yes. It was better than going back home or staying on the streets.”

I blink at him. The whole thing sounds so surreal I half expect him to start laughing, but his face is completely serious.

“And that necklace? Did it mean something? Maybe your parents were in a bad situation and were hoping to find you later.”

“I don’t know. Gennaro threw it away.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you. I’m sorry you never had a real family.”

He scoffs. “Why? Do you think that will make me let you go?”

“No, I just... No one should go through something like that.”

“Not even me?” His eyebrows shoot up. “Your enemy? Come on, Chiara. You tried to kill me, remember?”

“If that hadn’t happened to you, we wouldn’t be here. It’s all I’m saying. You’d be a different person. The people around us influence us in ways that—”

He laughs. “If you’re so bored. We can find something more entertaining to do. Find a better use for your mouth.”

I clench my jaw, glaring at him. He’s a lost cause. Nothing I say will change his mind. But I understand him a little better now. I was right. He wants to do this to prove to his adoptive family that they shouldn’t have abandoned him.

Maybe he doesn’t want to admit it, not even to himself, but it’s a good explanation for why he’s doing this and why it matters to him that everything is executed so perfectly. He wants to show everyone and himself that he can do everything on his own and doesn’t need anyone in his life.

In a few years or decades, when he’s all alone, he’ll realize that he needs more than just money and power, but it’ll be too late. I shouldn’t feel sorry for him, but I do. I feel sorry for him and for everyone who has suffered and will suffer because of him.

A wave of strange warmth overcomes me. I pull my chair back because the world is spinning around me. It’s as if I’ve gotten hit by a truck. Dark spots dance in my vision.

“Chiara, are you okay?” I hear Adriano’s voice, but it’s quickly drowned out.

And I'm falling.

CHAPTER 17

Adriano

"Chiara!" My chair topples with a thud as I jump to my feet.

I manage to catch her just before she's about to hit the floor. Her eyes are closed, her cheeks flushed. I glance at the table, but she hasn't snatched the fork or anything that she could use to kill me.

"Chiara," I repeat, caressing her cheek.

Her skin is hot to the touch.

"Should I call for help?" Rocco asks.

"Yes. Go!" I can't believe he's still standing here.

I pick up Chiara in my arms and rush with her to the bathroom. Kneeling in the shower, I let the water run. I splash her face, adrenaline surging through my veins.

"Chiara, wake up." What's wrong with her?

I let the cool water run over us as I hold her in my arms. There's an odd feeling in the pit of my stomach. Worry? Fear? I haven't felt that in forever, but that's because I've

always been in control of everything lately.

Now I don't know what's going on with Chiara, and I have zero clue as to why I even told her anything about myself. Why bring up the past? I hate it, and I hate talking about it. Why did I tell her?

Maybe because she's so used to seeing these seemingly perfect families, but I'm sure they all keep secrets. Just like her dad never told her he'd taken a loan from me and what he'd signed. Maybe he even read the full contract, the tiny letters and all. He just doesn't want to admit it because he wants to keep the benefits his wife and his daughter provide to him.

Chiara's eyes open, and a strong sense of relief flashes through me.

"Hey," I say softly as I help her sit up.

"What...? What happened?" She blinks at me in confusion.

I turn off the water. We're completely drenched.

"I was hoping you could tell me. Has it happened before?" I should've asked if she had any medical conditions, but I assumed she would've told me at the club.

"I don't know. I was suddenly very hot and dizzy. And no, I never felt anything like it."

"How are you feeling now?" My fingers brush her cheek.

She's no longer burning up.

"Um, fine." Her gaze locks with mine as I tuck a few strands of her wet hair behind

her ear.

“Let’s get you up, then.” I wind my arm around her.

She’s steady on her feet, but I don’t let go of her, just in case. Her shirt is completely wet and sticking to her body. I can see the curves of her breasts and her nipples. My cock instantly reacts. Fuck.

I want to run my finger over her lips and kiss her. I want to press her against the wall and rip her wet clothes off her. The way she’s looking at me right now, her eyes huge and full of fire again, makes me wish that we were at Amore Bruciante and everything were different. But nothing is the same anymore and never will be.

“We should get out of these clothes,” I say.

CHAPTER 18

Chiara

I haveno idea what happened to me, but now I feel perfectly fine. Wet and slightly cold, but fine. Maybe it was all the stress. Everything that’s happening is just too much for me.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

Adriano reaches out for my shirt, and my breath catches. Earlier, when he touched my cheek with such gentleness, I thought I'd gotten Blue back and I wanted him to kiss me. But I can't let myself be stupid. My gaze falls down on the bulge in Adriano's pants.

"Sunset," I whisper just as he starts lifting my shirt.

I don't know what I'm expecting. It's not like he has a reason to stop. He can do whatever he wants to me, and it's obvious what he wants.

His lips part in surprise, and he lets go of me and spins around. I take a shuddery breath as he strides to the door. Now I've just pissed him off, haven't I? He's going to come in here with a gun or some kind of weapon, or he'll tie me up. He'll hurt me and take what he wants, just like Filippo.

"I know you like it," Filippo whispers into my ear. "And I know what you really want. Don't make me sound like a liar. You like it when it hurts, and you're so pretty when you cry."

I push the memory away because the door opens. Adriano places a towel and a pile of clothes on the counter next to the door.

"If you need anything else or you start feeling dizzy again, just yell for me, okay?" He glances at me but quickly lowers his eyes.

"Yeah." I barely manage to form the word because I'm in too much of a shock.

Adriano closes the door, leaving me alone. It's a trap, isn't it? He'll make me pay for leaving him waiting. Even Filippo would sometimes back off when I told him I wasn't in the mood, but then he'd take his anger out on me a few hours later.

I quickly take off my clothes and dry myself off with the towel. When I pick up the black shirt he left for me, I realize it's his. I pull it over my head. It's so big it's like a dress for me, and it smells like him.

Oh hell. I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I picture us at Amore Bruciante. His warm embrace. His heated kisses.

I open my eyes. It's best to keep Blue and Adriano separate. The black shorts still have a tag on them, so I take it off before putting them on. They're too big, but at least I'm not naked. For now.

I steel myself and walk out of the bathroom. Adriano immediately looks up at me from the chair where he's sitting.

"How are you feeling now?" There's actual concern in his voice.

"Okay."

"The doctor is here. Do you want him to give you a checkup? He'll stay here, so if you feel unwell or faint again, he'll be ready."

"Um..." I feel fine now, just very tired.

Adriano's doctor wouldn't help me get out of here anyway.

"I just need to lie down," I say.

I need to stop thinking about Filippo and all the terrible things he'd done to me, and about all the horrible things that could still happen to me.

"All right." Adriano nods.

I eye him carefully as I settle back on the bed. The cuff is still on the nightstand, and Adriano makes no move toward it. He just keeps watching me.

Will he really just sit there and do nothing? Will he really let me choose whether to see the doctor or not? Let me rest?

I try not to think about it. Worrying about what might happen will only tire me and stress me out more. What will happen, will happen, and who knows if I'll be able to do something about it or not. For now, I just want to take a break from everything.

Adriano gets to his feet and starts toward me. I tense, but he only places a water bottle on the nightstand next to me and goes back to his seat.

Maybe, just maybe, an actual mafia boss is not as bad as Filippo.

CHAPTER 19

Adriano

Chiara is still tense, but she seems to be fine. Should I call the doctor up here anyway? She closes her eyes, but then opens them, her chest quickly rising and falling. I wish I could read her mind.

There are moments where it looks like she's frozen in a different time and space. As if she's somewhere else. But what's bothering her so much that it keeps her trapped like that? Is it just me?

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

I wouldn't discard that possibility. She'd been living her idyllic life until I showed up at her house. All of this is a lot for her to take in, but she's strong. I know she has a fire in her, and she'll be fine.

She's been alone with her thoughts for too long. Something like that used to happen to me sometimes, in moments when I had zero control over my life. She must be thinking about a way to escape, or she's wondering what will happen to her.

I don't want her to be uncomfortable around me, even though I don't know if that's possible anymore. The Chiara from Amore Bruciante will never be mine again, and deep down, that annoys me.

I go to the closet and pull out a pillow and blanket. As I toss it all onto the floor, Chiara looks at me.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"I'm not leaving you alone." I'll just sleep on the floor here. If anything happens and she makes even the slightest sound of distress, I'll wake up. My body is trained to know when I'm supposed to be on alert.

Her lips part in surprise, and I wait for her to protest.

"You must have a bunch of free rooms in this building," she says.

"I do. And?"

She settles on her side, still watching me. “Nothing.”

“I won’t cuff you,” I say. “I’m sure you’re aware my men are right outside. I’m a very light sleeper, so if you try anything, I’ll throw you in the basement and you won’t like it there.”

I won’t do that even if she attacks me in my sleep. The basement is too dark, dirty, and damp. Not to mention all the blood that has seeped into the cracks and is too hard to clean.

And if I did that, then I’d have to be right there with her. But she doesn’t have to know any of that. To her, I’m a monster. She and I are completely different anyway.

I settle on the floor. Our gazes lock. She doesn’t look away, and neither do I. Her face is so beautiful in the dim light.

I wouldn’t mind lying down next to her, just breathing in her scent and feeling her warmth. If she was really my wife, I wouldn’t even mind. She now knows who I really am, we’re perfectly compatible in bed, and I still haven’t gotten bored of her.

Worse, I’ll have to let her go and I’ll never discover all of her secrets and what it is about her that makes her so attractive.

But she should have her idyllic life back. She’ll get over this and move on.

I’m in the middle of nowhere. People pass me by, but I can’t see their faces. They’re all bigger than me. Huge. Everything is dark and full of shadows. One of the shadows steps forward. I recognize Gennaro’s face. He looms over me.

“Your parents didn’t want you. No one ever will. You only have me,” he says. “But that’s only for as long as your skills are useful to me.”

He disappears, and shadows start closing in on me. I want to move, but I can't.

CHAPTER 20

Chiara

My eyes fly open. Adriano is mumbling something in his sleep. I eye him carefully. It's dark, but I can see he's in some kind of distress.

"Don't leave me," he whispers.

Is he having a nightmare? His breathing is ragged, and his body is shaking as if he's trying to move but can't.

"Adriano?" I say softly.

He doesn't hear me. I want to go over to him, but I don't want to end up in the basement. Snatching a pillow, I toss it across the room. My aim sucks, so it ends up landing nowhere near him.

But Adriano rolls over, jumps up, and aims his gun at the pillow and then at me. I gasp. Where the hell did that gun come from and how did he do all that so fast?

I lift my hands up, not daring to move. He looks around the room and turns on the lights. I squint at him. His forehead is beaded with sweat.

"What the fuck did you just do? Throw a pillow at me?" he asks.

Page 37

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“Um, you were having a nightmare, I think. You said—”

“So what?” he snaps, holstering his gun. “I could’ve shot you!”

“That’s why I stayed over here. But how did you do that?” Having such crazy reflexes when you’re asleep and in the middle of a nightmare...

The pillow barely made any noise.

“Not hearing things and not reacting in time can get you killed. Matteo and I practiced for months to be able to do it.”

“Ah, so you actually heard me when I called your name, and this was all for show. Got it.”

He blinks at me in confusion. “You didn’t call my name.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Before you threw the pillow?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck,” he mutters.

I have no idea why he seems so upset. Is not hearing every single whisper while you’re in the middle of a dream really such a huge failure?

“What was your nightmare about?” I ask.

How does he even live like this? If every single noise at night makes him wake up and jump up with his gun, I can’t imagine how he ever relaxes or rests. Surely, all the money and power aren’t worth this kind of stress. I thought people like him slept peacefully every night with tons of security, and maybe they do, but not Adriano.

“It wasn’t a nightmare, just a distorted version of a memory. Now go back to sleep.”

“I can’t. I’m too awake. Please just tell me.”

“It’s nothing interesting. I was supposed to deliver a small package for Gennaro. I was a kid, so I was small enough to run past certain people without being seen. But there was something that caught my attention and I stopped, and they spotted me. I ran and ran. In the end, I had to call Gennaro because I got lost. He showed up to get the package, and he was very disappointed, so he left me there to find my own way back. Eventually, I did, and Gennaro gave me another chance, but I knew I couldn’t make such a mistake again.”

“What?” I gape at him.

Whenever he tells me something about himself like this, it horrifies me. Gennaro has to be on the list of the shittiest fathers ever.

“If you’re not useful to people, they get rid of you. It’s as simple as that. Now I’m the one who decides who’s useful to me and who’s not.” His lips pull up into a smile.

“Not everyone needs or wants something from you. You were just unlucky to be around such people.”

“I don’t care.”

“What about your adoptive mother?” I just can’t believe everyone in his young life sucked so much.

“I didn’t have one. Gennaro’s wife died shortly after Matteo was born, so I never met her. Their marriage was arranged, and since his alliance with her family has always been strong, he’s never looked for another wife. But enough about that.”

“So if your plan works, and you build your—”

“Gaviani Resort.”

“You build the Gaviani Resort and then what? What are you going to do next? Won’t your satisfaction only last for one meaningless moment?”

“Meaningless?” He raises an eyebrow at me.

“Well, you won’t really care about the resort because getting attached is wrong, right? So even if it caught fire and it all disappeared, you’d only be annoyed you were losing money, but in the end, it wouldn’t matter to you. You’d just be happy you built it and got everyone out of the way for one second. You’d prove you’re the biggest and baddest to your family, and then what? Who would share your happiness? The people you hired to work for you and who you’d get rid of the moment you no longer needed them?”

“I’ll just find another goal. And another.”

“But why? What’s the point?”

“You’re going to college. You planned to run the restaurant. What’s the point in all that then?”

“Yeah, and when I graduate, I’ll throw a party for my family and friends, who’ll be happy for me. And no, it won’t be because they need something from me. I did have a few fake friends, but they’re out of my life now. When I take over the restaurant, I’ll be doing exactly what I want. And yeah, I still choose to believe you won’t win.”

He chuckles.

“But that’s only a small part of what I want. I want a family. I want to grow old with the man I love and surrounded by the people I love. We’ll celebrate and be proud of each other’s achievements. We’ll be there for one another in difficult times. We’ll hang out at the restaurant, tell stories, and sing and laugh long into the night. I’ll fall asleep every night in the embrace of my loved one, knowing that I’m completely safe. I definitely won’t be jumping up with a gun every time a mosquito buzzes next to my ear. I want my children to have a happy childhood. I want them to grow up knowing I’ll always be there for them, for as long as I can.”

“Good for you,” he mumbles, annoyance evident on his face as he crosses his arms.

“Don’t you want something like that? Or will you pay people to spend some time with you? If you didn’t have any business projects or mafia business, would you even have anything to talk about? Would anyone be talking to you? Will you spend your days at your resort or Amore Bruciante?”

“Maybe I will. There’ll be enough drinks, food, and entertainment. Why would I want anything else? At least I’ll know exactly how things are and what I’m paying for. You, on the other hand, might find yourself wondering whether your precious husband is cheating on you. Or your restaurant, which will obviously have to be somewhere else because I’ll win, will struggle, and you’ll spend sleepless nights trying to figure out whether to take a loan from someone like me or not.”

“But even if I run into problems, I won’t be alone. I’ll talk to my friends and my family. Share experiences. We’ll find a solution together, just like we’ll defeat you.” Maybe I shouldn’t be telling him that, but I’m tired of him thinking that life is either a fake, pink fantasy or a dark, cold empty world where only money and power count.

It’s more complicated than that.

“I think you’re just afraid of love,” I say. “You’re afraid of letting yourself feel something because you don’t want to get hurt like you did when you were a kid, so you’re trying to convince yourself that everyone who loves someone is a fool.”

“I’m not afraid of anything.”

“Everyone is afraid of something.”

“And you should be afraid of me.” He narrows his eyes at me.

“I am.”

He jerks back in surprise. Did he think I wouldn’t say it out loud? That I would lie? I doubt he’s unaware of how I feel.

“Good night,” he says as he storms to the door.

I watch him leave and hear the door lock. My gaze lifts to the cameras, but the red light doesn't appear. They're still off, and I'm not cuffed to the bed.

I hop to my feet, quickly looking around for something, maybe a weapon. I find a big safe, but I can't get it to open because it's locked. I rummage through the closet, but I don't see anything interesting or find any forgotten knives or weapons.

Just as I'm about to shut the closet door, I spot a piece of paper at the bottom, under a pile of shirts. I pull it out and frown. It's a drawing of a necklace.

Is that the necklace he mentioned? The one that he had when he was a baby and that Gennaro threw away? I think it is. So much for Adriano not caring about it. He's been trying to find it again, hasn't he? Or maybe locate his birth parents.

I return the drawing back to its place. A voice at the back of my mind tells me that I shouldn't care. Adriano is my enemy and a threat to everything I hold dear. I can't allow myself to feel for him, but I do anyway.

It doesn't change anything, but all of it just makes me so sad. He still has the choice to become a better man, despite what he's been through, but he has to be willing to make it. I don't think he'll do that, so I need to focus on myself and getting out of here alive.

CHAPTER 21

Adriano

I'm too comfortable around Chiara. She's not a danger to me, and my body usually knows when I can relax and let myself dream. But not tonight.

Chiara says she called my name, and she doesn't have a reason to lie. And yet, I

didn't hear her. Weird things happen to me when she's around. It's almost as if she's my real wife, and I don't have to worry about anything around her, except making sure she's safe.

The things I told her can be used against me if she talks to the wrong people. It's as if I'm trying to find a reason not to ever let her go. But I don't want to kill her either.

I rake my hand through my hair. Everything will be done soon enough. I just need to make sure everyone knows and sees Chiara as my wife, and then I'll get her father to sign what he needs to sign.

Chiara and her parents are all terrified of me enough. Chiara even said it herself, but for some reason, I wasn't the least bit happy to hear it. Her strange effect on me will be over soon.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

Once she's free, I'm sure she'll go as far away as possible from me. She and her parents won't dare to make a move against me because they'll know just how dangerous I am. They'll realize that there's no point in fighting me when they have zero power.

I'm sure Matteo and Gennaro will be surprised when they hear I presented Chiara as my wife, but they'll put two and two together eventually. Hopefully, that won't happen too quickly, but it doesn't matter.

No one in the mafia world will think she's actually my wife once I let her go. She won't be in any danger. I just need the general public to believe it, especially her stubborn neighbors. Paradossi leading a small uprising against me and then becoming my father-in-law...

Yeah, people will just love that. They'll think he was faking it all or tried to get me to marry his daughter quicker or something. Gossipers always come up with something fun and totally ridiculous, but people end up believing it.

Without their leader, they'll be easier to conquer. Everyone will be too busy babbling to really care about anything else.

I head down to the basement. Domenico is still in the cell where my men have left him. He's all chained up and bloody, and it's a surprise he's still alive. But I won't let him die. Not yet. For now, I need something from him.

"You're wasting your time," he chokes out as he sees me.

I grab a big knife from a nearby weapons table before I enter his cell. “I’m not wasting my time. I need something from you.” I wave at one of the guards. “Hold his arm.”

“What are you doing?” Panic laces his voice as a guard grabs his arm.

Domenico tries to fight him off, but he has no energy, and the chains limit his movements anyway.

“Spread his fingers against the wall,” I say to the guard, who obeys.

“Let go of me!” Domenico shouts.

He no longer feels brave. Maybe I should’ve started cutting off parts earlier, but I don’t have time for him. It’s his fault for getting himself into this.

I ignore his cries and find the finger I need. Domenico’s bloodcurdling scream echoes through the room as I slam the knife down. I grab a handkerchief and wrap his severed finger in it. Domenico keeps crying and screaming.

“Stop the bleeding with something,” I tell the guard, and head out.

I could’ve cut off Paradossi’s finger, but people would be wondering what happened to him. It’s easier to take Domenico’s finger and put Paradossi’s ring on it, especially because their hands are very similar.

I’m sure Chiara won’t be able to tell the difference. She’ll only see a bloody, gross finger with her father’s ring, and that’ll be enough for her to do whatever I want her to do.

If she refuses because of this minor little detail, I’ll get her father’s finger. But I’m

pretty sure that won't be necessary. Maybe I should keep a bucket close because she might throw up when she sees it.

A smile spreads across my lips. Everything is going perfectly for me, and it'll stay that way. Chiara is still a little bit too much of a distraction, but I'll deal with that too. Once she's out of my sight, she'll be out of my mind too. I'll bury myself in work anyway, and I won't have any time left to think about anything else.

CHAPTER 22

Chiara

"I need you to do something for me," Adriano says with a smile on his face as soon as I take a seat at the table in the dining room.

There's no food on the table this time, just an empty bucket next to my chair. What the hell is going on?

"Do what?" I ask.

"There's an event where all important businessmen will be. I need you to come with me, as my wife."

"What?" I gape at him.

Is he serious right now? I don't even know how he can say we're married because the papers I signed can't be legal. And now he wants to parade me in public as his wife?

"No." I cross my arms. "I'm not your wife, so I won't do that."

"You should be glad I'm offering you this chance. Take it as a sign of my goodwill."

I'm going to let you go once I have what I want. My wife disappearing would cause me some complications. Of course, I'd deal with those if you decided not to do what I asked of you, but I'm sure you and your parents will be more reasonable in the future."

I don't trust him. If everyone really starts thinking I'm his wife, he'll want to keep me with him.

“No,” I repeat.

He sighs. “I thought we could do this the nice way, but I guess not.”

I watch him carefully as he pulls his phone out. After tapping the screen, he turns it to me.

“I have your parents,” he says.

I gasp. My mom and dad are huddled on the floor and chained up. Before I can see anything else, he pulls his hand back and lowers his phone onto the table. A moment later, he places something wrapped in a handkerchief on the table.

“If you don’t come with me and do exactly as I say...” He opens the handkerchief.

I cry out, nausea rising at the back of my throat. It’s a severed, bloody finger with my dad’s ring on it.

“Your parents will lose more parts.” Adriano grins at me.

I grab the bucket as my stomach heaves. Adriano snatches the handkerchief with the finger as I spill all the contents of my stomach into the bucket.

He’s a monster. I should never forget that. He’ll get what he wants, no matter what we do.

“If you still decide to be useless to me or try anything, I’ll just find someone that

looks like you. It would be a lot of trouble, but I'll get what I want even if I have to kill all your relatives and all your friends and forge a billion documents," he says.

I glare at him. He's a psychopath. Crazy. Sick. Selfish. And there's no way to win against him. He's always going to come up with something to force our hand or he's just going to kill us all.

"Okay," I whisper.

I don't have a choice. I'll have to do as he asks and hope he'll let my parents and me live. There's a slim chance he'll do that, but maybe he keeps his word. Maybe, and only if the alternative really inconveniences him.

"One wrong move at the party, and your mom dies. Got it?"

"Yes." I glare at him.

It will be so strange to go out there in the public again. Be so close to freedom but not be able to do anything. And letting everyone see me as Adriano's wife...

I don't know how I'll keep the disgust off my face. He's probably just toying with us for his own amusement. Even if he lets us go, we'll have nothing. My home will be gone. My neighborhood destroyed. And this asshole is going to look at it all and laugh.

I grit my teeth. I hate him so damn much. Another wave of nausea overcomes me, and I throw up some more bile.

"I'll get you some tea to settle your stomach," Adriano says, getting up to his feet as if nothing has just happened. "Don't go anywhere."

I stare at him. Is he now going to pretend he gives a damn about how I feel? After he just... The thought of it makes my stomach twist into a knot again.

I don't know how I'll get that image out of my mind. It'll probably haunt me forever in my nightmares, provided that Adriano doesn't simply kill me when this is over.

Where is he keeping my parents? Are they somewhere here? In the same building? Or somewhere else? I doubt he's going to tell me. I wish I could be with them and hug them.

Everything about this is so unfair, but there's no fairness in this world. People like Adriano profit from other people's suffering and pain, and they don't give a damn about anything or anyone else.

Resisting is useless because he'll find another way, and it'll be something we'll like even less. If only we'd known. We would've had to give up our home, but at least we'd be together and safe.

Now I don't know what will happen to us, and it's driving me crazy. There's nothing I can do, especially now. I'd never do anything to put my parents' lives at risk. I'll have to hope we'll be lucky enough to be reunited and that we can survive what's coming.

Adriano places a cup of tea in front of me, and I set the bucket back on the floor. Did he really just make me tea? I guess the business party he's planning to take me to is very important to him because I can't imagine him worrying about my well-being otherwise.

"You do realize everyone I know will be shocked I got married without telling them anything, right?" I say, just because I don't want him to go after my friends and relatives if his plan fails.

“I have your phone.” The corners of his lips quirk up. “Everyone you know is already aware you met your soulmate, but because of everything that’s been going on, you and I wanted to have our own private ceremony. And you’re too busy right now and will tell them everything once you see them. You and I were dating for a while, but you couldn’t say a thing because... Well, you didn’t want our relationship all over the news.”

“My uncle will never believe it.” I need a confirmation that he’s alive.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

Adriano got to my parents, but I don't know any details.

"He already does, because your father told him himself. Your parents were at our wedding, of course." Adriano grins. "That's why they... disappeared."

I grind my teeth together. Adriano will think of everything, won't he?

"And your father and your brother?" I bite out. "Were they there too?"

His face turns serious. "They were unfortunately busy."

"Right. And where was our wedding?" I take a sip of the tea.

"I'll have Rocco print out all the details that you'll have to learn if anyone asks."

"Of course," I mutter under my breath.

"He'll also bring you twenty different dresses and you'll have to pick one."

My eyebrows shoot up. Twenty dresses?

"Why not just choose one for me? Let's not pretend I have any choices here. You decide everything."

"I thought it would keep your mind off things a little. And I need you to be comfortable. Can't have you messing with your dress all evening. You'll only know which one is the best fit once you try out the ones you like the most. I'll make sure

my tie matches the color of the dress you choose. But if you need suggestions, I can give you some.”

He’s impossibly frustrating. Going from total psycho to wannabe fashion designer husband in two seconds.

“Can you do your own makeup or should I call one of my makeup artists?” he asks.

“You have your own makeup artist?”

“She’s the wife of one of my men, and she does makeup for special missions. Sometimes you have to pretend to be someone else or look exceptionally good. She’s great at all that.”

“I’ll do it on my own.”

Adriano’s people won’t help me, and I don’t like heavy makeup anyway. But he really does have a huge network of people working for him, probably in all kinds of professions. Even if my family and I tried going to the cops, he’d have his guy there too. No wonder he’s so sure he can get whatever he wants.

“All right, but if you change your mind, she’s only a call away.” He flashes me a smile.

I wish I could tell him what I really think about this whole marriage charade, but I need to bite my tongue for my parents’ sake.

“You should get some rest,” Adriano says. “We all need to be ready for the big night.”

CHAPTER 23

Adriano

Rocco told me Chiara chose a red dress to wear, but when the door opens and she walks out, my jaw hits the floor. The sleeveless dress hugs her curves perfectly, as if it has been molded to her body.

As she steps forward, her leg shows through the slit on the side. All my blood rushes down to a completely wrong place. I want to shove her against the wall and kiss her, and then I want to pull her leg up and fuck her right here in the hallway.

Do I even want her to go out like this? The dress wasn't this hot in the photos because Chiara wasn't wearing it. People will be staring at her. She'll have everyone's attention. Is she even wearing any panties?

I want to take a peek, but Chiara is watching me. Her chin is up, her eyes full of fire. I think she chose the sexiest dress on purpose. Does she think I'll change my mind and not want her to come with me? Or does she want to provoke me into ripping the dress off her and forgetting all about the party until it's too late?

If I didn't know any better, I'd hope for the latter. But Chiara hates me now, as she should, and I can't give in to the temptation. It would be so easy to let go of my iron control, but I don't want to. I can't.

Soon enough, our ways will part, and I'll never have to think about her or see her again. I'll just have someone make sure she and her family stick to my terms. There are plenty of beautiful women out there. Maybe no one quite like Chiara, but keeping her isn't in my best interest.

I offer her my hand because she's a little unsteady on her high heels. She gives me a wary look, but then she takes my hand.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

Our gazes meet as we make our way down the hallway. If I believed in love and wanted to stay with someone for the rest of my life, I'd choose her. It's an insane thought.

We'd have really pretty kids, like their mom. Another insane thought. The attraction between us is—or was—only physical.

I won't accept anything else because actually having a wife and children has never been in my plans. Many mafia bosses want to continue their bloodline, but I couldn't care less about that. And Chiara is just a pawn. A pawn I have to use very carefully.

"Smile for the cameras," I say to Chiara as we're about to enter the restaurant where the party is held. Tons of reporters are already lined up and waiting for us.

"And look at me as if I've just told you something romantic," I add.

"Oh, something romantic?" She raises an eyebrow at me. "Better tell me you're dying. That would actually make me smile."

Her face is deadly serious. I want to laugh, but we're already in front of the cameras. A moment later, Chiara smiles and everyone's snapping pictures of her. I keep my arm wound around her waist.

"Who is she?" someone yells from the crowd.

"Chiara Gaviani, my wife." I give everyone my best smile.

Chiara glances at me. My last name fits her way better than her own. I wish I could tell her that, but she would probably want to stab me. We need to look like the perfect couple. Our photos will be everywhere, and I'm glad Chiara's smile is convincing enough. The crowd goes wild. Everyone wants to know who Chiara is and how we met. They're asking her questions too.

"We'd like to keep some mystery." I grin before leading Chiara away from the reporters.

"I didn't know you were that famous," she says.

"I'm a billionaire. Someone put me on the list of most eligible bachelors, and ever since then, reporters have been pestering me whenever I go to an event like this one. I was always alone, but now I'm not."

"If only they knew the truth," she mutters under her breath.

"The truth is dangerous. Don't forget that." I don't think she's going to make the mistake of trying something with her parents' lives at stake, but who knows what's going on in her mind?

The best thing about not being alone here is that I can't get bored. Whenever I want to get away, I'll just say my wife needs me or that we want to dance.

Actually, I don't want to miss out on dancing with Chiara. She's too beautiful not to find an excuse to be close to her. I want to stare deep into her eyes and hold her close, even if she glares at me the whole time.

CHAPTER 24

Chiara

I hate him.

I hate the way he's looking at me, and I hate the way he's holding me.

The worst part is that I still feel safe in his embrace, even though I know that's not true. I still feel the warmth spreading through my body when he touches me.

He tilts his head, his eyes still trained on mine. Our lips are so close that I almost think he's going to kiss, and some twisted part of me wants it to happen.

I want to pretend that he's Blue, but I can't. He's Adriano, my biggest nightmare, and now I'm dancing with him as if we're truly married. My arms are around his neck and I want to choke him. I want to end him just to stop feeling the way I feel and to stop this torture.

But I can't do that. I have to survive tonight and play my role. It's the only way to get away from him. I don't think I'll ever be able to forget him and the things he's done, but if he's not close to me, then maybe he won't constantly be on my mind.

Adriano twirls me around and a familiar face catches my gaze. I freeze on the spot. No, it can't be. I'm hallucinating.

My mind must be playing tricks on me because the guy in a suit, with short dark brown hair and blue eyes, can't possibly be Filippo. This is just not the kind of event he'd be invited to, unless the startup he'd been talking about for ages actually succeeded and...

Filippo's gaze meets mine, and his lips spread into a wide smile as he raises a glass of wine toward me.

No, no, no! Everything blurs around me. My chest is heavy, and I can't breathe. My

stomach is doing a thousand flips.

I rip away from Adriano and break into a run. Tears cloud my eyes and I can barely see where I'm going, but I can't be there. I can't be in the same room as him.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

Memories that I've thought I'd forgotten assault my mind. Somehow, I find a restroom and push my way through the door. It's empty, and I sit down on the floor because everything's spinning. I hug my knees and close my eyes tightly shut.

Filippo's hands are all over me, and I want to scream, but I can't. His fingers wind into my hair, ripping a few strands, before my head collides with the edge of the desk. He throws me on the bed and unzips his pants. I try to push him off me—

“Chiara!” I hear Adriano's voice as he enters the restroom.

I screwed up. I screwed up so bad. The lock clicks as Adriano closes the door.

Tears stream freely down my face. Now he'll hurt my parents because I ran away from him like that, but he doesn't know it wasn't about him. I look up at him through the tears, trying to explain, but I'm choking. My mouth can't form any words, and my whole body is trembling.

“Chiara, breathe!” Adriano takes my hands in his. “It's okay. Just breathe.”

But it's not okay. Filippo is out there, and Adriano is...

“What's wrong?” Adriano places his hand on my cheek, wiping away my tears.

His other hand is still gripping mine, and it's the only thing keeping me from drowning in my own dark thoughts.

“What happened?” His voice is so soft and gentle like never before.

It's almost hard to believe it's still him. My mouth refuses to move, and I just shake my head.

"It's that guy, isn't it? The one who smiled at you. You know him."

I'm surprised that he noticed, but I guess Filippo was staring at me. Nothing escapes Adriano's eagle eyes.

"What did he do to you?" Adriano's voice turns harder, his eyes more intense and darker.

"He's... um, he's my ex, Filippo." A sob rocks my body, but I can finally breathe again.

Adriano is like my anchor to this world. I have to focus on him. On his eyes. On his mouth.

"Okay, and?"

I take a deep breath. He's probably asking because my ex could be a potential threat to our fake marriage story. Why else would he care?

"Tell me." He caresses my hand.

"He and I... We used to live together. He would... get violent. Physically. Sexually." I swallow hard. "He usually didn't leave any bruises in visible places, but when he did, he'd lock me up in our apartment until I could cover them with makeup."

What is Adriano thinking now? Maybe that I'm lying. He'll probably judge me for enjoying our time at Amore Bruciante after finding out about this, and he'll be on Filippo's side. He'll say the same thing as Filippo did.... that I must've liked it. That I

must've wanted it.

“Why is he here and not in prison then?” Adriano’s eyes have turned icy cold.

“Because I never reported him.”

“Why not?” His brow furrows.

“Because... Because I didn’t want my parents to find out. It would’ve broken their hearts. I didn’t want to talk to anyone about it. Not all the details, anyway. I don’t want to relive... I just... Look at what happened when I saw him... If I had to tell someone and describe everything that he... I’d probably freeze up, and just... People would never look at me the same way. He pretends to be so nice to everyone. I don’t know who would believe me. And I was afraid he’d find me and kill me before the cops got him. Before, I thought about getting a restraining order against him, but a piece of paper isn’t going to do anything. He’d know exactly where to find me. In the end, I was just glad I got away from him and that he stopped looking for me.”

“Stay here.” Adriano pulls me up to my feet. “Get cleaned up. Lock the door behind me and don’t open it until I return.”

“Why? What are you going to do?”

“Just stay here, okay?” He storms to the door.

I lock the door behind him and lean on the sink. Filippo can’t get in here. I’m safe. I stare at my reflection in the mirror. My makeup is smeared all over my face. Will Adriano get Filippo to leave? I guess.

Adriano doesn’t want me to break down in front of everyone again. At least I hope so. His story would go up in flames and we’d be in all the newspapers. I don’t want

that kind of attention either.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

Filippo must've made some powerful friends because I doubt his company is so successful all of a sudden. Someone would've already told me about it, especially since people don't know about our bad breakup, but they know we were together.

Adriano should have way more reach, and Filippo won't want to have a scandal to ruin his success, so he'll leave willingly. If I'm not wrong about that...

But neither Filippo nor Adriano care about me. I'm sure they'll reach an agreement that's favorable for both of them. Maybe they'll even strike a deal. Who knows what Filippo has been dabbling in without anyone knowing? He could be a member of some kind of mafia too.

I close my eyes for a moment. What I need to do now is stay calm and hope Adriano won't make me see Filippo again.

CHAPTER 25

Adriano

Rage. There is so much rage coursing through my veins, like never before. My fists are tight. My teeth hurt from clenching them. I want to grab Filippo and slam my fist into his face until he's a bloody pulp. Until every bone in his body is crushed.

I stop in the hallway, taking a deep breath. Images of Chiara in tears flash through my mind. How could anyone dare to hurt her? How could he even—

I close my eyes. It would be easy to just go in there and lunge at that disgusting piece

of shit. But if I do that, he'll get away with it. And I can't let that happen.

He wanted to destroy something beautiful. Something precious. That asshole had the nerve to actually grin at her like some brain-dead creature.

I find my phone in the pocket of my suit jacket and dial Rocco's number.

"What's wrong?" Rocco immediately asks because he knows I wouldn't be calling otherwise.

"I need you to get here, behind the building, but far enough away from the back door so no one sees you. With a yellow van." Yellow is our code word for special cleanup supplies that I'm going to need. "I also need you to take a look inside."

We might be on a secure line, but with Gennaro and Matteo messing with me, I don't want to take any risks. Rocco knows I want him to handle the cameras in the building so they'll stop working. If there's ever an investigation into this, I'll say it was all because of Chiara and I didn't want any paparazzi taking photos of her because she wasn't feeling well.

"Got it," Rocco says.

I hang up, because there's no time to waste. I have a date with human waste. As I enter the room and look around, I immediately spot him. He's the center of everyone's attention, or he's trying to be.

It's only my training that's keeping me from exploding right now. There's no room for mistakes. This has to be done perfectly. For Chiara.

I make my way to the bar and keep my gaze on him. He'll come to me. I know it. I can tell from across the room that he's glancing in my direction and wondering where

Chiara is.

If he doesn't approach me and tries going after her, I'll bash his skull in. But I know guys like him. They're idiots. They can't sense danger because they think they're oh-so important and powerful.

Filippo is riding some kind of high here. He's basking in his own self-importance because he somehow managed to get invited here. And he'll definitely want to come to me to make sure I know he was with Chiara.

I glance at him again. There he is, coming straight toward me. Good. I lean on the bar as if I don't have a single care in the world. My face is expressionless. I need him to fall into my trap, and I even have a backup plan if the first one fails.

Maybe the second one would work better because Filippo would jump at the opportunity to work with someone as well-known as me. But first I want to see how much of a sick fuck he is, and if he is very, very sick, it'll be easier and faster to deal with him.

"Hi," he says as he leans on the bar next to me with the fakest smile ever.

His blue eyes are so dead inside that even Gennaro would be proud.

"I'm Filippo Fracassi." He extends his hand to me. "Is your girlfriend all right?"

I squeeze his hand enough that he winces, and I let go before I crack his bones. "My wife, and she's perfectly fine. Actually, she told me all about you."

"Ah." He eyes me with suspicion. "And what did she say?"

"I heard you knew how to handle her, so I was thinking—"

“Bitch giving you trouble, eh?” The corners of his lips quirk up.

A bomb goes off inside me. It’s like overwhelming heat filling my whole body with rage. I picture Chiara’s beautiful face and her smile. It’s for her. I’m doing this for her, so I can’t fuck it up.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

I keep my smile, even though I want to strangle him right here in front of everyone, but then he'll be the victim. I won't be able to protect Chiara.

"Yeah. I'd like you to show me what you did to her. If you're interested, come to the back entrance on the other side of the building. I'll be there with her. I'll pay you too."

His eyes get a sick shine. It's all Christmas lights in his tiny brain. The fucker is actually so happy he's speechless.

"So you like to watch others with your wife?" he asks.

"I do, but you'll have to sign an NDA first. You understand why, right?" I have to make it sound at least a bit like a normal, professional agreement that famous people strike, even though the idiot is so eager he wouldn't even think about anything else.

It's a good thing we're out of everyone's earshot. This way, they'll think we're discussing business or chitchatting like everyone else.

"I do. I'll say goodbye to a few friends first, and I'll see you there." He winks.

I give him a nod. This has to be both the easiest and hardest thing I've ever had to do. Easiest because this sick fuck fell right into my trap. Hardest because every second that he keeps breathing is like a heavy weight crushing me.

Once I see Filippo leave, I head toward the restrooms. If anyone notices I'm gone, they'll think I'm tending to my wife, and I am, in a way. There's a tiny chance

Filippo will brag to someone about what we just agreed anyway because he technically hasn't signed anything yet, but I hope he's not that stupid.

He won't want to put off his business partners and lose contracts. Many people here would be horrified if they knew the truth about him... or about me.

I lurk in the hallway until Rocco texts me, and then I look around. Once there's no one to see me, I stride to the back exit. As soon as I open the door, Filippo turns toward me.

"So how are we—" he starts, but I don't let him finish.

I throw myself at him and bring him to the ground. He cries out as I trap him under me so he can't escape. I clamp my hand over his mouth.

With my other hand, I snatch the knife I always wear strapped to my leg. Beating up this asshole and tearing him limb by limb would be more satisfying, but I don't have much time. His eyes are wide as he tries to get me off him.

"This is for Chiara." It's all I say as I slit his throat.

Blood spurts out as he chokes and splutters, and I get off him. Someone's watching me. I lift my gaze. It's Rocco. I wave him over.

He rushes to me, and I don't even have to tell him what to do. We grab Filippo together and haul him into the van. Filippo's empty eyes stare at me as I quickly change my clothes. Then I grab a water bottle and wash my face... I can't risk anyone spotting Filippo's blood on me.

Rocco looks me up and down. "All good."

“Acid,” I say.

He nods.

There will be nothing left of Filippo after his body dissolves.

“But first clean all the blood on the ground.”

Once people start looking for Filippo, they’ll check the last place people saw him. It’s better if no one spots anything suspicious.

“Okay,” Rocco says.

I stride back inside. If anyone sees Rocco, they’ll think he’s just a regular cleanup guy, but I doubt people will go out through the back door, unless it’s to throw out the trash. The back of the restaurant is just walls and small vents. Nothing to see there. The alley stinks like piss and trash too.

Once I’m in front of the restroom door, I knock. Chiara could’ve run away by now, but not with her parents in danger. She’s too nice for that. Too good to only think about herself.

And I just made that asshole disappear because of her. Maybe I should be worried about that, but I’m not. He deserved to die, and worse. Too bad I didn’t have more time with him. I could’ve shown him what real pain is.

“It’s me,” I say.

The door unlocks. Chiara watches me, her eyes still slightly red and impossibly huge. I enter as she backs away and lock the door behind me again. Her makeup is all gone, but she’s prettier than ever, and I want to kiss her.

But I can't. She doesn't want me to, and fuck it all to hell, but I'm not like Filippo. I refuse to be.

“He’s gone,” I say.

“Gone?” She furrows her brow. “What did you do?”

“Scared him off. You won’t have to see him ever again.”

She lets out a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

And then she wraps her arms around me. I don’t know if it’s because she’s really grateful Filippo is gone or because she’s just too shaken up to care, but I wind my arms around her too. And it’s so fucking nice. For once, I feel like I did the right thing. Now I’ll know Chiara will be safe from Filippo forever.

“But what about any others who she’ll meet?” a tiny voice at the back of my mind asks.

I ignore it because Chiara is still in my arms, and it feels like she fits there perfectly.

The door handle rattles.

“Okay, now seriously!” someone yells outside and bangs on the door. “How much longer are you gonna be in there?”

“We should get out of here. Are you feeling okay enough?” I ask, because if Chiara isn’t ready, I’m going to tell the woman outside that the toilets are fucking broken.

“I am.”

I offer her my hand and she takes it. The older woman outside goes quiet when she sees us. She shoots us a dirty glare and storms inside, slamming the door behind her.

Even better. Now she'll think Chiara and I were fucking in the restroom. No one will ever assume I did anything unsavory.

I stop and place my hand on her cheek so she'll look at me.

"Everything will be okay," I say, because I feel like I have to.

She gives me a small smile.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a movement. For a split second, I see Matteo at the end of the hallway. I keep staring, but I don't see anything anymore. Maybe it wasn't him. It could've been anyone, but he moved so damn fast.

Fuck! Matteo is the last person who should be here.

"We should say goodbye to everyone and go home. We can say you had an allergic reaction to your makeup." Because I'm sure someone will ask.

People are nosy as fuck.

"Okay." Chiara is still in shock, or she would've scowled at me the whole time and told me my apartment was not her home.

Filippo now only might be a ghost inside her mind, but I'll make sure to chase him out of there too before I have to let her go.

There's so much traffic that I lose sight of my guards. I can see a suspicious car in the rearview mirror, but no one is moving. Someone keeps honking like crazy. Chiara is

just staring through the window next to me.

Maybe I should've had one of my men drive instead, but I didn't expect there'd be a traffic jam at this time. Something must have happened, probably an accident. Since Rocco is dealing with Filippo's body, I don't want to bother him and ask him to find out. It doesn't matter. I know a shortcut.

"Did Filippo tell you anything?" Chiara suddenly asks.

I meet her gaze. "Tell me what?"

"I don't know. How did you get him to leave?" Her eyes search mine.

Does she suspect something? Is she hoping he's dead? There's no point in keeping it from her if she's ready to hear it. She already knows I'm capable of a lot of things, and this is just one more of those.

I shouldn't even be contemplating what she might think of me. I don't give a fuck what people think about me, as long as their opinion doesn't interfere with my business. Her opinion doesn't matter either, except... it feels like it does, or I would've already told her everything.

I don't want to mull over it. For now, I'll tell myself it's just because none of this is her fault, and I can't have her fall apart and not stick to the story later.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

You killed for her. What about that?

It's all about the story. Her disgusting ex messing with her later could have become a problem. He could have asked about me.

What if Matteo gets her and asks about you?

Chiara is still staring at me.

"He's dead. I killed him. You'll never have to see him again."

There.

I said it.

She gasps and covers her mouth with her hand, her eyes bulging. Maybe she didn't expect me to say that, after all.

"What?" she whispers. "How?"

"I slit his throat, but don't worry. No one will find his body."

"Where?"

"Behind the restaurant. I baited him to come there."

"How?" she breathes out.

“I offered him you.”

She blinks at me. “What did he do to you?”

Nothing, but he did it to you, Chiara. He did it to you.

The car in front of us finally moves, and I grip the wheel. Filippo is still Chiara’s ex, and I’m her husband. His disappearance will put me in the spotlight anyway. It was a stupid thing to do and a big risk, but I was too furious to think things through.

And I still would’ve killed him.

Because fuck that asshole. Chiara has a new monster now, and it’s me.

CHAPTER 26

Chiara

I can’t take my eyes off Adriano. He’s telling me that he killed Filippo, but my brain can’t process it. Not too long ago, Filippo was just there, grinning at me. And now...

Is he really dead? Adriano’s face is serious and pensive. He’s gripping the steering wheel tightly enough that his knuckles are white. I don’t think he’s playing some sick and twisted game with me right now.

Filippo is dead.

But I still don’t know why Adriano killed him.

“So you knew him? Was he in the mafia too?” I ask because I have to know.

“No.”

“No? Not in the mafia and—”

“I didn’t know him.” His gaze briefly meets mine.

“Then why did you kill him?”

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“Do you really need every single little detail?”

“Yes.” I’m trying to understand.

This night has been a rollercoaster. First I had to smile and pretend I was Adriano’s happy wife. Then I saw Filippo, and my world was completely shaken. I thought I’d put at least some of it behind me, but I was wrong. Seeing him there was worse than getting punched in the gut twice in a row. And finding out that he’s dead...

I’m relieved. I can’t deny that. But it also confuses me. My fake husband has done terrible things, and he plans to do something even worse. If he didn’t know Filippo, then why would he kill him? Just for the fun of it?

Adriano’s brow furrows. “Do you wish he was alive?”

“No.”

He glances at me. “Are you sure? Did you still have any feelings for him?”

“Feelings? No, only fear.”

“So why does the reason I did it matter? You’re free of him.”

“It does, because if you didn’t kill him for some mafia-related reason... What do you expect in return?” It’s the only thing I can think of.

Adriano did it either to have an excuse to keep me with him for whatever plan he has

or because he needs me to do something else for him. The mafia never does anything for free. Maybe he thinks that I'm now in his debt and that I'll comply easier.

He pulls over on the side of the road. "I did it for you. You're my wife, and he hurt you and he didn't mind doing it again. For that, he deserved to die. I don't expect anything in return."

I blink at him in surprise because his eyes are flashing with anger. "But I'm not really your wife—"

"Yes, you are. We're currently married in the eyes of the law and the whole fucking world."

I open my mouth to tell him that can't be true, but I don't get to say it because a wave of nausea rises at the back of my throat. I open the car door wide and stumble out. As I fall to my knees, staining my dress with dirt and mud, I throw up under a streetlight.

"Chiara!" I hear Adriano's voice as he gets out of the car.

The whole you're-my-wife thing must be something related to the mafia. He sees me as his property, and if anyone harms me, it's a bad look for him. That's why he couldn't let Filippo live.

"Hey," he says softly as he pulls my hair away from my face.

I spit out some saliva and glance at him. There it is again. Worry in his eyes. But why would he be worried about me? Why isn't he getting away from me because I might puke all over his shoes?

Another wave of nausea hits me, but Adriano is right next to me. His warm body envelops mine, and I'm grateful because it's cold out here. Without thinking, I lean

into him as I try to catch my breath. What's with all the nausea? It's so annoying.

"What do you really want from me?" I whisper before taking a deep breath.

He doesn't say anything.

"Help me up." I don't think there's anything left in my stomach, and I want to see his face.

He gently lifts me to my feet, holding his arm around me so I wouldn't fall. Then he fishes a handkerchief out of his suit pocket and dabs the corners of my mouth with it.

"I don't get it. Do you have a split personality or something?" I pull away from him and cross my arms.

"What are you talking about?" He frowns.

"Before I knew who you were, I called you Blue, because of your eyes. Blue was good, and nice, and kind. Then I met Adriano, the selfish asshole who only cares about his stupid project and doesn't give a damn about who he hurts."

"I still don't know what you're talking about." He shrugs out of his suit jacket and offers it to me. "But if you want to keep standing here, at least take this."

"See? You cut off my dad's finger to get what you wanted, and now you suddenly care if I'm cold! You clean my face... It doesn't make any sense!" I should just get in the car and shut up, but I'm so tired and I don't feel like myself at all.

"You're overthinking it. I don't want you to get sick because that's inconvenient. And I don't want my car to smell like puke. Happy?" His eyes are guarded, his face expressionless.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“You probably have puke all over your shoes anyway.”

“Do you want the fucking jacket or not?” he snaps.

I snatch it out of his hand. “We had a good time at Amore Bruciante.”

“We did. Do you want me to fuck you? Is that what you want? Do you want me to bend you over the hood of the car and tear off your panties?”

My insides tingle at the thought his words form in my mind. The answer is yes, but I hate it. Not just because it’s not the right moment for that, but also because Adriano is a killer.

In the end, he’s going to choose himself, no matter how many small demonstrations of humanity he shows. His bad side will always win. I can’t just focus on the good things and leave out everything else he’s done, even if a part of me wants to do it.

“No.” I take a deep breath.

“Then get in—” His words are cut off by the loud sound of a motorcycle engine.

We both stare in the direction of the noise. The light falls on the motorcycle guy, and I gasp.

He has a gun.

CHAPTER 27

Adriano

I know that bike. I know who it is.

Matteo.

All I have to do is throw myself behind the car. But as I glance at Chiara, I know she's not going to be fast enough. Her eyes are wide, like a deer caught in the headlights, and she's not moving, even as a couple of bullets whiz close by.

I have a split second to make a decision as everything around me slows down. There's no time to contemplate my choices. I just act on instinct.

I tackle Chiara down to the ground. Pain rips through my back.

"Game over! You should always save yourself, you idiot!" Gennaro's voice rings in my head.

I broke all the rules. I broke all the rules for Chiara, and it was the biggest mistake I've ever made. It's going to cost me my life. I know it, and yet, I have no regrets.

It's weird, but I almost feel... free in a way.

"Are you okay?" I ask and grunt as I push myself off her.

There's blood on her dress, but it's mine.

"Adriano! What...?" Chiara gets up on her knees next to me, looking at me in panic. "You... You're..."

Everything fucking hurts and there's blood everywhere. I grit my teeth as my fingers

curl around my phone. I quickly send an SOS text, but it'll probably be too late and Matteo might be back. Who knows where my guards have gone? Matteo might have staged a diversion or had his men attack them.

"The keys are in the ignition," I say to Chiara. "Go. In the opposite direction, not after Matteo. He might be back."

"But—" She gapes at me like a fish, reaching out for me.

"Go! You're free! My men will release your parents. Go!" I type another text.

Luckily, it's just a simple code word that will let my men know I want Paradossi and his wife free.

"I can't just leave you here," she chokes out.

"And you can't stay here. Matteo will be back."

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“But... you... I need to call an ambulance.”

“No, you don’t. Just get the fuck out of here!” I grimace because the pain is getting stronger every time I speak.

This is her chance to be free of me forever. I don’t know why she’s even hesitating, probably because she’s in shock. But once she realizes what’s happened, she’ll be celebrating and dancing on my grave.

“Is there a place where I can take you?” she asks.

“I just told you—”

“And I’m not leaving you here to die! I’m not!” Tears fill the corners of her eyes, but she quickly wipes them away. “Come on!”

She grabs my arm, tugging me up.

“Chiara—”

“Stop wasting your energy. Come on! Let’s go!” She keeps pulling.

I groan as I force myself up. Why is she doing this? Is it just her good nature? Is she incapable of leaving another person to die? Even when that person is not a good man?

She all but drags me to the car. I use the last atoms of my energy to get in the passenger seat. Chiara closes the car door and races to the other side of the car. I’ve

never seen her so... focused. I like it.

“Where do I go?” she asks as she jumps into the driver’s seat.

“Here.” I press a button on the dashboard. “It’ll take you... straight there.”

Rocco set up the GPS system and everything to make things easier, and right now, it could come in really handy. Dark spots appear in my vision, and the pain is too much to bear.

Chiara’s face is the last thing I see, and I can feel the corners of my mouth lift up.

CHAPTER 28

Chiara

“Adriano!Adriano, no! Stay with me! Stay with me, please!” My voice is full of desperation as I glance at him.

He’s slumped in his seat, his eyes closed. His dress shirt is completely covered in blood. I weave through the cars like a madwoman. Someone swears at me, but I don’t care. I only have one thing on my mind. I need to get Adriano to that clinic before it’s too late.

It’s not far away, but I feel like I’m losing him, and it’s the scariest thing I’ve ever felt in my life. He could’ve saved himself. I’m sure of it. He was closer to the car and he could’ve used it as cover.

Me... I was just standing there, frozen like an idiot. Too slow to move or think about what to do because the armed guy on the bike was coming toward us so fast that I didn’t even have time to process what was happening.

But Adriano threw himself in front of me. He protected me with his body, risking his life for me. Why? That's not something a ruthless mafia boss would do for a woman he only wanted to use as a pawn. I doubt he believes he has to protect me as his wife. I bet dying for me isn't in his mafia code or whatever.

Does that mean he has feelings for me? Or has he finally remembered that he could be a good person?

I pull over in front of the clinic and rush out to open Adriano's door. "Help! Somebody help me!"

It doesn't take long for doctors and nurses to surround the car. Everything around me is a blur as they put him on a gurney and wheel him inside. I run after them, my heart pounding like crazy. Now that we're here, I can feel the full force of my panic.

It's like a punch in the gut, and I almost collapse in the middle of the hallway. Someone mentions Adriano's last name. They know who he is. I guess they have some kind of deal with him and his men, and they won't be calling the cops.

But that doesn't matter. I need him to be okay. I need him to live. A nurse gets in my way, and she says something, but I can't hear her at all. My ears are buzzing, and my throat is too tight. I open my mouth, but I can't form words.

The nurse waves at someone just as my knees give out from under me.

I open my eyes and blink at the beeping machine next to me. The clinic. Right. It's not an ordinary one. Well, it is, but I'm pretty sure it's mafia-funded and has way more equipment than a mere clinic should have, but I'm not complaining. My legs and my feet hurt, probably from running around in heels. I'm no longer wearing my dress.

"Hey, you're awake," a woman says with a smile on her face. Her curly brown hair is

tied into a ponytail.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“How is he? How is Adriano?” I push myself up on my elbows.

“He just got out of surgery. He’s stable at the moment.”

Relief rushes through me. “Can I see him?”

“No, not yet, but we can talk about you in the meantime. My name is Laura,” she says. “They referred you to me because I’m a gynecologist.”

I furrow my brow. “Is something wrong with me?”

“So you don’t know you’re pregnant?”

“What?” My jaw goes slack. “That can’t be right.”

All the nausea, and feeling weird, and fainting... It makes sense, but it can’t be. Adriano and I used protection. Except, nothing is infallible. The odds are tiny, but it’s not impossible.

“I’d like to do an ultrasound to make sure everything’s okay,” Laura says.

“I...” I don’t know what to say or what to think.

“If you’re worried that someone else will find out about this, you don’t have to. I’ll delete all the records and make sure word doesn’t get out.” Her brown eyes are trained on me.

Someone else? She means Adriano, doesn't she?

I give her a nod. "Okay."

"Good. Now lie back down and I'll set everything up." She smiles.

I'm pregnant. The words still sound surreal to me. I've daydreamed about it, but I've never thought it would be anything like this.

And the baby's father... Adriano is not my loving husband. He's everything I hoped the father of my children wouldn't be. He's a mafia boss with a complicated past, present, and future, and I don't think he even wants to be a father.

I could disappear. He let me go. I could find my parents, and we could all go somewhere far away from here. If we left our home to Adriano, he wouldn't need to look for us. I could raise my child on my own.

"Let's take a look." Laura holds the ultrasound probe.

A few moments later, I frown at the screen behind her.

"Oh," Laura says as she moves the probe around.

"What's going on?"

"There's two of them. Look." She points at the screen, but I don't even understand what I'm looking at. "You're having twins."

Twins? I don't know how many more shocks I can take today, but this is a positive one. A smile erupts on my face, and the corners of my eyes fill with tears of joy. My babies! I'm looking at my babies. They're real. This is really happening.

I can't stop grinning. Right now, I want to have my happy moment. A moment where I can just enjoy the fact that I'm going to be a mom to twins. I'll think about everything else later, when I'm calmer and once I've had the chance to think things through.

"Do you have a phone I can use?" I need to make sure my mom and dad are really free, and I want to let them know I'm okay too.

"Sure," Laura says.

My pregnancy will be my secret.

For now.

CHAPTER 29

Adriano

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

An obnoxiously loud beeping sound wakes me up. My eyes fly open, and I blink around me in confusion.

“Don’t move.” A familiar voice makes me look to my right.

Chiara is sitting in a chair next to my bed. I recognize the view through the window behind her. Matteo shot me, and Chiara brought me here.

I open my mouth, but the words that come out are too hoarse and my throat feels as dry as a desert. Chiara hops to her feet and grabs the water bottle next to the bed. She opens it and brings it to my lips. I stare at her for a long moment as I take a few sips.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

Am I dead? Because there’s no way Chiara is here with me. Why would she be? She’s free. Free to go wherever the fuck she wants. No one in their right mind would stay with me.

No one ever does. I’m always on my own. Maybe I’m actually in a coma, and this is my mind trying to trick me into believing things are fine when they aren’t. It wants to make me think someone gives a fuck about me.

“Do you want me to leave?” Chiara’s brow furrows in confusion. “I can call the doctor—”

“No.” I keep my gaze on her.

She's still so fucking beautiful, but she's no longer wearing the dress. She's in a plain white shirt and pants.

"Are you okay?" I ask, and I don't care if none of this is real.

I'll pretend it is, just to have her with me a moment longer, before reality comes right back for me. I'll bask in her light before the darkness swallows me forever.

"Yeah, thanks to you. You saved my life," she says.

"It was the least I could do. My conflict with Matteo has nothing to do with you."

"But you could've let me die anyway, and you didn't."

I study her face. If only things could be different between us. I want her to stay with me. Forever. She's the goodness I need in my life. Someone that can make me forget everything bad that's happening. Someone who'll smile at me and tell me everything's going to be okay. Someone capable of truly caring even for someone like me.

"Wow, pathetic!" Gennaro's voice fills my head, but I push it away.

Saving Chiara wasn't just pure instinct. It was more. If anything had happened to her, I would've gone after Matteo and torn him limb by limb. Actually, anyone who even thinks about hurting Chiara needs to die.

The biggest problem now is that Matteo knows I have a weakness. Chiara. She's not just my fake wife now. She's someone I absolutely refuse to let anyone harm.

He knows I have a deal with this clinic, and if he doesn't, he'll figure it out quickly enough. He'll come for me, and when he does, Chiara will be his target too. We need

to get out of here.

I try to push myself up, but the pain is strong enough to make me groan, even with all the meds that must be in my system. Fuck. I'm useless.

"No! The doctor said you shouldn't move." Chiara places her hand on my arm, her eyes wide with worry.

How can she be concerned about someone like me? After everything I've done?

"Is Rocco here?"

"Yeah, he's right outside, but you were in surgery and lost a lot of blood. You should rest."

"I need to talk to him." I should tell Chiara to get as far away from here as possible, but I can't.

I don't want her gone, and I want to be able to keep an eye on her. Even like this, the thought of letting her out of my sight unnerves me. If Matteo comes for me, fuck it. But if he comes for her... I'll use the last atom of my energy to stop him.

Chiara will be safe even if it's the last thing I do. I don't give a fuck if Gennaro or Matteo judge me for that. I don't give a fuck if they think I'm an idiot and a loser who would risk his life for a woman.

Is this love? The warmth inside me when I see her face and her smile? The fierce need to protect her no matter what? I don't know, but there's no going back now.

Chiara watches me with her brow furrowed, but she goes to the door anyway and calls for Rocco. He enters the room a moment later, relief evident on his face when he

sees me.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“I’ll give you some privacy,” Chiara says.

“No! Stay here.”

If she’s out there in the hallway, who knows what can happen to her?

Her lips part in surprise, but she sits down.

“How are you feeling?” Rocco asks, but I can see his eyes are troubled.

“What’s going on? Did you catch Matteo?”

“No. He’s still out there, and... we have a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“Our systems got compromised, and Matteo knows about most of our hideouts, if not all of them. He knows about this place too, and his men might be here anytime. I set up everything to defend the clinic, but the cops might show up too, and you’re in no condition to fight and—”

“We need to get out of here.” We’re sitting ducks, and I don’t want to confront Matteo now when I can’t even get out of this fucking bed.

“I know, but it’s not easy to find a place where you’ll be safe on such short notice. Matteo’s spies could be anywhere, and we’re scattered. There have been other attacks.”

“Fuck.” I glance at Chiara.

Can I send Rocco with her somewhere safe? Maybe Matteo wouldn’t find them, but I don’t want to take that risk.

“What about my house?” Chiara asks.

Rocco and I both look at her.

“You picked my neighborhood because it’s easy to defend, right? Will anyone even think you might be there? Because we can get there without anyone seeing us. Even if my neighbors see me, I don’t think they’ll tell anyone. I mean, they’re regular people.”

“You would want me in your home?” Does she regret not having left me to die?

But it’s Chiara. She’s not going to kill me in her own home. She’s one of the rare people I can lower my guard around right now and be sure nothing will happen to me. Her only attempt at killing me was out of pure fear.

“Yeah, until the danger passes.” There’s a strange glow in her eyes, as if she knows something that I don’t, but I don’t have time to dwell on it.

“That might actually work.” Rocco scratches his chin. “If Chiara stays there too, it won’t be suspicious to her neighbors.”

“But what about your parents?” I ask.

“They can stay with my uncle. I spoke to them earlier, and they’re a little shaken, but after they see I’m fine, I’m sure I can convince them everything’s okay. But... I have some conditions.”

“You want to keep your home and your restaurant,” I say with a smile because I’m sure I’m right.

It’s a smart move, and that explains why she’s still here. If she had left me for dead, someone could’ve saved me and she wouldn’t be in the position she is in now.

She gives me a nod. “And my family and I walk free and stay alive.”

The corners of my mouth lift up. She must’ve watched enough movies where walking free actually means dying.

Rocco raises his eyebrows as his gaze meets mine. “I could—”

“No. Chiara and I have a deal.” Right now, all I care about is making sure Chiara is safe and with me, even if it’s for all the wrong reasons.

Now’s not the time to be reckless and go after Matteo. I need to recover my strength first.

Even Gennaro always talked about recovery time and being at your best when you confront your enemies. I need to be at my best to defeat Matteo and Gennaro. Later, I can rethink my project and see what happens.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“Okay, I’ll prepare everything,” Rocco says.

“We need to be very, very careful. Don’t tell anyone about where I’m going, and set up our defense so it looks like I could be anywhere. Just make sure that Matteo’s people can’t get into the neighborhood anymore, not even to spy.”

“I studied how they got there before, so I think I know exactly what to do.” A smile spreads across Rocco’s face.

“Good. Then do it. Also, Chiara and I will need doubles.” I need to confuse Matteo as much as possible.

He might consider Chiara’s house, but he’ll think that would be too obvious or not safe enough. But we can set everything up. We just need to be careful. It’s a risk, like anything else, but it’s also a peaceful neighborhood where Matteo’s men will stick out like a sore thumb.

“And we’ll have to set up some security measures in the house and the restaurant,” I say. “Cameras, alarms...”

“Okay.” Chiara seems determined.

I wish I could read her mind and know exactly what she’s thinking. Is she just very grateful I saved her life or does she only care about keeping her home?

Maybe both. It doesn’t matter. I’ll keep her with me until all the threats are gone, and then... I don’t know what will happen. She’ll probably ask me for a divorce too, but

that's not my concern at the moment. I'll enjoy my time with her by my side for as long as it lasts.

CHAPTER 30

Chiara

"Honey, I don't understand." My dad gives me a bewildered look.

My mom grabs my hands. "We can leave," she whispers. "They won't even realize we're gone. We'll disappear."

She squeezes hard, her eyes pleading with me.

"It's all my fault," my dad says. "I shouldn't have started anything against Gaviani. It was a stupid, stupid move. I tend to get overly sentimental, but know this: our home is where we are. All this... This house means nothing. The only thing that matters is that we're alive and together. Everything else... It's meaningless."

"No, I... It's not about our home." Even though I'd like to keep my home, now it's more than that.

Adriano is the father of my children, and I want to give him a chance. For as long as we're here, I want to see if maybe there's hope. Hope that under all his darkness, there's a good man.

He's done some terrible things, but he also saved my life and almost got himself killed doing it. From the moment we left the clinic, I could see how annoyed he was that he needed to be wheeled out of there.

He hates being helpless, and yet, he put himself at risk for me. A selfish, evil person

would never have done that. A true monster would've saved himself and let me die without even blinking.

Hell, he'd be annoyed that my blood splattered his shoes. He wouldn't have killed my ex just like that, without benefiting from it in any way. My dad still has all his fingers, despite what Adriano told me. Maybe becoming a father will change his worldview completely, but I can't let myself blindly trust him either.

The fear I felt when I thought I was going to lose him... It was real. Somehow, I have feelings for him, and I can't deny that. It started with this burning attraction between us, and then, I got to know him a little better. If it had been under better circumstances, something even stronger could've already developed between us.

But for my sake and the sake of my children, I have to be careful. I can't let my feelings lead me into another trap. There won't be another Filippo. If I'm going to tell Adriano the truth, I need to be sure he's going to be a good father.

"Then what is it about?" My mom frowns.

"We'll talk about that later." I can't risk anyone overhearing me.

Adriano's most trusted men are in the house with us.

"But—" my dad starts.

"Please. Just trust me, okay?"

"How can we leave you with that..." My mom glances at the door before lowering her voice. "Monster."

"You can. I'll be fine. Adriano and I have a deal."

“He’s a mafia boss,” my dad hisses. “You can’t trust him.”

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“We’ll see. But don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. I promise.”

“Honey, I’m going to be honest with you. I don’t like this,” my dad says. “People are congratulating me on your marriage with that... It’s better I don’t say what I really think about him out loud. Your face is all over the news. I don’t know much about the mafia, but from what I’ve heard, they don’t let their wives go. Ever. It’s dangerous for you to stay here with him. Has he threatened you? Did he tell you he’d kill us all if you left?”

“No, Dad. It’s really not like that. I wish I could tell you more, but...” I throw a quick glance at the door over my shoulder. “I know it sounds crazy, but I know what I’m doing. Nothing will happen to me.”

“You can’t be sure of that.” My mom shakes her head.

I sigh. They’re not going to leave me with Adriano, are they? And I get that. If I were them, I wouldn’t want to leave my child alone with a mafia boss and his men. The same mafia boss who held us all captive and terrorized us.

“I have something that will protect me.” I place a hand over my stomach and lift my finger over my lips. “You can’t tell anyone anything about this.”

My mom gasps in shock, her eyes glistening with tears. My dad just looks confused.

“Oh honey.” My mom wraps her arms tightly around me. “I’ll strangle that monster with my bare hands for doing this to you. I...”

“Mom, it’s okay. He didn’t hurt me. We kind of, um, met before all this happened.”

“What?” She gapes at me. “Where? How?”

“At a club.”

“Oh. And you didn’t know who he was?”

“No. I thought he was just a normal guy.”

“Someone tell me what’s happening.” My dad looks from my mom to me. “Are we talking about the restaurant? You think he’ll like our food?”

“No! She’s—” my mom says.

“Mom!” I shush her.

“Well, then we absolutely can’t leave you here with him. You need to think about your... you know. He’s not... He’s not the one who should be with you. People like him trap their wives and steal their... What I’m trying to say is that you need to get out of here while you still can.”

“I just want to give him a chance. I want him to see that there’s more out there than just mafia nonsense. I don’t think he’s a bad guy. He’s just... been hanging around all the wrong people. I think I can get through to him.” I try to keep my voice as low as possible.

“Honey, men like him don’t change.” My mom sighs. “Do you want to be a mafia wife? Do you want...” She points at my stomach. “...to be in the mafia? Did you ask your husband how many people he’s killed? How many lives he’s destroyed? Have you already forgotten everything he’s done to us? What his plans are?”

“I’d never forgive myself if I was wrong, and if I robbed my children of their father out of fear.” My voice is barely a whisper. “And running could be dangerous because of who he is.”

My first instinct may be to ignore any feelings I might have for Adriano and just leave to protect my babies. They’re what matters the most. But if I run and change my name, it doesn’t mean I’ll be safe. Adriano has powerful enemies and everyone thinks he’s my husband. They could come for me anyway, especially if they see I have children.

Staying with Adriano might be a better and safer choice for all of us, but I don’t know how he’ll react. He might not even want to have children or he simply doesn’t care, so I just need some time to figure it all out.

Now that my mom and dad are fine, and we’re all free, it’ll be easier to think and focus on the important things. Adriano can’t really go anywhere and there won’t be much for him to do, so I’ll have him all to myself. He won’t be a threat to me, because I’m sure that even I can handle him in this condition.

“Wait, what do you mean children?” My mom pulls away and blinks at me.

“Twins,” I whisper into her ear.

She once again gasps in surprise, her eyes widening, and then she tugs me to her. “I know this is a difficult situation, but it’s the mafia we’re talking about. You said you knew him from before, and he still kidnapped you and he—”

“I get it, but it’s my choice. I’ll make a decision soon, okay?” I could list all the pros and cons of telling Adriano about the babies, but it’s not all about that.

For so long, I’ve lived in fear. Even when I didn’t want to admit it to myself, I was

always sticking to the safest options and tried to avoid anything risky. Until Amore Bruciante. Until meeting Adriano.

But after everything that's happened and with the twins growing inside me, I'm ready to face whatever is coming. I'm connected to the mafia forever now, and there's no changing that.

“What if it's too late then?” my mom asks.

“It won’t be.”

“How are you so sure he won’t hurt you?”

Because he killed for me, but I can’t tell my mom that without explaining everything I’ve been hiding about Filippo, and I really don’t want to talk about that right now. Maybe one day.

“He threw himself in front of me to protect me, and he knew full well he could die. I’ll be fine. I promise.” I hope she can understand.

She closes her eyes for a moment and sighs. “All right. But please think things through very carefully and take care of yourself. If you need anything, call us. We can use a code word and come here to get you. We can talk to the cops and—”

“Okay. But don’t tell anyone anything.”

She bobs her head and hugs me again. “Oh, honey. I don’t know how I’m going to survive this.”

“It’ll be fine, Mom.” I hope I’m not wrong about that.

Once my parents are gone, I head for the master bedroom. It was easier to put everything there than in any other room. Adriano has everything he needs there.

A grunt coming from the room makes me frown, and I burst through the door. Adriano holds his arm over his chest as he sits on the edge of the bed.

“What do you need?” I ask. “You shouldn’t be trying to get up on your own.”

“I’m fine.” He grits his teeth, which means that he’s lying.

“Adriano, just lie back down. I’ll get whatever you need.” I place my hand on his shoulder.

His brow furrows as his gaze meets mine. “Why? We agreed I’d stay here, not that you have to do anything else for me.”

“Maybe I just don’t want you to fall and bleed all over the carpet.” I cross my arms. “If you need help to get to the bathroom, I’ll call Rocco. He’s somewhere in the living room.”

“No. I only need a new water bottle. Mine’s empty.” He glances at the nightstand and the empty bottle.

“Okay. I’ll get it for you.” I look over my shoulder. A pack of new bottles is on the desk, so I go grab one.

“Thanks,” he says when I hand it to him, but he’s still staring at me with suspicion.

“What? You’re not used to being helpless, is that it?”

“Yeah. But no one’s help comes for free. What else do you want?” His eyes narrow at me.

“Doesn’t Rocco help you all the time? I thought he was your friend.” Or at least I noticed Adriano trusts him more than anyone else.

He nods. “But he’s getting paid for it. All of it. He’ll get a nice bonus for this too.”

“And you think no one would be willing to help you without expecting something in return?”

He opens the bottle. “Exactly. So stop pretending and tell me what it is, because if you don’t, I won’t give it to you. If we’re going to strike another deal, I need to know the terms. You’re already getting this house, the restaurant, and your freedom. That leaves only one thing I can think of.” He takes a few sips. “Money. How much do you want?”

I just stare at him because I don’t know what to say. He sees something as simple as passing him a water bottle as a billable transaction.

“Can your help include some extras?” He grins. “How much for a hand job?”

I scowl. “You know what? Fuck this shit. I’m going to pretend it’s the meds talking, and I’ll come back later. Try not to tear your stitches. And I don’t want your money.”

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise. I’ve surprised myself a bit too by saying those words, but I’m not his prisoner and I’m just done.

“Are you okay?” he asks as I storm to the door.

I stop, taking a deep breath, and turn around to face him.

“A lot has happened,” he says.

“Yeah,” I say softly. “But it’s fine.”

“It’s okay not to be okay.”

“Same goes for you.”

“Your world is different from mine.”

I tilt my head. “Not all that different.”

I walk out of the room.

Maybe staying here with me will help him see that. All I need is a good plan to push him in the right direction. If he can only see himself in the mafia world and doesn’t want anything else, then my babies and I will have to leave and go on without him.

I don’t know why, but it feels like a new chapter has begun for all of us.

CHAPTER 31

Matteo

“I’m telling you,he’s there,” I say as my father stares at me from behind his desk. “It’s the perfect time to attack. He’s still weak, and I know how to get in. It’ll be quick.”

After going through all the information and studying the movements of Adriano's men, I've come to the conclusion that he has to be hiding in his wife's house. It's the only thing that makes sense. It's weird, but I'm sure of it. He thinks I can't get to him there, but he's wrong.

"No." It's just one word, but I want to strangle my father for uttering it.

I haven't spent a week tracking Adriano down and barely getting any sleep just so my father can tell me no.

"Why the fuck not?" I glare at him.

But I know the answer. He prefers Adriano. He's always preferred Adriano, and he doesn't want me to kill him.

"Watch your tone." My father gets to his feet, striding toward me. "It would be a cowardly move to attack now. He's not at his best."

"Right." My lips lift up into a fake smile.

"Don't think about disobeying me again. If you do and go after Adriano, say goodbye to your inheritance. You'll be on your own. Penniless." His gaze is hard on mine.

He's not lying. He really means it. When I told him I shot Adriano, I thought he was going to put a bullet in me. But he only glared at me. I came up with a story about Adriano attacking me first, but I don't think he believed me.

I should've just gone back and finished my plan. Adriano would be dead, and my father... I should kill him too. He's had me in his clutches for way too long, and all because I know what's written in his will. If I kill him, I lose everything.

Maybe there's nothing to lose because he intends to give everything to his precious Adriano. If he had to choose between Adriano and me, he'd choose Adriano.

I know it.

He knows it.

Trying to get through to him and hoping he'll finally see me as his only rightful heir is a waste of time. Nothing I do will ever be enough.

"If I was the one who'd gotten shot and almost died protecting a woman, you would've let him finish me off. Or you would've done it yourself because you'd think I was pathetic and an embarrassment to our name." I stare deep into his cold eyes.

It's the truth and we both know it. My father only has a soft spot for Adriano and no one else. I've never understood why. I haven't even told him that Adriano's wife is pregnant with twins.

It's a piece of well-kept information that I had to torture out of the doctor's mouth, but I don't want to share it. My father would be so proud to hear he's going to be a grandfather. I won't give him that satisfaction.

I went after Adriano to get the final confirmation that no matter how many of my father's rules Adriano breaks, my father will always protect him.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 8:14 am

“I have plans for him,” he simply says.

“What plans?”

“I’ll tell you when it’s time.”

It’s all bullshit. He just wants Adriano back. I want to ask him why he hates me so much, but I know he’d only laugh at me. He wants Adriano to defeat me in the end. What does that bastard have that I don’t?

“Is there anything else you wanted to tell me?” my father asks.

“No.”

“You’ve done well.” His mouth twitches. “Take a week or two off. Have some fun. And remember, stay away from Adriano.”

Done well? Those words would’ve made me so happy and proud of myself once, but now I know he doesn’t mean that. He’s only saying it to appease me because he thinks I’m stupid enough to fall for it yet again. I should kill him right here and now, even if it’s the last thing I do. But I want him to witness Adriano’s downfall first.

“Thank you, Father.” If he’s taught me one thing, it’s how to lie to his face.

He briefly dips his head. I’m dismissed. Great. It’s what I want anyway. I know exactly where Adriano is, and I know how to exploit his weakness. He and his men will never see me coming. I’ll make him suffer first, and I’ll take everything from

him.

I don't need my inheritance. I'll just take over Adriano's business and his territory. And then I'll come back for my father and take what's rightfully mine.

They won't be able to stop me.

They can have each other in hell.

My father will probably send someone to follow me, but I'll get rid of them. My double will have fun partying somewhere while I enact my plan. All I want is to see my father's face when he realizes he should've picked me.

CHAPTER 32

Chiara

"I shouldn't have let you choose the movie." I grimace as I look away from the TV screen.

"Why? Are you scared? Come closer." Adriano pats the bed next to him.

I've never been a fan of horror movies, but Adriano wanted to watch one, so I figured I'd survive. I was wrong, but I want to know how it ends anyway.

"We're watching a romantic comedy next, just so you know." I wave my finger at him as I climb on the bed.

"I'm already terrified." He grins, then wraps his arm around me and pulls me closer.

"Are you sure you're not in pain like this?" I look up at him.

“No. It’s fine.” He gives me a small smile.

I lower my head onto his chest and focus on the screen. It’s really better like this. In his warm embrace, I’m not afraid of anything. I don’t worry the monster will jump out of the screen and come for me. All the tension just seeps out of my shoulders. When I glance at Adriano, he looks peaceful too. It’s nice.

His eyes catch mine, and I want to look away, but I don’t. We just stare at each other for a long moment. His gaze lowers to my mouth, and I bite down on my lip. Does he want to kiss me? Because the air is crackling with energy, and I don’t know if I can resist the pull.

Still, I take a shaky, deep breath and focus my gaze on the screen.

“I don’t like horror movies.” I groan after the movie finishes with an ambiguous ending.

“There’s part two.”

“Of course there is,” I mutter.

But I don’t want to move. I just want to stay like this for a few moments longer. Too bad I really have to pee. Why do normal bodily functions always ruin the best moments? So rude.

I push myself up.

“Don’t go,” Adriano says softly, his gaze meeting mine.

“I’ll be right back. Just need to do something. And I can get us some snacks. How about that?”

“Sure, but hurry, or I’ll start your movie without you,” he teases.

“You wouldn’t.”

“But I’m bored when you’re not with me.” He tilts his head and licks his lips.

Oh hell. I really want to kiss him and I think he wants that too, but I’m not sure if we should do it, so I get to my feet. It’s only been a week since we got here. I need a little more time.

“I’ll be quick.” I flash him a smile and stride to the door.

As I make my way down the hallway, a creaking sound stops me right in my tracks. I look around, listening carefully. Nothing. The movie must’ve made me extra jumpy. I’ll need to convince Adriano to pick something less scary next time.

I keep going, but before I reach the bathroom door, I feel a presence behind me. As I spin around, my eyes go wide with panic. My breath catches in my chest as I stare at the guy in front of me.

“Don’t make a sound,” he whispers, his gun pointed straight at my stomach.

His light blue eyes look me up and down as if he’s taking my measures. He’s wearing all black, and his short dark brown hair is completely messy. I guess he was wearing a helmet or something. How did he get in here?

I try to breathe against the panic forming in my chest.

“Matteo Gaviani,” he says with a smile. “Nice to meet you, dear sister-in-law.”

“What do you want?”

He’s here for Adriano. He’s come to finish the job. What do I do?

“Relax. We’re going to play a little game.” He leans in, pressing the barrel of his gun into my stomach, his voice barely a whisper. “And you’re going to like it.”

****To Be Continued****