



Unspoken Obsession

(Casino King #4)

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Category: Urban

Description: One night with a stranger ignited a fire I couldn't extinguish.

He was everything forbidden, everything dangerous—wrapped in power and mystery.

I didn't know his name, only the way his touch branded me as his, searing his presence into my soul.

Years later, I'm back in his world, living in the shadows, hiding the secret that binds us together.

He's the ruthless kingpin hunting a card counter who defied him.

He doesn't know it's me.

He doesn't know what I'm keeping from him.

But the truth is a ticking time bomb, and when it finally explodes,

it won't just expose my secret—it'll consume us both, leaving nothing but fire and ashes in its wake.

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FRANCESCA

Blackjack is my escape.

Not because I love gambling, but because it's the only thing I control.

I know it sounds silly - for a high stress card game to be an escape - but that's just what it became for me.

It started innocently enough—a game to pass the time. Then I realized I had a skill most don't. Counting cards isn't illegal, but it might as well be. In the mafia world, the only sin worse than getting caught would be disrespecting my father. Antonio Musetti rules these streets like a king—but in the world of Blackjack, I am queen. His reach doesn't extend here.

It thrills me to get away with it because, in all other aspects of my life, I have to stay in line, do what my father tells me to, and never question his rules.

But Blackjack is my secret way to rebel against the system that controls my every move.

There is a charity gala here at the casino this evening. It had started already, but I was fashionably late and sneaked in a quick game of Blackjack, seeing as I seldom get time to play because my father is always breathing over my shoulder.

For me, it's not about the money. It's all about the skill, the focus, and proving myself.

I'm not even supposed to be here. My father hates it when I come to this casino. He only gave me permission because of the event.

If he found out I came earlier to play cards, I would be in a lot of trouble.

I kept my head down and never looked up at the security cameras. I am aware of their locations. It's easy to avoid being seen when I need to be invisible.

I learned some of my special skills because I had no choice growing up in my family. There will be no evidence I was here playing cards tonight. Nothing my father could find and hold against me.

But right now, none of that matters. Right now, it's just me and the cards.

The dealer's eyes flick over to me, subtle but cautious. I see the tension in his wrist as he deals me another card. He knows. They all know. I've been counting cards for two hours, and I haven't lost a single hand. But I never do.

I lift my eyes from the table and meet his gaze, keeping my expression neutral.

"Hit me," I say, my voice smooth.

The man next to me lets out a slow, low whistle. He's already folded, hands raised in defeat after busting three hands ago. "You're playing with fire, sweetheart."

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye. He reeks of cheap cologne and desperation. A regular in a city that chews men like him up. I give him a small, dismissive smile. "I like fire."

I rarely get to sneak out past my father. My ruthlessly controlling father plans out every single aspect of my life. All of my decisions are made for me. I don't even get

to choose the color sweater I want to wear for dinner.

Tonight though - at this charity masquerade ball - my father can't make it, and I am attending alone. He had to leave Las Vegas for two nights. Something about business emergencies. I don't give a shit about where or why he's gone. All I care about is that I get two days of freedom. Some breathing room.

What's even more entertaining is that because I'll be wearing a mask tonight, no one will know my true identity and none of his cronies can tattle on me for having fun.

So, I plan to make the night count.

The dealer slides a card toward me. I don't need to look at it to know.

"The lady in the gold dress wins," he announces, his voice carefully controlled, but I see the flicker of frustration in his eyes. I've taken this table for a ride, and he knows it. But he won't say anything. Not yet.

I can't win another round. It will be too obvious. I think it's time for me to cash out and head to the event. I've had my little thrill for the night. It's time to be a social butterfly.

Slipping off the stool, I gather up my chips and turn away from the table. This dress is skintight, and it's fine to stand and walk in, but sitting and then trying to get up is a bit of a challenge. I don't care because it is gorgeous - like straight off the cover of Vogue.

I never get to dress up, especially not this sexy, because I am never allowed out of the house. And when I get out of the house and my father is around, he dictates the type of dresses I may or may not wear.

I bought this dress this morning. I will need to conceal it in a garment bag and hang it in the back of my closet after tonight so that he never sees it.

It's too tight, and it dips too low at the back. That's what he would say. That I am inviting trouble and sending the wrong message to men. Well, men should learn to look and not touch.

The fabric is metallic and when I move, it flows around me, looking like molten liquid. It's exquisite. And so soft against my skin. The warm tones complement my blonde hair, which is pinned up in a high bun, leaving a few loose waves around my face, hugging my jaw.

I feel like a goddess.

Russo River Casino is everything my father despises. A shining beacon of what he can't control. The very reason I find myself drawn here anytime I can sneak out. Maybe it's reckless, coming to a place so entangled with his rivals. But recklessness is what I crave. It's what I need.

I slip on my mask as I approach the grand ballroom—a delicate thing of gold filigree that matches the dress perfectly. Behind the mask, I'm no longer the daughter of one of the most feared men in Vegas.

Tonight, I'm invisible. A ghost among them. No one knows who I am. They don't need to.

I'm just...me. The woman I rarely get to be. For a few hours, I can pretend.

Stepping into the ballroom feels like entering a different world. Crystal chandeliers hang overhead, casting soft, glittering light over the sea of masked figures. The air smells of wealth—cigars, expensive perfume, and aged whiskey. It's a masquerade,

which means I could be anyone. And tonight, I intend to be.

I grab a champagne flute from a passing server, letting the bubbles tickle my throat as I survey the crowd. Laughter, music, the soft murmur of hushed conversations—it all blends together into a seductive symphony.

I take a deep breath. Tonight, I can breathe.

As I make my way towards the bar, I feel eyes on me. Men's gazes slide over my body, their expressions dark with intrigue. But none of them matter. They're nothing but pawns in a game they don't even realize they're playing. Men who would cower if they knew who I truly was.

The bartender barely glances up as I reach the counter, his hands busy polishing a glass. "Whiskey, neat," I say, my voice carrying the weight of someone who's used to getting what she wants.

He pauses for a fraction of a second, surprised, but doesn't comment. He's smart enough to know when not to ask questions.

"A whiskey? That is an interesting choice for a lady," a voice says from my right. Deep. Masculine. The kind of voice that commands attention.

I glance over, and for a moment, the world stops.

The man standing beside me is tall—easily over six feet—with broad shoulders that fill out the black fabric of his tailored suit. The suit screams power and money. Mafia. Most likely someone high-ranked.

His mask, a sleek piece of black leather, frames his eyes so intensely blue they almost seem to glow against the richness of his dark hair. His strong jawline is shadowed by

a hint of stubble, adding a rugged, almost dangerous edge to his otherwise polished appearance.

"You should never judge a book by its cover," I say, looking up at him.

"But the cover of this book says the story is more than meets the eye. A beautiful, but deadly tale of adventure and - passion."

A smile sneaks onto my face.

He is smooth.

My heart thunders. Like drums pounding in a rhythm so wild, I force myself to take a breath. His bright blue eyes are like a whirlpool that I am drowning in. They are piercing into me, and I can't look away. Even with the mask covering half his face, I can tell he isn't just handsome - he is drop-dead gorgeous.

"And what's your drink of choice?" I ask, turning my body slightly to face him. The dress clings to my skin, the slit parting just enough to catch his attention.

He doesn't look down, though. His eyes stay locked on mine. "Whiskey. Neat. Same as you."

My lips curve into a slow smile. "A man after my own heart."

"Or trouble," he counters, his gaze darkening just enough to send a shiver down my spine. "Depends on how you look at it."

"What can I call you?" His voice vibrates through me. Why do I have the sensation that I've encountered him before? Like I am acquainted with him? Like I was supposed to meet him.

"You choose."

"Alright, little fox."

He slides my whisky over to me and when I take it from him our fingers touch, sending sparks flying between us.

"And what do I call you?" I ask.

"I am a figment of your imagination. Nothing but a shadow."

"A dark and mysterious shadow." I grin. "I will admit. I rather like my imagination if this is what I thought up."

He chuckles and I love the sound. It makes me smile as it ripples through my body.

I lean against the bar, letting my eyes wander over him. He's built like he knows how to handle himself. Dangerous. Powerful. I know I should walk away, but something about him holds me captive. There's a charge in the air between us, a spark waiting to ignite.

He steps closer, just enough for the heat of his body to brush against mine. It's subtle, but it's enough to make my skin tingle. I'm playing with fire, and I know it.

"What brings you here?" he asks, his voice soft, intimate. It feels like a secret shared between us, a conversation no one else in this crowded room can hear.

I sip my drink, eyes never leaving his. "Just passing through."

"Passing through?" He leans in, his breath warm against my ear. "You don't seem like the type to pass through anything."

The way he says it makes my heart skip a beat. There's an intensity in his words, a challenge. He's testing me, seeing how far I'm willing to go.

I tilt my head, meeting his gaze head-on. "And what type do I seem like?"

"The type that likes to play games."

My pulse quickens. He's right. But I don't admit it. "Depends on the game."

His eyes darken the tension between us thick enough to cut. "I like games that end in fire."

The air between us crackles, the electric pull undeniable. Every instinct in me is screaming that I should walk away, that this man is danger wrapped in silk. But I've never been one to heed warnings.

"Dance with me," he says suddenly, holding out his hand. It's not a question. It's a command.

My heart thuds against my ribs, but I don't hesitate. I place my hand in his, the heat of his touch sending a jolt through me. As he pulls me onto the dance floor, the music shifts, something slow and sultry, perfect for the tension simmering between us.

His hand rests on the small of my back, pulling me close, and I let him. His touch is firm, and confident, like he knows exactly how to handle me. My body moves with his, our steps perfectly in sync, as if we've done this a hundred times before.

"What are you running from?" he asks, his voice barely above a whisper as his lips brush against my ear.

I stiffened for a moment, surprised by the question. I look up at him, trying to gauge

if he knows more than he's letting on. "Who says I'm running?"

His hand tightens on my waist, pulling me even closer. "Because I recognize the look. I'm running, too."

The admission catches me off guard. There's something raw in his voice, something I didn't expect. For a moment, I see past the mask, past the danger. There's something else lurking beneath. Something that mirrors the storm inside me.

"I don't run," I murmur, my breath catching as he leans in, his lips grazing my neck.

"No?" His voice is soft, teasing. "What do you do, then?"

I tilt my head up, my lips brushing his ear. "I chase."

His hand drifts down my back, his fingers trailing over my bare skin. Swaying in time to the music, my body is tingling up against his. I come alive. An intense need grows as my attraction towards him becomes deeper.

I gaze up into those stunning blue eyes and a mischievous smile graces my lips. He leans down, pressing his lips against mine. The kiss is slow, but so intense it takes my breath away.

I'm not sure how or why - but this man has captivated every cell in my body.

He wraps his hand around the back of my neck and pulls me close, whispering in my ear. "Follow me, little fox."

When he turns away, holding his hand out behind him, I slip my fingers into his without hesitation.

My heart races with the thrill of the unknown. "This is definitely not my scene," I say hesitantly, glancing back at the raucous party atmosphere. "I'm more of the 'stay in the shadows' type."

He smirks, his eyes glinting with mischief behind his mask. "But isn't escaping into the dark what makes it exciting? Who knows what could happen?"

"Exciting? Maybe. Reckless? Definitely," I retort, trying to mask my growing curiosity. "What's your angle here? A mysterious masked man stealing away a girl from the crowd? You must have a reputation."

"Maybe I do," he replies, taking a step closer, his presence magnetic.

"But what's the fun in playing by the rules?"

I catch my breath as he leads me around the edge of the party venue, behind the stage, and down a dark passage. Music is still vibrating against the walls around us, muffled.

"You're awfully bold," I challenge, crossing my arms. "What if I'm not the type of girl to get swept away by someone like you?"

"Who says you're not? Something tells me you're more daring than you let on," he quips, a knowing smile creeping across his lips. His gaze ignites an unfamiliar fire within me.

"Trust me, I'm definitely not the 'rebel without a cause' type," I insist, even as my body betrays my bravado, yearning for something I can't quite explain.

"Sounds like you could use a little adventure, then," he says, his voice smooth and enticing. "Maybe I'm just the one to provide it."

He pushes open a door to a small storage room, pulling me inside. The darkness envelops us, creating an electric atmosphere filled with tension.

"What do you think you're doing?" I ask, my voice wavering despite my attempt to sound composed.

"Exploring," he replies, stepping closer until I can feel the heat radiating from him.

"You're hiding behind your mask, but I can see the fire in your eyes. You want this."

"Want what? This is completely insane!" I protest, but my heart races in anticipation.

"Insane can be a lot of fun," he murmurs, his fingers brushing my waist, sending shivers down my spine. "Just admit it—you're tempted."

His gaze locks onto mine as he leans in, and the air thickens. Before I can protest, his lips crash against mine, igniting a spark I've never felt before. I gasp, my instincts urging me to pull away, but I melt against him instead.

"This is... crazy," I manage to breathe, wrapped in his embrace.

"Crazy can be intoxicating," he replies, lifting me up and pressing me against the wall with his solid frame. "Let go of inhibitions, little fox. Just feel."

He tugs my skirt up, and I bite my lip to stifle a moan as he kisses me deeper. "You don't even know who I am," I remind him, my heart pounding as the thrill spirals.

He wraps his hand around my mask as though he wants to pull it off.

"No," I say. "The mask stays on."

A deliciously dark chuckle vibrates from his chest. "As you wish, my secretive little fox."

With one swift motion, he pulls my panties aside and thrusts against me, millimeters from my core. "You'll have to tell me if you like it," he says playfully, his breath warm against my skin.

"I... this is all very wrong," I protest weakly, but my body betrays me as I rock my hips against him, yearning for more.

"Tell me you want it," he urges, his voice low and gravelly, driving me mad with desire.

I take a deep breath and finally let go of my reservations. "Fine. I want it," I admit, surrendering to the moment.

He tugs his pants open and pulls my panties aside, and before there is time to think about anything more, his cock is pressing against my pussy.

"Oh, fuck. Your pussy is perfect." He growls as his cock fills me.

"Fuck me hard," I whisper.

I rock my hips forward, begging him. He chuckles and whispers against my lips. "I'll fuck you so hard I'll leave my mark on you, little fox."

He slides out and thrusts his cock into me again, much harder this time. My back slams against the wall as his massive cock stretches me open and makes my entire body shiver with pleasure.

We share a heated, fast, and explosive moment of passion. When it is over, we are

both out of breath, trying to adjust our clothes and neaten our hair so that no one knows what we've been doing - and we are both grinning.

Just before he pulls the door open to head back out into the party, he leans down and kisses me again. My heart flutters as his lips touch mine.

"Think they'll notice we're gone?" I ask, a teasing tone slipping into my voice.

"Let them wonder," he replies, capturing my lips again with a smirk. "Let's create our own game."

With that, he takes my hand and leads me back into the party, the thrill of our secret igniting everything inside me as we step back into the world of masks and mystery.

Back at the bar, the weight of what just happened lingers between us. His hand stays on my waist, his thumb tracing slow circles against my skin. I should pull away. I should leave.

But I don't want to.

"You're trouble," I murmur, glancing up at him. My body is still humming with the memory of his touch.

His lips curve into a smirk. "I thought you liked trouble."

I can't help the small laugh that escapes me. "Maybe I do."

Before long, the party is getting quieter. Most of the guests leave in groups. I know I can't stay out too late because my father will check the security footage and interrogate me.

"I've got to go," I say, looking up at him. His eyes are like a dream.

"I wish you didn't." He reaches out and touches my jaw, running his fingers over my skin. I lean into his touch.

"Goodbye," I whisper.

He studies me for a moment, and there's something unreadable in his eyes. "Will I see you again?"

I hesitate, knowing the smart answer would be no. But I've never been known for making smart decisions. "Maybe."

He watches me as I turn to leave, his gaze burning into my back. Just before I disappear into the crowd, I glance over my shoulder. His eyes are still on me, and I know—this isn't the last time we'll meet.

Tonight was only the beginning.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:20 pm

DANTE

I can't stop thinking about her. Her bright green eyes, how her gold dress curved over her perfect body. Her luscious lips. The thrill of it all.

It's been weeks since the charity event at my casino.

And I've got a multitude of urgent matters to focus on - but I can't get that beautiful, mysterious little fox out of my mind.

I find my thoughts drifting off - wondering where she is.

She's out there somewhere, and it bothers me, every day, that I never got her name.

I keep reassuring myself that one day we will meet again because if she was at that event, she must be connected to someone in the city.

But even the reassurance doesn't stop the constant wonder.

I sit at my desk, staring through the massive one-way glass that overlooks the casino floor. It's always busy. There is always something happening here.

Glancing at my watch, it is still too early to head down below the casino to my underground operation -- the part of my business that I keep hidden from the rest of the world. This is the reason that they call me 'The Shadow'. Because I am so good at keeping things in the dark where no one can find them. It is essential to go unnoticed—if I want things to run smoothly.

I do need to check on my crew. We've been having some issues.

"Sir." There is a knock at my office door, pulling me from my thoughts. Lorenzo is standing there, waiting to be invited in.

"Come in, Lorenzo. Is there news about Daniela?" I ask, already knowing the answer. It will be the same answer as it was yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that. For the last six months, we've found nothing - not a trace - not a clue - nothing that even hints at where my sister might be.

"No news, sir. Not about your sister. I've got a lead I am going to follow up on this evening - But I came to see you now because I wanted to update you on other business."

"Alright. I've got fifteen minutes before my next appointment." I say, gesturing for him to take a seat.

Lorenzo is my head of security at the casino and my right-hand man. He is the person closest to me and one of the very people in this world that I trust.

He grabs a chair and pulls it up close to my desk. His bulky frame makes him daunting, and very few people would dare mess with him.

He puts a printed document in front of me, showing growth charts for our distribution chain.

My businesses are growing. The underground ones and the legitimate companies that are there to wash the dirty money. If this interference underground continues, it will stall that growth.

Beneath my casino is a network of vaults and tunnels - all carefully designed to move

illegal products. Anything you want - I can get it and move for you.

I've become more powerful, richer, and gained more influence - but none of it has helped me find my sister.

I still believe one of my rivals took her. The stronger I become, the more of a threat I become, and there are plenty of people in this city who don't enjoy having their positions threatened. Nonetheless - I will continue to push. The further my connections reach, the more chance I've got of finding her.

"This is great, Lorenzo," I say, thinking about Daniela. Dani is ten years younger than me. I always needed to keep my little sister safe from the world. That is my job. But somewhere along the line, I failed her.

In my heart, I don't believe she is dead.

I don't know if it's because I am connected to her, my blood, my family - or because I refuse to even consider the alternative.

"Alright, sir. That's it for now. I'll call you this evening if anything comes of that lead." Lorenzo stands and gathers his things.

"Before you go, I'll be heading underground to see what the hell is going on, around seven. Will you meet me there?"

"Will do. Yeah, like I told you yesterday—whatever is messing around in those tunnels is getting braver by the minute. We need to put a stop to it."

"Agreed. See you later."

I nod in thanks and when he has left the office, I stand, too. I am meeting with a

powerful mafia boss, someone who owns a casino here in Las Vegas as well. He claims he wants to ally with me.

I want to hear what he offers and decide if he is legit or not. I tend to err on the side of caution when it comes to letting people closer to me. I am suspicious even of my allies. I don't trust anyone until they've earned it - and like I said - Lorenzo is the only one I trust.

I pull the collar of my shirt straight and shrug my shoulders to adjust my jacket, making it more comfortable.

I've been sitting down too long. I prefer to be on the move. I don't enjoy these mornings of admin - so I'm grateful it's over and I can get out of this office.

The weight of my Glock against my side beneath my jacket is a welcome security. In my work, I must be prepared for anything. And I've been pissing people off with my investigation - searching for my sister.

I head down into the elevator. The doors slide closed and I sigh.

Where would that little fox be? Who was she?

Fuck. She was so beautiful, even half covered by the mask. I shouldn't be so obsessed with her - I keep telling myself to let it go, move on, forget - but it seems to be impossible.

If I put proper resources into finding her, I could. But I should not be wasting time or energy on that when I haven't found my sister.

And, if that little fox wanted to give me her name, she would've.

So, it's respectful not to hunt her down.

I already wasted a lot of time in the past just trying to learn her name. I scouted the casino security footage, hoping to catch a clear image of her face so that I could run facial recognition on it. But she seemed to be very aware of the cameras and kept her face hidden from every one of them. It made me suspicious of her because an average person with nothing to hide wouldn't do that? And what reason could she have for hiding her identity?

It makes me even more curious to uncover who she is, and my desire to see her again is growing stronger by the day. I don't know how much longer I will be able to ignore it.

Perhaps I need to host another casino event. Another masked ball. Perhaps she will come in the same gold dress to let me know who she is.

The elevator doors slide open, and I walk towards the restaurant section where I've got a table reserved in the private area - so that I can meet with a potential ally.

What I want to do is cancel this meeting and join Lorenzo to follow his lead. I shouldn't be sitting at a lavish restaurant, talking shit, wasting time - I should be out there looking for.

I sigh in annoyance at myself. There are men all over this city searching for her.

My time is better spent creating power and building wealth. Lorenzo will call me if the lead shows promise.

I will find out what happened to my little sister.

And I will find out who is responsible.

And when I do, I will tear that person limb from limb. I will destroy their entire world and everyone and anything they care for.

Stepping into the restaurant, the manager nods, smiles, and gestures toward the private eating area. My guest is already here.

I walk into the room with a bold step and my shoulders back. My stance is effortless and effective.

The man waiting to meet me stands up, stammering over his words, he holds out his hand to shake mine.

"Mr. Russo. Thank you so much for meeting me today. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

"Mr. Tailor. Welcome to my casino! Why don't we get straight to the point and you can tell me what it is you want?"

I sit down and the man rests his elbows on the table, twirling his glass of vodka in his shaky hands as he talks.

I thought he was someone more powerful. This is not what I was expecting. He is from another low-level family, eager to ride on the coattails of my name and enjoy the benefits of protection that being my ally offers.

Sure, I've turned down some of these requests. There are people I do not want to be associated with - scum with ties to human trafficking and sex rings. Not my style. Consent is sexy.

But this man is the owner of a smaller casino nearby. He deals with low-level drug distribution; he flies under the radar. He is the type of person who is useful for

gathering information -- someone overlooked, underestimated, and quiet. He's an asset and I'll use him to work in the search for my sister. I don't take on charity cases. He'll earn his keep and build his own brand under the protection of my name.

The man stands up, smiling and looking relieved.

"Thank you, Mr. Russo. Thank you so much. Anything you need, or anything I can do for you - you just call and I'll be there."

"Mr. Tailor, it's my pleasure. Welcome to the family of allies. I will inform you when to attend our monthly meeting. We like to stay in touch even when things are calm. I will reach out when I need you."

Mr. Tailor nods, still smiling, and I watch as he scuttles from the restaurant. I'll give him a few days before I ask for any favors. He will benefit from my protection the minute he walks out of the casino.

After the meeting, I've got the rest of the afternoon free and I want to get in a session at the gym. It helps me clear my thoughts. I usually go before the day starts, but this morning was chaos. I glance at my watch. It's almost four o'clock.

I'll hit the gym, then after a shower I make my way to the underground sector of the casino.

The huge cement-walled industrial elevator that carries me down beneath the floors of my empire is cold and daunting.

The doors slide open, and I step out into a different world compared to the one above, with lights music, and color.

This world is gray. Industrial. People hurry back and forth, pushing massive steel-

framed carts carrying products that will make their way into the tunnel network and out to wherever they need to be.

Lorenzo is already there when I get there. I walk over to where he is talking to the shift manager.

"Sir, shall we head to my office? It's noisy in here to talk."

I nod, then follow him, along with Lorenzo, into a cornered off-steal-walled room. It's insulated against the sound outside.

He flicks a massive screen on, taking up an entire wall in his office. A map of the tunnels lights the room.

He points to a section further away from the casino, closer to where the trucks collect the product on the outside. "This is where we had some minor issues two days ago. I don't think it's anything to worry about, but I wanted to make you aware of it."

"When you say issues?—"

"Two crates are fucked. At first, I thought it was just mishandling, but on closer inspection, it looks like it was deliberate tampering. I checked the cameras, but they both went down in that section of the tunnel."

"I see."

Lorenzo steps closer to the screen, squinting at the image. "Where does this one come out?" he asks.

"Back of Archer Street. Close to the truck yard." It's an exposed exit. We don't use it too often.

"Are there men set up near that exit?" I nod. "In fact, I think we should increase security at all exits? Even inactive ones."

"Agreed. Set up additional crews at each exit point. For now, we take precautions, but I don't want to overreact." Drawing attention to our operation increases the risk of getting caught.

After the meeting downstairs, I head back up for dinner and plan to get an early night.

I haven't been sleeping well. My mind is always racing.

Thoughts of Dani and where she might be.

Flashes of the mysterious woman in the gold dress.

Worries about my businesses and how I can extend my coverage in the city.

My mind never seems to find peace.

Perhaps that is why I am so caught up in the idea of that little fox. She is an escape for me. Something beautiful in a dark world. Something that sparks inside me and makes me come alive. Because I did - that night - I was more alive than I've ever been.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:20 pm

FRANCESCA

I wake up with a hangover and I can't remember drinking at all. A wave of nausea tightens my stomach and I throw myself out of bed and bolt to the bathroom - only just making it in time.

I gasp for air, my head hanging over the toilet bowl. What the fuck did I eat?

I only had lasagna yesterday and that wouldn't be off. It's never made me sick before.

I stand up, flushing away the horrible experience, and then wash my face with cold water. I splash it over my cheeks and take deep breaths to stop the nausea from bubbling up again. Ugh, I hope this is not a bug.

What is wrong with me?

Pressing my hand against my stomach, I groan. It hurts.

I get dressed -- pulling the long cream dress over my shoulders, running my hands over the soft cotton, and closing my eyes for a moment.

I'll be ok. It must just be a tummy bug or some plague going around.

Downstairs, someone is brewing coffee, and the smell is disgusting. I love coffee. Why is it so gross? Never in my life could I imagine being disgusted by coffee. I need it to survive.

I walk down the stairs towards the kitchen, wondering if I should make a ginger tea. Nausea disappears as though it was never there. I'm fine.

What in the world is going on - that makes no sense at all.

I press my hand against my stomach again. Maybe it's my period - I'm due to - no - oh no -

Panic surges through me.

I was supposed to start two weeks ago.

I'm late. And I'm throwing up first thing in the morning.

Oh shit. Oh no. this cannot be happening.

I turn back towards the stairs and run up to my bedroom again, grabbing my phone and my handbag. I need to get to a pharmacy.

Luckily, my father is out at meetings this morning, so I can get there and back before he returns home. The security guard that comes with me can wait in the car. He doesn't need to see what I'm getting.

"Keith, I need you to take me to the drugstore, please. I need tampons." I say, walking towards the front door.

"Yes, Ms. Musetti." He's red in the face.

He'll report the trip to my father, and I'll tell my father I needed female products. Easy.

All the way there, my stomach is in a knot.

If I'm pregnant, there is only one potential father. The man at the gala event. The masked stranger. I don't even know his name.

Does it even matter?

How can I keep a baby and raise it in this world - my father's world? A world filled with violence, fear, and death.

The poor child would be in constant danger under the constant and oppressive rule of my father.

It is not a good life. I wouldn't wish it on anyone.

My bodyguard parks right outside the pharmacy and gets ready to get out of the car. "You can wait here. I will only be a few minutes." I say, pushing the door open. He looks skeptical for a second but then nods. Thank God.

I hurry inside, grateful that he can't see me through the shop windows. I grab two pregnancy tests and run to the counter to pay for them.

I shove the brown paper packet deep into my purse and walk back out to the car, trying to act calm and casual.

All the way home, I am thinking about my options. I am trying to consider the best possible outcome, the best future, and the best choice to make - and the more I think about it, the more I realize that there is no way I would ever want to give this baby up.

My baby.

I need to keep the little one safe from this horrible world.

At home, I rush upstairs to my bedroom and shut the door.

In the bathroom I open both tests, peeing on both of them, and then I sit on the edge of the bath waiting.

Counting down the seconds, not daring to peek at the results.

My phone beeps - telling me the time is up.

I shake my head, taking a deep breath. "Frankie - you'll be ok, no matter what the result is."

I stand up and walk to the counter and stare down at both tests - both of them say the same thing.

I am pregnant.

It only takes me a few days to decide about what I want for the future of my baby.

When I made choices for myself, accepting my father's word as final was easy, as he made the decisions. However, the choice I need to make now is not about me.

It's about my baby.

And that's why I am leaving Las Vegas.

I spend a week researching and preparing.

I choose a small town, a little place in the middle of nowhere that I've never even

heard of - a place where no one will recognize me, and no one will think to find me. I've juggled with the idea of telling my father and not telling my father why I am leaving and where I am going - but I decided on a medium ground between the two. I will tell him why I am leaving, but I will not tell him where I am going.

By telling him why - he will understand my choice and respect it enough to not come chasing after me - but I will keep the location a secret just in case he can't relinquish that control over me he is so desperate to maintain.

I'm writing my father a letter because I'll have to sneak away. There is no other option. The morning I leave my father's house, the sky is still dark. I sneak out and walk farther down the road, out of sight, before the Uber I booked meets me.

My heart is racing with fear when I climb in and toss my one small bag of luggage into the back seat, looking back to see if someone saw me sneaking out.

"To the train station, please," I say with a million knots in my stomach.

A flight to Canada would be faster and more comfortable, but much easier to trace. From now on I live off the map, off grid and hidden.

I travel the long way, stopping and switching trains, catching a lift with a stranger, switching back to the train - and after what seems like an eternity I reach the small cabin at the side of the forest that I've rented using my fake identity.

There is a note pinned to the door by the old lady, who is my landlord.

Welcome, if you need anything, just shout. It's all unlocked and the keys are hanging on the hook inside the door. I'll be going into town on Saturday morning if you want a ride.

I smile. This is a small town where people take care of each other.

Running my hand over my stomach in a protective gesture and whispered, "We are going to be ok here." Then I push the door open and walk into my new home.

A cozy log cabin, with a built-in fireplace and an open plan living room and kitchen area. One small bedroom and views of the forest and the lake on all sides.

I smile.

Despite having to leave everything I'm familiar with and comfortable with behind, I think I will like it here.

Months roll by and my belly seems to grow bigger every time I breathe. I can't believe how quickly my little baby is growing.

I got a job at the local flower shop, and I know everyone in the little town by name. The local farmers come and drop fresh vegetables off every week and on Wednesdays, I play cards with my old landlord. She's so lovely. I get along with her really well.

There is a man who visits the flower shop often, Jake. He has a kind, gentle face and he is always asking me out—but I can't find it in my heart to say yes. It doesn't seem fair to be with someone else while my heart is still so consumed by the man I met at the gala.

But, over time he accepts I am not looking for anything like that and we've become good friends.

I've invited him around for dinner this weekend. It will be nice to talk to someone. My life has been empty and boring since I arrived here. It's so quiet, nothing ever

happens.

Life here is the polar opposite of the eventful, wild, and dangerous world I come from. Sometimes I miss it. Others I don't.

Either way, it doesn't matter - because being here is necessary for the safety of my baby and myself.

My eyes are always wide open, always on the lookout for my father's men.

But so far, I've not been bothered by anyone. I don't think it is his choice to leave me alone. I believe he can't find me, despite his valiant efforts.

I doubt it will last very long; he's a resourceful monster.

The fear is a perpetual whisper just beneath the surface. Fear of being dragged back home, fear that he will force me to give up my baby - it is always there.

But there is another whisper that plays with my mind - that mysterious and gorgeous man I met at the casino.

My baby's father.

Over time, what I remember of his face has faded from my memory, but not the way he made me feel. That passion will never leave my heart. Sometimes I wishfully daydream that he would find me, and we will be together. It's a childish notion, as we live in the real world where he more likely forgot about me the moment I walked away.

When I'm not at work, I spend my time walking around the forest and swimming in the icy water of the lake. I tried to keep my garden going, but no one ever taught me

how to grow things. I still enjoy murdering the poor innocent plants enough to keep trying.

I write letters to my son, growing by the day, so that one day when he is old enough, he knows who he is and where he came from. I don't know if the letters are for me or for him - sometimes I think it is just my way of trying to let go of who I am.

Even though I've made friends with an entire town out here, I am lonely. None of them have a clue who I am, or what my life was before I came here. I miss the noise and energy of Las Vegas - I miss the colorful lights and noisy casinos. But I don't miss my father. And I don't miss having every moment of my life controlled by him.

As humans, we are so adaptable to change - and I am doing my best to change.

I can survive out here alone.

I don't need my father's support because it comes at a price that is too high.

And I don't need the tender touch of a tall dark stranger that I only met once.

On Friday night I rush around the cute little cabin preparing for my first-ever dinner guest. I'm looking forward to having Jake over and hopefully, it will grow our friendship. I desperately need some real friends out here.

Jake knocks on the open door and sticks his head inside.

"Hello, anyone home?" He calls out.

I peek out from around the kitchen area. "Come in," I say.

He hands me a bouquet of sunflowers and a bottle of honey. "Sorry, I obviously

wanted to get you some wine—but—you know." he gestures at my swollen, very pregnant stomach.

I giggle and go welcome him into my home.

Dinner is fun.

Jake is polite and honors my request to be friends and nothing more although I can see longing in his eyes and the constant need to take care of me gives away his true feelings.

Over the years we grow closer, but my feelings never change. I wish they could, but my heart remains forever with the unknown man I met at the gala.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:20 pm

DANTE

Every time I host an event at the casino I stand by the bar and search the crowd of faces for that mysterious woman.

It's ridiculous because it's been years since the night I met her, the only time I've ever seen her - yet I can't stop myself from hoping that one day I will see her in a crowded room, and I'll just know it's her.

I swirl the ice in my glass, letting the whisky splash over it. Then I take a sip and lean against the bar, wanting the night to be over, I'm so bored. I only attend these events in the hope she will show up. When I've wasted enough time talking with people I don't care about - I leave already down that she wasn't there yet again.

Over the last three years, I've had two constants in my life: the constant search for my little sister, Dani, and the constant fantasy that one day that beautiful woman in the gold dress will just walk back into my life.

I think my obsession with her has caused me to piece things together in my mind that have nothing to do with each other.

I can't seem to stop this persistent nagging that the mysterious woman in gold is linked to my sister's disappearance.

It's foolish. My brain is blurring things together, the idea is in there, and it won't leave.

"Dante, another successful event," Lorenzo says, leaning against the bar next to me.

"I guess so," I reply with disinterest. "Another night, another event—" They're all the same.

Downing the rest of my drink I slide the empty glass onto the bar. Waving the bartender down and pointing to it. "Another."

He nods.

Turning to Lorenzo I ask, "What happened with that family that skipped town - did you find them?"

"Yes, I finished questioning the oldest brother this afternoon. He was acquainted with your sister, but they aren't the ones responsible for her disappearance. Their story checks out, he wasn't even aware she was missing."

"How can you be sure he's not lying?"

"I was very - persuasive - when I asked. Also, they are small fish in a big pond. They don't have the resources for something like that. They're into small, petty crime. A kidnapping would be a hell of a stretch, he's on the dumb side."

I sigh. He's right. We are getting so desperate we are looking at desperate leads that are wasting our time. But I'm stuck. I'm at a dead end and I won't give up.

"Why did they skip town then?" I ask, my eyes narrowed.

"Gambling debts they couldn't pay - the father owed a fuck-ton of money to Antonio Musetti."

"Fuck. That is not a man you want to be indebted to." He collects bodies when people run out of money.

"I'd sell my left ball before I borrowed money from a man like Musetti. And I wouldn't want to owe him any favors either." There are men in this city that I never want to associate with.

Antonio Musetti owns the second-largest casino in Las Vegas. His is on par with mine; his business is expanding as vigorously as mine. I am not allied with the man, nor am I enemies. We've got an unspoken respect, a silent agreement to stay the fuck away from each other. From what I have heard - he is one of those people I wouldn't want to be in bed with, anyway.

But as long as he stays on his side of the line, and I stay on mine - we've got no problems. It is obvious to both of us that there would be chaos if we interfered with one another. It wouldn't be worth the loss on either side. And we are both too smart for that.

Over the years, a few leads point in his direction when Dani's disappearance comes up. But until it's something concrete and more than rumors and gossip - I will not pursue those leads. I suspect that many of Antonio's adversaries would be thrilled if I were to believe that he is at fault - and to start a full-scale assault. It would wipe out half of my empire and more than half of his - and the worms would come from the woodwork to eat off our carcasses.

No.

If someone brings me tangible evidence that Antonio Musetti was involved - I will go after him. Until then, I will keep stay in my lane, and keep searching.

Business is booming. In fact - it's better than good. It's fucking incredible.

Over the last few years, I've purchased three additional casinos. Smaller than the River - but still very lucrative.

I've expanded my empire to impossible heights. With each expansion, I add new partnerships and collect enemies too. There's always a jealous rival in the wings waiting to take his shot.

Recent issues in the underground tunnels are getting out of hand.

We've got video footage of trespassers sneaking in and out. Two of my guards were gunned down last week, and it has forced me to double up on security at every entry and exit point. I don't understand why it has been so difficult to find out who is behind this. What started as a small, pesky annoyance, has now become a serious problem that needs urgent attention.

Despite the security breach below, I'm rolling in money. It still hasn't helped me find my sister - or the mysterious beauty who haunts my dreams.

Life is cruel.

I have money, success, power and yet there is a hole inside me. An empty, numbness that nothing can fill.

I am devoid of emotion, alone. I have no one to share all this success with. And until I find out what happened to Dani, none of it will matter. I will still be a failure.

The fantasy that keeps me alive and pushing and able to do anything at all - is the memory of that little fox -- how she made my entire body pulse with life, a blinding light, electricity in my veins. I want that again. I need it.

And the hope that it might happen again is what keeps me going.

"I'm leaving. I'm sure everyone is drunk enough not to notice."

Lorenzo chuckles. "These idiots wouldn't notice a fire alarm if it went off now. They are all either high or smashed; most of them don't even know where they are. Besides, they call you 'The Shadow' for a reason."

"Yeah, funny, but I'm sure sneaking out of a party is not the reason." I chuckle. "I want to get an early session in at the gym tomorrow. So, are we still on for our meeting to discuss the figures?"

"Yes, sir. Do you want me to drive you?"

"No, I'll stay here tonight. No point in leaving the city when I want to be back here so early."

Lorenzo lives in the casino hotel. I gave him a residential suite. He's earned it.

I live in the casino penthouse; most nights that is where I stay, but I own a mansion outside of the city limits. It's my sanctuary for when I need an escape from this life -- a little time away from the bullshit.

There hasn't been much escape recently.

I nod a goodnight to Lorenzo and leave him standing at the bar to entertain the pretty girl who is desperate to talk to him.

No woman has caught my eye since that night. They're all bland, and uninteresting, and never get my heart racing.

I end up comparing them to her, and not a single one has stood a chance.

Not one has come along and sparked the same fire she ignited in me.

What is it about her that has me so obsessed?

After all these years I've got to wonder if I've just built the idea of her up in my head, and one day when I find her, she is just going to be an ordinary girl.

I laugh to myself as I climb into the elevator.

Not a fucking chance.

There was nothing ordinary about her.

The elevator carries me up to the penthouse suite while I stare at my reflection in the mirrored walls.

I run my hand across the shadow of stubble on my jaw.

Would she recognize me if she saw me now, without that mask?

I press my thumb against the fingerprint reader and my door clicks open.

It smells of coffee and the scent of fresh laundry. I guess they changed the bedding just before I got back.

I'm tired, so I go straight to my bedroom, peeling the layers of my clothing off as I go. Tossing the shirt over the back of the chair and kicking my shoes off next to the bed. I flop backward, lying naked, letting the cool air-conditioned air touch my skin.

If I knew she would haunt me for years - I would've gone slower that night, taken my time with her, and savored every second I had her in my hands.

I should've followed her or made her tell me her name.

It seems too impossible that she just disappeared like she was never real, to begin with.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:20 pm

FRANCESCA

Jake came for dinner like he does twice a week. It's getting late, and he helps me by putting Damion to bed while I clean up the dinner dishes. When, out of nowhere he makes a move on me.

I'm standing at the kitchen counter when Jake steps behind me, wrapping his arms around my stomach and holding me against his chest.

"What are you doing?" I ask, trying to shrug him off.

"Don't be ridiculous, Frankie. You want this too. You can't keep denying it."

I try to push him away, but he holds tighter, and fear creeps in. My blood turns cold, and I ask nicely.

"Jake, please. We've spoken about this." I turn around, and now my back is against the counter so I'm facing him, looking into his eyes so that he can see how serious I am. "Jake I think you need to leave." He's made me uncomfortable.

He snarls and shakes his head. "You've been taunting me for years. A cock-tease, and I'm not fucking leaving. It's time you give me what I've been waiting for."

I scream when he grabs me by the throat, his hand cutting off the sound, and lifts me onto the kitchen counter. He's clumsy as he pushes his hips between my legs, shoving my dress out of the way. I kick, trying to move backward—anything to get away from him.

My head is spinning from the lack of oxygen because he is gripping my throat so tight I can't breathe.

I watch in horror as he tugs his belt off and unzips his jeans. His cock is throbbing and veiny when he pulls it out.

Tears are streaming down my face. "Please. Please stop this." I plead with him.

He dips his fingers between my legs and rips my panties off. The fabric cuts into me and my skin is left raw.

My fingers claw at his face, and he knocks me backward, hitting my head against the cabinet behind me and a dizzy wave of nausea washes over me.

I want to vomit.

He grabs his cock and pushes it between my legs.

I can't believe this is happening. Why is he doing this?

My vision swims in and out of focus, but I don't stop fighting him off.

Jake's eyes shoot wide with fright and he is flying across the room.

I fall off the counter and land on the hard kitchen floor, rubbing my throat desperate for air.

There are two men standing over Jake. One of them is holding him down, the other has a knife. He swings it in a wide arch from his hip upwards—straight through the bottom of Jake's jaw. It makes a cracking, squelching sound when the blade embeds inside his skull.

I turn to the side and puke as blood pours from his head and splashes onto the kitchen floor.

Through my tears, I watch the two men hoist Jake's lifeless body onto their shoulders and drag him from my peaceful little cottage. My haven that now has become some kind of hell.

I can't move.

I don't understand what is going on, how did they know? Did I scream?

After a while one of them returns to the kitchen where I am huddled against the cupboard with my knees against my chest. I want to check on Damion, but perhaps it is safer if I leave him where he is so that these attackers don't find him. He's quiet and safe for the time being.

But I'm terrified.

"Francesca." The man says my name and I choke in shock. "Your father says it's time for you to come home."

And then he walks out of the cottage, and I am left alone with a puddle of blood and the worst kind of fear in my heart.

My father's men found me, and now they are following me everywhere.

It's making the whole town talk and whisper, and rumors are feeding the gossip mill and it's making my life here more challenging. Everyone keeps asking me if I've heard from Jake and I have no idea what to say. My life has turned into a complete nightmare.

I came to town this morning to get some groceries and a new pair of shoes for Damion. He is growing so fast, and at three he is a little firecracker of mayhem and unbridled energy.

He has his father's eyes. Bright blue and piercing. In his first year, I kept expecting them to fade or change but that intense blue stayed.

Everyone comments on it.

Walking through town, I notice the goon following close behind me, the handgun on his belt hidden beneath his jacket. I scoop Damion into my arms so that I can walk faster.

I'll get his shoes another day. I hate this, I want to get out of here.

Everyone is staring at me as though I don't belong here anymore like I am an outsider.

I sigh as I climb into my car.

I guess I never belonged here. It was a temporary escape. A vacation from my real life.

My father will never stop having me followed.

The only way to stop them is to go back to Las Vegas.

It fills me with relief, and it terrifies me at the same time. I knew he would find us, I just thought that Damion would be a little older.

He is the sweetest little boy with the kindest heart - and I am so scared of him

changing when we go back to where we came from. The heart of Sin City.

They knew what they were doing when they gave Las Vegas that nickname.

I drive home along the long dirt road with Damion strapped into the child seat in the back. He is singing his favorite song in a jumble of words that make no sense, but I recognize the tune, so I hum along with him.

I am relieved to see that we are not being followed. I guess they know where I live - so they'll just pick up where they left off tomorrow.

Parking outside my little cottage I stop the car and turn off the engine.

"Home." Damion shouts tugging at his seatbelt.

"Baby calm down, I'll help you with that in a second."

"No, I do it." He says, sounding frustrated while his little fingers press the wrong part of the clip.

I chuckle, climb out of the car, and go around to help him.

"Here, press this." I point to the red button, hidden.

"Oooh." He squeals as it springs open.

He stands up and with no warning, he leaps forward into my arms. I laugh and step back away from the car, then spin him around in the air.

He leans his head back and stares up at the sky, grinning.

Then I put him down and he bolts towards the bucket of play-dough he was playing with just before we left for town.

I sigh as he dunks his hands right into the goo and grabs two handfuls. I'll bathe him again after this. Luckily he enjoys the water.

Walking up to the front door I see my landlord has left a note for me. She does this to invite me for dinner some nights or to ask me to help her with something.

I pull the note off the door.

But it isn't from her.

It's from my father.

My heart is beating so fast I can barely breathe. Dizziness sweeps over me, and I grab the railing of my little wooden porch and sit down on the swing chair near the door.

With shaking hands I unfold the piece of paper.

Francesca,

I'm done playing games. It's time to come home. Do not make me force you.

You've got forty-eight hours and then I expect you to return to Las Vegas. If you don't do as you're told I assure you—you will regret it.

Antonio

He signed the letter the same way he signed everything. Business contracts, bills, orders. Nothing is ever personal. Except it's my whole life. It's very personal to me.

I brush away the tear that spills from my eye and escapes down my cheek.

But Damion has been watching me.

He drops the wad of clay and runs over to me.

"Mommy sad," he says with concern, his little nose wrinkling with worry.

I smile, scooping him into my arms, ignoring his dirty little hands as he wraps his arms around my neck and hugs me.

"Mommy isn't sad. Mommy will be ok. But guess what little guy. We are going on an adventure. Do you want to go on an adventure with Mommy?"

"Avedent—"

"Yes." I laugh as his face scrunches in concentration.

"Ad-ven-ture."

"Ana-dent?—"

I stand up, holding him tight. "Let's go bathe and start packing. Do you want chicken nuggets for dinner?"

"Cheeken." He shouts. It's his favorite. I swear he would eat it for breakfast lunch and dinner if I let him.

I've got no choice now. I can't stay here anymore. It's too dangerous and anyone close to me here could get hurt. I need to go back home.

Las Vegas hasn't changed at all.

Nothing and everything is different.

It has the same smell, the same sounds, the same bright lights. It's as though I've stepped back in time, right back to where I left. It might be easy to forget that I ever left in the first place - except I've changed.

My hair is darker, no longer bleached blonde - now it is back to its natural color. It's longer and falls in wavy curls over my shoulders. I'm more alert, from years of being in hiding, and I no longer go by the name Francesca.

I am just Frankie now. I hope the slight changes in me will help me blend in and go unnoticed.

I don't want anyone to know who I am or that I am back.

For Damion's sake, I want to stay under the radar and unknown.

When I arrived three men confronted me.

My father's goons.

They tried to tell me they were taking me right back to my old home - my father's mansion - but I refused.

Instead, I've moved into a small apartment in the city, near the casinos.

I can't face the idea of living with my father - and how his overbearing control will affect Damion who has only known a peaceful, free life in the countryside.

I don't want this Las Vegas life for my son and even though I am back I will do everything I can to keep him safe from my father's suffocating influence.

Tonight, I am on my way to see my father for the first time since I left.

Seated in the back of the town car he sent for me, with Damion strapped in beside me, my stomach is in knots. Riddled with anxiety, I can't sit still.

Damion can sense something is wrong, even though I am doing my best to hide it from him.

He keeps looking over at me, a little frown on his face.

I keep reassuring him as best I can.

"We are going to see your grandpa," I say, tucking a dark wild curl behind his ear.

"Gampa?"

"Yes, baby. Then we will go home and make some chicken nuggets."

He nods, satisfied that he is getting chicken nuggets soon.

I stare out of the window, trying not to fidget.

Whatever happens - I will not let my father keep us there. That is my primary concern. His men could've kidnapped me at any time and they haven't - yet. So, me going to the house, or not going to the house will not make a difference.

We arrive at his mansion, and he is standing on top of the steps, like the 'king of the castle' waiting for the peasants to arrive. I get out of the car and pick Damion up.

Taking a slow, deep breath to settle my nerves.

"Dad," I say, walking up the steps towards him.

"Francesca, my daughter, it's good to see you." He steps aside and gestures for me to go inside.

Once we are in the house, he closes the front door and my throat tightens.

It's so strange being back in this house and there are far too many memories slamming into me right now.

"Is this my grandson?" My father says, tilting towards Damion.

Damion's little fingers grip tighter onto the shoulders of my jersey. He can sense something is off about this man. He isn't comfortable.

"This is Damion. Damion - this is my dad - your grandfather."

Damion scrunches his nose and leans his head against me. "Hello." His quiet little greeting comes out in a whisper.

"He's timid, isn't he? You can tell he wasn't raised by a man. It's good that you came back now while he is still young."

I grit my teeth, holding back the sassy reply I want to make, and instead opt to keep this visit as civil as possible. I knew my father would be his usual, cold self. I shouldn't let it surprise or hurt me.

His comment does make me wonder -- what are his plans for my son? Does he think I will let him teach my son about the mafia?

There is no fucking chance I will let that happen.

A new fear creeps in, the fear that my father intends to take my son from me because he is the perfect heir to his empire.

I push it away. There is no point in panicking now. Keep your head clear. Stay focused. Be polite. Keep it civil.

"We can't stay long, Dad. I need to get Damion home for dinner and bath time. I just wanted to say hello - and let you know I am back in Las Vegas."

"My men tell me you are going by the name Frankie now. Why is that? And who is the bastard's father?"

"It is nothing for you to worry about."

I'm going by the name Frankie to hide from my old self - the girl who lived under my father's oppressive rules. I don't want people to know that I am Francesca Musetti. I don't want them to associate me or my son with my father's name. I can't tell him that. It will only piss him off.

As for his question about who the father is. Well - I can't answer that because I don't know - and even if I did - it's none of his business.

I want to find out - even if I do it from a distance. He's here in Vegas somewhere.

My father huffs in annoyance and I can see his jaw clench. I've already upset him.

His eyes are cold and like daggers as he stares at me. His hair is a silver-gray, always sleek, and never a hair out of place. Even his close-cropped beard is silver now.

Yet, he doesn't look his age.

He looks sharp, and hyper-aware of everything around him. Decades of having to watch his back turned him into a paranoid control freak, driven by power he's a monster of a man.

I turn my face away from his stare.

I don't like the way it makes me feel.

In the living room, I do my best to hold a civil conversation with him, but every moment that goes by all I want to do is leave. Finally, when Damion becomes fidgety, overtired, and starts crying a little - I take my cue and as fast as lightning I say my goodbyes and get the men to take me home.

I can't even explain how much of a relief it is to be arriving back home, to my little apartment with Damion.

After chicken nuggets and carrots for dinner, it's the only vegetable he will eat right now - cooked, soft, and drizzled with a tiny bit of honey - Damion is fresh out of a warm bath and tucked into bed.

I call Clarissa, the girl who lives downstairs who I interviewed the day I got here; she is his nanny and I want to ask her to come and sit in the apartment while he sleeps so that I can head out for a while.

I need to clear my head.

A part of me wants to go to the Russo River Casino - but it is only because that is where I last saw his father. It's ridiculous to think that I would bump into the mysterious stranger again in the same place all these years later.

Besides, the new casino that opened up while I was gone is closer to my apartment and I don't want to be gone for long.

I just want to play a few games of Blackjack. I want to see if I still have my secret skills. The money would be good too. I'd prefer to not have my father support us here.

The casino is loud and colorful, just as I remembered them all to be. No windows, no clocks, just shiny lights, and the thrill of the games. I am wearing an understated but elegant black dress. I want to blend in, not stand out.

Sliding onto a seat at the Blackjack table I nod for the dealer to deal me in as I slide my chips across the table.

And yes - I do still have it. In fact, as soon as I play it all comes back to me, and the thrill, excitement, and that strange sense of empowerment I get when I count cards - it sets a wide smile across my face.

I play for an hour, letting go of all my worry and all of my stress about being back here in this City of Sin.

My father seems to be happy to let me keep some distance for now; I am in his city. He doesn't need to know that Damion's father was a one-night stand. He doesn't even need to know that Damion's father is a stranger to me. And I will take it day by day - doing everything I can to stay out of the mafia world that I despise. My son will not grow up having to watch his back.

I am terrified that my father only invited me back so that he could raise my son to take over his empire. He was always desperate for an heir to his kingdom.

If I need to - I can run again. Even though I doubt my father would just allow me to leave this time. But no matter what - I will be ok. And my son will be safe. I will

make sure of it.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:20 pm

DANTE

I t's been a morning of chaos. Too many meetings, too many updates, too much going on and I need a break. But it's still early and I've got a lot to do.

Standing up from my desk in my office at the Russo River Casino - my original empire - I gather my things, knowing I need to do a check on what's happening at one of the new casinos.

La Muse Casino is doing well. Revenue is pouring in and the reviews in the media are stellar. However, it has only been open for two years, and as with all new business - you've got to keep a close eye on things.

I need to be sure my managers are doing what they are supposed to; I need to ensure the staff are trustworthy. I need to watch over everything and trust no one until they've proven their loyalty and trustworthiness.

Our security system is state-of-the art. My primary focus when opening a new casino is always security. There are more cameras in my casinos than in any other casino in Las Vegas. Like I said - I don't trust anyone.

So, while I can access any of the cameras from anywhere - I still prefer to visit in person and make my presence known and remind everyone who works for me I've got my eyes on everything - all the time.

La Muse was a shopping mall before it became my casino. I purchased it - tore apart the insides and rebuilt it in less than a year. The location is prime, and the launch was

spectacular.

Since day one the casino has been packed and the hotel books out months in advance. I am impressed with its success.

I arrive at La Muse after the lunch rush, heading straight onto the casino floor to speak with the managers.

"Afternoon, sir." The executive floor manager, Andrew, greets me.

"Andrew, what news do you have for me today? Anything I need to be aware of?"

He knows me well and skips the bland conversation to dive straight into the updates as we walk through the casino floor.

"Last night's event was successful. And this morning we've got a lot of the guests from the event out on the casino floor, so we are busy. The hotel is full. There is a VIP high-roller arriving tomorrow evening so we will ensure he has everything he wants. There are some reports of a card counter who's been spending evenings at the Blackjack tables. There is no concrete evidence yet - but we are keeping a close eye."

I frown and stop walking. "A card counter?"

"Yes, sir. Goes by the name Frankie. New in town. Showed up a week and a half ago and comes in for an hour or two early in the evenings. Doesn't play large, and never two nights in a row."

"Frankie," I mutter his name. As a casino owner, I despise card counters. But they also pique my curiosity. The audacity - and that it is so hard to prove what they do. The problem with genius criminals is they are often too smart to catch.

"What makes you think they're counting?" I ask, wondering just how sure Andrew is.

"The skill is just - it's so good it's questionable. That's all."

I nod. That's how all card counters end up getting caught. They are too good at the game. And ego won't let them step back and lose.

They play with their egos instead of logic. If they just lost some money occasionally it'd be less conspicuous.

Well, now I want to meet Frankie myself. A face-to-face so he knows who is in charge, and then I'll add him to the blacklisted players at my casino.

And the best way to lure a card counter out of hiding is to host a high-stakes game. They can't resist.

He will learn that I am not a person to fuck with - and card counting in my casino will cost him more than he bargained for.

"Set up a high-stakes game. I want to meet this Frankie."

"Yes, sir. I'll set up for the end of the week?"

"Perfect. Send me the details. I want to be here in person. I might even chat with Frankie myself."

Andrew nods. He knows my reputation and his expression tells me he fears for this Frankie asshole. Well, Andrew - Frankie should've thought about the consequences of his actions before he fucked with my business.

After catching up on news with Andrew I go up to my office and complete some

paperwork. Finding out about a new card counter has set my irritation levels high. I hate to be taken advantage of - and that is what card counters do. They work around the system.

You've got to be a genius to count cards - but it is still cheating, and I won't tolerate it. If I don't act against this guy, my reputation will be stained.

On Friday night I walked into La Muse Casino wearing a slick black suit, my eyes already dark and broody to match my mood just having to be here to meet this card counter. It's a waste of an evening - but I must do it in person.

The game has already started when I arrive. I make my way to where they're playing and stand on the platform overlooking the tables.

Andrew comes to stand by my side.

There are seven players at the table. Six men and one woman. Four of them I know well. They are regulars.

I stare at the other two me wondering which one of those assholes is Frankie.

"She's superb," Andrew says, his arms folded across his chest, watching the girl instead of paying attention to the entire reason I set this game up.

"I don't care about her - which one is Frankie?" I sigh, even though I am staring at the girl too. There is something about her that stirs my insides and sets my pulse racing. Do I know her? Maybe I've seen her around here or in one of the other casinos. She looks so familiar, but I can't place her.

"She is Frankie, sir." Andrew turns towards me in confusion - as though he thought I already knew that.

"The girl? The girl is the card counter?"

My heart rate goes up. It never even crossed my mind that Frankie might be a woman. I just assumed - I mean card counting is a man's game. Women tend to - I don't know - not be that smart. It's a woman. That woman. She's fucking gorgeous.

"Yes, sir. And she's damn good at it. She knows when to hold back on winning and it's bloody hard we can't prove what she's doing."

"The girl. Fuck me." I mutter again in disbelief.

"I'm going down. Call if you need anything. We've got the cameras on her." Andrew says, oblivious to my complete and utter shock.

"Yeah - sure." I stammer, not sure I like this.

I step close to the railing, looking down at the table, at her face, the way she moves and that slight smile on her lips as she pushes her chips towards the dealer. Her slender figure, tall and athletic, elegant. Her tight black dress dipped low in the front to reveal tanned olive skin.

Why does she seem so familiar to me?

Her body language, her mouth - something about her - where do I recognize her from?

She glances up, sensing the intensity of my stare.

For a moment she looks taken aback - a sly smile crosses her face, and her eyes shine for a moment. Then she looks away and realization slams into me.

She reminds me of the woman in the gold dress, the little fox from the gala.

Her hair is different. Dark and long, compared to the shoulder-length blonde. This woman seems more poised, perhaps more serious, but similar in so many ways. I've never met someone who reminded me of that fox - but this girl - she has the same energy, movements, and the same intensity in her eyes.

But it can't be her. Something is different.

All night I watch her play; I can't tear my eyes off her even though it is weird and awkward.

I move from the balcony onto the main gaming floor so that I can see her at eye level.

Fuck. She is gorgeous. And Andrew was right - she is damn good at her crafty cheating. She plays it safe but is still kicking ass amongst the men in the game who are very upset to be losing to a girl. Frankie is bruising their egos while stealing from me.

"Frankie," I mutter, watching as she folds her hand. There are only three players left. If she wins now, she walks away with a lot of money - but I get the sense that this isn't about money.

"Who are you, Frankie? Where are you from?" I mutter, sipping my neat whiskey.

Frankie knows I'm watching her.

Her flirtatious glances confirm it. She is toying with me.

My phone has been an annoyance all night and as much as I want to keep my full attention on this game it seems like all hell is breaking loose underground. I've got no

choice but to step away and find out what the hell is going on.

Reluctantly, I leave the game, taking one last long look at her.

Maybe I can make it back before it's over.

I hurried down to the tunnels, agitated because I did not want to walk away from that girl. Something about her—I don't understand it—but she has my full attention.

"What the fuck is going on?" I demand, stepping out of the elevators into chaos.

The shift manager rushes over to me.

"Sir, we spotted some intruders on the cameras—the guards are after them and we've locked down all exits."

"And?"

"And that's it for now, sir. We will catch them." His voice was thin with stress.

"Well, don't fucking call me until you do. Handle this." I snarl, then turn back to the elevator, desperate to get back upstairs. It's not like I'm going to go running through the tunnels to catch these assholes in Gucci loafers and a suit. I pay other people to do that.

In the elevator, I do my best to regain my composure. Even with the shit going on in the tunnels, I am still obsessing over this Frankie girl. I want to find out more about her - but without giving away the fact that I own this casino. I don't want her to think I am onto her. I don't even give a shit that she is card counting at this point. The curiosity has overrun the irritation of her cheating in my casino.

I've got to find out who she is. I want to know why she reminds me so much of that woman. Could it be a sister? Could she lead me to find the other girl?

Frankie plays it safe and ducks out of the game in second place.

She could've won with no effort - but I guess she didn't want that attention. She's a clever thief, with no ego, unlike men.

Well, whether or not she wants it - she has my undivided attention.

My phone chimes with updates about what is happening down below. It's agitating me and making me tense. All I want to hear is when they catch the guys. Until then I do not care. For now—I want to focus on what is right in front of me.

I watch her as she saunters over to the bar. Her hips swaying. I am mesmerized by her beauty. Her long dark hair falls in thick waves down her back and when she moves it floats around her.

As she leans forward over the bar to order a drink, my eyes trace over the curve of her back, the silky black fabric of her dress looks like liquid against her skin.

Everything about her is understated. The way she presents herself - there is nothing flashy or over the top. She has subtle gold jewelry, complimenting her tanned skin. Elegant and simple. Her make up is natural and soft. Her dress is plain too. Thin straps and a long, flowing style.

It's as though she is doing her best to blend in and not draw attention - but with a body and face like hers, it is impossible.

A lot of men are watching her tonight, and one of them is busy making his move right now, offering to buy her a drink.

Frankie glances over her shoulder, towards me, half a smile curling the corner of her mouth. Then she turns back to the man, declining his drink with polite elegance. He looks disappointed, trying to push his luck by asking again - but she declines again - and then glances at me, her thick dark lashes framing that piercing gaze of hers.

Was that an invitation to me?

Either way - I've got every intention of going to talk to her.

Pushing away from the table I was leaning on I walk towards the bar.

I don't stand too close to her, and I don't turn my body towards her. I nod towards the bartender and order a whiskey.

Once he has placed the drink in front of me I turn towards her, lifting my drink up to hers. "Congratulations, you played a good game this evening."

"Thank you." She says, cool and polite. She touches the lip of her glass against mine.

Her eyes trace over me. My heart is racing even faster being this close to her. She has my skin tingling like it's on fire and my mind running wild with possibilities.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:20 pm

FRANKIE

He has been watching me all night. And from the moment I locked eyes with him, I had this crazy feeling that I knew him from somewhere.

I needed to pay attention to the game, so it was a little distracting having him there - but I didn't mind.

What I am trying to figure out though is why he seems so familiar to me.

Is he one of my father's men? I wouldn't be surprised if my father had people watching my every move.

I play it cool all night, but I keep glancing up to meet his gaze. Those intense blue eyes cause my stomach to flutter.

Fuck. He is gorgeous.

I keep thinking of that old saying - and it makes me smile.

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

Maybe it's just some excuse my mind is making up so that I've got a reason to spend time with this man - but I've decided that if he is one of my father's guards - I want to keep him close, then I can keep tabs on him in the same way that I assume he has been sent to keep tabs on me.

Ever since I came back to Las Vegas, I can sense I am attracting attention whenever I walk into the casino. It's because I am doing too well at Blackjack. People tend not to like that and become suspicious.

It's not good - and it's making it harder to keep my true identity hidden - but card counting is my only form of escape and for now, I need it. Although - I should play a lot less.

It was a risk to come to this game tonight, and I was irresponsible taking it. But - I can't stay locked away in that apartment all the time - and this is Vegas - what else can I do but the obvious - play cards.

In the casino over the past week, I've already seen several faces I know. Faces I don't want to see - and people I hope won't recognize me. Allies and enemies of my father. People I want nothing to do with. Lucky for me my father kept me locked away most of the time, so most people don't have any idea who I am. But if I keep playing cards and I attract any more attention, I am going to create problems for myself. Ones I don't need right now.

I should remove myself from the game and bow out, but I'm feeling cheeky and daring so, I stay in and take second place.

The man is watching me the entire time. His heated gaze sent shivers through me.

A delightful tease of my curiosity and my body.

When I leave the table, I congratulate the other player on his win, then walk towards the bar. I need a drink. And I am curious about whether the gorgeous stranger will come and talk to me.

I lean forward to order a whiskey from the bartender and when I glance over my

shoulder, he has made no moves towards me, but he is still watching.

Another man, one of many who was watching me tonight, comes over and stands next to me, grinning down at me. I assume they don't see a woman playing Blackjack and winning very often.

"Can I celebrate with you? Will you let me buy you a drink?" Again, with this.

smile at him. He's cute. Dark blonde hair and a friendly smile. For the briefest moment he reminds me of Jake, and I feel sick to my stomach as memories flash through my mind -- blood stains, and fighting for air, no thank you.

I can't be with a man like him. Besides, he is not the man who has caught my eye this evening.

"Thank you, but I am waiting for a friend." I'm polite but reject him.

"Are you sure? I don't mind if your friend joins us for a drink - or dinner - I would just celebrate with a gorgeous lady."

"Thank you, again, but I've got plans. Perhaps another night."

He gets the message, and with disappointment in his eyes, he steps away. At least he wasn't annoying or creepy about it. Some guys who've tried to pick me up in this casino were creepy - or flashy with their money - thinking that dropping their Aston Martin keys on the counter would impress me. I guess it works on enough girls that they keep doing it. I'm hard to impress.

I glance over my shoulder again, pleased to see the man who I want to share a drink with is still watching. His gaze sends a thrilling shiver down my spine.

I turn my back. I won't beg him to come over, if he wants to, he will.

I am enjoying this little game we are playing.

I haven't even thought of being with a man since the night I spent with that beautiful stranger - Damion's father.

"A whiskey, neat." A deep smooth voice vibrates through me as he orders his drink from the bartender, standing a few paces way away.

Once he has it, he turns towards me, calm and full of confidence. His presence demands respect. And from the way he presents himself, I can see he is a man with power. I wonder what he does and who he is? Could he have been sent by my father to watch me?

"Congratulations, you played a great game this evening." His voice is divine, like caramel - salted and smooth.

"Thank you."

I look him up and down. My heart is racing. It will not slow down. I know him - but I can't place where from. He must be one of my father's crew. It would explain the expensive suit. But then why am I so drawn to him like this? I avoid those goons like STDs. No, I'm not certain it's that - it must be something else. Maybe I've just seen him around here?

"Are you staying here?" He asks me, his eyes locked onto mine.

"No. Are you?" I need to keep my answers short and sweet. The less I say the better. I don't need him finding out who I am if he doesn't work for my father.

"I am staying at a different casino. I came here to watch the game tonight, and it wasn't disappointing." He grins, a dark sort of mischief playing in his eyes.

"Mm. I rather enjoyed the game myself." I laugh.

"If you aren't busy right now, I'd love to take you to dinner. I know the perfect place."

I glance at my watch. "I've got an hour or two, and I am hungry." I shrug, playing it cool. I should not have agreed to this. I should go home and be a responsible adult. I should not be playing with fire. I have a crazy father who'd kill the guy just for asking. But then again, what harm can come of dinner with a handsome man? It's just dinner. That's all.

"Excellent. The decision is made then."

He holds his hand out to me, and I narrow my eyes at him as I place my hand in his. My skin burns as we touch and electrify runs through me body.

Control yourself, Frankie.

"Wait," I say, almost pulling my hand back. "What is your name?"

"I'm Dan." He smiles.

I would not make that mistake again. No more mysterious men are going to disappear from my life. I'd rather just ask upfront.

"I'm Frankie." I grin.

"I know," Dan says. "Are you ready to go, Frankie?"

I nod.

He leads me away from the bar, and I think we are going to go somewhere inside the casino. There are so many places to choose from, but he takes me out of the casino, and we climb into his car and drive to a restaurant on the outskirts of the city.

"Why here?" I'm curious.

"Sometimes, even if I am staying in the casino, and it's a lot of fun and there's a vibe, I like to get away from all the noise -- especially when there is such a beautiful woman to give my attention to. I don't need the flashing lights, and jackpot sounds to know I've won."

I giggle. He's smooth, I bet he says that to all the girls.

He's a charmer. A smooth talker. He knows how to get what he wants from women. I need to be careful with this one because his charming tactics are working on me.

I shouldn't be playing games like this when I've got a son at home to worry about.

As long as I get back home by midnight - there is no harm in letting my hair down for a while. I do need to relax. Otherwise, I'll go insane.

Sitting at the table overlooking a horse ranch on the outskirts of the city is peaceful. It's beautiful out here and reminds me of the tranquility I experienced when I stayed in the little cottage with Damion - away from this noisy city.

I take a deep slow breath, letting myself relax into the moment.

"Where did you learn to play cards like that?" Dan asks once we've ordered a mixed seafood platter for two.

"No one really taught me, to be honest. My dad was always too busy, and I didn't really have a mom. The housekeeper showed me once. After that, Blackjack was just something I started playing to relax - and then figured out I'm good at it."

"You're brilliant. Those men didn't stand a chance. You could've come first if you wanted to."

His questions sound like more of an accusation than curiosity.

He keeps glancing at his phone during dinner and every time he does his eyes darken. What is bothering him so much about the messages he's receiving so late at night? He probably has a wife who wants to know where he is. His mood swings from attentive and alluring to cold and agitated.

My heart thunders as I wonder if he knows I count cards. It's unlikely though.

"I don't know what you mean. I played the best I could." I smile, tilting my head to the side and then looking away from him. I need to change the subject.

"What do you do, Dan? What brings you to Las Vegas? Who is texting you, your wife?"

"I've been here for a while now. I run an import-export company, and a lot of my clients are out here. So I stay in the penthouse at the Russo River Casino when I am in town. I don't have a wife; that is work."

At the mention of the Russo River Casino my memory jolts.

An image flashes through my mind. The man in the mask. A heated night of passion.

I clear my throat, pushing the images away. "It's a really exclusive hotel and casino;

business must be going well."

It is the most expensive hotel in Las Vegas. And he's staying in the penthouse. He isn't one of my father's goons - that's for sure. They do not get paid enough for that.

"I do alright for myself. What about you?"

I smile, glancing down at my drink, swirling the pink gin so that it splashes and mixes with the fruit pieces and aromatics. "I just moved to Las Vegas. I lived in Canada for years."

"Canada? What did you do there?" He asks, sounding confused.

"I worked in a flower shop."

He rests his hands on the table, leaning forward when he speaks to me. He really is giving me his full attention.

I look into his bright, cool blue eyes. What is it about him that has me so captivated?

"That is a big change - the move from a quiet flower shop to Las Vegas. What made you do that?"

"Spreading my wings. Seeing the world." I shrug. "Flowers are big business here, lots of weddings."

"Mm." He smiles at me. His eyes speak to my heart.

Then he leans back and taps his fingers on the edge of his whiskey glass.

"Come join me for dinner at my penthouse - I'll cook for you."

"Was that an invitation or a demand?" I laugh, amused by his bold confidence. It wasn't a question at all. He glances at his phone again and his jaw muscles flex. I wait --trying to ignore the warning signs that this man is not what he seems. Should I be risking everything just to spend some time with him? What is it about him that makes me want to do that? His phone rings and he looks even more annoyed. "Please give me a second. I need to take this call."

Stepping away from the table and walking up and down a distance from me—I can still hear some of the conversation.

His voice is deep and carries far.

"Kill the bastards if you catch them." He snarls.

He hangs up.

He slides his phone back into his pocket and I watch as he adjusts his composure and the darkness lifts from his eyes. He smiles at me, walking back to the table like nothing happened.

"Sorry about that. Some issues at work." He sits down, "Well, I will not kidnap you and force you to eat my food if that is what you mean." He laughs, a warm sound that rumbles from his chest and causes my smile to stretch wider.

My heart is racing -- eating like drums in my head.

I should say no. Just like I should never have agreed to this dinner date.

The darkness that keeps shining deep in his eyes is a red flag I should pay attention to.

But my response is out of my lips before my logic has time to filter it.

"I would love to find out if you can cook or not."

"Great. Sunday night?"

"Sure." My heart flutters. I can't believe I am doing this.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:20 pm

DANTE

I've just dropped Frankie back off at La Muse Casino where she left her car. There's a stupid grin on my face that I can't seem to get rid of. This girl is doing something to me. She has awakened something deep inside me, and I do not want it to stop.

I admit, I took her to the furthest restaurant hoping no one would recognize me out there. And I've invited her to my penthouse for the same reason - to spend time with her without anyone giving away my true identity.

I'm not sure why I want to keep it hidden from her; usually, I flash who I am if I'm trying to impress a lady. I think it is because I know nothing about her - and the way she reminds me of the mysterious woman from years ago.

She's a card counter, a cheater and I know she is not a florist -- red flags waving in my face! They do nothing to deter me; I need to know who Frankie is.

I want to spend more time with her.

I pull away from La Muse thinking about her eyes, and how familiar they are.

She was very insistent on being home by midnight. Perhaps she was just trying to make it clear to me that she had no intention of coming home with me. Who knows?

I'll find out her secrets. Whatever is hiding behind that flirtatious smile of hers, I will find out what the sly cheater is hiding.

All of Saturday I can't stop thinking about her and by Sunday afternoon I am driving myself crazy.

I've already gone out, trying to distract myself, and bought all the ingredients I need to make dinner - as well as two bottles of wine and flowers for the table, so I can prove she's not a florist. My chef made creme brulée, for dessert, which is in the fridge, ready and waiting. I'm not that good in the kitchen.

Now I am pacing up and down the tidy penthouse, anxious, like a man waiting for his first date, worried she might not show up.

I could call her. I've got her number. I could text her to confirm our dinner plans, but I won't.

I'll be patient.

The problems in the tunnels are testing my patience and I'm worried that they are going to do something stupid down there and I'll have to clean up the damage. Even one of those tunnels closing will impact my cash flow by slowing down my deliveries. I trust my team is on it, and they will handle it because that is what I pay them to do.

Frankie is arriving at seven and when I glance at my watch and see it is six fifty-five, I sigh in relief.

Pouring a whisky to calm my shattered nerves, I stand out on the balcony of the penthouse, overlooking the city lights. It's like a Christmas tree flashing non-stop, shiny and tempting.

The front desk buzzes. She is on her way up. I wait until there is a soft knock on the door.

I pull it open and gesture for her to come in.

She steps forward, stands on her tiptoes, and kisses my cheek, giving me an awkward hug.

The closeness sets my pulse racing.

Her perfume is intoxicating. It washes over me as she steps back and smiles, then walks into the penthouse. Sweet magnolia and wild orchids. It smells incredible. My eyes trace over her back, the long cream-colored dress she is wearing looks fresh and summery on her. White sneakers are a cute touch that keeps her outfit chic and casual while still making her look incredible.

"Wow, this place really has a spectacular view." She says, looking out towards the balcony.

"That's why I love it. Make yourself at home, I am about to cook. Can I get you a drink?"

She drops her purse onto the sofa and turns to smile at me. "I'd love a whiskey if you've got any?"

"I do." I tilted my head, smiling too, because I just remembered that it was what the beautiful fox girl liked to drink as well. What is it that makes them so similar?

Once I've poured her a drink, she follows me into the kitchen. It's strange how certain people can come into your space, and you just feel comfortable. That's how it is with her.

"What are you making for dinner?" She asks. "Not food poisoning I hope." She's cheeky.

"I'm going to try my hand at making pork chow mein. I hope you like Chinese food - I mean - if you don't or if this a total failure there are a lot of excellent restaurants, we can order from downstairs."

She laughs.

Frankie has a calm confidence about her. An alluring magnetism.

She teases me and jokes with me while I cook. Picking up a knife and sliding the wooden chopping board over she's helping cut vegetables and herbs. She fits in, as though she has been here a hundred times.

There isn't a single moment with her where I'm awkward or tense.

"I don't believe that this is the first time you are making this," she says, her brows raised. "Be honest. Did you practice three times already to make sure you looked good tonight?"

"If I said yes, would you still be impressed?" I chuckle, stepping closer to her and holding out a spoon with a little sauce on it for her to taste.

She opens her mouth, and I slip the spoon between her lips, then drag it out of her mouth. "Mm. That's really amazing." She nods, then brushes her fingertips over her lips. I keep my eyes fixed on her.

"More salt?"

"No, that's perfect as it is."

I can't stop staring at her mouth.

"Is there something on my face?" She giggles, touching her cheek.

I reach up and cup her face in my hand. "You are exquisite, Frankie," I say softly. Her eyes lock with mine and my heart thumps when I brush my thumb over her mouth, then lean forward, pulling her face towards mine and pressing my lips against hers.

The kiss is like a lost dream, one that I can remember only by the taste of her. I slide my arm around her waist and pull her body up against mine. A soft moan escapes her mouth, and it stirs lust in me.

My pulse gets quicker, and my cock is getting harder.

I step away from her.

The sound of the pan sizzling on the stove behind me forces me back into reality.

"I don't want to burn the place down." I chuckle, lifting the pan and setting it aside.

She picks up her drink, taking a slow sip, her eyes closed for a moment. Then she says, "I'll set the table. It looks like you are almost ready?"

"Yes, the plates are in that cabinet." I point towards the one in the corner. She sets the table while I finish cooking. I'm thinking about the kiss and how quickly it escalated. Her lips felt incredible against mine.

I want to kiss her again.

I want to do so much more than kiss her.

Sitting on the balcony next to her we're enjoying our chow mein. She doesn't seem bothered that our legs are touching under the table.

In fact, she leans into it.

I drop my hand beneath the table and run my fingers over her thigh.

She looks at me, a flirty smile on her lips.

"Thank you for coming tonight," I say.

"I'm really enjoying myself." She replies.

I shift, turning to face her. I can't resist her anymore. I can't hold back.

I wrap my hand around the back of her neck and pull her towards me again. This time when I kiss her it's with passion because I know what I want - and I can sense she wants it too.

She slides her hand around my neck and moves off her chair, onto my lap -- her legs wrapping around my waist. A low growl rumbles from my chest as she pushes her hips forward, riding against my rock-hard cock. She's trying to kill me, I'm sure.

I grip her waist and hold her still against me, pushing up against her. My fingers dig into her flesh. I want to bruise her. I want to leave a mark, so she knows who she belongs to after this.

Fuck, she is so sexy. The way she moves, the way she kisses me - I can't get enough of her.

I slide my hands up her legs, dragging her dress up over her hips and then pulling it over her head; but before she frees her hands, I lock her wrists together and twist the dress around them. Tying her up and leaving her vulnerable to whatever it is I've been fantasizing about doing to her.

She seems to hesitate for a moment, but her eyes darken with desire when I smile at her.

"I am just making sure you behave," I say.

All she is wearing is a black lace thong. Her perfect, round, full breasts catch the moonlight as they are thrust forward. Her arms are locked behind her.

I rub my thumb over her nipple, then grab a handful of her breast and wrap my lips over it, teasing her with my tongue. She moans, leaning back.

My cock throbs, aching to be inside her.

I lift her off my lap and unbutton my shirt while she watches me with demure eyes. I shrug it off my shoulders and then tug my pants open, shoving them to the floor.

She stares at my cock, biting her lower lip. The flick of her tongue makes my cock throb, the veins along the shaft pulsing.

I grip her throat, pull her back towards me, and then lift her back onto my lap. She is my toy and I'm feeling playful tonight. I grab my cock in my hand, holding it so she can sit down on me.

She smirks, cheeky and coy as she lowers herself onto my cock. I groan at the pure pleasure of it sliding into her tight pink pussy. She gasps as I fill her up and stretch her pussy open.

Steadying her with my hand twisted in her long hair, she bounces up and down on my lap.

I grip her hips, wanting to slam into her, bury myself inside her and then fuck her

until she screams.

But every time I move to thrust into her, she grins and takes control, not letting me.

She is teasing me - and enjoying it.

It turns me on, how she thinks she is the one in charge.

She rocks over me, dancing on my cock, her gorgeous body captivating me.

I cannot take it anymore.

I stand up, lifting her with me. Sliding out of her I spin her around and bend her over the table. Guiding her restrained wrists to the table, I slip the tip of my cock to tease her wet pussy. Two can play this game.

Her moans turn into desperate, breathless pleas as she whispers, "Fuck me already," the need in her voice pushing me past the point of control.

She squeals when I thrust into her from behind, my cock slamming into her pussy and jolting her forward. Her fingers dig into my hand as I fuck her the way I want to fuck her. Hard, deep, and aggressive. As I shove my cock into her, she moans louder and louder, and I lock my other hand over her waist to keep her in place.

Soon her legs shake, and she arches her ass high towards me.

Her moans are more drawn out and her pussy is tightening over my cock.

"Come all over my cock, Frankie," I growl against her ear as I grab a handful of her hair and pull her back against my chest.

Her body shudders against mine and she stiffens, then quivers as she tilts her head back against me. Her eyes close and her lips apart as the orgasm steals her away. I grab her breast and thrust into her again, exploding inside her.

Waves of pleasure convulsed through me.

I tug her dress loose from her wrists. It falls to the floor, and she bends down to pick it up, looking around her.

"Do you think anyone saw?" She asks, trying to see if the balcony is visible to my neighbors.

"Not unless they had binoculars - and if they did - they should consider themselves fortunate to have seen that show."

I grab her around the waist and drag her towards me, kissing her. Even now, after I've just been satisfied by her, her naked body is incredible against mine. I could take her again.

"Dessert?" I ask, smiling down at her, wrapped in my arms.

"I thought that was dessert." She grins, scrunching her nose.

"Well, we can have more of this dessert after the dessert in the fridge."

"Mmm. I like the sound of that."

Frankie stays in my bed, laughing and cuddling until just before midnight. Then she gathers her things, kisses me goodbye, and slips out.

Leaving me with this weird emptiness, wishing she could've stayed the night.

Wondering why she couldn't. What was so important?

The way she touched me, she lingers on my skin. I can smell her and taste her and it's like a drug - I crave more. Like an addict, I'm not satisfied, it wasn't enough.

It wasn't only the sex, but also her infectious laugh and her mischievous, playful attitude -- the way she spoke about life and how her smile lit up her entire face.

I need more of her. I want all of her.

After lying in bed for an hour, staring at the ceiling, unable to get her out of my mind - I pick up my phone and text her.

Me: Are you home safe? Lunch tomorrow? I will pick you up.

This way I can find out where she lives - and see her again.

Frankie: I'm home safe. Thank you for an amazing night. I can have lunch with you tomorrow. I'll meet you in the main lobby of Russo River Casino at twelve.

So, she is not allowing me to pick her up or see where she lives. Not yet. I will find out, eventually.

I'll be ready and waiting at the entrance tomorrow before she gets inside - again - I really don't want anyone giving away who I am.

I'll take her somewhere outside the casino for lunch.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:20 pm

FRANKIE

I wake up with a massive smile on my face. Last night was incredible.

Rolling over in bed I stretch my arms above my head, yawning, just as Damion runs into my room, slamming his little body onto my bed.

"Soft biscuit." He shouts, jumping onto me, and squashing the air out of my lungs. I wrap my arms around him and smother his little face in kisses. "You want a biscuit?" I ask. "With honey and or gravy?"

"Yes." He squeals, wiggling to get away from my hug.

"Yes - what, Damion?" I say.

"Yes, please, Mommy." He grins, sheepish, knowing he always has to remember his manners.

He's still so young, but he is so aware of other people and shows high amounts of empathy. He is a soft-hearted, old soul, and that is another reason I want to keep him safe from the world. He is too kind, and over time - I will teach him to set firm boundaries if he wants to survive this place.

For now - I will teach him manners. We all start somewhere.

He runs from my room, shouting please again while he laughs.

"I'm coming." I chuckle, throwing the blankets off and following him to the kitchen.

Damion insists on helping me when I make biscuits - but of course, that creates a nightmare of a mess and this morning I am not in the mood to clean. So instead of letting him help me with the actual batter - I break an egg into a bowl and hand it to him to mix.

He sits on the play mat on the kitchen floor and stabs at the yolk until it breaks then all of his focus goes into mixing while I make the batter.

I peek at the oven as the biscuits turn a golden brown.

I can't stop thinking about Dan.

The way he touched me, the way he kissed me. And how he filled my pussy. There was something so familiar about it. His entire demeanor reminds me of someone very specific, at first I pushed the thought aside, but there are so many small things about him. I might be right.

He told me he often stays at the Russo River Casino - and he is familiar. Those blue eyes.

I shake my head.

The intensity of the nagging sensation is suffocating and unrelenting.

I think he might be the man from that night. The Shadow.

I think he might be Damion's father.

What are the chances of that happening? It's crazy.

But after last night my instincts tell me that it is true. Dan is The Shadow.

"Mommy. All done." I turn to see Damion holding a bowl of mixed eggs that he is about to tip onto the floor.

"Well done baby boy," I say as I take the bowl from him. I'll throw it into the pan once the biscuits are done and make a little scrambled egg. He loves eggs and will eat them with the biscuit.

"Are you ready for your first biscuit?" I ask, seeing that another sixty seconds in the oven would've burned it.

Oops.

I'm daydreaming too much this morning.

Last night has gotten to me more than I would like to admit.

I slide the first two biscuits onto a plastic plate for him, squeezing some honey over them. He places his bum onto the mat on the floor again and holds his hands up to take the breakfast from me.

I leave him to enjoy his food while I pour two more scoops of batter into the pan.

"Could it be him?" I talk to myself. "And if it is him - what does that mean? Is it good or bad? Would I tell him the truth? How do I know it's him?"

"Ok, Mommy," Damion says, joining the conversation even though he does not know what I am talking about.

After breakfast and a shower, I take Damion to the park nearby so that he can play on

the little jungle gym and run around. I am meeting Dan at twelve, so Clarissa is coming to spend the afternoon with Damion. They are going to make pizza and watch cartoons. I don't like her to take him out of the apartment when I am not there. I just don't trust my father's men.

Even now - sitting in the park - I can see them, trying to blend in but sticking out like an alarm bell -- overdressed in dark suits with the bulge of their handguns beneath their jackets. Completely out of place at a kid's park.

I roll my eyes in annoyance.

I've got to be so careful. I don't want them following me when I go meet Dan. Especially if I'm right and he is Damion's father. The last person I want to be involved in that is my father.

I'll leave my car behind and catch a taxi, rather. That way I can sneak out unseen.

When I'm back from the park with Damion, Clarissa is waiting outside the door. "Sorry, I got here early."

"Clasa." Damion squeals in excitement, running to hug her. She scoops him up in her arms. "Guess what your mommy told me?" She asks, nuzzling his cheek with her nose. "What?"

"She told me we are making pizza."

"He helped make biscuits this morning."

"Did you? That's so clever." She grins at him.

I push the door to my apartment open and let them inside. Clarissa carries Damion

towards the living room, and I head to my room to change.

I'm excited to see Dan again. And nervous. Butterflies take flight in my stomach when I think about it.

My lips tingle at the memory of his kiss.

I don't know what I'll do if he is Damion's father, but I cannot stay away from him.

I cuddle Damion goodbye, but he is so busy looking at photos of pizza toppings on my laptop with Clarissa that he gives me a second of his time. He's really into this pizza-making adventure he is about to embark on.

"I don't know how late I'll be —"

"Just enjoy yourself. I'm here. I've got your number if I need anything, and you've got mine. Don't stress about it."

I give her a quick hug, leaning over the back of the sofa, and then I turn to rush out of the apartment. Instead of going downstairs to the front of the building where I parked my car after coming home with Damion this morning - I headed to the underground parking lot where I asked the Uber to pick me up.

I can see the two goons sitting in their car opposite the street, watching my car. Well - they are going to be watching all day, I chuckle.

When the Uber pulls out of the building, I sink low in the backseat, wondering if he thinks I'm crazy. Then when we are far enough away, I sit up again and straighten my blue dress. It's a beautiful day outside so I chose this one. It's short, flaring out after my waist, and I think it's really cute.

I wore my white sneakers again because I didn't know where Dan was taking us, and I'd rather be comfortable than trying to walk around outside in high heels. That just isn't my style even though so many of the women around Las Vegas are happy to suffer for their fashion sense. I am just not stupid enough to pull that off.

The driver drops me outside the entrance to Russo River Casino. I am about to walk into the foyer when I hear Dan's voice from behind me.

"Hi, beautiful."

I turn to see him sitting in his car, grinning at me.

He climbs out and walks around towards me.

He gives me the quickest kiss on my lips, then opens the car door for me as though he is in a hurry to get out of there.

"Are you embarrassed to be seen with me? Or just in a hurry to leave," I tease him as he climbs into the car.

He laughs. "Quite the opposite. I think any man who has the chance to be seen with you in public would be the center of attention and would love it. But - I am excited to whisk you away for our lunch date."

I smile. I hate the idea of being the center of attention. But I love the idea of him being excited to share lunch with me.

He doesn't strike me as a man who gets excited about things. He doesn't seem like a man who gets excited about things, but in all the times I've spent with him, he has been gentle, playful, and soft. Attentive even.

I stare at his mouth, trying to picture a mask over the top half of his face. It makes my heart beat faster.

I am so sure it's him.

But - it can't be. That would be bad because it would complicate things, I might have to stop seeing him.

I'm not ready for that - not after last night.

He drives us away from the city to a rocky cliff. The sun is hot, shining down on us as we climb out of the car. I walk over to the edge of the cliff. It's a long drop, and the view is incredible. The entire city of Las Vegas is spread out at the foot of the hill.

I hear Dan busy with something behind me and turn to see him gathering things from the trunk of his car.

I walk over to see if I can help.

"Here, take this." He hands me a blanket.

Then he scoops up the enormous basket and another bag of items, slinging it over his shoulder as he slams the trunk closed. "Alright - follow me." He grins.

We don't walk far - just around the edge of the cliff towards some trees. He spreads the blanket out on the grassy area of shade and then opens the basket.

He has packed a really elaborate lunch of crackers, cold cuts, cheese, fruits, and chocolates. It looks incredible.

From the other bag, he pulls out champagne, water, juice, and glasses.

"Wow." I giggle. Surprised by the amount of effort he put into this. I am just not used to having someone do things like this for me.

"I hope you like all of this food," he asks, looking worried for a moment.

"Dan, this is amazing. Thank you so much."

He leans back on his elbow, propped up on his side as he places a few items onto a plate. I move a little closer to him, leaning my back against his legs and pouring us some champagne.

Again - everything with him is so natural and the conversation flows like I've known him my entire life.

We are laughing when his phone, lying face up in front of me, beeps with a notification. I look down at it and catch a glimpse of a message before he picks it up.

The goods were stolen. We didn't catch them.

I watch his face as he reads the same message, and whatever else the person sent him. His eyes grow dark and my stomach churns.

This is another glimpse at the side of him I should pay more attention to. He is hiding something so dangerous about himself—I should not be around him.

I do not know what he really does, and these red flags should not be ignored. If I had any common sense, I would leave right now and never see him again.

But my life, growing up in a dangerous world, has numbed me to certain warnings.

I have survived my father, so far, so why can't I handle a little danger from this man?

He puts his phone face down, further away from me. I watch him take a deep breath and then his face returns to normal. He is an expert at hiding. Switching between his different faces and personalities. Which one of them is the real him?

Just as easily as he pushes aside his anger—I squash my worry. I want to enjoy the moment. As much as this denial will get me nowhere in the long run, I can't walk away from him. So, I've got no choice but to pretend I don't notice.

Now and then he rests his hand on my back, sending heated shivers down my spine while he is chatting and telling me stories about funny things that happened in Las Vegas. When our food is finished, I lay down on the blanket, facing him, staring into his eyes, and listening to him speak.

He asks me about my family, and I shrug off the question, telling him about anything but that.

The connection between us is so strong it's undeniable. I can't imagine this.

The more time I spend with him the stronger it gets and to be honest - it scares me how much I want him.

I fear how quickly this became so intense.

I was supposed to stay detached - just have fun - but my heart has other ideas.

DANTE

I don't know if I am making the right choice by spending so much time with Frankie. I want to know who she is and I keep telling myself that is why I am keeping her close, but every moment I spend with her my obsession grows deeper.

She is a blinding light, and I am a moth - lured towards her without thinking of the consequences.

"Lorenzo." I blurt out as I march into the office. He jumps at the sound of my voice. "What's going on?" He asks.

"Nothing, no, I just need you to do something for me."

"Jeez, you came storming in here like the casino was on fire." He breathes a sigh of relief.

"Sorry man." I sit down in the chair opposite his at his desk.

I wanted to find out who she was, but she avoided answering questions, and she was very secretive about her life. I don't know if it is on purpose or not - but I'm getting nowhere in learning who she is. So, I've decided to try another approach.

"Open your email. I sent you a still image taken from the casino security footage at La Muse. From a Blackjack game, we hosted there. The photo is of a girl named Frankie. She was counting cards - and I want everything you can find out about her."

Lorenzo clicks at his computer, his brows knotting as he focuses on the image. "Ok, I've got it here - jeez - she's a looker isn't she." He says, causing my jealousy to flare. But I don't want anyone to think I am involved with her - not even Lorenzo.

"Find out what you can about her."

"What's her last name?"

"I don't have a fucking clue. All I know is that everyone calls her Frankie. She moved to town from somewhere in Canada."

"Alright, I'll look into it. But how urgent is this - because I've got some more pressing matters to deal with—the tunnels?"

"It's urgent." I stand up, pressing my hands against the desk. "I want to know who she is."

He nods. "Fine. I'll get back to you as soon as possible. A fucking girl counting cards, I thought I'd seen it all."

"Make sure that you do."

At least by asking him under the guise of her being a cheat, he won't question why I am so curious about the girl.

I head out of the office to my car. I am meeting Frankie at a local art gallery. There is a new artist in the gallery, and she wanted to see her pieces - so, I arranged a private tour.

I am experiencing some contradicting emotions towards Frankie. Because on one hand, I want to sweep her off her feet and treat her like a princess. My other instincts

are telling me to be careful, that she is hiding something important from me.

I can't imagine what it would be - but I am sure that once Lorenzo digs into who she is - it will make more sense. I can find out who her family is and what history she has in this area - or where she is from. It's not a flower shop in Canada, not with her card skills.

I drive through the city thinking about her.

When I get to the art gallery, she is standing at the top step, waiting for me. A gorgeous smile lights her face when she sees me and, I smile too.

My heart gets soft at the sight of her - and I caution myself to keep my guard up until I can find out more about her. This could be a trap, a gold-digger trying to get my money.

"Frankie, you look gorgeous." I climb the last step and wrap my arms around her, holding her close to me for a moment. She is wearing a wide flowing, high-waisted gray pants, and a white cropped cotton shirt. It is casual and simple. She makes the simplest clothes look exquisite.

"Thanks. I'm thrilled you like art too. It's nice to have someone to do this kind of thing with." She smiles.

"I guess being new to town can get a little lonely."

"Well, I do know my way around here. It's not my first time in Vegas." She answers.

I turn towards the entrance of the gallery without letting her go. We walk into the massive foyer, and she looks up and down the long corridors to the left and right of us.

"Wow, I didn't expect it to be so quiet today - I wonder where everyone is? This is for a really famous artist, I just expected there to be a lot more people."

On cue, the gallery manager comes around a corner, claps his hands together, and greets us. "Welcome, welcome my friend." He says, not using my full name I asked him to just call me Dan instead of Mr. Russo. "So good to see you."

I've made several large donations to the gallery, supporting local and upcoming artists - and the manager knows me well - which is why it was easy to get a private tour this afternoon.

"Hi, Michael. How are you?" I shake his hand.

"Good - yes - is this your friend who likes our new artist?"

"This is Frankie. Frankie this is Michael - the gallery manager."

"Hello." She smiles and shakes his hand. "Why is it so quiet today? Are you open - can we walk around?"

The manager laughs. It echoes all the way down the left and right passages on either side of us.

"The whole gallery is yours for an hour. Didn't Dan tell you?"

Frankie glances at me with her eyes narrowed. "No. He didn't." She smiles.

"I arranged for a private viewing. I thought it would be nicer."

"Well, you two enjoy the gallery - it's all yours - if you need me just give me a shout and I'll come find you." Michael walks away, waving his hand over his shoulder to

say goodbye.

Frankie shakes her head and laughs. "I can't believe you did this. It's amazing. They're expecting his show to sell out."

We roam around the gallery, taking in the street art styled paintings on display. The guy is good. I hadn't heard of him before today, but I might even purchase one of these for my home.

After enjoying the solo, peaceful viewing at the gallery we go across the street to a coffee shop for something to eat.

Frankie insists they've got the best ciabattas she's tasted.

Sitting at the table, I stretch my legs out until my feet touch Frankie's. She grins but doesn't look up from the menu.

The server is standing next to the table, waiting to take our order.

"I'll have the bacon, avocado, and rocket please - toasted."

"Excellent choice. And for you sir?"

"Same. Thanks."

"Are you sure? There are a lot of different options."

"I trust your taste, if you like that one, I will too."

The server takes our menus and then confirms "So, it's two cappuccinos and two bacon, avo, rocket - both toasted."

Frankie nods.

I stare at her from across the table, wondering what secrets she is keeping - and why?

She looks at me, locking her gaze with mine. "What did you think?"

"About?" I ask, confused.

"The art?" She laughs.

"Oh, yes, that, I really like his style. Very graphic and bold. I've got my eye on one piece. I will call Michael later and arrange the sale."

"The one with the stop sign in neon colors?"

"Yes, where it's painted from the viewpoint as though he was lying on the road. I really like the way it draws you into the image."

"That was my favorite too."

We chat, enjoying each other's company and not even noticing how quickly the afternoon goes by. I keep reaching across the table to hold her hand or letting my hand rub over her thigh beneath the table. I can't stop touching her - I can't get enough of her. She is intoxicating, and it's becoming a problem.

I'm obsessed with her - even though I know so little about her. It is driving me crazy wanting to know everything.

"What part of Canada is your family from?"

She bites at her lower lip, and I can see her pausing to decide how to answer me.

"My father is nearby. I don't have family in Canada."

"Why did you live there then?"

"It was peaceful. It was just - what I needed."

"You don't strike me as being a quiet life kind of girl."

"Oh." She laughs. "And what kind of girl do I strike you as being?"

"A smart girl who can handle her own in any situation. Resourceful, talented, driven - and beautiful." I smirk.

"Mmm. Are you trying to butter me up? Because it's working." She tilts her head to the side as she grins at me.

After lunch I am sitting in my car, watching Frankie walk away from me - down the street. I don't know if she is going towards her own car or to catch an Uber. But for a moment I am caught in an internal battle because I want to follow her. It would be a bad idea. If she saw me, it would destroy whatever is between us. It's safer to get Lorenzo to handle that and for me.

I am already taking risks every time I go out with her in this city; someone who knows me could see me and give away my name.

I pick up my phone and dial Lorenzo.

"Hi." He answers.

"I was thinking we can host another Blackjack event tonight -- another high stakes game to lure Frankie back into the casino. I want to observe her playing -- see if we

can catch her this time."

"Can do. It'll also be a good way to get our men to tail her. They can follow her out of there and find out where she lives if we can't find anything before then."

"Good. Yes. Do it."

On Friday night at the high stakes game, I've got my eyes on Frankie the entire evening. She knows I am watching her, but she is still unaware that I am the owner of this casino or the one hosting this game.

She is so subtle with her win, moving, staying in the game without creating suspicion, but playing brilliantly.

Andrew and Lorenzo are both here tonight to observe her.

Andrew is pissed off, not understanding why I've let a card counter back into the casino. Lorenzo has made several remarks about how sexy she is, and I've had to bite my tongue to stop the responses I want to hurl at him.

During the game, a security alarm goes off on my phone. Lorenzo and I both go rigid and two seconds later his phone alarm sounds as well.

I pull mine out to silence it and read the report.

"A fucking explosion?" Lorenzo whispers.

"Get down there right now." I hiss. "They are still in the tunnels. There is no way they could've remotely detonated with those concrete walls."

Lorenzo shoves his phone back into his pocket. "You're not coming?" he asks,

confused.

"I'll be down later. I trust you to handle this, Lorenzo."

He glances from me to Frankie and his eyes narrow. It's not like me to leave something this important to someone else, but if it was going to be anyone—he is the person I trust.

"I'll keep you up to date." He says, then rushes off.

An explosion would've collapsed a section of the tunnel and that means millions in repairs and millions in lost shipments. This is fucking catastrophic.

I should be down there. But I also need to be so careful about what Frankie finds out about me. I am supposed to be a normal businessman, and she has already overheard too much—enough to make her suspicious. I don't want her to know who I really am because I want to keep her close to me.

At the end of the game, I stroll over to the bar to wait for her. I am tense and agitated, but trying to keep a smile on my face to hide the issues I'm dealing with behind the scenes.

She stands up from the table, brushing her hands over the soft blue velvet dress she is wearing. It's short and hugs tight against her body. The dress makes it difficult to take my eyes off her. As she walks towards me, her hips sway and my body sparks with electricity.

She's fucking gorgeous, and her elegance is unmatched.

"Soda water please."

"What a lucky surprise, to bump into you here," I smirk.

"Are you telling me you didn't hear about the game ahead of time and make sure you were here to watch me?" she taunts.

I shrug, "I might have asked to stay informed about upcoming games so that I could watch a gorgeous woman playing and destroying the egos of these men."

She giggles. "Don't be so dramatic."

"Are you ever going to tell me where you really learned to play? Or who your family is?" I say, leaning against the bar next to her.

"You are so closed off, it's like I don't know you at all - even though we've been spending a lot of time together."

She throws me a demure smile, her eyes glittering with mystery. "Sometimes it's nice not to know everything about someone all at once. There are certain bits of information that you can learn over time instead."

Her body language shifts, her walls going up. She is treating me as though I am one of the players in the card game. Her game face is strong blocking me out.

"It's just after eleven. Do you want to get a late dinner?"

She will turn me down. But I want to push against her boundaries. It's better if she says no tonight. I've got to get underground and find out what the fuck is happening.

"Not tonight. Another time?"

"Where is that you run off to at midnight Cinderella?"

"You know what happens to Cinderella." She raises her brows in a cheeky way. "I might turn into a pumpkin or a toad."

"Mmm. Alright. Keep your secrets. But not for long. One day you'll tell me?—"

She bites her lower lip while she grins at me.

"One day - maybe."

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:20 pm

FRANKIE

T onight is not going as planned. The card game was good, but halfway through it, I realized that two of my father's men were there and had eyes on me.

That meant I had to be very careful after the game when I went to say hello to Dan at the bar.

I keep a respectful distance from him, not wanting him to show me any affection while those goons are watching. I can't allow them to report anything back to my father.

I pretend I am just chatting to someone who is admiring my playing skills, all the while glancing over his shoulder towards the two men.

But then Dan asks me some very specific questions and my anxiety spikes. Why is he asking me now? What has he found out about me or what is it that is making him push for answers? He has asked me before, but it was subtle. He seems to be trying too hard now. Pushy and harsh.

I need to get out of here.

Besides, it's almost twelve and I need to get home to relieve Clarissa of her babysitting duties.

"Mm. Alright. Keep your secrets. But not for long. One day you will tell me."

He's pushing for answers this evening. I need to play this down and then leave as soon as possible.

"One day - maybe." I bite my lip, smiling, trying to keep the mood light.

Then I pick up my clutch and step away from the bar. "It was lovely to see you, sorry I can't stay longer."

"Can I see you tomorrow?" He asks, and my heart flips. I really want to see him tomorrow. I'm just getting nervous about how many times I've slipped away from the goons my father sends to track me. They are going to catch on soon and it's getting riskier every time I see Dan.

I can't let my father get curious about this man. I don't need my father to catch on that Dan might be the father of my son.

Dan smiles down at me. His blue eyes were brighter tonight, sharp, interested - as though he was searching for something. I glance behind him and see my father's goons, always watching. I hate the fact that they are here. They ruin the moment between us.

"I'll call you." I smile, anxiety churning in my stomach. He nods but doesn't step forward to kiss me goodbye. He's upset that I won't answer his questions.

I turn away from Dan and stride towards the exit. Behind me I see the two men fall in line and start following. I can't help but roll my eyes. My father is unbelievable. I thought that just maybe, maybe after being away for a few years he would've calmed the fuck down on all of this rubbish. But I guess not.

Outside the casino it's chaos. There are security crews visible everywhere. I've got no clue what is happening but from my experience at my father's casino when security

floods the area like this, it's bad. It is an enormous risk being here when the place is crawling with them on high alert. I scan the chaos, trying to spot my father's men. Before I saw the black suits and guns out here, I was considering giving those goons a piece of my mind—but now the best thing for me to do is leave—fast.

It's not worth the trouble it would cause drawing attention to them or me. I just want to get home to my baby.

Climbing into my car I toss my clutch onto the passenger seat. The engine purrs. The casino parking area is brightly lit, and when I pull away, out into the streets of Las Vegas, it doesn't get any less colorful and noisy.

This really is a city that never sleeps. There is always something happening somewhere.

The traffic light turns green, and I speed up, but a drunk man stumbles into the road and knocks the side of my car with a loud thud before he bounces off and lands on his ass in the gutter. I scream, slamming on the brakes. He holds up his hands and mumbles an apology as he staggers back up to his feet. He's going to get himself locked up tonight if he doesn't find his way home. Or worse, flattened like a pancake in the road.

My heart is still racing when I pull away again. That was a close call.

I need to pay more attention. I am so caught up in my thoughts I didn't even notice him standing there.

There is just so much going on.

And what the hell was happening at the casino? There was tension in the air like they'd robbed the place, but the alarms never went off and they didn't lock down.

I park in front of my apartment building, as I always do so that my father's goons can keep an eye on my car for me. Then I head upstairs, opening the front door and stepping inside my apartment at quarter to midnight.

Clarissa tiptoes through the apartment to whisper hello to me at the front door.

"He was unsettled earlier. He woke up twice, had some milk, and went back to sleep about half an hour ago - but otherwise, he has been an angel."

"Thanks, sweetie. Did you enjoy the mac and cheese?"

"It was divine." She grins. "There is a little leftover in the oven. I'll see you tomorrow." She gives me a quick hug and then tiptoes out of the apartment.

I close the door behind her and slip my feet out of the high heels. My poor toes are aching. Flexing my feet I sigh, the relief is instant.

Am I doing the right thing spending so much time with Dan?

I am listening to my heart more than my brain and it is going to get me into trouble.

I want to find out if he is Damion's father. Although at this point I am almost ninety-nine point nine percent sure of it. There are just too many similarities - too many connections that I've already made. Maybe I should steal his toothbrush and do one of those mail-order-dna-test things.

I sneak through to Damion's room and peek inside. He is sound asleep -- his beautiful, chubby cheeks squished against his pillow. I don't dare move the blanket or lean down and kiss him because I know how easily he would wake up especially if Clarissa only just got him to settle.

Wandering through to the kitchen I flick the oven on and stand, leaning against the counter, wondering what in the world I am doing with my life.

I keep taking risks with the card counting - but it's the only thing keeping me sane at this point. It's the only thing that I do that isn't controlled by someone else. But I've been doing it a lot more lately and the more I go to these high-stakes games, the more I am putting myself in the spotlight.

Which is bad.

I really can't have someone recognize me as Antonio Musetti's daughter, especially not when Dan is around. That would scare him off and I wouldn't blame him either. Who would want to be associated with the daughter of an underworld criminal?

I sigh, running my fingers through my hair and pulling it all over my left shoulder, brushing out the wavy curls.

How am I going to tell Dan who I think he is? And how am I going to tell him he has a son?

At this point - because I've already waited so long - the longer I wait the worse it becomes because I am keeping an enormous secret.

But that secret is protecting my child.

The kitchen is filled with the delicious scent of macaroni with rich cheese sauce, mushrooms, and bacon. I grab the cloth and pull the dish out of the oven, setting it on the wooden board so that I can dish some up for myself.

All I'm sure of is that I can't keep this up for much longer. I need to make a choice and then stick to it. It's difficult to stay away from Dan. But if my father finds out

what is going on, it will be ten times more difficult and Dan would be in danger.

The questions Dan was asking tonight were too forward - too intense. I wonder what he's thinking? He was interrogating me this evening it was more serious than casual 'get to know you vibes'.

Dammit. I really am playing with fire.

It will not end well.

I eat my late night dinner standing up in the kitchen, leaning my hip against the countertop - my mind racing, filled with worry.

Tomorrow I am going to decide.

I might need to stop seeing Dan - at least for a little while until my father's men back off or my father gets bored with following me around.

I put the empty bowl in the sink, filling it with a little water and leaving it to soak overnight. I tiptoe through to my bedroom, and pull my dress off, leaving it on the floor as I step out of it. I am so tired my bones are aching. I've been thinking too much, and it's giving me a headache.

I need sleep.

I need to make better choices.

I need to stay away from Dan, even though my heart hurts just thinking about it.

In the morning I wake up to a little voice calling me. "Mommy." I drag my eyes open. "Mommy." Damion whispers as he pokes my shoulder. I grin as I blink at him.

"Morning, my beautiful little boy. Did you sleep well?" I lift the corner of my blanket and he smiles, climbing beneath the covers and cuddling into my arms.

It's Saturday, and I promised Damion, I would take him shopping for a new dinosaur toy. He has been talking about it all week and he knows today is the day.

"What do you want for breakfast you little rascal?" I asked, nuzzling my face against his hair.

"Sea-really."

"Cereal? The colorful one?"

"Yup." He nods, wiggling away from me. I release him and he climbs out of the bed, waddling towards the kitchen. If I don't get up to help him, the kitchen is going to turn into a three-year-old's war zone within about five minutes.

I hear something banging. It's already started.

Hurrying towards the kitchen, not quite awake yet, I find him dragging one of the kitchen chairs towards the cupboard.

"Oh no, leave that where it was. I'll get it down for you."

Damion and I carry our cereal to the living room where we sit on the fluffy rug together, eating and chatting about what shops to go to for his new dinosaur toy. Which dinosaur is his favorite? And what's he going to name it?

I am smiling the entire time. This little boy is my entire world.

He is the only thing I should be focused on.

I don't need to be thinking about men - even very specific, tall, dark, and handsome men who make my heart thunder.

My phone beeps and I glance at it, seeing a text from Dan.

Dan: Tomorrow afternoon can I pick you up for a dinner date?

I sigh and bite at my lower lip. I should say no, but just reading his message has me smiling and butterflies are flapping in my stomach. I sigh.

Me: That sounds lovely, but I can meet you somewhere - maybe the Russo River Casino?

Dan: Meet me downstairs at the entrance at five.

I confirm the date and put my phone back on the coffee table. Damnit Frankie, just when you were telling yourself to stay away from him. What is it that makes him so difficult to resist? Even being at the casino is becoming more dangerous. The more time I spend there the riskier it is. But I'm not only there for the cards now. I am there for him as well.

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DANTE

"The airport?" She asks, shocked, as we pull onto the tarmac of the runway.

I drive along the long stretch towards the hangar where I keep my private jet.

She shifts nervously in her seat. "Dan, I can't."

"Don't worry. You'll be back by midnight."

She glances over at me with narrowed eyes. She is biting her lower lip - it looks so cute when she's thinking this hard, trying to make important decisions, fighting with herself.

I chuckle, pulling to a stop right outside the hangar.

"I promise - we will be back at eleven thirty - giving you plenty of time to get home by midnight."

The other night - Lorenzo had men on their way to follow her home - but they reported to him that there were already two men following her -- not our guys. They weren't even trying to hide it and she seemed to be annoyed - but aware of them.

He pulled his men back. It was risky, and we needed help underground after the explosion, so I didn't find out what I needed to, and the mystery of this beautiful woman just got deeper.

I want to know why a girl from some small town in Canada knows how to count cards, has armed men tailing her, and has to be home by midnight.

She sighs, giving in. "Where are we going?" She asks, unclipping the safety belt and pushing the car door open.

"One of my favorite places - with views to take your breath away."

I hold my hand out towards her, and she slips her fingers between mine. This is where she belongs, with me, close to me.

I've got to figure out a way to get her to tell me who she really is. I can't just relax and let this happen until I know.

It will be great to get away from the casino and the stress of work. The problem is that anyone could be following or watching me at any time. I'm always in danger. Just by being around Frankie, I am putting her in danger too. It isn't fair. But I'm selfish, I don't care. I want to be with her and whatever risk is involved I will take it.

"Welcome, sir, ma'am; we are looking forward to a lovely flight today. If you need anything at all, I will be here to help you." The hostess greets us as we climb on board. Frankie smiles, looking around the luxurious cabin with wide eyes.

I lead her to the comfortable sofas so we can sit close to each other, strapping in for take-off.

"Are you nervous?"

"No, I think I'm just excited to find out what you've planned." She grins.

"It's not a long flight, but the views will be incredible."

Once we are in the air, I unclip my belt and shift a little closer to her.

The hostess brings us a bottle of champagne and a cheese board of assorted cold cuts and crackers. It's just something light to ease us into the rest of the evening.

My goal is to smother her with every luxury - an attempt to really captivate her and pull her closer to me.

Frankie is relaxed in the luxurious setting; she is enjoying every moment.

The plane touches down at a small private runway just outside of Sierra Nevada and we move from the plane into a limousine which takes us up to a secluded mountain restaurant and hotel.

The chef here is world-class, and I've booked out the entire deck for us so that we can enjoy the private experience.

Frankie walks up the stairs towards the deck. My hand is on her lower back, and I am admiring how beautiful these soft, flowing cotton pants look on her. The matching cropped top leaves a narrow gap of skin revealed around her mid-section. A taunting delight that I can't help letting my eyes enjoy.

Her hair is pinned up in a loose bun on the top of her head, with soft waves falling around her face.

"You look exquisite, Frankie," I say, as I pull her chair out for her at our table.

"This place is exquisite - I can't believe how incredible the views are."

"I told you - it's one of my favorite places. Wait until the sun sets and all the city lights come alive."

She grins, and I stare as I sit opposite her. She is looking across the wide expanse of the Sierra Nevada desert - and I am looking at her -- the most captivating view in the whole place.

She turns her bright green eyes towards me and the corner of my mouth curls up. "I think you are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life," I say, then drag my eyes off her because I can't be staring at her all night like this.

She giggles, and beneath the table, she shifts so that her leg presses against mine.

Perhaps - this evening - I will ignore all the warnings in my mind and just relax and enjoy my time with her. Because I don't know who she really is, I never know if this is the last time I'll see her. She could just disappear -- be gone in an instant. So I should make the most of the time spent with her.

When the sun sets across the sky, it does not disappoint. This evening it puts on a very spectacular show as orange and purple streaks glow between the clouds above the city of Las Vegas in the distance.

Slowly the sky changes colors, fading from bright neons to glowing deep hues while the private chef brings our three-course dinner out in stages.

I ask Frankie questions about herself, but I am careful to keep them light and easygoing. Tonight is not about chasing information - it is about her.

After our main course, Frankie stands up and walks over to the edge of the balcony, resting her hands elegantly on the railings.

"I could look out over this view forever." She whispers as I step close behind her, pressing my chest against her back and pinning her to the railing. She leans into me, sending shivers of delight through my body as I wrap my arms around her and hold

her close. He tilts her head to the side, her eyes looking out over the view.

I trace my gaze over her neck, the curve of her shoulder. Gently I brush the loose curls away from her neck and let my lips trail across her skin.

My heart races.

My body is screaming I want her.

I don't just want to touch her - I want to possess her. I want to capture her and make her mine.

The fact that I don't even know who she really is only drives the mystery and cravings deeper into my veins.

A soft moan escapes her lips as she tilts her head further to the side, letting me kiss the sensitive parts of her neck and cause goosebumps to spread down her arms.

Frankie turns in my arms, facing me. She reaches up to touch my face, letting her fingers trace the shape of my jaw.

My cock is growing harder by the second and I won't be able to hold back much longer.

She stares into my eyes, and there is an intense connection to her. It is as though our hearts are already connected - long before I saw her at the casino playing cards - long before I kissed her the first time. It feels like I've kissed her a hundred times before like her name is already etched into my soul.

She raises herself on tiptoes and presses her lips against mine. My heart beats faster as I pick her up.

Carrying her over to the daybed on the far side of the deck, I lie her down beneath the strings of fairy lights overhead, glittering between the stars and catching in her eyes.

I lift her top over her head in the warm night air and she pulls the buttons of my shirt open, one at a time, working.

I kneel on the bed in front of her, tracing kisses between her breasts and over her stomach.

She arches her back towards me and sighs with pleasure, running her fingers through my hair.

I tug her pants off, pulling her lace panties with them and she lies naked beneath the glowing moon with the light reflecting off her olive skin.

"You are perfect in every way," I say, staring down at her as I pull my pants open and free my cock, throbbing and hard.

She bites her lower lip as her eyes take me in. Then she spreads her legs open, reaches up, and grabs me, pulling me onto her.

I kiss her as my cock rubs over her pussy and she pushes her hips up - her little desperate sounds of need taunting me.

Her fingers digging into my back as she encourages me to take her.

I push my cock inside her.

She gasps as I thrust forward, her body pulses over me as she shudders with delight.

"I could spend every night here with you - beneath the stars," I whisper against her

ear.

When I lean back to look down at her those gorgeous green eyes are piercing into me. She wraps her hand around the back of my neck pulling my mouth against hers. Kissing me while I fuck her. The intensity of our connection grows deeper - more intimate.

My heart tugs, warning me, threatening to burst.

I grit my jaw and fuck her harder.

Letting the pleasure of being inside her distract me from the way she makes me feel.

I can't let myself get lost in this girl I know nothing about - but - I am not the one in control of that.

She wraps her legs around my waist and in doing so allows me to push deeper inside her. She cries out as I thrust into her. I grab her hips and fuck her faster, each time I push into her I'm possessing her a little more - like I am claiming her and making her mine.

She tilts her head back as her body shakes. Her legs lock tighter around me, so I slip my arm around her and lift her hips up towards me.

Her fingers dig into the pillows of the daybed and her lips part. I lean forward and grab a handful of her hair, pulling her head back and kissing her neck as I push inside her.

She shakes uncontrollably as her pussy tightens on my cock.

Then she cries out, loud and carefree as her orgasm slams into her - wave after wave

of pleasure she is riding.

I can't control myself when I thrust deep inside her and explode into her.

Breathing heavily, I rest my head on her chest, letting the night air dry the thin layer of perspiration on my skin. She brushes her fingers through my hair as we lie together.

My heart is threatening me.

Warning me.

Telling me I am falling for her.

And that it might be a dangerous risk to take.

"Oh."

We both bolt up, blushing and laughing when the server hurries off the deck. I completely forgot where we were I was so lost in her.

She gets dressed, grinning and throwing me mischievous glances.

Just before we walk back to our table, I pull her close and kiss her again.

"I want to know everything about you, Frankie," I whisper.

She smiles at me with those calm, quiet eyes. Then she takes my hand and leads me back to my seat.

The server comes out again, making a lot of noise as he climbs the stairs, giving us

plenty of warning this time.

He seems a little embarrassed as he clears the dinner plates away and tells us dessert is on the way.

As promised, Frankie is back in Las Vegas by half-past eleven.

The evening could not have been more perfect.

Once Frankie is gone and I am standing alone in the casino's foyer, I shake my head at myself.

"What are you getting yourself into, Dante?" I mutter. Knowing this girl is going to bring trouble.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:20 pm

FRANKIE

Damion and I are walking through the park, feeding the ducks, and enjoying the sunshine. I always get him a little packet of sweet corn kernels when we come here because he loves the noises the ducks make, and it makes me smile to see him so happy.

But today - I am here, but my mind is in a million different places. I am struggling to be present which bothers me because I don't want to upset my son. But he seems oblivious to my distance.

The night I shared with Dan at that gorgeous mountain restaurant was two nights ago - and I still can't stop thinking about it.

Being with him this time - it was so intimate. The connection was so much deeper than before - and it seems like every time I am with him, I get pulled closer to him whether or not I am ready for it. Our relationship is shifting and growing into something else. I just can't figure out what that something else is.

And it's not something I really want to ask the man - because I've got too many secrets to keep.

I watch Damion run across the grass towards an angry-looking goose.

"Baby, leave the big ducks alone. Feed the little ones."

He turns to look at me, the expression on his little face says, "I can do this."

I chuckle and shrug. "He's going to chase you back," I warn him, sitting down on the wooden bench near the pond. I've learned with my son that sometimes he just needs to try for himself. Sometimes it doesn't matter if I tell him it's not a good idea - he needs to give it a go, anyway. And it's not like the goose is going to do any damage. He'll just scared if it nips at him or chases him.

Damion grins, continuing his path toward the goose. I sit watching, waiting for the drama - but to my surprise, when he's close enough, he squats down and starts talking to the goose, throwing corn towards him - and the goose wanders over, not threatened at all and showing no signs of agitation.

I'm impressed. He knew how to handle the large animal with calm confidence.

My little boy is so gentle.

I grin, shaking my head and when he looks back to check if I am watching I throw him two thumbs up and a massive smile.

I am doing the best I can as a single mom - but I really think he deserves to have a father in his life. He's a boy and boys need men to look up to.

Not my father. Definitely not.

Dan seems like such a kind and giving man.

But that doesn't mean he would be a good dad.

Although - I believe he would.

I look around me at the other couples enjoying the park today - some walking their dogs, hand in hand, and looking very in love. Others with baby strollers or two kids

running between them. Some look thrilled, others are pretty damn miserable.

I'd rather be alone than miserable. I learned that when I moved away from my father. It was so difficult being alone after being under constant watch with him - but the peace and the freedom were worth it.

So, when I meet a man who I feel safe introducing Damion to - he will need to prove himself first.

It's going to take a lot to encourage me to let my guard down. Trust doesn't come easy.

I choose peace over drama and stress any day.

Although, even though I am very single and alone at the moment I am still stressed.

My father won't leave me alone. He is a constant presence, breathing down my neck, and watching every move I make.

His men are even here at the park today. Maybe I need to see him again and have a conversation that won't be easy. I need to stand my ground and tell him to back off.

I sigh, rubbing my hand over my face. Yeah, right? That will never happen.

My father is not the type of man you tell to back off.

He does what he wants - regardless of what you ask. In fact, if I told him to back off it would trigger him to be more aggressive about his tactics.

No - talking to him is not the solution, unfortunately. There is no reasoning with that man.

Maybe running away again is. I can go somewhere further away. I can go somewhere where he will never find me.

But then I won't even see Dan again.

That thought causes my heart to pull tight with anxiety.

No - that isn't what I want either.

Whatever is happening between Dan and me - it is something unique and I want time to explore it.

I'm just terrified of what will happen when he finds out who I am and that I kept the truth from him - that I believe he is the father of my son. Secrets always come out in the end.

And, I can't hide the fact that I've got a son forever. He will find out.

Damion is running towards me with a proud grin on his face. He made friends with the goose, and you can see he is now the happiest little boy on the planet.

I stand up and scoop him into my arms as he reaches me, and he squeals with delight.

"The big duck my friend." He shouts and I spin him around tickling him.

"Does this big boy want a hot dog? The man over there is selling them and they smell fantastic? We can put mustard on it. Do you remember mustard, the yellow sauce that you like?"

"Mm. Popcorn please, Mommy." He replies with a serious expression.

"Damion, popcorn is not a lunch food. It will not give you any vitamins and minerals. It's not healthy. Do you remember we chatted about this already? You can choose a hotdog, or a burger, or..."

"Burga." He shouts and I breathe a sigh of relief. He can be a bit of a picky eater sometimes and when he gets a certain food in his head, it's hard to get him to want something else.

The last time I let him eat popcorn for lunch he wanted to eat it for breakfast lunch and dinner for a week straight. That was when he discovered chicken nuggets and we moved off the popcorn craze. I am not in the mood to kick it off again.

"Burgers it is." I sling him over my shoulder and start walking towards the food trucks.

I've been avoiding texting or calling Dan since our night in the mountains. I really want to talk to him. I just I need to at least try to back off - a little. To calm my heart. Slow things down.

Because it's scary how much I am thinking about him and scary how much I am craving him.

I am on dangerous grounds with that man.

"Can we get two burgers please - one with no garnish?" I say to the man inside the food truck and Damion leans forward in my arms to see what is going on inside. I pull him back and hold him tight.

"Of course, here you go; you can swipe or pay cash."

I tap my card against the machine, then step back to wait for our order.

Damion is relaxed in my arms, tired after a fun morning.

I sigh. My thoughts drift back to Dan while we wait.

I'm also really worried about how many times I have to avoid answering his questions. I feel so guilty the entire time I am around him because I know I am not being honest with him and it's not fair.

That's why I should. If I was a decent person, I would choose to either stay away from him - or tell him the truth - at least about his son.

If I tell him about his son, then I have to tell him about why I left when I found out I was pregnant and why I've been scared to let him find out the truth.

Damn it. I can't tell him anything without telling him everything.

I've really gotten myself into some trouble here.

"Ma'am—" the man in the food truck bellows at me. I turn towards him. "Were you daydreaming?" He asks with a chuckle, handing me the burgers.

"Yes, sorry, I didn't hear you calling me at all."

Damion and I head over to the bench again where I unwrap his burger for him and he sits eating it, watching the ducks again.

I pick at mine, chewing slowly. I yawn, exhausted just from my thoughts.

That evening I am pacing around my apartment like an animal trapped in a cage. Damion is fast asleep, and I told myself I was going to just stay home - not go play cards - and not contact Dan. But I can't sit still, and I can't stop pacing and I am

driving myself crazy.

So, I give in and call Clarissa. I am going to go to the casino - spend a little time playing cards - enough to clear my mind. Otherwise, I will get no sleep, and I will keep driving myself crazy.

I am living three secret lives that I've got to keep separate, and it's overwhelming me with worry.

In one life I am a mother. This is the real me. The me I would never give up. The version of me I wish I could be all the time with no worry.

In the other life, I am a daughter on the run - trying to protect her child from a father who might claim the boy as an heir and steal him away. If my father did that, I would have no power to stop him, and that thought terrifies me more than anything else in the world.

In my third life, I am Frankie - the mysterious card counter, who has met the man of her dreams and wants to explore all the amazing things that path might lead to.

I want to get close to him, and I want him to see the real me. But the real me - and the girl who counts cards at the casino - are not the same person.

Will he even like the real me - the single mother with more baggage than Louis Vuitton?

I need to get out of here.

My head is crammed full of stress and worry. I've got to clear my mind.

I catch an Uber to the casino, hoping it will stop the goons from tailing me, but

they've caught on now, and at least half the time they follow me even when I don't take my car.

At the casino, I want to just focus on the game and nothing else, but I scan the crowd for Dan. The chances of seeing him are so low. I mean he isn't even staying at this casino. He's staying somewhere else. Why would he be here - there is no reason for it? There isn't a big game on or something to watch.

I sigh and turn my attention back to the cards. I am not even focused enough to follow what is going on. I'm not even counting.

I take a deep breath. Start again. Relax. Clear your mind.

An impossible wish. A clear mind.

"Hit me." I tap the table and the dealer places a card in front of me. Shit. I need to pay more attention. I'm losing and not on purpose.

The next time he deals I am hyper focused.

And before long I am back in the rhythm of the game, relaxed. The worries about my father, and whether Dan would be interested in me if he found out the truth - they all slip away and all that matters is the cards - the game - the focus.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:20 pm

DANTE

My phone buzzes late at night, pulling me from some really deep thoughts that I've been lost in for ages. I am home, trying to relax after a long day at work. My mind's stuck on Frankie. She hasn't called or messaged since our flight to Sierra Nevada, and I am trying so hard to give her the space she needs - for whatever is going on in her life.

But it's getting harder every day and each time I pick up my phone, I open her chat window - ready to message her or hoping to see a message from her I somehow missed.

Tonight has been no different. And now I am standing out on my balcony with a whiskey hoping it will numb my mind enough that I can get some sleep.

The sound of my phone buzzing sets my heart racing and I rush over to pick it up - hopeful that it might be her.

My heart sinks when I see Lorenzo's name.

Lorenzo: Sir, she is at the casino - the card counter. Do you want me to do anything?

I hold my breath. Should I go there? Would it be weird? It would. It would be too obvious if I showed up just after she arrived.

No, I need to stay away.

She doesn't know I own that casino - or even what my real name is. She only knows me as Dan. But I only know her as Frankie - so I shouldn't feel guilty about that.

I clench my jaw, it is aching from the tension. I pace up and down the balcony with my phone gripped in my hand.

Finally, I message Lorenzo back after arguing with myself for a moment. Half of me wants to see her. The other half knows it is a terrible idea.

Me: No, leave her to play. But let's arrange another big game. And this time we will follow her, regardless of any other men tracking her. We need to find out where she is staying. In the meantime—try to slip a tracker into her handbag if you can. We haven't been able to follow her, but a tracker will be just as effective.

I need to step up my efforts to figure out who she really is.

That night on the mountain with her was incredible—magical even—but it also revealed a glaring truth that became harder to ignore the more time I spent with her.

I can't ignore the fact that Frankie is hiding something huge. I can't ignore it anymore. She is hiding something about herself - from me. Something that I suspect would affect me if I found out.

I don't like secrets. Especially when the person keeping them is getting very close to me. And over the past weeks, Frankie has somehow become an enormous part of my life. Despite keeping her distance from me, she has infiltrated my daily thoughts, wants, and needs.

It's driving me crazy.

I can't stop thinking about her and what she is doing.

I'm grateful Lorenzo messaged me with her location because just knowing that has given me a little peace of mind.

It's hard to think about someone when you can't even picture where they are or what they are doing.

I'll go to bed calmly now - knowing that she is in my casino. She is still in the city. She is around. I considered she might have disappeared back to wherever she came from. Something I've thought was a possibility all along. That she might leave my life as quickly as she swept into it.

The next morning, I woke up groggy, as though I was up drinking all night. It's because I was tossing and turning all night - trying to figure out what to do about this mysterious woman who has come into my life like a wrecking ball.

All day I am on edge. I'm out of my routine and frustrated -- snapping at people who don't deserve it.

I just had a fight with the floor manager and Lorenzo has been throwing me disapproving looks.

Walking across the casino floor at Russo River Casino - Lorenzo is right behind me as we do the rounds.

"I don't often speak up, but with respect, you're being dickhead today."

I spin to glare at Lorenzo who folds his arms across his chest and tilts his head to the side - daring me to deny his very confrontational words.

I sigh, heavy and angry. "You don't need to be a dick about me being a dick. You could've just asked me if I was doing okay or if something was wrong?" I mutter,

turning away from him again. I am being an asshole. I'm tired and stressed and I can't stop thinking about her and it's making me crazy.

"Alright - what's wrong? Do you need me to help you with something? We got a tracker into Frankie's purse last night if that makes you feel any better?" Lorenzo asks, following behind me, walking fast to keep up.

"No, I don't need help with anything - just mind your own business." I snap back at him, and the asshole dares to laugh at me.

I spin to glare at him again and he stops walking, holding his hands in the air in a defensive position, but the smile on his face sends a thick current of annoyance through me.

"I'll go and... find something else to do. But do us all a favor, boss, get laid or something to relieve your stress. You'll give yourself high blood pressure or some shit." He smirks, taking a step away from me. He knows I don't mind him being real with me. But today I've hit my limit. It's not a day to push me.

"I think that is a good idea." I nod, glaring at him. "You finding something else to do, not the high blood pressure thing."

I watch Lorenzo walk away, wondering what the hell I can do to fix this horrible mood I'm in. For him to say something like that - it means it's even worse than I thought. Maybe I do need to get laid, but the only woman I want in my bed is Frankie.

The news about the tracker being planted is excellent. I didn't even react to it; I'm so fucking frustrated right now.

I turn around, observing the busy casino floor, listening to the loud jackpot machines

ringing non-stop. Music plays from all directions and the longer I stand here the more I realize I would rather be anywhere else. I can't take all of this sensory input. I need silence.

In the distance, near the far side of the casino floor, I see a girl with long blonde hair - the way she moves - it looks like my sister, Daniela. It can't be. I'm imagining things. I'm just tired - yet - my heart is pounding a million miles an hour as I take off, sprinting across the floor -- ducking between loud chiming machines and past the colorful lights. Apologizing as I bump into people, knowing I am being rude but not caring because if that is my sister, I will run like my life depends on it.

The girl disappears behind a corner ahead of me and I shout her name as I sprint around the corner, "Dani."

But she's not there.

She can't just disappear like that. Where the hell did she go? Is someone playing some kind of fucked up joke on me? Who would do that? What is going on?

My sister.

My sister is here in this casino after years of being missing.

"Dani?" I shout again, then spot her walking out of the back exit towards the parking garage. I'm running again, faster than I have ever run in my life. Through the open doors and out into the cool night air, I reach forward and grab her arm, spinning her to face me. "Da?—"

It's not her.

My heart sinks to the pit of my stomach.

It's not Dani. It's not my sister.

I stare in disbelief at the stunned girl who is standing dead still, wide-eyed, and looking horrified at being manhandled by me. She looks so similar to Daniela. The shape of her face, her body - I can't believe how much she looks like my sister.

"Who - what?" She stammers, terrified of me. Realizing I am still gripping her arm I shake my head and release her arm. "I'm so sorry. I thought you were - I thought - I'm sorry." I back up away from her. My head spinning. I'm dizzy with tension.

Memories of my sister fill my head.

Her laughter, the way she would rip me off about everything.

She was - she is such an amazing person.

I can't believe the relief I felt when I thought I had found her.

What am I doing? Why haven't I been focusing every effort on finding her? I've been distracted, and it isn't fair. I abandoned her.

My heart pulls tight. I'm a terrible person. My sister is out there somewhere - scared and alone and she needs me. And what am I doing? I'm roaming around my casino feeling sorry for myself.

I worried about the mysterious woman - not focused on my family.

I sigh, pressing my fingers against my temple.

I'm selfish; I know that isn't a fair thing to say. I've spent years looking for my sister. I've spent millions, and so much of my time - but I slowed down. I never gave up; I

just slowed down. That's all. And tonight was a reminder that I need to pick up where I left off.

Maybe it's time to look into Antonio Musetti -- the man I was trying to avoid causing shit with. All the other leads were dead in the water. He is the last one still lingering.

He is not a man I want to mess with and upset the fine balance of power between us - but if he did anything to my sister, I would burn his empire to the ground.

Turning back towards the casino I find I can't face going back in there tonight. I need to go home. I need to catch up on some rest and face tomorrow like a new challenge. Today I am overwhelmed and unfocused and it's making me do stupid things.

On the drive home I am thinking about Frankie again, and even though whatever connection we share is real - she is not real - she's a beautiful liar.

I've got to think about my other duties and get my priorities back in order. Remember what is important to me.

Like finding Daniela.

I need to trust my instincts - the ones telling me that Frankie has something to do with Daniela's disappearance. I will figure it out. But that means I'd have to treat Frankie like a suspect, not a lover.

Frankie reminds me of the girl from all those years ago at the gala event and she gives me the same thrill that girl gave me. All I want is the truth.

The car behind me honks and I realize I've been staring at the green light, not moving. I hold up my hand to apologize and speed up away.

Just go home.

Get some sleep.

Tomorrow is a new day.

I'll reorganize my scattered thoughts and focus on what is important.

Antonio Musetti is now at the top of my list.

But I will need to tread carefully with him. I want to meet with Lorenzo and tell him we are going to pursue this direction. He will not be happy - but he will understand.

At home, I head straight to my bedroom. I can't even face food or a drink. I need a hot shower and sleep.

I lift the shower lever, pushing it to the hot side then I strip down and wait for the water to heat up. I stare down at my hands.

I thought that girl was Daniela. I grabbed her.

I shake my head, pushing away the thought. I will find my sister.

The hot water streams over my skin, burning me, and turning my body red. I stand under it for ages, letting it soothe away my tension and ease the pain in my shoulders.

When I step out of the shower, I am exhausted.

I dry off and collapse into bed - ready to sleep away all of this stress.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:20 pm

FRANKIE

I wake up frightened as someone pounds on my front door. I hear Damion's cries from his room.

What the hell is going on? Who would knock so loud?

Is it Clarissa - oh shit - is something wrong?

I push away the dazed confusion of sleep and run to the door. As I pass Damion's room, I call to him. "It's ok, baby boy. It's just someone at the door. I'm going to see who it is."

He gurgles something I don't understand, but at least he stopped crying. I think he was startled just as I was.

No one likes to be jolted awake like that.

Just before I open the door, I realize I am wearing a long t-shirt. No pants.

Shit.

Ok, but if it's Clarissa, and she needs my help...

I yank the door open and stand frozen, in shock, staring at my father.

He looks me up and down with an expression of distaste.

"Dad?" I say in disbelief.

"This apartment building really isn't the safest place for you to be, Francesca," He says, pushing into my apartment.

I don't try to stop him because I am so surprised to see him here. His two goons are standing just outside my apartment door.

I glare at them briefly, but they are just standing, doing nothing - so I close the front door.

My father walks into my living room. I glance to the right and see Damion wandering from his bedroom. For a second I am terrified. Is my father here to take him away from me?

I run towards my son and pick him up. He snuggles against me, oblivious to my tension.

"Dad, what are you doing here?"

"What - a father cannot visit his daughter?" He sneers.

I bite my lip. I don't know what he is up to - but I hate that he is in my home. This is my safe place - where my son can be at ease, and I don't need to worry about anything. His presence here is making me very tense.

"Can I - um - do you want a coffee?" I ask. This is ridiculous. I should tell him to leave. But I can't. I just don't want to cause unnecessary issues between us. Fear settles deep inside me, and I hold my son tighter.

"No, no coffee. I came to tell you it is time to move back home. All of this bullshit

with you staying here is a waste of my time and resources."

Between the fear, anger surges in me. "How can it be a waste of your time for me to just be living my life with my son?" I snap.

"Because it isn't safe, and I am wasting resources trying to keep you safe. Just come home. Living in the main house I can keep a better eye on you and your boy. It will be better for everyone."

I shake my head. No, it won't be better for me or for Damion.

He is pretending he wants me to move back there because of safety issues - but it's not true.

For him it always is - it will always be about control.

"Dad, I am staying here. I'm happy here."

"No, you are coming back to the main house with me. My men will help you pack your things. Get dressed."

Frustration burns in me. I set Damion in his chair in the kitchen then turned to face my father. "Listen carefully when I tell you I am not leaving this apartment. You will have to drag me out of here kicking and screaming if you want that. You hate to cause a scene. My neighbors are really nosy. I am old enough to live my life and make my own choices. And if for any reason I am not safe - it is still my choice not to live with you." I say with heated determination.

My father stands with a steel expression on his face, staring down at me. His white hair and white beard make him look cold and emotionless. His eyes are dead.

He watches me for a long time. My breathing grows heavy as fight-or-flight kicks in.

Then he smirks. A cold, heartless smirk.

"Fine." He says, and I let out a breath.

"Fine," I repeat.

"Stay here. But this is not the end. I want you back at the mansion. I'm sure you'll see the error of your choice soon enough."

I clench my teeth together, not wanting to say anything to trigger him. I just want him to leave.

He looks me up and down one last time, looking disappointed - then he pulls my front door open and leaves, shutting it behind him.

I stagger, and let out a heavy breath, fighting tears of fear and adrenaline.

I can't believe he was in my house.

My home.

He was right here.

Uninvited.

It was his way of reminding me he was still in control of everything. He always gets what he wants.

But he will never get my son. I will not move back into that house.

Damion will not grow up in the same horrible narcissistic environment that I did. It drains a person - being around my father that much.

I want so many better things for my little boy.

I turn to the kitchen and lift him out of his chair, hugging him tightly. He seems confused. Not even making a sound.

"It's ok, little guy. Everything is ok." I keep repeating - more to myself than to him.

I can still feel the burning threat of tears when I put him back on the ground and ask him if he is ready for breakfast.

I flick on the kettle, just because I need something to do. I need to be normal and try to grasp my morning routine. Coffee. Breakfast. Cartoons for Damion.

I am sitting on the sofa in the living room, still worried about how easily my father just walked in here - when my phone buzzes and I practically jump at the sound.

"Oh, my word," I mutter to myself, as I reach inside my purse for it.

My hand touches an object I don't recognize. I lift a small round disc out of the bag and stare at it in confusion. I know exactly what it is. A tracker. Is this from my father? Why would he need to track me though? He has Dumb and Dumber following me everywhere? He's known where I've been since I arrived. Was this just to track my other movements? I'm sick to my stomach as I turn the metal disc in my fingers. I need to get rid of it -- somewhere far from my home. But now I am terrified about who else is watching me. What do they want?

I set the tracker aside and picked up my phone.

It's a message from Dan. Even though I've spent the last few days trying to convince myself to leave him in peace - seeing his name on my phone right now, I'm thrilled. It's like a bright warm light amongst the chaos of everything else happening. I need this relief—this happiness. I need him.

I open the message with a smile on my face.

Dan: Hi, beautiful. I see there is another high-stakes game at La Muse. I assume you will be playing tonight then? I thought perhaps we could get dinner beforehand.

I hadn't realized there was another game. I want to play. And I've really missed Dan. After the unwelcomed visit by my father's here, I am eager to relax - and Dan's presence is as much a comfort as it is a complication in my life.

I type my response.

Me: Of course, I will be playing. We can eat dinner at the casino at seven.

Dan: Perfect. I'll make a reservation and send you the confirmation.

I finish my coffee and start to relax.

I will have to tell Clarissa not to open the door for anyone, no matter what. The hard truth is though - that if my father wanted to take my son he wouldn't need to do anything other than walk up to me and pull him from my arms. He has enough power and enough strength to get away with something like that. I couldn't fight him and wouldn't stand a chance against his millions in court.

I scrunch my eyes closed. There is no point in dwelling on such negative thoughts.

My son is safe. No one is going to take him.

Stressing about things that have not happened will get me nowhere.

After a lovely day spent with Damion playing games and reading his favorite stories - I am heading out of the apartment.

Dressed in a long dark gray dress of glossed silk that looks like melted metal as it moves over my body - I head downstairs to meet my Uber.

I don't see my entourage anywhere. Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum are missing today.

My luck -- they will show up at the casino later; there is a game on tonight and they know I will be there.

On the way to the casino, I dispose of the tracker inside the Uber. It will keep moving around and confuse whoever is following me.

At least Dan has booked us the VIP room in one of La Muse's restaurants. It is a private room where I won't worry about who is watching me. No one can get in without a reservation and my babysitters are not that smart.

I can take a break from all of my worries and just enjoy the dinner.

I've missed Dan. I'm looking forward to seeing him. At this point, he is more of a comfort to me than counting cards.

I walk into the restaurant and the hostess leads me to the private room.

Dan is already there. He stands up and walks over to me, pulling me into his arms he kisses me before I even say hello.

I melt against him, leaning into his broad, solid chest -- letting the familiar scent of his cologne wash over me. I close my eyes and let him steal me away from everything with his lips.

He leans back and smiles down at me. His blue eyes are warm and inviting.

"You look as incredible as ever." He says, his hand drifting down my back and sending shock waves through me.

"So do you." I grin, running my hand over his chest.

He leads me to the table and pulls the chair out for me, tucking it in behind me. Then he sits down next to me and with his leg against mine beneath the table. I wonder how I stayed away from him for so long.

His eyes are bringing back memories of the night from the gala.

I'm so sure it's him.

I'm certain.

We chat, sipping champagne and enjoying our appetizers. And just when I am relaxing, he says, "Where are your bodyguards?"

My back goes a little straighter.

"Bodyguards?" I say.

"Yes, the two men who follow you around. I guess that must make you a rather important young woman." He smiles, but behind it, there are a million questions he wants to ask, and I realize I will need to answer them with caution.

I can't deny the men who follow me because he is aware of them - but I can explain it.

Perhaps a little bit of truth is all I need right now.

"My father is very overprotective. He just likes to make sure I am safe. As annoying as it is for me." I giggle, trying to make light of the situation and ease the tension knotting in my stomach. "He has kidnapping issues."

"Your father? You haven't told me about your family. Nothing substantial anyway. What does your father do?"

Fuck.

Why is he asking these questions now? Does he know something?

I can't tell him that my father is Antonio Musetti. Even people who aren't involved in the mafia know who my father is, and his name carries weight -- heavy, dark, and threatening weight. And to normal people, it is something to be ashamed of.

If Dan does business in Las Vegas, chances are he has, at some point, had an encounter with my father - and whether it was good or bad - I don't want to be associated with that.

"My father - is not someone I really get along with. So, I prefer not to talk about him." I sigh, shrugging.

"Oh, that's not good. It's never nice when we lose touch with our parents."

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm

DANTE

Frankie shifts in her seat, squirming. Talking about her father is not something she is happy to do; she is uncomfortable.

She shrugs again, perhaps trying to push away the uneasy guilt of being caught in a lie. "I know, but my father and I never saw eye to eye. I still talk to him - I just - I avoid him as much as I can."

I watch her. Her entire body became rigid the moment I mentioned the men following her and when her father came up in conversation; it made her even more tense. It only makes me more curious about what she is hiding.

Her father must be someone with some power if he can afford to have his daughter followed everywhere. Personal security is not cheap. Is that why she has to be home by midnight every time?

I am pushing. I know I am, but I am done waiting for the truth.

I can't push her away though. That won't help anything.

"So, are you looking forward to tonight's game?" I ask to change the subject. Her shoulders drop a little and she nods.

"It's how I relax, playing cards."

"Most people find the games pretty intense and stressful." I chuckle.

"To each to their own." She grins.

"I guess it all comes down to why you play."

"I play to challenge myself." She says, looking down at her drink. I say nothing in return. I just watch her expression. She seems agitated by my questions no matter what they are about. Her family, her playing, her life...

She is hiding something and the urgency to finding out what she's hiding is grating at me. Maybe I should just drag her down to my dungeon beneath the casino where we question those who dare steal from me. Maybe I should stop being a na?ve idiot and letting this gorgeous girl take advantage of me. She is hiding something. That alone should be enough to make me want to force the truth out of her.

I know how to make men speak. I imagine she would crumble under pressure.

Just the thought of her tied up and hanging from the chains against the dungeon wall is enough to make my decision for me.

I shut my eyes, forcing the thoughts out of my mind. I should not rush into anything. I can't just torture every person who has a secret. It might have nothing to do with me at all.

I turn my thoughts back to the dinner and our conversation. I won't take such extreme steps—not yet anyway.

"Well, I am sure, as usual, you will be on a winning streak tonight."

The problem is that my team is no longer the only ones who've noticed her card-counting skills and people are whispering amongst themselves that Dante Russo is letting a card counter get away with cheating in his casino.

Most people don't know it's her. They are looking for a man named Frankie - the same way I was when I first heard about her. But the bottom line is that it is making me seem weak. And looking weak is dangerous for me. It's something I can't afford in my line of business.

Not after I have built up such a strong reputation.

A strong reputation that I am going to need when I face Antonio Musetti.

The rest of dinner I ease up on the questions, thinking that I don't want to make her so uncomfortable right now and when Lorenzo tries to follow her home later, she gets too skittish and disappears.

I need to play it cool and take it slow even though I am dying to get to the truth. I am a patient man. I can handle myself.

After dinner, we walk to the Blackjack tables together. Then I head to the bar and get comfortable, ready to watch her play. She settles into her game but seems anxious as she watches me and everyone around her. She isn't enjoying this as much as she usually does. I think my questions affected her more than I noticed at the time - and that tells me something important. It tells me she is hiding more and doesn't like to be in the spotlight, in the hot seat.

I also want to watch the crowd. Wondering who she is looking out for.

She had these two men following her the entire time, and we only just noticed them. Perhaps there are more clues about her under our noses we've missed.

The game kicks off with fewer players than usual. It is a quiet night despite the high stakes of the game.

I order a whiskey and sit quietly, observing everything going on around me.

Watching her, I keep thinking about my sister's disappearance and the attacks in the underground tunnels. Why do I get the constant, nagging feeling that she is connected to it all? Is she a distraction? Has she been playing me all along? Chaos erupted as soon as she walked into my life.

We are an hour in when Andrew finds me sitting at the bar.

"Why is she still playing? Why are you letting her get away with it?" He asks me. His arms are folded over his chest as he looks at me annoyed.

"What makes you think you can question my authority in my casino like that?" I snap back, wanting to defend her despite knowing he is right to be annoyed.

"Dante, you know what this is doing to our reputation. Don't you notice how two of the top players aren't even here tonight because she is still being allowed at the table? They don't enjoy playing with her. Even though they can't prove what she is doing - rumors are spreading fast and she is causing trouble for us."

"Fuck." I sigh. I knew this would happen. I rub my fingers against my eyes. I guess it's happening tonight.

"I'll have a one-on-one conversation with her tonight after the game. I will not cause a scene now in front of everyone - but I will make sure she doesn't play again."

Andrew's eyes fixate intensely on me for a moment. He's not sure he can trust me.

"Ok." He says, after a while. "I'll let everyone who commented know that we are dealing with it."

"Yes." I nod when he looks at me as though he has asked a question. "We are dealing with it."

Finally satisfied with my answer he leaves, and I continue to watch Frankie.

This girl has stirred up so much trouble in my life and I still can't seem to let her go. I haven't been able to take any risks as I've been too scared to lose her.

But I guess tonight I've got no choice - I am going to tell her who I really am and that I know she is counting cards.

I have no idea how she will react.

There is something else I decided to do tonight because I can't wait anymore.

I need information.

Pulling out my phone I send Lorenzo the location provided by the tracker we put in her purse. I want him to snoop around while she is here at the casino with me.

I want him to report back on everything he finds. I slide my phone back into my pocket and watch her, wondering what I am about to learn.

Frankie looks up from the table as though she can feel the heat of my eyes on her. She smiles -- a delicate, sweet smile - secretive and full of meaning. I wish I understood what she was saying with that smile. I wish I knew what secrets were hidden behind those beautiful eyes of hers.

When she smiles at me like that, it makes me feel like I'm the only man in the room.

I smile back, as gently as she is looking at me. My head and heart are at odds when I

think about her. It worries me. All of this is unknown and my heart is behaving like a fool. I am usually so careful, not taking unnecessary risks - but she has me on the edge of a cliff - standing and waiting despite all the danger.

I watch her for the rest of the game, preparing to confront her in private afterward.

It might be the last time I see her - if I don't do this right. I might scare her away. I don't want that, so I need to make sure she understands where I am coming from and why it is such a serious issue. I don't think she knows anything about the Vegas underworld - but it's a fucking dark place -- one I don't want her to get tangled in.

The game ends with Frankie taking second place. She is always so careful not to win even though she can. I guess it doesn't matter at this point as it is the last time; I can't let her play cards in my casino or anywhere in Vegas for that matter.

I know how I would deal with any other person who got caught counting cards in my casino - and Frankie can count herself 'lucky' that she isn't just anyone to me. She is going to get off lighter than pretty much everyone else ever caught.

She walks over to me, that dark gray dress moving like liquid gunmetal. It looks gorgeous on her. She is the finest example of elegance I've ever seen. Her subtle ability to be so sexy - looking like she isn't even trying - takes me by surprise every time.

"Would you like a drink?" I ask as she approaches.

"Sure." She smiles at me, standing just a little way away from me.

"Before we get a drink - I need to speak with you somewhere a bit more private."

She tenses. "Why?"

"It's not something I want to discuss in front of anyone else."

Frankie looks over her shoulder, searching the room with fear growing in her eyes. Again, I wonder who she is looking for. Is it her father she is so scared of?

"Um. Ok." She says after a while. "I guess we can talk."

Doing my best to keep her from stressing I take her hand and lead her around the back of the events room where we host the games - into a side room where we store alcohol for the bar.

She stands nervously shifting from one foot to the other with her arms folded across her chest. "Are you sure we won't be in trouble for coming back here?" She asks. "It looks like somewhere only staff are allowed - not guests."

"Frankie." I sigh, taking a moment to gather my thoughts.

"My name is Dante Russo. I am the owner of this casino and the Russo River Casino - where I stay in the penthouse. We've been watching you since the first time we met at this casino - because we know you are counting cards."

I pause to assess her reaction so far.

Her eyes are wide with shock, and she looks like she is about to run from the room, but it appears her pride is forcing her to stand there maintaining eye contact.

When she says nothing, I carry on speaking.

"I don't think you understand how it works - but when card counters are caught, we react. The consequences for the player are - well - unpleasant. My usual reaction is to ban you from Las Vegas casinos. You may never set foot in a casino in this city again

- and there is the possibility of having you arrested. Although, I prefer to deal with these matters more - privately."

Frankie gasps in shock when I tell her she is at risk of being kicked out of every casino in the city. Her face scrunches as though she is in pain -- her jaw tightened and her brows knotted. Her cheeks turn bright red.

"Dante - Dante Russo." She says my name as though she knows who I am.

I guess it is difficult to spend any time at all in Las Vegas and not know my name.

She is looking from my eyes to my lips, scanning my face, and I can see the conflict in her eyes.

She must be wondering about all the times we've spent together, every moment when I did not reveal who I really was. I never lied to her except about what I do for a living. Even that was a half-truth; I do import and export goods. Everything else between us was genuine.

"Have you really kicked people out for card counting - I mean banned them from Las Vegas?" She says after a long time, and I nod.

"Yes. And worse, you're a lady so we won't cut off any fingers. We've got no choice; if we let one cheater get away with it, the news spreads fast and the casino can't win. The house always wins, Frankie. Always."

"Please - Dante - I - I don't do it to make money. It's not about the money. I'm not stealing anything." She stammers, stressed and fidgeting with her hands.

"I know it's not about the money. And we can't even prove you are doing it - but that doesn't make it any less serious, Frankie."

Staring into her eyes my heart sinks. I need her to understand the position she has put me in - and I want to know what she is thinking.

Right now, she just looks terrified.

I can see the terror flashing across her face as she watches me. I don't think she knows what to say.

"Frankie," I say her name. "Do you understand you can't play cards anymore? Do you understand what I am telling you?"

"I understand. Are your men escorting me out? What is going to happen?" She asks with a tight nervous voice and her eyes looking as though she is fighting tears.

I sigh, shaking my head.

"I will not make a scene or tell other casinos. I can't bring myself to do that. If I wanted to kick you out, I would've done it ages ago. I like you too much. I really like you, Frankie. I want to spend more time with you. But the card counting has to stop. You need a new hobby -- learn to knit or some shit. This is a one-time free pass, Frankie. If you get caught again, there will be consequences." My head is pounding with a headache. I just threatened her and told her I liked her all at the same time.

FRANKIE

D ante Russo.

The only man who rivals my father in all of Las Vegas. I know exactly who he is - I've just never known what he looked like - until now. The enemy is awfully handsome, and I fell for him. Forbidden. Any man who is not an ally is an enemy — and this man has had my father seething for years.

My heart is beating so fast, and my breath is catching in my throat. I can't believe that all this time I've been spending with Dante and my father never realized. The risk I was taking was a hundred times worse than I thought. This could cause a war. They'll kill each other.

And Dante threatening to kick me out of Las Vegas - my father's reaction to that would be horrific. I don't know if he would come after me or Dante. Whatever his reaction to this, to 'us', it would be devastating.

For a long time, I am just frozen in place, trying to process his words.

He would have the person banned - but he would not do that to me. He'd hurt them. If I was a man, he would've cut off my finger. You hear these things, but they're so outrageous you convince yourself they're not real.

I'm relieved. I almost don't believe I could be that lucky.

I'm dizzy with the reality of being caught.

Reaching out to touch the wall, I hold myself up and take a few deep breaths.

"Thank you," I say after being silent for too long. "I understand the position I put you in and I am so grateful that you are being lenient with me. I'm sorry."

His eyes soften, but he is still looking at me.

He also confessed to liking me. He said he really liked me. I guess he wants me to respond to that as well.

I am drowning right now. So my mind is swimming with all the ways this could have gone wrong, and it's hard to understand exactly what happened.

I am terrified. I've heard the rumors about Dante Russo—The Shadow. I know what he is capable of. I've heard what he has done to men who've betrayed him. I've been toying with a very dangerous man and putting myself in far more danger than I could ever comprehend. This explains the glimpses of darkness that I keep seeing just beneath the surface of his gaze.

I need to be so much more careful now. I need to handle this situation with grace and confidence. I can't let him see I am afraid of him.

I've become addicted to this man. He is a drug, and I can't get enough of him.

I roll my shoulders back and sigh, then smile, tilting my chin up, doing my best not to look terrified.

"Can I make it up to you?" I ask, softening my gaze as I search those blue eyes for answers.

"Make it up to me?" He asks, confused, but interested in what I'm saying.

"Yes, let me take you to dinner. As an apology."

As soon as I invite him to dinner my blood begins to pulse faster through my veins. There's a rush, the same sensation I used to get playing cards. I'm playing with fire, not cards. I have been playing with matches from the start - but now that I know who he is, the thrill just got more intense.

But at least by making this bold move, I'm trying to regain control over the situation.

He chuckles, narrowing his eyes.

"I just told you I am Dante Russo, and your response is to invite me to dinner?" He is amused - amused is better than angry.

"Well, you did also tell me you like me and wanted to spend more time with me. And something about cutting fingers off." I raise my eyebrows at him, a cheeky smile on my face.

"I said that." He nods, taking a step towards me. "Yes, I would love to join you for dinner."

My skin tingles as he slips his arm around my waist and pulls me up against him. "You are a problem, Frankie -- one that I hope to understand one day." He leans close and whispers against my lips, then he presses his mouth over mine and kisses me, sending shivers down my spine. I stand on my tiptoes and wrap my arms around his neck, holding onto him, savoring the moment.

When he pulls away from me, I smile and say, "Right now - I need to go and I was hoping - seeing as you know this casino so well - that you could point me out the back door so that I can avoid being followed by my father's goons. I don't need them knowing I got into trouble." I ask, knowing I am pushing my luck a little.

He laughs and shakes his head. "Come on, I'll walk you around the back."

Dante walks me to my car, the long way around, avoiding going back onto the gaming floor, where my idiot guards are waiting.

He kisses me goodbye again at the car, and then I climb in and drive home with a mixed sense of fear and relief.

I know his name.

He must care about me because otherwise, he would have had me banned; he wouldn't even have taken the time to tell me what was happening. I am so relieved that isn't the outcome - my son and I can still stay here in Las Vegas. The nightmare I almost caused for myself just because of the stupid card games is a sharp reminder of what really matters to me - my son. My son and his safety are all that matter.

I've heard my father rage about Dante Russo many times in the meetings he hosted inside his mansion with his allies. His name came up a lot - sometimes in annoyance and sometimes in respect. The bottom line is that I understand Dante's power in this city. For my father to be giving him that much attention can only mean that he is wary of him.

Someone that makes my father wary - makes me nervous. That man is afraid of nothing. If my father catches on that I am spending time with him, it will be an automatic assumption that I am plotting against him -- that I have turned.

My life just got even more complicated.

I park the car underground and head upstairs where Clarissa is waiting for me. She says goodnight and leaves. I sit alone on my sofa, thinking about everything that has happened.

In all honesty, the most logical and safe thing for me to do is never see Dante again. My mind is already at war with that idea.

I am still convinced he is the father of my child, and while I've got no concrete evidence, I want to wait and try to confirm it.

In fact - learning who he is and that he owns both casinos - it makes it even more likely he is the man from the gala that night. He lives there. He was at an event for the mafia families; it has to be him. He called himself a shadow.

I want it to be him.

I want him to be Damion's father because I have fallen in love with him.

"Shit," I mutter, annoyed with myself for getting into this situation.

Why did I fall for Dante Russo?

It's times like these that I really wish I had a friend I could call and talk to about everything. I need advice. I need someone to tell me I'm not crazy - or that I am - who knows?

I stand up from my spot on the sofa, shaking my head. I go to bed because I can't sit here all night thinking about nothing. I need sleep. And tomorrow I need to plan a dinner date for Dante Russo and myself.

Living out in peaceful Canada in that little wooden cottage at the edge of the forest - it seems so distant now - like it was a life that didn't even belong to me - yet I crave that kind of peace. I want to be safe like that again.

I strip out of my dress, hanging it up behind my door. In the bathroom I splash a little

make-up remover onto a cotton pad and clean my skin, staring at my reflection and wondering what Dante sees and thinks when he looks at me.

He makes me feel pretty. The way he looks at me makes me feel really beautiful.

He told me he likes me.

I smile at myself in the mirror.

He likes me. I laugh.

I brush my teeth and put on some moisturizer - then I throw on my oversized shirt and climb into bed.

Luckily, I am so tired that almost as soon as I rest my head on the pillow I fall asleep.

My dreams are busy though - flashing between being chased by my father's men - and being safe in Dante's arms - then being banned from Las Vegas and not being able to see my son again.

I wake up drenched in sweat. My shirt sticks to my skin.

I kick the blankets off me and take a deep breath, trying to calm my body down.

It was just a dream.

That will not happen.

Dante already promised he wouldn't ban you from Las Vegas.

Glancing over at the bedside clock I see it is five in the morning. I could sleep for

another hour. Damion won't be up until six or six thirty - but with the way my heart is racing, I doubt I'll fall asleep again.

I get up and walk towards the kitchen to make coffee.

I guess I can research interesting places to go for dinner. A man like Dante can get anything he wants; he has probably been everywhere in Las Vegas. I want to do something different for him, something he will remember and be impressed by.

He has already impressed me with the amazing places he has taken me.

I want to return that favor.

With my steaming hot coffee, I carry my laptop to the sofa and curl my legs beneath me as I get comfortable.

After a few very generic search attempts I sigh in frustration. Typing in what is the best restaurant in Las Vegas is not how I am going to impress this man.

I need to think outside of the box.

Perhaps something that will take us away from the casinos and the city for a little while.

I smile as an idea forms.

I type in a search and find what I am looking for. It seems like something Dante might have never done. Also - I know I've cause trouble for him at the casinos, so it will be nice to avoid anything that reminds him of that. Even my father's goons will have a hard time following us. I grin.

I book two tickets for this afternoon and message Dante to let him know.

Me: Hello Mr. Russo. This is to confirm our dinner date. I will meet you at the Russo River Casino at four o'clock and we can go together from there.

Dante: That sounds perfect. I will be ready and waiting.

I am so excited all day that my mood lifts drastically. I have not felt this excited for something in such a long time and I really hope he likes it as much as I do.

At four o'clock I am ready and waiting outside the Russo River Casino. I'm wearing my white sneakers and a soft lace summer dress that sits just about my knees. My hair is braided over one shoulder and I am wearing the widest smile. When Dante walks out to greet me, he smiles at me. He puts his hand on my lower back as he leads me to his car.

"Where are we going?" He asks, still grinning at me.

"Why are you smiling so much?" I giggle.

"I don't know - it's just the way you are smiling. It makes me happy."

I laugh and point ahead of us. "Drive. I'll guide you as we go."

"Oh - you are keeping it a secret I see."

"It makes it that much more exciting."

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm

DANTE

We drive through the city, past all the best restaurants in the area, and I wonder what she has up her sleeve. She looks excited and keeps glancing over at me with a cheeky grin.

She looks gorgeous today.

That lace summer dress and her white sneakers - she looks divine.

"Are we almost there?" I ask, for the third time as we turn off the main road and head down a long dirt road.

"I think so." She says.

"Finally, I am on the edge of my seat with anticipation." I laugh.

As we turn the corner, I realize what she has planned.

In front of us is a bright red train. Shining and looking smart.

"Are we going on the train?" I ask in surprise.

"Yes, it's dinner, wine tasting, and a trip around the city." She grins, looking at me with a hopeful expression.

She is waiting for my response.

I am dumbstruck. In all of Las Vegas - out of all the things she could have chosen for us - she chose the one thing I have never done.

I shake my head, smiling from ear to ear. "You are full of surprises, Frankie. I've never been on the train before. I've heard about it - I guess I just had no one to go with."

"Well, we are going right now."

I park the car outside the train station, and we climb out. The air is warm and crisp, and I can already tell it is going to be a beautiful sunset.

I step closer to Frankie. She also chose a place where we don't have to worry about other people seeing us together. Although - now that she knows who I am - does it even matter anymore?

It does.

It matters because I don't know who she is yet.

Until I know who she is, I think my guard will remain up. And I think it is better to keep whatever is happening between us more private.

And there isn't anything more private than dinner for two on the famous Red Train.

At the ticket office, Frankie gives them her booking reference, and the conductor welcomes us onto the train. "You are in unit seventeen. Enjoy your dinner experience with us." He smiles and gestures for us to walk along the passage.

We get comfortable in our unit at a table elegantly spread with a white tablecloth, white roses, and candles set in very heavy-based holders.

There is a room alongside the dining area - a bedroom for those who book overnight trips. Frankie needs to be back at twelve, so I guess that isn't us.

Each dining area unit is behind a tinted glass wall. It offers privacy without cutting you off from the other passengers. Then the entire side of the unit that looks outward is glass - giving us uninterrupted views of the city and landscape we will travel past.

While Frankie is getting comfortable, my phone buzzes in my pocket. Earlier, I asked Lorenzo to report on what he found at the location of the tracker. I'm hoping it's him.

"Excuse me for just a moment," I say, opening the message from Lorenzo.

"It's no problem." She smiles.

Lorenzo: Can I call?

Damn. I guess it is quicker to explain that way. Before I answer him, my phone is ringing.

"I'm really sorry about this. I won't be long at all." I step out of the unit and walk a little way down the passage of the train.

"Hello," I say, speaking in hushed tones.

"You wanted an update about her place?"

"Yes, go ahead."

"It's a mediocre apartment block. I looked around inside her place and it looks like she's been moving around a lot. She has no belongings there. Maybe it isn't even where she lives. If she lives there, she is sharing the place with a friend. In the

bedroom, there was a woman asleep next to a kid. So, her roommate was home but didn't wake up. She must be using the place as a temporary spot, perhaps crashing with a friend? It's so sparse and not very homely."

"You found nothing out about who she is?"

"Nothing. I didn't want to wake the friend and the friend's kid either, so I got out as quick as I could. But—there was nothing to find."

"Thanks," I mutter, annoyed that again I've hit a brick wall with finding out anything about her.

I slid my phone into my pocket and returned to our unit. Frankie is taking in the surroundings, loving every moment.

She picks the candle up and sets it down again. "Oh, that's clever. They used magnets to keep it on the table." She laughs, looking at every detail and taking it all in.

"You haven't been on the Red Train either?" I ask, sliding into my seat.

"No, this is my first time."

"What made you choose it, then?"

"I wanted something different - something a man who has everything has maybe not experienced." Her smile is electrifying, and it pulls me into her eyes.

She continues to captivate me every time I see her.

But tonight, I want to ask the tough questions. I want to force answers from her.

She knows who I am - isn't it fair that I learn who she is as well?

Again, I am agitated because even the tracker proved useless. She's just crashing at a friend's place. If that is where she lives, even. Maybe she just spent the night there. I don't know. Maybe I need to reconsider the choice of forcing her to speak. But torturing her will destroy whatever we have grown between us—and I really like whatever is growing between us.

"I guess it would also be difficult for your father's bodyguards to follow us out here," I say as the train engine hoots to life, the whistleblowing.

"Yes, that was a bonus." She nods, looking out of the window.

"Why did you and your father not see eye to eye? What made you dislike him?" I ask, now that we are on the topic of her father. If I can find out who he is, then I can find out who she is.

She sighs and pulls her mouth tight.

"My father is strict. He is controlling and overbearing. Ever since I was really little - all I can remember about my childhood is that I wasn't allowed to make my own choices. Like my father was in control of every aspect of my life. Rigid rules, routine, and no room for emotions, or fun."

"So - you left? I mean, you left wherever you grew up. Does your father live in Las Vegas? Is this where you grew up?"

She shifts in her seat, already disliking the line of questions. But I don't care. I need answers. I never thought it was a clever idea to push her before - but at this point, I am desperate for the truth, and she isn't giving anything away.

"I left Las Vegas. Yes, I grew up here. I left and went to Canada to start a life for myself there, but my father hunted for me and when he found me, he had his men follow me and they made my life so annoying and difficult that after a few years, I was forced to come back here."

"When did you leave?"

She rolls her eyes, and I suppress a chuckle. I can't understand my attraction to her annoyance. She is cute when she is happy and she's cute when she is annoyed with me. But she's answering my questions - and I can't stop now.

"I left over three years ago." She sighs, throwing me a glare that says, 'Are you done - can we enjoy dinner now?'

But I'm not done.

"Three years. Then you came back. And now your father is having you followed everywhere?"

She nods, her lips sealed tight. She will not give away any information for free. That's for sure.

"What does your father do for a living?"

She glares at me. Her mouth turned down in a tight frown.

"I was thinking of trying the carpaccio for a starter. What do you think?" she asks, changing the topic.

I narrow my eyes at her, annoyed yet intrigued.

What secrets could be so big that she won't even utter them?

What could she be hiding that might be so bad?

"I'm a big fan of carpaccio - but if we each get a different starter, we can try two of them."

"Good idea - you choose something else then."

When the server comes over to take our order from the limited, but incredible-looking menu, we order the carpaccio and calamari in garlic butter with a side of Brussels sprouts.

They bring our first wine pairing with the bread.

A light white to ease into the evening.

Outside the window, the sky is changing color and the reflection from the glass is making Frankie's skin glow.

She is gorgeous, and it makes it so much harder to be wary of her.

My feelings towards her are a mess and I'm struggling to figure out if I want to protect her from her father - and whatever it is she is running or hiding from - or if I need to push harder to expose her secrets.

It's driving me crazy trying to figure out what to do.

The tension between us is palpable as I lift my wineglass and say "Cheers." She grins and tilts her glass towards mine. "To new experiences and good company."

"To both." I agree.

The wine is smooth and goes down easily. After the glass, I am a little more relaxed than before. And when our appetizers arrive with the second glass, I feel the tension leaving my body.

I am still wary of Frankie - this mysterious girl who wants to keep her secrets close to her chest - but at least I'm not so wound up about all the negative possibilities.

Tonight - it is just about relaxing. And hopefully, somewhere along the line Frankie will slip up and say something revealing to me -- something that helps me see who she really is and why she thinks she has to hide it from me.

I stretch my legs forward beneath the table and press my knees on both sides of hers. She grins at me, that sly cheeky expression I love so much.

The wine is making her cheeks glow.

Not able to hold myself back, I stand up, lean over the table, and grab her jaw in my hand, holding her still as I press my lips against hers, kissing her. The wine spills over into heated passion that for a moment I cannot stop.

We hear the door to our unit slide open. I sit back down again as the server apologizes for the interruption and takes away our starter plates.

"Your main course is about to arrive, sir." He grins and then hurries away.

Frankie is making a conversation about what it's like growing up in Las Vegas, asking me about my childhood and my family. I am reluctant to tell her anything. But I know that my childhood is no big secret. Almost everyone in Vegas knows me - and they all heard about my sister.

I push the thought of my sister aside. I have a meeting with Lorenzo tomorrow to discuss Antoni Musetti and the leads we have against him. Lorenzo wanted a little time to investigate before we discussed it all. He had a hunch with someone he thought could clear it up.

I will think about my sister tomorrow when I am working on the search.

Right now, it won't do me any good to get lost in that worry.

The server brings in our main course.

A lamb shank, roasted in sweet pepper and olive oil, served on a bed of caramelized baby carrots.

Frankie has chosen the salmon, baked in lemon butter and served with roasted baby potatoes. Of course, we have already decided to share again so that we can try as many things as possible and make the most of this experience.

I already want to bring her back here.

I just wish I knew what direction our relationship was headed in.

It all depends on who she is to me.

I can't allow myself to fall any deeper than I already have - the risk is becoming more dangerous by the day.

Frankie cuts a piece of salmon and holds the fork out to me. She slips it into my mouth. It tastes divine. The server has poured me a savory red wine, and Frankie a dry white.

The wine is going to my head. This is my third glass, and I rarely drink wine.

My suspicions towards Frankie are mixed with lust, an undeniable attraction, and my need to protect her.

I want to push her up against this table and fuck her so hard - but I want to grab her around the throat and demand that she tell me the truth.

Of course, I can do neither of those things.

So, I sip my wine again and enjoy my food while we chat about the view and what an incredible experience this is.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm

FRANKIE

My cheeks are glowing, warm from the wine.

If I have another glass after this, I am going to be revealing all of my secrets.

Dante has been relentless with his questions and while I have kept most of my secrets safe, I've said more than I would have liked to.

My mind is relaxed and fuzzy, tipsy, making me smile.

I can see Dante is also more relaxed than normal, so hopefully his wine will make him stop pushing for answers from me all the time.

There is this awkward mix of fear, and this deep attraction towards him. I'm scared I will say too much, or not enough. The confusion makes my head spin, or it might be the wine doing that.

The server has just collected our dinner plates, and we are pausing before we order dessert.

I am eyeing the salted caramel cheesecake though - but I am not sure I can fit it in. Maybe Dante will share it with me.

He is sitting opposite me, his eyes on me as he swirls the wine in his glass.

"Have you ever been to Russo River Casino - I mean, before you met me?"

I bite my lower lip, trying to remember all the times I went there. It didn't happen too often because my father hated me going to a rival's casino.

"The last time I was there was for a charity gala, a masquerade ball."

I realize what I have said only after the words have fallen from my mouth and I slam my lips shut.

I stare at him, wide-eyed, as he stares back at me. His body is rigid, tense, and frozen. His hand is gripping the edge of the table so tightly I can see his knuckles turning white.

"The masked ball." He says. "Around three years ago."

I nod, knowing what he is thinking because I have been thinking about it since I first saw him.

I open my mouth to say the words, but he says them first.

"It's you." He whispers in shock. "Little fox."

I nod. "It was me. I just - I wasn't sure if it was you - I thought - maybe - I just - I didn't want to say anything in case."

I am mumbling, tripping over my own words. Half laughing, half stammering, I know I sound like an idiot.

Dante laughs. "You do not understand how much I have thought about you over the years - and searched for you. Every time I went out, I was looking for you. Your hair is different. But you are the same. Just as beautiful, just as graceful and charismatic. I thought it could be you - but I wasn't sure. I didn't know how to be sure."

He is also speaking fast and tripping over his words. We both start laughing and he gets up, sliding into the long seat next to mine.

He wraps his arm around me and pulls me close.

"Frankie, I can't believe I had you right here with me all this time. I should have known the second I saw you because of how you made me feel -- that same intensity - I've never forgotten that night."

He presses his lips against mine and we kiss like we are kissing for the first time. There is a renewed and deepened sense of intimacy. A connection that was forged three years ago - that has been growing since we met again - and has now solidified into something else. Something special that is making my heart beat so fast I'm dizzy in his arms.

He is holding me tighter than before, his arms wrapped around me. I belong to him.

In an instant, he lifts me off the chair and he is carrying me away from the dining area to the bedroom.

He carries me inside and closes the door with his foot.

"I spent over three long years missing you, Frankie. You changed me that night. I couldn't let you go. I never moved on."

"I have spent three years missing you too, Dante. I regretted not finding out your name before I left, but it was too late. Then I had to leave—I had to—" I wanted to find him then, but it wasn't safe to stay and allow my father close enough to my son.

I can't tell him.

I can't tell him I had his baby.

I take a slow breath, trying to compose myself. This is crazy. This is happening too fast. I wasn't expecting an answer about this tonight - and now that I have one. I'm being washed away in a tide so strong I am struggling to stay afloat.

Dante's hands roam my body, and my skin tingles beneath his touch. Being with him is a thrilling mix of passion and fear. It's dangerously sexy.

The soft tender side of him disappears when he is set alight with desire. I see the dangerous glint in his eyes and the possessive streak takes over, and it turns me on. Lust and desire spark a dangerous flame between us.

He skims his fingers up my thighs, pushing my dress over my hips. I yank it over my head, toss it onto the floor, and step backward towards the bed, pulling him by his shirt so he is forced to follow me.

When I get close to the bed, I turn him around so that his back is facing the bed. Then I undress him, desperate to feel him inside me.

He groans as I pull his pants down and wrap my hand around his cock.

I want to give him something special. I want to take control before he gets carried away this time.

I sink to my knees in front of him and wrap my lips over his shaft. His groan turns into a low growl of pleasure as I slide my mouth up and down his cock, letting him fuck my mouth slowly.

I can feel the veins of his cock against my tongue. It's driving me crazy because I want him to slide it into me, craving that sensation. I lick him and suck him until his

moans are too much. I can't resist my need. I stand and press my hand against his chest, pushing him to sit back on the bed.

I climb onto his lap, straddling him. I lower myself onto his cock. The way it fills me and stretches me open, makes me moan. My vocal sounds undo him, and he holds me, sliding into my pussy, pressing against me, and filling me up.

He takes hold of my hips, pressing me harder against his cock, then he rocks me back and forth on his lap.

I grip his shoulders and rock with him. He slides inside me and sends shock waves of pleasure through my body. Dante grabs my jaw and pulls my mouth against his while I ride him. His tongue dips between my lips and plays inside my mouth, teasing my senses.

I move faster, the intensity of our connection making me desperate. He lifts me slightly, holding me up so that he can thrust up into me.

He fucks me hard, slamming into me and making me cry out, not worrying about who might hear us. Profanities spill from my lips between kisses. I can't get enough of him. The man from that gala, The Shadow in the mask. The man who has haunted my thoughts and dreams for such a long time.

He grabs a handful of my hair and yanks my head backward, running his other hand over my throat. He clamps his fingers over my neck, choking me as he fucks me so hard I am struggling to hold on to him.

The pleasure and pressure are building up too much and I can't take it for another second.

I gasp and cry out, but his fingers clamp tighter over my throat as my orgasm claims

me, pulsing through me, shudders of desire and need.

He goes rigid inside me as he presses harder into me, exploding and growling low and deep against my body.

We lie on the bed, tangled in each other, breathing heavily.

For a long time, neither of us says anything, but his hands are stroking over my back as I rest my head on his chest. My body is still buzzing from the pleasure of being with him. Sensitive to his touch, it is so easy for him to turn me on with just his hands or a kiss.

I know who he is now—but what does that change?

It makes my heart happier—but it doesn't give away his true intentions, or whether I can trust him with my deepest secrets.

I want to tell him. I want to share everything. But I'm afraid secrets can be used against me.

After a while, Dante sighs, lifting his face to look down at me.

"Little fox, it's getting late. What time does the train return to the station? I don't want you to be late getting home."

I shake my head, too comfortable to look up at him.

"The train will only return to the station tomorrow morning. We are having dinner and breakfast here."

"We're staying the night?" He asks in surprise.

"We are. But, I'm not ready for bed yet. I think I have worked up enough of an appetite to try that salted caramel cheesecake." I grin at him, and he shakes his head.

"I guess I can order the decadent chocolate cake, and we can share again."

"Excellent plan," I say, pushing off the bed to grab my dress. He pulls me back towards him, kissing me again.

"I knew it was you in my gut - but to be sure - I am thrilled I found you."

I smile and trace my fingers over his jaw. "Me too."

We order dessert and I boldly have another glass of wine. The entire mood of the night has shifted since we found out who we are to each other. We are far more relaxed, and he has not pushed for more answers.

I have dreamed of this night so many times. I have recreated it in my mind over the years. I was always afraid that I was reading too much into that one meeting - that he would have just forgotten me. But everything I had secretly hoped for was real.

He was thinking about me as well. He was wondering about where I had been - wishing to see me again and even looking for me in the crowds.

My heart is happy, and I am so pleased that tonight was the night that I asked Clarissa to stay with Damion until the morning.

It gives me more time with Dante - to appreciate that we found each other after all this time.

After a shared dessert, Dante grins and lifts me into his arms again.

"Well, seeing as I have you to myself all night, I think I want to make the most of it."
He says, carrying me back into the bedroom and kicking the door closed behind us.

He lowers me onto the bed, lying on top of me, holding my face in his hand while he kisses me softly.

My heart is full, and I know I am falling for this man.

It's been him since the moment I met him that night.

And it was him again when our paths crossed the second time - and now - more than ever - it is him.

He has my heart, but I am still filled with fear about what my father will do. I am filled with fear about what Dante will do when he learns I have his child - safe at my home.

His kiss is tender, and pushes all my worry aside, deciding to enjoy tonight as much as I can. I want to make the most of our time together - because I have no idea what tomorrow will bring.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm

DANTE

O ur night together is even more magical than I have fantasized it would be.

Falling asleep with her in my arms is better than I could have imagined.

I hold her close, and sleep finds me, the scent of her hair and skin soothing my dreams.

The steady rhythm of the train as it travels around the city is like a lullaby.

We made love twice more before we both fell asleep.

And I even now, as soon as I wake up with her in my arms, I want her again. Her body is warm against mine, curved and fitting against me as though she belongs here.

She stirs, restless. She mutters something in her sleep, waking herself up. I listen, but I can't make out what she's saying. When her beautiful green eyes blink at me and that soft smile traces across her lips, I lean down and kiss her. "Morning, little fox," I say quietly.

"Morning." She mumbles, snuggling her face into my chest.

When we are awake, which is a slow and lazy process, we enjoy a coffee and an English breakfast on the train.

Then the conductor announces over the intercom that we are nearing the end of our

journey.

I don't want to go back to the city - back to my normal life. This night with her has been incredible.

Finding out that she is the woman from the gala - it allowed me to really open up and accept that I am falling for her.

It was always there - this connection. It's the reason I couldn't stay away from her. But now what am I supposed to do about this?

I still don't know who she is. I know nothing about her life apart from what she has shared with me, which is nothing.

I know I have some very intense feelings towards her - but what do I do with those feelings?

I'm obsessed with finding out everything now.

"I have had an incredible time, Dante. I don't want it to end yet."

"So did I, little fox. When will I be able to see you again?"

"I'm not sure. Soon I hope."

The train comes to a stop, and we leave the breakfast table. Both of us were lost in thought. I think we are both processing the truth - and a little sadness at having to leave. This was an escape from the reality of my life, but there was always something waiting for me.

The drive back to the casino is quiet but comfortable. I have my hand on her leg the

entire way and I keep glancing over at her - right at the same time as she glances at me. We laugh every time it happens.

I wish she was comfortable enough with me to tell me what she was running from. What made her go to Canada? It's fucking cold there, and I can see she is a summer person. The sun loves her, it kisses her skin and makes her features glow. I can't imagine her trudging through the snow.

I know I will find out one way or another - I just wish she would tell me.

Outside the casino, in the underground parking area where she left her car, I pull her close to me and hold her against my body for a long time.

"Frankie, please don't disappear on me."

"I won't disappear." She promises with a sparkle of regret in her eyes as she gazes up at me.

I let her go and stood there, watching her climb into her car, and pull away. To where - I have no idea. It takes all my self-control not to follow her, to let her keep her secrets.

Glancing at my watch, I only have about thirty minutes before I meet with Lorenzo. It might be just enough time to run upstairs and take a quick shower before I start the day.

Back in work mode, surrounded by the noises of the casino, my mind is stuck back on my sister's disappearance and the things Lorenzo wants to discuss.

I wonder what it is he has found.

I don't have to wait long to hear.

In no time at all, Lorenzo and I are seated in a private section at the downstairs restaurant.

He orders a coffee, and I order the same.

"Alright, what can you tell me? Did you find out anything about Antonio Musetti?" I will not sit here waiting. I want to know.

He nods. "You are going to love and hate this," he sighs, strumming his fingers on the table. He only does that when he's worried, or anxious. I don't like it. It means that whatever he has found out is bad enough that he is afraid to tell me.

"You'll love it because I think it means we have found the link we were missing, but you'll hate it because of what it is—" Why is he stalling?

"Just fucking spit it out already, man. Stop fucking around."

"Sorry." He sighs, pushing his hand through his short, cropped hair.

"Antonio Musetti. Do you remember a few years ago when we investigated him and there were some really hushed rumors about him being involved in human trafficking - but the more we looked into it the more it looked like a load of bull shit made up by one of his ex-wives."

"Yeah, I remember." I fold my arms across my chest and lean back in my chair, trying to stop the buzz of rage that is radiating through me.

I am feeding off Lorenzo's energy, and it's prickling with the need to smash something.

"Well, I went on a little mission to ask again - more reliable people who are close to Musetti but owed us a favor or two. It turns out the rumors weren't really rumors at all." He wouldn't make an accusation without proof, and if there is proof, then Musetti is a dead man.

"Musetti is involved in human trafficking. Lorenzo, are you sure? Because this is a heavy accusation. This is big. This changes everything. If I take this to my associates, it can't be a rumor."

"Look, Dante, I don't have physical proof. I don't have photos or witnesses - I have the word of some people who I do trust, though." He shrugs, but his leg is bouncing beneath the table. He is uncomfortable.

I know why.

Because if he's right - then my sister might have been taken - and sold off to some fucked up pig anywhere in the entire world. Those auctions are online, and they are open to any scumbag with money -- the worst of humanity. They are another type of fucked-up. I can't pretend I have not seen it, the pretty women at parties. The 'sex slaves' that they drag around with pride when they should have their cocks cut off and fed to them. The reality of this - it's terrifying.

I would have preferred it if she ran away and just never wanted to see me again. Anything else.

I take a deep breath, processing the information separating my emotions from the rational reactions I need to handle this.

But I can't. Not right now.

I need time.

"Did you find anything out about the girl? The card counter?" I flip the conversation because the image of Dani chained to a pole in some rich man's living room makes me sick.

"Man, you can just admit that you have a thing for her? I can see straight through you."

I glare at him. "I don't—" I stammer. Then give up. "Whatever. Just tell me what you found out about her."

He smirks.

"I have a thing for her, a massive fucking thing. It's called a hard-on. What do you know?" Fuck him.

"It's not that great either. I don't know who her family is yet, but I can tell you that the thugs were 'bodyguarding' her - they work for people high up in the mafia. Whoever her family is, there are criminal ties there. She isn't just a rich kid with an overprotective dad, she is untouchable."

"How is it so difficult to find out who someone is?" I mutter in annoyance.

"The richer people are - the easier they can hide. Or she is hiding or running from something or someone so bad - that she has learned to be fantastic at not giving things away. Witness protection, maybe?"

"Maybe a bit of both. I get the sense that she is afraid of her family. Her father. Whoever he is, she doesn't seem to like him at all." Maybe she pays for the goons to keep him away. I hadn't considered that option. Witsec is just dumb. They would never put someone in Vegas with a bodyguard; it's too obvious.

"Alright then—the last thing on the agenda is the tunnels. What happened last night?"

Lorenzo nods. "Yeah, saving the best for last — we caught a sewer rat. Early hours of this morning."

"Alive?" I say in shock. "Why didn't you call me straight away?" I want to deal with this infestation down there. To send a message.

"Not to worry. We have him chained up and waiting for you to have a few words with him. He's not going anywhere. I was letting him piss his pants for a bit. But when you are ready, he is waiting in the cold storage room."

"This is great news. Leave him for now. No water. Make it cold in there. I'll be down there as soon as I can."

My meeting with Lorenzo ends, and I leave with more questions than answers. At least we have a lead on the trespassing in the tunnels—but Frankie remains a mystery.

I thought that by now he would know Frankie's full name - or her father's name. I thought he would have something for me.

And then finding out that shit about my sister's disappearance, having something to do with that asshole Musetti being involved in human trafficking - that makes me sick to my stomach.

And why, still, after all this time - do I think Frankie is connected to whatever happened to my sister? It's not like she did anything or said anything about my sister. As far as I know, they never met or crossed paths. It's an odd intuitive whisper that won't shut up.

I can't ignore it. It's been bothering me for too long.

Frankie needs safety. I don't know what she has been through - but I want to be a safe space for her. One day, she will see that I am on her side. I have to be patient with her, wait it out, and in the meantime, I need to keep her close to me - to uncover the truth and keep her out of harm's way.

I don't think I will ever see my sister again. I don't know where she is or if she is even alive - but Frankie is right here in front of me, and I have a chance to save her from whatever she's so scared of.

I will do my best.

I go to my penthouse, needing some private space and silence to think about what has come to light. Trafficking is not a business any of my associates would dabble in, and across the globe, the law is cracking down. They are sniffing out offenders everywhere -- celebrities, and politicians. They made an example out of a movie producer. It is not an honorable trade; I sell things - not people.

I sit out on my balcony sipping a whiskey trying to piece together all the information and connect the dots.

Now that I've confirmed Frankie is the woman from the gala - and she knows I am that man - I wonder if she will be more open with me? Less secretive. Will she be as interested now that the mystery is gone?

I pick up my phone to text her. I want to see her again.

I want to see where this connection with her leads, to build on the physical attraction and see beneath the surface.

The more time I can spend with her, the more I will learn about her.

Me: Hello, little fox. I've been thinking about you all day. Wondering where you go when you leave my side and want you back with me the moment you do. Can I see you tonight? Will you come to the penthouse for dinner?

Frankie: Hello The Shadow from my past. I would love to see you tonight. Can I be there at six? I wanted to talk to you - there are some things that maybe you should know about me before we take things any further.

My heart is pounding when I read her message. So, this means finding out who I am and telling her my name - it will all be worth it because it has built trust between us. She wants to talk to me, to open up.

Me: I will see you at six. I promise you that no matter what you share with me, you are safe with me.

I don't know how I am going to stay calm and collected until six tonight. I want to see her now. I've waited so long to hear her secrets.

Once I find out what she has been hiding, I can figure out how to help her - what I can do for her.

I guess there is one sure way to distract me from the waiting.

I make my way underground, far below the magic theme of the casino, into the dark and grungy world of my other life.

I have a man to speak to.

"Where is he?" I ask the manager, walking into his cold office. He doesn't seem to

notice the cold, and even when I asked if he wanted to sort the air out, he said no.

"He's in cold storage three."

"Thanks."

I take off my jacket, leave it on a hook on the back of his door, and then leave the office rolling my sleeves up.

The smell is astounding when I enter the cold damp, confined space we have the man chained up in. He is hanging with his hands bound above his head. His feet are off the ground, just like the carcasses of the wild animals we smuggle in and out -- only he's alive, and has pissed his pants in fear.

He looks almost dead, and if it wasn't for the shallow breathing I see in the rise and fall of his rib cage, I would have been pissed off. You can't question a dead man. Dead men tell no lies and spill no truths.

My crew has already worked him over. He either tried to run or got cocky with them.

I kick his leg and his body swings, making the chain clink.

"Hello," I say, and he tries to blink his heavy eyes open. One of them is too swollen. He stares at me with the eyes of a man full of regrets.

"The Shadow." He mumbles through cracked, dry lips.

"So, you knew who you were fucking with when you broke into my tunnels." I walk around him, looking him up and down.

He must be freezing. They have stripped him down to nothing but his underwear.

"I—I?—"

"You what?"

"Please just kill me." He says, tears spilling from his eyes. He is desperate. And that tells me enough.

"Not until you tell me who you work for."

"I can't—my family."

This confirms my suspicions. Whoever sent him here is powerful enough to put enough fear into him he would choose death over speaking a name.

"I can protect your family if you give me what you want."

"No—no you can't. No one can."

There is only one man who could create that kind of fear. He didn't need to snitch, saying nothing was enough.

I grin. The darkness in my smile makes the man tense and his body goes rigid with fear.

"Antonio Musetti," I say, watching his face. The old man is making bold moves, swerving out of his lane and into mine.

He shakes. Cortisol rushed through him. "No. No. I didn't tell you that. I didn't say a fucking word. No. Please, man. You can't do this."

I guess I didn't even need to get my hands dirty today. That was easy.

I step away from him, watching him kick and swing in his restraints. "My family. I have to get to my family." He screams as horror tears through him. The cuffs are cutting into his wrists and blood is flowing down his arm.

I walk out of the cold room and back into the manager's office.

"And?" he says, looking up at me while I shrug my jacket back on.

"I got what I wanted."

"Who was it?"

"Musetti."

"Fuck." The manager says with wide eyes. "Musetti. What do you want me to do with the guy? Are you going to question him again?"

"No. Leave him there for now. I'm still deciding." I say, walking away.

I am getting somewhere. These attacks were no coincidence; they were orchestrated by him to disrupt my supply chain. I know who is behind it; I will find out why, and I will deal with it.

Now I can relax and enjoy my evening with Frankie—and tomorrow I can focus on the Musetti problem.

To prepare for her arrival, I order us a platter of food from downstairs, a bottle of champagne, and a few artisanal chocolates for dessert.

I put some soft music on in the background, classic rock, and pour myself another whiskey. I need to calm down. A lot has happened; I've made progress.

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FRANKIE

I read the message I have sent him for the fourth time.

My heart is pounding, I am struggling to breathe. My hands are shaking a little. I'm dizzy.

I read it again.

It is the right thing to do.

I can't live like this anymore. I can't live with all these secrets weighing me down, the fear of being caught is making me crazy. He is unaware of my true identity, oblivious to the fact that I am a mother and the child is his.

It's too much.

I'm drowning under it all. Ever since I confirmed that he's the man from the gala and let go of any lingering doubt, I've been overwhelmed by the urge to tell him everything.

So, I will start by telling him who my father is.

I will see how he reacts to that and then decide what else to do from there.

There are still a few hours before I need to get ready, so to fill the time, and walk off this insane anxiety - I am going to take Damion to the jumping castle theme park.

He'll have an absolute blast there. We have driven past it a few times and he always shouts out of the window about how he needs to go there.

It will be the perfect way to fill the time.

"Damion?" I call out to him. My hands are shaking, so I take a deep breath and force a big smile onto my face as my little boy comes running into the room.

"Mommy?" He says, curious about what I want.

"Do you remember those big, colorful bouncy houses we drove past - the magic castle park?"

"Mm." He puts his hand to his cheek to think for a moment, then shouts, "Bouncy castle."

"Yes. Do you want to go there today?"

"Yes." He shouts, already hyped up. He jumps onto my lap and throws his little arms around my neck.

"Alright, let's go get you dressed, then we can go. What do you want to wear today?"

In a bolt, he is off my lap and running to his room.

By the time I get there, he has already pulled his Spiderman outfit from the bottom drawer. I don't even argue with him. He decides what he wants to wear - and if he wants to go as a superhero today - then so be it.

I help him get dressed, and strap into his car seat - and we are on our way.

I was right. It is the perfect way to distract myself from my thoughts and have a wonderful day with my son. He is over the moon about every castle he gets to jump on. Some are shaped like giant ducks; some are like dragons and some are just like actual castles. We get cotton candy and hot dogs and laugh until Damion is so exhausted he can't even pick his little feet up to take a step.

When we get home, I carry him upstairs and phone Clarissa. Then I get ready for my dinner with Dante at the penthouse - tense with anxiety about how he is going to react to my news.

When I arrive at Russo River Casino, I am almost dizzy with nerves again.

I catch the elevator up to the top floor and knock on the penthouse door. Before I've managed three knocks, the door opens and Dante pulls me into his arms. I lean into him, resting my cheek on his chest, feeling the reassuring warmth of his body against mine.

It's strange how just his embrace can soothe away so much of my worry.

"Come in, little fox. I'll pour you a drink. Champagne or whiskey?"

"Definitely a whiskey, please." I sigh, knowing that I need all the courage I can get.

He chuckles, but I can hear by the way he laughs he is tense, too. He's wanted to know who I am for a long time. I just hope he is ready to hear the truth. I hope he doesn't kick me out straight away.

"Did you have a good day?" He asks, handing me a glass of whiskey, neat.

"I took my son to the jumping castle park. It was bouncy." I say, looking up into his eyes.

That is my first truth for the day. I wait for his response.

He smiles, his eyes narrowing. "Your son - um - how old is your son? Why haven't I had the pleasure of meeting him?"

"He's turning four in a few months. His name is Damion. He's a little ball of energy and love. You will like him. You'll definitely like him." I smile, my stomach fluttering with butterflies. He will do the math; it's not hard.

"I can't wait to meet him. Is that - um - is that what you wanted to tell me?" He asks, frowning.

I take his hand and pull him towards the living room.

I need to sit down.

My entire body is going to collapse beneath me if I don't. I am so nervous.

I sit, facing Dante on the same sofa as him. My legs are turned towards his. I am holding my drink in my lap; I can't stop fidgeting.

He reaches out and takes the glass from me, taking my hand in his.

"Frankie, whatever it is - it's ok. You can't tell me anything that is going to chase me away." It might; he can't promise that without knowing the truth.

"You don't know that." I sigh.

"Try me." He says with a gentle smile.

"I thought you should know who my father is. Since we are spending more time

together - and I found out who you are - I just think it's important for you to understand."

"Ok." He nods, encouraging me.

"I am the daughter of one of the most powerful mafia bosses in Las Vegas. My name is Francesca Musetti. My father is Antonio Musetti."

I say it all in one breath, speaking clearly, but fast. I had to get it out. I had to get the words out of my mouth before I changed my mind.

Dante is staring at me with wide eyes - shook into silence.

He hasn't said a word; time has stopped. I'm afraid he will leave me now, knowing who I am.

I say nothing. I have to wait. I have to let him process.

I wait, trying to be patient, but my heart is beating too loud and too fast. Tears pool in the corners of my eyes, and I will not let them fall. This is why I didn't tell him because losing him is going to hurt.

"Dante?"

He looks into my eyes, frozen.

"Dante? Do you know who Antonio Musetti is?" His reactions suggest he understands who my father is.

He nods. "I know who your father is Frankie - Francesca - I have dealt with him on a few occasions in the past. Him and I - we run in the same circles."

I nod.

Mafia circles.

Of course, the man who owns the biggest casino in Las Vegas would be linked to the mafia too. I guess it is no surprise to me, but I'm still disappointed, my dreams were always to be free from the mafia.

Is he just like my father?

I have never gotten that impression from him. I've never associated him with the things my father does.

No, that is ridiculous. Just because he moves in the same circles does not mean he is the same as my father.

He has never been cold, cruel, or controlling towards me.

I bite my lip.

Looking into his eyes again. I search for answers, a clue to what he is thinking.

Finally, after an eternity he smiles.

I frown, and he pulls me closer to him on the sofa.

"It makes sense to me now. I understand why you tried to run from your father - and why you had to be so secretive. I really appreciate you telling me that, Frankie. You can always be honest with me."

I let out a gasp of relief as he pulled me into a hug.

I don't know what I expected, but I know what I feared, and I am so relieved that my fears did not become reality.

When he pulls me back again to look into my eyes he asks, "Can you tell me why you left - why you ran away to Canada?"

"It was because of my son. I didn't want him to suffer the same upbringing that I had - under my father's tyranny, control, manipulation, and cruelty. I wanted a better life for my son. I was, and still am terrified that my father wants to take him as the heir to his empire. He is my father's blood, a boy, the perfect candidate in my father's warped mind."

Dante nods, then reaches up and brushes a curl away from my face, tucking it behind my ear in a gentle gesture.

"Whatever happens, I will do everything I can to keep you and your little boy safe, Frankie." He leans forward, his fingers wrapped around my chin as he presses his lips against mine.

The kiss sends a shiver of delight through my body as it eases the last of my fears and anxiety away. He did not get angry or ask me to leave - instead, he promised to help keep Damion and me safe.

I can't describe the relief flooding every cell in my body.

All the pent-up anxiety I was holding onto suddenly ignited beneath my skin, burning like a wild passion for this man.

Every moment I spend with him makes me want him more.

His movements are filled with the same urgency as he pulls me onto his lap. His kiss

becomes deeper, more forceful, and possessive as he grabs a handful of my hair and locks his mouth over mine.

I gasp at how hard he is, my legs wrapped around his waist as he pushes up against me.

A knock on the door makes us both jump. Dante grumbles as he stands, lifting me off his lap and guiding me down on the floor, standing there looking bewildered and glowing with lust.

I grin and wipe my fingers across my lips as I pull my clothing straight.

Dante looks down at his cock and shakes his head with a chuckle.

"Do you think you could get that?" He asks, sitting down again.

I laugh as I walk to the door and pull it open.

The doorman smiles. "Evening, where I can put your food order."

"On the table would be great. Thank you." I point to the dining room table just past the living room in the open-plan design space.

The doorman nods a greeting at Dante, who nods back.

Then he leaves, and as soon as the door closes Dante, and I pack up laughing.

He stands up and walks over to me, hugging me against him and kissing my forehead.

"Sorry, I got very carried away there and forgot about the food that was arriving. Let's eat while it's still hot otherwise, it won't be as good. We can pick up where we left off

a little later." He grins.

I nod and let him lead me towards the dining room table. He pulls out a chair for me, hands me a plate, and lifts the lid of the platter.

It is a surf and turf with calamari done in several ways, steak strips, and chicken pieces. There is enough food here to feed way more people than just us.

"Are you feeding an army?" I laugh, letting Dante dish up for me.

"I wasn't sure how hungry you'd be - I would rather over cater than leave you wanting more."

"There is nothing wrong with you leaving me wanting more." I grin.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm

DANTE

Frankie and I sit together at my dining room table eating dinner and for the first time in a really long time, I relax. I am so grateful that she told me the truth about her family.

I know exactly who her father is. His name has been coming up a lot this evening.

And if all goes well, I will uncover even more evidence against him soon.

I want to prove that he had something to do with my sister's disappearance now as well. Seeing as he is everywhere else—interfering with my life. It is safe to assume he was involved in that too.

I need to find justice for her.

But I also have to admit that finding out her father is Antonio Musetti is also an enormous shock.

What will he do if he finds out I am involved with his daughter, all while launching an investigation into his sinister activities?

It's going to be a tricky situation - but through it all - I will keep Frankie safe. And her son.

Her son who was born months after she left Las Vegas - close to nine months from the night that we spent together.

Do you think it is possible?

Is he, my son? That kid in the apartment that Lorenzo saw—it makes sense now. It's her kid. Not her roommate's.

I push the thought aside because I am trying to process too much already at the moment. I have to deal with one thing at a time.

"Are you alright?" Frankie asks me from across the table. "Penny for your thoughts?."

"I guess, I am really happy you told me who your family is - but it means that us being together is complicated."

"I know, that is why I was trying to hide who I was. I didn't want to complicate things. There were so many times when I tried to convince myself to just walk away from you to save you the trouble of having to deal with my family. But I couldn't. I'm connected to you. Ever since that first night." She sighs.

"You never have to make choices for my sake, Frankie. If I thought you would complicate my life so much that I wouldn't want you to be a part of it - that is my choice to make. Not yours. Not for me. You promised you wouldn't disappear again. So, don't." I say sternly, piercing my gaze into her.

She nods, biting her lower lip. It sends a thrill of pleasure through me.

I want to kiss her again. I want to do so many things to prove to her I don't want her to leave my life.

I reach out beneath the table and run my hand over her thigh. She is beautiful.

I hold her leg while we carry on enjoying our dinner.

All the while the tension in my body is growing - my need for her.

I can see in her eyes she is thinking the same thoughts as me. Her eyes drift over my body, hungrily, eager to taste me.

The more I learn about her, the more she reveals to me, the more I want her. Our connection grows stronger with each revelation we find out about each other.

Frankie stands up from the table, and walking around it she stands in front of my chair, looking down at me.

"I'm hungry for something else." She whispers seductively. And it is the only invitation I need. She doesn't need to say another word before I stand up and lift her into my arms, carrying her toward my bedroom.

A few hours later we are both lying in my bed, smiling, our eyes closed as we take slow relaxed breaths. I have explored every part of her, and she has explored every part of me. We are both satisfied in ways that I could never have imagined possible.

She rolls onto her stomach, propping herself onto her elbows so that she can see me better.

"I have heard my father mention your name before - in meetings he has with his associates at the mansion. Are you two enemies or allies? I couldn't tell. He thought you were a threat to him - but he had respect for you. He understood your strength."

I sigh, brushing my hand through her dark curls. "Your father and I have never been allies, little fox. We have struggled to see eye to eye on a number of occasions. We are the two people who own the largest casinos in this city, so it is natural for us to be enemies. However, we used to be quiet adversaries. He stayed away from me, and I showed him the same courtesy." My thoughts drift off. It all changed when I found

out the rumors were true.

"Used to be - what happened?" She asks, unable to read my expression, and that there is more to the story.

She has told me who her father is.

Should I tell her the ugly truth about him? Would it destroy her?

She has no idea what type of man he really is.

"Your father - did he discuss business with you? Besides the casino, the other things he does?"

"He is involved in several things, but never discussed them; I'm a girl. No women in business, right? That's how the mafia works. Honestly, I spent most of my life locked up in my bedroom - bored out of my mind." She shrugs a little and pulls her mouth to the side. "Why? What is he doing?"

"I guess I need to tell you a bit about myself and who your father is to me."

She shifts her position, looking a little nervous. "Ok." She says.

"Several years ago my little sister, Daniela, went missing. She was the only family I had left, and it caused me to fall apart. I spent years obsessed with trying to find her, and her disappearance tore me apart but also put me back together again - because I needed money, resources to continue to search for her?—"

"Did you ever find her?"

"Dani is still missing. But just recently I learned that one of the mafia bosses in the

city is involved in trafficking women."

Frankie gasps, her eyes wide with horror. "Do you think your sister?" She can't say it.

"I think they took my sister to get to me. Frankie, the man I am talking about — it's your father. Antonio Musetti." Even if she hates him, I have just destroyed the humanity she saw in her father.

Frankie stares at me, dumbfounded for a moment. She takes a shaky breath and then pushes herself up into a sitting position, folding her legs in front of her beautiful naked body.

"Dante, I am so sorry - your sister - I can't imagine how that must hurt."

She sighs, closing her eyes for a moment. "I did not know my father was involved in anything that disgusting. I thought - smuggling narcotics or illegal goods. I've heard him and his men discussing difficult shipments, but I always assumed it was stuff... who ships humans?" She swallows hard, making a face as though a bitter taste has just filled her mouth.

"There is more though. I have something I need to show you."

"When?"

"Soon."

I am going to take her down to cold storage and look at her reaction to the man I have chained up there. It's the only way I can be sure she isn't involved. People can't hide their reactions to scenes like that. I will be able to read her body language and her expression.

I reach out and pull her towards me, hugging her against my chest.

"Frankie, I plan to go after your father. I have to find out what happened to my sister."

"After all these years — do you think she's still—" Alive, she doesn't finish the sentence. We both know what the odds are.

"I don't want to think about the worst-case scenario because every time I do, I can't decide whether it would be better to find out she died, or that she has been suffering for years at the hands of some madman."

"If your sister is anything like you, then she is strong." No one is that strong, we all have a breaking point.

"She is strong, but will she be the same person when I find her? And will she ever be able to recover from what she is going through?" My voice shakes. Anger and fear grip my heart thinking about Dani and what her life might be like now.

I want, more than anything, to find her alive and well.

I just don't want her to have suffered for this long.

We lie in silence for a while. Frankie is tense in my arms. Her fingers are tracing small circles against my chest, but her thoughts seem to be elsewhere.

When she shifts against me, I think she is going to tell me she needs to leave, but she wiggles up onto my chest, looks me in the eyes, and makes a promise to me.

"Dante, I don't know if there is anything I can do to help - but if there is I will do it. Whatever it is. I want to help you find out if my father took your sister."

"Frankie, I don't think it is safe for you to get involved with this. You are already worried about what your father could do to your son - and your priority, understandably, is to keep him safe." He is unstable and would take the boy to control her.

She nods. "Yes, but some things are bigger than just me and my son. If my father is trafficking women - then how many lives has he stolen? He has to be stopped."

Frankie and I talk a while longer. I watch the clock and at ten I tell her it's time to go. I have to show her something before she leaves the casino.

Reluctantly we climb out of bed. I'm tense because I am about to find out if she is playing me or being truthful. Is she working for her father? A trap set to infiltrate my life and take me down? I can't deny it is possible.

She is nervous as we climb into the industrial elevator that carries us beneath the glitz of Vegas into the pits of my underworld empire.

"What is this place?" She whispers, not wanting to draw attention to herself.

"Just follow me," I say coldly. I have to stay impartial right now. I need to be observant and watchful of her reaction. If she is his pawn, I will not be going back up with her tonight and that terrifies me.

FRANKIE

I follow Dante through a cold stone passage, rigged with a steel framework supporting the tunnels that spread out in all directions. We walk through a large cave-like hall, filled with people packing crates onto industrial trollies.

I am too afraid to ask anything. Dante's body language and the darkness in his eyes—he has turned into that dark and dangerous man I have only seen glimpses of. I feel sick with nerves.

I hurry to keep up and wince away from the curious stares of the men around me.

We walk down another passage, and Dante pushes open a thick, heavy door. I catch sight of the number three etched into the stone above it.

Immediately the smell hits me. My body convulses as I try not to vomit. It smells like death and human waste. It's fucking freezing.

Dante flicks a light on and a scream rips from my throat.

He grabs me and clamps his hand over my mouth.

I stare in horror at the man dangling from a chain on the ceiling. He looks dead. He smells dead. His body is covered in bruises and his skin is sagging like it wants to melt off his bone. He looks like meat hanging in the back of a butcher shop.

I fight the gag reflex again and my eyes water, tears flooding over Dante's hand.

"I am going to take my hand away. You will not scream. Do you understand me?"
His voice is deadly cold.

I nod; he lifts his hands, stepping to my side. His eyes are on me, but I can't tear my eyes off the man hanging lifeless in front of me.

"Is—is he dead?" I stammer.

Dante ignores my question. "Do you recognize him, Frankie? Do you know him?"

"Know him?" I say in shock. "How would I know him?"

He grabs my jaw and turns my tear-stained face towards his. "Just answer the question." He snarls.

"No. I've never seen him before in my life." I scream, filled with an intense need to get out of here. The shock has worn off and I am acutely aware of the fact that this man has been tortured to death.

I shove Dante hard, and he lets me go so I turn and run for the door.

I can barely breathe, and my legs are shaking. I fall out of the room and up against the cold stone wall in the passage outside.

I can stop sobbing.

I can't stop shaking.

I hear the door closing and Dante's arms wrap around me. He lifts me up against his chest.

"I'm so sorry, little fox. I had to be sure. I had to know if you were involved."

I shake my head in disbelief. "You think I had something to do with that?—"

"Not anymore. It was your father, little fox. He is responsible for everything."

The bright morning sunlight splashes through my apartment window onto the dining room table where I am sitting, staring at a bowl of oats. Damion is playing on the floor. He finished his cereal a while ago and has been content to keep himself busy with his new dinosaur toy.

I can't stop thinking about what Dante told me about my father last night. And I am still in shock about what I saw.

I don't think I've processed any of it.

The man's face—swollen and grotesque—is all I see when I close my eyes.

My father was behind it all.

And human trafficking? Can it really be true?

I hardly slept at all because I was tossing and turning, wondering how I went my entire life so oblivious to the type of person my father really is. Was I so spoiled and controlled that it made me blind?

I knew he wasn't a good man. His egotistical, self-centered mannerisms were always obvious, but I never could have imagined just how deeply the evil ran through his veins.

Human trafficking is the most heinous crime; murder is a lesser evil. Then to find out

your blood is involved in it. I want to throw up.

I lived there, in that house with him, while his business associates and he planned and plotted and stole lives. Not only the women they took - and sold - but the families they stole them from. There were parties with pretty girls, who were 'paid'... now I wonder if they were? Or were they slaves, stolen and sold off to disgusting rich men? Men like my father.

I gag, bile rising up my throat. They were there, in my house — I could have helped them.

I push the untouched breakfast bowl away. I can't stomach anything right now.

I want to find the truth, not only for Dante and his sister but for me as well. I need to redeem myself and remove the connection to his name. My father has tainted it, and I want no part of it.

"Mommy. Finish foods." Damion says, climbing onto the chair to peek into my bowl of oats.

"Mommy isn't very hungry right now my angel."

"No, Mommy must eat."

I smile at him. His soft heart and caring attitude are a blessing. I will never let that man near his grandson again. Not now, after I know the truth.

It's one thing to want to protect your son from an overbearing narcissist - but a man who would sell another person - I can't let him near my son.

I don't even want to call him my father anymore.

Damion pushes my oats back towards me and hands me the spoon from inside the bowl. I sigh -- take the spoon from him and stir my oats again.

"If I have three more spoons - will that be enough?" I ask him, entering the same negotiations I do with him when he is being a fussy eater.

"Mm." He says, thinking hard. "Ok. Three."

I take a spoon of oats and swallow it down.

Damion watches me.

"Two more," I say. Taking another spoonful.

He nods, not letting me get away with this.

I grin, picking up the last spoonful. "Last one," I say. Then I eat it, nodding while Damion claps for me.

"Good." He says, satisfied, climbing off the chair and going back to his games.

I push the bowl away from myself again. Eating that bit seemed to settle my stomach. But I am still rampant with anxiety about this whole situation.

What can I do to help Dante?

Out of everyone I am the most likely person to get close to him - or - maybe I can get into his home office and dig around in there.

He used to threaten me with unimaginable pain if I ever went into his office. He must be hiding something in there.

I pick up my phone and message Dante.

Me: What if I can get into my father's office in his house?

Dante: I don't see how that will be safe for you. I don't like the idea of you putting yourself in a risky position like that.

Me: But whatever I find out will be important, won't it? It will help.

Dante: No, let's find another way.

I sigh in annoyance. I can help. He doesn't get to tell me I can't help. But maybe he's right. I don't even think I would get in there without my father seeing me - unless I moved back into his mansion.

The thought makes me want to vomit as soon as it comes into my mind.

Living with him back then was a nightmare, but now, knowing what he's capable of, it would be so much worse.

And where would Damion go? Because there is no way in hell he would come with me if I wanted to play dangerous games like that.

I huff. Dante is right. It's a terrible idea. The risk is too high.

At lunch time I hop in the shower, hoping it will wake me up. I'm stressed and exhausted. But I want to see Dante. We need to figure something out together.

I get dressed, then message Dante and tell him to meet me at the park near my apartment. I tell him I will be near the coffee kiosk in the center of the park.

He explained why he showed me what he showed me last night.

I understand his need to find the truth.

I hate it. I hate what I saw—but I understand.

It is also a warning to me—because now I am terrified of hiding anything from him. I need him to meet my son. His son. And from there I need to decide if I can tell him who he really is to the child.

With a nervous excitement in my body, I decided he could meet Damion, and we could all sit and feed the ducks while Dante and I talked.

I don't want to tell him that part over a text though. So, he can find out I am bringing Damion when he gets there.

His reaction will be genuine. I want to watch him and see how he manages being around a child.

We have never discussed children - and there is a possibility that he never wanted children - or never wants them and then I don't think I will be able to ever tell him he is my son's father. If he is the monster that I saw last night—then I need to run. I need to run far away. But I believe he is so much more. I want to believe he is better than that. Or perhaps it doesn't even matter because all I see in him is good, despite the obvious warnings.

At the park, Damion is skipping around with a bag of corn kernels in his little hand. He is already covered in mud from sliding down the edge of the lake, but the smile on his face tells me he is having the best time.

I arrive a little earlier so that I can settle down and be more prepared for Dante's

arrival.

But even after I tried to be ready - my stomach still danced at the sight of him walking towards me.

I glance towards Damion, busy and distracted.

Standing up, I wait for Dante to walk right up to me. He hugs me tight and kisses me with a meaning that surprises me. He seems less and less worried about displaying his affection for me.

I am still nervous though as I glance around wondering if my father's goons are somewhere nearby.

"Hello, little fox. Are you ok—I mean—after last night?" He seems tense.

I nod. "Let's not talk about that. Ever."

He smiles, changing the subject right away. "You chose a beautiful day to enjoy the park's sunshine."

"Um... we wanted to come here to feed the ducks." I smile, glancing at Damion who senses my eyes on him; he turns towards us with a massive smile.

"Mommy, I got a duck friend." He shouts, throwing more corn kernels as the ducks flap around his feet.

Dante chuckles, slipping his arm around my waist and standing next to me. "So, today is my lucky day. I get to meet the man who has been stealing your attention from me." He grins down at me with a cheeky mischief in his eyes.

"Damion, come and meet Mommy's friend." I call out to my son.

"Coming." He says in a sing song voice, then dusts his hands on his pants and bolts towards us - not stopping - he runs straight into Dante. He wraps his arms around Dante's leg with his little dirty hand and muddy clothes. I gasp and go to pull him away from Dante.

"I am so sorry; I didn't expect him to do that - oh my word I'm so sorry." I bite my lip, looking at the mud spread across Dante's pants.

My son grins at us.

Dante drops to his knee, smiling and gentle. He makes a deep rolling sound that makes me tingly inside.

"It's just mud, Mom. Little boys are supposed to be covered in mud, aren't they buddy?" He asks Damion who nods.

"You, my friend?" Damion asks, poking Dante in the arm.

"I think we could be best friends. But it all depends - do you like ice cream? And chocolate?"

Damion nods again, looking as though he is going to topple over.

"I do." He roars.

"Me too. Well, I guess we can be friends then. Does your mommy like ice cream? Because I saw a man selling some on the way in here."

Dante turns towards me with his eyebrows raised. "Will your mom let us get ice

cream?"

"And sauce." Damion insists.

"Sauce?" Dante says, standing up and sounding confused.

"Caramel dip." I chuckle. "Yes, we can get ice cream." Then I nudge Dante with my hip and whisper, "Are you bribing my son into liking you?"

He shakes his head, "I don't think I need to bribe him. He already said we're best friends."

Damion holds his hand up towards Dante and Dante has to bend low to take it. Then they walk hand in hand towards the ice cream truck and my heart is happy and heavy at the same time. Damion really needs a father figure. Just seeing this brief interaction reinforces that idea for me.

But not just anyone. It has to be a man who will love and cherish him.

After a few paces, Dante looks uncomfortable bending so low, so he scoops Damion into his arms and carries him.

"You are going to have more mud on you than you've bargained for," I warned him. "It's ok, it's worth it." He smiles.

Damion refuses to climb off Dante's lap while we sit on the bench eating ice cream. Dante and I talk about my father and how we can get proof. We want to get evidence -- hard evidence that we can use against him.

"I am acquainted with people who don't like your father. I think if we work with them, they can help us gather the evidence we need. Then with that, we can try to

take him down. I just think we should move carefully. We don't want to go rushing headfirst into danger just because we want answers. We have to have patience."

I sigh, I hate being patient.

"But the longer we wait the more dangerous it becomes for us. Every time we are together it is a risk. My father knows who you are. We just need one of his goons to get confirmation that we are involved, and it will be hellfire that rains down on us. My father is a powerful man, and he has been threatening me for a long time - it is definitely going to get worse."

Dante nods. "I never want you or Damion to be afraid. I don't want to draw this situation out longer than it needs to - but rushing into things will only make it more dangerous."

Dante tells me about the men he is meeting with later that evening. He promises to keep me up to date on whatever he finds out.

He is gentle and attentive towards Damion and me. His constant reassurance makes me feel safer, just knowing he wants to be there for me, but I am still fearful of the endless possibilities of what could go wrong this time.

I let Dante walk my son and me back to the entrance of my apartment building. I grin when we reach the high rise. "This is me," I say, glancing up at it.

"So, you have finally let me see where you live." He laughs, leaning down and taking my face in his hands. "I hope that next time I come around I will be invited inside for dinner. Another night when I don't have to get to a meeting?"

"Definitely. But then I first want to make sure the place looks nice, and I want to..." He shakes his head and interrupts me.

"I don't care about any of that. I only care about spending time with you, little fox."

Dante leans close to kiss me again and Damion tugs at my hand. "Me also." He says, holding his arms up towards Dante.

Dante chuckles and scoops Damion into a hug.

"Are you going to be a good boy until I see you again?" He asks.

"I'm always good," he says, scrunching his nose.

"I bet you are," Dante says, ruffling his hair.

Damion and I walk into the building, and I glance over my shoulder for one last glimpse at Dante who is waiting until we are inside.

My heart is going crazy for this man.

I am filled with fear and hope.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm

DANTE

It is late evening when I sit down at the table with several other families. Two I know very well and a third I am only meeting for the first time tonight.

Given the nature of the meeting, I'm tense and ready for anything. I'm on high alert as I monitor everything and everyone around me.

Next to me, Lorenzo clears his throat.

We were both carrying our handguns, a precaution we had to take.

"Dante, this is Arman. He has risked his life to come and see us tonight."

I glance towards Arman. If he is who he says he is, then he has taken a massive risk to be here.

"Arman, we appreciate you doing this." I nod towards him, still unsure of him. Lorenzo seems convinced of his trustworthiness - I will need to see action before I believe words. "Is it true that you work for Antonio Musetti?"

Arman nods; he looks like he wants to throw up, but also like he has a certain deadly kind of determination in his eyes that will keep him focused on his goals no matter how fearful he becomes. I can admire that.

"I have worked for him for two years now. It is almost impossible to get a position this close to him because he is a man of many enemies. I worked hard to be in this

position."

"Why?" I asked, the distaste of his words clear. "Why would anyone ever aspire to work with a man like that and then brag about how good the position is?"

"You misunderstand me, Mr. Russo. Let me tell you my story - then you will see why."

I nod and lean back in the chair, folding my arms over my chest.

Arman takes a slow, but steady breath, then talks.

"Five years ago, my sister went missing. She worked as a housemaid for a very rich man in Las Vegas. My family lived in Peru, and we were grateful for the money she would send home every month. But one day it stopped. And all communication from her stopped. You understand my sister has always been very close with all of us. She would never just disappear like this." he shifts in his chair. "Weeks went by, then months. I tried to call and write and even hired someone to come to the house to speak to the man who she worked for. But after many attempts to find out what happened to her - the man denied she ever worked for him." Arman pauses, taking a moment to pull his thoughts together.

"You see, something bad happened to my sister in that house. The house of Antonio Musetti. And he denied it all he wanted, but I knew she worked there. I had photos she had sent me from her lunch breaks, photos taken inside his kitchen - in his garden. She was wearing the house uniform the maids still wear today. I came to Las Vegas under a different name and did everything I could until I got a position on his security team. I have been working, biding my time, learning about who he is and what he does - and waiting for someone like you to come along."

He is a man I can trust. I understand that something happened to someone you love.

We are in the same boat. I want to take this man down, I just don't have the power or resources."

I nod, my heart breaking for him.

"But you have access," I say.

"Exactly. And from Lorenzo has told me - you need a man inside."

Arman, Lorenzo, and I spend a few hours talking. This man has seen so many things - but he doesn't have concrete evidence that we can use. However, he will get it. I tell him what I think Antonio has been doing, and he says he might be able to get access to the office - but if he does, he will need a safe house to hide in afterward. I promised him that.

After an agreement is made, we all stand up, ready to leave.

I clench my jaw. I don't know if I want the answer to this question, but I can't walk away tonight without asking.

"Arman, did you ever find out what happened to your sister?"

I see his face darken, his eyes half-closing as he tries to swallow the truth.

"I found out months ago. There was a party at the mansion and one guest got rough. He killed my sister. And that man just covered it up as though she was nothing. He hired a new maid to replace her and got rid of any evidence she ever existed."

I sigh. "I am sorry."

"At least I know what happened and my family has peace and closure."

"Why did you stay, even after you found out?"

"Because I am going to kill him," Arman says with deadly honesty. "And if I cannot kill him - I want to take away anything he has ever loved and watch him suffer in pain."

The following night I am on my way to Frankie's apartment. She has asked me to use the underground parking and to come in through a back entrance to avoid being seen.

I pull up the parking brake of my car and slide it into neutral.

She and I have come quite far together since we reentered each other's lives. We grow closer by the day and I am excited to see where it is going to lead. I can't see a future that doesn't have her in it.

I climb the stairs that lead to the first floor and then get into the resident's elevator, avoiding the front foyer and any spying eyes.

I knock on her door and when she opens it, wearing that gorgeous lace summer dress that I love so much with a white apron over it, my lips curve into a wide smile.

"Wow, little fox, you look like you'd make a perfect wife."

She playfully punches my arm as I pull her into a hug, closing the door behind us. "That's rude. You can't say things like that." She laughs.

I tug at the apron. "Alright, what if you were only wearing the apron?"

"Well, if you behave then we can see about that for dessert." She grins, pushing me away and walking towards the kitchen to check on the food.

"It smells incredible - where is the little guy?"

"He's in his room trying to decide what to wear for dinner tonight. I told him you were coming over and he got a little stressed trying to decide. I've never seen him like this. I was helping him, but I had to come see to the food."

"Shall I go offer some help?"

"Sure, just down the hallway -- it's the first room on the left."

I wander through her apartment which is clean, bright, and feminine in a minimalist way. She has excellent taste and the few key pieces she has here and there make the space feel like a home. But, I can see she is living with one foot in the door and one foot out, not really settling. It is probably for fear of her father's actions and what he might do next.

She can't settle or give her son a proper home until that man is out of the picture altogether.

"Little buddy," I say, stepping into Damion's room.

Across the bedroom floor, he has clothes spread out, and he's standing with his hands on his hips staring at them-- stark naked and looking as though this is the biggest decision of his life.

I lean against the door frame and fold my arms across my chest, putting on my best serious face too.

"Mm. You have a lot of choices there." I nod towards the clothes.

"I dunno." He huffs, throwing his hands in the air.

"Well, let's see if we can narrow it down." I crouch on my knees, picking up the Spiderman outfit and a dinosaur onesie.

"I really like both. To be honest - I wish I had a dinosaur costume like this. Where did you get it? Do you think I could borrow it?"

He runs over to me, laughing. He jumps up and grabs the dinosaur onesie from my hand.

"Not fit you. You wear spiman. I am dinasa."

He pushes the Spiderman outfit onto my lap.

"Gosh, you got the best one. Tell you what. I am going to come over and borrow Spiderman one day when I have a party to go to. Is that ok?"

"Yes." He says, but now he is lying flat on the floor trying to get his arms into the sleeves of the dinosaur onesie. I laugh.

"Come on, let me help you." He rolls over, kicking it away from himself. Then gets up and hands it to me, grabbing my knees with his little hands to balance himself then lifting one leg in the air.

From the kitchen, I hear Frankie shouting. "Oh, sorry, please can you put one of his big boy nappies on? I don't want any accidents tonight. He already had a bath."

I pull my mouth tight, searching around the room for a nappy that I have no idea how to put on.

"Top drawer of the baby stand." She calls out again.

I pull the drawer open. "Which one is it, buddy?" I ask, holding up one nappy that looks really complicated and one that looks like a chunky pair of underwear.

He points to the chunky underwear. "The blue one?" I call to Frankie in the kitchen.

"Yes, that's the one."

Damion lifts his little legs into the nappy, then wiggles into the dino suit with my help. When he is done, he jumps up against me and demands to be lifted.

"Hey, little guy. Are you ready for dinner now?" I say, carrying him through to the living room. He rushes about, showing me his toys, bringing them to me one at a time.

I keep staring at him -- at how blue his eyes are and the darkness of his hair. The shape of his mouth and his eyes - he looked just like me when I was a baby. I am convinced that if I held a photo of myself up next to him at the same age, you wouldn't be able to tell us apart.

I noticed it at the park the other day, but now, I am struggling to deny it.

And the timing - he is almost four. He was born about nine months after she left Las Vegas - timed with our night at the gala event.

Should I just ask her? She knows if I am the father or not. She would know who she was with. I don't want to just assume I am the only man she had a wild affair with - but how can I not? Everything lines up too perfectly.

Frankie comes through the living room carrying a large roasted chicken and a bowl of roasted potatoes and veggies. She sets them on the dining table near the window. "You two look like you are having fun." She laughs.

"I am getting the full presentation." I pointed to the toys all lined up in the same order he showed them to me.

She leans down and picks Damion up, nuzzling her nose against his cheek. He grabs her face in his hands and kisses her. You can see how much love there is between them. She is a beautiful mother.

I open my mouth to ask if he is mine but then close it again. Perhaps now is not the time. Perhaps I should wait until we are alone.

FRANKIE

Sitting at my little dining room table with Dante and Damion, enjoying the roasted chicken I made, is like a glimpse into what it would be like to be a family. Living together and enjoying these small moments - this is what it would be like.

It is cozy and filled with laughter. Damion seems to adore Dante and Dante has shown incredible patience with him and a certain skill for building up a friendship with him. He knows how to talk to him and how to build trust. That - or Damion just senses that Dante is his father.

I don't know.

I'm really happy watching them together, but I'm also sick with guilt.

I want to believe that Dante can be a good father, that he is a good man, but I'm so worried.

What worries me even more is that I know I can never walk away from him—so I know I am going to take this risk. If it doesn't work, I will be on the run again, but I can't carry on without at least trying. I want to be with him. I want Damion to know who he really is too. It's a dangerous risk, but one I think worth taking.

After dinner I stand up to clear the plates, Damion is sitting on Dante's lap, telling him about his favorite dinosaur, even though most of what he says is difficult to follow, Dante is engrossed in the conversation.

But when he sees me gather the empty plates he moves to stand as well.

"No, sit, stay with him. This will be so quick. Relax. I am going to bring out the ice cream and salted caramel sauce."

He smiles up at me with a touch of sadness in his eyes.

I wonder what he is thinking.

Is it something to do with what he wants to talk to me about or what happened at the meeting he was supposed to have last night?

I push aside my worry and take the dishes through to the kitchen. Then I bring three bowls, spoons, and the ice cream back to the dining room table.

Damion jumps off Dante's lap and starts talking about ice cream. I dish up his bowl first and hand it to him. "Honey, look at me; hold it with both hands - no - both hands. Put down your toy. Yes. Ok, now both hands."

I watch as he carries the bowl to the living room floor and sits down to enjoy it.

Then I turn to dish up some ice cream for Dante and me.

But Dante, looking up at me, sends a shock wave through me with four simple words.

"He's mine, isn't he?"

He speaks, and he isn't really asking a question. He seems to just know. I sit down and take a slow breath, then nod as I answer.

"He is your son. You did the math?" I say, expecting him to be furious. I expect him

to shout at me for hiding that truth - for not telling him as soon as I realized he was the man from the gala - I expect him to push me away.

But as I look at Dante his entire face lights up.

My heart stutters and stops beating for a moment.

He is smiling.

"I have a son?" He asks, to be sure he understands. His voice is shocked and joyous at the same time.

"Damion is your son, Dante. He is your little boy."

Dante laughs, then stands up and pulls me into a hug.

"I'm a father." He says, hugging me close.

When he sits down again, I can see he is holding a lot of emotion back. Perhaps he doesn't want to make a scene in front of Damion, but one thing is for sure - he is over the moon about this news.

He hasn't shown even a hint of being angry or upset. He has no trepidation or hesitation about being a dad. He is happy.

I bite my lower lip because my smile is too wide.

I can't believe he is this happy.

This is incredible.

This is making me the happiest I have been in a really long time.

After the ice cream, Dante waits in the living room while I put Damion to sleep. I think he is taking a moment to process what he has found out. I am a little nervous to go back in there and face him now that Damion is not there.

I read my son a short bedtime story, thinking about all the things that have been happening in my life.

This investigation into my father's activities is really taking a toll on me. I want to do more to help, but every move I make triggers more suspicion against me. His goons were back this morning when I went to the shops, and they were a lot more aggressive with how they followed me around. I was so overwhelmed with fear when I got home that I burst into tears, hiding in the bathroom where Damion couldn't see me.

I thought those men were going to take my son away this afternoon. I thought that somehow my father had found out what I had been doing, that I had been spending time with Dante Russo - and I thought they were there to take my son.

I am so stressed out, but I am doing my best to keep it together and focus on the fact that I am not alone in this. I have Dante.

It's just becoming more and more difficult to keep my emotions together.

I am happy, again, that Dante knows the last truth I was holding onto. I have no more secrets from him now and all I can do is put my trust in him to not hurt me with what he knows.

I close the book, seeing Damion's eyes are closed and his breathing is soft and even. He is fast asleep. And now it is time for me to talk to Dante.

I close Damion's door and walk through to the living room.

Dante is waiting for me, looking up at me when I walk in.

He smiles, and it makes my heart flutter.

I sit down on the sofa next to him and he slips his arm around my waist, pulling me close, lifting my legs over his lap.

"I understand why you couldn't tell me - why you wanted to keep him safe - but I am so happy I know." He says, smiling at me.

"I have wanted to tell you for a long time. It just never felt right. I am so scared about what my father will do if he finds out."

"If all goes well, then you will not have to worry about your father; soon, we will take him down with evidence collected from an inside man. The meeting I had last night - it went very well."

"You have an inside man? Someone who works with my father who will turn against him?"

"Yes, it is someone who has worked with your father for a while - but was never on his side. Someone who has been plotting against him for a while and just needed help to take him down."

I lean my head against his shoulder. "Do you think this is all going to work out in the end?"

"It has to, little fox. It has to work out for the sake of our son - and his future." He places his finger beneath my chin and lifts my face up towards his.

His kiss is so tender it melts my heart.

I climb onto his lap, and he runs his hands over my thighs, pushing my lace dress up as his kiss becomes more intense.

Dante and I make love on the sofa, and then again in the bed before we fall asleep in each other's arms. I love not having to sneak away to be home by midnight anymore. I love the fact that he is happy to be here with me and Damion. I love the fact that he still wants to hold me and take care of us both, even after all the secrets I thought I had to keep from him.

In the morning, I sense him next to me before I open my eyes. A smile touches my lips as I snuggle closer.

He smells amazing. He feels amazing. And I am daring to picture a real future with him.

I know I am falling for him but it doesn't terrify me as much as it used to. The only thing that scares me now is my father and the fact that he can still take my son away. Our son.

I lie against him for a while before I have to get up, hearing Damion padding around in the hallway means he is up to something, and I want to avert disaster. I climb out of bed quietly, leaving Dante to sleep longer.

Damion hears me coming out of my room and runs to say good morning. He gives the best little hugs.

I pick him up and I am carrying him towards the kitchen when a knock on the door freezes me to my core.

It can only be one person. The anger, the aggression behind that knock is terrifying.

I turn and run into my bedroom. Dante is awake and his eyes darken when he sees the fear in mine.

"I think it's my father. Please, keep him here with you. Do not come out of this room no matter what you hear."

"Frankie—"

"Please, Dante," I whisper.

He nods, taking Damion into his arms.

I run out of the room, closing the door behind me, I go to answer the front door.

My father and his two goons are standing there.

His cold eyes stab into me like daggers.

He pushes me aside and strides into my apartment.

"What do you want?" I say, standing my ground in the living room.

"Did you honestly think they wouldn't see you two together? In the park? At the casino? Did you really believe you could hide it from me?" My father shouts, his voice booming inside the small apartment.

"Be more specific," I say coldly.

"Dante Russo. You are dating or involved with Dante Russo. Are you trying to insult

my intelligence?"

"Who I date is none of your business." I push against his darkening attitude.

He steps closer to me, glaring down at me, trying to make me feel small.

I do.

My legs are shaking, and my pulse is racing. The sweat is building in the palms of my hands and now my breath is catching. But I push my shoulders back and do my best to keep all of that hidden.

"I will tell you what is my business -- that you are my daughter - and no matter what you seem to think - you will do as I say or suffer the consequences of it. You are my business." He hisses in my face.

I clench my jaw and glare at him. He shakes his head. "You, stupid girl - do I need to spell it out? I will take my grandson. He will come to live with me. At this point, I don't care if you come with me or not. You are a whore going around dating a man like Dante Russo. But I will not let you expose my grandson to that. End the relationship - or I will make you regret every bit of this freedom you wanted."

He locks eyes with me and the coldness in them chills me to my bones.

I don't dare say a word.

My father turns away and marches out of my apartment.

He slams the door shut behind him and I lunge forward to lock it as though that would make any difference.

I lean with my forehead resting against the back of the door while streams of tears flood down my cheeks.

I look at my hands, shaking while I fight for control over my emotions.

Dante's arms wrap around my stomach, pulling me back against his chest. I turn towards him and bury my face against him, letting his shirt soak up my tears.

He talks soothing me and promising me he will make sure that man never gets our son.

"I will keep you both safe, Frankie. I won't let him touch Damion. I won't let him near him."

DANTE

Holding Frankie in my arms while she cries her heart out is more painful than I could have imagined. Her father treats her like she is nothing. He speaks to her like she is worthless and the fact that he is happy to threaten to take a child from his mother is so cold, calculated, and cruel.

Damion tugs at my pants and I look down at him. His gorgeous bright blue eyes fill me with fear and anger.

Fear of the threats against him from a powerful man. And anger that I don't know yet how to save them both from this horrible situation.

"Mommy?" Damion says, looking as though he might also cry.

Frankie leans back and I bend down to pick up my son, still holding Frankie in my arms as well.

They both belong to me.

Frankie has my heart. I can't deny it anymore. I am in love with her.

I will do anything to keep her and my son safe. I will do anything to keep that man away from them both.

"Mommy, are you sad?" Damion asks, lifting his head off my shoulder and brushing his hand over his mother's cheek.

"Mommy is ok. She just had a fight with someone. But it's all ok now."

"He is gone. We're not allowed to fight - it's no nice."

"He's gone, baby. He won't come back." She replies, but then she looks at me as though she is wishing it were true and wishing that she wasn't lying to our son.

"No, we don't fight. It's ugly and we want to be nice."

"It's going to be ok, Frankie," I whisper against her hair. "I'll do whatever it takes to make it ok," I promise.

I am a father. I have a son. And I have a woman that I have fallen in love with twice. Because I know I fell in love with her the first night we met at the gala. It was something I had to put aside, thinking I would never see her again - but now she is here.

I know I love her.

I cannot lose her.

When Frankie is calmer, I take her hand and lead her to the kitchen. "Let's make breakfast for Damion and I'll make some coffee for us."

She nods, grateful to have something to do - to distract her thoughts from the way her father bombarded his way into her safe little haven.

It makes me realize how much access that man has to her. There is really nothing stopping him -- knowing he can get to her, and she can't stop him.

She had a reason to be so fearful all this time.

"Frankie - I want you and Damion to come and stay with me at the penthouse."

She shakes her head. "I would love that, Dante, but imagine how my father would react if he found out. It would be like throwing nitroglycerine on the fire and hoping it doesn't go bang. He would become savage with rage."

"But staying here is a risk. He just walks into your apartment without even blinking an eye. It's too easy for him."

"I'll find somewhere else to stay. It doesn't have to be here. I can go to a hotel or something where they at least have some kind of security. But I can't risk staying with you. It would put you in danger too."

I sigh. Doesn't she understand? I don't care about the danger for myself. I only want to keep them safe.

"I am going to book you in at the Madison Grande. I have people there and I can have guards discreetly set up around the hotel -- just to keep an eye out if anything happens."

She nods. "Ok. That will work. As long as my father doesn't think you are the one arranging the room or that you have people there."

"I'll make sure it is booked under another name. It's not my casino, a close associate owns it."

After breakfast, I am reluctant to leave. I want to take them with me. I don't want them out of my sight. But I need to go because Arman is waiting. He has news and I am hoping like all hell that he has something solid to show me.

Kissing Frankie goodbye breaks me after what happened this morning, but she smiles

and puts on a brave face, so I have to do the same.

At the Russo River Casino Lorenzo is waiting for me in the foyer. He walks fast to fall into step with me as we hurry to my office.

"Did anyone follow him here?" I ask, remembering my promise to keep Arman safe.

"No, my men escorted him from just outside the territory line. He is alone. He has concrete evidence."

"Fuck, you do not know how happy I am to hear that," I say with a massive sigh of relief.

Lorenzo and I walk into my office and Arman stands up, looking pale, but standing tall.

"Sir, Mr. Russo - I got what we needed."

He steps forward, handing me a brown envelope that is scrunched as though he has been gripping it, holding onto it as though his life depended on it.

I sit down at the desk opposite Arman and open the envelope, pulling out the sheets of paper inside it.

Lists and lists of names.

There is a manifest of every shipment of girls that has gone out in the last five years, including the person they were sent to. I want to puke. There are hundreds of names on here -- hundreds of people who were taken from their families.

"Is that enough, sir?" Arman asks when I say nothing. My throat is tight with horror. I

want to flick through the pages to the day my sister went missing. But I can't bring myself to do it.

I stare at Arman. "This is exactly what we needed."

"I took photos as well. They are all on this phone -- of the office, where I took the papers from, and of the inside of his house and two of his warehouses. I got a very blurry photo of some girls, but I don't know if they were being taken or not."

I take the phone from him.

"You've done an incredible job, Arman."

He shifts from foot to foot. "I can't go back there. Will you keep your promise, Mr. Russo?"

"I will. In fact, Lorenzo is going to drive you straight to the airport right now. My private jet is waiting to take you home to Peru -- if that is where you want to go. Because you have been here and working under a fake identity, Antonio Musetti will never know who you are if you switch back to your own name."

"You will take me home?" His voice breaks and he looks as though he wants to cry. "I would love nothing more than to go home and be with my family."

I nod towards Lorenzo. "Take the briefcase. It is for Arman and his family. Get this man home. He deserves it."

Lorenzo picks up the briefcase of cash I had prepared for Arman. His family will not have to worry about money again.

They have lost their daughter and their son gave up years of his life to find the truth -

now they deserve a little peace.

Lorenzo leaves with Arman and I stare at the list in my hands.

I am alone now. Yet I still find it so hard to just turn the pages towards the date Dani went missing.

I shut my eyes and cuss under my breath.

Then I flip. Page by page, searching for the right month.

Starting the day she was taken I ran my finger down the list of names. I get more nauseous with each passing moment until I stop - my finger frozen in place. My heart is dead in my chest.

Daniela Russo. Bernard Lux.

My sister was sold to a man named Bernard Lux, in New York.

She was shipped out only three days after she was taken.

I can't stop staring at her name or his.

An intense hatred is building towards this man I don't even know.

It is blinding me with rage. Anger so deep it is threatening to tear me apart from the inside.

I slide the papers back into the envelope, fearing I might tear them to pieces. I can't destroy the only evidence I have against Antonio Musetti.

This and the photos.

It is enough to take him down.

This will stir a great amount of shit in his life; there will be eyes all over him.

I put the envelope into my safe and slammed it shut, double-checking it's locked and resetting the code.

I can't stop myself. Even though I need to be focused on the problem right in front of me, I can't stop myself. I pull open my laptop and type in that man's name.

Bernard Lux.

The search reveals several things about him. He lives in New York. That much I was aware of. He runs oil businesses across the globe, owning several ships that drill in the ocean. He has money - old money - and a lot of it. Political connections, and high-society friends. There are pictures of him with someone who looks like his twin, only younger than him. Nathan Lux. It doesn't state their relationship, maybe his son.

I research his companies, and the very praise filled media articles about him - no doubt fluffed by an expensive PR team. Hatred builds.

"I am coming for you, Bernard Lux. I am coming to tear your life apart." I want my sister back.

Lorenzo walks into my office and I jump, only now realizing how long I have been researching this man.

"Can we use what he found? Is it what we need?" He asks.

"It's more than we hoped for," I say, finding it too difficult to talk about the fact that my sister's name was on that list. At least now I know - I know more about where she was sent - that Antonio took her. I have the evidence I have been searching for.

"What do you want to do with it? How do you want to handle this?"

"Is Frankie safe at the new hotel? Did you set up the guards around her room and in the lobby?" I need to be sure he can't get to them.

"Yes, and the two rooms adjacent to hers are reserved as well and we have security guys 'on vacation' there."

"Then I think we need to move fast -- the sooner the better. I want to confront Antonio Musetti tomorrow." What I really want to do is kill him. "Tonight, I will decide the best way to handle this -- our way, or if I should unleash the law on him just for fun, but we are going ahead."

"I agree. The sooner the better."

Even though it is late I don't go home. I don't want to be alone tonight. I need to be with Frankie, to feel her touch. I need a distraction and to be close to her.

When I get to her hotel, I recognize my men in the foyer. They do not let on that they work for me; there is no acknowledgment, but I know they are there.

I take the elevator to the top floor that was booked out for Frankie and Damion.

She jumps when I open the door with the spare keycard I arranged.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I wanted to have a key just in case you needed me."

She wraps her arms around my waist.

"Is everything ok?" I ask, stroking my hand down her back.

"My father has been messaging me non-stop. He knows we are not at the apartment, and he is furious, demanding to know where we are - and that we are to come home." She has poked the bear, but she's not going home — not to his home. When she goes home, it will be with me.

I pull her away from me so that I can look into her eyes. "Frankie, we have the evidence we need to take him down. The guy I told you about - he got what we needed then I got him out; he's somewhere safe."

"Have you done anything to my father yet? What are you going to do? Does he know?" She asks.

"Not yet, but I plan to handle it tomorrow. I just needed a little time to process the information he gave me - and decide the best way to use it."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm

FRANKIE

When Dante arrived at the hotel, I felt such intense relief I wanted to cry. I want to curl up in his arms and have him hold me forever.

I don't know what to do. My father's messages are so dark that every moment that goes by I'm more fearful for my life and the life of my baby boy.

Dante follows me through to the open living room with views that overlook the city of Las Vegas. The hotel room is beautiful, but I am not in the right frame of mind to enjoy it.

"Read what he sent me," I say, holding my phone out towards Dante.

He takes it from me and reads out loud the message that my father wrote to me a few hours ago.

Antonio: If you do not return home by eight this evening, I will send my men out into the city to hunt you down - and when they find you, they will show no mercy to you for stealing my grandson and disobeying your father.

Antonio: If you do not come back to the mansion tonight, I will rip that bastard child from your arms, and you will never see him again. In fact - you might never see the light of day again.

"Stop," I say when he reads the next message. "I can't take it anymore. I just wanted you to understand how he is escalating."

Dante nods, his jaw clenched in anger.

"I will fucking make sure that man suffers. Death is too kind of an ending for him. He needs to rot miserably and with regret." It shouldn't be easy; his pain should be drawn out like Dani's. "I have a detective who will want to hear this story - and who will be happy to take down one of the biggest criminals in Las Vegas." They have been trying to crack down on organized crime for years and drove us all out of New York, but here in Sin City, there are a lot of dirty cops. Here the mafia runs things, not the law.

I chew at my bottom lip nervously.

"It will take time if we involve the authorities." It's a fact. "What are we going to do about the immediate threat to our son?" I ask with desperation in my voice. "What can we do to make him leave us alone right now? The cops will need time, and he'll have a plan. At least one of the judges he pays—if not more—is working against us. And he can definitely afford bail.

"Tomorrow you are going to message him and arrange to meet him in public. We are both going to be there with copies of the evidence against him." I have enough copies hidden all over the city, with my allies, and lawyers. He can't destroy them all; his secret is out there now. "We will confront him together and warn him that if he doesn't back off, he is going to end up rotting in a jail cell. They love men like him in there, the ones who hurt young girls."

Dante's voice carries a deadly threat in it. He has reached his limit. We are both done with my father and Dante has no mercy for his enemies.

"Where is Damion?" He asks, taking a breath and rolling his shoulders to ease the tension out of them.

"I put him to bed. It's been a long day. I thought we could just enjoy some alone time?"

He grins, nodding. "I would love that. Shall I run a bubble bath?"

"That sounds perfect."

Every night I spend with Dante is more intimate and special than the last. I can't believe how close we have become and all I can think about is how I want nothing more than to spend my life with him. But my father is making it almost impossible. I cannot do anything about him threatening my son.

In the morning, even though our night was amazing together, I woke up anxious. We are going to confront my father; I must face my personal demons and the fucking sins of my father head-on.

He is not a man who takes threats lightly even though he has no problem dishing them out to other people; he will be furious to be cornered. There's no way to know what he will do; he can be so volatile. If his control is taken away, he might turn into a feral animal and attack anything that moves.

I hope Dante knows what he is doing.

We are making the right choice. If the evidence is as condemning as Dante says it is, then my father will have to back down and leave us alone.

I am pacing up and down in the kitchen, unable to sleep even though everyone else is still resting, and the sun is only just touching the sky with light. Dante's voice makes me jump and I spin around to face him with my heart racing.

"It's just me. I woke up, and you weren't there." He says, pulling me into a hug.

"I am nervous about today."

"It's going to be ok, Frankie. Today, or tomorrow, or the next day. I don't care how long it takes, I will not stop until our son, and you, are safe."

His words reassure me.

Just having him here with me is like a safety net for my emotions.

"Lorenzo is bringing over a copy of the evidence." I'm not sure I want to see it.

"You can message your father and tell him you want to talk with him - somewhere out in the open, but not too public." It needs to be outside; I do not want to be trapped in a room with him. I will panic. "We don't want bystanders hurt if anything goes wrong," Dante says, setting off my anxiety again.

"I'll text him now," I say. My hand already shaking, I pick up my phone and start typing out a message to my father while Dante makes us coffee. I am careful with my words, thinking it through over and over again until I have the perfect message. I don't want to anger him or upset him before this even starts.

At eleven o'clock in a quiet parking lot at the start of a hiking trail, Dante and I are waiting. I am nervous leaning against the car. "Do you think we picked the wrong place?" I ask for the tenth time.

"This is perfect, Frankie. Take a breath; look at me - it's going to be ok."

In the distance, I can see dirt stirring up into the air as cars approach. I suddenly want to puke. Of course, he wouldn't come all alone, he needs an entourage of goons to make him appear important.

Dante steps forward to wait. He is standing tall, so bold and confident. The doors of the car parked right next to us open and our security crew gets out. He has already introduced me to Lorenzo, who stands just behind Dante, calm and casual as though he is getting ready to order some coffee or a movie ticket. How are they both so calm?

I try to take inspiration from them.

The most important thing is that Damion is safe, back at the hotel with Clarissa and an army of bodyguards. And we are here to get my father to back off. This is good. This is going to work.

I nod to myself just as my father's car pulls into the parking area, coming to a stop on the opposite side.

He climbs out with several men, including the two goons who are usually following me.

"What the fuck is this?" He snarls when he sees Dante.

"I thought you and I should have a face-to-face," Dante says stepping forward.

"I told you to stay away from this man, Francesca. Why are you testing my patience like this?"

I swallowed hard and decided to find my voice. "We have something you will want to see, and I think you should pay close attention because this is important."

My father chuckles, a dark, and sinister sound. "Oh, is that so? You want to show me something. Well, let's not fuck around - what is it?"

He walks closer to us, not bothered at all by the fact that Dante's men have drawn their weapons.

I don't know if it's good or bad. I assume it's good.

I walk over to stand beside Dante as my father gets close to him.

My father lifts his lip in a snarl and grunts at Dante.

Dante holds out the envelope, but before he lets it go and allows my father to look, he says. "This is not all of it, but it is enough to help you understand you are not in a position to negotiate." He yanks at the envelope. "You are going back off. Leave Frankie and Damion alone; you will never contact them again. You are going to disappear, become a ghost."

My father's laughter is so loud it makes me jump.

He snatches the envelope from Dante and tears it open, pulling the documents out.

I can tell straight away that he recognizes what they are.

"These are copies. Hm," he says, looking bitter, his confidence knocked down just a notch. "How the fuck did you get your hands on these?"

"It doesn't matter how. What matters is that we have them." Dante says, "We - there are copies all over the city already. Now, are you going to back off and leave, or do we need to show this evidence to the feds?"

My father steps forward and in a flash -- holding his guns against Dante's forehead.

I scream, and Lorenzo and the other security guards move. I don't know how he

moved that fast; he must have been holding his gun the entire time.

Dante is still calm. He has his hands held out at his side while my father screams right into his face.

"Who the fuck do you think you are? Threatening me; you are a fucking worm. You are nobody. You piece of shit. I will not tolerate this." His voice carries in the air. "You have just signed your own fucking death certificate. I will take my grandson. And when I have him, I'll kill the two of you myself." He's not afraid at all, he thinks this is nothing.

Dante waits until my father is done screaming, then he moves just as fast as my father did and spins. Knocking my father's grip loose, grabbing him around the throat, and slamming him to the ground.

My father drops his gun, and his men rush forward with their weapons aimed at Dante.

But Dante has the upper hand with his Glock inside my father's mouth.

"I'm done playing nice, Antonio. I asked nicely. If you don't want to oblige, we can move on to the other option -- the not-nice one."

My father's eyes are wide and brimming with anger. He is fuming. His fists are clenched.

Dante is pressing the barrel of the gun so hard into his mouth that he's gagging on it.

I can barely breathe. This is too much. I want to scream and cry and run. But I am glued to the spot, and I can't tear my eyes away from them.

"Tell your men to back off," Dante says.

At first, my father just glares at him. But then, realizing he has no choice he waves his hand signaling for them to back down. They all lower their weapons and step back.

"Leave the guns on the ground," Dante says, and reluctantly they all drop their weapons and walk to their cars. "Drive away -- do not come back." He orders and my dad's loyal puppy-dogs listen.

We wait until his men are out of sight, and then Dante gets up, yanking my father to his feet by the collar of his shirt.

"Think about your options, old man," Dante says before releasing him.

My father turns to look at me.

He stares right into my soul, his gaze burning like fire in my skull. I refuse to look away, keeping my eyes steady and my face calm. I can't show fear at this point. I must hold on. Stay strong.

"You are going to regret this." He says. "Your boyfriend's empire will crumble; you will lose your son, and I will destroy you both." He says. "I will always win Francesca. This is not over."

He climbs into his car, slamming the door so hard it rocks in protest. The engine starts, and he spins out of the parking area.

Dante's men stand ready with their guns aimed at the car until it is gone, only the dust left stirring in the air as they drive away from us.

Dante walks to me and pulls me into a hug. "That didn't go as well as I had hoped." he sighs.

"I don't think he cares about the evidence," I reply.

"Your father thinks he is untouchable. His ego is so big that he thinks the evidence won't harm him. But if he makes another move against you or Damion, he is going to find out that he's mistaken."

Tears of relief sting my eyes. I've never been in a situation like that before. I've never stood up to my father, not completely. He's always had some control and leverage to scare me into complying.

I'm realizing that I don't just dislike him - I hate him. I hate him for who he is and what he has put me through. I hate him for all the nasty things he has said and the cruel things he has done to me. I hate that he is threatening my child - my beautiful baby boy.

I hate him and I want him to learn that he can't get away with his crimes forever.

"I don't want to wait," I say, looking up at Dante.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want to wait for him to make a move." He will go after Damion. I know him. "I want you to take him down. I'm done. He had his chance, and he didn't take it. Let's move before he does damage control or hurts anyone else."

My father has proven himself to be a cruel and heartless monster. This situation is too dangerous, and I want to end it now -- before it's too late -- before I lose someone I love.

DANTE

Antonio and his men have driven away from the meeting place, and I stand, overwhelmed with rage, holding Frankie in my arms.

I am not a man who likes to react with rage. I prefer to hold it back and keep my emotions in check - but with Antonio, it is the hardest fucking thing to do. That man is a fucking asshole. I am so angry. I wanted to rip him to pieces. His ego is too big for his brain. He does not know who he is threatening when he threatens me. He has crossed the line now though.

I kept my cool - on the outside - but on the inside, I was burning anger. He has threatened my son - and the woman I love. He doesn't seem to care at all for his daughter, and I can see the pain in her eyes when I look at her.

When Frankie tells me she doesn't want to wait - that she wants to take him down now - I am so relieved, because now I don't have to convince her that there is no reasoning with her father. She knows.

She sees the logic in it. We need to strike first before he does something worse.

For the sake of my son, for the sake of Frankie, and for the sake of getting justice for my sister, Antonio Musetti must pay for what he has done.

I lead Frankie back to my car with my arm wrapped around her waist.

Holding the door open for her, she climbs inside, and I close it behind her. The

situation is tense even though Antonio has left.

Lorenzo and his team wait until we are in the car before they climb into theirs to follow us back to the hotel. We aren't taking any chances. We will stay on high alert from now on - until we have sorted out this problem once and for all.

I will stay with Frankie now, at the hotel. I don't care if it angers Antonio if he finds out; his tantrums are no longer my concern. My only concern right now is keeping them safe.

Driving back to the hotel my eyes are on the constant lookout for Antonio. I expect him to be waiting around every corner, ready to strike. I expect him to come scream from a side road and ram into our car. I am gripping the steering wheel and not speaking. I have to focus. I need to get us back to safety.

It is a comfort to know that Lorenzo has my back right now.

I am grateful for everything he does for me - for my little family.

Once I am underground in the parking area, Lorenzo comes to my window and I tell him he can go. There is enough security here at the hotel with the men we have inside.

Safely back in our room at the hotel, Frankie holds Damion in her arms, and I can see that having him with her calms her down.

I know how she feels - being separated from him is risky.

In the same way, I want to stay near both of them.

I need to speak to Frankie about so many things - it's hard to piece it all together in

my mind.

I want to tell her what I found out about my sister. She deserves to know that because it is something that is always on my mind.

And I want to tell her how I feel about her.

"Frankie?" I say, drawing her attention.

She looks up from the sofa where she is sitting with our son.

"Mm?" She says her eyes still filled with fear and worry after what happened this morning.

I walk over to the sofa and sit down on the coffee table in front of her.

"I have to tell you about something I saw in the evidence."

I take a deep breath, and she waits for me to continue.

"In the list of girls that Antonio sold - I found my sister's name - and the name of the man who bought her."

Just saying it out loud makes me ill. The knot in my stomach pulls and twists and my mind screams.

Frankie reaches out and touches my face. Her eyes are soft and gentle but glittering with tears. "I'm so sorry, Dante. I'm so sorry."

"I just wanted you to know - because I want - I don't know what I want. I need to know who the man is. He lives in New York. I need to see him. But my key priority

is keeping you two safe, right now. Ok."

She shakes her head. "Dante, you are already keeping us safe. Your sister's disappearance is something that has haunted you for years. Do whatever you need to do to find out what happened to her."

Relief at her understanding eases the knot in my stomach. I close my eyes and lean my face into her touch.

Taking a deep breath, I lean forward and kiss her tenderly.

"Remember what you keep telling me - it is going to be ok." She says, smiling.

Standing up I grab my phone to call Lorenzo. I need him to send a team to New York. While I am sorting out the shit storm here in Las Vegas - the team can investigate what happened in New York.

I want the man who thought he could buy my sister to understand the consequences of his actions.

The phone rings as I press it against my ear, waiting for him to answer.

"Lorenzo, when can you get to the hotel? We need to talk."

"I'm just down the road. I can come through now if it's convenient."

"Good. I'm here. Come straight up."

Lorenzo arrives and we sit at the dining room table.

"There are two matters to discuss. First, this—" I push the evidence towards Lorenzo

with my finger pointed at my sister's name. Lorenzo knew Daniela well. He worked with me for so many years that she became as much family to him as she was to me.

He stares at her name on the manifest and his eyes grow dark and serious. I wait. Because I know how he feels seeing that. Words don't come. His body is raging even though he is sitting dead still, his eyes locked onto her name.

After a long while he looks up at me.

"What do you need?" He growls, deadly quiet.

"I need you to take a team to New York to have a brief visit with this Bernard Lux. If my sister is still alive - bring her home. If not - make him pay."

"When do you want me to go? With everything happening here, don't you need me here?"

"No. I can handle Antonio. And I don't trust anyone else with what I am asking for here." I tap my finger on the documents sitting on the table.

Lorenzo nods. "I'll do whatever it takes."

"You can leave tonight, but before you go - I want you to help me strategize a plan of attack against Antonio."

"I'll just message the team now and tell them we are going to New York. I'll take four men and the private jet. We will have plenty of time on the flight to plan what we need to do. Once I've sent this message, I am all yours for the afternoon." Lorenzo stands up to handle the New York team and takes a deep breath. Things are happening. Everything is going according to plan. It's all going to work out as it should.

All afternoon Lorenzo and I discuss our plan. We put together something so solid and well thought out that I'm confident that taking down Antonio Musetti is going to be a smooth process -- with the help of the detective who owes me, of course.

We rally our allies, telling them our plan, bringing them together for a massive attack against a man that none of them like. They are eager to move the scum he is from our city.

We might be dangerous people; we might do dangerous things - but none of us approve of or will tolerate human trafficking.

I don't want to kill him.

I want him to sit in a jail cell for decades, bored out of his mind, eating shit food, thinking about the life he used to live and the freedom he used to have. I want him to suffer - day by day - wasting away in becoming a shell of who he used to be -- a shell of a man who used to have power. It will break his ego down, and bring him back to the earth and dirt from where he came.

He doesn't deserve death. He doesn't deserve that peace.

It is late in the evening. Lorenzo left a while ago to catch his flight.

Sitting down on the sofa with Frankie in my arms and Damion fast asleep in hers – it feels like the calm before a storm. Brushing my hand across Frankie's cheek, tucking a stray curl behind her ear, I smile. It is all worth it.

Everything that I had to go through to have her back in my life - it is worth it.

I will fight for her.

And for my beautiful little boy.

We sit together on the couch watching a movie. I don't even care what's on. I just know I feel like this is what home should be. When I see Frankie has fallen asleep as well, I lift both her and Damion in my arms and carry them each to bed.

Damion snuggles into his blankets, not even flickering awake for a second.

Frankie mumbles something and when I climb under the blankets to lie next to her, she stirs awake and pulls herself right up against me.

"I am in love with you, Dante." She mumbles.

My heart races at her words.

"Frankie?" I whisper, trying to figure out if she is awake or not - but she is breathing deeply and doesn't realize she said anything at all.

I smile a massive, radiant smile that spreads across my entire face.

Closing my eyes I drift off to sleep - because she loves me - and I love her.

In the morning, I wake up to a message from Lorenzo. The team has arrived in New York, and he has already begun the investigation.

They have found Bernard Lux's mansion and plan to pay him a visit tonight.

People say that he hosts luxurious parties for his clients, where the house is always filled with new girls dressed in lingerie and men can do as they please.

People have warned Lorenzo to stay clear of him because he has very key members

of the legal system in his pocket and a few high-ranking politicians. Of course, we are ignoring the warnings because I don't give a shit who he knows. And if the law won't take him down - there are other ways to get justice.

I have a quiet breakfast with Frankie and Damion, but my mind is in so many places I can't even find the strength to have a conversation. I have plans and routes and everything that could go wrong spinning inside my head, like a blender of chaos.

Frankie is just as distracted as I am. She is as quiet as me, despite that, she reaches out to rest her hand on my leg and leans over now and then to rest her head on my shoulder.

We are here for each other, even when we have no words to share. The bond is unbreakable.

She has my entire heart.

FRANKIE

Dante has told me the detailed plan he has devised to take my father down. I asked him to repeat it three times to make sure that I understood everything. It's a good, solid, sound plan. But even knowing that he has thought it out from every angle, I am terrified of what the outcome will be.

I know my father better than anyone. I know what he is capable of, and what I stand to lose if this doesn't work out in our favor.

I can't think about losing; my heart wouldn't take it.

It has been two days since we met with my father, and for the interim, Dante thought it would be safer if we all stayed inside the hotel, out of the watchful eye of my father's men and not taking any risks. I agree, but I find all I am doing most of the day is holding Damion.

I have this intense fear that my father is going to storm through the door and rip my son away from me - the mere thought of it has my body flooded with anxiety. And for that reason, I can't seem to put him down.

Damion gets agitated with me sometimes and wiggles free to play - but then I sit next to him, always close, always protective.

Dante has been a source of comfort – I can't imagine going through this without him. His strength is giving me strength. He has a calmness about him. I can see he is always thinking, and planning, but he never panics the way I would.

It reassures me that even in this horrific situation, I trust him completely. I'm convinced he can make all this right for us.

Through all of this fear and constant worry, there is another truth that I can't ignore. I am in love with him, but it seems unfair to tell him that now - when he has so many other things on his mind.

What if he doesn't want the same things I want? What if he isn't interested in building a future with me and our son?

My heart is aching with love for him, but I cannot express it in words.

I sigh, pushing my food around my plate. I've hardly touched it. I struggle to eat when I am stressed.

Damion is sitting on the floor next to my chair, playing with his toy cars. I am so glad he doesn't understand anything that is happening. He is blissfully unaware of the danger we are in, and I prefer it that way. He is still only a baby and all he needs to know is that I will do anything to keep him safe. He's young enough that he won't remember this.

"Hey, little fox. Don't be so worried." Dante says, smiling at me across the table where we are having dinner. He reaches out to touch my hand. "All you've done is move that food around. I haven't seen you take one bite of it."

"I can't help it. You are going to face my father tomorrow, and I'm worried. In fact, worried doesn't even describe how terrified I am." I sigh, fighting tears.

"My angel, my little fox, my beautiful girl—" He stands up and walks around the table to wrap his arms around me. As I lean against his chest, I feel a sense of warmth and safety. "The sooner we face your father - the sooner it will all be over, and you

and I can have a life together."

I stare at him with shock. "A life together? You want to have a life with me?" I stammer in disbelief. I have been dreaming about being with him, about making our little family official, but I didn't think he wanted the same thing -- the responsibilities of being a father and being tied down to one woman.

"Frankie, you are the most beautiful girl I have ever met. Your heart, soul, and spirit are everything I could ever want. Of course, I want to have a life with you. I just want to first make everything safe. After tomorrow, we will be free to do whatever we want."

I sigh, a sigh of release - letting go of some of my worries. Dante wraps his arms around me and nuzzles his face into my neck.

"Come on, try to eat at least a little something while I put Damion to bed; then I'll run you a hot bath."

I smile. He is always looking after me, always doing what he can to care for me.

I sit down at the table and force myself to pick at my food while he scoops Damion into his arms and carries him off to bed.

"I'll come to kiss you goodnight once you're tucked in, baby boy," I called after him.

Damion giggles with laughter as Dante spins him upside down.

I sit at the table, eating and listening to Dante and Damion's playful chatter. Dante reads him a bedtime story and I listen too - letting his deep voice soothe me as well.

When Dante comes out of the room, telling me Damion is fast asleep, my heart

explodes with love for this man.

How is it he is everything I could ever have dreamed of?

"The bath is ready," Dante says, holding out his hand.

I place mine in his and let him lead me to the luxurious bathroom, with views that overlook the city and all the lights sparking far below us.

Dante turns me to face him and he undresses me, removing my clothing one piece at a time, taking a moment to savor my warm, naked skin each time an item drops to the floor.

When I step out of my panties and I am standing naked in front of him, he lifts me in his arms and puts me into the hot bubble bath.

I look up at him with bubbles floating around me as he undresses himself.

I grin as he pulls his shirt off and the muscles across his stomach ripple.

He tugs his pants open and pulls them down. My eyes drift to his cock, already hard, the veins traced over it like a map.

He steps into the bath and pulls me towards him. I wrap my legs around his waist as water splashes around us and over the edge, onto the tiled floor. Neither of us cares.

His hand drifts up my back, knotting in my hair as he pulls my face towards his, locking his lips over mine. His tongue slides into my mouth and I can taste him.

His kiss is intense. Filled with unspoken words and fear and love and lust.

I gasp when he releases me from the kiss, struggling to breathe for the need that is building inside me.

He grabs my ass and pulls me right up against him - his cock pressing into me.

I wrap my hands over his shoulders and lift myself up, then lower myself onto him, letting his cock slide into my pussy, inch by inch, filling me up and making my heart race.

My entire body overflows with passion as I rock back and forth on his lap. He growls, a deep muffled sound that rumbles through me and makes me want him even more.

His cock moves inside me, sending ripples of pleasure through me that are driving me crazy. I want to slow down and speed up at the same time. I want to chase my orgasm but also make this moment last forever.

His hands wrap around my thighs, pulling my legs farther apart as he thrusts upwards into me. His cock pushes so deep inside my pussy that I feel as though I might tear apart. The pleasure is indescribable.

He moves slowly, taunting me, teasing me until I am begging him to let me come.

Then he lifts me off him and turns me over, leaning my stomach against the edge of the bath with my ass pointed up towards him as he slides his cock into me from behind. I cry out from the pleasure, and he locks his hand over my mouth. "Be quiet, little fox."

I nod against his hand, and he releases me, letting his hand trail down my spine as he rests on my lower back fucking me hard and fast.

I clench my jaw to stop the loud moans that want to dance off my lips.

My hands are gripping the edge of the bath and every time he thrusts into me water splashes over my body.

His cock is slamming into me, filling me up right to the base, then pulling out and leaving me begging for more.

I can feel him growing harder while my pussy throbs over him.

My body explodes in shock waves as the orgasm locks me onto him.

"Ah, baby." He groans as he slams into me one last time, exploding inside me at the same time.

We lie against each other, panting, my head at the edge of the bath.

I giggle when I see the disaster of a mess that we made on the bathroom floor.

He looks over the side of the bath.

"Nothing that a few towels won't sort out." He laughs, pulling me onto his chest as he leans back into the warm water.

Later that night Dante gets a phone call from Lorenzo.

He paces up and down at the foot of the bed and I am trying so hard to make out what is going on. His body is tense, his mouth pulled tight and his jaw muscles feathering.

But he is answering in one word. Short. Clipped. Not giving me any clues.

Finally, he says, "So, it's done then."

"Alright. Thank you. You guys better come home."

He hangs up the call and stands for a moment, pressing his fingers into his eyes. Then he turns to me.

"They raided the mansion of the man who purchased my sister."

"Oh," I say in shock as he walks over to the bed and sits down on the edge with his head resting in his hands. He takes a deep breath.

"They found the basement full of girls, all locked up in chains, in terrible condition. They have freed them all. Lorenzo and his team slaughtered every other person who was in that house. All of those people who knew about those girls being trapped down there who did nothing to help them."

"Your sister?"

"My sister was not there. And when Lorenzo questioned some girls - after everything was over - they all said the same thing. None of the girls live long. They get used and abused and left for dead - then they buy more girls to replace them."

Dante's voice is tight with pain -- an anguish I can't even imagine.

His sister went through that.

She was alone and in pain - and although he has given her the justice she deserved, it is still a bitter ending to his years of searching.

I crawl towards him on the bed and wrap my arms around his neck, holding him against me and running my fingers through his hair.

He leans his face against my breasts, and his tears soak into my shirt.

At least he is not alone now.

I will be here for him through his grief. I will do everything I can to keep his heart safe and bring him back to himself.

DANTE

Lorenzo stands in front of me in the hotel room.

He is as filled with grief as I am.

I can see in his eyes that what he saw in the basement of that house scared him in unimaginable ways.

"I made him pay." He says, not looking at me. "I made him suffer."

I swallow hard and nod. "Good." I clench my fists at my side, my heart is numb with pain.

"What happened to the girls you rescued?"

"They are somewhere safe. We will help them find their families and give them whatever support they need to overcome the horror of what they have been through."

"Thank you, Lorenzo. You have all of my resources at your disposal."

He takes a deep breath and rolls his shoulders back.

"Today we have other things that demand our attention though."

"Agreed. We can grieve when it is over."

Lorenzo pulls out a chair at the table and sits down, folding a map out over the wooden surface. He points to an entry point.

"This is how we are getting in."

Five dark SUVs pull up outside Antonio Musetti's home in the late afternoon. His security is no match for the firepower I've brought with me.

We are all climbing out, dressed in body armor when a sixth vehicle arrives, and Monroe climbs out and walks over to me.

"I appreciate you involving me in this; we have wanted to take this man down for years." His personal vendetta against Antonio is no secret.

"You have all the evidence you need - I sent you enough to put him away for life. And I am sure you will find more inside this place once we break it open." This attack is mafia on mafia; we are just going to leave the mess for the police to clean up.

"I am going to keep my men back until you have his crew under control. According to what will be in the reports - we don't arrive on the scene until after you've left."

"Good. I don't want my name in any reports," or anywhere that could link me to this. Cops and robbers shouldn't be on the same side, I would be considered a traitor.

"I made a promise. Your name will not come up, and we will turn a blind eye to your business operations."

Detective Monroe turns his back and walks back to his car. The unethical tactics needed to take Musetti down are above the law and there would be too much red tape for a man like Monroe to be allowed to blow this house open. He needs me as much

as I need him in for this plan to work. I don't need a warrant, or to hold my fire — I can storm the place guns blazing and shoot to kill. The law doesn't apply to men like me.

"Ready?" I ask Lorenzo.

He turns to signal his crew. "Ready." He confirms.

We have five teams, each with their own boss. My allies have kept their promise and shown up to support a common cause. This is what we have done for centuries, stood together, a code of honor between gentlemen.

We will win this, but we have to strike hard, and fast.

"Let's go." I nod, and we all move towards the main gate of his estate.

The guards are terrified when they see we have the numbers. They raise their weapons, and we meet force with force.

"This isn't a fight you need to have," I warn them. "Put down your weapons and you can walk away with your lives. No one will say you were cowards --being smart is brave." It's a lie. They'll be labeled as traitors and cowards.

Two of the men put down their guns. The third sets off an alarm and screams profanity at us in Italian.

One of my crew takes a single shot, and he drops to the floor, dead. He should have run, the idiot.

I set a charge on the gate lock, and with a dull thud from the explosive, it swings open.

Chaos erupts, bullets screaming — panic and absolute mayhem.

My crews flood onto the property, covering the ground, and eliminating the minimal protection Musetti has. The man believes he is untouchable just because of his name. No one is untouchable — not when they have broken the code of honor that keeps order amongst us.

Gunfire erupts from all sides; bodies drop like flies as we surround the enormous house. The bloodshed is horrific, but an unfortunate necessity if we want to bring Antonio Musetti to his knees. We can't allow even one man to be left standing -- the friend of my enemy is my enemy.

If there was another way, I might have considered a less bloody path - but Musetti had his chance to give up and leave Frankie and my son alone; he chose this. He chose violence, forcing me to choose it too.

Lorenzo yells my name, and I turn to see a man running towards me with a knife. I duck low and aim high. The bullet shatters through his skull, exploding out of the top of his head in a rain of blood and brains. Wiping my face on my sleeve, I keep going, ignoring the death and destruction surrounding me. It is not the first or last time I will be in a bloodbath like this one;; this is part of who I am.

Focused on my single goal, I need to find Musetti before he tries to make a run for it. He might think he still has a chance to get out of here, but I've got other plans for him.

Crews at the back of the house are waiting, blocking every exit, but he might have alternate escape routes we don't know about. I'm an expert on tunnels and secret hiding places — he will have a plan.

Inside the house, men move from room to room. The staff are all restrained and

moved outside; the guards are not so lucky. We can't trust they won't attack. The order is to kill them on sight, no questions asked. _Anyone who fights back dies.

We clear each room, but Antonio is nowhere to be found. He's here; we just need to keep looking.

"Are you sure he was here?" I ask frustrated it's taking this long.

"He's here. I know he's here. We will find him." Lorenzo snarls, continuing to move forward. "Flush the rat bastard out." He says to his top soldier.

The entire upstairs of the house is empty, and we are halfway through the ground floor when one of my men screams my name. "Dante - he's in the basement garage." Of course, he is hiding in the dark like a cowardly dog.

I don't hesitate. I run straight through the house, leaving my crew to continue the house check.

In the kitchen I yank open the door to the basement stairs and find Musetti standing behind two young girls, using them as a shield. They're terrified, tears streaming down their cheeks, shaking. What a weakling! He has to hide behind a woman.

"Come any closer and they die." The girls whimper.

I shake my head. "You've killed enough innocent people, Musetti. Let them go." I don't want to kill him; we have other plans. I won't hesitate to hurt the fucking bastard.

"Fuck you, Russo. I'd rather die than give up." He growls in anger.

He presses the knife to one of the girl's throats and she sobs louder.

Behind me Lorenzo arrives, his gun aimed at Musetti, but hesitant in his stance.

"What do you want to do?" He asks.

"If he hurts her - put a bullet in him."

"Don't we want him alive?"

"Yes, but not at the cost of those girl's lives. They deserve to walk out of here and go back to their families. Besides you can aim it where it'll hurt but he won't die."

Lorenzo moves around the edge of the basement, positioning himself behind Musetti. Musetti keeps his eyes locked on me as he steps toward the door, glancing at his car, as if I'd let him get out of here that easily.

"You aren't going anywhere. Just give up." I snarl.

To emphasize the point, Lorenzo puts two bullets in the back tires, leaving the car undrivable.

Musetti's anger gets the better of him, and he pushes the blade harder against the girl's skin. The man is losing control, and he's close to snapping. He shoves the second girl away from himself and she falls to her knees with a thud.

"Get her out of here," I say to the man standing next to me. He rushes forward and lifts the girl over his shoulder, carrying her to safety.

Musetti is cornered. The fear in his eyes as he searches for a way out of this reveals the feral monster beneath his calm exterior. He is an animal, trapped in a corner. He's going to bite or run.

I can sense he is about to do something stupid before he does it. His fingers tighten around the handle of the blade; he's daring us to kill him.

He will murder her to provoke us into attacking him -- he wants to die. The humiliation of being defeated would be worse than death.

So, instead of taking the risk, I drop to the floor and fire two shots at his knee.

One hits him where I want it to - shattering his kneecap. The other hits the girl in her ankle and she drops to the floor screaming in pain.

Lorenzo and I both storm forward.

Lorenzo grabs the girl, lifting her in his arms and dragging her away from Musetti.

I pin Musetti down and kick the knife away from him.

Forcing him onto his stomach I pat my hands over his body in search of any other weapons. He did not bring only a knife to my gunfight; that would have been stupid. I disarm him, putting pressure on his knee, and immobilizing him with pain.

He is screaming, swearing, threatening death - but he knows he has lost.

He's fucked.

There is nowhere for him to run and nothing else for him to use to bargain for his freedom.

"Get her to hospital - and tell Monroe he can come in. I have left a gift for him."

I keep my knee against Musetti's back while I wait. The adrenaline is wearing off and

the pain from the bullet in his knee is growing. He is squirming in agony, begging me to let him move his leg.

Instead, I lean against it, pushing his knee into the basement floor. I hear the grinding of broken bone against broken bone, and he lets loose an ear-piercing scream.

"That's for my sister," I say, wanting him to see the mistake he made.

"I took her to break you." He snarls in anger. "I took her away so that you would grieve and suffer and give up on life. I wanted you to fail at everything. I thought your empire would crumble if you lost her. I was going to pick up the pieces of your life and take over everything. But you fucking stayed standing and grew even bigger, you fucking asshole. You fucking didn't—" No, I didn't. His plan failed. It only fueled me. It made me an even larger threat. He underestimated me.

I punch the side of his face.

"Shut up." I snap, and his eyes roll back.

Monroe walks in and I move off Musetti. He clicks handcuffs onto his wrists and lifts him, dragging him up the stairs towards the waiting van - and the prison cell where he will live out his remaining years.

"His knee is fucked. You might want to get it looked at." I say.

"I reckon we will book him first. Maybe ask him a few questions, let him sit for a while - you know, while we wait for the doctor to arrive. The state doesn't pay their physicians overtime, so it'll be at least until tomorrow. I'll give him an Advil or something."

I chuckle.

"Thank you, Monroe. The house is yours. Tear it apart."

"He's never getting out, Dante." He says, "Thanks to you and the evidence you gave us. And we are already uncovering more evidence in this house. It's disgusting that he got away with it for so long, but his reign of terror has finally ended. You left a helluva mess though; fucking going to take a week to clean it up." That's a week no one can get near it and hide anything away. I'm no one's fool. His associates will be running scared, desperate to hide their involvement.

Monroe watches me for a while as we stand outside by the cars. I'm still a criminal; he is still a cop — we just exist in the gray area.

I have so many emotions, after having taken down the man responsible for my sister's death. Closure.

"What will you do now?" The detective asks me after a moment of silence.

"I am going to go home and celebrate with the woman I love. Then get back to work; the business doesn't run itself."

He smiles. "Lucky man. Women don't like cops; we don't get paid enough; the hours are shit and most of us drink too much." He jokes, then turns to walk away.

"I'll give you an increase. Maybe you can find yourself a good woman." I say.

"Are you trying to bribe an officer of the law?" He jokes.

"I would never." I wink; he is worth keeping on my books. He proved that today.

I stand and watch as Musetti is driven away from his luxurious mansion in the back of the police van. An animal in a cage, he looks feral. The powerful monster was

reduced to nothing but a squealing pig.

It's time for me to go.

His property is going to be swarming with law enforcement any minute and I don't want them to look at me too. Monroe's small crew of officers knew I was never here.

I have my closure, and now all that's left is to process it. To sit with my sadness and let it settle, so I can finally move on to better, happier things.

"Move out -- before the real cops get here," I shout to my crew.

The car doors slam, and black SUVs pull away in all directions so no one can follow them. We don't need to clean up today; the cops will tidy up the unholy mess we've made.

I go straight to the hotel because all I want to do is see Frankie and Damion.

I want to tell them they are safe and will never have to worry about Antonio Musetti again.

Frankie is waiting for me at the door when I walk into the room.

She rushes forward and slams into me.

"You're ok. I was so worried. I can't believe you are ok." She steps back and inspects me for damage.

She is crying when she looks up at me and my heart explodes with love for her. I pick her up and wrap her legs around my waist, holding her tighter than I've ever held her before.

"It's over, little fox. He's in jail. He will never get out."

Laughter bubbles from her. A manic release of all the tension she has been holding onto for years, while her father controlled and threatened her life. Damion is safe now and we can be together.

She leans back to grab my face in her hands and press her lips against mine.

"I love you." She blurts out. Then her cheeks turn red with embarrassment.

"I love you too, little fox. I love you more every moment I am with you."

FRANKIE

I t's been eight weeks since they arrested my father. His lawyers told me he'd like to see me, but I declined his invitation. I admit I was still nervous, thinking that he might be released - that he might pay someone off and buy his freedom - but the detective who came to talk to me has reassured me it isn't possible - and the media is having a field day with his story. No one will touch him for fear that'll taint them; not even money can buy him out this time.

The media has leaked his entire life of crime and all the disgusting things he has been doing behind closed doors, and they are tearing him apart. Trial by social media, his closest 'friend' putting distance between themselves and him publicly denying any alliance. His world is being torn down brick by brick, and now he's the most hated man in the city and even if he got out, which he can't, he would have to flee and never come back because someone would take him out.

He doesn't stand a chance. Even inside I believe they will get to him, to make sure he can't throw any of them under the bus.

He lost his empire, and now he is just an old man in an orange jumpsuit.

I flick the television on and see him on the news as they were leading him from the courthouse back to the cells after his sentencing. He got fifteen consecutive life sentences with no chance of parole. There will be more — they're not done with him yet.

He looks broken and destroyed. His eyes are sunken, his pain visible in his sullen

expression.

It gives me satisfaction to see him that way - the way he made so many people suffer - he deserves nothing less than to spend an eternity with only his own company. Stripped of the control he needed, now his every moment is controlled by someone else, it must be torture for him.

"They forced him to wait in absolute agony for three days before bringing in a doctor to operate on his knee. Monroe gave paracetamol for the pain. Nothing else." Dante chuckles, standing behind the sofa, watching the TV screen. "He won't be able to run away from anything ever again."

"I'm glad. After all the people he's made suffer, he deserves to be tortured," I say, not taking my eyes off the screen. I want to watch him being put into that car. I want to see the cuffs on his wrists. It is a reassurance that I need. My mind is still struggling to accept that everything is ok now. That he can't get to us. It will take time for years of trauma to heal, but we've started.

Even with my father locked away and his trial over - we are not out of danger. Dante is moving us into his penthouse later today because we have received threats from my father's allies. They are furious. All of his business connections are falling apart. Not only those involved in human trafficking - but everything else as well. They're scared, and being actively perused by the cops, they blame us.

"Dante, I was wondering about my father's casino. It is in my family name and I can claim it. The lawyers have been hounding me, I presume his associates want to protect their interests. I am his only heir and instead of leaving his allies to fight over his empire - isn't there something I can do?" I'd burn it down if I could.

Dante looks at me in surprise. "Do you want to run a casino?" That was not what I meant, at all.

"I do not know. I've never thought it was where my life would go, but with your help, we could run it together. We could create a new family. I was just thinking about it last night." The emails keep coming and I cannot ignore them forever, eventually, some man in a suit will knock on the door. "His allies are furious about losing money with his business closed and the casino being the only asset not frozen by law enforcement. I can take over anything that I'm comfortable running -- close the rest. It might help keep the peace."

"It's not a bad idea. The people he was working with on the human trafficking -- they are ghosts. We think they've fled the city." He says, and I'm not surprised. The news has had a field day with this, crucifying everyone involved and naming names. Politicians, celebrities, and socialites from all over the globe are being shamed. "Three of his allies are scared he will testify against them for a reduced sentence. They are looking for support. He wasn't even offered that option, but at least those rats are out of business. The other allies that have stayed are linked to the casino and some illegal merchandise he was shipping, along with a money laundering business. They're clean in the trafficking case, but they are not good people. Just remember that if you take this one - you are running an underworld empire. It won't be easy." He means it won't be easy for a woman.

I sit for a moment staring out of the window of the hotel.

It's not how I imagined my life going. But then again, I never thought I was going to have a child, run away, come back and find the mystery man - and after all of that fall in love.

I turn towards Dante with a smile on my face. "Actually, I think I'm up for the challenge. And I think you and I would work very well together. It would piss him off so much to know we control his precious casino."

He grins, leaning over the back of the couch, he wraps his arms around my waist, and

lifts me off the seat. Sitting on the back of the sofa with him standing between my legs, I stare at him.

My heart is overwhelmed.

So many things have happened over the last months since I came back to Las Vegas, and this is the first time that I've been free in my entire life.

Free to choose to make mistakes.

Free to go outside and not fear that my father will have me followed, kidnapped, or that he will try to take my child. There are still threats out there, but I trust Dante to manage them.

I feel like someone has lifted a massive burden off my shoulders - one that stayed with me for so long that I got used to living with it. I didn't realize how crippling it was to live beneath the darkness my father poured into my life.

I am still coming to terms with my new reality and how many things will change without him being around.

Dante runs his hands up the sides of my neck and I tilt my head so that my cheek rests against his palm. "No matter what happens I just want to be with you," I say.

"No matter what happens you and Damion will be with me. You belong to me to me, little fox. And my heart belongs to you."

I've never really belonged anywhere. There was always a burning need to escape or run away. I wasn't wanted, I was tolerated, and that has changed. I am about to cry tears of joy.

Dante laughs, a gentle warm laugh that makes me laugh too.

"Let's pack your things and get you two home to my penthouse. Once things have settled down with your father's furious allies - we can all move into the mansion, outside of town. Damion will love the garden. And I was thinking of getting him a few ducks seeing as they make him so happy." It's safer in the casino for now; the security is world-class, and I doubt anyone would be stupid enough to try to get to us there.

The rest of the day, we pack up the hotel room and the few things from my apartment that I no longer need. I don't have a lot and neither does Damion. We have been on the run for so long that we always lived with the bare minimum. I have a feeling that all of that is going to change. Soon, Damion will have a proper home and a real family.

The penthouse is bigger than my apartment and when we arrive Damion is running everywhere, touching everything and exploring every corner. I cover my eyes, then move priceless art, and glassware around — we have a childproofing issue that will have to be fixed fast.

I set my purse on the kitchen counter. "Dante, this is amazing," I say.

"Wait until you see what I did to his room." He holds out his hand towards me and I take it. He pulls me down the hall to what used to be his office.

The room has been painted pale blue on three of the four walls. One wall has a custom mural - a jungle theme - giant tropical leaves cover the wall and in between the leaves dinosaurs peek out.

The little bed is made to look like a plane wreck, crash-landed in the jungle. The floor has a thick green mat on it that looks like grass and there are shelves and shelves of

toys.

Even the lighting changes color with the touch of a button and Damion can choose the mood he wants.

"His night light looks like stars across the ceiling," Dante says, sounding proud of himself.

I stare in disbelief. It is a little boy's dream room.

"Do you think he will like it?" He asks me when I say nothing.

"He is going to love this." I stammer. "I love this. But we need to childproof this because he is going to give me a coronary touching things that cost more than a small island. Please." He thinks it's funny, but my heart will actually stop.

"Shall we call him and see his reaction?"

I nod, grinning. I've always wanted to do these things for my little boy - and now he has a father who is doing it for him.

Again, I am fighting tears of joy.

Everything is just so perfect.

"Damion?" Dante calls down the passage. "Come and look here, little buddy."

Damion comes speeding down the hall and Dante catches him before he can speed-wobble into the jungle.

"Ok, little man, this is very important - are you paying attention?" Dante says.

Damion puts on his serious face too.

"Are you listening?" Dante asks, and Damion nods. His little brows wrinkled.

"I want you to know that this room that you are about to see - this is your bedroom. It is your special place. It is just for you and no one else. Do you understand?"

Damion wiggles and grins. "Mine. Mine room for me." He shouts.

"That's right. Your room for you. Do you want to see what your room looks like?"

Damion is throwing himself backward trying to get out of Dante's arms so that he can see his new room. I can't stop laughing.

Dante sets him on the ground and the little boy bolts straight through the doors.

Inside the room he comes to a screeching halt, staring wide eyes, in total disbelief -- his mouth in a little 'o' as he takes it in.

We hold our breaths, waiting for his reaction to come.

Damion is dead still. Not moving a muscle.

Then suddenly he screams "Dinosaur." And leaps onto the bed, rolling around and tugging at the blankets. He rolls off the bed and runs to the toy shelf, grabbing a giant velociraptor teddy bear and carrying it to the bed. He keeps grabbing toys, shouting random words, and building a mountain of toys on the bed.

Dante steps close to me and pulls me against his side. "I think it's safe to say he loves it."

"I don't think we are ever going to see him again. I think he will never leave this room." I laugh, turning towards Dante. "Thank you so much for this. You don't understand what this means to me - for Damion to have such a special place to call his own."

"I understand. And I want him to know that he has a home here with me. Just like you do."

Damion is very busy in the room. So, I slip my hands beneath Dante's shirt, and with a cheeky grin I ask him, "Do you want to show me my bedroom now?"

His smile is naughty, and so is the reaction from his body. Without a second of hesitation, he lifts me up and throws me over his shoulder. I scream with laughter as he carries me to our bedroom and drops me onto the bed.

"Welcome home, little fox." He grins, tugging at my clothes and tossing them over his shoulder. "Now be a good girl and spread your legs wide for me."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm

DANTE

I have kept my security team on high alert, just to make sure that my little family is safe.

I still have intense moments of grief over the loss of my sister, but I am grateful for Frankie's gentle and loving nature, helping me through those moments and showing me constant and unwavering support. The thing about a loss so profound is that you don't experience it all at once; it comes and goes in waves. Some days they're small, just tickling the shores with sadness, others it can be a tsunami of anger and rage.

I can't imagine my life without her or Damion in it. That would kill me.

Because Antonio's business associates have been throwing so many threats around, we have escalated our plans for her to take over her father's casino.

The casino is held in a trust and she is named as the beneficiary if anything happens to him, so the process is less complicated than I expected. Two of his smaller casinos were closed and seized by law enforcement, but the main casino has been left for Frankie. We've initiated a merger, bringing our two worlds together to create a much stronger foundation.

Tonight, because we can't afford to delay anymore, we are hosting a grand reopening. The entire place has been rebranded, a new wholesome image with her face on it. All of the staff have changed because we didn't want Antonio's goons to be involved in this new beginning, and Frankie is eager to become a business owner.

The business associates who were making the biggest threats have been called into separate meetings to discuss the way forward. We have offered shares to those who want to work with us in exchange for whatever they can bring to the table.

So far, most of them have accepted our terms. There are some exceptions, but I have dealt with them the old-fashioned way. My crew will pay them a visit, and send a clear message that the Russo family is not to be messed with so they understand that if they don't back off, they will lose everything.

With Frankie and me partnering to own the largest casinos in Las Vegas, we're now the most powerful couple in the city. News is spreading fast that we are together -- not only in business but in love as well. Only a fool would dare take us on now.

"Little fox, are you ready?" I ask as Frankie rushes past me for the tenth time wearing something different. "You look incredible, my love, why are you changing your dress every five minutes?"

She pauses and glares at me, her face is strained with stress. "I need this to be perfect." She grumbles. "I've done nothing like this before."

She tries to rush off and I grab her arm, pulling her back. "You don't know how beautiful you are - do you? Because you have looked like the most beautiful woman on this entire planet in every single one of those dresses that you have tried on this evening. Now, take a deep breath, kiss me, and tell me how I can help you?"

She takes a deep breath, then stands on her tiptoes and melts against me as I press my lips into hers. She kisses me for a long time and when she leans away, she is smiling. "I think that is exactly what I needed. A kiss." She giggles.

"I'll go let Clarissa know we are leaving then."

"Yes, I'll grab my clutch and my coat."

Downstairs I hold the door open for her as she climbs into the back of the limo, and then I slide in behind her.

She is nervous, filled with anticipation, but she looks excited too.

"I can't believe we are launching a casino together."

I take her hand and hold it in my lap. "Black Rose Casino is going to be my favorite project - because I get to do it with you."

Outside of Black Rose, the media crowd the entrance, all desperate for a comment or a picture. As we step out of the limo, cameras flash, blinding us while photographers go wild. We walk up the stairs to the entrance, and they hurl questions at us, not even waiting for answers — we have no comment.

I wrap my arm protectively around Frankie as we walk, and my security pushes those who get too close away. Inside the casino only a select few members of the press were personally invited to document the opening -- ones we pay, and trust. This way we control the narrative.

The casino is packed to the rafters, and the renovations, new decor, and revamp make it unrecognizable from what it was before. Her father's legacy has been erased.

Frankie chose a very seductive red and black palette, with black velvet sofas and luxurious red chandeliers adorning the space.

It looks devilishly beautiful and mysterious at the same time.

To celebrate the full circle our lives have come, we thought it would be an interesting

twist to launch the casino with a masked ball.

Frankie slips a black velvet mask over her eyes, and I pull mine down.

She grins at me, and winks. "If I see you at the bar later; I might pretend I don't know you." She whispers, leaning close.

I run my hand down her back and gently squeeze her ass.

"But this time I won't let you get away from me afterward," I whisper against her ear.

The launch party is perfect. Everything goes off without a single hitch, and Frankie proves herself to be an exceptional businesswoman, talking to her new associates with ease and grace. She might hate her father, but she learned from him what it takes to be a boss.

She is the most eye-catching and beautiful woman in the room, and I am proud to have her at my side the entire night.

When I lead her onto the dance floor, both a little tipsy from the champagne, I pull her close against my body and lean down to whisper in her ear.

"Frankie, you and I belong together."

She looks up at me with bright eyes, filled with love. "I know we do."

"Will you spend the rest of your life with me? I can't imagine a day without you. I love you more than anything. I want you to be mine, forever."

She tilts her head, those gorgeous eyes framed by her velvet mask.

I grin. "Little fox, will you marry me?"

She throws her arms around my neck and leaps up against me. I catch her, holding her close as she nuzzles into my neck. "Yes. Yes. Yes. A thousand times. Yes." She says, laughing and kissing my neck.

I let her slide back down to the floor. I am grinning like a fool in love. I have never been happier in my life.

She steps away from me and takes my hand, the cheeky grin on her face is provocative and suggestive.

"Follow me." She says, turning and pulling me through the crowds on the dance floor. She guides me along the edge of the event room, towards the stage. She glances over her shoulder towards me, and it sends a shiver down my spine. She pushes a door open that leads to the area behind the stage.

I am having déjà vu as she leads us into the storage room behind the party.

I laugh as she pushes me against the wall in the small dark space.

"This is so familiar." I grin.

"I am recreating the moment I fell in love with a stranger." She smiles up at me.

I grab her waist and spin her so that her back is against the wall.

I lift her in my arms and push my cock against her.

She gasps as I run my hands up her legs, pushing her dress over her hips.

With my hands around her ass, I slide my fingers forward. I realize she isn't wearing underwear. My cock throbs with excitement. "Did you plan this, little fox?" I growl. "I might have." She says breathless.

I slide my hands towards her pussy and dip my finger inside her. She is soaked. She rocks against my fingers, ready for me, begging me to thrust my cock into her pussy.

Memories flood my mind of the first time I was with her. The thrill, the intensity, and the incredible connection I felt between us even then when I didn't know her.

We were always meant to be together.

Fate intended for us to fall in love and no matter what the world threw at us - we were going to end up together.

Frankie digs her nails into my neck as I tug my pants open, freeing my cock.

She gasps as I grab it and rub it over her pussy.

Tilting her head back she cries out when I thrust forward, slamming my cock into her.

We experienced a mysterious first time together.

Genuine, deep, fiery love has taken the place of the mystery this time.

I am obsessed with her.

I am in love with her.

I want to have her in every way possible.

I fuck her so hard the wall might come down behind us.

My cock is so hard it is aching with need, and I'm close to coming. The intensity of my emotions is overwhelming me.

Frankie screams and digs her nails in deeper, feeling the same intensity. She gives in to her orgasm sooner than she normally does. Her body shakes and her pussy clamps onto me.

I can't wait another second as I go rigid inside her and explode in wave after wave of pleasure.

I am still holding her against the wall, breathing heavily when I hear her little laugh. "So, stranger, do you want to get another drink at the bar?" She asks with a giggle.

"I would love to, little fox." I step away, letting her drop to the ground. She pulls her dress straight and readjusts her mask.

I lead her back out into the party, and we carry on enjoying ourselves, talking, laughing, and celebrating.

But this time when the party ends, I take her hand, and I don't let go.

Because she is mine and she is coming home with me.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm

FRANKIE

Dante has booked out the entire restaurant in Sierra Nevada on the side of the mountain so that we can get married there.

We have decided not to invite anyone. It will just be us, and Clarissa will join us to take care of Damion.

We both feel as though we don't have anyone to prove anything to and in all the world, this moment is just for us. It's not for the media, it's not for our business allies, it's not for anyone except for our close little family. It is our own personal expression of love.

I get a sense of sadness from Dante on the flight to Sierra Nevada. He is thinking about his sister. She is the one person who he would have wanted here.

I shift close to him and rest my head on his shoulder. We both watch Damion and Clarissa chatting about the story she has just read him.

I glance down at my finger to admire the engagement ring Dante bought for me the day after we got engaged.

"I'm sorry I wasn't patient enough to wait." He says, seeing me looking at it.

"I think your proposal was perfect." I laugh.

"But I had this whole elaborate thing planned, and I hadn't even collected the ring yet

- I just - I got impatient. I wanted to make you mine right then and there."

I slip my arm around his very defined abs and snuggle into him.

"Dante, I was yours before you asked me to marry you."

"I think you have been mine since the night we met at the gala all those years ago."
He whispers against my hair, kissing the top of my head.

When we reach the restaurant on the edge of the mountain in Sierra Nevada, Dante takes Damion from me and tells me to look in my room at the hotel above the restaurant. Clarissa follows me, obviously up to something, she looks excited.

"What about Damion?" I ask as we walk up the stairs.

"Dante insisted he would take care of him for now."

I bite my lower lip, curious about what he is up to.

We get to my room and the key card he has given me unlocks the door.

I step inside and two women greet me with massive smiles.

I look at Clarissa in shock, the last thing I was expecting was for anyone to be in here.

She steps forward and introduces me to the woman. "This is Sammy -- she does make up - and this is Lisa, she does hair. We are all here to help you get ready for your really special day."

"But - but," I stammer.

"Yes, Dante said you would try to tell me you just wanted to keep it simple and not worry about going too fancy. But he told me you are a princess, and you deserve to look and feel like a princess."

"Who chose the dress?" I ask, walking towards the long, glittering dress hanging from the top of the closet door. I reach out and touch the delicate lace, stitched with pearls and glittering diamonds.

"Dante chose it. I think Damion had a few mumbles of input, but - yes - it was Dante."

"It's so beautiful," I say, overwhelmed by what he has done for me here.

I didn't want him to have to fuss or stress over anything because of everything he had already done for Damion and me. I thought we were just coming here for a quiet dinner and to sign our marriage certificate after exchanging vows in front of a priest.

This is so much more than I expected.

My eyes burn with the threat of tears and Clarissa pulls me into a hug. "That man loves you so much, sweetie. You are so incredibly lucky to have found someone who would do anything for you. Just enjoy it. He wanted to do all of this. In fact, he insisted on it."

"Did you help him?" I ask.

"No, he arranged everything himself. All he asked me to do was help you get into the dress." She laughs. "So, let's make sure you are not late for your own wedding - shall we?"

The ladies get to work. And within an hour, the ladies braid my hair, adorn it with

white flowers, and delicately apply natural makeup to my face. When I step into the dress and Clarissa helps me wiggle it up over my hips, before it is tied closed at the back - I feel like a goddess.

I can't stop staring at myself in the mirror while Clarissa does each clasp over my lower back.

The dress dips low in the back, showing off my spine. The thin straps are elegant and beautiful, and the fabric is so gorgeous, the way it flows around me, that I can't stop swaying my hips back and forth in the mirror just so that I can watch it move.

My emotions overwhelm me again and Clarissa grabs a book and starts fanning my face. "No, don't cry now, you'll ruin your makeup,"

I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths.

"I can't believe this is really happening. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would meet a man that makes me this happy."

When I get myself under control, Clarissa hands me a bouquet of wildflowers in soft whites and creams.

She guides me through the hotel up the stairs and to the door that leads onto the roof.

"Let me go first. Wait one minute, then come out." She says.

I nod, my heart is racing so fast. I don't know why I am so nervous. I can't stop smiling.

I count in my head, and it is the longest minute of my life. Then I step through the door onto the rooftop which has been decorated especially for today.

Dante is standing at the end of a long white carpet. Rose petals are scattered on the floor and fairy lights are glittering above my head, glowing against the pink and purple sunset.

Dante and Damion are standing beneath a wide archway, covered in flowers and green leaves. Damion is dressed in the cutest little tuxedo, complete with a bow tie. And, of course, he's also wearing a Batman mask.

Dante is dressed head to toe in a slick black suit that takes my breath away. He looks divine. I can't believe I am about to marry him, and he will be my husband for the rest of my life.

As I am walking along the carpet towards Dante, Damion gets impatient and runs to me. He shouts "Mommy a princess. Wow." He jumps, forcing me to catch him and squish some of my flowers.

"Wow, Mommy." He says, touching my face as I carry on walking towards Dante.

When I reach the archway Damion wiggles from my arms and runs to Clarissa, taking my flowers with him. I turn to face Dante.

"You always take my breath away, little fox, but tonight - you look like you came straight from heaven to steal my heart."

His eyes trace over me, trying to take everything in.

I stare at him and beg my memory to hold on to this image forever.

This moment - tonight - this man - my heart is at home with him.

It doesn't matter where we are or who else is around - he is my home.

I've never had a proper home, one where I am safe and loved and wanted.

He is my home.

He is my everything.

Our vows are simple and honest, straight from the heart.

We exchange promises and rings and then a kiss that seals our marriage.

Dante sweeps me backward, dipping me low, and with a dark purple sky behind us, and stars beginning to glitter above us, he kisses me makes me blush.

Then he whispers in my ear, "I do not know how I am going to wait until after dinner before I steal you away to our honeymoon suite."

I giggle and blush again as he lifts me back onto my feet.

It is the perfect wedding, the perfect dinner, and the perfect night.

Damion shares the room with Clarissa, and Dante and I have a very magical night that we will both keep in our hearts forever.

Back in Las Vegas, I am now known as Mrs. Russo.

My business is growing bigger by the day with the help of my gorgeous husband.

We have moved into Dante's mansion, keeping the penthouse for those times we want to stay over there. Damion demanded to have the jungle room recreated in the mansion too. I think it makes him secure - like the dinosaurs and thick green leaves represent his own space.

Often, I look back over everything that has happened and wonder how we got so lucky that it all worked out.

My son is getting bolder. I can see his confidence levels shining more every day. He has a beautiful, gentle-hearted man to teach him things about life that only a father can really teach a son. And I have a man who will do anything for me to see me smile.

He keeps telling me that my heart belongs to him.

But we all know I am the one who is hopelessly, madly, and completely in love.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm

DANTE

Six months of married bliss has made me an incredibly fortunate man.

I still struggle every day with thoughts of my sister and what happened to her, but at least I have found peace with it.

I roll over in bed and pull my wife closer to me. She seems to get too warm and night and try to sneak away from me, but I won't let it happen. I want her right up close to me.

"I told you—" she mumbles, half asleep, "I get too hot when I'm pregnant. It happened the first time too."

"I'll turn the air conditioning up. But you aren't escaping cuddle time." I chuckle, holding her tighter in case she thinks she can wiggle away again.

"Mm. I think the morning sickness is starting. I don't feel that amazing."

She grumbles, snuggling into me despite the heat radiating from her skin and the thin layer of perspiration glowing on her forehead.

"Do you need me to help you to the bathroom?"

She props herself up on her elbows. "I had a whole baby all by myself the first time around." She says, sassy and moody.

"The first time around I wasn't there to take care of you. So, this time around I have to make up for it by doing extra."

She grins, shaking her head. She can never stay moody with me for too long because as soon as I see her struggling with anything at all I make sure I make it easier for her. I can't imagine what it is like to grow an entire baby in your body - the exhaustion and the discomfort and the weird things that happen, like the mood swings and cravings - and watching the start of her pregnancy now I feel guilt for not being there to help her when she had Damion.

"I love you, Dante. You might not have been there the first time - but I was the one who ran away, and you make every day the most special day since - oh - no?—"

She bolts out of bed and runs for the bathroom, just making it in time.

I chuckle. Even though I feel bad for her struggles, I love taking care of her and she still makes me laugh even through it all.

I walk into the bathroom and pull her hair away from her face, holding it up for her. When she is done throwing up her left lung, I hand her a damp cloth, and she wipes her face.

"Wow, that was close. You almost had an extra special morning."

"Well, as long as it isn't as bad as what happened last week - I'll be fine."

She blushes red. Last week, before she even knew she was pregnant, she threw up all over me one morning in the car.

It was the first hint that we were about to have another little bundle of joy running around the house.

Our family is growing, and I am so excited about it.

Frankie stands up and walks over to the sink to brush her teeth.

"Isn't it weird though that one minute I'm puking my lungs out and the next I'm starving and craving eggs and fried tomatoes?"

"I can't even pretend to understand what your body is going through, little fox. But if you are craving eggs and fried tomatoes, then I can make sure it is ready for you when you get downstairs."

I nuzzle my face against her neck and trace kisses over her skin.

"I think I want to have a quick shower." She says, pulling her shirt off. My eyes trace over her beautiful body.

"Take your time. I will sort out the other little monster. I think I heard him getting up fifteen minutes ago. He is probably already wreaking havoc somewhere with no supervision."

She laughs and I brush my hand across her cheek. "You are glowing. You are so beautiful." I say, then turn to walk out of the bathroom.

I walk through to the living room where I find Damion building a pillow fort with the blankets that he has dragged from his bedroom.

"Do you need help, little guy?" I ask, peeking beneath a very fluffy blue blanket.

"No, I no need help." He reassures me, his back to me and his butt pointed in the air as he tries to adjust the pillows to keep the back area from sagging.

"Are you sure?" I ask again.

"I no need help. I build a house for him."

He has been over-the-moon excited since we told him he was going to have a baby brother or sister. He has decided it's a baby boy and every day since we told him, which was only a week ago, he has asked if the baby is here yet.

I don't actually know who is more excited - me or him.

"When it's time to design the little baby's room I think you can help me. You are fantastic at this." I say, admiring the blanket fort even though everything looks as though it is about to topple over any second now.

"Yes," Damion says, but he isn't listening to me. He is so focused on his task he isn't taking his eyes off it.

"I'm going to make breakfast. I'll bring you some cereal." I say, walking towards the kitchen.

On the way to the kitchen, I hear a knock on the front door. One of my security guards is standing on the other side of the glass.

I pull open the door. "Frank, what's happening? Is everything ok?"

"Yes, sir. A courier delivered this for you this morning. We scanned it. It looks safe."

"Thanks," I say, staring down at the white, unmarked envelope he has given me.

Frank walks away, back to his post by the gates and I walk towards the kitchen, wondering what this is all about.

I flick the coffee machine on and lean against the kitchen counter as I pull the envelope open. It tears open and I reach my fingers inside to remove a photograph.

My heart stops dead in my chest. Frozen in a painful moment of shock.

Of all the things that I could have guessed might have been in there - a photograph of my sister was not one of them.

I gasp, dragging air into my lungs as I try to breathe again. My head is spinning as I sink to the kitchen floor.

The photo is still clasped in my hands.

She looks beautiful. As beautiful as I remember her, but she is older.

She is standing next to a man I recognize and my rage towards him is intense.

Nathan Lux.

The son of the man who bought my sister.

When was this photo taken?

Why is she leaning into him like that?

What the fuck is going on?

Who sent this to me?

Where is she?

Does this mean she is still alive?

I can't stop my head from spinning as the questions overwhelm me.

What does this mean?

"Dante," Frankie shouts my name as she runs into the kitchen, kneeling next to me. Her face is ashen with worry.

"What happened? Are you okay? Should I call an ambulance?" she asks, panicked, finding me on the kitchen floor.

I can't find my words or my voice, so I hand her the photo.

She has seen photos of my sister, so she knows who she is looking at - but it doesn't make sense to her either.

"Dante - where is this from?"

"A courier." I stammer. "A courier delivered it this morning."

"She looks older in this photo," Frankie says, examining the image.

She flips it over and stares at the back. "There is a number written on the back of the photo. Do you recognize it?" She holds it up in front of me so that I can see the messy scrawled handwritten phone number.

"I don't - but..." I take the photo from her again and stare at the number.

Will they have answers for me?

Frankie stands up and offers her hand to me. I take it and climb to my feet. My head is still spinning, and anxiety is flooding my body.

I put the photo face down on the kitchen table, unable to process whatever is happening right now.

"Are you going to call the number?" she asks, looking at me with knotted brows and deep concern.

"I just need a moment." I nod.

Frankie leaves me leaning against the counter and moves towards the coffee machine. She reaches up and grabs two mugs, taking her time she makes coffee while I watch her and think.

I try to piece things together to figure out what might have happened, but nothing makes sense. None of this makes sense.

I know I have to call the number, but I am terrified. I am scared because the photograph has given me hope that just maybe - Daniela is still alive. Just maybe - she really looks as happy and healthy as she seems to be in the photo.

Frankie hands me the hot mug of coffee and stands next to me without saying a word. She slips her arm around me and leans into me.

I wrap my arm around her and hold her close, finding comfort in her embrace and her understanding. She knows when I need a quiet moment, but she knows I still want her near me.

We sip our coffee. I am deep in thought and filled with fear while flooded with hope.

Finally, my heart stops hammering, and the dizziness fades and I say. "I am going to call the number. It is the only way to get some understanding."

We check on Damion who is still very busy working on his blanket fort - then Frankie follows me to the dining room where we sit at the table.

I have my phone in front of me.

Before I call, I search for the number online.

"What area code is that?" She asks.

"It's Bali," I answer, more confused than ever.

With a deep breath, I open the phone app.

Frankie calls out the numbers one by one as I punch them into the phone again, dialing.

I place the phone on the table in front of me on speaker and we both listen in tense silence as it rings.

"Lux residence, how may I help you." A woman with a thick accent answers the phone.

My heart is racing.

"Hello, I was wondering if you have a lady by the name of Daniela living there?" I ask, not really knowing what I am supposed to say or who I should be asking for.

"No, sir, the only lady who lives here is Mrs. Lux. Her name is Blake."

I glance over at Frankie whose eyes are wide with anticipation.

"Maybe she knows where Daniela is?" She whispers.

"May I please speak with Mrs. Lux - um - with Blake."

"Yes, sir. Of course. Who may I say is calling?"

I clench my jaw, unsure if I should say my real name or if it will cause them to slam the phone down on me.

Finally, I give in. Whoever gave me this number knows who I am and where I live.

"My name is Dante Russo. I am calling from Las Vegas."

The words are right in my throat.

"Ok, sir. Please hold for me while I get her."

The silence between Frankie and I as we both stare down at the phone is so heavy that I imagine if I reached out into the air, I could feel it.

An eternity goes by while I watch the call timer on my phone screen and count the seconds it is taking for Blake to come to the phone.

Will she know where my sister is?

Will she even know who my sister is?

Frankie reaches across the table and takes my hand, giving me a reassuring squeeze. I close my eyes because I cannot look at that counting timer for another second.

"Hello, this is Blake."

I gasp so loud I choke on the air that I try to breathe in.

I would recognize my sister's voice anywhere.

Tears spring to my eyes and flood down my cheeks as I cough her name.

"Daniela?" I stammer, then try again. "Dani?—"

"Is it really you?" She says into the phone. "Is it really you, Dante?" She is crying as well; her voice is thick with tears, and I can hear her breathing heavily.

Frankie is staring at me with her hand over her mouth and tears glittering in her eyes.

"It's me, Dani, I - are you - what is happening?" I can't breathe. I don't know what is going on. My sister is alive.

"The housekeeper said it was you on the phone, but I thought it was a trick. I thought - I didn't think it would really be you."

"Are you in Bali? Why are you there? Did you get kidnapped? How did you escape?" questions pour from my lips in an unorganized chaos of thoughts. I want to know everything, right now.

She laughs, and I can still hear the tears in her throat.

"Dante, I got away. They took me and someone helped me to escape."

"Tell me everything," I demand.

"Antonio Musetti's men kidnapped me. He told me he was going to destroy you by taking me away from you. The only family you had. They sold me, along with other girls, to a man in New York." She takes a moment.

"A man named Bernard Lux. A few months ago, we found out that his home was broken into, and he was murdered. A piece of news that was a joyous relief. I was held captive in his basement with about eight other girls for three months." That is an eternity.

"We went through hell. I still can't talk about what happened - but I stayed strong - because you always taught me to be strong - and then something amazing happened. One night at a party his son came to the house. His son, Nathan, never got along with his father. They hated each other. Nathan hated everything about his father. Nathan saw me at the party and when our eyes locked, it was as though we had known each other for years. A lifetime." She takes a breath, steadying her voice and calming her thoughts.

"I'm here. I'm listening." I say to reassure her.

"Nathan helped me fake my death because no girl ever leaves that house alive. He knew a body bag was the only way to get me out. He got me out then we ran away together. He gave up everything for me. We moved as far away from his father as we could. We had to change my name, get me a new identity because not only would Brandon Lux look for me if he found out I was alive - but so would Antonio Musetti." She takes a sharp breath in.

"But, Dante, if you know I'm alive then Musetti will find out too." She says, the fear in her voice a hint of the horror that she went through.

"He cannot get to you anymore, Dani. He is in the slammer, forever."

"But who told you I was alive - who gave you this number?"

On the phone, I hear a man's voice. "It was me, my love." He says.

My sister turns to talk to someone else. "Nathan - you told my brother?"

I swallow hard, waiting, listening, I am drowning and being saved at the same time.

"I sent your brother a message because I heard Musetti had been put away. I wasn't sure if it was real or some scam in the media. I trusted your brother would know if it was safe or not to be in touch with you."

I hear Dani laughing and crying. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." She says to Nathan. Then she comes back on the phone.

"Dante, if Musetti really is in jail and Brandon is dead - I can come home and visit you. I've missed you every day and thought about you every day for years."

"Nathan," I say, needing to clear the air. "Before we carry on, I need you to know that I am the one who is responsible for your father."

"Then you are the one who I need to thank." He replies, simply and calmly. There is no animosity between us. "If it is alright with you, I can have Blake - sorry - Dani, on a plane with me tonight. We can head over to Las Vegas. She talks about you all the time and I think it is about time I met her brother."

FRANKIE

I leave Dante in the dining room, talking to his sister on the phone, catching up on years of lost time while I make breakfast for Damion.

That call has left me shocked to my core and I think Dante is going to need some time to process everything that just happened.

He is smiling though. He is overrun by emotions, and he is smiling so much that his face is going to hurt soon.

I laugh to myself, tears of happiness threatening.

"She's alive," I whisper, realizing that everything that happened, happened for a reason - because Dani would not have been able to come out of hiding if Brandon Lux and my father weren't first removed from the picture.

She is so lucky she met Nathan. She is so lucky he went to the house that night. The things she must have experienced - I can't even imagine - but she is lucky that she has a man who loved her enough to do that for her.

After finally getting Damion settled with his cereal—which was harder than I expected, given that he's determined to finish the blanket fort for his little brother, who he thinks will arrive any second—I glance into the dining room to check if Dante is still talking.

The phone call ends, and he is just sitting at the table, staring at the blank screen.

I walk over to him and slip my arm around his neck as I slide onto his lap.

He looks up at me with a wide smile.

"I can't believe it. Was that real? Did that just happen?"

I giggle. "When will she arrive?"

"Tomorrow - late morning." He says, shaking his head, still in disbelief. "She says she likes the name Blake, and I should just get used to it." He laughs. "She hasn't changed at all. She's still cheeky and full of it - just like I remember her."

"She must have been through so much," I say.

"Yes, she must have, but Nathan is an amazing person and helped her through every moment."

"I guess we should get the guest house ready. Or would she prefer to stay in the main house?"

"Let's set them up in the guest house. I think they will enjoy the privacy and the views. And if they want to stay in the main house, we can switch it around."

All day Dante is running back and forth in a frenzy. There is nothing for him to do because the housekeepers have prepared everything, but he seems to want to get ready, is unable to wait, and needs to fill the time.

I tried a few times to get him to sit with me and watch a movie or have a glass of wine, but he is having none of it.

When he comes to bed and snuggles up to me, he is so tense with excitement that I

think he will never fall asleep like this.

"Hey, are you going to get any rest tonight?" I ask, laughing at him.

"Um - I don't think so. My mind is in overdrive. I can't stop thinking?—"

I brush my hand over his chest and down beneath his pants, wrapping my hand around his cock.

"Oh." He says, as his cock hardens beneath my touch.

"I think I can help distract you, and tire you out enough so you can fall asleep."

"I think that might work." He chuckles, rolling onto me, pushing my legs apart with his hips.

I reach up and run my hands through his thick dark hair, then pull his face down and press my lips into his. His cock grows harder and pushes against me. I rock my hips upwards towards him.

My body has been screaming to be with him all day. My hormones are going crazy with this pregnancy, and I need him inside me.

I've been patient, waiting for him to come around and find his peace - but all I really had to do was drag him to the bedroom.

He tugs his pants off, kicking them down his legs beneath the blanket.

I am only wearing my oversized shirt because I had planned this all along.

He slips his hand beneath the fabric and cups my breast, rubbing his thumb over my

nipple until it is tingling and hard. I moan as he rubs his cock up and down over my pussy, teasing me.

"Please, don't make me wait. I've waited all day." I whisper, trying to move myself so that his cock slides into me. He laughs, deep and divine, and continues to tease me.

"You are so wet -- you are dripping all over my cock." He growls, dipping just the tip of himself inside me, then pulling out again.

I growl and he laughs. "Mm. A wild fox tonight."

I lift my head and bite hard into his shoulder to release my frustration. He thrusts forward, slamming his cock into my pussy.

I let go with my teeth and cried out in pleasure.

He wraps his hand around my throat and growls back at me. "You are a naughty little fox tonight. I think I might have to punish you."

He fucks me hard for a while, letting the pleasure build up, then he pulls out and rolls me onto my stomach. He grabs my hips and lifts my ass into the air.

I wait for his cock to press into me again - but it's the sharp slap of his hand across my ass.

It sends a shockwave of pleasure through me, and I cry out, my face muffled against the pillow.

My pussy throbs, pulsing with need.

He slaps me again, his fingers stinging against my clit this time. The pleasure is

unbearable.

"This is what happens to naughty foxes who bite." He growls.

My breathing is heavy as I dig my fingers into the pillow.

Without warning he slams his cock into me again.

I scream and he clamps his hand over my mouth.

"Not a sound, or I will slap your pussy so hard you will throb for a week." He warns me as he thrusts deeper and harder.

I can barely hold it together.

I have never been so taken, so devoured, and possessed before in my life.

My body is his to do with as he pleases, and he is making me experience more pleasure than I could ever imagine.

His massive cock plunges deep into me, spreading me open and making my pussy pulse over him. I can feel how hard he is. He loves this. He loves being in control.

He fucks me until my legs are shaking and I can't breathe. Then he slips his hand around me and presses his thumb against my clit.

"Come all over me, little fox. I want to feel it."

I explode in violent waves of pleasure that shake me to my core. He stills inside me and releases his own pleasure, locked together and sharing the most intimate moment.

Dante lets out a heavy breath as he rolls onto his back, grabbing my waist and pulling me with him.

He holds me tight, my head resting on his chest, the widest grin spread across my lips.

I look up at his shoulder and trace over the faint outline of the bite mark. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me." I smile.

"I think I need to get you pregnant more often." He says with a mischievous laugh.

"I think I might misbehave more often." I giggle.

To my surprise, both of us fell asleep. And I wake up with the sunshine on my face and Dante still sleeping.

It's seven in the morning and his sister is arriving in a few hours. I want to make him a nice breakfast before she gets here. I want to do whatever I can to make this the best day for him.

Carefully I try to sneak away from his embrace, off the bed, but I hear a laugh and his arm locks around me.

"You aren't going anywhere." He grumbles in his deep morning voice.

"How am I supposed to surprise you with breakfast if you don't let me sneak away?" I sigh, leaning over and kissing him.

"I want to make breakfast with you, little fox. I want to do everything with you. You are my entire world. You, and my son and the other little one growing in your belly."

"Well, then you had better get your ass out of bed because the one growing in my belly is demanding a three-course meal of pancakes, berry oats, and avocado toast." I laugh, wiggling away again.

Dante lets me go, but he is up and out of bed to follow me before I even reach the door.

He grabs me from behind and lifts me off the floor, hugging me as he carries me into the kitchen.

Down the hall, I hear Damion waking up and calling for me.

"I'm in the kitchen, baby," I call back, still laughing.

Damion comes through rubbing his sleepy little eyes, so I scoop him into my arms, leaning against the kitchen counter and giving him a little good morning cuddle.

"Daddy is making us pancakes," I say, pointing to Dante as he pulls out mixing bowls and eggs and sugar.

"For my brother as well," Damion says to Dante.

"Actually, your brother is the one who demanded pancakes." Dante laughs, walking over to me and placing his hand over my belly.

"He's here?" Damion squealed in excitement.

"Now you've got him going again." I laugh, setting him on the floor so that he runs in overexcited circles.

Dante crouches down to his level.

"He's growing in Mommy's tummy. He's all safe and warm in there. He will only come out when he gets too big for her tummy."

"When?" Damion complains, pouting out his bottom lip.

"Did you decide the little one is a 'he' too now?" I ask, nudging Dante with my foot and pushing him off balance.

He laughs and stands up. "A family of boys. I think it will be great."

I wrap my arms around Dante's waist and hold him tight against me. My heart is so full and happy that I can't imagine my life being any more perfect than this moment.

I truly am the luckiest girl alive.

"I love you, little fox," Dante whispers against my hair.

"And me?" Damion tugs at Dante's pants. He chuckles and leans down to pick him up, squishing him in between us. "I love you the most, little guy."

"More than dinosaurs?" he asks, enjoying every minute of this.

"Even more than all the dinosaurs that ever existed anywhere."

Damion grins and wraps his tiny arms around Dante's neck. I look at the man I love, his bright blue eyes locking with mine and my heart thundering.

"My life is perfect," I whisper to him.

THE END

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm

My entire life, I yearned for a man I thought was forbidden... a ruthless Mafia Don,
Dangerously handsome and immensely powerful.

I grew up in the mansion of the ruthless Alegro Crime Family,

Inevitably drawn to Lorenzo—the magnetic heir who commanded it all.

Employed at his lavish casino,

Temptation confronted me daily.

Despite my mother's deception about our shared bloodline,

Desire for Lorenzo burned within me.

His slightest touch triggered tremors,

Awakening forbidden needs I dared not speak of.

Yet he claimed my innocence in one glorious night.

Years of repressed longing shattered, crumbling into ecstasy in his arms.

But Lorenzo's father dictated a different fate--

A marriage orchestrated to reinforce mafia supremacy.

Defying his father ignited vengeful rage.

And I was seized as a pawn, torn apart from my defiant lover.

Will Lorenzo save me from his father's wrath, or will loving him be the death of me?

Start Reading UNSPOKEN SECRETS today. Claim here.

Want a Sneak Peek? Here's Chapter One ~ Lorenzo

We are driving in stiff convoy around the cash-in-transit van. From the outside, you would never say it had three panels of bulletproof protection, and you would never assume that the driver and passenger were armed with heavy weaponry. This is how they always travel though. They have one of the most important jobs in my business, and I only give this job to men who can handle themselves. The van looks ordinary; it could just be any delivery van.

Except it isn't. This morning it is carrying an exceptional amount of cash. I don't usually follow the delivery of cash, but with the amount being moved today I wanted to be on the drive with the protection team. My black SUV is less conspicuous, a monstrous car with silver detailing. I tap my fingers against the steering wheel, aware of everything going on around me.

The radio blurts with static and then the driver's voice comes through into my SUV.

"Sir, the red pickup, three cars behind us," Bennie says calmly.

"I've noticed. Stay on track."

I've already sent Marcus to the back, his rifle locked on the pick-up truck.

Marcus is my right-hand man. He has been with me for many years. I trust him with

my life - and my money.

"He is coming round," Marcus shouts.

"And the other grey sedan?" I ask, pulling into the second lane to block them.

"Going left."

"Watch them both."

Gunfire erupts as a third vehicle spins out of a side street in front of the cash-in-transit van. Men are hanging out of the windows, firing towards the van and us. Bennie slows but doesn't veer off course or react in any other way.

"These fucking amateurs," I yell, pressing my foot against the accelerator.

Marcus chuckles, lowering his window and leaning out of my SUV, not bothered by the speed I am driving or the bullets already flying. He takes aim for the driver of the grey sedan and pierces a bullet straight through the windshield into his chest. The car swerves and smacks into a streetlight.

I hear the loud snaps as bullets thud against my car door, just inches from me. I don't flinch; it would take a tank to get into this car. Around me, civilian cars swerve away and slam on brakes, getting out of the line of fire.

I accelerate, aiming straight for the third vehicle. My bull bar slams into the side of the small car, sending him spinning out of the way. The path in front of Bennie's van is now clear.

I grab the radio. "Keep going, Bennie. Luca, Franco, stay with him."

I pull my SUV to a stop in the center of the road. Marcus and I climb out. I shake my

head wondering why someone thought it was a good idea to try and heist my cash with this airhead team. I've seen such a fuck of an attempt before. They clearly have no idea what they are doing or who they are dealing with. I stand to the side with my arms folded across my chest. Marcus stands in the middle of the road as the red truck aims for him. Two shots puncture the tires and the car shudders to a stop against the pavement after the driver loses control.

The driver gets out, his hands up in the air. His face is strained and lined with fear. "Please, I was just doing my job, please..." he drops to his knees and places his hands behind his head in defeat.

Marcus chuckles again and relaxes his stance.

I stride over to the driver. "Who are you working for?" I snarl. The driver refuses to make eye contact.

"Please - I have a family." His whimpering voice and desperate plea do nothing for me.

"Who are you working for? Don't make me ask you a third time."

"Alec Grendel." He quivers.

Marcus saunters over to stare down at the man kneeling on the road. He glances up at both of us, his eyes darting from Marcus to myself.

"He didn't even put up a fight. Clearly, he doesn't know the meaning of loyalty."

I grin. "Not worth a thing then, is he?"

I fire a single shot which explodes through his skull. His body slumps to the ground. Blood begins to spill across the road, oozing from his face.

I slide my Beretta back into the holster at my side. Everything around me has gone quiet.

"Marcus, check the other cars. I'll radio Bennie, and make sure they are on track."

"Lorenzo, you have a little something over there." Marcus gestures towards my suit jacket.

"For fuck's sake." I glance down at the blood splattered across my shoulder. Glistening against the black fabric. I shake the jacket from my shoulders and slide my arms out, tossing it into the back of my SUV.

I hear three shots. Marcus is cleaning up the remaining survivors in the other cars. No one lives. A clear message to Alec. And to anyone who dares to take a job with him.

Marcus climbs into the passenger side, and the car door slams shut behind him.

"I think we are going to have to pay Alec a visit soon."

"Agreed." I press the button to the right of my steering wheel.

The engine growls to life, and I accelerate to catch up with the cash-in-transit convoy. We aren't far from the delivery site. I'll follow along for the rest of the way to make sure no other clowns show up.

Marcus leans back in his seat. "I'm fucking hungry. I left in such a hurry this morning that I didn't have time to eat." He sulks.

"You can grab something when we get back; this isn't going to take long."

"I've got a date tonight. That hot brunette from the bar. The one who started a few weeks ago."

I throw him a sideways glance. "Are you going to get another fired after you get bored with her and decide you don't want to see her around anymore?"

The corner of his mouth curves up into a grin. "She didn't get fired. She quit. She made her own choices."

"I have a feeling you made her job miserable and gave her no choice. Leave the waitresses alone, Marcus."

"This one is different. She could be the one."

I snort. "I am pretty sure you said that about the last three."

"One of them is actually going to be the one." He laughs. "Besides, you don't even date. You can't comment."

My thoughts drift towards Valentina. No, I don't date -- because my attention is fully occupied by someone I am forbidden to interact with. My overbearing father laid down rules against us even spending time together. I get it. He already told me she is some distant relative of mine. She is a well-kept secret, a mark of shame on his reputation. He doesn't like the idea of a low-level cleaner being in any way related to our family. He thinks it taints our bloodline. He keeps her close to keep her under control. She has worked in our mansion since she was fifteen, and now also works at the casino.

Of course, I know, it can never be, but fuck, you don't always get to choose who your heart locks on to. I wonder how distant of a relative she is. My father was never specific. He always gets so annoyed when I mention her. A second cousin? Third? I have no idea. She looks nothing like me. There is no resemblance whatsoever.

We arrive back at the casino just after lunch. I head straight to my office to grab a clean jacket and a fresh shirt. I toss my blood-stained clothes into the corner of the

office. Standing topless, I glance at the mirror. Tattoos are etched across my chest, up to my neck, tracing dark patterns over my skin.

I pull my fresh shirt on, followed by the jacket. It is the perfect fit, custom-made by a designer I had flown in to handle my entire wardrobe. I check the full-length mirror on the inside of the cupboard door in my office. Not a thing out of place. I run my fingers through the golden-brown crop of hair framing my face and then make my way to the casino floor. La Fossa Dei Leoni is the biggest casino in the city. I started it for the family. We were making too much money, not that there is such a thing, and needed a way to launder it. The last few years of running this place have allowed us to triple our turnover and stay under the radar. Of course, we still have to pay off certain people to turn a blind eye to events like this morning, but it is all part of the game.

"Rocco." I walk over to the main floor manager for our daily check-in. "All good?"

"Lorenzo, I heard you had an eventful morning?"

"Not too exciting, just some idiots who made a weak attempt."

"Well, it is all good here. Last night we had a bit of an issue with a card counter. He won't be back. We sent him home with his finger in an envelope."

"Nice of you to give it back to him. You must have been feeling generous."

Rocco laughs.

"Gianni was looking for you this morning. I saw him at the poker tables earlier."

"Thanks. I'll head over there now."

Gianni looks pissed off. But then again Gianni always looks pissed off.

"I heard you were looking for me?"

He turns towards me with his brow knotted in frustration.

"That fucking bachelor party. You should see what they did to the hotel room." He snaps.

"Worse than the group last year?"

"No, but what the fuck. These people are disgusting."

"Just bill them. Don't let it get to you. It's just part of running this place."

He huffs loudly.

I squeeze his shoulder. "You are going to give yourself a heart attack, man."

"Ye, ye. Listen, that isn't why I was looking for you. That card counter last night. It was Grusso's cousin. He is pissed off."

"And?"

"Thought you might want to know." He shrugs.

"Grusso should know better. I doubt we will hear an actual complaint. If he does want to complain, let him come directly to me."

These small-time rival families have no idea how the bigger families operate. They let their egos trick them into thinking they have a say in anything at all, but at the end of the day, they know their place. I know I won't hear from Grusso.

I turn to walk away. I have to finish up my rounds. Gianni calls to me. "Lorenzo, are

you at the event tomorrow night? We have some big clients coming in."

"I'll be there." I carry on walking away; I have one more person to check in with before I can head up to my favorite part of the day.

Antonio oversees the restaurants in the casino. He confirms that everything is running smoothly, and he doesn't need anything from me. This is great news; it means I can get up to the hotel suites sooner than expected. The cleaning staff should be finishing up their afternoon rounds, and I have a specific someone who I can't wait to see.

I glance at my watch, the highly polished gold strap catching the casino lights.

One o'clock. Perfect. I turn towards the elevators and press to be taken to the forty-second floor.

I check my reflection in the mirror panels on the inside walls. I feel a grin spreading across my face as my heart rate increases with anticipation.

The elevator doors slide open, and I step into the hallway. Hotel room doors line both sides of the passage.

I glance to the left and spot Valentina immediately. Her long dark hair was braided down her back and the neat, black and white maid's uniform hugged her tight figure. A smile spreads across my lips. I remind myself to conceal it as I walk towards her.