



Text Me
You Love Me

You're a mafia queen now.

TEXTING

Mr. Mafia

FLORA FERRARI

TEXTING MR. MAFIA

TEXT ME YOU LOVE ME

BOOK TEN



FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

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TEXTING MR. MAFIA

When I leave a note for the mafia don at his table, I beg for his help. I never expect him to text back or to tell me he wants something in return...

My dad's got us into trouble again. His get-rich-quick schemes always mess up the family. Now, loan sharks are circling, and I'm unsure what to do.

When I see Elio Marino at the restaurant where I am a waitress, I almost lose it. My mind. My soul. I fall hard, but I have to be smart. This isn't a fairytale.

He's tall, way taller than me, ripped with muscle, mature, and brooding as hell. I know I can't have what I want deep down, but I need his help to make the loan sharks back off.

When I give him my number, I never expect his texts to get steamy. I never expect him to demand my address—demand to see me. I know I have to be smart about this.

I've got no relationship experience. I'm a curvy virgin. I just want to save my family.

His texts are getting more and more possessive. The loan sharks are gaining on us. Somehow, Elio is tied up in it all. I know I should listen to my head, but my heart is so damn loud.

** Texting Mr. Mafia is an insta-everything standalone romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

NEWSLETTER

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CHAPTER 1



S carlet

It's hard not to feel like a kid when my parents argue. Our bedrooms are jam-packed together, just like every room in this apartment, the walls barely thick enough to separate them, let alone block any noise. I'm sitting on my bed, like when I was a girl, my hands pressed against my knees. I'm nineteen. I shouldn't have to feel like this anymore.

"Then why did you borrow it?" Mom screams.

"I wanted to give us a better life," Dad roars back. *"Why is that so goddamn hard to understand?"*

I close my eyes and imagine I'm somewhere else, but my imagination doesn't go very far. Singing usually helps with feelings like these, not that I'm good. But focusing on my voice—blocking out everything else—often makes things easier. The issue is I've been crying, and my throat is raw.

"Loan sharks," Mom says in a quieter voice but still loud enough for me to hear, obviously, since we can hear everything in this apartment. That means Mom and Dad might've been able to hear me crying when they first started arguing, and they didn't care.

"Loan sharks," Mom repeats. "Jesus Christ, Philip. What were you thinking?"

"We're going in circles, Jessica," Dad snaps.

“Maybe I want you to explain it to me one last time.”

Opening my eyes, I stare across my small bedroom and my tiny desk with the chipped paint. We didn’t always live in a rundown apartment. When I was younger, we had a three-bedroom house in the suburbs, a white picket fence, and birds singing in the morning instead of people screaming at each other. That was before Dad started his get-rich-quick schemes, which inevitably always became get-poorer-quick schemes.

“It was a sure thing,” Dad says. “That butcher has been in business for decades. How was I supposed to know there’d be a black-market meat scandal the day after I bought in, huh?”

“I remember our old bed linens. They were so soft. This stuff makes my skin crawl, and you stink of booze.”

“Jess—”

“You *reek* of it. Stop pretending this is all about business. I bet you never even bought into this silly butcher’s. It all went on liquor, didn’t it?”

I’m relieved when my cell phone rings, Charlotte’s name appearing on my cracked screen. Charlotte’s the only friend from our old life who still bothers to stay in touch with me. Not that I can blame anybody else. They’ve got college and relationships and life to keep them busy. Charlotte and I have always been Char and Scar.

I leave my bedroom and go into the bathroom, the furthest room from the argument. “Hey,” I say, sitting on the cold toilet seat.

“Howdy,” Charlotte says, her voice upbeat despite the circumstances. “I wanted to check in about the you-know-what.”

Charlotte knows all about Dad’s latest scheme. “He lost all the money. They’re arguing about it now. Apparently, loan sharks will be kicking down our door any day now.”

My voice sounds way too flat, way too resigned. It’s like I don’t even care, but that’s not exactly it. It’s just that I’ve been through this too many times.

“Are you... angry?” Charlotte asks.

“I don’t even know,” I tell her. “It just is what it is. It’s like the color of the sky or grass. It’s like the fact we breathe oxygen. Dad borrows money. Dad loses money. We move to a cruddier neighborhood, but I’m unsure how much further we can slip.”

“I wish there was something I could do,” Charlotte whispers.

“You’re helping just by calling. Believe me. Anyway, it’s not like you can fly over here and fix everything. How’s college?”

“It’s... fine, yeah, okay, not great.”

I roll my eyes. “You don’t have to pretend just because I’m stuck here. Be honest.”

Charlotte sighs and then starts telling me about her latest assignment. I try not to get jealous or let my mind fill with foolish visions of having the time to pursue my own dreams. Not that I think I’ll ever become some majorly successful singer. Maybe a backup singer or part of a choir, anything that gives me that beautiful feeling of disappearing and not having to think.

Slam. The argument is spilling into the living room.

“I’ve got to go,” I tell Charlotte.

“Okay. Keep me posted.”

“Will do.”

I hang up and go into the living room. Dad has his suitcase open on the coffee table. Mom is in the doorway, throwing clothes at him. Dad catches them and shoves them into the suitcase. My chest tightens, my heart aching when I notice Dad purposefully not looking at me.

He zips up the case, then finally glances at me, only for a second. He’s fifty-four, bald, a little round around the middle. His features are tightly lined, and his eyes are bloodshot from the booze. I’ve never felt truly loved by him. We’ve never had a real father-daughter bond. It’s sad, but I can’t linger on it. Otherwise, I’ll go crazy.

“Well,” Mom says, striding into the living room, her eyes as wide as saucers from her pain pills. She had a fall last year, and even though her hip has healed, she says the pain is still there, always there. “What are you waiting for?”

“You know it’s not me who will suffer here,” Dad snaps. “I can disappear. Leave the city. Do whatever the hell I want. The sharks are going to come looking for *you*.”

Dad grabs his suitcase without looking at me again and almost runs for the door. Mom chases after him, screaming, calling him every name she can think of. I stand in the bathroom doorway the whole time, watching numbly. There are no more tears now. I’m retreating into myself, a secret room inside, with perfect acoustics and no pain, no doubt, just music.

Once he’s gone, Mom turns, falls against the door, slides to a sitting position, and starts sobbing. Maybe a good daughter would go to her, hold her, and tell her everything will be okay. However, since the pills started, my bond with Mom has begun to fray. It’s even more depressing than with Dad. At least he and I never had much of a relationship to begin with.

I go into my bedroom, shut the door, sit on my bed, and stare at the wall.

At first, I think I’m dreaming. The *bang-bang-bang* seems like it comes from inside me. I peel my eyes open and focus. It’s coming from the front door. This is another familiar routine. Dad leaves, vowing never to return, and then he comes stumbling back. Mom’s probably too dosed-up to answer the door. I have a double shift at the restaurant tomorrow, so I need my sleep.

Groggily, I drag myself through the apartment and open the door. “Dad, it’s late.”

A cold hand clamps over my mouth, sending an icy shiver through me. The man is wearing a balaclava, eyes narrowed as he shoves me against the wall.

“Don’t make a noise,” he says.

I was about to scream, so I bite down. My heart’s banging in my chest so hard that it hurts.

“Your father owes us money, Scarlet. Where is he?”

I shake my head, made difficult by the fact he’s holding my mouth, his grip crushing my jaws like he’s trying to twist my head off.

“You don’t know?”

I nod, wondering if I should try to remember any details about him. Green eyes, his accent indistinguishable from anybody born in the rougher parts of the city.

“That’s not good for you,” the man says, “but I believe that family is the most important thing in life. Don’t you?”

I nod again, but only because it’s what he wants me to do. So far, he hasn’t produced a weapon. He hasn’t tried to do anything to my hands—hold them in place, handcuff them, anything. I’m under no delusions about my ability to fight. I just need to let him get his speech over with, but what if he turns violent?

“That means this debt belongs to your entire family,” the man says. “I’m a generous man. I’ll give you three days. Do you have any questions?”

I nod a third time.

He slightly loosens his grip on my mouth. I can taste the leather of his glove. It makes me sick. “Don’t scream, Scarlet Smith. Don’t do anything stupid.”

It’s not hard to guess why he’s used my full name. He wants me to understand that he knows everything about me. About Mom. About Dad.

“How much?” I say, trying so hard to keep my voice steady.

“Thirty-two thousand,” he replies, “but it’ll be thirty-five tomorrow and thirty-eight the day after that. Tell you what. We can call it an even forty in three days. Unless you have thirty-two right now?”

“N-no,” I whisper.

He turns and looks into the apartment. From the way the balaclava shifts, I think he’s smirking. “I didn’t think so. Don’t worry about finding us for the payment. We’ll come to you.”

He lets me go and backs off into the hallway. Another detail is that he’s not very tall. Just a couple of inches taller than me. I’m five-five. So he’s around five-seven. Why does that matter, though? It’s not like I can go to the police. He doesn’t even need to say that part. Dad has borrowed from bad people before. Never *this* bad, but still. No police.

It’s like the man reads my mind. From the hallway, he says, “Call *911* if you want, Scarlet. I’d enjoy that.”

He walks down the hallway. Once he’s gone, I stumble against the wall, shaking all over. All I want to do is cry and scream that life’s not fair. There’s only so much I can take, but now the debt’s on my head and Mom’s.

I remember a few years ago, before the most recent move, Mom and me in the kitchen, Mom kneading dough, singing a few notes, then looking over at me with a daring, alert glint in her eyes—the kind of glint she never has anymore. “*Go on, Scarlet. I know you can do better than me...*”

When I sang, her whole face lit up. I think about that all the time. It’s one of our best moments. Whatever else is true about Mom—the pills, the hopelessness—she doesn’t deserve this, and neither do I. So what the hell are we going to do?

CHAPTER 2



Elio

“Try to smile,” Luca says, nudging me in the arm.

I glance at my little brother, shaking my head. “Maybe you smile too much.”

“We’re going to make a lot of money tonight.”

“By partnering with low-level street criminals. We don’t know enough about their operation. We don’t know enough about their income streams. We haven’t properly vetted them.”

“Building the stadium is a big project,” Luca says. He steeple his fingers, just like Dad often does... or did before his stroke. Luca’s hair hasn’t turned silver yet. He’s thirty-two, an entire decade younger than me, and it’s often difficult to see him as the man he is. “They’ve got the contact. They came to us because we’ve got the manpower. It’s a win-win.”

“Maybe it is,” I say, “but I’d feel more comfortable if we knew more.”

“If you were officially the don, what would you do?”

Luca adds *officially* because, since Dad’s stroke, I’ve been handling the Family business. Dad barely has any input. That’s another reason this is so damn troubling. I thought Dad was relaxing in his apartment, being tended to by Mom and his staff. Then he calls me in for a meeting with the construction contract but not with the Italian mob. Not even with the Irish

mob or the Bratva. We will be in business with a low-level gang known as the Shanks.

“Even their name is stupid,” I grunt.

“The Shanks,” Luca says, nodding. “I agree. It’s a little dramatic.”

“It sounds like something a bunch of kids would brand themselves—a bunch of high schoolers wanting to seem tough. Dad’s always been proud of the Family, maybe too proud. He’s refused to work on lucrative contracts because it meant working outside the Family, but now...”

“You think too much,” Luca says, sounding grumpy.

“One of us has to,” I reply.

“I’m just following Dad’s orders. Just because he’s had a stroke, it doesn’t mean he’s a different man, Elio.”

I close my eyes and let the car carry us through the city. There’s no point getting into this discussion with Luca. No matter what I say, he won’t accept that Dad is, in fact, not the man he once was. His mind has slowed as much as his movements.

“You need a woman,” Luca says a moment later. “That would set you right.”

“You sound like Mom.”

“Maybe she has a point. You’re an old man.”

I laugh gruffly. “Don’t I know it, but there’s too much work.”

“Even before you were acting don, you weren’t interested. Mom thought you were gay for a while. Then she saw you weren’t interested in *that*, either.”

“Maybe I was put on this earth to be a cold bastard and handle business, and that’s all. You’ll find a wife once you leave the clubs and the bars behind. You’ll carry on the family name. That’s enough.”

I grind my teeth and look out the window, watching the city pass us by. We’re on our way to a restaurant with no ties to

either the Family or the... Goddamn, it's hard even to think it's so ridiculous—the *Shanks*.

“Are you happy, though?”

“Happy?” I snap. “What does that even mean? I work fourteen, fifteen, sixteen hours a day to keep this family afloat. When you're with your women and bottles, I'm in the office, settling accounts until my eyes hurt. Happy doesn't come into it.”

Luca huffs. “Maybe you're using all that work as an excuse. Did you ever think about that?”

“I love you, Luca, but don't forget I can kick your ass.”

He laughs darkly. “Now I know I've hit a nerve.”

We don't say anything for the rest of the ride. We won't argue like this in front of anybody else. Soon, we'll be all business. Luca and Elio Marino, our reputations are known throughout the city. Hell, throughout the whole East Coast.

The driver presses the intercom button. A light appears above the partition. I press down on my button, meaning we can hear him, and he can hear us. Otherwise, he can't hear a thing. It's a necessity in our life.

The car slowly comes to a stop. “Sirs, we are here.”

“Thank you,” I say, reaching for the door.

“Wait,” Luca says. “Let one of the men open it. It'll make you look more important.”

“To who? The *Shanks*?” I push the door open.

“Relax,” Luca says quietly from beside me.

We're sitting at a table in the corner of the restaurant. Our men sit on the other side in case anything goes down and they need to spring into action. If we were in a Family place, they'd be shouting, joking, and laughing, but I've instructed them to behave like civilians. I don't want any undue attention.

“We’ve been stood up by the *Shanks*,” I say.

“It’s only been ten minutes.”

“Only,” I repeat. “If you were them—if you had the chance to do business with the Marinos—you’d be early, and so would I.”

There’s nothing Luca can say in response to that. He crosses his arms and slumps back in his seat. I remember when he was five, and I was fifteen, wrestling with him in the garden, holding him over my head and laughing as he thrust his hands in front of him, his gap-toothed grin wide as he *flew* through the air.

“Dad said we have to meet with them,” Luca says when I shift in my seat.

“I respect Father,” I say, “but—”

“Uh-oh. I know something bad is coming if you called him *Father*.”

“But I’m not going to wait here all night. For Dad, we’ll give the assholes five more minutes. If anybody else pulled some shit like this, though...”

“I know,” Luca says quietly. “I just want what’s best for Dad. He looked so excited when he talked about this deal.”

I bite down on my response. Luca’s living in a fantasy world when he talks like this. Dad’s tone and demeanor don’t change these days, no matter what he’s talking about. Yet Luca thinks he can see through the condition to the man he once was. Maybe I’m a cold, grim bastard, but I don’t have it in me to convince him otherwise.

“Five minutes,” I say, “and then...”

I can’t talk. My throat is suddenly tight. My balls pulse. *Pulse*. Is this what going insane feels like?

A waitress is walking across the restaurant. She’s got her light brown hair tied up in a bun, the color so pale it’s almost red, but not quite. Her uniform hugs tight to her hips, highlighting her curviness, her thick, beautiful legs in tights that make me

want to howl and find every other man in here who's admiring her and royally mess them up.

She sways her hips from side to side as she approaches our table. I don't think she's doing it on purpose. I've been around enough women who are intent on seducing me to know the difference. This is just her gorgeous thickness, moving her voluptuous, young body from side to side, hypnotizing me.

She stops at the edge of our table, letting me see her captivating light blue eyes and full cheeks. Her face is flushed and red. She looks so damn... fertile. *Fertile?* What's wrong with me? But it's the truth. I want to hold her, kiss her, bend her over and spank her ass and then slip into her tight slit and fuck her until she's pregnant.

I never wanted a family before. Now I need one.

No, slow down. *Think.* Has somebody spiked my drink?

She looks down at me, seeming panicked. Maybe she knows who I am. Or perhaps I'm just letting my feelings show way too obviously on my face. I could dart out of my chair, grab those thick hips, and pull her against me so she felt my hard manhood against her body. I'd turn her around and grind against her ass.

"Are you ready to order, gentlemen?" she asks.

"Still waiting on somebody, doll," Luca says, waving a hand at the empty seats.

I scowl at him. He tilts his head, silently asking me what the issue is, but there's no way I can explain it. I can't tell him that hearing him call her *doll* sends violent, deranged thoughts into my head. I can't tell him that nobody ever gets to talk to her like that.

"Thank you..." I lean forward and look at her name tag, pinned to the tempting shape of her breast. "Scarlet."

Her cheeks turn even more the color of her name. She nods, turns, and walks away. I struggle not to stare. It's not just how sexy she is. I mean, it *is* that. It's that big ass, made for caressing, for spanking, for owning. It's her legs, making me think what she'd sound like if I stripped her naked and bit

down on her curviness. It's also just... *her*, like her soul is calling to mine.

"You good?" Luca says.

"What?" I turn to him. "Fine."

"Do you know her?"

"Who?"

He tilts his head at me. My little brother can seem like a party animal to some people. They mistake his love of clubs and bars and women for a lack of intelligence, but he's a perceptive man. He sees something. It's not like he will instantly know I needed her the second I saw Scarlet. I *need* her. He's not going to know that I'd kill and die for her already.

"What do you mean, who?" he says after a pause. "The waitress. Scarlet. Is she Family?"

"No," I reply.

"Then why did you get so touchy when I called her *doll*?"

"I didn't."

"But you did..."

"You're wrong."

"Okay, Elio," he says, clearly not believing me. "Fair enough."

A minute later, the leader of the Shanks finally appears. He's a short man, around five-six, five-seven. He's wearing a leather jacket, and his black hair is combed back with so much product it glistens in the overhead lights. He has a few men with him, but they take a different table like ours.

"Fellas," he says, with a way-too-familiar tone. "It's nice to see you again."

"Again?" I ask, my thoughts still on Scarlet, my world spinning over and over as I try to make sense of all this heat.

Luca glares at me. "We met at Dad's birthday party, remember?"

Ah, right. Vaguely. A quick handshake. “Of course,” I say, forcing a smile onto my face. “It’s good to see you again...” What’s his goddamned name? It’s so difficult to think about anything else.

“Russel,” Luca says, walking around the table and shaking his head.

Russel. Russel Greene. That’s right—a two-bit criminal with an angry look in his eyes. He clearly thinks I should be kneeling at his feet. He hasn’t mentioned the fact he’s late, which pisses me the hell off. It doesn’t matter if you’re the president or the lowest of the low. If a man says he’ll be somewhere, he should be on time.

“Shall we get some drinks?” Russel says.

“Amen,” Luca replies.

“I’m fine with soda,” I say, taking my seat.

This gets another not-so-subtle look from Russel.

CHAPTER 3



S carlet

I'm in the bathroom, breathing way too hard, trying to get a hold of myself. I don't know what the hell happened when I approached the table. Two men were sitting there, one shorter with black hair, and the other...

He was tall and broad, wearing a stylish dark blue suit. His hair was streaked with silver, and his eyes were dark, maybe brown, but they looked black and intense. When his friend called me *doll*, the tall man looked so protective. I thought he was going to flip the table over. We shared some steamy eye contact... I think. It's not like I've ever done that before, but it felt significant and hot. It burned. It still burns, and it's been at least five minutes.

Despite the exhaustion and knowing I should be trying to find forty grand—or fleeing the city to find Dad—I have to get back out there. I'll still need a job if Mom and I somehow get through this.

When I see another man at the table, I approach, reminding myself to stay calm. Each step I take closer to the table sends more and more warm tingles thrumming through my body. The silver-haired man looks up. His dark eyes fixate on me again. It's difficult to tell if he's angry or... something else. The third man turns. When he spots me, his eyes snap open widely. Then he smirks.

I stare at him. I wonder, am I being paranoid? Those eyes. Those green eyes. They look so similar to the ones that stared from the balaclava last night. But that would be way too cruel, the universe throwing us together so soon. Or maybe it's not a coincidence? Perhaps he came here because he knows I work here and wants to intimidate me.

"Scarlet," the man says as I get closer.

I'm wearing a name badge, so this doesn't mean anything except that he can read—big whoop.

"What a lovely name," he goes on.

The silver-haired man flinches. I wonder why. I wonder if he cares, but he's so much older. He's handsome. He's *hot*. His suit probably costs more than our apartment.

"Th-thank you," I say, trying to lock last night away, the argument, the threats. "Are you ready to order?"

"We've been ready for a while now," the green-eyed man says, glaring at me.

"Don't worry," the silver-haired man says, his voice deep and reassuring. It's a voice I can imagine whispering me awake on a lazy Sunday morning, his warm body pressed against mine, song notes of lust and love, and... Jeez, I need to quit this. It must be the lack of sleep. I'm reading way too much into this. "My friend doesn't mean to be so rude. He's forgotten his manners."

The man waves a hand. "Bring us some whiskey and some steaks."

"Any particular brand of whiskey? And how would you like your steaks cooked?"

"Do we need to fill out a questionnaire, Scarlet?" the man says, then laughs like nothing funnier has ever been said.

"Medium-rare," the silver-haired man—*my* man—says.

The other two give me their preferences, and then I walk across the restaurant, wanting so badly to look over my shoulder to see if he's watching me. I've never wondered or cared if boys are looking at me before. Is that the difference?

This isn't a *boy*. He's a *man*, but I think it's more than that. It's like something in him is singing to something inside me.

After giving the order to the kitchen, my colleague pulls me aside. Terri is a tall woman with a shaved head and freckles scattered across her cheeks. "Do you know who you just served?" she asks.

"No, should I?"

"The bigger one, the older one, that's Elio Marino. The other one is his brother, Luca. You've heard of the Marinos, right?"

I shake my head. "Should I have?"

"The Marino Crime Family? You've really never heard of them?"

"They're a crime family? What, like the mafia?"

"Not *like* the mafia," she says. "They *are* the mafia. I thought I should give you a heads-up, just in case of... Well, I'm not sure what. Just be aware, okay?"

Elio Marino... I repeat his name in my mind, and then cogs start turning in my thoughts. Maybe I imagined the protective tone in his voice and the steamy, kind way he was looking at me, but it's worth a shot, isn't it?

Before returning to the restaurant, I quickly scribble a note on the order pad. A vicious voice whispers that this is a mistake, just as misguided as Dad's get-rich-quick schemes. However, my world is one of complete chaos right now. Maybe, just maybe, this can bring some order. What's the worst that can happen? It's better than doing nothing and feeling helpless.

With the note tucked in my pants pocket, I get ready. When my chance comes, I'll have to seize it.

CHAPTER 4



Elio

“You really aren’t going to take a drink with me, friend?” Russel says, then knocks back another glass of whiskey. I’ve never been the sort of person to count another man’s drinks, but he’s already wasted.

I can feel Luca getting tense beside me. Russel has asked if I’m going to have a drink three times now. “My brother isn’t much of a drinker,” Luca says. “But don’t worry. You’re not going to outdrink me.”

Russel grins, his lips wet, his eyes wet. I can’t believe Dad would ever do business with somebody this unprofessional. People can say what they want about the mob, but *our* Family has better standards than this. At least, we did.

“I’d be interested to hear about your income streams,” I tell Russel.

He scowls, toying with his steak knife. From across the restaurant, I spot a few of our men looking over, maybe getting ready for a fight. I normally try to avoid violence. Obviously, I’m capable of it, but there are usually better routes. Here, though, with this asshole, I almost welcome it.

“I thought we were here to sort out the stadium project,” Russel says.

“I like to know who I’m in business with,” I tell him. “It’s a reasonable question.”

Russel sighs and pushes his chair back. “I need to use the little boy’s room. Do you mind?”

Before I can reply, he stands and abruptly walks away.

“He walks like a junkie,” I say. “Look at him twitching.”

“Careful,” Luca replies. “We need him.”

“Need him?” I growl.

“He’s got an in with the stadium.”

“Then we’ll do this the old way. Gather all these Shank assholes up and persuade them to give *us* the in instead.”

“I’m not sure Dad would approve of that.” Luca stands. “I need to use the toilet, too.”

“Feel free to fuck that lowlife up while you’re in there.”

“Bro,” Luca says, giving me a look.

I massage my forehead. I’m getting a headache. It’s the meeting, the noise, but mostly, it’s the fact Scarlet has been walking back and forth between tables this entire time. With those hips moving, her cheeks red, and I can only sit here and pretend not to see, not to care. When she approaches our table, my balls swell, and my shaft aches.

“Are you done with your plates?” she asks.

I nod, finding it difficult to speak. Being this close to her without dragging her into my lap is tough.

As she clears away, she leans over the table near me. Her skirt rises just a little, showing more of her thick, tempting legs, juicy in the tights. My hand trembles with the effort of not grabbing her leg, sliding up, pushing against her pussy, and feeling her wetness.

She turns away, carrying the plates and leaving a note behind. I pick it up and read it. Savage instincts roar inside of me.

I’m so sorry, Mr. Marino. I don’t want to impose, but my dad has gotten into \$40,000 of debt with a loan shark. Last night, he got physical with me and threatened me. I wouldn’t be doing this unless I was hopeless. If you can help...

She left a phone number at the bottom of the note.

The savage sense of possession inside of me tries to send me surging to my feet. I'll find the bastard who threatened my woman—who *got physical* with her—and I'll make the prick pay. Just the idea of somebody getting physical with my woman is enough to turn me into a wild, violent animal. The thought of them hurting her...

I take out my cell phone and type her number in. I should probably wait until this meeting ends, but I must know. It hurts just thinking about this. It hasn't even been an hour since I first saw Scarlet or learned her name, yet I'm still ready to go to war for her.

How exactly did he get physical? I type.

Looking up, I see her carrying two plates across the restaurant. Her phone must be on vibrate. A moment after I send the message, she looks over at me. I'm too far away to see her expression fully, but it's like I can see the pain radiating from her.

After she's delivered the order, she heads to the kitchen. My phone vibrates.

He knocked on the door late last night... well, early morning. Then he shoved me up against the wall and put his hand over my mouth. He said my dad owes thirty-two thousand, but it would increase by three every day, so we should just call it an even forty.

I grip the edge of the table, my hands trembling as I try to process what I've just read. A man *put his hand* on my woman's mouth in her own home. He intimidated her in the place she's supposed to feel the safest. If he were here now, I'd rip his limbs off. I'd drive my fist into his face over and over and—

"You good, bro?" Luca says, sitting beside me.

"Fine," I say, forcing my grip to relax. "Where's our friend?"

"He's, uh..." Luca winces.

I look at my little brother. It's always been difficult for him to hide his emotions from me. "He's doing drugs in the bathroom."

Luca looks down at the table. I almost grab him and force him to meet my eye. Purposefully, I keep my hands in my lap. I'm not usually this on edge, but Scarlet's text surges around my head—the fact that somebody would dream of doing that to her, *my* woman, except she's not my woman. I don't even know if she has a boyfriend. She asked me to help, not because she wants me, but because I'm Elio Marino. That's all.

"Did you do any with him?" I ask.

"What?" Luca snaps. "Is that a joke?"

"Had to ask."

"I don't do that shit."

"We don't do business with people who do, either, and yet here we are."

I take out my phone and type a message to Scarlet. ***Do you have any idea who these loan sharks are?***

No, she replies half a minute later. ***My dad might, but he walked out last night. I could ask my mom, but I doubt she has any idea. This is a pattern with my dad. He does get-rich-quick schemes and then leaves us to handle his mess, but it's never been this serious before. I'm scared.***

I read the final declaration, and my gut is all twisted up. The fact she's scared just makes me feel so damn sick. She should never have to be afraid of anything—definitely not some lowlife who'd intimidate a woman in her own home.

How old are you? I ask.

"Who are you texting?" Luca says.

"Why does it matter?" I look up. "Our good friend is busy in the bathroom, isn't he?"

"It's just... you were smiling."

"I was?"

“Yeah,” Luca says. “It’s weird.”

I wonder what that says about me, the fact my own brother finds it strange if I crack a smile. I’m sure it’s nothing good.

“Who is it, then?” Luca goes on.

“It doesn’t matter,” I tell him, which is a downright lie. Nothing and no one has ever mattered more.

My phone vibrates again. *Nineteen. Why?*

That’s a good question. Considering our current conversation, I have no good reason to ask her age, but I had to know—nineteen. That means she’s less than half my age. She’s young, fertile, and naïve, and if she’s smart, she wouldn’t want anything to do with a man like me. She’d run if she knew all the hungry thoughts racing through my mind.

Only a scumbag would do that to a nineteen-year-old woman. What did he look like? Any distinguishing features?

He was wearing a balaclava, she replies. He had green eyes. I think he was maybe five foot six. Around there, anyway. His voice was like any voice you’d hear around this neighborhood. I’m sorry. I know that’s not helpful.

You don’t have to apologize, I tell her. I know this can’t be easy.

“Elio, he’s coming back.”

I hate how Luca says this, as though we should snap to attention just because Russel is... Wait, what the *fuck?*

“Why is Dad here?” I ask Luca.

“I don’t know,” Luca whispers, sounding just as stunned as me.

Dad walks awkwardly, leaning heavily on his walking stick. Mom stands at his side, looking dignified as always, her gray hair tied up. She’s recently started wearing a pinned-up veil, a strange addition to her wardrobe that makes it look as if she’s in mourning. Dad breaks my goddamn heart. He was a lion before the stroke. Now, it’s a struggle for him to walk to the

table. Russel stands at his other side, holding onto his elbow, helping him.

What the *fuck*?

I stand and rush over to my parents, taking my dad's arm, ignoring how Russel looks at me. It's like this bastard thinks he has any right to touch my father. "Hello, Father," I say. "Mother."

"Elio," Mom says, smiling at me warmly. She always looks loving and affectionate when she's talking to us. It's when she forgets to put on her brave face that the real misery slithers out.

"This is a nice surprise," I say, struggling to keep my composure.

"Your father thought it better we attend in person. Russel is a shrewd businessman."

I don't have to look at Russel to know this has him beaming. I can *feel* the arrogant sense of victory emanating from him like a big wave. I give Dad my chair, holding it out. He looks like he barely knows where he is. When Mom sits beside him, she leans in, offering Dad her ear. That's how he communicates these days, through Mom.

"Are you hungry? Thirsty?" I ask Mom and Dad.

"I'll have a glass of red wine," Mom says, "and a water for your father."

Dad sits there, all six feet two of him, staring blankly ahead. Luca sits on the other side, with Russel beside him. Russel, the leader of the *Shanks*, with his wide stoned eyes and a grin on his face that makes me want to beat the bastard bloody.

"I wasn't aware you all knew each other," I say, gesturing to the waiter. "I knew you were business associates, of course, but not friends."

"Russel helped your father with a project a while back," Mom says, waving a hand as though it's not important when it's more important than any business we've handled in the last

several years. The fact this piece of shit is somehow affiliated with us...

Scarlet approaches the table. I see Russel leering at her with his beady green eyes. The way he looks at her is more than a leer. It's like he's trying to send a message. Maybe I'm seeing things that aren't there, or perhaps my instincts are dead on the money.

"Yes?" Scarlet says.

"A glass of red and a water," Russel grunts, talking to her like she's filth.

She flinches and stares at him. I wonder if she's thinking the same thing I am.

"It says a lot about a man," I say once Scarlet walks away, "how he speaks to waiters and waitresses or anyone who is supposedly beneath him."

"Does it?" Russel says, way too damn confident with those wide eyes and that punchable face.

"Yes," I growl, "it does."

I know for a fact that Mom agrees with this—hell, she's the one who taught me—but she doesn't say anything. This is unusual for her. Mom is usually one of the most talkative people in the room, but she's not accustomed to being involved in business. She's only here because it's the only way Dad can or will speak.

Scarlet returns with the drinks. Like every other time she's been close to me, I have to fight the urge to touch her, but it's a little different this time. Instead of wanting to indulge all my steamy fantasies, I want to place my hand gently on her and softly tell her everything's going to be okay. She shoots me a look as she leaves, with terror streaked across her features.

"So," Mom says, "how much longer until we're done? Is the business almost concluded?"

"I believe so," Russel replies. "All that's left is to shake hands."

I grind my teeth and almost explode at the prick. “You still haven’t answered my question about income streams,” I snap.

Dad makes a moaning noise. Mom leans in and listens. His voice must be so quiet. Mom has to lean right up against him. After a short while, she sits up and folds her hands. “Your father says the stadium contract is far too valuable to risk with petty squabbles. He wants the Marinos and the Shanks to shake hands and get on with it.”

I almost tell Mom that listening to Dad in his current state is not advisable. However, just like Luca, she doesn’t seem to be able to accept that Dad isn’t the man he was. Anyway, he’s still the don of the Family. The only way to change that would be to get rid of him. I’d kill before I allowed that to happen.

“That sounds good to me,” Russel says.

Yeah, no shit. Of *course*, it does.

“We’re all going to make a lot of money,” Luca says, looking at me as if to remind me to keep my cool.

I swallow. “Yeah, I guess we are. Excuse me.”

Standing, I walk toward the bathroom. My phone hasn’t vibrated since I sent my last message, but I check it anyway. I feel myself grinning when I see the reason why. The text conversation was open, meaning I didn’t receive any notifications, but there are two messages.

My smile falters when I read them.

It’s hard not to be scared. Honestly, I’m terrified.

Her next message says, ***This is going to sound nuts, but your friend reminds me of the man who threatened me last night. When I approached your table earlier, he looked really shocked, like he was surprised to see me.***

As I read this message, another appears. ***Ignore that. I think I’m just on the edge.***

Yet I can’t ignore it. I thought the same thing. I’m about to reply when Luca walks into the bathroom. “Come on, bro. Mom’s ordered champagne. We’re going to toast the new deal.”

“This is a fucking joke,” I snarl, pushing past him. “Toast it without me.”

Instead of taking the left to the restaurant, I turn right, open the fire escape door, and walk onto the street. I’ve got as far as my car when Mom comes running after me. “*Elio, wait!*”

I turn, stunned at the tone of her voice. The last time I heard her sound this terrified was when Dad had his stroke. Her eyes are glistening like she could break down in tears at any moment.

“Mom?” I touch her arm. “What’s wrong?”

“You can’t leave,” she says. “Please. You have to stay. You have to toast the deal with us.”

“Why?” I snap. “Are we that concerned with keeping up appearances with the *Shanks*? The deal is done. The money will be made. Surely, that’s all that matters.”

“Please, Elio,” she says. “For me.”

I grind my teeth. I want to ask her more. Something’s going on here. I’m sure of it. Something more than a deal.

“Mom.” I pull her into a hug. “Is there something you want to tell me? Is Russel threatening you? Is—”

“It’s nothing like that,” Mom cuts in, her voice trembling with emotion. “Your... your father wants this. Your father needs it. Doesn’t he deserve to make a deal? You know how happy business makes him.”

As far as I can tell, Dad barely knows he’s here, but I won’t say that to Mom. It would break her heart. Anyway, he *must* know he’s here since he’s talking to Mom. It’s just everybody else he refuses to or can’t speak to.

“Okay,” I say, sighing, “but only for you, Mom. If I had my way, I’d beat that druggy bastard into the dirt.”

I know Mom is going through the wringer when she doesn’t even get angry at me for swearing.

CHAPTER 5



Scarlet

I sit in the breakroom, my phone on the table. After I texted Elio about suspecting his friend, I got no response. They're gone now. They ordered champagne, laughter coming from their table, the younger Marino brother clapping my possible loan shark on the back.

I'm staring at my phone like a freak, gazing at the three unanswered texts, praying for my phone to vibrate, wanting it so badly. It's not just that he said I don't have to be scared, and he seemed willing to help me. It's just *him*, too—talking to him and feeling wanted by him, even if it's all in my head.

I almost jump when my phone finally vibrates.

It would be one hell of a coincidence, his message reads. But stranger things have happened. Give me your address, Scarlet.

His demanding tone gives me pause. Through all the bull crap with Dad—the schemes, the fails, the moves—I've learned to be suspicious. Usually, I don't have to *remind* myself to be suspicious, but with Elio, I do. It's like something warm and glowy deep inside me tells me he'd never hurt or betray me. How can he *betray* me when we don't have a bond to begin with?

Why? I reply.

I'm going to arrange for your property to be protected in case the loan shark returns.

Wouldn't it be easier to pay them? I send, then regret it right away. I sound like I'm trying to shake him down for cash.

I'm unsure what the time is or if it's time to return to work. I'd normally be completely zonked by this point in the day, especially after so little sleep, but seeing Elio has jolted something in me. I have to remember all the times Dad walked out and came home with chaos.

I have to remember the broken promises and the sour looks, always like he wished I wasn't even there and would have preferred for me to disappear like all our money. I can't trust people. Not even Mom, in the end. But is that fair? Isn't it the pills' fault?

...

Three dots appear. I'm staring at the screen like I want to make my own eyes bleed. Maybe that's the most melodramatic way I could think about this, but that's how it feels, and it's been a dramatic couple of days. They vanish. I bite down. He thinks I've made this whole thing up to steal his money. He probably has countless people doing this every single day. Always trying to take, take, take.

...

Oh, they're back again. Good. It gives me more time to think about how he will phrase it when he tells me to get lost. He's not going to want anything to do with me. *Annnnnnd...* they're gone. Great.

The door to the breakroom opens. It's Terri. "Are you trying to get fired, girl? You're on the final push now. Don't be a quitter."

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"You're five minutes over. Management's going to have a meltdown. Come on. Up and at them."

I glance at the screen one last time. They're still there, those ugly dots, twisting me up. ... Walking over to the lockers, I

open mine and put the phone on top of my bag. Whatever he's writing, it can wait. I have to get through this shift first. I can work out how to save my family later.

As I follow Terri down the stairs, I remind myself to be cautious. He said he wants my address to help, but there's no guarantee of that. His motives could be far more harmful. In my experience, they usually are.

CHAPTER 6



Elio

I hit the heavy bag, teeth gritted and soaked in sweat. I'm soaked down to the goddamn bone. Down to the soul. With more than sweat. I'm drenched in the idea that I need to save my woman. *My woman*. I hit the bag harder. I've only been at it for twenty minutes, but I'm completely slick as if I've been here for hours. It's seeing my—I hit the bag—woman.

Again, I hit harder, and it swings and whines on the hinges. I'm trying to convince myself to delete Scarlet's phone number and forget she exists. After Mom came and stopped me from leaving, I was forced to laugh and joke with the Shanks. Shake their hands, smile at their jokes, and politely refuse their champagne. Dad sat there like a goddamn skeleton as Mom leaned in, forced a smile—it seemed so fake—and told everybody they should keep having a good time.

I glance down at my phone. I've left it facedown on my wallet. There's a chance Scarlet is just messing with my head anyway. Asking for money could mean she desperately needs it, like she says. Or it could mean she's just another woman trying to wring something from a Marino. It's happened plenty of times.

From behind me, I hear the door open. I turn to see who it is because I'm a Family man, and I'll never let anybody sneak up on me, but I don't have to. I know it's going to be Luca. He leans against the wall, still wearing his suit, seeming happily drunk despite everything.

“I knew I’d find you here,” he says.

The timer goes off. I start stripping my gloves. “Thought you’d be face down in a hole somewhere.”

“It spit me back out,” he says. “Doesn’t like Italian food, apparently.”

“Ha, ha, ha.” I throw my gloves on the counter and begin unwrapping my hands. “You realize what we’ve done this evening, don’t you, Luca? We’ve gone into business with a partner we know nothing about. We haven’t audited their books—”

“Their books?” Luca cuts in. “We’re not on the stock market.”

“Of their legitimate businesses,” I snap. “And we haven’t sent one of our men in to look at their other work. They could be dealing drugs. They could be human traffickers.”

“Dad wouldn’t sign us up with scum like that, Elio.”

“Dad isn’t *here* anymore!” I roar.

Luca flinches and takes a step back. I can’t blame him. It’s not often I get like this. Never, truthfully. I can’t remember the last time my temper erupted. I can generally keep myself under control, but my passion is scarlet, burning.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Luca says, recovering.

“It has to be said. He’s not the man he was.”

“Just because he can’t give speeches doesn’t mean he’s not the same man. He’s given his instructions.”

“Through *Mom*,” I say. “When did you ever know Dad to include Mom in Family business? When has *Mom* ever wanted to do it? She’s only agreed to it because she doesn’t see it either. She doesn’t see that the man we knew, for now at least, is gone. He shouldn’t be making deals. He should be recovering.”

“You’re not the don, Elio.” Luca steps forward, weaving side to side like he might drunkenly collapse. “Don’t forget that.”

I sigh, turning away and walking over to the bag. I punch it bare-fisted, glancing down at my phone. I could stomp on it right now. I don't remember her number. I could crush my phone and never return to that restaurant and focus on just the Family, like always.

"It would be so much easier if he would talk to us. I can't believe he'd only talk to Mom, especially about this."

"You think Mom's making it up?"

I turn back to Luca sharply. "What the fuck? No, I didn't say that. Mom would never lie about something like this. I think Dad's confused. His mind is clawing for any form of reason it can find. Maybe he's fixated on Mom because, well, he loves her. Maybe he's regressed in his mind, and he doesn't remember we exist. Who knows?"

"So you're a psychologist now," Luca says.

"No, but I read a book from time to time."

"I came here to see if you'd cooled off. Goddamn. We're breaking ground on the second-biggest stadium in the city. We're going to make millions from this, *tens* of millions. It's the best deal Dad's ever made. The men are calling him a legend, and all you can do is criticize."

Luca throws the door open, storms out, and slams it behind him. I don't bother shouting or chasing him. I let the anger cool off as much as it will. I didn't want to say any of that. I don't want to disrespect Dad, but this is getting out of hand.

This is yet another reason I need to delete Scarlet's number. I can't afford this complication right now. Even thinking of her as a *complication* makes me feel like dirt. She means so much more than that.

Picking up the phone, I see I've been typing a message from where I left it screen-down. There's a long series of random letters and numbers. I look at her last message, where she asks if it would be easier to pay them. Moving up to the number, I press it, hover over it, and *delete the thread*. I haven't added her to my contacts yet. I could make this disappear.

Yet, just thinking about it causes a cramp to squeeze my stomach. It's like the feeling I've had before fights, the tingle of instinct. However, this comes from somewhere far, far deeper.

How long did this loan shark give you?

I stare down at the screen. I'm at my private gym, just a block from my apartment. Luca was only able to get in here because he has a key. Otherwise, I'm alone, just Scarlet and me and my *phone*. If she were here, I wouldn't be thinking. I'd be stroking her sweet, perfect, wet pussy.

I need to focus on deleting her number, but I can't do it.

Three days. He said he'd come to me for the payment. Initially, he said it was \$32,000, but he didn't say how to contact him if I got the money early.

I can get you the cash, I reply. But he's just going to go on and do this to somebody else. I'd rather get my hands on him so he can't do that. You could help me, Scarlet.

How? she replies.

I walk over to the chairs on the other side of the room. I'm unsure how I've gone from convincing myself to delete her number to offering to team up, but here we are. Apparently, it doesn't matter if I should spend this time working hard to learn as much about the Shanks as possible. And what if Scarlet is right? What if Russel is the loan shark? It would be one hell of a... Or *would* it be a coincidence? I'm not sure who arranged for us to meet at that restaurant—the Family or Russel.

I'll give you the forty thousand. Then I'll hide in your apartment on the third day. When the lowlife shows up, I'll make him regret it.

Why would you do that? she asks. ***You don't even know me.***

I find myself relieved she's suspicious. Why, exactly? Because it means she's ready to protect our future *children*. How crazy is that? I'm supposed to be a cold, calculating Family man. I can't answer her honestly. I can't tell her that nobody gets to threaten her, ever.

It's bad for business to have innocent people shaken down. You'd be doing me a favor.

Hmm, she texts.

Hmm? You know we're texting, right, Scarlet? You don't have to write hmm or umm or uh.

Maybe I wanted you to know I'm slightly skeptical, she replies. *What if I'm right and that man earlier was the loan shark? I saw you all laughing together. If you're working together, maybe you want my address for another reason.*

If I was working with him. I have to pause, my hand shaking. It's the idea that I'd ever hurt Scarlet or even *think* about it. I can't imagine doing that. *Then I could just ask him for your address, couldn't I?*

There's a pause. Three dots appear. I never usually pay attention to that. My phone is for texts concerning business, maybe shooting the shit with Luca. Now, I stare at them, willing her to hurry.

Okay, fair point. I feel a little silly for not thinking of that. Also, maybe there's another factor I'm not aware of. Perhaps you want to do something to me without him knowing.

That all seems very vague, I reply, not knowing how to handle this. Scarlet can't believe this about me. Fucking hell. I've gone from almost deleting her number to hungrily trying to convince her I want the best for her.

Maybe it is vague, but I can't be specific about information I don't have, she sends. *I want your help, honestly, but I have to be able to trust you.*

I'm offering you forty thousand dollars, and I'll take care of this bastard. That's more than most people get, Scarlet.

I've been hurt too many times to give you my address, she texts. *Anyway, I don't think we'll be staying there much longer.*

I shake my head slowly. My woman's thoughts must be all over the place. She's suspicious of me but also telling me she might be moving soon. Then that would give me a time

incentive to get there faster if I *was* working with Russel. Or maybe that's what she wants. She wants to see if I'll rush over there, intent on hurting her.

But what then? She needs somebody to protect her. She needs her man. She needs *me*.

Running without any money isn't a good idea. You wrote that note for a reason. You want my help. I need something in return.

She doesn't respond right away. I tap my foot impatiently, rereading her text. She's been hurt too many times. By who? By her dad? She said it's a routine, his get-rich-quick schemes, the debt. That would be a good story for a con artist, a way to play on my emotions, but how would she know I have feelings for her?

I have to talk to my mom about this, she texts. ***I owe her that much.***

You at least need to let me put some protection on your house. That comes with no strings attached.

She doesn't reply. I wait ten minutes, pacing, and then text her again. ***Scarlet?***

The message doesn't show the *delivered* status like the others, just *sent*. That means she's turned her phone off, or the battery's died. Goddamn it. I grab my bag and head for the door, already making a call. It'll be tricky if she's moved so much, but I should be able to get her location, maybe through her work.

Yet, I don't know the lay of the land. If Russel did arrange the restaurant, maybe he knows people there. Maybe he'll hear I'm sneaking around. Too much of this is based on assumption. I'll have to hire somebody discrete. It may take more time, but I can't risk my Scarlet.

Sleep is usually a matter of passing out from sheer exhaustion for me. I'll work or work out and then collapse into bed, and

then, what feels like a moment later, I'll snap my eyes open. It's already almost three a.m. If I didn't need sleep, I wouldn't give a damn. I'd just get up and keep working, but it affects the mind too much. I need mine sharp.

Closing my eyes tighter, I turn over, move my hand across the mattress, and imagine my woman there. I could hold her, pull her against me, drive my manhood against her plump ass. I'd feel her heat through her panties as I shift back and forth, slip my hand around her, and slide it down toward her heat. Then I'd start rubbing her clit, kissing her neck, biting her softly at first, at least. I wouldn't be able to hold back for long.

Soon, I'd start biting with more passion. I'd let her feel the hunger bursting through me. It's a fire I've never felt before. Maybe I've felt *some* passion in the heat of a gunfight, but not like this. Even when it's life or death, I've never experienced this urgency.

I can taste her skin in the fantasy. Slipping my hand down my body, I grab hold of my cock and start stroking up and down, from base to tip, spreading warm precome over my length. My balls ache when I imagine the wetness coming from her horny slit instead.

"Turn over," I growl in the vivid fantasy.

I imagine my woman rolling over, the sheets shifting around her curviness. My hand moves quicker on my cock as I mentally strip her clothes off, revealing her perfect body. I'd climb on top of her, panting like a beast, far less controlled than I'd ever been before. Even as a kid, I was withdrawn, stoic, and calm.

But not with Scarlet. She makes me burn as hot red as her name. Leaning up, I'd look down to get a proper look at her, her body on display. Just for me. *Only* for me. Nobody else gets to touch her—nobody. Hell, I'd kill any bastard who *tried*.

"You're going to take every fucking inch. Tell me why."

She opens her pretty mouth, her wide eyes gazing lust-filled up at me, her chest rising and falling, causing her round,

luscious tits to shift at the same time. “*Because I’m yours. Only yours...*”

I bite down, panting heavily, stroking my hand up and down, up and down, so damn quickly. The end of my cock throbs as the seed rushes up my shaft, but there’s a sour note to it, too. My seed belongs in her. It belongs in her body where it can be of some goddamn use.

A trembling groan escapes me as the seed erupts all over my abs. I gasp, locked in the fantasy, seeing my woman bouncing in time with my thrusts. Her whole body would shiver for me. Her gorgeous thickness would bounce. Leaning down, I take her nipple in my mouth, sucking her toward the end.

Then the fantasy fades away, draining like my manhood. I’m left with come all over my stomach, causing the sheets to stick to me. The room feels far colder and emptier than usual. My life is hollow without her—without the woman I met *tonight*. It’s not like I’ve even had a real conversation with her. She could be trying to con me. These are all good reasons to go through with it and delete her number as planned, but I can’t.

Checking my phone, I see the status of my message is still *sent*, not *delivered*. I shouldn’t give a damn. I need to worry about my family, about *the* Family. Yet, no matter how hard I try, I can’t get Scarlet out of my head.

Pushing the sheets aside, I stand, walking toward the ensuite. I need to get cleaned up.

CHAPTER 7



S carlet

I sit on the edge of my bed, looking over at my phone, charging on the floor. The battery died when I was at the restaurant, mid-conversation with Elio. I shouldn't be speaking with him, anyway, especially if the crazy hunch I have is true, and he was eating dinner with the loan shark—all smiling, sharing champagne, toasting to some criminal success.

It's the middle of the night. I've worked over twelve hours. I should be tired enough to close my eyes and sink into welcome oblivion, but I can't even think about sleep while knowing that Elio might've texted me. There's also the fact that any second, somebody could kick down the door, charge in here, and hurt me to make me pay.

My phone is old and busted. The charging symbol takes forever to come on. Every time it dies, I wonder if this will be the last time. I use all my restaurant money for rent and household expenses. Buying a new phone isn't something I planned for. I almost laugh. How can I pay forty thousand if I can't afford a new phone?

Finally, the screen blinks awake. I spring out of bed way too fast, way too eagerly. I need to control some of this hunger. It's not wise for a person like me, with basically no experience, to rush headfirst into this, whatever *this* is. The best-case scenario is that he's a Good Samaritan who wants to help me,

and that's all. He's not going to want me in the sudden, captivating way I want him.

His final text is asking to put protection on my house. I sit cross-legged on the floor near the socket. There's one next to my bed, too, but it's busted, like half the stuff in this place. I bite my lip, wondering if he's awake. It's almost four a.m.

But that would mean giving you my address, I text.

A reflexive smile spreads across my face when he begins to type a message in response almost immediately. A stranger's text shouldn't be able to light me up like this—a stranger who also happens to be a mob boss. It shouldn't make me feel so sure he's the man for me. It's a *text*. I've been through too much to be so naïve.

We've been over this. I could get your address from the loan shark if we were working together, which we're not. Just let me help you.

Why do you care about helping me so much? I reply.

As he types his response, I imagine him telling me it's because he felt it, too. It wasn't all in my head. A lightning bolt crashed into our lives the moment we laid eyes on each other. It electrified us. It connected us. It created something truly special between us.

Because it's the right thing to do.

I shake my head. ***Please, Elio. I probably seem like a kid to you, but I'm not an idiot.***

You don't seem like a kid to me. You're a nineteen-year-old woman. It sounds like you've been through a lot. I don't think you're naïve, but it's the truth. Helping you is the right thing to do; occasionally, even men like me need to do that.

So you're just a Good Samaritan? Is that it?

Those three dots appear, disappear, and appear again. I torture myself by imagining all the things he could be typing, all the declarations of heat and possession.

Have you spoken to your mom about this? he asks. ***You said you were going to do that before you decided.***

She was passed out when I got home.

Then wake her the hell up. I imagine his huge body trembling as he types this. *This is important.*

I know, but when she's taken her meds, there's no point waking her up anyway. She'll be too groggy to understand what's going on.

What about your dad? Have you heard from him?

I sigh, my chest getting tight as it often does when I think about what sort of father-daughter relationship other people might have. *No, and I don't think I will. When he vanishes, he never contacts us. He just comes home when he feels like it. Mom takes him back, like always. To be honest, I don't think Dad even cares about me.*

Oh, jeez. I've already clicked *send*. Something about texting with him tears all my walls down, but I have to try to keep them up. I have to use my head, not my heart.

Why do you say that? he asks.

It's too late now, and truthfully, I want to talk with him about this, even if it makes no sense. *He's never really shown me any love. I always get the feeling he didn't want kids. I can't remember him showing me any affection or support, even when I was little.*

That's goddamn unacceptable, Elio texts. *A man should love and support his daughter.*

Something thuds into me, a heavy fist of emotion. I didn't even think about the very likely possibility that Elio might already have a girlfriend, a wife, and kids. *Do you have children?*

No, he replies. *But I value family. It's the most important thing. If I ever had a daughter, I'd be there for her. Always.*

Closing my eyes, I caution myself to slow down. I shouldn't let his words trigger a torrent of fantasy inside me. I shouldn't think about the first time Elio holds *our* daughter, the love beaming from him, the look he'll give me, both of us sharing in the perfection of the moment.

But we're getting off topic, he goes on. You're in danger, Scarlet. Right now. Being in the same apartment where that lowlife visited puts you at risk. I swear to you—I swear on my little brother, on my sick father, on my mother—I'm going to protect you. I'm not going to betray you. Please, trust me.

I bite down, knowing this could be a mistake, but also, he's right, isn't he? If they *were* working together, he could find me. Surely, a man like Elio has ways of finding this information anyway. Deep inside, something pulses. If I wanted to dance down Crazy Street, I'd think it was my womb, as if my fierce desire for a family with him is making me trust him.

Yeah, that's nuts, but so is this. I'm typing out my address. I stop several times and try to drum some sense into myself. I keep going, on and on, until the full address is typed out. Hovering my thumb over the *send* button, I try to convince myself one last time.

I don't know this man. He's a stranger. He's a *criminal*. He could've lied about everything he's said so far. So what if he swore on his family? These are just words. People can say anything they want, and yet I click *send* anyway.

Thank you, he replies. I'm going to be there soon.

Wait... YOU'RE going to keep watch?

For tonight. I can't sleep anyway. Then we'll figure out a long-term strategy. I still think trapping this bastard is the way to go.

But what if he sees you outside my apartment building? Won't he know something's up?

Yeah, that's a good point. It would be easier if I were inside the apartment.

My heart starts drumming way too hard. The idea of him in here with me...

My mom would freak if she found a random man sleeping on the couch.

Who said I'd be on the couch? he replies, causing a shiver to dance over my body. *I can take the floor in your bedroom. Then you can explain the situation to her in the morning.*

It kind of already is morning.

Whenever she wakes up, then. I wouldn't forgive myself if that bastard came to you tonight, and I could've stopped it.

Stuff like this is happening all over the city, I reply. *Every single day.*

But I can do something about this. Stop arguing with me. I'm coming over now. I'll text you when I'm outside.

I stand, looking around my bedroom at my old, chipped karaoke set in the corner, the flaking wallpaper, the carpet with stains at the edges. I've gotten used to this dreary, depressing scene, and it's not like I've ever had boys over before. Not that Elio is a *boy*.

I almost text him to tell him not to come, but he already has my address. If he's going to hurt me... Have I made a serious mistake? Quietly walking into the kitchen, I take a knife from the cupboard, wondering if I'd have the guts to use it.

About twenty minutes later, I get a text. *I'm outside your apartment door. The main entrance was open. Come and let me in.*

CHAPTER 8



Elio

As I wait outside her apartment, I remind myself I'm here to do a job, to protect my woman. I'm not here to bring my fantasy to life. My manhood is getting hard already, though. I only drained the goddamn pipes an hour ago, but I feel hungry for her.

The door opens, whining on the hinges. I almost grab her when I see her nipples poking through her pink pajama shirt. Her hair is messy around her shoulders, giving her a wild, sexy look. My fingers twitch, willing my hands to reach up, play with her nipples, and make her moan for me.

She raises a shaky hand, showing me her phone. ***We have to be quiet. Mom is sleeping.***

I nod, following her into the apartment. God, this place is grim. Scarlet deserves so much better. Everything is old. The walls seem thin, somehow. I'm unsure how I know that just by looking at them, but I do. They have a flimsy, papery look. Everything looks like it's on the verge of breaking.

She walks ahead of me, giving me a look at her thick, sweet ass. Again, my hands shake, willing me to grab her. Massage that ass. Spank her thickness. Make her cream and shake for me.

She leads me into her bedroom. Her bedframe is wooden and chipped, the wallpaper flaking. She has a small bookshelf with

a few books about singing on it.

“Are you a—”

She turns, glares at me, and raises her finger to her lips. She has no idea how cute and beautiful she looks doing that. She has no idea how wild she’d make me if she started to suck her finger, aiming those wide, innocent eyes at me. Being here with her, in person, makes me realize how foolish I was, thinking I could let her go.

She quickly types something on her phone and shows me the screen. *We can’t talk. The walls are too thin. Mom can’t know you’re here until I’ve explained everything.*

I nod, taking out my phone. *Get some rest. If we need to speak, we can text.*

Where will you go? she asks.

I smirk, sitting on the floor and stretching my legs out. In a low whisper, I say, “Never been more comfortable.”

A beautiful smile lights up her face. Then she holds her finger to her lips again. I watch obsessively as she walks to the bed, swaying side to side, her plump ass almost making me howl.

She climbs under the sheets. A moment later, my phone vibrates. *I’ve got to say, Elio, this is probably the weirdest thing I’ve ever done.*

I chuckle quietly. She laughs just as quietly, as if hearing me laugh is enough to make her feel joy, too. This small moment, shared laughter, is more significant than anything I’ve ever shared with any other woman.

Inviting a forty-two-year-old man to sleep on your floor? I type. *There’s nothing weird about that.*

You’re forty-two?! I thought you were in your mid-thirties at the oldest.

Darkness tries to touch me when I read her message. Maybe she thinks I’m too old for her. Or perhaps this has nothing to do with lust or attraction or, the most ridiculous of all, *love*. I’ve never felt romantic love. I never thought I would. All that matters is the Family. Yet here I am.

I'm an old, old man.

Looking across the dark room, I see her sitting up in bed. She shakes her head, her wild hair dancing around her shoulders. My manhood is rock hard. I'm not sure when it flooded with tension, but I know it's not going to quit until I taste her, touch her, own her.

You're not old. Don't be silly.

I wonder why she wants to convince me of this. Maybe it's because she feels the connection burning between us, too. She wants to ensure I'm not holding myself back because of the age gap. Or, more likely, she's just being friendly... to the stranger on her floor.

You should get some sleep, I reply.

What about you?

I don't mind staying up. I'll listen out for any sign of the lowlife. If we're lucky, he'll visit again tonight.

That would be lucky?

Yes. I pause, looking over at her again, my heart drumming so hard as I think about standing up, walking to the bed, sliding my hand between her thick legs, and massaging her needy pussy. ***Because then I'd be able to put the bastard in his place. I'd show him what happens when you threaten an innocent woman.***

A shiver moves through her. It's too dark for me to make out her expression clearly, but I can see her eyes snap open widely. I can see her silhouette, drenched in lust, drenched in heat. Or maybe that's me projecting.

It's cold tonight, she replies. ***Or is that just me? Maybe it's the fear, you know, making it cold?***

Oh, *fuck*. My balls surge with even more tension. Urgency drums into me. It's like a primal voice is howling inside to claim her now.

It is cold, I type. ***But you shouldn't tell me that, Scarlet. You'll give this strange man dark ideas.***

Another shiver moves through her curvy body. I wish I had my hand on her hip every time she did that. I'd be able to feel her lust coursing through her thick shape.

What sort of ideas?

I swallow, knowing I shouldn't cross this line. There's something else stopping me, too. I'm not experienced with women. Of course, I've been on dates before, but I've never hungered like this. I've never felt like, just by being close to a woman, I'm on the verge of snapping.

Climbing into bed with you, I type. Keeping you warm. Those sorts of ideas, Scarlet...

She makes a cute gasping noise. I stand slowly, the floorboards creaking, walking to the edge of the bed. She looks up at me with those wide, pretty eyes. It's so easy to imagine those eyes getting wide as I lift her veil, slip the ring onto her finger, and lean in with a claiming kiss.

She types something on her phone. I look down when the text arrives. ***You want to get into bed with me?***

I walk around the bed, standing close to her. Slowly, I nod up and down, keeping my gaze fixed on her the entire time. Kneeling, I smooth my hand over the sheets, finding her hand. The moment I touch her, I know that fighting this desire will always be absurd. Her warmth burns up my arm, chest, heart, and soul. I never usually think stuff like that—*soul*—but it's true.

“Elio,” she whispers.

“You're right,” I say, my voice so quiet. “You're cold. You need me to warm you up.”

Nothing could stop me from doing this now. Leaning forward, I pull her toward me at the same time. She makes a gorgeous whimpering noise as I guide my lips toward hers, but she wants it, too. I can sense it. I can feel her passion. My woman wants it. Maybe not *all* of it—the future, the family—but right here, she's ready.

A pulse of pleasure moves through me when our lips touch. I groan and push against her with more pressure, knowing I'll

never forget her reaction. It's a moan of surprise that becomes a moan of pleasure. She opens her mouth. I find her tongue and taste her, groaning even deeper as I move my hand from her arm to her leg, squeezing, feeling her warmth through the thin fabric of her PJ pants.

“Oh,” she moans, breaking the kiss off.

I push her leg aside, panting, almost roaring. My cock aches so badly. I'm ready to erupt. I'm ready to tear off her clothes and drive my dick into her tight body. I'm leaking so much precome just thinking about it.

She reaches down and places her hand on my wrist, stopping me.

“What's wrong?” I growl.

“We have to be quiet,” she whispers.

“Then bite a goddamn pillow. I need to feel your tight pussy.”

A shiver moves through her. I was right. It's hot as hell when I'm touching her. I can feel her lust talking to me, like her body is telling me how eager she is. I move my hand up her leg, squeezing onto her thigh, getting closer to her core.

I almost come in my pants when she actually grabs a pillow, clasp it to her chest like she's getting ready to bite it. My seed pushes against my tip, trying to burst out. She's so. Damn. Hot.

Finally, I push my hand against her sex, pressing firmly against her slit. I can feel her wetness, her heat. There's no doubt she wants this now. Her keen body is fucking soaked for me.

When I grab her pants, meaning to pull them down, she moans and grabs my wrist again. I growl, tugging firmer, letting the beast take over for a second. But no, that's not true. If I truly allowed the hunger in me to dominate completely, I'd tear off her pants, climb onto the bed, push deep and hard, and start fucking her like a madman right away.

She squeezes my wrist. “Elio,” she whispers. “Not, uh, under the pants...”

I bite down and almost snap at her. Then I check that instinct. That would make me a needy, pathetic crybaby. I'm not going to force my woman into giving herself to me. We've got plenty of time for that, though my shaft is throbbing with the hunger.

Leaning forward, I kiss her again. I'll never tire of her taste or how she returns the pressure. She's nervous and then passionate and then nervous again. When I push my hand against her sex, she gasps, ending the kiss. She grabs the pillow and gets ready to bite it again.

I rub her slowly at first. When she bites down on the pillow, I move faster, feeling her warmth, wetness, and need. She stares at me with those wide, shocked eyes. It's like she's never done this before. I can't let myself think that, wonder about that. If she's never touched another man...

I'd lose it. I'd strip her naked. I'd bend her over and spank her thick ass as she bounced up and down on me. Nothing could stop me from claiming her.

Her moans get louder, even with the pillow to block them. I'm pumping my arm now. I can feel her folds. The fabric is so thin. I can feel the shape of them, engorged like they're filled with lust.

Faster, with more hunger, I rub my woman until she starts shaking like a soda bottle about to burst. All the lust is going to erupt out of her. More precome leaks out of me, making my underwear slick with it. She's moaning urgently into the pillow, rocking back and forth, her legs bucking. It's like she's never felt pleasure like this before.

I feel her get even wetter when the orgasm releases. She squeezes her legs around my hand, my eager woman, like she wants to trap me there. Finally, she lets the pillow drop, breathing rapidly as if she's just emerged from the water and was drowning in her lust.

Kissing her again, I move to a sitting position on the bed. Then I wrap my arms around her and pull her into my lap. She moans as I drive my manhood against her ass. She's so damn thick that it's making me feral. She moans, sliding her hands up my arms and pressing down on my shoulders.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she whispers.

“Believe it,” I groan. “Now—”

Get on your knees. Show me those perfect tits. Get ready to take my seed.

Before I can say anything, there’s a banging noise from next door.

Scarlet springs up from my lap. “Mom?” She leaves the room quickly.

I follow her. Scarlet runs into the room to the bed. Then she turns to me with tears in her eyes.

CHAPTER 9



S carlet

I turn back to the bed in case I've somehow missed something. Mom left her lamp on. Maybe so she could see as she arranged her pillows to make it look like she was sleeping. When I came home, I checked on her, saw the pillows, and assumed she was asleep.

The crashing noise came from a book she left on the bedside table, balanced precariously. If it weren't for that, I wouldn't even know she's missing right now.

Elio walks up beside me, dark and handsome in his black T-shirt, silver-streaked hair catching the light, his muscles firm, and... And what the *hell* am I thinking? Dad's gone. Mom's gone. Despite that, I can't stop thinking about Elio's muscles.

"There's a note," Elio says, kneeling down next to the book. He stands, holding up a small piece of paper. He's about to read it. Then he pauses and hands it to me.

I sit on the bed, my throat tight, my belly buzzing with nerves. It's not fair. A few minutes ago, I was in a dream. Elio's hand was blazing pleasure between my legs. I forgot everything: my fear, doubt, inexperience, Mom and Dad, even the debt.

I'm sorry, Scarlet. I've gone to find your father. He called me when you were at work and told me where he is. It's not a good neighborhood. It's even worse than ours if you can imagine it.

I should be back before you have a chance to read this note. I love you. Be strong.

“Maybe she’ll be back by morning,” I mutter, handing the note to Elio.

He reads it, his jaw tight, the tension in him easily readable. “There’s not enough information here. Do you have any idea where she’s talking about?”

“N-no,” I say, wiping my cheeks. These tears are so annoying. “Dad’s the one who disappears. Mom usually waits until he’s back. If she’s gone too, he must’ve told her he’s somewhere awful.”

“In this city, that doesn’t narrow it down much.” Elio takes out his phone. “That settles it then.”

“Settles what?”

“You’re staying at my parents’ place.”

“*What?*”

“It’s the most secure location in this city. A penthouse with twenty-four-hour security. It’s far more secure than my apartment.”

“But what if Mom comes back?”

“I’ll have some men waiting just in case. They can bring her to you.”

“But—”

He spins on me, and suddenly, I see the don, Elio Marino, not the man I just kissed. I see the darkness in his eyes, the capacity for violence. “This isn’t a discussion anymore. You’re not staying here. That’s the end of it.”

“But what if she doesn’t come back?”

“We’ll find her and your dad,” he says.

“I’ve got work tomorrow.”

“Not anymore, you don’t,” he grunts. “Pack a bag. We’re leaving soon. Don’t fight me on this. If I have to kidnap you,

goddamn it, I will, Scarlet.” He looms over me, veins bulging in his neck. “Have I made myself clear?”

I glare up at him, but what other choice do I have? Maybe it’s a naïve reason, but after kissing him, after being intimate with him, I’m convinced he’s not tricking me.

“Promise me you’ll find her,” I say, stepping forward, close enough so we’re almost touching.

“I’ve lived too long in this city to make promises like that,” he replies.

“No,” I almost yell. I grab his arms and squeeze him tightly like I was minutes ago, except this is an entirely different kind of passion. “You have to promise. You have to. I can’t lose Mom.”

He swallows, leans down, and brushes his lips against my cheek. Then he finds my lips. We kiss, the steaminess tempting me to melt against him, forgetting about the heartache, stress, and doubt. I want to forget about Mom and Dad and just be with Elio.

Pushing against his chest, I lean away. “Promise me.”

He sighs darkly. “I promise, Scarlet. I’ll find her, but I’m not risking you. Pack a bag. Now.”

I turn away, leaving the room. In my bedroom, as I pack my ratty old suitcase—the one I used to dream about filling with clothes for college—it’s like I’m watching myself. I’m in the corner of the room, watching this scared woman get ready to go and live with the mafia boss and his parents. It’s almost too surreal for me to take seriously.

Once I’ve stuffed some clothes into the suitcase, I carry it into the living room. Elio is on the phone, pacing up and down. “That’s right. No. Just sit tight and tell me if anybody comes by. Yeah, exactly. Easy work.”

He hangs up, turning to me. “Ready?”

“I think so,” I murmur. “It’s just...”

He walks over to me, so huge, so experienced. It’s crazy to think how steamy we were getting not that long ago. He takes

the suitcase from me, holding it with one hand. With the other, he brushes the hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear.

“Just what?” he asks.

“This... everything... I don’t know. It doesn’t feel real.”

“You don’t have to worry,” he says. “I’m going to make this right. Let’s go.”

“What about your men? Don’t they need us here to let them in?”

“No,” Elio says. “Locks aren’t really a problem for us.”

He leads me from the apartment. My head is spinning. Can I trust him? But it’s too late for questions like that.

I lock the door behind us, and then he leads me down the stairs. He keeps his hand on my back, warm tingles flowing up and down my body. Despite everything—the tears, the stress, the wondering—I still feel myself smiling as he pushes against me. I forcibly wipe the smile away a moment later. I can’t get involved in some impossible, dreamy romance when Mom and Dad are missing.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” he tells me, as if reading my mind.

“How can you be sure of that?” I ask.

“Because I made a promise.”

“And you never break your promises?”

Before we walk onto the street, he turns to me, staring down with those intense eyes. I still can’t believe what we just did. What were we *going* to do if that book never fell off the shelf? We would’ve gotten even steamier. Maybe I would’ve had to tell him just how inexperienced I am. All the while, Mom would be out there, somewhere, lost in the city.

“Not to you,” Elio says, brushing hair from my face again. Already, it’s one of my favorite things that he does.

He takes my hand. We approach his car. It looks out of place on this street. It’s a sleek, dark car with tinted windows. It’s not flashy with outlandish rims or anything like that, but it

looks far too expensive. He opens the trunk, puts my suitcase inside, and then nods to the passenger seat.

“Get in.”

Somehow, another smile touches my lips. “Are you always this bossy?”

He smirks. “You must bring it out in me.”

Again, I wipe the smile away, pulling the door open and climbing into the car. Every smile is a betrayal.

“I should be ashamed,” I mutter once he starts the engine.

“Why?” he asks, pulling away from the parking spot.

“When Dad walked out, I thought nothing of it. It’s so normal. It’s just something he does. Honestly, sometimes, when he walks out, I wish he wouldn’t come back. That’s not something I’m proud of.”

“I understand,” Elio says.

“What? You can imagine thinking that about your own dad, too?”

“No,” Elio snaps. “That’s not what I’m saying at all.”

“Then how do you understand?” I say, matching his intensity.

“From what you’ve told me about your dad, he’s nothing like mine. Before the stroke, my dad was tough, sure. He was strict. He valued discipline above almost everything else, but he could also be kind. I’ve never had to wonder if my dad cared about me. Well, until recently.”

I place my hand on his arm. “I’m sure he cares about you. He just can’t tell you that anymore. For now, anyway.”

“You don’t have to feel guilty,” Elio says. “Your mom showed you love. Your dad didn’t. Naturally, you’d be more worried about one than the other.”

“Still, it doesn’t exactly make me a good daughter.”

“A man should be worried about being a good father if he wants a good daughter,” Elio snarls.

“You seemed passionate over text, too, about children. About fatherhood.” I keep my gaze firmly planted forward on the road. The city is quiet, but there are a few nighttime wanderers.

“I guess I am,” Elio says. “Maybe it’s the Italian in me.”

“I’m surprised you don’t have children,” I reply, my belly tightening, that strange thought touching me again. It’s my womb, calling to him, begging for a future I didn’t know I wanted until tonight. Well, yesterday, technically.

“My mother feels the same,” he says with a gruff laugh.

It seems like a way of avoiding the subject. “So why don’t you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I work a lot,” he says, “and I’ve got a baby brother. I always figured he’d be the one to continue the family line when he can stop his bar hopping and woman chasing.”

“But you want kids,” I go on.

I feel him look at me. I don’t turn to check if I’m right, but I’m sure I feel it—his gaze burning into me. “You sound pretty certain about that.”

“It’s the way you talk about it,” I say. “The passion in your voice.”

“Yeah, well, maybe I’ve never found the right person.”

I could be the right person, I almost say, but it’s so much easier to be forward and confident via text. I almost take out my phone and shoot him a message, but texting in the same car would be even weirder than texting in the same room. I squeeze down on my knees, thinking of all the things that could be happening to Mom. None of them are good.

“What are you going to tell your parents?” I ask, eager for conversation to distract myself from the torturing thoughts.

“I’m not sure yet,” Elio replies. “The truth would be ideal. They’re good people. They’ll want to help you. The only thing that gives me pause is Russel.”

“Russel?”

“The man you saw at my table. You said he looked shocked when he saw you.”

“I’m not sure if it was shock or surprise. His eyes got really wide. It could’ve just been recognition. It could’ve been a threat, like he was looking at me to say, *Be quiet*. Or something like that. I don’t know. Or maybe it’s all in my head.”

“In this life, you learn to trust hunches,” Elio says. “Russel and my family are working together. If I tell the truth, there’s a small chance he’ll hear about it. What about singing?”

I swallow, nerves suddenly touching me. “What about it?”

“Well, how good are you?”

I stare stubbornly out the window. I feel him glancing at me every few moments, but I can’t bring myself to look at him. I’ve never been able to talk about singing with other people, let alone sing for them, except Mom.

“I’m not sure,” I say.

“I saw those books in your room.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t get good at singing by reading books.”

“Don’t be so damn humble,” he says fiercely.

“How are you so sure I’m being humble?” I snap, finally turning to him. He glances at me with penetrating eyes, a gaze that cuts right into me. “I could completely suck, and what does this have to do with anything, anyway?”

“It could be a possible alibi. We’ll give you a fake name. I’ll tell my folks I hired you to sing for my dad. He used to love live music.”

I smooth my hands over my belly as if to trap the anxiety. “I don’t know about that,” I say. “I’ve only ever sung in front of my mom.”

“What’s her opinion of your talents?”

“Good, but she’s dosed up half the time. Plus, of *course*, she’ll say I’m good.”

I flinch when he slams his hand against the steering wheel. He sits up, his body getting harder, seeming to get bigger, as if he's going to erupt from his clothes. "Stop putting yourself down."

"Whoa." I lean away from him, even if my instincts tell me to get closer, place my hand against his arm, squeeze, and feel his strength. Feel his power. Just feel *him*. "You don't have to get mad about it."

"Stop putting yourself down," he says, then releases a long breath.

"Okay. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize."

"You're sort of acting like I should," I mutter. "You seem pretty pissed."

"It's just... you don't need to criticize yourself. If you want to sing, sing. If you're not where you want to be, you can work to improve."

We don't say anything for a while. His explosion has left me confused and also curious. Why *does* he care if I criticize myself? He's clearly interested in me physically, which is crazy enough. With how passionate he just got, he may be interested in me emotionally, too.

"We can think of another alibi," Elio says.

"I'm probably wrong about the look Russel gave me anyway. I'm probably reading way too much into that."

"I'm not taking that risk," he growls.

He's not taking that risk, implying he'd care if something happened to me. At first, I thought this came back to the Good Samaritan thing. Now, it seems a whole lot more significant than that.

"Maybe we could try the singing," I murmur. "What type of music does your dad like?"

"Love songs," Elio says, with a wry smile, watching the road but really looking into the past. He's got a dreamy look on his

face as though he's disappearing into a memory. "He always used to say that love songs are the best type for hard men. It reminds them that there's more to life. It reminds them that it's okay to be soft sometimes in the right contexts and with the right people. Do you know any love songs?"

Heat blooms in my cheeks. A background track in my mind is whispering that I should be thinking about Mom. I am endlessly wondering, but I should *just* be thinking about Mom, not this connection, not my embarrassment.

"What is it?" he says.

"What's *what*?" I ask.

"Your face just told a whole story."

"Maybe you should watch the road."

He laughs huskily. Maybe I'm reading too much into it, but it feels like a proud laugh. "Is it strange, Scarlet, that I like it when you talk back to me?"

"Maybe you're just not used to it."

"True," he replies. "Are you going to tell me or not?"

"It's just... I've written a few love songs. That's all."

He pulls the car up to the side of the road. We're in the middle of a residential area, a neighborhood a cut above ours. This is the kind of place that doesn't have people gathered on every corner, nobody warming their hands by a barrel. It's quiet.

"Let's hear one, then," he says.

"Are you serious? No way."

He smirks. "I didn't ask you, Scarlet. Sing one of your love songs for me."

I fold my arms, glaring at him and almost smiling *again*. This attraction must be on an entirely different level, so intense I'm able to smile at him now. *Mom, Mom, Mom* should be the only thing on my mind.

"This will help find your mom," he says, as if reading my thoughts. "The alibi will keep you safe, giving me the time I

need.”

“Are they really going to believe you hired a live-in singer?” I ask.

“Yes,” Elio says confidently, reaching over and touching my leg. A tantalizing tingle dances up my thigh and teases my core. “That’s how rich assholes like us live.”

“You’re not an asshole,” I say.

He smirks. “But I am rich. Trust me, they’ll believe it if…”

“It’s okay. You can say it. *If I’m good enough.*”

“We can think of another alibi, but something tells me we won’t need to.”

“Oh, really?”

“There’s no way your voice isn’t as angelic as you are.”

I shake my head, almost as if to push away my natural reaction. I can’t stop the stupid grinning. “If I do this, will you find my mom?”

“I’m going to find her anyway,” he quickly replies.

“But it *will* help?”

He squeezes my leg. “Stop delaying. I’ve already told you it will.”

“It’s hard to sing sitting down,” I tell him. When he reaches for the car door, I quickly say, “But I can do it.”

I don’t want anybody else to hear me. It’s going to be difficult enough doing it in front of Elio—a stranger. Yet he doesn’t *feel* like as much of a stranger as he should. It must be the kissing, the steaminess.

“Don’t laugh, okay?”

“I’m not going to laugh at you,” he snarls, sounding pissed. “Sing for me, Scarlet.”

I start tapping my hand against my leg, humming softly, getting ready to make a complete fool of myself. At least I can tell myself I’m doing it for Mom.

CHAPTER 10



Elio

She doesn't have any idea how beautiful she is as she taps her leg, humming. My savage mind tries to return to earlier, when my hand was between her thighs, rubbing her to completion. The sounds she was making, but my woman deserves more than just lust. She deserves attention, too—heat of a different sort.

"I never knew I loved you," she sings quietly, her voice shaking, her eyebrows raised as if asking me if she should keep going. I nod firmly. *"I never knew who you were..."* She gets more confident, letting her voice fill the car. I was right. She sounds like an angel. *"How can I love a stranger? Oh, my heart is in danger..."*

Her confidence increases even more, her voice getting louder, more beautiful, more perfect. I watch—the luckiest audience of one who's ever lived—beyond enthralled.

"That was incredible," I tell her once she's done.

She pouts at me. I lean forward, kissing her passionately, pressing my hands down on her hips, holding her tightly, holding her with meaning. "It was perfect," I growl. "So don't pout at me like that. Who was the song about? Who's this *stranger*?"

"I don't know," she replies. "That's always been the point. I've never loved anybody, but I enjoy love songs. So I write them

about the emotion itself. The love, not the person.”

Maybe that will change when we fall in love, I almost say, but this is already complicated enough.

“The alibi will work,” I say, “as long as you can sing in front of Mom and Dad.”

She shrugs. “I didn’t even think I’d be able to sing in front of you. With Mom’s life at risk...” She lets out a long, shaky breath. “I can do it. I have to.”

“You’re stronger than you think,” I tell her, then lean over and kiss her again.

She makes that cute moaning noise, half shock, half desire. When I start losing control—one hand sliding up her leg, the other around her waist—she puts her hand on my chest. When she pushes away, I can tell it takes some effort.

“We have to keep moving,” she says. “I can’t just leave Mom out there.”

“You’re right,” I say.

Yet it’s so damn difficult. It would be far better to drive to the nearest five-star hotel, get a suite, lay her down on a four-poster bed, and strip her clothes off. Then I’d fall to my knees and start kissing up her thigh, tempted by her soaked, tangy slit. I’d lick her clit first, then...

Focus. I drive onto the road, focusing on the simple mechanics of driving, nothing else. If I let my mind wander, I’ll start obsessing over my woman. I won’t be able to stop. Her angel’s voice. Her steamy body. Her everything.

Getting to Mom and Dad’s apartment doesn’t take much longer. One of our men, Matteo, wanders over to my car when he sees me pull up. Though my parents live on the top floor and have additional security up there, there’s always a Family man working as the doorman.

“Late night, boss,” he says, his eyes narrowing when he sees Scarlet. He knows better than to say anything, of course, but seeing me with a woman must be strange. As far as the men know, I’m a forever bachelor.

“Open the underground garage,” I tell him, “and Matteo, you didn’t see my friend here.”

“Of course.”

“Matteo’s one of my father’s most trusted men,” I tell Scarlet. “He won’t say anything to anybody. None of my father’s men will. Even so, we need to think of a fake name.”

She wraps her arms around herself. This must be what love feels like. Every single one of her gestures and tics makes me crazy. I could spend hours simply watching her, dissecting every single movement.

“Any ideas?” she asks.

“You have the voice of an angel,” I say. “How about Angela?”

She smiles. It’s shaky, a little unsure, but it’s better than the fear that could justifiably coat every one of her features. I can see the fear in her, but she’s keeping it buried, pushed down. “That works.”

Once the underground garage opens, I drive inside, parking in the corner near the private elevator. Climbing from the car, I try to walk around to Scarlet’s side and be a gentleman, but she’s already sprung out, shifting from foot to foot, seeming full of energy despite the time. She looks around the parking lot at the sports cars, the gleaming jeeps, and the limo.

“Are these all yours?” she asks.

“That one is,” I say, gesturing to the Bugatti. “The rest are my father’s. Or they were.”

“Were?”

“They still are,” I say. “It’s just... well...”

“It’s okay.” She places her hand on mine, giving it a warm squeeze of support. “I guess he doesn’t do much driving anymore.”

“Exactly,” I tell her, taking her hand and leading her to the elevator. Once we’re inside, it takes everything I have not to press her against the wall, wrap my arms around her, and

indulge in her. My dick is still aching from how close we almost got to real steaminess.

The elevator doors open. A bleary-eyed Sebastian greets us with a confused smile. He's been the butler since I was a teenager—a tall, thin man with a shock of white hair and a unique shade to his eyes, a blue that's almost purple in certain lights.

"Master Marino," he says.

"Prepare a room for my friend, please," I say. "I'll explain the situation to Mom and Dad in the morning."

"Quite right, sir."

"Is he a *butler*?" Scarlet whispers once he's gone, her voice full of awe.

I smirk, taking her hand and nodding. She looks at the tall walls and the framed artwork. It must be a big contrast to her place. If it wasn't for the situation with her mom, I bet she'd be asking many questions, but I can tell she feels guilty even contemplating doing anything but worry.

In the living room, she looks around again at the vaulted ceiling, the chandelier, and Dad's large bookcases. "Would you like anything to drink?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "I'm okay, but we've forgotten my suitcase."

"I'll bring it up before I leave."

"You're going?" she asks anxiously.

I take both her hands, pressing them reassuringly. At least, that's what I hope I'm doing. It's not like I've got much experience making people feel better. The books, keeping order, that's more my thing. I've never been one for big emotional displays. Maybe she's changing that.

"I have to get to work right away," I tell her. "In the meantime, try to think of anywhere your dad might've gone."

She bows her head. "I'm sorry. I have no idea. I don't pay attention to it. It's just been me and Mom and... and *him* when

he feels like coming home. Now he's got Mom all wrapped up in his mess."

I pull her into a hug, smoothing my hands over her shoulders and kissing the top of her head. When I kiss her, she gasps like the show of affection is as shocking to her as it is to me. I kiss her again.

"Don't beat yourself up. You shouldn't have to worry about any of this stuff."

We don't say anything for a while. Simply holding each other is enough. After a while, she says, "What should I tell my boss tomorrow? Not the truth, obviously."

"Definitely not that," I say, honestly, more than a little pissed that my woman has to even think about bosses and all the rest of it. In my mind, she's above all that. It shouldn't even enter her head. "Tell them you've been headhunted by a top talent agency. You'll be busy working all day."

"Ha, ha, ha." She turns away from me.

I grab her hand and pull her back. "The hell was that?"

"Don't make fun of me."

I step forward, pushing my body against hers. I wonder if she can feel this new heat in me—this new passion. I've never had it before. "I'd never make fun of you," I say firmly. "You're good enough. It wasn't a joke."

"Seriously, what should—"

"Don't worry about your job," I snap. "If they fire you, don't worry. I'll help you in any way you need."

She stands on her tiptoes. It's the first time *she's* initiated the kiss. I let her lead the way. We kiss slowly, her hands spreading over my back. "I can't believe you want me," she whispers, her face pressed against my chest. It's like she can't look at me when she says this.

"Why?" I ask.

"It's just... you're you. I'm me."

“That’s very helpful,” I say in a very light, teasing tone. My woman is clearly on edge. “I want you. I need you. I...”

I stop quickly. I started this by trying to delete her number. Now, I’m on the verge of giving a love-filled speech. I need to get a serious grip.

“Sir,” Sebastian says quietly from the doorway. “The room is ready.”

“Thank you,” I say. “Would you please show Angela where it is?”

I take a step away from her. She looks a little hurt, then nods and turns away. I have to put both hands behind my back to stop myself from reaching forward and grabbing her hand again, turning her toward me, and kissing her even with Sebastian there.

Instead, I go in the opposite direction. I’ll have to wake Mom and explain the singer angle. I suspect Mom will think I’m using the singing thing as an excuse. She’ll think I’ve finally found a woman I’m interested in and, for whatever reason—maybe she doesn’t have a home of her own—I’m keeping her here. That’s fine as long as Mom doesn’t know about the debt and the sharks.

I’ve got a lot of work to do.

CHAPTER 11



S carlet

I wake at eight a.m., feeling groggy. I'm not sure what time I fell asleep. I didn't think I'd be able to get any rest at all. But the second I felt the silk sheets and the soft pillows, I began to relax. My body was tired from the long shift, but my mind had different ideas.

Immediately, I reach for my phone—nothing from Mom. I left several messages last night once Elio left me. I try calling her again now. It goes to voicemail. Then I check my texts. There's one from Elio.

Morning, my singing angel. I won't be there when you get up. I've told my mom about the situation. She seems to think you're my secret girlfriend, and I'm using the singing angle as a cover story for some reason. That works for us. You can go along with it if it makes things easier. I've got several people actively searching for your mom and dad. I'm going to chase down a lead myself right now.

He sent the text just a couple of minutes ago. I sit up and quickly reply. *What sort of lead?*

It takes a few minutes for him to message me. The bedroom has an ensuite, so I grab my toothbrush from the suitcase and head in there. Nerves twist through me when I think about walking into the main apartment. Of all the ways I thought I'd meet my future husband's parents, it wasn't like this.

When I return to the bedroom, a text is waiting for me. *I'm canvassing all the neighborhoods in the city that could be classified as worse than yours.*

I thought you said that Mom's note didn't narrow it down.

Not much, but it's a start. I hope you don't mind. I've taken several photographs of your parents from your apartment.

Of course, I don't mind, I type. Anything that helps you find her.

I bite my lip, wondering if I should mention the steaminess. I want to talk about it and explain that I won't be able to give him what he clearly wanted before the interruption. However, now's not the time. Mom and Dad need help. That's all that matters.

The morning sun shining through the closed curtains makes the room look even more surreal. It's almost as big as our apartment. The carpet looks brand new. The drawers and closets are carved, ornate, shiny wood. Everything even *smells* more expensive, somehow.

What should I do? I text.

Ask Sebastian to whip you up some breakfast. Or you can eat with my mom. She should be at the dining table around eighty-thirty.

I swallow. *Does it make me a dork if this makes me wildly nervous?*

Don't worry. My mom's a good woman. She might grill you some, but you can handle it. I'm sorry. I've got to head out. Stay strong, my singing angel. I'll see you later...

I imagine him opening the door when it's dark, creeping across the room, and slipping into bed beside me. I don't have to wonder what it would feel like to have his hand pressed against my sex. The memory makes me shiver, but no, that's not right. It wasn't skin-on-skin. It wasn't the real thing.

I flinch when somebody knocks on the door. "Miss." It's the butler from last night. I recognize his voice—the *butler*. I must

be hallucinating. “Mrs. Marino would like to know if you’d join her for breakfast.”

It’s not like I have much choice here. She’s letting me stay in her home. It’s the polite thing to do. “Yeah, of course. Uh, give me a few minutes?”

“Very good.”

I put my suitcase on the bed, open it up, and look for something appropriate. I almost debate doing an internet search. *What’s the right outfit to wear to meet your not-boyfriend’s mom the night after you share some crazy steaminess and he offers to save your parents?* Somehow, I don’t think much would come up for that.

I settle on some fairly new-looking jeans and a shirt that doesn’t have holes, with the material mostly its original color. After a quick shower—the water pressure and heat are like Christmas gifts—I walk through the apartment. It’s mind-bogglingly big. I get lost twice, and then, by chance, I walk past the dining room.

“Angela?” a woman calls in an old-money sort of accent. It takes me a moment to respond to the name. Russel can’t learn that *Scarlet* is staying here, hence the name. Plus, I’m my man’s singing angel.

I poke my head through the door. Mrs. Marino looks intimidating as hell to me. She sits upright, her gray hair intricately woven, tapping her fingernail against the table. She looks more put-together than I’ve ever felt.

“Uh, hello, Mrs. Marino.”

Oh, God. I just *curtsied*. I’m not joking. I held an imaginary dress and bent forward. I expect her to laugh at me for being a complete weirdo. Thankfully, she seemed to like it, smiling and gesturing at the chair beside her. The table is long, with eight chairs around it. I sit.

“It’s lovely to meet you,” she says, offering me her hand.

I take it and shake her hand. She smells of perfume. Sadly, she reminds me of how Mom used to be, before Dad’s schemes,

before her pills. “And you, young lady. How old are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

I remember what Elio said in his text. Mrs. Marino—what the heck’s her first name—suspects I might be a possible girlfriend of Elio’s. Will she be shocked by my age? “Nineteen,” I tell her.

She smiles. “Oh, to be nineteen again. Savor these years. So young and yet so talented. My son says you’re a simply sensational singer.”

“I... uh, I try my best.” My cheeks are blazing red again. “I will try my best, I mean, for you and Mr. Marino.”

She waves a hand. “That can come later. For now, food! Do you like food?” She laughs in an almost unhinged way. “What sort of question is that? Of course, you do. It’s food. Do you like oxygen? How about water? Ha! We have to have our little jokes, don’t we? Otherwise, we’ll go simply insane.”

I laugh. I can’t help it despite everything. There’s something infectious about her energy. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“What are you in the mood for this fine morning?”

“Whatever’s convenient,” I tell her. “I don’t want to be a nuisance.”

“Nonsense. You’re our guest. Nothing is too much trouble.” She leans forward. “Between you and me, I like to keep the chefs on their toes. If you could dream up the most extravagant, unrealistic meal, you’d be doing me a favor.”

I laugh again. “Honestly, Mrs. Marino—”

“Please,” she cuts in. “Call me Allesia.”

“Allesia,” I say. “I’m fine with anything. Cereal. Bagel. Water. Whatever you can offer.”

“But what do you *want*?” she asks. “Excuse my forwardness, but something tells me that’s a new concept for you. Asking what *you* want.”

“I...” Leaning back, I look closely at her. She’s got a shrewd look on her lined face. “I guess so. How did you know that?”

“Reading people is something of a necessity for me,” she replies. “Now, don’t make me harass you any longer.”

“Eggs and bacon?” I say. “Maybe some orange juice?”

“Done,” she declares, making *me* feel like I’ve done *her* a favor by accepting breakfast. She raises her voice. “Sebastian, darling.”

The butler appears in the doorway. “Ma’am.”

“Two lots of bacon and eggs, please.”

“Of course.”

Once he’s gone, Mrs. Marino—*Alessia*—leans forward.

“Are you okay, dear?” she asks.

“Uh, yeah,” I say, trying to hide my instinctual reaction. It’s not as if I can list all my woes about Mom and Dad or the steaminess constantly trying to break out of me when I think about her son.

“Are you sure?” she presses.

I lean back, feeling a little stung. Physically, like she’s punctured me. “You seem pretty sure I’m not okay,” I comment.

Her lips flatten, and her eyes narrow. She looks like she’s about to snap at me. I wonder if I’ve made a mistake by getting too familiar with her. I should remember my role, the deferential singer. Just because she’s shown me a little kindness doesn’t mean she’ll tolerate me actually having an opinion.

Then she nods, sits back, and folds her hands. “Fair enough,” she says. “I didn’t mean to offend. It’s just that, dear, sometimes I look at people, and I see their sadness and hopelessness. Or perhaps I’m projecting. Perhaps I’m just a sad old crone with nobody to speak to properly.”

“It must be hard,” I say quietly, “after what happened to your husband.”

“Ah, yes,” she replies. “It’s difficult. I won’t lie. My Leo was always so strong. He was my lion. Leo the Lion. He was so

powerful, both physically and mentally. To see him like this is a true tragedy. I wish there were something I could do. I wish there were some spell I could cast.” She stares past me, but it’s like with Elio in the car when he was thinking about his dad, about Leo. She’s staring into the past. “But that’s life. It can be cruel, and I see the same when I look at you. Something’s troubling you.”

I shift in my chair, feeling spotlighted under her scrutiny. “I’m just trying to do my best,” I say, perhaps the vaguest statement I could’ve given.

“Aren’t we all?” she sighs. “Are you... in trouble, dear?”

It takes me a moment to understand what she’s asking. “No, I’m not pregnant.”

“But you and Elio... You’re not just a singer, are you?”

I remember what Elio said. It’s better to let his mom think we’re a couple—or involved, at least—than for her to know the truth. I look down at the table. It’s not difficult to seem shy. I don’t have to force it. “I’m not sure Elio would want me to discuss this.”

She takes my hands in hers. “You don’t have to say *anything* else. The meaning is quite, quite clear. Yes, if you don’t want to talk, it means there’s something to talk *about*, correct?”

I shrug, letting her come to her own conclusions. Soon, Sebastian brings the food. Even the eggs and bacon look expensive, and it tastes heavenly. As I eat the food, I’m able to forget about Mom, Dad, and even Elio for a few guilty minutes.

Once we finish eating, Alessia stands, holding her head. “I think I’ll have a lie-down. That’s the story of my life these days. It was lovely to meet you, *Angela*.” From her emphasis on the name, I wonder if she somehow knows it’s fake.

I return to the bedroom, sitting on the bed, waiting for a text from Elio. I need to know if he’s found Mom or Dad. Even if they weren’t missing, I’d still be eagerly gripping my phone, staring down, desperately waiting for any sign from him.

CHAPTER 12



Elio

“My brother asked you a question,” Luca says, standing behind the man tied to the chair. Luca places his hand on the man’s head. He’s around forty, plastered in tattoos of every color and pattern. A naked bulb lights the storeroom of the betting shop. Luca nudges his head. “Well?”

I lean down, holding the photo of Jessica Smith so the man can see better. “It’s simple. Have you seen this woman?”

“I don’t w-want any trouble,” the man stutters. “Not with the M-Marinos.”

“It might be a good idea to stop preying on innocent women, then, buddy,” Luca says in disgust, giving the man’s head another nudge. “I asked a friend about you. He said you like to hang around high schools, try to poach the graduates, get them hooked on shit so they’ll work in your *business*.”

Luca’s getting angry, I can tell. It’s the vein throbbing in his neck. He looks at me as if to ask if we should just end this lowlife here. I shake my head subtly.

“Have you seen her?” I growl. “Or him?” I show a photo of her dad.

His eyes snap open. He nods like a pathetic prick, happy to be able to give us something. “That’s Philip. Yeah, I know him. He was hanging around last night. Played a bit of poker.”

I grit my teeth in disgust. “With what money?”

“He owes me,” the man says, “but he took off.”

“Where?”

“Don’t know.”

“Did he say anything about where he might go?” I ask.

“He got real mad and mentioned a poker game that’d treat him better than we were. You heard of Satan’s Basin? That’s where he said he was heading.”

“That place is even more of a shithole than here,” Luca mutters. “Anything else?”

The man shakes his head frantically, desperately. He can probably sense how badly Luca wants to tear his head off. He’s almost drooling in fear. “N-no. I swear.”

“Okay. Good.” Luca takes out his pistol and pushes it against the man’s head. “Any last words?”

He starts properly whining now, trying to kick his legs, causing the chair to buck beneath him. “Puh-please.”

I give Luca a look. He gives me one back. “What?” he snaps.

“We can’t afford a murder charge,” I tell him. “We’ve got what we need.”

“This man is filth.”

“No argument there.”

“Puh-puh...”

“Shut *up*,” Luca snaps, pushing the gun firmer against his head, causing his head to tip forward so that his chin is almost touching his chest.

“I mean it,” I say.

“You’re lucky my brother’s here,” Luca says, walking around so he’s in front of the man. He kneels and pushes the gun against his throat. “If he weren’t, I’d have one hell of a time with you, buddy. Believe me. I’d turn you into goddamn soup.”

Luca places the barrel of the gun against the man's knee and pulls the trigger. I turn away at the last moment, but there's no escaping the noise. My ears start ringing right away. The man screams and throws himself backward, falling with the chair.

"If I see you in my city again," Luca growls, standing over him, "I'm taking more than a kneecap next time."

How was breakfast with Mom? I text.

It was okay, she replies immediately, telling me she was waiting near her phone. *She's a lovely woman. You were right. She thinks we're using the singer thing as a cover story.*

"We moving, bro?" Luca says from the passenger seat.

"Soon," I tell him.

"You're doing that weird smiling thing again."

I can't help but smile when I'm talking with my woman. Even if the circumstances are dark and we have a lot to worry about, it feels so natural.

Luca and I have another lead. We're going to check it out now.

Aren't you exhausted? You haven't slept.

This is more important than sleep, I tell her. *You're more important, Scarlet.*

Thank you. I hope I can repay you for all this one day.

I have to take a moment to calm myself down when I read this message. There are plenty of ways she could repay me. There's so much my woman could do. My thoughts will never stop going there, no matter what's happening. She's just too damn addictive.

I made a promise, angel, I text. *I want you to know... I've told Luca about you and me and our suspicions concerning Russel.*

He's your brother. You can trust him.

I'm glad you understand, I tell her.

It's like you said, right? Family is the most important thing.

Always, I reply.

What I don't tell her is that *our* family is going to be the most important thing. I'm filled with so much heat, love, and protective instincts when I think of our future children.

I should get moving. I'll see you later.

"Done texting your lover girl?" Luca says.

"Don't belittle it," I tell him.

He leans back, watching me with those shrewdly narrowed eyes. "I'm sorry," he says. "Hell, you must really care about her."

"I told you earlier," I snap. "The minute I saw her, it was different."

I haven't told him *everything* about how I feel. I haven't told him about my dreams for the future. The electricity that sparked between us the first moment I saw her, but I've told him enough for him to know my feelings for her are serious.

"I spoke to Russel, by the way," Luca says.

"What? When?"

"I texted him when we were driving out to the lead. He texted back when we were with our one-kneed friend."

"And?"

"It was his idea to meet at that restaurant. Apparently, he had a *very special* reason for wanting to meet there. He even said *LOL* and put a winky face, which is fucking annoying."

I smirk. "Since when are you so against texting?"

"I'm old-fashioned. I like to talk to people. Anyway, it's looking like your lady's theory might be right."

"Russel chose that restaurant because he's a sick freak and wanted to get closer to her, maybe to taunt her. Or maybe he

thought we'd be impressed if he told us what he'd done."

Luca shrugs. "Or maybe he and the Shanks are just drug-addled morons, and there's no logic behind anything they do."

"You've changed your thinking, then."

He lets out a long breath through gritted teeth. "I still trust Dad's judgment, but after our talk last night..." No matter how angry Luca and I get during arguments, we're always friends right after, and we never hold grudges. "I started thinking maybe if Dad was fully *Dad*, he wouldn't have rushed into this. Plus, if Russel *is* the one who broke into your lady's apartment, then we're done. We don't do business with people like that."

"I agree," I tell him. "Though we already *are* in business with him."

"Yeah, yeah," Luca says, sighing. "We'll burn that bridge when we come to it. For now, let's get moving. We need to find your lady's parents. By the way, you're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

He grins. "Smiling. Every time I call her your *lady*, you smile. It's like you can't help it."

"I don't think I can," I tell him. "There's something special about her."

"I'm happy for you."

"Don't be yet," I reply. "There's still too much up in the air. Her parents, Russel, and the fact I've never had a serious relationship."

I start the engine, pulling away from the alleyway I parked us in after Luca kneecapped the lowlife. As we left the storehouse, I saw a few of his men running in to tend to him. None of them would look us in the eye. There was no damn way they were going to try anything.

"Don't overthink it," Luca says. "That's your issue. Always thinking too much."

"She's nineteen," I reply. "She's so, so young."

“Why does that matter?”

“You never heard of an older man taking advantage of a young woman?”

“But that’s not what you’re doing, dumbass,” Luca says, the only man who’d ever talk to me like this. That’s one of the reasons brotherhood is so damn important. “There’s clearly something unique about her. You’ve basically been a monk for years, and even when you had girlfriends, everybody could tell you were only doing it for appearances and to keep Mom happy. Even the girlfriends could tell that.”

“I can’t argue there,” I reply. “I just wish we could’ve met under better circumstances.”

Luca shrugs. For a while, we drive without speaking. Then Luca chuckles and says, “Just think, bro. If everything works out with her, you’ll be thanking Russel. If it weren’t for him, we never would’ve gone to that restaurant, and you never would’ve met.”

“If he chose that place to put a scare in my lady,” I growl, “the only way I’ll be thanking him is with a bullet.”

CHAPTER 13



Scarlet

I focus on the simple act of unpacking my suitcase, folding the clothes, and finding space for them in the closet and drawers. I'm taking far, far longer than this task actually needs. It's the only way to keep myself somewhat sane. That's what my life has become, focusing on the present moment, the boring stuff, so my mind doesn't flit to Mom, to all the sick stuff that could be happening to her.

When my phone vibrates, I almost leap on it.

We're staking out a possible location now, Elio tells me. It's going to be a while. How are you keeping yourself busy, beautiful?

When he calls me beautiful, a warm flutter bounces through me. It lets me forget about everything else. There's something magical about my man.

I'm having a very productive day, I reply. I've folded the same shirt ten times just to keep myself occupied. I'm not sure what else to do. I think your mom's having a nap.

You could take a look at the library. Or watch a movie in the theater.

This place has a library and a theater?! It's like Beauty and the Beast.

Ha, ha. Am I the beauty or the beast?

I smile, sitting on the bed, warmth flowing through me. I don't let the nerves twist through me or let them take hold. There's no point thinking about what happens when he comes home, the sun falls, and he wants to go further. I want it, too, even with Mom missing. I'm not sure what that says about me.

I could use Mom as an excuse to hide the real reason for the nerves.

I'd say half beauty, half beast, I reply. What about me?

You're all beauty, Scarlet, no question about that.

My smile widens even more. There *must* be something unique here. I wouldn't be able to talk like this with anybody else without going crazy with guilt. It's like this deep, urgent impulse inside of me pushes all that aside.

Where are you now? I ask.

I don't think you want to know. Don't worry about what we're doing.

No, Elio, I reply. I want to know. I need to. Otherwise, I'll imagine stuff that's ten times worse.

Are you sure?

I'm not a little kid, I tell him. I can handle it.

CHAPTER 14



Elio

We're in a neighborhood known as Satan's Basin. Apparently, your dad mentioned he was going to come here for a poker game. We're currently staking out the most well-known game organizer in the neighborhood.

She takes a minute to respond. Luca leans back in his seat, eyes closed. He's always been able to relax easier than me. Even with the Family at stake, even after kneecapping a man, he can sit there completely at peace, with no stress at all.

Oh, God, she replies. *Be careful.*

Don't worry about me. I made you a promise, and I intend to keep it.

What are you waiting for? she asks, then sends a follow-up a moment later. *I didn't mean for that to sound rude. I just mean, why are you staking the place out?*

You don't have to worry about sounding rude with me, I type, then pause, rereading my message. I want to tell her that she and I are far too close for anything like that to matter. There's far too much heat between us, destiny, belonging. She never has to question herself when we're together. *We're waiting to get an idea of how many people are in there. Then we'll move in.*

I can't imagine what my mom is doing right now, my angel-voiced woman texts. *If she's there with those people, what is*

she doing? Have they kidnapped her? Is she playing poker, too? Or maybe she and Dad have decided to go on the run and leave me behind.

I almost gasp when I read that last sentence. *Do you really think they'd do that?*

I don't think Mom would, but with the pain pills, maybe Dad could convince her.

I grit my teeth. The more I hear about my woman's father—my future father-in-law—the more I dislike him. A man should stand by his daughter no matter what. She should never even have to *question* if he would abandon her. It shouldn't even enter her mind.

When we find her, we'll get answers, I text, holding back a lot about her dad. The last thing she needs right now is for me to rant about him. *Just try to relax.*

Relax? Doing what? I feel like I'm trespassing just being here.

I clench my hand around the phone. My woman should never have to feel like that in any Family-owned place, house, or business. She's going to be my mafia queen one day. She's going to give me her perfect, curvy body, her hand in marriage, and our children. She's going to provide me with a whole future.

Maybe relax isn't the right word, I reply. *But try not to stress. Hopefully, I'll have news soon.*

"Bro," Luca says, tapping me on the arm.

I look up and spot a side door to the house opening. One man walks out first, holding the bottom of a bundle of tarpaulin. Another man steps out after, holding the other end.

"Fifty bucks if you can guess what they're carrying," Luca says dryly, classic gallows humor.

I'm not in the mood for that today. "That could be her mom or her dad. Have some goddamn respect."

"Sorry," Luca says, reaching for the door. "Let's go find out before they get rid of it."

I swallow, wondering how I'm going to tell my woman if the worst has happened.

CHAPTER 15



Scarlet

“Ma’am,” Sebastian says from the other side of my closed bedroom door. “Mrs. Marino would like to see you in the study if you aren’t otherwise occupied.”

I almost laugh, wondering if staring endlessly at my phone counts as *otherwise occupied*. I haven’t received any updates about Mom or Dad since my man’s last text about fifteen minutes ago. “Uh, sure,” I say. “Where is the study?”

“I can take you there.”

I stand, brushing my clothes down. Then I fix my hair into a quick ponytail and open the door. Sebastian leads me through the luxurious apartment. We take two corners, and then he gestures to the end of a narrow hallway. “Just down there, miss.”

“Thank you,” I tell him.

Walking into the study, Alessia sits beside a tall, wide window. Sunlight bathes her. Leo sits in a wheelchair beside her, half slumped over, looking like he’s not really *here*. He’s a tragic sight, and my heart aches for them all.

“Ah, Angela.” Alessia rises from her chair with her hands clasped together. “I’d like to introduce you to the man of the house... Leonardo.”

“It’s nice to meet you, sir,” I say, going with the curtsy again.

As opposed to Alessia, who seems completely oblivious to the fact I was her waitress last night—she’s shown no sign of recognition—I’m sure I see a glint in her husband’s eyes. He doesn’t move or make a noise, but there’s something in his eyes and his lip. It twitches almost like a smile.

Alessia leans down, putting her ear close to her husband’s mouth. Then she leans up, smiling. “He says it’s lovely to meet you, too.”

I almost call her out for this. I didn’t hear *any* noise from him, but what would be the point in pretending her husband was speaking if he wasn’t capable? To keep up appearances? Why would she want to do that with me?

“We were wondering if you could sing for us,” Alessia says.

I take a step back instinctively, caught off guard. “Um...” When Alessia’s expression falters, and I see how badly she wants some brightness in her life, I quickly move forward. I force myself to smile. “Yes. I can. It’s why I’m here, after all.”

Alessia gives me a shrewd look. “Yes, and that’s the *only* reason you’re here, isn’t it, dear?”

I nod, then clasp my hands in front of me. More nerves are twisting through me than when I sang for my man. It takes me a few moments to get going. My voice falters. Alessia frowns. It’s the pity in her eyes that forces me to really start trying.

I sing a simple song about moving through a sea of fog, looking for my lifeline. The notes are long and low, and I hope the song evokes a certain type of lost sadness. At least, that’s what I was going for when I wrote it.

When I finish, I realize Alessia is staring at me with her mouth wide open. Then she turns to her husband, leans down, and brushes her hand across his cheek. “He’s crying,” she whispers. “Leo, my lion, you’re crying. Are you there, Leo? Did you like the song? Did you hear it?”

I don’t say anything, watching the exchange. It doesn’t make any sense. Why would she ask if he was *there* if she’d just spoken to him? She leaned down and put her ear to his mouth.

Was that all for show? Why would she fake that? I don't understand.

She seems to realize what she's done. She stares at me like she hates me, but I think she hates the fact she just let something slip. She didn't mean to.

"I think we're done here," Alessia says. "Thank you, Angela, and please remember whose home this is. Remember the respect we're owed."

I get the point. I didn't see this, whatever it was. I shouldn't tell her son. "Of course, Mrs. Marino," I say.

She doesn't correct me this time or say I should call her *Alessia*. When I turn away, I can feel her eyes on me. When I reach the door, she says, "You truly have a magical voice. An angel's voice."

I leave the room, wondering if I should tell her son. As I walk through the apartment, the situation niggles at me. If Leo had been speaking to her, she wouldn't have reacted like that. That seems obvious to me, but—

My phone vibrates from my pocket, cutting through my thoughts. I quickly grab it.

I'm on my way home now, Scarlet.

What happened? Did you find Mom?

No, I haven't found your mother yet.

But you found Dad? I ask.

I'll explain when I see you in person.

Stop being so damn mysterious! I type. *If something has happened, I want to know about it. Has he gotten himself into trouble again? Does he owe even more money?*

Please, just wait until I'm back.

I deserve to know. You're scaring me.

Surely, it can't be as bad as my imagination. Surely, the real demons can't be as messed up as those in my head. When he calls me, though, I know it must be deadly serious, and when

he tells me what he's found, my world crashes down. Not because of what happened to Dad—I'm a terrible daughter—but because of what it could mean for Mom.

CHAPTER 16



Elio

I wrap my arms tighter around Scarlet, smoothing my hand through her hair, wondering if I'm doing anything to comfort her. When Luca and I got our hands on the men and unwrapped the tarpaulin, we found her dad. They'd stabbed him to death over a poker argument. They were going to get rid of his body.

Ever since I got back, my woman hasn't stopped crying. The sound, the feel of her against me, the pain... It's all almost too much to handle. She feels like she's going to dissolve into pure heartache. Before, I thought that nothing could stop the savage in me. Now, I don't care about the physical side. I don't care about mauling her. I just want to stop her pain.

"What about M-Mom?" she asks.

"Luca is scouring the neighborhood with several of our men," I tell her. "I've given up on trying to keep this quiet. The whole Family is on the case. They're all over the city. We're going to find her."

"What if the men who hurt Dad find out?"

"We can't delay any longer," he tells me. "Anyway, once these bastards hear the Marino Family wants her back, there's a good chance they'll simply deliver her to us."

My woman leans back, looking up at me with red eyes. "Dad never loved me," she whispers. "He never wanted kids. He

ruined my and Mom's life, honestly. He got her addicted to those pills because it was easier than dealing with her, but he didn't deserve this."

She breaks down again, pushing her face against my chest. I hold her tightly, kissing the top of her head, knowing I'm probably less than useless right now. A long time passes like this.

Finally, she crawls up on the bed and lies down. Without a word, I join her. I pull her into my arms and hope she can feel the support burning through me. I hope it makes a difference.

After a while, it's strange. It's like I can feel her wanting to say something. Maybe it's the unspoken connection we have. The connection that was there the first moment I saw her. Or maybe it's the fact she keeps shifting around.

"What's going to happen with his..." She swallows audibly. "His body?"

Somehow, I know this isn't what she was *going* to say. Maybe I'm placing way too much emphasis on my ability to read her, but I don't think so.

"It's in a safe location," I tell her. "I can help you and your mother with the funeral."

"I don't want to think about any of this until Mom is back and safe."

"I'm going to find her," I say. "I swear."

"What about the men? The ones who... you know?"

"They're gone," I tell her gruffly.

She swallows. "Gone?"

"We searched their place. You don't want to know the filth we found on their computers. We had no choice but to end the pricks."

She kisses my chest, a shiver moving through her. "You did the right thing, and it's true. I don't want to know what you found. I think my imagination can fill it in."

We lie together without talking for a long while. Then she squeezes against my sides, looking up at me curiously.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

She averts her gaze. “Huh? Like what?”

Leaning close, I softly kiss her cheek, smoothing some of her tears away. “Like there’s something you want to tell me.”

“It’s not my place,” she murmurs.

“So there is something...”

She doesn’t reply, and I don’t try to force her. She’s been through too much for me to press her about anything. After a few minutes of holding each other, she whispers, “I don’t want to stir any trouble in your family. I know how much is at stake with your Family.”

“My family, or *the* Family?”

“Both,” she says quietly.

“Explain,” I tell her.

She speaks in a whisper, telling me about the song in the study—my dad tearing up, Mom seeming shocked, and asking if he had heard the singing.

“But if she’s been speaking to him...”

“Why would that be a shock?” I finish, nodding. “You were right to tell me this.”

“Do you think your mom...”

“Do I think she’s pretending my dad is speaking to her?”

Scarlet has her face pressed against me. When she nods, I feel it instead of seeing it. My chest is warm from where her tears have pushed through my shirt. “I can imagine other mafia queens doing that. They take advantage of their husband’s condition to get their own power, but not Mom. They were too in love, together long before Dad was the don, and she’s never cared about the business. I don’t understand it.”

“Maybe somebody else is behind it,” Scarlet says.

I sit up, my heart suddenly beating quicker, harder, with more urgency. “Go on.”

She looks up at me, beautiful even with her cheeks puffy and red from crying and messy hair from where I was rubbing it. If anything, she looks more beautiful like this. It makes her look more genuine. Real.

“What if somebody is threatening her? Or blackmailing her?”

I shake my head. “She would come to us,” I say. “I know she would. She knows that Luca and I would never let that stand.”

“Maybe it’s something she can’t talk to you about?” Scarlet says. “Remember, I don’t know what I’m talking about. I could’ve misread that whole situation. Maybe it’s just because he shed a tear.”

“Hmm, maybe,” I mutter.

“What now?” Scarlet asks.

“We find your mom. Save her. Reunite you with her.”

“But I mean... *now*. Right now. What should we do?”

“Whatever you want,” I say. “You’ve been through a lot. If you want to be alone, that’s okay. If you want me to stay here, that’s okay, too.”

“What if I want to forget?” she murmurs, sliding her hand down my chest.

I catch her wrist, the savage awaking in me. “You’ve been through a lot,” I say. “You don’t have to rush into anything.”

She shifts against me, tempting me with her body. Her heat radiates into me with an urgency that has me almost howling. Her head’s not in the right place. I’ve got to remember that. She’s not thinking clearly, but when she shivers against me as if her lust is bursting out of her, I almost lose it.

“Don’t you want to forget, too?” she whispers.

There’s a kind of desperation in her voice. She’s hungry to let everything go. If we disappear into steaminess, she doesn’t have to think. I get that. “If I let myself go,” I growl, “I’m

afraid I won't be able to stop. I'll take you hard. I'll claim your perfect body."

"Perfect?" she says doubtfully.

With a groan, I slide my hand down to her hip. I squeeze hard, feeling her curviness, her sexy-as-fuck wide hips, made for giving me a family. Made for grabbing and owning, holding as I drill her hard.

"Your body is perfect," I tell her. "*You're* perfect. Curvy in all the right places. It's so beautifully thick. You drive me nuts."

"So..." She pushes her hand lower. I let her wrist go. She smooths down toward my crotch, then pauses with a cute shivering breath as if she's working up her resolve.

"Are you sure you want to do this now?" I ask because I have to. It's the right thing to do. Maybe that's rich coming from a man like me. A killer. A mob boss. A bad man.

"I want to," she whispers. "I don't want to think anymore. Just us. Just here. Just this moment."

I almost howl as I lean in for a kiss. There's an animal in me, and I want to let him break free. She moans as our lips meet. She finds my tongue, pleasure bursting between us. I wrap my arm around her, drive my hips forward, let her feel how rock-solid she's making my dick.

She writhes against me, too. There's something about it that's so, so damn hot. It's like she can't contain her pleasure. Nothing she does is for show. Nothing she does is designed to trick me. I grab her pants and start pulling them down, waiting for her to stop me. The second I feel her slick, warm slit, I know I'll be entirely lost. I'll have to drive my dick deep. I'll have to fuck her hard. Explode in her tight hole. It will begin our future together—the start of everything.

She wriggles as I pull her pants down. I have to stop the kissing. Moving down the bed, I grab her underwear and pull them down at the same time, revealing her thick, creamy thighs and wet hole. Maybe she's doing this for the wrong reasons, and perhaps I'm a beast for taking my chance, but her pussy doesn't lie. She's glistening with wetness.

She looks up at me with those wide, pretty eyes. I kneel at the end of the bed, then grab her thighs, pulling her toward me. She shifts up the bed, bringing the scent of her tangy slit with her.

“Your pussy’s the most perfect thing of all,” I growl. “Fucking hell. You’re so wet. You smell so damn good.”

“I *smell* good?” she says, with a dreamy smile.

Goddamn, she’s right. There’s nothing better for forgetting everything than this, being together. My cock is so hard it almost hurts. Precome leaks hotly out of my end. My balls are throbbing.

“You smell perfect.”

You smell like you’re ready to give me a family—like your young body is giving me signals.

“I need to taste you,” I go on.

She bites her lip, staring down, her hair messy around her shoulders. She couldn’t look sexier if she tried. It’s how natural she is, nothing forced. “T-taste me?”

I smirk, then start kissing up her thigh. I can taste her sweat, just *her*. Maybe this would seem gross to other men, but I want to experience every part of her. Her scents. Her tastes. Her warmth. I kiss closer to her hole, sliding my hands up her thighs at the same time.

She gasps when I reach her center. Her clit and folds look swollen with lust. She makes the sexiest noise when I let out a breath. Her thighs shift. She laughs adorably.

“That tickles,” she says. “In a good way, though.”

My dick almost bursts with the tension. I lean forward and press my mouth against her pussy, stroking my tongue up her folds. I was right. She tastes so damn good. I smooth my hands around her legs, letting me massage her ass as I indulge in her sweet slit.

I pay special attention to her clit, flickering my tongue, listening to her moans. She gasps and shifts against me as I lick faster, squeezing onto her ass, feeling how *much* of her

there is—curvy flawlessness. The trembling of her legs makes my dick even harder. It's like she can hardly contain it.

Licking her faster, I move one hand to her entrance, keeping my other on her ass. I circle her hole as I claim her clit with my tongue. Her walls flutter for me like she's so excited she can barely contain it.

Her moans get more intense when I slide my finger in, just a little, enough to feel how tight she is. Enough to feel how fucking good she's going to feel when I drive my dick into her. She's going to squeeze me so hard, like she's coaxing the come out of me, and her body knows this ends with a family.

I finger her tight hole as I lick her clit. Her moaning gets frantic and breathy, as if she's barely holding on. I move even faster, chasing her orgasm, needing to hear her release, needing to feel it. When she comes for me, her pussy will get even more soaked, even better to take my dick.

She nervously strokes her hand over my head when I start finger fucking her faster. I'm licking her clit so fast it's like I'm trying to set her on fire. Her moans are sharp breaths now like she's drowning in pleasure. I'll never get tired of hearing that noise.

When she finally lets it all go, my cell phone starts to ring. Her body is vibrating and pulsing with pleasure, my ringtone playing all the while. Once she's done, she sits up, her face and neck red, like the euphoria is spreading.

She glances anxiously at my phone. She doesn't have to tell me what's on her mind. This could be news of her mom.

"Let me shut this crap off," I say. "Then you're taking every goddamn inch."

I grab my phone. Dammit. It's Luca. It could be important. Answering it, I say, "What?"

I know it's serious when he doesn't make a joke. He'd typically say something like, *What crawled up your ass and died?* But his voice is grim. "We've found your lady's mom, but we need backup. She's in a crack den, and it's teeming with the filth."

“Have you been inside yet?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know she’s there?”

“Got a look through the rear window,” he says. “There’s at least thirty men in there. It’d probably be okay, but you know what druggies are like. They’re too cracked out of their heads to know they should be afraid of the Marinos. I’d feel better with more men, not that I’m scared, obviously.”

I smirk. “Obviously. Drop me a pin. I’ll be there soon.”

“Good. I’ve got some more men coming, too. Should be an easy job.”

“Better safe than sorry.”

When I hang up, I see Scarlet pulling on her pants. I give her a look, and she says, “I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re not,” I growl. “I’m not risking you getting hurt.”

She stands up and marches right up to me. “I’m coming!”

I move in front of the door, staring down at her. She looks so sassy and strong. “You’re staying here. We can waste time arguing about it, or you can sit your ass down.”

She takes another step forward and puts her hand on my chest. “Dad’s g-gone, and now you won’t even let me *help*.”

“You can *help* by staying here,” I snarl. “You’ve never done this kind of work before. You won’t be able to do anything.”

My dick is *still* hard, especially when she bites her lip. She looks so damn captivating. If she somehow, in a warped world, wanted to carry on now, I’d leap on her. My instincts wouldn’t let me do anything else. I’d pound her soaked hole until I had nothing left to give.

“Sit down,” I tell her firmly.

She takes a step back and lowers her gaze. “So I’m your prisoner now, am I?”

“Call yourself whatever you want,” I say, “but I’m not putting you in danger. That’s the whole reason you’re here, so I can

keep you safe.”

She drops onto the bed and glares up at me. “Fine, but please, just bring her back.”

“I will,” I tell her, and I mean it.

CHAPTER 17



Scarlet

I lie in bed, my phone clasped tightly in my hands. I'm texting my friend, Charlotte, but I haven't told her anything about what's happening. I'm talking to her about her college course and nothing else. I wouldn't even know how to start explaining any of this.

Dad dead, Mom missing, my world spinning over and over and over.

I was almost relieved when the cell phone rang, interrupting our steaminess. The orgasm was like nothing I've ever experienced, so *intimate*. His tongue was so hot. I was right. It helped me forget, but once the orgasm began to come to an end, I had to think about the next bit—going all the way. He still doesn't know *just* how inexperienced I am.

Changing text conversations, I send Elio a message. *Any updates?*

We're surrounding the location now, he replies. Your mother seems to be on some sort of opium. She looks really out of it. There are a few men in there who seem to be on meth, properly amped up. We're going to approach this slowly and cautiously, but I promise I'll get her out of here.

Thank you, I reply, for everything.

Don't thank me yet, angel, he texts. Thank me when she's home.

Are you going to bring her here? I ask. Or are we going back to the apartment?

There's no way in hell I'll let you go to the apartment when the loan shark is still out there, he texts. I'll bring her to Dad's apartment.

Won't your mom get suspicious? It's one thing having a live-in singer, but her mom too?

I'll have to tell Mom the truth, he replies. Or a version of it, anyway. I'll tell her the singing front was a lie. I'll tell her I've finally found a woman for me, but you and your mom need my help.

*He's finally found a woman for him. I shouldn't let myself get all warm and tingly over this, especially when so much dread clings to me, but it's like his words are all the brighter because of the darkness. I have to remember this is a *story* he's telling his mom, a justification for bringing Mom here, not the truth.*

Thank you so much, Elio, I type. I don't know how I'll ever repay you for this.

You don't need to thank me, he replies. I'm going to keep you and your family safe. I've already failed once. I'm not going to fail again.

You didn't fail. Dad's death isn't your fault.

The sad truth is Dad's death is *his* fault. My emotions are so confused right now. Dad got us into trouble with loan sharks and then vanished, leaving us defenseless. If it weren't for Elio, I'd have no way of finding Mom. I loved Dad, but I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive him for that, even after his death. Does that make me a terrible daughter?

I won't be able to text for a while now, he replies. Try not to drive yourself crazy. I'll let you know when I'm bringing your mom home. I think she may need to go to the hospital first, so it might take a while.

As long as she's safe, that's all I care about, I send.

We're heading in soon. Stay safe, angel.

And you, Elio.

I can't keep up my casual texting with Charlotte once I know Elio's mission has started. There's too much fear drumming through me. Mom is high as a kite, could possibly OD, and if the meth heads decide to kick up a storm...

Closing my eyes tight, I imagine a different future. I see myself standing in a room full of light. Mom's sitting with a baby in her lap, looking so healthy and full of life—both of them, my child and their grandmother. More children run around, their happy footsteps like the world's best backing track. Then my husband walks into the room, my Elio Marino, dashing and silver-haired with those intense eyes. Even after all the years we will have spent together by then, he's completely captivated when he looks at me in the fantasy.

I spring to life when my phone rings. I haven't been sleeping, exactly—I don't think I'd be able to—but I've been disappearing into fantasy after fantasy. When I see that it's Elio, I answer quickly.

“Yes? Hello? Is she safe?”

There's a long pause, and then I hear Mom's voice. I can tell she's crying. “Oh, Scarlet.”

“Mom?” I yell. “Are you okay?”

“Your friend is driving me home now.” She sounds out of it and distraught at the same time, her voice torn. “I'm so sorry. I can't even... I tried to find your dad, but I lost my pills. These damned pills. I'm done with them.”

“Mom, do you know... about dad?”

“Yes,” she whispers. “Elio told me. Well, I demanded to know. I need to tell *you something*, but that can wait until we're together. I've not been a very good mother.”

“Mom—”

“It's the truth,” she snaps. “I've let Philip lead us on a merry dance. I've ruined your childhood. I've let you work to

support our family when *I* should have been. When you needed me most, I decided to get high instead. Scarlet, I've been a terrible mother, but I can do better."

I wipe a tear from my cheek. "I love you, Mom. That's never changed."

"I love you too," she replies, "but sometimes, more than love is needed."

"You're a good mom," I tell her.

"No, Scarlet. I've been a terrible mother, but I *can* do better, and that's the point. We've got a lot to talk about when I get home. Well, to Elio's apartment. One thing we need to talk about is exactly how you got involved with this man."

I swallow. "I'll explain when I see you. I love you."

She says I love you again, and then I hang up. I can't lie down after talking with Mom. Standing, I pace up and down, anxiety twisting through me. Despite what happened to Dad, I've got a big smile on my face. I'm grinning like a loon. Mom is safe. That's the most important thing.

About thirty minutes later, the door opens. Mom is wearing a hoodie two sizes too big—given to her by Elio or somebody else—making her look small and vulnerable. Her hair is tied up. She looks young and lost. Rushing across the room, she falls into my arms. I hug her fiercely, looking over her shoulder and seeing Elio in the doorway. *Thank you*, I mouth.

He nods, meeting my eyes with heavy emotion. "I'm going to explain to Mom," he says, shutting the door.

My mom sobs fiercely as we cling to each other. She cries for a long time, then takes my shoulders and pushes herself back so she can look into my eyes. "I've got to tell you now. Perhaps I should've told you years ago, but sit down, Scarlet."

I can't imagine her telling me anything that will make this any less of a relief. She's here. She's safe. That's all that matters. I can't ignore the shiver of nerves deep inside when I sit down, and she sits beside me, taking my hand and massaging it slowly. I can feel how cold and clammy she is. She still looks out of it. I think that's one reason she's being so forward.

Her eyes are saucers. She's obviously still high, but I can tell she needs to say this now. "Philip was..."

"It's okay, Mom," I mutter. "Whatever you want to say, it's okay."

She looks at the floor, tears glistening in her eyes. I smooth my free hand up her arm, rubbing her shoulder gently. "It's not okay. I've been lying to you."

"Lying?" I say. "About what?"

"About your father," she replies. "I just have to say it. Otherwise, I'll do what I've spent so many years doing—being a coward."

"Whatever it is, I can take it," I say, thinking of Elio, of how much more manageable life seems when I have him backing me up.

She lets out a long breath. "Philip wasn't your father."

I just stare at her for what feels like minutes, trying to make sense of this. It's like she's spoken a different language. Then my thoughts give me a slideshow of all those moments—the sour looks, the lack of love, the seeming indifference—and suddenly, it makes sense.

"I had a boyfriend. He passed away, unfortunately. When you were two, I found Philip. I wanted you to have a father. I wanted you to be like the other children. So we agreed to tell you that you were his. By the time I realized what a mistake it was, you were too old. Or maybe that's just an excuse for me being a complete coward."

"That's why he never seemed to care about me," I whisper.

Mom squeezes my hand so tightly it hurts, but I don't have the heart to tell her. "I think he tried his best in the beginning. Then those silly get-rich-quick schemes started. It made him bitter. It brought out all his worst qualities and mine. Let's be honest." She laughs shakily, sounding distant. "I have to tell you now, before it, before *you know what* wears off—the shit I put in my body."

Hearing Mom curse is so strange.

“Now he’s gone,” Mom whispers, shuddering all over. “He wasn’t a good man. Oh, let’s be honest. He was terrible in many ways, but he didn’t deserve to be *killed*.”

When she starts crying again, I pull her into a hug and stroke my hand through her hair, muttering soothing words. I hope they’re soothing, at least. I tell her it’s okay. I tell her I still love her. I say it repeatedly, holding her tightly, hoping she can feel the love burning through me.

Philip wasn’t my dad. My dad died before I can even remember. It all makes sense. He never wanted me because I was never *his*. I wonder if I should hate Mom, but I can’t. She’s the only family I have left... until I make one of my own.

CHAPTER 18



Elio

“You seem to have used many Family men for this pet project,” Mom says, then sips her red wine. She’s not usually much of a drinker.

We’re sitting on the balcony; the grill fire is lit. Luca sits to the side, almost like he’s getting ready to intervene if we start arguing. I lean forward, looking closely at Mom. “What did Dad say about it?”

She stares down at her glass of wine. I remember what Scarlet said about Mom’s reaction when she sang for him. Dad teared up, and Mom seemed *shocked*. She asked if he could hear and understand, but he’s been giving instructions for months.

“I haven’t spoken to him about it yet,” she says.

“Then, with all due respect, Mom, as acting don, I have every right to do what I did.”

Mom huffs and takes another sip of wine. Luca looks at me with his eyebrow raised, silently asking me why I’m speaking to her with this tone. I shake my head. I need to calm the hell down, but the idea of Mom lying about this is just sick.

“Do I have the right to ask *why* you did it, Elio?” Mom says.

“Scarlet isn’t just a singer.”

“Ah, *Scarlet*.”

I nod. “I gave her a fake name because I was worried about our new associate finding out she was here.”

“Our new... what?” Mom says.

“Russel,” I growl. “Now that I’ve told you that, I need you to promise you won’t mention anything to him.”

Mom’s face drains of color. Her eyes get wide as if she’s looking for an escape. It happened the moment I mentioned Russel’s name. “What does this have to do with *him*?”

“Promise, Mom. Please.”

“I promise. Now, *you* please answer my question.”

I run a hand through my hair. “I’ve got reason to suspect that Russel broke into Scarlet’s apartment and threatened her. He loaned her dad some cash, her dad took off, and so he threatened his daughter instead.”

“Russel suggested the restaurant,” Luca says. “Scarlet works there as a waitress. We think he was trying to scare her. Or maybe just get a look at her and see what effect his threat had. Or, well, who knows how idiots like Russel think?”

Mom scowls. “I thought *you* were in support of this stadium project.”

“I was,” Luca says, “but I won’t work with somebody who breaks into women’s homes and threatens them. If the dad took a loan, then all right, he should’ve paid it. If he didn’t pay it...” Luca shrugs. “He made his bed the day he took the cash, but to go after his daughter? That’s cartel shit. That’s the shit the Marinos have always kept out of this city.”

I smile at my little brother’s passion, then focus on Mom. I can tell she’s getting frustrated. It makes me feel like one shitty son. “What makes you think Russel is the loan shark?” she asks.

“A hunch Scarlet had.”

“A *hunch*?”

“Russel was eyeing her up at the restaurant.”

“You’re saying Angela—Scarlet—was working at the restaurant that night?”

“She served our food and drinks all night, Mom,” I say. “I knew you wouldn’t recognize her. You were too focused on Dad.”

That’s only half the truth. The other reason is that Mom rarely pays attention to waiting staff. She’s not rude—never that—but she doesn’t notice them. I probably don’t either, unless they’re curvy, perfect, and *mine*.

“Russel was reveling in it,” I say. “He chose that restaurant for a reason.”

“It’s hardly proof,” Mom replies, then drains her glass of wine.

“I can get proof,” I growl. “The debt’s owed tomorrow. The shark said he’d visit my...” Crap. I was about to say *my woman*. “Scarlet’s apartment to check on it. I’m going to set up an ambush there. When the shark shows up, we’ll spring the trap. If it’s Russel, we’ll know who we’re in business with. If not, we’ll catch the shark and make him back off. It’s a win-win.”

“That’s not a win for us,” Mom says. “It will jeopardize our business.”

She’s not looking at us. Her head’s on a swivel, constantly changing direction. It’s like she’s hiding something. I can’t stop thinking about what Scarlet said. When Luca asked if I thought Mom would pretend Dad was speaking to her, the idea seemed insane to me, but now, not so much. But *why*? If she’s doing this, she has to have a reason.

“It was Dad who said we should never be in business with men like that,” I grit out.

“Don’t yell at me, Elio,” Mom says, glaring.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“He didn’t yell,” Luca says quietly.

I wave a hand at him. “Mom,” I go on, “we have to do this. Maybe it’s a coincidence, and Russel chose that restaurant

randomly. Maybe the shark is somebody else, but we have to find out, don't we?"

"*Do we?*" Mom says, her breath coming fast as if she's about to have a meltdown. "I don't think we should put our business at risk so hastily."

"Let's ask Dad about it, then," I reply.

Mom flinches, head on a swivel again, looking anywhere but at me. She was *shocked* when my singing angel's voice stirred Dad to tears. There's no doubt in my mind now. This whole thing has been a sham. I just can't figure out why she would do that.

With a huff, she stands up. "I need a rest. This is all too messy for me. If you're going to do it, do it. You clearly don't need or want my opinion."

She storms off the balcony, slamming the glass door behind her so hard it's a miracle it doesn't shatter. Luca leans forward and crosses his arms. "That was weird. I can't remember the last time she got this upset."

"Luca, I need to tell you something, but you can't get pissed."

"Nah, fuck that," he says. "Tell me first. Then I'll decide."

Sighing, I tell him about the song, Dad's tears, and Mom's reaction.

"Are you sure Scarlet's telling the truth?" Luca says.

I have to warn myself not to slap my little brother. To him, Scarlet is a woman I've known for... hell, *days*. It might feel like years to me, but his question is fair.

"Yes," I tell him. "She has no reason to lie about that."

"True," Luca replies. "Unless she's working with somebody else. Maybe she left you that note at the restaurant because somebody—maybe even Russel—told her to. Or maybe there's no loan shark. Maybe the Irish or the... Bro? Elio?"

I don't even realize I've stood up until my little brother leans back, staring at me. The fear on his face is so rare it makes

him look like a little boy again. He's looking at me like he thinks I will hit him.

I sit down, shaking my head, trying to calm myself down. "She's not working for anybody. She's a good person."

"Okay, man. Shit. I was just saying..."

"Don't just say. You'll see she's telling the truth when we catch this loan shark bastard."

"So you *do* think Mom's been pretending Dad's been talking all these months?"

I swallow. "I don't know. If she has, something bad is happening. She wouldn't do that willingly. You know what Mom and Dad are like. Other dons have their side women. Other dons have their trophy wives. Mom and Dad are the real thing."

"No question there," Luca agrees. "What now?"

"Now, I catch up on some work. We've got the sting tomorrow, but there's still the day-to-day business. I've got reports to file. Figures to check. You know, the fun stuff."

"I'll help," Luca says.

I tilt my head at him. "Really?"

"I said I would, didn't I?" he snaps. "I want to be useful."

I reach across the table, clapping him on the arm. "Thanks, Luca. Let's get to it."

CHAPTER 19



S carlet

Mom is sleeping right now, I type, awkwardly holding my phone in one hand since my other is wrapped around Mom. She's on her side, trapping it, and I don't have the heart to move her. *So do what you need to do.*

I have to keep the Family running, he replies. *But trust me, I'd much rather be there with you. How are you feeling?*

Between hearing about what happened to Dad and then learning he wasn't actually my dad, my head's spinning, honestly.

Wait, what? he texts. *He wasn't your dad?*

Mom told me before she fell asleep. I think she wanted to do it while she was still high, so she didn't chicken out. Apparently, my real dad passed away when I was little. I always wondered why he didn't seem to want me. Now I know.

I'm sorry, angel, he sends. *You deserve better than that. Birth father or not, if he committed to be a dad to you, he should've fulfilled that role. If a man's lucky enough to have kids, he should do right by them.*

Maybe I was a terror as a child, hmm? Did you consider that? Perhaps he had a reason to hate me.

Dark humor might not be the healthiest coping mechanism, but it's better than lying here thinking of all the ugly moments with Dad—Philip—and all the sour looks and resentment.

Number one: I can't imagine you being a terror. Number two: Even if you were, it's a dad's job to help the child improve. Not to judge. Not to resent. Not to hate. When we have kids, we're going to do better.

I gasp, then bite down, not wanting to wake Mom. I have to reread the last statement to make sure I've understood him.

When WE have kids?! I text, excitement bubbling up inside of me.

When you have kids... When I have kids... We'll try to be better than that, won't we?

I swallow, warning myself to relax. Of course, he didn't mean when he and I have children together. He was speaking in general terms, but that doesn't mean my dreams will stop flying, multiplying, and bursting into the future. It doesn't mean I'm going to forget about that vision I had—my man and me, surrounded by warmth and happiness.

When I reply, I find myself thinking of ways not to *prove* that I'd be a good mother—not *convince* him or *advertise* myself, but something pretty darn close. As I write out the message, I feel like I'm applying for the best job in the world.

When I'm lucky enough to have children, I type, I will do everything differently than my parents. I don't want to criticize Mom and Dad. Well, I don't know how to talk or think about him. I know I will be there for my children, supporting them, letting them grow, and discovering their passions. I'm never going to put the responsibility on them. Don't get me wrong, Elio. I'm going to do my best to challenge them. If you ever had children, how many do you want?

My hand is aching from typing out this message one-handed. There's also a pit in my stomach, an ache that tells me he will see through my message. He's going to realize I'm talking

about *us*. I'm trying to convince him for *us*, and then he will outright laugh at me.

...

Great, we're back to this game. I try not to cringe when I see the three dots. I know he wants me. My body is still sore and tingly from the steaminess, but that doesn't mean he wants everything. That doesn't mean the idea of a future together isn't ridiculous to him.

Mom murmurs in her sleep, rolling over, finally freeing my hand. I lean across and kiss her on the head. Then I stare at my phone like I'm trying to give myself eye strain.

I've never thought about having children, he replies.

I shake my head. ***But you said you were passionate about it, remember? You said it was the Italian in you.***

There must be something wrong with me. Out of everything that's happened, including Dad, this has my heart beating the most. The idea of him not wanting kids doesn't fit into my head. Suddenly, my vision of the future starts to turn to vapor.

Yeah, that's true, but that's recent. I'd accepted the fact I was never going to have children. I assumed that Luca was going to continue our family's name. That was good enough for me.

I swallow, wincing when I hear somebody walk by outside the door. After things got icy with Alessia, I wonder how long until she tells us to get the hell out of here. So far, though, everybody has left us alone.

So what changed?

His message takes a long, long time. I sit up, unable to focus. Walking to the window, I crack the curtain, looking out on the city as the sun begins to set. It's been a long, long day of waiting, wondering, the crushing news about Dad, the confused emotions, and the clashing guilt.

Don't ask silly questions, angel, he replies.

I grit my teeth. How is that a silly question? What does he mean by that? My soul glows when I think about him meaning

everything has changed since he saw *me*. He saw me, and his universe changed shape as quickly and completely as mine did. Our destinies screamed like the crescendo in a song.

What's so silly about that? I send.

Then I start pacing the bedroom. It feels as if there's a lot at stake with his answer. Minutes pass, five, ten... Eventually, I sit down, staring at my phone: three dots, nothing, three dots, nothing. I wonder if he's just left his phone facedown somewhere. Maybe I'm driving myself nuts for no reason at all.

Finally, he texts me again, but it's not about children. *Sorry, angel. I just got a call from Mom. She wants us all to have dinner together this evening. Apparently, my dad has insisted on it. We're going to have a special guest.*

I'm tempted to tell him I don't care about that. All that matters is what we were talking about. The future. Family. Heat. Connection. Nothing else is relevant, but I won't pester him about it. If he doesn't want to talk, I can't force him.

Do you have any idea who the guest is? I ask.

No, he replies, *but she sounded stressed on the phone. I'm also suspicious about her saying Dad asked for it after what you told me.*

I cringe. *I don't want to come between you and your family, Elio. I know how important it is to you.*

It is, but so is the Family, with a capital F. Hundreds of men and their wives and kids rely on us. The city itself relies on us. We stop the filth from creeping in. We stop the thugs, the traffickers, and the drug pushers. If Mom is lying, I know she'd have a good reason. Or, at least, something she would see as a good reason.

So when are you coming back? I ask. I don't want to be at the dinner before him. Sitting with Alessia would be so awkward after what happened. She probably hates me for causing her to slip up.

I'm leaving now. I'll see you soon.

Okay, good, but what about children, Elio? What did you mean when you said I was asking silly questions? What about any of that? But before I can ask him this—not that I’m sure I would’ve had the nerve, anyway—Mom wakes, rolling over, rubbing her eyes.

She looks at me as though she’s startled. It’s like she thought she was still in the crack den. Or maybe she was pilled-up in her bed in her mind, thinking this was all a wild nightmare. Reaching for the bedside cabinet, she grits her teeth, then pulls her hand away like it’s burned.

It confuses me at first. Then I understand. It’s a habit. She was reaching for her pills. “I’m never taking another,” she says, looking at me with determination.

“What about withdrawals?” I ask quietly.

“They gave me some medication at the hospital,” she says. “More pills, but not the really bad ones, and I’m going to ween off these, too. I promise.”

I walk to the bed, sit, and take her hands in mine. She feels so clammy and cold. “I believe you, Mom,” I say, though I’m not sure it’s true.

CHAPTER 20



Elio

“What climbed up your ass and died?” Luca says from the passenger seat. “Did I fill out that spreadsheet wrong or something?” He laughs gruffly.

I drive through the city, teeth gritted.

“Elio?” Luca says, nudging me on the arm.

“We don’t have to talk,” I tell him.

“Jesus, bro,” he replies. “Is it this dinner? You know what Mom’s like. She’s probably hired some entertainment. Maybe she’s invited one of her opera singer friends over.”

“She said Dad requested the dinner,” I say, which means she most likely lied. As twisted as it might be, I believe my woman, my singing angel, over my own mother. What does that say about me? “Anyway, it’s not about that.”

“What is it, then?”

“I’m fine.”

“No,” Luca snaps. “You can get away with that shit with the men. Even with Mom and Dad, but not with me. Remember, I’ve been looking up to your grumpy ass my whole life. I’m better at reading you than you give me credit for.”

I sigh darkly. “Maybe I’m losing my mind, that’s all.”

“All the violence lately?”

“No, fuck no.” I grip the steering wheel hard. “Everything we’ve done has been justified. You saw the sick stuff those men had on their computers. I don’t feel bad about putting goddamn bullets into their worthless heads.”

“Just talk to me, then.”

“Is this a therapy session?”

“It’s about your lady,” Luca says. When I don’t reply, he continues, “I knew it. You’ve changed since you met her. It’s only been, what, a couple of days? But you’re like a different person. I know I’m right. Your lady’s making you lose your mind. That’s it, isn’t it?”

I groan as I come to a stop at a red light. “If I tell you, you have to promise not to repeat it.”

“Obviously,” he says.

“Yeah... but promise.”

He puts his hand on his chest, half-joking, half-serious. “I promise. I’ll take it to the grave.”

“Something happened to me when I first saw Scarlet,” I tell him. “The second I saw her in that restaurant, I knew I wanted her.”

“There’s nothing strange about that. I’ve wanted plenty of women as soon as I saw them.”

“Not like this,” I tell him. “The *moment* I saw her, bro, I knew she would be my future wife. She was going to be the mother of my children. She belonged—*belongs*—to me. This happened in an instant. It was like a religious revelation.”

A car behind me honks the horn. I’m lingering at the light. When Luca turns and puffs himself up, I pull away quickly. The last thing I need is my little brother getting into a road rage scene.

“You knew all of that right away?” he says quietly, his voice full of awe.

“*Instantly*,” he says. “I haven’t doubted it once. When I think about the future, the life I had before seems shallow. Pathetic.”

I worked sixteen hours a day, doing tasks I could easily delegate to give myself an excuse not to live. Now, I want to live with my woman. My Scarlet.”

Luca lets out a long breath. I glance at him. He tilts his head, looking like a little boy again, trying to make sense of his older brother. “I can’t say I’ve ever experienced anything like that,” he says, “but I know you. You’re serious about this.”

“I am,” I say passionately.

“Then you should tell her,” he says.

“Just like that? I thought you’d call me nuts.”

“Who cares if you’re nuts? Who cares if she’s half your age? Who cares if you’ve known each other for less than a week? Who *cares*, bro? If this life teaches us one thing, it’s that everything can end like *that*.” He snaps his fingers. “So you can spend your time umming and ahing over it, or you can do something about it.”

“Very wise,” I tell him.

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“No, I mean it. You’re right, but what if I scare her away?”

“If she knows what’s good for her, she won’t let you.”

“What does that mean?” I say, my voice edged with aggression.

“You’re Elio Marino. You’re richer than God. You’re going to be don one day. Any young woman with a head on her shoulders would leap at this chance.”

“That’s not what I want, though,” I growl. “I don’t want a woman with me only for my name. I want a woman who’d be with me even if I was dirt poor, even if we only had each other and were living in a tent because that’s how badly I want her. I don’t care about anything else. Just being together.”

“If you want a woman like that, you’ll be searching your entire life,” Luca replies. “There’s no such thing as a woman who’ll be with a man no matter what. They want security. It’s not a

bad thing. They need somebody capable of taking care of them and their children.”

“True,” I admit, “but I don’t want her to choose me just for my name. I want her to feel how I do.”

Luca sighs. “So you want her to have known that you were her future husband the second she saw you? That she was going to be the mother to your children? You want all that?”

I grind my teeth, saying nothing. I get his point. It’s an unrealistic expectation. Luca must sense my mood because he doesn’t say anything else. We drive in steely silence.

“Boys,” Mom says, rising from her chair in the living room when we enter.

I was going to see my woman first, but clearly, Mom has other plans. She has a frantic expression on her face, flustered, as though she’s been waiting for us. Dad sits in his wheelchair, hunched slightly forward, eyes slowly pulling shut as though he’s barely keeping himself awake.

On the armchair facing away from us, a man sits, but I can’t tell who it is from here.

“Mom,” I say, taking her hand and kissing her cheek.

“Hey, Mom,” Luca says, doing the same.

“Look, our new business partner is here,” Mom says with forced excitement.

Russel Greene stands, his hair slick with product, his grin wide and implying a lot. He’s alone, surrounded by our men, in the presence of the Marino brothers, yet he looks confident and happy to see us.

“Fellas,” he says, walking forward and offering his hand.

“Russel,” Luca replies in an unreadable tone, shaking his hand.

I shake it too, reluctantly, to keep up appearances, but I hold on to his hand for a moment longer before letting go. He tilts his head at me, a real shit-eating grin on his face.

“Shall we go into the dining room?” he says as if he’s in charge.

“I’m going to get changed first,” I say, giving Mom a look, but she’s too busy fluffing a cushion that is clearly already fluffed enough. She’s just giving herself something to do so she doesn’t have to meet my eye. “And say hello to my girlfriend.”

Mom gasps. “Your *girlfriend*?”

“You didn’t know?” I say, talking to Mom but keeping my gaze on Russel. “Scarlet Smith is my girlfriend now.”

Russel flinches at Scarlet’s name. He couldn’t make it any more obvious if he tried. “Scarlet... Smith?”

“You know her?” Luca says.

“I... no, no.”

“A bit weird of you to repeat her name ominously like that, then,” Luca comments.

“No, it’s not that,” Russel rushes to say. “I just expected a Marino to be with an Italian, that’s all.”

Hmm. It’s possible. Highly, highly unlikely, but that may be what he meant.

“Excuse me,” I say, turning and walking down the hallway.

I knock on Scarlet’s door.

“Yes?” she calls. Even her speaking voice is more angelic than any other woman’s.

“It’s me,” I tell her.

“Two seconds.” She opens the door and walks into the hallway. She’s wearing a polka-dot dress that shows off her thick, gorgeous legs. Her hair is wavy down to her shoulders, and she’s applied light makeup. It’s like she’s highlighting her natural beauty instead of covering her face. “Mom’s sleeping again. Is it okay if she skips dinner?”

“That’s fine,” I tell my woman. “I’ll have Sebastian bring her something when she’s ready to eat.”

Looping my arms around Scarlet’s waist, I pull her into a hug. She makes one of her cute, captivating noises when I lean down and press my lips against hers. We kiss deeply, passionately. I can feel the hunger in her.

I don’t mean to get carried away, but before I know it, I’ve got her pushed against the wall. I tell myself I’m listening out just in case somebody walks by, but that’s crap. I’m completely lost to my woman. I slide my hand down her body, getting closer to her hip, knowing it would be damn perfect to indulge in her curviness. Squeeze her hips, her ass, her thick, beautiful legs.

She puts her hand on my chest and pushes softly. “Elio,” she whispers breathily.

I glance up and down the hallway, making sure we’re alone, keeping my hands on her hips. There’s something addictive about holding her like this. I’m obsessed with her. Hungry.

“Just so you know, I told Mom you’re my girlfriend,” I say.

She gasps again, her hand tightening on my chest, her fingernails pressing through my shirt. “Really? Why?”

“Because you are,” I growl, pushing my lips against hers again.

We’re lost to the world for a minute or so. She smooths her hands around my neck, clinging tightly, making the steamiest moaning noises. It’s almost enough to make me snap. I should think of her dad, of everything she’s been through. Or maybe what Luca said. Any woman would jump at the chance, but when I’m kissing her, it’s like nothing else exists.

“If I’m your girlfriend,” she says, breaking off the kiss, “I think... uh... you should know something.”

I brush the hair from her face, savoring the moment—the way she tilts her head, the smile that passes across her lips. “Nothing can change how I feel about you,” I say, getting dangerously close to telling her everything, unleashing it all.

“Just so you know, when we... you know, get intimate.”

“You mean when your young, curvy, perfect body turns me into a fucking savage, and it’d take an army to stop me from claiming you?”

“Yeah, that,” she murmurs, her cheeks flushing with lust. “I’ve never done that before, gone all the way, I mean, so you’re not surprised.” She shakes her head, laughing wildly. “I think there’s something wrong with me. After everything, I still can’t say the word.”

“Say it,” I snarl. “You can. You will. Say it, Scarlet.”

I’ve forgotten about everything. Her mom. Her dad. Even Russel. My woman doesn’t even know he’s here. All that matters is this moment. My heart is thudding. My head is swimming with heat and lust. I’m aching for her.

“I’m a virgin,” she whispers.

I take a step back. I *have* to. Otherwise, my instincts will take over. I’ll lift her over my shoulder and carry her into the nearest spare bedroom, throw her down, and tear off her clothes. Drive my dick deep into her inexperienced body and fuck her hard. Fuck her *for the first time*.

“Is that okay?” she asks.

I reach forward, holding her hand tightly so she can feel my passion. “Nothing could stop me from wanting you, Scarlet. Never doubt that.”

“I just thought I should tell you,” she murmurs, smoothing her thumb over my knuckles. “I don’t want you to be disappointed.”

“You could *never* disappoint me,” I say, kissing her again, with somehow more passion this time.

There’s only so long I can leave this, though, without being a complete jackass. “I need to tell you something, too. I should’ve told you right away, but you’re so damn distracting.”

“*I am?*” she says, flushed and beautiful. “When I’m with you, Elio, it’s like *poof*.” She laughs adorably. “Everything else just

vanishes from my head. It's like a superpower."

"Russel is here," I tell her.

Her smile drops immediately.

"That's the special guest," I go on. "Mom wants us to have dinner with him."

"Maybe he's not the shark," she murmurs, a low note of hope in her voice.

"Maybe," I say, "but when I mentioned your name, he seemed to know who you were. Something's making this prick think he has power over us. The leader of the *Shanks*."

"The Shanks?"

"It's his little gang. They're worse than two-bit. Something's happening here, and I intend to find out during dinner, but I need your help, angel."

She stands up straighter. Pride touches her features. Pride fills me, too. She's got so much fierceness in her, so much to pass on to our children. "After everything you've done for me, anything."

"You're my brave, beautiful virgin," I tell her, kissing her forehead as gently as I can. Otherwise, I'll take her virginity right now. "It's time to find out once and for all. Together."

"Together," she says.

CHAPTER 21



S carlet

I expect Elio to let go of my hand when we walk into the large dining room. Though we're girlfriend and boyfriend—terms that seem like massive understatements and downright perfection—I didn't think he'd be so obvious about it in front of his parents and brother.

He holds my hand even tighter as we approach the table. Silverware gleams from each place. I recognize Luca from the restaurant. He stands, offering me a small smile. Alessia stands, too, keeping one hand on her husband's. Russel remains seated, looking at me with a confusing expression on his face, a cross between gloating and panic. Like before, I could be reading too much into this.

Elio pulls out a chair and gestures for me to sit opposite Russel. When Elio sits, everybody else takes their seats, too. Elio is on one side of me, and Luca is on the other. Then it's Alessia, Leo, and Russel.

Russel idly toys with a gleaming silver knife, looking around the table. "Thank you so much for having me, Alessia. It means a lot."

Elio flinches when Russel uses her first name. I remember what my *boyfriend* and I talked about, the test we're going to give to Russel. Surely, this is a way to find out once and for all. I'm glad to have an objective. It makes it easier than thinking about everything else.

Alessia flinches, too. She's staring at the table. "You're most welcome."

"And you, sir," Russel says, looking at Leo. "Well?" Russel glances at Alessia. "Does he have anything to say?"

He's got a wicked grin on his face. Whatever's happening here, Elio's right. He thinks he's in charge. He believes he has total control. Alessia leans down and puts her ear next to Leo's mouth, and there's no noise. If he's speaking, it must be so, so quietly.

"He said you're welcome," Alessia says.

"Did he? What a man!"

"What's on the menu, then?" Elio grunts, clearly trying to move the conversation along.

"I hope it's Italian," Russel says. "Italian food is the best, in my *humble* opinion."

"We'll start with some caviar," Alessia says.

"Caviar? For the likes of me?" Russel beams. "That's a treat I didn't expect."

It's the first time I've ever eaten caviar. I have to admit, I'm not too impressed. Give me a burger or a steak and fries any day of the week. Russel and Alessia talk about opera, and Alessia clearly knows far more. Once the waiting staff clear away the plates, Elio nudges me under the table.

That's my cue. Showtime. I've never been much of an actor—I was cruddy in high school the one time I auditioned—but today isn't like any other day. All I have to do is let the tension and the pain bubble to the surface. I let myself think about losing Dad and almost losing Mom.

Soon, the tears come. I push away from the table, shuddering.

"Dear," Alessia says, sounding like there's genuine concern in her voice. "Is everything okay?"

As Elio and I planned, I stand, quickly rushing from the room. The tears are coming far faster and with far more intensity than I thought they would. There's an aching desperation in me, just below the surface.

After cleaning myself up in the bathroom, I return to the dining room. "I'm so sorry, everyone."

"Don't be," Elio says. "You've been through a lot. Your dad, your mom, the loan shark."

I'm guessing Luca's in on this, too. He says, "Loan shark?" But I'm sure he already knows. He and Elio seem very close.

Elio sighs, placing his elbows on the table. I'm pretending to dab at my cheek, but really, I'm watching Russel keenly. He's staring at Elio with that look of panic again.

"Some lowlife broke into Scarlet's apartment and threatened her because her dad owes a debt. He got physical with her."

"Pathetic worm," Luca says. "Absolute mongrel. No real man would do something like that."

"Yeah," Elio replies. "It takes a real piece of worthless scum to threaten a woman in her own home."

"Fellas," Russel says, the idiot. He should keep his mouth shut. He looks angry, pissed that they're insulting him, even if they're not explicitly calling *him* out. "Surely you understand that if a man takes a debt and then runs, the loan shark must try to collect."

"We don't target women," Luca snaps. "It's pretty damn simple."

"What sort of mafia has a policy like that?" Russel says, laughing as he takes *another* sip of whiskey. He's been sipping it ever since we sat down. He's had three glasses more than everybody else. Maybe that's why he's making such a stupid tactical error.

"The Marinos don't hurt women," Luca says, leaning forward. "You sound like you've got a problem with that, Russel."

"What's with the tone, man?"

Luca suddenly slams his hand on the table. The cutlery leaps up and down. “Don’t fuck with me. You shouldn’t have come here.”

“Luca,” Elio says.

“No,” Luca growls. “You stupid fuck, Russel. Do you really think we’d go into business with somebody without vetting them? We’ve been following you for weeks. We saw you go to Scarlet’s apartment. We saw you leave. You were the only one that night. You’re the loan shark.”

I didn’t know Luca was going to say this. I guess Elio didn’t want to distract me from my role.

Russel drains the last of his whiskey, slams the glass down, and then sighs. “So you think you’ve got it all figured out?”

“It’s pretty simple,” Luca says. “You misjudged us. You thought we were scum like you. So you arranged that restaurant, thinking you’d have a chance to gloat about what you’d done.”

“I didn’t think you’d gone soft, but it’s true,” Russel says, shrugging.

“So you are the shark,” Elio says, standing up.

“With the teeth to prove it,” Russel says, laughing and flashing a smile.

“You shouldn’t have admitted it,” Elio says, walking slowly around the table. He’s got purpose in his gait. His intense eyes are focused, ready for violence. “Luca, get Dad and the women out of here.”

Russel stands quickly, pushing his chair back and raising his hands. “You need to wait.”

“I don’t need to do a goddamn thing.” Elio raises his hands in a fighting stance when he’s almost at Russel. For a man his size, he looks incredibly light on his feet, bouncing back and forth subtly. “Except break your nose. Maybe shatter your jaw, too. Then put you in the ground. You broke into my girlfriend’s home. You threatened her.”

Russel backs up against the wall.

“You don’t want to be here for this bit,” Luca says, leaning close to me. “Please, Scarlet, Mom, you need to leave.”

Russel yells when Elio darts forward, grabs his wrist, and throws him on the floor like a child. Elio falls on top of him, driving his knee into Russel’s chest. Veins bulge in Elio’s neck. He’s got a wild look in his eye, yet he keeps himself calm. It’s a cold, ready aggression.

“Mom?” Luca says.

I look over to find Alessia with her head in her hands. She suddenly stands up, waving a hand at Elio. “Stop, Elio! Stop *right now!* You can’t hurt him!”

CHAPTER 22



Elio

I'm just barely keeping myself restrained. The second this piece of filth admitted what he did, I almost went full berserker. The moment Luca clears the room, I *will* do just that. Snap his limbs. Smash his face with my fist until he's a bloody, broken mess. Then I'll finish the job with a steak knife right in his goddam throat.

Russel stares up at me, a coward's look of complete fear on his face. Fighting a big, angry man is much harder than a short, scared woman.

"Elio," Mom says, walking up beside us. "Please. You have to stop."

"Give me one good reason," I snarl. "This bastard deserves it."

"Please."

"Listen to your mommy, Elio—"

I drive my fist into Russel's face. Hard. My knuckle catches his nose, and it erupts with blood. He gasps and starts screaming right away, proper bitch stuff. Proper cowardly stuff. He's like a little sniveling baby.

"Elio..." Mom touches my arm. "Please. No more. Not now."

"Then explain," I yell, glaring at her, something I can't ever remember doing. Yelling at my mother makes me feel so small. "Why are we in business with this freak? This was your

choice, Mom. Dad hasn't said a goddamn thing since his stroke. I know it. You know it. Luca knows it. You've been lying this whole time."

Mom blinks, tears sliding down her cheeks. Behind her, I can see Luca frowning at me. Even if I said it in the wrong way, it's a fact. There's no way around it.

Finally, Mom nods. "Just let him up. Then I'll explain."

"What if I don't feel like letting him up?" I snarl.

"Then you'll sacrifice our entire Family," she replies.

"What? How? *How?*"

"Elio, please."

"He broke into my woman's apartment."

"It's okay," Scarlet says. I glance over and see her standing, her hands clasped in front of her, her features flushed. "Your mom clearly needs to tell you this, whatever it is. It's not like Russel is going anywhere, is he?"

"You should thank her," I tell Russel, standing and keeping my gaze on him, praying for him to try something else.

He struggles to his feet, groaning as his nose continues to piss blood.

"Cover the door, Luca."

He moves to the doorway, a steak knife in his hand, staring at Russel. I pick up a knife, too, grab Russel by the shirt, and hold the knife to his throat.

"Please move," I tell Russel. "Please fight. I'd enjoy that."

"I think you should listen to your mom," he says, and that almost makes me drive the blade into his throat—the fact he thinks he has any right to get involved with my family. Or *the* Family, and especially after what he did to my woman.

Mom stands behind her chair, her hand on her head. She glances at Dad, then at Luca. "Luca, please, take your father."

"Mom—"

"Please," she pleads.

“I’d listen to her,” Russel says. “Unless you want a nasty surprise—”

I give him a stiff jab at the base of his spine, letting him feel how serious I am. He grunts and stumbles forward. I grab his shirt, pull him backward, and press the knife against his throat again.

“Do it, Luca,” I tell him.

He groans, walking around the table. “Dad, I’m taking you to your room, okay? I’ll have Sebastian stay with you.”

Dad sits there, borderline lifeless. It breaks my damn heart. Luca wheels Dad from the room.

“We’ll wait for Luca to return.” Mom sits, sighs, and waves a hand. “You might as well sit down, dear.”

Despite the circumstances, hearing her call Scarlet *dear* touches me deeply. I know it’s a small thing, nothing to get overly excited about, but it’s enough to make me think of the future—the days when she and Mom will become friends, all this crap behind us.

Luca returns, closing the door behind him.

“Do you want to tell them?” Russel says. “Or shall I?”

Mom whimpers. “You do it, you evil man. *You fucking do it!*”

Luca and I exchange a look. It’s rare to hear Mom curse or see her so irate.

“Can I do it without a knife in my throat?” Russel says. “And maybe I could get a damn napkin for my nose?”

“You’ll be a corpse soon,” I tell him coldly. “No need to worry about any of that.”

When he laughs, I almost lose it again. I can only forcibly calm myself down when my Scarlet gives me a look. It’s a complicated look, saying a whole lot. It’s like she’s telling me she *wants* Russel to pay, but she also wants me to keep the Family safe. Maybe that involves hearing how Russel has Mom so scared.

“Get on with it,” I snap, shaking him.

Russel sighs. "I've been the leader of the Shanks for six years."

"You say that like we should be impressed," Luca snaps.

Russel shrugs. He's keeping his composure well for a man whose life is at serious risk. I'd admire it if I wasn't ready to gut him like the pig he is.

"We were less impressive when we started," Russel says. "Say what you want, but many of our members are rich. We've dragged ourselves out of the dirt. We're succeeding."

"Good for you," Scarlet says bitterly. "We should give you a round of applause."

"Feisty, aren't you?" Russel says, and then he makes an animal whining noise.

Mom averts her gaze. Scarlet gasps. I don't give a fuck. I've dragged the blade across his throat just a little, not deep enough to cut, enough to make him bleed, but not enough to hurt seriously.

"Say one more word to her," I tell him, "and the next cut won't be so nice."

"Even if *she* talks to *me*?"

"She can sing you a fucking song," I say, which would be more than he deserves, hearing her angelic voice. "You'll still keep your worthless mouth shut."

He sighs. "The point is, fellas, I'm always looking for a way to advance my cause and help my men. I put feelers out years ago, dozens of different plans. The Irish mob, the Cartel, the Marinos... any way I could get an *in*. For years, I searched. For years, I failed. I'm man enough to admit that."

Mom shudders, squeezing her hands together. On the exterior, she looks glamorous, her rings flashing, but a desperate sadness tells me something terrible is coming.

"Get to the point," Luca says.

"I finally got a lead," Russel says. "A man heard I was searching for a way in. This fella was real smart and real

scared. He was sitting on some dirt that could tear your Family apart, but he didn't have the manpower. He didn't have the vision. So he sold it to me instead."

"Sold *what* to you?" I snarl.

"A tape," Russel says, a sick note in his voice. "Are you sure you don't want to explain this part, dear Alessia?"

Mom looks up, tears in her eyes. "You're a dirty, disgusting man. You're not *even* a man."

"What sort of tape?" Luca says, but the hitch in his voice tells me he already knows.

"What do you think?" Russel snaps. "Twenty years ago, your mother had an affair. They made a little video together."

My blood turns cold. The mob life is hypocritical. I've never agreed with the rule that the woman has to be loyal and the man can sleep around if he wants. When a man chooses his woman, they should *both* be loyal. Dad feels the same. He's told me it many times, but Russel's right. If this got out, it would be a massive blow to the Family.

"Blackmail," Luca says in disgust.

"Not just simple blackmail, my friend," Russel says. "That's a very simplistic way to look at it. I knew I would have to wait for my chance. Leonardo Marino has a fierce reputation. I had to be careful."

"But then he had a stroke," I growl, "and you knew Mom would be vulnerable."

"He said I had to go along with it," Mom whispers. "I had to pretend Leo was talking to me."

"For the stadium project," I say, applying more pressure to the knife. "He knew we'd never do business with a scumbag like him otherwise. What else did he make you do, Mom?"

"Nothing," Mom replies.

"It was all *set up*," Russel says. Even with his voice made quieter by the pressure of the knife, he sounds proud. "You had to believe in the lie. So, for the time being, I had your

mom pretend your dad was giving her regular instructions. Keep the business running. Nice and simple.”

“And then the stadium,” I say, nodding. “Well done, Russel. You sick fuck. You exploited my mother’s moment of weakness.”

“Not just a moment—”

Luca suddenly springs across the room, murder in his eyes, fists clenched.

“Wait,” Mom cries, leaping to her feet and pushing her chair into his path. “You can’t hurt him.”

“Oh, really?” Luca snarls, trying to get past Mom, but she blocks his path.

“If anybody hurts him,” Scarlet says, glaring, “he’ll release the video somehow. That’s it, isn’t it, Russel? That’s what you are. A pathetic lowlife using a woman’s sexuality against her. I *bet* that’s it.”

Russel wisely doesn’t respond to this. I wonder what my woman thinks about the cheating. I can’t let myself think about it right now. Twenty years ago, when I was twenty-two. Mom and Dad have been together since before I was born. I never could’ve imagined her having an affair.

“I check in with one of my boys every four hours,” Russel says. “If he doesn’t hear from me, he has instructions to release the video. We’ve got the email addresses of several of your men. We made sure to choose the more old-fashioned and power-hungry ones who’d use it as an excuse to start a war. Your Family will tear itself apart.”

“So as long as your men hear from you every four hours, the video stays hidden,” Luca says, nodding. “You stupid fuck. You shouldn’t have told us that.”

A shiver moves through Russel. I feel it through the knife. “In p-person,” he says.

“Nope,” Luca replies. “You can’t lie now. Dumb fuck. Right. Let’s tie him up, bro. We’ll force him to check in.”

“You can’t make me,” Russel whines.

Luca finally walks around Mom. He stares at Russel with his intent and capability completely clear. He'd ragdoll him without a single question. He'd slice him to pieces. "There are ten ways I could force you," Luca says, "and that's just off the top of my head. I'll get some rope."

"Oh, lord," Mom says, burying her face in her hands and bursting into tears. It's like all the pain of the last few months, ever since Dad's stroke, is catching up with her. She melts into her chair. I can't go to her, but even if I wasn't guarding Russel, I'm not sure I *would*.

She cheated on Dad. How am I ever going to be okay with that?

Scarlet walks over to Mom and sits beside her, placing her hand on her shoulder. Mom turns and collapses against my woman, crying desperately. Scarlet hugs her tightly. There's a twitch in my chest when I see my woman comforting my mom.

When Luca returns with the rope, we tie Russel to the chair.

"Can you stay with him?" I ask Luca. "I'm going to take Scarlet and..." I trail off, realizing it's better not to talk about this in front of Russel in case he somehow gets loose.

"I got you," Luca replies. "You should probably take Mom and Dad too. I'll tell the staff to leave. From now on, vetted, trusted Family men only."

CHAPTER 23



Scarlet

Elio drives us to another penthouse about a mile from his parents. Mom, Alessia, and I sit in the back, Alessia staring out the window on one side of me and Mom doing the same on the other. They both seem spaced out for their own reasons. Leo sits in the passenger seat. My heart broke a little when I saw my man helping his dad into the car—the pain in his eyes.

When we reach the penthouse, Elio drives us into a private garage and climbs from the car. He opens the door and offers his hand to his mom. I can tell he does this reluctantly, as though it hurts him. I'm unsure what to say or do to help heal the rift between them.

Cheating... It's just so wrong. It makes me sick to think about it. Whenever I think about getting steamy, it's always with my man. I can't even imagine somebody else touching me, being naked with me. It's unnatural. It doesn't fit into my head.

"Come on, Mom," I say, touching her arm softly.

"Hmm?" she replies. "Oh, yes..."

She opens the door on her side and climbs out. She's shaky on her feet, so I offer her my arm. She clings to it gratefully as I lead her to the elevator, joining Alessia. Elio returns for his father, helping him into the wheelchair and pushing him over.

"Mom, can you take Dad and Mrs. Smith upstairs? I need to speak with Scarlet."

He speaks in a detached way, and he doesn't look at his mother. It's like he can't, not after what she did. There's a coldness to him that wasn't there before, but I can't blame him for that.

"Of course," Alessia says, pressing the button to the elevator.

Elio takes my hands and leads me away from them. Even so, he waits until they're inside the elevator. I turn and see Mom watching us, even in her spaced-out state. She's got a small smile on her face, almost like she's happy I've found somebody and can see how much belonging flames in me when I'm close to my man.

"What a dinner," he says once they're gone, shaking his head. "Jesus Christ. Mom cheated. I never would've guessed that."

"Would it really ruin the Family?" I ask.

"Don't you think cheating is serious?" he growls.

I place my hand on his chest, calming him down a little. "I'd never cheat on you," I tell him. "*Never*. Just the idea of it is sick to me."

"Promise," he says fiercely, leaning close, letting me feel the heat of his passionate, frantic breaths.

"I promise," I tell him. "I swear..."

He pushes his lips against mine. I can feel how badly he needs this kiss. There's fresh hunger in the closeness. We kiss even deeper, the passion scorching, but then he grabs my shoulders and gently pushes me away.

"I need to go back."

"What are you going to do?" I ask.

"First, we need to ensure Russel checks in with his men and that his men don't guess something's up. After that, we'll work out how to get our hands on this video and delete all the copies. Then..." He grits his teeth. "We end the prick. I would've cut him to ribbons if he hadn't pulled that slimy little ace. What he did to you..."

"It's okay," I whisper. "*I'm* okay."

“No,” he grunts. “Nothing about this is okay. You need to go now, angel. Otherwise, I won’t be able to do my job.”

“I’ll talk to you later?” I ask hopefully.

He nods, kissing me with surprising gentleness on the cheek. “I’ll text you.”

Is everything okay there? he texts a few hours later.

I’m lying in bed, Mom snoring across the room from me. We’ve decided to take the room with two singles. Mom passed out almost as soon as we got here. I’m glad she was sleeping when all the mayhem happened and didn’t have to experience any of it.

Yes, I reply. *Everybody’s in bed. What about with you?*

As good as they can be. Russel has checked in with his goons. They bought it.

Was it difficult to make him do that? I ask.

I’m not sure you want to know that. It might make you feel differently about me.

I know you have to be tough, I tell him, my thumbs moving so fast. *I know you have to be brutal sometimes, but I know you’re a good person, too. You use your toughness for a reason.*

Then yeah, he replies. *It was surprisingly difficult. I think he’s staked everything on this. He got overconfident. He’s sobered up a little now and clearly regrets it.*

What’s the next step? I ask.

Finding out how many copies there are, where he’s stashed them, and how to delete them all.

I know cheating’s wrong. I’d never do it. I swear, Elio. I only want you, but would it really ruin the Family?

Men in this life are old-fashioned, he replies. They take a dim view of a woman being unfaithful. It will make Dad look weak, weaker than he already appears. If I were don, not just acting don, maybe that would be different.

Then become don, I tell him. You can do that, can't you?

Not soon enough. There are procedures. We'd need to gather the men. I can't waste time until this video is gone. It's disgusting to even think about. A video of my mom...

I can't even imagine, I reply. I'm so sorry you have to go through this. I'm sorry any of it happened.

You don't need to apologize for anything. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't have found out what this lowlife piece of filth had over my mom. If it weren't for you, we'd be lost.

I don't think that's true, I type. Anyway, the main point is that now you've got to handle this mess. I know you can do it, Elio. You're strong. You're capable. You're experienced. You're all the things I ever dreamed my boyfriend could be.

Did you used to dream about having the perfect boyfriend, then? he asks.

One of the downsides to texting is not being able to hear the person's tone. However, I don't have to hear him to know he's probably sounding pretty bitter right about now. The stuff with his mom has got him thinking about our *relationship*. It feels so amazing—not to mention surreal—to think of it like that. Even if I've told him I would never cheat, maybe the concerns are still there.

I didn't have time to think about relationships, I text. I was too busy working, stressing, trying to help Mom. When I did think about it, I always just figured it wasn't for me. I never felt anything for anyone. Anyway, high school boys are so immature.

Some would say you would be better off with one of them, he texts. Your own age, no criminal connections... There's a lot to think about.

Are you saying you'd end things with me?

No. Never. I don't want that. I want you, Scarlet.

Then stop implying it, I type. I'm happy being with you, even if this has been the craziest couple of days of my life. Even if it shouldn't make sense, it DOES. We make sense. Tell me I'm wrong.

You're not. I feel exactly the same, but I've got twenty-three years on you. I'm a forty-two-year-old man. Some people would say you're not in the best position to make an informed decision.

Are you trying to convince me to have doubts?

COULD I convince you? he counters. The last thing I ever want to do is take advantage of you.

I sit up in bed, looking across the room at Mom, her chest rising and falling softly in silhouette. I wish he were here now, in person. Then I could hold him tight, look him directly in the eyes, and let him know how serious I am.

You could spend the next ten years trying, and you still wouldn't convince me, I type quickly. I don't care if I'm only nineteen. I don't care if people would think I'm immature. I've had to grow up fast. I know what I want—who I want. It's you.

I want you too, he replies. Just you. Nobody else. The mafia life is one-sided as hell. Men can cheat. Married men can have girlfriends, but not me, Scarlet. I only want you. Forever.

I gasp, then bite down, not wanting to wake Mom. I read his message repeatedly, trying to convince myself I'm not going crazy. I read that correctly. He wants me, only me...

Three dots appear and disappear. He's probably wondering why I'm taking so long to reply. I'm unsure how to tell him I've wanted him since the moment I saw him. How can I explain that destiny touched me the second I laid eyes on him? Fate claimed us both.

Forever? I type slowly, as if taking my time with the message means his answer will be the one I want—the one I need.

I wanted to tell you this in person, but yes. Forever. Learning what happened between Mom and Dad has made me see things differently. I can't keep this locked inside anymore.

I read his message, then see he's typing another. Turning, I sit up, placing my feet on the floor. I can't stay in bed. I feel like I need to get up and run, get up and sing, get up and *do something*. Maybe I should call him, but if he's texting, there's probably a reason. Honestly, texting about this is far easier than talking would be.

When I saw you, my singing angel, I knew you were mine. It happened before you left me that note and asked for help. It happened INSTANTLY. Before, I was a cold workaholic. I was content to work sixteen hours a day, burying my head and ignoring even the idea of relationships. But when I saw you, that all changed. I knew I had to have you.

I read this message, my heart beating so hard, a smile spreading warmly across my face. Tears threaten to sting my eyes. I can't believe he's saying this. What if somebody has somehow gotten hold of his phone? Is this really him?

I knew you were—you are—MINE. You're the future mother of my children. You're my future wife. I have to tell you this now. I can't wait. Life changes too quickly. Everything can flip upside down in a moment. Nothing is secure except us. I have to know. Do you feel the same? COULD you? Do you want to be my woman?

I'm about to reply when I see he's typing another message. I imagine my man hunched over his phone, powerful shoulders bulging, typing fast as the passion scorches through him. My body tingles just like it did when we were getting steamy, my core telling me to find him, ride him, take his seed.

My dad, my not-really-a-dad, passed away *today*. No, he was murdered, but the truth is—I couldn't even say this to Mom—I don't care. I don't even care about Mom's addiction or all the drama and bloodshed. All I care about are those three dots on my cell phone screen, telling me he's going to say something else that will send my soul soaring.

If you think I'm crazy for thinking this, you have to tell me. I need the truth. Don't tell me what you think I want to hear. Don't lie to me. Don't agree just because you want my money. I always need two things from you, Scarlet: loyalty and honesty. If you can give me those, nothing can ever break us apart.

I'm breathing fast, passion making my heart beat hard. There's so much... yes, *think it*. There's so much *love* inside of me. It's burning through me, making me want to sing and cheer. It makes me want to sink into his lap.

Send me a picture, I reply.

Why?

I need to make sure you were the one who actually sent all these messages.

Okay...

A photo of my man appears. He's not pulling some pretty boy pose like boys my age would be. He simply stares at the camera, his eyes as intense as usual.

I swallow, then start typing my message. I can't let myself wonder if this is a trick. I can't let myself wish we were sharing this under different circumstances without so much tension and doubt. I'll never forgive myself if I'm not honest in this moment.

If you want the crazy truth, Elio, I feel the same. I wanted you the first moment I saw you. I never dreamed you'd want me, too. I thought I'd be too young, too plus-size, too unglamorous. I want you badly. I need you. I want to have your babies. I want to be your life. I want to be yours, only yours, and I need you to be mine, only mine.

When I send the message, I bite down, waiting for his reply. Texting has taken on a whole new meaning since I started doing it with my man. Before, it was just a convenience for making arrangements and making small talk with Charlotte. Maybe that makes me a strange nineteen-year-old.

Yet with Elio, it's like we've gone back a hundred years. We're not texting, exactly. We're sending electronic love

letters. My heart glows when I see those three dots. There's no nervousness. He's not going to take back what he said.

Swear you're telling the truth.

I swear, Elio, I reply. I'm more confident about this than I've ever been about anything in my life. When we were talking about kids, I was thinking about US having a family. When I think about the future, I see US together. I can't imagine anybody else. If we didn't work out, I'd be a spinster forever.

If we didn't work out? There's no way for that to happen, my perfect girl, unless one of us cheated. I'd die before I cheated on you, and I'd kill any bastard who touched you.

I don't want to be with another man. I look across the room, wondering why Mom's panting so hard, and then I realize the sound is coming from me. ***You're the only one I ever want. I promise. I'd never cheat on you.***

Good, he replies. ***When this Russel crap is sorted out, we're going to be together. Properly. You'll be my mafia queen. You'll always be at my side.***

Me, a queen? I smile. ***I never thought I'd hear anybody say that.***

You're a kind, funny, sassy, beautiful, sexy, curvy, perfectly plus-size queen. Get used to it.

Perfectly plus-size? I write. ***That's something else I NEVER thought I'd hear.***

There's something I don't want to hear, beautiful—any negativity about your size. It was one of the first things I noticed about you. Your curves are perfect. Your thick, gorgeous legs. Your chest. Your wide hips and every single curvy part of you drive me wild. Never, never fucking talk badly about that. Understand?

More tingles move through me. I'm done being guilty about the way he makes me feel, the flurry of lust, the heat. So what if this has been the most eventful, stressful day of my life? This, right here, is real. ***We're real.***

Thank you for saying that, I reply. ***It means a lot.***

It's true. I'm sorry, angel. I've got to go now. Business, but I'll see you soon.

Be careful.

I will. I've got a whole lot to live for now.

I love you, I type. Then I hover over the send button and quickly delete the message. That might be a step too far. Though, would it, after everything we've shared, this instant connection?

Screw it. Typing it out again, I click *send*.

Then it's like fate gets involved. A moment later, I get a notification. The text failed to send. My signal has just dropped out. Call me superstitious, but maybe that's a sign. I quickly unsend the message, meaning it won't try to resend when the signal returns.

I lie down, too restless to sleep, my mind filled with vivid dreams about the future. Before, they were fantasies. Now, it's real. There's light at the end of this. There's hope. There's love. There's family. When you get right down to it, that's the most important thing.

CHAPTER 24



Elio

“His boys are going to get suspicious soon,” Luca says as we sit on the balcony, looking over *our* city. The large lights of the stadium construction have started going up on the outskirts, a project we never should’ve gotten involved with without proper vetting. “We’re going to have to drag the information out of him. Once we learn where he’s saved the video and any copies, we can end the bastard.”

“I’ll do it,” I growl. “After what he did to my woman.”

“Is there a reason you’re smiling?” Luca snaps.

I flatten my lips. “No.”

“You sure about that? We just learned Mom cheated on Dad. There’s a fucking *sex tape* of her out there.”

My brother doesn’t understand that while parts of my world are falling, others are ascending as if on an angel’s wings. Others are pulsing so damn brightly.

“I don’t know what to make of it,” I say, running a hand through my hair. “I can’t think why Mom would do that.”

“Did you ask her when you gave them a ride?”

“No, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. We need to focus on the business at hand. We can hear her justifications later.”

“Justifications, not reasons... interesting word choice.”

“Is there an acceptable reason?” I snap.

“I’ve cheated,” Luca mutters. “I’ve had girlfriends who have cheated, too.”

“You’ve never been married. Once a person takes that oath, it’s for life. I don’t give a damn what ups and downs you have. You stick to the path. Loyalty, honesty, family... That’s what a marriage means.”

Luca sighs. “I’ll try to talk to her soon. I feel like a kid who’s just learned Santa isn’t real. Everything’s been pulled out from underneath me.”

“I know,” I say darkly. “Mom’s a good person. If she did this, she must’ve believed there was a reason.”

“Or maybe, no matter how good a woman is, there’s always a chance they’ll stray.”

“No,” I snap. “I don’t accept that. I don’t believe it. There are good women out there. I’ve found one, and when this is over, I’m going to marry her. You’ll be my best man and soon an uncle. We’ll have it all: the Family back where it belongs and the Shanks in the dirt.”

“Amen to that,” he says.

I smirk over at him. “Then you’ll find a woman of your own. You’ll stop chasing tail. You’ll settle down. Our children will grow up together.”

“Wait a sec...” He smirks, too, though I can tell it takes tremendous effort. “How soon are *you* planning on having some little Elios and Ellas?”

“As soon as I can,” I tell him, thinking of my curvy virgin and the texts we sent earlier.

“You’ll have a head start on me, then.”

“It’s not a race,” I tell him. “Anyway, maybe that’ll be good. My sons and daughters can look out for yours.”

He reaches over and claps me on the arm. “Seeing you like this, I’ve got to admit, makes me wonder. If a cold, grumpy,

moody prick like you can start smiling because you found the right lady, maybe it'll work for me, too."

I laugh. "But you've never been cold, moody, or grumpy."

"True," he grins, "but I am a prick. You can't argue there."

We laugh together, and then one of our men knocks on the glass door to the balcony. We turn. It's Matteo, one of my father's oldest and most trusted operators, often working as the doorman to the apartment.

"Russel says he's ready to make a deal," Matteo tells us. "It didn't take long to break him. He's given us several locations for copies of the video." When Matteo says *video*, he looks down respectfully. He's the only man who knows the nature of it. The other men only know we're trying to extract information from the dog.

"And the digital copies?" Luca says in disgust.

"He's given us several passwords to several accounts. I've taken the liberty to delete them."

Luca rubs his hands together. "There's no way to be sure he's given us everything."

"We'll have to move him, keep him prisoner for a while. Maybe up to a couple of weeks, to be sure."

"And what, wait for the video to release?" Luca says.

"But if we've deleted them, he can't release it," I reply.

"I don't trust the bastard," Luca growls.

"Neither do I, but he's taken a beating. He's taken some cuts, too."

Darkness flashes across my mind, across my soul. We've had to do nasty things to the prick to make him squeal, but I'd do much, much more after what he did to my woman. Nobody gets to threaten her. Nobody gets to torment her. She's under my protection now.

"He'll take a bullet, too," I go on, "and I'll pull the goddamn trigger."

“Sir,” Matteo says. “I’m sorry, but is that the wisest move? You’re acting don...”

He’s right. Typically, the don wouldn’t pull the trigger himself. Risking prison time for the man in charge isn’t a good move, but the circumstances are different here.

“He broke into my girlfriend’s house,” I tell Matteo.

Shock registers on Matteo’s face, but he’s too experienced in the life to outright question the don.

I smirk, leaning forward. “You heard me right. He tried to blackmail my woman. He tried to make her life hell. Nobody gets to threaten her. Nobody gets to make her feel weak or small. *Nobody.*”

Matteo nods, fear flickering in place of the shock as he steps backward, frowning as if he thinks I will leap at *him*.

“Are you sure you want to advertise this, bro?” Luca asks when he’s gone.

“Why shouldn’t I?” I snap.

“You know what mob guys are like. They hear the don’s found a lady, and it won’t be long until they start talking about wedding bells.”

“Good,” I tell him. “That’s exactly what I want. If it weren’t for this crap with Russel, I’d marry her right now.”

Luca leans forward with a slight smile on his face. “Good for you, man. Good for you. Okay, time to roll out?”

“We’ll hit the physical locations,” I reply, nodding. “Then we’ll transfer Russel to one of our safe houses in the ’burbs. It’ll be simple enough to keep him there until we’re done with him. In the meantime, we’ll need to get ourselves out of that shitty stadium deal. I’m not touching anything that has Russel’s prints on it.”

Luca lets out a breath between clenched teeth. “That’s a lot of work.”

I reach over and clap him on the arm. “Rather be at the bar?”

“No. Hell no. It’s time I took after my big brother and put that hard work in.”

Luca stands, enters the apartment, and prepares for the word ahead. I take out my phone and send a text. After this, I’ll have to put my phone away and make a conscious effort not to contact my woman. She’s so distracting in the best way, constantly making me want to forget about everything but texting her and being with her.

I love you, I type, then bite down so hard my jaw hurts. Is it too fast? Is there such a thing as too fast for us?

Thinking about the future, I wonder what our kids would say if they knew I’d told their mother this so soon after meeting her. If we want—need—each other, nobody else... If even the idea of being with somebody else is bizarre to us... If we’re ready to commit our lives completely, isn’t that love? If not, what *is* love?

Screw it. I click *send*.

Staring at the screen, I wait, but a red exclamation mark appears. A “*Message failed to send*” notification appears on my screen. I’m not a superstitious man, but maybe that’s a sign.

Deleting the message, I stand, roll my neck from side to side, and swing my arms a little. There’s a lot of work to do.

CHAPTER 25



S carlet

I wake with sunlight across my face and to the sound of Mom vomiting. It's a weird contrast. Sitting up, I see Mom hunched over a small bin across the room. She looks up, her mouth aimed down, her eyes glinting apologetically.

"I'll get you some water," I say.

"Thank you," she replies wheezily.

As I walk through the apartment—smaller than the other one but just as expensive—I'm shocked to find a *spring* in my step. After everything that's happened, I should try to take this a little more seriously. I should probably be shell-shocked about Dad still. Yet all I can think about is the texts Elio and I sent each other last night, the heat, the closeness, the destiny.

Returning with the water, I place it on the side table and tenderly touch Mom's shoulder. "Have you taken your pills, the ones that will help with the withdrawals?"

She nods, shaking. "It's still going to be tough. The doctor warned me about that. I just want to sleep."

"Let's make a deal. Eat something, drink some water, then you can rest some more, yeah?"

She takes my hand, smiling with such sadness that I feel my heart trying to break down the middle. It's a sad smile, but it

also has some pride. It's like she's the kid, and I'm the grownup. "Okay, Scarlet. Thank you for being so strong."

"It's not as hard as you think," I murmur.

She laughs shakily. "Maybe not for you."

"No, I think it would be, but I've found Elio. He's helping me to be strong."

"You've... *found* him?" she says.

I swallow and nod. This is one thing I didn't take into account—her reaction. "We're going to be together long term, Mom," I say, deciding to keep the explanation simple for now. All the destiny and children talk might be too much for her.

Mom would probably have more of a reaction if she didn't feel like every inch of her body was burning intensely. Instead, a spaced-out smile spreads across her face. "After everything, you look *happy*. How is that possible?"

Love. That's my instinctual answer. However, that message not being sent has messed with my head, as crazy as that seems. Yet when *everything* seems crazy, is it fair to pick out one note of madness?

"I don't know," I say. "What do you want? Some toast?"

"Sure," she replies. "Just one slice."

I return to the kitchen and quickly make the toast. Then I have a shower, leave Mom resting in bed, and go to make myself some breakfast. As I put my bread in the toaster, Alessia enters, wearing a dark dress, her eyes downcast with heavy makeup. She looks like she's barely slept.

"Good morning, Mrs. Marino," I say.

Her expression is just as sad as Mom's. It's like she's grateful to me for even addressing her. She acts as though I will call her names, push her away, or insult her. "Yes, hello, Scarlet."

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

"How am *I* feeling?" she repeats, shaking her head as she sits at the kitchen bar. "I hardly think that's the right question."

How my *husband* feels is more to the point, isn't it? I wonder if he even knows what's going on. Oh, goodness gracious."

"What is it, Mrs.—"

"Alessia, *please*," she says tightly.

My toast pops, almost making me jump. It feels like there's way too much tension in the room. "Is something wrong?"

"Not wrong. Not right. It just feels like a relief not to have to pretend anymore. Pretend he was speaking. Pretend I knew what I was doing. Oh, I've ruined everything."

She starts to cry, hunching over. Despite what she did, I can't just stand here and watch. Walking around the bar, I place my hand on her shoulder. It's just like in the dining room last night. She turns and presses her face against me.

"You're so strong," she says after a minute or two of heart-wrenching sobbing. "Such a resilient young woman."

"I don't know about that," I say. "I try my best. It's all we can do, right?"

"But you judge me for cheating."

I hesitate. She leans back, staring firmly up at me. "If you're going to be my daughter-in-law one day, get used to being honest."

"Uh... Mrs.... Alessia... I'm not sure..."

"Oh, *please*," she says, dabbing at her cheeks. "If I know one thing, it's my family. I've never seen Elio look at anybody the way he looks at you. I tried. His father and I *tried*. We wanted grandchildren. We wanted our son to find love, but he's always been obsessed with his work. Then you came along. You changed everything. I can see it. When he looks at you, it's like how Leo used to... used to..."

She breaks down again. This time is worse than the last. I do my best to hold her, trying to contain some of her heartache. It's like she's tearing apart from the inside. Finally, she manages to stop herself. "So?" she says. "Honesty, dear, please."

I swallow a ball of nerves. Even if she made a mistake, I don't want to start our relationship with judgment, but I don't want to start it with lies, either.

"I don't agree with cheating," I tell her. "I think if you've committed yourself to one man, you should keep that commitment. If you can't, you should leave him, but there's no excuse for cheating in my book. I'm sorry."

"Don't you *dare* apologize for that," she replies. "It's exactly how I feel, which may surprise you. I was weak. Leo was working so much. I let this *person* fill my head with stories of romance and princes and princesses. I enjoyed the physical side, but I hated myself afterward. I scrubbed myself raw in the shower every time. I broke it off after a month."

When I nod, she tilts her head at me. "You don't think that's a reasonable excuse."

"With all due respect—"

"I don't need respect. Just the truth."

"Okay. There's no excuse for cheating."

"Yes, you're right. Leo knew, by the way."

I gasp. "He did?"

"I told him the day I ended it. I couldn't live with this secret. He knew and getting back to where we started was a lot of work. I thought he'd never stop hating me, but finally, we recovered."

We sit silently for a while, and then I touch her arm. "Why don't I sing for Leo?"

"Would you?" she replies eagerly, as though she's been waiting for me to ask this question. "Last time, I *know* he understood. He heard your voice. He hasn't reacted like that to anything since the stroke."

"Whenever you're ready—whenever *he's* ready—I am, too."

"He's awake now if you're sure you don't mind?"

"If I'm going to be your daughter-in-law one day, I should get used to singing, right?"

She grins, looking like a little girl for a moment. Wiping her cheeks, she nods and takes my hand. I know she's made mistakes. I know it will be hard for her sons to forgive her. Yet despite the fact she did something I could never dream of, she's a good person.

CHAPTER 26



Elio

I stand at the window of the suburban neighborhood, watching as two brothers wrestle in the front yard of the opposite house. I've got a few Family men posted at locations around the 'hood to make sure the Shanks don't find us, not that there's much chance of that happening.

It's been a long day. It's almost the evening. A long day of going from location to location, destroying hard drives, eliminating that filth. Then I was on the phone with our business manager, cutting the cords to this stadium deal before we get any deeper.

"Russel's in the basement," Luca says as he enters the living room and drops into a chair.

"Good," I reply.

"Nothing to do now except to make sure he's told us the location of every single one. I'll let him stew for tonight."

I nod. "In that case..." I reach for my pocket.

Luca chuckles. "You've been doing that all day."

Sitting opposite him, I can't help but smile. It must be how accustomed we are to this life, the fact I can still smile after everything. "I knew it would distract me if I started texting her."

Checking my phone, I finally open my text thread with Scarlet. She sent me a text several hours ago. *Good morning. I know you're busy today. I just wanted to say good luck.*

It has been busy, I reply. But I think we've deleted all the copies. I'm almost certain. Russel is adamant about it, but it's not like I'm going to trust that worm. When he's given us everything, I'll be able to get revenge for what he did to you.

...

As the three dots appear, telling me she's typing a reply, I can't help but grin widely. It means my woman has been waiting for my message, maybe. I imagine her in bed, wearing some tight-fitting PJs, her lips pursed in that sassy, sexy way of hers.

I know you'll do what you have to do, she replies.

It would be the same for any bastard who tried to hurt you, I tell her. *You're my woman now. Don't forget that—my perfect, kind, beautiful girl. Nobody gets to hurt you. Ever. How has your day been? Or is that a stupid question?*

It should've been terrible, right? she texts. *Mom's going through withdrawal hell. And there's Dad, but honestly, after what we talked about last night, I've got this floaty feeling. You know?*

I do know, I tell her. *Very well. It's*

I stop writing the message for a second, knowing what I want to say. *It's love,* but that message not being sent has prevented me from crossing that line. For now, anyway.

It's all I can think about, I go on. *Being with you.*

Me too, she replies. *When will I see you again?*

Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the day after. I have to get this sorted before I see you. Otherwise, I won't be able to focus.

Am I really THAT distracting?

I laugh, wishing she was here so badly it hurts. That's the exact reason she *can't* be here. Looking up, I imagine this suburban living room filled with photos and memories and the happy footsteps of children. In the basement, we'll have a

weight room, or maybe a studio for my woman to work on her music, not a man tied to a chair, his face a bloody pulp, several bandages covering his arms to hide the places we've cut.

You are, I tell her. You're all I can think about, but that's nothing new. You were all I could think about the first moment I saw you.

Well, to be fair, it's not like that was a long time ago.

I don't care if it was a day, a minute, or a second. When you know, you know. I don't send the message right away. I'm wondering if I should type the next bit. There's still a twisting agony in my gut when I think about it. *How's Mom? How's Dad?*

I click *send* quickly, feeling like a teenager at forty-two, as if I'm getting nervous texting the prom queen.

I was hoping you'd ask that, she replies. *But I didn't want to bring it up. I spoke to your mom this morning. She explained a little about the cheating. I asked her if I should talk to you about it if you brought it up.*

Did she try to justify it? I text.

No. She hates herself for it. She said your dad was working a lot, and the man she had an affair with filled her mind with a bunch of romantic stuff. She regrets doing it. Your dad knew, and he forgave her.

Dad KNEW?!

According to Alessia, yes.

I sit back, tapping my foot, trying to process this. If Dad knew, it's a wonder he's still with her. *That's pretty damn shocking. Dad only spoke about cheating a few times that I can remember, but it was always in the harshest possible way. The way he spoke, I thought he'd die before he stayed with a woman who cheated on him.*

Maybe he loved her too much.

Still, I couldn't do that. If you cheated on me, it would break me, and then I'd break the goddamn world. I'd find the

bastard and tear him to pieces. I'm surprised Dad didn't do the same to the man Mom was with.

He asked her not to tell him, she replies. She told me after I sang for them earlier. He purposefully didn't want to know. He was rising within the ranks. He was making a name for himself. The last thing he needed was a murder charge.

It makes sense. Dad and I have always been similar in that way—coldly calculating what's best for the business and the Family.

It's still unbelievable, text. At least, it is to me. Maybe Dad's a better man than I am.

I couldn't stay with you, either, if you cheated on me. We haven't done you-know-what yet, but I still feel that part of our relationship is mine.

EVERY part is yours, I tell her. Every piece of me belongs to you as much as every piece of you belongs to me.

I can't even think about you flirting with another woman. Does that make me needy and possessive?

You're damn right it does, but it's a good thing. I'm needy and possessive, too. I'm obsessed with you. Anything romantic—flirting, kissing, sex, all of it—we only do with each other.

Agreed, she replies. There's something else, too. I sang for your dad again. He didn't cry this time, but he made a noise.

What sort of noise? I text, my heart thudding, wondering if it's really possible.

A singing angel came into our lives, saving both Dad and me.

Sort of like a cheer? It was hard to tell, but I swear, Elio. It makes him seem way more awake. More alert. Do you know what I mean?

I think so, but I need to see it. It's been months since the stroke. Honestly, I stopped believing we'd ever get the old Dad back.

Maybe you won't, she replies.

I swallow, knowing this is another aspect of my and Scarlet's relationship I'll always value. Other women intent on slithering into the Family might tell me whatever they thought I wanted to hear. They'd tell me Dad's *definitely* going to transform. However, my Scarlet gives me what I want and need most: honesty and loyalty.

What do you mean? I ask.

Your dad, as you remember him, might not ever come back. That doesn't mean some version of him won't. I don't want to be a Debbie Downer, but I think you should temper your expectations. That's all.

Thank you for saying that, I tell her. *You're right. Still, some version is better than nothing.*

I wanted to ask you something else, she goes on. *I've been thinking about it all day, especially since I learned your dad didn't want to know who your mom cheated with.*

Ask away.

Do you have to... you-know-what Russel?

The last time she said *you-know-what*, she was talking about me claiming her perfect body. My balls tingle and swell just thinking about it. Seed pumps up my shaft. Everything aches just imagining stripping her clothes off, and... Now, she's not talking about that.

I don't want you to go to prison, she follows up.

I'll be careful, I reply.

There's something else. This new life of ours is going to be so bright. I know we have to endure some darkness. Is there a way to put him in prison instead for a very long time?

Of course, there is, I tell her. *We've got the contacts to make that happen. It wouldn't even be difficult. He's spent his life being a lowlife piece of filth. There are probably a hundred charges that would stick.*

Do that, then, she texts. *Let's try to make our new life bright, meaningful, and full of passion and light. I don't want you to do something you don't HAVE to do.*

He threatened you, I reply. He would've done far worse if you hadn't asked me for help. I'm sorry, Scarlet, but this isn't your choice.

...

Three dots appear and disappear several times. One of the downsides to texting is the fact you can type and retype a message. I want her raw, honest reaction, but maybe she's just taking time to phrase her raw, honest reaction in the best way.

I understand, she texts. I know you'll do what you think is best. I just wanted you to get my side of it.

Explain how the world would be better if we went with your plan.

I don't care about THE world. I care about OUR world. Things like this eat away at people. I know you have to unleash the savage sometimes, but if there's a way around it to preserve just a little humanity, that's what I want.

Unleash the savage... That makes me think about what *really* unleashing the savage would be like. My thoughts don't turn to murder when I read that phrase. I think about being with my woman instead, letting out the beastly hunger in me, the primal starvation.

I'll think about it, I tell her.

When we're together, will you still be doing things like this?

What? Working? Always.

No, I get that. I mean THIS specifically.

I understand. She doesn't want to come outright and talk about killing.

No, I reply. Unless there are special circumstances like these, it's highly unlikely I'll be involved. The whole Family shouldn't be involved in this, honestly. It's only this stupid Shanks crap that's drawn us in.

Okay, good, because I want my children to have a dad. I never had one, not really. That may be horrible to say so

soon after what happened, but it's true. Philip was never a father to me.

You don't need to worry about that, I reply. I'm always going to be there for our children. I will support them, push them when needed, and always encourage the best out of them. I will be the best dad I can be, and I know you'll be a perfect mother.

Really? Are you sure of that?

I lean forward, clenching my fist tightly around my phone. *I'm certain. You're kind, funny, interesting, and resilient. You're all the things it takes to be a good mother.*

Resilient? Your mom called me that earlier, too.

That's because you are, I text. After everything you've been through, you can still smile, laugh, and sing, and you've done the impossible. You've turned grumpy Elio Marino into a sappy romantic.

You can be emotional and soft and still be tough when you need to be. Thank you for saying all that.

I said it because it's the truth. You're right, too. I'll be romantic with you, but if our family needs it—our family, not THE Family—I'll let out the darkness.

What are you doing now? she asks.

I'm waiting to see if Russel is holding out on the locations of any more copies of the video. I'm tempted to leave Luca and the men here and come and see you.

I'd love that, she texts quickly.

She'd *love* that. There's that word again, but with my luck lately, my phone would explode if I tried to send her an *I love you* message.

Be careful what you wish for. If I come to you now, after learning you're just as crazy as me, I won't be able to hold myself back. I'll have to claim your virgin body. I'll have to own you. Every. Single. Inch.

I want that so badly, but what if I can't?

You can. You will. Our bodies were made for each other. If souls are real, they were made for each other, too. We belong together. Once we're naked and your tight, perfect slit feels my cock, you'll open up for me. You'll be so damn wet. You'll stop worrying the second I slip deep inside you.

Oh, God, you've made me all tingly, but I'm sharing a room with Mom. I think she needs me here for support.

Wait until she's asleep, then take one of the other bedrooms, I text. I'll want to enter quietly anyway. I don't have it in me to hash everything out with Mom now.

That will be hours, won't it?

Yes. What's wrong, my singing angel? Don't you think you can wait that long?

CHAPTER 27



S carlet

I glance across the living room at Mom. She's watching the TV with glassy eyes. I think she's deep in thought, maybe reflecting on Dad, on the path that led us here. My body buzzes all over when I reread my man's texts, my core aching. Nervousness tries to claim me, but I'd rather let my man claim me instead.

I wish you were here now, I reply. But I don't want to make promises I can't keep.

Are you having second thoughts?

No way. I want you so, so badly, Elio, but part of being a virgin means not knowing if I'll be able to perform.

It's not a performance, he texts. You don't have to put on a show. You don't have to TRY. All you have to do, my singing angel, is be you. That's all I need to drive me completely wild. Just be your curvy, perfect self.

But what if my body has other ideas?

I think I'm missing your point.

I swallow, glancing over at Mom. *What if I can't TAKE you? Is that clear enough?*

I love it when you get sassy with me, he replies. I read that word. Love. Shimmers dance around me. I'll take it slow with you at first. I'm not going to hurt you.

Then you better get here later, I tell him. Then we can try, at least. It's not like we can make a baby just by texting, is it?

Hell, if we could, we'd have a dozen by now. I've never texted this much in my life.

Me neither. It's weird. I know it's just words on a screen, but it makes me feel so close to you.

I know what you mean, he replies. But I still prefer the real thing. I always will. It will have to be late, so our moms are sleeping. I'm forty-two, but I'm sneaking around like a teenager.

Ha, ha. That's me, Elio, keeping you young. That's why we're the perfect match. You've got the experience. I've got the youth.

You're damn right. We're the perfect team. I'm getting so hard just thinking about later.

Oh yeah? What are you thinking?

Be careful with questions like that. If I start dirty-talking to you, I'll have to drive over there sooner.

I squeeze my legs together, my core burning with temptation.
Maybe I just want to know the protocol.

There's no protocol. All I know is I'll see you, lose my mind, and claim you with my rock-hard dick. I'm solid now, just thinking about you.

What about me? I ask.

Your curves, your smile, the way you fucking moan... I love how MUCH of you there is to indulge in. I'll never be able to get enough. Your thick legs. Your big, juicy ass. Those round, perfect tits. Your messy hair. The youth and light in your eyes. The fact that your fertile, young body is going to get pregnant as soon as I come deep inside of you.

"Scarlet," Mom says. "Are you okay?"

Oh, dammit. I'm panting like a real freak. It's like my womb is sending urgent lust signals through me. I'll add that to the list of crazy thoughts that haven't stopped spiraling.

“Yeah, Mom. Sorry.”

“I thought you were having a panic attack for a second.”

“No, I’m fine. Really.”

It’s more like a *lust* attack.

Maybe you’re right, I reply. I’m in the living room with Mom. I just started panting like a crazy lady. You’re making me so hot. I feel like I’m burning up.

Soon, then, he texts. If you’re asleep when I get in, I’m going to wake you by kissing those gorgeous thick legs, kissing up toward your sweet, wet slit, licking your needy clit, and making you cream all over my mouth.

I bite my lip, trying to push the lust away. It’s totally inappropriate with Mom in the same room. ***I won’t be able to sleep. I’m going to be waiting for you.***

Those three dots appear. I remember the first time, days ago. Just two? Three? It’s hard to keep track of time. It feels like we just met. Yet through the texting, it’s like I’ve known him forever. It’s like our romance is a song that’s always been waiting to be sung, and now we’re doing it, *singing* it. Together.

You better, he tells me.

CHAPTER 28



Elio

“Are you sure you don’t mind staying?” I ask Luca. We’re standing on the porch of the suburban house. As far as the neighbors know, this belongs to an elderly couple who rent it out as an Airbnb-type deal. People nod and wave to us, curious about the new visitors. We smile and wave back. They’ll never know there’s a half-dead man in the basement.

Luca shakes his head with a wry smile. “I know you’re itching to see your lady.”

I look over at the city, hazy in the setting sunlight. I’ve purposefully waited until it’s getting dark. “I just hope I don’t run into Mom.”

Luca sighs and shrugs.

“Was that a shrug?” I snap.

“We can’t hate her forever. Your lady said *Mom* said Dad already knew. If Dad knew, and he forgave her, then we’ll have to as well. Maybe he’s not the man he used to be, but Leonardo Marino’s opinion counts for something.”

“Of course it does,” I growl.

“Unless you think Mom’s lying? Dad didn’t really know?” He looks genuinely concerned.

“She wouldn’t have lied if it wasn’t for Russel,” I say. “It was blackmail, plain and simple. I doubt she’d lie about this.”

“Dad will be able to tell us one day,” Luca says fiercely. “I was looking online. It can take years for people to recover. He’ll get there. It’s time to get him into a proper rehab program. It’s time for you to step up as don.”

I clap Luca on the arm. “You’ve got no idea how happy that makes me, bro. That’s all I want for Dad, too. For him to get better.”

“You good?” Luca asks when I stare off at the city again.

I clench my teeth, thinking of the bastard in the basement, thinking of what he did to my woman: breaking in, shoving her against the wall, intimidating her, terrifying her. He thinks he can get away with it.

“Scarlet wants me to turn Russel over to the police. She thinks there’s been too much darkness.”

“What do you think?”

“It’s what I feel, and I feel like hitting him until I break my hand. If I could find it in me to do what she wanted, I would for her. Maybe it’d help me, too. Just a little less darkness, but I can’t.”

Luca nods slowly. I can tell he understands, even if he’s never felt this way about a woman. I can tell he’d want to do the same in my position. “Just go be with her tonight. We can handle all this tomorrow.”

Sitting in my car across the street from the apartment, I text my woman. *Is your mom asleep?*

Yeah, she replies. *I’m in the corner bedroom. I thought it’d be best since there’s nobody in the one next door.*

More heat floods into me. I’ve been solid ever since I started driving over here, thinking about her thick legs, her pink, glistening slit, and her hard, tasty clit. I know how tight she’s going to be around my shaft, her walls squeezing, needy, and desperate for the future.

Good. Start rubbing your pussy for me. Get yourself nice and wet.

Oh my God, Elio. You make me so hot when you say stuff like that.

Are you doing it?

Yes, she replies.

Tell me what you're doing. Precome leaks hotly from the end of my dick, actual come trying to erupt out of me. ***Be specific, my singing angel.***

I've got my hand between my legs, she replies. ***I'm stroking my clit slowly, but I'm getting quicker.***

Are you getting wet for me?

Yes. Just for you. Only for you.

I can't text anything else. My dick is pushing against my zipper like it's going to make it explode. My balls are so damn full. Pushing the car door, I almost run across the street. After riding the elevator up, I nod to the Family man at the door, who opens it for me. No questions.

The hallways are dark. I keep it that way, moving like a big cat on a hunt, and that's how it feels. Like all the hunger is taking hold of me, possessing me, owning me. I walk down the hallway and then push her door open.

Oh, *fuck*. She's lying on top of the sheets in a baggy hoodie, like a gift ready to be unwrapped so that I can see all the beauty beneath. She's only got her underwear on her bottom half, her hand wriggling beneath them.

She opens her eyes and stares up at me, her cheeks flushed. She's got an almost guilty expression on her face, as though she knows that I'm the one who's supposed to make her cream. Closing the door behind me, I stalk to the bed, kneeling down and grabbing onto her thigh.

"You're mine," I growl, indulging in her thick thighs, squeezing so that my fingers sink into her curviness. She sits up and clasps my face with her hands.

“Only yours,” she whispers. “You meant it all, yeah, Elio?”

“A future, a marriage... We’re going to have it all.”

I climb onto the bed and lie atop her, holding myself up with my arms as we kiss. I graze my body with hers, letting me feel her breasts, her thighs. Her mouth is so damn warm, and so is her slit. I push one hand against her underwear, feeling her heat beneath it, the wetness.

“Your virgin pussy is ready,” I snarl.

She pants heavily, hot breaths against me. “Are you sure?”

“I need you,” I tell her. “You’re cute and beautiful as *hell* when you’re nervous, but you’re going to open that pussy for me and take my dick. Take the future. Aren’t you?” I sound like a wild beast, growling deeply. “Scarlet?”

Her cheeks flush the shade of her name. She nods, biting her lip. “Get that hoodie off.”

She tugs at my clothes. “I could say the same to you.”

I smirk, leaning back, stripping off my shirt, then my jeans, looking at her almost the whole time. She’s doing the same. She unhooks her bra, and then I’m on her big tits as they gorgeously bounce free. I push them together, groaning when I feel this particular thickness.

When I start sucking her needy nipples, she moans, smoothing her hand through my hair. At the same time, while keeping so much hot attention on her nipples, I slide my hand between her legs and feel her naked heat and her juices seeping all over my hand.

She moans, making it a song because my singing angel can’t help but do that. I push my finger against her slit, spreading her lips apart, circling her entrance. She’s got so many sweet juices for me. She’s leaking as hotly as my tip is, precome making me burn, making me need.

Slipping my finger inside of her, I move my tongue around her nipple. She starts to tremble all over. She starts to make the sweetest noises. I’m stunned she’s getting so close, so fast. It’s

like a hunt again. I'm getting that sweet, musical orgasm from her.

Pushing my finger deeper, I move it in circles in time with my tongue. I stroke her passionately, feeling her open up for me. Her body shakes even more, her curviness rippling. She drives her fingernails against my neck, almost screaming.

I lean back, letting myself watch her. Her tits bounce as I fuck her with my finger. As the orgasm pulses through her, I slip another finger inside.

"F-fuck," she whimpers.

"You're so tight," I growl. "Your young virgin pussy is going to feel so fucking perfect around my dick."

"Y-y-ye..." Then it's like a second wave hits her. The most dick-hardening part is how adorably shocked she seems by it, smiling as she shifts against my hand in time with my fingers. She shivers against me and then lies back, stunned, wide-eyed.

I lean down and kiss her again. With one hand, I guide my dick up her leg, pushing my tip against her inner thigh, then her entrance. Passion blazes through me when I feel her hot wetness right against my tip.

"You feel big," she moans. "So, so big."

"I told you before," I growl, stroking her with my tip, opening her sweet hole up. "You're taking every inch. You're mine. Your pussy belongs to *me*."

She moans as I push my hips forward. Oh, fuck. I'm watching my dick disappear inside her. I was right. Her walls squeeze me as enthusiastically as she creamed. She grasps the sheets in big handfuls. Her tits shake as I push deeper and deeper, her heat scorching my length.

Then she pushes one hand against me. "Is that all the way in?" she moans, her voice tight.

I look down. Half my dick is inside of her, her juices sliding down the rest. "Halfway," I groan, my seed burning as if I'm going to explode right away. I can feel how badly my body

wants to do it. To make her pregnant. But I need to fuck her deeper.

“Half... way?” She bites down. “Oh, you’re so big.”

I growl and push some more... slowly. Inch by inch, watching her face. When she bites down, I stop, holding myself there. I feel her pulsing around me. It’s like her body is getting used to it.

Then she smiles and nods up at me.

I smirk. “Is that your cute-as-fuck way of saying you want more?”

I stumble over my words at the end when I feel her walls give another squeeze.

She smiles again, a victorious glint in her vibrant eyes. She knows the effect she’s having on me. She knows the power she has over me and always will. More seed rushes up my hard dick, and she nods, biting her lip in the sexiest possible way.

I push even deeper inside her. She’s moaning like she can’t take it now, but also like she wants me to keep going. It’s like her virgin slit is fighting with her deep need. Her horny-as-fuck body is hungry for my seed. My thoughts are wild, but I know they’re true, too. This leads to everything—perfection.

Finally, her slit is wrapped tightly around the base of my dick. I hold it there, feeling her heat, feeling her neediness. She blinks up at me. For a second, I think she’s going to tell me to stop, but then her lips twitch captivately.

“I told you,” I say fiercely. “You’re going to take every inch. Every. Single. One.”

She reaches up and digs her fingernails into my shoulders. I can read the passion easily. It’s moving through her like an earthquake, changing her, changing us both.

“Y-yes,” she whimpers. “Oh... my... yes.”

I slide my dick out. When my tip slips out of her, she moans in the neediest way. I push inside again, savoring every inch, feeling her deepest parts, her most intimate parts. We’re as close as two people can get, melting together. The moment I

saw her, I knew it was leading here. My dick balls-deep in her tight slit. The future is calling to us.

Slipping out again, I drive harder, faster. The mattress makes a whining noise. My woman starts to move with me, her hands pushing her breasts together.

“Yes,” I groan. “Fuck. Rub those nipples, too.”

“Like this?”

My body keeps trying to end this early. When she gently pinches and pulls on her nipples, the tip of my cock bulges. The pressure is so damn intense. Still, I keep fucking her faster, more frantically. She bounces in time with me, her mouth open, that shocked look in her virgin eyes. No, not a virgin. Not anymore.

She applies *more* pressure. I feel her guiding her curvy hips down my dick, stroking me with her hole. She lets her nipples go and grabs onto my arms, rocking with me. I push so deep, so hard. I’m stretching her horny hole. She gasps and bounces even more.

“Oh, oh, *fuck*,” I groan. “You better come on my dick soon. I need to see it. See your cream. My perfect... singing... angel...”

I shudder between the words, struggling to maintain control. She bites her lip. Fuck, I almost do it, but I need to feel her creaming on my dick first. I need to see her soak my hard cock, so I can’t even see my skin, just her cream.

She bounces up and down like she already knows how to please her man. It’s all instinct. She doesn’t have to think about it any more than *I* have to think about it. We can listen to the voices inside us that started shouting the second we saw each other.

I lie on top of her, feeling her tits against my chest, her belly against mine, curvy as the rest of her, ready for a baby. “I love you so fucking much,” I moan in her ear.

She gasps, then kisses me. We’re moving so fast, it’s more like she rubs her mouth across my cheek. “I love you too. I... love... you.”

We both gasp at the same time. Seed surges up my shaft. It's like a wave of lava bursting out of me. I've never felt something this intense. In all those long, gray hours at my desk, I never dreamed I'd feel something filled with so much passion. My singing angel. The future mother of my children.

I'm emptying myself into her tight, fertile body. I'm filling her slit right up. She's pulsing around me, massaging my dick, sending thick cream down my length. I turn and try to kiss her. Our teeth click together. She laughs, and I know I'll never forget the sound. That laugh. Full of excitement and love and a readiness for adventure.

She's the best thing that ever happened to me. I knew it the second I saw her, but now it's like our bodies are fusing together. How the hell is a cold bastard like me thinking something like that? She's changed me. I'll never be able to go back to being the man I was before.

Her laugh turns into another moan when her pussy shudders one last time. It's like she's caressing the last of my seed out of me. I collapse atop her, kissing her cheek, then bite down on her shoulder softly.

She pushes me gently. I roll onto the bed and immediately wrap my arm around her, kissing the top of her head, savoring her scent, just savoring *her*. Everything about her is so damn perfect.

"Did you mean it?" she whispers.

"I." I kiss her. "Love." Again. "You." And again.

She squeezes onto my side and pulls herself against me. I hold her even tighter. Nothing could make me let go: no gang war, no blackmail, no cheating, no temptation, nothing. She's my woman, the only person in this goddamn world I ever want to be with.

She sniffles from beside me, sobbing quietly. That's when I realize I'm talking aloud. "My woman," I repeat. "I mean it. I never want anybody else."

"Neither do I," she whispers, pulling herself even closer.

CHAPTER 29



*L*uca

I walk into the basement, a knife in my hand, knowing I have to do this for my brother. He's changed these last couple of days. A man like me, I never spend much time thinking about love. Sure, I want a family one day, but I'm too much of a dog. Not my big brother. His life was as gray as the streaks in his hair, but Scarlet's brought color into it.

Russel cringes when he sees me. He's got dried blood on the side of his head. His arms are covered in it, too. I don't feel any pity. Men like Elio and I learn to switch off those parts of ourselves when we need to. It's not that we're less human. We're just better at pretending we're not when we need to.

"I've been asking around about you," I tell him, walking across the room.

I don't enjoy the way he flinches with each step. I don't dislike it either. It's entirely neutral to me. The life is the life; that's all. A man, if he's worth anything at all, has to take action. Scarlet asked for less darkness, but I saw that look in my big brother's eyes. I saw the devil. He won't be able to stop himself. He cares about his lady too deeply.

Kneeling down, I rip the duct tape from Russel's mouth.

"You had me fooled. Or maybe I wanted to be fooled. I wanted to believe my old man still knew what he was doing. You took advantage of that." I trail the knife up his neck. He shudders.

“But I’ve learned a lot these last few hours. We found some videos of our own.”

He screams when I drive the knife into his knee hard, fucking him up badly. He might bleed out. I lost my temper.

“I saw what you did to those women,” I growl, twisting the blade. “There are wolves and sheepdogs, you little bitch, but you’re neither. You’re meat on a bone. I could happily beat you to death, but you’re going to prison, and everybody in there is going to know what sort of monster you are. They’re going to eat you alive.”

I twist the blade, wrench it loose, then headbutt him. I’m not lying about the videos. Russel is into some really sick shit, far worse than blackmailing Mom.

Standing up and turning away from him before I get carried away, I leave the basement and nod to Matteo. He must’ve heard something.

“Let’s go with Plan B,” I tell him. “Get Russel to the hospital. Make sure the cops know about it. Make sure the Marino name is kept out of it.”

Matteo is already walking toward the basement stairs before I’m even done talking. That’s how it works in the Family. We do the right thing, even if our methods are a thousand shades of fucked up.

Walking into the garden, I light a cigarette. It’s a bad habit. Elio doesn’t even know I’ve picked it up again. I smoke, letting my head clear. I’ve got blood on my hand, spatters of it. The night is dark, but no lights switch on. Nobody else heard what I did to that scumbag. Picking up my cell phone, I text my brother. *Are you awake?*

A minute later, he responds. *Yeah, but I’m busy. Is it important?*

That makes me smile. There was a time when, day or the middle of the night, Elio would drop whatever he was doing if I texted him. That’s because he was only ever working, and we mainly discussed work. It’s good to think of him as busy with his woman.

What we talked about... a little less darkness. It's done. You don't have to think about it anymore.

I'm wondering if he's pissed as I wait for his reply. I could see the violent intent in his eyes. He was ready to tear that lowlife to pieces. My phone vibrates—a new message.

Thank you, brother.

CHAPTER 30



S carlet

I think this is going well, I text Elio, looking at him across the restaurant. As he stands at the bar of the restaurant where I used to work, I have to remind myself that we made it. It's been three days since the police arrested Russel in the hospital. Initially, my man told me they would keep Russel for weeks.

“Luca did me a favor. He found some dirt on Russel. Something so bad, it doesn't matter what he says now. With me as don, even if that piece of filth tried to leak something, I'd keep the city in check.”

There have been no leaks, though. From the darkness in my man's eyes when he talks about Russel, I know there's lots he's not telling me. I know my Elio did violent, bloody things to that man to protect me.

Elio reaches into the pocket of his silver suit jacket, reads the text message, and smirks over at me. He's *mine*. We've said *I love you* so many times I've lost count. The first time we had sex, it was shocking and crazy, and I was struggling to believe I could be everything my man wanted me to be. Now, there's no doubt.

I'm surprised, honestly, he texts, leaning against the bar, looking so stylish and confident and *mine*. ***Even Dad looks like he's having a good time.***

Looking across the table at Luca smirking at his blond date, Mom sitting beside Alessia, and Leo with a soft smile on his face, I remind myself how lucky I am— how lucky *we* are. Russel and his *Shanks* almost ruined our lives, but we fought for the Family, for *family*, period.

Terri approaches, a grin on her face. “How may I serve the lady?” she says, then leans down and whispers, “I’m so happy for you. You both look over the moon to be together.”

I touch her hand. “We are, but don’t think I’m all high and mighty now just because I’m on this side of the table. I’ll always be a waitress at heart.”

“No, girl,” Terri says confidently, picking up a plate. “You’ve always been destined for greater things. Don’t think I haven’t heard you singing when you think nobody’s listening. Maybe you don’t even know you’re doing it, but I know you’re going places.”

I smile and touch her arm. *You’re a mafia queen now*, Elio texts me from the bar. *Don’t feel guilty about that.*

How can you read me from all the way over there, hmm?

He smirks. *I can read you just through texting. Don’t be so shocked, beautiful.*

“Look at you two,” Alessia says, a big smile on her face. “Like two excited little doves.”

“Mom, did you just call Elio a *dove*?” Luca says, chuckling.

She beams. “I called him *little*, too. That’s the thing about motherhood, Luca. No matter how old your children get, they’re always little. They’re always tiny. They always need you.”

Tears press against my eyes, trying to fall. She’s taken my broodiness to another level. Every time Elio and I make love, I lie there with my hand on my belly, wondering, hoping.

“She’s right, though.” Luca grins over. I know what he did for his brother. I hope when Elio and I have children, they’re as close as he and Luca. “You two are almost making me think

love is possible. That's a psychopathic achievement right there."

His date laughs, but I can see there's no real love between them. Or maybe that's judgmental of me. It's not like every relationship can start with the thunderbolt of need that began ours. It's not like I can expect everybody else to know instantly when they see their man.

Suddenly, everybody is looking at me like they're expecting something. My phone vibrates in my pocket. Across the restaurant—what the hell—Elio is on one knee, looking at me. The whole restaurant has gone quiet.

"Check your phone," Alessia whispers, tears in her eyes.

I take it out and go to my texts. There's a message from Elio.
Will you marry me?

I spring out of the chair. I've thrown my phone by accident. "Yes," I cry, no embarrassment at all. It's like everybody else has disappeared. My man is rushing across the restaurant.

He sweeps me into his arms and spins me around. My whole universe is spinning. A song soars in my heart. I never knew happiness like this could exist. I never knew *I* could experience it.

"Wait, the ring." Elio chuckles, taking my hand and slipping it onto my finger. It's a large, beautiful diamond in a silver band. It glistens on my finger. Elio leans in and kisses me. I can feel the hunger in him, the desire to make the kiss deeper, more real, but he's holding back. He doesn't want to let himself go in front of everybody.

"Oh my God, Leo!"

We all turn. Leo has my phone in his hand.

"Did he catch it?" Luca says, in shock.

Elio steps forward. "Dad?"

Slowly, a smile spreads across Leo's face.

EPILOGUE



TWO WEEKS LATER

Elio

“There’s a system to everything,” I tell Luca, leading him through the office. There have been times in the past when Luca would say he wanted to learn about the business more. Then he’d come in hungover, stinking of booze, and not paying attention. Now, though, I see how alert he is. “Far more than half the business is legit now. That takes real skills. Not street bullshit.”

Luca nods, leaning against the pillar. The city is behind him, shown through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

“I can handle it,” he says.

“I noticed you weren’t drinking on the night,” I reply.

He grins. He doesn’t have to ask when I mean by *the night*. He knows I’m talking about asking my woman the most important question of our lives. He knows it was the most memorable moment of my life.

“Yeah, I’ve been cutting back, and I quit smoking.”

I nod. “Good.”

He tilts his head. “You knew?”

Honestly, I didn’t, but it never hurts to seem smart in front of my little brother. “Of course I did. Hang on.” I reach for my phone.

He chuckles. “Look at your face light up.”

My face lights up even more. My whole world does. Scarlet has sent me a photo of a pregnancy test. It’s positive. Then a text comes through. ***This is it, Elio. We’re going to have a baby. Sorry for texting. I know you’re at work. But... I HAD to let you know. When you’re done with your meetings, call me.***

I’m on my feet. I’m cheering. Luca rushes over with a little kid’s smile on his face, melting years away, happy just because I am, even if he doesn’t know the reason. “What is it, bro? You look so happy! It’s freaking me out.”

When I tell him, he lifts me into a bear hug and picks me up right off my feet. I laugh and pat him on the back. It’s happening. Our lives are beginning. I’m going to be a father.

EPILOGUE



TEN MONTHS LATER

S carlet

I stand over Molly's crib, our daughter sleeping peacefully with a soft smile on her face. I could watch her for hours. I *do* watch her for hours, and I never get bored. I never stop being fascinated that my husband and I made something, somebody, so beautiful.

When she opens her eyes and starts crying, I keep singing. I thought she was asleep. I sing softly, without words at first, humming some of it. Her face is so cute when I do this. It's like she's trying to sing when she opens her mouth with that adorable smile.

I add some words when she starts crying again. It's weird. Even if she can't talk—she's a long way off from that—I know what she's telling me. She likes it when I add words to the songs.

"My little baby, an angel so bright, my little darling, my perfect light." I lean down, gently kissing her on the forehead. She closes her eyes and starts sleeping again. She's so warm. She fills me with so much love. It's like reuniting with somebody I met long ago rather than meeting somebody new. She's a piece of me.

"Your daddy's a devil, they say. But who keeps the baddies away? He's your shining knight by day. And at night..."

"Keep going," Elio says from the doorway, his voice husky.

I turn, a smile spreading across my lips. He leans in the doorway, shirtless, still looking a little sweaty from what we did before I came to check on her. I'm not ready for the real thing just yet, so soon after the birth, but my man has other ways to make me tingle.

"I can't think of another line."

He walks over, smiling, kissing me, then reaching into the crib and gently touching Molly. "I'm a devil, they say?" he says.

I laugh quietly and kiss him again. "Well, they do."

"You're right," he says. "I will keep the bad guys away. Always."

"You've done it so far."

"*We've* done it. This life... your music... Dad getting better... that evil piece of—" He cuts himself off before he curses in front of Molly. "That *Shank* getting shanked in prison. It's been a good year, and we did it as a team."

"My music is..."

"Is what woke Dad up," he says passionately. "You heard the doctor. It was a clear sign."

He holds me tightly. I cling to my man, savoring the love, the warmth, the belonging, knowing there's nowhere else I would ever want to be except here, with my family.

EPILOGUE



SEVEN YEARS LATER

*L*eonardo Marino

I sit on the couch, Molly on my knee, love and family in my heart as my daughter-in-law sings for the whole family and the *Family*. We're gathered in the restaurant where they first met, where they locked eyes and felt their souls fuse.

"Mommy is so good," Molly says, jigging up and down on my knee.

I'll never be able to explain how grateful I am to be able to hold her in place, trusting my body. Luca sits on the couch beside us with his wife. Elio is on the other couch with his other two children—my grandsons. Beside me, Alessia sits forward, watching the performance.

We're in the bar lounge area, and the well-respected and successful singer, Scarlet Marino, has graced us with her presence. Her song notes flutter into the air. I remember the first time she sang in the apartment. I was trapped in a cage inside my mind, but she broke me free.

Alessia gently touches my arm. Love burns between us. It's a changed kind of love. It will never be what it was before she cheated, but it will always be there.

"I still don't know how you did it, Dad, how you forgave her," Elio told me a few years ago. *"I'm glad you did. The kids need a grandmom and a grandad. You seem happy, but..."*

I touched his arm, telling him, *“Of course you don’t, son. Anybody who looks at you and Scarlet knows that nothing could ever make that happen. There is no straying. You have a rare thing. A perfect marriage.”*

“I’m not saying that,” Elio muttered for my benefit. The poor boy thought he’d offended me.

I touched his arm again, squeezing it this time. *“I mean it,”* I told him, getting teary-eyed. I’m not ashamed of that. Sometimes, there are things we can come back from stronger. I sure did.

Elio looks over at me, smiling, happier than I ever thought I’d see him. “Daddy,” little Leo says, reaching up for his father’s hand.

THE END

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Turn the page to get a sneak peek of

[Riding My Brother's Best Friend](#)>

RIDING MY BROTHER'S BEST
FRIEND

CHAPTER ONE

Kayla

“You *knew* he was sick?”

My voice is torn with agony and disbelief.

Ryan stands at the window of our kitchen. It’s the same one Mom used to bake apple pies in, the room smelling so homely. It’s the same place we’ve had countless family scenes and so much happiness. We never worried that Mom would die in a bus crash and Dad, a few years later, would get an incurable illness—the big C. I hate even thinking of its name.

Since I was sixteen, it’s just been me and Ryan, and now he won’t look at me, gazing out over the dusty hill that leads to our small corner of California. He’s wearing his Titan’s MC jacket, the motorcycle club my dad started.

Ryan glances at me, his mop of black hair falling over his eyes. I’m nineteen. He’s thirty-two. He’s always been just as much of a father figure to me as Dad, and that was doubly true when Dad passed.

“Talk to me,” I snap, hurrying across the room.

Ryan sighs and stuffs his hands in his pockets. He’s tall and lean, with sharp cheekbones. He has Mom’s eyes. It always makes me sad when I think about that.

He’s watching the hill as if expecting an army of motorbikes to surge over it any second. He’s been tense lately, maybe because he recently split with his girlfriend, or perhaps it’s something else. He won’t talk to me.

I grab his arm, spin him roughly, and force him to look at me.
“Did you know Dad was sick?”

Dad hid his illness for a year, spending most of his time at the motorcycle club, not telling me and, I thought, Ryan.

“I thought we were *both* in the dark, but you knew?”

He swallows and nods shortly. “I’m sorry. He told me soon after they diagnosed him.”

“Did he make you promise not to tell?” I demand.

This could be the saving grace. If Dad, dying, had *begged* Ryan not to tell me, then I can understand. I can forgive him.

“No,” Ryan says. “I made that decision myself.”

I take a step back, shaking my head.

“It’s the anniversary tomorrow.” What an upbeat word for what it is the day my dad died. “I’m ready, and you drop this on me *now*?”

Ryan’s eyes flit to my duffle bag. We have a tradition of camping on the peak that overlooks our small town. It’s where Dad used to take us when we were kids. Just me and Ryan, remembering the good times. This will be our third year. Or it *would’ve* been if Ryan hadn’t thrown this news at me.

“I don’t understand why you didn’t tell me. We’ve always told each other *everything*.”

“There’s no excuse,” he says darkly.

“Aren’t you going to defend yourself, at least?”

“I don’t think I can.”

“Jesus, Ryan.”

He bows his head and nods, his teeth gritted. “I never wanted to lie to you, but you must know.”

“You have to give me a reason.”

He folds his arms, turning fully to me now. A thousand versions of him flutter across my memory. My wannabe poet’s mind starts composing some probably terrible lines.

*A titan, staring,
But I'm not lost.
The ocean glaring
And now we sail together.
Just us, only us,
We can do it.
We can do anything.*

God, how dramatic, and now I'm almost crying. I feel so immature as I walk across the room and grab the kitchen towel, roughly pawing at my cheeks. Memories of Dad attack me: bobbing up and down on his knee, his voice as he read bedtime stories to me.

But *that* leads me to the other man who used to read me stories: his husky voice and dark eyes. The calm concealed a world of fire, heat, and potential violence—

Kai. I won't think about him. He's been gone for two years. When I was seventeen, he left to work with the European branch of the Titans. I sometimes hear him and Ryan talking on the phone, my entire body tingling at Kai's voice, but I lock that away. I lock it down deep.

Ryan and Kai have been best friends for as long as I can remember. Hell, when Kai *started* reading stories to me, we were both kids. I was four, and he was seventeen. Mom and Dad loved Kai so much and treated him like family, which helped because he never had one of his own.

"I'm going to stay at the apartment," I say, not looking at Ryan. I'm not sure if that comes from guilt or rage.

The apartment is the two-bedroom Ryan bought in town a couple of years ago. Sometimes, he'll stay there when handling business, or I'll stay there if I'm spending time with friends or working late at the diner.

I've taken some holiday time, just like last year when working at the diner as a summer job. Now, there's no more high

school, just the diner and the wild, weird dreams of being a poet—the most unsustainable and unlikely profession.

“I understand,” Ryan says, walking over and wrapping his arms around me. I almost yell at him to take his hands off, but the feeling is too familiar. Falling into his arms, holding him, and letting him hold me. “I love you.”

There are more tears in my eyes. “I have to go.”

“Kay—”

He’s about to say *Kayla*, but I only hear the first part. It’s almost like he says *Kai*, and that reminds me of when I was a kid, writing *Kai & Kay* in notebooks, knowing I could never act on these feelings. It would’ve been a betrayal, just like Ryan betrayed me.

I leave the room and almost run down the hallway. I’ve got my sneakers on, so I push the door open and walk down the windy, dusty road leading to town. I could’ve taken the pickup, but the keys are on a hook in the kitchen. Anyway, I want to walk. Maybe the motion will clear my head, though I’ve never been the biggest fan of exercise.

I walk with my head raised. If I stare at the ground, my thoughts will collapse inward like a sinkhole. I won’t be able to do anything except think about all the moments I missed. Ryan supported Dad, caring for him, but I didn’t even know anything was wrong.

Only toward the end, when he collapsed, I finally saw past what I expected him to be to what he had become—shrunken, half of the man he was. I hated myself for not noticing sooner. Maybe I still do. How could I miss that?

After five minutes of walking, the town is in sight, lying in a natural dip in the terrain. Everything is tinted yellow. As the midday sun blazes, I hear a bike engine roaring behind me. I turn to find a cloud of dust swirling in the air, so I can only see Ryan’s silhouette. He must want to talk about what just happened, though I don’t know if I can, don’t know if I’ve got any more words in me. Maybe some bad poetry. Maybe some lines of pain.

I turn and walk quicker, though obviously, that's a fool's game. It's not like I've got bionic legs. I'm not outrunning him. The bike gets closer, and I clench my fists. The sound of bikes usually brings a smile to my face. It means my brother or his friends, who are all friendly and respectful to me, are here. It means comradery and warmth.

Once, it even meant Kai. *That* didn't make me smile. That rumbling made my insides quiver and my soul hurt. It made me think of a life where this huge, handsome, hot-as-hell man and I could be together.

The bike pulls around in front of me. The driver comes to a clean stop. He handles the bike even better than Ryan, which says a lot. It's not my brother. I bite down, stepping back, wondering if I've got a heatstroke. A light layer of sweat covers my body, so maybe that's what's happening here. Perhaps I'm losing my mind.

Kai steps off the bike. I know it's him even before he takes his helmet off and lays it on the ground. He's the same age as Kai, thirty-two, with dark black hair grown a little wild, swept to the side to keep it out of his eyes. A few specks of silver glisten in the sun, giving him a more mature look than the last time I saw him.

He wears his leather, which outlines his broad shoulders and muscular arms. His face is perfect from every angle. I should know. I studied it a *lot* growing up. His eyes are bright green. Maybe that's it, but the green becomes a raging fire in other lights—ready for violence and prepared to do what has to be done for the club. He's not just Kai's best friend. He's his right-hand man.

If I acted on these feelings, I'd ruin a friendship *and* put the club at risk. It's a good thing he'd never want me.

[>One-click Riding My Brother's Best Friend<](#)

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