



The Romano
CRIME FAMILY

The
DON'S
Hidden Heir

CELESTE RILEY

A SECOND CHANCE DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

The Don's Hidden Heir

A Second Chance Dark Mafia Romance

The Romano Crime Family – Book 1

by

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Chapter One

Elena

Today is the day I die.

Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating a bit too much, but I'll rather win the contract or die trying. Failure is not an option, not after months of sleepless nights preparing for the moment that starts exactly an hour from now.

My stiletto heels *clink* on the polished marble tiles of my company building as I move briskly through the hallway. It's barely seven in the morning, and the clicking of a keyboard from the reception desk is the only signal of a presence which isn't mine in the hallway.

"Good morning, Ms. Marconi," Grace, the receptionist on duty greets as I come to a halt in front of her sandstone desk. Her sapphire blue eyes gleam as she beams a smile at me.

I return her smile, although my eyes are heavy with sleep. After spending the entire night preparing my presentation for this morning, I was only able to get three

hours of sleep before getting Lucas ready for school and driving to the office.

And everyone knows three hours of sleep is barely enough to get an adult human through a day. I think I'll function on zombie mode for the rest of today.

Not that I am complaining, though.

I expect that much being a single mother, and CEO of one of the biggest multi-million-dollar baby care products company in New York. And I am only twenty-seven.

“Have the conference room ready.” I glance at my Cartier secret phoenix décor watch to check the time. It's ten minutes past seven a.m. now. “The meeting starts in fifty minutes.”

“Sure, ma'am,” Grace answers. Her eyes are just as heavy with sleep as mine, but she manages to wear the brightest smile I've ever seen on any one. Grace has worked with me for three years now, and at the end of this deal, I plan to sponsor her an all-expenses paid trip, and also surprise her with a promotion.

It's long overdue anyway.

The company is bustling with investors lately, and that is thanks to the latest hypoallergenic diapers we launched two weeks ago. Of course, it isn't just the fact that they are hypoallergenic that does the trick, it is also really affordable, and comfy for babies.

I invented those diapers for single mothers who can't afford good luxury diapers for their babies. I also invented the product because it reminded me so much of me...when I was pregnant with my son Lucas.

That is story for another day, though, for now, I have a meeting to prepare for—a meeting with one of the biggest investors in the country. Mr. David Peterson, politician, investor, and the biggest fish in the business industry.

It isn't very often he takes interest in investing in businesses like mine, but when he does, it is usually a big hit. A smile tugs at my mouth before I realize I'm still standing in the reception area. "Thank you, Grace," I say, then navigate my way to the elevator and press the button with number *nine* on it.

When I get to my office, I spend the next thirty minutes scanning through my presentation. Time rolls by

quickly, and my phone beeps to remind me there's only five minutes left before my meeting.

I reapply my lipstick, grab my briefcase and leave the office. My confidence is like a crown, and I wear it with pride as I walk into the conference room and sit at the head of the table.

My team and board of directors are already taking up part of the long mahogany, conference desk to my right when I sit down.

Mr. Peterson comes in ten minutes later, and I swear he is more down-to-earth than the media outlets reveal. Mr. Peterson is a middle-aged man with short brunette hair he loves to gel, and eyes which are almost grey. He's wearing a pair of denim pants and a plain, sky-blue shirt.

He's always been a simple man from what I've heard, and a humble one, too. I would say that is the reason he is loved by the public. It isn't every day you come across a billionaire who doesn't think he is made of gold and diamonds.

I stand up and shake his outstretched hand. "I'm Elena Marconi, CEO of Babies and Moms," I introduce myself. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Peterson."

“The pleasure is mine,” he says. His smile doesn’t fade or falter for a minute. “This is my lawyer, Ms. Skylar Campbell.” He twists his head toward a tall caramel-skinned woman. She’s wearing a two-piece black suit with an inner which matches her red lipstick. Her braids cascade down her back beautifully.

I shift half my attention to her. “It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Jones.”

Her smile is even more beautiful. “The pleasure is mine, Ms. Marconi. I’ve heard a lot of good things about you.”

I bite back a grin, and a blush even. “I hope you confirm those good things for yourself.”

We both chuckle.

“Oh,” Mr. Peterson recalls. He gestures towards a guy to his right. “This is my CFO, Mr. John MacPherson.”

Mr. MacPherson extends a hand to me. “I’m glad to finally meet you, Ms. Marconi.”

“Thanks for coming,” I say. Pulling my hand away, I gesture towards the empty seats to my left. “Please have a seat.”

I wait until they settle before I start the meeting. “Thank you once again for taking the time to meet with us today. Shall we proceed?”

Mr. Peterson clears his throat. “Of course. I’ve heard a lot about your new product. Can you tell me more about it?”

I flash a smile at him. “Of course.” Gathering my iPad, notebook and other documents I spent the whole of yesterday night and weeks before putting in place, I step up to the screen where my presentation will be displayed.

Opening my file, I nod at David, my tech guy, to display the power-point presentation on the screen behind me. “Our new diaper, named ‘BabyXMomComfort’, combines a cutting-edge technology with an eco-friendly twist.”

I nod at David to move to the next slide. “As you can see from our reviews, it’s not only super absorbent to ensure dryness and comfort for the baby, it is also chemical free, making it less of an irritant to the skin. The diapers are made from bio-degradable materials which dissolve completely in water, making them environmentally friendly. What’s best, is that it’s sold at regular diaper price so all Moms can afford it for their babies.”

Mr. Peterson bobs his head, his interest piqued. “Do you mind if I ask what led to this new invention?”

“As I single mom with no help around, I often worried about my baby’s comfort while I was busy with work or studies. For years I’ve thought of all the ways I could help other mothers like me, and that was how I came up with this life-changing invention.”

My mind drifted back to seven years ago, when I was just a college student who could barely afford to make ends meet.

I lost my mother when I was eleven, and my dad’s world crashed down quickly after that. He’d started drinking, and soon the loving father I once knew vanished, leaving a monster behind. I pretty much raised myself, taking up menial jobs and doing whatever I could to train myself through high school.

A year after graduating high school, I got admission into a prestigious university here in New York. Life was good, and everything seemed to be going great until I met him. The man I loved with my whole heart, and the man who I now hate more than anyone else.

Dominic Romano.

“You have a really compelling product, Ms. Marconi,” Mr. Peterson praises me. “I’m impressed. However, I’m concerned about the high demand for your products. Do you think your company can meet the projected demand?”

I wear my confidence like a Balmain coat. “We invested significantly in production before the product was released to the public. Our facilities are well equipped to handle the expected growth in demand, and we’ve partnered with top suppliers in the country to ensure distribution demand is met without compromising the quality of our products.”

I proceed to give a detailed explanation on our marketing strategy plan, market domination, possible expansion of our company beyond Europe and diversification of our products.

My stomach churns, anxiety creeping up my spine every second I stand front and center, but I don’t let it show. Working with Mr. Peterson is a dream I’ve held for so long, I am not going to let my nerves ruin it.

When I started my business four years ago, I hadn’t planned for it to explode into a multi-million-dollar company. I’d started with making smaller affordable creams to put food on my table. Like magic, more and mothers supported me, and

their encouragement was the trigger I needed to start a baby product company.

While I'm grateful for how far I've come, I believe there's no limit to how far I can go.

"Impressive," Mr. Peterson says after I finish with my presentation. "Give me a minute." He turns to his staff, and they hold a small private conversation.

My hands are clammy as I clench my fingers around my folder, waiting for his decision. My heart rate speeds, and I'm swear I'm dying with the anticipation surging through me.

Please approve the contract. Please approve the contract.

Mr. Peterson brings his attention back to me after what seems like an eternity. "Ms. Marconi. I'm quite inspired by your vision and motivation. You're a force to be reckoned with, and I'm more than happy to invest in your company."

My heart jumps to my throat. Happiness shakes my insides, and it takes a lot of restraint for me not to jump up and down with excitement. "Thank you for deciding to invest in our company, Mr. Peterson," I say, the calmness in my voice

not matching the happy screams in my head. “We won’t disappoint you.”

He smiles at me. “I’m sure you won’t.”

Returning to my seat, we spend the next hour drawing up a contract and coming to an agreement. Mr. Peterson leaves after we’re both satisfied with the terms of his investment.

The second he is out of the door, my face splits into a full smile, mingling with the excitement on the remaining faces in the room.

“We did it,” my best friend, Moira, says. She’s a tall, slender, blonde with dark blue eyes. I met Moira a few months before I gave birth to Luca, and she has been the biggest support I’ve had.

She’s Lucas’s godmother, and also my company’s legal representative.

“We did,” I answered, vibrating from the exhilaration of my success. “Mr. Peterson is one of my investors. I can’t believe it!”

“I can’t believe it either, girl,” she says, her blue eyes sparkling with excitement. “By the way, don’t you think you should up my salary? I mean, you’re a rich bitch now.”

“Should I?” I tease, chuckling. “Send in a request and we’ll work something out.”

Moira clamps a hand over her mouth to mute her squeal. “Really?”

I wink at her. “Absolutely.”

She throws her arms around me and pulls me in for a tight hug. “You’re so sweet, Elena. You’re the best girlfriend ever. I don’t regret the day I met you.”

“You will if you don’t let me go right now. I can’t breathe,” I joke. Moira is a six-foot-tall beauty. She goes to the gym five times in a week and takes karate classes. Then there is me, a five-foot-five goddess who goes to the gym only on the days I feel like it. Moira can literally squish me to a pulp with her body.

She laughs as she pulls away. “How about we celebrate, maybe go out for a drink or something?”

“Trust me, I want to.” But being a mother means I have to sacrifice girls’ night out for a dinner date with my son. “I’m staying in with Lucas tonight. I promised him we’d watch a movie together.”

Moira shakes her head. “I can’t believe I’m sharing my best friend with a seven-year-old.” She rolls her eyes, then pouts. “I’m jealous.”

I pat her shoulder in consolation. “I’ll make it up to you some other time, okay?”

“Alright, but you have to promise,” she insists, crooking her pinkie finger towards me.

Looping my pinky finger with hers, I say the words she wants to hear. “I promise.”

Her giggles echo in the hallway as we stroll to my office. I draw in a deep inhale as the scent of lavender essential oil hits my nose the second we saunter into the office.

I have an obsession with good scents and minimalistic white and black decors. I believe less is always better.

Moira grabs a white mesh chair in front of my black desk and nestles in it. “How about we go on a blind date on a night of your choosing, see if we find a guy who meets your standards?”

I sit across from her, setting my iPad and folders on the desk. “I’m not sure about that, Moira. I don’t think the whole love thing is for me.”

I doubt a guy who meets my standards exists. I've been on several dates since Dominic, and most of them were either walking red flags or pretended to be the kind of men I like, until they weren't.

To be honest, I would rather stay tucked in on a sofa with Lucas, eating cheese and crackers, and watching a full season of SpongeBob SquarePants. I've long given up on finding a partner, but Moira hasn't.

She has set me up on several blind dates and it doesn't seem like she'll be giving up on finding me a lover anytime soon.

"Don't say that." She shakes her head disapprovingly. "No one is fated to become a single mother."

"Maybe I am."

"Maybe you're not believing in yourself as much as you should." She props her elbow on the desk. "Listen, you're not going to spend the rest of your life as a single mother. You're only twenty-seven. What will you do when Lucas goes to college?"

"I'll think of it then," I protest. I'm the kind of girl to face my problems when I have to, not before.

“No, you won’t,” she argues, her tone authoritative. “We’ll find you a lover while your ass is still firm and your breasts perky. End of discussion.”

I laugh. “My boobs and ass aren’t a problem. I can just buy new ones when they get saggy.”

She rolls her eyes. “Of course, you can afford to. You’re worth millions and millions of dollars.”

“See who’s talking?” Moira isn’t as rich as I am, but she’s doing well for herself. She owns a mansion downtown and a Ferrari that cost millions.

The air goes silent between us for a moment as I shift my focus to my computer. When I glance at Moira again, I notice she’s staring at me.

“What?” I ask, staring at my reflection through the computer screen to make sure I haven’t grown a pair of horns.

“You’re still not over him, are you?”

Her question causes my stomach to churn. I want to lie to her and pretend I’m over Dominic, but Moira is the only person I trust enough to confide in. She’s the only person who knows about Dominic and my past relationship with him.

I met Dominic on a group trip to Italy during my freshman year in college. We'd clicked at first sight, but I'd tried not to give in to him. Long-distance relationships were never my thing—still aren't—so I'd tried not to start anything I would end up regretting.

Well, it's safe to say fate had other plans for me, because I bumped into Dominic exactly two months after we first met in Italy. Apparently, business brought him to New York and he was here to stay.

We went on a couple of dates, had some good sex, and we both realized our feelings for each other. Our relationship was perfect. There was no doubt we were made for each other.

Three months into our relationship, I found out I was pregnant. Despite being a college student with my future ahead of me, I was more than excited to share the news with Dominic.

But then I found out something I should never have. Dominic wasn't just a business man like he'd told me. Our whole relationship had been a lie.

That night, I found out he was the head of the Italian mob. The brutal man famously known as "*Death.*"

Being only twenty, I did the only thing I could think of. I ended our relationship, and never told him about the pregnancy. I'd heard enough about the mafia to decide that wasn't the kind of life I wanted for my child.

It's been seven years, and while I can't swear I made the right decision that night, I don't regret it.

"I don't know, Moira. Some days, it feels like I'm completely over him. Other days, I want to break down and cry. I wonder how he is doing, if he thinks of me or if he's moved on to another woman."

Moira looks at me for a minute, her gaze filled with pity. She means no harm, but I hate the way she is looking at me right now. It makes me feel pathetic.

She leans forwards and reaches out for my hands. "It's okay to miss him, Elena. But you have to move on at some point."

A pang of an emotion that has haunted me for years starts to tighten my chest. I can't put a name on what I'm feeling right now, but I can admit Moira is right. I have to move on, I should've long ago.

Still, I can't find it in me to let go of my feelings for Dominic.

"It's not an event for Moms," Lucas complains, his small face heavy with a frown. "I don't want you there. All my friends are coming with their Daddies."

I lounge beside Lucas on the light grey sofa in the middle of my living room, wearing a SpongeBob onesie that matches Lucas's. "I know you want a dad, and I'm only offering because I don't want you to go alone."

His frown deepens. "You know nothing about soccer, Mom. It'll be really embarrassing when all my friends see you there."

Embarrassing?

Lucas has never used a word like that with me before. My heart clenches at how much he's grown. My little boy is no longer the toddler who followed me around, wanting to see as much of me as he could.

He's a big boy who thinks his Mom is embarrassing now. I finger his dark hair, keeping my voice soft. "Hey,

buddy!”

Lucas doesn't turn to look at me. He's too upset.

I don't give up though. “Hey. Your Dad isn't here with us, Lucas. I know you miss him, and you want him here, but it's just you and me right now.”

Guilt slithers through me as I look at my son. Lucas was three the first time he asked of his father. It'd come as a surprise, and though it wasn't a logical lie, I'd told him his daddy traveled faraway and may never come back.

May.

Because as much as I try to deny it, there's still the slightest gleam of hope in me that someday, my love and I will be together. And I then won't be able to keep Dominic in the dark about his son's existence.

The thought of it scares me.

The thought that a day will ever come when I won't be able to shield Lucas from Dominic, lurks around me like a nightmare.

Dominic left for Italy shortly after I broke up with him. I don't think he will ever return to New York, but if he does, I

plan to keep Lucas as far away from him as possible. It doesn't matter if I have to put my life on the line to do so.

But my son will never have to live the darkness of the mafia.

“Mom.” He is no longer frowning, but the expression on his face doesn't show he is happy either. “Do you miss Dad sometimes?”

I pat his head. He has the same onyx dark hair as Dominic. The same almost dark, brown eyes and tan skin. Lucas reminds me so much of Dominic, and often times, I wonder if the reason I haven't moved on from Dominic in all of these years is because of Lucas. Because he keeps Dominic center front in my mind.

The resemblance between them is striking and is always bubbling up memories of my past I've tried to bury.

Huffing out a sigh, I take Lucas's hand in mine. “I miss him.”

Someone once said ‘time heals everything’, but even after seven years, my feelings for Dominic are still as fresh as new. The stab in my heart from the night I left him still bleeds.

“Is that why you don’t want to have a boyfriend?” Lucas asks, scrunching his brows. He’s too smart for a seven year old. “Do you not want to have a boyfriend because of me?”

“My sweet boy.” Cupping his chubby cheeks, I give them a gentle squeeze. “Of course not. Mummy just hasn’t found the right one.”

Lucas raises his brows. He’s such a curious kid. “How do you know when you meet the right one?”

I think back to the first night I met Dominic. “Hmmm,” I hum, reminiscing over the way just looking at Dominic for the first time, took my breath away. I tap his chest. “You feel it here, then you know.”

His giggles are innocent and contagious. “Did you feel that way when you first met my daddy?”

A smile blooms on my face. “Yes.” Even now, my heart flutters as I think of him.

My phone rings before Lucas can ask anymore questions. Moira’s name flashes on my screen when I pick my phone up.

I wonder why she’s calling.

“Hey, babe!” I answer. The pop music blaring in the background tells me she’s in a bar. Moira is very outgoing, a contrast to my introverted nature. I wonder how we’ve managed to be best friends for all these years.

There’s a mix of excitement and panic in her voice. “Guess what?”

My eyes meet with Lucas’s. I don’t trust Moira enough to take her calls around him. She’s very naughty and unpredictable sometimes, so I move away to the kitchen and grab a stool by the island. “You know I’m not good at guesses. What is it?”

“Take a deep breath first,” she warns.

My stomach clenches as my anticipation builds. “Whatever it is, it better be worth the torture you’re putting me through.”

“Believe me, it is.” She pauses, and I’m close to ripping out all of my hair. “I’m at a club downtown and you won’t believe who just came in.”

I sighed. *God, I’m going to send a soul to you soon.* “Who?”

She breathes his name like fire. “Dominic Romano.”

Chapter Two

Elena

“Which Dominic Romano?” I ask, laughing as if Moira has just made some sick joke.

I know it’s not a joke. Moira might be crazy, but she’s not the type to make things up, even for fun.

But I guess I want it to not be him so bad it’s easier to live in denial for a few minutes than accept he is back to New York. If I pretend it’s not the Dominic Romano I know, then it won’t be him. Right?

Fuck.

“It’s that Dominic Romano, Elena,” she says. “Your ex.”

I run my fingers over my hair, as another wave of unhappy laughter escapes from my chest. “It can’t be. Dominic is in Italy. He’s been in Italy for seven years now. It’s not...”

“It is him,” Moira breaks in before I can squeeze myself further into a tunnel of denial. “He just got back. I

didn't mean to go snooping around, but I heard him say he's settling in New York for good."

No. It's not true. This can't be happening.

"Maybe it's a look alike?"

"Elena." Moira calls my name in an undertone, as if waking me up from a dream I don't want to wake up from. "It's really him. I know what you're afraid of, we should talk about it at work tomorrow."

"Sure, we should." She hangs up before I can add, "That's if I can make it until tomorrow."

My mind is a distressed mess for the rest of the night, and when the next morning comes, I go to the office with swollen eyes. I wasn't crying, I'd barely gotten any sleep, my thoughts wouldn't let me.

I try to deal with paperwork to keep myself distracted. Time rolls by slowly, but I'm grateful when someone throws my door open without caring to knock first. I know it's Moira, only she would dare walk into my office without knocking first.

"Hey, girlfriend," she says as she bolts into the office, a wide smile splitting her face in a friendly greeting. She's

gasping for air as she collapses on an L-shaped sofa a few feet away from my desk. She's late. So late I thought she wasn't going to make it in today. "God, I think I'm going to pass out."

I look at her suspiciously. "Did you drink last night?"

She flashes a guilty grin my way. "I met this hot Italian guy, couldn't pass when he offered me a drink... and sex."

I retch at the mention of 'sex' and she notices. "Girl, you need to get fucked one of these days. You've been celibate for so long you're basically a virgin now."

Thanks. As if I don't already have enough problems from the sex I had seven years ago.

"So, let's talk about your problem," she starts, bringing her attention to me and away from the delicious sex she had the night before. "What are you going to do now that he's back?"

I try not to roll my eyes because the answer is obvious. "If I knew the answer to that question, I would be the most untroubled woman on earth, don't you think?"

She shrugs her shoulders, and I can't tell if she's agreeing with me or not. "There's still the problem of you not

being able to find a guy. But first things first, you can't hide Lucas from him forever."

"Are you sure? Because I think I can." I don't joke in serious situations like this one, but my shoulders are heavy with the weight of fear coursing through my veins. I think I can calm my anxiety if I try to downplay the situation a little, but it's only making me more nervous. "Moira, I can't let Dominic meet Luca. I don't want him..."

"Mixing up with the dark world," she helps me complete. "I know, but I'll tell you this, Lucas deserves a chance with his father."

"His father is the head of the Italian mafia, Moira." Frustration creeps up my spine, making it hard to keep my tone in check. "He's not a normal man. He's a mafia boss. Do you know what that means?"

It means his money is blood-money, his hands are soaked with blood, and he's as brutal as a monster. How can I possibly let my son be anywhere near him?

"What do you intend to do right now? I'm certain you don't plan to keep Lucas locked up in the basement of your mansion to keep him away from Dominic."

I chew my bottom lip as I think. “I can’t keep Lucas locked away, but we can make sure Dominic never finds out about him.”

“How do we do that?”

“Start by not getting drunk and spilling the beans at the club. You’re the only person who knows the truth about me and Dominic. Dominic won’t suspect a thing if you don’t tell him.”

“Are you being serious right now?”

I lean back in my chair, swiveling it from side to side. “Serious as hell.”

Moira huffs. “Maybe you haven’t noticed but Lucas is the spitting image of Dominic. If Dominic lays an eye on Lucas, he’ll be only a DNA test away from finding out that’s his son.”

She’s right, and the fact she is makes my heart pound hard against my ribcage. It wouldn’t take long for Dominic to connect the dots and find out Lucas is his son if they ever meet. “Then I’ll have to keep Lucas away from him somehow. I don’t know how yet, but I have to.”

“Elena.”

I blink at my friend.

“What is it you’re really afraid of?” she asks, her voice gentle. “Are you really afraid Lucas will get hurt if Dominic finds out about him, or you’re scared of your own feelings for the man?”

The world stops around me, and Moira’s question plays on a loop in my head.

What am I really afraid of?

I couldn’t deny my feelings for Dominic are still as strong as they’ve always been. Still, there is the fear for Lucas’s safety.

Dominic may have lied to me about what he did for a living, but I never, for one second, doubted he loved me. The way he looked at me, the way he was gentle with me, all of that couldn’t have been fake.

He loved me. Maybe not as much as I loved him, still I know that he did, and he wouldn’t do anything to hurt me. It’s not him I’m afraid of. It’s the pain I’ll see in his eyes if he ever found out I’d kept such a secret from him that frightens me to my bones.

And it’s his enemies who scare me the most.

What if a war broke out? What would they do? Men like the ones in the mafia can hurt women and children without batting their eyelashes.

I never indulged in his world the four months we were together, but I'm not too naïve to be ignorant of the dangers that exist in the mafia. I know the danger, and I don't think I'm cut out for that.

I wasn't seven years ago, and I'm still not now.

My voice comes out strangled as I force a reply. "It's everything that scares me, Moira. Everything."

The silence that follows is loud and clear.

Moira readjusts her position on the sofa. "Listen, babe. I still think you should give Lucas and Dominic a chance, but I'll be by your side no matter what decision you make. We will get through this, alright?"

A wobbles my lips. It's not my brightest, but it's genuine. "Have I ever told you how lucky I am to have you?"

Moira has been my 'ride or die' since the first day we met. She's been the best aunty to Lucas, and the best friend-turned-sister any woman could ever want.

We don't always have the same opinions, and we fight sometimes. But no matter what happens, we always stand by each other. That is the highlight of our sisterhood.

"You have now," she says, grinning. "You better treat me right and give me a big salary hike."

"Oh, right. Did you write the report?"

"Shit." Her head fall between her shoulder. "Between rocking a guy's boner at the club and drinking my soul out, I didn't get the time." She pinches her nose. "I'll turn it in tomorrow."

"You'd better, before I change my mind."

She laughs. "You wouldn't dare."

There's already a long list of company staff awaiting salary increments, and while I can skip the queue to get Moira to the top of the list, I prefer to follow protocol. Everyone at the company already knows Moira is my best friend, but I'll never disrespect my other employees by showing favoritism.

She glances around the office. "Where's Lucas?"

I heave a sigh. "At school. He has a soccer game today and wouldn't let me come. He insists only dads are allowed there."

“Makes sense if you ask me. I think it’s time you consider getting him a dad.”

If only it were that easy.

I stretch my legs beneath the table. I’ve been sitting all day and they’re starting to ache. “You say it like I can just order one from Amazon.”

Moira’s eyes crinkle with mischief. “You can order one at a club. Tall, hot, and ready to put a ring on it.”

I want to ask why she doesn’t have a ring on her finger already, considering the club is her second home, but I don’t. Asking will lead to hours of her narrating how she isn’t ready to be cuffed to a man yet. Moira likes to be a free bird, and as she has said so many times, she won’t be settling until she is thirty-five. I envy her sometimes.

“You can find good sex at the club, but not a husband.”
And especially not father material. I didn’t keep Lucas’s birth a secret from Dominic for years, just to have a party-dude become his step-father.

She disagrees. “Honey, there are good men everywhere. You just have to find the right one.”

“Hmmm.”

My phone buzzes. When I grab it, there's a notification from a blog page I follow on Instagram. My heart kickstarts as I read the headline.

Billionaire CEO of Romano Enterprises Returns to New York: Whispers of Rekindled Romance Ignite Speculation About His Relationship Status. Is He Stepping Out Of The Singles Market For Good?

There's a reel of Dominic in the airport right under the post. He's wearing a dark-gray, three-piece Tom Ford suit. His hair glints off the overhead and camera lights around him, just like Lucas's.

He has a phone to his ear, and there are five to six bodyguards around him. All of them in black. It's crazy that even now, no one knows his true identity. Every media house reports him as an Italian Billionaire CEO.

None of them sees the darkness in his shimmering brown, almost black, eyes. None of them know the true depths of his existence. And if they did, would it change anything? I truly doubt it.

Air drains from my lungs, my eyes refusing to move from my phone. I'm not supposed to feel this way. Dominic is

no longer mine. Yet, a pang of pain slices through my chest at the thought of him with another woman.

It's like I'm stuck in a prison, but it isn't really a prison because my feelings for him haven't faltered even once in the last seven years.

Moira's face is scrunched with concern as she looks at me. "Everything alright?"

"Um." I draw a harsh breath as I pass my phone to her.

Shock spreads across Moira's face as she reads the headline. "Is this for real?" she asks, returning the phone to me.

I scan through the rest of the story. Relief washes over me when I find out it's only just a rumor for now. I don't know what I'm hoping for, but it makes me feel happy in some way. "I don't think it's true. It says here it's just a rumor."

"There's always a figment of truth to every rumor, Elena," she says. "Wouldn't it be better if he's actually hooked in a relationship? That way, you'll be sure he is off your back for good."

I roll my lips between my teeth. My thoughts are frazzled, and maybe I'm just being selfish because I haven't

truly gotten over my feelings for him, but I don't want him with another woman.

Not that it's his fault, but it's been seven years. I've had our kid, raised him alone, and stayed single. It wouldn't be fair if he just moved on to another woman.

God, what am I thinking?

"Girl, listen. You can't keep doing this to yourself." Moira stands from the sofa and walks over to my desk. She stops opposite me. "You have to make a decision at some point. You either want Dominic or you don't."

"It's not that simple. There's Lucas. I have to protect my son."

"Then you have to let Dominic go for real. You can't keep Lucas safe otherwise." She reaches out and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "I'm going to stand by you no matter what. But first, you need to make your decision."

I look at her through my lashes. "My decision is the same as it was seven years ago."

Chapter Three

Dominic

I twirl my drink as I glance over the city from my skyscraper building, watching the cars race down the street, and the other skyscrapers as they battle to pierce the baby-blue sky.

‘Tower Romano’ is the tallest skyscraper in the city. I spent the last seven years breathing air into it’s existence, waiting for the day I mount it like a war stallion. When I left New York seven years ago, I’d sworn to return only after I completed this building, and now that I have, there’s no going back.

I have every intention of ruling this city, making everything in it mine. I’d learnt to dominate since I could walk. My father, Alexei Romano had always taught me that walking wasn’t enough.

“Listen, boy!” he always said. *“If you must stand on your own two feet, then you must run!”*

Ten years after his death, I’ve lived just like that. Never backing down or relenting. Never letting anyone rule

over me.

If I must be honest, then it wasn't just because of my father's brutal way of preparing me to rule the Italian mafia. Right from the moment I was born, an insatiable darkness clouded me.

A monster with an immense craving for blood and control lurks inside me. A monster that had been tamed for a fleeting moment, by the only person I've ever loved.

Elena Marconi.

But it'd ended as quickly as it started, because she unleashed the beast the night she left me.

I take a swig of my scotch, enjoying the burn as it trails down my throat. I wonder how she's doing. If she chose to leave me, then she must've found happiness somewhere else.

Who knows? She might even be married, living far away from the darkness that roams around me.

My jaw flexes, and that is when I realize my fingers are clenched tightly around my glass. Jealousy burns like a volcano at the thought of another man touching and claiming what was once mine.

After she broke things off with me, I'd made the decision to let her go for her own sake. I could have claimed her, made her mine whether she liked it or not. But I'm not like the other idiots in the mafia who treat women like toys they can treat however they want.

No.

I like my women willing.

“Look who we have here!”

I spin my head to the door to see Dante. He's a tall guy with curly brown hair that matches the color of his eyes. For some reason, he thinks he is my best friend, and I can't get rid of him.

He can be a handful sometimes, but he's the only person I confide in. Seeing him again after his last visit to Italy a year ago spreads a strange feeling of warmth over my chest. I'm not excited to see him, I just don't *hate* seeing him.

He strides across the room and pulls me in for a hug before I can manage a reply. “It's nice to see you again, *mio amico.*”

I pull away, glancing down to see if my shirt is creased. My suit jacket is draped over my swivel chair, exposing my

white shirt to dirt. “I can’t say the same.”

His eyes gleam, a smile spreading across his face. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Regrettably, you haven’t either,” I say as I amble to my chair and sit on it. “How is business going?”

Dante can read me like the back of his hand. He knows it’s not business I’m asking about. “I’m fine,” he answers, dragging my glass to himself and filling it up. “The latest shipment came in this morning, and so did the detectives.”

I cross my arms. “Interesting.”

To the public, Romano Enterprises owns several clubs, alcohol brands and hotels across three continents. It’s a different story behind the scenes, though. We do everything illegal, except women and child trafficking.

My soul is so dark I hardly see light, but hurting innocent people is where I draw the line.

Which brings me back to my discussion. “Who is the traitor?”

I spend a good amount of money on keeping my business away from trouble. If the cops are snooping around

my business, it can only mean there's a mole squeaking something he shouldn't.

“He wasn't very sneaky,” Dante says. He fills the glass and downs the contents in one gulp, then he winces. “I have him right where he should be. What should we do to him? Discard him, or put him in misery for as long as his body can endure?”

A smirk lifts my lips. “*Put him in misery for as long as his body can endure.*” I'm liking this version of Dante, way more than the version who was always eager to put rotten souls out of their misery.

Death is mercy, and I'm merciful as often as I can be. And that is the reason I like my men to be the opposite of me.

Mercy is a luxury only I should be able to afford.

“Any detail on who put him up to it?”

Dante shakes his head. “The fucker wouldn't speak.”

“He isn't speaking because you've not offered him mercy.” The murk in my soul takes hold. “Bring him to me.”

Dante finishes his drink and leaves to bring the traitor to me. When he returns, I'm wearing my three-sided skull

rings, carved from pure gold, and sharpened enough to tear through flesh.

Four of my men drag in the traitor. He's already been beaten black and blue. His eyes are swollen, his teeth bloody and his face purple beyond recognition. His right cheeks bulges, as if he is hiding a whole apple in it. *Poor thing.*

"You're probably a bit disappointed, but this is the mole who squealed on us to the cops," Dante says, returning to the swivel chair across from my desk.

"Disappointed?" A dangerous chuckle sounds from my chest. "Looks like you still need a lesson or two, Dante." If there's anything I've learnt from ten years of ruling the Italian mafia, it's never to underestimate anyone.

Everyone is a threat, and no one can be trusted.

I nod to the four bodyguards who brought him in, signaling them to drop him on his knees. The second he is in the position I want him, I prop my elbow on my mahogany desk. "I need a name."

The bastard has the nerves to chuckle. "I don't have any names to give you. If you want names, find them yourself."

My nostrils flare at his obvious insult. Idiots like him lack the ability to read the room, either that or he knows he won't make it out of here alive and is holding onto what little pride he has.

It's true he won't make it out of here alive, but unlike before, I plan to make his exit excruciating.

“You just ruined your only chance of a peaceful death.”

“Screw you, Dominic,” he spits, refusing to give in.

I want to commend him for his bravery, but the fact that misplaced bravery is just mindless stupidity, doesn't let me. I lift myself from my swivel chair and prowl to him, a wicked smile tainting my face. “I do the screwing, Oliver.”

Oliver. Even his name is goddamn annoying.

His pupils dilate with fear when I tower over him. He tries to hide it, but I can swear this cunt is peeing in his pants right now. “I need a name.”

He opens his mouth, but my fist collides with his swollen cheeks before he can pour more useless words from it. He thuds to the ground, pain filling his growl. “It's a shame, Oliver. You're so quick to speak, yet so weak.” I shake my head sardonically.

My bodyguards raise him back to his knees.

A tendril of satisfaction fills my chest at the blood cascading down his cheek. However, it fades when I notice the splatter of blood on my white shirt.

Fuck, I hate dirt.

Lowering myself into a squat position, I look Oliver in the eyes. “Do you know how much this shirt costs?”

His mouth quivers, as if he’s trying to say something but is unable to.

“It costs more than your life.” Every muscle in my body shakes awake with violence. I’m more enraged his blood splattered on my shirt than I am with his insults and refusal to speak.

Lunging forward, I drive my fist into his jaw. The sickening crack that follows fuels my anger even more. I grab the collar of his black shirt with one hand, throwing punch after punch on his jaw until he goes limp on the white marble floor of my office, a mess of gashes and bruises.

I stumble back to my feet. “Clean this mess.”

“Yes, boss,” the bodyguards say. Two of them drag an almost lifeless Oliver out of the office, while the other two

clean up some of the bloody mess with a Kleenex before they find the cleaning lady.

Dante looks at me with admiration. “You haven’t lost your touch yet.”

I ignore him and grab a fresh shot glass from the minibar in the corner of the office. “Find out whatever you can from him. If he still refuses to talk, finish him off in a gruesome way.”

He nods. Silence hangs between us for a moment.

From the corner of my eye, I notice Dante doesn’t stop looking at me. “What do you plan to do now that you’re back?”

I raise my brows. “Is there something I should be doing?”

His throat moves as he swallows. “You miss her, don’t you?”

My stomach twitches at the mention of ‘her’.

Her.

I’ve dreaded that word every day for the last seven years, and I hate the mention of her name even more.

The first time I met Elena Marconi, my world came to a stop. An emotion that was so foreign it swept me off my feet and bloomed in my heart. I'd thought she was the one. I stupidly believed she was the one light to glint in the dark tunnel.

But she wasn't.

The night she left, she called me a "monster." My memory drifts back to that night. Her hazel eyes sparkled under the moonlight pouring in from the glass wall in my suite, her expression grim.

Elena had always been a ball of warm, bright, summer sunlight. Her energy was so contagious it rubbed off on me. The moment I saw the tears in her eyes that evening, I knew something was wrong.

And it was.

She told me she was leaving me, begged me not to look for her as if I was a parasite she was dying to rid herself of.

Then she left me.

No explanation. No second chances. She just up and left.

I hate her. I despise her. And I don't ever want to hear of her again. "I do not want to talk about her." My voice is strained. I've tried not to think of her, but she's the one person I've never been able to forget.

How is it possible to hate someone so much, yet still not hate them completely? Even after throwing my heart to the dogs, it's like she still has me wrapped around her pretty fingers.

"Are you sure, man?" he asks, still staring at me, as if he can see through my blank mask. I wonder if he can sense that even now, my heart is throbbing for Elena, and my cock is yearning for the feel of her around it.

Dante knows me better than I know myself, and it scares me sometimes.

"Lie all you want, bro. But you can't shut your feelings off just because you don't want to feel them."

I send a dark look his way, but he doesn't relent. "I can find her if you want me to."

The offer is tempting, but his persistence causes my fists to clench. My ring has dry crusts of blood around it, and I need a fucking shirt. "Speak of her one more time, and it'll be

the last time you speak,” I warn him, pushing up from my seat. “Also, I’m your boss, not your bro.”

I grab my jacket and start for the door.

Dante’s voice follows me outside the office. “Where are you going?”

“I have dinner plans with my brother,” I answer over my shoulder. I don’t care if Dante heard my reply or not. I’ve yet to see my brothers since I landed in New York last night.

Early this morning, Vincent me sent a text, inviting me to dinner at Romano Manor—our parents’ home. I haven’t been there since I left seven years ago, and although I dread the notion of having a supposedly happy dinner in the same place our parents met their end, I can’t turn my brother down.

But first, I need to change, to take off this blood drenched shirt.

There’s a hushed silence as I drive through the white gate of Romano Manor. The only sounds that keep me company are the occasional chirping of birds, the whisper of my tires on the tarred road and the fluttering of the red maples lining the drive.

The silence sends chills up my spine, as if I'm a twelve-year-old who's been abandoned in a cemetery at midnight.

It's been this way since my parents were murdered here ten years ago. I'll never forget the vacant look in their eyes when I walked in that night. The stench of their fresh warm blood still haunts me.

And it's a constant reminder of why I chose to return to New York, and why I decided to rule this city. I must find their killer, and I must repay blood with blood. Death with death. My need for revenge is an anthem that blares in my head before I go to sleep every night.

I bring my car to a halt in front of a water fountain across the staired porch that leads inside the mansion, my headlights flashing on an old willow tree across the entrance before it fades to darkness

Sliding out of the car, I stride into the mansion. I find my brothers—both of them—sitting in the living room.

“Fratello,” Vincent says, our eyes meeting. He stands up from one of the cream colored sofas and strides to me, a smile beaming in his eyes. *“Welcome home,”* he says. He opens his arms for a hug.

Vincent is the youngest of the three of us. At only twenty-eight, he has managed to build a reputation for himself as CEO of an automotive company. Maybe it's because he is the youngest and didn't face the pressure of becoming the perfect heir, but unlike Marcus and I, he isn't very involved in the mafia.

If anything, he detests the mafia and chooses not to get involved.

We're often at loggerhead with each other given the differences in our personalities and beliefs, but it doesn't change the fact we come first with each other.

"*La ringrazio,*" I reply, accepting his hug. My brothers are the only family I have, and as much as I hate the display of affections, I do not mind showing it to them.

Marcus is the second to stand. "Welcome home, *fratello.*" We shake hands. "I'm glad you're back."

"*Grazie,*" I tell him. I look at my Patek Philippe watch, wanting to get out of here as quickly as I can. The house still reeks of blood and death. You'd think years of being in the mafia and spilling blood would drown the nightmare of having to clean up my parents' dead bodies. But

it never did. “Shall we get to dinner? I have someplace else I should be tonight.”

The three of us settle down at the dining table before Marcus starts to brief me on the progress of our new club.

“Did you hear about the shipment that went missing?”

I ask him when he is done.

Marcus is the middle child, and as such, he'd been groomed to always come after me. Unlike me and Vincent, he is more practical and level-headed. My middle brother does not resort to violence unless it is absolutely needed, the reason why I put him in charge of managing our business.

He waits for the servers to finish before he answers. “I did.”

The three of us hold hands and say a prayer, like we used to do when our mother was alive. “I got a report from Dante. A mole named Oliver ratted us out to the cops.”

“I know.”

I cut into my steak. Medium-rare, just like I like it. “And you did nothing?”

Marcus shakes his head. “I wasn't too sure.”

My cutlery clinks as it hits the ceramic plate. “The bratva are on our tail, Marcus. They’re closing in on us. You can’t afford to not be too sure.”

“We can’t afford to strike blindly, either.” He pushes his plate aside, but not in a way that makes it seem like he wants to attack me or something. “One mistake is all it will take for them to wipe us out. We only strike when we’re ready.”

I sip on some water from the glass in front of me. “It’s a tad too late for that. Dante already ferreted him out. Beat him bloody. Whoever the fucker works for must be more terrifying than I am.”

“Or he has their loyalty? The Russians are quite stubborn, you know? They’re loyal to a fault.”

I heaved a sigh, the anger from my encounter with Oliver earlier this afternoon starting to rise again. “Who do you think is responsible for this attack?”

“I’m not certain, but I have reason to suspect it’s David Peterson.”

Something in me twitches. “David Peterson,” I repeat.

David Peterson, best known in the mafia as Federico Romano, is our uncle. Or should I say, our father's younger brother who somehow came to the conclusion he was cheated out of ruling the Cosa Nostra because he was the youngest son.

He's a big politician who parades himself as a business investor. After our father's death, he reigned hell trying to become the new Capo of the Cosa Nostra.

I'd come close to killing him. Very close. But I'd ended up sparing his life because Vincent didn't want more bloodshed in the family, so I banished him instead. A decision I still regret.

Peter has always been a nuisance to the family, and with so much on my plate, I don't need an idiotic uncle running around and spoiling my business. I glance at my younger brother across the table. He's eating in peace, not caring to add anything to the discussion.

"Can we just have dinner?" he asks when he finally cares to speak. "I thought that's what this was about. Us having dinner together for the first time in years."

"Men don't just have dinner and catchup." Picking up my knife and fork, I stab at my steak. "We discuss business at

dinner.”

“Money laundering, drug trafficking and whatever bullshit you guys do isn’t business,” he retorted. His tone is furious and unfriendly. He’s been this way at the mention of the mafia since our parents died. “That’s blood money.”

“Well, kid, that blood money pays for your expensive lifestyle.” I slice through my steak and bring a piece of it to my mouth. “You better be quiet, unless you want to learn how to work for your own money.”

Vincent opens his mouth for a comeback, but he doesn’t get a chance when Marcus speaks. “That’s enough, guys.” Marcus directs all of his attention to me. “What do we do now?”

“We protect our territory, and we also send a warning to Peter. Do you have any idea how I can bump into him?” It’s not like I can just invite him to dinner since I exiled him from the family.

He is more or less an outsider now, and if I must meet with him, I have to keep it classy.

Marcus thinks for a while. “There’s news he signed a contract worth millions of dollars with a baby care product

company. Within the same twenty-four hours, he bought a share in one of the biggest airline and hotel companies in the country.”

I’m lost. “How does this benefit me?”

“Good question.” Marcus leans back on his chair. “The hotel and airline company belongs to Kirill Vadim.”

My interest is piqued. Kirill Vadim came out as one of the highest shareholders of Romano Enterprises after my father died. Turned out he’d been buying our company stocks in secret, while keeping an eye on all of our shipments. I’d managed to retain the stocks and kick him out, but something about that man makes my skin crawl like I’m covered in a thousand ants.

I’m sure all of this is linked somehow. There’s a dot somewhere that I’m yet to connect, and while meeting with Peter won’t be of much help, I can manipulate his egotistical mind until I’ve gotten a clue.

“I need to meet David Peterson.”

“Even better, Kirill Vadim has a business gala coming up in two days.” He pauses. “As expected, it’s only open to high-profiled elites.”

A smile lifts my lips. “That’s it.” I rise from the table with urgency.

Marcus looks at me, clearly confused I’m ditching them in the middle of dinner. “Are you leaving?”

“I’m afraid so, yes.”

“You’ve barely taken a bite of your food,” Vincent chimes in. He’s talkative when it doesn’t have to do with business or the mafia. I’ve got to teach the boy a lesson about becoming a man soon.

I tug my jacket in place. It’s not much of an excuse, but it’s reason enough for me to leave Romano Manor. This place gives me chills, as if father and mother’s ghosts are lurking around every corner.

Ten years ago, Peterson told me my fear spirals from the darkness that follows me around, but he was wrong. My fear lurks in the fact that my father’s ghost—if something like that does exist—is most definitely tumbling and tossing in the grave with the need for vengeance.

My brothers don’t know of my plans to hunt every one of our parents’ killers. No one knows who they are, but I made

a promise the day they were buried to find whoever put them six feet under, and chew their hearts out.

I'm yet to fulfil that promise, and I have feeling I won't ever rest until I succeed.

"I'm sorry, but I have a party to prepare for." I stride outside to my car, ignite the engine and hit the road.

Something tells me my parents' killer will be in the same room as me in two days. For what it's worth, I hope he looks me in the eye and sees my newfound obsession with hunting him down.

He'd played his part, and now, I'm coming to hunt him down.

Chapter Four

Elena

Dominic Romano is just ten feet away from me.

Oh my God.

I try to breathe, but it's as though air refuses to fill my lungs. My hands are sweaty, my legs wobbly and threatening to give out from the shock of seeing Dominic here. Something's not right, he is not supposed to be here.

My throat dries up like I'm stuck in a middle of Sahara. There are voices in my head telling me to run before he sees me, but my legs are limp and glued to the floor.

There are so many thoughts running through my frazzled mind, but it doesn't stop me from noticing he is still as handsome as he was seven years ago.

He stands tall in his tailored tuxedo, exuding sophistication. His dark eyes glint from the obscene chandeliers in the room as he looks in my direction.

My stomach churns with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. It's only when he looks away I realize I'd been

holding my breath. He probably didn't see me, right?

He wouldn't look the other way if he had. I still can't take my eyes off him when a group of people walk up to him in the same way a person would run up to a celebrity. Not that I blame them, Dominic commands attention without putting in any effort.

When he is in a room, he soaks up the air, dominating every single thing and person in it.

A surge of conflicted emotions sears through me. It's like I'm happy to see him again, but I can't really be happy because I'm also afraid.

Two nights ago, Mr. Peterson sent an invitation to me, requesting I attend a business gala hosted by his friend. I'd tried to turn it down, but it proved impossible when he insisted, stating it was the perfect opportunity to build a connection that would last a lifetime.

He didn't lie though. The entire room flashes with men and women who look like they sleep on sheets woven with dollar bills. I assume most of them are either politicians or business tycoons.

Even the hall is a symphony of elegance and luxury. It's adorned with glistening chandeliers that cast a soft glow over the assembled elites.

Six years ago—when I first started my company—I would've been intimidated mixing in a crowd like this one. But years of attending events like this has helped me become accustomed to gatherings such as these.

I'm new money, so it took a lot of time for me to build my confidence. Sometimes, I still feel like I don't belong.

Tonight though, It's not the hundreds of aristocrats around me that has my heart sinking into my stomach, it's the man standing at the center of the room, giving all his attention to the people around him.

He doesn't even notice me standing here.

My fists clench, my knees almost giving out from standing in the same spot for too long. I want to turn around and leave before he sees me, but I'm afraid a movement from me will draw his attention.

Christ. My survival instinct is next to zero.

“Ms. Marconi!”

I almost jump out of my skin hearing Mr. Peterson's voice. When I turn around to face him, he's holding two glasses of sparkling gold wine. I swallow, my throat yearning for alcohol.

He offers one of the glasses to me. "You look quite spectacular tonight."

A blush spreads over my cheeks. "Well, thank you. You don't look too bad yourself."

The corner of his eyes wrinkle as a smile spreads over his face. "There's only so much an old man can do to look good."

Mr. Peterson is only fifty-nine, which I don't consider old, but I don't tell him that. Instead, I say, "Thank you for inviting me to this lovely gala."

He waves. "Please don't say that. I should be thanking you for honoring my request. My apologies that it came so late."

"It was no trouble, Mr. Peterson." The corner of my eye drifts back and forth to where Dominic is standing. I'm wary he'll notice my presence if I stand here for too long, but

it's not like I can shove Mr. Peterson to the side and make a run for it.

“If you don't mind, there's someone I'd like you to meet.”

I take a sip of my wine. It doesn't burn nearly as much as I need it to, but I can make do with it. “Sure. I don't mind.”

He places his hand on my lower back as he leads me to a group of older men. One of them has grey hair and a pot belly. As we near them, I notice the other men defer to him with respect. His face rings a bell, but my mind is too warped to try and remember where I've seen him before.

“Mr. Vadim,” Mr. Peterson says to the man when we reach him, and all eyes in the group dart to us. “I believe I've told you about Ms. Marconi,” he says, “my newest partner.”

Then Mr. Peterson turns to me. “This is my good friend, Kirill Vadim, I believe you've heard of him.”

Of course I have. Kirill Vadim, along with being the retired president of the biggest bank in New York, also owns several multi-million dollars companies across Europe, one of which include Vadim Air.

My eyes bulge, excitement sizzling in my chest. “Oh my God.” I try to water down my excitement, but it’s hard when I’m standing in front of greatness. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Vadim.”

Mr. Vadim stretches his hand out. “The pleasure is mine. I’ve heard a lot about you, Ms. Marconi, and I must say I’m impressed by how far you’ve come.”

I shake his hand. “Thank you. I’m not nearly as far yet, as I dream to be. You’re an inspiration to many like me. Would you be willing to share some of your secrets with me?”

His large belly vibrates in his suit as he laughs. “I’ll be more than happy to be your mentor.” He reaches backward and one of his bodyguards slips a card between his fingers. “You’re free to reach out to me whenever you need.”

I gasp as I take the card from him.

It still feels like a dream that I’ve caught the attention of someone like Mr. Vadim. It’s an opportunity that rarely comes, and I’m going to maximize his influence to the benefit of my company.

Having the most successful businessman in New York as my mentor is not an opportunity that comes every day, and

I'm grateful I didn't turn down Mr. Peterson's invitation. "I sure will."

"I almost forgot. Congratulations on your new contract. I'll watch out to see how far you can go."

I curl my toes in my shoes, not certain how to respond. A nervous smile touches my lips. "I hope to go far with your guidance."

"You're very smart. I'm sure you will reach far enough."

He's about to say something when a bodyguard walks in from God-knows-where and whispers something into his ear.

When the bodyguard steps away, Mr. Vadim flashes a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "I'm sorry, but there's something I need to attend to. If you'll excuse me."

"Of course."

"I'll be looking forward to an appointment with you one of these days," he adds before walking away. David Peterson joins him, and I'm left alone.

My blood curdles when I glance over to the spot Dominic had been standing and see it's now empty. *Where did*

he go? My pulse grows weak, my insides tightening from how nervous I am.

My phone buzzes in my purse and when I take it out, my son's number flashes across my screen.

I have to take this.

Navigating my way out of the room, I find a quiet veranda. When I step outside, I can't tell if I'm shivering from how nervous I am, or if it's the soft breeze that my causes my hands to grow cold.

"Hey, Mom." Lucas sounds excited when I answer. "How are you?"

Somehow, talking to Lucas makes all my worries disappear and a smile steals across my face. I swear my son is a guardian angel sent from heaven to save me from myself. "Hey, Lucas. Mom is doing just fine. How are you?"

"Fine. Mommy, Aunt Moira won't let me watch the chipmunks."

I don't feel safe leaving Lucas with a nanny at night, so when Moira offered to babysit while I attend the party, I readily agreed. It isn't the first time though, she babysits Lucas

from time to time when I'm on a business trip or too busy with work.

They are like best friends, and even though they aren't blood relatives, Moira loves Lucas like an aunt would love a nephew. I have so many reasons to be grateful she's my best friend.

“What does Aunty want to watch?”

I can feel his eye roll. “The Little Mermaid. It's girl's stuff.”

A laugh bursts from my chest. Moira's a big fan of Halle Bailey, and she has been literally obsessed with “The Little Mermaid” since the film was released last month.

“Can you do something for Mommy?”

“Sure. Anything for you, Mom.”

“Can you let Aunt Moira watch whatever she wants?” I ask, pouting as if he can see me. “She's doing Mommy a favor watching you tonight. We should be good to her, shouldn't we?”

He stays silent for a moment. “I'm only letting her 'cause you asked.”

“Are you reporting me to your Mom?” Moira’s voice comes from a distance. “You’re such a baby.”

“I’m not a baby,” Lucas protests, “I’m a big boy.”

Moira’s voice is closer and clear now. She huffs a laugh. “Yes, you are. Only babies report their Aunties to their Mommies.”

“I’m not a baby!”

“Uh oh. Someone’s getting real mad,” Moira teases him. “You see, big boys don’t get mad when they’re arguing.”

“I’m not mad.”

“Then let me talk to your Mommy.”

I imagine Lucas handing her the phone to prove he’s a big boy.

“Hey, babe,” Moira says, “having fun at the party?”

I exhale loudly, wishing I could dish the news over the phone. But I can’t. I have a party to return to. “It’s anything but fun. How’s it going with Lucas?”

“Luckily, he is not being too naughty. Have fun and don’t worry about us, okay?”

“Alright. Thank you.”

“Have fun, Mommy. I love you,” Lucas shouts in the background.

I laugh. “Have fun with Aunt Moira. Mommy loves you too.” I blow kisses to the phone. My smile doesn’t fade for a while after I hang up, and my chest is less heavy now, as if a weight had just been lifted from it.

Talking to Lucas and Moira lifts my mood each time.

“Fancy meeting you again!”

I freeze at the deep gruff of his voice, the Italian accent turning my blood to ice.

It can't be him. I must be mistaken.

When I spin around, dark brown eyes bore into mine with so much intensity it makes my heart skip. “Dominic,” I mutter, my voice a bare whisper.

Sparks of tension ignite the air, bringing the world to stop around us.

His gaze devours me completely. “Elena,” he says my name, his voice a low velvety sound that sends shivers down my spine. “You look breathtaking tonight.”

Chapter Five

Dominic

I'm thrown back to the night we first met.

Her face glowing under the moonlight. Her eyes sparkling in a way that captures and intoxicates me completely. She's wearing a strapless sapphire dress which glistens like a diamond when it's directly under the glow of sunlight.

She's beautiful.

The sharp palpitations in my chest and the throbbing in my cock testifies to that. I can't peel my eyes off her, not for a moment. She's too intoxicating for me to, and I don't even try.

When I saw her walk into the gala room two hours ago, I'd come close to losing every fiber of self-control in me. I'd seen her look at me, and it had been a struggle not to watch her like I would watch the sunset.

This woman standing in front of me, gazing at me with her shimmering hazel eyes, is beautiful. I hate her, but I've missed her even more. And I hate myself for it.

She'd abandoned me without a second thought. There's no reason for my heart to be pounding this much around her. Yet, I can't control my own emotions.

Her eyes sparkle as they tear up. I can't tell if she's upset at seeing me, or if she's happy. I don't care which it is. I have every intention of tormenting her tonight.

"You're look breathtaking," I repeat, just in case she didn't hear me the first time.

I notice her lips tremble and her throat moves as she swallows hard. "Thank you." She wrenches her gaze away, staring at something in the sky. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Neither did I."

After dinner with Marcus two nights ago, I'd decided to come to this gala for only one reason, and that was to see David Peterson. To teach him a lesson or two about why he shouldn't be sticking his nose where it doesn't belong.

But when I saw him lead Elena away with a sly smile smeared on his face, I knew it was a warning. He must've known I wouldn't let a subtle attack slide, and that I would find him.

I'm not sure of the reason he invited her here, but I assume it has something to do with him warning me to keep my distance.

Foolish man.

He must think I still feel something for Elena. An emotion caged away somewhere in the chambers of my heart. If only he knew the truth, that my heart only beats to get revenge for my parents, and to dominate this city.

“Excuse me. I have unfinished business.” She tries to hurry away, but stops when I grab her arm.

“Isn't it rude to walk away? It almost feels like you're still in love with me but trying hard to deny it.”

She draws a gasp. “I'm not in love with you. I'm just uncomfortable around you.”

Right. That is what I want, for her to be uncomfortable around me. She deserves that much punishment for discarding me the way she did.

“Were you also uncomfortable around me seven years ago?” My question thickens the air like fog.

Her expression shifts, a flicker of pain darkening her features. “Dominic, let's not do this.”

“I decide what we do.” Anger simmers deep in my stomach. “You decided when our relationship ended. You do not get to do that now.”

“What do you want?” Her voice is a tremor. It’s shaky, clouded with emotions she’s fighting to contain.

“You.”

Her brows lift. “What do you mean?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

The atmosphere thickens around us, and the world fades away. Even through the strained air and the pain slithering through my heart like barbed wire, there’s a part of me that is dying to hold her.

Whatever little light I have left in my soul yearns for Elena, it needs her love. And the electricity jolting through my cock doesn’t help matters. I want to rip her dress apart and make her stare over the city as I fuck her from behind.

Christ.

My emotions and sexual desires conflict with the intense hate etched on my heart.

God, this woman fucking drives me insane.

“Or maybe not,” she sputters. “I doubt we’ll be meeting again. I wouldn’t have come if I knew you’d be here.

Interesting.

She’s still as smart-mouthed as I remember her to be. I’m amazed to see she hasn’t changed one bit.

“Trust me, we will.” I didn’t plan on running into her, either, but now that I have, it’s impossible for me not to look for her now. I lean on the wall, my curiosity getting the better of me.

It’s not that I care, but I wonder how close she is to David Peterson. She doesn’t know much about the mafia or anyone in it, so chances are, she doesn’t know David’s true identity.

Or mine.

“I heard you signed a business contract with David Peterson.”

“Mind your business,” she answers sharply, “you seem to have forgotten, but you stopped being my boyfriend seven years ago. We’re strangers now.”

A chuckle rumbles in my chest. “Strangers?” It’s an insult that the only woman who’d been etched on my mind for

seven years, considers me a stranger. “Should I refresh your memory on what happened that night? You left me, not the other way round.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “Don’t you want to know why I left?”

I do.

I’ve been dying to know the reason she left the way she did. But my ego gets in the way. “It’s in the past now.”

“And so is our relationship. Let’s not do this, please.”

It’s hard hearing her say such harsh words to me. They rip through me, carving a wound so deep the pain is almost physical. “Do you hate me that much?”

“I don’t hate you,” she whispers, “I just can’t be around you. It’s not that easy for me, Dominic.”

Only a few inches separate us. I take a step forward, inhaling the scent of her innocence mingling with the fragrance of lavender. It’s so familiar and seductive, I want to bury my nose in her neck and breathe her in.

She tenses when our bodies touch for the briefest second. Her breath is ragged, and she refuses to look at me.

I tilt her chin, needing her to look at me. “It wasn’t easy when you chose to leave without giving me a reason.”[\[JV1\]](#)

“I had a reason, Dominic. I chose not to tell you the reason because you lied to me,” she rasps. Her eyes flicker to mine, and I take in the way she’s gasping for air. Her long ash-blond hair flutters with the breeze like expensive satin, and it blankets the smooth, olive skin around her shoulders.

Christ, what am I to do with this woman?

My eyes take hers captive until her cheeks are a deep crimson. I can tell she’s nervous around me, and it makes me want to taunt her even more, but the sadness I see in her eyes breaks me.

It’s no fun when she’s hurting.

I tuck her hair behind her ear, and she gasps as my skin comes in contact with hers. “I missed you.”

She places her hand on mine. “Dominic...”

Whatever she wants to say is cut off when a couple saunters out onto the veranda. Elena leans away from me, returning to her previous shell. “I think we should call it a night.”

I glare at the couple. They're smiling, happiness filling around their faces. It infuriates me to see them so happy, like I used to be with Elena all those years ago.

"Fine." I tug my jacket. I'm not leaving because of the couple, and the conversation is not over yet. I have some other things to attend to, so I let her off the hook this one time. "See you around."

I turn to leave but stop by the door leading into the gala room. "One more thing," I say as I twist my head to look at her. "Stay away from David Peterson. He is not who you think he is."

Her eyes lock onto mine, as if she's searching for something. "Neither are you."

Her words hit me in the gut as I re-enter the hall.

Neither are you. I'm curious as to what she meant when she said those words, and I find it'll make the perfect excuse for me to see her again. Not that I need an excuse. Everything in this city will gradually become mine, and she's no exception.

My eyes meet with David Peterson's, and I stride over to him. "Well, well. Who do we have here?" he greets me. His

eyes glint maliciously as he stares at me through his grey lashes.

“Hello, Uncle.” I stretch the word to let him know I don’t call him that as an act of respect.

He *tsks*. “It’s good to see you’re still as arrogant.”

“The same can be said about you.” I grab a glass of wine from a passing tray. “Except arrogance doesn’t look good on you. You’re better whining and plotting against your own family.”

He snorts. “I don’t consider you, or your brothers, family.”

I clutch at my chest, pretending to be in pain. “You’re hurting my feelings, Uncle. Don’t you think you’re being a little harsh?”

He turns to me, seething. “Listen, boy. We stopped being family when you humiliated me and threw me out of the family. I promised you I’d take everything you own, and I intend to keep that promise.”

“You’ll need to have your legs attached to your torso to keep that promise.” I close the space between us. “I would hate to have to tear your limbs off to get you to behave.”

Anger heats my veins like a furnace, but I manage to keep my calm. My uncle has always been a chatty man, arrogant beyond his true strength. He makes every nerve in me twist violently.

He's been begging for death for far too long, and while I'll be more than happy to grant him his wish, I still need him around. He's the last person who saw my parents before they died, the only person who knows what truly happened that night.

It's been ten years, yet he refuses to speak of it. My patience is an overflowing cup, and I intend to get the truth out of him soon. First, I need him to get his ass out of my damn business.

His chuckle forces me back to the present. "You're all words and no action, boy. If you wanted to kill me, you would have done so by now."

I tug his tie and drag him close. "Don't get it twisted, old man. I'm keeping you alive only because I want to."

His gaze is malicious, but he doesn't dare say another word.

I pat him on the cheek. “I know you ratted to the cops. Do you hope to become the next Capo if you sell me out to your little friends?”

“I didn’t sell you out. I’m running for a position in government and as you know, I need to play my part as a good citizen.”

“Too bad.” I gulp down my wine in one drink. “Dead men don’t run for government. Try that one more time, and it will be the last thing you do.”

I feel his glare burn my back as I disappear into the crowd.

I weave my way across the room, and as if on cue, I come face to face with the man I dread the most.

Kirill Vadim.

Although he hides behind politics and business, I see him for who he is. A treacherous old man with a lust for blood. He’s the head of the *bratva*, and I have reason to believe his rivalry with my father played a part in why my parents were murdered in such a gruesome way.

Men like Kirill and I have never gotten along easily. His crimes run from drug trafficking to human trafficking.

Why do dirty business? Who needs the blood of innocent women and children in their hands?

While he parades himself as the symbol of charity, his money reeks of innocent blood. Like metal to magnet, my uncle can't resist being in his circle. He must've promised him the Cosa Nostra throne in exchange for his loyalty.

But I know Kirill too well. He won't hesitate to kill my uncle and take over our business the second my brothers and I are out of the way. Only a fool would trust him, and that word best describes my uncle.

It's funny how much greed can destroy a man's sense of reasoning.

"If it isn't Death himself," he says, wearing the usual friendly mask he shows to the rest of the world.

God, I want to punch him in the face.

Unlike my uncle, I don't have the patience to stop myself and I get straight to the point. "Return my shipment, and leave my uncle out of your schemes."

He smiles first, then bursts into a laugh. "Are you worried I'll hurt your woman?" He laughs again. "I don't play dirty."

I scoff. “That’s rich coming from a bag of dirt like you, Kirill.” I draw closer to him. “Fuck with her, and you’ll have me to answer to.”

He’s quiet for a moment, his expression sour like curdled milk. I can see he isn’t taking my insult very lightly. “You realize I can kill you right where you stand, don’t you?”

I smirk. “I dare you.”

My bodyguards are stationed around this building. One word from me and this little gala he has going will end with bloodshed and Kirill’s mutilated corpse. He knows that will be the result and won’t risk it.

“Fine.” Kirill tries to hide it, but I see the panic in his eyes. “Don’t mess with me, and I won’t mess with you.”

“You’re misunderstanding something, Kirill. It’s not up for negotiation. It’s a warning.” I lean in close enough for him to absorb every word I say. “Fuck around with Elena, and I’ll be sure to make your last days on earth a misery.”

Chapter Six

Elena

“Dominic Romano was at the party last night?”

Moira’s eyes are almost bulging out of their sockets from how stunned she is, and I don’t think she realizes it, but her jaw is hanging open.

“He was,” I answer, grabbing a piece of pizza from the box sitting on the kitchen island. Lucas is on a school trip, and Moira decided to have a sleep over at my place. We were both too lazy to cook so we ordered in.

Nothing better than pizza and chicken wings on a Friday night while gossiping with your best friend.

My mind had been so frazzled after I met Dominic last night I’d ended up drinking enough wine to get me tipsy. Don’t ask me what I was thinking because in truth, I don’t think I was.

I’d been nervous, panicked and anxious.

If I’d ever thought I was over my feelings for him, then last night was an affirmation that, in fact, I still love him as

much as I did seven years ago. Every cell in me ignited when I stood next to him, and even now, every hair on my body stands on end.

“Did he find out about Lucas?”

My chest tightens. “He didn’t.” When I heard his voice, I’d been afraid he’d been eavesdropping on my call, but luckily, he either wasn’t or he didn’t care enough to speak of it.

Moira sighs, relived. “Thank goodness. It would have been a disaster.” She walks over to the fridge and grabs a bottle of water. “What did you guys talk about?”

I shrug. “Nothing, really.” My mind wanders back to him stepping closer and tucking my hair behind my ears. A jolt of electricity courses up my spine and travels to the rest of my body.

A single touch from him had caused all the walls I’d built to collapse. If the couple hadn’t walked out... Well, if they hadn’t, who knows what would have happened?

I might have gone ahead and done something stupid like hug or kiss him.

Moira looks at me suspiciously. “Nothing happened between you two, right?”

I quickly shake my head. “Of course not. What do you take me for?” Heat spreads over my cheeks at the thought of something happening.

Damn.

What am I thinking entertaining thoughts like this about Dominic? I should be pushing him away, not daydreaming about him.

“I take you for someone who lost her virginity to a stranger in Italy,” she says, flashing a mischievous smile at me. “Who says it can’t happen a second time?”

“The chances of it happening a second time are zero, unless I can miraculously become a virgin after birthing a whole human.”

She grinned. “I miss the days when we could be free and wild. Now all we do is work and take turns babysitting.”

I sighed. “Tell me about it.”

Moira throws the empty bottle inside the trashcan and grabs a stool beside me. “What do you plan on doing now? I have an eerie feeling Dominic may seek you out.”

“I’ll keep turning him down until he gives up,” I say with my mouth stuffed with pizza.

I’m worried Dominic is the kind of guy who never gives up when he sets his mind to something, but I hold my breath, praying he’ll actually take the cue and not insist.

My heart lurches at the notion I’ll have to push him away, when all I want is to have him close.

I’ve made peace with the fact I can’t be with him no matter how much I love him, but it doesn’t quench the pang in my heart every time I have to mute my feelings for him.

“Good luck with that, babe. I don’t see Dominic leaving you be.” She throws a hand over her mouth to muffle a small yelp. “What if he wants you back?”

I shake my head. Moira claims there are thousands of women around the globe wanting Dominic’s attention. I think she also has a little crush on him. “I didn’t leave because he didn’t want me, Moira. I left because I had to protect Lucas.”

“I understand, babe. Trust me, I do. I just feel sorry for you.” Her tone softens. “I hate that you have to deny your feelings for him when it’s clear you’re still in love with him.”

“Is it very obvious?” I ask. My chest is cramped from how fast my heart is beating, but I’m trying not to let it get to me.

“Very obvious,” Moira says. She points to my cheeks. “You’re getting red and you sound like you’re dreaming about him. Even a blind man would know you’re in love.”

Heat scorches my cheeks even more, and I shove another piece of pizza into my mouth.

“So,” Moira says, breaking the silence that has lingered for a moment. “Are you going to date someone soon?”

I cough from the intensity of her question. She scurries to the fridge and grabs a can of soda for me.

“God. Moira, you’ll be the death of me,” I squeal as the drink forms a cold pool in my stomach. “I’m too busy to date now.”

“You know you’ll never get over Dominic if you don’t give another man a chance.” She glances to the door as if there’s someone there. “You said it yourself, Lucas needs a dad. You should find one for him if you’re not willing to let him meet Dominic.”

I give it a brief thought, then I sigh because I can't think of a better replacement for Dominic. "There are thousands of single mothers in the world, Lucas will be fine having just one parent."

I know I'm being selfish, but I find solitude in the fact I'm not keeping Lucas away simply to hurt Dominic. It's more complicated than that.

Memories of Dominic chopping off a man's finger seven years ago seep into my mind. It's dark, bloody, and gruesome.

It's a nightmare I can't expose Lucas to, no matter how heart wrenching it is for me that I have to keep the truth away from Dominic.

"He might be." She leans in and whispers, "But will you be okay being celibate all your life? Even if you resort to sex toys, nothing feels better than the hands of a man, you know... or a woman."

She grins when I gasp. "You filthy girl. Is having sex with a woman your latest fetish?" I envy how sexually expressive Moira is, but if I were to be honest, she surprises me sometimes too.

One time, when we were in college, she'd organized a reverse-harem threesome and almost went through with it. One of the guy's girlfriends pulled up at the hotel and ruined everything.

Moira had no idea he was dating, and she ended up sulking over it for weeks.

Bad times I tell you.

She rolls her eyes and huffs. "No. I like dick way too much for that. I only suggested it since I don't think you'll ever let a man who isn't Dominic get in your pants."

"I like dick..." I trailed off and threw a hand over my mouth, smothering the words that'd left my lips without permission. "Shit! What did I just say?"

Moira's eyes twinkles with mischief. She flashes a sly smile at me as she repeats, "I like dick..." She propped her hands beneath her jaw as if thinking. "Let me guess; you were going to say you love dick too much to sleep with a woman."

Oh, God. I have a feeling she's going to torment me forever with this.

"Don't do that, Moira. I'm embarrassed enough as it is," I say, directing my gaze to a pot on my stove top.

“I will taunt you, but not tonight.” She drags the box of pizza over to herself and takes a piece. “I heard a rumor. I don’t know if there’s an iota of truth to it though, but I thought I’d let you know.” She takes a bite out of her pizza. “It’s about Mr. Peterson.”

“Mr. Peterson?” I lean on the kitchen island, my interest piqued. “What is this rumor about?”

“An anonymous blog released an article stating Mr. Peterson is not the investor and humanitarian we think he is.” She pauses for a drink from my can of unfinished soda. “Heard he’s into all sorts of shady business, including drug trafficking, importing contraband and stuff like that.”

I furrowed my brows. “Isn’t that what the mafia do?”

She inclines her head in a nod. “Yeah. Something like that. I don’t believe it though, he doesn’t seem the type to be involved. I think it’s a mere case of political propoganda. He’s contesting a political seat, and he’s well recognized for his humanitarian services and all that. It’s not rocket science the opposing party will pull some stunts on his public image.”

“Hmm.” One thing I’ve learned from my relationship with Dominic is to never trust anyone too much. “You can’t be too sure.”

She tsks. “Who cares if he makes his money illegally? Our company is benefitting from his investments.”

I glance at my friend and shake my head. “You give me more reasons to understand why you chose to become a lawyer.”

She scrunches her nose. “Why?”

“Mr. Peterson is our latest investor. A slight scandal linked to his name will affect our stock, and it will in turn affect how much the company pays you.”

She straightens up and gapes at me, as if I’d just announced the second coming of a messiah. “In that case, I hope he’s as clean as a neatly shaved dick.” She chuckles at her own joke. “I need a new car, and a new designer bag.”

“Your needs are endless,” I mutter with a grin. “I wonder what you’ll do with all that designer stuff you get.”

“I’ll look at them every morning and smile to myself. You have no idea how much happiness luxury brings.”

I lift a brow. “I do. Try having a kid, you’ll be surprised at how much happiness comes with being a mother.”

She waves off my suggestion like I’m asking her to rob a bank. “No, thanks. I’m better off being the rich and cool

aunty. Babysitting is the most I can do.”

“Mmm, so you say,” I retort with a grin.

We finish up the rest of our food and move to the living room. Moira turns on the tv, and just as I’m about to slump into one of the cushions, my phone buzzes from the tv console.

“Late night messages,” Moira teases. “That’s suspicious.”

I amble to the console. “Hush, woman. It could be Lucas.”

“Or not,” she argues. “Lucas falls asleep before the sun slips past the horizon. There’s no way he’s texting you by almost midnight.”

“You’re right.” My eyes expand as I glare at the message on my screen, and my stomach flips. “It’s not Lucas.”
It’s Dominic.

My lips quiver as I read the text a second time.

I’m glad you got home safe. It was lovely seeing you last night.

Moira flies up from her chair and scurries to me. “Who is it?” She grabs the phone from me, then she throws a hand over her mouth as she reads the content of the text. “Oh my fucking god.” She drags her gaze to me. “Did you exchange numbers with him?”

I shake my head.

Dominic’s connections reach far and wide. He can have whatever he wants in just a snap of his fingers. I’m not surprised he somehow has my number. No, I’m just stunned he cared enough to try and reach me.

“Then how did he get it?” She snaps her head to the window. “What if he’s outside?”

My chest tightens. *What if he is outside?* I nearly trip on the monochrome rug in the middle of the living room as I hurry to the window and part the curtains.

Streetlamps light the lonely road outside, a gentle wind flutters the trees. There’s no sign of Dominic anywhere. Still, my heart roars loudly in my ears, as if he’s lurking in a corner, watching me and sniffing out my secret from afar.

What if he finds out about Lucas?

Chapter Seven

Dominic

I'm an inch close to pulling out my gun and shooting at the flickering neon light, but it's the loud music in the background that makes my headache flare.

Dante sits across from me, sipping on his alcohol and staring at a whore with lustful eyes. There's a dark smile on his face and his hands move as if they can't wait to grab her ass.

I just can't stand him.

Not because of his insane obsession of waking up to a new woman beside him every night. My loathing for him stems from the fact that he reminds me of the man I used to be before I met Elena.

After she left the party, I had Dante follow her home to make sure she was safe. I don't like that she's mixed up with men like David Peterson and Kirill Vadim. Even more, I detest she's part of some stupid plan they have to take me down.

I want to keep her away, but she's far too stubborn for me to try and keep her from them unless I tell her the reason, which I can't, since it will only put her in more danger.

My best bet in protecting her is having some of my men watch her.

And image of her in that sapphire dress flashes through my mind and it makes my cock throb. How can she be so fucking sexy without even trying?

I swear that woman will be the death of me. It's been seven years, and I want to flip her over my lap and spank her ass as much as I want to wrap my fingers around that slim neck of hers.

That woman is like venom to me, burning through my veins with no antidote.

Fuck. I loosen my tie, pour myself a finger of whiskey and down it in one gulp. "Why did you ask us to meet here of all places?" I ask as I slam the empty glass on the table.

Dante smiles at me. "Don't you miss partying here, boss? This used to be your favorite spot."

I recline in my seat, irritation creeping over me. "I have fucking PTSD from nightclubs," I spit out. It reminds me

too much of the night Elena left me. “Get to business.”

“Easy, man.” Dante glances at Marcus who’s sitting beside him, and then to my cousin, Lorenzo. When he sees no one is sharing in his excitement, his expression turns serious. “Alright. Alright. Word came from one of the men watching the New York bratva.”

“And?” Marcus asks.

“The family has no idea when or how our shipment went missing,” Dante explains. “I don’t think that fucker Kirill Vadim had shit to do with it.”

“If not them, then who?” Lorenzo asks.

Marcus looks like he’s thinking for a while. “Do you think the Valentés have something to do with this, brother?”

I run my finger through my beard. The Valentés lead the Camorra mafia, and they’re just as messed up as the Bratva.

We—the Cosa Nostra—have never gotten along with those bastards because our codes of conduct are completely different. Those sickos have no problem with human trafficking, and that would always be a major problem for me.

There is no denying we're all the same twisted bastards, but unlike the Camorra, the Cosa Nostra has limits. A rule we abide by.

It's simple. Fuck as many whores as your cock needs, do whatever illegal business earns you some dollars, but don't hurt women and children.

Our rivalry dates back decades, when a war broke out between our families. We'd won and drove the Valentés out of the city to protect the territories and the victims of their mindless brutality. Years after the war, the head of the Camorra, Victor Valentés called for a truce. My father allowed them return to New York when they agreed never to cross our territories, which I believe was his biggest mistake.

Despite the tension that has lingered between the Cosa Nostra and the Camorra, they've lain pretty low. I don't have reason to suspect them, but I wouldn't put it past them to make a move like this either.

"Meet Victor Valentés tomorrow," I say to Marcus, "have him know I won't sit quietly if he tries shit with me."

"We're not too sure they're behind it, boss," Lorenzo says. His brown, curly hair hangs over the side of his face. He's a giant-sized guy with a head as big as his belly, but he

handles a .45 caliber gun better than most men I've seen. Sadly, his brain is not as useful as his gun skills.

I swipe my tongue over my lips. "We don't need to be sure, Lorenzo. We're warning them, not killing them."

He groans and rubs the gun tucked in his belt. "I wouldn't mind leaving a few bullets behind. Something for them to remember."

"Don't." I don't mind shedding blood as long as it doesn't belong to innocent people, but we have a war looming with the Russians already, it will work against us if we start a fight with the Camorra now. "Just do as I say."

"*Si*, brother," Marcus replies.

Dante finishes his drink and rises to his feet. "Good. The meeting is over, now it's time to party."

Lorenzo stands with him, his fat frame casting a shadow over me. "That whore right there has had her eye on you since we got here," he says looking at one of the strippers grinding a pole across from us. "She wants you, man. See that ass."

They both chuckle like mad men while I cringe in my seat. *These fuckers.*

“I’ll be drinking my whiskey off her cunt tonight, bro.” Dante claps Lorenzo’s shoulder. “Find yourself a bitch or jerk off at the thought of me fucking her cunt. Whichever one works for you.”

Lorenzo growls. “Fuck you, man.”

“I’ll be fucked soon enough.” Dante tucks his white shirt in his jeans and turns to storm off.

“Sit your fucking ass down,” I order as he’s about to leave. I hate to be the party killer, but I’ve still got stuff to discuss with them.

Both Dante and Lorenzo look at me in confusion, but they don’t argue. “Yes, boss?” They both answer in unison as they sit.

“Dante, find out what you can about the businesses Peterson has invested in. They must have something in common.”

“*Si*, boss,” Dante answers.

“And you.” I drag my gaze to Lorenzo. “Keep an eye on Elena. Make sure she’s safe at all times.”

He nods. “Yes, boss.”

I cross my legs and spread my arms on the armchair.
“Get out! Both of you.”

They glance at each other, and then scurry away before I can change my mind.

I scoff when Dante goes to the whore on the pole and wraps his hands around her waist. She smiles at him and he leans in to whisper something into her ear. Soon they disappear into the sea of people dancing in the middle of the room.

I'm forty, only a year older than Dante, but he reminds me so much of me and Marcus when we were much younger. Clubbing and fucking whoever we wanted.

When I became the Capo, my interests drifted from sliding my cock into any cunt to jerking off in their mouths and sending them away with a stack of cash. My father's death was too sudden and chaotic, and I had to step up to keep the family and business in order before I was ready to.

I'd been just fine living like that until I met Elena, now I can't even jerk off without pretending it's her on her knees, sucking me dry.

Speaking of Elena...I grab my phone from the table and check my messages. After the party, I'd gotten her number from one of her staff. Grace, her name was. It didn't take much, just a smile from me and she'd melted completely.

Elena needs better employees.

I'd sent her a message after I'd gotten her number, and I know she's seen it, but she isn't replying. I don't like to play chase, but her determination to stay away from me makes me want to taunt her even more.

She deserves that much after how she pushed me away seven years ago. I imagine all the ways I could punish her, but the one that strikes me the most is her naked and blindfolded, not knowing what part of her body I'll torture next.

Christ, I think I need more drink.

I don't realize I'm smiling until my reflection stares back at me from the glass I'm holding.

"Dante told me you met that woman at the gala."

I shift my gaze to Marcus. He's looking at me as if a screw has gone loose in my head. I swear it's more than just one screw.

"So?"

“So?” He leans forward. “What are you going to do?”

I shrug and pour myself more alcohol. “What’s there to do? She’s history.”

He gives me a lop-sided grin. “Given the way you were smiling at your phone just now, I don’t think she’s history, brother. Just so you know, I heard from Dante she’s seeing someone.”

My jaw clenches. I think the glass will shatter if I gripped it as tight as I was any longer, so I slam it on the table. “I don’t give a fuck.”

“I think you will soon enough.” The smirk on his face is evil. Marcus is the opposite of me. He puts his head to work more than his fists or gun, but when he chooses to be badass, even the devil grabs a seat to learn from him. “He saw a child through the window. He’s not certain the kid is hers though, could be her best friend’s. Moira was home with him.”

A lump forms in my throat, and it’s almost cutting off my airflow. Marcus is trying to get a reaction from me. Marcus knows me better than I know myself, and he sees right through the bullshit I put up. He knows I hate Elena, and he also knows beneath my hate, my feelings for her haven’t died yet.

I detest that he reads me like an open book.

“You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you?”

A smile tickles his lips, but it fades as worry causes his brow to wrinkle. “I’ve known you my whole life, brother,” he says, “something’s bothering you, and I have a feeling it has to do with that woman.”

I pull a pack of cigarette from my pocket and light one, dragging in the smoke. “I have two problems, Marcus. A woman is not one of them.” It’s not completely a lie, it’s just that Elena is the antidote to the fury burning through me every second since I returned to New York.

She’s like venom to my system, but I’ve learnt even venom can save lives. There are bigger problems than my dislike for her, and thinking of her is the only way I can keep sane.

He glides a finger over his cufflinks. “What is it then?”

“I need to find our parent’s killer.” Anger licks the walls of my stomach as I say it, images of the night my parents died flashing through my brain. “And I need to take over this city. We’ve been slack long enough and the Bratva are making a mess of this city.”

Marcus's eyes flash red through the neon light, and his jugular bulges, but it's over as quickly as it started. My brother has mastered the act of keeping his emotions in check.

He hadn't shown he was angry or sad after our parents died. Even now, he keeps those emotions himself, but I know more than anyone, he is just as thirsty for revenge as I am. He'd been very close to our mother.

"Do you still think Peterson had something to do with their deaths?"

I lean towards the table and flick my cigarette on the ashtray. "He has the motive, I wouldn't put it past him."

"I wouldn't either, but we shouldn't leave the others out of the box. Both Peterson and the Bratva have the biggest motives, but they're not our only rivals."

He's right. The Irish mob are our biggest allies, but that doesn't mean they can't switch sides if it benefits them. Then there's the Camorra, our mortal enemies.

"As for ruling the city, how about I set up some meetings?" he asks, tilting his head to the side. "Carlos Diego is in town for a while. How about we meet him first thing tomorrow evening?"

Carlos Diego is the first son of the Jose Diego, a Mexican drug lord. He runs one of the biggest drug trafficking and contraband smuggling organizations in New York. His influence stretches to all parts of the country. Although I'd love to keep my hands clean, an alliance with him is something I need.

I nod. "Perfect."

A silhouette lurking in the shadow catches our eye. When it emerges into the light, a slender woman with long dark hair and long legs appears. She's wearing a red dress and heels I see are over eight inches.

I sigh. "You're still not over this shit?" Her name is Caterina, and well...she's Marcus's whore. She works in the club as a stripper, and he marked her as his eight years ago.

An arrogant smile parts his lips. "I'm not a saint like you, bro. At this point, you'll be martyred after you die."

Caterina smiles at me, then she walks to Marcus and parts his legs. I retch when she sits on him and grinds her ass.

"Get this out of my sight," I say with a growl.

Marcus's laugh mingles with the music blaring from the speakers. He holds Caterina's waist and pushes her off,

then he stands. “Let’s get you fixed shall we? How about we meet at Elena’s tomorrow morning?”

“What for?”

“Don’t you need to take back what’s yours?” he drawls, and then he follows Caterina out of the club like a toddler after a Blow Pop.

His words linger long after he leaves, and I agree with him. I need to take back what’s mine.

Marcus and I are parked in front of Elena’s apartment the next morning. Marcus came up with the idea that we first confirm if the kid is hers and if she has anyone else in her life, that way, I can plan my next step.

Although I didn’t see a ring on her finger at the gala, I also don’t care if she’s shackled to some ugly-ass dude. I was going to claim her anyway, and then I’ll decide what to do with her.

What’s the best way to punish her for seven years ago?

The chirping of birds, along with the morning sunlight filters in through the tinted window of my SUV. My patience

is running thin, and I'm seconds away from sliding out of this car and going into the damn building to find out what I want.

Patience is not my strongest suit, and I'm particularly annoyed I have to stalk from a corner because Marcus decided we should. I'd have broken his jaw when he first suggested it if he weren't my brother.

“Chill, brother. You'll break the steering wheel.”

A glance at my hands shows they're gripping the steering wheel very tightly, then I shift my gaze to my brother. “You know we could've been out of here already. I have a business to run.”

“So do I,” he retorts. He doesn't take his eyes off the entrance. “I only did this so you'll stop being such a grump, yet here you are.”

I open my mouth to say something, but I'm cut off when the glass door leading into the apartment pushes open and a boy runs out from it. From where the car is parked, I can tell he's no less than six years old, and he has hair as dark as mine.

Looks like Elena has a type.

Clutching his backpack, he flips around and smiles at someone I can't see yet. When the door pushes open a second time, Elena walks through it and static shoots up my spine.

She's wearing cooperate, black pants and a white and black striped turtle-neck top. A beige jacket which matches her shoes drapes over the hand holding a black handbag.

Her hair is pulled back in neat bun. I swear she's the epitome of elegance and class. And she's so fucking beautiful that she glitters under the morning sunlight.

She reaches for the kid and he takes her hand. They walk to her car, get in and drive away. I twist my car-key and the engine roars to life, then I roll the tires onto the road.

"I've never seen you so determined," Marcus remarks. "You must really love this woman."

"I don't love her," I bite out. My heart lurches whenever I see her, and my stomach twists in ways I don't like, but I think it's just a wave of nostalgia. I'd been really drawn to her once and now... Fuck! I'm losing my damn mind.

There's no logical reason why I'm stalking her so early in the morning. I'm just not the kind of guy to do something so

embarrassing, yet here I am. The worst thing is, I could maneuver the car the other way and go about my day, but I'm determined to see this to the end.

“Yeah, you don't.” His tone is sardonic as he says it. “I wonder why we're out this early in the morning chasing a woman you don't even like.”

I twist my head to him. “One more word from you and you'll lose a tooth.”

My brother grins like he used to when we were teenagers. “I'll take a bullet for you brother, but I'm not in the mood to lose a tooth today,” he says.

I sigh and the car is almost silent but for the beat of my heart in my ears.

Shortly after, I come to a stop behind Elena's car. We're parked in front of a school. The kid gets out and waves at Elena as she drives off.

I roll in just as she drives away and unstrap my seat belt with urgency.

“Where are you going?”

I glance at my brother, then back to the boy who's still staring at Elena's car as she drives away. “I need to confirm if

she's really his mother and if she's seeing someone. I'll be right back."

My thoughts are erratic and I'm unable to think straight as I stride towards the boy. When he turns to me and his eyes meet mine, I halt.

Something's not right.

I hadn't noticed it from afar, but aside from his hair being as dark and curly as mine, he has blue eyes and a sharp jaw like every other Romano in the world.

He has an uncanny resemblance to my brothers and me.

His smile fades when I close the gap between us and squat in front of him. "Hey, little guy."

"My name is Lucas." He looks at me from head to toe. "Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of your Mom. Elena Marconi is your Mom, right?"

He narrows his eyes on me. "My Mommy doesn't have any friends except Aunt Moira. Are you her boyfriend?"

It's impossible to bite back my smile. "Something like that."

He frowns. “Are you my Daddy then?”

It feels wrong, but I shake my head anyway. “Where’s your Daddy?”

He furrows his brows and drops his gaze to the ground. “I don’t have one. Mommy says he’s faraway.”

Something in me snaps at that information. There’s no way it’s a mere coincidence this kid is walking around with a face which looks just like mine. He’s Elena’s son and he doesn’t have a dad.

It can only mean one thing...

I try to connect the dots and a bell begins to clang in my head, but there’s one final *little* piece of the puzzle left. His hands are small in mine when I take them. “How old are you, kiddo?”

“I’m six years old.” He pouts and starts to kick something in the paving. “Aunt Moira says I’m a baby, but I’m not. Mommy doesn’t think I’m a baby either.”

My stomach twists violently.

“Are you okay? You look sick.” He scrutinizes my face. “I can call 911. My Mom taught me to call the cops if I’m sick or in danger.”

I force a smile. “I’m not sick, kid. I’m just a little shocked.”

“Why?”

It’s a battle to not get lost in thought right now. This kid is just like his mother. They’re both talkative and they’re the sweetest and cleverest people I’ve ever met. “Nothing, kiddo. You should go inside.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone outside,” he argues. “I’ll call my Mom, she’ll take you to the doctor.” He removes his backpack and start to take his phone out but I grab it from him. “Don’t. I’m fine.”

He shrugs. He’s such a cute boy. “If you insist.” He puts his backpack on and takes his phone from me. “I’m sorry, but I have to go now.”

I force another smile and pat his head. “Go on.”

He runs through the red gate and I wait for him to enter the orange building towering above me before I rise to my feet. For some reason, my legs wobble, as if my bones have dissolved into rubber.

He is six years old.

That means Elena had him only a few months after we
broke up.

That means...*he is my son.*

Chapter Eight

Elena

“I’m sorry, sir, but you can’t go in,” my personal assistant, Ava, yells from the hallway. “You can’t...”

The door to my office opens before she can finish her sentence, and a figure in black Armani suit comes in. Our eyes meet and I recoil in my seat from how he’s glaring at me as if he’s barely holding back from wrapping his fingers around my neck.

Jesus. What’s Dominic doing here, and why is he looking at me like that?

Ava runs in after him, she’s panting as she glances between us. “I’m sorry, Ms. Marconi. I told him not to come in but he wouldn’t listen. I’ll call security.”

I’m scared and I don’t know that I want to have any conversation with Dominic when he’s fuming, but something tells me he won’t be leaving until he settles whatever score he has with me.

My heart is pounding as I wave at Ava. “That won’t be necessary, Ava. You can return to your desk now.”

“Are you sure, Ms. Marconi?” She glowers at Dominic and then her gaze softens when she looks at me.

I nod because I can’t muster any words.

“I’m only a phone call away if you need me,” she says. She gives Dominic one last venomous glare before she walks away.

My pulse skyrockets once she closes the door, and my stomach churns nervously. “What are you doing here?” I ask. Shivers rush down my spine, but it doesn’t stop me from noticing how goddamn handsome Dominic is.

His curly, dark, hair glints off the overhead light and the sunlight pouring in from the glass wall. His suit is not doing a good job at hiding his broad shoulders and all the muscles underneath.

He tucks his hands into his slacks and ambles to the window. He stares over the city for an eternity before he finally speaks. “Why did you keep my son away from me?”

My lungs empty like a popped balloon. “What do you mean?” I ask, trying not to let on I’m starting to panic, but the

tremble in my voice betrays me.

Dominic knows about Lucas. I don't know how or why, but the fact he's asking means he does. I shouldn't try to play dumb or lie to him, but I can't help it.

I need to protect Lucas.

He twists his head in my direction. "Don't try to play smart with me, Elena." A storm rages in his eyes, and it's followed by the growl in his voice.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say, my voice a bare whisper. I look away from him. I can't make myself look straight in his eyes while I lie to him.

The tension in the air is palpable, the silence louder than any words either of us could ever say.

Thump...thump...thump.

My heartbeat quadruples when he prowls closer. My hands begin to shake as adrenaline streams into my veins. They're cold and sweaty so I clamp them between my thighs so he won't see.

Dominic places his clenched fists on my desk and leans toward me. "Look at me, Elena."

I close my eyes. *I can't look at you.*

“Look at me,” he roars. His tone is harsh, furious and commanding. My muscles tense when his fingers grip my jaw and tilt my face in his direction. “Open your eyes.”

Oh, God.

My breath is ragged as I tear my eyes open and force myself to look at him.

“Lucas is my son.” He’s not asking. “Why did you keep him away from me for all these years, Elena?” [\[JV2\]](#)

I open my mouth to speak, but instead of words, tears I didn’t know I was holding back spill down my face.

“Stop crying, Elena.” His hands curl into fists and his nostrils flare. “You don’t have the right to cry.”

I sniffle to stop the tears from falling, but it’s impossible. Dominic is right, he’s the one who’s had to live without knowing he has a son, but I’m overwhelmed with all the emotions I’d forced myself to keep hidden for seven years. “I didn’t keep him away from you because I wanted to.”

His smirk is mirthless. “You have five minutes to explain yourself.”

I grab a Kleenex from my desk and clean my tears with it. “I had no choice, Dominic. You left me no choice, okay?”

He squints at me, his expression stone-hard and his icy-blue eyes piercing mine. “How is it my fault?”

“Death.”

It looks like his eyes widen for a moment, but I’m not certain.

“I found out you were *Death* the same night I found out I was pregnant.” Tears begins to prickle my eyes again, blurring his image. “You chopped that man’s finger off, Dominic, and you smiled when you did it.”

His thick lashes flutter and his jaw clench. “You saw that?”

“Yes.” I bite my lip, trying to hide my horror at the memory. “You’re part of the mafia. No, you’re the head of the mafia,” I correct myself. “When I saw you do that, I couldn’t bring myself to tell you. I couldn’t raise a child with a monster like you.”

A wave of sadness flickers in his eyes. “You think I’m a monster?”

“You kill and hurt people. Are you an angel then?” I huff out a laugh, ignoring the ache clawing at my heart. “You

kept the truth of who you were away from me. Why is it a problem I did the same?"

"Because he is my son, Elena." He slides his fingers through his hair. "It doesn't matter if you think I'm a monster or not. Lucas is my son and you had no right to keep him away from me." [\[JV3\]](#)

"He is my son, too, and I have every right to keep him safe, Dominic." He slams his fist on the desk and hangs his head low. A beat passes before he raises his head to look at me. "Seven years, Elena. I've missed seven years of my son's life because of you."

A knot forms in my throat at how quiet his voice sounds. I've never seen Dominic so angry and so sad. A pang of guilt slices through me and for the first time, I realize how selfish I've been.

It doesn't matter if Dominic is a two-horned beast. I once loved him and my son deserves a father, yet I'd kept them apart from each other for so long.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted what was best for our son," I muttered. I look into his eyes. "I didn't realize the truth would hurt you this much."

Dominic rounds the desk until he's standing an inch away from me. Heat prickles down my spine from the sudden closeness. "Why didn't you tell me when you found out who I was?"

"I was afraid." My throat dries up so I swallow. "You lied to me. I had no idea how you'd react if you found out I knew your true identity. The only thing I could think of in that moment was to protect myself and our baby."

"I didn't lie to you, Elena." He sits on the edge of the desk, so close his leg brushes against mine. "I kept the truth away from you to protect you."

"You did a poor job at protecting me."

Dominic watches me silently without protesting. The air is dense around us, but his intense gaze simmers into the pit of my stomach, heating me up from the inside out. God, the effect this man has on me.

I'm supposed to hate him for being such an asshole, but I can't even take my eyes off him. It's a battle between my head and my heart, and I can't tell which one will win.

"You have until tomorrow morning to tell my son about me," he says, breaking the silence.

“Or what?” I rasp as the blood flowing through my veins whooshes in my ears.

He leans forward, bringing his face only an inch away from mine. My chest swells as my gaze lands on his mouth, his very sexy lips. My tongue darts out and swipes over my own lips.

When he moves closer again, it’s instinctive for me to swivel my chair away, but he places a hand on the armrest and pulls me closer before I can dare to move away. “I’m not sure you want to know what happens if you don’t.”

He’s damn serious, and I know I should obey him, but I have the sudden urge do the opposite of whatever he says. “I don’t,” I hear myself mutter. “As you know, I don’t take threats very well.”

A flicker of a smile flashes through his face. “Will you take it seriously when I flip you over this desk and spank you until your skin burns and turns red?”

My breath hitches and a blush scorches my cheeks. *Jesus*. “You shouldn’t say things like that to me, Dominic. We’re no longer...”

“Lovers?” he helps me to complete. “We don’t need to be, Elena. I own you.”

Anger simmers in my guts. “You don’t own me, Dominic. You didn’t seven years ago, and you never will. I hate you.”

He smiles at me, his frosty eyes dark with mischief. “How much do you hate me?”

“Very much.” I breathed.

“Not as much as I do.” He glides his hand between my legs and it burns all the way to the top of my thighs and starts a heartbeat there. “I hate you for leaving seven years ago,” he whispers into my ears, his warm breath awakening every cell in me. “I hate you even more for keeping my son away from me.”[\[JV4\]](#)

This is too much.

His touch is too hot and if I let it go on any longer, I’m afraid it will consume me. I place my hands on his chest, feeling the rock-hard muscles underneath as I try to push him away, but he is too heavy and too strong. “Don’t do this, Dominic,” I plead. “Let’s talk about Lucas instead.”

“What’s there to talk about?”

“It won’t be easy for him when I tell him you’re his father.” *I can’t believe I’m saying this.* “We need to find a way to navigate co-parenting. For Lucas’s sake.”

He pulls away from me and his eyes soften at the mention of Lucas. His expression is more serious now. “What do you want?”

“I want you to be a part of his life.” He gives me a *that’s a given* look. “But I have two conditions. He must never be exposed to the mafia, and you must keep him safe.”

“You can rest assured I have no intention of putting him in any situation that would hurt him,” he says, his voice gruff. “I promise to keep our son safe, *mio caro.*”

My stomach flips. *Mio caro.* It’s been so long since he called me that. “I know you will.” Dominic lives by his word. At first, I didn’t understand it, but it made sense after I found out he was the head of the mafia. My knowledge of the mafia is very limited, but one thing I know for sure is that they never go back on their word.

He stands up, tucks his hands in his pocket and starts to leave. When he reaches the door, he swirls around to face me. “Tell our son I’ll introduce myself formally tomorrow.”

“Can the handsome man at school today be my Dad?” Lucas asks. He jumped into my bed and snuggled up beside me. “He was really handsome, and I think he is cool, too.”

I twist my head to look at my son. “What man?”

“I don’t know his name, but he said he’s your friend.” He grins. “He was really tall and his eyes were the same color as mine.”

My jaw drops open. “Dominic?” I sit up and push my MacBook to the side. “You met him already?”

I’d been too shocked when Dominic came to my office and demanded answers from me that I didn’t think to ask him how he came to know about Lucas and if they’d met already. “What did he say to you?”

He thinks for a moment before he shrugs. “He said you’re friends,” he repeats, then he goes silent.

My stomach flips. “And?”

Lucas purses his lips. “He didn’t say anything else, Mom. Is there something he was supposed to say?”

You have until tomorrow morning to tell my son about me.

Tell our son I'll introduce myself formally tomorrow.

My chest constricts because I know Dominic wasn't bluffing when he said that. I need to tell Lucas about him before Dominic does, but I can't think of a way to start. All I know is that I have to do it now.

I spread my arm around Lucas's shoulder and bring him. Closing my eyes, I inhale deep breaths. "There's something I need to tell you, Lu." His blue eyes are blinking at me through dark lashes when I open mine. "It's about your Dad."

Lucas furrows his brows. "Is he dead? My friend at school said you're lying and my Daddy is dead. That's why you won't let me see him."

A bitter smile quirks my lips and I ruffle his hair. "No, baby. Your Daddy isn't dead." I swallow to push down the lump in my throat, but it doesn't help much. "He's alive and... he's the man you met at school today."

His tilts his head and stares at me through squinted eyes, then a slight smile parts his lips. "You're teasing me, Mom, aren't you?"

"I'm not."

His smile widens when he sees that I'm serious. "That handsome man is my daddy?"

I nod.

Lucas jumps to his feet and bounces on the bed. "Yes!" He begins to dance while singing, "I have a Daddy! And my Daddy is cool!"

The churning in my stomach hasn't died down yet, but seeing Lucas so happy puts a smile on my face. When I came home this evening, I'd dreaded telling him about Dominic because I wasn't sure how he would react.

Sure, he's always wanted a father, but he was still a child and I was afraid he wouldn't be able to process the information very well. Luckily, Lucas is mature for his age, and he is a bubbly little human. He's been that way since he was born.

I'm reeled back to the present when Lucas wraps his hand around my neck. "Can he take me to school tomorrow, Mom?"

"Lucas, I..."

"*Pleaaaaase.*" He pouts and blinks. He is so cute.

I don't think I can say no to him. "Fine. I'll call him to pick you up tomorrow."

He squeezes his arms around my neck as he hugs me. "Thank you, Mommy. You're the best!"

I rub his back. "You're the best too, baby. I love you."

"I love you, too." He pulls away, lies down beside me and pulls the cover over his body. "I'll go to sleep now. I need to wake up early so I won't keep Daddy waiting."

"Daddy?" That's so quick.

"Don't be jealous, Mom," he says playfully. He curls his arms around my leg and after only a few minutes, he starts to snore.

I carefully remove his hands and slip from the bed. I take my phone and pad my way to the living room. Crashing on one of the sofas, I pull up Dominic's number.

I haven't replied to his last message yet and I don't intend to. *I'm only texting him because of Lucas, nothing more.*

I'm uncertain if that is the only reason I'm texting him tonight. Would I be in the living room, conflicted about texting

him if Lucas hadn't begged me to allow Dominic drive him to school tomorrow?

My fingers hover over the screen. I take another deep breath, then start to type. Once I'm done, I tap the *send* button and toss my phone on the sofa.

I can't bear this.

Memories from the office start to invade my mind. I'm back to the moment where Dominic is sitting so close to me heat sears from his body and prickles mine. It's so hot and raw that static shoots up my thighs and starts to throb between my legs.

I place my hand in the same spot his had scorched my skin. Goosebumps shiver over my skin, skittering all the way to my breasts until my nipples are hard under my nightie.

It's been seven years since he touched me, seven years since he whispered dirty commands into my ear. Still, he has the same effect on my body as he did before. Just a simple touch from him and I'm going berserk with need for more.

Shit!

A pool of dark desire wets my panties, the pulse between my legs growing stronger and stronger, until I'm

forced to soothe it myself. My fingers glide into my panties and start to circle my clitoris.

I spread my legs further and throw my head back on the sofa as I rub my sex. My hands aren't mine now, they're Dominic's. I imagine him staring at me with predatory eyes as he swipes his tongue over the aching between my legs.

God.

The ache is too strong and my need is too deep. I plunge a finger inside me and my slow breath metamorphoses into a soft moan.

Quiet, Elena. You might wake Lucas.

I rake my teeth over my lips as I remember how close his lips had been to mine and how hard I swallowed when I thought he would kiss me.

If he kissed me, then his hand would have dropped to my collar bone, then it would have glided under my shirt until his fingers grazed my hard nipple.

I don't realize when I bring my hand to my breasts and start to tease my nipple. Wildfire explodes all over my body. My touch is not nearly as intense as Dominic's. No.

Dominic loved to fuck me just how I loved to be fucked. Raw, hard, and possessive. His hands were too rough to tease my sensitive nipples gently. The feelings that came with his touch were usually a mixture of pain and pleasure, though the pleasure always outweighed the pain.

I imagine the dark smile that would darken his eyes if he saw I was masturbating to visions of him. I imagine he would flip me over, spank me for being such a bad girl before pressing his erection to my ass.

I groan from how filthy my thoughts are and from my fingers, now circling my clit harder. I need more pressure so I dip another finger into my sex and start to grind on it. I want it harder and faster. I miss how ruthless and brutal his touch was.

I miss him.

My thrusts pick up the pace as an electric current ripples over my body. My other hand starts to twist and squeeze my nipple harder.

My orgasm builds like a hurricane, and it takes one last image of Dominic's wicked smirk as he watches me come, to make me explode. My eyes roll my entire body convulsing.

A bolt of satisfaction zaps up my spine and I clamp a hand over my mouth to smother my cries.

Holy fuck.

A new dawn of shame tints my cheeks pink after I come down from the high I'd been on seconds ago. I'm still panting, and my fingers are still buried inside me, but I'm ashamed I'd come from thinking about Dominic, when I claim to hate him.

My body jerks when I pull my fingers out. They're soaked with my juices and I gamble with my self-discipline when I think of what it would feel like to have him slide him me.

Jesus, Elena. Get yourself together, girl.

My phone buzzes beside me and I grab it. My stomach somersaults when I glance at the message I sent to Dominic. I'd intended to type *Come pick him tomorrow morning.*

Instead, I'd sent, *Come fuck me tomorrow morning.*

My lungs still, my pulse escalating as I tap on Dominic's reply. *How do you want it, mio cara? I prefer it rough.*

Chapter Eight

Dominic

“Remember not to drive like a psychopath,” Elena says. Her tone is hostile, but I don’t miss the scarlet red blazing her cheeks.

She’s still pissed and embarrassed about last night. To be honest, my cock had throbbed in response to her text, and I’d imagine her touching herself while she sent a text like that to me.

After I sent a reply, she’d made it clear it was a mistake. She wasn’t asking me to fuck her, she wanted me to drive Lucas to school this morning. Both of which I intended to do without a hassle.

“Am I free to take you like a psychopath, then?” I tease. I like how beautiful she is when she’s trying to hold back her anger, and I love the stain of pink on her cheeks even more. She’s trying to convince herself it isn’t so, but it’s obvious I affect her in ways she detests.

Good. She deserves that much punishment.

She shifts her gaze behind me. When she sees Lucas is inside my Porsche and he can't hear us, she glides her eyes back to me. "I told you I didn't mean it."

I smirk. I like that she is getting worked up. "It didn't sound like a mistake, *mio cara*." I tuck my hands in my pockets and take a step forward. "Tell me, do you type mistakes like that to other men?"

"No." She crosses her arms.

"Correct answer. If there's even a single man who's had the notion of touching what's mine, I wouldn't let it slide."
I mean it.

Her chest heaves in and out rapidly. "I'm not yours, Dominic. The only reason we're around each other is because of Lucas."

"You seem to have a habit of making up excuses with his name. Not a good habit, if you ask me."

She peels her gaze away from mine. Her throat bobs as she swallows. "Lucas will be late for school."

"Right." Another excuse using our son's name. Elena will learn sooner or later she simply cannot escape me. "See you later."

“Let’s not meet unless it’s necessary.”

She tenses when I close the gap between us. I pick up the scent of strawberries and vanilla when I lean in and kiss her forehead. “You don’t get to decide, *mio cara*. Have a day as beautiful as you are.”

I feel her gaze burn my back as I stride to the car and climb in. She doesn’t look away until I bring the engine to life and peel from the driveway.

The first five minutes of the drive is silent. I glance at Lucas through the rearview mirror and see he’s looking at me.

I never thought a day would come when I’d say this, but I’ve never been around a kid before, much less one that’s mine. I don’t care about first impressions and whatever else other people care about, but I want to impress this kid for a reason.

“Hey, buddy.”

“Hey,” he says quietly. We don’t speak to each other for another minute, then he asks, “Don’t you think it’s rude that you know my name when I don’t know yours?”

I smile. “My name is Dominic.”

He furrows his brows. “I have a friend at school and his name is Dominic, too. He is not as handsome as you, though.” He tries to push forward bit, but let’s out a frustrated groan when his seatbelt won’t let him. “What do I call you?”

“Dominic. Dad. Whatever you want, kid.”

“I’ll call you Dad.” He giggles happily. “I now have a Daddy too.” He kicks the back of my seat. “Dad?”

I try to bite back the grin attempting to force its way out, but I fail. It’s easy to wear a blank mask around anyone else, but not with this kid. His presence pulls at my heart in sweet way. He reminds me of the time when I was just a boy, without the burden of the Cosa Nostra weighing down my shoulders.

“Yes, kid.”

His giggles fill the car. “Daddy?”

God, this kid makes my heart flutter. I guess this is what it feels like becoming a father. “Yes, son.” Warmth spreads across my chest. It’s still feels like a dream that I have a son.

“It feels good to call you Dad.”

I maneuver the car onto the busy road. “Did you miss having one so much?”

He nods his head. “All my friends have daddies. I’m the only one who didn’t have any. I didn’t have anyone to play football with last week.”

My chest constricts, knowing my son must have been so lonely without me. “You have someone to play football with now.” I want to cheer him up. “What do you love to do in your free time?”

His smile returns, along with a happy gleam in his blue eyes. “I love to play video games, visit the zoo, and do things that make Mummy happy.”

The last one catches my interest the most. “What are the things that makes your Mom happy?”

He seems lost in thought for a second. “Pizza nights with Aunt Moira. Popcorn and SpongeBob nights with me...” he trails off and thinks some more. “But I think she’ll be happier if she has a boyfriend.”

I stop the car in front of the red gate of his school. I get out the car and help him from his seat. “Mommy will be happier from now on.”

Lucas raises his brows. “Do you like my Mommy?”

“Mm-hmm.” I lower myself into a squat position and pat his shoulder. “I like your mother.”

“Does that mean you’ll make her happy?”

I nod. “I will.” I’m not sure how yet though, but Elena gave birth to our son and raised him all on her own. I can’t begin to fathom how hard that must’ve been for her, and although I approached her with intentions that weren’t so pure, I don’t think I have it in me to hurt her any more than I have.

He sticks out his pinky finger. “Promise?”

I’m not one to make promises, but I link my pinky finger with his anyway. “I promise.” *Anything for my son.*

He flashes a smile at me, then he hugs me. He’s so small and so sweet. I’m filled with determination to protect this little human with every fiber of my existence.

When I pull away from him, I smooth his hair. “You’ll be late if you don’t go in now, little buddy.”

“Will you pick me up later?”

“If your Mom allows it,” I say. I’m getting attached to this little guy, and the thought of separating from him for even a minute makes my chest burn.

“She will if you convince her.” He winks at me then starts off. “Bye, Dad.”

I wave at him. “Bye, buddy.” I wait for him to go inside before I walk back to my car. When my engine roars to life, the next destination in my mind is Elena’s office.

It takes only an hour before I’m inside her office. She’s giving me a look that says she doesn’t want me here, but I ignore it and help myself to the chair across her desk.

“What are you doing here?”

I lean back in my seat and spare a moment to take in how fucking beautiful she is. Her ash-blonde hair is pulled up in a tight pony-tail, and her hazel eyes dilate every time she looks at me.

“We have unfinished business,” I say, running a hand over my hair

She heaves an exasperated sigh. “If it’s about last night, then I assure you it was nothing more than a mistake, okay?”

I don’t believe her, but that isn’t the reason I’m here. “Thank you, Elena.”

Her jaw slackens as if she can't believe I just thanked her. "You're..."

"You heard me right." I clear my throat. "It can't have been easy for you to take care of Lucas all on your own. I should've been there for you, but I wasn't. So, thank you for doing it all on your own."

She opens her mouth to speak but closes it back. "I don't know what to say, Dominic. This was unexpected, and being this nice doesn't suit you."

I pause. "You don't need to say anything. I just needed to tell you that, at least once."

She flicks a look my way. For the first time since I met her again, her eyes are not dull and gloomy. They aren't filled with years' worth of resentment either.

They're warm, just like I remembered them before I returned to New York. "Thank you. Now go back to being the real you."

I bite back a smirk. "What's the real me?"

Her shoulders raise and fall. "The you that's always an asshole. Arrogant and all knowing."

I don't know when last a chuckle escaped my throat, but it does so now. "Here I was thinking I'll learn to be a better man for you."

She rolls her eyes. "Dream on, asshole. Just learn to be a good dad to Lucas, that's all I'll ever ask for."

"And you, who will be good to you?"

She inhales deeply. "I have Lucas. He'll be a good son to me."

"I'll be good to you, too," I say. I don't care what she says or what she thinks. I want to be good to her, because she's the mother of my child and the only woman I've ever loved.

Her gaze is intense, her silence louder than words.

"Why, you don't want me to be good to you?" I ask. I straighten my back from the chair and lean against her mahogany desk. "Are you in love with anyone else?"

Her eyes drop to a silver ballpoint pen on her desk. She picks it up and starts to fiddle with it. "It's not that, Dominic."

"What is it?" My stomach twists with anticipation. I'm not sure what her answer will be, but it already tastes bitter on my tongue. If she's in love with another man, then, he'll have to go.

“I’ve heard too much about the mafia,” she says, her voice etched with worry. “It scares me and you’re the head of one of the families. I’m not sure I’m built for your world and the dangers that seem to come with it...”

She pauses to breathe. “I also don’t want our son mixing up with men in that world. They’re all murderers, criminals and everything I hate.”

“Hey.” I reach for her hand and squeeze it in mine. “Do you hate me?”

She lifts her eyes to meet mine. “No, Dominic. I don’t. Even after seven years, I still can’t bring myself to hate you.”

The air around us is palpable as I rub her hand. I’ve missed touching her soft and silky skin. “We’re not all heartless bastards, you know. Sure, I’m one, but not all of us are. You can’t judge us until you’ve seen a glimpse of our world.”

She pulls her hand from mine. “What if I don’t want to see a glimpse of your world? What if I’m that much of a coward and I don’t have the courage to see it?”

“Then I won’t force you. I just want to be a part of your life and Lucas’s.”

She rolls her bottom lips between her teeth.
“Dominic....” She’s cut off when my phone rings.

Whoever it is better pray what they’re calling me for is serious.

Marcus’s number flashes on my screen when I remove my phone from my pocket.

“Brother,” he says the minute I answer. Marcus is usually calm, but I pick the almost undetectable panic in his voice.

“What is it?”

“Something’s wrong, you need to come over to the warehouse.” He drops the call before I can ask any more questions, not that I would have.

Concern mars Elena’s face. “Is there a problem?”

I shoot up to my feet and smoothen my shirt. “Tell Lucas I’m sorry I can’t pick him up today. I’ll call you tonight.”

My phone buzzes just as I walk out of Elena’s office. I just received a picture from an unregistered number. When I tap on it, my eyes widen.

There's a woman in the picture, I'm not certain who she is yet, but my stomach twists from the puddle of blood around her.

Sightless eyes stare back at me when I zoom in on her face and I see there's an obvious incision on her neck from where her blood is pouring out like water from a fountain.

That is when I recognize her. It's Caterina, and she's been murdered.

Chapter Nine

Dominic

“Another shipment went missing last night,” Marcus says, twirling his gold knife between his fingers. He doesn’t mention Caterina, but I know he is pissed off about her death about as much as I am.

Caterina was just a whore to Marcus, but she was also a woman, and one that had nothing to do with the mafia. Whoever killed her must have done so to send a message.

“Someone’s fucking with us, boss. I have a feeling it’s those fucking Bratva bastards,” Dante says, fists clenched.

Dante swears the Bratva has something to do with the attack, and I, too, suspect they have something to do with it. Still, I can’t trust the Camorra either.

In our world, trust is the cheapest ticket to the grave.

Music filters into the office through the small gap around the door of my office from the dance floor in the main club. While I don’t usually mind it, I need silence to get my

thoughts in order. I twist my head to Marcus. “When does Victor Valentes arrive?”

Marcus glances at his watch. “He should’ve been here five minutes ago.” Marcus demanded a meeting with Valentes when we returned from the port an hour ago. Anger burns my veins, making me tremble from inside that the Russian bastard dares to keep me waiting.

I’m quivering with the urge to kill, and God help me that I don’t start another war tonight.

The door opens and one of my bodyguard walks in. “Victor Valentes is here, boss.”

I signal him to let him in.

The bodyguard leaves and closes the door behind him. Less than a minute later, Victor walks into the office. I don’t know which I hate most; whether it’s the smell of alcohol and marijuana oozing off him, or his cunt of a son who follows him in.

Victor smiles at me as he takes the seat across from my desk and his son sits next to him. “I never thought the day would come where Dominic Romano would seek my presence,” he says with an ugly chuckle.

Victor is sixty. He's a tall, slender man with a bald scalp and a face I want to spit on. His dark eyes match the dark organ in his chest that he calls a heart.

"You must be happier than you've ever been," I tell him, watching his every move like a hawk. "It's not every day you get to sit before greatness."

He chuckles again and I clench my fists. I want to rip his pharynx out. "To what do I owe this invitation?"

"It's barely an invitation considering I could kill you right where you sit." I glance at my brother who's raging in silence. "I'm sure you heard the news."

He cocks his brows. "What news?"

Smart bastard's playing dumb with me. "My shipment went missing, and a girl from my club was found dead in the woods."

Victor massages his beard, making a *hmm* sound as he listens and waits for me to finish. "I don't know jack about your shipment that's gone missing, Dominic."

"You don't know?" Marcus asks, his veins are twitching, but he still manages to remain calm. His ability to function properly under pressure is one of the reasons he's

been able to triple our wealth. Being born with a good brain is the second reason.

“Yes, son. I don’t know.”

“I’m not your fucking son,” Marcus roars. “And you better be telling us the truth.”

A sly smirk deforms Victor’s face. “Are you mad about your shipment that’s missing, or are you upset your whore’s been killed.”

Marcus’s eyes darken. “Watch your mouth, Victor.”

“Oh, my bad.” Victor fakes sympathy. “Get over it, son. She was just a whore, I’m sure you’ll have another one by Friday. If it’s a sweeter cunt you want, then I can get you someone.”

My fists twitch. *I’ve had enough*. I also hate how hard Victor is trying to crawl under Marcus’s skin. “That’s enough from you, Victor.”

“Forgive my manners, Dominic. It seems to me your brother didn’t get the basic training on becoming a made man. He’s sulking over a dead piece of pussy.”

“Man,” Dante hisses. “I want to fucking kill you right now.”

Victor's son, Matteo, rises to his feet. "Watch your mouth, asshole."

Dante flashes a daring smile at him. "Or what? You'll run behind your dick of a father and hide, huh?"

"I'll tear your mouth off for speaking to my father in that tone."

I grab Marcus's knife and toss it to Matteo. "Fine."

Matteo peels his gaze away from Dante and brings it to me. He glances between me and the knife with confusion.

"Try and see if you can tear his mouth off." I bet he wouldn't even make it past three steps before his dead body drops to the floor like a stupid sack of potatoes.

Matteo doesn't move an inch. He doesn't pick the knife up either.

"You can't?" I sigh, a new wave of fury boiling in my stomach. "I thought as much. Kick the knife to me, boy."

Matteo withers when he meets his father's disappointed stare. He kicks the knife in my direction.

"Good. Now sit your fucking ass down."

Matteo's demeanor is as stormy as a thundercloud, but he doesn't dare go against my orders. He lets out what I assume is an angry growl before he glues his ass to his chair like a good puppy. The boy is barely a man.

"I'm not going to say it once, Victor, so listen good." Bitterness burns my throat, carving its way from my stomach. "You're going to regret it if I ever find out you lied to me tonight."

Anger flashes in Victor's eyes. He's not taking my warning too well, he doesn't need to. What matters is that he adheres to it because I mean every fucking word I just said. "Of course. I dare not go against you. I remember the war fifteen years ago, and everything I lost. I can't begin to imagine it happening a second time."

"We all lost something or someone," Marcus chimes in. "Let's make sure it never happens again. One more thing, you must not take sides if a war happens between the Cosa Nostra and the Bratva."

"I won't."

"Good." I walk to a minibar at a corner in my office, grab a glass and a new bottle of whiskey, then I pour myself a finger of drink. "This meeting's over."

Victor starts to leave but calls for my attention when he pauses by the door. “Are you back for good, Dominic?”

I don’t turn back to look at him. “I’m back to put things in their rightful place.” *Which is me on my throne, and everyone else underneath.*

The door opens and then it closes. The room is silent, tension still lingers in the air.

“What do you think, brother?” Marcus asks, breaking the silence.

I think we’re in some deep shit.

I don’t say that though. Marcus already knows the worst enemies are the ones you can’t see. “From this point on, we don’t trust anyone.” I carry the drink to my desk. “Tell Vincent to come home. From this moment, we must be on guard.”

“Yes, brother.” Marcus rises to his feet and ambles to my desk. He reaches for my glass and downs my whiskey in one swig, then he slams the empty glass on the table. “What do you plan to do about your son?”

“Son?” Dante squints at me, his eyes begging for an explanation. “What son?”

“He has a son with that girl. Elena.” Marcus smiles and pats Dante on the shoulder. “Don’t be too surprised, mate. I found out I was an uncle yesterday.”

It takes a moment for Dante to process what he’s just heard. “Then I’m an uncle too?”

“You wish. The kid is my nephew. Mine and Vincent’s.” He looks Dante from head to toe. “You’re just a guy who works for his dad.”

Dante clutches his chest playfully. “That hurts, man. I thought we were family.”

“Not a chance,” Marcus tells him before shifting his attention back to me. “Tell me what you want me to do, brother.”

There’s only one thing to be done. “Tighten security around my son and his mother. Make sure to look into everyone around them. Also, please watch them yourself.”

Marcus nods. “I’ll cross the ocean for you, brother. Keeping your family safe is nothing. Trust me.”

“I trust you.” I turn to Dante. “Find out what club Vincent is wasting his life away in and drag him home. Break his legs if you need to, I just need him alive.”

Dante rises to his feet and strokes his shirt. “Trust me to do just that.” I know he will. Dante is even more displeased with Vincent’s lifestyle than I am.

Marcus and Dante nod at me then leave. The music gets louder when they open the door, then it fades to a mere whisper when the it closes behind them.

Once I am alone, my hands curl into back into fists and I allow my anger to show.

A war is looming, and it’s coming at us full force. I can feel it, taste it, and smell it as it approaches. The stench of blood, the vulgar taste of death, and the ominous feeling of souls drifting away from their bodies.

It’s been fifteen years since the last war, and I’d sworn to keep everyone safe after I lost my parents.

My shoulders stiffen as realization kicks me in the guts. I have way more to lose if a war happens. I just found my son and Elena, and I need to keep them safe.

Caterina wasn’t Marcus’s weakness, yet they’d gone after her. It was a sure deal they would go after Elena and Lucas if they found out about them. Those are my biggest

weaknesses now, and my enemies would take any chance they could to use them as bait to lure me in.

They can try though, but they won't succeed because I'm determined to keep them safe. And I don't care if I have to risk my life to do it.

“You're kidding, aren't you?”

Elena stops smiling when she sees how serious I am. After my meeting with Victor last night, I'd thought of a better plan to keep her and Lucas safe.

They have to move in with me.

After I drove Lucas to school this morning, I wheeled back to Elena's house to fill her in on what was going on. Of course, I didn't tell her about Caterina's murder. Elena has no idea who Caterina is, and she would only become scared if I told her someone was murdered.

“Dominic, you know that's not possible, right?” She shakes her head. “We can't move in with you.”

“I wasn't asking if you can. I am telling you to.”

“No.” She drags her fingers through her hair. “Lucas and I have nothing to do with the mafia or whatever is going

on with you. Why do we have to suffer for it, too?"

She doesn't understand, and I'm going insane trying to make her.

One thing I love about Elena is her stubbornness, but I'm not sure how I feel about that trait of hers right now. "You don't get it, Elena. Lucas is my son, and you're his mother. That is reason enough for anyone to hurt both of you."

"And no one knows that," Elena says.

"Sure. No one knows besides me and my brothers, but some things don't stay hidden for long, especially when the people involved are soulless bastards who'll stop at nothing to exploit my vulnerability."

She leans against her kitchen island. "I don't know, Dominic. I can't live the rest of my life in fear. I also want Lucas to have a normal life like every other kid."

"Lucas is not every other kid, *mio cara*. You own one of the biggest businesses in New York, and I'm a billionaire. He was never destined to be a normal kid."

"Maybe you're right," she admits, huffing out a breath, "but being our son means his life is hard enough already and

this will only make it worse. I'm sorry, but I can't move in with you."

I clench the edge of the counter as a growl rumbles in my chest. I'm exasperated, and raw rage flows through my bloodstream. I'm this close to lifting her up and carrying her to the car. Maybe keeping her in a room until she comes to her senses.

Instead, I try to take in deep breaths, reminding myself to remain calm. Elena has no idea how deadly the mafia world is or how evil my rivals can be.

Be patient, Dominic. Calm down.

"Fine." I peer out the window then take in every corner of kitchen to see where I can install hidden cameras. "If you don't want to do it my way, then we'll do it your way."

She shifts her weight to her other leg. "What way?"

"You'll have bodyguards around you every single minute of the day," I explain. I don't intend for my voice to sound as gruff as it does, but I'm too damn worried to care. "Same goes for Lucas."

"Bodyguards?" She scoffs and glares at me as if I've gone crazy. Maybe I have. "No way."

“Yes, way.”

“No!” She struts away to the living room, her anger propelling her forward. “This won’t work, Dominic.”

I follow her. “My word is final. We won’t argue about this anymore. Oh, and you have just three days to agree to move in with me.”

She crosses her arms and taps her foot in anger. “Or what?”

“Or I am taking you with me, whether you want to come or not.”

“You can’t do that!” she fires at me. “You don’t have the right to tell me what I can or cannot do. I’m not one of your minions you can order around, Dominic.”

God, this woman. “No, you’re not. But your safety matters more to me, *mio cara*, that is why I am doing this.” I take a step forward and cup her cheeks. “Hey.”

Her hazel eyes are sparkling with tears as she lifts them to look at me. She’s afraid, and I don’t blame her for it. I blame myself. I shouldn’t have dragged her into this mess seven years ago, but there is no going back now. Not when my enemies are hot on my tail.

“Listen, *mio cara*. Everything’s going to be alright.” I pull her closer so her head is resting on my chest, then I snake my arm around her waist. “I’m going to keep you and Lucas safe even if it’s the last thing I fucking do. All I want is a chance to prove it to you.”

She snuffles as she pulls away. “I’ll give it some thought, but I’m not promising.” Her eyes shift behind me. “Can I at least have some privacy from the bodyguards outside? I’m not comfortable having them watch me round the clock.”

I look around, checking the windows to see if there’s a slim chance anyone can crawl in through them. I’m relieved when I find there are vertical window grills on every window.

“On one condition.”

She tilts her head and raises her brows. “You’re kidding me.”

“I’m not.” I hate the annoyance flickering on her face, but I ignore it. “I’ll drive Lucas to school every morning, and my brother will spend the night here until you’re ready to move in.”

“I thought I could decide whether I move in or not.”

“You can, but your options are the same.” I trail a finger down her face. Her skin is silky and cold, I want to wrap her in my arms until she falls asleep tonight, but I’m afraid I can’t. I’m meeting up with Peterson an hour from now. “You’ll move in with me.”

I didn’t expect it, but when she laughs, it fills the air and brings a smile to my lips. “I guess it’s nice you haven’t changed one bit.”

“You haven’t changed much either.”

She taps my shoulder. “The choice is still mine to make. I’ll let you know when I’ve decided, unless you plan to bundle me out of here like a doll.”

I will if I have to.

But I don’t tell her that. Instead, I lean over and plant a light kiss on her forehead. “I’ll call you later.” When I move back, I notice her eyes are closed as she absorbs my kiss.

I’m about to leave when she grabs my arm. “Don’t get killed, Dominic.”

I smile at her. “I’m not an easy man to kill, *mio cara*.”

As soon as I leave the house and slide into my SUV, I place a call to Marcus.

He picks up as soon as the call goes through. “Hey, man.”

“Hey.” I run my finger through my beard. “Where are you?”

“Romano Manor,” he answers. “Vincent just got home. Anything you want me to do for you?”

“I need more security around Elena’s apartment.”

“There’s enough security there already.”

Enough. I hate that word. I’d order every single one of my men to stand around the building to her apartment if I have to. “Just do as I say. And get your ass over here before midnight, you’re spending the night here.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” I hang up before he can voice the obvious protest looming in his voice. He won’t like the idea of sleeping far away from home, and I don’t care what he likes. He’s the only person I trust with my life, and Elena’s.

I’m used to controlling and manipulating everyone and everything around me, but that’s what drives me tonight. I’m fueled with the need to protect what is mine, and God help me

if anyone dares to touch a strand of hair on either of their heads.

I don't care if the fucker crawls into the darkest and deepest hole on the planet, I'll burn the rest of the world to a crisp to find him.

Chapter Ten

Elena

“He’s so hot,” Moira whispers, pushing her chair closer to me with her eyes glued to the man sitting on one of the sofas in the living room. “Who is he?”

I glance at Marcus. He has the same piercing blue eyes, onyx black hair and sharp jaw as Dominic, but while Dominic soaks up the energy around him and morphs it into a dark aura, Marcus’s presence just makes me fidget a little.

They have the same emotionless masks, but I don’t melt away from the intensity of Marcus’s stare. He’s wearing a black shirt and black slacks that I’m sure are from one of the most expensive designer shops, but unlike Dominic, he’s not obsessed with fitting himself inside a suit jacket.

I bite back a smile because I think Dominic has an obsession with suits. I imagine him going berserk if I decided to hide all his suit jackets.

While I’ve never seen jewelry on Dominic besides the gold signet ring that curls around the index finger on his right hand, Marcus has flashy diamond and garnet rings on his

fingers. He's also wearing a stainless-steel bracelet with a lion and crest carved into it, just like it is on Dominic's signet ring.

"He's Lucas's uncle," I mutter. Marcus's eyes meet mine and I quickly look the other way.

Moira keeps her gaze glued to him, though. She's licking her lips and salivating over a man who looks like he wouldn't even flinch before he kills a person. My shoulders sag because I'm not any better than she is.

I come close to losing my mind whenever I am around Dominic. He's teased me so much for sending the text I did the other night, not that I care. The problem, however, is that my body aches with needs whenever I'm around him and I just want him to rip off my clothes and fuck me hard.

I know I shouldn't entertain thoughts like that about him, but shit, I can't help it. Heat prickles down my spine just thinking of him.

"You didn't tell me Dominic had such a handsome brother." She fans herself with her hand as if the room isn't freezing cold. If it isn't, then maybe the shivers trickling down my spine are from two hours of thinking about Dominic's offer.

No, not an offer. More like an order.

I hiss and clench my fists. *He must think I'm one of his boys.*

Given how much Moira hates brutes, I'm surprised she's drooling over Marcus like freshly baked bread. When she came in an hour ago, Marcus had refused to let her come in without thoroughly searching her bags. He'd taken it a step further and asked her to take off her shoes, bra and every other piece of clothing he thought a weapon could be hidden in.

My pleas for him to let her come in were like pouring water on rock, none of it moved him.

While his hands searched her, Moira had touched him, "Be careful where you touch. You don't want me getting the wrong idea."

Marcus's reply was only four words that silenced Moira for thirty minutes after they'd been uttered, "You're not my type."

I giggle because they'd been so cute. I'm not a fan of fiction, but it sounded like they were enemies who would soon be lovers. On a second thought, I doubt there's a chance that

would ever happen. Marcus doesn't strike me as the type of guy to ever fall in love.

“That's because it's the first time I'm meeting him.” I'd heard about Marcus and Vincent when I dated Dominic seven years ago, but this is the first time I'm meeting Marcus in person. I haven't met Vincent either, but I imagine he looks just like his brothers.

She grabs my arm and squeezes it. “Introduce us.”

“No.”

“Please.” She sticks her face in mine.

I place a finger on her forehead and push her face away. “No. Didn't you see how cold he was to you earlier? He's also part of the mafia, and I'm not sure you want to get mixed up with stuff like this.”

“Mixed up with what? Having hot men protect you around the clock?” She laughs. “Girl, I wouldn't mind if that's what it would take to get him in my pants.”

I shake my head. I should be used to it by now, but I still get surprised whenever Moira says one of those crazy things she does. “Horny rabbit.”

She throws her head back and laughs. “Who wouldn’t be around a guy like that? Now I see what it is you see in Dominic.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “What do I see in Dominic? And didn’t you have a crush on him too?”

“Firm abs and a back I can’t wait to dig my nails into while he fucks me?” She nudges me with her shoulder and winks at me. “I did have a crush on Dominic, but only for a while. Dominic is yours, and his brother is way hotter anyway.”

Dominic is yours.

Dominic is mine.

Butterflies gain wings in my stomach and I swear they’re flapping inside me. I’m biting back a sheepish smile but it’s not possible to stop Moira’s words from echoing in my head.

I don’t know that I want Dominic to be mine, but the thought of him actually being mine, is tempting.

I nearly fall out of my seat when Moira waves her hand in front of my face.

“Earth to you, Elena.”

I gasp and try to pretend I've not been lost in thought.
"I was...listening."

"Were you?" Moira props her elbows on the table and leans towards me. "What do you think about what I said."

"I-uh..." I roll my bottom lips between my teeth.
"Sorry. I wasn't listening."

"Let me guess. You were thinking about Dominic, weren't you?"

Jesus. I hate that she reads me like I'm an open book.
"I was, but it's not what you think. I promise."

Her face morphs into a mischievous smile. "What do you think I'm thinking?"

I laugh when she flutters her brows to tease me. "Okay, it's what you're thinking." I inhale and exhale deeply.
"Dominic asked me to move in with him."

Moira's eyes bulge out of their sockets. "Huh?" She glances at Marcus who is now busy showing Lucas something on his phone. *I hope it's nothing about the mafia.* "When was that?"

"Yesterday." I rake my fingers through my hair. "Don't get too excited though, it's not because he's asking me to

marry him or anything.”

“Then why?”

“Because of the whole rivalry stuff. I don’t know the details, but he thinks it’s safer for me and Lucas if I move in with him.”

She blinks rapidly and scrunch her face. “What did you say?”

I shrug. “What else? I can’t move in with him.” I don’t tell her the reason I don’t want to is because I’ll end up falling for Dominic again. I also don’t tell her I have this weird obsession with disobeying Dominic. I’d become like that when we were dating.

My cheeks heat as memories from seven years ago flash through my mind. I’ve missed the way Dominic punished me whenever I wasn’t a good girl. I became addicted to his punishments, and addictions aren’t easy to overcome.

What is wrong with me? I’ve become a horny mess overnight.

Moira is wide-eyed as she listens to me. “Elena.” She’s cautious when she calls my name and places the back of her palm on my forehead. “Are you sick?”

My brows shoot up. “I’m not. Why are you asking?”

“Because I think you are.” She cranes her neck to Marcus and Lucas, and then back to me. “I know you’re still not over Dominic and you’re trying to fight your feelings for him, but don’t you think you’re being stupid putting your ego before your safety and Lucas’s?”

I lower my gaze to the top of the dining table in shame. Moira is right. I admit I’m being stupid putting everything else before our safety. I also agree I’m afraid I’ll fall for Dominic again—if I haven’t already.

She reaches for my hand and places hers on top of it. “I know what you’re afraid of and trust me, it’s better that, than for Lucas to get hurt. You’ll never forgive yourself if he does.”[\[JV5\]](#)

“You’re right.” I pause and huff. “Lucas should come first.” *And I should try to ignore my feelings for Dominic.*

She smiles and pats my hand. “Good. Now come and introduce me to the hot guy over there.”

“No way!”

“Yes way!” She stands and drags me up from my chair and over to the living room. Lucas smiles as we near them and

it's a contrast to the scowl on Marcus's face.

Moira pushes me on the sofa across them and slouches beside me, smiling like a high-school girl who's just seen her crush.

When I don't immediately start an introduction, she nudges me with her shoulder. "Come on!" she whispers.

I sigh and roll my eyes. "Fine," I whisper back. "Moira, this is Marcus, Lucas's uncle." I gesture to Lucas. "Marcus, this is my best friend, Moira."

Moira stretches her hand to Marcus for a handshake. "It's nice to meet you, Marcus."

Marcus glares at her hand then drags his icy eyes to her face. "I don't shake hands with women."

Moira snorts and retracts her hand. "You're not one of those misogynistic bastards, are you?"

"I don't touch women unless I'm protecting or fucking them." He says with a very serious expression on his face. Although I don't expect Marcus to smile, his voice is gruff as he says it, so it's definitely not a joke.

Me and Moira share a glance, both of us flushing. It takes a moment for my eyes to dart to Lucas and for me to

remember he's in the living room.

“Jesus. Guys. No explicit language or curse words around Lucas.”

Lucas chuckles. “It’s okay, Mom. I’m not a kid.”

I widen my eyes at my son. “No. You’re a kid and you shouldn’t be listening to grown up conversation. It’s time for bed. You have school tomorrow.”

He frowns. “Mom—”

“Go. Now!”

He stands up, pouts and shuffles reluctantly to his room.

I drag my attention to Moira and Marcus. “You two have to be careful around Lucas. Kids these days pickup bad things very quickly.”

Moira smiles a lopsided grin at me. “You’re such a mom.”

Marcus stretches his hand on the arm of the sofa. “I was his age when I had my first sex and only a few years older when I first killed.”

My jaw drops and disbelief courses through me.
“You’re kidding.”

“Ask Dominic. I’m sure you’ll be stunned to find it was the same for him.”

“Why would anyone sleep with a—” I trail off. I don’t think I have the strength to stomach a conversation like that.

Moira on the other hand seems so intrigued by the conversation she leans forward and props her elbows on her legs. “How old were you when you first killed?”

“Eleven.”

She gasps. “You killed a man at eleven years old? What does it feel like to kill a man for the first time?”

Marcus’s eyes darken as if he is dead on the inside. “You feel afraid. Hands shaking and legs wobbling that you’ve just taken a life. That is what a normal person would feel on their first kill.”

I don’t know why I ask, “How did you feel?”

“Happy.”

I wince and recoil, he notices and smirks. “Our world isn’t the same as the rest of the world. Murder is a terrible sin for people like you, but for us, it’s a thing of pride. Every boy

wants to become a made man and killing is the only way to make that happen. For some, they achieve it a bit earlier and become their father's pride."

"And for those who can't?" Moira asks.

"They're weaklings and unwelcome in our world."

"What of Dominic?" I hear myself ask, unsure as to why I'm concerned. "How old was he when he first killed someone?"

"He was nine. My brother's good with a gun. Better than anyone I know." He notices me fidgeting and his lips curl to the side. "Are you afraid? You love my brother, but it worries you he's not the gentleman you grew up dreaming off."

"I don't love him."

He scoffs. "Do you know one rule for staying alive in the mafia?" He answers when I shake my head. "Reading body language. You have better luck fooling yourself than me."

I break eye contact and inhale deeply. "I have to check on Lucas." I feel Marcus's eyes on me as I scurry away from the living room and run upstairs.

Lucas is asleep when I reach his bedroom and turn on the light. He's snoring lightly, with one leg tucked in his SpongeBob blanket and the other draping down his bed. I tuck his leg back in the blanket and the bed dips under my weight as I sit on the edge and watch my son in awe.

It's hard to believe that me and a man like Dominic, created a child like Lucas. He's witty, intelligent and kind. He stirs in his sleep and strands of dark hair cascade over his forehead. I tuck the hair away and run a finger over his skin, my chest swelling with pride.

"How about we live with your Dad, Lucas? Would you like that?" I whisper.

Lucas stirs again and wraps his hand around mine. He was five the last time I shared a bed with him. I miss those days when he was just a baby. It's sad how quick they grow up.

One day he was an infant who cried for my attention, then he became a toddler who followed me everywhere and all of sudden, he's a fine old man who'll rather hang out with his friends than me.

I lie beside him, watching in wonderment and consumed by my thoughts, then I drift off to sleep.

It's almost midnight when I wake up and sneak out of the room so I don't wake Lucas. Marcus is sitting alone in the living room when I go downstairs for a cup of water.

"Where's Moira?"

"I'm here to protect you and Lucas, not her."

I pull my brows together. He's such an ass. "Do you always have to be so rude? You can just say she's gone to sleep."

"You don't tell me what to say."

"No, I don't, but you don't always have to sound like you're about to kill someone."

His jaw flexes and he grinds his teeth. "Maybe if you just do the right thing and move in with my brother, I wouldn't have to be here babysitting you."

Anger spirals in my gut like a whirlwind. "I didn't ask for you to be here. I don't need to be babysat. You might've forgotten but you and your brother are the only reason I'm in this mess to begin with."

Marcus clenches his fist [\[JV6\]](#) and slams it on the sofa beside him. In a second, he's in front of me and I take a step back, heart pounding as cold sweat covers my body.

“I’ve known Dominic all my life, Elena. You may think of him as a monster, but that monster protected me and Vincent all our lives.”

Panic sears my stomach, but I don’t back down. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Everything,” he growls in a low voice that sends shivers down my spine. “Dominic never lies. If he’s protecting you then he cares about you. I haven’t seen him care about anyone as much and I’m fucking angry because you’re taking him for a fool.”

“No.” I dare a step forward. “I won’t let you speak to me like that in my own home. Your brother used me, he kept the truth about the mafia from me. If there’s anyone who took the other for a fool, then it’s him.”

“Would anything have changed if he told you the truth seven years ago?”

When I don’t answer, he smirks. “I thought as much. He probably couldn’t tell you because he knew you were such a coward.” He steps back and returns to the sofa.

I stare at him for minutes and my anger blends with reality kicking me in the guts because I know Marcus is right.

I'm a fucking coward and I would have run from him the moment I met him if I knew the truth.

Scampering to my room, I close the door behind me and throw myself on my bed. I stare at the ceiling most of the night, consumed by my own thoughts and the weight of the decision I need to make.

But before I fall asleep, the decision is made.

I'm moving in with Dominic.

Chapter Eleven

Elena

My jaw is agape and refuses to close as I take in the large expanse of Dominic's mansion. The living room is elegant and deluxe. The décor monochrome yet tasteful and expensive.

Crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling, casting a golden glow over the room and striking a prismatic reflection on the white granite floors.

Expensive art pieces adorn the tall walls and plush velvet furniture takes up most of the space in the living room. His home is both breathtaking and intimidating.

“Wow!” Lucas gasps as he looks around.

Dominic smiles at him, his blue eyes sparkling with amusement. “Do you like it?”

Lucas runs to one of the white sofas and jumps on it. “It's perfect!”

“Good, now let's see if your mom likes it, too.”
Dominic looks at me and I twist my head so I can meet his

gaze. “How do you like it?”

I’m tempted to act indifferently, but it’s impossible to deny how luxurious Dominic’s home is. I’m rich, but nowhere as rich as Dominic. “It’s beautiful.”

After I came to a decision last night, I’d called Dominic first thing this morning to let him know Lucas and I would be moving in with him. I’d underestimated how happy he would be because within an hour, he’d sent cars, bodyguards and maids to help pack our essentials.

A smile parts his lips and it takes my breath away. “What would you like to do first? I can have the maids make a meal for you if you like, or I can show you around.”

“Um.” I give it a thought. “I have to unpack, so I think it’s better you show me to my room first.”

“Just what did you come with?”

“*Essentials*, just like you instructed.” I cross my hand over my chest and shake my head. “You’re one hell of a man.”

“I am. The maids will unpack for you.” He tucks a hand in the pocket of his slacks to lean on the door. He’s super handsome and if he wasn’t already a billionaire, he wouldn’t have had a hard time finding a job with a modeling agency.

“Let me know if there’s anything you need and I’ll make it available. You probably didn’t come with a lot of clothes, so I think you should go shopping first.”

“Dominic, I’m also rich. I can afford whatever I need for me and Lucas.”

He glances at Lucas who is busy checking out how perfect the TV is for video games, then he settles his intense gaze on me. “You’re a millionaire, Elena. I’m a billionaire. We aren’t the same. I’ll provide for you and my son while you’re under my roof.”

My lips itch for a comeback, but it’s hard to think of any when my mind is this frazzled. I’m distracted by how handsome he is. “Fine. Show me around then.”

We’re about to leave the living room when Lucas calls my name and draws both of our attention.

“Mom, can we have breakfast?” He rubs his stomach and frowns a little. “I’m hungry.” So much was happening while we packed, I’d forgotten we hadn’t eaten.

I drag my attention back to Dominic. “Do you have a cook?”

He nods. Of course, it would be impossible for him to have a dozen maids running around the mansion and not a cook.

“Can you get one of them to prepare something for Lucas to eat?”

“How about you?”

I peer at my wristwatch. It’s almost noon and it isn’t a weekend. On a normal day, I would be in my office looking through and signing piles of documents by this time.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to leave for the office as soon as we’re done with the tour.”

“No, Mom. You can’t leave,” Lucas says. He’s frowning a little harder now. “Can’t we have breakfast together? Me, you and Dad?”

“Lucas, Mom needs to—”

He makes that sad puppy face he learnt from Squidward. “Please?”

I huff and reluctantly give in. “Fine.”

“Yes!” He jumps, celebrating his victory.

Dominic looks at his son with obvious amusement.
“He’s a little genius, isn’t he?”

“Uh-uh. He’s a manipulative little guy, just like you. I guess genes don’t lie.” I brush past Dominic. “Where’s your kitchen?”

“Walk straight ahead and turn to your right.”

The maids freeze when we step into the kitchen and the chief chef—a middle-aged man—flashes a smile at Dominic and greets him, then he turns his gaze in my direction. “You must be Ms. Marconi.”

“I am.”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Mark Spencer,” he says. “Tell me what you want to eat and whenever. It’s my job to make sure your tastebuds are well taken care of.”

I smile at him. He’s such a nice man. “Thank you.”

I cross my hands and begin to look around. Dominic’s kitchen is what my dream would be if I were a chef. It’s big enough to become an apartment on its own. There’re the latest kitchen appliances tucked away at every corner. The granite countertops are an immaculate white and so are the custom-made cabinets. They glitter from the overhead light.

Dominic's eyes trace my face. "Do you like the kitchen?"

"It's amazing. You're still a perfectionist."

"Always was. Always will be," he says cockily. I hate cocky men, but I have to bite back a smile whenever Dominic is being full of himself. His arrogance makes him even more attractive. "What would you like to eat?"

"Well..." I turn to the chef. "What do you have?"

"Everything," he answers.

I chuckle. "Everything."

He nods his head.

"How about Chinese food?" I tease. It's not like he's running a restaurant, how can he have everything?

"It'll take a moment longer to prepare. Would you like some snacks while you wait?"

"No," I mutter defensively. He didn't get my sarcasm. "I was joking. We'll have French toast, with sausages and baked beans. I'll have a cup of coffee and Lucas will have a cup of hot chocolate."

The chef smiles. “Breakfast will be ready in twenty-minutes. Where would you like to be served?”

“We’ll eat at the dining table.”

I don’t realize I’ve been holding my breath until Dominic and I leave the kitchen. I have a cook and cleaner over three times every week. They’re mostly gone before I’m back from work, so it’s really odd having someone do everything. It’s strange having people serve me.

The closest I have come to this is at work, but it’s work, so it’s different.

Dominic narrows his eyes on me. “Are you okay?”

I curl my hand into a fist and hit my chest. “I’m fine. Just a little anxious. All of this is new to me.”

He grabs my wrist before I can hit my chest again and covers my fist with his hand. “Hey,” he says in a voice that’s barely a whisper, “if it makes you comfortable, I can order them to stay out of sight. Even better, I can have all of them leave if you want. Just say the word and I’ll do just that.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll adjust to having people around me. I’m the outsider here, I shouldn’t make them walk on egg shells around me.”

Dominic cups my cheeks and I flush from his touch. “I brought you here, Elena. This is your home. You’re not an outsider. You’re the mother of my son.”

We look into each other’s eyes for a moment and I burn where his hands are on my cheeks. My stomach flips. I gasp and move away when all I want to do is lean into his touch. “Can we hold off the rest of the tour for today? I need to settle in and freshen up before breakfast, which should actually be lunch!”

There’s an awkward silence for a moment and I wonder if he can hear how fast my heart is pounding. I’m a total idiot around him.

“I’ll show you to your room.” He finally breaks the silence.

He leads me to the staircase and it’s large and imposing. The balustrades are crafted from intricately carved wood. Wall sconces adorn the walls and an obscene chandelier dangles from the soaring ceiling overhead, casting a warm glow on the stairs.

“This is the master bedroom,” he says, pointing to a room on the right when we reach the hallway upstairs. “It’s

mine. The room after it is Lucas's room and next two rooms are my brothers'."

"You mean Marcus and—"

"Vincent. He's the youngest."

"Oh." I cringe when I remember my fight with Marcus last night. He was gone before I woke up this morning, but it doesn't take away the feeling he doesn't like me. "Do they come around very often?"

"The mansion is well guarded, but I only trust Marcus to protect you and Lucas. Vincent will stay with us until the rivalry with the Bratva is sorted."

My brows pull together. I get lost whenever he talks about mafia business. "How long will that take?"

He shrugs and I can't help but notice how wide his shoulders are. *Goodness me!*

"It'll take as long as it needs to. My priority is that you and Lucas are safe."

Can I have a replacement for Marcus? I'm not comfortable around him.

I don't voice my thoughts though. Instead, I chew on my acrylic nails and stare blankly at the long hallway.

“Your room is right here.” He points to the room across it. “It’s also a master suite.”

I glance between my room and his. “It’s—” I don’t complete my sentence. I bite my lips instead and stare at him like a mute.

If Dominic notices the retort I’m biting back, he doesn’t show. “Take a shower and come down for breakfast.”

I nod, open the door to my new bedroom and step inside. I lean my back on the door and take deep breaths before I notice the intense dark eyes staring at me and flinch.

She flinches too, her wrinkles forming into a frown when both of us see we’re no harm to each other.

My heartrate drops and my chest heaves in and out as I gulp down a greedy amount of air. “You scared me.”

The woman in front of me is no younger than sixty. Her gray hair is slicked back in a neat bun and she’s wearing a white dress that’s similar to the maid’s, but I’m not quite sure.

She does a sign of the cross. Placing her forefingers on her forehead, chest, right shoulder and left shoulder before she glares at me. “*Perché sei così nervoso?*”

“I’m sorry,” I mutter. “I don’t speak Italian.” I’m not even sure it’s Italian she just spoke, but since Dominic is Italian, I don’t expect he’ll keep a non-Italian so close.

She looks at me from head to toe, then she lets out an exasperated sigh as if I’m a bother to her. “You’re that child he spoke of, aren’t you?”

I scrunch my nose, confused. “I’m Elena Marconi,” I mutter. Something about this woman’s gaze makes my heart pound fast. “I’m—”

“I know who you are,” she cuts in. “I’m Bianca, chief housekeeper. Let me know if you need anything.”

She shoves past me and leaves the room. My eyes remain on the door after she’s left.

What the hell was that?

I’m not a person that allows people walk over them, so why did I stay quiet and let her treat me as if I’m some sort of whore Dominic brought home? It’s obvious she doesn’t like me for whatever reason, but she doesn’t need to be rude to me.

Huffing out an exhale, I saunter to the walk-in closet where my clothes are neatly folded. I pick out a red tank top

and denim shorts, then I get naked, grab a towel and enter the bathroom.

When I'm done taking a shower, I put on my clothes and step out the room. Dominic's door creaks open immediately, as if he's been waiting for me. He's wearing a black shirt which shows off the muscles on his arms, and sweatpants. The bulging in his pants catches my attention and I don't bother to tear my gaze away.

“Don't look at my cock like that if you're not going to suck it.”

I gasp and electricity shoots up my spine. “Your mouth really has no filter.”

“And neither do your thoughts.” He steps closer and he smells like aftershave and sandalwood. “Swear you weren't thinking of wrapping your tiny fingers around my cock, though I think I'd prefer your mouth.”

Heat caresses my cheeks and I quickly lift my gaze to his face. His dark hair is curly and his blue eyes shimmer from the light streaming into the hallway.

God. He's so handsome.

“I’d rather suck on a piece of metal than put my mouth on you, Dominic.”

A sly grin darkens his expression, but he doesn’t push it any further. “Ready for breakfast?”

I nod. I can’t speak when my core is pulsing and my chest is fluttering.

Lucas is already digging into his food when we reach the dining room. He is leaning over the expansive dining table, the sound of his cutlery clanging on the fine china echoes in the room as he stuffs his mouth with food. He looks like he hasn’t eaten in days.

Dominic sits beside Lucas, ignoring the empty seat at the end of the table and I sit across him.

Lucas looks up at him and grins. “I’m sorry. I was too hungry to wait.”

Dominic smiles back and pats his head. “It’s fine, son. Do whatever you want. It’s your home.”

Lucas peers at me and his smile widens. He wraps his hands around his cup of hot chocolate and drinks from it. When he puts it down, there’s foam around his mouth.

I grab a towel and push myself to wipe it off, but Dominic beats me to it. He's so tender with Lucas. I would admit he was a good father if I wasn't in denial about everything concerning him.

Dominic and Lucas chat as we eat. A pang of regret slithers through me as I watch them. It's such a heartwarming sight, watching them get along so well.

For the first time in years, I start to wonder if I'd really done what was best for Lucas by keeping him away from his father.

I'd been selfish and I'd put my own interests before Lucas's. The weight of regret doesn't lighten by the time we're done with the meal. I go up to my room and place a call to Moira. She's the only person who can make me feel better.

"Hi, babe," she says as she answers my call. "How is it going over there?"

"Fine," I croak. "We've settled in and Lucas is fitting in really well. It's like he's been here all his life."

"If that's the case then why do you sound so sad?" She pauses. "Elena, are you okay?"

I sniffle and rest my back on the headboard. “I’m fine. It’s just...Dominic is being a really good father to Lucas and I’m wondering if I did the right thing depriving him of a father for so long.”

There’s a brief silence.

“Babe, I’m probably the wrong person to judge your actions. I don’t even know right from wrong, but I can tell you that I don’t think it matters.”

“You think I was wrong?”

“That is not what I’m saying,” she says, “all I’m saying is that your intentions are the only thing that matter. You did what you did to protect Lucas and that is what moms do. They protect their babies in whatever way they can. I’m sure Lucas will understand that once he is old enough to.”

I allow Moira’s words to simmer in my head long enough to give me a little comfort. “You’re the best, Moira. You know that, right?”

I imagine her smile at the other end of the phone. “I know I am, that is why I think you should consider increasing my pay—”

I hang up before she completes her sentence and chuckle to myself. My best friend is obsessed with money and dick.

Two days passes and living in Dominic's mansion really hasn't gotten easier. Bianca is still rude and unwelcoming and it's getting harder to ignore my attraction to Dominic.

We have breakfast every morning with Lucas, and Dominic insists on driving him to school and dropping me off at work. Marcus and Vincent haven't come around in the last two days and I grow anxious when I think of seeing them

I wonder if Vincent is as much of a grump as Marcus and Dominic. It seems to run in the Romano blood.

Lucas is already in bed when I come back from work. It's almost midnight and I stayed late preparing some paper work for the product my company is launching a week from today.

The maids are already asleep and the house is as quiet as I imagine a graveyard would be. I take a shower, wear one of my night gowns and go downstairs to fix myself a quick dinner.

I hit up some leftover pasta and settle down on a stool by the kitchen counter. The door swings open just as I'm about to start digging into my food and Dominic comes in.

He's wearing a white pajamas and his hair is disheveled. His eyes aren't swollen or red so I assume he wasn't sleeping.

I drop my fork on the plate. "Hey."

"Hey," he says and walks to the fridge. He grabs a bottle of water and empties his down his throat. Squeezing the empty bottle, he tosses it into the wastebin. "You're home late."

"I had a lot of work to do. It was either I stayed late or I miss the deadline."

He nods at my pasta. "Is that dinner?"

"Yes. I'd intended to make salmon and creamed spinach, but I'm too exhausted, so I settled for this."

He scratches his jaw. "How about I fix you something to eat?"

I blink. "What?"

It's been years since Dominic made me dinner. Nostalgia licks at my chest and memories from seven years

ago swamp my head. Dominic is a good cook. An arrogant one, but good.

He made the best salmon I've ever tasted. I'm not certain in what state his cooking skills are, but if they're anything like they used to be, then I already know what my answer is.

“Yes.”

He smiles and points at my pasta. “Let's get rid of that first, shall we?”

Chapter Twelve

Dominic

“It smells so good,” Elena says and lick her lips as I set the plate of salmon and creamed spinach in front of her. “It’s almost too pretty to eat.”

Elena was the first person I cooked for who wasn’t one of my brothers and if I recall correctly, her reaction right now is what it used to be.

She does a little dance, moving her shoulders from side to side, with a full smile on her face. When she slices into the salmon and brings the piece to her mouth, she inhales before she eats it.

“Hmmm,” she moans, closing her eyes and relishing in the deliciousness of her food.

I gaze at her. She’s so fucking beautiful. She has no make-up on. Her hair is tied up in a messy bun, and she’s wearing a silky nightgown that does nothing to hide her nipples. They poke through the fabric, practically begging for my attention.

When Elena opens her eyes, she eats another piece and moans again. “God. I’ve missed your cooking, Dominic.”

She’s about to take another forkful when her eyes widen and she looks at me. It’s obvious she hadn’t intended to praise my cooking skills, but it’d somehow slipped past her barriers.

Red paints her cheeks and she chugs down a glass of water.

“Aren’t you hungry?” she asks quietly. “We can share.”

“I’d have made myself a plate if I was hungry.”
Watching her eat fills me more than eating would.

She continues to eat and then says into the quiet, “Your brother, Vincent? I was expecting he would be here already.”

He would have, if the fucker hadn’t run off to LA. “He’ll be here in a few days,” I tell her. I don’t say that my brother is a feeble-hearted bastard who would rather run off to a different city than be here for his brothers at a time like this.

I also don’t tell her Marcus hasn’t been around because he’s gone to find Vincent.

“Marcus told me you became a made man at nine. What was it like?”

I lean on the kitchen island and regard her shrewdly. The last time Elena showed any interest in my personal life was when we dated years ago. I'm stunned because she wouldn't ask if she wasn't really curious.

"What do you want to know?" I ask.

She thinks for a moment. "Well, he said most boys are happy to become made men. He told me he was one of those boys. Were you happy?"

My mind drifts back to that moment twenty-one years ago. It's a memory that has stuck in my head like glue. "I was nine and Marcus was five. Our parents were out for a party and I'd been asleep when I heard Marcus cry."

Elbow on the counter, she rests her head on her hand. All her attention is focused on me.

"My father taught me never to leave my room unarmed. I took gun he'd given me from under my pillow and ran to Marcus's room, but he wasn't there. I ran downstairs and saw a man in a black cloak trying to sneak him out through the back door despite Marcus's struggles. I pointed my gun at him, pulled the trigger and fired."

I pause. “To my surprise, my shot hit the man. I don’t know what exactly it is you want to know, princess, but I saved my brother and I would do it over again.”

Something shifts in her eyes and she swallows. “You did a good job,” she says softly. “I shouldn’t have judged you before I heard the full story.”

I try not to smile. “I’m not a knight in shining armor, Elena. If anything, pulling the trigger that night awakened my thirst for blood. I’m a cold-hearted bastard, so don’t expect anything different. This is who I am.”

“I know, but you’re also a good father.”

My blood freezes because it’s the last thing I’d expected her to say to me.

She doesn’t take back her compliment, instead a warm smile spreads on her face. “I’ve seen you with Lucas. I’ve seen how gentle and kind you are with him. I think you underestimate your own ability to be good.”

“I’m not good.”

“No, you’re not. Not in a conventional way at least, but you’re not all bad.”

My muscles twitch. “Damn, Elena. How am I supposed to stay away from you when you make me waver so much?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know.”

She finishes her food and sets the plate into the dishwasher. I pour us each a glass of red wine and add soft music to the quiet space.

“How did you manage on your own?”

She twists her head to gape at me. “What?”

“You were so young and you didn’t have anyone else. How did you raise Lucas on your own?”

She sucks in a deep breath. “I don’t know. I had the will to not give up and I had Moira. It wasn’t a walk in the park, but it was worth it.”

My stomach twists. “I’m sorry.” Those are two words I’ve detested all my life. Two words I don’t think I’ve ever said to anyone. And they feel like dust in my mouth. I take a sip of wine to moisten my tongue. “I should have been there with you. I’m sorry I wasn’t.”

Elena’s eyes well with tears. She tips her head back and one of her delicate fingers dabs at the corners of her eyes

before she brings her gaze back to me. “It wasn’t your fault, Dominic. I had a choice, but I didn’t give you any.”

I can’t help but feel a pang of guilt. Her words echo in my mind, a constant reminder of the past, of the mistakes we both made. It has been seven long years since we were last together, and the wounds are still fresh, still painful.

What hurts the most is that I hated her all those years, and while I wallowed in my hate, she lived through hell.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on the kitchen island, my gaze never leaving her. “Elena,” I say, my voice gentle, “I know you didn’t make the decision you did because you wanted to. I can only imagine how hard it was for you. I should’ve been honest with you from the very beginning.”

She meets my gaze, her eyes searching mine. “Dominic, even if you’d come clean, I don’t think I would have done anything differently. I did what I thought was best at the time. I don’t regret it, and I don’t blame you either. I want us to move past this. For Lucas’s sake.”

Her words seep through my defenses, chipping away at the bitterness that’s eaten at me all these years. But there’s longing in her eyes when she looks at me.

Her breath hitches. She's trying to rebuild her barriers against me. She's trying not to get hurt again.

I'd done that for so many years. Seven fucking years I'd tried not to find her even when I was dying to. I'd ignore my feelings for her because I didn't want her to rip my heart apart a second time.

Because of that, I know better than anyone else that the defenses she's is trying to keep in place are just a temporary solution to something that can't be denied. Sooner or later, she will burn in a pool of something deeper and wilder than her obstinacy.

Her need for my touch and caress.

She regains her composure and gulps down all of her wine. "I'll wash this so we can go to sleep." She scurries off to the sink, avoiding eye contact.

After she's done rinsing her glass, she dries it off with a towel and places it in the cabinet. Then she mutters, "goodnight," and starts to leave the kitchen. I stand and stride over to her, grabbing her wrist and swinging her around.

Her eyes bore into mine and she shivers under my touch. I can hear her breaths. Her breasts heave, nipples

hardening. It's a beautiful sight.

“Dominic,” she whispers. She doesn't say anything more.

I pull her closer and wrap my hand around her waist. She's warm, soft and delicate. “I missed you, Elena,” I whisper, tucking a strand of ash-blonde hair behind her ear, my finger brushing her ever so lightly.

“I really missed you.” Leaning in, I inhale her vanilla and strawberry scent.

She flattens a palm on my chest and her touch simmers in my blood, sending fire straight to my cock. “Dominic, I missed you, too,” she whispers, her eyes searching mine, her breath quickening.

I lean in, unable to resist her. “I'll never let you go again. Never.” I find her lips and I kiss her.

Chapter Thirteen

Elena

Dominic's lips press against mine and I freeze, not knowing if I should kiss him back or push him away. When his tongue requests entry, I am lost. He kisses me with a ravenous need, whatever restraint I had melts away and I kiss him back.

He tastes so good and reminds me of the way things were between us. I've missed his rough kisses and how he explores my body like he's worshipping it.

When he presses his hips against mine and his erection rubs my lower belly, I moan into his mouth and electricity ripples through me.

God!

My heart is a wild beast in my chest, thudding violently and needing to break free. My body is on fire from his kisses and there's a deep ache pooling in my core. I'm consumed by Dominic's touch and kisses, and I would not have it any other way.

His arms tighten around my waist and he lifts me on the counter. He parts my legs and steps between them, the

bulge in his pants meets the pulse between my legs. I push myself forward, grinding on him.

I'm sure I'll regret this decision in the morning when my hormones are more stable and I'm not pumped with desire, but right now, I don't want to think about consequences.

I want him, even if it's just for a night.

Just tonight.

He pulls away for a moment and looks into my eyes, his fingers caressing my hips. His eyes are dark with lust. It's so dangerous and dark it pulls me in and I wrap my arms around his neck.

"Let's go upstairs," he says in a husky voice which makes my spine vibrate. I'm filled with need for more of his kisses and caresses.

I'm not sure it's a question, but I nod. "Lucas..."

He smiles. "It's soundproof." He leans in and lick my lips. "He won't hear us."

Dominic finds my lips again and claims them. I kiss him back, savoring the delicious flavors.

Every move he makes is possessive. He's reminding me of a time when I was his. He's claiming me and marking

me so I don't forget that even after all these years apart, I belong to no one else but him.

Logic is tucked away in a faraway corner of my mind, so I don't care. I've wanted nothing more than to be his again.

When he lifts me from the counter, I wrap my legs around him and we kiss our way upstairs. It's only when he tosses me on his bed I realize we're in his room.

His room is monochrome, just like the rest of the house. A white sheet covers the king-sized bed and a black sheer curtain drapes from the canopy overhead. Above the canopy bed, a chandelier casts a blood-red glow across the room.

There's a lit lavender scented candle on the nightstand beside the bed and its fragrance fills the room.

Dominic rips off his shirt. I gasp at the firm muscles on his chest and shoulders. Then my eyes widen at the tattoos and scars that cover his skin.

I get to my knees and run my finger over the scars. I'm not certain but the ones on the right side of his chest are round, like bullet wounds and there's three more of them.

There's a longer scar across his stomach and abs, I assume it's a stab wound. "How did you get these?"

He slides his fingers through my hair and grips tight enough to cause pain. "That is what it takes to be a made man."

I lean in and kiss each of his scars and a deep groan rumbles in his chest. He wraps his fingers around my neck, hauls me back and with his free hand, he tears my night gown in half. A dangerously wicked grin appears when I sigh. "It was useless anyway."

My nipples harden and goosebumps cover my skin as the air caresses my naked body.

His eyes are filled with desire as he skims my bare breast and brushes a delicate finger over my nipple.

My body jerks violently in response. My clitoris begins to ache and I feel a pool of wetness between my legs as desire settles in my core.

"Fuck, Elena," he grunts, flicking one of my nipples with his finger. He doesn't say anything more. Instead, he leans over and claims my nipple, twisting and teasing it with his tongue.

I moan, my eyes darting to his erection and my hands reaching for him, but freeze when pain ripples through me as he bites my nipple. It's not just pain, it's a perfect blend of pain and pleasure.

“Dominic.”

He removes his mouth from my nipple and his hands cup my face. Then he squeezes lightly. “Touch me again and there'll be a punishment.”

I bite my lips. I want to be punished by him. I'm becoming light-headed with the shallowness of my breaths in anticipation of the things he will do to my body tonight.

I reach out for his erection again. He stops my hand before it comes close. He smiles, releases me and stalks to the recliner across the room. He sits. “Crawl to me,” he orders.

Like a good girl, I climb down from the bed, lower myself to all fours and start to crawl.

“Good girl,” he rasps, patting my head as I reach him. He lifts me to his lap.

He opens the drawer beside the recliner and digs around for a moment. When he removes his hand, he is holding something metallic and shiny.

“Cuffs?”

He ignores my question, spins me around and down, so I’m lying across his lap. In a smooth move, he secures my hands behind my back. He licks my earlobe. His warm breath causes a spark of pleasure inside me. “That’s the price for disobeying me, princess.”

I groan when he his hand comes down on my butt and tears prickle my eyes from the sting.

“I own you, Elena.” *Spank.* “You’ll obey me.” *Spank.* “Do you understand?”

A nod should suffice, but I’m turned on even more by his actions. Rather than be the good girl and do what he wants, I shake my head instead.

Why am I turned on by a spanking? I’m crazy.

I close my eyes, expecting another slap. Instead, he parts my legs and his fingers glide down my back, moving down my ass and finding the heartbeat between my legs.

My head drops and I moan when he delicately circles my clit with his fingers. “*Oh, fuck!*” I gasp. Fire burns my cheeks because I know he is watching every reaction I have to his touch.

“You’re so fucking wet, Elena.” His voice is so deep and raspy as it slithers through me, adding to my desire. “Tell me, Elena. How long have you wanted this?”

I gasp. “I...” It’s hard to muster any words when I’m about to lose my mind.

He presses his finger even more firmly on my clit. “I’m not a very patient man, Elena. How long have you ached for my touch? How long have you gone to bed, wishing I could play with your pretty, pink pussy?”

His dirty words work their way into every pore of my body, awakening a deep longing. My pussy throbs almost painfully. “Please, Dominic...” A sharp crack fills the air and the mix of pleasure and pain which follows thrills me.

“Answer my question.” Another slap and I know I need to answer him.

“Since the day I left—”

He slides a finger inside me, curls it all the way up to caress the pulsing spot deep inside and I cannot say any more. My muscles contract as he slides his finger in and out of me. “Please, what?”

The sensation is intense and overwhelming. I grip his legs, my fingers clawing into the firm skin as my orgasm builds and surges through me.

“I...” I trail off. I’m too consumed with pleasure to muster any words.

I cry and my body spasms from the pleasure. Dominic carries me to the bed and I don’t realize he’s naked until I feel his erection pressed against my entrance.

It’s so warm and hard, I ache to have him inside me.

He kisses my neck and traces his lips down to my stomach, then he glides up and claims my lips. I’m ravenous, so I kiss him back as roughly as he’s kissing me, only pulling away when he thrusts inside me.

He doesn’t let my lips go though, he keeps kissing me, his strokes gentle and slow as I stretch to take him in.

“You’re so fucking tight, Elena,” he groans, pulling out.

I don’t know if I’m tight because I’ve been celibate for what feels like forever, or because he is just that big. My cheeks redden with embarrassment. Dominic lifts my legs and

rests them on his shoulders, then he thrusts into me with hard, deep, long, strokes.

My hands fly to his arms and my fingers dig into his bunched muscles. My moans mingle with his groans and the room is filled with the sound of flesh meeting flesh.

“You like the way I fuck you?”

I nod. “Yes. Fuck me harder.”

He smiles. “I’m fucking you hard.”

I shake my head. “It’s not enough. I want you deeper.”

His eyes darken and he obliges, pounding me hard until another orgasm explodes through me, leaving my legs trembling and my lungs struggling for air.

Dominic jerks and comes with a powerful groan. He empties inside of me, pulls out, then collapses beside me. We’re both panting and sweaty and the air smells like sex.

His fingers tangle with mine. “How was that?” he asks.

I blush, still breathing hard. “Intense.”

He turns to look at me and cups my cheek. “Good, because I’m going to fuck you again.”

My stomach clenches and heat cascades down my back. “All night?”

He rolls over, climbs on top of me and steals a kiss. “All night.”

I wake up to the soft knock on the door the next morning. My eyes are still heavy with sleep as I blink them open and rub the sleep away. I squint at my surroundings and remember where I am as memories from last night rush through my mind.

My cheeks heat as I remember how hard he fucked me. I wonder if the room is really soundproof or if I’ll have to endure critical glances from the maids, especially Bianca.

I cringe.

I’d rather die.

A small amount of sunlight penetrates the gap between the dark-gray drapes, streaming into the room and casting a dim glow.

When I try to move, something weighs me down and I see it’s Dominic’s arm. My back is pressed against his chest

and he's still sound asleep. I try to move from him, but he stirs and pulls me closer.

Crap!

"Dominic." I call his name in an undertone. I hate that I have to wake him up, but I have to get to Lucas. "Dominic."

He moves behind me lifts his arm. I slide out of the bed, naked.

"You're not sneaking away, are you?"

I freeze, my face burning with embarrassment. When I turn around, his blue eyes meet mine and he's watching me with amusement.

"No, Dominic. I'm not. Lucas needs me."

His eyes glide down my body and I flinch a little. A slow ache forms between my legs. Dominic and I fucked all through the night, still my body needs more.

"You'll need something to wear."

"My nightgown..." My eyes dart to my nightgown on the floor. It's ripped in half. *Right.*

He nods toward to his walk-in closet. "I'm sure you'll find something in there."

“Thank you,” I mutter then hurry off to the walk-in closet.

The closet stretches from one end of the wall to the other, with plush monochrome carpeting underfoot and walls adorned in dark mahogany wood paneling.

A vast collection of black designer suits drape the hangers, shiny jewelry, designer shoes and ties line the wall. I grab a white dress shirt and tug it on.

I hear the water running in the bathroom when I return the room, so I don't bother to tell him I'm leaving. When I open the door, icy-blue eyes stare back at me and I jump back.

I clutch my chest. “Fuck!”

“Where's my brother?” Marcus asks in a tone that's really unfriendly, narrowing his eyes on me with suspicion and looking from the collar to the hem of the shirt I'm wearing.

I flush. I wonder what he's thinking.

“He's inside.” I point my thumb towards the bathroom. “Please move from the door. I was leaving.”

Marcus moves to the side, making space for me to pass.

“Thank you,” I mutter. I brush past him and walk to my room.

After I take a shower, I head downstairs for breakfast. Lucas’s laughter echoes from the living room, catching my attention as I climb down the stairs and I follow the sound.

When I step into the living room, he’s playing a video game and there’s a man beside him.

I lean on the door and fold my arms. “Lucas.”

Lucas twists his head to look at me and smiles. The man beside him does the same. I can tell from his oily, dark hair, sharp jaw and glistening blue eyes that he’s the youngest Romano brother.

He has a striking resemblance to Dominic and Marcus, only he is visibly younger than both of them. He looks to be in his twenties, or maybe his early thirties.

Unlike his brothers, he doesn’t seem to have a hint of darkness about him. I don’t shift under his gaze and I don’t get the impression he wants to murder me.

I’m even more surprised when he flashes a boyish grin at me. “You must be Elena.”

“I am.” I straighten myself from the door and walk to where they’re sitting. “You must be Vincent.”

“The rebel? Yes, I am.”

I sit on the sofa across from them and scrutinize him. “Why are you the rebel?”

He drags his attention back to the video game. “My brother hasn’t told you yet?”

“Told me what?”

“Hear it from the horse’s mouth. I really don’t care what he says to you.”

The question leaves my mouth before I can stop it. “Are you a made man?” Dominic and Marcus are, I don’t believe there’s any way Vincent could have escaped the Romano fate.

“I’m not.” He looks at me again and smiles. “Are you disappointed?”

“Why would I be?” If anything, relief washes over me. It means there is a chance Lucas doesn’t need to be part of the mafia. “Is there a reason you chose not to be part the mafia?”

He shrugs. “Bloodshed. Cruelty. None of those words describe me. I’d rather party and fuck.”

“Language! You can’t use words like that when you’re with your nephew.”

A cocky smile quirks his lips. “Relax. It’s not like I brought a whore home for him to fuck or something.”

I roll my eyes. Vincent might not be part of the mafia, but he’s just as crazy as his brothers. “No cuss words and no fucks or whores around him.”

“Aye, captain,” he jokes.

I huff a laugh. I have a feeling I’m going to like the youngest Romano brother.

“Have you guys had breakfast?”

“Yes, Mommy,” Lucas answers. “I knocked to wake you for breakfast, but I guess you were fast asleep.”

I flush and bite my lips. My stomach growls painfully and straighten. “Mom’s going to have breakfast. Have fun.”

Dominic and Marcus are in the dining room when I walk in and they both stop talking as if they were discussing something they didn’t want me to hear.

I feel Dominic’s eyes on me as I round the table and pull out a chair next to his and across Marcus . “Good morning.”

They both stare at me and neither one of them responds to my greeting.

“What were you two discussing?” I ask, grabbing a slice of toast and spreading Nutella on it.

“None of your business,” Marcus says, his voice so gruff it’s malicious.

What the hell is his problem?

“Do you have to be an ass all the fucking time, Marcus?” I ask, contemplating the slice of deliciousness my mouth is watering for. “Why do you hate me so much?”

He sighs and huffs. “Peterson is not who you think he is.”

“Marcus,” Dominic warns.

“What? She’s curious, it’s only right she knows what the hell is going on.”

I swallow, confused. “What do you mean?”

“He’s our father’s younger brother. His real name is real name is Federico Romano.”

My jaw drops. When I manage to close my mouth again, I snort. “That’s not possible. Everyone knows David

Peterson. There's no way he is your uncle." I look to Dominic, expecting him to agree with me, but I can tell from the look in his eyes that won't happen.

I drop my unfinished toast back to the plate. I'm no longer hungry. "Is he really your uncle?"

"Sadly," Dominic answers.

"And he approached you for a reason," Marcus chimes in. "He's using you as bait to get to Dominic and you don't even know it."

My throat suddenly feels dry and I swallow. "Why would he do that? I mean, we signed the contract the same week Dominic returned to New York and we weren't even together then."

"Lucas." Dominic's fist clenches on the table, his blue eyes dark with rage. "He must've known about Lucas."

I shake my head. I still don't understand what they're talking about. "But he's your uncle, right? Why would he want to harm Lucas to get to you?"

Marcus lets out an exasperated sigh. "He's with the Bratva, a rival Russian family. Peterson is after the Cosa

Nostra throne. It's always been his goal, and after our parents died, Dominic exiled him from the family to keep us safe."

"So, he's out for revenge?"

"Yes. And since the Bratva are our rivals, he needs them to take Dominic down. Should that happen, the two groups will then be allies."

I lean back in my sit. "Wow." This is a lot to take in. It turns out the mafia is even more complicated than I thought. It doesn't end at trafficking drugs or smuggling contraband. It's a lot more than that and it's even darker than I thought or ever imagined.

While I'm intrigued by Marcus's loyalty to his brother, I'm shocked at finding out their uncle has joined with the family's enemies to betray his own nephew.

Fuck.

"That was the reason you warned me to stay away from him."

"Yes."

I rake my fingers through my hair. "This is crazy."

"It is," Marcus agrees. "All you have to do is keep your ass out of trouble while we handle it."

“How? Don’t you think it’s weird if I suddenly start avoiding Mr. Peterson? I don’t think it’ll do us any good if he finds out I know his true identity.”

Dominic’s eyes meet mine. “Elena’s right. You’ll play along for now. Don’t give him any reason to suspect you know the truth about him.”

“What if he tries to hurt me or Lucas?”

“This has nothing to do with you, Elena. I’ll do anything I can to keep you both safe, just as I promised,” Dominic assures me.

I shoot my gaze to him. “You’re wrong, Dominic. This has everything to do with me. I may not be a Romano, but my son is and I’ll do whatever I can to protect him.”

Chapter Fourteen

Dominic

“Alexei was spotted in New York this morning.”

I run my hand over my beard, my interest piqued. “Are you sure about this?” I ask Dante.

“I’m as certain of his return as I am certain of what whore I’m fucking tonight.” He smiles cockily. “You think he will get rid of the old fuck for us?”

“Can’t be too sure. I know we’re bloody bastards, but shedding his own father’s blood is something else.” I give it a second’s thought.

Alexei is Kirill’s son from his first wife, a woman he murdered twenty years ago. After Alexei made his first kill at fourteen, Kirill became afraid of his own son and fearing he would kill him, he shipped Alexei off to Chicago as soon as he could.

“If he’s returned, then it’s because he wants to take his father’s place,” I say, a dark smile lurking on my face. “How about we strike a deal with him?”

“What deal?”

“We put him on the Bratva throne and in return, he delivers Kirill to us.”

Dante snorts. “Those Russian bastards have egos bigger than their balls. If Alexei returned with the intention of killing Kirill, he won’t take your offer.”

I nod. “That could be true. Still, no one wants to be a kin slayer.” And that’s the only fucking reason Peterson is alive.

I don’t give a damn what anyone says about me killing my uncle, but I’ll try to keep him alive until I have a good reason to take him out. He’s been lurking around Elena too much recently. Little does he know he’s being stalked by death.

“Possibly. But he won’t come to you just because you invited him over.”

“I am not inviting him over.” I slide my phone out from my pocket and call Marcus. He answers on the second ring and I put the call on speaker. “The phone is on speaker. Dante’s here with me.”

“Hello, brother.”

I ignore his greeting and get straight to the point. “Alexei’s in town. Dante found him sneaking around our territory. Have you heard?”

“I heard minutes ago. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking we need to have a little chat with him.” I place the phone on my desk and crack my fingers. “We could have a reunion this evening.”

Dante lets out a manic laugh. “I love the idea.”

“Of course, you would,” Marcus says in a gruff voice. “You’re the crazy asshole putting ideas in my brother’s head.”

“I’m consigliere for a reason. Don’t like it? Suck on my big, fat cock.”

“I’d rather chop it off. I’d be doing you and those whores a favor. How about that?”

“Enough!” Bile rises to my throat at hearing them argue about cocks and whores. “Chop of each other’s cocks later. For now, the only cock I’m interested in is Alexei’s. Find him and bring him to me by evening.”

“*Si, Capo.*”

“Good.” I hang up. I point at Dante. “You, fuck off. Do whatever you want with the whore you’ve booked for tonight.

Make sure you're at the warehouse before me."

Dante smiles a lopsided grin. *Cocky bastard!*

"You seem to be in a better mood." He squints at me.
"It's because of her. Isn't it?"

I wave him off. "Don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

"Oh, but it does. Your business is my business. You're finally getting the only piece of pussy you've ever wanted."

My nostrils flare. "You will not speak of Elena unless you're according her the respect she deserves, do you understand?"

He raises his hands in a placating gesture. "Chill, man. I'm just happy for you. I should come over for dinner sometime. It's been years."

"Come near my house and I'll put a bullet in your fucking skull."

"You won't have a friend if you do that. I'm the only one crazy enough to be friends with a heartless bastard like you." He leans forward. "You're in love with her, aren't you?"

"Manipulative bastard." I walk to the minibar in my office, grab a bottle of scotch and two glasses. When I return

to my table, I pour two fingers in each glass and push one to Dante. “We’re taking it one step at a time. For Lucas’s sake.”

He downs his drink and winces. “Ah. Lucas. Perfect excuse for you to hide your feelings. I can’t tell which of you is more stubborn. You or Elena.”

I trace the rim of my glass with my finger, my cock hardening as I think of last night. Sex with Elena is the best I’ve had in years. The way she melts into me and clenches around me is better than anything I’ve ever experienced.

“Why are you smiling?”

Dante’s voice drags me back to the present and against my will, my brows knit. “You’re such an idiot.”

“And you, my friend, you’re pussy-whipped.” He pours himself another drink. “Who would’ve believed a small woman could have almighty Dominic Romano wrapped around her tiny fingers?”

Elena has me wrapped around her fingers and she doesn’t even know it. For her, and for Lucas, I would burn the world. I wonder if a day will come when she realizes how much power she holds over me and this city.

I own this city, but Elena owns me as much as I own her.

“She doesn’t know that yet, and that’s where the problem lies,” I say. I sip my drink and heat burns down my throat, searing into my stomach and mixing with the worry that’s awakened in there.

It’s a battle not letting my thoughts drift to Elena, to concentrate on what needs to be done. My cock is throbbing for her and for more of last night.

“A day will come when she sees it. You’ll be a total cunt-worshipper when that happens. It’ll be a tragedy to watch you fade away, man.”

My fist clenches and I remind myself why I’m friends with this crazy fucker in front of me. He’s my *consigliere* and he’s been by my side since we were boys. He’d give up his life for me and I will give up mine for him.

We’re brothers by vow.

Friends by choice.

And those are the only reasons I put up with his arrogance. Men have died for just looking at me the wrong way.

“You’re lucky I like you, Dante.”

The door swings open and David Peterson walks in. My secretary runs in after him, panting heavily. “I’m sorry, sir. I stepped out for coffee and didn’t see him walk in.”

I wave at the secretary, dismissing him then turn my attention to Peterson. “What do you want?”

Peterson flashes a sly grin at me. “That’s no way to greet your uncle, boy.”

“I believe a better way would be killing you by driving a knife through your heart, but that’s not what you want, is it?”

Fear flickers in his eye, but he doesn’t stop smiling. “I’d like a word with you.” He glares at Dante. “Alone.”

Dante looks at me and I nod. He reluctantly gets up, scowls at Peterson and brushes past him. Their shoulders collide and Peterson staggers a little.

When Dante leaves and closes the door behind him, Peterson sits on the chair Dante just vacated.

“Better make it quick,” I tell him. “I don’t have all day.”

“We’re both busy men so I’ll get straight to the point, Nephew. I’m here to make a deal with you. Hand the mafia in

New York over to me and return to Italy. You'll still be Capo here—in name, of course—and in return, I'll bring the Bratva to your feet.”

I lean back in my chair and swivel it. I take a moment to answer. The only reaction I can manage is a slow smile.

“What is funny?”

“I'm amused. You're not only a traitor, you've also got guts. I guess you truly are a Romano, Uncle.”

He cocks his head and regards me with a sinister expression. “What's your answer, boy?”

I lean forward and my nostrils flare. “You're an idiot if you think I'll give up my throne to a traitor like you. Call me 'boy' one more time and I'll cut off your tongue and shove it down your throat.”

Tension drips in the air and fogs the atmosphere for a minute before he huffs out a sardonic laugh. “You can't kill me, Dominic. You would have already if you could.”

“You're mistaken. It's not that I can't. I just don't want to, but each time you open your mouth, you utter something that makes me reconsider the choice I made.”

“Easy there, boy,” he draws. “You shouldn’t make threats you don’t intend to carry out. The Cosa Nostra forbids kin slaying. You’ll be seen as nothing more than filthy and dirty if you dare to harm me.”

“I am the Cosa Nostra. My word is the rule. Push me one more time and it won’t be just threats you’ll be getting.”

Anger courses through my veins and murderous thoughts ring in my head. Peterson is weak and old. I can kill him right where he sits if I wanted to. I’m not sure why I let this old fart walk all over me, but I know I’ve near damn reached my limits with him.

“If that is all, then, leave. You’re no longer welcome here. Ever.”

Peterson grunts and raises himself to his feet. He slams a fist on my desk. His darkening eyes contrast the smile on his lips. “Don’t be too sure. You may have a very good reason to see me again. Your son looks just like you. I should invite him and his mother over for dinner sometime.”

I look Peterson dead in the eye, my gaze unwavering. “You’ll stay away from Elena and Lucas or I’ll make sure you never see the light of day ever again.”

His smile falters and his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. "I'll take my leave now, Nephew."

He smooths his burgundy suit and adjusts his tie then turns around to leave. When he reaches the door, I can't resist getting in the last word. "One more thing, Uncle."

He turns around to face me. "Let Kirill know I'm coming for him and he won't survive it when I do."

I'm at one of the clubs five hours later, sipping whiskey and still seething with anger from my encounter with Peterson.

Music thumps from the speakers tucked away in the corners of the club and the flickering lights threaten to blind me. It's ironic how I own the biggest clubs in New York, yet I can't stand the blaring music or the strobing lights.

A whore walks up to the pole across from me and begins to dance. She twists her waist, shakes her ass and gives me 'come hither' looks.

She's sexy and it's entertaining watching her dance, but the only woman who makes my cock rock hard is Elena. I

can't wait to go back home to her and our son.

I lift my hand and glance at my watch. It's almost seven p.m., thirty minutes left before Marcus brings Alexei over to the warehouse.

My phone buzzes just as I drop my hand and Marcus's number flash on the screen when I lift it from my pocket.

"He's here," Marcus says when I answer. "What should we do with him?"

"Tie him up. You can knock out a tooth or two if he tries to fight. I'll be there in fifteen."

"*Si.*" He hangs up.

It takes ten minutes for me to get to the port. A cold breeze greets me when I climb from my car. The port is serene at night, silent apart from the soft lapping of waves against the harbor walls. The stillness is of my favorite things about this place at night.

A crescent moon hangs overhead, its light shimmering on the surface of the water and illuminating the dock. I can see Dante and Marcus from where I'm standing. I also spot a man, hands behind his back with my men surrounding him.

When I walk up to them, I notice Marcus's eye is swollen. "What happened to your face?"

"Russian fucker wouldn't go down without a fight," Marcus retorts.

Alexei glares at me. His eyes are almost as dark as his raven hair. A tattoo covers most of his right hand and he has a stare that spits venom. If looks could kill, there would be a hole in my heart right now.

He's handsome, better than most Bratva lunatics I've seen. It's hard to believe he's Kirill's son. That old fucker shares no resemblance to the man in front of me.

"What the fuck do you want?" Alexei growls. He's fearless.

I smile. "Forgive my manners. I'm Dominic Romano. Capo of the Cosa Nostra."

He spits at my feet in response. "Get lost! *'svoloch.*"

I think I underestimated Alexei. He's every bit the man his father isn't. I like him. "Untie him."

Dante and Marcus both whip their heads to me. I repeat my order. "Untie him."

Two of the bodyguards hurry to Alexei, release the binds, then help him to his feet. At six feet four, Alexei is almost taller than me. “What do you want?” he drawls, shooting up an eyebrow.

“You.”

He scoffs. “You’re one of those crazy Italians. Too bad, I have no intentions of belonging to you. If you’ll excuse me, I have to meet my family. It’s been years since I saw any of them.”

He brushes sand from his slacks and turns to leave. I nod to the bodyguards. “Bring him back.”

Four of them run to him and try to drag him back, but Alexei manages to hold them off. He kicks one in the crotch and I wince. *That’s got to hurt.*

Headbutting the other, he twists his arm to the back and shoves him into the other two. The fight goes on for a few more minutes before I’ve had enough.

Pulling out my gun, I cock it and point it at him. “As much as I love you see you put your talents to use, I have to get back home. My woman doesn’t like it when I’m late.”

Alexei breathes heavily. His arms twitch and I can tell he's holding himself back from beating the other bodyguards. "I'm listening."

Good.

"You want revenge on your father and to claim your rightful place as the head of the Bratva. I can help you."

"In return?"

"Your father's life will be mine, and we'll form an alliance against our enemies."

Alexei's laugh echoes in the air. It's violent and sardonic. "Your offer means nothing to me. I don't want to be boss, I want my dignity back."

"The only way you can do that is by taking the throne for yourself. You've lived a meaningless life so far, now it's time to make something out of it."

Alexei's expression hardens. "And if I refuse?"

"Then you're just another Vadim to me."

"I'll think about your offer and I'll come to you. Don't try to find me before then." He turns his back on me and leaves.

“You’re letting him go? Just like that?” Dante asked.
“What if he betrays you? That fucker could snitch to Kirill just to get on his good side.”

“He could,” I agree, rubbing my beards. “But I doubt he will.” Alexei and I are similar in a way. Neither of us fear death, and both of us would choose honor over mercy.

Marcus stands beside me, watching as Alexei disappears into the darkness. “What next?”

“Keep an eye on him. The chances are slim, but kill him if he does something stupid.”

Chapter Fifteen

Elena

Moira gapes at me. “No way Mr. Peterson is Dominic’s uncle.”

I set a plate of brownies and a glass of orange juice in front of her. “I wish it was a lie, but I don’t think Dominic and Marcus would lie about something that serious.”

Moira wraps her hand around the glass I put in front of her and gulps it down. “Orange juice, Elena? Seriously? I need whiskey to digest news like this.”

I smile and push the brownies closer to her. “You’re driving home. Remember?”

She rolls her eyes and sighs. “I can’t wait for all of this to be over. I miss our girl’s nights and watching SpongeBob with Lucas.”

I nod, I’m not really certain I want all of this to be over yet. The part about the mafia war? Yes. But the thought of being away from Dominic makes my chest constrict.

It's been two weeks since we moved in with him, yet it feels as if we've been here all my life. I'm no longer uneasy around him, and I've learned to accept the things I cannot change.

Like him being the *Capo* of the Cosa Nostra.

Moira picks one of the brownies and takes a bite. "How are things going with Dominic?"

I try to bite back a smile, but it breaks through anyway.

"What's that?" Moira gasps.

"What was what?"

She points at my face. "You just blushed, Elena. I asked about Dominic and you blushed. Something's going on between you two, isn't it?"

I lower my gaze to the table, tuck hair behind my ear and nod.

Moira leans forward and grabs my hand. She's like a happy puppy wagging her tail with excitement. "Spill the beans, babe. I want to hear all of it."

"Dominic and I had..."

She throws a hand over her mouth. “You had sex with him?” she asks, her voice high-pitched. Moira can be dramatic and I love her for it. But Lucas is upstairs and the maids could hear us.

“Keep your voice down,” I whisper, flushing.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” She breathes in deeply. “How was it?”

I take a sip of my tea to buy myself a moment, and Moira leans in closer, her eyes gleaming with curiosity. “It was...” I search for the right word, but my mind is clouded with images of that night. “Incredible.”

Dominic and I haven’t been intimate since, though. He’s been busy trying to get things under control with the Bratva and on nights when I’m not worrying about his safety, I’m blushing and wishing he would fuck me the way he did that night.

Her eyes widen. “Incredible? That’s all you’re giving me, Elena?”

I chuckle nervously. “What do you want me to say, Moira? It was passionate, intense, and unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before. But it’s complicated.”

Moira leans back, contemplating my words.
“Complicated? Are you worried about the mafia stuff?”

I nod. “It’s always there, lurking in the background. I can’t escape it, and I can’t forget what he does. But when we’re together, it’s like the world fades away.”

She grins mischievously. “Sounds like love to me.”

I hesitate, unsure if I should use that word. “I don’t know, Moira. It’s too soon to say.””

Moira nods, understanding in her eyes. “Well, whatever it is, just be careful. You and Lucas deserve happiness.”

I smile with gratitude at her. “I know, Moira. And that is the reason I’m taking my time to consider the risks of becoming entangled with him.”

“Don’t miss out on something good just because you’re afraid. You were miserable for years because you and Dominic couldn’t be together. Don’t put yourself through all that stress a second time.”

“I won’t. Thank you for being so easy to talk to.”

She waves it off, but her smile remains. “Now, spill more details. How did it happen? Where? When?”

I laugh, grateful for the chance to change the topic, even if only slightly. “It happened in his bedroom. I came home late and went to the kitchen for dinner. Dominic joined me, made me dinner. We got talking, and...”

Moira leans in even closer, hanging on to my every word. I don’t tell her about how deep his thrusts were, or how he cuffed my hands and spanked me.

Fuck.

I also don’t tell her about the two magnificent orgasms I had, but as I narrate the basics of how intense it was, I can’t help but feel a warm, tingling sensation deep inside me. It’s not just the memory of passion; it’s the realization that despite the danger, I’m falling for him. Again. And there’s no turning back now.

Moira listens with rapt attention. I expect her usual gasps and all when I finish, but instead, worry mars her expression.

“Elena, have you talked to Dominic about what you want in this relationship?”

I still. Discussing my feelings with Dominic is a conversation I’ve been avoiding. “What do you mean?”

She leans in closer, lowering her voice. “I mean, have you discussed where this is going? Do you want a future with him, or is this just a fling to distract you both from the war with the Bratva?”

I don’t answer.

“You do realize there’s a life once all of this is over, right? Have you talked to him about what to expect once everything returns to normal?”

“I don’t know, Moira,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. “I’m afraid. What if Dominic wants nothing more than a fling? What if I speak to him about it and it ruins everything?”

Moira places a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “It’s natural to be scared, Elena. But you can’t hide from your feelings forever. You need to talk to Dominic, ask him where he sees this going. If you’re in love with him, you deserve to know if he feels the same way.”

I nod. Moira is right; I can’t keep avoiding this conversation. But I also know that confronting Dominic about our future could mean the end of what we share now.

He could be a total asshole and turn me away, or he could choose to restore what we once lost. Something I ruined because I was foolish and young.

Moira and I talk about her dating life and work. By the time she leaves, it's pretty late and Dominic isn't home yet.

I sigh and make my way to the kitchen to prepare a cup of coffee.

The soft glow of the kitchen lights makes the room seem homely, and I find solace in the rhythmic sounds of the coffee maker. As the dark liquid fills the cup, I think back to my conversation with Moira.

Although she's right and I consider bringing the topic up with Dominic, now is not a good time.

When the machine sighs its last steamy sigh, I take the aromatic brew and settle at the dining table with my MacBook, opening the presentation I've been preparing for my next presentation.

I take a sip of the steaming coffee and bitter taste lingers on my tongue.

Hours pass as I work and I lose track of time. The clock on the wall ticks away. It's only when the front door

creaks open that I look up from my laptop and realize it's almost midnight.

Dominic enters, his imposing presence filling the room. His sharp eyes immediately find me at the dining table, and a faint smile tugs at his lips. "Working late, Elena?"

I close the laptop and stand, then I smile. It can't be helped when my heart flutters the way it does whenever I'm around him. "Yes, I need to prepare for tomorrow's meeting with David Peterson."

His brows knit together and he frowns. "Elena..."

I walk up to him to him, raise myself on my toes and pepper his face with kisses. He smells like sweat and sandalwood. "I know, Dominic, but this war doesn't end with you. It's mine and Lucas's by extension. I just can't sit around and wait for it to happen."

He curls his hand around my waist. "What are you planning?"

I shrug. "Not much, but maybe I can find out what illegal businesses he's involved in. He doesn't know I'm aware of his true identity yet, so I can deal with him if I play my cards right."

Dominic's sudden withdrawal from our embrace catches me off guard. His blue eyes are clouded with concern. He places his hands on my shoulders, holding me at arm's length.

"Elena, I can't allow you to get involved in something so dangerous," he states, his voice firm and unwavering.

I meet his gaze, searching for any sign of compromise. But I know him well enough to recognize when he's made up his mind, and this is one of those times. His protective instincts are in overdrive, and it doesn't seem like he will back down no matter what I say.

"Dominic, I understand your concern, but this meeting with Peterson could be helpful. If I can gather information on his illegal activities and threaten him with that information, you can get him off your back for good without having to kill your own uncle."

He releases a heavy sigh, his fingers tightening on my shoulders. "It's not that easy, Elena. You're underestimating how dangerous this could be. Peterson doesn't fear the police. The system is just as corrupt as our world. A threat will mean little to him and you'll only get hurt."

I reach up and place my hand on his cheek, gently caressing his sharp jaw. “I appreciate your concern, but I can’t just sit on the sidelines while all of this unfolds. It’s my life, too, and Lucas’s future that we’re talking about. Just trust me this one time, okay?”

Dominic’s eyes soften as he leans into my touch, his lips brushing against my palm. “I trust you, Elena, but this world we live in—it’s ruthless. I’ve seen things that would haunt your nightmares. I can’t bear to expose you to that darkness.”

I understand the weight of his words. The world of the mafia is brutal and unforgiving. It’s a darkness that swallows you whole when you step inside and it never sets you free.

Still, it’s a risk I’m willing to take for my family.

“I promise to be careful, Dominic,” I say earnestly, my gaze locked with his. “I won’t take unnecessary risks, and I’ll prioritize our safety above all else. But I need to do this—for Lucas’s sake.” *And for yours.*

He closes his eyes for a moment, his forehead resting against mine. I can feel the internal struggle he’s fighting, torn between giving in to my request and shielding me from harm.

Finally, he exhales slowly and opens his eyes, a hint of resignation in his expression. “Alright, Elena. But promise me you’ll never underestimate the danger, and you’ll call me first if anything goes wrong.”

I nod, relief flooding through me. “I promise, Dominic.”

He leans in and captures my lips in a lingering kiss and groans deeply. I kiss him back. His lips are soft and they taste like whiskey.

When he pulls away, he places a finger under my chin and tilts my head back. “We’ll face this together, Elena. And I’ll make sure no one harms a hair on your or Lucas’s head.”

I return his smile, my heart swelling with emotions I haven’t cared to label just yet.

The following morning, I wake up to the soft rays of sunshine filtering through the curtains. The first thought on my mind as I open my eyes, is my meeting with David Peterson and my stomach churns.

My body trembles with anxiety, but I don’t let it stop me. I take a shower, dress in a white suit and let my hair

blanket my shoulders. I'm wearing my favorite lipstick today: it's blood red and it masks my insecurities just fine.

When I finally make my way downstairs, Dominic is waiting for me in the foyer like he does every morning. He's dressed in a sharp, black suit. His eyes meet mine, and I can still see the reluctance in his eyes.

"Are you ready to leave, Elena?" he asks, his voice low and steady.

I take a deep breath and nod. "As ready as I'll ever be. Where's Lucas?"

"He insisted on having Vincent and Marcus drop him off. He's getting along just fine with them," he adds and a ghost of a smile flickers across his face.

"Lucas is lucky, you know? He has the best dad, uncles and aunt in the world. We'll keep our son safe, Dominic."

Dominic steps closer and takes my hands in his, his touch grounding me. "We will," he assures me with a smile.

The drive to the office is quiet, and I can sense Dominic's worry from the passenger seat. When the tall, steel building of my company comes in sight, my heart pounds.

As we arrive at my office building, Dominic walks me to the entrance. His eyes search mine for reassurance, and I offer him a smile. “I’ll be fine, Dominic. Peterson doesn’t know I know his true identity. I’ll play it safe.”

Dominic nods, his expression still filled with concern. “Just remember, if anything goes wrong, call me immediately. I’ll be on standby.”

I lean in and press a kiss to his lips, feeling the soft warmth of his mouth against mine. “I will, Dominic. Don’t worry.”

With one last glance, he watches me enter the building, his piercing blue eyes staying on me until I disappear through the glass doors.

Inside my office, I take a moment to compose myself. My heart is pounding, but I remind myself this is nothing. Peterson won’t hurt me in my office and Dominic is outside to protect me if anything happens.

I settle into my leather chair and begin reviewing the documents related to my meeting with Peterson. I’ve gathered information on the illegal businesses he’s invested in over the last ten years.

Some of them belong to Kirill Vadim. I also managed to find an investment I assume has to do with an underground casino.

It's not much, but it's enough to put pressure on him if the need arises. Knowledge is my weapon, and I intend to use it wisely.

Time passes slowly, and I can feel the weight of the impending meeting pressing down on me. Just as I close my eyes to inhale a deep breath, there's a knock on my office door.

"Come in," I call out, my voice steady.

The door swings open, and David Peterson walks in. He has a calculated smile on his face. He's dressed impeccably in a tailored suit, and his confidence radiates as he approaches my desk.

"Elena Marconi, it's a pleasure to see you again," Peterson says, extending a hand.

I rise from my seat and shake his hand firmly. I can't let him notice I'm nervous, so I maintain a smile. "Likewise, Mr. Peterson. Please, have a seat."

Peterson takes the chair opposite my desk, his gaze never leaving mine. "I must say, I was surprised when I found

out about your relationship with my nephew.”

Fuck. He doesn't beat around. He is so direct.

My heart sinks and I choose my words carefully. Pretending I'm not aware of their family connection, I narrow my eyes on him and ask, “Your nephew?”

Peterson's smile doesn't reach his eyes as he leans back in his chair. “Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about, Elena. I'm sure Dominic must've told you our complicated family relationship by now.”

I lean forward and prop as elbow on my table. My hands come close to quivering, but I keep my composure. “I don't involve myself in family feuds, Mr. Peterson. We're here to discuss business and I'd appreciate it if we could keep it at that.”

Peterson regards me with a shrewd expression. If he's half as good at reading body language as Dominic is, then he must've noticed that I'm uneasy. “You know why I agreed to invest in your company, Ms. Marconi?”

“How about you tell me?”

“You're smart and intelligent. It's trait many women your age lack. I'm impressed.”

And not because you wanted to use me as bait to get to Dominic?

I force a smile although my fingers itch to wrap around his wrinkled neck. “Thank you. It’s the best compliment I’ve heard in a while. Can we get to business?”

“Not so quickly.” He taps his fingers thoughtfully on the armrest of the chair. “How about we discuss business in my home?”

“In your home?”

“I’m inviting you to dinner, and I’d love to meet my grandnephew.”

Silence hangs between us and the air is tense. I know what Mr. Peterson is playing at. He’s trying to gauge how much I know. I wouldn’t turn down dinner in his home if I had no idea who he really is and he knows that.

If I turn down his invitation, I’d be giving away how much I know. If I accept it, I’ll be playing right into his game, exposing myself and Lucas in the process.

I weigh my options carefully. “How about we have a family reunion?”

He smirks. “What do you propose?”

“Dinner with the rest of the Romano family.” And just like that, I caught him in his own web.

Chapter Sixteen

Dominic

“There’s no way in the world I’m letting you or Lucas into that fucker’s dungeon, you hear me?” I take in a deep breath when I realize I’m raising my voice at Elena.

After I dropped her off at the office this morning and she was with Peterson, I’d nearly lost my mind from the fear he would hurt her and I wouldn’t get there on time to save her.

Damn.

I’d been stupid to even allow her to take such risk in the first place, and what now? She wants to have dinner with Peterson. Fuck being family, I would tie a rope around that bastard’s neck and drape his lifeless body from the roof of my skyscraper before I let that happen.

Elena nears me and places a light hand on my arm. Her touch is so soft and warm it almost melts the icy storm whirling inside me. “Dominic...”

I move away before her touch has a chance to work its way any deeper in me. “No, Elena. I don’t care what you say, I’m not letting you in harm’s way.”

“Peterson won’t hurt me and I’m not going alone. I’ll have Marcus and some bodyguards with me. They’ll keep me safe.”

I rub my forehead. She just doesn’t get it. She has no freaking idea how dangerous this is. I’d overestimated her understanding of the mafia and how dark the world really is. “This conversation is over, Elena.”

“But...”

“It’s over!” I slam my fist on the nightstand and Elena visibly trembles. “I’m not going to risk your life, Lucas’s or Marcus’s to prove a point to that bald-headed fucker. And I’m sure as hell not going to let you get in harm’s way to win some stupid war with the Bratva.”

Rage bleeds into my veins and it’s tearing at every part of me. “You and Lucas are everything I have. I don’t care if I die, but I can’t lose you. I’d die for you, Elena.”

Her hazel eyes sparkle with tears as she flattens a palm on my chest. “You’re so unfair, Dominic. You’re so selfish. Who gave you the right to talk about dying as if you’re taking a walk in the park?” She sniffles and digs her teeth in her bottom lip. “You can risk your life for me, but and Lucas and I can’t do the same for you?”

“No, you can’t,” I say in the quietest tone I can manage. I grab her shoulders and pull her close enough I can smell her sweet strawberry shampoo and vanilla perfume. “You know why? Because if anything happens to you or Lucas, I will burn the world to the ground and I would burn with it, as well.”

Her small hand cups my face and I lean into her touch, placing my hand on hers. “I want to help you.”

“I know, but the only way you can help is if you stay alive. I’ve already lost my parents and in the cruelest way possible. I won’t survive if I lose you too.”

We stare into each other’s eyes for a moment, then she lifts herself on her toes and kisses me. I groan, the soft sensation of her lips sears through me, mixing with the rage in my guts.

I want to kiss her back, but I pull away. “We shouldn’t. I’m too angry. I’ll hurt you.”

Her breath is warm and it caresses my lips like a lover’s touch. “I can take it.”

“No, Elena...”

She presses a finger to my lips. “Hush. I want you. Now.” She stands on tiptoes again and her lips find mine. I can hear her heart beating as I cup her cheeks and kiss her back like my life depends on it. Her lips are so soft, so delicious.

My anger dies a slow death and a dark insatiable need to have her consumes me. I curl my arm around her waist and she moans into my mouth.

Good lord.

That sound, it makes my cock throb painfully in my pants. I need her like I’ve never needed anyone before. And God help me, because I don’t just want to fuck her, I want to make love to her.

I want to hear her moan my name as I thrust deep inside her.

“Fuck,” I groan. I lift her from the floor and she snakes her legs and arms around me as I carry her to the bed, lay her on it and climb on top of her.

My hips press against hers and she moans loudly when my erection glides against her clit. “Fuck, Dominic. I want you,” she cries. “I want to feel you inside me.”

I want to feel myself inside her.

I break away from our kiss and reach for her nightgown. It's made from a transparent purple fabric and I can see the lines of her pink nipples as they harden. They're begging for me to bite and tease them.

When she lifts her hips and I slide her nightgown up, electricity ripples through me as I drink in her naked body. Her skin is so silky and the overhead lights make it glow. Her hair cascades down her shoulders, falling over her breasts and leaving small view of pink, hard nipples for me to enjoy.

“God, Elena. You have no idea how beautiful you are.”

She blushes and breathes harder.

Mio Cristo.

I pull her closer, spraying her legs as I crawl on her and take lingering tastes of her neck and earlobes.

She moans from the pleasure, pushing her bare breasts against my chest and grinding her hips against my erection.

Her sounds are soft and the sensation they send to my brain is mind-blowing. I'm becoming more turned on by the second, thinking of all the ways I want to fuck her tonight. I want her on her knees, on her back. Sitting on my face.

Jesus.

As if she's reading my mind, she pushes at my chest and smiles in a way that makes my heart skip a beat. "I want to be in charge tonight, Dominic," she whispers.

She's not asking permission, she's telling me.

She attacks the buttons of my shirt and in a second I'm naked. "You're so hard," she whispers, not taking her eyes off my erection. "I'm dying to have you inside me, but not yet."

Her eyes crinkle with dark desire when she smiles at her. She pushes me to my back and crawls down between my legs to swipe her tongue on the tip of my cock, licking a bead of precum.

My body jerks from the sensation and I groan. *Holy fuck.*

Elena tucks hair behind her ear, giving me the perfect view, fists my shaft in her delicate hand and begins to pump. Warmth coats my cock as she takes it in her mouth and lets out a sultry moan, then she starts to bob her head, stroking then sucking and flicking her tongue around my tip.

My muscles tense and I'm entranced by the way she sucks me. I've gotten blowjobs from more women than I can count. None of them have ever brought me to the brink of

orgasm with just a few licks. In fact, I've had to imagine it was Elena each time their mouths were wrapped around my cock.

But this...this is so different. I don't have to fake the groans rumbling from my chest or the grunts escaping my lips.

Elena darts her eyes to me, thick lashes casting a shadow over her cheeks. She brings me close to climax and stops, then crawls up to my face and straddles it like it's her fucking throne.

I glide my tongue over her clit and she vibrates, her eyes close and she throws her head back.

"So fucking sweet," I grunt. *Lick*. "So fucking delicious."

I see her pleasure reflected in the expressions which cross her face as I stroke her with my tongue. God, she's beautiful.

"You like that?"

She draws a shuddering breath and nods. "I like it." She pants, grinding herself on my mouth. "Harder!"

I press my tongue harder, swiping up and down, then side to side. Elena's cries are filled with pleasure and need. I love it.

When she tenses above me, I know she's about to come so I flip her over on all fours, fist my cock and thrust myself into her.

Her surprised yelp is music to my ears. Her hands bunch the sheet. "God...Dominic."

"I love the way you moan my name, baby."

My fingers dig into her waist and her ass is a sight to see as I slam into her over and over again, each thrust deeper, faster and possessive.

She's so tight. So wet.

I stop for a moment, drag her up, and kiss her. The taste of her lingers on my tongue and she laps it up. "Please, Dominic..."

"Please what?" I slide a hand across her chest to pull at a nipple.

"I need you," she pants. "Please."

Shit.

I like it when she pleads for me to fuck her. I like that she needs me. I flip her back on the bed and begin to drive my cock in and out of her again. This time, I take her like a bad man. I'm not gentle. Not good.

My hands explore her body while my cock sinks deep enough to touch her uterus. We're both breathing heavily, both groaning and moaning, sweating from the pleasure.

We're consumed by each other and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Elena clenches around me, she rakes the sheet with her nails and cries out as her orgasm explodes.

She's convulsing beneath me, quivering from how intense her climax is. I thrust into a few more times before my balls contract. I let out a powerful groan as I empty myself inside her.

It takes a moment for both of us to come down from our high. We're still breathing heavily as my cock softens inside her. I pull out and collapse on the bed, taking her with me.

"That was intense," she mutters, drawing a line on my chest and listening to my erratic heartbeat.

I run my fingers through her hair. "Which part?"

"Every part," she says in a low tone. "I liked the way you...licked me and how hard you fucked me."

My stomach flutters. I caress the small of her back with my palm, feeling the goosebumps on her skin. “There are still many things I want to do to you, Elena. I want to fuck you every corner in this house without a care in the word. I want to fuck you in every position there is.”

I feel her smile. “Easy, *Capo*. We have a six-year-old living with us, and a sixty-something-year-old grumpy Italian woman.”

“Bianca?”

“I think she hates me.”

“Trust me, she doesn’t. Bianca helped raised my brothers and I, so she’s protective of us.”

I lower my head to look at Elena and she pouts. “She’s rude to me, but I’ll let it be since you like her so much.”

“You don’t need to try and be extra nice. Be you and she’ll come around soon enough.”

We’re both quiet for a moment.

“What do you plan to do with Mr. Peterson and the Bratva.”

I plan on bringing them down and crowning a new king on the Bratva throne. I don’t tell her that though. From now

on, I plan to protect Elena from my world and the darkness.

“Don’t concern yourself with the mafia.”

She sits up. “Dominic, I’m my own woman and you don’t have the right to order me around. It’s fine if you don’t need my help, but my son has lived six years without a father and I won’t let you get yourself killed now that he’s met you.”

“I can’t let him live without a mother either.”

“So...”

“This conversation is over, Elena.” I get up from the bed. “This will be the last time you speak to me about the mafia.”

I walk to the bathroom, turn on the shower and step in. As the hot water burns against my skin, I’m stuck between heaven and hell.

I’d become a beast when Elena left me. After we reconnected, she’d helped to lock that monster away.

Now, I must become that beast once more to protect her and my son.

Chapter Seventeen

Elena

“You should know there’s no winning with my brother, reading self-help books won’t change anything,” Vincent says, his blue eyes gleaming under the scorching sun. He nods towards the book I’m holding. “Your book is upside down by the way.”

I quickly turn my book the right way and sigh.

It’s a Saturday afternoon and I’m sitting on the patio, pretending to read a book titled, *‘Standing Your Ground with a Narcistic Partner’*, when all I want to do is Google the different ways I can kill Dominic without actually killing him.

Vincent is right, there’s no winning with Dominic.

I shut the book and slam it on the granite coffee table in front of me. “Is he always like that? Doesn’t he ever listen to other people?”

Vincent leans over and steals a handful of the delicious fish-shaped cookies the chef made this morning. “He’s *Capo*. He was born and raised to lead, so it’s natural for him to be cocky and bossy. He listens to Marcus and Dante, though.”

I furrow my brows. “Believe me, I’ve met Marcus and he’s the last person I want to go to for help. Who is Dante though?”

“He’s a guy who has a love-hate relationship with Dominic. Dante swears he and Dominic are soulmates, Dominic pretends to hate him. It’s complicated.”

His eyes meet mine and he continues when he sees I’m not satisfied with his answer, “I choose not to get involved in mafia business, but I can get you Dante’s number if you want.”

I wave off his suggestion. “If Dante likes Dominic that much then he’s probably just like him.” I lean back in my seat and cross my arms over my chest. “There’s a war brewing between the Bratva and Cosa Nostra. Aren’t you worried about your family?”

Vincent smiles. He’s wearing a white leather jacket and pants, a white turtle-neck sweater creeps up his neck from inside the jacket. “I’m worried. My brothers are not easy men to kill, but they’re all I have left since our parents died.”

“Do you mind if I ask what happened to them?”

“They were both murdered in their mansion. We don’t know who did it, but Dominic suspects the Bratva.”

“Oh.” A pang of guilt and sadness constricts my chest.
“I...I had no idea you lost your parents that way.”

There’s a flicker of sadness in Vincent’s eye for a moment, but it doesn’t last. “We don’t talk about it. I have no idea what’s going on between you and my brother, but he’ll never forgive himself if something happens to you and Lucas. That is why he is asking you to stay away from mafia business.”

I’m silent. I don’t know what to say. I’ve been so self-absorbed I didn’t realize before now that I don’t know much about Dominic. I don’t know what made him the way he is, and what has caused him pain.

Vincent looks at his watch. It’s a white Patek Phillippe watch, limited edition. “Got to run now. See you later.” He stands up and saunters towards his car.

Time flies quickly as I think of Dominic and the trauma he had to endure, seeing his parents’ bodies, after being killed in their home.

It must’ve hurt him so much.

When he comes home later that evening, I’m lying on his bed chatting with Moira on the phone as I wait for him. I

end the call and run my eyes over the man who fathered my child.

“Hey.” He places his gun on the nightstand and unbuttons his shirt. “You’re up.”

“Haven’t been able to sleep, to be honest.” I climb from the bed and go over to help him out of his clothes. “Had a bad day?”

“No.” He tosses his shirt on the floor. “Today was surprisingly calm. Where’s Lucas?”

“Asleep. He stayed up waiting for you until eight.”

Dominic rubs his temple and groans. His eyes are gloomy and he looks exhausted. “I should spend more time with him, but I’m barely home. I’m sorry.”

I curl my arms around his neck. The heat from his body seeps into mine. “It’s fine. You can spend more time with him when all of this is over.”

He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Sure. I can.” He kisses me softly on the forehead. “I’ll take a shower and join you.”

“How about dinner?”

“I’m not hungry. I just need a hot shower and a good sleep.” He pulls away and strides to the bathroom. I put his clothes in the laundry basket, then I return to the bed and slip under the cover.

I’m drifting off to sleep when Dominic enters the room from the shower, filling the air with the scent of sandalwood. He walks butt naked to the closet and when he returns, he’s wearing just his briefs.

The bed dips when he climbs in and presses his chest to my back. His body is cool after the shower, still, he manages to warm me up when he wraps an arm around me.

I turn to face him. He doesn’t look as exhausted as he did minutes ago, but the darkness in his eyes hasn’t faded completely. “Can I ask you something?”

He gives me a slight nod. “Go ahead.”

“Your parents. How did they die?”

His breath hitches, he uncurls his arm from me and tries to turn away before I grab his shoulder. “It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it. I don’t mean to be pushy.”

He holds my gaze for a moment, his blue eyes piercing my soul. “They were both shot dead in their home, on their

anniversary,” he says quietly. “I’ve seen many dead men in my life, Elena, but the image of their lifeless bodies never leaves my mind. It feels like I’ve been cursed to never forget. It’s like a price I have to pay for my cruelty, and is a driving force for my ruthlessness.”

Pain bleeds into his eyes and it’s the first time I’ve seen a sad expression on Dominic’s face. His sadness is all it takes for my heart to squeeze in my chest. “I’m sorry, Dominic. I can’t imagine how hard it was for you.”

My heart was ripped into a thousand pieces when my mother died, but she’d died from cancer. She’d fought hard and we had time to prepare for her final moments. Still, it hurts whenever I think of her.

I want to assure Dominic I understand how he feels, but I imagine it’s a different level of pain knowing his parents didn’t die naturally, their lives were snatched from them.

“If you’re sorry, then you have to protect yourself, Elena. I can’t lose you too.”

I move closer to him and rest my head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. Now I understand why he has always been so protective of me and Lucas. I feel so sorry for not understanding him better earlier. “I will. I won’t

get involved again. I promise, but Peterson, he'll expect me to come over for dinner.”

“He will, but no one is going to step into the enemy’s territory just to prove a point. Leave my uncle to me.”

I nod my head. “You have to make me a promise, too.”

He tucks my hair behind my ear. “What is it?”

“Promise me you won’t get hurt, Dominic. I don’t want Lucas to grow without his father. He needs you.” *We both need you.*

“I won’t die, Elena. I am hard nut to crack, you know?”

A smile quirks my lips. “I’m sure you are.”

“I’m sorry for dragging you and Lucas into all of this mess, Elena.” His Adam’s apple moves as he swallows. “I hated you for years because you left me, but now I feel you did the right thing. I should have never come back into your lives.”

“Hey.” I straighten myself against the headboard. “I thought I did the right thing. To be honest, I’m not entirely sure what I did was wrong, but I don’t regret having you here and I’m sure Lucas would understand too.”

“What if he grows up and hates me for what I do?”

“If you think there’s a chance Lucas would hate you, then you have no freaking idea who your son is.” I’m not exaggerating to make Dominic feel better. Lucas has been the happiest I’ve seen him since we moved in here. A few years down the line, I doubt he’ll even remember there was ever a time when Dominic was not a part of his life.

A soft knock on the door grabs our attention. “Who do you think it is?”

“I think it’s Lucas.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I just am.” Dominic quickly pulls on his discarded briefs, grabs the gun from the bedside table, cocks it. “I better check.” He walks stealthily to the door and opens it gently.

Lucas is standing in front of our door, his SpongeBob pillow held between his left arm and torso. “Hi, Dad.”

Dominic quickly tucks the gun in the back of his briefs. “Hi, little man. What’s up with you?”

Lucas glances between me and Dominic. “I had a nightmare. Can I sleep here with you and Mommy tonight, please?”

Dominic doesn't hesitate and answers, "Yes." Stretching his hand out to Lucas, he shuts the door when Lucas takes it and walks inside. They both make their way to the bed with Lucas taking the space between Dominic and me.

"Hi, Mom." Lucas wraps his arm around me and I pat his back gently. "You had a nightmare, huh?"

He nods.

"I'm sorry, baby. It was just a dream. Nothing bad is going to happen."

Lucas blinks up at me, his blue eyes sparkling in the dimly lit room. "Because Daddy's here to protect us?"

I smile at Dominic and he smiles back. "Yes, baby. Daddy's going to protect us. We're safe here with him."

Lucas doesn't say a word for another minute. "Dad?"

Dominic rubs his hair. "Son?"

"Is there a reason you and Mom aren't married yet?"

I gasp, eyes wide open and my jaw drops. "Lucas!"

"All my friends at school say that their parents are married to each other," he whines, pouting his little mouth. "I'm the only one who my Dad is not married to my Mom."

He narrows his eyes at me and his father. “Are you two divorced?”

“No!” Dominic and I answer in harmony, then we both chuckle. Lucas is being naughty. I’ve been afraid my son is growing up too fast. It’s cool seeing he isn’t very grown up just yet.

“No,” I repeat alone this time. “Your Dad and I have never been married. Something went wrong before you were born. Mom and Dad had to go their separate ways for a while.”

Lucas nods. “So, will you get married now that you’re together?”

I bite my lip and glance over to Dominic.

“I’m never going to let you or your mom go again,” Dominic answers, while looking straight at me. “Never.”

“So, you’ll marry her?”

Dominic smiles and pats Lucas on the head. “Go to sleep, little guy. No more questions, okay?”

Lucas mumbles something before he places his head on my stomach.

There's a warmth in my chest. A prickle of happiness I haven't felt in a while. When I was younger, I'd always wanted to have the perfect family. I think the need for one was birthed from the absence of a motherly figure and a grieving, alcoholic father.

I needed someone to love and who would love me back. I knew the only way for that to happen was starting my own little family. It's years later and I somehow feel like I've gotten everything I wanted.

Seeing Dominic watch Lucas as he sleeps with such warmth in his eyes, fills me with a new radiating hope. I may not have had the perfect wedding yet, but this, this is all I've ever dreamed of.

And I would not have it any other way.

Chapter Eighteen

Dominic

“What the hell happened here?” I growled, clamping a hand over my nose to block out the stench of stale blood and stepping over the corpses of men on the floor.

It’s seven o’clock in the morning, twenty minutes since I got a call from Dante that one of our warehouses had been attacked.

Dante clenches his fist and pounds it into the brick wall. “I have no fucking idea, man. I came here at exactly six to record the shipment that arrived last night. I could smell the blood from feet away and when I walked in, I saw this shit. Someone attacked the warehouse,” he adds, as if it isn’t very obvious.

Huffing angrily, I pull out the pack of cigarettes I carry around, but never smoke, from my breast pocket and slide one between my lips.

“You need a lighter, *Capo?*” Dante asks.

I lift an eyebrow in his direction. My nerves are twitching with rage and I swear I only see red. At least ten of

my men are dead and a shipment of drugs worth millions of dollars is gone.

Dante flicks the lighter and I inhale, closing my eyes as the ashy smoke mixes with the bitterness in my stomach. It's supposed to be relaxing, but it makes my throat itch with the thirst for blood.

When I open my eyes, I exhale the smoke and stare at Dante. "I was here last night. Whoever did this shit knew I was here and waited for me to leave."

Dante looks like he's thinking when Marcus bursts into the warehouse, cracking his fingers, the fury on his face matching mine. "What the hell happened here?"

"What the hell do you think happened?" Dante bites back. "A Christmas party?"

Marcus looks around, he doesn't cover his nose and doesn't seem affected by the smell at all. "Those Russian bastards."

"You can't be too sure the Russians did this," I say. Kirill is a fucking loser, but he isn't so stupid that he'd launch an open attack on me like this one.

“Then who?” Marcus snarls. “Irish mob? The Camorristi?”

My eyes meet his when he says, “The Camorristi.”

Marcus shakes his head. “*Nessun fratello*. The Camorristi are pussies, they wouldn’t attack you like this. Those fuckers would wet their pants if you glared at them.”

“Which is why I suspect them.” The Russians wouldn’t risk my anger and the loss of life it would bring. Plus, Kirill is a proud man. A cunt, but a proud old pig, nonetheless. If he did something like this, he would want me to know it was him.

I draw in more smoke. “Any news from Alexei?”

“No,” Dante answers. “He’s made sure to avoid our territory.”

“Avoiding our territories won’t do him any good. I’ve given him enough time to make a decision. It’s on him if he hasn’t decided.” I’m done being patient. Too fucking angry to be merciful.

“Say the word and I’ll kill him, brother,” Marcus says.

“There won’t be need for that.” Not yet at least. I take in a final inhale of my cigarette then toss it to the floor and

watch as it slowly gets drenched in blood. I step on it with my Tom Ford leather shoe.

“What should I do, then?”

“Find him and bring him to me tonight.” I tuck my hand inside my pockets, my breath heavy as I try not to let my anger slip through. “Clean up this mess and make sure their families are taken care of.”

“I heard about the attack on your warehouse,” Alexei says. He’s different from the last time I saw him.

Way too different for my liking.

He’s wearing a black tailored suit, one of his legs crossed over the other and an arrogant smirk on his lips as he sips on my expensive whiskey. There are ten men behind him, all ten looking fierce and ready to give up their lives for him.

I’m tempted to point my gun at him, just to make sure they will.

It’s been a month since he snooped around my territory. Thirty fucking days since my men captured him and brought him to me like a fucking nobody, tied up with rope.

He doesn't seem like the same guy he was that night, though. His aura is darker and his presence commands respect. I don't like the guy, but I must say I'm proud of him.

At any rate, I think he's going to make on hell of an ally. That is, of course, only if he had nothing to do with the attack on warehouse. If he does, then I'll make him food for worms tonight.

I spread my arm out on my chair and a dark smile parts my lips. We're in the office at one of my clubs, away from the blaring music and neon lights I detest. It's the only reason I can even muster a smile.

Those flickering lights bring me to the edge of insanity whenever I'm around them.

“Is that sympathy I sense in your voice?”

“More like a condolence. Forgive me, Mr. Romano, but my life has been hell. I sadly do not have any more sympathy to spare.” His voice is thick with a Russian accent. I hate it.

“Careful, Alexei. You're not king yet.”

“I'm not a pauper either. I'd like to consider myself a king without a throne for now.” He takes another swig of his

drink. “To what do I owe this invitation?”

“I suppose you know already. I cannot wait any longer for your answer.”

“I’m afraid I still do not have a reply to your offer yet.”

I stare at him for a moment. This little shit somehow knows how to get on my last nerve. “I understand,” I tell him. “I believe you also understand why I can’t let you walk out of here alive.”

He stills in his seat, his eyes flickering between anger and something I can’t quite place my finger on. Then an outburst of laughter trickles through his lips, thickening the air. *Fucking psychopath.*

“You have no sense of humor, bro. Relax, I was only joking,” he says sardonically. “You can’t be sure my father had anything to do with the attack on your warehouse.”

“I know. I won’t attack unless I’m certain, but I don’t want to wait until then.”

Alexei leans back in his chair, studying me with those sharp, calculating eyes of his. “So, Dominic, tell me, what’s your plan now?”

I steeple my fingers in front of me, my gaze never leaving his. “First, I need to know if you had any involvement in the attack on my warehouse. Be honest with me, Alexei.”

He meets my gaze squarely, his smirk fading into a more serious expression. “I didn’t touch your warehouse, Dominic. My grudge is with my old man, not you.”

His words hold conviction, but in our world, sincerity can be a façade. I have to take his word for it, at least for now.

“All right,” I say, cautiously accepting his answer. “But if I find out otherwise, this alliance will crumble faster than a house of cards.”

Alexei nods, his expression grim. “I understand the stakes, Dominic.”

“Now, as for the missing shipment,” I continue, shifting the conversation back to business. “I need you to find it and retrieve it for me. It’s worth a hundred million, and its loss could have far-reaching consequences.”

Alexei leans forward, his eyes narrowing with focus. “I’ll do my best to track it down. My contacts should be able to help. But don’t expect me to do it out of the goodness of my heart, Dominic.”

I chuckle softly. “I wouldn’t expect anything less. You’ll get your share, of course. But remember, we have an understanding. You won’t interfere with my operations, and I won’t interfere with yours.”

“Taking my father down is my war, not yours, Dominic. I’m not a pussy who hides in a corner while real men fight.”

I lean back in my seat. “Your father has many allies. Many won’t just sit back and watch after he’s taken down. Trust me, you’ll have a lot more battles then, but this one is mine.”

My heart thrums as I wait for him to decide. My rage is slowly creeping up my back, and I’m not sure how much longer I can hold it back. I have a family to protect and I need to take down whoever is behind the attack before Elena or Lucas is hurt.

While I’m busy keeping my family safe and fixing the damage losing that shipment will cause me, Alexei will find the shipment and bring me the thief. Whether or not the Bratva are involved, my alliance with him will still stand.

“We have a deal,” Alexei says. “I know you’re *Capo* and the city will soon be yours, but betray me and I’ll die just

to take you down.”

“The *Capo* of the Cosa Nostra doesn’t betray anyone.”

It’s an insult to our pride and honor as made men.

Alexei nods. We both drink to our new alliance.

“Does your father still not know you’re in New York?”

I ask as warmth from my drink trails down my throat. A good brand of whiskey reaches where a cigar doesn’t. It simmers inside me and soothes the storm that was awakened by the attack from this morning.

He shrugs. “He does. My dear old father is expecting a visit, I suppose. I plan to pay him one soon.”

It’s odd, but I feel something, maybe pity for Alexei. My father wasn’t perfect, no man in our world is. But hating your own son is a whole other level of brutality. I can’t fathom it, because I would give my life for Lucas if need be. “He won’t welcome you.”

“*Da*, but I’m not going there to be welcomed by him. Just a little chat before he gets what he deserves.” Alexei says it so freely, but I can tell by his tone he’s not as strong as he pretends to be.

Parents have an insane amount of influence over their children. Even the strongest man breaks when it comes to their parents.

For a moment, I'm thrown back to the night my parents died. Me falling to my knees, not feeling the shards of glass on the floor, the pain that slithered through me as if my heart was being ripped from my chest, and the growl that had broken from me.

That night, I was someone else.

Something was taken from me, a part of me that only felt alive again because of Elena and Lucas.

I'm pulled back to the present when Alexei stands from and smooths his suit. "I believe this meeting is over. I'll take my leave now."

I twist my head to him when he reaches the door. "Watch your back," I tell him.

"Worry about yours," he returns. "One more thing, knowing my father, your girl and kid will be the first thing he comes for. Trust him to play dirty."

My blood curdles. If Alexei knows about Elena and Lucas, it means the Bratva, the Camorra and whoever the fuck

has it out for me, knows about them, too. It means Peterson most likely didn't fall for Elena's tricks.

I'd expected that. What I hadn't expected was that it would happen so fucking soon. "How did you find out about them?"

"Everyone knows. You should've kept it hidden, now they see you as vulnerable." The door creaks as he opens it to leave. Music blares through the opening and fades when it closes.

I lift my drink and swirl it before bringing it up to my lips. My mind is too busy and my thoughts aren't aligning. The door creaks open again and a familiar cedarwood scent fills the office.

"What did that fucker say?" Marcus asks, settling on the seat Alexei occupied minutes ago.

I bring my glass down. "We have a new alliance."

Marcus frowns. "I still don't trust that bastard."

"Neither do I, but we must put an end to the rivalry with the Bratva if he becomes the boss."

Marcus pushes up from his seat and reaches for my drink. He empties it down his throat, slams the glass on my

desk and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “I know, that’s the only reason I didn’t blow his head off even when I was dying to. What do we do now?”

“Tighten the security around Elena and Lucas. Those idiots will go for them any chance they get.”

“Will do. And the Bratva?”

I think. “We won’t sit around and wait for another attack, but we won’t fight them without any evidence either. It will backfire. Get the soldiers ready, we need to be prepared in case something happens.”

Marcus nods, then we both sit in the silence that engulfs us, both of us lost in thought. Unease settles in my stomach and it churns relentlessly.

I have to protect Elena and Lucas.

I remind myself of that every second that passes. I don’t mind losing a billion more worth of shipments, I just want my family safe.

“Have you decided what to do with her after this is over?” Marcus asks gently, a trait my brother doesn’t show often. He’s always grumpy and gruff. “Elena, I mean.”

“Yes.” I don’t need to rummage in my head for an answer. I’ve had years to think and a few more months to make a decision. “But this is not the night to discuss things like that.”

“We don’t know how this will end. We’ve seen it happen once before and the picture wasn’t very pretty, brother. You should let her know you care before it’s too late.”

No.

If anything happens, I don’t need Elena to know how I feel about her. I’d prefer it if she hated me and considered me worthless. That way, I won’t have any regrets if I end up dying.

I won’t be holding her back from finding the happiness she truly deserves.

Someone kicks the door open and saunters inside. I’m not disappointed when I crane my neck to see Vincent walk in. I don’t think I raised him right because the fucker has no manners.

He slouches on the sofa across from me and props his foot on the glass coffee table. He looks around and raises his brows. “What happened this time?”

“Get your fucking shoes off my table.”

He doesn't listen. He never does. “There was another attack, wasn't there?”

“Why do you care?”

“You're my family, that's why I care, man.” He lifts his foot from the table. His white outfit is an eyesore, I swear. “Is it another war?”

Marcus answers this time. I don't know how he has the patience for Vincent's bullshit, but I'd rather smack some sense into the kid than play word games with him. “With the Bratva. We lost twelve men this morning.”

“And a shipment,” I add. “Maybe if you actually chose to become useful, we would have someone more capable of keeping our shipments safe.”

“Or you could have a dead brother. I'm not Clarke Kent just because I'm good with a gun, man.”

“I wouldn't have wasted my hard-earned time teaching you how to use a gun if I knew you were going to be so fucking useless to the *famiglia*,” I retort. Do I regret it? No. Vincent is a Romano despite his refusal to get involved with

the mafia, that alone puts him at risk of being attacked if anything happens.

He should be able to protect himself, but the boy has skills my best men don't even have. His aim is good and so are his fists when he decides to use them. His skills would be useful to us, but he insists on not getting blood on his hands.

It's infuriating, but he was born into this world and it's something he can't escape.

Whether he realizes it or not, the mafia runs deep in his blood. Sooner or later and for whatever reason, he'll find himself deeply rooted in the underworld. For now, I let him have his fun.

“Speaking of useless, shouldn't you train your son? The kid is going to be underboss someday and I don't mind teaching him.”

Marcus tries to bite back a chuckle but it slips through him. “Elena will be mad when she hears that, bro.” He looks at me with an accusing eye. “I imagine she'll nag you to death when she finds out Lucas can't escape his fate.”

My head falls between my shoulders and I sigh. “Lucas joining the mafia is the least of my problems now. I've got to

figure out how to keep them safe first.”

“I’ll protect Lucas. You take care of your lady.” He yawns. “I’m only offering because I like the kid.”

“Of course, you should. He’s your nephew, you idiot,” Marcus retorts.

“And yours, too. I’ll be out for tonight though, got to stick my cock in a whore’s mouth one last time before my confinement begins.”

My brothers go on and on with their bickering. I don’t listen to half of it, I’m too busy thinking about Elena.

When I return home, she’s sitting up in bed, wearing earphones and with her MacBook on her legs as she examines the screen. She doesn’t notice enter, so I just lean on the door frame and watch her for a while.

I’m getting a good view of her profile from here. Her long thick lashes flutter each time she blinks. She licks her lips and heat zaps to my cock. She’s beautiful. More beautiful than any other woman I’ve come across.

She must’ve noticed me standing there because she slowly turns her head to me and smiles, then she gently places

her MacBook on the bed and removes her earphones. “How long have you been standing there?”

I lean out from the door and prowl to her. “A few minutes. Maybe more.”

Elena stands up from the bed and hugs me, she’s peppers my cheeks and lips with kisses before she buries her head in the crook of my neck and takes a breath. “I missed you so much.”

I kiss the top of her head and allow my lips to remain there seconds longer. “I missed you more. How was your day?”

She pulls away and helps me out of my clothes. “Normal. How was yours?”

“It was the same,” I lie. I’m dying to share how terrible today has been. I’d lost men, brothers in every way except blood, and money. But I don’t want to trouble her with mafia problems. I don’t want her to be part of anything that involves my dangerous world.

She stops unbuttoning my shirt for a second and squints at me. “Are you lying to me?”

I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her closer.
“I’m not.”

She heaves a relieved sigh. “I was worried since you left in such a hurry this morning. I thought something had gone wrong.”

I’m seething on the inside, but I keep my mask in place. Everything has gone wrong today, and I have a feeling nothing will go right until I take down Kirill, still, I don’t let my worries show. “Trust me, everything’s fine.”

She grins, her eyes sparkling. I’m completely captivated by this woman. “I’ll get the chef to make you something to eat.” She starts for the door but I grab her wrist and pull her back, then I hug her tight.

“Don’t. I just want to go to bed wrapped around you.”
Because you’re the only good in my life, Elena. You and Lucas.

“Dominic, are you sure you’re okay?”

“I am. Just exhausted and a little needy.” I break my embrace and place a finger under her chin, tilting her face up to mine. “Don’t I have the right to need you?”

“You do.” Her smiles fade a little. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot!”

“What happens when all of this is over, Dominic?” she asks quietly.

My chest constricts and suddenly feels too small to contain my heart. I want to give her an answer, but all I can offer is my silence.

Chapter Nineteen

Elena

“That doesn’t sound good, babe,” Moira says, her voice shaking with anger. She’s scowling, her arched brows knitted as she frowns. She’s fucking pissed, not that I can blame her.

I’m not mad at Dominic, but I’m not happy either.

Last night, I’d mustered enough courage to ask Dominic about our future together. Then I’d know what to expect, but what I got wasn’t anything like it. Silence and a kiss on the head before he walked off to the bathroom, was the answer he gave me.

Asshole.

My chest aches as if I’ve been stabbed. I can’t say that I have been stabbed, but a stab wound would probably hurt less than this.

“You should move out once all of this is over and never see him again.” She slams her fist on the desk and bites her lip, her nostrils flare. “I should go to his office and teach him a thing or two about treating a lady right.”

Elena tries to stand but I rise to my feet and grab her hand. She flicks her eyes to me and I swear I see fire in them.

I shake my head. “Don’t, Moira.”

My best friend will go through hell and back for me. She would fight a scary man like Dominic even if it meant she would die from it. She’s been that way since we met in college years ago.

Still, I can’t let her do that.

I can’t always be the pathetic and heartbroken friend. I also don’t want Dominic to find out how much his silence hurt me.

“You’re not trying to protect that asshole, Elena. Tell me you’re not.”

“I’m not. I’m trying to protect myself and what little pride I have left.” *I’m also trying to protect you.*

Dominic wouldn’t hurt Moira. He knows she’s my best friend, but I can’t risk it. I’ve seen him get angry, and I doubt he has a soft spot for anyone who isn’t me or Lucas.

My insides twist.

I know he cares for me, it’s just heart-wrenching that despite how much he cares, he still doesn’t want me.

Moira peers at me for a moment, the storm in her eyes calms and she reluctantly sits back down. “Girl, I know you love that man, but you deserve more than that.”

“I know.” There’s a knot in my throat and I swallow to push it down. “Trust me, I do.”

“Then why are you letting him play with your feelings?” She places a comforting hand on mine and speaks more softly. “Elena, I think you should tell him how you feel. You’re not a fucking dog. Don’t let him sit on his high and mighty throne and throw bones to you. Even Twinkie gets better treatment than that.”

I try to hold back the chuckle bubbling in my gut, but it breaks free. Twinkie is Moira’s pet Maltese. It was two years ago, or there about, when a guy she’d dated for six months—the only guy she’s dated for that long—broke up with her because his mother didn’t like her. Moira jumped through his window and stole Twinkie while he was at work as her revenge.

He never found out where his dog went and I agree that Moira is a better parent to Twinkie than her ex ever was.

“What I’m saying is, don’t waste so much time waiting for Dominic that you miss your chance on true love.”

I'm not sure what true love is, but I really doubt anyone else can make my heart beat as fast as it does when I'm around Dominic. No one can make my stomach flutter as much as he does.

No one will ever hold a candle to him in my heart.

I let out a shaky breath. "You're right, Moira."

Her brows quirk. She knows there's more I want to say. She knows me too well. "But..."

"I can't leave now. You know the whole thing with the mafia, Dominic has it rough already. I can't bother him now."

My mind drifts to last night. His blue eyes were gloomier than I'd seen them in a while. Something was wrong, I could feel it.

I wonder if it has to do with the mafia?

Did they attack a second time?

I try to think, but my head is blank and I can't seem to come up with anything. I know Dominic is trying to shield me from the mafia, but I feel useless being in the dark.

Vincent wouldn't tell me anything if I asked, and Marcus would rip his own tongue out before he leaked what's going on with Dominic.

“What are you thinking?” Moira asks, giving me a suspicious look. “Girl, please don’t tell me you’re worrying about him again.”

I rest back in my seat and stare at the white ceiling blankly. “You know that’s not possible, Moira.”

“It will be, when you finally realize you need to put yourself first.”

“I’m a mom. Mother’s don’t get to put themselves first.” I don’t hate Dominic, but even if I did, I’ll pray he remains safe for Lucas’s sake.

The double black door to my office swings open and David Peterson walks in. He’s wearing a creepy smile that sends shivers down my spine and an oversized black suit that makes him look like a grim reaper.

I only recently noticed he has the same features as the Romano brothers. Tall, broad shoulders and piercing blue eyes. The only problem though is that his vile nature has clouded his handsomeness.

Moira’s lip quivers when he walks in. She gives Mr. Peterson a through head-to-toe stare before looking at me. She

doesn't speak, but she raises her brows and I know she's asking if I have any idea why the man is here.

I shake my head once, though I have a feeling it has something to do with me not coming to dinner as he requested.

Sweat trickles down my forehead, but I sit straight. I can't show terrified I am of him.

"Ms. Marconi," he says, his sly smile widening. I think I'm going to throw up. "You look even more beautiful today."

What an odd way to greet someone.

I try to force a smile, but I can't through the pounding of my heart against my ribcage. "I wasn't expecting you today."

"I know, my dear, but I was expecting you last night."

Right!

He'd sent the address to his mansion yesterday morning. I deleted the message as soon as it came in. I couldn't risk Dominic reading it and getting upset.

His eyes meet Moira's, who is spitting venom at him with her eyes. "You must be..."

“Moira Carter,” she says. My best friend is such a sly fox, she fakes a smile so easily. “We’ve met before.”

“Ah. Your face seemed quite familiar.” She shakes her head in disgust. “If you don’t mind, I’d like some privacy with my nephew’s girlfriend, or baby mama. Whatever you young people call it these days.”

“Just stick to calling her by her name,” Moira says. Her tone doesn’t hold any humor.

Mr. Peterson nods. “You’re right. I should stick to her name.”

Moira looks at me and I nod at her. She sends Mr. Peterson one last disgusted glare before she leaves.

When she closes the door behind her, Mr. Peterson helps himself to one of the chairs across from my desk. “How are you, my dear?”

I scoff. I’m not in the mood for his silly games today, and judging by how he is here, he’s probably aware I know his true identity already. “Get straight to the point, Mr. Peterson. I’m certain you aren’t here to ask how well I slept last night and if I’ve had breakfast.”

He laughs like a mad man, thudding his feet on the floor and slapping my desk. “This is why I like you, Elena. You’re so fierce. So entertaining.”

The last thing I want to do is entertain this old goat. My eyes dart to a silver ballpoint pen in my desk organizer. My fingers are itching to reach out for it to poke his damn eyes out.

I curl my hands into fists and remind myself not to let him get to me. “This is my office, Mr. Peterson. It’s not a circus and there are no clown costumes, please leave if you have nothing to talk about.”

“Oh, trust me. I have something to talk about.” He leans in and his face deforms into that annoying smirk he always has. “Something you may find really interesting.”

Whatever trick Mr. Peterson is up to, I know it won’t be anything funny. Nothing good can come from this man.

“What is that?” My voice doesn’t tremble when I ask. Instead, it resonates with a power I didn’t even think I had in me.

He takes out his phone from one of his pockets, scrolls through it for a moment and holds it out to me. “See for

yourself.”

I’m reluctant to take the phone from him. My heartbeat is like a battle drum in my ears and I’m scared of what I’ll find. My hands don’t stop trembling when I finally oblige and take the phone from him.

There’s no oxygen in the room for me to breath when I see the picture of his men holding Lucas on phone I’ve just taken. “Why...why...” I’m stuttering. I can’t speak through the fear engulfing me, pulling me under a tidal wave of horror.

He has Lucas.

He has my son.

My eyes are wide and they’re wet with the tears I’m fighting back. “Don’t you dare hurt my son!” I try to be strong, but my voice cracks.

Peterson takes his phone from me. “I’m sorry, pretty one. You’re asking for too much.” He pretends to be thinking. “We can negotiate on something else though.”

“What is it you want? I’ll give anything for you to let my son go. Even my life.”

He gaze skewers me, his eyes pausing on my breasts for a minute. “Tempting offer. I’d choose to have a piece of

what my nephews enjoy every night, though fucking can wait.”

Bile rises in my throat, acid so vile I could swear its burning holes in my body.

Disgusting pig!

“It’s Dominic I want, but the son of a whore won’t just walk in to be killed...unless of course, I give him a reason to.”

“What?” My tears disappear as anger siezes me. It’s coursing through my veins, corrupting me down to the marrow of my bones. All my life, I’ve never thought of killing a man as much as I am right now. “You’re dragging my son into all of this just to get to Dominic? Lucas is seven. He’s just a child, you fucking idiot!”

He shrugs. “I’ve never had kids, it’s hard to show any empathy to one. Plus, I hate those whiny little assholes.”

My brain misfires and I lose control of my mouth. “You’re pathetic.”

“Better pathetic than dead, bitch.”

I’m seething. “Dominic won’t let you get away with this.”

“He won’t, because he won’t be getting out of this alive.” He grins at me. “Here’s my offer, come with me and I’ll let your little shit go. I’d rather not have that spawn of yours around me.”

I’ll jump into fire for Lucas. Damn it, I’ll die for my son, but I don’t trust Peterson. “How do I know you’ll really let my son go?”

A groan accompanies the roll of his eyes. “You’re not as smart as I thought you were. I hate kids, would rather not have them around me. Waste anymore of my time and I’ll kill the little bastard and take you with me anyway.”

That’s it!

I don’t think. I just fly to my feet and give in. I’ll take whatever chances I can to save my son, no matter how slim they are. “Where are we going?”

He glowers at me, clearly annoyed with my question. “I ask the questions and give the instructions from now on. Do you fucking understand?”

I swallow. “Yes.”

“There are at least thirty men outside waiting for me. If you make any wrong move or try to raise an alarm, I’ll kill

you and kill your little shit...”

“That won’t be necessary, Federico. I’ll do as you say.”

His brows shoot up his bald hairline. No one has probably called that in so long, I think he’s close to having a heart attack where he sits.

I don’t know where I get the courage to mimic his ugly smirk, but I do. “What’s the problem? You allergic to the sound of your name?”

He stands and inclines, so he’s towering over me. “The only person who’ll be allergic is you when I put a bullet through your fucking mouth.” He gestures for me to move. “Remember my warning.”

Moira is pacing the foyer when we step outside my office. I don’t want to raise any suspicions so I smile at her. “I’ll be back in a bit.” She’s too temperamental and I fear she will do something rash if she finds out what is really going on.

She sucks in a breath. “You’ll be fine, won’t you?”

I nod. “See you, Moira.” I hope she gets the hint and calls Dominic as soon as she can. When Mr. Peterson contacts him, it will be to give him an ultimatum. I want Moira to tell

him first so he has time to calm down and make the right decisions.

He should choose himself and Lucas when that time comes.

The silence in the elevator as it whisks us down to the ground floor envelops me like a mist. It's cold and foreboding.

As my heels clink on the marble floor in the hallway downstairs, I'm reminded of the morning I met David Peterson for the first time. Funny how fast things can change.

A deranged laugh escapes me. It's almost unbelievable the man I'd been so excited to meet is the person who will most likely kill me.

Fleets of black, tinted Mercedes are lined up in the parking lot when we reach it. I can't steady my mind enough to count how many there are, but it's like one of those convoys you see when the King of England is on a trip. He has over thirty bodyguards with him, all of them as stone-faced and heartless as their master.

A bodyguard opens the back door of one of the cars in the middle of the line and Peterson shoves me inside. He rounds the car to climb in with me.

My heart leaps when the engine roars to life beneath me. Rather than cry as panic swallows me belly first, I think of all the good memories I've had with Lucas and Dominic.

Will death really come for me today?

Chapter Twenty

Dominic

“It’s Elena...” Dante says over the phone. He is hesitant to complete the sentence, and my heart sinks further each second he waits. “Federico Romano took her.”

My heart stops and the world spins in slow motion around me. “What do you mean Federico took Elena?” I grind out, my words barely more than a growl. I clench my jaw, my knuckles whitening as I grip the phone to my ear.

“I’m sorry, *Capo*. She left with him, so no one suspected anything.”

“You had one job!” I roar, anger and panic surging in my veins. “All of you had one fucking job and that was to keep my family safe.”

I don’t realize my grip on my phone is extra tight until I hear the screen pop, the broken pieces pooling in my hand and the edges digging into my skin. The device turns off from the damage.

An anguished cry rumbles from my chest and I throw the pieces at the wall across from me so violently, they fly everywhere.

Marcus jumps up from his chair and rushes to me, face marred with concern. “What happened?”

I’m panting, trying to breathe through the anger constricting my lungs.

Marcus’s eyes search mine, then he realizes what has just happened. “They took her, didn’t they?”

“And they will pay for it.” I’d known shit like this would happen and that is the reason I made sure she and Lucas had the best security. Somehow, the sneaky old fart had wormed his way in and has now taken what is mine.

The other families know not to cross me like this. Not after the way I lost my parents. They know I’ll go on a killing spree if anyone harms my kin.

But these fuckers, they’ve bitten off more than they can chew.

“What do we do now?”

I look at my brother. It’s hard to see anything through the rage boiling inside me. Still, I have to be calm. That is the only way I can find Elena. I have to think carefully.

“We have to find her. I don’t care how, but we have to find her as quickly as we can.” *And Lucas?* Fuck. “My son,” I

whisper, dread sucking my breath from my body.

Marcus glances at the watch strapped on his wrist. “He should be home any second now. Vincent went to fetch him.”

“Good. Get the CCTV footage on every route from Elena’s office.”

He nods and claps my shoulder. “We’ll find her.”

We will or we’ll all die trying.

Elena is everything to me. She’s the air that I breathe.

I cannot live in a world where she doesn’t exist.

My brother turns to leave, but I call him back. “Lend me your phone.”

Marcus doesn’t argue. He places his phone in my hand. “Try not to break it. I’ll get the bodyguards ready and find the footage.”

I dial Alexei’s number. It bleeps just once before I hear his aggravating voice through the speaker. “Marcus. It’s a surprise I’m getting a call from you of all people.”

“Did you find the shipment?” I don’t care for pleasantries when the life of the only woman I’ve ever loved is on the line.

“Dominic, it’s only been a day, man.”

My jaw flexes and I bite my lip so hard I taste blood.

“My woman was taken.”

“Oops! By who?”

“Federico fucking Romano.”

There’s a long pause. “We’re allies now. You need my help, just say the word and I’ll do all I can to bring her back.”

I close my eyes for a moment and try not to clench my fist around Marcus’s phone. “Just find the shipment. I’ll tell you if I need your help.”

“Okay, man. Mind if I ask if my father had something to do with your woman going missing?”

“I’m not sure, but God help if he did. There will be no mercy, not for your father and not for my uncle.” I plan to tear whoever dared to lay a hand on Elena, limb from limb until they’re begging for mercy— or death.

“Make it painful. I’d love to see the look on my old man’s face in his final moment, but I have a shipment to find.” He hangs up and I stand in the foyer for minutes with my eyes closed.

“Dad?”

I tear my eyes open and whirl around when I hear Lucas's voice. His eyes are red and swollen as if he's been crying. I drop to my knees and hug him. "What the hell happened, son?"

"I brought you souvenir's," Vincent says as he enters the foyer. Some bodyguards come in with two men who are badly wounded. Both of their mouths are gagged and they're tied up. "Some of Kirill's men were in the school. They tried to take him."

It makes sense now. Federico got Elena to go with him in exchange for Lucas's life. That old fucker tricked her. I know he'd never have let Lucas live. Not when he's my heir.

And it's even more obvious he didn't do any of this shit on his own. He planned all of this with Kirill.

Lucas pulls away, still teary-eyed. "Where's Mom?"

I take my son's hand. It's super small in mine, then I look him straight in the eye. "Some bad guys took your mother, but I promise I'm going to find her and bring her back. Okay?"

"The bad guys said they'll hurt you. I don't want you and Mommy to get hurt."

I chuckle. “No one will hurt me or your mother. Do you trust me?”

He nods.

I pat his head. “Good boy. Take a bath and have your lunch, then do your homework. Me and Mommy will be back before you wake up tomorrow morning.”

He nods again, wiping his tears and he smiles. “Yes, Dad.” Bianca comes in and takes him away.

Once Lucas is no longer in sight, I rise from my crouch and return to beast mode. My anger doubles as I look at the two imbeciles smearing their dirty blood on my marble floor. “Neither of you will leave here alive, and death won’t come easy either.”

They try to say something, but their words are muffled through the tape around their mouth.

“What are you going to do with them?”

I don’t look at Vincent when I answer. “You don’t want to know. Roughing up two men is the most I expect from you, kid. Keep my son safe and your nose out of mafia business like you’ve always wanted.”

Brushing past my brother, I readjust the signet ring on my finger. It's been a while since I had a real showdown with this ring. I prowl to the guys, nod at the bodyguards to force them to their knees, then I slam my fist into each of them, relishing the way their bones crack and their flesh tears after each blow.

By the time I'm done, their bodies are lying on the floor, blood pouring out of them like water down a drain.

"I'm only going to ask once, so think carefully before you answer," I growl, my voice so deep it's barely recognizable. "Where did he take Elena?" I squat in front of them and take one by the collar of his torn suit.

He is barely able to open his eyes, and his whimpers are driving me insane. *Jesus*. I slam my fist in his face a few times until he thuds on the floor like a sack of potatoes, most likely dead.

The bodyguards swing to action and begin to clean the mess I've made, while I move on to the next guy.

This one's shivering, his eyes are swollen, but I see the horror, just like I like it. "Speak."

“I don’t know much,” he mutters. “But I do know the boss will call you tonight. We were supposed to meet them at the warehouse by the port at lower Manhattan tonight.”

“Good boy.” I give praise when it’s due. “I’d like to show you a little mercy, but you called that fucker *boss* in front of me, and like I said, earlier. No mercy.” I raise myself to my feet and hit him with my shoe until his head cracks open.

What a waste.

When I turn away from him, Vincent is behind me, his nose scrunched. “You’re so messy, bro,” he says, clearly disgusted. I don’t see the phone in his hand until he shoves it at me. “Marcus is on the line.”

One of the bodyguards hands me a white hand towel and I wipe the blood off my hands before I take the phone from Vincent. “Got anything for me?”

“Checked the CCTV cameras, looks like they’re headed to lower Manhattan.”

I glance at the puddle of blood on the floor. “Vincent brought home two Russians. Kirill had a hand in this, and one of them said the same thing about meeting at the port.”

“You know it’s you he wants right?”

“I know, and I’m going to give him exactly what he wants.”

Marcus sighs. “It’s a trap. You can’t just walk into it.”

I ignore my brother’s concern. “I’ll get the guns ready. Pick me up in thirty minutes. Dante and the other guys can follow discretely.”

I promised my son I was going to bring his mom home by morning, and I’m going to do just that.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dominic

Dark clouds cover the sky by the time I get to the port. It's freezing cold out here and a heavy breeze whispers hymns of death in my ears as it *whooshes* by.

Marcus is with me, the other men—about ninety of them—will join us in a few minutes. Kirill hadn't tried to temper with any of the CCTV cameras and that can only mean one thing, he was expecting me to come.

He knew I'd fall for his trap.

What he doesn't know though, is that he'll end up being caught up in his own web tonight.

“You ready?”

Marcus nods. “Are you?”

I nod.

We search the warehouses until we find one that is lit. “This must be the one,” Marcus says.

“It is.”

We prowl to the warehouse, but two bodyguards emerge from the darkness just as we're about to enter. I

remove the gun tucked in my holster and it takes only two bullets to bring their lives to an end.

Marcus smiles. “Good shot, brother. You haven’t lost your touch.”

“As if I would,” I retort grimly.

Kirill and Federico are sitting across the entrance when we enter the warehouse, they’re surrounded by bodyguards—about fifty of them, all armed and ready to take down two men.

Pussies!

I scan the room for Elena, but I can’t see her anywhere. “Where the fuck is she?”

“Easy now, boy,” Kirill says, his voice gruff with a thick Russian accent and the arrogance he wears like badly fitted armor. “Try shit with me and the bitch dies.”

My patience is in reserve now. I swear to God no one will leave here alive if Elena has been harmed in any way. “What do you want?”

A wicked smile wrinkles his face. “Give them your weapons. No tricks. The bitch loses a finger with each stupid move you make.”

I remove my guns, all five of them, strapped to my chest, my back pocket and my legs, then I toss them on the floor. Marcus does the same and we raise our hands above our heads as one his men searches us.

When he finishes, he nods to his Kirill. “They’ve got nothing on them.”

Kirill nods again and a piercing pain shoots through my head, bringing me down on one knee. My ears ring and my vision clouds, but I don’t allow myself sink into the darkness clawing at me with cold hands.

I can’t. I have to save Elena first.

“The mighty Dominic Romano,” Kirill says. He walks to me and rounds me, his face crooked with a smile. “You walked to your doom all by yourself and for what? A piece of cunt? Too bad you lost your father so early. You still had much to learn.”

Rage surges inside me, but I’m saving all my strength to attack him when I get the chance.

“You will not speak to my brother like that,” Marcus snarls beside me.

Kirill smiles. “You brothers are nothing but muscle with no brains. Look around you, what do you see?”

“Old men I’d beat to a pulp if it weren’t for the suited fools protecting both of you,” Marcus retorts. Kirill signals one of his bodyguards, the bodyguard steps forward and hits Marcus’s stomach with his gun.

My brother groans beside me, clutching his stomach and smiling. “Is that the best you’ve got?”

“No, actually.” Kirill drives his attention back to me. “But sadly, you’re not the highlight of the show tonight, boy. Your brother is.”

Regaining some of my strength, I push back to my feet. “What do you want from me?”

“Good question.” Kirill holds his hands behind his back, his belly pushing forward. “You dared to challenge me when you returned to New York, claimed the city was going to be yours. One thing you must have forgotten is that this city belongs to me. Not you or your deadass father.”

“Is that why you killed my father?”

He chuckles like a madman. “Your father had what was coming to him. He should’ve known he was making enemies

when he decided to make himself god of New York.”

My jaw clenches, trying to stop the shiver in my voice as I speak, “So you killed him?”

“Is it a problem if I did? You know the drill, boy. It’s the mafia, the weakest are eliminated. Just like you will be soon.”

I’m suffocating with all the anger I’m trying to hold in. Then it breaks through me and I can’t hold back anymore. I lunge at Kirill with a growl, driving my fists into any part of him I can find.

Luckily, my men come in just in time and gunfire erupts. The ring of shots and smell of gun powder in the air fuels my anger even more.

When I’m able to hold myself back, I stop punching Kirill and grab his jaw tightly. “Where is Elena?”

The old man’s laugh is a picture of stupidity and pain. He’s whimpering and making that maniac sound I despise. “Where is she?”

“You’ll never find her. The bitch is probably dead somewhere.” I groan and my slam my fist into his jaw a few more times until I knock the consciousness from him.

“You okay?” Dante asks when I stand up.

“Where’s Federico?” I scan the room. The bastard is gone.

“Shit. Go find her, I’ll take care of things here.”

Marcus joins us. “We lost Federico.”

“We can’t lose him. He has Elena.” There’s a weight on my chest that makes it hard for me to breathe. I’m afraid I’ll lose Elena. “You two remain here, I’ll find her.”

Dante cocks a gun and hands it to me. “I’ll cover you. Go. Now!”

I nod at him then look at my brother. “Don’t get hurt.”

He places a hand on my shoulder. “Make sure you find her.”

I don’t intend to come back unless I do.

Running off, I manage to evade the bullets flying around and run to the back of the warehouse where there’s a second exit. I hear footsteps in the distance and...*Elena’s voice?*

Fuck. I run faster until I can see Federico and his men dragging Elena to a fleet of cars up ahead. “Federico, you

fucking bastard!”

My voice echoes under the pitch-black, starless sky. Some of Federico’s men stop in their tracks and begin to shoot at me. I duck behind a container beside me and shoot back until all five of them are dead.

“Dominic. No!”

Elena’s scream is like poison in my veins, driving me to a slow miserable death. Federico and his men are dragging her a prisoner of war.

I hate it.

I need to save her.

That is all I can think of as I run towards them. I shoot down the other men with Federico as I approach.

When he realizes he won’t be getting out of this alive, he wraps his arm around Elena’s neck and points a gun at me. “Move one bit and this bitch dies.”

I dare a step forward. “And then what? You’re not getting out of here alive.”

He breaks into an eerie manic laugh. “Not if I kill you first.”

Elena whimpers as he tightens his grip on her. “Dominic, please leave. Save yourself,” she pants. Her hazel eyes are filled with tears, her hair disheveled. Her skin is pale, bruised. A stabbing pain shoots through my heart as I look at her.

It’s my fault she’s in this mess.

All of this is my fault.

“Tell me, dear nephew, how does it feel seeing your loved one at my mercy?” He draws back his gun and presses it to her head. “All my life I’ve been nothing but second best. A coward like your father was never supposed to rule the Cosa Nostra. He took what was mine only because he was the first son.”

“Do you hate my father that much? Even in death? He was your brother.”

“I wish he never was and I hate him so much more now that he is dead, and I hate you even more.” There’s a psychotic gleam in his eyes when he looks at me. “I was supposed to be *Capo* after your father died, but you and your brother came and took everything from me. It’s only fair I take something in return.”

My veins pulsate with anger. “You won’t be leaving here with anything tonight. Not even your life.”

He pulls his gun from Elena’s temple and shoots at me. Pain sears through my right arm like a white-hot poker and I stumble backward, my vision swimming with a disoriented haze.

“No! Dominic!”

Elena digs her teeth in Federico’s arm, biting off a chunk of his wrinkly flesh. Federico lets out an anguished cry and loses his grip on her.

“Dominic!” Elena cries as she runs to me.

Federico points his gun at her. His fingers are about to press the trigger when I shoot his hand and the gun falls from it. He staggers backward and groans.

Elena presses my bleeding shoulder with trembling hand. “You’re hurt, Dominic. You’re bleeding.” She’s hyperventilating. “We need to take you to the hospital.”

“Elena.”

She’s not listening. She’s panicking too much to hear anything I’m saying.

“Hey.” I tuck her hair behind her ear and tilt her face to mine. “I’ll be fine. Trust me, I’ve been through a lot worse than a bullet in the shoulder.”

“You can’t die on me, Dominic.”

I smile through the throbbing pain to give her a little comfort. “I told you I’m not an easy man to kill.”

She smiles back. It’s a small, sad smile, but it somehow dulls the pain.

I glance behind her in time to see Federico reach for his gun. I shoot him again and the bullet pierces his back this time.

Staggering to my feet, I walk to him and flip him over with my foot. Then I point my gun at him. “Any last words?”

“You’ll never find the truth about the night your parents died.”

I shoot him twice on the head and he jerks, blood pouring from the hole in his head. There’s vile disgust in his eyes, then it’s gone, leaving behind an empty stare. “That’s for touching what is mine.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Elena

A month has passed since I was kidnapped by David Peterson. Four weeks since Dominic risked his life to save mine. And twenty-eight days since the horrifying night I thought I would lose Dominic.

But like Dominic said, he isn't an easy man to kill.

He is Dominic Romano after all, *Capo* of the Cosa Nostra. He wouldn't go down that easily.

A lot of things have changed, and in a good way.

Dominic doesn't have his bodyguards follow me everywhere like he used to, he trusts I can handle myself just fine now. But then, there's Moira who never leaves my side.

She's afraid I'll get hurt again, and she blames herself for leaving me alone with David Peterson that afternoon in the office.

Marcus isn't as much of an asshole anymore, but he lives off of throwing jabs at me here and there, but it doesn't get to me anymore. Vincent, on the other hand, is such a good uncle to Lucas. He protects Lucas like he is his son.

Some things haven't changed though. Lucas and I still live with Dominic, we decided it was best to stay together until everything was back to normal. I'm not sure things will ever get back to how they were. I still have nightmares from that night, but I know I must shape my reality into what I want it to be.

One more thing that hasn't changed is my love for Dominic. If anything, it's gotten stronger since the attack.

Dominic has been away for a week now. I heard Kirill's first son is now the boss of the Bratva and Dominic has formed an alliance with him. Hence, his need to meet with the rest of the brotherhood in Italy to inform them of the new alliance with the Bratva.

I don't know much about mafia business though.

Dominic decided it's better I don't get too involved with it and I agree with him. My desperation to help him out might just be the death of us.

The house feels too large without him. Too empty. He is all I can think about as I lie in his bed, wearing one of his shirts that still has his smell, and buried in his covers.

I miss him, and it doesn't help I have no idea when he'll return.

A knock on the door catches my attention. It's almost eight p.m. I wonder if it's Lucas, but the knock is too heavy to be his.

"Come in," I say, sitting up and resting against the headboard.

The door opens and Bianca walks in. There's an expression on her face I can't quite read. She seems to be struggling between smiling at me and wearing her usual blank mask.

"What is it?"

She finally makes a choice and the edges of her mouth wrinkle as she smiles. "He's back."

My heart leaps with joy in my throat. "Who?"

"Boss. He's waiting for you..."

She hasn't finished when I jump off the bed, fly down the stairs and run outside. Dominic is leaning against his S.U.V. in front of the entrance. He's wearing a burgundy, three-piece Tom Ford suit and he looks so handsome.

I jump on him, wrap my legs around him and start to pepper him with kisses. “Oh. My. God, I missed you so much.” I’m almost shouting I’m so excited.

He holds me tight, sliding his fingers through my hair and kissing me back.

When we’ve had enough of each other, I wrap my arms around his neck and tip my head back. “I wasn’t expecting you to be back so soon.”

“I missed you. I would have gone crazy if I had to spend another night without you, Elena.”

I narrow my eyes at him. I can’t help the sheepish smile on my lips. “How much did you miss me? On a scale of one to ten?”

He pushes strands of hair from my face. “A hundred.”

“Then you didn’t miss me as much as I missed you,” I joke. “I missed you ten thousand times more.” I bury my face in his neck and breathe him in. He smells so refreshing, like sandalwood and cedar. I think I’m addicted to him. “I’m just happy you’re home.”

He slides his hand up and down my back. “I’m happy to be home, too.”

We hold each other for a while. We don't say much, Dominic and I have gone beyond expressing our feelings with just words.

"There's something I need to show you," he whispers into my ear.

I drop my legs and take a small step back, not taking my hands from his warm body. "What is it?"

He takes my hand in his. "Go get changed. I'll wait for you in the car."

I waltz my way back upstairs and slip on an olive maxi dress, brush my hair and put on a little make-up, then I rush back downstairs.

Dominic holds the passenger door open for me and I get in. He rounds the car and climbs into the driver's seat.

My stomach churns anxiously when the engine comes alive beneath me. It takes all of thirty minutes for us to reach our destination. It's an imposing white mansion that looks like it's been abandoned for a while.

Tall flowers cover the patio and the sculptures of angels lining the driveway are covered with dust.

“Where are we?” I ask when Dominic brings the car to a stop in front of the entrance.

“This place belonged to my parents.” He opens his door, climbs out and comes to open mine, but I’m already out and peering around in awe.

The mansion beckons with an air of unapologetic opulence, from its gilded exterior to what I can glimpse of its lavish interior through dirty windows. It’s breathtaking. Dominic pushes open the front door and ushers me in.

The hallway is lined with roses and candles. I try not to let my thoughts go astray. Dominic wouldn’t propose to me here, in the place his parents died.

“Your parents lived here?”

“They did. My brothers and I grew up here, too.” He pauses and pulls in a deep breath. “We had happy memories here. Lots of them. But after my parents were murdered, those good memories somehow faded from my mind. Whenever I think of this mansion, all I can remember is my parents laying lifelessly on the cold floor, floating in a pool of their own blood.”

My lungs constrict and my heart races. “Dominic...”

“That is the reason I brought you here. I want to get rid of those bad memories.”

My heart is not just racing, it's sprinting. “What do you mean?”

“I want to start afresh, Elena, and I want you by my side as I do so.” He holds my gaze and the world melts away.

God, the effect he has on me.

“I'm such a fool for not realizing this earlier. I'm a bigger idiot for not saying it as soon as I realized it, too. I can't live without you, Elena. I've lost you once and I can't fuck up and lose you a second time.”

My cheeks are hot and I wonder if he's noticed how labored my breaths are. I smile nervously. “That sounds like a love confession, Dominic.”

He leans in, towering over me and his eyes don't leave mine for a second. “It is. I love you, Elena. I loved you seven years ago and my God, I love you even more now.”

Butterflies awaken in my stomach and I'm blushing. “You can't be serious?”

“I am.”

I'm dumbfounded for a minute, trying to process his words.

Dominic loves me.

He just confessed to me that he does.

It feels like a dream.

Fat, happy tears roll down my cheeks, making them even hotter. "I love you too, Dominic," I croak through my tears. "From the moment we met, there has never been a time in my life I didn't love you."

He smiles and the twinkle in his eye draws me in like magnet. "Will you marry me, then?" He puts a hand in his pocket and removes a silver ring with a large diamond stone.

I offer my ring finger without hesitation. "Yes. I'll marry you, Dominic."

He chuckles as he slides the diamond ring on my finger. "It looks beautiful on you," he says. "It was made for you. Just like my heart was." He closes the space between us. "Thank you, Elena. Thank you for teaching me how to love, and for making me the happiest man on earth."

"I love you, Dominic. I'll love you for the rest of my life."

“I’ll love you beyond life and death, Elena. It’s a promise. And you know I never break my promises.”

I smile. “I know.”

Dominic leans in and kisses me.

Epilogue

Dominic

A year later...

Elena and I got married eight months ago in Italy. Our life ever since has been blissful and there's nothing more I could have asked for.

I have the most beautiful wife.

The sweetest son.

A perfect family.

My life is nothing like I imagined it would be, still better than anything I could have dreamed of before we reconnected.

Everything was perfect until Marcus and Dante came knocking on my door this morning. I swear I don't like the look on their faces. "Talk or get the hell out of my house," I order them, furrowing my brows to show them how serious I am.

"Alexei called me. He has traced the missing shipment."

“Oh, good.” I stare at him. “After all this time?” After the war with the Bratva, Alexei had informed me there was no trace of the shipment anywhere.

It was gone like it never existed.

“He traced it back to Victor Valentes. *Capo* of the Camorra,” Dante says. “I think you were right. The Russians were not our only enemies.”

“I’m never wrong.” I’m only wrong when I have an argument with my wife. She’s always right. Always.

“Keep a close eye on the Camorra. Alexei is an ally, but we can only trust ourselves for now.”

“Yes, brother.”

I stand up from the sofa and gesture towards the door. “You may leave now. My wife will be back soon and I’ve got to make her breakfast.” She’d left home so early to go god knows where with Moira.

She didn’t even take a shower first.

Dante offers me a cocky smile. “Married life looks good on you, brother.”

I clap his shoulder. “It would look good on you too if you weren’t so busy fucking different whores every night.”

I'm pushing them to the door now. "See you guys later. Or never."

After I escort Dante and Marcus out of the house, I close the door and make my way to the kitchen, ready to start breakfast for Elena. With Lucas away on a school trip, it's just the two of us in the house, and I appreciate these moments of tranquility.

As I busy myself with making omelets, Elena enters the kitchen with an infectious grin on her face. She wraps her arms around me from behind, her soft cheek pressed against my back. Her voice is laced with excitement as she speaks, "What are you making, husband?"

"Breakfast," I reply, smiling as I feel her warmth against my back. However, curiosity gets the better of me. "Where have you been?"

Elena's response is a playful one. "Guess."

I turn to face her, ready to play along, but my eyes are immediately drawn to her hand gently rubbing her belly. The realization hits me like a bolt of lightning. "Are you pregnant?"

Elena nods, her lips curling into a smile. “We’re having another baby.”

I still. “You mean, Lucas is going to be a big brother?”

“Yes. I’m five weeks pregnant.”

The joy that washes over me is immeasurable, and I can’t help but embrace her tightly, my heart filled with warmth. Tears prickle my eyes. “I can’t believe we’re going to be parents again.”

“Me too,” she says. “Do you think Lucas will be excited he is going to have a little brother or sister?”

“He will. He’ll be the best big brother, because he takes after you.” Lucas is nothing like me. He is kind, caring and sweet. Just like Elena. “Thank you, Elena, for giving me a family. I love you so much.”

Elena looks up at me with those beautiful hazel eyes, her face radiant with joy. “You’ve given me so much, Dominic. A loving family, a life I never dreamed of. You mean everything to me.”

Tears glisten in my eyes, and I lean down to kiss her, savoring the sweetness of the moment. “And you mean

everything to me, Elena. I love you more than words can express.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Celeste Riley crafts romance tales that span multiple genres, showcasing a penchant for dark, intricately-woven love stories. She harbors a soft spot for the anti-hero, championing the notion that even villains deserve a shot at love. Beyond the confines of her writing sanctuary, where she breathes life into characters of her own creation, Celeste immerses herself in literature or cherishes moments with her family and her eclectic ensemble of pets.

Outside of her literary pursuits, Celeste dedicates herself to her role as a veterinarian, caring for animals just as passionately as she crafts her characters.

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