



Obsidian Devotion (Empire of Sin & Blood #3)

Author: *Sylvia Rae*

Category: Romance

Description: He murdered my brother.

Now I carry his child.

For two years, I've been the perfect weapon—beautiful, calculated, and built for revenge.

Lorenzo Bellanti is the Devil's Hand, the mafia's most feared enforcer. I crawled into his bed to destroy him from the inside out.

But I didn't plan on craving the man behind the monster.

Didn't plan on carrying his baby.

Now I'm trapped in the same underground cell where my brother died—my unborn child a pawn in a brutal power game.

I was the trap.

Now I'm the target.

And the man I meant to ruin?

He's coming for me—with blood in his eyes and nothing left to lose.

Some debts are paid in blood.

But whose blood will hit the floor first?

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Prologue

I'm still in my cocktail dress from the charity gala, stilettos clicking against wet concrete as I count the warehouses. Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen. The metal door groans open, and the first thing I notice is the copper smell.

Blood. So much blood.

"Hello?" My voice echoes. In the dim light, I see Uncle Carlos standing by a chair. No, not a chair. A torture chair. And in it...

The scream tears from my throat before I recognize it as mine.

That can't be Luciano. That twisted, mutilated thing can't be my beautiful brother. But I know his watch—our father's Rolex. Know the small scar on his wrist from when I pushed him off his bike at nine. Know the St. Christopher medal around his neck—now stained red.

"Don't look, piccola." Carlos catches me as my knees buckle. "Don't—"

But I can't stop looking. At his missing fingers. His flayed skin. The burns. The careful, almost artistic precision of the torture. This wasn't rage. This was a performance.

"Lorenzo Bellanti." My uncle's voice drips with venom. "He took his time. Made it last six hours."

“Why?” The word breaks on a sob.

“Wrong place. Wrong time. Wrong questions.” He strokes my hair like when I was small. “The monster needed entertainment.”

I see the video camera in the corner, its red light blinking. Still recording.

“You need to see,” Carlos whispers. “Need to understand what he is. What they all are.”

He leads me to a laptop. Pushes play. And I watch. Every cut. Every burn. Every scream. I watch Lorenzo Bellanti work with the focus of an artist. The satisfaction of a demon.

I throw up when Luciano finally stops breathing. Again when Lorenzo keeps going.

“He needs to pay,” Carlos says quietly. “They all do. But we’ll need time. Patience. I can help you, Sofia. Help you become what you need to be.”

I touch Luciano’s icy hand. Count the missing fingers.

“I’ll make him suffer,” I whisper. “I’ll destroy everything he loves. Then I’ll destroy him.”

Ivan squeezes my shoulder. “I’ll make the arrangements. But Sofia?” He turns me to face him, eyes glittering. “The Bellanti are powerful. Connected. If we do this, there’s no halfway. You’ll need to be perfect. Patient. Are you sure?”

I look at my brother’s body one last time. Think of his laugh. His stupid jokes. The way he protected me.

“Yes.” The word feels like a blade in my mouth. “Whatever it takes.”

I don't see Carlo's smile. Don't recognize the calculation in his eyes. Don't realize I've just traded one monster for another.

I only know that on this night, Sofia Bianchi dies with her brother.

And who rises from the blood is someone else entirely.

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Sofia

I slide the crystal tumbler across the bar top, stopping it perfectly in front of the Wall Street executive who's been mentally undressing me for the last hour.

"Your Manhattan, sir." I keep my voice professional and my smile warm enough to ensure a good tip.

He leans forward, his heavy cologne invading my space. "When do you get off tonight, sweetheart?"

"That information is not for men who call me sweetheart." I wink and move down the bar, ignoring his indignant sputter.

Men. They're all so annoying.

The Inferno Club is New York's playground for the obscenely rich, and Isabella Bellanti runs it like the queen she is.

I've worked here for three months, taking my place behind this Italian marble bar top.

Three months of pouring drinks for criminals dressed in Armani, of learning the rhythms of this family, of waiting for him .

Lorenzo Bellanti.

I check my watch. It's almost midnight. The Bellanti siblings will soon fill the VIP

room for their monthly gathering. Isabella, Olivia, Matteo, Angelo. All of them except him.

For the past three months that I have been working here, I haven't come across his shadow. But I suppose, as the enforcer of the family, he's got a lot of shit to do.

Dangerous shit.

"Sofia." Isabella appears at my side, her black cocktail dress hugging curves that have half the men in here ordering drinks they don't want.

Even after two children, she still looks super attractive. At twenty-nine, she's a striking presence with her long dark hair cascading down her back, the auburn highlights catching the club's dim lighting. Those sharp green eyes, the distinctive family trait, miss nothing as they sweep over me.

"You'll handle the VIP section personally tonight."

"Of course." I keep my voice steady, though my heart kicks against my ribs. "Any special requests?"

"The usual for everyone." She lowers her voice. "And Lorenzo prefers Macallan 25, neat. He doesn't like to ask twice."

My fingers nearly slip on the glass I'm polishing. "Mr. Bellanti is coming tonight?"

A flash of curiosity crosses Isabella's face. "Yes. First time in months. Problem?"

"Not at all. Just want to be prepared."

She studies me for a beat too long before nodding. "Good. You're the best hire I've

made in years. Don't make me regret putting you in Lorenzo's path."

I smile, all innocence. "I'm just pouring drinks, Isabella."

"Honey, nobody's just anything around my brother." She pats my arm and glides away.

Nobody's just anything around my brother.

If only she knew.

—

The VIP lounge glows with amber lighting, imitating the vibe of the club.

I arrange crystal decanters on a silver tray, checking my reflection in the mirrored bar back.

My natural red locks—a gift from my mother's Irish genes—usually fall to mid back, but tonight they're pinned up. I smack my lips together, appreciating the way my red lipstick accentuates my amber eyes and cream-colored skin—the only thing I got from my father's Italian side.

I've heard Lorenzo has a weakness for redheads, and I plan to use that to my advantage.

Two years of planning, of becoming someone else. Of learning how to move into this world. Now, everything hinges on making an impression.

Voices filter through the doorway before the Bellanti siblings sweep in.

Isabella first, then Angelo, with his easy smile.

Despite being the youngest at twenty-five, Angelo carries himself with the confidence of a much older man.

His sharp features mirror Matteo's, though his green eyes hold more warmth.

He perfectly styles his black hair, not a strand out of place, and his expensive suit proclaims old money and good taste.

Olivia follows, phone in hand as always. At twenty-seven, she commands respect with her professional demeanor and razor-sharp mind. Her straight, black, shoulder-length hair frames her face.

Her brown eyes glance at me from behind designer glasses, nodding slightly.

Matteo enters last, scanning the room like he expects an ambush. At thirty-five, he has finally become the Don of the Bellanti Syndicate.

Standing at 6'1", he cuts an imposing figure into his precisely tailored suit. His short black hair is meticulously cut, emphasizing his cold gray eyes and angular features. I notice the burn scars on his hands as he adjusts his cuffs—badges of honor from "work" that no one dares question.

I pour drinks. Champagne for Isabella. Negroni for Angelo. Gin martini for Olivia. Bourbon for Matteo. I gently place each one before its owner.

"You're new," Matteo says, eyes narrowed as he inspects me.

"Sofia's been with us three months," Isabella interjects.

"Three months?" Matteo's gaze is distant. "And I'm just meeting her now?"

"You'd know my staff if you bothered visiting more than once a moon cycle," Isabella retorts.

Angelo laughs, raising his glass. "To family dysfunction!"

I slip away as they bicker, arranging Lorenzo's whiskey on a separate tray. The bottle of Macallan 25 costs more than my monthly rent. I pour a generous measure, positioning the glass perfectly.

"Fuck, he's bleeding on my floor." Isabella's voice snaps through the room.

I turn in time to see him enter—Lorenzo Bellanti.

Blood streaks the side of his white dress shirt. His eye is swelling, split at the brow. But it's the way he moves that catches my breath—like violence barely contained in human form.

Photographs haven't done him justice. At 6'3", the second-oldest Bellanti brother dominates the room with his sheer physical presence.

His dark long hair, usually packed in a man bun, looks disheveled, partially obscuring green eyes that hold a disturbing intensity.

His muscular build is clear, even beneath his leather jacket and dark clothes.

I can see trails of ink peeking from beneath his cuff. Fresh marks layer over his bruised knuckles, adding to the old ones.

He is all sharp edges and icy beauty, dark hair pushed back from features that would

make Renaissance sculptors weep.

But it's his eyes that stop my heart—green as forest shadows and just as dangerous.

Eyes that belonged to the last face my brother saw.

"What the hell happened?" Matteo demands, taking a sip of his drink.

Lorenzo waves him off. "Business disagreement." His voice is deeper than I expected, rough-edged but cultured. He spots me hovering with his drink and raises an eyebrow. "That for me?"

I step forward, every nerve ending alive. "Macallan 25, neat."

His fingers brush mine as he takes the glass, gaze assessing me from head to toe. "You're new."

"Sofia," I offer, letting my accent slip a little more than usual. Let him hear the Italian in my blood.

"Sofia," he repeats, testing my name like he's tasting it. "You always serve whiskey to men covered in blood?"

I meet his eyes steadily. "The job is the job."

For a moment, he says nothing. Then his mouth curves slightly—not quite a smile, but something dangerous all the same.

"I like her, Isa." He doesn't look away from me. "Where'd you find this one?"

"Hands off, Lorenzo. She's the best bartender I've ever had."

"Can I get you anything else, Mr. Bellanti?"

"Lorenzo," he corrects, swirling his whiskey. "And yes. Tell me how you knew my preference without asking."

"Isabella mentioned it earlier."

"Hmm, and if she hadn't?"

I allow myself a small smile. "Then I would have served you the Macallan 18. Second shelf, left side. The dust pattern shows it's favored by someone who doesn't visit often but has expensive taste."

His eyebrows lift slightly. "Observant."

"It's my job."

"Your job is making drinks. Observation is a bonus." He takes a sip, eyes never leaving mine. "Or a sign of someone with ulterior motives."

My pulse jumps, but I keep my expression neutral. "The only ulterior motive in a place like this is a better tip, Lorenzo."

A commotion at the door saves me from his scrutiny. I excuse myself to check what's happening, heart hammering in my chest.

In the hallway, a red-faced man with a thick Russian accent is attempting to push past security. "I have business with Bellanti!"

I assess the situation quickly. The man is drunk but dangerous—thick neck, arms built for violence, and a bulge under his jacket that screams concealed weapon.

"Sir," I step between him and the security guards, "perhaps I can help."

The Russian snorts. "Get out of my way, pretty girl. Men are talking."

"How's Mikhail?" I ask quietly, leaning close like I'm sharing a secret. "Still meeting the Bratva rivals at the Brighton Beach sauna every Tuesday? I've heard some fascinating rumors about those meetings."

The blood drains from his face. He steps back, muttering something in Russian that sounds like a prayer.

"Perhaps another night would be better for business," I suggest. "When you're more... composed."

He backs away, nearly tripping over himself.

"That was impressive."

I spin to find Lorenzo leaning against the wall behind me, watching through hooded eyes. How long has he been there?

"Just doing my job," I say.

"Now you're lying." He arches an eyebrow. "How does a bartender know about Bratva internal politics?"

I shrug. "Men talk too much when they drink. Especially to women they underestimate."

He studies me for a long beat. Then, unexpectedly, he laughs—a low, rich sound that makes something warm unfurl in my stomach.

"I should keep you close," he says. "In case I need something more than a drink."

Before I can respond, Olivia calls from the doorway. "Lorenzo, stop terrorizing the staff and get in here. We have things to discuss."

He pushes off the wall, wincing slightly.

"Sofia," he says my name like he's filing it away for future reference. "We'll continue this conversation soon."

As he walks away, I allow myself to breathe again. First contact made. Interest was established.

Step one of getting closer to Lorenzo Bellanti is complete.

The satisfaction that washes over me is cold and sharp. No one sees the hatred simmering beneath my carefully crafted smile. No one knows that every step closer to him is calculated, measured in the beats of a heart that stopped caring about anything but vengeance two years ago.

Because revenge is a drink best served neat—no dilution, no sweetener, just pure, burning hatred.

And I'm going to pour until there's nothing left.

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Lorenzo

Fresh blood fills the surrounding air, and I inhale deeply, feeling my pupils dilate as the scent floods my senses. The fear emanating from the man strapped to the chair before me makes my skin tingle with anticipation.

This is why I love what I do.

"Last chance," I say, wiping my fingers on a handkerchief. "Where are they moving the weapons to?"

The soldier—some low-level Catalina family enforcer—spits blood onto the concrete.

"Fuck you."

My chest rumbles with laughter. "Thank you for making this more entertaining."

I move to the metal table across the room and grab the pliers.

"W-w-h-hat are you doing?" The man splutters, and for the first time, I can see genuine fear in his battered face.

Ignoring him, I place the pliers in his mouth and wrench his teeth from his gums.

I watch his eyes bulge as he screams loudly, his pleas sending a wave of pleasure coursing through my veins.

"That was just practice," I whisper, dropping the pliers. "We haven't even started the main performance."

I select a scalpel from my custom leather case, holding it up so the overhead light catches the edge. The blade is German steel, perfectly balanced—a proper tool for proper work.

"You know what fascinates me?" I drag the tip along his forearm, not cutting yet, just introducing the metal to his skin. I can feel his pulse jumping beneath my touch. "The human body can endure so much more than the mind believes possible."

When I finally slice into him, the rush hits me like a drug. The scent of fresh blood blooms in the air, rich and metallic, and my body responds instantly—pulse quickening, every nerve ending electrified, cock hardening against my zipper.

This moment—life and death held in perfect balance at the edge of my blade—is better than any high.

"I can do this for hours," I explain casually as I carve patterns into his flesh, blood oozing out. "In fact, I hope you hold out. The ones who break too quickly... they disappoint me."

Thirty minutes later, when his leg cracks under my tools, he begs. His fear has changed, deepened into something primal and desperate.

By the time it reaches an hour, as I methodically separate his skin from his muscle, almost like peeling an orange, he's offering information.

Fifteen minutes later, we have our answer.

I send a quick text to Matteo: "The Russians. Working with the Albanians to push

weapons through our southern corridor."

Then I send another text to one of my men, telling them to come dispose of the remains.

My phone buzzes with a text from our family group chat. Matteo sent a picture of his infant son sleeping. Little Leo, just three months old, was a perfect miniature of my cold-blooded brother.

The baby's eyes are gray, just as Matteo's. His tiny fists are curled against the designer onesie that Isabella undoubtedly purchased.

'Little man's gonna be just like his daddy,' the caption reads.

I study the image, still shocked by everything that happened in the past year.

None of us saw it coming—the day our ruthless, analytical brother fell for Elena, the single mother he saved from Massimo Caruso, a man who overstepped his boundaries. Elena somehow thawed the ice in his veins and made him more bearable.

My fingers glide over the phone as I reply: "50 grand, he'll grow up to be a playboy like Angelo."

The responses are almost immediate. Angelo protests, Matteo curses me out, while Isabella and Olivia send laughing emojis.

I tuck the phone away and head to the roof. From here, I can see the whole of New York.

Beautiful and corrupt, just like my family.

This warehouse sits on the edge of our territory, a nondescript building that's witnessed countless confessions and blood spills.

My father built this empire from nothing. Paving the way with his blood and sweat.

Now, it's our responsibility as his children to protect it. To grow it. To ensure the Bellanti name strikes both fear and respect for another generation.

And I'll destroy anyone who tries to interfere.

—

Peccato Noir, a/k/a Black Sin, pulses with sensual music when I arrive.

It's a recent business that I opened. It's a club that provides neither service nor entertainment. It facilitates desires, fantasies, and hedonism.

That's a fancy way of saying, "what happens at Black sin, between two—or frequently over two —consenting adults, stays at Black sin." The wealthy, powerful, typically connected mafia heads—their wives come to my house of ill repute to play how they like.

But always consensually, and with no money changing hands. There's a membership fee, but that's it.

This is important. One, because I'm not, nor have I ever once wanted to be, a pimp.

Those who come to play at Black Sin are here because they one hundred percent want to be—I know this because I personally and thoroughly vet every single member.

Black Sin is not a place for escorts, sex-workers, or anyone else who's only here

because they have to be.

Because Fuck. That.

I abhor any situation where someone has to participate in sex for money, and the Mafia shares that loathing. Or at least, they have a strong intolerance.

The Commission agreed almost thirty years ago to stop any involvement in the sex trade. As in: the Italians don't pimp anymore. At all.

One, it's morally reprehensible. But more than that, speaking in a purely business sense, it's just not worth the bullshit involved.

Despite its appeal, Peccato Noir isn't open to the public. It caters to a very specific clientele: powerful men and women with deviant appetites who would pay anything to keep their vices private.

It also provides me with the opportunity to use these vices against them when necessary. The women and men here... They all work for me to get information when necessary for these clients.

Nothing works hand in hand with violence better than blackmail.

I go to my office above the main floor and pour myself a whiskey from the mini shelf by the window.

Taking a seat, I open the file on my desk.

Sofia Russo. Twenty-seven. Orphaned at sixteen. Worked her way through college tending bar at increasingly exclusive establishments. Perfect employment record. Glowing references.

Too perfect.

I study her photograph. That copper hair, those blue eyes. The way she handled the Russian—that was... Interesting.

I don't think she's just a bartender. No one is ever just what they seem, especially in my world.

I hear a soft knock at my door. Right on time.

"Come in."

Sofia walks in wearing just a silk blouse and jeans, her red hair let down and in waves.

"You wanted to see me?" Her voice has that slight Italian lilt that makes me wonder which region her family came from. If that's even her real heritage.

"Sit." I gesture to the chair across from me.

"Drink?"

"No, thank you."

I raise an eyebrow. "Bartender, who doesn't drink?"

"I prefer to keep my head clear." A hint of a smile plays at her lips. "Especially around men who ask as many questions as you do."

I laugh despite myself. "Fair enough." I close her file. "Isabella says you're the best she's ever had."

"I'm good at what I do."

"Which is what, exactly? Because I'm thinking it's not just mixing drinks."

Her expression doesn't change, but something flickers in her eyes. "I handle difficult situations. I read people. I make sure everyone gets what they need without creating problems."

"Like our Russian friend that night."

"Exactly like that."

I stand, moving around the desk. "Walk with me. I want to show you something."

The lower level of Peccato Noir throbs with bass and red light. Different private rooms, each accessible by private elevator, to avoid any leaks about their patronizing the place, line the hallway.

I watch Sofia carefully as we walk through, noting how she observes everything.

"Not what they have at Club inferno," I say.

"Different clientele, different needs." Her eyes track a dancer getting into one elevator that is clearly off limits. "Though the power dynamics remain the same."

"Explain."

She turns those blue eyes to me. "Everyone wants something they can't admit to wanting. The more rich and powerful the person, the darker those desires are."

"Cynical view."

"Realistic one." She stops, facing me fully. "Why am I here, Lorenzo? I doubt it's for philosophical debates about human nature."

Direct. I like that.

"As you must know, this is a new establishment, and it's different from the usual clubs. This is more exclusive for people with more deviant sexual tastes. So, I need someone who can... manage delicate situations. Someone who understands discretion and control."

"And Isabella recommended me," Sofia comments.

"No. Isabella would never willingly give you up." I step closer. "I'm poaching you."

She doesn't back away. "Why?"

"Because you fascinate me." The truth slips out before I can catch it.

Her pupils dilate slightly. The only sign of my words has affected her. "That's not a business reason."

"Everything is business in my world," I counter. "Including fascination."

A server passes with champagne. I take one glass, but Sofia stops her, taking one for herself as well.

"I thought you didn't drink around questioning men," I say.

She takes the glass, her fingers brushing mine. "Maybe I'm willing to make an exception."

"Why?"

"Because you fascinate me, too." She repeats my words with a small smile.

I clear my throat, nodding at the man who's raising his voice at the hostess.

"How would you handle him?"

Sofia watches for five seconds, then says, "His wedding ring is new, but he's not wearing it proudly. He's rotating it constantly. First time cheating, feeling guilty. He's creating a scene to get thrown out so he can tell himself he tried to stay faithful."

I raise an eyebrow, impressed despite myself. "And your solution?"

"Have a female staff member approach him privately, say his wife called, looking for him. The fear will sober him up. He'll leave on his own, relieved to have an excuse."

"Not have security throw him out?"

She shakes her head. "For what? Violence creates witnesses, discussion, police reports. This method is cleaner. No one remembers the night nothing happened."

I smile. She understands one of the fundamental rules of our world: true power moves invisibly.

"The job is yours if you want it. Double what Isabella pays you."

She sips her champagne, studying me over the rim. "And if I refuse?"

"Then I've wasted a perfectly good glass of Dom Pérignon."

That earns me a genuine laugh, and the sound does something unusual to my chest. I want to hear it again.

"You're not what I expected," she whispers.

"What did you expect?"

She considers me for a long moment. "Someone who doesn't have to try so hard to appear human."

The words hit with surprising force. Not an insult, but an observation that cuts too close to truth.

I lean closer, close enough to smell her perfume—something subtle with notes of amber and vanilla. "What makes you think I'm trying?"

"Everyone's trying something, Lorenzo." Her eyes never leave mine. "The question is whether it's working."

I realize I've been watching her lips as she speaks. Full, perfectly shaped, still stained with that calculated red.

"Is it?" I ask.

"It is." She extends her hand. "I accept your offer."

I take her hand, but instead of shaking it, I turn it over and press my lips to the inside of her wrist, where her pulse jumps beneath my touch.

"Welcome to the family business, Sofia Russo." I release her hand. "I hope you know what you're getting into."

"Oh, I know exactly what I'm doing," she smirks, her eyes never leaving mine.

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Sofia

I feel it the moment I step into his office—heavy, electric, dangerous. Lorenzo Bellanti is in a pissy mood.

"Your drink." I place the crystal tumbler on his desk, careful to avoid his fingers.

He glances up, pushing his sleeves to his elbows. My breath catches at the sight of his forearms—powerful, veined, and covered in intricate tattoos that disappear beneath the fabric.

"Bad day?" I ask, unable to tear my eyes away.

Those impossibly green eyes lock onto mine. "Is that part of your bartending service? Therapy with the bourbon?"

"No." I smile slightly. "That costs extra."

The corner of his mouth curves up as he reaches for a silver case. He extracts a cigarette with long, elegant fingers—the same fingers that pulled a trigger and took my brother from me.

My stomach twists with disgust. With desire. With self-loathing.

Lorenzo lights the cigarette, his eyes never leaving mine as he takes a deep drag. The smoke curls from his lips when he exhales, and something hot and forbidden coils inside me.

"Nothing I can't handle," he says, his voice rough like gravel. He leans back, stretching those tattooed arms behind his head. The movement pulls his shirt tight across his broad chest.

My body responds instantly, a shameful heat spreading through me. This man killed Luciano. My brother's blood stains his hands. I should plot his death, not imagining those same hands on my skin.

When he takes another drag, his lips wrapping around the cigarette, I force myself to look away. The memory of my brother's funeral flashes through my mind—a brutal reminder of why I'm really here.

Vengeance, not desire. Justice, not lust.

"Of course. The great Lorenzo Bellanti can handle anything." I can't help the hint of sarcasm that creeps into my voice.

He raises an eyebrow. "Careful, Sofia. I might start thinking you have opinions about me."

"Everyone has opinions about you." I tilt my head. "Most are just too scared to share them."

"And you're not scared?"

The question hangs between us, weighted with meaning beyond the words.

Am I scared?

Every day. Every night. Every moment I'm in his presence, playing this dangerous game, I'm scared that he'll see through me and it'll all be over.

"I respect your position," I say carefully. "But fear isn't particularly useful in my line of work."

He studies me with that unnerving intensity, like he's trying to read the thoughts beneath my skin. "And what exactly is your line of work these days? Still figuring that out myself."

"Whatever you need it to be." I hold his gaze, refusing to look away first.

Lorenzo's laugh is unexpected, a rich sound that warms the room. "Christ, you're something else, Red."

The nickname sends an unwelcome shiver down my spine. I force myself to remember why I'm here—the video of Luciano's mutilated body.

I nod toward the door. "I should get back. The bar won't run itself."

"Stay." It's not quite a command, but it's close enough. "Pour yourself something."

"I don't drink on the job."

"Then sit. I could use the distraction."

I hesitate, then sink into the chair across from him. "Rough week?"

"Rough year." He rubs a hand over his face, and for a moment, I see the weight he carries. The responsibility. It would be easier if he were just a monster through and through.

"Want to talk about it?" I ask, wondering if he'll actually share anything real.

Lorenzo studies me over the rim of his glass. "You first."

"What?"

"Tell me something real, Sofia. Something I won't find in that perfect background check."

My heart rate kicks up. "Like what?"

"Like why a woman with your talents is serving drinks to degenerates and criminals?"

I shrug, keeping my expression neutral. "Good tips."

"Bullshit."

"Glamorous lifestyle?"

"Try again."

I sigh. "I enjoy learning people's secrets. Understanding what makes them tick. What better place than behind a bar?"

Lorenzo leans forward, elbows on his desk. "And what have you learned about me?"

"That you ask too many questions." I state flatly.

He chuckles. "Occupational hazard."

"Your siblings love you," I say finally. "They all light up when you walk in."

Something softens in his expression. "Family is everything."

"So I've heard." The bitterness slips out before I can catch it.

His eyes narrow. "What exactly happened to your family?"

"Car accident," I respond. It isn't a lie. My parents died in a car accident while driving back home from a date. My uncle Carlos took Luciano and me under his wings after that.

"What about you?" I ask, needing to redirect the question. "Any secrets to share with your bartender?"

"More than you could handle," he says, but his tone is lighter now.

"Try me."

He swirls the amber liquid in his glass. "I hate this part of the business."

"Which part?"

"The waiting. The politics. Give me a direct problem, I'll solve it. But this..." He gestures to the papers on his desk. "Shifting alliances, whispers and rumors. It's exhausting."

I nod, understanding more than he realizes. "You prefer getting your hands dirty."

Something dangerous flashes in his eyes. "Sometimes getting your hands dirty is the only way to truly clean up a mess."

I think of Luciano, of what these hands did to him, and my jaw tightens. "There are

other ways."

"Like what, Red? Tell me your secret method for handling men who want to destroy everything you've built."

The challenge in his voice is impossible to ignore. This is my opening.

"Psychological warfare," I say coolly. "Physical force is effective, but messy. People expect it from men like you."

His eyebrow raises. "Men like me?"

"Powerful. Dangerous." I meet his gaze. "Feared."

"And what would you suggest instead?"

"Target what they care about most. For most men, it's not their bodies, but their reputations. Their legacies. Their sense of security." I move closer, forgetting myself in the conversation's thrill. "Make them destroy themselves."

Lorenzo watches me with interest. "Spoken like someone who's given this considerable thought."

I realize my mistake immediately. I've shown too much of my hand.

"Just an observation," I say lightly. "People confess all sorts of things to their bartenders."

"And what would you confess, I wonder?" His voice drops lower. "After a few drinks, alone, with no one to overhear?"

Heat crawls up my neck. "Nothing interesting."

"Liar," he mumbles, but there's no accusation in his tone. Just certainty.

Before I can respond, Olivia bursts through the door, her normally perfect composure visibly shaken.

"Lorenzo, we need to talk." Her eyes flick to me, and for the first time since I've known her, there's no warmth there. Just a curt nod before she turns back to her brother. "Now. Privately."

The transformation is immediate. Lorenzo's entire demeanor shifts, shoulders squaring, jaw hardening. The man who was almost vulnerable moments ago vanishes, replaced by the Lorenzo Bellanti who makes grown men tremble.

"We'll continue this later," he tells me.

I nod, gathering his empty glass. "Of course, boss."

As I turn to leave, his hand catches my wrist, the touch sending electricity shooting up my arm. His thumb brushes over my pulse point, and I know he can feel how it races.

"I'm not finished with you, Sofia," he says quietly, dark promise in his eyes.

It sounds like a threat, but it feels like a promise. Either way, it terrifies me.

"I'm counting on it," I reply, pulling away before he can feel me tremble.

As I close the door behind me, I glimpse Olivia's expression—tight with worry. Something major has happened.

Good. Let their empire crumble. Let them feel a fraction of what I felt when they took everything from me.

I touch my wrist where his fingers were, the skin still burning. This is getting complicated. I'm supposed to be bringing him down, not wondering what his lips would feel like against mine.

Focus, Sofia. Remember why you're here.

But as I walk down to the bar, I can't help but wonder which is the real Lorenzo Bellanti—the ruthless killer who tortured my brother, or the man whose eyes hold shadows of something like conscience.

And worse, I'm not sure which version I'm more drawn to.

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Lorenzo

Blood never quite washes out from under your fingernails. Not completely. No matter how hard you scrub, traces remain invisible to everyone but you.

I stare at my hands as Olivia paces my office, her heels clicking a frantic rhythm against the hardwood floor. The door has barely closed behind Sofia, but already I can feel the absence of her sharp wit, the challenge in her eyes.

"Are you even listening to me, Lorenzo?" Olivia snaps, dragging my attention back to the crisis at hand.

"Gabriel is in witness protection," I repeat flatly. "With a federal agency."

"Not just any agency." She leans across my desk. "International. Beyond our reach, beyond our influence."

The implications sink in like a blade between my ribs. Gabriel. My protégé. My mistake.

"How reliable is this information?" I keep my voice measured, controlled. Leaders don't panic. I can't afford to panic.

"Impeccable. My contact at Interpol confirmed it this morning." Olivia runs a hand through her hair. "He's offering them everything, Lorenzo. Everything."

I rise slowly, moving to the window that overlooks the pulsing lights of my club

below. Somewhere down there, Sofia is mixing drinks, charming patrons with that razor-sharp smile that reveals nothing while promising everything.

"He won't live long enough to testify." The words come out cold, detached.

Olivia laughs bitterly. "Did you miss the part about international protection? This isn't some local cop we can bribe or threaten. These people are untouchable."

"Everyone is touchable." I turn to face her. "Everyone has a price or a weakness. Often both."

"This isn't one of your operations," she hisses. "Your specialty is breaking bones and smuggling guns, not espionage."

"Gabriel knows me," I whisper. "He knows how I think, how I operate. That makes him dangerous."

"It makes him deadly," she corrects. "If they build a case with his testimony—"

"They won't." I move to the bar, pouring myself another whiskey. I think of Sofia's slender fingers placing the glass on my desk earlier, the way she intentionally avoided touching me. "Tonight. We move tonight."

Olivia stills. "You have a plan?"

"I always have a plan." The lie comes easily. I don't have a plan, but I'll come up with one. "We can't let him talk."

"And how do you propose to extract someone from federal witness protection?" Olivia crosses her arms. "Even father isn't sure how to approach this."

The mention of our father tightens the knot in my chest. "Father knows?"

"Matteo told him this afternoon."

Of course he did. Even though he's retired, father still demands to know what's going on in all aspects of our lives and businesses.

"Father doesn't need to concern himself with this." I drain my glass. "I created this problem. I'll solve it."

Olivia studies me, her expression softening slightly. "Gabriel was my friend too, you know. Before..."

Before I took him under my wing. Before I showed him the darker sides of our business. Before he betrayed us all.

"He stopped being our friend the moment he sold us out," I say, cutting her off. "Now he's just a liability."

"And what about his family? His daughter?"

An image flashes through my mind—Gabriel's little girl at our Christmas party last year, sitting on my lap while I explained how the model train set worked. Her tiny hand in mine, trusting.

I push the memory away. "They're not our concern."

"That's not how family works, Lorenzo," Olivia says quietly. "You taught me that."

The irony burns worse than the whiskey. Family. Loyalty. The principles I've killed for, bled for. The same principles Gabriel has shattered.

"I'll handle it," I say again, more firmly this time. "I need an address, security details, patrol schedules. Everything you can get me in the next hour."

Olivia hesitates, then nods once. "And if you fail? If they connect this back to us?"

"Then you get your wish. You have one less annoying brother."

"Don't joke about that." She slaps my forearms.

"Who's joking? We both know how this works." I cross to my desk, pulling out the bottom drawer where I keep my weapon. "The family survives, no matter the cost."

Olivia watches me check the gun, her face pale. "Be careful. Please."

"Always am, little sister." I tuck the weapon into my holster. "Now go. Get me what I need."

After she leaves, I sit alone in the silence, running through scenarios, calculating risks. The full weight of the Bellanti operation presses down on my shoulders. One wrong move, and it all collapses.

A soft knock interrupts my thoughts.

"Enter," I call, expecting Olivia with the information.

Instead, Sofia steps through the door, a bottle of my preferred whiskey in one hand.

"Thought you might need a refill," she says, eyeing my empty glass. "Looked like a serious conversation."

I study her, searching for any sign that she overheard. Her expression gives nothing

away.

"Business," I say dismissively. "Nothing that concerns you."

She places the bottle on my desk, closer than necessary. I catch the scent of her perfume—something citrusy.

"Everything in this club concerns me," she replies, the hint of a challenge in her voice. "Especially when it has you looking like you're planning a war."

I snort. "Perceptive, aren't you?"

"It's my job to read people." She shrugs, leaning against my desk. "And right now, you're an open book."

"Is that so?" I lean back in my chair, curious despite the urgency of the situation. "And what am I saying?"

Her eyes meet mine, unflinching. "That you're hunting someone who knows too much."

My blood turns cold. I keep my expression neutral, but my hand instinctively moves toward my weapon.

Sofia notices the movement and smiles. "Relax. Like I said, it's my job to read people. The tension in the room when your sister arrived, the way you immediately checked your gun afterward..." She shrugs. "Doesn't take a genius."

"It takes someone who's watching carefully," I counter, studying her. "Why are you watching me so closely, Sofia?"

Something flickers across her face too quickly to identify. "You're the most interesting person in the room. Where else would I look?"

The echo of our earlier conversation isn't lost on me. I stand, moving into her space, close enough to see the flecks of gold in her blue eyes, the slight quickening of her pulse at her throat.

"And what do you see when you look at me?"

Her gaze drops to my mouth for the briefest second before returning to my eyes. "Someone who's about to do something dangerous and probably stupid."

I laugh again, surprised by her audacity. "And what would you suggest instead?"

"I don't know what you're planning," she says carefully, "but whatever it is, there's always a smarter way than the direct approach."

"Sometimes direct is all you have."

Sofia shakes her head slightly. "There are always other options. Sometimes the actual power is in making your enemies destroy themselves."

"I'll keep that in mind," I say, stepping back. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have business to attend to."

She nods, moving toward the door. "Good luck, Lorenzo. With whatever war you're fighting."

As she reaches for the handle, I call after her, "Sofia."

She turns, eyebrow raised in question.

"When I get back," I say, "we'll finish our conversation from earlier."

A slow smile curves across her lips. "I'm counting on it."

After she leaves, I stand motionless, replaying our interaction. Sofia Rossi is becoming a distraction I can't afford—especially tonight. But there's something about her, something that feels almost like...she understands the darkness inside of me.

I shake off the thought. Gabriel is the priority. Everything else—including my fascination with a certain redheaded bartender—can wait.

Tonight, I reclaim control of my family's future. One way or another.

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Sofia

" You survived another night with us," Adriana says, her warm smile crinkling the corners of her eyes as she unties her apron. "One month in and you haven't run away screaming. I'm impressed."

I wipe down the last of the tables, my muscles aching from hours of carrying trays and dodging wandering hands. "Thanks for showing me the ropes. I'd be lost without you."

Adriana tosses her perfect black curls over her shoulder, the dim lights of Peccato Noir catching on her multiple ear piercings. "Most pretty girls like you don't last a week. The men here..." She shakes her head. "They can be animals."

"I can handle animals," I shrug.

She giggles as she grabs her purse from beneath the bar. "Listen, a few of us are grabbing drinks at Martino's tomorrow night. Nothing fancy, just staff unwinding. You should come."

The invitation catches me off guard. Three weeks of playing the role, and I'd almost forgotten this wasn't real. That these weren't my friends. That I'm here for one reason only.

"I'd like that, but unfortunately I have plans tonight." I let her down gently, feeling bad about the disappointment on her face.

Adriana smiles warmly. "That's okay. There's always a next time."

She pats my back and leaves.

After Adriana leaves, I'm alone with the hum of the ice machine and my thoughts. I wipe down the bar methodically, each swipe bringing me closer to the end of another night with no progress. No sign of Lorenzo still.

"Working hard or hardly working?"

The voice makes me jump. Tommy Chen leans against the doorway to the back office, arms crossed over his chest, military-precise buzz cut and sleeve of Chinese dragons visible beneath his rolled-up shirtsleeves.

"Jesus, Tommy. Make some noise next time."

His lips curve into a wide smile. "What's the fun in that?" He pushes off the wall and moves towards me. "You know, most people are running out the door at closing, not scrubbing like their life depends on it."

I shrug. "I need this job."

"What you need," he says, taking the rag from my hand, his fingers brushing mine deliberately, "is dinner. With me. Tomorrow night."

His confidence would be charming under different circumstances. In another life, I might have said yes. Tommy Chen is exactly the man I would have wanted before everything changed. Before revenge became my only purpose.

"Dating coworkers is a no-go," I declared, taking my rag.

He lets out a laugh. "That's not a no. That's a policy. Policies can be changed."

Despite myself, I smile. "Not this one."

"Is it because of the boss?" Tommy asks, his voice dropping. "He has been around a little, but I've seen how he looks at you."

My pulse quickens. "Lorenzo? Don't be ridiculous."

"The way you just said his name tells me everything I need to know." Tommy sighs dramatically. "Fine. I'll back off. For now." He winks. "But fair warning—I don't give up easily."

After he leaves, I finish closing up, turning off lights and making sure everything is ready for the next shift in the morning.

It's past 3 AM now, and I'm exhausted. Working the late shift at Black Sin is grueling—Things pick up considerably at 11 PM.

When the regular clubs are winding down, but that's when our real clientele arrives.

I roll my shoulders, willing the ache away, but my mind keeps drifting to Lorenzo. Three weeks of planning my move, and he vanishes. Did he sense something off about me? Did I already blow my cover?

I step out into the cool night air, locking the door behind me. That's when I hear it—a rustle from the alleyway where the dumpsters sit. My hand instinctively reaches for the knife strapped to my thigh.

I round the corner slowly, careful to keep my footsteps silent.

And there he is. Lorenzo.

I stare at his unconscious form sprawled across the pavement, blood seeping through his side. My heart hammers against my ribs as I glance around the deserted alley behind Peccato Noir. No witnesses. No help.

Just me and the devil, him bleeding out at my feet.

I stare at his unconscious form, watching the blood spread across his expensive shirt. Time seems to slow as opposing forces war inside me.

This is it. The moment I've dreamed about for two years. Lorenzo Bellanti—the man who killed my brother, dying alone in filth, where he belongs. Poetic justice served on a silver platter. All I have to do is do nothing. Walk away. Let the night to finish what someone else started.

My legs actually twitch with the impulse to turn. To leave. To finally close this chapter.

But something holds me in place. Not sympathy—he deserves none.

Perhaps it's pride.

The cold, hard truth?

I want to be the architect of his downfall, not some unknown assailant in a back alley.

Or maybe it's something deeper, a need to look him in the eyes when he pays for what he did.

But I don't leave. I can't. I guess I'm not that type of monster.

I drop to my knees beside him, cursing under my breath. Blood warms my hands as I apply pressure to his wound.

"Don't you dare die on me," I hiss through clenched teeth.

His eyelids flutter, revealing those green eyes.

"Sofia? His voice is rough with pain. "What are you doing here? "

I almost laugh at the irony. Two years of plotting his downfall, of dreaming about watching the light fade from his eyes, and now here I am, desperately trying to keep him alive.

"Don't talk," I order, pressing harder on the wound. The blood seeps between my fingers, stubborn. Just like the man himself.

Part of me—a dark, vengeful part I've nurtured since that night I saw my brother's mutilated dead body—whispers, "Ease the pressure. Stand up, walk away, and let fate take him. "

It would be so easy.

No one would know.

The alley is empty; the night is dark, and Lorenzo has made enough enemies that no one would question finding his body here.

My hands lighten their pressure for just a moment.

His breath hitches, and something primal in me responds. I press down again, cursing under my breath.

I want his blood on my hands—just not like this. Not in some dirty alley where he'll become another statistic, another casualty in a world that creates men like Lorenzo as often as it destroys them.

No, I want him to face me. To know exactly what he's done.

"Can you stand?"

He nods weakly, and together we get him upright. His body is heavy against mine, solid muscle turned deadweight. The scent of blood mixes with his cologne—sandalwood and something darker, like gunpowder.

"Hospital," I say, half-dragging him toward my car.

"No." His grip on my arm tightens painfully. "No hospitals."

"You've been shot, Lorenzo. You need—"

"Basement," he interrupts, each word an effort. "Take me... to the basement."

I frown. "What basement?"

His laugh turns into a grimace. "Secret... door. Behind the bar storage."

Great. Of course, the mafia enforcer has a secret torture chamber. Because why wouldn't he?

Somehow, I manage to half-carry, half-drag him through the club's back entrance, grateful that most of the staff has already left. The storage room is dimly lit, stacks of liquor cases creating narrow pathways.

As I adjust my grip on his shoulders, I tell myself that this is justice, not mercy. That keeping Lorenzo alive is the cruelest thing I could do to him. That watching him heal, only to face what's coming, is the revenge I've dreamed of.

But as I feel his weight against me, as I catch the familiar scent of his cologne beneath the copper tang of blood, another part of me—a treacherous part—whispers, " Maybe I'm saving him because, despite everything, I'm not ready to live in a world where Lorenzo doesn't exist. "

And that terrifies me more than any threat he ever posed.

"There," Lorenzo mumbles, pointing weakly to what looks like an ordinary wall.

I shift his weight, reaching for the spot he showed. My fingers find a recessed panel that slides away, revealing a keypad.

"Code?" I ask.

"Eight... four... seven... two..."

The door slides open silently, revealing a steep staircase leading into darkness. As we descend, motion sensors trigger soft lighting, illuminating a space that makes my blood run cold.

It's a medical room and torture chamber combined. Surgical tools laid out with meticulous precision. Restraints bolted to a steel table. A drain in the center of the concrete floor.

I swallow hard, forcing down the bile rising in my throat. God knows how many people have been killed in here.

"Put me... on the table," Lorenzo gasps, his usual tan skin turning dangerously pale.

I help him into the cold steel. He fumbles with his shirt buttons, fingers slick with blood, until I push his hands away and rip the fabric open.

The bullet wound sits just below his ribs, dark and angry against his taut skin. Not his heart. Not immediately fatal. I'm not sure if I'm relieved or disappointed.

"Cabinet," he mutters, gesturing weakly. "Medical supplies."

I move to the stainless steel cabinet, finding it better stocked than some hospital emergency rooms. Forceps, scalpels, gauze, antibiotics, even bags of blood stored in a small refrigerator.

"You've done this before," I observe, gathering supplies.

"Professional hazard...." He attempts a smile that turns into a grimace. "Need to remove the bullet."

I raise an eyebrow. "You want me to perform surgery? I'm a bartender, not a doctor."

"Trained field medic," he grunts, gesturing to himself. "I'll talk you through it."

My fingers tremble slightly as I pull on surgical gloves. I've never dug a bullet out of someone before, but I've patched up worse injuries during my time with Carlos. Still, there's something intimate about this—having Lorenzo Bellanti's life literally in my hands.

One slip, one "accident," and I could end it all now.

"Forceps," he instructs, his voice growing stronger as he focuses. "Clean the wound

first."

I do as he says, trying to ignore how his muscles tense beneath my touch, how his breathing quickens when my fingers brush his skin.

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"What happened?" I ask, partly to distract him, partly because I need to know.

He hesitates. "Ambush. Went after the wrong person."

"The 'him' Matteo mentioned?" I probe, keeping my tone casual as I prepare to extract the bullet.

His eyes sharpen, despite the pain. "Exactly how much did you overhear that night?"

"Enough." I hold his gaze steadily. "This is going to hurt."

I don't wait for his response before pushing the forceps into the wound. His body arches off the table, a strangled sound escaping through clenched teeth. His hand shoots out, grabbing my wrist with surprising strength.

"Easy," I murmur, not knowing if I'm talking to him or myself. "Almost there."

I feel the forceps connect with something solid. "Got it."

The bullet comes free with a sickening sound, and I drop it into a metal dish. Lorenzo releases a breath that sounds almost like a sob, his grip on my wrist finally relaxing.

"Not bad," he exhales, watching as I clean and dress the wound. "Ever consider a career change?" he grunts.

"Digging bullets out of mafia bosses? Not exactly my life goal."

He actually laughs at that, then winces. "What is your life goal, Sofia Rossi?"

The question catches me off guard. What is my goal? Once, the answer was simple: make Lorenzo Bellanti pay for what he did to my brother. Now...

"To survive," I answer honestly.

Something shifts in his expression—recognition, maybe. Understanding. "That's the only goal that matters in our world."

Our world. As if we share something, belong to the same dark universe. And maybe we do, though he doesn't know it yet.

"You didn't go with your men? How come you came back alone, bleeding out?" I ask, securing the bandage over his wound.

His eyes close briefly as his jaw clenches. "Operation went wrong."

"This guy... how dangerous is he?"

Lorenzo grunts as I tighten the bandage. "Gabriel has information... dangerous information."

"About the family business?" I keep my voice neutral, even as my pulse quickens.

"Yes," His eyes open, meeting mine. "He knows things... no one should know."

I wonder what sins the Bellanti hide that are worse than the ones I already know about.

"Rest," I tell him, disposing of the bloody gauze. "You've lost a lot of blood."

"Stay," he murmurs, his hand finding mine again. His touch is gentler now, almost vulnerable. "Please."

Something twists in my chest—not quite sympathy, not quite desire. Something more dangerous than both.

"I'm not going anywhere," I promise, and I'm not sure if it's a lie anymore.

He drifts into unconsciousness, his breathing evening out. I watch him sleep, this man who destroyed my family, who ordered my brother tortured to death. In sleep, the hardness leaves his face. He looks almost... human.

I tiptoe around the room, exploring. His gun lies on a nearby table—loaded, within reach. I pick it up, feeling its weight.

Two years of planning. One bullet would end it all.

I point the gun at his sleeping form, finger hovering near the trigger. Images flash through my mind—Luciano's mutilated body, the video of his torture. But also Lorenzo laughing with his siblings, the gentleness in his hands as he showed me how to mix the perfect whiskey sour.

Monster. Brother. Killer. Protector.

My hand trembles. The gun feels heavier with each passing second.

I lower it slowly, disgusted with myself. Not because I couldn't pull the trigger, but because part of me didn't want to.

Settling into a chair beside him, I prepare for a long night. My phone buzzes in my pocket—a text from Carlos, no doubt wondering why I haven't checked in.

I'll deal with my uncle tomorrow. Tonight, I keep watch over the devil that I'm fearing I might not hate enough.

I feel something warm and firm beneath my head, rising and falling in a rhythm that doesn't match my own. My eyes flutter open—God, where am I?—and realization hits me like a truck. I fell asleep on Lorenzo's fucking chest.

I jolt upright, heart hammering in my chest, only to find him already awake, those dark eyes boring into me, watching me sleep like some kind of predator sizing up prey.

"You stayed," he says, voice gravelly with sleep and pain.

"I said I would."

He reaches for me, rough fingertips grazing my cheek in a touch that feels too intimate, too real. "Sofia..."

I should pull away. I fucking should. But I don't.

His eyes drop to my mouth, lingering there as something electric crackles in the air between us.

Lorenzo runs his tongue across his lower lip, leaving it damp, and I hate myself for tracking the movement.

I notice everything—How his hair sticks to his forehead in dark strands, still damp with sweat from last night's fever. How his chest rises and falls a little faster now. The way he slowly leans towards me, like he's giving me a chance to back away.

But I stay frozen.

When his mouth finally crashes into mine, it's nothing like the careful, forgettable kisses I've known before.

This is violence and hunger and need.

His lips claim mine with a dominance that makes my knees weak, and oh Christ, my body betrays me instantly.

My thighs press together, seeking friction as heat blooms between them. I'm wet—embarrassingly, shamefully wet—and all from a fucking kiss.

Lorenzo's hand finds the back of my neck, fingers digging into my hair, holding me in place as he devours me.

And the thought that flashes through my mind shocks even me—I wish those fingers would slide around to my throat instead, pressing, controlling.

The thought shatters something inside me. I wrench away from him, stumbling back, struggling to catch my breath.

His taste is still there on my tongue, and I can't look at him, can't bear to see whatever's written on his face—triumph or confusion or worse, understanding.

I all but run out of the basement, leaning against the wall and panting.

What the fuck just happened?

My phone buzzes against my thigh, the vibration jolting me back to reality. With shaking hands, I pull it out and send a quick text to Carlos: 'I've got something.'

What exactly I have, I'm no longer sure.

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Lorenzo

It's been three weeks. Three weeks since a bullet tore through my flesh and I lost my men.

I trace the puckered scar tissue with my fingertips as I stand before the mirror. It's still angry and red.

"Fuck," I mutter, dropping my hand.

The memory of that night rushes in vivid detail now. Thanks to Olivia's inside man, I could locate Gabriel. He fed me information about Gabriel's movements, his safe houses, the rotation of guards.

I planned the operation carefully. A diversion was necessary to draw the bulk of the protection detail away from Gabriel's location. One of my men called in a false threat related to the case at another site.

With most of the guards scrambling to respond, I positioned my men to secure the perimeter while I went inside to confront Gabriel.

I wanted to face him myself. Somehow, I convinced myself I could reason with him, talk him into coming with me willingly. After all, we had history. I believed that connection might count for something.

But I miscalculated.

Gabriel flinched when I entered his temporary apartment, but his composure returned quickly—he wasn't the type to be caught unprepared. The fear in his eyes quickly hardened into something else—determination.

"Lorenzo," he said, backing away. "How the hell did you find me?"

"That doesn't matter now," I replied, keeping my voice calm. "You know why I'm here. We can go the easy way or the hard way. Your choice."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Gabriel hissed. "The things your family is involved in—I can't stay silent anymore."

"Yet you had no problem profiting from those same things for years," I countered. "Come with me now, and perhaps I will be merciful."

We both knew that was a lie. I don't forgive rats.

As I moved toward him, Gabriel lunged for what appeared to be a decorative box on the side table. Before I could stop him, he had a gun in his hand—a weapon that shouldn't have been there.

The shot came fast—too fast for me to fully dodge.

White-hot pain exploded in my side as the bullet found its mark. I staggered back, my weapon drawn instinctively, but the commotion had alerted the remaining guards.

Gunfire erupted throughout the safe house.

My men outside were overwhelmed almost immediately—professional hits from the security team. I heard their deaths through my earpiece, staccato bursts of violence ending in silence.

Blood soaking through my shirt, I had no choice but to retreat, barely escaping as sirens wailed in the distance.

Gabriel had vanished in the chaos, neither captured by me nor secured by his protectors.

A complete failure.

My phone buzzes, pulling me from the memory. Matteo. I answer with a grimace.

"What?"

"We need to talk," my brother says without preamble. "Face to face. About the Gabriel situation."

Twenty minutes later, I'm sitting across from Matteo in his immaculate office, the wound on my side throbbing with each heartbeat.

"So," he begins, crossing his fingers. "You want to tell me how everything went so spectacularly wrong?"

I meet his gaze without flinching. "I had an inside man. The plan was solid. Gabriel had a weapon that shouldn't have been there."

"A weapon?" Matteo raises an eyebrow. "In witness protection? Someone slipped up."

"Or someone helped him," I suggest. "Either way, the extraction failed."

Matteo leans back in his chair, studying me. "Well, there's a slight consolation. The agency can't tie us directly to the incident. No survivors from your team, and your

inside man is keeping his mouth shut—for now."

"And Gabriel?" I ask, though I already suspect the answer.

"Gone." Matteo spreads his hands. "He ran during the chaos. The protection agency has lost him too. He's in the wind."

The knowledge sits like acid in my stomach. Gabriel is free, with everything he knows about our operations, our contacts, our weaknesses. A ticking time bomb.

"I'll find him," I grunt.

Matteo studies me for a long moment. "See that you do. Father is... displeased, to put it mildly."

I stand, ignoring the pain that shoots through my side. "Gabriel has a daughter. I'll start there."

"Just make it clean this time," Matteo advises. "No more complications."

The club is already pulsing with energy when I arrive that evening, bass thumping through the walls, colored lights painting the night in neon hues. Despite the chaos of the past weeks, business has never been better—thanks to Sofia.

Sofia.

The thought of her brings a complexity of emotions I'm not ready to untangle. Since that kiss in the basement, we've been circling each other like wary predators, neither willing to acknowledge the tension crackling between us.

I spot her from across the room, her copper hair cascading down her back as she leans

in to speak with the bartender.

In just a short time, she's made herself indispensable—the staff respect her and the customers adore her.

And then I see him. Some clean-cut businessman type, leaning too close to her, his hand casually resting on the small of her back. She laughs at something he says, and something dark and possessive unfurls in my chest.

Without thinking, I cross the floor, my eyes never leaving them. Sofia spots me just as I reach them. Something flickering across her expression—surprise, perhaps. Or guilt.

"Mr. Bellanti," she says, straightening. "I didn't expect you tonight."

The businessman looks between us, sensing the sudden tension, but he's smart enough to back away with a murmured excuse.

"My office," I say to Sofia, my voice low enough that only she can hear. "Now."

She follows me without protest, though I can feel the indignation radiating from her. The moment the door closes behind us, she turns on me.

"What the hell was that about?" she demands.

"Who was he?" I counter, stepping closer.

"A customer. A good one." She crosses her arms. "Is there a problem with me being friendly to the people who keep your business profitable?"

"There's friendly, and then there's whatever that was," I snap.

Sofia's eyes narrow. "We haven't even discussed what happened between us, and you think you may dictate who I talk to?"

The mention of our kiss hangs in the air between us, charged and dangerous. We've both been avoiding this conversation, this confrontation.

"We're discussing it now," I say, closing the distance between us.

One breath of stillness—then she crashes into me, all heat and fury. Her lips devour mine, desperate and wild. My grip tightens in her hair, dragging her into the storm with me. The pain tearing through my side vanishes beneath the burn of her body against mine.

I lift her onto my desk, papers scattering to the floor unheeded. The look in her eyes is downright feral as she grabs me by the belt with one hand and the tie with the other.

Sofia gasps as I grab her knees and spread them wide apart. She tries to shut them, but I'm stronger, and when my hands slide up her smooth thighs, she whimpers.

"What are you...oh my God..." she whines when my finger teases up her lips through her lace panties, her eyes rolling back in bliss.

I slip my fingers under her skirt, feeling her lace panties, teasing up and down her bare, slick pussy before I peel her panties down her legs, slowly.

I let them dangle from her heels before I push between her legs and kiss and nibble my way up her thigh.

Sofia squirms, and when I shove her back across the desk, my laptop crashes and tumbles to the floor, and she gasps.

I'll buy another one.

“Lorenzo—oh fuck...”

She's propped up on her elbows, her face bright red and her breath coming fast as she watches me hover, my mouth mere inches above her eager cunt.

I lock eyes with her, making her wait for it as I drool on her pussy for a moment before slowly dipping my mouth to her.

“Oh. My. Fuuccck...” she coos in pleasure helplessly as I lick her slowly and languidly, not hurrying. I take my time savoring the taste of her pretty pussy.

I lap at every drop of her honey-sweetness. My tongue dances lightly around her clit, teasing her into a frenzy before I plunge it deep inside of her.

Sofia's legs shake. Her chest rises and falls, never breaking eye contact as I slowly work my tongue and lips over her sweet little pussy, taking her higher and higher.

I don't rush it. I don't demand, which is a change for me. But I do utterly subjugate her pussy and claim it as mine. I have her dancing on a fucking tightrope, and I keep her there for damn near close to twenty minutes, until I'm legitimately worried I'm going to break something in her head.

I keep the pace slow. I keep the tip of my tongue teasing around her clit. Until suddenly, with one precise, tiny flick, Sofia's universe comes crashing down.

She slams a hand over her mouth, biting down hard on her palm as she wrenches and writhes. Her swollen, throbbing pussy explodes in spasms against my tongue, flooding my mouth with her orgasm as her thighs lock around my head.

Gently, I tease my lips up and down her thighs as she catches her breath. Then, with a smug grin, I stand between her legs and sink my cock into her.

“Fuck!”, I groan. “Your pussy was made for me.” Nibbling her glistening skin, I move my lips along her jawline.

“Do you like how my cock fills you to the brim?”

“Yes.” A throaty moan next to my ear.

“Good,” I rasp against her ear. “Because you will only be stretched around this cock from now on,” I said.

“And if I ever see you smiling at another man like that again, I’ll fuck the memory of him out of you. You hear me?”

She moans, breath ragged, but the defiance is still there—glowing hot behind her flushed cheeks. “You don’t own me, Lorenzo,” she spits, trying to hold on to the upper hand. “We’re not anything.”

I grab her chin, force her to meet my gaze. My grip is firm, but my voice goes low—deadly calm. “You’re mine when I’m inside you,” I whisper. “And after this, you’ll feel me even when I’m not.”

Her lips tremble, but she doesn’t look away. “I can still do whatever I want,” she says, but her voice has softened, uncertain.

I smirk, not letting go. “Say that again after you come screaming my name.”

I lose my ever-loving shit.

Grabbing her throat, I plunge into her.

My sanity is gone.

My sense of reality—nonexistent. I ravage her kiss-swollen lips as I pound into her like a madman. The only things I can fathom are Sofia's panting, the feeling of her legs clutching my waist, and the smell of her citrus perfume.

She is mine.

“Your pussy’s mine, Red,” I growl against her neck, voice rough and dark. “Now, and forever. There won’t be any other men. Do you hear me?”

“Yes,” she gasps, breath breaking over a moan.

“No one else will touch you. No one else will ever feel you come apart on their cock.” I drive into her harder, deeper. “Only me. Always me.”

I sound possessed. I am possessed. Every thrust shreds the last of my restraint, and something feral claws its way to the surface.

My eyes lock onto her face. I want to remember everything . The way her mouth falls open with every stroke. The way her hair sticks to her sweat-slick skin. The way her lashes flutter like she’s caught between pleasure and surrender.

She’s fucking perfect—wrecked and radiant—and mine.

The desk groans beneath us, barely holding up under the force of my need. Sofia’s moans rise into cries, raw and breathless, as her body tenses around me. I feel her getting close, so close, but I don’t let her fall over that edge. Not yet.

I slow my pace, dragging it out, rolling my hips with deliberate control. She whimpers, writhes, begs—but I keep her right on the brink. It's exquisite torment, watching her unravel.

Then, finally, I let go. Her body trembles, her scream rips free, and she shatters—tightening around me like a velvet vise.

I give her a heartbeat to feel the high... then slam back into her, hard and deep.

Her second orgasm tears through her before the first even fades, and that's all it takes—Heat explodes in my spine, and I come with a growl, burying myself inside her as release crashes through me.

My vision whites out. My lungs burn. And for a second, I feel like I've lost gravity—like nothing exists but her.

As we collapse against each other, sweat-slick and breathless, the world slowly creeps back in. My heart's still racing, but it's not just the sex. It's her. I've never felt like this before. Not with anyone.

Maybe it's not just the blood rushing to my cock. Maybe this is what it feels like when you fuck someone you're falling for.

The problems waiting outside this door haven't disappeared. Gabriel is still out there. My family still demands answers.

And Sofia—Sofia remains a beautiful enigma I can't afford to trust completely.

But for now, with her head resting against my chest, I allow myself this moment of peace—the calm before the storm that's surely coming.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am

Sofia

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, recognizing the woman staring back at me.

Dark circles rim my eyes and my skin paler than ever, despite the flush that rises whenever I think of him . Of Lorenzo. Of what we've become.

"It's just sex," I whisper to myself, the lie bitter on my tongue.

It's been happening for weeks now. Ever since that night in the basement, when I pulled a bullet from his flesh and felt something shift between us. And then, weeks after, his lips claimed mine with a hunger that matched my own.

We've been insatiable. His office. The basement. Once against the bar after closing. No surface seems safe from the fire that ignites whenever we're alone. No words necessary beyond rasped commands and breathless pleas.

But there's no tag on whatever this is. No definition. And I refuse to admit that I care.

"It's just part of the plan," I tell my reflection, but the woman in the mirror looks unconvinced.

The plan. My brother. My sweet Luciano, whose tortured screams still echo in my nightmares. They returned his mutilated body to us as a message.

I close my eyes, willing the images away, but they persist—Luciano's fingers broken. The video they sent, showing Lorenzo Bellanti working with calculated precision as

my brother begged for mercy.

"Remember why you're here," I hiss, gripping the sink until my knuckles turn white.

But even as hatred burns through me, guilt follows close behind. Guilt for the information I've been feeding Carlos. Guilt for the way my heart races when Lorenzo looks at me. For how I'm seeing the human behind the monster—the brother, the protector, the man whose touch I crave despite everything.

I straighten, splashing cold water on my face. It doesn't matter what I feel. Lorenzo Bellanti must pay for what he did to my family. Even if I'm damning myself.

When I arrive at the club, Lorenzo is already there, his dark gaze tracking me as I move through the space. I offer an awkward wave, then regret it.

What are we, teenagers? But he responds with that half-smile that makes my stomach flip, and I hate myself a little more for the reaction.

Hours pass in a blur of customers and cocktails. I'm reviewing inventory in the storeroom when my phone buzzes with a message from Lorenzo: 'My office. Now.'

No please, No explanation. Just a command he expects to be obeyed. The worst part is how quickly I move to comply, my body already humming with anticipation.

But when I push open his office door, all thoughts of pleasure evaporate. A man kneels on the floor, hands bound behind his back, face bloody and swollen.

Lorenzo stands over him, his face closed off.

"Close the door," he says without looking up.

I obey, heart hammering. "What's happening?"

"This is Rodriguez Vassallo." Lorenzo circles the kneeling man like a predator. "He's been selling information about our shipments to the Carelli family."

The man—Rodriguez—whimpers something in Italian that sounds like either a denial or plea. Lorenzo silences him with a sharp kick to the ribs.

"I've confirmed it through three separate sources." Lorenzo's eyes are flat, devoid of the warmth I've glimpsed in our private moments. "He's guilty."

I swallow hard. "Okay. So why am I here?"

Lorenzo retrieves a gun from his desk drawer. He checks the chamber with practiced ease before extending it to me, grip first.

"Handle it," he says.

The weight of the gun feels alien in my palm. Wrong. I've held firearms before—Carlos insisted I learn—but I've never practiced intending to execute a helpless man.

"Problem?" Lorenzo's voice carries a dangerous edge as I hesitate. His eyes narrow. "You said yourself that sometimes getting your hands dirty is necessary. Were those just empty words?"

Rodriguez begs in broken English, tears cutting clean tracks through the blood on his face. "Please, miss. I have children. Three little girls. Please."

I tighten my fingers around the gun, willing them not to tremble. Is this a test? A trap? Or Lorenzo bringing me deeper into his world?

"If you're going to be part of this world—part of my world—I need to know you can do what's necessary," Lorenzo says, his expression unreadable.

I raise the gun, aiming between Rodriguez's eyes. My finger hovers near the trigger as a war rages inside me.

Carlos would want me to maintain my cover at all costs. But this man has children. Little girls who will become orphans with one squeeze of my finger.

Could I live with that?

Lorenzo observes my internal struggle, then takes the gun from my trembling hands. Relief floods through me, only to freeze into horror as he speaks again.

"It was a test." His voice is soft. "If you had pulled that trigger without hesitation, I'd have known you weren't who you claimed to be."

Before I can process his words, Lorenzo raises the gun and fires a single shot. Rodriguez crumples to the floor, the back of his skull painting the expensive carpet red.

I flinch at the sound, at the spray of warm blood that mists my face. At that moment, I realize Lorenzo's suspicions run deeper than I thought. This wasn't just a test of my ability to kill—he was looking for something else.

"You think I don't recognize someone trained to kill?" Lorenzo tucks the gun into his waistband. "It becomes instinct. Automatic. You hesitated because it's not in your nature. Not yet."

His hand cups my cheek, thumb wiping away a speck of blood. "That's what I like about you, Sofia. You're still... clean."

The next day, I'm opening the bar when my phone rings.

Carlos.

I glance around before answering, moving to a quiet corner.

"What did I tell you about calling me at work?" I hiss.

"Is that any way to greet family?" Carlos's voice drips with sarcasm. "You've been distant, Sofia, darling. Is something changing?"

"Nothing's changed," I snap, but the lie tastes sour.

"Good. Because I'd hate to remind you why you're there." His tone hardens. "Your brother's face when they sent back his body—you remember that, don't you? How they carved Lorenzo's initials into his chest while he was still breathing?"

Bile rises in my throat. "I remember."

"Then listen. Lorenzo has an arms deal tonight. He's meeting with a military official from a neighboring country—advanced weapons, big money. This deal would boost the Bellanti's firepower."

I grip the phone tighter. "What does that have to do with me?"

"You're going to make sure he doesn't make that meeting," Carlos states. "If Lorenzo doesn't show, the official will feel disrespected. The deal will fall through. The Bellanti's reputation takes a hit, and rival families seize the opportunity."

"And how am I supposed to stop him?" I ask.

"Figure it out," Carlos snaps. "Or have you forgotten Luciano's screams already?"

He hangs up.

Fucking hell.

Hours later, I'm dressed as one dancer, unrecognizable beneath a dark wig, sequined mask, and colored contacts.

My heart pounds against my ribs as I approach Lorenzo's private booth with a drink in hand.

It's whiskey, good quality and laced with enough sedative to ensure he sleeps through the meeting.

I place the drink before him, my voice pitched higher than normal. He glances at me, distracted by a phone call.

Perfect.

Minutes pass and he downs the entire glass.

I watch from the shadows as his movements slow, his eyelids growing heavy. When he slumps in his seat, I move, helping the "drunk boss" to a back room to "sleep it off."

As I lay him on a couch, his fingers catch my wrist, the tiny bell on my bracelet tinkling. His eyes flutter, struggle to focus.

"Sofia?" he murmurs, confusion clouding his features before unconsciousness claims him.

I freeze, heart stopping for one terrified moment. Then I run, leaving behind the man
I'm caring for and the vengeance I'm no longer sure I want.

Lorenzo

"Incompetent. Irresponsible. Unforgivable."

Each word from my father's mouth lands like a physical blow. I stand before him in Matteo's study, hands clasped behind my back, spine rigid, as he leans heavily on his cane, his right leg stiff from the bullet he took years ago.

Matteo sits behind his desk, watching with concern.

"The most important arms deal of the year, Lorenzo." Father's voice drops to that dangerous whisper I've known since childhood, but there's pain beneath it—not just disappointment, but genuine worry. "And you simply... didn't show up."

I swallow the excuses that form in my mouth. It's pointless for me to explain that I was drugged, that I woke on a leather couch with a pounding head and twelve missed calls. No Bellanti man offers excuses. Only results. Especially not the family enforcer.

"The Vietnamese official felt disrespected," Matteo says, rising from the desk to stand beside our father, subtly offering his arm for support when Father's leg trembles slightly.

"He's threatening to take the entire shipment to the Carellis.

We're talking fifty million in lost revenue, but worse—the firepower advantage shifts to them. "

"I'll fix it," I say, the words like gravel in my throat.

Father sighs—not harsh or brittle, but heavy with concern.

He hobbles to the leather couch and eases himself down, gesturing for me to join him.

"Fix it? Like you 'fixed' the Gabriel situation?

" He places his hand on my shoulder. "This isn't like you, Lorenzo.

You've never failed the family before. Not once in fifteen years. "

The observation stings more than any accusation could. I've given everything to this family—my conscience, my future, my soul.

My role as the enforcer allows Matteo to be the strategic leader. We each have our place, and I've never faltered in mine. Until now.

"The official has agreed to meet with me tomorrow," Matteo says, pouring three fingers of scotch into crystal tumblers.

"But I need you there, Lorenzo." He hands me a glass, his eyes meeting mine with the silent communication we've perfected since childhood.

This isn't a punishment; it's an opportunity to redeem myself.

"It won't happen again." I accept the drink.

"What's distracting you, son?" Father leans forward, his cane resting against his good leg, hands clasped in front of him. "First Gabriel slips through your fingers. Now this. You've built your reputation for reliability. The men fear you because you're

methodical. Uncompromising."

"It's that bartender," Matteo mentions carefully, as he takes a seat across from us. "Sofia. The reports say you've been spending considerable time with her."

Something cold slides down my spine at the mention of her name. "She's a distraction, nothing more."

"Nothing more?"

My father's eyes—mirrors of my own—narrow with the scrutiny that's kept him alive through three bloody mob wars.

"Then why were you seen with her—doing things that raise questions—just weeks after meeting her? Why are you escorting her home yourself?"

I remain silent, unable to deny the truth in his words.

"The family comes first, Lorenzo," Father says, but his tone is gentle now.

"We need you at your best," Matteo adds, leaning forward. "The Carelli are watching for any sign of weakness. The FBI is circling closer. Gabriel's testimony could destroy everything our father built, everything I'm trying to protect as Don."

"And everything you enforce," Father finishes, squeezing my hand before releasing it. He reaches for his cane, and I instinctively move to help him stand. "Fix the weapons deal. Find Gabriel. And remember who you are—a Bellanti. My son."

"Yes, Father."

"We trust you, brother," Matteo says as he walks us to the door, his hand firm on my

shoulder. " Whatever's happening, whatever's got you off your game—handle it. The family needs you."

Outside, I slide behind the wheel of my Maserati and sit in silence for a long moment, hands gripping the leather until my knuckles turn white.

Something doesn't add up about last night. I've gone through the security footage a dozen times. The only suspicious thing was that someone disabled the cameras in the VIP section—standard procedure for certain clients. No faces I didn't recognize. Just dancers, servers, the usual.

Yet someone got close enough to drug me. Someone knew exactly which drink to bring, how to approach me without raising suspicion.

And just before my consciousness slipped away, I heard something. A soft tinkling sound. A bell.

Like the one on Sofia's bracelet.

I shake my head, refusing to follow that thought to its conclusion.

Not Sofia.

Not possible. She was bartending last night, not serving in VIP. It was just a hallucination from whatever they slipped into my drink. It must be.

My phone rings, cutting through my thoughts. One of my men, Dante.

"It's done, boss," he says without preamble when I answer. "We have the girl."

A grim satisfaction replaces the sour taste of failure. "Any complications?"

"None. Clean extraction from her school. No witnesses, no traces. She's secured at the warehouse on Marshall Street."

"Good." I start the engine. "Keep her comfortable. I don't want her harmed."

"Understood. But, boss... she's just a kid. Ten, maybe eleven."

"I'm aware," I snap, then soften my tone. "Make sure she has food, water, whatever she needs. This ends today."

I hang up and pull away from father's estate, mind already racing ahead to the next move. Gabriel's daughter, Anna. His only weakness.

The last time I saw her was at a family barbecue three years ago, before her father betrayed everything I'd given him. She'd been a tiny thing with her father's eyes and a gap-toothed smile, shyly asking me to push her on the swing.

I don't want to use a child as bait. But Gabriel has left me no choice. The family's security—Father's legacy, Matteo's future—depends on my next move.

I send the text from a burner phone: 'I have Anna. Come alone to the abandoned Larson Textiles factory at midnight, or I send her back to you in pieces.'

It's a crude threat. One I have no intention of fulfilling.

But Gabriel doesn't know that.

All he knows is that I'm the enforcer who taught him how to extract information when all else fails, who showed him the lines we cross so the rest of the family doesn't have to.

The response comes almost immediately: 'Don't hurt her. I'll be there.'

Hours later, I watch from the shadows as Gabriel enters the factory, gun drawn, eyes wild with panic.

He's thinner than when I last saw him, his once-sharp suit hanging loose on his frame. Being on the run hasn't been kind to him.

"Anna!" His voice echoes through the factory. "Baby, are you here?"

I step into the light, keeping my gun trained on him. "Drop the weapon, Gabriel."

He whirls toward me, eyes narrowing in anger. "Where's my daughter?"

"Safe. For now." I gesture to the floor with my gun. "Weapon down. Now."

For a moment, I think he'll fight. Then his shoulders slump, and he places the gun at his feet, kicking it toward me.

"Please, Lorenzo. She's innocent in all this."

"I know." I move forward, retrieving his gun. "That's why she'll go home tonight, unharmed. Unlike the men who died because of your betrayal."

Relief and confusion flashes across his face. "You're... letting her go?"

"I'm not a child killer, Gabriel. My father raised me better than that." I signal to Dante, who appears from a side door with Anna. The girl runs to her father, who clutches her.

"Go with the nice man, baby," Gabriel whispers, kneeling to look his daughter in the

eyes. "He's going to take you to Aunt Maria's house, okay? I'll see you soon."

The lie is smooth and practiced. Gabriel knows he's not walking out of here alive. But he manages a smile for his daughter, kissing her forehead before Dante leads her away.

Once she's gone, all pretense falls away. Gabriel straightens, meeting my gaze.

"Let's get this over with."

I almost admire his courage. "Not here." I gesture to the exit with my gun. "We're going somewhere more private."

The drive to Peccato Noir is silent. Gabriel sits in the passenger seat, staring out the window at the city lights as if seeing them for the last time. Which, I suppose, he is.

In the club's basement, I secure him to the steel chair bolted to the floor—the same chair where I've extracted countless confessions, where I've done the family's darkest work so Matteo can keep his hands clean, so father can sleep at night.

"I trusted you," I say finally, removing my suit jacket and rolling up my sleeves. "Trained you. Made you my right hand. And you betrayed me to the feds."

"They have evidence against all of you," Gabriel replies, his voice steady despite the sweat beading on his forehead.

"Enough to put the entire Bellanti family away for life.

Your father will die in prison, Lorenzo.

Matteo will never see daylight again and the rest of your family will spend their lives

in jail.

I'm just the first domino. You can't stop what's coming. "

My fist connects with his jaw before I can stop myself. "My father rebuilt this family from nothing. Matteo is guiding it into legitimacy. Who are you to destroy that?" I grip his chin, forcing him to look at me. "As long as I breathe, no one touches my family."

I leave him there, instructions clear to my men: guard him, keep him alive, wait for my return. Tomorrow, I'll extract every piece of information about what he's told the authorities, who his contacts are, and what evidence might still be out there. Then I'll decide his fate.

For now, I need a drink and a clear head to process everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours and the nagging suspicion about Sofia that I can't quite silence.

Tomorrow, I'll get answers.

From Gabriel.

And from Sofia.

If I've failed the family because of her, there will be no forgiveness—not from my father, not from Matteo, and certainly not from myself.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am

Sofia

I stare at the third pregnancy test in my trembling hands, the two pink lines staring back at me.

Pregnant .

The word echoes in my mind, bouncing off the walls of my tiny bathroom like a ricocheting bullet.

I'm pregnant with Lorenzo Bellanti's child.

My stomach lurches, and I grip the edge of the sink, breathing deeply through my nose. This wasn't part of the plan. None of this was part of the plan.

I was supposed to infiltrate, gather intelligence, and help dismantle the organization that tortured and killed my brother. I wasn't supposed to end up carrying the enemy's child.

I wasn't supposed to care for him.

The pregnancy test feels like a ticking bomb in my hand. With shaking fingers, I wrap it in toilet paper and bury it deep in the bathroom trash.

I can't deal with it right now.

Through the bathroom door, I hear a sharp knock at my apartment entrance. My pulse

jumps into my throat as I quickly wash my hands, smoothing my hair in the mirror.

"Coming!" I call, my voice steadier than I feel.

When I open the door, Carlos stands there, his face unsmiling beneath his salt-and-pepper beard.

"You look terrible," he grunts, pushing past me into the apartment.

"Thanks. always the charmer." I close the door, instinctively touching my stomach before catching myself. "I wasn't expecting you."

Carlos's eyes scan the apartment, ever vigilant, ever suspicious. "Clearly. You should always be expecting me. Or him ."

The way he says 'him' leaves no doubt about who he means. "Especially after what happened with the weapons deal."

Pride flickers briefly in his eyes, and I hate how much I still crave his approval.

"Lorenzo was furious," I say, sitting on the arm of my sofa. "The whole family was. I heard Matteo had to beg the Vietnamese official to reconsider."

"Good." Carlos paces the small living room, hands clasped behind his back. "That was just the beginning. I have more news."

The way he says it sends a chill down my spine. I know that tone. It's the one he used when he first showed me proof of Luciano's death, when he laid out his plan for me to infiltrate the Bellanti organization.

"What news?" I ask, though part of me doesn't want to know.

"Gabriel," he says simply.

My blood runs cold. "What about him?"

Carlos stops pacing, turns to face me fully. "Lorenzo has him. In the basement of that club."

"How do you know this?" My voice sounds distant.

"I have my sources. The same ones who told me about the weapons deal." Carlos steps closer, his eyes boring into mine. "Sofia, this is our chance. Gabriel knows everything—shipment routes, offshore accounts, names of corrupt officials. If he testifies, the entire Bellanti empire crumbles."

"And if Lorenzo kills him before that can happen..." I let the sentence hang in the air between us.

"Exactly." Carlos's hand lands on my shoulder, heavy with expectation. "You need to get him out. Tonight."

My laugh sounds brittle even to my own ears. "Are you insane? The basement is guarded. Lorenzo doesn't trust anyone with prisoners except his most loyal men."

"But he trusts you." Carlos's voice softens, becoming the voice of the uncle who comforted me after nightmares, who taught me to shoot, to fight. "He let you in once before, didn't he? When he was injured."

I cross my arms over my chest, over the secret growing inside me. "That was different."

"Was it?" Carlos moves to the window, gazing out at the New York skyline. "I've

watched you these past weeks, Sofia. You're changing. Softening toward him."

"I'm playing my part," I snap, too quickly.

Carlos turns, his expression suddenly gentle in a way that frightens me more than his anger. "Do you remember what they did to Luciano? What he did?"

My throat tightens. "Of course I remember."

"They tied him to a chair in that basement," Carlos continues, his voice relentless. "For three days, Lorenzo tortured him. Broke his fingers one by one. Cut pieces from him. And when they finally shot him, it was a mercy."

"Stop." The word tears from my throat.

But Carlos doesn't stop. He pulls out his phone, and I know what's coming. The video I've seen too many times, that plays in my nightmares. "Maybe you need a reminder—"

"I said stop!" I knock the phone from his hand. It clatters to the floor, and for a moment we both stare at it, breathing hard.

"Don't forget why you're here," Carlos says finally, retrieving his phone. "Don't forget what Lorenzo Bellanti really is beneath that charm. He's the family's enforcer. Their butcher." His eyes narrow. "The man who made your brother beg for death."

Something shifts inside me. Of course, it's far too early for it to be the baby—but something moves all the same. Guilt, perhaps. Or determination.

"I know what I have to do," I whisper.

After Carlos leaves, I sit in silence for a long while, hands resting protectively over my stomach. Then I rise, eager to get this over with. Maybe after everything is done, I can move to a faraway country and raise my child alone.

Night falls as I prepare. I put on dark clothes and tuck my hair beneath a cap.

The club is busy when I arrive, music pulsing through the walls, oblivious patrons dancing and drinking above the basement where Gabriel waits to die.

I slip in through the kitchen, nodding to a cook who barely glances at me—just another employee coming in for a late shift.

The hallway to the basement is empty, the guard missing from his usual post. Probably for a smoke break.

I punch in the code to the basement with trembling fingers, and the door clicks open.

Gabriel looks up as I enter, his face a mosaic of bruises, dried blood caking his split lip. Confusion flashes in his eyes as I remove my cap, red hair tumbling free.

"Who are you?" he whispers.

"Hurry," I whisper back, working at his restraints. "We have little time."

His wrists are raw when the zip ties finally give way. He stands on shaky legs, leaning against me. "Why are you helping me?"

I think of Luciano. Of Lorenzo. Of our baby. "Let's just say I have my reasons."

We make it out through a service tunnel Carlos told me about, emerging three blocks away from the club. Gabriel grips my hands, his battered face shining with gratitude.

"Thank you," he says. "I'll never forget this."

I nod, unable to speak past the knot in my throat. He disappears into the night, and I return to my apartment, heart hammering against my ribs.

It's done. Whatever happens now, it's done.

Hours later, a knock at my door jolts me from a restless sleep. Not the sharp rap of Carlos's knuckles, but a heavy pounding that makes the hinges rattle.

I wrap my robe tighter around myself, heart hammering against my ribs. Who could it be at this hour? The pounding comes again, more insistent this time.

My hand trembles as I unlock the deadbolt and pull the door open.

My breath catches in my throat.

Lorenzo fills the doorway, his powerful frame somehow larger in my narrow hallway.

His usually loose dark hair is slicked back in a severe man bun that exposes the sharp angles of his face and reveals his eyes—green as poison, burning with cold fury. The elegant lines of his leather jacket can't disguise the tension radiating from his body.

In his hand, he holds a single strand of copper-red hair.

"Found this in the basement," he says, voice terrifyingly soft. "Right where Gabriel was being held before he mysteriously escaped."

My mind races, searching for an explanation, an excuse, anything. "I'm not the only redhead who works at the club," I counter, but my voice wavers, betraying me.

"True." He steps inside, uninvited, closing the door behind him with a decisive click. "But you're the only one with this."

His hand shoots out like a viper strike, grabbing my wrist where my bracelet dangles—the bell charm I never take off, a gift from Luciano on my sixteenth birthday.

"I heard this the night I was drugged," he continues, thumb pressing against my racing pulse. "Told myself I was imagining things. That you couldn't possibly have betrayed me."

The look in his eyes shatters something inside me—not just anger or suspicion, but genuine hurt. As if I've wounded him in some fundamental way.

He backs me against the wall, his presence consuming the oxygen in the room. "Did you deliberately approach my family?" he demands, voice rising. "Was all of this—us—just a way to get close enough to destroy us?"

I try to slip away, to create space between us, but he cages me in with his arms, palms flat against the wall on either side of my head.

"Lorenzo, please," I whisper, searching his face for any softness, any remnant of the man who held me so tenderly just days ago. "You don't understand—"

"Then make me understand!" His voice cracks like thunder in the small apartment. "Tell me why the woman I was falling for just released the man who tried to destroy my family!"

Then something in me breaks. The weight of too many lies collapses.

"Yes!" I shout, tears spilling hot down my cheeks. "Yes, it was deliberate. And do

you know why?"

Lorenzo stares at me, waiting, jaw clenched tight enough to snap.

"Luciano Bianchi," I say, and watch recognition flicker in his eyes. "He was my brother."

Lorenzo's brow furrows, confusion replacing anger for a moment. "What brother? I don't—"

"Luciano Bianchi," I repeat, my voice breaking on the name I've held inside for so long.

"The man you tortured and killed in that basement.

The only person I had left in this world.

" My hand finds the photo in my pocket, the one I've carried every day since his death.

I thrust it toward Lorenzo. "You took him from me, so I vowed to destroy everything you love. "

Lorenzo stares at the photo, his face draining of color. "I've never—I don't recognize this name." He shakes his head, running a hand through his hair, loosening strands from the tight bun. "This man... I know this face, but I didn't kill him."

"Liar!" I spit, but something in his expression makes me pause.

"The last time I saw this man, he was alive." Lorenzo's voice is quiet now, almost pleading. "He walked into a deal that was happening at the club. I was drunk. I barely

paid attention to him. I remember someone escorting him out, but he was alive, Sofia. I swear to you."

The room seems to tilt beneath my feet. Carlos's voice echoes in my head, showing me the video, telling me who was responsible. A wave of nausea hits me suddenly, violently.

I barely make it to the trash can by the kitchen when I double over and hurl all of my stomach's contents. I'm not prone to nausea; this must be from the new life growing inside me.

When I straighten, Lorenzo is watching me suspiciously.

"Lorenzo, there's something else—We didn't use protection," I whisper.

Understanding dawns in his eyes. His eyes—those fierce green eyes that have looked at me with desire, with tenderness, with rage—now glisten with moisture. For the first time since I've known him, I see tears forming, turning those emerald irises glassy.

"Sofia. Are you pregnant?"

I can't speak, can only nod, the confession tearing my soul open.

"Is it—" his voice hardens again, even as a single tear escapes down his cheek, "—is it even mine? Or is that part of your revenge, too? Make me believe I'm having a child, then take that away as well?"

The accusation slams into me like a physical blow. My hand moves before my mind can process what I'm doing. The crack of my palm against his cheek echoes in the quiet apartment.

"How dare you?" I seethe, trembling with rage and anguish. "How dare you question that? After everything between us, you think I would lie about our child?"

Lorenzo laughs, but it's hollow and devoid of any warmth. He rubs his reddened cheek, eyes now completely dry, as if he's burned away any vulnerability in an instant.

"You know what the saddest part is, Sofia?" he says, his voice lethally quiet. "I thought you were different. Special. But you're just damaged goods playing dress-up in my world—another pretty face with a rotting soul beneath. I should have fucking listened to my suspicions."

Each word is a knife, precisely aimed at my deepest insecurities. The cruelty of it steals my breath, makes my knees weak. I reach for the wall to steady myself.

"Lorenzo—" I reach for him, but he steps back.

Before I can say anything more, the door crashes open behind him. Carlos strides in, flanked by armed men I've never seen before.

His smile is cold, triumphant, as he levels a gun at Lorenzo's back.

"Perfect timing," Carlos says, his voice dripping with satisfaction as he presses the gun into the back of Lorenzo's head. "I finally have you exactly where I planned, Lorenzo Bellanti. "

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Lorenzo

I feel the cold metal of a gun barrel press into the back of my skull. Time slows.

My first thought is to protect Sofia and our child.

It's still so unreal.

I'm going to be a father. Me.

The thought both terrifies and exhilarates me.

In our world, family is everything—and now I have one starting right in front of me.

A life is growing inside the woman I've fallen for. My blood. My legacy. The fierce surge of protectiveness that rushes through me is primal, overwhelming.

Even knowing what I now know about her lies, I still want to protect her.

"Uncle Carlos," Sofia whispers suddenly, her face draining of color.

I freeze at her words. Uncle? The file said she had no family. But then again, I shouldn't be shocked, not after everything else I just discovered.

The man—Carlos—circles around to face us, gun trained steadily. His face reveals nothing but cold hatred. Two armed men flank the doorway, weapons ready.

"The great Lorenzo Bellanti," Carlos says, voice rough with contempt. "Finally, at my mercy."

Sofia steps forward. "Carlos, this wasn't the plan—"

"Wasn't what?" he cuts her off. "The plan changed when you became compromised." His eyes flick between us, hardening when they land on Sofia. "Or did you think I wouldn't notice?"

He produces a phone, showing Sofia surveillance photos of us together, our intimate moments captured from afar. A grainy photo of Sofia buying pregnancy tests. His face contorts with rage.

"You let the enemy breed you. Just like your mother," he spits. "Weak. Sentimental."

Carlos smiles thinly, then nods to his men. "Tie them both up. Secure them well."

The men move forward efficiently, zip-ties ready. I calculate my odds—two armed guards, plus Carlos. I could take one, maybe two if I'm lucky, but not before one of them puts a bullet in Sofia.

Sofia. My child. The thought of them in danger makes my vision blur with rage.

As if reading my thoughts, Carlos presses his gun barrel against Sofia's temple. "Don't even think about it, Bellanti. One wrong move and I put a bullet in her head. Family or not."

I lock eyes with him, letting him see the promise of death there. "Touch her and there won't be a hole deep enough for you to hide in."

But I allow them to secure my wrists behind me, my ankles to the chair legs. Every

muscle in my body screams to fight, to protect what's mine, but I force myself to stay calm. I need to think. Need to find a way out that keeps Sofia and our child safe.

Our child .

The words echo in my head as they secure Sofia to a chair across from me. I never thought I'd want this—fatherhood, a family of my own.

Men like me don't get happy endings.

But now that it's happening, I can't imagine anything else. Can't imagine not protecting them with everything I have.

Even if Sofia came to me with lies. Even if this started as a trap. What's growing between us now is real. And what's growing inside her is innocent.

“You manipulated her from the start!” I shout, my fists clenching.

"Of course I did," Carlos says, circling us. "Though I must thank you, Lorenzo. Your child makes this so much more... poetic. A life for a life."

Sofia's eyes widen. "What are you talking about?"

"Lucia," Carlos says, his voice breaking slightly. "My daughter. She was carrying a child when she died. Michael's child."

The name hits me like a physical blow. Michael. My best friend. The memories flood back—his smile, his loyalty, his absence in my life these past years.

"Michael?" I repeat, genuinely confused. "What does Michael have to do with this?"

Carlos laughs, the sound unhinged. "Don't play dumb. My Lucia was eighteen, in Catholic school, when she met your friend. When she got pregnant, they planned to run away together." His eyes narrow. "Until you killed them both."

"That's impossible," I say firmly. "Michael was my brother in everything but blood. I would never—"

"LIAR!" Carlos roars, striking me across the face with his pistol. Blood fills my mouth as he continues, "I saw their bodies. I know your methods, your signature. The way you arrange them, the precision of your cuts."

He wheels a metal cart beside Sofia's chair, arranging torture implements methodically. My heart hammers against my ribs as he selects a scalpel, pressing it against Sofia's stomach just enough to draw a thin line of blood.

Something in me breaks. That's my child.

My future. A rage I've never known darkens my vision.

I strain against the restraints, feeling them dig into my flesh, drawing blood.

I don't care about the pain. All I care about is getting to Sofia, shielding her body with mine, killing anyone who threatens her or our baby.

"Watch carefully, Lorenzo," Carlos says, eyes wild. "I want you to feel what I felt when I saw my daughter's body."

"STOP!" I yell, straining against my restraints. "I didn't kill Lucia or Michael. I know who did!"

Carlos pauses, scalpel hovering over Sofia's skin. "More lies?"

"Michael and Lucia reached out to me," I say rapidly. "They needed help to disappear. Starting fresh. We met, but when I got there..." I swallow hard at the memory. "They were already dead. Killed using my methods, my signature."

Carlos studies my face, searching for deception. "On the night my pregnant daughter was murdered, I received an anonymous call. When I arrived, I found them arranged like... like dolls." His voice breaks. "With your calling card all over the scene."

"Why would I kill my best friend?" I demand. "Why would I murder an eighteen-year-old girl? Think, Carlos! Someone wanted you to believe it was me."

Carlos presses the scalpel harder against Sofia's skin. "Don't trick me like you've tricked her, making her fall for you."

I look at Sofia, at the fear and confusion in her eyes, and something breaks inside me.

I've spent my life building walls, keeping people at a distance.

Sofia slipped past those defenses. And now there's a child—my child—depending on me.

I've never begged for anything in my life, but I'll beg now. For them.

"Please," I plead, my voice raw. "She's innocent in all this. Your own niece. Your blood."

Carlos laughs bitterly. "Innocent? Like her brother was innocent? Did you know, Sofia?" He turns to her. "I was the one who ordered Luciano's death and framed Lorenzo. I needed you motivated, focused on revenge."

Sofia's face crumples in shock and betrayal. "You... you killed my brother? Your own

nephew?"

"I needed a weapon against the Bellanti," Carlos says dismissively. "You were perfect. Beautiful. Deadly. And now... compromised."

While Sofia's reaction distracts Carlos, I continue working at my restraints. "The Russians killed Michael and Lucia," I say firmly. "After their deaths, I tracked down the killer. The order came from Viktor Petrov."

Carlos' head snaps toward me. "The Bratva? Impossible."

"Michael was skimming from shipments meant for the Bratva. Small amounts, but enough to notice. He needed money for the baby, for a new life with Lucia." I can see doubt creeping into Carlos's expression. "Petrov found out and used my methods to throw suspicion on me. To create chaos."

"Why would they kill Lucia?" Carlos demands, but his grip on the scalpel has loosened.

"She wasn't supposed to die. She was collateral damage." I lean forward. "I confronted Petrov myself. He admitted everything. Said he wanted to mess with the Bellanti, create friction between our families. And it worked perfectly."

Carlos stands frozen, processing this information.

In that moment of distraction, I break free from my loosened restraints and lunge for the nearest guard. His gun fires, but I'm already moving, driving my shoulder into his stomach.

Air explodes from his lungs as we crash to the floor in a tangle of limbs.

The second guard swings his weapon toward us, eyes wide. With no hesitation—I roll, hauling the first guard's body up as a shield. The second guard's weapon chatters, each impact jolting through the human barrier between us.

Hot blood sprays across my face as the bullets find their mark.

Three seconds. That's all it takes to slip my hand to his waistband, fingers closing around the cool metal. I extend my arm past the dying man, sight down the barrel, and squeeze.

Clean. Precise. The standing guard drops without a sound.

Across the room, Sofia makes her move. She slams her head backward into Carlos's face with a sickening crunch and frees herself from the restraints.

He staggers, the scalpel slipping from suddenly nerveless fingers. Sofia stands, her hand closing around a surgical hammer from the nearby cart.

The hammer comes down on Carlos' forearm with a crack that echoes off the walls. His scream cuts through the room as bones shatter. Before he can recover, Sofia pivots, swinging again. The hammer connects with his temple, the impact dropping him to the floor like a puppet with cut strings.

Carlos struggles to rise, blood streaming down his face, but his legs won't cooperate. Sofia moves toward him, stooping to retrieve his fallen weapon. Her hands are rock-steady as she levels it at his chest.

"This is for my brother," she says, voice barely above a whisper. At the last moment, she adjusts her aim and fires. The bullet carves a furrow along Carlos's side, spinning him back to the floor.

He clutches at the wound, blood seeping between his fingers. His eyes find mine—hatred burning in them even as the light fades.

I pull my phone out, surprised to find my hands trembling with adrenaline. Matteo answers on the first ring.

"I need a cleanup crew," I say flatly. "Now. "

He responds immediately. "On it."

I tuck the phone away and make my way to Sofia, where she stands motionless, staring at Carlos's body. When I reach for her, she collapses against my chest, sobs wracking her body.

"I'm sorry," she whispers against my shirt. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know... I thought..."

I stroke her hair, holding her close. "It's over now."

She pulls back, eyes searching mine. "How can you even look at me after what I've done? I betrayed you. I was sent to destroy you."

"And instead?" I cup her face gently.

"Instead, I fell in love with you," she admits. "God help me, I love you, Lorenzo."

I press my forehead to hers, relief flooding through me. "I love you too," I whisper. "Both of you."

My hand moves to her stomach, resting over the place where our child grows. I've killed men for business, for revenge, for the family name. But this time was different. This time I killed to protect something more precious than power or territory.

Something I never thought I'd have.

Her hand covers mine, a small smile breaking through her tears. "We're having a baby," she giggles.

I kiss her then, gently at first, then with growing intensity. Whatever lies ahead—the truth about her brother, the fallout from tonight—we'll face it together. Sofia and our child are mine to protect now, and I will burn the world to keep them safe.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am

The Sicilian sun warms my skin as I stand on the balcony of our villa, cradling my swollen belly. Six months pregnant and I've never felt more alive, more complete.

Behind me, I hear Lorenzo's footsteps.

"You're supposed to be resting," he says, his arms encircling me, hands coming to rest protectively over mine on my stomach.

"Tell that to your daughter," I reply, tilting my head back against his chest. "She's practicing her kickboxing again."

Lorenzo chuckles, the sound reverberating through my body. "Already fighting. She's definitely a Bellanti."

I turn in his arms, studying the face I've come to know better than my own. The scar above his left eyebrow is new, a permanent reminder of the night I shot Carlos. The night I chose Lorenzo over wrongful vengeance. Truth over lies.

His eyes, though—they're softer now when they look at me. He still looks at everyone else like he wants to kill them, but with me, there's tenderness. With us, there's hope.

The nightmares still come sometimes. Carlos's face contorted in shock as my bullet found its mark.

The spray of blood. The sound of his body hitting the floor.

In my dreams, sometimes he gets back up.

Sometimes, he reaches Lorenzo before I can stop him.

Sometimes, it's my brother's face I see falling instead of Carlos's.

"What are you thinking about?" Lorenzo asks, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

"How we got here?" I answer honestly. "How close we came to losing everything."

Lorenzo's jaw tightens momentarily, then relaxes. The past six months haven't erased the betrayal, but they've transformed it into something else. Something stronger.

"I didn't lose the both of you," he says simply. "That's all that matters."

I shake my head. "It's not that simple, Lorenzo. I drugged you. I lied to you. I came to destroy you."

"And stayed to save me." He presses his lips to my forehead. "I'd say that balances the scales."

Inside, voices rise in laughter. The Bellanti siblings have gathered here in Sicily for the weekend, a tradition that now includes me—the woman who infiltrated their family with vengeance in her heart, only to find herself irrevocably part of it.

"Come," Lorenzo says, pulling me gently back inside. "Matteo's threatening to tell embarrassing stories from my childhood again."

The villa's room is bathed in golden afternoon light. Matteo's sitting on the couch. He was the last to accept me after learning the truth, but his forgiveness, when it came, was complete.

"There she is," Matteo says, raising his glass as we enter. "The woman who tamed the beast."

Isabella elegantly sprawls across a chaise, holding a wineglass, while Olivia sorts through a stack of ultrasound photos with childlike enthusiasm.

"So, Sofia," Matteo says, his tone light but his eyes serious, "has my brother been behaving himself? Or do I need to remind him that pregnant women are always right?"

I smile, settling onto the sofa next to Lorenzo. "He's learning. Slowly."

"Ah, the woes of creating a family," comes a drawling voice from the doorway. Angelo Bellanti, the youngest sibling and notorious playboy, saunters in with a bottle of expensive champagne. His dark hair is artfully tousled, his smile effortlessly charming.

Lorenzo raises an eyebrow. "Don't you think it's time for you to create one for yourself, too?"

Angelo shakes his head dramatically. "What the fuck, man? I'm only twenty-five. Besides, only a fool will get married. No offense to you all."

Matteo throws a pillow at him. "You're a disgrace to the family name."

"On the contrary," Angelo retorts, dodging the pillow. "I'm upholding our finest traditions of hedonism and selective commitment."

Olivia rolls her eyes. "Ignore him, Sofia. He's just bitter because his latest conquest dumped him for a yacht captain in Monaco."

"She did not dump me," Angelo protests, uncorking the champagne with a loud pop.

"We mutually agreed to pursue other opportunities." He pours glasses for everyone except me, then raises his in a toast. "To my future niece—may she have her mother's lethal aim and her father's black card?"

The room erupts in laughter, and even Lorenzo cracks a genuine smile. These moments still feel surreal—sitting among the most feared crime family in New York, sharing jokes and ultrasound photos as if we're just any ordinary family.

Later, when the siblings disperse to freshen up for dinner, Lorenzo leads me to the terrace overlooking the sea.

"I've been thinking about Michael lately," he whispers, his eyes on the horizon.

I take his hand, saying nothing. This is rare—Lorenzo volunteering information about his murdered best friend. The best friend that I didn't even know existed till that day.

"He was more than my friend—he was my brother in everything but blood," Lorenzo continues, his voice low. "When I saw his dead body... Chopped up like that, it broke something in me."

I tighten my grip on his hand, feeling the tension in his body. The rage still simmering beneath the surface.

"Michael and me were all the rage at sixteen. We were racing motorcycles through the back streets of the city; staying up all night talking about our dreams; covering for each other when one of us got into trouble." He shakes his head. "The weight of his absence hits me all over again sometime."

The pain in his voice is raw, unfiltered. This is Lorenzo without his armor—the man beneath the monster.

"We used to work out at this old gym downtown," he continues. "Every morning at

five. He'd always show up with these terrible protein shakes he made himself. Tasted like dirt, but I drank them anyway."

I lean my head against his shoulder, offering what comfort I can.

"We smoked our first cigarettes together behind his father's boathouse. Got so sick we swore we'd never do it again." A ghost of a smile touches his lips at the memory. "We were back there the next day."

"What else?" I ask softly, hungry for these glimpses of the boy who became the man I love.

Lorenzo turns to face me, his eyes distant with memory. "We used to go to this little spot by the lake. We'd talk about what we wanted from life. He always said he wanted something different from what our families had planned. He wanted love—real love."

He gently turns me to face him fully. "He would have liked you."

"How can you be sure?" I ask, searching his eyes.

"Because he always said I deserved someone who would challenge me. Someone brave." He brushes a strand of hair from my face. "Someone who would make me better than I am."

My throat tightens. "Do I? Make you better?"

He leans down and brushes his lips against mine. "You make me want to become the best version of myself."

"I found something today," Lorenzo says later, after dinner. He leads me to his study, a room of rich mahogany and leather that smells perpetually of his cologne and old

books.

From his desk drawer, he withdraws a small velvet box. My heart stutters.

“Lorenzo...”

“It’s not a ring,” he says, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Though I’m intrigued by your reaction. I thought you wanted to wait to get married after giving birth?”

I roll my eyes, feeling the heat rise to my cheeks. “Just open it, smartass.”

Inside the box lies a delicate gold charm, with a tiny bell identical to the one on my bracelet.

“I thought perhaps our daughter might like her own someday,” Lorenzo says quietly.

My throat tightens with emotion. “You’re a sentimental fool beneath all that ruthlessness, Lorenzo Bellanti.”

He touches my chin, tilting my face up to his. “Only for you. Don’t spread rumors—I have a reputation to maintain.”

I lean into him, our foreheads touching. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

Later that night, when everyone has gone to bed, I find Lorenzo standing in what will become the nursery. His back is to me as he gazes out at the sea, shoulders straight but somehow vulnerable in the moonlight.

“What happens if she asks about her other family someday?” I ask softly, voicing the fear that sometimes keeps me awake. “What do I tell her about my brother? About Carlos?”

Lorenzo turns, his expression solemn. “We tell her the truth. That families are complicated. That people make terrible mistakes.” He crosses to me, taking my hands in his. “That sometimes vengeance leads to love, and love is worth protecting at all costs. ”

“Even when I came to you under false pretenses?” I whisper. “Even when I betrayed you?”

“Sofia,” he says my name like a prayer, “you freed me from years of rage and suspicion. You gave me a future to look forward to instead of a past to avenge. Everything else is just... details.”

I shake my head, marveling at how completely our roles have reversed. “I spent two years planning to destroy you, and now I can’t imagine my life without you.”

His hand slides to the nape of my neck, fingers tangling in my hair. “That’s the thing about fate, amore mio. It has a way of correcting itself. ”

“Is that what we are? Fate?”

Lorenzo’s smile is slow, predatory, and achingly familiar. “We’re whatever we choose to be. Kings and queens of our own kingdom.” His hand drops to my stomach. “And now, parents.”

I laugh softly. “Just promise me one thing.”

“Anything.”

“No matter what comes—rival families, old vendettas, new threats—we face it together. No secrets. No lone-wolf heroics.”

Lorenzo’s brow furrows slightly. “You know who I am, Sofia. What I do.”

“I’m not asking you to change,” I clarify. “I’m asking you to include me. To trust me as your partner, not just protect me as your woman.”

He studies me for a long moment, and I see the calculations behind his eyes—the old instinct to shield me from his world.

“Partners,” he says finally, extending his hand as if we’re sealing a business deal.

I take it, but pull him closer until our bodies are flush against each other. “Partners,” I agree, sealing it with a kiss that promises far more than words ever could.

Outside, the Mediterranean laps gently against the shore. Inside, within the walls of this building, a new chapter begins.

We’ll never be an ordinary family with

white picket fences and Sunday dinners.

The scars on Lorenzo’s knuckles remind me of that. That holstered gun at his back reminds me of that.

The men stationed discreetly around the perimeter of the property remind me of that. The nightmares that still wake me sometimes, memories of that night, with Carlos remind me of that. Our love story is written in blood and bullets, in betrayal and redemption.

But it’s ours. Every dark, beautiful moment of it.

Tomorrow, Lorenzo will return to business calls and territory negotiations. I’ll continue adapting Isabella’s nightclub management strategies to our new venture in Sicily. Our daughter will grow completely aware of what she’ll inherit.

For tonight, though, we're just a man and a woman standing in the moonlight, learning to trust in a future neither of us saw coming. A future carved from the ruins of vengeance and built on the unlikely foundation of forgiveness.

"I love you," Lorenzo whispers against my hair.

"I love you too," I reply, meaning it with every fiber of my being.

And at this moment, that's enough. More than enough. It's everything.

THE END

THANK YOU for reading Obsidian Devotion!