



# Tangled in Deception (The Dark Enchantment #1)

**Author:** *Gwendolyn Morgan*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Lexi Caruso is trapped in the gilded tower of her uncle's criminal empire, uncovers a web of deceit surrounding her parents' tragic fate. As she unravels dark secrets with Nate Blackwood, who's loyalty hides a forbidden desire. In a world where danger lurks behind every whisper, Lexi must choose between loyalty and love, knowing that escaping her tower may lead to both salvation and destruction.

Tangled in Deception is a spicy reimagining of Rapunzel and is a stand-alone book in the Dark Enchantment Series. Embers of Revenge and Treacherous Tides will be released soon, and feature Lexi's best friends, Ellie and Scarlett.

**Total Pages (Source):** 4

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:26 am*

Lexi – Age 13

As I turned the corner onto my street, the blaring lights and piercing sounds of police cars and ambulances attacked my senses. I had no idea what was happening. At first, I thought it was our next-door neighbor's house, Mrs. Roberts. But as I approached the scene, a realization hit me. It was my house. Suddenly, it was like a wave of white noise washed over me, and the only thing I could think about was my parents, making my feet fly underneath me.

I got yanked backward by a massive police officer, “Whoa there, young lady, where do you think you’re going?” He asked.

I blinked twice. “That’s my house,” I said, pointing to the white wrap-around porch with chipped paint.

The officer said something in his hand-held radio, and then gave me a look of sadness and pity.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait here,” he said.

“But..but my parents! Where are my parents?”

I began to move myself under the tape when he caught me a second time. He held onto me until a female officer took me to a police car and had me sit in the back.

“I’m Officer Wendy.” She crouched down and smiled. “And what is your name?”

“Lexi – I mean Alexandria Caruso,” I said, swallowing hard.

“Miss Caruso, I’m afraid I have some bad news,” she said, placing her hand on my knee. “Both your parents are gone. I am so sorry for your loss,” she said, her arm reaching to touch my shoulder, gently moving my long blond hair behind my back.

Those words hit me like a ton of bricks.

“Do you have any other family, sweetheart?”

“Huh? What?” I asked.

“Family, do you have any other family, grandparents, aunts, uncles?”

“My aunt Lydia lives somewhere in Europe, I think, and I have an uncle, Carmine Caruso.”

Her face flashed with concern for a split second; then, her demeanor changed as she used her hand-held radio, and another officer joined her. They stepped a few feet away, but I could still hear them.

“Her uncle is Carmine Caruso,” Officer Wendy said to the other.

“Shit,” the other officer said, then winced when he noticed I was looking at him. He smiled awkwardly at me as he walked over to a woman who was in a different uniform from the rest.

The flash of bright lights faded into the evening, and a slight breeze tickled my arms as I sat in the police car. The scene became less chaotic, and Officer Wendy approached me.

“Good news! Your uncle is going to meet you at the station and take you to Brookhaven.”

“But I live here. I don’t want to live in Brookhaven,” I said. The words came out over a lump in my throat. I hadn’t seen my uncle for a long time, and the man I remember was not a nice person.

“I’m afraid there isn’t much of a choice, my dear,” Officer Wendy said with a little smile. “This is Rachel with children and family services.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Lexi,” Rachel said with a little smile. “I’m here to help pack some of your things, so please come with me.”

Lexi – age 18

“Lex, I swear to cow, if you don’t get up, I will pour cold water over your head!” Scarlett threatened with a teasing tone.

I rolled over with a sigh, only to see her standing on my bed with a glass of water above my head.

“Don’t you dare!” I shouted. She started laughing and jumping up and down on my bed.

“Come on! Get up! We have shopping to do! El is going to be here any minute!”

Scarlett and El or Ellie have been my best friends since I moved to Brookhaven when I was thirteen. Scarlett’s mom, Dierdre, manages the casino my uncle Carmine owns. El’s dad is my uncle’s lawyer, who also has clients worldwide, so he’s gone a lot. Dierdre has become like a mother to me and El over the years, and has helped me through more than I could have alone.

The Majestic Mirage Hotel and Casino takes up the first 48 floors of the tallest skyscraper in the city. My uncle lives in the penthouse, which is on the fiftieth floor. Above the penthouse are the Grand Gardens, a lush landscape in the middle of the steel and glass jungle of the city of Brookhaven. That's where I live in a little white tower near the back of the gardens.

Invisible security fences surround all four sides. The only way to get in is through a stairwell; about twenty feet from my tower. There is also a glass conservatory where all our special family events are held.

The perpetual bachelor, my uncle always has women around him. I think he built this place because I cramped his lifestyle. He's been very protective of me since day one. My parents died when I was thirteen, and their death was ruled a murder-suicide. It was discovered later it was just staged to look that way. A rival family took a hit out on them because my father was planning on changing things when my nonno died, and he took over the business. My uncle was his younger brother, and he took my father's place. He doesn't talk about it and gets mad when I bring it up.

He keeps a close watch over me. I'm not allowed to leave the casino. I've been told since day one that I am a valuable asset, and I could get taken very easily and used as a bargaining chip against my uncle. It's not something a thirteen-year-old wants to hear, but those are the cards I was dealt. I've had tutors for all my schooling, and my uncle won't even entertain the idea of me going away to college, so I'll be taking online classes instead. My friends never miss a chance to tease me about living in a "tower" at the top of the tallest building in the city. And because of my long blonde hair, they're always calling me their modern-day Rapunzel. You'd think I'd be mad, but I'm not. My friends know the life I live—they just joke to keep things light. I guess it's their way of trying to make me feel normal like I'm just some girl in a tower, not someone tangled in all this mess.

It was super rough for me, especially those first few years. My aunt Lydia didn't want

me to live with her, so I was sent here. As I got older, with Scarlett and Ellie by my side, we started sneaking out of the building. This place was built in the nineteen twenties by my Great-Grandfather Vito. It has lots of hidden passageways and staircases. Behind the garden wall, past all the rosebushes, we discovered a secret door leading down three flights of stairs to a service elevator that spits into an abandoned hallway. We are always careful because my long, almost white-blond hair is extremely noticeable. My uncle would be livid if he ever found out.

“It’s too early,” I yawned.” Last night, we went out to another casino, staying out until past midnight. It was risky, but it was a lot of fun. The garden gate isn’t connected to the security system, so slipping back in is easy.

“We have to shop! You need to look hot tonight!”

“What’s the point? I won’t know anyone besides you, Ellie, your mom, and Zio.”

“That’s not all,” she squealed.

“What aren’t you telling me, Scarlett?” I asked, sitting up.

Nate’s back, and he’s coming tonight!” She cried.

I flopped myself back onto my bed and screamed into my pillow.

I’ve had a crush on Nate Blackwood since I moved here. He’s five years older and is a living, breathing, chiseled, sculpted god. Dark wavy hair, tanned and muscular with a trim waist and blue eyes so deep you could drown. His father is head of security for the entire building and casino. He’s always seen us like his annoying kid sisters, but that will all change tonight.

“Holy shit!” I screamed and jumped out of bed. “Why the hell didn’t you start with

that?” I screeched.

She just laughed and followed me into my little kitchenette.

Scarlett popped over to the door after we heard El knocking, “You aren’t ready yet?” El shouted after she noticed I was still in my pj’s.

“I’m going, I’m going!” I waved them off and hopped into the shower.

The evening of my party, the weather was perfect. Not a cloud in the sky, and the city's twinkling lights surrounded us.

I walked out of my cottage wearing a pink iridescent sequin strapless dress with a high-low mermaid tail bottom, pink ice jewelry adorned my ears and neck, and I was wearing white iridescent strappy stilettos. They still only made me about five foot seven. I’m five foot five on a good day.

My uncle was walking toward me with a pink rose corsage. He gave me a soft kiss on the forehead. “Bellissima,” he said flawlessly in Italian. Even though he and my father were born and raised here, they both had an Italian accent because my grandparents only spoke Italian around the house.

“Graze, Zio,” I replied, and a smile arched his lips as he offered his arm and guided me to the conservatory. He insisted I learn Italian, so I always called him Zio – or uncle in Italian.

Zio went all out for me like he always did. A pink satin tablecloth covered a long table adorned with huge bouquets of pink roses in giant crystal vases. The lighting was very subtle; he hired a band and laid a small dance floor next to the table.

“It’s perfect, Zio,” I said, taking it all in.

“Anything for mio piccolina,” he smiled. That’s what he’s called me since the first day I came here. His face was genuine; he was happy, which for him was rare. He is always rushing from one thing to another, so I rarely saw this side of him. A twinge of worry crossed my mind for some reason, but I just chalked it up to him being able to take an evening away from putting out fires.

He pulled out a chair for me and then sat at the head of the table as the guests arrived. Scarlett and El sat next to me, along with Deirdre, who was on Scarlett’s other side. Twenty or so others joined us, and my uncle introduced them as either colleagues, friends, or associates.

When I noticed Nate and his friend Julian walking toward the table, my uncle was just standing up to speak. My breath caught as I watched Nate waiting for my uncle to finish.

“Happy birthday, piccolina!” My uncle said joyfully.

I felt my cheeks get warm as I thanked everyone and watched Nate and Julian approach the table, excusing themselves for being late. Nate sat directly across from me, Julian across from Scarlett. Julian is a big flirt and is a year younger than Nate. He flashed Scarlett a killer smile, and she turned bright pink; her eyes suddenly focused on her cream-colored, gold-rimmed plate.

Dinner was served, and after, Mario, the executive pastry chef, brought out a giant pink chiffon cake. Everyone sang, and I made my wish.

I closed my eyes as I blew out my candles. I wish he would kiss me tonight.

Once the table was cleared, people started to head to the dance floor. Julian asked Scarlett to dance right away. Nate came around the table, ran his fingers through his wavy blond locks, and gave me a smile that made my stomach drop.



“Happy birthday, little mouse,” he said with a devious smile.

He’s called me Little Mouse since the day we met. He’s a good foot taller than me, plus he knows it annoys the hell out of me.

“Thanks, I said, ignoring his nickname for me. “So, I hear you’re done with school, congrats.”

“Thanks,” he said, throwing his hands into his pockets, looking all innocent, but still as hot as sin. He stared at me for what seemed like hours, then offered his hand and led me to the dancefloor. The moment my hand touched his, electricity shot through my entire body. Heat pooled in my core when he wrapped his strong arms around my waist. Fuck.

Neither of us spoke for a few minutes. He just stared into my eyes with his gorgeous, almost sapphire blue ones.

“So I suppose your uncle hasn’t changed his mind about college, huh?”

“Nope,” I said, blowing out a big breath. “I stopped asking months ago.”

“He’s looking out for you, that’s all,” Nate said.

“Since when did you start agreeing with him?” I asked in an annoyed tone.

“Lots has changed since I finished school, Lex,” he said.

“I’m not a little kid anymore, Nate; I understand what’s happening in the world. I have for a long time. Zio has enough resources if he wanted to let me go; he would,” I said with a tone that told him to drop it.

I ignored his intense gaze, and neither of us said anything until the song ended. I pulled away, but he caught my hand and led me to the edge of the garden wall, away from prying eyes.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Nate,” I said with a huff, leaning against the wall.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about; you haven’t been in the world like I have.”

“You take a gap year, then four years of college, and now suddenly you ‘understand the world?’” I said with air quotes.

He huffed. “You never leave the tower, princess; you have no idea.”

“Yes, I” ...- I clamped my mouth shut.

His eyes narrowed at me, and he caged me in with an arm on either side of my head. “What did you say?”

“Nothing, never mind,” I said, looking away.

He took my chin and made me look at him.

His eyes narrowed, “Don’t do it again.”

“You’re not my dad, Nate,” I said with sarcasm dripping from my words.

He made a little rumble noise in the back of his throat.

“Why do you care anyway?”

“I’ve always cared, little mouse.”

“Sure,” I said, my eyes cast down at the ground.

“What do you mean, sure?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

“Mouse?” I look up at him and into his intense gaze.

His look changed at that moment, as if he was seeing me differently than before.

“We’ve talked about this before,” he said with a warning tone.

I had tried to kiss him a couple of summers before. It ended with me alone in this very spot.

“I’m eighteen, Nate.”

“True, but it doesn’t change anything,” he said, pushing his arms off the wall and away from me. His eyes pierced into my soul, and I didn’t think; I just flew forward and kissed him. He leaned into the kiss, pulling me toward him, my body melting against his before he pulled away.

“Lexi, it’s not possible.”

“Why not?”

“It’s just not, okay?” He said, brushing his hand through his hair.

“Why? Is it because of Zio?”

“No.”

“Then tell me.”

“I’m leaving for the Army in the morning.”

It was like someone squeezed all the air out of my lungs.

“Oh,” I said softly and started to walk away.

“Lex, please. Let’s not leave it this way.” He reached for my arm; I yanked it away.

“Fuck off Nate,” I growled.

Walking away from him was the hardest thing I ever had to do.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:26 am*

?Nate

Present day – five years after Lexi’s party

Julian rolls up in a red Mustang convertible, and I throw my duffel into the back seat. He pulls me in for a hug as I close the door.

“So good to have you home, man!”

He pulls away from the curb, and we dart into traffic.

“You might as well ask. I know you’re dying to know,” he says, raising a brow at me and giving me a knowing look.

I’ve kept tabs on Lexi since that kiss on her eighteenth birthday. She walked away, and it killed me.

She had gone from a girl to a woman in the years I was away at college. I had to adjust myself under the table when I laid eyes on her. I haven’t forgotten that kiss. The way her body molded to mine, the softness of her perfect pink lips, and her vanilla and lavender scent forever in my brain.

I lied to her. I told her nothing could happen between us because I was entering the Army. I knew she was going to be engaged the next day, and like an asshole, I didn’t warn her. I chickened out, kissed her back, and lied to her face. Little did I know her uncle would be marrying her off to a monster. I only could think about her the entire time I was away. I hardly dated. Whenever I was with another woman, her face

would pop into my head. She was too young for me. I was an adult; she had barely been eighteen. It was wrong. But that didn't stop me from thinking about her twenty-four-seven.

She was marrying Matteo Russo. The son of George Russo, International arms dealer. Matteo is a sociopath. He has a different woman on his arm every night and a different one in his bed later that night.

“Her bachelorette party is tomorrow night at the casino, and we're on security detail,” Julian says, looking over at me. Carmine offered me a job at the casino when my father told him I had gone into counterintelligence.

I've only been home once since I enlisted, for my father's funeral two years ago. He died of a heart attack, which I believe is bullshit. I've been looking into his death ever since. I'm certain Carmine's number one – Sal Graziano had something to do with it. He's a slimy son of a bitch. He became head of security after my father died. He always wanted my father's job and was all too happy to take it, even before my father was laid to rest. I swore to myself that I would prove it was him, and now that I'm back, I can focus on making that happen.

Julian has worked security at the casino since I enlisted.

“How is he allowing her to marry that sociopath?” I ask with a hiss.

“Money. Power. Take your pick.”

“He knows about Matteo's reputation? What the fuck? I thought he was keeping Lexi on a short leash because of her ‘gift.’” I say with air quotes.

Lexi has what Carmine calls ‘a gift.’ He discovered it a few weeks after her eighteenth birthday. She had been sneaking out of the tower, going to other casinos,

and winning big. Lexi has a sixth sense for detecting deception and recognizing hidden agendas. Her uncle has been using it to his advantage ever since. He's made a lot of money and business deals because of her, so to let her go off and get married to someone who's been a rival for decades doesn't sit right with me.

"He's made some arrangements with the Russo's. They have no idea what she can do. He's been telling people for years that she went into cybersecurity to help the business, and she will continue to work for the casino from her office a few floors down from his penthouse."

I have to chuckle that she went into cybersecurity after sneaking out so many times. I nicknamed her Little Mouse the first day I met her; she was this tiny little thing and had an unnatural ability to fit into tight spaces, especially when she was somewhere she shouldn't be.

"What has your contact come up with?" Julian asks.

The contact he's asking about is my FBI contact. But not even Julian knows who it really is. He thinks I have a friend who's still enlisted and is in counterintelligence. I enlisted and was trained as an explosive ordinance disposal -or EOD specialist. I also went into counterintelligence and was recruited by the FBI. I've been at Quantico for the past two years. My dad told me it was too much, and he was probably right.

The nightmares started soon after my first EOD mission, and the only way to quiet them was through the underground boxing matches that I participated in. Being back home, I hope the nightmares will subside. They take me to a very dark place, one where I can lose control very easily. I don't have to be asleep for them to find me; they find me either way, awake or asleep; it doesn't matter.

Now, I've been assigned to the Caruso family. The FBI and Interpol have been trying to take Carmine Caruso down for decades. His shady dealings are well hidden, and

my association with the family puts me in a unique position.

I've been trying to get something to prove to Carmine that Matteo can't be trusted. I finally found something that might do the trick, but waiting for confirmation is taking forever.

"Something pretty big, but they probably won't have confirmation until Saturday."

"The wedding is Saturday," he says, raising a brow.

"You don't think I don't know that asshole?"

"I missed you too dickhead."

I just hope Carmine sees how much Matteo could hurt Lexi and calls off the wedding.

Lexi -Present Day

"You about ready?" Scarlett asks as she peers around the door of my office.

Scarlett's long red hair is in a ponytail, and she is wearing a green mermaid sequin mini dress.

"I'm not going," I say, not looking away from my computer screen.

"You can't miss your bachelorette party," El says, popping up behind me.

"Seeing as I'm being forced to marry a womanizing asshole who brought a hooker to his apartment last night, I think I'm entitled to do whatever the fuck I want," I say with a sarcastic tone.



“I know this is shit, sweetie, but you don’t have a choice,” Deirdre says from behind Scarlett.

The night after my eighteenth birthday, my uncle introduced me to my fiancé, Matteo Russo. He’s a womanizing sociopath whose father is an International arms dealer. That’s why he was so happy the night of my party. Not because he was glad to be celebrating but because I was old enough to announce the engagement.

Arranged marriages are not new in our family. My grandparents’ marriage was arranged, and they had been married for over fifty years. They were happy almost right away. My engagement is a business deal. Nothing more.

Last night, I called him to finalize plans with the photographer, and a woman answered Matteo’s phone. I heard a loud crack and then silence. He picked up the phone and was beyond angry that I dared call him. Asshole.

Scarlett takes my hand as I reluctantly click off my computer. Deirdre slips her arm around me, and we take the elevator up to my suite, one floor below my uncle’s penthouse. When I turned twenty-one, he gave it to Matteo and me as an engagement present. Luckily, my uncle wouldn’t let Matteo move in until the wedding night. My little tower sits empty, but I still sneak up there every so often using the secret door, which thankfully is still a secret, even after Scarlett, El, and I got caught a few weeks after my eighteenth birthday.

My uncle’s number one, Sal, had been following us, watching me win at different casinos in the city, until one night, he revealed himself and brought us to my uncle’s office. Why he picked that night, I have no idea. It was all on me. I got greedy and sloppy. I was trying to win enough to escape and it blew up in my face.

My uncle was beyond livid. He was red-faced and kept throwing things as he raged at El, Scarlett, and I. Deirdre threw herself under the bus and told him that she had left

the security codes on her desk, and that's how we slipped out.

I had to admit how I was winning. He made everyone leave the room and threatened Deirdre's job if I didn't tell him. I have the ability to read people and know if they are being truthful or not. My uncle calls it 'my gift.' He's used it to his advantage ever since. I've sat in more meetings than I can count since he found out. He always told people I was in the room to learn the business because I was his heir. I've been on a very short leash ever since. He had me go into cybersecurity as a cover for my ability.

I put on my little purple and blue iridescent cocktail dress, throw my hair into a twist, and put on my matching stilettos. My bachelorette party is a joke. It's at the casino in the VIP section.

Scarlett, El, and Deirdre are the only three that I will really know at my own bachelorette party. Matteo's sisters, Giovanna and Grace, and Sal's granddaughter, Valentina, will also be there.

Giovanna and Grace are the biggest bitches on the planet and only want to come to be seen. Valentina isn't as bad, but she always follows Grace and Giovanna's lead. They are also my bridesmaids, and I trust all of them about as far as I can throw them.

We take the elevator down to the hallway that leads to the VIP section. Two huge security guys are guarding the door. One pulls the red velvet rope aside, nods, and we all file in. The three other women already emptied a bottle of Dom, and a waitress is bringing a second bottle. All three get up, and it's fake cheek kisses all around before they sit back down, and the gossip continues.

"Here's to you and our big brother," Grace says with a tiny hiccup.

"You are so lucky, Lexi," Valentina says.

“Thanks,” I say dryly.

Julian climbs the stairs and flashes a smile at Scarlett, and she smiles back. He must be on security detail tonight. My breath catches as I see Nate following close behind him.

“What is he doing here?” I whisper to Scarlett.

“I have no idea,” she answers. Her eyes narrow as she looks at Julian.

I haven’t seen Nate since his father’s funeral two years ago. I avoided him at the service and faked a migraine so I could skip the cemetery and lunch afterward. He left a day later, but not before knocking on my door. Scarlett answered and told him I didn’t want to see him.

“He looked like I just kicked a puppy,” she told me after closing the door. “Maybe you should clear the air.”

“I don’t know what I’ll do if we are in the same room again. It went so well the last time,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“I don’t think he’d have come if he didn’t want to make things right, Lex.”

“I can’t,” I said quietly. “I just can’t. Maybe someday, but not now.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:26 am*

Nate

Julian and I are about twenty feet away from the table where Lexi and her friends are sitting. She looks even more amazing than I remember. I can tell Julian didn't let her know I'd be here by the look on her face.

"You didn't tell Lexi?" I ask quietly, pushing his arm.

"Sorry man, my bad," he says with a grin that tells me he is anything but sorry.

"Dick move, man," I say with a huff as I try my damndest not to stare at her.

I took a risk and called my contact this morning. He still doesn't have confirmation on what he's found out about Matteo. The need to protect her is consuming me.

I watch Lexi drinking a glass of champagne. Then, a second one.

I walk over around the booth bench near her. "Maybe you should slow down," I rumble in her ear.

"Maybe you should mind your business," she says with a little hiccup.

"I'm serious, Lex," I rumble.

"Leave me be, Nate," she spits.

"Nate!" Grace Graziano shrieks and stumbles as she walks toward me. I catch her,

and she leans into my body.

“Thanks,” she purrs, looking up at me, her arms around my neck.

“How about we go someplace quiet?” She mews. “You must need some relief after all those years in the Army,” she says with a smile, her fingers are moving up my chest.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Awe, let me take care of you,” she says, touching my belt. I move her hand away and her arm from around my neck.

“Asshole,” she hisses. She then starts after another one of Carmine’s security guys.

My eyes snap to Lexi. Her eyes are narrowed, and her mouth is twisted as she looks at me.

She breaks her gaze and pulls Scarlett’s hand up; Ellie follows, and they head for the dancefloor.

“You need to let her be. She’s entering into a nightmare. This is her last night of freedom before being chained to a monster,” Deirdre says, looking at Lexi with sadness in her eyes.

“I know, Deirdre, but she’s vulnerable this way, even with all of the security around her.”

“Let her have this, Nate. You have no idea the hell she’s been through the past four years. Matteo is a sociopath who has hit her more than once.”

I growl low in my chest, and I see red, “And Carmine knows?”

“Yes, and he doesn’t care.”

“What the fuck is wrong with him?”

“He’s always been weird when it comes to Lexi, you know that. He uses her to his advantage; he always has.”

My fingernails are digging into my hands. Hearing that monster put his hands on her makes me want to rip him apart.

Lexi danced with Scarlett and Ellie late into the night. Now she’s drunk off her ass and half asleep on the booth bench.

“I’ll get her back upstairs,” I say to Julian with a rumble.

Lexi

Seeing Nate threw me for a loop. I was already on edge; then, he had the audacity to tell me to stop drinking. This is my last night of freedom before I’m married to a monster. I’ve been told what to do my entire life, so his getting after me just pissed me off even more.

“Let’s get you home,” Nate says as he places my arm around his neck.

“I don’t want to go home yet,” I say.

“You can barely stand, little mouse.”

I poke him in the chest, “I hate when you call me that. I’m not a little kid anymore.”

“I am very well aware,” he says with a smirk tugging at his lips. He places his arm around my waist, leads me to the elevator, and pushes the button.

The elevator starts to move, and I lose my balance and lean into his chest. He makes an annoyed rumble noise in the back of his throat, and I right myself and take a step back.

The elevator reaches my floor, and the door opens. I reach into my bag and take out my key, which slips out of my hand, so I bend down to pick it up. I get dizzy as I stand up straight. I touch the frame of the door, and Nate’s strong arms are around me again.

“Give me the key,” he says.

I hand it to him, and he opens the door and flips on the light.

“It looks like the nineteen eighties threw up in here,” he says, taking in the surroundings.

I’ve been obsessed with the nineteen eighties since my dad first played me New Kids on the Block when I was seven. It was our thing, and it helped me get through some tough times when Mom and I were on the outs, which happened a lot. She was never an affectionate person, but my dad loved her. That’s how I knew even before my uncle told me that my parents were killed that it couldn’t possibly be a murder-suicide. Dad would never do something like that.

When you walk into my suite, you’ll see eighties pop references, furniture, and knickknacks I’ve collected over the years. My walls are covered in posters of rock bands and celebrities from the eighties, like John Stamos and Jon Bon Jovi.

“You don’t like my decorating style?” I ask, almost offended.

“It’s unique, to say the least,” he says, flashing a killer smile.

I flop on the couch. I unstrap my shoes, toss them on the geometric patterned rug, and pull my granny square blanket off of the back of the couch, covering myself.

“Don’t let the door hit you on the way out,” I say, rolling away from him staring at me.

He is a huge presence hovering over me, so I sigh and roll back over.

“What?”

“What you did tonight was reckless, Lex,” he says with a glower, brows knitted.

“So I had too much to drink, so what? It was my bachelorette party. I get a pass.”

“No, you don’t. You always have to be aware of your surroundings.”

That makes me sit up; now I’m the one doing the glowering. “You don’t think I know that? I’m in cybersecurity. I know every inch, every dark corner of this place. I was surrounded by armed security and people I know; I was just fine,” I spit out, crossing my arms over my chest.

He lets out a big sigh and sits on the couch, “That’s all well and good, but you still need to be careful and keep your wits about you all the time. You’re in more danger now that you’re associated with Matteo Russo. More than you were with your uncle.”

“I know that too.”

“Then why keep drinking?”



I don't say anything for a minute, but a small smile inches my lips.

"You did it to piss me off, didn't you?" He looks at me with one brow raised.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I say, trying not to laugh.

"Not cool, Lex."

"I had fun tonight. I won't have that after tomorrow," I say.

He lets out a big breath, "Lex, I'm sorry. I should have told you."

"Told me what?"

"That your uncle was going to announce your engagement the night after your party."

"You knew?" I ask. I feel like I've been kicked in the chest.

"Yes, but I had no idea that he was arranging for you to marry Matteo, I swear."

"Oh, that makes it all better then!" I shriek and jolt off the couch. "You could have warned me, at least!"

He stares at me, not saying anything.

"You need to leave," I say, sitting back down and pointing to the door.

He looks deeply into my eyes. "Now!"

He pulls himself off the couch, walks to the door, and turns the handle before turning and looking at me again, "I'm sorry Lex," he says, his eyes sad, as he looks at me

before closing the door.

Nate

I punch the down elevator button when I get a text from Julian telling me to meet him on the casino floor.

I walk over to Julian and see a guy about a head shorter than me being dragged on his knees away from one of the tables by two other security guys. I look over across the bar, and one of the cocktail waitresses is standing by another who's crying; her dress is torn.

Sal comes over, and I try to hide my disdain.

"Please follow Tom and Gregg in escorting Mr. Bryant to the garage. It seems he's having trouble understanding what the word, no means."

The space we call the garage used to house various cars and van transports for the casino until Carmine built a bigger one. Ever since, security has used the space, bringing all sorts of low-life scum to be questioned. Mostly small-time assholes who got caught counting cards. From the stories I've heard, most haven't made it out under their own power.

Finding out Matteo put his hands on Lexi more than once had me seeing red; add on the fact that I feel like a complete asshole not telling her that I knew she was going to be married off has made the night a shit show. Now, I have to question some drunk asshole who thought it was a good idea to force himself on a waitress on the casino floor. My patience is long gone, and all I want is to find a release for this pent-up rage.

As Julian and I follow Tom and Greg, I can feel the anger simmering just below the

surface. My fists itch for the boxing ring, for that sweet release of pounding flesh. The ghosts of my past are whispering in my ear, their voices mingling with the chaos of the casino.

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to focus. I need to handle this scumbag, and maybe, just maybe, I can keep the darkness at bay for one more night.

Lexi- 3 AM – day of the wedding

The loud pounding on my door matches the pounding in my head.

“Yeah, yeah, just a second!” I shout, immediately regretting it, as I hold my head. Fuck, I drank a lot last night.

The banging gets louder, “I said I’m coming! What the hell is wrong..”-

Bang! The door slams into the wall; Matteo is on the other side, looking murderous, rage in his eyes. I instinctively step back three steps as he slams the door closed.

“You little slut!” He hisses. “Embarrassing me by going home with another man!”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I ask with a dare in my voice.

“Don’t you take that tone with me, you little bitch! Where is he? I can smell him on you!” He screams as he stalks into my room. I follow behind.

“No one is here!” I shout. He grabs me by the wrist and pulls me against him until we are inches apart; I can feel his fury rolling off of him.

“Don’t lie to me, you little bitch. Grace saw you bring him up here! You better still be untouched, or so help you!”

I pull my arm away from him and rub my wrist.

“Nate brought me up here and then left,” I say, looking him directly in the eyes.

“Nothing happened!”

“I don’t believe you!” He hisses. He starts moving toward me. I back up into the couch, and he forces me to spin around, pushes me down, and tears off my shorts and panties.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I scream, kicking my legs and trying to get away from him.

He grabs my legs and hovers over me as he begins to move his hand between my legs.

“Don’t touch me!” I hiss and kick him in the balls. He snarls and doubles over.

“You’d better be intact, you little bitch. Because Saturday, the moment we are out of the sanctuary, I am going to make sure that little cunt of yours is still unbroken!”

“Fuck you! Get the hell out!” I roar, throwing a little round clock at him. It hits him in the forehead, and he rises up over me again, smacking my thigh so hard it turns red immediately.

“Maybe I’ll just check now instead!” He says with an evil laugh, grabbing me and pushing over the back of the couch, smacking my ass. I hear his pants unzip, and I reach over to the side table for the first thing I can grab as he kicks my knees apart. The next thing I know, he’s howling on the floor, pants unzipped, blood running down the side of his head, and my floor is covered in shattered glass.

“Get the fuck out, you psychopath!”

His eyes are black as night; his face is red as he gets up, zips up his pants, and takes out a handkerchief to wipe the blood off his face.

“You little whore! I am going to fuck you raw once we step out of that church,” he hisses. “And I will continue to do so until you have my heir in your belly. Once my line is secure, I’ll lock you back in that little tower of yours for the rest of your fucking life,” he spews. The wall shakes as he slams the door behind him, and I crumple to the floor.

Nate

The sun wasn’t even up on the day of the wedding and I was feeling sorry for myself, hanging out in Julian’s suite.

“Dude, would you take it easy? You are halfway through my top-shelf bourbon!” Julian shrieked as I poured myself another.

“You should have seen her face when I told her,” I say with a slight slur in my voice. “Pure betrayal. It killed me,” I said, taking another swig.

“You’ve said that. Over and over for the past two hours.”

“She’s never going to forgive me. Ah, hell!” I howl, “I guess it doesn’t matter anyway; she’s going to be married to a monster in less than ten hours. What does it matter anyway? I’ve done so many bad things- I’m just as much as a monster.”

“You are not fucking Matteo Russo! Yes, you have a dark side to you; we all do. Trauma fucks us all up, but you’d never ever hurt her, and you know that!”

I let out a big breath of air.

“You’ve heard nothing from your contact?” Julian asked, changing the subject.

“Do you think I’d be sitting here drinking if I had? I can’t stop this wedding without confirmation; Carmine would never trust me again!”

“You can still be there for her. You will kick yourself if you don’t go, and you know it.”

“I should have told her. You should have seen her face..” –

“Yes, yes,” Julian says, “I know, pure betrayal,” he sighs and moves the glass away from me, leading me to his lumpy, brown couch.

“I’m going to make coffee,” he said.

I woke up five hours later with a monster headache. I haven’t drunk that much since my graduation in the Army. Fuck! I roll over with a groan and see a white suit bag hanging over the door of Julian’s kitchen with a note attached:

Put it on and just be there for her, you asshole.

Dickhead. I hate it when he’s right. I may not have heard from my contact, but I can be there for her. I will figure out how to protect her from the asshole she’s marrying before anything else. I have to. I made a promise a long time ago.

Yeah, you’ve been doing a bang-up job at it, too, walking away from her. Asshat.

When I made that promise, I was young and thought I could do anything. How hard could it be? She was like an annoying kid sister, getting into trouble, sneaking into the casino, dumb kid stuff.

She tried to kiss me when she was sixteen. I said some really awful things to her. I avoided her my entire summer break, making Julian watch over her. He wasn't thrilled.

I had no idea that I'd develop feelings for her. She was five years younger, and I felt like I was taking advantage. That's part of the reason I enlisted. To keep away from her. Julian kept me updated, and it only made me want to be with her more, to protect her like I promised. But I didn't.

I throw on the black suit and step over to the mirror to put on the green silk tie. The same color as her eyes.

I feel like such a failure right now.

By some miracle, my phone buzzes on my way out the door.

Maybe the universe doesn't hate me after all.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:26 am*

Lexi

Scarlett and Ellie found me in a ball on my floor. The photo of my parents clutched in my hands. I hit Matteo hard, and the frame shattered. Glass surrounded me, but I didn't care.

The red mark on my thigh stung when El touched it with an ice pack.

Both she and Scarlett looked murderous when I relayed what happened with Matteo.

Scarlett called Deirdre, who gave me a look of love, but letting me know without words that it would make no difference to my uncle, and she was right.

I am a pawn; I have been since I stepped foot in Brookhaven. But her just being there for me helped immensely.

Women like me have been used for centuries in my uncle's business. Pawns and baby-making machines. A woman's virtue is a deal breaker, and Matteo seems to think I slept with Nate last night. Jokes on him, though. Nate wouldn't touch me with a ten-foot pole.

I barely remember Dierdre helping me get into the car and driving me to the church.

The beauty team was just finishing prepping me when my uncle stepped in.

"Zio," I said, trying to smile.



“I’d like to have a word with Alexandria.”

Fuck, he used my whole name.

Everyone filed out, and he stood behind me, hands on my shoulders; I was facing the floor-length mirror, sitting on a pink pouf chair.

He looked deeply into my eyes, “Mr. Russo has some concerns in regard to your virtue, Alexandria. Would I be lying if I told him his concerns are unfounded?” He asked, looking me dead in the eye. His grip on my shoulders got tighter as he spoke.

I know my uncle; if you don’t look him right in the eye, he believes you're being dishonest.

I looked him right in the eye, “No, Zio, of course not. I would never.”

“Good,” he said with a smile, and the pressure on my shoulders let up. “Now, let me take a look at you.” He took me by the hand and had me face him.

“Bellissima, piccolina,” he said softly and kissed me gently on the forehead.

“I am proud of you. Understanding how important this is to our family and our livelihood. It pleases me to see you not resist this union, piccolina.”

“Of course, Zio,” I said with a nod.

My breath caught as Nate entered the room. The man can fill out a suit. He’s in a black designer suit and an emerald-green silk tie with a pocket square to match. Fuck he’s gorgeous.