







# Stolen Vows (Empire City Syndicate #1)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** He's the enemy of my family—

And the first man to ever touch me.

One second, I'm walking down the aisle.

The next, I'm in a cabin with a mafia enforcer who looks at me like I'm already his.

Max Mastroni is cold. Brutal. Covered in scars.

He says I'm just leverage—bait for my father.

But his hands say something else.

So do the things he makes me feel.

I try to run.

I scream, I fight, I curse his name.

But he doesn't care that I'm untouched.

He just says he'll ruin me gently.

I thought I knew what hate was.

Turns out it looks a lot like obsession.

And sounds a lot like his voice in my ear, promising I'll beg for more.

I was supposed to be a pawn in his war.

Now I'm the girl he'd kill to keep.

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**\*\*Book 1 in a series of STANDALONE forbidden romances within an interconnected mafia world.\*\***

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:42 am*

## ELEVEN YEARS AGO

Peeping around the banister at the top of the stairs, I rest my head against the polished wooden slats and peer down towards the entrance hall below.

I can't sleep. I know I should be in bed. Dad will be furious with me, when he finds out I have been sneaking around where I shouldn't be, but I keep hearing voices somewhere in the house, and my curiosity has gotten the better of me.

I'm crouched in the upstairs hallway, nestled in the shadow cast by the large chandelier that dangles from the ceiling, just enough to keep me under cover.

Voices from my father's office had drifted to my room, sharp and commanding.

Hearing the tone to his voice snapped me out of bed, wondering who was unlucky enough to receive his anger today.

When he's mad, I know he might take it out on me if he finds me like this, but I'm ten now—I'm practically grown-up. I should know what is happening in my home, shouldn't I...?

A noise catches my attention, pulling me out of the shadows.

Footsteps?

I grip two of the slats in the railing and peer through them to the front door where two guards normally stand.

They're not there. I feel a little tingle of fear that makes my stomach hurt.

I don't like it when things don't go as they're meant to.

Dad never told me, but I know he's what is called a "mafia don." Life is scary. I know that too.

But where are the guards? Are they the people my father is arguing with...?

Movement catches my eye. I crane my neck to see a woman bursting from the corridor that leads down to the basement. She's running for the grand entryway, to the front door, as though her life depends on it.

Something about the sight of her stirs even more fear in me.

I'm the only girl who lives here. After Mom died when I was born, it's just been Dad and me...

and his lieutenants and guards and other men.

Tonight, a woman stands by the door, near the bottom of the curved stairs.

Her eyes dart around wildly before she lunges for the front door.

She tries the handle, but it doesn't budge, just rattles in the frame. I notice that she has red marks on her wrists—like a bracelet was fastened too tightly on each. Those rings of red aren't the only things staining her skin.

Beneath a mess of red hair, I see bruises that run along the side of her face and neck—purple and bluish and green.

She's hurt? I part my lips, wanting to call out to her and offer her help, but before I can, a voice booms through the entrance hall, making both me and the woman jump.

I draw back into the shadows, not wanting to be caught out of bed at this hour.

“Veronica! Where the fuck are you...?”

It's my father. I hate hearing him curse like that. He only ever does it when he thinks I'm not listening, but the words sound so nasty coming out of his mouth. He's always quick to tell me off if I say something he doesn't like, but when it comes to his own words, he is far less careful.

The woman bolts towards the corridor on the far side of the foyer, away from where she came, and just as quickly as she appeared, she's gone.

I can hear her footsteps shuffling along the polished floors, the ones that I skid along in my socks when Dad isn't looking.

But she's not running for fun—the look on her face, those wild, wide eyes, tell me that she is running for her life... from my dad.

He strides into the center of the grand foyer, followed by two guards. His face is like thunder ready to explode as he casts his gaze this way and that.

"Find her!" he roars to the men, slamming his hand into the wall beside him.

The portraits of our family members, of my mother and his father, shake dangerously in the frame, as though they are about to leap out.

I jerk in surprise, and, to my horror, my leg pops out beneath me and connects with one of the wooden slats of the banister.

All eyes in the room turn towards me; I want to vanish, to blink out of existence right then and there.

"Is that her?" One of the guards demands, and my father shakes his head as he stalks towards the stairs.

"No," he mutters. "Just Cara. Search the gardens, block off the roads—whatever it takes to get her back."

The men move out at once, abandoning me alone with my father. As he climbs the stairs, I know I'm in trouble.

And if there is one person in the world I don't want to be in trouble with, it's my father.

He reaches the top of the stairs, and I scramble backwards.

"I-I'm sorry," I blurt out to him, doing everything I can to soften the blow of my naughtiness. "I didn't mean to... I was awake. I heard voices, I?—"

But before I can finish what I am trying to say, he reaches down and grabs my arm, yanking me upright roughly. I cry out, a shock of pain running through me as he twists my wrist around and shoves his face close to mine.

And the man who is staring at me right now, he doesn't look like my dad. He might have the same graying hair, the same brown eyes, the same expensive suit as my father would wear, but I have never seen that look on his face before. His gaze is dark, dangerous, his jaw set tight as he glares at me.

"What are you doing out of bed?"

He tightens his grip on my wrist as he waits for an answer, and I feel tears spring to my eyes.

"And now, crying?" he snaps at me. "You can't cry your way out of everything, Cara. What did you see? Did you see a woman go through here?"

"Yes," I breathe, finally, pointing down towards the side hall. I feel a stab of guilt, knowing that I'm going to make it harder for this woman to escape, but whatever she's done, it's angered my father.

And he's always telling me that everything he does, he does for my benefit, so I should be honest with him.

Shouldn't I?

He releases me for a moment and turns to his men in the entryway..

"Along the east corridor!" he yells to them. "She's probably going to the garden. Stop her before she gets there...!"

In the brief moment I have from under his scrutiny, I realize that my leg is throbbing.

I glance down and see that I have managed to cut it, right along the edge of my right calf.

I had been so scared before that I hadn't noticed it, but the sight of the blood seeping through my pastel pink pajama bottoms makes my tears come faster.

"Oh, for God's sake," my father mutters when he turns his attention back to me. He stoops down, yanking up the leg of my pajama pants to inspect the wound beneath it. It doesn't look too bad, just a cut from a loose nail, but it still makes me feel a bit



dizzy.

I turn my head away from it, but then I feel my father's hand on my shoulders, pulling me to my feet.

"See? This is why you need to stay in bed," he tells me, his voice less angry as he pulls me back towards my room. "You'll get hurt. You have to listen to me; it's the only way you'll be able to stay safe. You understand?"

The tone of his voice leaves no room for argument. I know he expects me to nod along. I do as I'm told, agreeing silently, and praying that this will be enough for him to let me get back to bed.

"Good girl," he mutters, and he pushes open the door and leads me inside. "I'll send up one of the maids to take care of your leg."

"Can I see Misha?" I ask hopefully. The maids all live on the adjoining property and have been part of my life for years.

Misha has always been my favorite since she is the kindest, sweetest lady.

Plus she always seems to have some kind of candy on her when I need something to distract from a bruised elbow or scraped knee.

"Mmm," he replies, as he heads for the door, and even as he leaves, I know that he has half-forgotten what he promised me. I scurry to the bathroom.

The look on the face of that woman I saw keeps playing in my mind. Who is she? Where is she going? Did they find her? I pointed them in the right direction to go after her, so if she is caught, then it might be because of me...

I brush those thoughts aside as I wash the blood from my hands.

Like Dad always says, he just wants the best for me.

He wants me to be safe. He would never do anything against my best interests.

That's why he works so hard to provide a good life for me, so the least I can do is tell him where that woman rushed off to in return.

And yet, as I catch sight of myself in the mirror, I can't help but wonder what scary things she might have been running from.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:42 am*

Cara

### PRESENT DAY

Smoothing the dress, I pick a loose thread from the fabric, tossing it to the plush hotel carpet below.

I study myself in the mirror—naturally blonde hair pulled back from my face, large blue eyes trying their hardest not to look disinterested.

I blink a few times, putting on the sweet expression that Dad approves of. That's it—now I look perfect.

I have to, because the way I look is pretty much the only thing I have control over today.

Outside, the sun is shining, pouring in golden light through the enormous windows that frame the side of this room.

The furnishings are luxurious, from the red velvet chaise lounge to the dressing table that looks like it could have been plucked straight from some princess fantasy.

I'm feeling more medieval peasant girl than royalty right now as I prepare to marry the man my father has chosen for me.

Marry.

That word dances around my head, feeling almost surreal, as though it must apply to someone else entirely. This can't be happening—not to me.

My father's spent years guarding my body like it's some priceless object. Now he's handing me over as if my opinion on the matter means nothing to him.

The man he chose is Mario Mancioti. He's waiting just a few hundred yards away from me downstairs in the packed grand ballroom of the hotel where the wedding is taking place.

My wedding to a man I don't really know.

I can hear the buzz of the press downstairs, many of whom my father hand-picked for the occasion.

He wants to make sure that news of this wedding travels far and wide through the city, through the state, that the Leone family and the Manciotis have been joined together at last, stronger than ever.

I stand here, having never felt weaker.

A spray of pastel flowers is waiting for me on the bed; the pale yellows and blues complement my virginal-white gown, every detail considered and catered to. I know they will look beautiful in the wedding pictures that will be printed alongside the wedding announcement.

I'm just not sure I will ever want to look at the delicate flowers again... or at any part of this day.

Dad's really doing it. Handing me off like I'm part of the estate. All the arguments, all the fighting, all the ways I tried to put my foot down, and none of it was enough to

sway him.

The moment he heard that Mario was looking for a wife—not to mention that he was looking for an excuse to join forces with Mario—my dad had served me up on a silver platter to the older man as though it was nothing.

I'm not saying that older men can't be attractive. But this particular older man holds no allure at all for me.

Every time I lay eyes on him, I feel the shiver of revulsion. I can still remember the first time we met, his hand resting on my knee beneath the table at my father's favorite Italian restaurant, that shark-like smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"I've heard a lot about the women your father works with," Mario had murmured to me, his face creasing as he ran his other hand through his thinning gray hair. "But I have to admit, you outshine them all..."

The way my stomach twisted at those words I'll never forget. He managed to keep his hands off me for the rest of the night, but that was little comfort since I knew he'd have free rein to do whatever he wanted to me when we were married.

I heard him and my father in conversation when I slipped out of my room as I had when I was a child, hovering outside Dad's office door.

I had thanked God for the absence of guards, and hoped against hope that nobody would rat me out for eavesdropping.

There had to be someone in this house who cared about me here, right?

Someone who didn't want me to get married to this creepy man twice my age who was already looking at me more like a product to be used for his pleasure rather than

a wife to cherish.

"And you're sure she's never been with anyone before?" Mario had asked. I heard the creak of the leather seat as he leaned forward to emphasize the importance of the question.

"Certain," my father replied smoothly. "I've been keeping a close eye on her since she came of age. Nobody comes or goes in this house without my knowledge, and I can assure you that no man has been alone with her long enough to... deflower her."

I could have thrown up at the sound of those words coming out of my father's mouth.

Not because he is wrong, of course, but because no father should ever be considering the status of his daughter's.

.. virginity . He's never exactly been open with me when it comes to having adult conversations to my face, but it seems as though when I'm the subject, he's happy to get into the details behind my back.

That's all it took to seal the deal. Mario would take me as his wife.

It's been a few months since the choice was made, and I've been swept along with every bit of the planning process—picking out the dress, the cake, the champagne, the music.

My father allowed me to choose the small details, perhaps to make me feel as though I had some kind of control over all of this, but he knows as well as I do that this has nothing to do with what I want, and everything to do with what he wants from me.

And this is it. Last chance, last gasp—last few minutes before I am a married woman, and as soon as my last name becomes Mancioti, everything will change.

I know what Mario will want from me; he will expect children.

I'm barely twenty-one, hardly old enough to drink, and soon, he will be using me as his broodmare.

Another surge of nausea courses through me, and my hand flies to my mouth before I vomit all over this beautiful dress.

It's for the good of the family.

That's what Dad had told me, the day before last, when he had attended a dress fitting.

I got the feeling it was more to make sure I didn't run out on the arrangement than anything else.

I had managed to plaster on a smile in response, but he must have been able to tell that there was no truth to it, because he took me aside this morning.

"Think of everything I've done for you over the years, sweetheart," he told me softly, as I ignored the champagne breakfast laid out ahead of me to celebrate my upcoming nuptials. "This is a small price to ask in return, isn't it? For keeping you safe in a world of violence, for keeping you secure? For all the luxuries you've enjoyed, all the trips you took, all the people you met? "

I wish I could have argued with him, but I know he's right. In this family, in this line of work, there is only one way that I could truly make a difference, and that's in marriage. It might not be how I pictured my wedding day, but very little in my life is how I would want it to be.

My desires don't matter. I have to take responsibility, step up and do my part for the

family. It's not as though Mario won't be able to provide me with a good life. He's wealthy enough, and he has connections all over the city. There are worse men I could end up married to.

I think.

A bang on the door makes me jump. The door swings open and I see Taylor, the wedding planner, standing there, her lips pressed together in a hard line, irritation flashing in her eyes.

"You were meant to be downstairs three minutes ago!" she scolds as she glances at her watch.

The entire morning she has been looking between her watch and her phone, coordinating times and trying to keep everything on track.

I offer her a small smile of apology. This might be my wedding day, but the way she has been speaking, it's clear that she views me as little more than an annoyance she has to perfectly present to the man waiting for me at the end of the aisle.

"I'm sorry, I'll be right there?—"

But before I can even finish what I am saying, she has vanished again.

I pick up the bouquet, the stems of the perfectly-pruned flowers digging into my clenched hand.

My nails have been done in a delicate pink, my makeup light and fresh-faced, my skin pale and soft; everything down to the smallest detail has been accounted for.

All I have to do is meet him at the altar. Mario, soon to be master of my fate.



I muster up every bit of courage I have in me, and make my way to the door.

String quartet music wafts through the door.

I can hear the chatter of guests downstairs, all those people who are going to watch me accept this man as my husband.

If I stall any longer, I know that my father is going to come up here to make certain I do my duty, and the thought of his irritation aimed at me is enough to send a shiver down my spine.

Pushing open the door, I meet Taylor out in the corridor—though she is murmuring into her phone, something about the wedding cake arriving in one piece.

I went to the tasting to select the flavors I wanted, but they all tasted like ash to me when they hit my tongue.

Knowing what the cake represented, my marriage to this man I barely know, it was impossible to enjoy the normally-delicious confection.

She pointedly gestures to the end of the corridor as she turns and continues her conversation.

The corridor leads to a stairwell, which takes me down to the holding area before they allow me into the main hall. I eye it from where I'm standing, stalling, trying to find a little more time. But the seconds are ticking down, and I know that I need to get this over with.

My new life starts here. Whether I like it or not.

I hitch the skirt up in one hand so I don't trip over it—though falling down the stairs

would certainly be an effective way to get out of what is ahead for me—and head to the top of the stairs.

I can feel my heart slamming against my ribs, the palms of my hands sweating as I prepare to face my fate.

I can almost hear my father's voice in my head, reminding me how important it is that I go through with this—telling me, over and over again, that this is all he's ever asked from me, and that the least I can do is see it through.

But, before I can start my descent, I hear a noise behind me.

My head snaps around, searching for any excuse that will allow me to delay a little longer.

I expect to see Taylor, or one of her dozens of minions, rushing over to me to fix my hair or change the arrangement of my flowers, but instead, I am faced with a man.

A man I have never seen before in my life.

And what a man he is. He's tall and muscular, lean and strong-looking.

I find myself staring, the briefest whisper of a fantasy of him standing at the end of the aisle instead of Mario calming my nerves.

I should be afraid of this strange man, but I'm not. I'm intrigued.

Behind him, one of the large windows has been forced open, making enough space for him to climb in. But we're on the second floor...

"Are you... are you one of the guests?" I ask, trying to keep the tremble out of my

voice.

He strides towards me, powerful and quick.

My pulse jumps, heart racing. Silently, he pushes a hand through his hair.

My eyes drop down his body—his clothes certainly don't look formal, a black tee, black jeans, and leather gloves.

His close-cropped brown hair is slightly wavy, and there is a smattering of stubble on his jaw.

As he closes the distance between us, a grin curls up his lips, as though my question is hilarious to him.

I back towards the stairs. If I wanted, I could call out to Taylor or whoever else might be near, tell them that there is someone here, let them know that I am being.

.. well, what, exactly, does he want with me?

But I don't say a word. And, before I can try, he wraps his muscled arm around my waist, pulls me against him, and clamps his gloved hand over my mouth.

"No," he murmurs in my ear. "I'm not."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:42 am*

Max

I can feel the terror in her body before I see it—the tension in her shoulders, the way her back arches away from me, her lips attempting to move against the confines of my hand.

She's not going anywhere.

If she thinks I'll let her walk down those stairs and marry that psychopath, she's delusional.

She twists her head this way and that, trying to tear her face free of my grip, but I hold her steady as I lift her off her feet and pull her back towards the open window.

I don't have much time—minutes, maybe even down to seconds now—and I am not going to waste any of it.

This is the one place in the hotel without cameras, no way for them to watch what I am doing, but this won't stay a secret for long. Someone will come here to figure out what's taking her so long, and I need to have her in the car and out of this place by the time that happens.

As I pull her towards the window, it feels almost surreal to be this near to her.

After so long watching her, watching her father, learning every detail of this sham of a wedding, sifting through the schedule until we could locate the exact moment that we could take her, I'm finally here.

The princess of the Leone family is in my grip, the plan in action.

The vengeance that we have waited for for so long is finally ready to begin.

"Head down," I growl to her, as I kick the window frame open a little further. I had a hard enough time getting in as it was, and she's going to struggle dragging herself out of there in this giant dress, but I know she'll fit.

I know she'll have to.

I push her head to duck it down through the opening, and, all at once, something in her seems to shift—as though she has suddenly worked out what is happening here, that she is in the process of being snatched away from her wedding day.

"Get your hands off of me!" she exclaims.

My hand flies to my side. I don't want to use the weapon I brought with me, but if I have to, I will. Her eyes dart down to the bulge in the side of my pants, and whatever color is left in her face pales.

"Get through that window," I order her, my voice dropping. "Or I'll make you."

"How am I supposed to get down?" she protests. "It's a?—"

"The lattice attached to the wall," I reply, as I hook one leg out of the window. The thick sill will give her enough space to climb on to the lattice, but in that dress, she's going to be limited.

"I can't climb down that!" she argues. "I'm not—I'll fall!"

I let out a growl of irritation, and swing my other leg out onto the balcony. The drop

to the ground below isn't far, but the way she's talking you'd think I'm asking her to throw herself off a damn cliff.

"You go first," she tells me, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm not going to jump down there until I see that it's safe."

I let out a snort of derision, and move a little closer to her. Her blue eyes are wide with terror, but she stands her ground, her mouth slightly parted as she waits for me to respond.

"You think I'm going to climb out there and leave you to run off and get your father's men?" I snap back at her. "No. You're going. Now."

I shoot another look over my shoulder. I can almost hear the clock ticking, and I know we're running short on time.

I don't have a scout on the scene to keep me updated with what's going on down there; too much risk that they might get caught.

I only have myself to rely on, and if this girl thinks I am going to let her call the shots, she has another thing coming.

She crosses her arms over her chest and stares me down. Fuck it. If she wants to play it this way, so be it. I don't care what state she's in when we get her to the cabin, as long as she's alive enough for us to barter with her father.

I whip out the gun, and press it into her side. It nestles into the voluminous fabric of her dress, almost swallowed entirely, but I know she can feel it. Her breath catches in her throat, and she glances down in horror, the reality of the situation finally starting to settle in for her.

"You have ten seconds to get out on that ledge," I warn her. "Or that dress is going to have some serious stains."

She swallows hard. I can see her throat rising and falling as she peers through the window once more. Grabbing her arm, I pull her out, her feet kicking in the air for a moment before they make contact with the sturdy cement below.

"Oh, my God!" she cries out, and I grab her, pulling her against me, clamping my hand tight over her mouth to keep her from alerting anyone. The guests are in the main hall, waiting for her to arrive, but that doesn't mean that there aren't some staff wandering around who might catch me in the act.

"Down," I order her. "Now."

I begin to loosen my grip on her, and, at last, she turns to scramble off the edge of the ledge.

She is still hanging on to my arms tight, probably hoping that if she falls, she'll at least take me with her.

I watch as her feet kick in the air for a moment, before they finally find their footing on the lattice that climbs up the side of the building.

In the sunshine, her hair glows an almost beacon-blondé, and I grimace.

As if I'm not attracting enough attention already. ..

As soon as she is on the lattice, I jump down to join her, moving to the ground as fast as I can and urging her to hurry.

"Jump, now!" I demand, as she dangles there for a moment, a few yards off the

ground, her white skirt billowing out around her.

"I can't! It's too far..."

"I'll catch you. Come the fuck on!"

I shoot another look around. My car is tucked in the parking lot, hidden amongst all the other sleek vehicles driven by her guests.

Maya tried to insist on coming as my getaway driver, but there's no way in fucking hell that I am risking my sister getting caught up in all of this.

I know, in far too much detail, what that bastard Lucio Leone will do to a woman once he gets his hands on her, and I refuse to risk subjecting my sister to that.

Cara hangs there for another few seconds.

I can tell that her arms are already starting to give, judging by how hard they're trembling.

She probably hasn't had to lift so much as a grocery bag in all the time that she's been alive, pampered under the care of Lucio's blood money.

For once, she's going to have to find out what life is like without that.

I can't help but smirk at the thought. Making the Leones pay for what they've done feels good after all this time, even if I know that a woman like her is going to be a royal pain in my ass.

At last, she drops. I lunge forward, holding out my arms to catch her before she hits the ground.



Not that I'm worried about her well-being or the state of that ridiculous dress, but because the noise could attract more attention that I don't need.

I reach up to cover her mouth again as soon as I have her, planting her back on her feet, but, to my surprise, she doesn't even try to cry out.

Probably too shocked to even think about it.

She's been so used to living under her daddy's care for so long, she doesn't even know how to handle shit like this.

"This way. Try anything, and I'll shoot," I mutter to her as I pull her towards the parking lot.

She stumbles slightly, her heels catching in the soft earth, and she crashes into me.

The scent of rose and vanilla drifts from her skin, some floral perfume still clinging to her, like the last memories of what she was meant to do today.

We make it to my car, and I throw open the back door and push her inside.

I have to grab handfuls of the dress and shove it in behind her to keep it from getting caught in the door.

She is staring up at me from the back seat, her blue eyes so wide it looks as though someone could drown in them, searching my face for some kind of explanation, something that will allow her to make sense of all of this.

I snatch the blanket from the trunk of the car, and stand over her.

"Lay down. Tuck your arms in. Try to move this thing, and I'll kick you out on the

highway, you hear me?”

She nods, her breath stuttering in her lungs.

For a brief moment, I pause. I'm not sure what I expected from her, but there's something about the way she's looking at me right now that doesn't feel right to me.

As though... as though there is something going on here that I can't see, a detail I haven't accounted for.

I shove the thought aside swiftly. Whatever it is, I'll deal with it when I have to— if I have to.

I toss the heavy blanket over her, covering her completely, and slam the door, double-checking that the lock has clicked into place before I climb into the front seat.

The blanket will disguise her from any CCTV that happens to catch us on the way out of the city.

The last thing we need is anyone tracking us.

The cabin might be in the middle of nowhere, but that means we don't have much in the way of security out there, either.

I slam my foot down on the accelerator, and pull us out of the parking lot, cutting around the hotel and towards the back gate where the staff come and go.

It might raise some red flags that someone is leaving just as the event is kicking off, but I don't have any other choice.

The front gate is watched by security at all times, and no doubt they'd have some

serious questions about the bride-shaped bump in my back seat.

Keeping my head low and sliding on a pair of shades, I pass by the back entrance and out onto the road beyond.

It hits me that I have actually done it.

After all this planning, all these months, I have her.

Cara Leone, in the back of my car, trapped.

It might just be stage one of my plan, but it's a start.

And I know that, soon, Lucio Leone is going to pay for everything he has done.

Whether he's ready for his karma or not.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:42 am*

Cara

Beneath the heavy blanket, the air is stuffy, and I can feel a ring of sweat around my scalp; the dress feels constricting, the corset digging into my skin.

I can't lay like this much longer, I need to get some air, but I have no idea how much further it is to our destination.

If I am even going to get there alive at all.

He hasn't said a word to me since he took me from the hotel—not that I was expecting witty conversation.

I just want to know who he is, why he is doing this, and what exactly his motives are for breaking into the hotel on my wedding day and stealing me away just moments before I was due to walk down the aisle.

He must know who I am, who my father is, so he must be aware of how much danger he is in, doing something like this.

I shuffle around beneath the blanket, the rumble of the car rocking me this way and that as I try to at least unhook the corset.

If I am going to be kidnapped, then I want to do it in clothes that will not constrict me if I try to make a break for it.

Though I get the feeling that he will make me pay if I so much as think about

escaping.

I manage to find the hook of one of the layers of the corset, and I grope around until I can push the hook back out of the eye. There, almost got it, just a little?—

"What the fuck are you doing?"

I freeze. His voice is sharp and laced with anger; I can't see his face, but I can picture it.

From the moment he laid eyes on me, he's talked to me with nothing but disdain and distrust, even though I have never met him before.

It must be something to do with my father, something to do with his business.

"I'm just taking off my corset," I mumble back, though the words are muffled by the fabric of the blanket.

"I told you, don't try anything," he warns me. "If you think I won't kick you out on the road?—"

I inch the blanket back a little, trying to get a look at him. His eyes dart to mine in the mirror, and a flash of fury crosses his face.

"Get back under there," he spits. "Keep your face hidden. I'm not telling you again."

"We're in the middle of nowhere," I protest, as I peep up to the window to see streaks of trees and fields passing by. "It's not like anyone will see me. I need to breathe, it's?—"

"I said, get back under there!"

The roar in his voice sends me skittering back beneath the blanket, my heart hammering in my chest. I have no idea where we're going, but I can tell that any more attempts to push my luck are only going to end in disaster.

I don't know what this man is capable of, and if I'm smart, I will not have to find out.

I still can't believe this is happening. Just as I was about to go down the stairs to the man I'm meant to marry, this stranger bursts in through the window of the hotel and orders me to scramble down the lattice before he forces me into his car. None of this makes sense.

And yet, there is a part of me that almost wants to thank him.

I have no clue what he is going to do with me, what he has planned once he gets me far enough away from the city, but I know that it means I won't have to go through with the marriage to Mario.

At least for the time being. I can't imagine that my father is going to let me dodge my duties that easily, but if I get a stay of execution on my wedding night, I will take it.

Did I put up enough of a fight? I don't know what more I could have done, especially when he pulled the gun on me.

I know this is part of my father's world, the violence, the rivalries, but Dad has always gone out of his way to insulate me from having to deal with it.

When he drew that weapon and pressed it to my side, it was like all the breath was knocked from my body, and the only thing I could do was obey.

But if he thinks that I am going to be that easy to control... I have some bad news for him.

After what feels like an eternity, the car slows to a halt beneath me, and I hear him climbing out.

I listen to his footsteps as he approaches my side of the car.

He pulls open the door, and then tugs back the blanket that's been draped over me for the entire ride.

As soon as I gulp down some fresh air, I scramble out of the car and glare him down.

"Where are we?" I demand. It looks to me like we're in the middle of some forest. A canopy of green lies above us, a few shafts of sunlight studded where the leaves break to allow the sky through.

"Doesn't matter. This way."

He grabs my arm, and steers me towards a path. It leads a little further into the woods, and, if I know one thing, it's that I shouldn't wander off into the forest with a man I don't know. Especially when he has a gun.

I dig my heels into the soft ground below, and stop dead in my tracks, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I don't know if you noticed, but I'm not exactly dressed for a hike."

He pauses, facing away from me, and I can see the tension rising in his body at the sound of my words. I shouldn't be pushing him like this, but hell, maybe if I can annoy him enough, he'll think better of keeping me here...?

"I have clothes at the cabin. Move."

"The cabin?" I ask him, raising my eyebrows, still not taking a single step. "Why are you doing this? Who are you?"

His face darkens, and he finally turns to face me. I can see the bulge of his gun in his pants, and a cold shudder rushes through me at the sight of it. I need to remember what he is capable of—what he could do to me. I've already been held at gunpoint once today, and I don't intend to repeat it.

"You don't need to know what this is about. You just need to do what you're told. This way."

He takes my arm and pulls me along roughly, and I nearly careen straight into the ground below. I let out an indignant squeak, trying to wrestle myself out of his grip, but it's no use.

"Slow down!" I protest, and this time when he rounds on me, I can tell that I have pushed things too far.

His handsome face is twisted into a mask of fury, his eyes dark with anger.

He grabs my face in his hand, tilting my chin up so I have no choice but to look into his eyes.

His grip is tight, leaving no room for argument, and I know that I am staring into the eyes of a man who is willing to do far, far worse to me if I don't start behaving.

"If you think I'm going to let a Leone tell me what to do," he snarls at me, "you've got a lot to learn. Keep your mouth shut, keep your voice down, follow me, and you might make it to the end of this day alive. Got it?"

For a moment, I can't come up with the words to reply.



There is something about the way he's holding me that's almost intrusive.

People don't talk to me like this, let alone men, and my father would certainly never have allowed some man to grab me by the face when I was talking back to him.

Hell, he'd have likely killed anyone who tried.

And yet, as his thumb rests just an inch or two from my bottom lip, it seems as though everything else has vanished from my mind, leaving nothing but the feel of him in front of me.

Finally, I manage to nod, and he drops my face, turning back to the path and guiding me through the trees. I lift my skirts and do my best to catch up; I wasn't kidding when I said that this was hardly the outfit for hiking, and I feel as though I snag on every tree branch I pass.

Eventually, though, we round a corner and I find myself staring at a log cabin. It looks like the kind of place a hunter would live out of, barely big enough for a single person, but my kidnapper strides up to the door and unlocks it, gesturing for me to get inside.

"This is where you expect me to stay?" I ask, as I come to a halt, my feet aching in these heels.

"You can sleep in the woods, if you prefer," he shoots back, jerking his head inside.

I glance around, for a moment considering taking him up on that offer, but then I let out a sigh, brushing the thought off and doing as I'm told.

I've never been somewhere this rural before in my life; the closest I have come is staying in a luxury villa that my father owns on the outskirts of Bologna, and even

that had a live-in chef and a swimming pool.

Somehow, I doubt that this place will have the same luxuries. ..

Inside, the place is tiny. There is room for little more than a kitchen that opens out to a small living space, a fireplace surrounded by three chairs, and two doorways that lead through to what I assume are the bathroom and bedroom.

The floor creaks as I pass over it, and my lips turn downward as I take in my new surroundings.

"What is this place?" I ask as I turn back towards him. Now that I've done everything he asked of me, he has to explain himself, right? But he's not even looking at me, instead striding over to the fireplace where he starts to stoke up some flames. He doesn't reply, utterly ignoring me.

I plant my hands on my hips and stare down at him as he finally brings to life a flash of fire in the hearth.

I feel ridiculous, standing here in this tiny log cabin in my dirt-stained dress, a few twigs and leaves still clinging to my hair and the fabric of my gown.

A rush of anger hits me all at once; who does this man think he is, stealing me away from my wedding like this?

I mean, yes, of course, I didn't want to go through with it, but that doesn't mean I'm just going to stand by all demure and sweet while this person orders me around and threatens me.

"I'm talking to you!" I exclaim, jabbing my finger in the air at him. As he looks at me, his eyes flicking back and forth between my own, I can tell that I've made a

mistake. I draw back as a dark shadow flits across his face, whatever patience he might have had left slipping away.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:42 am*

"Oh, I know you are," he murmurs. He isn't snapping or snarling at me like he was before. He seems almost... calm. Almost amused. Like the thought of me trying to take control of this situation is downright funny to him.

"But I don't think you know who you're talking to," he goes on, his voice low, menacing. "Let me guess—your daddy kept you out of his 'work' all this time, and now, you don't have a clue what you're up against. Am I getting close?"

I don't reply. I can feel a terror stirring in my belly, sickness twisting in my guts as I try to wrap my head around this.

"But the truth is, you don't need to know who I am," he continues. "You only need to know that if you do everything I say, you might get out of this alive. And if you don't..."

He lets those words hang in the air between us, an unspoken threat. His eyes don't move from mine for an instant, letting it all sink in.

"What do you want from me?" I whisper, trying to muster up whatever courage I have left.

"I want you to know that if you try anything, I won't hesitate to do what needs to be done," he replies. "There's nobody around for miles. You try to get out of here, and you're going to get lost in the woods. It's cruel out there. You won't last long."

He speaks with a matter-of-fact tone in his voice, as though he's just telling me what I need to know. I clench my hands into fists at my sides; I almost wish I was dealing

with Taylor the wedding planner again. Almost.

"So, you can either die out there, or you can stay here," he continues. "Your choice. But I've seen what happens to people who get lost in these woods, and..."

He lets out a low whistle through his teeth.

"Wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy."

He spits the final words out, and I wonder if, somehow, I fall under that banner myself. His worst enemy? How could I have made someone hate me this much, when I have never met them before in my life? I need answers. I need him to explain himself to me. I need?—

"There's clothes for you to change into in the bedroom," he tells me, waving his hand towards the door. "Get changed. I'll get you something to eat."

"I don't want anything to eat."

He rests his hand on his gun once more—not a threat, exactly, just a reminder of what he's capable of.

"I suggest that you start doing what you're told, Cara," he murmurs.

The sound of my name on his lips sends a shiver rushing through my body.

How does he know who I am? I suppose that he could have come across any number of the wedding announcements that my father put in the papers, but something tells me this runs deeper than that.

Whatever sleight has led him to this moment, it's far deeper than just a marriage.

"Who are you?" I demand before I can stop myself.

"You know my name, so it's only fair that I know yours," I continue, and he eyes me for a long moment, probably wondering if it's worth giving me even a small piece of who he is.

But it's not like I can use it against him, not out here, in the middle of nowhere.

I just want to know something about the man who has stolen me away, no matter how tiny it might seem to him.

"Call me Max," he replies. "Now, change. Get that ridiculous dress off."

"I can't just unzip it," I point out. "I had to have a couple of dressers help me into it this morning. I can't reach all the buttons by myself."

He lets out a grunt of annoyance, and then spins me around, grabbing me by the shoulders and facing me away from him. His touch is firm, and I find my breath knocked from my lungs for a moment as his fingers move over the buttons of my dress.

He is deft and quick, doesn't say a word, and I get the feeling that this isn't the first time that he has undressed a woman like this.

Perhaps even from a wedding dress. I didn't notice a ring on his finger, but, with everything he has done today, it's hard to believe he would respect the sanctity of someone else's marriage.

His fingers graze along the small of my back as he undoes the final button.

It's just the barest touch, but it sends an explosion of tingles running up my spine. I

suppose I'm just oversensitized from everything that's happened.

Still, when he steps back from me I feel his distance, like my body isn't ready to be alone again so soon.

"There, done," he mutters, and he plants his hand against my back and pushes me towards the bedroom. "Now, go. I don't want to see you again until you're changed."

I hurry into the room and pull the door shut behind me.

The bedroom is small, just like the rest of this place, barely enough room for the double bed and dresser that is pressed against the wall.

A window filters through a little light, but, when I give it a half-hearted tug, it doesn't budge.

And, even if it did open, he's right—I know I wouldn't last a night out there.

I don't have the skills to get by without a chef and a maid, let alone survive in the wilderness on my own.

I pull open the dresser and find some sweatpants and a few oversized tees shoved in there—a far cry from my collection of designer dresses, but it's better than this wedding gown, that's for sure.

I shrug it off my shoulders, and pull off the lingerie beneath, the white lace panties and bra that Mario made a point of picking out for me.

I shudder when I remember the leer on his face as he gifted them to me—silently telling me that he could hardly wait to see me in them, or out of them.

I know that chaos will be exploding back at the hotel by now.

My father will have sent everyone he can on to the streets to find me, scouring every inch of the city and beyond.

I don't know if any of the CCTV cameras we passed by would have picked up on me in the back of the car, but I know my dad has contacts all over the city, and it's only a matter of time before one of them gets back to him with something he can use.

Only a matter of time before he traces me here.

And only a matter of time before I am walked back up to that altar to marry Mario, whether I like it or not.

Slipping on the sweatpants and a tee, I climb on to the bed and wrap my arms around my knees.

Between a rock and a hard place—either a marriage to a man I can barely stand to look at, or captured by one who seems to despise everything about me.

Hardly the wedding day I was dreaming of...



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:42 am*

Max

I stand outside the door, listening intently for the sound of anything amiss.

It's the first time that Cara has been out of my sight since I took her, and I know she's going to try and make a break for it. She'd be stupid not to. I nailed down the windows in the bedroom, so there's no way that she's going to be able to free herself, but that doesn't mean she won't try.

She's not going to make this easy, I can tell.

She's got a mouth on her, too. Seems like she can't get her head around the fact that I am serious about this, and I am not one of her little lackeys who'll rush to do anything she wants.

I can only imagine the life of luxury she's lived so far and how far removed this is going to be from it.

I can hear the creak of the floorboards as she moves around the room, probably searching for the clothes I told her to change into.

I didn't expect her to need my help undressing.

The soft curve of her waist beneath the dress could have been a distraction, but I wouldn't let it turn into one.

She's using whatever she has to pull my attention away from keeping her here, but I

have prepared for this, prepared for everything that she might throw at me.

I feel a buzz against my thigh. I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone, answering it before I check the name on the screen. I know who it is.

"Max," my father's voice sounds in my ear. "You got her? You're at the cabin?"

"Yes," I reply, turning away from the door so she won't be able to hear me. "Got her out here without much trouble. She didn't put up as much of a fight as I thought."

"Don't get used to it being that easy," he warns me. "I just got a message from one of our allies in the city. Looks like Leone has sent out a search party to find her and bring her back."

I nod. It was what we expected. When we decided to take on the Leone family, to bring down Lucio Leone once and for all, we had been ready for something like this. He never let anything slide, and the kidnapping of his only daughter was sure to bring his ire down on our heads.

"Anyone see you leaving the city?"

"Not that I know of," I assure him. "I covered her with the blanket, and she didn't kick up too much of a fuss until we got here."

"Must have been in shock," he mutters. "I've never known a Leone to make life easy for anyone..."

I let out a slight chuckle. He's right about that.

The Leone family has been causing trouble for as long as I can remember.

At first, I thought it was the same kind of trouble that anyone in our line of business commits, but after Veronica joined our family I discovered just how deep and dark their business was.

No matter what people might think of my work, there's shit that I won't touch, and I am willing to take drastic measures to make certain nobody else does, either.

"I'll let you go," my father tells me. "Don't want someone tracking this call. You let us know if you need backup, okay?"

"Will do," I reply. "Maya alright?"

"Pissed that she's not part of this," he replies.

I grin. My youngest sister has always had an attitude when it comes to the family business. She doesn't like feeling as though she is being left out of it, and no matter how much I try to convince her that this kidnap is best as a one-man job, she's had a hard time accepting it.

"Send her my love. Speak soon."

With that, I hang up and turn my attention back to the bedroom where Cara is hiding out. She should have changed by now. A few seconds later, she opens the door, nearly crashing straight into me waiting on the other side.

She leaps back from me as soon as she realizes what she has done.

Finally out of that ridiculous gown, she looks a little more human with her hair pulled back from her face.

She crosses her arms over her chest and looks up at me, defiant, even though she's

standing there in a pair of my old sweatpants and a tee that's at least twice the size of her.

"There, I changed," she snaps at me.

I almost have to admire her spirited attitude in the face of everything she is going through. Not many people would be able to handle a gun to their gut without learning some manners, but she's just as sharp-tongued as ever.

"I suppose you want me to get rid of the dress," she adds, as I flick my gaze back to hers once more. The dress—yeah, I suppose I'll have to destroy it. Don't want to leave any evidence that connects her to her old life, if I can help it.

"Not like I'm going to have much use for it out here..."

She lets out a sigh as she goes to brush past me, and I reach out to plant my hand on the doorframe, blocking her path.

"You're staying right here."

She pauses for a moment, cocking her eyebrow at me.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I think you heard me."

I am going to give her one chance to think better of this—one chance to reconsider her attitude here, because if she's not careful, it's going to start causing her problems.

"You expect me to just live in this bedroom?" she exclaims.

I am almost surprised that she is so willing to talk back to me. After what I did, I expected her to be running scared from me every chance she got. But her father must have taught her that the world revolves around her and her alone, and she clearly believes it.

"I expect you to do as you're told if you want to stay alive," I growl back at her. Her face pales slightly. She doesn't want to show how scared she is, but it's written all over her face.

"I'm not just going to do what you tell me," she mutters in return, but this time, she doesn't make eye contact. She can't. She can hardly bear to look at me, and I know that I have finally won this round.

She steps back inside, turning away from me and heading towards the bed. I close the door behind her, locking it and double-checking that there's no way for her to get out.

I don't know what comes next. I doubt it's going to be pretty.

In fact, there's no question in my mind that Lucio Leone will do everything in his power to get his daughter back, to keep her from falling into our clutches entirely.

But if he thinks that is going to be enough to save him, I am happy to disabuse him of that notion.

I head to the kitchen to make myself coffee. I want to be on the lookout for a few more hours before I get some sleep of my own. I doubt they've tracked us here so soon, or that they'd try and strike by daylight, and I can sleep when the sun comes up.

Until then, though, I am going to be on high alert. And I am not going to let my guard down for a moment.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:42 am*

Max

I pace for a while, and eventually pull an armchair around to face the largest window that looks out over the forest.

It's dark, but not entirely silent, interrupted by a few hoots and rustles from animals out there in the night.

My ears are perked up to every little thing, but after everything that has happened today, I am struggling to keep my eyes open.

I knew taking her from her own wedding was risky. And in the back of my mind I knew there was always the possibility that the timing would be all wrong, that no one would leave her alone long enough for me to grab her.

It's like fate knew she needed to get out of there. My timing couldn't have been more perfect.

But her dad won't stop looking until he finds her. This much I know. My body sags as I allow myself a moment to relax.

Eventually, I lean my head back against the soft plushness of the chair behind me, my eyes drifting shut for a moment.

They're not going to come looking for her here tonight, I assure myself. They're still trying to figure out what happened in the first place. If I'm going to rest, it needs to be tonight, because soon, I'll have to put up a fight for my life...

I'm not sure exactly when I slip into sleep.

I linger between waking and sleeping for a long while, not quite sure whether I am in the real world or not.

Shooting looks towards the bedroom door, my head is full of her—what I am going to do with her, how we are going to keep her here, how difficult she is going to make all of that for me.

There's something sharp-edged about her, something more intense than I had predicted. Most girls like that would just curl up and let it happen, hope that they didn't get hurt in the process, but she stands her ground as best she can, even when she must know it will land her in danger...

All at once, I can see her in her white dress, ready to walk down the aisle and give herself to that man, the man that her father chose for her.

As I linger in that place between sleep and waking, the images flow together with ease; the skirt rippling around her waist, the flowers clutched in her hands, the strange, unreadable expression on her face that looked something close to relief.

And, suddenly, there I am beside her in my dream—not pulling her out of the window, as I did in real life, but behind her.

My arms slipping around her waist, pulling her against me, taking the very thing that her father has tried to offer up to someone else, the warmth of her body pressed to mine as though she belongs there.

I know it's wrong. I know she doesn't want me like that. But there is a part of me that desires her—perhaps just misplaced possessiveness, perhaps something else entirely, but I can't deny it.

The dream is so vivid, I can almost smell the scent of her skin, the fragrance of her coursing through me and filling me to the very brim.

I let myself sink into the dream, at least for now, a brief moment of respite from the stress that has surrounded me these last few weeks as we put together this plan of action.

I move her against the wall, pressing myself into her, the silk and lace of her dress bunching up between us.

She half-glances over her shoulder, and I can see that flash of fear in her eyes again, but mixed with something like wanting—something that demands my attention.

I gather her skirts in my hand and pull them aside, slipping my hand between her legs and sliding it over her lips, and I can already feel how wet she is for me, how much she wants me.

Tell me, I order her, my voice sounding as though it comes from someone else entirely. Tell me what you want...

But she has long since lost the ability to speak, her eyes communicating everything I need from her.

I sink my fingertips into her thigh, feeling the way her soft flesh gives below me, and it strikes me how vulnerable she is.

.. but instead of scaring me off, it only draws me in closer.

As though she is an unwritten tablet, and I am the first to write my words upon her.

I draw my hardness into my hand, guiding it against her body, letting her feel the



thickness of me pressed to her for a moment, and I slip my arm around her waist, hand flattening against her belly.

I hear a slight gasp escape her lips, and her eyes search for mine again, as though making certain that I am not going anywhere.

But as I hold her to me, all I can think about is keeping her close.

Making her mine. My mind blurring the lines between taking her and having her, kidnapping her and consuming her. ..

I buck my hips forward, thrusting deep into her, and listen to the slow gasp that escapes her lips as she feels me within her.

Her jaw slackens, and I slip my hand to her face, guiding her gaze around to me.

Her eyes are distant, hazy, but they are still searching for me in all of this, still needing me and wanting me here.

The feel of her around me is so delicious, I have to still myself to keep from going over the edge, holding myself there, just stirring my hips against her, until I hear the words slip past her mouth.

More.

It takes me a moment to realize what she wants from me, but when I do, I am more than happy to give it to her.

She seems hardly able to speak past a word or two, but that's all I need.

I draw back and thrust back into her once more, driving myself deep inside of her,

feeling her most intimate parts wrapping around me like she is inviting me further.

Her back arches, and I lift my fingers to her face, feeling the rough raspiness of her breath on my skin as I take her in long strokes.

I slow myself, even as the pleasure begins to get the better of me.

There is something about the warmth of her breath on my fingertips, her body moving against mine as though she wants nothing more than to feel me, that has me close to the edge, even though I am well experienced in keeping myself from finishing too quickly.

I groan, pressing my face into the back of her neck, the stirring pleasure rising and rising until ? —

A sound shocks me out of my slumber, and I jerk upright, springing to my feet, still hazy from sleep. The dream is so vivid, I can almost smell the scent of her lingering in my senses, but I know it's nothing more than a fantasy.

I rush to the door and throw it open, looking out into the dark night beyond, trying to figure out what drew me from my sleep. But there's nothing there, nothing that would suggest anything has actually happened. Just my paranoia.

Or perhaps my subconscious, trying to stop me from going any further with her in my dream than I already have.

I push a hand through my hair and let out a sigh.

It's not that I am actually attracted to her, of course. Yes, she's pretty, but there are plenty of pretty girls in the world that have nothing to do with a bastard like Lucio Leone, let alone the fact that I took her from her damn wedding day.

And yet, as I glance back towards her bedroom door, something nags at me. I know she couldn't have sneaked out, but still... a noise woke me, pulled me from the depths of sleep, and I need to know whether there is anything going on inside this cabin.

I head to her door and check that the lock is still pushed over.

It seems to be, and as I scan the area around it, I can't make out anything that might indicate something has changed.

I pause there for a moment, wondering if I should look inside.

Even if she's not in the middle of something intimate, like undressing, I get the feeling she'd fly off the handle at me for invading her privacy.

But I can't let that bother me. I kidnapped her, for fuck's sake—I can check on her anytime I want to. As quietly as I can, I push the lock back and crack open the door, peering inside to make certain that she is right where I left her.

And she is. But as I stand there in the door for a moment, I find myself staring at her for a little longer than I need to.

She is reclined on the bed, the covers pulled up to her chin, her face half-turned to the side, where a beam of moonlight is laying over her cheek.

It almost looks like a slash on her skin, so pale and cold.

She's so untouched in every other way, from the white dress I found her in to the marble-clearness of her skin, it's almost hard to imagine anyone laying a hand on her, let alone in the way that I did in my dream.

My hand flexes at my side, trying to crush down the desire the dream stirred in me as

best I can. It's the first time I have seen her as anything other than a problem. And for some reason, this feels a million times more intimate than the dream I just had about her, as vivid as it was.

Seeing her like this, utterly defenseless but completely at peace, it's almost as though I am spying on her undressed. I can't see anything but her face, her soft, slumbering features, and yet...

I draw back swiftly, closing the door behind me and pushing the lock back across without a second thought.

I don't know what the fuck is going on in my head right now.

First, dreaming about fucking her, and then, unable to so much as look on her asleep in bed without being caught up in a mess in my mind.

I need to get some rest. Clear my head. I can't let my thoughts get the better of me, not when we have only just arrived out here. My family has poured too much into planning and orchestrating this for me to get skittish on day one and make a mess of things.

I return to the armchair and settle my head back against the plush fabric, my ears alert as I watch the window. Outside, everything seems quiet, but in here, in my head, I am not sure I can say the same thing.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:42 am*

Cara

Pressing one foot down on top of the bed, I wince as it lets out a loud squeak.

I glance towards the door, checking that I have not attracted his attention, but, for now, at least, my captor—Max, he'd told me his name was—seems to be keeping his distance.

I'm actually glad about that.

For the last couple of days I've been stuck here all by myself—no company, nobody to talk to, nothing to do.

He comes in with food, lets me go to the bathroom a couple of times a day while he stands watch outside the door, and then locks me back up in the bedroom again.

I didn't know when that routine was going to change, if ever. What if I have to get used to living like this...?

"Can I at least go outside? Stretch my legs?" I had pleaded with him when he'd brought my food this morning. He had placed down the plate of toast and eggs at my feet, and then straightened back up again before he replied.

"No."

"You can come with me," I offered him desperately. "Hell, if you want to cuff me to you, I'll do it. I just need to get out of here, please, for a little while..."

His eyes darted down to my wrist, as though he was picturing the cuffs on them right as I said it. I felt a flood of heat come to my cheeks at the thought of him cuffing me, and wished I could take it back.

He'd turned me down, and that had been the last time I'd seen him. I knew he would be back to bring me dinner in a few hours, but I'd resolved to use the time to my advantage.

I'm not just going to stand by and let him call the shots like this. I'm going to try to make my way to freedom.

Even if I'm not sure what that looks like right now.

And so, I test out the strength of the bed, seeing if it can hold my weight.

It's not exactly sturdy, but it seems to be able to keep me balanced upright.

I'm not going to have to be up there for long—just as long as it takes for me to get a grip on the window latch, which is at the top of the window on the far side.

It will take a little ingenuity to open it, but I will find a way.

I just need to get up there and get a closer look at it.

I double-check the door, listening closely to make sure that he is not intending to burst in on me, and I step on the bed.

Biting my tongue between my teeth to keep my focus, I run my hand along the edge of the window.

It feels shut tight, no air coming through.

I just need to get closer to the latch. If I can just.. .

I stand on tiptoe, but that's not enough. I need a few more inches of leverage. I grit my teeth, and lift my foot onto the inside of the sill, trying to push myself up on the wood, but...

All of a sudden, my foot skids out from underneath me, dropping to the bed with a crash. It goes straight through the cheap, old bed frame slats, twisting painfully to one side. I let out a cry filling the room with an undeniable explosion of noise.

I try to wrestle myself loose before he comes in, but the pain shooting up and down my leg refuses to budge. I groan, and resign myself to my fate as the door opens and he bursts in.

"What the hell are you doing?" he exclaims, as he rushes to my side. He goes to lift me out, but I push him away.

"Don't pull me," I protest. "I've hurt my leg. I need help..."

He stares at me for a moment—looking at the bedframe, at me, clearly piecing everything together.

And, as he runs a hand through his hair, for a moment I think he is going to turn his back on me and leave me to get out of this mess himself.

I wouldn't have blamed him if he did. I mean, I was trying to escape.

There's no way I can pretend I was just exploring the springiness of the bed for some utterly innocent reason.

But then, to my surprise, he leans down, and he tucks one hand under my thigh. He

eases it up slowly, lifting my leg till it comes loose from between the broken wood slats.

The wood has torn into my skin, not too deep, but the blood has soaked through the pants, which have been ripped. I look away from it, gulping hard. I've never been good with the sight of blood, let alone my own.

"Shit," he mutters, and he leaves the room. I peel the leg of the pants up, trying to get a better look at the damage. I can't believe I've been so stupid as to let something like this happen.

I should have been more careful. I am never going to get out if I hurt myself like this.

I need to be ready to run at any given moment, and I can tell that this is going to stop those plans for the time being.

He returns a few moments later, and sinks down onto the bed, pulling my leg into his lap and setting the first aid kit he brought with him down beside me.

I turn my head to the side so I don't have to look at him at work, but I can't help but let out a yelp of pain as I feel the sting of the antiseptic on my skin.

"It's okay," he murmurs, as he briefly rubs his hand against my thigh. I didn't expect him to be quite so...tender. He's careful with me, maneuvering my leg this way and that so he can clean off all the blood, and then bandaging up the cuts before they can bleed any further.

He pauses for a moment when he's done. I look over at him once more, and breathe a sigh of relief when I see that my leg has been tended to.

"Thanks," I murmur, and I go to pull my leg away, but, before I can, he tightens his



grip on me slightly.

"What's this?"

My heart drops. He's gesturing to an old scar on the back of my calf—the very same scar I got the night that I saw that woman fleeing from our house. It's a reminder of that night, and it has left me unable to forget everything that happened, no matter how much I might want to put it behind me.

"Nothing," I mutter. "Just an old cut. I got it in an accident when I was a kid."

He glances over at me, studying me for a moment, and I can tell that he doesn't buy what I am saying to him right now.

And, for a moment, one crazy moment, I almost want to spill it all to him.

I want to tell him what happened that night, how it felt to see something like that go down—how strange it was for me to see my father in such stark reality.

But I shove it aside, staring him down, refusing to give him any more than that. He releases my leg, and I pull it up and tuck it under me, hiding it from him before he can ask any more questions about me.

"I'll get you some new pants," he tells me, rising to his feet before he looks down at the bed.

He leaves the room, and I can't help but breathe a sigh of relief as soon as he's gone.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do when he's around, how I'm supposed to act.

Or how I'm meant to make sense of how gentle he can be with me, but how harsh at

the same time.

He's my kidnapper, so shouldn't he be going out of his way to terrify me, to leave me to struggle in pain when he can tell that I have tried to escape?

Why did he take care of me like that? Who is this man. ..?

I glance down at my leg once more, at the scar that drew his attention, and I reach down to brush my finger over it.

The memory of that woman flashes through my mind, the woman who had been fleeing from the house that night.

I have no idea if she got away. I have no idea where she went, if she managed to go anywhere.

And maybe I'm better off not knowing the answer to those things. Maybe it's for my own good.

Because there are some truths I know I'm better off without knowing. I close my eyes, and let out a long breath. I find it hard to breathe around Max, hard to think.

All I can think about is the way his hands felt on my leg. And how much I craved them somewhere far more intimate.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:42 am*

Max

Days have passed—days without a word from anyone. And, though it should be a relief, I can't help but wonder what is waiting for me on the other side of all of this.

I glance towards her bedroom door, which has the lock pushed across it. I'm glad that she seems to have quieted down in there, especially after the accident she had the other day.

"I know what you were trying to do," I told her once I had patched her up. She narrowed her eyes at me, as though daring me to call her out.

"Oh, and what do you think that was?"

I gazed back at her, incredulous.

"You really need me to say it?"

"If you're making assumptions about me, I want to know what they are," she replied, cocking an eyebrow.

"Assumptions?" I scoffed back.

"Yeah," she replied, lifting her chin slightly, meeting my gaze. And there was something in the way she looked at me that told me that she was willing to dig her heels in about this—even if she was wrong, even if she knew it.

And there is something about that which excites me.

I don't like this. I don't like any of it. I thought I could handle being alone with her. Hell, I insisted on it, telling my family in no uncertain terms that I could manage this side of our operation without a hitch. But the longer I spend here, the more I wonder if I was telling the truth or not.

I know the shit her father is involved in—the filth attached to her family name.

The sex trafficking. And I know that there are few people in the world I loathe more than Lucio.

I've heard what he does to people, to the women who fall into his grasp.

It's not enough for him to use them. He wants to break them—to make it so that they have no choice but to do what they do for him, to make them his for life.

It's beyond evil, and, worse than that, he doesn't even bother to hide it anymore.

He doesn't have to. He is too powerful to stop.

But what does she know about it? That's the part that gets to me. I've skated around the question a few times, talking with her about her father, but she has always been quick to deflect.

"Do you know what your father does?" I asked her as I leaned in the doorway to watch her eat.

Now that I knew she had escape on her mind, I was even more determined to keep my eye on her, and it gave me a chance to shake loose some information about the Leone business.

She glanced up at me, mouth set in a hard line.

"You think I'm that naive?" she fired back. "I know he's—I know he's mafia. I'm not stupid."

I eyed her for a moment. Mafia, sure... but what does she know about how he makes his money?

"How much are you involved with?"

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly that."

"Why are you interrogating me like this?"

She crossed her arms over her chest, pushing her food away from her.

"I can leave, if you want," I replied. Her jaw tensed. It was obvious she didn't want to be left alone.

"I'm... I'm involved with the business," she told me, almost defensive, as though she didn't like the thought of me imagining her as some useless damsel in distress.

"You are? In what capacity?"

"Why do you think I agreed to marry Mario?"

The words seemed to catch her off guard, even as they came out of her mouth.

She swiftly pressed her lips together again, and turned her attention back to the food.

But the sentence hung there between us, heavy with meaning, as I tried to make sense of it.

That was why she had been marrying him? Some business deal?

With the age gap between them, it shouldn't have come as a surprise, but I thought his daughter would be off-limits when it came to buying and selling.

With how defiant she has been, I can only assume that she doesn't really know how much danger she's in.

That her father never told her that she should keep her mouth shut and her head down when she had been taken by someone, and not to piss them off.

He would have told her that, if he had thought she would need to know, if he had imagined for a second that she might one day be in danger.

But he didn't. Which means he has kept her out of it. Which means...

She might be innocent in all of this.

Even as the thought crosses my mind, I brush it away with irritation.

No. I am not going to let myself think like that.

As far as I'm concerned, she's as much a part of it as her father is.

She has benefited from it, hasn't she? She's lived a life of luxury built off the back of the suffering that he has inflicted on other people, and she's an adult.

She can't be so ignorant as to truly have no idea.

A sound draws me out of my thoughts, and I look over to see the pot on the stove nearly boiling over. I curse and head over to grab it, quickly serving up the pasta I made for us tonight.

There's something strangely domestic about cooking for her like this—something I'm not entirely averse to.

Living at home with my father and my sister, it's not like we're spending time together Brady-bunch style.

All we talk about is work, what we're going to do next, how we're going to handle whatever threat has been aimed in our direction.

But this? This feels almost peaceful. Almost pleasant.

I could get used to it.

I head to her room, pulling back the lock on the door and then stepping inside. She is perched on the edge of the bed, a book in her hand. She pleaded with me for something to read, and, unable to see any reason why I shouldn't, I brought her some stuff to flip through.

She stands up and reaches out for the bowl. Her eyes are wide as she looks into it, and she flicks her tongue over her lips.

"God, that looks so good." She sighs, as she sinks down again to start eating. I'm about to head back out to have my own dinner and leave her for the night, but before I can, my phone buzzes.

As soon as it goes off, I snatch it out of my pocket, and lift it in front of my face. There's a message. It's not from a number I know, but that's not entirely unheard of.

Maya uses burner phones often enough...

But, as I tap open the message and scan through what's waiting for me on the other side, my chest tightens. It's not from any member of my family. But I can't say the same for her.

This is Lucio Leone, the message reads. And this is the only warning you'll get from me.

That's it, the whole message. Not as bad as I had been expecting, but somehow, even more chilling for its brevity.

I push my phone back into my pocket, staring straight ahead, my ears pricked for any noise outside.

I don't know if they are already nearby.

Maybe they found my unlisted number by getting it out of one of our confidantes. I have no idea.

But I am going to have to find a way to be ready for them, one way or another. Just as I'm about to head out the door, a voice pipes up from behind me.

"That message. It was from my father, wasn't it?"

I freeze. Did she see the screen somehow? There's not a chance she could have seen it from where she's sitting. I look over at her, confused.

"How did you know?"

She smiles slightly.



"I've seen people look like that before," she admits. "And it usually means my father has had something to say to them."

Her words hang there for a moment. I see the chance to interrogate her a little further on this, and it's one that I am going to jump on.

"You work with your father a lot?" I ask her, trying to keep my voice as casual as I can. She shakes her head.

"No, no, he runs the family business himself," she replies quickly. "I just... I mean, I've lived with him my whole life. I get to know how people look at him, you know?"

I nod slowly. So, she doesn't work directly with him. Or, if she does, she's smart enough not to admit to it. She knows how it will look. She knows that she has to get me on her side.

She stares back at me, waiting for me to say something. I don't know exactly what to come out with. I feel as though I will expose myself if I tell her something that she doesn't want to hear, and if I do, I might make this harder on myself than I have to.

Because... it's going to be easier for me to convince her to stay, if she actually likes me.

If she actually thinks she can put her trust in me.

She hasn't exactly been speaking highly of her father in the time that she's been here with me, and it's obvious she holds some dark emotions towards him.

Anger? Guilt? I wish I could see into her head somehow, expose her for the person she really is, no matter what it takes.

"Are you close with your father?" she asks me softly. I nod.

"Very. And my sister."

Her face brightens at once.

"You have a sister?"

"Yes. Two, actually, but..."

I trail off. I don't want to get into the saga that surrounds my sister Melinda right now. There are far more important things for us to focus on.

"You're so lucky," she sighs. "I always wanted siblings. Sisters, especially. But my mother died not long after I was born, and I never had... I mean, it was just my father and me from there on out. And I'm very grateful for everything that he's done for me, but sometimes, I wonder if I would have been better off with someone else to help me through it. .."

She trails off, stopping herself, as though she never intended to say so much.

She places the plate to the side, crossing her hands in her lap. All at once, she looks distinctly vulnerable, as though she might vanish in on herself at any moment.

"Sorry, you don't need to hear all that," she tells me. She's not looking at me any longer, and, without thinking, I reach out to cup her chin in mine. I tilt her gaze back up to meet my eyes, and I notice that her lips are slightly parted, a sharp breath passing through her.

"You don't have to apologize," I murmur.

My words are softer than I intended, something in me wanting to protect her from what's coming.

Not just because we can't let her fall into the hands of her father before we get a chance to carry out this plan, but because I don't want her to go back to a man who makes her feel the way that he clearly does.

My thumb skims up towards her lips, and they open a little wider, almost as though she is waiting for more...

And then, I snap out of it. I draw my hand back, letting it fall to my side again. She lowers her gaze, reaching for the food and planting it back on her lap, like it's a safety blanket.

"Thank you for the food," she replies, and I grunt in reply before I make my way to the door.

I don't want to be alone with her in here for another moment.

I can tell my certainty is starting to waver, and I am not going to let this happen.

I need to remember what her family has done, what they are capable of.

Acting out this damsel-in-distress bit wouldn't be past her skills, no doubt.

Perhaps this is the role her father told her to play in a situation such as this one, lull her captor into a false sense of security only to hit me with reality as soon as the time comes. ..

I need to make a coffee—something to keep me awake as I face off against whatever her father has planned for me.

I know he's not going to make this easy for me.

He's not going to play a predictable game.

He is going to make sure that I get hit when I least expect it, and I can only imagine how badly that's going to go for me.

I stride to the kitchen, ignoring the food I know I should be eating, and go to put on a pot of coffee.

I can hear her moving around in the room next door.

I wonder if she is scared about her father coming to get her, or scared about the fact he might not.

The fact that she might be trapped with me.

My teeth set on edge as the thought crosses my mind.

How is what I am doing so different from him?

I might not be selling her body, but I am still using her.

Still making it so that the most important thing about her is her relationship to her father, and how we can exploit it.

She didn't ask for this. Fuck, she was walking down the aisle when we came to take her away. Starting a whole new life...

And I've pulled her away from that. Pulled her into this mess that my family and I have made, a mess that will end with either her family or mine being ripped to pieces.

I'm not sure I can stand the thought of it right now, of losing my family, or...

I push the thoughts aside. Whatever comes next, I will deal with it when I have to. For now, I know the only thing that matters is keeping her under lock and key, where she belongs, and making certain that I don't let this threat from her father throw me off.

Because that's exactly what he's counting on.

Cara

"You had a shower yesterday."

"And I want one again today!" I protest, pressing my hands into my hips and glaring at him with as much certainty as I can muster. "So, you going to let me, or not?"

He looks me up and down. I can tell that he has his doubts about this. Everything I do when I'm around him seems to come under this same scrutiny from him. But I have a plan, and I need to get into that bathroom to complete it. I will throw everything at him to force his hand and make it happen.

"You look fine to me."

"It's not about how I look; it's about how I feel," I shoot back. "You're really going to keep me locked in that room like some kind of prisoner?"

That seems to get through to him. Something in his demeanor shifts, as though that turn of phrase doesn't sit right with him. He plants a hand on the door, and nods for me to go inside.

"Fine. Ten minutes. Be quick."

I brush past him and into the room, pulling the door shut behind me.

My heart pounds against my ribs as I stand there in the bathroom, distinctly aware of how close he is to me right now. I have to make use of this time the best I can, or I

am going to risk letting this man see far more than I want him to.

I glance towards the door again. I know that he can't see through it, but I'm certain that his ears are tuned in to everything that is going on behind it.

He has barely let me out of his sight since I arrived here, and these brief moments of respite I get in the bathroom I have been hanging onto for dear life.

But today, I'm in here for far more than just a shower.

As I reach up beneath the latch on the bathroom mirror, I promise myself that I am going to make it out of here no matter how hard it might seem, no matter what kind of threats he has leveled at me about what waits for me on the other side.

I have to push myself. I have to get out. I have to try...

I pause for a moment, catching my breath, and try to remind myself why this is as urgent as it is.

Ever since I saw that look on his face, his gaze lowering to the phone both times when he received a message from my father, I've known exactly what is going on.

The first text had words; I could see that much on the screen.

Hours later the second message looked like a skull and bones emoji.

Coming from a man like my dad, that would be enough to put the fear of life or death in anyone.

My father is somewhere nearby, probably closing the distance on me even as I fiddle with this window.

"What do the messages say?" I demanded, attempting a different approach to try and shake the truth loose from him.

"Nothing."

His voice was curt, almost sharp. He thought he was leaving no room for argument, but I was going to test him on that. I rose from the bed before he could leave the bedroom again, making my way towards him swiftly and blocking the door.

"If it's about me, I deserve to know about it."

His eyes settled on me. Irritation flashed in his gaze, but I didn't budge an inch.

"It's nothing to do with you."

"Oh, so it's got nothing to do with the fact that you brought me here?" I replied, tipping my head to the side.

"Get out of the way, Cara."

"Not until you tell me what the messages said."

He took a step forward, close enough that I could feel the irritation coming off him in waves. Still, I didn't budge an inch. I had grown up with Lucio Leone as a father; if he thought something like this would scare me, he's wrong.

"Move."

He growled the word. Sighing, and figuring there was no other option, I reached down to his pocket where I knew he kept his phone. But before my fingers could make contact, he caught my wrist in his hand, whipping it up and away from him.



"Hands off me, Cara."

His fingers tightened around my wrist. Suddenly, the way he was looking at me shifted from annoyance to something more. His gaze darkened, and I felt a jolt run down my spine.

I yanked my wrist away from him, and stepped aside, thinking better of going after his phone. At least, for now.

I knew that Dad wouldn't leave me to face this alone. Not a chance in hell. He might have wanted to marry me off that awful Mario, but that doesn't mean that he's willing to let me slip through his fingers like this.

Max hasn't hurt me, but the very act of stealing me away from my wedding day was always something he was going to have to pay for.

Hell, he probably only patched me up after that fall I had in the hopes of keeping me from looking too beat-up by the time they had to start sending out ransom requests or whatever it was they were going to use me for. Not out of the goodness of his heart.

And that's what I keep reminding myself as I pry open the window a few inches, a sudden gust of cold air rushing in and filling the room.

I shudder. I'm still dressed, of course, but the shower running beside me has filled the room with steam, and the sudden shock of chilliness makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

Or maybe that's something to do with the man standing on the other side of the door.

I'm sure he has no idea that the glue around the edges of the window has started to come up.

I noticed it a few days ago, and have been careful to smear the sealant that holds the window in place with soap and water every time I am allowed in, in the hopes of making it a little easier to peel off.

And, today, nearly a week after my father's second message, I'm ready to put it to the test.

The sealant comes off in a single piece, which I stuff behind the toilet. I need to make this whole scene look as confusing as possible, when he finally opens the door. There isn't a lock on it. He doesn't trust me. And it's not as though this is going to give him any reason to.

That thought nags at the back of my mind, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up.

It shouldn't matter to me what this man thinks of me, right?

I don't know anything about him. And the things that I do know are hardly flattering.

He stole me away from my wedding, forced me out of a window at gunpoint, and tossed me under a blanket to drive me across the country and lock me up.

In some ways, I'm still trying to wrap my head around it—what he has done, how someone who can be so cruel has offered me these small moments of kindness, too.

Perhaps because they are some of the only moments of kindness I have experienced other than with Misha.

I grimace as the glass in the window cracks dangerously, as though warning me it may explode.

It sounds ridiculous, even to me, to think of him in those terms—as the sole arbiter of people being nice to me—when I know it's not true.

"You've had everything you could ever have wanted," my father had told me, gesturing around my beautiful bedroom, when he had first told me that I was to marry Mario and I had dug my heels in. "Travel, clothes, a home, luxury. Think of all the women who would kill to have had everything you did, and you won't give me this one thing in return?"

I would have traded it all in to escape that fate.

I shove the thought aside as I finally manage to lift the glass from the frame. It doesn't give me much room, but the sudden rush of fresh air and the scent of the forest beyond draws a smile to my lips. I don't do well with being locked up. Especially in a place as tiny and rundown as this one.

I glance at the door one last time. I know I don't have much time.

He seems to be attuned to everything that is going on around him, ears pricked for any sign of something wrong.

I guess it shouldn't come as a surprise, given that he's some sort of ground soldier for whatever rival mafia faction has sent him here with me.

But there's something human behind that piercing gaze that makes it hard for me to think straight—as though he is seeing further into me than anyone should.

Or anyone would want to.

I have to get out now. I'm going to flee this cabin and head into the woods, until I run into one of the men that my father will have sent out to find me. I have no doubt that

he has flooded the whole damn state with people searching for me, and if he's gotten hold of Max's number, then he must be narrowing down on my location.

I doubt I'll be out of this place for more than a few hours before someone comes across me, and, when they do. ..

I stretch my arm out of the window, feeling the cold bite of the air on my skin.

The tee he gave me is enormous, but it doesn't come down past my elbows.

A shiver runs down my spine. Maybe he's right.

Maybe I really won't last long out there, once I make a break for it.

I have no idea where we are, no idea where the nearest road leads to, no idea if my father is anywhere close by.

My mind has been so focused on finding a way out of here, I've hardly thought about what might be waiting for me on the other side when I do.

Mario. I know he'll still be expecting me to go through with the marriage as long as I'm untouched; he didn't see anything, after all, of my doubts before I made my way down to meet him.

As far as he's concerned, I was a blushing bride ready to meet him at the altar, and this man has stolen me away from my rightful duty.

The thought of it sends a thick lump rising up in my throat, and I swallow it down swiftly.

Maybe all of this will have given my father reason to re-evaluate whether this is a

good idea or not, and I might be able to reason with him and find some way out of this.

As long as I am hidden away here, I will never know.

Pushing my shoulders awkwardly through the bathroom window, I scramble to find my footing on the toilet, the polished ceramic nearly sending me crashing to the ground once more.

A shock of pain rushes through my leg where my injury is still healing, but I ignore it.

The seconds are running out, and I can't let that happen.

If there is one thing my father has drilled into me above all else, it's to find a way back to my family—that he is the one who can protect me, he is the one who knows me, he is the one I can trust. As much as Max might have kept me physically safe here, God knows what he will start doing once he realizes that he has managed to lull me into a sense of security. ..

Finally, with an almighty shove, I fumble out of the window and on to the ground below – the wind is knocked out of me as I hit the earth hard, my chest slamming into the damp ground. I spring to my feet and glance around. Inside, I can hear Max calling out, probably checking that I am okay.

And, to my surprise, there is a note of concern in his voice.

Not that it means anything, not that it ever could.

He's worried about his prime asset getting out of containment, not about anything happening to me, the same reason he patched me up before.

I can still remember the cold look of fury in his eyes when he stole me away from that wedding, and I am not going to forget it any time soon.

I don't have shoes, so the rocks and twigs are already digging into my feet as I straighten up and look around.

As far as the eye can see, there are trees stretching out in every direction.

It doesn't look like another living soul has stepped foot in this place in longer than I'd care to imagine.

Every direction looks the same, which probably means it doesn't matter which one I head off into.

And yet, as I hear his voice rising behind me, there is a part of me that wants to stay rooted to the ground, right where I stand.

I could climb back in through the window.

Try to shove the glass back in place, replace the sealant, whatever I can do in the time before he bursts in to check on me.

I can still hear the shower running, and the thought of the hot water running over my body is almost too tempting to resist. That cabin, as much as I might never have chosen to come here myself, has been something like a sanctuary, and running away from that and into the woods where I have no idea what is waiting for me suddenly seems like the stupidest idea I've ever had in my life.

But then, I see the door start to move, and I turn my back and run, ignoring the pain in the soles of my feet, ignoring the cold of the wind in my hair.

The further I can get from here, the more chance I have of being found, the more chance I have of one of the men my father has sent to bring me back managing to come across me. ..

I can already feel the breath tearing through my lungs as I try to force my legs to keep moving.

It's not as though I get out to the gym much, not with my father being who he is.

He's always insisted that I'm better off cultivating my mind than my body, and that no men in this business care for a woman who's all muscly, anyway.

Right now, I would do anything to have muscles that could carry me a little further, but I have to rely on what I have to work with.

"Cara!"

A voice roars through the forest, and I glance back, almost on instinct.

I have no intention of stopping. But there is something in his tone that throws me back to the day he took me.

A real hatred, as though he can barely believe that he has been stuck with me at all.

My eyes are already burning with the cold air, my hair flying back from my face in tangled waves.

I don't know why Max took me in the first place, but it doesn't matter.

My father will deal with all of that when the time is right.

All that matters to me right now is getting out of here, finding some way back to my old life; the comforts of everything that I've ever been used to, my home, my father, my family. It's where I belong.

And, even as I hear footsteps following me into the darkened woods, I know that I will do anything within my power to get back to it.

No matter how far and fast I have to run to make it happen.



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:43 am*

Max

I survey the forest before me, my hands clenched into fists at my sides. Shit, shit, shit!

How could I have let her get away? I feel so fucking stupid.

I should have come into the bathroom with her, kept an eye on her, but I couldn't bring myself to invade her privacy quite so brutally.

And how does she repay me? She pulls the glass from the window, climbs out through the tiny gap, and takes off into the woods like some kind of fucking idiot.

I run a hand through my hair, looking this way and that as I try to see which direction she must have taken off in.

She doesn't know this place, and she has no idea what she's up against; these woods take a turn for the freezing in the middle of the night, and if I don't have her back by then, she'll be in serious trouble.

Not to mention the fact she's not dressed for the weather, and she doesn't have any shoes on.

If I lose her, there's going to be hell to pay.

Not just for me, but for my family. She's the one bit of leverage we have in all of this, the one promise that Leone will not come down on us with wrath.

In the war against them, she's our bargaining chip, and my family has put every faith in me to make sure she doesn't get away.

And now, she's running through the woods to God knows where—probably to meet with one of her father's men, if the last message he sent me was anything to go by.

My mind whirs as I plan my next move. No point following a single direction.

Chances are she'll double-back on herself and get lost, given how confusing this place is.

I'm better off tracking a large circle around the cabin, keeping watch for anything that might indicate where she has headed.

She's just a spoiled mafia princess. I doubt she'll have much in the way of survival skills, let alone the presence of mind to cover her tracks as she flees.

I dart back into the house and grab my gun and a jacket. I don't know who I am going to encounter out there, and I'm smarter than to just let myself walk into a trap. I need her back, but getting myself killed in the process isn't going to help.

I can practically hear Maya in my ear, telling me that she should have been the one to do this. I could have helped you! You shouldn't have tried to leave me out of all of this...

But I can't let that get to me, not now.

Maybe she's right. Or maybe she would have been even more of a liability, given her hot temper and sharp tongue.

I can only imagine the shit that she'd have to say to me if she knew that I had

dropped the ball this badly, but, God willing, she'll never find out.

I grab my phone and quickly pick out the path I'm going to take through the trees.

I have explored this place extensively in the run-up to the execution of this plan, and I know it about as well as anyone can.

Even still, the trees start to look the same after a while, and it's too easy to get turned around and lose your way.

Or your prey.

I head out into the forest, and start my route around the cabin.

The air is cold, despite a few rays of sunlight poking through the canopy of leaves and branches above me.

I pause for a moment, my ears pricked, trying to make out any noise that might give me a hint as to where she has gone, but I've got nothing.

No instincts to run on. I just need to find her and fast.

Plotting my route around the cabin, I trace a wide arc away from my base and into the woods.

There has to be something here, something that will nudge me in the direction of wherever she's gone to.

Has she spent time in places like this before?

I can't imagine that her father would have allowed her to pass the time anywhere

other than that ridiculous mansion that he calls home, but perhaps he trained her for the possibility of something like this going down, I'm not sure. ..

I loop around towards the river that cuts through the middle of the forest, the sound of the rushing water an anchor in the chaos of everything that is going on right now. I pause by the bank, sinking my knee into the soft earth for a moment to recalibrate myself...

And that's when I hear it. A noise from somewhere inside the woods.

My head snaps up. It sounds like a twig cracking; the echo of it fills the air, the only sign that it really happened at all.

My eyes slide this way and that, searching for the source of the noise, for anything that might point me in her direction.

A sudden movement draws my eye, and, as my gaze roves around to locate it, I realize it's her.

In that gray tee that I gave her, the old sweatpants that stand out like a sore thumb against the glum greens and browns of the forest surrounding us.

Her hair flies out over her shoulder as she turns her back on me, and she sprints off into the woods, not pausing to look back for a moment.

"Cara!" I roar after her. She doesn't know what she's dealing with out here.

One wrong move, and she could take a fall that would leave her with some serious injuries.

I might have been able to patch up her leg, but I couldn't say the same for something

worse.

I spring to my feet, and follow her into the trees, my breath tearing from my lungs as I try to keep up with her.

Eventually, I burst out of the thicket of trees and into a small clearing.

There are a few paths leading off from the main central space, and she could have taken any of them.

I freeze, holding my breath, not making a noise, and it seems as though the entire forest is doing the same thing right along with me.

I can't hear so much as a bird singing right now.

I'm not sure if I should take it as a sign that they're helping me or a warning that they're on her side.

I force myself to get my breathing under control, the panic that's been threatening to get the better of me still coursing through my system.

If there's one thing my father has taught me over the years, it's that emotions land you in trouble.

You need to keep your shit on lock, or you will create cracks in your facade that are all too easy to exploit.

She's relying on me panicking and making mistakes, giving her just enough of a chance to get out of here, and I need to make sure that doesn't happen.

It's not just my life on the line; it could be my whole family along with it, and I am

not willing to allow that to happen. We've come too far to fail now.

And, in that stillness, I can make out something.

It sounds like the rustle of branches, not due to the wind, but to movement.

My head whips around to a path that leads off behind me, and, sure enough, it looks as though there are footsteps tracking away from the clearing and amongst the trees.

She doesn't have shoes on, so she hasn't left much in the way of solid marks behind, but I can see where the grass has flattened and the leaves have scattered to make room for her.

I follow her into the woods, keeping my pace steady. Running will cause more chaos, and I don't want her to know that I am on to her. If I'm going to catch her, I'm going to do it by keeping my cool, because out here that's the difference between life and death.

In the dark of the trees, I can almost sense her. The scent of her hangs in the air, that same floral fragrance that came off her in waves when I grabbed her from the wedding. I don't know how she still smells of it so strongly. It must emerge right from her pores.

And then, I catch another flash of her hair.

It seems so bright against the darkness, that blonde in the dim light, and I shoot off in her direction without a second thought.

I don't call out to her this time, don't give her any kind of warning that I am approaching, and soon, I have closed the distance between us.

I push branches aside, ducking my head this way and that to keep my eyes on her as I follow her through the woods.

She casts a look over her shoulder a few times, her eyes wide with terror, as though she can hardly believe what is happening.

As though she is an animal trying to shake themselves loose from a trap, and I am the hunter, hot on her heels.

My eyes narrow, my vision closing in on the sight of her before me.

Her arms are covered in scratches where the branches have snagged at her skin.

The soles of her feet are nearly black from the dirt that has clung to them, and no doubt they're shredded from the uneven earth, too.

I can hear her breathing, the way it seems to fall helplessly from her lungs, like she might not be able to keep going for another instant, but I don't let it stop me.

I reach out to her as I close the distance between us, and her hair snatches through my fingertips for the barest instant, not close enough for me to pull her back, but just near enough to feel like I'm getting somewhere.

She's running like her life depends on it, like a rabbit from a trap, and, I suppose, right now, that's exactly how she feels.

She has no idea what I am going to do to her when I lay hands on her again, no idea how I am going to react to this bullshit she has tried to pull; I am too focused to be angry right now, but honestly, it's not going to stay that way once I catch her, and she knows it.

Suddenly, her foot catches on something—a rock, a raised root, who knows—and she stumbles, sprawling forward onto the ground with a cry of anger and fear.

I drop down, wrapping my arm around her waist and pulling her back to her feet, pinning her there against me so she can tell there is nowhere for her to go.



## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:43 am*

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"I snarl in her ear, the rage getting the better of me.

It's more than anger, more than simple fury at what she has tried to pull off here.

It's fear. Because I know what could be on the line if she gets away from me, and that is something I am not willing to contend with, not willing to even think about right now.

She could cost me my family. And that means I have to be a whole lot more fucking careful when it comes to keep her under wraps.

She kicks her legs back against me, squirming in my arms, but it's futile.

She's putting up far more of a fight now than she did on the day of her wedding.

It strikes me suddenly, but that has to be because I'm not pressing a gun into her guts this time around.

She twists her head around to face me, her eyes wide and pleading.

"Please, just let me go," she begs me. "I promise I'll tell my father that you were good to me. I'll make it so he's got no reason to come after you, I swear, I?—"

I can't help but let out a short bark of laughter, though there is little mirth in it.

"You think your father is capable of showing mercy?" I snap at her, as I lift her into my arms. She reluctantly puts her arms around my shoulders, her feet and legs clearly too sore to risk walking any further.

"You don't know him like I do," she protests. "You could—I mean, he's not all that..."

She trails off as she stares back at me.

I guess she must be able to tell that I am not buying a word that comes out of her mouth right now, and I have no intention of starting.

I have no idea what she really knows about her father, how much she is ignorant of, and how much she is just lying about.

She might think he's a decent man, but I know what lurks underneath.

She slumps against my chest, and I can feel the fight slipping out of her body.

She couldn't have really thought she would get far with no shoes and nothing to protect her against the cold, could she?

Maybe she's that naive. Maybe her father really has kept her hidden away for so long that she doesn't know what the real world is like.

Or even the world that she is a part of.

I plant her back on her feet once we're out of the woods and back at the cabin. I'm going to give her the chance to prove to me that she's not going to run again. It's not like I trust her, but I need her to think there's a chance for her to repair the damage she's done here today.

She looks back at me for a moment, her eyes wide with fear.

Her hair is a mess, leaves and twigs tangled into it, her arms bloodied and scratched to shit from her attempt to flee through the woods.

A far cry from the woman I grabbed from her wedding, the one who was perfectly put together, ready to walk down the aisle and accept her place at the side of a bastard almost as bad as her father.

But there is something about the way she looks at me that tells me that she's the same woman. Not just in the way she physically appears, but in her eyes. There is some kind of defiance there, some fight, as though she is warning me that she is not going to make this easy for me.

Whatever it is, it vanishes almost as soon as I notice it. Her shoulders slump down, and she stalks to the cabin, her head hanging to her chest, her hair falling into her face.

I follow her inside, and double-check that the door is locked behind her.

I need to repair the damage done to the bathroom and make certain that I have some sort of surveillance on this place, so I can keep watch on her if she tries to make another break for it.

I didn't want to mount cameras here originally, worried that her father might find some way to hack into them, but I will find a way to install something to keep watch over her from here on out.

In that instant, I start to believe that her little escape attempt is over. But then, before I can say another word, she rounds on me, and the rage in her eyes tells me everything I need to know.

She is far from done with me yet. And if I thought I was getting away with dragging her back here like a hunter with their newfound prey... I was wrong.

"I need a shower."

I let out a snort.

"You think I'm going to let you in there, after what you did?"

She crosses her arms over her chest.

"I'm a mess. I need to clean myself up."

I look her up and down; she's not wrong. But, after what she just pulled, she's hardly in any place to be laying down demands.

"Back to your room. Now."

I leave no room for argument in my tone, but she doesn't budge an inch. She's clearly feeling defiant right now, like some kind of errant teenager. But I am not her father, and she can't pull this entitled shit here. Here she's under my command, and she needs to learn that.

"I'm not going to my room until I have something to eat and clean myself up."

"You think you're in any place to be making demands?"

"I growl at her as I close the distance between us, the fury temporarily getting the better of me.

I just had to run through the forest to bring this girl back where she belongs, and she's

speaking to me like I'm the one who fucked up.

It's infuriating, to say the least, and I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to keep myself in check.

"I think you need me alive for some reason," she shoots back. "And I guess that means you don't want me getting an infection in one of these cuts and having to cut my arm off or something..."

She gestures to the scratches along her arms.

"So I suggest you let me clean myself up, and then we can talk."

I almost laugh at how fucking bold she is.

The way she talks to me is like she thinks she calls the shots here.

I stalk a little closer to her, our faces just a few inches apart.

She doesn't draw back, staring me down as though she doesn't want to give me an inch, though I can see that she is shaking slightly, her bottom lip trembling as she tries to hold my gaze.

"I don't think you understand how this works," I warn her, not moving my eyes from hers for an instant. "You don't get to tell me how this is going to go. You stay here, you keep your head down, and you don't pull any great escape attempts, and you get out of this alive. You hear me?"

She doesn't move a muscle. Her eyes flash with something I haven't seen before—something that almost looks dangerous, or would, if it was coming from someone with the ability to actually threaten me.

"You have no idea who I am," she snaps back at me. "You have no clue what you're getting yourself into. My father?—"

"Oh, I know all about your father," I murmur to her, my voice dropping. "Question is, do you?"

That seems to get to her. For a moment, she's silent, her brow furrowing slightly, and she shakes her head.

"What does that mean...?"

"You know everything that your father is involved with?" I taunt her. Now that I've found something that gets to her, I can't help but use it, pressing on it like I'm applying pressure to a bruise.

"What the hell are you talking about?" she counters, but there is a slight quake to her voice. I know I hit a nerve.

She might want to put up this front that she can handle everything I throw at her, but her father is clearly a sore spot. How much does she know about him? And how much as she tried to ignore over the years, just because the reality would have been too much for her to handle...?

"You really don't know," I murmur, leaning towards her slightly. All the energy that coursed through my body the moment I realized she had run seems to have turned to something else now—something that's stirred by her presence before me, her eyes burning into mine.

"Don't know what?" she snaps back.

I can hear the doubt in her voice now. She is second-guessing herself, though she

doesn't want me to know. Her eyes are wide, not moving from mine, her lips pressed together as she tries to disguise everything that is going on inside her head.

"You tell me," I add, lowering my head slightly so that we are barely more than a few inches apart. "You think you know your father? Tell me what kind of man you think he is."

She doesn't reply. Her eyes slide from mine, but I reach out, catching her chin in my hand and drawing her gaze back to meet mine.

The anger is dissipating into something else now, something that seems to consume my whole body.

Being alone with her in this place, the scent of her skin filling my senses, her wide blue eyes gazing back at me as though she can barely believe that I am real, it's lighting something dangerous in me, something I know I should be able to control.

"You wouldn't believe me, even if I told you."

"So, tell me," I press her, cocking an eyebrow. "Try me, Cara."

She inhales sharply. I can tell she wants to lay this out on the line right now, and I want to hear just how much she knows, just how much she is ready to share.

She has hinted towards her father's work before, but there has to be more that she's not telling me, more that she's trying to contain right now, and I'm determined to shake it loose.

"Because from where I'm standing," I continue, "he tried to marry you off to that Mario bastard to serve his business. Selling off his baby girl to make a connection. How is that right?"

Her face pales. It seems that she forgot she told me her marriage to Mario was nothing more than a facade, something she had agreed to in order to help the business, not because she actually cared for him.

"You don't understand what it's like for women in this world?—"

"I don't?" I reply, keeping my voice steady.

We are standing just an inch apart now, and I am distinctly aware of how near we are to one another, how easy it would be to shut her mouth with a kiss.

I've been locked up in here with her for so long now, and the tension is getting the better of me.

How am I meant to keep my shit under wraps when she's glaring at me like that, eyes alive with a passion I've never seen in her before. ..

"No, you don't," she mutters. "You don't know what we have to give up. The things we have to do..."

"And what exactly was your father going to make you give up, hmm?" I press. "You can't tell me that Mario wouldn't have expected everything from you. Your mind, your body..."

She draws in another breath. I can tell she wants to fight me on this, but how can she? She knows as well as I do that these marriages are meant to produce offspring, and if they don't, they attract the kind of gossip that a man like Mario would never want to happen.

"I— that part was meant to be up to me," she protests, but her cheeks have flushed, her eyes widening, like the mere thought of it is enough to scare her.



"Look at you," I murmur, my eyes grazing up and down her body. "You really think he would have been able to keep his hands off of you, Cara?"

"What do you mean?" she whispers, and I chuckle slightly. My hand grazes against hers for a moment, and she doesn't pull back.

"I mean, you're a gorgeous woman," I tell her, letting my gaze rest on her for a long moment. "And any man in the world would kill to get you alone."

She bites her lip. Her eyes flick down my own body, considering the statement.

"And does that include you?"

It's a challenge—a daring statement meant to stir up more emotion in me than I can handle. If I'm smart, I'll shut it down before it can go any further. But as we stand there facing one another, I'm not sure if I have any good sense left in my system.

Because all I can think about right now is kissing her.

My hand skims up her arm, testing. I don't want her to do this because she feels she has no choice. I want her to want me. The way she's looking at me, I'm almost certain she does, but I'm not willing to make the first move. If she needs this, she has to show me.

"Do you really need me to answer that?" I murmur.

And, all at once, her gaze softens, and she moves herself into me, planting her lips on mine.

Cara

As soon as our mouths come together, it's like the tension that has been burning between us all this time boils over in an instant.

I don't know what I am doing. I don't know if this is a good idea or not. But I know that the way he's looking at me, I can't pretend that I don't want more. And now that I've tried to run, there is no more hiding from him. No more pretending.

His tongue snakes past my lips with a hungry eagerness, his hands sliding to my waist and pulling me roughly against him.

He spins me around, pinning me against the kitchen counter, and I can feel the muscular pressure of his chest against mine.

My breath stutters in my throat as I try to make sense of it, but I can't.

All I can think of is giving myself to him, giving myself to him in ways I have never given myself to anyone before.

"Fuck," he growls against my mouth, his teeth catching on my bottom lip as he deepens the kiss.

I have never kissed anyone like this before in my life. The way his hands are moving all over me, the way his lips sink into mine, the way his tongue explores my mouth, it's as though he is starving for me, as though this is what he has been waiting for all along.

My chest is heaving against his, desire and confusion and lust coursing through me in a mess I can't even begin to control, and he picks me up off the ground, lifting me onto the counter behind him and moving between my legs so he can press himself against me.

I draw in a sharp breath when I feel the hardness of his length nestled against the inside of my thigh.

I have never felt a man want me like this, and it's shocking in its newness.

But just as much as that, it's a thrill.

I need this. I need him. I don't know how far I will take this, how far I can even go without exposing my complete lack of experience, but as long as he is willing to kiss me like this, I will gift him anything he wants in return.

He slides his hand up the nape of my neck and into my hair, twisting my head to the side slightly so he can kiss greedily down the side of my neck.

For the briefest moment, his teeth catch against my throat, and I am distinctly aware of how dangerous this is.

This man kidnapped, for God's sake, and here I am making out with him as though my life depends on it.

His hands move to my hips, and he slips his fingers beneath the waistband of my sweatpants to pull them down.

I am wearing nothing underneath, and the sudden shock of being exposed like this draws another gasp from between my lips.

He kisses me again, but this time, I can feel him grinning against my mouth, as though he is enjoying every one of my responses.

Slowly, he moves one hand between my legs as he kisses me, cupping his fingers over my wet sex for a moment, just holding them there, not quite touching me, hovering an inch or two from my folds as though waiting for me to plead with him for more.

"You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this," he murmurs as he draws back for a moment, brushing his nose against mine and gazing into my eyes.

I can feel a warmth building between my legs, a warmth that I know he caused, and I squirm to the edge of the counter, trying to press his hand against my most intimate spot at last.. .

But then, he pulls back, his hand resting on my bare thigh once more. I let out a whimper of desperation, the desire getting the best of me. I need something to relieve it, something to turn these urges into pleasure.

And then, he sinks to his knees before me, spreading my legs and moving between them. He glances up at me, and there's a playful glint to his eye, a smirk on his face, as he watches my jaw drop.

"I need to taste you," he tells me, as he brushes his nose along the inside of my thigh.

I groan, gripping each side of the counter next to me, just doing my best to keep myself from dissolving into him.

I thought that a moment like this would be nerve-wracking, that I would be too self-conscious of everything to give myself over to a man without second-guessing it.

But, as he slowly kisses along the inside of my thigh and towards the arousal between my legs, all I can do is focus on the tingling sensations pulsing between my legs, and starting to build towards a release I know only he can give me.

Finally, he lands at my entrance, pausing for a moment and pulling back to admire the sight of me glistening before him. He allows an appreciative groan to slip past his lips, and then looks up at me once more.

"You are so fucking perfect," he murmurs, his voice throaty with desire.

I have never had a man talk to me like that, the filth of his words sending another shudder of desire through my system, and I whimper and try to inch my hips closer to him, even though I am aware that any more movement will send me toppling off the edge of this counter.

Finally, and with his eyes pinned to mine, he leans forward and plants his mouth against me. The sensation is intense, so intense it feels as though everything else has fallen away, leaving room for nothing but the passion of his tongue as it swirls around my most sensitive places.

I tip my head back as the pleasure begins to rush through me.

It's clear that this is far from the first time he has done something like this, but I try not to linger on all the other women he might have pleased in this way.

All that matters now is that he is intent on making me feel satisfied.

As he slowly works his tongue in circles around my clit, I can tell that it is not going to be long until I get there.

I can't take my eyes off of him. There is something so alien about the sight of him

between my thighs as he seals his lips around my clit and draws it into his mouth.

He applies the softest sucking pressure, but it sends shockwaves throbbing through my body.

A sharp gasp snatches past my lips, and before I can stop myself, I reach down to push my hands into his hair, holding him in place, letting him know what he is doing is all I need.

He slips his hands around me, pushing me on to him even further, like he wants to gorge himself on the taste of me, like he wants nothing more than to get lost with me in this moment.

He lets out a groan, the vibrations pulsing through me in an almost excruciating rush of pleasure.

I am already growing close, my thighs beginning to clamp on either side of his head, demanding more, needing more. ..

And then, it hits me. The orgasm, when it tears through my body, is almost more than I can take, the pleasure sending my head spinning helplessly out of control.

I cry out, glad for the first time that we are somewhere so distant from the rest of the world, because I know I would not have been able to contain myself, no matter how hard I tried.

My hips are rocking back against his mouth, and he doesn't move his tongue for a moment, continuing the teasing assault on my clit until I can't take a moment more. Gasping for air, I push him back, as my pussy aches with oversensitivity for a moment, and he rises to his feet.

He kisses me again, seemingly without so much as a second thought, and I can taste my own wetness smeared all over his face.

It's a shocking sensation, but one that I am utterly obsessed with, the reminder of where he's just been, of how much he wants me, how much he wants this.

He moves against me once more, and I can feel the hardness of his cock pressing into me, a promise of how much more he wants, how much more he is willing to take.

"Fuck," he growls against my mouth, as his hand slips down to his cock. He unzips his pants quickly and pulls himself into his hand, and I steal a glance at his erection.

The sight of it twists my stomach. He is big. And I have never been with anyone before, and I am suddenly so distinctly aware of that fact, I don't know what to do with it. He pauses as soon as he sees the look on my face, his brow furrowing.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I breathe, and I interlace my fingers around the back of his neck.

I don't want this to stop.

A million thoughts are rushing through my head right now.

There's physical desire, yes, but there's something more than that, too.

The thought that, if I give myself to him like this, then I will have ruined myself for other men.

I will have made it impossible for my father to marry me off to Mario, because I will already be tainted by an enemy of his.

And I know that's not exactly the best reason to lose your virginity, but the man before me is willing and gorgeous and. ..

And then, he steps back from me. He zips his pants up against, pushing my hands away, even as I try to reach for him.

"What are you doing?" I ask him, my voice sounding more pleading than I intended it to. He shakes his head.

"You've never done this before, have you?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it fucking matters!"

The sharpness in his tone catches me off guard. I can tell that he's doing everything he can to control himself, that he wants this as badly as I do, but he is not willing to be the one to take my virginity. Not like this.

"I want this," I plead with him. "I— I want you. Please, I?—"

"No," he replies, shaking his head, drawing his gaze away from me. "I can't do this. I should never have let it get this far in the first place. Fuck, Cara..."

"Look at me," I breathe to him, and I try to reach out and catch his face again, but before I can so much as make contact with him, he has pulled back from me, putting distance between us as though he can't stand the thought of what he's just done.

"No," he mutters, his voice hollow. "I shouldn't have done this. I shouldn't have done any of this. Shit..."



He paces, his eyes pinned to the floor. I can still see a smear of my wetness across his lips, and the reminder of where he has just been is almost painful.

I want him back here; I want him wanting me the way he did before.

I need to feel that desire coming off of him in waves.

I need all of it, more than I can put into words.

But he won't give it to me. This man might have kidnapped me, might have hunted me through the woods like prey, but he will not take my virginity, not under these circumstances.

Good to know that he has some kind of rules for himself.

I just wish they didn't apply here, now, when all I want is to feel him inside me.

I can still remember, all too well, the terror of knowing that I was going to have to give myself to Mario, and how far removed this is from that.

It might be a mess, but I need him, and the thought of him running from me before we get a chance twists deep into my guts.

I catch his hand and pull him against me once more, hooking my legs around him, trying to kiss him once more.

"Please, I want to do this with you," I beg him. "I don't want my first time to be with someone like Mario, I?—"

"And I don't want to fuck you just because I'm the lesser of two evils," he growls at me, pulling back at once. "That's not how this works. You understand?"

There is something close to an answer in his voice.

I'm not sure if he is really mad at me, or at himself, or some combination of the two, but the fire of his emotion is so intense that it silences me at once.

I watch as he steps back from me, still hardly able to bring himself to look at me, as though the very thought of it is enough to drive him to something he knows he shouldn't want.

And, with that, he turns away and stalks towards his room, leaving me there on the kitchen counter.

I hitch up my sweatpants and stare at the spot where he was just standing, wondering how I have gone from such pleasure to such pain in such a short amount of time.

Just a few minutes ago, he had his tongue between my legs, pushing me to the point of no return in a way nobody ever has before, and now, he has left me, turned his back on me as though my virginity has painted me as damaged goods.

I make my way back to my room. I know I should try to run once more, but I can't even think about facing the outside world right now.

And besides, the thought of putting that much distance between us, when all I really want is his closeness, is too impossibly painful to contend with.

I pull the bedroom door shut behind me, close my eyes, and crash down onto the bed, letting out a breath I didn't even realize I was holding.

This couldn't possibly get any more complicated...

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:43 am*

Max

I pause outside her room before I head inside, gathering myself as best I can.

Come on, Max. You can do this. No woman has ever gotten under your skin like this before. You're not going to let her start now.

"Max, is that you?"

Cara's voice drifts out from inside the bedroom, putting cold water on whatever attempt I might have been making to control myself.

I grit my teeth, and push open the door all the way, stepping inside with breakfast for her.

It's not much—toast, eggs, orange juice—but it's the best I can do while I'm waiting for my father to send out one of his men with supplies.

"Morning," she says, like we didn't cross almost every line three nights ago. Like she doesn't still taste sweet on my tongue. I grunt and set the tray down like a soldier delivering rations—not breakfast in bed.

As though a second has gone by without me thinking of it since.

"You don't want to join me for breakfast?" she asks, and I shoot a look at her.

"This isn't room service with a side of friendly conversation, Cara."

"I know," she replies, lifting her chin to look at me. "But I'm getting bored in here all alone. Least you can do is give me some company."

There is something in her words that tells me this is a challenge, but it's not one I'm entirely sure I'm ready for, at least not yet.

I can still remember, with crystal clarity, how good her pussy tasted, the pulsations of her clit beneath my tongue, and being this close to her is flooding my memory with the sensory input that nearly drove me to make a choice I knew I would never have been able to come back from.

I go to make a move for the door, but, before I can, her hand shoots out to catch my arm.

I glance over at her, and I can see some genuine pain in her eyes.

She's not just trying to get me alone, though that is part of it.

She actually wants someone with her, and I don't know if I have it in me to turn my back on her right now.

"Please, Max," she whispers. "I— I don't like being alone."

I tug my arm from her grip, opting to lean against the doorframe while she eats her breakfast. The distance between us should grant me some safety from the power of her eyes on mine, the smell of her skin filling my senses, at least for a little while.

She begins to pick at her food, her delicate fingers tearing off a few pieces of toast before she pops them into her mouth.

"I thought you'd enjoy your own company," I remark without thinking. She stares at

me for a moment, looking surprised.

"Why?"

I pause for a moment. I don't know if I should tell her just how much of her life I am aware of.

How many details I've learned in the process of trying to bring her father down.

But I've seen how few people come and go from that mansion he calls home, and I know she doesn't have a lot of friends visiting, to say the least.

I shrug.

"Seems like your father kept most people out of your life, where he could."

She picks at a loose thread on the covers for a moment.

"Yeah, well, maybe that's why I don't like being alone," she replies. "Too much time with my own thoughts. Doesn't do anyone any good."

I manage a small snort.

"Yeah, I'm with you on that one," I reply.

Her face brightens as soon as she hears me say that.

I've been doing my level best to put as much distance between us as possible the last few days, ever since my slip-up, but she has been jumping on every chance she gets to try and connect with me.

Part of me feels bad for even letting her get her hopes up.

"You spend a lot of time alone?"

"No."

"Family? Friends?"

"Family, mostly," I reply, finally giving up on trying to keep her at arm's length. It's clear that she's not going to stop peppering me with questions at any chance she gets, and it's easier to just give her something than it is to brush her off.

"You have siblings, right?"

"Yeah. I see more of my youngest sister, though."

"God, I always wished I had siblings," she sighs, as she reaches for her orange juice. "I always thought life would be easier to handle if I had siblings. Especially a brother."

"Why a brother?"

"Because..." She trails off for a moment, like she's not entirely sure she wants to tell me what's actually on her mind. But then, seeming to think better of playing mysterious, she forces herself to continue.

"Because then I know that my father would have someone to hand the business down to," she admits. "With it just being me, and with my mom not being with us anymore, I know... I know it's not what he had imagined."

The way she says it, I can tell that this has hung over her head for a long time.

She might not want to admit it, maybe not even to herself, but there's clearly some weight that sits on her shoulders as she tries to contend with everything she is not.

I almost want to go over to her and comfort her, but I know that would be risky.

Any time I come close to her, I can feel the heat building between us again, the tension, and I know that I can't let that get the better of me.

"I guess that's why he was going to marry me to that man," she remarks, managing a small smile. "Some way to make use of the fact I came out female, at least."

That's all he thought she was good for? It shouldn't come as a surprise, all things considered.

I know what he does to women, how he uses them, how easy it is for him to turn them into husks of their former selves with no humanity to fall back on.

But his own daughter... he really must hold women in serious contempt if this is what he's willing to do to her.

Everything Veronica said about him is right.

"Would you have gone through with it?" I ask her. "If it hadn't been for...?"

She glances up at me, a slight smile quirking up the corners of her lips.

"If it hadn't been for you busting in and kidnapping me?" she asks. To my surprise, her voice is light, not accusatory, even if she has every right to be. I nod.

"I don't know," she admits. "I mean, I'm sure I would have. I don't think Dad would have given me much of a choice, and he's the kind of man... when he's angry, you

don't want him to aim it at you, I'll just say that."

"He would have forced you?"

She shrugs.

"He wouldn't have had to. He knows that."

My heart pangs, hearing her speak about him like that. She's already so resigned to her fate, to her place as his pawn, that she doesn't even seem to realize there's more out there for her. I know it's not my job to introduce her to all of it, but there is a part of me that longs to.

"Any other family at the wedding?" I ask her, changing the subject. I should use this to get as much information out of her as I can. Though, truth be told, I am just more interested in listening to what she has to say. She shakes her head again.

"No," she replies. "Most of our family... well, they're either dead, or they don't want anything to do with my father. I guess because of his work."

"They're not part of the game?"

"No, a lot of them are," she replies, furrowing her brow.

"Honestly, that always confused me. He has cousins who are involved in... you know, illegal stuff. That's how he got into all of this in the first place.

And yet, these last few years, they have all cut him off.

I never see them anymore. I guess they were jealous of all the success or something.  
.."



I grit my teeth. She doesn't know. She really, really doesn't know.

Because what her father is doing is a hard line for a whole lot of people in this business, even people you might assume could never lay down such a line in the first place.

Sex trafficking, selling people's bodies, it was beyond what we could live with.

Which is why there is so much money in it, why her father has succeeded in building such a powerful and influential empire off the back of it.

He's the only person willing to stoop to those lows to get what he wants, the only bastard bad enough to force people to act in such a way, and even his own family have cut him off now.

At least, the ones who know about it.

"Max?"

She seems to have noticed my silence. I blink and clear my throat. It's not my job to tell her the truth about her father. It's my job to keep her here, under wraps, and make sure she doesn't slip through our fingers. We need her.

Even if there is a part of me that longs for nothing more than to tell her the truth. I'm not sure if it's a desire that springs from wanting to hurt her, or wanting to free her from the feeling that she has to give that bastard of a father of hers any respect at all.

"What's wrong?" she presses.

"Nothing," I shoot back swiftly. I straighten up, and nod to the food on the tray in front of her. "Eat. You need to look after yourself."

She gazes up at me for a moment, her eyes heavy-lidded.

"And there I was thinking you wanted to look after me," she shoots back, a small glint flashing in her eyes.

Fuck, there's something about the way she looks at me sometimes that makes it hard for me to think straight, as though every sensible thought in my mind is threatening to give out from underneath me at any moment.

"I'm just keeping you alive," I remind her sharply, my voice laced with a little more anger than I intended.

It's not anger aimed at her. It's anger aimed at me for not being able to control myself when it comes to having her this close to me. I'm a grown-ass fucking man, and I should be able to handle myself around a pretty girl, even around a pretty girl who's looking at me the way she is right now.

But I can't. I can feel that want in me all over again.

And before I can let it get the better of me, I turn my back and stalk out of the bedroom towards the bathroom, making sure to lock the door before I head into a shower.

I don't want her making a break for it again, not after what happened last time.

I know I need to keep a closer eye on her than this if I am going to make sure of it.

I start running the shower, and turn the water down to as cold as I can handle it. I need a short, sharp shock to my system right now, something to blast me out of this dangerous headspace that I find myself in. Because I want her—fuck, I want her. And I know she wants me.

I step under the cold water and tip my head back, letting it course over my body and trying to dampen the rush of fiery desire that threatens to get the better of me, even in that moment.

I have wanted women I couldn't have before, of course, but this is different because I know that she wants me, she has made that part pretty damn clear.

So, holding myself back feels like a trial I am putting myself through for no reason, and I am not sure how much longer I can handle keeping my distance like this.

I'll call up some of my father's men, get them down here, fill this place with some other people to try and push away the feelings that are coursing through me right now.

Soon enough, this will be over, and we will have what we wanted from her kidnapping.

Even if, right now, it's hard to believe that I will ever be free of this need.

Closing my eyes, I try to focus on the sensation of the chilly water flooding my body, and not the memory of those half-lidded eyes she looked up at me from under back in her bedroom.

Cara

I watch him from the shadows—broad shoulders hunched in front of the fire, scotch in one hand, and who knows how many secrets buried deep within him.

There's something magnetic about his silence. Like he's wrestling demons... and barely winning.

I move slightly, and the floorboard creaks below me. His head snaps around at once, and I draw in a sharp breath when I feel his gaze settle on my body once more.

"What are you doing?" he demands, rising to his feet. "I said you could come out of your room in the evenings, not that you could hang around watching me while my back is turned."

"I'm sorry," I blurt out. "The fire just looked really cozy, and I— I wanted to join you. I just didn't know how to ask."

His eyes flick to mine for a moment and then he lets out a sigh and gestures for me to take the seat opposite him.

"Fine," he mutters. I move to the seat, brushing past him, drinking in the scent of him for a moment before I tuck my legs up and under me on the chair. The warmth of the fire crackles beside us, filling the room with the scent of burning wood; it's almost peaceful, or, I guess, it could be, if it weren't for the circumstances.

He has been allowing me a little more freedom. Perhaps he's hoping that it will keep

me from running again, if I am not hidden in that room twenty-four-seven. But what he doesn't know is that this little taste of freedom that I have gotten, I need more—and, most of all, I need him.

I watch him for a moment, hands clasped on my lap.

The fire reflects on the planes of his face, casting shadows beneath his strong jaw and his sharp cheekbones.

He raises the glass to his lips and takes a sip, and I'm reminded, all too clearly, of how good it felt when his mouth was put to work between my legs.

I want to feel his lips on me again, more than anything.

I want to feel him touching me, his hands all over me, taking me, and making me belong to him.

"What even is this place?" I ask as I gesture around the cabin, breaking the silence between us. He looks over at me.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why do you have access to this cabin in the middle of nowhere?"

"It's a safe house."

I almost laugh.

"Well, I don't think it's very safe," I shoot back. "Or much of a house, for that matter."

The corners of his lips twist up into a smile, for just a moment. He doesn't want to admit it, but that thought amuses him.

"Just somewhere we keep to bring people who need to lay low."

"You get a lot of that, in your line of work?"

"More than you'd think."

I twist a strand of hair around one finger, trying to think of some way to keep this conversation going.

I need more from him. I need to be with him, in all the ways I have never been with anyone before.

In the time since our brief sexual encounter, my mind has been filled with him, and I know that I need to take advantage of his presence here before I am returned to my father once more.

Because my virginity is one of the few things that I have to offer—but one that I can get rid of at any time, if I just find the right guy.

I know that it's one of the things my father has made a big deal of to Mario.

I overheard them talking about it a few times, how sweet I am, how innocent, and I'm sure that Mario wants to be the one to take that from me.

But I have other plans. And they are sitting right in front of me with a scotch in hand right now.

"Do you come here a lot?" I press. "Just to get some space, I mean..."

He shakes his head.

"I don't need space. Not from my family."

He speaks with a certainty that catches me by surprise, to hear someone who obviously cares so deeply about their family surprises me. I've never heard my father talk that way about me, and I'm not sure I would have been able to muster the same enthusiasm when it came to him, either.

"What about women?" I remark, lightening my tone. "You ever come here to get away from a one-night-stand gone wrong, or something?"

He smirks slightly. This seems to have gotten under his skin.

Does he have some kind of reputation with women, or something?

I know so little about this man, so little about the person he is outside of this place, that the thought of him with someone else briefly sends a startle of jealousy through my system.

Which is crazy, because we have hardly done anything, and yet. ..

"Why are you so interested in what I get up to with other women?" he asks me, his voice steady, his tone pointed.

He can tell what is going through my head, even as I try my best to cover it up. Suddenly, his gaze feels almost exposing, like he is looking straight through me, deep into my head.

"I'm not," I shoot back, a little too quickly. "Just trying to make conversation. I told you, I don't like being on my own, especially not after?—"

I stop myself. The unspoken words hang between us. He knows as well as I do what I am referring to, but I press my lips together. I am not going to be the one to come out and say it, not when he's the one who stopped us.

"After what?" he asks, cocking an eyebrow.

"You know."

"Act like I don't. Tell me."

I fire an angry look at him.

"You're really going to play it like this?" I demand, exasperated. "I mean, we did all that, and then you... and then you pulled back when you found out I had never done it before."

"Because I'm not taking your virginity under these circumstances."

"Why not?" I ask him. "I want it. And you want it. I could tell by the?—"

"Cara," he cuts me off. "I'm not discussing this with you. I told you, I'm not going to... be with you like that."

I rise to my feet. I don't know what I am doing, but I can feel my head spinning, the thrum of my heart pushing me forward. I don't want to give up on this, not so easily, I don't want to lose my chance to have him.

When all this is over, I will never have a chance to see him again, and that thought twists deep in me. Suddenly, being apart from him feels impossible, despite the fact I have lived my entire life up until this point without knowing that he exists.



"I asked you, why," I remind him. "And I deserve an answer. Don't you think?"

He glowers up at me for a moment, but, even in the midst of all of that, I can see something, something he is trying his best to hide. He wants me. He needs me. And, no matter what he says, he can't pretend otherwise.

"You really want the answer?" he asks me, as he rises to his feet, staring down at me as he places his glass aside.

I nod, a sudden rush of fear heating my chest, but I push it aside.

I deserve to know why he is so unwilling to do what I want.

I know that he might have kidnapped me, that this hardly started in any way that people would think was safe or appropriate, but that doesn't mean I am willing to let it slip through my fingers.

Sometimes, the most unconventional attractions are the best ones.

"Because you have no idea what's going on here. Not really. And I'm not going to sleep with someone who doesn't have the full picture."

"So tell me," I plead with him. "Tell me what's going on. I want to know. I really do. I can't just?—"

"You don't," he growls. "Trust me, you don't."

He goes to sit back down again, but before he can, I grab his hand, forcing his attention on me once more.

"Please, just listen to me," I beg him. "My father... my whole life, I haven't been part

of things. I have been on the outskirts of his world, but he has never let me any closer than that. He never would, not as long as I'm his daughter. I can't stand feeling like I don't have a say in any of this, in the life that I have.

I need to know what you know. I need to.

I want to be able to make this choice to be with you, but you're hiding and I can't do it anymore. .."

The words spill from me in a rush I can barely control, and I can see something shifting as he stares at me, his hand still wrapped around mine.

His fingers interlink with my own, and my breath hitches in my throat.

Even the slightest touch from him feels electric, every hair on the back of my neck standing on end.

I want him. God, I want him. I have never wanted anyone the way I want him in this moment, and I know that I am willing to listen to whatever he has to say to explain his reluctance.

Because I doubt it will matter enough for me to pull back, anyway.

"You really want to know?"

His words are careful, almost calculating. I can tell that he doesn't want to tell me what's really going on here, either because it makes him look that bad, or because he thinks it will hurt me that deeply. I have no idea which it is, which to expect, but I nod.

"Yes," I whisper. "Yes, I really want to know."

He draws his gaze away from me a moment, the flames flickering against his handsome face. I can see a furrow in his brows and tension in his jaw, as though he is trying to think of any way he can get out of this.

"Your father," he murmurs, finally, turning his attention back to me. "Your father is involved in stuff that's way darker than anything the rest of your family has ever been in."

My heart flips.

"Darker like how?" I demand. My voice is shaking slightly, and I pray that he doesn't notice it, though I doubt that I am going to get that lucky. He pushes a hand through his hair.

"Darker like... like he buys and sells people. Women. Uses them."

I frown. This still isn't making sense to me.

"I don't get it..."

He grits his teeth slightly.

"For sex," he snarls out, at last. "He buys and sells people for sex."

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:43 am*

My heart stops. The words just sit there between us for a moment, and I stare back at him, waiting for him to admit this is all a joke, waiting for him to grin and tell me that this is nothing more than his twisted attempt at lightening the mood.

But he doesn't. He just stares back at me, waiting for me to respond, as though there is anything I can say to an accusation like that.

I whip my hand back from him.

"What are you talking about?" I fire back. "Selling people? For sex? You're crazy."

"I'm not," he mutters. "I wish I was, but I'm not. My family has been keeping watch on him for a long time. A few of the girls he forced to work for him, they got out and came to us. As soon as my father found out what he had been doing, he vowed to put a stop to it. He doesn't take kindly to men like that, men who use and abuse other people's bodies. .."

My head is spinning, the corners of my eyes fluttering with clouds.

I can't make sense of this. I can't believe this, not a word that is coming out of his mouth.

My father might be into some dark things, sure, but sex trafficking.

.. that's insane. He would never—there is no way that he would have been able to do something like that without me knowing about it.

"You're lying," I spit at him, as I take a step back from him, shaking my head. "You really think he's involved in that? That he would do that?"

"Yes, Cara," he replies, his eyes narrowing as they lock on to mine. "You really think we would have done all of this if it wasn't something serious? If we didn't have any choice but to go through with it? We can't just stand aside and let a monster like that?—"

"Don't call my father a monster!" I exclaim. I'm not even sure why I'm defending him. It's not like he's exactly been on my side, but he is still my dad. I can't help but wonder if Max sees some part of him in me, sees that same evil that he so clearly wants to destroy.

"If he doesn't want to be called a monster, he shouldn't act like one," he contests hotly. "I know what he's done. And I know he's tried to keep you out of that part of his life, but you must be able to see now what he's capable of, everything that he's?—"

"You're talking about my father!" I blurt out, and my voice cracks, giving away the intensity of my emotion before I can stop it.

I realize tears have sprung to my eyes, and I whip my hands up, wiping them away before he can see them.

I am not going to let him see me like this.

I refuse to allow him to know that he's managed to get under my skin in such a way.

I want to scream, to batter my fists against his chest, but I know that it wouldn't change anything. ..

"You really don't believe me?" he demands, lifting his chin and staring down at me. "Even after he was willing to hand you over to Mario in marriage? You can't tell me you wanted that..."

I bite my lip hard. I wish there was some way that I could counter him, but there isn't.

Because he's right. My father was willing to basically sell me off to the highest bidder.

And while I might have done it in a beautiful dress, I would still have been expected to sleep with him, there's no getting around that part.

But that doesn't mean this is some long-running scheme of his to exploit women and God knows who else. I barely know Max. I am not going to let him speak to me like this, I am not going to just roll over and trust every word that comes out of his mouth.

"You're the one who took me," I shoot back at him. "You really expect me to believe you? To trust what you say about my family?"

"And you're the one who asked about him," he reminds me. He is speaking almost gently, and there's something about that which pisses me off even more—hearing him talk to me like that, as though he doesn't want me upset, as though he doesn't want to hurt me, when he has just laid out that information in front of me.

"I'm not going to just... just believe your lies," I tell him, but my voice cracks into a sob even as I speak. I hate this. I hate feeling so emotional. I came here with the intention of giving myself to him, and now, I am more confused than ever, more confused than I know what to do with. Is he telling the truth? If he's not, why would he try to spin this kind of lie to me?

None of it makes sense. None of it. I feel like I might fall apart on the spot.

I don't know where to start, what to say, how to take this.

"Cara—"

He reaches for me, but I push him away. Only a few minutes ago, I would have done anything to feel his touch on me, but now, it's the last thing I want.

"Don't," I warn him, but it comes out as a whisper rather than the certainty I have been trying to muster.

There is still a part of me, however foolish, that wants to sink into his arms and let him hold me as I try to make sense of this, but I can't.

I can't let him close to me, not knowing what he believes, not knowing that he sees me in such a light.

Does he think that I am a part of this? He speaks like he doesn't, but I can't be sure of it.

I back away from him, the heat from the fire suddenly feeling suffocating. I can't stand to be in here another second. I can't stand the way he is looking at me right now, almost as though he is sorry for what he has said.

I am going to find a way to make him sorry. I can't just let an accusation like that slide. I need him to pay.

I turn my back and stalk my way towards my room once more. The freedom that he has been giving me, I don't want it, not if it comes with those sick beliefs. I can hear him calling after me, trying to get me to come back, but I pay no attention to him. He doesn't deserve anything from me.

I slam the door loudly behind me. I know it's immature, but I can't help it. I lean back against the door, and, as soon as I am alone, the tears really begin to flow down my cheeks, the weight of this pressing down on me, crushing me.

I sink down onto the floor and put my head in my hands. I can't believe I even thought about being with him, not knowing what I know now. I can never trust him, not if he is going to spin such lies to me, to try and turn me against my father.

If they are lies at all...

I push that thought aside. I know my father might have been involved in some illegal things, but it's nothing like that. He never would. He's ruthless. He gets what he wants. But that doesn't mean he's evil. That doesn't mean that my family is evil.

I am distantly aware of the tears running down my face. Mercifully, Max seems to have realized that I need my space right now, and he has given up on trying to speak to me—not that I would have had anything to say to him anyway. Not after that.

I don't know where all of this leaves me.

I'm sure that my father is still on the way, still trying to break me out of here.

But is he doing it because he wants me back, or is he doing it because he's terrified that I might find something out about him that he won't be able to hide from me any longer?

My head a mess, I close my eyes and pray that something will come along to make sense of all of this. I can't tell if Max is lying to me, trying to turn me against my family, or if he is speaking the truth.

But I have the horrible feeling that, one way or another, I will know before my time



here is up.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:43 am*

Max

"How far out are they now?"

"A half-hour," Maya replies, her voice taut. "You sure this is a good idea?"

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. She's got every reason to be worried.

Sending someone down to the cabin could open us up to the people who have been following us, and I am distinctly aware of that.

But we can't get by much longer on what we have here, and I need to stock up our supplies and touch base.

And, more than that, I need to get someone else in this place to cut the tension that has been filling it like heavy smoke since the revelation a few days before.

When I told Cara about her father, what his business actually is and the people it involves, I could tell that I had made a mistake.

She doesn't believe me, refuses to. I've brought food for her every day since, and she has snatched the plate out of my hand without another word, hardly so much as making eye contact with me.

"Yeah, I'm sure," I reply.

"What's going on?"

Maya's blunt tone cuts through the bullshit in my mind. She might be the youngest of the three of us siblings, but she's the most intuitive, always picking up on whatever is going on inside my head.

"Nothing."

"Yes, there is," she shoots back. "Tell me. Or I'll come there myself and find out."

I smirk slightly. I wouldn't put it past her. Maya's a fiery girl, and she's willing to say exactly what's on her mind.

"It's fine," I reply. "Just been out here by myself for too long. Looking forward to seeing Max and Veronica, that's all."

"Yeah, I don't know how long I would be able to put up with that princess," Maya sighs, and I can almost picture the way she would toss her hair over her shoulder when she says it. She might not like to admit it, but I get the feeling she's more similar to Cara than she'd like to admit.

"I'll speak with you soon," I promise her. "I don't want to stay on the line too long."

"Good call," she replies. "You need anything, you know where to find us, right?"

"Yeah. Speak later, Maya."

"Speak soon."

She hangs up the phone, and I am suddenly cast into silence, standing there in the kitchen.

I shoot a look towards Cara's door, and I'm not sure whether I'm willing her to come

out or stay right there.

I'm sure that she's got a whole lot she'd like to say to me, but she has been keeping it under wraps since her outburst a few days before.

She doesn't believe me. Which shouldn't come as a surprise. How could she? This is her father I'm speaking about, and no matter what he's put her through, their bond is still there.

I wouldn't take something like this about my father without some kind of protest, and no matter how much evidence we have pointing to being right, she's not going to just roll over and take it.

I glance towards her door; she has been hiding in there for what feels like forever now, and I doubt that she's going to try to come out and show her face again anytime soon.

She thinks I'm some kind of liar, spinning stories to try and make her father look like a horrible person.

The truth is, there's nothing I could do to make him seem any worse than he already is.

It's just a matter of whether or not she believes me, and I know she doesn't.

Veronica being here might change things.

There's a reason I have specifically requested Veronica to be the one to drop off supplies.

Of everyone who works with my father, she is the one who has seen the gritty hell

that Cara's father puts people through.

Veronica might have been able to escape him, but the same couldn't be said for so many of the other people who were trapped in the same situation.

It kills me to know that there are dozens still out there who never got a chance to see the outside world, to know that there were people out there who would care for them if given the chance.

I push a hand through my hair, letting out a sigh, and head to the shower. My brain is a scrambled mess right now, so stuffed full of questions and doubts I hardly know where to start.

My phone buzzes again, and I glance down at it. It's my father's number, much to my surprise. Frowning, I grab for it, lifting it to my ear and trying to figure out what is going on.

"Everything okay?"

He sighs, that rush of static straight into my ear.

"I just got off a call with your sister. She said there was something going on with you."

I rub a hand over my face. I should have known that Maya would mention something. She thinks she's helping me, helping keep the mission on track, but she's just creating more drama where there doesn't need to be any.

"There's nothing going on, Dad. I'm fine."

I can tell that he doesn't believe me—the long silence says more than words. It's not

that he doesn't trust me, I know he does, but rather that he knows as well as I do how quickly all of this can go to shit if I'm not being careful. I can't afford to be distracted.

"What's going on with her? The Leone girl?"

"Cara?"

I can practically hear the flinch down the line.

In all this time, he has referred to her as the Leone girl— nothing more than part of our plan, a way to pull all of this together.

If he calls her by her name, I suppose, he'll have to acknowledge that he's ripped someone away from their real life—that he isn't so different in this way from the man we are trying to take down.

It's not a flattering comparison, and he knows it.

"Yeah, Cara."

"She's fine."

"Fine, fine, fine," he mutters. "That's all you can say. I know when you're keeping something from me. I know?—"

"Dad, you're paranoid," I shoot back. "You know how Maya gets. Starts seeing ghosts where there aren't any."

He pauses.

"You're right," he concedes, though I can tell he doesn't like admitting it. "But she's alright? Nothing going on with her? She hasn't been giving you too much trouble?"

I hesitate for a moment before I respond.

I could tell him, of course, about the escape attempt she tried to pull on me the other day.

But there's no point. All it's going to do is stress him the fuck out, and he's going to freak and think that I can't handle this.

But I can. I will. Nothing is going to stop me.

"No trouble," I reply, mustering as much certainty as I can. "She's just stayed in her room. I've hardly talked to her."

Another beat of silence. He is analyzing my words right now, trying to figure out if I might be trying to hide something from him. I realize, all at once, that I am holding my breath.

"Good," he mutters. "Get in touch when Veronica arrives, okay? I want to know that she's made it there in one piece."

I let out the breath.

"Yeah, I will," I promise him. "I'll speak to you soon, Dad. Bye."

I hang up the phone. I don't know what he made of everything in that conversation. But he seemed satisfied with my answers, vague as they were.

I make my way towards the shower until I feel the phone buzzing once more in my

pocket. Without thinking, I snatch it up and lift it to my ear.

"Dad, what is it?" I demand, a little more sharply than I intended.

But instead of hearing his worried tones down the line, I am met with a sudden and distinct silence.

A shiver runs up my back—fuck. Is it him?

I pull the phone away to check the number, and it's blocked.

My heart leaps in my chest. Someone has intercepted the burner phone's number—someone is probably tracking my location.

I hang up the call at once and dump the phone on the counter, striding off towards the bathroom before I can overthink things. The last thing I need is for someone to catch wind of where we are, especially with things between Cara and me being so tense.

I need to think, restrategize, and hope the anti-hacking software on the burner phone is successfully blocking our location.



Cara

Pushing open the door, I peep outside the bedroom, clutching the key in my hand.

Max was so distracted earlier, he hardly noticed me grabbing the key from his pocket when I saw it glinting there as he dropped off my breakfast.

I don't know what I am planning to do with this freedom, exactly. But when I heard the shower running, I figured that now is my best chance to make use of it. I need to do something, even if I am not entirely sure what that something is.

Or what I am trying to get from it.

Proof, maybe. Proof that what he said to me was true.

Or space away from that tiny cage of a bedroom.

I have no idea. I don't believe what he said about my father, at least, not entirely.

Yes, my father is involved in the criminal world, but that doesn't mean that he's some kind of monster utterly consumed by his need to hurt and control people.

I have no doubt that's what Max's father has said to him, just to try and convince him that all of this is right.

Despite everything that has happened, I don't think Max is a bad person.

I don't think he's cruel, or that he would kidnap someone on their wedding day unless he had a very good reason to.

I glance around the living room, and my eyes land on the kitchen counter where his phone is sitting.

I can't believe my good luck! I stare at the device as if it's a trap.

I don't want to get Max into any trouble, but I also don't want to stay here.

My heart skips a beat in my chest. I don't know who I'll call, and I don't know if it will trigger some kind of alarm, but I have to try and make the most of this opportunity.

I dive towards the phone and grab it. A call has been recently logged on the phone from an unknown number.

I hover my finger over it for a moment. Who could it be?

One of his men, most likely, maybe family.

I heard him talking to someone a few moments ago.

Though, even with my ear pressed to the door, I couldn't make out who it was.

Before I can find some way to talk myself out of this, I click the number and call it back.

I listen as it rings a few times, glancing towards the shower door, wondering what he will do if he comes out and sees me like this.

I can still remember the rage and fury in his voice when he caught me after that escape, and the thought of bringing that down on my head all over again is not pleasant.

Suddenly, the call is answered. I swallow hard. I don't know what to say. Before I can talk myself out of it, I blurt something out.

"It's me. It's Cara Leone!"

My voice cracks as I say my name. I hadn't realized how hard it was for me to call myself by that last name in a situation like this.

I am part of that family, my father's daughter, and no matter how unsure I might be about holding that position, I have to acknowledge my heritage, who I am.

Even if it means associating myself with the things Max accused my dad of.

"Cara?"

A voice replies in shock—not my father, but someone who knows me, at least. My body tenses.

"Yes, it's me!"

"Stay on the line," the man orders, as I hear him rustling around on the other side of the call. "We're going to track your location..."

The moment he says that, for a split second, I want nothing more than to hang up the phone and pretend like I never made this call.

Because if they find me, if they find us, I know what is going to happen to Max. I

know what my father does to people who fuck him over, even in the most distant, abstract sense, and Max put hands on me, his daughter. Even if it's just to prove a point, my dad has to do something about that.

My hand trembles and I stay on the call.

I have to get back to my father. It's the only way I am going to be able to find out if what Max said to me is true.

And if I can reason with him, maybe I can find some way to keep Max alive, too, or, at least, to protect him from the worst of my father's wrath.

If I tell my dad that Max's been brainwashed to believe he's into sex trafficking, maybe he won't wipe him off the face of the earth because of what he's done.

"There," the man replies, finally. "Done. You'll be out of there soon, alright, Cara?"

"Okay," I whisper back, my voice hitching once more.

Is this a bad idea? It doesn't matter. Whatever doubts I might have had, they are behind me now. I have acted. I've done it. I've connected with my father's men, and they are going to find me, and then...

And then, whatever comes next, I will be entirely responsible for.

I realize with a start that the shower has stopped running. Panic stabs my chest as I put the phone down as quietly as I can, trying to remember what angle it was sitting when I came in.

I chew my lip, but I don't have time to question it any further.

I dart back towards my room, diving past the door and pulling it shut so that the lock clicks into place behind me.

I shove the key under the door, trying to make it look as though it fell out of his pocket in the corridor.

I don't know if he's noticed that it's missing yet.

Throwing myself down on the bed, I turn my gaze to the ceiling, painting my face with a nonchalant expression, even as my heart slams against my ribs. I'm sure that he will sense there's something up, and come to check on me. He hasn't let me get away with anything since the escape attempt.

Sure enough, after a few moments, I hear footsteps outside the door. I lift my head to make it look like I've just noticed he is present as he unlocks the door and looks inside.

"Were you out of this room?"

His voice is cold, taut. I shake my head.

He still doesn't trust me, of course. Why would he?

Sometimes, I'm not even sure he likes me, especially given how he started being sexual with me that one night only to pull back right when he had me at the point of utter need for a release, the type I've never experienced.

I feel his gaze assessing me, taking in every detail from my pale cheeks and tense body language. At least I'm not blushing. I shake my head.

"No. I haven't gone anywhere. How could I? You keep me locked in here like I'm

some sort of prisoner."

He pauses for a moment, eyeing me as he tries to work out in his mind whether he believes me or not.

I look back at him as steadily as I can, though I am sure a man like him can see straight through me.

There is something piercing about his gaze, something suspicious that I can't help but squirm under.

"Good."

He pulls the door shut once more, and I exhale slowly, reminding myself that everything is fine. Whatever panic I might be feeling right now, he knows nothing. He could notice the call I made on his phone, of course, but he has hardly looked at that thing in the time he'd been standing there.

The lock clicks shut, and I glance up to the window.

Out there, someone is looking for me. Someone might even be close to finding me.

A few days ago, that thought would have been a huge relief, but now, I feel conflicted.

I thought for a brief moment that he cared for me in some way.

That part of me is reluctant to leave, battling the part that made the phone call for help.

It's ridiculous since he kidnapped me, and all I should want is to go home. I can't live

in this cabin, in this room, alone in the woods with him forever. So, why does the thought of returning to my father also fill me with dread? Is there nowhere in this world I can feel safe?

My father wants me home, pulling me back into his world, making me part of everything again, whether I like it or not. I have no idea what it will mean when I'm back home, no idea where that leaves me after all these days alone with a man.

Will my father have me tested to ensure I'm still worthy of marriage to a man of his choosing... still a virgin? Will he blame me in some way for the kidnapping?

Then there are the claims Max made about my father. I have no idea if Max is telling the truth, or if he is the one who has been convinced of something that sure could never be true.

Or if it is true... then I am the deluded one with her head in the sand.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:43 am*

Max

Something about the feeling in the air doesn't sit right with me.

I can't put my finger on what it is that's wrong, but I sure as hell know it is something.

I have a well-honed nose for this shit, an ability to sense when there is something out of place, even when people are trying to cover it up or deny it.

Cara is in her room. She seemed fine when I checked on her. Less angry at me, somehow.

Veronica is arriving later today. Matthew is dropping her off in the woods, and she is finding her way here based on a map I sent to her.

I had some concern about her being able to find the place, but she insisted that she could. It's best that she approach alone. Any extra activity out here could easily draw attention and suspicion.

"I've done a lot of running in my life," Veronica had reminded me grimly. "I'm not going to get lost out there. Trust me."

I had backed off, then. Sometimes, I forget how much she's been through, how much she's survived with no complaint.

She's been such a strong presence in my life, always courageous and kind despite



what happened to her—hell, maybe even because of it.

She came out swinging to try and take that asshole down, and I know she is not going to be able to rest until she does just that.

Whatever it takes, even these two decades of planning, she's never going to walk away from her goal of stopping Leone from using people, and I admire that.

Even if, sometimes, I wonder if there is any risk she won't take to bring this to an end.

I wrap my hand around the mug of coffee and keep my ears alert, listening for anything that might indicate the truth as to what is happening here. Because something is... off. I don't believe in rushing to figure things out. Sometimes, being watchful is the best approach.

The sun is shining, and any other day I'd be enjoying this as a pleasant morning—but out here, I can't. I can't take my hand off the wheel of this train for a second, because I am all too aware of what price I might pay if I do. What price my family might pay. And Veronica.

I'm pretty sure Cara is up to something, though she denied it when I confronted her about the matter earlier.

The call I accidentally answered from the unknown number threw me so badly that I left my phone out for a while.

It's an ancient device, an old school burner phone, making it harder to track. But that also means the interface is more than basic, so I couldn't see if there had been multiple calls with the unknown number or not.

I'm concerned though... what if the call I answered was some kind of code to let her know that they were on their way. What if she was listening, ear pressed to the door, hearing something I missed, a secret code word lost on me.

The weird energy lurking in the cabin today has me doubting everything. Even her trying to seduce me the other night when I pulled back could have been a kind of distraction, teasing me and maybe even lying about being a virgin so she wouldn't have to go through with having sex with me.

I cross my arms.

She looked like she really wanted me that night, but maybe it was part of her act.

A noise from outside draws my attention. My head snaps up, my eyes wide, and I rush to the front door, throwing it open so I can try to get a better idea of what it was.

For a moment, I just stand still, looking, waiting. There is nothing but the near-silence of the forest around me, the breeze through the trees, the sound of a bird singing here and there. Nothing out of the ordinary, until?—

"Help! Help!"

A woman's voice cuts through the sun-dappled woods. A voice I recognize at once. I dive off the porch and into the trees without a second thought—it's Veronica.

"Veronica!" I yell into the trees.

I have no idea where she is, no idea how far she has made it towards the cabin before someone came to intercept her.

I squint between the trunks, but I can't make her out.

I yell to her again, but before she can reply, a bullet flies over my head and burrows into a tree next to me, releasing a hail of splinters.

I throw my hands up, trying to protect myself, but I can still feel them tearing into my skin like needles.

The pain that sears through me for a moment, though, is the least of my worries.

Because I know sure as hell that Veronica wouldn't be shooting at me.

Whoever has her yelling for help might be.

Another shot rings out, this time hitting a tree a few feet away from me. I quickly follow the line of the bullet, and my gaze lands on my attacker, a man in a pair of dark jeans and a dark tee, brandishing a weapon.

The only thing on him that gives away his presence is the flash of a watch on his wrist. I'd guess it's what he used to track us this far into the woods, though I don't know how he got the coordinates for our location.

I barrel towards him before he can figure out what is going on, his attention split between me and the woods around him.

I manage to crash into him, knocking him into the trunk of a tree behind him.

I grab his hand and slam it into the wood, his fingers flexing and the gun dropping from his hand at once.

I keep him pinned there. I can't reach the gun from where I'm standing, but I can't let go of him in case he manages to get to it before me.

We're at an impasse.

And then, footsteps sound beside us. I tense, preparing myself for a second attacker, but instead, Veronica bursts out of the darkness of the thick woods, scooping up the gun and aiming it at the man without a word to me.

She narrows her eyes, steadies her shot, and squeezes down on the trigger, one last shot exploding out into the forest before the energy around us sinks into an eerie silence.

I step back from the man, and he slides to the ground, dead, a large blossom of blood spreading across his shirt. I am breathing hard, the sound of the shot still ringing in my ears, but it might not be over yet.

I turn to Veronica.

"Any more of them?"

She shakes her head as she lowers the gun, expelling the last bullets quickly so nobody else can use it.

"Not that I saw," she replies. "There were two in the car that drove us off the road—killed my driver. I made a run for it into the woods and they started shooting, I managed to take one of them out, and the other one..."

She glances past me, to the heap of the body on the floor in front of us.

"Yeah. He's gone now."

"Are you alright?"

She nods. She is shaking slightly, but I can tell that she is telling the truth. She turns to me.

"You?"

"Yeah. Fine."

"What about the girl?"

"Back at the cabin. Come on. You need something to eat, and we need to figure out if there's any more of those fuckers on the way."

She nods, and I reach out to put an arm around her shoulders as I steer her back in the direction of our home base.

My eyes dart back and forth, the hair on the back of my neck standing up as I consider what the hell is happening here.

Who were these men? How did they figure out where we were hiding?

Has Cara got something to do with it? That call I accidentally answered from the number I didn't know?

I have a million questions, and I doubt that I am going to find answers to them anytime soon.

We reach the cabin, and Veronica pauses for a moment, pulling away from me and catching her breath.

"I'm sorry," she mutters to me, glancing up at me out of the corner of her eye. "I didn't bring any supplies. They were in the car, and?—"

"Shit, Veronica, I don't care about that," I reply, as I plant a hand on the door. "Get inside. Let's regroup. I'm just glad you're alive."

We head into the cabin, and once we step in, I double check that all the doors and windows are locked, that there is nobody watching this place from the outside.

Whoever those men were, there is not a chance they weren't sent by Lucio Leone.

I know that bastard too well to imagine it could be anyone else.

He just underestimated us, thought that we could be dealt with that easily with no pushback.

Two men aren't enough, not by a long shot—not for something that we have been working towards for so long.

"Sit down," I tell her, gesturing for her to sit down. "You need to rest."

"I know," she sighs. "Got a coffee or something like that? I need to call your father. Make sure he knows I'm here safe, even if the driver didn't make it."

She winces as she says that part. No matter how long she has been part of this life, part of this world, I know there is always a sliver of her that feels bad for how far we have to go, for the lives we have to lose in the process.

You can't bring down a man like Lucio Leone without being willing to put yourself at risk, no matter how much you might like to think otherwise.

I am about to make my way back to the kitchen when I hear a sudden banging on the door from inside Cara's room. I shoot a look over there, frowning. Why the hell is she making such a fuss? At least I know that she hasn't somehow made a break for it

when I was handling the emergency outside.

I stride over to the door, unlock it, and pull it open swiftly, meeting her with raised eyebrows.

"What is it?"

"I heard gunshots! And another voice. There's someone else here," she shoots back as she looks past me, peering towards the living room. I step in front of her. Though I doubt that laying eyes on Veronica before I have a chance to catch up with her would make much of a difference at this point; that doesn't mean I am going to just let it happen.

"That's got nothing to do with you."

"I heard a woman's voice," she snaps, crossing her arms over her chest.

And for just an instant, I am sure I can see something in the way of jealousy in the expression on her face.

I almost smirk, despite everything. I know that whatever is happening here between us is complicated, more complicated than it needs to be, but I am not going to deny the fact that in between worrying about everything, I enjoy it.

I step aside. If she wants to see Veronica for herself, maybe it will help bring all of this home for her—make her see that there are real people involved in the hell that her father has unleashed on women in this world.

She might not want to believe he could be capable of something like that, but Veronica, of all people, knows better. She survived it.

Cara brushes past me and towards the living room, and I follow her.

But, to my surprise, she comes to a sudden halt when she realizes who is sitting there in front of the fireplace.

I hear her draw in a sharp breath, shock coursing through her faster than she can make sense of it, faster than she can even think.

"Oh my God," she gasps.

I glance between the two women. Veronica seems just as surprised as me that Cara is reacting in such a way. Veronica pushes a strand of wild red hair away from her face, tilting her head at Cara as if to say do I know you?

But Cara seems certain in the way she's looking at Veronica. This isn't some case of mistaken identity; whatever she is seeing before her right now, she is not acting as if Veronica is a total stranger.

She moves a little closer to Veronica, as though waiting for her to snap out of existence right as she sits there before her. But, as she stares, Veronica just looks back blankly. Cara's face is paler than I've ever seen it, like she's looking at a ghost.

"Oh my God," she repeats, but this time, she adds words that change everything.

"It's you."



Cara

I can't believe what I am seeing.

There is no way that I can be taking this in right—my brain is playing tricks on me, bringing me back to that night the woman with red hair tried so hard to escape—escape my father.

I'm hallucinating. All the stress has sent me back in time to the evening I crept out of my room and peered down over the banister and saw her running from Dad, running like her life depended on it.

And here she is now, sitting in this cabin as though it's exactly where she belongs.

I feel as though I have plucked her straight from my memory and set her down in front of me again.

The same eyes, the same hair, though she looks a little older, and she is far less panicked than on the night I first saw her.

As she sits before me now, she is self-possessed and looks sure of herself, even if she can't figure out why I am looking at her like she's a long lost puppy come home to me.

"What does that mean?" she shoots back, her voice defensive.

I don't blame her. I heard gunshots in the woods, and I know something has gone

down.

My father's men sent to get me and bring me back...

and failing—I'm not sure whether that's a good thing or not, all things considered.

Because if I had gone out that door myself after making the phone call, I would never have been here to see her, and I get the feeling that her presence here is going to change everything.

"I know you," I continue, trying to gather as much of my strength as I can.

"I... I saw you. You were at my father's mansion, maybe ten years ago.

You were running. I remember. I was sitting on the balcony at the top of the stairs in the entrance hall, and I saw you running.

There were men after you. I never knew if they found you, but. .."

I can't string my words together properly.

I feel as though my head is going to burst at any moment.

That same woman is here, standing here before me, looking at me as though I'm talking nonsense.

But as I speak, I can tell that she is starting to understand where I am coming from.

It might not be easy to put it into words, but she remembers that night, too. Probably even better than I do.

"Jesus Christ," she mutters, as she turns to face me fully.

Max steps forward beside me. Even though I know I will have a lot of explaining to do, there is something comforting about having him so close to me.

"What is it?" he demands. "Veronica, how do you know Cara? I thought you said?—"

"I don't know her," she replies. "But I... I remember that night. I remember running from that house. I went through the main hall, I remember, because I had to cut back on myself and go through the garden when I ran into guards on the walls. I thought I wasn't going to make it, I thought they were for sure going to catch me in there, but. .."

She shakes her head.

"But they didn't. I got away."

I step towards her. I have held questions about that night for all these years, needing to know how all the pieces fit together, needing to know if I can make them fit.

"What were you running away from?" I ask her.

I hardly even know if I want the answer, not when I have a feeling of what it might be.

She gazes back at me for a moment, and the look on her face scares me.

It is almost as though she feels sorry for me, sorry that I might, for a moment, believe a single one of the lies my father has spun to me over the years.

But she is not going to be the one to hold back.

Flicking her tongue over her lips, she speaks at last.

"I was running away from your father, Cara," she replies, as calmly as she can.

My jaw tightens. It doesn't feel right that she can speak to me like this—her words are lies. They must be! Suddenly, it doesn't feel as though I belong here, where I can be talked to in this way, lied to like this. As though my father is some kind of monster, when I know he's not, I know...

"Tell her what he had done to you," Max prompts quietly. "Tell her why you didn't want to go back."

Veronica pauses for another moment, and I see a dozen memories flash across her face in a single second. She's having a hard time hiding the intensity of her emotions right now, and I feel a twist of sadness and anger, already knowing where she is going to go.

"He was... using me," she replies, carefully. "He was selling my body. He bought me from my father when I was young. I didn't know any better back then. Hell, I thought all of that was normal. It wasn't until I got older, and I saw some of the other girls who were being brought in, that I started to question it at all. "

She shakes her head slightly.

"They were all so... vulnerable," she admits, after a long silence.

"All so unaware of how much trouble they were in, how badly all of this might go for them. They'd had lives before this, and they told me what those lives had been like, what it had been like for them to give up on everything they thought they knew—to pay off a drug debt, because one of their family members got into trouble, whatever it was. "

Her eyes mist slightly. These memories are still fresh to her, even though the night I saw her fleeing from the mansion feels like a thousand years ago now, another world, another life.

"And I knew I had to try and strike out and make a life for myself out there," she continues, her voice dropping again. "I couldn't get everyone out. God knows I wanted to. But I knew if I got out, I could work against him. I'd been with him for years.

I had seen him burn through some of his most trusted generals, and I had information on him that could get other women out of his grasp, too. .."

It's clear she has told herself this particular part over and over again—repeating it like a mantra until she truly believes that there is nothing more she could have done to get those women out of there.

She trails off for a moment, but it doesn't take her long to gather herself, shifting back into the story.

"And I ran away," she finishes up. "That's the night you saw me, the night I left, the night I promised myself I would never go back. I shopped around a few of the people I knew to be his enemies, and I encountered Max's father, and..."

She shrugged.

"Rest is history."

"And you're working to bring him down?" I whisper, barely able to get the words out of my mouth.

It seems so impossible, even acknowledging that I am standing in a room with people

who are so willing to work against my father—the same one who was going to marry me off to Mario as soon as he got the chance.

"That's why we took you," Max mutters, as he finally steps in. "Needed a bargaining chip. We were going to distract him long enough to hit his major centers and free as many women as we could, and take out some of his men to boot."

I stare at him for a moment. I can still remember the day we met, when he wrapped his arms around me and carried me out of that corridor, forcing me to climb out of the window to his waiting car before bundling me in the back seat and speeding off into the distance with me.

It seems insane to me now, to think that I would ever have seen it as a good thing, but I did now.

If I'd known that his plans were to end my father's business, maybe even his life, that would have been a whole different story.

"Why are you telling me this?" I manage, finally.

I don't know why he would spill something like this to me.

I don't get why he would willingly lay his family's secret plans on the line in such a fashion.

Doesn't he know that I could just go back to my father, and tell him all of this, warn him before they can do anything and bring all the things they're accusing him of to an end. ...?

"Because I know you're starting to see him for what he is," Max replies evenly. "And when you do, I want you to understand everything about where we're coming from."

And how powerful an ally you would be to us."

I squeeze my eyes shut, shaking my head.

I can't stand any of this, I can't stand hearing it.

I feel as though I am going crazy, my mind pulling apart at the seams as I try to wrap my head around it.

The way that his eyes feel, burning into mine, I know that he is serious.

This isn't a game for him—this isn't some kind of play—he really wants me on their side.

But do I just switch that easily? Do I have such little loyalty to my father that I would allow myself to be twisted without any protest, without any data to support these claims?

They could have found out about that night and strung something together to convince me—he had seen my scar, after all, so maybe he had put the pieces together and dug out Veronica to force me to believe him.

"I... I need some time to myself," I protest, my voice still shaking hard.

Max catches my arm, but I pull it free swiftly.

I don't want to have to do this with him right now, I don't want to have to think about where this leaves me.

Because everything that Veronica is telling me is making a whole lot of sense.

I am starting to wonder if all the stories I have heard about my father. ..

If they are only just scratching the surface.

I rush back to my room voluntarily, pulling the door shut behind me and drawing in a long gasp of air.

I sink down to the ground, head in my hands, as the reality of it sinks in.

The gunshots in the forest, the woman in the living room, the revelations about my father—I don't know how much longer I can keep blocking out the truth.

Or what is waiting for me on the other side if I don't.



Cara

I'm not sure what time it is when I hear a knock on my door. It's dark out, and has been for a while—a few hours, at least. I've barely been aware of the time passing, too caught up in my thoughts to really give a damn.

I haven't been able to stop going over what Veronica told me when I saw her sitting there—the story she spun to me, and how much it makes sense with everything I know about my father, about the kind of man he is.

I might have wanted to believe, to tell myself that he's not all that bad, but everything he is, everything he has done, it all adds up to the image of a man who would be capable of doing the things that Max and his family are accusing him of.

What Veronica told me chilled me to the bone, and I know that it's barely even scratching the surface.

I don't want to know how young she was when she was pulled into that, nor how long she spent in that hellish place.

I want to just lift all those memories from her mind and cast them somewhere far away where they can't hurt her or anyone else.

But if it worked that easily, none of this would be happening.

"Come in," I call out to whoever is on the other side of the door, though I already have the feeling I know who it will be.

Sure enough, Max steps in, haloed by the warm light in the corridor outside. He looks me up and down, concern written all over his face.

"Are you okay?"

"What do you think?"

He smirks slightly. I guess he can tell that it's a redundant question, given what is going on.

"Okay, my bad," he concedes. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't know," I confess, finally.

I have been hiding in here for most of the day, and, to be quite honest, I don't feel like emerging anytime soon.

All I really want is for this to be over.

No, not for it to be over, for it to have never happened in the first place, because trying to live with the reality of everything that is going on is hell on earth.

I want to sink back into blissful ignorance and leave this behind, I want to. ..

Finally, I look up at him again. He is standing there, just in front of me, his sharp features knitted together as he tries to parse what is going on in my head.

I'm not sure if I want him to find out, not really.

The thought of letting him inside in that way, of letting him crawl inside my head and know how close I am to turning my back on everything is petrifying.

"You said you thought I could be an... an ally to you."

He nods.

"Yeah," he replies, watching me carefully. "And I stand by that, for the record."

I hesitate before I continue. I don't know quite how to put this into words, but I have to try.

"And you wouldn't doubt me? You know, because of who my father is?"

He sighs, and moves towards me slightly.

The air in the room seems to thicken for a moment, a ripple passing through my body as I register his presence.

My mind flashes back to the sensation of his mouth between my legs, which I have been doing my level best to try and forget.

But it's still there, burning as bright as it ever did, and there is still a part of me that wants nothing more than for him to pull me into my arms and kiss me like he did before.

"Only if you give me reason to doubt you."

I flick my gaze back and forth between his eyes, scanning them. What does he suspect? Is he on to me? Does he realize what is going on here, what I'm capable of?

"I ran away," I counter pointedly. "I was ready to leave all of this behind and go back to my father. Doesn't that give you reason enough to doubt me?"

He shakes his head, moving a little closer to me.

"You were scared," he murmurs, the back of his hand tracing against mine for a moment. A jolt of electricity passes over my skin. I hate how obvious I make it, how easy it is for him to get the better of me like this.

"And what about... what about the people who were shooting earlier?"

"You heard that?"

"Of course I did. I told you I did."

He pauses for a moment.

"You know anything about it?"

Now, there's the question. I wince, shifting my weight from foot to foot slightly.

"Yeah. I... when you were in the shower, I... I called the last number on your phone."

His jaw tightens. I can tell that he's pissed, but I have no idea just how this is going to go. He could fly at me in a rage; he could rescind all his trust in me in a moment. But if I am going to earn the right to call myself an ally, I need to start doing it right now.

"You did what?"

"I know," I breathe, my voice trembling as I force the words out. "I'm... I don't know what I was doing. I just couldn't stand the thought of being locked up in this place any longer. I needed to get out. I needed to do something. I..."

Even as the words spill out of my mouth, I can tell that he doesn't believe them.

Maybe he has every right to. If what Veronica has told me is true, then there's no way that he trusts a word coming out of a Leone's mouth. God knows, he doesn't have any reason to, and yet...

And yet, there is still a part of me that longs for his approval, and I will do anything I can to earn it.

"I guess it must have been one of my father's men," I admit, filling the silence between us as I wait for him to respond. "They— he— he—"

"They tracked us here," he replies bluntly. I can't tell if he's about to fly for me or if he isn't surprised. Perhaps he laid out the phone as a trap, to see if I would go after it, but surely, he wouldn't have done something as crazy as that...

"Yeah," I whisper back. "I— I guess so..."

He doesn't move his gaze from mine, eyes flicking back and forth as he takes me in. I can feel the tension between us, the doubt—everything that has always been there, everything that has always lingered here, no matter how much we might have tried to leave it behind us.

"You could have got me killed."

His words leave no room for interpretation. I nod slightly.

"I know. I'm... I'm sorry, Max. I never would have if I'd known."

I stumble over my words uselessly. I feel stupid.

I feel as though I am making a fool of myself, but I don't know how else to get it out.

I just want to tell him that I am sorry, but I am not sure that will even come close to being enough compared to everything that my father has done, everything that he has inflicted on this world.

"If you'd known," he repeats, as he closes the distance between us even further, drawing himself just an inch or two from me. "What would you have done?"

I press my lips together for a moment as I gather myself.

"I wouldn't have reached out to him," I confess. "I only did it because I thought there was some way to ensure that you would be safe. That if I got myself out of here alone, you wouldn't have to deal with anything that my father tried to throw at you in the way of revenge."

He chuckles slightly, but it's mirthless.

"You think your father would have spared me? After everything I've done?"

"I don't know," I confess, my voice a little more barbed than I intended. "But I was willing to try. Because I... I don't want to see you get hurt, Max. I don't."

"Why not?" he shoots back, challenging me. "Why wouldn't you want me to pay for dragging you into all of this shit in the first place? If I hadn't kidnapped you from that wedding, you would have been happily married to that Mario fucker, and you'd never have had to find out about?—"

"Because if I'd married him, he would have been using me the way he used every other woman who has passed through this business," I fire back, my voice taut with fear. "That's why I believe her, Veronica. That's why I know she's telling the truth. Not just because I saw her all those years ago, but because... because I know what my father is capable of. I know that he expected me to give myself to Mario, every bit

of myself, whether I liked it or not. And if it hadn't been for you. .."

I pause for a moment, my breath stuttering.

"Then that's where I'd be right now. And there would be nothing I could do to change it. My body, my virginity, all of it would belong to him."

Anger flashes across his eyes at the sound of those words.

"You would never have belonged to him," he growls, as his fingers wrapped around mine. "You hear me, Cara? It doesn't matter what he did to you, how he laid hands on you, you would never have belonged to him, never..."

I shake my head, my eyes starting to blur with tears.

"You don't understand," I whisper. "What would have been expected of me as his wife, it would have given me no choice but to?—"

"Oh, I understand," he cuts me off. "I understand what he would have thought he was owed favors from you. But it doesn't matter what he believes. You're your own person, and you always will be. You choose who you give yourself to. You choose who you belong to."

"And... if I choose you?"

I blurt the words out before I can consider what I am saying. I know that it would be crazy to allow myself to be drawn into anything with him, given everything that has just happened, with everything I thought I knew about my life spiraling apart at the seams, faster than I can make sense of it.

"What do you mean?"

His fingers are still wound around mine. I half expect him to pull back, but he doesn't. He stands there, so close to me the heat of our breath mingles between us. But I want more.

I want more than just his hand in mine. I want his touch all over my body, his mouth between my legs, I want to give myself to him completely.

I want to belong to him in every way that it is possible to belong to someone.

I need something to hang onto right now, and the way he makes me feel seems as good a place as any to start.

"I mean... what we did the other day," I confess. "It wasn't enough. I want... I want all of you. I want you to have all of me. I want..."



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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:43 am*

I gaze into his eyes, praying that my words are not falling on deaf ears even as I speak them.

But there is nothing left to say, nothing left for me to stir up.

I have told him everything. It's on him whether or not he wants to do anything with the revelation of these feelings, especially with my father on our tail, more men likely being sent out to find us even as we speak.

He would be crazy to want me, just as much as I would be crazy to want him. ..

And yet, as he lifts his hands to my face, I can feel a stutter of excitement starting to pick up the pace inside of me. My emotions are raw, and I realize that nobody has ever seen me like this before in my life. No one has ever laid me open like he has, physically, emotionally.

But I am ready. As an act of lust, of want, as much as it is an act of defying my father and giving away the one thing he has been forcing me to hold onto.

Max draws me close to him, gliding his lips along the curve of my cheek, so close to my mouth that I can almost taste him—and God only knows how much I want to.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure," I reply, my voice almost hoarse as I wait for him to give me what I want.

I can hardly believe that he is willing to even consider this, given what he knows

about my family, but when he holds me like this, I find it hard to care about anything but the way he is looking at me.

And finally, he sinks his mouth into mine in a slow, deep kiss that touches the deepest parts of my soul, his arms sliding around me and pulling me against him hard.

I can feel his heart thumping against mine, the stir of his hardness against my hip, and this rush of sensation courses through me.

For a moment, I have no idea how I will even begin to hold back, the desire seems so all-consuming.

But then, he backs me towards the bed, which he has repaired since my escape attempt the other week, and guides me down on top of it.

It's not like when he caught me after I fled, all frantic hands and tongues and teeth.

He seems to recognize what a huge moment this is for me, and he is taking his time in exploring every inch of my body before he thinks of taking things a step further.

He continues kissing me, his mouth not breaking from mine for a moment as he lavishes me with attention.

His hands roam across me, pulling off my shirt and undoing the drawstring around my sweatpants, lifting my hips to ease them off of me.

His touch is easy and confident, and I can't help but give myself over to it, allowing the sweet, consuming feeling to brush away whatever nervousness I was feeling.

Moonlight leaks through the window above us, casting the room in a blueish glow that feels almost otherworldly.

Soon, I am naked beneath him. I cross my hands over my body without thinking, having never been this exposed to someone before in my life. But before I can hide myself from him, he catches my hands and pushes them aside gently.

"You're perfect," he breathes, and, as his eyes drink in the sight of me like this, I actually believe him. I sink into the sheets, staring up at him, watching as the want darkens his gaze and the passion between us swells even further.

I reach up to slide my fingers over the back of his neck, pulling him down to me for another kiss. I can't get enough of him; I can't even imagine getting enough.

"We're going to take this slow," he promises me, as he grazes his lips over my ear.

I nod. I can hardly keep my thoughts straight as it is, and I'm pretty sure I don't have it in me to argue with a single thing he says right now. His words cast a hypnotic glow over my body, my system responding to him in ways I am not sure I can control.

"Open your legs for me," he orders.

His voice is soft, almost tender, but his words are filthy enough to almost undercut the sweetness. I do as I am told, and he grins, his hand slipping down between my thighs where he cups his fingers around me.

I gasp at the sensation. Though he is not touching me yet, I can feel the warmth of his hands radiating through my body, the anticipation almost more than I can take. He reaches out two fingers to graze them over my untouched entrance, and my eyes widen, my breath stuttering.

"You okay?" he asks, pressing his forehead to mine, and I nod.

Nervousness is still stirring inside of me, but it's not enough to make me want to stop, not by a long shot.

"Tell me what you want," he murmurs. "Tell me..."

I draw in a deep, shuddering breath. There's something so intense about being guided in this way, but he wants me to take every step on my own terms, that much is clear. If this is about making sure my body is not owned by anyone other than me, he has to let me call all the shots.

"I want... I want to feel your fingers inside of me..."

As soon as those words escape my lips, he sinks two fingers into me. The sensation is new, shockingly so, and I tighten my grip on him as my breathing tautens.

"There you go," he murmurs, brushing his nose against mine with a soothing touch. "Fuck, you feel so perfect..."

He moves his fingers into me, slowly, opening me up like he is savoring every second of this. At first, the sensation is so new I can hardly make sense of it, but soon, it feels less like an invasion and more like an invitation for more.

"You're so tight," he groans as he brushes his lips along my temple, the want written in every word. "I'm going to have to be careful with you..."

I moan again, turning my head to kiss his lips, as he slowly pushes another finger into me. His words are soothing, softening the edges of my nerves, and pleasure starts to pulse out from between my legs, getting the better of me, rising through me faster than I can make sense of it.

His tongue moves slowly against mine as he fingers me, coaxing me closer and closer

towards my release.

The tension builds, the strange pressure of being opened up warming my body in a way I have never felt before.

And, as my thighs begin to tighten and twitch, I know that this will not be enough. I know I need more.

"That's it," he continues, the words traced out against my lips as he speaks them. "I want you to come for me. Let me feel you go over the edge. Let me feel that perfect pussy..."

His words are all it takes to give me the last few vestiges of pleasure I need, and my body lifts from the bed, pressing into him, as a warm, deep orgasm courses through my system.

It's unlike anything I've ever felt before, the sensation as new as the experience.

I have never had anyone touch me like this, and I know it should be intimidating, but the way he talks me through it with such ease makes it impossible not to get swept along with the tide.

"Mmm," he groans against my mouth, as he slowly slides his hand back from me, resting his slick fingers on my hip for a moment. "And I just know you're going to feel even better around my cock..."

I whimper at the thought. If it felt that good with just his fingers, I can only imagine how intense it will be with his fullness inside of me. He slips his hands down to his jeans and unzips them, and I pull back for just long enough to watch his cock spring free from his pants.

I draw in a sharp breath, the sight of him a little intimidating, but as he wraps his hand around himself and brings his lips to mine again, he is quick to assure me that everything is alright.

"I know you can take me, baby," he tells me, his tongue drawing a line along my throat, as though he is listening to the pulsing of my blood right there beneath my skin.

My back arches from the bed, my hips lifting towards him. Even if my mind might still be a little trepidatious, my body knows precisely what it wants, and it will not settle for anything less.

He slides one hand to my leg, bringing it up to his waist so that I am exposed to him.

My belly rises and falls rapidly as I watch him draw himself to my entrance for the first time, my skin tingling with excitement as I wait for the feeling of him inside me for the first time.

His hand strokes my face again, drawing me up to look at him for a moment.

"You sure you want this?"

"Yes," I whisper back as I cup his face in my hand, telling him in all the ways I am able that I mean this and I am ready for this.

It's more than just the physical act, it's the knowledge that I am giving myself to a man who my father hates—a man who stands opposed to everything that I have lived my entire life thinking is normal, thinking is standard.

By offering my body to him in this way, I know that I am turning my back on my family.

And, after everything I've heard, there's nothing in the world I want more than that. Or more than him.

He presses himself against my entrance, and I let out a slight moan as he enters me for the first time—just a few inches, slow, careful. He pauses, watching me intently, brushing the hair back from my face.

"How does it feel?"

"Different," I breathe, as I settle my hands against his shoulders. "Just... give me a second. I need to get used to it..."

"Anything you need," he breathes back, though his voice is heavy.

He holds himself there for a moment. Heat pools between my legs, just like it did when he was going down on me, only this time, more demanding, more needy. And then, I nod, breathing out slowly as my body adjusts to this new sensation. He begins to move his full length inside of me.

"How does that feel?" he asks, and I groan.

"It feels... so new... so different from your fingers..."

He brushes his lips against mine.

"Different in a good way," he corrects me, grinning slightly, and I giggle, looping my arms around him tightly.

I can tell that it is taking every bit of restraint he has not to just start fucking me fully, right then and there.

All the tension, all the want that has built between us—it's not as though we can just ignore that because I'm new to this.

But soon enough, he is all the way inside of me, our bodies pressed together in the most intimate embrace I've ever shared with anyone in my life.

"Fuck, Cara," he growls, nose along the side of my neck, teeth catching on my ear.

I can tell from the strain in his voice that he is struggling to hold himself back, fighting to keep from giving in to the passion that is almost overwhelming him right now.

It could be frightening, knowing how close he is to the edge, but instead, I find something thrilling about it—thrilling about knowing that I can push him to this point, that I can make it so impossible for him to contain himself.

"You have no idea how much you turn me on," he continues, his voice laced with a tension that speaks to how serious he is. I tighten my grip on him slightly, pulling him closer to me.

"You want me to show you?" he asks, sensing the playfulness in my movement.

I nod and as he leans down to kiss me once more, he gives me everything that he has been holding back.

Finally, slowly, carefully, he begins to move inside of me.

He takes me in long, slow strokes that echo pleasure all the way through my body, the heat that has settled between my legs starting to spread out to consume every part of me.



I gingerly wrap my arms around him, drawing him even closer, as the two of us begin to fall into a pace together.

I can smell the scent of him surrounding me, enveloping me, his strength filling every corner of me until I am not sure there is room for anything else in the world.

"Fuck, you feel even better than I thought," he groans.

Without thinking, I slide my ankles to his legs, taking him in even deeper.

A sudden hunger rises up inside of me, and I know I am not going to be sated with just this one time.

Whatever he has opened up within me, it's demanding, it's hungry, it's wanting in a way I have never wanted anyone before.

He presses his forehead to mine, his eyes burning into my own as we move together in perfect harmony, our bodies rising and rising to the point of no return, until. ..

"There it is, baby," he murmurs. "Come for me again. I want to feel you come undone around me..."

Those words push me to my release, a second wave of pleasure consuming me in a flash.

When my climax hits me, it spins my vision out of control, and whatever vague semblance I had of being connected to the real world is forgotten.

I cry out, and he covers my mouth with his, presumably to keep Veronica from hearing the two of us.

Or maybe more men who might have tracked us here from the forest. But if there is one thing I am certain of, it is that I don't care what might be outside of this door.

As long as I have him, here, now, as I do, none of that matters.

The pleasure courses in waves from between my legs to consume every part of me, and my hands rake down his back, fruitlessly trying to pull him even closer.

He holds himself there for a long moment, as though savoring the feeling of me going over the edge like this, and then, once he is satisfied that I have gotten exactly what I need, I feel him reach his own release inside of me.

His manhood twitches slightly, and he lets out the most delicious growl against my neck, the vibrations of it coursing all the way through my system to make a mark on my mind for life.

He holds himself there for a long time, as though he is reluctant to draw back and admit this is over.

I am still pushing against him, hardly even able to pay attention to the way that I am clutching on to him for dear life.

He kisses over my neck and down my shoulders, his breathing heavy, as though he is doing everything in his power to bring himself back down to earth.

"You okay?" he asks me finally, as he swipes a strand of hair away from my face, cupping my chin in his hand with a tenderness I don't know if I've ever seen before.

"Mmhmm," I breathe back, and I kiss him again.

Because, no matter how much I might try, I know I can't communicate everything

going on in my head right now with words, with something as banal as sentences I try to string together.

Sometimes, only a kiss will do.

Max

"Are you sure she can handle this?"

Veronica's words are far from unfounded. I know she has every reason to doubt Cara, but I need her to trust me right now, if not the woman whose father has been involved with some of the bleakest shit I've ever heard of. I nod slightly, glancing towards the bedroom where Cara is changing.

"I know she can. Just talk to her, Veronica. She's serious about this. I know she is."

Veronica stiffens her jaw slightly, shifting in her seat.

No matter the conversation they shared the other day, there is still a part of Veronica that doesn't want to believe it could be this easy, and I can't say I blame her.

She has spent a good portion of her life doing everything she can to bring down the Leone family, and now, she is being asked to believe that one of them has her best interests in mind.

I don't know if I would be able to approach it with a clear head, either, but that's exactly what I need right now, as we enact the plan that is going to bring Lucio Leone down for good.

Cara emerges from the bedroom, and the two of us glance towards her. She stiffens, likely able to tell at once that we are in the middle of a conversation about her.

"What's going on?" she asks, her voice a little shaky, as she makes her way over to my side. I hand her a cup of coffee, and she takes a long sip, her lips brushing along the edge of the cup in a seriously distracting way.

"Just talking about what's going to happen today," I reply.

She shivers slightly, and I can tell that she has been doing everything she can to put that part out of her head.

"It's going to be alright," I assure her, and she nods, gritting her teeth slightly, as though she is trying to convince herself as much as us.

"I know," she replies, and her eyes dart over to Veronica. She seems distinctly aware of the fact that I'm not really the one she needs to convince. Veronica is.

"So, run me through it again," Veronica tells her, lifting her chin and raising her eyebrows.

After Cara and I came together for the first time last night, we lay there and talked for what felt like hours—about her father, about everything she has been through, about where she stands now that she knows what he is involved with.

And in the midst of it all, we put together a plan, a plan that I have since run past my father and a few of his men—a plan that will bring everything to an end, if it plays out exactly how we want it to.

Cara takes a deep breath and lowers her head.

"Okay, so," she begins, "I'm going to leave the cabin. Look as much of a mess as I can, so it looks as though I managed to escape. You guys are going to come after me, at least make it seem as though you don't want me out there, and I'm going to head

towards the road so one of my father's men will find me. I'll insist on being in a car alone with him, say that I can't trust anyone else, and we'll drive out of the forest and right into Max's guards. And then...."

Her eyes dart back and forth between us.

"We're going to take him in."

That's one way of putting it. I know that she isn't ready to contend with the fact we are going to do more than just slap a pair of handcuffs on her father and be done with it.

No matter how much she understands about what he has done, that is still the man who raised her, and she is not ready to accept that she will help bring him down.

But after all we have been through, after all that we have seen from him, I know that none of us will be willing to stop at a slap on the wrist.

"And you know where you're going?" Veronica demands. "To the main road, I mean?"

Cara nods.

"I have a map," she replies, patting her pocket. "I'm not great with directions, but Max walked me through it this morning. I know where I'm going."

I grimace. I wanted to take her out there, trace her journey so that there would be no doubt about where she was headed, but I know if anyone spots us walking together, it's going to be obvious that this is nothing more than a set-up, and the last fucking thing we need is to be busted.

Because now, it's not just us I have to worry about.

It's her, too. And I have no doubt that her father will turn on her with just as much brutality as he would anyone else who betrayed him.

"Good," Veronica replies, though she is still not quite looking Cara in the eyes.

Cara watches her for a moment, chewing her lip.

I know everything that Veronica represents to her, all the guilt she still feels for what happened all those years ago.

I wish I could lift some of that from her shoulders, assure her that she was nothing more than a kid and that she has nothing to feel bad about, but I doubt that I would be able to cut through the weight in her head.

"I'm going to make this work, Veronica," she tells her firmly, the certainty in her voice catching even her off-guard, by the looks of it. Veronica locks eyes with her, her gaze impassive and hard to read.

"I promise," she continues, and her breath hitches slightly in her throat. I notice that she is clutching the coffee cup so tight it looks as though her knuckles are going to burst straight through her skin. I put an arm around her, steering her into the kitchen.

"You need something to eat," I tell her firmly, though really, I am just looking for a chance to get her alone.

Veronica seems to sense this, and she rises to her feet and heads to the porch, putting some distance between us.

"I don't know if I can eat anything," Cara mutters to me, shaking her head. "My

stomach's a mess. Worse than it was when I was meant to get married to Mario..."

"It's okay," I promise her, as I cup her face in my hands, gazing into her eyes. "You're going to be okay, Cara. You believe that, don't you?"

She hesitates for a moment before she responds. It's just a second, but it's enough to set off alarms in my head. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and I narrow my eyes at her.

"Cara," I repeat. "If you have any doubts about this at all, you need to tell us now. You can't go out there into the midst of all of this unless you're?—"

"Of course, I have my doubts," she replies softly, a small smile tracing up the corners of her lips. "Of course I... I don't know if I can do this. This is the longest I've ever spent away from home in the first place, and now, I'm going up against my father...?"

She trails off for a moment, the emotion cracking her voice.

"But I can't just stand by and do nothing," she admits. "I've done that for too long. I looked the other way when I should have done something about it, I haven't... I haven't been the kind of person I want to be."

"You didn't know."

"I knew enough," she murmurs, her head drooping down to her chest for a moment. "The moment I saw Veronica that night, I should have known something was wrong, I should have known?—"

I clasp her by the shoulders. I can't stand to hear her talking down on herself like this, as though there's anything more she could have done. She has been through enough as it is, and I will not let her turn on herself, not now.



"Hey," I cut her off softly. "You're doing something now. That's all that matters, okay? You're going to bring an end to all of this, once and for all. You should be proud of that."

"I'll be proud of it when I know that it's done," she replies, sighing heavily. "But... I just can't help but worry that he's going to see through all of this. That he's going to know that this is a trap..."

"Why would he know that?"

She chews her lip for a moment.

"Because I don't think he would believe I would be able to escape," she confesses.

My heart clenches in my chest. Hearing her speak about herself in those terms, as though it's so damn impossible for her to believe that she's capable of doing what needs to be done, I hate it.

She's so much more than she thinks, capable of much bigger things than she will give herself credit for, and I hate that her father seems to have stamped that flame out of her.

"It doesn't matter what he thinks," I reply hotly. "You can do this, Cara. I know you can. I believe in you, you hear me?"

She looks up at me, her eyes wide, searching for the promise that she will be able to get through all of this.

"You do?"

"Of course I do," I reply. "I wouldn't even think about sending you out there if I

thought you couldn't handle this. Because I'm not going to lose you. I won't."

Even as I say it, I am surprised by the intensity of my words—by how much I mean it.

Even though I have only known her a few weeks, there is something about her that I know I cannot lose, because, even despite everything that she has been through at the hands of her father, even with the way he has tried to brainwash her into believing that he did nothing wrong, she has seen through it, she has stepped out into becoming her own person.

And that person—that is a person I am falling in love with.

I press a kiss into her lips, and she lingers there, like all the time in the world for this kiss still wouldn't be enough.

"Thank you," she breathes back. "I think... I needed that vote of confidence."

"We can go over it again, if you want," I offer to her, but she shakes her head.

"No, I think I've done enough of that," she replies. "I have the directions down about as well as I'm ever going to, it's just that..."

She grips to me a little tighter, as though unwilling to let me go.

"It's just that I'm worried I might not make it back to you. And that scares me. Because I... I feel like I have something here that I've never had before in my life, and I don't want to lose it now that I know what it feels like."

I wrap my arms around her and pull her against me with a passionate protectiveness, my head against her neck, my breath on her skin. I inhale the scent of her, just as I did

last night, wanting to burn it into my memory, as though I could ever forget it.

"You won't," I promise her fiercely. "I won't let him. I won't let anything take you from me, you hear?"

She smiles against my neck. I can feel the movement of her mouth, a small sign of her trust in me. It seems a miracle that I could have earned that trust at all, given the circumstances under which the two of us met.

When I pull back, I can see that she has steadied some part of her resolve. It's clearly not easy for her, changing sides like this after she has been raised a certain way her whole life, but I know she is capable of it.

"I wouldn't be asking you to do any of this if I wasn't sure," I promise her, and she nods as she reaches for her coffee again.

"I know," she breathes back. "I think I just need to catch up with being sure of myself, too."

I press a kiss to her temple and go to make her something to eat.

All things going to plan, she will be out of this cabin in the next hour, in the forest and fleeing towards the location that we plan to lure her father to.

I know it's not going to be easy, not any part of this, but if it's enough to bring him down for good. ..

Then it's worth it.

At least, that's what I have to tell myself, as I glance at her out of the corner of my eye once more.

Cara

As I rush through the woods, the branches tearing at my skin and the smell of the earth hot in my nostrils, all I want in the world is to turn back and run into Max's arms once more.

It's a far cry from my last escape attempt, when I put so much space between us—when all I wanted was to get away from the cabin, away from him, back to my real life, no matter what it might have demanded from me.

Back before I knew everything that my father has done, back before I understood the extent of the man he is, back before. ..

Back before my innocence was shattered and I had to face up to the fact that my family fortune is built on the back of the abuse and exploitation of Veronica and people just like her.

I stumble slightly, the adrenaline spiking in my system as I struggle to find my footing once more.

I just need to make it back to the road, that's all that matters.

With my father's men aware of my general location, I know that they will be patrolling the area around the cabin, watching for any sign of me.

They came close enough before, when they nearly intercepted Veronica and Max, but this time, I am trying to lure them out of hiding, trying to make it so that they see me.

I glance back towards the cabin, but it's long vanished into the woods now.

I can feel the thread between Max and me pulled taut, close to snapping.

Though he told me that he would not have let me do this if he wasn't certain I could handle it, I am not sure I have the same sureness in myself.

That is weighing heavy on me as I kick our plan into action.

I can hear the roar of engines in the distance.

There's no way they can belong to anyone other than my father's men, likely trying to parse a way through the woods that won't end in the same bloodshed as the last time.

I am surprised they've even given us a day to figure out a plan, but given how Veronica and Max dispatched of the last threat, perhaps they're trying to come up with something a little less easily thwarted.

I scramble over the soft earth of the edge of the river that runs through the forest, trying not to let my feet sink into the mud.

The river is just a few hundred yards from the edge of the woods; that's what the map showed me.

I couldn't bring it with me, because it would have been too obvious that I was in on whatever they were planning if I turned up with directions.

I just have to hope that I have not managed to somehow double back on myself and make a mess of this.

But then, I see a crack of sunlight tracing through the trees, and my heart leaps. I have

made it. I'm nearly there, nearly back to my father.

And then, all at once, my footsteps falter as it clicks into place where I am running to.

Back to him—back to my dad, the man who is responsible for all of this, the monster who was willing to sell me off just like the dozens if not hundreds of other women he has done this to before.

Suddenly, the thought of being alone with him terrifies me.

He will be able to see right through me; he will be able to tell what I am thinking.

I have never been good at keeping my thoughts off my face, and even now, I can feel my skin prickling at the mere notion of looking into his eyes and having to pretend for a moment that I?—

"Fuck! It's her!"

A voice cuts through the rush of thoughts in my mind, and I look up, realizing that I am closer to the edge of the woods than I thought.

Sure enough, a man is standing in between a few of the trees, outlined against the near-blinding sunlight.

I raise my hand to block the brightness piercing my eyes, but he is already racing towards me, and I can hear other footsteps traversing the forest to close the distance between us.

I know that they are here to rescue me—at least, that's what they think—but in that instant, I feel like an animal about to be returned to the cage, a circus lion to be put on display all over again.

I inhale deeply before they reach me. I have been practicing what I am going to say since I left the house, and I will not flub my lines now. As soon as the first man reaches my side, he goes to grab my arm, and I wrench it free.

"Get off of me!" I scream, loud enough that I send a few birds fluttering from the trees around me in a panic.

"Cara, your father?—"

"I want to see my dad," I demand, as I stare up at the men around me.

"He's waiting nearby in a hotel for you," one of them tells me, his voice laced with some irritation.

I guess that they have been out here for a long time, and the moment they set eyes on me, they thought all of this would be over—only for me to dig my heels in and make it even more difficult than it already has been. I shake my head, pressing my lips together into a pointed pout.

"I don't know who I can trust," I shriek, feigning terror. "I'm not going anywhere with anyone other than him. You might be kidnappers too! If you really work for him, tell him to come to me himself..."

There is a muttering of conversation amongst the men as they try to figure out how to handle this.

They know as well as I do that my father will not take kindly to being dragged away from his work, but I don't give a damn.

The only thing I care about right now, the only thing I can care about, is seeing this plan through.

One of them grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet. I might not like it, but I have to play along, at least for now.

"Please, tell him to be quick," I beg them, putting as much of a quiver in my voice as I can. "Those people, the man who took me, they could come back at any time?—"

"Don't worry," one of the men tells me gruffly. "You're safe now."

I bite back a snarl of disagreement, wondering, for a moment, if this man has any idea of everything that my father has been doing.

It's hard to believe that anyone could be ignorant to it.

I might have looked the other way for a long time, but that's only because I didn't know.

I was living in a state of complete ignorance.

And even recently I could barely wrap my head around the thought that my father could do something so evil.

These men, do they really think that I am safe here? That my father will not make use of me the way he has made use of so many women over the course of his life to get what he wants...?

They lead me from the forest, and I make sure to throw in a pointed stagger to my walk, hoping to sell the idea that I am weak or injured, that I have only just barely made it out of captivity alive.

It's not hard to bring the tears to my eyes, knowing what I am about to do.



After everything that has happened, all that has changed within me, it's hard to even remember the innocent girl I was before all of this happened.

"Here, if you just?—"

One of the men tries to push me into his car, the door propped open so I can get in, but I brace my hands on either side of it and let out a cry of protest.

"I told you, I'm not going anywhere until I see my father!" I argue, my voice shrill. "I don't know who I can trust, and he's the only person I am certain of. Bring him here! I won't leave until you do!"

There is another mutter of frustration around the half-dozen or so men who have been patrolling the roads, but finally, one of them gets on the phone and calls my father.

I have no idea how long I will have to wait to see him once more, but I am going to need all the time I can get to muster up readiness for what is waiting for me on the other side.

I lean against one of the sleek black cars parked along the side of the road.

The sun is beating down on me, warming the metal I am leaning against, though I am hardly aware of it.

My eyes are fixed on the road on either side of me, waiting for his car to roll up, waiting to see him again.

Wondering how it will feel to look into his eyes and know the kind of man he is.

How it will feel to see him without the lies he has tried to drape over himself to keep my opinion of him sweet.

Finally, I hear the rumble of an engine in the distance, and my ears perk up, my shoulders tensing. My stomach churns, but I plaster a smile on my face, as though I am nothing more than a devoted daughter relieved to finally see her father once more.

His car pulls up just beside me, a dark vehicle with blacked out windows that I know are bulletproof. A sourness stirs in my stomach, as I try not to think about how he made the money for it. He throws open the door and climbs out, his face like thunder as he strides towards me.

"Finally," he mutters, as he grabs me and pulls me into a hug. It doesn't feel warm or paternal, though.

Not now, not after everything I have learned.

His arms feel like shackles around me, like cuffs clicking shut around my wrists.

I force myself to hug him back, praying that my disgust translates to relief in his mind.

"Oh, I'm so glad" I sigh. "You came, you really came..."

Even as I speak, I wonder if I am laying it on too thick, but when he pulls back, his face has softened slightly, and I know it is working.

"How did you get away from them?" he demands, and I shake my head.

"I don't remember much," I lie quickly. "It's all a blur. One moment, I was locked in my room, and the next, I was in the forest... I didn't know where to go, so I just ran..."

"Thank God you did," he mutters, as he puts an arm around my shoulders and steers

me towards the car he just came from. "God knows what they would have done to you if you had been there any longer..."

I have to bite my tongue to keep from calling him out on his disgusting hypocrisy. What would they have done, when he's the one who was willing to sell my hand in marriage to a man twice my age who just wanted me for my body? I force myself to contain it.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:43 am*

I notice that there is a driver in the front seat of the car, and I freeze, shaking my head. If I am going to do this, then I need to make sure that my father is alone. I don't want any backup to help him. And if I have to throw some sort of a tantrum to make it happen, I will.

"No. No, I'm not going anywhere with anyone else," I tell him, jabbing my finger in the direction of the driver. "You can drive me."

"Don't be ridiculous, Cara," he snaps back sharply. "I've worked with this man for years, you can't?—"

"You don't know what I've been through!" I wail as I force another round of tears out.

A flash of fury paints his face for an instant, but, thank God, he seems to think better of fighting with me on it any further.

He nods to his driver, giving him the sign to get out, and then climbs into the front seat himself.

I wonder, briefly, how damn long it's been since he drove himself anywhere; he's always had a driver as long as I can remember, so dependent on other people, though I doubt he would have seen it that way himself.

"You," he barks to one of the men before him. "Keep watch on the roads. I want to know if anyone comes or goes. If these fuckers think they're going to get away with going after my daughter..."

His eyes land on me for a moment. But there's no love there, no concern, no worry about what might have happened to me. I see only a possessive cruelty, a willingness to wreak whatever revenge he can on the people who pissed him off.

"Come on," he growls at me as he pulls the door shut. "Let's go."

He puts his foot down, and we pull away from the forest and on to the road that will lead us back towards the city. I press my head into the window, pretending like I am relieved, but I'm actually watching in the rearview mirror to make sure that we're not being followed.

The last thing I want is for Max and his family to come against more firepower than they are prepared for.

I don't know much about their plans to capture my father.

Max assured me that the less I knew, the better for my safety.

I couldn't lie to my father if I didn't know anything, and he couldn't suss out a lie that wasn't there, Max had said.

All I do know is that I need to get him on the road and back to the city, and then they will blockade us on the way.

Until then, I have to convince him that I am entirely on his side, even if all I want to do is scream at him, beat my fists against his chest and tell him that I know the man he truly is and that I will never fall for his bullshit again. ..

"Are you hurt?" he demands curtly, glancing at me out of the corner of my eye.

"I don't know," I reply vaguely. If I can just keep him talking, maybe he won't think

twice about the fact that we're alone. He might be selfish, but he's not stupid, and it can't be lost on him that we're out here alone.

"What did those bastards do to you?" he asks me, his voice dropping low. "If I find out they laid a hand on you, I'll fucking?—"

"Is Mario okay?" I ask, changing my approach.

Saying his name out loud makes my stomach stir in discomfort, but I ignore it.

I need to make it seem like I can't wait to be back home and then straight into his arms, even if the thought of his touch disgusts me.

Now that I have been with Max, I can't even imagine allowing him to lay hands on me, let alone giving myself to him as his wife. ..

"He's fine," my father retorts sharply. "No thanks to you."

I part my lips, a part of me intending to protest, but I think better of it. I have to act as I always did, as though I am willing to go along with anything and everything that he says to me, no matter how obviously wrong it is.

He is talking as though I was the one who made the decision to walk away from that marriage, when he knows that's not true.

I never could have been so bold. If it hadn't been for Max, I would have been wearing that ring on my finger, and there would have been nothing I could do about it.

As if I didn't have enough to thank him for as it was. ..

"But we managed to find you," he continues, as the woods whip by outside.

We're driving so fast that they are nothing more than a blur of greenery, and I silently send out a prayer that Max is ready for us. Because if my father manages to get me out of here, I will have to return to the life I lived before; but with the knowledge of what I understand now. I don't think I could live with myself.

I know I couldn't...

"I've been staying in a town nearby, waiting for them to find you," he continues. "Would have come out there myself, but it wouldn't have been safe. Never know how far those fuckers are willing to take it..."

"What do you know about the people who took me?" I ask him quietly. I am not sure I really want the answer to that question. He snorts.

"The Matronis," he replies, spitting the name as though it's a curse. "Almost funny they would come after you like this. They've always played at being the good ones, the ones with morals, the ones with rules. Guess that falls away just as soon as they get a chance to play with the big dogs..."

Our eyes lock for a moment in the mirror.

Suddenly, his brow furrows, and my heart skips a beat.

Can he tell what is going on inside my head?

See the disgust written on my features? I quickly try to rearrange my expression, trying to recall the way I used to look at him before.

I'm not sure I can go back like that, though.

I'm not sure I can convince myself to forget it, even for a moment. The weight of it is too heavy, like a plague I'm carrying right down in my cells.

"What did they do to you, Cara?" he murmurs.

And for a moment, I think I can hear an edge of concern in his voice—an edge of real worry, like he is actually wondering what I went through.

And for that moment, I can feel something wavering within me dangerously, something threatening to bust through the walls of my resolve and make a mess of everything that I have promised myself. Because...

Because this is what I have known my whole life.

This is the only person I have ever been able to trust, the man who has taken care of me in the face of all this chaos.

And yes, he might have been willing to push me towards a marriage with a man I barely know, a man twice my age, but he's still my father.

Could he really be so cruel, so evil, so. .. so awful?

If I believe that Max and his family are lying to me, then I could just go back to everything I knew before.

I could direct him out of danger, away from this place, and back to the city where I could pick up on everything right where we left off.

And it might not be how I expected my life to go, but at least it's familiar.

At least I know how it works, that side of things, at least I know where I fit into it.



The impulse to return to it is almost overwhelming for a second, and it takes everything I have to push it down, not to let my doubts get the better of me.

"I'll tell you when we get home," I murmur to him, and I watch as the car crests the hill that will lead us straight into the Mastroni trap. I am not going to change my mind now. I have chosen my side in all of this. And I am not going to let anything get in the way of it. It's not just my future I have to think of, but the futures of so many of the women he has forced to serve him all these years.

I have to do it for them, if not for myself. I have to make certain of it...

"Those bastards," he growls. "When I get my hands on them, I'll?—"

But then, before he can say another word, he sees it—what is waiting for him on the other side of this hill.

A blockade has been set up across the road, stopping him from travelling another inch.

He slams his foot down on the brakes, the car screeching to a halt just before he crashes into the line of people waiting for us.

And at the head of them stands Max, his eyes dark, his mouth set into a hard line as he locks eyes with me.

I can tell he's relieved, though he doesn't let it show on his face.

I guess there was a part of him that wondered if I was really going to go through with this, if I would turn my back on them when they least expected it.

"What the fuck?"

But before he can get the words out, Max strides over to the car and pulls open the door. He offers me a hand, and I don't hesitate before I take it. He guides me to my feet, and I can feel my father's gaze burning into me, fury pulsing from every part of him.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he demands as Max steps forward. Max reaches for a gun at his side and draws it, pointing it calmly at my father's head.

"Get out of the car," he tells him.

"I'm not going to?—"

Max cocks the gun, and when he speaks again, his voice leaves no room for argument.

"I said, get out of the fucking car."

This time, my father seems to understand that there is no room left for him to argue.

His teeth gritted, he climbs out of the vehicle, and I stay pinned to Max's side.

I feel if I step away from him for a moment, everything is going to come apart at the seams. I need him—I need to be near to him, to remind myself why I am doing all of this, even if it feels crazy.

I cast a glance towards the waiting blockade—three cars, a handful of people.

Veronica, an older man I have to assume is Max's father, and a girl who looks to be a few years younger than him.

His sister? One of them, at least. All of them are armed, and a few men hang back

behind them, clearly ready to jump into action if the situation calls for it.

"I have dozens of men up and down these roads," my father spits. "If you think you're going to get away with this shit..."

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:43 am*

"We've dealt with them," Veronica shoots back.

Of everyone here, she looks the most furious, and I suppose she has reason to be.

Her hand is pressed against the weapon at her side, just waiting for a chance to bring it out and wipe my father off the face of the earth.

Given what he has done to her, it seems a miracle that he is still standing there at all.

She takes a step towards him, narrowing her eyes at him, a decade's worth of anger boiling in her veins.

I can practically feel it crackling in the air around us.

My father stares back at her, though his face has paled slightly, as if he can tell that he is not going to get away with this, as if he knows that everything is finally crashing down around him.

"Do you remember me?" Veronica asks him.

Though her voice is quiet, I know everyone can make out what she is saying. It's clearly a question she's been waiting to ask him for a long time. My father shrugs.

"I've never seen you before in my life."

She lets out a short bark of laughter, clearly too shocked to manage anything else. Turning her back on him, she locks eyes with Max's father.

"Do what you have to do, Mastroni. I'm finished here."

Max stalks forward, ready to deliver the final blow himself. My heart slams against my chest as he rests his hand on the gun. Is he going to kill him? Of course, I knew it was a possibility, but being faced with it right here and now is almost more than I can take...

"I don't know what you told her," my father snarls at him, refusing to back down. "But if you think for a second that she is going to believe whatever brainwashing that you?—"

"We told her the truth, Leone," Max replies, his voice almost measured. "We told her what you do. What you've done. The harm you've caused. And you know what?"

He grins slightly, though it doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"She believes us. Because you were going to sell her to a husband she didn't even know, just the same way you sold so many women over the years. She believes us because you gave her every reason to. You understand that?"

He doesn't move a muscle. His eyes flick to mine.

For a moment, I am sure I can see some kind of fear there, some kind of terror, as it clicks in his mind that they are telling the truth.

I stiffen. No matter what has happened, no matter what I know about him, there is still a part of me that wants to defer to him, that wants to let him call the shots, as he has done my entire life up until now. ..

"Is that true?" he asks me.

And it's as though everyone else around us has dropped away. It's just my father and me, standing here, staring at one another, as he tries to work out just how much of this I believe.

I nod. It almost feels surreal, defying him like this, but I can't lie.

I have seen him for the person he is, the person he has always been, and I am not going to let anything change that.

Now that my eyes have been opened, I refuse to return to the version of myself that I knew before.

I refuse to go back and pretend like I don't know who he is.

What is ahead of me might be terrifying, but it's better than living in ignorance as he wreaks havoc on the city around me.

"You're a traitor! Just like your mother," he snarls at me.

A flash of fury shows on his face, and he makes a move towards me, clearly intending to make me pay for what I have done. I tense and Max lunges forward, clearly ready to leap to my defense, but he doesn't have to.

My father's expression changes, anger giving way to something like resignation.

His hands drop back by his sides again, like he knows it is pointless to try and hurt me.

Or maybe there is a part of him, as twisted and foul and distant as it might be, who actually understands that I am still his daughter, some instinct of fatherly care still left there despite all he has done to me.

The expression on his face when he looks at me once more is different now, different from anything I have ever seen on his face, at least when it comes to me.

Almost impressed. Like I have surprised him, and that's the last way he expected this to go.

I think he knows that he has raised a woman more capable than he ever could have imagined, and now, he is having to deal with what that means.

"You did this," he mutters. "You."

"Me," I breathe back, not taking my eyes off of him, not even daring to blink.

His shoulders slump. His lips part. And I know that, finally, he believes that I am the one responsible for what has happened.

That the very girl who was meant to usher in the key to expanding his empire through marriage is now his downfall.

Even despite it all, I feel bad. No matter what happens next, no matter how much I might hate him for everything he has tried to do, he's still the man who raised me...

"So what is this? You're going to kill me?" he snarls as he looks at Max once more. Max shakes his head.

"We're not like you, Leone," he replies. "Much as I know there are people here who would take great pleasure in wiping you off the face of the map..."

He glances over to his sister, whose eyes are burning with such rage it's a wonder she can contain it at all.

"We're giving you the chance to leave. Get out of here, never come back, and you'll live. You get a second chance, even if you don't deserve one."

My father smirks.

"You might live to regret that?—"

Max lifts his gun again, aiming it directly at my father's head.

"Or, we might not," he growls. My father lifts his hands. It's clear that he is starting to understand just how serious Max is about this. Veronica jerks her head towards the car.

"Get in, and fucking drive," she commands him. "Out of the city. Out of here. I don't want to see you again as long as I live. You show your face around here again, and you're dead, you hear me?"

I can tell he's furious. In fact, I don't think I have seen him so full of rage since the night that I saw Veronica fleeing from our house, the night all of this kicked off.

The scar on my leg throbs, though I know it has no reason to.

It's years old now, but there is still a part of me that aches, knowing I could have done more.

He slams the car into reverse and takes off down the road.

I watch as he vanishes into the distance, my hands clenched into fists at my sides, my heart thudding against my chest. All things having gone to plan, his men will already be gone—killed or driven back to the city, given a chance to get out of this before it really blows up.



All that's left now is to break the women he has been holding out of their cells in the brothels he has been selling them from, and all of this will be over.

As soon as he is out of sight, something gives way inside of me, something so heavy, so powerful, it feels like it might have been the only thing propping me up. With a gasp, my knees buckle out from underneath me, and Max wraps his arms around me, catching me just before I hit the ground.

My ears are ringing, but somewhere at the back of my mind, I am distantly aware of the way he is talking to me.

His comforting voice, his hand on the small of my back, his touch trying to bring me back down to earth as he tells me over and over again?—

"It's done. It's over. You're safe, Cara."

Cara

I gaze up at the apartment block in front of me, my eyebrows raised.

"This is where you live?"

"Where we'll both be living, for the foreseeable future," he reminds me as he slips an arm around my waist. "You think you can handle that?"

"Uh, I think so," I laugh. "This place is amazing!"

"You haven't even seen inside yet. Come on..."

He leads me through the doors of the building, and I glance around, trying to drink this place in.

My new home. It's still a lot for me to make sense of, but I know it's where I belong.

It's so far removed from everything that I've known before, it's hard not to feel like this is the new start I have been waiting for all this time.

The apartment building is modern, all glass and polished metal. As we step into the elevator, the glass walls give me a view of the city below, and I draw in a sharp breath.

"Oh, I'm going to have to get used to this," I mutter, as I grab the railing to steady myself.

"Scary?"

"A little," I admit. "But in a good way, I think."

I mean it. I have spent so much of my life living in that stuffy mansion that my father called home.

It wasn't until I got out that I really started to see the kind of home it was.

More a prison than anything else, at least for me.

He might have thought it the height of luxury, but what does luxury even mean if you can't walk out of those front doors any time you want?

I cast my gaze towards the mansion. I can't see it from here, it's too far out of the city for that, but it still feels too close. A shiver runs down my spine, and I wonder if he has already fled back there, plotting some evil revenge against Max and his family for dragging me away from him.

"What's going to happen to the mansion?" I ask quietly. "I mean, where I used to live. He could just go back there."

"We've got men staking it out right now," Max assures me, as he wraps his arms around me from behind, resting his head on my shoulder. "If he tries anything, we'll drive him straight back out."

"And what are you going to do with it? Burn it to the ground or something?"

"Something like that," he replies as the doors slide open.

The apartment that waits for me on the other side is just as beautiful and bright as the

elevator. I step out, glancing out, and make my way over to the large bay windows that look down over the city.

"God, it's beautiful," I murmur, for a moment forgetting about all the stress that brought me here. He moves in behind me once more, but this time, his grip is a little tighter, pulling me against him hard.

"So are you," he replies, as he brushes his lips along the back of my neck.

My heart stutters in my chest, and I reach back to cradle his head close to me.

His fingertips dig into my belly, and I can feel his hardness against the small of my back, demanding me, commanding me, leaving me with no choice but to do exactly as I am told.

"This is your home now, Cara," he continues as his hands move to my dress, unzipping it slowly and pushing it from my shoulders so that it pools at my feet.

I draw in a sharp breath. I can see the reflection of myself in the window, the outline of my body still in my underwear, and the sight of his hands moving across me is scorching-hot.

"Mhm," I breathe back, glancing over my shoulder at him. I am still getting used to what it feels like to desire someone as deeply as I desire him, to want someone with the sheer, reckless abandon that consumes me when we are together.

He presses the flat of his hand to my belly, pulling my body flush to his. Sliding his other hand to my hair, he winds it around his fingers and tugs my head backwards so that I am looking at him.

There is something in his eyes that almost scares me, or perhaps it should have, were

it not for the burning need coursing through me in that moment.

His eyes are overheated with passion, something almost close to anger, but not aimed at me.

Aimed at everything that has happened to me, all the ways that I have been hurt, as though he can extract them from me with just one kiss.

Our mouths crash together once more, his tongue exploring mine as he lets out a deep growl. He undoes my bra and tosses it aside, and then slips his thumbs around my panties, coaxing them down my legs to strip me naked right there in front of the window.

For a moment, I feel a flush of nerves. Perhaps someone will see us, see me with him like this, on display.

But, as he kisses my neck once more, I sink into him, my eyes drifting shut and all inhibition slipping from my body.

Maybe I want everyone to see us like this together.

Maybe I want the world to know that he wants me as badly as he does.

Maybe it's the only damn thing that matters in this moment.

He moves his hand to my mound, massaging it softly with his knuckles, as he unzips his pants and takes himself into his hand.

I whimper as I feel the sudden pressure of him against my entrance.

It's still so new to me, the way it feels to take him so close, but my system already

demands it in ways I can hardly make sense of.

I tremble as he eases himself into me, resting back against his body, his arms wrapped around me. But as he grazes his tongue along my neck and finds my ear, it's clear that he is not going to settle for anything less than my full attention.

"Open your eyes," he orders me, stilling himself within me. I press my lips together and swallow hard, trying to muster what little self-control I have left to do as he says.

"Open your eyes," he repeats, his words a little firmer than before. I respond at once, my eyes flicking open, staring out onto the streets below.

"Good girl," he murmurs, biting down on my lobe as he draws back and then slides deep within me again. "I want you to see yourself. Let them see you. Let the whole damn world see you giving yourself to me..."

I find my reflection in the mirror once more, and the hairs on the back of my neck rise in response to his filthy words.

There is something so cathartic about it, just giving myself over to him like this, as though it's the most natural thing in the world, as though our bodies were made to fit with each other, even when our minds could not.

He starts to pick up the pace inside me, moving into me in long, deep strokes that send shudders through every inch of my body.

It's like the echo of each thrust courses out to every nerve ending in my system, and soon, I find myself rocking back against him, taking him even deeper inside of me, letting him feel every inch of me.

"Fuck, you look so good like this," he growls in my ear, as he brings a hand to my hip

to steady me as he continues to drive himself, deep and hard, inside me.

I can only let out a slight whine in response.

I can already feel the orgasm growing in me, an overflow of all the tension that has been building within me all this time, and I can't think of anything but letting it take me over entirely.

I have been so focused on all the bad in my life, all the things I need to make amends for, but this moment is about nothing but pure pleasure, and that's all I want to focus on right now. ..

He moves himself into me one last time, thrusting deep, our bodies coming flush together as I hear the guttural groan slip past his lips.

I reach back to clutch at his head once more, holding him against me.

Even when we are this close, more intimate than I've been with anyone else in my entire life, there is still a part of me that craves even more of him, craves his closeness in some deep, unspeakable way.

It's the feel of his release that sends my own pleasure toppling over the edge, and I climax against him. He presses me against the window, the cool glass on my skin, and it strikes me that he is making sure there isn't a damn person out there who can't see me, who can't see that I belong to him.

And, when he finally pulls back, he spins me around and catches my panting face in his hands.

He presses his lips to mine again, with a ferocious want that drives everything else from my mind again.

All I can think about is him—not anything that lays outside the confines of this moment, just him, him and me, together.

On my wedding day, I never could have imagined that I would live out anything else but the life my father had planned for me, but here, now, I can hope for something different.

"I love you, Cara," he murmurs against my lips, but he kisses me before I can respond.

And I know that, while I might not always be able to put into words just how much I adore this man, I will do everything in my power to show it. And I intend to start right here, right now.



Max

Cara pauses as she steps out of the car, and as she looks up at the building in front of us, I can tell she is second-guessing her decision to come here.

"Hey," I murmur to her, reaching over to give her hand a squeeze. "It's alright. You don't have to do this if you?—"

She steels herself, narrowing her eyes slightly.

"I want to do it," she replies firmly.

And, with that, she makes her way towards the door where Maya is waiting for us.

This place is grim enough that her reaction would make sense even without all the baggage she happens to be carrying. This is the first time she has seen any of her father's brothels up-close and personal.

Though we have already found new accommodations for most of the women, there are a few who remain as they wait for family or friends to come pick them up, and we're stopping by to check on them and see if they have any more information to share with us about what remains of the Leone empire.

"Thought you guys were never going to make it," Maya remarks as she looks between us.

Cara stiffens at once, and I shoot my sister a look.

It's not that I don't understand where she is coming from with all of this, having her doubts about Cara, but the last thing we need is for her to feel unwelcome.

This is a big moment for her, coming here, contending face-to-face with everything that her father has done, and I am not going to let my sister's second-guessing get in the way of that.

"Yeah, sorry, I held us up leaving," I tell Maya firmly, before Cara can jump in and make an excuse for it. I don't want to give Maya anything else to blame Cara for, and God knows that she is looking for it right now.

"Mhm," Maya replies, as she steps aside to let us in. "Anyway. One of the girls wanted to talk with you, Max. Said she had information about one of the other brothels in the city..."

I nod to her, and Cara hangs back for a moment. I glance over at her, confused.

"I— I don't think I should be here for that," she mutters.

I can tell she is freaking out at the thought of it. She might have a point, but that doesn't mean that I am just going to leave her standing here, wondering if she should even have come at all.

"I think you should be," I reply, slipping my hand into hers. "Might make her feel more comfortable, knowing that there's another woman there. Someone she can relate to."

Cara hesitates for another second, but then, with a nod, she agrees to come with me. We head through the long, gray corridors that lead to the room we have turned into a hub for the women still staying here.

None of them will even set foot in the rooms they worked in upstairs, and I can't say I blame them. I checked them out myself to ensure there was no remaining evidence, and they were filthy, almost as though Lucio was intent on degrading them in any way he could.

A woman is sitting on the edge of a long bench, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes downcast. She glances up as soon as she hears me drawing closer. I go to sit beside her, but she recoils at once, almost on instinct.

"I'm—I'm sorry," she blurts out. I shake my head.

"You have nothing to apologize for," I promise her. "My sister said you had some information you wanted to share with us?"

"Right, yes," she replies, fiddling with her long, bleached-out hair.

She looks to be around my age, but there is something both so vulnerable and so heavy about the way she holds herself—as though she has lived a million years and none at the same time.

"I was... I was speaking with one of the other girls.

Millie," she continues. "And she told me about this place on the other side of the city that was attached to a casino... I'm not sure what it was called, but a few of my regulars mentioned it to me. I think there might still be girls there, and I just couldn't stand the thought of... "

Her words catch in her throat abruptly, and her hand flies to her mouth. I grimace. I wish there was more I could do, but I feel like any move I make will just throw her back into that dark place again.

And then, to my surprise, Cara pushes past me. She sinks down on her heels in front of the woman—not speaking, not moving to touch her, just being there with her. When the woman finally lifts her head again, she looks at Cara, and something in her seems to settle.

"What's your name?" Cara asks her softly. The woman takes a deep, shuddering breath before she replies.

"Rose. Rosie."

"Rosie," Cara repeats. "You have to understand, you're not responsible for anything that's happened to any of the other women who were trapped here, or anywhere, for that matter. What you're doing is amazing, telling us everything you know, but you don't have to carry that weight. It's not yours to carry."

She pauses for a moment, her jaw tightening. I can see a flash of realization crossing her face, but she quickly focuses back on Rosie.

"Trust me, I know how hard it is to believe that," she murmurs to her. "But it's true."

Rosie snuffles slightly, still staring at Cara, as though she is trying to figure out just where this leaves her.

"You went through something similar?"

Cara hesitates for a moment. I know that she doesn't want to equate what happened to her to the living hell these women were put through, but she does understand it, on some level, what it's like to be pushed and pulled and forced to do what was demanded of you.

And besides, Rosie is looking for a thread of connection right now, anything to drag

her out of that place she currently finds herself in.

She needs to know that there are other people out there who have been through something like her ordeal, and come out the other side alive.

"Yeah," she replies, with a nod. "Yeah, I did."

The two women smile at each other for a moment, and Cara reaches for her hands. She gives them a squeeze, and then rises wordlessly to her feet. Rosie takes another breath, then turns her attention to me.

"So, here's everything I know about that place..."

She fills me in on all the details that she has picked up from her regulars over the years with complete clarity.

By the time she is done, I'm certain that my men will have no trouble tracking this place down.

I thank her, and we turn to leave, but I notice that Cara is shaking slightly as we head to the door.

I place my hand on the small of her back, and she stops.

"You alright?" I ask her. She presses her lips together for a second and closes her eyes, as though bringing herself back down to earth.

"Yeah," she replies. "Yeah, I... I'm fine."

"You did great back there," I murmur to her. She glances at me, clearly not entirely believing it.

"I just talked to her. After what she's been through?—"

"You have no idea how important talking can be for these women," I cut her off. "They haven't been spoken to like people in a long time. Even besides the information we get from them, it's important for them to figure themselves out."

That seems to get through to her.

"I guess so," she mutters, and we continue towards the door. "Just hope that your sister is going to be able to forgive me one of these days, too..."

"Don't pay any attention to her," I reply, waving my hand slightly. "She doesn't know what she's talking about. She just likes to hold a grudge, trust me."

As we walk, she falls silent again, as though something has just crossed her mind.

"Didn't you mention having another sister?"

I tense slightly. This is really not the thing that I want to be talking about right now. Everything that happened with Melinda is in the past. It has to be, or I know it's going to drive us all even more crazy than it already has.

"I'll tell you about her some other time," I promise her.

She takes my hand, and I can tell that she's still curious—still wants to get to the bottom of this, whatever is going on inside my head.

But she is willing to wait. At least she seems to realize that we have time now.

With her father gone, we are not running against the clock.

We're finally able to relax and focus on just being a couple.

Even if I know I've got a whole stack of baggage left for my family to unravel yet.

We reach the door, and Maya is still standing there, almost like she's on lookout.

No doubt she just wanted to keep her distance from Cara, as she tries to figure out whether she likes her or not.

When I say that Maya loves to hold a grudge, I mean I'd list it among her most notable attributes, and Cara is a Leone, even after turning her dad in to us.

Cara makes her way to the car and Maya catches my arm before I can follow her. I glance around to look at my sister, eyebrows raised.

"What is it?"

"What was she talking to Rosie about back there?"

"You saw that?"

She deflates slightly.

"I followed you in," she admits. "I wanted to see what she was doing up there."

"What she was doing?" I hiss back. "You think she's going to hurt them or something?"

She glares back at me. She doesn't have to say what is truly on her mind, I can tell, as much as it pisses me off.

"What was she saying?"

"She was helping her," I reply bluntly. "Told her not to blame herself for everything that happened."

Maya's face softens for a moment. She throws this sharp exterior out there, but the truth is, beneath it all, there is a girl who worries about the people closest to her, and that includes me.

"She's treating you well?"

I press my lips together to contain a smirk.

"Oh, yeah. She's treating me well."

"Oh, shut up," she exclaims, pushing me slightly.

I laugh, leaning against the doorframe. "You going to let me go now?"

"I guess so. You coming to Dad's this weekend for dinner?"

"I sure am."

My father had insisted on all of us getting together to celebrate our recent victory, though I got the feeling that there was also something of a plan to scope out Cara at the same time, too.

My father had been insistent on his acceptance of her, but he still wants to see how she's going to fit into the family.

Though, of course, only I know that she is going to be a part of the family like never



before after that night. I haven't even told my sister about it. Call me selfish, but I want to see the looks on everyone's faces when it happens—especially Cara's.

"See you then."

Maya leans up to give me a quick hug and I return it; afterwards, I make my way over to the car. Cara is leaning against the door, and her face lights up as I get closer.

"You ready to go home?" she asks, and I nod, pulling the door open for her. She climbs inside, the scent of her hair filling the air for a moment.

"Yeah," I reply. "Ready to get home, Cara."

Cara

As soon as the door opens, I am greeted by a warm smile on the face of the eldest member of the Mastroni family.

"Mr. Mastroni," I greet him, slightly nervous. "I— thank you so much for having me here..."

"Are you kidding?" he says, putting his arm around my shoulders and steering me inside. "Any woman who can put up with my son is welcome here..."

I shoot a look back to Max, who rolls his eyes at me playfully as he heads through to the kitchen to drop off the bottle of wine we brought with us.

I have been equal parts nervous and excited about this evening.

My nerves aren't because I don't want to spend time with Max's family, far from it.

It's because deep in my heart I know I still have to prove myself as a trustworthy person to his sister and their father.

"And call me Dario," he adds as he leads me through to the dining room.

The table is already groaning under the weight of all the food, and the deliciously savory scents fill the air. I inhale deeply, closing my eyes and letting the smell of it rush through me.

"Oh, that smells amazing," I sigh. "Did you make this yourself...?"

"With some help from me," Maya interjects from the doorway.

I glance around and smile at her, and, to my surprise, she smiles back at me, with no hint of malice.

I am not sure I have ever seen her so pleased to see me.

I hope that the conversation I had with Rosie yesterday might have helped soothe her concern about me, though I get the feeling it's going to be a long road with her.

"Well, it looks amazing," I reply as Max enters the room, bringing a hand to my back so he can guide me to my seat.

Their dining room is cozy, but well-appointed—deep red wallpaper accented by dark wood furnishings.

I notice a picture of Dario with a woman propped up on a small table next to the door, and I guess at once it's their mother.

I smile. It's almost as though she's joining us for this dinner, though of course that's impossible.

"Tuck in," Dario announces as he pours everyone a generous glass of wine from the bottle that Max brought with us. He reaches for my knee under the table and gives it a light squeeze. I manage a small smile, hoping that my nerves are not making themselves known too obviously on my face.

We begin to eat, and soon, the conversation is flying.

It's clear that these three get on best when there is a dinner table between them, a little wine to keep the conversation going. I can't help but notice that there are two empty chairs around the table, conspicuously empty—one for their mother, I suppose, but who is the other one for?

This sister that he won't tell me about. ..?

I push that aside. It's not my place to go asking for explanations about that, not now. I am just here for a pleasant family dinner, and to try to make some inroads with this new life I am living.

"So, tell me, how are you finding Max's apartment?" Dario asks me, turning the conversation suddenly in my direction.

For a moment, I trip over my words, not quite sure how to get out an answer.

"Uh, yeah, it's—it's lovely," I reply.

"Different than anywhere else you've lived, huh?" Maya remarks.

"Oh, I... I never lived with anyone other than my father," I admit, and suddenly wish I could take it back. It makes me sound so unworldly.

Maya seems to be in the thick of it with her father and everything else, but there I was, part of my father's family with no idea what he was really doing.

"Well, plenty of time for you to make the place your own," Dario adds kindly, finding some way to divert the conversation away from the fact that I have nothing good to say.

I breathe a sigh of relief. They don't seem to hold it against me. In fact, I think most

of these nerves are more coming from inside my head than from anything they are doing.

"Yes, and the next one, you might even be able to get rid of my brother," Maya jokes.

A laugh passes around the table, and I reach for my wine. See? I tell myself. It's going well. You were getting worried for nothing...

We eat and clear the plates together, then Max offers to make everyone a coffee in the kitchen. I linger with him before I return to the table with Dario and Maya.

"You sure you don't need a hand?" I ask Max, before I go. I hook my chin over his shoulder, glad to have a moment alone with him.

"I'm fine," he replies, dropping a kiss on my head and then turning his attention back to the task at hand. "You go and spend some time with my father and my sister. They really like you."

I nod and do as I'm told. Though, if I'm being honest, I'm a little surprised that he would brush me off the way he did. Usually, he wants to grab every single moment we can get alone together, and I am more than willing to give him everything he wants...

Still, I return to the table, where Maya has topped off my wine and Dario is putting on a record.

For a moment, I pause in the doorway, just looking at the people before me.

For the first time, it strikes me, I actually feel like an adult, like an equal to everyone in the room.

I'm sure there is still so much I have to learn about the way this world really works, but here, now, I actually feel at home.

I take my seat again, and Dario glances around.

"You like the music?" he asks, waving his hand towards the record player. "Always sounds better on vinyl, I'd say..."

"It's lovely," I reply, and it is—the soft notes waft through the air around us, filling the room like the scent of the food did earlier, just as earthy.

A few moments later, Max appears in the doorway, carrying a tray with all of our coffees on it. He distributes them between us, passing them back and forth, every one made up exactly how the recipient likes it.

But as he takes his seat next to me, I notice that there is still something on the tray before him—a small, squarish object that I can't quite see from where I am sitting. I crane my neck over to get a better look, and Max flashes me a grin, catching me staring.

"What's wrong?"

"What is that thing?" I ask, pointing to the object that has me so confused. Now I am a little closer to it, I can see what looks to be deep purple velvet. But what would a velvet box that small be?—

Before I can finish the thought, he reaches across and grabs it. And as he pops it open, I hear Maya let out a gasp.

Because inside that box is a ring. A sparkling silver ring, with a diamond pressed into the center, the gleam of it so intense in the soft light it's hard to believe it's real.

"Oh, my..."

"You know what it is now?" he asks, a low, teasing tone to his voice. I nod, my hands clasped to my chest. I can't believe what I am looking at—I can't even come close to figuring it out.

"Yeah..."

"I wanted to do this properly," he continues.

It suddenly clicks to me that this is what he has been planning all night, this is why he was so insistent I come, and this is why he wanted this time in the kitchen alone.

The thought of someone pouring all of that effort in, just to ask me—not to demand an answer, not to force me down the aisle whether I want it or not, but to allow me to make that decision about my future—is more than I can make sense of.

The emotion swells up in my chest, my heart pounding as he tells me what I didn't even know I needed to hear.

"Because I'm in love with you, Cara, which you already know well," he continues, a small smile flickering on the corners of his lips. I want to kiss him so badly, but more than anything, I want to hear what he has to say.

"And I want to spend the rest of my life with you. More than that, I want to offer you a place in this family. God knows the one you had before didn't treat you the way you deserved to be treated, but you made the hardest choice in the world by choosing to side with us."

I press my lips together. I feel like I might start crying at any moment, happy tears, the joy almost bursting out of my chest. Yes, it's bittersweet, knowing everything that

has led to this moment, but that is all behind us now. And what awaits in the future is the only thing that matters.

"So, Cara," he murmurs, as he lifts the ring from the box and takes my hand. "Will you marry me?"

"Of course, I will," I reply, without so much as a second thought.

He grins as he slips the ring on my finger, and he pulls me in for a kiss. It's just a chaste one, but I know that there will be far more to come tonight.

When we pull back, Maya is gaping at us both in total shock.

"Max, it's fine to surprise her, but you should have at least told us!" Maya exclaims, punching her brother lightly on the arm.

"Hey, I wanted to see the looks on all your faces," he replies, holding his hands up playfully, like he's been caught in the act. "And trust me... it was so worth it."

He glances around the room at all of us—at his father, who is grinning widely, his sister, who is already leaning over and demanding to get a look at my ring. And then, his gaze lands on me, and the look on his face when our eyes come together is everything that I need in that moment.

"I love it," Maya sighs. "Just like the one Mom had..."

But I can hardly hear what she is saying, nor can I make out what Dario is announcing, though I'm distantly aware that it's got something to do with getting a priceless bottle of champagne out of the wine cellar.

I slide my fingers across the table to interlock with Max's, hardly able to believe that



this is the man I am going to get to spend the rest of my life with.

The last time I knew that I was going to be married, all I could think about was how scared I was.

How it felt like a million opportunities slamming in my face, crushing me, pushing me down, leaving me with no way to come out the other side unscathed.

I had slipped into that wedding dress like a funeral shroud, feeling as though I was walking to my grave instead of my husband.

But this? This feels anything but that. This feels like everything opening up before me again, the light of a new day breaking over my face, the pressure finally lifting.

Not just being with Max, but being a Mastroni, being part of this new empire that would do good in the world instead of tearing it down as my father had done.

I mouth I love you over the table, and he mouths it back. He tightens his grip on my hand, and I know, more clearly than anything in the world, that this is where I belong.

Max

"I don't know," Cara laughs, as she follows me out of the elevator. "I still think I have some impressing to do with your family..."

"Seriously?" I shoot back. "My dad loves you. I think he was happier than me when you said yes to the proposal."

"Oh, I don't know about that," she teases, as she spins around to face me, biting her lip.

Her cheeks are slightly flushed, and I can see the playful flirtatiousness flashing in her eyes. She might have been playing the role of my innocent, loving girlfriend-turned-fiancée all night, but there is another side to her, a side to her that I can't wait to remind myself of tonight.

I make my way towards her, sliding my hands beneath the green fabric of her dress. As I sink my fingers into her thighs, I let out a long groan.

"You see, how could I let anyone else get close to you?" I murmur to her, shaking my head as I brush my lips across hers. "I had to lock you down as soon as I got the chance. Couldn't risk it going any other way..."

"Oh, that's how this works, huh?" She giggles, swooping a strand of hair back behind her ear. "And what exactly do you want me for, Max?"

"I think you know..."

"Yeah, but I'd like to hear you say it."

I pull back, cocking an eyebrow at her. This side of her, this liberated, exciting side, I can't wait to see more of. I love it when she's vocal with me, and I intend to make the most of that over the course of the night.

"I want to fuck you," I breathe in her ear, and she shudders against me, her body sinking into mine. I pick her up off the ground and pin her to the wall just next to the elevator—no need to get to bed to do this. I have to have her right here and now.

"That's what I thought," she teases, as I kiss her again, reaching up to slip my fingers into her panties.

She groans against my mouth, her tongue sweeping along my bottom lip lavishly. I can taste the remnants of red wine on her lips, though she is more intoxicating than it could ever be.

I sink two fingers inside of her, grinning as I feel how wet she is for me, how ready.

She moans again. I sink my teeth into her lip slightly, drawing another shudder from her.

She is still so new to all of this that we have a whole world of sexual connection to explore, and I want nothing more than to be there to lead her through every single part of it.

"Tell me what you want," I demand, turning her question around on her.

She squirms slightly against me, as I curl my fingers a little, pressing against the sensitive nub a few inches inside of her.

"Oh!" she cries out, her eyes flying open as the new sensation hits her. It's intense, I can tell from the look on her face, but that just makes me want to push her even further.

"Tell me, Cara," I continue, not letting her sudden reactions throw me off.

If anything I want to make this difficult for her. I want to make it hard for her to think straight, hard for her to focus on anything other than how much she wants me, and how much effort it is going to take to get the words out to tell me.

"I... I want..."

I press my fingers against her a little harder, massaging them in a circular motion. She lets out a hiss through her teeth, her body shivering, her legs parting so she can wrap them around me.

"I want to feel you inside of me," she blurts out, at last, as though she can hardly believe that she is actually saying it out loud. I grin and drop an almost tender kiss on the corner of her lips.

"With pleasure," I murmur back, and I withdraw my hand from between my legs and take myself into my hand.

Her panties are pulled to the side, just enough that I can nestle myself against her entrance. I watch her face as I sink myself into her, and the way the pleasure rushes to fill her eyes is the hottest damn thing in the world to me.

"There you go," I continue, as I start to move into her at a slow, steady pace. "You like the way that feels?"

She nods, but I am not going to settle for anything less than every detail.

"Then say it," I demand, grinning.

Her eyes are a little hazy and distant from the pleasure, and she is clearly struggling to drag her mind back into the moment.

"I love the way it feels," she finally manages to force out, her eyes focusing back on mine for just a moment, but I change the angle slightly, so that I am grinding up against her with every thrust, and her eyes drift shut again as she lets the pleasure take control of her.

Her ankles squeezed on either side of me, it's as though she can't possibly get enough of the way that I feel right now.

Her breath is starting to come harder and faster, her belly rising and falling against mine.

Her hand rests on the back of my neck, and I can feel the cool metal of the ring against my skin, the reminder of the fact that she has just agreed to be with me for the rest of my life. ..

I can feel her starting to tense around me, her body rocking back against mine as she takes every inch of me. It's hard to believe that we only started doing this a few weeks ago. It might be new, but I can already tell that it is going to feel this exciting for the rest of our lives.

There is something addictive about her, something that consumes me body and soul in a way no other woman ever has, and as I watch her lips part to gasp down a few more gulps of air, I pull her onto me hard.

And finally, her body arches against mine. She clings to me, her whole back tensing up for a moment as her thighs crush against me. As she spasms around me, I whisper

into her ear, telling her what a good girl she is for me, how perfect she feels right now, how perfect she looks.

Listening to the sighs of pleasure she lets out as I tell her everything she wants to hear, it's all I need to go over the edge myself.

I sink into her one last time and let the warmth of her envelop every part of me, holding her close, drawing in the scent of her as I bury my face into her neck.

I can never get enough of the way her skin smells, like an alchemic mixture made just for me.

I trail my tongue along the vein in her neck, feeling the throbbing of it beneath my tongue as she begins to catch her breath once more. When she draws back enough to look me in the eye, I can tell she is still having a hard time speaking, so I just kiss her.

"This, us, together for the rest of your life," I tease her gently. "You think you can live with that?"

"Oh, I don't think I can live without it." She kisses me one more time, and then begins to disentangle herself from my body, her legs shaky as she finally plants them back on the floor.

I catch her hand, and draw it to my lips, pressing a kiss against the finger that she now wears her engagement ring on. Her eyes soften when she realizes that is what I am doing, and she smiles at me.

"I can't believe I get to spend the rest of my life with you," she whispers, and I can hear the swell of emotion in her chest as she forces those words out.

I can't help but think back to the day I met her, at what was meant to be her own

wedding—how close she came to being wedded to someone else. Even now, it feels laughable, like she was always destined to end up here, with me.

"The rest of your life," I echo after her, a promise that I intend to keep. She tugs her dress down slightly, and grins.

"You think we should toast to that? Out on the balcony?"

"I think we should. I have a bottle of champagne just for the occasion, actually..."

We pour ourselves a glass and then head outside, where the city air is warm, the breeze pouring in from the river. She takes a sip of her champagne, and glances around.

"You know, I think this place would look better with some plants in it," she remarks. "A bit of life, you know?"

I chuckle.

"Oh, so this is what they were all warning me about when it came to a woman's touch, huh...?"

"What the hell does that mean?" she exclaims, but she's laughing.

I draw her in beside me, resting my hand on the curve of her waist, marveling for a moment at how well the two of us fit together.

"I love you, Max," she tells me, her voice barely carrying above the sound of the breeze. But I feel as though I could make it out anywhere, my ears tuned in to her frequency.

"I love you, too," I reply, pulling her a little more firmly against me.

Because I want her to know that I wouldn't want to be anywhere other than at her side, not for anything in the world. I wouldn't want to be anywhere but here, with her, with the woman who makes me feel alive in ways that nobody ever has before.

No matter what the world throws at us next, as long as we have each other, I know that we will make it through in one piece.

And for now, at least, that's all I can think of that matters.



## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:43 am*

I lean back in my office chair as the door opens and grin as Cara slips around the door, carrying a tray of coffee.

"Thought you could use a break."

"Yeah, I've been hard at work all day," I reply as I reach out for her, pulling her onto my lap for a kiss before she can so much as put the tray down. She grins into my embrace, softening against me at once, and I know she has been holding off on this for just as long as she is able.

I have to admit, I'm getting far too used to these little interruptions from her when I am supposed to be working. It's like there is a constant pull between us, a need to be together. It makes the times we aren't in the same room hard.

I should really be keeping my focus on my family's work, but given our recent victory, things seem to have calmed down around the city.

We have been clearing out all of the brothels and almost all of the women have been given new homes, a few heading out of state to live with friends or family.

I'm sure it's going to be a while before they are entirely back on their feet, but at least just by receiving their freedom back they are going a long way towards it.

And that leaves Cara and me time to plan the wedding.

She wants to get married as soon as we can, and more than that, she has insisted on taking every detail in hand personally, seeing to it that everything is precisely as she

wants it.

I suppose it makes sense, after her last wedding, when she didn't even get to choose the groom for herself.

I am happy to give her everything she could possibly want. I don't give a damn how much it costs. I just want her to feel like she is truly part of my life now, part of the family.

My father already views her that way. We have a standing dinner date with him every Friday, and the two of them chat about music, Cara indulging him in his conversations about records.

And the news on the topic of her father has been gratifyingly silent for the time being, though I'm not sure how long it will stay that way.

He seems to have done the smart thing and made a break out of the city, but where exactly he has gone or what he is planning are another thing entirely.

With his empire in shambles and his only family abandoning him, I don't see what he has left worth fighting for, but a man like that won't necessarily act in ways that make complete sense to outsiders.

I am about to lose myself to this kiss with Cara when a sudden noise pulls me back to reality—a buzzing at the door. We pull back from each other, and she frowns as she looks back at me, clearly confused.

"Were you expecting someone?"

I shake my head.

"You?"

She does the same. She hops from my lap and makes her way over to the buzzer, and peers at the small screen that allows us a view to the street outside.

"Looks like Maya..."

My heart drops. My sister wouldn't just come by with no warning. If she's here, then she has good reason to be, and I am not entirely sure I am going to like it.

"Let her in. Buzz her up."

I wait by the elevator as Maya rushes upstairs, and when she reaches me, I can tell that something serious has happened. Her eyes are wide, her gaze drawn, as though she has seen a ghost, and she is clutching her phone in her hand, brandishing it to me.

"What the hell is wrong? Are you okay? What are you doing here?" I demand.

I need answers before I jump into this. If it's as serious as her expression tells me right now, I don't want to walk in with no context.

She swallows hard. She stares me down for a moment. And then, at last, she speaks.

"It's Miranda."

The world stops for a moment.

"Miranda?" I hiss back, as I snatch the phone off of her. Cara glances between us, no clearer on what is going on.

"Who's Miranda?"

"You didn't tell her who Miranda is?" Maya asks me incredulously, her eyes widening.

Doesn't she get it? There are some things we just can't get into, some things that I thought were so far in the past they would never matter any longer.

She is on the other side of the damn world, all the way in Italy, as she has been since the night that call came through—the call where she told us that she couldn't come back to the family, the call that changed everything, the call that tore another gaping hole in my heart. ..

I lift the phone to my ear, and pause for a moment. I can hear breathing. Is it her? I stand there for a moment in silence, no idea what to say, no idea what to do.

"M-Max? Is that you?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. It's her; there's no doubt about it. Hearing her voice tosses me back in time, to the years that we grew up together. We were the two oldest. We had been a pair for so long, until she had turned her back and left...

"Yeah, Miranda," I reply, after a long pause. "Yeah, it's me."

"Max, I?—"

In the background of the call, I hear what sounds like a gun cocking. My ears prick up at once. But she's meant to be out of all of this. She's meant to have left this all behind...

She has to catch her breath, her fear getting the better of her. And, if there is one thing I remember about my sister, it's that she doesn't scare easily.

She speaks again, her voice low and urgent.

"Max, I need your help."