



Blood Queen

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Category: Romance

Description: A dark mafia romance where vengeance collides with forbidden love—and only one can survive.

Raised in the shadows of the mountains, Kid was trained to survive. Stolen from a life of blood and betrayal, she was raised by Papa, the only man who ever showed her love—and the one who taught her how to disappear.

But the past never stays buried.

When Papa's enemies find him, Kid is thrust back into the criminal underworld she was born to destroy. Fueled by grief and vengeance, she sets out on a mission to make them all pay.

Until she meets Truman—a small-town golden boy with a kind heart and eyes full of hope.

Their love is fierce, forbidden, and built on secrets. As her need for revenge pulls her deeper into the mafia's deadly grip, Kid must choose: the boy who sees the light in her, or the darkness shes vowed to embrace.

Perfect for fans of dark mafia romance, strong heroines, and epic, heart-wrenching love stories.

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Present

Ruling requires intelligence and intimidation. That much I garnered quickly. My father was nicknamed the Blood King. It is a nickname I intend to live up to—even though I don't actually remember him. Or care to, if I'm honest. I've got my own reasons for keeping the title in the family.

"You're not the first dumb ass to underestimate me and you won't be the last," I say. Viggo Scarfo scowls at me and balls his fists until his knuckles turn white.

I've pushed a button. I smirk. With deliberate steps, I walk to where he's tied to the pool table and play with the knife in my hands. My dad's knife. A man who sacrificed everything for me.

"I can't kill you. Yet . I know that. But I can teach you a lesson."

"There will be hell to pay if you do," Viggo threatens. No matter. He doesn't understand the game because I'm changing all the rules. He's only a Capo anyway. Sure, a Boss's son but still.

Fair game.

"Ankles, please, boys."

Viggo snarls at me as my two muscled goons grab his ankles, spread his legs wide and hold them down.

I kneel between his legs and stare at him curiously.

This world he's grown up in, it baffles me.

It is so far removed from what I experienced.

They can't predict me because I was made not groomed.

I'm not motivated by the same emotions they are.

But like all intelligent, motivated people, you do whatever it takes to accomplish your goals.

Leaning forward with a swift motion, I stab the knife just below his testicles and draw it upward, slicing between his balls.

He screams. It's a blood-curdling sound that echoes off the walls and between my ears. Nausea bubbles in my gut at the blood leaking from him but I can't show weakness, so I stand and briskly walk away.

Broken people are easy prey. And quite frankly almost everyone in this life is broken. Men in this life attack in packs. Unleashing punishment they'd never have the balls to deliver alone. Cowards.

All of them.

"He's free to go," I call over my shoulder to the two burly men restraining his legs. I quickly make my way to the bathroom to vomit.

Wait... we need to back up .

I'm afraid if you don't understand the playing field, you won't understand me, and I need you to. I want you to understand what I'm doing and why I'm doing it.

Before we jump into this story, I guess I need to provide you all with a little background so that you understand what I'm dealing with here. It's not pretty and you might think you already know how these things work, but I'm going to set you up for success—not failure. I'm an optimist like that.

So, here we go.

Once, a long, long time ago four families ruled the new world.

These four families lived in different cities throughout the US, but they were all linked together by greed, blood, and a code.

They ran a clandestine operation. Mafia, or a cartel, if you must label it.

The mob, La Cosa Nostra. This is the new world though, we're talking fourth-generation mob.

Now, a word to the wise, the mob is like a pack of New York City wharf rats.

They eat whatever's in their path, including each other. They carry disease and malice.

Yes, they still exist.

A hidden empire.

A network of gangsters who live by a code of crime, violence, and power.

The Testa family, the wealthiest family of the four, resides in Miami. Known for controlling the shipping ports. Need cameras, computers, leather goods or jewelry? Testa's can secure it for you. Their boss ran his family like a company. The Boss? Leonardo.

The Scarfo family lives in New York City and are the second wealthiest family. Known for controlling unions, specifically the garbage and construction industries, to the tune of millions each year. The Boss, Sal.

The Leonetti family is in Las Vegas. Known for their gambling rackets and straight-up violence. These whack jobs are unpredictable. True violent wild cards. Not people you want to piss off. The Boss, Lorenzo.

The Falcone family lives in Philadelphia. Known for their smarts. They are quiet and secretive in their prostitution and drug trafficking dealings. They keep a low profile generally and stay out of others' business. The Boss? Enzo.

Now, when shit hits the fan so hard you can smell it, the Commission meets. These are the group of men who decide your fate. If they're already meeting, your fate is probably of the buried-in-fresh-dirt variety. These are the Bosses, the heads of each family—the Supreme Court, if you will.

When controlling major cities in America, there are rules these families must abide by. If they don't, well the Commission gets involved and that never works out for anyone.

Rule one: You can't kill a Boss.

Rule two: Omerta is a code of silence you must follow.

Rule three: You do whatever you're told or asked to do.

Rule four: All soldiers and Capos must kick up twenty-five percent of their income to their boss.

Now, if you wanted to be a hero and take down the entire operation, well... you'd have to wipe out the heads of the families: AKA the Commission. Only an insider could accomplish something like that, but nobody would be so stupid to attempt it.

It's a death wish.

By the end of that kind of reign of terror, so much blood would be shed that oceans would be tinged crimson forever.

Now maybe you already know how these families operate (And I use that term loosely, because really, what kind of family would put a hit out on their own mother, father, son, or daughter ?) But I'll give you an example flow chart on the off-chance that perhaps you aren't familiar with the life.

One last thing to make clear. These four families don't like each other much.

Hell, some of the families don't even like their own family members.

What these people are loyal to is money and assets.

Whoever has the most is the most powerful.

So, as you can imagine, the head of the Testa family, the wealthiest family, went to painstaking measures to secure their family's wealth.

To ensure that money stayed in the family.

He became paranoid about it. And paranoia is a chink in the armor. Success can be as

dangerous as failure. He created fail- safes around his assets to keep the Testa name at the top of the food chain, so long as that food chain existed.

Painstaking measures.

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Past

My room is sweltering. I sit up and wipe the sweat from my upper lip. The air is thick and oppressive already. Tossing the sheet aside, I relish the feel of the cool wood floor against my feet before I stand. I close the bedroom window to keep the heat out until it cools down tonight.

I drag a brush through my midnight hair, then pull it up into a sloppy bun.

This summer feels like it has edges—unforgiving, jagged ones.

Perhaps it's because I'm on the cusp of turning eighteen, teetering on the brink of adulthood.

Or maybe it's that I want so desperately to see more of the world or meet friends or even a boy.

Yet, each day cuts with the precision of a finely honed blade.

"Morning, Papa," I say when I round the corner to the kitchen. No doubt he's been up for hours already.

"Kid." He nods.

I pour a tumbler full of coffee before adding ten ice cubes and cream. I don't know how he drinks hot coffee on days like this. When I take my seat next to him, he pushes the basket of muffins toward me and gives me a rare grin.

“Do you have the grocery list ready for me?” I ask.

He lifts his chin. “On the fridge.”

Mornings are always quiet. Hell, most days are. Papa is a man of few words. His actions are what speak. It’s a quiet comfort if I’m honest. He’s not overly affectionate, although, I have nothing to compare him too, he’s all I know. All I have.

While I’m in the shower, I hear the front door snap shut as Papa heads out to the small barn to milk the goats and tend to our vegetable garden. The cool water feels good against my skin.

In a couple months, the temperature will drop, and the cool water will be irritating.

We live in a cabin way off the beaten path, away from a small mountain town.

Papa home schools me, which to be honest, is getting old.

I’m almost eighteen and crave interaction with people my own age.

The only time I get away from him is when he sends me into town to run errands.

I relish the moments of freedom.

Toweling dry, which doesn’t take long in this heat, I finish up and dress. I holler to Papa as I pass the barn on my half-mile walk to his truck.

As always, he hollers back, “Be safe and stay alert.” I roll my eyes, thankful he can’t see me.

Papa’s always saying stuff like that. Always harping on me about training, survival

skills, and being alert. In a town of eight hundred people, I doubt anyone's exactly worried about crime.

The town of Moffitt isn't exactly riveting. It boasts a feed store, a grocery store, a gas station, and three small restaurants. Oh and an ice cream stand. The kids who live here are bussed to the neighboring larger town for school.

But on a day like today, where the heat is stifling and the sun is scorching, all the kids are clustered at the bridge. They jump off into the river below.

I long to try it, but I'm not allowed to fraternize. I must be polite but not too friendly. Papa likes our quiet life, and I'm not to mess up the anonymity he's worked so hard for over the years.

Not that I would.

I like our life too; I just want a couple friends. I watch a tall boy stand on the rail of the bridge. He flexes his muscles at a blonde girl in a pretty sundress before jumping. The blonde girl rushes to the edge of the bridge and looks down.

I wait for the sound of the splash. It's at least a six-meter fall given the length of time it takes him to hit the water. The blonde giggles and whispers to her friends. It's not hard to notice the glaring differences between the blonde and myself. She looks soft and delicate.

I'm all sinewy muscle and dark hair.

I want to jump. I want to feel the cool water engulf me, but I won't. Strangely none of the girls are jumping anyway, which seems weird. Why do only boys get to do it?

"Morning, Hun, nice to see you," the checkout clerk says when I pass her with my

cart.

I smile and return her greeting. Papa says she's all talk.

He's said that for the last five years. She looks nice enough.

She has a big smile and warm eyes and is probably in her forties.

Talking is likely all she has for entertainment in this town anyway.

I pick up the items written on Papa's list and check out.

"How's your old man?" she asks.

"Just fine, thanks." I pay her with the cash Papa gave me.

"Tell him Rosie says hello, would ya?" she says. I nod, smile and grab my bags.

Sweat beads on my chest and forehead as I walk my bags to the truck. One of the boys on the bridge meows in my general direction. I ignore him. I don't even know what a meow is supposed to elicit from me as far as a response goes.

Do girls my age like that? Does it mean something good or bad? Honestly, I don't get it. I don't interact with townies. I don't interact with anyone, generally.

At the feed store, I grab some food for the chickens and goats. My tank top is stuck to my back—slick with sweat from the heat. I pull at it, but it doesn't make me feel any better, or cooler.

Most of the crowd at the bridge has moved on by the time I exit the feed store. Only a couple of kids remain. The idea of plunging into that cold water is impossible to

ignore. I drop my purchases into the bed of the truck and walk over to the bridge.

A boy—about my age if I had to guess—jumps.

I peer over the edge and watch him plummet.

Moments later, his head breaks the surface of the water, a giant grin on his face.

I toe off my sneakers absentmindedly before stepping up onto the ledge.

I hear a couple of snickers behind me, but I can't ignore the call of that cool water, and what Papa doesn't know won't kill him.

Without much thought, I leap. An unexpected shrill wail leaves my mouth as I drop. My stomach rushes up into my throat. I clamp my legs together and cross my arms over my chest and then I'm there.

Submerged in cool, clear water.

My elbow knicks something after impact and I flinch as I sink a little more before kicking my way up to the surface. My head breaks through and I gulp air.

That was by far the most exhilarating moment of my life. In that free fall nothing mattered. My head was clear. The sun didn't scorch. I wasn't under the watchful eye of Papa. I was free.

I can't make out what the kids on the bridge are hollering at me, but it doesn't matter. I swim to the riverbank and crawl up onto the grassy shore.

"You're bleeding." The voice startles me. The golden skinned boy from earlier is watching my arm with concern plastered all over his face. I look at my elbow.

Blood, a tiny rivulet of crimson rolls down my forearm.

I shrug. “Yup,” I say.

The boy’s eyes roam over me, taking in my wet clothes from my breasts to my ankles. I tug at my tank top to loosen it as much as possible, then walk past him to the trail that leads back up to the bridge.

“You’re that crazy guys’ kid.”

I roll my eyes and keep walking. He catches up. I frown and walk faster up the steep incline.

“Sorry, I guess that was rude,” he says.

“Yup.” Do not engage, Kid . Papa’s rules.

“Is that the only word you know?” he pushes.

I stop short and turn to face him. He’s much closer than I thought. “Papa isn’t crazy, and neither am I. He’s just...” I flounder to find a fitting description. “Private.” I start walking again.

“And you? Are you private?” the golden-skinned boy asks. He’s attractive in a hard-not-to-miss kind of way. He has a dimple and I wonder if it’s from smiling so much. He never seems to stop. His eyes are hard to look away from, a sharp green that reminds me of summer grass.

“I’m home-schooled, not private.” I don’t even know where that came from, but I shouldn’t be talking about my life with a stranger.

“That sucks. I mean, school isn’t exactly fun but if I were stuck at home with my parents twenty-four-seven, I’d kill myself.”

I keep walking. He lopez along behind me. He’s obviously prone to dramatics.

“Hey, slow down, will ya?” he says. I pause for a moment to let him catch up.

“What?” I ask, exasperated.

“I’m just trying to be friendly,” he says.

I study him, curiosity swelling inside me.

His tan skin, easy smile and strong muscles suit him.

I could be friends with him. I could ask him questions.

We could hang out. Maybe jump off the bridge together and then get a hamburger or fries.

I could understand what it’s like to be a normal teenager.

He raises an eyebrow at me and smirks. The sun catches his eyes and makes the green in them brighter.

I flush, realizing all that is a fantasy.

Papa would never let it happen.

“I have to go,” I say.

As I stomp my way back to the truck, I hear him holler: “Name’s Truman, by the way.”

The whole way home I roll his name over in my mouth , silently testing out the feel of it.

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Present

I watch as he swings aside a painting that hides a safe. He presses his thumb against the bio-metric pad and retrieves a wad of cash from it. He slides the money into an envelope and hands it to me.

“Thanks,” I say and tuck it in my purse. He stares a moment too long in my direction. The scrutiny makes me uncomfortable, so I turn away and head onto the balcony. Each step I take, my heels make a harsh metallic noise, like little hammers on marble.

Standing on the balcony, my back to him, staring out at the ocean and sandy beach, I let myself falter in my capabilities.

I wasn't sure I could pull this off. What did I understand about this world I'd thrust myself into?

What difference could one person make? Orange and gold smeared the sky with late setting sun.

Two rows of palms line the driveway to the East. The balconies line all back windows of the enormous and ostentatious house.

I suck in a breath and nearly choke on the thick humid air.

From the corner of my eye, Leonardo wipes his neck with a soda can.

He's so crass. Always fighting to fit into this life. Everything about him is repulsive.

“The heat is atrocious today,” he says. I nod.

His dark, freshly pressed suit masks the obvious realities of his line of work.

A dangerous buzz hovers around him and it does nothing to ease my stomach.

I had been dragged out with some girls last night on a tour of the clubs, so I felt like trash when I was suddenly woken by my phone on my nightstand.

Exhaustion is a serious condition and doesn't play well with duty.

And duty had called bright and early.

Leonardo closes the short distance between us. I've waited patiently for years now and I'm so close, but that also means I'm vulnerable. One wrong move and I could be six feet under.

“As a Testa, you've got a moral duty, and you did good today, Evany.

You've got that mercilessness gene in your DNA.

” I roll my shoulders back, tits up, trying to convey pride at his words though I feel none.

Leonardo Testa has probably been underestimated all his life.

I won't make that mistake. “I'm going to make you a one-time offer.

There'll be no questions, no discussion, and no negotiation.

When I'm done talking, I only want to hear one of two words out of you; yes or no.

Just one of those words.”

This is how professionals work. In demands. I fight the urge to roll my eyes.

“I have a job for you.”

“I already have a job,” I say.

Leonardo grabs my wrist. “I told you to keep quiet. I told you to not speak until I finished.”

“Yes, Uncle,” I say.

In this world, you don’t get to become what you want, you become what they want.

Defense is key. If you can’t defend yourself, no one will do it for you, and as a woman in this world, a princess, a mob princess, I know better than to open my mouth out of turn unless it’s to eat.

Women in this family cannot afford to look weak.

Leonardo’s on a tirade now, rambling on about love, ambition and loyalty.

The same words he always jams down my throat. It doesn’t bother me anymore.

I understand my uncle.

“So what have you got for me to do?” I ask, donning a saccharine smile. I watch as condensation stipples the sides of the soda can he holds and notice for the umpteenth time the nub on his left hand where his ring finger used to be.

“We deal in swift, lethal justice. We are the judge and jury. Three bullets to the back so he can still have an open casket. No one escapes this. No one gets away.” I can and I will, I think. “Danza’s, Wednesday at nine. Roberto Leonetti.”

Instinct makes me pull my chin toward my chest. That’s a big hit.

One that could start a war. Especially after what I did to Viggo Scarfo, Sal Scarfo’s only son.

It’s as if Uncle Leo is looking for a meeting of The Commission.

Not that I’m opposed. It provides me with an opportunity I wouldn’t normally have.

“Vegas?” I ask.

“Evany,” he snaps, rolling his eyes at my talking out of turn, but I don’t care. I glare at him. “Justice for Luca and Stefano.”

Stefano was a dick, but my cousin Luca was kind. He didn’t belong in this shitty underworld we’re a part of and his death hurt—really hurt. The death of both my cousins is a direct result of the actions taken by the Leonetti family.

I don’t let much hurt me anymore.

He grips both my shoulders. “Yes. Or do you like Mr. Leonetti?” Is it my imagination or does my uncle sound a little jealous?

“He’s always been warm,” I say carefully. Men make things so complicated. Am I supposed to like Leonetti better than him? Is this some kind of test? A hit that high up the food chain could be a test.

“Can you do the job?” he asks, squeezing tightly.

“Yes,” I answer without hesitation. The word hangs in the air between us uncomfortably for a moment, and in that flash, I think perhaps it was a test—one I failed. But then Uncle grins and releases me.

“He’s just an ordinary man, capable of the extraordinary.”

He heads back inside, and following on his heels I say, “Whatever you’re up to, I don’t trust it.”

“You’re panicking because you’re being asked to destroy a life, but the moment you remove emotions from the action, you will be fine.” He waves a hand dismissively in the air at me.

The study door flies open with force, and my Aunt saunters in.

Her hair is overdone—stiff as a board. Her cleavage so deep that nothing is left to the imagination.

She looks like a Vegas showgirl—and for all I know she could have been one before they met.

Or hell, when they met. She’s constantly trying too hard to look respectable.

Affluent. Controlled. But she always misses the mark.

“More like we follow a set of custom-made moral codes,” I say.

Uncle Leo stops dead in his tracks and spins on the soles of his expensive leather shoes to face me. His posture shifts more erect. Leaning in close, he whispers harshly,

sending his breath skittering across my face.

“Get the fucking job done clean and stop running your mouth.”

I inhale slowly to steady myself. “Yes, Sir.”

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Past

I stick my hand in the feed bag and pull out a handful. Offering my palm to the goats, I giggle when their tongues tickle my palm. The distinct sound of metal cutting through the air breaches my brain.

I lean left slightly and exhale. A throwing knife, sharp and lethal, lodges in the wooden post next to my head, and I whirl around.

Eyes bulging from my head, I yell, “Not funny!”

“You can’t afford to be complacent, Kid,” Papa says.

“I’m not. I was feeding the goats.”

He gives me a stern look. “You’ve always got to be prepared.”

I jut my hip out and slam a hand down on it. “For what?!” I cry out.

“Emotion will get you nowhere. Fifty. Now,” Papa grunts.

I glare at him before stomping to the metal bar that is lodged between two barn beams. I dry my palms on my shorts and leap up, grabbing the bar.

“One,” he counts.

By forty, my arms scream in protest, but I don’t quit. I pull myself up, chin over the

bar ten more times until he counts fifty, and drop down. My arms hang like worms at my sides. They tremble and quake as if they're controlled by their own separate nervous system.

"Tomorrow, we hunt," he says before turning and walking back inside. I drop to the ground and lie there, staring at the ceiling, wondering why in the hell my schooling consists of training for the apocalypse.

I didn't start questioning anything until I turned thirteen. I never questioned what Papa taught until he started bringing home books for me to read. Books that taught me what school was like, what normal kids were like. Before that moment, I'd assumed that all kids were schooled like me.

I thought everyone's life was like ours.

Hunting, gun safety, crossbow training, Krav Maga, pull-ups, sit-ups, squats, push-ups, and knife throwing. We worked on one skill a day until we completed the list and then went back to the beginning again. Rinse and repeat.

The only thing I questioned was my mother's absence. To which I only ever got a terse, "She left us a long time ago, Kid."

We grew our own food, hunted for meat. We played hide and seek so I could learn how to remain silent and still—for survival. He set up elaborate traps to hone my attention to detail and my ability to focus.

But those books he got me, those changed my world.

They altered the very fabric of my being.

The books made me realize our lives were unique.

I asked Papa why I wasn't in school like other kids.

Why I didn't have friends or parents like they did.

Why we never saw the ocean, or traveled the world, or do any of the things I read about?

"You're not like other kids, Kid. You're special." He'd grinned down at me but I didn't like his answer.

"But why?" I'd asked.

"You just are. The skills I teach you serve a purpose. We're living in an age of pesticides, of all-important capitalism, greed, four-bedroom houses, and Stepford wives.

Greed and materialism have tarnished this country.

We live humbly to keep us grounded. To keep us alert and alive, Kid.

Every skill I teach you, you will need someday. And I mean every single one."

"For what though? Why do I have to learn these things?" I whined.

He patted me on the head and grinned. "Because Kid, you're special. You might be the most special kid alive."

God, Papa was so irritating with his cryptic responses.

I'd been so infuriated that day. I'd stormed to my room and slammed the door.

I'd laid on my bed and cried and sobbed until I fell asleep.

I didn't want to be special. I didn't want Papa's stupid tricks and tactics.

I wanted to be normal. But normal was as useless as a wish blown across a dandelion.

I push off the dirt floor of the barn and pet the goat's heads before I go inside.

Judging by the sky, it was nearing dinner time.

Dinner is rabbit with apple, parsnip, potato hash. It hits the spot.

Papa is a great cook, always has been, so he says. I clear the plates from the table and rinse them. It's my job.

He cooks. I clean up.

It's been this way for as long as I can remember. I wipe the dishes dry and set them in the drying rack.

"Kid," Papa calls to me.

When I reach the living room Papa has the chess board all set up and waiting for us. I snag a pillow off the couch and sit atop it on the floor. Papa winks at me.

"Think you can beat me yet?"

"You're on old man," I say, which makes Papa chuckle. It's a deep rumbling laugh; a sound I love to hear because it happens infrequently.

Papa might be strict, strange, and quiet, but he loves me, of that I am certain. The

timer dings about thirty minutes into our game. Papa stands, stretches, and heads for the oven.

“What’d you make?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he pulls a tray from the oven and transfers it to a plate. He carries the plate over and sets it down next to the chess board. Chocolate chip cookies. Fat, thick, gooey ones.

My favorite.

“Thanks, Papa.” I snatch one from the plate and shove the entire thing in my mouth with a groan. They’re still hot, but I don’t care.

Treats are just that in our house—treats. Papa nods and does the same. By nine the sun has set, and blackness surrounds our modest cabin. I pick up the chess pieces and put them away, along with the board, before kissing Papa on the top of his head. He squeezes my hand in response.

From my room, I can hear Papa closing up the house for the night. Locking windows and doors and checking my bedroom door before setting his rifle down next to his bed. The thunk of the butt hitting the hardwood floor, the telltale sign.

After my door handle turns and Papa is satisfied that it’s locked, I know it’s safe to crack open my window. I love the smell of the fresh, crisp mountain air. A cacophony of sound creeps inside when I stay still and quiet. Crickets, frogs, deer, and birds. It’s the best soundtrack.

It’s also the only noise out here, we’re buried so deep in the mountains. The cool night air wafts in gently, improving the sleeping conditions. My eyes flutter closed as I think about the golden-skinned boy, Truman, from earlier.

Soon, I drift off.

I'm sitting at a table. Sunlight streams through big windows next to me.

A radio plays lively dancing music with a little static mixed in.

I watch the dust dance in the beams of light.

Two boys sit at the table with me, laughing as they use a piece of macaroni for tabletop football.

A beautiful woman kisses my forehead before returning to the stove to stir a silver pot.

I feel so small. Too small.

A man enters the room. He tousles the boys' heads before pinching my cheeks and kissing me. It makes me laugh.

The man kisses the beautiful woman and I feel joy or maybe just peace. The man grabs the beautiful woman and starts dancing around the kitchen with her.

Glass shatters around me. It flies like glitter. Red-tinged glitter. I blink rapidly and swipe at my face. The joyful song still plays.

Debris flies and crimson splatters every surface.

I cry.

I wail.

Except for the radio, the room falls silent. No one moves. Not the beautiful woman. Not the man. Not the two boys. I can't move from my seat. I'm locked in. I squeeze my eyes shut tightly and scream.

When I open my eyes, a man, my father, lifts me from my chair and squeezes me to him. He whispers words in my ear as he walks with me from that room. From the woman, and man and the two dark haired boys.

I wake up sweating and nervous and confused.

It's a dream that has plagued me for as long as I can remember. It feels more like a vivid memory than a dream, but that's ridiculous. I've never been in any life-threatening situation before.

Sometimes, I lie in bed and try to recall my very first memory after I wake up from the nightmare.

As far as I can tell, I remember being three or four years old and Papa's handsome face. His big hand holding mine and the way I struggled to keep pace with his long even strides as he walked.

I remember hotel rooms and being in the car a lot before we finally settled in our cabin. I don't remember my mother. It ticks me off that I can't conjure up a vision of her. It pisses me off even more that Papa refuses to discuss it with me.

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Present

It's a straightforward job, but I can't shake the unease creeping up my spine. Lorenzo, Roberto's father and head of the Leonetti family, was always nice to me. He knew not to cross the invisible line and never treated me like a dumb woman. He was respectful in a way most mobsters weren't.

Which is probably only thanks to his mother.

His father definitely didn't inspire any morals.

But I've been raised better than that. My father once told me, "You can't let emotion cloud your judgment.

" And as much as I hated to admit it, he was right.

I need to distance myself from the situation.

This isn't personal, it's just business, no more, no less.

In the end, I'm a Testa, and Testa's don't back down—ever.

I'm dressed to kill in my little black dress and heels clicking on the casino floor of Danza's Casino, a glass of expensive vodka in my hand. The blonde wig irritates my scalp, and the sunglasses feel like overkill inside. But I fit right in with the other patrons.

Roberto has a suite on the top floor, which means he feels untouchable here in his own empire.

It only makes him an easier target—overconfidence is what gets you killed in this line of work.

Viggo was my first real test; if I screw this one up, it's over for me and I've worked and sacrificed too much in the last four years only to fail now.

This hit will hurt. It's not a maiming like Viggo—it's a kill.

Fake ID in hand, I flash it at the burly bouncer outside the elevator.

"I'm here to see Mr. Leonetti, he's expecting me," I purr. Sex sells in Vegas and I'm here to deliver him a ticket to his grave. The man leers at my cleavage, his eyes nearly popping out of his head before he waves me through.

The elevator doors open on the penthouse floor to reveal him lounging on a plush leather couch, watching *The Godfather*. How cliché. The particular scene, the horse head in the bed, has me momentarily flashing back six years. I shake the memory away.

Focus .

"You're early," he snaps, thinking I'm the call girl he hired for the night. I pull my sunglasses off my face.

"I think I'm right on time," I say. His eyes snap to mine. A ripple of emotion—maybe shock flits across his face then disappears. He smirks as if he already knows what's coming for him.

As if he's daring me to do it.

"Evany," He says my name like a caress as he rises smoothly to his feet. "What an unexpected surprise. Who let you up here? I'll have to make sure they're taken care of."

"Roberto," I say, slipping my right hand inside my clutch purse to grip the Beretta .250 caliber hidden inside. "Uncle sends his regards," I say, cocking the hammer back on the hidden gun as I raise it to aim at his chest.

He chuckles darkly, resignation flickers in his eyes for a moment, replaced by an emotionless mask before he turns away from me.

"So, it's come to this. Go ahead, make your move." He stares out the window, down at the neon strip below, his back to me.

I hesitate for the slightest second, remembering the man who always treated me decently, but duty comes first. I swallow thickly.

"I'm sorry," I say even though I'm not as I pull the trigger three times in rapid succession.

He is Roberto Scarfo's son, he would have, eventually, taken the Boss position. Yet he is also the same man who was directly involved in the murder of my cousins.

The room is silent save for the click of my heels as I exit, my part completed. I wipe the gun down and drop it in the trash can as I leave, just another hired hit man in a sea of assassins.

Blood may be thicker than water, but loyalty to the Testa family is thicker than both. At least that's what they want you to believe. In the elevator, I slip on my sunglasses

and steady my racing heart. Popping a piece of gum in my mouth, the doors slide open.

“He didn’t want me, can you believe it?” I gesture to my body and blow a giant bubble.

The guard bites his bottom lip, drags a hand over his face, then shakes his head. “I’m off in an hour.” He gives me one of those ridiculous male nods.

I laugh wholeheartedly. “You can’t afford me,” I say and walk away.

Climbing into my waiting car I slam the door behind me.

“Drive,” I say through gritted teeth, my heart pounding in my chest. The driver gives a small nod, and within seconds, we’re speeding away from Danza’s Casino into the night.

All I can see is the road I didn’t choose in life. These moments always throw me for a loop, and I’m thankful that mostly, I’m alone when they happen.

I pull out my burner phone and dial by memory.

We aren’t born with hate. That’s something I had to learn.

Just because something’s temporary doesn’t mean it isn’t real either.

This is all far more real than I thought it would be.

This justice I seek requires sacrifice. Sometimes, we need lies to survive.

I’m trying to convince myself out of this even though I want it, when he answers.

“Hey.” He sounds sleepy. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Did I wake you?” He grunts in confirmation. “Sorry, I didn’t look at the time.”

“It’s okay. It’s always ok,” he breathes. I can almost picture him now, groggy, in bed, sleep—swollen lips and mused hair. I long to be there with him.

I smile. “I miss you,” I breathe out.

“Don’t,” he says. The Vegas lights stream past the car window causing a little vertigo. I never did get over my motion sickness.

I grimace. “I need you. I need to see you.”

I am bitter and resentful. Overwhelmed and feeling heavy. So heavy. The world is a dumpster fire that rages day and night around me, and all I can do is cover my mouth to try and keep the fumes out and he is my only solace.

He groans. I imagine a pained look on his face. Barely concealed heartbreak and disappointment. Because of me. Always because of me.

“We’ve been over this. I just... can’t,” he says finally.

I swallow thickly. “You’re the only thing that keeps me... myself. Grounded. Please,” I whine. “Please, say yes.”

Another groan followed by steady breathing and silence.

“Fine. I’ll text when I’m available.”

The line goes dead as I breathe a sigh of relief. The kind of hope that kills the tiny

shred of unease in my gut and leads me straight to trouble. They say history is told by its survivors, but what would you trade for the truth ? Your soul? Your freedom? Your chance at true love?

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Past

Judging by the light outside, it's around four am. I raise my wrist and tilt the face of my watch toward the window so I can read it. Thirty minutes to five. I pull the cover up over my head and groan. There's not even enough time to go back to sleep before the day starts.

I love summer, but I hate the heat and humidity. Even though the sun is not quite up, it's already warm outside. The deer will be feeding soon, and it's better to wait them out rather than in the evening when it's sweltering hot and the mosquitos and gnats are buzzing around you.

Papa's picked crossbow for hunting today. I sigh. It's not a shotgun, but at least you get to aim and fire like one.

"Show me," he says. And as always, in our small barn, I do what is asked of me.

"To begin with, I tighten all screws and bolts in the stock, bow and sight," I say as I do so. "Next, I check the bowstring to be sure it's centered, then I sight it in to make sure it's accurate."

Papa nods at me, a tiny grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. We load our gear and head out into woods.

When we reach the small clearing where the deer like to graze, we stop and set up shop. I place the crossbows stirrup on the ground and slip my foot through it firmly while I cock the bow.

Grabbing the string with both hands, I pull it upward using the same amount of force on both sides all the way to the cocking mechanism.

I hear a loud click, which lets me know to place a bolt in the groove, making sure that the end of the bolt touches the string.

I line up my shot precisely and click off my safety.

Hunting takes time.

Patience.

Papa and I don't talk. We wait, we breathe, and we take our shots when ready.

A doe stutters into the clearing—finally—and Papa nods to me. It's to be my shot. This kill is mine.

Slowly and gradually, I squeeze the trigger. You might think a crossbow is silent. It's not. The ping is quite loud in the quiet of the woods. The doe pops her head up as the string jumps, but it's too late.

My shot hits her behind the shoulder, clear and clean.

Armed with a knife and gloves, Papa and I wait for the doe to fall before heading over.

"You're up, Kid," Papa says when we reach her. She lies so still, eyes open, watching, that it unnerves. I'd rather not have to see her, her eyes or face or really any of the death part.

"Up for what?" I ask.

He hands me the knife in response. I've never field dressed a deer before and I don't really have any inclination to either, but what Papa says, I do.

"Cut from sternum to groin, penetrating the hide and the membrane below. You should be able to feel the difference between the hide wall and the membrane or muscle wall that holds the innards."

I groan and kneel next to the large doe. With a swift motion that I've watched Papa do a hundred times, I cut into the deer.

"Pull the guts out, starting from the groin while also cutting the membranes. Then yank them free," he directs.

Blood. Lots of it. There is so much blood. It coats my hands. I push down the nausea bubbling in my gut and do as he says.

"Cut the center of the pelvic bone by pounding your knife through. Then cut the skin around the anus and pull the colon out of the body cavity." My gloves and forearms are covered in slick crimson innards. It's unsettling that it's all hot too, fresh. And the smell...the smell makes me gag.

"Are you serious?" I wail.

"Kid, do it," he orders. His authority is overwhelming. So, I obey.

I do it, and I'm horrified. It's difficult to witness someone else do it, but it's really disturbing doing it yourself.

So disturbing that I don't utter a single word to Papa the entire walk home with that stupid doe dragging behind us.

I know I need to know how. He won't be around forever, but maybe I won't live in the wilderness forever either. Right? Maybe I will move to a city and eat in restaurants every night if I please, never hunt for food again.

I glare in stubborn silence as he hoists the deer up so that the hind legs are barely touching the ground.

I watch as he cuts all the way up through the ribs to one side of the sternum and lets the innards fall out before hosing it off to get rid of the rest of the dirt, debris, and blood in silence. And only then, when he turns to face me, do I speak.

"I never want to do that again."

"It's life, Kid. Survival. You want meat—you gut the animal," he responds, but I'm already halfway to the cabin.

He doesn't call me back to him. I dart inside and strip my clothes off. My hair is sweaty and stuck to my head as I turn on the shower. I just want all this filth washed off.

I know he's right. I don't mind hunting or eating the meat, just dislike the steps in-between, and I know, as I shampoo my hair into a giant sudsy lather, that he let me get away without having to gut and clean an animal for longer than necessary.

I'm seventeen. I should have been doing this years ago. Still, I don't like it.

Papa is waiting for me in the kitchen. "You had to learn," he says quietly.

I don't look at him. "I know. But I don't have to like it."

"Killing is a necessary part of life, Kid." Papa sidles up to me, squeezes my shoulder

gently.

“It’s not the killing part. It’s the blood. The gutting part. It makes me feel dirty,” I answer.

He locks eyes with me. “One in the same. If you don’t gut the animal, you don’t get the meat. If you kill the animal without using it for food, it’s just murder. And in life, there will be many things you won’t like doing.”

I sigh and roll my eyes, but he’s right and I know it. Killing for the sake of killing is murder . Killing for the sake of survival is not. He’s said this before many, many times.

“Okay. How about this: I understand but I won’t ever do it because I like it. It will always be gutting under protest.”

Papa grins at me, then looks down to his boots. “You’re the best part of my life, Kid.”

And just like that, I’m filled up. Brimming with contentment and joy. Papa heads back outside to finish harvesting the meat, and I slide on an old pair of sneakers to go weed the vegetable garden.

Our life is simple but good.

That night, Papa turns on the radio during dinner.

It doesn’t happen often, although when I was younger, I’d beg him to turn it on and dance with me and I’d stand on his feet while he moved us around, but tonight he must be feeling happy because he leaves it on all through dinner and well into our reading time afterwards.

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Present

At the airport, I change into more comfortable clothes and trash what I had been wearing. I switch my return flight to Atlanta instead of Miami. Five hours later, I'm in Georgia and driving a cozy street lined with lovely quiet houses.

I park my car across from his house which radiates a warm welcome. Lush greenery stretches along either side of the central front door, glossy leaves stroking the ground-floor window sills.

It's a little after six am now and the sun is just beginning its ascent. I lift the fake rock at the side door and let myself in. His distinct scent hits me so aggressively that I almost tear up at the comfort it brings.

In the living room, I run my fingers over the spines of his book collection. I pull one out just enough to see that the journal wrapped in a random hardcover book jacket is still there. Hidden on a shelf, pretending to be something it's not. He'd kill me if he knew. The history of us.

I toe off my shoes and pants as I head toward the staircase. I drop my shirt on the landing. He won't have much time before work at this point. Opening the door to his bedroom, I watch him for a moment, sleeping so soundly. Instantaneously, everything inside me rights itself.

I sneak across the carpeted floor, lift the blankets, and slide in next to him. He gives a sleepy groan as my arms snake around him.

“I know you said you’d text, but... I’m here.”

A sleepy little grin tugs at the corners of his mouth as his arms envelop me. “You’re such a little shit,” he rasps into my ear.

I kiss the soft spot under his ear lobe, trailing kisses along his jaw to his full lips.

He hums against my lips, his body warm and solid beneath my touch. His hands slide down my back, pulling me in closer, anchoring me. His grip tightens like he knows—like he always knows—when I need to feel held together.

I kiss him deeper, tasting sleep and familiarity, his breath mixing with mine. His fingers skim up my spine, threading through my hair, tilting my head the way he likes. It’s slow. Unrushed. Like he has all the time in the world for me, even though I never stay long.

He breaks the kiss first, his forehead resting against mine, his thumb brushing my cheek.

“Rough night?” His voice is a quiet rasp, but the weight of the question lands like a blow.

I swallow, tightening my grip on him. “Something like that.”

His sigh is knowing, heavy. His fingers stroke along my bare hip, but he doesn’t press. He never does. He just lets me take what I need, lets me exist in this stolen moment before reality rips me away again.

“Stay,” he murmurs, lips ghosting over my temple.

I squeeze my eyes shut. If I let myself, I could pretend. Pretend that I don’t have

blood under my nails. Pretend that I'm not a woman who has carved a path of destruction back to the people who made me this way. Pretend that this—this warmth, this safety—is something I could ever really have.

I press another lingering kiss to his lips, breathing him in. “You know I can’t.”

His hands tighten against me, his jaw flexing as he fights whatever words want to spill free. I know what they are. They’re the same ones he always gives me. The same ones I’ll never listen to.

Instead, he exhales slowly, pulling me closer, like he can keep me here through sheer force of will.

“Then shut up and let me love you while I’ve got you.”

I relent, just for a moment, letting myself melt into his arms. Tomorrow will be different. Tomorrow, there will be no part of me left to hold. But tonight—even if it’s the last—I can give him this.

Later, when he drifts asleep, I slip from the bed without a sound. Every movement is quiet agony; every shift of my weight threatens to wake him. I pause in the doorway, memorizing the rise and fall of his chest.

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Past

“ D rill!”

The word booms from Papa, and instantly, I’m running around like a chicken after its head has been chopped off.

I run to the barn’s back corner, grab the backpack and rifle hidden in the corner, and bolt through the small doggy door he built behind the hayloft.

I cut through the woods, tiny, seemingly inconsequential branches scratching at my face as I go.

The heat causes little droplets of sweat to drop from my chin down between my breasts as I sprint.

What the hell is in this backpack anyway?

I’m at our rendezvous point in under three minutes, which is a new record for me. I huff and puff to catch my breath.

Papa shows up a couple minutes later to find me leaning up against the base of a tree relaxing.

“Backpack?” he asks while eyeing the rifle. I yank it into view from the other side of the tree by its ratty strap.

He narrows his eyes. “You didn’t aim at me.”

I shrug. “I know your footsteps; I didn’t need to aim at you.”

“You always need to aim. Any man of similar size would sound the same walking through these woods.” He shakes his head, mildly disappointed.

“You are paranoid, old man,” I quip.

Years ago, I thought our drills were fun little games. A break from the monotonous schooling routine. Now, they’re just irritating. I was right in the middle of harvesting broccoli for dinner when he called drill.

“Next time we drill, that gun better be aimed right here—” he points to his heart “—when I arrive.”

“Yes, sir,” I answer. “Now, can we go eat?”

Papa holds out his hand and helps me to my feet. “Did you open the backpack?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No. Should I?” I have to ask.

Maybe one time he will say yes.

“No.” His answer is short and gruff. He always asks. And he always looks slightly afraid when he does. Relief sweeps over him each time I answer no.

One of these days, I will break that cardinal rule he stated so many years ago: the only time you open that backpack is if I’m gone. Do you understand, Kid, never open that backpack .

I understood all right.

One time he took longer than usual to meet me, and I'd decided I was curious enough to open the damn thing. I had one of the two buckles unclipped when he showed up. I'd been spanked, yelled at, and made to do thirty push-ups and pull-ups before bed that night.

I never dared to try it again. It just didn't seem worth it. It was probably full of nothing but bricks anyway; the damn thing was so heavy.

After dinner, I'm beat. Too tired for chess. Too tired to read and too tired to think.

I kiss Papa on the cheek, he smiles and gives me the 'I love you' sign, his pinkie, index finger and thumb up, as I walk away and close myself in my room. I lay on the bed and stare at the beams of the ceiling.

A tiny spider sits in a small spider web at one of the beam's intersections. I mouth thank you to it silently because I know it's eating all the mosquitoes that come in during the night when I leave my window open.

I count my breaths. Slow and steady. In and out. One by one, always the same, yet unique, too and I wonder if in three months, when I'm eighteen, Papa will tell me it's time to move out. To go to college like normal kids. To experience the world for myself. I like to imagine that day.

He'd help me with my duffel bag to town, where once a month, a bus comes and picks up travelers. As we stand there waiting, his eyes would glisten, but he wouldn't shed a tear. Not until I was gone, and he was back at the cabin.

He would tell me how proud and excited he was for me, and he'd tuck some money in my back pocket just because. I'd cry. I'd cry and cling to him in a ferocious hug

until the last moment when I had to board the bus. I'd tell him and he'd tell me all the things we rarely say out loud.

I love you. Be safe. I'm proud of you. You did good. I'll miss you so much.

I would promise to send him a postcard from every stop. And then, as the bus pulled away, He'd sign 'I love you' and I'd wave at him until he was out of sight.

Maybe I'd sit next that boy Truman. Maybe we'd talk endlessly as the bus drove us away.

It's a nice thought. I love Papa. I love our home, but I crave finding out what the world is like.

He has sheltered me my entire life and I know there is more to life than our home and the tiny mountain town of Moffitt.

I continue to count my breaths and stare at the tiny spider. I wonder what happens to all the blood when they catch their prey. Do spiders drink it up or does it evaporate over time while they sit trapped in that web helpless?

I fall asleep before the sun fully sets.

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Present

Leonardo's mansion is a fortress. A sprawling white estate perched on the edge of the water like a king surveying his kingdom. I step through the grand double doors, the air inside thick with the scent of cigar smoke and expensive cologne. The guards barely glance at me anymore.

Leonardo is in his study, nursing a glass of something dark and expensive. His salt-and-pepper hair is combed back, his suit crisp despite the late hour. He looks up as I enter, his lips curling into something that might be pride if he were capable of feelings.

"Well?" His voice is smooth, expectant.

I drop into the chair across from him, stretching out like I own the place.

"It's done."

Leonardo exhales through his nose, a satisfied sound. He swirls the liquor in his glass, watching the liquid catch the light before taking a slow sip.

"Good girl." He sets the glass down with a quiet clink, eyes sharp with approval. "I knew you had it in you."

I say nothing. Just watch him.

He leans back, the leather of his chair creaking.

“You’ve earned yourself a break. Kick back. Enjoy. Have some fun.” He smiles like he actually means it, but I know better. Leonardo doesn’t believe in fun. He believes in control.

I nod, standing. “Sure. Fun.”

My apartment is a far cry from the cage he first kept me in.

The luxury high-rise is all sleek glass and steel, perched high above Miami like I finally belong in this city. I toe off my heels, tossing my purse onto the pristine white couch, but I don’t sit. Instead, I make my way to the floor-to-ceiling windows, looking out over the neon glow of the city.

It’s almost funny how different my life is now. How different I am. My dark hair is tamed, glossy and expertly maintained. My sneakers and shorts replaced with designer attire. My soft edges sharpened.

Seven years ago, I was just a ghost of a girl stepping through the gates of Leonardo Testa’s estate.

His missing niece.

I remember the way his face twisted when he saw me, how his first instinct was to lock me away, a puzzle piece that didn’t fit in his neatly curated life.

The room he kept me in was elegant, but a prison is still a prison no matter how gilded the bars.

He demanded a DNA test before he’d even entertain the thought of my existence.

I remember sitting on the edge of the king-sized bed, staring at the locked door,

knowing that if the test came back wrong, I'd never leave that room alive.

But the truth had been undeniable. His blood ran in my veins.

Guards had whispered.

“Hey.”

“Sup?”

“I don't know if you've heard but Evany is back. Been living in the middle of nowhere.”

“Evany? As in the surviving Testa? I thought that was just folklore, man.”

“Nope. She exists, and she's back.”

“Leo must be pissed.”

But, little by little, he let me out of my cage.

At first, it was small rewards. Sitting at the dinner table. Watching from the sidelines as business was discussed. Then the tests began. Subtle at first. Then not. Would I lie for the family? Would I steal? Would I hurt? Would I kill?

And I did.

Because I had a goal. Because every time he asked me to prove my loyalty, I thought of Antonio. Of my mother and father. My brothers. Of my blood-soaked history.

I pick up my phone and text Marcy.

Shipment lands Wednesday at Pier 14. Tension is high. Someone's taking out the bosses' sons. Families are getting nervous. Won't be long before they start turning on each other.

I stare at the screen for a moment before hitting send. I roll my neck. Think of Truman. The way his body molded to mine, the feel of his lips on my skin. I strip off my clothes right there in front of the windows and pad naked to the bathroom to shower.

I dry off, slip into a silk robe, and reach for my burner. My fingers hesitate over Truman's name before I force them away. Grabbing my regular phone, I tap out a message to Maria instead.

Me: Drinks? I need to blow off steam.

She responds instantly.

Maria: Thought you'd never ask. Meet me at Noir in an hour. Wear something slutty.

I huff a quiet laugh. Of all the Testa's, Maria is the least like them. Or at least, she pretends to be. She's reckless, loose with her words and her body, and always in search of a good time. She's the only one I'd dare call a friend. Even if she never knows the truth about me.

An hour later, I'm stepping out of my car in front of Noir, the neon lights flashing a seductive promise of sin. The line wraps around the block, but I walk right past it, straight to the bouncer. He barely nods before unhooking the velvet rope and letting me in.

Inside, the bass thrums through my veins, the air thick with sweat, liquor, and the sharp bite of expensive cologne. Maria is already at the bar, a vision in a black dress

that clings like a second skin, red lips curled into a wicked grin.

“You clean up nice, cousin.” She drags her gaze down my body, taking in the fitted dress, the stilettos that could double as weapons.

“Slutty enough for you?” I slide onto the bar stool beside her, signaling the bartender.

“Could be sluttier.” She sips her drink. “I’d tear a few inches off that hem if I were you.”

“I’d like to be able to sit without flashing my entire ass to the room, thanks.”

Maria smirks. “That’s the difference between us. You like control. I like chaos.”

She’s not wrong.

We drink. We dance. We draw attention like moths to a flame. Men approach, each one more confident than the last. I turn them down with sharp smiles, polite refusals, a hand on Maria’s arm when she looks like she’s about to invite me into trouble.

Maria, on the other hand, is a magnet for trouble. And she enjoys it.

A man in a navy suit, with a watch that probably costs more than most people’s rent, leans in, murmuring something in her ear. She laughs, tilting her head back, exposing the long column of her throat. When she turns to me, her eyes glint with mischief.

“I’m going home with him.”

I arch a brow. “And what’s his name?”

She waves a dismissive hand. “Does it matter?”

I sigh. “Be careful.”

She grins. “Always.” Then she’s gone, slipping through the crowd with her sharp-dressed stranger.

I stay for one more drink, letting the burn of liquor settle in my stomach before heading home.

Back in my apartment, the silence presses in, thick and suffocating. I toe off my heels, pour myself another drink, and sink onto the couch, staring out over the city.

Viggo’s screams still ring in my ears, the memory of his mutilation vivid and visceral. And Roberto—his body cooling on the floor, his blood a dark stain against the marble.

Leonardo is playing a game. I just don’t know the rules yet.

He’s never careless. Never random. If he had me take out the Leonetti heir, there’s a reason. And if he is targeting the bosses’ sons, maybe—just maybe—I can finally gain the upper hand.

I sip my drink, the ice clinking softly against the glass.

Past

Life is funny. While the majority of people are acquiring mortgages, cars, and retirement funds, I've been collecting experiences and survival skills to sustain myself. But an experience gives what you are willing to take from it. At least that's what Papa tells me. But it seems accurate.

I'm up with the birds. The cool air will be thick and oppressive soon enough, but right now, it's perfect. I collect the eggs, feed the goats, and check our rabbit traps before Papa shows his face for the day.

I find him in the yard on my way back from the vegetable garden. His movements controlled, and breathing even.

I used to sit and watch Papa's Tai Chi routine in silent awe. His face and frame so relaxed for that forty-minute period that he looked like a different man. Before he taught me the martial art, it looked peaceful to me.

I wander next to Papa. He nods and pauses so I can join him. The water-like flowing movements of Tai Chi and the crisp mountain air sedate me and fill me up with that child-like peace I used to feel simply watching him.

These are the best kind of mornings. By the time we finish our slow and steady movements, my stomach is growling, and the sun has begun to heat the Earth.

Papa decides today is too hot to do much of anything, and I agree with him. It's sweltering outside and even worse in the cabin.

Papa is tinkering around behind the house with the rainwater collection tank and I'm lying on a blanket in the shade of the barn with a book. What I really want is to go swimming.

Maybe see Truman again. Maybe this time I can talk to him more, ask some questions. Make a real friend. Maybe I can tell Papa that I'm craving a treat and could I pretty please head into town to grab us something for later.

From my spot in the barn, I hear sticks and leaves crunching and snapping under footfalls. At least two people approaching. I dog ear my page in the book and listen harder.

I can recall only three times we've had visitors over the years.

All of them were hikers who'd lost the trail.

The first time, Papa greeted them with a rifle. At nine years old, I'd had to muscle past him and show a wonky, gap-toothed smile as big and wide as I knew how, to get them to talk.

Apparently, most people don't respond well to guns pointed at them. The second and third time, Papa left the gun inside but stuck right by my side while I directed them back to the trails, safely away from our property.

The people approaching are wheezing and bickering. I'm too hot to get up, so I stay where I am a little longer. They sound out of breath. I want to laugh, the trail isn't that steep or hard to the house.

One calls out, "Toni, where the hell are ya?" I roll to my side and peek my head around the bale of hay blocking my view.

Three men.

All in black suits. All greasy and slick-looking standing between the barn and the cabin.

I don't know who Toni is but they keep calling out the name.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

These are not hikers. One fans his suit coat in and out, trying to cool off.

Their fancy shoes are dusty and dingy from the walk.

The fattest of the three puts his hands on his knees, half bent over and pants. Clearly the walk from town was on the cusp of too much for him. Again, Toni is called out. Again, it is met with silence.

I don't dare move. Papa is only around the corner from them, just barely out of sight. I know he hears them. There's no way he doesn't. What is he doing?

The chickens begin to cluck as one of the men turns, facing the barn entrance, and takes three steps in my direction. I scurry silently backward, deeper into the small barn.

"Stop." The voice is Papa's. It's authoritative and menacing. I shiver at his tone. A tone I'm not familiar with.

"Toni. You look alright, man. It's been a while," one of the men says.

"Not long enough," Papa says.

The fat man lights a cigar, then wipes sweat from his forehead. Papa looks tough in his white ribbed tank top with a wrench in his fist. His muscles are extra pronounced as the shirt clings to him with sweat.

I think these men must be extra stupid for coming here. Papa's gun is just a couple feet to the left against the house.

"Where's the girl, Tony?"

"I don't know what girl you're talking about." Papa's voice drips with sarcasm.

"Enough bullshit!" The middle man shouts as he steps toward Papa. "You disgraced the family, and you disgraced hers. The war you caused ends now. Give me the girl."

Papa looks at the middle man and cocks his head. His eyes narrow. "You always were a shit brother Sal," he says.

My heart races in my chest. I'm sure someone out there can hear it. It's that loud. What is Papa talking about and who the hell is Toni? Is that man related to Papa?

The fat one pipes up. "I'll search the house."

Papa doesn't move. Of course, Papa knows I'm not in there so what does it matter if that fat, sweaty man goes in. The middle one, Sal, and Papa glare at each other the way wolves snarl and growl when protecting their own.

I hold my breath, scared. The skinny one takes a step toward the barn door, and I scurry farther back behind the hay bale.

Papa's eyes glaze over as if he's completely detached from, well, everything. He looks like he's full of rage but also like he's about to give up. Why isn't he fighting?

Why is he just standing there? Why does he look so resigned and not surprised?

“The girl is gone,” he says in a growl.

Those four words freeze my heart. Ice-cold blood runs through my veins. I stop breathing.

That’s the phrase.

Our phrase.

The one that is never uttered unless Papa means it. All those drills. Those are to practice for this moment. But, I’m rooted in my spot. Mind racing, heart stuttering. No, Papa. No. I’m not ready. What is going on?

“I don’t believe you,” Sal says.

“And I don’t care,” Papa retorts. A gun cocks. The sound echoes around us. “Go ahead, Sal. Shoot me. Mama would be so proud of you.” The words are not true. I can see it in his glare. Papa doesn’t mean them, but that man Sal only laughs.

“You wouldn’t know since you abandoned her when you disappeared.” I poke my head around the hay bale. “She died you know, a slow painful death.” Sal lifts his pistol and takes aim.

Papa stands tall. His free hand hanging at his side, the hand facing me, is curled into the ‘ I love you sign’ against his thigh. His middle and ring fingers curled in. His index, thumb and pinky straight.

I love you too Papa, I think.

Fight , I think.

Do something, anything. I don't know if I'm willing Papa or myself. I have clear directives.

He said, the girl is gone . I know exactly what I must do but I can't leave him alone.

Sal pulls the trigger. The crack of the shot splices the thick air. It bounces off the trees and barn and cabin and my brain. I don't move or blink or breathe or scream.

Time stands still.

Papa, my father, my only family, drops to his knees. In the presence of death, everything seems to move slower. Thoughts, movements, speech...it all moves slower when death is involved.

Red runs down his forehead and drips off his chin. His body goes slack and he hits the earth with a dull thump.

I think, maybe, my entire world has stopped. Or perhaps, the entire world—not just mine.

There is no sound. No birds, no leaves rustling, the chickens are silent and the goats too. My thoughts click through like a combination lock being cracked by a thief, slow, careful, meticulous.

“Find the goddamned girl, now,” Sal commands.

I snap out of my frozen moment and crawl behind the hay bales to the opposite side of the barn, I grab the backpack, push through the Kid-sized doggy door and sprint into the woods.

I forget the rifle.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:06 am

Present

The Scarfo-Falcone wedding is a spectacle of wealth.

The reception takes place in a sprawling villa on the cliffs, the Mediterranean glittering dark and endless beyond the terrace.

The guest list is a who's who of the underworld—bosses, heirs, and enforcers draped in silk and armed to the teeth beneath their suits.

It's a show of unity, but the air is thick with tension.

Because this marriage isn't about love. It's about power.

Lucia Scarfo, the precious daughter of Sal Scarfo, has been bound to Rocco Falcone, the hot-tempered heir to the Falcone empire.

And their union could tip the balance between the four families.

At my table, Uncle Leo sits at the head, flanked by his most trusted men, his salt-and-pepper hair sleek, his suit crisp.

He's sipping whiskey, eyes sharp as he watches Sal and his wife toast their son and daughter-in-law.

"Enjoying yourself, mia nipote?" he asks without looking at me.

I give a slow, unimpressed glance around the room. “Riveting.”

He smirks. “You always were hard to please.”

I drain the last of my champagne and push up from my seat. “I should make the rounds, see who’s still breathing.”

Leo chuckles, tipping his glass. “Play nice.”

I don’t bother responding.

The air hums with low conversations as I weave through the tables. Every step in this room is a careful dance—smiles edged with steel, laughter disguising negotiations.

At the bar, Adriano Marino, one of Rocco’s right-hand men, leans against the counter, his tie already loosened, his dark eyes tracking me like a hunter sizing up prey. In any other setting he’d be brutally handsome.

“Evany.” His voice is warm, inviting. “You’re looking particularly lethal tonight.”

I arch a brow, accepting the fresh glass of champagne the bartender sets in front of me. “And you’re looking particularly desperate.”

His lips curve. “Desperate? No, just observant. I heard about your little... incident last week.”

I take a slow sip. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

He laughs. “Come on, don’t play coy. Word is, you left some solider bleeding out like a gutted pig.”

I tilt my head. “Is that what they’re saying?”

“I also heard you didn’t even break a sweat.”

I let the silence stretch, watching the way his fingers tighten around his glass. He wants me to confirm it, to give him something to carry back to his boss.

Instead, I set my champagne down and lean in slightly. “Be careful what rumors you spread, Adriano. Sometimes, they come true.”

His throat bobs. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

I give him a slow, knowing smile before turning away.

At a center table, Lucia Scarfo sits with a group of other young women, her wedding ring glinting under the golden lights.

Her expression is composed, regal even, but her fingers twist in her lap.

The relationship between the female family members is a different beast. We’re royalty but also property.

Needed but disposable. Except me. I’d made sure Uncle Leo saw how capable I was.

I needed action and responsibilities not vacations, sex, and parties.

The women in the families are never in line for Boss, therefore to me, they aren’t a threat.

“Lucia,” I greet smoothly, sliding into the seat beside her.

Her eyes flick to mine, a polite smile appearing. “Evany. I was beginning to think you’d ignore me all night.”

“I’d never dream of it.” I glance toward the dance floor, where her new husband is laughing too loudly with his men, already a few drinks deep. Women rubbing all over the lot of them. “Rocco looks... pleased.”

Her smile tightens. “He’s celebrating.”

“Of course. It’s not every day a man gets gifted an empire.”

Lucia inhales slowly, her fingers stilling. “And what about you, Evany? Any plans to settle down?”

I exhale a quiet laugh. “And let some man put a ring on my finger so he can feel powerful? No, thanks.”

Lucia hums. “I used to think the same.”

I study her, the fine tension in her posture, the way her gaze flits toward the exit like she’s already looking for escape routes. She was raised in this world, bred for this moment—but that doesn’t mean she wants it. They never want it. We’re all captive in one way or another.

I lean in, lowering my voice. “I hear the Falcones like their women obedient. If that’s true, you’re going to be a disappointment.”

For the first time tonight, real amusement flickers in her eyes. “Then maybe they should have done their research.”

I grin. “If you ever need... a favor, let me know.”

Lucia holds my gaze for a beat longer before nodding. It's not acceptance. Not yet. But the seed has been planted.

I stand and make my way back toward Leo's table. I smooth my silk dress as I take my seat next to him. His phone vibrates on the table. I watch him glance at the screen—face morphing in annoyance.

Then, without shifting his gaze, he murmurs, "There's a situation at the warehouse. Handle it."

I exhale through my nose. A wedding full of backstabbing criminals, and he's sending me to deal with some bullshit at the docks.

But I don't argue. I just rise and step silently away from the glittering crowd.

The car is waiting when I step outside and drops me where I am needed.

The warehouse is dimly lit, the scent of salt and steel thick in the air. It's quiet except for the occasional clang of metal and the rhythmic clicks of my stilettos.

I step into the back room.

A man sits bound to a chair, his head caught between the iron jaws of a vice bolted to a steel table. His face is slick with sweat, veins bulging in his neck as the pressure builds. Blood drips from his nose, his split lip, staining his collar.

Beside him, one of Leo's men—Cruz—leans against the table, expression bored.

"Caught him dealing in our territory. Right under your nose." His gaze flicks to me, challenging. "Brought him here as a courtesy."

This does not look good. I've slipped. Been called out. I roll my shoulders to relieve the stress building.

Leo's men tolerate me because they have to, but they like to remind me that I have something to prove.

I step closer, dragging a gloved finger through the blood on the man's cheek. "And?"

Cruz shrugs. "Figured we'd let you handle it."

The man jerks against his restraints, wild eyes darting between us. "I—I didn't know it was your territory! I swear! I just—I saw the jewels at the docks. Thought I could—" His words choke off as Cruz tightens the vice another notch.

Cruz watches me. Waiting.

I grip the handle of the vice, twisting it ever so slowly. The man whimpers, his breath hitching.

"You saw them where?" My voice is soft. Almost bored.

"An open shipping container—some crates were open. I saw diamonds. Didn't think." His breath shudders. "I—I was just trying to unload them! Didn't even know it was yours!"

I study him. Just some dumb street thief who got too greedy. No ties to the families. No real threat.

But that doesn't matter.

I grip the handle again. Twist.

A strangled sob leaves his throat as the vice grinds his skull.

“Who did you try to sell them to?”

“I—” His voice breaks. “Some guy in Little Havana. Goes by Nico. Please—I swear, I won’t”

I release the handle. Step back.

He’s talking.

Cruz’s lips twitch, almost like he’s impressed. “So? What do we do with him?”

I glance down at the trembling man, considering. Letting him live sends a message—that ignorance can be used as an excuse. But if I make an example of him... well. It sends a stronger one.

I reach into my clutch and pull out a sleek blade, twirling it between my fingers. The man’s breath turns ragged.

“Please,” he whispers.

I crouch beside him, tilting my head. “Do you believe in mercy?”

His throat bobs. “Y-yes?”

I press the blade to his cheek, just enough to break the skin. “Then pray that I do too.”

The silence stretches.

Then I stand, wiping the blade clean on his sleeve.

Cruz smirks, pushing off the table. “I’ll take care of it.”

I don’t have to ask what that means.

I step out of the warehouse, the humid night wrapping around me. The wedding is probably still in full swing, alliances being forged over champagne and false smiles. My footsteps echo as I move down the alley, where shadows coil like snakes around the shipping containers.

The night smells of rot and rust.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:06 am

Past

B ranches whip my arms and legs as I clear the miles from home. My tank top is glued to my skin with sweat. The backpack has rubbed my shoulders raw.

I've long passed the meeting spot. But with no Papa, there's no meeting, so I keep running. I wipe the sweat from my eyes. The tree stand is just a little further.

I can be safe there. A high vantage point in the trees will give me a three hundred sixty view below and chances are, those men won't be looking up.

He's gone. He's gone . He's never coming back. I don't understand it.

The moment I lost Papa my world shifted. I shifted. I am alone. But I'll keep breathing for him, for the life he wanted me to have.

Until my heart stops.

For him. For the life he wanted me to have.

I'm tired and confused. Who would want Papa dead? I slip while trying to climb the tree stand the first time, my muscles fatigued from the run and the heat and adrenaline.

The grief.

I sit, legs tucked up against my chest and listen for movement while tears sting my

watering eyes. The sun sets low in the summer sky.

Hours pass with no sign of the men. I stretch out my legs and reach for the backpack, pulling it between my legs to unsnap the buckles. If I'm honest, I'm scared to open it.

Scared that Papa isn't dead and will pop his face up in the tree stand to scold me the moment he hears the click of the buckles.

Panic spreads through me like a blast of icy air.

I inhale and pull.

No Papa.

I move to the zipper and yank.

Nothing. Just the sound of the zipper that echoes from my temporary temple, soon to be gone.

The boards of the tree stand wiggle under my legs like loose baby teeth as I adjust myself to a more comfortable position. I open the largest pocket of the backpack and turn it upside down.

The contents clatter onto the loose boards.

A small snub-nosed .25-caliber pistol. A ten-inch Sheffield hunting knife. Two bottles of water. I spin the cap off of one and gulp.

A box of Swiss cake rolls. I bite down hard on my lip to stop myself from crying out. My favorite store-bought treat—not Papa's.

These are for me.

Two throwing knives. A box of bullets. A fire starter, a long-sleeved shirt and a fat stack of hundred-dollar bills.

I pull the shirt on over my tank top immediately. I don't want to start a fire without knowing where those men are, so I finish one of the bottles of water and have two packs of Swiss cake rolls as I turn the four-inch thick stack of hundreds over in my hand.

Why would I need this much money and where did Papa get so much?

I set it down and stuff my hand into the outermost pocket and pull out an envelope.

It's sealed, and I don't want to open it.

I don't want any more upsets for one day.

I want to cry and mourn Papa, but I'm scared to make too much noise. I'm scared to be still for too long.

I'm wired, twitchy, leaking tears and random noises. I try breathing my calm-down sigh, the one that signals my body to be peaceful, but it doesn't work.

I tuck my chin, hug my chest, and fight off waves of shivers and sobs. My toes are wet, numb stubs jammed into my sneakers.

The temperature has dropped, as it does on the mountain, and I know, in another hour, I'll be freezing.

I have to move.

Now.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:06 am

Present

I don't go back to the reception.

I can't.

The air outside the warehouse still clings to my skin—coppery, thick with blood. My dress is clean, but I feel stained.

Leo hasn't called.

That bothers me.

I pull out my phone and text him: It's taken care of.

I don't wait for a reply. I slide into the car I had waiting and tell the driver to head to the airport. A flight to Atlanta is easy enough to arrange. Being a Testa opens doors that aren't available to regular people.

The flight is a blur. I don't drink, don't speak to anyone. Just sit there, staring out at the clouds, replaying the last few hours in my head. The way the man's body slumped in the end.

It's past ten when I land. Atlanta is quieter than Miami, cooler, the air crisp with the promise of a storm. I take a cab straight to Truman's house.

I shouldn't be here. I've given him no notice.

I know that.

But I don't care .

He is the only part of my life that still feels real. The only person I have who isn't tangled in duty and blood and the Testa name.

I let myself in, locking the door behind me. The house is dark, but his familiar scent wraps around me. My chest tightens.

Relief floods my veins, making my limbs heavy. I move toward the bedroom, heart pounding harder than it should. Maybe he's awake. Maybe he'll pull me into his arms, let me forget—

I step into the doorway and freeze.

He's asleep, starfish on his belly. His preferred sleeping pose.

But there's a woman in his bed.

She's tangled in his sheets, bare shoulders exposed, blonde hair fanned out on his pillow.

For a second, my brain refuses to understand what I'm seeing.

Then it hits me, like ice water through my veins, a blade through my ribs.

I suck in a breath—sharp, ragged—and it comes out broken. A sound I don't recognize.

The woman stirs. Blinks up at me, bleary. “What the fuck—?”

I could kill her. So easily. So quickly. I could. My shoe would work fine. My bare hands. My teeth.

He shifts beside her. His dark lashes flutter, then his eyes open. My eyes lock on his as the woman starts screaming.

Sleepy.

Confused.

And then he sees me.

His body goes rigid. His gaze flicks to the woman beside him, then back to me.

“Stop screaming,” he yells over her shrieks.

For a long, suffocating moment, none of us move.

Then his jaw tightens. “You need to leave, Mara.”

The woman frowns, pushing up onto one elbow. “What?”

He is already sitting up, voice like a blade. “I said get out .”

Her eyes flash with anger. “Are you serious? You—”

He doesn’t even look at her. His attention is locked on me, sharp and unreadable.

I don’t move.

Can’t move.

The woman huffs, muttering a curse as she scrambles out of bed, grabbing her clothes from the floor. She shoots me a glare on the way out, but I don't register it.

The second the door slams shut behind her, I turn. Ready to leave, to pretend this never happened.

But he is faster.

“K—” His voice is low. Rough.

I flinch. “Don’t.”

His fingers close around my wrist—firm but gentle. “Why are you here?”

I lift my chin, forcing steel into my spine. “Mistake.” My voice doesn't waver. But my body does.

He sees it.

Feels it.

His grip tightens, his free hand coming up to cup my face.

“You’re shaking.”

I let out a sharp breath, hating how raw I feel. “I just killed a man.” My voice breaks around the words, and his thumb brushes over my cheek like he can smooth out the damage.

He exhales hard. “Come here.”

I should push him away. He deserves a life. He deserves to have happy and normal relationships with available women.

But when he pulls me against his chest, I let him.

And when his lips press against my temple, I break.

The tears come first, hot and unstoppable. He rocks me gently, his breath warm in my hair, his heartbeat a steady rhythm beneath the chaos spinning inside me.

“You hate me now,” I mumble against him.

“I could never.” His voice is fierce now, pulling me back from the edge.

I press my face into his shoulder, trying to breathe past the knot in my chest.

We don’t move for a long time. It feels good, being like this with him again. Too good.

When I finally pull away, there’s something new in his eyes—a flash of something deep and urgent.

“You can’t keep doing this. You have to get out.”

I shake my head before he’s even finished speaking. “You know I can’t.”

His jaw flexes, his hands still gripping my arms like he can physically hold me together.

“K—”

“No.” My voice is sharper than I mean it to be, but I can’t let him say it. Can’t let him tell me what I already know—that I should run, that I should escape this life before it swallows me whole. Because it’s too late .

I wipe at my face, forcing the weakness away.

“You think I don’t want to?” My voice is raw, the edges frayed.

“That I don’t dream about just—just disappearing?

Leaving it all behind?” I shake my head, laughter bitter in my throat.

“But that’s not how this works. You don’t leave the Testa family. You don’t walk away from this world.”

His grip tightens, frustration flickering in his dark eyes. “You’re not just playing in this world, you’re beholden to it. You’re a pawn in their game, making moves and pulling triggers for them. And one day, all of their demands are going to catch up to you .”

I exhale slowly, pushing past the ache in my ribs. “Maybe.”

He curses under his breath, raking a hand through his messy hair. “And that doesn’t scare you?”

Of course, it does. But fear is a luxury I can’t afford.

I step back, putting space between us before I do something stupid, like beg him to make me forget—like crawl into his bed and let him kiss the blood and guilt away.

My gaze flickers to the crumpled sheets, to the faint imprint of another woman’s

body.

A sharp pang slices through me, fast and brutal.

I lift my chin. “You should get back to bed.”

He watches me carefully, his expression unreadable. “I don’t want her.”

My stomach twists, but I force a smirk, brittle and hollow. “She looked pretty convinced.”

His mouth tightens. “You disappeared that winter. For a year! Then, out of the blue you call me. You beg to see me. I let you back in. And now six years of this cat-and-mouse game where you don’t call.

You don’t text. You hold me at arm’s length only appearing when you need me.

I get what’s in it for you...but what about me?

I’ve made it clear over and over again that I want you.

All of you, however, you’ll give yourself to me. But Christ...” he trails off, frustrated.

He sighs and scrubs a hand down his handsome face. “I was trying to forget you.”

A painful beat of silence.

I swallow hard, my nails digging into my palms. “Did it work?”

His gaze darkens. “Not even a little.”

I nod, even though it feels like my heart is being stripped away inside my chest, ragged edge by ragged edge. “I never meant to drag you into this,” I say softly, barely above a whisper. “That’s why I leave. That’s why I disappear. To protect you.”

His eyes flash like lightning in a storm. “Protect me? From what?”

“Me.” The word sticks in my throat like broken glass.

He shakes his head, disbelief etched across his features.

“You don’t get to decide that. Not for me.

” He takes a step forward, eyes boring into mine with the intensity of a wildfire.

“I’m not some lost puppy you need to shelter from a hurricane.

You act like you’re saving me by leaving, but you have no idea what it’s like on this end.

Emotion shivers through me—a potent mix of longing and terror. I waver on my feet but hold my ground, fists clenched tight with the urge to touch him.

He moves closer, until he’s a breath away and his presence is all around me—hot and demanding and impossible to ignore. He kisses me, and all of the fear and guilt and longing I’ve been holding inside erupts, shattering the dam I’ve kept so carefully in place.

I kiss him back with reckless abandon, letting it all bleed out. My hands find his hair, his shoulders, grasping desperately, like if I just hold on tight enough, maybe I can keep this, keep him.

For a moment, nothing else exists but him—his touch scorching away everything else. I forget who I have to be. I let go.

We break apart, ragged and breathless. His forehead rests against mine, and he's watching me with those eyes that see everything.

“Stay,” he murmurs, low and rough—a quiet plea that twists my heart.

“I...” My voice is hoarse, torn between hope and despair.

He brushes a thumb across my lower lip, a soft promise that makes me ache in ways that are almost unbearable. “What do you want?”

“Your mouth,” I breathe out.

He grins at our inside joke.

“Where?”

I point to my neck, then drag my finger lower, over my collarbone, down my sternum over my black silk dress, over my belly and stop between my legs.

He makes a low sound in his throat, one that vibrates straight through me. He dips low, his fingers find the hem of my dress, brushing my thighs—teasing as he lifts it, and I'm dizzy with how much I need him.

His name is a gasp.

He slides the fabric higher, trailing kisses over every inch of exposed skin until the dress slides up and over my arms, gets tossed on the floor. His lips burn like fire, and I arch into him, my body a live wire. He pauses, just shy of where I want him most,

hooded eyes meeting mine.

His mouth moves lower, and the world fades to white hot bliss.

“Fuck,” he growls, his voice low and rough. He presses a single, deliberate kiss right there. My thighs clamp around his head instinctively, my hips grinding against his face, but he pulls back just enough to drive me insane.

I bite my lip hard enough to taste blood, my heart pounding so loud I’m sure he can hear it. He spreads my legs wider and lowers his mouth to me, I swear I see stars. His tongue flicks against my clit, and I nearly come undone.

I wake a few hours later in tangled sheets, sleep clinging to the edges of me. His arm is heavy across my waist—a warm weight that lulls me back toward unconsciousness.

But an itch keeps me awake, a whisper at the back of my mind that sounds like danger.

The window frames a bruise-colored sky. Dawn isn’t far off.

I untangle myself slowly, careful not to wake him. As I rise from the bed, his hand slides free from my body—the loss of contact colder than it should be.

He shifts but doesn’t wake. A part of me wishes he would—that he’d stop me before I can disappear again.

I dress quietly in the gray slant of early morning light. On his nightstand, a framed photo of us sits proudly. I smooth the hair back from his forehead. Press a kiss to his temple.

And leave.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:06 am

Past

I took the hiking trail that runs adjacent from our land into town.

I stayed in the shadows. I couldn't think of anywhere to go that would be safe, so I settled myself under the bridge where I jumped from, just the other day.

I finally let my eyes close as the darkness under the bridge shrouds me.

The river is low compared to the other day and the sound echoes off of the arches.

I'm exhausted and chilly, but I clutch the backpack to my chest, gun still clutched in hand.

My eyes slip shut for a moment.

"What're you doing here?"

I startle and withdraw deeper under the bridge. "Go away," I say, but there's little conviction. I hold the pistol out in front of me and aim toward the shadowy figure in front of me.

"Dude! Put that thing down. What the hell is wrong with you?"

I recognize the boy from the bridge, Truman, as he steps toward me into the light.

"Sorry." My voice wavers as my hands begin to shake. I put the gun down next to me

and sob.

He leans forward and squints through the darkness at me and then glances all around us. “What’s up? You’re kinda freakin’ me out.”

I look over at him. He’s seated himself a couple feet to my left but looks hesitant. “I...I’m in trouble, I guess.”

“Any particular kind of trouble?” he asks genuinely looking concerned.

I can’t stop my body from shaking. “Men came up to the cabin.”

Truman furrows his brows. “Guys wearing suits and fancy shoes?”

I nod my response.

“I saw them in town yesterday. Looked shady. Did they hurt you? Where’s your dad?” he asks.

I suck in a deep breath and prepare myself to say the words out loud. “He’s dead. They shot him.”

Truman seems shocked. “We should call the police.” He moves to stand but I stop him.

“No!” I say. “I’m never supposed to call the police. It’s a rule.”

He gives me a funny look but doesn’t say more about it. “Truman, remember?” he finally says and scoots over to me so close that our thighs touch. His skin lingers with the heat of the day. The warmth feels good.

I nod. “Yeah, I remember.”

Silence seems to expand between us. I don’t know what to say. I don’t know who to trust. I don’t know up from down right now. I sit sniffing while Truman quietly stares at me. Finally, he speaks.

“Well, we can’t stay here.” He inhales a deep breath. “Come on...”

“Kid, my name is Kid.” He slaps his thighs and stands up.

He looks at me, slightly baffled a beat and then, “Come on, Kid, looks like you’re staying at my house tonight. Hope you’re hungry; we’re having Chinese tonight.” He shrugs and walks out from under the bridge and waits.

I decide I’ll take my chances with Truman.

I get to my feet and sling my backpack over my shoulder. Truman’s hands are dug deep into his jeans’ pockets as he strides up the wooded path to the street. I scurry behind him to keep up—exhausted.

They have cast iron radiators that steam angrily as we walk into the house.

“You can stay here tonight. I promise it’s okay with my parents.” I watch him as he makes himself comfortable.

He’s got an aggressively sexual face, I decide. His golden-skin, deep-set smoldering green eyes and full sensual lips somehow make him seem like the perfect crush or the perfect best friend. Neither of which I need at the moment.

“So, Kid, huh? That’s a weird name.”

I furrow my brow. “Is it?”

Truman laughs and nods his head yes. I shrug. A woman walks through the door carrying two white plastic bags.

“I swear the summers here are bipolar. Eighty-nine this morning and down to forty-five already. God damn, oh,” she says when she sees me. She looks at Truman, eyes widening. “You didn’t tell me we were having guests.”

Her blonde hair looks soft. It hangs near her breasts as she cocks her head at her son. She looks suspicious and suddenly I’m hit with a pang of grief. I’m not welcome here. I might not be welcome anywhere.

“Is it okay?” he asks.

She stalls for a moment but ultimately nods her head and gives a quick verbal ‘sure’ before heading into the kitchen.

The kids set the table with paper plates, and we pick what we want from the white takeout containers.

Truman has a younger sister named Kenzie who doesn’t look too much younger than us and an even younger brother named Nate.

They all have the same smile, complete with matching dimples.

Their mom, Mrs. Biggins, says grace. They all try to bring me into the conversation as we eat, asking me questions, but I try to stay out of it.

Giving only basic information. The bare minimum.

Survival means keeping to yourself and minding your own.

Kenzie speaks rapidly, gesticulating wildly, making faces to emphasize her points. It's comical to observe. This family's dinners are so much different than mine and Papa's. Loud, talkative, gluttonous.

"No one is going to believe this. The crazy chick is eating at my house! I'm so instagraming this!" She holds up her phone and snaps a picture of me eating. I'm bewildered. I don't know what she's talking about, and my confusion must show.

"Quit it, Kenz!" Truman says and swats at her phone. It bangs on the table loud enough that I jump in my seat. He snatches it up and does something to the little white box that makes Kenzie whine.

I stare at their interaction bewildered. I've never used a phone. I've only read about them in my books.

"It's a smartphone. You don't have one?" I shake my head and he pulls his from his pants' pocket and hands it to me.

I turn it over in my hands. It's thin and small and doesn't look like much of anything at all really. I'm not sure what the fuss is about. Is it a weapon? Or a book? Like what makes these things so special?

"Neat," I say. I set it on the table and pick up my fork.

"We can go over smartphone basics after dinner," Truman says.

Confused, I shrug. "Sure."

"Dude, you don't know what a smartphone is?" Kenzie asks blinking rapidly.

Nate smacks her shoulder. “What?” she says looking around the table.

“Do you like Chinese?” Mrs. Biggins asks.

I point to my plate with my fork and she nods. “Yes. Thank you. It’s very good.”

“You’ve never had it before?” she asks.

“Um, I’ve heard of it, but no, Papa and I make our own meals, and I wouldn’t have known how to cook this up.”

“Where is he now, honey?” she asks.

My fork stops midway to my mouth, hovering with an orange glazed morsel of chicken skewered on the tines.

“He went away for a couple days. Kid got nervous up there all by herself and I saw her wandering around town and thought I’d invite her over,” Truman babbles.

I stare at him. He lies to his family? Papa would never tolerate that. But I appreciate he didn’t rat me out either. She would surely want to call the police.

“Uh huh,” his mother answers. “Well, you can’t stay in those shorts. You’ll freeze tonight, even with the heat on. Kenzie will let you borrow some yoga pants and socks.”

Kenzie rolls her eyes at her mom.

“Thank you,” I answer.

After dinner, Truman tells me that his father works the overnight shift and won’t be

home until six am. Everyone treats me like a scared animal, and it makes me feel like one.

I want to go home. I want to sleep in my bed in my house with my familiar belongings and sounds.

Kenzie and Nate are watching television and I find myself entranced at the flat, large screen.

Truman watches me when he thinks I won't notice. But I do. I want to look at him, too, but I don't think it's for the best, so I let myself be in awe of the television instead. So, this is what I've been missing .

True to his word, after Kenzie and Nate have been sent to bed, Truman sits with me on the couch and shows me his phone, while his mother searches for some spare blankets and a pillow. With a no more than a fingertip brushed across the glass you can access almost anything.

Books, music, videos, and what Truman calls, the internet .

It kind of blows my mind. A tiny stab of anger pokes my gut, seeing all that Papa kept from me, followed by a surge of guilt.

Papa.

Truman's eyes narrow as he takes me in. "You look like you're about to freak out," he says.

"I feel like I might," I admit and run my fingers through my snarled hair.

"This day has been kind of...I don't know.

It was all so normal until after lunch. Papa's gone.

I'm alone. And now, now, I'm sitting here with you, and watching a television and eating new food and learning what's so special about these phones everyone seems to use non-stop.

" Embarrassed, I slap a hand over my mouth to shut myself up. I didn't intend to babble like this.

Truman grabs my hand and pries it away from my face. "Hey, it's okay. I'd probably be overwhelmed, too if I had to experience all those new things in one day."

I let him just hold my hand. I focus on our hands clasped together between us, and it's comforting in the strangest way.

Present

The message comes through encrypted channels, terse and urgent.

I need to talk. Privately.

Bianca Leonetti.

My heart hammers in my chest, my stomach twisting into tight knots as her name blazes on the screen. My thumb hovers, trembling, over the keyboard. There's only one conceivable reason for her to reach out— Roberto.

I hesitate, tension crackling through my veins, then force my fingers to respond.

Where?

She sends a location, a small bar on the outskirts of town, the type of place where silence is currency and curiosity is unwelcome.

I go armed.

Bianca sits cloaked in shadows at a secluded booth when I arrive, a drink cradled before her, her dark eyes etched with exhaustion and something more raw—grief.

The sight pierces through me, leaving me unsteady.

I force my expression into something neutral, slipping into the seat across from her.

“You called.”

She exhales, reaching for her glass with trembling fingers. “I didn’t know who else to trust.”

The words land like a fist to my stomach.

Guilt coils in my ribs, sharp and punishing. She doesn’t know. She can’t know.

“What’s going on?” I ask, voice smooth.

Bianca stares at her drink, then looks up, and for a second, I see the girl she used to be before this world hardened us.

“My brother is dead, Evany,” she whispers. “And I don’t know who to trust anymore.”

I swallow hard. Keep my face blank. “I heard.”

A muscle ticks in her jaw. “There’s a rumor going around.” She leans in, her gaze sharpening. “That you had something to do with it.”

A long, slow beat of silence.

Then I give her my best smirk, the one that says I don’t have a care in the world. “You really think I’d be stupid enough to kill Roberto and stick around for the aftermath?”

Bianca studies me, searching for cracks. “No,” she admits. “But I had to hear it from you.”

She nudges the drink in front of me forward. Whiskey. My usual.

The ice clinks against the glass as I lift it, taking a slow sip. “You were close with him,” I say, keeping my voice easy.

Her eyes glisten. “He was my brother.”

And I put three bullets in him.

The whiskey burns down my throat, but then the rest of my body starts burning too. My vision blurs. My limbs go heavy.

Panic lances through me as I try to move. But my fingers won’t cooperate.

Bianca’s face shifts, sharpening at the edges.

“You shouldn’t have come, Evany,” she murmurs, voice like a lullaby.

The last thing I see before the darkness takes me, is her sad, knowing smile.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:07 am

Past

“H ere you go, hon,” Mrs. Biggins says before dropping two folded blankets and a pillow at my feet. “Feel free to take the back cushions off the couch if you need too.”

I stare up at her thankful. “Thank you.” How different it might have been growing up with someone so warm and soft in the house with us.

She arches a brow at me. “Anytime dear. Tomorrow, though, you and I are going to call your dad. Okay?”

My eyes fill with tears, but I manage to hold them back. I’d love to call Papa. I’d give almost anything to hear his voice just one more time. Truman squeezes my hand, and it brings me back to the moment.

“Yes, ma’am,” I answer.

Truman and I are alone in the living room with the television on. His mouth twitches every once in a while, like he wants to say something but he never does and I’m grateful for it.

I don’t like questions, and I don’t have answers. The silence would be awkward but the TV fills the silence so it’s alright. It’s nearing 10 p.m. when he finally stands and shuts off the television.

“You all set?” he asks.

I nod my response. He shuffles his feet, thumbs stuck in his pockets. “Okay then. Night, Kid.”

“Night Truman,” I say.

When he’s gone, I pull the back cushions off the couch and drape a sheet over it. I set the pillow at one end and then spread a blanket across the length of it. I wander around the room.

Happy family photos. Mom smiling, dad smiling, kids all arranged by height in front of them. Trips to different places. Memories .

It stings. I have no photos of Papa. Nothing tangible to look back on and remember our lives together.

I sink into the couch and pull out the sealed envelope. I let its weight settle in my palm before turning it over and over, unsure I want to read what has been written.

Finally, when I no longer hear the bathroom water running upstairs, or the creaking floorboards, I open the envelope.

Kid,

If you’re reading this, it means I’m gone and can no longer protect you. I’m writing this as you sit in the living room coloring. I’m writing this because someday you’ll need to know the truth and I can’t seem to bring myself to tell you. You’re much too young now anyway.

But you deserve the truth.

My name is Antonio Scarfo. I am not your father.

I'm no blood relation in any way that counts.

I snatched you up. I don't know why. I was ordered to do a job and I did it, but when I saw your tiny face and big brown eyes, I just...

couldn't. I picked you up and we disappeared together. For both of our safety.

Please forgive me.

Your real name is Evany Testa. You're from Miami and your parents are dead. I've given you everything you'll need to survive to get to Miami. You still have family there. I caution you... don't believe everything you're told.

If I'd had my way, you'd never know the life you were born into, the one you and I both came from.

You have a choice Kid, you can seek out your family in Miami or you can disappear into the wind. Change your name. Tell no one what is written here.

I urge you to disappear, but I know you, even now, at nine, you'd choose the truth over running.

You're smart, skilled, kind, and beautiful and you will need to use that to your advantage.

Trust no one. Be safe and stay alert.

Love, Papa

My thoughts swirl around messily, trying to make sense of Papa's words. A picture rests in the envelope, so I pull it out.

Through watery eyes, I see a clipping. From a newspaper.

A picture of me at maybe three or four years old being held by a beautiful woman with a broad, easy smile.

A handsome man has an arm wrapped around her, and two dark-haired boys stand in front of them.

I know those faces. I know those smiles. I know that family.

They are from my dreams. My nightmares.

But the nightmare happened to them, not to me.

My gut constricts, and I roll to my stomach and push my face into the pillow to scream.

Present

I wake to pain.

A relentless, searing burn that radiates from my ribs, my jaw, my face.

My arms are wrenched behind me, secured to the back of a chair. My ankles are bound. The metallic tang of blood coats my tongue.

Bianca stands in front of me, breathing hard, her knuckles bruised.

“You killed him,” she says. It’s not a question.

I smile, blood-stained and sharp. “You got proof?”

Her nostrils flare. She slams a fist into my stomach. I bite down on the groan, let my head loll back against the chair.

“Proof? Really? Does that exist in this world? We all know the rumors are usually true.”

“What rumor? Tell me? Because I’m telling you I didn’t do it.” My lies suffocate me, the walls inching closer in on me.

She snorts. “Oh please, you know,” she cocks her head, “here’s a rumor you might be interested in. One I’m sure dear Uncle Leo has kept from you.”

I fight to stay focused on her. On what she's saying.

"Once upon a time... A Testa contracted a hit on his own family."

I spit blood. "What are you talking about?"

"Evany, sweet little missing Evany, don't you know? Your Uncle hired Antonio Scarfo to slaughter your parents. You and your brothers were meant to die too. He craved the Boss's throne, lusted after power, and your father, his own brother, was the obstacle."

My lungs scream for air. "I've never heard that one." My vision blurs with the revelation. "You shouldn't believe everything you hear."

She punches me square in the face, and my nose erupts with agony as the brutal crack of bone shatters the air and deafens me.

"Did you fucking kill my brother?" she snarls.

"You can torture me all you want," I rasp, tasting iron, "but I'm only going to tell you two things."

Bianca's jaw tightens like a vice.

"I didn't kill him," I lie with practiced ease. "And I don't give a damn that he's dead." I lock eyes with her, unyielding. Her chest heaves with the weight of her wrath—a rage that burns as fiercely as my own.

Something snaps within her.

She glares at me, breathless, then releases a choked, guttural sob. The first punch was

restrained, but what follows is not. She's a storm, wild with grief, raining blows on me with frantic desperation, driven by uncontainable sorrow.

I don't fight it.

I let her take what she needs, let the guilt sink deep into my bones.

By the time she stops, my vision is hazy, blood trickling down my face.

Bianca staggers back, pressing shaking hands to her mouth. Then, like something inside her crumbles, she collapses in a heap, sobbing into her hands.

A long, heavy silence stretches between us.

Then, finally, she moves.

I barely register her cutting the ropes before she's gone.

Getting back to my place is a blur.

I lock the door, lean against it, and press shaking fingers to my ribs. Pain flares white-hot, but I barely register it.

I exhale hard, forcing my battered body forward. My reflection in the mirror stops me cold.

Two black eyes. A split lip. A nose that's broken.

I look like hell.

For the first time in my life, I pick up my real phone and dial without thinking.

It rings twice.

Then his voice, groggy and edged with concern. “ Kid? ”

I close my eyes, exhaling raggedly.

“I need you,” I whisper.

A beat of silence.

Then—“ Where? ”

Past

“Hey...” Something pokes my arm. “Kid, wake up.”

My eyes snap open. Truman hovering near my face startles me and I squeak.

“Shh, you’ll wake up my mom,” he whispers with a serious expression.

I suck in a deep breath. “What time is it?” I ask.

I haven’t slept much. I read the note over at least five, six times. None of it makes any sense. I don’t understand. Did Papa kidnap me? Raise me as his own? What job was he hired to do? The questions spiraled like a tornado, keeping me up until I finally drifted off a couple hours ago.

“Early,” Truman muses with a grin. The windows at his back and the weak light coming in make him golden and soft. I have a weird urge to reach out and touch his face.

I squint at him. “Is something wrong?” Panic roots low in my belly. Do I need to leave?

Truman shakes his head. “No, but I think we should go up to your place before my mom gets up and wants to call your dad.”

Panic settles in my gut. “Oh, yeah,” I say. I sit up and rake my fingers through my long dark hair. “Um, I need the bathroom.”

“Yeah, use the one down here. I brought you a toothbrush.” He hands me a new toothbrush, and I tiptoe to the half bath to relieve myself and clean up a little.

When I come out, Truman is waiting for me in the kitchen with my backpack. A jolt of panic sweeps through me, seeing him holding it. Did he go through it? Did he read the letter? See the money?

“Come on, let’s go,” he says quietly. I eye him wearily. “You can’t go up there alone, Kid. I’m going with you.”

I take my bag from him. I weigh my options quickly.

“Fine.”

The sun’s heat is already starting to scorch the Earth as we walk through town. The only things moving, and alert are the birds in the trees. It’s quiet enough that I can hear the gravel crunch under our shoes with every step.

Just two tire tracks with grass trying to grow in between. I’m a jumble of emotions as we approach the clearing that leads up to home.

“What if they’re still there?” I ask panicking.

“Then we leave,” Truman says.

“But what if they kill us?”

Truman thinks on this for a moment. “We’ll creep up. If the coast is clear we keep going.”

I stop moving forward. A guttural moan slips from me. “What if they’re not there but

Papa's body is?"

Truman stares at me and swallows hard then blows out a breath. "We'll figure it out."

We keep walking and my thoughts keep swirling. I don't understand Papa's letter. I don't understand any of this. I don't know what's real and what's not.

He said not to believe everything, but what if he was the one lying?

Truman grabs my hand. I look down to where we're now connected.

Any other week and I'd be freaking out at the normalcy of this moment.

The first time a boy held my hand. I'd wonder what it means and think about how good my hand feels in his, but I can't see anything but the tears pooling in my eyes or feel more than utter confusion over the last twenty-four hours.

"Don't cry. I'm sorry. I'll let go," Truman says watching my face carefully.

"It's not that," I say and clasp his hand even tighter. "He left me a letter. It doesn't make any sense. I don't understand what's happening."

Truman stares at me, brow furrowed. It makes him look confused in a cute way. "Let's just get to your place and then we can figure out what to do, okay?"

We keep walking. Truman reaches out and picks a wild daisy then hands it to me with a smile. He is so calm and so steady. It makes my heart clench.

"Aren't you supposed to be at school or work or something?" I ask.

"Nope. I think I'm right where I'm supposed to be," he says.

It takes a solid hour to make it to the truck's parking spot and another twenty-minute walk from there to the house.

Truman asks me at least fifty questions in that time. Mundane things like, how old am I, what's my favorite color, food, book and on and on. I learn we're the same age and share the same favorite color: green.

As far as common denominators between us—that's it.

He's impressed by my intelligence, which confuses me.

I don't know why he assumed I'd be dumb just because I was home schooled.

His strange chit-chat distracts me, though and I'm happy to indulge him as long as it takes my mind off what lies ahead.

When we approach the barn, I hesitate. Anguish engulfs me. Truman stands silently next to me. He squeezes my hand gently. My bones feel soft, like overcooked spaghetti noodles.

"I can't," I say.

Truman nods and walks. Twenty steps. I count.

He stops, looks around, then turns to face me. "There's nothing here," he says.

At his words, I'm bereft. Nothing there? They took Papa's body. He doesn't get to be laid to rest. I'll never be able to visit his grave and mourn. I will never see him again. Who are these people and what the hell have I been thrust into?

I join Truman and scan the area, my hunting instincts kicking in.

They dragged his body. The grass is matted down and there are still red hues streaked through where they pulled him along. I close my eyes and suck in a steady breath.

“What’s really going on here?” Truman asks.

“I wish I knew,” I say.

I pull my backpack around and pull out the letter from Papa and hand it to Truman. His eyes scan quickly over the words, and he looks back up at me, mouth agape, eyes wide.

“This is some messed up shit. Seriously. Like, what?”

“Yeah,” I say, “I know.” He hands the letter back to me.

“So are you going to Miami?” he asks. He shoves his hands deep into his pockets and looks around.

He must be curious about our house. The crazy recluses of Moffitt who live alone on the mountain.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I can’t stay here, can I? What if those guys come back?” Despite the heat, a chill raises gooseflesh on my arms and I shiver.

He shrugs back. “Don’t know. This is all pretty wild.”

“I’m going to go inside, I guess. Think on it all. Thanks for walking me home.” I turn and head into the cabin.

My mind reels, and I feel stunned. The screen door slaps behind me, but the sound is off—too delayed. I spin around and find Truman in my home.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

He bites his lip. “I can’t leave you alone here.”

My chin pulls in toward my neck. “Why not?” I ask.

He shrugs, yet again. “It doesn’t feel right.”

“What if I told you you’re not welcome here?” I say and drop my bag on the floor.

He taps one foot on the floorboards and smirks. “I guess I’d tell you that’s too bad because, you are the most interesting thing to ever happen to me and what kind of man would I be if I didn’t see this through with you?”

I roll my eyes at him but am slightly relieved at his sense of duty. Papa would like him. The thought sends a fresh wave of grief through me.

“I’m fine on my own.”

He cocks his head causing a loose blonde wave to fall near his eye. “I didn’t say you weren’t.”

I toss my hands in the air. “Semantics. You implied it.”

He holds up his index finger. “No, I implied that you need a friend and that I’m qualified for the job.”

I huff and collapse onto the couch. “Why? Why are you doing this?”

Truman follows me, grinning. “That’s easy, because you’re easily the most interesting person I’ve met.”

I stare at him, a deadpan expression on my face. “You read the letter; trust no one. Tell no one about even the letter.”

Truman thinks on my words. “Yeah. He was right, but I bet he wasn’t talking about a townie boy you just met. How ‘bout I just hang out until you decide what you’re going to do.”

“How’re you going to pull that off with your parents?” I ask.

He lopes to the couch and flops down next to me. “Don’t sweat it. Do we have a deal?”

I rest my head back on the cushion. “Okay,” I sigh, frustrated. “Deal.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:07 am

Present

A knock at the door sends an electrifying shock through my entire body. I exhale shakily, clutching the edge of the marble countertop with knuckles that turn white. My fingers tremble uncontrollably. Another knock, fiercer, more demanding.

I force myself away from the counter, wincing as my ribs scream in protest, and swing open the door, my heart pounding in my chest. He stands there in the dimly lit hallway, his chest heaving as if he sprinted through a hurricane to reach me.

His piercing, stormy green eyes scan over me, and his whole frame goes rigid, locked with tension.

“Jesus Christ,” he breathes, his voice a mixture of shock and horror.

I know what he sees.

My eyes, swollen and bruised to a sickly black, my lip, cracked and perpetually on the verge of bleeding, my nose, bruised and likely broken, and a grotesque purple-green bruise blossoming at my temple. His face drains of color before flushing to a deep, furious crimson.

“Who did this to you, baby?” His voice is low, trembling with barely restrained fury.

I don’t answer. Instead, I step aside, inviting him into the wreckage of my world.

He walks in slowly, but his fists are still clenched like he’s barely holding himself

back.

I can see the exact moment he registers my apartment—the floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing the Miami skyline, the sleek, modern furniture, the immaculate space that looks more like a showroom than a home.

He has never been here before. Never seen my world.

I've kept him separate, kept him safe from the filth I wade through every day.

But tonight, for the first time, I let him in.

"Fuck," he mutters, running a hand through his hair. "I—" He swallows hard. "I had no idea you lived like this."

I don't respond.

Because what is there to say? He was never meant to be here.

His attention snaps back to me, his eyes darkening with something raw. He closes the distance between us in two steps, his hands hovering like he wants to touch me but doesn't know where it would hurt the least.

His voice drops, rough and urgent. "This has to stop. This—" he gestures to me, to the evidence of the life I live, "—this isn't you. It's killing you."

I stiffen. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine," he growls, frustration bleeding into his voice. "You're standing in front of me beaten half to hell, and I—" He cuts off, his jaw flexing. "You have to get out. Leave this life. Come with me."

His words hit me like a hammer to the chest.

Leave. With him.

I've dreamed of it before—of escaping, of disappearing into a life where he is all I ever have to worry about.

I shake my head, stepping back. "You know I can't."

His expression shatters. "Why the hell not?"

"Because this is who I am." My voice is quiet but steady.

His hands run through his hair, yanking at the strands in frustration. "Please," he pleads, voice breaking. "You don't have to do this. Just... let me take you away from it. Let me—" He exhales sharply, like it physically hurts him to say, "Let me save you."

The words sink deep, slicing through me like a blade.

I want to say yes. God, I want to say yes.

But I don't.

Silence stretches between us, heavy and suffocating.

Then, something in him shifts. His anger, his desperation—it all folds into something else. Resignation. Determination.

"Then I'm staying," he says firmly.

I blink. “What?”

“I’m staying for a few days.” He says it like a challenge. “Until you can at least see straight.”

He tends to me with a tenderness that makes my chest ache. Ice packs, painkillers, soft touches against my bruised skin. He cooks, forces me to eat even when I protest, and sits beside me on the couch, close enough that I feel his warmth.

It’s the longest stretch of time we’ve had together since before. Before I left him. Before I became this version of myself.

And it’s dangerous.

Because it feels too good . Too real.

On the third night, I wake up on the couch to find him watching me. The room is dim, the Miami skyline glowing behind him. His gaze flicks over my face, unreadable.

“You should get some sleep,” I murmur, my voice rough from exhaustion.

He doesn’t move. “I keep thinking about it,” he says quietly. “The first time I saw you at the bridge, remember?”

I let out a quiet laugh, but there’s an edge to it. His lips twitch, but his eyes remain serious.

“I think I loved you then.”

A sharp pang lances through my chest.

I open my mouth—but I don't get the chance. Because in the next second, he's there, his fingers sliding into my hair, careful of my injuries, his lips brushing against mine, slow and deliberate.

The air between us turns electric.

I inhale sharply, my hands fisting in his shirt. He deepens the kiss, warm and so achingly familiar that I nearly come undone right there. I press into him, letting myself have this moment. When we finally break apart, we're both breathless. He looks at me, his eyes searching for answers.

A thousand thoughts careen inside my head. I want to explain everything and nothing all at once.

His forehead rests against mine, his voice barely above a whisper. "I can't lose you."

Past

Truman stays true to his word and keeps me company as I wrestle with what to do next. Though wary at first, I slowly open up to him, feeling a kinship I didn't know I needed. I show him the picture and the money.

I don't show him the other stuff.

He keeps my brain from steam rolling into panic talking of life's pleasures and hopes for the future. He's going to graduate this year and plans to go to college in South Carolina. Something about law and justice. The events of the day fade into the background as we lose ourselves in conversation.

Truman's stomach growls loudly, making me laugh.

"You're hungry," I say. He looks shy but nods. "I can make us dinner. Are you sure you aren't going to get in trouble for not going home?"

"I'm sure. What will you make?" he asks.

"I just got a deer yesterday, so there's fresh venison and plenty of vegetables or we can make a salad."

Truman's eyes are wide. "Like, you shot a deer?"

I nod. "Yeah."

“With a gun? Like you’re a good shot?” he asks.

I cock my head at him. “Actually, I shot him with a crossbow.”

“You keep blowing my mind. There’s always something else to learn about you,” he says looking bamboozled.

I shoot him a look. “Lots of people hunt around here, it’s not that exciting.”

He shrugs. “Sure, lots of boys. Can’t think of a single girl in my class who goes hunting. Let alone with a crossbow. Just makes you even cooler than I thought.”

A laugh bubbles up and out of me, and soon, Truman laughs too.

I pan fry some venison steak tips while Truman assembles a salad. Every so often, he glances at me.

“Am I doing it wrong?” I ask, catching him watching me.

“I mean, I don’t know, I don’t really cook, but my mom usually puts some kind of oil or butter in the pan I think.”

I sigh. “Yeah. Crap. Papa did all the cooking. I always washed up. But I think you’re right.”

I grab the butter dish and portion off a tablespoon into the pan. It feels weird cooking in the kitchen. It feels weird being here without Papa. It feels even weirder realizing that I’m missing a man who wasn’t even related to me. That for my whole life I’ve lived a lie.

Who am I? Better yet, who was Papa.

When night falls, Truman insists on staying to ensure my safety.

We stay up late swapping stories, our laughter ringing through the quiet cabin.

I put the radio on, a little luxury, I shove the stab of grief away.

During a game of Guess Who, we both drift off.

Truman on the couch and me on the floor.

I wake startled and early, the sun's not up.

Truman's chest rises and falls in steady rhythmic beats. I tiptoe upstairs to my room, crawl into my bed, and stare at the ceiling willing myself not to cry. Begging myself to keep it together just a little longer.

Truman was right to stay. His presence gives me a sense of comfort and security I didn't know I needed.

When I come downstairs, purposely quiet, he's still sleeping.

He's so handsome with his sleep puffy lips and mused hair.

I start frying eggs and bacon and get the coffee going to let him sleep a little more.

"Oh my God, what smells so good?" He groans the words out from the couch. A tiny grin lifts the corners of my mouth up.

"Breakfast," I call out to him.

Truman shuffles to me and licks his lips. "I love breakfast. It's my favorite." He

bumps his shoulder against mine gently. “Did you sleep ok?”

I set the spatula down and turn to face him. “Not really. But, coffee helps.” I pick up my glass, ice clinking, and take a big gulp.

Truman wrinkles his nose at me before snatching a strip of bacon from the hot pan and tossing the hot strip between his hands mumbling that it’s hot. I can’t help but laugh.

Finally, he gets it in his mouth and groans with pleasure. When he notices me staring at him he freezes. His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows and his jaw ticks. I have the overwhelming urge to press my lips to his.

“What?” he asks.

I clear my throat and shake my head.

“Hand me two plates?” I say and nod to the plates on the counter. He runs a hand through his hair and smiles, his dimple appearing. I plate our food and we sit at the small table together.

“Can your phone look up people?” I ask while we eat.

“Of course,” he pulls his phone from his pocket.

“Should we Google the names your dad wrote in the letter?” I suck my bottom lip between my teeth, uncertain what Googling names means.

“Like if we search the names it should pull up any social media accounts, news articles or information on those names,” Truman explains.

“Oh. Then, umm, yeah. Let’s Google them.” But I’m nervous.

What kind of information will there be? What lurid details will I learn? Will I end up hating Papa if I know the truth? I grab the letter and put it between us on the table.

He takes another bite of food. Chews. Swallows. “Are you sure you want to know? I mean, if there’s anything to find out, are you sure you want to know it?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m not sure. But what the hell else am I supposed to do?

Just stay here and live my life until I die?

Or disappear somewhere else and pretend like none of it happened?

I’ve never had a job. Never had a phone, gone to school, we don’t even have a TV here, how the heck would I start a new life somewhere when I barely know anything about the world?

” I finish feeling the weight of my current situation set in.

Truman considers this a moment and then, “Well I could help you if that’s what you want?”

I shake my head again. “I need to know the truth.”

Truman nods. “Okay, let’s do this.”

He spins the letter toward him, and his thumbs start swiping across the screen. I don’t know what to expect or what to hope for. But hope blooms regardless.

Present

Day four.

He's been here with me for three days. and every moment is spent with utmost caution—we both hide away, careful to avoid drawing attention.

I cannot risk anyone catching a glimpse of his coming or going.

In our family, even a fleeting moment of intimacy becomes fodder for whispered inquiries and probing questions.

He lies sleeping in my bed beside me. I gradually slide beneath the blankets, delving ever deeper into the soft embrace of the covers until I position myself between his legs. Skillfully, I free him from the confines of his boxers.

He won't stay much longer and he's been too chicken to touch me in the ways that I want.

.need...because of my injuries. I let my lips trail languidly along the sensitive tip of his cock, savoring the delicate sounds he makes, both a signal of his pleasure and a plea to continue—quiet yet unyielding, like a secret whispered in the dark.

My body still aches.

I'm at his shaft before he's halfway awake.

I move my fingers over him lightly, breathing on the root of him until he's shifting against the mattress and panting a little bit and looking for my face.

"Babe," he says, hopelessly. I hum low around his head—yes, I'm here—and dig my fingers into his thighs. Yes, yes.

One of his hands finds my wrist and squeezes three times soft like don't fucking stop this time. His other hand moves to the back of my neck, urging me on. I let him put pressure on me, let him guide the even, greedy pull of my mouth. I know he won't last long. He flings the blankets off us.

I flick a glance up to his face and his eyes are pinched shut, like he can't quite believe it. He's so beautiful.

I continue my slow, deliberate actions, taking him in a way that makes him shudder long before full wakefulness sets in; I feel the tide of his arousal rising.

"Babe," he whispers again—this time with more urgency—and in that moment, I taste the mingled salt and desire as he trembles, unraveling in the warmth of my throat.

With a lazy, possessive grace, he gathers me close as I crawl up to nestle against his neck,

His fingers ghost over the spot where I'm bruised darkest while our breathing evens out together.

He slides his free hand between my legs.

Fingers push aside my panties. I gasp, and his breath is salty and warm on my cheek.

He makes this low sound in his throat like gravel tumbling down a hill, and I clutch at him like he's the edge of a summer storm, and I want the rain so bad. He brings me to the edge and stops.

I whine. But he settles between my legs with his head low and shoulders tense like a spring trap already sprung. There's a split second where the heat of his breath makes me buck and squirm against sheets.

Then he's licking at me open-mouthed and messy like time is almost up for us.

My back arches, and I moan so loud it surprises the both of us.

He groans in response, digging his fingers into my hips like he's holding on for dear life.

His tongue moves with a furious rhythm that leaves me breathless, dizzy, in a haze of wanting more.

I curl my hands through his hair, tugging him closer, pushing him deeper.

My heart beats like a relentless drum against my ribs.

Underneath my skin, a delicious pressure builds—intensely consuming and molten hot. I ride the wave of passion until I can resist no longer. I ride it until I can't anymore. Then I'm falling hard and fast into white heat, like fireworks behind closed eyes.

He doesn't let up through any of it, keeps going until I'm twitching from the aftershocks and too sensitive to breathe right. Only then does he shift to kiss his way up my stomach, chest, neck—a trail of promises on my skin. When our mouths meet again, he tastes like salt and fire and me.

He looks at me like no one else exists, not in the whole damn world. My hips work toward him, desperate. He slides inside me slowly, deliberately, as though this intimate ritual were a familiar indulgence, each movement leaving me more unraveled in its wake.

Our moans collapse like stars imploding. They're gonna hear us through the walls, across the street, into the city's beating heart. We're breaking rules with every thrust and don't even care. I clutch the sheets as he pulls me deeper, calls me deeper with barely a whisper, but that's all it takes.

"Fuck," he breathes.

My breath catches on a new wave of him, hitting places I forgot I had until now, and his mouth curls up in a smile like he knows he just unlocked something dangerous.

The pressure builds again, relentless and electric, converging like a storm.

It's a decadent kind of madness we cultivate, a reckless kind of chemistry.

He rolls us over without breaking contact, and I straddle him, find my footing like an addict finding faith.

"You're so..." his voice trails off. I move above him with everything that I am—he watches me like I'm the secret to the universe.

Our bodies press and pivot until it's all impossible friction and zero gravity—trouble brewing like a new religion.

Neither of us holds back; we come undone in perfect disarray.

I collapse against him, hair sticking to my slick back.

We're heaving for air and staring at the ceiling like there might be something written up there for us.

His fingers trace lazy patterns on my skin.

When our breathing slows and the room cools from inferno to something survivable, he pulls me close again, almost tender this time. My head fits perfectly in the hollow of his shoulder.

Past

Truman's brow is furrowed, his mouth parted, creating a perfect O shape as he scours the headlines.

"What?" I ask. I stand and drag my chair next to his to read over his shoulder.

He slaps his phone against his chest. "This is bad, Kid. Like, really dark stuff. I don't think you wanna know."

I pierce him with a glare. "This is my life apparently. I definitely want to know, Truman." Unease and indecision flicker across his face. "Just... just tell me."

Truman's shoulders sag and he hands the phone to me. I take it gingerly, anxiety creeping up my spine.

'Crazy' Antonio Scarfo, The Unhinged Mobster Who Started a Mob War; Murdered family identified as FBI investigate biggest Mob Family power grab in decades; Antonio Scarfo, Italian mafia 'massacre mastermind' missing.

My stomach contracts painfully at the headlines. I scroll the page. "Are all these about Papa?" I ask, stunned and confused.

Truman nods. I hand the phone back to him shaking my head. "He never lifted a hand to me. Never once raised his voice in anger really. He was so gentle. Stern, but gentle. I don't understand. It doesn't make any sense."

“Let’s look up your name. See what happens.”

I swallow thickly and nod. “Okay.”

Baby Testa unaccounted for in Testa family massacre; Manhunt for Scarfo related to baby Testa.

The list goes on and on. Truman clicks a button and suddenly the result page is all photos. The picture from the letter appears as well as a handful of others. I gasp.

The family from my nightmare.

“According to the news,” Truman says and points to a photo, “that’s you. And your real family.”

I reach out and touch the photo. A new page loads.

“Oh crap, sorry.” I say. But Truman doesn’t seem irritated.

“No worries. You just opened the article that the picture was featured in. Do you want to read it?”

“Can you read it to me?” I ask. I can’t think straight let alone focus my eyes on the tiny words.

“The man accused of gunning down four members of a Miami Mafia family and two security guards (not identified yet), Antonio Scarfo, had been embroiled in an extensive feud with the family and had once shot at one of them, according to police records obtained by The Times.

Shortly before 10 a.m. on Aug. 6, 2010, Miami-Dade officers responded to a shooting

in the Coconut Grove neighborhood.

They found Dario Testa with his arm around his wife, Bianca, who had her hand around her son, Emilio's, ankle.

Their other son, Alfonso, was face down at the kitchen table in a plate of food, a deputy wrote in a report.

The third Testa Child, Evany, is presumed missing.

After gunning down Dario, 40; Bianca, 33; Emilio, 10; and Alfonso, 7, Scarfo fled the home, it is thought, with Evany, 3. ”

My stomach roils and I feel as though I'm going to be sick. I put my hand over my mouth but Truman keeps reading.

“Scarfo has an active warrant for his arrest on six counts of murder and a series of special allegations including aggravated homicide, larceny, assault, racketeering, extortion, trafficking, and now kidnapping. The Scarfo family is the one of the wealthiest organized crime families in the nation. It is believed the Scarfo hit on the Testa family was a power grab within the organized syndicate.”

What kind of people do this sort of thing? Vomit rises and I lunge for the sink and wretch. Truman looks to me. I sniffle and turn to him.

“I'm ok. Keep going.”

He wrinkles his brow but continues. “Leonardo Testa, Dario's younger brother, 34, has released a statement on behalf of the surviving extended family members.

‘We are devastated over the loss of my brother and his family. We have a tip line set

up and a hundred-thousand-dollar reward for the safe return of my niece Evany. If you have any information regarding the crime, please call 1-888-555-TIPS.’”

“Kid, this is huge. This is... wild . You’re definitely in over your head. I really think we should call the cops. They might put you in WIT SEC or something. This is straight up a movie plot.”

“What’s WIT SEC?” I ask.

“Witness protection. They give you a new identity and set you up with a new life to keep you off the radar and safe. Like instead of Kid...wait, what’s your last name?”

I stare at him, mind whirling.

“Um, I don’t know,” I say slowly. It never occurred to me before now. It’s always been me and Papa. No school, no friends, so no need to ever bring up a last name. “Why would I need that? I didn’t do anything. I was three! I was kidnapped.”

Truman stares at me like I have three heads. “I don’t know. You really don’t have a last name? What’s your dad put on the utility bills? Where’s your birth certificate or social security card? I’m just... talking. I gotta go home. We need a laptop. Do you have wifi?”

My brain hurts at all the words coming out of his mouth. Everything feels like it’s closing in on me. The cabin walls, my bones and skin. I’m suffocating.

“What? Internet? No.” Truman’s face falls.

“Crap. Ok. Well...we could go to the library. Use their computers. I think we need more information on the Testa and Scarfo families. I mean, they’re mafia...”

you can't just waltz into that world and reconnect with them.

Why would you even want to? That's like, so dangerous. ”

“I don't really know what the mafia is,” I say.

Truman's cheeks puff out and he blows out a breath.

“This is above my pay grade. We need research and information. My parents are at work. I've got some movies you should see, and then we need to hit the library and print off all the information we can so we can come back here and read through it all.
”

“I...”

“Kid,” Truman slaps the table, the sharp sound makes me jump. “You're not leaving this town until you have all the information to make a solid decision.”

I stare at Truman, mind spinning. I had never questioned my past before, never doubted the life Papa had created for me. But now, learning my family's violent history, I feel lost, adrift.

“I don't know anything,” I say softly. “My whole life has been a lie.”

Truman's expression softens. He reaches across the table and takes my hand in his.

“I know this is a lot,” he says gently.

I take a deep breath and nod. “Okay. Where do we start?”

“Let's go to my house. I've got some movies that will help explain the Mafia and

give you an idea of what we're dealing with.

Truman stands and tugs me to my feet. As we walk to his house, questions swarm my mind. Who was my real family? Why did Papa kill them? Was he forced or did he act of his own volition?

Either way, how could the man who lovingly braided my hair and kissed my skinned knees have committed such brutality?

Present

He is gone.

My apartment is silent, but his presence lingers like a ghost. The faint scent of his cologne clings stubbornly to my sheets despite my attempts to ignore it.

In the kitchen, a solitary glass sits in the sink, a remnant from when he insisted I drink water before he left.

His absence feels like a deep wound, a gash in my world that I stubbornly refuse to acknowledge.

Because tonight, I'm back where I belong.

I sit at the long mahogany dining table in the opulent Testa estate, my wine glass balanced delicately between two fingers.

Around me, the murmur of low voices fills the room, a symphony of whispered power.

The grand chandelier overhead throws a golden glow, illuminating the faces of the men who silently control this city.

At the head of the table sits Uncle Leo, his face a mask of neutrality as he listens intently to the reports pouring in.

The food is decadent, the wine expensive, but the real feast is the conversation. Deals are made between bites of filet mignon. Death sentences are whispered over half-drunk glasses of whiskey. And tonight, the topic of choice is blood.

I twirl the stem of my wine glass between my fingers, my face carefully neutral as Leo Testa leans back in his chair, surveying the room. The air is thick with cigar smoke, with power, with the casual ease of men discussing destruction.

“Viggo Scarfo won’t be a problem for a while,” Marco smirks, reaching for the bottle of scotch. “If he can still call himself a man after what was done to him.”

Laughter rumbles around the table. I let my lips curve into a smirk, though I taste nothing but acid.

“And Roberto Leonetti?” one of the older men asks, his voice thick with curiosity. “That was clean work. A professional hit.”

A hum of agreement passes through the gathering. I’m irked that Leo seems to be gloating in the fact that he ordered these hits but kept them all secret. That he ordered me to do these things.

“Someone is sending a message,” Leo muses, tapping a slow rhythm against his glass. His dark eyes flick across the table. “And our sources say the Falcone’s are feeling the heat. Rocco and Alessio are laying low.”

Someone? He’s the one sending the message, just no one knows it but me.

I don’t react, don’t flinch, don’t let them see the way my pulse spikes at those names, at what I’ve done.

Leo holds my gaze, daring me to say something.

I don't. I sip my wine, swallowing down the satisfaction that he mistakenly thinks he has the upper hand.

Inadvertently, he's given me everything I need.

Targeting the sons.

The next generation of power.

And the bosses—foolish, arrogant men—will never let their legacies be touched. They'll come together, forced to act in a way they never would for their men, their women, their soldiers.

They'll come together for their sons.

For their names.

The Commission will have no choice but to meet.

And once they're all in one place... I'll be closer than I've ever been to revenge.

Uncle Leo sits across from me at the polished mahogany table, his salt-and-pepper hair meticulously combed back and his tailored suit without a wrinkle. He scans the room with the calm authority of a King, lifting his glass of whiskey to his lips, savoring each sip as if assessing his vast domain.

Inside me, rage unfurls like a slow-burning fuse, simmering just beneath the surface, waiting for the moment to explode.

He ordered the execution of my biological parents. Had my brothers—brothers I don't even remember—slaughtered before they had a chance to live. But Papa trained

me. And Uncle Leo's spent every day since I returned shaping me into something useful, something sharp, something deadly.

I curl my fingers around the cool, smooth surface of the glass, feeling the subtle chill seep into my palm. My breath escapes in a measured, steady stream, as if releasing the tension with each exhale.

Patience, I remind myself, as I stare intently at the swirling liquid inside.

I can't strike until I can burn it all to the ground.

Past

At Truman's house, we settled onto the couch with a pile of mafia movies between us and a bowl of popcorn. Popcorn that he made in a metal box called a microwave. He laughed at me when I stood and watched the bag expand, spinning on a little plate inside.

His parents were at work, and we had time, seven hours to watch what we could, he said. The day faded away into evening as we watched *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*, and some of *The Sopranos*. The movies portray the mafia as ruthless, but they also show the love they had for their families.

I couldn't reconcile the two images.

"This is... intense," I mutter, my stomach churning from the graphic violence and betrayal depicted on screen.

Truman squeezes my hand. "Yeah, it's not pretty," he says grimly. "Are you sure you want to get involved with them?"

I glance at him, my brown eyes searching his green ones for answers he doesn't have. "I don't know if I have a choice," I say truthfully.

At five, we left. I promised him I would show him how popcorn was really supposed to be made when we got back to the cabin. I watched as he wrote a note for his parents—lying again, saying he was sleeping over at a friend's house.

Although, was I friend? Maybe we were. Maybe it wasn't a lie. We detoured to the library, they were closing soon, but Truman managed to snag a computer and print out a bunch of articles he found about the four families so we could bring them back and read them. So we could learn more.

By six thirty, we'd returned to the cabin and Truman looked beat.

"Do you always walk to town? It's so far," he says wiping sweat from his brow.

I snort and shake my head. "No, I usually only walk to the truck and drive it into town."

He throws his hands up in the air before collapsing onto the couch. "Why the heck have we been walking then?"

I shrug. "It slipped my mind. I wasn't really thinking about it. But honestly, what if those guys were still around and saw his truck?"

Truman stares at me. "Ok, fair point."

"Here, let me get you some water," I say, heading to the kitchen.

I pause for a moment, thinking of my papa and how he'd react if he saw me now—caring for this outsider boy, letting him into our home and our lives.

"Thanks, Kid," Truman says, gulping his down.

"No problem." I sit beside him on the couch. "So, you wanna learn how to make real popcorn or what?"

His eyes light up and he grins. I retrieve a pot from the kitchen and place it on the

stove, drizzling the bottom with oil. Truman watches intently as I add the kernels and turn the heat to medium.

“Now we let the kernels dance and pop in the oil,” I explain. “Gotta keep ‘em moving so they don’t burn.”

“No microwave, no buttons to push,” Truman remarks. “I like it.”

I smile. “Wait till you taste it.”

We retreat to the living room with a bowl of salted and buttered popcorn with some sprinkled nutritional yeast and our printed articles.

“Do you think the Mafia is really like the movies?” I ask while grabbing a handful of popcorn.

Truman shrugs. “I mean, maybe? I don’t know. I guess it could be less violent, but then again, it might be worse than they make it seem too.”

I heave out a sigh. “None of this feels real.”

Articles are spread out haphazardly around us in the living room.

“Most of these seem to be covered by one reporter,” he says, squinting at a page. “An investigative reporter named Marcy Saviano. Let me look her up real quick.”

I scrub my hands over my face, tired and feeling heavy. Truman’s been at it all day and night and shows no signs of stopping. My eyes are heavy and my chest feels tight.

Too much information. Too much gore.

Too much truth.

“I need a break,” I whisper.

Truman’s gaze flicks to mine. An apologetic look on his face.

“I’m sorry.” He shakes his head. “This is like a movie, and I kinda forget that it’s not fiction, that this is your truth. Your life.” He sets his phone down. “Do you want to do something? Play another game?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know.” I slap my thighs in frustration. “I don’t know what I want to do or what I should be doing.” I push to my feet. Pace the room. Pent-up anger, betrayal, and grief war for a home in my gut. Tears prick at my eyes. I spin around wildly, a cry slipping through my lips.

Suddenly, Truman is there, in front of me. Pulling me against his hard, board body.

“Breathe, Kid,” he murmurs into my hair. “Just breathe.” I sink into him, gulping air. The scent of his skin—grass cuttings and summer sweat—calms me. My legs give out but he holds my weight easily. Steadies me.

“This is just—the horror,” I say into his chest. “How? How did I not know any of this?”

“How could you? It’s not your fault.” He peels back slightly, looks in my eyes. “Imagine if you hadn’t met me. You’d be all alone in this,” he says and grins playfully.

I huff out a sigh and stifle the urge to roll my eyes back at him, but the truth of his

words isn't lost on me. Where would I have gone? What would I be doing right now if not for him? This glorious boy with the ability to calm and comfort and soothe me. He is all I have in the world.

"I have an idea that might make you feel better. Do you trust me?"

Nodding, I take a step away from him, slightly embarrassed at our embrace.

The water is dark and cool, rippling under the moonlight. He's taken me to the river, although not by the bridge in town. A secluded spot where it pools more than flows.

He'd asked me to trust him, and I had. Especially when he'd mentioned needing the truck keys.

I hesitate on the edge, toying with the hem of my shirt.

Truman's already kicked off his shoes and waded in calf-deep, waving for me to hurry.

Watching me intensely. He'd stripped off his clothes like it was nothing.

As if seeing him in only his underwear didn't affect me.

It did. It made my body react in ways I wasn't accustomed to.

"Come on!" he calls, his grin a challenge.

I take a deep breath and peel off my shorts, inching toward the water like it might burn.

Truman splashes ahead, goading me further until I'm hip-deep.

The sudden chill cuts through my despair like a knife, sharp and shocking.

But his eyes are locked on my body as if he's trying to memorize every inch.

"See? Told you," he says with a laugh, diving under and popping up beside me, his hair slicked back and dripping. "Feels good to do something normal, right?"

For a moment, it does. I float on my back and stare at the sky.

It's dark and velvety—more stars than normal shining—and empty of anything but possibility.

Truman swims lazy circles around me, and slowly, the day that was pressing against my skull begins to evaporate.

His arm or leg ever so often grazing mine. Giving me goosebumps.

"You know," he says, treading water closer to me now. "I think that reporter—what was her name? Marcy Saviano?—we should talk to her."

I stare at him in shock. "Didn't you hear me? I said I needed a break!"

"Yeah," he says, grinning sheepishly. "But isn't this kind of exciting too?"

He splashes water at me lightly, just enough to make me blink and realize I'm smiling back at him.

He grabs my waist, tugs me under the rippling water.

His warm hands against the flesh of my belly send a jolt of heat between my legs.

I've never been touched like this before. It's a warm and gooey feeling.

I fight against him as we sink, hold my breath and then finally kick to the surface, gasping. "You scared me!" But there's no anger in my voice. Just laughter.

"Sorry," he says, and he's laughing too. "Seriously though."

"Promise me," I say, treading water and trying to look stern.

"Oh." He gives me a nod, solemn. "Promise."

"No more articles tonight?" I ask.

"Tonight is for floating," he says, hands outstretched. There's a glint in his eye, playful and mischievous. "Mostly on your back."

We drift until our skin wrinkles and the night air no longer feels refreshing but cold. It reminds me of things I can't push away. Of Truman's warmth. Of everything waiting at the cabin, the potential energy of pages lined up on the floor, ready to tumble my world even more like dominoes.

There are still news clippings stuck to the bottom of my socks when I wake up on the couch the next morning, Truman asleep beside me.

I let him rest while I busy myself around the small kitchen, making toast with peanut butter. When he finally stirs, groggy-eyed, he looks around like he's forgotten where he is.

Then his eyes find mine.

"God," he says with a smile. "Still not a dream?"

“You promised,” I remind him.

“Okay! Okay.” Truman holds up his hands, laughing sheepishly. “Breakfast first.”

Present

The boutique smells of leather and expensive perfume, the kind of place where both are custom, and the sales associates pretend they don't hear the whispers between women with last names that carry weight.

Lucia Falcone stands in front of a wall of handbags, her manicured fingers brushing over the smooth Italian leather of a deep emerald clutch.

The color is bold, rich, the kind a woman like her should wear with pride.

But her eyes are dull when she looks at it.

She knows I'm watching her. She has since we stepped into this store together, since I suggested a shopping trip after calling in an old favor. Tense, wary, like a cornered animal waiting for the trap to snap shut.

"I didn't expect you to reach out," she says finally, lifting the clutch and turning it over in her hands. Her tone is even, practiced, but I don't miss the way her fingers tremble slightly on the gold clasp. "The Testas and Falcones aren't exactly friendly these days."

I keep my expression neutral, tilting my head as if considering the statement. "The daughters of the families have always understood things differently than the men, haven't we?"

Lucia lets out a quiet breath, something close to a bitter laugh. "That's true."

I pick up a sleek black purse, examining the fine stitching. “And sometimes, it’s good to have a friend.”

Her lips press together, and for a moment, I think she’ll push back. But then she exhales, setting the clutch down. “Friendships not something we get the luxury of, Evany.”

No. We get alliances. We get calculated moves and delicate dances. We get survival.

I glance at her reflection in the floor-length mirror.

She’s stunning, the way all the mafia wives are expected to be—dark waves falling over her shoulders, curves that are meant to be displayed and envied.

But the makeup on her face is too heavy today, a little too perfect.

And when she turns slightly, I catch it.

A bruise, faint beneath the layers of foundation, just at the edge of her jaw.

Something inside me goes cold.

I set the purse down carefully. “Are you okay?”

She stiffens. It’s the slightest reaction, but I see it in the way her shoulders lock up, in the way she reaches for another bag like it’s something to anchor herself to. “Of course.”

I don’t look away. “Lucia.”

She hesitates, her fingers curling around the strap of a navy-blue handbag. The

silence stretches. And then, so quietly I almost miss it, she says, “It’s mostly fine.”

Mostly.

The word grates against my nerves.

“Marriage is... an adjustment,” she adds, forcing a small smile. “But Rocco and Alessio are out most nights at Diamond Club, so I have the house to myself. It’s not so bad.”

Diamond Club. My mind locks onto the name instantly.

Lucia’s gaze flicks to mine in the mirror. “Why did you really ask me to come out today?”

I hold her stare, considering my answer. If I tell her the truth, she might warn them. If I lie, she’ll know.

So I choose something in between. “Because I know what it’s like to feel trapped.”

Relief flickers in her eyes, but it’s raw and fleeting, before she masks it with a scoff. “You? Please.”

I arch a brow.

She turns to face me fully, folding her arms across her chest. “You don’t get it, Evany.

You were never made to be someone’s wife.

Your uncle made you into a weapon, not property.

I had one role—be beautiful, be obedient, and birth the next generation of Falcones.

” She shakes her head, jaw tight. “Do you know what that’s like? ”

My throat tightens. Because, in a way, I do.

“I don’t envy you,” she murmurs, voice quieter now. “I admire you.”

That stuns me. I expected resentment. Expected jealousy, maybe even bitterness. But admiration?

Lucia huffs out a breath and shakes her head, like she’s shaking off whatever moment of honesty just slipped free. “Come on. Let’s get lunch.”

I nod, falling into step beside her. But as we leave the boutique, one thing is clear.

Lucia isn’t the kind of woman who would protect her husband.

And Rocco just became a much easier target.

I step into Il Fiore with Lucia, the hush of the restaurant a stark contrast to the chaos brewing in my head.

The place is upscale—white linen tablecloths, crystal stemware, waiters moving with quiet efficiency.

The scent of truffle oil and fresh bread lingers in the air, wrapping around us like a warm invitation.

Lucia walks beside me, her posture perfect, her movements elegant, but I don’t miss the tension in her shoulders. She’s used to playing a role—doll-like wife, silent

possession. She wears it well, but I can see the fractures beneath the surface.

We're led to a booth tucked away in the back, away from curious eyes and eager ears.

Privacy is a luxury in our world, one that's rarely granted without intention.

The waiter pours us both glasses of Barolo without asking, because of course, they already know what we'll be drinking.

I lift my glass, watching Lucia over the rim as she does the same.

"To marriage," she says, her voice dry.

"To survival," I counter, because that's all this is.

She smirks but doesn't argue, taking a sip before setting the glass down. "I suppose you want to ask about my husband."

I lean back, tilting my head. "I don't care about Rocco." It's not a lie. He's nothing to me but a means to an end.

Lucia lets out a soft laugh, but there's no humor in it. "Of course you don't. But you still want to know, don't you?"

I don't pretend to misunderstand. I set my glass down and glance at her, at the bruises she's tried so hard to hide. "Yeah," I say quietly. "I do."

She exhales, her fingers tracing the rim of her glass. "It's not as bad as you think."

I arch a brow. "So he only hits you when you deserve it?"

Lucia flinches, just barely, but I catch it. She glares at me, but there's something tired in her eyes that says she's too used to this. "You wouldn't understand."

"No," I agree. "I wouldn't."

She shakes her head, reaching for a piece of bread, tearing it apart like it's personally offended her. "It's not like I had a choice."

None of us do. That's the unspoken truth.

"Why do you admire me?" I ask, not bothering to soften the words.

Lucia looks up sharply, eyes flashing. "Why wouldn't I? You get to be something. You get to be someone. My father—he groomed me to be a good wife, a good pawn. Your uncle made you a real part of the family."

I swirl the wine in my glass, watching the deep red liquid catch the dim lighting. "You think that's better?"

Lucia leans in slightly, lowering her voice. "I think it means you get to fight back."

A beat of silence stretches between us, heavy with what neither of us say. She's right about one thing. At least I get to carve my own way out.

"I suppose you're right. But being right has consequences."

She eyes me warily as our lunches are set down in front of us. "What does that mean?"

"It means I was never here."

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Past

T ruman goes home. Says his parents won't be okay with him spending two nights away.

Says that he'll stop at the library later and see if there's more to print off and go over. Find out more about Marcy. The sight of him walking away does funny things to my gut. I busy myself with the chickens and goats, purposely avoiding the matted grass where Papa's body last was.

In the ruckus of the barn, I let myself break down. The goats circle me, crying out alongside me. They nudge and prod at me with their snouts, uncertain what to make of me.

I clean up the cabin. Read some of the articles on my own, anger growing with each new word I read.

Anger at these families. These monstrous people who commit heinous acts.

The emotion festers inside me. I'm flushed and dizzy, my chest tight with it.

I want to strip from them what they've stripped from me. And I could, couldn't I?

Isn't this what Papa trained me for? To be ruthless and cunning? Don't I have the skills to fit right into their life? Right under their noses and secure my revenge from inside their world?

A headache worms itself into my temples.

By the evening, the sky is a bruise of purples and grays.

My head throbs in rhythm with the crickets' chirps, mocking me with their persistent song.

I try to eat a cold dinner, knowing I need to keep my strength up for whatever comes next.

Knowing Papa would insist I be disciplined enough to not let my anger get the better of me.

Darkness settles over the cabin like a heavy quilt. With it comes a thick loneliness that fills up the small space, spilling into every corner. I turn on the radio and let its tuned-out buzz keep me company while I straighten the papers, scanning them once more.

I find myself wishing for Truman, seemingly my only ally, only outlet in all of this grief and anger.

Sleep eludes me.

I get up before sunlight finds the horizon, making lists in my head about what needs doing—what comes after chicken feed and goat milk? How far am I willing to take this? I make myself something to eat.

Outside, a dull yellow grows above the trees when I hear footsteps through the open windows. My heart lurches before my brain can catch up. A figure emerges from the brush, breathing hard.

I grab the pistol, check to make sure it's loaded and that the safety is off.

Truman holds up his hands in surrender when I push open the door, gun aimed at his chest.

"I know! It's barely light yet."

A wave of relief sweeps through me.

"Mom wanted to make sure you didn't starve without proper food." He hefts a bag, shaking his head at the improbability of it all. "I mean, it's not proper food at all, it's just snacks, really, but still..."

I tuck the gun into the waistband of my pajama bottoms and grin.

Truman breezes past me straight into the kitchen and begins unloading the goods. When everything is out on the table, he turns to me.

"The gun's a little much, don't you think?"

I give him a sheepish smile. "Sorry."

"Were you scared, alone last night?"

I shake my head. "Not really. Just didn't know who was coming. Better safe than sorry right?" I set the gun on the table.

Truman shrugs then wraps his arms around me. "I'm sorry I couldn't be here."

His arms feel just right holding me. I relax into them slightly as he rubs my back.

Truman wants to make a plan.

To go to the FBI.

Tell them who I am .

“The day he died, that was the day you had to stop looking to him for any answers. You’ve gotta figure it out for yourself now,” he says.

“He wouldn’t want that. He said as much in his letter.”

“He’s not the boss anymore.”

I glare at him. “Don’t talk about him like that to me.”

Truman throws his hands up in surrender.

“Sorry,” he says.

We’re lying on the living room floor when it happens. We’re talking. Truman’s telling me that in a month he leaves for college. That he was excited to go—couldn’t wait, but now the idea of leaving me alone here, makes him upset.

“Come with me,” he says.

I roll my head to the side to look at him. “What?”

“Get on the bus with me. Come to South Carolina. We can make a stop in North Carolina too, see if we can meet with that journalist, Marcy.”

“I can’t just come with you. Where would I live? What would I do?”

But the thought ignites a deep curiosity in my belly. See more of this world. Experience anything besides this cabin in the clearing and this tiny town.

Truman props himself up on an elbow and stares at me. His gaze feels charged and oppressing.

“I have a single. That means no roommate. I can sneak you in. You can stay with me.”

He pushes an escaped strand of my wavy hair out of my face. I suck in a sharp breath. He leans in, slowly, until his mouth is inches from mine.

Truman freezes, his eyes searching mine for the permission he already knows I’m going to give. We lean into each other until our lips touch. My head spins in the way I imagine what falling feels like—floating and tumbling all at the same time. Just the way it reads in one of my books.

My body’s buzzing. Truman pulls away, his eyes locked on mine. We’re both smiling like idiots and I can’t make it stop. I don’t want it to.

“Maybe,” I whisper, more a breath than a word. “I’ll consider it.”

He flops back onto the floor beside me, an exhale of relief, and we lie there quietly, a mess of arms and legs.

“I didn’t think you’d agree,” he finally admits.

“I didn’t think you’d kiss me.”

Truman kisses me like he’s memorizing every inch of my mouth, like the world could end any second, and he wants to make sure he’s tasted every single moment of me

first. His hands cradle my face, rough but careful, like I'm breakable—precious.

When we finally pull apart, I'm breathless, my lips tingling from the heat of him. He presses his forehead to mine, eyes dark and searching.

"I never asked, when's your birthday? You're eighteen soon right?"

I swallow hard, suddenly shy under the intensity of his gaze. "Tomorrow, actually."

His whole body tenses, then softens, and something unreadable flickers across his face. "Jesus, Kid," he breathes, shaking his head like he can't believe it. "You should've told me."

I shrug, feeling small but not in a bad way.

His fingers tighten just slightly, like he wants to argue, but instead, he just kisses me again—softer this time, slower, like he's savoring me.

"It's important," he says against my lips.

Truman helps me with the goats, his big, capable hands surprisingly gentle as he rubs down the smallest one, making sure she's warm enough.

He helps me gather eggs, careful not to break a single one, even when I catch him watching me with an expression close to awe in his eyes.

It makes my stomach flip, the way he looks at me—like I'm good—a person worth looking at.

We sit in the yard after chores, legs stretched out, sipping sweet tea while the sun starts its slow descent behind the hills.

That's when he finds it—the journalist's contact information, in one of the pages he printed out at the library.

He types out an email on his phone, hands shaking just a little, telling her we need to talk.

That we have information she might want. That we need her help.

Then we wait.

Present

The Diamond Club pulses with low, sultry lighting and the kind of exclusivity that keeps outsiders at bay.

The air is thick with perfume and cigars, the underlying scent of whiskey and sweat mixing with the thudding bass of deep house music.

Rocco and Alessio Falcone hold court in the VIP section, surrounded by women who drape themselves over their laps like expensive accessories.

While his wife is at home nursing her bruises.

They think they own this place. They think they're untouchable.

I blend into the opulence, wrapped in a deep crimson dress that hugs my curves but allows for movement.

The silk clings like blood on skin, the thigh slit high enough to conceal the compact pistol strapped to my garter.

My red wig is swept into a sleek, effortless chignon, my makeup sultry but understated.

I'm just another wealthy woman in this crowd, another anonymous figure in the dimly lit world of the powerful and corrupt.

No one notices as I slip through the bodies on the dance floor.

My heels are high enough to be elegant but low enough to run in.

Every detail of my presence is intentional—every glance, every shift of my posture, every sip of the untouched whiskey glass in my hand.

I take my time, letting the moment stretch, letting my target settle deeper into his arrogance.

Rocco lounges like a king, legs sprawled, a hand around a brunette's throat as he murmurs something into her ear. She giggles, leaning into his touch. Alessio, his younger brother, watches the club with the lazy half-interest of a man who's never had to fear for his life.

I move closer, taking a seat at the empty bar stool a few feet away. I let my presence be felt—just a brush of awareness, something to make Rocco look up, to notice me. When he does, he smirks.

“Now that's a face I didn't expect to see here.” His voice is slick with confidence, his eyes dragging over me like I belong to him already.

I let my lips curve just slightly, just enough to keep him interested. “Maybe you haven't been paying attention.”

Alessio chuckles beside him, nursing a drink. “Or maybe you're looking for some real Italian Stallion?”

I tilt my head. “Maybe I've been waiting.”

The air shifts. Rocco leans forward, elbows braced on his knees. “That so? Waiting

for what?”

“For the right opportunity.” I sip my drink, keeping my gaze level. “For the right company.”

He grins, cocky and assured. He thinks I’m here for him. He doesn’t see the trap closing around him, not yet.

I watch their movements, waiting for the exact moment they drop their guard. Rocco signals for another drink. Alessio shifts, angling himself toward a passing waitress, his attention momentarily broken. I slide the gun from its holster. Screw the silencer onto the barrel.

That’s when I move.

Smooth. Unseen. This is how professionals work. No grand gestures. No wasted movement. The bullets are designed to expand and fragment on impact—no ballistics, no traceable evidence.

The first shot buries itself in Rocco’s shoulder. His body jerks, twisting as the bullet explodes through his collarbone. The force sends him staggering back, a look of pure shock frozen on his face.

Before he can recover, I fire again.

The third bullet rips through Alessio’s thigh, shattering bone, decimating muscle. He crumples, a strangled sound escaping his lips as he clutches his leg. Blood pools instantly, dark and thick against the marble floor. He’ll bleed out in minutes.

Panic erupts around us. Screams, scrambling bodies. People duck, tables overturn. The music stutters before cutting off entirely. I stand in the middle of it all,

unmoving. Calm.

Rocco tries to right himself, his good hand pressing against one wound, his breath ragged. His eyes meet mine, wide with fury and disbelief.

“What the fuck—”

I step closer, crouching just enough to meet his gaze. “Shh.”

His chest rises and falls in sharp, uneven gasps. He’s in pain. Good.

Alessio thrashes weakly, the blood loss making him sluggish. He tries to reach for his own weapon, but his fingers tremble too much to close around it. His mouth works soundlessly, as if he’s trying to understand how this happened, how someone got the drop on them here, in their own playground.

I lean in, my voice low enough that only they can hear. “For Lucia.”

Then I’m gone, slipping through the chaos like a ghost. The shadows swallow me whole before anyone can get a good look. The club security is too slow, the patrons too focused on saving themselves. I walk out the back entrance, into the cool night air, my heartbeat steady, my breathing even.

There’s a sourness in my gut, rotting me from the inside out, and I don’t know how to staunch it. My carefully curated life feels hollow and unfulfilling. But this is what needed to be done.

Now, the Commission will have no choice. They’ll come together to protect their sons, their legacies.

Because that’s what foolish men do.

And when they do, I'll be waiting.

Past

Days pass with no response from Marcy, but Truman makes sure I barely notice.

He holds my hand when we walk the property, his thumb tracing slow, lazy circles against my skin like he doesn't even realize he's doing it.

He picks wildflowers for me, tucking them behind my ear with this small, secret smile like he knows something I don't.

He brings me treats—chocolate chip cookies, fresh peaches, little things he knows I love.

And he kisses me. God, does he kiss me.

Somewhere in the quiet of those days, I realize something: Truman isn't just filling the time. He's making it matter. He's showing me—without words, without grand declarations—that he's here. That he sees me. That I'm not just some orphaned soul flailing alone in the universe.

Marcy finally replies, setting a date and place to meet. Terror washes through me. Life crashing down on me, reality bisecting fantasy from real life.

“What if she goes to the police?” I ask. “What if she turns me in?”

Truman leans into me, kisses my forehead.

“Don’t freak out yet. This is just a meeting. You don’t have to tell her anything you don’t want too. Let’s just see what she’s like,” he says.

I nod.

Truman surprises me with a trip to the movies.

I’ve never been to a theater before, never sat in a seat that reclines or felt the rumble of sound vibrating through my chest. It’s overwhelming in the best way.

The lights dim, and Truman takes my hand, lacing our fingers together.

He doesn’t let go, not even when the screen flickers to life.

I steal glances at him in the glow of the film, memorizing the shape of his jaw, the way his lashes cast shadows on his cheek. I don’t know if the movie is any good because I’m too caught up in this—his warmth beside me, his thumb brushing over mine, the sheer wonder of being here with him.

Afterward, he takes me for ice cream.

“You have to get at least two flavors,” he insists, grinning as we scan the rows of options.

“I don’t know,” I say, overwhelmed by the choices. “Which ones are best?”

“Depends,” he says, pretending to study me. “You seem like a classic chocolate kind of girl.”

I elbow him lightly. “Is that an insult.”

He laughs, then orders for both of us—one scoop of honey lavender, one of chocolate chip cookie dough.

“You need a little bit of adventure and a little bit of comfort,” he tells me as we sit outside, the night air cool against my skin.

I take a bite of the lavender, surprised at the floral sweetness. “It tastes like sunshine.”

Truman watches me, his expression soft. “Yeah,” he murmurs, “it does.”

Truman folds me into his life, into his family over the next weeks. Easily as mixing chocolate chips into batter.

When I spend time with Truman’s family, his mom is kind, gentle in a way that makes my heart ache. His dad is often at work but the few times he’s been around he’s been warm, too.

Kenzie, his fifteen-year-old sister, chatters at me about school, about books she loves, about the bracelet she made. She makes me one, too. She asks me to go back to school shopping with her. I love her spirit. Her playfulness. I hope she never loses it.

Nate, the youngest, is a ruckus wild child. Always a joke or playful jab at his brother’s expense.

It feels strange, being here, surrounded by a family that isn’t mine. I miss Papa so much it hurts, but at the same time, I feel like I’m slowly finding my way.

That night, Truman and I sit on the porch, the stars stretching wide above us.

“We need a plan,” he says, his voice low and steady. “If you’re coming with me, we have to tell my parents something when they send me off. And see you on the same

bus.”

I nod, curling my legs beneath me. “That I’m going to school too?” I suggest. “Not the same one, but the same area. I hate the idea of lying.”

His hand finds mine in the dark, his fingers intertwine with mine. “Are you scared?”

I glance at him, my chest tightening. “A little,” I admit. “But not as much as I would be if I had to stay here alone.”

His grip tightens. “You’re not alone.” His voice is rough with emotion. “You have me.”

The weight of those words settles deep inside me, warming the coldest parts of my heart.

I squeeze his hand back. “I know.”

The next day I use some of Papa’s money to buy a bus ticket.

The last week of August comes faster than I expect, and before I know it, we’re standing at the bus station with Truman’s family, their goodbyes clinging to the humid morning air like the scent of his mother’s lavender perfume.

They are emotional—bereft almost. I wonder if this would have happened between Papa and I if we were given the chance.

Kenzie hugs me so tight I can barely breathe. “Text me,” she demands. “Every day.”

“I don’t have a phone,” I remind her, laughing softly.

She pulls back, glaring at Truman. “Fix that.”

“I will,” he promises, then nudges her playfully. “Keep an eye on Nate for me, yeah?”

“Duh.” She rolls her eyes but wipes at them when she thinks no one’s looking.

Truman’s mom embraces him next, whispering something only he can hear. His jaw tightens, but when he pulls away, he presses a kiss to her cheek. A promise in its own way. Nate—who’s been quiet this whole time—shuffles up to me last. He kicks at the concrete, scuffing his sneakers.

“Don’t let him be too bossy,” he mutters.

I grin. “Oh, I won’t.”

Truman snorts. “Like I’ve ever bossed you around.”

Nate hugs me quickly before darting back to his mom’s side. And then it’s time.

We step onto the bus, and as I settle into my seat beside Truman, I turn and press my hand to the window. I watch as his family waves, getting smaller and smaller as the bus pulls away. My heart squeezes.

And then—just like that—we’re gone. Leaving Moffitt. The only place I’ve ever lived. The only people I’ve ever known.

The only home I’ve ever had.

The world stretches wide outside the window, more than I ever imagined. I press my forehead to the glass, watching fields and forests blur past. Every town, every city,

every flickering neon sign is a new story I've never read.

Truman shifts beside me. "You good?"

I nod. "I've just never been anywhere."

He drapes an arm over the back of my seat, close but not caging. Protective, but gentle. "You're not scared?"

I think about it. "No." I glance at him. "Are you?"

His lips twitch. "Of course not."

I hum, unconvinced. "You sure? You're awfully quiet."

"I'm thinking."

I grin at him. "Dangerous."

His fingers find my braid, tugging lightly. "Smart ass." His face dips down, his lips finding mine. A ghost of a kiss. "It's a new adventure."

The bus rumbles on. I keep watching, memorizing, cataloging. The colors of the buildings, the curve of the hills, the way the light shifts as the sun rises higher. At one point, we pass a massive bridge, and I grab Truman's arm without thinking.

"Holy hell," I breathe. "That's a big river."

His chest rumbles with laughter. He tucks a piece of hair behind my ear, his touch lingering. "You're cute when you're amazed."

I huff, crossing my arms. “It seems I’m always amazed.”

“That’s what I mean.”

I shake my head, but there’s warmth in my chest.

For hours, I lose myself in the movement, the miles, the newness of it all. But somewhere in the quiet lull of the ride, when Truman dozes off beside me, my mind drifts back home. To Papa.

He should’ve been here.

He should’ve been the one to send me off, to hug me and tell me to be safe, to remind me I could always come back. Instead, all I have is the ghost of his voice in my head, the aching emptiness where he used to be. Be safe and stay alert.

I squeeze my eyes shut, pressing my knuckles hard against my mouth, fighting the sob that wants to rise.

Then Truman shifts, waking, and without a word, he reaches for my hand. Laces our fingers together like he already knew.

I grip him like a lifeline.

We don’t speak. We don’t have to.

I just hold on.

By the time we reach North Carolina, the sky is a warm orange. Truman and I step off the bus with our bags, stretching our legs. His parents gave him money to purchase necessities when he arrives so that he wouldn’t have to haul a boat load of

belongings with him on the bus.

“She said she’d meet us at a café near the station,” he says, scanning his phone.

We walk a few blocks, the city humming with life. I stare at everything—the people, the traffic lights, the way the streets seem to breathe with movement. It’s overwhelming, but Truman stays close, his palm resting against my lower back like an anchor.

We spot Marcy before she spots us. She looks younger than I expected, with sharp eyes and a leather notebook clutched in her hand. She’s tapping furiously at her phone when we approach.

Truman clears his throat. “Marcy?”

She looks up, assessing us in a blink. “Truman and Kid, I presume.”

I nod. “That’s us.”

She waves us inside, gesturing toward a booth in the corner. “Come on. Let’s talk.”

Truman slides in beside me, close but relaxed. I know better, though—he’s watching, assessing, making sure she’s trustworthy.

She folds her arms, leaning in. “So. What made you reach out?”

I glance at Truman, and he nods.

“I think you have an idea.”

Her lips curve slightly. “Maybe. But I want to hear it from you.”

I meet her gaze, steady. “I want to know the truth.”

Marcy studies me for a long moment, then exhales. “Alright, then,” she says, flipping open her notebook. “Let’s see what we can do.”

Truman’s hand tightens around mine beneath the table. I squeeze back and take a breath.

“Holy shit. You’re really her? Little Evany Testa?” Marcy leans back in her seat stunned at all the information I just dumped on her.

Marcy is sharp. Too sharp. The kind of person who sees everything at once and decides which piece of information to sink her teeth into first. She hasn’t stopped watching me since we sat down, her pen tapping rhythmically against her notebook. I don’t think she even realizes she’s doing it.

Truman doesn’t look away either. But his attention is on her, his posture tight, his jaw locked.

“I’ll get straight to it,” he says, his voice low but firm. “Would going to the FBI do any good? Would they help her?”

Marcy exhales through her nose, flicking a glance at me before leaning back in the booth. “Maybe,” she says. “But the key word there is maybe .”

Truman’s frown deepens. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The Testas have people in a lot of places,” she explains, propping her chin on her hand.

“And while the FBI isn’t known for being corruptible, I wouldn’t bet my life on every

agent being clean.

The wrong one catches wind of Evany, and suddenly, they know exactly where to find her. You willing to take that risk?"

Truman tenses beside me, his hand tightening into a fist against his thigh.

I don't blame him. My options seem rather limited. Maybe Papa was right, maybe I should disappear into the wind and live a quiet life forever.

I can feel the weight of her words in my bones. The cold, creeping knowledge that no matter how far I run, how many miles stretch between me and these people, I am still tangled up in their world.

"So what?" Truman challenges. "You're saying we do nothing?"

Marcy studies him, then me. Her eyes are calculating, like she's measuring us up for something. And then she says it.

"No," she murmurs. "I'm saying she should go back."

The world stops. My ears ring and I feel dizzy.

Truman goes deathly still beside me, but me? I just blink at her, the words slow to sink in.

"Excuse me?" Truman's voice is dangerously calm.

Marcy doesn't flinch. "I've been covering the four families for decades.

I know the way they move, the way they operate.

I also know the Testa family lost something valuable—you.

” She tilts her head at me. “If you went back, Evany, if you earned their trust again, you could take them down from the inside. Feed me information. Give me an exclusive.”

It’s an out-of-body experience, hearing her say it. Like the world is moving without me, and I’m just watching it happen. Papa said I could go back, but he also said that’s not what he wanted for me. But I could right wrongs if I did, couldn’t I?

Truman is not watching. He’s moving.

“Are you out of your mind?” His voice is sharp enough to cut steel.

Marcy sighs, setting her pen down. “Truman—”

“No. No Truman. You’re seriously sitting here, asking her to walk into that kind of family just so you can write a story?”

“It’s more than a story.”

“The hell it is.”

I stay quiet, staring at the table, at the rings left by our water glasses.

It’s not that I want to do it.

I don’t.

But she’s right.

I am valuable to them.

Truman turns to me, his voice gentler now, but no less firm. “You’re not doing that.”

I meet his eyes. “I haven’t said anything.”

His throat works, frustration simmering just beneath his concern. “Then say it. Say you won’t.”

I don’t.

Not because I want to say yes. But because I don’t know what the right answer is yet.

Marcy exhales, then slides a small white card across the table. “Think it over,” she says. “And if you want to talk, call me.”

Truman doesn’t touch the card.

I do.

I tuck it into my pocket, standing when Truman does. He’s fuming, holding it together by a thread as we step out of the café, the warm summer air pressing in on us.

We walk in silence a few blocks before he stops abruptly, turning to me. “Kid.”

I lift my chin. “Truman.”

His jaw flexes. “You can’t actually be considering this.”

“I don’t know what I’m considering,” I admit. “But I do know she’s not wrong.”

His nostrils flare. “I don’t give a shit if she’s right. I will not let you go to them so they can finish what they started.”

The finality in his voice is solid, unwavering. I should be annoyed at how quick he is to try and decide for me. I should fight back, argue that it’s my choice. Because it is. It’s my life. My family.

But instead, I just feel... tired.

So I step closer, pressing my forehead to his chest. His arms come around me instantly, his grip strong, steady.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I murmur.

His breath shudders against the top of my head. “Promise me.”

I close my eyes. The spark inside me from home—the cabin—the angry, vengeful spark, grows in the pit of my stomach. I could go. I could make them pay for killing my biological family, for executing Papa. For making me an orphan.

I could right all the wrongs.

Couldn’t I?

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:07 am

Present

The hotel suite is silent when I slip inside, the heavy door clicking shut behind me like a judge's gavel sealing a verdict.

My pulse hasn't slowed. My skin hums with the phantom echoes of gunfire, the ghost of adrenaline still sinking its claws into my veins.

I exhale sharply, pressing my back against the door for just a moment, feeling the weight of the night press against me.

Then I move.

The crimson dress slides from my shoulders with a whisper, pooling at my feet in a puddle of silk. The garter comes next, then the wig, tossed onto the dresser like a discarded persona. I stare at my reflection in the mirror across the room, at the woman left behind in the wake of destruction.

A stranger stares back.

I peel off the rest, stripping myself down to bare skin, to something real beneath the facade. The clothes—tainted with sweat, smoke, and the stink of the Diamond Club—get shoved into a trash bag. No evidence, no loose ends. Just the ghost of blood and gunpowder clinging to my memory.

My hands don't tremble. Not yet. That'll come later, when the echoes settle, when the night catches up to me.

The bathroom is a sanctuary of cool marble and expensive silence. I twist the faucet, let the water run scalding, watch steam curl against the air like breath from a sleeping beast. The scent of gun oil still lingers on my fingertips. It clings, refusing to be scrubbed away.

I step into the bath, letting the heat envelop me, burning away the filth of the night. My body sinks into the water, tension unraveling in slow increments. My nerves still prickle with awareness, but beneath it, buried deep, there's something else. A thrill. A quiet, simmering satisfaction.

I did what needed to be done.

Rocco and Alessio thought they were untouchable. They thought their father's power made them gods. But tonight, I reminded them that gods can bleed. That vengeance isn't loud or reckless—it's a blade in the dark, a whispered promise turned into reality.

I close my eyes, tilting my head back against the porcelain, listening to the steady drip of water against my skin. The high is still there, but so is the unease. The hollow part of me that asks: When does this end? What am I doing? How have I sunk so low?

And yet, as the water cools around me, as my heartbeat settles into something almost human, I wonder if I'll ever feel clean again.

I slip a towel around me as I rise from the tub, water sloshing onto the floor. Shadows stretch long against the walls as I cross the room, a ghost haunting my own space. Night simmers outside my window.

For a moment, I stand there and watch the city blink and breathe, a beast licking its wounds, preparing to strike back. I imagine Rocco and Alessio being found, the

Commission's oil-slicked rage spilling over every corner of this life I've built.

The Commission will meet. Will retaliate now that I've put things in motion.

I slip into the King bed naked. Yank the heavy duvet over me and exhale.

Past

The bus rumbles beneath us, eating up the last few miles to South Carolina, and I watch out the window like a kid seeing the world for the first time. Because, in a way, I am.

Everything outside the glass is bigger, brighter, louder than I ever imagined. Cities stretch out in ways I've never seen, highways twist and tangle, and the world doesn't stop moving—not even for a second. It's overwhelming, but in the best way.

Truman shifts beside me, stretching his long legs into the cramped aisle. "You're gonna get whiplash staring out the window like that."

I don't look away. "I've never seen so many buildings in my life."

His lips twitch. "Wait 'til you see the campus."

Right. The campus. His college. The place he's actually supposed to be. Unlike me.

I press my forehead to the cool glass. "You sure I'm not gonna be a problem?"

Truman doesn't hesitate. "You are a problem."

I snap my head toward him, about to fire back, but his eyes are stormy, a devilish grin on his handsome face.

Asshole.

I shove his arm, but he catches my wrist easily, his grip firm, warm. “Truman—”

“You’re my problem, Kid, which is to say no problem at all.”

I swallow hard. He says stuff like that so easily, like it’s just fact. Like I belong to him, and he wouldn’t have it any other way.

The bus jerks, the speakers crackling to life.

My stomach flutters.

Truman’s thumb brushes against my pulse. “Ready?”

I nod, even though I’m not sure I’ll ever be ready for this.

The campus is beautiful. Paths bisect lovely green lawns. Old brick buildings line the edges. The warm South Carolina sun makes everything glow. The new student orientation leader sits behind a desk outside the registration hall. Truman steps up to him when it’s his turn.

“Name?” the guy asks.

“Truman Biggins.”

The guys scans a list, nods, and grabs a packet.

“Here you go, Truman. Welcome to Kanuga College.” He flashes a grin that’s entirely too chipper and thrusts the folder into Truman’s hands.

“Thanks.”

Truman steps aside and opens the packet. His new student ID flutters to the ground—a terrible photo next to his name and STUDENT printed above in bold letters. He grabs it quickly, glancing around to see if anyone noticed, then stuffs it back inside.

The cover of the packet has a picture of students laughing in front of a fountain. THEY SAY YOUR BEST YEARS ARE AHEAD OF YOU! is splashed across the top in big letters.

“Where to now?” I ask.

He glances around, sees what he’s looking for and nods. “This way.”

Truman’s dorm room is—small.

The room is incredibly tiny. It contains just one desk, a bed that seems almost too short for him, and a well-worn dresser.

The window is slim, and the closet is even slimmer.

I gaze at the floor for a moment, trying to figure out how to arrange a sleeping area for myself.

But it’s his. And now, for as long as I can stay, it’s ours.

Setting my bag on the floor first, I drop onto the bed, testing the mattress. “Cozy.”

Truman snorts, unzipping his duffel. “That’s a generous way of putting it.”

I glance around. “At least you don’t have a roommate.”

He shoots me a look. “Because I requested a single.”

I raise a brow. “Why did you do that?”

He leans against the dresser, arms crossed. “I need quiet to study and do homework. I don’t test well.”

I flop back on the bed. “So, what now? Do I just... lurk around campus like some ghost with no identity?”

He chuckles. “Not exactly.” He grabs his wallet and slips back into his sneakers. “First, we’re getting you a cell phone.”

I blink. “A cell phone?”

“Yeah, you need one. I need to be able to text you, let you know when I’ll be around to let you in and out.”

I sigh. “Oh right.”

I don’t know what I expected from a cell phone store, but it’s a little overwhelming. Bright lights, walls lined with screens, a dozen salespeople bouncing between customers like they’ve downed a pot of coffee.

I stick close to Truman as he guides me toward a display. “Anything look good?”

I glance over the options. “They all look the same.”

He huffs a laugh. “That’s fair.” He picks one up, flipping it over in his hand. “This one’s solid. Easy to use, good camera, won’t die on you every five seconds.”

I take it from him, feeling the weight of it in my palm. My very own phone. It's weird. Foreign. But kind of thrilling.

The salesman appears like a shark scenting blood. "Looking to start a new plan?"

Truman nods. "Yeah, just calls, texts, data."

The guy grins. "Great! Can I see your ID?"

I stiffen. I have no birth certificate, no social security card, no id. Just a wad of cash and some clothes and toiletries. Truman's expression doesn't change, but I feel the way his whole body tenses beside me.

"She's on my plan," he says smoothly, pulling out his wallet. "I'll handle the paperwork."

The salesman shrugs. "No problem."

I exhale slowly as Truman starts filling out forms, listing me as some extension of himself.

I pull out cash for him. Truman glances at me while the guy runs over the setup options. His fingers brush mine, grounding me.

"I've got you," he murmurs.

I nod, because if I speak, I might feel too much.

The walk back to his dorm is quiet, but not uncomfortable. He swings the bag with my new phone inside it, hands tucked in his pockets.

“This is weird,” I admit.

Truman smirks. “Which part?”

“All of it.” I gesture at the campus around us. “You. Me. Here. I feel a little unmoored.”

He stops walking, turning to face me. The streetlight above us casts a glow over his face, making his eyes look impossibly deep.

“You’re here because you belong with me,” he says.

A shiver runs through me, part anticipation, part something heavier.

“Truman—”

He steps closer, backing me up against a tree. “You wanna know what’s weird, Kid?”

I swallow hard. “What?”

His fingers trace up my arm, slow, teasing. “That I haven’t kissed you in hours.”

The breath rushes out of me. “That is weird.”

His lips twitch, then he’s kissing me—deep and slow, like he’s trying to make up for lost time. His hands frame my face, thumbs brushing over my cheekbones. I grip his shirt, pulling him closer, letting him press me into the rough bark of a tree.

It’s dizzying. It’s reckless.

When he pulls back, his forehead rests against mine, both of us breathless.

Truman's dorm is still a mess. Clothes spilling out of his duffel, a stack of books teetering on the desk, and an unopened box shoved against the wall.

I sit cross-legged on his bed, holding up a t-shirt. "You gonna fold these or just let them become one big wrinkle?"

He glances up from unpacking a box, smirking. "Wrinkles build character."

I snort. "No, they make you look like you slept outdoors."

His brow lifts, all challenge. "That right?"

Before I can react, he's grabbing me, pulling me down onto the bed with a low grunt. His weight pins me for half a second before he shifts, bracing himself on his elbows so he doesn't crush me.

I try to act unaffected. Try .

"Truman," I mutter.

His smirk deepens. "Kid..."

I roll my eyes, but my pulse is erratic, and he knows it.

Before he can do more, a knock sounds at the door.

Truman sighs, reluctantly peeling himself off me before yanking the door open.

A guy leans against the frame, grinning like he's already decided we're all gonna be best friends. He's tall, lean, with shaggy brown hair and a backward baseball cap.

“Yo. Saw you moving in—figured I’d introduce myself.” He holds out a hand. “Eli. I live across the hall. I’m a sophomore.”

Truman shakes it. “Truman.”

Eli nods, glancing past him. His gaze lands on me still sprawled on the bed, and his grin widens. “And you are...?”

Truman shifts, blocking part of his view like it’s instinct. “My girlfriend.”

The words hit me like a live wire. Am I? Is that how it happens? I assumed that there would be an asking, a conversation. But all I have to go off of is books I’ve read. The corners of my mouth tip up into a grin.

Eli lets out a low whistle. “Damn, freshman year and you’re already off the market? Rough, man.”

Truman smirks. “Tragic, I know.”

I sit up, feeling awkward and out of place. “I don’t go here.”

Eli winks. “Oh, okay.” He’s got the kind of easy energy that balances out Truman’s serious tendencies.

Before anyone can say more, a second voice chimes in from the hall.

“Helloooooo, new people! ”

A girl appears next to Eli, all confidence and bright eyes.

She’s tall, with a messy ponytail and an over-sized sweatshirt hanging off one

shoulder.

These people all seem to know how to chat, how to live, how to just exist in the world.

I have so much to learn, to catch up on in the ways of socializing that my head spins.

“Are we making introductions?” she asks, placing a hand on her hip.

Eli gestures lazily. “Truman. His girlfriend. ” He makes air quotes, grinning at me. “Still waiting on a name, by the way.”

I smirk. “Kid.”

Her eyes sparkle with interest. “That your real name?”

Truman exhales, already exasperated. “Yes.”

The girl tilts her head, assessing me like she’s already decided we’ll be friends. “I dig it.” Then she grins. “I’m Tasha. And I live exactly four doors down. Convenient, huh?”

Truman doesn’t react, but I see the way his jaw tightens. He’s already wary .

Tasha must sense it, too, because she laughs, holding up her hands. “Relax, big guy. I’m not here to steal your girl.” Then she winks at me. “Unless you’re interested.”

I bark out a laugh, marveling in the way a cast of characters can literally jump from the pages of fiction into real life. Despite feeling out of my depth, a bubble of joy forms in my gut. What if I, we, can have real friends?

Truman groans. “Jesus Christ.”

Eli claps him on the shoulder. “Man, you’re in for a wild year.”

I pull out my new phone, snap a picture, and text it to Kenzie to show her Truman’s new friends.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:07 am

Present

I leave Philadelphia the following afternoon, my body still humming from the adrenaline. The drive to the airport is quiet, my mind already moving forward. Miami is the endgame, but first, I need something else. Someone else.

Atlanta.

When I land, I don't call him. I don't warn him. I just go to his house. But when I step onto the porch, something feels off. No lights. No car in the driveway. I knock once, then again. Nothing.

I lean against the door frame and pull out my phone. The moment he picks up, I hear the hum of a restaurant in the background.

"Where are you?" I ask, keeping my voice light, controlled.

"Out," he says, and I hear the smile in his voice. "Why? You miss me already?"

I ignore the teasing. "With who?"

There's a pause, like he hears the edge beneath my words. "Eli."

I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't that. "Eli?" I repeat, a strange weight settling in my chest. I didn't know they were still friends.

"Yeah. You should meet us."

I hesitate, but the jealousy gnaws at me—relentless. “Where?”

He gives me the name of the restaurant, and a twenty minute uber ride later, I step inside. It’s cozy, warm, the kind of place Truman has always liked. I spot them instantly—Truman relaxed, a drink in hand, and Eli laughing at something he just said.

When Eli sees me, his expression shifts from amusement to shock. “Holy shit. Kid.”

I smirk as I slide into the seat across from him. “Nice to see you too.”

Eli shakes his head, still staring. “Didn’t think you two were still... in touch.” He glances at Truman, then back at me. “Especially after the way he” he jabs a thumb at Truman, “was so wrecked after you left.”

Guilt, sharp and sudden, twists in my stomach. I push it down. When I left, I left. I tried not think about Truman, or Eli, or Tasha. I couldn’t. I couldn’t walk into the Testa household, the Testa life, and carry them with me.

It was a year before I reached out to Truman. Before I could no longer handle not having the comfort of him.

“Well, I didn’t know you two were still friends either.”

Eli snorts. “Why wouldn’t we be?”

I shrug.

Truman watches me, quiet, his eyes saying things I don’t want to read into.

The conversation shifts, the past creeping in between bites of food and sips of beer.

I think about Tasha. About what she's doing now.

About how, in another life, we could have all been friends if I hadn't left.

If I had let myself be soft. If I had been someone else entirely.

It's loud in the restaurant, but not loud enough to drown out years of regret. Stories spill out: bad tattoos and old flames, epic stunts and almost-arrests. The new ones leave me cold, like I'm just a ghost floating through them.

After dinner, Truman and I leave together.

"It was good seeing you," I say.

"Yeah you too," Eli says as he wobbles off into the night.

The moment we step into Truman's car, the easy facade drops.

"It's only been two weeks," he says. "What's going on, Kid?"

I don't answer right away. He winds through the traffic efficiently. Taking us toward his home.

"You only show up like this when something's wrong." His voice is low, steady.
"What have you done?"

The weight of it all presses against my ribs. I tilt my head back against the headrest and close my eyes. "I'm close, Tru."

"To what?"

“The end of this.”

He pulls into his driveway, kills the engine, but doesn’t move to get out.

A muscle in his jaw ticks. “You say that every time.”

I open my eyes, turn to him. “And every time, it’s true.”

He exhales, running a hand through his hair. “You can still walk away.”

I reach for him, my fingers brushing his wrist. He goes still, watching me. The tension is thick, charged, tangled in something neither of us have ever fully faced.

“You see me,” I murmur. “The real me.”

His breath hitches, just slightly. “Yeah. And I hate what this life is doing to you.”

I don’t answer. I just lean in, pressing my lips against his, desperate to hold onto the last sliver of myself that only he still recognizes.

He kisses me back with a vehemence that almost hurts, like he’s trying to erase the world beyond us. For a moment, everything fades—there’s no threat twisting its way toward us, no shadows licking at my heels. No distance or time or regret between us.

I pull away first, because I have to. “One more job,” I say, my voice barely more than a breath. “I promise.”

His response is sharp and biting: “Your promises mean nothing.” Yet, his eyes tell a different story, filled with a deep worry and an emotion that tightens its grip on my heart like a vice.

“I mean it.” I cradle his face in my hands. His fingers tighten against my neck, his thumb sweeping gently across my jaw.

“Fuck, Kid. How long am I supposed to...” his voice trails off.

My phone buzzes in my pocket—a reminder, a summons—and I close my eyes for a moment, trying to block out the wave of guilt that crashes over me.

“Go,” he whispers, the word hanging heavily in the air. I take a moment to etch his face into my memory—the curve of his dimple, the depth of his eyes, the very essence of him.

With a heavy heart, I nod.

I open the car door, stepping into the night air that feels as sharp and unforgiving as shattered glass against my skin.

I slide into the driver’s seat of my rental car and reluctantly answer the buzzing phone.

“Where the fuck are you?” Uncle Leo’s voice hisses through the line, dripping with venom and impatience.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:07 am

Past

The first month at college is a careful game of hide-and-seek.

While Truman goes to class, I slip through the cracks of the world only he belongs to. I wander the campus, sticking to the edges, watching from the safety of shadows. No ID. Not a student. Just a ghost in stolen places.

The town is bigger than Moffitt—buildings stacked high, streets humming with people, shops overflowing with things I've never had.

I step into a bookstore just to breathe in the pages.

I watch students in coffee shops, scribbling in notebooks, laughing with friends.

I wonder what it would feel like to sit among a group of people and feel like you belong.

But I don't.

So I wait for Truman.

He finds me every afternoon, his gaze sweeping over me like he's making sure I'm still in one piece.

Sometimes, he brings me snacks from the dining hall, sneaking them into his backpack like a criminal.

Other times, he takes my hand and tugs me toward the off-campus diner where we split fries and I steal his milkshake.

He often picks me wildflowers for no reason and always, always has his hands on me somehow.

But nighttime—that's when I feel real.

Every night, he pulls me into his bed.

I don't know if he thinks I need it, or if he does. Maybe both.

At first, I thought it would be awkward—two bodies crammed together in a twin bed. But it isn't. It's warmth. Safety. A place to land.

The first night, I stiffened when he wrapped an arm around me.

The second night, I melted into it.

Now, it's instinct.

I crawl under the covers, and Truman follows, tangling us together like he needs to hold me as much as I need to be held. His chest is solid against my back, his arm heavy over my waist, and I revel in every second of it.

I've never had this before.

His breath is warm against my neck when he murmurs, "You okay?"

I close my eyes. I don't know.

But I say, “Yeah.”

Because when we’re like this, it almost feels true.

The days pass, turning into weeks, and I help him study when he’s too tired to focus. We sit on the floor, papers and books scattered between us, and I read the same passages over and over until he groans and pulls me into his lap, pressing his forehead to mine in defeat.

“This is a nightmare,” he mutters.

I smirk, running my fingers through his hair. “No, this is college.”

He exhales sharply, and I feel the warmth of his breath on my lips. The space between us disappears. But he doesn’t kiss me—he just breathes me in, like I’m the only thing keeping him sane.

And maybe I am.

But in the quiet moments, when I’m alone, I miss home.

I miss the trees, the sound of the wind through the leaves. I miss the way the forest smelled in the morning, how the earth felt solid beneath my feet. I miss the goats and the chickens and training.

I miss Papa. Sometimes, I wake up expecting to hear his voice, to smell the wood smoke from our cabin. But all I get is the distant hum of campus life outside the window, a world moving on without him. A world moving on without me.

And then Truman shifts beside me, his grip tightening like he knows.

Like he feels it too.

So I press closer, let his heartbeat drown out the ache, and tell myself this is enough.

I stretch my arms over my head, arching my back until I hear a satisfying pop. Truman is at his desk, flipping through his textbook, but I don't miss the way his eyes flick toward me, sharp and distracted.

"You good?" he asks, setting his pen down.

I roll my shoulders. "Yeah, just stiff. I need to move more."

His gaze drags over me like he's taking inventory. "You walk all over town." I wonder how much more kissing we can do when my body has begun screaming for more.

"It's not the same." I shake my head. "At home, I chopped wood, hauled water, climbed trees, ran through the forest—" My voice catches. Back home. Papa. I push past it. "Papa and I trained. I kept myself strong. Here, I feel..." I exhale through my nose, searching for the right word.

"Weak?" Truman offers.

I nod. I drop onto his bed, folding my legs under me.

"Think you could get me a gym membership in town? I Googled one. Open all hours and just has a fob to get in and out. So I don't think they'd know if wasn't you going?"

"You Googled?"

“Hey...” I swat at him playfully.

Truman grins and leans back in his chair, rubbing his jaw. “You wanna lift weights? Run on a treadmill?”

I shrug. “I want to feel like me again.”

His lips press together like he’s already turning over the logistics in his head. “I can get a membership.”

“I’ll pay.” His brows lift, amused. I fold my arms. “It’s my membership.”

He nods his head, leaning toward me until his elbows rest on his knees, his face inches from mine. His voice drops low.

“You miss being strong?”

I swallow. “Yeah.”

His fingers graze my knee. Heat floods my chest, climbing up my throat. I look away, but he catches my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes. His thumb brushes my jaw. I bite my lip, and his eyes darken.

For a second, I forget about the gym.

Forget about everything but the way his touch makes me feel.

I shift forward until our noses brush. His hand lingers on my face for a second longer before he finally kisses me. A hand dips low, to my thigh. Truman gives it a gentle squeeze, then his fingers move higher.

“Are we... doing this?” My voice is shaky but eager.

Truman smirks, his lips close enough to graze mine with each word.

“Doing what?” he asks, sliding his hand just under the hem of my pajama shorts.

A shiver races through me. I want—more than I’ve ever wanted anything—for him to keep touching me like this.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to find words that don’t trip over each other.

His fingers move higher, teasing the edge of my underwear where my hip meets my thigh.

He pushes me gently onto my back on the bed.

Kisses the sliver of exposed skin between my tank and bottoms. His fingers, under my pajama shorts, flutter between my legs over my underwear.

Truman’s mouth travels lower, drawing more heat from me. He pauses, looks up, and it’s like he’s seeing every part of me at once.

“Well?” His voice is low, the question hanging between us and pulling tight.

My breath catches. “Doing exactly this,” I whisper, half-laughing with a nervous gasp at how much I want him.

He takes my words like permission. Or maybe he doesn’t need them—maybe he knows already—but either way his hands are quick, confident. He peels back my shorts just enough to bring a rush of air against bare skin, then his lips follow.

I arch into him, every inch of me alive and reaching for where he'll go next.

He slides my underwear down and kisses me there , between my legs.

His tongue teases out the most desperate part of me, and I'm filling up with heat, sweet and unbearable.

My thighs tremble as he holds me open, his mouth impossibly soft and relentless.

He has me gasping, fingers locked tight in the blankets, pulling me nearer and nearer to some perfect, shattering edge.

“Truman...”

The tension builds until it's all I can feel; more pressure than I know how to hold, everywhere and all at once. His movements slow for an instant and then grow firm again, sending me plunging over and through it.

I'm shaking—still soaring—when he lets go of my hips and crawls up beside me. His grin is wicked. Satisfied.

He settles his hand on my stomach, tugs my tank top higher with one finger to plant a kiss on my breast. When my heartbeat calms enough for words, I look up at him through heavy-lidded eyes.

“Wow.”

“First time?” he asks.

I pull his face to mine. “You know it was.”

His grin is so big his dimples appear. “I like that.”

I raise an eyebrow. “What else can we do?” I ask.

Truman laughs, deep and rumbley.

“Lots, but let’s go slow. One thing at a time.”

Present

Leo's office reeks of cigar smoke and whiskey, thick and cloying, a scent that lingers like bad memories. He's pacing when I walk in, his jaw tight, his hands balled into fists.

"It was fucking you, wasn't it?" he demands, turning on me with the kind of rage that shakes the walls.

I don't flinch. I tilt my head, feigning mild amusement, letting his fury roll right off of me. "Good afternoon to you too, Uncle."

"Don't give me that bullshit, Evany!" he roars, slamming a fist against his desk. The crystal tumbler beside him rattles but doesn't spill. "Rocco and Alessio Falcone were hit two nights ago, and I know damn well it wasn't sanctioned." His eyes bore into mine, dark and accusing. "It was you."

I scoff, crossing my arms. "Why the hell would I do that?"

"Because you're reckless," he snarls. "Because you've got an agenda of your own. Because you're your father's daughter."

I step closer, my voice even, measured. "I wouldn't dream of starting a war between the families, Leo. That's bad for business, and I, unlike you, prefer business thriving."

His eyes narrow, calculating, but he's not stupid. If he had proof, he wouldn't be

yelling—he'd be disposing of me.

"If I didn't order the hit, and you didn't go rogue," he finally says, his voice quieter but far more dangerous, "then tell me, Evany, who did this?"

I meet his stare, letting just enough doubt flicker across my features. "I don't know."

Silence stretches between us thick and suffocating. I hold my ground.

"This is bad," he mutters. His jaw flexes, a muscle ticking at the edge of his cheek, but I don't waver.

Finally, he exhales sharply, dragging a hand down his face before leveling me with a warning look. "You stay put.

That evening, I overhear him on a call. His voice is low, sharp, edged with the kind of tension that only comes when men like him are afraid.

"We can't do this over the phone. No one's safe right now," Leo mutters. A pause. Then, clipped and certain, "New York. Wednesday. No more delays."

I don't have to hear the rest. The panic in his tone says enough.

They're scrambling.

And I'll be there to watch them fall.

I return to my apartment, moving through the space with precision, my fingers quick on my laptop as I book a flight under the alias I'd prepared months ago.

The ticket to NYC is one-way, just in case.

A new name, a new identity. I secure a hotel room under a different alias, clean, precise. Every detail accounted for.

But before I go, I have one more stop to make.

Truman answers his phone on the third ring. “Kid?”

“I’m in Atlanta.”

Silence, then a sigh. “Where?”

“Your place.”

He hesitates. “I’ll be there soon.”

When he arrives, his expression is tight, wary. “It’s only been two days.”

“I know.”

He studies me, his gaze sharp and searching. “Things are escalating.”

I swallow. “I’m ready to collect what’s mine. What has always been mine—my father’s hard-earned legacy. I’ve waited patiently for this moment for years. For them to be exposed, caught off-guard.”

His jaw tenses, pain flickering behind his eyes. “This goddamned revenge scheme is going to kill you, and I can’t bear to lose you.”

Something in my chest tightens, but I shove it down. “You make me weak,” I whisper. “One kiss, one brush of your hand—it’s like a drug. It’s all bad for me, but I never turn it down. And now you want me to be strong and just what, Truman? Run

away with you?”

“Yes.”

I laugh, but it’s hollow. “How can you ask that of me now? After so much time? I’m so close now.”

He doesn’t answer with words. Instead, his hands are on me, his mouth claiming mine, desperate, his kiss tastes like regret.

We lose ourselves in the fire that’s always burned between us.

I moan into his mouth, my hands clawing at his back, pulling him closer, closer, until I can feel every goddamn inch of him.

He breaks the kiss, his breath hot and ragged against my neck, his teeth grazing my skin as he growls, “I’m not asking.”

Before I can say anything, he’s lifting me off the ground, my legs instinctively wrapping around his waist. His hands grip my ass, squeezing hard, and I whimper, my core throbbing with every step he takes toward the bedroom.

He kicks the door open, and then I’m being tossed onto the bed like a rag doll.

He stalks toward me, ripping off his shirt.

His chest is a masterpiece, all hard muscle and smooth skin, and I can’t help but lick my lips as he unbuckles his belt.

He’s on me in an instant, his hands tearing at my clothes like they’ve personally offended him.

My shirt is gone, my bra follows, and then he's sucking my nipple into his mouth, his lips and tongue working me until I'm writhing beneath him, my hips grinding against nothing but air.

The needy sounds escaping my throat drive him wilder, and he shifts lower, his mouth blazing a sinful trail down my stomach.

The anticipation is nearly unbearable, making my whole body taut with longing.

He yanks at the waistband of my jeans, pulling them off in one determined motion, leaving me in just my panties.

His eyes darken as he stares at me sprawled out for him, like he's ready to devour me whole.

My breath catches when his fingers slip under the edge of my panties, teasing me until I can barely think straight.

"Please," I beg, desperate for more.

A wicked smile curls his lips as he drags the last bit of fabric down my legs and tosses it aside.

He lowers himself between my thighs, exhaling hot against my skin, before diving in with a deep hunger that sends shivers up my spine.

His mouth on me feels like fire and silk, each stroke of his tongue pushing me closer to the edge.

My hands grip the sheets as a tidal wave builds inside me—intense and unstoppable. My back arches, pressing closer to him, and then I'm falling apart, blissful and

breathless as pleasure crashes over me in surges so strong that it feels like they might never end.

He leans back on his heels, watching with a triumphant glint in his eye while I come down from the high he's given me. Then he's over me again, kissing me deep while one hand tilts my chin up and his other arm wraps possessively around my waist. I can taste myself on him as he kisses me senseless.

The hard length of him grinds against my stomach, teasing and tormenting until I dig my nails into his back with a moan. He breaks the kiss, breathing hard, eyes gleaming with a mix of raw desire and fierce impatience.

"I love you," he rasps.

I barely have time to brace myself before he plunges deep inside me, filling me completely in one intense thrust that knocks the air from my lungs. I gasp as he stills for a moment, our bodies perfectly fused.

Then, it's like something snaps inside him. He moves with a relentless rhythm, each drive more intense than the last, and I match him, meeting him with equal urgency. Fireworks explode behind my eyelids every time he takes me to the hilt, the friction and heat sending sparks through my veins.

"I love you, too," I groan against his neck.

I can only cling to him tighter, consumed by the way we seem to unravel each other so completely.

My legs lock around his waist as I angle my hips for more—more of this wildness, of him—and a keening cry escapes my lips when he shifts just right, hitting a spot that makes everything spin into bliss once more.

My body tenses again with sweet overload as another climax barrels through me, even fiercer than the first. He doesn't stop—doesn't slow—a man undone and untamed above me until his own release hits with a shudder that rocks us both.

He tilts my face to his. "Don't go."

I wrap my arms around him, snuggling into his body.

"I'm here all night."

When dawn breaks, I slip out of his bed, dress silently, and leave without a word. Always careful not to wake him. The goodbye is something I cannot stomach. Not with him.

On the way to the airport, I text Marcy.

The Commission is meeting. They're panicked. This is it. Be ready. If anything happens to me, you know what to do.

I don't wait for a reply. I tuck my phone away and stare out the window as the city blurs past, my pulse steady, my mind razor-sharp.

It's time.

Past

The music pulses through the packed house, heavy bass rattling my ribs.

I've never been to a party before, never stood in a room filled with this many people—laughing, dancing, drinking.

It's overwhelming but also... intoxicating.

A frat party, or so I'm told. I'm still not exactly sure what a Frat is.

Tasha loaned me some clothes after declaring that what I had on wasn't good enough.

I'm mildly self-conscious in her too-short skirt and barely there tank top. A halter top she called it.

Truman's hand is wrapped around mine, keeping me tethered to him as we push through the crowd. He's solid and sure, the only familiar thing in this chaos of flashing lights and bodies moving in time with the music.

"C'mere," Truman murmurs, tugging me toward the kitchen, where Eli and Tasha are standing near the counter lined with bottles and red cups.

Tasha's already sipping something pink and fruity, leaning against the fridge like she owns the place. She grins when she sees me.

I arch a brow. "Should I be nervous? I um, I don't drink."

She laughs, handing me a cup. “Nah. Just don’t let these assholes talk you into taking shots.”

I glance at Truman. He’s watching me like a hawk, like he’s already regretting bringing me here. “You don’t have to drink,” he says, low and close.

I tilt my head at him. “You think I can handle it?”

His jaw tics. “I think you don’t have to prove anything to anyone.”

Warmth unfurls in my chest. I nudge him with my elbow. “Relax, I’ll be okay.”

I take a sip. It’s sweet and deceptively smooth, but heat spreads through me almost instantly.

Tasha cheers. “And so it begins.”

One drink turns into two. And damn, I like the way it makes me feel.

Lighter. Freer. Less like the girl who grew up secluded in the woods and more like someone who belongs here.

Eli makes a batch of something with vodka, pineapple juice, and Sprite, and when he hands me a cup, I take it without thinking. Truman watches every sip I take, his hand firm on my lower back, but he doesn’t stop me.

Maybe because I’m laughing more than I have in forever.

Tasha and I play a drinking game with a group of people crowded around the kitchen island, some variation of ‘Never Have I Ever.’ I don’t know half of the things they talk about, but I drink when they do, giggling when Tasha nudges me with her elbow.

“Never have I ever milked a goat,” some guy says, and I take a sip automatically, grinning into my cup.

Tasha gapes at me. “Shut up . You? You milk goats?”

I shrug, a little buzzed and a lot amused. “I mean, yeah.”

Eli laughs. “Shit, I keep forgetting you were raised like some feral mountain girl.”

Truman stiffens beside me, but I just shake my head. “Not feral. Just... off the grid.”

Eli smirks. “Same difference.”

I flick my straw at him, and he ducks, laughing.

Truman leans down, murmuring against my ear. “You good?”

I turn to face him, looking up into his dark, steady eyes. He’s been watching me all night, making sure I don’t go too far, don’t get too drunk.

I smile. “Yeah, I’m good.”

I’m buzzed. Warm. Loose-limbed and light-headed.

He studies me for a long second before nodding. “Let’s dance.”

I don’t know how to dance.

At least, not like this—pressed up against Truman in the middle of a crowded living room, his hands low on my hips, our bodies moving in slow, lazy circles.

I don't even care that I don't know what I'm doing.

Because God, this feels good.

Truman smells like soap and alcohol, his skin warm where it brushes mine. He's solid and steady, the only thing keeping me from floating away completely.

Tasha dances by and deposits a bottle of water into my hands. Truman laughs as I stare at it.

"Drink," he says.

Suddenly thirsty, I chug the bottle.

Truman hasn't left my side all night, a steady presence at my back, his fingers resting on my hip whenever someone gets too close. But he's distracted now, talking to Eli near the couch, so when a guy sidles up next to me, I don't think much of it.

"You new around here?" he asks, his grin lazy and a little too familiar.

I smirk. "I guess."

He leans in. "Never seen you at one of these parties before."

I grin at him, feeling light and happy. My buzz has faded just a little from the various bottles of water that Eli, Tasha and Truman have been giving to me. "I've never been."

His eyes sweep over me. "Damn shame."

I don't get a chance to respond before Truman's there, stepping in front of me, chest-

to-chest with the guy in a heartbeat.

“Walk away.” Truman’s voice is low, deadly.

The guy scoffs. “Relax, man. Just talking.”

Truman shoves him back. “Walk. Away.”

The guy stumbles, holding his hands up. “Alright, alright.” He backs off, disappearing into the crowd.

I stare up at Truman. His hands are clenched, his chest rising and falling like he’s barely keeping himself in check. A side of him I haven’t seen before—possessive, territorial .

I should probably tell him to cool it. But the truth?

I like it.

Laughing, I step into him, sliding my hands up his chest. “You jealous, Truman?”

His gaze snaps to mine, dark and heated. “You think this is funny?”

I bite my lip. “I think it’s hot.”

His breath hitches. Then, he’s gripping my wrist and tugging me toward the door.

“We’re leaving,” he growls.

The second we’re inside his dorm room, the door slams shut and Truman has me pressed against it, his hands framing my face.

“You drive me crazy ,” he rasps against my lips.

Panting, I tug him closer. “Good.”

“What do you want?” he breathes, inches from my face. Green eyes stormy.

I can’t find my voice. “You have to say it, Kid.”

“I want your mouth,” I whisper.

He arches an eyebrow at me, a devilish smirk on his lips. “Where?” he asks.

I move my hair over one shoulder and point to my neck. His head dips down, lips caressing from my earlobe to my collarbone. A moan slips out of me.

“That it?”

I shake my head. I point to the swell of my breast.

“Here.”

His head drops lower, lips ghosting the skin from my collarbone down, down, down until they reach my breast. His hands hook the halter strap and pull it over my head and down until my breasts are exposed.

Taking a nipple in his mouth, I arch toward him, wrapped up in the sensation.

He switches to the other one and I whimper like the lust-drunk fool I am.

“Where?” he grunts.

I trail a finger between my breasts, down my belly, and between my legs.

Truman groans, his hands sliding down my sides, still pinning me to the door as he drops to his knees.

His lips, his tongue scorching a path to the waist of my skirt.

I'm squirming, all in. I don't want him to hold anything back.

He tugs once—hard—and the skirt is pooled at my feet. He spreads my legs.

The kiss between my legs is fierce, all heat and hunger, like he's been holding this back for too long. My legs begin to shake as I watch him devour me.

He groans, lifting me effortlessly. My legs wrap around his waist as he carries me to the bed, laying me down beneath him.

I've never done this before—never been this close to anyone. But with Truman, I'm not nervous. I want this.

I pull his shirt over his head, dragging my fingers down his chest. His muscles tense under my touch, and he groans, dropping his forehead to mine. "Tell me to stop, and I will."

I shake my head.

His control snaps.

He kisses me—deeper, more urgent. I'm lost in sensation; the world narrows to Truman's hands and mouth and the way his every touch sets me on fire.

My heart races, I'm nervous. Truman's not a virgin but I am. What if I'm not good at this? What if it hurts?

He pins my arms above my head but he must sense my hesitation because he pauses, his breath warm against my skin.

“Hey,” he murmurs softly, and the tenderness in his voice melts away some of my doubt. He kisses the tip of my nose, a small, sweet gesture that makes me smile. “We don't have to do everything.”

But I want it all.

Instead of replying, I lift my mouth to his—kiss him hard. His resolve breaks again, body pressing into mine, and we're drowning in each other's heat.

It's not perfect, at first we collide with nervous giggles, breaking the tension.

But once we slow down, once we start paying attention to what feels right, everything clicks into place.

And Truman is really good at paying attention to every cue my body gives.

The way he guides my hand over his cock—the look on his face as I take over.

I'm fascinated by all of him, every square inch.

Truman's hands and mouth seem to be everywhere—working magic up my spine, skimming across my stomach—and I shiver, arching into him.

The awkwardness gives way to something electric.

My nerves fade; all that's left is want.

He fumbles the condom at first. Then he pushes inside me slowly.

I brace for the pain I've read about, but I don't feel more than a slight pinch, and then it's gone.

"Still okay?" His voice is rough with emotion, eyes searching mine for any trace of uncertainty.

I nod frantically, breathless with how much I mean it. "Yeah."

Time blurs; sensation peaks and crashes like waves until I can't tell where he ends and I begin. We find a rhythm together—slow then desperate—that builds higher and higher until finally, the world shatters around me in a violent flood of light.

We lie tangled up afterward, still catching our breath in the quiet dark. Truman traces idle circles on my shoulder, and I cuddle into him, as close as I can get.

Present

The city throbs with a life of its own beneath me as I plunge into the shadow of the towering skyscrapers, the air thick with the oppressive weight of humidity and raw anticipation.

New York feels like a jungle tonight, its pulse quickening as I slip through the crowded streets unnoticed, blending in with the chaos.

The shadows are my allies, the night my cover.

I'm not a ghost—I'm a predator. Every step I take reverberates with purpose, each move meticulously calculated.

The empires of the Families have loomed for too long, but their downfall is imminent.

He perceives me as his niece, unaware of the force I've become.

Memories of Papa flood my mind. The life he envisioned for me.

The relentless training. The grueling drills—all to forge my unyielding resolve.

I pull the hood of my black jacket lower over my face, my dark hair tucked beneath.

My grip tightens like a vise on the small, lethal crossbow concealed beneath my jacket, its cold metal, a comforting promise of retribution.

I have memorized every inch of this building—a penthouse office perched atop an exclusive, high-rise tower.

The families will meet in the private, soundproofed boardroom, away from prying eyes.

And I've already scoped out the guards. I think of Tasha, her quiet companionship, her genuine concern, and her playful spirit.

The friend I might have had if Papa hadn't been ruthlessly gunned down before my eyes.

If I'd been allowed to graduate and go off to college on normal terms.

The lobby is empty, the marble floors reflect my every move in the dim light.

I slip past the front desk with ease as my high heels click on the polished surface.

I've already disabled the security cameras.

The guards outside are busy chatting about football, their attention distracted for just long enough.

Two of them fall before they can even draw their guns.

The throwing stars sink into their throats with surgical precision. No noise, no mess.

I crouch low to the ground, sliding through the corridor toward the elevators.

Three guards are stationed there, their postures relaxed as they converse animatedly, laughter echoing softly through the hall—a careless error on their part.

They are blissfully unaware of my presence.

I don't need to get within arm's reach to execute my plan.

With swift precision, I draw the crossbow from beneath my jacket, its cold metal a comforting weight in my hands.

A single, silent bolt sails through the air, embedding itself into the first guard's temple with deadly accuracy.

He collapses silently, and before his companions can register what's happening, I've already dispatched two swift shots from my silenced pistol.

Their bodies slump to the floor, joining the first in a heap of silence. Be safe. Stay alert. Papa's voice echoes in my head.

My pulse is steady, but adrenaline surges through me. I slide the crossbow back into place and move forward, now walking with a brisk pace, though still cautious. The door to the stairwell is on the left—perfect. I bypass the elevator, knowing it will be too slow and too exposed.

My legs carry me up the stairs to the 25th floor. I rest a moment at the landing. Catching my breath. I pass the security guard on duty, but he doesn't see me. One quick maneuver, a tap to the back of his head, and he's unconscious, slumped against the wall.

I think of Truman, a friendship that blossomed into so much more.

He made me notice him with affectionate words, touches and small gifts, but after he had my attention, it was the way he held my hand, the random text in the middle of the day, the way he stopped to kiss me when I passed by him or letting me eat his

fries.

He paused Netflix shows so I could talk, and laughed at my terrible jokes.

That's what kept me, hooked me. From the compliments to the care with which he delivered them, it was a romance of gestures.

Actions that snared me and held me hostage.

Loyalty and love so intertwined that I couldn't possibly let this life consume me whole. He tethered me to my true self—to him.

Even after I left him.

After I used him.

I think of all the things I need to say to him, to show him.

I reach the door to the conference room, and listen to the muffled voices inside. The heads of the Falcone, Scarfo, Testa and Leonetti families. Four of the most dangerous men in the world, all in one place. I've got one chance to do this right.

I pull out my throwing stars, flip them between my fingers.

A slight breath in. I slip into the shadows just as the two guards by the door turn to face the hallway.

Their eyes sweep the area for a moment, and then I make my move.

Both fall, no sound but a quick gasp as the blades embed in their throats. They drop silently to the floor.

My fingers curl around the cold metal handle, twisting the door open just enough to make out their words. The men—their voices deep and full of arrogance—are seated at the conference table. They're discussing things they have no idea will end in bloodshed. I step inside, soundless as a shadow.

The room is large, dimly lit by overhead lights casting an ominous glow across the marble floors. The four heads of the families sit at the table.

Trust no one. I hear Papa's voice clearly as though he were standing next to me.

"Hello boys," I say. All heads turn toward me.

Sal Scarfo, the man who shot Papa, scrambles for his weapon, but I'm faster. I pull the pistol, silencing him in one clean shot. Blood runs out of his head and his shirt drinks it up. The room erupts into chaos.

Lorenzo Leonetti follows suit, his eyes widening in fear as I turn toward him.

Another shot. He crumbles.

Enzo Falcone drops with a bullet between his eyes.

It's just Uncle Leo and me. The room is still, the weight of the moment thick in the air. The only sound is the hum of the AC. I've taken out the competition, but it's Leo's death that will send the ultimate message.

He turns to me, eyes narrowing as recognition hits him. He stands slowly, his hand resting on the back of his chair. He knows. The grin on his face is tight, his lips curling with cold amusement.

"You always were a disappointment, Evany," he says, his voice oozing venom. "But

you can't beat me."

I tilt my head, my grip tightening on the gun. The moment is so close now, I can taste it.

I take a step forward. "Did you order the hit on my family?" I ask, my voice low but clear, steady. Every word laced with cold steel.

He laughs, a rasping sound that fills the room. Then, he spits in my direction, and I feel the sting of his hatred in the air. "Yes," he says, his voice full of spite. "I hired Antonio Scarfo to kill you all."

My hand doesn't tremble. Instead a calmness ripples through me. I pull the trigger, the silencer cutting through the air with a precise pop. Uncle Leo's body jerks back as the bullet hits its mark, his groin. He doubles over in pain. Blood gushes.

I want to make this slow.

Painful.

"Evany..." he groans, collapsing to the floor like a dying animal. "You... filthy..."

I stride towards him, gun still raised, my shadow casting long and dark across his writhing form.

He clutches at his wound, his fingers red and slick. His breath comes in strangled gasps. "Your father... would never..."

My father. He dares use him as a weapon against me now? Fury surges white-hot through my veins.

“My father was a man I never knew,” I say, each word sharp as glass. “And you were the poison that caused that.”

I fire again. This time at his knee. A wet crack and another howl of agony. He’s crying now, tears mingling with blood.

I watch, detached, as if from a great height. What a sad, pathetic man.

“It doesn’t matter,” Leo hisses through gritted teeth. “You’re still...”

“For Papa.”

The final shot ends it.

I stand over him, breathing steady, no emotion in my chest. Cold. Calculated. All the blood is his, not mine, absorbing the victory—empty and full at once—then turn away, leaving all of them dead.

I slink out of the room. Into the elevator.

I numbly punch the ground floor button. I wait, unthinking, as I descend.

I ease onto the street. Each step echoes in my ears—solid, alive.

Figures linger under broken lamplight—kids, mostly, looking to make a quick buck off someone like me.

They scatter when they see me coming. No chance tonight, boys.

The city pumps electricly through me in rhythm with my heart.

I keep walking until this city can no longer tell one life from another. Until the crowds swallow me up and make me an invisible part of the mass.

Until I'm back at the hotel.

Past

The week before Thanksgiving, Truman gets the call from his parents.

He's sprawled out on his bed, flipping a pen between his fingers while he listens, his voice low and even. I sit cross-legged at the desk, pretending to read while my stomach knots itself into something sharp and unbearable.

When he hangs up, he runs a hand through his hair and exhales. "They want me to come home for Thanksgiving." His green eyes lift to mine. "They said you can come too."

I grip the book harder. The pages blur. I knew this was coming, but I still feel like I've been sucker-punched.

"I don't want to go back," I say, my voice quiet.

His brows pull together. "Kid—"

"There's nothing there for me, Truman." I swallow hard, staring at the words on the page even though I can't read a single one. "Papa's gone. The cabin is empty. I—I can't go back."

The weight of his stare presses against me, heavy and warm, but I keep my eyes on the book. If I look at him, I might break.

After a long silence, he shifts, sitting up. "Then I'll stay here with you."

I shake my head, finally glancing up. “No. You should go home.” I force a small smile. “Eat a big Thanksgiving dinner. Fight with your siblings. Watch football with your dad.”

Truman’s jaw clenches. “Not if it means leaving you here alone.”

I get up and cross the room, pressing a quick kiss to his jaw before he can argue more.

“Tasha and I are going out for dinner tonight.”

Truman studies me for a long moment before exhaling through his nose. “Alright,” he mutters. “But we’re talking about this later.”

I nod.

The restaurant is cheap, but the food is good. Greasy fries, crispy chicken tenders, and burgers so thick they fall apart in your hands. It’s busy, but the kind of busy that feels warm and lived-in, like people actually belong here.

Tasha steals a fry from my plate and pops it into her mouth. “So,” she says around a mouthful. “What school do you go to again?”

I hesitate, then shrug. “I don’t.”

Her chewing slows. “Okay. Where do you work?”

I pick at my burger. “I—uh—

She tilts her head, eyes sharp.

Shit.

I take a sip of my soda, avoiding her gaze.

Tasha doesn't say anything for a second, just studies me in that way that makes me feel like she can see straight through my bullshit. Then she leans forward, resting her chin on her hand.

"You live with Truman, don't you?"

I freeze, fingers tightening around my cup.

She exhales. "Kid... you know if the school finds out, he could get kicked out, right?"

Guilt slams into me, a cold, sinking weight in my stomach. I do know.

But hearing her say it out loud makes it real in a way that squeezes the air out of my lungs.

Truman has worked his ass off to get here. And I'm just... hiding in his dorm like some stray cat, risking everything for him.

I push my plate away, suddenly not hungry anymore.

Tasha sighs. "Look, I get it. You guys are crazy about each other. But be careful, okay? I like you both too much to see this go to shit."

I nod, even though my throat is too tight to speak.

Tasha watches me for a moment, then her voice softens. "What's your plan, Kid?"

You can't keep doing this forever."

I let out a slow breath, staring down at the table. "I know I have to figure things out," I admit, my voice quieter now. "But Truman... he's all I have. He's all of my firsts." I look up at her then, something raw and vulnerable creeping into my chest. "I love him."

It's the first time I've said it out loud. It hangs between us, real and terrifying.

Tasha's expression softens.

Tasha's smile is small but warm. "I get it," she says. "I don't know exactly how sheltered you were, but I can tell you've lived a... different kind of life."

My pulse kicks up, but she doesn't press, doesn't ask questions I can't answer.

"But that's exactly why you have to start building something for yourself," she continues. "Something that's just yours. You know what happens if you don't?"

I shake my head.

She leans in, voice gentle but firm. "You start to lose yourself. And maybe that doesn't sound so bad now, but trust me, down the line? You'll resent it. And if you resent it, it'll bleed into your relationship, no matter how much you love him."

A lump forms in my throat.

Tasha reaches across the table and taps my hand. "You don't have to figure everything out overnight. But you do have to start thinking about it. Create a life for yourself that you can share with Truman instead of just living his."

I nod again, even though my chest is tight and I don't know how to make sense of the emotions swirling inside me.

Tasha grins and steals another fry off my plate. "And hey, if you need a wing woman while you figure it out, I know a great one."

Despite everything, a small, shaky laugh escapes me. "Oh yeah?"

She winks. "Damn right."

Back at Truman's dorm, I sit on his bed, watching as he flips through one of his textbooks. My chest is tight with everything I haven't said yet, every unspoken thought pressing against my ribs like they're trying to claw their way out.

"You have to go home for Thanksgiving," I say finally.

Truman glances up, frowning. "We've been over this."

"And I've made up my mind," I say firmly. "I'll get a hotel."

He sets the book down, jaw tightening. "With what ID, Kid? What credit card?"

I straighten my spine. "I can handle it."

His frown deepens. "You don't even have—"

"I've got it handled."

He blows out a frustrated breath, raking a hand through his hair. "This is fucking stupid."

I force a smile. “You’ll be too busy stuffing your face with turkey to miss me.”

He doesn’t smile back. Just watches me with that unreadable expression, the one that makes my stomach flip in a way I don’t know how to handle.

I look away. “It’s just a few days.”

Truman exhales heavily but doesn’t push it. Instead, he leans back against the headboard, eyes dark with emotions I can’t place.

I don’t say anything else. I can’t. I sit at his desk as he goes back to his text book.

I pull out my phone and, in secret, type out a message.

Me: Hey, Eli... I need a favor.

Eli responds almost immediately.

Eli: That’s a dangerous ask coming from you.

Me: Can you book a hotel room for me? Just for Thanksgiving break?

A pause. Then—

Eli: Are you okay?

Me: Just avoiding home.

Another pause. Then—

Eli: Yeah. I’ll take care of it.

I exhale, relief washing through me.

The motel reeks of mildew and stale cigarettes, the walls stained with time and encounters I don't want to think about.

The heater rattles like it's coughing up its last breath, barely cutting through the chill that seeps into my bones.

But it's a place to sleep. A roof over my head.

And thanks to Eli, it's mine for the week.

Truman is furious. Refused to kiss me goodbye when I walked him to the bus station.

I'd cried most of that night. I texted Kenzie and apologized for not going home with him, but to be nice and enjoy her brother while he was there.

She asked what he did to mess up. I'd laughed but let her know he didn't do anything wrong.

I spend my days at the gym, pushing my body until the burn drowns out everything else. Push-ups until my arms shake. Pull-ups until my grip gives out. Burpees, cardio, anything to keep moving, to keep from thinking too hard.

But the thoughts always creep in.

The barn was sweltering that morning. The wood rough against my palms as I clung to the beams, watching through the gaps. Two men. Papa flashing the I love you sign. The barrel of a gun raised at him.

I squeeze my eyes shut, but it doesn't stop the memory. The sound of the shot. The way his body jerked. The silence after he hit the ground.

I tell myself he wasn't really my father. Not by blood. But it doesn't matter.

He raised me. Fed me. Loved me. Taught me how to survive. How to fight and hunt and be strong.

And I just sat there.

I swallow the lump in my throat and push harder, sprinting until my legs scream, until my lungs burn. But the grief doesn't leave. It never does.

I shower at the gym quickly. While I'm changing my phone vibrates.

Truman: Do you miss me? Nice of you to stay behind .

Me: I do, desperately. Just wasn't in the cards for now. How's Kenzie? Is Nate still being a pain?

Truman: Kenzie's fine, being a little brat as usual, all shopping this and look at what I made. Nate's still convinced he can run the entire family. You know how it is.

Me: Yeah, I remember. Sounds... fun .

Truman: Sure, if you like the chaos. But no, no big deal. I just thought you might've wanted to be here.

Me: I wanted to be there, just didn't feel like it was the right time.

Truman: Right.

Me: Truman, stop. Don't do this. I'm just trying to check in. I'm sure your family misses you and is happy to have you visit.

Truman: Guess so.

Me: Truman, we'll talk when you get back. I don't want this tension between us.

Truman: Fine.

Me: Okay.

Truman: ...I miss you.

Me: I'll be waiting.

Back in the motel room, I drop my bag on the bed, peeling off my damp tee-shirt. Something flutters to the floor.

A business card.

Marcy's name stares up at me, bold and sharp. I flip it over between my fingers, the edges slightly bent from being stuffed into my bag for so long.

I should throw it away.

Instead, I sit on the edge of the bed, rolling my phone between my palms.

Going to Miami. Joining the Testa family.

The idea sits like a weight in my chest, heavy and uncertain.

I don't trust Marcy. Not completely.

But maybe... just maybe, she's right.

My fingers move before I can stop them, typing out a message.

Me: What exactly would going to Miami entail? What would you expect from me?

I hit send before I can change my mind.

Seconds pass.

Then minutes.

Then my phone buzzes.

I inhale sharply before looking at the screen.

Marcy: Let's discuss.

Present

I 'm on the edge of her well-worn couch, fingers twisting the hem of my shirt, heart racing.

My chest feels too tight—like I can't breathe right.

But no matter how hard I try to still my nerves, the blood-red glow of the news reports flashing on the TV keeps dragging me back to reality.

The deaths are everywhere. The words murdered , mob bosses , executed keep cutting through my brain like a blade.

I've been here for forty-eight hours. I couldn't go to Truman. I couldn't risk it.

She was the only logical alternative.

Marcy's house feels too small now, even though she's been kind enough to hide me in her quiet little corner of North Carolina. The sound of the TV is a constant, unnerving hum in the background. I should feel safer.

I'm with Marcy, right? She's helped me before. But now? Now, it feels like the walls are closing in. Like I can't escape the weight of what I've done.

I run a hand through my hair, letting out a shaky breath.

"They're calling you The Blood Queen," she says bewildered.

“I know,” I snap, not caring that it’s probably too harsh. “But that’s what they do, right? Come up with catchy names for people? I don’t care about the name. I care about what’s next.”

Marcy’s not dumb. She’s not going to pretend she doesn’t see the wild, nervous energy in me. My usual calm is gone. It’s been gone since I pulled the trigger on my uncle and his cohorts. Since I wiped out the families.

Now it’s only the quiet, disorienting panic that’s consuming me.

I know Marcy well enough to know that she’s trying to put it all together, working her journalist’s brain at full speed. But the horror on her face is still there, creeping into her eyes. “Evany, you—this can’t—”

I cut her off. “What? It’s a nightmare, right? I never wanted this. But they killed my papa, my family. And now...” I trail off, voice shaky.

I can’t even finish the thought.

She swallows hard, still looking torn between anger and sympathy, and then shifts her gaze to the TV. They’re playing the footage of the crime scene now—images of the bodies, the chaos in the wake of the killings. I feel a cold sweat break out across my skin.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she says, her voice unsteady. “I thought the Falcone , Testa, Scarfo , and Leonetti families would be too big to topple. You toppled them all. You killed them, Evany. You—”

I look at her sharply, trying to rein in the surge of panic trying to claw its way out. I nod, glancing at the screen. The news anchor’s words are swirling around in my head like a blur.

Surprising reports have emerged, with a surviving guard claiming that the ruthless assassin responsible for the mob bosses' deaths was a woman. Authorities have yet to confirm details, but the survivor referred to the mysterious figure as a 'The Blood Queen.'

I stand up, pacing, a little frantic now. She disappears into the closet, rummaging for a moment. When she returns, she's holding a thick stack of old journals, bound in leather. My journals.

My heart drops.

She holds them out to me. "I kept them. The ones you've been sending me—dropped off at the P.O. Box for years. All the details. All the Mafia activity. All of it's here. We can use this to your advantage."

I stare at the stack, my chest tight. "You kept them..."

She gives me a hard look. "Evany, you've been documenting all of it. Everything the families did— everything . The world needs to know the truth. This is your ticket at a new life."

I blink rapidly, trying to hold it together, but the tears threaten to spill. My burner phone vibrates on the coffee table. Only Marcy and Truman have the number. I don't want to leave this life without seeing him but it's too dangerous right now.

"I'll just be in the kitchen," she says and leaves me to my phone.

A voicemail notification. I dial in.

Click play.

“Kid, I saw the news today. And I can’t sit here, knowing what I know, and say nothing.

I know you. I know the weight you carry, the way you tuck your pain away where no one can see it.

Fuck, but I see it. I always have. Please let my love be the light that gets you through.

When all you believe in is the hurt, let me be the one to catch you before you spiral.

I don’t want anything from you—not your apologies, not your explanations.

Just your trust. Just for you to believe, even for a second, that you have me.

I’ll be right here. You don’t have to say a word.

You can start with a whisper. Or nothing at all.

Just fucking let me in. Time is our friend, Kid.

If you even have the smallest bit of faith left in us—let me hold you up.

” He sighs. “Just, have a little faith in me.”

I break apart. Sobs rip through me so fiercely that I can’t stand.

I hit the call button. Wait impatiently for it to connect.

Truman answers on the first ring.

“Evany,” he breathes. The sound of my biological name from Truman’s lips instead

of Kid sends a jolt through me, stirring something bitter. Something sour and rotten. It's as if a part of me is fading, the innocence of my childhood slipping away, never to return.

My heart fractures at the thought.

I have lost Kid, but I am not Evany.

"I need you," I whisper.

Past

The moment I see him leaning against the wall of the bus station, my heart skips.

“You came,” he says, his voice a little too quiet, like he’s not sure whether to be relieved or mad.

“Of course,” I answer.

He watches me, arms crossed over his chest as I approach, but his eyes are softer now. The anger from before is gone, replaced by an energy— that makes my pulse race.

I stop just a foot away from him, feeling the space between us burn. He swallows hard, and I can see the conflict in his eyes. He uncrosses his arms and steps toward me, slow but sure.

“I shouldn’t have said what I said, Kid.

I—hell, I missed you. Missed your laugh, your kisses, your warmth next to me at night.

And Mom was grade A pissed at me for my mood.

” His hand comes up, barely brushing my cheek, but I can feel the heat of it even without touching.

His voice lowers, all gravel and desire. “Missed everything about you.”

A shiver runs down my spine at his words, the honesty in them sinking deep. I don’t say anything for a moment. Instead, I move into him, pressing my body against his, feeling the tension in his shoulders melt away when I slide my hands up to his neck.

“God,” I breathe, my fingers tangling in his hair. “I missed you, too.”

His hands slide around my waist, pulling me tighter against him until we’re flush, every inch of our bodies touching. It’s almost too much, the feeling of him—how right it is to be this close again. How much I’ve been aching for this.

His lips crash down on mine, hot and hungry, the way I’ve missed. I taste the apologies in his kiss, feel the regret in the urgency of it. His hands slide down my back, tugging at the hem of my shirt, and I can’t help but let out a soft, breathless laugh.

“Come on. Let’s go home,” I say taking his hand.

The walk to the campus feels familiar. It settles my nerves. I did miss Truman—so much it hurt.

Before I can fully close the door to his room, he’s pulling me toward the bed, his mouth never leaving mine, not even for a second.

We hit the mattress in a tangle of limbs, the sheets twisting around us, the whole world fades into the background.

I can’t get close enough, can’t touch enough.

My body is craving him like I’ve been starving for months.

His hands skim over my body with a familiarity that's almost overwhelming. When he pulls me on top of him, I can't stop the gasp that leaves my mouth at the feel of his hard length beneath me. I grind against him instinctively, his breath hitching at the contact.

"Missed this," he groans, his hands gripping my hips, urging me to move, to feel him. And I do. Every inch of him. Every press, every slide, every brush of his lips against my skin.

A frantic, fiery rhythm builds between us, and a sweet pressure coils tight in the pit of my stomach. I know I can't last. My head falls back deeper into the pillows, tangling into the sheets as his white-knuckled fingers press indents into my hips, pulling me faster until—

"Kid..."

We're a mess of tangled limbs and heated skin, each of us trying to get closer, deeper, to forget the space that was between us for so long.

I barely hear him before I unravel completely, the rush of bliss leaving me boneless and breathless and gasping his name on repeat.

He rolls me below him and catches my mouth with his, moving wildly now, losing himself deeper inside me until he shudders hard and collapses against me, our heartbeats pounding in unison. We breathe each other's air, feel each other coming down.

Finally.

"Yeah." He nuzzles his face into my neck, lips finding my pulse. "Definitely missed this."

I lace my fingers through his hair and hold him, feeling raw and content. I lay on his chest, feeling his steady heartbeat beneath my ear. It's so soothing, like I'm right where I belong. But I can't stay quiet. Not now.

"I love you," I whisper, the words slipping from me before I can stop them.

He shifts slightly beneath me, his fingers tenderly weaving through my hair, and I feel the warmth of his lips as they press against my forehead, soft yet firm, an anchor.

"I love you, too," he murmurs, his voice a comfort that wraps around me like a warm embrace.

I'm lying in bed next to Truman, his steady breathing a comfort against my side, but I can't shake the gnawing feeling in my chest that's been there since Thanksgiving break. Something's been eating at me, and I can't ignore it anymore.

I shift a little, trying not to disturb him, but he stirs anyway, his arm tightening around me instinctively. I can feel his warmth pressing against me, his scent, the safe, solid feeling of being here with him.

I've been lying to him, keeping things from him. Not the kind of lie that's a full-on betrayal, but the kind that still feels like a weight around my neck.

The text messages from Marcy buzz in my bag on the floor, and I bite my lip.

I haven't told him about those—haven't told him I've been talking to her almost every day since he left for Thanksgiving.

Haven't told him how she's been pushing me to go to Miami.

To fold myself back into the Testa family.

My stomach churns just thinking about it. The anger. The resentment. The rage I've been holding inside since the day my Papa was taken from me. It feels too big, too raw, too fucking heavy to say out loud.

I slide my phone from my bag and glance at the screen again, my thumb hovering over Marcy's last message. "You can't keep running forever."

I swallow hard. The words burn. But it's true. I can't keep running. And I don't know what to do with that.

I turn my head, my gaze meeting Truman's in the dim light. His face is relaxed, his eyes still closed, his lips parted just slightly in sleep.

For a moment, I want to curl into him, forget everything that's weighing me down, and pretend life is perfect.

But I know it's not, won't be until I make it right.

I pull the blanket up, covering my face for a second to block out the guilt.

I'm being selfish, aren't I? I'm keeping all of this from him, hoping it'll go away on its own.

But it won't. It's going to catch up to us sooner or later.

Truman stirs again, and I force myself to put the phone down, trying to push the thoughts away. I want to tell him. I want to scream it out until the weight lifts, but every time I open my mouth, it feels like I'll be giving up a part of myself I'm not ready to lose.

And maybe that's what scares me the most. That in telling him, I'll be losing

myself—becoming someone I don't recognize anymore.

I reach for his hand in the dark, intertwining my fingers with his, and squeeze. The movement is soft, almost tentative, but it's real. It's me telling him, in the only way I know how, that I'm still here, even if inside, I'm falling apart.

Present

The sound of a knock at the door sends me into a tailspin.

My heart leaps in my chest, and I freeze, momentarily paralyzed.

Marcy is in the kitchen, stirring something that smells far too comforting for the weight I'm carrying in my chest. She looks up, the worry in her eyes too obvious to miss, but she doesn't ask anything.

She just waits for me to move. I don't. The knock comes again, more insistent.

"Evany?" Marcy calls, walking toward me slowly, her voice low. "Do you want me to get it?"

I don't respond, but my feet finally move, carrying me to the door like they're guided by something other than my own will.

Truman.

He's wearing his typical suit, hands in his pockets, his jaw clenched. He looks like he's been through hell—his hair a bit disheveled, his eyes dark with the kind of exhaustion I've only seen in people who are holding a weight too heavy to bear. The moment his eyes meet mine, my chest fractures.

"You look like you've been fighting a war," he breathes, his voice rough.

I can't hold it together anymore. Not with him standing there, not after what's happened, not with all the blood on my hands.

My legs go weak, and I collapse, sinking into him, letting him catch me.

It feels like I'm drowning, like the world is closing in on me, and Truman is the only failsafe keeping me from slipping away.

"Hey... you're safe now, okay? You're safe," he murmurs, his voice soothing, but there's a tremor in it I know too well. He's scared. Just as scared as I am.

I can't bring myself to look up at him. I can't let him see how broken I am, but I know he feels it. I feel the way he holds me tighter, his strong arms wrapping around me, pressing me against his chest as if he's afraid I'll shatter into a thousand pieces.

"I—I didn't want this. I didn't want to drag you into it," I whisper, my voice trembling. The words are a confession, an apology, a cry for help, all tangled up in one. "I never wanted you to be part of this... this nightmare."

Truman doesn't answer immediately. He just holds me, letting me sob into his shirt, the weight of everything pouring out of me.

The tears feel endless, but with each one, I feel the tension in my body loosen just a little.

I can feel his heartbeat—steady and sure—under my ear, and I hold onto that steady rhythm like it's the only thing keeping me grounded.

When I finally pull back, Truman wipes the tears from my cheeks, his hands gentle but insistent.

“Don’t apologize.”

He’s so calm, so steady. It only makes the storm inside me rage harder. I want to scream, to break everything in sight. But I don’t. I stay silent, trying to hold onto the last shred of composure I have left.

“I… I can’t keep running, Truman. I can’t do this anymore.”

Truman’s grip tightens for a moment, like he’s afraid I’ll vanish if he lets go. “You don’t have to. We’ll figure it out, okay?”

I shake my head, wiping my face, trying to regain some control. “What do I do?”

Truman’s brow furrows. Marcy sets down two mugs on the coffee table. Motions for us to sit.

“Marcy,” Truman says. “Should have known you were involved.”

I put a hand on Truman’s chest. “Don’t.”

His jaw ticks. “I told you both, all those years ago, exactly what we should have done. Go to the FBI. And you,” he lifts his chin at Marcy, “shat all over that idea.”

Marcy’s face falls. She nods. “You’ve every right to be pissed Truman. But how could I know how far Evany was going to take this? I thought I was just getting information. Just writing the true crime book of the ages.”

Truman snorts. “I knew. I. fucking. Knew.” Truman’s shaking with anger. I wrap an arm around him.

“Please. Can we not fight. This was no one’s choice but mine. Be mad at me. I’m

sorry. I'm so sorry for all of it. But that doesn't change right now. What the hell do I do?"

Marcy and Truman stare at each other, faces set hard.

"You go to the FBI," Marcy finally relents.

"I know a guy," Truman says.

My brow furrows. "What?"

"Eli," he says.

"Eli?" I echo.

My mind races, the words spinning through my thoughts, but none of them seem to land.

The air in the small living room feels thick, suffocating.

I can feel Truman's anger still simmering beside me, and Marcy is just a few feet away, her gaze fixed on the floor as if she's waiting for something to break.

"Let me make a call." Truman walks to the door, his hand on the knob. My stomach roils. Marcy pushes my mug of tea toward me.

It's two days later when Eli shows up to Marcy's house. My stomach, a perpetual coiled ball of dread, has kept me up every night, no matter how Truman tries to distract me.

"Truman," Eli says, his voice deep, cutting through the silence. "Kid."

I nod, feeling small under the weight of his gaze.

“Let’s get this over with,” Truman says, his tone still edged with frustration, but there’s something else there now. A quiet hope, perhaps. Or maybe a resignation. I can’t tell which.

Marcy stands by the kitchen counter, nervously fidgeting with the edge of a dish towel. The three of us settle around the small table, and Eli takes a seat, his eyes never leaving me.

“So, what’s the situation?” Eli asks, his voice clipped and businesslike. He looks between me and Truman, clearly waiting for us to bring him up to speed.

I inhale deeply, feeling the air fill my lungs as my fingers curl into tight fists.

With a steady voice, I recount every detail to Eli, starting from the moment I left them at college until last week.

As my words spill out, I watch Eli’s expression shift dramatically: his eyes widen in shock, then his brows knit together in anger, and finally, his features soften into a look of resignation and acceptance.

“You understand what that means, right? The FBI is ready to bring charges. If you testify, it all ends. If you don’t...” He lets the words hang in the air, heavy with implication.

I feel a cold sweat breaking out on my skin. “I’m not testifying,” I say, my voice shaking with more fear than I care to admit. “I can’t. I won’t ever be safe.”

The words hit the room like a stone sinking into water. Eli doesn’t flinch, but I can see the flicker of disappointment in his eyes.

“Kid,” Eli starts.

I shake my head, my chest tightening. “I can’t.

I’ll be a walking target. But I will give you something.

I’ve been keeping journals. Six years of detailed accounts on every mafia crime I knew about.

I sent them to Marcy.” I turn to her, and she pulls a stack of journals from the safe she keeps hidden in the back of the house.

I push them toward Eli, my hand trembling. “I’ll give you all of it. Everything I have. But in return, I need protection. I need to be safe.”

Eli’s expression remains a stoic mask. He rises with deliberate calm, extracting his phone with an unnerving silence.

His fingers move with purpose as he dials, striding out onto the porch with a determination that speaks volumes.

His voice, low and intense, mutters briefly into the receiver, leaving us behind in a suffocating silence that stretches into eternity.

The air grows heavy, each second dragging like a weight.

Truman’s hand on my back offers a fragile, fleeting comfort against the oppressive anticipation.

Eli strides back in, in what feels like an eternity later.

“You’ll be put under the witness protection program,” he says, his eyes now softer.

“The US Marshals will move you to a secure location. No one will be able to touch you. You’ll have a new identity, a new life.

But you won’t be able to contact anyone from your past. Ever. ”

I can feel my heart stop. The weight of it all crashes down on me, and I can’t breathe.

“I—” The words catch in my throat.

He holds up a hand. “You don’t have to decide right now,” Eli says, his tone softer than before. “But this is the only way you’ll be safe.”

I feel Truman’s hand on mine, and I squeeze it, trying to steady myself. “What about Truman?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Eli shakes his head. “No. No one. Not ever from the moment you sign the papers.”

Past

Truman's room is half-packed, his duffel gaping open on the bed like it's waiting to swallow the last few weeks whole. Mine's already zipped, slumped against his desk chair like it's been ready to leave for days. But I'm not ready. Not for the bus, not for what comes after.

He moves around me, grabbing a handful of t-shirts from his dresser, and I watch the way his muscles flex beneath his sweater, the way his jaw shifts in quiet concentration.

God, I need this—the simple things, the normalcy of just being near him, the way we fit together when there's nothing between us but breath and skin.

And soon, there will be something between us.

Something big.

Something I haven't told him yet.

I step behind him, press my fingers to the hem of his sweater, and slip them underneath, feeling the warmth of his skin. Truman stills, his breath hitching just enough for me to notice before he turns to face me, eyes dark with something deeper than just desire.

“What are you doing, babe?” he murmurs, though he already knows.

I answer him by lifting onto my toes, pressing my mouth to his, slow at first, teasing, waiting for him to give in. He does—because of course he does. His fingers knot in my hair, dragging me closer as he backs me against the desk, and I feel his breath shudder when I push my hips up against his.

“Kid,” he groans against my mouth. It’s half a protest, half a prayer.

I kiss him harder.

We shouldn’t be doing this. Not when I have something to tell him. Not when the weight of it sits heavy in my gut. But right now, I don’t want to think. I don’t want to talk. I just want to feel.

And Truman makes me feel everything.

Clothes fall away. His hands are everywhere—palming my thighs, gripping my waist, sliding up my ribs like he can’t get enough. I sink my teeth into his shoulder as he lifts me onto the desk, and he hisses through clenched teeth, his fingers bruising against my skin.

I should stop this. I should tell him. But the words tangle with the heat between us, lost in the way he moves, the way he fills every empty space inside me.

The cool edge of the desk presses against my backside, but I’m burning everywhere else, igniting under every touch.

The dim room fades—there’s only skin, heat, pulse.

We move together, frantic and unrestrained, like we’re trying to make this last—like I know that when this moment is over, everything will be different. I open my mouth, try again. But his lips are there before I can speak, stealing the words before they

become real.

His taste leaves me dizzy; his hands draw new paths down my spine. I gasp against him as the world narrows to a single point. I come hard. His groan and release follow.

A crash breaks through—papers and pens tumbling to the floor—and a laugh escapes him, low and dark. He pauses, just for a second, his forehead resting against mine, eyes wild and shimmering in a way that makes me ache all over again.

Truman collapses against me, breath heavy against my skin, his heartbeat thundering beneath my palm where I press it to his chest. I close my eyes, trying to memorize the way he feels. Trying to hold onto this before I ruin it.

I know I have to tell him.

So I do.

“I’m not going to Moffitt.”

I say it quietly, but it shatters the air between us like a gunshot. Truman stiffens, pulling back just enough to look me in the eye, his brow furrowing like he doesn’t understand the words.

“What?”

I swallow hard. “I’m going to Miami.”

His hands slip from my waist. The warmth disappears between us, and suddenly, I feel cold.

“What the hell are you talking about?” His voice is sharp, but not loud. Not yet.

I push myself off the desk, finding my feet, my arms wrapping around myself like I can hold in all the pieces of me that are about to break.

“I’m going to meet my uncle. Leonardo Testa.”

His face twists, his jaw going tight, and I can see the moment realization slams into him.

“No.” He shakes his head like he can will this into not being true. “No, you’re not.”

“Truman—”

“You can’t,” he snaps, stepping back, raking a hand through his hair. “You know what that family is. What they do.”

I lift my chin. “They’re family.”

“No, they’re not,” he fires back. “Your family is gone, Kid. You don’t have to do this.”

But I do .

I’ve felt it simmering in my gut for months, the anger, the resentment, the weight of my father’s murder pressing down on me like I’m supposed to just live with it. Like I’m supposed to pretend it doesn’t matter.

But it does matter. And I need answers.

“I have to,” I say, my voice raw. “I need to know—I need to understand—”

Truman’s face is unreadable, but his eyes—God, his eyes—they cut straight through

me, sharp with betrayal.

“Understand what ? How to become one of them?”

My breath catches, and for the first time, I don't know what to say. Because maybe—maybe that's exactly what I'm doing.

His hands clench into fists at his sides. “So what? You're just gonna walk into Testa's life and let him decide who you are?” He laughs, but there's no humor in it. “Jesus Christ, Kid. Do you even hear yourself?”

Anger flares up hot in my chest, battling the guilt I don't want to acknowledge. “This isn't your decision.”

His mouth presses into a thin line. “No. But it's yours. And it's the wrong one.”

Silence stretches between us, heavy and suffocating. The same hands that were on my body minutes ago are now curled at his sides like he doesn't know what to do with them. Like he doesn't know what to do with me . I pull my clothes on in a hurry.

Finally, he exhales sharply, shaking his head. “If you get on that bus to Miami, don't expect me to come chasing after you,” he says yanking up his pants.

My stomach twists.

He's never said anything like that before. Never thrown down an ultimatum between us like a loaded gun, waiting for me to pull the trigger.

But maybe I already have.

I hold his gaze, even though it hurts. Even though I can feel something breaking

between us.

“I never asked you to.”

I pick up my two bags.

And I walk out.

I cry the entire walk to the bus station. Wiping my tears with my coat sleeve I sniff back my emotion to steel myself. My phone vibrates in my pocket but I don't bother looking at it. I know it's Truman. Apologizing.

Negotiating.

Begging.

If I look...if I take the bait, I will cave in. I will go with him to Moffitt and I will only prolong our inevitable destruction. He has a future—bright and shiny—with school and a normal life and I have no place in that world until I right the wrongs in my own life.

I've been on the road for hours, watching the world blur past the window in a smear of asphalt and gas stations, my stomach tight with a feeling I don't want to name.

I left Truman standing in his dorm room, anger coiled in his shoulders, jaw clenched so tight I half expected his teeth to crack. If you get on that bus to Miami, don't expect me to come chasing after you.

The words rattle around my skull like loose bullets, and I tell myself they don't hurt. That I don't care. That this is what I have to do.

The bus lurches as it pulls into the Miami station, the heavy sigh of brakes snapping me out of my thoughts. I drag my bag out from under the seat and sling it over my shoulder, stepping off into the thick humidity of Florida air.

I don't know where I'm going.

The reality of that hits me as I stand on the sidewalk, the city stretching out in front of me like a monster with too many teeth. Miami is loud, fast, impatient. Neon lights and honking horns. A sea of people, none of them looking at me, none of them giving a damn that I don't belong here.

I pull out my phone and hover over Marcy's name in my messages. My fingers hesitate for only a second before I type.

Me: I'm in Miami. Where do I go?

The response comes fast.

MARCY: You actually did it. Hold up. Sending you the address now.

A second later, a new message pops up with a pin drop. I tap it, and the map zooms in on a mansion—because of course it's a mansion.

I take a breath, wave down a cab, and slide into the backseat.

"Where to?" the driver asks, barely glancing at me.

I read him the address. He whistles low, gives me a look in the rear-view mirror. "Fancy place."

I don't answer. Just stare out the window as we pull away, the city twisting around

me in a blur of motion and noise.

Twenty minutes later, we're outside a sprawling estate, gates black and gleaming under the streetlights. My pulse kicks as I pay the driver and step out, my sneakers crunching against the gravel driveway.

The house looms in front of me, too big, too expensive, too much .

Two rows of tall palm trees line the driveway. I look up and see the vast balconies adorning the windows of the enormous and ostentatious house. The driver hops out and runs to the trunk, yanking out my oversized bag. I get out, choking on the humid air, and thank the driver.

I take a breath, adjust my bag on my shoulder, and move toward the front door.

All I know is what Truman and I have read about or that Marcy has told me.

The Testa family, the wealthiest of the four, resides in Miami.

Testa's are known for controlling the shipping ports.

Think cameras, computers, leather goods, or jewelry.

The boss, my uncle Leo, supposedly runs the family like it's comprised of venture capital instead of loved ones.

Uncle Leonardo. My murdered birth father's brother. Also known as: The Blood King.

Guess that makes me royalty.

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Present

Eli has gone to a hotel for the night. Marcy retired hours ago, the late nights of the last week taking a toll on her.

The room feels heavy, the silence between us thick with the weight of what's unspoken.

I'm lying next to Truman in Marcy's guest bed, the soft hum of the night air seeping through the cracks in the window.

The room is dark except for the faint glow of the bedside lamp, casting long shadows on the walls.

I can barely breathe, my chest tight with all I've been carrying, and the moment feels like it's stretching on forever.

Truman's warm body is next to mine, and I feel his presence like a grounding force, steady and unyielding.

His fingers gently trace circles along the bare skin of my arm, as if trying to calm me, soothe the restless energy that I can't seem to control.

His touch is gentle, deliberate—exactly what I need right now albeit not what I deserve.

I feel the heat of him beside me, but it doesn't comfort me the way it used to.

“Evany,” Truman’s voice is low, just above a whisper, but it cuts through the quiet like a lifeline. I hate him calling me that. “You have to take the deal. The witness protection deal. It’s the only way you’ll be safe. You understand that, right?”

I close my eyes, swallowing hard, the lump in my throat threatening to choke me. It’s the last thing I want to hear. The last thing I want to face. Leaving my whole life behind. How could I ever leave him?

I pull the covers up over my head, trying to shut it all out, but the reality of what’s happening crashes over me again. The danger that still lurks. My body trembles with the effort it takes to hold it all together.

Truman shifts beside me, his arm sliding around my waist, pulling me close until I can feel the beat of his heart against mine. His warmth, his steadiness, which I’ve always run to, now feels as if it’s slipping through my fingers.

“I can’t leave you, Truman,” I murmur, the words barely escaping my lips. “I can’t leave you behind.”

He’s quiet for a moment, and when he speaks, his voice is thick with emotion. “Evany, I can’t live with the thought of you out there, alone. You’re finally free. You deserve peace.”

I shake my head, not wanting to hear it, not wanting to face the truth that’s staring me in the face.

“But what about you? You have your sister, your brother, your parents, your friends. You have your career, Truman. You’ve worked so hard for all of this. I can’t ask you to throw it all away for me. I won’t.”

His grip tightens on me, as if he’s trying to hold me together, trying to steady me

when I feel like I'm about to fall apart.

"I'm not asking you to leave me. I'm asking you to choose a life that's safe. A life where you can finally breathe without looking over your shoulder every second of the day."

I pull away slightly, looking up at him through the dim light, my eyes filled with unshed tears. "What?"

Truman's eyes soften, his thumb brushing a stray tear from my cheek. He looks at me like he's searching, like he's waiting for me to finally understand.

"You're everything to me," he says quietly, his voice raw with emotion. "I've waited my whole life for you to come back to me. I can't lose you again. Not now."

His words hit me like a wave, and I feel the ground beneath me slip away.

My heart aches at the intensity in his eyes.

I've always known Truman loves me, but I never accepted the depth of it until this moment.

The way he's looking at me now, like I'm all that matters, like he's willing to burn the world to the ground just to keep me safe.

"You... you'd give up everything?" I whisper, my voice barely audible. "Your family? Your friends? Your career?"

He nods, his gaze unwavering. "For you? Yes. I've already made my choice. You're it. You're all that matters to me. If I have to walk away from it all to be with you, I will. I've been waiting for you since you left."

I can't stop the tears now. They fall freely, hot and painful, as the weight of his words crashes over me. It's too much. I've been fighting this, fighting the idea of leaving my life behind, but Truman... he's right. I've already lost too much. My family, my life as I knew it—it's all gone.

The only person I have left—have ever truly had—is him.

"I can't... I can't make you do that," I whisper, my voice breaking. "I can't ask you to give up your life for me. I don't deserve that."

Truman leans in, his forehead resting against mine, his breath warm against my skin. "You're not asking. I'm choosing this... I choose you."

His words wrap around me like a blanket, pulling me closer, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I let myself believe it. Let myself believe that maybe, just maybe, there's a way out of this.

A way to start over.

He presses his lips to my forehead, his kiss soft and tender, and it's precisely what I need in this moment. He's here with me. He's staying. And he's going to help me rebuild whatever is left of me.

"I'll be with you," Truman says, his voice steady now, as if this decision has already been made. "Wherever you go, I'll be right there with you. I won't let you go. I can't."

The tears come harder now, and I nod into his chest, letting myself crumble, letting myself break down completely in his arms. For the first time in my life, I feel like I have something real to hold onto. Something worth fighting for.

“I love you, Truman,” I whisper, the words spilling out like they’ve been bottled up and buried for too long.

“I love you too,” he murmurs back, his voice thick with emotion. “And we’ll figure this out together.”

Truman’s heart beats steadily under my cheek, reassuring and true, and I breathe in the scent of him—warm, familiar.

Finally, reluctantly, I pull back and look up into his eyes which are bright with tears. We both laugh shakily, swiping at our wet cheeks with the backs of our hands.

“I must look like a mess,” I say with a half-smile.

“You look perfect,” Truman replies.

He reaches out to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear, his touch sending a calm ripple through me. And for once, for this moment, I believe him. I believe in the truth of us.

“So,” I say softly, “how does this work?”

Truman

Five years.

I've spent five damn years in this small town where every day hides its own secrets just for us—a place where even the rustle of the wind and ripples on the pond feel like they belong solely to our world.

Blueridge sits tucked away among rugged mountain slopes, home to barely two thousand tough souls.

Here, life moves at a steady, unhurried pace—a quiet pond inviting a summer dip, an ice cream shop that brings simple joy with its sweet creamy treats, and a bakery that never fails to fire up the oven with fresh, gooey chocolate chip cookies.

And believe it or not, I'm still in the law game, working as a legal assistant at our local firm.

I'm sitting on the weathered wooden porch of our cabin, watching the sun climb slowly behind the towering mountains.

The sky bursts into bold shades of pink and gold, each flare reflecting off the pines and scattered clouds.

A cool breeze weaves through the trees, rustling the leaves, and in that moment, I feel at home—grounded and at peace.

The chaos of the outside world seems a distant memory, the violent echoes of a past life have faded away.

Then I hear the creak of the door and the soft, sure steps of her approaching.

Meghan—my wife, my rock—steps onto the porch.

Even with the undeniable changes of pregnancy marked by her beautifully rounded belly, she carries herself with a determined grace.

We fought hard to carve out this life, navigating uncertainty, weathering nightmares, and letting go of trauma.

We made it together, and I'd make the same choice every damn time to be here with her.

She's radiant, her belly proudly showing the life growing inside, just a week away from meeting our daughter. I can't tear my eyes away from her—the way she moves, the effortless beauty of her loose ponytail catching the light as she steps forward, a soft, knowing smile on her lips.

"Sam," she calls out, her voice warm and laced with affection, making our new names—Meghan and Sam—feel as natural as the air around us. "You're out here all by yourself again."

I let out a deep, genuine laugh that vibrates with a mixture of contentment and relief.

Meghan rolls her eyes playfully but crosses over to sit beside me on our creaky porch swing.

The wood beneath us groans softly as it sways, laden with our shared history and

hopes for tomorrow.

Pulling her close, I wrap my arm around her shoulders as I inhale deeply, savoring the familiar, comforting scent of her hair—a scent that speaks of home and healing.

I can't get enough of her. Never could.

"How's the feed store?" I ask, my thumb tracing small circles on the bare skin of her arm.

She shrugs, leaning her head on my shoulder. "Busy, but good. The animals are all fed, the shelves are stocked, and I managed to talk to that cranky farmer about his chickens today. He's a little grumpy, but I think he likes me."

I chuckle softly. "You can charm anyone. It's one of the things I love about you."

She grins at me, her eyes crinkling at the corners, and I feel the warmth of her love, of everything we've built, radiating off her. She's stronger than she gives herself credit for, but she's also still that gentle, hopeful woman I met all those years ago.

"I love you," she says, and her voice is so tender, it catches me off guard every time.

"Love you too," I reply, my heart bursting with gratitude.

She shifts in my arms, her hand drifting down to rest on her belly, a gentle smile playing on her lips. "You're really going to be a dad. Can you believe it?"

I shake my head slowly, eyes drifting to the soft curve of her, marveling at the secret life growing inside her. "I never imagined I'd be here," I confess, voice thick with emotion. "I never imagined we'd be here. But I'm so damn grateful—for you, for her, for everything."

She takes my hand and presses it against her belly, and I can feel the subtle movement of our daughter. A wide grin spreads across my face. I'm going to be a dad—a real one. And I'll give our little girl every ounce of my love.

Every bit of who I am.

Every ounce of myself.

“I can't wait to meet her,” I say quietly, my voice thick with emotion.

Meghan laughs softly, her fingers grazing over my knuckles. “She's going to be perfect. Just like you.”

I snort, shaking my head in disbelief.

She gives me a look, soft but knowing. “You gave me everything I needed, even when I didn't deserve it. You gave me a life, a future, and you loved me in a way no one else could.”

I pull her even closer, pressing my lips to the top of her head, breathing her in. “This life we've built. This love. It's all ours.”

In that moment, the world shrinks to a safe, small space. The past—with all its darkness, danger, and fear—no longer holds power over us. We're free.

Free to build a life here, in this quiet town where no one knows who we were before. Where no one cares about the people we used to be. Where no one cares about the mafia or the bloodshed.

But even with the quiet, I can't help but miss my family.

My parents. My sister and brother. I don't regret what I did, but I still feel that ache for them, that longing to be close again.

They were told that I was gone for their safety, that a case I was working had gone sour, but given no further details.

It pained us both at the time. Caused many days and nights of dread, grief, and sleeplessness.

I had never imagined a life where I'd leave them behind, but I had to make a choice. And I'd done it—at the time—so easily. I chose Meghan. And I'd choose her again in every lifetime.

"Sam," Meghan's soft voice tugs me back from my reverie, laden with concern. "Are you okay?"

I nod, pulling her tighter into my embrace. "Yeah, just thinking."

"About your family?"

I pause, then answer, "Yeah. I miss them, Meg. I miss them so much sometimes it feels like I'm suffocating."

She kisses my cheek softly, her hand resting on my chest. "I know you do. And I'm so sorry for that."

I shake my head, a small smile tugging at my lips. "I'm okay." I glance at her belly once more, my hand hovering there, feeling her move. "I'm more than okay."

"I was thinking," she says.

“Oh?” I grin at her.

She threads her fingers in my hair, her deep brown eyes set on mine. “How do you feel about the name Kenzie?”

Leaning in, my lips hover just above hers, teasing, torturing, making her wait for it. There is no better way to honor my family than to name our little girl after my sister.

Meghan’s eyes, dark and wide, flicker with anticipation, her lashes fluttering.

“What do you want?” I whisper. Just like all those years before.

Her mouth yawns into a grin. “Your mouth,” she breathes.

I groan. “Where?”

She points to her mouth. I press my lips to hers tenderly before deepening the kiss as I pour all my love and gratitude into it. There has never been anyone else for me. I don’t need anything else in this world. Not now, not ever. All I have ever longed for is right here, held close in my embrace.

And as I pull back, my forehead resting against hers, I whisper, “I think Kenzie is perfect.”

She smiles the kind of smile that lights up everything around her, including me. “Good,” she whispers back.

Epilogue

I can't think of a better word than wild, to be sitting across from Marcy again. To see how she's aged. To hear her voice.

Her book, *The Blood Queen* was a New York Times Bestseller.

I never did bother reading it though.

"If you had to, would you do it all again?" Marcy asks. I look down at Kenzie, and gently play with my napping daughter's hair. We're in my living room. She shouldn't be here but when Kenzie and I were in town eating lunch—there she was, at the same restaurant as us.

A chill had whipped up my spine. Set all my hairs standing on end.

If she could find me, who else could? I'd braced myself.

Certain panic was about to terrorize me.

But she'd been visiting family in the area.

What are the chances? And so, when she asked if we could catch up, I'd said sure—off the record of course, because I'm no longer Kid, or Evany.

I'm just Meghan, a quiet, polite, single mom now.

I shrug. Would I? If I could go back, would I change anything? Would it still lead me to where I am right now?

“I loved and I lost, Marcy; what more is there to a life well lived? I try not to dwell on the would haves or could haves.”

She crosses and then uncrosses her legs. The chair she’s sitting in is the most uncomfortable chair in the house, but Truman loved the aesthetic of it. Even now it makes me want to laugh—the absurdity of it.

“Did you and Truman stay together?” She asks, looking around the cabin.

I let out a quiet laugh. “I’m surprised you don’t know. I thought you’d try and keep tabs on us.” Marcy shakes her head sadly.

“Couldn’t have found you if I’d tried. You were ghosts the moment you left my house.”

I sigh and nod my understanding. “We had seven blissful years together.”

“Where is he now?” she asks. “If you can tell me.”

I let out a breath. “He passed away. Two years ago. Cancer.”

Sadness etches itself in the lines of her face. “I’m so sorry. He was much too young”

I shrug, used to the constant state of grief I feel without him. Of the pain that Kenzie only got two short years with him and that besides what I tell her and show her, she probably won’t ever have her own memory of the greatest man I ever knew. Of her father.

“He gave me the greatest gifts in life. Unconditional love and Kenzie.”

Marcy nods slowly, her eyes filled with sympathy. “He was a good man. I could see how much he loved you, even back then.”

I smile softly. “He was the best thing that ever happened to me. If not for him...” I trail off, glancing down at Kenzie again.

“Do you think you would have gotten out?” Marcy asks after a moment. “Of the life, I mean. If Truman hadn’t been there.”

I consider the question. Would I have left the mafia had fate not brought Truman into my life?

Given me a glimpse of something pure and good amidst all the violence and darkness?

My throat tightens with emotion. I think about those early days with the family after Papa was killed.

The wrath burning inside me, scorching my soul.

I wanted revenge so badly I could taste it.

Would have done anything they asked if it meant avenging Papa.

“Truman was my lifeline,” I say quietly.

“He saw the good still left in me when I thought it was all gone. Reminded me I had a choice. But without him...” I trail off, watching Kenzie’s chest rise and fall in sleep for a moment.

“The pull was strong back then. Like a riptide dragging me under. I’d like to think so, though,” I say finally. “For Papa’s sake.”

Marcy nods again. We sit in silence for a minute, the weight of the past hanging over us.

She looks at me thoughtfully.

“Do you think Antonio would be proud of the life you’ve made for yourself now?”

I glance down at Kenzie again, sleeping peacefully. Would my papa be proud of the vengeance I had rained down on the families on his behalf? He certainly didn’t want me in that world. Would he be proud that I chose love and family over violence in the end?

“I think...” I begin slowly, “that in the end, Papa just wanted me to be happy. As long as I’m taking care of myself and the people I love, then yes - I believe he’d be proud.”

Marcy gives me a small smile. “You’ve come a long way, Kid.”

I let out a little laugh.

The late afternoon sun filters through the blinds.

“Do you think you’ll ever tell Kenzie?” Marcy asks after a while. “About...everything?”

I glance down at my daughter again and brush a strand of hair from her face. Her features are so peaceful, so innocent. The thought of burdening her with the darkness of my past makes my heart ache.

“No,” I say softly. “Some parts of my history died with the four families. And that’s for the best. Truman wouldn’t want that for her anyway.”

Marcy nods in understanding. “The past is the past. All that matters now is the life you’re living.”

I nod. “Exactly. Speaking of, Truman would kill me if he knew I was spending time reminiscing with a reporter instead of making dinner.” I smile at her, but my words are not affectionate.

Marcy laughs and stands abruptly. “Alright, alright. I’ll get out of your hair. It was good catching up, Evany—I mean—”

“Meghan,” I say firmly. “If anyone found out my real name, it’d be....”

She smiles softly at that, and the years melt away as I slide out from under a napping Kenzie to stand and hug.

“Stay safe, Meghan. Best of luck to you,” she says.

“Ditto,” I answer.