



Veil of the Past (Veil of Power #2)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: The past has a strange way of coming back into the present.

Mine threatens everything that I've built and the future of the Camorra. But will the love that blooms be enough to stop it from enveloping me in darkness and all those who surround me?

Romiro Esposito

I'm the enforcer of the Camorra, my job is to serve the Camorra. Spending my entire life looking behind my back comes with the job. One thing that doesn't is the way I feel about my friend. Alessia and I always seem to gravitate towards each other one way or another. But, when a single glimpse of someone from my past brings it crashing down. And a game of hide and seek begins.

Alessia Visconti

My family is the most notorious in the entire country, which comes with its own kind of danger, but nothing can compare to the danger of falling for your own friend, especially when it's one-sided.

Romiro's always had a flirty personality, but when he becomes a possessive a-hole and his actions don't match his words, it makes me question everything. And maybe those feelings aren't so one-sided.

But when one letter forces the past into the present, everything changes.

Decade-long secrets are forced into the light, the past threatens the present and poses challenges that can destroy even the most powerful of all. But will love be enough to withstand the weight of the past? Or will the flames of the past burn everything in its wake?

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PROLOGUE

ROMIRO

Age: 7

It's dark. I'm in the closet again. And I'm scared. Ma locked me in here...I don't know how long ago. I'm so hungry. My stomach keeps making noises. I wish Nicolo were here but I think he's out doing something for the Capo. I pull my legs further into me, and I keep my head on my knees and my eyes firmly closed.

Don't move, Romiro. I repeat the words over and over again in my head. My back still hurts. Ma hit me extra hard with the wire today, which opened the old, scabbed scars —and created new ones. I wince, and tears well up in my eyes when my back hits the cold, damp wall. I try to shift to a position that doesn't hurt, but there isn't one.

It's hard to breathe in here. The air smells musty and wet, and tears slide down my cheeks. I hate crying. It makes me feel weak, and Ma doesn't like weakness. "Stop being a baby," she says. "You think I have time to take care of you?" I just wanted to eat something, just wanted to be safe, to not be in this dark, cramped space. I can't even tell how long it's been since I last saw the light.

I hug my knees tighter, wishing I could disappear. The dark is thick and heavy, like a blanket wrapped around me. I hear the muffled sounds of the world outside—the TV playing loudly in the living room, Ma's voice slurring as she talks to someone, the bass of music thumping through the floor. I can't tell if it's night or day, but the

sounds feel far away, like they're coming from another world.

I think about Nicolo. He's the only one who ever seems to care about me. He always tells me to be brave and strong. "You're tough, Romiro," he says, ruffling my hair. "You're my little warrior." I wish he were here now. He always knows how to make things better, even if just for a little while. But he's gone, and I don't know when he'll be back.

Ma said he's busy with the Capo, but I don't know what that means. Sometimes I hear things I'm not supposed to, things that scare me. Words like "business" and "money" and "danger." I don't really understand, but I know it's not good. Nicolo is always trying to protect me, but I can't help feeling that something bad is coming.

I press my face into my knees, trying to block out the noise, the smell, and the cold that seeps into my bones. I can't think about it. I need to focus on something else.

I remember the last time we had spaghetti. The smell was so good. I can almost taste it. Ma had cooked it with too much salt, but I didn't care. I just wanted something in my stomach that wasn't pain. I remember how Nicolo smiled when he took the first bite, his eyes lighting up. "See, Romiro? I told you she could cook!" he said, and I laughed along with him, the sound ringing bright and clear in the small kitchen.

But that was a long time ago.

Now all I can think about is the hunger gnawing at me, the pain in my back, and how I'm still locked in this stupid closet. I try to distract myself. I imagine I'm in a big field, green grass stretching out forever, and the sun shining bright overhead. I can see the blue sky and the fluffy white clouds drifting lazily. I'd run around laughing, feeling free.

But then I hear a crash from the living room, and my heart drops. I sit still, holding

my breath, listening. Ma's voice rises in anger, sharp and loud, and I feel the fear creep back in. I don't want to be here, but I also don't want to be part of whatever's happening out there. My heart races, thudding against my chest like a wild bird trying to escape a cage.

I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, wishing for it all to go away. I think of the field again, but this time it's harder to picture. The colors blur into darkness, the laughter fades, and all I hear is the pounding in my ears.

"Romiro!" Ma calls, her voice cutting through the haze. "Get out here!"

I freeze. I don't want to go. I want to stay here, curl up, and disappear. But I can't ignore her. I can't. I slowly push myself up, the pain flaring in my back as I stand. I hesitate, heart racing as I reach for the doorknob. It's cold and feels foreign in my sweaty palm. I'm not allowed to touch the doorknob. Ever. Ma has always maintained her strict rules. One of which has me knocking three consecutive times on the bottom of the wooden door, otherwise it's a beating and no food for the next three days.

With a deep breath, I turn it and step into the living room.

The brightness stings my eyes, and for a moment, I'm blinded. When my vision clears, I see Ma sitting on the couch. Her eyes are wide and unfocused, her hair is a mess, and her clothes are rumpled. She looks different—almost like a stranger.

"Where were you?" she snaps, her voice cutting like glass. "I told you to stay close!"

"I was—" I stammer, but the words get caught in my throat. I don't know what to say. I was just hiding. I was scared.

"Did you think you could just run away? You think I'm playing with you?" Her face

twists in anger, and I shrink back, feeling the shame creep over me like a blanket of lead.

“I’m sorry, Ma,” I whisper, looking down at my feet. The carpet is sticky beneath my toes, and I don’t want to think about what that means.

“Get over here,” she commands, and I shuffle forward, my legs feeling like anchors, refusing to cooperate. I stand in front of her, not knowing what to expect. The dark circles linger under her eyes, the way her skin looks pale and clammy. I wish Nicolo were here.

Why couldn’t he be here? Why am I always left behind?

“Look at me!” she shouts, and I jump, meeting her gaze. There’s something in her eyes, a wildness that makes my stomach drop. “You think you can just hide away and pretend like I don’t exist?”

I don’t know how to answer, so I stay silent, hoping she’ll calm down. I think about the spaghetti again, about the way it felt to eat until my belly was full. I wish we could go back to that.

“Speak!” she barks, and I feel tears prick at my eyes. “Don’t you dare look at me like that! Don’t look at me the way your bastard father looks at me!”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper again, and it sounds so small, so pitiful.

Ma rises abruptly, her movements quick and erratic. She grabs my arm, her grip painful as she pulls me close. “Sorry? Is sorry the only thing you can say to me? Pathetic! You think I want to be stuck with you? You’re a burden, Romiro! A little rat that I can’t get rid of!”

I flinch at her words. They hurt worse than the wire. I want to tell her I'm trying, that I'm not a burden, but I can't get the words out. My throat is tight, and my tears spill over, hot and stinging as they slide down my cheeks.

"Stop crying!" she yells, shaking me a little, and I can't help it; I cry harder. "You think I want to see you like this? You think I want to be your mother?"

I shake my head, but it doesn't matter. She pushes me away, and I stumble backward, nearly falling into the coffee table.

I look up at her, and for a moment, I catch a glimpse of something else. Fear. Something unravelling just behind her gaze. But then it's gone, replaced by the anger, the rage that's familiar and terrifying.

"Go back to the fucking closet, you pathetic vermin," she snaps. "I don't want to see you right now."

I don't argue. I turn and run, my heart pounding in my chest. I don't want to be here, don't want to be around her. I just want to disappear again, to find my way back to that closet where it's safe and quiet.

I reach the closet and slowly close the door behind me, making sure not to slam it. The last time she thought I slammed the door, I received thirty lashes. I still remember the way my shirt soaked up the blood and stuck to my back.

She's still yelling. Her voice is echoing down the hall, but it's muffled now. I sink to the floor, wrapping my arms around my knees as I try to calm the storm inside me.

"Don't cry," I whisper to myself, even though the tears keep flowing. "Stay calm. Be strong."

But it's hard. It's so hard. I don't want to be strong anymore. I want to be a kid, to run around and play without a care in the world. I want to feel safe. I don't want to be stuck in this closet, scared, alone, and in pain.

I reach for my favorite toy, a small worn-out bear that Nicolo gave me. Its fur is frayed, but it's the only thing that brings me a sense of comfort. I hug it tight against my chest, wishing it could take away the fear.

"Please, Nicolo," I whisper into the bear's fur. "Come home."

Time drags on, the sounds of the house fading into a dull hum as I sit here, trapped in my thoughts. I think about what Ma said, about being a burden. I don't want to be a burden. I want to make her happy, but everything I do seems to only make her hate me. I don't want her to hate me.

A loud crash from the living room jolts me upright, and my heart races again. I stand, peering through the crack in the door. I watch as her silhouette moves in the dim light, and I hear voices. They're muffled, but I catch snippets—angry shouts, words I can't quite make out.

I want to go back in time, back when Pops still came home and Nicolo and I could play outside, back then I felt safe. I should stay in here but something pulls me forward. I want to know what's happening. I tiptoe toward the living room, my heart thudding in my ears.

As I peek around the corner, I see two men in suits, their faces tight and angry. They're towering over Ma, who's sitting on the couch with trembling hands. I can't see their faces clearly, but the tension in the air is thick and suffocating.

"Where's the money?" one of them demands, his voice low and dangerous. "You promised. You think you can just keep running?"

Ma stares up at them, her eyes wide, darting frantically from side to side. “I’m trying! I just need more time! Please!”

A rush of fear surges through me. What money? What are they talking about? I want to turn away, to hide, but I can’t move. I’m frozen in place while watching the scene unfold like a terrible movie I can’t turn off.

One of the men leans in closer, his voice menacing. “You don’t get it, do you? This isn’t a game. You’re in deep, and you’re going to pay. One way or another.”

I back away slowly, my chest rising and falling rapidly. I want to run, but my feet feel glued to the floor. Questions swirl around my head, but I can’t process them. I’m just a kid. I don’t understand.

As I inch back toward the closet, I hear Ma crying, her voice trembling. “I’ll get it! I promise! Just give me more time!”

The men scoff, and their voices fade into the background as I close the door quietly behind me, sealing myself in. I hug my bear tightly to my chest, rocking back and forth as the tears fall freely now.

“What do I do?”, I whisper to the stuffed animal, feeling so lost and scared. “What do I do?”

I don’t know what to do. I feel so small, so powerless. I don’t want to be small and powerless; I want to be like Nicolo. Strong and big. And safe. I want Nicolo to come home and make everything okay again.

I know he can’t. He’s out there, somewhere in a world I don’t understand, and I’m here, alone, trapped in a life that feels like it’s spiraling out of control.

And all I can do is hold onto my bear, keep my eyes closed, and hope that somehow, someday, things will change.

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ALESSIA

Tonight is movie night, hosted over at Valentina and Emiliano's penthouse. Pushing back a stray hair out of my face, I press the button to Eli's penthouse and wait until they let me up; he may be my cousin, but he doesn't trust anyone. The hot summer days are cooler during the night, but New York in July isn't something to laugh at. The fabric of my green T-shirt is sticking to my back.

Val's voice comes over the intercom and the small red dot near the camera makes it obvious that she can see me; it's a new installation that Emiliano had done after getting Valentina back from her family. "Allie! You're the first to arrive for movie night. Come on up."

Once she presses a button on her end, the elevator starts to go up. I hold the small apple pie pan close to my chest. My curtain bangs stick to my forehead, and I fight the urge to push them away. The elevator finally stops, and the doors slide open, revealing the open floor plan of Eli and Val's penthouse. As I step inside, the city stretches out before me through towering floor-to-ceiling windows, a glittering expanse of lights that always manages to make my breath catch. The room is a sanctuary of warmth and elegance, bathed in a soft, golden glow that contrasts beautifully with the cool night outside. The warm smell of cinnamon rolls wafts through the open space, and Val greets me with a hug.

I let out a light laugh into her soft dark waves. "Hello to you, too."

She pulls back and gives me a sheepish grin before saying, “Sorry, I’ve just missed you so much. You’ve been crazy busy taking over the new role at the hospital.” We make our way into the kitchen, and I put the pie down on the counter.

“I know, I wish I wasn’t that busy. But work over at the hospital never stops. Enough about me, how have you and Eli been?” I ask her.

“We’ve been good. Emiliano has been extra busy the past couple of weeks,” she says as she moves around the kitchen trying to have everything ready before everyone else arrives. I pull my red curls up into a ponytail, grab the bag of gummies, and empty them into a small ceramic bowl before placing it on the turning tray. Valentina grabs the other plates, one of some bagel bites, another has some pretzels and cucumbers with a side of hummus, and she places a small plate of cheese, grapes, and crackers down as well. The soft notes of Bach’s “Air on the G String” float across the entire apartment. Val and I look at each other before giggling.

“Does he always play that?” I ask as we move into the living room. I place the turning tray on the coffee table.

“What? Classical music?” she asks, and I nod as I sink into the plush sofa, feeling the luxurious fabric beneath my fingers. Glancing around, I take in the perfectly arranged details—the carefully placed books and the inviting lounge chair by the window. Val continues, “Yes, he’s very much a pretentious asshole—regardless of who’s here and who’s not.” Eli suddenly comes from behind Val and wraps his arm around her waist, pulling her into him.

Kissing the top of her head, he mutters, “I may be a pretentious asshole, but I’m your pretentious asshole.”

The soft platinum rings twinkle in the soft light of their penthouse, and as Eli hands Val and me each a flute of red wine, I ask, “Have you guys set a date for the

wedding?”

Eli's the one to answer me. “Not exactly, you know how this one can be so indecisive, but we're thinking November.” Taking a sip of the deep, dark wine, I notice notes of blackcurrant and blackberry, unfolding like a dark whisper on my tongue. There's a velvety smoothness to it, with a hint of vanilla and oak that lingers even after I've swallowed.

“November? Wouldn't it be too chilly by then?” Val shrugs at my question, but before either of them can answer, the elevator doors slide open, and in walks Romiro. He's in gray sweats, his wet blond curls sticking to his forehead. His sleeve of tattoos are on full display. Eli walks over to him, and they whisper under their breaths about something.

Valentina looks at me, a brow raised as if to ask what they're talking about. I shrug and take another sip of my wine. She does the same before setting her glass on the coffee table and making her way toward Romiro. “Hi, how are you Rom?” she asks him as he wraps his arms around her and pulls her into a bear hug. I hide my smile behind my glass of wine. I still can't believe how fast we've all become close with Val. The past year and a half has been hell for all of us. With the death of my uncle, Alberto, and Emiliano taking Valentina captive, I didn't think we'd ever be the way we used to be. I guess I was right in a way; we never truly recovered, but somehow, we became a collection of broken pieces glued together, holding each other close.

I grab the TV remote, switching the device on and flipping through shows and movies until I see Lucifer . Romiro plops down next to me as I linger on the series, and he reaches for the remote out of my hand, but I slap him away.

“Ouch. Hello to you too, Allie.”

“Hello, Romiro.” I keep it short, my eyes drifting to Valentina to see what she thinks.

“Wanna watch Lucifer tonight?”

She raises a singular brow. “I wish, but Mariana is coming over tonight as well. The name alone would give her a heart attack.”

I snort, “Never mind the name.” Val’s face breaks out into a wide grin, and she wiggles her brows at me. I shake my head at her, and we exchange a few more looks before Romiro butts in.

“The fuck? Are you two fucking telepathic or somethin’?”

I’m about to answer when Valentina replies, “Yes, Romiro. We’re discussing Lucifer’s smoking-hot abs.”

Of course, in true Romiro style, he says his next words with a slight smirk. “You know I have even sexier abs, right?” Both Val and I snort and shake our heads.

“Stop talking about your abs, Romiro, nobody cares,” Eli says as he pours some of The Macallan Fine he’s been busy in Italy, you know, business and shit. But he’s alive, last I checked.” We fall into a familiar, comfortable silence as we wait for everyone else to arrive. Both Eli and Val are in the kitchen, probably preparing more snacks before everyone else gets here. But now that I think about it, as I hear Valentina giggle, I doubt that’s what they’re really doing.

Just as I’m about to ask Val where everyone is, the elevator doors slide open again, and Lucio walks in. Lucio is much like his older brother Emiliano—at least in appearance. He has wavy black hair, which he keeps short, tattoos on his neck, a full sleeve on his left arm, and the words fuck boy tattooed on his knuckles. Piercing blue eyes complete his look that tends to scream pure chaos. “What’s up, mother fuckers?” Lucio shouts, as his younger sister, Mara, stands behind him, shaking her head at his words. They both step in, and Eli comes out of the kitchen, his eyes narrowed at his

younger brother.

“Stop being a fucking idiot Lucio. Where’s Ma and Matteo?” he asks.

“They’re downstairs. Ma brought some of her Rhubarb Spritz, and Matteo’s helping her carry the cooler inside,” Mara says as she walks farther into the penthouse. Valentina comes out of the kitchen and hugs Mara, and they exchange a few words before Val goes back into the kitchen. The sound of something popping fills the air, followed by the smell of popcorn.

“Hi, Allie. Romiro. How are you guys?” Mara asks as she settles on the small beanbag sitting at the end of the L-shaped couch.

“Good, thanks, Mara. What about you? How’s college been?” I ask her.

She shrugs and replies, “Good, I guess.” Lucio doesn’t greet anyone; he’s busy staring at his phone screen as he sits on the hardwood floor, his back to the couch.

Soon enough, the elevator doors slide open, revealing Aunt Mariana and Matteo, who’s Mara’s twin brother. Matteo and Mara may look alike, with light-colored hair and blue eyes, but that’s as far as their similarities go. They’re polar opposites. I get up to greet Aunt Mariana, and she pulls me into a hug, pecking both my cheeks. “Aunt Mari, how have you been?” I ask her.

She pulls back and gives me a broad smile. “I’ve been good, thank you for asking, Alessia. How has your residency been?” I’ve recently begun my residency as an A he’s still grieving the death of his wife, and his usually well-kept hair is a mess, his tie loose, and he looks like he’s barely standing on his own two feet. Both Mariana and Valentina walk out of the kitchen.

Emiliano is frowning at Dom, his lips twisting into a snarl before he asks, “Have you

been fucking drinking? Again .”

Dom’s unfocused gaze settles on Eli before saying, “Fucking mind your business. Cugino .”

“I’m not just your fucking cugino, asshole. I’m your Capo. And I fucking told you to stop drinking. Your liver is begging you to quit.”

“Mind. Your. Fucking. Business. I don’t give a shit what you told me. I’m of legal drinking age.” Dominico’s words are slightly slurred as Eli grabs him by his collar and pulls him close.

“Listen. And listen very carefully. When I fucking tell you to stop drinking, you fucking listen . I’m your Capo—your boss. I’m the fucking law, and what I say will be obeyed.”

Dominico yanks Emiliano’s hands off him and shouts, “You can come fucking preach to me about not drinking when you lose your wife and aren’t able to see her before she’s buried. How about that? I didn’t even get to fucking bury my damn wife! So lay off your power tripping bullshit and let me deal with my own fucking liver. Asshole.”

Aunt Mariana holds Emiliano’s elbow and whispers something in his ear. He doesn’t answer and instead stalks back into the kitchen, jaw clenched.

“Why don’t you come in and make yourself comfortable, Dom?” Val suggests, pulling Dom by the sleeve of his suit jacket and trying to diffuse the situation. He begrudgingly lets her guide him, his face not once changing. We all settle back into our previous positions, but Dom goes into the kitchen and comes back out with a glass of what I would assume to be black coffee—the way he prefers to take it—before taking a seat in the far corner, away from the rest of us.

“Have you decided on a movie yet?” Mara asks me.

Shaking my head I say, “No, not yet, so any suggestions are welcome.”

She opens her mouth to say something, but Lucio beats her to it. “Don’t let her pick anything, she’ll make us watch a gruesome horror film.” Mara shoots a scathing glare his way before a sly smile appears on her face. “Not a word out of you, sister ,” he warns, and she shoots him a glare.

“It’s not my fault you got so scared the other night that you had to sleep with the lights on.” I hide my smile behind my glass of wine. Lucio used to be scared of the dark when we were younger, but it seems he hasn’t outgrown the fear.

Val comes back in and places four bowls of popcorn, and Lucio lunges forward and grabs a bowl, quickly shoving a bunch into his mouth. “Horror movies are shit and use CGI to make people scared; you can’t convince me otherwise,” Lucio says to Mara, throwing a kernel of popcorn after each word.

Mara picks up a handful of kernels and says, “Fuck off, Lucio,” before throwing them back at him.

Aunt Mariana walks in with two jugs of the Rhubarb Spritz, and once she spots those two pulling that shit at their age, she says, “Quit it, the both of you.” Mara scowls and she’s about to argue, but when Aunt Mari narrows her eyes at both of them, Mara just rolls her lips together. After careful deliberation, I settle on the movie, Father of the Bride .

“We’re watching Father of the Bride ,” I tell everyone, and as the lights dim, everyone settles into their usual spots. Eli pulls Val into his lap in the large armchair in the corner. Lucio and Mara continue their bickering—in whispers—earning them a glare from Aunt Mariana every time they raise their voices. The only person who

doesn't join us is Dom; he stays seated far away, nursing his Negroni.

ALESSIA

I step out of my apartment building, and the July heat hits me. The air feels thick, almost sticky, clinging to my skin as I weave through the crowded streets of Manhattan. The sun beats down relentlessly, causing the pavement to shimmer with a heat that seems to rise from below. Sweat gathers at my temples and trickles down my face, a constant reminder of the humidity. I speed up, trying to get through the sea of people faster, hoping to escape the heat. This is why I hate the summer.

A gust of wind drifts by. Even the breeze, when it comes, is warm, offering little relief. It's the kind of day that makes the city feel both alive and overwhelming, the kind of day where every step is a reminder of the sweltering summer.

I'm on my way to meet Valentina, Mara, and Aunt Mariana for brunch at the Velvet Bloom Café and thankfully it doesn't take me long to get there. When I do, I immediately spot the three bodyguards standing outside the cafe doors, which means that another three are stationed at the back entrance of the café. The guards out front are smoking, cigarettes dangling from their lips as they talk among themselves.

I push open the door, and a cool breeze washes over me as I step inside the cute, family-owned café just off Fifth. The rich aroma of freshly baked pastries mingles with the scent of brewed coffee, instantly soothing me. I glance around, taking in the rustic charm—the exposed brick wall lined with shelves, each cubby filled with quaint jars and mugs. A soft glow from the pendant light above casts a warm hue, making the space feel even more inviting. My eyes catch sight of Valentina, Mara,

and Aunt Mariana at a table by the window, and I make my way through the bustling space, passing displays of golden croissants and tempting treats, eager to join the girls.

After giving each of them a hug, I settle into the rustic booth. “So, what have you guys been chatting about? Did I miss anything?” I ask.

Val says, “Not much. We were talking about the wedding. Remember when I told you about deciding which month Eli and I want to get married?”

“That’s amazing! You’ve decided on having the wedding in November?” I ask Valentina, and Aunt Mariana’s eyes widen.

“November? If you mean November as in this upcoming November, then that’s too soon to actually plan anything. Unless...” Aunt Mariana trails off.

“Unless what, Mariana?” Val asks her.

“Unless you’re pregnant,” Aunt Mariana finishes.

“Ma!” Mara chastises from beside Valentina.

Val shakes her head and says, “It’s fine, Mara. But no, I’m not pregnant. That wouldn’t be a reason to rush our wedding.”

“You shouldn’t get pregnant before you guys get married. The Camorra is still traditional regardless of how much Emiliano is trying to reform it,” I tell her.

Val gives me a nod and says, “I’m not trying to make a statement by getting pregnant before Eli and I get married, but what I mean is, if it happens. I’m not going to rush the wedding just to fit the expectations of others. That’s something I had to fight with

on my own—” She stops, blinking away the tears in her eyes.

I reach out and place my hand over hers. “Has anyone reached back out?” I ask her.

She inhales deeply before shaking her head. “No. It’s been two years. Two years, and I know nothing. No one has...” She clears her throat. “No one has been able to get any information to Emiliano. My sisters, my mom, and my brother have been out of the public eye for the past two years. They hadn’t even been in the Chicago Outfit’s inner circle. The Mafia in Chicago loves large, extravagant gatherings. It’s like—” She pauses before she says, “It’s like they’ve disappeared.” Valentina quickly composes herself, as if she’s suddenly remembered that we’re outside and not within the safe walls of her penthouse.

Then Mara asks Val the one dreaded question no one has dared ask for the past two years, “Do you regret leaving the Chicago Outfit?”

Val’s reply comes quick and strong. “No. Never. I miss my family, but I don’t regret choosing love. If I had stayed, I would have just ended up like all the women in my family.” Before anyone can ask anything else, Valentina says, “Let’s order something. We’ve been sitting here for the past twenty minutes, just talking.”

I call Jade over, one of the co-owners of the Velvet Bloom Café. “Jade, how have you been?”

“Good, how have you ladies been?” Jade is around my age, her short, chic bob streaked with deep purple that blends into her black hair. She tends to change her hair up every couple of months.

“We’ve been great, thanks for asking, Jade,” Aunt Mariana says.

“So, what can I get for you? The usual? Or would you ladies like to try something

else today?”

“What’s today’s special?” Mara asks.

“We’ve got a baked Alaska as today’s special, but I doubt that’s something you’re interested in, Mara,” Jade says, laughing at the expression on Mara’s face at the mention of baked Alaska.

Mara shakes her head, her face still twisted in disgust. “No thanks. I’ll just take a turkey sandwich with a tall glass of lemonade, please.”

Jade writes Mara’s order and then looks up at me. I order my usual. “I’ll take the eggs and avocado on toast and a cup of iced mocha, please.”

“I’ll have the Banana whip acaí bowl, and do you have the berry sparkling water?” Val asks Jade.

“We don’t, we’re waiting on an order, but we do have the strawberry one. Would you like that one?”

Valentina shakes her head and says, “That’s okay. I’ll just have some iced water. Thanks, Jade.”

“And what about you Mariana, what would you like?” Jade asks Aunt Mariana.

“Oh... I don’t want anything. I have to head out soon. I’m fine, thank you.” Jade gives her a single nod, tucking her small notepad and pen into her back pocket.

After Jade heads back to the kitchen, Val turns to Aunt Mariana and asks her, “Are you sure? We thought you’d be able to stay for brunch today.”

Aunt Mari reaches out, covering Val's hand, and says, "I know, but unfortunately, I have an important scan at the clinic around the corner, so I can't stay for long."

"It's not something dangerous, is it? Why do they want to do a scan?" I ask, noticing both Val and Mara seem to be alarmed as well. Val's brows are scrunched up in confusion, and Mara leans back, her arms folded over her chest. Aunt Mariana has always been as healthy as a horse—so this is out of the ordinary for her.

"No, nothing to be worried over. The doctors just want to eliminate a few things. I've been having stomach aches that haven't been going away. That's all," she tells us. When she looks at her phone screen, she says, "I have to get going. The appointment is in twenty minutes, and we all know how busy New York can be." When Aunt Mariana scoots over, I move so she can get out of the booth.

"Keep us updated, yeah?" I say, and she nods before making her way through the now-crowded café.

Jade doesn't take long to return and says, "Your food will be out in just a couple of minutes. Enjoy."

The café is alive with noise, the chatter of weekenders, and the clinking of cups creating a hum that fills the air. It's busy, but that's part of its charm—no one ever pays much attention to us here. We're just another trio of girls sharing coffee and conversation, nothing more. I guess, with the chaos that comes with being a woman in the Mafia world, we seek the simple things that comfort us.

I wrap my hand around my iced mocha, letting the coolness seep into my warm palm. Valentina sits across from me, her engagement ring glinting subtly in the soft morning light. She's leaning back, relaxed, but there's a small furrow in her brow that I've come to recognize. Next to her, Mara stirs her lemonade absently, eyes distant, as if lost in thought. I decide to break the silence.

“So, how was everyone’s week?” I ask, taking a sip of my coffee.

Mara’s the one to speak up first, setting her spoon down with a sigh. “Exhausting, honestly. Ma, Val, and I are organizing everything for this year’s family Christmas gala.”

I nod, understanding her frustration. “God, I hate having to go to that fucking gala, I can’t stand the hostility. At least it’s only once a year, and then everyone goes back to their cities. Remember what Aunt Rosa wore last year?”

Val laughs and says, “Oh, my God. Yeah, I remember. She wore that dress that made her look like a chicken, all yellow feathers.”

Mara laughs, nodding. “Yeah, and I seriously thought she was going to fly at any moment.”

“And then Aunt Belinda had ‘accidentally’ poured red wine over the front of her dress after Rosa kissed her husband under the mistletoe.” I let out a giggle. I remember it vividly because I was standing right next to them when everything unfolded.

Mara groans. “She did, and Aunt Rosa called her on her shit, and a catfight ensued because they both were too drunk to give a flying fuck about making a scene. It was so embarrassing, especially since Emiliano had to pull them apart. Meanwhile, I was running around making sure Fernando didn’t steal any of the purses left out on the tables. We all know how he has light fingers when it comes to new and shiny things.”

“God, it was awful. At least when he was younger, the family was able to avoid any outright scandals, but the man is in his forties with two daughters,” I say, leaning back. “Has Eli decided to let you go back to school or...?”

Mara's smile falters for just a second. "He keeps avoiding the topic every time I bring it up, or flat-out ignoring me. He's being overbearing, and it's just ...a lot sometimes."

Valentina reaches over, squeezing Mara's hand gently. "He just wants the best for you, you know that. He's very protective."

Mara nods, but there's a flicker of something in her eyes. "I know. I just wish he didn't see me as some fragile little thing that needs to be wrapped in bubble wrap and hidden away."

I can't help but smile at that. "Fragile? You?" I tease. "The girl who once threw a shoe at Lucio because he stole the last piece of cake?"

Mara laughs, and the tension lifts just a bit. "He deserved it. It was our cake," she retorts. "And I have good aim."

Valentina shakes her head, her smile warmhearted. "You two are ridiculous." She pauses, then her gaze shifts, a little softer. "But really, Mara, you know he loves you. He just ... doesn't always know how to show it."

Mara nods, her expression thoughtful. "Yeah, I guess."

I take another sip of my coffee, feeling the familiar coolness spread through me. "Well, if you need any more distractions from family drama, you're welcome to join me in the ER," I say, trying to lighten the mood. "I had three cases of appendicitis in one night. I'm starting to think it's a conspiracy."

Valentina's eyebrows raise. "Three? That sounds ... intense."

I shrug. "It is, but it's also kind of nice, you know? To be busy. To have something to

focus on that isn't all ... this." I wave my hand vaguely, trying to encompass everything about our complicated lives in one gesture.

Mara nods. "I get that. Sometimes I wish I had something like that, something that was just mine."

Valentina gives me a knowing look. "Speaking of things that are just yours, how are your 'friend lunches' with Romiro?"

My cheeks warm slightly, and I try to play it off with a shrug. "He's fine. Annoying, mostly. Keeps stealing food off my plate after he orders something he doesn't like."

Mara grins. "Oh, come on, Alessia. You can't fool us. I've seen the way you look at him."

Valentina nods, her smile widening. "It's true. You've got that look."

I roll my eyes. "What look?"

"That look," Valentina says, pointing her spoon at me. "The one that says, I don't want to like you, but I do, and it's really annoying. "

I laugh, unable to help myself. "Okay, maybe a little," I admit. "He's ... he's different. Not like most of the guys we grew up around. He's funny and kind of ... clueless, but in a sweet way."

Mara leans in, her eyes gleaming with curiosity. "Clueless, how?"

I grin, remembering. "Like, he was trying to impress me the other day, and he started talking about some new medical study, but he got all the details wrong. It was like watching a puppy try to learn how to walk."

Valentina chuckles. “Adorable.”

“Exactly,” I say, shaking my head. “It’s annoying how adorable it is.”

Mara sighs dramatically. “Ugh, I’m so jealous. You’ve got a cute friend , Valentina has my brother ... and I’ve got ... a charity event.”

Valentina laughs again, and warmth rushes in my chest. This, right here, is what makes everything bearable—the moments when we can just be ourselves, without the weight of our family names or the expectations that come with them. Just three girls at a café, talking about life and love and all the ridiculous little things in between.

“And you, Valentina?” I ask, shifting the focus. “How’s my dear cousin treating you? Still writing you those cheesy love notes?”

Valentina blushes, her smile turning shy. “Maybe,” she says softly. “He left one in my purse the other day. Something about how my smile is brighter than all the lights in the city.”

Mara groans playfully. “Oh, please. Spare us.”

I laugh. “Don’t be jealous, Mara. One day, you’ll find someone who writes you terrible love notes, too.”

Mara sticks her tongue out. “I doubt it. I’m not exactly the romantic type.”

Valentina’s eyes soften, and she reaches out to touch Mara’s arm gently. “Love isn’t always about grand gestures or perfect words,” she says quietly. “Sometimes, it’s just about being there for each other, no matter what.”

There’s a moment of silence as her words sink in, and I feel a strange mix of

emotions swell in my chest. Love has always seemed so complicated in our world, wrapped up in expectations. and alliances and the ever-present threat of danger. But Valentina makes it sound so simple, so pure.

“Maybe,” I say softly, “love really does conquer all, even in our world.”

Mara’s smile is small but genuine. “Maybe,” she echoes. “I guess we’ll find out.”

We sit there for a moment, just the three of us, sipping our drinks and enjoying the calm. Outside, the city moves on, fast and relentless as always. But here, in this little corner of the café, time seems to stand still.

For now, we have our Saturday brunches, our laughter, and each other. And maybe, just maybe, that’s enough. For now.

Jade finally makes her way to us with a tray of our orders, and a plate of three croissants. “Sorry for the delay, ladies. Here’s a plate of some fresh croissants on the house.”

“Oh, Jade. You didn’t have to do that, but thank you,” Val says as Jade puts the plates in front of us.

“No problem at all. Now enjoy your food. It’s getting even busier by the second,” Jade jokes before heading to another table to take their order.

Valentina reaches for a piece of croissant, tearing into it delicately, as if savoring every bite. “You know,” she says, her voice softer now, “sometimes I think about what it would be like if we weren’t part of all this. If we were just ... normal. Going to college, finding jobs, falling in love without worrying about who’s watching or what it might mean for our families.”

I nod slowly, letting her words sink in. It's a thought I've had countless times, especially during those late-night shifts at the hospital. Everyday when I see other people just living their lives, free from all this ... weight, even as sickness plagues their lives. "It'd be different, that's for sure," I say. "But would it be better?"

Mara leans back, looking thoughtful. "Maybe," she says, "but I like to think we're stronger for it. We know what loyalty means. What it means to fight for what you love, for who you love. We're bound by it."

Valentina smiles—it's a gentle curve of her lips that reaches her eyes. "That's true," she agrees. "And I guess that's what matters, in the end. Not the world we're born into, but the love we choose to carry with us."

I raise my coffee cup, and the three of us toast silently to that, to the love that binds us and the strength we find in each other.

ALESSIA

I hug Mara first, feeling her arms wrap around me in a quick, tight squeeze. "Stay safe," I whisper into her ear, and she nods against my shoulder.

"You too," she murmurs back, and I sense the hint of concern in her voice that she can never quite hide. Mara always worries, especially when it comes to family after the death of Uncle Alberto. We pull away, and I turn to Valentina, who's waiting with a small smile, her hand resting instinctively on the engagement ring that still seems so new on her finger.

"Tell Emiliano to be nice to you," I say, teasing her just a little. "He may be my cousin, but I'm on your side."

Valentina laughs. "Oh, I'll make sure of it," she replies, giving me a quick kiss on the cheek. "See you next week?"

"Of course," I say, smiling. Our Saturday brunches are a ritual, a small piece of normalcy in a life that rarely allows for it.

"Are you sure you don't want Eli to drop you off?" Val asks.

I shake my head. "I'm sure. I'd like to walk for a bit."

Emiliano's car is parked a few feet away, engine idling, and he's watching us with

that protective, slightly impatient look he always has. He gives me a quick nod from the driver's seat. His expression softens when Valentina and Mara finally climb into the back. They exchange a few words with him, Mara's laughter echoing out of the rolled down windows before he pulls away from the curb, disappearing into the late afternoon traffic.

I take a deep breath, savoring the moment of peace. The streets are quieter now, a rare lull in the city's constant motion. I reach into my pocket for my phone, intending to check the time, but just as I do, it starts vibrating in my hand. Romiro's name flashes on the screen.

My heart does a little flip. I press the green button and bring the phone to my ear. "Hey," I say, trying to sound casual, even though my pulse ticks up a notch.

"Hey, Alessia," Romiro's voice comes through, warm and familiar, like always. There's a smile on his face; I hear it in the tone of his cheery voice. "Are you heading home now?"

"Yeah," I reply, turning my steps toward the subway entrance. "Just said goodbye to the girls. Why? Miss me already?"

He laughs softly, a sound that makes my stomach flutter. "Always. But that's not why I'm calling. I wanted to ask—do you have someone to pick you up after your rounds tomorrow night?"

I hesitate for a moment. "I was just going to take a cab, maybe," I say, though I know I won't. I hate taking cabs that late, and Romiro knows it, too.

"Well," he continues, and I can picture him leaning against something, maybe his kitchen counter, that half-smile playing on his lips. "I could swing by the hospital and pick you up if you want. I don't have much to do around that time."

I bite my lip, trying to keep the grin out of my voice. “You don’t have to do that,” I reply, even though the idea of seeing him at 2:30 in the morning is more appealing than I want to admit. Although, I may look like shit after a somewhat long shift. “I know you’ve got your own stuff going on.”

“I don’t mind,” he says, and there’s something softer in his voice now. “I’d actually like it. Just... Just say yes, okay?”

My heart skips again, and I let out a long breath, trying to ease the rising tension in my chest. “Okay,” I say, feeling warmth spread through my chest. “I’ll see you at 2:30, then. I work at the?—”

“I know where you work; I’ll be there on time,” he replies. “Get some rest before your shift, okay? I’ll see you soon.”

I hang up, a small, ridiculous grin tugging at my lips. I’ve known Romiro for years—since we were kids, growing up in the same tangled mess of family alliances and expectations. He’s been my friend, my confidant, and my rock through all of it. But lately ...

Well, lately, it feels like there’s something more lurking just beneath the surface, something neither of us is brave enough to name, let alone act upon.

I don’t want to think too much about it, though. Not now, when everything else is so complicated. Instead, I focus on the rhythm of my steps and the sound of the city around me as I make my way back to my apartment.

By the time I reach my building, the sun is already sinking, painting the sky in soft hues of pink and orange. I push open the heavy glass door and climb the stairs to my apartment, the familiar creak of each step grounding me back in reality. My bag is heavy on my shoulder, a weight I’ve grown used to carrying.

Inside, the apartment is quiet, dimly lit by the streetlights outside. I flick on a lamp and toss my bag onto the small kitchen table, kicking off my shoes with a sigh of relief. Just as I do, I hear a soft meow and look up to see Mr. Marvin, my gray tabby, padding over to greet me. He weaves between my legs, purring loudly, his green eyes blinking up at me expectantly.

“Hey, Mr. Marvin,” I murmur, bending down to scratch behind his ears. He purrs even louder, rubbing his face against my hand. “Did you miss me?”

He meows again, as if scolding me for leaving him alone all day. I laugh softly, scooping him up into my arms and holding him close. His fur is soft and warm, and he nuzzles against my cheek, a little ball of comfort in the chaos of my life.

“I missed you too, buddy,” I whisper, carrying him over to the couch and settling down with him in my lap. I glance at my phone, my thoughts drifting back to Romiro, and I feel that familiar mix of excitement and nervousness curl in my stomach.

What are we doing, exactly? We’ve been friends for so long, but lately, things have felt ... different. The way he looks at me, the way he talks to me, the way I feel whenever he’s around. I keep telling myself it’s just my imagination, that I’m reading too much into it.. But there’s a part of me—a hopeful, reckless part—that wonders if maybe he feels it, too.

Mr. Marvin shifts in my lap, pawing at my shirt, and I smile down at him. “What do you think, Mr. Marvin?” I ask softly. “Is it all in my head, or is there something real here?”

He just blinks up at me, his tail flicking lazily as if to say, You’re on your own with this one.

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. “Yeah, that’s what I thought,” I mutter. “It’s

probably nothing. Just ... wishful thinking.”

But then I remember the way Romiro sounded on the phone, the way he said he'd like to pick me up, the way his voice softened when he said my name. And I wonder, for just a moment, if maybe, just maybe, there's something more waiting for us in the quiet, in-between spaces of this city. Something we've both been too afraid to reach for.

I glance at the clock. Still a few hours before my shift starts. I should probably get some rest, but my mind is buzzing with thoughts of him. I lean back on the couch, holding Mr. Marvin a little closer, and let myself imagine, just for a moment, what it would be like if we finally stopped dancing around whatever this is—if we just let it happen.

The thought makes my heart beat a little faster, a nervous flutter that spreads through my entire body. I feel like a teenager again, caught up in some secret crush, and it's both terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

Mr. Marvin shifts in my lap, stretching out and curling into a little ball. Trying to calm my racing thoughts, I run my fingers through his fur. "Alright," I whisper to him, "let's see what happens."

By the time I'm done with my one-sided conversation with Mr. Marvin, it's around one p.m. I barely got any sleep last night. Our movie night seemed to linger on and on. I made it back to my apartment around six in the morning, then, brunch with the girls was around 11:30. It's been a long few days. After making my way to my room, I slip out of my clothes. I opt to sleep without any pajamas—I'm just more comfortable that way. I quickly get into bed, and my eyelids already feel heavy. A nap sounds nice. I'm hoping that tomorrow night will bring some clarity—or at least a step in the right direction.

* * *

I'm startled awake, my heart racing from a half-forgotten dream, and then I realize—Sunday lunch. I glance at the clock on my bedside table. I can't believe I slept for so many hours. "Crap," I mutter under my breath, quickly calculating the time till lunch. Not much.

I throw back the covers and scramble out of bed, Mr. Marvin barely budging from his spot at the foot. He blinks up at me lazily, completely unimpressed with my sudden rush.

"I know, I know, but I'm late," I mumble as I make my way to the bathroom and brush my teeth at lightning speed. The scent of coffee from the kitchen fills the small apartment, I'm so damn glad I got a timed coffee pot for Christmas, but there's no time. I need to be out the door in less than ten minutes if I want to be considered fashionably late. Otherwise, I'll just be late, and we can't have that.

I pull on a simple white T-shirt and my Levi's jeans before running a brush through my hair, smoothing it down as best as I can before slipping into a pair of sneakers. As I catch my reflection in the mirror, I can't help but think about the lunch ahead—the routine of it, the questions I know are coming. My family can be predictable that way, and while I love them dearly, they have a knack for making me feel like I'm always behind on some invisible timeline they've set for me.

A glance at my phone confirms my worst fear: I'm definitely, undeniably late. I grab my purse and phone, give Mr. Marvin a quick scratch behind the ears, and rush out the door. "Wish me luck," I call to him, even though I know he's already curled back up, drifting off to sleep again.

By the time I reach my parents' house, I take a deep breath, smoothing down my T-shirt one last time before stepping out of the car. The front door swings open almost

immediately, and Marietta, one of the housemaids, is smiling warmly at me.

“Buonasera, Alessia,” she greets in Italian, ushering me through the front doors.

“Grazie, Marietta,” I reply, offering a sheepish smile. “Sono in ritardo, come sempre.” I’m late, as always.

She chuckles softly. “Better late than never, no?” Marietta always tries to practice Italian with me whenever I come to the house.

I nod, my nerves tightening as I step inside. The familiar scent of my Mamma’s cooking fills the air, and I can hear the low hum of conversation coming from the dining room. I walk quickly, trying to compose myself. As I enter, my brother’s eyes meet mine. Tristan’s sitting at the far end of the table, and I immediately sign, I’m sorry. His lips curl into a small, forgiving smile, and he signs back, Always late.

I smile sheepishly and make my way around the table, kissing Mamma, Papa, and Nonna hello. “Ciao, Mamma, Papa,” I say softly, feeling a familiar warmth settle in my chest. “Nonna.”

My grandmother beams up at me, her eyes sparkling with that mix of love and mischief she’s so wellknown for. “Ah, Alessia, finally! I thought we’d have to start without you,” she says in her thick Italian accent, patting my cheek affectionately.

“Sorry, Nonna,” I reply, taking my seat. “Lost track of time.”

“Always working yourself to the point of exhaustion,” Mamma murmurs, but she’s smiling, her eyes soft as she looks at me. “You must be tired, cara .”

“A little,” I admit. “But I’m good. How is everyone?”

The conversation drifts into familiar territory. My Papa asks about my residency, nodding approvingly as I talk about my latest cases, and Mamma checks in on Tristan, asking about his girlfriend, Mio. He lights up when he signs back, telling us all about a trip they're planning to take to Guatemala next month, and I feel a swell of happiness seeing him so content. They've been together for the past ten years. They met in college when they were both nineteen, which is, in my opinion, the best kind of meet-cute.

But then, just as I'm starting to relax, I spot the knowing glance Mamma shares with Nonna, and know what's coming next. I brace myself, trying not to let it show.

"So, Alessia," Nonna begins, her tone overly casual, "when are you going to find yourself a nice young man, hmm? You're not getting any younger, you know."

I suppress a sigh, forcing a smile instead. "Nonna, I'm twenty-seven, not eighty."

Mamma jumps in, her expression turning more earnest. "Your Nonna has a point, cara. It's time to start thinking about settling down. A family is important, especially in our world."

"I know, Mamma," I reply, trying to keep my voice light. "But I'm busy right now, and I'm not exactly?—"

"Oh, but we've already thought of that!" Nonna cuts in with a delighted smile. "Your Mamma and I spoke to Maria, you know, the one from the garden club. She has a son, Francesco, a very nice boy, handsome, from a good Italian family. We've arranged a date for you." She pauses before adding, "Next Friday."

I blink, stunned. "A date? You're setting me up on a date?"

Mamma nods, looking too pleased with herself. "Yes, cara. Just one date. What's the

harm in meeting someone new?” This is what they say every time they set me up with someone.

I open my mouth to protest, but I can feel their eyes on me, expectant, hopeful. They don’t know about Romiro. They don’t know that my heart is already tangled up in someone else—someone I’ve known my whole life, someone who makes me feel alive in a way I’ve never felt before. And yet... We’ve never said it out loud. We’ve never crossed that line.

“I don’t know,” I start, hesitating. “I’m not sure if?—”

“One date, Alessia,” Nonna says, her voice more serious now. “For me?”

I sigh, feeling cornered. “Okay, fine,” I say reluctantly. “One date. ”

Mamma and Nonna exchange satisfied smiles, and I try to ignore the tight feeling in my chest. Just one date. What’s the harm in that? But even as I try to convince myself, I can’t help but feel like I’m betraying something— someone . And I wonder, not for the first time, if it’s finally time to let my family in on the secret I’ve been keeping. But instead of doing that, I swallow the words that seem to be fighting for their way out of the darkness and try to focus on whatever it is Nonna is trying to convince Tristan of.

ROMIRO

The room is dim, almost too dark, but that's how Emiliano likes it. A long, polished black table stretches before me, lined with leather-bound chairs that look like thrones for men who think they're Gods. I sit in one of those chairs, leaning back just enough to make myself look casual and relaxed. My fingers tap lightly on the wooden armrest, the only sound besides the faint hum of the air conditioning. Costa Armenalli sits across from me, his jaw clenched, eyes narrowed into slits, practically seething with the kind of hatred that makes this all the more fun for me.

He's already pissed off, and I haven't even started yet.

I smirk, leaning forward and breaking the silence. "Costa, you look tense. Something on your mind? Or is it just that Chiara's been keeping you up at night?"

The mention of his wife's name makes his jaw tighten further. He hates it when I bring her up. I know it, he knows it, and everyone else in the room knows it, too. Costa never used to take the bait when it came to Chiara, but after she ran off to London and left him with a gunshot wound...? Well, that changed everything. The kicker is, no one truly knows the reason, except for Costa and Chiara. Emiliano, sitting at the head of the table, glances at me from the corner of his eye, a silent warning. But I'm not done. Not yet.

"Chiara... beautiful name, beautiful woman. It was a pleasure meeting her," I continue, my voice dripping with mock admiration. "I mean, I can see why you'd be

so distracted, Costa. She's... what's the word? Enchanting?"

Costa's fists are on the table now, his knuckles white against the black surface. "I'm warning you, Romiro, bring up my wife's name again and?"

"And what?" I cut him off, my tone sharp now, taunting. "What will you do, Costa? You're here in our territory, remember? You've come to make a deal, not threats."

He glares at me, nostrils flaring, but his face remains frozen. For a moment, I wonder if he's going to throw a punch. I almost wish he would. It'd give me an excuse to break his nose, but before he can, Emiliano clears his throat. A subtle sound, but it carries weight in this room.

"Enough," Emiliano says, his voice calm but commanding. "We're here to discuss business, not wives. Romiro, let's keep this professional."

I lean back again, smirking. "Of course, boss. Just trying to lighten the mood."

Costa's still staring at me, but now with a bored expression. He's one of the best businessmen in the world and an asset for the Camorra when we need him, but Emiliano's in charge here, and everyone knows it.

Dominico's watching us, but he doesn't seem present. After the death of Thalia, his wife, he became colder, careless, and even reckless. The fucker had loved her; that much is clear to all of us. Dom pushes a folder across the table toward Costa. His eyes, always calculating, flicker between Costa and me, measuring the temperature of the room. "Costa, as I was saying before we were ... interrupted ... the terms are simple. A fifty-fifty split on all revenue from the new line. Folonari Jewelry will handle distribution in New York and the East Coast. Armenalli I see the vein pulsing at his temple. "And why would I agree to that?" he asks, voice strained. "We've already established our presence in North America, Asia, and Europe, not to mention

Australia. We don't need you for distribution."

Emiliano leans forward, steepling his fingers. "Perhaps you don't need us, Costa," he says, his tone as smooth as the leather on his chair, "but you'd be wise to want us. Folonari Jewelry has a unique reach. We can get your product into places you can't, places you won't—like South America."

Costa's face tightens again. He's trying to maintain his composure, but the gears in his head are clearly turning. He knows Emiliano's right, but he doesn't want to admit it.

"And what about security?" Costa finally says, shifting tactics. "Our shipments have been targeted recently. I need assurances that?—"

I interrupt him with a chuckle. "Oh, we can assure you, Costa. Our shipments never get touched. Because everyone knows whose shipments they are."

He glances at me with a blank look before he says, deadpan, "I can't be assured of that after your Capo decided to crash the wedding between the Morettis and the Guerreros. And take Valentina. How can I make sure that the Outfit won't try to attack in retaliation?"

"Look," Emiliano cuts in, bringing the conversation back to the point. "This is a mutually beneficial arrangement—you expand your reach in our market with our help. We expand ours globally with yours. And together, we dominate the market. We've always looked out for each other. You've always been my advisor for the security of our online businesses ." The word "businesses" is being used lightly—organized crime is more like it.

Dominico nods, leaning forward. "And as for security, Costa, consider it a non-issue. Your goods become ours, and no one dares touch what belongs to the Folonaris."

Costa takes a deep breath, weighing his options. There's a hint of conflict in his eyes. He wants this deal, everyone does. And on the other hand, there's Chiara. He's wondering if I'll keep bringing her up, keep pushing him. Wondering how much he can take before he snaps.

He finally speaks, his voice a bit steadier now. "Alright, I'll agree to the fifty-fifty split. But I want a guarantee of exclusivity in the European market. No competition from Folonari Jewelry for at least five years."

Emiliano glances at Dominico, who nods subtly. "Agreed," Emiliano says. "Exclusivity in Europe for five years. And in return, you won't step on our toes in the States. Fair?" It's never fair, regardless of what anyone says. The Camorra doesn't do fair; that's why we're an organized crime syndicate.

Costa nods, but I can tell he's still not happy. He's never happy when he's not outright winning. And today, he's not winning. To him, an equal field is not a win.

"Good," Emiliano says, sitting back, satisfied. "Then it's settled. We'll draw up the contracts."

Costa nods again, and his eyes flicker to me, just for a second, as if he's wondering when I'll strike again. I grin, a slow, knowing smile, but he seems unfazed as he stares me down. And neither of us backs down from the other's stare.

Emiliano stands, signaling the end of the meeting. "Thank you, Costa. I know this partnership will be very profitable for both of us."

Costa stands too, straightening his suit. "I hope so, Emiliano. For all our sakes."

We start to move toward the door, and I can't help myself. As Costa passes me, I lean in close, my voice low so only he can hear. "Give Chiara my regards, Costa. Tell

her... I'm thinking of her."

He freezes for a moment, the tension palpable, before he continues walking.

As the door closes behind him, Emiliano turns to me, a slight frown on his face. "Romiro, was that really necessary?"

I shrug. "Maybe not, Boss. Sure was fun though."

Emiliano shakes his head, but I see the hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth. "You'll be the death of me, Romiro."

"Maybe," I reply, grinning. "But not today."

* * *

The lights of the Lower East Side flicker in the night as I step into the casino, the noise of slot machines and the murmur of gamblers washing over me like a wave. Inhaling deeply, I notice the air is thick with cigarette smoke and perfume. The patrons try to mask the scent of desperation—at least most of them do—with the scent of money being made and lost. The place is fancy, all golden chandeliers and red velvet carpets in an attempt to look like some palace in Monaco, but underneath, it's still gritty, still ours. The casino is buzzing tonight; high rollers and the regulars are all throwing their luck on the table, their eyes dancing with desire.

I spot Mario, the floor manager, by the roulette wheel. He catches my eye and quickly nods, gesturing for me to follow. I weave through the tables, past the sound of chips stacking and the quick shuffle of cards. As I get closer, I see the worry etched into his face like cracks in old plaster.

"Romiro," he says, his voice low but urgent. "We've got a problem. A big one."

I raise an eyebrow. “What kind of problem, Mario?”

He looks around, makes sure no one’s listening, then leans in closer. “A cheater. Been at it for weeks, skimming us at the tables. We caught him tonight, finally, but the cost was hundreds of thousands.”

My jaw tightens. The thought of someone having the balls to cheat us, to think they could get away with it, sends a spark of anger through me. “Where is he?”

Mario nods toward the back, “we got him in the dungeons. Silvio and the boys are keeping an eye on him. He’s a mess, but he’s still got some fight left in him.”

I nod, my lips curling into a grim smile. “Good. Let’s go have a chat with our friend .”

We move through the casino, past the flashy lights and the oblivious gamblers, until we reach a heavy door guarded by two of our men. They nod to me, stepping aside as I push the door open and head down a narrow staircase. Bricks cover the walls, and cobwebs hang around the corners of the low ceiling. The sounds from above fade, replaced by the muffled thud of footsteps and the faint drip of water. The dungeons aren’t much to look at—bare concrete walls, flickering fluorescent lights, and the smell of rancid mildew in the air. Rats scatter around, looking for anything to feed the hunger, the greed. But it’s where we handle our business when words alone aren’t enough.

At the bottom of the stairs, I see him—the cheater. He’s slumped in a chair, his face already bloodied and bruised, his hands tied behind his back. Silvio and a couple of the guys stand around him, their arms crossed, faces expressionless. They know better than to interfere.

I walk up slowly, my shoes echoing on the concrete floor. The guy lifts his head,

blinking through swollen eyes to look at me. There's a mix of fear and defiance behind those eyes of his. He's young, maybe mid-thirties, with a shock of dark hair matted with sweat and blood. I don't ask his name; I don't care.

"Why am I here?" he spits, trying to sound tough, but the tremor in his voice gives him away. "I didn't do nothing."

I laugh. It's a low, cold sound that makes the room feel even smaller. "Oh, you did plenty, pal. You've been cheating us, and worse, you've been getting away with it. Until now."

He shifts in his chair, trying to straighten up, to look brave. "You got no proof," he mutters. "Just a bunch of muscleheads thinking they're?—"

Before he can finish, I step forward and land a quick, hard punch to his gut. He doubles over, gasping for air, his words dying in his throat. I lean in close, my voice calm but laced with steel. "We have all the proof we need. You've been seen, you've been caught, and now... you've got to pay the price."

He coughs and spits blood on the floor. "Screw you," he snarls, but his bravado is fading fast.

I grab his chin, forcing him to look at me. "No, screw you, pal. You think you can come into our house, steal from us, and walk away? You think you're some kind of genius, pulling one over on us?"

I let go, and he slumps back, breathing heavily. I straighten up, looking down at him, feeling the anger rising inside me like a fire. "You've cost us a lot of money," I say slowly, letting the words sink in. "Money that belongs to the Camorra. Money that you can't pay back."

He flinches at the word “Camorra.” Now he knows who he’s dealing with, and I see the realization dawning in his eyes. The fear is stronger now, almost palpable. I can almost taste it. And, God, do I love the taste of fear.

“Look,” he says, his voice breaking. “I—I didn’t know. I swear, I didn’t know this was your place. I just... I was desperate, okay? I needed the money. My kid. My kid has cancer. Just... let me go, I won’t come back, I swear.”

I chuckle again, but there’s no humor in it. “You won’t come back? Oh, you’re right about that. You’re never setting foot in any of our casinos again, you hear me? You’re done. Finished.”

I take a step closer, and he tries to shrink back, but there’s nowhere to go. “But first,” I continue, “I’m gonna make sure you remember why.”

I nod to Silvio, who steps forward and hands me a pair of brass knuckles. I slip them on, feeling the weight of them in my hand, the cool metal against my skin. The cheater’s eyes widen, and he starts to shake his head, mumbling, “No, no, please, don’t?—”

I don’t wait for him to finish. I bring the brass knuckles down hard on his face, once, twice, feeling the crunch of bone beneath my fist. He cries out while blood sprays from his mouth, and his head snaps backward. I don’t stop. I keep hitting him, methodically, deliberately, until his face is a mess of blood and swollen flesh.

Finally, I step back, breathing heavily, my knuckles aching. He’s slumped in the chair, barely conscious, his breath coming in ragged gasps. I crouch down, grabbing his hair and forcing him to look at me.

“This is your one warning,” I say softly, but my voice is full of menace. “You’re lucky I don’t kill you right here. But I want you to spread the word. I want everyone

to know what happens when you mess with us. You stay out of our casinos, or next time, I won't be so merciful. You and your entire family won't see the light of day if you try us again."

I let go, and he slumps forward, sobbing and trembling. I nod to Silvio, who steps forward and unties him, dragging him toward the exit. "Get him out of here," I say. "And make sure he knows the way out."

Silvio nods, and they haul him up the stairs, his feet dragging on the concrete. I watch them go, my heart still pounding, my blood still boiling. I've done my job. I've sent the message loud and clear.

I turn and head back up the stairs, back to the noise, the lights, and the smoke. The casino's still buzzing, oblivious to what just happened below. I like it that way. We do our business in the shadows, where it belongs. I flick the thick blood off of my knuckles before wiping my hand down my black suit. Black hides everything.

I step back onto the floor, and Mario gives me a nod, a slight smile on his face. "Handled?" he asks.

"Handled," I reply, wiping the remaining blood from my knuckles with a handkerchief. "No one cheats us and gets away with it."

And with that, I blend back into the crowd, just another face among the gamblers. Tonight, I've reminded everyone who really holds the cards in this city.

* * *

The parking garage is quiet at this hour, just the way I like it. The only sound is the occasional hum of a distant car engine and the soft flickering of the fluorescent lights above. I check my watch—2:30 a.m. on the dot. I lean against the hood of my car, a

black sedan that blends into the dark, and wait. It's been a long night, but I don't mind. Not when I'm waiting for her.

I glance over at the passenger seat, eggs and avocado on toast in a bag, just the way she likes it with a cup of coffee beside it. . An iced mocha, too because I know she's got a weakness for them. I pull them out and hold them in my hand as I wait for her. I've memorized these little details, the things that make her smile. Alessia's had a long shift, and I want to be the first thing she sees when she walks out of those hospital doors.

Finally, I hear footsteps echoing down the concrete walls. I look up and see her coming, her white coat hanging loosely over her scrubs, her fiery red hair pulled back in a messy bun. Even exhausted, she's beautiful. The kind of beautiful that makes you forget everything else. Her steps are heavy, but when she sees me, a smile breaks across her face, and it's like the sun rising in the middle of the night.

"Hey, stranger," she calls out, her voice light and teasing, but there's a tiredness to it. She's been running on empty, I can tell.

"Morning, Doc," I reply, holding up the bag and cup. "I brought your favorites. Figured you could use a little pick-me-up."

She grins, her green eyes sparkling despite the exhaustion. "You know, Romiro, you're the only person who knows my cravings better than I do." She takes the bag and the cup, and our fingers brush briefly. Her touch sends a small spark through me, but I keep my cool.

"Just doing my part," I say with a shrug, but there's a smile tugging at my lips. "And, I'm pretty sure that iced mocha is the only thing keeping you standing right now."

She takes a sip, closing her eyes with a satisfied sigh. "You might be right about

that." She opens her eyes, looking up at me with a playful grin. "What would I do without you, huh?"

I laugh. "Crash and burn, probably."

She laughs, a soft, tired sound, but it's genuine. I open the car door for her, and she slides in, her movements slow and weary. I get in on the driver's side, and we pull out of the garage. The streets are mostly empty, a few cars passing by, the city still wrapped in an early-morning haze.

We fall into that easy rhythm we always do, like slipping into an old, familiar song. She starts by telling me about a patient, some old guy who came in complaining about his heart but wouldn't stop flirting with the nurses. She rolls her eyes, mimicking his gravelly voice with dramatic flair; "Darlin', I'm not sure if it's the heart or if it's just you making it race." I chuckle, and she grins, pleased with herself for getting a laugh out of me.

I lean into the moment, telling her about my night, about this guy I saw outside one of our clubs who was trying to impress his date by doing some ridiculous dance move that ended with him flat on his ass. I give a reenactment in my seat, waving my arms around, my voice going up a few octaves, and she laughs. Fuck. That's the only sound I'd chase to the ends of the earth. Her laugh is light and musical, like the way the sun spills through the window blinds in the morning, making the room feel alive.

She shakes her head at me, her eyes bright. "You really are the worst driver in the city, Romiro," she teases, glancing over with a smirk. "I swear, you've got a personal vendetta against every stop sign."

I put on my best mock-offended face, hand over my heart. "Hey, I stop ... sometimes," I say, grinning back. "Besides, it's called defensive driving. Keeps things interesting."

She rolls her eyes, but I see the smile she's trying to hide. "Oh, right. 'Defensive.' That's what we're calling it now?" Her tone is light and playful, and I feel the warmth in my chest spread.

"Sure," I reply, leaning closer. "I'm just defending against boredom, which is a serious danger on these streets."

She laughs again, her head falling back against the seat, and for a second, the tired lines on her face soften. I take in the way her eyes crinkle at the corners, the way her mouth curves upward in a way that seems to light up the darkened car. Her laughter is like a balm, and I drink it in, every note, every breath, because there's something pure and unguarded in it, something that makes all the heavy things in my life feel light, if only for a heartbeat.

And I realize then I'd tell a thousand more stupid stories, make a hundred more jokes, just to keep her smiling like this. I don't care if I look stupid as long as she keeps looking at me like that.

But after a while, the conversation fades, and a comfortable silence settles between us. It's the kind of silence you only find with someone you're truly at ease with, the kind where you don't have to fill every gap with words.

I glance over at her. She's leaning back against the seat, her eyes fluttering shut, her head tilted to the side. Her hair, that fiery red, has come loose from its bun, a few strands falling across her face. She looks peaceful, like she's finally found a moment of rest.

Without thinking, I reach over and gently brush the hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear. My fingers linger for just a second longer than they should, feeling the softness of her hair, the warmth of her skin.

She doesn't stir, just breathes softly, her chest rising and falling in a slow, steady rhythm. I can't help but smile. She's exhausted, but she's here. And for a moment, just a moment, I let myself think that maybe, just maybe, this could be something more.

I keep my hand on the wheel, my eyes flicking back to the road, and drive the rest of the way in silence. A comfortable, perfect silence.

ALESSIA

Romiro slows his car to a stop outside my apartment building. It's dark outside, the sun still hiding. I turn to look at him, and take in his sharp jaw and the small scar that runs from the top of his cupid's bow to the corner of his mouth. I try not to let my eyes linger on his lips, so I decide to ask, "Want to come up for a nightcap?"

He gives me his signature smirk before replying, "You know I'd never say no to alcohol." Rom pushes his door open, and before I can even reach over to open my door, he swings it open and says, "Slow and steady doesn't always win the race, Red."

"You would know, wouldn't you," I retort, laughing at the way his smug smirk drops from his face. He mutters something under his breath, something I can't quite hear. "Did you say something?" I ask, leaning in close to him in a mocking manner.

He leans in, his lips brushing over the shell of my ear, his voice a low murmur that sends a shiver down my spine. "I was just thinking"—he pauses, his breath tickling my skin—"if you want a demonstration, all you have to do is ask."

I pull back just enough to meet his gaze, arching a brow. "Overconfident, aren't you?" I say, feigning nonchalant even as my pulse quickens.

His smirk returns, slow and deliberate. "Is it overconfidence if I've never been wrong?"

Sucking in a breath, I try to brush off his words, but there's a dangerous flame licking at me, heating the spaces where his voice has settled. My heart hammers, and despite myself, I feel the undeniable pull, the way his eyes trace over me like he's memorizing every reaction. My skin tingles where his breath had brushed against it, a ghost of warmth that lingers, demanding to be felt again. The elevator doors close, and it starts ascending toward my apartment.

I swallow, forcing myself to smirk, to play along even as my pulse betrays me. "You think you're that irresistible, huh?" The words sound steady, teasing almost, if it weren't for the way my voice dips for the breath I can't quite catch.

He doesn't break eye contact, the corners of his mouth lifting just slightly, like he can see through every attempt I make to hold back. His hand moves, fingers brushing my wrist in a touch so fleeting it could almost be accidental. Almost. I feel my resolve slip just a bit more. But the elevator doors snap open onto my floor, and he moves back, slower than he should've. His touch lingering, his heat searing itself into my skin.

I quickly open my apartment door and drop the keys into the paw-shaped key holder. Mr. Marvin loops himself around my legs as he purrs. Romiro bends down to my cat's level and pets him. "Hey there." Rom scratches behind his ear before picking him up and walking into my space.

The door closes with a small thud, and I make my way in behind them, the low light casting Romiro in harsh shadows, accentuating his lethal looks. He's whispering something in Mr. Marvin's ear, the scene unfolding in front of me makes it hard to hold back giggles. I head to my liquor cabinet and pull out some cognac, pouring two fingers for each of us before placing one in front of Romiro and sitting beside him, making sure I leave some space between us. Romiro lets Mr. Marvin go before grabbing his glass and swirling the cognac, the amber liquid catching in the dim light. He brings the glass to his lips, his eyes never leaving mine. He's watching me with a

quiet intensity, as if he's waiting for me to make the next move—or daring me to.

I shift slightly, pretending to focus on my own drink, but every nerve feels attuned to him, to the space he's occupying beside me. The faint scent of his cologne drifts over, warm and smoky, and the magnetic pull between us grows stronger with each passing second. I take a sip of my drink, hoping the burn will distract me from the heat settling in my chest.

Setting down his glass, he leans back, stretching his arm along the back of the couch—close, but still with just enough distance that it feels calculated. His fingers rest near my shoulder, close enough that if I just shifted a little, I'd feel his touch again.

“So,” he says, his voice low, almost casual, “is this what you had in mind for tonight?”

The question sounds innocent enough, but the way he's looking at me, his gaze steady and unreadable, says otherwise.

I meet his eyes, feeling my bravado falter, and shrug. “You tell me. You're the one who's so confident about knowing what I want.”

He lets out a breath of laughter, his eyes narrowing with amusement. “Oh, I know what you want.” He leans forward, closing that final inch of space between us, his hand skimming the edge of my shoulder, barely a touch, but enough to make me freeze. “The question is,” he continues, his voice a rasp against my skin, “do you?”

For a beat, I can't answer. Every part of me is painfully aware of how close he is, of the heat radiating from his hand where it hovers just shy of my skin. I know I should laugh it off, throw back some teasing remark, but nothing seems to come to me. So I stand abruptly, hoping to break free of the charged bubble surrounding us, but his

hand catches mine, and with a smooth pull, I'm in his lap before I can blink twice.

A yelp slips from my lips, but he's already leaning in, his gaze flicking from my eyes to my mouth, intent and unyielding. The breath catches in my throat, and before I can overthink it, his lips find mine, soft, yet sure. The kiss is electric, sparking against every part of me that's been craving this. I pause, testing the waters.

But that pause only makes the hunger sharper. I gasp as he pulls me against his body, fusing our lips together. My hands slip up to his broad shoulders, fingers curling into him as I press back, deepening the kiss. His arms wrap around me, one hand sliding up into my hair, his fingers tangling there, forcing my back to arch while his tongue runs a caress over mine. His mouth is warm, insistent, and each kiss leaves me craving more. His touch is hot and possessive and desperate, branding itself into my skin.

I feel him shift, settling me closer against him, his erection pressing into me. I grind against it, and he growls against my lips. His hold is firm but careful as my hands slide down to trace the familiar line of his jaw, savoring the feeling of finally crossing that line. Romiro has always had a boyish humor to him, but now, here on my couch, with his lips devouring me, he's all man. All hard edges, muscles, and sexy as sin. For a moment, it's just us, wrapped up in the passion and thrill of the kiss, the world beyond my apartment fading away. All I can think about is him—his hands, his breath, his touch—igniting a desire I've denied for too long. I straddle him, and something hard presses against me, something that ignites a low desire that licks at my abdomen, begging for release. His hand slips under my scrubs, the rough calluses on his palms creates a delicious friction that makes a moan slip out.

"Oh, God," I choke out.

"Not God, Red. Romiro." His voice is low and husky, full of lust. It makes my entire body burn with desire, but the sound of glass shattering makes us both jump. I look

down to see Mr. Marvin innocently sniffing the remnants of a shattered cognac glass. Romiros hand falls from my waist, and I quickly slide off his lap, cheeks flaming as reality crashes back in.

Romiro clicks his tongue, shaking his head at the cat as if nothing just happened between us. “Guess Mr. Marvin doesn’t appreciate a good drink left unattended.” He stands up, brushing off his hands, and bends down to pick up the larger shards. It’s as if the passion between us, the kiss, the way he’d held me—it all disappeared in an instant.

“Right... he’s got a knack for causing chaos at just the wrong time,” I reply, trying to keep my voice steady, though my heart is still pounding. My cheeks burn with the flames of embarrassment and something more.

Romiro grabs a nearby towel and bends down to pick up the shards, not meeting my eyes. “Probably shouldn’t leave these glasses on the floor,” he says matter-of-factly, his tone light, as if he hadn’t just been touching me in a way I’d only ever imagined. His calm and collected expression is back, his focus entirely on the glass, as though we’re simply two friends cleaning up a small mess. He taps my feet with his forefinger, signaling me to lift them before he clears the floor beneath.

I feel a strange pang of disappointment, mixed with relief, and glance down at the cat, who has the nerve to purr in complete satisfaction. I let out a soft laugh, trying to match Romiros easy-going mood, and start gathering the smaller pieces of glass. “Yeah, wouldn’t want to make a habit of it.”

He glances up, a casual smile on his face, but that heat is still in his eyes as they roam over my face. “I should...I should head out.”

I bite my lip, a little stunned by how he’s effortlessly shifted gears, leaving the tension of moments ago hanging in the air like a forgotten dream. With Mr. Marvin

now rubbing against Romiro's legs, I force myself to go along with it, brushing off my nerves as best I can.

After a few silent beats, Romiro claps his hands and stands. "I'll see you later, Allie. Bye, Mr. Marvin." He winks, his smirk entirely back in place, as if the kiss, the pull, the way we'd crossed a line ... had never happened at all. My apartment door shuts behind him, the sound echoing around me. All the heat I felt has now become an arctic chill. Fuck. What did I do?

ROMIRO

I stand in front of the mirror looking at the tattoos that litter my entire body, but the only one that has any meaning behind it is the blue heart, above the barcode those people had given me. I throw on a shirt before glancing out at the city outside my window. It's alive, even at this hour. Lights glint from the skyscrapers like a million watchful eyes. I've always liked it up here, high above the chaos, where the noise is just a dull hum. My apartment is dark, after all, monsters thrive in the dark. The faintest glow from the skyline slips through the tall windows, cutting shadows across the floor.

I'm pacing the room, restless. Nicolo called me earlier and said he'd be coming over. That was enough to put me on edge. My brother doesn't do house calls, not unless there's a reason. And with Nicolo, the reasons are never good.

I check the clock—4:30 a.m. I shouldn't be surprised he'd want to meet at this hour; the night is more his time than the day. I pour myself a glass of whiskey, just a finger to take the edge off, and lean against the glass, watching the city breathe.

A soft ding breaks the silence. I don't jump, but my heart picks up speed. I knew he'd be here soon, but Nicolo always has a way of appearing like a ghost, moving quietly, always one step ahead. I press a button on the panel to let the elevator up, the doors slide open. There he is—tall, dressed in a tailored black suit, his dark hair slicked back, eyes as cold as winter. There's a stillness to him; a control that makes him look almost carved from stone.

“Romiro,” he says, his voice calm, a bit too calm, like he’s already figured out every possible move I might make.

“Nicolo,” I reply, stepping back to let him in. He doesn’t smile, doesn’t nod. He just walks past me, his gaze sweeping the room as if he’s assessing for threats, even though we’re supposed to be safe here.

“Nice place,” he mutters, though I can’t tell if it’s a compliment or just an observation.

I turn to face him. “Yeah, well, it’s home,” I say lightly, trying to break through that cold exterior. My brother’s always been a cold fucker. A product of the abuse we endured. Interesting how polar opposites we’ve turned out to be. I lean against the kitchen island, watching him as he moves like a panther—careful, deliberate.

He’s not here for pleasantries, and I know it. “So,” I start, keeping my tone casual, “heard anything about the Outfit? They’ve been really quiet lately, only a few hits here and there.”

Nicolo’s eyes flick to me, sharp and unblinking. “Why would I know anything about the Outfit’s plans?” he asks, his voice cool and detached.

I shrug, trying to keep it light. “Why wouldn’t you? You have eyes everywhere; information is what you hold over everyone’s heads. Besides, it’s odd, them going silent like this. Makes me think they’re up to something.”

Nicolo doesn’t answer right away. He just watches me, his gaze like ice, reading me in a way only he can. “Maybe,” he finally says, his tone giving nothing away. “Or maybe they’ve just lost their edge.”

I snort. “You don’t believe that any more than I do, Nic. They’re planning. And you

know something. So, spill it.”

He steps closer, and for a moment, I can feel the coldness radiating off him like a winter wind. “If I knew something, little brother, I wouldn’t be here. I wouldn’t involve myself in the Outfit’s and the Camorra’s petty fights. And unlike your Capo, I’d actually handle shit.”

His words hang in the air, heavy with unspoken threats. Nicolo doesn’t handle things quietly. When he “handles” something, it usually means bodies drop. And quickly. “Fair enough,” I say, taking a sip of my whiskey, trying to keep the mood light. “But you didn’t just come here to chat about the Outfit, did you?”

He glances at his watch as if my time is running out. “I’m going back to Italy,” he says finally, his voice flat, emotionless. “Got some deals to take care of. I won’t be around for a while.”

I raise an eyebrow, a grin tugging at my lips. “You? Taking a vacation? I didn’t know you knew how to relax.”

His expression doesn’t change. “That’s not what I said, Romiro. It’s business. Serious business. I need to make sure that you can take care of yourself while I’m gone. No games, no screw-ups.”

I lean back, folding my arms. “What do you take me for? I can handle myself.”

He stares at me, his face hard, eyes narrowing slightly. “I know you can handle yourself. It’s everyone else I worry about.”

I chuckle, but it’s short, more to cover the tension than anything. “Got it. No messes while you’re away. You only just returned the other day, but I still expect you to bring me something nice from Italy. I hear the wine’s good this time of year.”

Nicolo's lips twitch, just barely, like he's considering a smile but decides against it. "Just keep your head on straight, Romiro," he says, turning toward the door. "Don't make me come back early."

I nod, watching him go. "Safe travels, big brother."

He pauses, just for a second, his back to me. Then he's gone, the elevator doors sliding shut behind him. The room feels colder—and emptier—without him, but I don't mind. I take another sip of whiskey, looking out over the city, and wonder what the Outfit's next move will be... and if I'm ready to face it without Nicolo here. He may not be in the Camorra, but it always feels better knowing I have my brother backing me when I need him.

* * *

The diner is quiet tonight, just the way it's always been. Velenci's has always been our spot—a little hole-in-the-wall place that's been here for decades, family-run, and barely known to anyone who doesn't stumble upon it by mistake. The walls are cluttered with old black-and-white pictures of families, faded wedding photos, and kids with ice-cream smiles. The light is low and warm, cast from vintage bulbs that hang from the ceiling, creating soft shadows across the tables. It smells like fresh coffee, sizzling bacon, and something sweet baking in the back—maybe the apple pie that's always on special. I sit in our usual booth, tucked in the corner by the wall, where we have a little more privacy. The place isn't full—just a couple of regulars sitting at the counter, old man Jacobs reading the newspaper, and Lisa the waitress humming along to the soft jazz playing from a vintage jukebox in the corner. The ambiance is intimate, almost secretive, like a hidden corner of the world where time moves a little slower.

I check my watch again. 8:15. Alessia is late, but that's nothing new. Fuck! Did I shoot myself in the foot when I kissed her? I don't regret it one bit, but maybe I

should. I drum my fingers on the tabletop, glancing out the window across the diner at the flickering street lights outside. And then I see her—a flash of red hair, her silhouette framed against the glass of the door as she pushes it open. The bell above the entrance chimes, and I feel my heart skip a beat, just like it always does when she walks into a room.

She spots me, and her face lights up, the corners of her mouth curving into a smile that makes me forget, just for a moment, about everything else. She slides into the booth across from me, her cheeks a little flushed, probably from the heat outside. “Sorry I’m late,” she says, her voice breathless. “Got caught up at the hospital; you know how it is.”

I shrug, trying to play it cool. “I’m just glad you showed up,” I reply, a grin tugging at my lips. “Thought you might’ve found someone better to spend your time with.”

She laughs softly, a sound that makes the diner feel even cozier. “As if,” she replies, her green eyes sparkling with mischief. “Thanks again for the ride this morning, by the way. You didn’t have to wait for me, but I appreciated it.”

No mention of the kiss. I wave it off, leaning back in the booth. “It’s no big deal. I was in the area. Besides, I figured you could use some company after a long shift.”

She takes a sip from the glass of water the waitress left at the table, while her fingers brush her hair back behind her ear. “Well, I owe you one,” she says, her voice light. “Maybe I can make it up to you at Val and Eli’s wedding ... if they ever actually set a date.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Knowing them, it’ll be last minute and chaotic. But hey, it’ll be fun. Those two know how to throw a party.”

She nods, smiling, but there’s something else behind her eyes—a look I can’t quite

read. "Speaking of events," she says, almost too casually, "my Nonna and Mamma have decided I need to be set up on another date. Tomorrow, actually. Some guy they know through his mother from a gardening club or something. I don't know... I'm kind of dreading it. But I just thought I'd let you know, so guys won't wait for me on Friday, for movie night."

I feel a prickle of irritation at the back of my neck. I lean forward, my voice dropping a notch. "Don't go," I say, the words coming out sharper than I intend.

She blinks, surprised, and then laughs, but it's a little forced. "Romiro, come on. It's just one date. It's not like I'm getting married."

"I'm serious," I say, my tone flat, no humor in my voice. "Don't. Go."

Her smile falters, and I see confusion flicker across her face. "Why not?" she asks, a touch defensive. "It's not a big deal. It's just to keep Nonna and Mamma off my back."

I lean against the booth's couch, my jaw tightening. Tension rises between us, the air thickening. "Because," I say, trying to keep my voice steady, "you don't want to go. You just said it yourself. So, why waste your time?"

She crosses her arms, a stubborn look in her eyes. "Why do you care so much, Romiro? It's just a date. You don't get to decide who I see or don't see."

I feel something twist in my chest, frustration bubbling up. "I care because you're my friend, Alessia. And I know you. You're just doing this to make them happy, not because it's something you want."

She tilts her head, studying me like she's trying to read between the lines. "Is that all this is, Romiro? Just you looking out for a friend?" I don't answer right away. The

tension is crackling now, like electricity in the air before a storm. Her eyes search mine, looking for something, but I'm not sure what. Finally, she sighs, shaking her head. "You're being ridiculous," she says, but her voice is softer, almost uncertain. "It's just one date."

I feel a tightness in my chest, and I say, "I'm warning you Alessia, if you go through with this 'date', you won't like the outcome."

She looks at me for a long moment, like she's trying to figure me out, and then she nods, her expression guarded. "I will do what I want Romiro. You don't get to dictate what I do," she says. Grinding my teeth, I hold back from shattering the boundary that's been set between us for years. Yesterday's awkward mishap only reinforced them. We fall into a tense silence, the air between us heavy with unspoken words. I glance around the diner, at the old photos on the wall, the flickering lights, and the waitress who keeps glancing over like she senses the strain between us. Alessia finally stands, grabbing her phone. "I should go," she says, her voice tight. "I've got an early shift tomorrow."

I nod, sliding out of the booth after her. "Yeah, okay," I say, trying to keep my tone neutral. "Take care, Allie."

She hesitates for a moment like she wants to say something more, but then she just nods. "You too, Rom."

She turns and walks toward the door, and I watch her go, feeling a strange hollowness settle in my chest. The bell above the door chimes as she leaves, but I stay in place, in our little booth, staring at the empty seat across from me. I know I've crossed a line tonight, but damn it, I meant every word. somehow, I know this isn't the end of whatever just started between us.

* * *

The street is bustling, people moving in and out of buildings like ants on a mission. I'm leaning against my car, parked next to a white scooter that's seen better days. I'm waiting for Eli, who's running late as usual, and tapping my foot impatiently on the cobblestones. The late afternoon sun dips behind the clouds, casting long shadows across the square, and the smell of freshly baked bread wafts out from the restaurant nearby. I take a drag of my cigarette, watching the smoke curl up into the air, letting the familiar bitterness settle in my chest.

I'm supposed to be keeping an eye on a few transactions today, making sure everything goes smoothly, something that's part of the job. But my mind isn't on the job. It's on Alessia and the way she looked at me last night. That look that was part confusion, part something else—something I can't quite figure out. I keep playing our conversation over and over in my head, like a broken record, trying to make sense of it. Trying to figure out if she got the message I was sending.

I flick the cigarette to the ground, grinding it out with my heel, just as Eli finally comes into view. He's got that cocky grin on his face, the one that says he's in a good mood, which probably means he's going to annoy the hell out of me today.

"Hey, Romiro," he says, clapping me on the shoulder. "Sorry, I'm late. Got caught up with Val."

I grunt, not really in the mood for his excuses. "Yeah, whatever. Let's get this done."

He leans against the car next to me, pulling out his own pack of cigarettes. "You seem tense," he says, lighting up, amused. "Something on your mind?"

I don't answer right away, just glance at him, trying to decide if I want to get into it. but Eli's always been nosy, he doesn't need much encouragement to start talking.

"Had to drop off Val at Alessia's apartment," he continues, exhaling smoke. "She

asked Val to help her get ready for some date.”

His words stop me cold. I turn to him slowly, my jaw tightening. “What did you just say?”

He looks at me, cautious by the edge in my voice. “Yeah, Valentina was helping Alessia get ready for a date. She also wanted me to tell you, that you don’t need to pick her up from the hospital tomorrow morning.”

My chest feels tight, and I feel the slow burn of anger starting to build, creeping up my spine like a fire. “Who’s the guy?” I ask, my voice low, dangerous.

Eli shrugs. “I don’t know, some guy my aunt set her up with. I didn’t get the details. Val just said she looked really nice, all dressed up and everything.”

I nod, my teeth clenched so tight I can feel my jaw ache. I told her not to go. I fucking told her.

I push myself off the car, pacing a few steps, my fists clenching and unclenching at my sides. Emiliano watches me, his eyes narrowed. “What’s your problem, Romiro? It’s just a date. Why do you care so much?”

I don’t answer. I can’t. The words are stuck in my throat, tangled with the frustration and anger bubbling up inside me. I don’t care if it’s just a date. I care that she didn’t listen to what I said.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself, but it’s not working. “She’s going on a fucking date,” I mutter, mostly to myself.

Eli raises an eyebrow. “Yeah, so? What’s the big deal? She’s a grown woman. She can do what she wants.”

I glare at him, and he tilts his head, realizing he's hit a nerve. "You don't get it," I snap. "I told her not to go."

He looks at me like I've lost my mind. "Why the hell would you do that? Are you trying to keep her on a leash or something?"

"I'm heading off, I have something to deal with." I shove past him, not wanting to hear any more of his bullshit. I don't need a lecture from him, not right now. I stalk down the street, my footsteps heavy. My heart is pounding in my chest like a drum against my ribs, fighting to get out. People glance at me as I pass, clearly sensing the tension radiating off me, the fury I'm barely holding back.

I should be focusing on the job, keeping my head straight, but all I can think about is Alessia sitting across from some asshole, smiling, laughing, maybe even touching his arm. The thought makes my blood boil.

Why did she do it? Why did she go?

I round the corner, needing to move, needing to burn off this energy before I do something stupid. But the red, hot, blinding anger is growing, filling my veins, making my hands shake. I stop, pressing my palms against the wall of a building, trying to steady myself, trying to breathe.

But all I can see is her face, her eyes, the way they challenged me that night in her apartment, like she was daring me to say something, to make a move. And I didn't. I held back. And now, she's out there with someone else.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath, my voice tight. Slamming my fist against the wall, pain shoots up my arm, but I don't care. I need the release, need something to distract me from the thought that's clawing at my brain.

She fucking went. She disobeyed me.

ALESSIA

It's been a couple of hours since Romiro and I spoke. This morning feels surreal, a hazy blur of moments I can't quite wrap my mind around. The other night with him still hangs in the air, heavy and electric, like there was a shift between us. But I force myself to push it aside, focusing on what lies ahead —the date my Mamma and Nonna have arranged.

Val helped me pick out an outfit before she left. I run my hands down the deep purple dress we chose, feeling the soft fabric glide against my skin. It's beautiful, with a slit that climbs up my thigh, just enough to feel a little daring, though I know I'm making a mistake. I bite my lip. If Romiro finds out ... I don't know what he would do, but I know it won't be good.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. He has no business dictating what I do with my life. It's not like we're together. I grab my matching purse, slip into my black heels, and throw on a light, thin shawl. My hand fiddles with my silver earring as a wave of doubt crashes over me. Should I cancel? No. I straighten my back. I'm going. I give Mr. Marvin a quick peck on his head, earning a soft purr in response, and head out the door, making sure to lock it behind me.

I take the elevator down, my foot tapping anxiously as I watch the numbers descend. When the doors ping open, the cold air outside greets me. I try to hail a cab, and it takes a good ten minutes before one finally stops. Sliding into the back seat, I give the driver the address. "The GERALDEEN, please."

The driver gives me a quick look, then pulls away into the sluggish traffic. It takes nearly half an hour to cover a distance that should've taken ten minutes—classic New York. I hand the driver the money, muttering a polite “thank you,” then step out of the cab. My eyes land on the restaurant's entrance, already lined with people waiting to get in. I don't bother with the line; instead, I walk straight up to the guard at the front.

He's a tall guy in a neat black suit, his chestnut brown hair slicked back. He looks at me, a little wary, a little curious. I stifle a laugh when the tips of his ears turn red, and he clears his throat. “Name?”

“Visconti. Alessia Visconti.” His eyes widen just slightly at the name. He doesn't bother checking the list; he steps aside and opens the door for me. “Go ahead, Miss Visconti.”

The sound of my heels clicking against the granite floor rings out in the open entrance of the restaurant. At the hostess stand, a young brunette gives me a bright smile. “Hello, Ms. Visconti. Your date has arrived already. Please, follow me.”

She leads me up the familiar stairs. My hand lightly trails along the cool black stone railing, my heart beating a bit faster with every step. We reach the second floor, and there's only one table set. A man in a navy-blue suit stands as we approach, his dark hair combed back neatly. He smiles warmly as I reach the table, stepping forward to greet me.

“Hello, Alessia. I'm Francesco, but you can call me Frankie.” His voice is smooth and polite, and he leans in to kiss my cheek, his cologne light and pleasant.

“Ok, Frankie,” I say, giving him a grateful smile as he pulls out my chair for me. I settle into the seat, and he takes his place across from me.

We begin with light conversation, the usual small talk—where we grew up, what we like to do. I ask him what he does for work, and he answers with enthusiasm. “I’m in investment, mostly in new tech startups. It’s risky, but I love it. It feels like I’m part of something bigger, you know?”

I nod, feeling a bit more at ease. “That sounds exciting,” I say honestly. “I imagine you’ve seen some interesting innovations.”

“Oh, definitely,” he replies. “And you’re a doctor, right?”

“Still finishing my residency,” I admit, feeling a little spark of pride. “Just one more exam to go, and then I’ll be officially qualified.”

Francesco smiles, his gray-colored eyes lighting up with genuine interest. “That’s impressive, Alessia. You must be incredibly dedicated.”

My cheeks warm a little. “Thank you. It’s ... been a long road, but worth it.”

We continue to talk, the conversation easy, flowing smoothly from one topic to the next. Frankie is attentive, polite, and genuinely interested. As the meal progresses, I find myself relaxing more. He’s not bad. Maybe this won’t be such a disaster after all.

Then, as we’re finishing our dessert, he leans in closer, his voice softer. “I’ve had a great time tonight,” he says, his eyes looking into mine. “I’d love to see you again, if you’re open to it.”

Before I can respond, he’s closing the distance between us. His lips brush mine, soft and tentative, a polite, testing kiss. But in that instant, my thoughts freeze—Romiro’s face flashes across my mind, his smile, the way he looked at me the other night ... my heart twists in my chest.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps fills the room, firm and deliberate. I pull back quickly, my heart pounding and see Romiro standing at the top of the stairs. His gaze is dark, sharp, and locked on me. There's something fierce and unyielding in his eyes, a storm gathering right in front of us.

Francesco, oblivious, smiles and straightens. "And who might this be?" he asks, trying to keep the atmosphere light.

Romiro's lips curl into a cold, dangerous smile. "I'm the one who's about to make you regret that kiss," he says, his voice low, each word deliberate.

My stomach drops. I can see the tension rippling through his body, the restrained fury simmering just beneath the surface. "Romiro, wait," I start, standing, but he doesn't break his gaze from Frankie. Oh, God. This is going to get messy. Quickly.

Frankie's smile falters. "Look, man, I didn't know?—"

"That she's mine?" Romiro cuts in, stepping forward. "You didn't know she's mine?"

The room feels smaller suddenly, the air thick with tension. I step between them, my hand on Romiro's chest, feeling the hard drum of his heartbeat beneath my palm. "Romiro, please," I whisper, my voice pleading, trying to defuse the situation.

He finally looks at me, and his expression softens just a fraction, but his voice is still taut with emotion. "We need to talk," he says, quieter, but there's no mistaking the intensity.

Francesco, sensing he's out of his depth, rises from his chair. "I think it's best if I leave," he murmurs, giving me an apologetic nod.

I offer him a quick, strained smile. "I'm sorry, Frankie. Really."

He waves it off, looking more confused than offended. “No worries. Maybe some other time.”

Romiro steps in front of him, effectively stopping him from leaving. “Not so fast.” He slips out his Camorra dagger and he grabs Frankie by his collar. Frankie starts screaming and thrashing, but Romiro has an iron-clad grip that no one has ever been able to escape from. Unless he wants a chase.

But he doesn’t drag out Frankie’s torture. Instead, he quickly slashes his throat and drops him to bleed out on the black tile floors. It all happens so fast. Blood everywhere. On his hands, on the tile floors, oozing out of Francesco. This is my fault.

I let out a choked sound before trying to escape the horrific scene that just unfolded in front of me and head downstairs, but Romiro stops me. “I’m not done with you,” he tells me, his lips near my ears. A man is dead because of me.

My throat moves as I swallow before I ask him, “and what do you mean by that? It’s not like you have any right to dictate who I go on a date with and who I don’t go on a date with.” My heartbeat quickens when he doesn’t answer me. Instead, he grabs me by my upper arm and guides me to my date’s dead body. I gag, but nothing comes up. I’m not naïve to what my cousins, brother, father, and friends do, but I’ve never been in the same room before. Romiro’s hands are soaked with blood that isn’t his own. My breathing is ragged, and pressure is quickly building up in my chest.

“I mean, I am going to fuck you over his dead body until you cry and beg me to stop. Understood?” Romiro’s voice sounds crazed, and I confirm it when I look at the wild look in his eyes. He grips my chin and shakes me, demanding I give him an answer. I don’t think I can speak without throwing up what I just ate, so I settle for a small nod. He accepts it, utters one command, then takes a step back from me. “Strip.” My throat constricts.

I shake my head. “Romiro, don’t do this.”

“I said strip,” he grinds out. I know that if I try to reason with him, especially while he has that crazed look in his eyes, he’ll do so much more damage than he already has. So, I quickly lift my hands up, slide the straps of my dress from my shoulders, and slowly unzip it. Romiro’s eyes leave a trail of flames down my body as his gaze follows the dress on its way down. His jaw clenches when he sees that I’m not wearing any underwear. Bile rises at the thought of doing something so intimate near a fucking corpse. The corpse of my date. I shouldn’t be this freaked out; I’ve seen dead bodies dropping left and right since I was baby. We’ve been at war with the Chicago Outfit for that long.

“Big. Fucking. Mistake. Alessia.” The warning in his tone is loud even though his voice is low. Romiro doesn’t make a move. Instead, he stands rooted in his place, his hands in his pockets as his eyes devour me. My legs clench together on instinct. I’m a sick fuck for finding this situation so arousing—the fact that I’m naked and he’s fully clothed. His eyes zero in on the action, and he says to me, “Come closer and give me a kiss. Don’t I deserve a kiss from my dear friend?”

“Stop that,” I say, and he gives me a smirk.

“Stop what exactly?” he asks, acting coy.

“Don’t say friend —” I falter before continuing with, “Don’t say friend like that. It’s weird,” I tell him as I step closer to him, craving the kiss he’s asking for. I wipe my sweaty palms down on my naked thighs.

“I’m not saying it weirdly,” he says before he yanks me closer. Suddenly, we’re standing chest to chest, and my lips are inches from his.

“Just say the words, Red.”

“Kiss me.” I breathe out, and his lips quickly fall on mine. His kiss is rough, possessive, and all-consuming. He’s taking all I can give, and more, as his arms wrap around my waist, slowly bending us until we’re both on the floor. He runs his callused hands over my waist, inches from Francesco’s dead body. Romiro makes his way down my body, nipping, biting, and kissing until his lips reach my wet pussy. His finger glides from the bottom, and he flicks my clit.

“Do you understand the implication of this, Red? Hmm?” he asks, but he’s not really looking for an answer, because he leans down, flattening his tongue against my clit, alternating between long, slow licks and fast flicks. It’s as if he’s starving. I cover my mouth with my hand to muffle the squeal. Romiro thrusts his fingers inside of me, his fingers curling inside of me until he finds the spot that has me bucking against his face. His other hand digs into my flesh, He tugs on my clit with his teeth, gently, flicking over the sensitive nub with his tongue, and I explode on his tongue. “You taste so fucking good,” he growls, lapping up every drop of my release. I feel the sting of embarrassment as my face heats and my chest heaves trying to catch my breath from the best orgasm I’ve ever had. Romiro leans back, and I feel myself flush red as I see my arousal drip off his chin.

“Fucking delicious,” he says, and then he’s back to the same position, his head between my thighs and his tongue inside my pussy.

“Romiro,” I moan out.

“Shhh, baby. I’m not done with you yet,” he murmurs softly against me. His tongue licks and teases me, then sucks on my clit, and my moans ring through the large space as I scrape my nails against the hard floors. “Someone might come,” I try to reason, my voice breathy.

“That’s the most exciting part of what we’re doing, isn’t it? You like being fucked out in public because you’re a dirty fucking whore, aren’t you? You’re my dirty

fucking whore.” His words make a wave of desire wash over me, and I shatter again on his tongue making my legs feel like jelly. He unzips himself, rolls on a condom, and grips my throat before thrusting into me mercilessly, his cock stretching me. My back arches again, and I moan as I dig my nails into his shoulders.

“You.” Thrust. “Are.” Thrust. “Fucking.” Thrust. “Mine. Do you fucking understand?” He punctuates each word with a thrust deeper and harsher than the last, groaning when I tighten around him.

“Romiro—” I try to speak, but he’s fucking me so hard that I can barely think.

“Not a word, Red. You’ll take my cock how I want you to,” he says. He keeps up with his savage pace, and a familiar sensation builds up in the pit of my stomach. That sweet wave of pleasure heightens as he reaches his hand down to rub my clit. Romiro’s movements are rougher, more frantic, and his strokes become harder as his control slips away. I feel myself fall over the edge once his lips circle my nipples and he grazes his teeth against the hard peaks. But he doesn’t stop; Romiro keeps thrusting inside me, even as my orgasm subsides.

“Romiro I’m tired,” I whine, his cock still deep inside of me.

“Beg me to stop. I fucking dare you,” he growls against my lips, his harsh breath grazing my bottom lip. I’m about to kiss him, but he pulls out of me, flips me onto my stomach, and slides back inside me just as fast. His hand snakes out and yanks me up so my back is to his chest.

“Don’t you ever entertain the idea of another man as your partner. There is only me. I’m warning you, Red. I won’t fucking share. Their blood will be on your hands.” My shameless moans fill the air as Romiro pins me with his hips against the floor. His thrusts are so rough I know that bruises are already forming. I shatter around him again and a sob rises in my throat.

“Please. Romiro. I can’t take this anymore.” I should be upset that he’s fucking me on the floor of a high-end restaurant, of all places, especially for our first time, , but I’m so unbelievably turned on I can’t see straight.

There’s something so dirty and delicious about fucking in public.

His thrusts find a steady, punishing rhythm, and I roll my hips against him. Romiro groans against my ear, “I fucking love you, Red.” He stills, and I watch him come apart. I don’t think he realizes what he said, because after he finishes, he slowly pulls out of me and helps me clean up and put my dress back on.

Romiro waits until I’m fully dressed before saying, “What are you doing, Alessia?” he demands, his voice barely above a whisper, but there’s an edge to it that sends shivers down my spine. My heart is racing, and I can’t find the words. He steps closer, his forehead almost touching mine, and his voice drops even lower. “Why are you doing this?”

I swallow hard, my breath catching, I guess we’re doing this, we’re talking about this. “Because I’m scared,” I finally admit, my voice breaking. “Do you realize what this is, what happened between us tonight? Do you? Know what it means, to lose you to something that might not last...”

He sighs deeply, his expression softening further. “You won’t lose me,” he whispers. “Not ever. But we can’t keep running from this, from whatever this is.” He points between us.

I nod slowly, my hand still resting on his chest, feeling his heartbeat steady under my touch. “Okay,” I say, my voice trembling. “Okay, well I’m done running. Are you? Are you willing to give me a chance?”

He pulls me close, his arms wrapping around me, and I feel the world right

itself—like everything is finally where it's meant to be. Romiro and I head downstairs after he calls a man named Shadow, i'm guessing it's some sort of nickname. He asked him to clean up the body upstairs. I don't know how Romiro dares to leave a dead body in a popular restaurant. We may be the Camorra, but that doesn't mean we're stupid and reckless. Or maybe that's just Romiro when it comes to some people.

We're waiting for the valet to bring out his car when I feel his body go rigid beside me. I look up and find him staring across the street, his face frozen in horror as if he's seen a ghost.

ROMIRO

The car hums softly beneath us as I drive, my fingers gripping the wheel a little too tightly. The city blurs past in streaks of yellow and white, streetlights flashing through the windows, painting Alessia in a wash of color and shadow. I glance at her from the corner of my eye—her hair tousled, her lips slightly swollen, a small smile still playing on her mouth. She’s talking, her voice a soft melody in the enclosed space, but I barely hear her. I can’t focus on her words. I can’t focus on anything except the image burned into my mind: my mother. Helen. Alive .

I thought she was dead. No, I was sure of it. But I saw her, walking out of the darkness in Midtown like she hasn’t supposedly been dead for years now—at least she should’ve been. She trafficked and threw me away like garbage, all for a bag of fucking cocaine. I grip the steering wheel even harder, feeling my palms strangle the leather, trying to steady the rush of memories, the flood of anger, confusion, and something I can’t even name.

Alessia’s voice breaks through, a soft, curious note. “Romiro ... are you okay?” She’s trying to catch my eye by leaning closer. Her hand reaches out to touch my arm, but I flinch at the contact, my muscles tensing involuntarily. I don’t mean to, but I’m too wound up, too lost in my own head.

“Yeah,” I mutter, my voice sounding flat even to me. “I’m fine.”

But I’m not fine. Not even close.

Alessia's brows furrow, concern flashing in her green eyes. "You seem ... distracted," she says gently. "Did something happen back there? Other than ...that."

Back there. In the restaurant. With her, pressed against me. With me sinking into her like she belonged to me. Her lips on mine, her breath hot against my skin. Her moans echoing against the shell of my ear, I should be thinking about that. I should be feeling something—satisfaction, desire, anything. But fuck, all I feel is this cold, creeping dread clawing at my insides. And all I can fucking think about is that bitch—Helen.

"I'm just tired," I say, trying to keep my tone light, but I can't hide the edge. She picks up on it, of course. She always does.

"Romiro, you've been quiet since we left," she presses, her hand still on my arm, her touch warm, grounding. "If there's something you need to talk about?"

"There's nothing to talk about," I cut her off, sharper than I intended. I see her flinch, and guilt twists in my stomach. I can tell she's doubting the truth behind what we talked about at the restaurant, the way her eyes are cast down, her face dropping into a cold mask, shutting me out. This is my fault, and I want to reach out, to apologize, to reassure her, to explain, but the words get stuck in my throat. I don't know how to tell her that I just saw a ghost. A ghost that could tear my whole world apart.

She pulls back slightly, her hand falling away, her expression resolute. "Okay," she says quietly, looking out the window as the darkness casts shadows over her face. I can see the hurt there, the confusion, and it makes me want to punch something. I'm already screwing this up. I'm screwing everything up. And this is only the start. I can't do anything properly.

I focus on the road, trying to keep my hands steady, but my mind races in a hundred different directions. Do I tell Eli? Nicolo? What the hell do I even say? Hey,

remember how I thought the woman who trafficked me was dead? Surprise, she's not! My jaw tightens, my teeth grinding together. If she's back, she's not here alone. That woman always had someone backing her up. Always had someone pulling the strings. If she's here now, it means there's a reason.

The silence between us grows thicker, more suffocating. Alessia shifts in her seat, glancing at me again. "Romiro ... are you sure you're okay?" she asks, softer this time, like she's afraid to push too hard.

I nod, but it's a lie, and we both know it. "I'm fine," I say again, but the words feel hollow. She watches me for a moment longer, and I feel her eyes on me, searching for something, trying to read the chaos in my mind.

I don't know how to explain it to her. I don't know if I even want to. She doesn't know about Helen. Doesn't know what that woman did to me, what she turned me into. And I don't want Alessia to know the kind of monster Helen shaped me into. I don't want Alessia to see that side of me, to see the darkness that still clings to my bones, no matter how much I try to bury it.

I keep my gaze fixed on the road, forcing myself to breathe, to think. I need a plan. I need to figure out what the hell Helen is doing here, and more importantly, what she wants. If she's back, there's a reason. And I need to know what it is before she makes her next move.

But right now, all I can see is her face—the way she looked at me, like she knew I'd be there, like she was waiting for me, like a predator waiting for its prey. I feel a chill run down my spine, my fingers digging into the wheel. She shouldn't know where I am. She shouldn't even know I'm alive. And yet...

"Romiro, you're scaring me," Alessia says suddenly, breaking through the fog in my head. Her voice is small, almost fragile, and I realize I've been gripping the wheel so

hard my knuckles are white.

I force myself to relax, to take a breath. “I’m sorry,” I say, my voice softer this time. “I’m just ... dealing with something. It’s not about you, okay?”

She nods, but I can see the uncertainty in her eyes, the doubt that’s probably eating at her, the way she’s biting her lip, like she wants to ask more but doesn’t know if she should. I hate that look. I hate that I’ve put it there. But I can’t deal with her questions right now. I can’t deal with anything except the fear crawling up my spine, whispering that everything I’ve built, everything I’ve done to protect myself, is about to come crashing down.

We’re almost at her apartment. The streets are quieter here, fewer people, fewer lights. I pull up to the curb, the car coming to a stop with a soft squeal of the brakes. Alessia looks at me, her eyes searching mine, and for a moment, I feel like I’m suffocating.

“Thanks for the ride,” she says softly, her voice tentative, like she’s trying to gauge my mood. I nod, not trusting myself to speak. She reaches out, touching my arm again, only this time more hesitantly. “If you need to talk ... if there’s anything?”

“I’m fine,” I repeat, a little too quickly. “Just ... go inside, okay?”

She frowns, pulling her hand back, hurt flashing in her eyes. “Okay,” she whispers, her voice barely audible. She opens the car door and steps out into the cool night. I watch her go, my heart pounding in my chest, a thousand thoughts racing through my mind.

She glances back at me once more, and I try to smile, but it feels wrong, forced. She nods, then turns and heads toward her building. I watch her until she disappears through the door, then I’m alone. Just me and my thoughts, the city stretching out

around me like a labyrinth of dark clouds.

I let out a long breath, my hands still gripping the wheel, my mind spinning. I need to figure this out. I need to know what Helen wants, who she's working with, and why the hell she's back. I can't let her destroy everything I've built—everything I've tried to protect.

I reach for my phone, my fingers trembling slightly. I falter, my thumb hovering over Eli's number, then Nicolò's. Who do I tell? Who do I trust with this?

The only thing that keeps repeating in my mind, over and over like a chant, is the one thought I can't shake.

She's back. She is back. Fuck.

Helen's back. And I don't know what the hell I'm going to do about it.

I sit in the car, the engine idling, my mind racing. I watch the door to Alessia's building for another moment, hoping she'll come back out, that she'll defy me, walk back to me, and just sit with me, even if she doesn't understand. But she doesn't. The door stays closed, and the silence inside the car feels suffocating.

I run a hand through my hair, exhaling sharply. I can't just sit here. I need to move, to do something. I grab my phone from the console, my fingers moving on instinct as I dial Eli's number. It rings once, twice, and then he picks up.

"Yeah?" Eli's voice comes through, gruff and annoyed. I hear the noise of the street in the background; he's probably on a date with Val or heading off to one of the clubs.

"I saw her," I say, cutting straight to the point. My voice is lower than I intend,

almost a growl.

There's a pause, a beat of silence. "Saw who?" Eli asks, like he's already bracing himself for bad news.

"Helen," I say, my voice flat, but the name feels like a punch to the gut. "My mother. I saw her, Eli. She's alive."

I hear the sharp intake of breath on the other end, the rustling of movement. "What the fuck, Romiro? You're sure?" His tone is all business now, sharp and focused.

"I know what I saw," I snap, pounding on the wheel. "She was across the street from the restaurant. I saw her come out while I was leaving with Alessia."

Eli lets out a low curse, and I can almost envision the way his face tightens, the way his eyes narrow when he's thinking hard. "Shit. This is the last thing we need right now. We've already got the Russians breathing down our necks and the Outfit lurking around like fucking ghosts. And now this?"

"I know," I mutter, the anger is rising in me again. "I thought she was dead, Eli. I thought we were done with her."

"Well, apparently not," he snaps back. "And if she's here, it means trouble. Big trouble. Who the hell is she working with? Why now?"

I don't have answers, and it's pissing me off. "I don't know, but we need to figure it out. Fast." My phone signals another person is attempting to call me, and I merge the calls together.

"Yeah, no shit," Eli grumbles. "This is gonna put more heat on us, more than we can handle right now."

I hear a click, and Nicolo's voice cuts in, cold and controlled. "What's going on?"

"Romiro saw Helen," Eli tells him. "She's alive."

There's a pause, a moment of heavy silence. I can almost hear Nicolo's brain working, processing the information. "Alive?" he repeats, his tone measured, almost disbelieving. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm fucking sure," I snap. "I saw her with my own eyes. She was in Midtown, coming out of a different restaurant. It looked ... like she knew I'd be there."

Nicolo is quiet for a moment, and I know he's thinking, calculating every possible angle. "That complicates things," he says finally, his voice steady. "If she's back, she has a reason. She never did anything without a reason."

"No kidding," Eli mutters. "And it's a bad reason, you can bet on that."

Nicolo takes a deep breath, and I hear the decision in his voice before he even speaks. "I'm coming back to New York," he says, calm and commanding. "I'll be on the jet in the next hour."

"From Italy?" I ask, surprised. "I thought you were handling deals over there."

"I was," Nicolo replies. "But this takes priority. If she's back, it means she has a plan, and I need to know what it is. We can't let her catch us off guard."

"She already has. She deliberately let me see her. To unsettle us. Fucking bitch," I mutter, frustration bubbling to the surface. "She's clearly already been watching us."

"We can't just drop everything we have. The Outfit's gone too quiet. We've got our hands full as it is," Eli says

Nicolo is unfazed. “I’ll make a few calls, rearrange things. The deals can wait for now. This is more important. I can’t afford to ignore this. We can’t afford to ignore this.”

Eli swears under his breath, clearly not happy, but he knows better than to argue. “This is fucking up everything,” he mutters. “But we need to move fast. If she’s in the city, she’s already a step ahead of us.”

“I agree,” Nicolo says smoothly. “Eli, set up a meeting with Dominico and the enforcers. You’ll need to get everyone on the same page and figure out our next move.”

Eli exhales sharply. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll make it happen. But I’m telling you, Nicolo, this is gonna stir shit up.”

“I know it’s going to stir shit up. You think I want to be drawn back into the damn Camorra? We deal with this now, or it’ll deal with us.” Nicolo’s always been like this, even when I was younger.

There’s a tense silence, and I hear the low rumble of the jet engine in the background of Nicolo’s call. He’s already moving, already acting. That’s Nicolo—never a second wasted, always ten steps ahead of everyone else. I’m honestly surprised he didn’t sense Helen coming back into the picture.

“What about me?” I ask, my voice quieter, calmer than I feel. “What do you want me to do?”

Nicolo hesitates for a moment, and I can feel his calculating brain running a mile a second. “Keep your head down, Romiro,” he says finally. “Stay out of sight for now. Let Eli and me handle this. Don’t do anything stupid.”

I bristle at his words, my pride flaring. “I’m not a kid, Nic. I can handle myself.”

“I know you can,” Nicolo says, his voice softening just a fraction. “But this is bigger than you, bigger than all of us. We can’t afford mistakes.”

I grit my teeth, swallowing back my frustration. He’s right, but it doesn’t make it easier to hear. “Fine,” I mutter. “Just keep me in the loop.”

“You’ll know when there’s something to know,” he replies, and then his tone shifts, back to that commanding coldness. “Eli, I trust you’ll do what’s necessary on your end. I’ll see you both soon.”

“Right back at you, Nicolo,” Eli says, and then there’s a click, and the line goes dead.

I toss the phone onto the passenger seat. I’m angry. Angry that she’s back, that everything I thought I’d left behind is creeping up on me again. Angry that I have to wait, have to sit on the sidelines while Nicolo and Eli make the moves.

The city rushes by outside, but I barely see it. My thoughts are a whirlwind, my mind jumping from one thing to the next—Helen’s face, her smile that always hid a thousand secrets, the way she looked right through me, like I was nothing. I tighten my grip, feeling my knuckles crack.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself, trying to think. I need to get back to my apartment, regroup, and figure out my next move. I know Nicolo will take care of things, but I can’t just sit back and do nothing. Not this time.

I drive through the streets, the city lights blurring into streaks of color, my mind racing somehow faster than the car. I can’t shake the feeling that Helen’s appearance is just the beginning, the first step in some twisted game she’s playing. And I have no idea what her endgame is.

I pull up outside my building, cutting the engine, and sit there for a moment, staring at the darkened windows. I need a plan. I need to figure out what she wants, who she's working with, and why. Why now? I reach for my phone again, hesitating for a moment before dialing another number.

It rings once, twice, and then a familiar voice answers. "Yeah?"

"Dominico," I say, my voice steady. "We need to talk."

9

FLASHBACK I

ROMIRO

Age - 13

I sit in the corner, away from the harsh light of the bulb. My skin rubs against the concrete floor. My knees are pulled to my chest, arms tight around them.

Chains sway above, clinking together as a draft sneaks through the broken window. The air stinks of rust and decay, sharp and sour. The room feels huge, sounds bouncing off the walls. Most of the time, it's quiet. Too quiet—until it isn't.

When the noise comes, I wish it didn't.

A scream cuts through, raw and sharp. A girl. Her voice cracks, breaking into sobs, and then stops. The silence after is worse. It stretches, waiting for something to follow. A slam. A voice. But nothing comes. Just the dark.

I don't know how long I've been here. Days and nights blur together. They only come when they need to. They throw food on the floor. Bread that's hard, soup that smells rotten. Sometimes they don't come at all. The hunger aches, then fades.

Hunger doesn't matter anymore.

Breathing fills the dark. Someone coughs, wet and rough, but no one talks. Talking makes this place too real. Silence is safer. So, we sit, lost souls in shadows, waiting for the next sound.

The bulb swings and shadows slide across the walls. Graffiti marks the concrete—names and scratches left by others.

One word shows up over and over: RUN.

I almost laugh. Run where?

The table in the center sits empty for now. Chains hang nearby, stained with old blood. My eyes flick to it before I can stop myself.

I don't think about what happens there. Thinking hurts.

My nails dig into my skin, sharp and grounding. It pulls me out of the fog that always hovers, waiting to pull me under. I let it sometimes. It's easier than feeling. Easier than knowing.

The door creaks open at the far end. My chest tightens, but I don't move. Moving gets you noticed. Footsteps echo, slow and heavy. One. Two. Three. I count to steady myself. Metal scrapes the floor, dragging something. Someone.

I don't look.

“Get up,” a rough voice orders. No one moves. A scream, a thud, and more dragging. The door slams, and the silence comes back, heavier than before. No one breathes. No one shifts.

The bulb flickers, and shadows twist on the walls. I follow them with my eyes. They

mean nothing, but it's better than looking at the chains, the table, the door.

She said we were going somewhere better. Her voice was soft, almost kind. Moms aren't supposed to do this, but she did. The memory stabs at my mind. I push it back into the fog where it belongs.

The fog thickens, dulling everything. The screams, the chains, the stink. It wraps around me, cutting me off. The others fade. The room fades. Even the table fades. Just the dark stays, and I sink into it.

The bulb swings. Chains clink. A faint cry fades into the walls. I close my eyes and let the dark take me. It's safer there.

10

ALESSIA

The door closes behind me with a click, and the sound feels unnaturally loud in the silence that fills my apartment. I flip the lights on, the warm glow illuminating the familiar lines and curves of my furniture. The soft beige of the sofas, the sleek surfaces of the low coffee table, and the wide, expansive windows that stretch from floor to ceiling—all of it looks the same as it did when I left, but somehow it feels different.

I kick off my heels, the ache in my feet subsiding the moment they meet the cool stone floor. I let my shoes fall to the side, not caring where they land. I'm too tired to care about anything at the moment. Too exhausted to even think straight.

I walk slowly across the room, and my feet hit the plush carpet as I make my way toward the large sectional sofa that sits in the center of the living room. The cushions are soft, and inviting, their pale cream fabric glowing in the dim light. Unclasping my bra, I slip it off from underneath my dress and throw it across my living room. Those things should be burned; whoever invented them clearly hated women. I collapse onto the couch, sinking into the familiar comfort, my body feeling heavy with the weight of the night.

The city sprawls out beyond the windows, the skyline a jagged silhouette against the fading light. The sun has dipped below the horizon, but the afterglow still lingers, painting the sky in shades of pink and orange. The city lights are starting to flare to life, tiny dots of yellow and white in the distance, as if the stars have fallen from the

sky to settle among the buildings.

I stare out at the view, trying to find some sense of calm in the familiar sights, but my thoughts keep drifting back to Romiro. I don't know how to feel about any of this. The way he looked at me tonight, that mix of anger and something else—something I can't quite name. I don't know what to make of what happened at the restaurant; my body heats up, and goosebumps cover my arms just thinking about it. I replay the car ride over in my mind, the tense silence that stretched between us like a taut wire, ready to snap. We crossed a line, and I don't know if I want to go back from it. I tried to make conversation, tried to bridge the gap, but he was so quiet, so distant, his eyes fixed straight ahead on the road, his hands locked around the steering wheel firmly. Maybe he regrets it? Maybe what happened was a mistake on his part, but for me, it wasn't.

I don't know what I expected after the restaurant, after what he did to Frankie, but I didn't expect ... this. I didn't expect him to shut me out, to wrap himself in a blanket of silence so thick I couldn't break through.

A soft meow breaks through my thoughts, and I turn to see Mr. Marvin hopping onto the couch beside me. His little gray body curls up against my side, his warm fur a welcome comfort against the chill that seems to have settled in my bones. I reach out, my fingers threading through his soft fur as he purrs loudly, his eyes half-closed in contentment.

“At least you're not mad at me,” I whisper, scratching behind his ears. He leans into my touch,, and I feel a small smile tug at the corners of my lips. “What do I do, Mr. Marvin? What do I do now?”

He blinks up at me, his green eyes calm and steady, and I let out a sigh, my gaze drifting back to the window. The city is alive with light now, the buildings glowing against the darkening sky, but inside, it feels so quiet, so still.

Too still.

I can't just sit here and do nothing. I can't keep wondering, keep questioning, keep feeling this knot of anxiety tightening in my chest. I need to know what he's thinking, what he's feeling, where we stand now after everything that happened tonight.

I grab my phone from the coffee table, my thumb hovering over Romiro's contact details. I hesitate for a moment, my heart pounding in my chest before I start typing a message.

Me

Hey...

I think we need to talk about what happened tonight.

About us...

Can we meet up and just... figure out what this means?

I don't want things to be weird between us.

My fingers move quickly as I send each text—one after the other. And when I stare at the screen, I feel myself cringe at how desperate I look. The seconds tick by, stretching into minutes, and I feel the knot in my chest tighten. What if he doesn't reply? What if he says he doesn't want to talk? What if ... what if everything is ruined now?

I lean back against the couch, my eyes closing as I take a deep breath, trying to calm the racing thoughts in my head. Mr. Marvin nudges my hand with his nose, and I open my eyes, smiling down at him. "I guess we'll just have to wait and see," I

murmur, giving him another scratch behind the ears.

The silence stretches on, broken only by the soft hum of the city outside, the distant sound of cars and voices drifting up from the streets below. I feel the weight of the night settling in my bones, exhaustion creeping in, but I can't relax. I can't stop thinking about the way Romiro looked at me, or the way he didn't look at me, the way his fingers wrapped around the wheel, white-knuckled, like he was holding on to something too tightly to let go.

My phone buzzes, and I nearly jump out of my skin. I grab it quickly, my heart racing as I see Romiro's name on the screen. I open the message, my breath catching in my throat.

Romiro

Yeah, we should talk. Tomorrow? After your shift?

I let out a long breath. A mix of relief and anxiety floods through me. At least he wants to talk. That's something. That's a start. I quickly type back,

Tomorrow works. I'll see you then.

His reply comes almost immediately.

Okay. Goodnight, Alessia.

I stare at his words, my thumb brushing over the screen. Goodnight. I feel a tightness in my chest, a sense of something unresolved, something left hanging in the air between us. I type back,

Goodnight, Romiro.

and hit send, hoping it sounds casual, not desperate.

I set my phone down on the coffee table and lean back into the couch, my eyes drifting to the window again.

My mind drifts off as I think about all the years we've been friends, all the times he's been there for me, the way he knows me better than anyone else. I think about the way my heart races whenever he's near, the way my skin tingles when he looks at me, the way I feel every time he smiles.

I don't know what tomorrow will bring. I don't know what he'll say—or what I'll say. But I know one thing for sure: I can't go back to the way things were. Not now. Not after tonight. I've crossed a line, and there's no un-crossing it. Not for me.

Mr. Marvin curls up closer, his little body is warm and comforting against mine, and I let out a slow breath, letting my eyes close as I try to calm my racing thoughts. I don't know what tomorrow will bring, but for now, I let myself hope. For now, I let myself dream.

I glance around, feeling a small sense of calm wash over me as I take in the familiar sights—the walls are a soft, warm gray, smooth, and unblemished, and the large abstract painting above the TV adds just the right pop of color—a swirl of deep blues and gold that reminds me of the ocean at sunset. I move toward the windows, my fingers trailing along the edge of the cream sectional as I go, and pause to look out at the view.

I notice a small stack of books on the glass console table by the window, left from my last attempt at a quiet night in. Mostly medical texts and a few novels I've been meaning to read. I run a finger over the spines and feel the crisp edge of pages I haven't yet opened. I sigh and turn away, moving toward the kitchen, which is tucked to the side of the apartment, separated only by a sleek marble countertop.

The kitchen is all clean lines and modern surfaces, the white cabinets almost glowing in the dimming light. The space is spotless, every surface wiped clean, every utensil in its place. I brush my hand over the cool marble of the island, feeling its smoothness beneath my fingertips.

This is my home. The place I come back to after long nights and stressful shifts, the place where I've laughed, cried, and lived for years. But tonight, it feels different. The light feels softer, the shadows darker, the silence louder. I let out a deep breath as I sink onto the sofa, pulling a throw blanket around me, and I try to find comfort in the familiar surroundings.

ALESSIA

The hospital's fluorescent lights are too bright and too cold. I squint against them, rubbing the exhaustion from my eyes as I head toward the exit. My shift finally ended, and the ache in my feet is a dull throb. The world outside is still dark, the kind of early morning darkness that feels more like night clinging on, refusing to give way to dawn. I run my hand down my face, the warm air rushing to meet me as I step outside.

Romiro is waiting, leaning casually against his car. I notice he doesn't have the usual coffee cup or pastry bag in hand, and something twists inside me—something small and sharp, but I swallow it down. His face is unreadable, his usually light eyes are clouded under the streetlight. I can't tell if he's angry, tired, or something else entirely.

He looks up as I approach, offering me a tight-lipped smile, the scar on his upper lip stretching but the smile doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Hey," he says simply, opening the passenger door for me.

"Hey," I mumble back as I slip in, feeling the familiar hum of his car vibrating beneath me. He shuts the door with a soft click and circles around to the driver's side, sliding in without another word.

The silence between us is thick, nearly suffocating. I try to think of something to say, something to break through the tension hanging in the air, but I don't know where to

start. The car pulls away from the curb, and I finally manage, “So, where are we going?”

He glances over at me, his expression still carefully neutral. “The diner,” he replies, his voice low, clipped. “Thought we should talk somewhere... quieter.”

My heart sinks a little, and I nod, biting my lip. The diner. Our diner. The little hole-in-the-wall diner. The place we used to sneak off to as teenagers, escaping the noise and chaos of our families. The place where we laughed over cheap coffee and greasy fries, where we told each other secrets that no one else knew. It feels like another lifetime.

The drive is short, but it feels like it stretches on forever. And I spend it sneaking glances at Romiro, trying to read his face, but he’s giving nothing away. His hands grip the steering wheel tightly, his jaw set. I feel a knot forming in my stomach, my anxiety growing with every minute of silence.

When we finally pull up to the diner, it looks almost the same as it always has—small, cozy, with its worn-out sign and its neon lights flickering slightly in the early morning dark. But there’s something different. It’s too quiet, no other cars in the lot, no movement inside.

Romiro steps out, coming around to open my door again, his movements quick, almost impatient. I follow him toward the entrance, my eyes flicking over the empty windows. “Is it closed?” I ask, my voice sounding smaller than I intended.

“No,” he says, pushing the door open. “I rented it out for us. Just us.”

I blink, surprised. “You... rented the whole place?”

He nods, not looking at me. “Yeah. Thought it would be easier that way.”

Easier. Right. I swallow down the sudden tightness in my throat and step inside. The warm, inviting smell of pancakes and fresh coffee fills the air, and for a moment, I feel a wave of nostalgia wash over me. The walls are covered in old photographs, black-and-white pictures of families, smiling faces caught in moments that feel timeless. The old-fashioned light bulbs hang low, casting a soft yellow glow over the empty booths.

The owner, Greta, an older woman with gray hair pulled back in a neat bun, gives us a small smile, her smile lines becoming more pronounced, from behind the counter. “Morning,” she greets softly, her eyes crinkling with kindness. “Your food’s almost ready. Just like old times, hmm?”

I force a smile, nodding. “Just like old times,” I echo, but my voice sounds hollow, even to my own ears. “How have you been, Greta?”

Greta nods her head, a soft smile still gracing her face. “Good, thank you, Alessia. How have you guys been?”

“Good, thank you for asking,” I tell her, and I see her face soften before she shoos us away to our corner. Romiro leads me to the booth near the back, the one we always sat in, away from the windows. The wooden seats are worn, the tabletop marked with years of memories. I slide in across from him, my hands folded in my lap, my heart beating too fast. He seems hesitant, almost like he doesn’t know where to start.

“Why did you rent out the whole place?” I ask softly, trying to meet his gaze.

He shrugs, his eyes drifting to the wall of photographs. “Wanted privacy,” he mutters. “Didn’t want anyone else listening in.”

I nod, waiting, but he doesn’t say anything more. The silence stretches, and I feel the knot in my stomach tighten. “Romiro... what happened last night? After the

restaurant, I mean. You just... dropped me off and left. You didn't say anything. I don't understand."

He sighs, running a hand through his dark hair, his gaze finally meeting mine. "What is there to understand, Alessia?" he replies, a hint of frustration creeping into his voice. "It was... it was a mistake, okay? I got carried away; we got carried away. And it shouldn't have happened."

I feel the words hit me like a slap, my breath catching in my throat. "A mistake ?" I repeat, my voice barely a whisper. "You think it was a mistake?"

He nods, looking away again. "Yes. We... we crossed a line. A line we shouldn't have."

I feel a sting behind my eyes, but I blink it away, my hands tightening into fists under the table. "So, what? You just want to pretend it didn't happen? Go back to the way things were?"

He doesn't answer immediately, his jaw working, his fingers tapping against the table. "Maybe we should," he says finally, his voice low, almost defeated. "Maybe it's better that way."

I swallow hard, feeling like shards of glass are caught in my throat. "Better for who , Romiro? For you? Because it doesn't feel better for me."

He looks at me then, his expression conflicted, his eyes searching mine. "I don't know, Alessia. I don't know what to do with this... with us. We've been friends forever. I don't want to lose that."

A bitter laugh escapes my lips before I can stop it. "Right. Because staying friends is so easy when you're pretending you don't feel ... something more."

He flinches, just slightly, but enough for me to notice. “I’m trying to protect us,” he says quietly. “Trying to keep us from ruining something good.”

“Maybe it’s already ruined,” I shoot back, my voice sharper than I intended. The words hang heavy between us, and I immediately wish I could take them back.

He leans back, his expression hardening. “Maybe it is,” he murmurs, and the pain in his voice cuts deeper than I expected.

I look down, my vision blurring, my chest tight. “Fine,” I whisper. “If that’s how you feel.”

Greta approaches, setting down a plate of pancakes and bacon in front of us, the smell delicious, but I suddenly have no appetite. She gives us a small, concerned smile before retreating, leaving us alone again.

For a long moment, neither of us speaks. I stare at the food, my hands trembling slightly in my lap. I feel raw, exposed, like every nerve in my body is on edge. The silence stretches and once I’m sure that he won’t speak up, I pick up my phone and get up. His head snaps up, his eyes narrowing on me. “Where are you going?” he asks me.

“Home.” I keep my answer short. His brows knit and he looks confused.

“We haven’t finished talking,” he says.

Biting my lip I say, “Well, to me it seems like you’ve made up your mind, you seem to think that the other night was a mistake. So ... I’m going home.” I inhale deeply after my long-winded rant, and I try to get out of the booth, but Romiro moves faster than me and blocks my exit. His eyes are narrowed, a frown settling on his face, and he looks as if he’s been punched. I don’t wait for him to move out the way. I shuffle

toward the end of the booth until we're chest to chest. "Move, Romiro. I'm leaving."

"The fuck you are. We're. Not. Done. Talking," he grits out.

"Well, to me, that"—I pause pointing between us—"seemed like sitting in awkward silence. Not talking."

He lets out a sigh before running a hand down his face and saying, "Listen, I'm sorry. I was trying to think of what to say."

I hold up my hand. "It's fine, Romiro. You don't have to say anything. Since you're not sure about it, we're better off as friends. I can go back to the arranged dates my Nonna and Mamma love so much."

Oh. He doesn't like that. His face twists into a vicious snarl before he moves into my personal space. "Oh, so now you think that we're better off as friends? You think you can go on your little dates, huh, Red?"

His face is now inches from mine. "Remember what I did to Frankie?" He waits for an answer so I nod, and he continues, "I can make each of your little dates disappear like they never existed. Don't test me, Red," he warns.

"I don't know what makes you think that I would ever allow you to control who I date, but that won't happen," I taunt, and his amber eyes move over my features, taking in the defiance I am sure is etched into the contours of my face.

Romiro lifts his hands, and they cradle my face, his thumb brushing lightly over my freckled cheeks. He leans in, his lips brushing over my own as he whispers, "Who said I need anyone's permission to stop your so-called dates." Before I can say anything back, his lips smash against mine, biting, tugging, and bruising, the taste of him filling my senses. He pulls back slightly, his breath hot against my ear. "Come

with me," he whispers, his voice low, thick with something dark and hungry.

He takes my hand and tugs me out of the booth. My heart pounds in my chest, a wild, erratic rhythm that matches the intensity in his eyes. I don't ask where we're going; I already know. He leads me past the empty tables, past the lingering scent of coffee and pancakes, until we reach the narrow hallway at the back of the diner.

The light flickers overhead, casting long silhouettes against the white tile walls. I glance up at him, and there's a wild, almost desperate look in his eyes that sends a shiver down my spine. Without a word, he pushes the bathroom door open, pulling me inside with a rough urgency that makes my breath catch.

The door to the bathroom slams shut behind us with a force that rattles the tiles on the walls. Romero's hand is at the small of my back, pressing me roughly against the cool, white tiles. His warm, labored breath brushes against my ear. I can feel the tension in his grip with how his fingers dig into my skin, almost bruising, like he's holding on for dear life.

There's no softness in his eyes now, only a dark, feral hunger that sends a jolt of adrenaline through me. He doesn't wait, doesn't hesitate. His mouth crashes against mine, hard, his teeth biting down on my lower lip with just enough force to make me gasp. I taste the metallic tang of blood, but he doesn't relent; he presses harder, his lips demanding, punishing. And in between kisses I say, "We shouldn't do this. Not here."

"No?" he asks before lifting me effortlessly, shoving me onto the cold, unforgiving edge of the porcelain sink. My back slams against the mirror with a sharp thud, the pain radiating through my spine, but I barely notice it. His hands are already moving, rough and urgent, sliding up my thighs, pulling my work pants over my hips.

"Do you still think that we should be friends?" he snarls, his voice a low, dangerous

rumble. “Think we can go back to acting normal, pretending that you don’t crave me as much as I crave you?”

I try to catch my breath, try to speak, but he grabs my jaw with one hand, his fingers digging into my skin, forcing me to look at him. “Answer me,” he demands, his eyes blazing with something dark, something I’ve never seen in him before.

“No,” I gasp out, my heart racing. I don’t know if it’s fear or desire coursing through my veins, but I don’t care. I need this. I need him. I grab onto his shoulders, my nails digging into his skin, and he smirks, his grip tightening.

“Good,” he growls, his voice a rough whisper against my lips. “Because you’re going to take it. All of it.”

He yanks my panties aside, the fabric tearing slightly, and I feel a thrill shoot through me. Romiro pulls me off the edge of the sink and twists me around, his chest to my back, his fingers thrust deep inside me. There’s nothing gentle about his touch, nothing tender in the way his fingers thrust inside me, rough and relentless, making me gasp, my head falling against the mirror with a dull thud. His other hand slides up to my throat, squeezing just enough to send a pulse of fear and arousal through me.

“We shouldn’t be doing this in a public restroom,” I whisper, turning to look away.

“But it feels good, doesn’t it, baby?” he coos, and my stomach swoops. Romiro’s grip tightens on my throat. “Don’t look away. I want you to see what you do to me.”

I force myself to meet his gaze, my breath coming in short, ragged gasps as he thrusts his fingers inside me, hard, his movements demanding, unyielding. He watches me with an intensity that makes my pulse race, his eyes dark and hungry. Romiro curls his fingers and presses the heel of his hand over my clit, his face close to mine as he asks me. “You like riding my fingers in a dingy restroom in the back of a greasy

diner. Don't you?"

He doesn't wait for the answer before his fingers pull out abruptly, leaving me feeling empty and desperate. I was so close. Before I can even draw another breath, he undoes his belt with a swift, violent motion, his jaw clenched tight. He positions himself between my thighs, his hands gripping my hips with a bruising force. His eyes never leave mine as he thrusts into me in one hard stroke. I cry out, a mix of pain and pleasure ripping through me.

"Shut up," he snarls, his voice a harsh whisper against my ear. "You don't want the owner hearing your moans. Do you?" I shake my head, pushing my hips back into him. "Good." He thrusts again, harder this time, and I bite back another cry, my fingers gripping the edge of the sink so tight my knuckles turn white. He's hot like a furnace, his heat sears itself into my back, and all I can focus on is him—the way he fills me, stretches me, takes what he wants without asking.

His pace is brutal and relentless, each thrust slamming me harder against the mirror, making it rattle with the force. His hand moves to my hair, yanking my head back roughly, exposing my throat to his teeth. He bites down, hard, enough to make me gasp, and a dark chuckle rumbles in his chest.

"You think you can just do whatever you want?" he growls against my skin, his breath hot, burning. "Go on dates with other men? Make me feel things I shouldn't about my friend?"

His words are like a slap, and I feel a mix of anger and desire flood my veins.

"I didn't make you feel anything you didn't want to feel." I try to push him away, but he's stronger, and faster. He pulls out, twists me around to face him, pins my hands above my head, pressing them against the cold, tiled wall, his grip like iron. "I'm not done with you," he whispers, his voice low and deadly. "Not even close."

He thrusts deeper, his movements rough and punishing, and I feel myself tightening around him, my body betraying me. He knows it, too—he can feel it, the way my body responds to him despite everything, and it drives him harder, faster.

“Say it,” he demands, his voice raw. “Say you’re mine.”

I hesitate, and his hand tightens around my throat, cutting off my air, just enough to make my vision blur, and my breath stutter. “Say it,” he growls again, his lips brushing against my ear, and I feel a shudder run through me.

“I’m yours,” I gasp, the words barely audible, my heart hammering in my chest.

He releases his grip just enough for me to breathe, but his thrusts don’t slow; if anything, they become more frantic, more desperate. He slams into me, over and over, his breath hot against my neck, his hands everywhere—gripping, squeezing, marking me.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, his voice dark, and possessive, and I feel the edge coming, sharp and hard, and I know I’m going to shatter.

And when I do, he’s right there with me, his growl vibrating against my skin, his hands clutching me so tightly I know I’ll bear the bruises tomorrow. But I don’t care. All I care about is him—this moment, this madness, this fire that burns between us, dark and dangerous and all-consuming.

12

FLASHBACK II

ROMIRO

Age:13

The room isn't quiet, but the sounds start fading. The murmurs, the clinking chains, the faint cries from somewhere far off—it all blurs into static, buzzing faintly at the edge of my awareness. My eyes are open, staring at nothing, the cracks in the concrete floor shifting in and out of focus. My chest rises and falls, but I don't feel the air moving in or out. I don't feel anything.

It's better this way.

The fog is thick, wrapping around my mind like a cocoon. It dulls everything, keeps the pain and the fear at arm's length. I sink into it, letting it pull me under. There's no need to fight it. Fighting doesn't change anything.

I don't even think about the others anymore. Their voices blend together, a mix of cries and whispers. I used to care. I used to wonder if they'd survive—if I'd survive. Now, it all feels pointless.

My body is here, but my mind drifts. It floats somewhere distant, untouchable. Flashes of the past come and go, jumbled and indistinct. My mother's face, blurry and faded. The sound of my own laugh—a laugh that sounds strange now, like it

belongs to someone else. My brother's sharp gaze. The way the sky looked when I used to play outside. Blue. I try to remember the color blue, but it feels fake, like something I imagined.

The thought comes, unbidden, cutting through the haze like a knife. I don't want to be here anymore.

Not in this room. Not in this body. Not in this life.

I'm tired. My legs ache from sitting in the same place for too long. My ribs hurt from the last time I was being "defiant." But the worst pain isn't in my body. It's somewhere deeper, somewhere I can't reach.

Death feels like a promise, distant but certain. It waits patiently, just out of reach. I think about it often. What it would feel like to finally let go, to stop breathing, to sink into nothing and never come back. The idea doesn't scare me. It's the only thing that doesn't.

Maybe death will be quiet, I think, the words slow and sluggish in my mind. Maybe it will be dark and empty, and I won't have to feel anything anymore.

But another thought follows, creeping in like a dark cloud...

Maybe death is just another kind of chain.

Even in death, I wonder if I'd be free. What if it's worse? What if there's nothing but the same—the same fear, the same pain, the same emptiness?

The sound of the door creaking open cuts through the stillness. My head stays down, eyes locked on the stained floor. Heavy footsteps echo, sharp and deliberate. I don't flinch. I know what comes next.

They're dragging someone in. A girl. Her screams ricochet off the walls, desperate and raw. The scrape of her shoes against the ground fills the room, every movement a battle she's already lost. Once they have you, they never let you go. Not without a price. Death or money.

"No! Let me go! Let me go!" she yells, voice cracking. Her fight feels distant, like a memory I don't want to touch. My chest tightens, but I don't move. I don't look. I've learned not to.

The new ones always fight. They haven't learned yet. Not like us. Not like me.

We've all been dragged through the same routine. The punishment takes care of the fight. The rape takes care of the spirit. Most of them stop resisting after the first time. Some last longer. It doesn't matter. It all ends the same.

Her screams turn to ragged sobs. The sound fading into the static in my head. I press myself deeper into the corner, my back against the cold wall. She doesn't know yet—none of them do—that hope only makes it worse. Hope is a poison that keeps you trying long after it's cost you everything.

The static grows louder, filling the space in my head, drowning out the whispers of my thoughts. The fog thickens again, pulling me deeper. I let it. There's nothing else to do. I keep staring at the floor, at the cracks in the concrete that never seem to lead anywhere. Just lines, splitting and curling and going nowhere. Like me.

I close my eyes and wait.

For what, I don't know. For nothing, maybe.

13

ROMIRO

The apartment is dark, the only light spilling in from the vast floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the city. The skyline is a mosaic of distant lights, skyscrapers that reach up like jagged teeth against the black sky. I'm sitting on the edge of the sofa, staring out into the void, waiting for Nicolo. My fingers tap restlessly on my knee, an anxious rhythm I can't seem to break.

I hear the elevator doors slide open down the hall. Nicolo's footsteps are quiet but firm, and I know it's him before he even steps inside. He moves like a shadow, always has, the kind of presence that fills a room without a word. When he finally appears, he looks almost out of place in the sleek, modern expanse of my apartment, his tailored black suit making him seem even more formidable. His face is carved in stone, unreadable.

He doesn't waste any time. "Romiro," he greets me, his tone clipped, business-like. He walks over to the bar, pouring himself a drink without asking, and then one for me. Scotch. Neat. He knows I hate the taste, but I take the glass anyway.

"Nicolo," I reply, trying to keep my voice steady, casual, but there's tension there. I know he hears it, too. If someone from the outside saw us, they'd think we're merely acquaintances and not brothers. But Nicolo has always veered on the cold, stoic side.

He takes a seat across from me, his eyes never leaving mine, and for a moment, neither of us says anything. I'm not sure where to start, or if I should start at all. It's

Nicolo who breaks the silence.

"Italy was... productive," he says, swirling his glass. "I was able to close a deal with the Marchese family. They agreed to my terms, and I'll be able to expand through Naples."

I nod, trying to focus, trying to keep my mind on the business. "Good," I say, taking a sip of the scotch and forcing myself not to wince at the burn.

Nicolo's eyes narrow slightly. His eyes are a forest green shade, but they're so dark they almost look black. I shift in my seat, feeling the tension between us thickening like smoke. I know where this is going, but I'm not sure I want to go there. Not tonight. Not with everything else swirling in my head.

"So," Nicolo continues, "this woman. She resembled Helen? Or are you sure it was Helen? She just shows up out of nowhere after all these years of us thinking she was dead. And you think it's just a coincidence?"

I swallow, my throat dry. I don't want to talk about her, but there's no avoiding it. Not with Nicolo. "It's not someone who looks like her Nico. It was her," I tell him. "And no," I say, my voice low, "It's not a coincidence. She's here for a reason. But I don't know what it is yet."

Nicolo nods, his gaze still locked on me. "And what do you think that reason is?"

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself, but the memories are clawing at the edges of my mind. "I don't know," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. "But it's not good. It's never good with her."

There's a long pause, the air between us heavy. Nicolo sets his glass down on the table, leaning forward, his expression softening just a fraction. "Tell me, Romiro," he

says quietly. “What happened... back then?” I never told him—or anyone—about what happened when I was in that hellhole.

I flinch at the question, my heart hammering in my chest. I don’t want to go back there. Not now. Not ever. But he’s looking at me, waiting, and I know he won’t let it go.

“After she sold me off—” I start, but my voice catches in my throat. I look away, staring out the window at the dark city below. “I was drugged out of my mind and made to do things no living thing should be subjected to,” I say finally, the words feeling foreign on my tongue. “Let alone a thirteen-year-old child.”

Nicolo’s face remains expressionless, but his eyes darken, a flicker of something dangerous passing through them. “Made you do things,” he repeats, his voice flat. “What things?”

I shake my head, trying to push the memories back, but they keep flooding in—dirty rooms, the smell of sweat and fear, hands grabbing, pulling, tearing. “Fuck Nico.... I was trafficked, forced to have sex with grown men and women,” I say, my throat closing up. “With... whoever would pay. They... used me. Hurt me. And she just... let it happen. I was thirteen, man.”

Nicolo’s hand tightens around his glass, his knuckles turning white. “Bastardos,” he mutters under his breath in Italian, but I barely register the word. My mind is miles away, back in those dark places I swore I’d never go again.

“She didn’t care,” I continue, my voice hollow, my hands trembling. “She didn’t... she didn’t care about me. I was just... something to sell, something to use. I was nothing to her.”

Nicolo leans back, his expression still cold, but there’s something else there

now—something almost like pain. “Helen never cared about anyone but herself. She was a junkie that didn’t want kids. Our sperm donor raped her. We were born out of rape,” he tells me. My brother was and has always been the only person who cares about me; I might not hear it from him but his actions are enough for me to know. After all, he’s the one who rescued me. “Why do you think she’s back? To build that organization again?” Helen wasn’t just some junkie; she ran with a crowd known for human trafficking.

I shake my head, not wanting to think about it. “I don’t know,” I whisper. “I don’t know what she wants. But I’m not a kid anymore. She can’t do this to me again. And I won’t allow her to do this to other kids.”

Nicolo nods, but he’s still watching me, still studying me like he’s trying to figure out a puzzle. “You’re not a kid, and you have me,” he says. “But she’s not just any enemy, Romiro. She knows you. Knows us. Knows our weaknesses.”

I feel a sharp stab of anger at his words, but it’s drowned out by a wave of shame. “I don’t have any weaknesses,” I snap, my voice harsher than I intend.

Nicolo’s eyes harden. “Don’t lie to yourself, little brother,” he says, his voice quiet but firm. “We all have weaknesses. You think I don’t know that?”

I glare at him, my chest tight with anger and something else, something I can’t name. “And what are yours, Nicolo?” I challenge, my voice low.

He doesn’t answer, just looks at me for a long moment. And then his eyes flicker to the side. I follow his gaze, and that’s when I see her.

Alessia.

He must’ve noticed her movement; I’ve been so tense that I’m bent out of shape.

She's standing in the doorway of my bedroom, wearing nothing but my shirt, her red hair falling in loose waves around her shoulders. Her eyes are wide, a little startled, but then she smiles softly. "Hi, Nicolo," she says, her voice light, but I can see the curiosity in her gaze.

Nicolo's expression doesn't change, but his eyes flick back to me, and I know he's making a thousand calculations in his head. "Ms.Visconti," he replies smoothly, giving her a polite nod. "I didn't realize you were here."

She blushes slightly, tugging at the hem of my shirt. "Yeah, I—I'll just give you two a minute," she mumbles, quickly turning and disappearing back into the bedroom.

The door clicks shut, and the silence in the room feels deafening. Nicolo turns back to me, his expression unreadable. "So," he says slowly, "you and her?"

I shrug, trying to play it off, but I know he sees right through me. "It's... nothing," I say, but even I don't believe it.

Nicolo's eyes narrow slightly. "Be careful, Romiro," he warns, his voice low, almost a growl. "Helen isn't someone who will let you be happy. Or me. Or anyone else who gets in her way."

I stiffen, my hands curling into fists at my sides. "I know that," I snap. "I know who she is, what she's capable of. But I'm not going to let her control my life. Or the fear of her control my life. Not anymore."

Nicolo leans forward, his gaze intense, his voice soft but dangerous. "If she's back, like you said, then she wants to destroy everything, Romiro," he says. "She wants to burn everything to the ground. Our past... it's a weapon she can use against us. Against you."

I feel a flash of anger, hot and sharp. “I know what I’m doing,” I insist, my voice tight. “I don’t need you to tell me how to handle my own life.”

Nicolo holds my gaze for a long moment, his eyes cold, and calculating. “I hope you’re right,” he says quietly. “For both our sakes.”

The tension between us is thick, almost suffocating, but I refuse to back down. I won’t let him see my fear, my uncertainty. Not now. Not ever.

“I can handle this,” I say again, my voice firm, unyielding. “I’m not a kid anymore, Nicolo. I’m not weak. I’m thirty years old, not thirteen.”

Nicolo nods slowly, but I see the doubt in his eyes and the worry he’s trying to hide. “Just... be careful,” he says finally, his voice softer. “She’s not done with us. Not by a long shot.”

I swallow, my throat tight, but I nod. “I will be,” I promise, though I’m not sure if I’m saying it to him or to myself.

He stands up, finishing his drink in one quick swallow. “I need to go,” he says, turning toward the door. “But I’ll be in touch. And Romiro... keep your eyes open. She’ll come at you when you least expect it.”

I nod again, watching as he leaves, the door closing behind him with a soft click. The silence settles around me, thick and heavy, wrapping itself around my chest like a vice.

Taking a deep breath, I try to steady myself, but my hands are still shaking. My heart is pounding, my mind spinning with everything Nicolo said, everything he didn’t say. He’s right—I know he’s right—but I can’t let him see how much it rattles me. How much it scares me.

I turn toward the bedroom, my gaze lingering on the closed door. Alessia is in there, probably trying to make sense of what she overheard, maybe wondering what the hell is going on between my brother and me. She doesn't know any of it. She doesn't know about the dark cloud that looms over our family, the secrets we keep buried, the scars we don't show.

But she will. She's smart, and she's already started to ask questions, questions I'm not sure I can answer.

I run a hand over my face, feeling the rough stubble on my jaw, and sigh. I should go in there, reassure her, tell her something, anything, to put her at ease. But what would I even say? What could I say that wouldn't sound like a lie?

I take a step toward the door, hesitating. I don't want to drag her into this mess. She's too good, too kind, too pure, too... everything I don't deserve. But she's already involved, whether I like it or not. And it's all my fucking fault.

I push the door open slowly, finding her sitting on the edge of the bed, my shirt hanging loose on her slender frame. Her eyes lift to meet mine, and there's a mix of curiosity and concern in her gaze.

"Is everything okay?" she asks, her voice tentative as if she's afraid to push too hard.

I nod, forcing a smile that feels more like a grimace.

"Yeah," I lie, stepping into the room. "Just... family stuff."

She nods, but I can tell she doesn't buy it. She's too sharp for that, too intuitive. "You and Nicolò... you're close, but there's a lot of tension there," she observes, her eyes searching mine.

I chuckle softly, but there's no humor in it. "That's one way to put it," I mutter, crossing the room to sit beside her. I can feel the warmth of her body next to mine, the softness of her skin where our arms brush. It's grounding, calming, and I need that right now.

She doesn't push for more, and I'm grateful for it. I don't have the words to explain it all to her—not yet. Maybe not ever.

We sit there in silence for a moment, and I can feel the weight of the world pressing down on me, but then she reaches out, her hand covering mine. Her touch is gentle and comforting, and some of the tension bleeds out of me. In the chaos of everything, she's the only one who can calm me.

"Whatever it is," she says softly, "you don't have to face it alone." Her words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I realize how much I've been carrying, how much I've been hiding, even from myself. I nod, swallow hard, and squeeze her hand.

"Thanks," I whisper, my voice rough. "But some things... some things you have to face alone."

She doesn't argue, just nods, and I know that it's hard for her to not ask questions, but I'm grateful for it. I don't want her involved in this, not any deeper than she already is. I don't want her caught in the crossfire.

I lean over, pressing a kiss to Alessia's forehead, and she closes her eyes, leaning into me. For a moment, I let myself forget everything—Helen, Nicolo, the dark past that threatens to swallow me whole. I let myself just be here, with her, in this quiet moment, in this place where nothing else matters. But I know it can't last. It never does.

Lying down I pull her closer, feeling the warmth of her body against mine. Alessia

settles into my side, her head resting on my shoulder, and I wrap an arm around her, holding her there. She fits perfectly, like she was meant to be here all along, and for a moment, I allow myself to enjoy the comfort of it, the simplicity of just being close to her.

I run my fingers through her hair, feeling the soft, fiery strands slip between them. Her hair is like silk, and I can't help but lose myself in the sensation. It calms me, the repetitive motion, the feel of her so close, and I find myself relaxing, my heartbeat slowing, my thoughts quieting.

Alessia lets out a small sigh, nuzzling closer to me. "You always do that," she murmurs, her voice soft, almost sleepy.

"Do what?" I ask, my voice low, as I continue to weave my fingers through her hair.

"Play with my hair," she says, her lips curling into a faint smile. "You've done it ever since we were teens."

I chuckle softly, the sound rumbling in my chest. "I guess I never grew out of the habit," I admit, my fingers tracing gentle patterns against her scalp.

"I don't mind," she whispers, her eyes drifting shut. "It feels nice."

Her words are so simple, so honest, and they hit me in a way I don't expect. I feel a tightness in my chest, an ache I can't quite name. It feels good to hold her like this, to touch her, to feel her heartbeat against mine. It feels right, in a way that nothing else in my life ever has. She feels right.

But I can't forget what Nicolo said. I can't forget what I saw tonight, or the threat that lingers like a cloud over us. I don't want to pull her into this, into my darkness. But now, with her so close, it feels impossible to let go.

I brush a strand of hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear, my thumb grazing the curve of her cheek. She looks up at me, her green eyes half-lidded, soft and trusting, and I feel my resolve faltering.

“Alessia,” I murmur, my voice low, almost hoarse.

“Hmm?” she responds, her eyes fluttering open, searching my face.

I want to tell her everything. I want to tell her about Helen, about the past I’ve tried so hard to bury. I want to tell her that I’m afraid of what’s coming, that I don’t know if I can protect her from it. But the words catch in my throat, tangled with fear and doubt.

Instead, I lean down, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. “Thank you,” I whisper against her skin.

“For what?” she asks, her voice barely more than a breath.

“For being here,” I say simply, because it’s the only truth I know right now. “For... just being you.”

She smiles at that, a small, sleepy smile that makes my heart ache in a way I can’t explain. She snuggles closer, tucking her head under my chin, her breath warm against my neck.

“I’m not going anywhere, Romiro,” she whispers, her voice a soft promise in the dark. “Not unless you ask me to.”

I close my eyes, holding her tighter, my hand continuing to stroke her hair, feeling the silky strands slip between my fingers. I don’t answer, because I don’t trust myself to speak. I don’t want her to go, but I don’t know if I can keep her safe if she stays.

We lie there in the quiet, our bodies entwined, the room dark and still around us. I listen to the sound of her breathing, steady and calm, and let it soothe the storm inside me. I feel her relax against me, her body growing heavy with sleep, and I keep my fingers moving through her hair, gentle and slow, afraid to wake her.

I should be thinking about what to do next. I should be planning, strategizing, figuring out how to handle Helen, how to protect Alessia, and how to keep everything from falling apart. But for now, in this moment, I just want to hold her. Just for a little longer.

I press my lips to the top of her head, breathing in the faint scent of her shampoo. It smells like something floral and sweet, something that reminds me of better times, of simpler times. Times before everything got so damn complicated.

She stirs slightly in her sleep, her fingers curling into the fabric of my shirt, and I feel a strange sort of peace settle over me. I know it won't last. I know the morning will bring new challenges, new threats, new battles to fight. But for now, in this quiet, dark room, with her in my arms, I feel something I haven't felt in a long time.

Hope.

I let my eyes close, my hand still moving through her hair, and for the first time in what feels like years, I allow myself to just... breathe. To just be here, with her, in this moment.

Whatever comes next, whatever the future holds, I'll face it.

We'll face it. Together.

14

ALESSIA

Music fills my apartment, “Cruel Summer” spilling out of the speakers with a steady beat that matches the pulse in my veins. I stand in front of the mirror in my bedroom, leaning close to apply a final swipe of deep red lipstick. It’s a bold color, the kind that makes my mouth look just a bit more dangerous; I press my lips together, feeling the matte finish settle. I take a step back, studying my reflection.

My hair is pulled up in a high ponytail, my curtain bangs falling just slightly over my forehead. I push them back with a quick flick of my fingers, liking the way they frame my face. I’m wearing a black leather jacket—his leather jacket. I stole it from Romiro four months ago after he left it at my place, and I never gave it back. Underneath rests a short, cream-colored cotton dress. The worn leather smells faintly of him still, of smoke and something else, something that feels like trouble and safety all at once.

The music swells as I take a deep breath, feeling the excitement buzz under my skin. Tonight is different. Tonight, there’s no hiding, no pretending. I smooth my hands over the jacket, feeling the familiar weight of it on my shoulders, and I feel a shiver of anticipation rush through me.

Then, there’s a knock at the door, three sharp raps that echo through the room. I glance at the clock—he’s right on time, like always. I turn down the volume of the music, my heart pounding a little faster as I make my way to the door. I open it, and there he is—Romiro, leaning casually against the doorframe, a cigarette between his

lips, smoke curling lazily around his face.

His dark eyes flick over me, and I see the hint of a smile tugging at his lips. “Hey, Red,” he murmurs, pulling the cigarette from his mouth and flicking it away. “Looking for trouble?”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face. “Maybe,” I reply, stepping aside to let him in. He steps forward, and as he passes, he leans in, his lips brushing my ear. “You’re gorgeous,” he whispers, his breath warm against my skin.

My heart skips a beat, and I turn to see him bending down to greet Mr. Marvin, who’s already winding around his legs, purring loudly. “Hey, buddy,” Romero says, scratching behind his ears. “Keeping Red in line?”

I laugh softly, leaning against the door as I close it. “He’s doing his best,” I say, and Romero straightens, his gaze locking onto mine.

He takes a step closer, and I feel the air shift between us, charged, electric. “You really are gorgeous,” he says again, his voice lower, rougher. His hand reaches out, brushing a stray lock of hair from my face, his fingers lingering against my cheek, just a moment longer than necessary.

I lean into his touch, my breath catching in my throat. “You’re not so bad yourself,” I manage, my voice a little unsteady. He’s devastating, and he knows it. His lips curve into a knowing smile, and he steps closer, his hand sliding down to my waist, pulling me to him.

He guides me backward, pressing me against the kitchen counter, the edge digging into my back, but I don’t care. His fingers are at my waist, then lower, pushing up the hem of my dress. I bite back a gasp as his hand slips under the fabric, his touch firm and unapologetic.

“Romiro,” I whisper, my hands gripping the edge of the counter, my knuckles white.

He smirks, his lips brushing against my neck. “What is it, Red?” he asks, his voice teasing, dark. His fingers find their way to the heat between my thighs, sliding against my panties, and I feel a rush of desire flood my senses.

“Oh, God,” I moan softly, my head falling back as his touch grows rougher, more insistent.

“Not God, Red,” he murmurs against my skin, his breath hot against my ear. “Romiro.”

His fingers slip beneath the lace, pushing inside with a swift, determined motion that makes me cry out, my body arching against him. He moves with a purpose, each thrust of his fingers rough, relentless. His thumb circles, teases, drives me closer to the edge. My breath comes in short, desperate gasps, my heart races, my body trembles.

I grip his shoulders, my nails digging into the fabric of his shirt, and he groans softly, the sound vibrating through me. “Come on, Alessia,” he whispers, his voice low, commanding. “Let go for me.”

I feel the tension coil tighter, winding through me like a spring about to snap, and then I’m there, shattering around him, my body trembling as I gasp his name—my voice breaking, raw and desperate.

He keeps going, his fingers pushing deeper, harder, until every nerve is on fire, and I can’t think, can’t breathe, can only feel. When I finally come down, my chest heaving, he pulls his fingers out slowly, watching me with a dark, satisfied smile.

He lifts his hand to his mouth, his gaze never leaving mine as he licks his fingers,

tasting me with a look that sends another shiver down my spine. “Sweet,” he murmurs, his voice like velvet, his eyes blazing with heat.

I swallow hard, my heart still pounding in my chest, my legs weak, unsteady. “Maybe we should... we should stay in tonight,” I manage to say, my voice shaky, breathless.

He grins, taking my hand and pulling me toward the door. “Not yet, Red,” he says, his tone teasing, but there’s an edge to it, a promise of more. “But soon.”

We step out into the hallway. He leads me down the stairs, his hand firm and warm around mine, and I can’t help but smile, feeling light, almost giddy.

The drive to the diner is quick, the city lights flashing by in a blur of neon and darkness. He keeps his hand on my thigh, his fingers tracing lazy circles against my skin, and I feel a constant, steady pulse of heat wherever he touches me.

When we arrive, he pulls up outside the little diner, the one we always come to, our secret place, our refuge, the one that gave us hope. The lights are dim, the sign flickering softly in the night, and I feel a wave of nostalgia wash over me as we step inside. We might have been here the other night, but this feels different.

Greta gives us a knowing smile from behind the counter, nodding as Romiro leads me to our usual booth. A bottle of wine is already waiting on the table, two glasses beside it.

He pours us each a glass, his movements smooth, controlled. I watch him, feeling a warmth spread through me that has nothing to do with the wine. “So,” he says, his voice soft, a hint of a smile playing at his lips, “are we finally going to talk about this?”

I take a sip of my wine, feeling the warmth slide down my throat, and settle in my

belly. "Talk about what?" I ask, feigning innocence, though my heart is pounding.

He leans forward, his eyes locked on mine, his expression serious now. "About us, Red. About what's been happening between us for years."

I bite my lip, looking down at my glass, then back up at him. "I thought it was obvious," I say quietly. "I've... I've always had feelings for you, Romiro. I just didn't think..."

He reaches across the table, his hand covering mine, his grip firm, reassuring. "Didn't think what?" he asks gently.

I swallow hard, meeting his gaze. "Didn't think you reciprocated those feelings."

He laughs softly, his thumb brushing against the back of my hand. "You don't understand do you?" he says, his voice warm, affectionate. "I'm completely obsessed with you." He swallows before continuing. "I'm...fucked up. Someone like me doesn't deserve to have you. But I'm done trying to stay away. I'm too selfish to not chase after the only person I've ever wanted."

I feel a rush of warmth, my heart swelling with hope, and I smile, a real smile this time. "Then why didn't you say anything?" I ask, my voice barely more than a whisper.

He shrugs, his eyes darkening slightly. "Because I was scared. Scared of what would happen if I let myself feel this... if I let you in."

I nod, understanding more than I want to admit. "Me too. I don't want to lose our friendship," I whisper.

He lifts my hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to my knuckles. "We won't be losing

anything,” he says firmly. “From now on, you’re mine as much as I’m yours.”

I feel a surge of emotion, my throat tightening, and I nod, squeezing his hand. We sit there, holding hands, the wine forgotten, the world outside fading away, and for the first time in a long time, everything feels right. Everything feels like it’s exactly how it’s meant to be.

* * *

The sun is shining through the tall, arched windows, casting a soft golden pattern on the wooden floor as I make my way down the long hallway toward the dining room. I feel lighter, almost like I’m walking on air, with the events of last night still buzzing in my veins. I can’t help the smile that tugs at the corners of my lips, a secret smile that I try to hide before I step through the doorway. I look fresh, I feel alive, and I know I look it, too.

I pause for a moment just outside the dining room, taking in the scent of fresh coffee and warm croissants that wafts out to greet me. My Mamma’s favorite, of course. The familiar sound of silverware clinking against china drifts through the slightly ajar door, accompanied by the soft murmur of conversation. I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. This morning, I feel different, renewed, but I know I need to keep it to myself.

I push the door open gently, stepping into the room. The chandelier above is a cascade of crystals, catching the morning sun and scattering fragments of rainbows across the navy walls. The long, oval dining table gleams, polished to perfection, with its rich wood reflecting the light like a mirror. The silver place settings glint in the sunlight, perfectly arranged around delicate china plates with gold trim.

The room feels like it’s waiting, like it’s always waiting—every detail meticulously curated to create an air of elegance, a sense of old-world grandeur. The kind of room

that doesn't belong to the everyday; it's meant for grand moments, for decisions that ripple through the lives of those seated at the table. Today, it feels almost too big, too grand, for a simple breakfast.

My eyes sweep over the tall, heavy curtains that frame the windows, a deep shade of emerald that contrasts beautifully with the navy walls. They're pulled back just enough to let the light pour in, making the crystal glasses sparkle. The floral arrangement in the center of the table catches my attention—a burst of soft pink roses and ivory peonies, lush and fragrant, arranged in a silver vase. A touch of softness in a room that always feels so... serious.

Nonna is already seated at the head of the table, her back straight as an arrow, her silver hair perfectly coiffed. She glances up as I enter, her eyes sharp and assessing, but there's a small smile on her lips. "Alessia, cara," she says warmly, her voice like honey, but with an edge that tells me she's not done with her questions from last time.

"Good morning, Nonna," I reply, crossing the room to kiss her on both cheeks. Her skin is cool against mine, her perfume—a mix of gardenia and something spicier—envelops me.

Mamma is seated next to her, delicate and refined as always, with her hair pinned up neatly, her blouse crisp, her pearls shining around her neck. She looks up with a smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. "You look well-rested," she comments, a little too casually, her gaze lingering on me like she's trying to read between the lines.

"I slept well," I say simply, taking my seat next to her. "How is everyone?"

"Oh, fine, fine." Nonna waves a hand dismissively, her eyes still sharp, a small knowing smile playing at her lips. "But we are more interested in you, darling. Tell us about your date with Francesco."

I feel my stomach tighten just a fraction, but I force a light laugh, reaching for a glass of orange juice. “It was... fine,” I say, carefully nonchalant. “We had dinner, talked a bit, and then we parted ways.” I’m not telling them he’s dead, courtesy of Romiro’s short temper. We may be a family in the Mafia, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t any rules to go by.

Nonna’s smile widens just a bit. “Parted ways? So you didn’t have sex?” she asks, her tone amused. Papa chokes on a piece of toast, and my brother taps him on the back before handing him a glass of water.

“Celia! Please not at the dining table,” Mamma chastises.

“Oh, hush. Don’t be such a prude.” Nonna rolls her eyes at the horrified stare Mamma gives her. “No one has seen Frankie since your date. We thought you’d know something,” Nonna adds with a small giggle before taking a sip out of her morning coffee.

Mamma laughs softly, shaking her head. “Did you chase him away, Alessia?” she teases, but there’s an edge of curiosity in her voice.

I smile, playing along, hoping to keep it light. “Maybe he wasn’t up for a challenge,” I joke, taking a sip of my juice, feeling the cool liquid slide down my throat.

Mamma raises an eyebrow, her smile still in place. “He didn’t seem like the type to back down easily,” she says thoughtfully. “What happened?”

I shrug, trying to appear relaxed, though my heart is starting to race just a little faster. “Nothing happened, Mamma. He just... wasn’t interested, I guess.”

Nonna clicks her tongue, her eyes narrowing just slightly. “Not interested?” she repeats, sounding almost incredulous. “A handsome young man like that, not

interested in our Alessia? I find that hard to believe.”

I feel a flicker of irritation but keep my smile in place. “Well, maybe I wasn’t interested in him,” I counter lightly, trying to steer the conversation away from where I know it’s headed.

Mamma leans in, her expression softening, but her eyes still probing. “You know, cara , it’s just one date. Perhaps another try? There are plenty of eligible young men?—”

I cut her off gently, but firmly. “Mamma, I appreciate it, really, I do but I’m just too busy with my shifts at the hospital. I don’t have time to go on another date right now.” Papa and Tristan manage to slip out without either Mamma or Nonna noticing. Traitors .

Nonna waves a dismissive hand. “Nonsense. Everyone has time for a little romance,” she says, her voice carrying that no-nonsense authority she’s perfected over the years. “We just want you to be happy, darling. That’s all.”

“I know, Nonna,” I say softly, reaching across to squeeze her hand. “But I really am busy. There’s so much going on right now. Maybe later, when things calm down.”

Mamma sighs, a small, resigned smile on her lips. “You’re always so focused,” she says, but there’s a hint of pride in her voice. “Just don’t let life pass you by while you’re too busy working.”

I nod, smiling. “I promise, Mamma. I’m not letting anything pass me by.”

Nonna gives me a long, considering look, then nods slowly. “Very well,” she says finally. “But don’t think you’re off the hook forever, young lady. We’ll find someone suitable for you eventually.”

I laugh softly, relieved they're letting it go—for now. "I'm sure you will, Nonna," I say, my voice light, teasing. "But until then, can we just enjoy breakfast?"

Mamma reaches for the teapot, pouring a cup of coffee with a graceful, practiced hand. "Of course, darling," she says with a smile. "Tell us about the hospital. How have your night shifts been?"

I lean back, feeling the tension ease from my shoulders. "Busy," I say, and I launch into a story about a recent case, knowing that this will keep the conversation away from Frankie, from dates, from anything I'm not ready to talk about.

As I speak, I feel the warmth of the room settle around me, the crystal chandelier above catching the light, the familiar sounds of family filling the space.

15

ROMIRO

The air is thick with smoke and sweat as I make my way down the narrow, dimly lit stairs, the distant sound of fists meeting flesh echoing through the metal walls. The underground fight scene is buried deep beneath Cincinnati, hidden in the bones of old buildings where no one but the desperate and the ruthless dare to tread. It's the kind of place where rules don't apply, where money changes hands faster than punches, and where information is the most valuable currency of all. I'm deep in the Outfit territory. I'd managed to get through their half of Ohio and sneak into one of their fight clubs.

I step through the doorway into the pit, immediately swallowed by the noise—jeers, shouts, and the dull roar of a crowd thirsty for blood. The space is dark, the only light coming from a few flickering bulbs that cast shadows across the cold steel walls. The makeshift ring at the center is barely held together by rusted chains and metal posts, the canvas stained with years of spilled blood.

I keep to the edges, moving slowly, my eyes scanning the crowd. I'm not here to watch the fight. I'm here for something else—for the whispers, the secrets that slip through clenched teeth, the rumors that ride on a drink too many or a threat too few. I need to know where the Outfit is, and what they're planning. I need to know why the hell they've been so quiet... until now.

The crowd parts for a moment, and I catch a glimpse of the fighters in the ring. Two men, both battered and bleeding, their faces twisted in a mix of pain and fury. One of

them, a stocky guy with a broken nose and blood streaming down his face, is driving his opponent into the ropes, his fists beating into his opponent. The other guy is struggling to stay upright, his eyes glazed, his mouth slack. The crowd is on its feet, shouting, screaming for more.

But I'm not interested in the fight. I turn my attention to a group of men huddled near the back, speaking in low, urgent tones. I drift closer, trying to catch their words over the noise.

"...Moretti's lost control," one of them mutters, his voice just loud enough for me to hear. "The brothers are fighting, tearing each other apart. Word is the old man's out of commission—paralyzed."

I freeze, my heart pounding in my chest. The old man. Val's father. He's alive? The Capo. Alive but paralyzed. I push closer, pretending to be interested in the fight, keeping my ears open.

Another man, taller, with a scar running down his cheek, shakes his head. "I heard he's alive but barely. Some say it's because Emiliano took Val back to New York. The Moretti brothers are losing their shit, fighting over who's in charge now."

There's a low chuckle from another guy, a thin man with a snake tattoo crawling up his neck. "Yeah, and now they're planning something big. Some attack. But who the hell knows where or when. Just rumors, right?"

My mind races, piecing together the fragments. Val's dad is alive but paralyzed. After we took Valentina back to New York, Eli went face to face with her father and the Capo of the Outfit. It ended badly, both were shot. We thought we had killed him—and left the Outfit in disarray, the Moretti brothers tearing at each other for power. It makes sense—their Capo is out of commission, and they're trying to fill the vacuum. And we are expecting an attack. But when? And where?

I edge a little closer, trying to catch more of their conversation. The taller guy glances around, and I look away, pretending to watch the fight, my hands in my pockets, my shoulders hunched. I can feel their eyes on me, but I keep my face blank, uninterested. No one knows me, so I'm in the clear.

"I don't know, man," the scarred one mutters, lowering his voice. "But if they're going for the Folonari's, it's going to get messy. Real messy."

I grit my teeth, my jaw tightening. Of course, it would be the Folonari's. The Outfit has always had a hard-on for us, always looking for a reason to make a move, to take us down a peg. And now, with their own house in chaos, they might be desperate enough to try something stupid.

I step back, blending into the shadows, my mind whirring. I need to get more information, to figure out exactly what's happening, and who's pulling the strings. Right now all I have are whispers and rumors—nothing solid.

I make my way around the edge of the crowd, my eyes scanning for familiar faces. I spot a few low-level guys, faces I recognize from past dealings, but none of them look like they're in the know. I keep moving, slipping through the throng, my ears tuned to the conversations around me.

"...can't trust Moretti's youngest," a voice says nearby, low and sharp. "He's too hungry for power, thinks he can step into his brother's shoes."

"Yeah, but his brother's no better," another voice replies. "He's losing control. Too much bickering, too many alliances breaking apart. Now, the old man's just a ghost, stuck in a chair."

I pause, leaning against the cold steel wall, pretending to adjust my coat. I need to know more, to confirm if it's true.

I spot a familiar face—a guy named Jaco, who’s been known to run messages for the Outfit. I sidle up to him, keeping my tone casual. “Jaco,” I say, nodding in greeting. “Heard some interesting things tonight. Thought you might be able to clear them up.”

Jaco’s eyes flick to mine, wary. “Romiro,” he says slowly, his expression guarded. “You shouldn’t be here, and I don’t know anything worth telling.”

I shrug, playing it cool. “Maybe, maybe not. But I’m hearing talk about old man Moretti. Is he really alive?”

Jaco hesitates, glancing around. “That’s the word,” he says finally, his voice low. “But he’s not the man he used to be. They say he’s paralyzed. Can’t move. Just sits there, staring at the walls.”

I nod, trying to hide my reaction, my mind racing. “And the brothers?” I press. “What’s going on with them?”

Jaco shakes his head. “It’s a mess,” he admits. “They’re tearing each other apart, trying to prove who’s stronger. The youngest wants control, but the older one... he’s not letting go that easy.”

I nod, processing the information. “And the attack?” I ask, keeping my tone neutral.

Jaco shrugs. “Rumors,” he says. “But where there’s smoke...”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “There’s fire.”

I thank him, slipping back into the crowd, my thoughts spinning. If Val’s dad is alive and the brothers are at each other’s throats, it means there’s a power vacuum, a struggle for control. It’s what we wanted, but now that they might be planning an attack on us, they could be trying to unite under a common enemy... us.

I need to get this information back to Eli, to Dominico. We need to be ready for whatever's coming. I turn, heading for the exit, my heart pounding in my chest. The underground is alive with danger, with threats lurking in every corner, and I can't afford to stay here any longer.

I push through the door and out into the cold night air, my breath coming in sharp bursts, my mind racing with possibilities, with fears, with plans. The Moretti's are fighting with each other, Val's dad is alive, and the Outfit is planning something big.

And we need to be ready when they make their move.

* * *

The sounds of the roulette wheel spinning, chips clinking, and muffled laughter fill the air as I walk through the back room of the Camorra's base. I'm back in New York. The place is alive tonight, filled with gamblers and shadowed figures, their faces half-lit by the dim overhead lights. The room is thick with cigar smoke, the scent mingling with expensive cologne and the underlying tang of desperation. I make my way past the roulette tables, where hands move quickly over the green felt, placing bets, testing fate.

I spot Emiliano at the far end, lounging in one of the deep, leather-lined booths, a glass of whiskey in his hand. He's talking to Dominico, whose eyes are focused on something distant, his expression unreadable. I catch Eli's eye, and he gives a quick nod, signaling for me to come over. I weave through the crowd, slipping past the waitstaff carrying trays of drinks, my footsteps barely making a sound on the plush carpet.

As I approach, I see Dom lean in, speaking quietly, his voice low, his expression tight. He's always like that—calculated, cool, the kind of guy who measures every word. Eli looks more relaxed, but I know better. He's always coiled tight, like a

spring ready to snap. Even when he looks laid back, his mind is working a mile a minute.

I slide into the booth next to Eli, across from Dom. Eli's eyes flick to me, his smile tight, a hint of tension in his gaze. "Romiro," he greets me, his tone light but there's an edge to it. "What did you find out?"

I take a moment, choosing my words carefully. "Val's dad," I say slowly. "He's alive. Paralyzed, but alive. The Moretti brothers are tearing each other apart, fighting for control, and there's talk of a planned attack. Rumors mostly, but enough chatter to suggest it's serious."

Eli's smile fades, his face hardening. He takes a slow sip of his whiskey, letting the information settle. Dom leans back, his fingers tapping on the edge of his glass, his eyes narrowing slightly. He's listening closely, always weighing every piece of information like it's a puzzle he's trying to solve.

"The old man being alive changes things," Dom murmurs, his voice calm but sharp. "If he's paralyzed, he's a weak figurehead. But he's still the Capo in the eyes of many. The brothers fighting... it's a power vacuum, and that makes them unpredictable."

Eli nods, his jaw tightening. "And if they're planning an attack, it could mean they're trying to solidify their position, unite under a common cause. Or it's a smokescreen for something bigger." He pauses, swirling the amber liquid in his glass, staring into it like he's trying to read the future in its depths.

I lean in, lowering my voice. "Are you going to tell Valentina?"

Eli's head snaps up, his gaze piercing. For a moment, he doesn't answer, just watches me, assessing. "No," he says finally, his tone firm, brooking no argument. "She's

not... she's not in a good place right now. She's been struggling, mentally. I don't want to add to that. Not until she's a bit more stable."

I nod, understanding, but a part of me is uneasy. Val has a right to know, doesn't she? But Eli's protective, fiercely so, and I know he's not saying this lightly. Still, I have to push, just a little. "She'll find out eventually, Eli. Better it comes from you."

He sighs, running a hand through his hair, looking older than he is for a moment. "I know," he mutters. "But not yet. Let her get stronger first. Then I'll tell her. Right now, she needs to feel safe. She needs to feel... like she has some control."

Dom nods in agreement, his gaze steady on Eli. "He's right. If we tell her now, it could set her back. She's been through enough. We need to handle this carefully."

I glance between them, feeling the weight of their decision. I get it. But it doesn't make it any easier. Val's been through hell, and knowing her father's alive, it could break her.

Eli downs the rest of his whiskey in one gulp, slamming the glass down on the table with a soft thud. "Keep your ear to the ground, Romiro," he says, his voice tense but controlled. "Find out if these rumors have any teeth. And if they do, we need to be ready."

I nod, my mind already spinning with possibilities, plans forming and reforming. "I'll find out," I promise. "And I'll make sure we're not caught off guard."

Eli leans back, his expression hardening, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Good. Because if they're coming for us... we'll make sure they regret it."

* * *

I take a steadying breath as I make my way down the hall, my footsteps echoing softly on the polished floor. Her door opens before I even have a chance to knock, and she's standing there, eyes bright and inviting. I hardly have a second to take her in before she pulls me in.

The door barely has time to close behind me before her hands are on my chest, pulling me down into her. I take a step forward, and her back hits the wall, a soft gasp escaping her lips. I'm on her before she can catch her breath, my mouth capturing hers in a hungry kiss. Her fingers dig into my shoulders, holding me tight, and it only fuels the fire that's been building inside me all night. I pull back, my fingers trace the flimsy see-through nighty she's wearing. Leaning down, my lips trace the outside shell of her ear as I whisper, "Did you wear this"—my fingers trace the hemline of the nighty—"for me?"

Her fingers dig into my shirt, and she lets out a breathless, "Maybe." With one swipe, I tear the flimsy thing off her body, a low curse escaping from my lips when I can finally see her whole body, she's fully naked. Alessia isn't wearing any underwear.

Pushing her back into the wall, I feel her body press into mine, the heat between us undeniable, like something electric coursing through my veins. Her hands slide up to my neck, tangling in my hair, and I can feel her heart pounding against my chest. My lips find hers, and I take my time as my thumb traces her hard nipples, toying with them, drawing out breathy moans. I groan against her lips, biting down, and when she gasps, I thrust my tongue into her mouth. The kiss deepens, urgent, full with a hunger that's been simmering for too long.

"Romiro," she breathes, my name a desperate whisper on her lips, and it's all I need to hear. I pull her closer, lifting her slightly, and she wraps her legs around my waist, her body arching into mine. I feel her shiver under my touch, her breath hitching as my hands roam, exploring every curve, every soft line. She arches her back, and I can feel her wetness soak the front of my pants.

I lay her down on the bed, tugging and biting at her bottom lip. I give her a final peck before slowly moving to her neck. I bite down on her sensitive spot, earning me a moan. “Romiro...I—” I don’t let her finish talking, I thumb her nipple, before tugging at it. Unable to resist, I lean in and take the nipple into my mouth, lapping my tongue against it like a teenager with a tit obsession. Her lip’s part. “Mmmm...” The sound goes straight to my dick, hardening it to the point of torture. I bite down on her nipple enough to cause slight discomfort. Moving down her body, I kiss, bite, tug, and take. Fuck she’s heaven.

I pull back, watching her flushed face, her hooded eyes on mine, I take my time parting her soft thighs, pressing a kiss along the inside of her thigh as I make my way toward her heat. I swipe my tongue over her sex before focusing on her clit. I trace my fingers over her wetness, teasing her entrance with them before thrusting my fingers inside her. Christ, she’s soaked.

“Is this all for me, Red?” I ask, my voice sounding foreign to me.

Her fingers tug at my hair, as she chokes out, “Yes, God, yes.” Her breaths come in sharp gasps, and I feel her body tense, arching beneath me. I take my time, teasing her, drawing out every reaction, every sound, until I feel her begin to unravel, her breath hitching, her body quivering under my touch.

“Please,” she whispers, her voice breathless, and I feel a surge of satisfaction at her need, at the way she’s falling apart in my hands. I draw it out, letting the tension build, feeling her tighten, her breath catches, and then I give her what she wants, what she needs. I let her come.

She cries out, her body shuddering, her hands gripping the sheets, and I don’t stop until I feel her relax, her muscles trembling, her breath coming in uneven gasps. I move back up to her, capturing her lips in another kiss, my hand cradling her face, my thumb brushing over her cheek.

She's still trembling, her eyes wide and dark, and I feel the need inside me rising, demanding to be sated. I move over her, quickly unbuckling and positioning myself, her legs wrap around me, pulling me closer, her nails digging into my shoulders. I meet her gaze, holding it, making sure this is what she wants, what she needs.

And then, in one swift movement, I thrust into her, hard and deep, and her head falls back, a soft gasp escaping her lips. I breathe her in and memorize the complete abandon on her striking features as I fuck her in a rhythm that leaves her whimpering for her release. She comes apart when I pull back, then drive back in.

She tightens around me, her breath uneven, her nails digging into my back, and I drive deeper, harder, pushing us both to the edge. Her hands clutch at my shoulders, her body arching, and I physically feel her getting closer, her breaths turning to soft, desperate sounds.

We move together, in a rhythm that feels like a storm, fierce and consuming. And then, she shudders, her body tightening around mine, her fingers clutching her bed sheets as she moans, "Romiro...yes...yes...Romiro..." The sound of her throaty moans sends me crashing into my own release.

I hold her close, feeling her body tremble against mine, her breath hot against my neck. Our bodies covered in a sheen of sweat as we breathe each other in. I press a soft kiss to her temple, my hands gently stroking her back, calming her, grounding her. "You okay?" I murmur, my voice still rough, my heart still racing.

She nods, a small smile playing on her lips. "More than okay," she whispers, her fingers tracing my jawline.

I pull her into my arms, lifting her gently, and lay her down on the bed, brushing her hair back from her face. She looks up at me, her eyes still a little hazy as she reaches for me, tugging on my arm. "Stay," she breathes.

I slip out of my clothes, or I should say, what's left of them, and slide into the bed beside her. She curls against me, her head resting on my chest, and I stroke her hair, feeling the soft strands slip through my fingers. The tension in my body slowly eases, replaced by a warmth that fills the quiet space between us. Her breathing slows, mine follows, and as the world outside fades, I feel something settle inside me—something steady, something real.

I hold her close, my fingers playing with her hair, and I close my eyes, letting sleep pull me under, knowing that tonight, at least, we are safe.

16

ALESSIA

The sheets are tangled around my legs, and I feel the comforting weight of Romero's arm draped over my waist. His breath is soft and steady against my shoulder, his body warm against mine. For a moment, I just lie here, still and quiet, savoring the peace that fills the room, the rare tranquility that never seems to settle over us.

I turn my head slightly, catching sight of his face. His eyes are still closed, dark lashes resting against his cheeks. He looks so different when he's like this, so relaxed, so unguarded. Almost like he's a different person than the man who walked into my apartment last night, carrying all this tension in his shoulders. I can't help but smile as I study the lines of his face, the curve of his lips, the scar that rests there. I don't think I've ever seen him look this peaceful.

Gently, I reach out and trace my fingers along his jawline, feeling the roughness of his stubble beneath my touch. His lips twitch slightly, and I know he's awake. "Hey," I whisper, my voice still a little husky from sleep.

He opens his eyes, a slow, lazy smile spreading across his face. "Hey," he murmurs back, his voice deeper, a little rough around the edges. His hand moves up, brushing a stray lock of hair from my forehead. "You look so beautiful."

I laugh softly, rolling my eyes. "Liar," I tease. "I probably look like I've been through a war."

His smile widens, and he pulls me closer, his arm tightening around me. “Well, maybe a little,” he admits, his tone playful. “But a beautiful warrior, nonetheless.”

I snuggle closer, burying my face in the crook of his neck, breathing him in. There’s a quietness in this moment that I want to hold onto, a softness that feels fragile, like it might break if I move too quickly. I feel his chest rise and fall beneath me, steady and calm, and I let myself relax against him.

I skim my fingers over the tattoo. Romiro’s breathes coming out labored, his chest heaving. The little blue heart that’s tattooed just over his pecks, and underneath the heart is a barcode. “What do the heart represent?” I ask him, my voice a whisper.

He swallows. “The heart...the heart is a reminder of my past. What I had to go through to be here. The fight, the years I had lost hope to be out of those monster’s clutches.”

I press my lips to the tattoo, Romiro drags a ragged breath in.

“So,” I say, my voice muffled against his skin, “how was your week?”

He lets out a soft chuckle, the sound vibrating through his chest. “Chaotic, as usual,” he replies, his hand moving in slow circles over my back. “I had to deal with some... issues. Nothing too exciting, just the usual.”

I pull back slightly, looking up at him with a knowing smile. “Oh, come on, Romiro. I’m sure there’s more to it than that. You’re always dealing with ‘issues’.”

He smirks, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Okay, fine,” he concedes. “There was a bit of a situation with one of the new guys. Thought he could cut corners, skim a little off the top. I had to remind him how things work around here.”

I raise an eyebrow, my smile growing. “Remind him, huh? I’m guessing that wasn’t a friendly conversation.”

He shrugs, his grin widening. “Let’s just say he won’t be making that mistake again.”

I laugh, the sound filling the room, and he joins in, his hand moving up to cup my face, his thumb brushing over my cheek. “What about you?” he asks, his tone softer now. “How’s residency treating you?”

I sigh, leaning into his touch. “Long hours, a lot of caffeine, and more cases than I can count,” I reply. “But I’m getting there. One day at a time.”

He nods, his expression turning serious. “You’re doing amazing, Alessia. I’m proud of you.”

A warmth spreads through my chest at his words, and I smile, feeling a blush rise to my cheeks. “Thanks,” I whisper, my fingers playing with the edge of the sheet. “It means a lot, coming from you.”

We settle into a quiet, uneasy silence, the sound of our breathing filling the space between us. Romero’s hand tightens on my hip, his thumb tracing slow, distracted circles on my skin. I can feel the tension radiating off him, an unspoken weight pressing down between us.

“What’s on your mind?” I ask gently, watching him closely.

He hesitates, his gaze dropping, and for a moment, I think he won’t say anything at all. But then he sighs, jaw clenching as if bracing himself. “She’s back,” he mutters, his voice barely above a whisper.

I blink, confused. “Who?”

His eyes flick back to mine, dark and stormy. “Helen,” he says, the name falling from his lips like a curse. “I thought she was dead... years ago. But she’s back, Alessia. I saw her.”

Shock ripples through me. I don’t know much about his mother, only the fragments he’s let slip—enough to understand she’d caused him unimaginable pain. “Romiro...” I start, reaching out to touch his face. “I didn’t know. How... how do you feel?”

He laughs bitterly, pulling back from my hand, his gaze hardening. “How do I feel? After everything she did, after I thought I’d escaped her ghost for good... Now she’s here, like it’s nothing. Like she didn’t destroy my life.”

My heart aches for him, but a part of me is desperate to understand. “Romiro, please,” I say softly. “Help me understand. You’ve never told me what really happened with her. What did she do to you?”

His jaw clenches, and he looks away, every muscle in his body tense. “There are things about my past, Alessia, that you don’t want to know. Things I don’t want you to know.”

“But I want to help,” I whisper, my hand hovering near his arm, unsure if he’ll even accept my comfort. “Whatever she did, you don’t have to carry it alone.”

He shakes his head, his expression shutting down, a cold mask replacing the pain that had been there moments ago. “No,” he says firmly, pulling his hand from my hip. “You don’t understand. This is my burden. My history. You don’t belong in that part of my life.”

The finality in his tone makes my heart sink, but I press on, unwilling to leave things this way. “Romiro, if we’re going to be together, you can’t just shut me out every

time things get hard. I want to know you—all of you. Not just the parts you're willing to share."

He stands up, running a hand through his hair, frustration etched in every line of his face. "You don't know what you're asking for, Alessia. You say you want to know me, but there are parts of me that are broken beyond repair. Parts that will only hurt you if you get too close."

"Then let me decide that," I insist, a pleading note in my voice. "I can't stand by and watch you go through this alone. Not if you're going to keep shutting me out."

He looks down at me, his eyes softening for just a moment, and I see the flicker of something raw, something vulnerable. But just as quickly, he pulls back, his expression hardening again. "I'm sorry, Alessia," he says, voice distant. "But there are things I can't share with you. Not now."

A painful silence stretches between us, his words hanging heavy in the air. I swallow, feeling a hollow ache in my chest. "So... what does that mean for us?"

He hesitates, avoiding my gaze. "It means... I need time. Time to deal with this—alone."

I nod, though my heart feels like it's shattering. "If that's what you need," I murmur, trying to keep my voice steady. "But Romiro, I can't keep waiting forever. One day, you'll have to decide if you want me in your life... or if you'll keep me at a distance."

He doesn't answer, and I can see the struggle in his eyes. He presses a brief, almost desperate kiss to my forehead, lingering as if he's memorizing the feel of me. "I'm sorry, Alessia," he whispers. "For everything."

I watch as he turns, heading for the door, and I feel something inside me crack, a deep, aching sadness that settles in my chest like a weight. The door closes behind him with a quiet click , and I'm left alone, the silence of the room pressing in on me, thick and suffocating.

I sink back against the pillows, staring up at the ceiling, my chest tight with a quiet, lingering ache. I'm not sure how to handle this—how to accept being kept in the shadows, hidden like something he can't fully claim.

I lift a hand to my lips, still tingling from his kiss, but the hollow feeling only settles deeper, rooting itself in the pit of my stomach. I want to be strong enough to believe this is temporary, that one day he'll let me into his world completely. But right now, I just feel... adrift.

Mr. Marvin hops onto the bed, curling up beside me, his soft fur and gentle purr a small, steady comfort. I run my fingers through his coat, grounding myself in the rhythm, letting his warmth ease some of the emptiness around me.

I take a deep breath, trying to hold onto the hope that somehow, we'll find a way through this—that he'll let me all the way in. But as dawn breaks, casting pale light across my room, a flicker of doubt lingers, wondering if I'm just setting myself up to be let down all over again.

The morning light spills through the curtains, growing brighter, casting a soft, golden hue across the room. I feel its warmth on my skin, but it does little to chase away the chill that has settled in my bones. Mr. Marvin's purring fills the silence, a small, rhythmic sound that usually soothes me, but today it barely makes a dent in the storm of thoughts swirling in my mind.

I wipe at the tears still clinging to my lashes and let out a shaky breath, trying to gather myself. It's ridiculous to feel this way, to feel so raw and hollow over a

conversation that, deep down, I knew was coming. I knew Romiro would push back; he's been protecting me since we were kids, always watching my back, always stepping in when things got rough. But this time, it feels different. This time, it feels like he's building walls around himself, between us, and I don't know if I have the strength to climb over them.

I force myself to sit up, push the sheet away, and swing my legs over the side of the bed. The hardwood floor is cold beneath my feet, a sharp contrast to the lingering warmth of the sheets. I run a hand through my hair, my fingers tangling in the messy strands, and close my eyes, trying to find some clarity in the chaos of my mind.

What am I supposed to do now? Pretend that everything is fine, that I'm okay with hiding in the shadows, with keeping this part of my life locked away from the people I care about? How can I stand next to Romiro at family gatherings and act like nothing has changed when everything inside me feels different, feels so much more? How can he act like nothing has changed between us?

I think about his words, about the fear in his voice, the way his hand trembled just slightly when he touched my cheek. I know he's scared, scared for me, scared of what might happen if people find out about us. I know our world is darker than that of "normal" couples, filled with threats and dangers I can barely comprehend. But I also know that I can't live like this, can't keep pretending that my heart isn't tangled up in his.

I stand up, crossing the room to the window, pulling the curtain aside to look out at the city below. The streets are starting to come alive, cars moving slowly through the morning traffic, people hurrying along the sidewalks, their coats pulled tight against the chill. I watch them for a moment, feeling a strange sense of detachment, like I'm standing on the outside of my own life, watching it unfold without me.

I press my forehead against the cool glass, closing my eyes. Maybe I'm being selfish,

maybe I'm asking too much. Maybe Romiro is right, and it's better this way, safer this way. But it doesn't feel safer. It feels like I'm trapped, like we're trapped in a space where we can't move forward, can't go back, just stuck in this endless loop of hiding and pretending.

I hear my phone buzz on the nightstand, the sound breaking through my thoughts. I turn, hesitating for a moment, before walking over and picking it up. It's a message from Valentina.

Val

Morning! How was your night? Want to grab coffee later?

I smile faintly, grateful for the distraction. Valentina has always been good at sensing when I need a friend, even when I haven't said a word. I type back quickly, my fingers moving on autopilot.

Me

Morning. Last night was... complicated. But coffee sounds good. Usual spot?

I hit send, and almost immediately, her reply pops up.

Of course! See you in an hour?

I quickly text back.

An hour sounds great! See you then

I nod to myself, setting the phone down. An hour is good. An hour gives me time to pull myself together, put on my best mask and pretend that everything is fine. I head

to the bathroom, splashing cold water on my face, trying to wash away the remnants of tears and sleeplessness.

I look at myself in the mirror, my eyes still puffy, my skin pale. I take a deep breath, forcing a smile, trying to summon some semblance of normalcy. But all I can see is the uncertainty in my own eyes, the questions that keep swirling in my head.

How do I make him understand that I don't want to be protected? That I want to stand by his side, face whatever comes together? How do I make him see that keeping us a secret doesn't make me feel safe—it makes me feel small, insignificant, like a piece of his life he's too afraid to claim?

I grab my toothbrush, scrubbing away the bitter taste in my mouth, my movements quick and angry. I hate this feeling, this feeling of being helpless, of being stuck in a space where I have no control, no voice. I rinse my mouth, spitting out the toothpaste with more force than necessary, and stare at my reflection, my hands gripping the edge of the sink.

I think about the tattoo again, that blue heart and the barcode underneath, and my stomach twists. How long has he carried that mark, that brand of his past? How many times has he looked at it and been reminded of everything he's lost, everything he's endured? And how many times have I looked at it and pretended I didn't see it, didn't feel the weight of it pressing against my own skin? I know what his mother did to him, I've heard whispers, but I never wanted to believe them. Now, I want him to be honest with me, trust me.

I feel a surge of anger, not at him, but at the world that made him feel like he has to hide, like he has to protect everyone else at the cost of himself. I want to reach into that part of him, pull it out, and show him that he's worth more than the scars he carries, more than the ghosts that haunt him.

But I don't know how. I don't know if I ever will.

I turn away from the mirror, wiping my hands on the towel, and head back to the bedroom. Mr. Marvin is still curled up on the bed, his eyes half-closed, watching me with a curious tilt of his head. "What are you looking at?" I murmur, scratching behind his ear. He purrs softly, his eyes closing again, and I feel a small pang of envy for his simple life, his ability to live in the moment, without worry or fear.

I pull on a pair of jeans and a sweater, glancing at the clock. Thirty minutes until I meet Valentina. I grab my bag, shoving my phone and keys inside, and head toward the door, pausing for a moment to glance back at the empty room.

The weight of this morning settles on my shoulders, a heaviness that I can't shake. I know I have to find a way to move forward, to figure out what comes next, but right now, all I want to do is breathe, and try to find a little bit of clarity in the chaos.

I step outside, closing the door behind me, and take a deep breath of the cool morning air. The city is waking up around me, not that New York City ever sleeps. The sounds of traffic and voices fill the space, and I feel a small, tentative spark of hope. Maybe today will bring some answers. I'm not sure what's going to happen next, but I know one thing—I'm not giving up on us. Not yet. Not ever.

ROMIRO

I step onto the cobblestone street of Little Italy, the scent of fresh dough and garlic filling the air, mingling with the smell of strong coffee and the faint traces of last night's rain. The narrow lane is alive with the chatter of locals, the clinking of glasses, the soft hum of conversation, and laughter. I weave my way through the clusters of tables that spill out onto the sidewalk, shaded by red-and-white striped awnings, vines creeping up the walls beside them. It's early, just before the lunch rush, and the streets still have that calm-before-the-storm feel.

My destination looms ahead—a small, family-run pizzeria tucked at the corner, with its classic sign reading *Ristorante Pizzeria* in faded letters, the kind of place that looks unassuming but has been here longer than I've been alive. It's a known hideout for the Camorra, one of the few places in the city that's truly ours. Safe. Or as safe as anywhere can be.

I push open the door, and the smell of freshly baked pizza hits me, warm and inviting. Inside, the red-checkered tablecloths and low lighting create a cozy, almost intimate atmosphere, with framed photographs of old Italian families lining the walls. A few men I recognize from our circle are scattered at the tables, some nodding as I pass, but most keep to themselves. It's the kind of place where no one asks questions, and where you can talk freely without fear of being overheard.

Emiliano is already here, sitting in the back corner, his posture rigid, his expression hard as stone. He's nursing a black coffee, his dark eyes scanning the room like he's

expecting trouble any minute. He doesn't see me at first, but when he does, his face doesn't change. Just a nod, acknowledging me, but his eyes tell me he's not in the mood for bullshit today.

Next to him is Dom, leaning back in his chair, looking too relaxed for the kind of meeting this is. His face is unreadable, like always, a cool mask that doesn't give anything away. He raises his hand in greeting, a lazy wave, like we're just here for a friendly chat. But I know better.

I slide into the seat across from them, and the waiter, an old man who's worked here longer than anyone can remember, brings me an espresso without asking. I take a sip, the bitter liquid burning down my throat, and set the cup down with a soft clink.

I'm the first to speak. "Helen's alive. And she's here to stir shit up."

Both Eli and Dom let my words sink in, Dom curses under his breath, and Eli asks, "What the hell do we know about her? Do we even know what the hell she wants?"

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. "Not much," I admit. "She's been dead for over a decade. At least we thought she was. I have no idea why she's back now, or what she wants. But we can't ignore this. She's too much trouble, Eli."

Emiliano nods, his jaw tightening. "I know," he mutters, his voice clipped. "And that's what worries me. If she's back, she's here for a reason. We just don't know what it is yet."

Dominico leans forward, his chair creaking under his weight, and sets his glass of bourbon down on the table. "The question isn't just why she's back," he says, his tone casual but sharp. "It's where she's been all this time. What she's been doing. Who she's been working with."

I nod, agreeing. “Exactly. She didn’t just disappear into thin air. She had help. Connections. Someone’s been keeping her hidden, and now they’ve let her out. Or maybe she’s cut loose from whoever’s been holding her. Either way, it means trouble for us.”

Emiliano’s eyes flick to me, then back to Dom. “And that’s what we need to find out,” he says. “We can’t have her running around, stirring shit up. Last thing we need is another problem, especially now with the Outfit getting bolder.”

I lean back in my chair, feeling the weight of their stares. “So where do we start?” I ask, looking between them.

Dominico shrugs, a slight smile playing on his lips. “We start where all problems start—with the people who know her best. Her old contacts, anyone who might still be loyal to her. She had a network, once. We just need to find out if it’s still intact.”

Eli nods, but there’s a tension in his shoulders, a frustration that’s been building for weeks. “And what if they’re all dead?” he asks, his tone almost mocking. “What then?”

I smile, but it’s tight, strained. “Then we dig deeper. We ask questions. We shake the trees and see what falls out. She can’t hide forever.”

There’s a pause, a silence filled with the sounds of the restaurant around us—the clinking of cutlery, the soft murmur of conversations. It’s almost peaceful, a stark contrast to the tension at our table.

Dominico takes a slow sip of his wine, his eyes never leaving mine. “You think she’s here to settle old scores?” he asks.

I shrug. “Maybe. Or maybe she’s just here to cause chaos. Either way, we need to

find her before she gets to us.”

Emiliano leans forward, his eyes narrowing. “And what if she’s already got us?” he asks.

I meet his gaze, unflinching. “Then we make sure she regrets it.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then Eli nods, a small, tight smile forming on his lips. “Alright,” he says. “I’ll keep looking. I’ll reach out to our contacts in Europe, see if they’ve heard anything. Dom, you do the same. We need to know where she’s been, who she’s been with, and why the hell she’s back now.”

Dominico raises his glass in a mock salute. “You got it,” he says. “But don’t expect miracles. She’s a slippery one—always has been.”

I nod, finishing my espresso in one gulp. “I’m not expecting miracles,” I say. “Just results.”

Dom nods, and for a moment, there’s a sense of camaraderie between us, a shared purpose. “We’ll find her, Romiro,” he says, his voice firm. “And when we do... we’ll make sure she doesn’t cause us any more trouble.”

I nod, my mind already spinning with possibilities and plans. “Let’s just hope we’re not too late,” I mutter.

Dom chuckles, a dark, humorless sound. “In our line of work, we’re always too late,” he says. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t fix things.”

Emiliano leans back, his face hard, determined. “We’ll find her,” he says like he’s making a promise. “And we’ll end this.”

I nod, feeling a strange mix of dread and determination settle in my gut. Helen is out there, somewhere, and she's not done with us yet. But we'll find her. And when we do, we'll be ready.

We finish our drinks in silence, the weight of what's to come hanging heavy in the air. But I know one thing for sure—we won't let her slip through our fingers again.

Not this time.

The conversation hangs heavy in the air, settling over us like a thick fog. The clink of glasses and the occasional burst of laughter from another table feel like distant echoes in the background, their normalcy a stark contrast to the tension crackling between the three of us. I glance at Emiliano and Dominico, and I can see it in their eyes—they're just as on edge as I am, but they're trying to mask it with that cold, calculated calm that comes with our world.

Eli drums his fingers on the table, his face a mask of concentration, but I know him too well. I know the tightness around his eyes, the way his jaw clenches when he's frustrated. It's the same look he's had since we were kids, whenever he felt like the world was moving against him. But this isn't about some childhood grudge or friendly rivalry. This is Helen we're dealing with—a woman who's always been two steps ahead, always had a plan, even when it seemed like she was flying by the seat of her pants.

I lean back in my chair, stretching my legs out under the table, feeling the strain in my muscles from the tension of the past few days. "You know," I start, my voice low, "there was a time when I truly thought she was dead."

Eli's eyes flick to mine, sharp and searching. "You and me both," he mutters, his voice dark. "But we're not that lucky, are we?"

Dominico smirks, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table. “No one ever stays dead in our world, boys. You should know that by now. If you want someone gone, you make damn sure they’re gone.”

18

ALESSIA

Standing outside the Folonari townhouse, I take a moment to appreciate the grand structure that blends French elegance with the grit of urban life. The crisp summer air nips at my skin, sending a shiver through me as I look up at the familiar limestone facade, the windows draped in ivy, and the shadowed balconies above. A sleek black sports car, one of Emiliano's favorites, is parked near the entrance, gleaming in the soft glow of the exterior lights, surrounded by white hydrangeas arranged perfectly along the walkway.

As I step inside, the overwhelming grandeur of the interior washes over me. High ceilings loom above, and the sprawling marble floors reflect the warm light from the chandeliers. Everything feels heavy and luxurious, almost suffocating. In the living room, Mara and Valentina are already waiting for me. Despite the room's opulence—with its plush velvet chairs and gold accents—there's a warmth emanating from these two women that grounds me in a space that could easily feel overwhelming.

Mara lounges in one of the armchairs, her legs crossed elegantly, but her expression softens as she glances up at me. Valentina sits beside her, giving me a small wave, her brown eyes filled with a kindness that's hard to resist. Seeing them is a balm for my heart, which is still aching and unsettled by thoughts of Romiro, the memory of our last encounter replaying in vivid, painful clarity.

The early morning conversation haunts me. His voice, low and biting, feels like a

knife twisting in my gut. I push the hurt down, forcing myself to focus on the present.

“Finally,” Mara says, raising an eyebrow as I step into the room. “We were starting to think you’d forgotten us.”

I manage a small smile, though it feels thin, forced. “Sorry. Got held up.”

Mara waves a hand dismissively, already shifting her attention. She leans forward, reaching for her glass of wine. “We’re just glad you’re here. We were talking about the engagement party.”

Valentina nods, her glow seemingly brighter with excitement. “I was hoping you’d help us plan it. It wouldn’t feel right without you, Allie.”

Swallowing hard, I force a nod. “Of course,” I reply, though my voice sounds hollow, even to my own ears. I can feel Mara’s keen eyes assessing me, sensing the tension I’m trying to mask.

“Are you okay?” she asks, her tone casual but with a hint of concern that makes me want to hide.

“I’m fine,” I lie, my gaze drifting to the expansive window behind them, where the beautifully landscaped garden outside feels distant and blurred, like a scene from a movie I’m only half-watching.

“Is it about Romiro?” Mara’s voice cuts through the silence, blunt and direct.

I look back at her, startled. How can I explain everything? After years of friendship, I’ve only recently crossed that line with him, and now I’m stuck in this confusing web of emotions. “It’s... complicated,” I say, hesitating. “I’m seeing Romiro now.”

Both women lean in, their interest piqued. “Romiro?” Valentina exclaims, eyes wide with surprise. “I didn’t know you two were dating!”

Mara’s expression shifts from surprise to encouragement, her gentle personality shining through. “How long has this been going on?” she asks, her shyness fading as she becomes invested in my story.

“It’s been a few weeks,” I admit, my heart racing. “But he wants to keep it hidden.” The words tumble out, heavy with the weight of my conflicting emotions. “He thinks it’s better this way.”

Valentina’s brow furrows in concern. “Why would he want to keep it hidden?” she asks, her tone earnest and caring. “That doesn’t sound right, Allie.”

I shake my head, frustration boiling inside me. “I don’t know. He says it’s complicated, that now isn’t the right time to be public. But it makes me feel... like I’m something to be ashamed of. Like I’m not good enough to be seen with him.”

Mara’s expression softens, and she leans forward, her eyes filled with empathy. “That sounds really tough,” she says softly. “You deserve to be public with someone you care about.”

Valentina nods, her passion evident as she speaks. “Exactly! If he cares about you, why wouldn’t he want to show you off? You’re amazing, Alessia. You shouldn’t feel like you’re worth hiding.”

Their words wash over me, filling me with warmth but also a pang of hurt. “I’ve been trying to understand his perspective,” I say, my voice trembling slightly. “But it feels like I’m constantly in the dark, waiting for him to decide when it’s okay for me to be part of his life. I want more than that.”

Mara reaches out, her hand gently resting on mine. “You have every right to want more,” she says gently, her shyness giving way to a fierce protectiveness. “But you also have to think about what you want, what makes you happy. If he’s not willing to give you that?—”

“Then maybe it’s time to reevaluate,” Valentina interjects, her voice steady and reassuring. “He may be my friend, but you’re also my friend, and you deserve someone who is proud to be with you, someone who will stand by your side.”

A bitter laugh escapes me, and I shake my head, trying to blink away the tears that threaten to spill. “It sounds so simple when you say it like that,” I murmur. “But it doesn’t feel simple. It feels... impossible.”

Mara squeezes my hand, her gaze steady. “It’s not impossible,” she says. “It’s just hard. But you’re strong, Allie. Stronger than you realize.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. They’re right; I can’t keep clinging to something that’s only hurting me, to someone who won’t meet me halfway. But letting go feels like tearing out a piece of my soul.

“Maybe I need to talk to him,” I say, my voice shaky but resolute. “Maybe I need to let him know how I feel. I can’t keep living like this.”

Valentina beams at me, her eyes sparkling with encouragement. “Don’t be afraid to stand up for what you want.”

As I sit here, surrounded by the warmth and support of Mara and Valentina, a quiet resolve begins to form inside me. I may not have all the answers yet, but I know that I can’t keep living in the shadows, waiting for someone who may never be willing to give me what I need.

I take a deep breath and lift my head, meeting their gazes with a small, tentative smile. “Thank you,” I say softly, my voice filled with a quiet gratitude. “For being here. For everything.”

Mara smiles gently, her shy demeanor shining through as she leans closer. “What are best friends for?” she asks, and I can hear the warmth in her voice.

Valentina wraps an arm around my shoulders, her embrace comforting and steadying. “We’re here for you. Always,” she says.

And in this moment, I know that no matter what happens, I won’t be walking this path alone. With their support, I feel a flicker of hope ignite within me. And maybe, just maybe, that’s enough to get me through this.

ALESSIA

The elevator doors slide open with a soft ding , and I step out into the dimly lit entrance of Romiro's apartment. My heart pounds against my ribs like a drumbeat, my breath coming in shallow, uneven bursts.

I take a deep breath and try to steady myself. I can't back down now. I've been thinking about this for days, weeks even, and I need to know where we stand.

Romiro's standing in the doorway of his bedroom, his dark eyes almost undressing me, a cigarette dangling loosely from his lips. He's wearing a simple black T-shirt and jeans, casual, relaxed as if he didn't have a care in the world. But his eyes—his eyes are darker than usual, like he knows why I'm here, like he's been waiting for this moment just as much as I have.

"Alessia," he says softly, pulling the cigarette from his mouth, and exhaling a plume of smoke that curls around his face like a cloud. "What are you doing here?"

I step into the apartment, not waiting for an invitation. The place smells like him—smoke, leather, and something distinctly Romiro. The low lights cast long shadows across the walls, the city glowing faintly through the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the skyline.

"We need to talk," I say, my voice coming out stronger than I feel.

He closes the door behind him, turning slowly, his expression carefully neutral. “About?”

I take a deep breath, trying to steady the tremor in my voice. “About us,” I say, meeting his gaze. “About what we’re doing. I can’t keep going like this, Romiro. I need to know where we stand.”

He raises an eyebrow, leaning back against the door, his arms crossing over his chest. “We’ve been over this, Red. What do you mean?”

I feel a spark of frustration flare up inside me. “No, we haven’t,” I insist. “We keep dancing around it, pretending like we’re okay with this... this in-between. But I’m not okay with it anymore. I don’t want to be your dirty little secret. I don’t want to hide from my family, from anyone. I want us to be real, out in the open. I want to be with you, Romiro. Publicly.”

He lets out a sigh, a small, almost irritated sound, and pushes off the door, stepping closer to me. “And what do you think that looks like, Alessia?” he asks, his voice calm but edged with something sharp. “You think your family’s just going to welcome me with open arms?”

I lift my chin, refusing to back down. “I don’t care what they think,” I say firmly. “I care what you think. I care about us, and I think we’d be stronger together, facing them, facing everything, instead of hiding.”

He looks at me for a long moment, his eyes narrowing slightly. “This is about control, isn’t it?” he asks quietly. “You want control over this, over me.”

I feel my frustration build, my voice rising. “No, Romiro! This is about respect! About not being hidden like some dirty little secret. I want to be with you. I want everyone to know. Why is that so hard for you to understand?”

He laughs, a low, bitter sound that cuts through me like a knife. “Because it’s not that simple, Alessia. It’s never that simple. You should know that by now.”

I take a step closer, refusing to let him dismiss me. “I do know that Romiro. But I also know that I’m done hiding. I’m done pretending that I’m okay with being kept in the dark. It’s either all or nothing.”

He blinks, his jaw tightening, and for a moment, something flickers in his eyes—fear, maybe, or anger. “You’re giving me an ultimatum?” he asks, his voice dropping to a low, dangerous whisper.

I nod, my heart hammering in my chest. “Yes. I am. Either we do this, or we end it. I won’t waste my time with someone who’s too afraid to admit he cares.”

His eyes darken, his expression hardening. “Alessia,” he warns, his tone cold, “you don’t know what you’re asking for.”

I take a step back, my hands trembling. “Maybe I do,” I say softly. “Maybe I know exactly what I’m asking for.”

For a second, I think I see his resolve waver, but then his expression shifts, his eyes narrowing, a cruel twist to his lips. “You should go,” he says flatly, his voice like ice. “You’ve had a busy week. You’re tired. Go home.”

I feel the sting of his words, sharp and cold, like a slap to the face. My throat tightens, my chest aching with the weight of his dismissal. “That’s it?” I whisper, my voice breaking. “That’s all you have to say?”

He doesn’t answer, just looks away, his jaw clenched tight. “Go home, Alessia,” he repeats, turning his back on me.

I swallow hard, trying to fight back the tears burning in my eyes. “Fine,” I whisper, my voice barely more than a breath. “If that’s how you want it. But once I’m out. It’s over.”

I turn on my heel, my hands trembling as I reach for the elevator button. I don’t look back as I press it, stepping out into the elevator, a door slams shut behind me with a final, resounding thud. The sound echoes in my ears, a painful reminder of the wall he’s just built between us.

I watch the floor numbers as I descend to the lobby, my footsteps heavy, my head spinning. The lights are dim, the shadows long, and everything feels distant, blurred like I’m moving through water. I don’t even realize I’m crying until I feel the hot tears streaming down my cheeks, leaving trails of salt on my skin.

Pushing the glass door open, I step out onto the street. My mind is a whirlwind of thoughts, memories, and emotions I can’t seem to control. His face, his voice, his touch—they’re all there, all tangled up in the ache in my chest.

I feel hollow, numb. I don’t know where I’m going, but my feet seem to know the way, moving on autopilot, carrying me forward, one step at a time. The city is alive around me, the sound of traffic, the distant hum of voices, but it feels like it’s happening somewhere else, somewhere far away.

I turn down a familiar street, the neon lights of the diner glowing in the distance. Our diner. The place we used to come to when we needed to escape, when we needed to feel something real. I push open the door, the little bell above it tinkling softly, and I’m greeted by the warm smell of coffee and the sizzle of a grill.

I slide into a booth near the front, away from our usual spot, the seat still warm from the last person who sat here. The waitress gives me a sympathetic smile, her eyes flicking over my tear-streaked face. “The usual?” she asks softly, and I nod, not

trusting myself to speak.

A few minutes later, she sets a burger and fries in front of me, a tall glass of water on the side. I pick up the burger, my hands still shaking, and take a bite, but I barely taste it. The tears keep coming, hot and relentless, and I feel them drip onto the table, onto my hands, but I don't wipe them away.

I chew slowly, each bite feeling like sawdust in my mouth, my throat tight, my chest heavy. I swallow hard, and it feels like I'm swallowing shards of glass, each one cutting deeper, tearing at something inside me that I can't seem to reach.

I stare out the window, the neon lights outside blurring in my vision, my heart aching with every beat. I thought I was ready for this, thought I was ready to fight for us, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was foolish to think he could ever want me, need me, the way I want and need him.

I take another bite, my eyes stinging with fresh tears, and I feel the familiar ache settle deep in my bones. I feel lost, untethered, like I'm floating somewhere far away from myself, and I don't know how to get back. I don't know if I want to.

The diner is quiet, the low murmur of voices in the background, the clinking of dishes, the hum of the fluorescent lights overhead. I close my eyes, let the tears fall, and try to breathe, try to find some small piece of calm in the storm inside me. But all I feel is empty. All I feel is alone.

I sit there in the corner booth, the world around me fading into a blur of muted colors and sounds. The burger in front of me grows cold, half-eaten, the bun limp and soggy. I poke at the fries, pushing them around the plate with my fingers. My appetite is gone. I feel hollow like I'm running on fumes, the last of my hope draining away with each passing second.

The lights inside the diner flicker, casting brief shadows across the walls, and the murmur of conversation seems to grow louder, filling the air with noise that I can't quite make out. I glance around, seeing the familiar faces, their expressions kind but indifferent—like they're aware of my presence but not my pain.

I reach for the glass of water, and take a slow sip, feeling the cool liquid slide down my throat, soothing the rawness there. I close my eyes for a moment, letting the silence inside me expand, trying to find a center, something solid to hold on to.

But all I feel is the ache. The emptiness spreads through my chest like a stain, seeping into every part of me. I thought I was ready to face him, ready to stand up for what I want, but his cold dismissal cuts deeper than I expected. His words replay in my mind, each one like a dagger: You should go. You're tired.

A bitter laugh escapes my lips before I can stop it. Tired? Maybe I am. Tired of waiting, tired of hoping, tired of being the only one who wants this to be real. I stare across the diner, out the window at the passing cars, their headlights cutting through the night, and I wonder if I'm a fool for wanting more from him, for believing that he could ever change.

I remember the way he looked at me when I gave him the ultimatum—the flicker of something like fear in his eyes before he shut me down. He didn't even give me a chance to fight for us. He just turned away like I was nothing, like we were nothing. Like everything we've shared, everything we've done, was just... a mistake.

The tears burn hotter in my eyes, and I swipe at them angrily, hating the weakness they reveal, hating the way they betray me. I don't want to cry over him. I don't want him to see me break.

The door of the diner opens, a gust of cool air sweeping in, and I glance up out of instinct. A couple walks in, laughing softly, their heads close together, their hands

intertwined. They look so happy, so free, and a sharp pang of envy twists in my gut. I look away quickly, swallowing the lump in my throat, pushing the feelings down, burying them deep.

I don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to be anywhere. I just want... I don't know what I want. I slide out of the booth, leaving a few bills on the table, more than enough to cover the untouched meal and grab my bag. I force my feet to move, one step at a time, toward the door. The bell chimes overhead as I push it open, stepping back out into the night.

The air clings to my skin, and I fan my face with my hand, sweating as if I'd just ran a marathon. The street is quieter now, the traffic thinning, the city settling into its late-night rhythm. I start to walk, my feet moving on autopilot, my mind somewhere far away.

I think about calling Valentina, about hearing her voice, her gentle reassurance. She always knows what to say, always knows how to pull me back from the edge. But I don't want to drag her into this mess, don't want to burden her with my problems when I know she has enough of her own. Besides, what would I even say? That I put my heart on the line and watched as Romiro crushed it with a few careless words? No. I can't. I can't put that on her.

I keep walking, my footsteps echoing off the concrete, my breath coming out in small puffs. I don't know where I'm going, but my feet keep moving, carrying me down streets I've walked a thousand times, past buildings I know by heart. Everything feels different tonight—sharper, colder, like the city itself is turning its back on me.

I glance up at the sky, the dark clouds rolling in, obscuring the stars, and I feel a raindrop hit my cheek, then another. Great. Just what I need. I hold my hand over my face, quickening my pace, but the rain comes harder, faster, soaking through my clothes, chilling me to the bone.

I duck under an awning, pressing myself against the cold brick wall, my heart pounding. I feel the tears come again, mixing with the rain on my cheeks, and I let out a sob, the sound raw and painful, echoing in the empty street. I feel stupid, so stupid, for letting him get to me like this, for letting him make me feel like I'm not enough.

Why does he have this power over me? Why do I let him do this? Do I mean nothing to him?

The rain falls harder, a steady rhythm against the pavement, and I feel a strange sense of calm wash over me. Like the rain is washing away some of the pain, some of the doubt. I take a deep breath, and close my eyes, letting the cold droplets hit my face, feeling them cleanse me, and soothe me.

I don't know what's next. I don't know what to do. But I know one thing—I can't keep waiting for him. I can't keep hoping he'll change. I need to find my own way, my own path, even if it means walking away from him.

Even if it breaks my heart.

20

ROMIRO

I lean against the cold metal railing of the balcony, the cigarette dangling between my fingers glows in the darkness. The smoke curls around me, mixing with the cool night air, but it doesn't bring the calm I crave. Not tonight. I take a deep drag, feeling the burn in my throat, but it does nothing to soothe the frustration gnawing at my insides.

I keep replaying our conversation, Alessia's voice sharp, her eyes flashing with hurt and anger. I can still see the way she looked at me, like I'd ripped something out of her, like I'd betrayed her in the worst way. Maybe I have.

I exhale slowly, watching the smoke drift away, disappearing into the night. I told her to leave. I told her to go. To forget about this, about us. I thought it was the right thing to do—to protect her, to keep her away from the mess that surrounds me, the darkness that's always one step behind.

But the way she looked at me, the way her voice cracked when she said she wanted to be with me, wanted us to be real... it broke something inside me. Made me feel like a coward. I should have held her, reassured her. Instead, I pushed her away and shut her out. Told her to go home like she was nothing, like she meant nothing.

The truth is, I'm terrified. Terrified of what it would mean to be with her openly. Of the risks. Of the threats. Of what it would mean to care so much for someone in a world like mine. But even more than that, I'm terrified of losing her. Of what happens if I let her in and something happens to her because of it. I don't know how Eli does

it.

I take another drag, the smoke filling my lungs, but it doesn't make anything clearer. I feel like I'm standing on the edge of something, teetering, ready to fall. I can't get the sound of her voice out of my head, the way she said my name—soft, pleading, broken.

I put out the cigarette against the railing, watching the ember die, and flick the butt over the edge. My heart pounds harder, a mix of frustration and fear, anger at myself, at her, at the whole damn situation.

I can't stay here. I can't just stand here and do nothing. I turn and head back inside, grabbing my leather jacket from the chair, the fabric heavy in my hands. I shrug it on, my mind already made up. I have to find her. I have to fix this. I need to tell her... something. I don't even know what, but I can't leave it like this. I can't leave her like this.

I head out, taking the elevator down to the lobby, and step outside into the cool night air. The city lights glitter around me, a thousand tiny stars against the darkness. I know where she'll be. She always goes to the same place when she's upset—the small park near the diner, the one we'd sneak away too when things got too loud, too chaotic. It used to be our spot before we'd matured enough to have lunch or dinner together.

I start walking, my pace quick, purposeful, my hands shoved deep into my pockets. The rain begins to fall in soft drizzles, and I let it hit my face, hoping it might clear my mind, steady my nerves. But all I can think about is her—alone, angry, hurt. I imagine her sitting there, her shoulders hunched, her face turned away, and I feel a tightening in my chest.

By the time I reach the park, the rain has picked up, a steady drizzle that makes the

pavement glisten under the streetlights. I spot her almost immediately, sitting on one of the benches, her head bowed, her shoulders slumped. She looks so small, so fragile, and it makes something twist inside me, something that feels like regret, like fear.

I approach slowly, my steps quiet, careful. She doesn't see me at first, too lost in her own thoughts, her own pain. But then she looks up, her eyes widen in surprise, then narrow in anger. They're red. She'd been crying and it's all my fault. "What are you doing here?" she snaps, her voice raw.

I stop a few feet away, feeling the sting of her words, the ice in her tone. "It's dangerous for a beautiful woman to be out here alone," I say, my voice soft, trying to sound light, but even I can hear the tension in my words.

She stands up abruptly, her eyes blazing. "Go fuck yourself, Romiro," she spits, turning on her heel, storming away.

I follow her, my steps quickening. "Alessia, wait," I call, but she doesn't stop, doesn't slow. She walks faster, her heels clicking against the wet pavement, but the ground is slick, and suddenly, I see her foot slip.

Without thinking, I reach out, grabbing her arm, pulling her against me before she can fall. She gasps, twisting in my grasp, but I don't let go. Instead, I hold her tight, my heart hammering in my chest, adrenaline surging through my veins.

"What the hell are you doing?" she snaps, trying to pull away, but I don't let her. I pull her closer, feeling the heat of her body against mine, and before I can stop myself, I press my lips to hers in a hard, desperate kiss.

She stiffens at first, her hands pushing against my chest. But then she melts, just for a second. Her lips part, letting me in. I push deeper, my tongue sliding against hers,

tasting the salt of her tears and the rain. But then she pulls back, her hand flying out, and I feel the sting of her palm against my cheek.

I laugh, the sound rough, almost a growl. “I’m sorry,” I say, my voice husky, my breath ragged. “I’m sorry, Alessia. I’ve had my head up my ass. I was scared, okay? Scared of what it means to love you. Scared of losing you. But I can’t... I can’t imagine my life without you. I don’t want to. I don’t know how to.”

She stares at me, her chest heaving, her eyes wide, and I see the flicker of confusion, of hurt, of something deeper. “You don’t get to do this,” she whispers, her voice shaking. “You don’t get to push me away and then come after me like this. You don’t get to toy with me, Romiro.”

I swallow hard, my throat tight, my hands still holding her arms. “I know,” I whisper. “I know. I was wrong. I’m an idiot, okay? But I’m here now. I’m here, and I don’t want to be anywhere else. I’m done hiding. I’m done pretending I don’t care. I want you. Just you.”

She’s silent for a moment, her eyes searching mine, and I can see the battle going on inside her, the war between anger and forgiveness, between trust and doubt. I feel my heart pounding, waiting, hoping, terrified of what she might say.

Finally, she takes a deep breath, her expression softening just a fraction. “Do you mean that?” she asks, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Do you really mean that, Romiro?”

I nod, my grip tightening on her arms, my voice firm. “Yes,” I say. “Yes, I mean it. I’ve never meant anything more in my life.”

She closes her eyes, her shoulders sagging, and I feel her relax, just a little, against me. “Then prove it,” she whispers. “Show me. Show me that you mean it.”

I nod, my heart swelling with something I can't quite name, something that feels like hope. "I will," I promise. "I will."

And for the first time in a long time, I feel like I'm not running anymore. Like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

The rain comes down harder, soaking us both, turning the world around us into a blur of gray and silver. But I don't care. I don't care about anything but the woman in my arms, the feel of her body pressed against mine, the way her breath hitches in her throat, the way her eyes search mine, like she's trying to find something there, something she can trust.

"Show me," she whispers again, her voice barely audible over the rain. "Show me that you mean it."

I don't need any more encouragement. I pull her closer, my hands sliding up her back, tangling in her hair, tilting her head back so I can look into her eyes. There's something there, something raw and vulnerable, something I've never seen before, and it makes my chest tighten with a feeling I can't name.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, my lips inches from hers. "I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry I was an idiot. But I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere."

Her eyes flicker with something like hope, and I feel a surge of determination, a need to prove myself to her, to make her see that I'm serious. I lean in, closing the distance between us, and press my lips to hers, soft at first, waiting for her to pull back, to push me away.

But she doesn't. She lets out a soft sigh, her lips parting, and I take that as all the invitation I need. I deepen the kiss, my tongue sliding against hers, tasting the rain, the salt of her tears, the sweetness of her breath. She makes a soft sound, a whimper

that goes straight to my cock, and I feel a rush of heat, a hunger that I've been trying to ignore for too long, ignite.

I press her back against the tree behind us, my hands roaming over her body, feeling the curves, the softness, the warmth. She arches into me, her hands clutching at my shirt, pulling me closer, and I can feel her heart racing, matching the wild rhythm of my own.

The rain pours down, drenching us, but it only makes everything more intense, more real. The fabric of her dress clings to her skin, molding to her curves. Her body fits against mine, like she was made for me. I kiss her harder, deeper, my hands sliding down to her hips, pulling her closer, and she gasps, her fingers digging into my shoulders.

She's breathless, her eyes wide, her lips swollen from our kiss. I can't help but smile, a fierce, triumphant grin that I know is more than a little wild. "You think I don't want to claim you as mine?" I murmur against her mouth, my breath hot against her skin. "You think that I don't want anything more than to fucking tell the entire world that You. Are. Mine. And no one gets to have you other than me?"

She shivers, not from the cold, but from something else, something deeper, something that sends a thrill through me. "You say all of this but..." she whispers, her voice low, urgent. "Your actions are louder than your words, Romiro."

"Then let me show you," I tell her before I kiss her again, harder this time, more demanding. My hands roam her body, pulling her closer, feeling the way she melts against me, the way she trembles under my touch. The rain is pounding down, soaking us to the bone, but it only adds to the electricity crackling between us, the heat that seems to burn hotter with every passing second.

Her hands are also on me, sliding under my shirt, up my chest, pushing my wet

jacket aside. Her fingers are cold against my skin but leave a trail of fire in their wake. I growl low in my throat, the sound vibrating between us, and she gasps, her nails digging into my skin.

I push her back against the tree again, my mouth trailing down her neck, tasting her, nipping at her skin, and she lets out a soft moan, her head falling back, her body arching into me. “Romiro,” she breathes, and it’s like a drug, like a fire igniting in my veins.

Her hands slide up my hair, pulling me down to her, and I kiss her hard, pouring all my frustration, all my want, all my need into it. She responds immediately. Her lip’s part against mine, her tongue teasing, tasting, a familiar rhythm that drives me wild every single time.

I push my leg between hers, feeling the way she’s already pressing closer, searching for friction, for release. She moans softly, a sound that I know well, a sound that always makes me lose my damn mind. I slide my hands up her curves, fingers tangling in her hair, pulling her head back, exposing her throat to my hungry mouth.

I know every sensitive spot, every place that makes her gasp, makes her shudder. I kiss down her neck, biting gently, sucking just enough to leave a mark, and she arches against me, her nails digging into my shoulders, her breath coming faster.

“Romiro,” she gasps, and that familiar thrill runs through me, the rush of knowing I can make her feel this way, that I can bring her to this edge again and again.

“I know, baby,” I murmur against her skin, my lips tracing the curve of her shoulder. “I know exactly what you need.”

I slide my hands down, finding the hem of her dress, lifting it slowly, teasingly, feeling the way her breath catches, the way her hips press forward, seeking more.

She's wet, soaked from the rain, but I can feel the heat radiating from her, the way her body is practically vibrating with tension, with need.

Her hands are on my chest again , trailing over my abs, my ribs, familiar and bold, like she's claiming me, reminding me who I belong to. I let her push the fabric over my head, tossing it aside, and then her hands are on my skin, her nails scraping lightly, making me hiss with pleasure.

"Impatient?" I tease, my voice rough, my lips finding her ear, my teeth grazing the sensitive skin there.

She laughs, a low, throaty sound that sends a shiver down my spine. "Always," she murmurs, her breath hot against my ear, and then her hand slips lower, brushing against the front of my jeans, making me groan, my body arching into her touch.

"God, Alessia," I mutter, my voice tight, my hands gripping her hips, pulling her against me, letting her feel just how much I want her. "You drive me insane."

"Don't blame your crazy on me," she whispers, her lips brushing mine, her eyes dark and knowing. "But I like you crazy."

I laugh, a short, breathless sound, and then I'm kissing her again, deeper, harder, my hands moving with purpose now, sliding up her thighs, feeling the soft skin under my fingers, feeling her tremble against me. She's so familiar, and yet every time feels like I'm discovering her all over again, like she's a mystery I can't solve but never want to stop trying.

I find the edge of her underwear, slipping my fingers underneath, and she gasps, her hips jerking forward, her breath coming in quick, shallow pants. I know exactly what she likes, what makes her lose control, and I thrust my fingers inside, feeling her soak my hand, drawing a moan from her lips that sends a bolt of heat through my body.

“Romiro,” she breathes, and I hear the need in her voice, the desperation, and it drives me wild, makes me want to punish her for being such a temptation, make her beg, make her scream my name to the damn sky.

“I’ve got you,” I whisper, my lips brushing her ear, my fingers moving faster, harder, and she cries out, her body arching, her hands clutching at me, holding on like she’s afraid she might fall. “I’ve always got you, Alessia.”

She nods, her eyes squeezed shut, her lips parted, her breath coming in ragged gasps. I can feel her getting closer, feel the tension building in her body, but I don’t slow the thrusting of my fingers, instead I press the heel of my palm against her clit, and watch her come undone.

She clings to me, her hands in my hair, her body pressed tight against mine, and I can feel her heart racing, can feel the tremor in her limbs, the way she’s shaking with something more than just the cold. I want to wrap her up, to protect her, to keep her safe, but more than that, I want her to feel this, to know this, to know that she’s everything to me.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I murmur against her lips, my hands cupping her face, my thumbs brushing away the rain and tears. “I’m here, and I’m staying, and I’m not letting you go.”

She lets out a soft moan, my thumb rubbing her clit softly, before she kisses me back, harder, fiercer, her fingers digging into my shoulders, pulling me closer, holding me like she never wants to let me go. And I know, in that moment, that I’ve found something I can’t lose, something I won’t let myself lose.

The rain is a torrent now, pouring down around us, but I don’t care. I don’t care about anything but her, and the way she feels in my arms, the way she tastes, the way she makes me feel like maybe, just maybe, I’m not so broken after all.

“Romiro,” she whispers, her lips brushing mine, her breath warm and sweet against my skin. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“I won’t,” I promise, my voice low and fierce. “I won’t, Alessia. I’m done being afraid. I’m done hiding. I’m here. I’m yours.”

And as I pull her closer, as I kiss her again, I know that it’s true. I know that I’m done running. Done hiding. Done pretending that I don’t care.

Because I do. I care more than I’ve ever cared about anything—about anyone. I care enough to risk everything, to fight for this, for her, for us . And I will.

I’ll fight until my last breath.

21

ALESSIA

The hospital is alive around me, a constant hum of activity, voices, and footsteps echoing down the sterile hallways. I weave through the corridors, the bright overhead lights casting a harsh glare on the tiled floors. The scent of antiseptic clings to the air, mingling with the faint aroma of coffee from the nurses' station. It's one of those mornings that makes me feel like I've been awake for days, and maybe I have. I don't know anymore, time blurs in this place.

My fingers curl around the edge of a chart, my thumb brushing over the paper as I flip through the pages. The black ink sprawls in neat, precise handwriting—vitals, notes, observations. I scan each line, letting the details soak into my mind, filing them away like pieces of a puzzle.

"Dr. Visconti?" a voice calls from behind, and I turn to see one of the nurses approaching, her face kind, her hair pulled back in a neat bun. She hands me a clipboard. "Room 312 is asking for you. The patient's been a bit restless this morning."

I nod, tucking the chart under my arm. "Thank you, Sheila. I'll check in on them now."

I make my way toward Room 312, the sounds of the hospital fading into a distant hum. The weight of everything presses on my shoulders—my responsibilities here, the unrelenting pace of residency, the way my personal life seems to have bled into

the professional space. I think of Romiro, of his hands on my skin in the pouring rain just days ago, his mouth hot against mine, the rain falling as we kissed as if it were trying to wash away all of our doubts and fears. But the memory is fleeting, slipping away as quickly as it came, replaced by the reality of where I am now.

I reach the door to Room 312 and knock softly before pushing it open. Inside, the patient, an older man with graying hair and tired eyes, looks up from his bed. His name is Mr. Wallace; he's been here for days now, recovering from a minor surgery that took a little longer to heal than expected.

"Good morning, Mr. Wallace," I say, offering him a warm smile as I step closer to his bed. "How are we feeling today?"

He grunts, shifting slightly, his expression grumpy but not unfriendly. "I'd feel a lot better if I could get out of here, Doc," he mutters, his voice gravelly from too many years of smoking, the edges softened by the hint of a smile he tries to hide.

I chuckle softly. "I hear you. Let's take a look, see how everything is healing up. We might just make that happen."

I set the chart down on the small table beside his bed, pulling on a pair of gloves as I approach. His arm is in a sling, a thick bandage wrapped around his shoulder, and I carefully peel it back to inspect the wound. The stitches are neat, holding the skin together in a clean line, and the redness is beginning to fade, the swelling almost gone.

"Looks good," I murmur, my eyes focused on the incision. "The healing is right where we want it to be. Have you been following the instructions? Keeping it elevated?"

He grumbles something under his breath, but I catch a small smile playing at the

corner of his mouth. “I’m doing my best, Doc. Though I’d rather be lifting a beer than keeping this arm elevated.”

I laugh, a genuine sound that feels good in my chest. “Maybe soon,” I say, moving back to the chart. “But for now, let’s stick to the plan.”

He nods, his smile widening. “You’re the boss,” he concedes.

I scribble a few notes on the chart, making sure everything is in order for his discharge. “You should be out of here soon, Mr. Wallace,” I assure him, and I see the relief in his eyes, the way his shoulders seem to relax just a little bit.

“Good,” he mutters. “I’ve got a dog at home who’s probably thinking I’ve abandoned him.”

I smile again, making a note to myself to check in on his paperwork one last time before he leaves. “We’ll get you back to your dog soon enough,” I promise. “But first, I need to go over some discharge instructions with you. I’ll be back in a bit.”

He nods, looking grateful, and I give him a reassuring pat on the arm before turning to leave the room. As I step back into the hallway, the noise of the hospital rushes back in—cartwheeling down the corridors, voices echoing off the walls, the beeping of monitors from unseen rooms.

I make my way back to the nurses’ station, dropping off Mr. Wallace’s chart before heading to the small alcove where I’ve stashed my papers. I find my discharge forms, a stack of them, and thumb through until I find his. I check his file again, making sure all the necessary signatures are in place, all the boxes checked.

My mind drifts again, despite myself, back to that night with Romiro. The rain soaking through my clothes, the taste of his lips against mine, the feeling of his hands

gripping my waist as if he might lose me if he let go. When he found me in the park, his eyes dark with worry, his hair plastered to his forehead from the downpour. I was angry, hurt, but the moment I saw him, the fight went out of me. And then, somehow, we were kissing, and everything else faded away.

But now, back in the hospital, it feels like a dream, like something too good to be true. I shake my head, refocusing on the paper in front of me, the scrawl of my handwriting filling out the last of the information. I don't have time to think about Romiro right now. I have patients, responsibilities, people counting on me.

I head over to the attending physician to get the final sign-off on Mr. Wallace's discharge, weaving through the crowd of staff in the busy corridor. Doctor Harris is at the counter, flipping through a stack of charts, his brow furrowed in concentration.

"Doctor Harris," I say, stepping up beside him. "I've got a patient in 312, Mr. Wallace, ready for discharge. Just need your signature to finalize."

He looks up, his expression softening when he sees me. "Ah, yes, Mr. Wallace," he says, taking the papers from my hand. "Good work on his case, Alessia. You managed his post-op complications well."

I nod, feeling a small flush of pride at his words. "Thank you, Doctor Harris. I'll make sure he understands his discharge instructions before he leaves."

He signs the papers with a flourish and hands them back to me. "Good. Keep up the good work, Doctor."

I take the papers and head back toward Room 312, feeling a little lighter, a little more focused. I glance at the clock on the wall; it's still early, the day stretching out ahead of me like an endless road. But for the first time in days, I don't feel weighed down by it. There's a clarity in the work, a purpose, a sense of moving forward.

I step back into Mr. Wallace's room, finding him sitting up, his expression a mix of hope and impatience. "Good news," I say, holding up the discharge papers. "Looks like you're getting out of here today."

He breaks into a grin, the lines on his face softening with relief. "About damn time," he mutters, but there's a twinkle in his eye.

I laugh, setting the papers down on the table and pulling up a chair beside him. "Okay, here's the deal," I say, my tone serious but gentle. "I'm going to go over these instructions with you, and I need you to listen carefully, okay?"

He nods, his eyes fixed on mine, and I start explaining—how he needs to keep the wound clean, what signs of infection to look out for, when to take his medication. He listens carefully, nodding along, asking questions here and there, and I feel a sense of satisfaction settle over me. This is why I do what I do, why I push through the exhaustion, the long hours. To help people, to make a difference, even in these small ways.

When I finish, he reaches out and gives my hand a firm shake. "Thank you, Doctor," he says, his voice sincere. "You've been really good to me."

I smile, squeezing his hand back. "Just doing my job, Mr. Wallace. But I'm glad you're feeling better."

He nods, his smile widening. "I'll make sure to keep this arm elevated, like you said. And maybe I'll hold off on the beer for a little while."

I laugh. "Sounds like a good plan."

Standing I gather the papers and turn to leave. But before I go, I pause, glancing back at him. "Take care of yourself, Mr. Wallace," I say softly. "And take care of that dog

of yours, too.”

He nods, his expression softening. “I will, Doc. And you take care of yourself, too.”

I smile, nodding. “I will. I promise. I’ll have someone finish up your discharge papers and get a wheelchair ready for you. Take care now.”

I step back into the hallway, the noise and bustle of the hospital surrounding me once again, but there’s a lightness in my step, a sense of purpose that carries me forward. I feel a faint buzz in my pocket and reach for my phone, already knowing who it is before I see the screen light up.

A message from Romiro.

Romiro

Miss me yet, Red?

I can’t help the small smile that pulls at my lips, a warmth spreading through my chest that wasn’t there a moment ago. The memory of him, drenched in rain, pulling me against him, the world blurring around us, flickers back into my mind. For a second, I let myself remember the way his hands gripped my waist, the way he kissed me like he needed me more than air. How, even after everything, he found me, found a way to bring us back from the brink.

I type a quick reply.

Me

Don’t get too cocky. I’m busy saving lives over here.

I hit send and slip the phone back into my pocket, a smile lingering on my lips as I turn and head back toward the nurses' station.

There's a flurry of activity as I approach—nurses and techs moving quickly, charts being shuffled, and I see Sheila again, her face pinched with concentration as she types something into the computer.

"Sheila," I say, catching her eye. "Can you make sure Mr. Wallace gets his discharge paperwork and a wheelchair to the front? He's ready to go."

Sheila nods, a quick smile crossing her face. "Got it, Doctor Visconti. I'll handle it."

I thank her and turn back to the hallway, moving toward the next task on my never-ending list. I feel a buzz in my pocket again, and my heart skips a beat. I pull out my phone, glancing down at the screen.

Romiro

You're busy saving lives, huh? Good thing I have nine of them.

I roll my eyes at the message, but my smile widens. I'm about to type a snarky reply when I hear my name being called from down the hall.

"Doctor Visconti!" It's Doctor Harris again, his tone urgent, pulling me back to the present. I slip my phone away and turn to face him.

"Yes, Doctor Harris?" I ask, moving toward him, my expression shifting back to professional mode.

He holds out a chart to me, his face serious. "I need you to check on a new admit in Room 218. Possible sepsis, post-op complications from another hospital. We're

getting the lab results now, but I'd like you to get a sense of their condition."

I nod, taking the chart from his hands and glancing over the notes. The details are sparse, but enough to get a picture of what I'm walking into. "Got it," I say, my mind already switching gears, filing away thoughts of Romiro for later.

I head down the hall toward Room 218, feeling the adrenaline pick up, sharpening my focus. The halls are a blur of blue scrubs and white coats, the low hum of medical monitors and hushed conversations weaving through the air. I pass by a window, catching a glimpse of the sun climbing higher in the sky, its light reflecting off the glass in a bright, blinding arc. I blink, refocusing, feeling the familiar rhythm of the hospital settle back into my bones.

I push open the door to Room 218, stepping inside with a deep breath. The room is dimly lit, the blinds half-drawn, and I see a woman lying in the bed, her face pale, beads of sweat glistening on her forehead. Her breathing is shallow, her chest rising and falling in rapid, uneven intervals. I quickly scan the room, noting the IV lines, the machines beeping steadily beside her, the half-empty bag of fluids hanging on the stand.

"Good morning," I say softly, moving to the foot of the bed, my eyes on the patient. "I'm Doctor Visconti. How are you feeling?"

She blinks up at me, her eyes glassy with fever. "Not... not great," she whispers, her voice barely audible, strained with the effort.

I nod, stepping closer, reaching for the stethoscope draped around my neck. "I'm going to take a quick listen, alright? Just breathe as normally as you can for me."

She nods weakly, and I lean in, placing the cool metal of the stethoscope against her chest, listening to the rapid, uneven thumping of her heart, the shallow wheeze of her

breaths. I frown slightly, adjusting the stethoscope, trying to get a clearer sound.

Her skin is hot to the touch, the fever radiating off her in waves, and I feel the pulse in her wrist—fast, too fast. My mind runs through possibilities, potential diagnoses, my brain working like a machine, moving from one thought to the next.

“How long have you been feeling like this?” I ask, keeping my voice calm, steady, my eyes on her face.

“Since... since yesterday,” she murmurs, her eyelids fluttering. “I thought it was just the... the flu, but...”

She trails off, her voice fading, and I squeeze her hand gently. “It’s okay,” I reassure her. “You’re in the right place now. We’re going to take care of you.”

I turn to the nurse beside me, my tone brisk, efficient. “Let’s get another set of labs, blood cultures, chest X-ray, and start her on broad-spectrum antibiotics. And call for a respiratory consult—she’s showing signs of distress.”

The nurse nods, moving quickly, and I turn back to the patient, offering a reassuring smile. “You’re going to be fine,” I say, though my mind is already racing through the next steps, the tests, the treatments.

She nods weakly, her eyes fluttering closed, and I step back, letting the nurse take over. I make a few more notes in the chart, jotting down my observations, my recommendations, my brain already moving ahead to the next case, the next task.

But even as I move through the routine, my mind slips back to Romiro, to the way he looked at me in the rain, his eyes so intense, so full of something I can’t quite name. I think about the way he held me afterward, his hands steady, his voice a soft murmur in the storm, and I wonder if maybe, just maybe, we’re finding our way to something

real.

I push the thought away, turning back to the work in front of me, feeling the weight of responsibility settle over my shoulders again. There's still so much to do, so many people counting on me. But for now, at this moment, I feel okay. I feel... enough.

And that's something. That's more than I've felt in a long time.

ROMIRO

The gravel crunches under my shoes as I step out of the car, the mansion looming ahead of me like a specter in the night. The rain has stopped, leaving everything wet and glistening, and the lights from the grand entrance reflect off the damp stone, casting strange shadows against the towering columns.

Nicolo's place is just like him—cold, imposing, impenetrable. The kind of place you don't get too comfortable in, the kind of place that keeps its secrets close, its doors always ready to slam shut. I glance up at the massive wrought-iron chandelier hanging from the high ceiling of the foyer. It sparkles like a web spun from glass, delicate but somehow dangerous like one wrong move could bring the whole damn thing crashing down.

I take a deep breath and push the door open, stepping inside. The air smells like polished wood and old money. My footsteps echo off the marble floors, and I can hear Nicolo's voice murmuring to someone in the next room. As I get closer, I catch a glimpse of him through the open door to the study, standing by the poker table, a glass of something dark and expensive in his hand.

He looks up as I enter, his expression unreadable, but his eyes are sharp, assessing. He's wearing one of his usual dark suits, tailored to perfection, not a single hair out of place. He looks like he could have just stepped off the cover of some business magazine, but I know better. There's a predator behind that polished facade.

“Romiro,” he says, his voice cool, controlled. “You’re late.”

I shrug, leaning against the doorframe. “Traffic,” I reply, keeping my tone light, and casual, but I can feel the tension thrumming between us like a live wire.

Nicolo gestures to a chair across from him. “Sit,” he says, not a suggestion but an order, and I obey, taking the seat, my eyes never leaving his.

He sets his glass down on the table, his fingers tapping against the edge. “You wanted to talk about her,” he says, and there’s a bite to his words, an edge that cuts deeper than the cold air in the room.

I nod. “Helen,” I say, the name feeling like a curse on my tongue.

Nicolo’s face remains impassive, but I can see the flicker of something in his eyes—a flash of anger, or maybe panic, quickly buried. “She’s like a cockroach,” he mutters. “She always finds a way to crawl back from the gutter.”

I can’t help the smirk that tugs at my lips. “She did teach us everything we know, didn’t she?”

He doesn’t smile. “Don’t give her too much credit,” he says sharply. “She didn’t teach us everything. She just forced us to learn faster.”

I nod, knowing he’s right. Helen was never a mother. She was a monster. But even monsters have their uses. “I’ve been thinking,” I continue, “about the Syndicate. About whether it was ever really eradicated.”

Nicolo’s eyes narrow, and he leans back in his chair, his hands steepling in front of him. “The Syndicate is finished,” he says, but there’s something in his voice, something unsure. “The arrests, the deaths... we wiped them out.”

“Did we?” I ask, my voice low, and challenging. “Or did we just cut off the head of the hydra? Two more heads in its place could pop up in the dark, waiting for a chance to strike.”

Nicolo’s jaw tightens, a muscle ticking in his cheek. “You think Helen is involved?” he asks, and I can hear the doubt, the worry that he’s trying so hard to hide.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “But it wouldn’t be the first time she’s aligned herself with the worst of the worst.”

Nicolo is silent for a moment, his gaze fixed on the wall behind me, lost in thought. I can almost see the gears turning in his head, the calculations, the possibilities. “The Syndicate...” he murmurs, almost to himself. “If they’re still out there—if they’re regrouping...”

“They’ll want revenge,” I finish for him. “And they know exactly where to hit us.”

Nicolo’s eyes snap back to mine, and there’s a fire there now, a determination that I recognize all too well. “We need to get to her,” he says, his voice low, urgent. “Before she gets to us.”

I nod. “Agreed. But we can’t do this alone. We need to be smart about it. We need to be prepared for whatever she’s planning.”

Nicolo stands, his movements quick and decisive, and I can feel the shift in the air, the shift in him. “I’ll see what I can dig up on my end,” he says. “See if they’ve heard anything. If Helen is working with anyone, they’ll know.”

“I’ll reach out to our contacts in the Camorra; Eli only knows about Helen—not the Syndicate,” I reply, standing as well. “And if the Syndicate is still out there, we need to know who’s running the show now. They won’t be the same without their leaders,

but that doesn't mean they're any less dangerous."

Nicolo nods, and for a moment, there's a strange, almost reluctant respect in his eyes, a rare acknowledgment of our shared past, our shared scars. "Be careful, Romiro," he says, his voice softer, almost concerned. "If she's really back, she's going to come for you first."

I smirk, trying to hide the unease that curls in my gut. "Let her try," I say. "I'm not a scared kid anymore."

"No," Nicolo agrees, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "You're not. But don't let your guard down. She knows you better than anyone."

I nod, feeling the weight of his words, the truth of them. "I know," I say quietly. "And that's what scares me the most."

We stand there for a moment, in the dim light of the mansion, two brothers bound by blood and pain, by a past that refuses to stay buried. And I know, deep down, that this is just the beginning. Whatever Helen has planned, it's going to test us both in ways we can't even imagine.

But I also know that we're ready. That we're stronger together. That we'll face whatever comes, no matter how dark, no matter how dangerous.

Because we're Esposito's. And we don't back down. Not ever.

* * *

The dim lights of the casino cast a soft, amber glow over the rows of slot machines. The air thick with the scent of smoke, mingling with the faint, stale odor of old perfume and the unmistakable clink of coins falling into metal trays. I lean against a

pillar, my eyes scanning the room, every nerve in my body tense. It's a stupid tradition, this formality, but if it's what it takes to be with Alessia, I'll swallow my pride.

Toni is here somewhere, as is Tristan. The two men who hold the most sway over her life. The men whose approval I need, no matter how much I hate the very thought of it. I take a deep breath and rub my fingers over my lips, feeling the subtle prickle of stubble against my fingertips. My heartbeat thuds in my chest, steady but hard. I feel a certain level of anxiety, but I know it's more than that. I'm wired, like I'm bracing for something, for anything.

The sounds around me blur into a constant buzz — the beeps from the slot machines, the murmurs of gamblers, the occasional burst of laughter from a table across the room. But none of it matters. Not right now. My focus is on one thing—getting through this meeting and proving myself to them.

I spot Tristan first, sitting at a corner table, a drink in front of him untouched, his expression as cold and distant as ever. His eyes catch mine, and there's no hint of friendliness in them. I walk over, feeling the tension in my shoulders increase with every step. His fists are clenched on the table, and I know I'm not in for a warm reception.

Before I can even speak, Tristan's fist comes out of nowhere, catching me square in the jaw. Pain explodes across my face, my head snapping back as I stagger, tasting blood on my lips. I should have seen it coming. Hell, I half expected it. But I stay standing, refusing to back down.

"Is that how you greet all your guests, Tristan?" I say before wiping the blood from my lip, my voice steady, even though my jaw throbs.

Tristan just glares at me, his jaw clenched, eyes burning with a mix of anger and

something deeper—a brother’s protective instinct. I get it. If I had a sister, I’d probably do the same, maybe worse.

Toni appears from the shadows, his face as stoic as always, watching me with that cool, calculating stare. He’s the one I need to win over, the real gatekeeper. He stands still, arms crossed, his expression revealing nothing. It’s a silent challenge.

“Romiro,” Toni says, his voice low but carrying the weight of authority, “Why are you here?”

“I’m here because I want your blessing,” I say, holding his gaze. “To be with Alessia. Publicly, officially. I intend to marry her.” The only reason we can talk freely is because gamblers only focus on the dollars, not those who stand in the darkness.

A slight twitch of his mouth—a reaction, at least. “You think you deserve her?” Toni asks, his tone measured, his eyes unyielding.

“No,” I reply honestly, surprising even myself with the admission. “But I know I want her. More than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life. And I’ll do whatever it takes to make her happy, even if it means standing here and taking whatever you want to throw at me.”

There’s a beat of silence. The noise from the casino fades into the background, a dull roar, while Toni assesses me, his eyes searching for any sign of weakness, any hesitation. Tristan stands at his side, his fists still clenched, watching me like he’s daring me to make a wrong move.

“You’ve got the nerve, I’ll give you that,” Toni says finally, his voice still low, almost a growl. “But nerves aren’t enough. I need to know you can protect her, that you won’t hurt her, not ever. Because if you do...” He steps closer, his eyes like steel, “If you even come close to hurting my little girl, they won’t find your body for

centuries.”

I swallow hard, holding his gaze. “I understand,” I say, my voice steady. “I wouldn’t dream of hurting her. I want to protect her with everything I have. With my life, if I have to.”

He stares at me for a moment longer, and then, slowly, he nods. “We’ll see,” he mutters, his tone still cold but slightly less hostile. “We’ll see if you’re worthy of her.”

I exhale, feeling some of the tension leave my shoulders. It’s not a yes, but it’s not a no, either. It’s a start, and right now, that’s more than I could have hoped for.

Tristan still looks like he wants to knock my teeth out, but I meet his gaze squarely. “I want her, Tristan,” I say, my voice firm. “And I will fight anyone, anything, to keep her safe. You know that.”

He watches me for another moment, and then, grudgingly, he gives a curt nod. He doesn’t smile, but it’s something.

Toni gives a final nod, his eyes still cold but maybe, just maybe, a little less so than before. “Don’t make me regret this, Romiro,” he says, turning away, signaling the end of the conversation.

“I won’t,” I promise, my voice strong, certain.

Toni turns away, disappearing back into the dimly lit depths of the casino, leaving me standing alone in the noise and haze. The blood on my lip still stings, and the metallic taste on my tongue is a reminder of the stakes I’m playing with. I watch his retreating figure, my jaw tight, my chest heavy. This isn’t just about winning Alessia’s hand in some old-school, antiquated tradition. It’s about proving that I belong in her world, a

world where I'm still seen as an outsider, a risk. Even as a Camorrista, as the Enforcer.

Tristan stays behind a moment longer, his dark eyes never leaving mine. There's something in his stare — a warning, maybe even a challenge. I hold his gaze, unflinching, and after a beat, he inclines his head slightly, just enough to acknowledge me. This is the second time he's given me a nod.

It isn't his approval, not yet. But it's something. A crack in the wall.

He turns and walks off, and I finally allow myself a deep breath. The tension in my muscles slowly starts to ease, but I know better than to think it's over. It's never over. Not when it comes to their family—, my family now by association, and all the tangled, twisted strings that bind us.

I wipe my lip again, feeling the sharp sting, but I don't mind it. Pain has always been an old friend of mine, a constant reminder of where I come from and what I've fought against my entire life. But this time, it's different. This time, it's for something—someone—worth fighting for.

The air around me feels heavy, almost suffocating, as if the weight of every decision, every step forward, is bearing down on my shoulders. Alessia is worth it, every single sacrifice, but the stakes have never been higher. The Camorra's ruling family eyes are on me now, their scrutiny as sharp as any blade, and one wrong move could cost me everything. Not just my life, but Alessia's trust, her love—everything I've been trying to build with her.

I know I'm not done. Not by a long shot. Winning over Toni is just the first of many battles to come. The rest of the family, the Camorra itself... they won't be so easily swayed. I have to tread carefully and play the game wisely. This isn't just about love; it's about survival. It's about protecting what I've claimed as mine, and I'd be a fool

to underestimate what I'm up against.

I glance around the casino once more, taking in the dim lights, the faces of the patrons lost in their vices, oblivious to the war playing out beneath the surface. It's a fitting place for this kind of conversation—a battlefield disguised as entertainment, where the stakes are high, and every roll of the dice could change the game.

I shove my hands into my pockets, turning toward the exit. I need to get back to Alessia, to hold her, to remind myself why all of this is worth it. But as I step out into the night, I know that the real fight is just beginning. And in this world, a single mistake could cost me everything.

I won't let that happen. I can't. Because losing isn't an option, not when the prize is the only thing that makes sense in this messed-up world. Not when Alessia's heart is on the line—and mine with it.

So, I set my jaw and keep walking, the darkness of the city swallowing me whole. I've had a small victory today, but I know better than to celebrate. There's still a long way to go and a lot more to lose. And I can't afford to let my guard down—not for a second.

ROMIRO

I adjust my cufflinks in the reflection of the window, the city lights of New York glowing behind me, painting the glass with streaks of neon. Alessia is in the other room, finishing up. I hear her light footsteps, and the soft rustle of fabric as she moves. There's a low hum of conversation in the background—Valentina and Emiliano are already outside, waiting by their Maserati.

I glance down at my phone. A message from Nicolo, just the usual cryptic check-in. I pocket the device, my fingers brushing over my Jeep keys. The thought of tonight sends a strange current through me. Officially meeting her family. As if we need their permission, but it's tradition, and in our world, tradition holds weight.

The door to the bedroom opens, and Alessia steps out. My breath catches. She's wearing a deep, dark dress that hugs her curves, elegant and simple. She pauses for a second, catching my eye, a small, knowing smile playing on her lips.

"You ready?" I ask, voice lower than I intend. I push myself off the window ledge and cross the room, taking her hand. She looks up at me, her eyes filled with something—anticipation, maybe?

"As ready as I'll ever be," she replies. I squeeze her hand, a silent promise in that touch, and we head out.

Down on the street, the cars wait. Emiliano leans against his Maserati, his expression

unreadable, as usual. Valentina stands beside him, her hand resting on his arm. They both nod as we approach.

“I’ll take the lead,” Emiliano says, his voice calm but commanding. I nod back, and we head to the Jeep. The city is bustling tonight, the streets a blur of headlights and the murmur of the weekend crowd. I focus on the road, but Alessia’s presence beside me pulls at my thoughts and keeps them from drifting too far. They still don’t know what this dinner is about, but I’m sure they suspect something.

The city lights blur past us, streaks of neon red and gold against the black canvas of night as I grip the steering wheel. The engine purrs under my hands, a steady hum that matches the quiet tension in my chest. Beside me, Alessia sits with one leg crossed over the other, her red hair cascading over her shoulder like liquid fire, catching the glow of the passing streetlights.

She’s been quiet since we left the apartment, her fingers playing absently with the hem of her dress. Her reflection in the window is soft and contemplative, eyes focused on the buildings flashing by. The weight of what we’re about to do presses down on both of us, a thousand unspoken words hanging between us in the stillness of the car.

I reach over, my hand finding hers on her lap. Her skin is warm under my touch, familiar and grounding. She turns her head, her eyes meeting mine, a small smile tugging at her lips. I squeeze her fingers gently, feeling a wave of calm wash over me.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my voice low, just above the rumble of the engine.

She nods, but I see the flicker of nerves in her gaze, the way her breath catches slightly. “Just thinking,” she replies, her voice soft, almost swallowed by the hum of the city.

“About?” I prompt, my thumb brushing over the back of her hand.

She exhales slowly, a little laugh escaping her lips. “About how my father might kill you tonight,” she jokes, but there’s a seriousness in her eyes, a worry she’s trying to mask.

I chuckle, a deep sound in my chest. “Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve faced death,” I say, and she rolls her eyes, squeezing my hand tighter.

“I mean it, Romiro,” she murmurs, her tone turning earnest. “This is... it’s a big deal. For them. For us.”

I nod, my gaze fixed ahead as I navigate the winding streets leading us away from the heart of the city. “I know,” I reply, my voice steady. “But I’m not backing down, not from this. Not from you.”

Her smile grows, a little softer, her eyes glimmering with something like gratitude, like relief. She leans over, pressing a quick kiss to my cheek, the scent of her hair—jasmine and something sweet—filling the space between us.

“Good,” she whispers against my skin before pulling back, her fingers threading through mine.

We fall into a comfortable silence, the kind that only comes from familiarity, from knowing each other’s rhythms and breaths. The buildings grow taller, more imposing, as we drive deeper into the affluent outskirts. I can see the lights of Emiliano’s Maserati ahead of us, a flash of red and silver weaving through the streets.

I keep my focus on the road, the city slowly giving way to sprawling estates, high walls, and manicured lawns. Alessia’s family home looms in the distance, a dark silhouette against the night sky, with tall wrought-iron gates standing sentinel at the

entrance.

As we pull up, the gates open slowly, creaking with a metallic groan that sends a chill down my spine. I cast a quick glance at Alessia; her face is composed, but there's a tightness in her jaw, and her fingers tremble slightly in mine.

"It'll be fine," I murmur, trying to reassure her—and maybe myself, too. She nods, a small, tight-lipped smile, but I can see the determination in her eyes, the fire that I've always admired in her. We drive through the gates, the gravel crunching under the tires, and park beside Emiliano's parked vehicle.

Emiliano and Valentina step out, and I see Valentina give me a quick, encouraging smile. Emiliano's face is unreadable as usual, but there's a slight nod of approval. It's a small thing, but it helps.

I cut the engine, and for a moment, there's only silence. Alessia takes a deep breath, and I turn to her, squeezing her hand one last time.

"We're in this together," I remind her, and she nods, her eyes softening.

"Together," she echoes, and we step out of the car, the cool night air wrapping around us.

The house is even grander up close, the kind of old-world elegance that commands respect. The double doors are already open, and we're greeted by Christina, who envelops Alessia in a warm hug. "Look at you," she murmurs, stepping back to examine her daughter. "Absolutely stunning."

Alessia laughs, a little nervously, and I feel the tension in her shoulders ease slightly. Christina's eyes then turn to me, assessing, but there's a warmth there, too.

“Romiro,” she says, her voice polite but firm. “Welcome.”

I nod, offering a small smile. “Thank you, Mrs. Visconti,” I reply.

Behind her, Toni stands, his arms crossed over his chest. His face is hard to read, a mask of authority and a touch of suspicion. Tristan is at his side, his expression more open, but there’s suspicion there, too. I nod to both of them, and they nod back, but I feel the weight of their scrutiny, their silent judgment.

Christina turns to Valentina, welcoming her with a smile. “It’s nice to finally meet the woman who tied my nephew down,” she says playfully, and Valentina laughs, a light sound that cuts through the tension. Emiliano just smirks, and for a moment, the mood lifts.

We move deeper into the house, the men heading toward the dining room while the women stay in the hall, their conversation fading behind us. The dining room is well lit, with heavy wooden furniture, gold accents and flowy white curtains shielding the windows. Toni pours drinks slowly and deliberately, handing the first glass to Emiliano—a gesture of respect that doesn’t go unnoticed.

“So,” Toni says, looking at me, “You asked for this meeting.”

At this point, the women follow us into the dining room, Alessia coming to stand beside me. His voice is calm, but there’s an edge to it, a challenge that I can’t ignore. I take a deep breath, feeling Alessia’s hand slip into mine beneath the table, her touch grounding me.

“Yes,” I reply, my voice steady. “As you know, Alessia and I... we’re together. We wanted the whole family to know after I received your.... blessings.”

The room falls silent, the tension almost palpable. I can feel all eyes on me, waiting

for a reaction, an outburst. But before anyone can speak, Alessia's Nonna's laughter breaks the stillness.

"I hope that he has a big dick. You've waited all this time," she says, her voice loud and serious.

"Celia, for God's sake, don't speak in such distasteful manners," Christina chastises her.

Rolling her eyes, Celia says, "For the last time, Christina, don't be such a prude. I've always wondered why you and Anthony stopped after only two grandchildren." She turns to Toni. "You knew I wanted more grandchildren."

Toni curses in Italian under his breath.

Slowly giggles begin to ripple through the room, the tension easing, if only slightly. Toni gives his mother an incredulous look before shaking his head and taking a sip out of his drink. Alessia's mother looks between us, her brows furrowing. "You knew?" she asks Toni, her voice filled with disbelief.

Toni takes a slow sip of his bourbon, leaning back in his chair. "Romiro came to see me at the casino the other night," he admits, and for a moment, there's a hint of a smile on his lips.

The mood lightens, the conversation flowing more naturally, but I can feel Toni's eyes on me, still assessing. We talk about business, the Outfit, and the past few months. Emiliano speaks in his calm, commanding tone, and I listen, my mind half-focused on the conversation, half on Alessia beside me.

Eventually, Toni leans in close, his voice low. "You hurt her," he warns, his tone cold.

I cut him off, meeting his gaze, unflinching. “And they won’t find my body for centuries,” I repeat the words he said to me the other night, and for the first time I see a flicker of something like approval in his eyes.

Dinner is served, and as we take our seats at the long dining table, Alessia’s hand finds mine again. Her fingers are warm and steady, and I squeeze them, a silent reassurance.

The meal unfolds with surprising ease, stories, and laughter filling the space. I catch Valentina’s eye across the table, and she gives me a small nod. “I’m happy for you, Romiro,” she says quietly, her smile genuine. “It’s about time.”

I grin back. “And I’m glad you chose to come back to New York,” I reply.

The night winds down, but there’s a sense of something new, something unfolding. The stakes are high, the future uncertain, but as I sit there, with Alessia’s hand in mine and her family slowly accepting us, I feel a strange sense of hope.

24

ALESSIA

My parents want us to stay the night, so once everyone left and my family settled in for the night, Romiro and I make our way up the stairs to my bedroom. The moment I step inside, warmth wraps around me—a soft, late summer night warmth that feels like a memory brought back to life. My eyes trace the familiar arches sweeping high above, shadowed now, but somehow just as grand and alive in the darkness. The scent of jasmine drifts toward me from the vase near the bed, and I know my mamma put it there. She always does.

Everything here feels soft, muted. The bedding is like a sea of cream, smooth and untouched, each fold catching a whisper of light from the hallway. The windows pull me in next. Tall and proud, they stretch up into the shadows, the glass a patchwork of faint reflections and tiny starlit glimmers. Beyond them, the night sprawls endlessly, quiet and dark, just a hint of sky pressing against the glass.

Romiro stands beside me, taking it all in. I feel his quiet admiration, the way his gaze lingers on the details—the carved moldings, the graceful sweep of curtains framing the windows. I feel the parquet floor cool beneath my bare feet, grounding me in something unchanging. This room, this place—it's like stepping back into another version of myself. Each detail whispers of the past, familiar and untouched, as though it's waited patiently for me to return. Nerves swirl at the pit of my stomach; I have a surprise for him, and I hope he'll enjoy it.

I turn to look at him and find him staring at me with his hands tucked into the pocket

of his black pants, his eyes full of raw lust, full of a furious need to touch me. I guess that's how we've always looked at each other, even before we knew how to deal with it. I swallow back whatever nervousness I'm feeling and tell him, "I have a surprise for you."

He lifts a singular brow at me and asks, "Oh really?" I nod. "And what might it be?"

I open my small handbag and feel around for the smooth—slightly squishy—cylinder. Then I find it...the cool sensation pushing into the heat of my palm, it's unmistakable. As I wrap my fingers around it, there's an odd mix of arousal and embarrassment bubbling up. The bottle is small, rounded at the edges, easy to grip, yet my hand tightens around it just a little too hard, maybe out of a lingering tension. I pull it out, and glance down, avoiding Romiro's scorching gaze.

"Turn around and walk to the bed. Leave the bottle on the nightstand," he commands, shutting my bedroom door behind him, locking us both in and locking the rest of the world out. I do as I'm told, but I add a gentle sway to my round, full hips, feeling his wild gaze on my back and ass. I can sense his need for ownership even without him having to say it. I prop the bottle up right on the nightstand and turn to look at him. He hasn't moved an inch but I can tell by the tic in his jaw that he wants to pounce on me. Romiro lifts one of his hands to his stubbled jaw, swiping his thumb over the edge. "Strip."

"W-what?"

"You heard me, Red."

My panties are soaking wet with my arousal, and my hands go to the back of my dress. My fingers tremble as I unzip it and allow the dress to pool around my feet—standing only in my underwear. He watches me for a beat, the muscles underneath his shirt moving with precision.

“All of it.”

I unhook my bra, letting it join my dress, my nipples hardening instantly. And it's less to do with the cold air that floats in through the open window and more because of his scorching, dark gaze. Romiro looks like he's ready to devour me.

A shiver makes its way down my spine as I hook my thumbs in either side of my panties and slide them down my legs, piling them with the rest of my clothes.

“Get on your knees at the foot of the bed, face against the mattress, and raise your ass in the air.” Sucking in a deep breath, I drop into the position, the friction of the duvet against my breasts has me biting down on my lips to stifle a moan. Romiro's footsteps ring out, slow and deliberate. The sound of him unbuckling his belt echoes and bounces off the walls. I dig my fingers into the soft mattress and turn to watch him.

“Eyes ahead.” I pout, not wanting to miss him stripping, but he lets out a deep chuckle before saying, “You'll get to do what you want another time. Tonight, I'm punishing you for being such a tease.” I face ahead. He tsks before adding, “What were you thinking? Bringing lube to your parents' house?”

“I was—” Romiro pushes my face into the mattress, his mouth against my ear.

“That was a rhetorical question, and I didn't allow you to speak, Alessia. Now be a good girl and grab your ass cheeks and spread them, show me that tight hole that you want to give to me.” Fuck. My arousal drips down my inner thigh. My hands tremble, but I obey his command. God. He's being so rough today. He's never told me to do this before, it only adds more stimulation to my already glistening sex, and he hasn't even touched me. I pull my cheeks apart, fully aware that my hole, and the juices that coat my pussy and inner thighs are on full display for his eyes. His footsteps ring out again, he walks away from me before coming back to stand right behind me. I feel

him kneel behind me, his heat radiating down my back. “I’ll start with your ass. And if you’ll be good for me, I’ll fuck your tight pussy.” My thighs quiver at the image he’s painting. Romiro’s savage when he fucks, and I know better to expect anything other than that tonight.

“Tell me Red, has anyone ever fucked your ass?” he asks me.

“No.”

“And no one will get to, other than me. Don’t move,” he commands and I obey. My heart beats like a drum as he repositions himself, the mattress dipping under his weight. A cold liquid covers my hole and before I can focus on the sensation, Romiro forces two fingers inside my ass. He’s slow at first. I can’t help the small gasps leaving my lips, pushing my face into the mattress as I try to muffle them.

“Shh, baby. You don’t want your parents to hear the dirty sounds you make with your boyfriend’s fingers in that tight ass, now do you?” he whispers, his lips brushing against my earlobe.

“Romi—” I try to speak but a smack on my ass stops me. Did he? Oh, my God. He did. He fucking spanked me; I don’t have time to even process it. Romiro rubs his hand over my butt, soothing the stinging sensation.

“I didn’t allow you to speak, now did I? Now be good, and hold still while I loosen this hole so it can...accommodate my size.” My body burns as he thrusts his fingers slowly, in and out. But before I know what he’s doing, he’s slipping his fingers out and positioning his cock against my entrance, running the tip against me. He grabs my hips and slams himself into me.

Holy. Fuck.

He's so deep inside of me, and then he pulls his cock out with a ruthlessness that feels like hell and heaven at the same time. His hot breath is against my back, and whimpers escape from between my lips as he drives into me with ferocious vigor that has the bed shaking. My upper body sliding back and forth on the bed with each thrust. I grab the mattress, attempting to gain some balance, but Romero's voice stops me. "Don't even think of letting go of your ass. Keep holding it." He pulls out slower this time, almost all the way, then he rams back inside, he pushes my face into the mattress to muffle an escaped scream, my teeth scrape against the linen sheets, and I feel my insides melt.

Romero's free hand finds my swollen clit and he works it, twisting and stroking it, leaving me panting, begging for me. His thrusts become longer, harsher, as if he's claiming me over and over again. With the brutality of his thrusts, I don't last. I can't, I come apart with a hoarse cry as he spills into me.

He pulls out and collapses next to me. Romero's breathing is shallow—coming out fast. I'm still reeling from that orgasm, my body tingling. The bed dips, and he disappears into the attached bathroom. When he comes back, he's holding a wet towel in his hand. I let a low groan slip out as he runs the warm wet towel over my back, the act so intimate, I feel my heart swell. He pushes my hair out of my face, pressing a kiss to my head. Then, he holds my gaze and whispers, "Thank you for trusting me." I give him a small, tired smile.

ALESSIA

The heavy oak doors creak slightly as I push them open, stepping into the grand foyer of my parents' house. Romiro had to leave in the early morning and managed to let my father know. I'm sort of hoping he won't bring it up. The light filters in through the tall, arched windows, casting a warm, golden hue on the dark wood paneling that covers the walls.

I take a deep breath, feeling the familiar scent of old leather, polished wood, and my mamma's perfume—a floral blend that's both sharp and sweet—wafts toward me. The house is quiet, save for the soft ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner, its pendulum swinging back and forth like a metronome, keeping time with my racing heart.

I cross the foyer, my footsteps echoing against the high ceilings. I know they're waiting for me in the sitting room, the one just off to the right—the room that's always reserved for serious conversations, the kind that leaves a knot in my stomach.

The door is ajar, and I hear the low murmur of my parents' voices. I push it open gently, and they both look up as I step inside. My father is seated in his usual place, a high-backed, leather armchair that looks more like a throne than a piece of furniture. His face is stern, as always, but there's a hint of something softer in his eyes today—anticipation, maybe, or concern.

Mamma is perched on the edge of the sofa, her hands folded neatly in her lap, her

expression a careful mix of warmth and calculation. She's dressed in one of her tailored dresses, her hair perfectly coiffed, a single pearl necklace resting against her collarbone. She looks like she's waiting for an audience to arrive.

"Alessia," my father says, his voice deep and commanding, but there's a slight smile tugging at his lips. "We need to talk."

I nod, taking a seat on the opposite sofa, feeling the fabric press against my back. "About what?" I ask, though I already have a feeling I know where this is headed. The conversation last night at dinner is still fresh in my mind—the surprise, the tension, the curiosity in their eyes when Romiro and I announced our relationship, of course my father knew beforehand, but that still left some questions unanswered.

He leans forward slightly, his hands resting on his knees. "We're having the family lunch this Sunday at Vito's," he says, his tone leaving no room for debate. "And I want my son-in-law, Romiro, to be there."

I blink, caught off guard by the suddenness of it. "Dad, they just met him last night," I protest. "Isn't it a bit early to call him...son-in-law?"

My father's smile widens just a fraction, but his eyes are serious. "It's not too early, Alessia," he replies calmly. "Not for a man who clearly knows what he wants."

I open my mouth to argue, but Mamma cuts in, her voice softer but no less firm. "Alessia, dear, he is smitten with you," she says, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "It's obvious to anyone who looks at him. You'll be married soon, I'm sure of it."

I feel a flush of warmth spread across my cheeks, my heart skipping a beat at her words. "Mom, it's too soon to talk about marriage," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "We're just... we're just figuring things out."

She waves her hand dismissively, as if brushing away my words like a pesky fly. “Nonsense,” she says with a laugh. “You’re not getting any younger, and neither is he. If he wants to be part of this family, he’ll have to prove himself sooner or later. Why not start now?”

I shake my head, feeling a knot tighten in my chest. “It’s not that simple,” I insist. “Romiro... he’s complicated. And so is our relationship.”

My father’s smile fades, his expression hardening. “Well, uncomplicate him,” he says, his tone firm. “He needs to show up. I expect him to be there on Sunday.”

There’s a finality in his voice that makes my stomach twist. “Dad,” I begin, trying to keep my tone light, “I can ask him, but I can’t promise he’ll come.”

My father’s eyes narrow slightly, and he leans back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “This isn’t a request, Alessia,” he says, his voice low and steady. “I expect him to be there. If he’s serious about you, he’ll come. If he’s not... well, then maybe it’s better we know now.”

I feel the words hit me like a punch to the gut, my breath catching in my throat. I glance at Mamma, hoping for some kind of support, but she just nods in agreement, her smile bright but her eyes sharp.

“Romiro will come,” she says confidently, as if it’s already been decided. “He wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

I bite my lip, feeling a surge of frustration rise inside me. “You don’t know him, Mom,” I say, my voice edged with irritation. “He’s not like that. He doesn’t just show up because someone tells him to.”

She raises an eyebrow, her smile never wavering. “Then maybe it’s time he learned,”

she replies smoothly. “If he’s going to be part of this family, he needs to understand how things work.”

I feel a rush of anger flare up, hot and sharp in my chest. “And what if he doesn’t want to be part of this family?” I snap, my voice louder than I intended.

My father’s eyes narrow, and he leans forward again, his expression stern. “Then he has no business being with you,” he says flatly. “We don’t have time for games, Alessia. We need to know where he stands.”

I take a deep breath, trying to calm the storm inside me. “Fine,” I say finally, my voice tight. “I’ll ask him. But I’m not promising anything.”

My father nods, satisfied. “That’s all I ask,” he says. “Make sure he understands what’s expected of him.”

I nod, feeling the tension in my shoulders, the weight of his words pressing down on me. I don’t know how I’m going to ask Romiro, or what he’ll say when I do. But I know one thing—I’m not going to let my parents dictate the terms of my relationship.

“Alessia,” Mamma says, her tone softening, “we just want what’s best for you. We want you to be happy.”

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. “I know, Mom,” I say quietly. “I know.”

But as I sit there, the grandeur of the room pressing in on me, I can’t help but feel like I’m caught in a battle between two worlds—my family’s world, with its rules and expectations, and the world I’m trying to build with Romiro, which is uncertain and fragile, but real in a way that feels like breathing.

And I don’t know which one will win.

26

ROMIRO

The smell of sizzling bacon and freshly brewed coffee greets us as we step into the diner, the familiar warmth wrapping around me like a well-worn coat. This place hasn't changed in years, and maybe that's why I like it. It's constant, dependable, a small slice of normal in a life that's anything but.

Alessia slides into our usual booth, her red hair catching the harsh diner lighting just above our heads. She tucks a few stray strands behind her ear and reaches for the menu, even though I know she doesn't need it. I settle across from her, leaning back against the cracked vinyl seat, my fingers drumming lightly on the tabletop. I know she's got something on her mind—her smile is too wide, too forced, and there's a light in her eyes that tells me she's scheming.

“What?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

She glances up, feigning innocence. “What, what?”

I narrow my eyes, smirking. “You've got that look.”

“What look?”

“The look that says you're about to drop something heavy on me,” I reply, leaning forward and resting my elbows on the table. “So, spill it, Red.”

She laughs, that soft, melodic sound that always manages to draw me in. “You know me too well,” she says, setting the menu down. She toys with the edge of her napkin, her gaze flicking to mine, and I feel the tension in my shoulders tighten. Whatever this is, I know it’s going to be something I won’t like.

“I was thinking...” she begins, and I brace myself. “Since things are getting serious between us... maybe it’s time for you to come over for Sunday lunch at Vito’s.”

There it is.

I feel my stomach tighten, my mind flashing back to the dinner with her family not too long ago. The polite smiles, the measured words, Toni’s unyielding stare. I’ve spent my life navigating these kinds of situations, reading people, understanding what they want, what they need. But this feels different. This feels... personal.

“Alessia,” I start, keeping my tone light, “we’ve just started this... officially. It might be a bit soon, don’t you think?”

She frowns slightly, leaning back against her seat. “Too soon?” she repeats, incredulous. “Romiro, we’ve known each other longer than most people our age have been adults. It’s not like you’re meeting strangers.”

I sigh, rubbing the back of my neck. “I know, but... meeting the whole family, at Vito’s, no less. It’s a big deal. And you know your father?—”

“My father,” she interrupts, a spark of determination in her voice, “has already given you his blessing. He wouldn’t have done that if he didn’t want you around.”

I can’t help but chuckle at that. “Given his blessing or threatened me with my life if I hurt you?”

She rolls her eyes, but I see the hint of a smile playing on her lips. “Maybe both,” she concedes, “but that’s just how he shows he cares.”

I shake my head, still hesitant. “I don’t know, Red. What if things get... complicated?”

Alessia leans forward, her hand reaching across the table to cover mine. Her touch is warm, grounding, and for a moment, the tension eases from my muscles.

“Romiro,” she says softly, her voice steady, “this isn’t about them. It’s about us. I want you there because you’re important to me. Because I want my family to see that.”

I take a deep breath, trying to push back the creeping feeling of dread. I know she’s right. I know this is important to her, and by extension, it should be important to me. But the thought of sitting at that table, under the watchful eyes of her family, feels like a test I’m not sure I’m ready for. The only reason I was able to sit at the dinner table in their home was because I had Alessia, Emiliano, and Valentina there with me.

“You know I’m not great with these kinds of things,” I admit, my voice low. “Family... gatherings.”

She smiles, her thumb brushing over my knuckles. “You were fine at the last dinner,” she points out.

I snort. “Barely. Your Nonna is planning to leak nudes that aren’t even mine as we speak.”

Alessia laughs, a real, genuine laugh that lights up her face. “She loved you, actually,” she corrects. “She just has a... unique way of showing it.”

“Unique is one way to put it,” I mutter, but I can’t help the grin that pulls at my lips.

She gives my hand a squeeze, her eyes earnest. “I promise it won’t be as scary as you think,” she says. “Just... come. For me?”

There it is, the ace up her sleeve. The way she says, for me , like it’s the simplest request in the world, knowing damn well I’d do just about anything to keep that smile on her face.

I sigh, a long, dramatic sound that makes her giggle. “Alright,” I finally relent, “but if your Nonna starts talking about cocks and vaginas, I’m out.”

Alessia grins, her eyes sparkling with triumph. “Deal,” she says, and I feel the weight lift just a little. Maybe she’s right. Maybe it won’t be so bad.

The waitress approaches, and we place our usual order—two cups of coffee, scrambled eggs for her, and an omelet for me. As she walks away, Alessia settles back into her seat, looking far too pleased with herself.

I watch her, the way her fingers dance along the edge of her cup, the way her lips curl into a soft smile. I’ve known her for years, seen her in every mood, every light, but somehow, she still manages to surprise me.

“So,” I say, breaking the silence, “what’s the story with Vito’s?”

She blinks, as if surprised by the question. “You mean, besides the fact that it’s been in my family for generations?”

I nod. “Yeah, besides that. You said it’s a big deal. Why?”

Alessia takes a sip of her coffee, her expression thoughtful. “It’s... well, it’s like the

heart of the family,” she explains. “It’s where all the important things happen. Birthdays, celebrations, Sunday lunches... It’s where we come together. Where we’re reminded of who we are.”

I nod, understanding. “So, it’s more than just a restaurant.”

She smiles, a touch of nostalgia in her eyes. “Yeah. It’s more. It’s home.”

I feel a pang in my chest, an unfamiliar ache that I can’t quite place. I’ve never really had a place like that. A home that feels like it’s more than just walls and a roof. The closest I’ve come is here, in this diner, sitting across from her.

I take a sip of my coffee, letting the warmth seep through me. “Alright,” I say again, more firmly this time. “I’ll come. For you. For... us.”

Her smile widens, and she leans over the table, pressing a soft kiss to my lips. It’s quick, just a brush of warmth, but it sends a jolt of something electric through me. “Thank you,” she murmurs against my mouth.

I chuckle. “You’re welcome. Just promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Promise me there’ll be good food.”

She laughs, a light, joyous sound that makes the corners of my mouth lift. “Always,” she promises. “You’ll love it. Just wait and see.”

We finish our lunch, the conversation drifting to lighter topics, the ease between us returning like it never left. The worry still lingers in the back of my mind, but with Alessia’s hand in mine and her laughter filling the air, it feels manageable, almost

insignificant.

As we step back out onto the street, the sun high in the sky, I feel a strange sense of anticipation. Maybe this is the next step. Maybe this is what we need.

Alessia slips her arm through mine, resting her head on my shoulder. “You know,” she says softly, “you’re braver than you think, Romiro.”

I glance down at her, my brow furrowing. “What makes you say that?”

She smiles up at me, her eyes warm and bright. “Because you keep choosing me, even when it scares you.”

I feel a lump form in my throat, her words settling deep in my chest. I pull her closer, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “I’ll always choose you,” I whisper, the words coming out rough, and honest.

She leans into me, her grip tightening around my arm. We walk down the street, the city buzzing around us, and for the first time in a long time, I feel... settled. Like maybe, just maybe, I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be. As I glance down at Alessia, her hair shining like fire in the sunlight, her smile soft and true, I realize that, yeah, I am.

ALESSIA

We step inside Vito's, the heavy glass door closing behind us with a quiet thud. The familiar sounds and scents of the restaurant greet us, but today they feel distant, like echoes from another world. The low murmur of voices, the clink of silverware, the soft strains of Italian music—all of it feels muted, almost drowned out by the sound of my own heartbeat pounding in my ears.

Romiro's hand is at the small of my back, guiding me forward with a gentle pressure that is both comforting and firm. His touch usually calms me, but today even his presence feels overshadowed by the weight of what we're walking into. My family is waiting for us.

We weave through the restaurant, past the dark wood booths and tables where other diners are seated, laughing and talking over their meals. The air is thick with the scent of garlic, fresh herbs, and tomato sauce, all of which are usually a comfort to me. I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself as we approach the terrace.

The outdoor seating area is bathed in warm sunlight, a stark contrast to the dim interior. Vines hang from the pergola overhead, their green leaves casting dancing shadows on the cobblestone floor. The alleyway, with its narrow tables and terracotta pots filled with blooming flowers, feels like a slice of Italy tucked away in the heart of the city. Usually, it brings me comfort. Today, it feels like a stage set for something I can't quite predict.

I see them immediately—my father sitting at the head of the table, his posture straight, his expression calm but serious. He’s the underboss of Rhode Island, a role he fills with a natural authority that he carries like a second skin. Beside him is my brother, his expression focused and calm. He’s been involved with the Camorra since birth, just like my father, and even though he can’t speak, his presence always makes itself known.

Mamma sits across from them, her fingers lightly tapping against the tablecloth, her expression carefully composed but with a hint of curiosity that’s hard to miss. She knows this life intimately, having been born into it, and she knows the stakes of today’s meeting as well as anyone. Next to her is Nonna, her sharp eyes flicking up to meet ours as we approach.

There are two empty seats at the table. One between Mamma and Nonna, and the other between Tristan and my father. I glance at Romiro, who gives me a slight nod, understanding instantly. He moves to take the seat beside Tristan and my father, while I slip into the chair between Mamma and Nonna. The tension in the air is thick, almost palpable, and I can feel the weight of everyone’s eyes on us as we sit.

“Romiro,” my father begins, his voice calm but carrying that unmistakable edge of authority. “I’m glad you could make it.” He gives me a pointed look before he continues, “We were just discussing your position within the Camorra here in New York.”

My heart starts to race, and I force myself to breathe evenly, keeping my face neutral. Romiro, as always, remains calm and composed. His posture is relaxed, but his eyes are sharp, alert.

“As you’re aware, Mr. Visconti, I have been loyal to the Camorra since my initiation, and even before then,” Romiro replies evenly, his voice steady. “This city is my home. I know every street, every corner. Familiarity with our territory is essential in

our line of work.”

Mamma leans forward slightly, her smile polite but probing. “And what exactly is your line of work?” she asks, her voice soft but firm. “Alessia hasn’t given us many details.”

Romiro’s lips twitch in a faint smile, his eyes glinting with a hint of amusement. “I’m an enforcer,” he says calmly. “I ensure that the family’s business is conducted smoothly, that our interests are protected, and that order is maintained.”

There is a moment of silence at the table as everyone digests his words. My father nods slowly, his expression thoughtful. “A vital role,” he acknowledges. “Not everyone can handle that kind of responsibility. And New York... it’s not a place that forgives mistakes.”

Romiro nods. “It’s not a job for everyone,” he agrees, his tone measured. “But I’ve found my place in it. I know what needs to be done, and I do it.”

Beside him, Tristan’s hands move swiftly in the air, signing. He’s asking Romiro if anything interesting has happened in the past couple of weeks, any progress with the war we have with the Camorra.

I translate for Romiro, keeping my voice calm and steady. “Tristan wants to know if you have any updates for the...issues that we’re facing with the Outfit,” I say. “If there are things you’ve done that still linger with you.”

Romiro doesn’t flinch. He meets Tristan’s gaze directly, his expression steady. “Yes,” he replies. “There’s talk of....” Romiro lowers his voice before continuing, “an attack. The Moretti’s are out for blood.”

Tristan watches him carefully, then nods, his hands moving again, this time more

slowly, deliberately. He signs for me to tell Romiro that we should strike back for the attack we had a couple months ago.

I translate for Romiro. “Tristan’s suggesting we—the Camorra hit back for the attack the Outfit did on the port in Texas.”

Romiro shakes his head. “No. It’s too risky, though we did think of it, but logistics-wise the hit won’t be worth the time or resources.”

Nonna claps her hands, drawing our attention. “Enough with the morbid talk, it’s time to order.”

And with that, any talk about business ceases, and we place our orders. Mamma opts for her usual chicken piccata, and my father orders the seafood risotto. Nonna, ever the traditionalist, chooses gnocchi. Tristan asks for his favorite, margherita pizza, and I decide on the spaghetti alle vongole. When it’s Romiro’s turn, my father interjects with a grin. “You should try the rigatoni, Romiro. You can never go wrong with pasta at Vito’s.”

Romiro smiles. “Rigatoni sounds good. I trust your judgment, Sir.”

The waitress takes our menus, and for a moment, there’s a brief lull in the conversation. The sun is warm on my face, and the air carries a gentle breeze. I feel a flicker of hope. Maybe, just maybe, this lunch will go smoothly after all.

But then I hear it—the sharp screech of tires slicing through the calm, and my father’s face hardens instantly. Romiro tenses, his body coiling like a spring, his eyes scanning the street. My father shouts, “Get down!”, He pushes Mamma down, “Now!” My brother’s hand moves instinctively toward the gun beneath his jacket.

Before I can even know what’s happening, the world erupts around us.

Gunfire. The sharp, deafening crack of bullets fills the air, and in an instant, Romiro pulls me to his side before pushing me down, his arms wrapping around me tightly, shielding me with his body. The rough cobblestones scrape against my knees as I hit the ground, but all I can focus on is the roar of gunfire and the chaos that surrounds us.

“Stay down!” Romiro’s voice is fierce and urgent in my ear. His breath is warm against my skin, his body solid and protective above mine. My father is shouting commands, his voice cutting through the noise, and I see Tristan moving quickly, his gun drawn, firing back with a precision born from years of practice. Bullets are flying everywhere. A dozen casings dropping in seconds.

The air is heavy with the smell of gunpowder, the acrid scent burning in my nostrils. My heart is pounding so hard it feels like it might burst out of my chest, my breath coming in short, ragged gasps. Romiro’s expression is focused—his jaw clenched tight as he keeps me close, and his eyes scanning for threats.

And then I hear it—a scream, high and desperate. Mamma’s scream.

I twist, trying to see through the chaos, and my heart stops. Nonna is slumped in her chair, her head tilting at an unnatural angle, a dark red stain spreading across her neck. The blood is thick as it quickly pours from a wound that looks too deep, too fatal.

“Nonna!” I scream, my voice breaking, but Romiro’s grip tightens, holding me in place.

“Don’t move!” he orders, his tone sharp, his gaze still fixed on the street, watching for more danger.

Dad looks back and says, “We need to call for help.”

I turn to look at Romiro, my words tumbling out in a rush. “Please, let me go to her...”

Romiro nods slightly, loosening his grip just enough to let me scramble toward Nonna. I reach her side, my hands pressing against the wound on her neck, but the blood is warm and slick, slipping through my fingers.

“Nonna,” I whisper, my voice choked with panic. “Please, stay with me...”

But her eyes are vacant, her body still, and I know. I know she’s gone. Mamma is sobbing, a broken sound that tears through the air, and my father’s face is pale, his hands trembling as he grips his gun, his eyes scanning for more threats.

Dad’s voice shouts over the top of the chaos “We need to get out now; it’s too dangerous.”

Romiro nods, already moving to stand. “We need to leave,” he says, his voice steady but urgent. “Now, Alessia. We’re not safe here.”

I’m numb. My body moves on autopilot as Romiro pulls me to my feet. I glance back at Nonna, my heart breaking as I see her lifeless form slumped in the chair, my Mamma’s hands still gripping her arm as her sobs fill the air.

The sirens grow louder and closer, but all I can hear is the sound of gunfire, the screams, the echo of my Mamma’s cries. The taste of blood and fear lingers in the air, suffocating, a harsh reminder of the world we’re entangled in, and the dangers that come with it.

As we make our way out, I know this is only the beginning. A line has been crossed—a battle ignited. And nothing will ever be the same. Not for me, not for my family, and certainly not for Romiro and I. We’ve just stepped into a war we didn’t

ask for, and I can feel the cold determination settling in my bones.

They've taken something from us, something precious, irreplaceable. And there will be a reckoning. For Nonna, for the blood spilled on these cobblestones, for the shattered peace of this lunch—we will make them pay.

Romiro's hand tightens on mine as we move quickly through the alley, his eyes darting around, ever watchful. Tension radiates from him—the rigid set of his shoulders, the way he holds himself, ready for anything. I know he's thinking the same thing I am. This isn't over. Not by a long shot.

As we step out into the street, the reality of what just happened starts to settle in. The shock is wearing off, replaced by a cold, simmering rage. I feel it building inside me, spreading through my veins like ice. I've lost too much already, and I'm not willing to lose anything more.

Romiro looks at me, his dark eyes meeting mine, and there's a promise in his gaze, a silent vow that we will see this through, that we will find out who did this and make them pay. His hand tightens around mine, and for the first time since the gunfire started, I feel a glimmer of something else—strength, resolve, the fire of determination that's burning brighter than the fear.

We've just stepped into a storm, but we're not alone. We have each other, and together, we will face whatever comes next. They don't know what they've unleashed, but they'll find out soon.

I'm a doctor. I save lives every day, but today, I couldn't save my Nonna. She's gone.

Something cold has settled into the dark crevices of my heart.

The Outfit will pay.

28

ALESSIA

The silence in my apartment is suffocating, a thick blanket that presses down on my chest, making it hard to breathe. I'm sprawled on the floor in front of my couch, my knees pulled to my chest, my arms wrapped around them like I can keep myself from falling apart if I just hold on tight enough. My breath hitches, and another sob breaks free, ripping through me with a force that shakes my whole body.

I can't stop crying. The tears flow unchecked down my cheeks, hot and relentless, blurring my vision, making everything look distorted and strange. Mr. Marvin, nudges against me, his warm body offering some comfort, but even his purring doesn't reach the hollow ache inside me. My chest feels like it's been carved out, a void where my heart used to be, and every breath I take feels like I'm inhaling shards of glass.

I try to focus on the sounds around me—the hum of the fridge, the distant wail of a siren, the ticking of the clock—but nothing cuts through the fog of my grief. I feel like I'm drowning in it, lost in a sea of memories and pain, each wave pulling me under a little more.

Nonna. She's gone. Just like that.

The image of her slumped in the chair, her head tilted, her eyes lifeless, her blood slipping through my fingers like water—it all flashes through my mind again, and I choke on another sob. I press the heels of my hands to my eyes, trying to block it out,

but it's seared into my brain. I can't erase it. I can't unsee it. I loved her so much. She was the glue that held us all together, the one who always knew what to say, the one who could make everything feel okay. Now she's gone, ripped away in an instant, and nothing makes sense anymore.

A knock on the door startles me, jolting me out of my thoughts. I wipe my face with the sleeve of my sweatshirt, my hands trembling. I don't want to see anyone, don't want to face the world outside these walls, but the knocking comes again, more insistent this time.

I force myself to stand, my legs feeling like lead, and make my way to the door. I don't even check who it is before I open it. I just need something, anything, to break through this unbearable loneliness.

Valentina and Mara stand on the other side, their expressions a mix of worry and determination. They're carrying bags of snacks and bottles of wine, and I see the resolve in their eyes, the way they're ready to bulldoze through whatever walls I've put up.

"Oh, Allie," Valentina breathes, stepping forward and pulling me into a tight hug. I feel her warmth, the strength in her arms, and I cling to her, my fingers gripping the back of her shirt like she's my lifeline.

Mara wraps her arms around us both, and suddenly, I'm in the middle of a group hug, surrounded by my closest friends, my family, feeling their love and support like a balm against my broken heart.

They pull back, and Valentina gives me a small, understanding smile. "We're here," she says simply, and those two words are enough to crack something open inside me. I nod, unable to speak, and step back to let them in.

Their bodyguards remain outside, standing by the door, alert and watchful. Valentina leads the way into the living room, placing the bags on the coffee table as Mara lowers the lights to a soft, comforting glow. She puts on *Mamma Mia* !. It's light and warm, but none of us really pay attention to the screen.

We settle on the couch where they flank me, each of them taking one of my hands, grounding me in their presence. I try to speak, to tell them how much this hurts, how lost I feel, but the words stick in my throat. Instead, I just let the tears fall, my shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

Valentina's grip on my hand is firm and unyielding, like she's trying to transfer her strength to me. Her breath is warm against my cheek, her other hand gently brushing a stray hair away from my face. "We're here, Allie," she murmurs, her voice a soothing whisper. "We're right here. Just breathe. Just stay with us, okay?"

I nod weakly, my head pounding, the room swaying. I see Mara beside Val, her usual playful expression now tight with concern, her hand gently rubbing my shoulder in small, comforting circles. Mara's eyes are bright with unshed tears, her lips pressed into a thin line, and I know she's fighting her own battle against the fear that clings to us like a second skin.

"I... I can't believe she's gone," I manage to choke out, my voice trembling, the words raw and jagged in my throat. "Nonna... she was... she was everything."

Mara's hand stills on my shoulder, her grip tightening just slightly as if to reassure me that she's here, that she understands. Her voice is soft when she finally speaks, barely more than a whisper, but there's a rough edge to it, a crack that betrays the depth of her own pain.

"I know," she says, her gaze far away like she's staring into a past she can't escape. "I know how it feels, Allie. When we lost my dad to the—" She pauses looking at

Val, who gives her a nod to continue, “to the Chicago Outfit...It was like... like my whole world just... stopped. He was my hero, you know? And then... he was just... gone. And I couldn’t do anything to stop it.”

Her voice breaks on the last word, and she takes a shaky breath, trying to steady herself. Grief glimmers in her eyes. The sadness flickers and burns like a dying ember, still glowing with the remnants of an old, searing pain. She looks down at her hands, clenched tightly in her lap, and I realize she’s shaking.

“I used to think,” Mara continues, her voice steadier now, “that if I just held onto the anger, if I just kept it burning hot, I’d never feel the pain. But... the anger only lasted so long. Eventually, it just left me empty. I had to find a way to fill that emptiness... with memories, with the good things, even when it hurt.”

I feel a tear slip down my cheek, and I nod, my throat tight. I know exactly what she means, that empty feeling, that desperate need to hold onto anything that makes sense when everything else is falling apart.

Valentina shifts beside me, her hand still holding mine, her thumb brushing gently over my knuckles. She takes a deep breath, like she’s steeling herself for something difficult, something she’s kept locked away.

“When I decided to be with Emiliano,” Valentina begins, her voice low, “I knew I was making a choice. I knew I’d have to leave my family behind—my sisters, my brother, my mom. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I still remember the look in their eyes after I returned to Chicago... it was like the war was tearing us apart.”

She pauses, swallowing hard, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I used to think I could have both, you know? That I could keep them close, even from a distance. But... it doesn’t work that way. Not in this life. Sometimes, love means making impossible choices. It means sacrifice. And sometimes, I wonder if I made the right

one.”

Her words hang in the air between us, heavy and filled with the weight of a thousand unspoken regrets. I feel the tension in her grip, the way her fingers tighten around mine as if she’s afraid I might slip away, too. I squeeze back, letting her know I’m still here, still with her, even in the midst of my own pain.

The room is silent for a moment, filled only with the quiet sounds of our breaths and the distant noise of the city outside. I feel my own pain mixing with theirs, a tapestry of loss and longing that connects us in ways we never fully realized until now.

Valentina turns the music on the soundtrack up slightly, the soft notes of the mournful tune fill the air, like an echo of sadness we all feel. “We all have our losses,” she says quietly. “Our sacrifices. But we’re still here, Allie. We’re still here, and we have each other. That’s something. The pain is still fresh, but time will dull it. I won’t lie to you and tell you that it will make you forget, or it’ll make it any easier, but it will dull it.”

I nod, my tears blurring my vision, but I feel a strange warmth blooming in my chest, a tiny spark of light in the midst of all this darkness. They’re right. We’re still here, and we still have each other. Maybe that’s enough. Maybe, for now, that’s enough.

We start to move, slowly at first, our bodies swaying to the rhythm of the music. It’s not dancing, not really, just a way to feel something other than pain, a way to remember that we’re alive, that we’re still here, still breathing.

But then, the lights flicker. Once, twice, and then everything goes dark.

I freeze, my heart leaping into my throat, my breath catching in my chest. “What... what’s happening?” I whisper, gripping Valentina’s arm, my fingers digging into her skin.

“I don’t know,” she replies, her voice tight with fear. “Stay close. Don’t move.”

The sound of footsteps, heavy and fast, echoes from the hallway outside. There’s a shuffle, the sound of a low voice muttering something I can’t quite make out. I feel the hair on the back of my neck stand up, a shiver running down my spine. Then a thud, and another thud follows shortly after.

Mara fumbles with her phone, turning on the flashlight, the beam of light cutting through the darkness, casting long, twisted shadows on the walls. Valentina follows suit, and we all huddle together, our breaths shallow, our hearts pounding. I fumble with my own phone, trying to call Romero, but it’s too late.

The door bursts open with a deafening crash, splinters flying through the air. I see the silhouette against the doorway, tall and menacing, and I barely have time to react before something hard slams into the side of my head.

The pain is instant, a blinding flash of white that makes the world tilt and spin. I hear someone scream—maybe it’s me, I don’t know—and then the ground rushes up to meet me, and everything goes black.

ROMIRO

The bourbon burns as it slides down my throat, a welcome distraction from the gnawing sense of dread creeping through me. I'm sitting in Emiliano's apartment, the room dimly lit and heavy with the scent of cigar smoke and spilled whiskey. Emiliano, seated across from me, swirls his glass of dark liquor, his brow furrowed in concentration.

We've been talking in circles for the past hour, dissecting every detail of the attack on the Camorra, the hit that took Alessia's Nonna. It's all we can think about, even with the liquor coursing through our veins, dulling the edges of our anger and grief.

Emiliano's voice cuts through the silence. "I'm glad Mara and Valentina decided to check on Alessia. She shouldn't be alone right now."

I nod, thinking of Alessia. Her fiery red hair and the fierce way she holds herself despite everything. The way she looked at me with determination on Sunday, even as her world crumbled around her. I should have stayed with her, should have insisted. But she's strong. Stronger than I give her credit for.

I down the rest of my drink and slam the glass onto the table. "This attack was a warning," I mutter. "And I'm sure it was the fucking Outfit."

Emiliano pulls out his phone and frowns. "I'll text one of Valentina's bodyguards—just to make sure everything's good."

We wait, the seconds stretching into minutes. Emiliano's frown deepens when no response comes. "That's odd."

"Try another," I suggest, tension coiling in my voice. "And then the other guards."

Emiliano does, but the silence from the other end is deafening. My heart starts to pound, an uneasy feeling settles in my stomach. They wouldn't dare...would they? They would. Another minute passes. No answer.

I grab my phone. "I'm calling Alessia." Eli tries Valentina and Mara, but neither of us gets answer from them.

"Shit," I mutter under my breath, rising to my feet. The room feels too small, the air too thick. "We need to get over there. Now."

We race to Alessia's apartment, the drive a blur of city lights and tension. My hands grip the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles turn white. When we finally pull up to her building and take the stairs two at a time to her floor, the scene that greets us stops me cold.

The door to her apartment is busted wide open, splinters of wood scattered across the floor. Just outside, two bodyguards lie unconscious, tied up like discarded dolls.

"Goddammit," Emiliano breathes, rushing forward.

We enter the apartment cautiously, our hearts hammering in our chests. The place is empty, not a sound. No sign of a struggle inside, no broken glass, no overturned furniture. Just the chilling emptiness.

But on the coffee table, there's a note. I snatch it up, my hands trembling.

You thought you could keep them safe? Think again. - H

Fuck. The blood drains from my face. Helen. Of course, it's her. My mother, the woman who sold me into the Syndicate. I grip the note so hard it crumples in my hand. And then my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out to see a new message. No number. Just a picture.

It's them. Alessia, Valentina, and Mara. All unconscious, tied up, gagged. Blood drips down their faces. My eyes zero in on Alessia. My Alessia. My heart stops. For a second, I can't breathe, can't think. A darkness crashes over me, a wave of panic and rage and something so sharp it feels like a knife twisting in my gut.

"They're gone," I whisper, my voice barely a breath. "She took them."

"Fuck," Emiliano snaps, pacing, running his hands through his hair. "We need to move, and fast."

"We might be able to track the phone through cell towers," I tell him; Matteo has done it thousands of times.

Emiliano's nodding. "I'll call Matteo. He'll know how to track them. But we need to be quick."

I'm barely listening. My mind is spiraling. Alessia. I let this happen. I left her alone, and now she's in Helen's hands. My mother—if you can even call her that. The woman who thrives on chaos, who won't stop until she's taken everything from me.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. "We need to get to the club, to the Camorra's headquarters. Matteo can set up there."

We rush out, but the car ride is silent, tension hanging thick in the air. I grip the

wheel, my mind racing with every possibility, every scenario. My phone vibrates again. Another text.

Unknown Number

You have no idea what's coming, Romiro. You better start praying. - H

"Nicolo," I mutter. "I need to call Nicolo. If anyone can help us find Helen, it's him."

Emiliano glances over. "Nicolo tends to stay out of the Camorra's business."

"Not when it concerns Helen," I grit out. "He'll come. He has to."

I hit the speed dial, my heart hammering as my fingers grip the phone so tightly that the case digs into my skin.

The line rings, once, twice. "Come on," I mutter under my breath. "Pick up. Pick up."

On the third ring, he answers. "Romiro?" His voice is calm and steady. A lifeline in the chaos.

"I need you," I say, my voice raw, desperate. "It's Helen. She's taken Alessia and the others. I need your help."

There's a pause, a heartbeat of silence, and then his voice, firm, resolute. "I'm on my way back to New York, text me your location."

I hang up, my heart pounding, my mind racing. This isn't over. Not by a long shot. I'm not going to let her win. Not this time. Not ever.

I take another swig of bourbon from my flask, letting the burning fuel the fire in my

chest. We're going to find them. All of them. We're going to bring them back. And Helen... Helen will pay for every second she keeps them away from me.

As I look around the darkened room, at the men I've come to trust, at the tension etched on their faces, I feel a cold determination settle over me. The stakes have never been higher. The battle lines are drawn. And I will do whatever it takes to bring them home.

* * *

The club is buzzing with low murmurs, the bass of the music throbbing through my veins. I'm back in the dimly lit heart of the Camorra's world. It's too familiar, the haze of smoke curling up toward the ceiling, the low lights casting long shadows across the polished floors. The red glow from the neon lights on the bar is the only warmth in this cold place. It's a stark contrast to the icy tension gnawing at my insides.

I pour another drink, the amber liquid catching the red light for a moment before sliding down my throat, burning a path to the core of my turmoil. Nicolo is pacing behind me, his brow furrowed in concentration, fingers tapping against his phone as he examines the CCTV footage from the surrounding area. Matteo sits at the end of the table with his laptop, the screen flickering with codes and images, his fingers moving with a frenzied urgency.

"Matteo," I snap, my voice harsh, desperate. "What have you got?"

He doesn't even look up, his focus unbroken. "I'm running an analysis on the metadata from the photos Helen sent. If there's any geo-location data embedded, we might have a chance."

I clutch the glass, my knuckles pale, struggling to maintain a shred of control. The

room feels too small, the walls closing in, the noise too loud, a pounding rhythm that matches my heartbeat. My mind races, flashes of Alessia's face, her smile, her laughter, all of it distorted by fear now. I shouldn't have let her stay alone, but she wanted space to grieve the loss of her Nonna. I shouldn't have left her unprotected. I should've been there to protect her myself. Their guards were clearly useless fucks. What the fuck was I thinking? No one can protect my woman better than me.

Nicolo moves to my side, his gaze still fixed on the screen. "Found something," he mutters, his voice tight. I lean over, squinting at the grainy footage. There, barely discernible in the shadows, are two black vans parked out back. The image is shaky, the quality poor, but it's enough. We see figures moving, the girls being dragged out, split up between the two vans.

I slam my fist on the table, making the glasses rattle. "Dammit!" I growl, anger boiling over. "They knew exactly what they were doing."

Nicolo doesn't flinch. He never does. His calm under pressure is maddening. "They were prepared," he agrees, his tone measured, too measured. "And they're covering their tracks well. Matteo, can you enhance the plates?"

Matteo nods, fingers flying across the keyboard. "I'll try, but the camera that was used is old and grainy. They were smart and stayed out of the camera's direct line of sight. This is the best angle we have."

I down the rest of the bourbon, feeling it scorch my throat, trying to burn away the helplessness. It doesn't. Nothing does. I glance over at Nicolo, whose jaw is clenched, tension rolling off him in waves. This is different for him. He always keeps his distance and stays out of Camorra's business. But not now. Not when it concerns Helen. Our mother.

"Nicolo," I start, my voice strained. "Why didn't we pursue her harder? Why did we

let her slip through the cracks?”

He turns to me, his eyes sharp, unreadable. “Because we thought she was done, Romiro. We thought she’d disappear into whatever hell she crawled out of. We never expected her to come back. And we never thought she could do this much harm.”

I laugh, but there’s no humor in it, just bitterness, just a gnawing pit of regret. “Well, she’s back. And she’s more dangerous than ever. We underestimated her.”

Nicolo’s expression softens just a fraction, a glimpse of something almost like pity in his eyes. “Maybe. But we’re not done. Not yet.”

Matteo suddenly sits up straighter. “I’ve got something,” he announces. “There’s a slight reflection in the window of one of the vans... it’s faint, but it looks like a street sign.”

We all crowd around the screen, eyes straining to see the tiny details Matteo has managed to pull from the pixelated mess. It’s there, just barely—a few letters, part of a name.

“Matteo, can you enhance it?” Nicolo urges, his voice low.

“I’m trying,” Matteo mutters, his fingers flying over the keyboard, tweaking the image, sharpening the details.

The tension is thick—my breath shallow. Each second feels like an eternity. I’m holding on by a thread, the hope that this might lead us somewhere, anywhere. I can’t lose them. I can’t lose her. Alessia. Her name is a mantra in my mind, a lifeline in this sea of chaos.

30

ALESSIA

I blink awake, my mind foggy and disoriented. The air is thick and stale, each breath a reminder of my captivity. My surroundings are bleak: the rough, cold concrete walls close in on me, and the faint sound of dripping water echoes ominously. I try to move, but the ropes binding my wrists restrict me, biting into my skin. I spot Mara and Valentina across from me, slumped in their chairs, tied up.

The shadows dance across the walls, creating a haunting landscape that mirrors my fear. I close my eyes, attempting to block out the panic rising within me, but a sudden shout pierces the silence—my heart races. I strain to listen, each sound amplifying my dread.

The door creaks open, and a figure steps inside, their presence casting a long silhouette. A woman. I don't recognize who she is, but I suspect that she knows who I am. She approaches with a predatory smile, an embodiment of my worst fears.

"Ah...look who's awake," she taunts, her voice dripping with malice. I shudder as she grips my hair, tugging sharply. A jolt of pain shoots through me, mingling with my humiliation. I feel so small, so helpless.

As she leans closer, the stench of her perfume overwhelms me, a sickening reminder of my reality. I can't suppress the whimper that escapes my lips. Her laughter echoes as she leans back, relishing my distress.

“Who are you?” My voice is hoarse, and my eyes sting.

She lets out a menacing laugh, before she calls out, “Boys!” Two large stocky men step out from the darkness. One of them moves to grab something from the corner, and the other goes to untie me from the chair, before tying my hands behind my back and pushing me to the cold, stone floor.

I’m lying on the hard ground, strapped down, unable to move. My heart races as I sense the cool air against my skin, but a chill runs deeper—into my bones. I hear the sound of rushing water, and dread pools in my stomach.

Suddenly, I feel the cloth being placed over my face. It's heavy and suffocating, cutting off my vision. Panic surges within me as I realize what’s about to happen. My breaths quicken, but the fabric clings to my face, making it impossible to inhale. I want to scream, but the sound catches in my throat.

Then, the water starts pouring. It rushes over the cloth, and I feel an immediate wave of terror wash over me. My body instinctively struggles, thrashing against the restraints. My lungs scream for air, but there’s none to be found. The world narrows, and my senses are overwhelmed—the sound of water rushing, the darkness behind my eyelids, and the terrifying grip of panic tightening around my chest.

Time distorts. Each second stretches into infinity as I fight against the urge to breathe, knowing that every gasp will only fill my lungs with water. I can’t escape the crushing realization that I am drowning. I’m teetering on the edge of consciousness, the instinct to survive battling with the darkness creeping in.

As I feel myself slipping, a part of me wonders if this is the end. The desperation to escape is intense, but it’s overshadowed by the numbing grip of despair. Just when I think I might pass out, the cloth is pulled away, and I’m hit with a rush of air. But it doesn’t last long; I’m drawn back into the nightmare, the cycle repeating, my mind

fracturing under the strain.

Every moment feels like a lifetime. I'm lost in a whirlwind of fear, pain, and hopelessness. All I can cling to is the flickering hope that this will end—that somehow, I'll find a way to break free from this torment.

Just as I feel my consciousness slipping, darkness takes over.

* * *

I wake again to the sound of my own cries. The room swims into focus—bare walls, the cold floor beneath me. I sit up, gasping, but the moment is fleeting. Helen's grip returns, her fingers tangled in my hair, yanking me back into the depths of my nightmare. I'm alone this time with Helen. No one other than her and I.

“Did you think you could escape?” she says with a sneer, her breath hot against my face. I try to look away, but the sheer terror of her presence keeps me frozen in place.

She tugs on my hair so hard that when she pries her fingers from the strands, a clump comes free. But she doesn't stop there, her hand rises and strikes me hard enough that I feel my cheek sting.

Time becomes meaningless. Each moment stretches into eternity as I oscillate between consciousness and the void. I hear the distant screams of my friends, their agony wrapping around me like chains. It's a reminder that I'm not alone, yet it does little to ease my suffering.

In these moments of clarity, I cling to thoughts of freedom. I imagine the sunlight breaking through the darkness, the warmth of my friends' laughter. These fleeting thoughts become my sanctuary, a fragile thread of hope in an otherwise suffocating despair.

As I come to once more, I feel a flicker of something inside me—a resolve buried beneath the weight of fear. I am more than this torment, more than her plaything. I begin to visualize a plan, no matter how distant it seems.

With each passing moment, I remind myself: I will not break.

* * *

When I awaken again, I find myself enveloped in darkness, an oppressive void that swallows every ounce of light. The silence is deafening, a heavy blanket smothering my senses. I strain my ears for any sound—footsteps, whispers, anything to remind me that I am not utterly alone. But there's nothing. Just an eerie stillness that presses against my thoughts, amplifying the dread swelling in my chest.

Time loses all meaning here. I can't tell if I've been here for a moment or a lifetime. My heart pounds in my ears, each thud a desperate reminder of my existence. The isolation wraps around me like a thick fog, dense and suffocating, making it hard to breathe. I feel the weight of it pressing down, squeezing the air from my lungs. I'm trapped in my own mind, my thoughts echoing endlessly against the walls of my consciousness.

Every moment spent in this darkness stretches into an eternity. I want to scream, to break the silence, but the sound feels trapped inside me. It claws at my throat, but no words come out. I instinctively reach out, my hands searching for something—anything to ground me—but there's nothing. No surface to touch, no reassuring presence. The emptiness is overwhelming, an abyss that threatens to swallow me whole.

I close my eyes tightly, trying to block out the sensation of being alone, but that only deepens my sense of despair. I am engulfed in a cacophony of memories—echoes of laughter, fleeting moments of joy that now feel so distant, so unattainable. I grasp at

those memories like a lifeline, but they slip through my fingers, leaving me more isolated than before.

Every thought magnifies in this void, spiraling into a chaotic storm of anxiety and fear. I feel as if the walls are closing in on me, their presence a stark reminder of my helplessness. I try to focus on something—anything—to anchor myself, but my mind races, conjuring up every fear and regret I've ever had. Each memory cuts deeper in the dark, exposing my vulnerabilities like raw wounds. I replay conversations I wish I could take back; moments of weakness I wish I could erase.

Panic rises within me, a relentless tide that claws at my chest and threatens to drown me. I'm losing myself, piece by piece, to this darkness. I clutch my head in frustration, willing my thoughts to quiet down, but they only intensify. The silence becomes a living thing, wrapping around me like chains, binding me to my fears. I can almost hear their whispers, taunting me, reminding me of all the things I am—flawed, weak, and alone.

What terrifies me most is the sensation of slipping away. I fear what I might become in this solitude, what darkness will take root in my mind when left unchecked. The ghosts of my thoughts become my only companions, each one more sinister than the last. I catch myself imagining the worst—faces I love twisted in pain, their cries echoing in this void, blending with my own desperation.

I want to escape this hell, to feel the warmth of sunlight on my skin, to hear the comforting sounds of laughter, the chatter of life. But here, in this endless night, I am alone. The weight of that isolation is crushing, pressing down on me until I can barely think. I am left with nothing but my own thoughts, and they are slowly unravelling me.

With each passing second, the darkness seeps deeper into my soul. I long for a flicker of hope, a sign that this will end. But the silence swallows my pleas, and I am left in

this endless, tormenting void, where despair reigns and the clouds loom large.

I don't even know why this is happening.

* * *

The harsh lights turn on abruptly, and the door swings open. Helen walks in with a tall man that has a stoic look on his face. She's grinning from ear to ear. The man stands behind Helen—a couple of steps behind her—and she comes to a stop in front of me. I'm still tied to the fucking chair.

"How's my son's little whore?" She sneers and I spit right in her eye. Helen shrieks and slaps me, making the flimsy chair rock and nearly fall over. She's rubbing her face in disgust, and I feel vindictive. I won't sit here and be docile for anyone.

That changes the second she turns to the man and orders, "Strip her."

"What?" Acid burns my throat, and I try to untie myself. I pull at my restraints until I feel my skin peeling, but it's no use. The man descends on me. "No!" I scream. "NO! DON'T TOUCH ME!" He doesn't stop. He's not stopping. Oh, God. Tears burn their way down my face. "Pl—" He rips my shirt open. Bile rises. I wish it would suffocate me. Helen says something, but I don't hear anything other than the tearing sound of my clothes. I don't see anything other than his disgusting hands on me. Hands I don't want on my skin. He steps back after yanking my pants off, and I cower into myself, wanting to disappear.

Helen leans behind me, pulling my head backward, and it's only then that I realize that I'm screaming. "Take what you want from her."

"NO! DON'T TOUCH ME." I let out a guttural scream. Someone. Anyone. Please help me. He paws at me like I'm something he can touch freely. Without permission

or enthusiasm, I try to kick him, but he cages my legs between his meaty thighs. I rock the chair, trying to make it fall over. Hot palms cover my body in ways I don't want. Everything hurts.

In the end, nothing works. Helen and her minion brutalize me in this dingy warehouse, and I know, deep down in my bones, that I'll never recover. No matter how much I scream or beg, it won't stop.

It. Won't. Stop.

31

ROMIRO

Emiliano stands beside me, his face a hard mask of determination, his hand resting on the butt of his gun, ready for anything. The tension between us is palpable, like a live wire sparking in the cold night air. He glances at me, his eyes narrowing as he assesses our surroundings.

“We’ve got to be smart about this, Romiro,” he murmurs, his voice barely audible over the soft hum of the nearby city sounds. “This isn’t just about finding them; it’s about getting them out alive. We can’t rush in and blow our chances.”

I nod, feeling the weight of his words settle heavily in my chest. Emiliano has always been the pragmatic one, the one to think three steps ahead, to plan for every possible outcome. I, on the other hand, have always been driven by impulse, by the raw need to act, to do something, anything. But he’s right. This isn’t just about charging in with guns blazing. This is about finding the people we care about and bringing them home—safely.

Matteo, the youngest among us, is huddled over his laptop, his fingers flying over the keyboard as he tries to make sense of the data. He’s a genius with computers, and we’re all depending on him to crack this, to pull a miracle out of thin air.

“Okay, I’m triangulating the signal now,” Matteo mutters, his eyes never leaving the screen. “Give me a second... Just a second...”

I watch him, my heart pounding in my chest, my hands clenched into fists at my sides. I can feel the anger, the fear, the frustration building inside me like a storm, threatening to tear me apart from the inside out. I keep seeing Alessia's face in my mind, the fear in her eyes, the helplessness. I can't let that be the last image I have of her. I won't.

Nicolo is pacing back and forth, his face tense, his jaw clenched. "We need more than this," he says. "We can't rely on just one weak signal. We need more data, more information. We're flying blind here."

Matteo doesn't look up, his focus unwavering. "I know, I know," he says quickly. "But this is all we have. I'm doing everything I can to enhance the signal, to pull more from the cell towers..."

"Then work faster!" I cut in, my voice sharp, my patience clearly wearing thin. "Every minute we waste here is a minute they're getting farther away."

Emiliano holds up a hand, a signal for silence. "Let him work," he orders, his voice steady but firm. "We don't have time for second-guessing. Matteo, you've got this. Keep going."

I can see the tension in Matteo's shoulders, the strain in his eyes. He nods, his fingers moving even faster, his focus so intense, it's almost painful to watch. "Almost there..." he murmurs. "Just a bit more..."

Emiliano turns to me, his expression grim. "If this doesn't pan out," he says quietly, "we're going to need to try something else. We can't sit around hoping for a miracle."

I nod, swallowing hard. "I know," I reply, my voice low. "But we're running out of options, Eli. If we can't find them through this..."

He doesn't let me finish. "We'll find them," he says with a fierce certainty that I almost believe.

"Got it," Matteo mutters, his voice maintaining the same bored tone it always has. He spins the laptop around so we can see the screen. "There's a secondary signal. Weak, but it's there. Looks like the phone was turned back on for just a moment. Just enough to give us a ping."

He points to the map on the screen, a small red dot blinking slowly as it moves. "It's heading towards the docks," he continues. "The east side, near the old shipping yards."

Nicolo's eyes narrow, and he steps closer to the laptop. "That makes sense," he mutters. "The docks are quiet this time of night. Plenty of places to hide. And if Helen's trying to move them quickly, she'll want to get them to a place where she can get them out of the city fast. There are warehouses nearby."

"Then that's where we go," I say, my voice stern and cold. "We don't wait. We don't hesitate."

Emiliano nods, his expression firm. "Agreed. Matteo, keep tracking that signal. We'll need it to guide us in."

We move quickly, rushing back to the cars. I'm in the driver's seat again, with Emiliano next to me, and Nicolo in the back. Matteo stays with his laptop in the back seat, his fingers still moving, still working. He's our lifeline, our only connection to where the girls might be.

As I drive, the city blurs around us, the lights and sounds fading into the background. My focus is laser-sharp, my thoughts racing. I keep seeing that picture in my mind, the girls helpless. I feel a rage building inside me, a fire that threatens to consume me.

This is my fault. I should have seen this coming. I should have protected them.

Emiliano must sense my turmoil because he glances over at me, his expression softer than usual. “You okay?” he asks quietly.

I don’t answer at first, my jaw clenched. Finally, I manage to nod. “I will be,” I say. “Once we get them back.”

He nods, a small, grim smile touching his lips. “We will,” he says simply. “One way or another.”

The drive to the docks is tense, every second dragging by like an eternity. I keep my foot pressed hard on the gas, pushing the car to its limits. We don’t have time to waste. Not now. Not ever. The city whizzes past us as we drive faster.

Finally, we reach the docks, the dark shapes of the shipping containers looming in the darkness. I park the car, and we slip out, moving quickly but quietly. The air is heavy with the smell of salt and oil, the distant sound of water slapping against the sides of the docked boats.

Matteo points toward the east side, where the red dot is blinking on his phone screen. “Over there,” he whispers. “That’s where the signal is strongest.”

We move closer, our footsteps silent on the cracked concrete. My heart pounds in my chest as adrenaline courses through my veins. Every sense is heightened, every muscle tense. I know this could be a trap, that Helen could be waiting for us. But we don’t have a choice. We have to go in.

We reach the edge of the docks, slipping between the shadows. There’s a small cluster of buildings ahead, dark and silent, where the windows blacked out. My hand tightens around the handle of my gun, my heart racing.

Emiliano moves ahead, his gun drawn, his eyes scanning the area. He signals us forward, and we creep closer, our breaths coming in short, quick bursts. We reach a large metal door, and I press my ear against it, listening for any sound from within.

Nothing. Just silence.

Nicolo moves to the side, his back against the wall, his gun ready. “On three,” he whispers. “We go in.”

I nod. “One... Two... Three...”

We burst through the door, guns raised, ready for anything. The room is dark, the air cold, the walls lined with old shipping equipment. I can see a faint light in the back, flickering, and we move toward it, our footsteps silent.

Matteo is right behind us, his laptop still in his hands, his eyes focused on the screen. “The signal is right here,” he mutters. “We’re close...”

Three men emerge from the back, their guns raised. Gunfire cracks through the warehouse, echoing off rusted steel beams and concrete walls. I take cover behind a stack of crates, my grip steady on the pistol as I fire off two quick shots. One of them drops, clutching his stomach, a strangled curse spilling from his lips. The other two scramble for cover, but Emiliano flanks left, unloading his clip, forcing them into the open. A bullet whizzes past my ear, close enough to burn. I don’t flinch. Instead, I rise, take aim, and put one between the bastard’s eyes. He crumples, dead before he hits the ground. The last man standing knows he’s fucked. He backs toward the exit, shaking, weapon loose in his grip. “Drop it,” I order, stepping forward, my gun locked on him. He hesitates. Wrong move. A shot rings out—Nicolo’s this time—and he collapses, blood pooling beneath him. The warehouse falls silent, save for the distant crash of waves against the docks.

Suddenly, a voice crackles through a hidden speaker in the corner, cold and mocking. “Well done, boys,” Helen’s voice echoes through the room, sending a chill down my spine. “You found the place. But did you really think it would be that easy?”

I feel a surge of rage, my hand tightening on my gun. “Where are they?” I shout into the darkness. “Where are the girls?”

Helen laughs, the sound high and cruel. “Oh, you’ll find them soon enough,” she taunts. “But first, you’ll have to play my game. Let’s see how smart you really are, Romiro. Let’s see how much you care.”

The speaker cuts off, and the room is plunged into silence once more. I feel the rage rising inside me, threatening to boil over. Emiliano grabs my arm, his grip tight. “Stay calm,” he says, his voice low and steady. “We have to think this through.”

I nod, trying to steady my breathing, trying to focus. “Alright,” I say. “What’s our next move?”

Matteo glances at the laptop, his eyes narrowed. “The signal is still here,” he mutters. “But it’s bouncing around. She’s using multiple devices to throw us off.”

Nicolo steps forward, his expression determined. “Then we split up,” he says. “We cover more ground that way, but stay in contact. No one goes rogue.”

I turn to Matteo, my mind racing. “Can you keep tracking the signal?” I ask him.

He nods, his fingers moving over the keyboard. “I’ll do my best,” he says. “But it’s going to be tough. She’s good. Really good.”

I nod, swallowing hard. “Then we need to be better,” I say. “We don’t have time to waste.”

We split up, moving through the darkened building with our senses on high alert. I can feel the tension winding tighter and tighter, my mind racing with possibilities. I know Helen is watching, waiting for us to make a mistake. But I won't give her the satisfaction. I won't let her win.

Not this time. Not ever again.

Suddenly, Matteo's voice crackles through the earpiece. "I've got something," he whispers. "There's a room on the north side. The signal is strongest there. It's probably a setup, but it's our best shot."

I nod, signaling Emiliano and Nicolo. "North side," I whisper. "Let's move."

We make our way through the building, slipping through the shadows, our footsteps silent on the cold concrete. My thoughts racing. I know we're close. I can feel it.

We reach the door, and I press my ear against it, listening. I hear faint sounds from within—movement, muffled voices. I glance at Emiliano, who nods, his gun ready.

I push the door open slowly, peering inside. The room is dark, but I can see shapes moving, figures. I step inside, my gun raised.

"Alessia?" I whisper, my voice low, desperate.

A figure steps forward, and I feel a surge of hope. Then, I see the face. Helen. Smiling, taunting, her eyes gleaming with triumph.

"Hello, son," she purrs. "Welcome to the party."

32

ROMIRO

Helen's smile is a razor, cutting through the air between us, sharp and cold. My pulse quickens, my grip tightening on the gun as I step into the room. Every muscle in my body is taut, coiled, and ready to spring. I have to stay calm. I glance around quickly, assessing. It's a small space that's cluttered with boxes and old shipping crates. There's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

"Drop your guns," she orders, her voice a venomous whisper. She steps to the side, revealing Alessia, Val, and Mara. They all have their wrists bound, a strip of duct tape across their mouth—their eyes wide and terrified. Helen's arm is wrapped around Alessia's throat, the barrel of her gun pressing into her temple.

"Drop them," she repeats, her eyes flicking between me, Emiliano, and Nicolo, a sly smile spreading across her lips. "And kick them over here."

I meet Alessia's gaze. Her eyes are pleading, filled with a fear that makes my chest tighten painfully. I can feel the sweat on my palms, the tremor in my hand. I know Helen is watching me closely, looking for any sign of resistance. But there's no way I'm giving her that satisfaction.

Nicolo gives me a small nod from the corner of my eye, a silent signal. We have backup weapons hidden in our jackets, but she doesn't know that. This could be our chance if we play it right.

“Alright,” I say slowly, lowering my gun to the ground. “We’re putting them down. Just... don’t hurt her.”

Helen’s smile widens, her eyes glinting with sadistic pleasure. “No promises.”

I grit my teeth, carefully placing my gun on the floor and nudging it toward her with my foot. Emiliano follows suit, his face hard and unreadable, his movements slow and deliberate. Nicolo hesitates a beat longer, just enough to draw Helen’s attention. Her eyes dart to him, suspicious, and I see her hand twitch.

“Now,” she snaps. “Kick them all the way over. And don’t try anything stupid, or I’ll blow their brains out.”

I nudge the gun harder, sliding it across the cold concrete floor. It scrapes loudly, echoing in the small space. Emiliano does the same, and our weapons come to a stop near Helen’s feet. Her smile broadens, triumphant.

“Good boys,” she purrs. “Now, step back. All of you. Hands where I can see them.”

We obey, moving back slowly, our hands raised. My mind is racing, calculating, searching for any opening, any chance to turn the tables. Nicolo shifts slightly, his hand brushing against his jacket. I see the glint in his eye, the barely perceptible nod.

I know the plan. I know what he’s thinking. The backup weapons, hidden at our backs, ready to be drawn in an instant. But we have to be careful. One wrong move, and Helen could pull the trigger.

Helen’s grip on Alessia tightens, and I see Alessia wince. My heart lurches in my chest, a mix of fear and fury boiling up inside me. I have to do something. I have to act, but I can’t risk Alessia’s life. Not anymore than I already have.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself. “What do you want, Helen?” I ask, trying to keep my voice calm, steady. “Why are you doing this?”

She laughs—a high, cold sound that sends a shiver down my spine. “What do I want?” she repeats, mockingly. “Oh, Romiro... I want so many things. But mostly, I want to watch you suffer.”

Her words hit me like a blow to the gut, but I don’t flinch. I can’t. I keep my eyes on her, watching her every move, every twitch. She’s playing with us, enjoying the power she holds, the fear she’s instilling. But she’s distracted. I can see it in her eyes, in the way she keeps glancing between us, uncertain, nervous. She knows we’re up to something. She just doesn’t know what.

Nicolo moves slightly to the side, drawing her attention again. I take the opportunity, sliding my hand slowly toward my back, feeling the cool metal of the hidden gun beneath my jacket. I keep my movements slow, controlled, careful not to draw her eye.

Emiliano speaks up, his voice calm, steady. “Helen, this doesn’t have to end like this,” he says. “You’ve got what you wanted. You’ve made your point. Just let them go.”

Helen’s eyes narrow, suspicion flickering across her face. “Oh, no,” she says, her voice low and dangerous. “I’m not done yet. Not by a long shot. You see, I suffered for far too long because of their father.” She tilts her head in Nicolo’s and my direction. “And now, in my old age, they’re making me suffer again. Well, it’s time for some payback.” This bitch loves her I’m the victim speeches.

My fingers close around the grip of the gun, and I feel a surge of adrenaline, my heart racing in my chest. I know the moment is coming, the split second where we have to act. Nicolo is ready, his hand hovering just above his waistband, his eyes fixed on

Helen. Emiliano shifts his weight, preparing for whatever comes next.

And then, it happens.

Helen's attention wavers for just a second, her gaze flicking to the side. It's all the opening we need. In one fluid motion, I draw the gun from my waistband and fire, aiming just over her shoulder, a warning shot that ricochets off the metal wall behind her. She jumps, startled, her grip loosening on Alessia.

Emiliano lunges forward, grabbing Alessia's arm and pulling her to the side, out of Helen's grasp. And then he moves to the other girls, untying them. Helen snarls, turning the gun toward him, but Nicolo is already moving, his backup gun drawn, aimed straight at Helen's chest.

"Drop it!" Nicolo shouts, his voice a thunderous command.

Helen hesitates, her eyes wide, darting between us, calculating. Panic flares in her eyes, the realization that she's outnumbered, outgunned. Her hand wavers, her finger on the trigger, but she doesn't pull it. She knows she won't make it out if she tries.

"Drop it, Helen," I repeat, my voice low, deadly. "Or I swear to God, I will put you down myself."

She sneers, her eyes flashing with rage, but slowly, reluctantly, she lowers the gun, letting it fall to the floor with a dull clatter. Nicolo moves quickly, kicking it away from her reach.

I step forward, my gun still trained on her, my heart pounding. "On your knees," I order, my voice harsh, resolute. "Now."

Helen hesitates for a moment, her eyes narrowing, but then she complies, sinking to

her knees, her hands raised in surrender. I feel a rush of relief, a wave of adrenaline that makes my hands shake, but I don't lower my weapon. Not yet.

Emiliano pulls Alessia behind him, shielding her with his body, his gun still pointed at Helen. "Nice move," he mutters to me, a small grin touching his lips. "Didn't think you had it in you."

I nod, my eyes never leaving Helen's face. "I had to," I reply quietly. "For her."

Nicolo steps closer, keeping his distance, his gun steady. "What do we do with her now?" he asks, his voice low, his eyes cold.

I take a deep breath, my mind racing. We can't just let her go, not after everything she's done. But we can't kill her, either. Not yet. We need her alive. We need answers.

"We take her with us," I say finally, my voice firm. "Lock her up somewhere safe. We'll figure out what to do next."

Nicolo nods, his expression grim. "Alright. But we need to move—fast. Her men could be on their way."

I look at Emiliano, who's already moving toward the door, his gun still drawn, his other hand wrapped around Valentina. "Let's go," he says. "We need to get out of here."

I reach for Alessia, my hand closing around hers, pulling her close. "Are you okay?" I ask, my voice low, urgent.

She nods, her eyes wide, her breath coming in quick, shallow bursts. "I'm okay," she whispers. "But... we need to get out of here. Now."

I nod, turning back to the others. “Alright. Let’s move.”

Nicolo hits Helen with the butt of his gun, knocking her out before throwing her over his shoulder, he offers his hand to Mara who takes it. But she doesn’t look like she’s responsive.

We leave the room quickly, moving through the shadows, our guns ready, our senses on high alert. I keep a firm grip on Alessia’s hand, my heart pounding in my chest, my mind racing. We’ve got Helen, but this is far from over. I know her men will come looking, and they won’t be far behind.

We make our way back to the cars, moving quickly but carefully. Tension lingers in the air, the sense of urgency, the danger lurking around every corner. I glance back at Nicolo, who’s carrying Helen. She’s not going to make this easy for us. I know that much.

But for now, we’ve won. We’ve got her. And that’s a start.

Emiliano pulls me aside as we reach the car, his expression serious. “What’s the plan?” he asks quietly. “What do we do next?”

I glance at Alessia, who’s watching us with wide eyes, her face pale but determined. I turn back to Emiliano, my jaw set, my resolve firm.

“We take her to a secure location,” I say, keeping my voice low and steady, even though my mind is racing with a thousand possibilities. “Somewhere no one knows, not even her men. We need to keep her under wraps until we figure out our next move.”

Emiliano nods, his eyes flicking to Helen, who is still glaring at us with cold fury. “I’ve got a place,” he mutters, a dark edge to his tone. “A warehouse out by the docks

on the other side of the city. It's off the grid; no one goes there unless I say so."

"Good," I reply, glancing over at Nicolo, who's still keeping a careful eye on Helen, we never know when she'll wake up. "Nico, get the cars ready. We need to move quickly."

Nicolo nods, heading over to one of the black sedans parked nearby.

I tighten my grip on Alessia's hand, feeling her trembling beside me. "It's going to be okay," I murmur, squeezing her fingers gently. "We've got her now. We're going to get through this."

She nods, but she seems to be catatonic. I can't blame her.

Nicolo pulls the car around, and we hustle Helen into the backseat, securing her hands behind her with a handkerchief. Emiliano slides into the driver's seat, his face grim, his jaw set. Nicolo gets into the car behind us, keeping a close watch as we pull out of the alley and onto the darkened streets. Val and Mara are both in the car with Nicolo.

The city rushes past in a blur of neon lights and shadowed corners. I keep looking back, half-expecting to see Helen's men appear out of nowhere, guns blazing. But so far, nothing. Just the hum of the engine and the occasional distant wail of a siren.

We reach the docks, the air heavy with the smell of saltwater and oil. Emiliano pulls up to a nondescript warehouse, its windows dark, its doors heavy and reinforced. He jumps out, motioning for me to follow.

"We'll take her inside," he says. "There's a room in the basement, locked down tight. She won't be able to get out."

I nod, before getting Helen out of the car. Inside the warehouse, the air is cool and damp, the only light coming from a flickering bulb overhead. We drag Helen to the back room, a small, windowless space with a heavy metal door. Nicolo unlocks it, and we shove her inside.

Emiliano steps forward, his face inches from Helen's. She's still out cold, but not for long. Emiliano nods to one of the guys, and they dump an ice-cold bucket of water over. She wakes up with a loud gasp.

"You've got a lot to answer for," Emiliano says, his voice full of barely contained rage. "And trust me, we'll get every damn answer out of you."

Helen's smile is tight, almost amused. "I wouldn't count on it," she replies, a dangerous gleam in her eyes.

I step in front of her, blocking her view of Emiliano. "You're going to talk," I say, my voice low and firm. "And if you don't... well, let's just say we have other ways to make you."

She sneers, but there's a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. I know she's weighing her options, trying to decide if she can outlast us, if she can hold onto whatever twisted plan she's cooked up. But I won't give her that satisfaction.

"We're done here, for now," I say, stepping back and motioning to the door. "Lock her up."

The guard slams the door shut with a heavy clang, turning the key in the lock. I let out a long sigh, my shoulders relaxing slightly. This is far from over.

I turn to Emiliano and Nicolo. "We need to regroup," I say. "Figure out what our next move is. We've got her, but there's still so much we don't know."

Nicolo nods, his face set in a grim expression. “Yeah. We need to find out who else is involved and where her men are hiding. She’s not working alone.”

“And the girls,” Emiliano adds, his voice tight with worry. “We need to find out what she did to them while they were held.”

I nod, feeling the weight of his words settle over me like a heavy blanket. “I know,” I say quietly.

“You did good,” Nicolo says quietly. “Back there, with Helen. You kept your cool.”

I nod, my throat tight. “Had to,” I reply. “For Alessia.”

He claps a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. “We got her,” he says, “and we’ll get through this. Together.”

I nod again, swallowing hard, my heart aching with the weight of everything that’s happened, everything that’s still to come, but I can’t let it show. I can’t let the fear, the doubt, the guilt consume me. I have to stay focused, stay sharp. For Alessia. For all of us.

I glance over at Helen, locked away in the small, dark room, her face shadowed by the dim light. She’s not done fighting, I can see it in her eyes, but neither are we.

“Let’s get to work,” I say, my voice firm, resolute. “We’ve got a lot to do.”

33

ALESSIA

I 'm awake, but everything feels like a blur. The world around me is both too loud and eerily quiet, every sound amplified and muffled all at once. My head throbs, my pulse pounding in my temples, a steady rhythm that matches the terror still thrumming in my veins. I can tell that we're at Valentina and Emiliano's apartment.

The softness of the sofa beneath me is a stark contrast to the terror I feel inside. I hear the faint rustle of movement from the others—Mara and Valentina. I don't have to look to know that Mara is struggling. Her breaths are coming too fast, sharp, ragged pants that fill the room. I can hear the soft, panicked wheeze with each exhale, the sound of fear squeezing the air out of her lungs. I reach out blindly in the dim light, my fingers brushing against her arm. She jerks away at first, her skin cold and clammy under my touch, but I hold on, firm and steady.

"Mara," I whisper, my voice barely a thread in the darkness. "It's okay. I'm here." My own voice doesn't sound like mine. It's raw, shaky, but I try again. "Breathe with me, Mara, okay? Just breathe."

Her eyes are wild, unfocused. She's not hearing me; she's somewhere else, somewhere deep inside her mind where the walls are closing in. I tighten my grip on her arm, my fingers digging into her skin just enough to ground her, to bring her back. "Look at me," I say, louder this time. "Look at me, Mara. You're safe now."

She finally meets my eyes, her chest still heaving and her face pale as tears silently

flow down her cheeks. I keep my gaze steady, trying to anchor her to the present, to the reality that we're no longer tied up, no longer trapped in that dark, suffocating place. I match my breath to hers, slowing, deepening each inhale and exhale, praying she will do the same. Slowly, painfully slowly, her breathing starts to sync with mine, still shaky but less frantic. I don't let go of her arm, don't stop whispering reassurances until I feel the tension start to ebb from her muscles.

I glance over at Valentina. She's sitting against the wall, her knees drawn up to her chest, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. Her eyes are open, but there's no light in them, no recognition. She stares straight ahead, unblinking, unmoving, like she's somewhere far away. I call her name softly, but she doesn't respond, doesn't even flinch.

"Valentina?" I whisper, more urgently this time. "Val, please... look at me." Nothing. She's lost in her own head, a place I can't reach, and my heart aches from the sight of her, usually so strong, so fierce, now so vacant—so gone .

The door opens suddenly, and the light from the hall spills into the room, a harsh, blinding contrast to the dimness that surrounded us for the last two days. Emiliano steps in, his face set in a grim line, but his eyes soften when they land on Valentina. He crosses the room in quick, purposeful strides, dropping to his knees in front of her. "Valentina," he says softly, his voice a low rumble. "Val... it's me."

For a moment, she doesn't react, and my heart sinks even further, a lead weight in my chest. But then, slowly, so slowly, her eyes shift, focusing on his face, and something flickers in her gaze, a spark of recognition. She blinks, her mouth opening slightly, like she's trying to say something but doesn't know how.

Emiliano reaches out, gently brushing a strand of hair from her face, his touch soft, almost reverent. "It's okay," he murmurs. "You're safe. I've got you."

And then, like a dam breaking, Valentina's face crumples, and she starts to sob, deep, heart-wrenching cries that shake her whole body. Emiliano pulls her into his arms, holding her close, his hand cradling the back of her head, whispering words I can't hear over the sound of her grief.

Beside me, Mara is still trembling, her breath uneven, but she's watching Emiliano and Valentina, her wide eyes filled with something that looks like hope, or maybe envy. Emiliano looks over at her, his expression softening even more. "Mara," he says, extending a hand. "Come here."

She hesitates, her eyes flicking to me, and I nod, gently nudging her forward. "Go," I whisper. "It's okay."

She takes a tentative step, then another, until she reaches him. Emiliano wraps one arm around her, pulling her into the hug with Valentina, and Mara collapses against him, her small frame shaking with quiet sobs. I can hear her murmuring, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," over and over again, and my heart breaks a little more.

The door opens again, and this time, it's Romiro. His eyes find mine immediately, and I see the relief, the worry, the fear still etched on his face. He crosses the room in three long strides and pulls me into his arms, holding me so tight I can barely breathe, but I don't care. I bury my face in his chest, inhaling his familiar scent, feeling the steady beat of his heart against my cheek.

"I've got you," he whispers, his voice thick with emotion. "I've got you, Red. You're safe now."

I nod against his chest, my tears finally spilling over, soaking into his shirt. "I was so scared," I admit, my voice a broken whisper. "I thought... I thought you'd never find us."

He pulls back just enough to look me in the eyes, his hands cupping my face. “I’ll always find you.” he says fiercely. “I’ll never let that happen. I promise you.”

I nod again, a sob escaping my lips, and he pulls me back against him, his arms like a fortress around me, keeping the world at bay.

Nicolo steps into the doorway, his eyes scanning the room, his face unreadable. He lingers for a moment, his gaze flicking to Mara, watching her for a long, silent moment. His jaw tightens, and then he looks away, his voice rough when he speaks. “I’m heading out,” he says. “We’ve got work to do.”

Romiro gives him a nod, still holding me close. “Be careful,” he says to him, his voice heavy with meaning.

Nicolo’s lips twitch into something that’s almost a smile, but not quite. “Always,” he replies, and then he’s gone, the door clicking shut behind him.

The room is quiet again, the air thick with emotion, with the weight of what we’ve just been through. But for the first time since being kidnapped, I feel a flicker of hope, a small spark of light in the darkness. We’re not out of this yet, not by a long shot, but we’re together.

34

ROMIRO

“We called Callahan,” I say, my voice calm but firm, trying to cut through the tension that’s thickening the air around us. “He’s already on his way. Just let him take a look.”

Emiliano agrees, his voice a low rumble. “Callahan’s good. The best.”

I nod, turning my attention back to the girls—Mara, Valentina, and Alessia. Each of them wears the look of someone lost in a storm, their expressions a mix of shock, fear, and something deeper, darker. I feel a knot tightening in my chest as I watch them, the helplessness gnawing at me like a wild animal trapped in a cage.

Mara’s eyes are wide, darting around the room like she’s looking for a way out, her breaths coming in short, quick bursts. She’s shaking, a slight tremor running through her body, her hands clenched into tight fists. Valentina, on the other hand, is a different story altogether. She’s sitting still, too still, her back pressed against the wall, her knees pulled to her chest. Her eyes are fixed on a spot in front of her, unblinking, unseeing. It’s like she’s retreated somewhere deep inside herself, somewhere none of us can reach.

But it’s Alessia that makes my heart ache the most. She’s trying so damn hard to keep it together, but I can see the cracks, the way her eyes are glassy with unshed tears, the way her shoulders tremble, even though she’s trying to hold herself steady. I move to her side, reaching out to take her hand, feeling the coldness of her fingers against my

palm.

“Hey,” I murmur, my voice low, just for her. “Callahan’s on his way. He’s going to check you over, make sure you’re alright.”

She nods, but her gaze is distant, like she’s not really seeing me. There’s a haunted look in her eyes, something that twists a knife in my gut. I squeeze her hand, trying to give her some of my strength, trying to ground her here with me. “You’re safe now,” I say, my voice firmer. “I’m right here.”

Emiliano’s voice cuts through the tension, pulling me back. “Callahan’s about fifteen minutes out,” he says, his tone clipped, professional. “He’ll do a thorough check.”

“Good,” I reply, still holding Alessia’s hand. “The sooner, the better.”

We wait in heavy silence, every second dragging out longer than the last. I keep my eyes on Alessia, watching every flicker of emotion on her face, every tremble of her lips. She’s holding it together, but barely, and I don’t know how to help her, how to make this better. The helplessness claws at me, a cold, biting ache that settles deep in my bones.

When there’s a knock on the door, I feel a wave of relief, even if it’s just a small one. Emiliano moves to answer it, letting Callahan in. He’s tall, with a slim figure, and a face carved from stone, his eyes sharp, always assessing. He nods at us, his black bag in hand, his expression unreadable.

“Callahan,” I greet, stepping back to give him space.

He nods back, his voice even. “Let’s get started. Who first?”

“Mara,” I say, nodding towards her. She looks like she’s about to bolt, her eyes wide

and wild, like a cornered animal.

Callahan nods, moving over to her with a calm, measured pace. He talks softly, his tone soothing, explaining what he's going to do, trying to put her at ease. I watch as he checks her over, his hands moving with that careful precision that comes from years of practice.

Emiliano stays close to Valentina, his hand on her shoulder, his face etched with worry. He's always been the protector, the steady one, but I can see the fear in his eyes, the way he's holding on to her like she might slip away at any moment. Callahan moves on to Valentina next, going through the same routine, his voice a low, calming murmur.

And then it's Alessia's turn. My heart beats a little faster as he kneels in front of her. "Alessia," he says softly, his tone gentle but firm. "I'm going to check you over, alright? Just relax. I'll be gentle."

She nods, her eyes never leaving mine. I kneel beside her, keeping her hand in mine, squeezing it tight. "I'm right here," I whisper again, trying to pour every ounce of reassurance into those three words.

Callahan stands beside her, his demeanor calm and collected, a stark contrast to the turmoil that's painted over her features. She sits on the edge of the examination table, her fingers intertwined with mine, gripping tightly as if I am her only lifeline in this chaotic reality. The flickering fluorescent lights cast a harsh glow on her pale face, highlighting the bags under her eyes—a testament to the hours she'd spent in the clutches of Helen.

"Okay," Callahan begins, his voice steady and reassuring, "we're going to take this one step at a time." He meets her gaze, his expression warm but focused, and she nods slightly, her breath hitching as she prepares herself for what comes next.

He moves closer, his hands steady and sure as he approaches her. I can see the determination in his eyes as he works quickly but methodically. His touch is gentle, almost reverent, as he starts to check her arms, running his fingers along her skin to assess for any bruises or cuts. Each gentle press is a reminder that she's not alone, that someone is here to care for her.

"Just a few questions," he says, maintaining a tone that is both professional and compassionate. "Have you felt any pain anywhere? Any spots that are particularly tender?" She shakes her head slowly, her voice barely above a whisper when she replies, "No, I don't think so."

As he continues his examination, he moves to her back, carefully lifting her shirt just enough to inspect the skin beneath. I watch her flinch slightly, the memory of her trauma flickering behind her eyes. Callahan pauses, glancing up at her with a reassuring nod. "I know this is difficult," he says softly, "but I need to make sure you're okay."

She squeezes my hand tighter, grounding herself in my presence. The connection between us is palpable, her need for comfort evident in the way her body leans closer to mine. I can feel the tension in her muscles, the way she holds her breath, as if each moment is a reminder of the vulnerability she feels.

Callahan's hands glide over her skin with the same care and thoroughness he has shown from the beginning. He checks for any signs of injury—bruises, cuts, or anything that could indicate the severity of her ordeal. His movements are practiced and precise, ensuring that he doesn't miss a single detail.

"How about emotionally?" Callahan asks, his eyes remaining fixed on her. "How have you been feeling?" She hesitates, looking away for a moment, the weight of her experiences crashing down on her. "It's hard," she admits, her voice trembling. "I feel... lost."

Callahan nods, his expression understanding. “That’s completely normal after what you’ve been through,” he reassures her. “We’ll get through this together.”

As he finishes the examination, he gently helps her sit up straight, his hands lingering on her shoulders for a moment longer. “You’re stronger than you realize,” he tells her, and I can see the flicker of hope in her eyes as she clings to my hand.

Finally, he stands, turning to Emiliano and me. “Minor injuries,” he says, his voice professional, but I hear the undercurrent of concern. “Some bruising, a few sprains. No signs of a concussion but keep a close eye on them. If there are any changes, any dizziness, nausea, memory issues, call me immediately.”

I nod, a bit of tension easing from my shoulders. “Thanks, Callahan.”

He hesitates for a moment, then adds, “It might be beneficial for them to see Katherine. She’s good with trauma, understands what it’s like in our world. She might be able to help them process this.” Katherine’s the daughter of an Underboss, and she’s the shrink for the Camorra. Unofficially, of course. Mental health is still something considered to be a taboo amongst the Camorra members, despite Eli’s effort to reform it.

Emiliano frowns, thinking it over. “You think they need that?” he asks, a hint of doubt in his voice.

Callahan nods, his face serious. “They’ve been through a lot. It’s not just the physical injuries we have to worry about. Katherine gets it. She knows how to handle this kind of thing.”

I glance at Emiliano, weighing the suggestion. I’m not thrilled about bringing in a shrink, but Callahan wouldn’t suggest it if he didn’t think it was necessary. “Alright,” I say slowly. “We’ll consider it. Thanks, Callahan.”

He nods, packing up his bag, but before he leaves, he turns back, his eyes meeting mine. "Keep an eye on them," he repeats, his voice softer, more earnest. "And think about Katherine. It could make a difference."

I watch him go, then turn back to Emiliano. "What do you think?"

He sighs, rubbing a hand over his face, his features drawn and tired. "I don't know, Rom. I just... I want them to be okay. I want this nightmare to end."

I nod, feeling the same weight pressing down on my chest, the same frustration clawing at my insides. "Yeah," I mutter, my voice low. "Me too."

We stand there in the heavy, oppressive silence, the weight of what happened hanging over us like a dark cloud. I look at Alessia, still trembling, still holding onto me like I'm her lifeline. And I know, deep down, that this is just the beginning. That the storm isn't over yet. I also know that I'll do whatever it takes to protect her, to protect all of them.

Even if it means calling in a damn psychiatrist.

"Alright," I say, finally breaking the silence. "Let's keep moving. We've still got a lot to do."

35

ROMIRO

I stand in the kitchen, trying to keep my hands steady as I slice through a loaf of bread. The early morning light filters through the blinds, casting long, pale lines across the counter. Alessia is still asleep in my room, buried under a mound of blankets, her breathing steady but shallow, like she's trying to hold on to some last bit of comfort. She looks so small there, so fragile, and it twists something deep in my chest, something raw.

I glance at my phone sitting on the counter, Katherine's number still pulled up on the screen. She'd responded to my message in less than five minutes, a quick reply with her availability. I know I need to speak to her, to figure out how to help Alessia, but the thought of leaving her alone, even for a moment, feels like a betrayal. My thumb hovers over the call button, but I hesitate, my eyes darting back to the bedroom door.

It's been a long night, and I've been watching over her like a damn hawk, listening for every small noise, every change in her breathing. She's already had three panic attacks in the past few hours, each one hitting like a freight train. I've held her through all of them, trying to keep her grounded, whispering reassurances I'm not even sure I believe myself. I know I should reach out for help. Katherine's the best there is—she knows how to handle this kind of thing. But leaving Alessia... I just can't do it.

I set the knife down and grab my phone, deciding to call before I can second-guess myself any further. Katherine picks up on the second ring, her voice calm and

professional. “Romiro,” she greets, a slight warmth in her tone. “I’m glad you called. Callahan filled me in, and there’s been some whispers floating around.”

Running a palm over my face, I curse under my breath, “Fuck, already?”

“Yes, you know how our world loves drama and gossip. Anyways, I have some time this afternoon if you want to come by,” she tells me.

“I... I don’t think I can leave her,” I admit, running a hand through my hair, feeling the tension pull tight at the back of my neck. “Alessia, she... she panicked when I tried to step out for just a minute. I don’t think she can handle me being gone right now.”

Katherine’s silent for a beat, and I can almost hear her thinking it over. “That’s understandable,” she says finally, her voice gentle but firm. “Can you tell me more about what happened? What led to this?”

I swallow, glancing back at the bedroom door, making sure it’s still closed and that Alessia is still sleeping. “They were... taken,” I say, keeping my voice low, as if speaking too loudly will shatter what little calm remains. “By Helen. She had them in some warehouse by the docks. It was dark and cold. They were all tied up, and she was playing some kind of twisted game. Alessia... she saw a lot. Too much. Then we... we managed to get them out, but not without...” I trail off, the words sticking in my throat.

“Not without trauma,” Katherine finishes for me. “And she’s been having panic attacks since?”

“Yeah,” I admit, feeling a flicker of shame in my chest. “Three in the last few hours. I... I don’t know how to help her. I feel like I’m just making it worse.”

Katherine is quiet for a moment, and then she speaks, her tone gentle but firm. “Panic attacks can be overwhelming, and they often feel like they come out of nowhere, but they’re usually a response to a trigger. Do you know what might have triggered hers?”

I think back, my mind racing over the events of the past day. “I tried to leave the room,” I say slowly. “Just for a moment, to get her some water. And she... she panicked. Like she thought I wasn’t coming back.”

“She’s scared,” Katherine says softly. “She feels unsafe, and she’s looking for the only source of comfort she has right now—you. It’s common in situations like this, where someone has experienced trauma. They cling to what feels familiar, what feels safe.”

I nod, even though she can’t see me, trying to take in what she’s saying. “So what do I do?” I ask, my voice tight with frustration. “I can’t just leave her, but I can’t fix this either. How do I help her?”

Katherine pauses for a moment, and I hear the rustle of papers on her end. “When she starts to panic, you need to help her feel grounded,” she explains. “There are a few techniques that can help with that. One is the five senses technique—ask her to name five things she can see, four things she can touch, three things she can hear, two things she can smell, and one thing she can taste. It helps to bring her back to the present, to remind her that she’s safe, here, now.”

I nod again, feeling a small surge of hope. “Okay, I can try that. What else?”

“Another technique is deep breathing,” Katherine continues. “Panic attacks often come with hyperventilation, which can make the symptoms worse. Encourage her to take slow, deep breaths with you. Count out each breath, in for four, hold for four, out for four. Repeat until she starts to calm down.”

“Got it,” I murmur, trying to commit everything she’s saying to memory. “What about afterward? When it passes?”

“That’s just as important,” Katherine says. “After a panic attack, the body is still on high alert, still full of adrenaline. It’s important to help her calm down, to feel safe again. Talk to her about what happened, but don’t push. Let her lead the conversation, and remind her that she’s not alone, that you’re here for her.”

“Okay,” I say.

Katherine then asks, “I’ll do that. And what about group therapy?”

“Do you think that would help?” I ask her.

“I think it could be beneficial,” Katherine replies. “Especially since the other girls went through the same thing. It might help them to know they’re not alone, that they’re not the only ones feeling this way. But it has to be done in a safe environment, somewhere they feel comfortable.”

“At the Capo’s apartment,” I say immediately. “That’s where it’ll have to be. It’s the only place we can control who comes in and out.”

Katherine seems to consider this for a moment. “That could work,” she agrees. “If they’re comfortable with it. I’d suggest starting with just the three of them—Alessia, Mara, and Valentina. It’s important that they feel like they have some control over the process.”

“Alright,” I say, feeling a little more confident now. “I’ll talk to them, see how they feel about it.”

“And Romiro,” Katherine adds, her voice softening. “Remember, this is a process.

It's not going to be a quick fix. There will be setbacks, and there will be days that feel worse than others. But you're doing the right thing, reaching out, getting them help. Just... be patient. With them, and with yourself."

I nod, swallowing past the tightness in my throat. "Thanks, Katherine. I appreciate it."

"Of course," she replies. "Call me anytime, if you need anything else."

I end the call and lean against the counter, letting out a long sigh. I glance over at the bedroom door again, and my heart clenches at the thought of Alessia waking up alone, finding me gone. I push off the counter and move to the door, opening it quietly. She's still asleep, her face peaceful for the moment, but I know it's only a matter of time before the nightmares come back.

I sit on the edge of the bed, reaching out to brush a strand of hair from her face. Her eyes flutter open, and for a moment, she looks at me with such fear, such vulnerability, that it nearly knocks the breath out of me.

"Hey," I murmur, keeping my voice soft. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

She nods, but her eyes are still wide, still filled with that lingering fear. I reach for her hand, squeezing it gently, and she grips mine like it's a lifeline. "It's okay," I say again, feeling the weight of Katherine's words settle over me. "We're going to get through this. Together."

She takes a shaky breath, her grip tightening on mine. "Promise?" she whispers, her voice barely audible.

"I promise," I reply, my voice steady. "I'm not leaving you. Not now, not ever."

I once again feel the flicker of hope, a small, fragile flame burning in the darkness.

36

ALESSIA

I lie still in Romiro's bed, staring up at the ceiling, the dim light filtering through the curtains casting soft, uneven shapes across the room. The sheets feel rough against my skin, my body heavy with exhaustion, but my mind is racing. Images flash through my head—darkness, cold metal cutting into my wrists, and the muffled sound of waves crashing against the docks. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block it all out, trying to make sense of what happened, but it's like my mind is stuck on a loop, replaying every moment, every sound.

Why? Why did this happen to me? What did I do wrong?

I feel a tightness in my chest, a pressure building like a dam about to break. I keep asking myself the same question over and over again, trying to find an answer, but there's nothing. Just the same cold, empty feeling, the same sense of dread that's been gnawing at me since they took us. I can still hear the echo of Helen's voice, her cold, detached laughter, the way she looked at us like we were nothing, like we were just pieces on a chessboard she could move around at will.

A shiver runs through me, and I pull the blanket up higher, trying to find some warmth, some comfort. But there's none. I also keep seeing Nonna's face, her pale skin, her lifeless eyes staring up at the sky. I blink, trying to push the image away, but it's there, burned into the back of my eyelids. Why her? Why us?

The questions swirl in my mind, faster and faster, until it feels like I'm drowning in

them. My heart starts to race, my breaths coming in short, shallow gasps. Then I hear a sound outside the door—voices, low and urgent, and something crashes to the floor. My body tenses, every muscle tightening like a coil. My heart is pounding so hard I can hear it in my ears, and a cold sweat breaks out across my skin.

They're back. Oh, God. They're back.

I try to sit up, but the room tilts around me, the walls closing in, and I feel like I can't breathe. I hear the voices getting louder, more frantic, and I want to scream, to run, but my body won't move. My mind is spinning, spiraling, and I can't think, I can't breathe, I can't?—

The door bursts open, and I flinch, my hands flying up to cover my head, a scream caught in my throat. I hear a voice, a woman's voice, soft but insistent, but it's like I'm underwater, everything muffled and distant. I feel hands on my shoulders, warm, familiar, but I can't focus, can't see through the haze of fear clouding my vision.

"Alessia, darling... it's okay... it's okay, sweetheart..."

Mom. It's my mom, but her words don't reach me. My breaths are coming too fast, too shallow, and my chest feels like it's being crushed, like there's a weight pressing down on me, squeezing the air out of my lungs. I hear another voice, deeper, more urgent, and I see a blur of movement in front of me.

"Alessia, listen to me," Romiro's voice cuts through the fog, sharp and clear, like a lifeline thrown into the storm. "Look at me, Red. Look at me."

I try to focus, to find his face, but everything is spinning, and I feel like I'm going to pass out. I hear him again, his voice steady, commanding. "Breathe with me. In for four... hold... out for four. Come on, baby. You can do this. Breathe with me."

I try to follow his instructions, to focus on his voice, on the rhythm he's setting, but it's so hard. My lungs feel tight, my throat constricted, but I force myself to take a breath, counting in my head. One, two, three, four... hold. I feel his hand on mine, warm and steady, and I cling to it like a lifeline, like it's the only thing keeping me from slipping under.

"In... hold... out," he repeats, his voice a steady anchor in the storm. "That's it, just like that. You're safe, Red. You're safe."

I don't know how long it takes, but slowly, the panic begins to recede, the fog lifting just a little. I can see him now, his face close to mine, his eyes full of worry and something else... something deeper. I take another shaky breath, following his lead, feeling the air fill my lungs, feeling the tension start to ease, just a little.

"There you go," he murmurs, his thumb brushing over the back of my hand. "You're okay. I've got you."

I nod, swallowing hard, my throat dry and scratchy. I can still feel the tremors running through my body, but they're fading, becoming less intense. I hear a soft sound from the doorway, and I turn my head slowly, blinking to clear my vision.

Mamma is here, her face pale, her eyes wide with concern. She's looking past me, at someone else, and I follow her gaze to see my dad standing in the doorway, his shoulders slumped, his face drawn with guilt.

"Toni," Mamma hisses, her voice sharp. "I told you this was not the time to fight with him."

I feel a flicker of confusion, my mind still trying to piece everything together. I look back at Romiro, who's still holding my hand, his gaze steady and reassuring. He squeezes my fingers gently, his eyes never leaving mine.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs, just for me. “You’re safe. They’re not here. It’s just your parents.”

I nod, but the panic is still simmering beneath the surface, threatening to boil over at any moment. Mamma moves closer, her hands coming up to cup my face, her thumbs brushing away the tears I didn’t realize were falling. “Oh, sweetheart,” she whispers, her voice breaking. “I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry...”

I feel a lump rise in my throat, the words tangled up inside me. I want to tell her that it’s okay, that I’m fine, but the truth is, I’m not fine. I’m not okay. I don’t know how to be okay right now. I look up at my dad, standing there with that look of guilt on his face, and I feel a fresh wave of anger, of frustration.

“Why?” I whisper, my voice hoarse. “Why did this happen?”

He flinches, his eyes darting away from mine, and I see my mamma’s face tighten, a mix of anger and pain. She looks back at me, her eyes wet with tears. “We don’t know, darling,” she says softly. “We’re trying to figure it out. But none of this... none of this is your fault. Do you hear me?”

I nod, but the words feel hollow, empty. How can it not be my fault? How can any of this make sense? I feel like I’m trapped in a nightmare I can’t wake up from, and every time I close my eyes, I see Nonna’s face, pale and still, her blood pooling around her.

I take a shaky breath, feeling the tears burning in my eyes again. “I just... I just need some time,” I whisper. “I need to be alone for a little while. Just... until I can think.”

She nods, her hands still on my face, her touch gentle, comforting. “Of course, sweetheart,” she says. “We’ll give you some space. But if you need anything... anything at all...” I nod again, and she leans in to press a kiss to my forehead. “I love

you, Alessia,” she whispers, and I feel a tear slip down my cheek.

My dad steps forward, his face still tight with guilt. “We’re here for you,” he says quietly. “Whenever you’re ready to talk... we’re here.”

I nod, feeling a fresh wave of exhaustion wash over me. “Thank you,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

They leave the room, closing the door softly behind them, and I’m alone again. I lie back against the pillows, my heart still racing, my mind still spinning. I close my eyes, trying to block out the images, the sounds, the memories, but they’re there, lurking just beneath the surface, waiting to drag me under.

I don’t know how to make it stop. I don’t know how to find my way back to solid ground. I feel like I’m drifting, lost in a sea of confusion and fear, and I don’t know which way is up, which way is out. I press my hands to my chest, feeling the rapid beat of my heart, trying to ground myself, to find something real to hold on to.

I hear Romiro’s voice in my head, calm and steady, guiding me through the breathing exercises, and I try to focus on that, to anchor myself to his words, to his presence. But it’s hard. So damn hard.

Why did this happen? Why us? Why Nonna?

The questions swirl in my mind, relentless, unforgiving. I feel the tears start to fall again, and I let them because I don’t know what else to do. I don’t know how to fix this, how to make it right. I feel so lost, so broken, and I don’t know how to put myself back together.

I curl up on the bed, pulling the blanket tight around me, and I close my eyes, letting the darkness take over—because at least in the darkness, I don’t have to see. I don’t

have to think. I can just... breathe.

37

ROMIRO

I watch Alessia as she sits by the window, staring out at nothing. Her hair is pulled up in a messy bun, loose strands falling around her face, her skin pale in the dim light of the room. She looks so small, so fragile. Like if I reached out to touch her, she might shatter into a thousand pieces.

She's barely moved for hours, barely spoken since we brought her back. I feel a knot tightening in my chest, a heavy weight pressing down on me. I hate seeing her like this, so distant, so far away from me. And I know it's my fault. All of it.

I pace the room, my hands shoved deep into my pockets, trying to figure out what to say, what to do. But nothing feels right. Nothing feels like enough.

"Alessia," I say softly, my voice breaking the silence. She doesn't respond, doesn't even turn her head. I swallow hard, stepping closer, the floorboards creaking under my weight. "Red... you need to eat something."

She blinks slowly like she's just coming back from someplace far away, her eyes finally shifting to mine. But they're empty, hollow, like she's not seeing me.

"I'm not hungry," she whispers, her voice so quiet it's almost drowned out by the sound of the rain hitting the window.

I take a deep breath, trying to keep my voice steady. "You have to eat, cara. You've

barely had anything all day.”

She looks away again, her gaze drifting back to the window. I feel a surge of frustration, of helplessness, bubbling up inside me. I don’t know how to reach her, don’t know how to pull her back from wherever she’s gone. I feel like I’m losing her all over again, and it’s killing me.

I move closer, kneeling down in front of her, trying to catch her eye. “Please, Alessia. Just a few bites. For me?”

Her eyes flicker, just for a moment, and I think I see something there, some small spark of recognition, of life. But it’s gone as quickly as it appeared, replaced by that same blank stare.

I let out a sigh, rubbing a hand over my face. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to fix this. And the guilt, the weight of it, it’s suffocating. I keep seeing her face in my mind, the fear, the pain, when Helen had her at gunpoint. I keep hearing the sound of her voice, the way she said my name like she was afraid she’d never get to say it again.

I failed her. I wasn’t there when she needed me. And now, she’s slipping away from me, and I don’t know how to stop it.

I stand up, running a hand through my hair, trying to think, trying to figure out what to do. I can’t lose her. Not now. Not after everything.

I walk over to the kitchen, grabbing a plate and piling it with whatever I can find. Some bread, a piece of cheese, a few slices of prosciutto. It’s not much, but it’s something. Something to keep her grounded, to keep her here with me.

I bring the plate back to her, setting it down on the small table by the window.

“Here,” I say, keeping my voice gentle. “Just try a little, okay?”

She doesn't look at me, doesn't move. I feel a tightness in my chest, a mix of frustration and desperation. “Alessia, please,” I whisper, my voice cracking. “You need to eat.”

She turns her head slowly, her eyes meeting mine, and again, I see something there. Pain, maybe. Or sadness. Or something else, something I can't quite name. But then it's gone like last time, and she's looking away.

I feel a sharp pang in my chest, a hollow ache that spreads through my body. I can't stand this, can't stand seeing her like this. So lost, so broken. I want to pull her into my arms, hold her close, tell her everything will be okay. But I can't. Because I don't know if it will be.

I sit down on the edge of the couch, watching her, waiting for some sign, some flicker of life. But she just sits there, staring out the window, her hands limp in her lap. I feel my heart breaking all over again, the guilt, the shame, clawing at my insides.

I take a deep breath, closing my eyes for a moment, trying to steady myself. “I'm so sorry, Alessia,” I whisper, my voice barely more than a breath. “I'm so damn sorry.”

She doesn't respond, doesn't move. A tear rolls down my cheek, and I quickly wipe it away, hating the weakness, the helplessness I feel. I should have been there. I should have protected her. But I wasn't. And now she's paying the price.

I stand up, pacing the room again, my mind racing, trying to find a way to make this right. But there's nothing. No words, no actions, nothing that can undo what's been done. I feel like I'm drowning, like I can't breathe, the guilt weighing me down like a lead weight.

I glance back at her, my heart aching at the sight of her, so still, so quiet. I need to do something, anything, to break through, to reach her. But I don't know how.

I walk back over, kneeling down in front of her again, taking her hands in mine. They're cold, so cold, and I rub them gently, trying to bring some warmth back into them. "Alessia," I say softly, my voice trembling. "I need you to come back to me. Please."

Her eyes flicker again, just for a moment, and I feel a surge of hope, a small spark of light in the darkness. "I'm here," she whispers, her voice so soft I almost don't hear it.

I nod, swallowing hard, trying to keep my voice steady. "I know," I reply, squeezing her hands gently. "But I need you to come back all the way. I need you to eat, to talk to me, to let me help you."

She looks away, her eyes filling with tears, and my heart breaks all over again. "I'm trying," she whispers, her voice thick with emotion. "But I don't know how."

I feel a lump forming in my throat, and I nod, pulling her hands to my lips, pressing a soft kiss to her knuckles. "It's okay," I say, my voice barely more than a breath. "It's okay. We'll figure it out together."

She nods slowly, her eyes still filled with tears, and I feel a small flicker of hope. Maybe, just maybe, we can get through this. Maybe we can find our way back.

I sit with her, holding her hands, letting the silence stretch between us, not needing to fill it with words. Just being here, with her, is enough. For now.

The day drags on, the rain continuing to fall outside, a steady rhythm against the window. I keep trying to get her to eat, to drink, to do something, but it's like pulling

teeth. She's so far away, so distant.

But I can't give up. I won't. I promised her I'd be here, that I'd take care of her, and I intend to keep that promise.

As the afternoon turns into evening, I make us some tea, bringing the cups over to where she's sitting. "Here," I say, holding out a cup to her. "It's warm. It'll help."

She takes the cup slowly, her fingers brushing against mine, and I feel a small spark of warmth in my chest. She takes a sip, her eyes closing for a moment, and I feel a surge of relief. It's not much, but it's something. A step in the right direction.

We sit in silence, sipping our tea, the rain still falling outside. The room grows darker as the sun sets. I keep stealing glances at her, watching for any sign, any flicker of life. And slowly, slowly, I see it. A small smile, a soft sigh, a whisper of a laugh.

It's not much, but it's enough. Enough to give me hope, enough to keep me going.

I reach out, taking her hand again, squeezing it gently. "We'll get through this," I whisper, my voice filled with determination. "I promise."

She nods, her eyes meeting mine, and for the first time in days, I see a spark of the woman I fell in love with. And it's enough to keep me going, to keep fighting, to keep hoping.

We sit together in the fading light, holding onto each other, holding onto hope. And I know, somehow, we'll find our way back. Together.

* * *

I step into the basement, looking at Helen in the corner. Her head is bowed, but she

looks wild. Mariano and the boys have been interrogating her for the past couple of hours.

“Helen.” Her head snaps up when I call her name, her face twisting into a vicious snarl, but she winces. Her eye is swollen, lip bleeding, and she looks like she hasn’t slept in weeks.

“You useless bastard. I should’ve aborted you long before you were able to grow into whatever monster you are.”

Ignoring her, I ask, “Where are the other men that helped you?” She looks out of it, one of the guys must have given her something to make her more compliant, and a junkie like her would never turn down an offer of getting high.

“You killed the...” she trails off like she can’t find the words. “You killed them all,” she says, slurring her words a bit.

“Bullshit!” I spit out.

Helen shakes her head. “The Outfit didn’t agree to give me more men than the ones you killed.” The fucking Outfit. I slam the door behind me, taking the stairs two at a time. I barge into Eli’s office, and he side-eyes me. His laptop is open, and I realize he’s on a call with Nicolo.

I don’t wait for any of them to say anything, “The Outfit was behind this shit show. Helen was fed something that made her lose her senses, which made her confess.”

Eli leans back. “Why the fuck is anyone feeding that junkie drugs? I need her to stay alive. She’s not getting out of this so easily.”

* * *

Two weeks have passed, and it's like walking through a fog that doesn't want to lift. Every day feels like a battle, though small victories have been won. Like the way she'll smile a little brighter or laugh a little longer—it's a step in the right direction, but it's still a fight. She's still distant, still guarded. And I feel like I'm always on edge, waiting for something to break.

I'm sitting on the couch, and Alessia's curled up beside me with her head on my shoulder. She's awake, but her eyes are closed, her breaths are slow and steady. It's the most peaceful I've seen her in days, and I don't want to disrupt that. But I know I have to bring it up. I have to at least try.

I run my fingers through her hair, the strands slipping through like water. Her hair has always been like fire to me—wild, untamed. Now, though, it's dulled, like she's lost some of that spark that drew me to her in the first place. But I'm not giving up. Not on her, not on us.

"Alessia," I start softly, my voice barely louder than a whisper. She tenses slightly against me, and I curse myself for breaking the silence, but I can't let this go any longer. "I've been thinking."

She doesn't answer, doesn't even open her eyes, but I know she's listening. She always listens.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself. "About... maybe us seeing someone. A professional, I mean. Together. To talk things out."

Her eyelids flutter open, and she looks at me, confusion clouding her eyes. There's hesitation there, the instinct to pull back, to retreat into that shell she's been living in for weeks. But she doesn't pull away. She stays. And that gives me hope.

"I don't know if it will help," I continue, careful to keep my tone gentle and non-

threatening. “But I think it’s worth a try. For both of us. And I was thinking... maybe you could go with Valentina and Mara, too? As a group. I think it could be good for all of you.”

She frowns, shifting slightly, her head still resting on my shoulder but her body going tense. “Therapy?” she repeats, her voice flat, like she’s trying the word out on her tongue and doesn’t like the taste of it.

I nod, brushing a stray strand of hair away from her face. “Yeah. Therapy. With Dr. Katherine. She’s good. She knows how to handle... situations like ours.”

Alessia’s silent for a long moment, and my heart hammers in my chest, the anxiety clawing at my insides. I don’t want her to say no. I don’t want her to push me away again. But I also know I can’t force this on her. It has to be her choice.

She finally speaks, her voice soft, uncertain. “Why... why do you think we need therapy?”

I take a deep breath, choosing my words carefully. “Because,” I say slowly, “we’ve been through a lot, Red. You and me, together. And there’s a lot we haven’t talked about, a lot we’ve buried deep down. I think... I think it’s time we start facing it. Together.”

She sits up, pulling away from me, and I feel a sharp pang of loss at the absence of her warmth. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that,” she admits, her voice barely more than a whisper.

I nod, trying to keep my expression calm, and understanding. “I get that,” I say. “But you don’t have to be ready all at once. We can take it slow. One step at a time. Just... think about it, okay?”

She nods slowly, her gaze distant, and I can tell she's still processing, still trying to make sense of what I'm asking. I want to reach out, to hold her, to tell her everything will be okay. But I know she needs space, needs time to come to terms with this on her own.

I watch her, my heart aching, the silence stretching between us. "And the group therapy," I add, trying to keep my tone light, and casual. "It's just an idea. I know you've been through a lot with Mara and Valentina... I think it could help all of you to have someone to talk to. Together."

Alessia's eyes flicker with something—fear, maybe, or uncertainty. "I don't know," she says again, her voice wavering. "I don't know if I can do that."

I nod, leaning back against the couch, trying to hide my disappointment. "That's okay," I say. "You don't have to decide right now. Just... think about it. For me?"

She nods again, her gaze still distant, and I can feel the tension between us, the unspoken words hanging heavy in the air. I want to break through that barrier, to pull her back to me, but I don't know how. I don't know what to say to make her understand.

We sit in silence for a while, the weight of the conversation pressing down on us. Finally, Alessia sighs, her shoulders slumping. "I'll think about it," she says quietly, and I feel a small spark of hope, a flicker of light in the darkness.

"Thank you," I whisper, reaching out to take her hand. She hesitates for a moment before letting me, her fingers cold against mine. I squeeze her hand gently, trying to convey everything I can't put into words. "We'll figure this out. I promise."

She nods, her eyes meeting mine for a brief moment, and I see something there—a glimmer of trust, of understanding. It's not much, but it's enough. It's a start.

* * *

The days pass slowly after that, each one blending into the next. Alessia is still distant, still quiet, but there are moments when she seems to come back to me, when she smiles and laughs, and I see glimpses of the woman I fell in love with. It's enough to keep me going, to keep fighting.

But I can't shake the feeling that we're standing on the edge of a precipice, one wrong step away from falling into the abyss. And I know we can't keep going like this forever. Something has to change.

One evening, after dinner, I bring it up again. "Have you thought any more about what we talked about?" I ask, trying to keep my voice casual, and nonchalant.

Alessia looks up from her plate, her expression guarded. "About therapy?" she asks.

I nod, leaning back in my chair. "Yeah. About therapy. For us. For you."

She hesitates, her gaze flickering away from mine. "I've thought about it," she admits. "But... I'm still not sure."

I nod, trying not to let my disappointment show. "That's okay," I say. "Take your time. I just want what's best for you. For us."

She's quiet for a long moment, and I can see the wheels turning in her mind, the way she's weighing her options, trying to make sense of what I'm asking. Finally, she looks up at me, her expression serious. "I'll do it," she says softly.

I feel a rush of relief, of gratitude, flooding through me. "You will?" I ask, trying to keep the hope out of my voice.

She nods, her gaze steady. “I will. For you. For us.”

38

ALESSIA

The room is quiet, too quiet. The kind of quiet that feels like it's pressing in from all sides, like a heavy blanket I can't shake off. I sit on a soft, beige couch, the fabric rough against my palms, trying to focus on the small details—the muted colors of the room, the soft ticking of a clock somewhere behind me, the faint scent of lavender in the air. Anything to keep my mind from wandering too far, too deep. But my house feels foreign, I haven't been back here since that day, but I know Romiro is right out that door. No one knows the full extent of what happened to me...the way I was forced.

Katherine sits across from me, her face calm, her eyes attentive. She's got this air about her, this calm, patient energy that makes me feel like I'm under a microscope, like she can see right through me. It's unnerving, and I can feel my shoulders tense, my fingers digging into the fabric of the couch. I don't know why I'm here, why I agreed to this. I don't want to talk, don't want to open up, but Romiro thought it would help, and I... I don't know what else to do.

"So," Katherine says softly, her voice breaking the silence like a gentle breeze. "How are you feeling today, Alessia?"

How am I feeling? I don't even know how to answer that. I stare at the floor, tracing the lines in the hardwood with my eyes, trying to find the words, but they're stuck somewhere in my throat, heavy and tangled. "I... I don't know," I finally mumble, my voice barely more than a whisper. "I guess... tired?"

Katherine nods, like she's heard this a thousand times before, like she understands. "That's okay," she says. "It's normal to feel tired after everything you've been through. Your mind and body are trying to process a lot."

I nod, but I don't look up. My fingers tighten around the edge of the couch, my knuckles turning white. I don't want to talk about it, to go back there, to those moments, but I know that's why I'm here. I know I have to.

"You've been through a lot of trauma, Alessia," Katherine continues, her voice soft but steady. "And it's okay to feel whatever you're feeling. There's no right or wrong way to process what happened. But sometimes, talking about it can help."

I swallow hard, my throat tight. I feel a lump rising, my chest tightening. I don't know where to start, I don't know how to put everything into words. How do you even begin to explain what it feels like to lose someone you love so violently, so suddenly? How do you talk about the fear, the pain, the emptiness? How do you even talk about the absolute terror that courses through your body after waking up and finding out you've been taken away from the one place you felt safe?

I take a deep breath, my hands shaking slightly. "It's... it's not just the kidnapping," I say, my voice trembling. "It's... it's Nonna. Losing her... I can't get it out of my head. I keep seeing her face... the way she looked, so still, so... gone."

Katherine nods again, her expression softening. "Tell me about her," she says gently. "Tell me about your Nonna."

My chest tightens, a sharp pain cutting through me like a knife. I don't know if I can do this. But I force myself to speak, to say the words out loud. "She was... she was everything," I whisper, my voice breaking. "She was strong, and stubborn, and she loved us so fiercely. She was always there, always... always making sure we were okay. She was the heart of our family, you know?"

Katherine listens, her eyes never leaving mine, her expression open, encouraging. “She sounds like a wonderful woman,” she says softly.

“She was,” I reply, my voice barely above a whisper. “She was always there. Always... fighting for us. She taught me how to be strong, how to stand up for myself, how to love with everything I have... and now she’s just... gone.”

I feel a tear slip down my cheek, and I brush it away quickly, like I’m ashamed of it, like I shouldn’t be crying in front of this stranger. “I don’t know how to do this without her,” I confess, my voice raw. “I don’t know how to be... strong.”

Katherine leans forward slightly, her voice gentle. “It’s okay to feel that way, Alessia. It’s okay to feel lost, to feel like you don’t know how to move forward. Grief is... it’s a process, a journey, and it takes time.”

I nod, but the words feel hollow. I’ve heard them all before—grief takes time, it’s a process, blah, blah, blah. None of it changes the fact that she’s gone, that I’ll never see her again, never hear her laugh or feel her arms around me.

“It’s not just that she’s gone,” I say suddenly, surprising myself with the force of my own words. “It’s how she... how she died. It wasn’t... it wasn’t supposed to be like this. She didn’t deserve that. She didn’t...”

My voice cracks, and I feel another tear slide down my cheek. Katherine’s expression doesn’t change, but I see something in her eyes, something that looks like understanding. “You’re angry,” she says softly. “And that’s okay. It’s okay to be angry, Alessia. It’s okay to feel whatever you’re feeling.”

I nod, but the anger is there, burning in my chest, hot and sharp. “I am angry,” I admit, my voice shaking. “I’m angry at... at everything. At whoever did this. At myself... because I couldn’t do anything to stop it. I couldn’t save her.”

Katherine's voice is calm, steady. "What happened to your Nonna... it wasn't your fault, Alessia. There was nothing you could have done."

I shake my head, my hands clenched in my lap. "But I should have done something," I whisper, my voice breaking. "I should have been able to... to protect her. To protect all of us."

"You did everything you could," Katherine says firmly. "You were caught in a situation that was beyond your control, and you survived. That takes strength, Alessia. That takes resilience."

Resilience. I let the word roll around in my mind for a moment, trying to grasp it, trying to feel it. But all I feel is the weight of the guilt, the heaviness of the loss. "I don't feel strong," I admit quietly. "I feel... broken. I feel like I'm... drowning."

Katherine nods, her eyes soft. "I understand. And it's okay to feel that way. It's okay to feel like you're not strong right now. But you are. You survived, Alessia. You're here. You're still fighting, even when it feels impossible. That's strength."

I look down at my hands, my fingers twisting together, my nails digging into my palms. "I don't know how to move forward," I whisper. "I don't know how to... live with this. How to live without her."

Katherine leans back in her chair, giving me space, but her eyes never leave mine. "It's not about moving on," she says softly. "It's about learning to carry the grief with you. Learning to live with it, to make room for it in your heart. It's not something that goes away, but it can become something that you grow around, something that makes you stronger."

Her words sink in slowly like stones dropping into water, and I feel something shift inside me, something small, something fragile. I take a shaky breath, trying to absorb

what she's saying, trying to find some meaning in it.

"And the kidnapping," Katherine prompts gently. "Can you tell me about that?"

My heart clenches, my chest tightening at the mention of it. I close my eyes, the images flashing in my mind—Helen's cold eyes, the ropes digging into my wrists, the darkness pressing in from all sides. "It was... terrifying," I whisper, my voice barely audible. "I thought... I thought we were going to die."

Katherine nods, her expression empathetic. "You went through something incredibly traumatic, Alessia. It's normal to feel scared, to feel anxious, to have panic attacks. Your mind is trying to protect you, to make sense of what happened."

I nod, but the words don't feel real. Nothing feels real. "I keep... I keep seeing her face," I admit, my voice trembling. "Helen's face, her smile... like she enjoyed it, like it was all a game to her. And I... I don't understand. Why? Why us?"

Katherine leans forward slightly, her hands resting on her knees. "I don't know why, Alessia," she says softly. "Sometimes, there are no answers. Sometimes, things happen that we can't explain, that we can't make sense of. And that's one of the hardest parts... accepting that there might not be a reason, that it might not be fair."

I feel a tear slip down my cheek, and I brush it away, frustrated, angry. "It's not fair," I say, my voice sharp. "It's not fair that she gets away with it, that we went through this. It's not fair that... that I'm still here, and she..."

Katherine's voice is soft, soothing. "No, it's not fair," she agrees. "And it's okay to feel that way. It's okay to feel angry, to feel sad, to feel lost. You don't have to have it all figured out right now. You just have to take it one step at a time, one day at a time."

I nod, my hands still shaking, my chest still tight. “I don’t know if I can do that,” I whisper. “I don’t know if I can... find a way through this.”

Katherine’s eyes are gentle and understanding. “You’re stronger than you think, Alessia,” she says softly. “You’ve already survived so much. And you’re not alone. You have people who love you, and who want to help you. And you have yourself... you have your strength, your resilience. You have everything you need to heal, to grow, to find your way back to yourself.”

I take a deep breath, letting her words settle over me, feeling the weight of them, the truth in them. I know it won’t be easy. I know there will be days when it feels impossible. But maybe... maybe there’s a way through this. Maybe there’s a way to carry this grief, this pain, without letting it destroy me.

Maybe there’s a way to be okay again, to find some light in the darkness.

And for the first time in a long time, I feel a flicker of hope, a small, fragile spark that maybe, I can do this. I can find a way to keep going. To keep fighting. To keep living.

* * *

I sit on the edge of the couch, my legs tucked under me, staring at the door that Katherine just walked out of. The room feels colder now, emptier, like the silence has grown louder somehow. I feel... hollow, like I’ve been scraped out from the inside, like all the words I just spoke to her took something out of me that I can’t get back. I’m not sure if I feel lighter or just more exposed. My fingers twist the edge of my shirt, fidgeting, trying to find something solid to hold onto.

The door opens slowly, and I look up to see Romiro standing there, leaning against the frame, his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes find mine, searching, and I see

the worry etched into every line of his face. He looks so tired, so worn down, and I wonder if that's my fault, if I've done this to him. I feel a pang of guilt twist in my stomach, but I push it down. I've been feeling guilty about everything lately, and I can't take on anymore.

"How did it go?" he asks, his voice soft, like he's afraid to startle me.

I shrug, my gaze dropping back to my lap. "I... I don't know," I admit, my voice small. "I talked. She listened. It was... hard."

He nods, moving into the room, sitting down beside me on the couch. His leg brushes against mine, a gentle pressure that grounds me, makes me feel less like I'm drifting away. "I'm proud of you, Red," he says quietly. "It's not easy to talk about... what happened. But you did it."

I glance up at him, his words sinking in slowly, like stones dropping into still water. "I don't know if it helped," I whisper. "I still feel... I still feel so lost."

He reaches out, his hand warm as it covers mine, his thumb brushing gently over my knuckles. "It's okay to feel lost," he murmurs. "It's okay to not have all the answers right now. But you're trying. That's what matters."

I nod, swallowing hard, feeling the tears prick at the corners of my eyes again. I've cried so much these past few days, and I'm tired of it, tired of feeling weak, of feeling like I'm falling apart. I look away, blinking rapidly, trying to hold myself together.

Romiro squeezes my hand a little tighter. "Come on," he says, his voice lighter now, like he's trying to pull me out of my own head. "Let's get out of here for a bit. I'll take you back to the apartment, and I'll make you something to eat. Your favorite—scrambled eggs, just the way you like them."

I feel a small smile tug at the corners of my lips, despite everything. He knows me too well. “Scrambled eggs?” I echo, my voice a little stronger now. “You’re going to cook for me?”

He grins, a playful glint in his eyes. “I’ve been practicing,” he teases. “Come on, let me show you what I’ve learned.”

I nod, standing up slowly, feeling a little unsteady on my feet. He stands up beside me, his hand slipping around my waist, guiding me gently toward the door. I lean into him, feeling his strength, his steadiness, and for a moment, I let myself feel safe.

The ride back to his apartment is quiet, the city blurring past the windows in a rush of color and light. I watch the buildings go by, my mind drifting back to everything that’s happened, to everything Katherine said. I feel a mix of emotions swirling in my chest—grief, pain, anger, but also... something else. Something softer, something like hope. I don’t know what to do with it, don’t know how to hold it, but it’s there, a small, fragile flicker in the darkness.

Romiro reaches over, his hand finding mine on the seat between us, fingers lacing through with quiet reassurance. I glance over at him, his face set, his jaw clenched, like he’s deep in thought. “You okay?” I ask softly, squeezing his hand.

He nods, his eyes flicking over to meet mine for a moment. “Yeah,” he says. “I’m okay. Just... thinking.”

“About what?”

He hesitates, then sighs, a small smile playing at the edges of his lips. “About how much I love you,” he says, his voice soft, almost shy. “And how much I want to help you through this. How much I want to see you smile again, really smile.”

I feel my heart squeeze in my chest, a warmth spreading through me that I haven't felt in days. "I love you too," I whisper, my voice thick with emotion. "I'm just... I'm trying, Romiro. I'm trying so hard."

He lifts my hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to my knuckles. "I know," he murmurs. "And that's all I could ever ask of you."

We pull up to his apartment building, and he parks the car, helping me out, keeping his arm around me as we walk inside. The elevator ride is short, and soon we're stepping into his apartment, the familiar space feeling strangely comforting, like a safe harbor in a storm.

"Go on and change," he says, his hand brushing against my lower back as he guides me toward the bedroom. "I'll get started on those eggs."

I nod, heading into the bedroom, the door clicking softly shut behind me. I take a deep breath, looking around the room, trying to find something to focus on, something to anchor me. The bed is unmade, the sheets still rumpled from where I slept earlier. I see a shirt of his tossed over a chair, and I smile faintly, picking it up, feeling the fabric between my fingers.

I change into something more comfortable—a pair of leggings and a loose sweater—and I pull my hair back into a messy bun, looking at myself in the mirror. I look tired, shadows under my eyes, my skin pale. But there's a softness in my eyes that wasn't there before, a hint of something new. Maybe Katherine was right. Maybe there is a way through this, a way to carry the grief without letting it destroy me.

I step back out into the living room, and the smell of scrambled eggs hits me immediately, warm and familiar. I smile a little wider, moving toward the kitchen where Romiro is standing at the stove, a pan in one hand, a spatula in the other. He glances over his shoulder as I walk in, a grin spreading across his face.

“Just in time,” he says, flipping the eggs with a practiced motion. “Almost ready.”

I lean against the counter, watching him, feeling a sense of calm settle over me, a moment of peace in the midst of all the chaos. “You look like you know what you’re doing,” I tease.

He laughs, a soft, warm sound that fills the space around us. “I told you I’ve been practicing,” he says. “I had to get it right for you.”

I feel my heart swell, a warmth spreading through my chest. “Thank you,” I whisper, my voice soft. “For everything.”

He turns, setting the pan down and moving closer to me, his hands finding my waist, pulling me against him. “You don’t have to thank me,” he murmurs, his lips brushing against my forehead. “I’d do anything for you, Red. Anything.”

I close my eyes, leaning into him, feeling his heartbeat against mine, strong and steady. “I know,” I whisper. “And that’s why I love you.”

He presses a kiss to my forehead, holding me close for a moment longer before pulling back, his eyes searching mine. “Come on,” he says with a grin. “Let’s eat before these eggs get cold.”

We sit down at the small table, and he serves me a plate of scrambled eggs, just the way I like them—soft, fluffy, with a little bit of cheese and a sprinkle of chives. I take a bite, and the familiar taste fills my mouth, warm and comforting. I smile, feeling a little bit of the weight lift from my shoulders.

“These are perfect,” I say, looking up at him. “You did good.”

He grins, a proud look on his face. “Told you I was practicing,” he teases. “Glad you

approve.”

I laugh, a genuine laugh that feels good, feels real. “You’re full of surprises, you know that?”

He winks at me, taking a bite of his own eggs. “I try to keep you on your toes.”

We eat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the sound of our forks against the plates, the soft hum of the city outside the window. I feel a sense of calm settle over me, a feeling I haven’t had in days, and I hold onto it, letting it fill me up.

After a while, Romiro sets his fork down, looking at me with a thoughtful expression. “Hey,” he says slowly. “I was thinking... maybe we could go out today. Pick up some new furniture for the apartment.”

I blink, surprised. “Furniture?”

He nods, his eyes brightening. “Yeah. I’ve been meaning to get a few more things, make this place feel more like home. And I thought... maybe you’d like to help me pick some stuff out.”

I feel a small smile tug at my lips. “You want my help? Aren’t you afraid I’ll pick something not to your liking?”

He laughs, shaking his head. “Nah, I trust your taste. And besides, I could use the company. What do you say?”

I hesitate for a moment, the thought of going out, being around people, feels both daunting and a little exciting. But then I look at him, at the hopeful expression in his eyes, and I feel a flicker of that same feeling spark inside me.

“Okay,” I say, nodding. “Let’s do it. Let’s go buy some furniture.”

He grins, standing up and reaching for my hand. “That’s my girl,” he says softly. “Let’s make this place ours.”

I take his hand, feeling the warmth of his skin against mine, and for the first time in days, I feel a glimmer of something new, something bright. I don’t know what the future holds, don’t know how long it will take to heal, to find my way through this darkness. But with him by my side, I feel like maybe, just maybe, I can do it.

We grab our coats, and he opens the door, holding it for me, his eyes never leaving mine. I step out into the hallway, the light filtering in from the windows at the end, and I take a deep breath, feeling the air fill my lungs, feeling my heart steady in my chest.

We’re going to be okay. I’m going to be okay. One step at a time. One breath at a time.

39

ALESSIA

3 months later

Three months. It's been three months since everything changed. Since I lost Nonna, since I was taken hostage, since I felt like my entire world was ripped apart and scattered into so many pieces I didn't know how to pick them up. But somehow, here I am, still standing, still breathing, still putting one foot in front of the other.

I run my fingers along the spine of my notebook, the one I bring to every session with Katherine. It's filled with scribbles and notes, the messy handwriting a mix of my thoughts and the things I don't know how to say out loud. I flip through it, letting my gaze skim over the words. Words like grief and anger, fear and strength. Words that feel like they belong to someone else, someone who's still lost in the dark. But they're mine. They're mine, and I'm learning to live with them.

I glance at the clock on the wall of Katherine's office. It's almost time to leave. I've been coming here every week, sometimes more, sometimes less. Sometimes alone, sometimes with Romiro by my side, his hand squeezing mine, his presence a steady anchor in the storm. Sometimes with Mara and Valentina, when the weight of our shared experience feels too heavy to bear alone.

At first, it was hard—harder than I thought it would be. I remember the first sessions, how I felt like I was pulling teeth just to get a single word out of myself. How my chest would tighten, my throat closing up like I was choking. The panic attacks were

relentless then, hitting me like waves crashing against rocks, breaking me down, piece by piece. I felt like I was suffocating, like I was trapped in a cage with no way out.

But now... now it's different. The attacks have lessened, their grip on me loosening like a rope being slowly unwound. I still feel the fear sometimes, still feel the anxiety creeping up my spine, but I know how to manage it now. I know how to breathe through it, how to find my footing when everything feels like it's slipping away. Katherine taught me that—taught me how to recognize the signs, how to ground myself when the world feels like it's spinning too fast.

I take a deep breath, feeling the air fill my lungs, feeling my heartbeat slow to a steady rhythm. I close my notebook and slide it into my bag. Today's session was hard—talking about Nonna, about what she meant to me, about how her loss still feels like a gaping wound in my chest. But I'm learning to live with it, to carry the grief with me without letting it swallow me whole.

Katherine smiles at me from across the room, her eyes warm, understanding. "You did good today, Alessia," she says softly. "You're making progress."

I nod, a small smile tugging at my lips. "I'm trying," I reply, my voice steady, but there's still a hint of uncertainty there. "It feels... better, sometimes. Lighter."

She nods, her smile widening just a little. "That's all we can ask for," she says. "One step at a time."

I nod again, feeling a flicker of something like hope in my chest. One step at a time. That's been my mantra these past few months. Just keep moving forward, even if it's just a small step, even if it feels like I'm barely moving at all.

I stand up, grabbing my bag, and Katherine walks me to the door. "Remember to take

care of yourself,” she says. “And if you ever need to talk, you know where to find me.”

“I will,” I promise, and I mean it. I’ve come to rely on these sessions more than I ever thought I would. They’ve become a lifeline, a way to keep my head above water. I step out into the hallway, taking a deep breath, feeling the cool air hit my face. It feels good, refreshing, like a small reminder that I’m still here, still alive.

I head out of the building, into the bustling streets of the city. The sun is shining, the sky a bright, clear blue. I pull my jacket tighter around me, feeling the crisp air against my skin. I’ve got a shift at the hospital in an hour, and I feel a mix of nerves and excitement bubbling in my chest. I’ve been able to return to my residency, to throw myself back into the work that I love, the work that makes me feel like I’m making a difference.

I walk down the street, weaving through the crowd, feeling the familiar rhythm of the city around me. I used to hate the noise, the constant movement, the way it never seemed to stop. But now, it feels comforting, like a heartbeat, a steady pulse that keeps me grounded. I reach the hospital, pushing through the doors, nodding to a few nurses as I make my way to the locker room. I slip into my scrubs, tying my hair back into a tight bun, looking at myself in the mirror.

I look... different. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but there’s something in my eyes, something that wasn’t there before. A softness, maybe, or a strength I didn’t know I had. I take a deep breath, letting it out slowly, and head out onto the floor.

The hospital is buzzing with activity, patients and doctors and nurses moving in every direction. I make my way to the board, checking it for my assignments. A few check-ups, a discharge, a new admission. It’s a busy day, but I’m ready for it. I feel a surge of energy, a determination to prove to myself that I can do this, that I’m not broken, that I’m still the same Alessia I’ve always been.

I move through my rounds, checking on patients, updating charts, listening to heartbeats and checking vitals. I feel the familiar rhythm of the work, the way it pulls me in, focuses my mind, pushes everything else to the background. I feel... almost normal, almost like myself again.

I finish up with a patient, a little girl with a broken arm, and head back to the nurse's station to update her chart. As I'm writing, I hear a voice behind me, and I turn to see Dr. Patel, one of the senior residents, looking at me with a smile.

"Hi, Dr. Visconti," she says. "How's it going?"

I smile back, feeling a warmth spread through my chest. "It's good," I say. "Busy, but good."

She nods, glancing at the chart in my hand. "I've heard you've been doing great since you came back," she says. "I know it wasn't easy, but you're handling it well. Just wanted you to know that."

I feel a flush of pride, a small, satisfied smile spreading across my face. "Thank you," I say, my voice a little steadier, a little stronger. "That means a lot."

She nods, giving me a small pat on the shoulder before heading off. I turn back to my chart, feeling a sense of accomplishment, a sense that I might just be on the right track.

The rest of the shift passes quickly, a blur of patients and paperwork and the steady hum of the hospital around me. When my shift finally ends, I head to the locker room, changing out of my scrubs, feeling the exhaustion settle in. But it's a good kind of exhaustion, the kind that comes from knowing you've done something worthwhile, something that matters.

I step out into the cool evening air, my breath forming small puffs of mist in front of me. I pull my coat tighter around me, feeling the chill seep through, but I don't mind. I feel... content. Not happy, not yet, but content. I start walking toward Romiro's apartment, knowing he'll be waiting for me, that he'll have dinner ready, that he'll be there with that steady presence that's become my anchor.

When I get to his building, I take the elevator up, my heart beating a little faster as I approach his door. I don't know why, but I feel a sense of anticipation, like I'm coming home, like I'm stepping into something safe, something warm. The elevator doors slide open and he's standing there waiting for me.

"Hey, Red," he says, pulling me into his arms, holding me tight. "How was work?"

I lean into him, feeling the warmth of his body against mine, feeling his steady heartbeat under my cheek. "It was good," I say softly. "Really good."

He pulls back, looking at me, his eyes searching mine. "You look... different," he says, a smile tugging at his lips. "Lighter."

I nod, feeling that flicker of hope again, that small, fragile flame that's been growing inside me. "I think I am," I whisper.

He smiles, a soft, loving smile that makes my heart flutter in my chest. "Come on," he says, taking my hand. "Dinner's ready. Your favorite."

We sit down at the small table, and he serves me a plate of pasta, the smell of garlic and tomatoes filling the air. I take a bite, savoring the familiar taste, feeling a sense of comfort, of home.

"So," he says, watching me, his eyes bright. "How's Katherine been?"

I shrug, taking another bite. “She’s good,” I say. “It’s... it’s helping, I think. I’m starting to feel...better.”

He nods, his smile widening. “I’m glad,” he says. “I knew you could do it.”

I feel a surge of affection for him, a warmth spreading through my chest. “I’m not there yet,” I say softly. “But I’m getting closer.”

He reaches across the table, takes my hand, and squeezes it gently. “One step at a time,” he says, echoing the words Katherine has said several times.

I smile, feeling a sense of peace settle over me, a sense of calm I haven’t felt in so long. “Yeah,” I whisper. “One step at a time.”

We finish dinner, and he pulls me onto the couch, his arm around my shoulders, holding me close. We sit there in the quiet, the city humming outside the window, the light from the streetlamp casting soft shadows on the walls. I lean into him, feeling his warmth, his steady presence, and for the first time in months, I feel... okay. Not perfect, not whole, but okay.

I know there’s still a long road ahead, still so much to work through, so much to heal. But I also know I’m not alone. I have Romiro, I have Katherine, I have my friends. And I have myself. I have my strength, my resilience, my determination to keep moving forward, no matter how hard it gets.

I close my eyes, feeling his arms around me, feeling his heartbeat under my cheek. I take a deep breath, letting it out slowly, and I feel a sense of peace, a sense of hope.

One step at a time. One breath at a time.

40

ROMIRO

6 months later

The kitchen fills with the acrid smell of burnt food. Smoke curls up from the skillet, wafting into the air, setting off the smoke alarm with a high-pitched shriek. I curse under my breath, quickly moving to yank the pan off the stove, but it's too late—the damage is done. The pasta is charred beyond recognition, a blackened mess that's already glued itself to the bottom of the pan.

Behind me, I hear a soft, melodic laugh. Alessia stands at the entrance to the kitchen, her hand covering her mouth, her green eyes dancing with amusement. “That’s the third time this week, Romiro,” she teases, leaning against the doorway, her red hair cascading down her shoulders like a fiery waterfall.

I glance over my shoulder, trying to play it cool. “I’m just testing your patience,” I say, smirking, though inside I feel a rush of warmth at the sound of her laughter. I’ve missed that sound more than I care to admit. She’s been so quiet these past few months, so lost in her thoughts, and to hear her laugh—really laugh—feels like a victory.

“Testing my patience or trying to burn the apartment down?” she retorts, a playful grin tugging at her lips.

“Maybe both,” I say, putting the skillet in the sink and turning on the faucet. The

water hits the pan with a loud hiss, steam billowing up in thick clouds. I look at her, leaning back against the counter, watching her as she brushes a loose strand of hair behind her ear. God, she's beautiful.

"Go get dressed," I tell her, trying to keep my tone casual. "We're going out."

Her brows knit together in confusion. "Out? Where?"

I smile, enjoying the little game I'm playing. "I left you a dress on the bed. I'd like you to wear it."

She narrows her eyes, suspicious. "And why should I trust your fashion sense?"

I laugh, pushing off the counter and walking over to her, brushing my fingers along her jawline, my thumb grazing her lips. "Because" I say softly, "tonight is special."

She studies me for a moment, trying to read my intentions, but then she relents, sighing dramatically. "Fine. But if it's something ridiculous, I'm not wearing it."

"It's not ridiculous," I promise, stepping back and giving her a playful shove toward the bedroom. "Now, go."

She rolls her eyes but turns and heads to the room, and I hear her footsteps fade as she moves down the hallway. I take a deep breath, leaning back against the counter, my heart pounding with anticipation. Tonight has to be perfect. I've spent weeks planning this, weeks trying to find the right moment, until I finally realized there's no such thing as the right moment. There's just the moment you make right.

Minutes pass, and then I hear her footsteps again, softer this time. I look up, and the sight of her takes my breath away. She stands in the doorway, wearing the sage-green maxi dress I picked out, the fabric hugging her curves perfectly. Her red hair falls in

loose waves down her back, catching the dim kitchen light and glowing like ember in the night.

She looks uncertain, her fingers playing with the edge of the dress. "Is this okay?" she asks, her voice barely a whisper.

I swallow hard, nodding. "More than okay, Alessia. You're... breathtaking."

A blush creeps up her cheeks, and she looks down, smiling. "You're just saying that because you picked the dress."

I chuckle, moving toward her, reaching for her hand. "I'm saying it because it's true." I give her hand a gentle squeeze. "Come on. Let's go."

We step out into the cool night, the city humming around us, the distant sounds of traffic and nightlife filling the air. I lead her to the car, opening the door for her and watching as she slides in, the green fabric of her dress spilling around her like liquid emerald. I close the door behind her, taking a deep breath to steady myself before walking around to the driver's side and getting in.

As I start the engine, I feel her gaze on me. "You're being awfully mysterious," she says, a teasing edge to her voice.

I smirk, keeping my eyes on the road as I pull out of the parking lot. "You'll see soon enough."

She lets out a huff, crossing her arms but smiling, "You know I hate surprises."

"And yet, you're with me," I reply, shooting her a quick grin.

She laughs softly, shaking her head. "You've got a point there."

We drive through the city, the streets lit up with a million lights, the buildings towering above us like silent sentinels. Tension builds in my chest with every passing mile, the anticipation clawing at me, but I force myself to stay calm, to keep my hands steady on the wheel.

We reach the park, the place where I almost let her slip away from me, but also the place where I found her again. I park the car and cut the engine, turning to look at her. “We’re here,” I say softly.

She looks around, her brow furrowing in confusion. “The park?”

I nod, getting out of the car and moving to open her door. She steps out, looking around, still clearly puzzled. I take her hand, leading her down the familiar path, the one that winds through the trees and toward the bench where I found her that night.

And then she sees it—the candles, the flowers, the fairy lights strung up in the trees, casting a soft, golden glow over the clearing. Her breath catches in her throat, and she stops, her hand tightening on mine.

“Romiro...” she whispers, her voice filled with emotion.

I squeeze her hand, leading her closer to the bench, our steps slow and deliberate. “I wanted to bring you back here,” I explain, my voice low, “because this is where everything changed for me. This is where I realized I couldn’t lose you.”

She turns to me, her eyes wide and glistening with tears. “What... what is all this?”

I take a deep breath, my heart pounding so hard I can barely hear my own thoughts. “This,” I say, reaching into my pocket and pulling out the small velvet box, “is where I ask you to be mine forever.”

Her eyes go even wider, her hand flying to her mouth as she gasps. “Oh, my God...”

I drop to one knee, flipping open the box to reveal the ring—a vintage piece, delicate and beautiful, the diamond catching the light and sparkling like a star. “Will you marry me?” I ask, my voice thick with emotion.

She stares at me for a moment, her hand trembling against her lips, tears streaming down her cheeks. And then she nods, a sob escaping her lips. “Yes,” she chokes out. “Yes, Romiro, of course I’ll marry you.”

I let out a deep breath, sliding the ring onto her finger, my hands shaking. I stand and pull her into my arms, kissing her with everything I have, feeling her melt against me, her fingers threading through my hair.

When we finally pull apart, she’s laughing and crying at the same time, her eyes shining with joy. “I can’t believe this,” she says, her voice full of wonder. “It’s perfect. It’s... everything.”

I smile as I brush a tear from her cheek. “There’s one more thing,” I whisper.

“What?” she asks, looking up at me.

“The ring... it was your Nonna’s,” I tell her softly. “I wanted you to have something that would always remind you of her.” She had given it to me after that first dinner. Her Nonna cornered me and said, I know you’re going to propose, sooner or later, but you’ll do it. And I want Alessia to have this ring.

Her face crumples, a fresh wave of tears spilling over, and she pulls me into a tight hug. “I love you,” she whispers against my neck.

“I love you too,” I reply, holding her close.

And then, from behind us, there's a burst of applause, and we turn to see Mara, Emiliano, and Valentina stepping out from behind the trees, clapping and cheering.

Alessia laughs, wiping her tears. "You! You all knew?" she exclaims.

Mara grins, pulling her into a hug. "Of course, we knew," she says. "We've been helping Romiro plan this for weeks."

Alessia shakes her head, still smiling. "What would you have done if I'd said no?"

Emiliano laughs, clapping me on the back. "We had a backup plan," he says with a wink. "But this is much better."

The rest of the night is a blur of laughter, hugs, and congratulations. The candles burn low, the fairy lights twinkle in the trees, and the stars come out, one by one, filling the sky with their light.

As I hold Alessia close, her head resting on my shoulder, I feel a sense of peace settle over me, a feeling of rightness, of knowing that this is exactly where I'm meant to be. I look around at our friends, our family, and I know that no matter what comes next, no matter what challenges we face, we will face them together.

BONUS #1

ROMIRO

It's been a year since I proposed to the woman I love, and time really does fly when you're happy. Although, right now, I am getting the biggest fucking migraine from Dominico's nervous energy. He paces the room and runs his hand through his hair for the fifth time in two minutes.

"If you need to shit, you know the bathroom is right there." I point behind me with my thumb. Dom stops his pacing to throw me a glare.

"Fuck off, Romiro. I don't have the fucking time for your stupid jokes." He narrows his eyes and throws himself on the couch opposite me. I lean back into the leather chair.

"What's gotten you all worked up? You look like there's a stick up your ass." Dominico gives me a glowering look before running a hand down his face.

"You're a fucking idiot. I still can't believe the Capo actually went back into Outfit territory for a woman." His lips curl in disgust, and protectiveness swells in my chest.

"Watch you're fucking tone, asshole. That woman is going to be the Capo's wife in a couple of hours, and she's the woman who dictates what mood he'll be in."

He rolls his eyes, muttering, "Fucking great."

I stand up, straighten my suit out, and run a hand through my hair.

“You’re such a hypocrite. Thalia had all the control in your relationship, and you know it,” I say. Dominico grinds his teeth together, his jaw clenched as he stalks toward me.

“You little fucker. You think you’re funny bringing up my dead wife?” Dom’s voice is barely restrained. Ignoring him, I flick a lone lint piece off my suit before giving him a blank stare.

“No, I don’t think it’s funny. But I think it’s quite pathetic the way you can’t even handle her name being mentioned,” I finally answer. He lunges at me, grabbing me by my throat, and I grab his collar.

“You fucking bastard. You don’t even deserve to have her name in your fucking mouth.” I give him a sardonic smirk, our faces inches from each other.

“You, little fucker, forget that I was the one to save her when she nearly drowned.” His hands loosen a bit, and I take the chance to knee him in the balls. Dominico lets me go with a groan as he rolls on the white marble floors.

“What is going on?” Alessia storms into the room, the door flinging open with a bang. My breath gets stuck in my throat as I take her in. Her red fiery hair is in loose waves around her face, soft makeup light enough so it doesn’t hide the galaxy of freckles over the bridge of her nose. She’s wearing her bridesmaid dress, a floor-length, flowy sage-green one. Her forest-colored eyes find mine, softening slightly before they harden again. My eyes land on that lone freckle near her plump lips; it's shaped like a star. That godforsaken freckle had been the bane of my existence since I was twelve.

“What happened?” she asks, and I give her a grin before looking at Dom, who has

finally managed to get off the floor.

“Nothing,” I reply. Her eyes narrow into slits before she steps toward Dom.

“Dom? you okay?” she asks. I take my chance to get away and head for the door.

“Rom?” she calls out. I pause, turning to look at Alessia.

“What’s up?” I ask. She turns her head, looking back at me.

“Stop fucking around, I won’t allow either of you to ruin this day for Val or Eli. They have gone through enough, they deserve for their wedding to go smoothly.” I give her a grin. My best friend is about to be married and have other priorities, which means that our friendship might go on the back burner. But I’ve got Alessia.

“I’m serious, Romiro. Please don’t provoke anyone.” She turns back to Dom, who’s giving me the stink eye.

The hallway is practically buzzing with life. I spot Mara, Lucio, and Matteo at the end of the corridor. Lucio is leaning on the wall with a cigarette between his lips. I snatch it out of his mouth once I reach them and put it out with the sole of my shoes.

“What the fuck, Rom?” he complains. I flick his forehead with my free hand.

“You little shit! If you smell like cigs and if Eli smells it on you, he’ll gut us both.”

Lucio swats my hand away, muttering under his breath, “Yeah, yeah, just say you want to be a buzzkill.”

I turn to Matteo. “I thought you would have at least attempted to stop him,” I say to him. Matteo’s resting bitch face remains in place.

“You know how he reacts when I try to tell him how cigarettes aren’t the best for his health,” he replies as Lucio wraps one of his arms around his shoulders with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“We should all go to the strip club after this,” Lucio says before winking. Mara scrunches up her nose and gives him a shove.

“You’re gross.” She turns to look at me and says, “I’m going to go and check on Val, wanna come along?”

I ruffle her blonde hair, “You go ahead. I’ll be right behind you.”

Mara slaps my hand away. “Why would you do that? You’ve ruined my hair.” She huffs a frustrated breath before stomping down the hallway toward Valentina’s and Emiliano’s room.

“Have you found out who’s been killing those girls?” Matteo asks. I run my hand over my stubbled jaw. We’ve been looking for the past three years and nothing. Girls have been dropping dead around New York, and we can’t figure out who’s behind it.

“No. Costa thinks it’s some dude who wants to threaten you.” Weak. That’s such a fucking weak excuse, and I wince as soon as I say it.

“That’s such fucking bullshit, and you know it, too,” Lucio says, and I shrug my shoulders.

“Let’s not talk about this today—not when the place is full of our associates, soldiers, and allies,” I say. His lips curl into a snarl, but Matteo shakes his head at him.

“Lucio, he’s right. If someone catches a whiff of your involvement, we could have a problem on our hands.”

Lucio huffs out a frustrated groan as he runs both hands through his black hair. “Fuck, fine but you guys need to stop keeping me in the dark,” he says, finally relenting. I tap his shoulder as I walk past him to go see Val.

“Talk to your brother, he’s the one to call the shots,” I tell him.

The wall leading to Eli’s and Val’s room is filled with pictures from when they visited Italy and Greece. Most of them are clearly of Valentina, since Emiliano loves to take pictures of her.

Discarding the thought at the door, I fling it open for my grand entrance. My chest constricts when I see Val, she’s in a long flowy dress. Her long black hair is in a low, loose bun with a small gold headband. Her eyes light up once she spots me, and she pushes her way through the crowd of the women to make her way toward me.

“Romiro, I’ve missed you.” She wraps her arms around me, and I laugh into her hair.

“I missed you too, piccolo rosa. How was Rome?” I ask. Valentina pulls back a little and steps out of my personal space.

“It was great. The museums were amazing, we got to go to so many libraries and the food. Oh, my God! Romiro, you would have loved the food. I literally became a glutton to the point some of my clothes didn’t fit. You and Allie should go there soon.” Her laugh is like a melody as she explains how much she loved Rome. I’m glad she’s happy, I’m glad both of them are happy. A twinge of longing to have something similar with Alessia curls its way into my chest.

Mariana, who’s wearing the same dress as Mara and Alessia, makes her way toward us with a soft smile.

“Hey, Aunt Mari.” I give her a kiss on both cheeks once she comes to a stop next to

me.

“Hello Romiro. Hope everything is running smoothly over on the men's side of the house,” she says. My lips pull into a shit-eating grin, which she returns with a raised brow. She speaks up again when I don’t say anything. “Please, make sure that nothing gets out of hand. We have the entire family here. Some came all the way from Italy.”

Val loops an arm through mine before she says, “I trust Romiro to keep things flowing.” Wrapping my arm around Val’s shoulder, I give her a grateful smile.

“Well, you might want to take that back, because I walked in on him kicking Dominico between the legs before he came here.” Val and Mariana both raise their brows at me as Alessia whispers enough for only the four of us to hear.

“Of course you’d walk in as I’m defending myself,” I say. Alessia narrows her eyes at me, a teasing smile on her lips.

“Romiro, both you and I know that you don’t have to lay a finger on him for you to defend yourself,” she counters. I give her a wink, and as I’m about to speak up, something grabs both Val and Mariana’s attention.

“I have to go, please be on your best behavior, Rom. For me,” Valentina pleads before heading off to her wedding planner, Mariana hot on her heels.

“Is there a problem between us that I don’t know about?” I ask, and Alessia’s eyes widen when I step close to her, toe to toe, with our chests barely two inches apart.

“No, why would you think that?” Her brows furrow as if she’s confused.

“Oh, nothing. Just the fact that you’re trying to get me in trouble, Red,” I say and her

lips twist as she tries to stop her smile. My eyes flicker to them, I remember the way they wrapped around my dick yesterday. Fuck, I feel my cock press against the front of my pants. I take a step back.

“You know that nickname has raised some questions, right?” she asks with a little smirk. Hiding my smile with the palm of my hand, I slip the other in my suit pants.

Looking around the room, I ask her, “And what kind of questions have been raised?” When she doesn’t answer, I turn my head, searching her eyes. She bites her lips in contemplation.

“Als?” I ask. Her eyes flicker around the room, but I put two fingers under her chin, bringing her attention back to me.

“It’s the way you say it,” she says, shaking her head.

“And how do I say it?” I ask, leaning down, pressing my thumb against her small chin.

She lowers her voice to a whisper, “It sounds very sexual. You need to tone it down.”

“It’s not my fault that the Italian women in this family are perverted.” I shrug, then laugh when she swats at my shoulders. “How’s your hand?” I ask her, and she looks down at it before looking back up.

“It’s fine now,” she says as I go to grab it. She’d burned it two months ago. Our cat, Mr. Marvin, had jumped on the counter, near the stove, and nearly burned his tail. When she tried to save him, she poured boiling water on herself. My eyes trace the scar running from the middle of her hand to her wrist; goosebumps snake their way up her arm when I run my thumb over the scar.

“Does it hurt? If it does, I can go grab some medicine for you.”

She shakes her head, tugging her hand out of my hold, “No, no, it’s fine. Thanks, Rom.”

“Come on, guys. I need you all to be downstairs. Now.” The wedding planner slaps her hand on the clipboard she’s holding as she tries to get people moving. She stops next to us.

“Romiro, you’ll walk Val down the aisle. Please remember the rhythm of the walk we planned.” I give her a nod, not wanting to argue. The stupid rhythm of the walk—even Val had snorted when the planner had suggested it. But we still went ahead with it, because the entire Camorra will be present, and so will all our allies.

“Right, come on. Let’s go Alessia.” Alessia opens her mouth, as if to say something, but the planner drags her outside after everyone piles out the doors. I hear them make their way through the house, and then the door is slammed shut and the whole house is finally silent.

Val is standing at the mirror, looking at herself. A wide smile on her lips, her eyes bright. I slip my hands into my pockets as I stop behind her.

“Excited?” I ask, and her lips purse as she holds back a smile.

“That would put it mildly.” My eyes narrow when she runs her hand down her stomach and pauses. She looks at her reflection before she looks back at me. My brows raise as the realization sinks in.

“Are you....are you what I think you are?” She huffs out a laugh before nodding.

“I’m pregnant, Rom.” Her face glows in a way I have never seen, and my breath is

stuck in my throat in disbelief.

“Oh, my God! Get over here, you little shit. Does Eli know? What am I even saying, of course he knows.” I tug her into a bear hug and she laughs into my shoulder. Pulling back, my eyes search her face.

“Who else knows? I better be the second person to know.”

“Of course Eli knows, and you’re the fourth person to find out. The only people who know are the doctor, Mariana, and Emiliano.” She reaches her hand and wipes my suit.

“Look what happened! You got foundation on your suit.” Valentina loops her arm through mine, practically dragging me to the doors.

“Come on, let's get me married,” she says with a big smile.

I still can’t believe Valentina asked me to walk her down the aisle. It’s an honor I don’t take lightly. We silently make our way down the grand staircase, Val’s hand in mine.

The End...

PRINCESS

Warning this is an unedited chapter of Veil of Power 3, and is subject to change

My fingers move over the keyboard rapidly as I try to figure out why the code keeps breaking when a knock echoes in my room. Letting out a frustrated sigh, I run my hand through my hair before saying, "Come in."

Looking back at the white door, my brother, Kaito, pops his head in and gives me a smile that doesn't quite reach his dark eyes. "What are you doing?" He asks me.

I shrug and lean back into my chair, "Just trying to figure out why my code keeps breaking."

He grimaces and says, "Not something I can help with, I'm afraid."

Rolling my eyes, "I didn't expect you to. You're more of a muscle head than anything else."

He lifts a singular brow before shaking his head and says, "Don't be disrespectful. Mother wants you to come down; dinner's about to be served."

My gaze drifts back to the monitor with the flashing square 'Error, the code you have entered will not run'. "In a second, you go, I'll be down in a minute."

"Right, just don't be late. You know how mother can get." He tells me before shutting my room's door.

“I know,” I whisper to myself, my thumb running over the fading bruise on my wrist. Existing the coding program, I let the mouse cursor hover over the recent videos that I saved from my stalking session, debating if it would be worth a beating. Mother has abusive tendencies.

Shaking my head, I shut down my computer and let my hair down from the tight bun. I look over what I’m wearing to make sure it’s not something that will cause my mother to lash out. I’m in a pair of black jeans and a long-sleeve red top, she was fine with it last night, but that doesn’t mean jack shit because if she doesn’t like it today, then I’m fucked.

Making my way out my bedroom, I try to jump a couple of steps just so I’m not late. I make it to my seat just as the grandfather clock begins to chime. As the final note echoes, I hear the click of Mother’s heels, her voice drifting in, followed closely by my father’s.

“I told you, Giorgio, that we shouldn’t let your brother control our business.” She stops at the entrance of the dining room, her heels tapping on the hard marble floors as her eyes scan the table before they stop on me, and a scowl settles on her face.

“Hannah, dear, I told you it’s not that simple. Stefano holds a majority in both the company and the assets that we’re using for our benefit.” Dad tries to tell her, but she doesn’t pay any attention to him or his words.

“Princess.” Her voice cuts through the air like a whip and I hold my breath. What did I do now?

“Yes, mother?” I ask, standing but making sure that I don’t meet her sharp gaze.

“Why does your hair look like a rat’s nest? I did tell you to take care of it before coming down for dinner every night, did I not?”

Swallowing down my nerves I answer, “You did but —”

A sharp, stinging sensation cuts me off. I resist the urge to reach my hand out to try and soothe my cheek. “Your apologies don’t work, Princess. Not when you keep repeating the same damn ungrateful attitude. Go to your room.”

My stomach clenches. The words aren’t new, but they still cut sharp, like a razor dragging over old wounds. I stare at the marble floor, at the faint smudge of my shoe against its pristine surface, and wonder if she’d notice if I screamed.

Probably not.

Swallowing down the lump in my throat, I push my chair back. “Excuse me,” I whisper. My voice is small, like it always is around her.

I take the spiral stairs, holding back my sobs, I won’t let her have the satisfaction of seeing me break down. Closing my door, I lean against it, pressing my forehead against the cold wood. I breathe. In. Out. In. Out. My cheek still burns. My mother’s voice still echoes.

But here—in this room—she doesn’t exist.

I count to ten, listening for footsteps. Nothing.

Only then do I move. My fingers twist the wall-mounted lamp, and with a quiet click, the hidden panel shifts open. A breath of cool, stale air rushes out. My pulse steadies.

The room hums with a quiet, steady energy, almost like it’s alive. Four years of watching him, and I’ve pieced together my little shrine. Monitors everywhere, each one blinking with his world in gray, grainy footage. The screens show fragments of his life—the places he haunts, the people who orbit him like moths to a dangerous flame. He doesn’t know it, but he’s under my watch, every move of his captured and

catalogued.

Across the room, my wall sprawls like a spider's web. Strings connect faces to places, pinned down with photos, notes, and the occasional napkin stained with something darker than ink. The New York Camorra—his world, his family's empire. I know its veins, its paths, where they meet, where they splinter. I've traced every line over and over with my fingers. He'll never see the lines as I do; he only walks them.

Under dim, buzzing lights, the shadows make everything look old, forgotten, and secret. I can smell the faint scent of old paper and ink, the tang of metal from tacks and clips. Each piece of paper, each photo, is like a piece of him I've claimed, a fragment I've stolen without him even knowing. To him, I'm invisible. To me, he's everywhere. I take a seat behind the screen, and within seconds, I'm looking into his bedroom. There's something that makes it feel so...intimate. I can see him, but he can't see me, and that stirs something in me I can't even begin to understand.

He's sprawled on his bed, sheets hanging low on his hips, bare skin. His lean muscles are all covered in ink, all mine to watch. He has no idea. No clue that my gaze traces every inch of him, that my breath catches when he shifts, muscles flexing beneath tanned skin.

He's right there. So close. So oblivious. I zoom in on his face; he's not asleep, but he's just lying there. He usually leaves for the gym in an hour or two, will stay there for a couple of hours before returning to his apartment, which is just enough time for me to sneak in and leave him some souvenirs.

I just hope that no one will come looking for me while I'm gone. I usually turn the shower on and lock the door before sneaking out from the window in the bathroom. Instead of just sitting here and watching him, I go back into my actual room, closing the entrance to my secret place. Leaning back on the wall, I let out a loud and long sigh. I rub my hand over my face, I won't cry, I. Will. Not. Cry. Feeling like shit

doesn't resolve anything and I refuse to sit here and cry about the...problems that are between me and my mother because it hasn't ever gotten me anywhere and it won't get me anywhere.

To be continued....