



# Saint Of Envy (Tangled Hearts, Sinful Hands #2)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** She was promised to a ruthless don. He took her anyway.

Luciano Moretti, The Saint, is calm, calculating, and dangerously loyal. As the Moretti family's consigliere, he's lived in the shadows until the day he crosses the line.

When Luc steals a rival Don's bride-to-be from the altar, he doesn't just shatter an alliance. He sparks a full-blown mafia war.

Valentina Ricci was supposed to be a bargaining chip. Now she's on the run with the one man who's always watched from a distance. The one man she was never supposed to love.

He's older. Untouchable. Obsessed.

And he's about to lose control.

**Total Pages (Source):** 24

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

LUC

Valentina Ricci is a dangerous obsession. The kind that gnaws at your mind until there's nothing left but reckless desire. She's not mine. She's with another man. Yet, I woke today knowing I had to see her, consequences be damned.

"You're risking everything," Alonzo warns, watching me gather my things.

"Vincent won't miss me for a few hours," I reply, ignoring the judgment in his eyes.

He sighs, resigned. "You realize Leonardo Conti won't forgive this."

"Leonardo doesn't scare me," I say coldly. He might be a Don, but beneath his expensive suits. He's just another arrogant prick exerting dominance through fear.

I arrive at Conti's estate at twilight, slipping effortlessly through the iron gates with practiced lies. His guards, more muscle than brains, let me pass without suspicion. Once inside the grounds, I move silently, guided only by the faint glow from Valentina's window.

My heart pounds when I throw the pebble. It sharply hits the window frame. Moments later, she appears, breathtaking and startled.

"Luc? You shouldn't be here!" she whispers urgently.

"Can I come up?" I don't wait for an answer, scaling the tree effortlessly, slipping into her room. The instant we're face to face, every buried emotion between us flares to

life.

"They set the wedding date," she admits softly, sadness heavy in her voice.

"Then don't marry him," I insist, angered by the hopeless look in her eyes.

"You know it's not that simple."

Instead of answering, I pull her close, my mouth claiming hers fiercely. Forbidden, reckless—it's exactly what we've both craved for years. Our clothes disappear quickly, passion overtaking caution. Every touch, every gasp is desperate, knowing this stolen moment might be our only chance.

Later, as I reluctantly rise to leave, I see the tears in her eyes.

"You don't have to do this," I remind her again, but her resigned expression tells me otherwise.

Before I leave, I place a small box in her hand. Inside, a delicate bracelet with a camera charm, a symbol of the night we first connected.

"You will always have my heart," I whisper, slipping back into the darkness.

But as I climb down the tree, dread coils tightly in my chest. Tonight, I've crossed a line. I betrayed my family and defied powerful men. The fallout will be swift, merciless, and unstoppable.

As I vanish into the shadows, I realize there's no turning back. I didn't defy just Vincent tonight. I ignited a war.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

### VALENTINA

Italy's deep burnt orange sunset pours through the window of the cathedral's dressing room as I stand there looking out the window like a caged bird.

Two weeks—it's been just over two weeks since Luciano climbed through my bedroom window and gave me the most wonderful night of my life.

Granted, it was more like the most wonderful few hours rather than a whole night since our time was short together, but to me it felt like my entire life being distilled down into that one, intensely powerful window of time—or at least the life that I want to have, rather than the one that is now being forced upon me.

"You're so blessed and fortunate to be having a wedding in Italy," the attendant gushes as she fawns over the lace-covered buttons at the back of my bodice.

They feel more like sutures than buttons, stitching me up into the shell of a bride that I don't wish to be, wrapping me up in a beautiful dress the same way that they dress up corpses, in order to hide the fact that I'm dying inside.

But this old woman doesn't even see it. She's on Leonardo's staff, so she sees and says only what he wants her to see and speak.

"The Amalfi Coast," she continues as she looks out the window in front of us. "I've never seen such a lucky bride before. Just look at these dramatic cliffs and the sun-soaked romance of it all. This venue is the epitome of vibrant sophistication if I dare say so."

I wish she wouldn't say anything at all.

I wish that she'd just tend to my dress in silence.

It would make it easier for me to pretend that this is all just a bad dream that I will somehow wake up from, instead of the current nightmarish reality that I face.

What could be worse than being forced to marry someone you don't love?

There's no amount of stunning ocean views or colorful Mediterranean glamour that will make up for that injustice.

She's right that this would be my dream wedding destination if I were marrying Luc instead of Leonardo Conti.

All of the most important families are here to attend Leonardo's wedding and show their respect, all except for the Barones.

The Morettis are here, which means at least I will have my friend, Isla, in the church pews as a warm and friendly face to look out at while I walk toward the end of my freedom.

"Oh here, can't forget this!" the old woman says as she stuffs a tampon down the front of my dress for safekeeping. "Wouldn't want any bloody mishaps in a white gown! And who knows how long you'll be in that dress tonight."

"Wait, how did you?—"

"Oh, I saw the box of feminine products in your toiletries bag, so I just assumed it was that time of the month. Just trying to be helpful," she smiles.

“Are all of Leonardo’s staff this helpful?” I ask in annoyance.

She ignores my question and busies herself, placing another rhinestone-studded hair comb in my dark, swept-up hair. But the truth of the matter is that it isn’t the old woman who stressed me just now, as much as it is the fact that I am late.

My period was supposed to come last week, and it hasn’t. I’m never late. I’m one of those rare women whose cycle arrives each month like clockwork, sometimes absurdly even down to the same hour of the same day. But this time, it hasn’t even made an appearance yet.

Of course, that fills me with panic over the fact that I did just have sex with Luc two weeks ago. But one can’t get pregnant that fast—right?

I’m already emotionally conflicted over my intimate reunion with Luc.

On the one hand, it was the best night of my life and the sensual, impassioned culmination of years’ worth of pining over him.

It only made today worse. Now, not only am I entering a loveless marriage, but I’m doing so while my heart longs for another man.

The intimate encounter that Luc and I shared has only made me want him more and Leonardo less.

And it’s without a doubt that I stand here now in this expensive wedding gown, feeling completely and utterly in love with a man that I cannot have.

I close my eyes and try to picture Luc in my head.

His tall, commanding, muscular physique as he climbed through my bedroom

window.

Those dark eyes and sharply groomed hair hovered over me as he made love to me.

I have never yearned more for another man but also for my independence. The ability to love and to be loved.

Leonardo Conti doesn't love me—he simply wants to own me.

This is all just a game of societal expectations, and I'm sick of it.

I crave a genuine connection, the likes of which I've never had, even during my time living on Leonardo's estate with him.

Living with him was stifling enough, but now—well, now this arranged marriage seeks to trap me in a life that I don't want and didn't ask for.

“Almost time!” the old woman chirps as she takes a step back to look me over. She claps her hands together once and holds them with palms pressed flat against the other as if she's saying a little prayer. “My goodness, how lovely you look, Valentina! Leonardo will be so pleased.”

I have to fight back a gag reflex at the thought of my entire purpose in life being simply to live up to my husband-to-be's expectations. I've spent months styling myself impeccably, reflecting my role as a prestigious bride-to-be, and now I'm about to become a mafia wife.

I don't want this.

“I'll leave you to collect yourself for a moment now, my dear,” she says as she gathers up the makeup brushes and stray flower petals that fell from my bridal

bouquet when someone took it out of its box.

“No cold feet now! Everyone expects to see you walking down that aisle like a queen—Mrs. Conti, my, what a lovely ceremony this will be!”

As soon as the door closes behind her, a heavy dread falls over me, as does a moment of intense, adrenaline-fueled distress.

I have only a few minutes left before that door opens.

Then, I have to walk out in front of a church filled to the brim with prestigious mafia families and powerful guests and take my place at the altar to marry a ruthless, heartless mafia Don.

If I don't do something at this very moment, then this will be my inescapable fate.

And even though the chance of it seems rare, if I am indeed pregnant with Luc's child, then how can I live with myself if I marry another man and doom the child of the man I love to a life beneath Leonardo Conti's thumb?

Although rash, reckless, and likely incredibly dangerous, I feel like I'm left with only one real choice in the matter. I need to flee.

Frantically, I look around the dressing room. There is nothing useful in here to help me escape—no weapons, no car keys, not even a change of clothes—just me in my wedding gown and a window that opens onto the street outside. That will have to do.

Driven by guilt over both abandoning my family duties and possibly carrying the child of a man that I should've never slept with, but am deeply in love with, I make the bold decision to escape Leonardo.



After months of living under his thumb, I know what a life with him would doom me to experience, and I can't accept that, pregnant or not.

I can't go through with a marriage that will make me miserable for the rest of my life.

Leonardo symbolizes everything that I hate—ownership, control, suffocation, all things that he would inflict on me if I were to become “his”.

I would be nothing but an accessory until my old age.

I put all thoughts of a potential accidental pregnancy aside, hike up the skirt of my wedding dress around my thighs, and open the latch on the window, holding my breath as I push the pane open and hope that it doesn't creak.

Big, old churches like these are notoriously creaky, but perhaps God is looking over me now because the window swings open without a sound.

I peer out the window, looking quickly down both sides of the street to make sure Leonardo didn't have the foresight to place guards outside.

There are undoubtedly guards outside the front of the church, as there are outside the door to where I'm soon expected to walk out of.

But I can't see any here outside my window.

Perhaps he didn't think I would be bold enough to climb out the window and escape onto the street.

Honestly, even I didn't think I would be bold enough to do something like this.

I don't even know where to go. My only friend here is Isla, and she is sitting inside

the church right now.

I'll have to rely on the kindness and sympathies of the Italian people meandering the streets outside since I have nowhere to go and nowhere to hide once Leonardo finds out that I've run away from our wedding.

I just need to make it somewhere safe to hide.

I climb out the window as fast as I can.

My dress snags on the window hinge, and I have no choice but to tug at it until it tears.

Once free, I take off running down the street alongside the old brick exterior of the church.

For a second, I feel exhilarated and hopeful that I'll get away from all of this.

Granted, I feel the weight of guilt over my father sitting in the front pew of the church, waiting to see this arrangement come to fruition, he married me off into, , but I can't let that remorse slow me down.

I kick off my heels, letting my bare feet scrape against the sidewalk as I run, and take a sharp turn around the building to disappear into a side alleyway. But no sooner do I turn the corner, one of Leonardo's men turns from his position at the perimeter and spots me.

"What the—hey! Stop right there!" he shouts as soon as he sees me standing out like a sore thumb in my brilliant white dress against the rich, reddish-brown buildings. He whistles for backup, and within seconds, several of Leonardo's men are racing toward me.

Frantically, I look around as panic sets in.

I can't outrun them in this heavy wedding dress, and I can't fight against them as they're much stronger than I am.

They're also armed, although I'm not sure how kindly Leonardo would take to them creating as grisly scene, shooting the bride on his wedding day.

Still, I wouldn't put it past them. Leonardo values appearance and reputation above all else, but he also despises humiliation and rejection.

Such things trigger volatile responses and amplify his intense rage if he feels his power threatened.

It's the one thing that can crack his unsettling public composure, and it's something that I would prefer not to test with my life.

I've been careful all this time not to upset his emotionally volatile demeanor, but this act of betrayal on my part will undoubtedly put him over the edge. I have to get away.

I turn and run in the other direction but can hear them closing in on me from behind.

From my peripheral vision, I can see how narrow the streets here are, and how uneven the cobblestone is too.

I decide to take the chance, crossing the street to see if I can slip away among the people perusing the quaint little shops surrounding the area.

But as soon as I step out onto the street, I hear the squealing brakes of a car and turn to look at a black car stopped merely a few feet from me.

“Get in!” a voice calls from the open window.

Adrenaline pulses through my veins so hard that I can hear my heartbeat in my ears over the sudden fear of nearly being hit by oncoming traffic.

But then Luc sticks his head out of the driver’s side window and motions for me. “Valentina, get inside the car now!”

Instantly, I do as he says and run toward the passenger door that he’s flung open for me.

I jump into the seat and slam the door closed on the train of my wedding dress just as Leonardo’s men reach the side of the car and try to grab at me.

One of them aims his gun at Luc, but Luc punches the gas and runs over the guard’s foot.

Behind us, there’s a loud scream of pain and a few poorly aimed shots fired.

“Get down,” he says as he reaches his arm out protectively and pushes me down in my seat to avoid the gunfire.

But Leonardo’s men aren’t fast enough to stop him as Luc races past the cathedral and drives away.

I look out the side mirror of the car and catch sight of Leonardo as he steps out of the church to watch the tail end of the chaos and the car that Luciano speeds away with me in.

Even from a distance, and in the mirror's distortion, I can see the seething rage on Leonardo’s face.

I only hope that he doesn't take that rage out on my father in my absence.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

LUC

“J ust don’t do anything stupid,” Vincent says, half-joking but also half-serious as he adjusts his tie while we walk toward the church.

The wedding between Leonardo Conti and Valentina Ricci will begin within the hour, and I can’t shake the sick feeling in my stomach over the whole thing.

“Leave him alone,” Isla says gently as she smiles up at her husband. “You’re the one who invited Luciano to come along with us to Italy for this wedding to begin with. Why invite him if you’re just going to torment him over being here?”

“I invited Luc as extra protection,” Vincent answers her matter of fact. “One can never be too sure with Leonardo; the man has the temper of a cat in a hot bath.”

Isla shoots me a sympathetic look, and I try to hide the fact that I am uncomfortable with this whole thing.

It’s not a secret to my cousin that I’ve adored Valentina from afar, but Vincent doesn’t know that I snuck off to see her a couple of weeks ago.

Discovering that would definitely not be well-received, because it would undermine the already tenuous relations between the two mafia families.

Leonardo’s guards fear him too much to mention I visited his estate during his absence.

Otherwise, he would have already come after me.

“What kind of stupid thing are you implying that I might do?” I respond to Vincent bitterly. “It’s not like I’m going to start a war between the families inside a church filled with armed mafia dons and their men.”

“Good,” Vincent chuckles as he takes Isla’s arm and walks inside to be seated. “Just checking.”

As soon as I follow them inside the church, my head fills with the memory of my night with Valentina—the soft, warm touch of her skin, the smell of her hair as it tangled around her shoulders while I thrust myself into her.

And perhaps even greater than the physical pleasure of it all was the haunting, unhappy look in her eyes.

I take my seat next to Vincent and glance around the church.

The Conti family fills a solid portion of the pews, along with other notable families and their higher-ups.

We’re seated midway between the altar and the exit, in a respectable seating position, but one that clearly shows the Morettis aren’t high on the Conti family’s list of friends.

I watch as Leonardo Conti appears at the front of the church to greet his guests.

That man is such a pompous ass, even as far as mafia bosses go.

He’s always calculating his next move to expand power and eliminate his rivals, but he hides his ability to manipulate and seduce beneath a fake charm and polished

etiquette that conceals his darker intentions.

His cold charisma doesn't fool me one bit.

He's an entitled jackass who believes deeply in his inherent right to power, status, and control over others.

I've heard he derives sadistic pleasure from controlling women. To me, that makes him weak.

When he walks over to greet Vincent, I stare directly at Leonardo's calculating eyes.

He, like the rest of us in the mafia, is always assessing for weakness in those around him.

His expensive, perfectly tailored suits and lavish wedding ceremony might project wealth and power, but he's merely compensating for profound, unredeemable moral failings.

"Thank you for coming," Leonardo sneers as he shakes Vincent's hand.

It never ceases to amaze me how these Dons dance around each other with formalities. If I were a Don, I would cut the crap. My strength would be my genuine disinterest in posturing around other men, especially with the likes of Leonardo Conti.

"Thank you for the invitation," Vincent says with a cold, polite smile.

Even though they have had occasional dealings here and there, the two men are rivals, not friends.



As is apparent from how Leonardo's broad-shouldered and physically imposing build hovers over Vincent's seated position.

Vincent's presence is just as intimidating as Leonardo's is, but it would be rude of him to stand in the pew during Leonardo's ceremony, so he remains seated and simply shakes the bastard's hand instead.

Leonardo greets Isla, kissing the top of her hand when it's offered to him, before looking at me.

It amuses me how we're almost the same age, yet Leonardo has a light streak of silver shooting through his impeccably groomed dark hair.

Perhaps that means his days on this earth are fewer than he thinks.

He doesn't bother greeting me with more than a nod and a sarcastic remark, considering me a lesser rival and underestimating me because of my disciplined and inferior position as consigliere.

"Fitting that you should bring such a Saint into the church," he chides, referring to my reputation that remains elusive from my cousin.

I quickly dismiss his taunt before it raises any suspicions from Vincent that I might have my agenda within the family hierarchy and treat the remark as a benign compliment.

"We can't all be as Godlike as you now, can we, Leo?" I ask with a smirk.

I can see in his eyes how much offense he takes at my calling him "Leo", and I catch a look of warning from Vincent. Leonardo is driven by an insatiable hunger for respect and absolute power, so offending him at his own wedding is a bad idea as far

as Vincent is concerned.

“I think I’ll catch a moment of fresh air before the ceremony begins,” I say as I stand to excuse myself before tensions rise further.

“Good idea,” Vincent says beneath his breath as he lets me out of the pew.

As I walk out of the church, I glimpse Leonardo walking toward his place at the altar, showing that there isn’t much longer before the ceremony will commence. It’s at that exact moment that I get a strange feeling—a hunch, or a sixth sense perhaps — that Valentina might do something reckless.

I step outside the church and walk around the side of the building, noting that Leonardo’s men guard only the front of the church since there is no back exit to the building.

But there are windows all along the sides of the building.

I peer into a few of them, and then I see the one window that Valentina is in.

She’s standing there inside the small room, staring at her stunning reflection in the mirror.

But there’s a look of rash determination in her eyes, one that hints at her doing something unexpected, something that might get her in a whole hell of a lot of trouble.

I thought previously that this entire situation was hopeless, that she would devoutly go through with this arranged marriage in allegiance to her familial duties, whatever they may be. But now, as I catch a small glimpse of her through the window, I’m not so sure about that.

As the music inside the church plays, and the doors at the entrance close, I make the choice not to go back inside.

Instead, I head to my car, start the engine, and pull up alongside the narrow street that buttresses the cathedral.

I don't know why I'm sitting here in my car waiting for something to happen with no clear sign that anything will, but it beats seeing Valentina walk miserably down the aisle looking beautifully tortured in her gown as she marries a man that deserves far less than her.

As much as I want to see her, I don't think I can stand seeing her marry that man.

So, I sit in my car staring at the street up ahead and the side of the church building and wait.

I'm not sure if I'm waiting for the ceremony to be over and for Vincent to scold me for having rudely missed it, or for something else to happen.

It isn't until I see a window at the side of the building open and a wad of white wedding dress being shoved through it that I realize exactly what I'm waiting for.

As soon as Valentina clears the window, kicks off her heels, and takes off running down the street, I know that she's in danger.

"What the hell are you thinking?" I murmur to myself as I put the car in drive, knowing that in a matter of seconds, she will turn the edge of the building and step straight into the line of sight of Leonardo's guards. And when she does—I will be there.

There's a split second of time between when the guards see her and when Valentina

takes off running towards my car down the street, that I almost instantly deliberate on the consequences of what I'm about to do.

There are immense personal and political risks in intervening here.

If I swoop in to rescue her from Leonardo's men, who are in hot pursuit of the runaway bride, it will start a war, not just between the Moretti and the Conti family, but likely also between me and Vincent since my cousin won't take fondly to me crossing this line.

But that deliberation takes less than a second before I slam on the gas and speed toward Valentina, because I already knew in my heart that I'm willing to protect her fiercely from anyone that she runs from.

She steps out in front of my car without looking, making a frenzied last-ditch attempt to cross the street and outrun these guys. Immediately, I roll down my window and shout for her to get in.

For a split second, she looks like a deer in headlights, frozen in shock and fear.

"Valentina, get in the car now!" I urge as I pop open the passenger door and pull my gun up toward the windshield to fire on her pursuers if need be.

Thankfully, she jumps into the car just in time for me to avoid firing any shots, and also, I get the bonus of running over one of the guys' feet.

"Get down!" I say as I reach to push her below the window as I punch the gas and race away from the church, leaving Vincent and Isla behind in what is sure to be a hot mess of a situation that I just helped to create.

Beside me, Valentina is breathing heavily, her face as pale as snow, still in shock, her

breasts heaving with ragged breaths at the top of her dress.

“What are you doing here?” She asks as she turns to look at me with grateful surprise.

“How did you know I was going to run?”

I narrow my eyes as the realization of what just happened sets in, and I turn to look at her. She’s scared but still exudes a sort of quiet strength that is beautiful beyond words.

“I didn’t,” I say truthfully.

I don’t know what I’m going to do now, but the one thing that I know is that I will not let Leonardo come for her.

Never again will I allow anyone to take Valentina from me or coerce her into anything against her will.

I fiercely protect those I love, and though Leonardo Conti may think I’m a “saint,” that’s only because he hasn’t seen the unholy wrath I unleash on anyone who touches Valentina Ricci, because she belongs with me.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

VALENTINA

The moment I step into Luc's car, the destination stops mattering.

As long as it's far away from Leonardo and his men, that's good enough for me.

With Luc, I feel safe—more than that, I know I am safe.

He treats me like a person instead of like property, as both Leonardo and my father do.

Besides, it doesn't matter where I'm going because I don't think I even have a home anymore.

I'm in another country with no one to turn to, and back in Vegas, I have only Leonardo's estate or my father's house.

But my father is part of the reason I ended up in this mess with Leonardo to begin with.

He's the one responsible for my arranged marriage to Leonardo, a "strategic family arrangement" as he called it.

And as much as I love my father, I'm now deeply conflicted and frustrated with our relationship.

What kind of man would put his daughter in this position, committed to a husband

she doesn't care for?

I feel for my father. He was always a neutral man who kept a low profile and tried to get by without getting sucked into too much trouble.

But his fatal flaw was turning to Leonardo when his business struggled, and he needed a loan.

Asking a Conti for money means that you are in their debt—or, as the case turned out to be, I'm the one responsible for paying my father's debt by giving my hand in marriage.

I tried to do my duty and passively go along with it, but that night with Luc changed things.

It reawakened a personal desire that has been burning hot ever since and quickly led me to finding my agency outside of my family loyalties.

Still, this can never work between us. It's a tragedy waiting to be written.

"You know we can't actually be together, right?" I ask him, wanting Luc to convince me otherwise. "Neither of our families would allow it."

"Do I look like a man who lets mafia politics and societal expectations impede taking what I want?" he asks without looking at me. "I know the risks of what we just did, Valentina. You left Leonardo Conti embarrassed at the altar during his own wedding, and I just stole you out from under him."

Funny, I hadn't thought of Luc as "stealing" me until just now. It seemed at first that he was just there in the right place at the right time to help me escape. But in truth, Luciano stole my heart a long time ago.

“You’re a consigliere, not a Don,” I remind him carefully. I’m used to having to tread lightly around Leonardo so as not to set him off, and those habits die hard. “You’ll have to answer to Vincent too, for what you did in helping me escape.”

“Yes, I’m well aware of that. It’s not something for you to worry about, though. I’ll take care of it. Besides, Vincent doesn’t have as much power over my life as he thinks.”

I can pick up on a hint of envy in Luc’s voice, as if he thinks he might be a better leader than his cousin.

But there’s a quality that I’ve seen almost every Don share in common—a ruthless, cold, selfish demeanor that puts them above others.

Vincent might be an exception to that with Isla, but he still has a hard edge around his heart.

Luc doesn’t strike me as being that way, especially not with how he seems both so adoring and protective of me at the same time.

I look down at my wrist and pull the charm bracelet he gave me out from beneath the sleeve of my wedding dress.

Luc catches sight of it and seems surprised that I’m still wearing it, especially on my wedding day.

I can only imagine that Leonardo would have ripped it from me later tonight, behind closed doors, after the wedding reception was over.

Thankfully, I don’t need to think about that scenario now.



“You know, being a don doesn’t seem like it’s all that it’s cracked up to be,” I say, trying to ignore the consequences we’ll both face if our families catch us. “There are sacrifices that men who are dons have to make.”

“Like their souls?” he jokes, lightening the mood a bit as we drive.

“I don’t think you could sell your soul if you tried,” I smile back at him. “You’re much too good of a man, Luc.”

“Why did you agree to marry him, Valentina?” Luc asks. “Did your father pressure you?”

“I don’t want to talk about that right now,” I say as I look out the window at the evening landscape rushing past the car window. “But you already know that my father commands respect with his mere presence. He doesn’t even need to raise his voice inside his house—his word is law within my family.”

“From what I know of your father, he loves you. You’re the jewel of his eye.”

“Perhaps,” I say forlornly. “It’s complicated.”

My father is a weakened man these days, and I don’t want to think about it now, especially knowing that he will have to deal with Leonardo directly now, and that Leonardo will see my escape from him as the ultimate betrayal.

“What is Vincent going to think of you taking his plane?” I say as we pull up outside a private airport.

“Eh,” Luc shrugs. “He already thinks he’s the most powerful man in the universe. I’m sure having his consigliere borrow his jet won’t do anything to humble him. Besides, by the time he catches up with me, we’ll have already landed in Vegas.”

Luc's phone lights up on the console between us, and I can see from the caller ID that it's Vincent.

"Speak of the Devil," he says as he silences it. "I'll deal with him later. The important thing right now is to get you out of Italy and somewhere safe."

"And where will that be, exactly?"

"With me."

When we board the plane, I stand in the aircraft's belly, barefoot and still in my wedding dress, while Luc talks to the pilot. I can hear him giving the man some story about how Vincent approved the flight and there's "no need to call and check since Vincent and Isla are enjoying an event reception and don't wish to be bothered right now".

The pilot glances over at me several times with a raised brow, but in the end, he does as Luc directs.

Luc has an air of confidence about him, along with the sort of honorable reputation that no one questions his loyalty to his Don—perhaps they should.

I bet Vincent might after this incident.

Once the plane is in the air, Luc pours us both a drink from the extensive minibar on board.

"Scotch?" He asks as he hands me a glass.

At this moment, I would drink anything to dull my nerves a bit but think better of it at the last second.

“Thank you,” I say, shifting uncomfortably in my seat because the gown I’m wearing is so obnoxiously bulky.

“Here, let’s take care of that too,” he says with a small chuckle as he walks to the back of the plane and returns a moment later with a bathrobe folded over his arm. “Sorry, but there’s not really a change of clothes on here. The only thing I could find is this robe.”

“That will work,” I smile as I take it from him. It looks delightfully more comfortable than this god-awful dress. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure. Now, before I forget, let’s go over a few things that will be important to establish as boundaries before we land in Vegas.”

“Boundaries?”

“Yeah. I’m going to bring you to Vincent’s Casino,” he says, knocking back his glass of scotch in one gulp.

“It’s the safest place that I can think of to keep you protected for now.

Leonardo is going to be beyond furious, and he’s going to do everything in his power to get you back.

And since you and I both know that we shouldn’t be together, we’re going to need to keep things at arm’s length. ”

“I understand,” I say, already feeling the rising chemistry between us, even on this plane. “There’s a lot at stake.”

“Which is why you’re going to have to follow every safety rule that I lay out once we

get there.

Otherwise, I won't be able to keep you safe.

"His voice is strained, and I can't help but wonder if it's because of the constant threat that we'll be under or the emotional danger of our forbidden relationship.

"If Leonardo finds out that I care about you, Valentina, he will use it as a weakness to exploit."

I think that's the first time Luc has said aloud that he cares for me, even though I already knew it by his actions and the fact that he's risked so much just to help me escape from that hell.

"I promise I won't reveal anything to anyone," I swear. "Not even Isla."

Luc nods and then turns to close the door at the front of the plane that separates the cockpit from the rest of the aircraft. Despite the cockpit door already being shut, he also secured the secondary door before getting another drink.

"You can get changed here if you want," he says over his shoulder. "The bathroom is a rather tight space for that absurdly enormous dress."

He turns around, highlighting the fact that he really is a gentleman. But I can't get undressed because I can't unbutton the bodice of my dress.

"Can you help me, please?" I ask hesitantly.

When Luc turns back around to look at me, there's a darkened desire in his eyes, as if he's trying to silence his sinful thoughts before they get the better of him.

Our adrenaline is still running high as he walks to stand behind me and unbuttons my dress.

There are so many lace-covered buttons. It's a painstakingly slow process, one that becomes more insatiably charged with each button that he loosens.

I can feel his hands lingering along my backbone.

He traces gently down the sides of my spine as he goes.

I can hear his breath become labored as he reaches the last button.

He sucks in a sharp inhale as my dress hits the floor.

I turn to face him before reaching for the robe, wearing nothing but the delicate white lace bra and panties that I had on beneath my gown, and the charm bracelet that he gave me with the tiny gold camera dangling from it.

Luc reaches his fingertip to graze across my nipple. It feels divine through the lace and sends a quiver down the inside of my thighs.

"Didn't I just mention the rules?" he asks, with a hint of sultry mischief in his eyes.

"Yes, you did," I say, joining him in his banter. "Arm's length and no giving away that there are any feelings between us. But I thought that only started when the plane touches down in Las Vegas?"

Instantly, Luc reaches his arm behind my waist and pulls me against his body.

The composed, controlled demeanor that he's held onto until now snaps, and his protective instincts over me create a new desire that consumes me.

I'm not sure yet if his actions outside the church have saved me, set me free, or plunged us both into a dire and inescapable situation.

But with Luc, I feel more alive than I ever have before.

I reach down to undo his pants, sliding them off over his hips until they drop to the floor of the plane.

I'm practically overwhelmed with delight when I see his very ready and waiting cock, erect and so filled with physical desire that the swollen tip is pink with pressure.

With only the two of us on the plane and the cabin door locked, nothing stops us from satisfying our mutual desires again.

Luc snaps open the clasp of my delicate bra with ease and tosses it aside, taking a moment to stare at me in awe before slipping his fingers into the side of my panties and dropping them to the floor.

Every time Luc looks at me, it makes me feel like I'm being worshipped.

It's a feeling that I'm not used to. I think I could get used to it easily, maybe even dangerously easily.

It's too hard to stay cautious when his mouth is on mine.

It's too hard to focus on my desire for independence when I'm overcome with my desire for Luc.

Perhaps we are both hungry to choose our own fate and chase our own ambitions, and maybe the loneliness that we've suffered while being part of other people's stories has pushed us together despite knowing that the world that we're a part of is against

our union.

Who knows—maybe love can exist even inside this violent world of ours.

I push all thoughts of the outside world from my mind as Luc lifts me onto his hips and presses my body against the aircraft's side, using the plane's wall to steady us both as he lowers me onto his cock and enters me.

Even if we weren't flying over the city in an airplane, I would still feel as if I were flying above the world right now.

I run my hands across his chest, over his shoulders, and down his back, as I feel his muscles work, flex with every push, and pull, he makes between my thighs.

Our tongues tangle together, and I feel intoxicated by the taste of him—strength and power, need, and desire.

Those are the things that Luciano tastes like to me.

He groans with pleasure as he thrusts deeper, touching a place deep inside of me that makes my entire body tremble uncontrollably.

And as we soar through the sky toward Las Vegas, Luc and I soar toward ecstasy.

I curve my pelvis against him, wanting to draw him in even further, and he moans in response. It makes me feel empowered knowing that I can cause his body to react to mine. Luc makes me feel like I can do anything.

“You have my heart, Valentina,” he whispers against the side of my face as he kisses the lobe of my ear. “My heart, my body, even my soul—it's yours.”

His words send me cascading over the tipping point in a crashing, nearly violent seizure of pleasure that grips my entire body and causes me to lose control.

No sooner do I erupt into climax than Luc follows, clawing one hand against the side of the plane over my shoulder to keep us both from falling.

I don't know if the pilot can hear us, but the sound Luc emits as he presses his cock into me to soak up the last seconds of orgasm is a primal growl.

After that remarkable in-flight encounter, I put on the robe, curl up against Luc's in the wide leather seat, and rest my head on his chest. I let my eyes close and feel his hand stroking the side of my hair.

"This won't be easy," he whispers as he wraps one arm around me to pull me close. "Being near each other, keeping the emotional tension between us a secret from everyone else, all while dealing with the fallout of what we just did."

"I know," I say as I feel myself drift off into an exhausted, but comfortable sleep that falls over me.

"But at least I'll be free of Leonardo Conti, and with you instead."



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

LUC

“Do you have any idea what you’ve fucking done?” Vincent bellows.

Even without seeing Vincent’s expression over the phone, I can practically hear the bulging, angry vein at the side of his neck. I knew that taking his plane would cause some drama between us, but in my defense, I sent it right back to Italy after Valentina and I disembarked.

“My apologies for taking your plane without asking,” I say, avoiding the real reason he’s pissed off at me.

“You know that taking the plane is the least of it,” he hisses.

“Leonardo Conti is livid. He’s beyond livid.

He’s fucking seething with rage. I’ve got no love for that asshole, but this is going to cause trouble not just with the Conti family but with all the leaders of other mafia families as well.

Conti is a master manipulator, and it won’t take him long before he passes around threats like Halloween candy.”

“I’m not the one who left him at the altar,” I say sarcastically, knowing full well that the remark is going to earn me Vincent’s ire.

“No, that’s true,” he matches my sarcasm and adds a helping of bitter reality to it.

“You’re just the one who helped his bride escape.

Leonardo is obsessively possessive of what is his.

He sees that girl as the ultimate prize, a symbol of his dominance over anything he sets his sights on.

You and I both know that marriage wasn’t about love or even convenience or a lucrative transaction between families—it was about control, and you’ve just helped Valentina Ricci fracture his carefully controlled image.

It’s going to ignite retaliation on his part. ”

“I’ll deal with that if it happens.”

“Oh, there’s no if—only when. You can expect it. You’ve wounded his ego, Luc. If he disliked you before, you can now expect him to hate you with a violent fervor.”

“I don’t think Leonardo Conti is as mighty as everyone thinks he is,” I counter. “He’s a desperate man. Only desperate men try to force women to marry them.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I wish they hadn’t. Vincent essentially did the same to Isla back when they first entered the marriage. It was a transaction.

“Vincent, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean?—”

“It’s fine,” he interrupts. “What happened between Isla and me was unique. And I don’t disagree with you that Leonardo likely has nothing more than a twisted obsession and control complex over Valentina.

But that doesn’t change the fact that even desperate and insecure men can be

dangerous, especially after rejection.

Let me know if anything changes. Isla and I can take the plane back to Vegas if a situation erupts. ”

“No, you two enjoy your time there. I have a handle on things here,” I say, not wanting to strain the already tense relationship with my cousin after what I’ve just done.

After hanging up with Vincent, I glance over at Valentina, who is sitting at the bar of the casino, talking with Alonzo. To his credit, the underboss isn’t freaking out yet, which is contrary to his usual impatient and overly aggressive demeanor.

“You know she can’t stay here, right?” Alonzo asks when I walk over to them. “You may be in hot water with Vincent, but I intend to stay out of this debacle. You are both nothing more than lovesick puppies.”

He rolls his eyes and walks away, but he is right about not staying here. A casino club isn’t really a hospitable environment for Valentina to stay in, even if it’s heavily fortified.

“Come on,” I say as I reach out to give her my hand. “I’m going to take you to the hotel for the time being. Guards protect the entire building.”

She smiles, looking nervous as some of the adrenaline that we had rushing through us in the immediate aftermath of her escape is now being replaced by the thought of looming consequences. But as soon as she takes my hand and stands up, my phone rings. I take one look at it and know who it is.

“Excuse me for one more moment,” I say, not giving her any sign of who it is because I don’t want her to worry. “I have to take this, but I’ll be right back.”

I motion for Gabriel to pour Valentina a drink at the bar if she wants anything and to keep an eye on her while I take this call.

Hopefully, he won't talk her ear off with a bunch of bartenders' gossip that he's amassed.

When I'm out of earshot, I answer the phone and wait, saying nothing until I hear Leonardo's painstakingly controlled voice.

From Leonardo Coni's first few words, I knew Vincent was right—he is enraged.

“Hello Luciano,” he says. His words sound like they're being pushed through gritted teeth with supreme effort. “I'd like to keep this call professional, but I am calling with a demand, not a negotiation.”

“A demand? Seems a bit off-putting to start a call that way.”

“You little prick,” he snarls, letting his fury uncork itself.

“You speak to me as if you think you and I are equals. We are most certainly not. You're nothing but a weaselly little consigliere with no actual power over anything at all—not even your own cock.

I suppose that's why you coveted my bride. ”

“She's not your anything,” I hiss back at him. “Valentina has her own agency. She isn't your possession. You don't own her.”

“To the contrary, I do. And you've stolen something that belongs to me. So, I'm going to give you one chance to give it back.”

My skin crawls when I hear him refer to Valentina as “it” instead of a living, breathing human being. I don’t care if Leonardo is a Don or not—he’s human garbage, as far as I’m concerned. Still, he’s human garbage with power.

“I’m not handing her back over to you,” I say defiantly. “She doesn’t want to marry you, and she’s under my protection now. So, you can take your sick fantasies about power over women and find another target. Valentina Ricci is off the table.”

There’s a moment of heavy silence that hangs in the air between us. I’d be a fool to think that he was using the time to think. Instead, he’s using the time to rein in his temper enough to formulate words. If we were talking in person, I know that he would have already tried to blow my head off.

“I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that you already know what a perilous situation it is that you have placed yourself in the middle of by getting involved in my family’s business.

And I’m also going to assume that you know my reputation of being a cunning and ruthless man with a propensity for enjoying violence,” Leonardo says slowly.

“So let me make this all very clear and easy for you to understand that you have no options here, Luciano. Either give me back my bride, or others will pay for your transgression.”

“What others?” I ask as I try to navigate this conversation carefully, showing no weakness.

“Oh, Valentina didn’t tell you?” Leonardo’s voice is thick and sly.

“Her hand in marriage was the only thing keeping her father out of the crosshairs. You see, Giovanni Ricci has gotten himself into a bit of an entanglement that he can’t

get out of.

I did my best to help the old fool, with payment expected, of course.

But now you've gone and soured things. If you don't return the woman to my possession, things will go badly for him. "

I don't know what kind of mess Valentina's father has gotten himself into, but I intend to find out. Still, that has no bearing on my commitment to keeping Valentina safe and with me. No one will hold her responsible for her father's mistakes, whatever they may be.

"Valentina isn't responsible for her father's sins," I say to him.

"Spoken like a true Saint," Leonardo laughs. "But I don't think you're taking this seriously enough, Luciano. I'm not the only enemy that your family has."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask angrily. I'm getting sick of dealing with this guy and his thinly veiled threats. "If you have something to say, just come out and say it, Leonardo. Stop playing games like a child."

I've insulted his pride, and so he lashes out.

"Do you know why you're not the leader of the Moretti family, and Vincent is?

" he snarls. "Because you let your emotions run you, Luciano. You're weaker than your cousin, and you shouldn't have poked your nose into the business of proper leaders.

Does Vincent even know you keep trying to play at being the alpha male?

I'm betting not. He'll find out soon enough though, when the wolves come knocking at the door of the Moretti house.

You're a fool to think that you're dealing with just one man.

My reach stretches much further than you can even imagine.

The Barones, for starters, would be more than pleased to collect their pound of flesh from your family.

Angelo Barone and I have some business together, which makes him an amicable partner of mine.

You'd be wise to rethink my demand and hand Valentina Ricci back over to me before you dig a grave for not only yourself but everyone else that you care about as well. ”

Without thinking first, I abruptly hung up the call. I don't want to hear anymore of Leonardo's bullshit demands.

I'm usually level-headed, cool-tempered, and pragmatic.

But right now, I can feel my blood racing through my veins like a thousand small rivers inside of me.

No one will bully me, and I won't surrender Valentina.

And if Leonardo Conti coaxes Angelo Barone out from hiding in order to combine forces with him, then they'll have to get through me first.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

VALENTINA

I can't help but notice that Luc seems more on edge now that we've gotten up into the hotel suite than he was down at the casino bar. When he returned from taking his phone call, his demeanor, although he tried to hide it, seemed different and more worried than before.

"Is everything alright?" I ask as he pours himself a scotch from the minibar and takes a seat on the long couch in the living room of the suite.

"Yes, everything is fine," he says with a tight smile. "Are you okay? I know you've been through a lot, and I'm sure it's difficult having everything up in the air right now. I promise that we'll get you settled as soon as possible."

"Settled?" I ask, not even sure what that means for me anymore.

I sigh and sit down beside him as Luc hands me his glass to take a sip, but I decline.

"Do you remember the conversation that we had while we stood in the corner of that gala years ago? The one that made me giggle and garnered the attention of everyone around us."

"I do," he says with a small chuckle. "There were at least two other men standing close enough for me to hear their remarks when they looked over and saw you smiling so widely. Honestly, I wanted to punch their lights out for thinking such salacious thoughts about how delicious you looked in your dress."



“You never told me that!” I laugh. “Well, I was thinking more about what you said that made me giggle. We had been talking about my love of photography, and you suggested I take a series of candid mafia photos—a sort of visual exposé. I responded that photographing the mafia would likely anger them, and you joked I could use the photos for their obituaries if they dared to harm me.”

Luciano laughs again and nods as he remembers the conversation vividly. “That should have been your first clue that I didn’t want anyone else touching you.”

I can feel the heat rise to my cheeks when I think back to that night.

I knew I felt a burning attraction to him, but I was still uncertain if Luc felt the same way about me.

After all, he was older, in a position of authority as a consigliere, and could have had any woman he chose.

It didn’t seem plausible that he and I would ever have the chance to be anything more than friends, and yet—here we are.

“It’s been a long time since you and I have had the chance to sit and talk,” I muse as he refills his glass.

“When you climbed into my window, there wasn’t much talking that night, and then after the incident at the church in Italy and on the plane ride home, well, there wasn’t much talking then either. I’ve missed our friendship.”

“So have I.” Luc leans forward to kiss me and, as much as I want to, I feel like maybe we should slow things down a little.

Everything has been a crazy, passion-fueled, adrenaline rush since he climbed

through my window, and I want to make sure that it isn't just a forbidden lust that is behind our feelings.

"I think maybe we should take things slow now," I suggest as I let my lips brush against his. "Get to know each other again in the midst of all this chaos."

For a second, I worry about upsetting or angering Luc with my idea. But he isn't at all opposed to it. Instead, he smiles and takes my hand in his.

"I agree," he says as he leans back against the couch. "So, tell me, have you been using that old camera at all?"

I had almost forgotten about the things that I left behind in Leonardo's estate when I ran from the cathedral.

The camera that Luc gave me is still there, although it might not be there much longer now that I'm gone.

I wouldn't put it past Leonardo to destroy my things in a fit of rage over my betrayal and the fact that I made him look like a fool without power over me in front of an audience of his peers.

"Sometimes," I say wistfully. "Mostly, I just looked through the lens."

Luc cocks his head to one side as if trying to understand why I would look through a camera without actually using it. So, I let him in on one of the little secrets that kept me from wanting to jump out of the window of Leonardo's estate in order to escape my fate.

"Sometimes," I say thoughtfully as I recount the memory. "I would take off the lens cap and stand at the window, looking through the camera lens at the world outside.

I'd use my imagination to add things to the images that I could see through the camera."

"What kinds of things would you add?" he asks, genuinely interested in my thoughts again, as he always seems to be, even from the first moment we met.

I hesitate to tell him I would often picture him on the other side of that camera lens. "Just people that I would rather be with and places that I would rather be in," I say, leaving the interpretation vague for now.

"Well, I'm glad that you had the camera to keep you company when I wasn't there to do it myself," he says, surprising me with how tender his remark is.

I want him with every fiber of my being, but a part of me knows that this flame might burn too hot, and I don't want to risk it burning out. Many things hinder Luc and me from being together, primarily my betrothal to a family rival.

"You know, I used to wish secretly that you were at every gathering that I had to attend," I admit. "I would scan the guests, looking for your face or the shape of your profile amidst the conversations being had."

Luc's eyes light up as if we're both feeling the excitement of that long-lasting forbidden romance that started years ago.

"I would always spot you as soon as I walked inside any venue that we were both at," he says.

"I could pick you out from the crowd a mile away—those endless dark eyes and the way your hair falls in waves against your shoulders. Sometimes, your father would show you off, and it was all I could do to keep myself from intervening and whisking you away. Especially when I saw other men looking at you. There was more than one

night that I left those events, wishing I had broken a few necks.”

“I wish you would have—whisked me away, not broken anyone’s neck,” I clarify.

Luc laughs lightly and tightens his grasp on my hand.

The emotionally charged conversation about what began as our friendship—a mutually shared experience in a sea of mafia settings that we both felt frequently averse to, and progressed to deepening, secret desires about the forbidden romance we both knew we shouldn’t entertain ideas about.

“My father would have locked me in my room forever if he knew I was having secret fantasies about an older man,” I tease.

“And yet now he wants to marry you off to one,” he grimaces. “And a bad one, at that. Valentina, why is he?—”

Before he can ask me about my father’s questionable judgment and before I have to wrestle again with the conflicted way that I feel about it, I interrupt him.

“So, if we’re supposed to keep a distance from each other and act like we didn’t just sleep with each other before I ran away from my arranged marriage to your rival, does that mean that I’m going to have to stay in this hotel alone?”

“Not necessarily,” Luc says, quickly forgetting about the question he was getting ready to ask me.

“I’ll just let everyone know that I’ll be staying here with you in order to protect you.

There’s more than one bedroom inside this suite, so Alonzo and Gabriel and the others will assume that I’m simply keeping you under my protection. ”

“Are you sure about that?” I ask. Isla hinted, I’ve noticed that Vincent is aware his cousin has been watching me from afar. I doubt they’re the only ones who can see the way Luc and I seem drawn to each other any time we’re near.

“Sure enough,” he answers.

At that very moment, there’s a knock at the door and Luc reacts instantly by drawing his gun. It surprises me the way his reflexes jump to a heightened threat level, especially since we’re here on his own family’s territory.

“It’s me,” a familiar voice calls from the other side of the door.

I recognize Vincent’s underboss’s voice as Luc shoves his gun back in its holster. I remain seated on the couch as I watch him open the door. Alonzo steps inside and glances over Luc’s shoulder at me.

“Jesus, tell me you’re not fucking Leonardo Conti’s wife,” he says with an exasperated groan.

“She’s here because she needs a safe place to stay,” Luc says without directly answering him. “And she’s not Leonardo Conti’s wife.”

“Well, she was supposed to be,” Alonzo huffs, still glancing over at me as I try to pretend like Luc and I weren’t just sitting here having an intimate conversation about our feelings.

“Why are you here, Alonzo?” Luc asks. “Did something happen?”

“Yeah, actually. Gabriel said he heard word on the street that some of Conti’s men have been snooping around our neck of the woods.

I wanted to give you a heads-up before you get yours blown off.

Also, you should probably keep the girl inside for a while until things die down a bit.

If Leonardo really wants her back, he might send one of his goons to snatch her off the street. ”

“He doesn’t want Valentina back,” Luc grumbles. “He only wants control over the situation and her.”

“Same thing,” Alonzo huffs before turning to leave. “How long are you planning on keeping her holed-up in here, anyway?”

“As long as it takes for me to figure out a better plan to keep her safe from being forced to return to the Conti household.”

“Godspeed,” Alonzo chuckles as he walks out the door, mumbling under his breath about how this is the reason he doesn’t have a woman because they are “more trouble than they’re worth”.

“He’s rough around the edges, isn’t he?” I joke after Luc shuts the door.

“We all are,” he says as he grabs his jacket.

“I thought you were going to stay here with me?” I ask, unable to hide my disappointment.

“I need to do a perimeter sweep and keep my eyes open and alert for a few days. I suspect Leonardo will want to make a move that will help him save face after the embarrassment he suffered in Italy. He blames me for that, not just you,” he explains.

“It’s best if you stay here where I know you’ll be safe for a few days while I check things out.

I promise I’ll be back soon, and you’ll have everything you need in here until I return.

If you need anything urgent, just ask a member of the hotel staff.

They’re all loyal employees of Vincent’s. They’ll know how to find me.”

After he leaves, I walk over to the window to look outside.

A few minutes later, I can see Luc walking across the street outside the building.

It’s ironic that I’m right where I started, stuck inside a building.

Except that this time, instead of dreading the return of a man like I used to every time Leonardo came home to his estate, I’m eagerly awaiting Luc’s return.

It worries me that he’s out there, managing the Moretti mafia family while Vincent is still in Italy with Isla, and while Leonardo is likely scheming up a way to exact his vengeance on us both at this very moment.

If that wicked man had his way, he’d kill both Luc and his cousin and force me to return to his side.

The only thing currently preventing that from happening is the fact that such action against another Don’s family, and those under its protection, would constitute a war.

Still, I don’t think that Leonardo will just let this go.

He’s never been one to open the cage and let a bird fly free.

For the next few days, I see Luc only for a few moments at a time.

Sometimes, Alonzo is with him, and we both act as if this situation is nothing more than Luciano stepping in to protect a vulnerable friend.

Other times, Luc is alone and able to stay just long enough for it to make me long for him even more once he has to leave again.

There is something he's not telling me—something going on that has his guard up and our time together limited. And it isn't until he finally comes back to the hotel suite late one night that I have time to ask him about it.

“What's going on out there?” I ask with a furrowed brow as he comes in and takes off his jacket, and sets his gun on the coffee table. “Are things escalating? Have you heard from Leonardo?”

“I'm taking care of it,” he assures me with a smile that leaves lingering questions. “You don't need to worry. I promised you I would protect you.”

“That doesn't exactly answer my question,” I frown. “Luc, I can't stay locked up inside this hotel suite forever. This is no way to live. I feel like I'm still being imprisoned by Leonardo's hold over me, even though he's not here and I'm not trapped inside his estate.”

“I know,” he sighs. “And I promise that I'm working on it. But for now, let's get some rest, okay? I think we could both use it.”

I wait for him to leave again, almost as soon as he's gotten here, but to my surprise, Luc turns and walks towards the bedroom.

“Coming?” he asks as he holds out his hand to me.



“Wait, you’re staying the night?” I ask as I try not to get my hopes up.

“Yes.”

It’s the first night that we’ve slept in the same bed, wrapped around each other as I nestle into Luc’s arms until the morning sun appears over the top of the buildings on the Vegas Strip.

And it’s the first night in more nights than I can remember that I’ve slept so soundly I almost don’t want to wake up.

If I could snapshot tonight and keep it forever, I would.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

LUC

I know it's difficult for Valentina to be kept inside the hotel suite for several days in a row.

I feel bad for her, having gone from one place of confinement to another, but this time, it's for her own safety.

So far, Leonardo hasn't made his move, but I know it's just a matter of time before he does.

He's not a man who will just let this go.

He'll come for her, or me, or all of us.

Until then, I need to make sure that Valentina stays safe.

But that doesn't mean I can't try to make things easier on her in the meantime.

I don't want her thinking that I'm just like Leonardo.

So, I came up with an idea—a romantic dinner date in the hotel room to make up for both her inability to go out and for all the time that the two of us have missed together during the past several years.

“What is all this?” she asks with surprise when I arrive back at the hotel suite with my arms laden with bags.

“It’s a surprise. Go take a nice relaxing bath, and when you’re finished, the surprise will be ready.”

Valentina looks at me with suspicion, unsure of what I’m up to.

But after assuring her it’s something good to look forward to, she gives me a small peck on the cheek and then turns to go draw herself a nice bath.

Unlike Leonardo Conti’s cold estate, the luxurious and comfortable suite at the top of Vincent’s flagship hotel offers a welcome change of scenery.

And right now, I intend to make it even nicer.

After hearing the bath water stop and giving it a few minutes to make sure she will not come out and ruin the surprise, I set everything up.

In half an hour, fine dining will arrive, and I’ve already packed candles, flowers, and an expensive bottle of champagne for our romantic in-house date.

I even picked up a fine linen tablecloth and asked the hotel staff to bring up a few artificial greenery topiaries to make it look like a candlelit picnic outside.

The hotel staff delivered the topiaries, and I had already laid out the food when I heard Valentina drain the tub.

I light the candles, pour the champagne, and wait for her to emerge.

Her face, as soon as she appears at the end of the hallway and sees what I’ve done, is the best reward I could’ve asked for. Valentina’s eyes light up with surprise, and her smile spreads all the way to her high cheekbones.

“This is incredible!” she gasps as she walks toward me, still smiling. “But why did you do all of this?”

“I wanted to make up for missed time,” I say as I hand her a champagne glass that is still fizzling with tiny, popping bubbles. “And I wanted you to feel like this isn’t such a terrible place to stay in for a little while longer.”

She takes the glass and smiles.

I offer her my hand, and we both take a seat to enjoy the aesthetic that I’ve created for our nice dinner.

After a few bites of tasty food, and a few moments of enjoying the cozy, romantic atmosphere, conversation once again flows naturally between us.

It’s rather incredible how, even after all the time we spent apart, it feels like we are right back in that first moment at that first gala, as if we haven’t missed a beat.

She’s the only one in the world with whom I’m unguarded.

The only person who I can reveal my deepest thoughts and feelings, even my fears and vulnerabilities.

It’s as if the words just flow from my usually carefully constrained tongue without her even having to press me about anything.

There’s a sense of freedom between us—free to be who we truly are with each other.

And I can tell by how Valentina opens up to me as well that she feels the same way.

She’s emotionally intuitive and deeply empathetic, and the more that we talk, the

more I can see a subtle boldness and courage within her that is trying to emerge.

“I wasn’t sure how I would handle all of this at first,” she says, speaking freely as we finish our dinner.

“I worried that your protective instincts that you’ve shown over me might make me feel stifled, like I did with Leonardo.

But I’ve realized that instead of feeling controlled or diminished, I feel as if I have growing agency with you.

I feel more like you, and I are a balanced partnership, as if we both see each other as equals. ”

“Of course, I see you as an equal,” I agree immediately. “Valentina, I would never try to control you. Only a weak and pathetic man feels the need to assert his power over a woman, and I respect you too much to want your possibilities diminished by anyone, including myself.”

Her smile shines brighter than all the lit candles in response to my words.

“I was afraid to be vulnerable with anyone, to embrace the idea of love,” she continues. “But being with you has made me feel like I can be an active participant in my destiny, not be controlled or contained. You see me, just like you did when we first met.”

“I’ve always seen you for what you are,” I say as we sit together beneath the flickering candlelight, as the sky outside grows darker.

“I see you as a woman with limitless potential. Kind, smart, brave, and exceptionally lovely. I’m committed to protecting you, Valentina, as I always have been, even when

I haven't been right by your side. But I will never seek to dominate you. I understand all too well what it feels like to feel powerless."

"You?" she asks, as if my remark surprises her. "But you're in a position of power as a consigliere to one of the most powerful mafia families in Las Vegas. You're highly skilled and respected."

"That might all be true," I say with a heavy sigh. "But there are things you don't know about me, things that no one does."

"Like what?" Her raw and innocent question prompts me to do something I hadn't expected to—to confront my envy and need for control over my life.

Just as I've tried to help push Valentina to claim her own power, I suddenly find myself in a position to confront my own flaws, and reveal something to her I've kept close to my chest this whole time.

I shift in my seat, smoothing my palm down the front of my suit.

I hesitate for a moment before revealing the secret that I'm not so sure I want to keep any longer.

"Would you think less of me if I told you I might not be as honorable as you think?" I say carefully.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have been struggling with something for a long time—with a deep envy toward my cousin's dominance over the Moretti legacy.

Vincent is Don, and I'm his consigliere, and yet I have to succumb to all of the family

pressures with none of the power and glory that comes with the title that he has. ”

“I don’t think that feeling envious makes you any less honorable,” she says graciously.

“Perhaps not, but my jealousy isn’t just a feeling. I’ve acted on it as well. Although now I’m not so sure I want to go through with it.”

“What did you do?” she asks.

“Shortly after Vincent took Isla to Italy, I started a rumor, a rumor that I placed into the ears of everyone who would spread it. The rumor talked of a new Don coming to Vegas, one that planned on taking over the city and ousting Vincent’s power over it.

” I explain as I fess up the truth to her, hoping that she won’t think less of me for it.

“Then, I pretended to deliver news of the rumor to Vincent, telling him that The Saint was coming to Las Vegas. I played it up until the fictional character of the rumors I created took on a life of its own, one that had everyone conflating whispers about this new Don. But the truth is?—”

I pause for a moment before I speak words I won’t be able to take back. “The truth, Valentina, is that I am the Saint, and that I was planning on taking over.”

Instead of looking at me with disgust or disappointment, her eyes soften, and she reaches her hand out to set against my lap.

“But you didn’t do it,” she says. “And from how you sound right now, it appears you no longer want to do it.”

She’s not wrong. In truth, I regret it. Having Valentina back in my arms has made the

need for power, which once plagued and then consumed me, seem much less appealing.

If I were to go through with it, I would have the title of Don, but less time to be with her.

I have more agency without that burdensome position of authority.

“That’s true,” I admit. “Ever since the night I climbed through your window, I’ve thought less and less about being a mafia boss, and more about being with you.

Since bringing you back here from Italy, I no longer want to usurp power from my cousin.

All I want is to keep you safe and to keep you in my arms.”

She smiles softly and sets her water glass down before leaning forward to whisper against my ear. “Then think no more of it, Luciano. Instead, maybe the Saint can use his power to heal us both from our past sins and let us find solace in each other’s arms.”

Those are the sweetest words I’ve ever heard, and I couldn’t possibly want anything more. I’m no saint, but Valentina is an angel. At least she is to me.

I pull her into my lap and wrap my arms around her—Heaven.

Valentina presses her mouth softly against mine. When her lips part, I slide my tongue between them. Passion swirls around us, thicker than the wafts of smoke from all the lit candles, as our intimate little dinner gives way to a yearning that we have years’ worth of making up for.



I try to keep myself calm, to keep my erect cock at bay, because I want to respect Valentina and what she said before about taking things slowly. But when she grinds her ass against my lap and presses her chest against mine, it's almost too overwhelming to bear.

"Valentina," I say in a ragged breath. "You're killing me."

As if to tempt me more, she unbuttons my shirt and slides it over my shoulders. Her fingers trace over the muscles of my chest and trail down my torso and into the front of my pants. When her fingertips touch the tip of my cock, I tense and then quiver.

"I thought you said you wanted to take things slowly," I remind her, struggling to form words when my body is hijacking the control my brain is still desperately trying to hold on to. "If you don't stop, then I'm not sure how well I can keep things from speeding up."

"I wanted to take things slowly," she says as she places gentle kisses on the side of my jaw.

"But that was then, and this is now. Now, what I want is to be with you, Luciano. I want to be with you in every way possible, over and over again, until we've both shed our pasts and replaced them with a new beginning. "

That's all I need to hear before pulling her down over me and laying my back flat against the floor of the hotel suite as I slip her clothes off and toss them aside.

Since she came from the tub right before our romantic dinner, she's wearing nothing beneath her clothes, not even the slightest pair of panties.

The sight of Valentina's naked body above mine makes waiting any longer to have her feel unbearable.

My pants are barely off for more than a second before my cock swells to the point of pain.

I grasp her hips with both hands and pull her down onto me.

Valentina moves slowly, purposefully, as she rocks her hips and grinds her body against mine in pure, unadulterated delight.

Her delicate frame moving rhythmically over me, pleasuring herself with my cock inside of her, is the epitome of pleasure.

But when the need becomes too great, the temptation too tantalizing, I wrap my arms behind her and flip her over onto her back, thrusting deep inside of her and driving us both to the orgasm that we share at once in an explosive eruption of climactic bliss.

After a few moments of catching our breath, I stand up, lift Valentina into my arms, and carry her onto the bed. When I climb beneath the sheets next to her, I pull her against my shoulder and feel her soft breathing as she lies against my chest.

“I’ve freed myself of all seeds of envy,” I whisper to her in the dark. “Because how could I possibly be jealous of another man when I have you?”

VALENTINA

Last night was wonderful. And not just the sex either—the whole thing.

The gesture of the romantic dinner inside the hotel was so thoughtful, and the open and honest conversations that we shared were meaningful, but above all—the words that Luc whispered to me right before I fell asleep made me feel as if I've finally found home.

Even with all the still-looming uncertainties that remain—the threat of Leonardo still likely to retaliate, and the fact that I haven't spoken at all to my father since I ran away, when I'm in Luc's arms, it feels as if everything will be okay.

I feel like I can be myself with him, and that the two of us could have a future together.

Maybe that's a fairytale, but I like to think that after all I've been through, I might get a happy ending too.

It isn't until I get up from bed in the morning, after Luc has already left to attend to more business that needs his attention, that I remember something I've kept at the back of my mind.

I'm standing in front of the bathroom sink, washing my face and brushing my teeth, when it suddenly dawns on me.

I don't know why I'm remembering it now suddenly, but the memory of the old

woman at the cathedral handing me the tampon to stuff down into the bodice of my wedding dress pops into my head.

On the airplane, when Luc and I removed the dress, it must have simply fallen deeper inside the fabric, and I forgot it.

I haven't given it another thought since, until now, or I've purposely kept it at bay.

It's definitely been too long. My period has never been this late before, and now I'm actually thinking that the "rare" chance of me being pregnant might not be that far-fetched.

I don't want to alarm Luc without knowing for sure.

He's got enough on his mind right now with both running things while Vincent and Isla are still in Italy and waiting for the other shoe to drop with Leonardo.

I just need to get a pregnancy test to know and take things from there.

The only problem is that I can't leave this hotel suite.

I remember what Luc told me, that if I needed anything at all while he was away, I could ask any of the hotel staff here for help.

He said that they are all loyal and obedient to Vincent.

Since Vincent has a reputation, I don't doubt it.

I'll wait until the maid comes to clean and I'll ask her for help—woman to woman.

I usually avoid her while she cleans the suite, but I'm confident she will help.

It's late afternoon when she arrives.

“Hi,” I say with a polite smile as I walk out to greet her. She stops and stands in the kitchen, looking at me with dark brown eyes, and returns the greeting with a thick Italian accent.

“Hello, ma’am,” she smiles. “Is now a good time for me to come clean, or would you like me to come back later?”

“Now is fine. And please, you don’t need to call me ma’am,” I laugh. “It makes me feel old. My name is Valentina.”

The maid and I look to be around the same age.

She might be a couple of years older than I am.

Her crisply pressed gray uniform weighs down her petite, slender frame, and she wears her dark brown hair tied neatly back in a tight ponytail.

She has a sort of natural beauty about her, the kind that could easily blend into the background if it weren’t for her expressive, observant dark eyes.

“And what’s your name?” I ask when she doesn’t immediately offer it up.

“Maria,” she nods. “Maria Russo.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Maria,” I smile before getting right to the point. “I’m wondering if I could ask a favor of you?”

Her expression remains respectful, but also cautious.

I get the sense that her loyalty to Vincent runs deep, and that she isn't one to seek trouble.

I imagine that being a maid in this hotel means she sees and hears quite a lot.

She's smart to stay quiet and keep her head down.

I would probably do the same if I were in her shoes.

"What is it that you need?" she asks timidly.

"I mostly clean and stick to the duties that my employers give me. I can't do much else without Mr. Moretti's permission, or that of his people. "

"I understand," I nod as I reassure her that there's nothing for her to be worried or anxious about with me. "It's just that Luciano instructed me not to leave the hotel room, and there's something I need from the drugstore."

Her brow raises at that. Maria seems to notice everything, even the slight apprehension in my voice when I mention my request.

"The drugstore?"

"Yes, and if I can ask you, woman to woman, it needs to be discreet," I explain. "Can I trust you to keep this between us, Maria? Please?"

Her reluctance is palpable, so I press her a bit more. I'm honestly not trying to manipulate her or apply pressure that seems to make her increasingly anxious. I just really need her help since I can't leave this suite. So, I need to do what is necessary to attain her compliance.

“I promise you won’t get into any trouble for helping me, as long as you can stay silent about what I’m about to tell you. I feel you can understand what it might be like for me here, surrounded by men, with none of my family around, and needing another woman to confide in for help, can’t you?”

“Yes,” she says sympathetically. “I can understand that. My family and I are very close, and I would do all that I can for them if they needed my help. They are back in Italy. I moved here to Vegas to make money to help support them. Sometimes I feel like I’m alone here too, even though I am constantly surrounded by people.”

“Then we have that in common,” I say with a relieved smile as I get ready to ask her for what I need. “Maria, I need you to get me a pregnancy test from the pharmacy. Can you do that for me, please?”

Her eyes widen and dart down to glance at the front of my stomach. “Are you pregnant? Is it Mr. Luciano Moretti’s baby?” As soon as she blurts out the question, she looks horrified at having asked it. “I’m sorry! Forgive me for asking. It is none of my business at all.”

Maria’s eyes drop to her feet. She’s so clearly in a position of vulnerability, working a job in such a wealthy environment that makes her feel in over her head. I wonder if she even knows that the family she serves is a notorious mafia-aligned one.

“It’s alright,” I say, reaching out to take her hand in an attempt at beginning a new friendship between us. “I know what it feels like to be unsure of where your place is and who to trust. I promise you can trust me, okay?”

“Okay,” she nods with a relieved smile. “I can get you the test. I can bring it to you after my shift this afternoon if you would like.”

“That would be great. Thank you, Maria, and please remember to keep this just

between us girls. Can I trust you to do that?"

"Yes. You can trust me."

After that, I let her go about her duties in the suite, cleaning and putting everything back into perfect order. When she leaves, I try not to let my mind slip down the rabbit hole of potential consequences until she returns. Thankfully, Maria keeps her word regarding being discreet.

She's dressed differently now, in modest, casual clothing, which must mean that she's off duty now.

Her jeans and practical shoes look humble and reflect limited means.

She must work really hard in order to send money back home to her family in Italy while financially struggling herself.

I give her a lot of credit for being a young woman clawing her way toward the life that she wants.

It's difficult being alone in a big city like Vegas, especially when you're surrounded by powerful men and dangerous dynamics, whether she realizes it.

"The man at the door asked me why I was back after I had already cleaned this suite," she says as she reaches into her apron pocket and pulls out the pregnancy test to hand to me. "I told him I had accidentally left my bottle of cleaning solution here and needed to come back to get it."

"Great excuse," I say as I take the test.

"But I left nothing here, so I need to bring something back down with me. Otherwise,



he will know that I'm lying."

"That's not a problem," I say as I walk toward the kitchen to see what we can find. I pull out a bottle of counter cleaner and hand it to her. "Will this work?"

Maria nods and hesitates before leaving again. "Miss?—"

"Valentina," I correct her. "I'm not your boss; I'm your friend now."

"Valentina," she says with a nervous smile. "Are you going to be happy if you are pregnant? Is it something that you have been wanting, or is it unexpected? I know it's not my place to ask. I am just curious."

"It's alright. I'm not upset about the question. Honestly, I'm not sure how I will feel if the test is positive," I answer truthfully. "It definitely isn't something that I planned on happening. But there is love involved, so it wouldn't be a bad thing."

"That is good then," she nods. "Babies born out of love are the lucky ones."

She's not wrong. I can't even imagine if I had become pregnant with Leonardo. It would feel like a life sentence, tethered to a man I don't even want to be around. She reaches out her hand and touches my flat stomach, catching me by surprise.

"Se nasce un bambino, ti auguro una buona vita," she says before removing her hand.

"What does that mean?" I ask her.

"It means good blessings if there is a baby. Italian is my native language. I find it more beautiful when the words slip off my tongue, especially when offering a blessing of protection," she says.

“Thank you. That’s really very kind of you.”

Maria nods. “We do not know each other well yet, but I see something similar of myself in you. You live comfortably, supported by money and a man, yet your secret leaves you vulnerable when you’re alone.

I understand how that feels. I hope that when you take your test, you get the answer that you want. ”

“Thank you, Maria.” I almost feel like reaching out and giving her a hug, but I stop myself since she’s right about us not really knowing each other for long.

It’s nice to have a female friend here since my only friend, Isla, is still in Italy.

Even if it’s a friendly female willing to run an errand to the drugstore for me.

After she leaves, I head straight for the bathroom to take the pregnancy test before Luc returns. I want a concrete answer to ease my racing thoughts.

I take the test, set a timer, and leave it in the bathroom so that I’m not tempted to peek at it until it’s ready for an accurate result. There are two tests in the box, so I used them both. Whatever result they show, if it’s the same, that will mean it’s my answer.

But just as the timer goes off, the door opens and Luc steps inside.

He looks at me curiously for a second as I hold the timer in my hand before quickly silencing it.

I could make up some excuse for why I’ve set the timer, although I’m a terrible liar when put on the spot under pressure.

Besides, after he told me his secret about using his persona as the Saint to usurp power from Vincent, and he opened up to me about how his feelings have changed—I feel like I owe him the same sort of raw truth.

“Come with me,” I say as I reach for his hand without telling him where we’re going.

As if sensing that it’s something important and sensitive, Luc takes my hand and walks with me without asking questions.

When we reach the bathroom and I open the door, the two pregnancy tests are in plain sight, sitting on top of the bathroom counter.

It doesn’t take him any time at all to see what they are, and as soon as we look at them, it’s immediately clear that I am, indeed, pregnant.

Not one but two bright pink plus signs stare up at us from the tiny test windows.

Luc is still holding onto my hand as I brace for his reaction while also trying to wrap my head around my own feelings at this indisputable news.

“You’re pregnant,” he whispers quietly as he turns to look at me. “With my child?”

I nod.

Luc squeezes my hand tighter before wrapping an arm around me and pulling me against him. He kisses the side of my face, and I can feel his hand stroke the back of my head before reaching down my back to wrap me in a tight embrace.

“I love you, Valentina,” he whispers.

“You’re not upset at the news?” I ask with a sigh of relief.

“Upset? How could I be upset? We’ve created a new life between us—part me, part you, and part fate.”

“It raises the stakes in this whole situation that we’re in,” I remind him. “It puts you in an awkward situation between your family and me and this whole mess that I’ve dragged you into with the Conti family.”

“Trust me,” he reassures me as he holds me close.

“I’ve been struggling internally with my familial obligations long before this.

The only thing that this news intensifies for me is my devotion to you and my protective instincts that are committed to keeping you, and now also our unborn child, safe. ”

He reaches down to place his thumb beneath my chin, lifts my face to his and kisses me softly on the mouth.

This is what real love feels like, and I think that I have known it all along.

## Page 9

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LUC

“It’s too dangerous,” I say when Valentina mentions wanting to leave the hotel suite. “Just because Leonardo has done nothing yet, doesn’t mean that he won’t. And now, with you being pregnant, it risks too much.”

“I know that you’re worried, and I am too,” she says, pleading with me to reconsider the strict security protocols that I have her under. “But who knows how long it will be before Leonardo acts? I can’t stay cooped up in here any longer, Luc. It’s been days and I’m going stir-crazy.”

“I can have whatever your heart desires brought into the suite for you,” I offer.

“I want nothing brought in,” she argues. “I want some freedom. It’s necessary for me to leave this room and the building. I can’t continue to be caged, Luciano.”

“I’m not trying to cage you. I’m trying to keep you safe.”

“I know you are, and I’m beyond grateful to you for that. And you know I want to stay here with you, but I also need to feel like I can have a life outside of these walls too—even if there are some risks involved.”

As much as I hate to admit it, and as much as it worries me, I know that what she’s saying is true.

What kind of life is it for her to stay trapped in here, as she lived with Leonardo at his estate?

Still, the thought of her being exposed to the eyes and ears of the city makes me feel increasingly tense and vulnerable, even more so now that she's pregnant with my child.

"Alright," I concede. "But first, I want to know what prompted the arranged marriage to Leonardo to begin with. Every time I've asked you about it, you've only given me vague answers before changing the subject.

And if I'm going to protect you, even whilst giving you more freedom with Leonardo still out there seeking his revenge, I need to know exactly what I'm dealing with. No more secrets."

She sighs, but then concedes and fills in the gaps of what I'd already suspected.

"My father's hotel business was failing.

His pride was based on that business venture.

It meant the world to him to keep up our family's reputation and to uphold the status and legacy of his family name.

But when the business struggled, he took out a loan that he couldn't repay. "

"Let me guess," I say. "That financial arrangement led him straight to Leonardo Conti."

"Yes," she nods. "He needed the help. And as much as my father has always struggled to show his affection for his family, I think he was trying to do right by us. He wasn't looking for power or wealth; he was simply trying to survive for our family."

“What father marries off his daughter to a wicked man like Leonardo Conti?” I ask, getting angrier by the moment as I hear her describe Giovanni’s failings as a father.

“The kind that was attempting to secure a material future for me.” Valentina’s voice is saddened.

I can tell that she would have preferred a closer relationship with her father and a life of emotional happiness to a life of financial security.

If only her father had taken that into account before trying to make her choices for her.

But Giovanni Ricci is not a man suited for mafia life.

The demands of a mafia alliance of this magnitude aren’t for the faint of heart, nor those without the constitution to overcome internal conflicts—I should know.

“Initially, I think my father viewed his alliance with Leonardo as a beneficial one. Their relationship was transactional, to help save my father’s business, secure a stable life for me, and then hope for the best. My happiness was never a factor.”

I wonder silently whether Giovanni feels any guilt over that.

I wonder if he thinks it’s worth it to dress in tailored suits and luxury accessories, to play at being a successful hotelier with a family of status, if it means sacrificing his daughter’s freedom over it.

That will not be the father that I am with my child.

Especially not after seeing how much that sort of emotionally detached relationship has hurt Valentina.

There is a small part of me that feels bad for the man and the fact that Leonardo Coni could manipulate his financial desperation, leveraging loans over the poor guy to force the arrangement of marriage to Valentina.

But Giovanni should have known that Leonardo wasn't worth getting involved with.

Surely, he must have known how much Leonardo disdains men he deems to be "beneath" him.

"Have you heard from your father at all since we left Italy?" I ask.

Valentina shakes her head. Her eyes speak volumes regarding her conflicted feelings about her father and whether she's glad or saddened that he hasn't attempted to contact her.

"He has always respected you, Luc," she adds. "I'm sure he knows that if I'm with you, then I'm safe."

I say nothing, as I wouldn't be so sure of that. A man who will sell out someone he cares about once can do it a second time, too. At the moment, I don't trust anyone other than those within my small inner circle. Which leads me to the next thing I want to talk to Valentina about.

"I think that it's time we stopped hiding our relationship," I say, to her surprise.

"I know I said it would be best to keep our involvement with each other a secret, but I think that openly acknowledging that our friendship has transformed into something more is more of an asset now than a weakness."

"How so?"



“Despite Leonardo Conti’s constant attempts to degrade me, he’s well aware that my reputation might be one of calm but also one of brutality when need be.

Despite the chance of dangerous societal repercussions when those around us and in the mafia find out about our relationship, I think it will serve as another layer of protection for you.

Anyone who attempts to come at you will know that they will have to deal with me.

Getting to you now means going through me first.”

After we talk a bit more and I’m assured that Valentina and I are on the same page about how we’re going to approach this.

I agree to let her go out of the hotel suite, and I suggest taking her on an actual date in the city.

That way, people around us can see that we’re indeed together, and I can keep an eye on her while also letting her have a night outside of this hotel.

The delight on her face at the thought of it makes the risk we are taking almost worth it.

The following day, I have a dress sent up to the suite for her while I finish up a bit of business. I will have the maid bring it up to Valentina, along with a note telling her to be ready to go out for our date at seven o’clock in the evening.

“Make sure that she has everything she needs,” I instruct the maid. “And if there’s anything else that Valentina wants, please let me know so that I can get it to her before our date tonight.”

“Yes, of course, Mr. Moretti.” The maid nods as she lowers her head. “Are the two of you celebrating something special?”

How she asks almost seems as if she’s got a sixth sense about it.

But then again, how could she know anything about Valentina expecting a child?

All she does is clean the suite and keep to herself.

I don’t even think she knows she works for a mafia family, considering Vincent and I have never let the lower staff in on our more interior business dealings.

“Just celebrating being able to spend some time out in the city together,” I smile at her as I glance at her name tag. “Thank you for taking the dress up, Maria.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

After a long day of business meetings, a chat at the bar with Gabriel and Alonzo, and a few loose ends tied up that Vincent wanted me to tend to, I am more than ready to take Valentina out for a nice date somewhere.

And when I return to the hotel suite and see her step into view, she is nothing short of breathtaking.

I stand in the hallway, frozen and speechless as I stare at her.

Valentina blushes and smiles as she walks toward me. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a powerful man at such a loss for words,” she teases as she stands in front of me and runs her finger down the front of my chest.

She makes me feel as if I’m the most powerful man in the world.

Who needs a title when I have the affections of such a goddess?

To think that Leonardo Conti, a man who would have perversely enjoyed psychologically manipulating her for his own sadistic tendencies, almost trapped her in a loveless marriage.

He will never again dominate her emotionally.

He will never lay a finger on Valentina.

She is mine now, and she is free to do as she pleases.

“So, where are we going?” She asks, with a gleam of excitement in her eyes.

“Well, not to a bar in your current condition,” I tease her. “But how about a very nice restaurant and a delectable virgin cocktail?”

She grins and threads her arm in mine as we head out together.

I chose the most expensive restaurant in all of Vegas, one that usually requires a reservation months in advance.

But I mention the Moretti name, and within minutes, they seat us at one of the nicest tables in the whole place.

We talk and laugh and sample several items off the menu, and for a few hours, it feels like everything else melts away.

I’d like to think that Leonardo would simply be disillusioned with Valentina now, that he might just let her move on to torment some new woman that he can exert power over.

But I'm not foolish enough to believe that.

At least for the moment, we can enjoy some time tonight and not think of such things.

"People are looking at us," she whispers as she leans across the table toward me.

"Who?"

"Those people over there." She lifts her finger inconspicuously to point to a couple sitting in a corner booth.

I recognize them instantly. They're friends of Alonzo.

Good, that means that word will spread quickly that Valentina and I are a couple and that she is not only under my protection but is my woman to protect.

I can only imagine how enraged that will make Leonardo.

I try to put thoughts of him out of my head and enjoy this evening out with the beautiful mother of my unborn child.

"Do you have any idea how much I'm in love with you, Valentina?" I ask, hoping that she does.

"No," she says with a subtle smirk. "I think maybe you should tell me."

"I love you more than the moon loves the night," I say, trying my best to be poetic and hoping that I don't sound ridiculous. "More than a camera loves the perfect view."

"Oh, that's a good one," she grins.

We both share a small laugh, but I'm so in love with her I would give anything to see Valentina happy and content.

"You have always been important to me," I say as I reach across the table to hold her hand between my palms. "Ever since the first moment I laid eyes on you, and within the spaces of each time we saw each other. When I came to see you at the Conti estate, it wasn't just because I wanted to.

It was because I needed to. I think that perhaps you and I have been meant to be together this whole time.

And now that we are, I intend never to let you go. "

After I say it, I feel the need to clarify to make sure that she knows she will always be free with me.

"Unless, of course, you want to go. I will never hold you hostage, Valentina. Your happiness means the world to me."

She smiles and lifts my hand to her lips, kissing the top of my knuckles as she stares across the table into my eyes. "There is no place that I would ever want to go other than at your side."

The waiter comes to clear our plates and offer dessert.

Valentina eyes the dessert menu eagerly, and I tell the waiter to bring a taste of all the offerings.

She is eating for two, after all. And if she can no longer enjoy a sip of wine, then there must be some sort of decadence to replace the indulgence of things.

“Luciano,” she says, carefully using my full name, which I automatically assume means that what she’s about to ask me is important.

“Are you truly happy about this pregnancy? Are you sure that it’s not something that you’re worried about?”

Others, like Vincent, will eventually notice and learn about it, which I imagine will lead to entirely new discussions about your position in his hierarchy. ”

“I absolutely cannot wait to start a family with you,” I assure her.

“I will remain Vincent’s consigliere, and he will accept the choices that I make.

Just because I serve as his advisor doesn’t mean that he controls my life.

You can trust me when I tell you that you and our unborn child are the most important things in my life now.

There is nothing I want more and nothing that I will guard and protect more fiercely.

And one day, I will be the one waiting for you at the altar.

If, of course, you will want to marry me. ”

She giggles and tosses her hair over her shoulder. “Well now, it’s not like I would run away from my wedding ceremony again—because if I did, who would be there to pick me up like you did the last time?”

Her playful banter makes me grin, and for the first time in my entire life, I feel complete and want nothing more.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

VALENTINA

I t's almost hard to go back to a day alone in the hotel suite after spending such an enjoyable night out in the city with Luc. It appeased a bit of my desire to get out, but now it feels anticlimactic to spend the day inside the suite when I would rather be out doing anything.

Luc and I struck a happy medium, a negotiation of sorts.

I agreed to give things a bit more time to blow over as long as he agreed to keep taking me out so that I don't go stir-crazy in the meantime.

It seemed like a fair deal to strike. And honestly, the way he protects me has increased and intensified because of my pregnancy makes me feel surprisingly good instead of stifled.

With Luc, it feels more like we are partners, each looking out for the other.

He's trying to keep me physically safe, while I'm trying to help him embrace his more vulnerable, empathetic side, an emotional openness that comes from building a true, intimate connection.

I think we might save each other by embracing the flaws we thought we had.

Instead of envy, Luc now has love to fill his life.

And instead of being controlled, I now feel worshipped.

We solidified our once forbidden connection into something unbreakable—a genuine connection transcending physical longing, forging a nearly unbreakable emotional bond between us.

I'm lost in thought all morning about Luc and our unborn child as I stare out the window and let all sorts of fantasies play out in my head. I almost don't even notice when someone comes in.

“Valentina? Miss?” Maria's voice interrupts my daydreaming.

I turn to see her standing there in her maid uniform with a cleaning bucket in one hand and a vacuum in the other.

“I'm sorry, am I interrupting?”

“Oh no, not at all,” I say as I get up to greet her. I'm actually grateful to the company and happy to see her again. When she brought me my dress yesterday, she didn't linger. But now that she's here to clean the hotel suite, that means she'll stay and chat for a while.

Aside from talking with Isla on the phone a few times, during which she's done her best to act like a sister to me and offer me advice and solidarity from afar, I haven't really had another female friend to talk with.

“Did you have a nice evening last night?” She asks as she wipes down the counters. “Your dress was lovely.”

“Yes, I did, thank you,” I smile as I watch her subtly graceful movements while she cleans.

“And did you get the answer you were hoping for?”



For a second, I'm not sure what she's referring to. But then I remember the pregnancy test, and that she left before I found out the results.

"Well, it was an unexpected answer," I laugh a little. "But I think that being pregnant has turned out to be a good thing."

"Oh, congratulations!" she beams, genuinely seeming excited for my news. "I was wondering last night if perhaps that was what you and Mr. Moretti were celebrating. I didn't say anything to him because I promised you I would keep it a secret."

"Yes, well, he knows now, and he's happy about it as well," I say. "Thank you for all of your help."

Maria nods and goes back to focusing on her work, and I go back to my daydreaming since she has work to do and I don't want to distract her or take up more of her time.

Just before she's finished, there's a knock at the door.

Since Luc isn't here, I hesitate to open it.

Call it an old habit, but a knock at the door still sends a sense of foreboding down my spine.

When I lived at Leonardo's estate, it meant that he had returned.

If it were Luc at the door, he certainly wouldn't be knocking.

But I suppose Leonardo wouldn't likely be knocking either.

While I'm still deliberating whether to answer it, Maria reaches for the doorknob and opens it.

“Someone delivered this downstairs for Ms. Ricci,” the man at the door says as he hands her a small package. “Gabriel asked me to deliver it.”

Maria takes the little box and then closes and locks the door. She pauses for a moment to look at the package as if reading who it’s addressed to. Then she turns and hands it to me.

“It has a seal on the front,” she says. “Looks like a big, ornate letter C.”

Dread fills my stomach. I would recognize that seal anywhere—the “C” stands for Conti. It’s Leonardo’s family seal.

I take the package and stare at it. Someone wrote my name on the front, just below the seal.

Whatever he’s sent me is irrelevant—the bigger issue is that he knows exactly where I am in order to have it delivered to me.

Luc was right—it was only a matter of time before Leonardo made some sort of move.

True to his style, it might be some sort of elaborate bribe, an over-the-top token that mimics generosity only to lure me back to him.

But then again, Leonardo knows I wouldn’t fall for such shallow tactics.

“I will give you your privacy,” Maria says as she quickly collects her cleaning supplies to leave.

I don’t actually want to be alone with this box, but it’s not as if having the maid here is going to help me deal with this unwanted “gift”.

Once Maria has walked out, I take the little box to the couch and sit down.

Carefully, I open it and find a pretty jeweled necklace sitting inside.

At first, it seems like nothing more than what I had initially expected it to be—an unwelcome, shallow bribe to get me to return.

As if having more money than Luc was going to tempt me to run back into his arms. I'm surprised that this is the best he could do, especially when he still has my father's debt to leverage. But then, I see something else.

In the box's corner, peeking out from beneath the red velvet inlay that the necklace is resting against, I see the edge of a white note. When I open it, I instantly recognize Leonardo's handwriting.

It's rare that he would write anything by hand himself.

Usually, he had someone else do it for him while he dictated whatever information he wanted relayed.

The only time he ever handwrote anything was when it was a personal threat.

An unborn bastard child, eh? Are you so sure that it's Luciano's? Don't forget about the drunken night that we had together, Valentina. That child could be mine.

—Leonardo

I instantly feel sick to my stomach. Crumpling the note in my hand, I stuff it back into the box. I throw the box into the trash can as if merely holding it in my hand is unbearable.

Leonardo's threat is just that—a threat, nothing more.

I can barely remember the one night he and I were together.

My drunkenness caused me to nearly pass out, and it happened only once.

I'm convinced he spiked my drink, as I would never have consciously agreed to have sex with him.

Another clue is I distinctly remember only having two glasses of wine that night and then suddenly feeling more drunk than I have ever been in my life.

I remember he took me to bed in a quick, emotionless act that wound up leaving me with nothing more than regret and a throbbing headache in the morning.

But now, after reading that note, I questioned whose baby I may be carrying in my womb.

I pull up the calendar on my phone and count back the days.

My foggy recollection of that night makes it less than clear when exactly it was that I slept with Leonardo.

I suppose it could technically be possible that the baby could be his too, but it's far less likely.

Besides, my gut tells me that the baby is Luc's and that this is just a sick game Leonardo is playing. The baby has to be Luc's.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

LUC

Just when I think my day of tending to the family's business is over, and I'm looking forward to heading back to the hotel suite to spend a nice evening with Valentina, Gabriel Reyes waves at me from the bar and motions for me to come take a seat at one of his barstools.

That usually means he has information to share with me.

Normally, I don't mind having a brief chat with Gabriel.

He's been a trusted, confidential informant of mine ever since I first hatched the plan to be the Saint, and I credit him with secretly gathering intel for me, even without Vincent knowing.

Gabriel always has an ear to the street, and he hears every secret in the city.

I swear he has some sort of crazy, impressive web of "bartender spies" that he uses his charisma and his funny as hell personality to manipulate and extract info from.

But today, the look on his face reads less like he's going to be helpful and more like he's going to make my night a lot less pleasant.

Before I even sit down, he has a drink poured for me. That's a clear sign he's prepping me for bad news.

"Alright, so you're going to want to have that drink before I share what I've just

found out,” he says as he stops and stands in front of my barstool, leaning over the counter toward me so that no one can overhear us.

I take the drink, not wanting his intel to ruin my mood.

Things have been going well, all things considered.

Even during the ongoing threat, the growing relationship between me and Valentina, and the prospect of fatherhood, makes me feel more hopeful and optimistic than I’ve ever felt before.

I like that feeling, and I don’t want to lose it.

“So, I have a bit of alarming information to pass along to you,” Gabriel says, immediately turning my mood sour, even with the drink already swallowed down. “Angelo Barone is back on the scene.”

“What exactly does that mean?” I ask, recoiling at the mention of the Barone name.

The Barones have remained quiet and caused little trouble since Vincent expelled Angelo Barone before going to Italy.

“It means that Angelo and his crew have resurfaced and resurged with a new strength because they’ve formed a new alliance—with Leonardo Conti.”

Fuck. That’s exactly what I didn’t want to hear.

That isn’t just a new alliance, it’s an incredibly dangerous one.

Angelo Barone is a ruthless man. If Leonardo has formed a pragmatic alliance with him, then he intends to use Angelo’s resources strategically to achieve their shared

objective—the complete downfall of the Moretti family.

“No doubt their collaboration is mistrustful,” I remark, trying not to look flustered by the news. “Both of them want to be the alpha. Neither Angelo nor Leonardo will put up with the other for long.”

“That may be true,” Gabriel points out, “but they have a mutual contempt for you and Vincent, and even if they each have their own self-serving motives, they have a common goal. Their combined resources aren’t a small matter, Luc. They want to overthrow your family.”

“That’s nothing new,” I remind him. “Angelo Barone has wanted to destroy this family ever since Vincent first came into power.”

“True, but Leonardo Conti didn’t. You’ve now given them reason to team up against us, and I think that the intensifying threat means that we should fortify our defenses here. Of the two foes, one is formidable, but both? I don’t know, man—I think we might be in over our heads with this now.”

I don’t discount his warning, but I also don’t want to overreact preemptively.

Sometimes, Gabriel has a tendency to exaggerate the severity of things, and I don’t think that the Barone and Conti families teaming up means the end of the world.

Yes, it’s definitely not good, but I still think that I can handle it.

“How did you hear about all of this, anyway?” I ask, curious about how reliable Gabriel’s sources are.

“Leonardo sent a package here to the bar,” he says, to my surprise.

“What kind of package?”

“A gift—for Valentina.”

Instantly, my back raises when I hear Leonardo has attempted to contact her. “Why wasn’t I notified?”

“You just were,” he says, snider than I’ve heard him speak to me before. “I had one guy take it up to her a little while ago.”

“What? What if there was something dangerous in that package, Gabriel?” Now, I’m angry—angry that someone didn’t notify me immediately about any communication intended for Valentina, and angry that Gabriel was stupid enough to let a package from Leonardo Conti enter this building.

“Relax, I had it examined. The only things inside were a necklace and a note.”

“What did the note say?” I demand to know.

“That’s between you and your girl to work out.

The delivery made me curious about what Leonardo is up to, so I reached out and asked around my bartending circles in the city to see what I could find out.

That’s how I found out about his involvement with Angelo Barone,” he explains.

“Turns out that Leonardo and Angelo have been having secret meetings in the city.”

“Hang on a second,” I say as I shift my anger to a keen focus on the escalating situation. “Leonardo is back in Vegas?”



“Yeah, of course he is. You didn’t think he was going to stay in Italy after that botched wedding, did you?”

He’s been back for a while and just been lying low.

Angelo has been lying low too, but my sources could track him to several meetings with Leonardo and the Conti crew this past week. They’re up to something.”

“What are the meetings about?” I ask. “Can any of your sources get inside or get close enough to hear what’s being said?”

“No. But one guy heard Angelo talking at the bar last night. He wasn’t able to get a lot of details, but whatever they’re up to, it’s big.”

“How do you know?”

“Because,” Gabriel says as he lowers his voice to a hush. “I’ve never seen my sources shaken before, but this time, my bartender friend could barely get the sentence out. He stated that Barone’s entire crew was heavily armed, and the whispers now carry a different tone.”

“What kind of vibe?” I ask. “I don’t want to go basing my next actions on rumors and vibes. Gabriel, I need to know specifics.”

“Well, I don’t have specifics,” he grunts. “You try being an informant to the mafia and see how well it plays out for you. Listen, Luc, I’m telling you that things are bad. Whatever Leonardo is planning, it will not be good. You need to notify Vincent.”

“No, I can handle this on my own.”

“I think that’s a mistake,” he insists.

In all the years that Gabriel has been feeding me confidential information, he's never once questioned me or my methods on handling things. This is a first, and it doesn't sit well with me at all.

"Are you questioning my ability to handle things in Vincent's absence?" I asked him point-blank. I sense Gabriel's sudden conflict, and considering my long history of trusting him as a reliable spy, I expect a new, unexpected conflict between us.

"I think you can handle yourself just fine," he says with a sigh.

"And I think you can protect Valentina just fine, too. But what I worry about, Luc, if I'm to be straight with you—is that the joint force of both the Barone and the Conti crew coming at our guys will be too much for any of us to handle.

I think Vincent deserves to know. He's the Don, after all, and this is going to explode in front of his face. If you don't notify him, then I will."

It's the first time that Gabriel has ever challenged my position on how to handle something, and the first time that he has ever threatened to betray our confidence. I can't tell whether he's doing it out of a sort of noble attempt to save me from what might be my own clouded judgment, or whether he's got his own interests in mind.

Either way, I don't like it. That said, Gabriel is probably right—it's time for me to let Vincent know what is going on here in Vegas.

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*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

LUC

Before I can make it out of the casino bar and back up to the hotel suite to talk with Valentina and call Vincent, all hell breaks loose.

Several of our men come rushing into the bar at once, two of them bloodied and one with a frantic look on his face.

“Luciano! There’s been a strike at the new casino!” Alonzo shouts as he races through the door towards me. “It’s bad—the whole place is torched.”

This is exactly the thing I feared—that Leonardo would take out his revenge on the entire family instead of just me.

I pull out my phone to dial Vincent now because this simply can’t wait any longer.

But before I can even place the call, the men inform me that Vincent is already on his way back from Italy.

“We called the boss as soon as it happened,” he says. “He and Isla are already on a plane heading this way.”

Great, now not only do I get to deal with my cousin’s fury over his newest casino being torched, but I also get to deal with explaining to him in person about how The Barone and Conti families are now teaming up against us.

I get in the car with Alonzo to head back to the new casino and assess the damage. As

soon as the building comes into view, it's clear that Leonardo's retaliation was a brutal one.

"Holy shit," I whisper under my breath as we pull up in front of the still flaming building.

The fire has destroyed the entire casino.

There are small fires still smoldering that the fire department is trying to put out.

The fire blew out all the window glass, charred the casino's walls, and destroyed everything inside.

This casino had just opened a few months ago.

It was the family's newest business establishment and one that Vincent had left in my care to tend to without feeling the need to return for its opening operations.

The top floors were high-roller levels, and the lower levels were where our more illicit and illegal trading went on. Now, there is nothing left.

"Was anyone hurt besides the injuries that I saw from a few of our men?" I ask Alonzo as I step out of the car.

"Thankfully, no," he shakes his head. "The casino hadn't opened for the night yet, so there were no patrons inside. A few of our guys took a beating when they chased out the attackers."

"What attackers? Were some of Leonardo's crew here?" I ask, wanting to sort this out before Vincent arrives so that I can at least assure him I can handle it.

“Not sure whose men they were,” Alonzo says as he runs his hand through his thinning hair. “Our guys chased them, and they fired shots. They made it out and into a getaway car before anyone could get a good look to ID them.”

“What about the security cameras?”

“Haven’t had a second to check that video feed yet.

First thing we did was come to get you and notify Vincent in case there were any other attacks in the works,” he answers.

“You and I know Leonardo Conti will want more than one hit. This one was likely a diversion for something even bigger that he’s planning to execute. ”

I find no reason to keep Gabriel’s intel a secret from Alonzo, especially not now, after there’s already been an attack that has created major damage and interrupted business operations at a brand-new facility.

“It’s not just the Conti family,” I say, knowing that this is likely just the beginning. “There’s credible intel to suggest that he’s working with Barone now, too.”

Alonzo says nothing, but the look of shock on his face and the dropped open jaw relay that even he didn’t expect things to get this bad. A partnership between those two families is a definitive threat to us all.

“Luciano,” he says as we watch the cops take an assessment of the damaged casino and talk to witnesses still standing on the street outside. “This whole thing is going to be a mess to clean up.”

“Trust me, I’m aware.”

After assessing the damage and talking to the cops to smooth things over, I head back to check on Valentina. I know that she's safe inside the suite, but it's unsettling knowing that Leonardo could get a package through to her. I need to step up her protection before something else happens.

As soon as I return to the casino hotel, Vincent is there waiting. His eyes are fuming with anger and palpable annoyance. And before I've even fully stepped into the building, he's already scolding me.

"I told you that this would happen," he scowls as the two of us walk into the casino together.

We sit down at a table to talk. I had hoped to get up to the suite first to talk with Valentina before dealing with my cousin, but since he's already here, there's really no chance of avoiding dealing with him first.

"Where's Isla?" I ask, hoping that she's with Valentina now so that she at least isn't up there alone.

"She went up to the suite to visit with Valentina, and to give the two of us some time alone to talk," he says, still audibly angry.

"Luciano, I told you to inform me if Leonardo leveraged any threats. I wasn't expecting to be notified by my men without warning that our newest installation was just blown up. "

"Yeah, my apologies, neither was I," I say with a regretful sigh. "Honestly, even for Leonardo, that was a big attack."

"I told you not to underestimate him," Vincent repeats. "And I knew that the stunt you pulled in Italy would come with steep consequences."

“It wasn’t a stunt, Vincent,” I say as I try to appeal to the common ground which we now both share.

“I did it for love. Come on, you of all people know what it’s like to go to war for the woman you love.

Valentina is that woman for me, just like Isla was for you.

I love her, and she’s carrying my child. ”

Vincent’s eyes widen at that news. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence between us, he backs off his anger-infused scolding a little. I see him shift the focus from being upset with me to dealing with the situation pragmatically.

“Alright,” he says as he pulls out his phone and sets it up on the table for us both to see. “Let’s look at what happened.”

I watch the screen as Vincent pulls up the security footage from the cameras at the new casino that was just attacked. It takes less than a minute for the screen to fill with video of the entire scene playing out.

“Impressive,” I say, narrowing my eyes as I focus in on the men who started the attack.

“I’ve learned a few things since my last dealings with adversaries.

” Vincent nods. “I figured it would be wise to have the casinos better prepared with surveillance in case anything came up again. Now, everything that happens in any of my buildings’ feeds right into my devices in real time and saves a copy of the video to a backup hard drive via Bluetooth.

I would not mess around with being unprepared again. ”

We both watch the footage and can clearly see not only Leonardo’s men but also Angelo Barone’s men on the scene.

They walk straight in through a service delivery door, pretending to be liquor vendors, before throwing a couple of Molotov cocktails into the belly of the casino and then splitting.

Vincent’s face contorts in disappointment and displeasure at the idea that his men at the door were so easily fooled.

“That’s a matter that I will deal with after we finish here,” he huffs, speaking of disciplining the men who made a mistake, which cost him his polished new casino building. “This is worse than I thought, though—Leonardo pairing up with Angelo is definitely not ideal for us.”

“Agreed,” I nod. “Although I don’t imagine it will last.”

“Probably not. But it will last long enough to cause us substantial trouble, and long enough to potentially use their alliance to overwhelm any security measures you have in place to protect Valentina. Luciano, things could get pretty ugly with all of this,” he warns.

“You need to send Valentina somewhere safe.”

“She is safe here, with me,” I assert. I don’t want her leaving my side. The safest place for her is with me.

“I understand you feel that way, trust me. I would feel the same regarding Isla if I were in your shoes right now. But Valentina is not safe here, not with both the Barone



and the Conti family after her. Your best shot at keeping her protected from Leonardo is to get her somewhere that he can't find her.

And trust me, he will look for her," Vincent says.

"And the first place that he will look is wherever you are. He'll expect you to keep her close. "

As much as I hate the idea of sending Valentina away from my side, I know Vincent is right. I have to send her away in order to keep her and the baby safe. The question is where to send her.

"Nico Vitale," Vincent says quietly, as if he knows exactly the question in my mind right now. "You could send her to Nico."

"The Ghost?" I ask in surprise at that suggestion.

"Yes. I doubt either Leonardo or Angelo will think of looking there. Valentina and your unborn child will be safe with the Ghost. He can protect her away from here until we can get a handle on this situation and put Barone and Conti back under thumb."

I nod and stand up from the table. "I'll go break the news to her."

When I get up to the hotel suite, I find Isla and Valentina sitting on the couch together, deep in conversation. Isla graciously steps out when she sees me come in to let Valentina and me talk privately.

"Are you okay?" I ask her once we're alone. "I assume Isla filled you in a bit about what's happened?"

“I’m fine,” she smiles bravely. “And yes, a bit. What are we going to do?”

“We will do nothing,” I say, already knowing that she will not like what I’m about to tell her. “I’m going to handle things here with Vincent now, and in order to do that and keep you and our baby safe, I’m going to need to send you away for a little while until we take care of this threat.”

“What? No! I want to stay here with you. I don’t want to be sent away,” she protests. “Besides, I feel the safest when I’m by your side.”

“I know, but that is exactly where Leonardo will look for you. I need to get you away from here just long enough to handle this situation. Then I’ll bring you back here with me, I promise.”

“Where will you send me?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

Valentina frowns, and it pains me not to tell her anything, but it’s for her own safety.

“It’s better if you don’t know,” I say, realizing that not being in control of her own fate is already a sore spot with her. “For your own protection.”

I wait for her to say something, but she punishes me with silence as she gets up and walks out of the room.

This will undoubtedly cause her emotional distress and self-doubt, but it’s my only option to prevent her from returning to Leonardo.

I just hope that once this is all over, Valentina can forgive me.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

VALENTINA

In the morning, Luc offers me the chance to visit Isla at the private dance theatre that Vincent created for her in the hotel.

There's even a new camera waiting for me on the counter of the hotel suite when I leave my bedroom to make some breakfast. He says that it's because he and Vincent still need to work out the arrangements of how I will travel to whatever secret location it is they are sending me to.

The gift of a camera and the opportunity to spend a few hours watching my friend dance makes it seem more like he's trying to make up for my unhappiness with a token gesture to serve as an apology on his behalf.

I don't like it when things feel "off" between us.

Being upset with Luc doesn't feel right.

But I don't know how to stop being upset about the fact that he's sending me away, especially when he won't even tell me where I'm going.

He knows how much it upsets me to feel like other people are pulling the strings of my life. I hate feeling powerless.

"Look at it this way," Luc says, mustering up a smile as he walks me down to Isla's dance studio. "At least you'll be able to get out of the hotel suite now for a little while."

“Yeah, I suppose,” I sigh as I mumble under my breath. “Trading one prison for another again, and this time I get to go back to being all alone in my cage.”

I can tell that Luc heard me even though I mumbled it, because there’s a pained look on his face, as if that comparison stung him.

I’m not trying to hurt him at all. I’m just frustrated about being sent away, as if he doesn’t want me here anymore.

Although I know he’s trying to keep me safe, I still don’t understand why I can’t stay with him and be safe.

Isla’s bright smile greets us as soon as we walk inside the theater.

“You two enjoy your morning together,” Luc says before he leaves. He glances at me as I sit down on the edge of the stage and set my camera on the dance floor beside me. “I’ll be back this afternoon to collect you.”

Collect me—I huff and roll my eyes because it makes it sound like I’m a “thing” to be collected instead of a living, breathing person with agency.

It isn’t at all how I felt before when it seemed as if Luciano and I were equal partners.

Now, it feels like I’m alone again, and this time it feels even worse because I don’t want to be apart from Luc.

It was different with Leonardo—I was glad when he wasn’t around, even if it meant that I was alone.

But now, every time I think about being away from where Luc is, it feels like a shot of piercing cold straight to my chest. I don’t even say anything before he leaves.

I just pretend I'm adjusting my camera lens until he's gone.

"That's quite the cold shoulder you're giving him," Isla says gently as she walks toward me, preparing to sit and talk for a while. But I'm not ready to talk, not yet.

"Can I take some photos of you dancing?" I ask to steer away from starting a deep conversation until I've had a moment to collect my thoughts.

"Sure," she smiles, immediately picking up on my cue and giving me some space and time. "I have a new routine to practice. I'd actually like some photos of it to add to my dance portfolio."

"Well, I'm not a professional photographer, but I'll do my best," I chuckle as I look through the lens at her.

"I'm sure they'll be wonderful. Besides, maybe you should pursue your photography professionally instead of just dabbling in it as a hobby. You love it, and it would probably be a brilliant career to balance motherhood with."

I look at her with wide eyes. I've been meaning to tell Isla about my pregnancy, but there just hasn't been the chance to do it in person yet.

"Sorry," she smiles. "Vincent told me. I think Luc mentioned it to him, and, well, you know how word travels."

"I'm not upset," I say. "I was getting ready to tell you, and now I'm glad that you know so that I can talk to you about something. I still don't know how Leonardo found out. It's rather unsettling."

"Yeah, agreed. That part is a mystery. But one thing I've learned about being in a mafia family is that everything has eyes and ears. Nothing stays a secret for long in

this world.”

As Isla dances, I’m almost instantly mesmerized.

She is such a graceful dancer. Each of her motions is like poetry in movement form.

She makes it easy to take excellent pictures because each dance move is akin to a perfect pose for the camera.

For a while, I sit and watch in awe, snapping photos and thinking about how happy Isla looks as she dances across the stage in her own personal theatre.

When she’s finished dancing and goes to take a quick water break, I think about how she, too, went through a similar experience as I am in some ways.

“Are you ready to talk now?” she asks as she comes to sit down beside me.

I nod and put my camera away.

“You know, you were very brave back in Italy on your wedding day,” she says, meaning it as a compliment, but one that I cringe in response to because I don’t like to think of that day as my wedding day.

“It took a lot of guts to run from Leonardo Conti, and that arranged marriage with a church full of mafia powerhouses waiting for you to walk down that aisle. Especially since you didn’t know that Luciano would be there outside to help you escape. ”

“I didn’t feel brave as much as I just felt desperate,” I admit. “I mean, sure, there was a rush of adrenaline, but mostly I was just running in fear of what would happen to my life if I stayed and went through with it.”

“Sometimes, running in fear is the bravest thing someone can do,” she smiles wisely at me.

We sit beside each other in silence for a moment or two, as Isla patiently waits for me to open up to her, and after a few more minutes, I do.

“It’s just so upsetting that he would want to send me away,” I say, fighting back tears as the floodgates open and I blurt out the feelings that I’ve been angrily keeping inside.

“I thought that Luc and I were a team. I thought we were equals and partners now. But he won’t even tell me where I’m being sent.

. Maybe I’ve been wrong about all of this.

Perhaps all the men involved in the mafia families are all the same—selfish, controlling, and cruel. ”

“I know you don’t mean that about Luc,” she says as she takes my hand and gives it a small squeeze.

She’s right—I don’t. But I’m upset and I’m having trouble holding in my feelings, especially with the addition of raging pregnancy hormones on top of everything else.

“You know Luc is sending you and the baby somewhere safe so that he can protect you. He wouldn’t do that if he didn’t love and care about you deeply,” she says softly.

“It has to be a secret so that no one can know or find out where you are. Just like you were saying about how unsettling it was that Leonardo could find out that you are pregnant. The walls in these buildings have ears, and there are spies around every

corner. Luc isn't sending you away because he wants you gone from his life, or because he wants to control you, or close you up in some trap like Leonardo Conti did.

He's doing it because that is what strong, powerful, good men do—they do what is necessary to keep the women they love safe, even if it means keeping them safe from being around themselves. ”

She speaks as if she knows exactly what I'm going through. Sometimes I forget that her relationship with Vincent didn't start out all “champagne and roses” either.

“You know, when I was first married to Vincent, I didn't want to be—at least I didn't think that I wanted to be,” she says.

“But then, it evolved until the thought of being without him pained me the most. There were times I most definitely felt just like you do now, times when I didn't understand why he wouldn't listen to me or let me stay by his side when I felt like I could help.

Back then, my hurt and frustration made me question whether he truly loved and respected me enough to value my autonomy and decision-making ability.

But looking back, I know now that he has always had my best interests at heart.

He only ever wanted to keep me safe and to ensure that we could have the future together that we now share. ”

“I hope that is how Luc feels, too,” I sigh. My anger is giving way to a sort of calm acceptance now after talking with Isla.

“He does. Just think of how he essentially started a war for you.”



I hadn't really thought of it that way, but now that she mentions it, I can see that she's right.

Luc not only rescued me from Leonardo's men back in Italy, erupting what he knew would be a catalyst for a rival mafia Don to pursue vengeance against having his bride taken from him.

But he also temporarily "stole" Vincent's plane and brought me back to Vegas to hide inside of his Don's hotel suite without so much as thinking about the consequences that he might face for all that he's done.

Now, the Conti family and the Barones are essentially launching a full-scale war on the Moretti's business operations and crew, and it's literally all because Luc saved me and brought me here to be with him.

He's gone through so much trouble for me, and deep down, I know that he only has my best interests in mind.

We talk a bit more, and I already feel better, although I'm still not fond of the idea of being away from Luc for long. But by the time he returns to get me, I'm less upset with him than I was before.

I smile at him, and he seems relieved that I'm no longer giving him the cold shoulder.

"I've made an appointment for the doctor to see you," he says carefully, trying not to sound too pushy. "I just don't want to risk anything before you and the baby are out for travel. If that's okay with you."

I glance over at Isla, and she gives me a little reassuring nod and smile, showing that she's right about everything we just talked about. Luc is doing all of this, not because he wants to shove me off somewhere, but because he wants to protect me and our

unborn child.

“Yes, thank you,” I say as I reach for his hand. “That’s a good idea. Will you come with me to the appointment? If you want to, that is.”

Luc’s face lights up. “Of course! I was planning on accompanying you anyway, for security, since there’s no telling where Leonardo or Angelo’s men are lurking around.”

“I’d like it if you came inside to talk with the doctor with me, too. I want you to be as involved with the pregnancy as you’d like to be.”

“I’d like that,” he says as he wraps an arm around me.

“Alright, you two lovebirds better get going then,” Isla says, getting ready to go back to rehearsing her new dance routine. “Keep me posted on things.”

I give her a hug, and then Luc accompanies me to the car so that we can head straight to the doctor’s office. I hadn’t quite expected the appointment to be right now, but I guess there’s a reason that things are moving so quickly, in order to stay one step ahead of Leonardo.

I try not to think about the waning time that Luc and I have together or worry about when and where I’m being sent off.

Instead, I try to focus on the fact that he and I are going together to our very first doctor’s appointment to check on the status of my pregnancy and the health of me and our baby. I’m excited and also a little nervous.

“You know, even when you’re not right beside me,” he says as we pull up to the doctor’s office.

“I’m going to make sure that you have everything you need during your pregnancy.

You and the baby will be safe and healthy.

Want for nothing. And then, as soon as it’s safe for you to return to my side, I will come and get you. I promise.”

“How long do you think it will be before this is all over?” I ask, not wanting to hear an answer that will take too long.

Before Luc can answer me, a call rings through his phone. It’s Vincent, and that means he can’t ignore it.

“Hello,” Luc says into the car’s speakers.

“I need you to come meet with me now,” Vincent says in a calm yet serious tone. “It’s a matter of importance.”

“I’m just about to accompany Valentina to her doctor’s appointment.”

“Luciano, I’m afraid I need to insist on your coming to meet with me now. There is some urgent business that we need to attend to, which can’t wait,” Vincent presses. “I’ll send a bodyguard to accompany Valentina to her appointment.”

When Luc hangs up the call, he is visibly disappointed, and in truth, so am I.

But I put on my best brave face about it and reassure him I will be fine with the bodyguard that his cousin is sending.

Besides, there will be plenty more appointments throughout my pregnancy that we can go to together.

All that matters now is getting through the current situation at hand so that we can start our life together unencumbered by all the rest of the mafia families' drama.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

VALENTINA

Luc getting pulled away unexpectedly for business isn't ideal timing. I was really hoping that he'd be able to attend the doctor's appointment with me. But the important thing is that I know he wanted to, and that eases some worries that I was having earlier.

Once the bodyguard arrives, Luc gives me a kiss on the top of my head and takes off to meet with Vincent.

"Would you like me to accompany you inside, Ms. Ricci?" the guard asks as we stand in front of the building.

The medical clinic is a fancy, private, three-level office that is likely the best money can buy in the city.

Luc meant it when he said that the baby and I would have everything that we need.

I glance at the glass front doors. The building has security and a check-in desk right at the entrance.

It looks safe and secure enough. I doubt that even a man like Leonardo Conti would try to attack a medical facility with pregnant women inside.

"I'll be fine on my own," I smile politely at the guard. "You can wait in the car, thank you."

He nods and returns to the driver's seat of the waiting vehicle parked right out in front of the entrance. I take a deep breath and step inside to check in.

The doctor is a kind older man with wise eyes and deep wrinkles on his forehead. He looks like he's delivered a lot of babies throughout his career, and he has a comfortable bedside manner that puts me instantly at ease.

"Looks like everything is progressing nicely," he says. "You should start seeing a little baby bump coming along soon, and you might have felt a bit more tired than usual. Any nausea or lightheadedness?"

"No," I shake my head.

He looks over the medical history form that I filled out at the registration desk and nods silently a few times to himself. "You look like a very healthy young woman, so just keep yourself away from any major stress, stay hydrated, and this should be a nice, uneventful pregnancy."

I can't help but let out a little snort of sarcastic amusement at the thought of keeping things "low stress". He looks up at me with a questioning expression, and I quickly brush off my reaction. "So, when will I be able to feel the baby move?"

"Not for a little while still," he says, forgetting about my snort. "Unless you have a real athlete in there, it can take a few months."

"Months?"

"Don't worry," he laughs good-naturedly as he pats the top of my shoulder. "I'm sure you'll be feeling those pesky little kicks in no time. I'll send in the nurse with your paperwork and a prenatal vitamin prescription, and then you're free to go."

“Thank you, Doctor.”

After he leaves, I get dressed and think about being a mother, and about Luciano being a father and my partner. I close my eyes for a second, place my hand over my stomach, and picture Luc standing at the altar. Maybe one day, that vision will come true.

But just as I’m about to open my eyes and leave the room, the door bursts open and the one person who I would never expect to see comes rushing inside.

“Dad?” I ask as my father runs into the room. “What are you doing here? How did you even get in here? How did you know I was here?”

“Valentina, you need to come with me right now!” he says in a hushed, panicked voice.

“What? Why?”

He grabs my arm and pulls me toward the door, but something doesn’t feel right.

“Dad, what’s going on?”

His voice is quiet, which means nothing since he never raises his voice. My father has always exerted a sort of quiet authority, even in times where overt aggression might be more warranted.

“You aren’t safe here, Valentina. You need to come with me now out the back door.”

In a moment of quick indecision, I go with my father.

I can already tell that in hindsight, I’ll regret this decision.

I should be listening to my instincts, which are screaming at me in my head, warning me that something isn't right about all of this.

It doesn't add up that my father is here, that he even knew where I was after not having reached out to me at all until now.

The guilt-ridden look in his eyes should have been my first clue not to follow him.

The nurse looks flustered and confused in the hallway as we race past her. But it isn't until my father has his hand on the back door of the building that I start to really question what is going on. By that point, it's already too late.

It's as if it all happens at once, time stands still, and I can simultaneously picture the bodyguard waiting in his car out front, the nurse realizing that I left without checking out, and the display of moral weakness and internal desperation on my father's part.

He pushes open the back door, and I see a black tinted car sitting there waiting.

"I'm sorry, Valentina," my father instantly cries out. "I'm so sorry. I didn't have a choice. I had to do it, or he said that he would kill you. Please forgive me. He left me no other choice."

For a second, everything is a blur. I think that's because I don't want to see the back window of the car roll down and Leonardo sitting inside the car.

My father's betrayal, coupled with the threats from Leonardo Conti endangering me and my unborn child, is something I can't bring myself to acknowledge.

I simply can't believe that he's done this to me again.

I thought he would feel guilty for arranging my marriage to Leonardo in the first



place and prioritizing his business survival over personal happiness.

Maybe he has regret over that, but it hasn't stopped him from selling me out yet again.

I turn and attempt to run back inside the building, but it's too late. The door is closed and locked. There's no way past the waiting car and Leonardo's armed men to get back to the front of the building. I'm trapped.

I wish that Luc were here, and that he hadn't been called away. If he had been here, none of this would have happened.

"Get in the car, Valentina," Leonardo calls from his seat in the back of the car. "Other side."

He motions toward the back passenger door, and one of his men opens it for me.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," I hiss.

Leonardo's face contorts into a mix of amusement and arrogant anger. "It's sad and rather annoying how you still seem to think that you have a choice in any of this. Just because you flew the coop once, and ran off with that mutt of a consigliere, doesn't mean that you don't still belong to me."

I look over at my father to see if there is any part of him that will help save me from this fate, but he's already being walked off toward another car.

Likely, he can leave now that the deal is complete, and Leonardo has taken me back.

Even if Leonardo had threatened my life, my father should have been smart enough to know that Luc would have kept me safe.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way,” Leonardo hisses at me through the open car window. “But we don’t have all day. That rent-a-cop bodyguard of yours out front will come looking for you soon, so I’m going to need you to get in the fucking car.”

When I don’t budge, he motions for one of his men to come and grab me.

I try my best to keep my arm protectively over my stomach without drawing attention to it, even though Leonardo is already well aware that I’m pregnant.

The man shoves me into the backseat right beside the man that I despise most in this world.

And as soon as I’m seated, and the car drives off, Leonardo smirks with a look of complete satisfaction.

“Where are we going?” I ask him.

“I’m going to put you somewhere safe and sound, somewhere that Luciano can’t find you.”

“And then what? Are you going to marry me again?” I scowl at him. “If you do, then I’ll run away just like I did the last time.”

“I haven’t quite decided what I’m going to do with you yet,” he says as he looks out the window, ignoring direct eye contact with me as if my betrayal still repulses him.

“I guess that depends on several factors. But for right now, I’m going to take you to one of my acquaintances’ businesses, where you will stay hidden away from prying eyes until I decide what to do about you. ”

“We’ll be at the Barone’s warehouse in ten minutes,” the driver says over his shoulder to Leonardo.

“Excellent.”

“Angelo Barone? That’s your new friend these days?” I taunt him. “You know Luc will come for me, don’t you? And he’s going to kill you if you harm me or our child.”

That garners his attention enough for Leonardo to look over at me and glance down at my hand resting on my stomach.

“Ah, yes, the baby. If you really are pregnant, I haven’t yet decided what to do about that either. First things first—your new living quarters.”

When we arrive at the Barone’s warehouse, it looks even more miserable than I’d expected. Not only is it dank and dark and practically abandoned, it’s also completely uninhabitable.

Leonardo gets out of the car and walks around to open my door. When I refuse to get out of the car, he reaches his hand in and pulls me out.

“See now, you had such a beautiful home before, Valentina. You had everything that any woman could ever want—wealth, comforts, baubles, the company of staff and servants, and even the pleasure of my company whenever I was in the mood for you,” he sneers.

“Now, you have this—an empty, uncomfortable warehouse where you will sit alone in a room guarded by my men until I decide to take you out. You should have been smarter before you ran from me in Italy. You could have had a pleasant life as a kept woman, and now you have fallen from my good graces.”

With that, he shoves me toward the door of the building, and two of his men walk me inside.

I try to get a look at my surroundings before I'm stuffed inside a room, but the light is dim, and everything looks gray and monotone.

As soon as the doors are closed, I hear Leonardo giving the guards their instructions outside.

“Feed her, make sure she doesn't escape, and don't let her do anything stupid like try to run or hurt herself. I'll be back soon.”

A single tear falls down my cheek. I'm back inside a cage again, and this time—the cage doesn't even have windows for me to look out of.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

LUC

When I get back to the casino, Vincent is waiting for me in his corner booth.

I'd expected him to look more stressed or to have a pressing expression on his face since he made it sound like this meeting was urgent.

Instead, he's sitting there with a drink in front of him and his eyes keenly focused on his phone screen until I walk over and sit down to join him.

"Luciano, thank you for coming," he says as he looks up and puts his phone back in his pocket. "I'm sorry that I had to interrupt your accompanying Valentina to her doctor's appointment."

"It's okay," I say, even though I'm not at all thrilled to be missing it, especially since I'm going to be sending her away soon and was trying to spend as much precious time with her as possible first. Plus, impending fatherhood, even though it was an unexpected occurrence, isn't somewhat that I want to miss out on any moments of.

"You said it was important," I remind him. "Has something happened?"

"Not quite, but there is intel that suggests something is about to."

That holds my attention now. Honestly, I want Leonardo to make his move, whatever it's going to be. The sooner he acts, the sooner we can counteract and put him down, and that means the sooner Valentina can stay by my side so that we can move on with our lives and her pregnancy.

“People have seen Leonardo, Angelo Barone, and Valentina’s father together near the Vegas Strip during the last twenty-four hours,” he says.

“Giovanni Ricci?” I ask, surprised that he would still be in bed with the likes of men like Leonardo after what happened in Italy.

Leonardo Conti isn’t a very forgiving man.

Considering that Giovanni’s daughter made a fool of him in front of a crowded church audience, I’m surprised that Leonardo hasn’t had Giovanni killed, or at the very least, cut him out financially and made his life a living hell.

There’s only one reason Leonardo would still keep Valentina’s father around, and that is because he wants to use him for something.

“Has Valentina mentioned anything about her father contacting her?” Vincent asks.

“No, not at all.” I shake my head. “Actually, she mentioned how hurt she felt he hadn’t even bothered to contact her after the Italy fiasco.”

“Well, if there’s one thing that we both know, Leonardo is a master of, it’s manipulation.

He’s probably pulling Giovanni around on strings like a puppet,” he says.

“And I’m guessing that he’s going to use Giovanni to get to Valentina.

I’m just not sure how yet—maybe he’ll threaten her father in order to leverage her back or send Giovanni to talk some sense into her and ride her with guilt about breaking the arrangement. ”

“But what part do the Barones have to play in all of this, then?” I ask.

“Angelo Barone and his crew are the muscle. Leonardo has all the resources, Giovanni Ricci has the familial leverage, but if those things don’t work to both return Valentina to him and achieve the vengeance that he wants, then Leonardo will try to use Angelo Barone and his might to finish the job,” he explains.

“That simply means the stakes are higher. I know you don’t want Valentina caught up in the middle between her father and whatever Leonardo has planned, so you really need to get her on the next flight out of the city. ”

I nod in agreement, even though I had hoped to spend one more night with her before having to send her away. “I’ll put her on the next flight out of town as soon as her doctor clears her for travel.”

“Good. That should also free up some of your headspace to focus on handling things here. The sooner we take care of business, the sooner Valentina can return and be with you again.”

As Vincent sips his drink, I take a moment to consider thoughtfully all his current efforts to help me.

He could still be angry about the trouble that I’ve caused him.

He could honestly demote or punish me for acting against my consigliere duties, prioritizing Valentina over my family responsibilities.

Instead, he’s having this impactful strategic planning discussion with me as if everything that I did is now just water under the bridge.

It’s big of him to act this way, and I respect him even more for it.

I also feel even more guilty for having ever planned on trying to overthrow his leadership position inside the family. So guilty that I need to fess up.

“Thank you for doing all of this to help me, Vincent. I know that part of this has now bled over into your businesses and into the family itself, and for that, I am sorry. But you are doing more than just looking out for the Moretti family’s interests.

You’re helping me to keep Valentina protected and to resolve this quickly so that we can be together.

You don’t need to do all of that, and yet, you are. ”

“I understand the sacrifices that you’ve had to make in order to serve as consigliere, Luciano,” he says as he reaches out to pat the side of my arm.

“And I fully grasp the love that you have for Valentina. Yes, I was angry at first, as any man would have been. Isla’s wise counsel reminded me I would have done the same thing if it were her in Valentina’s place. ”

I let out a small laugh to ease my nerves before I tell Vincent the truth of things. “Maybe Isla should be your consigliere,” I joke. “She sounds like a much better advisor to the Don these days.”

Vincent chuckles, ready to get back to planning how we are going to figure out what Leonardo’s plans are and how to stop him, but I have to interrupt because I need to tell him the truth.

“Vincent, I need to confess something to you.”

“Ha! You really are the Saint, aren’t you?” he laughs. “You don’t need to confess anything to me, cousin. I’m the Devil, remember? I can’t absolve you of your sins.”



“This one pertains to you,” I say regretfully. “Because I am The Saint.”

It takes Vincent only a moment before he understands what I’m saying. And for a second, he looks disappointed. That look is even worse than the look of anger.

“You know,” he sighs as he leans back in his seat.

“I think I already suspected that. All the joking references that were made both to you and about you being so “saintly” and being a “saint”. Yet I just couldn’t fathom how you could be the Saint, because that would have meant working against your own family, and against me. ”

“I’m not proud of it,” I say, taking full ownership of the nagging guilt that has been eating me from the inside out ever since I changed my mind about wanting to topple my cousin’s position in the hierarchy.

“I thought I wanted your power. I thought that if I had it, then I could stop Valentina’s wedding to Leonardo Conti even before the day of the ceremony arrived.

I wrestled with it even as I sat there in the church pew as the music played.

But then, as fate would have it, things turned out differently.

And once I was with Valentina for more than just a passing night, I realized I didn’t really want the power of a Don after all. All I truly want is to be with her.”

Vincent sighs, and I wait for the verbal scolding that I can only imagine he’s been holding in, but it never comes.

“I understand,” he says.

“Wait, that’s it? You’re just okay with what I told you?” I ask in disbelief. “I was the one who started the rumors about The Saint coming to Vegas. I orchestrated the whole mirage in order to usurp your position. Aren’t you even angry about that?”

“Sure,” he nods. “But you just said yourself that you don’t want that path anymore.

Trust me, Luc,” he says with a wise look in his eyes.

“I’ve walked in your shoes and learned these lessons the hard way myself.

I know exactly what it feels like to do anything and everything in the name of love.

And all that I can say to you is that these women that we’ve found—they are worth every second, every mistake, every transgression, and every ounce of knowing better.

They make us whole and teach us to be better men, and I think Valentina is doing the same for you that Isla did for me.

In my book, that simply means that we’re both flawed and human, and that we are lucky to have found women who love us so purely. ”

No one ever spoke truer words. Now that I have come clean, and Vincent and I have made amends, I feel as though I can finally focus clearly on putting Leonardo Conti back in his place.

It’ll be difficult now that we are facing two adversaries instead of one, but difficult doesn’t mean impossible.

Besides, Vincent and I both have something worth fighting for—love.

It’s not just our own Moretti crime family that we have to protect now, but also our

own families that we are creating with the women we love.

That fuels the need to ensure that no one— not the Barones, the Conti family, or any rival that might rear its ugly head— will topple us.

But just as Vincent and I are getting ready to craft a new plan, Alonzo rushes into the casino and makes a direct path toward our table.

At first, he looks like he's coming to deliver dire news to Vincent, but then, upon seeing me here too, he stalls for a brief second.

He looks between the two of us, as if trying to decide who to address first, and to my surprise—he chooses me.

“Luciano,” he says with a visibly pronounced gulp. “Valentina is gone.”

It doesn't even compute with me at first. After all, how could she be gone when she was just at the doctor's office with a bodyguard?

“The guard can't find her,” Alonzo continues when he gauges my visual disbelief. “He said he hadn't laid eyes on her since she went inside the building. Her appointment was over thirty minutes ago, so he checked on things and the nurse told him that Valentina wasn't there.”

I feel as though my head is in an echo chamber as I listen to Vincent ask him several follow up questions and directs more men to the clinic to look for traces of where she could have gone.

But I already know exactly who took her—Leonardo.

I just don't know where or how he got her out of that clinic without our man seeing it.

“We have to find her,” I say as I slam my fist against the top of the table and abruptly get to my feet.

“Agreed,” Vincent says as he joins me. “But in order to do that, we’re going to need some help.”

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

LUC

“Why do I feel you guys only bring me in on things when they’ve reached a dire level?” Zara asks as she sets up her laptop and all of her peripheral tech inside the hotel suite, where Vincent, Alonzo, and I are all huddled around her.

“Because you’re the best tech and security specialist around,” Vincent compliments her. “That’s why you work for me.”

Zara lets out a small laugh and then gets to work.

She is the best there is in tech surveillance.

Her skill, combined with her high intelligence and cynical ability to get into the heads of those who would do harm, makes her nearly infallible in tracking people down.

Which is exactly why we called her to help us find Valentina.

Plus, she’s got a good heart, even if she is a bit jaded.

I swear she has connections and secrets that even Vincent and I still have yet to figure out.

“You know, in order for someone to have extracted her from the medical clinic,” Zara thinks aloud as she works. “Someone would have had to have known that she was going to be there.”

“Leonardo knew she was pregnant,” I say.

“They would have had to know more than just the fact that she's pregnant,” Zara says as she clicks away on her keyboard at a furious pace. “Like exactly when she was going to be there for her doctor’s appointment in order to take her at the right time and be able to sneak her past the doctor and your bodyguard. Is there anyone else who knew she was going to that appointment today?”

“I don’t think so,” I shake my head. “Just me, Vincent, and she probably told Isla. But I don’t think there’s anyone else she would have talked to about it. She isn’t even around anyone else since she’s been spending all her time inside the hotel suite.”

“What about staff?” Vincent asks. “Besides the bodyguard, of course. Was there anyone else Valentina would have had contact and communication with?”

“I don’t know, maybe the maid?” I say with a shrug. “I doubt she would tell personal details to the housekeeping staff, and I doubt the maid would have any connection to Leonardo Conti.”

“Doubt is an explicative in my world,” Zara says as she pulls up another screen on her computer. “Everyone has connections.”

Within seconds, we’re all staring at a security image of the maid on her laptop screen.

“Maria Russo,” Zara says. “Twenty-nine-year-old, Italian immigrant with family still back in the homeland, lives in a modest apartment near the casino district.”

“Man, I am really glad that we’re on the same team here,” Alonzo teases her. “You can dig up instant dirt on anyone, can’t you?”

“Mhmm,” Zara nods with a smirk. “And I think you might want to take a better look

at this girl.”

“I’ve fully vetted all of my staff,” Vincent says, doubtful that anyone in his employ would betray him even though it has happened before.

“I’m sure you have,” Zara says. “But fully vetting someone still doesn’t guarantee that you can peek inside their head.

From the looks of it, Maria Russo is pretty deeply devoted to her family obligations, with regular cash transfers back to her family in Italy.

All the while, she keeps a low, humble profile here in Vegas.

Her bank transactions and living situation show that to be the case.”

“I don’t see how any of that is a problem,” Vincent says.

“People with little means and lots of responsibilities tend to be vulnerable to bribery or blackmail,” Zara says. “Just like Giovanni Ricci.”

She’s not wrong in that assessment.

“And look!” Zara exclaims as she pulls up some of the city’s street camera security feed and points to an image. She zooms in, clears up some of the visual debris on the camera, and then it’s clear as day what she’s pointing to. “Your maid and Angelo Barone like to eat at the same sandwich deli.”

Sure enough, the two of them are sitting at the same table with untouched sandwiches in front of them.

God damn it. Angelo Barone got to the maid. He must have exploited her

vulnerability in order to get her to spy on Valentina.

“I’m going to kill her for betraying Valentina,” I growl beneath my breath.

My remark surprises everyone in the room. Sure, I’ve done my share of hits, but I’m usually the last one to opt for slaughter.

“Easy,” Vincent says with a measured tone.

“It’s more than likely that Maria was just used as a pawn in the larger game here.

She’s been no trouble at all until now. You know how cruel and heartless the manipulation of the mafia can be.

Let’s give her the benefit of the doubt and bring her in to talk.

We’ll get her to crack, and then we’ll go from there. ”

Vincent turns to Alonzo and gives him instructions to bring the maid in for questioning.

“What do the Barones want with Valentina?” Zara asks while we wait for him to return with Maria.

“Nothing,” I say as my anger rises with each passing moment. “It’s Leonardo Conti running the show and calling the shots with this. The Barones are just a temporary alliance that he’s using. “

“Geez,” Zara rolls her eyes. “You guys really know how to piss off all the bad guys at once, don’t you? Leonardo Conti and the Barone family? You’re not trying to get yourselves killed, are you?”



“Trust me,” I say through gritted teeth. “If anyone lays a hand on Valentina, it will be their graves being dug, not ours.”

Vincent paces the room. “We should have seen something like this coming. I can’t believe I missed the connection the maid had with our enemy.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it,” Zara says.

“I don’t think anyone initially connected her to the Barones.

I think this situation just sort of developed.

Leonardo was probably looking for a way in, had the Barone’s scope us out for him, and this poor woman was likely just an innocent victim who got caught up in their game.

You know how indifferent those guys are to collateral damage. ”

As much as I want to stay furious at the maid for potentially putting Valentina in direct harm, I also agree that what Zara is pointing out is true.

Maria was likely completely innocent with a clean past when Vincent first hired her.

Men like Angelo Barone can turn anyone against their own morals by using the right threats.

The focus now is to find out how he got the maid to turn and what, exactly, she told him.

“Hopefully, she can give us some insight into where Valentina is,” I say as my concern over her and the baby continues to climb.

When Alonzo returns within the hour with Maria Russo in hand, it's time to get some answers.

Maria does admittedly look completely terrified when she's brought in and shoved down into a chair to face our questioning.

She glances over at Vincent, visibly afraid of what punishment her boss is going to provide, now that she's aware of who he really is.

But it's me she should fear the most in this moment.

Vincent might be the more ruthless of the two of us on a normal day, but not today—not when Valentina is involved.

“Why did you do it?” I ask slowly as I kneel in front of her and put my direct eye contact squarely in her face. “Why did you give information about Valentina to Angelo Barone?”

“Answer carefully,” Vincent warns her from behind me. “You won't get a second chance if you lie to us, Maria.”

Tears swell in her eyes as her hands shake in her lap.

“I had no choice,” she chokes on her words. “I am so sorry, truly I am. Deep remorse haunts me, and I've felt guilty ever since I gave that wicked man information. I like Valentina. She has been nothing but kind to me, but I had no choice—he threatened my family.”

Her face twists with conflicted emotions as she blabbers and rambles as if she's glad to be getting this off her chest. “I was too afraid to speak out. I had to stay silent. They told me that if I didn't, there would be consequences.”

“What consequences?”

“Mr. Barone said that he had men in Italy who were watching my family. He showed me photographs of my parents and my sister there and said that if I didn’t report to him every night about Valentina and if I dared to let anyone know about our arrangement, that he would have my entire family killed and he would make me watch. ”

At that, Maria bursts into tears and buries her face in her hands. “I never wanted Valentina to get hurt,” she cries, obviously deeply troubled by the conflict between her moral compass and the reality of her position, a position Barone forced her into by threatening her family.

“What information did you provide to him?” I ask, trying to get the answers that might help us find Valentina before deciding what to do with the maid.

“He asked me if she was pregnant, and I told him she was. I was the one who brought her the pregnancy test. He asked me whose child it was and if she was sure that the baby belonged to you.”

“What did you tell him?”

Maria shakes her head. “I told him honestly that I didn’t know that part.

Then, he told me I needed to tell him everything that Valentina did and said, and everything I heard about during my shifts here at the hotel.

We met at the sandwich shop down the street every night for me to report to him.

He told me that if I was late or didn’t show up, my family would die within hours. ”

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*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

For a second, Maria stops and looks around at all of us in the room.

She wipes the tears from her eyes and straightens her posture a little in her chair.

“I regret what I have done—truly. I have not slept a night since all of this started. I never meant to betray Valentina. In fact, I wanted to be her friend. I don’t have very many friends here, and I hoped that once this was all over, she and I could remain friends.

I didn’t know that confirming her pregnancy to the Barone or telling him when she had her appointment would cause such consequences as her being kidnapped.

I will never forgive myself for having done this. ”

Alonzo interjects to fill us in on the “talk” he had with Maria on their ride here.

He told her how Valentina went missing from her doctor’s appointment and how she is now in danger with our mortal enemies.

It’s clear that Maria didn’t realize the level of impact her betrayal would have until she understood what happened.

And as furious as I still am with her, I can’t help but think that Valentina would want me to spare her.

“Do you know where they took Valentina?” I ask.

Now that we know how Leonardo and Angelo found out when Valentina would be at the clinic, the important thing is to figure out where they are keeping her.

“I’m not sure,” she says. “But I heard them talking about a few strange things.”

“What kind of strange things?” Vincent asks.

“Well, Angelo received a call from a man named Leo while we were at the cafe. He hadn’t finished speaking with me, so I had to sit and wait while he took the call.

I only heard his side of the conversation, and it sounded like he was speaking in code sometimes, but I could hear mention of a few things,” she continues.

“He said that he would bring Valentina to him—this Leo man — and that they could figure out whose baby it was quickly.”

She pauses and looks worriedly at me. “Leo wanted the baby to belong to him, and if it didn’t, he would discard Valentina and the baby.

”Fury and fear rush through me. If he harms Valentina or our child, I will dismember Leonardo Conti and everyone who has aided him, limb by limb—slowly and painfully.

“But there was also mention of something else,” she says, interrupting my momentary violent fantasy. “Something about how her father still owes him a lot of money and how he is going to make sure he gets paid.”

“What could that mean?” I ask, turning to Vincent to get his thoughts on that threat.

“If he thinks the child is his, then I’m guessing he will reclaim Valentina through the arranged, forced marriage promised to him and claim the child as his offspring,”

Vincent says. “A wife and a child would be repayment of any debt that Giovanni Ricci has outstanding with the bastard.”

“And what about when he finds out that the child is mine?”

“That complicates things,” Vincent says.

“He won’t want her then, and he definitely won’t want your child.

He’ll likely try to get rid of her for a price, maybe sell her off to the highest bidder in order to recoup his funds.

He’ll dispose of the baby, turn a profit off Valentina, and likely murder Giovanni so that the man doesn’t cause him any trouble over it. Time is of the essence here, Luciano.”

I have to find her before it’s too late.

“What do you want to do with her?” Alonzo asks, tipping his head toward Maria, who is still trembling in the chair.

She told us everything she knew and cooperated willingly once we confronted her.

The details of the phone call she overheard between Leonardo and Angelo have provided at least enough critical information to give us a starting place for Valentina’s rescue, now that we know what Leonardo intends to do.

I tap my fingers at the side of my hip where my gun is, knowing that I could pull it and kill Maria with a clean, quick shot to the head within seconds.

But I also know that I could be merciful, and that it’s likely what Valentina would

want me to do—if not just to spare Maria, but also to spare my soul from being stained with another sin.

I turn my attention back to Maria, who is clearly still terrified of me.

“I’m going to spare your life,” I say to her quietly and with carefully controlled restraint over my emotions.

“Valentina would want me to, and you were forced into this against your will. But I never want to see you here in Vegas again. If I do, I will have you killed on the spot, do you understand?”

“Yes, yes, thank you! Thank you for showing me mercy!” she sobs. “God bless you. I swear to God that I will do nothing like this again—I will never allow myself to stray from what I know is right again, and I will never let anyone manipulate me.”

I motion for Alonzo to get her out of here without saying another word to the maid. After she leaves, Vincent puts his hand on my shoulder.

“That was big of you, cousin,” he says with a nod of respect. “I can’t say that I would have done the same. If it were Isla, I probably would have put a bullet in the maid’s head.”

“Consider it a weakness,” I groan, wondering whether I should have just killed her instead of sparing her life.

“Not at all, Luciano. That was true strength. Your ability to show genuine mercy and humanity during your own personal suffering—well, that’s what makes you a good and saintly man. Valentina would be proud of you for that decision, as am I.”

“Thanks,” I say with a quick moment of gratitude for his kind words. “But none of

that is going to matter if harm comes to Valentina. We need to get her back now.”

Vincent nods, and we both turn back to Zara, who has been sitting quietly in the corner of the room this entire time, pretending to work on her laptop but listening and watching the entire interrogation with the maid play out.

“Tell me you can find her,” I say with sheer desperation.

“I can find anyone,” Zara nods as she gets back to work.

Vincent and I stand behind her, watching over Zara’s shoulder as she pulls up more camera feeds of the city streets. Alonzo returns to join us after a little while, informing us that Maria Russo is now on a direct flight back to Italy to be with her family.

Even though it’s only been a few hours, it feels like days are passing while we wait for Zara to monitor the Barone’s actions and find Valentina.

I try to be patient, but it’s exceedingly difficult.

“You know, the more you guys keep looking over my shoulder, the longer this is going to take me,” Zara complains.

“I’ve found the car, verified that Leonardo is with the men who took Valentina, and tracked their route halfway through the city before losing sight of the vehicle.

But I could be a lot faster if your constant pacing and sighing didn’t keep interrupting my concentration. ”

“Sorry,” I say. “I can’t help it.”



“Come on,” Vincent says as he puts an arm over my shoulder and walks me toward the door. “Let’s get a drink downstairs and talk about what we’re going to do when we find Angelo and Leonardo while Zara works.”

As much as I want to stay right here staring at the screen until we find them, I know that he’s right. The best thing that I can do right now is let Zara do what she does best.

“I’ll come and get you right away if she finds anything,” Alonzo says from his seat on the couch.

When we reach the casino, Gabriel pours us both drinks immediately and tries to start up a conversation to take my mind off the current situation.

But I feel a rift with him now, and the last thing that I want to do is let the bartender, whose loyalties I’ve questioned, overhear my plans for what I intend to do to Leonardo Conti once I get my hands on him.

Vincent and I sit at his private corner table and talk about all the places that the Barone and Conti family have mutual access to in the city, and whether any of those places would make good, secure, hiding spots for them to tuck Valentina away in.

“You know he’s going to find out that the child she’s carrying is mine,” I say with a heavy heart when I think about what Leonardo might do before we reach them.

“I know,” Vincent replies solemnly. “And I’m going to loop Isla in on what’s going on so that she can help as moral support once we get Valentina back. Trust me, cousin, we will get her back.”

I swallow my drink in one gulp and let the burn slide down my throat.

“Where do you think a man like Leonardo Conti would take a beautiful woman to sell her off?” I ask, thinking aloud.

“I mean, if he wants to get top dollar for her, it would need to be somewhere inside his elitist circles, not just any random place on the street.”

“Agreed, and knowing Leonardo’s affinity for luxury, he has connections to the city’s highest bidders.”

“That’s it!” I say as it suddenly clicks in my head.

“What is?” Vincent asks.

“That’s the way he can assure he’ll get the most money for Valentina—an auction.”

VALENTINA

Being kidnapped while pregnant is not what the doctor ordered. In fact, it's completely contrary to what the doctor recommended when he told me to keep things "low stress," but it's not as if I have any control at all over what is going on right now.

"I told you, I've already taken a pregnancy test," I argue with Leonardo as he pushes another test toward me. "I've already been seen by the doctor, and my pregnancy has also been confirmed. I don't need to take another test."

"Call me overly cautious," Leonardo sneers. "I want to see it for myself. You're also going to take a different test just as soon as the doctor I've called arrives here."

"What kind of test?" I ask with creeping anxiety.

"One that will give me a clear and definitive answer regarding whose baby it is that you're carrying inside your womb—a paternity test."

The thought of taking these tests under Leonardo's supervision turns my stomach.

Not only do I not want him knowing anything about me and my child, but I also don't want him finding out with certainty that the baby is Luc's.

Obviously, it disturbed me when he sent that note to the hotel suite and hinted at the possibility of it being his, and part of me wants that confirmation of a paternity test that it indeed is not.

But I'm also well aware that if he finds out the child isn't his, it will put me and my baby in even graver danger.

Despite my concerns, though, there's really no way out of this.

I just wish Luciano would figure out where I am and come rescue me, just like he did outside the cathedral in Italy.

But that time, he knew exactly where I was.

Thanks to my father's involvement with Barone and Leonardo Conti, I don't think anyone other than the confused nurse at the clinic who saw me leave out the back door knows what has happened to me.

She also doesn't know where they took me.

The situation feels desperate. My short flight of freedom with Luc might be the last time I'm ever allowed to spread my wings again.

I try to hold my emotions together and not despair as I take the pregnancy test, like Leonardo demands of me. While I wait for the expected positive sign in the test window, I stay in the bathroom for a moment of quiet solitude before going out and having to face him again.

"Time to come out," Leonardo beckons with a sharp knock on the door after not over ten minutes have passed. "The doctor is here."

I walk out and hand over the positive pregnancy test, eyeing the doctor that Leonardo apparently has on call. The man looks a lot less wise and friendly than the doctor at the medical clinic. This guy looks the part of "mafia doc" and he has the bedside manner to match.

“Open your mouth, please,” he instructs as he pulls a swab out of his black bag.

I do as I’m told because I know better than to defy any of Leonardo’s men. It won’t matter how much I protest. They’ll force me to do as I’m told, regardless. I’ve learned that lesson the hard way before.

After the test, Leonardo will soon receive the results and decide my fate and my unborn child’s fate. Before the doctor leaves, he also insists on a blood draw.

“Why so many tests?” I ask as he raises a brow at the fact that I have the audacity to ask questions at all. “And how long before the results come back?”

“Efficiency and accuracy, my dear,” he smirks as he glances at Leonardo out of the corner of his eyes. “Mr. Conti doesn’t want any mistakes to be made or any false results. I’ll have the results back by tomorrow evening.”

“Tomorrow?” I ask in surprise, having thought that the results would at least take several days, if not more than a week.

“I can usually offer Mr. Conti my same-day service, but some things take a little more time,” the doctor replies as he jabs me with a needle.

As much as I want all of this to be over, I don’t want it to end badly. Tomorrow is too soon. Luc doesn’t have enough time to find and rescue me before Leonardo discovers the baby isn’t his.

Once the blood draw is complete, I take a few steps backward, wanting to put as much space as possible between me and these awful men, even though I’m still stuck inside the same room with them.

But the blood collection, combined with stress and nerves, and the fact that I haven’t

eaten, makes me momentarily dizzy and off-balance.

Leonardo reaches out a hand to steady me, and I instantly try to wrench my arm away from him.

But his grip is tight, and he holds fast, pulling me over to a chair that he practically shoves me down into.

He asks one of his men to bring me a glass of juice, and when it's handed to me, I don't refuse it because I'm determined to keep my baby safe and nourished throughout this whole ordeal.

Leonardo pulls up a chair and sits beside me as if he's planning on staying for the duration of this waiting period.

I sip my juice and look away from him, not wanting to look at such a hideous man who can do such terrible things.

I hated Leonardo Conti even before this, but now I truly despise him more than anything else in the world.

While we sit, his phone rings.

"Ah, yes, Angelo, the doctor just left. I'm just waiting here, keeping my pretty pet comfortable for the time being until I get the results.

" Leonardo places the call on speaker so that I can hear Angelo Barone as well, likely only to torment and taunt me, and to remind me it's these men who will decide my fate, not me.

"Did you decide what you're going to do if the kid belongs to Luciano Moretti?"

Angelo asks, as if intentionally trying to stir the pot.

“If the child is mine, then Valentina and I will marry right away.”

My stomach turns upon hearing that proclamation.

“No wedding ceremony this time, just the legal paperwork drawn up to ensure that she belongs to me and that the child, as soon as she pops it out, will become my property,” Leonardo continues.

“And if it doesn’t belong to you?” Angelo asks. His tone indicates that he’s almost gleeful, already knowing or expecting what the answer will be.

“Then I’ll make her abort the bastard, and we will go about selling Valentina at one of my special auctions so that I can get the money back I loaned out to her pathetic excuse for a father.”

I turn abruptly to look at Leonardo in horror. “You’re going to kill my child?” I ask, feeling a cold terror sweep over me.

“Now, now, dear,” he smirks. “It’s more of a conglomeration of cells, really. It will only become a child if it is mine and allowed to survive inside of you. Otherwise—what’s that saying? Oh yes, we’ll simply flush the baby out with the bathwater.”

“You’re a monster!” I hiss at him.

“Perhaps, but I’m an obscenely wealthy one, and you’d better hope you fetch me a good price at auction if it comes to that.

Because if I can’t recoup my financial loss over your father’s loan by selling you for

a hearty price, then my only other option is to sell you for slaughter, much like a prized pig who has outlived its time in the barn.

I know at least one buyer who would like to see you killed. ”

His eyes dart down toward the phone, implying that Angelo Barone would pay at least a small sum for the pleasure of killing me.

“I’ve done nothing to cross the Barones,” I say, confused over why Angelo would hate me enough to want me dead.

“True,” Angelo says over the phone. “But the Moretti family has done plenty to vex me and make my life difficult. I owe Vincent and Luciano a debt of pain that I intend to repay in full. Killing you would inflict pain on Luciano Moretti, and that would bring me a lot of satisfaction. And don’t worry, we’ll be coming to get Isla as well.

By the end of this, both Moretti men will regret ever crossing me—and ever doubting the power and reach of the Barone family.

They will pay for what they have done to me, and you and your pretty ballerina friend will pay for their actions too. ”

The waiting feels like forever. Leonardo comes and goes, leaving me in this room alone to ponder my fate and drive me crazy with worry over the life of my unborn baby.

And when the next day rolls around, I’ve barely slept more than a few minutes at a time in this cold room as I slouch against the uncomfortable chair.

I can already tell by the look on Leonardo’s face as he enters that the test results are contrary to what he would have liked to have been told.



This time, he's not alone as he walks in—Angelo Barone is beside him.

Angelo looks like a rabid dog, eager to sink its teeth into his pound of flesh.

Leonardo strides toward me with narrowed eyes and a grim expression. Even the perfectly pressed suit that he's wearing can't hide the chaos of anger within him. He doesn't say a single word to me. Instead, he grabs me by the arm, pulls me up from my seat, and snaps me around.

“Careful!” Angelo calls out to my surprise. “Don't damage the merchandise. The auction is too close for that.”

That settles it then—the paternity test came back so the baby I'm carrying is Luc's. I know I should feel nothing more than fear over what is about to happen to me, but I can't help feeling a moment of relieved joy because, just like I thought, the unborn child within me is Luc's.

That brief moment is fleeting when Leonardo pulls a pill out of his pocket and shoves a bottle of water into my hand.

“Take it!” he shouts as he glares at me. “Take the pill.”

“What is it?” I ask, knowing full well that it's meant to terminate my pregnancy.

“It's your last chance at staying alive and being sold for a good price,” he growls.

“Swallow it, Valentina.”

“No.”

My defiance only serves to enrage Leonardo even further.

He waves for one of his men to come into the room and pin my arms behind my back.

Angelo watches from the other side of the room, taking sick pleasure because the woman his enemy cares about is being subjected to such treatment.

Leonardo pinches my nose with one hand and forces my mouth open with the other.

I do all that I can to free myself. And when I can't, I do all that I can not to swallow that pill.

But Leonardo shoves the tiny pill inside my mouth and presses it against the back of my cheek where it quickly dissolves.

There's nothing I can do to stop it, and nothing that I can do to save the tiny little life inside of me from the effects of that drug.

Tears roll down my cheeks, and when Leonardo and his goons let me go, I crumble into a sobbing heap on the floor. I may not have expected this baby, but I wanted it. How will I ever face Luc after this? Will I even survive what's about to happen to me and ever find freedom again?

"Stop your blathering," Leonardo scolds as he walks out of the room. "You need to get cleaned up and beautified so that you present well tomorrow at the auction."

Angelo and the other man follow him out, and before the door closes, the same old woman who fitted me for my wedding dress inside the cathedral in Italy steps inside.

"Oh dear," she says as she comes to take my hands and lift me up to my feet. "See? If you had only listened to me back in Italy, then none of this would have ever happened. When will girls like you learn?"

“Learn what?” I snap angrily at her as tears continue to roll down my cheeks. “That we are nothing more than things to be owned by terrible men?”

For a moment, I think I see a glimpse of sympathy in her old eyes. But a dutiful, emotionless stare quickly replaces it.

“No, that if you don’t embrace the fact that you are nothing more than the property of a powerful, very dangerous mafia king, this will be your fate.

I tried to warn you, but you didn’t listen.

And now, instead of that lovely wedding dress inside that lovely church on the Mediterranean, they will guise you up and sell you like a whore at auction.

There is no fight left in you, girl—or at least there shouldn’t be.

Because you cannot win against Leonardo Conti, and neither can that Romeo Moretti man of yours—he’s no knight in shining armor that is going to swoop in and save you this time, and he’s no Saint. None of them are.”

She’s right, and Leonardo Conti wins. He broke me, and he stole my child from me, and now there is no more fight left in me.

I stand there, staring vacantly at the mirror the old woman has brought in as she ties my hair back into a tight ponytail behind my head, and she dresses me to be sold.

She chatters just as she did in the dressing room at the church, but I don’t hear her words.

I’m simply swimming inside my head right now, thinking of nothing other than the beautiful future and family with Luciano I almost had.

It isn't until she's almost finished dressing me up that something she says slips through the fog. I don't know what she was talking about mere moments before, but I catch the tail end of her sentiment.

"Besides, sometimes those things don't even work. Modern medicine can't defeat miracles."

"What?" I ask as I break out of my stupor. "What are you talking about?"

"The abortion pill," she frowns as she repeats herself. "Sometimes, those pills don't even work. Medicine is not the same as a miracle."

"That's what I need right now," I whisper under my breath. "A miracle."

"What did you say?" she asks.

"Nothing."

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

LUC

Leonardo Conti's estate, located just outside of downtown Las Vegas, is practically a compound.

The familiar guarded iron gates that I could cleverly get through the last time I was here, on the night I climbed through Valentina's window, are now doubled in security.

He knows I'm coming for him. Good, I hope he knows I intend to bury him six feet under, too.

"If Leonardo is holding a high-priced auction," Vincent says as we drive up to the gates. "Then it will be here. He wouldn't risk taking his cargo anywhere outside of his most fortified structure, and there is no place of his that is more secure than this."

"Agreed, but I still don't think we're just going to walk right in. He won't let us anywhere near the event where Valentina is being held. He knows better."

Vincent shrugs as he drives up to the guards and rolls down his window. "I'm not so sure about that. Money talks, and I've got lots of it. We're about to see whether it buys us entry."

"Good evening, Mr. Moretti," the guard greets us, already aware of who we are.

"Good evening," Vincent says smoothly. "We're here to enjoy the auction."

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible. The two of you aren’t on the guest list, and tonight’s auction is a closed event—invitation only.”

“Oh, come on,” Vincent says with a chuckle. “My money spends as well as anyone else’s. Besides, I’m in the mood to spend quite a lot on the right item.”

The guard’s expression tightens as he has to repeat himself, and I notice his hand set subtly on the gun at his waist.

“My apologies,” he says. “But Mr. Conti strictly instructed that only specifically invited guests can attend tonight’s event. You two weren’t invited. I’m going to need you to turn your car around and leave.”

Vincent notices the hand tighten around the gun at the guard’s waist too, and realizes this way inside is impossible.

“That’s a shame,” Vincent says, shaking his head as he pretends to concede. “Ah, well, there are always other places to spend my money.”

He rolls up his window and turns the car around to leave. I watch through the mirrors at the guards, who stare at us until the car is out of sight.

“Now what?” I ask increasingly anxious about reaching Valentina.

“We’ll try another way,” he says as he pulls the car off the road and parks it under the darkness of some trees.

“We have to get to her before she’s purchased.

If another Don buys her, then that just means our adversaries continue to stack up even further.

I don't want to fight off a third man who's pissed about us stealing his "goods". "

I bristle at Valentina being referred to as an object, but it's the cold, hard truth of the situation that she's currently in. Vincent is right. Time is of the essence.

After getting out of the car, I draw my gun and grip it in my hand while we walk back toward Leonardo's estate.

We stick to the trees and the side of the property and steer clear of the long driveway where the car headlights of more cars coming to the event are flashing.

When we reach the estate's perimeter, we look for a way in.

"This gate looks like it stretches around the entire property," Vincent says in frustration after we've walked for quite a ways along the side of the wrought iron.

"There can't just be one opening, though.

From a security perspective, it makes little sense to have only one way in or out in the event of an emergency.

Besides, Leonardo doesn't seem like the man who wants his service staff mingling with the guests at a single entry point. "

"No, he doesn't," I say as I spot something up ahead. "Look there!"

A few yards away from us, there is a small door in the gate. It must be a staff entrance to the property. When we reach it, we find the door locked as expected, but a large keypad replaces the lock.

"We could be here all night trying to guess a number combination," Vincent sighs in

frustration.

“Yes, we could,” I nod. “Or we could take a chance on someone having a soul in this godforsaken estate.”

Before Vincent can do anything to stop me, I let out a small whistle at the old woman standing just outside the side door to the building. It looks like she’s just about to take out the trash with the bag still held in her hand. She looks vaguely familiar to me.

She looks over at me and instantly turns to run back inside, likely to alert the guards of our presence here. Beside me, I can hear Vincent curse at the mistake I’ve just made, but I’m not done with this risky endeavor yet.

“Wait, please!” I call out to her in an urgent, quiet voice. “We’re here to help Valentina.”

For a second, it looks like my plea falls on deaf ears. But then, after a second of hesitation at the door, the old woman turns, looks quickly to either side, and rushes silently toward us.

“What are you doing?” she scolds quietly as she stands on the other side of the locked iron door. “You shouldn’t be here. You’re both going to get yourselves killed!”

“Please,” I plead with her. “I’m here to save Valentina. Surely you know that she’s going to be sold to the highest bidder tonight, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. The entire place is abuzz with chatter over tonight’s auction. If you want to have her, then you should just come inside and buy her yourself,” she says. “Unless?—”

The old woman looks at me more carefully in the dim moonlight, and her eyes widen.



“You’re Luciano Moretti,” she gasps. “You’re the one who fathered the child within her.”

“Yes,” I say. “I am. And I love her with all my heart—both her and our unborn child. Please help me save them both. Valentina is a good woman. She doesn’t deserve any of this.”

The expression on the woman’s face drops, and her eyes look saddened.

“You might already be too late for that,” she says without elaborating.

“And you’re right. None of us deserves this.

But this place is crawling with armed men loyal to Leonardo and to Angelo Barone.

You’ll never reach her in time. You’ll never make it out of here alive, any of you. ”

“I have to try.”

For a moment, the fate of this plan hangs in the balance as the old woman considers whether to risk helping us and putting herself on the chopping block if she gets found out as having let us inside. But then, she says something that changes the course of how tonight’s plan will go.

“You know, when I was helping to get Valentina dressed for the auction tonight, I couldn’t help but notice the same look in her eyes that she had on the day I was helping her get dressed for her wedding ceremony in Italy,” she says thoughtfully.

“It was a look of sheer and utter hopelessness—like all the life left her eyes as she resigned herself to accepting a fate she didn’t want.

I've tried to toughen her up, but there are some women who can never survive in a cage. Valentina is one of those women."

With that, the woman reaches out her hand and punches a few numbers on the keypad. The door swings open, and she turns to hurry back into the house without another word.

"Thank you," I whisper to her as she leaves.

She turns to glance at me with a blank expression on her face, one that proves she is the woman who can survive in this environment and that her act of pity for Valentina is a gift that she doesn't do often.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she says in denial as she scurries away.

Once inside, there is a flurry of activity, which makes it all the easier for Vincent and me to blend in.

We're dressed like every other man here, in fine suits with designer accessories, and bulging wallets in our pockets to spend at the auction.

No one here knows that we are uninvited guests, and so as long as we steer clear of running into any of the Barone or Conti crew, we should be able to make it into the auction before raising any alarms.

A cocktail waitress walks down the wide marble hallway past us, and Vincent reaches for a drink off her tray. I give him a crooked glance as he takes a sip.

"What? It helps us blend in to look like we're enjoying ourselves. Besides, it takes the edge off for a steady trigger finger." He takes a sip and then hands the rest of the glass to me, and I do the same.

When we reach the double doors of the main ballroom, we hear the sounds of the auction already beginning inside.

“It’s too late. It’s already begun,” I shake my head.

“That doesn’t mean they have already auctioned her off,” Vincent reminds me as the staff opens the double doors and lets us inside the grand space.

Eager, hungry men, nearly shoulder-to-shoulder, crowd the ballroom, ready to spend their money on beautiful women and expensive status symbols.

Leonardo frequently holds events like this to sell off trinkets and girls, and everything in between.

I once heard of him selling off a prized thoroughbred with a saddle laden with designer drugs.

The man is a gluttonous prick with little respect for anything other than himself.

“There!” Vincent whispers as he taps me on the side of the arm.

I look up and see Valentina being dragged out onto the stage by a leash that is affixed to a collar around her neck.

The entire scene is nothing short of barbaric, coated with a layer of luxury to make it more palatable for those spending their money.

Many armed people are here. It will not be easy ambushing this event and getting her out of here.

“We’re literally outnumbered several dozen to one,” I say to Vincent under my

breath.

A voice from behind us responds to my remark.

“Actually,” the man says. “I’d wager you’re outnumbered a hundred to one.”

We both turn to find Angelo Barone standing there behind us with his gun held at his side.

“I could just kill the two of you right here,” Angelo smirks. “But where would the fun in that be? I’d much rather wait and let you watch Valentina get sold off first. Then we can handle our unfinished business.”

“Valentina isn’t leaving this place with anyone other than us,” Vincent growls at him in a low voice as the sounds of the auction for Valentina begin all around us.

“I assure you she is,” Angelo sneers. “But don’t worry. I haven’t forgotten about the special debt that I intend to claim from you specifically. Your precious Isla will be on this same stage soon enough.”

What happens next happens faster than I can react to it. Within a second, and with a smooth, silent movement that no one even notices until it’s too late, Vincent pulls his gun and shoots Angelo Barone dead between the eyes.

The sound of the shot echoes above the noise of the auction, and the spray of blood and bits of Angelo’s flesh erupts in a gruesome confetti onto all the guests directly around us. Instantly, everyone scatters as screaming breaks out and Angelo’s lifeless body falls to the ground with a dull thud.

For a frozen second, I can see the look of sheer satisfaction and fulfilled vindication on Vincent’s face. Immediately after, the two of us rush toward the stage to grab

Valentina and get the hell out of here.

The Barone crew and Leonardo's guards, hidden in the crowd, fire on us as we dodge their bullets.

Vincent fires back at them, taking a few out with his impeccable aim, but I remain keenly focused on one thing—getting to the stage and reaching Valentina before she gets hurt.

I am almost there, with one foot on the step up to the stage, when one of Leonardo's men barrels into my side, knocking me off-balance and taking me down.

I fire my gun into his chest, instantly killing him, before shoving his body away from me. But it's too late.

As soon as I get to my feet again and lunge toward the stage, I see Leonardo grab the end of Valentina's leash and jerk it so hard that she falls to her knees.

He reaches down to grab her, throwing her over his shoulder before taking off toward the back of the stage, where I assume there's another way out of the room.

I follow in close pursuit, racing through dark hallways and pushing the Conti staff out of my way as I run after them.

But even as fast as I make my way through the estate, I don't catch them in time before spilling out into the back of the yard and see Leonardo speed off with Valentina in his car.

"Damn it!" I shout into the night just as Vincent arrives at my side. "Fuck! He got away with her."

“Come on,” Vincent says as he pulls me toward the trees. “We need to get out of here before we’re overrun. We’ll find her, Luc, I promise.”

I run alongside Vincent until we make it back to his car, with a horde of men in hot pursuit of us as we speed away from the Conti estate.

This mission failed, and now, instead of being auctioned off, Valentina is alone with Leonardo Conti, and I fear that might be even worse.

### VALENTINA

For a single moment, I saw a glimpse of my freedom again. I saw the fierce determination in Luc's eyes as he rushed to the stage of the auction in order to save me. But then, just as quickly as he had appeared, that glimpse of freedom was gone again.

Now, I'm in a car being driven by a madman as he heads out to the surrounding desert outside of the city.

Leonardo curses and mumbles under his breath in a feverish fit of rage.

He's driving erratically, kicking up dust around the outside of the car as the wheels spin.

All the while, he rambles on about how Luciano is always ruining his plans and impeding things for him.

He isn't yet ranting at me. So, I stare out the window, looking at my reflection in the side view mirror and at the collar still affixed to my neck as if I'm a dog.

I block out the sound of his voice and the words spewing out of his mouth because all I can think about is how much I've lost—the child inside of me, the love of my life, my freedom.

There truly isn't much more for me to be afraid of because there isn't much more that Leonardo can steal from me.

He's already taken my pride, my choice, and my autonomy.

And it almost amuses me to see how upset he is that he hasn't been able to do so without at least some pushback that has vexed him.

When the car stops, I force myself back into the present moment and look around. We are in the middle of the desert, with nothing around within sight except for sand, a winding dirt road, and a few scrubby-looking desert plants that look as dry as Leonardo's patience.

"Get out," he snarls at me as he opens the door and pulls the leash attached to my collar.

I do as he says simply because I know I have no choice and would prefer not to suffer a broken neck out here in the middle of nowhere.

To my surprise, he pulls a key from his pocket and takes off the leash and collar, tossing them into the dusty dirt at his feet.

"Are you letting me go?" I ask, not getting my hopes up but thinking that maybe he's just dumping me out here in the desert to be rid of me once and for all.

"Ha! Hell no," he laughs. "You won't be worth jack-shit at auction now that everyone has seen how much trouble you've caused.

No one will want to buy you and risk being on the opposite side of the Moretti family, not after witnessing Vincent just shoot Angelo Barone at point-blank.

And your father can't afford to buy you back or pay off his loan.

So, that leaves me with no choice other than to keep you for myself.



Trust me, you're more trouble than you're worth, and I would have rather simply had my money back.

I can find a thousand women to wet my cock, and I sure as hell don't need you anymore.

But since I'm saddled with you, I intend to get my money's worth. ”

“What does that mean?” I ask, feeling fear surge once more.

“It means that you will now be the mother of my children, not Luciano Moretti's. Now that we've dealt with the insignificant problem of your conception, it's time to make sure you're useful,” Leonardo growls, lunging toward me.

“What? No! Stop it! What are you doing?” I scream, trying to bat him away and wrestle free of his grasp.

My brain can't register what is happening, what Leonardo is trying to do.

We're in the middle of an open desert, a vast space with nothing around us but his car and miles of dust, sand, and dirt.

And right here, out in the open, with no one around to hear me scream—Leonardo tries to force himself onto me.

He hooks one arm behind my back and digs his fingers into the side of my torso so hard that I can already feel it bruising. Then, he reaches his other hand behind my head and grabs my hair to wrench my head back.

“You're not going anywhere, not this time,” he sneers at me as he pushes me to the ground.

My back slams against the hard dirt, and a cloud of sand blows up into the surrounding air around me, filling my nostrils and making it hard to breathe.

Leonardo's weight against me adds to the feeling of suffocation as he pins me down beneath his thighs and sits over me to keep me from being able to get away.

I struggle to get free, but I'm pinned. Swatting him, I hit his side and stomach, but nothing works as I try to buck him.

I'm simply not strong enough to hurt or overpower him, not with just my bare hands, at least.

I look around quickly to see if there's a rock within reach, but all that I can grasp is a fistful of sand, which I throw at his face.

But Leonardo turns his head in time to miss it and slams his body down onto me further to prevent me from being able to twist around at all.

I can barely breathe, both out of panic and the crushing sensation over me, as I watch in horror while he undoes the buttons of his pants.

The only time that I had sex with Leonardo before, I was drunk and remember little of it, thank God. But now, as he pulls his erect cock from his pants and reaches for his hand to yank my panties down between my thighs, I feel as though I'm going to be sick.

I press my thighs together as tight as I can, fighting his hand away and struggling to keep myself covered, but failing to impede his efforts much. Then, without knowing what else to do, I scream.

"Get off of me, you motherfucker!" I scream a shrill stream of profanities. "God

damn you, Leonardo, get the fuck off of me, you monster! Luc is going to come for you for what you've done to me and our child. He's going to come for you, and he's going to kill you!"

I practically spat that last sentiment at him. I feel as if I'm seething and foaming at the mouth with rage and fear mixed as one.

"By the time Luciano catches up to us—if he even catches up to us," he taunts.

"You'll have my seed inside of you, and it will be too late.

I'll shoot him just like his cousin shot Angelo Barone, and then there will be nothing stopping me from giving you the life you actually deserve, Valentina—a life as my lovely, obedient, trophy wife that does exactly as she's told or meets with the butt of my gun at the side of her pretty face. "

His threat is meant to silence me into futile compliance. Instead, in an instant, it reminds me of something.

My eyes dart down to his waist and to the holster that is still attached to his unbuttoned pants, and that's when I see it. Leonardo forgot that he still had his gun on his waist.

Just as he goes to stick his cock into me, I reach for the gun.

It's a bold, desperate move. I don't even know if the gun is loaded or if I can draw it from the holster in one motion. His distraction and vulnerable position give me a few precious seconds to surprise him.

The look on his face is priceless when I swiftly pull the gun free, aim it at his chest, and take the shot before the tip of his erect penis can touch me. I think this is the first

time I've ever seen Leonardo look like he knows defeat.

He always has an arrogant air about him. Having the upper hand, being the richest, smartest, most powerful man in the room—but not this time. I plan to block out his entire experience from my memory someday, but the look on his face right now, I will gladly remember.

Firing the shot causes Leonardo to release his grip on me.

He falls to the side, with a little help from me, and clenches his hand to the now-gushing bullet hole just below his ribcage.

His body falls like dead weight onto the sand, limp dick and all, as he hits the ground.

Only his wide, surprised eyes and the gaping open mouth that hangs in shock still show signs of life.

I kick him in the side, not because he needs it in order to help him through the veil of death, but because it brings me great pleasure to know that I can cause the bastard pain, too.

“Die here alone, Leonardo,” I say as I turn back to his car. “Die here and know that you leave nothing behind—no legacy, no heir, nothing. Tomorrow, people will forget your name except for the stories of your shameful death, your dried-up cock exposed in the desert sun.”

He tries to say something, but all that escapes his mouth is a gurgle of blood. Vindicated, I walk back toward the car to drive back to Luc. But before I can make it more than a few steps, something happens.

In all the chaos, from the preparations for selling me off at the auction, to the ambush

inside the estate's ballroom, and then finally to this horrific experience in the desert in which Leonardo almost forced himself onto me—I haven't had time to even think about that pill.

Whatever the drug has been doing in my system since I was forced to swallow it, I haven't felt a thing. But now I do.

A sharp pain pierces my stomach, one that is so severe it causes me to buckle down to my knees. I'm only a few feet away from the car, but I can't reach it. It's all I can do to curl up in pain and hold my stomach with the palms of both hands as I cry.

"No, no," I cry as I try to sob and breathe through the pain.

Above me, circling vultures make me wonder if they await Leonardo's death or mine.

I try to stand up and walk again, this time, making it only a single step before the pain returns.

I stay on my feet as I hold my stomach and suck in tight breaths to ride out the feeling as if my uterus is being compressed inside of a vice grip.

But when the feeling subsides, even a small enough amount for me to take a step, a new feeling emerges.

Something warm and wet is running down my leg. I look to see the crimson streak that streams down my leg and makes a small puddle near my foot in the sand. I'm going to bleed out here if I don't make it to the car, and the circling vultures overhead know it.

I cry again. This isn't how things were supposed to go.

Luc and I were supposed to be together and happy and start a family.

I was supposed to be free and have a healthy pregnancy, and we were supposed to be in love and have a child together.

None of this is how it was supposed to go.

The old woman was right all along—I should never have had hope.

Some girls don't get happy endings. Some of us only get the lot we're dealt.

And for me, that apparently means dying in this desert along with my unborn child.

With every ounce of strength and determination that I have left, I try to make it closer to the car.

I move slowly, deliberately, making sure not to fall down onto the ground again because I know that if I do, I won't be able to get back up.

When I get close enough to see into the car's window, I notice there are no keys in the ignition.

I turn to look back toward Leonardo and see his possessions scattered around his now-dead body.

The gun that I used to shoot him with is there in the sand, a few feet away from where he lies, and just past that, I can see the shining reflection of his metal car keys.

I cry again as intense pain sweeps over me, knowing that I won't make it to get the keys and get back to the car, not like this—not while I feel like I'm both going to pass out and be sick and die all at once.

So, I take the final few steps toward the car, crying and holding my stomach as I leave a trail of blood in my wake.

At least if I make it to the car, I can lie down on the seat and pass out.

Whatever happens after that, I leave to God or fate or whatever now controls what happens to me.

As soon as I get close enough to the car to reach out and touch the door handle, I see my reflection in the window, covered in Leonardo's blood, and pale as a ghost from the loss of my own.

I look like an apparition, and I think perhaps I'm seeing one too.

Before I pull the handle open, I see something else coming toward me off in the distance.

A black car, speeding so fast that it is kicking up a veritable sandstorm behind its wheels.

I don't think I'm imagining it or hallucinating because I can hear the rev of the engine and smell the fuel burning as it comes to a quick stop.

Then, a man steps out of the car and runs toward me.

"Valentina!"

My eyes tunnel as I look with hope up ahead at the face that I want to see more than anything else.

"Luc?"

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

LUC

“Zara, we need your help,” I say as Vincent and I burst through the doors of her office.

Her eyes glance up at us over the top of her laptop screen. “Geez, you know that knocking before barging in through a closed door is a thing, right?”

But as soon as she sees the desperate and furious look on my face, and the spray of Angelo Barone’s blood on Vincent’s face, Zara drops the sarcasm and realizes that this is a dire matter.

“What happened?” she asks.

“Leonardo ran from the auction with Valentina,” I explain as I pace the room furiously. “I almost had her, but he slipped away from me, grabbed her, and ran.”

“We were vastly outnumbered,” Vincent adds. “When we lost sight of Leonardo, we had to get out of there or risk not being able to get away at all.”

“Whose blood is that?” she asks as she motions toward the splatter covering Vincent’s clothes and face.

“Angelo Barone,” he proclaims proudly. “After all these years, he finally got what he deserved.”

“Sorry, not to give you this moment to bask in the glory of your revenge,” I say



impatiently, knowing how much it means to Vincent and the entire Moretti family to have eliminated Angelo once and for all.

“But we need to find Valentina now. God only knows what Leonardo will do to her after the trouble we just caused him at his auction. Not only did another one of his high-profile events just get ruined in front of an audience, but now he surely realizes that keeping Valentina around is nothing more than a liability for him.”

“Agreed,” Vincent nods as he sits down beside Zara, who is already getting to work pulling up the camera network around the city.

“And he also now knows that selling her won’t be a viable option for him anymore, either.

No one is going to want to risk purchasing a woman that puts them in our crosshairs, especially not after seeing what just happened to Angelo Barone. ”

“I found them,” Zara announces within a matter of seconds. “Well, I kind of found them.”

“What does that mean?” I ask anxiously, looking over at her laptop screen.

“It means that I’ve got them on camera surveillance, leaving Leonardo’s estate, and driving through the city,” she explains.

“I’ve got them driving all the way through the city until the camera network ends.

I can see them heading out to the desert, taking the lone road, and driving at record pace.

But after that, the city’s surveillance camera network ends.

There aren't any cameras in the desert."

"So that's where they are, though—in the desert outside the city?" I ask to be sure.

"Yep. If Leonardo had driven back onto the Strip, I would have been able to see it on the video feed. I sped up the video to the current moment, and there's no sign of him, or his car, or Valentina re-entering the city. They're out there in the desert somewhere still."

"What the hell is he doing with her out in the desert?" Vincent asks me.

"I don't know, but whatever it is, it can't be good."

I head for the door, and Vincent follows.

"No, thank you for all of your help, cousin, but I'm going after him alone this time," I say as I pause momentarily before leaving.

"He's alone out there, and he owes me a debt for what he's done to Valentina.

I can take him on myself. I intend to put a bullet in his head just like you did to Angelo Barone. I'm sure you can understand that."

Vincent nods and gives me a pat on the shoulder for luck.

"We'll be right here monitoring things over the cameras.

As soon as you and Valentina get back into the city, we'll be here to support whatever you need.

And if I see any of the Conti crew heading out to the desert while you're gone, I'll

send our men to stop them in their tracks before they reach you. Good luck, Luc.”

I nod in appreciation and then race out to my car, leaving Zara and Vincent to monitor things from here as I chase Leonardo Conti into the desert.

When I find him—I’m going to kill him. I won’t hesitate this time.

I know that the only way to get this bastard out of our lives for good, and to keep him from ever tormenting Valentina again, is to end him once and for all.

Otherwise, his sick obsession with having her will continue.

I drive like mad out into the desert, ignoring every traffic light and breaking every law in order to reach her before something happens.

There’s no good reason to take someone all the way out into the desert beyond the city unless you intend to kill them.

I hadn’t expected Leonardo to kill her, as it would be the ultimate admission that he’s failed to keep and control her.

But now that Valentina is useless to him, and she has humiliated him more than once—I wouldn’t put anything past him.

I slam on the gas until it feels like I’m pressing the pedal through the floor of the car, and as soon as I get outside the city, I follow the one long dirt road out into the night. All my eyes can see is dirt and sand and deserted land until I spot Leonardo’s car far in the distance.

I slow the car down so as not to kick up as much dust as I approach and reach for my gun so that I’m ready to jump out and engage Leonardo as soon as I’m within

shooting range. But the sound of a single gunshot cuts through the still air.

Panic instantly sets in, and despite the sand, I punch the gas again and race toward the car up ahead. As soon as I get close enough, I stop the car and step out.

The air all around me is thick with dust and sand that the car's spinning tires have kicked up.

I take a few steps forward with my gun held out in front of me, not able to get a clear view of what's ahead until the debris in the air settles.

Then, I think I see someone walking toward me, someone much too small to be Leonardo.

"Valentina!" I call out.

"Luc?"

As soon as I hear her shaking voice, I run toward her.

By the time I reach her, the dirt and sand have settled, and I can see her dust-covered body standing against the horizon with one shaking hand held outstretched toward the car, and the other reaching out for me.

Blood covers the front of her body and face, and runs down the inside of her leg.

"Valentina!" I shout out as I reach for her.

Her trembling body falls into my arms as she cries.

I hold her against me and try to calm her. "Shhh, everything is going to be okay. I'm

here now. I've got you." As I look over her shoulder, I can see Leonardo's body on the ground, surrounded by a pool of blood.

"What happened?"

"He tried to come at me," she cries. "Tried to force himself on me, but I didn't let him. Not this time. I shot him and killed him, and I'm glad for it."

The thought of him bringing Valentina all the way out here so that he could force himself onto her blinds me with hatred and rage.

"Stay right here for one second," I say as I steady her against the side of the car. I need to make sure that he's dead and that Leonardo Conti will never bother her again.

I walk toward Leonardo's lifeless body and kick it twice. He's completely unresponsive, with his eyes rolled into the back of his head. But still—I crouch down beside him, disgusted at the sight of his flaccid, sand-covered dick, and put the barrel of my gun against the center of his forehead.

"No amount of money or status could protect you from the death you so greatly deserve, Leonardo," I say, before pulling the trigger.

Now, with his brains splattered against the ground, I can be sure that he will never again interfere in our lives. Tonight, the Moretti family made good on two of its debts of revenge—Angelo Barone and Leonardo Conti are no more.

Just as I go to stand up and wipe Leonardo's blood off my face with the back of my hand, Valentina lets out a scream of pain. I turn to look at her and see her fall to her knees beside the car. Around her heels, a puddle of blood is forming on the sand.

I run toward her, panicked over her condition, seeing the urgent need to get her to the

hospital.

“What happened? What’s causing all this bleeding?” I ask, feeling entirely out of my depth, but knowing that a bleeding pregnant woman is definitely bad.

She tries to talk as she holds her stomach and cries, but her words are scrambled and faint. She’s losing too much blood and is in obvious excruciating pain. I can make out a few words she utters—forced, pill, too late, but I don’t know what that all means. All I know is that she needs help.

I lift Valentina up into my arms and carry her quickly back to my car, opening the back door and laying her down on the backseat before driving back into the city at record speed. On the way, I call Vincent through the car speaker and update him on the situation.

“Zara is informing the ER at the hospital now,” Vincent says. “They’ll be expecting you and ready when you arrive. Everything you need will be at your disposal, and Isla and I will head that way and meet you both there.”

“Thank you, Vincent,” I say, struggling not to let my voice crack as Valentina continues to cry in the back of the car.

“Of course. Don’t worry, Luciano. Valentina will be okay. Trust me when I say that our women are tougher than we give them credit for.”

When I end the call and glance in the rearview mirror at Valentina, all I can think of is how not tough she looks right now.

She looks fragile, afraid, and in pain. I know deep down how strong and resilient she is.

I've seen that strength in her before. But it's not just her anymore—there's a tiny life inside of her, one that is so innocent and delicate, and it is now that little life too that I'm afraid for.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am*

As soon as the hospital is in sight, I speed toward the ER doors where, just like Vincent said, the staff is waiting for us with a stretcher for Valentina. I barely get the door open before the doctors and nurses are lifting her out of the car and whisking her off into the hospital.

“I’m coming with her,” I demand as one nurse stands in my way.

“Please, sir, you need to wait here and let us do our job. She’s in good hands,” the nurse says firmly.

I open my mouth to argue with her and barge my way past, unwilling to let Valentina out of my sight again, but then I feel a gentle touch on my arm and turn to see Isla standing there with Vincent beside her.

“She’ll be okay,” Isla smiles, her eyes worried but calm. “It’s best if you stay here with Vincent and not get in the way of the medical team. I’ll go talk with the head intake nurse and see what I can find out, okay?”

Minutes feel like hours as I pace the halls of the waiting area while Vincent sits stoically in a chair, whispering to Isla every time she returns from the nurses’ station with no additional news.

Finally, after what seems like literal hours, there’s an update.

“Mr. Moretti?” the doctor says as he walks toward us. “You’ll be able to see Ms. Ricci now. We’ve moved her into a private hospital room to rest.”



“How is she?”

“She’s suffered some internal hemorrhaging, likely from the pill doing the job it was created to do,” he says with a frown.

“What pill?”

The doctor glances between all three of us.

“My apologies. I thought that perhaps you already knew. Apparently, someone forced Valentina to take abortion medication, according to what she told us after the pain medication took effect and she could think and articulate. That, combined with the extreme stress she endured, caused some hemorrhaging, which led to her pain and blood loss. We’ve got her stabilized now, and the worst of it should be over. She’s going to be fine.”

I’m frozen in shock. Not only at the news that Valentina suffered such a cruel and horrific act, but that it’s likely resulted in the loss of our unborn child.

I want to ask if we’ve definitely lost the baby, but that seems a foolish question with an obviously horrible answer. Thankfully, Isla asks it instead.

“And the baby,” she says softly, with a sorrowful tone. “Are you certain that the pregnancy has been terminated?”

“It’s honestly hard to say this early on,” the doctor sighs heavily.

“From my understanding, she was only given one pill when the process consists of two pills. Later in the pregnancy, we should see the usual signs of fetal heartbeat and movement. The success of those pills largely depends on how and when they’re taken, as well as factors like expiration date and drug effectiveness.

That said, there is some evidence that a rare, persistent pregnancy or two slips through the margin of error rate.

But if you're asking for my professional opinion, the fact that Ms. Ricci experienced hemorrhaging is not a good sign.

I would, unfortunately, bet that the baby is gone. ”

His words echo around me as if I'm standing at the end of a tunnel. I feel Vincent put his hand on my shoulder in condolence, and hear Isla ask if she can see Valentina. I watch as she and the doctor walk off toward Valentina's room, and I want to follow, but need to gather my emotions first.

“It's not impossible,” Vincent says as he hands me his handkerchief.

I wipe away the lone tear from my cheek.

“Come on, Vincent,” I say, steeling myself before I see Valentina. “We both know that you suck at being an optimist. Let's be realistic—the baby is gone. But Valentina is still here, and for that I'm grateful.”

He nods, and I go to see the woman I love.

When I walk into her room, Isla steps out, and I sit at Valentina's bedside, reaching an arm around her and kissing the side of her face.

“I'm so sorry,” she cries. “I tried to protect the baby as much as I could.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” I say as I wipe her tears away and give her a grateful smile.

“You’re alive, and we’re together. Leonardo Conti is gone forever, and we have forever to spend together now, unencumbered by those who would oppose our relationship.

I love you, Valentina, and we will have many, many more chances to try again. ”

She lifts her hand to my face and cups my jaw in her palm.

“Do you promise?” she says with a small, tearful smile.

“Oh, I can definitely promise you that,” I grin.

“As soon as you’re out of this hospital room, I intend to wine and dine you, shower you with all the pampering you deserve after having gone through so much.

And then, when you’re feeling up to it, I intend to make love to you for days on end until we are both too tired to do it anymore. ”

She giggles. I can see the light and hope returning to her eyes.

“What if I never grow tired?” she teases softly.

“Then I will never stop making love to you,” I say as I lean down to put my mouth on hers.

Part of this might have ended in a tragedy, but this isn’t the end of our story.

Valentina and I both live on, and our love lives on, despite our enemies’ attempts to snuff it out.

That means that there is always hope. As soon as the hospital releases Valentina, she

will finally be free to live her chosen life, free from constraints and men who would imprison her.

She will be free from fear and confinement, and I will be free from envy and anger—because we will both have each other going forward, and that is all we will need to build a future together.

VALENTINA

It's hard to believe that weeks have passed since that terrible night in the desert.

I try not to think about it. I try to focus only on what I have now, which is a life free from control and forced submission.

There is so much for me to be happy about now that I try my hardest not to think about what I've lost.

Since I've recovered from my time in the hospital, I've been taking things slow, both physically and mentally. But honestly, I feel at least as if my body has completely recovered.

"Maybe we should take a trip," Luc suggests one morning over coffee. "Get out of the city for a bit, take some time to relax and see new sights, and then come back to Vegas for a fresh start."

"That sounds wonderful!" I exclaim. "But are you sure? Is it alright with Vincent if his consigliere takes off again?"

Luc laughs. "Technically, I was still fulfilling my duties even after I rescued you and absconded with you in Italy, and so I haven't actually had a real vacation in a long while.

But yes, it's fine with Vincent. I've already asked.

Isla even suggested initially. She thought you could use the chance to make a fresh start of things after?—”

He doesn’t finish that sentence, but I know where it was headed—after I lost the baby.

My body may have healed from the trauma I endured, but my mind is being peskier about letting it all go. The scars that I feel are internal, emotional ones that aren’t so easily patched up.

“It’s a great idea,” I say, moving past the awkward silence because I don’t want to dwell on those feelings for too long.

Even though I never planned on becoming pregnant, I wanted to see it through.

I wanted there to be a happy, healthy baby at the end of it—one that was created by the love that Luciano and I share.

“Great!” he says. “I’ll make the arrangements now.”

Within two days, we make the arrangements, set the vacation, and are on Vincent’s plane to a luxurious destination in Greece.

Unlike my last Mediterranean trip, I plan to enjoy this one to the fullest extent—starting from the moment we enter the hotel’s penthouse and Luc lifts me up and carries me into the bedroom.

I toss my head back and laugh as my legs dangle over the side of his arms. “Isn’t carrying a woman through the threshold supposed to only be for one’s wedding night?” I tease.

“I like to break the rules,” Luc grins mischievously. “Besides, I’m practicing.”

“Practicing for what?”

He doesn’t answer me. Instead, he sets me down on top of the bed and climbs over me.

Even though we are both still fully dressed, his cock is so hard and swollen that it visibly presses against the fabric of his pants, making the bulge between his legs press against me as I wriggle with delighted anticipation.

“Remember what I promised you back in the hospital?” he asks.

I nod, knowing full well what he’s referring to.

“And do you remember what you asked me in return?”

“Yes,” I grin. “I asked you what would happen if I never tired of making love to you.”

“Mhmm,” he nods as he unbuttons my shirt and pulls my skirt gently down over the side of my hips. “I’m about to test the theory of whether you will tire after hours of lovemaking.”

The very idea of spending hours upon hours in this bed, with Luc’s naked body intertwined with mine and my innermost crevices filled with his throbbing desire, sends me into an intoxicating delirium.

I absolutely can’t wait to spend most of this little getaway of ours in bed having sex.

And who knows, maybe it will create another little unplanned miracle.

I pull Luc's shirt up over his head and toss it aside, practically giddy as I reach for his pants next.

My fingers fumble with the zipper because I'm too worked up and already practically vibrating with palpable desire.

So, he helps me, sliding his pants off and onto the floor beside the bed with ease before letting his weighty cock fall against the top of my thighs.

"You're teasing me," I whisper into his ear as he kisses the top of my collarbone, letting me feel his erection at my entrance without pushing into me just yet.

"Maybe," he smirks as he traces the curvature of my breast with his tongue. "Maybe I just want to make this as satisfying as possible for you."

I feel so worked up that it's already nearly unbearable to wait any longer.

I'm not sure why everything feels so intense, but every sensation feels as if it's amped up tenfold.

The touch of his skin against mine, the slow slide of his tongue across my breast, and the gentle pressure of his cock between my thighs—it's overwhelming, as if all of my senses are on fire.

I dig my fingers into the sides of Luc's waist and pull him into me, not wanting to wait even a moment longer. I think surprise overtakes him because he groans as if the feeling were unexpectedly intense.

Luc lifts himself up onto the palms of his hands and arches his back as he drives into me, unbridled, by taking his time now. He feels the same insatiable yearning that I do, and he can't stop himself enough to slow down. It doesn't take long before we're



both quivering into a roaring climax.

“I wanted that to last longer,” he pants against me as he lowers his face to my chest.

I run my hands through his carefully groomed hair until I’ve mussed it up a bit.

“Why would that matter?” I ask teasingly. “You said that we were going to be at this for hours, so I assume we can just go again, can’t we?”

“And again, and again, and again,” he smiles as he kisses me more.

The second time is longer, as is the third. But by the fourth time I’ve orgasmed on a single night, my body seems overly hyped. When Luc’s cock simply touches me, I tremble as if the oven is already too hot to stand anymore.

“Okay, I need to pause,” I laugh in exhaustion.

“Are you sure?” he grins at me, nibbling the side of my ear and holding in a small laugh. “I thought you said that you wanted to go on for hours or even days.”

“I do, I do.” I laugh. “But I need to catch my breath and give my body a chance to regroup. Otherwise, it’s going to get to where all you need to do is look at me in order to make me break into orgasm. That would be a pretty awkward precedent to set once we get back from this vacation.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he laughs. “It might be kind of fun.”

I give him a playful smack on the side, and we both sit up to drink some water. Luc reaches for his pants on the floor to put on, and I can’t help but frown.

“Aw, do you really need to put your pants back on, though?” I tease.

“Actually, yes, I do.” He puts his pants on and promptly reaches his hand into one of the front pockets as I sit naked on the side of the bed, watching him and wondering what he’s doing.

Before I can think anything of it, Luciano gets down on one knee in front of me. In his hand, he holds a small black velvet box. And when he opens the hinged top, it reveals the most stunning diamond ring that I’ve ever seen.

“Valentina Ricci,” he says, completely taking me by surprise.

“I am so in love with you, as I know I always have been. You have my heart, and you always will. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and make you the happiest woman alive, if you’ll give me the chance and do me the honor of being my wife. Will you marry me?”

Tears fall from my eyes, dripping down my cheeks and onto my bare breasts as I stare at him, overjoyed. Luc, half-naked as he holds the ring up toward me with one hand and wipes my tears with the other, is everything that I’ve ever wanted, and I could not be more in love with him than I already am.

This time, when I get married, it will be my choice. It will be for love, and I will be the only one to determine my fate.

“Yes!” I say ecstatically. “Yes, of course I’ll marry you, Luciano! I love you so much.”

I cry happy tears as I throw my arms behind his neck and pull his mouth to mine. The kiss is one that I feel like I’ve waited my whole life for, even though my lips are practically sore from all the kissing we’ve done since we got here.

When I let go, Luc pulls the ring from its box and carefully slips it onto my finger.

It's stunning, and this moment is nothing short of perfect. Actually, it's about to get even more surprisingly perfect now.

"Oh!" I say in surprise as my hand with the new diamond ring on it quickly touches my stomach.

"What is it?" he asks. "Are you okay?"

"Luc," I say hesitantly, so that I don't let myself get carried away again with false hope. "Luc, I think I just felt something."

"What? What do you mean? Did I hurt you with too much sex?"

"No, no, not at all," I say as I quickly get up and walk toward the floor-length mirror at the corner of the room.

I turn sideways and notice my profile. I have been feeling a bit more "round" lately than usual, and my clothes have been fitting tighter for no apparent reason.

It isn't until I stand at the mirror studying my profile that Luc notices it too.

"Valentina, did your period ever return after the hospital?"

"No," I say as it suddenly dawns on me that I've missed several cycles now. "Do you think it's possible that I—oh! There it is again!"

"What?"

"I feel a fluttering inside," I say as I rub my stomach with both hands and try to elicit the motion again as we both look in the mirror at my stomach.

When it happens a third time, there's no mistaking it—it's not just a "fluttering," it feels like a tiny, definitive little kick.

I wanted a miracle, and I thought it was naïve of me to think that I would ever get one.

But yet all the signs are now adding up—my rounder figure, the missed period that never returned, the increased hormones and sensations during sex, and now—the indisputable feeling that there is something, or someone, inside of me moving around to let me know they are still there and still alive.

I reach for Luc's hand and press it tightly to my stomach. It might still be too light for him to feel from the outside. But then, when it happens again, his eyes quickly dart to mine without saying a word.

"You felt that too, didn't you?" I ask, embracing the idea that the impossible has happened and that even after the horrid pill, our unborn child has survived.

Luc nods, and his jaw drops open for a moment before he pulls me into his arms and holds me.

"She's still here with us," he says with a reverent sigh of relief. "She's a fighter, just like her mother."

THE END

Did you miss Book 1 of the Tangled Hearts, Sinful Hands: Devil of Vegas? Check it out here or turn the page for a sneak peek.

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I'm late.

The word pounds through my head with each slap of my shoes against the pavement. Twenty-three minutes until curtain. My first major solo at the Grand Vegas Theatre, and I'm racing through the streets in nothing but a rhinestone covered tutu and tights.

I should have grabbed my coat. The thought stings almost as much as the October wind cutting through the thin fabric.

But Madame Durant's voice echoes in my mind: Punctuality is the courtesy of kings and the discipline of dancers.

I'd lost track of time warming up in my apartment, too nervous to eat, too anxious to sit still.

Now I'm paying for it. The rhinestones on my costume catch the neon lights of the strip, making me shimmer like a beacon. Look at me, they seem to scream. Young woman, alone, practically naked.

I quicken my pace, my dance bag bouncing against my hip. The theatre glows just ahead, its art deco marquee promising safety. Fifteen minutes now. I can make it.

"Hey, baby."

The voice slithers from the shadows of an alley, stopping me cold. "You a dancer or something? Bring that pretty body of yours over here and you can dance for me ."

I keep walking, practically breaking into a run. But footsteps follow—heavy, persistent.

"Hey, slow down, princess." A second voice joins the first. "You got time for a private dance with us, don't you?"

"No, I'm late and people are expecting me and I—" The words tumble out as I try to outpace them. The theatre doors gleam ahead. Just another hundred feet. Fifty. Twenty?—

A hand clamps onto my shoulder, spinning me around. The world tilts. My knees hit the concrete hard, tearing through my tights. My dance bag skitters across the pavement, spilling ribbons and rosin.

"Come on now, sweetheart." The first man looms over me, his friend closing in from the side. His backhand catches me across the mouth before I can scream. I taste copper. "We just wanna have a little fun, then you can go, okay?"

He grabs my wrist, pulling me up towards him. I wrench against him with everything I have, but he's too strong. This can't be happening. Not tonight. Not when everything I've worked for is just minutes away?—

"I suggest you lowlifes crawl back under the rock you came from before I make you regret it."

The voice cuts through the night with surgical precision. Madame Durant stands ten feet away, streetlights turning her gray hair silver, her cane gripped in one weathered hand. She looks like what she is—a ballet instructor in her late fifties, maybe five-foot-four in heels.

She looks like nothing.

She looks like prey .

But both men freeze. The one holding me actually takes a step back.

"Sorry, ma'am." The words tumble out like a child caught stealing. They let me go so fast I stumble. "We didn't mean?—"

"Leave." One word. Quiet. Final.

They melt back into the shadows without another word, heads lowered, shoulders hunched. As if they know something I don't.

"Come along, Isla." Madame Durant retrieves my scattered belongings with surprising grace. "You're late, and now we need to get you cleaned up."

Inside the theatre, she guides me to my dressing room with brisk efficiency. "Let me see." Cool fingers tilt my chin, examining my split lip. "Not too bad. The stage makeup will cover it."

"Madame, how did you?—"

"I heard you call out." She dabs at the blood with a tissue. "Though I don't recall you screaming."

She's right. I hadn't screamed. The realization sends a chill down my spine.

"You should be more careful, child." Something flickers in her eyes—knowledge, perhaps. Or a warning. "This city, this life we've chosen... There is always danger lurking. Some perceive it more readily than others."

"Five minutes to curtain, Isla!" The stage manager's voice echoes down the hall.

Madame smooths the bodice of my tutu with practiced hands and hands me another pair of tights. "You deserve this moment. You've worked hard, sacrificed much. Now go out there and show them what you're made of. Make it all look effortless ."

I nod, pushing down the tremor in my hands, the ache in my knees. The show must go on. It always does.

The stage swallows me in darkness. I find my mark by muscle memory alone, arms in preparatory position, chin lifted. Waiting.

The music begins—Tchaikovsky's violin crying out my entrance. The curtain rises. Light floods my world.

And I dance.

The audience disappears. The fear evaporates. There is only movement and music, the perfect marriage of athletic precision and artistic expression. Every leap defies gravity. Every turn defies time. This is what I was born for. This is why I endure.

My variation builds to its climax—a series of fouettés into a sequence of pirouettes.

Ten rotations from a single preparation.

I've done it a thousand times in rehearsal, but never when it mattered.

Never with scouts from the major companies watching.

Never with my entire future balanced on the knife's edge of a single turn.

I need a focal point. Something steady in my spinning world.

My eyes sweep the balcony, searching. There—a figure against the far wall. Tall.



Broad-shouldered. Perfectly still in a sea of shifting bodies. Even in the shadows, he commands attention. Angular features carved from marble. A darkness that has nothing to do with the lighting.

I prepare. I spot. I turn.

One. The figure doesn't move.

Two. Three. Four. Absolute stillness.

Five. Six. Seven. My axis holds true.

Eight. Nine. He might be a statue.

Ten.

I land in the fourth position as the music swells to its conclusion. The applause erupts like thunder, washing over me in waves. Roses rain onto the stage—red as blood, red as victory. My cheeks ache from smiling. Everything I've dreamed of, everything I've bled for, it's here. It's mine.

"Stunning performance, my dear!" Backstage, Madame Durant sweeps me into a whirlwind of congratulations. "And those pirouettes—your strongest yet!"

She guides me through the crowd with strategic precision. "Come now, there are important figures who want to meet you. People who can make your dance dreams come true."

I shake hands, accept compliments, and make the right sounds at the right times. But my mind keeps drifting to that still figure on the balcony. My anchor. My focal point.

By the time the reception ends, exhaustion weighs on me like a lead blanket. I gather

my things from the dressing room—street clothes pulled over my tights, pointe shoes tucked in my bag. The adrenaline fades, leaving only the ache in my feet and the lingering taste of copper in my mouth.

The backstage area is nearly empty now. A few stagehands moving set pieces. The ghost light standing sentinel on the empty stage. I head for the stage door, eager for home and a hot bath.

A sound stops me. Rustling from the wings.

Madame's training kicks in automatically. Always congratulate your fellow performers. Manners are what separate us from the beasts.

I change direction, stepping into the dimly lit wing space. "Beautiful show tonight?—"

The words die in my throat.

A man stands in the shadows, his back to me. Broad shoulders. Tall frame. The same silhouette I'd used as my focal point. But it's what's at his feet that steals my breath.

A body. One of our male dancers—Kyle? Kevin? He'd only joined the company last month. Blond hair now dark with blood. Throat opened in a second smile. So much red spreading across the black floor.

The man turns.

Steel blue eyes meet mine. Angular face, sharp as a blade. Beautiful in the way dangerous things are beautiful. A knife drips in his hand, catching the ghost light like a ruby pendant.

We stare at each other. Predator and witness. Devil and dancer.

I should scream. I should run. I should do something, anything, but I'm frozen like a butterfly pinned to velvet. Those eyes hold me more surely than any hands could.

He takes a step toward me.

The spell breaks.

I run. My dance bag hits the floor as I sprint for the stage door, shoes slapping against wood, then concrete, then asphalt. Behind me, footsteps—calm, measured, inevitable. He's not running. He doesn't need to.

The night swallows me whole. I don't know where I'm going, only away from here. My lungs burn. My legs scream. A lifetime of training means nothing now. Grace is useless. Beauty is irrelevant. There is only prey and predator, and I am so very clearly prey.

Footsteps echo closer. How is he gaining on me when he's only walking?

An arm snakes around my waist, yanking me backward. I open my mouth to scream, but a cloth covers my face. Something sweet fills my lungs.

The world tilts. My knees buckle.

As darkness creeps in from the edges, dragging me down, I have one last absurd thought:

Blood has no place in ballet.