



Intrigue

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

Description: He broke her heart once to save her life. Now he'll burn the city to have her back

Five years ago, Alessandro "Sandro" Vescovi called her a mistake—and walked away. What she never knew: it was all a lie. But why?

Now, Selene Marconi is promised to another man—a safer future with a clean slate. However, Florence's most feared underboss has other plans.

He's back. Darker. But still acts as if she is his.

Assigned to oversee her wedding, Sandro turns it into a battlefield.

He buys out her fiancé's gallery. Crashes her bridal fitting. Corners her in the chapel the night before the vows. "Marry him, and I'll burn it all down."

Selene resists. Fights. But can she resist for long?

Book 4 of "Dark Syndicate" by Eva Lush—this mafia bad boy forbidden romance delivers twisted love, raw, forbidden attraction, and scenes so explicit they'll leave you breathless. Perfect for readers who crave unfiltered heat in their dark romance books for adults.

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Chapter 1

Selene

Five years ago.

I always thought my first heartbreak would come gently. Something inevitable, something I could brace for.

I didn't think I'd have to watch the man I've been in love with for the last five years slip his hands under another woman's skirt, touching her like I never existed. Like I never held him at 2 a.m. when our world felt too heavy. Like he never traced my name against my skin or kissed my fingertips just to make me smile.

How many times did he swear I was his forever? How many times did I believe him?

I used to believe love was the safest place in the world. That if you gave your heart fully, that someone would hold it carefully. But what no one tells you is that love doesn't protect you. It's the equivalent of handing someone a knife and daring them to use it.

There's this tightness in my chest, a gnawing emptiness that feels like it's swallowing me whole. I keep telling myself this isn't real, that I'm not trapped in this nightmare, that what I am currently witnessing is just an illusion.

This can't be real, this agony, this devastation.

Florence at this time of the night beyond the courtyard walls is all laughter spilling from piazzas and music floating through the narrow streets. It's a night for lovers and whispered promises. For the kind of reckless dreams he'd once pressed against my skin.

But I am not a lover tonight. I am a fool with my heart in my hands, bleeding out at the feet of the man who swore to protect it.

I see her draped over him like she belongs there, fingers tracing his chest, lips skimming his jaw. And he lets her. A stranger with dark hair like mine, wrapped in a bright red dress. His hand rests at her waist, his face buried in her stupid tresses, tilting her head just enough to whisper something against her mouth. She laughs and I swear I feel it more than hear it.

I stand frozen, my boots scuffing against the uneven stone, the stiff heat pressing my shirt to my back. Ivy twists up the walls and catches in the moonlight that spills over Alessandro Vescovi and this girl. This drunken, swaying mess with her skirt bunched up and his fingers between her thighs.

Heat slices through my chest, and I dig my nails into my palms hard enough to form crescents.

"Sandro," I choke out, stepping forward despite my trembling legs, the pebbles crunching ominously beneath me. "What are you doing?" My voice breaks in a feeble attempt to cling to the remnants of what we once had. A part of me hopes he'll snap out of this nightmare, see me, and realize what he's about to lose.

He pulls his hand free, slowly, and wipes it on his jeans, then he turns his head, looks at me, and my stomach twists. Ice-blue eyes, impassive. A stranger wearing his face.

The girl at his side stumbles back, her skirt still bunched, lipstick a crooked smear.

She giggles loudly and sings songs. “Oh, crap, you’re in trouble.”

“Be quiet,” Sandro mutters, pushing her aside gently. She sways, grabs the fountain’s edge, and hiccups, still grinning. He looks at me, eyes leveled but full of something, regret, maybe, or just irritation. “Selene, why are you outside this late? You should go back inside.”

I step closer, my boots scraping louder. “Go inside? I just caught you with your hands all over her, and I should just leave?”

She laughs again, leaning toward him. “Aw, the little princess is pissed. Did not know she was a clingy one, Sandro.”

“I said quiet,” he repeats, voice calm and nudging her back. He faces me fully now. “You should have known this wasn’t going to lead anywhere. Your father would never have allowed it. This is for the best.”

My chest clenches. “So, I don’t get a say?”

His silence before he replies is worse than any answer.

“You don’t have a choice. This is how it was always meant to be. What happened between us never should have. My loyalty is to Don and no one else.”

The words land like a slap. “So that’s it? You were just playing around? Everything we did, everything you said to me, none of it was real?”

He drags a hand through his hair, exhaling like this conversation is more exhausting than the betrayal sitting between us.

“I got carried away.”

A hollow laugh breaks from my throat. “Carried away? You’re telling me the nights we spent together, the things you swore to me, were just, what? A lapse in judgment?”

He looks past me, and I continue.

“If this is about what my father’s friends said the other day about me getting married, you know it’s a joke, right?” My voice shakes, but I push forward. “They were drunk, running their mouths. That’s not real, Sandro. You and me, we—”

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He sighs, rubbing the back of his neck, avoiding my eyes like a coward. “You were a childish distraction, Selene.” His words come slowly, almost indifferent, but they land like a knife between my ribs. “Something stolen in the dark, never meant to survive the morning. So grow up.”

My breath snags. “Tell me it is not true,” I say, closing the gap until I am right in front of him, close enough to smell her cheap perfume mixing with his sweat. “Tell me you did not just—”

“Stop,” he cuts in, softer than before, but still harsh and tired. “It is over. You need to see that.”

The breath I pull in tastes like iron.

He’s lying. He has to be. This isn’t him. This isn’t the boy who kissed me breathless in the alley behind my father’s estate, who tangled his fingers in my hair and promised me forever. Except maybe forever never belonged to people like us.

I should have seen it from the beginning. But how could I when it felt so good to doubt it. Like my first time, three months ago, with his hands peeling my dress up in this same alley, his mouth hot and desperate on mine, his body pressing me into the brick until I shattered around him, whispering his name like a prayer.

My legs shake now, remembering, and I hate how much I still want him.

Sandro knows that better than anyone.

I push at him, my palms hitting his chest, but he barely moves and just catches my wrists, holding them loosely. “You promised me,” I say, voice shaking as I twist free, heat sparking where his skin brushes mine. “Just last night, right here, you promised we’d leave this behind. Was that just another lie too?”

He lets go and steps back, rubbing his neck. “I say a lot of things I don’t mean. You should not have believed me.”

The girl pipes up. “You didn’t tell me she’d be so delicate, Sandro. Was to be expected, she’s just a kid.”

“Back off,” I snap at her, then turn to him. “I almost didn’t believe it. But I heard whispers outside my bedroom, Sandro. One of father’s men said they saw you with someone. I came to confirm, and this is what I get?”

“Fuck, Selene. You want the truth? Fine. I am not your savior. Never was. I said it all to get into your pants and that’s it. You were a good lay, took a while to convince you to give it up but it was worth every second.”

“You are a liar,” I say, louder, stepping back. “Last week, you had me against that gate and said I was your whole world. It didn’t feel like I was just a lay. What happened?”

He flinches, just a twitch, but it is there. “That was then,” he says, quieter. “This is now. I’ve come to my senses.”

My face burns as another memory hits. I still feel him, those nights sneaking out, meeting here, his hands shoving my jeans down, lips bruising my neck, his cock stretching me open as I clung to him, my first, my only.

“We belong together, I don’t care how wrong this is,” he had growled with every hard

thrust, kissing me passionately, our bodies slick and pressed tightly. “You and me forever baby, screw what your father thinks.” I had arched into him, desperate and dumb, swallowing every word. Now he stands there with her juices on his fingers and I just feel sick.

“You are full of shit,” I say, voice rising. “A coward who cannot even own it.”

“Call it what you want, I’ve said my piece. Now go.”

The girl has a snide grin on her face. “Yeah, take a hike, sweetie. He is busy now.”

“Shut your fucking mouth.” I move to her but Sandro steps between us, hand up.

“Selene,” he says, almost pleading. “Walk away. Please.”

I stumble back, shaking my head. “No.” The word is small, useless against the ruin spreading through my chest. “No, you don’t get to do this. You were my first, Sandro, I trusted you.”

He drags his hand down his face, like I’m exhausting him. Like this, us, everything has been some great burden he’s finally free of. “I already have.”

I move past him, my boots pounding stone as I head for the archway. “You are nothing,” I yell back. “You and her, choke on each other.”

“Hey!” she calls with a laugh. “Do not be a sore loser!”

I keep going, forcing the gate open, metal screeching in my ears. “Fuck you both,” I shout, my voice echoing. My hand shakes when I cut it on a sharp edge, blood dripping from my palm, but I do not stop.

Lies. Every touch, every word, just a game to keep me close. My mother used to warn me about love before she died, about the way it twists through your ribs like a knife, but she never told me it could gut you clean through.

Guess I should have taken her pointers seriously.

I turn on my heel, my steps uneven but moving. Away. As far from this moment as I can get.

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He doesn't stop me. Doesn't even come after me.

I make it three steps before my fingers shake too hard to be fists anymore, before my throat closes around the ache building there.

I love him. I loved him. And now I'll bury that love so deep even he won't find the ashes.

Sandro was my secret rebellion, my stupid lifeline, and he has cut it all like it meant nothing. I need out, and I know where to push.

I storm up the hill to the villa, chest heaving and tears stinging my eyes. The Marconi estate looms ahead with marble steps, heavy doors, and the weight of my father's name etched into every corner. I storm through the entrance, boots slapping the tile, and find him in his study, cigar smoke curling around his chair. Don Marconi looks up, gray hair slicked back, eyes narrowing as I barge in.

"Selene," he says, voice gravelly, setting his drink down. "What is this noise?"

"I'm leaving," I say, planting my hands on his desk, my blood smearing the polished wood. "Tonight. I want out of this city, out of your world."

He leans back, regarding me with cool indifference. "You're not a prisoner." He takes a slow drag of his cigar, then exhales. "You were already set to leave soon. Your aunt Valeria is expecting you."

I scoff. "That's not leaving. That's being shipped off like a problem you're sick of

handling.”

He studies me for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly, then exhales another plume of smoke. “Valeria has been instructed to train you because she sees what I’ve struggled to find. A potential worth shaping. She’ll mold you into a woman fit to stand beside powerful men, a woman capable of wielding influence, not wasting herself chasing childish fantasies.”

“You think this is punishment?” He almost smiles, dark amusement beaming across his face. “No, Selene. I’m offering you purpose. Your mother never understood that. She was always weak, soft, and worthless. I refuse to let you follow her pathetic path.”

“So you’re selling me off like cattle to one of your allies? Another chess move?”

His expression doesn’t change, but contempt seeps into his voice. “Valeria will ensure you’re ready. She’ll harden your edges, smooth your flaws. I won’t allow you to disgrace the Marconi name with your reckless impulses and misguided youthful exuberance.” He taps ash into the tray, eyes piercing mine. “Perhaps you should take notes from Sandro, seeing as he is like a brother to you. He wouldn’t mind giving you a few pointers. He understands loyalty, duty. He embraces the life he’s been given, rather than running from responsibility.”

I ignore the ache I feel when I hear his name. “What if I don’t want any of it? What if I just want to leave for real?”

He lets out a short, dry laugh. “Where would you go? You think the world outside this house is any safer? That you can live without the name that’s protected you your whole life?” He shakes his head. “You’d last a week before someone tried to use you as leverage against me.”

“Then maybe I’ll learn to protect myself.”

His smile is humorless. “You can learn that, too. Valeria will make sure of it.”

I want to scream. I want to flip his desk and shatter his crystal glass against the wall. Instead, I force myself to breathe, to swallow the rage burning up my throat. “And if I refuse?”

He sighs, like I’m being exhausting. “Then I make you. You might hate me for it, but you’ll thank me one day, when your place is secured beside someone worthy of our empire.”

I shake my head, stepping back. “You don’t get to control my life forever.”

“No,” he agrees. “But today, I still do.”

Silence stretches between us. I despise him, I despise how effortlessly he maneuvers me like a pawn. But confronting him now would be useless.

So I nod slowly, forcing steel into my spine. “Fine.”

He studies me a moment longer, then gives a curt, satisfied nod. “Good. I’ll arrange for your flight to leave at dawn. Do not disappoint me.”

I turn sharply, boots echoing loudly against marble as I stride from his study. He believes he’s won, believes I’ll bend to his twisted will. But he’s wrong. I may be going to my aunt Valeria, but I won’t be another puppet.

I am going to become something else entirely.

Chapter 2

Alessandro

Present Time.

I've done a lot of fucked up shit in my life. I've killed men with my bare hands, maimed and twisted their limbs until they begged. Fucked their wives, their daughters, then slit their throats when they came for revenge.

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But the worst thing I ever did? Let her go.

Nothing I've ever done compares to the madness she stirs in me. Night after night, I drown in a darkness of my own making, a void that echoes with her name. Her absence gnaws at my sanity, an unhealed wound I can't cauterize.

Now, I watch from the rooftop, the city stretching beneath me in hues of fading dusk. Florence feels smaller somehow, as if closing in on me with every breath. I see her stepping off that train, and my chest constricts. I'm still haunted by the ghost of our shared past. I let her go because it was the right thing to do, or at least that's what I tell myself in sleepless nights. But the truth? I was a coward, afraid to confront the depth of my own feelings.

Selene Marconi returns, utterly unaware of how her mere presence throttles my sanity. Five years. Five fucking years of believing I could survive the loss of her. Five years since I let her think I was a monster, since I crushed her spirit with words harsh enough to scar.

The truth is worse than she'll ever know. I ripped myself apart for her. Every kill was an attempt to silence the haunting echo of her laughter, her touch, her breathless whispers against my skin. It never worked.

The moment I walked into the Marconi house after my father's death and saw her standing at the top of those stairs, watching me with eyes that pierced straight through my soul, I knew I'd let her ruin me. And fuck if I didn't want it. From the first second, my obsession was born, twisted and burning through my veins.

I welcomed it—craved it, even—because right then, with her eyes branding me from above, I knew in my bones she was worth every ounce of chaos I would unleash to claim her.

I made a silent vow that day: I'd shield her from every storm, every threat, every horror dredged from the darkest corners of hell that this world conjures. I'd protect her, even if I had to drown in blood to do it. Even if it meant slicing pieces from my own heart to keep her safe.

She steps off the train below, Cassian Varela's arm around her waist, her eyes bright with hope, oblivious to the predator stalking her from above. How dare she be with someone so fucking weak, someone who'd never bleed for her like I would?

I shouldn't be here, shouldn't be tormenting myself, but obsession doesn't know reason. My boots scrape tiles as I pace the rooftop, eyes never leaving her form.

Her jet-black hair catches in the wind as she walks with that soft-handed artist who doesn't deserve to breathe near her. He looks like he's never lifted anything heavier than a paintbrush in his life. His arm loops her waist, and the glint of that ginormous ring on her finger twists the metaphorical knife lodged in my ribs. Probably fake. No way he can afford a rock that size and still dress like an unpaid intern at a museum.

I watch Cassian touch her, gentle, careful, and my blood boils. I'll rip him apart piece by piece, strip him of everything until Selene sees just how pathetic he truly is. I'll break him, break them both.

Dropping from the roof, I land heavily, the force jarring through my bones. I head to my business for the day, the image of her haunting every step I take to the warehouse.

I'm the Marconi underboss now but seeing her reignites the rot I've been running from. I let her go to keep her alive, took the blame when she knifed that rival's son,

kept Don Marconi's wrath off her neck. It cost me everything. Nights after, I'd wake choking on her name, my fists bloody from smashing whatever broke first—mirrors, walls, men dumb enough to cross me.

She was my fire, and without her, I'm just ash pretending to burn.

I kick the door open, wood slamming violently against the wall as I step into the dim, smoke-filled meeting room. Cigar smoke curls thickly, creating ghostly shapes around the leather chairs where five of Don Marconi's men—men I now control—sit hunched over maps and ledgers. Their shoulders snap tight, spines rigid, tension palpable the moment they sense my presence.

"You're late and so is this week's shipment," Gino says, tapping a pencil on the table, his pinched face twisted with smug satisfaction. Ever since Don promoted him to my second, he's believed himself untouchable, confident he'll outlast me one day. Idiot.

Truth is, things between me and Don haven't been right since she left. Not that he ever knew about me and Selene's little secret. But I've despised him from the start, hated the way his cruel and impossible expectations made Selene vulnerable enough to fall prey to a monster like me.

I never stepped out of line. At least not openly. Not because I feared him, but because openly defying a man of his rank was a death sentence. So, I bided my time, using his power and influence to build my own, gathering strength till it was time to strike. Selene complicated things and I couldn't risk him discovering us and using her as leverage. Letting her go was necessary, even if it nearly destroyed me.

I thought I had more time, though. Believed she would stay gone. And that when I was finally ready, when I'd conquered everything I wanted, I'd tear apart the earth itself searching for her, indifferent to whoever might've gotten attached to her along the way. She was always mine. She will always belong to me.

Her return forces my hand, accelerating plans that had been slowly, meticulously unfolding. It might mean more chaos, more violence but what's a little more blood if, at the end of the day, she ends up exactly where she belongs? By my side.

"Turns out it was Moretti's crew stalling at the docks, who would've thought," Gino continues, a sly smile tugging at his lips like he thinks he's caught something I've overlooked.

My patience snaps. I'm done playing nice.

I bring my hands onto the table, leaning in close enough to watch the blood drain from his face. "You only breathe because I allow it, Gino. Remember that the next time you open your mouth." My voice is soft. "Speak to me without respect again, and I'll carve you a smile wide enough to silence your whining forever. Move the shipment tonight."

He swallows audibly, the pencil frozen in his fingers. "It'll be done, Sandro."

I jab a finger toward Bianchi, the wiry bastard with the scar splitting his eyebrow. I think I gave him that, I just don't remember the specifics of the why. "You're on the trucks. Fuck it up, and I'll make you wish for death."

"Got it," he blurts out, nodding frantically, eager to please me, desperate to survive.

My eyes cut through the rest of them, each man shrinking back beneath the threat implicit in my stare. "Anyone else want to waste my time?"

They shake their heads, quickly averting their eyes. I have them collared, chained by their fear. I have the power. The thrill of breaking men until they grovel—it's all that's kept my sanity tethered. It's fucking intoxicating, feeling untouchable, knowing their lives hang on my every whim.

I stride out and cut through the warehouse to the back. There's a club here, a grimy little pit where the boys unwind. Red lights shine through the windows and bass thumps low. I need something to drown her out—her face, her laugh, that stupid ring on her finger.

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Inside, the stage lights flash neon colors, bodies writhing beneath. A girl onstage notices me, her face instantly interested.

She looks nothing like Selene—but she'll do for now. I jerk my chin, commanding her closer, and she obeys, stepping down with a knowing smile.

When I seize the dancer's slender wrists, adrenaline floods my veins so fast my head spins. Her hands, soft and pliant, offer so little resistance I almost pull away. But I can't stop thinking about Selene and her wild, defiant eyes. The memory of her lithe body shuddering under me keeps me teetering on the edge.

I drag the dancer across the stage and through a door that's marked "Employees Only." It leads us into a short, semi dark hallway. At the end of it, when I find another room, I pull her in there, kick the door shut, and spin her around.

"You need me so bad, don't you, big boy?" Her voice, laced with a British lilt, sharpens every syllable, taunting me.

I shake my head and give her a stern look. "Don't talk. You're not her."

"Oh." But she doesn't say anything else. Her eyes drop to my hands, which I've methodically balled into fists, and I see her flinch when she looks at me closer.

She knows who I am.

"I'm not going to kill you," I growl. "You have my word."

She nods, curving her lips as she leans casually against the wall, her dress tight enough to outline every curve. “Sandro, right? Heard you’re a wild one.” Her voice dips, teasing and hinting at her last colleague who tried playing games and ended up with a snapped neck before she could even pull her panties back up.

The bitch thought she could pry secrets out of me for an enemy but I wasn’t feeling generous.

“Lucky you,” I mutter, stepping close.

She relaxes visibly and bites down against her lower lip in an attempt to reel me into her. I’m here to get Selene off my mind and I’m going to fuck her out of my system no matter what.

I cup her cheeks in my hand. She’s warm and soft and willing, a combination I so desperately want. I don’t register anything else because this isn’t about her. If I’m going to purge Selene and everything I still feel for her out of me, I’m going to do it buried inside another woman, cock-deep in her filth.

I grab her neck, wrap my fingers around it firmly and hold, squeezing until her pulse thumps against my palm. “Are you going to make me forget?”

She nods, eyes charged with pleasure, pupils blown wide with a sick kind of want. “I can make you forget all about the other woman.”

I hook a free hand around her hair and tug, pulling her head back until her throat’s bared. She lets out a shocked gasp, one that rocks across the room and through her body. I feel it in the soft shiver that comes then, her flesh trembling under my grip. I apply pressure to my fingers until her gasp becomes a choked cry, her voice breaking.

“Sandro, slow down—”

Only then do I release a little, but not because she asked.

I push the dancer to the wall and pin her there with my body, my chest hitting against her back, cock grinding against her through my pants. I grab a hold of both her hands and raise them up above her head, letting them graze the rough concrete until her skin splits. She yelps as she fights off the pain but since she doesn't complain, I don't let her go. I want her marked.

I reach down with one hand and tear her dress open, the sound of fabric ripping loud in my ears. I hear the snap as the lacy dress crumbles to the floor by her feet, a shredded heap.

"Easy there," she says, voice catching, but her lips quirk up. "This dress wasn't cheap."

"Step away from it," I growl, panting, angry at the past and at myself.

She steps away from her dress in silent obedience before resuming her position by the wall, ass out, begging for it. She's completely naked and hungry and I'm both feral and angry so it works for me, this twisted, sweaty collision.

My nose flares as desire courses through me, thick and rancid. This is exactly what I want, what I need to drown Selene's ghost.

My hold on her hip is fiercely tight, enough to bruise her olive skin and leave red lines in the morning, but I don't soften the blow, I dig in harder, wanting her to feel me tomorrow. "I'm gonna fuck you in your tight little ass like I despise you, like you're nothing."

She's panting and breathless even though there's still a wall of obstruction between us, her body quaking. "Do whatever's going to make it easier to forget her."

“Don’t speak again.” I press her face roughly against the wall and hold her there like that, hips in place and ass high up, ripe for me. I smack her naked ass, hard, and she yelps, the sound sharp and needy. “You speak only when I tell you to. Do you understand?”

She’s nodding even before I finish, frantically, so there’s no need waiting for her to agree before unzipping my pants and releasing my very hard cock from my briefs, the ache pulsing in my grip.

I slap her butt again and groan at the softness and the promised ecstasy, her flesh jiggling under my hand. The thrill has always been the best part of sex for me and today isn’t going to be any different. I wet my open palm in my mouth, slobbering over it, before running it up the length of my throbbing cock, slicking it with spit. I flip her around then to see the green of her eyes widen in fear and want, a twisted plea I’m too far gone to care about.

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I hook one of her legs in my arm and spread her wide enough for me, her cunt glistening, split open like a wound. She's flexible so this makes for a very beautiful show, her body a canvas for my rot. That's what this is in the end. A show, a depraved fucking ritual. I put my cock in her entrance and feel the heat of her capture me completely, wet and tight and wrong. When I thrust in, I go in roughly, unable to control my feelings anymore, slamming her against the wall until plaster dust rains down.

"Oh, fuck, oh oh..." she moans, dragging her nails against the plaster in the walls, scrabbling like she's trying to climb out of this.

"Good. Take me in just like that." I move fast inside of her, pounding her raw. The sound of her wetness fills the room, sloppy and loud, that and her loud moans, half-scream, half-prayer. "You like when you're fucked like this, huh? You like being fucked rough, split open?"

"Uh-uh." She tries to meet my strokes but fails and instead grabs hold of my shoulders to steady herself, nails biting into my skin. "You fuck me so good. Please don't stop...keep pounding my pussy like this...oh, God!"

I go deeper and faster, claiming her with every pent-up emotion lodged in my chest, every thrust a stab at Selene's memory. I feel it when I go too deep, her body seizing up. She immediately cries out and digs her nails into my shoulders, but when I try to shift, she holds me in place, gasping, "No, please..." like she's begging for the hurt.

The more I pound into her pussy, the more her back scrapes the plaster, skin peeling against the rough edge.

My mind goes back to Selene's storm-gray eyes and stays. No matter how hard I try, I can't shake off the thought that I want her and I'm never going to stop wanting her no matter how many women I take to my bed, no matter how much I wreck myself. Because this isn't passion, fucking this woman roughly in the backroom of the party, but a punishment for me, for her absence and for thinking I could ever forget her, that I could ever scrub her from my soul. A sick penance I'll never finish paying.

I hook both her legs in my arms, press her even more into the wall, her body folding under me, and thrust in and out, faster, deeper until she begins jerking in my arms, her voice shallow when she thinks to speak, cracking like glass. "I'm gonna come. I'm...gonna...come..."

She screams as her orgasm hits, a ragged wail, body convulsing, but I don't stop pounding, driving through her spasms. I need to purge her by any means necessary, need to fuck Selene out of my marrow.

When the sweetness envelops me, hot and unbearable, I put her down, pull my cock out, and stroke, slick with her. "Get down on your knees and open your mouth. Fuck, open that sweet little mouth and take my load, swallow it all."

The dancer gets down to her knees and parts her mouth open, tongue lolling out, greedy. She swipes it on the tip of my cock, lapping at the mess, and my head rolls back in answer, a guttural sound ripping free. I stroke, fast and sloppy, ready for the release, then break apart in her mouth, spilling everything.

I watch as she sucks me dry, swallowing my essence, lips stretched around me. "Good girl!" I growl, panting, chest heaving like I've been gutted.

I step away from her once it's over and adjust my briefs to accommodate me, the damp fabric sticking. She gets up on her feet and wipes her mouth with the back of a hand, smearing what's left.

“That was incredible...I have never been...fucked like that.”

It's never going to be more, and we both know that, so there's no formality to the sex. No tenderness, no afterglow.

She picks up her dress and tries to fit herself back into the torn lace in a futile scramble. I shake my head at her and back out of the room, my boots scuffing the floor. I should feel better with everything, but I don't. Instead, I feel hollow, the same way I'd felt all those years ago when Selene walked out of my life.

It's my fault, but she'd be crazy to think she's free now. I'll drag her back to me if I have to, kicking and screaming, until she's mine again.

I lean against the gritty wall a few hours later, dusting cigarette ash onto the pavement as my eyes fixate on her hotel room window. She's in there right now, with him, probably whispering about some future I'll never be part of. It was supposed to be me.

For five years, I imagined her storming back into my life, eyes blazing, forgiving me for sins she'd never fully understand.

Instead, there's a ring on her finger from a man who barely knows the darkness beneath her skin, the secrets she hides—who could never crave her the way I do.

I take a slow drag from my cigarette, exhaling the bitterness that's been coiling in my chest since the moment I saw her. It gnaws at me more now because every life drained at my feet was all to prove I could exist without her. But it was pointless.

She's happy. The thought makes my jaw clench.

No, not happy. Delusional.

She's playing house with a man who doesn't know what it means to bleed for her.
Who would never burn down the world to keep her safe.

He doesn't deserve her.

But he does deserve to suffer.

Her wedding, her tranquility, this lie she's crafted, I'll tear it apart. I've already started. I discovered the precious gallery Cassian just acquired is nothing but leased space. The landlord is a greedy bastard who'll sell his soul and smile as he counts the cash I hand him.

Cassian's world is about to collapse and he doesn't know it yet.

But he's about to lose everything.

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I can already envision it: Cassian, panicking, fumbling desperately as the cracks spread through his carefully constructed life, Selene watching helplessly as the fantasy crumbles around them. And then, with help from a few friends, a whisper, a lie passed through the right channels, enemies will descend on him like vultures, convinced he's using his art business to move product.

They'll rip apart his illusions of safety, and she'll finally see he's powerless and she'll come back to me. Even if she hates herself for it.

Till then, I'll wait, watch her unravel until she realizes the truth she can't outrun: No one else will ever fit into her soul the way I do.

Chapter 3

Selene

It's been a day since I arrived in Florence, and it still greets me like an old enemy. Cassian gently squeezes my hand as we step onto the bustling platform, gathering our wits to meet my father, who is expecting us. We chose a hotel on the outskirts of town, far enough from the noise to get some rest after the long journey but close enough to the villa for an easy morning drive.

"You okay?" he asks after observing me for a while.

"No," I reply honestly, scanning the crowd that is already dispersing around us. The heavy dread in my chest is betraying my calm exterior. "But I'll be better soon. Just seems like everything is moving so fast."

He holds my hand the way a man should, with care, with patience. It's the kind of touch that should ground me, should make me feel less alone in this. Instead, all I feel is suffocation. As we move into this city, into the past, his grip tightens, not in possession, but as a promise that we will have each other. A promise I know, deep down, I might not be able to keep.

"We'll keep this quick. Just breathe." He pulls me closer, his thumb brushing reassuringly over my knuckles. "We'll do it together." It's gentle. Steady. Dependable. I try to let it comfort me, to pull warmth from it, but all I feel is absence.

The absence of something wilder. Something messier and more exciting. Something real.

Don't get me wrong—I care about Cassian. There are days when I've convinced myself that I love him, days when I wake up and believe in the story I've told myself. That's why I said yes. That's why I let him slide a ring onto my finger despite the gnawing emptiness in my chest. Because maybe love isn't always a wildfire. Maybe it isn't supposed to be destruction and ruin and the kind of hunger that devours you whole.

Maybe love is supposed to be safe.

That's what I told myself when I chose him. That I needed this. That I needed him. A distraction. A way out. A chance to see what a healthy love should look like—one that doesn't take everything from you and leave you hollow when it's gone.

Unlike him.

Unlike the only man who ever made me feel like my entire existence had no other purpose than orbiting him. The only man who turned my world into a single, unsteady thread, then cut it clean, letting me fall without a second glance.

The one I swore I would never let near me again. That's how I ended up with Cassian.

And that's why I'll stay with him.

But the moment I see my father's men waiting at the exit, cold-eyed and silent in their perfectly tailored suits, the illusion fractures.

The warmth of Cassian's hand, the soft promise in his presence, it all fades.

Without a greeting, one of them opens the black SUV door. Cassian and I climb in, sinking into silence as Florence unfolds outside the tinted windows. The city rushes past, familiar and agonizing, winding its way through the cracks in my armor, through every scar this place ever left on me.

I keep my eyes on the streets, willing my heartbeat to slow, willing my hands to steady.

I should feel safe.

I should feel chosen.

Instead, all I feel is the slow, creeping inevitability of something I don't want to name. Seeing him again.

The Marconi villa is exactly the same as it was when I left. My father's soldiers hover about like shadows, their eyes tracking our every move. Cassian guides me up the steps to the front door, unaware each stride tightens the noose around my heart.

When the massive wooden door swings open, my stomach knots painfully. My father stands like a sentinel in the entrance hall, his stocky build unavoidable, graying black

hair slicked back, deep-set brown eyes. He's wrapped in an expensive suit exuding old-world power, and as usual, a cigar smolders between his fingers. He ignores Cassian, his eyes locked on mine.

Beside him, Alessandro watches me, all calm and put together, his eyes hard to read.

"Hello, Father. Alessandro," I say, looking at him next, forcing my voice to sound as unbothered as I wish I were inside.

He nods with a slight incline of his head. "Welcome home, Selene."

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“Come,” my father commands without greeting back, his voice clipped and authoritative.

Cassian hesitates, releasing my hand slowly. He presses a comforting touch to my lower back. “I’ll let you guys catch up but I’ll be close, okay? I love you.”

I nod stiffly, not saying it back but something in me twists. Love? He thinks that’s what we have? I’ve said it back to him many times but only because I felt I was supposed to. But did I ever really mean it?

And Cassian? He doesn’t notice. He never does. He doesn’t see the way my fingers curl slightly, nails pressing into my palm like I can force myself to say it. But the words won’t come. Because love isn’t supposed to feel like this, like obligation, like something I have to remind myself to reciprocate.

With Sandro, love had never been a choice. It had been wildfire, spreading too fast, too uncontrollable, too consuming. It was hands grasping, bodies colliding, whispers of forever spoken between breaths like an unbreakable vow.

With Cassian, it’s a quiet, steady ember. One I should want. One I should be grateful for. But all I can think about is how I miss the burn and I want to rip my own skin off just to feel something. Anything.

The moment his touch fades, another presence replaces it, setting every nerve in my body on edge.

Alessandro.

He doesn't even have to touch me. He never did. He was always more than a hand on my back or a whispered reassurance. He was destruction in its purest form.

I follow my father into the villa's depths. My haunting phantom of an ex trails silently behind us, a shadow stitched to my heels, his stare a brand searing into the back of my neck. The weight of it slithers down my spine, curling tight in my chest, squeezing until I can't breathe. Until I can't forget that he's right there.

The corridor echoes under my boots as I follow my father deeper into the villa, past guards who avoid my eyes. We enter his study, and my pulse spikes.

Alessandro goes to stand beside my father's desk. He is taller than I remember. Those blue eyes slice through me, colder than marble.

Once seated, my father faces me. His voice cuts sharper than the cold silence. "You've disappointed me again, Selene."

I bristle. "And here I thought you'd appreciate my return."

His lips curl slightly, cigar smoke unfurling around his harsh features. "Always defiant. You forget your duty, your purpose. Running away, hiding behind your art dealer fiancé—it's pathetic."

"I'm not hiding," I chide back.

"No?" My father chuckles darkly, eyes sliding mockingly toward Alessandro. "Then you choose weakness. A fucking painter? How could you forget everything you were taught? You resist every path set for you. Always making reckless choices, just like your mother. I sent you to Valeria hoping you'd come back stronger, sharper."

"He's good to me. Better than anyone else ever was."

“Good isn’t useful, Selene. Strength matters here.” He looks pointedly at Sandro. “Loyalty, sacrifice, ruthlessness. My godson here embodies these. You should have chosen a man worthy of standing beside a Marconi, not some spineless collector of paintings.”

Sandro shifts subtly, his voice silk wrapped around steel. “Your father’s right. You disappoint us, Selene. Choosing weakness over strength never ends well.”

“Don’t talk to me about loyalty,” I hiss bitterly, locking eyes with him, all the pain from his betrayal rising like bile.

Sandro’s jaw clenches, a hint of something—regret, anger?—quickly masked by cold arrogance. “Still the same rebellious girl I remember.”

“And you’re still the pretentious asshole I remember,” I snap.

My father’s hand hits the polished desk, shattering the tense silence. “Enough! I sent you to Valeria so you could learn to manipulate, to command power subtly, like the women who built empires behind closed doors with a mere shift of their skirts and bent men to their wills with a mere whisper. And instead, what have you done? You tormented your aunt, pushed her into madness and an early grave, and now you insult me further by bringing home a painter? A damned painter!! Did I not drill into you that survival means aligning yourself with ruthlessness? Instead, you choose a lapdog instead of a protector.”

“My thoughts exactly, sir,” Sandro interjects coolly, eyes gleaming with calculated amusement.

“This conversation doesn’t involve you, Sandro.”

My father cuts me off with a wave, voice edged in warning. “Valeria’s training

should have sharpened you, turned you into someone who neutralizes threats instead of creating them. Sandro understands this perfectly. You would do well to mirror his strength.”

“I’d rather shit in my hands and clap.”

Sandro’s expression remains carefully blank, but his jaw tightens perceptibly, a crack in his otherwise perfect composure.

“You both don’t just get to decide who I become,” I add defiantly.

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My father leans back, sighing with thinly-veiled irritation. “Oh, but I do, Selene. You will become exactly who I say, because your choices ended the moment you stepped back into Florence.”

“I’m marrying Cassian. I’m getting married. Isn’t that what you wanted?” My voice shakes despite my effort to remain strong. “Why can’t you just let me have this one thing?”

His smile turns colder. “Because Cassian is merely convenient and he’s weak. You need a made man beside you, someone who commands respect. You’ve chosen poorly, just as your mother did when she left me for that riffraff who later got her killed.”

“I don’t care about your approval,” I state. “I will marry Cassian, with or without your blessing.”

He nods. “Very well. Then Sandro will oversee the wedding. Tradition demands the eldest son lead such events. Perhaps it will remind you of your place, Selene.”

“It would be an honor,” he drawls mockingly. “Tradition must be upheld.”

“This isn’t necessary,” I argue coldly. “Cassian and I can handle it. We don’t need your interference.”

“I’m an old man now, your brother got himself killed while burying his cock in an enemy’s son, your mother is long dead, and my godson now holds this family together. I won’t let you disgrace our name any further by marrying some peasant and

throwing a wedding no one wants to attend. Sandro's earned his place." My father takes a puff of his cigar, indifferent. "He'll ensure things run smoothly, so what he says goes."

"But this doesn't make any sense."

My father deliberately ignores me as he signals a guard to summon Cassian. "Your pet isn't equipped to handle the details involved with a Marconi ceremony."

Moments later, Cassian enters, tension clear in the tight line of his shoulders. Sandro appraises him openly, derision sharp in his stare.

"So this is the fiancé," he says, a subtle mockery coloring his tone.

Cassian offers his hand politely. "Cassian Varela. It's good to meet you."

Sandro ignores the gesture, studying him with dismissive eyes.

Cassian's brows furrow as he lowers his hand. "You look strangely familiar. Have we met before?"

A predatory grin spreads across Sandro's face. "I can't say that I have. It's not my habit to forget a face... except maybe those of the men I've killed. Have I had a reason to shoot you and you somehow survived?"

Cassian's throat bobs visibly as he forces a nervous laugh. "Of course not... must be my imagination playing tricks."

Their exchange seems a little odd. While Cassian's intimidation is clear as day, something doesn't quite add up. Why would someone so clearly unsettled deliberately poke the bear by suggesting they'd met before? Then again, this could simply be

another case of male ego at work –that primal, unconscious pissing contest men sometimes fall into when sizing each other up. If that's the game they're playing, Sandro's casual mention of killing makes it crystal clear who holds the power here. One look at his wolfish smile says it all–this is his territory, and everyone else is just visiting.

My father continues casually, like he couldn't be bothered. "We're agreed then. You'll marry this da Vinci enthusiast, and Sandro will ensure everything is up to our standards."

Cassian stiffens beside me, clearly uncomfortable under their scrutiny but attempting composure. "I'm sure we can manage the details ourselves."

He says it with confidence, but I hear what they do, that slight tremor in his voice, the uncertainty creeping in. I squeeze his hand, pretending I don't feel how clammy it's gotten.

"Yes, Father. Besides, we're only here briefly, no need to disrupt my dear pseudo-brother's precious schedule on my account."

My father laughs again, eyes coldly amused. "Ah, the painter speaks. And yet, you understand nothing. My decision is final. Do not make me put a stop to this after everything you've done so far."

"So you are just all of a sudden cool with our union?"

"Actually, Selene, we need to discuss your fiancé's gallery. It interests me. Expanding into your circle could benefit our... ventures."

Cassian's brow furrows slightly, confused. "Meaning?"

I clench my fists, hating how easily I'd stepped into this trap. "Of course. Everything is a negotiation to you."

"Your fiancé's business holds promise for our endeavors. His gallery could serve our interests. Art moves discreetly. Contraband, even more so—especially under the name of a reputable art consignee. No one would suspect it. Think of it as your family contribution, Cassian. It's the least you can do, given you've chosen to wed my daughter."

Sandro leans lazily against the desk, his mocking tone stoking my anger. "It's a practical arrangement, Selene. Cassian isn't exactly built for taking down rival factions. Auctions and galas, though, he might manage those. He just has to paint, hold events for our secret meetings and clients and help move some goods. He doesn't even need to know what they look like. Leave the dirty work to the ones who can handle it."

My fists clench at my sides, my anger flaring at his subtle insult and twisted enjoyment of my discomfort.

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He's baiting me. He's my father's underboss now, so he has more tact. So sad that his gorgeous face is attached to those perfect lips twitching into a half-smile that makes me want to slap him.

"Cassian will do his part," I grind out.

Cassian hesitates only a moment before tightening his hold on my hand, offering silent support. "I'll help however I can."

I hate dragging him deeper into this life.

My father nods. "Good. See, Selene? Cooperation isn't so difficult."

Sandro pushes away from the desk, his body brushing lightly against mine, deliberate yet subtle enough to set my pulse racing. He pauses, leaning slightly closer, his voice dropping to a quiet, provocative murmur meant only for me. "It's settled, then. Tradition dictates I manage things, and we both know how much you secretly adore tradition."

Heat floods my cheeks, my pulse racing with both fury and desire. I hate him. I hate how effortlessly he stirs chaos within me.

"I'll see it done," Sandro says louder, turning casually back to my father, satisfaction glittering in his dark eyes. "Consider the matter handled."

My father merely smiles in cold triumph, watching the turmoil rage within me, knowing he's already won. "Good. In the meantime we're celebrating your return

tonight. Join us in the villa hall. Both of you.”

The hall's packed when we get there, mafia style all the way: long tables, wine flowing, men in suits laughing too loud. Cassian sticks close, his hand brushing my back. I try to focus on him, on the deal I brokered—Cassian as an aide for their contraband art smuggling. No one suspects a clean-cut art dealer. Father agreed, and Sandro backed him, which stinks of a setup. He never liked Father before. This is just him screwing with me, some sick way for him to prove he is still the guy who broke my heart years ago.

Except I knew him before he turned into whatever he is now, this cold, jagged thing. Back then, I loved him, drank him in like he was air. Now, I've grown to hate him, a hate so thick it chokes me. Only sad part is the bastard's hotter now—broad shoulders filling out that black shirt, stretched tight over muscle, hair falling just messy enough to make my fingers twitch against my will. I want to rip it out, drag him to his knees and punish him for still looking like that.

Memories of times he'd had that hair between my legs as he sucked me to oblivion scramble my mind. Him kneeling there, those hands bruising my thighs, spreading me wide as he buried his face in me, tongue relentless, lapping at me like he'd die without the taste. How I'd arch up, helpless, cursing his name while he growled into my skin, lips and teeth working me until I shattered, screaming, soaked, hating how good he made it.

Or how he'd hold me down after, licking me clean, that hair tickling my shaking legs while I panted, torn between shoving him off and pulling him deeper. I loathe how my body still remembers it, how it flares up now, traitorously, when I should be spitting in his face instead.

I quickly snatch a glass of wine from a passing tray. I take one sip and look around the room as I feel my resolve begin to shift.

There's an orchestra playing on a raised platform at the corner of the room, the music swallowing up most of the things I want to say. I twirl the ring on my finger for a beat before searching for Sandro. I don't even know I'm doing it until I meet his eyes from across the room and he tips his drink at me in a silent dare. Fucking hell.

I don't think I'm ever going to be able to forget the past or the simmering hate between us. Even after years, my hatred for him flexes in my chest like an avalanche. I loathe Sandro and all that he represents, every smug breath, every calculated glance. In the semi crowded room with everyone deep in conversation, I stare him down, my pulse hammering, my skin itching to break him apart.

The icy blue of his eyes pierce me like he's trying to unravel all of my secrets, strip me bare with a look. I swallow hard on instinct and straighten in my seat, defiance warring with the heat pooling low in me.

He ducks his head and gulps down the drink, throat working in a way that makes me want to sink my teeth into it. When my eyes find him again, he's not looking, and that stings more than it should.

Beside me, a man my father had introduced as an associate tries to pull me into his conversation with a question I don't register until after he nudges me with a hand.

"You're lost in thought. Don't tell me the question I asked is that complicated."

He sounds naturally flat in his tone and I can't tell if he meant to be indignant or funny. Either way, I figure I can get my mind off Sandro if I focus on him instead, drown out the sick pull of that bastard's gaze.

“Sorry, what was the question?” I reply, taking another sip. I’m not much of a drinker and so my glass is still half full.

He clears his throat again, leans in too close, and asks a second time, “Are you going to be staying in Florence or is this just a road trip sort of thing?”

It’s an odd question, given that I don’t know him and, frankly, don’t give a fuck about him, but looking at him, I see that he’s genuinely interested. Too bad I’m not.

I’m just about to answer him when I feel watchful eyes peering me down, burning into me. It’s a known phenomenon, really, to know when you’re being stared at so intently, and I do. I feel it, his stare like a brand on my skin. I glance up at Sandro’s table again and catch the brilliant blue of his eyes.

Without thinking, I give him the finger, a jagged little fuck you. He smiles back at me in response, slow and filthy, and I feel a sliver of desire run through me, hot and wrong. This is so not happening.

I have a fiancé. I have a man who is kind, who treats me gently, who doesn’t twist me into something I don’t recognize. I should be thinking about Cassian, about our future. I should not be drowning in the ghost of Alessandro fucking Vescovi.

And yet—

My body remembers. My mouth remembers. The way he used to whisper my name like a curse, the way he could tear me apart and put me back together in the same breath. I hate him. I hate myself more for still wanting him.

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I should feel nothing for him except a burning desire to hurt him as he did to me years ago. I can't feel...this—whatever this sick, twisted thing is rolling up my spine.

He stands up then. He's probably six feet something and is dressed in all black, with nothing out of place, a dark god carved from sin. His hair is gelled and styled back, but there are loose strands on his forehead, strands that cling dutifully where I ache to touch, to pull, to ruin him with my hands.

I watch him lean down to whisper words to a fierce-looking man. Then he straightens and, without sparing me a second glance, dashes out of the room, leaving me simmering in my own filth.

I'm fuming when I flip sideways to the man beside me. "Please, if you'll excuse me, I need to take care of something."

"Oh, right." He smiles sadly, allowing me to keep my composure until I too am out of the room, glass in hand and chasing the ghost of Sandro's shadow. I follow the sounds of receding footsteps, not knowing if I'll see him but refusing to give up, my blood screaming for a reckoning.

I should have said something before. Lord knows there'd been quite a lot of things simmering in my mind—none of them good—when I saw him again, but he'd been by my father's side, untouchable. If I'm ever going to lay my mind out for him, bare my teeth and my rot, I'm not going to do it trapped in a room with my controlling father watching. It's why I'm more than desperate to find Sandro again and desperate to corner him, to break him open.

Chapter 4

Selene

The hallway is long and spiraling, with so many doors I don't think I've ever been to or seen. The air is cool here, with heavy pictures on the walls, oppressive and cold. It's hard being in here, trying to fight my way out of the chill darkness, because of the past and my father's wicked ways, but I think these years away have taught me to push ahead and hold my ground, to sharpen my edges into something lethal.

I'm not going to stop until I get my revenge.

At the end of the hallway, I stumble into a garden and have to pause and breathe in the soft smells of roses and nature and crisp air. In the sky, the moon is halved by clouds gathering, and as a warm breeze caresses my skin, I falter, unsteady with want and rage.

I take a look around. The garden isn't remotely beautiful. The twisted vines edging up an old stairway and the withering roses give the place a kind of stillness that's tense, decaying, but I walk in, moving past the benches and shrubs and roses to find—

“Alessandro!” I don't know if I've said his name out loud until he's turning, slowly, like he isn't certain what he's going to find, or maybe like he's been waiting for me.

He leans in, voice dropping. “You look out of it, little Marconi. Finally come to the realization that the painter's not doing it for you?”

“Shut up and do not call me that,” I counter, then step back. “You don't know anything about him.”

“I know he's not me.” He follows, matching my step, eyes locked on mine. “I know

you're always still thinking about me whenever you're with him."

I want to hit him. I want to scream. Instead, I throw the rest of my wine in his face. It splashes red across his shirt, dripping down his chin. He freezes, then laughs, wiping it off with his sleeve.

"That's my girl," he teases. "Keep fighting. Makes it better when you give in."

"I'll never give in," I hiss. "You're nothing to me, Sandro. Nothing."

He grins, slow and mean. "Keep telling yourself that."

"Why are you such an asshole?"

The frown on his brow tightens. "You'll do well not to speak to me like that, Selene. I'm not the man you once knew. I've strangled men for less."

"Yeah? You'll always be a puny coward in my eyes." I move closer to meet him and slap him the second I'm close enough. Hard. His eyes widen as he lets out a soft, measured gasp of surprise, but I feel the heat of him, the solid wall of his chest. "That's for today. You think you can just show up here by my father's side and boss me around? I'm not the girl you used to know, Sandro, so don't fucking mess with me. Stay out of my business."

"Or what?" He sizes me up, hands flexing as he corners me, voice dropping. "What is it you're gonna do? Call your freaking fiance who, by the way, looks like he couldn't fight his way out of a wet paper bag? He can't save you from me, baby. You can't keep pretending he's enough. I see it, Selene. You're burning up for me, dying to feel something real."

"You're delusional."

“Am I?” He steps closer, breath hot against my hair, stirring it just enough to prickle my skin. “Tell me your pussy didn’t tighten the second you walked in and saw me. Tell me you don’t want me to slide my hand down there right now, prove how wet you are, and fuck you proper and better than that painter’s limp dick has in five damn years.”

I move to hit him again, but this time, he’s prepared.

He catches my hand and, with control and skill, pulls me away from him and slams me against a tree. Slamming might not be the right word because when he holds me and presses his body against mine, he’s artful and deft about it, pinning me with a sick precision.

He holds me firmly but not enough to hurt me—the distinction is one I find conflicting, intoxicating, as his hips grind into mine, his breath hot on my neck.

“Get your filthy hands off me!” I yell as I push him away, but my voice cracks, betraying the ache between my thighs.

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He lets me go and licks the wine that has trickled down his lips suggestively, a menacing smile curving at the edge like he knows what he just did has my mind spiraling.

Like he knows that no matter how much I despise him, my body remembers. It remembers the heat of his skin, the way his hands once left marks I never wanted to fade. It remembers that once upon a time, I would have licked that drop of wine from his lips myself.

His eyes go dark as he regards me under heavy lashes, voice a growl.

“You think the ring on your finger means anything? You think that’s going to stop me or change anything? Cassian might have his ring on your finger, but you’re still mine, always fucking mine. Your entire body knows it. And if I have to put Cassian in the ground to remind you, so be it.”

I push at him again, but he’s too close, too solid, and my hands linger on his chest as he refuses to break his grip.

“You’re disgusting,” I spit, but my body’s trembling, sold out by the heat he’s stoking. He grabs my wrists, pulls me flush against him, and I feel every hard inch of him pressing into me, daring me to break.

“Disgusting?” he murmurs, lips brushing my ear, voice dripping with filth. “Pot calling kettle black. You’re soaked for it, aren’t you? Hating me so bad it’s got you dripping down your thighs. Go ahead, hit me again, make it hurt, baby. I know you like it rough.”

I wrench free, panting, but I can't step back—don't want to—and the air between us is thick with rot and lust, pulling us both down into the muck.

Ugh, he's so infuriating. I hate him so much it feels hard to breathe sometimes, and even now, when he says this, I'm overpowered by the hate, a choking, living thing drawing up in my throat.

“Get off your high horse, Sandro,” I quip, holding his stern gaze. “I came here to find you and tell you to stay off my back. I could never be yours, and Cassian is a better man than you'll ever be.”

Sandro drags one foot forward, anger flashing across his handsome features, a storm breaking over that perfect, loathsome face, but I put a hand up to stop him, my nails itching to make him bloody. “Touch me again and I'm gonna cut you.”

“Cut me?” he asks, mockingly. He brings out a dagger from his belt behind him and snaps it out of the holder. The blade glistens in the dark, even as he holds it between us, taunting me. “Try it, princess. I'd like that, bleed me out, see if I don't make you drink it.”

“Fuck you.”

He throws the dagger on the floor and doesn't make a move to pick it up, daring me with that smug, filthy smirk. I do. I reach down, grab it, and point it at him.

“You're not the one holding all the cards now, you see? It's pathetic what you've turned out to be, isn't it?”

Sandro rushes at me suddenly. One moment I have the dagger waving in front of me, and the next, his hands are in my hair and on my cheeks, dragging me into him, his body pressed firmly against me, breaths coming in ragged, desperate gasps that burn

against my skin.

“Tell me how pathetic I am,” he mutters, voice rough and unhinged, his lips grazing my jaw. “I’m here in front of you now, Selene, so tell me or cut me, but know this...I’m not letting Cassian take you from me. I’ll gut him first, and fuck you raw right beside his cooling body.”

“Get off me, Sandro,” I snarl, shoving at him, but it’s useless.

His hands drop to my waist and he pulls me into him, hard, possessive. Goosebumps ride up my arm when I feel something harden in his pants, his erection pressing into me until all I can think about is how thick and insistent it is, branding me through the fabric.

Sandro guides my hand to his length and rubs himself through his pants, groaning like the animal he is.

“See what you do to me? My body still fires up for you. It still wants you badly, craves you like a fucking drug. Tell me you don’t feel it too, you lying little slut.”

I squeeze his cock gently, tentatively, knowing I shouldn’t be doing it but wanting to anyway, needing to feel him pulse under my grip. He groans when I rub him faster, breathing hot and wet against my neck, his tongue sticking out to taste me.

I stop, mutter, “No...” but it’s weak, a plea drowned in want.

He shakes his head and looks at me, and I see the darkness in his eyes, a void that swallows me whole.

“Stop fighting this, Selene. You can’t run from this sweet ecstasy, can’t run from me fucking owning you.”

I push at his hard chest even as heat begins to pool at my core, a traitor's flood. I have to grind my thighs together to settle the tingles, but I feel it as it happens: my body still wants him, hungers for him, and I can't stop it, can't kill the sick pulse of it. "You're not gonna get away with this, Sandro..."

"You still call me Sandro," he growls, triumphant, like it's proof I'm his.

He slips a hand under my dress to press a finger against the slit in my panties, finding me soaked, betrayed by my own flesh. He hisses a breath, victorious. "You're fucking wet for me...you want me to fuck you up against this tree, don't you? You're dripping, such a needy little whore for me, aren't you?"

He's right. He's so right. But I can't play into his arms like this, not after fighting hard to forget about him, to scrub him from my bones.

"Let me go," I snap, but it's half a whimper, my resolve cracking.

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Let me go. Let me go before I do something irreversible, before I tear apart the life I've tried so hard to build. Let me go before I prove that I was never meant for the quiet, renewed kind of love Cassian gives me.

He doesn't. Of course he doesn't. And maybe, just maybe—I don't want him to.

He leans forward to kiss my neck but uses some teeth too, biting down just shy of breaking skin. As he grazes my neck, I shiver in his arms and do the worst thing imaginable: moan, loud and broken, a sound that rips me apart.

“Goodness gracious,” he murmurs, his breath hot on my skin, voice thick with lust. “I'd give anything to hear you moan my name like that again. Fuck. I want to taste you, lick that sweet, wet cunt till you're screaming, till you're begging me to ruin you.”

I try to push him off me again, but I can't. I'm a trembling mess in his arms, weak and wanting. His body is all ripped muscles and hardness, and when my palms flatten against his chest, my first instinct is to undress him and kiss his body, to drag my tongue over every inch, to mark him as he's marked me.

Wait, no! I can't.

“I'm fucking engaged.”

He lets me go then, stepping from me with a shake of his head, eyes blazing with hunger. “You will never get over me. This isn't over, Selene. Trust me. Soon I'll have you. Enjoy painter boy while he's still alive.”

I watch him walk away, and this time, I don't follow him, too wrecked to move. My legs are jelly after he leaves, so I have to find a bench to sit and calm my nerves, my pulse pounding, my panties soaked through with shame and need.

That's when Cassian comes to find me. He kneels down in front of me and clasps my wrists in his hands like they're the most delicate thing, gentle where Sandro was brutal.

"You're tense and flush. Did something happen?"

I can't exactly tell him about Alessandro and what he's just done to me, how he's turned me into a quivering, hateful wreck, so I settle for a breathless fib, my voice shaking.

"I just had a headache, so I stepped outside for a breather. It's nothing. I'm fine, I promise."

A lie.

Because the real headache just walked away with my soul in his hands.

Chapter 5

Alessandro

I sign the lease in bold, clear letters, watching Cassian's name vanish beneath mine. The agent's pen scratches impatiently.

"Make it quick," I tell him. "He either answers to my terms or he is out by month's end. Remember, I am to remain anonymous."

He nods, takes the documents, and scurries away. I linger outside Cassian's gallery, savoring the sharp twist of satisfaction. Selene's little world, the tidy, safe life she's built away from me, is crumbling at the edges, and she doesn't even know it.

The street's lamps glint above, painting dark shadows across old stone walls. I walk toward the alley, the wind snapping at my coat. Two of my men hold Raffaele pinned against the bricks, his shirt torn, skin already bruised and bleeding. He sees me and smiles, bloody teeth bared.

"Evening, Vescovi."

"You're moving product in Marconi territory." My voice is quiet, cold enough to bite.

He shrugs, smug despite the blood dripping from his split lip. "Business is business. You'd do the same."

I step forward, knuckles cracking audibly, and drive my fist into his ribs. He gasps sharply, coughing violently as his knees buckle. I grip his hair and pull his head up to meet my stare.

"You didn't just move product, Raffaele," I hiss into his face. "You stole our shipment from the docks worth two million euros. You nearly got my men killed, and you think you'll walk away breathing?"

He struggles, his breath ragged, yet still manages a cocky grin. "Had to pay some debts. Nothing personal, Sandro."

"Everything's personal with me." I release his hair roughly, turning to one of my men and nodding. Immediately, a blade flashes in the dim alley. Raffaele's arrogant smirk falters as he sees it. I take the knife myself, pressing the cold, sharp edge against his throat, hard enough to break skin. Blood wells, sliding warm over steel.

“You begged me for a chance once, and I gave it to you. Now, you’ve used it up.” My voice is deadly calm. “This blade belonged to Marco Silvestri, you remember him, don’t you? He died because you screwed us. The Silvestri family wants your head, and right now, I’m inclined to give it to them.”

Fear finally sparks in his eyes, replacing arrogance with a cold understanding of his situation. “Wait—Sandro—”

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I tilt the blade slightly, increasing pressure just enough to send panic racing through him. “You’ll pay Silvestri double what you stole. Fail me again, and I’ll deliver you to them alive, in pieces. Am I clear?”

He nods frantically, swallowing hard despite the steel at his throat. I release him with a push, watching as he collapses against the bricks, breathing heavily, trembling.

“Tie him upside down in the basement until I get back,” I tell my men. “Let’s see if gravity helps him rethink his decisions.”

As I step away, I know he won’t last long, not with the injuries he already has. Hanging upside down, the blood rushing to his head, will cause unbearable pressure, disorientation, and pain. By morning, he’ll be begging for death.

I leave the alley without another glance, stepping back into the narrow street. I turn at the sound of laughter, my jaw tightening as Selene strolls into the gallery with Cassian trailing behind her, both of them lost in a conversation. I hear her laughter even from a distance and feel my blood begin to boil at the thought of him making her laugh like that. Even though I know how to control my impulses, I’m awakened by a jealousy so unbecoming I’m startled by it, a feral heat clawing through my veins.

I clean the splatter of blood off my fists, each red smear a reminder of how quickly my restraint snapped earlier, and stride across the cobblestone path to the gallery doors. They swing open to welcome me and as I traipse through, I catch the whispers of fear from the people in here, their eyes darting, bodies shrinking. Selene sees me coming and rolls her eyes, looking between Cassian and me, like he can do anything about my wrath, like he can shield her from the storm I’m about to unleash.

Like he can face me.

I come to stand in front of her, towering, my shadow swallowing her whole. She runs her tongue over her bottom lip, the way I know she does when she's thinking, a slow, deliberate tease that sends a jolt straight to my cock, before keeping her focus on me. Her eyes, usually storm-gray, are darker now, with a storm of anger and incredulity passing through them, but beneath it is something that begs to be broken.

"Why are you here?" Cassian asks, straightening his shoulders and back to give me a domineering look. But he's standing at maybe 5'11 so there's not much he can do, a twig against a goddamn oak. I'm not even bothered by him. He's wiry, all limbs and barely any muscle but I find, in his eyes, a quiet fierceness that feels all too real, though it's laughable next to my hunger. "You shouldn't be in here, Mr. Vescovi."

I give him a long hard look, my lips curling into a sneer. "Shooting me straight with disrespect in one brief statement has to be a new one, even for me. I'll let that slide once. You won't like what happens if you say it again."

Cassian has the grace to actually look annoyed, his jaw ticking. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave. Right now, I'm being polite but it won't matter in a few minutes if I have to drag you out of here. And believe me when I tell you, I will."

I've been known to bring down better men with just a snap of my fingers but for Cassian, his words barely even register, a fly buzzing around a lion. "And I'm going to pretend you didn't say that, Cassian. I'm sure your pretty little fiancée can tell you just what a beast I can be with just the right motivation. Tell him, won't you, darling? Tell him how I'd ruin him without breaking a sweat."

"Don't you dare speak to her like that."

The place hushes all at once, a collective intake of breath. I give the place a sweeping

glance before breaking into a burning laughter. Against my better judgement, I'm actually learning to enjoy this conversation, the way it stokes the fire in my gut.

Selene touches Cassian's arm lightly, and my eyes can't help but linger there for a bit too long. "Cassian, don't engage him. He's not worth it."

Cassian sighs. He steps back, but not because of me.

For her.

Interesting.

"You don't know the woman you claim to love. If you did, you'd know she hates it when a man tries to be her knight in shining armor. Especially weak ones like you." I suck in a breath and tsk at him, circling the couple with one hand hidden in the pockets of my pants, the other itching to grab her. "See, the problem with men like you, Cassian, is that you think puffing your chest gives you power. What makes you think strolling into this miserable gallery, the only thing you have worth taking, isn't within my rights?"

"If you're trying to scare me, Vescovi, it won't work. I don't know what twisted game you're playing but leave Selene out of it. You—"

"Cassian," Selene says softly, stopping him from continuing with just a hand placed delicately on his, her touch light but commanding. I feel another bout of jealousy erode my blood at the sight of how comfortable they seem to be around each other, a jagged shard of want twisting deeper, but I don't act it out—yet. "It's not worth it."

"I can see that," he mutters, eyes narrowing.

"It's not a smart move, Cassian." I'm armed. I have a dagger in the belt of my pants

and a gun hidden behind me, the weight of them grounding me. I could kill him right here and now, paint the floor with his blood, and go home and not have to worry about him but that'd be too messy. And risky. And bloody too, though the thought of her watching, wide-eyed and trembling, makes my dick twitch. "I'm in a bind. Do I go easy on you by cutting off all of your sponsors and deals and leave you penniless or do I go hard and cut off all your limbs one at a time until you die a slow and painful death? Why don't you help out here, darling? What do you think? Should I carve him up slowly or just take what's mine?"

Selene jumps to the rescue just as someone behind me calls out Cassian's name for a delivery he needs to check and sign, her timing impeccable.

"Go ahead," she tells him in a whisper. "I'll handle things here and then we can go have that nice dinner you were talking about. How does that sound?"

"Alright," he agrees, looking at me, his eyes wary but impotent. "But be careful around him."

"I will, he's always been more mouth than action towards me," she promises, a lie so sweet it almost fools me.

"Ouch." I plant a hand against my cheek in mockery, pinning them both with a flat look, my smirk sharp enough to cut. "Don't make me look like the bad guy here. Come on, I'm just here to talk about your wedding. I'm still planning it, after all."

Cassian scratches his chin as he moves away, throwing over his shoulder, "Yes, a fact I'm going to change pretty soon."

"Don't hold your breath, you fucking worm."

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Once he leaves, Selene does the smart thing. She shuffles me out of the gallery and through a short hallway to a door at the far end, her hips swaying with every furious step. She shoves me in there and shuts the door behind her, locking us in. She's fuming as she glares at me, her chest heaving, nipples pressing against her shirt.

I glance around and smirk, the air thick with tension. "The storeroom? What? You want to get kinky, you dirty little tease?"

"Shut up, asshole!" she spits, but her voice wavers, betraying her.

"You keep saying that," I step closer, crowding her against the stacked boxes. The dim lighting softens her furious expression, highlighting flushed skin and parted lips. "Maybe find new words, Selene."

She sniffs and runs a hand through her hair, the gesture shaky. The storeroom is large but cluttered with crates and opened paintings, the soft light casting shadows over her flushed skin. It's dim enough that I can't make out most of the details but light enough that I can see the scowl on her beautiful, perfect face, the way her lips part like she's already imagining my hands on her.

"What are you really doing here, Sandro?" She snakes her hand around her waist as she asks this, her voice a bit shrill in the room, cracking with frustration and something darker. "Following me here like a lost dog isn't flattering."

"I wasn't following you," I lie, stepping closer still.

"Then why are you here?" she snaps. "Just to taunt me?"

“I’ll tell you if you’d stop answering your own questions!” My voice comes out rougher than intended, edged with impatience.

She swallows and relaxes her hand from her hips, her defiance evident. “Fine. I’m listening.”

I don’t think. I just act.

I pick her up, her gasp sharp and delicious, and push her onto the only table in the room that’s not cluttered, the wood creaking under her weight. Then I pin her down by her wrists, hard enough to bruise, my body pressing into hers.

“This is why I’m here, Selene. You. I’m here to fucking claim you.”

She struggles against me, baring her teeth like a wild animal and trying to push me off her but I’m lodged between her open thighs, her heat searing me through our clothes, so there’s not much she can do. Her skirt’s ridden up, exposing creamy skin I want to mark with my teeth.

“Sandro,” she gulps, breaking, her voice trembling with rage and need. “Can you just stop?”

“Look at me right now,” I growl, my grip tightening.

And she does. Under the arrogance and defiance, I see a fine trace of lust etched in those gorgeous eyes, a hunger that mirrors mine. I run a hand across her cheeks, stopping at her left cheekbone where her scar used to be. Now, there’s only a faint trace there, a ghost of her past I’ve memorized. She shivers when I caress it, bringing her hands up to stop me but not fighting me when I press into her harder, my erection grinding against her core.

“You’re still so beautiful, God damn. I could stare at you all day and never grow tired. You’re perfect, and I’m gonna ruin you all over again.”

“Sandro—”

I let my fingers fall to the curve of her mouth and trap her words there, silencing her as my thumb smear across her lips. “You asked me why I came and I’m telling you it’s because I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you. Let me have you, Selene. All of you. Every fucking inch, right here, right now.”

She shakes her head, pulling against my hold, her wrists straining in my bruising grip, nails scraping my skin. “Let me go, Sandro, or I swear—”

“Swear what? I can feel you shivering for me. You want me. I can feel it. It’s in your eyes. Fight it all you want but I know you’re gonna beg for it in the end, gonna spread those pretty legs and scream my name.”

“That’s all in your head. Whatever we had ended years ago. I’m going to get married to the man I love,” she snaps, but her hips twitch toward me like a moth to flame.

“You just think you love him. You physically shake for me, it’s so obvious, baby. Why don’t you just ask for what I know you want,” I rasp, my hand sliding down her throat, squeezing just enough to make her gasp, her pulse pounding like a drum under my palm. “I can smell your cunt from here, soaking through your panties, begging for my tongue. You’re gonna destroy me, and I’ll thank you for it.”

“Stop,” she hisses, but it’s weak, crumbling, her breath a stuttering mess as her eyes flare with a wild, trapped heat.

Her shirt rides up then, baring her stomach, and when I touch her exposed skin, she falters, arching her back into me with a choked moan, her body screaming yes when

her mouth won't. Her skin is creamy and soft and as I trail my fingers along the smooth expanse down to her belly button, I feel myself harden to the point of pain, my cock leaking against my zipper. I cup her breasts through her bra and squeeze, roughly and possessively, her flesh spilling over my hands, her nipples stiffening instantly.

"Jesus," she breathes, trembling, her resolve shattering, a ragged whimper tearing from her throat as her thighs clamp around me, needy and desperate. "Fuck..."

"Not him. Just me."

I feel her nipples as they harden under my thumbs and twirl them, pinching hard until she cries out, her head snapping back, sweat beading on her neck. It takes all of my willpower not to rip her shirt open, bend down, and suck those perfect tits until she's sobbing my name, begging me for more. I am a freaking mess in front of her, a beast unraveling, my cock throbbing with the need to bury itself inside her. But it's her taste I crave most, a hunger so deep it's eating me alive.

"Selene," I groan, my voice a broken, guttural plea as I drop to my knees, a wrecked man at her altar, hands clawing at her skirt like a junkie for his fix. "I want to go down on you, baby. Please, this is me on my knees begging for a taste between your legs. I'm fucking starving for your pussy, Selene, let me bury my face in it." My fingers rip at her skirt, almost tearing the zipper wide, and I push it up, exposing her drenched panties. I press my face into her, sniffing the hot, musky scent of her slick arousal.

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But I don't go further. I won't. Not until she says those words I want to hear.

"Fuck, you're so wet, dripping for me. I can smell how bad you need this. Let me lick your juices, baby, please, it's been so long, I can't even think straight when you're nearby. Please. Let me suck that clit until you're gushing down my throat."

She squirms, her hands shoving at my head, but her hips jerk forward, grinding against my nose, her breath coming in sharp, frantic gasps, her cunt pulsing with heat so close to my mouth. "Sandro, stop—"

"No, I can't, I fucking won't," I moan, my lips grazing her soaked folds, tongue sticking out to lap at the edge of her panties, tasting her through the fabric, a tease that makes mewhimper like a dog. "You're killing me, Selene. I'll die if I don't get my mouth on you. Let me eat you out, please, I'll tongue-fuck you so deep you'll forget everything but me. I'll make you come so hard you'll beg me to keep going, fiancé or not, I don't give a shit, just let me taste you." My hands wrench her thighs wider, nails digging into her flesh, and I nuzzle closer, my breath hot against her slit, lips brushing her clit as I growl, "Look at this pretty pussy, weeping for me. I'm gonna devour it, baby, gonna lick you so good until you're screaming my name."

If I don't stop this now, I'm going to fuck her right here, on this table, with her fiancé outside, and I won't care who hears her scream. But her words, those fragile, fractured words, chain me, barely.

"Please, Sandro, don't make me do this..." she whispers, her voice a shattered sob, laced with terror and a trembling, undeniable ache, her fingers tangling in my hair, pulling hard but arching into me all the same, her body a war of want and resistance.

Her plea cuts through the haze, a blade of clarity in my fevered spiral, and I freeze, mouth hovering over her dripping core, spit pooling on my tongue, my whole body shaking with the effort to stop. For a tortured second, I stay there, nose pressed to her heat, lips a whisper from claiming her. Then I wrench myself back, releasing her thighs, staggering to my feet, hands trembling as I smear her scent across my face, my chest heaving like I've run a marathon. She collapses against the table, pulling her skirt down with shaking fingers, her face flushed, eyes wet and wild with a mix of shame and unspent lust.

I can see the cracks as they form in the push and pull of our relationship, if I can even call it that. She's filled with desire, the kind that I feel for her, a filthy, consuming rot that mirrors my own. Everything that she says is just fuel on the fire.

"Selene. I—"

"You already got the gallery like you wanted. Don't come back here again, please. If you think I'm still the naive girl you left, then you've got it all wrong," she says, her voice cold, eyes narrowing as she straightens, wiping her flushed face like she's scrubbing me off her skin. "I'm not your toy anymore, Sandro. You don't get to slink back in here, drooling like some rabid dog, thinking I'll just roll over for you. I'm done, done with your games, your sick obsession. You're nothing to me now, just a pathetic mistake I scraped off my shoe years ago."

Her words land like a blade to the ribs, so deep, precise, and meant to wound. I feel each one cutting through something I barely admit exists. I force myself to meet her eyes, to hold them so she can't twist my meaning, but the effort costs me. My voice drops, meant to be a warning, a dark promise, but there's a fracture now, a raw edge she's pried open, exposing something I've spent years burying.

"Listen to me, princess. The longer you make me wait, the rougher it's going to be when I finally take you. I was minutes away from bending you over this table, ripping

those panties off, and fucking you so deep you'd be dripping with me, begging for more like the desperate little slut you are, and we both know it." I stop, my throat tightening, the sting of her rejection burrowing under my skin. My mask slips, the controlled dominance unraveling, my voice turning hoarse. "You can't just cut me out like I'm nothing. I'm fucking desperate for you, don't you see it? You're in my bones, and I can't carve you out. Tell me you feel it too. Even a little. Please."

She stares at me, her lip curling in disgust. "Feel it? All I feel is pity for the sad, broken man who can't let go. Go home, Alessandro. Crawl back to whatever hole you came from and leave me the hell alone."

Her venom seeps in, and I flinch, my bravado crumbling, hands balling into fists to hide the shake. I'm laid bare, awounded animal, exposing the soft, rotting core I've buried under threats and lust.

I have a choice now: to break her through desire or through fear. It's not a hard decision but it takes me a while to come to a conclusion, the anticipation making my blood sing.

I'm going to do both.

Chapter 6

Selene

The coffee in my cup has gone cold, but I keep stirring it anyway, watching the swirl of cream dissolve into nothing. Across from me, Cassian shifts in his seat, his fingers drumming against the wooden table. He's been quiet too long, and I know something is wrong before he even speaks.

"The lease fell through," he finally says, voice tight. "I don't know how—"

My stomach drops. The spoon slips from my fingers, clattering against the saucer. My mind can't stop thinking about the things Sandro did to me in the gallery. His mouth against my skin, his hands pinning me down, his words sinking into me like a promise and a curse. God, I almost broke.

How can I still want him after everything?

Then Cassian speaks again, and my heart clenches.

“Apparently, Sandro offered the landlord a better deal,” he continues. “The gallery is his now.”

Of course it is.

Cassian looks at me like he's waiting for me to make sense of it, to explain why the man who shouldn't have any part in our lives keeps sinking his claws deeper. But I don't have an answer he'll want to hear. Because I know exactly why Sandro did this. He's proving a point.

Cassian shakes his head. “I don't understand. We had a contract. This was supposed to be—”

“Our future,” I finish softly.

I should feel anger on his behalf, rage that Sandro keeps taking what isn't his. Instead, all I feel is something tangled and ugly inside me, because I know this isn't about Cassian. It's about me.

It's about the way my body still remembers Sandro's touch before my mind can tell it to forget. It's about the way my breathing turns shallow when he's near.

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How I could put a stop to all this with one word to my father. But I don't.

Because deep down, I've been waiting for an excuse. A reason to stop pretending. To stop playing the role of the devoted fiancée when I've been slipping through the cracks for months.

And Sandro?

He's always been the fall I never learned how to stop taking.

"This is weird, Selene." His voice is careful, like he's stepping around something sharp. "Almost like he has something else up his sleeve. He already made your father give him total control over our affairs for the time being, why would he want my gallery too?"

I force myself to meet his eyes. Hazel, warm, searching. He's looking for something in me that isn't there, something whole, something pure.

"He and I have history," I say, the words heavy and finally out there. "It's complicated. We don't exactly see eye to eye."

Cassian blinks. He leans back slightly, like I just knocked the breath from his lungs. "History?"

I nod, fingers curling around my cup. "Before I left Florence."

His brows draw together. "I don't get it. Isn't he like your brother? You grew up

together before your father turned him into a war machine.”

I swallow, my mouth dry. “Not exactly.”

Cassian studies me, waiting for more, but I have nothing else to give him. Because how do I tell the man I’m about to marry that my pseudo-estranged brother was the man who took my virginity? That he made me feel things no man ever has? That even now, my body still betrays me at the thought of him?

Cassian rubs his jaw. “Does your father know about this?”

I let out a dry laugh. “Knowing him? He probably orchestrated it.”

Cassian’s expression tightens. “Selene, you have to talk to him. If Sandro is doing this because of your past—”

“No,” I cut in. “It won’t change anything.”

His jaw clenches. “So, what? We just let him take whatever he wants?”

I want to tell him it’s not about the gallery. That it was never about the gallery. That Sandro isn’t taking things, he’s reclaiming them. And I don’t know if I can stop him.

The ring on my finger feels heavier. I curl my hand into a fist, pressing it into my thigh. “I don’t know.”

Cassian’s frustration flares. “You’re not even trying to fight him, Selene. Why?”

Because I don’t know if I want to. Because some part of me still aches for the way Sandro touches me, the way he makes me feel alive even when I’m drowning. But I can’t say that.

I shake my head. “I just, I need time. But I’ll talk to him.”

He watches me for a long moment, then sighs, running a hand through his hair. “I don’t understand you.”

Neither do I.

Apparently, I’m well known because when I storm one of Sandro’s warehouses, the one I know he’ll most probably be at, his guys do nothing to stop me. I figure that’s one way to go about it. If they see the anger flashing in my eyes and in my stiff shoulders, they don’t point it out.

They’re more subtle about it, giving me a clear path to cut through, their silence a tacit bow to the fury radiating off me like heat from a furnace. A million thoughts go through my mind at this point, most of which are about how much I can’t stand his audacity and the way Sandro seems all too keen to rope both me and Cassian into his carefully crafted web, a spider savoring the tremble of trapped prey.

I know how dangerous Sandro is. I’m not so naive that I’d think he’s all words and no bite since his reputation almost certainly precedes him, a shadow that swallows men whole. But today, I’m pissed and rightly so, which means I don’t care about his reputation or the danger he commands. My blood’s boiling.

I want him to know he’s not going to be able to get away with this intentional sabotage no matter how much power he seems to hold.

The warehouse is grimy and smells of moss, and there are crates all around, a labyrinth of decay and greed. On the day that I storm here to confront Sandro, I walk in on a moving shipment of guns. The irony isn’t lost on me, a bitter taste on my

tongue as I stride deeper into his den.

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“How dare you go that far?” I yell, my voice cutting through the din.

Sandro doesn't look surprised. If anything, he looks amused, hands tucked into his pockets, watching me like he's been expecting this. Expecting me.

“You're relentless,” he muses, stepping closer. “I like that.”

“You bought the gallery lease.” I go right at it. “Why?”

His head tilts. “You already know why.”

I do. And it infuriates me.

I push at his chest, but he doesn't budge. “Stay out of my life. You're nothing but a leech, even with all the power you think you possess, sucking at anything that moves just to feel alive.”

“Selene—”

“Don't say my name with that mouth of yours!” I don't know why I'm yelling even after getting his attention above the seaof noise in the warehouse, but I know why I can't seem to stop myself, my rage a live wire sparking uncontrollably.

Because Sandro enjoys this, revels in it even, his eyes glinting with sick delight. Perhaps that's why he finds ways to rattle me despite having a lot of things he can better use his time for, like a hound baiting a fox for sport. The moment the scowl on his face dissolves into a smirk, I'm proven right, and my stomach twists with loathing

and something darker, hotter.

What a monster.

A gorgeous, fucking monster.

He's dressed in jeans, the first I've seen on him in ages, the denim hugging his thighs like a second skin. This, he pairs with a plaid shirt and work boots, rugged and primal, a man carved from shadows and sin. Even in the dim lights of the place, my body immediately recognizes him and sets the longing between both of us ablaze, an electric current that sears my nerves despite my fury.

I'm not here for that. I ball my hands into fists as I draw close to his face, close enough to smell the sweat and gunpowder on him. "How low can you go? Trying to frustrate Cassian for your selfish gains? That just makes you look insecure and wholly incompetent, a petty king scrabbling for scraps."

"Be careful with your words, Selene. You're walking on a very thin rope right now."

His words send a chill down my spine, icy tendrils curling around my resolve. A part of me knows he'd never physically hurt me, but maybe I crossed a line just now, and doubt makes my pulse race.

Whatever. He crossed the line first. He's going to have to deal with me. My vengeance has to start slowly to be able to do more damage, a creeping poison, but I hate how much he takes and takes to incite me, feeding off my chaos like it's his lifeline.

"You really make it hard for me not to hate you, Sandro."

"You certainly won't be the first to come to that conclusion," he replies, unfazed, his

tone dripping with mockery.

“You think you’re so mighty right now, don’t you? I’m gonna pull you down even if I have to claw my way through. You get that?” I say, my voice trembling with something unnameable.

He pins me with a hard look, poised and ready, his lips drawn in a tight line, eyes burning into mine. “That’s the difference between us, then. I’m always prepared to fight dirty,” he says, each word a promise of ruin.

“Cheat!” I drawl, ready to slap him as hard as I can, my fist cocked and itching to connect.

He moves fast, grabbing my wrist, pushing me until my back hits a crate. Hard. A gasp rips from my throat, but I don’t fight him. Not yet. His breath is warm against my cheek, his grip unforgiving.

“I won’t let you do that twice, Selene,” he murmurs. “Once is all you’ll ever get.”

I hate him. I hate how close he is, how his scent—leather, smoke, something enchanting—invades my lungs. I hate the way my pulse betrays me, hammering against my ribs, my body reacting before my mind can shut it down.

Then he hoists me up by my forearm, flinging me over his shoulders as though I weigh nothing, his strength a brutal reminder of his control. Adrenaline pumps in my veins as he holds me to him and strolls away from the chaos of unloading guns and high-pitched commands, his grip iron-tight.

“Put me down right now, Sandro!” I demand, thrashing against him.

“In time,” he decides, harshly, his voice a growl that vibrates through me. “Now, be

patient.”

I drive my fist into his lower back, surprised by his firm hold on me even as he walks away, his muscles flexing under my blows. I writhe in his arms, pushing, until he smacks my butt.Hard. The sting blooms hot and sharp, a jolt that makes me gasp and clench involuntarily.

“Ow!” I yelp, heat flooding my cheeks and lower.

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“I need you to see just how willing I am to go further. I intend to make you beg, princess. Now, stop fighting,” he says, tone laced with a hunger that sets my skin alight.

“You’re impossible,” I hiss, but my voice wavers, betrayed by the shiver his touch ignites.

He pauses mid-stride to unlock a door before jostling me through it and closing it with the heel of his foot, sealing us in a shadowed cage. The moment I land on my feet, I kick him, aiming for his shin. He winces but doesn’t topple over in the way I’d imagined, and my mind blanks, fury mingling with a sick thrill as he stands firm, unyielding.

“Don’t tell me you came all this way to defend Cassian because that would just be foolhardy,” he says, his voice a taunting caress.

“Why’s that?”

“You belong to me, princess, whether you like it or not.” This time around, there’s no teasing in his tone. He says it without hesitation or remorse, his eyes drawn to me as if he doesn’t want me to forget this information, a claim etched in steel and fire.

“You say that because you don’t want to admit you lost and this? This is just fear,” I retort, my words a blade aimed at his pride.

“I am not afraid. Rarely anything ever scares me.” As he says this, he backs me to a corner, his presence a wall of heat and menace. When he throws me on a crate, I do

the next worst thing by trying to punch him, but he grabs my hips, places himself between my thighs, and pulls, wedging me right where he wants me, my skirt hiking up, leaving me exposed and trapped.

God, please not this again. How do we always end up like this?

I can't do anything about it, my breath catching as his hardness presses against me.

A foolish part of me thinks this is a good idea, to be taken with greedy hunger and ravished, devoured until I'm nothing but a trembling wreck. The other part of me, the more rational part, knows it's only going to get worse if I give into him, a descent into an abyss I might not climb out of. I hate him to the point of wanting to push him off a balcony, but I'd also like to be fucked by him, savagely, until the lines between hate and need blur into oblivion. There's really no right way to put it. I barely even understand it myself, this twisted knot of loathing and lust choking me.

I try to wriggle against him but come up short. With his huge, muscular body between my legs, I realize he's caught me good, his thighs pinning mine, his scent, sweat, musk, and sin flooding my senses.

"You don't think it's time to accept you still have feelings for me, Selene?" His voice is husky, like he's finding it a bit difficult to convey his thoughts, rough with want as he leans closer, breath hot on my neck.

"I don't." I huff at him but resign when I look at him and catch the tenderness in his gaze, a flicker that pierces my armor. "I hate you."

"Are you sure?" His hands are in my hair now, tenderly massaging my scalp, a cruel contrast to the fire in his eyes. "Tell me Cassian makes you ache like this, and I'll stop," he murmurs, daring me to lie.

I nearly whimper. What the hell? He's my enemy. If anything, I'm supposed to have him chained, bleeding at my feet. I should hurt him as much as he hurt me—that's the fair thing to do—and yet in the face of such greed and lust, I don't do anything, my body betraying me with a shudder I can't suppress.

He takes my silence for an answer. "That's right, princess. I'm the one that lights you up, the one that makes your pussy wet and dripping," he growls, his voice dipping into a filthy drawl. "I bet you're soaking through those panties right now, aching for me to rip them off and fuck you senseless."

I shake my head at him in a frenzy, mouthing, "No..." but it's a weak protest, my core clenching at his words.

"That's fine," he says, smirking, eyes gleaming with dark intent. "I don't plan on giving up anytime soon. I'm gonna make you remember just how good we were together, how I'd fuck you until you couldn't walk, until you were screaming my name, begging for my cock."

I should do something. Why am I not fighting and—his mouth crashes against mine.

Holy hell.

Sandro kisses me, driving his tongue in my mouth with such demand I melt into him, a molten surrender I can't stop. He grinds his body against mine as his kiss deepens, igniting fire deep in my belly, his erection pressing hard against my throbbing core. He nibbles at my lower lip, sucking and twirling and owning my mouth, a savage claim that leaves me dizzy. I've been kissed before. Cassian kisses well enough and not once have I ever felt the need to complain, but when Sandro drags me to him and fucks my mouth with his tongue, I realize how inadequate everyone else has been, pale shadows next to this consuming inferno.

Because fuck—this man can kiss, a master of ruin who leaves me gasping and owned.

How could I have ever forgotten this?

He pulls away from my mouth and swipes his tongue on my neck, wet and possessive, marking me. A shiver of pleasure runs through me at the impact, and I freeze, my body alight with a twisted mix of ecstasy and dread. This feels good. So damn good.

And so bad, a sin I'm drowning in.

When he brings his mouth to mine again, I bite down on his lip and taste blood, metallic and hot, a primal thrill surging through me. Even as I gather his shirt in my fist to push him away, I don't. Instead I pull him closer, blood and all, until I think I'll never be able to forget him, his taste searing into my soul, a brand I'll carry forever.

The world narrows to this, his body pressing against mine, the heat, the fight, the sick thrill of knowing I could break if I let myself.

We break away from the kiss, from each other, at the same time, both panting and breathless, our chests heaving, air thick with the stench of our mutual rot.

I stand up quickly from the crate and wipe my mouth with the back of a hand, the taste of his blood lingering, a taunt.

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Then I push him away, breathless, shaking.

“I still hate you,” I rasp.

Sandro’s expression darkens, something glinting in his eyes. “Liar.”

I start to run before he can prove me right.

“Next time, I don’t think I’m going to be able to stop. So don’t fucking show up or I’m going to be pounding your tight little ass until you forget your fiancé’s name,” he rasps, his voice raw, eyes wild with a promise of depravity. “I’ll fuck you so hard you’ll feel me for days, princess, my cum dripping down your thighs while you crawl back to him, ruined.”

“Next time,” I say, swinging the door open, my voice steady despite the tremble in my limbs, “I’m going to be coming with a gun, and I’ll blow your fucking head off before you touch me again.”

“Ooh, I’d love to see that.” His tone hides humor, but his face is expressionless, a mask of stone over the chaos beneath. “If you do intend to bring a gun to a fist fight, make sure the safety’s off. You’re not going to get a second chance, not with me.”

I make my way out of the warehouse without looking back, my heels clicking on the grimy floor, a war drum in my ears. I’m seething, sure, but I’ve also just confirmed something: I want him as much as he wants me, a sick, gnawing hunger that pulses in my veins, and it’s not going to stop until we both have at it, tearing each other apart.

Now the question is whether I want to take it that far in my quest for vengeance or not, whether I'll let this fire consume us both or snuff it out with his blood.

Cassian's arms are warm, his body solid against mine as I press my face into his shoulder. I know I'm supposed to feel safe or whole. But I don't.

"You're distant," he whispers, fingers threading through my hair. "Talk to me."

I swallow hard, the lie thick in my throat. "It's nothing. Just tired."

His hold tightens, but he doesn't push. He trusts me. And that trust feels heavier than the ring on my finger, heavier than the guilt twisting inside me.

I close my eyes, willing away the taste of Sandro on my lips, the phantom press of his hands on my skin. Cassian doesn't deserve the truth. He doesn't deserve the wreckage I am becoming.

Sandro is breaking me. Again. And I don't know how much longer I can hold myself together.

"So how did it go?" he asks quietly, fingers tracing absent patterns on my back. "Did he say he'd give it back?"

I stiffen. The memory of the two times I've let Sandro touch me in the span of twenty hours is still fresh. "It didn't go well," I say. "He refused."

Cassian pulls back slightly, searching my face. "That's it?"

I nod, keeping my expression neutral. But he isn't satisfied. His jaw tightens, his grip

on my waist firming as his frustration seeps through.

“Selene.” His voice is stronger now. “You walked into a warehouse full of armed men, confronted Sandro, and all you have to say is ‘he refused’?”

“What else do you want me to say? That I begged? That I threw myself at his feet?”

“I want you to tell me the truth,” Cassian bites out. “Because you’re acting like this was inevitable, like you knew before you even went that he wouldn’t back down.”

My mouth opens, but no words come.

Because he’s right.

Ididknow. I knew the second I saw Sandro’s face again, the second I met his eyes across the room and felt the pull like a tether. I knew, and I went anyway.

Cassian cups my face the way he always does when he’s trying to soothe me, and I feel my pulse spike—not in fear, but in shame. Because he’s not supposed to be the one I feel guilty around. Nothim.

But he is.

And that alone is enough to make my stomach turn.

“Because I did.”

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He pulls away fully now, sitting up on the bed, shaking his head like he's trying to make sense of something that refuses to align. "You knew. And you still went."

"I had to."

His expression darkens. A muscle ticks in his jaw. "What is he to you, Selene? What's this history you guys have? Because I look at you, and I don't see a woman who just lost a business opportunity. I see someone who's—" He stops himself, but I already know where his mind has gone. His voice is quieter now, but just as deep. "Why does it feel like you're afraid of him?"

"I'm not," I say too quickly.

Cassian laughs under his breath, but it's bitter. "God, you think I don't see it? The way you shut down every time I say his name? The way you came back from that warehouse looking like—" He runs a hand over his face, exhaling sharply. "Like something happened that you're not telling me."

My throat tightens. "Nothing happened."

"Don't lie to me."

I force myself to hold his eyes, even as something inside me crumbles. "It's complicated."

"That's not an answer."

A heavy silence settles between us. I can see the war in his eyes—wanting to believe me, wanting to understand, but knowing he’s missing something. And he is. He always has been.

Finally, I say, “It’s in the past, Cassian. He’s just trying to control me because of my father. That’s all.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to trust me enough to open up to me,” he says, his voice laced with something almost like hurt. “Because it feels like you’re still caught in something I can’t touch.”

He doesn’t realize how right he is. I am caught. Tied up in chains I put on myself. And there’s no version of this where Cassian comes out unscathed.

I reach for him instead, pressing my lips against his, willing myself to get lost in him. His hands come up, hesitant at first, then stronger, pulling me closer. His touch is gentle, careful in ways Sandro’s never was. Cassian doesn’t take. He gives.

But even as I sink into his warmth, the taste of Sandro lingers. His hands, his mouth, the way he made me burn.

I try to focus on Cassian, on the safety of him, the steadiness. I let his kisses deepen, let his hands skim my waist, let myself believe, for a moment, that this is enough.

But when Cassian whispers my name, his breath warm against my skin, all I hear is Sandro’s voice.

And I know.

It will never be enough.

Chapter 7

Alessandro

Ten years ago.

The Marconi estate is as cold as I remember.

Every inch of the house is designed to remind you who is in control. The high ceilings, the marble floors, the low hum of distant voices murmuring in rooms I'm not supposed to enter—it all screams power.

I have been here before. Many times. When my father was still alive and he and Don bonded over things old men with ties in the mafia in their forties bond over.

But this time, I'm not a guest.

This time, I'm here to stay permanently.

Memories of my parents flood my mind—a fleeting image of my mother's gentle smile, my father's strong presence before the fire took them from me. The fire, a rival's arson, scarred me physically and emotionally, leaving me with a relentless drive for vengeance and a coldness that matches the marble around me. Don Marconi has already offered his assistance in seeking that vengeance, under one condition: my loyalty to him.

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It's a pledge I have no qualms about, given I don't have much left to live for anyway. Bouncing from foster home to foster home isn't a life anyone would wish for, nor does it promise much of a future.

Don Marconi's voice rings from his study, instructing one of his men on something I'm not interested in. I'm supposed to wait, to stand here like a loyal dog until he decides I'm worth acknowledging.

But then, I feel it.

A presence.

I turn just as she appears at the top of the grand staircase.

She isn't what I expect. I knew Don had a daughter but he never let her out when he had us over.

Dark hair, loose waves tumbling over one shoulder. A silk slip of a dress that's a little too elegant for a girl who looks like she just caused some kind of trouble. Bare feet, and a silver anklet catching the light. She moves like she belongs to this house, but her eyes say otherwise—storm-gray and sharp with amusement. Like she's constantly waiting for the world to entertain her.

And then she smiles.

And fuck me, I hate that I like it.

I don't even know her name yet, but I know this—she's going to be a problem.

She leans against the banister, arms folded, watching me like I'm something to be studied. Like I'm an animal in her father's zoo.

“Well,” she drawls, “I expected something more impressive.”

I arch a brow. “Excuse me?”

She gestures lazily in my direction. “You. The infamous Alessandro Vescovi. I heard so much about you growing up, I thought you'd at least have a scar or two. Maybe a missing eye. Instead, you just look...” She tilts her head, as if choosing her next words carefully.

I wait, arms crossed, already irritated.

“...tired.”

A slow breath leaves my nose.

I should ignore her.

But there's something about the way she says it, like she has already dismissed me, that makes my fingers twitch with the urge to ruin her mood.

“And you must be?” I ask, my tone cool, as if she's a mere inconvenience.

“Selene Marconi. I'm sure you've heard of me. You've been coming to my house since you were a child.”

“Is that so? Keeping tabs on me? I see.”

“Nahh, I just take note of everything that walks in here, whether or not I interact with them. Can’t be too careful. Who knows when a stray or psychopath might wander in?”

I hold back my laugh. Can’t let her know she amuses me. “Your father never mentioned you were such a pain in the ass.”

Her crooked smile widens. “He wouldn’t. He likes to pretend I don’t exist unless he needs me to sit quietly in the corner and look pretty.”

I give her a once-over, slowly. I know I’m older than her by about four years, so that should make her seventeen, but her eyes betray a maturity that belies her years. “I can see why. Sitting quietly doesn’t seem like your strong suit.”

She gasps in mock offense, hand pressed dramatically over her chest. “Oh, he bites! I was starting to think you were one of those stiff, brooding types who never says anything interesting.”

I huff a laugh, stepping closer to the staircase. “And I was starting to think you were one of those spoiled little princesses who only speaks when spoken to.”

Her eyes gleam. “I never do what I’m told.”

Of course she doesn’t.

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I should walk away.

But instead, I keep going, stopping just at the foot of the stairs, looking up at her.

She cocks her head, watching me, clearly enjoying herself. “What’s wrong, Vescovi? Am I making you nervous?”

“Nervous?” I let my eyes drag over her, slow enough to make her shift slightly where she stands. “You don’t have that effect on me.”

Her lips twitch. “Shame. Would’ve been fun.”

“I can already tell you’re going to be trouble.”

Her grin is all teeth. “And yet, you’re still standing there.”

I shake my head, looking away for just a second before meeting her eyes again. “Don’t patronize me, Selene.”

She leans forward slightly, lowering her voice like we’re sharing a secret.

“Or what?”

That’s it. That’s the moment.

The second I know she isn’t just trouble.

She's the kind of trouble that gets men killed.

And worse, the kind that makes men want to die smiling.

My lips curve up before I step back. "You'll find out soon enough."

And then I turn away, before I do something stupid. Like stay and beg her to smile at me again.

But as I walk toward the Don's study, I can still feel her eyes on me.

Like she already knows.

Like she already owns me.

Chapter 8

Alessandro

I wait in the rank alleyway, trash cans overflowing beside me. Angelo emerges from the shadows, his footsteps splashing through puddles. I lean against a damp brick wall, one boot kicked up, arms crossed over my chest, watching Angelo light a cigarette with shaking hands when he stops. He's nervous. Good. That means he'll listen.

"This better be worth my time, Vescovi." He adjusts his collar, keeping distance between us.

"Twenty grand to stir up trouble with your Moretti friends." I pull out my own cigarette, lighting it with steady fingers. "Make it look good."

He takes a slow drag, exhaling smoke through his nose. He looks me over, sizing up whether I'm playing him. He should know better. I don't play.

Angelo's lips twist. "You want me to set up an attack on your own shipment? What's your angle?"

"My angle is money in your pocket." I blow my own smoke towards his face. "Unless you'd rather explain to Moretti how you've been feeding me information for months?"

His shoulders stiffen. "You're a bastard, Vescovi."

"And you're running out of time to choose sides." I toss him a thick envelope. "Stir the pot. I'll clean it up."

"The Don trusts you." Angelo thumbs through the cash. "Does this have anything to do with his daughter coming back?"

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I pin him with a look that makes him step back. “Set it up. Tonight. South docks.”

“Your funeral.”

“Make sure they hit the shipment hard,” I say. “Messy. Loud. Make it look real.”

He pockets the money, glancing toward the mouth of the alley like someone might be listening before melting into the shadows.

Moretti’s crew has been circling me for months, waiting for me to turn against the Don. They don’t know I’m going to use them first.

Angelo swallows, nods once. He’ll do it. He wants the cash, and he knows I’ll gut him if he screws me over.

The plan unfolds exactly as intended. Three hours later, I’m directing the unloading when shouts erupt. Gunfire peppers the shipping containers. I dive behind a crate, drawing my piece.

Five Moretti soldiers emerge, faces covered.

Then, the first shot rings out.

I spin, ducking behind a stack of crates as bullets tear through the air. The Moretti crew swarms in from the shadows, knives flashing, boots pounding. It’s chaos—just the way I planned it.

I take the first one out with a bullet to the gut, the second with a blade to the throat. Blood sprays hot against my arm. A knife glances off my ribs, cutting deep. I let out a sharp breath, shoving my attacker back, my own blade driving into his chest. He gurgles, eyes wide, before collapsing at my feet.

Pain burns through my side, but I don't have time to feel it. Moretti's men scatter as my crew retaliates, gunfire echoing against the metal containers. I stagger back, pressing a hand to my wound. Blood seeps through my fingers, soaking my shirt, but the wound isn't fatal. Perfect.

I let the chaos cover my escape, slipping into the shadows. The remaining three retreat, leaving their dead. Let them think they got me. Let the Don believe the threat is real. And let Selene see what she does to me.

Her apartment is in a quiet neighborhood, warm light spilling from the windows, the scent of something sweet lingering in the air. The kind of life I don't belong in. I shouldn't be here. But my feet move anyway, my vision blurring as I try to make sense of my surroundings.

"Goddammit!" I crash into something in the kitchen and let out a sharp yelp. I press a hand to my side as I straighten and take in the décor. Her house is spacious but it's the kitchen I'm most awed by. Everything has been painted a vibrant shade of green and white, like nature spit into the architecture. Mostly, I think it's the pain rocking through my body that keeps me wide awake and assessing. I glance at the watch on my wrist and groan at the time. Almost midnight. Just great!

Now, I'm going to have to explain what I'm doing at Selene's place so late into the night without sounding obsessive.

I stumble forward and crash again into a chair. It scrapes in the silence and maybe I'd have cared more about it if not for the second bout of pain running up from my stomach to my chest. Fuck, I'm bleeding out for real. I need help.

"I'm armed."

I'm shocked that I don't hear the footsteps until it's too late but even then, I'm relieved to hear Selene's voice through the blood and pain.

"And I have a surprisingly great hold on guns. If you move, you're going to be doing so with a bullet in the back of your head."

Despite the pain, I find it funny and badass. "If you put a bullet in the back of my head, then I wouldn't be able to move in the end. Be kind, love."

It takes her a second or two to respond but when she does, her voice is a strangled whisper. "Sandro? Is that you?"

I turn around slowly, hands up in the air, and step out of the shadows. "Hey, Selene."

She gasps again, louder this time, before pressing her right hand to her chest and hitting softly. "Jesus Christ, Sandro. What are you doing at my house at midnight?"

"Bleeding I thought that was obvious," I mutter and take off my jacket. "Sorry about your floor. I think I've got blood all over. I'm dying, princess, don't look so angry."

"I'm not a doctor," she says but as the light fawns across her pale features, I note the concern in her eyes. "And we hate each other. Why would you even think to come over right now? It's stupid."

"Maybe I'm stupid in love with you?"

“If you still have time to be smug and flirty, then maybe you aren’t close to death.”

I let out a sharp groan again and fold into myself for a moment. When I straighten again, she’s closed the kitchen door and is now close enough to touch me.

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“What the hell happened to you?”

“Just a regular...hmm...fucking...day,” I pant just before she reaches over to take my hand in hers. “I’m sure the cut isn’t deep but it hurts as hell and I’m bleeding out like a goddamn—”

“Cassian is here in the shower, so you better keep your voice down.” She’s stern in the way she says this so I snap out of it and swallow down the pain as best as I can. To be honest, I don’t know why I came here either. All I know for sure is that I’d been consumed with the grave need to be by her side.

“Come here, take a seat. We need to get the bleeding under control.”

She hurries to a cupboard, opens it and brings out her first aid box. I take a seat on a stool by the island and watch her. Even at midnight, Selene oozes sex. She’s dressed in a blue, silky nightdress that falls just over her thighs. I can see the longstretch of legs and creamy skin. I can see the curves of her hips and that perfect, rounded ass. I can almost taste her, a fact that has me freefalling into a daydream where she’s still mine and there’s not a chance in the whole fucking world she’s ever going to look at someone else.

Then she turns and tosses me a clean towel. “Keep that pressed on the wound. Hold it firmly there. We can’t have you bleeding out here.”

I press the towel to the cut and hold. The pain slices through me again and I groan, loudly, head bent low. She puts the box on the island and hurries to stand in front of me.

“Let’s see the cut, Sandro.”

I take off the towel and lean back so she can assess it. Her eyes widen when she does.

“What the hell happened? This is bad.”

“I’ve had worse happen.”

“You’re gonna get yourself killed at this rate.”

I shake my head at her, a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. “What? Don’t tell me you’re starting to care for me.”

She hits my shoulder and I groan, playfully but then wince once I start to feel lightheaded. “You’re lucky I took some courses.”

“Are they going to be enough to save me, huh, doc?”

She sneers. “Don’t be so dramatic. You should have asked that question before you broke into my house with my fiancé in the next room. If he finds you here, you’re gonna be dead for sure.”

“Then, we’ll just have to be careful, right?”

“Tell that to yourself, ass.” She scrubs her hands in the kitchen sink before taking a pair of gloves from the cabinet.

“You really got to be so serious?” I ask, not sure I’m going to be awake much longer.

“They’re rubber gloves and cheap but they’re the best you’ve got right now.” She takes a chair next to where I am and slumps down with a sigh. “Besides, I’m not going to risk you getting an infection in the middle of my kitchen.”

Usually I'd drop some retort but I don't. When she tugs my shirt upward to get a better view, I hiss out a curse. "You're killing me here, baby."

"Don't distract me, Sandro. I'm sure you don't want to die right here like this."

I shut my eyes for a second and almost forget to peel them open. "Ah, wouldn't it be nice? Dying in your arms would be so fucking worthwhile, Selene."

She uses gauze to clean off the blood around the cut and I wince, biting down to avoid screaming out. "I don't have a local anaesthesia here and you'd need one if you're gonna want this cut stitched—"

"Stitch it!" I growl.

"What? No way. It's going to hurt like hell. I'm going to be sewing you up—"

"Just do it."

"Fine!"

She starts the sewing almost immediately and even though I know she's upset, her hands are careful, the stitches neat. A few minutes of that and she finally looks up at me with a satisfied smile. "You didn't die, so you can quit being dramatic."

"It got you to do this for me, didn't it?"

She slaps a bandage over the stitches and stands to clear the space. With everything back where they should be, she tears off the gloves, stuffs them in the kitchen bin and washes off her hands under the faucet a second time.

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“Next time, you won’t be so lucky, Sandro.”

It’s ominous, the way she says it, but again, I’ve been through worse so this doesn’t move me. Except, with the danger out of the way and the pain a little bit manageable, I see all that she is and I lose control.

“Come here...”

“You should go now.”

“Selene...”

She walks to me and raises a hand sharply. At first, I think she’s going to hit me but then it stays steadfast on my cheek. Without speaking, she gently caresses my face, eyes dark and cloudy with something I oddly recognize as desire.

“If you keep touching me like that, I’m gonna have to take you right here.”

When her trembling fingers drift downward to my mouth, I suck them into my mouth. It’s a dare. A filthy, twisted dare, and I’m hard as fuck already, bleeding or not.

“Sandro...” she breathes, voice cracking with need, and doesn’t think to pull away.

I push her back against the island, her ass hitting the edge, and she climbs on it like she’s been waiting for me to ruin her. I spread her legs wide open in front of me and swallow hard, my throat dry with raw, animal hunger.

“I’ve been thinking about your body for so fucking long. Know how many times I’ve had to stroke my cock raw, picturing you spread out like this? Fuck it—let me have you... I need to be buried balls-deep inside your tight little cunt right now.”

“We...we...can’t...” she stammers, but her thighs tremble, parting wider, betraying every weak word.

I can’t wait anymore. The animalistic urgency to fuck this woman before me collides into me with such feral speed it feels like I’m possessed. I rip her flimsy dress off her body in one savage pull, the fabric tearing under my hands, and run a rough finger over her naked, hardened nipples. They’re begging for me, desperately. I cup her heavy tits in my hands and squeeze hard, kneading them like I own her. Her head lolls back, a slutty littlemoan slipping out as my hands claim her body, and I take that as my green light to drop my head down and suck her nipples into my mouth, biting just enough to make her squirm.

“Ooh...Sandro...we can’t,” she gasps, writhing beneath me aggressively. “I’m not going to have sex with you...please stop.”

But her protests are bullshit, and we both know it. There’s nothing we can do to stop this sick, delirious obsession consuming us both. I drag a greedy hand to the front of her soaked panties and flick the damp fabric aside, exposing her dripping pussy. She trembles in my arms, fighting me off with weak little pushes, but I’m too far gone to care. It’s a constant push and pull between us, this twisted dance of want and denial, but it happens, and I don’t stop.

“I told you, the more time it took for me to have you, the rougher I’d be—fuck, I warned you I’d wreck you,” I snarl, my voice thick with lust.

“Please stop...” she whimpers, but her hands fist in the front of my shirt, drawing me closer, and her legs spread wider, positioning my throbbing cock right against the

slick heat of her pussy. I know a part of her wants to push me off, but there's a bigger, darker part that's screaming for me, that knows she's mine, that our fucked up chemistry is a live wire ready to burn us both alive.

"I want you now!" I growl into the tangled fall of her hair before grinding my body into hers, my erection pressing against her through my pants. "I want to taste every goddamn inch of your skin, lick the sweat off your thighs, but we don't have time, so I'm just gonna fuck you senseless instead."

"I'm engaged," she whispers, voice limp and pathetic. "No...Sandro..."

I undo my belt with a vicious yank, pull out my pulsing cock, and stroke it right in front of her, letting her see how fucking hard she makes me. Pre-cum glistens on the tip, and I smear it over my length, jerking myself harder as her lips part, her eyes locked on me like she's starving for it.

I push her panties aside then and swipe one finger through her drenched folds, groaning at how wet she is. She jerks against me, nails clawing into my shoulders, and I shove another finger inside her, pumping in and out, obsessed with how her pussy clenches around me, slick and dripping, begging for more.

"Deny it all you want, but your cunt's weeping for me. You're mine, not his, say it, Selene, fucking say it!"

"I can't." She's breathing hard, shivering like she's about to break, but she chokes out, "Oh, God, this feels so...good...and so...bad."

"Give in," I growl, finger-fucking her faster, my thumb circling her clit. "You can hate me all you want with my hands tearing you apart, but let me have you here, now, because I need it. I need you, you little tease. I'm gonna split you open and make you scream."

“Stop—Cassian’s—”

I cut her off with a brutal thrust, driving my cock into her so hard she cries out, her voice muffled against my shoulder as I pound into her with a force that’s pure, unhinged madness.

“Ah, you’re so fucking tight...so goddamn good...your pussy’s sucking me in like it’s starved.”

Selene wraps her legs around my hips and holds me tighter, locking me into her dripping heat like she’s claiming me back. “Say that again, please...” she whispers, voice shaky and needy. “Tell me I make you feel good...”

“I like it when you order me around,” I rasp, my breath hot against her ear. “You’re fucking beautiful, my filthy little goddess. You make me feel...wonderful. Your tight pussy is like heaven, sucking me dry, and I’m gonna ruin it for anyone else.”

“Mm, that’s...oh, right there...yes...oh my God...” she moans, her hips bucking up to meet my brutal thrusts, her nails raking down my back like she wants to peel me open.

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I pull out just to plunge into her again and again, each thrust harder, deeper, rattling the goddamn island beneath us. “Do you even know what you do to me?” I snarl, my voice cracking with desperation. “You’ve got me so fucked up, I’d bleed out just to feel you clench around me like this.”

“Sandro...” she whimpers my name like a prayer, her eyes glazed with lust and shame, and it drives me wild.

“Fuck—” I pound her harder, burying myself so deep she cries out, a raw, slutty sound she can’t hold back. She doesn’t let me slow down, her legs tightening, pulling me in like she’s as lost in this sickness as I am. I grunt with every thrust, my balls slapping against her, the need for release clawing at me, feral and desperate.

She breaks out with a sharp, “I’m going to come. Please...please don’t stop...” Her voice is a wrecked plea, and it’s music to my fucked up soul.

I shove a hand between us and rub her swollen clit with my thumb, rough and relentless, while still driving my cock into her soaked pussy. “Come for me, you dirty little slut,” I growl. “Scream my name while I fuck you, let him hear who owns you.” It sends her crashing over the edge, her body convulsing as she comes hard in my arms, whimpering and trembling, her juices coating me. And I lose it too, spilling inside her with a guttural roar, pumping every drop into her tight heat to mark her as mine, to stain her so deep she’ll never wash me out.

Then, he calls her. Cassian. And she freezes, her breath hitching like a deer caught in a trap. “He’s coming down...”

I pull out of her, my cock still twitching, dripping with her and me, and pull my pants up, rearranging myself. She scrambles to do the same, her torn dress hanging off her like a fucked out rag, a gaping rip exposing her flushed skin. She presses her palm over it, trying to hide the evidence of our sin, but her thighs are slick with my cum, her nipples still hard under the shredded silk.

I go out through the window as I'd come, the cold air hitting my sweat-drenched skin. Cassian may have his ring on her finger, but now I know she's addicted to me, to the way I break her apart.

I leave her with a mark, my seed leaking out of her, my scent clinging to her skin, my name burned into her soul. I leave her with the knowledge that she's all mine, no matter what she tells herself or him. She's fucked for me, and I'm fucked for her, and this twisted, rotten thing between us is only getting started.

The drive home pounds with victory and something darker. Blood still seeps through my hastily bandaged side. Every throb reminds me of her fingers on my skin, her teeth in her lip as she tried to stay quiet.

My phone buzzes. Angelo.

"It's done," he says. "But Moretti's asking questions. They didn't authorize that hit."

"Let them ask." I pull into my garage, knuckles white on the wheel. "Just keep your mouth shut."

"And when the Don finds out?"

"He won't." Unless I want him to. "Get your story straight, you saw nothing."

I end the call, climbing the stairs to my penthouse. The wound pulls with each step. In my bathroom, I examine the damage in harsh fluorescent light. The cut runs four inches along my ribs, deep enough to scar, shallow enough to heal. Worth it.

My phone chimes with a text. Selene.

You're an asshole. I had to tell Cassian I spilled wine on my dress so I changed.

I type back: Bet you're still wet.

Fuck you.

Again? So soon?

She doesn't respond, but I picture her face flushing, thighs pressing together. The memory of her heat around me makes my hands itch to possess her again.

A shower washes away blood and grime. I dress the wound properly, mind racing through the next steps. The Moretti crew will be furious about their dead men. Good. Let them come. Every threat brings me closer to being Selene's only safety.

My phone rings again—the Don this time.

“Someone hit our shipment,” I report before he can speak. “Moretti's crew. We lost two of theirs.”

“Any of ours hurt?”

“Just me. Knife wound. Nothing serious.” I keep my voice neutral. “Want me to handle it?”

“No.” Papers shuffle on his end. “I’ll send a message myself. Rest up, son. We’ll need you ready.”

Son. The word tastes like ash. I think of Selene’s father calling me that while I fuck his daughter behind his back. While I plot to take everything he owns.

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“Of course.” I end the call, pouring myself whiskey.

The amber liquid burns less than the guilt trying to surface. I didn’t expect her return to complicate things. The Moretti alliance was supposed to be my key to power, now it’s my weapon to win her. To keep her.

My phone buzzes one last time. Selene again.

Did you really get attacked or was this another of your tricks?

Smart girl. I consider lying, but she deserves better.

Does it matter? You still took care of me and came all over my dick.

Her response is immediate: I hate you.

No. You hate that you want me.

She goes silent again. I finish my drink, satisfaction warming my veins. The wound throbs in time with my pulse, a reminder of what I’ll sacrifice to possess her completely.

Let the Moretti crew rage. Let the Don trust me. Let Cassian play house with what’s mine. I’ll burn it all down to claim her, piece by bloody piece.

I touch the bandage, feeling Selene’s phantom fingers there instead. Soon, she’ll understand that some obsessions are worth destroying everything for.

Chapter 9

Selene

Ten years ago.

The compound is too quiet tonight.

I should be in my room, pretending to be the obedient daughter Don Marconi expects me to be. But I'm not. Instead, I'm outside, in the dimly lit courtyard behind the estate, gallivanting by the ivy-covered walls.

Waiting.

I tell myself I'm out here because I can't sleep, because the house feels suffocating, because I need air. But I know better.

I'm waiting for him.

Ever since Alessandro Vescovi walked into my father's house three weeks ago, everything has felt different.

Not that I'll admit it.

I don't like him, not really. He's cocky, infuriatingly calm, and has this way of looking at me like he already knows my secrets before I do. I should hate him for it.

But I don't.

I can't.

Not when he's the only person in this godforsaken house who doesn't treat me like a delicate little thing meant to be hidden away and paraded when convenient. Not when I catch him watching me when he thinks I'm not looking, those cold, assessing eyes of his heating my skin in ways I don't want to think about.

And definitely not when I hear the gravel crunch softly behind me, followed by his deep voice, so smooth and laced with something I can't name.

"You're going to get caught one of these days, little Marconi."

I don't turn.

Instead, I exhale, slowly, like I wasn't just shivering at the sound of his voice. "And you're going to get yourself killed one of these days, Vescovi."

A quiet chuckle. "Probably."

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He steps beside me, close enough that I catch the scent of him—smoke, leather, something that shouldn't make my stomach twist the way it does.

I shift slightly, finally glancing at him. “You do realize that if anyone sees us alone like this, my father won't just be mad, right?”

He cocks his head, amused. “Oh? What would he do?”

I press my lips together. “He'd have you kneeling in that study of his before sunrise, with a gun to your head. And you know it.”

Sandro tilts his head toward the house behind us. “You think he'd really kill me?”

I don't answer right away.

Because yes, I do.

My father is many things, but sentimental is not one of them. Sandro might have been taken in because his father used to be very close to mine, but my father doesn't see him as a son. He sees him as a weapon. A valuable, trained, loyal soldier.

And if there's one thing my father does not tolerate, it's disloyalty.

“He'd kill you if he thought you were touching something that didn't belong to you,” I say finally, keeping my voice even.

Sandro hums, his eyes gleaming with something wicked. “You?”

A slow, measured nod.

Me.

Because to my father, that's all I am, something to be owned. To be used. My future isn't mine. My body isn't mine. I'm not even a person to him, I'm a pawn. A bargaining chip he'll marry off to some powerful ally when it suits him.

And Sandro?

Sandro is not an ally.

He's a stray dog my father has trained into a weapon. And weapons don't get to touch the Don's property.

Which means this—us, whatever this is, whatever this could be—is not just forbidden.

It's a death sentence.

Sandro watches me, eyes obscure. And then, he steps closer.

“You sure about that?” he murmurs.

My pulse jumps. “About what?”

“That I'd be the one getting killed.”

Something dark laces his voice. Like he's not afraid of my father. Like if Don Marconi ever came for him, he wouldn't kneel.

He'd burn the whole fucking house down first.

I should be scared of that and run.

But instead, I lock onto his icy blue eyes, and for the first time in my life, I feel alive, like stepping off the edge, diving headfirst into the freezing depths, daring the fall.

“Shouldn't you be inside?” he asks.

I scoff, kicking at a loose stone near my foot. “Shouldn't you?”

He hums, tilting his head slightly, studying me. I can feel it, the weight of his stare, the way his presence alone is too much.

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“I don’t like being locked in,” he murmurs.

Something about the way he says it makes me pause.

“You say that like you know how it feels.”

His gaze flicks over me then, hard to read. But there’s a shift, subtle but there, like I’ve pressed against a wound he thought was buried too deep to find.

For a second, I think he’s going to ignore the question. But then, he surprises me.

“I was ten when I learned what it meant to be alone,” he says quietly. “My parents died in a fire. My father was a soldier under Moretti’s crew. Your father’s biggest rival now. Back then, they were equals. Someone set the house ablaze to send a message and start this war.”

A chill creeps over my skin.

I’ve heard the story before. And how Don Marconi took in his best friend’s son, raised him like family. But no one ever talks about what came before. About what he remembers.

I angle myself toward him. “Did you see it happen?”

His jaw ticks. When he speaks, his voice is flat, distant. “I smelled the smoke before I saw the flames. I hid in a crawlspace under the stairs. I heard them scream but I couldn’t do anything.”

A lump forms in my throat. I don't move.

He isn't just telling me a story. He's pulling me into it.

The feeling of being trapped with smoke and heat pressing in. The screams. A child, curled into a space too small, too dark, breathing in death, listening as everything he knew burned to ash around him.

And he survived.

I don't know why I reach for him, but I do. My fingers brush his wrist, just a whisper of contact.

His eyes snap to mine, sharp first and then surprised.

I don't pull away.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

Something unreadable flashes across his face, but he doesn't pull away. He doesn't move or speak. He just watches me, his eyes dipping to my lips for a fraction of a second before locking back onto my eyes.

I swallow hard.

There's something between us now. Something we both felt the first time we met.

It's not just the past. Or our shitty interconnected lives.

Something else. Something we don't have words for yet.

This—whatever this is—it's dangerous.

We aren't supposed to be standing here like this, close enough that I can feel the heat radiating off of him. We aren't supposed to be anything.

He's my father's godson, the closest thing to a brother I'm supposed to have.

But we are not family.

Not even close.

And for the first time in my life, I want to cross a line.

I tilt my chin up slightly. "You're not supposed to be out here with me."

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His lips twitch, something salacious curling at the corners. “I know.”

I should walk away, or say something cutting, roll my eyes, pretend I don’t feel like my skin is on fire just from standing near him.

But I don’t.

Instead, I say, “I hate this place.”

His brows lift slightly. “Your house?”

“My prison.” I exhale sharply. “My father watches my every move. I can’t step outside without a guard. I can’t speak to a man without it being considered a strategy. And I certainly can’t be alone in the courtyard in the middle of the night with someone like you.”

He grins. “Someone like me?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You know exactly what I mean.”

His slow-spreading smile deepens, and God help me, it’s unfair how good he looks when he does that. “I do. And yet, you’re still standing here.” Throwing my words back at me. Classic, Vescovi.

I scowl. “I like defying my father.”

“Careful, little Marconi.” He steps closer, dropping his voice even lower. “You say

that too many times, you might actually mean it.”

Something shifts in the air between us.

The playful tension melts into something hotter, heavier. My breath catches.

His eyes drop to my mouth.

Slowly.

My pulse pounds. I’m not supposed to want this. To want him.

But I do.

God help me, I do.

His hand lifts, fingers skimming my jaw, tilting my chin up just slightly. Not forcing. Just testing.

I don’t pull away.

That’s all the confirmation he needs.

He leans in, gently, like he’s giving me a chance to stop him.

I don’t.

And then his lips brush against mine.

Soft at first, barely there, like he’s waiting for me to take the lead.

So I do.

I press forward, my hands curling into his shirt, tugging slightly. A quiet groan rumbles in his chest, and then his hands are on me, one at my waist, the other sliding into my hair, fingers tangling, tilting my head so he can kiss me deeper.

I feel him.

Not just the heat of his body, not just the way he tastes like something dark and forbidden, but the weight of it.

The way he's been holding back.

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The way he's wanted this as much as I have.

And the way he's done fighting it.

When he pulls back, my lips are swollen, my breath ragged. His thumb brushes my bottom lip, eyes hooded, dark.

"I should walk away and make sure this doesn't happen again," he mutters.

I grip his wrist, holding him there. "But you won't."

A sinister curve of his lips. "No," he murmurs. "I won't."

We both know what this means.

We both know the consequences.

But in this moment, with the taste of his mouth still on mine and my father's house standing tall behind me, I don't care.

Let my father go to hell.

Let the whole damn world follow.

Because Alessandro Vescovi just kissed me.

And I'm never going to be the same.

Chapter 10

Alessandro

I lean back in my leather chair, the weight of the day pressing down as I review the latest security footage from Cassian's gallery. The shutters come down for the last time, and there's a satisfaction in watching what little he has built here crumble. Yet behind that, a pang of something unsettling, almost like regret. This isn't my first hostile takeover, but there's something different about this one.

I pour another drink as I stand and watch lightning illuminate the city skyline from my home office. It is probably going to rain tonight.

My financial advisor enters with his usual precision and his tablet in hand. The financial report makes me smile as I flip through—Cassian's complete destruction laid out in neat columns and percentages.

"The anonymous tip worked perfectly," Marcus says, adjusting his tie. "His biggest investor pulled out this morning. The others will follow."

"Numbers?"

"Gallery's value dropped 60% overnight. Total losses approaching two million. No bank will touch him now."

"Good. Make sure he doesn't secure any outside funding."

I can't help but replay the flashbacks of orchestrating this downfall. It was seamless, really. Buying the gallery through shell companies, planting those rumors of money laundering and stolen art among Florence's elites. I knew it would cause a scandal that Cassian couldn't outrun.

I continue sifting through the tablet, sifting through eviction notices, each one bearing my signature. I imagine the look on Cassian's face when he receives that final blow. There's a sense of pride, yet something about this victory tastes different, bitter, perhaps.

I dismiss Marcus with a nod, settling back at my desk. The contract waiting there is the one meant for Selene, and it feels heavier than the stack of papers it really is. My phone vibrates, pulling me out of my reverie.

"What?" I snap.

"Sir." It's James again. This has to be his sixth call today. I put him in charge of monitoring the ins and outs of that gallery. "She just entered the building. Taking the elevator to Cassian's temporary office."

Of course she is. I stand, straightening my cuffs. "Keep your eyes peeled."

The walk to the home gym takes exactly forty-seven steps. I count them, using the rhythm to steady my thoughts. A good five hours sweating out my frustration. Then I take a shower and get dressed before retreating back to the office. I replay the feeds, which show Cassian explaining everything to Selene, her face crumpling as reality sets in.

Victor appears beside me, his reflection ghosting across the monitors. "The eviction notice is ready for delivery tomorrow morning."

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“Good.”

“Sir...” My legal aid hesitates. In all the years he has been working for me, he’s never hesitated. “Are you certain about this approach?”

I turn, fixing him with a look that makes him step back. “Problem?”

“No, sir. Just... unprecedented.”

He’s right. This is different. Personal. The usual satisfaction of crushing an opponent feels hollow. I watch Selene comfort Cassian, her hand on his shoulder, and something burns in my chest.

“Leave,” I tell Victor. Once alone, I pull up the gallery’s original purchase documents. Every shell company, every false trail, every piece of leverage, perfect in its execution.

A few minutes later, rain is pelting against windows forty-seven floors up. Thunder cracks again as my office door opens.

I stand, grabbing a drink from the bar, waiting for her to say something. It isn’t long before Selene speaks up, cheeks flushed with fury. Her eyes lock on mine, my gaze moving over her soaked form and for a moment, I almost wish I felt nothing at all.

“You’re despicable.” Her voice shakes with rage as she closes the distance between us.

I take a slow sip. “I prefer practical.”

Her fingers dig into her palms, her shoulders rigid. “You broke my heart, Sandro. You made damn sure I knew I meant nothing to you. So why? Why the hell are you doing all of this to a man who has done nothing but pick up the trash you dumped? Why the hell are you doing this to him?”

I set my glass down. “Because I can.”

“That’s not an answer.”

I turn fully toward her, letting her see just how little I care about her outrage. “I’m not in the habit of explaining myself.”

“Then let me make it simple.” Her breath is uneven, her chest rising fast. “What do you want?”

I take my time. Let her stew in the silence. Then, finally— “He keeps his gallery. His reputation stays intact. But I get something in return.”

She swallows hard. “What?”

I step closer. “You.”

The word lands like a strike. Her whole body locks up, disbelief flashing in her eyes before something deeper creeps in.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I am.” I let my voice dip, just enough to remind her exactly how serious I was two weeks ago in her kitchen with her back against the counter, my hand around her

throat, and Cassian just upstairs. As I fucked her in her own kitchen.

The moment hits her too and I see it in the way her lips part, in the sharp inhale she tries to smother.

Finally, she lets out a bitter laugh. “Do you even hear yourself? I’m engaged. You talk like Cassian and I are nothing. Like I can just—”

“Yet you let me fuck you while he was upstairs.”

She exhales sharply. “Stop that.”

“No.”

“For Chrissakes. Why now, Sandro?” Her voice is quieter, but it cuts just as deep. “You never wanted to claim me out loud before. You hid what we were. You threw me away like I was nothing. So why the hell are you suddenly bold enough to do this now? What if my father hears about this?”

I let the silence stretch.

Then, finally— “Because I’m not answering to your father anymore.”

Her breath hitches.

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I step closer, forcing her to meet my eyes. “Because you were never safe, Selene. Because the second you came back, you put yourself in his crosshairs all over again.”

Confusion appears. “What are you talking about?”

I could tell her. That she’s a threat to the man she still calls her father. That she’s walking around with a target on her back.

But I don’t.

Instead, I lean in and lower my voice. “Think about it, Selene. Cassian keeps everything. And all it will cost is you.”

The air between us tightens, thick with everything we haven’t said. The storm outside howls against the glass, but I don’t move. Neither does she.

I watch her, waiting for her decision.

As she stands in front of me, I feel that unfamiliar pang of guilt again. It’s a weakness, but I brush it aside. My desire for control outweighs all else, yet her presence complicates everything. Just as I’ve orchestrated every move in this game, I need to see this through.

I slide the contract across my desk. “Read it.”

She doesn’t move. “Just tell me.”

“One year. You live here, work for me, belong to me completely. In exchange, Cassian keeps everything.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then watch me destroy everything he has. Your choice.”

She takes three steps forward, picks up the contract. “That doesn’t even make sense... Cassian and I are due to marry in a few months. How am I supposed to live with you?”

“You aren’t going to marry him as quickly as you thought. Delay the wedding till this is done.”

“And fuck you in between that time, right?”

I raise my glass to her and smile wickedly. “Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“You’ve planned this from the start, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

Her fingers tremble, but she forces them into a fist. “Why?”

I should say power, control, victory, really those are the easy answers. But none of them are true.

So I say the real one. “Because I had to know if you’d choose him or yourself.”

Lightning flashes, catching the tears she won’t let fall.

“You are such a prick.”

I step closer. “I know.”

She picks up the contract, turning toward the door. “I’ll have my answer tomorrow.”

I let her go. “Thirty days, Selene. That’s all he has.”

The thunder crashes just as she marches out of my office. The sound reverberates through the room, but nothing drowns out the satisfaction of a plan well-executed, even if a part of me resents what it’s cost.

Selene needs time to process, to sit with the decision she never wanted to make. But it doesn’t matter. She’s already in.

By the time she reaches Cassian, the eviction notice will have arrived. His gallery, his pride, and his entire world would be ripped out from under him.

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Cassian will fight it. He'll make his calls, try to find a way out. He won't.

Because the ground beneath him already belongs to me.

And now, so does Selene.

I've won, exactly as planned. So why does victory feel like defeat?

Chapter 11

Selene

I wake with the sheets tangled around my legs. And sweat cooling against my skin. The scent of him still clings to me, no matter how many times I tell myself it's gone. Sandro lingers like a haunting phantom, pressing against my ribs, curling around my throat. My stomach twists. I should get up.

Instead, I close my eyes. Just for a second.

The sounds of the apartment settle around me, from the scrape of a spatula to the clink of plates and the low hum of Cassian singing under his breath in the kitchen. I inhale. It should be comforting. It used to be comforting. Now it chokes me with something sharp and bitter.

I swallow it down and force myself up. The sheets slip away, and I push my hair from my face, fingers trembling. The moment my feet hit the floor, I regret it.

I force myself forward anyway.

Cassian looks up as I enter the kitchen. A warm smile breaks across his face, bright and easy, like he doesn't see the cracks. Or maybe he does and chooses to pretend they don't exist. He stands over the stove, flipping eggs, barefoot, wearing the old t-shirt I love. The one I used to steal.

He also hasn't been sleeping.

I see because I lie next to him every night and it is like I can hear everything he is thinking out loud. I see it in the way his smiles don't reach his eyes anymore.

I swallow the lump in my throat.

"You're up," he says, tone light. "Thought I'd let you sleep in. Made breakfast."

"Thanks." My voice scrapes against my throat. I reach for a glass of water instead of looking at him.

"You're quiet."

I sip my water. Swallow. Try to steady my hands. "Bad dreams."

His eyes move to mine. "Something like that?"

I nod. He studies me for a long moment before setting the spatula down and stepping closer. "Selene."

I exhale slowly. "Don't."

His jaw tenses. "I told you not to worry about me. I have it under control."

I squeeze my fingers around the glass. “How could I not worry? Because of Sandro’s interference, now you have a debt to pay wavering over your head. And you have less than a month to pay.”

Cassian’s throat bobs. He looks away for a second, rubbing the back of his neck before facing me again. “I just want you to trust me.”

I don’t hear the rest of what Cassian says. Something about lawyers. About options.

Options. Like we have any.

Alessandro doesn’t give options. He takes. He crushes.

And he’s doing it now.

“Selene?”

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Cassian's voice pulls me back. His brow is furrowed, concern tightening his features. I force myself to nod, to breathe.

But I don't know if I still can. I set the glass down carefully, afraid of shattering it. "Cassian..."

He forces a smile, brushing a kiss against my forehead before pulling back. "Hey, we should forget about all of this. We have the dress fitting soon. I booked the appointment."

I hesitate. "Right."

"I was going to surprise you, but—" he scratches his jaw, his voice light, almost like he's teasing, "I can't afford to fly my parents in for the wedding."

I snap my head up. "What?"

He shrugs, feigning nonchalance. "They wanted to come, but I'd rather put that money toward getting you the dress you deserve."

A pit opens in my stomach. He doesn't say it, but I know what it means. He's sacrificing for me.

And I know what I have to do.

My hands curl into fists. I hate it. Hate that I already made my choice before I walked into this kitchen. Hate that I knew it the second I walked into Sandro's office last

night, as he told me exactly how he would break me. How I would break Cassian. Hate that it's working.

"I need to go out for a bit with Gia. Don't wait up," I say quietly.

Cassian nods understandingly, without questioning why I'm suddenly meeting my old friend Gia, especially after I'd previously told him of our falling out before I left Florence. He's always been like that—never pressing when unsure. And not I'm certain he is assuming that Gia and I have reconciled. His concern is always for my happiness, evident in every thoughtful gesture. It hurts, knowing he cares when he shouldn't. It breaks my heart in ways I can barely comprehend.

I turn before he can see the truth on my face.

Sandro's penthouse is exactly how I remember it. Too much. Too clean. Too perfectly curated to look effortless.

I step inside, pulse thudding in my throat. I hate that I'm here. I hate that I came anyway.

"Selene?"

"Hello, Sandro."

His eyes narrow. "How did you get past my passcode?"

I give a small, knowing smile. "Like I'd ever forget your birthday. Even if you pretend it doesn't matter, it's stuck in my memory."

I watch with bated breath as a shadowy figure rises from the darkness. He's tall but delightfully so and when he straightens, I feel my toes curl. He steps forward, one hand held at a reasonable distance away from his face and the other kept suspiciously close to his side. I take him all in at once. The white T shirt stretches evenly against his very muscular chest, looking like he never takes it off. It's clean so it's not really about that. It's in how it fits him so well, how it seems to have been made just for him. He pairs this with jeans that hang low on his waist, clinging to his hips like a fucking invitation. Tonight, in the cool stillness of his house, he looks impossibly delicious—dangerous, edible, a predator I want to sink my teeth into and let devour me whole.

“How are you here right now?” he asks. His tone is casual and calm and even though there's still a tinge of surprise in them, he sounds more curious, frighteningly so, like he's already calculating how to pin me down and take me.

I shrug off my jacket, letting it slide off slowly, a tease I know he'll catch, and toss it on his couch. “What? You didn't think you were the only one capable of breaking into a house, did you?”

“Ah.” He rakes a hand through his hair as he regards me carefully, eyes glinting with something dark and hungry. “You should be thankful I didn't shoot you on sight. Most people usually avoid breaking into my place.”

“They're not me.”

“I see.” That's the only thing he says before stopping in front of me. I have to strain my neck to catch the look in his eyes. He's impressed. That's the look he gives me even as he tries to hide it by curving his mouth to a frown—a shitty mask for the lust pooling in his eyes. “I don't suppose you're here to check out the architecture, so what are you doing here?”

I spread my arms out, letting him drink me in. “Well, what do you think?”

I don’t know if I’m dressed inappropriately for the occasion. Sandro has shown, every single time, that he wants me back in his bed, that he craves me there, sprawled out, helpless under him. He leverages the power he has over me and has me falling at his knees every single time, a puppet to his twisted game. The sex had been a brute result of that power, but today, at home, I decided I needed to get that power back, to make my own choices and decisions without having to follow him like some lost dog. Tonight is about taking the power—ripping it from his hands and making him beg for once.

I’m dressed in a tight wrap dress, the color of which I hope brings out my eyes well enough, screamingfuck mein every shade. I’d taken extra time on my hair to make it softer and cool and now it sits framing my face and neck, brushing my skin like a whispered promise. The dress is low cut so my tits spill out just enough to make him twitch, but Sandro doesn’t quite acknowledge this. Instead, he gives me a long look, one infused with a kind of indifference that’s staggering, a lie so blatant it’s almost cruel.

“You’re here for a reason,” he murmurs. “Speak.”

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I clench my fists.

“I need you to fix this,” I grit out.

A side of his lips curves up. “Fix what?”

“You know what,” I snap. “The gallery. Cassian. Everything you’ve done.”

He exhales, dragging his eyes over me like he’s memorizing every inch of my destruction.

Then he leans in. “And what will you give me in return?”

My breath catches. I knew this was coming. I hate that my body reacts before my brain does.

“I can’t do a year, but I can give you a month,” I whisper.

He shakes his head. “That’s not going to work for me. One month isn’t enough.”

“Please, Sandro. Just leave us alone. Leave Cassian alone. You don’t even want me, you just enjoy breaking people, bending them until they snap. So here I am, as you asked, giving you a month. That’s all I have to give. All I will ever give.”

And then it will be over. Cassian and I can go back to our lives. Back to normal. Away from my father. Away from Sandro. Away from all of this. At least, that’s what I tell myself—over and over—like a mantra I’m afraid to stop repeating,

because if I do, the doubt might creep in.

Something glints in his eyes, hurt, maybe, but it's gone before I can be sure it was ever there.

“You think I don't care for you?”

He reaches for my face. I pull back.

His eyes darken. “You hate me, don't you?”

I swallow hard. “More than you'll ever know.”

His lips barely graze mine, a whisper of contact before he murmurs—

“Then prove it.”

Then with more force, his hands frame my face, his fingers sliding through my hair, tucking it behind my ears, too gentle, too careful, a contradiction to everything I know he is.

Then he leans in, his breath warm against my skin.

“Say it,” he whispers.

I swallow again. “Say what?”

“That you don't want this.”

I open my mouth but nothing comes out. Because I have come to realize that I can't lie to him. I've never been able to successfully. He reads me like a book.

His fingers trail along my arm, like he's memorizing the shape of my surrender.

"Tell me to leave you alone," he whispers. "Tell me you'll go back to him, pretend none of this ever happened."

I clench my fists. "I—"

No more words come out.

He tilts his head. "That's what I thought."

I hate him. I hate him. But my body doesn't. It never has.

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Alessandro exhales, something dark shining in his eyes. “You’re shaking.”

I am.

Because the second I do this, it’s over. No more pretending. No more fighting. If I touch him now, I’ll never stop.

“Selene,” he murmurs, his fingers brushing my jaw. “I need you to say it.”

The words burn. But they come anyway.

“I want you,” I whisper.

His breath catches. Then he kisses me.

Not like before. Not like destruction. Like possession.

Like I’ve belonged to him since the beginning.

His hands slide into my hair, his body pressing me back against the wall, his lips claiming mine with a hunger that hasn’t dulled in five years.

I don’t fight it. I don’t want to.

His tongue parts my lips, deepening the kiss, dragging me under. My fingers fist in his shirt, pulling him closer, because I need him closer.

I don't care that I shouldn't.

I don't care that this is wrong.

Because nothing has ever felt so right.

His hands find my waist, pulling me flush against him, and I feel him—every sharp, hard part of him, all heat and power and barely restrained control.

“Say it again,” he demands, his mouth tracing my jaw, my throat, my collarbone.

My nails rake down his back. “I want you.”

A groan rips from his chest, rough and wrecked, and then he's lifting me, carrying me to the bed, his weight pressing me into the mattress.

I ought to stop this. But I don't. I won't.

Not tonight.

Because tonight, I don't want to be Cassian's.

I don't want to be anything but his.

“I want to fuck you senseless right now, but I also need you to sit on my face. Either way, that's fucking heaven. See my dilemma? You've got me so hard I can't even think straight.”

Oh lord!

He's got a body of sin and a dirty mouth to go with it and staring back at him, I

realize this is what I've always wanted. To be claimed and owned and given enough power to burn the world to the ground, then fucked into the ashes until I'm nothing but his.

"Is that all you want?" I ask, voice trembling, daring him to break me first.

He caresses my cheeks like it's a fragile flower, like he's afraid his coarse hands might hurt me when, in fact, those hands incite a belly of fire running up my veins and down to the soft bud between my thighs, pulsing and aching for him.

"Take off your clothes," he says. "Right now, Selene. Strip for me, nice and slow, so I can watch every inch of you come undone."

I stare at him, defiance evident, but my hands move anyway.

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He pulls out his phone, turns it on and shows me the picture he'd been looking at before I broke in. "I have a dozen of your pictures from before. The ones you used to send. I saved them all. I look at them every time I have a bad day or a good day." He chuckles but there's no humor in his eyes, just a hollow, obsessive edge.

"I was looking at them just now because I was horny, and I needed release. Jerking off to you like some sick fuck. And now you're here. It's as if I conjured you up by my need. Do you understand what I'm saying? I need to touch you. I need to bury myself in you until I can't tell where I end and you begin."

I undo the wrap and shrug the dress off my body, letting it pool at my feet like a surrender. He hisses.

"You aren't wearing anything underneath? Fuck! You came here bare for me, didn't you?"

"Yes..."

"I want you like this all the time. No panties from now on."

I nod. "You can touch me, if you want." My voice is a dare, a plea, a fucking mess.

There's no hesitation in his hands when his fingers brush the undersides of my breasts, rough and possessive. He fits them in his hands and squeezes, hissing again like he's about to lose it. "You have these perfect tits, Selene, the kind that are hard to look away from, the kind I want to mark up and ruin."

I run my tongue over my lips and bite down, moaning as he rubs his thumb over the hardness of my nipples and twirls, sending jolts straight to my core.

“Your body is beautiful. It’s what I think about, what I stroke myself to every single night since you came back. Picturing you like this, spread out, begging for my cock.”

“Sandro...” My voice cracks, needy and wrecked.

His hands drift to my belly where he draws a circle there. It lights me up, a spark to gasoline. He snakes his fingers downward to my pussy lips where he strokes once, twice, before slipping those fingers back in his mouth, sucking them clean with a groan. His eyes darken considerably, doing something I’m surprisingly proud of, turning him into a beast I’ve unleashed.

“Where’s Cassian?”

I don’t have to think. “Home.”

“And you’re here because you need me more, right?”

“Don’t—”

“I want you to say it. Heaven knows I want to have you right now but I’m not going to unless you tell me what I want to hear. It is all part of the deal. Say it, Selene. Tell me you’re here to get fucked like the dirty little thing you are because I’m better than he could ever be.”

I suck in a breath. This is no show of power, at least not from me. I’d come here to show him he’s not the only one with the cards set right but I think I’ve fallen back into his web, tangled in his filthy threads. Still, he gives it to me straight by asking me to voice out my desires and while I know I shouldn’t, I give in, letting the words spill

like venom.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you, Sandro, and I hate it. I hate that I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you fucking me in my kitchen while there was a chance we could be caught. I hate it and yet...I need to feel that way again. I need you to make me come. I need you to fuck me until I can’t breathe, until I’m nothing but yours.”

I’m breathless when I stop speaking, chest heaving, pussy throbbing.

“Jesus Christ,” he sighs, voice ragged. “You’ll be the death of me, Selene. But fuck if I don’t want to die buried in you.”

But even as he says this, he’s picking me up and carrying me to his room, hands bruising my hips like he’s afraid I’ll vanish. He launches me on the bed and begins to pick apart his clothes one at a time, his fingers working at a quick pace, trembling with need.

Once naked, he climbs onto the mattress, cock hard and leaking, and trails kisses around my ankle, a deceptively tender start.

His cock bounces up the insides of my thighs as he wedges himself between my legs, positioning his frame to take me in, to claim me whole.

“Look at me,” he drawls, voice thick with command.

I do. I look deep into his eyes just to see the fire there, where he holds me deep. The vulnerability there turns me inside out—raw, jagged, a man unmade. It’s the first time I’m seeing him so torn, so unable to hold back and so desperate that my body immediately surrenders to him, wet and willing.

“You feel good. I love when you look at me slide in and out of you. Look at what you do to me...fuck, you’ve got me obsessed, Selene. I’m fucking ruined for you.”

I drip for him, soaked and shameless. Blood rushes up my body to my head and stays. I’m lightheaded and drowning in how much I want him, so I turn to my side and bend my leg at the knee, opening myself up like a fucking offering.

“Take me, Sandro. Please, please, please...fuck me until I break.”

He strokes his cock with his hand, eyes never leaving mine, before guiding his erection to my pussy. He doesn’t slide in fully but gives me the tip, just enough for me to feel like I might die if he doesn’t fuck me, a cruel tease that has me whimpering. He slides between my slick folds, wetting his erection with my juices and making me tremble against the sheets.

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“I don’t think I could ever get enough of this...of you...” he groans, voice cracking with want. He probes a finger between the lips of my sex and artfully massages my clit until all the power disappears from my bones, from my mind and from my soul, leaving me a panting, desperate mess. “You turn me into something of an animal. I want to fucking devour you, Selene.”

“Sandro...stop teasing me and fuck me, God damn it. I need it—need you—now.”

He drops his head to my breasts, sucking my nipples one at a time, roughly, like he wants to pull them off. He strokes, twirls and licks until there’s nothing left inside of me but the desire to accommodate him, to die with him, impaled on his cock, lost in his filth.

And that’s when he thrusts in. I let out a sharp gasp as he hits that delicious spot and Sandro stops. He doesn’t slide out or move, just stays inside of me like that, hands in my hair, cock pulsing like it owns me.

“Sandro?” I feel him throb inside me.

“Hmmm?”

“What happened?”

He shakes his head, breath shaky. “If I move inside of you right now, I’m afraid I’m going to come so fast. Give me a minute, baby. Let me feel you clench around me first. You’re so fucking tight, it’s killing me.”

I swallow hard, pulsing with a need as he settles inside my wet pussy, stretching me, filling me. And then finally, finally—

He slides deeper into me until I can feel him nearly hitting my core, a brutal, delicious invasion. He shifts his weight and grinds and my head falls back, mouth open in a silent scream. The impact is like a car hitting a brick wall and I feel it everywhere—shattering me, remaking me.

“Mmm...yeah...just like that...fuck me harder, Sandro...”

He thrusts in and out of me without a pattern for a brief minute before finding a rhythm and pounding my pussy. He’s not particularly fast or rough but he fucks me like that, like this is something he’s wanted for way too long—like I’m his to destroy.

His sweat clings to me and mine to him, our bodies slick and fused. The sounds of his heavy breathing, my loud moans and our wet bodies meeting reverberates in the room but we don’t care. The need to empty out our desires is far too great so we both fall into the passion recklessly, clawing at each other like animals.

I want him.

He knows.

And he fucks me like he wants me too, like he’ll die if he doesn’t have me.

Screw the power play!

“Can I come? I want to come...please, Sandro, let me...”

He grunts his response but does nothing to his punishing rhythm. Most men change the pace when they hear a woman’s close to coming and that just shatters the rhythm.

I know how terrible it is to compare Cassian to Sandro but I do it anyway, deciding nothing can ever compare to the way Sandro seems to know me—knows how to unravel me until I'm a screaming, sobbing mess.

How he knows to bring me an orgasm that's wanton and wild, filthy and free.

I'm crying in his arms as I release, feeling like I'm floating, breaking apart. "Sandro...oh God, fuck...oh...mmmmh, yes, fuck me through it..."

He pulls out of me then, even though he's not yet close, drifts downward between my legs and buries his head in my pussy. He swipes his tongue between my lips, licking and sucking and tasting my orgasm in his mouth, groaning like it's his fucking lifeline.

"You're delicious."

He kisses the bud between my thighs, laps it with his tongue and teases, dragging me back to the edge. I buckle beneath him but reach over to gather a fistful of his hair, pulling hard.

"I like eating you out. I like tasting all of you. My God, you're amazing and always so fucking wet for me, so fucking mine."

I don't know what to say to him. I don't even think I'm capable of forming comprehensible words at this moment, so I say nothing but fall into the sweetness of his tongue thrashing inside of me. He fucks me with his mouth until I'm whimpering again.

He comes up again, slides into me and moves, cock slamming back where it belongs. This time, he's faster, grunting as I whimper, capturing all that I am and all that I'll ever be. There's no going back for us now, me especially, so I give in to him, letting

him use me as he wants, letting him wreck me until I'm nothing but his dirty little toy.

“Selene, baby...” he drawls and stiffens, voice breaking with need.

That's how I know he's coming. I shift my body closer to his and melt into his warm embrace, greedy for every drop. He empties himself inside of me but refuses to pull out, spilling hot and thick, claiming me from the inside out. His breathing is in my ear and on my skin, but I feel his cock the most, still throbbing and dripping inside of me, marking me as his.

“I'm not letting you go again, Selene. I can't...fuck, I won't.”

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He brushes his lips on mine before sliding out and dropping to the side, spent but still possessive. For the first time in years, I'm roped back into his arms and cuddled until I fall into a blissful sleep, trapped in his heat, his filth, his everything and knowing I'll never claw my way out.

Chapter 12

Selene

I tell myself it was a mistake. That last night didn't mean anything.

That it was just lust, just old habits crawling back under my skin.

But when I wake up in his bed, my body still tangled with his, his scent still clinging to my skin—

I know I'm lying.

The room is still dark, just the faintest hint of dawn creeping through the windows. I could leave. I should leave.

I watch him sleep instead, the slow rise and fall of his chest, the faint crease between his brows even now.

Like even unconscious, he's waiting for a war.

I reach for my dress, my hands shaking, but I don't make it past the door.

Because his voice, deep and low and wrecked with sleep, stops me cold.

“You run from me again,” he murmurs, “I will come for you.”

I freeze. Slowly, I turn.

Alessandro’s eyes are open now, heavy-lidded but alert, watching me like he already knows what I was thinking.

Because he does. He always has.

I swallow hard. “This was a mistake.”

His lips curve, but there’s no amusement in it. Just something dark. Something dangerous.

“Keep telling yourself that,” he murmurs, pushing up on his elbows, the sheets slipping down his chest. “But you’ll still come back.”

I shake my head, gripping the doorframe. “I told you this is only going to be for a month. Just stay off Cassian’s back. Allow us to get married in peace.”

He tilts his head. “You say one thing, but your body is saying another.”

I hate him. I hate him for being right. For knowing me better than I know myself.

His fingers drag over the sheets as he adjusts more upright. “You can leave, Selene. If that’s really what you want.”

I don’t move. Not because I want to stay. Because I don’t want to leave.

And that's worse.

He exhales softly, standing, the mattress shifting under his weight. My breath hitches when he steps toward me, bare feet silent against the floor.

"You might think this is all it is." His voice is quieter now, almost gentle. "That this was just a relapse. But I assure you that even after this one month is up, you'll rather die than leave me."

I force myself to look at him.

The room feels smaller. Like the walls are closing in.

"This means nothing, I won't be coming back. I can assure you," I state more firmly.

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Alessandro lifts a brow.

Then, without breaking eye contact, he reaches down, plucks my engagement ring off the nightstand, and twirls it between his fingers.

My breath stutters.

The small band of gold, the one that's supposed to meanforever, looks insignificant between his rough fingers, like something weightless. Worthless.

“You don't even wear it when you sleep?” he murmurs in a low and amused tone. “Interesting.”

I want to snatch it back. To shove it onto my finger like it might somehow undo everything, like it might rewrite the choices I've already made.

But I don't move.

Because we both know the truth.

I mentally took it off the moment I walked in here.

He never asked me to take it off. I did that on my own yesterday—in our reckless, desperate rush to consume each other.

And yet, he didn't say a word. Because he knows.

He knows I couldn't bear to fuck him with another man's ring on my finger.

What does that say about me? Where does my loyalty lie—with the man staring at me now, half-naked, the one who can unravel me with a single touch? Or the man I said yes to, the one I promised a future?

I don't know. All I know is that every day, I feel more and more like the shitty person I've always feared I am.

"You don't belong to him," he murmurs, holding the ring between us like it's inconsequential. Like it never meant anything at all.

"Give that back."

He doesn't. Instead, he steps closer, pressing the cool metal into my palm.

"Put it on," he says.

My breath catches. "What?"

"Put it on," he repeats, softer this time. "And look me in the eyes when you do it."

I stare at him, pulse hammering. He just watches me, waiting.

And that's when I know.

This isn't about a ring. This is about choosing. He's giving me an out.

If I put it back on, I lose him.

If I don't—

I lose myself.

The ring feels like fire in my palm. I tell myself to slip it on, to force it over my knuckle, to say nothing has changed.

But my fingers don't move.

And his mocking smile deepens.

Alessandro reaches out, tracing a single finger down my wrist, a touch so light it shouldn't make me shiver. But it does.

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“You’ll never get over me, Selene,” he murmurs again.

And this time—

I don’t argue.

Chapter 13

Alessandro

Five years ago.

The stars never change.

No matter how many nights we spend out here, sneaking past guards, slipping through dark corners, standing in the cold with our backs against the courtyard wall—there they are. Unmoved. Indifferent. A map of burning constellations scattered across the sky, completely unaware of the way my world has been spinning off its fucking axis for years.

Because of her.

Selene Marconi.

As is our usual routine, she is lying on the old wooden bench, one arm resting over her forehead, the other loosely draped over her stomach, the thin silk of her summer dress pulling over her legs. Her anklet catches the moonlight, winking at me like it

knows my secrets, like it's daring me to acknowledge what I've spent five years trying to ignore.

I want her.

I've always wanted her.

And God help me, I love her.

But I can't bring myself to have her.

Not when she deserves something better than the stolen moments we've carved into the night. Not when the places we meet—grimy stairwells, abandoned staff rooms, starlit corners like this—are nowhere near good enough for more than what we do.

Not when I can still give her a way out.

She deserves a better man. A man who can give her love, not just a whispered promise between shadows. And yet, I can't stop asking to see her. Can't stop looking at her. Can't stop feeling like she's the only thing tethering me to something human when my hands are stained with the kind of work that makes me forget what kindness even looks like.

She hums beside me, shifting slightly, bare feet curling over the edge of the bench. "You're staring."

I exhale a quiet laugh, tipping my head back. "You say that like it's a crime."

She peeks at me from under her arm, a slow curve tugging at her lips. "It is. Haven't you read the rule book?" Her voice drops, mockingly, "Alessandro Vescovi, trained soldier, future executioner, certified heartless bastard. No unnecessary distractions

allowed.”

I roll my eyes. “Heartless? You wound me, little Marconi.”

“Please.” She sits up, stretching lazily, her dress slipping dangerously low at the shoulder. “You wouldn’t know emotions if they stabbed you in the chest.”

I let my eyes move downward, taking in the tease of bare skin, before dragging my eyes back to hers with an infuriating smirk. “And yet, somehow, I manage to endure.”

Something shines across her face, something deep and knowing, because she does know. Knows me better than anyone ever has. She shifts again, this time tucking her legs under her, watching me with those storm-gray eyes, those damn eyes that have owned me from the start.

Then she tilts her head like she is debating how much trouble she wants to cause tonight. “Here you are,” she echoes, softer now. “Why do you keep coming back, Sandro?”

Lie.

No doubt it’ll be easier to. To just smile and deflect like I always do, say something careless, pretend like she doesn’t make my blood run hot and my heart stumble in my chest like a fool learning to walk.

But I don’t.

“Because I don’t know how to stop.”

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Selene stills. Just for a second. Then she shifts onto her knees, inching closer, her fingers ghosting over my jaw, her touch featherlight but enough to send my pulse into chaos. “Good. Because I don’t want you to.”

Fuck.

I catch her wrist before I can do something stupid, something irreversible. She lets me, lets my fingers wrap around her delicate bones, lets me pull her hand away even as she watches me like she’s daring me to break first.

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” I murmur.

Her lips press together. “I’m twenty-one now, Sandro. I know exactly what I’m saying.”

“Selene—”

“Don’t do that,” she cuts me off, firmly. “Don’t treat me like I’m some sheltered little thing who doesn’t know what she wants. I know what I want. And it’s you.”

I shake my head, exhaling sharply. “This isn’t right.”

“No, what isn’t right is waiting for a future that doesn’t exist.” She presses forward, hands braced on my shoulders, her breath warm against my throat. “You keep saying you want to do things properly, that I deserve better, but Sandro, don’t you see? You’re the only thing I have ever wanted.”

My restraint snaps like a gunshot in the dark.

I crush my mouth to hers, swallowing the small sound she makes, my hands threading into her hair, tilting her head back so I can taste her fully, completely, the way I've been aching to for years.

She sighs against me, melting into my lap, her fingers fisting the fabric of my shirt like she's afraid I'll pull away. I won't. Not this time.

Until tonight, we've only gone past second base—just our hands wandering, breaths hitching, and her soft gasps driving me insane—but I've always stopped myself. Not because I don't want her. Fuck, she's all I think about. On the missions I carry out for the Don. When my hands are stained red, when the weight of my choices drags me under, she's the only thing that pulls me back.

But I don't feel right taking her. She's still a virgin, untouched, and she deserves better than a bastard like me. I refuse to be the man who takes that choice from her before she's sure.

And then there's the logistics. The places we steal these moments aren't fit for her first time. I want it right for her, perfect, not some quick fuck against a wall. I want to give her something more than a rushed moment in the dim-lit corridors of a house filled with anger.

I've been saving up, every bloodstained paycheck tucked away with a single purpose—to take her somewhere better. A weekend away, a resort with silk sheets where she won't have to hide, where I can lay her out on soft sheets instead of against rough stone. Where I can take my time, worship her like she deserves.

And the truth is, I just love being with her, learning her hates, her joys, the way her eyes spark when she teases me. But tonight...

Tonight, out here under the stars like we used to, it's wrong. The Don would slit my throat for this, for her, but right now, I don't give a damn. She's here, and I'm done fighting it.

I lift her, pressing her against the old brick wall, my hands slipping beneath the soft silk of her dress, feeling the smooth, heated skin of her thighs.

I groan into her mouth when she hooks a leg around my waist, pulling me closer, dragging me deeper into the dark, into the place where I forget the consequences, forget the Don, forget everything but her.

Her heat presses against me, and I'm rock-hard, trembling with the need to claim her.

"Fuck, Selene," I rasp, voice breaking, "you're making me lose my mind."

She doesn't pull back, just digs her nails into my shoulders, daring me to take what I've denied myself for years.

"Tell me to stop," I rasp against her jaw, my fingers digging into her hips. "Please, Selene, tell me to—"

"No." She moans with a grind of her hips.

I curse under my breath as she pulls my hand higher, guiding me where she wants me, her breath shuddering when my fingers slide between her thighs.

"I'm done waiting, Sandro," she whispers, pressing her forehead to mine. "Make me yours."

God fucking help me.

I swear in my head, I swear to the stars above us, and I swear to the girl in my arms. I will do better for her. I will be more than the bloody fate carved out for me.

But tonight...

Tonight, I give in.

Chapter 14

Alessandro

The basement stinks of rot. Mold creeps up the stone walls, the slow drip of a leaking pipe the only sound besides Gino's ragged breathing. Blood smears the concrete floor, pooling beneath his shaking hands. His fingers are barely recognizable now, the skin peeled back in wet ribbons, nails cracked and pried loose. He sobs, head lolling against the chair's back, but I dig the knife in again, just under his knuckle, and his body jerks.

"Scream as loud as you want," I say. "No one can fucking hear you."

A strangled whimper. Pathetic. "Please—"

"No." I press down. "You thought you could snitch on me and walk away breathing?"

His chest heaves, spit pooling at the corner of his mouth. "Don promised me a big payout. I was just supposed to report to him, everything you did. Please."

The tip of the blade slides under his next nail. A single movement, and it pops free with a wet snap. His scream is choked, desperate.

Then I snap his wrist back, his bones cracking sharp under my grip. Blood spatters my boots, pooling in large volumes all over the floor. "How long have you been

spying on me? Answer me, you dumb fuck.”

“Please...” His voice is a whimper now, fading fast.

Gino’s head wobbles. His swollen eye is barely open, lip split down to the teeth. “Since the girl left,” he wheezes. “After that night. After Edoardo died.”

My fingers tighten around the knife handle. My scars throb. Fire roars through my skull, its phantom flames licking at my arms, my throat—

I exhale sharply, pushing it down. “Don Marconi’s known since then?”

Gino nods frantically. “He—he’s been watching you. Since before Selene disappeared. He knew—he knew you were playing both sides.”

I step back, tossing the blood from the blade. My jaw clenches. That bastard. The old snake’s been on to me longer than I thought.

I glance at Gino’s trembling form, his body sagging in the chair, half-conscious. Useless now. I twist the knife one last time, a final breathless gasp escaping his lips before his body slumps forward.

This war just got personal.

Don Marconi’s villa looms ahead, golden light spilling from arched windows, guards stationed at every entrance. They tense when I approach, but I don’t stop. My steps echo against polished marble, the scent of cigar smoke thick in the air.

Inside his study, the Don lounges behind his desk, swirling a tumbler of whiskey, his

eyes cool. His eyes lift to mine, cold and cutting, but there's something else there, and it is not surprise, it's like he's been waiting for this.

"Sandro." He leans back, assessing me. "Imagine my surprise when Gino paid me a visit. In fact he came to me with an interesting story. Something old. Then you go and buy Cassian's gallery. What's really your angle?"

I don't sit. "Cut the bullshit."

His lips twitch. "Alright. Let's get to it, then. What exactly was my daughter doing in your house?"

I keep my expression blank. "Nothing that concerns you."

"Everything concerning Selene concerns me." His voice is smooth, too smooth. "And what's this about Cassian's gallery? That wasn't part of our arrangement."

I tilt my head. "Respectfully, sir, that isn't the bone of contention."

His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Oh, but it is." He sets the glass down with a deliberate clink. "You're playing at something, Sandro. Buying out Cassian's leverage. Taking an interest in my daughter's affairs. I wonder, should I be worried?"

I meet his eyes. It's a standoff, two predators circling, each unwilling to submit. My stomach churns, but I don't let it show. He knows too much already. I can't let him see just how deep I'm in.

Instead, I keep my tone light. "Since I bought the gallery, why don't we make a trade? Free Selene from Cassian's leash."

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The Don chuckles, shaking his head as he stands up and walks toward me. “You think this is about money?” He leans forward. “You’re a fool, boy. Always have been. Chasing a girl who’s never been yours.” He steps closer, his shadow falling over me. “You think I don’t know what you’ve been up to? Playing both sides, sniffing around the Morettis like a stray? I let you because you’re useful. But this?” He jabs a finger at me. “This ends now.”

My blood boils, but I hold steady. “Let her go,” I say, voice low. “I bought the gallery. Cassian’s got no claim. Cut her loose from this wedding bullshit.”

He grins, teeth flashing like a wolf’s. “Her marriage seals the Cassian deal. You think I’d unravel that for you? She’s a piece on the board, Sandro. Always has been. You’re just too blind to see it.” He leans in, voice dropping. “That girl is worth more tied to him than she ever was to you.”

The words hit wrong, heavy with something he’s not saying. Then finally having the courage to do something I haven’t been able to ever do, I shove him, hard. He stumbles back, crashing into the desk, papers flying.

“She’s not a fucking piece,” I snarl, stepping over the wreckage. “You talk about her like she’s disposable, but you’re the one selling her off. What kind of man does that to his own blood?”

He laughs again, darker this time. “Blood? You don’t know shit, boy. She is just a whore like her mother was.” He swings, fist clipping my jaw. I stagger, then lunge, slamming him against the wall. Glass shatters somewhere, the room spinning. I pin him, forearm crushing his windpipe.

“Say that again,” I growl, pressing harder. “Call her a whore one more time.”

He chokes, eyes bulging, but there’s a glint there, something cruel, knowing. “You’ll... lose her... anyway,” he rasps. I shove off him, letting him slump to the floor, gasping. He’s wrong. She’s mine. Not his pawn, not Cassian’s bride. Mine. But his words stick, burrowing deep.

My fingers flex at my sides. He knows it’s not just about a deal. Not just about power.

His voice turns cold. “You always were weak when it came to her.”

I let the words settle, let him believe I’ve taken the hit. But inside, something sharp twists. I know what he did. I know the truth. That she was never supposed to make it past that night. That he would have sacrificed her just to keep his secrets buried.

His daughter. His own flesh and blood.

He deserves nothing more than for me to kill him now. To burn this whole house down with him inside it.

Instead, my lips curve up with a sinister smile. “Then I suppose we’ll see who comes out on top.”

He raises his glass in mock salute. “We will.”

I turn on my heel and walk out, my pulse thrumming.

This all ends now.

I'm outside their house now, crouched in the shadows, brick cold against my back. Selene's voice floats through the window, wrapping around Cassian's laugh. My chest splits open, jealousy clawing me raw. She was with me last night, her hands on me, her breath in my ear, and now she's playing house with him? I slam my fist into the wall, skin tearing, blood dripping down my knuckles.

I drive back home feeling my whole world imploding before my very eyes. I climb the rooftop once I arrive. The city stretches beneath me, Florence glittering in the darkness, mocking me. I brace my hands against the ledge, head bowed and trying to breathe slowly. Why does it feel like my heart is going to explode from my chest?

I was the one who shattered her heart, let her believe I was the villain. Let her believe I never loved her.

When in truth, I had loved her enough to destroy myself.

Edoardo's blood was still fresh on my hands, her kill I buried. I let her hate me to keep her breathing.

Propelled by that anger, I fumble with the belt of my pants. It takes me more time than my patience can allow, but I do it, fingers shaking with the need to punish myself for her.

I unzip my pants, hand rough on myself, her name leaves my lips, a curse, a prayer, a punishment. The memory of her tears, the way she looked at me before she ran—

My boxers come off next, pushed down slowly with anger. It's not a violent anger, really, but when it moves through me, I become powerless.

I pull my eyes open and glance around. Of course, I'm alone on the rooftop patio, but I still search around, paranoid, feral. The art of trying to be extra careful has already

been ingrained inside of me, so this means nothing.

Those storm-gray eyes, her happy voice with Cassian, her body under me last night. I groan her name again. It's twisted, this need eating me alive, but she's all I've ever wanted.

It is all I ever do about the anger and the hate, what I usually do to push down anxiety when I don't have heads to smash in. It's easy to get in the mood and harden beneath my pants because she is all I think about. I see her even with my eyes closed. When I keep my mind focused, I'm propelled forward by memories of us together. I remember the edgy tone of her moans, like she's unsure what to do with all of the feelings I force into her.

“Want to see how much power you hold over me, huh? Want to see me come undone, how fucked up I am for you?” I growl to the empty air, imagining her smirking, daring me to break.

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I cup my cock in my hands and run the insides of my palm across the tip, smearing the pre-come already beading there. The wind whips up my hair, but the shiver that works its way down my spine isn't because of that. It's because of Selene and my desperation to have her, to own her, to ruin her like she's ruined me.

My obsession with Selene makes me more of a brute than a man, and I revel in it because that's who I am and who I'll always be. She's driven me mad, and I think she knows this. She fucking revels in it.

You know what you do to me, don't you? You love watching me rot for you.

She knows how much power she wields, and she uses it to punish me. She holds me captive even as I massage the hardness of my flesh, squeezing until it hurts, until I hiss.

More pre-come hits my palm, and I run it up and down my length, feeling every bit of it course through me—electric, filthy, wrong. I need this. I need to feel this sweetness and pain to be rid of the jealousy and loss of control I now feel, this tormenting ache she's injected into my very core.

“Fuck, Selene, you've wrecked me,” I rasp, my voice breaking.

I change pace, rolling my hand up and down my shaft, faster, harder. When my mind goes back to the thought of Selene, I concoct a different version, one where she is softer and more carefree and deeply in tune with what I feel for her.

I imagine her back in my bed, her hair tousled in the sheets, eyes closed tight, thighs

parted just for me. I wake her with a soft kiss to the top of her head and push my fingers underneath her dress even though she is asleep, dragging them slowly and possessively over her wet heat.

I cherish those moments when she's caught between sleep and awareness—when her body responds to mine instinctively. Like an invisible thread connects us, her unconscious self recognizes me, reaches for me, even before her mind fully wakes. It's as if our souls have synchronized, transcending the boundary between dreams and reality.

“See how wet you are for me. Even half asleep you want my cock inside you,” I'd whisper, imagining her gasping, arching into me.

She doesn't hate me in this version. And she doesn't question where my loyalties lie. Instead, she wraps her arms around me to draw me into her body, her nails digging into my back like she's claiming me too.

Even though she's still woozy from sleep, she kisses me back, and I harden here even more, my cock throbbing to the point where it feels like I might bust if I continue. I feel lightheaded from the blood pounding in my head and in my cock, but in my mind, Selene kisses me with wild passion, the kind that can't be placated or soothed.

“Take it, Selene. Fucking take me,” I groan aloud, stroking myself faster.

I continue to stroke myself, reaching where I am most hard, where the skin around my shaft is deliciously tender, and I imagine that it's Selene touching me there—her soft, cruel hands jerking me off, owning me. I bring my hand back to my mouth and lick it, tasting salt and shame, before returning back to my cock, wet and sloppy now.

In my head, Selene bites down hard against my lower lip, enough to draw blood, and then runs her tongue over the sting to soothe it down, her breath hot against my skin.

“I missed you,” she tells me, and I stiffen, feeling like I can’t breathe. “I missed you so much I couldn’t do anything but wait. I was waiting for you, waiting for you to fuck me like this.”

Yeah? You missed this cock, didn’t you?

Pre-ejaculation drips from my tip. I use my open palm to run the liquid up my length and imagine that it’s her tongue doing the work, licking me clean, sucking me dry. I let out a loud groan as the movements become faster, more desperate, my hips jerking into my fist.

Because in my head, she’s knelt before me a thousand times, taking me in deep in her mouth, gagging on me while her eyes water and lock on mine.

“Oh, fuck, yeah, baby... suck it. Choke on it. You exist to be like this for me,” I grunt, lost in the fantasy of her lips stretched around me.

My need is greedy and overpowering and strikes me even now. I ache for her. I burn, in fact, for a taste, for her here with me, touching me and sucking me until I come inside her mouth, until she swallows every drop like she’s starving for it. It’s the only thing I can think of as I continue the onslaught of my hand on my cock, relentless, punishing, addicted.

Take it all, Selene. Fucking beg for it.

And suddenly, I can feel myself giving in to the sweetness, the dark, filthy rush. I am about to come, and I know that there is no stopping this now. Even now, I feel the surge coming over me, and I give in completely to it, letting it rip me apart. I’m grunting like an animal as I spill into my hand, slick and thick with my juices, hot ropes of cum painting the ground while I shudder and curse.

“Selene—fuck, Selene!” I groan her name into the space, loud and wrecked, because I want her to hear, and I want her to see how much I want her—how much she’s turned me into this depraved, obsessed shell.

After cleaning myself up, I put my pants back on and bring out my phone to call her. I can masturbate with the thought of her, but the tension hasn’t yet dissolved. The only thing I can think of next that would be able to help me is to call her and tell her about the past—spill every dirty secret, every rotten truth. And I do. I dial her number, press it to my ears, and wait for her to pick up.

The line rings. No answer. Straight to voicemail.

My heart thunders against my ribs as I draw in a shaky breath.

“I know this is too late to say all of this now, but I’m going to say it anyway because I’ve carried this weight for far too long.” My voice breaks. “I thought keeping it from you would protect you. That if you hated me, you’d be safe. But all I’ve done is lead you right back to the very thing I swore to protect you from. I’m so sorry, Selene. For everything. But I had to let you hate me.

“I’ve been living with this lie for five years, and it’s eating me alive. That night—that terrible night—I found you standing over Edoardo, blood everywhere, and I discovered something that changed everything. I couldn’t tell you because there was only one choice: take the fall and let you hate me. So I did. I shattered us because I had to. I let your hatred become my cross to bear because it was the only way to keep your heart beating and keep you from finding out what your father did.”

“I should have told you years ago. Everything you believe about that night is wrong. I took the fall because... because there are things you don’t know about who you really are. About what your father did...”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 10:05 am

Tears burn hot trails down my cheeks. “I loved you then, Selene. Christ, I love you now, more than ever. Every lie, every cruel word that night, it was all for you. I’d do it all again, even if it destroys me. I can’t give you all the details now, time isn’t on my side, but this, this is the real me, Selene. This is me fighting for you, coming for you, even if it’s too late. Even if you never hear this, even if you never believe me, I need you to know...” My voice drops to a whisper. “These last five years have been hell. But seeing you with him?” I shake my head. “That hurt more than all of it combined. But you deserve happiness. You deserve someone who can give you that. Someone safe. Someone like Cassian.”

I press my forehead against the cold wall. “I know I asked for a year, and you gave me a month that hasn’t even started, and God, how I wanted that time with you. But I can’t take it. So maybe this is a goodbye. These past few days of having you back, even for a little while, it was worth it. But I’m done now. I won’t keep messing up your life. I won’t stand in your way.

“I’m sorry for who I became for you. Sorry I couldn’t be the man you deserved. Sorry I broke your heart into pieces I can never mend. But I loved you from the first day we met. I love you now. And I did it for us. I love you, little Marconi. You were the best part of my world.”

I hang up.

Chapter 15

Selene

“Want me to change the music?” he asks as soon as we step inside.

I glance to the left where Cassian has set up a radio for slow, love songs, their syrupy croon slithering all the way here, where I’m perched, legs dangling, on the edge of the island.

“No,” I cough out, shaking my head even as the word spills free. “The music is good. Well, you’re in some mood. Was the food tonight that good?”

“Just happy to be with you, babe.”

He falls back to the kitchen sink, leaning the entirety of his weight there, before going on to study me. He’s dressed in a loose-fitting sweater and slacks, clean-shaven, his face soft, boyish. But the way he stares, those warm, hazel eyes sinking into me, it’s a slow, sticky trap, reeling me in, coiling tight. When his eyes droop low, snagging on the swell of my breasts straining the shirt, his eyes darken, molten and hungry, and I feel everything all at once, a filthy rush igniting my veins.

I feel the evening breeze scratch against my forearms and neck. I think he’d left a window open before we went out for dinner. Or maybe, just maybe, I’d been the one to crack it wide, secretly aching for Sandro to slink through like he did all those nights ago.

I was in this position that night.

I feel the island, cool against my flesh, pressing into my skin, branding me, and I suddenly feel the guilt creeping in.

Just last night I was in another man’s bed. Today I’m laughing with another. I don’t think I can do this anymore. Fuck, the contract or whatever Sandro said. I can’t keep doing this to an innocent man.

I suck in a breath when he leaves the kitchen sink and comes to stand in front of me. He's close enough for me to feel the heat rolling off him.

"You've been tense. I know coming back here has done a number on you, and I want to help ease that. That's what I want, tonight, to pleasure you."

"I'm a hard woman to please."

I mean it as a joke, but he doesn't laugh. Instead, his hands come up to my neck and stay. I moan softly as warmth starts to trickle down and pool between my thighs.

He swipes a tongue over the flesh of my neck, and I shiver, body jerking against my will. "Cassian, I need to tell you something..." My voice cracks.

"Shhh...baby. It's been so long. We haven't done it since we got here. I miss you."

"I know you do. But..." He uses a bit of teeth now, first to graze the softness of my neck, teasing, then to bite down, hard, sinking in. I buckle where I'm sitting, a choked moan ripping out, but his hands pin me down, slamming onto my hips, anchoring me to the cold edge.

"No talking...."

"Cass..."

"Tell me what makes you feel good. Tell me what you want, baby, I'll fucking give it to you."

His tongue slithers from my neck to the back of my ear, that spot that unravels me, and he nips—with teeth and tongue and suction, relentlessly obscene.

“Oh, do that again...” He does it again, and I feel a rush of goosebumps swarm up my arms, my skin prickling, alive. “Cass...”

He pulls my shirt up over my head, roughly, and tosses it down on the floor like it offends him. Cassian looks at my naked tits like he’s seeing them for the first time, raw hunger twisting his face. I see him swallow, throat bobbing, just as he begins to grow in his pants, the outline thick, straining.

“I’ve been staring at your breasts in this skimpy shirt all night. You know it kills me when you skip the bra. And when you hopped up there the second we got back—Jesus, the way your tits bounced? You don’t even realize how sexy you are, do you?”

Ok. This is new. Cassian’s never been shy in bed, but now, his words hit harder, dirtier, sinking into me like a slow burn. This is what I always wanted from him. It’s almost like he tapped into a version of him I’ve been asking for. Or could it be because it’s been awhile? He’s good at this tonight, too good, and it’s unraveling me, though a bit of Sandro’s rougher edge still lingers, uninvited, but I push it to the back of my mind.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 10:05 am

I won't let him in. Not tonight.

I grab a hold of the island on either side and lean back, spreading my legs wide in front of me, an invitation, a dare. I'm wearing shorts, sure, but that's the only flimsy barrier between us. I'm not wearing any panties, my pussy bare. Since we weren't going far, I decided to skip them.

Which isn't my usual style.

It hits me now, a gut punch, that even while getting ready to step out, I didn't think about Cassian. I wore this shirt and shorts, skipped the panties, because I was holding out hope for Sandro, that bastard who's wormed into my blood.

Damn, how did it get so bad? Cassian is soft and safe and loves me, a warm cradle I'm supposed want, but Sandro is wild and carefree and dangerous, a complete opposite I shouldn't crave but do, so badly it's tearing me apart.

I want him.

I want him so badly it hurts, like a sick, throbbing wound.

I drag my focus back to the man in front of me and try my hand at a smile, brittle, fake. "Fuck me, Cassian. Make me forget about everything."

What I mean is I want him to fuck Sandro out of me, to purge that gnawing need, to bury it under Cassian's steady hands even when I'm this close to the safety I've been aching for since the start.

Cassian slides his hands to my breasts, cups one in his palm. It doesn't quite fit, spilling over, and it's beautiful when I glance down. Seeing my flesh spilling against his grip. He squeezes softly, like he's scared to break me, but when I look up, his face is wrecked—a man unhinged by want. He's drowning in this as much as he's giving, but the need to pleasure me, to own me, wins out, a twisted bet he's hellbent on cashing.

He presses a thumb around my nipple, circling, teasing, and I groan, loud, shameless. Then, without a word, he bends down and collects my hardened nipple in his mouth, hot and wet, sucking hard.

“Mmmm...that's it...” My voice is a rasp, trembling.

He licks and twirls, working his tongue into the bud, all suction and sweetness, a filthy devotion that has me panting, arching my back into him, shoving my tits deeper into his face.

“Oh, yeah...Cassian...so...good...” I'm babbling, lost, my body a live wire.

He makes a deep sound in his throat, and shifts his attention from one wet nipple to the other, attacking it with the same relentless hunger until I'm blinded with a burning need.

I'm wet. Hell, I think I'm dripping in my shorts, soaking through, a mess for him—or someone else.

Cassian straightens and looks at me. “There's nothing I wouldn't do for you, Selene...do you know that?”

“Yes...yes...I know...” I'm breathless, pleading.

He works the button on my shorts with his eyes still locked on mine, fingers steady, predatory, and when it snaps open, I lift myself up, eager, so he can peel them down. He brings the damp fabric to his nose and inhales deeply, a low growl rumbling out.

“I think I’m going to burst in my pants just from this,” he says, more to the small line of wetness he finds in the middle of my shorts. “Fuck, you smell so good.”

“Cassian—” My voice cracks, needy, warning.

“Spread your legs wider for me, Selene. I’m starving for a taste of you, gonna eat you alive...”

Oh God. Shit. Holy hell...

But I spread my legs for him wanting to forget Sandro. When Cassian kneels down in front of me, like he’s about to worship at my altar, I imagine it’s Sandro—his scarred hands, his cruel mouth—kneeling there, ready to devour me, to tease and punish, to make me hate him and crave him until I’m nothing but a dripping, broken thing.

It’s the worst, I know, but in the face of such wrecking emotion, I become a woman—a filthy, feral woman.

“Beautiful,” Cassian murmurs against the insides of my thighs, his breath hot, vibrating down to my pussy where the wetness has gathered. I spread my legs wider, offering myself up. “I love the way you smell. Let me make you feel good, baby, let me tongue-fuck you ‘til you’re screaming.”

“Please...” It’s a whimper, a surrender. But it’s not for him.

He swipes his tongue between the lips of my sex, slowly before using his finger to part me open, exposing me. He looks up at me as his tongue teases the opening,

sucking and dipping and taking me whole, a starving man feasting.

“Mmmmm...fuck...just like that...oh, yeah.” I’m loud, unhinged, filling the kitchen with my moans.

He groans as he sucks me, making these sweet, wild sounds, like I’m the one ruining him, like my cunt’s the drug he can’t quit.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 10:05 am

The music has changed to something sad, a mournful wail I can't fully grasp, but the tune seeps into me, and I'm sobbing before I even realize it, tears streaking as he unravels me.

Cassian slides two fingers into my pussy, curving them upward where he knows I'll break, and pumps in, hard. I grip the edge of the island tighter, but lose control and fist my hands in his hair, tugging, pulling him closer.

He comes forward to me like a tidal wave, like a fevered dream, and takes me back in his mouth, tongue lashing through my folds even as his fingers fuck me deeper.

I hold his hair firmly and pull down, grinding against him. "I'm about to come, Cassian...I'm...going...to...come...don't stop, don't fucking stop."

So, he doesn't stop. He gives and he gives, a man possessed, until his face completely disappears from my sight. In his place is Sandro—smiling—kneeling there with his fingers and tongue buried in my pussy, giving me the release I'm dying for, the one I shouldn't want.

I feel my body go stiff as the sensations crash, too much, too wrong. It's a different kind of orgasm, warped and filthy, because while it's Cassian—my fiancé—pleasuring me, it's Sandro's face that has me this fucked up, this lost.

It's Sandro. It's always him.

And I give in to it. Completely. Like it's the only thing I've ever lived for, like he's branded me from the inside out.

“You’re mine! Not Cassian’s but mine!” Sandro’s voice snarls in my head as the orgasm slams through me, and I scream his name, the pleasure ripping from my clit to my belly to my chest. I moan his name as I finish.

I can feel him slightly pull back but I’m too lost in the euphoria, emptying myself in Cassian’s mouth, a flood of wet heat he drinks down.

Then the haze clears.

Cassian rises from the floor and takes a step backward, looking torn, gutted. I crash back to earth when my eyes catch his, because I know I’ve done the worst thing on earth, betrayed him with a ghost.

“You called his name,” he tells me, voice flat, like I don’t already feel the knife of it. Then he turns around, flips on the faucet in the kitchen sink, and splashes water on his face, hands shaking. He breathes heavily with his back turned against me as he says again, “You just came with his name on the tip of your tongue, Selene.”

Looking at him now, I realize I have a choice to make—a choice I need to make right now or risk losing my sanity to this festering, twisted rot eating me alive.

Cassian’s back stiffens at the sink. My thighs still tremble, slick with his spit and my shame, the island cold under me. I scramble for my shorts, pulling them up. Guilt drowns everything else, choking me with what I’ve done.

I ought to say something—anything—but what words could undo this?

“You called his name,” he says again, quieter now, like he’s testing the wound. He turns, eyes red-rimmed, blazing. “Say it, again.” His voice is eerily calm, but I hear the fracture beneath, the tight coil waiting to snap.

I shake my head. “Cassian, I—”

“Say his name. You had no problem moaning it while I had my mouth on you. What’s stopping you now?”

Shame scorches through me, but anger shows too, rising like bile. “It was a mistake.” I grab my shirt from the floor, hastily dragging it over my head. “I didn’t mean—”

“Didn’t mean to say it? Or didn’t mean to think of him while my tongue was inside you?” Cassian steps forward, closing the space between us in a heartbeat. “Because we both know the truth.” His voice drops. “He’s the reason, isn’t he? The reason why you haven’t let me touch you since. Why you keep saying you’re tired or that we should wait for the wedding.”

“Cass...”

“You’re in love with him.”

I step toward him. “Cassian, I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t.” He jerks back, hands slamming the counter. “Don’t you dare lie to me. You screamed for him while I was on my knees for you.” His voice cracks. “What the hell, Selene. What am I to you? Some stand-in while you cry for him?”

My chest caves. “You’re not. I swear, you’re not. I just...” I falter, words crumbling. How do I explain this?

Cassian scoffs. “There it is. No denial. No argument. Just the truth, sitting ugly between us.”

I glare at him, not sure why I am getting angry. “And what do you want me to say,

Cassian? That I don't dream of him? That I don't hear his voice in my head every goddamn day? That I haven't spent every second trying to erase him? I wanted to forget him! I wanted you to be the one! But he's in my fucking blood, and I can't rip him out no matter how hard I try!"

He laughs, bitter, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Oh, I see how hard you've been trying," he says, his tone dripping in sarcasm. "You have not in any way been showing that you're still hung up on that bastard." He steps closer. "Tell me you don't want him. Look me in the face and say it."

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I open my mouth, but nothing comes. My throat burns, eyes stinging. “I don’t know what I want,” I whisper, honestly. “I tried to hate him, Cassian. I tried so much it hurts, but he’s... he’s everywhere.”

His face twists. “Then why the hell am I here? Why’d you let me touch you if he’s all you see?” He grabs my arms, fingers digging in, not hard enough to bruise but enough to rattle me. “I’ve fallen so deeply in love with you, Selene. And you’re killing me.”

Tears spill hot down my cheeks. “I don’t want to hurt you. I’m trying—I’m trying to let him go. You’re good, Cassian. You’re too good for me.”

“Good?” He shoves away, pacing now, hands raking through his hair. “I don’t want to be good. I want to be enough. But I’m not, am I? Not next to him.”

“Stop it,” I snap, voice rising. “This isn’t about you not being enough. It’s about me being a wreck. I came back here thinking he and I were over. But he’s in my head, under my skin—”

“Then get him out!” Cassian whirls, fist pounding the counter so hard a glass topples and shatters. “Or tell me to walk away, Selene. Right now. Because I’m not competing with him.”

I freeze, breath hitching. “I don’t want you to go,” I say. “I care a lot about you. I do.”

He stares at me, chest heaving, eyes wet. “You care about me? Or you need me to fix

you? To heal you from loving him?”

Cassian catches my wrists, his grip bruising. His hazel eyes flash with something dark, something I’ve never seen before. “You want me to make you forget about him, right?” He leans in, voice thick with resentment. “You want me to be bad and wicked like he is, right? Treat you like shit. Break you like your father did. That’s what you like, isn’t it?”

My breath catches as he pulls me closer, his breath hot, against my skin. For a second, I think he might kiss me, that maybe he’ll try to reclaim what’s slipping through his fingers. But then—

BZZT. BZZT.

My phone vibrates on the counter, the sound slicing through the air like a knife.

Cassian tenses, then moves before I do, snatching it up with lightning-fast reflexes. My stomach twists into a knot. I already know who it is.

Sandro.

Cassian stares at the screen, jaw clenched so tightly I swear I hear his teeth grind. Then, with slow deliberation, he swipes across the screen and plays the voice message aloud.

He must have fast-forwarded it, looking for something to prove his point, because my world cracks open in the space of three words.

“I loved you.”

The voice spills into the kitchen, rich and aching, a sound I haven’t heard in so long it

feels like it's stepping into my skin, breathing my air, wrapping itself around my ribs until I can't tell if I'm trembling from rage or something far, far worse.

Cassian's face twists as he stares down at my phone, his knuckles white around it. "I loved you then, Selene," Sandro's voice continues. "Christ, I love you now, more than ever."

I lunge for the phone, but Cassian jerks it out of reach, holding it high as the message keeps playing.

Every word hits harder the next.

Every lie, every cruel word that night, it was all for you. I'd do it all again, even if it destroys me.

I can't breathe.

No. No, no, no.

This isn't happening.

The kitchen tilts, the walls pressing too close, Cassian's breath coming fast and loudly from his body rigid beside me. The message crackles on, unstoppable, dragging us both into the past, into a place I swore I'd never return to.

"I can't give you all the details now, time isn't on my side, but this—this is the real me, Selene. This is me fighting for you, coming for you, even if it's too late."

The words strangle me.

The last ones are softer, but they hit the hardest.

Even if you never hear this, even if you never believe me, I need you to know...

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The message cuts off.

Silence.

Cassian exhales and tilts his head back like he's trying to catch his balance, like he's reeling just as much as I am. Then, his hand drops, and his eyes meet mine.

And I know.

I know the exact second the betrayal takes root.

His eyes go dark. His lips curl. And when he speaks, his voice is quiet. Too quiet.

“Gosh. How could I have been so blind. That’s why you’ve been acting weird since we got back. It’s been going on even before we met, hasn’t it? You were fucking your brother?”

A single, sharp breath leaves me.

“It’s not like that...” My throat is sandpaper.

Cassian lets out a choked laugh, a sound so broken, so bitter, it slices through me worse than a scream. “That’s what you wanted me to believe, isn’t it? That he was like a brother to you? That’s what you’ve always told me. That’s what everyone says.” His nostrils flare, his whole body trembling. “And yet he’s here, spilling his fucking soul to you. Telling you he loves you. Telling you he’s coming for you.”

I shake my head. “Cassian, stop.”

“Oh, I think I finally get it.” He steps forward, close enough that I can feel his breath, his fury curling into the space between us like smoke. “All those years, all those fucking times I told myself I was imagining things. That you just weren’t the type to love out loud. That it was nothing and you’d come around. But it only became worse when we got here.” His voice drops. “I bet you laughed at me, huh? While you were sneaking around with him? While you were in bed with me, you were thinking of him?”

“It wasn’t like that.”

Cassian’s face crumples, his hands trembling at his sides. “Then tell me what it was, Selene.”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

Because I don’t have an answer.

Because how do I explain the mess inside me, the years of love and hate and longing so tangled I don’t even know where one feeling ends and another begins? How do I explain the ache that’s never left me, the way Sandro’s voice still has the power to unravel me, even now, even after everything?

Cassian watches me struggle. Watches the silence eat me alive.

And something inside him shatters.

His expression smooths, his fury slipping into something colder, something I haven’t even seen on him before. “You can’t, can you?” His voice is a whisper. “Because you still want him.”

“Cassian—”

“I should’ve known.” He sighs. “You were never really mine. You’re his, aren’t you? Always have been.”

“I—”

He moves before I can finish.

His hand flies, cracking against my cheek.

Pain explodes through my skull. And I stumble, vision blurring as my head hits the island’s edge.

The world spins.

I don’t even have time to react before the floor rushes up to meet me.

Then— everything goes black.

Chapter 16

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 10:05 am

Alessandro

I shouldn't have called her.

I know it the second my own voice echoes back at me, taunting through the voicemail replay. Every word sounds wrong—too much or not enough. I should have left it alone, let her stay wrapped up in her fake little fairytale with Cassian. But I couldn't.

Now, pacing the rooftop, I replay every syllable, every breath between my words. Her name still sticks in my throat like glass. I can't tell if I was warning her or pulling her back into me. Maybe both.

The cigarette between my fingers burns to the filter before I even register the taste of smoke. I toss it over the ledge, watching the ember spiral down, swallowed by the streets below.

I'm to do the right thing and let her go. But I can't.

A knock at the metal door behind me breaks through the static in my head. Bianchi steps through, his face unreadable, which only means one thing.

Bad news.

He doesn't waste time. "It's the gallery."

I already know. My body tenses before he even finishes.

“Morettis?” The Morettis haven’t let Edoardo’s death go. Despite everything I’d done to bury it—smashed the phone, staged the scene, sent Selene running, but they’re like dogs with a bone. And if they figure out she’s the one who stuck the knife in him, or the other worse truth... she’s dead. No question.

He nods. “Two of their men were sniffing around. Didn’t take anything, but they left something behind.”

Bianchi hands me a folded scrap of paper. My fingers tighten before I even open it.

The Marconi girl bleeds Moretti red.

The words are jagged, scrawled fast, but they may as well be a gun pressed to Selene’s temple. My pulse pounds against my ribs, the weight of five years of buried truths clawing their way to the surface.

They know something.

Maybe not the full truth, not yet, but it’s enough to get her killed. And if they dig any deeper—if they confirm what I’ve spent years making sure stayed dead—Selene’s body will be in a ditch before she even knows why.

“They’re onto her,” I say, voice low, turning to Bianchi. “How’d they get this close?”

He shrugs, stubbing out his cigarette on the desk. “Beats me. Could be they’ve been watching longer than we thought. Edoardo’s death never sat right with them.”

I slam my fist into the wall, plaster cracking under my knuckles. “They don’t get to touch her. Not now, not ever.”

Bianchi nods “What’s the play?”

I grip the note, crushing it in my fist. There's no waiting. No more games.

"We set a trap."

The gallery is still and cold when I arrive, the scent of old paint and polished wood clinging to the air. The main lights are off, but the emergency ones cast eerie streaks of orange along the floor, cutting across empty display cases and paintings that don't belong to Cassian anymore.

They belong to me.

I walk the length of the room, silent, letting my footsteps announce my presence. If the Morettis left men behind, they'll hear me before they see me.

I almost hope they did.

Bianchi flanks me, his steps just as measured. He stops at the back office door, nudging it open with the barrel of his gun. The space inside is untouched, save for a single chair slightly out of place and a vent cover hanging loose.

"They were looking for something."

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“They found more than they expected.”

I kneel by the vent, running my fingers over the edges. There’s no dust, no sign of old neglect. They opened it.

My gut tightens.

Bianchi shifts beside me. “They knew what they were looking for.”

That’s what bothers me.

The Morettis have never been subtle, but this isn’t their usual brand of recklessness. This was deliberate. They weren’t just fishing for leverage. They were confirming something.

My chest tightens with the weight of it. Edoardo’s death has always been a fracture line—dangerous but manageable. But this? This isn’t just about revenge or territory.

This is about Selene.

And if they know about—

Yes. I guess it’s time to let them know the real truth. But I’ve always been one to go big.

I push to my feet, jaw locking. “We burn it.”

Bianchi doesn't blink. "The whole thing?"

"We lure both of them back first. Give them something to chase." I nod, forcing myself to think, to be precise. "Make them believe they're getting closer. Then we end it."

"How?"

I kick open the storage door, revealing stacks of crates, some Marconi shipments, some just junk. "They think this place is a front. Let's make it one. Spread word we've got a big drop tonight. Don would know I'm not bluffing. Lure them in."

Bianchi hesitates. "And then?"

I grab a can of accelerant from the shelf, the kind we use to torch evidence. "We burn it down. Them with it."

His eyes widen, but he nods. "Risky. Don Marconi won't like losing the gallery."

"Don Marconi can shove it," I snap, sloshing the liquid over the crates. "He's the reason she's in this mess."

Bianchi nods once, already on his phone. I turn away, fingers flexing, reaching for another cigarette I don't light.

Selene thinks she still has time to decide. To choose between this life and whatever fantasy she's built with Cassian.

She doesn't.

By the time this night is over, her choice won't matter anymore.

Bianchi stands by the door, his gun loose in his hand. As I work, my thoughts zero in on that night five years ago. Edoardo's blood pooling on the floor, Selene shaking over him, knife still in her hand. I'd walked in, saw the phone, read the texts. "Tonight. After the announcement. She won't see it coming." Her own father signed off on it. I had to move fast and wipe the scene, break her heart, send her running. It worked. Until now.

"They'll be here soon. How long till they bite?" I ask Bianchi, turning back to him.

We had been able to lure Don here too. I just made it seem like the Don was about to lose his very important shipment I had stolen at the docks earlier. He and some of his men are no doubt on their way now. What he doesn't know is that when he comes here, I'll let the real truth out.

The Don is coming to kill me. The Moretti's are coming to kill him.

"Hour, maybe less," he says, pocketing his phone. "Word's out. They'll come."

"Good. When they show, we hit them hard. No survivors."

He nods. "What about Cassian?"

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He's not my problem, yet. But if he tries to play hero, if he gets in my way, I won't hesitate. He was never meant to keep her. That ring on her finger is an insult, a lie she keeps telling herself. And when she sees how quickly her perfect world falls apart, she'll have no choice but to face the truth.

"If he gets in my way, he'll meet his end."

Bianchi shifts beside me. "You sure about this?"

"Never been more sure of anything in my life. They wanted answers," I murmur. "Let's give them something to find."

Bianchi signals our men waiting outside. Within minutes, the Morettis and Don will arrive, drawn in by the chaos, walking straight into the ambush we've set.

I check my gun, the weight of it grounding me. This ends tonight.

Selene doesn't know it yet, but I just decided her future for her.

Chapter 17

Selene

My head throbs as consciousness returns. The kitchen tile presses cold against my cheek, and copper fills my mouth where I bit my tongue. Cassian's footsteps echo somewhere in the house, punctuated by breaking glass.

The broken phone lies inches from my fingers, Sandro's voicemail still burning in my mind. I manage to press play again, needing to hear it one more time.

"I should have told you years ago." His voice breaks. "Everything you believe about that night is wrong. I took the fall because... because there are things you don't know about who you really are. About what your father did..."

The phone screen goes off.

What does he mean?

Rage propels me up. My legs shake as I stumble toward the living room, following the sound of destruction. The apartment is eerily silent, but the moment I step through the doorway, I find him.

Cassian stands amid the wreckage of his paintings, canvas shreds scattered like confetti. An empty whiskey bottle dangles from his fingers, his knuckles smeared with blood.

When he spots me, his lips twist.

"There she is. The princess who ruined everything." He hurls the bottle. It shatters against the wall beside my head. "The perfect setup, wasn't it? The struggling artist who just happened to catch the princess's eye."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ask your father." He hurls another bottle past my head. "He paid well for this performance."

Before I can process his words, his hand connects with my face again, harder this

time. Stars explode behind my eyes. “Cassian please stop this...”

“Don’t you fucking tell me what to do, you whore!” he screams.

I cough and struggle up. “Ok...I’m sorry...” I just need to get him to calm down so I can get out of here.

“I just want to know one thing. Was any of it real? Or was I just another puppet in your game?”

“You hit me, you drunk asshole. You don’t get to play victim.”

He lurches, staggering closer. “Victim? You picked him! Sandro! After all I did for you!” He laughs. “Hit you? You destroyed my life. Everything I worked for, gone because I was stupid enough to fall for you.”

“What are you talking about?”

I don’t see the next slap coming.

He lunges forward again, hand raised. Pain explodes across my face before I can block him. I stumble back, vision blurring.

Slowly, I lift my head. Cassian’s breathing hard, his face twisted with something worse than anger. Betrayal. Hatred. Despair.

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“Do you know what I gave up for you?” His voice is unhinged, teetering between a sob and a scream. “Do you have any idea what I had to do?”

“You had to do?” My voice shakes. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Before he can answer, the front door bursts open.

Everything happens at once.

Three men in black suits rush and then Cassian is being ripped away from me. He thrashes, screaming obscenities as they drag him across the room. He thrashes, but they're stronger, forcing him to his knees. A sharp cry rips from his throat when one of them drives a fist into his gut.

I barely register the movement behind them before he steps forward.

My father.

The world stops. The blood drains from my face.

He looks at me with something that isn't quite disappointment, but isn't surprise, either. Like he's known all along I'd end up here. Like he planned it.

“That's enough theater for one night.” My father's voice cuts through the chaos. He steps inside, immaculate in his tailored suit. “Hello, daughter.”

“What is this?” I demand, tasting copper.

He smiles, all predator. “The final act, cara mia. Where all the pieces come together. Starting with your precious Cassian, my gift to keep you distracted while I continued to work the Morettis over to my side. Did you enjoy falling in love with him? He played his part well. Amazing what a struggling artist will do for funding, isn’t it?”

The floor seems to tilt beneath me. “What?”

“Oh yes. Every ‘chance’ meeting, every shared moment... all orchestrated.”

“You’re lying.”

“Am I? Shall we discuss more lies? Like the story of your birth?” He pulls out a photo—old, creased—and tosses it at my feet. I pick it up, hands trembling. It’s Mom, young and smiling, with a man I don’t know. He’s got my nose, my jaw.

“That is Adriano Moretti, your real father.”

My stomach lurches. I shake my head, willing him to stop, to take it back, but he doesn’t. He steps closer, his presence suffocating, and tells me the truth.

The real truth.

I was never a Marconi.

“You see, cara mia,” my father continues, circling me like a shark, “you were never meant to exist. Your mother, Bianca, was already in love with another man long before her arranged marriage to me. That man? Adriano Moretti. A Moretti heir. They were together before and after her forced marriage, and you... you were the result of that affair. I mean I suspected. But he didn’t care, at first. After all, I married her for power, not love. And when she finally left me, taking you with her to be with Adriano, I saw it as treason and took you back.”

I feel sick. My hands shake at my sides. “You killed them.”

He tilts his head, unimpressed. “I did what was necessary. Your mother’s indiscretion with Adriano should have died with them. But you... you grew to look so much like them both.”

Rage burns through me. “That’s why you wanted me dead.” My voice is barely above a whisper. “Because I look like him. Because if the Morettis ever found out you were the one who killed Adriano—”

“They’d burn me to the ground,” he finishes easily. “Yes. And that’s exactly why I couldn’t allow you to live. I orchestrated another rival to take the fall for Adriano and your mother’s death. Then made it seem that your mother’s affair was with him and not Adriano. I actually made it seem like she was two timing, but that part wasn’t so hard since she was a whore anyways.”

He laughs before continuing.

“Then it all leads back to you being the product of that affair. I played the part of the heartbroken widower whose wife left him but couldn’t abandon an innocent child and took you in. Making it look like I didn’t really care that you weren’t mine but loved you anyways.

“Sadly, Adriano’s brother couldn’t do much when he died shortly after from drunk driving. Putting a dent in my plans. But the seed had already been sown. So, I had to wait for his stupid, reckless son to grow up. Do you know how hard it was living with you all those years? Hearing you call me ‘dad’...it fucking irritated me. But I was determined to see it through. And thankfully, when you were both of age, he was stupid enough to fall for my vices. Little whispers here and there and he came to me of his own accord.”

The room spins. “The Morettis...”

“Don’t they know they’re trying to kill their own blood?” He laughs, a low, twisted sound. “It was the perfect plan all along. I could have ended you any time. All those years, watching you sleep, waiting. I could’ve slipped something into your food and just watched you choke on your own blood. I was so damn close. But I needed to let it simmer. I wanted to send one final ‘fuck you’ to your whore of a mother and her lover, both rotting in their graves. I wanted them to roll in their graves all this while watching they way I neglected you as a child, yes, but I also wanted them to suffer. To know that their betrayal would echo even in death. Killing you myself would’ve been too easy. No, I wanted them to see you grow up, to see you have a life. To see you fall in love. And then, I wanted your life to end at the hands of your own flesh and blood, the very ones who should protect you. It would have been the sweetest revenge, a beautiful tragedy. You’d have been the final brunt of their betrayal to me, and they’d have known every agonizing moment of it.”

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“You’re a sick, sick man.”

“Irony, isn’t it? Edoardo was originally supposed to plot your death, not realizing you’re his cousin. Though I suppose family killing family is a time-honored tradition. But the bastard got greedy and wanted to wet his dick first.”

And like a flash I remember everything.

The Morettis had always been a threat, but this was different. This wasn’t about power plays or territory disputes. This was personal.

Edoardo Moretti was a pompous ass who wanted to control me.

He had always been too bold, too sure of himself. The way he looked at me at gatherings, the way he spoke about me when he thought I wasn’t listening. Like I was already his.

Now I understand why father played along, indulging the Morettis in their “discussions” about an arranged marriage. And I was commanded, never asked. Just expected to accept my brand new life.

I never thought much of it because after the day was done, I had Alessandro to see at night. He was all that mattered. He alone would be my true love.

But I didn’t know how far it had gone—until the night of the party.

That’s when I learned the truth.

The Morettis weren't just proposing an alliance. They had already sealed it.

A deal had been struck behind my back. I was to be handed over, married off, bound to Edoardo before the year was over. No say. No escape.

I had confronted him—angry, reckless, and twenty-one—and he had laughed.

“You should be grateful, Selene. I'm doing you a favor. Your father? He's tired of you. I'm the only reason you're not dead yet.”

I didn't understand that statement then. Now I do.

But back then, that's when it clicked.

It wasn't just about marriage. My father hadn't sold me off because I was valuable, but he had done it because he needed me gone.

Now I understand why Edoardo grabbed my wrist so hard and cornered me, trying to force his disgusting self on me, but I snapped.

So much so I didn't remember pulling the knife from his belt. Didn't remember the first stab. Only the wet, choking sound as he stumbled back and his blood bloomed across his suit.

Or how the second stab was deliberate. Because by the time I had let go of the knife, he was gone.

Breaking out of my reverie, I glare at him. “So the initial engagement with Edoardo I argued against...”

“A convenient way to keep you close while they planned your accident. After the

announcement, of course. Can't have the bride disappearing too soon." He pulls out his phone, showing me texts. "See for yourself. Edoardo was quite detailed in his plans."

Edoardo to Don: "Tonight. After the announcement. She won't see it coming."

Don: "Clean. No mess. I love her but she just reminds me so much of her mother. I think it will be better for everyone if this happens. "

Edoardo: "Of course. I must avenge my uncle."

My hands shake as I read messages discussing my death with clinical precision.

I wasn't supposed to leave that party alive.

My own father had agreed to it. At least who I thought was my father.

If the Morettis had gone through with their plan, the Marconi Don wouldn't have retaliated because he had been in on it.

All this while I thought I had acted in self-defense against a power-hungry rival. In reality, I had just unraveled a conspiracy that should have killed me.

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And if anyone found out, I wouldn't survive the fallout.

But then I remember why nothing happened. It was because of him.

The one person I hated all this while. Who'd wiped the scene. Staged the body, shattered the balcony glass to fake a break-in, and probably erased the phone messages. Who'd sent me downstairs before the body was discovered, told me to make sure I was seen somewhere else. And never to speak of it again. All to give a solid alibi.

And then somehow made the whole thing disappear.

Is that why he did that?

Because he knew if I kept asking questions, if I stayed close to him, I might find out the truth? I might put myself back in the crosshairs?

So he did the only thing that would push me away for good. Allowed me to walk in on him with another woman. Let me see the betrayal, let it break me in a way that would keep me away.

And when I confronted him, he'd twisted the knife.

"You were a childish distraction, Selene."

I know the whole truth now but I just have to ask.

“And Sandro? What part did he play in your game?”

“Sandro?” Father scoffs. “That fool spent years trying to outmaneuver me, building alliances, gathering evidence. He thought he could save you.” His smile turns cruel. “But I’ve always been ten steps ahead. You were not supposed to have returned just yet, but then I discovered the whole thing with Sandro and I had to act fast. Why do you think I arranged your return? With Cassian? I made the idiot guilt trip you into coming to seek for my blessing.”

Cassian lets out a strangled noise, still kneeling on the floor, held down by my father’s men. He doesn’t deny it. Doesn’t even look at me.

My father smirks. “He was just a desperate artist looking for a break. And all he had to do was make you fall in love with him.” He hums. “Though I must admit, I didn’t know about your involvement with Sandro. That was... unfortunate. I would have eliminated him much sooner.”

Something in me snaps.

Cassian lied to me. My father orchestrated every single move. Sandro—Sandro tried to protect me, but he never stood a chance.

Bile rises in my throat. “You knew. That night, when I told you about Edoardo...”

“Of course I knew but shrugged it off as nothing. Telling you Sandro would take care of it. I orchestrated everything. Your fear, your pain, all of it leading to this moment.” He spreads his arms wide. “The grand finale.”

“You’re a monster and sick.” I say, voice low, trembling. “You’d kill your own daughter?”

“You’re not my daughter,” he spits. “You’re a mistake. A Moretti stain I should’ve scrubbed out years ago. I’m a king. And you?” He steps closer. “You’re the mistake that could burn my kingdom down. No one can save you now. Not Sandro. Not the Morettis. Not even—”

I lunge at him, fists swinging, but one of his men grabs me, wrenching my arms back. I kick, thrashing, but he’s too strong. My father laughs, brushing off his coat.

“Pathetic. Just like your mother.”

“Let me go!” I shout, twisting hard. The guy grunts, loosening his grip just enough. Movement catches my eye. One of the guards shifts, his jacket opening just enough. The gun holstered at his side gleams in the light.

The guard never sees me coming. In one fluid motion, I grab the gun from the nearest guard’s holster. The weight feels like destiny in my hand as I aim at my father’s heart.

He freezes, eyebrows rising. “Now, now, piccola...”

“Stop talking.” My voice sounds strange to my own ears, calm despite the inferno raging inside me. “You’ve said enough.”

His eyes narrow. “You won’t—”

The gun roars.

Chapter 18

Alessandro

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 10:05 am

It's been a few minutes and I'm still waiting.

The gallery reeks of varnish and fresh paint, an undercurrent of something metallic staining the air. The art pieces mock me from their perches, pretty distractions meant to draw moths to the flame. I check my watch again. The Morettis will arrive soon, following breadcrumbs about a nonexistent shipment straight into my carefully laid snare.

My fingers brush the cold metal beneath my jacket. Everything is positioned exactly as planned, but my thoughts keep drifting to Selene. To last night.

A door creaks. Footsteps echo through the gallery's hollow spaces.

I stand in the shadows near the mezzanine, watching the men filter in below. The Morettis are careful, backs to the walls, hands twitching too close to their weapons. They know something isn't right, but greed trumps caution.

I count three. I expected more.

Bianchi's intel said they'd come sniffing around for a shipment that doesn't exist, a fabrication meant to dangle bait in front of their desperation. The Marconis have been closing in, and the Morettis are bleeding resources trying to keep up. That makes them reckless. And reckless men are easy to kill.

"Check the back rooms," a gruff voice commands. "That shipment has to be here somewhere."

I slip behind a marble sculpture, trying to slow down my heartbeats. This could go terribly wrong in one wrong move. Three sets of shoes scuff against hardwood. Amateur work, coming in blind like this. But desperation makes men stupid.

The first shot is clean. Straight through the throat. A wet gurgle, a heavy fall. His body crumples before his friends react. The second man spins, gun raised, but I'm faster. A shot to the kneecap drops him, and the next one ends it before he can scream.

The third—Giovanni Moretti, I recognize now—scrambles backward. “The bastard!” he screams. “Don Marconi was right about everything. About the girl—”

I advance, weapon raised, but he's already running. His words echo: “The Moretti bastard will pay! She'll pay!”

My blood turns to ice. They know about Selene already.

That bastard put everything on her.

Now they want to finish what Edoardo started. They do not know the real person who orchestrated this whole thing.

They know but not the whole of it.

I lunge forward, firing, but he's already past the gallery doors, stumbling into the night. Bianchi will handle it. I tell myself that, but my pulse is hammering too hard against my ribs. If they know who she is—if they're putting pieces together—I don't have time to let him run.

I turn, ready to chase, when a shuffling noise drags my attention to the left.

Cassian.

He stumbles in through the back entrance, leaving a trail of blood. His shirt is soaked, dark smears streaking down his arm. He's gasping, mumbling, hands shaking. When he lifts his head, his eyes are wild.

"I—" His breath hitches. "I fucked up."

I move before I think, gripping his collar, yanking him up until his toes barely scrape the floor. "Where is she?"

He chokes on a laugh, or maybe it's a sob. "Gone."

Something sharp twists in my chest. I slam him against the wall, rattling the frame of some worthless painting. "Where?"

His smile is red, teeth stained with blood. "Tried to stop her. Tried to stop him. The Don." His head lolls, eyes unfocused. "I loved her. I loved her, and she—"

"Where. Is. She?"

"I ran when she shot the gun. I left her with... the Don..." He coughs, red spittle on his lips. "Been working for him... watching her... but I fell in love. Wasn't supposed to happen."

"Focus." My fingers tighten. He gags. "What did you do?"

"Hit her." His laugh is broken glass. "Hit her good when I found out about you two. The Don will kill her anyway. Should've seen how she looked when—"

Something snaps inside me. I don't remember moving. One second, he's standing.

The next, he's on the floor, coughing up more blood, hands scrabbling for purchase as I drive my fist into his ribs. Again. Again.

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Then my fist connects with his face, next. Each impact is for every time he touched her, hurt her. My pulse pounds, drowning out reason. I think about Selene's voice, the way she looked at me, the way she always looks at me like maybe I'm more than this. More than a blade waiting to be buried in someone's throat. I promised her I wouldn't let the rage own me.

Cassian wheezes, barely conscious. The red haze nearly consumes me until I hear her voice in my memory: "You're more than your violence, Alessandro."

I stop, chest heaving. Cassian moans, barely conscious.

Cassian's blood drips onto the polished floor. "The Don..." he mumbles. "Gun... drove here... had to warn..."

I grab the accelerant I stashed earlier, methodically dousing the gallery's perimeter. The sharp chemical smell fills my lungs as I work. This place needs to burn, it needs to draw everyone here for what comes next.

"You really love her," Cassian slurs, spitting blood. "Should see... your face when... someone mentions her."

"Shut up." I drag him toward the exit, his dead weight slowing me down. Part of me wants to leave him here, let the flames claim him. But Selene's voice whispers in my head again: "Show me who you really are."

The first flames catch, hungry orange tongues licking up the walls. Soon the old building will be an inferno, a beacon in the night. The Morettis will come running to

their fallen. The Marconis will follow the smoke. And Selene...

I secure Cassian in my car, not too gently. The fire spreads faster now, consuming artwork worth millions. Money means nothing compared to keeping her safe. The Morettis know her secret. They'll try to use her, break her, claim her as their own.

I watch the blaze grow, planning my next moves. The game board has changed. Everyone will converge here soon, drawn by the flames like moths. When they do, I'll be ready. For Selene, I'll burn this whole city down if I have to.

Then, through the crackle and roar, I hear it.

My name.

Selene's voice.

"Alessandro!"

My heart stops. That voice—her voice—cuts through the roar of the flames. I spin around, and there she is, silhouetted against the burning night.

Chapter 19

Selene

Smoke fills my lungs as I sprint toward the burning gallery. The gun weighs heavy in my grip, still warm from taking down the Don's men. Flames lick up the historic brick walls, painting the night sky orange. My heart pounds against my ribs as I round the corner.

Through the haze from a distance, I spot two figures. Sandro drags Cassian's limp

body from flames and secures him in a lying down position, to the backseat of the car, but leaves the door open.. Without thinking, I charge forward.

“Alessandro!”

He spins and our eyes lock. It’s like five years of pain and confusion crash over me as I see the truth blazing in his expression.

“I got your message,” I choke out. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I doubted you.”

In three strides, he closes the distance between us. His hands cup my face and his thumbs brush away tears I didn’t realize were falling.

“Never apologize to me,” he whispers fiercely. “Not you. Never you.”

Our lips crash together in a desperate and healing kiss. I pour every ounce of regret and longing into it while clutching his shirt. He tastes like smoke and redemption.

“I will never let you go again,” Sandro vows against my mouth. “Never.”

A harsh laugh cuts through our reunion. Cassian pushes himself up on his elbows on the seat, blood trickling from his temple. “How touching. The street rat and the traitor, together at last.”

Red clouds my vision. I lunge for him, but Sandro catches my waist. “He’s not worth it.”

“Let me go!” I thrash in his grip. “This bastard had the guts to hit me! He lied about everything!”

“Your whole life is a lie, princess,” Cassian spits. “Daddy dearest wanted you dead

from the start. You're not even his blood."

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The truth slams once again into me like a physical blow. I shove away from Sandro, screaming until my throat burns raw. “I just can’t believe he would do that to me! It all makes sense now. All those times I wondered why he treated me that way. When he talked down to me. Made me feel like I constantly had to try so hard to meet his expectations. Everything... everything finally makes sense. Gosh, life really doesn’t give me a break does it? My father... you... these past five years...”

“Selene.” Sandro reaches for me, but I back away.

“Don’t!” The gun shakes in my grip. “I’m not even sure what to think of you. You let me believe you hated me. For years! I hate you for leaving me. Then hated myself for the longest thinking I did something wrong. That just like with my father, I’d never be enough.”

The flames roar closer. Sandro’s composure finally cracks. “I had to, Selene. It was the only way to keep you safe. To keep you alive, I had to take you out of the picture so he didn’t get suspicious. Being with you was too dangerous, he would have killed me and you without blinking an eye.” His voice breaks. “Do you think it didn’t kill me every single day?”

“Everything I did was for you,” Sandro continues with intensity. Heat from the surrounding flames makes sweat trickle down my neck. “Every mission, every sacrifice, every moment I had to watch you from afar.”

My finger tightens on the trigger. “You could have told me somehow. Found a way.”

“They watched your every move. Even while with your aunt. I couldn’t even take a

plane in that direction.” He takes a careful step forward, hands raised. “One slip, one wrong word, and the Don would have known. I couldn’t risk it. Not with your life.”

Cassian laughs fulling sitting upright now. “Such devotion. Tell her the rest, Sandro. Tell her how you stalked her for months before making your move. How you memorized her schedule, her habits...”

“Shut up!” I kick him hard in the ribs, satisfaction coursing through me at his grunt of pain.

“He’s right.” Sandro’s admission freezes me in place.

“So that time in my dad’s office when he said you’d looked familiar to him. It was true?” I ask.

Sandro nods. “Yes. We did meet once. He found me watching you after dropping you home one night. Asked me who I was but I did well to threaten him to never tell you if he wanted to see the next day.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. So, Sandro knew where I was all along? He never really abandoned me.

“I just knew I had to see you. Even if it would probably lead to your dad finding out. I had to take that chance. I had a mission in Africa that needed me to take a year to profile a client. I finished it without hassle under two and stayed the remaining months watching you. My life meant nothing until I found you. I couldn’t even function knowing the way I left things. I’ve always known where you were. I watched you paint for hours in that studio close to your aunt’s street, even though you were terribly bad at it. I don’t understand why you even kept going.”

I laugh. “Hey, I had limited things to pass for entertainment.”

“I noticed. I also saw that despite the menace you were for your aunt, you helped that homeless woman every Tuesday with groceries. Noticed how you always ordered your coffee black but added three sugars when no one was looking.”

I clean snot from my nose. “That’s... that’s creepy as hell.”

“I know.” He runs fingers through his ash-streaked hair. “I know I didn’t deserve to look for you. To even search for you like you were still mine to watch over. I know what I did to hurt you was wrong, is wrong. But everything about you has always pulled me in. I would do anything so long as I get to make you happy in the end. Your strength when your father tried to break you. Your kindness when the world gave you every reason to be cruel. The way you still see beauty everywhere, even in this darkness we live in. Your snarky but very true remarks about everything that crosses your eyes. You always give a piece of your mind, no matter the consequences. How you never let your challenges be an excuse to hurt people you care about. How despite being alone in your corner you show up when you’re supposed to, and never let it derail you from finding your own happiness.”

The gun lowers slightly. “Sandro...”

“I love every piece of you, Selene. The terrible artist. The fighter. The woman who can’t cook to save her life but tries anyway. The one who feels so alone but never stops trying to form connections with people she senses are like her. I love your rage and your compassion. Your scars and your smile. Everything.”

Tears blur my vision as flames dance at the edges of my peripheral vision. “Even the broken parts?”

“Especially those.” He steps closer. “Because they mirror my own. We’re both shattered, but our pieces fit together. I know I do not deserve a second chance but if you would let me show you just how beautiful our messed-up lives can get, I’ll never

stop trying to prove it to you.”

The gun clatters to the ground. I stumble forward into his arms just as multiple vehicles screech to a halt nearby. Doors slam. Footsteps thunder toward us.

Sandro’s phone then beeps with a message and I feel him reach for it to check. “Your father’s men, Moretti’s men will soon be here,” Sandro mutters against my hair. “At least fifty.”

“We’re trapped.” The fire has spread, blocking every exit.

He tilts my chin up, eyes reflecting the inferno around us. “I brought them here so we can put an end to this. I’ve been able to turn them against each other. We face this together this time. No more lies. No more separation.”

Heavy boots approach. Multiple weapons cock in unison.

I press closer to Sandro’s chest, feeling his heart race in time with mine. “Together,” I agree as flames and armed men close in from all sides.

The truth about my life may have burned everything to ash, but from these embers, something new ignites. Something real. Something ours.

Chapter 20

Alessandro

The heat is intense, and not just from the fire of the building in front of us. Every muscle in my body tightens as I stand, shielding Selene from the impending chaos. The Moretti family has arrived, their wrath a tangible force, driven by decades of vengeance. The Don's men, bloodthirsty and relentless, are equally enraged, and the entire atmosphere smells of ashes, gunpowder and betrayal.

"Stay behind me, Selene," I command, scanning the perimeter. Her hand grips my arm tightly, a fleeting moment before the storm.

My mind races through every possibility, every calculation I meticulously made over the years. Overthrowing Don Marconi was never about brute strength alone; it was a game of patience, strategy, deception, and above all—timing.

For five long years, I navigated treacherous waters, carefully selecting allies from among Marconi's own rivals. Men who hated the Don as fiercely as I did. Yet betrayal lurked around every corner, and loyalty was a fragile currency. To outmaneuver a man like Marconi, I had to play smarter, sharper. I created two separate lists of powerful contacts, men equally influential and dangerous. One list I courted openly, baiting Marconi into exposing his spies and traps. As expected, sabotage followed, proving my suspicions correct.

The second list I approached differently and quietly, anonymously, yet with clarity. A single, powerful message conveyed through clandestine channels: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. The mutual hatred for Marconi was a common ground, strong enough to unite bitter rivals. Trust was thin, but necessity forged alliances where

friendship never could.

Tonight, those carefully cultivated alliances come alive. I glance toward the entrance as Bianchi and my reinforcements surge in, powerful and ruthless just exactly as planned. These were products of years of strategic maneuvering. Each man fighting beside me tonight does so not from blind loyalty, but because their hatred for Marconi eclipses their doubts.

The first shots ring out, and I move, a well-oiled machine built for survival. My focus is singular: keep her alive.

“You killed my my cousin!” Giovanni Moretti’s voice thunders through the gallery. “Made us believe he died in some petty mob war and we ended an entire lineage. All while his daughter lived under your roof!”

Don Marconi laughs and it is so hollow. “Adriano was a prick who died way too easily. Thought he could steal my wife, my power. The fool deserved what he got.”

“She’s our blood!” Another Moretti charges forward, fury incarnate. “You kept her from us for over twenty years!”

“Your precious Adriano’s bastard?” Don spits. “I should have drowned her at birth. Instead, I raised her, watched her grow into his mirror image. Every day, a reminder of his betrayal.”

Selene’s fingers dig into my arm. “You murdered my father. My mother.”

“And you murdered my blood,” Giovanni snarls, gun trained on Selene. “Edoardo was meant to finish what his father couldn’t start. And I wasn’t supposed to interfere in all of this because it wasn’t my place but I’m here now to avenge their deaths.”

“Edoardo was a rapist piece of shit,” I cut in, voice sharp as steel. “He got exactly what he deserved.”

The Don’s laugh echoes again. “Such loyalty, Sandro. All these years, plotting against me. Building your little army. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

“You noticed nothing,” I reply coldly. “Too busy playing your games, sacrificing your own daughter.”

“She was never mine!” His composure finally cracks. “And now the Morettis can have what’s left of her. After I finish what I started twenty years ago.”

The first shot splits the air. I move fast, shoving Selene behind a pillar of a nearby abandoned building as bullets spray every where. My men engage, precise and deadly. The Morettis scatter, taking cover, some running into the building we take cover at, and returning fire at both us and the Don’s crew.

The Moretti and Don’s men collide in a bloody, violent dance, and I plunge into the fray. My movements are swift, calculated. I disarm one attacker, twisting his wrist until the bones crunch. A swift knee to his face ensures he won’t get up again. Another man falls victim to a brutal elbow to the throat.

As I clear a path on one end, Bianchi and my reinforcements stayed close behind and attack. It’s a calculated risk bringing them here, but I’ve spent years weaving this web of alliances. We fight with ruthless efficiency, each kill pushing our enemies back. But they keep advancing and run inside further inside the building.

Blood spatters across marble floors. Bodies fall. And from one corner of the fight, we hear a beep before an explosion happens and we duck. It takes out one side of the building and a second the fire roars louder, consuming priceless furnitures and worthless men alike. Through smoke and chaos, I catch glimpses of Selene fighting. She takes

down one of the Don's men with brutal efficiency, her mother's daughter to the core.

A bullet whizzes past my ear. I duck, roll, come up firing. Two more Morettis drop. Bianchi appears at my flank, providing cover as we push toward the back exit.

"Alessandro! Behind you!" Selene's voice cuts through the noise. I pivot, just in time to see Cassian crawling through the wreckage, gun in hand.

I spin, furious. Cassian stands, trembling, gun shaking in his hand. "You destroyed everything!" he screams.

There's no time to react as his shot grazes my shoulder, a searing line of pain.

"Bianchi, cover me," I instruct, advancing on Cassian. He's screaming, a man desperate for a retribution he'll never achieve. I disarm him, my movements a blur. I rush him, grabbing his wrist, twisting hard until it snaps. Cassian cries out, weapon clattering to the ground.

With a satisfying crack, his arm breaks under my grip.

"You think you can take her from me?" I snarl, kicking him in the ribs, having him gasping in the dust. "I should've broken you sooner," I hiss and he collapses, clutching his shattered arm. "I showed you mercy just because I thought you'd realize when your time was up and make yourself scarce, Cassian. But if you reject that mercy, then suffer my wrath." I deliver another vicious kick to his ribs. "I should have ended this long ago. You're nothing. Never show your face around her again."

I leave him there, watching him writhe before turning away. Blood soaks through my sleeve as Selene calls my name sharply. I turn just as she swings heavy metal into the head of a Moretti charging from behind. He collapses immediately.

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“Not bad,” I say, breathing heavily.

“I can handle myself,” she retorts, eyes fierce despite the panic.

Together, we press forward, my men pushing the attackers back. Fire rips through the second building that dayflames climbing the walls, smoke clouding my vision.

Bianchi shouts, “Boss, let’s go!”

“No, take the men and get out of here. We’ll converge later.”

He nods and rounds them and they make their way through the back.

“We have to move,” I shout, grabbing Selene’s hand. The building groans around us, beams cracking.

The fire spreads, beams collapsing around us, cutting off escape routes. “Selene, this way!” I shout, grabbing her hand. We move toward the back exit from where my men left, but the path is obstructed. Out of the smoke, Don Marconi steps from the shadows, gun raised, eyes cold with fury.

“You should’ve died long ago,” he spits at Selene, voice trembling with disgust. “Just like your whore of a mother. I’m done waiting for your death to be part of some grand scheme. I’m taking you out now!”

His gun is aimed at Selene, his face twisted in a mask of fury. “I guess I just have to do this the way I should have the minute I found out you were a bastard,” he spits,

finger tightening on the trigger.

I step swiftly between them, meeting his stare unflinchingly. “You’ll have to kill me first.”

My words hang heavy between us, a promise I’m fully prepared to keep. Death has always been my shadow, but tonight, I’ll embrace it gladly. For her.

Don Marconi’s eyes flash dangerously, his finger squeezing the trigger.

“Your move, old man,” I challenge. “But you only get one shot.”

The Don’s finger twitches on the trigger. “You disappoint me, Sandro. I made you what you are.”

“You made me nothing,” I reply, tracking his subtle movements. “Everything I am, I built myself. While watching you destroy everyone around you.”

A beam crashes nearby, showering sparks. Through the chaos, I hear Selene’s steady breathing behind me. The Don’s eyes move between us, calculating. His legendary control finally cracks.

“You ungrateful slut!” He fires wildly at Selene. I tackle him, the bullet embedding in my shoulder instead of her heart. We crash to the ground, trading blows. His age shows in his movements, but desperation makes him dangerous.

“Alessandro!” Selene’s warning comes just as Giovanni Moretti emerges from the smoke with his gun raised.

“Family takes care of family,” he announces coldly. His shot catches the Don in the chest. Blood blooms across expensive silk.

The Don laughs, choking on his own blood. “You think... this ends anything? The girl... killed Edoardo. Blood... demands blood.”

“Edoardo was a monster,” Selene steps forward. “Like you. I chose my own family.”

Giovanni considers her words. “You have Adriano’s spirit. But you killed Edoardo.”

“Edoardo tried to rape me,” Selene states flatly. “Do you think your cousin, Adriano have wanted that for his daughter?”

Something shifts in Giovanni’s expression. The gun lowers slightly. “No. I guess he wouldn’t.”

More beams crash around us. The building groans, ready to collapse. I grab Selene’s hand. “We need to move. Now.”

“This isn’t finished,” Giovanni warns, but steps aside. “Blood still calls for blood.”

“Then come find us,” I challenge. “But tonight, we walk away.”

Giovanni nods and soon disappears as he tries to find his men in the haze to escape.

But we don’t see the next thing coming. Like a phantom from the embers, still grasping for air with the hole in his chest, Don levels at Selene’s chest as he coughs blood trying to talk. “You’re coming with me, bitch...”

With no hesitation, I step forward again.

Chapter 21

Selene

The shot rings out. But instead of pain, I feel a body slam into mine. Sandro. His weight knocks me sideways as crimson blooms across his shirt. Without hesitation, I snatch his fallen gun and fire. One shot. My father staggers, confusion etched into his features.

Then another. So close to where Giovanni shot him and blood bursts across his chest.

He collapses, knees hitting the floor first. There's no satisfaction, just cold relief as his body slumps, lifeless.

"Sandro!" I drop to my knees, gripping his arm. His face is pale beneath the soot. Flames lick the walls around us, hungry and unforgiving. Pieces of the ceiling crash down, exploding into sparks. The heat presses in like suffocation.

"We need to get you out of here." Sandro's voice comes out rough, pained. "The structure won't hold. I can stand."

I loop his arm over my shoulders, ignoring his grunt of protest. "Shut up and lean on me."

With effort, he leans heavily on me, and we stagger toward the only window that

hasn't been taken up by the fire. Smoke burns my lungs, blurring my vision. Debris rains down as we stumble through burning hallways. The building groans, timbers splintering overhead. Somewhere in the chaos, I hear faint voices either from the Moretti men trapped or fleeing, I can't tell. Cassian could be among them, but he was too damn hurt to have not been trapped under the rubble.

"Leave me," Sandro mutters. "Save yourself."

"Not happening." I tighten my grip, half-dragging him toward the exit. "You don't get to play hero then check out."

Fresh air hits like a punch when we finally break free. We collapse on wet grass as the building caves in behind us, sending sparks spiraling into the night sky. Sandro's breathing comes shallow, his shirt soaked through.

Sirens wail distantly, barely audible over the roar of fire behind us. Sandro collapses onto the pavement, groaning. I drop beside him, heart hammering, hands trembling as I press down on his wound.

"Stay awake," I snap at him, terrified by how weak his pulse feels under my fingertips.

He coughs and laughs bitterly. "After everything, you're still giving orders."

"Shut up." My voice cracks, betraying me. Tears blur my vision, mixing with sweat and soot. "Just shut up and keep breathing."

His hand covers mine, warm despite everything. "You're worth it, Selene. I'd take that bullet again. Every time."

My throat tightens, anger and gratitude tangled together. "You idiot. Don't ever do

that again.”

His fingers find my face, leaving smears of ash and blood. Then a small, tired smile pulls at his lips. “Can’t promise.”

“Come on, I need to take you somewhere and treat that,” I say, hauling him upright again. We need shelter, a place no one will think to look, especially the police. We cannot go to the hospital for now so as not to gather suspicion.”

“There’s a house nearby,” Sandro says, struggling to sit up. “My old apartment.”

Each step is agony, for him physically, for me watching him suffer. The streets blur past as I focus on keeping us both upright. Three blocks feel like thirty before we reach a nondescript building.

“Third floor,” he rasps. The elevator’s out of order, because of course it is.

By the time we stumble into his apartment, Sandro can barely stand. The emptiness hits me immediately as I scan through to see the apartment is barely furnished, so hollow, like a place waiting indefinitely for life to happen.

“Home sweet home,” he murmurs weakly, eyes moving around. “Always wanted to bring you here...but I never managed to live here myself.”

“Thank God you didn’t,” I tease gently, masking the tightness in my throat. “Your taste is terrible.”

A soft, painful laugh escapes him, quickly turning into a grimace. “Still kicking me when I’m down, huh? So typically you.”

I guide him carefully into the bathroom, peeling away his blood-soaked shirt. My

breath catches as there's so much blood, but at least the bullet passed clean through. Lucky, if you could call this luck.

"First aid kit's under the sink," he mutters, leaning heavily against the cold tiles.

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I drop to my knees beside him, using my own shirt to gently wipe away the blood and grime from his face. For once, his eyes aren't guarded, they're raw, open, and deeply haunted.

"Forgive me," he whispers, his voice ragged and small. "For every lie, for hurting you the way I did, for every damn mistake I've made."

My fingertips lightly trace his bruised jaw, emotions knotted painfully within me. "I should hate you." My voice trembles.

His eyes burn into mine. "Do you?"

"No," I admit softly, throat tightening. "And that scares me more than anything."

His hand comes up, fingers threading through my hair, pulling me close. The kiss is desperate, fierce, tasting of smoke, regret, and the bitter tang of blood. I melt into it, clinging to him, before forcing myself back, my heart pounding violently.

"Let me finish this," I whisper shakily.

I work swiftly but methodically, cleaning his wound and bandaging him tightly, my hands steadier than my heart. When it's done, relief washes over me as he's alive, still breathing, though pale and weak.

I help him to the couch and search the cabinets for anything edible. Oddly, everything seems fresh, newly stocked.

Noticing my confusion, Sandro murmurs, eyes half-closed, “I wasn’t lying. I always imagined us here. This was the first place I bought with my own money, dreaming you’d make it ours one day. Since we had your first time at the villa, I wanted to do something even better for you. To show how serious I was about you. I was going to tell you at the party...but things didn’t exactly go as planned.”

A tender warmth blossoms deep within my chest, slowly unfurling into something almost painful in its beauty. He had planned for us, dreamed of us, long before everything fell apart, long before I made choices that twisted and tore at the fabric of our lives. Before I took Edoardo’s life and set our worlds ablaze. Sandro had envisioned a future, stubbornly hopeful, carefully crafted against all odds and despite every harsh reality. Even with my father’s calculated moves to pawn me off back then, Sandro had seen past the barriers, the battles, the betrayals. He’d imagined us together, not as pieces on someone else’s chessboard, but as something genuine, something real.

He wanted us.

My heart swells and aches with that realization, the profound simplicity of being wanted, chosen, not for power or convenience, but purely out of love.

Just like he always has.

“I would never have forgiven myself if you’d died tonight,” I say quietly, swallowing hard.

He meets my eyes, intensity blazing through his exhaustion. “Again I’ll say this. Worth it. Always worth it.”

I walk back and sit next to him, the reason I was looking for something for him to eat slipping from my mind entirely. His fingers curl around my wrist, sending a shock of

raw, primal desire through me. This time, I don't hesitate. I press my mouth to his, urgent and hungry, matching the desperation in his touch. We kiss for what feels like forever, lost in the heat of it, before I finally pull back, breathless, and beg him to get some rest. Reluctantly, he complies.

I lay by his side, my fingers running through his hair, soothing him until I'm sure he's asleep. But sleep soon claims me as well.

The next day, I wake to find him still sleeping peacefully beside me. I don't know what time it is, but it feels like we've been asleep for almost twenty-four hours. My mind stirs with curiosity, trying to piece together the hours we've lost in a haze of exhaustion and passion. I glance around, unsure of where to check the time.

I stand up, my feet meeting the cool floor, and walk over to the window. The curtains are thin, frayed at the edges, and barely block the weak light from outside. I pull them back, and peek out, hoping to catch a glimpse of anything that might give me some sense of the hour.

I get distracted, watching two cats play near a garbage can in the alley below, completely unaware of the world beyond their small, insignificant fight. The sight almost brings a smile to my lips, but the moment is interrupted by a faint rustling sound from the couch.

I turn, and to my surprise, I see him awake, his eyes heavy but alert, silently gesturing for me to come closer. His body is still marked with the remnants of his injuries, but the pain that had tortured him yesterday is less visible now, as though he's masking it with sheer willpower. He's something beyond human, something almost otherworldly, and the thought makes my heart race. This man—he's not really of this earth.

“Come here,” he says and jerks me to him. It’s not a plea but a command, dripping with possession. “Please...Selene,” he breathes against my lips.

“We shouldn’t, you’re hurt—”

“Shut up.” He moves me to straddle his lap, careful of his wound. “I don’t want to wait any longer to have you. I need this. Need you.”

Our coupling is frantic, raw hands grasping, bodies melding. Every kiss feels like forgiveness, every touch like absolution. We’re both broken, both healing, both alive against impossible odds.

I want to do this right this time, we both need to heal, we need to determine what this whole run down mean for us, but I follow him blindly because it’s Sandro, and because I’ve allowed myself to understand that I’ll never be able to forget him—his scent, his violence, his fucking grip on my soul.

“Ah, my love, I still can’t believe you’re here. You’re here. God—I...I...fuck!”

I don’t quite understand the reason for his stuttering and the way his wild eyes can’t seem to devour me as fast as he craves. I’m only aware of his hands, rough and soft on my skin, clawing at me like I’m his last lifeline, and the ragged breathing tearing from his chest. He smells of smoke and granite and patchouli, and while one part of my brain, the fundamentally rational one, screams not to indulge in the way he smells, the other part of me falls through, drowning in him.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 10:05 am

I inhale him and feel myself go weak inside, my core clenching with sick need.

He all but pulls me to a room of the house, this part I notice just has some materials inside. The other rooms are empty. There's a charred crate by the door when we reach. He pushes me against it roughly, then lets me go and balls his hands into fists, trembling with barely-leashed hunger. I see the blood first before the feral, bottomless starvation in his eyes.

"Fuck, I forgot I had no bed put in yet."

"You're bleeding again, Sandro—"

"I know but I fucking need you, Selene!" He growls, voice guttural, like a predator snapping its jaws. "You deserve so much better than an old couch or against a crate of some forgotten apartment."

I have about a million things to tell him, all of which end with the fact that I hate him still, but after what I've just experienced, after all that I've just seen happen, I'm in no mood to say the words. Instead, I settle in the near awkward silence between us for a while before speaking again.

"What's going through your mind right now, Sandro?"

He blanches. Flips a bloody hand through his hair and groans, a low, primal sound that vibrates through me. "All through the fight, I kept praying that nothing happened to you."

“But you never pray.”

“That’s the thing, isn’t it? I never pray, and yet it’s the first thing I did.”

It takes me a while to fully grasp what he’s saying, and that when he says he prayed for my survival, he’s indirectly telling me I’ve become his addiction, his weakness, his fucking obsession carved into his bones.

And at this moment I know the right thing to say.

“I need you too, Sandro. Always have. Always will. Now take me.”

He pulls me to him, hard, before crushing his lips to mine, a brutal claim that steals my breath. I taste blood, like rust, from the cut on his lower lip, cool and twisted with his heat. I grab a fistful of his hair, yank him closer, and kiss him back, desperate and filthy. The kiss is open-mouthed and raw, his tongue thrusting into me, twirling inside my mouth. It’s like he’s devoting himself to dragging me to the edge of an orgasm with just his lips and teeth.

But he breaks it long enough to rasp, voice thick with lust, “Your lips are the most obscenely delicious thing I’ve ever tasted, Selene. Fuck, I could eat you alive.”

Then he’s back on my lips again, tugging and nipping, splitting me wide open for his taking, his tongue fucking my mouth like he’s starving for it. I wrap my hand around his neck to guide him, to pull him deeper, and Sandro hums his arousal into me, a low, dirty sound that makes my thighs clench.

“I need to be inside of you right this second!” he groans loudly, voice cracking with animal need. “Gonna fuck you ‘til you can’t breathe without me.”

The animalistic urgency in his breathless kisses and the way he takes over, thrusting into my mouth, owning me like this is to be our very last kiss, ignites fear in

me—fear and a sick, pulsing want. I can tell myself that I hate him, and I might mean it, but leaving him, leaving his kisses and touches, can never happen. I'm his prisoner, his junkie, his prey.

I am tied down to him, shackled by my own twisted desire.

He grabs me by my butt and lifts me, rough hands digging into my flesh, hooking himself between my open legs while standing. He works on his belt so quickly I have no time to anticipate, no time to brace for the violation I crave. Sandro nudges my panties to the side with a snarl and slides in, in one fell thrust, splitting me open. He grunts, a savage sound, as I moan loudly at the impact, my body shuddering, and for a brief moment, we both go still, locked in the depravity of it.

He fills me up completely. He's hard inside of me, so thick and unrelenting. This position has him reaching deep, so deep I feel him in my fucking soul, and I'm clawing at his shoulders and back when he begins moving, nails raking his skin, marking him as mine too.

It's rough sex, nothing like we've done before, pure, unfiltered filth. He fucks me now without restraint, pounding into me like he's trying to break me, and I meet his thrusts with the same raw, unhinged need, my hips rolling to take him deeper.

"Mmmm...oh...oh...Sandro..." I moan loudly, voice wrecked, dripping with submission.

He goes faster, panting, "We belong together, Selene, say it. Say you agree with me."

I'm panting too, feeling the pure ecstasy ride through my body, a tidal wave of heat and shame, but even then, when the words come out, they're not what he wants to hear. "I don't want to just be your fucking toy anymore. I mean it. You tell me everything. No matter what!"

“Of course, baby. I promise. And you’re my goddamned soul!” he snarls, voice thick with possession. “My filthy, perfect ruin.”

I suck in a breath, choking on it. “You’re still a bastard.”

He tightens his hold on my hips, fingers bruising, and thrusts harder, slamming into me like he’s punishing me for it. I groan out, feeling like I might rip open, my body trembling on the edge of collapse. “You’re still here, baby. That’s right, you chose me... you can’t fucking quit me.”

He uses his teeth to graze my neck, biting down hard, and I burst, shattering around him, my cunt clenching him tight. “Yeah, I...I chose you. It’s you... it’s you, Sandro, you sick fuck.”

“That’s right,” he grunts, feral and triumphant. “You’re my greedy little whore for life!”

He goes still for a second, still panting, chest heaving, before thrusting one more time, deep and brutal, and releasing inside of me, hot and claiming. I’m still holding on to his neck, still trapping him to my body, my legs locked around him like I’ll never let go, and he takes care of my needs, grinding into me until I’m whimpering, spent.

“I love you, Selene,” he whispers, and then he sets me down, his hands lingering like he’s scared I’ll vanish. It’s the first time he’s said those words to me in a long time, and when I look in his eyes, I realize he means it, that it’s like a curse he can’t escape. “I don’t expect you to say the same... not right now, anyway. But I promise you that I’m going to make you love me again, and I’m going to spend the rest of my life proving to you that I love you and I’m never backing out again. You’re mine to worship, to ruin, to keep.”

I feel relief wash over me, mingling with the filth of what we’ve just done. I smooth

over my dress, go on tiptoes, and kiss the hell out of him, claiming him back, my tongue tangling with his in a messy, needy clash. I chose him, and that's all that matters to me—our mutual descent into this twisted, unbreakable hell.

“Yes,” I murmur, resting my head on his chest. “I’m here.” I’ve loved you all along, dummy.

But I’m going to make him work to hear that part. On his knees.

THE END