



King (Shattered Pieces #1)

Author: *Hannah Rio*

Category: Urban

Description: Giovanni

I loved her in secret. I buried her in silence.

Now, she's back with the one thing I can't deny—my son.

Zina appears at my wife's funeral like a ghost from hell with a boy who has my eyes.

She says she wants justice. She wants me to accept him.

But I know she wants power.

She's poison in a black dress. And I crave every damn drop.

I can't think straight around her—her scent in my sheets, her fire in my veins.

Her scent haunts me. Her body still begs for mine.

Zina wants the kingdom I built...and I want her.

If I'm not careful, she'll take it. Piece by piece.

Zina

I was his wild obsession. His hidden sin.

I loved him, but SHE wore his ring.

Giovanni Rivas swore he loved me. Then he left me to rot in silence.

I disappeared—pregnant, heartbroken, and erased.

Now his wife is gone, and I'm done hiding.

But this time, I'm not his mistress—I'm his reckoning.

I want what was promised to me long ago—my place beside him.

I see the way he looks at me...he remembers my taste.

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

ONE

giovanni

My beautiful Bella is dead.

I've loved her since we were teenagers.

Decades ago. A lifetime.

She's spent every day at my side, committed to me, the perfect wife and mother.

And now she's gone, and the world is cold and empty without her.

I don't know how I'm supposed to carry on. She took care of me in ways that no one else has ever done.

The church is heavy with tension as people move quietly towards the open casket to say their last goodbyes.

The only sound is a methodical beat of rain against the stained glass windows as a storm beats against the side of the church.

I walk slowly towards the ornate, hand carved, mahogany box holding my wife's dead body. Gold inlays curve in delicate floral patterns over the side of the coffin.

From here, I can't see inside.

My brain and my heart are at war. One wants to look at her, to capture one last image of her beautiful face. But the other is warning me, screaming in fact, that it isn't her, her soul is long gone, and I don't want to see the lifeless, pale emptiness of whatever remains.

Whatever is in that casket—is not my Bella. It's not my wife.

My sons shift in a line behind me, their heads bowed in grief. They are quiet. Silent and numb.

Santino, my oldest, reaches out and squeezes my shoulder as I step close to the coffin, staring inside -

“She loved you, dad.” He whispers.

At twenty-four years old, he is a strong young man with a fearless heart.

One day, he will take over my kingdom and rule over everything I've built in this dark, underground world. I am a king without a queen.

My heart clenches tight in my chest.

Bella. She could be sleeping. She looks so peaceful. I can't help myself. Impulse takes over and I reach out and brush my fingers over her cheek.

Regret shoots through me. I draw my hand back quickly, as though I've been stung by the cold, rubbery feeling of her flesh.

“Wherever your mother is - I hope she is happy.” I say, my voice sounding harsh and hollow.

Santino doesn't say anything. He steps up to say goodbye to his mother as I move away, wiping my hand on my pants to take away the memory of that touch. The foreign sensation of it against my skin.

One by one the people who knew Bella take a moment at her coffin, looking down at her empty shell, they cry, whisper things, then find a seat in the rows of wooden chairs positioned around her, and the forest of blue flowers at her side.

Blue was her favorite color.

I clear my throat, standing at the podium, trying to ease the thick lump sitting at the back of my throat away so that I can speak with authority.

“Bella—”

I take a deep breath.

“Bella was an incredible woman. She was the pillar of this family. She was my strength when I needed strength, and my heart when I needed love. She was magnificent and kind. She was the perfect wife. The perfect mother. The perfect friend to those who knew her.”

Murmurs of agreement breeze through the crowd of people listening, watching me with stoic eyes.

“Bella, the mother of my children, left this world three days ago and while she is no longer with us in the flesh - she is with us, a piece of her in each of our souls, engraved into our memories forever.”

Three days.

The nights since she passed have been too long and too cold. The bed has been empty, something I've not used to, and never thought I would need to be.

It was only this morning, for the first time, that I referred to her in the past tense. It's taken me a long time to accept the truth—that she's gone.

I'm still struggling to wrap my head around, not seeing her smiling face in the kitchen every morning or finding her curled up on the sofa in the library, reading in the afternoon sun.

She was too young.

But the cancer drained her. Slowly, day by day, it took from her until there was nothing left but a shell of who she used to be. her pain was horrifying to witness.

Her death is a torture in my soul, but also a relief to no longer see her in that pain.

I look up at the waiting faces in the crowded church and realize I haven't spoken for a long time.

"Bella." I stammer. But my throat closes, and I can't say another word.

Santino steps closer to me, gently pushing me away from the podium. With incredible strength, he takes my place and continues.

"My mother was my guiding light—" he talks and I turn my face down to the ground to hide my tears.

After the eulogies, we are all standing outside in the heavy torrents of rain. Black umbrellas form a canopy above us as we watch her coffin slowly sink into the earth, swallowed up in a dark hole. I can't begin to understand any of this.

I'll never see her again.

My mind taunts me, and I pull my eyes from the morbid scene, up towards the trees in the distance on the far side of the graveyard. Searching for something green, something alive and beautiful.

A figure stands alone, close to the crowd, but not part of it.

My heart stops cold in my chest.

Zina.

What is she doing here?

It's been sixteen years since I last saw her and of all the days in all the world for her to come back - why would she show up at my wife's funeral? She has to know she won't be welcome.

I stare at her, dressed in black, with a boy standing at her side. How old is he? Fourteen? Fifteen?

Sixteen?

Why does the boy look so familiar?

Anger spikes inside me. It's disrespectful of her to show up today. I drag my eyes off her and my mouth pulls tight.

"Who is that?" I hear Romeo asking Santino in a low whisper.

"I don't know." He whispers back.

Santino turns towards me with questioning eyes. I shake my head.

Not now.

When the time comes, I throw a handful of dirt onto to the top of her coffin, along with a single red rose, then I walk away from her for the last time, back into the warmth of the church building and rich scents of coffee and food that the Nona's have been preparing for days.

"I'm so sorry for your loss." I've heard it a thousand times today. I nod, taking my friend's hand and shaking it. "Thank you, Georgia." I grumble.

He moves aside and the next person takes his place. "I'm sorry. She was wonderful."

"Thank you, Amelia."

When Zina steps forward and holds her hand out towards me, I take it in slow motion. "I'm sorry for your loss, Giovanni." She says, almost in a whisper.

Next to me Santino is standing straight as a nail, glaring at her as though he can sense the trouble she brings.

My words are stuck in my throat.

"This is my son." Zina says gesturing towards the boy. "Be polite, Guido." She nudges him gently. He's staring at me with wide eyes, filled with shock and wonder.

He holds out his hand and shakes mine. "I'm sorry for your loss." He murmurs, then pulls his hand away.

Why does he look so familiar?

“What are you doing here, Zina?” I growl under my breath. “You shouldn’t have come.”

She smiles tightly. “It’s been a long time, Giovanni. I thought we could move past the hostility.”

I shake my head. “You need to leave.”

“I need to speak with you.”

She’s holding up the line of family and friends who want to wish me well and share their heartfelt words.

I glance towards Santino, who senses my annoyance and discomfort.

He takes Zina’s arm, pulling her away with a rough tug. “My father needs space. And he told you to leave.” He says.

Zina yanks her arm away, standing her ground. She glares at Santino before turning to me again. “I will be here. When you’re ready, please take a moment to speak with me before you go.” She says, polite but firm.

I clench my jaw, not saying anything.

She’s causing a scene. Even though she’s being subtle and quiet, people have noticed the tension and they’re all watching closely to try to understand what is going on.

Santino takes her arm again. This time, she let him pull her away from me. The boy follows her quietly, looking uncomfortable and out of place.

The next person who steps up to speak to me looks more curious than lost in grief.

This annoys me.

They quickly shake my hand, noticing my glare, muttering something about my loss before they hurry away.

For the rest of the afternoon I speak with my family and friends, the people who have come to say goodbye to my beautiful wife, and while I am drifting through this nightmare - my eyes keep drifting towards Zina and her son, Guido .

“Dad, do you want me to have them removed?” Santino leans close and whispers to me.

“No, leave them. Everyone has a right to say goodbye.”

“Don’t get the feeling that she’s here to say goodbye to mom.” He huffs.

“Son, I said leave it.” I snap.

He pulls his mouth tight and nods.

“Where is Dante?” I ask about my youngest son because I’ve hardly seen him since this morning when we left the estate.

“He’s not doing well today. He’s struggling with all of this.” Santino says.

“Go check on him. You boys need to be there for each other through this. You will each experience grief in your own ways - but understand that you are all hurting the same.” I tell him, wrapping one hand over the side of his neck. My son. My oldest, strongest son. With the heart of a warrior.

I gently slap his cheek and he smiles sadly.

“I’ll look after both of them, dad. You don’t have to worry about us.”

“I will always worry about you. It is my job to worry about you.”

A loud scuffle breaks out behind us and I spin to see Dante pushing Guido , Zina’s boy.

“Why are you here?” he shouts. “Who are you? Why are you here?”

Zina steps in between the two boys. Guido is younger than Dante, but they are almost the same height. Dante’s eyes are filled with rage, the only emotion that might distract him from his grief, as he tries to push Zina away too. She grabs his wrists and forces him to look at her.

“Dante, stop this. Your mother would not want this.”

“What do you know about my mother? Who the hell are you?” he shouts again.

Everyone in the room is watching and a heated murmur of questions begin to flurry over the surface of the room. Who is she? Who is the boy? What is going on? Was Giovanni having an affair? Why have we never seen her before?

“Enough.” I shout over the noise. “Stop this immediately.”

Dante ignores me and pushes the boy again, so I storm over to him, grab him by the collar, and drag him aside. “This is not how we behave.” I snarl at him, but my heart aches to see the swollen redness of his eyes and the pain drowning him.

Grabbing him into a tight hug, I hold him against my chest, pressing his head against me as I whisper. “It’s going to be ok, Dante.”

He breaks down against me and sobs, heavy, aching sobs of grief.

“She’s gone, dad.”

“I know.”

“She’s never coming back.”

“I’m so sorry, son.”

Santino gently pries Dante from my arms and guides him out of the main hall, onto the front step, to watch the rain and breathe some fresh air.

I turn towards Zina, angry and glaring coldly at her. “What are you trying to do?” I snap.

“I just need to talk to you, Giovanni.” She says quietly.

“And you honestly thought this was the right time?”

“It’s the only time. I’ve waited sixteen years.”

I shake my head. The only way to get rid of her is to listen. I gesture for her to follow me as I walk briskly towards a private room at the back of the hall.

Zina takes her son’s hand and pulls him to follow her.

Romeo runs outside to tell his brothers what is happening.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

TWO

zina

I came here knowing that it would not be easy. Knowing that Giovanni would not be happy to see me. But what choice did I have? I've waited sixteen years to see him. I respected his wishes to stay out of his life, but his wife is dead now and he can no longer push me away.

We were in love once. At least I was.

I was young and, at just twenty-twenty one, I knew nothing about relationships or heartbreak. He was my first love and, unfortunately, my only love. He was older than me, at twenty-seven, and I looked up to him as though he knew everything. I didn't question a word he said to me. Even when he told me, we could run away together. He told me we could make a life for ourselves.

He was already married to her. Bella. The most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, but he said he would leave her for me. And I believed him.

Of course, it wasn't true. I still don't know if he always knew he would never leave her or if, just for a moment, he let himself believe he might.

But at the end of the day - he chose her and his young boys. At the time, his oldest son, Santino, was only eight years old and his youngest, Dante, was five.

They've all met me, but I doubt they would remember it.

I hardly remember it - it feels like a thousand years ago.

A different life in a different world.

It broke me to pieces when he chose her, but now, years later, as a mother with my own son, I understand that he had no choice. His children came first - he chose them over love, over wild dreams. Even if he had loved me more than her - he would have chosen his family.

But now she's gone, and his boys are old enough to know the truth.

Santino gently pries his brother from his father's embrace and leads him away. My heart breaks for the pain the boys must be going through. I would hate for my son to experience the grief of losing me.

Giovanni takes a moment to compose himself, then turns towards me with anger in his eyes.

"What are you trying to do?" he snaps coldly.

"I just need to talk to you, Giovanni." I answer, keeping my voice low because the crowd of people around are already staring with hostile intensity.

They can look all they want. It isn't going to make me leave.

"And you honestly thought this was the right time?"

"It's the only time. I've waited patiently for sixteen years." I say with a deep sigh.

Giovanni pulls his mouth tight and shakes his head.

I think he finally understands that I'm not leaving until he gives me a chance to say what I came here to say.

With a tilt of his head, he gestures for me to follow him and I quickly grab Guido's hand and pull him to follow me. I will not leave him alone out here. Not with these people who look at him as though they hate him, even though they've got no idea who he is.

Romeo looks from me to his father and bolts towards the door that leads outside into the cold evening air, probably to find his brothers.

Guido stays close to my side as I step into the catering kitchen off the main hall near the back of the church.

I squeeze his hand, trying to reassure him that everything is going to be ok. I hope so. I hope it will be ok. My heart is racing. My shoulders are tight with anxiety and my stomach is knotted. I've practiced this conversation a thousand times in my head. But none of the scenarios I played out late at night while lying awake in the small hours of the morning could prepare me for coming face to face with the man from my past.

He is still as gorgeous as he's always been.

Dark, thick hair frames his face and there are deep lines etched between his eyes. He used to scowl often, even when I knew him all those years ago. Whenever he was lost in thought, his brows would knot together. Now the lines in his face tell stories of a lifetime carrying that same expression.

Age suits him. He looks stronger, taller, more serious. But in his green eyes, I can still see the younger version of himself. That wild, beautiful man who I loved so deeply.

I take a deep breath.

Giovanni looks furious. But I imagine he is filled with grief and most of the emotions clouding his expression have nothing to do with me being here. Although he looks more than surprised to see me again.

“Zina. Of all the days for you to choose to show up on my doorstep - today is the worst.” He growls as he steps towards me.

I hold my ground, not taking a step back, not letting him see how nervous I am, even though he is towering over me ominously.

“Giovanni, you loved me once. You treated me with respect and with care. If any of that was ever true, then please, give me a chance now.”

“A chance for what?” he huffs, his eyes turning away from me at the mention of our past.

I’ve made him uncomfortable. His fists clench and unclench at his side and he presses his lips together, closing his eyes for a moment.

“A chance to make something right.” I sigh, trying to sort through the jumble of words spinning in my mind.

“Stop talking in riddles and spit it out, Zina. Today is not about you. It’s about saying goodbye to my wife, and your presence here is nothing but a hinderance.” He growls.

I’m about to tell him what I came to say when the door to the kitchen bursts open and all three of his son’s spill into the space.

“Dad, what the hell is going on?” Santino demands.

“Who is she? And who is that?” Romeo snaps, pointing at my son.

Guido steps behind me as tensions rise.

Dante says nothing, but his eyes are locked onto me with hatred.

“Boys, you need to give us a moment. We have things to discuss.” Giovanni tells them, but not one of them makes an effort to leave.

“If he’s allowed to be in here, then so are we.” Dante says, gesturing towards Guido with his chin.

Giovanni sneers in annoyance. He never liked to be disobeyed, even back then, he hated it when people said no to him. It’s one of the things that made him so attractive. His dominance, his ability to make me do whatever he wanted.

My cheeks flush at the memory and I quickly blink them away.

There have been so many nights when I’ve dreamed of him and the passion we used to share.

But that was long ago.

And it’s not why I’m here.

Giovanni glares at his oldest son. “Santino, get your brothers out of here. This conversation is private.”

“No, dad, we have a right to know what?—”

“Santino!” He snaps.

“Giovanni, Santino is right, they should hear this - “ I say boldly, knowing I’m playing with fire and it’s going to quickly turn into a rain uncontrollable blaze.

“Who the hell are you to tell me what my sons can and can’t be part of.” He steps close to me, tilting his chin down as his bright green eyes shoot anger into mine.

I don’t budge.

I can’t show weakness.

“Your family deserves to know.” I say calmly.

“Know what?” Santino insists, getting impatient.

“You need to leave.” Giovanni snaps at me.

“No.” I say, keeping my tone neutral.

In a rage, Giovanni grabs my arm and drags me towards the door. He pulls me out of the kitchen, through the main hall as everything single one of his guests turns to watch.

Their eyes are glued to us as he marches me ceremoniously out of the church hall and through the wide wooden doors that lead onto the front steps.

He pushes me into the rain.

Guido quickly comes to my side, glaring at him, angry and defensive.

I pull Guido behind me. “It’s ok.” I whisper to my son.

Through the doors the guests are murmuring, trying to guess what is going on.

Giovanni is standing in the doorway, neither in nor out.

“Giovanni, if you won’t speak to me in private, I will have to say what I came to say here - now. Where everyone can hear.”

In a second, he has closed the space between us. His hand locks around my throat as his eyes are filled with warning. Rain splashes down onto us, quickly drenching him and causing his dark hair to stick to his forehead.

“Don’t you dare.” He growls. “Whatever spills from your lips is a lie.”

His fingers loosen, but the heat of his gaze remains intense.

The rain soaks through my black coat, through my dress, and bites cold against my skin.

His sons are standing nervously on the steps of the church, shifting, tense, waiting.

“He’s your son, Giovanni.” I whisper.

Santino hears me and his eyes shoot wide.

“Dad?” He stammers.

“It’s not true, Santino. She’s lying.” He says quickly, glancing back, but I can sense the panic in him. He can see it. The boy looks just like him. It’s been sixteen years since he chased me away and Guido is sixteen years old.

I was three months pregnant the last time I saw Giovanni.

I never told him.

What was the point?

But Guido deserves to know his father. He deserves to have the same security his brothers have.

And I won't back down until Giovanni agrees.

I've been respectful enough to stay away for the sake of Bella, for the sake of his family. But not anymore.

"What are you trying to do, Zina?" Giovanni says, a harsh whisper against my lips. He's leaning close, terrified that someone else will hear.

He glances nervously towards the door, the guests are slowly creeping closer with curious stares.

"Get back inside. This is none of your business." He shouts at them and they jump in fright before hurrying away.

"Dad." Romeo says, his words tight with questions.

Giovanni shakes his head. He drops his hand from my throat and takes one step back, trying to regain control of himself.

"Zina, please don't do this." He whispers to me.

"I can't walk away again. It's not fair of you to ask that of me." I reply.

"Dad - it's not true is it?" Dante says, walking out into the rain, his eyes narrowed

towards Guido. “She’s a liar, like you say.” He snaps.

Giovanni doesn’t take his eyes off me.

Guido takes a step back as Dante closes the gap between them.

In a flash, Dante is on top of Guido, rolling in the muddy grass, soaked by hours of rain.

Guido kicks and tries to block the punches, but Dante is stronger, tall for his age and full of anger after losing his mother.

Guido screams my name and I run towards him, trying to pull Dante off him. “Please, stop.” I shout. But it’s as though Dante can’t hear. His grief has blinded him to everything other than what is right in front of his face.

He punches Guido again and I scream at Giovanni to do something.

Giovanni reluctantly grabs Dante and lifts him off Guido.

I kneel beside Guido in the mud and pull him into my arms, cradling his face in my hands, to see how bad he looks.

A trail of blood runs down the side of his mouth, quickly washed away by the rain, but otherwise he looks ok - it’s his heart that has suffered more pain than his body.

Giovanni holds out his hand and pulls me to my feet.

“Can’t you see you’re causing problems here. Just go.” He snaps.

I pull my hand away from his and anger surges inside me.

“I’m not leaving until you acknowledge your son.” I shout, my words almost drowned away by a rumble of thunder above us.

Giovanni glances in panic towards the guests.

“Keep your fucking voice down.” He warns me.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

THREE

giovanni

Rain beats heavily from the sky and I'm grateful that it's hushing her words and only my sons, standing right here, are able to hear what she's saying.

I can't have the guests, the rest of the family, hearing any of this.

That is a scandal I don't need.

Not now.

What the fuck is she doing this to me?

Zina looks beautiful, even soaked, with her long dark hair falling in streams over her shoulders, her eyelashes glittering as rain drops drip from them - she looks as beautiful as the first day I saw her.

A day that changed my life in ways I've spent sixteen years trying to deny.

I've always loved my Bella, and I never wanted to hurt her. But when I met Zina, something inside me snapped. It's like the universe was taunting me with the woman I was supposed to have married - the woman who is more perfect for me than anyone else could ever have been. She was wild and energetic. Full of life. Daring and fun. She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

But I couldn't keep her.

I couldn't have her.

It would have torn Bella apart if she found out what I'd done, and my duty was to my son's, my wife - as the leader of this family. I had no choice but to turn my back on her.

Rain splashes over Zina's lips and I stare at them, remembering the past, and the way she'd once molded her body against mine.

I squeeze my eyes shut and let out an agitated breath.

Behind me, my sons are arguing. They're fighting over whether or not it could be true. But all three of them are adamant I would never have done that to their mother.

My heart is weighing heavily with guilt. I don't want them to think of me as a man who would have hurt their mother in that way.

"He's not my son. It's not true. And you need to leave before I have you dragged away by my security." I snarl.

Santino steps close, ready to drag her away himself.

I let go of her and step away. She is not my responsibility.

She is.

And so is her son.

My son.

No. She can't just walk back into my life like this.

"He's yours , Giovanni." She says with strength and determination.

I press my lips tightly together and turn towards my oldest son.

"Get them to take her away. I don't want to see her again - ever."

He grabs her arm, ready to do as I asked, but she shouts.

"I have proof."

My heart stops. Every cell in my body freezes in panic.

"Bullshit." Santino snaps, pulling at her again.

"Wait." I say with heavy reluctance. If she has proof - I need to see it. I can't have her going to the media or spreading this information around behind my back. If there is proof, I need to get it under my control before things get out of hand.

"Dad, she's lying." Santino says with desperation. He doesn't want to believe it.

"Son, you can go inside."

"No." He shouts angrily. He drops his hand away from her arm and glares at me.

I turn towards Zina.

"Show me." I say tightly.

She sticks her hand into her pocket and pulls out her phone. She's shaking as she

scrolls through images until she finds the right one and holds the screen towards me.

I take the device from her and stare at the print out on her screen.

It's a screenshot from a website. A website where people trace their DNA. Romeo had sent in an application years ago for a school project when he had to trace his DNA to find out his heritage. He was about ten at the time.

I remember how upset he was to find out, even though he was through and through Italian - on his mother side there were traces of gypsy. Three percent, to be exact. The smallest, most insignificant amount - but at his young age, this seemed like a world ending disaster. He thought we would disown him, and it took hours to convince him we wouldn't.

He refused to hand in the school project and got a zero for it. But the zero was safer than having anyone else find out the horrific truth.

Bella and I had stayed up late that night giggling about it over a bottle of wine.

Poor Romeo.

I'm looking at Romeo's DNA report - and she's matched it up to Guido .

They are half-brothers.

For the longest time, I can't look away.

Words won't even form in my mind.

They are related. He is my son.

I hand her phone back to her.

Santino is staring at me, his eyes darting between me and Zina. “What is it?” he says.

I nod.

“No.” He says.

“Santino, go inside.”

“What did you do?” He shouts at me.

“Dad?” Romeo asks, from behind me.

“Santino, go inside and take your brothers with you.” I demand.

Santino’s eyes are flooded with betrayal. He’s never looked at me that way before and it breaks my heart to see it now. He’ll need time to process this, and he’ll have to learn to forgive me. He’s a man now. Maybe he’ll even understand once the initial shock wears off.

Without another word he pushes both of his brothers back towards the church. They follow, glancing back over their shoulders, not fully understanding what just happened, or perhaps not wanting to.

The rain is still heavy around us, but I hardly notice the weight of my clothes, soaked and clinging to me. When I look down at Zina she’s biting her lower lip.

Guido stands behind her and my eyes drift towards him. He looks just like me. Even at his young age, sixteen, his jaw is strong and square, his hair is dark, and his shoulders are broad.

But he has his mother's dark brown eyes. Warm and gentle. Although angry as he stares at me now.

"What do you want from me, Zina?" I ask in quiet acceptance of the truth.

"I want what you owe me and our son." She says, not harsh, not a demand, but perhaps a plea.

"What is it that you think I owe you and the boy?"

"A father—" She stammers in disbelief. "Doesn't he deserve that?"

"Zina, you're insane. How do you think that would ever be possible? I don't even know you anymore. I don't know him." I throw my hands in the air in frustration.

"You have to get to know him. He's your blood. No less than Santino, or Romeo, or Dante. He is your son."

My heart aches as her words settle into me. No less than Santino...

It's true. He's mine. But we are years apart. And I can barely get my thoughts into a single, coherent line to understand what is happening.

Bella, my beautiful wife is gone. My heart aches for her.

And Zina - my lost love - is suddenly back and threatening my peace and stability.

"I need to think." I say sternly.

"No, you need to what's right." She snaps, glaring at me, her brown eyes glittering as though flaked with gold.

“Zina, I need time - “ I say with more force.

She shakes her head. “You’re a better man than this.” She mutters. “I expected more from you.”

Always defiant. Still defiant. I used to love making her do what I wanted. Bending her over with her hands tied behind her back -

I push the image away.

“Fine.” She says.

My brows raise. “Fine?”

“I’ll go. But this isn’t over, Giovanni. This conversation isn’t over and I’m not disappearing again. We will talk again. I’ll call you in a few days, after you’ve had time to grieve. But you have to understand that Guido and I have waited sixteen years. We won’t wait much longer.”

I clench my jaw and nod. At least she’s leaving for now. I’ll come up with a plan once I’ve had time to think. Maybe I can offer her money to disappear again.

“I understand.” I nod again when she looks at me with expectations of an answer.

“Good.” She sighs. Her eyes trace over my face, studying my features. Her lips part for a moment and my heart races for no reason at all.

Zina looks down, away from me, then turns her back on me and disappears into the dark sheets of rain with our son at her side.

For a long time I stand out in the rain alone.

I don't want to go back inside. I should, but at the same time, I am the king of this kingdom and I have nothing to prove to anyone inside there.

I shove my hands into my pocket and walk towards my car. Away from the crowds waiting to find out what's going on.

They can wait. I'll never tell them the truth, anyway.

My sons will find their own way home.

I need to get away from all of this.

Grief affects everyone in different ways.

Losing Bella is an ache I'm carrying in my chest, but the weight of the constant pain she was in has lifted from my shoulders. The last two months were hell for both of us. More for her, but no one ever wants to see someone they love experiencing that.

Walking into our bedroom on the top floor of my mansion, my clothes still soaked from the rain, I leave wet footprints on the carpeted floor.

Bella would be angry with me if she saw this.

I smile, kicking my shoes off.

Two days ago this room looked like a medical ward at a hospital. There were machines next to her side of the bed to help her breath. There was a drip attached to a long steel pole, constantly feeding a low dose of morphine into her blood. She was in and out of consciousness. Sleeping through the worst days, fogged and weak on the best days.

I sigh loudly.

The family cleared everything of hers out of here, even her clothes in the closet. I didn't stop them. What's the point of holding onto her things when none of those items will bring her back to me.

I clench my jaw. I did keep something.

Pulling the top drawer of our dresser open I reach inside and pick up the ornate, vintage style perfume bottle. The crystal glass glitters as I turn it in my fingers. Lifting the bottle to my nose I breathe in, closing my eyes as her scent washes over me.

Her wedding ring is tied with a ribbon around the neck of the bottle.

This is all I have of her.

It's all I kept.

Before emotions can overwhelm me I place the bottle back where it was and close the draw roughly.

In the bathroom I peel off my wet clothes and dump them into the tub before I climb into the shower and let hot, steaming water wash over me.

It beats against my back, massaging my skin and my thoughts.

Zina.

Why are you here?

What do you really want?

Why did you hide my son from me for all those years?

But I can't be angry at her about that. She saved Bella the pain of knowing. But she robbed me of a son.

It can't just be that she wants Guido to have a father. He's already sixteen. She must be after money or status or power. I don't know. When I knew her back then, she didn't care about those things. She loved the earth, the ocean, the smell of the sea. She wore her hair loose and wild around her shoulders and laughed, loud without care.

And if this was about money she could have contacted me and blackmailed me years ago.

This is about something else.

I'm going to have to face her again sooner or later.

But I have no idea what to do about this.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

FOUR

zina

The taxi stops outside the gates of his estate, and I take a deep breath, trying to center myself. Guido was furious that I wanted to come here alone. He's scared of what they'll do to me - and he wanted to be here to protect me. But I need to have this conversation in private. It hurt Guido immensely when his father refused to accept him last time, even though I tried to warn him it would happen, and it would take time. Emotions are raw, untamable things. And I'm not ready to expose him to the same hurt again.

Giovanni finally agreed to see me again and this time the shock is over, and we can have a real conversation.

Giovanni, the king of the mafia underworld.

He has power beyond imagination and his reputation is daunting.

When I hired a private investigator - with the sole purpose of getting me solid proof that he is Guido's father - I was warned that Giovanni has become ruthless and cold since I knew him. I was told not to approach him with the truth because it would cost me my life, or that or my son's.

But what choice do I have? And if he is still the same man I was once in love with then he isn't going to kill me or our son. That's not who he is. He values family. He would never hurt his own blood.

But I am not his blood.

My hands are shaking slightly in my lap.

I sit up straighter in the taxi, pushing my shoulders back and flicking my hands to try to dispel the overflow of energy causing anxiety.

“Thank you.” I mutter to the driver, pushing the back door open and climbing out. “If you don’t mind waiting, I don’t think I’ll be longer than an hour.”

“Yes, mam.” He says with a nod.

When I’m out of the car, he turns it around and parks on the other side of the road. I look towards Giovanni’s massive estate.

I can do this.

I tell myself for the hundredth time.

When I walk towards the security gates I half expect the guards to tell me to fuck off, but they don’t. With a polite greeting the gates swing open and I am free to walk inside.

My heart is beating loud and fast in my chest when I reach the front door.

The doorman pulls it open and smiles at me.

“Miss. Lucas. Please follow me. Mr. Rivas is waiting for you in the sun room.” He gestures for me to follow.

My heels click against the marble floor, echoing through the otherwise quiet mansion

until I step onto the wooden floor of the sunroom. The sound of my heels changes and becomes softer.

Giovanni doesn't stand up or even look at me when I walk in.

The doorman bows ever so slightly, then turns away, pulling the door closed behind himself to give us privacy.

Giovanni's voice is calm when he speaks.

"Come inside. Sit down." He demands.

I make my way to the pale grey sofa and sit opposite him, crossing one leg over the other and placing my purse next to me on the sofa. I brush my hands over my thighs to push my dress down where it's riding up my legs.

"You look lovely." He says his eyes tracing over me with a coldness I don't recognize. Maybe he has changed. Maybe he would kill me.

"Thank you for seeing me."

"You caused such a scene at my wife's funeral, I don't think I had a choice, Zina." He snaps angrily.

I sigh loudly. "He's your son, and he wants to know his father. I waited as long as I could but how can I say no to him when all he wants to do is?—"

"For fuck's sake, Zina. Do you understand what you're doing by coming here? You're causing havoc. It's your fault that Guido never had a chance to know me - you're the one who kept him from me." He says with dark accusation on his voice.

Anger spikes inside me. “Are you serious?” I snap. “So, you would have wanted me to come bursting in here while your wife was still alive? You don’t think I was hiding him out of respect for her? You should thank me!” I shout.

“Thank you?” he says, standing, his fists clenched at his side.

“Yes.” I snap, remaining seated, refusing to let him chase me out before I’ve had my say.

Giovanni stands over me, peering down at me, trying to intimidate me with those piercing green eyes of his.

I shake my head and stare back at him just as fiercely.

“I’m not leaving.” I whisper.

He turns away in a huff, storming towards the bar to pour himself a drink. He doesn’t offer me anything.

If I don’t turn his mood around, I’m going to get nowhere again.

I let out a huff of air and force myself to speak calmly.

“You’re the one who pushed me away, Giovanni. I thought we were going to run away together. I thought we were in love. I loved you. I know that much.” I say, closing my eyes. When I open them again, he’s staring at me from across the room. The coldness in his gaze has softened a little.

“I never wanted to leave.” I continue. “But I did it because you wanted that of me. Somehow you always got what you wanted.” I shake my head with regret. “You have no right to be angry at me for hiding Guido from you. You know I made the right

choice. But now - it's only fair of you to give us a chance. You abandoned me. Not the other way around. Don't forget that."

Giovanni clenches his jaw and lifts the glass of whisky to his lips, draining all of it from the glass in one tilt of his head. He slams the glass down onto the wooden counter top.

"All of that is in the past." He tries to argue.

I sigh in frustration.

"We can't change the past. We were young. I was stupid to believe you loved me. But I refuse to let you push your own son away now." I snap, finally standing up because my body is trembling with anger and I can't sit still anymore.

"I never—" he starts, but his words trail off.

"You never what?" I demand.

"I never—" he closes his eyes. "I never loved you." The lie that spills from his mouth is so obvious even a blind man could see straight through him.

"I see." I say, tilting my head to the side. "Not that it matters."

He's trying to hurt me. He's trying to make me leave.

"I'm not here to upset your life, Gio." I say gently, walking towards him and reaching out to touch his arm. He flinches away from my touch.

I reach out again and this time he doesn't move. I gently trace my hand over his bicep. The muscles flex beneath his shirt and my mind instantly flashes memories of

how gorgeous he was, his body pressing into mine as he lies over me, pinning my hands above my head.

The image sends a thrill pulsing through me.

“Gio, please, he is your son.” I say quietly.

The door bursts open and Santino storms into the room.

“What is she doing here?” He demands. His voice echos off the walls.

“Santino stop—” Giovanni says, turning towards his son with command in his tone.

“No, she has no right to be in this house - mom’s home. ” He snaps at his father.

Giovanni realizes what he’s done by inviting me into this space.

“Santino, I need to speak with her - this was the only private place?”

“I don’t care.” He yells.

Behind him Romeo and Dante arrive, hearing the noise.

“Dad.” Dante mumbles in disbelief. “Why is she in our home?”

“She’s leaving.” Giovanni sighs.

“No. I’m not.” I snap angrily. “You said we could talk.”

“Get out.” Romeo screams at me, launching at me with his hands reaching towards my throat and his eyes flaring like a wild animal.

I yelp in surprise, lifting my hands over my face to defend myself, but Giovanni has grabbed his son and isn't letting him near me.

"She's a slut." Romeo screams. "She's a hoe wrecker, a whore."

"I—" I stammer, wanting to defend myself. "I didn't know your father was married when I met him." I say.

"You found out at some point - you found out he was married, and you begged him to leave our mother. You wanted to tear our family apart." Romeo is beyond rage. His voice is breaking in anger.

I look at Giovanni, waiting for him to defend me - to tell them the truth. I never asked him to leave his wife. He made promises. I wanted it. But I never asked him to. I was hurt when I found out about her - that he lied to me. I wanted to leave him at first and he begged me not to.

"Giovanni," I whisper, pleading with my eyes.

"Don't even speak to him, you whore." Romeo screams at me, trying to tear loose from his father's grip.

"Get out." Giovanni says, his eyes have turned even colder than before. "Leave."

"I won't." I shout. "You promised you'd speak to me."

"Get out!" He demands with more force.

I swallow hard and turn fully towards him, setting my shoulders back firmly. "I will destroy your name, Giovanni. If you refuse to be decent, if you refuse to give me what I deserve to ask for - I will tear your world apart, piece by piece. I won't stop

until everyone knows who you are. The liar. The cheat.” Anger bubbles from my lips as I spit the words at him. I never intended to threaten him this soon. It was meant to be a last resort. But I also didn’t expect him to let his son speak to me this way.

I deserve so much more respect than this.

If he wants to play a darker game, then I will play.

Giovanni bites down on whatever he wants to say and tilts his head towards the door.

“Fine.” I snap. “But this isn’t over. I mean what I said.”

I grab my purse from the sofa and storm out of the sun room, leaving him and his three sons to deal with each other.

Outside, the taxi is waiting for me in the quiet shade of a tall tree.

I climb inside and quickly brush away the tears spilling down my cheek.

I hate him.

I hate him with every piece of my soul.

And I will destroy him.

* * *

It’s late at night when my phone rings.

I roll towards the nightstand and tilt the screen towards me as I blink at it, trying to see who it is.

Giovanni .

I answer quickly, my heart racing.

“How dare you threaten me?” He growls deeply into the phone. His voice a rumble of threat and warning. I sit up in bed, instantly furious.

“How dare you think you have any control over what I do? I raised our son on my own. I fought tooth and nail to give him a good life. You have lived in luxury, your boys have everything they could ever dream of. Including a future rich in wealth and power. Guido deserves the same and I will stop at nothing to give my son what he deserves. Do you understand me, Giovanni?” I snarl.

The silence on the other end of the phone makes me wonder if he hung up. I glance at the screen. The timer is still counting.

“If you don’t accept our son - and me - I will reign hell down on you.” I say darkly. “I will never stop. If you want to get rid of me, you’ll have to kill me, Giovanni. Do you understand?”

“What the fuck do you want from me, Zina?” he snaps.

“I want to move in to the house. Guido will be accepted into the family as your son. You don’t have to announce it - but you have to treat him right and give him what he deserves of your estate.”

“You want to live here?” he asks in disbelief.

“Yes. I will give you until tomorrow night to decide.” I hang up the phone, my heart pounding in my chest as I set it back down on the nightstand and settle into my bed.

Sleep doesn't come through.

I toss and turn all night, wondering if I've made the biggest mistake of my life. But I'm determined. And I won't back down.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

FIVE

giovanni

It's been the longest night of my life as I pace up and down the carpet of my bedroom.

"Who the hell does she think she is." I mutter to myself.

"What the fuck does she expect from me."

My body is aching, and my mind is racing. I'm already exhausted after losing my wife. And I was already exhausted from a year of fighting cancer by her side. And now I'm weighed down by this as well.

This stress.

And anger.

The rage I feel towards Zina for putting me in this position is the worst weight of all.

She's asking me to betray my sons. To have her move into their mother's home and to welcome her as though she belongs.

How can I do that to them?

How can I turn away my other son?

Again anger surges and I continue to pace.

Eventually, the sun rises, and the room gets brighter and brighter.

Her warning has been on my mind for the last few hours.

And Zina has made it clear that she isn't going to back down. I believe her when she says she will tell everyone. And it will tear my world apart. The rest of the family will start to lose respect for me, and everyone knows that respect is power. Whether it comes through fear or not.

It's five when I push my bedroom door open and head down to the kitchen to make coffee.

The house is still quiet but in the kitchen I find the head of the security team, and my right-hand man. He's busy making coffee for himself and turns towards me with a smile. "Rough night?" he asks. "I imagine it's hard to not have her next to you."

I nod.

"Can I make you a coffee?" he asks.

I nod again.

He busies himself, pulling a second cup out of the cabinet, scooping freshly ground coffee into the machine. Watching him I realize I need to talk to someone if I want clarity. My mind is too busy with too many things. And if there is anyone who will be brutally honest with me - it's him.

He's been at my side for over a decade and I've trusted him with many secrets before.

“Fabio, I need your advice.” I say with resignation.

He turns away from the machine, handing me a hot, dark coffee. Black without sugar. Exactly how he’s made for me a thousand times.

I mutter thanks and he leans his back against the kitchen counter, crossing one foot over the other and watching me quietly.

This is one of the reasons why I like him so much. He doesn’t speak unnecessarily and when he does, its words worth listening to.

“That woman who came to the funeral - “ I begin.

“Mm.” He nods. “Zina.”

“Yes, her. The boy who was with her - he’s my son.”

He doesn’t move and his face doesn’t change. There is no judgement, only patience. He’s waiting for a question.

“His mother and I were together sixteen years ago, and I ended it because - well - it’s obvious why I ended it. But now that Bella is gone, Zina is demanding that our son have the same rights that my other sons have. She wants her and the boy to move in here.”

He nods, sipping his coffee.

“I don’t know if - you see - I understand he is my son, and I would love the chance to get to know him. But now is not the right time. And it would cause hell with the other boys. I need to know how to make this go away. If the family found out. Or worse - if our rivals found out and tried to use it as leverage against me?—”

Fabio sets his coffee on the kitchen counter.

“What do you want to ask me, Giovanni?” he says.

“What am I supposed to do? I think my judgment is clouded with grief and anger and memories of the past.” I sigh heavily.

Fabio nods slowly.

He thinks for a while, standing quietly.

“Gio, I think the best way to handle this situation is whatever way is the quietest. Your companies are always under public scrutiny. Your clients, your allies, your enemies - none of them should find out about this. We need to avoid a scandal. Whatever you do - that should be your focus.”

I sigh, staring at the dark liquid on my mug. “I have to let them move in to the estate.” I mutter.

“I agree.” He says without emotion.

“Fuck.” I say in agitation.

I’m standing on the front step, staring down at Zina and Guido while they climb out of the car I sent to collect them.

“The driver will bring your things inside.” I say.

Guido shoots me a glare that tells me his mother told him everything.

The boy is clearly not interested in getting to know me. He already hates me. I sigh

and walk back into the house, letting them take their time.

When Zina steps inside, Guido is close at her side.

I gesture for them to follow me upstairs, weaving through the wide hallways towards the back of the mansion where I've had two rooms prepared for them.

The back of the house is where my guests usually stay. It's private and out of the way and it's perfect for them. The rooms are massive and tastefully modern. Bright, natural sunlight streams in through wide balconies and each room has its own private bathroom. There is a second swimming pool in the back garden that they can use without coming into contact with the rest of the house. They have privacy from us - and we have privacy from them.

"That is your room." I gesture for Guido to go inside. He glances at his mother.

"Go ahead." She says, smiling.

"Your room is just around the corner." I say.

She follows me and I push her door open, walking inside and standing next to the bed while she puts her things down.

"The rest of our belongings—" She starts.

"They are being brought over this afternoon."

She nods.

"Thank you." Zina mutters, looking out towards the garden through the wide doors.

“Don’t. If I had my way, you wouldn’t be here.” I huff.

She ignores my rude remark and strolls slowly around the room, brushing her fingers over things, walking towards the balcony. She doesn’t open the door, but she stands in the bright afternoon light with a smile on her face.

She shrugs her coat off her shoulders and throws it over the back of a nearby chair.

My eyes are glued to her. The light catching her shape as she moves.

She looks absolutely gorgeous.

The tight blue dress she’s wearing hugs over the curve of her hips, following the line of her back, fitting over her perfect ass. She is fucking sexy and to my horror, looking at her stirs things inside me that I’d forgotten were there. A deep, dark desire that I never felt with Bella.

Bella was beautiful and gentle and sweet.

But Zina is passionate and fierce and so sexy she is the kind of woman who has the power to tear you apart and set you on fire with one glance.

That same, familiar feeling pulses through me. The desire to pin her down and force her to give me what I want. The desire to see the flash of defiance in her mischievous smile as she lets me take her.

I clear my throat loudly and force my eyes away from her.

I’m horrified with myself. How can I still be attracted to her?

Especially now, when she’s manipulated her way into my home, the last thing I want

is for her to realize she has any power of me.

“Zina, I suggest you stay on your side of the mansion. Keep away from my sons. I don’t want you interacting with them unnecessarily. And Guido should do the same. We eat dinner as a family. But that is it. The rest of the time I don’t want to see you.”

She turns to me with a sly smile. “We’ll see.” She says casually.

I knot my brows. “What does that mean?”

“This is our home now, Gio.” She shrugs. “Nothing should be off limits.”

“I have set boundaries in place, Zina and I expect you to follow them.” I say, glaring at her.

She tilts her head to the side, her eyes glittering with something I can’t read.

Her expression stirs my cock and fires my anger.

I need to leave before I’m the one crossing boundaries.

I march out of the room, angry with myself more than her.

In the living room of the living room near the front of the house I sit down heavily on the sofa, pressing my hand over my face as I try to calm those inappropriate thoughts.

When I open my eyes my son is standing in front of me, his eyes fixed on with me disbelief.

“You’ve lost your mind.” Santino says. “Dante isn’t even close to dealing with our mother’s death, and what do you do - you move your mistress into our home. Romeo

wants to kill her. You expect me to hold them all together and keep everyone happy - but I don't agree with you. I think you've gone insane."

"Santino, you're old enough to understand." I sigh.

"Am I? Is that because I'm almost as old as you were when you cheated on mom?" he snarls.

"Don't you ever talk like that again." I growl, standing up and glaring down at him.

"I am your father, and you will respect me."

He shakes his head.

"I respect you. But right now I'm questioning your judgement." He says with malice in his voice. "I think you lost your mind when mom died."

"I am grieving your mother as deeply as you and your brothers are, Santino. Don't question my love for her." I mutter, angrily.

"But you betrayed her. For that slut."

My chest tightens when he insults Zina. She isn't a slut. What happened between her and I wasn't like that - it was real. It was genuine.

But I press my lips together biting back my words because I can't defend her to my son.

I can't expect him to accept that I could love them both at the same time. Bella and Zina.

In different ways. Two different kinds of love.

My face softens as I watch my son.

“I’m sorry, kid.” I say with a deep sigh.

“I’m not a fucking kid anymore. Just make them leave.” He pleads.

“I can’t. They have to be here - for our family. I need to do whatever I can to keep this quiet.”

“You mean - what you did - to mom.”

I sigh again. “Yes.”

“This is your fault, dad. You betrayed the whole family when you chose her over mom. We won’t accept her. Don’t expect us to be ok with this.”

“What are you going to do about it?” I ask sternly.

“Whatever we can to make her life a living hell until she leaves.”

Santino turns from me and walks away. I don’t have it in me to reprimand him. They’ve been through enough this past week.

I sit down again and lean my head back against the sofa, closing my eyes. I’m exhausted. I’m angry.

I’m confused and worst of all - I’m turned on just knowing she’s upstairs in that room.

I don’t know what’s wrong with me.

I press my fingers into my temples and massage the headache growing behind my eyes.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

SIX

zina

I knew it would be a challenge integrating into the Rivas household, but I wasn't prepared for the level of hostility that Guido and I are having to deal with on a daily basis.

Giovanni has practically been a ghost over this last week. He makes an enormous effort to stay as far away from Guido and me as possible. It's annoying me.

And his sons are making an effort - to complicate our lives in every way they can.

"Morning, Guido. Do you want to come down for breakfast with me?" I ask, leaning into the open door of his bedroom.

He looks up from his bed where he's lying reading a book.

Pulling his mouth to the side he sighs softly. "I don't know, mom. Maybe it's better if I wait until everyone else has eaten and go get some food later."

Anger heats my blood. Anger because someone is making my son feel unwelcome in his own home.

Because this is his home now. Where he belongs - with his father.

"No, Guido. We are not going to let them do that to us. Get up. You are coming

down to eat breakfast now.” I snap, not meaning to be short with him, but I’m losing patience for this entire situation.

“Mom - “ he tries again to negotiate his way out of it.

“Now.” I say sternly, shooting him a look that makes him put his book down and accept his fate.

This entire week, none of the staff have been in to our rooms to clean up or change the sheets or collect our laundry. I wanted to ask Giovanni about that because I’ve watched them do it for everyone else that lives here - so why not for us? But now, I’m at their point where I’m accepting that it’s deliberate. There was no misunderstanding.

Because on a number of occasions - just walking past them - they have purposefully not moved aside and made a show of bumping into me.

I’ve given it sometime - but at this point I’m ready to take matters into my own hands.

They have been treating us like shit since day one and I think it is because one, or all, of Giovanni’s sons made it clear to the staff that we are unwelcome and if they treat us with kindness, they will be punished in some way. The staff seem to relish having a chance to look down on someone.

They don’t realize they are messing with the wrong woman.

Down stairs the staff are busy setting the breakfast table.

Not one of them greets us. This is normal.

“Good morning.” I say loudly to all of them, not willing to accept this anymore.

One girl glances at me and pulls a sour face. No one replies.

“I said - good morning. ” I say more sternly.

The girl sniggers.

I walk over to her, standing right in her space I grab her chin, forcing her to look at me. “Do you think its brave to act rudely towards the people who live in this house?”

“Pfft.” She snorts, glaring at me. “From what I’ve heard you manipulated your way in here and won’t be here for very long.”

I take a step back from her, tilting my head to the side as I narrow my eyes at her. She looks at me with a satisfied smirk spread across her face.

In one, swift, sharp movement I slap her across the cheek and that smug grin disappears. Her mouth drops open in shock.

“You’re fired.” I snap. “Get out immediately.”

“You can’t fire me?—”

I cut her words off with another slap. Her eyes shoot wide, glittering with tears. “Even if I was nothing more than a guest in this house - how does your mind justify treating another human being with such disdain. Get the fuck out. And if I see you again I assure you, you will regret it.”

She runs from the dining room and I turn slowly to look at the rest of the staff. “If anyone so much as frowns at my son or me again I will have every single one of you

fired. It's time for people to learn their place and learn how to show respect where it's required."

The staff are shifting, standing nervously with their eyes glued to me.

"Does anyone have any questions?" I ask.

"No, mam." Three of them quickly answer.

"Good. We would like two cups of fresh coffee. I take mine with cream." I say, sitting down to enjoy my breakfast. I gesture to Guido to do the same. He's not as sure as I am and watches the staff skeptically.

We can't act like we're not welcome here - we have to be the ones who change this environment to make sure others follow our lead.

Santino and Romeo walk into the dining room and Romeo sighs loudly.

"Look what the cat dragged in." He huffs, glaring at me.

A number of staff scuttle from the room, suddenly eager to be elsewhere.

"Good morning, Romeo. Did you sleep well?" I ask, ignoring his rudeness.

He huffs and turns to his brother. "I'm not actually that hungry."

Santino shakes his head. "Just sit down and eat for fuck's sake. Don't let them ruin your breakfast."

I clench my jaw.

Maybe it is time I had a conversation with Giovanni. Although that might be the easy way out. If I reply on him to fight my battles for me these boys will never learn to respect me.

I need another plan.

Breakfast ends in the same awkward way it started.

When Guido stands up to leave Romeo tries to trip him and laughs like an immature little asshole. I stand up, accidentally knocking over the last half of his coffee and sending it splashing across his lap.

He jumps up from his seat and yelps in horror.

“So sorry.” I mutter, not bothering to hide my smile.

We’re walking up the stairs, towards our side of the house, and I’m lost in thought, trying to figure out the most effective way to stop this bullshit. Guido says, “Mom, they hate us. Why are you bothering to try? My father still doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

It breaks my heart. Every son deserves a father.

I slip my arm around his waist and pull him to my side. “Hey, I promise you, it’s going to get better. I’ll fix this. We aren’t leaving and we aren’t going to let those boys treat us like this either.”

He doesn’t reply and I realize he doesn’t believe me. I’m letting him down. He’s losing faith in me and I will not accept that. The anger inside me triples as the urge to protect my son fires uncontrollably.

Once Guido is settled and busy in his room, I wander through the estate looking for Giovanni. I've decided to inform him that I won't tolerate any of this behavior and while he doesn't have to do anything about it - he should know that I will be taking control of the situation.

Giovanni is sitting in his office in the West wing. He's focused on his laptop with his brows knotted as he sifts through spreadsheets and emails.

"We need to talk." I say, walking inside.

"Not now." He says, without looking up.

"Yes, now ." I say, sitting down in the chair opposite him.

He huffs and rolls his eyes, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms across his broad chest.

"What is it?" he snaps.

"Why are you avoiding me, Gio?" I ask without hostility, because while everyone else has been rude - he has been absent. I might, for a moment, give him the benefit of the doubt that he's been busy.

His eyes flare slightly. "I'm not." He denies the obvious.

"You are. And your staff treat me like shit. And your sons are nothing but rude to Guido and me."

He swallows hard and presses his lips together tightly. Watching his expression, all I see is discomfort. He hardly looks at me.

“Giovanni. Why can’t you even look at me? I’m sitting right in front of you.” I snap.

When his eyes meet mine, his pupils dilate and his eyes narrow. He clenches his jaw as his gaze drops to my lips. Tension sparks between us and my lips part as desire floods through me. Something in his eyes triggers memories of the past. My cheeks flush and I shift in my seat.

I didn’t come here with the intention of being distracted by him in this way. This feeling came out of nowhere, just from the way he was looking at me.

I stand up quickly, pressing my hands against his desk.

“You know what - I don’t expect you to do anything about it, Gio. But I’m letting you know that I’m not going to tolerate it. I demand respect, no matter what I have to do to get it.”

“Zina, just give them time.” He says softly, his voice a deep hum.

“No, they’ve had enough time. We’ve been here for a week and they treat us worse every day. I’m done being patient. I don’t expect them to gush over us like best friends - but I do expect manners. Basic polite manners.”

Gio sighs and brushes his hand through his shaggy dark hair. He shakes his head and closes his eyes for a second. My eyes trace over his chiseled features, his strong, square jaw.

He can try to shut me out as much he wants, but he also needs to learn that I’m not going anywhere.

“And you need to stop avoiding your son. Give him a chance, Gio. Take the time to get to know him.”

He nods, letting out a slow breath.

I've said what I had to say.

Turning away from him I hope that if he does anything, even one thing, it's spending some time with Guido . He can keep avoiding me. But not Guido .

With satisfaction I turn towards our side of the mansion, but walking back upstairs I'm thinking about his eyes, how they filled with darkness when he looked at me - an intensity I found so familiar. With a fright I stop mid step and my eyes widen in surprise.

I do recognize it.

It was desire .

That's how he used to look at me just before he told me to do something sexy. His eyes would darken, and he'd demand that I turn around and bend over the chair, or kneel on the bed -

My heart races and I press my hand over my chest to try to calm it. Is he still attracted to me? I won't deny that I'm still unquestionably attracted to him.

It isn't why I came to this house though.

But if he is attracted to me, it would explain why he's been avoiding me. And I might be able to use that to my advantage.

A smile creeps onto my lips as I carry on climbing the stairs towards my bedroom. I feel better already.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

SEVEN

giovanni

The dining room is loud. Romeo and Dante are fooling around, laughing and joking with each other.

But when Zina and Guido walk in they fall silent and turn to glare at her.

My jaw clenches as I watch them, then her.

I never intended for it to be hostile here for either of them, but how am I supposed to reprimand my sons for being angry about the mistakes I made.

She was never a mistake.

I shake my head, dispersing the thought. She was a mistake. It could easily have torn my family apart if Bella found out at the time.

Zina stands quietly for a moment, scoping the scene while Romeo and Dante stare daggers at her.

She walks confidently to the seat next to me, the first seat to my right where I'm positioned at the head of the table.

Romeo is on my left.

Zina sits down and Romeo instantly stands up and slams his fists against the table.

“That seat belongs to Santino. He is the oldest son, the rightful heir, and he sits at our father’s side.” He blurts out angrily.

Zina ignores him, gets comfortable and says nothing at all.

Dante stands up and moves behind her, ready to pull her seat away from the table.

“If you touch my chair, I assure you, you will very quickly learn that I don’t tolerate disrespect. I’ve been patient, Romeo, but don’t push me.” Her voice is so dark and threatening that it freezes Romeo, filling him with uncertainty.

Dante hesitates and looks at me with questioning eyes.

“Sit down Dante. Romeo, move over so that Santino can sit there.” I demand.

Romeo and Dante look horrified. They look betrayed.

But Romeo stands up and shifts across to clear a seat for Santino. Dante walks, sulking, around the table to sit next to his brother and Guido takes a seat next to his mother.

My shoulders are tense.

Turning to Zina I mutter under my breath. “You are making things more difficult for me.”

She scoffs and whispers back. “You’ve been avoidant since we got here. It’s time you made things easier for me.”

“Zina, you can’t just take my son’s rightful seat?—”

“Rightful?” She snaps quietly. “This is my rightful seat, as the woman of this house, right next to the man of this house. And I will not stand down from this position to accommodate a boy .”

Her eyes are fiery and fierce. She sucks her cheeks in and her lips pout in defiance as she presses them together. She’s not moving. That much is clear.

And her eyes, heated against my skin, send a thrill of desire pulsing through my body.

I turn my head away, acutely aware of her leg brushing against mine beneath the table. Electricity sparks between us and no matter how hard I try I can’t ignore it.

Santino walks in and I clench my jaw.

“Santino, sit down.” I command, before he can say a word.

A low growl rumbles through him as he takes his new seat on my left. He glares at Zina, then at Guido .

Guido remains calm, avoiding eye contact, but the way he’s holding his fork, his knuckles white with anxiety - it upsets me.

I don’t know the boy, but he is my son. Zina right, I’ve been avoidant. I should at least get to know my son. My heart is heavy with guilt over this mess I’ve created. I look towards Santino.

“Stop.” I mutter to Santino who hasn’t taken his eyes off his new found enemies.

“Dad.”

“No.” It’s time to put an end to this hostility as best I can.

He pulls his mouth tight and sits back in his new seat.

Dinner is served, and the tension is palpable as the only sounds are that of knives and forks against plates.

Zina looks pleased with herself and when she glances at me I note a trace of mischief in the slight smile touching her lips. The corner of my mouth twitches and curves upwards, so I look down at my plate to hide it.

She notices and nudges me with her knee beneath the table.

Clenching my jaw I manage to pull my face straight again, but, without thinking about it I drop my hand beneath the table and wrap it around her thigh, squeezing gently. My only intention was to reassure her that I will do my best to make things more comfortable here - but the moment my hand touches her skin, her dress too short to cover her legs, I know I’ve made a mistake.

Every cell in my body ignites, and it takes every single ounce of will power to pull my hand away instead of pushing it higher, between her legs.

It’s a relief when dinner ends, and I can escape to the upstairs balcony to clear my mind. The night air is crisp and fresh as I take a deep breath in, filling my lungs and letting the air push against them until it starts hurting.

Slowly, I let it out.

I’m standing with my hands resting on the railing when Dante walks in, he stands next to me without a word, watching the sky in silence.

Reading his body language I don't say anything either, until, after ten minutes has passed he quietly asks.

"Did you know you had another son before Zina showed up at the funeral?"

"No. I didn't know."

"So, he really is my brother. My half-brother?"

"Yes, Dante, he's your family."

He's quiet again.

I wait, knowing there's more he wants to say.

"She accused me of being disrespectful." He sighs.

"You have been."

Dante nods. He knew this before I confirmed it.

Reaching out I squeeze his shoulder gently. "Kid, you don't have to follow your brothers lead with everything. If you want to get to know Guido - it doesn't mean you're betraying your brothers - or your mom. Imagine what he's going through. He didn't ask for any of this. He's been thrown into a world where everyone is against him for something he has no control over."

"Why aren't you getting to know him?" Dante asks, and the question cuts into my chest. I clench my jaw and turn my eyes back towards the stars.

"It's complicated, D."

“I’m not so sure it is anymore.” He shrugs. Letting go of the balcony he smiles tightly at me. “Goodnight, dad.” He says, then walks away.

Walking through the mansion I don’t think about what I’m doing, I follow my feet until they lead me to the open door of Zina’s bedroom.

Quietly, I step towards it, standing in the doorway I watch her.

She’s sitting on the sofa by the window, her feet curled beneath her and her face turned towards the window.

She looks beautiful and peaceful, but her eyes are sad, and her posture is one of defeat. She’s wearing tiny sleep shorts and loosely fitted t-shirt that has slipped off one of her shoulders.

She’s gorgeous.

“Zina.” I say her name softly.

She turns to look at me, her head tilted.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, keeping her voice low. With her face turned towards me I can see the stress etched across it. The defeat. The hurt. The worry.

I walk into her room without waiting for her to invite me, my instincts pushing me to her side. I want to ease her pain. “Are you ok?” I ask, sitting down on the sofa next to her. She looks delicate and I want to protect her from the world.

She doesn’t move and her thigh presses against mine. Awareness floods me again, the warmth of her body, the familiar current, like energy exchanged between us.

She glances at the space where our bodies touch, then up at me.

She bites at her lower lip and release the softest sigh.

I can smell her, something uniquely her. It's not perfume or lotion - it's just her. And the smell intoxicates me.

Her big brown eyes are wide, and her face is soft, doll like and innocent. My heart hammers in my chest. I reach up and touch her cheek, tracing my finger over the warmth of her skin.

It's like touching silk.

My thumb brushes over her perfect pink lips, tracing the shape of her cupid's bow.

My heart beats faster as I fight the urge to kiss her.

What am I doing?

Pulling my hand away I set it on my lap, my fingers gripped against my thigh to stop myself from reaching for her again.

Zina's eyes are still on me, piercing into mine.

"I can't stop wondering if I've made a mistake bringing Guido here. I don't know if we will ever be welcome here - and I don't want to put him through the agony of constant rejection." She says, almost a whisper. Her expression is so raw and her words so honest that it breaks my heart to see her, with her walls down, her heart on her sleeve.

"Zina, you are welcome here. Both of you." I sigh heavily. "It's just a complicated

situation.”

She shakes her head. “All I want is for Guido to know he has a home and a family. It’s been just me and him for such a long time. He deserves more than that. If he can be happy here, I won’t care about anything else. I will do anything for my family.”

She shifts and the t-shirt pulls further off her shoulder. My eyes trace of the delicate curve of her collar bone. She looks down at her hands, settled in her lap, and a wave of dark hair falls forward like silk, half covering her face.

I brush it back, letting my fingers trace over her shoulder as I do so.

Memories are spilling forward, haunting me and pushing through my body.

“It’s going to be ok.” My voice is deep and husky when I speak, and she turns towards me with her eyes narrowed and her lips parted.

I have to get out of here. All I can think of is kissing her.

I want to press my lips against hers and pull her onto my lap. Those shorts are hardly covering anything, and my mind is wild with temptation.

I stand up, rigid, fighting for control.

“Guido will be happy here, Zina. It will take a little time, but things will settle.”

Her smile is perfect.

“Goodnight, Gio.” She says sweetly.

“Goodnight, little firefly.” I whisper, unconsciously calling her the enduring name I

called her sixteen years ago when we were in love.

She gasps softly and quickly turns away from me.

I hurry from the room, my cheeks heated as the desire inside me grows stronger.

In my bedroom I throw the covers back and strip out of my clothes. My mind is at war with itself. I can't go back in there, I can't pull her into my arms and kiss her. I can't throw her onto the bed face first and trace my fingers over the curve of her back

-

Fuck.

Get a grip, Giovanni.

The sheets are cold against my skin, but my body is so overheated it feels good. A distraction I desperately need.

Rolling onto my side I press my face into the pillow and squeeze my eyes shut. Sleep. Dammit. Stop thinking about her.

But with my eyes closed the images of her are more defined.

My cock is so hard its aching, so I reach beneath the covers and wrap my hand around the shaft.

I lie on my back in the bed and imagine her sitting on her knees on top of me with her legs spread wide as she straddles me, rocking her beautiful body over me, her hips swaying as she slowly rides my cock with that look on her face. Pure pleasure, absolute bliss.

She is the goddess of temptation.

I push my hand back and forth and my cock gets harder and harder.

All those years ago I was not able to say no to her - and it's happening again. I want her. I can't stop thinking about it and it's getting worse the more time I spend with her.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

EIGHT

zina

Halfway to the mall, just as I turn a corner, I press my foot against the brake, and nothing happens. It's floppy and loose as though something has disconnected.

Panic spins through me as the car carries on rolling forward.

Grabbing the steering wheel tighter I yank the car to the left, managing to ramp the pavement and hit a light post instead of hurting anyone.

The jolting impact takes me breath away for a second, but then anger takes over and I push the door open in a huff.

This wasn't an accident. It was too perfect.

His sons are determined to get rid of me in whatever way they can - but this is pushing the boundaries. I could've been in a serious accident.

People are gawking at me as I pace up and down next to the car, my high heels clipping loudly against the sidewalk with the phone pressed to my ear.

"I need you to send a driver." I snap at the security officer who runs Giovanni's estate. "I'll send the location."

The boys will expect me to throw a tantrum. They'll be waiting, eagerly for a reaction

from me. They'll probably expect me to rat them out to Giovanni.

Instead, I'm going to play this cool. I meant it when I said they have no idea who they're messing with.

The driver arrives and I even though he's worried about me, I tell him to take me to the mall, not home. I still have shopping to do and I'm not letting those assholes ruin my plans.

The security office makes arrangements to have my car towed.

But at the mall I'm in for another surprise.

After taking my time to select my face creams and lotions and shampoo and conditioner - I'm not standing at the cashiers desk and she's looking extremely embarrassed on my behalf as I hand her another card. "Please try this one." I sigh.

But it doesn't work either.

All of my cards have been cancelled.

Every single one of them.

"If you like I can set it aside for you and you can draw cash?" The cashier asks.

"No, it's ok. I'll come another day. I don't have time to run back and forth now." I say in frustration.

She nods, her smile so forced it looks painful.

At the mansion Santino and Romeo have their eyes on me. They follow me into the

kitchen, pretending to be looking for a snack.

They're waiting for my reaction.

The car has been taken to a mechanic and Gio was notified by the security team, but I didn't tell anyone what actually happened.

The boys know though - and they're confused.

"Did it just breakdown?" Romeo asks, leaning with his elbow against the kitchen counter as I lean into the fridge to retrieve a bottle of water. His eyes are glued to me, as are Santino's.

"I think we both know what happened to the car." I say calmly, pouring a glass of water.

"Didn't you go to the mall? Where is your shopping?" Santino chuckles dryly.

"You know what, it turns out that I just didn't like any of the brands they had. I'll order online instead."

Romeo glances at Santino. This is not what they were hoping for.

I smile. "Did you have to google it?" I ask, tilting my head to the side.

"Google what?" Santino snaps.

"How to cut brake lines."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he snarls, standing up straight and pushing his shoulders back. His voice has turned defensive.

I giggle quietly. “It just surprises me, that’s all.”

He scrunches his face in annoyance. “What does?” he can’t resist asking.

I walk over to him and take his hand in mine. He’s rigid and awkward as I turn his palm upwards, brushing my thumb over it. “You have such delicate skin, not the skin of a man who works for what he has in life. It just surprised me that would get your hands dirty like that.”

He yanks his hand away from me. His face flushing with embarrassment. “I work for what I have.” He snarls.

“Is that so?” I shrug, still smiling when I walk out of the kitchen.

I stop just outside the door, standing quietly to listen to whatever they’ll say to each other now that they think I’m gone.

“It didn’t work.” Romeo hisses. “You said she’d be scared, and she’d run away.”

“I know, for fuck sakes. I thought she would have by now. We’ve been doing things to break her down since she got here and none of it is working.” Santino is confused and annoyed.

Nodding in satisfaction I walk away. Let them see that I’m stronger than they think. And maybe now they’ll stop underestimating me.

In the living room Giovanni is in a heated conversation with his head of security, Fabio. He’s pacing with his face knotted and his jaw clenched. I press my back against the wall, watching from around the corner. Tension is high in the estate today.

“Who the fuck is doing it?” Giovanni snarls.

“We don’t know yet. We’re trying to figure it out.” Fabio answers.

“This is the third time they’ve interfered with one of our shipments in the past two weeks.”

“I know. I’m working on it though. It’s like they have someone on the inside - feeding them information. We changed the route at the last minute this time and they still got to it.”

“Someone on the inside?” Giovanni says, tensely.

Fabio sighs heavily.

“Sir, I know it’s not an easy thing to accept, but have you noticed how tense and on edge the estate has been since she moved in with that kid?”

My heart stutters in my chest and I hold my breath, listening closer.

“What is your point? What does that have to do with any of this?” Giovanni says sharply.

Santino walks into the living room, answering for Fabio. “He thinks she has something to do with it. That she’s the spy.” Santino huffs, flopping into the sofa.

“I didn’t say that exactly.” Fabio corrects him, trying to be more cautious with his words. “But I do think it might be better if you asked her to leave.” He admits.

I’m so tense my ears are ringing as I wait for Giovanni’s response.

He’s hesitating. He’s not immediately telling them they’re wrong about me. The realization that he isn’t confident that I am not the traitor shoots through me like an

arrow. It hurts.

“Look, let’s just keep investigating.” Gio sighs. “There has to be a clue, something to lead us in the right direction.”

I bite at my lower lip. He didn’t agree with them, but he also didn’t exactly defend me either.

I should focus on the positive. He might not have my back yet, but he wasn’t willing to throw me to the wolves either. Maybe it means I’m getting somewhere - and slow progress is better than no progress at all.

But what the hell are they talking about regarding the shipments. Someone is messing with the family business - and they think it’s me.

If they think it’s me, they’ll spend their time looking for evidence against me - to prove their bias - instead of looking for the real culprit.

I have no choice but to start digging into this myself.

I have to find out who is responsible before they find a way to pin this on me as a guaranteed chance of getting rid of me.

I wouldn’t put it past them to fake evidence if that’s what it took.

Dammit.

If they managed to somehow convince Giovanni that I am responsible it will be worse than just being kicked out of the estate. Enemies are dealt with brutal and deadly consequences.

Guido and I will disappear from this earth.

That evening I start reaching out to my connections. I need to get ahead of this. I message the private investigator who helped me with proving Guido is Gio's son. At first he's reluctant to become involved, but I assure him that he will be compensated double whatever he's expecting and that I won't mention his name to anyone. He can remain anonymous.

I'm flooded with relief when he agrees.

After that I'm still tense and anxious, but at least I'm not going to be caught off guard when this whole thing comes crashing down.

Putting my phone away I make my way downstairs. Dinner will be served soon. I have to put on my brave face and confront whatever shit his sons are going to be handing out tonight.

But half way down the stairs I hear screaming and shouting and instantly know something is very wrong.

I run down the stairs, two at a time, almost tripping. Bolting into the dining room, Santino has Guido pinned to the floor, and he's punching him, over and over again while Guido screams and does his best to fight back.

"Get off him." I scream, but my voice is lost in the chaos.

Romeo and Dante are standing to the side. Romeo is smiling. Dante looks horrified.

"Get off him." I scream again, trying to grab Santino's shirt and pull him away, but he swings backwards, and I lose my grip and fall hard onto my ass.

Giovanni bursts into the room and grabs Santino, lifting him in the air as he tugs him off Guido . He pushes Santino away and stands between the two of them.

“What the fuck is going on?” he snarls angrily.

Santino immediately starts accusing Guido .

“He stole from me. That fucking little dickhead went into my room and stole from me.” He shouts.

“When?” I say in desperation. “H’s been in his room all day. He doesn’t even come into your side of the house.”

“What, you have eyes in the back of your head? Don’t defend him. I found the money under his pillow.”

“Money?” I stammer in disbelief.

Guido has never stolen in his life. And he doesn’t need money. There is no reason for him to risk everything to steal from Santino.

I look at Giovanni, desperate for him to put an end to this.

“Apologize.” He says to Guido .

“What?” I snap in disbelief.

“If the boy stole, he needs to apologize.”

Guido is standing, his hands shaking as he listens to the accusations. Blood is flowing from his nose and one eye is already darkening with a blue bruise.

I step in front of him, protecting my son because apparently his father isn't going to.

“My son would never steal.” I snarl, like a lioness defending her cub.

Giovanni bites down hard and shakes his head.

“Apologize.” He says again.

Santino is smiling so coldly it makes me want to slap him.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

NINE

giovanni

Zina is standing in front of Guido with an expression of pure anger on her face. She looks like she wants to launch at me and tear me apart.

Behind her Guido is shaking - with anger - or shock. I don't know.

My heart is heavy in my chest.

"If the boy stole he needs to make it right." I say, without much conviction. I just want to put an end to this.

Zina glances back over her shoulder talking gently, but firmly.

"Guido, you can go. I'll bring your dinner to you. Go clean up." She says, overruling my request.

I glare at her with my jaw tight.

Santino huffs and storms out of the dining room as well.

Romeo runs to follow him, and Dante stands frozen, looking from Zina to me and back to Zina.

"Dad, that wasn't?—"

“Get out.” I say to Dante. “Make sure Santino and Guido don’t get into it again.”

He pulls his face tight, but then leaves.

Zina continues to shoot deadly arrows at me with her gaze.

“You didn’t even try to defend him.” She says coldly.

“My son said he stole from him.”

“Your son?” she says, rich with accusation. “ Your son? ”

“You know what I mean.” I mutter, the guilt in my chest swelling and spreading.

“I don’t know what you mean, Giovanni. But it sounds like you need a massive wake up call. How can you treat your own blood like that? You didn’t even give him a chance to defend himself. You just assumed Santino was right and Guido didn’t have a chance to say a single word before you sided with the other boy.”

I press my lips together, not able to say a word before I know she’s right.

“You’re going to have to think long and hard about what it means to be a father. Whether you like it or not that boy is yours. You can hate me. You can treat me however you want - and you can allow your sons to continue to treat me like shit too - but don’t you dare, ever again, dismiss Guido like that.”

I glance around the empty dining room because I’m struggling to look at Zina. My heart is breaking over what I’ve done. I don’t know how to handle any of this. They are all my sons.

“Let’s just eat.” I say gesturing towards the food.

“I’m not hungry anymore. It turns out that being treated like nothing ruins a person’s appetite.” She snaps.

She storms from the dining room in a rage and I stand alone, looking at the empty space, wondering how I stop all of this from tearing my family apart.

This entire thing is a shit show. A disaster. I wish she’d never come back. I wish she’s rather blackmailed me and taken a huge amount of money instead of making me deal with these emotions. I don’t fucking know how to deal with this level of conflict within my own home.

I’m ruthless with my enemies. I tear people apart when they cross me.

How to I stop my sons from fighting each other?

My thoughts drift to Guido .

My son. My son who I just betrayed in so many ways. He will grow to hate me if he doesn’t already. Santino was violent, far too violent - even if there was an issue between the two of them that is not how he should have solved it. And the strange thing is that Santino is the oldest, and usually the rational one. He’s losing his mind since his mother died. Since this mess started.

But it doesn’t give him a right to inflict such damage.

Guido didn’t deserve that and I know it.

I realize that Zina never took a plate of food for him.

The roast lamb smells incredible as I dish up thick slices of it for Guido and pour a generous amount of gravy over the vegetables and the meat on his plate.

It's the least I can do. I sigh.

I carry the plate upstairs, wondering what I need to do to make this right. To fix all of this. Is it something I'm supposed to just lay the law down on? Or do I need to let them sort it out between themselves?

Zina is right though - I should have stayed neutral this evening.

I'm about to reach up and knock on Guido's open door when I hear them whispering.

Zina is sitting on his bed with her arms wrapped around his shoulders. Guido is sitting stiffly, looking utterly miserable.

"I know, honey." She says softly.

"You know me, mom. Please tell me you don't believe I would steal from him."

"I do know you, honey. I know you wouldn't steal. I'm so sorry about all of this. I thought coming here was the right thing."

"I don't care what they think of me, mom. I just need you to believe me." His voice is thick with emotion.

She takes his face in her hands and forces him to look into her eyes. His face is still coated in blood.

"Guido, I know who you are. I know you have a good, kind and strong heart. Don't let them bring you down." She says sternly.

I clear my throat and both of them jump.

Zina stands up, spinning to face me with shock in her eyes.

“What is this?” She snaps.

“Guido , wanted to bring you some food. Can I get you anything else? Pain killers or - uh - anything?” I step inside, oddly uncertain of myself. This is the first time I’m really talking to my son.

“I’ll be in my room.” Zina says quickly, glancing at Guido . He nods tightly. She walks past me and her scent brushes over me.

When she’s gone, I set his food down on the bedside table.

“Let me get a look at you.” I say, standing in front of him.

He tilts his head up, not saying a word. He won’t make eye contact.

I take his jaw in my hand and examine the bruises and the cut on his lip.

“Give me a second. I’ll get the med kit. We’ll disinfect for you.”

“Don’t bother yourself.” Guido says, calm but angry.

I pause and let out a heavy breath.

“I’m sorry, Guido . What I did downstairs was not fair.”

For the first time since I walk in he looks directly at me.

His eyes are filled with curiosity.

I shake my head. "I was wrong." I say again. "And I will have a word with Santino."

Guido stares at me for a long time, then simply says, "thank you." With a tight smile.

I smile as well. He is a man of few words, much like me. And staring at him now - I can see myself in him again. A quiet strength that people might underestimate.

"Do you want the first aid kit?" I ask.

"No, it's alright. There's one in my bathroom cabinet. It's not as bad as it looks." He gestures over his face.

"Alright then."

"Alright then."

We watch each other for a moment and things shift slightly.

He smiles.

I smile and step back.

"Goodnight, son." I murmur.

"Goodnight." He turns his face away but not before I catch the massive smile that spreads over his face.

Outside his room, with my back against the wall, I'm smiling too.

It's a small, seemingly insignificant step - but it's a step in the right direction and for the first time in a long time I can smile about something.

But he's not the only one who deserves an apology over what happened tonight, so I walk towards her bedroom.

She's standing at the window, waiting for me.

"What happened?" She asks, nervous.

"It went well."

Her shoulders drop slightly as she lets go of the tension she was holding.

"Thank you." She says softly.

"You don't have to thank me, Zina. I owe you an apology. I should have stayed neutral. I should have given both of them a chance to talk."

She nods. "I appreciate you saying that."

Sitting down on her sofa I push my hands back through my hair and let out a dry chuckle.

"Being a parent is so fucking hard sometimes." I muse.

She grins and sits down next to me. "Oh, don't worry, I know. And it's even more difficult now because every time I look at Guido I see the little baby boy I held in my arms and rocked to sleep - but he's a man now. He's a grown, strong, individual with his own dreams and thoughts and ideas." She sighs wistfully.

"I keep calling mine 'kid', even though they're not even teenagers anymore. I keep waiting for one of them to call me out on it."

She giggles again.

“And all the boys are taller than me.” She laughs louder this time. “It’s so hard pulling rank when they’re all taller than me.”

I start laughing to and as it rolls from my belly and out into the air it feels so good to be letting go and giving myself permission not to grieve for a moment.

Zina wipes her eyes, brushing away the watering tear that escaped in her amusement. She sighs loudly and leans over to rest her head on my shoulder.

“It’s not that long ago that we were their age.” She says.

“It’s not that long ago. And I still have all that same energy, the same yearning for a life of adventure and freedom.”

“Adult life steals a lot of that away from you.” She nods.

“It does. But why should we let it?”

Zina grins, turning to look at me, her body still leaning against mine. “It’s been a long time since I expressed my freedom or let go and had a little fun.”

The glitter in her eyes is impossible to misread. She looks exquisite as she stares up at me.

She bites her lip and turns away, comfortable against me. I wrap my arm around her shoulder, trying to ignore the pulsing need growing thicker by the second.

“It’s nice to have someone to talk to about it.” I say, resting my cheek against her hair.

“It is. I’ve been a single mom the entire time. All I wanted was someone to do it all with. You know. The hard times and the good times. To raise a family. To be together.”

My heart breaks for her realizing that I had all of that, but she had none.

“I wish you’d told me about him sooner.” I say quietly.

“You know I couldn’t do that, Gio. But now - from now on - I want him to at least experience what it’s like to have a family that isn’t just me.”

I nod, finally understanding why she’s here. Understanding that as a parent she was fighting for something for her son. Our son. And I would have fought for the same thing in her position.

We sit for a long time on her sofa, with my arm wrapped around her shoulders and her leaning into me.

Zina falls asleep and I gently lift her into my arms and carry her to her bed.

I want to climb in next to her so that I can carry on holding her. But I know better than that. Instead I lean down, brushing my lips over her cheek I whisper. “Sleep well, little firefly.” Then with all the effort I can muster inside me - I leave her and walk back to my own room, spinning with thoughts of her and what happened between us tonight.

She’s so much softer and warmer when she’s not fighting me.

She lets me close. And I understand it’s because I made her feel like she had to fight me. I made her defensive and cautious of me.

I need to do better by her so that I can do better for my son.

TEN

zina

While the private investigator works outside to find clues or evidence for me - I've been working inside, searching the estate, looking in every room and trying to find anything that can help.

Some of the doors are locked and I'm torn between forcing them open or coming back later after trying to find a key. It's a careful balance between being caught in the act, and looking even more guilty, or playing it safe and having them beat me to it - finding fake evidence against me before I can find the real evidence.

I hurry down a long passage and again that creepy feeling makes my skin crawl.

Above me the camera slowly tracks my movements. It follows me, turning from left to right with the red light blinking constantly as I walk, narrowing my eyes at it.

Who is watching me?

Why have they been tracking me around the entire house today - and yesterday? I think it started maybe three days ago - but today whoever it is isn't even trying to be subtle. At least before they were less obvious.

In defiance I stop exactly where I am and turn to glare at that ominous black lens. The light blinks. Red. Red. Red.

I stare for a long time, then with a spur-of-the-moment idea I bolt towards the security office. It's literally around the corner from where I am in the mansion and I can easily get there and figure out who's watching me.

I almost skid around the corner I'm running so fast and breathe a sigh of relief. No one is standing in the passage way or hurrying away - whoever has been watching me is still inside, sitting at the long white desk in front of the wall of monitors.

When I walk into the room, I do it with my head held high and my gaze set. I want them to know I'm not messing around. I'm going to demand they tell me what they're up to.

Except - the door bursts open - I step inside - and find the room completely empty.

"What in the world - " I mutter to myself, the fight draining out of me.

There wasn't enough time for someone to escape.

This doesn't make any sense.

I walk towards the computers and brush my fingers over the keyboard. The screens flicker with live footage of each camera.

A separate screen appears to be running a stream of information.

I watch it for a while, trying to figure out what it is.

It looks like it might be the access log, or record log for the entire system. When a house keeper walks past the camera in the kitchen, I note it on the live video, but then it also makes a written log of it on this separate screen.

Movement. Kitchen. 15:32.

Movement. Hallway 7. 15:32.

Movement. Patio. 15:32.

Movement. Living room 1. 15:33.

Each movement is recorded and my eyes dart to the corresponding video to confirm as someone walks past the camera.

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to figure out what the hell is going on.

“What are you doing?” A deep voice makes me jump. I spin to face the security officer who has walked into the room, holding a cup of coffee.

“Were you in here before?” I ask.

“Before what? I went to get a coffee. I’ve only been gone about ten minutes.” He says defensively.

I nod. “Never mind. Um. Enjoy your coffee.”

With slow steps, lost in thought, I head back to my bedroom.

What does this mean? If it wasn’t someone in the security office - who else has access to the cameras. Maybe his sons have the security app installed on their phones? Giovanni surely wouldn’t be watching me from his phone? What good would it do for the sons to watch me though - it seems like a total waste of time for them?

“Zina.” His voice is commanding and deep and it sends a thrill racing through me.

“Giovanni, did you need something?” I ask, turning to face him.

“We need to talk, now.” He snarls, grabbing my arm he drags me from the passage into his office. He pushes me hard and I stumble, only just managing to catch myself from falling.

“What are you doing - “ I squeal in fright and anger. He slams the office door behind himself and glares at me.

“What are you really doing here?” he snarls.

“What - “ I stammer. “You know what I’m doing here. We spoke about just the other night - for our son, Gio.”

He shakes his head and steps closer to me, looking down at me with a dark scowl. I push him hard against his chest, refusing to let him intimidate me. But he doesn’t budge.

“Explain this.” He says coldly, shoving his phone into my hand.

For a moment I don’t move. I just blink at him in disbelief.

I’m confused in so many ways I can hardly think.

The heat of his body against mine is not helping anything either and that dark, hungry look in his eyes is sending warmth between my legs.

“Look at the damn phone.” He growls and I flinch, lifting it up to see whatever he wants me to see.

A message.

Unknown: you have a traitor in your midst. She wears a crown as though she is your queen, but she's there to tear you down from the inside out. Beware the woman who smiles so sweetly.

I squint at the message in confusion. "What is this?" I mutter, reading it again.

"It's a message. And it's obviously about you. A clear warning not to trust you." He says roughly as he grabs his phone back.

I shake my head. "Giovanni, I don't know what they're talking about. Who sent it? Whose number is that?"

"The number is hidden. What difference does it make? Someone is trying to warn me about whatever it is you're up to."

"But I'm not up to anything." I huff in annoyance.

He stares at me with his jaw set.

"Stop doing that." I snap, pushing him again, trying to create some space between us so that I can think clearly.

"I'm not ignoring this." He says, gesturing towards his phone.

"Oh - what? You're going to believe some coward who doesn't even want to reveal who they are - instead of trusting me?" I say in defensive. "If it was a message from someone you knew I wouldn't blame you for being wary - but this asshole isn't even showing their face. Why would believe it?"

He sneers, pulling his mouth tight as he turns away from me. I sigh in relief to have some room to breathe.

“Giovanni, something is going on here.” I sigh again. “I’ve noticed strange things happening.”

“Mm.” He huffs, reluctant to hear me out. “What strange things?” he mutters, annoyed.

“Someone is watching me.”

“What?” he snaps, rolling his eyes. “No one is watching you, Zina.”

“Someone is. When I walk around the estate the camera’s move to track me. They follow my movements everywhere I go. Someone is watching me.” I insist.

He shakes his head.

“The guards would only be doing that if I gave them instructions to do it. And I certainly didn’t. Although - after this warning, perhaps it’s something I should do.”

“For fuck sakes, Giovanni. Listen to me. I’m not crazy. I’m not imagining the camera’s tracking me. I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

“There is no one in this house watching you, Zina. No one cares where you go and what you do.” He snaps. His eyes are shooting into me like steel rods. The way he’s looking at me, as though I’m the enemy, as though there is hate in his heart - it reminds me of the day he broke my heart.

I was twenty-one, completely in love - madly, crazy in love. And he was looking at me just like that. His words are still crystal clear in my memory. “You need to stay

away from me and stay away from my family.”

I argued with him. “I don’t understand. Why are you doing this?”

He grabbed my arm and pulled me close so that the heat of his breath brushed over my face. “I never want to see you again, Zina. You are nothing to me. Nothing. Is that clear?”

I shake my head to get rid of the memory. It was a long time ago, but it still shatters my heart when I think about it. It was the most brutal rejection. Only a day before, we were lying on the grass near the harbor with my head resting on his shoulder and his arms wrapped around me. Just one day before - he told me he wanted to be with me forever. That no one would ever tear us apart. He told me we were meant to be together.

My heart is racing, each beat is a pulse of agony as I try to let go of the memory. It’ll always haunt me, like it has for years. Sometimes it makes me angry. Sometimes it makes me cry.

Two days after he rejected me I found out I was pregnant. I fought with myself, at war with my heart and my mind, deciding whether or not to tell him. I wanted to get revenge against what he’d done to me. His cruelty.

But I couldn’t. When I watched him with his sons and his wife - I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t tear a family apart and hurt Bella - it wasn’t her fault he’d made promises to me.

And the truth was that I still loved him. I still had hope that he’d change his mind and I didn’t want to do anything to risk ruining that.

Of course, during my pregnancy and after my son was born - I fell in love with being

a mother. The pain left over from Giovanni was still there, but I was able to ignore it most of the time.

Outside the office, a sound comes from the hallway and both Giovanni and I turn towards it.

Laughter.

It's such a strange sound to hear in the house lately. Tensions are so high, and nothing seems to be going right. Laughter seems out of place.

Giovanni walks towards the door and tugs it open, peering through it.

"What is it?" I whisper, standing at his side to see as well.

Down the hallway, walking away from us, Guido and Dante are walking side by side, carrying a pizza, laughing and joking about people who are stupid enough to put pineapple on pizza. "Let's go to the sunroom upstairs. It's got a great view." Dante says, turning off and gesturing for Guido to follow.

"Good idea." Guido says.

I knot my brows in disbelief. Both Giovanni and I step back into the office.

"They're getting on really well." I say, more to myself than him.

"Ye, Dante was asking me about his brother the other day. He's a good kid." He sighs, pressing his fingers into his eyes.

"What was he asking?" I ask.

“He’s the youngest, you know, and I think he was angry at himself for just blindly following his older brother’s lead. He never wanted to push Guido away. I’m glad he finally found the confidence to do what he feels is right. Older brothers can be very influential on the younger ones.” He shrugs.

I smile, my heart warming. At least something good is happening. Finally. Guido has a friend in this place and that, despite everything else, is enough to make me really happy.

But I still have to deal with the issue at hand.

Turn to face Gio and try again to get to the bottom of this issue with the cameras. There has to be a way to see who logs in when and where they log in from. If we can get to the bottom of it - if it is Santino or Romeo spying on me - at least I’ll know, and I can put it down to more of their stupid tricks. But if it isn’t them, then I’m worried that someone else has access to the cameras - someone who shouldn’t have. And that is a danger that Giovanni can’t ignore.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

ELEVEN

giovanni

Zina takes a deep breath and folds her arms across her chest. “Can you please do me a favor?” She asks.

I narrow my eyes at her. I’ve only just confronted her about an anonymous warning I got that she’s here to do more harm than good - and now she’s asking me for favors. What the fuck?

I glare at her without answering. I won’t say yes, but I am curious what she wants from me. She’s standing just in front of my desk. She looks uncomfortable. Nervous. She’s fidgeting and knotting her fingers together.

When she realizes I’m not saying anything she goes ahead and asks what she wants of me.

“Giovanni, on your security system - is there a way to see who’s accessing the cameras?” Her mouth tight as she bites at her lower lip.

“Why the hell would I give you information about my security system?” I snap.

“Please, just do this for me - I want to know who was linked to the system between 2:30 and 3:30 this afternoon. Someone is watching me, and I need to know who. Why don’t you want to know? Aren’t you worried about who’s linked to your system?”

“No one is linked to my system, Zina.” I say in frustration. “I have state-of-the-art firewalls. No one can get through them. You’re imagining this.”

“Stop being so fucking stubborn.” She shouts. “Why do you always have to be like this?”

Anger spikes inside me.

“Like what?” I growl, walking towards her, closing the gap as my patience disintegrates and I have an intense urge to grab her around the throat and shake her, demanding to know she’s up to. Why someone would feel the need to warn me about her. Why is she asking me about my security system?

I clench my fists at my side as I glare at her. Her scent flows over me and I huff out a breath to push it away.

She tilts her chin upward to confront me. “What are you going to do, Gio? Hit me? Strangle me? Will that make you feel better?” She hisses in anger, but I can see the fear in her eyes. The doubt, creeping in like a slow burning flame. She’s scared of me. My heart beats faster.

Her fear is turning me on in dangerous ways.

Unable to control myself, I reach up and slowly wrap my hand around her throat, tightening my grip until that panic in her eyes intensifies. It’s a beautiful sight, seductive. Tempting.

Expect now my body is burning too. My cock is growing harder and I know she can feel it as it bulges against my pants.

Her lips part and she takes a strained breath, my fingers cutting off most of her air.

Her chest is heaving, and her pupils dilate.

I press my body harder into hers. My cock throbs against her stomach and she doesn't move. She doesn't try to push me away.

The look in her eyes is daring me to go further. Daring me to do whatever I want to her.

My lips crash into hers and instantly the taste of her floods through me like a drug, one I thought I was long over, but the moment I taste her every cell in my body ignites with need. Every pleasurable moment I've ever had with her taunts me. My lips move over hers and I push my tongue inside her mouth.

I step towards her again, forcing her onto the desk as the kiss intensifies. Her hands are pulling at my shirt and the sounds she making against my mouth are almost enough to tear me apart.

My hand slides up her thigh, pushing her skirt higher, my touch burning against her skin.

I shove her legs apart with my hips, leaning into her to pin her to the desk.

She whimpers beneath me and my adrenalin spikes.

She is mine to do whatever I please.

My cock aches, remembering how it felt to thrust into her -

A dark growl vibrates through me and I pull her off the desk, spinning her around and pushing her face down onto it again.

She cries out in fright but arches her ass up towards me. I slap her hard, leaving a red mark on her skin. She looks vulnerable and unspeakably sexy.

Yanking her dress out of the way I took my finger beneath her panties, brushing over her pussy, feeling how wet she is already.

With a sharp tug, I rip the delicate lace right off her body. She gasps and shifts beneath me.

She tries to look at me over her shoulder and I shove her head forward, pushing her cheek into the desk as I tear my belt off and free my cock. Thick veins are throbbing down the length of me, pulsing and aching with need.

I position myself behind her and when I thrust into her, I do it with force.

Holding nothing back I shove my cock deep inside her pussy, stretching her open and burying myself inside her. Her pussy tightens over me as she tries to adjust to the size of me.

I pull out and thrust in again. Her hips bash against the edge of the desk and she cries out.

“Shut up.” I growl in warning.

She whimpers quietly, obedient. And I begin to fuck her like I used to. Claiming her entire body each time my cock plunges into her. My fingers knotted in her hair as I hold her down. She is beautiful and helpless beneath me, but more willing than she wants to admit.

She used to tease me for hours until I took her like this. It was a game I loved to play with her.

I thrust, again and again, pleasure building and intensifying as I fuck her harder and harder.

My cock slides in and out, soaked with her desire, pushing her pussy open for my pleasure. She arches against me, rocking into my thrusts and when I place my hand on her hip, I can feel her body shaking with pleasure.

An urgency rushes through her and she starts moving, trying to circle her hips, trying to have more of me. A low, dark laugh rolls from my lips and I kick her legs wider apart, grabbing both hips in my hands I fuck her as though she was a whore, and her only purpose was to please me.

She loves it - and the more she loves it the more it drives me wild.

Until she is gasping and moaning and shaking so much she can't take anymore.

She explodes onto my cock, her entire body convulsing as the orgasm waves through her.

I push deep inside her and release as well.

Leaning over her as I fight to steady my breath while the last spasm of pleasure flows from me.

I close my eyes, breathing heavily.

What the fuck have I done?

My head swims with regret as I slide my cock out of her. And even as I do this, my body floods with new desire, seeing her bent over and exposed like that.

She stands up, tugging her dress down.

I clear my throat and turn away from her as I zip my pants.

My office door suddenly opens, and Santino walk in, instantly freezing in place when he sees us.

His jaw sets tightly. I glance at Zina, dressed, but still adjusting her clothes to straighten them. Her hair is loose and wild around her shoulders, messy from my fingers being knotted in it.

I'm still busy doing my belt up.

There is zero chance of denying what just happened.

Santino lets out a harsh breath, glaring at me in anger.

"Seriously." He snaps.

"I'll talk to you later, Santino. Just give me a moment." I demand.

Zina giggles and steps to my side. "No, that's ok, I'll go." She says, but then she stands on her tiptoes and with her hands wrapped around the back of my neck - she kisses me.

The moment our lips touch my body melts against hers. My blood flows hotter and my heart races. I forgot everything else around me.

She pulls away, brushing her thumb over my lips. She smiles up at me, then turns to walk away. My eyes follow her as she steps around Santino, not acknowledging him, and walks through the door with her hips swaying and my mind screaming at me to

follow her because I want more of everything.

“Seriously, dad?” he snarls angrily, snapping me back into reality.

“Just leave it alone, Santino.” I huff, sliding my belt into the final loop. I turn away from my son, busying myself by straightening the paperwork we sent flying over the desk top.

He walks around the desk so that he’s in my line of sight again.

“You can’t be that stupid dad. You’re not blind, so why are you falling for this?” he challenges me.

“What are you talking about, Santino?” I sigh, trying to figure out how it got to that point. One moment I was confronting her about the message - the next -

“She’s manipulating you. She’s using her body to control you and your letting it happen.”

“No one is manipulating anyone, Santino. It was just - it was - just leave it alone.” I say with regret cutting into me. Fuck. What have I done? Why the fuck did Santino have to walk in right at that moment?

Thank goodness he didn’t walk in earlier.

I clenching my jaw and brush my hand through my hair.

This is a disaster.

That should never have happened.

Santino is still glaring at me.

“Just fucking let it go.” I snap. “You don’t get to question my actions.”

His lip curls back in anger, but he nods. “You’re right. But open your eyes dad. If you don’t realize what she’s doing to get her way - you’re going to regret it.”

He storms from the office, and I have no idea why he came in here in the first place.

I flop down onto the chair and let out a loud groan of frustration.

I already regret what happened.

I can’t believe it - she - she felt so incredible. Every inch of her is exactly the same as I remember it. Her curves, her beautiful pussy, those sweet little sounds of desperation that spill from her lips. The way she hands control over to me and gives me permission to be wild and aggressive and -

My cock throbs and I groan again, adjusting it before it becomes uncomfortable.

Is she manipulating me?

Is my son seeing something I’m not seeing?

All I know is that being with her is nothing like anything else I’ve ever experienced. And I’m worried now, because how will I stop thinking about this. How can I convince my body that it’s too risky to give in to those desires?

Standing up I leave my office, unable to focus or think clearly. I need a session on the gym. A good work out will get rid of the edge that’s cutting against me.

I'll sweat her off my skin and out of my mind.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

TWELVE

zina

Being with Giovanni was not something I planned, but it isn't something I regret either.

My heart has been dragged all the way back in time, and it's flooded with those same feelings I felt all those years ago.

I still love him.

I never stopped.

No matter how hard I pretend that I'm over it, it's always been there.

I focused on being a mother and raising my son and working hard to keep our lives together - but Giovanni has always been there, like a shadow hovering over me.

And after what happened in the office yesterday - everything has resurfaced.

It hurts.

But it's also beautiful.

It also makes me smile.

He's the one who kissed me. He's the one who started it. The moment he kissed me I was lost to him. And now, even though I'm terrified of how I feel, I'm unable to deny it.

I still love him.

Realizing this has made me even more determined to prove to him that I'm innocent of everything I'm being accused of. I hate the fact that he believed the message he received. Whoever sent it is a coward. For all I know it could be one of his sons. But that would be the best-case scenario.

The worst-case scenario is that one of his rivals is up to something. Whoever is messing with his shipments - maybe they are behind everything else as well.

I stare up at the camera as it moves, staying in line with me as I walk down the hallway.

I wonder -

If someone inside the house is watching me - and I go into a section of the mansion that I've been forbidden to explore - surely they will come and stop me. They wouldn't just sit by and let me get away with that.

My heart flips with tension as I march towards the forbidden wing, towards the room I've never been in.

The door is locked, but I stand on my tiptoes to try to reach the top of the frame where I can see the key peeking out.

I take off my shoe and throw it up at the key until, after three attempts, I manage to knock it down.

I'm very aware of the camera watching me.

The blinking red light is like a silent alarm in the corner of my vision.

The key slips into the lock and clicks when I turn it. The handle turns all the way and I push the door open. With one glance at the camera, I step into the forbidden room. My heart is racing.

I thought I would find documents. Work folders, secret files - something like that. But instead I find a room that obviously used to belong to Bella.

For a moment I just stare at everything in disbelief. It's like a secret shine to her. A memory of everything she was. A beautiful display of everything she meant to Giovanni and her family.

My chest tightens.

I walk deeper into the room, my eyes roaming over all of her beautiful things.

It smells of fresh flowers and delicate perfume. Unmistakably feminine., and even though she's been gone a while, someone has been keeping it clean from dust and airing it out.

I walk slowly around the room, my heart strangely tight, aching with jealousy because I never had a chance to be loved by Giovanni in the way that he loved her.

Why was she so lucky?

Why didn't I deserve the same love?

My fingertips brush over an ornate book with a pearl cover. I open it and let the pages

drift through my fingers. A diary. Her careful, neat cursive looks elegant and beautiful on every page.

I close it roughly, not wanting to read her words. Scared that it will upset me more. I'm already on the verge of tears.

I swallow, trying to push back the lump forming in my throat.

Dresses hang on a railing near the window. Silk, velvet, lace and carefully hand stitched beaded designs. Each dress is exquisite. Far more beautiful than anything I was ever able to afford.

I wonder if he held her, danced with her to romantic music while she wore these - his hands brushing over her body as he stared down at her with love in his eyes.

I sigh softly and move on, looking at her small selection of first edition books. Romance. Sweet stories with sweet endings.

I never liked romance novels. They seem like a taunting jibe at something I would never have.

On the dressing table her jewelry box is open, and I dip my fingers inside, gently lifting the most gorgeous necklace from it.

I hold it up, letting the clear white diamonds catch the sunlight splashing through the window. The light bounces off the stones and dances over the walls around me.

"She wore it on our wedding day." His voice is full of pain.

I spin towards him with a fright, still holding the necklace. He's standing just inside the door way.

He closes his eyes for a moment, and I see the agony of losing her, etched into every muscle of his body.

It hurts me to see him hurting. But at the same time I hate the fact that he's hurting because he misses her when I'm standing right in front of him.

I push aside the pain I feel, the haunting rejection that has followed me my entire life
-

Carefully I put the necklace back. "It's so beautiful. She was very lucky to live the life she had with you." I say quietly. "She was lucky to have your love, Giovanni."

When I turn towards him again, he is pressing his fingers into his eyes, fighting tears.

"Gio - " I say his name gently.

He shakes his head, unable to speak. The necklace has brought back memories he wasn't prepared for. This space overwhelms him with emotions.

Stepping close to him I slip my arms around his waist and rest my face against his chest. His scent is so masculine, so enticing, I close my eyes and let it steal me away. "I'm sorry." I whisper, losing myself in dark musk and forests of pine.

He wraps his arms around me too, leaning forward he rests his chin on top of my head and for the briefest of moments - he lets me comfort him.

But it doesn't last long.

His body goes stiff against mine. Rigid and cold. He drops his arms away, pushing me back.

“What the fuck are you doing in Bella’s room. This is not for you to see.” He snarls angrily.

“I’m sorry, Gio - I didn’t know it was her room - I was - I was just?—”

“You were snooping where you aren’t welcome, Zina.” He growls angrily.

“I was wondering what it would be like to have been her. To have felt your love.” I mutter quietly.

His eyes soften as he stares at me. He takes a deep breath, but then pushes away whatever he was thinking and shoots heated anger at me again.

“You will never be her, Zina. She was the love of my life.”

I storm up to him and grab his shirt in my hands. I pull and with deep frustration and tears in my eyes I shake him. He doesn’t move, but he watches me as I say. “She’s gone, Giovanni. She’s gone and you’re still pushing me away. Why can’t you give me a chance?” I sound pathetic. Like I’m begging someone to love me. I hate the way the words spill from my lips, a weakness I never wanted to show the world.

I’ve been strong for sixteen years - but being with him again has shattered that strength. Leaving me vulnerable.

Giovanni lets out a sharp breath and pries my fingers from his shirt.

“I came here to remember Bella, not to deal with you.” He snaps.

I step away from him, hurt by his harsh words.

“So, you pushed me away then - and you’re doing it again now. That day you left me

- you did it so coldly it broke me to pieces. You treated me as though I was nothing but trash - you tried to make me believe that you never loved me in the first place, but I know you did, Giovanni. Say whatever the hell you want to try to ease your mind - but I know you loved me once . And if you weren't so stupid and stubborn now, you would give me a chance."

"No." He snaps, glaring at me.

The air between us sparks with tension. Static spiking at my heart.

I wanted him to leave her for me.

I thought he was going to. I believed him. I was planning my life with him. But he chose her. And it seems he will always choose her.

The hurt shifts inside me - turning into a jealous rage.

"I don't ever want to find you in this room again, Zina." Giovanni warns me.

"Or what? You'll break my heart by telling me everything was a lie? It's too late for that. You've already destroyed my belief in love." I snap at him.

It's not true though.

I wish I didn't believe in love anymore - but how can I say that when I love him so deeply.

"Get out." He snarls.

I close my eyes and turn my face away from him.

When I open them again, I don't look at him.

I walk out of his wife shrine. Away from her memory, her heavy presence, her ability to overpower me despite the fact that she's dead and gone.

Tears are streaming down my cheeks as I run up to my bedroom and slam the door shut.

I lean against the back of it, slowly sinking to the ground, pulling my knees against my chest I bury my face against my folded arms and let everything spill out of me.

I cry without restraint. I don't care who hears me or who is bothered by my pain.

I cry until I have no more energy left. Until my eyes are dry and burning and I can barely keep them open anymore.

When I'm too tired to be anything but numb, I stand up and walk over to my bed, kicking my shoes off along the way, I tug the covers off and climb beneath them.

All I want is for him to see how much I love him. How much I have always loved him.

A blind man can see he wants me too - but he won't let himself love me. Why? Why don't I deserve it? Why am I not good enough?

Why am I not worth his admiration?

I thought I couldn't cry anymore but as pain floods my heart again my tears spill onto the pillow.

I roll over to bury my face against the soft fabric, muffling the sounds of my

heartache.

Hours go by before I'm able to drag myself up and climb into a shower. Dinner is being served soon and I want to be there for Guido .

He's always been my reason to keep going - and he can be my reason now.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

THIRTEEN

giovanni

At dinner I keep glancing towards Zina. This afternoon I was harsh. I treated her like shit, and I didn't mean to.

She looks exhausted, and I think it's my fault.

The memory of Bella on our wedding day was more painful than I expected - it came out of nowhere.

And on top of it all - being with Zina again has reminded me of the guilt I felt back then. The guilt I felt for betraying my wife.

I study Zina's face at the table next to me. Her eyes are swollen from crying, red and raw.

I feel terrible.

She's done her best to cover the shadows beneath them with make up - and I don't think the boys have noticed anything. But I can see it.

Her demeanor has changed.

And I can feel her tension.

She's too quiet. Her usual glow is faded and dull. She's pushing the food around her plate, hardly touching it and making empty conversation with Guido .

Guido seems occupied with Dante though, he's laughing and making jokes with him. I don't think his mom has to worry about him right now.

I watch Zina as her eyes drift towards her son. When he laughs she smiles, relieved that he's finally fitting in. I like the fact that the boys are starting to get along. Dante anyway - I don't know about the other two.

Sensing my gaze on her she glances at me, but then quickly looks away and lets out a sharp breath. Her cheeks flush slightly, turning light pink. She's embarrassed - or avoiding me.

Every fiber of my being wants to reach out and comfort her. I want to protect her from ever feeling pain. I want to take care of her and be the one who makes her smile.

Frustration swarms through me along with the guilt I'm already carrying. I've only just lost Bella and I'm already falling for the woman who almost took me away from my family before.

Did I ever stop loving Zina?

Yes.

No .

I stab my steak and cut at it aggressively with the serrated knife. Angry with myself because I know I never stopped loving her. In order to leave her I had to convinced myself I never loved her in the first place. Knowing it was a lie. Knowing it was impossible to let her go. I lied to myself and forced myself to believe I didn't even

like her. I convinced myself that she was a temptress. A muse. That she was dangerous and wicked.

I told myself it was her fault that I cheated on Bella.

But it was me. I made the moves. I made the promises.

I chased her until I could possess her in every way possible.

It was the most exquisite thing I've ever felt.

And then I left her.

I was cruel. I remember the day. It broke me in ways that changed me. But I had no choice.

I clench my jaw.

Being with Zina makes me feel powerful. She is the ideal feminine for me. And I think that's what terrifies me the most.

It feels like a sin to admit that she was a better woman for me than my wife could ever have been.

My sweet, innocent, beautiful wife. I loved her dearly, but she never saw the real me. The version that I showed Zina.

A darker, more dangerous love. An enticing, exciting love.

After dinner when Romeo and Santino have left and Dante and Guido are still chatting away, Zina stands to clear the dishes.

“You can leave it. The cleaners will do it.” I say, confused.

“It’s ok. I just want something to do.” She mumbles.

“I’ll help.” Dante says cheerfully.

Zina and I both look at him in surprise.

“Oh.” She says, tilting her head to the side.

Dante gathers plates, stacking them together.

He hands Zina the cutlery so she can collect it in an empty dish. They work together and I see the smile on her lips growing wider.

“I used to help my mom with all sorts of things.” Dante says, chatting happily.

“Like what?” Zina asks, standing next to him.

“Like, I used to make her tea. She said no one else made tea like I did.”

“I love tea, but I’m super fussy about how it’s made.” She shrugs.

“I’ll make tea for you. You’ll see how good it is.” Dante grins.

I watch them as they leave the dining room carrying empty dishes and stacked plates. Still talking about random things.

My heart is tight with a strange sense of relief.

Dante is going to be ok.

He's been the one struggling the most with his mom's death - but for the first time the weight of his pain has eased, and I can smile. He's going to be ok.

Now I need to get through to Santino and Romeo.

If they can give Zina and Guido a chance the tension in this household will ease away.

The dining room is empty, so I sit down again at the head of the table, with my hands resting on the dark wood.

Maybe I also need to give Zina a chance.

What if someone is watching her and it's not just a story to distract me?

I would be furious with myself if something happened to her - something I could have stopped if I had just taken the time to listen.

I pull out my phone, messaging my head of security.

Me: Fabio, I want you to pull a report of who accessed the security cameras this past Thursday - between the hours of 2:30pm and 3:30pm. You can email me the data.

Fabio: Will do. Did something happen? Is there something I need to be aware of?

Me: Not at the moment. It's just a precaution.

Standing up I make my way to the kitchen, following the sounds of laughter.

Dante, Zina and Guido are all in here, rummaging through the fridge and pulling out random ingredients.

“What’s going on?” I ask, leaning against the kitchen counter with my arms folded across my chest.

“Zina said she can make macaroons with strawberries and creams.” Dante says, holding up the punned of bright red strawberries. “Do you want some?”

“Uh. Sure.” I nod.

Santino walks in with Romeo close behind him. They stop and stare in confusion at this scene.

“What’s this?” Romeo snaps.

“We’re making desert.” Dante smiles.

Santino glares at him and Dante shrinks backwards. The smile wipes off his face and he shifts uncomfortably.

“You guys should join us.” I say to Santino, hating the effect he has on his youngest brother. Can’t he see Dante is happy. That he’s smiling for the first time in a really long time.

We all went through a lot, watching Bella suffer as the sickness got worse.

Santino shakes his head, still glaring at Dante. “I’m not a traitor.” He says quietly, aiming his words at Dante.

Romeo and Santino leave, and Dante looks beaten down.

“Hey.” I say, walking over to him. “Ignore them.”

“I try to - but they hardly speak to me anymore.” He says tightly.

“They are your brothers, they’ll come around.” He nods without conviction. “I mean it, D. They are still processing their grief in their own way. Let them work through it. You’ll see, it’ll be ok in the end.”

Zina hands Dante a cutting board while Guido searches through the cupboards for a bowl.

She smiles at Dante, talking quietly to him.

“Your dad’s right, D. Everyone processes things in different ways. You are braver than them, kinder - for how you’ve treated Guido . For giving him a chance. Honestly, thank you.” She reaches up and touches his cheek, her smile soft and warm. “It means a lot to me to know he is close to one of his brothers.”

Dante smiles, his cheeks stretching with pride.

“It’s kind of cool to have an extra brother. And to not be the youngest anymore.” He laughs.

“Well, he’s lucky to have you.” She grins, “Now are you going to help me slice strawberries or what?”

“Found one.” Guido says, setting a white bowl on the counter. “This should be big enough.”

It’s almost four in the morning, when I wake up with a fright, hearing someone knock on my door. Bolting upright in bed I try desperately to focus on the shadowed figure walking into my room, but I can’t see who it is. I’m tense, ready to defend myself.

“It’s me.” She whispers.

My heart races in a different way. Instead of fright, it’s turned to excitement.

Zina stands next to my bed in the dark.

“Did you need something?” I ask, my voice hoarse from sleep.

“I got a message that I think you should see. It came through earlier, but I was asleep. I saw it a few minutes ago?—”

She sounds nervous.

Throwing the blankets off I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and flicking the bedside light on.

Light spills over her tousled hair and her sleepy eyes. Her lips are pink and slightly swollen. She was sleeping too. Her face is rosy from it.

Fuck.

She really is gorgeous.

Her hand is stretched towards me with her phone in it.

I take it from her and squint at the brightness of her screen, groaning and scrunching my face.

“Oh, sorry.” She says, taking it back with a little giggle that makes my cock stir. She turns the brightness down, then hands the phone to me again.

It's a message from a sender she has saved on her phone.

My heart clenches tightly in my chest when I read the name.

Emiliano Maritz.

Why the fuck would she be interacting with my biggest rival and enemy.

I look up, trying to read her expression.

She gestures towards the phone. "Did you read it?" She asks.

Emiliano: I understand your stay at the Rivas estate is not going as well as you'd hoped. I can offer you a better place to live. A more welcoming home. Just say the words and I will make the arrangements for you and your son. I told you before, Zina, I'm here for you - whatever you need.

There are no messages in the chat before or after this one.

"What is this about?" I say darkly. My trust in her slipping. "Why are you talking to this man?"

"I'm not. I didn't even reply." She says defensively. "I don't even know how he knows I'm here."

"I find that hard to believe. You have his number saved on your phone. He knows your name. He even made reference to the fact that you've spoken to him in the past. Don't fucking lie to me Zina, it won't go well for you."

I stand up, agitated and confrontational.

She shakes her head and grabs her phone back in frustration, taking a step away from me.

“Why can’t you ever assume the best of me instead of the worst. Why in the world would I have shown you the message if I was trying to hide it from you?” She snaps.

“To feign innocence.” My eyes are locked onto her, watching her, every movement, every change in her expression.

“Explain how you know him.” I demand.

“I don’t actually know him. I’ve spoken to him once in the past. He approached me almost a year ago.”

“A year ago - alright - and what happened?”

“He told me he could help me. That he would give my son and me the life we deserve. He gave me his number and told me to call him.”

“And?”

“And I turned him down. Why would I believe him when I don’t even know him? He offered me money - and I turned that down too. I never called him.”

What she’s saying doesn’t add up. Why is my enemy talking to her? Why is she involved with him in any way?

I can’t push away the suspicion that she’s not telling me everything.

“Who is he?” She asks, her eyes narrowed towards me. “Why are you so angry that he’s offered to help me?”

“I think you already know who he is, Zina - that he’s my biggest rival in the mafia.”

Her lips part as though she’s shocked.

“I know he’s someone wealthy and powerful - but I didn’t know that .” She’s nervous now, knotting her brows and fidgeting with her phone. “Gio, please, you have to believe me. I have no involvement with him.”

Her discomfort piques my desire as I step closer to her.

“And why should I trust you?” I ask dangerously.

She looks up at me, her brown eyes flaked with gold, wide and pleading.

My eyes drift over her body, the short nightie, barely covering her ass.

My breathing gets heavier as I press closer against her.

My cock begins to stir, and she feels it, her lips pressing together.

“Gio.” She murmurs, barely a whisper.

“Do you know what will happen to you if I find out you’ve been lying to me?” I ask with a dangerous edge to my voice.

My cock grows harder as I imagine the ways I would punish her.

She takes a sharp breath, her lips parting.

I lean close, wrapping my hand around her jaw. My lips hover just inches away from hers.

She lets out a soft moan.

Somehow, from somewhere deep inside me, I snap to my senses and drop my hand away - stepping back in a hurry.

Zina seems to realize what was about to happen too and she turns her back on me, tugging her nightie down and trying to cover herself.

“I just wanted to show you - in case it was something important.” She stammers.

“Fine.” I say sharply.

“I’ll - um - I’ll see you in the morning.” She mutters, walking away from me.

I watch her leave my room and my cock aches, throbbing and pulsing. With a growl of frustration I climb back into bed, flicking the light off and refusing to acknowledge the effect she has on me.

I can’t trust myself around her. Even confronted with evidence that she might be involved with my biggest rival - I am still drawn to her. I’ll need to watch myself - and her. I was so easily distracted now, so quickly forgetting about the message in favor of her temptations.

My jaw clenches, my cheek against my pillow. Perhaps my son sees something that I don’t see. Maybe she is a master of manipulation and I am falling for it hook, line and sinker.

FOURTEEN

zina

“You’re coming with me.” He snaps, standing in the doorway of my bedroom. I’ve just stepped out of the shower and I’m staring at him in disbelief, clutching the towel against my body as his eyes roam unrestrained over me.

“You can’t just barge in here, Giovanni. You have to at least knock.” I blurt out.

“Wear something corporate.”

“Where are we going?”

“I have a meeting. Hurry up. You’ve got thirty minutes.” His voice is commanding and cold. He throws the information at me and walks away without waiting for my reply.

I blink at the empty doorway, trying to figure out why he would want me at a business meeting. But I’m happy for the chance to get out for a bit and to do something different. I’m also secretly pleased that he wants me with him. Any time with him means something to me. Regardless of his moody attitude.

From my closet I select a body hugging white dress, the bandage style designs accentuates my waist and has a power-suite vibe to it when I pair it with black heels and a black blazer.

My hair is pulled up into a high bun on top of my head and I opt for a dark shade of fudge colored lipstick.

When I walk into the living room to tell Giovanni I'm ready he stares at me, wide eyed and gawking. I grin, pretending not to notice his admiration.

He catches himself and clears his throat loudly, gesturing towards the door. "Let's go." He snaps.

I walk ahead of him out to the car and the entire way I can sense the heat of his eyes on me.

He tugs my door open and his gaze is locked onto my legs as I lower myself into the seat. "Thank you." I say sweetly.

"Mph." He huffs in response.

The meeting is hosted at a warehouse near the docks. It's clear that he brought me here as a show of power. Maybe this is a subtle threat after what happened last night. He wants to show me the strength of his control over his allies and his enemies, just in case I'm working with his rival.

The men seated around the table look rough and dangerous. Some wear black suits, clean cut and crisp, others, seated in the outer edge, are in overalls, covered in grease and grime.

Giovanni stands at the head of the table, leaning forward with his knuckles pressed into the wood.

"Another shipment was tampered with. Who the fuck knows what is going on? I want answers." His voice booms across the room and the other men tense. He has power

here. The air is thick with ego - but Giovanni is the one in power.

I watch curiously as people hurry to offer their thoughts and solutions, but none of them has anything valuable to add until one man stands up, his dark hair falling forward into his eyes. His name is Marcus, and he is Giovanni's strongest ally. "I brought you a gift." He says calmly.

Giovanni folds his arms over his chest and tilts his head to the side. His jaw is set as he watches Marcus, waiting.

Marcus waves his hand to one of the guys dressed in overalls and he disappears from the room. The rest of the room is silent, curious, waiting -

A few minutes later the goon drags in a prisoner.

A man - blindfolded and bound at the wrists, filthy, coated in blood, his skin torn and bruised. His front teeth are missing, punched out or pulled with pliers, it's hard to tell.

My stomach twists. I've never seen someone who's been tortured before. And that is obviously what's happened here.

Tensing, I sit up straighter in my seat and glance at Giovanni. A sly smile drifts over his lips. He wanted me to see this. Maybe he knew all along.

"Did you get anything from him?" he asks without emotion. My eyes are torn between Giovanni and the prisoner. My heart is beating fast I watch them both.

Marcus nods. "He mentioned our old friend Emiliano. But he didn't give any specifics." My chest tightens at the mention of that name.

"I see." Giovanni says, walking towards the prisoner. The goon pushes the prisoner

down into a chair and he lets out a yelp of surprise. Giovanni slowly pulls his blindfold down and the prisoner blinks rapidly, squinting against the bright lights above him.

He narrows his eyes and sneers at Giovanni who is standing over him.

“Do you work for Emiliano?”

“Fuck you.” The man snarls.

He’s about to spit blood at Giovanni when his eyes catch sight of me. His mouth drops open and his eyes narrow with malice.

“Pretty little fucking thing. Something so pretty should watch her step in this world.” He snorts laughter and Giovanni’s eyes darken with anger.

He pulls his gun from the shoulder holster and flicks the safety off.

“Do you know her?” he growls, pressing the gun into the top of the man’s knee.

He laughs. “If you let me fuck her, maybe it’ll jolt my memory about whether I know her or not.” He licks his blood stained, bruised lips, his eyes devouring me from across the table.

The loud snap of a single gunshot bites into my ears and I jump in my seat, my heartbeat tripling in speed. My breathing is faster, sharper, but I try to cover my shock, noticing that no one else in the room is surprised by Giovanni’s cruel and violent display of power.

The prisoner is screaming.

He's leaning forward and clutching at his knee. Blood bubbles from the hole in his leg and flows down onto the floor forming a puddle around his foot. His face is distorted in pain.

"What the fuck?" The prisoner spits, tears streaming over his face, streaking against the grime.

"Nobody threatens Zina." Giovanni says darkly. He turns to look around the room. "Does everyone understand that?" he asks, and men quickly nod, glancing at me, then back at Giovanni. "She is under my protection. I want my enemies to know that. Send a clear message. Use his body, make it look good, leave it somewhere they can find it." Without looking at the prisoner he lifts his gun towards the man and fires a single shot into his skull.

The men standing and sitting within range of him get sprayed in a fountain of blood, brains and bone fragments as the bullet erupts from the back of the prisoner's skull and smacks into the concrete wall, missing one of the goons, but coming close enough to make him yelp.

In slow motion the dead man rocks forward, Giovanni steps aside and lets him fall into the concrete floor, his face landing with a wet slap against the ground.

I press my lips together, fighting the surge of nausea churning in my stomach.

Giovanni turns to look at me and his eyes are so dark they're almost black. One corner of his mouth curls upwards in a dangerous smile. My heart beats faster and my body floods with desire despite the gory scene behind him.

His darkness, his power and the ruthless way he was willing to declare his protection over me - it's incredibly enticing.

Despite knowing better - I can't help but be attracted to this side of him.

Giovanni slides the gun back into its holster and walks to me. He holds out his hand. "Come, let's go." He says calmly.

I place my hand in his and he lifts me to my feet. When his eyes lock with mine, a smile spreads over my lips. I bite my lower lip, fighting the wild urge to kiss him.

"Marcus." Giovanni says, turning towards the other man. "Good job with getting that information. See what else you can find out."

"Will do." Marcus says. He gestures over the body and nods towards the goons. "Clean this up. We have work to do."

The drive back to the estate is quiet. Giovanni is focused on the road ahead and he doesn't notice me watching him, my gaze tracing the outline of his profile, his solid chest and the way his arms flex against his rolled-up sleeves while he shifts between gears. His thick, muscular thighs stretched against his pants.

I'm fighting the urge to climb onto his lap. I want to sit on his cock and ride him until his body gives in to me.

All of that power he has - it can be mine if I have power over him - and I know I do.

I know I am some sort of weakness to him. Like Kryptonite.

Every man has his Kryptonite.

A dark, silent smile drifts over my face and I turn to look out the window, watching the buildings race by as we speed through the streets.

Giovani is more than I ever imagined. He's stronger, darker and more in control of the world than I thought. He is the king in a dangerous kingdom - the darkest force. I saw how the other men looked at him. I saw their obedience. Despite their own power - they were all willing to concede to his.

And now he has made me his queen in their eyes.

At the estate Giovanni goes to his office and I head up to my room to figure out what all of this means. I don't see much of him until dinner, and then after dinner he disappears again, closing his bedroom door and shutting everyone out.

It's disappointing, because I'm desperate to find out why he did what he did. I want to know what he was thinking, why he chose to defend me so coldly.

I'm lying in bed, trying to fall asleep when my phone buzzes. My heart immediately somersaults when I see his name on my screen.

Giovanni: Come to my room. I need to talk to you.

Without waiting another heart beat I throw my blankets off and rush towards my bedroom door. But then I hesitate, smiling, I turn back to my closet and wiggle out of the sweatpants I'm wearing, and instead I slip into a pale pink lace nightie. It's practically transparent.

When I walk into Giovanni's room I pretend as though I've been sleeping. I hurry in, bewildered and confused.

"What's happened?" I stammer, "Is everything ok?"

His eyes flare with dark desire as they roam over my body.

“What are you wearing?” he growls angrily, standing up from where he was sitting on the edge of his bed. He’s wearing black sweatpants, no t-shirt.

I glance down at myself and gasp. “Oh my word.” I murmur, trying to cover my body with my hands. “Um.” I stand next to his bed, my eyes wide and my cheeks flushed pink with shyness.

He grinds his jaw and closes his eyes for a moment.

Giovanni shakes his head and grabs his shirt from the back of the chair. He hands it to me, refusing to look at me. My eyes trace over his chiseled chest and down to the budge of his cock, pressing against the soft fabric of his pants. I bite my lower lip and take the shirt from him.

“Thank you.” I say with relief.

Slipping my arms into the oversized shirt I don’t button it up. And I let it fall off my shoulder when I climb onto his bed and curl my legs up beneath me. “What did you want to talk about?” I ask, leaning against the headboard, looking up at him with wide, innocent eyes.

A low growl rumbles from him.

His eyes drift over me as he settles on the bed next to me, leaving a very obvious gap between us.

“I want to talk about what happened today.” He says.

“Ok.”

“You need to understand that you have been elevated. My enemies will see you

differently now that I have stated you are under my protection. A move against you will be a declaration of war. It adds a layer of security around you - but it also puts a target on your back for those wanting to start war with me.”

I nod, listening closely, watching his eyes move over me.

“It also means that you have power, Zina.” He says quietly.

“What do you mean? What power do I have?”

“My allies know you have meaning to me. And that gives you the power to command them. They will do what you say, because you are with me.”

“With you?” I say quietly.

“Not like that - “ he stammers, looking away and taking a sharp breath.

I shift closer to him, closing the space he left open between us.

“Why not like that?” I ask in a seductive whisper.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

FIFTEEN

giovanni

The shirt I gave her to wear isn't helping at all.

In fact - she looks sexier wearing it, the oversized sleeves and the long fit draped over her slender body make her look small and cute.

She shifts closer to me, her head tilted to the side and her brows knotted. Her lips are lush and beautiful.

"Why not like that?" She whispers, and my heart beats faster.

The shirt slips off her shoulder and instinctively I reach out and slowly pull it back up, my fingers brushing over her warm skin.

She bites her lower lip and her eyes glitter with suggestion.

I can't answer her question.

I don't know how to answer it.

I don't have answers.

My cock stirs and I force myself to drop my hand away.

Zina doesn't give up though.

She leans closer to me, her naked thigh press against my leg and the lace nightie hardly covering anything at all. My eyes roam up the smooth skin of her leg, drifting to the dark space between her thighs.

“You say I have power now—” She grins, shifting so that she's kneeling on my bed, her back arched as her ass points away from me. “What other kind of power do I have?” She whispers.

“Zina - “ I warn her as my blood begins to heat, pulsing through my veins like lava.

“Do I have power over you?” She asks with the most innocent sweetness in her voice.

She reaches out and brushes her fingertips over my leg, up towards my groin. My cock throbs, swelling in response.

I push her hand away and stand up, leaving her with a disappointed sour expression.

She huffs and sits on her knees, folding her hands in her lap. “Are you scared of how much you want me?” she asks.

I won't give her that satisfaction. “Who says I want you, Zina?” I snap.

“I'm not blind.” She muses, moving to spread one leg out in front of herself, then the other, her nightie caught up around her hips - she's giving me a show.

“By the looks of things it's you who can't control yourself around me.” I growl darkly, glaring at her, but unable to look away.

Her eyes drift down my body to the rock hard outline of my cock in my pants. She

giggles.

“Mm. Yes. I see that.” She teases me, slowly spreading her legs wider.

She isn't wearing panties.

My defenses crack and anger surges. I don't want her to have power over me.

I refuse to give her that.

Zina leans back, pushing her hands against the bed behind herself as she spreads her legs even wider. She's inviting me to take her. But she's not going to get things the way she wants them.

In a flash I grab her ankle and tie her harshly down the bed, she falls onto her back and I'm on her in seconds, kicking her legs apart and grabbing her throat. I press my weight into her, choking the air from her as I grind my cock against her pussy.

She gags and gasps, her eyes watering as pleasure spikes through me.

Zina digs her nails into my back and my eyes are on her lips, parted, gasping for air.

I release my grip slightly and she sucks in a desperate breath. Before she can say anything I lock my mouth over hers and kiss her, pushing my tongue into her, still grinding my cock against her.

She moans into my mouth, a plea, begging me to take her.

I pull back, my mouth hovering over hers as I whisper a warning my voice dark with need.

“You might have power, sweetheart, but it’s nothing in comparison to mine. Don’t test me.”

My eyes lock with hers and to my surprise I see the most intense desire I’ve ever seen in my life. My violence has turned her on in ways I didn’t know were possible. I thought she’d turn away from me, be scared of me after today - but she only wants me more.

In shock I push away from her.

What am I doing?

I turn my back on the bed where she’s reaching up to touch her throat and taking deep breaths of air.

She looks so fucking vulnerable and beautiful.

I hear Zina moving over the bed, standing, pulling her clothes straight.

When I glance at her she looks bewildered, surprised by what just happened.

“I’m sorry.” I mutter, angry.

Her brows knot together.

“What?” She stammers. “Why?”

I shake my head.

I’m sorry that I’m feeding whatever attraction I have towards her. It’s dangerous and wrong. But instead of saying that I turn to walk out of my bedroom. I need air.

“No.” Zina gasps, running after me.

She grabs my wrist and tries to stop me.

“Don’t. Gio - don’t go.” She whimpers.

I’m fighting for control and she’s not making it any easier. Can’t she see that I don’t want this. That I don’t want her. That it hurts me to want her.

Can’t she see the turmoil she causes me.

“Gio,” She pleads.

Anger surges inside me and I spin around and grab her around the waist. I lift her off her feet and storm towards the bed, throwing her down into it. She lets out a sharp scream and I growl. “Shut up or I’ll make you shut up.”

Her eyes are wide in shock, her mouth gaping open as she takes in a sharp breath.

I kick my pants off, grab her thighs I push them apart as I climb onto the bed.

“You want my cock?” I snarl.

She nods, still in shock.

I fold her legs over her chest, her ankles above her head, lifting her pussy folding her up in a way that barely lets her move at all.

I rub my cock over her pussy, glistening wet and spread open for me.

This is just sex. Nothing else.

She is just an outlet for my frustration. She is nothing to me.

I have to do this to teach her, this is her place. She has to learn that I am the one in charge. I am the one in control.

But as soon as I push my cock into her, sliding deeper, inch by inch - the lies I tell myself fade away.

She means everything to me.

Zina gasps beneath me, her fingers digging into the blankets as I slide out and thrust into her again. Her pussy throbs around me, her muscles twitching as she adjusts to my size.

I let go of one of her legs, holding the other above her. She drops her leg, spreading herself wider for me. Her beautiful face is strained with pleasure, her lips swollen and pink. I push her free leg between mine, kneeling over her, moving myself so that I can push deeper into her. I lean down and grab her jaw, pulling her lips onto mine as I plunge my cock into her, again and again, filling her up, invading her body and claiming her as mine.

I own her. I have made it clear to my allies and my enemies. And now I'll make it clear to her as well.

I roll onto my back, dragging her with me so that she's sitting on top of me.

Lifting her with ease I begin to lift her up and down on my cock. I use her, rubbing her pussy over my cock as though she is nothing but a toy to be used and abused in whatever way I need.

It makes me hot with desire to see her so willing to please me, and so helpless to

defend herself if I were to push this further.

A dark thought slips into my mind and I grin.

Her eyes widen when she sees my face.

“You think you have power, little firefly?” I growl.

“Gio - wait - what - “ I throw her off me and onto her stomach. I shove her face into the blankets and kneel over her ass.

With one hand hard against her back so she can't escape me, I grab my cock and push it into her ass.

She screams against the blankets, the sound muffled in the soft folds of the bed.

I push deeper. Moving slowly. She's so tight on my cock it hurts with pleasure.

She's crying, her fingers digging to the blankets.

“Beg me stop.” I demand, thrusting forward.

“No.” She sobs.

I push deeper. Her body is rigid, and it's the most incredible fucking feeling. Her pain, her unwillingness to give in.

I lay my body over hers, my cock buried in her ass and her tense beneath me. She's twitching and I can feel every little spasm.

I slowly pull out and slowly slide in again.

She gasps, this time in relief, the pain mixing with the pleasure.

She arches her ass up towards me.

“Mm.” I growl against her ear, sliding my hand around her throat. “You’ll give me anything I want.”

She nods weakly, lifting her head, tilting it back as I pull her face towards my lips. I kiss her, moving my cock faster, rocking back and forth, she moans against my mouth.

I watch her slip her hand down the front of her body, between her legs to rub herself while I fuck her ass.

It drives me fucking crazy.

She spreads her legs and rubs her fingers over her clit, faster and faster, her moans getting loader.

I can’t hold back.

My cock is so hard inside her ass I’m going to explode any second.

I slip my hand between her legs as well and push my fingers inside her pussy. I fuck her with my cock and with my fingers while she plays with herself.

When her orgasm hits her every single muscle in her body goes tight as she spasms. Wave after wave she convulses beneath me and I thrust deep into her one more time before I explode inside her.

Zina is exhausted when I roll off her, lifting her so that I can pull the blankets over

both of us. She snuggles against me, her back curls into my chest perfectly and I slip my arm around her waist.

I nuzzle my face into the curve of her neck.

“Goodnight, little firefly.” I whisper, kissing her warm skin.

She mumbles sleepily and her body relaxes, sleep stealing her away quickly.

I’m exhausted as well, but my head is busy.

I lost control to her again.

And I can no longer deny what I feel for her.

This is so much more than a physical connection - and this is a very dangerous position for me to be in.

How can I allow myself to become emotionally involved with someone I don’t fully trust?

I have more questions about her than answers.

I don’t know what she’s up to, or who she’s allied with. I don’t know anything about her other than what she’s shown me. A carefully constructed mask of what she allows me to see.

She could be anyone - she could be plotting anything.

I close my eyes and try to push the worry aside.

Her scent is on my pillow and on my skin.

When sleep finds me I dream of her, her dark eyes are touched with mystery and I can't understand her words.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

SIXTEEN

zina

Something wakes me with a fright and instantly I'm aware of his body against mine.

It must've been him. I'm not used to sleeping next to him.

I sigh softly and close my eyes again, smiling against the pillow and I snuggle into him.

I like this.

I want more of this. This is everything I've ever wanted from him.

A thud from somewhere in the house makes my eyes shoot open again.

What was that?

My eyes dart to the bedside clock.

It's past one. It could be one of the boys getting a late-night snack. But something inside me is flashing a massive warning.

Alarm bells are flaring in my mind.

Another thud. Someone whispering harshly. I sit up.

There are people in the house. People who shouldn't be here.

Reaching over I shake Giovanni and the moment his eyes open I press my hand over his mouth and whisper. "Stay quiet, someone is in the mansion."

He understands instantly and grabs my wrists, pulling it away as he nods. His hand slips beneath his pillow and he pulls out a Glock.

"Stay here." He demands, his voice low.

I shake my head and glare at him. Not a fuck. My son is out there. His sons are out there. They all need me. He sneers and shoots me a look of warning that I ignore. When he climbs out of bed I follow him. I grab his shirt from the floor and slip it over my lace nightie.

Tiptoeing behind him I stay close to the wall.

Downstairs gunfire erupts.

"The security team." Giovanni shouts over the noise.

Santino runs out into the hallway. "What the fuck?" He shouts, holding a Glock as well.

I run towards Santino. "Come with me. We have to find your brothers and make sure they're all safe."

At first he wants to argue, but he knows I'm right. He nods stiffly.

I glance at Giovanni who nods as well before heading downstairs to help the team. My heart aches as I watch him go.

I don't want him to get hurt.

But I need to take care of the boys.

Room by room we sweep the upstairs area and I pull each of the boys to safety. "Stay close." I shout to Dante, shoving Romeo's door open. He's standing in his sweatpants, his eyes wide as he pulls his gun from his dresser. "What's going on?" He snaps.

"Come with us, we just need to get Guido, then everyone is safe." I say.

He glances at Santino who nods, sticking close to my side.

Once we have Guido, I breathe a massive sigh of relief.

"Santino, I need you to stay upstairs and protect your brothers." He opens his mouth to argue and I shake my head. "Do it." I snap.

He swallows hard. "Romeo, give me your gun." He does as he's told.

I glance at Guido with a tight smile, then I run out of the room and into the hallway, heading downstairs towards the gun fire.

The weight of the Glock is reassuring in my hands. I've never shot a gun before. But I've seen enough to know it's pretty simple. As long as the safety is off - you just point and shoot.

I stay low and hidden, creeping into the living room. The security team is making quick work of the intruders.

Giovanni spins towards a shadow, taking aim and firing two shots. A man falls, but

behind him another man moves from a hidden corner.

I stand up, scream Giovanni's name and fire four shots in quick succession. The gun jolts in my hand and I fight to keep it steady.

The intruder drops to the ground. Giovanni spins towards me with his gun aimed high, then realizes it's me. His eyes go wide, and he bolts towards me.

"You were supposed to stay upstairs." He snarls.

"She just took out the last guy." Fabio eyes me and instantly I feel very exposed. I grab the edges of Giovanni's shirt and pull them tighter around my body.

Fabio still doesn't look away. He doesn't look impressed.

Surely he should be grateful that I just stopped Giovanni from getting shot.

Everyone gathers in the kitchen while the security teams clear up the carnage left behind by the intruders.

The coffee machine is on we're all tense, adrenaline still rushing, and nerves frayed.

Giovanni walks in, his eyes drifting over me. I've buttoned his shirt up and it's longer than most of my dresses, but he still seems unable to take his eyes off me.

"The house is clear." He confirms, picking up a cup of coffee and taking a sip.

"What happened?" Santino demands, his arms folded across his chest.

Dante and Guido are sitting on the edge of the counter, quiet, watching everything unfold.

“We don’t know yet.” Fabio answers.

“It was her.” Santino glares at me. “She was way too calm. Way too confident the entire time. It was so fucking obviously her.”

“Santino—” Giovanni says.

“Stop being so fucking blind, dad. She’s right here - in our house. She probably unlocked the door for them. How else would they have gotten inside with all this security around?”

His eyes are on me like a hunter tracking its prey. I press my lips together. No matter what I say right now - it will sound wrong. I can tell him it wasn’t me - beg him to see reason - but it would sound desperate and fake. I could get angry, but I would sound too defensive.

I fold my arms across my chest, angry to be the one under attack when I am the one who did whatever I could to keep them safe.

Giovanni walks over to Santino and puts his hand on his shoulder. His back is turned to me so I can’t hear what he’s saying. He keeps his voice low.

Santino nods, sulking, still glaring at me.

When Giovanni turns to face the rest of us again, he sighs heavily and says, “I will get to the bottom of this. I promise you, no matter who is responsible for betraying the safety of this family - I will figure it out.”

His eyes are locked onto me as he spells each word out.

My chest tightens as I fight the urge to defend myself.

If he is so determined to find out the truth - then he'll find it - and he'll learn I had nothing to do with this.

I have to let things happen how they need to happen. Nothing I say will change anything. He needs to find out for himself.

So does everyone else by the looks of things.

Slowly, everyone leaves and goes back to bed to try to find some sleep in the last few hours of the night.

I'm walking towards my bedroom, certain that Giovanni won't want me in his bed anymore, but he reaches out and grabs my arm, pulling me to follow him.

He tugs me into his room and gestures towards the bed.

"You don't want to me go back to my own room?" I ask quietly, unsure.

"I want to keep an eye on you." He says coldly.

My heart sinks.

"Ok." I mutter, climbing into his bed. To my surprise he wraps his arm around me and pulls right up against him, holding me just as he was before.

I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

Over the next few days the estate is tense with distrust, aggression and anger.

Everyone is looking at everyone else as though they are to blame. Or maybe it's just me they stare at in that way.

Giovanni and Fabio have set up an interrogation area in the downstairs office and one by one they are dragging every staff member and every one of the security force, into a brutal interrogation.

They aren't holding back anything, and when I sneak close to listen, it shocks me the levels they will go to in order to extract information - especially considering that most of these people are not bad people.

I hear screaming coming from that room and sobbing and pleading.

Fabio and Giovanni aren't letting up or showing any mercy. They are determined to find out who did this.

On one hand it terrifies me that he's so cruel to the people who work in his home - on the other hand I am relieved that he's looking everywhere - and not only at me.

The days go by and the tension doesn't settle.

We have no answers.

Every night I fall asleep safely wrapped in his arms - or trapped - it's hard to know the difference.

My eyes flicker open, the first thing that comes into focus in the darkness is the alarm clock, blinking 3am.

I groan softly, stretching my legs out as I lay on my back beneath the blankets. I turn my head, wanting to move closer to Giovanni but in fright I gasp as I find him propped on his elbow and staring at me.

"Gio?" I whisper, my eyes slowly adjusting to the dark.

“Zina.” He whispers back at me.

“Can’t you sleep?” I roll onto my side, watching him.

He sighs slowly but doesn’t answer me. His face is lined with deep thought.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask, reaching out to touch his jaw.

He takes my hand, threading his fingers through mine and pulling it close to his chest. He still doesn’t answer me though.

I shift again, moving a little closer to him.

“Why haven’t you interrogated me yet?” I ask the one question that has been burning on my lips since the day they started looking for answers. Why not me? The person they suspect the most.

Giovanni lifts my hand and presses my fingers against his lips. He doesn’t kiss me, he just lets my fingers brush over his warm, soft skin.

I’ve asked - I don’t need to repeat it - he heard me clearly. But he’s taking his time to answer.

A minutes passes and Giovanni is just watching me.

Another minute and I narrow my eyes, knotting my brows.

Resignation sinks through me. He isn’t going to answer. He has nothing to say to me. Whatever thoughts are troubling him tonight he has no intension of sharing them with someone he doesn’t trust.

“I hope you get some sleep.” I whisper quietly, closing my eyes. I can still feel the heat of his gaze on me.

“Zina.” My eyes shoot open.

He takes a deep breath. “I’ve made a decision that I hope is the right one.”

“What decision?” I ask with tension burning inside me.

“I’ve decided to give you the chance you deserved when you first walked back into my life. A real chance, to be a part of this family. I have decided to trust you.”

I let out a rushing breath of relief. Laughter spills from lips and I reach up and grab his face, pulling him down to kiss me.

He moves with a stiff reluctance, unsure of his own words, perhaps.

Maybe he needs more time to adjust to his own decision.

I’m over the moon though. It’s all I wanted - a real chance to be with him. A real chance for him to see the person I truly am.

“Thank you.” I whisper in the darkness.

He pushes me so that I roll over, then pulls my back against his chest again.

“Go to sleep.” Is all he replies with a rough edge to his voice.

SEVENTEEN

giovanni

Breakfast the next morning is a miserable affair.

Santino has refused to come down as long as Zina is here, and the table is quiet as Zina and I sit alone. He's been furious with me for the last few days, angry that I'm questioning everyone but her.

I told Santino that her time would come, but in the back of my mind I don't think interrogation would work on her if she was hiding something. She's too smart. Too sharp. I'd have to peel the skin from her body before she gave me the information I was chasing - and it's not something I'm willing to do.

Last night I told her I wanted to give her a chance. A real chance. I want to trust her. I want to trust her. Desperately.

I really do. I have every intention of trying.

I'm just not certain it's going to be possible.

Zina's eyes keep drifting towards me. She looks miserable.

She drops her fork, tired of pushing the scrambled egg around her plate.

"Why is everyone so hell bent on accusing me?" She blurts out and I notice the tears

glittering in her eyes as her defensive fall away.

“Zina - “ I mutter in surprise. “They don’t all think it’s you - “

“But they do, Giovanni. Even you do. Last night you told me you’d give me a chance - but what does that mean at the end of the day - it means you’ve doubted me since the moment I walked in. You’ve been holding back and not trusting me. Why? What did I do that was so bad?”

I shake my head, the urge to comfort her floods me. I reach out and pull her into my arms, onto my lap.

“I want your sons to trust me too. Santino despises me, Romeo won’t even look at me. Dante is the only one who speaks to me.” She buries her face against my shoulder as tears soak into my shirt.

“Zina, I’m so sorry.” I sigh, realizing how much she’s been holding back in her attempt to be strong.

Santino walks into breakfast, to my surprise, and I stiffen. Zina senses the shift in my body language and turns to see him.

“Santino, did you come to join us?” I ask.

Zina stands up, moving off my lap, her mouth set tightly as she takes her seat again.

“I was going to try - but this is a fucking shit show.” He snaps.

“Come on, man.” I snap too. “Just sit down and have some fucking breakfast.”

“Are you two a couple now?” he throws the accusation at me, his eyes boring into me

like drills.

“Sit down.” I insist. “Where is Romeo? Breakfast is getting cold.”

“Are you two a couple?” he shouts.

I glance at Zina, her eyes are tight on me as well.

“No.” I answer quietly.

“You could’ve fooled me.” Santino snaps angrily and storms from the room.

Tears spill from Zina’s eyes as she watches me, silent and hurt.

She stands up.

“Zina - “ I call her name, but she ignores me, walking out of the dining room just as Dante and Guido arrive.

“Mom?” Guido says, looking at his mother with concern.

“It’s ok, man, give her some space.” I sigh, gesturing for both of them to sit down.

My appetite is gone, but I force myself to eat, trying to create a normal environment for the two sons that have decided to join me.

When they get up and leave I lean back in my seat and groan loudly in frustration. What the fuck is going on in this house? Everything is falling apart.

“Giovanni?” Fabio sticks his head in the dining room, leaning through the doorway.

“Am I interrupting breakfast.”

I shrug with my hands high in the air, pulling my face tight and gesturing for him to look around. “What breakfast, no one is interested in breakfast anymore.” I huff.

He chuckles, a dry laugh with no genuine joy in it.

Fabio walks into the room and drags Santino’s chair out from under the table, sitting down he lets out a deep breath.

“What is it?” I ask, “Did you find something?”

“No. But I think we need to talk.”

When he looks at me he has that expression in his eyes that tells me I’m about to hear something I might not want to hear.

I clench my jaw and fold my arms over my chest.

Everyone else is pissed off with me - why wouldn’t Fabio be as well.

I nod my chin towards him. Go ahead.

He pulls his mouth tight, pressing his lips together and nodding too.

“It’s about the girl - Zina.” He sighs. “I think you’re unable to see clearly. Whatever she has over you - it’s clouding your judgment.”

“She doesn’t have anything over me, Fabio.” I say defensively.

“Whatever. I just think you aren’t seeing it for what it is.”

“Seeing what exactly?” I snap, losing my patience.

“Ever since she got here shit has been happening. It’s been a different place. Things are going wrong. Everyone is tense.”

I shake my head. “Everyone is tense since we lost Bella. It’s got nothing to do with Zina being here.” My words are thick as they fall from my lips.

Fabio raises his brow at me. I know that look.

“Fine.” I huff. “Obviously her being here has caused some issues, but she’s not dangerous, Fabio. She’s not behind the attacks.”

He tilts his head to the side and shrugs his broad shoulders. “I want to believe you, Gio, but I’m not as convinced as you are.”

“What am I supposed to do? She is the mother of my son.”

He shrugs again. “It’s your decision to make, but from where I’m sitting - that girl is going to be your downfall.”

He pushes back from the table and stands up.

Alone in the dining room again I fold my arms across my chest and lean my head back, closing my eyes.

Is everyone seeing something I’m not seeing.

No.

Not everyone. Dante likes her.

Romeo has no opinion except that of his older brother. I think he could go either

direction.

Santino is the only one who is dead set against her - Santino and Fabio. Two options that I have always trusted.

And then there is me.

What do I think about her being here? What does my gut tell me about Zina and whether or not I can trust her?

The main problem with me is that I don't know if my opinion is tainted by desire or not. Santino is convinced I'm being manipulated.

Fabio is convinced she poses some kind of threat to this family - to me.

I'm not so sure.

I don't view her as being that dangerous. Not in that way anyway.

I see her as a danger to my heart.

She clouds my thinking.

So I can admit it.

Huffing I stand up, not wanting to analyze this anymore.

The moment I get close to believing she is the threat they accuse her of being - that's when I have to tell her to leave.

I don't want that.

I'm not ready for that and I don't think I'll ever be.

I walked away from her once, sixteen years ago, and every day after that, even though I denied it - I hated myself for it. I regretted the choice.

I won't do it again.

It's late, and the house is quiet when I walk up to my room.

Zina is lying in bed reading a book she found in the library. She ignores me when I stand next to the bed, peeling my clothes away.

"I'm going to shower. Do you want to join me?" I ask, my body already burning at the thought.

She shakes her head.

Disappointment breezes through me.

"Are you alright?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" She says coldly.

I narrow my eyes at her and watch her expression.

She's angry. She's been angry since breakfast.

The shower beats hot water into my aching muscles, slowly massaging some of the tension out of them. I hang my head forward, letting the pressurized flow wash over me.

When I climb out I feel a lot better. Drying off I think of ways to soften her anger and my lips curl into a smile.

When I walk back into the room wearing only my sweatpants, my hair still wet from the shower, she looks up and desire floods her expression. It makes my heart race faster, but she looks away quickly.

The blankets move off her as I tug them, and she shoots me a warning look. “Stop that.”

“What?” I say innocently, as I slide beneath the covers.

“You know what.”

Reaching out I take her book from her hands and drop it off the side of the bed. She shoots me another glare, even more angry than before. The laughter that rumbles through me is genuine as I pull her into my arms. “Come on, stop this.” I whisper, wrapping my arms tightly around her.

She’s stiff against me.

This morning our conversation was interrupted by Santino and I have the feeling it’s what has made her so upset. I want to give her the chance to talk again now, while no one can walk in.

“You said this morning that you wanted people to trust you - you want my kids to accept you.”

She shakes her head, pushing her hands against my chest.

“Don’t worry. I understand it’s not possible.” She huffs.

“What do you mean?” I knot my brows, letting her slip from my arms.

“You’ve made your position clear.” She snaps, becoming more heated. “In fact - you couldn’t be more clear if you tried. You and I - “ She gestures between us, “Are not a thing. I will never be chosen by you. I will never be a priority. And every time one of your sons accuses me of something or gives you the opportunity to stand up for me in front of them - you won’t defend me or be on my side. I get it. Like I said - you made yourself clear. ”

My heart sinks. I understand now.

Santino asked me if there was something between Zina and I and I was quick to deny it. I publicly rejected her, pushing her aside and suggesting her worth to me.

Zina laughs coldly, then turns to face me.

“But - “ She says, smiling, and moving closer, tracing her fingers over my chest. “There are other ways I know I am wanted by you.”

The mischief in her eyes is blatant as she climbs onto my lap. My cock hardens instantly, but somewhere in my mind my thoughts are screaming at me that this is a test. If I say yes to this after I pushed her away this morning - there will be all hell to pay.

She rocks her hips against me, and I growl in desperation, spreading my hands over her waist and pushing her down onto me.

She moans sweetly, leaning forward to kiss me.

For a moment I’m lost in the kiss, forgetting that this is wrong, that I have to say no.

My fingers press into his flesh, clawing at her, pushing her harder against my cock.

A flash of anger bolts through me -

I throw her off me, onto the bed next to me and she squeals in fright.

“I’m trying to have a serious conversation with you, Zina. This isn’t all I want - “ I snarl darkly.

“Really? Well, apparently you don’t want this either - so why am I even here?” She hisses, hurt by this new rejection.

I shake my head and roll away from her, lying on my side with my jaw set tightly.

My heart is racing, and my blood is rushing through my head, making me dizzy with confusion.

What the fuck does she want from me?

Next to me I hear a soft sigh. The bed moves. Her hand touches my waist, then slowly wraps around me. She snuggles against my back.

“I’m sorry.” She whispers.

With a heavy sigh I thread my fingers through hers and pull her tighter against me. “Me too.” I reply, my voice low.

Rolling over to face her I pull her up against me and she presses her lips into mine, kisses me slowly.

My cock grows hard, pushing into her and she moans, moving slowly, pulling my

pants down to free it.

I wrap my hand around her thigh as she lies on her side next to me, pulling her leg up and around my waist while her other is on is straight down the bed.

My hand wraps around her ass cheek, my fingers dipping into her pussy and she gasps, making sweet little sounds for me.

I thrust upwards, my cock slipping inside her, my fingers still touching the opening of her pussy, so I feel my cock sliding past, pushing her open. I press my finger into her as well, and from inside her I feel my cock moving - the sensation is wildly sexy.

We make my love slowly, with deliberate, controlled movements, paying attention to everything happening between us.

EIGHTEEN

zina

At breakfast Giovanni is watching Santino.

His son is glaring at me with hatred and I'm waiting for Giovanni to reprimand him.

I'm so tired of this back and forth. This endless game of accusation and coldness. If Santino is angry at anyone, it should be his father. His father is the one who cheated on his mother - not me. His father made that choice and hunted me like prey until I gave myself to him - only afterwards finding out he had a family.

I don't deserve to be treated like this.

I sigh loudly and set my eyes on Giovanni, trying to convey my thoughts with my glare.

He clenches his jaw and refuses to understand me.

Santino continues to glare.

In a moment of frustration and defiance I glare back at Santino. "Why do you hate me so much?" I snap at him.

He snorts. But my direct confrontation has made him uncomfortable.

“Zina, not now.” Giovanni says, brushing his hand over my thigh beneath the table.

I shove his hand away. “Not now. Not ever. I am expected to just sit here and let people treat me however they want? With you being the biggest confusion in my life. IF there was at least one person who didn’t treat me with this hot and cold attitude, I thought I would be you.” I snap at Giovanni.

Standing up I shoot another look at Santino. “It takes two people, not one.” I say in anger.

Santino shakes his head. “I’m angry with my father as well, don’t think you’re special.”

“Oh don’t worry. I know I’m nothing special in this place.”

My last words are directed at Giovanni again. He makes me feel like nothing more than someone to entertain him - but only when he needs it. In the quiet, dark hours of the night.

I storm from the breakfast table, marching up the stairs two at a time, wanting the privacy of my own bedroom, not his.

Giovanni follow me, he’s right behind me as I walk into my room.

“Why did you make a scene at breakfast?” He asks, heated.

“I’m sick and tired of this, Giovanni. I’m tired of being chosen at night and discarded in the morning. I’m tired of you not knowing how you feel about me. It’s not fair - it’s not fair that you get to choose if you want to trust me. And all the while I’m losing faith in you. I’ve loved you since the day we first kissed. I never stopped. I never pushed you away and after all these years I came back - willing and wanting to

try again.”

I pause to catch my breath. He doesn't say a word.

“I came back - and you're still playing the same game. Pulling me in with your lies, pushing me away with your actions. I'm not a toy. Make up your damn mind and stop treating me like I'm your play thing in private and nothing but an annoyance in front of other people.”

Giovanni takes a step away from me, his head hanging in defeat. He looks exhausted.

Looking up at me he pushes his fingers through his hair, brushing it out of his face. “I don't know what to say.” He sighs.

“What?” I snap in disbelief. “Say you want me.”

“Zina - “

“No. Don't you dare walk away. Tell me you want me. Tell me I'm worth fighting for. Can't you see how much I'm fighting for you?”

“It's not that simple.” He argues.

“Why? Because you think I'm some kind of threat to your family?” I blurt out.

He doesn't answer - which means the answer is yes.

I reach out and grab the front of his shirt. “I'm your family.” I shout. “I'm a part of your family. I am the mother of your child. I live here with you - I am your family, Giovanni. ”

He steps away from me again. This time I don't argue. I don't fight him.

I've tried and I've said what I needed to say.

He has to choose now.

Giovanni walks away from me and my heart shatters in my chest. I press my hand over my ribs to try to push away the pain, but it's deep inside me.

Tears spill down my cheeks.

I wish I knew what he was thinking or what he was feeling. I wish I knew how he saw me.

That night, still miserable about everything, I decide I can't let this happen. I have to solve the riddle and prove to Giovanni that I am not the enemy. If that is the only way that I can convince him to love me - I will do whatever it takes.

I can't be without him.

Picking up my phone I message the investigator, who up till this point hasn't found a damn thing either.

Me: I have a suspicion that someone is watching the security footage in the estate - someone who shouldn't have access to it. How can I check myself?

Ricardo: I can send you the link to install a program. But if you get caught - you didn't get it from me. They will kill you.

Me: Send it.

Ricardo: Delete these messages.

Ricardo sends the link. I download the program and then as he requested, I delete the link and his messages.

An unfamiliar program blinks at me, a black screen with a green cursor, flickering in a steady rhythm.

I click the dot at the top of the screen, and it asks me if I would like to connect to a network nearby. I click yes.

Within seconds the program is linked to the cameras. My heart races in panic, certain that someone is going to burst through the bedroom door and accuse me of being the hacker all along.

But nothing happens.

My breathing becomes slower and calmer and my heart returns to a normal pace. Still nothing has happened. They don't know I'm able to watch them.

I click on one of the small camera views. The screen enlarges and I'm watching one of the cleaners move about the kitchen. I can hear the sound of water and plates knocking each other. I have sound.

I click back and click on a camera showing Santino. Instantly guilt floods me. I shouldn't be spying on him, but I need to know the truth and that means I need to be ruthless in my pursuit of it.

"She needs to go." Santino says, pacing up and down his room.

"How?" Romeo asks, picking up a book from the top of the dresser, finding it boring

and returning it back to where he found it.

“Are you paying attention?” Santino snaps.

“Yes, dammit. I asked you how.” He says, defensive.

“We’ll have to make it look like an accident. If dad finds out we did this - he’ll never forgive us even though we’re doing the right thing.”

“You don’t just want to make her go away - you actually want to kill her.” Romeo says, but he doesn’t sound shocked or upset by this.

My heart is in my throat. I can’t swallow. I don’t even know if I’m breathing.

“Yes.” Santino replies without hesitation.

“And Guido ?”

“I haven’t decided.” He sighs.

“I don’t think we should. None of this shit is his fault. With his mother gone - well - he’ll just have to do as we say.” Romeo shrugs, and I’m seeing a completely new side to him. This is what they talk about. This is how he is in private with Santino. All this time I thought Santino was the only one against me, but I was so very, very wrong.

“When?” Romeo asks.

“I need a bit of time. But I think we should do this as soon as possible. Three nights from now. No matter what we decide - that will be her last night alive.”

“I’m with you.” Romeo says.

Santino nods and my blood runs cold.

I flick away from the screen.

I can't process what I just heard, and despite it being devastating to me - it isn't the reason I wanted to app.

I scroll through the security program until I find the separate monitor, rolling off data about who is connected and where from.

I watch it for a moment, the text constantly moving over the screen.

Movement. Patio 3. 11:23pm.

Movement. Kitchen. 11:23pm

Movement. Hallway. 11:24pm

I scroll up through the notifications until my throat tightens. There, this is what I wanted to see.

Connection. Internal, home network. Unknown device. 11:01pm.

That must have been me. That's the time I connected to the system.

I scroll up further and my eyes lock onto the text.

Connection. External, unsecured network. Private. 10:14pm.

I click on the line of text.

The screen blinks next to what looks like an IP address.

Active.

Active.

Active.

Who is it?

Is Giovanni at home? Or is he out somewhere and watching the cameras as well?

How do I find out?

I have the confirmation right in front of me - but I don't understand what it means.

I swipe my hand across the phone to take a screenshot of the IP address and connection information.

Then I bite at my lip.

If I take it to Giovanni, he will know I have this program installed. If it's his connection, I've blown my cover and I won't get a chance to find another connection.

He's already angry with me.

This isn't enough to prove anything.

I need more evidence. Evidence that can't be questioned.

With a huff of frustration I throw my phone onto my bed and groan loudly. I need a

break. I need a distraction. Something to clear my head.

Outside in the garden the evening air is crisp and cold against my skin.

It's dark and peaceful and for a moment I close my eyes, taking a slow, deep breath. This is what I needed. Fresh air, a brush of cold to remind me that I'm alive.

My feet make no sound as I walk barefoot through the garden until I'm standing next to the massive swimming pool beneath Giovanni's balcony, right outside his bedroom.

I turn to look up at the balcony - he's not there.

No one is anywhere to be seen. I'm completely alone - and I love it.

An overwhelming sense of peace and quiet drifts over me.

The pool light is on and it's making the water glow turquoise. It's glitter in the darkness - so beautiful.

With a flutter of defiance I tug my t-shirt off. I drop it on the stone tiles next to the pool. I wiggle out of my pants and kick them aside, then glancing around me one more time I unclip my bra and push my down my legs.

Completely naked, the air is a lot colder. I giggle and wiggle my butt, a sense of mischievous freedom filling my heart.

With a bold leap, I dive into the glittering blue water.

The moment my body sinks beneath the surface my muscles release the tension they were holding so tightly.

The water is warm as I swim beneath the surface.

I'm a little disappointed. I wanted a shock of cold to rush through me - but this is so beautiful, so welcoming, I can't complain. My lungs begin to scream for air, but I ignore it for a moment longer, my hair is floating around me like fire, the water is caressing my body.

Slowly, I let my body drift to the surface, and I take a deep breath as my lips touch air again.

Rolling onto my back I stare up at the stars.

There are so many of them. It makes me feel small.

I'm insignificant, one tiny life, in an ocean of glittering little pieces.

I can sense his gaze on me.

Without making it obvious, my eyes drift to the balcony and he's standing there in the shadows, watching me.

Did he just get home now?

Does he know his sons plan to kill me? I don't think so.

The heat of his gaze begins to pulse through my body and swim towards the steps. Sitting on the shallow one, I stretch my legs out across the surface of the water and tilt my head back.

If he's watching - I may as well give him a show.

My hand dips between my legs, slipping inside me and my lips part in pleasure.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

NINETEEN

giovanni

The splash pulls me from a light sleep. I groan, rolling over to see the time. It's still relatively early, not quiet midnight yet.

I swear I heard someone diving into the pool.

Throwing the blankets off I pad barefoot over to my balcony and peer through the closed glass doors into the darkness - there is someone in the pool.

Quietly, I unlock the doors and push them open. The pool water is glittering, bright turquoise, the surface rippling and disturbed.

I move to the corner of my balcony, staying out of sight, and I watch her beautiful body as she swims just below the surface, her hair cascading behind her like a river of gold in a bright blue sky.

My heart tugs in directions I wish I could ignore.

She surfaces, rolling onto her back to stare up at the stars and my eyes trace over every curve, her swell, every dip - I've never seen anymore more perfect than she is.

It almost seems unfair - that she got so lucky.

Or is it me that got so lucky?

I clench my jaw, my hands knotting into tight fists.

Fabio's words have been bothering me.

She will be my downfall.

Why?

Why can't I have her?

Zina swims to the step, spreading herself over it.

My heart begins to hammer wildly.

Surely not.

Surely she wouldn't.

I deep growl rumbles from my chest and my cock hardens like steel.

If I have any self-control, I need to turn and walk away. Now.

But I don't. Because she is my weakness.

I push my hand beneath the elastic of my sweatpants and wrap my fingers around my rigid cock.

With my back against the wall, I free my cock and stroke it, up and down, watching her while I imagine myself down there in the pool, fucking her in that crystal blue water.

The visions of her last night in the pool are still teasing my thoughts. I can't figure out if she knew I was watching her or not. She's not giving me any clues.

The dining room smells of garlic and mushrooms and creamy sauce.

When I walk in Santino is dishing up tagliatelle for himself. Zina is waiting patiently, watching him. Guido and Dante are chatting as usual. At least that friendship has only strengthened.

Romeo nudges Santino. "Hey man, leave some for me."

Pulling my chair out I eye Santino with disappointment. "Why did you not dish up for Zina first?" I ask, scowling at him.

He snorts.

"I told him too, but he wouldn't listen. Mom would have kicked his ass if he did that." Dante taunts him.

"Don't you dare compare her to mom." Santino snarls, his eyes darkening. "She is a whore, and you will never compare her to our mother."

His words hang in the air like poison.

I've had enough.

Reaching out I backhand him across the jaw. He yelps in surprise, stumbling he lands hard on his ass, his eyes wide with shock.

"I've had enough of your disrespect towards Zina. I won't tolerate another second of it. One more word from you and I'll ban you from this house."

Santino stands up, wanting to fight, but hesitant, knowing he doesn't stand a chance against me.

Romeo looks uncertain.

I raise my hand again, ready to make sure he understands the warning.

"Stop." Zina shouts, standing and grabbing my arm, pulling me away. "This has to stop. This isn't going to solve anything."

She gently pulls me towards my chair.

"Thank you, Giovanni. It means so much to me that you stood up for me. But seeing it happen breaks my heart. I don't want you to fight with your sons. I'm sorry this is what it's come to."

She bites at her lower lip, turning her eyes to Santino and Romeo.

"I was outside your room last night, Santino. I heard everything."

Santino and Romeo both turn as white as ghosts. The blood drains from their face and they look sick with worry.

"What is she talking about?" I ask, my stomach knotting.

"I know about the plan to kill me tomorrow night." She says slowly.

My body is ice cold when her words reach me. It can't be true. My sons wouldn't so this.

She's still facing them. Santino is glaring at her in disbelief. Deny it. Deny it,

Santino.

Zina takes a deep breath. “The thing is - I understand why you want to get rid of me. I understand that you think I don’t belong and you miss your mother. But I’m not trying to replace her. I’m not trying to make your lives more difficult?—”

“It isn’t true?” I say to Santino, a statement and a question.

He presses his lips together.

“It is true?” I stammer. “You were planning to kill her?”

Santino looks down, his face turning red. “I have to fix things.” He mutters quietly. “Romeo and I wanted to make things right.”

“This is not how you do it!” I shout. The rage burning through me makes me want to tear them apart. I’m in disbelief. How do I punish them for such an unspeakable crime?

I feel her hand brush over my arm. “Gio.” She says gently. “It’s ok.”

“It’s not.” I say, shaking my head.

“It is. Nothing happened. It’s not going to happen.” She turns her eyes to Santino and Romeo again. “I forgive you. I would like to let this all go and move past this. I don’t want to fight. I don’t want there to be so much hate. But I can’t change things alone. We have to work together.”

“What will you do to us?” Santino asks her, his voice dry.

“I don’t understand what you’re asking.”

“What will you do to us in retaliation? As punishment.” He huffs bitterly.

“Nothing.” She shakes her head. “I’m serious. I forgive you. I don’t want this go any further than tonight. It’s over - right now.”

“Why?” Romeo blurts out. “We were going to kill you.” He looks broken by his own words.

“But you didn’t. Ok. It was a mistake. A stupid idea. Born out of anger and misunderstanding. I’m letting it go.”

Santino sits down slowly. He can’t believe she’s been so gentle about this.

Neither can I.

If I overheard someone plotting to end my life, I would not be this graceful, this understanding.

Across the table, in full view of my sons, I take her hand.

Threading my fingers tightly through hers I squeeze it.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Zina. I had no idea it was that bad.” I say in horror.

She shakes her head. Smiling.

“It’s ok. It can be different now.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you come to me with the information when you overheard them?”

Santino shifts nervously. Romeo is breathing so loud I can hear him.

She glances at the boys then back at me.

“I thought I could talk to them myself and find a way to sort it all out. But then - when I saw you fighting with him tonight I realized that the more secrets we keep from each other, the more we hide and whisper, the further this family drifts apart. So, here we are - all cards on the table for everyone to see. Its better this way. I’m not angry. All I want is for everyone to see that we can work together. We can solve things together.”

Santino nods, Romeo quickly doing the same.

“I’m sorry.” Santino mutters, struggling with the words. “I’m sorry too.”

I stare at both of them. “It would have broken me, to know you were capable of such horrors. To know you were willing to hurt me like that.”

My son’s shoulders slump forward in defeat. When Santino looks up at me his eyes are wet with tears. “I’m so sorry, dad. I wasn’t thinking. I only wanted to protect you.”

Reaching out I squeeze his shoulder.

“Can we move past this?”

He nods.

“Good.”

* * *

That night, after dinner ends, I take her hand and lead her to my room.

Pulling her into my arms I nestle her safely against my chest.

She shocked me today. She showed her strength in ways that took my breath away. Her ability to deal with that - it was beautiful.

And it opened my eyes to the mistakes I've been making all along. In my own confusion - I gave my sons room to hate her.

But I am the king of this mansion. This is my family. They run by my rules and when I make a choice - they follow.

I never made a choice. And it sent them into chaos.

I'm making a choice now.

Leaning down I kiss the top of her head, the warmth of her scent teasing me.

"I'm done pretending I'm not in love with you." I whisper.

The softest little gasp sounds from her and she tilts her head up to look at me with wide, beautiful eyes.

Her lips part as she searches my face, a million questions flickering through her eyes.

I laugh. Brushing her hair away from her face and tucking it behind her ear. "I love you, Zina." I smile.

Her face suddenly glows, her side brighter than I've ever seen it.

She reaches up and grabs my face and pulls me against her lips to kiss me.

It's the most beautiful thing - to finally give in to the truth of how I feel.

I lift her in my arms, wrapping her legs around me as I carry her to bed.

Laying on the blankets I slowly pull her clothes off, pieces by pieces, taking my time to brush my hands against her skin and let my gaze wonder over her perfection.

Naked, I crawl over her, gently pushing her legs wider with my hips.

I trace my fingers around the curve of her breast, gently touching her nipple, watching her shiver in delight.

"You are beautiful, Zina. More beautiful than my eyes have ever seen."

She reaches up to touch my lips. I rock my hips forward, rubbing my cock against her warmth, letting it push against her pussy. Her eyes are locked with mine.

"Do you mean it? Do you love me?" She whispers.

"I love you." I say it again, pushing into her, my cock sliding inside her, stretching her slowly open. Her pupils dilate and her gasps softly.

My cock slides deep into her, making me growl with pleasure.

She wraps her hands around the back of my neck and pulls my mouth over hers and as we fuck, slowly, in tantric waves of desire, I slide my tongue inside her mouth. The kiss lasts forever, our bodies joined together, the depth of my emotions flooding from me as I wrap my arms around her and hold her, determined to keep her safe from the everything and anything.

She is mine.

She has always been mine, I just didn't accept it.

"I'm so sorry." I whisper against her lips.

"I love you, Giovanni." She says her body shuddering as I push deeper into her.

My movements become more urgent, faster, and she spreads her legs wider, wrapping them around me.

I lift myself up on, pressing my hands into the bed on either side of her head as I watch her, each thrust eliciting the sweetest moan from her lips.

Her brows knot and she tilts her head backwards. Her lips part and she cries out.

My cock slams into her, faster and faster until she digs her nails into my back and arches up against me.

I explode into her at the same time as her orgasm pulses over my cock.

And both of us are left gasping, shocked by how intense the connection is.

She snuggles against me with her cheek resting on my chest and my arm wrapped around her.

I'm going to make it up to her.

There wasn't ever anything holding me back - except my own stubborn fear. I was afraid of the love I have for her. But that fear is gone now.

And I'm free to possess her in the most beautiful ways.

TWENTY

zina

It's not a subtle change. The difference in him is like day and night.

Giovanni has been smothering me with attention, both in private and in front of his sons. He isn't holding anything back and I could not be happier than I am right now. He doesn't hesitate to pull me near or to kiss me. He is affectionate and warm. The moment I sit down close to him he pulls me closer. He holds me. He kisses me.

He is treating me like I am his queen. Like I deserve to be standing at his side and like he wouldn't want anyone else here with him.

He's bought me beautiful jewelry and surprised me with a glittering gold dress which he told me brought out the gold in my eyes. He's booked a romantic dinner for us, so that I can dress up and enjoy a night out with him - which we've never had before because he wanted to keep me a secret in the past.

For the first time I feel like he's proud to be with me. I'm not a hidden treasure, or a dirty little treat that no one else can know about.

My confidence has grown, I feel stronger and prouder and like I have more power than I've ever had in my life. With him supporting me - I have strength no one can match.

Santino no longer looks at me with hatred. He speaks to me with respect, so does

Romeo. I'm still wary of them, watching closely in case it's an act, but overall - things have shifted drastically and the house is far less tense that it was before.

I'm in the kitchen, making something rich - with velvety, chocolate layers - because I want to surprise Giovanni with something sweet after dinner.

When his hands brush over my waist I scream in fright and jump so high I almost ruin my carefully poured layers. The concentration was more intense than I realized, and I forgot I wasn't alone in the house.

"Nooo." I laugh. "You weren't supposed to see this yet."

He chuckles, and it vibrates against my back as he leans over to see what I'm up to.

"Damn, that looks good." He says, his voice low, the same seductive note he uses when he's turned on. He reaches around me to try to dip his finger into the chocolate and I slap his hand away.

I look over my shoulder to glare at him. "Excuse me. Don't talk about the desert as though you'd choose that over this —" with a cheeky smile I arch my back and press my ass into his cock.

"Mmph." He huffs loudly and his hands tighten around my hips as lust shoots through him. The deep growl that rumbles from him is one of desire - and the difficulty to fight for control over it.

"Sweet, little firefly." He growls. "I will paint that chocolate over your body and lick every drop off with my hot, skilled tongue?—"

I push him away and turn to glare at him. "So you are choosing the chocolate." I say in horror.

He packs up laughing, adjusting his semi hard on trying to hide it. I grin. Stepping close to him again. “Ok, I forgive you. You can lick it off me.” I whisper, standing on my tip toes to kiss him.

I lift the spoon against his lips, and he takes it into his mouth, closing his eyes as chocolate flavors coat his tongue. “Wow.” He murmurs.

I kiss him again and the chocolate spreads over my tongue as well.

“Wait.” He says, “I actually came in here to tell you something important.” He kisses me again.

“What?” I ask, not pulling away.

He laughs and steps back, holding his arms up in defeat. “This really is important.”

I lean against the kitchen counter, still smiling, but giving him the space to clear his thoughts.

He slides his phone from his pocket. Shaking his head, not looking up at me in case I’m too much of a temptation.

He flicks through his phone and looking at whatever he wants to show me he is reminded of how serious it is.

“It’s very important.” He sighs, his face tightening as he waits for me to read the message on the screen.

Artimis: Inside your kingdom, there is someone plotting to betray you. Keep your eyes open King. Your house of cards is about to fall.

I read the message twice.

“Who is Artemis?”

“A rival.” He says, taking his phone back. “One of my enemies.”

“If he is your enemy, and he knew someone was plotting to take you down - wouldn’t he rather stand back and let it happen, instead of warning you.”

“I was thinking the same thing, but then again, if I’m taken down, he is not guaranteed a better standing in life. The person who takes over might not be someone he gets on with.”

I sigh, agitated. Why is it always bad news?

“Are we ever going to get answers instead of more riddles?” I ask in frustration. “When will things get better?”

He pulls me into his arms. “Things are better. I have you at my side. And soon, Zina, all of this will be in the past. I have my men looking into it. We’ll find out what’s going on. It might be my enemies spreading lies, trying to cause conflict inside my kingdom in order to weaken it - or there might really be someone close to me, plotting against me.”

“I don’t like either of those options.” I sigh, resting my cheek against him.

“Whatever it is, we will face it together.” He whispers against my hair.

That night after a hot shower I climb into bed and wait for Giovanni to finish up the meeting he’s having downstairs with his security team.

Nervously, I open the program on my phone that lets me watch the cameras.

Another warning - another ominous threat.

And I still don't know who is watching us from the outside.

I flick through the cameras, accidentally opening one that has never interested me. It's near the servants quarters, outside, by the washing line. On the screen, standing near the back door - Santino is talking to Fabio.

"Why aren't you at the meeting?" I whisper, turning the volume on my phone up so I can hear what they're saying.

"So, you confirmed it." Santino sounds worried.

"Yes, there is someone outside the estate accessing our security cameras. They log in almost every day and they've been doing it for almost two months."

"Fuck." Santino mutters.

"I haven't told your father yet. He's the one who asked me to look into it. I was meant to email him the data, but he forgot about it."

"Don't tell him yet." Santino says.

Why wouldn't they tell him - they have the evidence.

Footsteps coming up the stairs have me closing the program in a panic and dropping my phone onto my lap.

But it's not Giovanni.

It's one of the housekeepers.

She walks past the open door carrying fresh bedding for another room.

My heart is racing so much I have to get out of bed. Walking around I do my best to try to disperse the nerves energy.

I open the door reading from the bedroom to the balcony. Outside the air is cool and instantly calms me down.

Standing in the same corner Giovanni stood when he watched me in the pool down below, I smile, remembering how sexy it felt. I love how he looks at me. The intensity in his eyes never fails to set my heart on fire.

I have to tell Giovanni.

I'll have to tell him I overheard them talking - somehow. But no matter what happens he needs to know the truth. I don't understand why they would hide it from him. The breeze catches at the edge of my nightie and dances the laces over my skin. I pull it down, brushing my hands over it to smooth it in place.

Tonight.

It has to be tonight.

I won't wait. I don't want to keep this secret from him.

As soon he comes back - and I think it's time to confess that I have the program on my phone too. He will understand why I did it. He has to understand when he finds out I was right all along.

I turn at the sound of his footsteps.

“Hey, gorgeous.” He says with a smile. “It’s a beautiful night, isn’t it?”

“Hey, you.” I step into his arms and press myself against his solid chest.

My heart feels heavy with the secret. Taking a breath I step back to look at him, his gaze is warm as he looks down at me, his eyes so blue they make my thoughts drift away for a moment.

He smiles and takes my hand.

“Zina.” He says, brushing his thumb over my knuckles. “I want you to stay.”

“I want to stay?—”

“No, listen to me.” He grins.

To my absolute shock he drops down to one knee, opening his hand I see he’s holding the most beautiful ring. “I want you to stay with me, but properly. To be together. You and me. You have to belong to me - and be fully mine.”

I stare in surprise, unable to say a word.

“Marry me.” He says. His voice full of authority.

I stammer, hesitating, even though I know exactly what my answer is. My heart thunders in my chest, wanting to beat right through my rib cage.

“Yes.” I blurt out when I manage to pull myself together. “Yes. I will marry you.” I squeal in excitement.

He stands up, wrapping his arms around me as he does, and lifting me off my feet, he spins me in a circle, laughing loudly.

“I’m so fucking in love with you.” He shouts.

Laughter spills from my lips and he kisses me passionately, not stopping until I can’t hold back the smile anymore.

He drops me slowly to my feet, letting my body brush over his.

Then he takes my hand and gently, with the most beautiful expression on his face, he slips the ring onto my finger.

My heart somersaults and dances wildly.

I am going to be his wife.

Nothing else matters in this moment except that.

The years I’ve spent waiting for him - everything finally came to this moment.

* * *

Tonight is not the night to discuss secrets after all. I don’t want to ruin this moment with more drama and more stress. I will tell him what I know soon - but it won’t be tonight.

Giovanni raises his brows, slipping his arm around me again.

“I want to do some vile things to you.” He says darkly.

I bite my lip. “But - I’m going to be your wife - a lady of honor and respect and?—”

He lifts me up and throws me over his shoulder. I giggle and kick, trying to escape his hands as they drift up my legs, between my thighs.

“You’re right. You’re going to be my wife. And that means I have the right to do anything I desire.”

“I don’t think that’s what it means—” I squeal as he throws me onto the bed.

I watch him tugging his belt from his pants as desire heats my body.

“Ok, maybe it is what it means.” I whisper as he tugs his cock free and his eyes pierce into me.

TWENTY-ONE

giovanni

Tonight's party is more important than they understand, so they don't realize why I'm so agitated about making sure it's perfect. The living room is busy with people rushing back and forth setting up decorations throughout the house.

"Can you double check that the caterer is fully prepped and will be on time?" I ask again, demanding Romeo's attention.

"Dad, I have already. What is going on with you today?" Romeo complains. He's over this. I've never been this pedantic about a party before and it's annoying him.

"Nothing." I sigh and shake my head. I should take a breather.

"What is this party about, anyway? Are you trying to strengthen relationships with the alliances?" Romeo asks.

"Yes. And no."

He looks at me as though I've lost my mind. "Well, thanks - that really clears things up." He says sarcastically, walking out of the living room.

I'm flooded with anxious excitement. I'm over the moon that she said yes, but I'm also prepared to face backlash from my sons when I tell them about my engagement to Zina.

Her and I discussed it last night and while she didn't fully agree with me - I told her the best way to announce it was to surprise everyone at the same time. In public they won't be able to react overly emotionally and by the time we talk to them about it they will have calmed down.

That's my theory, anyway.

For a moment I press my hands against my eyes. What else do I need to do? Check that the security team has hired more men for tonight. Make sure the extra crate of wine of brought up from the cellar - my mind starts listing things and I sigh. At least it will keep my busy.

By late afternoon the house looks amazing. The space is filled with flowers, balloons, special lighting, tempting foods, champagne - the works.

Music is pulsing through the estate when the first guests begin to arrive, and the space slowly fills with people chatting and laughing.

I message Zina.

Me: Where are you?

Zina: I'm ready, but I'm nervous.

Me: Come down, I'll be at your side the whole night.

With a smile on my face I make my way towards the stairs to find her. But I get caught up in conversations along the way and by the time I get there she's already coming down.

My heart leaps to my throat when I see her.

The dress she's wearing is emerald green and gold. Geometric designs shape around her body in sequined patterns, accentuating her waist and her hips. The thin straps show off her long neck and sculpted shoulders and the dress dips low in the front. She is unspeakably beautiful.

Her dark hair is pinned high with a few loose curls falling around her face. Her lips are dark red.

Her gaze find mine as she smiles, a demure glimmer in touches her eyes.

My heart is beating too fast and too slow at the same times. I press my hand over my chest, my mouth dropped open in awe of her beauty.

She is going to be my wife.

"Do I look ok?" She whispers as I wrap my arms around her and pull her close. "Is it too much?" She nervously touches the dress, brushing her hand over the sequins.

"It's absolutely perfect. You are perfect, Zina." I whisper with my lips against her ear.

She's grinning at me and can't help think to myself that my life is suddenly perfect. All I had to do was let go and allow myself to love her.

How lucky am I that I got a second chance with this beautiful creature?

My fingers thread through hers and I lead her into the bubbling energy of the party.

She sips champagne and elegantly entertains the guests. They are enthralled by her and her presence adds to the glamour of this event.

Finally, it's time.

"Zina, will you join me up here?" I say, standing on the top step of the patio, looking down at my guests.

She smiles nervously and makes her way through the crowd.

While she's walking I talk, giving her time to get here.

"Thank you to everyone who has joined us here tonight. We were overdue for good energy, some laughter, some friendship."

Zina stands close to my side and I wrap my arm around her, looking down at her with warmth in my gaze.

"And we were overdue for some good news." I smile.

The crowd murmurs but stays quiet enough for me to carry on.

"I have asked this beautiful woman to be my wife. Zina and I are getting married and we would love it if you would all be there."

The reaction is split. Half of my guests gasp, the other half cheers. My eyes search the crowd until I find my sons. Santino is furious.

I smile at him and tilt my head to the side, pleading with him to accept this.

He sneers and turns away from me.

But this is for the good of the family - and the good of my heart. They will have to learn to accept it, they have no other choice.

I wrap my arm around Zina's waist and dip her backwards, pressing my lips against hers and this time the crowd cheers. The energy of the party lifts up, and the music turns louder again.

Zina and I spend the rest of the night mingling and accepting congratulations and well wishes. Santino and Romeo are nowhere to be found. Dante and Guido are over the moon.

Guido is standing close to his mother's side. I overhear their conversation while I'm talking to one of my guests.

"Mom, does this mean our surname will change?" He asks.

"It does." She says with a smile that speaks a thousand words.

My heart warms and the entire world fades away as I watch her. She is everything I want.

It's late when the last guest leaves. Zina is walking around pulling doors closed and locking up. "My love, did you have fun tonight?" I ask, stealing her from her task and holding her close to my chest.

She looks up at me with a glitter in her eyes. "It was magical." She says, standing on her tiptoes to kiss me.

"We need to talk." Santino's voice is harsh and cold as he walks into the room. All of his brothers follow behind him.

"Why can't you just be happy for them?" Dante insists, and I realize that this is a conversation that they are carrying from another room.

“Because nothing about this is right.” Romeo snaps.

“Come on, everyone sit down, and we can have a family conversation - an open discussion.” I say, gesturing for all of them to take a seat in the living room.

“Except it’s not an open conversation, dad. If it were an open conversation, you would have discussed it with us before asking her - or before telling the whole world you’re engaged.” Santino is furious. He won’t sit down, instead he’s pacing up and down the living room with his fists clenched tightly.

“Santino, this is the right decision for the whole family - “ I say, trying to stay calm despite wanting to tell him that the decision is final, and he needs to grow the fuck up and accept it.

He shakes his head. “Other mother just died. In case you forgot. It’s hardly been three months and you’re already moving on - with her . The woman who manipulated her way into your life?—”

I cover the space between my son and I in a few long strides and grab the collar of his shirt, tugging him close to my face.

“I’ve told you before, and I warned you what would happen if you spoke badly of her again.” I growl.

“Giovanni.” Zina says, pulling me away from Santino.

Santino snarls and shoves himself away from me at the same time.

He shakes his head and glares at me. “I don’t know who you are anymore.” He hisses.

When he storms from the room, I don't follow.

There is nothing more to say. He disagrees and I don't care.

My eyes turn to Romeo. He shakes his head, his anger is quieter, but it's there. He disapproves as well.

He leaves the room and Dante and Guido sit tensely watching everything unfold.

"Go on. Go to bed." I sigh, gesturing for them to leave too.

Alone again, Zina slips her arms around my waist, tracing slow circles over my back.

"Gio, maybe this is a mistake. Your sons are still so angry. They haven't accepted me yet. They clearly don't like me - " She sighs softly.

I hate the sadness in her eyes. I want to brush it away with my kisses.

"It's not you they don't like, Zina. In their eyes it wouldn't matter who I was marrying - it's the fact that I am re-marrying that has them so angry."

"Because they're not ready. They haven't processed their mother's death yet."

I nod. "I know. But it doesn't matter."

"How can it not matter, Giovanni?" She says desperately.

"Because what matters the most is for my son to join my family - officially. For Guido to have my surname - that is the only way the world will accept him as my blood. This will secure his future. And yours." I cup my hand around her cheek, letting my eyes drift over her features. Her beauty, her calmness, the warmth in her

eyes.

“I don’t want your sons to drift away from you. It was never my plan to break your family apart - I only wanted your son to have a chance to know his father.” She whispers.

“They won’t, Zina. It will take time. Everything will come right. But this is not something I’m willing to give up. My heart won’t let me give this up.”

I lean down and press my lips against hers and she lets out a delicate sound against my mouth as I kiss her.

TWENTY-TWO

zina

The idea of putting a wedding together in one week was almost laughable when he told me he wanted to get married so soon after our engagement. I argued that we need at least a month, there is too much to plan and too much to do - but it turns out that Giovanni will stop at nothing once he's decided he wants something. And he shocked me, by putting all of this together with hardly any help from me. The only thing he needed from me was to know what I envisioned as the perfect day. The perfect flower and the perfect decor.

Now the day has arrived.

We are getting married on the estate, in our own garden. Giovanni has arranged for two gorgeous white tents to be put up in the garden. One is filled with seating for our guests during the ceremony. Another sits on the other side of the garden decorated as though it was the most luxurious dinner party ever to be celebrated.

White roses, lilies and peonies curtain the entrance of each tent and hang in long, elaborate chains from the ceiling to the floor.

Fairy lights glitter between the flowers and the tables are covered in white silk and crystal glass.

Chandeliers adorn the space above the seating and dancing areas and soft white fabric floats in a gentle breeze around the windows.

My heart is so happy I could scream and sing and dance.

Upstairs in my old bedroom I am tucked away where Giovanni can't accidentally see me - it's bad luck for a groom to see his bride in her wedding dress before the right moment.

I'm already dressed. I'm wearing the style that he chose for me, a very similar cut to the dress I wore at our engagement party. Thin straps and a low dipping front, the back is scandalous low, and hints of white lace tease the eye all over my body. The dress is made of pure white silk. Hand stitched into the lace and flaring over the long, flowing skirt, crystals and diamonds sparkle when I move.

Its exquisite.

I have three girls fussing over me, doing my hair and make-up and spraying a beautiful fine mist of perfume on my skin. One of the girls gently clips an oversized, diamond tiara into my hair.

If ever I felt like a queen -

A knock on the door draws our attention.

Giovanni's voice carries through.

"My love?—"

I stand up and wave the girls away from me, lifting the front of my dazzling, crystal covered white silk dress, I walk to the closed door.

"Giovanni, you can't come in - you can't see me."

“I know, but this - this is important.” He sounds terrible. My heart sinks. What could be so important that he would risk breaking tradition.

My heart flips when I open the door to let him in.

His mouth drops open at the sight of me. The satisfaction and happiness that floods me almost makes me cry.

And he looks incredible. He’s wearing a black suit and a white shirt. Every inch of him is perfect. From his carefully styled shortcut beard, to his hair, to the way his clothes fit snugly over his muscular physique.

Damn - my man is the sexiest person on this planet.

“Oh my fuck.” He mutters, taking a step back. He rubs his hand over his square jaw and shakes his head. “I knew you would be too beautiful to put into words - but Zina - I can hardly breathe.”

My smile is so wide it aches against my cheeks. I reach out and pull him into the room, turning to the girls who have been helping me get ready - “Please give us some privacy.” I demand.

They hurry out.

Giovanni walks in and paces slowly up and down. He rubs his hand over the back of his neck.

“What’s going on?” I ask, realizing how bad it is - whatever it is. It’s hard to shake him, especially on a day like today when we have so many reasons to be happy.

Giovanni lets out a long, stressful groans before he speaks.

“Firstly, Santino is refusing to attend the wedding.” He sighs in frustration, but then waves his hand through the air as though that’s the least of his worries.

“I’m sorry, Giovanni. Did you talk to him? What did he say?”

“I spoke to him, but Zina, that doesn’t matter. He is man enough to make his own choices. It doesn’t change anything. Something else has happened and I don’t know what to do?—”

I walk over to him and grab his waist, turning him to face me so that he stops pacing up and down.

“Talk to me. We’ll figure it out together.” I say, searching his eyes.

“The security alarm was triggered when the servants carried a gift in. One that got delivered by courier.”

“Why would an alarm trigger?” my brows knot in confusion.

“Because it’s a bomb.” He says sternly.

My heart stops, my body freezes. “We have to get everyone out of here immediately.” I stammer in shock.

“No. No, that isn’t necessary. My team has disposed of the bomb. It’s gone. We’ve scanned every other gift and every car of every guest. We haven’t found anything else concerning - but the point is that someone is willing to go to extreme length to stop this wedding.”

I drop my hands from his waist, now I’m pacing up and down the bedroom. Should we stop the wedding? Is it too dangerous? Are we playing with fire by carrying on?

“I can see it on your face - all the same questions I’m asking myself.” Giovanni sighs, flopping down into the sofa on the corner. He leans forward, resting his face in his hands for a moment before he looks up at me.

“I don’t want to cancel anything, Zina. I don’t want to call off the wedding.”

I bite my lower lip, searching my thoughts for answers.

“Is there a risk that there is a bomb hidden somewhere we haven’t found?”

“There is always a risk. This is a dangerous world. But that risk will never go away - and if we stop now we send a very clear message to whoever sent that bomb that they are more powerful than us - that we are afraid of them and they can control us with a simple threat.”

I shake my head.

Not a chance. “No one is more powerful than us.” I demand. “No one can control us, Giovanni. We run this city.”

A dark, proud smile spreads across his lips.

“You really are the perfect woman for me, Zina. Why did I think you’d want to stop? How blind of me.” He stands up, his smile growing wider.

He folds his arms around me as I step close to him.

“It’s you and me, my husband.” Raising myself onto my tiptoes I kiss him.

He moans against my lips, his body relaxing into mine. “I am not your husband yet, my sweet little thing.”

I grin, brushing my thumb over his lips.

“Well, get out - so I can finish getting ready.”

Reluctantly, we step apart and Giovanni takes one last look at me before leaving.

Music plays from inside the tent, indicating that it's time for me to walk.

Two men in tuxedos draw a white curtain open, revealing me standing at the start of the path that leads me to the man of my dreams. Giovanni's eyes are glued to me. His hands are clamped in front of his body as he stands straight, his shoulders back, waiting for me.

He's waiting for me.

The love of my life.

He's waiting to commit the rest of his life and heart and soul - to me.

I smile beneath the veil that covers my face, walking slowly towards him, one step at a time, holding a bouquet of crisp white peonies. They are my favorite flower and Giovanni made sure that there were thousands of them here for my wedding.

He slowly lifts my veil and I pass my flowers to someone to hold for me.

My heart is beating like a million butterflies are dancing in my chest.

He looks down at me with those gorgeous blue eyes, reaching his hands out, he takes mine in his.

The priest talks about love, happiness and sacrifices. He talks of family, promises and

trust. He talks of souls, coming together as fate always intended them to do.

We exchange rings, our hands brushing over each other's fingers as we slip the promises onto our fingers.

Giovanni has never looked more handsome than this moment.

As the priest speaks I am faint with excitement. I can't believe this is finally happening.

"I now pronounce you - husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

Giovanni steps against me with a smile, he's hand wraps around my waist and dips me backwards, his hand slipping into the slit of my dress so that he can pull my bent leg up against his hip. It's picture perfect as he presses his lips over mine.

I'm lost in a fairytale moment, the perfect moment - one I have dreamed of since the day he first kissed me.

He doesn't hesitate with his kiss. It's barely appropriate for public view, and it sets my skin on fire with desire. His hand slides over my leg, beneath the wedding dress and I giggle, blushing, as my cheeks heat with need.

He belongs to me now and no one should dare try to take him from me.

This is my husband. My man. My life. He 's claiming me in front of everyone.

When he pulls me back to my feet and stares down into my eyes, he is grinning mischievously. The crowd is cheering and throwing flower petals. He leans close and whispers in my ear. "Do we have time to disappear for a few moments?"

I laugh, scrunching my nose.

Giovanni leads me back down the aisle, past all of those watching eyes. My arm is slipped through his and he walks proudly with me at his side.

“Mrs. Rivas.” He says my name to test how it feels on his lips. It makes my heart beat faster. “Mrs. Zina Rivas.” I never expect a new name to turn me on as much as that one does.

I bite my lip, wishing we could sneak away - and steal a moment for ourselves.

Our guests move from the ceremony tent to the dinner tent.

Music plays and we dance, eat incredible food and laugh all night.

I see Santino, outside the tent, glaring in through an open window. His face scowled in anger. It clenches my heart, but I turn away from him - this night isn't about him. He has no idea how much I deserve this night. And I won't let him ruin it for me.

Guido cheekily steals a dance from Giovanni, wanting to celebrate too. He takes my hand and slowly waltzes with me over the dance floor, but it doesn't last long before Giovanni is back at my side, chasing Guido away to enjoy the night with everyone else.

“I don't want to share you tonight.” Giovanni whispers against my ear, moving seductively as he guides me through a slow, romantic song.

Beneath his jacket, I slip my hand under his shirt, untucking it at the back so that I can touch his skin. I want him more than words can describe.

I want to consummate this union. To make it final. To have him claim me in that final

way that will seal our fates.

“It’s late.” I whisper with a smile.

“It is.” He nods, his eyes flaring.

“It’s about time for everyone to leave.” I remark.

He shakes his head. “Let them stay. Let them celebrate.”

Giovanni slips his arm around my waist and lifts me off my feet, cradling me against his chest. He carries me through the crowd, not even trying to hide his intentions or to slip away quietly.

We leave the celebrations to carry on without us as he carries me upstairs, to claim me as his wife, in the most delightful way possible.

TWENTY-THREE

giovanni

The wedding dress slips off her body, sliding over her curves as it drifts to the floor.

My wife.

My heart and my soul.

She smiles at me and presses her finger against her lips, letting it slip into her mouth, she licks it, teasing me.

Zina has pushed me into the chair in our bedroom and insisted that I stay here and not move.

Now she's seducing me by slowly stripping off clothes, layer by layer, revealing the white lace lingerie beneath everything.

She turns her back on me and bends down, pushing one lace stocking down her leg, arching her ass towards me. The thin lace of her panties covers nothing at all, and the sight of her perfectly pink pussy makes my cock throb harder.

I pull the button of my pants open, easing the strain off my cock, letting it free instead of leaving it confined against the fabric.

When she spreads her legs and reaches through her legs, still bent over, to cup her

hand over her pussy - I can't help myself. I wrap my fingers around my cock and squeeze.

She glances at me and drops her mouth open.

"I said no touching." She scolds me.

"Why don't you come over her and stop me?" I dare her.

She giggles, pulling her mouth to the side and scrunching her nose. "I'm not falling for that." She sasses.

I stand up.

Zina's eyes widen as she takes a step back. "I'm not done. Sit down." She tries to sound authoritative, but I take another step towards her and she squeals in fright.

She turns to run and I'm on top of her before she can reach the bed.

Grabbing her, I sit on the edge of the bed and throw her over my knees. Holding her in place I slap her ass hard.

She cries out and tries to squirm free, but I'm holding her too tightly. I brush my hand over her ass, playing with the white lace, I dip my fingers between her legs to feel her pussy.

"Soaked." I growl.

She wiggles again, moving against my fingers as she lays bent across my lap.

I pull my hand away and grab a handful of her hair, tugging her head up. My lips

brush against her ear as I growl, “Did you really think I would let you tease me?”

She giggles in defiance. “You were just too weak to control yourself.” She says, boldly.

I sneer, hating the fact that she’s right. I can’t hold back when it comes to her.

My hand slices through the air and stings across her ass again. She gasps in shock, but she has very little time to process the pain before I lift her off my lap and throw her onto the bed, face down, ass up, legs spread.

“If you move, I will hurt you.” I warn her and she freezes obediently.

This time when I spank her I let my hand land right across her pussy.

She screams in delight, arching up towards me, her pussy swelling instantly. Rosy, red lips, throbbing with need.

I touch them, letting my fingers slip between them to play with her clit.

She moans and pushes into my hand. My cock is aching to slide over her wetness, and to push into her.

“Who do you belong to?” I ask, positioning myself behind her.

“You.” She whispers.

“I can’t hear you, Zina.” I warn her, brushing my cock between her pussy lips.

“I belong to you.” She says louder.

“That’s right.” I growl, thrusting my hips forward - my cock plunges into her with such force she forgets how to breathe for a moment. Her fingers tighten around the bedding and she shudders on her knees in front of me.

I slide out, fueled by the ecstasy of being inside her, and thrust forward again. She gasps and her grips tighter as I begin to fuck her like I own her. And I do. I own her now. She is mine and she will never belong to another soul.

My cock throbs at the thought. The thought of controlling her, possessing her, fucking her -

I push in deeper, perhaps too hard, too fast - and she tries to squirm away, whimpering.

Grabbing her hips I shove her flat onto the bed.

“I’m sorry, little firefly.” I growl, unable to stop, unable to hold back. My cock is aching, and she is mine to do with as I please.

I slam into her pussy, harder and faster, pinning her beneath me, her body belonging to me - not her. She is my wife.

She’s gasping and crying out each time I enter her, but her cries are different now. She wants more. She wants me to take her to the edge and push her over into pure bliss.

My cock stretches her open every time I move forward and leaves her begging and arching every time I pull out.

In no time at her she is shaking beneath me.

Her body quivering as her mind slips away. I grab her arms and fold them behind her back, her face pushed harder into the bedding.

Pleasure builds become too much to bare.

Her pussy tightens over my cock, I can't last much longer.

But I don't need to.

I thrust into her again and her mind snaps as she convulses, her orgasm so intense she is writhing beneath me, sending me over the edge with her, as my cock goes rigid and I explode inside her.

Today has been the perfect day.

It was long, and chaotic and beautiful.

I couldn't have wished for a more magical wedding, and my heart is full of love for the woman lying in my arms, in the darkness of our bedroom. It's peaceful, quiet and safe as she drifts to sleep with her head against my chest.

On the nightstand my phone buzzes. It's set to vibrate but against the wooden top it's noisy and alarming.

I reach out, quickly trying to silence it so that Zina isn't woken up.

For a moment I pause, the phone in my hand, while I wait to see if she stirs. But she doesn't. She's still breathing peacefully, and I let out a sigh of relief.

Carefully slipping my arm out from beneath her I sit on the edge of the bed to read the message I received.

Unknown: She will destroy you, Giovanni. How can you trust her? Do you even know who she really is? All those years apart - she's not the same woman you met sixteen years ago.

My jaw clenched uncomfortably tight.

When will this end?

Why is someone so determined to make me doubt her?

I glance behind me at her peaceful, beautiful face.

And why is it so easy to plant that seed of doubt? Is it because I already have doubts of my own? Doubt I've been denying and pushing aside for too long.

I read the message again and sneer.

Fuck.

It's our wedding night. Can't I enjoy one night?

I set the phone back down and lie down again. Zina mumbles quietly. "Where did you go?" in a soft, sleepy voice.

"Nowhere. I'm right here." I reply, but my body is tense.

She wraps her arm around my waist and snuggles again, but for some reason I hold back. She's lying in the cradle of my arm, but I can't bring myself to brush my fingers over her skin, to touch her with love -

My heart is beating harder than it should be.

She notices my discomfit and lifts her head to look at me, her long hair messy around her face.

“Gio,” She whispers my name. “Are you ok?”

I should tell her about the message, but what good would it do?

“I’m fine, my angel. Go back to sleep. I’m sorry I woke you.” I mutter.

She shakes her head. “I can see that something is wrong, why won’t you tell me what it is?”

“Zina, I need you to leave it alone please.” I say, too harshly.

She bites her lip and lies her head back down on my chest. Now I can sense her discomfort as much as she can sense mine.

Sighing I force myself to wrap my arm around her properly.

“I’m sorry.” I whisper. “I’m just thinking about things.

She nods but says nothing.

Zina is asleep again, breathing softly. I’m watching her naked back, the gorgeous curve of her spine and the delicate outline of her ribs moving as she breathes. Her perfect, smooth skin. Her long dark hair.

What if I made a mistake?

I was so desperate to convince myself that I could trust her that I forced the wedding to go ahead much sooner than it should have. Maybe I should have waited. Maybe I

needed more time to learn about who she is.

With all the warnings, and threats - I should have looked into it first. I should have cleared it up before making her my wife.

I think I've made a huge mistake and there is no way I can take it back.

The bedside clock is glowing red, telling me it's past three. The house is dark and quiet, and I have not found even a moments sleep yet.

My head is swimming, my heart is turning colder the more I consider all the things I should have considered before.

I'm going numb with worry.

And the only option I have left - the only way I can fix this is to prove to myself that all of those warnings are false.

I need to find evidence, something, anything, to prove that there is no truth to any of it - that someone is just messing with my head to throw me off.

Then, I can love her.

Realizing that sleep won't find me tonight or give me a moments freedom from this worry - I slip away from her and make my way down stairs to make coffee.

Without turning lights on I stand in the dark kitchen, my eyes already adjusted to the night hours ago, and quietly go through the motions of making coffee.

I'll have to keep my investigation to myself. I don't even want Santino or Fabio knowing. If anyone finds out I'm looking into my wife's past they will have

confirmation that I don't trust her - and it will give them permission to doubt her too.

I have enough on my hands with Santino being so openly against our marriage. And Fabio still warning me not to let her control me.

I stare at my phone as hot steam wisps from the coffee next to me.

I know who to message.

But once it's done, it's done. There is no turning back.

I have no choice.

Punching at my keyboard I type out the message I'm reluctant to send - instructing the private investigator to look into her past. Everything and anything about her that I need to know.

When I hit send, I expect to feel guilt, but instead I feel relief. A weight lifts off my shoulders and I close my eyes, relishing it.

It's just a precaution.

He'll find nothing and I will be able to carry on with my life instead of worrying over this.

I shove my phone into my pocket and walk out into the garden. It's still messy with remnants of our wedding. White flowers litter the grass and empty champagne glasses sit on tables around the tents.

It ended late - a team will be here first thing in the morning to take all of this away - the garden will return to normal as though nothing happened here.

I look down at my finger, the solid platinum band around it is heavy and uncomfortable in my doubt.

Toying with it I push it in circles over my fingers.

I hope he replies soon.

I can't wait long.

I need to know if I can trust her.

TWENTY-FOUR

zina

The decorations were cleaned away, and the tents were taken down - if I look out into the garden from the balcony off our bedroom - it's like the wedding never happened.

The only evidence I didn't imagine it all is the beautiful white gold ring around my finger, a massive diamond ring next to an elegant wedding band.

I play with the rings, moving them around my finger, trying to figure out what's wrong.

Since the wedding Giovanni has been distant and cold towards me.

I've tried over and over again to talk to him, to try to convince him to let in - to tell me what's bothering him. But his walls are up and so high they are impossible to break through.

Nothing I do is working.

And I'm beginning to think he regrets marrying me.

Tension in the house is horrible high.

Santino has reverted back to how he was before, when he didn't hide the fact that he

hated me. Romeo is the same.

The boys are plotting again. I can see it in the way they look at me. With cold stares and anger so deep it might be deadly.

Would they try to kill me? Their father's wife? Would they dare to move against me in an attempt to take my life?

Yes .

My heart clenches.

They would.

I bite down hard to fight the panic rising in my chest.

Standing out here on the balcony feeling sorry for myself isn't going to solve anything. Defiance and anger spill into me.

I lift my face up to the grey clouds and close my eyes. Be strong, Zina. You can get through this. Whatever is wrong, you can fix it.

With a nod, encouraging myself, I walk off the balcony and down stairs to find Giovanni. He has to talk to me. We can't carry on with closed communications.

As I walk into his office, he stands from his desk, clasping a piece of paper, looking down with the worst frown etched into his forehead.

I hesitate.

"Giovanni can we talk?" I ask, nervous because he already seems furious about

something.

His head snaps up towards me and his eyes burning into my soul like ice.

“Yes. We can talk. And you explain what the fuck this is about.”

He walks around the desk and slams the photograph down onto the hard surface. I step closer, my eyes on him, nervous -

Glancing down at the image my stomach knots with frustration.

It's a picture of me, standing next to Emiliano Maritz. Emiliano has his arm around my back, his hand resting on my waist. The picture looks intimate, like we've known each other for years, like we're close, maybe even close enough to be lovers.

But that picture is one moment taken completely out of context.

“Giovanni - we've spoken about this.” I sigh. Pressing my fingers into the picture and pushing it away.

“No. You lied to me about it. That's what really happened.” His words are dark with accusation. Anger rises in me.

I shake my head, refusing to back down.

“I most certainly did not lie. This photo was taken years ago - and I told you exactly what happened the day I met him.”

“Why don't you tell me again, because from where I'm standing you two look awfully close. Intimately close.”

I pull my mouth tight and my shoulders tense.

“He came up to me on the streets, outside a coffee shop. I had no idea who he was. He told me he could make my life easier, for my son, and for me.”

“And?” Giovanni steps closer to me, folding his thick arms across his muscular chest.

“And I said no .” I shout in anger. “I told you I turned him down.”

He clenches his jaw, searching my face for the truth. He doesn’t believe that I gave him the truth.

“Why is he holding you?”

“He’s not holding me. ” I huff. “He reached out and touched me. It was uncomfortable, as uncomfortable as it would be if any stranger stepped into your personal space. This photo tells a fake story. It’s one moment frozen in time. As soon as I felt his hand on my waist, I moved away from him.”

Giovanni’s eyes flare in anger and he turns his back on me.

“I trusted you, Zina.”

I laugh bitterly and he turns to glare at me.

“You never trusted me - why did you have someone investigate me if you trusted me. That’s where the photo comes from right? Someone digging into my past - trying to find out all my dirty little secrets - well, what else did you find, Giovanni? Apart from one misleading image from a story I already told you . One I wasn’t hiding in any way whatsoever. What else did you find?”

I'm heated with fierce confrontational anger. He can see the frustration in my eyes. I'm so fucking tired of having to defend myself.

I so fucking angry that I dared to believe I could let those defenses down and actually be happy with him.

Who was I kidding? Thinking I was allowed to be happy?

Giovanni is staring at me in disbelief. The accusation is still dark in his eyes.

"Nothing?" I snap. "You found nothing. Because there isn't any horrible secret in my past to find. But why don't you just waste your time and money and keep looking. Let me know when you're satisfied enough to trust me again."

I spin on my heels and storm from the office.

At least this answers my questions - this explains why he's been acting so weird since the wedding. He reverted. He has regrets. He's questioning his decisions.

And knowing all of that doesn't make me feel any better. In fact - it tears me apart inside.

My king doesn't trust me.

Everything I thought we were building is a lie.

How can he love me if he doesn't trust me? The two go hand in hand.

Needing something to take the edge off my anger I go into the living room, to the bar, and pour myself a straight whisky.

Lifting the glass I throw back the shot and close my eyes, letting it burn slowly down my throat, reading through my chest like fire.

I pour another, this time a double, and carry the glass out to the patio, standing on the top step I let my eyes wander over the garden.

Beautiful and serene it is not aligned with how I feel inside.

There is chaos, burning through me like acid. I want to scream and shout and force him to believe me.

My fingers twitch and my jaw clenches tightly.

I can't hold it in. I can't hold this back.

Throwing my arm back, I fling the glass forward, it hurtles through the air into the stone wall on the side of the patio.

Glittering shards of shattered glass explode outwards, raining over the tiles. My heart races, somewhat calmer after the outburst. The sound of glass breaking was a release of whatever was locked inside me.

I let out a sharp breath and walk to the edge of the pool.

Without taking my dress off I step onto the top step, then the next, then the next. Kicking off I drift weightlessly into the water and my dress floats around me like the flowers of a petal.

I close my eyes and blow out all the air in my lungs, letting myself sink beneath the surface of the cool, clear water.

For a moment I'm suspended, away from all the stress and worry and frustration.

But the moment can't last forever, and when my lungs start screaming for air I stand up, wiping water out of my eyes.

Giovanni is on the balcony of our bedroom staring down at me.

There won't be a show today, husband.

I glare back at him, angry, heartbroken and refusing to back down.

That night I stand under the hot shower and my heart is aching more than I want to admit. Am I making a mistake by being angry with him? Should I rather approach this with more patience? If I tried again to explain to him or reassure him - I might get through to him.

I wish he believed me.

I wish he could see how deeply I love him.

I climb out and wrap the fluffy towel around my body and another I twirl on top of my head to soak the water from my hair.

Slowly I go through the motions of my night time routine, all the while thinking, trying to figure out what to do.

Brushing my fingertips over my cheeks, I pat soothing serums beneath my eyes and touch moisturizing lip balm to my mouth.

I blow dry my hair and rub Argan oil through its length.

I'm delaying going to bed, because Giovanni is already there - and I'm angry and confused and not wanting to fight again.

With a mischievous smirk I let the towel drop from around my body.

My dark, silky hair flows over my shoulders and down my back as I stand naked, staring at my reflection.

Perfect. I grin.

Walking into the bedroom I act completely casual. It's the most normal thing for me to walk around my own room naked.

From the corner of my eye I watch him. Giovanni immediately tenses.

His eyes are glued to me as I stand near the closet, pretending to choose something to wear.

"Zina."

I knew this would get his attention.

I turn slowly, my brows raised. "Yes?"

"I. Uh. I need to know the truth. Can you please tell me what happened with you and Emiliano. Whatever it was - it's in the past - but I need to know, anyway." He sounds gentler than before, more able to talk without losing his temper.

I abandon my task of finding something to wear and walk towards the bed. Lifting the covers I slip beneath them and enjoy his discomfort. He's struggling. I love it when he struggles to control his attraction towards me.

“Gio, I wish you could read my mind.” I shift closer to him. Reaching out I brush my fingers over his face, letting the heat of my touch shiver through him. He growls in frustration. “I wish you could see my thoughts and know that I haven’t lied to you. Nothing happened between Emiliano and me. Nothing.”

Giovanni closes his eyes, his shoulders tense.

When he opens them he grabs my wrist and pushes my hand away from his face.

My expression changes as hurt pulses through me.

“I can see straight through you.” He snaps. “Trying to distract me, trying to seduce me to hide the truth.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.” I shout my patience gone, replaced by hurt. “What would the point be? Why would I lie about this? What good would it do me? I’ve spent sixteen years waiting for the day when I can be with you. I’ve turned down countless men, countless opportunities to be loved by someone else - because the only person I could ever love - is you. Why would I risk this for anyone or anything? I did not lie to you. There was nothing between that man and me. And if you don’t wake up see how desperately I am trying to be patient about this - you’re going to wake up and be left with nothing but regret.”

He watches me and there is the smallest flicker of doubt in his eyes.

I shake my head.

“I can’t stay here if you don’t trust me. I won’t live like that. I’d rather be alone than with a man who won’t let me love him.” My voice breaks as tears spill down my cheeks.

But the tears seem to anger him.

He rolls towards me and grabs my jaw, forcing me to look at him. His eyes pierce into mine as he towers over me on the bed.

“Are those real tears, Zina?” he snarls.

TWENTY-FIVE

giovanni

For a moment the doubt creeps in. I'm so desperate to believe what she's saying is true. But the risk is so high.

Her voice breaks a little, and I turn to find her crying.

More manipulation.

No, she's upset.

She's tricking you.

I roll onto her, grabbing her face and forcing her to look at me. I want to see into her eyes. I want to see her soul.

Tears roll down her cheeks as I pin her to the bed, her eyes are wide with fright.

"Are those real tears, Zina?" I snarl.

She slaps me hard across the face. "Get off me." She shouts.

My fingers tighten on her jaw.

My body is throbbing with excitement.

Her legs are spread beneath me.

Don't be distracted.

She's so small and weak under my body.

My cock hardens and my frown deepens.

Don't let her control you.

But she 's not in control. Not now.

She's so beautiful, so lost, her eyes are wild and fearful.

She's fighting so hard to make me believe her, it's almost working.

"Giovanni." She sobs. "Please believe me. I don't want to lose you."

Her words break something inside me, and I let go of her face and press my lips against hers.

I want her. I never want to lose her.

Desperation ignites between us and she wraps her legs around my waist. I push my hips forward, pressing my cock against her naked body.

"Wait, don't do this if you don't love me." She whispers against my mouth. "Don't do this to me - if you don't love me." She pleads.

"I do love you." I growl, fighting myself. I do love her, but I don't trust her.

I should stop though, this isn't right. This isn't ok. How can I sleep with someone I don't trust?

Grabbing the elastic of my sweatpants I tug it down and grab my cock. Rigid, etched with thick, throbbing veins over the shaft.

She gasps when I rub it over her, coating myself in her wetness.

"Giovanni - " She says, breathless. "Tell me you love me."

"Of course, I fucking love you, I never stopped loving you." I say angrily, thrusting forward and penetrating deep into her body.

She cries out. Tears are still streaming down her cheeks, spilling from the corners of her eyes.

I thrust again, her body jolts beneath me and I groan with pleasure.

I didn't lie to her. I love her.

But -

I thrust again, and she punches with her fist into my chest.

"Stop." She says, her throat tight over her words.

"No." I growl, fucking her harder.

"Gio - " I slam into her and she gasps, tilting her head back in pleasure.

The faster I move she less she resists and there is no chance in hell that I can stop

now, even if I wanted to.

She wraps her legs tighter around me and her nails dig into my back and my cocks slides in and out of her pussy.

It's like we were made to be together. Our bodies perfectly aligned, perfectly fitted - nothing has ever felt so incredible, so right.

But so wrong.

A deep groan rumbles through me as my mind taunts me with whispers of how she betrays me - even now, even in my bed. She's hiding things. Secrets.

I slam my hips forward and shove my cock deep inside her, punishing her with pleasure is all I can do now.

My fingers wrap around her throat and I move faster.

She gasps, her lips parting and her pupils dilating as I hover over her with ominous strength. The muscles of my arms flexing as I move, fucking her with brutal force and watching her enjoy every second of it.

Zina's tears taste salty when I run my tongue over her cheek.

She moans softly, closing her eyes, her body shaking beneath me.

Her nails are so deep in my skin I'm bleeding.

I close my eyes too - to shut off my thoughts, to block out the conflict swarming through me.

Her pussy tightens over me and begins to pulse.

She goes rigid beneath me, her body tense as wave after wave of her orgasm shoots through her.

I groan with pleasure, thrusting forward one last time and exploding inside her.

I roll off her, not wanting to look into her eyes.

I tug the blankets up over my body and lie on my side facing away from her.

Her hand runs softly over my back. It feels incredible. My eyes close and I try to ignore it.

“I wish I knew how to make you see.” She says softly. “No matter what it took - I would do it - if I could prove to you that I would never betray you. I love you, Giovanni. I love you more than life itself.”

Her soft voice is soothing, and I can't help but turn towards her.

She's also lying on her side, and I pull her into my arms, letting our legs tangle as we lie together.

I don't know what to do.

Her big, brown eyes are full of hope as she stares up at me.

I brush her silky hair from her face and let it spill onto the pillow behind her. She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

But if there's one thing I've learned in life - it's that the beautiful things are often the

most deadly.

* * *

I wake up long before the sun rises and make my way downstairs, grateful for the quiet moment that allows me to think clearly, without anyone needing anything from me.

As usual, I leave the lights off, preferring to move around in the dark. It's more peaceful this way.

The coffee smells incredible and I lean with my back against the kitchen counter, sipping it, lost in thought.

"Dad." Santino's voice is strained and quiet.

"Hey, kid." I say. We haven't been getting on lately. To be really honest, I've missed him deeply. He has always been closest to me - my eldest. The man who will take over after I've gone. "What's up? How are you?" I ask.

He gets a cup down and makes himself a coffee too. I can see there is something on his mind.

"Are all women only put on this earth to cause us pain?" He asks.

"What?" I say, confused. "Your mother was?—"

"My mother left us. She left us to suffer without her."

"Santino don't say that. She would have given the world to stay and watching you become a man."

“She gave up her life—” he mutters. “And now, you pretend to be in love but the woman sharing your bed is evil. She’s a liar and a manipulator and you refuse to see it.”

“Santino, you’ll understand one day, when you fall in love. When you meet a girl who steals your heart.”

“Actually, I wanted to tell you,” he sighs, and my chest tightens. His eyes giving away the seriousness of what he wants to say next.

“You can tell me anything.” I assure him.

“I’m studying to become a Bishop. I will never fall in love, dad. I won’t put myself through that. It’s not the path I’m meant to walk.”

My first reaction is a burst of laughter. My son? A man of God? It’s ridiculous. He’s teasing me.

But then I realize he’s never been more serious in his life and I trip over my words trying to recover.

“Santino, why, are you sure, why, I don’t understand. You are a beautiful man, any woman would love to be with you.” I shake my head and reach out and grab his shoulder, turning him towards me.

He pulls himself free and mutters. “I knew you wouldn’t understand.”

“No, wait. I’m sorry. It’s just a shock. That’s all. I will support you, Santino. Whatever path you walk in life. I will support your decisions. The same way I want you to support mine.”

He nods. “I appreciate that.” He smiles tightly.

“Santino—” I sigh.

“Dad, I can’t hold it against you, but I can’t lie to you and tell you your new wife isn’t trying to destroy you. Everyone else can see it. Why can’t you?”

He picks up his coffee and leaves.

I’m standing alone in the dark kitchen again, more confused that I was before, more worried and more anxious. Flooded with even more doubt.

My son wants to be a Bishop.

That’s something I never, in a million years, would have expected.

But it’s his choice, and I meant it when I said I would support him.

He might go down that road and veer off it. He might not. It’s not for me to know right now.

For now - I’ve got to find a way to get to the bottom of the threat against my family.

The bomb.

The cryptic messages.

The hints of betrayal.

My wife.

* * *

The day doesn't get any better.

It starts off with breakfast, which is tense. Santino has joined us, and I feel the weight of what he's told me sitting between us like a wall. He wants to be a Bishop. But again I remind myself it's his choice.

I make small talk with my sons, my leg brushes against Zina's beneath the table, Zina is quiet - breakfast ends, tensions are high.

By ten in the morning I have a headache. It's sitting at the base of my skull, throbbing and threatening to turn into a migraine.

Tilting the glass back I take two gulps of water to wash the painkillers down my throat - just as my phone buzzes in my pocket. It's only ten and I already want to climb back into bed and wait for tomorrow to arrive. Not that tomorrow has any guarantee of being better than today. I'll still have to face all of this shit and find a way to fix it. It's not just going to go away.

Sighing, I pull my phone out.

And my heart sinks even deeper.

Unknown: We were disappointed about your wedding lacking an expositive element. Good job stopping the bomb. But don't get too confident just yet, you can't stop everything from reaching your castle, King of the Underworld.

For fuck sakes.

Then its war - and I need to prepare.

Whoever this is has no intention of backing down or giving up.

I march straight to the security room to talk to Fabio.

He reads the message and lets out a low growl of agitation.

“We need more men.” He sighs in frustration. “We’ll reinforce security around the perimeter. Nothing comes in or out of this estate without being scanned and searched. Cars. People. I don’t want a fucking bird flying overhead without registering on the system.”

“So, you understand. Good. You can go ahead with that. Keep me informed. Do whatever you need to do.”

“Yes, sir.” He grumbles. I’ve just made his day a lot more complicated and stressful.

My sons are all sitting in the living room, staring at me expectantly. Zina sits quietly in the single sofa, her legs crossed and her hands in her lap. She’s the only one who looks calm while she waits to hear what this family meeting is about.

It bothers me that she’s so calm - as if she already knows.

But the only way she can know about the latest warning is if she was somehow involved with it.

My eyes pierce into her, trying to read her thoughts. Can I trust her?

I’m busy preparing for war against my home, against my family - and I have no idea if I can trust the person I chose to give my heart to.

“What’s going on, dad?” Romeo asks, getting impatient.

I want to tell them enough convince them to be vigilant, but not enough to have them lying awake at night worrying. That's my job, not theirs.

"I'm in the process of increasing security on the estate. It's a precaution, but I need everyone in this family to be extra alert and to inform a guard, or me, if you see anything strange or suspicious."

After the family meeting Santino pulls me aside.

"What was that about?" he demands.

"It's ok, son - I've got it covered." I sigh.

"No, dad. You need to tell me everything. I am your oldest son, I have a right to know what is happening."

My eyes meet his and I stare into the face of my son, who is quickly becoming a man. A man I can be proud of. A man I can trust.

"Santino, we received a threat this morning. Someone is coming. I don't know what's going on and I feel out of my depth. I'll do everything I can to protect this family but I'm worried. I'm worried about everything."

TWENTY-SIX

zina

As soon as I walk into Giovanni's office, I can sense that I've walked in on a private conversation. I hesitate in the doorway, not knowing if I should leave, and give them privacy, or stand my ground and force them to include me in whatever is going on.

Santino and Giovanni are standing close together and Santino's expression is one of deep concern while Giovanni looks more stressed than I've seen in a very long time. My heart aches for him. I want nothing more than to take his pain away.

"Is everything ok?" I ask, looking from one man to the other. They look so similar. Giovanni, strong, aged and refined by years of experience. His body is broader, more muscular, more masculine -

But Santino is clearly his father's son. His jaw has the same strong shape, and his eyes are just as clear, just as sharp.

Santino sneers at me. "Why don't you tell us?" he snaps.

I knot my brows, confused and offended. Why me? "What do you mean?" I ask, walking further into the room.

"Santino, don't." Giovanni snaps, shaking his head at his son.

I narrow my eyes towards him. What's going on? What were they talking about?

Santino pouts in annoyances and lets out a sharp breath. “I’ll talk to you again later, dad. When we have privacy .” With one last glare in my direction, he storms out of the office, knocking my shoulder with his as he walks past me. I gasp in fright, trying to move aside, but it’s not the knock that hurts - it’s the gesture. The disrespect he feels confident showing me in front of his father.

I wait, listening to his footsteps fade down the hallway. All the while I’m trying to calm myself.

When I look at Giovanni, he’s staring at me, a hundred questions in his eyes.

“Please, tell me what’s happening. That family meeting left us with more questions than answers. What are you worried about? Why won’t you share it with me?” I ask, stepping closer to Giovanni.

He stands up straighter, but turns away from me, picking up things from his desk and busying himself with sorting them. He’s blocking me.

“Giovanni - “ I say sternly. “I’m your wife.”

“I said everything I intended to say at the family meeting. There isn’t anything more to discuss.” He says coldly.

“Why are you pushing me away like this?”

“I’m not.” He says, carrying on over his desk. Moving paperwork around, pointless shifting things.

For a while I just watch him, hoping he’ll break down and stop. But he doesn’t.

“Fine.” I sigh, turning to leave. “When you’re ready to talk - come and find me.”

My heart is heavy as I leave the office. What I don't expect is to walk right into Santino just a short way down the hall.

He snarls and pins me against the wall, his forearm pressed against my throat. If I called out, Giovanni would hear me, but somehow I don't think it would do me any good.

"What the hell are you doing?" I gasp in shock, trying to push him away from me.

"I'm watching you, Zina. You might have my father fooled, but you haven't fooled me. I know that the greatest betrayals come from within."

He steps back, his eyes piercing into me like two swords aimed at my heart.

"What are you talking about?" I snap angrily.

He pulls his mouth tight, then turns to walk away and I'm left in shock and confusion again. The greatest betrayals come from within.

Something's happened - and Santino thinks I'm responsible - and by the way Giovanni is treating me - so does he.

This is another reminder than Giovanni doesn't trust me, and it hurts.

Watching Santino walk away I stay where I am, my back against the wall, my heart aching - wondering how I can show them that I'm on their side.

Whatever's happened has triggered Giovanni to increase security.

The bomb at the wedding.

It must be something similar.

He's worried, because they haven't backed down. He's preparing for an attack on the estate. And he thinks it has something to do with me.

My eyes drift down the passage towards Giovanni's office. The intense longing to go back in there and hold him is a sharp pain in my chest. But he won't let me. He's pulled back, assuming that I am the one he needs to protect his family from.

I'll prove to all of them that I'm going to fight by their side. I'll do it - no matter what it takes.

I'll become someone they need, someone they value - I'll do what it takes to prove that I'm here for them.

* * *

That night at dinner, everyone is silent, and the tension is palpable. It's heavy in the air.

Santino and Giovanni are both watching me closely.

The dinner is incredible; rich lamb stew with jasmine rice and sweet apricot jam, but it hardly brings me satisfaction. I'm struggling to find enjoyment in anything without the reassurance that Giovanni still loves me.

When Fabio walks into the room, everyone turns to look at him. He goes straight to Giovanni, leaning close to whisper something in his ear, everyone is frozen, tense with their locked onto to Giovanni, waiting for answers.

Giovanni's jaw sets like stone and he presses his fingers into his temple.

Fabio leaves.

We are all still staring at him, waiting. My heart is beating fast.

He stands up and leaves the dinner table without a word.

Santino runs after him.

I sit for a moment, wondering whether to interfere or stay out of the way, but in the end, I follow.

“What’s going on?” Guido asks.

“I don’t know. Stay and eat your dinner.”

Out in the hallway their voices carry towards me.

“Who?” Santino snaps, his voice a harsh whisper.

“We don’t know.” Fabio says.

“We can’t jump to conclusion, it could be anyone.”

“How many files have they downloaded?” Giovanni asks.

“Whoever is hacking the system is sending and receiving files. That means someone inside the estate is sending - and someone outside is receiving.”

“Are you fucking kidding me - then we have proof?” Santino growls.

“Proof of what?” I ask, walking up to them.

They all stiffen and glare at me.

“Proof of what?” I ask again. They have proof that someone is betraying us from inside, I overheard enough to know that. But I want them to admit it.

But not one of them is saying a word.

Their eyes say everything their voices don’t.

“We need to lock down this estate. All the systems must be switched to the internal network.” Giovanni says when the silence becomes too much.

“Yes, sir.” Fabio agrees, nodding, his eyes on me, his brows knotted.

“Will someone please tell me what’s going on?” I sigh.

“We’re expecting an attack.” Giovanni says calmly. “And we need to be prepared for anything. From any direction.”

“We’re not safe in our home.” Santino mutters, shaking his head. “We are a powerful family, but somewhere along the line I think we trusted the wrong person.” His eyes lock with his father’s. They’re talking about me. Giovanni clenches his jaw and swallows hard. He says nothing.

“I want to help.” I say, quietly, expecting them to push me away.

“We’ll inform you if we need anything.”

“Don’t be like that. I can help.”

Giovanni turns to Fabio, “Lock everyone’s phones off the connection. I don’t want

anyone to be able to access the security system from a mobile device - in or out of the estate.”

“Yes, sir. What about yours?”

“Lock mine as well. We have no idea who’s been tampering with things. They might know my password.”

Again - they all look at me.

I clench my jaw, biting down on the anger building inside me. I want to scream and fight and defend myself. But it’ll do no good. I’ll find a way to prove to them that it wasn’t me. Somehow .

* * *

The days that follow are some of the worst days of my life.

When I walk through the hallway, I hear people whispering - my name on their lips - the housekeepers, the security staff, Romeo and Santino. They’re all talking, and it seems that somehow someone said enough to make them all suspect me - and now they all think I am the enemy.

It reminds me of my first week here. The hatred is so intense, the mistrust and the accusations, whispered and quiet - but so heavy it’s impossible to ignore.

The estate has turned into a prison of sorts, for everyone. If you want to leave you get searched, if you want to go somewhere, you are assigned a security escort. When you come back, you get searched again. Everything is scanned, poked at, prodded, questioned - it’s like we’re all waiting for a bomb to go off and we have no idea who’s holding the trigger.

But what upsets me the most is how my husband is treating me.

He is doing everything he can to pretend I don't exist.

At night, Giovanni sleeps far away from me, on his side of the bed. He hardly looks at me, he hardly speaks to me, and I'm going quietly insane.

No matter how hard I try to reach out to him, he has the highest walls in place, and it feels like I've lost him forever.

If I touch him he flinches away from me as though I have a disease. His eyes no longer roam my body with desire - I don't know what to do to win him back. I'm devastated.

I can't take much more of this.

TWENTY-SEVEN

giovanni

I 'm hiding in my office again. Hiding from her, and her beautiful gaze, constantly turned towards me as though she's waiting for something. I'm hiding from having to deal with the hurt in her eyes every time I turn my back on her.

My desperation is getting worse by the day. The estate is in lock down, but this can't be a long-term thing. We can't live like this.

And my fears are eating me alive.

I've never felt fear like this - a genuine, undeniable fear that my life is in serious danger.

Ever since the day I took over from my father, there was always a threat, a constant knowing that any moment could be my last. But along with that threat I felt the respect of my allies, the trust of my business partners and friends - I felt powerful and in control of the word around me - and with that power I had a sense of security.

Right now, that control is gone. I'm in a defensive position for the first time ever, when I've only ever played offense.

I sigh loudly, picking up my whisky and taking a slow sip.

It's past midnight. Another sleepless night, fighting the urge to reach out to her while

she shifts closer to me in the bed - another sleepless night wondering if she's the one trying to kill me.

Santino knocks lightly on my office door, walking in and sitting down opposite me at my desk. I push the bottle of whisky towards him, and an empty glass.

Silently, he pours himself a drink, leaning back in the chair and swirling the golden liquid in the glass.

"How are you doing?" he asks, without looking up.

I wonder how to answer him.

But all I can think of is that I can't lie anymore. I've been trying to stay strong for my sons, but I need someone to confide in.

"I've never felt this lost in my life." I mutter.

"We've been under attack before. We always came out fine." He tries to reassure me.

"This is different, Santino." I say with regret.

"How?" he looks up at me, his brows knotting.

"This is a lot more personal. In the past - people have come after my business, my clients, my products - this is—" my words trail off.

"What?" He demands, his body tensing.

"I think someone is trying to kill me."

“Dad—”

“I’m serious. I’ve been going over and over everything in my mind. They’ve made no demands for money, no demands for territory or power. This is personal. It’s about me. They want me dead.”

Santino closes his eyes for a moment and brushes his hand through his hair.

I should tell him everything. He deserves to know.

“At my wedding - they sent a bomb.” I say, feeling the weight of my confession as it lifts slightly off my shoulders. A burden I no longer have to carry along.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asks, disappointed that I didn’t trust him with this earlier. But it wasn’t about trust.

“I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Dad, we’re in this together.”

I nod.

“Did they get the bomb into the estate?”

“Yes, but it was picked up by one of the scanners - and we got rid of it before any harm could be done.”

Santino is thoughtful for a moment.

“It is a very personal thing - to send a bomb to a wedding. If this was about business, it would be a bomb at one of the warehouses, not at your home.”

I nod again - he understands.

“Someone is trying to kill me.” I sigh, accepting the truth.

Santino sets his empty glass down on the desk. He leans forward and looks at me with an intense stare.

Narrowing his eyes, he asks. “Are you sure it isn’t your queen?”

I open my mouth to defend her, but nothing comes out. No words spring to my lips, no denial, no eagerness to convince my son he’s wrong.

I don’t know anymore.

Santino stands up. He places his hand on the desk, leaning forward, looking down he quietly says. “I think you just answered me. Your silence says more than your words.”

He walks away and I stare through the empty door into the dark hallway beyond it. When did he get so wise?

With a heavy heart I walk to my bedroom, to where Zina is lying in my bed, fast asleep. The woman I openly invited into my heart.

She’s lying on her side, facing where I would be lying, her hand stretched out to touch my pillow. Her face is sweet, doll like and innocent. Her luscious lips are parted as she breathes softly. Her hair, dark and silky, is spread out over her pillow in waves that frame her face.

My heart aches, because I love her.

The blankets have slipped down, off her shoulders, they are knotted around her legs as though she has been restless in her sleep. She isn't wearing anything and my eyes trace over her gorgeous breasts, the delicate curve of her waist - my cock stirs as I watch her. I am a voyeur, secretly admiring her beauty.

Day after day I want to pull her close to me and brush my hands over her body. I want to kiss those perfect lips and thread my fingers through her hair. I want to hold her, and whisper to her - telling her how special she is.

But I can't.

There are things blocking me from allowing myself to express anything towards her but silent distrust.

The suspicions I have are too intense to ignore.

Everything I tell her, every moment I share with her is a risk I'm too wary to take.

She is my weakness. She always has been.

I'm terrified that everyone was right all along. That I should never have let her into my life again.

Lifting the blankets I quietly climb into bed, stretching my legs out I lie closer to her than I should. The heat from her skin reaches towards me and I continue to watch her, my cock growing harder, my tension rising.

When I can't take it anymore I turn my back on her, aching to be with her, but refusing to let her manipulate me, even in sleep - she has power over me.

Closing my eyes I eventually drift off to sleep but my dreams are horrible.

Hands reach out to grab me in the dark, dragging me away from my sons, away from my home. Her lips curve into a smile, wicked and beautiful.

* * *

I wake up with a jolt.

It feels like I was asleep for a few minutes, my eyes are burning with tiredness, but sunshine is streaming in through the bedroom windows indicating that hours have slipped past.

Zina is no longer lying next to me, the sheets on her side are cold when I reach out to touch them. She's been up for a while.

I groan and roll over, pressing my face into the pillow and wishing for a few more hours of rest. When I throw the blankets off and swing my legs over the side of the bed, my body is heavy with exhaustion.

"I made you some coffee." She says, smiling gently as she walks towards me, carrying a tray. The white silk robe is tied around her waist, but it flares open when she walks, hinting at her beauty beneath the fabric.

"Thanks." I grumble.

She puts the tray on my nightstand and sits down on the bed next to me. She shifts closer and hesitates for a second before she takes my hand, threading her fingers through mine. "Gio, I know things aren't easy right now. I know you're worried about - about everything."

My eyes study her face, wishing I could kiss her.

“I’m here for you.” She sighs. “Whenever you need me. I’ll be at your side, Giovanni.”

I nod. What do I say? I can’t say anything.

My fingers tighten around hers unconsciously. My body wants her. Every cell of my being wants her - but my mind is not allowing it.

I pull my hand away and glance at her. She looks hurt. Rejected.

Zina stands up and smiles at me again. “I love you. Please don’t ever forget that.” She whispers, then leaves me to have my coffee.

It smells dark and rich and delicious.

And I can’t drink it.

I can’t drink it because I don’t trust her. How did things go so wrong in my life that when my own wife, the woman I love, brings me a cup of coffee in the morning - my first thought is that it might be poisoned?

I try to argue with myself, to tell myself I’m being pathetic - but it doesn’t change the suspicion.

And that makes me furious.

Anger fills my body and erupts from me like a volcano. I pick up the mug of coffee and fling it with all my strength.

It flies across the bedroom, spraying dark liquid as it spin, until it shatters against the wall next to the door.

My heart is racing, and my hands shake with the adrenalin coursing through me.

I can't live like this.

I can't hate her.

And I can't love her.

I can't have her.

And I can't be without her.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

TWENTY-EIGHT

zina

The attack doesn't come in the dark as we expected. It doesn't come in the quiet, secret hours of the morning while we're all asleep.

It comes in broad daylight.

It starts with an ear shattering scream from outside.

I spin towards the sound, frozen.

They're here. My mind whispers.

I bend down to grab the small handgun I've been wearing on my thigh beneath my dress. Checking the safety, I hold it securely in my hand, hanging at my side as I run towards the garden.

Around me the security force is heading in the same direction.

One of the men grabs me and pulls me aside. "Stay out the way." He growls, pushing me onto the sofa.

Before I can shout at him to keep his hands off me - he's gone.

I get up, running again. Romeo and Santino burst through the doors behind me.

Everything happens all at once.

An explosion at the perimeter knocks down a massive chunk of the fence. The bodies of security guards are lifted high in the air and thrown across the garden. More screaming, men writhing in agony, their legs torn from their bodies and blood flowing freely from the wounds -

Through the newly formed hole in the wall enemies run in wearing black Kevlar and dark masks to hide their faces.

I lift my gun and fire.

Two shots, three, one man falls.

“Get inside.” Fabio yells over the chaos. “Get the family inside.”

I run towards Romeo, grabbing the sleeve of his jacket and telling him to follow me. He yanks his arm away, but Santino grabs his jacket too. “Get inside.” He yells to his brother.

We run towards the house and Giovanni runs from it. He pushes his sons towards the doors, standing behind them to give cover fire.

Without hesitation I take my place at his side and aim my gun in the same direction.

A bullet snaps past me, tearing against my side. I cry out, dropping to my knees in fright.

“Are you hit?” he asks in panic, lifting me to my feet. I shake my head. “No, I’m ok. I’m ok.” But the blood is already running over my hip.

His eyes widen in fear as he grabs me and spins me so he can see the wound.

I bash his hand away. "It skimmed past. I'm fine." I yell, taking my position again, firing at the enemies who are getting closer to our home.

We can't let them get inside.

The next explosion is louder and closer.

The aftershock punches air against my chest and knocks me off my feet. Giovanni is right beside me, lifting me up, his eyes search my body again. "Please don't die." He whispers. I reach up and grab his face and kiss him. If I'm going to die today - I want to feel his lips one more time. It's the only thing I ask.

He doesn't push me away like he's pushed me away a hundred times in the past week. Instead he wraps his hand around the back of my neck and kisses me harder.

There is no doubt in my mind now that this man still loves me.

A bullet snaps into the stone tiles at my feet and I scream. Giovanni pulls me to the side. "Get inside, Zina." He demands.

"No, I'm not leaving you."

"Get inside." He screams louder, his voice thick with authority.

I shake my head. "I'm not leaving you. If I die, I'm dying right next to you. I'm not running."

He gives up and drags me to his side. "Stay close." He says, as we move from the patio, into the garden, staying close to the walls and shooting our way through the

swarm of intruders attacking our home.

It feels like hours, but it could have been minutes.

The gun fire slowly fades until the estate is quiet. Deadly quiet. A silence you can feel in your veins. The air smells of gunpowder and smoke. Burning things. Broken things. Bodies scattered everywhere.

It's like walking through hell.

Giovanni takes my hand, and the small gesture is reassuring in a way he can't imagine.

"Fabio." Giovanni shouts, running forward, pulling me along with him.

Fabio has his hand around a man's throat. The black mask has been pulled off his face and thrown to the side.

"Who sent you here?" he screams into the man's face.

His prisoner laughs and when he does he coughs up blood, spluttering from his mouth, he gags and spits.

"You're asking the wrong question." The man smirks, gasping between words, his lung pierced by a bullet.

Fabio's anger surges and he punches the guy in the face.

His head snaps back, and he gags again.

"Tell me what you know." He demands ferociously.

“You shouldn’t ask who sent me - but - who - invited me in.” He’s fighting for his last breath, and even in his dying moments, he’s still gloating. Fabio is about to hit him again, but his body goes limp, his head lolls backwards - his life is over.

Fabio growls angrily and drops him to the ground.

“Who invited them in?” he snarls.

“Is he saying that it came from inside the estate?”

“That’s exactly what the fuck he’s saying.” Fabio screams, the veins on his temple popping out.

“Calm down.” Giovanni warns him. But it’s no use. Everyone is pumped full of adrenalin. Everyone is traumatized by what happened.

Fabio looks across the garden at the bodies of his team, his security force. Giovanni’s eyes trace the same path and both men look broken.

“They were good men.” Giovanni says tightly.

Fabio nods, pressing his fingers against his eyes.

“We’ll secure the property, run a sweep, and clean up - “ he mutters, his mind returning to his job. A defensive instinct, to protect himself from having to deal with the loss of life suffered today.

“I need to check on my family.” Giovanni says tightly.

Fabio walks away from us, shouting commands to his men.

“Check to see if anyone is still alive.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You, grab those two and sweep the perimeter.”

“Yes, sir.”

Giovani pulls me to follow him - towards the house.

As we walk up the patio steps Santino, Dante and Guido walk out. I cry out with relief to see Guido , unharmed, smiling tightly at me.

“Are you ok?” I ask, pulling him into my arms.

“I’m fine, mom.” He says, hugging me close.

“Where’s Romeo?” Giovanni asks.

“He’s inside. He got grazed by a bullet, but he’s ok.” Santino answers.

I glance at Giovanni, stepping away from Guido ’s embrace - and run inside. I go straight to the bathroom and grab the first aid kit. My family needs me.

Kneeling down next to Romeo, who is lying on the sofa, groaning in pain, I gently touch his arm where I can see blood soaking through the fabric.

“I need you to take your shirt off.” I say quietly.

He glares at me, but winces at the effort of this slight movement. Residing to the fact that he needs help he lets me assist him.

“Cut it off.” He sighs.

Using the scissors from the first aid kit I cut up his sleeve, pulling the fabric open to reveal a jagged line, cut deep enough to need stitches.

“The bullet grazed him.” Santino says, leaning over to see for himself.

“It did, but it’s deep enough to need stitches.”

“Do you know how?” he asks.

“She’s not fucking giving me stitches, are you fucking crazy?” Romeo shouts, terrified.

Giovanni sets his hand on his son’s shoulder, gently calming him. “She knows how. She took an advanced first aid course last week.” He reassures Romeo.

I narrow my eyes at him. How does he know?

“I pay attention to everything.” Giovanni says to me, answering my silent query.

“I was just trying to be prepared - for - this.” I shrug.

He smiles at me. “I’m grateful.”

My heart somersaults in my chest.

I turn to Dante and Guido . “Will you two please get the black first aid kit up in my bathroom? It’s better than this one.” They run off immediately.

I turn to Romeo. “It’s ok, I have local anesthetic in that one. You won’t feel

anything.”

“ You’re not injecting me with anything.” He snarls.

His dad chuckles. “Well, then she’s going to stitch you up with no pain relief. It’s your choice.”

I’m not sure when Giovanni decided to trust me, but it’s clear that something has changed.

Romeo sits on the sofa, looking relieved, but angry at me. He keeps glaring at me and shaking his head. I did five neat stitches over his arm, then disinfected the wound again and bandaged it up.

I’m so glad I could help. I’ve finished repacking the first aid kit, but when I try to stand, my head spins and I fall backwards.

Giovanni is quick and moves to catch me in his arms.

“What happened - “ he stammers, but with his hand wrapped around my waist he fingers feel the wet, sticky blood, still oozing from my side.

“Fuck.” He growls. “She’s losing blood.”

“Let her die.” Santino snaps. “Fabio told me what one of the attackers said - we all know it was her.”

Giovanni lays me down on the sofa. I grumble that I’m fine and try to sit up, but he pushes me back down.

Santino leans over his father, trying to see if my wound is bad enough to please him.

“Why are you helping her?” he huffs to his father. “She’s the one who caused all of this. Let her die.” He says again.

Giovanni stands up and grabs Santino. He yanks him forward, slapping a backhand across his face. “One more fucking word.” He growls. “She saved my life today. She fought right at my side. She protected this family, and she protected me. I decide who we trust - and I trust her. And it’s time for you to fucking accept that once and for all.”

Santino is staring at his father in shock. His eyes are wide, and his brows raised high.

He reaches up to touch his face, stinging from the slap.

“You’re making a mistake.” He murmurs.

Giovanni pushes him away. Santino stumbles backwards.

“This conversation is over. If you aren’t going to help, then get out of my sight.”

Santino tugs his shirt straight and turns towards Romeo. “Let’s go.” He snaps. They leave the room, marching upstairs, and Giovanni turns his attention back to me.

His hands are gentle as he peels away the torn edges of my dress, around the wound in my side.

Quietly he reaches for the scissors and cuts away the fabric, enough so that he can see what’s going on.

“Is it bad?” I ask, as the adrenalin simmers down and pain begins to throb through me.

“You’ll live.” He chuckles. “But you need stitches.”

“Damn.” I sigh.

“I can do them.” He reassures me.

“Really?” I ask, confused. “Then why did you let me do Romeo’s stitches - why didn’t you do them?”

“Because - “ he sighs. “I trust you, Zina.”

I swallow away the tears lumping in my throat.

“You - you believe that it wasn’t me?”

He lets out a slow breath, pouring disinfectant over my skin that fizzes as it cleans the wound. I wince, clenching my teeth together.

“I’ve been thinking about everything that happened. I’ve been thinking about all the moments with you. Nothing you’ve done has given me any reason not to trust you. It’s only fear that’s pushed me away from you. Fear, and letting other people’s opinions cloud my judgement. I have no reason to doubt you, no evidence against you.”

He looks at me and gently brushes his hand over my cheek. “I love you, Zina.” He says quietly.

Tears are running freely down my face, but I’m smiling.

He leans close and presses his lips against mine.

“I love you, little firefly.”

“I love you too.” I whisper back.

Giovanni carefully does seven very neat stitches in my side, then covers it with clean gauze and bandages.

“No sudden movements, or you’ll tear the stitches out.”

“You better tell my husband that, he tends to be a little - rough.” I grin.

Giovanni chuckles, sitting down on the sofa next to me he pulls me onto his lap, gently wrapping his arm around my waist.

“I’m so sorry.” He nuzzles his face in my neck.

“I’m just glad to have you back. I thought I lost you - that I lost your love.” I murmur.

“No matter how hard I tried - I could never stop loving you, Zina.”

We sit quietly for a long time, until Giovanni stands up, cradling me in his arms, to carry me to bed so that I can rest.

“Do you think it’s over?” I ask with my head resting against his broad chest and his strong arms holding me safe.

“I don’t know, my love. But I won’t let doubt come between us again.”

His words flood me with happiness.

All I want is his love.

All I want in this world is him.

TWENTY-NINE

giovanni

The broken wall around the garden has been rebuilt.

It took eight days and a full team to get it done, but now it's finished, and the estate looks the same as it did before the attack. It's a relief, one small step towards going back to normal.

Bullet holes in walls and windows were repaired, glass was cleaned away, and the blood was washed from the grass. There are still dark stains in the stone, but over time, those will fade too.

The things that will take longer to heal are the pain we feel from the people we lost, and the wounds in our flesh. Fabio is struggling the most, his team means a lot to him and he feels responsible for the lives taken.

But time will help that too.

I walk into the dining room and find Guido and Dante dishing up their dinner.

Zina is laughing as she hands a glass of water across the table to Dante.

He takes it with a smile. "Thanks." He says.

Santino and Romeo are less interactive. They're still angry with me for my choices.

My decision to trust Zina has given me such immense relief.

For the first time in a very long time - I'm happy. I've let go of the weight I was carrying on my shoulders.

I don't question everything or feel like I have to stalk every move she makes. At night we lie together in bed, wrapped in each other's arms and savor each moment. I enjoy her body, her lips against mine, her love.

I no longer look at her with doubt or fear or anger.

She loves me - and I love her and that is all that matters.

The estate is still on high alert, because we still don't know who attacked. But I've come to the decision that until we have solid information pointing to an inside job - I have to assume that the enemy is only planting seeds of doubt to try to destroy me from within - and I am the one who controls whether or not I let that happen.

I can't let it happen.

I can't let some unknown force push between me and the woman I love.

She deserves a king who supports her and defends her.

She deserves me.

I take my seat at the head of the table and reach my hand over to take Zina's. She smiles at me, her face lighting with radiance.

"You look gorgeous." I say.

She leans over and kisses me.

Santino turns away, shaking his head.

“How’s your arm, Romeo?” I ask, picking up my fork.

“It didn’t fall off.” He snaps sarcastically.

“So, Zina did a good job with the stitches?” I push, trying to force some kind of grateful attitude into me.

“It doesn’t make up for the rest of the shit she did.” He mutters under his breath.

I clench my jaw and Zina reaches under the table to touch my leg.

She shakes her head, ever so slightly, asking me to ignore his snide remarks.

She is incredible.

The patience she has shown through everything - from the moment she arrived here - with me treating her like some dark secret I never wanted to reveal - to the patience she showed towards my sons, despite their open hatred of her - I am in awe of her.

And now again, her patience shines through.

She is stronger than I am.

Late at night she’s snuggled against me and I brush my fingers through her dark hair.

“My love, tomorrow night I have some special planned.”

She rolls over and props herself up on her elbows to look at me. The curious smile on

her lips is beautiful. “What it is?” She grins.

“It’s a surprise. But if you look on the back of the bedroom door, you’ll find something—” before I can finish talking she’s already wiggling out of bed and running to the door.

She squeals in delight when she unzips the protective bag around the dress and the gorgeous dark blue fabric floats to the floor.

“It’s beautiful.” She gasps, unhooking it and holding it against her naked body.

She spins slowly and I watch her, completely obsessed with everything about her.

She hooks the dress on the door again and climbs back into bed, snuggling against my side. “Are you taking me somewhere?” She whispers.

“I am. Just you and me. We need some time alone together - away from all of this. I just want the chance to show you how much I love you.”

She presses her lips against my chest, right over my heart. “You show me how much you love me all the time, Giovanni.”

With a smile I trace my fingers down her spine. “I want to show you again. Over and over again. I never want you to forget or doubt it.”

She nods, her eyes glittering with happiness.

Zina climbs onto me, laying her body over mine, she takes my face in her hands and kisses me.

* * *

Zina is getting ready upstairs in her old bedroom. She likes to get ready there when she is surprising me with how she looks. I can't wait to see her in that dress.

Glancing at my watch I see it's almost time to get going. I set my empty whisky glass on the side table next to the sofa and stand up. I'll grab my phone from the bedroom and then see if I can hurry her up.

Smiling, I climb the stairs up to my room.

Tonight is going to be incredibly special. And I can't wait to spoil her with the champagne, the jewelry, the dinner, the views and the hotel I've booked for us to enjoy after.

She deserves so much, and I intend to give her everything. Everything I can offer her. My heart, my soul, my love.

Tonight I'm going to tell her exactly what she means to me. I want to apologize properly for all the pain I've put her through and make sure she understands that it will never happen again.

Walking into our bedroom I'm lost in thought about her, and what she means to me, when I spot a black gift box on our bed.

With a grin I walk towards it, tracing my fingers over the dark silk bow.

There is an envelope tucked beneath the ribbon.

Tugging it free, I tear it open and slide the card out.

My heart warms when I read the words, written in beautiful cursive, elegant handwriting.

A lot of care was put into making it beautiful.

For my love, the King go Kings, you have my whole heart.

My smile stretches across my cheeks.

I drop the card onto the duvet next to the box and pull at the edge of the black ribbon, it slides smoothly, untying and falling away from the lid.

Excitement ripples through me.

No one has ever done something like this for me before.

I've never received a beautifully wrapped, secret gift before, and I love that she did this for me.

With both hands I lift the lid, peering inside into the dark folds of black, glossy tissue paper.

I drop the lid onto the bed, next to the card dip my hand into the box to move the paper aside.

The snake strikes faster than the blink of an eye.

His fangs are buried in my flesh within seconds.

I heard myself scream, but even now I wonder if it really happened.

I stare in disbelief, not comprehending what has just happened.

My mind is spinning, trying to work out why - why would she do this?

How did she do this?

The snake, still biting my hand, writhes and squirms, its fangs pulling painfully at my skin.

I grab its throat and rip it away. With both hands wrapped around it I snap its neck, but even as I drop its lifeless body to the floor, my blood burns - like acid - a painful heat searing through me as the venom spreads through my veins.

I look at my hand the numbness getting worse, paralysis running swiftly up my arm, through my shoulder - my knees collapse beneath me and I drop to the ground, my lungs suddenly heavy and struggling to draw breath.

Zina bursts through our bedroom door, she screams my name as she runs towards me, that beautiful dress dancing around her legs as she moves.

Everything is happening in slow motion.

“What happened, Giovanni, what happened?” She shouts, grabbing my face, turning it towards her.

Santino and Romeo burst through the door as well.

I open my mouth to speak but my tongue feels numb and heavy.

“We heard him scream. What the fuck is going on?”

“Is that a snake?” Romeo gasps.

Santino drops to his knees at my side, he grabs the snakes body and his face distort in agony. “It’s a King Cobra. One of the deadliest snakes in the world.” His words are

tight with disbelief. He throws the snake aside and grabs my hand. "It bit him."

I turn towards Zina.

My heart is aching more than my body. Even with the venom coursing through me, it's her betray that is destroying me.

"What - did - you - do - " I say, taking painful effort to form each word. I need to know. I need to understand why.

Santino screams, a high pitched, soul tearing scream. He shoves her hard, pushing her away from me. She's thrown backwards, landing on the carpet, tears streaming down her beautiful face.

"I didn't do this - I love him." She screams, trying to crawl back towards me. Her hand reaches out for me, trying to hold me, trying to grab me -

But Romeo grabs her around the throat, tugging her back, throwing her against the door.

He kneels at my side.

My eyes are still on her.

My heart is still hers.

My body has never felt such pain before. But slowly the numbness spreads through me - my organs shutting down one by one.

I can barely breathe, the weight of my own body crushing my lungs as my body bleeds internally and my muscles fail -

She used a King to kill a King.

Her last, manipulative play was to make me love her again. And I did.

Zina crawls to my feet, crying hard.

She rests her hands on my legs and shakes her head.

“I didn’t do this.” She whispers, pleading with me to believe her. “I didn’t do this - I love you.” Her sobs are heart wrenching. So real. So genuine. Another act? Another game?

I try to take another breath and I can’t. My lungs won’t let me. The air won’t fill them. My body is no longer able to obey me. It’s dying.

I gasp against nothing. Gagging.

My tongue is swollen, and my face is numb.

The world slips away, the edges growing dark.

My eyes drift lazily to her gorgeous face. Those dark brown eyes, filled with tears.

Did she kill me?

Did she do this?

Why do I still love her?

The very last essence of life drains from my body as my mind says her name one last time.

Zina.

She will destroy you. The warning echoes through my soul in those last seconds.

Then there is nothing.

No life.

No pain.

No hurt.

Just nothing.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 pm

thirty

Zina

Six months have passed, and the pain isn't any less than it was the day I lost him. Not a moment goes by when he's not on my mind.

Every night I lie in bed, wishing his arms were around me. I ache with the need to bury my face against his chest and breathe in his scent. I can't believe he's gone. No matter how hard I try, I can't accept it. My heart won't let go.

His name often spilling from my lips, a wish, a memory. A hurt so deep I doubt it will ever leave me.

His last will and testament was clear.

His sons were furious to find that he left me everything. The kingdom is mine. I own it all. And yet it feels empty and hollow.

I'm grateful that Guido and I still have a home, but I'm torn - staying in the mansion where we are clearly hated and not welcome - it's not easy.

But I've been investigation and I've found out things that Giovanni failed to discover.

If he had - he might still be alive.

Santino hardly spends any time at home anymore. He is always at the church,

studying, practicing, learning and following his new path towards becoming a Bishop.

The rain beats down on me from a dark grey sky. Lifting my face up towards it, I let the cold droplets splash over my cheeks and my closed eyelids. It's nice to feel something - even if all it is, is coldness.

I'm hesitating. Reluctant to go inside and face him.

We haven't spoken since the night his father died - when he made it clear I would face justice for what I did. My pleas fell on deaf ears. He refused to believe it wasn't me.

Romeo is the one who constantly reminds me what they are all thinking.

The hatred.

The way they all despise me.

Even Dante has pulled away and refuses to speak to Guido .

My life has fallen apart with Giovanni. His death is something I'm not even allowed to grieve because I am being accused of murdering him.

But yesterday I found out who it was.

Whether it was brave or stupid of me - I messaged the one responsible and he made it clear that he was coming for all of them. For every single one of Giovanni's sons. He made it clear that he would leave no male heir to take his throne.

Their lives are all in danger and I'm the only one who knows.

With a heavy breath I tug my coat tighter around my shoulders and shove my hands into my pocket. It's time to face him, and hopefully he will listen.

The church is beautiful. The moment I walk inside I'm shrouded by a sense of calm, which intensifies the ache in my heart. It's so quiet I can't think of anything else but my pain.

It's like this place was built as a space for us to face the things that hurt us the most, but to do so in safety. In quiet.

I swallow hard and walk towards the confession booth.

The heels of my stilettos click loudly on the stone floor, echoing up to the ceiling.

Stained glass windows splash colorful light onto the pews.

I slip into the booth and sit down.

The Bishop sits quietly on the other side of a mesh screen that obscures his face.

"What have you come to confess, child?" he asks, his voice deeper than I remember, perhaps broken from pain and loss.

"Six months ago I lost the man I love. He died righting front of me, and right in front of his sons. He was an incredible man, who deserved more than what happened to him."

Santino recognizes my voice, and my story.

The tension in the air crackles, but he doesn't move.

"I have been accused of his death." I say tightly. "But I have proof that it wasn't me.

And I know who really murdered him - who sent that snake.”

Santino lets out a heavy, angry breath.

“I’m struggling because no one will believe me, but I need them to, because they are in danger as well. All of his sons are in danger. Someone is after our family, Santino. You have to help me keep them safe.” I beg, turning towards the mesh.

Santino lets out a low, deep growl and stands up.

“This confession is over.” He says coldly.

“Please, no, wait - Santino please, listen to me.” I beg.

He steps out of the booth and into the church and I hurry out of mine to stop him from leaving before I have a chance to explain everything.

I grab the sleeve of his gown and pull him to a stop.

His back is facing me, his shoulder set in tense agitation.

“Please, get your hands off me.” He says, a dark warning, hidden behind incredible restraint that he has been practicing over the past six months.

“Santino - I know killed your father. I know who is after the family.”

He spins to face me, his cheeks dark red as anger fumes through him.

“It was you, Zina. We all know it was you. How the fuck do you think you can convince me otherwise. You killed my father and now you’re here to try to manipulate me too. But I won’t fall for it - I’m not him.”

I swallow hard and fight the tears stinging in my eyes.

“It wasn’t me - “ I whisper in pain.

“It was.” He snaps, trying to turn away again.

“Your family is in danger.” I shout. I’m desperate now, desperate to make him believe me. “I need help to save them.”

He turns to face me again, and this time there is a terrifying smile painted across his lips.

He stares down at me, an ominous threat in the way he stands.

“My family doesn’t need to be saved from anyone - but you. You are the danger, Zina. You are the plague that crept into our home and took our father from us. It’s you.” He says with harshly clipped words.

“Stop being so blind.” I shout. My voice echoing further than I thought it would.

He snorts.

“No. I’m not blind. I see more than you’ll ever know. And I see you, Zina, I see right through you mask, right into the darkness of your heart.”

I take a step back, shaking my head. I can’t hold back the tears anymore. I can’t convince him. He won’t help me - that’s clear now.

I have to do this on my own.

Santino turns away from me and walks down the aisle, but he stops, talking over his shoulder he says, “Don’t come here again. You’re not welcome in this holy place.”

The heartache makes me want to collapse to the floor and sob, but I can't be weak now. Even if he doesn't believe me - I still plan to do everything in my power to keep him and his brothers safe from the very real threat looming over them.

The rain is falling harder outside, but I don't run to my car. I let it soak through me, wishing it could wash away my hurt.

I'm scared to do what I have to do next, but what choice do I have? None.

In the car I pull my phone from my purse and with shaking fingers I dial his number.

His name flashes across my screen like an accusation.

Emiliano Maritz.

My king's enemy.

"My angel." His dark voice purrs into the phone, pressed against my ear.

"Emiliano." I say, my throat tight around my words. "We need to speak. Do you have a moment?"

The low chuckle that spills through the line, vibrates through my chest, sending a shiver down my spine.

"For you, my beautiful queen, I have all the time in the world."

I shiver in fear but push it aside and speak boldly.

"I know it was you."

"Yes, I believe we've already discussed this."

“You threatened the Rivas brothers.”

“I did.” He says, acknowledging my remark.

My heart is beating so loud I’m convinced he can hear it.

“What will it take to make you stop?”

He laughs again, like dark chocolate, overflowing -

“Stop laughing. Answer me.” I demand.

“Little bird, haven’t I made myself clear? Haven’t I asked you time and time again to be mine?” I can’t describe the sensations he sets alight inside me. Fear and anger, confusion–hatred.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I wasn’t entirely honest with Giovanni. I didn’t tell him everything, but at the same time - there was nothing to tell other than a story of a man, a king’s enemy, who was determined to win my heart - no matter how many times I turned him down. A man who sent me flowers that I returned. A man who sent me gifts that I threw away. A man who wrote letters and cards of the sweetest words - that I burned. Because I didn’t want that man. I wanted Giovanni.

“That’s not what this conversation is about, Emiliano. I want to know what it will take to keep the Rivas brothers safe from you. This isn’t a conversation about your undying love.” I’m angry, because every after years of trying, he refuses to accept my rejection.

Emiliano laughs warmly. “Little bird, every conversation about how much I love you. Every conversation is about how you belong to me and you just haven’t realized it yet. Why do you think I killed the king? Do you really think I would let have what belongs to me?”

“You - you killed him because of me?” I stammer.

“Yes, sweet thing. I killed him because he dared to touch you.” He snarls, his darkness showing.

“What do you want?” I demand, shouting into the phone.

“You.” He says simply. “If you give yourself to me, all of you, your heart, your love - your body - I will leave those boys alone. As long as you are at my side, the Rivas brothers will be safe.”

I sit in stunned silence trying to process his words.

It was about me, all this time, it was me he was after -

How did I not see it? How was I so blind?

“A queen must make sacrifices for the ones she loves, don’t you agree?” he asks.

I nod. “I agree.” I say, my voice is not my own. The words are not my own. I’m saying what I have to say to save the brothers.

“So, it’s settled then. You will be mine.”

I can barely speak I’m crying so much.

“I will be yours.” I stammer.

“I’ll make the arrangements, little bird. And don’t worry. I’ll be gentle.”