

Gangsters
& Roses
Book 3



SAVAGE ROSES

SIENNE VEGA

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Rubi,

*Thank you for answering every single silly question I ever had
about organized crime. Even if a mafia aficionado like
yourself had no idea you were actually helping me publish my
books. I will always miss you.*

♥Love, Sienne

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content warning - please read!

Hello readers!

We're finally here, book 3 of the Gangsters & Roses series! Every reader, including myself, is unique in terms of tastes, likes/dislikes, and even triggers. With that said, in my opinion, Savage Roses is significantly darker than the previous books in the series. While I can promise you there will be many moments when Salvatore and Delphine show how much they love each other, there will also be many moments where they are pushed to some really dark places, both psychologically and physically.

Please take care! I really do not want to make anyone upset, so if you think the content might be too much for you and need to forego reading this book, no hard feelings at all. Below are more specifics of what could potentially be upsetting so you can make that decision for yourself:

- Graphic sex and violence/gore
- Graphic torture/disfigurement
- Graphic nonconsensual sexual violence
- Graphic depictions of human sex trafficking
- Brief depictions of nonconsensual sexual situations
- Brief depiction of suicide and suicidal ideation
- Brief nonconsensual drug and alcohol-related use

- Brief depiction of domestic violence
- Mentions of child abuse and child SA

This book is not suitable for readers under the age of eighteen.

<3 Sienne

prologue - stefania

...



march 1988

A WOMAN'S WEDDING DAY. The happiest day of her life. The first day of her happily ever after.

So they say.

Everybody leaves out the most important part. It's only a happily ever after if the guy you're spending forever with is the guy you're in love with.

Nobody wants to talk about the *other* kind of wedding day. The worst day of a woman's life. The first day of many to come that'll be hell.

A given when you're marrying the devil.

"You look gorgeous, Stef!" Marsia cries out, coming up from behind. She's taller than even me, which says a lot considering I model. A big smile spreads onto her face as she stares at our reflection in the full-length mirror. With both hands, she gathers my long blonde hair and twists it into different styles. "Just wait 'til we're done with you. Most beautiful bride ever. Hair up or down?"

"Down," I say.

Florina shakes her head from where she stands in the background. "Up. Mr. Mancino requested."

My mouth pulls tight.

Marsia notices and squeezes my shoulders. "It's okay, doll," she says. "You'll still be a ten. It'll show off this long model neck of yours. I'll go check on the dress."

I barely notice her wander off. The air seems to be running short, sucked dry from the room. It becomes a furnace despite the breeze blowing the window curtains and the ceiling fans spinning.

Which makes no sense, but it's how I feel.

No air. No oxygen. Can't breathe.

My skin's feverish and rosy, like I've been baking under the sun.

Today is the day I have always dreamed of.

The positive affirmation echoes in my dazed head. Fake and meaningless and gone within seconds. It doesn't help take my mind off the situation or make it any prettier. It sure as hell doesn't help my lungs breathe.

I stagger over to the credenza where a tray of refreshments and appetizers have been laid out for us girls to nibble on.

Prosecco. Bruschetta. Antipasto. Among other things.

I grab a bottled water and chug. I drink 'til there's nothing left. 'Til the plastic crinkles under my slender fingers.

All the while, halfway across the room, Florina remains quiet. She shifts through a handful of wedding documents, my brains for the day. My brains every day.

Probably stuff like guest lists, seating arrangements, ceremony schedules, and whatever else. Her round face is focused, so I think nothing of it.

...until an envelope slips free and floats to the floor.

My gaze follows it. She scurries to snatch it up, but it's too late. I've set sights on it, and I've seen the name scrawled on the back.

“Flo, what was that?”

“Nothing important. Just mail.”

“Just mail. It didn’t look like ‘just mail.’ Lemme see!”

I lunge for it, and she attempts to beat me to the punch. Long arms come in handy, whereas short and stubby ones don’t. We crash into each other like we’re linebackers playing football. I come out on top, holding up the envelope beyond her reach.

Still unsteady and dizzy, I put space between us by retreating to the open window.

My sharp gasp fills the room and eyes flit up to her. “Flo, you were gonna keep this from me?”

She bows her head, her shoulders slumped. “You shouldn’t read it. Nothing good’s gonna come of it.”

“You’ve got no right hiding my mail!”

“If he finds out—”

“I don’t give a fuck who finds out—you’ve got no right, Flo! This is mine,” I say, my voice swelling with emotion. I blink and suddenly I’ve got tears in my eyes. “I’ve got nothing and you’re taking this too?”

At least she looks ashamed. She has the good sense to mumble an apology before mentioning she’ll give me a moment.

I’m not even listening. I’m spinning. I’m wrapped up in a memory reel of passionate kisses and intimate caresses.

Today is the day anima gemella remembers me.

My heart’s racing. My cheek’s heat up. The good kinda heat. Not the panicky, stifled, I-can’t-breathe heat from earlier.

The envelope's already been cut open. No wonder Florina was hiding it—she probably read it and didn't want me to know.

I'll worry about it later. For now, I take this small slice of happiness and embrace it.

He's written me in his neat cursive:

Solnishko,

I pause and let out a dreamy sigh at my pet name. He always says me and my golden hair reminds him of the dawn. I keep reading.

Solnishko,

I hope this letter finds its way to you. I believe many of the others have not. The decision has been made and there is no turning back, but consider this one last goodbye.

We discovered one another by mistake. I had no intention of becoming besotted by a woman, a daughter born of a rival no less. Yet, I could never resist you, even as I tried to stay away. My forbidden downfall.

Circumstances have always been impossible for us. Though it may dictate the future, it can never change the past.

That will always be ours. Ty vsegda budesh' moim solntsem v zimniy den.'

V.

I'm blubbering by the time I read the last word. A couple tears roll down my cheeks and drop onto the letter, wetting the paper. Being the glutton for punishment I am, I read it again. Then again. And again.

Today is the day I lose the love of my life.

So much for positive affirmations. My heartbroken affirmation vibrates inside my chest as I wipe my swollen eyes and ponder how what's happening is any fair.

Papa needs to marry me off. But only to the right kinda guy. The list is a short one. He vetted, he combed over the options, and eventually selected who he thought was the best fit—his successor to the Crotone family empire.

An arranged marriage. A contractual arrangement for money and power. Love couldn't matter less.

My lungs shake exhaling another breath.

"Addio per sempre, anima gemella," I whisper, hugging the letter to my chest.

I'm so distracted, I don't hear the door creak open or the footsteps padding into the room.

"Solnishko, I hope this letter finds its way to you."

My body freezes, tensing up at the cold, husky voice.

No. It can't be.

I stand still, as if I'll disappear into thin air somehow. I'll sink through the floor. I'll cease to exist completely.

No longer existing sounds better than what I'm about to face.

He read my letter.

“Lucius,” I say, keeping my back to him. “You’re not supposed to see me. It’s... it’s bad luck.”

“I don’t believe in that superstition.”

Click.

He locks the door.

I swallow hard. My hands shake as I try to stay calm. “Marsia and Florina will be coming back with my dress. I have to get ready.”

He ignores my comment, circling back to our last topic. “You know what superstition I *do* believe in?”

“What... Lucius... I don’t...”

“Turn around, Stef.”

With fear infecting my lungs, I do as I’m told. I turn around to face him with the letter clenched in my hand.

“What’s that?” he asks simply, though he knows.

He so clearly knows. It’s in the glint in his beady eyes. It’s in the curl of his fat lips. In his stupid patronizing tone.

He wants to hear it from my mouth.

“A personal letter.”

“A personal letter,” he repeats. He holds out his large, meaty hand. “Bring it here. Share.”

“It’s personal—”

“We’re man and wife, Stef. Do you know what that means? It means no secrets. What’s yours is mine. Bring it here.”

Going anywhere near him feels like approaching a landmine. You never know what you’ll step on and when it’ll

explode.

I suck in a breath, and then on weak knees, I walk it over. “Lucius, it’s from the past. You’ve said it yourself. I had many suitors. A... a lot of guys were interested. That’s all it is. Somebody unable to let go. It’s not a big deal.”

He snatches it out of my grasp so roughly, his hand smacks my hand out of the way. I step back several paces and watch as he unfolds it and scans the contents as if it’s the first time he’s reading it.

Today is the day I’ve been caught red-handed.

His beady eyes shrink meeting mine. “About the superstition I believe in, Stef—it’s bad luck when the whore of a wife can’t keep her legs closed. That tends to not bode well for her *or* the marriage.”

“Lucius, this was before you,” I say with a desperate shake in my voice. I stumble more steps away from him, needing the space. “This was when my father hadn’t chosen my suitor yet. A long time ago.”

“Did you love him?”

“Lucius—”

“When I ask you a question, Stef,” he says coolly, though it’s with an edge of warning, “I expect an answer. Did you love him?”

“Y-yes. B-but—”

“So it was a big deal.”

“What?”

“You said it wasn’t a big deal. Now you say you love him. Which is it?”

“That’s not what I meant. I meant it’s in the past. I...I’ve moved on. I loved him, but that was before my father selected you as my suitor and arranged our marriage.” I’m fidgeting, my eyes wide, nerves fluttering inside me like crazy.

The more I talk, the deeper I dig the hole. But I can’t shut up. He’s glaring at me as if he expects an explanation.

“Are you saying our arranged marriage matters less than the love you had for him?”

“What?! No!”

“Do you think it’s smart, Stef? Doing what you’re doing? Disrespecting me? Is that what you want to do—you really want to try me?”

“Please... I swear that’s not what I was doing. This thing between us—it’s been arranged—that’s all I was saying.”

He shakes his head and neatly folds the letter in half like he’s about to return it. Instead, he rips it down the middle. Those halves get torn up once and then twice until it’s basically confetti he tosses up into the air.

“No!” I scream in horror.

An emotional reaction that only gives him ammo. That only confirms what he already knows.

He smiles. The most evil smile I’ve ever seen. His fat lips twist as far as they can go, baring his teeth, with no touch of warmth or humanity to be found. Just cold cruelty that seems to amuse him.

It sends a chill down my back and disturbs my spirit. It’s not a smile worthy of a normal human being. Nobody with a soul would ever smile like this.

“C’mere, Stef.” He crooks his index finger at me.

I take a step back and shake my head.

“I *said*. C’mere.”

“Lucius, please.”

“C’MERE.”

He charges at me like a bull. The evil smile vanishes. Fury clenches his face into a mask of rage. He raises his meaty hand in the air. I shriek and spin around to run and hide.

I’m not fast enough. His fist grips me by the roots of my hair, and he rips me off my feet. Pain smarts across my scalp as I’m flung halfway across the room like I’m some weightless toy.

Today is the day I realize just what my forever’s gonna look like.

Before I’ve even regained my balance, he’s grabbing me again. He’s got a fistful of my hair as I cry out and beg him to let go.

Lucius yanks on it like it’s a leash, ramming me straight into the vanity table. I crash into it with flailing arms. My head collides with the mirror and all of the beauty products on the countertop spill to the floor.

Those made of glass, like the perfume, shatter.

He steps over them, the tiny, crushed pieces crunching under his feet, and snatches a pair of scissors off the vanity counter.

“P-please,” I sob. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

I don’t even know what I’m apologizing for.

For the letter. For calling our marriage arranged. For loving another man before him.

For wishing it was *anima gemella* I was walking down the aisle to today and not the devil.

Fisting his fingers into my hair, he raises my head high enough so I'm forced to stare at our reflection in the mirror—me, flushed and teary-eyed with blood spots under my nose and him grinning behind me.

“You gonna tell your pop on me?” he taunts. “That’s what you’re thinking, right? Go ahead, Stef. Rat me out to daddy.”

“I wasn’t thinking that... I wasn’t thinking anything—”

“You really want your pop finding out you’re fucking the enemy, *puttana a buon mercato*? How do you think that’ll go over? You realize the kind of shit you’re gonna start between our family and his? Use that pea-sized brain of yours,” he growls, shaking my head with his fistful of my hair. His other hand tightens around the scissors he holds. “What do you think is gonna happen when he finds out his baby girl’s a cheap slut whose been opening her legs and fucking the Kozlov crew?”

“I didn’t—”

“Shut up!” he snaps. He glares at me in the mirror, the hate in his gaze bone-chilling. “You fucking disgust me, Stef. You have no idea how I’m gonna make you pay for this. For trying to *humiliate* me. I can humiliate you too.”

“But that’s not what I was doing!” I’ve sobbed so hard I feel dizzy. Not that he cares.

A moment passes where he stares in the mirror and studies our reflection.

Considers my punishment.

Today is the day I learn he always wins. No matter what.

“How about I carve this pretty face of yours up?” He trails the sharp blade of the scissors along my cheek, my nose, lips, and jaw. “Make you not-so-fucking-pretty so he doesn’t want you anymore? No man will want you. Let’s face it, *puttana*. You’re not too bright. You’re not interesting. That’s all you’ve got going for you—this pretty face and this body. All this fucking blonde hair. *Solnishko*, right?”

He holds up a lock of my hair in one hand and the scissors in the other.

My eyes widen as it dawns on me what he’s about to do.

“PLEASE... DON’T!”

Snip!

I watch for what seems like forever as the lock of my hair falls to the floor.

Over the next minute, dozens of others join it.

Snip! Snip! Snip!

Lock after lock of my long hair floats to the ground as he hacks away. He chops it all off so fast, so eagerly, it’s like he’s getting off on it. He grunts and pants. His hand clamps down on my shoulder and he pins me against the countertop, holding me down. He climbs onto the bench, practically on my back, to reach across my head. I try to cover myself with my arms, but he laughs and restrains those too.

His heavy weight presses into me. I choke, and my vision blurs watching the pile of blonde hair on the floor.

My hair.

Once he’s satisfied, he wrenches me up, and shows me my ugly new makeover.

“How do you like it?” he asks. When I try to turn my head to avoid looking, he jerks it straight again. He digs his nails into my chin, and I can feel it—cold, evil malice from the deepest part of him. It becomes more than a feeling. It’s a *presence*, taking over the room.

Taking over me.

“I asked you a question. How do you like it?”

The woman staring back at me in the mirror is a stranger.

A hideous, puffy-eyed, broken-down stranger.

But that’s what he wanted—the humiliation was the point.

My beautiful hair has gone from almost waist-length, silky, and golden, to an uneven, chopped-up mess that’s both as short as my ear and as long as my chin. I rub my lips together to stifle another cry, trying to bottle up my true horror.

The scissors are still clenched in the fist at his side. A lingering threat that clogs fear in my throat.

“I... I like it,” I whisper.

He kisses my wet, tear-stained cheek. “Good. I like it too. Know why?”

I shake my head, so broken down my voice has left me.

“It’s a whore’s haircut. A reminder of your place. *My whore.*”

Lucius hooks a thick arm around my slender waist and holds me against him. The kinda embrace two lovers would share during an affectionate moment. He’s smiling once more as he brushes his lips near my ear.

I feel sick. Crawling inside my skin at him touching me at all, let alone intimately.

“Don’t fucking try me, Stef. Don’t ever lie to me again.”

Before I can deny his allegation, he presses the sharp point of the scissors into my stomach. I whimper at the surprise of it—not because it’s pierced skin but because the jab catches me off guard.

“Pray that it’s mine,” he snarls into my ear. “Or I will cut it out of you myself.”

He lets the scissors go and they clang hitting the floor.

He steps off me and leaves. The door slams shut and I jump at the loud noise.

I’m on edge and panicked. Dizzy and tearful. Shaky.

Today is the day I decide I need a drink. Or two. Or a lot.

Marsia and Florina scream when they return and find me a mess.

I’m sitting on the floor with the confetti that was once *anima gemella’s* letter and the bottle of Prosecco. They take one look at my chopped-up hair and stagger to chairs before they pass out.

“What... did... you... do...?” Marsia asks. Her eyes fall on the heap of blonde tresses gathered on the floor.

I shrug and take another swig of the Prosecco. I didn’t bother with a glass.

“You’re getting married in two hours! And you chop your hair off?!” Marsia scrubs her hands over her face as if testing whether she’s awake.

Florina seems less panicked about it. In the coming minutes, I find out why. She helps me to my feet, stealing away the bottle from me, and guides me into the bathroom.

“I can fix it. Even it out,” she says, pulling out some sheers from a drawer. “You remember my ma used to be a hairdresser. She taught me some things. I used to cut my little sister’s hair.”

My throat tight and eyes itchy, I nod. I’m drunk and tired and ready to get today over with.

“He was mad?” Florina asks suddenly. A deep frown crosses her face. “That’s what I was worried about. I tried to hide that letter for a reason, Stef.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s over.”

Lucius won. He always wins.



Today is the day I noticed everybody looking at me crazy.

It’s the champagne—and the whiskey I snuck at the hotel bar. It’s helped in some ways, blurred reality so I’m not upset and tearful anymore.

An hour is all it takes.

I’m stumbling, slurring, trying hard to be a blushing bride.

To Florina and Marsia’s credit, they cleaned me up well. Florina turned Lucius’s disastrous ‘whore’s haircut’ into a teased pixie that stops at my ears. It shows off my cheekbones and the veil disguises how short it is anyway.

The dress is the star, accentuating my slender model physique. All lace. All shoulder pads. Very 80s chic.

Too bad I can’t walk in a straight line. I trip and step on the hem of my long gown. Then I giggle.

A couple guests glance my way and mutter amongst themselves.

I'm the problem. Not the devil standing at the altar waiting for me.

I snort and shake my head. “Dumbasses.”

Papa gives a tired sigh when he sees me and my short hair. “Stefania... what did you do now? Your beautiful hair. Is that liquor on your breath?”

The music's playing and it's our cue. He's supposed to walk me down the aisle. My father walking me down to my husband.

Fitting, seeing as Papa arranged this in the first place.

There's a voice inside my head screaming at me to do something. Say something. Yank my arm out of Papa's and run for it. Make my escape.

I already look crazy, stumbling with my hair chopped off. Why not go all the way?

But I chicken out. I'm held captive under Lucius's cold, cruel glare as he watches Papa escort me down the aisle. It's plain on his round, pudgy face—*don't fucking try me, Stef.*

My mouth clamps shut.

Today is the day I make a deal with the devil.

The minister speaks and I ignore every word. I'm swaying, glancing around, unable to focus. My thoughts are scattered and my heart's broken. Hundreds sit in the audience and witness my mess live.

They'll be talking about this for years. Stefania Crotone, daughter of Leandro Crotone, a drunken slob at her own

wedding.

I blink and squint as a familiar face sticks out to me. Standing at the entrance of the banquet hall, a man in a suit as dark as his jet-black hair. His face is expressionless, his jaw clenched and hard, though his gaze tells a different story.

What's left of my heart disintegrates into ash.

Addio per sempre, anima gemella.

My knees wobble and my legs give out. I lose my footing and drop to the floor. On my way down I hit my head and black out.

Today is the day I died of a broken heart.

salvatore

...



present...

WHAT IF LIFE could always be this good?

I glance out at the view before me.

White sands and turquoise waters. Chunks of driftwood lying on the ground, and the occasional seagull swooping by. The dusk sky hanging like a ceiling.

Imagery most would consider the epitome of peace.

But I'm focusing on a different detail—the curly-haired woman stretched out on the lounge chair with a book in her hands. Cotton shorts hug her curvy hips and cut off at the very top of her thighs, showing off caramel skin that's silky to the touch. Her legs bend at the knee, the book she's reading propped up against her thighs.

Sunglasses cover half her beautiful face, but her eyes are on the words on the page. I know this, because I know everything there is to know about Delphine Rose Adams—when her brows knit like they are, it means she's concentrating.

Every so often, she turns a page. Her lips move, silent, but kissable just the same as she mouths the words she's reading.

A sudden strong gust of wind blows some curls into her face, messing up her hair.

I bite back a grin and pretend I'm not spying on her.

Karma hits me a split second later.

Shit!

Smoke thickens in the air. The steaks on the grill need turning. I was so distracted watching Delphine, I forgot I was supposed to turn them over. I grab the tongs and do just that, flipping them onto their other side.

Luckily, I caught it in time. They'll still come out medium rare.

I'm doing that a lot more often these days. Getting lost in the moment. Lost in *Delphine*. In this private escape we've carved out for ourselves.

"Meow."

I glance down. Pepa's stopped next to my ankle, staring up at me like I'm her fucking daddy.

I might as well be.

Salt and Pepa have basically become my pets too. It's gotten to a point where I understand what their little meows and swishes of their tails mean.

Right now, for instance, she's thirsty.

I check on the steaks one last time before jogging inside the beach house. On my way, I can't help myself. I drop a kiss on Delphine's lips.

We're spending another evening dining on the deck. She likes watching the sunset, and I like watching her watch the sunset. It's the last decent weekend Montbec Island will be having before the colder weather comes in.

Before we return to the real world and stop playing house.

That's what this is—playing house. A glimpse at what our future could be like.

The past two weeks have been nothing but Delphine and I enjoying each other. Truly uninterrupted for the first time in our lives.

I'm... *happy*.

It's a foreign feeling that seems like it's not supposed to be mine. Yet, there's no other word to describe this break from reality. No one who knows me would believe it if I told them.

Salvatore Mancino, happy.

I set fresh water bowls out for Salt and Pepa and look up when I sense another presence.

Delphine hovers in the doorway leading onto the deck. She's smiling, an amused glint in her brown, sunlit eyes.

"You should adopt them," she says as I meet her by the door. She slides her hands up my chest and I walk her backward through the doorway, looking over her head at the steaks.

"I'll adopt them the day we get a dog."

Her nose wrinkles. "Don't start something you can't finish, Jon. I will bring a puppy home so fast."

"That's the last thing we need. A race to bring home a puppy. We're too competitive. We'll both wind up bringing one home, trying to be the first."

"So two puppies. I'm not seeing the problem."

"You say that now. Wait 'til they're chewing on the shoes you love so much."

I taste her lips and squeeze her hips, indulging myself for an extra second or two, before forcing myself back to the grill.

It starts drizzling in the coming minutes. The sky darkens a stormier shade and the tide picks up, crashing against the shore. Delphine checks the weather app on her phone and confirms the forecast for the evening has changed—the good weather promised this weekend has migrated. We'll be getting plenty of rain.

Fortunately, we've finished grilling by the time it really comes down.

No big deal.

We move inside. We light candles and the meal becomes that much more intimate. At one point, Delphine slides into my lap, and we enjoy dessert together—strawberries and cream we feed each other and savor. I may get carried away, licking cream off her lips, kissing her deeply, my arms keeping her planted where she is.

She curls her fingers into my shirt and makes all the breathy sounds I love.

Time escapes us in moments like this. It's no surprise when we have the entire evening to do as we wish.

Our stay at the beach house was Delphine's idea. It was coming off a rough year for her, where she'd been raped, targeted by the Belini family and the Neptune Society, blackmailed by an old classmate, and still managed to run a campaign for District Attorney of Northam. In the middle of dealing with these situations, she was trying (and failing) to resist the pull between us.

She learned the hard way. You can't escape the inevitable.

The lesson I learned was similar but different—my infatuation for this woman, which began as a means to destroy a man I hated, had taken on a life of its own.

Try as I might to pretend otherwise, it wasn't merely an obsession anymore. It was love.

I didn't even know I was capable of the feeling 'til I realized I felt that way about her.

Hate, rage, the thirst for revenge, don't leave much room for love.

For more than half my life, I've waited for the chance to exact my revenge against Lucius. The kind of revenge that's more than simply killing him. That would be an ending too lenient for a man like him. He deserves to suffer, to be humiliated, stripped of his ego, and made to know what a pathetic, insignificant sack of shit he is.

For him to feel small. Worthless. Repulsed with even himself.

To such a degree he'd prefer death instead.

After all the things he's done, the ways he tormented me from the moment I was born, it's more than owed.

But I never saw myself surviving. I always figured he'd immediately retaliate, and I'd probably be killed. Something I've never had a problem with, considering life has no real purpose or meaning. I was fine with dying, so long as I went out knowing I got what I wanted and took down Lucius.

Delphine has changed my outlook. Due to no real effort on her part, but more so just being the woman I fell for, and who I'm wanting a future with.

A future that entails things *beyond* my revenge against Lucius. The idea of making it out of our war alive finally feels like it has a purpose... and that's to be with her, and discover what more there is to life than blood and violence. Maybe even traditional milestones I once balked and laughed at.

With Delphine, it's begun to creep into my mind. It wouldn't be so ridiculous, would it? A guy like me becoming those things?

I just have to do this first. Carry out my plan. Get my revenge. Destroy Lucius.

Then I'll have earned what I now see as my reward; I can return to *this*.

After dinner and dessert—and our heavy kissing and petting—we move into the living room. The drizzle's graduated into a full-blown downpour, pounding on the roof and tapping against the beach house's many windows.

I'm sitting on the sofa with a drink in hand, pretending like I'm paying attention to the sports game on TV. Really, I'm watching Delphine play with Salt and Pepa.

She's on the floor between my legs, teasing the pair with a toy mouse on a wand.

They're entranced, chasing after it.

Just as they believe they're about to trap it, she tugs it away. Then the chase starts all over again as they blur into white and gray fluffs of fur. Pepa cinches the victory, pouncing a millisecond ahead of Salt, and entrapping the fake mouse within her paws. The deep purr she lets out makes it that much funnier.

She means business.

Salt trots up, and together they attack with feline vigor.

"There goes another toy," I say.

Delphine smirks. "We'll find his head somewhere when we least expect it."

“I’m telling you. *Saldatos* in a former life.”

A wild crack of thunder cuts me off. In the same moment, lightning flashes, barely masked by the curtains on the window. The rain bears down twice as hard in the seconds to follow. Instead of simple drops, it sounds more like bullets pelting down.

“So much for good weather this weekend,” Delphine sighs, crisscrossing her legs.

I set my drink down and glide my hands along the graceful line of her shoulders. “You want me to turn on the heat?”

“No. It’s just... you know what this means, don’t you?”

“I’m sure you’re about to tell me.”

Her head falls back to look up at me. “If this storm is here to stay, we’ll be stuck inside for who knows how long.”

I grin at the playfulness in her tone and gleaming in her dark eyes. Even her heart-shaped lips look deliciously poutier, like she’s daring me to take advantage.

An opportunity too good to pass up.

“It sounds like we’ll have to find some way to preoccupy ourselves,” I say slowly.

I’m quick lifting Delphine up off the floor. One second she’s sitting cross-legged between my legs. The next, she’s seated in my lap. She shrieks in surprise as it happens, my grip hoisting her up by her underarms and setting her down like she’s in a chair.

The cats scatter. If possible, the fat raindrops beat harder against our beach house. The mood in the air changes. Our chill relaxation vibe changes for something much more heated and passionate.

Delphine turns her head and we meet in a hungry kiss, picking up where we left off during dessert. I lay back on the sofa, perching Delphine on top so that she's straddling me.

It's a good position to be in—an instant turn-on for many different reasons. Her curves arched and pressed against me. So close the addictive notes of her scent linger in the air. The thin layer of clothing separates her pussy from me as she sits on my lower abdomen and gently rocks her hips.

She leans over as though about to resume our kisses. Before her lips can touch mine, she pulls away and denies me with a glint in her eye and a smirk on her face.

Such a fucking tease.

A growl rumbles from my chest, aggressive enough to rival the thunder outside.

I grab the nape of her neck and yank her mouth to mine. Her many zigzag curls fall all around us. She still tastes like the strawberries and cream we had for dessert. I groan and suck her plump bottom lip, hungry to taste more of her.

But it's never enough. The more of her I have, the more of her I want.

Call me the greediest asshole in the world. I don't give a damn. Where Delphine is concerned, I am.

My hands settle on her round ass with my tongue in her mouth. Deep and passionate like she likes, making her skin heat up and her breath run short.

She gyrates against me and does just that—produces breathless moans for my ears only.

The hottest fucking sound in the world. The sound of Delphine Adams turned on, practically panting.

I squeeze her ass cheeks and feel my cock strain against the zipper in my jeans.

We'll definitely keep ourselves preoccupied during this storm.

With the weather only growing worse, there's no use pretending otherwise. We might as well lean into the situation.

"Bedroom," I command. "Now."

Delphine kisses me one last time before leaping off me, like a cat. She's definitely in a playful mood, making the best of the stormy evening.

She stops at the doorway, tugs off her tank top, and then flings it at me. The thin fabric lands on my face. I snatch it off to her smirking at me from over her bare shoulder.

"I'll be waiting!" she calls as she dashes off.

Watching her go, I'm caught between laughter and my impatient hard-on.

First, lockup. Every night I ensure the place is secure. I double, triple, check the locks on the windows and the doors. I verify the alarm system is on. I check in with my security crew that surveils the property so long as we're staying here.

No one but my crew and inner circle know about this vacation.

But you can never be too cautious.

I check the windows in the living room and flip off the light and the TV. In the hall I find a surprise waiting for me—Delphine's tiny cotton shorts. A short chuckle leaves me as I pick them up and continue my security measures.

A gingerbread trail of her clothes.

The imagery of entering the bedroom to a naked Delphine only motivates me to hurry.

Once the first floor is good to go, I start up the staircase and find her panties. Soaked through from all our heavy kissing. A groan vibrates from deep inside my chest. These get stashed in my pocket.

I make it up the rest of the stairs like a man on the hunt.

Outside, the rain shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon. The *pitter-patter* beat echoes into the night.

The master bedroom is at the end of the hall. The light's on. The door hangs open. Knowing her, she's probably lying in bed waiting for me.

I'm walking down the hall when the loudest crash of thunder yet booms, and the ceiling lights flicker.

A second later, the lights go out completely. Everything's plunged into total darkness.

The storm's caused a power outage.

It's unplanned, which leaves no room for control, and plenty of room for error.

"Delphine," I call out, speed-walking the rest of the way down the hall.

The pulse in my veins goes cold when she takes too long to answer. She's supposed to be in our bedroom. Why the fuck wouldn't she answer? Why wouldn't she—

I rush over to the doorway of our bedroom and it's like a nightmare come to life.

No one's inside.

"Delphine?!" I yell, my panic immediate.

I'm spinning back around to launch into a full-scale search when I almost collide with her behind me. She jumps back and drops the laundry basket that's in her grasp. She's wearing one of my shirts, eyes wide and alarmed.

"Jon, what's going on?" she asks. "I realized I didn't have anything to wear to bed, so I was grabbing the laundry out of the dryer when the lights went out."

For a moment, I'm lightheaded, so relieved to see her, I don't answer. I breathe raggedly and scrub a hand over my jaw.

Fuck. I've got to work on that. Not flipping my shit so easily.

Since she was badly injured, almost killed in a recent explosion orchestrated by the Belinis, I've been on edge as far as her safety's concerned.

Grabbing her by the wrist, I wrench her toward me. "Stay with me."

A loud thud sounds from downstairs. Both our heads snap in the direction it comes from, our gazes falling on the staircase, seeking it out despite the heavy shadows.

"What was that?" Delphine whispers.

I draw the Glock I have on me and step forward, with her behind me. "I don't know. But I'm going to find out."

salvatore

. . .



LEASE down the staircase one careful step at a time. Slow and measured as I keep my eyes peeled for anything amiss.

It could be nothing—between the downpour shooting raindrops like bullets and the wind blasting waves across the ocean, it could've been Mother Nature.

As if emphasizing this point, lightning and thunder make themselves known again. For a split second the ground floor illuminates in a flash of white light among the dark and the deep rumble from the thunder tells us there's more to come.

In the few minutes since the power's gone out, my eyes have adjusted to the darkness. A cold chill ices the air now that we're without the central heating. Part of me wants to turn to Delphine and tell her to go upstairs and lock the bedroom door.

Then I remember how, only a minute ago, I was about to flip the fuck out because I assumed she had mysteriously gone missing. It might be better if we stick together. At least 'til I know what the hell is going on.

At the bottom of the stairs, I'm at a crossroads, standing in the middle of the hall. Left leads to the front of the beach

house. Right leads toward the back. I point the flashlight from my phone in either direction, verifying nothing's off.

Probably really is just a power outage.

Though I can't place a call to security or the electric company to confirm. The reception has gone out on my phone, dropping to zero bars.

"Where's the electrical panel in this house?" I ask Delphine, pocketing my phone.

"In the basement."

"Which I get to by?"

"Outside. The cellar doors on the side of the house."

I glance at her from over my shoulder. Even in the dark, she gets what the look means.

"Not the most convenient location, I know. My mom meant to have the house remodeled when she inherited it, but the project never seemed important enough. And you know how often I've bothered coming up here."

We walk down the hall into the kitchen as another burst of lightning flashes and then fades just as quickly. Delphine shadows me, half a step behind.

I peer out the rain-speckled glass portion of the door and locate the sloped hatch in the ground she's talking about. They're almost entirely out of view from where we stand—about a twenty-foot trek in the pouring rain to reach them and make it inside.

Her slender fingers bunch up tightly in the back of my shirt. "Jon, let's just go upstairs. It's probably an island-wide power outage. No use messing with the circuit breaker."

“Stay here. I’m going to be quick. You see me running back, open the door, let me in. I’m about to be soaked.”

I don’t give her a chance to protest.

I wrench the door open and take off, crossing over to the side of the house. I’m soaked through within seconds. The downpour’s bone-chilling, a heavy spray of cold water that feels like a plunge into an ice lake.

It’s only as I’m coming up on the basement doors that I realize I’m not alone.

Delphine’s followed me.

“Phi,” I grit out. “What the fuck are you doing? You were supposed to stay inside.”

Not that I should be surprised—she’s known to do what she wants even when she shouldn’t.

I pry open the doors in the ground and descend the stairs, shining my cell phone’s flashlight into the dark abyss below. “Stay here. I mean it.”

This time she listens. She stays on the top few stairs as I head deeper into the basement and check out the electrical panel.

It’s a waste of time. There’s no blown fuse. The power really is out.

I emerge up the stairs, positioning myself behind Delphine as if I’ll somehow be able to shield her from the rain. It’s no use considering we’re both drenched.

But we run. She darts back inside while I pause quickly to slam shut the sloped basement doors.

Lightning brightens the grayish, purpled sky. It's in the flash that I notice it—sunken into one of the steeper sand dunes on the beach is my security crew's patrol truck.

Both guys on duty have gotten out and are attempting to push the truck out of the wet sand.

Delphine slams the door shut as soon as I cross the threshold into the kitchen.

“So, that settles it,” Delphine mutters, shivering, dripping wet on the spot. “The power really *is* out.”

My hands rest on my waist as I take in a ragged breath and then turn around. My gaze finds hers in the dark, knowing hers is doing the same. Engulfed in shadows or not, her stare carries a feeling. Probably the same she feels in mine.

We might as well be the only two things alive other than the violent storm wreaking havoc outside. The elements flexing their power, proving they're inevitable.

It ignites something inside me. The electrifying bolts spiking in the sky and the boom of thunder awaken a baser element of mine that's just as inevitable.

An intense, ravaging need I've realized will never leave me; it's bigger, stronger than myself, all-consuming once it's set ablaze.

Its own wildfire of hot blood pumping to my cock and heat in my veins.

I want Delphine so fucking much I can't stand it.

I surge forward before she can even process what I'm doing and crush my lips against hers. It's almost funny—in the millisecond leading up to it, even in the dark, I can sense her surprise as she begins to realize what's happening.

The shock lasts another second, just long enough for her small intake of air. Then it fades as I take her parted lips as an invitation. I devour her however I can—sucking on her soft lips, rubbing her tongue with mine, tasting and exploring the sweetness of her mouth.

All while my arms clench around her, trapping her within my hold. She clings to me as tightly, slender fingers bunched in my shirt, and answers me in more breathy intakes of air.

Fuck, she feels so good like this, soft and pliant, pressed up against me.

My earlier erection is back, twice as hard and impatient for release.

We fall into a rhythm like we always do, our kisses passionate and deep.

We're heavy, sopping wet from just those couple minutes in the rain. My denim might as well weigh fifty pounds, which has never given me a better excuse to take it off. It's as my hands grip her thighs and feel bare, smooth flesh that a thought pierces the fog of my arousal.

"Phi, did you run outside with only my shirt on?" I ask between kisses, pushing the long shirt up, letting my hands skim her achingly soft thighs.

"I didn't know," another long, deep kiss cuts her off, "we were going outside."

"Bad girl. I told you to stay."

"That's a command for a dog." She stops to shudder as I move on to teasing her throat. "I didn't want you going to the basement alone."

I pause, drawing back to look her in the eye. It's still too dark to see much beyond the outline of our faces, but I can't help the half grin working at my lips. "How protective of you," I say, gliding my hands up and down her bare thighs. I hook them underneath and hoist her up, earning a squeal out of her as I set her down on the kitchen counter. Resuming my kisses on her neck, I tease her some more. "I could've been in real danger without you."

"Jon," she whines, though there's a sternness to her voice. "You said we should stick together."

"I did say that." I drag my lips down her throat and step between her parted thighs. My fingers find her swollen, wet pussy. A groan leaves me remembering that her panties are in my back pocket. "But I didn't have this in mind, Phi," I scold, rubbing her clit. "You running into the rain in nothing but my shirt."

She's distracted. Her breath shallows and her chest heaves as she draws another in. Her nipples are poking through the wet fabric, stiffened by more than the cold. Yet another sign of how turned on she is.

I slip two fingers inside her tight heat, and it's over—for both of us. Her pussy clenches around my fingers and I groan, so fucking hard I can't even think straight. I can't even stretch this out and coax an extra orgasm or two out of her—not right now, not when I want her so damn badly. My dick throbs threateningly, demanding I find my way into her tight hole fast or I'll be blowing one in my pants.

"Fuck, Phi," I grind out as her slick walls pulsate around me. I snatch my hand away and rush to get my belt undone. "I've got to be inside you right now. You drive me so fucking crazy, did you know that?"

No more than a second later, I'm slamming into her and she's gasping. Her arms and legs come around me and we're off at an immediate, furious pace.

The kitchen fills with grunts and groans and the smacking noises of her skin against mine, backdropped by the deluge of rain outside.

We've forgotten all about the storm.

From my first stroke into Delphine's tight, wet pussy, I can feel my climax building up. The tingle at the base of my spine and the tightness in my balls.

This woman really is my weakness—every fucking thing about her. More than ever in a moment like this.

Wet, wild, wanton.

Her pussy wet and the T-shirt stuck to her body. Her zigzag curls a wild cloud that frames her beautiful face. And her moans that are openly wanton and needy.

Delphine is a bundle of sexual energy as I bounce her on my cock. I go deep, my arms linked around her hips as I wrench her toward me, impaling her. Each time her pussy clenches a little bit tighter. Silky heat that encases my cock from all angles.

Hot fucking velvet that feels so damn good, I'm forced to grit my teeth to maintain control.

If I don't, I'll come right now.

I pride myself on making Delphine come first. Definitely an ego thing that asserts I'm the best lover she's ever had.

But... *fuck!*

I growl and rip her off the kitchen counter. She shrieks and clings to me, arms and legs banded around me, my dick still fully inside her. I shut her up with a deep kiss, walking us through the dark for a new spot... somewhere... anywhere I can fuck her and send her over the edge and fast.

It doesn't help that she continues squeezing me. I retaliate and squeeze her ass cheeks, lifting her off me and setting her down on her feet. I spin her around, smacking her ass as another quick retaliation, and push her down on the sofa. Barely a second's gone by as I return to her heat, sinking even deeper than before.

We cry out together at the depth of this new angle.

Every cell in my body buzzes. Every muscle strains. Every beat of my heart feels like it's about to bust out of my chest, echoing in my ears.

So. Fucking. Good.

Delphine moans, her sopping pussy clenched around me, as she stretches her torso out and rests her head on one of the throw pillows.

No more holding back. I withdraw only to slam back into her. She screams and squeezes and sinks her nails into the cushions.

But I don't stop. Over and over again, I'm stroking into her at a hard and unrelenting pace. I grab her hips and hike them up as high as they'll go. Another shared groan tears from our throats as I drive into her even deeper.

I tangle my fingers in her curls and force her up onto her hands, grinding against her. "You have no right having a pussy this good," I grunt, sweaty and breathless. I slap my large palm to her ass, and she mewls at the sudden sting. "Do you

know how good you feel? Do you know how fucking tight and wet you feel squeezing my cock?”

She’s shaking her head. Shaking her head because she’s so overcome, she can’t answer me.

A beautifully erotic sight before me, even in the shadows of the room—Delphine on her hands and knees, the silhouette of her curves unmistakable as I drill into her body with savage thrusts. Her soft skin slick with perspiration under my fingers, her pussy so gushy and wet, she’s close.

I flip her over and shove her legs far apart, a beat of madness pulsing through me.

She makes me like this. She drives me insane. She has no idea how much she means—twelve damn years I waited, watched, wanted her.

Not once over those twelve fucking years did I ever stop wanting her.

Only her.

Delphine’s whole body arches as I bury my face in her pussy. She melts in my mouth. Her sweet, wet pussy quivers as my tongue flicks and teases, and I suck on her clit and finish her off. Within seconds, she’s coming.

“Jon... oh... OH!” she cries. She sounds like she’s in pain, but it’s really the pinnacle of pleasure—pleasure so intense it’s almost painful.

I’m desperate to join her. She’s still coming when I’m positioning myself between her thighs and slipping inside. I cover her body with mine and take her lips in another passionate kiss. With no patience left, my strokes gather speed and power immediately. I fuck her until my climax takes over, and I finally let go.

I come with a deep grunt and spasmodic jerks of my hips. Seconds of endless, spine-tingling, dick-twitching, muscle-relaxing pleasure that leaves me almost drunk. I'm unable to move beyond settling behind Delphine. I wrap my arms around her and pull her tighter against me on the limited space of the sofa cushions.

It's only once the aftereffects of our orgasms wear off that I remember the storm—the rain's still bucketing down and the wind's still whistling and blowing shit over.

I tighten my arms around her. "This has been a strange night."

She nods. "Hopefully the power comes back on soon. We should head up. I have candles we can light."

"Phi," I say, grabbing her elbow as she moves to get up. "About earlier. You reminding me what I said about us sticking together. I teased the hell out of you. But I did mean it."

I don't know why I'm telling her this. It just seems... important.

In the past, Delphine's been frustrated by my lack of transparency about my feelings. I'm not a feelings guy and probably won't ever be, but one thing that's important is that she always knows where we stand. Where she stands.

She softens. "I know you meant it."

"Nothing will ever take you away from me again. Not even you." Even though she can't see me, I smirk at her and run my hand along the arc of her neck. "We're a team, Phi. Okay?"

"Always," she whispers. "Always, Jon. I love you."

I kiss her, almost too heatedly, or else risk starting up another round of sex. “Go head up. Light the candles. Start a shower for us. I’m going to do one last check and make sure everything’s good. Then I’ll be up.”

Delphine disappears upstairs. I move through the first floor and verify the doors and windows are locked, collecting our discarded clothes, and pause at the kitchen door to peer out the glass. The security team has managed to make progress on the truck—it’s only partially stuck in the sand dune now.

I shake my head and turn away. I probably won’t sleep well tonight. Only because this situation with the power still feels unpredictable. Paranoid? Maybe.

But in my line of work, you have to be. Particularly when staring down the final stretch of a war with your father, *the* Father of the Family. One of the most powerful crime lords in the country.

I have every reason to be paranoid. Yet, as I start up the stairs to join Delphine, I’ve never felt more confident. I meant what I told her—we’re a team.

Nothing’s taking her away from me again. That alone will motivate me to win.



We have sex again in the bathroom. It starts as we’re getting ready for our shower and ends with us dizzy from hard orgasms slamming into us. It’s half past two in the morning by the time we’re settling down for good, buried under the warmth of our comforter.

Though the storm's let up slightly, the rain hasn't stopped altogether. The power hasn't returned.

Delphine yawns, her drowsiness a distinct mood in the air. "We'll have to come back during a better season. When it's not so... wet."

"Wet's not so bad."

"As we found out tonight."

I can practically feel the sleepy smile on her face as I stroke my hand along her spine and hold her close. Her voice carries that dreamy lilt that's a telltale sign she's moments away from drifting off. While she's on the verge of sleep, I couldn't be more awake.

"We'll come back," I say, more so to the dark than her. "Maybe in the summer."

"Really?"

"Yeah... with our new puppy."

"Jon," she snorts, burying her face in the crook of my arm. "I'm being serious."

"I am too. You said you wanted to start our future together."

She shifts in my arms, enough so she can tip her head back for a glance up at me. "But is that what *you* want?"

"I want you... and I love you. Any future I have is going to be with you."

"Am I dreaming?"

"You could be. I can't imagine it either—me being certain things."

Her soft lips press into the side of my neck. "Like what?"

“You know what,” I answer. My skin warms. It fucking *warms*, like I’m an embarrassed child. “Can you honestly say you see me as those things?”

“Jon.”

“Phi, can you?”

She breathes softly at my side, a sigh that feathers my bare chest. “I think you’d be an amazing husband and father, if that’s what you’re asking.”

My stomach flips. “You... *what?*”

Delphine sits up, keeping the comforter crowded around her shoulders as she folds her legs and sits facing me. Although I still can’t see more than the outline of her in the dark, I know she’s staring at me as intently as I am her.

“I think you will be an amazing husband and father,” she repeats in a matter-of-fact tone.

“You’re being serious.”

“I wouldn’t be in a relationship with you if I didn’t think you had the qualities I’m looking for.”

“But what about—”

“The Mafia,” she says, pulling the comforter tighter around her shoulders. “It’s your profession. You—*the man you are*—I think would be great. You’ve looked out for me for half of my life. Even when you didn’t have to. When most people would’ve given up and walked away. You’re the most loyal and devoted person I’ve ever met, Jon. You make me feel safe and understood. You’ve been there so many times when I needed you most... when I was in a really dark place.”

She snuffles and I can hear the pain in her voice. The same tone she’s taken on most recently when discovering Ernest’s

betrayal.

“Phi, I didn’t bring this up to make you upset. C’mere.” I reach out for her, pulling her and the comforter back down over me. There’s a lump in my throat and a surrealness about the moment. It doesn’t feel real—like we’ve already fallen asleep and I’m dreaming. My arm hooks around her and I hold her flush against me. “I hate families. All families. But especially mine. It seems wrong imagining otherwise.”

“But this would be ours. The family you and I make together. Our family.”

Our family.

The two short words reverberate in my head as I kiss Delphine’s brow and absentmindedly mutter something about her being correct.

It’s true—how has this never occurred to me? Our family. Of course, it would be completely different.

Everything with Delphine is.

The nightmare that was my childhood wouldn’t apply. I would never let it, and neither would she. She would be an incredible wife and mother, like she is incredible at everything she does, and she believes in me...

I think you will be an amazing husband and father.

She had sounded so sure.

Delphine’s maybe the smartest person I’ve ever known. If she could say this with so much certainty...

I drift off with these thoughts, fading into sleep to the feel of her warm, slack body against mine and the sound of rain tapping on the window. Both the light, sweet scent of her skin

and the leftover notes from the candles we burned hang in the air.

The dark surrounds us like a cloak we can't take off.

I should be more relaxed than I am, but even slipping away, my guard isn't all the way down.

Some find comfort in the dark. I'm not one of those people.

Something I have never told anyone.

Not even Delphine.

Maybe the one phobia of mine.

I don't like the dark. I bear it when forced to in certain circumstances. But once again, it's the unpredictability, the suffocating unknown that makes me... unsettled.

When I was a boy, Lucius used to lock me inside a closet for hours. Pitch-black. Tight and confined. It was sometimes worse than the other forms of torture he put me through. Something psychologically unnerving about sitting in the dark with no end in sight. It fucked with me.

I jerk awake as if I've only had my eyes closed for a second. When I glance at the time, I discover it's been almost two hours. Delphine hasn't moved and the dark has gone nowhere. The rain trickles in at a steady pace.

Lazy calm. After-hours stillness. All is right with the world.

My lids droop, ready to slip close.

...until I notice the man standing at the foot of our bed.

A large, intrusive, shapeless shadow of a man looming over us.

Somebody that could be Lucius.

My heart slams against my chest as I snap upright and go for my gun in the nightstand.

In another blink, he's gone.

Just the blank space remains. The shadows of the room.

A sleepy figment of my overactive imagination. I scrub a hand over my face and husk out a rough breath.

"You okay?" Delphine murmurs, barely lucid. She's curled like a cat, a lump under the covers.

"Yes," I answer tensely. "I'm fine."

But I'm not fine. Not anymore. I'm on edge.

I settle beside her and glare out at the dark, resenting how this strange night seems to keep stealing our peace away from us.



Fists pound on our door early in the morning. I'm taking a piss. Delphine's downstairs with the cats, brewing coffee and making breakfast. The storm ended, though it's left the island soaked in puddles and wet sand.

My first thought is security, but they know better than to beat on my door like they're my boss and not the other way around. If they're that stupid, they can expect a swift introduction to my incredibly sharp and deadly knife collection.

"Who the fuck is it?" I growl, storming from the bathroom. My feet pound against the stairs as the fists pound at the door.

Delphine emerges from the other end of the hall with a kitchen towel in hand. “I’m not sure. I’d answer, but...” She gestures to the state of undress she’s in.

“Better it’s me anyway. I can shoot them in the face.”

A dark joke that’s not a joke. I’m serious.

Whoever the hell it is, better have a damn good reason for banging on our door like this...

I wrench it open, a stone-cold scowl on my face, shirtless in my sweatpants.

It’s not my security team. It’s not even an enemy, like somebody from Lucius’s crew or the Belinis, who I’d feel comfortable stabbing in the throat.

“Salvatore Mancino,” says the uniformed police officer. “We have a warrant for your arrest. Put your hands behind your back. You’re coming with us.”

delphine

. . .



“MAY I ASK FOR WHAT?” Salvatore asks in a mock polite tone. “I’ve been a law-abiding citizen my whole life. Never so much as littered on a public street.”

The uniformed police officers share eye rolls.

“Whatever you say, pal. You’re coming with us.”

I’m rushing down the hall, knotting my robe at the waist to cover up the fact I’m only half dressed, in a tank and panties. “What’s going on here? I’m Delphine Adams, Salvatore Mancino’s attorney.”

The officers ignore me, forming a wall around Salvatore. One stands at his back, twisting his arms behind him and slapping handcuffs on his wrists. The other speeds through his Miranda rights.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law,” he recites listlessly. “You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you?”

“I’m his attorney!” I shout, squeezing my way through.

A move that turns out to be a mistake—the officer reading Salvatore his Miranda rights takes it as a threat, and shoves me

against the wall with a vice-like grip on my shoulder.

“Get your fucking hand off her!” Salvatore roars, in an instant ready to fight off the officers. He bucks against the one cuffing him and takes him down to the ground with an over-the-back toss.

The officer who’s shoved me, draws his firearm. “Stop where you are, Mancino, or I’ll pull the trigger!”

It takes another second for me to process how everything’s escalated so quickly. A minute ago, I was in the kitchen feeding Salt and Pepa their kibble. My expression sharpens at the sheer audacity. I step away from the wall and put myself between the officer with his gun drawn and a handcuffed, rage-infused Salvatore.

My anger may not be a razing firestorm like his, but I *will* shut this mess down right now.

“Officer, put your firearm away,” I say calmly. “I am Salvatore Mancino’s attorney. You will present me the signed warrant stating why my client is under arrest. I believe my client already asked, though he was ignored.”

“Your client,” he spits, “just assaulted a police officer by knocking him on his ass.”

“You will also overlook this little... *misunderstanding*,” I speak over him. I glance down at the winded officer lying on the ground before meeting his glare with a withering one of my own. “You have not only illegally entered *my* home of residence to detain a third party—that’s right, this house you’ve tracked wet sand into is *mine*—but you have unlawfully put your hands on me.”

His brows push together, and he slowly lowers his gun. “I... well... we didn’t...”

I step closer, closing the gap between us. My gaze dips to his badge. “Officer Yancy, is it? Badge number 304578. Former Assistant District Attorney, Delphine Adams. I am quite cordial with Montbec Island’s DA, Victor Sumney. I would be happy to place a call informing him that his police officers are accosting law-abiding citizens in their private domiciles. I would also be thrilled to tie up your station—I believe you have about eight hundred officers assigned—with so much litigation, your island will be paying court costs for *decades* to come. Your choice. Decide quickly. I haven’t had my coffee this morning, so my patience is fairly nonexistent.”

His upper lip curls in pure bitterness. I’ve just made myself a new enemy.

Good.

I’ll gladly be his enemy if he’s arresting Salvatore. I’ll crush him any way I can. Both inside and outside the courtroom.

He blows out a reluctant sigh and holsters his gun. “Get up, Lovitz. Stop floundering on the floor like a damn wet fish on dry land.”

I snatch the arrest warrant out of his hand and speed read through the text typed out on the page.

Murder two. Ralph Mirra.

My expression remains neutral as I fold the warrant signed by a magistrate not from Montbec, but from Northam—immediately, I know what’s going on, and who’s behind this.

He’s fucking with us. He knows we’re here. It was only a matter of time once he won the election.

Yancy’s watching and waiting for a reaction out of me, likely expecting an emotional one. When I don’t give it to him,

he shifts to provocation.

“Your client is in hot water, so you might want to put some real clothes on, *ADA*.” His gaze rakes over me like the asshole he so clearly is.

“You’re right, officer. I will need a moment to put proper clothes on. So will my client.”

“No fucking way! This clown circus is already out of hand. He’s coming with us right now. You can catch up.”

“Do I have to remind you of the protocol that’s been broken? You called your partner a floundering fish, but it seems like you’re the one with a memory as poor as a goldfish. Excuse me, we’ll be down in five minutes. Changed. Mr. Mancino.”

Salvatore’s glare scalds with hot rage. He spares neither of them, glaring hatefully at Lovitz as the clumsy officer staggers to his feet, and then at Yancy on passing.

It’s an energy that thickens in the air like a toxic fume—Salvatore’s bloodlust that has him tempted to crush both officers ’til they’re a pile of bones.

He would, if at all possible.

I know him better than anyone, which makes me confident enough to say these are the thoughts running through his dark mind.

He’s listened for now, going along with me taking the lead as his lawyer, but he’s never done well with authority.

The second we’re inside the bedroom and I’m certain we’re out of earshot, I rip off my robe and tank top, rushing to the closet.

“Don’t speak to them,” I say. “Don’t say a word from here on out, Jon. Let me do the talking.”

He doesn’t answer, his anger still an intense presence. Jaw clenched and muscles taut, he yanks open a drawer and pulls a T-shirt over his head.

“I’m going to get you off. This is a bogus ploy to intimidate you and get to me. My father’s behind this.”

“I never would’ve guessed,” Salvatore snaps suddenly. “Your father, the good man you blindly trusted for how long, has a hard-on for targeting me! Absolute fucking shocker, Phi!”

“Shhhh, lower your voice! No arguing. No outbursts. No explosions of your temper. Not right now. Just... for once... let me handle this. My father has no idea what he’s started.”

And it’s true—I’m livid, shaking as I snatch the only dress that could work in a professional setting off a hanger. When packing for our mini vacation I wasn’t thinking about work attire.

We’re supposed to be spending a lazy morning with the cats, sipping coffee. Instead, we’re being accosted by the police, sicced on us by my vindictive, vengeful father.

As if he hasn’t hurt me enough.

I’d break down in tears from the pain of it if I weren’t so fucking *pissed*.

My father once told me I’m the only person he knows who’s more ambitious than he is, who’s cleverer and sharper. He’s about to find out the truth to his words.

I will happily take him down myself.

“C’mon,” I say once in my heels, striding to the door.
“We’ll be home by dinner.”



I keep my promise—Salvatore and I make it home by dinner time. It’s no easy feat considering the situation, but they didn’t have enough to hold him. We presented an alibi for the night in question, and after sitting through two hours of questioning, it became clear the case being built was flimsy at best.

For now.

They cited crucial information provided by a credible informant as their probable cause.

However, with no direct evidence or anything else tying him to Mirra’s murder beyond a brief encounter at a shopping mall last year, the officers had no leg to stand on. They had to release Salvatore.

An arrest warrant shouldn’t have been signed in the first place. Something I made explicitly clear as we left the Montbec Island station, and I promised to follow up on once we returned to Northam.

Why Montbec was even handling the arrest when the case was being investigated by Polk and Northam PD gave me a splitting headache. Officer Yancy claimed it was because Salvatore was cited as a flight risk, particularly since he’s been out of town for almost two weeks.

But the real reason is plain as day—my father’s toying with us. I bet he’s having a brandy, sitting in his office, with his Northam Society club ring on, laughing over how he’s ruined the last day of my vacation with Salvatore.

Thanks to him, we spent it holed up in a stuffy police station the size of a garden shed, reeking of dank earth and fertilizer like one too.

Once home in the beach house, I kick off my heels and kneel to greet the cats. The poor things have been left home all alone for the day; we left in such a rush I didn't have a chance to replenish their water.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, scratching under their chins. "We're home now."

Salvatore followed my instructions from start to finish. He's barely said a word the entire afternoon. He remained completely silent throughout the questioning at the station, allowing me to provide answers to their questions. Though if looks could kill, he would've murdered every police officer within a five-mile radius.

As I stand up, I'm prepared to face more of his sullen mood, only to be pulled into his arms. My heart flutters at how fast I'm jostled, and what I find myself on the receiving end of—Salvatore's unblinking, oceanic blue-green eyes peering at me.

An intensity in his gaze so overwhelming, it elicits a shock of electricity down my spine.

Just like that, I'm swept up in him. I'm under his spell, my lips parting, my skin warm.

"Thank you," he says, his arms low along my hips. "Sorry I snapped at you earlier. It's not your fault your father did what he did. I was pissed they'd shown up like that."

"It isn't over just yet. It's an open investigation and you're their primary suspect. This means we'll have to be very careful. You can't be anywhere near anything linking you to

Mirra or Belini—are there any loose ends that have been left hanging?” I ask, my brain buzzing. At the same time, I’m dizzy from his closeness and his effect on me, feeling breathless desire rising up inside me as Salvatore tightens his hold on my hips. “Mirra was receiving payments from Volchok. Very interesting that that’s the murder my father has decided to pin on you—”

“Phi,” he interrupts, kissing my mouth. “Calm down. You can stop strategizing right now. We’re home. It’s been a long day. Our last day... like this.”

Our last day away...

My lips quirk in a smile. “Remember that whole thing about me being obsessed with my career? Still sort of a thing once I get going.”

“Hard to miss at the station. You’re so fucking sexy when you’re in lawyer mode,” he groans between kisses along my jaw and throat. “You had every officer at that station tripping over their words. You made them look stupid, and they knew it.”

His lips return to mine for another indulgent kiss. My pulse races and a moan hums in my throat. “They deserved it,” I mutter when we part. “They shouldn’t have come after you.”

“True. But,” he says, gripping my chin, forcing my dizzy gaze to his, “don’t ever get between me and a gun again. Understand?”

“Don’t antagonize the police on my behalf. Jon, the situation could’ve escalated in a way that went against our favor.”

“We’re not an ideal couple. I’m a Mafia guy. A criminal to them.”

“And I’m a Black woman,” I finish. “Wealthier and more educated than both of them put together, yet they easily ignored me until I asserted myself... which they then punished me for. That’s exactly my point. You assaulted a police officer.”

“After one assaulted you. That’s *my* point. I’m never going to stand by and let anybody—I don’t give a fuck if it’s the police, someone in the Mafia, some bozo off the street, or the fucking President himself—put their hands on you and get away with it. They fuck with you, they fuck with me.”

He shuts me up with more hot, passionate, open-mouth kisses before I can protest.

It works—for the most part.

Salvatore means every word he says, but he forgets the inverse is true too. Anyone who fucks with him is *also* fucking with me.

In the back of my mind, as he strips me of my clothes and hauls me off for a shower, I’m thinking about the investigation into Ralph Mirra’s murder. I’m piecing together how I’ll handle him being targeted as the prime suspect and how I’ll get him off.

I’m making plans for how to deal with my father.

We’re a team.

We’ll get through this together.



Dad is a man of routine. He likes structure. He likes boundaries. Many of my idiosyncrasies come from him. Monday mornings, he arrives an hour early to the office for a

jumpstart on the workweek. He owns twenty-six ties he rotates in the exact same order each time, rain or shine—the only exception being his three Christmas ties he slips into the rotation around the holiday season. Every morning he drinks exactly one cup of medium roast coffee, and every evening when logging off his computer, he clears out his sent folder in his inbox.

In the afternoons once he returns from lunch, he charges his phone, leaving it at his desk while he attends the hour-long staff meeting, receiving briefings on different issues around the city.

Today is no different.

The lights in his office are off and his desk chair is positioned at the center of his desk as he left it when he returns. He walks in with a whistle on his lips, flicking on the light switch, and carrying a leather folder of reports from the meeting at his side.

I wait until he's a couple footsteps away from his desk before greeting him.

“Hello, Dad.”

He flinches, causing the folder to tumble out of his large hand and skid to the floor. The papers scatter everywhere.

“Delphine! Just what do you think you're doing here!?”

“I needed to speak to you.”

“How did you get into my office? It was locked.”

“That's not important.”

Dad's jaw tenses up, his stare darkening. “It's plenty important, Delphine. Don't you dare think for one second you can turn up in my office after weeks of giving me the cold

shoulder and behave like this—I never allowed my daughter to be a rude, insufferable little brat before, and I won't now."

The insult barely registers. Likely because I'm growing used to the hurt he causes. I'm much more tuned into my anger, much more focused on the goal I'll accomplish by the end of our meeting.

I sit poised on the sectional in his office, giving him no reaction thus zero pleasure from earning a rise out of me. "I don't have time to waste on you, so I'll be brief."

He scoffs with a disbelieving shake of his head. "That's rich. My own daughter."

"I'm not your daughter. I don't want to be your daughter."

"You had no problem being my daughter when you were taking advantage of my connections. Of my money and legacy. Everything you have, *I* gave you!"

My skin flushes hot, my anger rising. I keep my mask on, ironically enough, like he spent so many years teaching me. "You'll never have me under your thumb again. Any act of revenge against Salvatore won't end like you think it will. I'll never speak to you again. You'll never have to worry about me 'taking advantage' as your daughter again. You can even forget I exist. All I ask for is the same courtesy. Leave me—leave *us*—alone."

Dad spends a dumbfounded moment stuck in the middle of the room. My best guess is he's thinking of what best works in his favor; should he push more of my buttons or slip into his old manipulation tactics?

He smooths a hand down his pinstriped tie and then bends to swipe his folder off the floor. "I never thought I'd see the

day when my little girl would tell me to pretend she doesn't exist."

A twinge of pain aches inside my chest. I shut it out, holding strong. He won't get to me. I won't let him.

"Do we have a deal?" I ask.

"Delphi..." he sighs. "He's playing you for a fool. Why can't you see it? Why do you refuse to see him for who he really is?"

Aaaanndddd he's made his pick—the oldie but goodie known as manipulation. So many times in the past, I fell for it.

When I say nothing, he takes a step toward me, his brow furrowing. "I can tell you things about his family that will make your skin crawl. He's using you."

"Do we have a deal? If we don't, then I'm afraid you're going to regret it."

He releases a confused laugh. "Do you hear yourself? You're even starting to sound like him, issuing mob-like threats. He only wants you to get to me. That's not love. If you weren't my daughter, he wouldn't give a damn about you. Deep down, you know it."

"I guess we don't. Goodbye, Dad." I get up to go, but he steps in my way to block me. His heavy hands fall on my shoulders, gripping them.

"You hate me. I realize I hurt you by keeping things from you. But don't you understand, I would've told you if I thought it would benefit you? I was *protecting* you. That's all I've ever done, Delphi. Protect you, Leontine, and Marcel. You might not understand how, but believe me when I say, it's always been a priority," he explains, his eyes sad. "I can't

protect you when you're running into the arms of the man who will hurt you."

He's really starting to piss me off—and that's saying something considering I was *already* pissed.

Dad has always told me Salvatore was bad for me. He's always hammered home the point that Salvatore will use me and break my heart. In the past there have been times where it seemed what he said was true.

I know better now.

...yet the concerned bend of his mouth and seeming sincerity in his tone unnerve me.

They make me, even as in love as I am with Salvatore, second guess if there's something I'm still possibly missing. If I can't trust Salvatore, then there's no one alive I can trust.

I'm all alone.

But... he's lying. HE'S LYING.

I blink, breaking his almost trance-inducing stare, and tug myself from his hold on my shoulders. "Don't touch me. If you won't leave us alone... if you proceed with this investigation, then I will come for you myself. I will destroy you and your legacy myself. Your own daughter."

His lips twist cruelly. The fatherly concern vanishes from his face. "But I thought you weren't my daughter anymore."

"You're right. I'm too good to be. Good day, Mayor Adams." I step around him and move toward the door.

"Your mother would weep in her grave if she knew how you turned out."

“She’s already weeping... because her husband got her killed and then proceeded to fuck his mistress in her home.”

Emotion swells in my tone as I say it, but it feels justified as I leave his office in a flurry of fast footsteps. How dare he try to guilt trip me about Mom when he’s the one who caused her death? How dare he call me a brat and insinuate I took advantage of his connections when he groomed me from birth to follow in his footsteps?

Everything I did was to make him proud, make *him happy*.

He said Salvatore is using me. He’ll hurt me.

But I’m not sure anyone has ever hurt me like Dad has. It’s so unspeakably personal, so deeply entrenched—rooted in the very essence of me, my inner child in some way. I had looked to him for protection from the time I was a baby girl, and now...

As I ride the elevator down to the ground floor in city hall it feels like I’ve done nothing but torture myself visiting him. I’ve torn open a wound that I’d told myself was healing. My eyes close and I lean against the elevator wall, easing slow breaths in and out of my lungs.

It’s okay... you’re going to be okay... you don’t need him...

The reason I had to do this—I had to subject myself to this type of pain dealing with Dad all over again—pings from the inside of my purse.

He’s calling her.

I dig out my phone to confirm. A wide smile comes to my face when I do.

Dad may believe my purpose in stopping by his office was to ask him to leave Salvatore and I alone, but he’d be wrong.

My real objective was access to his phone. The phone he charges after lunch. The phone he leaves unattended on his desk for the hour-long staff meeting in the afternoon.

His phone is now tethered to my phone. Not only with the tracking app I've used so many times in the past, but with another spy app I had Stitches help me configure. This one to monitor his calls, emails, and texts.

As I exit the elevator and stroll across the lobby of city hall, Dad places a call to his favorite mistress. He has no clue I'm listening in from several floors below.

"Hello? Ernest?" Lena says in her thick Russian accent.

"We need to meet," he says. "Are you available tomorrow night? Let's say, seven o' clock at Luxe?"

I smirk and answer before Lena does.

I'll be there.

salvatore

. . .



I HIT the ground running when we return to Northam. Summer has long been over. Lucius is back and we've entered the final stretch of our war. The gathering with the Five Families is around the corner, and I'm so close to exacting the revenge I've lived my life for I can taste it.

Delphine talked me into a two-week interlude, where we escaped to Montbec Island, and pretended the rest of the world ceased to exist.

But there's no more time left to waste. Either Lucius is going to remain undefeated, or I'm going to do what nobody else has ever done before—I'm going to humiliate him to the point of no return.

Then I'm going to take everything he has, emerging as the victor.

My first big goal upon returning to Northam can best be described as *misdirection*. As in, I want Lucius to believe I'm doing one thing when I'm really doing another. I'm no fool; he's got eyes on me, both inside and outside the family.

No one can be trusted beyond my inner circle. Even the supposedly neutral parties on the street are being paid off to feed info his way.

So I set it up to make it look like I'm following a certain lead for the second half of the VHS tape. We long ago discovered it was a dead end, but I'm fairly confident Lucius doesn't know that.

The second he thinks I've got a lead on the second half, is the second he'll send his hound dogs sniffing after my fake trail. Meanwhile, I'm really searching for something else I've decided might lead me to part two of that video tape.

Stefania's missing cell phone and photo albums.

Both disappeared when she died. Florina claimed they practically poofed into thin air without a trace. As if a fucking photo album stuffed with a hundred polaroids suddenly grows legs and strolls off into the sunset.

Somebody who was around the Mancino estate the day of her death took them—and *Lucius* ordered that mystery person to do so. Nobody can convince me differently.

The question is, what piece of the puzzle could he want to stash away while also not realizing it could lead to the very thing he fears me getting my hands on?

My new theory came about in the weeks following Stefania's death. The more I thought about the drunken voice messages she'd left me and the surprise visit to Nirvana she'd made, I realized she wasn't even speaking to me half the time—she was too fucking belligerently drunk to recognize she was speaking to the wrong person.

“Why won't anybody forgive me?!” she wails, covering her face with her hands. Her long crimson nails dig into her artificially tanned skin. “It's not like I... hic... had a say... hic... in anything! I never meant to betray you. I'm so, so sorry, anima gemella.”

I'd been confused why Stefania was slurring and stammering, calling me her fucking *soulmate*. Telling me she'd had no choice in some matter. Apologizing for some sort of betrayal.

Then, it hit me. The worst night of Lucius's life was the culmination of a power struggle between him and Leandro—one years in the making—after Lucius had allegedly pulled some underhanded tricks to weasel his way into not only my grandfather's good graces, but winning Stefania's hand in marriage.

Whatever shady shit he'd pulled had been found out by Leandro.

Hence what set into motion the worst night of Lucius's life. The night I intend on exposing to the entire criminal world soon.

But I've never given it thought as to *who* could've tipped off Leandro; just who was it that could've betrayed Lucius and caused what happened to him?

It provides a level of clarity that leaves me seeing my whole life in a new light. Lucius has always detested Stefania and me. He's hated our guts. The very air we breathe.

...because his own wife betrayed him.

Something in those photos, something in her phone, has to be a clue.

So while Lucius is sending his hound dogs to pursue my fake lead, I'm putting feelers out for my real one. I've had Stitches working with our computer guy to hack into the camera system at the Mancino estate in hopes they can recover the footage from the night of Stefania's passing.

I've begun drafting up plans to scope out each of Lucius's other properties; if he were going to hide Stefania's belongings, it's possible he did so by blending it in with others at a different estate (assuming he didn't have it destroyed).

At my behest, Fabio and Arturo even pay a visit to her longtime shrink. They use some interesting intimidation methods trying to get him to spill on things she told him. He does, but none of it proves useful.

The only downside about pulling off such a deceptive plan is you become more paranoid. Any moment Lucius might realize I've been leading him astray; he might catch on or prove he's actually one step ahead.

Our war can escalate into physical violence... its inevitable conclusion.

Every start of a car. Every step down a public street. Every night as I survey the crowds in Nirvana, it's on my mind.

Waiting for his move.

The many possible scenarios crowd my mind, my newest fixation. At all hours my body buzzes with energy. Sleep eludes me. Rest escapes me no matter how hard I try.

How can I lay my head down when anything can happen at any moment?

The gym becomes my refuge. There's one located on the third floor of my compound, equipped with the bare necessities like a weight and cardio room. The contractors that remodeled the building constructed a sparring room at my request, complete with punching bags, a built-in ring, cushioned flooring, and other state-of-the-art features.

Any given night at three or four a.m., I'm there, sweating bullets, pummeling the shit out of a punching bag, pretending

it's Lucius's pudgy, bloated face.

He'd never fight me man to man. Not these days. Not now that he no longer towers over me, and can't squash me like a bug.

That's when I was a boy.

Fear flashed in his eyes the one time I demonstrated how the tables had turned in my favor. I could easily physically dominate him.

I'd snapped—I'd showed my hand in a way I didn't normally, after he'd sent his men to my loft and destroyed everything I owned. I slammed him against the wall and choked him out. For once, Lucius wondered if he *was actually* losing control.

My fist collides with the punching bag, sending it flying back on its chain. If I had my way, it would come down to me tearing him apart with my bare hands. Once I've humiliated him and taken away his power, I'd delight in the chance to rip him apart.

The sweetest kill.

Blood splatters onto the punching bag as I throw out a few combination hits. My knuckles have split open, but I don't give a shit. Technically, a bag as heavy and granular as this, you're supposed to at least use wraps. But the burning pain feels too good.

As always, a reminder I'm alive.

I draw back my bloody fist, ready to pound the bag some more. Someone steps behind me, their movement so stealthy and silent it's not a sound I hear but a presence I sense. My adrenaline pumping and heart racing, I spin around and grab

them by the arm, about to execute a maneuver that'll have them flipped on their ass.

Then I freeze. My breath stalls in my lungs. My viselike grip releases and I feel like I'm the one who's been knocked on my ass.

Delphine's staring wide-eyed and terrified back at me, in her hair scarf and robe. She must've woken up and noticed I wasn't in bed and come looking for me...

"Phi, don't ever sneak up on me like that," I croak, feeling out of sync with my own body. I'd come so close to reacting in a way that would've been very bad the second I discovered it was her. "What are you doing down here?"

"I can ask you the same thing. It's a quarter past three..."

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Your knuckles. They're bleeding."

"Aren't they always?"

"Jon, what's wrong?" She steps toward me and takes hold of my left hand anyway. Her soft touch chases away the burn from the skin splitting open. She runs her fingers along the bruising with her brows knitted as if she's a doctor at the ER. "I'll grab the first aid kit."

"They're fine. Phi—"

Before she can rush off, it's me who holds onto her. I don't let her release my hand. I intertwine our fingers and reel her toward me, pulling her up against me. I'm sweaty and panting from my workout, but now that she's here, I don't want her to go.

"You're scaring me. Your... breathing is off. More than from your workout. Your heart is beating like crazy." She

places her hand on my chest and stares up at me with worry swimming in her brown eyes, framed by the delicateness of her lashes.

So beautiful.

Not the first time I've been thrown by her beauty. But I take the moment to appreciate it, filling up her face with my hands and touching my forehead to hers.

"I have a lot on my mind," I say.

"Tell me. I'm here."

Delphine leans in and presses her lips to mine in a tender kiss. She doesn't pull away. Her hands wander, skimming over my chest, up my shoulders, and tracing my jawline. Gentle reassurance she's here, she's mine.

I welcome the soft touches, curling her hand within my own. "You should be sleeping."

"The bed's empty without you. We go back together. Boxing at three a.m. isn't really a thing."

"That punching bag is my father's face."

Understanding dawns in her eyes and she strokes a thumb along the clench of my bearded jaw. "You're going to win. I'm going to help you."

"You're not involved."

"Of course I'm involved. I love you and we're in this together. Remember what you said? If someone fucks with you, then they fuck with me too—"

"That's not how I meant it, Phi. This isn't your fight."

"But I want to fight with you," she says, pressing her lips to mine. "By your side."

“It’s not your place.”

“If you think I’m going to let you deal with this alone, you don’t know me as well as you think you do. When have I ever stood by when someone was fighting against evil? And your father *is* evil.”

“Which is why you won’t be involved.”

“Wouldn’t you rather me be involved under your supervision than me be involved behind your back?”

Leave it to Delphine to be clever enough to use this argument to twist the situation in her favor.

“Phi... you aren’t trying to rationalize your involvement.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing—and I think I’m doing a damn good job. Risk mitigation, Jon. If I do so with your knowledge, you’re aware of my involvement. It’s a controlled situation, something an obsessive like you prefers. If I do so behind your back, it’s an uncontrolled situation, and I could be up to anything. Don’t you hate it when I sneak off against your wishes?”

“How about you don’t sneak off *and* you don’t get involved? That sounds like the best solution.”

“I was a defenseless lamb once before. I wound up attacked in an alley, unable to even put up a fight. I never want to be that weak again. Let me be involved. I’m a fast learner. I’m a good shot. I took out six men on my own—”

“And Skip Little had you on the ground, almost about to kill you.”

“I almost beat him. I *would’ve* beaten him. I’m not weak.”

“I never said you were. All the shit you’ve been through over the last year—it would’ve broken most people, but not

you. I just want to keep you away from it, okay?" I say, releasing a rough sigh.

"That's not possible, Jon. We have to be realistic. I'm your girlfriend... which means I'm a part of this too."

Deep down, as much as I hate admitting it, she's right. By mere virtue of our relationship and her importance in my life, she's involved in this fight against Lucius.

Though I intend on minimizing her role to the fullest extent.

"We'll compromise," I say. "I'll teach you more things. More maneuvers, more moves. We'll keep practicing at the range too. Maybe I'll even keep you in the loop on some of my plans. But you're not directly involved, Phi. I mean it when I say to stay out of it."

She nods. "I just don't want you to bear this alone."

Bending my head so that our brows touch, I drop a peck on her lips. "I'm not alone. You're mine."

"So let me in. Every time you can't sleep, I'm here. Tell me all the things on your mind so you don't have to come here and bust your knuckles open."

"I'll try." I step back and admire the blood on my hands. "Where's that first aid kit?"

Relief flickers across Delphine's face before she disappears to grab it. I let her clean up my busted knuckles and wrap them up, and though we sit in silence as she works, I have to admit it's soothing. Her caring, gentle touch and her presence.

When she's done, she grabs me by the hand and leads me back up to bed.

I let her, grateful she knew what I needed even when I didn't, like only Phi would.



“We’re leading ’em in circles,” Stitches laughs, busting through the doors to my office. “We’re leading ’em every which way and they’ve got no fucking clue! Psycho, it’s the most fun I’ve had since the time I burned down my home ec teacher’s classroom junior year of high school!”

I’m reclining at my desk, sipping on some whiskey and mapping out my next moves. “Don’t let me find out you’re a pyromaniac. That’s on top of everything else, like the feet stuff.”

“So I’ve also got a fetish for women’s feet! Is that a crime?”

“It would be if I had any say about it.”

“Good thing it wasn’t your credit card being charged for those Cyber Fan pics,” Stitches huffs, nudging his wire-framed glasses higher up his skinny nose. “Anyway, me and Bernie just got back from leading on your pop’s crew—they thought they’re slick tailing us, like we had no idea. But we really did! They’ve got no clue we’re really playing them! I like this game of misdirection, Psycho.”

I’m calm taking another sip of my whiskey. “You need a better poker face.”

“They told me the same thing in med school. I kept making faces when giving prognoses. I can’t help it if you having some flesh-eating virus is real fucked up, you know? How am I supposed to pretend that it’s not? Wouldn’t you

rather have a doc who kept it real with you? But, noooo, they were yammering on about professionalism. Yada, yada, yada.”

“Tell me more about yours and Bernie’s trip. You led his men all the way out to Cedonia?”

If I don’t steer Stitches back on topic he’ll ramble forever. He’s the type to annoy a kidnapper so much if he were ever captured, he’d be returned.

“They sure did,” he answers with an excited gleam. “Followed us the whole way. We made a show about searching for it. Tore up the place. Pretended like we thought Leandro really would’ve stuck it there. It’s not so far-fetched—it used to be one of his getaways way back when.”

“Good enough for today. But I’m not convinced he’s convinced. Lucius is no fool.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“It’s been too quiet. He’s up to something.” I rise out of my chair and walk around to the front of my desk, leaning against the ledge. “We’re in the final hours and he’s content letting me conduct full searches for it? He’s not going to make any moves?”

Stitches strokes his knobby chin. “He could be playing the long con. Lulling you into a false sense of security before he strikes.”

“Possibly.”

“You think it’s something else?”

“I think a guy who snatched Leandro Crotone’s family out from under him’s capable of anything.”

The light in Stitches’ face goes out. His features tighten up, a grizzled look he doesn’t normally carry. “In that case,”

he says more soberly, “it might be useful to put our ears back on the streets. See if we hear anything else about what he might be plotting.”

He leaves on that note. I finish my whiskey, considering the possibility I’m being paranoid. Maybe Lucius really is fooled—he really believes I’m tracking the second half of the tape to Leandro’s old getaway and that I don’t have anything else up my sleeve.

That’s the thing about paranoia, rarely does it have an ending once it’s given a beginning.

My phone twitches on the desk, alerting me to an incoming call... from a number I don’t recognize. The area code belongs to South Valley.

My eyes narrow into slits.

Few people have my personal number. Only my inner circle.

I snatch the phone up and let ragged, heavy breathing answer for me.

“Salvatore Mancino,” says the voice on the other end. Female. Older. Though unfamiliar. “I have something you want.”

The muscles in my jaw pull tighter as I grit my teeth. “Which is?”

“You know what it is. They went missing when she died, and I have them. Meet me tomorrow at the city wharf. Seven in the morning. Bring no one.”

She hangs up without waiting for my answer. As if she knows my curiosity will win out and I’ll show up regardless.

Whoever the fuck she is, she's right—if she's in possession of Stefania's cell phone and those photo albums, I want them.

I'll do anything to get my hands on them.

delphine

. . .



THERE'S something darkly amusing about spying on my father after finding out he spent most of my life spying on every intimate, private moment of mine. I have complete access to his calls, texts, even his emails. I can track every place he goes (so long as he brings his cell with him, which he does, everywhere).

Some would say it's wrong. It's a complete invasion of his privacy and betrayal of his trust. Those people would be right. I just don't give a damn.

The respect for privacy and care for maintaining trust went out the window the second he tricked me into wearing a necklace with a hidden camera inside. As far as I'm concerned, Dad deserves a taste of his own medicine.

What I call perfect karmic irony.

The spy is now spied on. The tracker now tracked.

I scroll through the app, rummaging through his text messages for anything interesting. In a few minutes I'll make my way to Luxe, where he's slated to meet Lena for drinks. They haven't been in contact since scheduling their meeting.

As far as I can tell, most of their digital footprints are making arrangements to meet in person.

The definite sign of two people up to something. But the question is, what could it possibly be?

Mom passed away years ago. Dad is a widower. *Technically*, he could date Lena out in the open. There's no reason for them to sneak around, other than perhaps the optics of the situation. Perception is everything to Dad, but it's not as though Lena's a slouch—she's a professor at Northam University.

When ripples of his affair spread to the public, the identity of the mystery woman was never revealed. In hindsight, likely due to a favor Dad worked with the media to ensure that was the case.

They could conceivably date out in the open.

The possibility nothing romantic is happening between them disturbs me more. If Lena's father is Volchok and Volchok orchestrated my rape, then that means Dad had to have played a role. Just like Mom's murder. Has he been selling us out? Trading us in for favors with his disgusting friends in the Society?

I'm so lost in thought I don't realize it's time to go. I leap up from where I sit with Salt and Pepa on the sofa and rush off. Oscar insists on driving me.

“Miss ADA, you okay going in by yourself?” he asks.

But I'm already rushing out the back door, hiding myself among a flurry of other working professionals.

Luxe on any night feels like a hive of bumblebees buzzing around with no end in sight. The crystals from the chandeliers sparkle, and the expensive drinks flow to match the high energy, one big never-ending loop of overindulgence.

Nobody cares. Everyone's too busy networking. Listening long enough for their turn to talk.

I used to be one of these people—when I wasn't locked away in my office, working late into the night on an upcoming trial.

I take care to position myself in a discreet corner, far out of sight from where Dad and Lena will be meeting.

Lena's waiting on him. She's by the bar, stirring the little straw in her cocktail. Every so often she tosses an uncertain glance over her shoulder, presumably checking if he's arrived yet. She runs a hand through her short, white-blonde hair when she does, smoothing down strands that are already flat and thin against her scalp.

This isn't a woman confident the man she's seeing will show. This isn't a woman whose been romantically involved with a man for years and feels comfortable with her standing in his life.

Quite the opposite.

The more I learn about this situation between Dad and Lena, the more confusing it becomes.

Dad arrives with the exasperated air of a man forced to participate in a menial chore. He garners several looks as he moves through the posh lounge, including the brightening eyes of several young female professionals who'd love nothing more than a fling with the mayor himself. He ignores the fanfare, even bypassing Lena.

I shrink in my seat and angle my body so I'm out of their sight.

It occurs to me at the same time it does Lena—he's moving to a private room. One of three available at Luxe.

They're almost always empty, reserved only for the most prestigious VIPs. As Mayor, Dad qualifies.

Lena follows. So does a member of the staff. The door swings shut.

I sit up straighter, breathing out in relief. This works better in my favor. While I won't be able to watch them like I would've if they sat at the bar, I'll still be able to listen. Only now it'll be without worrying about either of them chancing a glance in my direction.

Volume turned up on the app, I listen live as Dad and Lena order drinks. They wait until the staff member exits the room before breaking into real conversation.

"You are late again, Ernest," Lena scolds in her thick accent. "Do you think it is amusing to leave me waiting?"

"I'm a busy man. You know that."

"This was at your request. You are not the only one who has a busy life."

"It's fair to say our lives are very, *very* different, Lena."

There's a condescending edge to his tone that makes me cringe. It leaves me wishing I could see their expressions, read their body language as they share this exchange.

A beat of tense silence passes and then—

"What is this about?" Lena snaps.

"We have to speed things up. It's not working out the way we envisioned."

"No."

"Lena, there's no time—"

"The last time we took a risk, it did not end well."

“I’ve been patient. I’m tired of waiting.”

“I said no. It is not possible. It is too soon.”

“You’ve always known it would come down to this!” Dad snarls, followed by the thud of what sounds like a fist against the table.

Lena gasps and mutters something about him spilling some of her drink. My brows are knitted and I’m leaning so closely to my phone that I’m sure it appears like I’ve put my head down to passersby.

The next few words spoken are drowned out by the door opening and the waitstaff checking if they need anything. Dad answers for them with a curt dismal.

From my end, I see the young woman emerge from the private room with embarrassed rosy cheeks and a tight expression. So service workers don’t appreciate Dad’s treatment either. Has he always been this way and I’ve been this blind?

Lena speaks and draws my attention back to their secret meetup.

“I will not have a part in it,” she says.

“You know the deal already, Lena. You don’t have a choice. You agreed a very long time ago to do this. You’re involved whether you like it or not. I expect you to be there.”

“I do not wish to be there.”

“Friday night, Lena,” Dad says in a cool tone that brings gooseflesh to my skin. “The Clubhouse. Festivities begin at ten. Wear your mask.”

The rustling noise of movement follows. Dad gets up and leaves the private room, effectively ending his meeting with

Lena. He emerges on the main floor of Luxe a second later, back to ignoring the dozens of others in the lounge. Everyone else is a commoner as he strides through in his finely tailored power suit, with the confidence level of a king rolling off him.

King of the city.

He certainly carries himself like he is.

As the mayor of the city, he basically is.

If only he knew just feet away, his daughter was listening in on every word he spoke.

Lena doesn't come out for another minute. Her exit is more discreet, similar to a mouse fleeing the kitchen late at night.

Their conversation could've been about anything, though they're no lovebirds. It seems Dad could've been telling the truth about that—he and Lena weren't romantically involved. They seem to be allied somehow, yet adversarial at the same time. Lena had no interest in attending Friday night's event, but Dad forced her hand.

The event he said was at a clubhouse.

The clubhouse that has to be the Neptune Society's. One of their elite parties.

I'd watched Mom doll herself up for them many times as a girl, unaware of what was truly going on.

My mind goes to only one place hearing the news.

If there's a secret Neptune Society party Friday night, it means my attacker will be in attendance.

The best opportunity I've had to find him and finally make him pay. I can't pass this chance up; I have to find a way to

attend.

Salvatore won't like the idea that I'm going. I could lie and pretend I'm somewhere else, but we're at a place beyond that in our relationship. I'll tell him the truth with the catch being that I'm attending regardless of his approval.

I finish my cocktail and slide out of my booth at Luxe. The tracker app on my phone shows me Dad's headed back to his office. Another late night at work. Whatever agenda he has, I'll figure it out, and if he's responsible for what was done to me, I can't promise he'll be spared...

salvatore

. . .



SEVEN A.M. SHARP at the Northam wharf. I play by the rules. I show up on time. Even come by myself.

Rank fish stinks up the space no matter where you go, its stench frozen in the cold morning air. Nobody else seems to notice—the fishermen and deliverymen go on about their morning like they’re smelling fucking roses and not some foul stench bad enough to churn your stomach. I’d rather hang around a pile of dead, decaying bodies than this.

At least they’re interesting to look at. This is just depressing and boring.

Ships and shipping containers. Guys with beer bellies and beanies. Murky waters and morning wind. I could be speeding around the downtown streets on my bike, not standing around the docks watching some couriers offload foreign furniture.

The mystery lady who claims to have what I want has five more minutes before I’m gone—and I do everything in my power to track her down anyway and make her pay for standing me up like a fool.

Somebody clears their throat from behind. It’s not one of the fishermen or delivery guys because theirs sounds a lot

more like hacking up a lung and a lot less civilized. I turn around to find myself facing a woman I've never seen before.

She keeps her distance, layered in a long, woolly coat and shawl that's draped over her head, partially disguising her face.

"Seguimi."

With a swish of her long coat, she's scrambling away. I'm trailing a couple steps behind. She disappears between two giant shipping containers, then makes another left. It's the beginning of a little game—quick steps and hard turns as she takes me down a maze of containers that fan farther out from the docks.

I have no fucking clue where we're going. For all I know, this lady could be leading me into a trap of some kind.

She could work for Lucius or some other enemy of mine.

This could be the worst mistake of my life. Yet I walk faster, staying behind her.

She leads me down another narrow passage that eventually opens up to a gravelly lot with more containers spaced out more generously.

"Rimani dove sei."

"Is there a reason you're speaking to me in Italian?"

The woman runs several paces ahead before she slows down. The shawl's slipped halfway down her head, revealing straw-like copper hair with touches of gray. It's also now that she's stopped moving that I've realized how tall she is—maybe only an inch or two shorter than I am.

Who is this lady?

“Well?” I ask when she says nothing. “Make this quick. I hope you weren’t bluffing. That would be a grave mistake on your part.”

She puffs, trying to catch her breath from all the scurrying she did, though the corner of her lip twitches. “*Parli Italiano?*”

“No... not really. Look, lady, what the fuck do you want?” I snap, losing the last shred of my patience. I stick my hands in my motorcycle jacket, a deep scowl on my face. “Either get to it, or I’m out and you’ll be sorry for wasting my fucking morning.”

“You have his temper.” She clicks her tongue and shakes her head. “But first, some reassurance. Promise there’ll be no payback for having this. You won’t be angry and get revenge for taking it.”

“Give back what you took. And I won’t bring you any harm. Whoever you are.”

She regards me with her heavy, scrutinizing brow as if I must pass some secret judgment test I had no idea I was taking in the first place. Then she turns away and disappears into a shipping container.

A few seconds later, she emerges clutching Stefania’s missing photo albums, walking them to me like they’re fragile heirlooms made of glass.

“There are many photos in here that should be of interest to you,” she says vaguely.

“And her cell phone?”

“In his summer home. He demanded it be brought to him firsthand. But there is a contact in there that should be of interest—one who will have the other half of what you’re looking for.”

“How do you know?”

She holds her hands up as if she’s wiped her hands of the situation and takes a step back.

But I’m not done yet. I grab her by the wrist, my hold tight and aggressive.

“I asked you a question,” I growl. “How do you know and who the hell are you?”

“Let go!”

“Give me one reason why I should trust you?”

“Stop!”

“Tell me why I shouldn’t blast you now that I’ve got her photo albums back. How do I know you’re not setting me up?”

The woman panics, twisting and pushing against my ironclad hold, but I’m not releasing her anytime soon—I’m intimidating her ’til she’s scared enough to give me some real answers as to what the fuck is going on.

My grip tightens around her wrist, hard enough to bruise, and she winces.

“Salvatore!”

It’s another voice. Another woman’s. Older too.

But this one, unlike the tall woman’s, is familiar.

Still with my unbreakable hold clamped tight on the tall woman’s wrist, I whip around, and face the other person to join us.

“You put her up to this,” I yell at Florina. “You have ten seconds to explain or you’ll both be swimming with the fishes at the docks.”

“Salvatore Jonathan Mancino, you wouldn’t dare!” Color rises to Florina’s chubby cheeks, and though she’s trying to sound stern, there’s a waver in her voice.

“Try me, Florina. Explain. Now.”

I let go of the tall woman, shoving her toward Florina. With gangly limbs and zero coordination, she stumbles right into her. Both older women wobble like bowling pins for half a second ’til they straighten themselves out. Standing side by side, they look ridiculous—Florina short and squat, rosy-cheeked and raven-haired, and the tall chick with broom-like hair and her heavy wool coat.

They both glare at me, like I’ve betrayed *them* somehow. Bet they’re regretting ever meeting up with me.

Oh well. I want answers.

“Maybe I wasn’t clear enough,” I say. “Now means... *now.*”

Florina’s bottom lip pokes out. “Mister Lucius demanded I take the photo album and cell phone.”

“Yeah, sorta figured that out from the start. What’s he hiding?”

“Those photos... are from before they married.”

I stare at them. “So?”

“They’re important,” the tall woman answers. “They’re all she had left.”

“Stop speaking in fucking riddles.”

“Your father won your mother’s hand. But she didn’t want him. He wasn’t her first choice.”

“Not her first choice?” The tall woman scoffs with a skeptical lift of her heavy brow. “Or her second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth—”

“Shhh, Marsia—”

“Marsia,” I repeat. “That name’s familiar. Marsia Grebano? You’re Fabio’s mother?”

She gives a hesitant nod, tugging her shawl tighter about her shoulders.

My gaze skims over the long length of her. “I guess that explains the height.”

“We grew up together. Stefania, Marsia, and myself. But he can never know we provided you this, Salvatore,” Florina says in a hushed tone. She throws a paranoid glance over her shoulder. “Please, he can never know.”

“What were you saying about the contact in the phone?”

“Stef had it saved under...” Florina stops again for another glance around. “*Solnishko.*”

“*Solnishko?* What the fuck is *Solnishko?* What language is that?”

“Shhhh! No more. We have to go. We’ve been gone too long. Come, Flo.” Marsia hooks her arm with Florina’s and scurries off with hardly a goodbye.

I’m not convinced what’s gone on is as transparent as it seems. Florina’s never given me reason to doubt her character, but ultimately, Lucius signs her paychecks. He’s her employer and her loyalty could very well lie with him.

Though the two were close and she’s seemed upset since Stefania’s passing, there’s no telling what her true motives are.

Still, the photo album is an asset. So is the knowledge about Stefania's cell phone.

There's just one problem: if it's at Lucius's summer home, then that means I'll have to find a way to infiltrate the premises in order to access it and find the contact she claims can point me in the right direction.

Solnishko.



The day speeds by. I'm locked into more work. Another deceptive scheme I'm cooking up to test Lucius as I pursue my latest lead thanks to Florina, and more business operations at the club. The evening rolls around with some light drizzle as I'm riding my bike to the compound and entering the loft.

Delphine's waiting on me.

I shuck my leather jacket off and toss my keys on the kitchen counter.

I know this Delphine—sitting by the spot near the window, her tablet in her lap as she pretends to read but really spends her time overthinking, nibbling on her bottom lip. She wants to talk.

I'll help her out by kicking things off.

“Busy day?”

“You can say that.”

“Dinner?”

“Not hungry,” she says.

I can't help the grin that starts curving at my lips. Delphine's such a creature of habit I can practically predict her

responses before she says them. As I move through the loft, cutting over from the space by the door into the living room, she watches me. Her brows are drawn close, her eyes a dark, pensive abyss as she analyzes the thousand and one scenarios she's considered in her head.

Whatever it is that's on her mind, she's already thought about it enough for the both of us. Now she's simply deciding how she wants to tell me about it.

I drop onto the couch with a relieved sigh, my body language open and relaxed. Then I glance over at her, my expression the same.

What? Something on your mind?

We communicate well enough without words that she understands the look. She takes me up on my cue and seizes the chance.

"You're not going to like this," she starts.

I pause, letting a second go by. "If that's how you're opening... it must be pretty bad."

"I'm being honest," she says, raising her chin defiantly. "Because I could've gone behind your back and done it without you knowing. But I want you to know. I want your support in this... or at least for you to know it's important to me."

"Phi, what is it you're talking about?" I sit up, no longer in the mood to relax and recline.

She moves over to the sofa and joins me on the cushion next to mine. She's styled her curls away from her face, in one of those giant puffs at the back of her head, which I like, because it allows me to see every feature, every birthmark.

Her whole beautiful face.

As she takes her seat, she folds her hands in her lap, a determined air about her. It's then I notice she's holding her iPhone with an email open on her screen.

I take the hint and ease the phone out of her hand so I can read what it says.

It's an invitation—Ernest Adams' invitation to a 'soiree' hosted by the Neptune Society.

"Phi, where did you get this?"

"I'm tracking my father. I'm spying on him."

She says it so simply, it's enough to make me laugh on that alone. A throaty laugh leaves me before I can control it and I reach for her, planting a quick kiss on her lips.

"You're fucking amazing," I say. "You're... you never stop surprising me. That bad girl side of yours is unmatched."

But as I'm spending the moment proud of Delphine, thinking it's great she's turned the tables on Daddy Adams after what he did to her, I'm alone in my celebration. She's sitting there solemnly, practically resigned about whatever else is on her mind.

The humor wipes off my face and I grip her thigh. "Phi, what are you not telling me? Why do you look like you're about to go on some doomsday expedition?"

"Don't you get it, Jon? The party. I have to go. *He's* going to be there. It's the best shot I've had so far to get him. A contained environment where he'll be in attendance. This might be my only chance."

The room's darkened. My *mood's* darkened, and my jaw's clenched. The homicidal urges inside me stirred the second she

mentioned him, a pulse that beats inside me like a second, heavier heartbeat.

“You don’t want me to go,” she predicts. “But this is something I have to do. I’ve been working with Stitches and the computer guy to use my father’s invitation to Photoshop a fake one for myself. We’re creating an alias. Stitches is willing to be my cover for the night. He’ll be my date and be with me the whole time. I’ll be in disguise, and I’ll be as safe as possible.”

I squeeze her thigh, blinking out of my murderous trance. “It’s extremely dangerous.”

“Maybe, but it’s a chance to finally get him. I can’t let this go.”

“It could even be a trap of some sort.”

“I know you don’t want me to do this—”

“That’s where you misunderstand. It’s dangerous and could be a trap, like walking into a lion’s den,” I clarify, meeting her gaze. “That’s exactly why you’re not doing it alone. I’ll be coming with you. The three of us will come up with a plan. We’ll get him, Phi. He’s escaped us for a year. It’s time we come to him.”

She smiles with warmth in her eyes and mouths ‘thank you’ before kissing me.

But Delphine doesn’t need to thank me. I want to make the bastard who hurt her suffer even more than she does.

And he will—I always keep a promise.

salvatore

. . .



IT'S BEEN BOTHERING me how quiet Lucius has been. So I decide my next deceptive move is to draw him out. Test him a little bit more. Push him a bit harder. See how far he's willing to go at this point in time.

Something beyond distracting him with false leads to my insurance against him.

Stitches once said I had a real knack for pissing people off. An assessment that I'd say is pretty damn accurate.

I'm a pro at pissing Lucius off—I've been doing it from the day I was born, before I even had a conscious awareness of what the hell was going on. My mere existence angered him.

"Thank you for meeting with me today," I say, shaking Armen Kurchoff's hand. "I apologize for the short notice. I realize this project is very expansive."

"It is no bother," the Russian contractor answers with an easy-going shrug of his muscled shoulders. "We always make time to accommodate the Mancino's. You, being Lucius's son, of course you are of importance." He breaks out into a hearty laugh that echoes in my office.

I patronize him with a forced half grin. "Actually, this is a project I'm handling... independently."

“Independently? How so?”

“It is funded solely by me. My father has nothing to do with it.”

He frowns. “Uh, is that... will he be okay with that?”

“Have you seen my offer?” I slide the sheet of paper across the table and watch in amusement as his eyes practically pop out of his sockets. “Tell me, Armen. When was the last time my father paid you so generously for a project like this? If we’re being honest, he can be a bit... frugal with his wallet. I love and adore my father as much as any loyal son, but at times, I don’t agree with his business practices. I’d prefer this project stay between us. What do you think?”

Armen snatches the piece of paper off the desk and studies the text for another minute. His eyes slide left to right over the paper as if he’s double- and triple-checking the proposal for the job is real.

There’s so many zeroes, he’s enamored by the sight of them.

Once he’s verified he’s in fact not hallucinating, he lowers the sheet of paper, his bushy brows connected and his mouth agape.

“Well? Do we have a deal?”

“I have worked exclusively for Mr. Mancino and Mr. Kozlov for twenty years,” he says.

“Armen,” I say as if I’m scolding him. Even pierce him with a look of warning that would intimidate most people. “Do we have a deal?”

He swallows, fucking *gulps*. “Yes, sure. Okay. We have a deal. This should take all of the winter. It should be complete

by spring.”

“Excellent. Let’s go survey the site. Ready?”

Fabio and Omar flank us the moment we exit my office. Armen pauses as if second-guessing his decision, but it’s too late—we carry him like a current in the ocean takes you farther and farther out from shore.

He’s escorted away, shoulder to shoulder with my men. I lead, making fake conversation about the weather and his architect business and other dumb shit that serves as a half-assed distraction.

And they say I’m not a people person!

It might be with asshole intentions deep down, but I can fake it when I want to. I grin at Armen, my shades on my face as we step into the autumn sunshine to examine the future construction site.

“This is where you’ll be expanding my baby, Armen. Don’t let me down.”

He glances around at the other shop buildings and finds nothing except a dry cleaners and an old shoe repair shop. “But... the others?”

“They’ll be bought out. Knocked down. Let’s talk about the club wall you’ll be tearing down here.”

I lead Armen toward the backside of the club. Though there’s a chance he might not follow, I’m certain he will. I’m proven right in the coming seconds. I don’t even have to turn around to know I am; the pad of his footsteps trail several feet behind me. Fabio and Omar’s come up last.

Over the next few minutes, we discuss more details about the project. I’m obnoxious with it. All on purpose. I fire off

questions that throw Armen for a loop and make him stumble on his words. Many of my design ideas are architecturally impossible. When he tells me this, I laugh and tell him he needs to figure out a way to make it happen.

I'm stalling. Biding my time. If I've timed things correctly, and everything goes according to plan, shit will hit the fan in a few minutes.

Word must've gotten around by now.

Either I've played a good hand or I've misjudged Lucius, which could turn out to be a crucial mistake.

"Let's check out what the last company got started on," I suggest.

We slap on hardhats as we enter the construction site that sits on the corner of Eighth and Frazier. Abandoned machinery and slabs of concrete litter the area that will be expanded into a brand-new section of the club.

The plan is to have rooms that'll have different themes and music playing. It'll attract more club goers and allow for more underground operations behind the scenes.

Which equals more cash flowing in.

Armen's distracted by the construction site. He's making note of the equipment already available and the layout.

I check the time. Where the fuck is he? Have I really calculated this wrong?

Fabio's staring when I look up. He's thinking the same thing I am, questioning if we're on the wrong track after all. I clued him in more than I usually do after my brief encounter at the docks with his mother—he'd told me Florina had confided

in her as a longtime friend and asked for her help in hopes she could conceal her identity.

Minutes pass with Armen thinking he's on a real site survey. He pulls out his phone, snaps photos, asks questions, flashes me reassuring smiles, and promises his company will do my vision justice.

While it's reassuring, I'm distracted. My fake, charming I-actually-like-people act has evaporated. I'm about a minute away from calling off this charade.

Then an unmarked black car rounds the street corner. My gaze zeros in on the license plate and the grin I've been faking automatically returns to my face.

I know you better than you know me, and you don't even realize it, Pop.

The car pulls up with the doors on both sides flying open and my father's men filing out. They approach us in a fast stride, their faces arranged in tough guy mean mugs meant to intimidate.

Leading the charge is Lucius's most trusted confidant, his righthand and underboss, Ray De Trolio. Ray's unibrow forms a thick, hairy V at the center of his face, accompanying the angry curl of his lip.

Definitely meant to intimidate.

My grin goes nowhere. I hold out my arms in welcome.

“Gentlemen, how nice of you to join us. I wasn't aware my father wanted to see my latest project. Say hello to Armen. He's the architect associated with Kurchoff Konstruktion. You remember him, right? He's a favorite of Lucius's. I've hired him personally to—”

“This project is over,” interrupts De Trolio. “The Boss wants to remind you the club is not your operation to run at your behest. Any major business decisions are to be submitted to him for approval. You are also not cleared to hire his private contractors without checking with him first.”

Armen wipes sweat off his brow with his forearm despite the fact it’s chilly and November. “I... I was only surveying the site. No contracts have been signed.”

“You will be dealt with later,” De Trolio scolds, hardly sparing him a glance.

“I don’t agree,” I say.

Nobody knows how to follow up. A second passes before De Trolio grits his teeth and his unplucked, hairy unibrow dips into an even deeper V.

“You don’t agree with what?”

I stick my hands in my pockets and shrug. “Every word you’ve said.”

“It doesn’t matter if you agree. The Boss—”

“I have no boss.”

“So, it’s true,” he sneers. He glances behind him at the crew he’s brought with him. “The Boss’s son really is a cocky dumbass who thinks he can beat out the rest of the family.”

The other men chuckle along with him like trained chimps. I don’t expect any better. They’re not the A team. They’re not even the fucking B team. These guys are *C string* at best.

Just like Lucius to underestimate me.

De Trolio and I have mostly stayed out of each other’s way, though he’s on my kill list. He’s been a brown-nosing

kiss ass for as long as I can remember. I'll never forget the times he hung around puffing on cigars and chugging brandy in the den while Lucius cracked jokes about the times he roughed me up.

Sometimes he showed up for these gatherings with the blood still on his knuckles.

My blood.

I wouldn't mind returning the favor during this quest for revenge—test out if he thinks it's so funny when he's the one spilling blood on the floor...

“You're outnumbered. Not to mention *outranked*,” he says. “You and your two pals stand the fuck down and shut the fuck up. *Capeesh?*”

“It would appear that way, but being at a disadvantage has never stopped me before. Nevertheless, please pass along a message to my father. I am no longer a part of his organization. Neither are my men. Neither are any of my operations. He has one of two options. *He* can stand the fuck down and shut the fuck up about it. *Or* he can face the consequences.”

At my threat, De Trolio and the other men bust up in laughter. They throw their heads back and the air rings with the sounds of their laughs as though I've told the funniest joke they've heard in a while.

Armen's hanging somewhere in between. Fabio and Omar still flank me, stoic and loyal.

I wait for them to finish.

“Are we done, gentlemen?” I ask when their laughter dies out. “We have a project to continue.”

“Your funeral, *Psycho*,” De Trolio spits. He holds his cell phone up to his ear with a nasty grin, as though I’m supposed to plead for him not to place his call. The other line answers within a few rings. “Boss, he’s not standing down. What should we do with him?”

Seconds pass as Lucius speaks on the other end. I can almost hear his croak of displeasure. Probably pissed with a vein throbbing in his temple.

It’s almost noon. I’ve ruined his lunch. Good thing he can stand to miss a few.

“There’s only him, Grebano, and Lisi. Yeah, he only has two guys as backup.” De Trolio spends another moment laughing at my expense.

This time, I interrupt him with a clear of my throat. “I’d count again. You might’ve missed a few.”

De Trolio looks up as I give the signal and a red dot appears on him and the other five guys he has with him. Right away, they’re looking around, scanning the many buildings surrounding us in the metropolitan jungle that’s Northam.

The red dot lingering on De Trolio’s chest glides up his body, traveling up his throat and then his face. It goes all the way up to his forehead, where it stops dead center, one squeeze of the trigger away from blowing his brains out.

Fear fills his bulging eyes and he stares at me, frozen, with his phone pressed to his ear.

I tilt my head to the side. “What’s the matter, Unibrow? You’re looking a little nervous all of a sudden.”

Lucius screams on the other end. I know this, because I can hear the muffled sounds despite the fact that the phone’s not on speaker.

“May I?” I ask, holding out my hand. “I’d like to speak to my father.”

With a shaky hand, De Trolio passes me the phone. The sniper that’s on him has more fun, waving the red dot all over his body some more, bouncing from the tip of his nose to the quivering Adam’s Apple in his throat.

I put the phone on speaker. I want everybody to hear our exchange. “Hello, Pop.”

“You fucking piece of shit!” Lucius rages. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?!”

“I was having a peaceful afternoon before you sent your men over.”

“A peaceful afternoon, was it? You think it’s funny, hiring Armen?”

“Honestly, I’m shocked you know about it.”

“I know everything that goes on in my fucking family. My fucking city.”

...or you know because I wanted you to know and fed you the information.

“Regardless, I guess now would be a good time to tell you, your men are at my mercy,” I say calmly. My gaze meets De Trolio, who stands as frozen as a block of ice. The red dot’s settled between his eyes. “One quick word and they’re dead. So we should be clear—I’m no longer your concern. Not my club or my crew. You won’t be sending your little unbrowed minions over again.”

“You kill my men, and you’ll regret it. I’ll hit you back five times harder.”

“Maybe. But as of right now, you’re not in the position to make threats. I am.”

“This is a game to you.”

I laugh. “Not a game. Just revenge. You had your men roll up today, thinking they were going to control shit. I shut that down and showed them—and you—that’s not how this is going to go. Ask me nicely not to kill them. Then I might let them go.”

Hate has a feeling when it’s in the air. Even when it’s over the phone. The tension runs deep enough that I can feel Lucius’s loathing from his end. His fat fingers must be clenched up into fists and his face red hot. If he could murder me on the spot, merely by his thoughts, he would.

I take morbid comfort in that—we’re a father and son who hate each other to the point of destruction.

“I won’t ask you for shit,” he spits. “You are an ugly stain on my life. I wish you were never born. If I could travel back in time to the day that bitch gave birth to you, I’d rip you out of the doctor’s arms and strangle you myself, *pezzo di merda*.”

“Suit yourself.” I glance up at one of the many windows of the building across the street and give the signal.

The soldier standing to the right of De Trolio drops dead. The bullet is silent but deadly and messy. He tips backward, crashing into the cement sidewalk in a fast-growing pool of his own blood. The other men in the crew shift uncomfortably in their stances, still held hostage by the red dots on their person.

“One down,” I say. “Either call them off, or they’re all ending up dead.”

Lucius speaks through clenched teeth. “Ray, get the fuck out of there. We’ll discuss the matter in further detail later.”

I grin. “Was that so hard? And, Pop? Don’t come to my territory unannounced like this again. Are we clear?”

“We’ll see about that.”

“You’re more than welcomed to try, but you’ll have to come harder,” I say. “This was pathetic. Even for you.”

I hang up on him and then toss De Trolio his phone. He hesitates for so long in catching the device that he almost fumbles and drops it.

“This is boring. Get the fuck out of my face,” I say. “And never come back or next time I *will* kill all of you.”

De Trolio and the others are forced to do the mafia walk of shame—it entails backing down from a confrontation like a pathetic pussy. Two of them drag the dead guy’s body to the trunk. The rest turn away and pile into their car. I wave them off before letting my gesture switch to the middle finger.

The second they’re gone, Fabio and Omar explode in laughter.

“It worked!” Fabio cries out. “You pulled a power move on the fucking Don!”

“You got him to retreat.”

“For now,” I say. “But now he’s pissed. Which means retaliation. It means he gets impulsive. We need to heighten security measures, but it’s also good we’ve driven him in this direction. His temper will do him in.”

We head inside the club, abandoning the construction site. Armen doesn’t move to follow until I hook an arm around his neck and shoulders.

“Trust me when I say, you’re playing for the winning team.”



The night of the Neptune Society's party arrives. We dress to the nines. Stitches and I in tuxedos. Delphine in a sleek, sexy cocktail dress that's black, backless and accentuates her amazing round ass. I can't resist smacking it as she's standing in front of the mirror putting on her jewelry for the evening.

"Jon!" she gasps.

"What?" I ask innocently, leaning closer, kissing the nape of her neck and then bare shoulders. I haven't let go of her ass. Soft and round in my palms. I give her cheeks a firm squeeze.

"You keep touching and kissing me like that and you know exactly what's going to happen."

"Would that be so bad?"

"Considering we're carrying out a potential execution tonight? Yes."

"Don't forget." I curl my arm around her waist and force her to turn my way so we're facing each other. Our bodies touch, a current of warmth between us. "You're not to confront him alone. If you see him—"

"I don't do anything until Stitches or you are with me. You've reminded me fifty times."

"This has been difficult for you," I say, bringing a hand up to grip her chin. I can't resist ghosting my thumb along her bottom lip as my gaze bores into hers and then dips to her delicious, soft mouth. "I'm concerned you'll..."

She frowns, grabbing my hand to pry my thumb away. "What do you think I'm going to do?"

“I don’t know. That’s the problem. *If* you do believe you see him, it’ll be the first time. Emotions will be running high.”

“*We’re* going to take him out,” she says simply, confidently.

The woman I’m in love with.

She smiles at me with a spark about her that’s unbelievably sexy as she turns back around and finishes pinning on her earrings in the mirror.

If Delphine can be this sure tonight’s going to go according to plan, then I’m not worried about her. On several occasions she’s proven she can handle her own and then some. It’s for purely selfish reasons that I’m so protective over her, otherwise I’d be fine with her going at it alone. She probably *could* take him out on her own.

Our plan should run smoothly.

I’m the free agent. Delphine and Stitches are attending together under aliases, dressed in light disguises. The fact that the event is masked helps.

As I’m the free agent, attending solo, lurking in the background, I’ll be ready to interject as necessary. Since Daddy Adams will be in attendance, we figured it’d be too obvious and risky to have Delphine be on my arm, even if we’re in disguise. It’s an extra layer of protection to have her on the arm of Stitches, a man who looks wildly different than I do.

The goal is to pass under the radar. Not rouse any suspicions. Locate her attacker, capture him, and bring him back to our compound where he’ll meet an unfortunate ending.

We’ve devised many alternatives for how we’ll capture him depending on the way the evening unfolds. Everything

from drugging him with a sedative Delphine has used called Setophyl to tailing him home at the end of the night and kidnapping him that way. We even have a detailed plan for killing him *inside* the party—but that’s a last resort.

Once we’re dressed, we meet in the living room of the loft.

Stitches looks the funniest—he’s ditched his wire-framed glasses and bleached his mousy brown hair a silvery blond, including his brows and facial hair. He’s even got on a fake muscle suit under his tuxedo to give the illusion he’s beefier than he is. It works—he instantly appears about twenty pounds heavier.

Delphine put a lot of thought into her disguise too. She went and hired a makeup artist to work some magic, changing her features as much as possible. I have no clue what was done, but I overheard the word contour used several times, and when she emerges, she looks more like a cousin of herself than herself. The makeup artist has even added a few fake birth marks and Delphine’s hidden her tight, springy curls under a long, auburn wig with bangs.

I’ve made the least effort in my disguise. I shaved my beard and put on some colored contacts, turning my blue-green eyes brown. I’ve combed my hair in a more professional style. Rather than slicked back, it’s neat and parted on the side like some respectable guy with a 9 to 5.

The masks will aid us in disappearing more than any changes we’ve made.

“Boy, are we an interesting-looking trio of people,” Stitches says, laughing. “I kinda like me with this extra weight. Might keep it.”

“It’s a muscle suit. You’d have to pack it on for real,” I say.

He flexes in the reflection of the loft window. “I could hit the gym for a couple months. Pump some iron. Gains, you know?”

“You struggle picking up the gallon jugs for the water machine.”

“That’s ’cuz the handles are always slippery. You can’t blame that on me!”

Delphine smirks at us. “Hate to interrupt, boys, but we should probably get going.”

“What Miss ADA said,” Stitches says, shooting me an affronted look.

I shake my head. “Now that we’re all on the same page. We stay in contact the whole time. As soon as we locate him, we go with the course of action that applies to the situation. Then we get the hell out of there. If we get separated, we meet at the regroup spot. We’re all in on these aliases—we’ve got our names, backstories, and everything else down. Don’t offer up any information. Anybody probes or seems suspicious, you remove yourself from the situation as soon as possible. Keep your earpiece on at all times and communicate when necessary. Everybody clear?”

The other two nod.

“Good,” I say as we turn and head for the door. “Now let’s go crash this party.”

lena

...



august 1994

A FIST POUNDS on the door. It is not the first time, and it will not be the last.

I stay perched on the toilet seat. I spend the time counting down the minutes as I always do.

He likes to collect early, but I will not go with him. I refuse to spend a second longer out there than I have to.

The doorknob rattles and he kicks the door with his heavy boot. “Open up, *puttana*.”

“That is not my name, *mudak!*”

Our English-Italian-Russian spat makes him growl. He kicks the door again. The force behind it makes the wood shake.

I have two minutes left. I will use those two minutes doing as I please.

As he bangs on the door and yells out profanities, I get up and grab my bag off the bathroom counter.

Everything I own is in this bag.

One child-sized leather backpack that barely fits a few pairs of worn-out underwear, a hairbrush, and my wallet.

Before I came here, my wallet had things in the pouches—loose change, ID cards, even a bank card, though there were very few funds in the account.

Now, my wallet is empty except for an old, torn picture I have tucked inside a side pocket.

We are told when we are brought here that we do not have any use for the things people on the outside do. Our new belongings are at the Mill... and we are belongings too.

I set my bag on the toilet seat and then hop up on the bathroom counter. He is outside the door, distracted by his anger, taking it out with his fists. That is good for me, because he does not hear me slide the ceiling tile over and dig around for the flask the last girl hid. My heart skips a grateful beat when I find it. I take a big sip, savoring the vodka, praying that it will help with the long evening.

Time runs out.

He drags me out of the bathroom as soon as I open the door. He is a tall man and walks twice as fast as I do. His dirty fingers dig into my upper arm on purpose, pinching the skin with his chewed-up nails.

I am taken to the dressing room, scrubbed clean, shoved into a lacy piece of fabric that still feels humiliating no matter how many times I put it on, and my hair is braided.

The customers like when my hair is braided. It makes me look younger.

Though I am old enough to be on a college campus somewhere, it does not matter. I am still able to appeal to *that* audience.

Tonight is a special occasion. Another one of the parties. They come in droves in their nice clothes, donning their masks to hide their identities, and spend hours sipping champagne. Any request they make is indulged.

Anything they want.

Many visit the Mill and browse the selection.

A diverse stock is kept that appeals to all tastes. Male. Female. All sizes, ages, colors.

It is a profitable business that I imagine brings in millions for their organization. Though I do not know for sure. As a product for sale, I can only speculate.

He returns. His cold eyes rake over me.

He is one of the ugliest people I have ever seen. Inside and out.

I once pitied him for the jagged scar on his face. Then I learned how evil he can be and realized it must have been deserved.

Satisfied with my look, he grunts and grabs my wrist.

He is known as the Handler for a reason. He handles all the products. Often samples them himself much like he did me while I pleaded for help.

Rumor is, he works for the Owner. None of us know who that is, who the man—or men—is who owns us at the Mill.

I have concluded it is the members of the Neptune Society. We are their toys.

The party has started. As I am dragged by the Handler, my feet kicking at the ground to resist, the sounds travel down to our floor.

The Mill is underground. That I do know. Dark and drafty like a basement, it is also dimly lit on purpose. For the purpose of discretion but for atmospheric intentions as well.

I am shoved inside my cage. The Handler twists the lock into place with an amused glint in his eyes and then walks off, swinging his keyring on his chewed fingers.

I plop down on my perch and wait to be bought.

There is no clock. Talking is not allowed. Nothing is allowed except to sit on our perch, pose, and wait.

So that is what we do.

A long hall of human products locked in cages, up for sale.

Most of us have learned not to make eye contact with each other. It is easier that way.

Many develop a faraway expression, as though they are daydreaming. They are miles and miles away from their living hell.

I have done this myself. I have imagined I am home in Russia, bundled up, playing in the snow like I did as a small girl.

Life was not always easy, and we were poor, but I was never *sold*.

Before I was forced into the Mill, I was hopeful I would find a pleasant life in America. Volchok had promised me we would stick together for many years. Kozlov was our ally, and had struck a lucrative agreement to work with Volchok.

I believed I would have freedom and would be able to earn a good education.

That was not what happened.

My life went from bad to worse. I have lost hope there is any means of escape.

Few have ever managed.

The only escape is dying; most products do not last long. Either they take their own lives, develop some sort of sickness or health issue, or a customer has an *accident* with one of us.

All deaths are kept secret. No one on the outside knows—or so I believe that is the case.

As the evening goes by, the customers make their way over. They browse with interest. Some come by themselves. Others come in pairs. Couples looking for a third participant. Groups of friends searching for some live entertainment for a couple of hours. Usually drunk bachelor parties of some kind.

I make it almost two hours before I am bought. Two men in suits, still wearing their masks from the party, have decided they would like me.

It happens fast. From the time of purchase. I am taken from the safety of my perch, up an elevator, to one of the playrooms that are offered. These men keep it simple—nothing more than a bed and some other bedroom furniture inside.

Every customer is different. It is impossible to know what to expect. Some have tried to make conversation. Role-play even.

These two say nothing.

The first man shoves me down on the bed and slams into me. The air evaporates from my lungs and I gasp for more, clawing at the comforter for some leverage, but that proves impossible. He moves too fast, drilling away.

The second man sits in the corner, pulls his penis out, and begins stroking himself as he watches. Eventually, they switch places. The second one is no gentler. He is just as rough and forceful.

I do my best not to look at them. I do not want to remember what they look like, or see the cold indifference in their eyes. Instead, I bury my face in the comforter and

squeeze shut my eyes until they're zipping up their pants and walking out of the room.

Again, I am collected and then returned to my perch. The night is still young, which means there are more sales to make. More money to earn them.

These parties can feel like an eternity. Sometimes I prefer when a customer will pay for the night. It can be easier entertaining one monster for hours than many monsters for a few short minutes.

I sit on my perch and pretend I do not notice the customers as they stroll by, admiring the selection. As the night goes on, it becomes harder to stay neat and tidy. My braids loosen and my make up fades. My tiny, lacy negligee no longer seems expensive.

After being grabbed and shoved aside so many times, the fabric wears thin.

I am exhausted. My body aches and begs for rest and sleep.

The later in the night it becomes, the more important people come by. I am not a native to the city, but I recognize the mayor coming through. He makes several questionably young purchases that churn my stomach.

Another familiar face makes me just as nauseous.

Lucius Mancino enters with men at his sides. A large, round man with a face born to be cruel, he smirks looking at the hall of cages.

Every product for sale goes still. We hold our breaths as the air fills with tension.

His presence unsettles me more than the devil.

Tears prick my eyes and I blink them back and try hard to blend in.

If he recognizes me... if he remembers me... if he knows who I am...

The last time I was around him, it was a few months ago. Before I had been brought to the Mill, I had only been in America a couple of years. Kozlov and Volchok brought me to a dinner, and I witnessed something that I will never forget.

His footsteps thud against the hardwood floor. Heavy and slow with each step he takes. He casts a reproachful look at each cage, as if each person disgusts him.

As far as I know, he has never made a purchase. I have no idea what he is doing here tonight.

Has he come looking for me? Does he know?!

I bow my head and avert my eyes when he nears my cage. He stops at the iron bars and peers inside, taking his time to study me.

An ice-cold dread trickles over me as I stop breathing and my nails dig into my thighs. For what seems like an eternity, he stays at my cage and stares.

His smirk remains. The disgust ever present on his flat face.

It seems he might recognize me... until he turns away and walks to the next cage.

The breath I inhale sweeps through my lungs and leaves me feeling lightheaded. I sway on my perch and hardly pay attention to the rest of his walkthrough. My nails drew blood on my thighs, but it is a small price to pay to escape Lucius Mancino's wrath.

He leaves, making no purchase. The purpose of his visit remains a mystery. One I do not care to solve so long as I never have to peer into his evil eyes again.

The Mill returns to normal—more customers, more purchases.

My exhaustion sinks in. I nod off, my head drooping. Though I have no way of telling time, I pray it is almost the end of the night.

Someone bangs on the bars of my cage.

It is the Handler. He grins maliciously, using his keyring to wake me up. Standing next to him is a man I have never seen before.

He is darker complected, handsome, with defined and masculine features. He is shoulder to shoulder with the Handler, which means he, too, is tall, though he is broader.

The Handler has changed into a suit for the festivities, his greasy hair slicked back into a short ponytail, but even the nicest clothes cannot make a hideous ogre look nice.

In comparison, the mystery man next to him looks refined. Regal, even. His eyes, so dark they are almost black, are on me, as though he knows who I am.

I have no clue who he is.

“Get up,” snarls the Handler. “You have been bought. A special request.”

“But—AHHH!”

My protest is drowned out by the Handler wrenching me toward him by my braid. My scalp burns as I struggle like a baby deer to stay on my feet. I have no idea why he is being

crueler to me than usual; he seems angry about something else and has decided to lash out at me.

He walks us down the block of cages and into the elevator.

We ride in silence.

When we exit, one of the flunkies from the salon wraps me up in an overcoat. I am prodded onward, shoved along until we reach a back door and the warm summer air blows in my face. A limousine awaits.

What is going on?!

The mystery man sets off at a brisk pace. The limousine driver rushes to meet him and open the door for him, greeting with a polite nod.

“Evening, Mr. Adams.”

I am uncertain what to do. I stay put at the back door and breathe in the fresh air—the first intake of fresh air I have had in... who knows how long.

But, apparently, I am supposed to follow.

The Handler shoves me in the back, sending me stumbling forward.

“Go on,” he grunts. “Remember, if you try anything, we will track you down. You are being monitored every second this transaction is happening.”

How can I possibly forget? I still feel the pinch behind my ear from whatever they inserted into me.

I hesitantly approach the limousine. The door hangs open and the limousine driver stands dutifully by it, waiting to greet me as I climb inside. If he is judging me for my appearance—I

am sure I look worn after all I have been through tonight—he does not let it show on his face.

“Evening, Miss Burtka,” he says.

I flinch, my eyes widening. “My name. How...?”

I am nudged inside the limousine and the door promptly swings shut.

The fancy vehicle is moving within seconds. We leave the Mill behind, though I miss seeing it sink out of view. The windows are too tinted, and it is too late at night. I try, anyway, pressing my face and hands against the warm glass.

This must annoy the man named Mr. Adams. His voice is deep and masculine, with a layer of irritation.

“Sit down properly,” he says. “And don’t touch the glass. You’ll smudge it.”

“I apologize.”

I do as I am told, sliding down into the seat, folding my hands obediently in my lap.

My customers have only taken me to different playrooms inside the Mill. I have never been bought by someone who has taken me outside, though I have heard of rare requests where this happens. Usually it is with someone like the mayor.

Nerves ripple inside my stomach. Since I do not know what to expect, I would prefer if he returned me to the Mill.

He sits looking powerful and luxurious in his suit and tie, his gaze on me in much the same way Lucius Mancino had stared earlier—only maybe his stare is less reproach, more interest.

Neither man is someone I trust.

He leans forward and presses a button on a panel. It splits open to reveal a selection of beverages. He reaches for a glittering champagne bottle and two glasses.

“Thirsty?” he asks.

We are taught to be agreeable. We are told to go along with whatever our customer wants.

I do not like the fizzy taste of champagne, but he does. So I do too, for the occasion.

“Yes, please,” I answer.

He hands me a glass. “Are you nervous? You’re trembling.”

I smile and shake my head, though my knees will not stay still.

His gaze dips to them as they bounce, then flick back up to my face. “You can’t be cold. We’re in the middle of a heatwave. Half the city still has their AC blasting into the night. Rest assured. You have no reason to be nervous. Nothing bad is going to happen to you, Lena.”

My name.

He knows my name.

I press my lips together, tempted to ask how, but remembering the rules. It is not allowed.

“I’m taking you to the Plaza,” he says casually, leaning back into his seat. He sips from his champagne and looks out the window as if our car ride is one between friends. “We should have plenty of discretion there.”

“Oh... yes. Okay.”

“Do you not like the champagne? It’s Perrier Jouet.”

I hurry to slop down several mouthfuls to please him. Some of it misses my mouth and spills down my front.

He raises a brow and then reaches to take my glass from my hand. “If you don’t like the champagne, that’s alright. One thing I want to make clear—communication between us has to be very honest, or this will never work. Do you know why I paid for you tonight?”

Slowly, I shake my head.

“I figured as much. I’m also guessing you have no idea who I am.” When I confirm this with another shake of my head, he smooths a large hand down his tie and resumes his position, sitting like a refined, powerful man in the back of a limo. “My name is Ernest Adams. I am newly-elected District Attorney for the city of Northam. My family has lived in this city for generations, and we have been fortunate enough to build a legacy over the decades. I am carrying that on in certain ways, hence why it’s so important I became DA.”

“That is... very admirable,” I stammer, unsure what he expects me to say. Why is he telling me this?

“I belong to the Neptune Society. The club that is... well, *selling* you.”

It sounds so harsh when spoken out loud.

Despite my best efforts to remain well-behaved, I cringe. My cheeks burn with embarrassment remembering I am not only dressed in ripped, provocative lingerie under this coat, but there are no shoes on my grubby feet.

“My wife hates the Neptune Society,” he says, sighing. “She doesn’t enjoy the events or any of the members. Unfortunately, she’s affiliated by virtue of her marriage to me. She left early tonight. She’s home with my son and daughter.

They are both very young. My daughter will be four soon. She's a little prodigy in the making."

Why should I know this? It is a question I ask myself over and over again inside my head.

He seems to sense my confusion.

He drinks the last of his champagne and says, "I'm telling you this because I'm very much in love with my wife. I am devoted to my kids. I did not buy you tonight for the purposes you would assume. Lena, what's happened to you... is a human rights violation on the deepest level. I intend on helping you."

My brows knit and I frown. "No."

"No?"

"No," I say. "I do not want any trouble. I... I do not want to be disfigured. The last product to defect had her face ironed. Please take me back. This is not what I asked for."

Panic rises up inside my chest and I scoot back in my attempt to put as much space between us as possible.

Mr. Adams does not react. He simply refills his glass of champagne. "You won't have your face ironed. I won't let that happen. Do you realize the opportunity I'm offering you? You do as I say, you will be *free*, Lena."

"Free?"

"Yes, free. I know about what you saw. I know what you did," he says. His dark eyes gleam staring into mine.

"How do you know... what are you talking about?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. You may be the only person in the city who could bring down Lucius

Mancino.”

My hand rests on my stomach, the nerves rippling. “No... please... I can’t...”

“I’ll protect you. But you have to help me. That’s the deal.”

“You cannot protect me against him. Volchok said the same and now where am I?” I whisper, tears filling my eyes. “No one can. Please just return me.”

Mr. Adams sets his glass down and leans forward. His expression hardens and he captures me with his intense stare. “Lena, I promise you, I won’t let Lucius Mancino get you. He’s powerful, that’s true. But so am I. Northam is *my* legacy by birthright. You help me, and we’ll take him down. So, does that sound good? Shake my hand.”

Both nausea and lightheadedness overtake me. My stomach churns and the limousine spins like it has lifted off the ground. The moment feels like a strange dream.

I doubt I am strong enough for what he is suggesting, but when I look into his eyes, he seems certain. He exudes so much confidence, he could tell me he is able to sprout wings and fly in the sky and I would possibly believe him.

Before I know what I am doing, I slip my cold, shaky hand in his and shake it.

“Excellent,” he says. “We have a deal. We’ll be at the Plaza in a few minutes. We’ll talk over more details there.”

“How do you know my name? How do you know about... how do you know about that night? The night that... the night between Lucius and Leandro?”

Mr. Adams has returned to admiring the tall city buildings outside the limousine window. “Because,” he says in a somber tone, “I know Volchok. He came to me, Lena. He came to me about everything.”

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present...

TO SAY the security at Neptune Society events is airtight is putting it lightly.

Attendees must pass three levels of security just to make it through the main entrance. Unidentified men in white vested suits snatch the invitation from our grasp and pore over it with open scrutiny. They run a searchlight over the sapphire-blue embossed seal on the luxe black card, testing its authenticity, conferring amongst themselves.

I glance at Stitches. He spent a long time doctoring the invitation with Salvatore's computer guy. The result was impeccable—or so we thought.

As we await the first round of security to give us a verdict, I place a hand on my hip and channel my persona for the night.

Sasha Newton is a part-time med student, full-time socialite from Lunbury, great-granddaughter of real estate mogul Clive Newton. She's not the type to worry about trivialities like invitations.

I cause a diversion. Tugging on Stitches' tie, I yank him closer. "If they don't hurry up, I'm not sure how much longer I'll be able to keep my hands off you. We need to finish what we started in the limo."

One of the men checking our invitation glances up.

Stitches blinks, thrown by my curveball for only a second before playing along. "Uh, yeah... things were getting hot and

heavy. You know how we get. We're like a couple of bunny rabbits."

"There's a table right here. Don't tempt me," I purr.

By the time I'm trailing a finger along Stitches' jawline, the men have forgotten about our invitation. They wear similar expressions of restrained horror as they thrust the gold-sealed black card back into our hands and direct us through the entry point.

Stitches grabs my hand and hurries me along. "What was that about?!"

"I figured we'd distract them! They were staring at our invite a little too closely."

"You trying to land me in the ER? Let Psycho see you purring at me, and I'll have no kneecaps by tomorrow."

I don't argue with him on this. That's definitely something Salvatore would do.

The second and third security points are hardly easier—once again we're subjected to thorough checks by unidentified men in tuxedos. At the third security check point, I spot *armed* guards.

The last guy to check our invite and verify our names and identity waves us through. The mood changes within a single stride.

We're bathed in the bright, sparkling lights of the chandeliers in the atrium as we pass through. A giant, pot-bellied older man with a bushy mustache, donning the same white tuxedo as the others before him, greets us by the elevator.

“I hope you enjoy tonight’s festivities,” he says, guiding us inside. “If you need anything at all, please feel free to seek me out. My name is Gene. I’m the event organizer. Up you go.”

We soar up in the glass box Gene has led us into. My stomach lurches along with it as though I’m about to be sick.

The sensation intensifies when the glass doors slide open and we’re confronted with the Neptune Society itself.

A large party room filled with *dozens* of members socializing—the din of their many voices, the blend of their many scents, an array of luxurious masks covering their smug faces, surrounded by the plush setting of the club.

But I zero in on only one thing.

The rings.

Silver braided bands and sapphire stones. Representative of the city of Northam and our mascot, Neptune, and his trident.

Almost everyone has one on. Some don rings with variations—a man behind a scarlet Venetian mask who looks suspiciously like my high school best friend Ashley’s father wears a gold version of the ring.

At once it’s all I can do not to stare. Obsessively, my gaze slides from hand to hand, seeking his out of the crowd. I’d know them anywhere. I have them memorized down to the last detail. Even his touch—you could blindfold me, and I’d be able to pick it out of a lineup. The cold, cruel feel of his grimy, chewed up fingers on my body, my hips, between my thighs, inside me, is something I’ll never forget. I’m sure of it—

“Hey,” Stitches whispers, nudging me. “You okay?”

“Hmmm?”

“My arm. Your nails.”

I glance down. I’ve grabbed hold of his forearm and sunk my long nails into his sleeve so hard he must feel it through the fabric.

“Sorry,” I mutter, letting go. “I... I was distracted.”

As months have gone by, my blackouts have happened fewer and farther between. Occasionally, I lose concept of time and get stuck in a moment. It happens when spotting something that triggers my memory of that night.

The club ring. The stench of a cigarette. Even if someone walks too closely behind me.

I should’ve anticipated this. Being in a room full of Neptune Society club rings would be potentially disastrous; it’d set off every anxious fiber of my being.

Stitches grabs my hand and tucks it into his arm. “Don’t worry about it. We’re in this together. How about we check in with Jonathan?”

Just as the anxiety began filling my lungs rather than air, Stitches’ reassurance chases it away. I breathe in relief and give a slow nod, grateful for his reminder.

We’re in this together.

Jonathan is Salvatore. I worried his alias was too obvious. He insisted it wasn’t so I dropped it.

Salvatore has a way of blending in when he’s on his own. It’s the loner inside of him. Though he’s a dominant man who leads a whole crew of men loyal enough to follow him to the pits of hell, he’s a lone wolf at heart. He and people typically don’t mix well.

A hindrance in most traditional social situations.

But also an advantage in unconventional ways.

Tonight happens to be one of those times.

We've fitted ourselves with earpieces and miniature mics that allow communication anywhere we go during the party. Another gadget Stitches and the computer guy worked on. Since we've made it through security and we're submerged into the depths of the party, we turn ours on and check in with Salvatore.

"About time," Salvatore says in my ear. "You've taken long enough."

"How did you possibly beat us? We went in before you!"

"I have my ways."

I search the crowd of socializing snobs dressed in formal wear. He's nowhere in sight.

Part of me yearns to tell him I wish I were on his arm tonight—I wish I could feel his warmth as I navigate the sea of club members and their sapphire braided rings. I hold back only because it'll drum up more emotions I don't need to be feeling right now.

We need our heads in the game if we're going to succeed.

Our objective is simple. Find my attacker and take him out.

Tonight is the best chance we've had. It might be the only real chance we have, where he's in a contained environment. Who knows when we'll be able to infiltrate another Neptune Society event?

"I'm scoping out a place called the Bidders Block," Salvatore tells us.

“What’s that?” Stitches asks.

“A black market of some kind.”

“Then we’ll stay in the main room and see if we locate him.” Stitches barely moves his lips as he nods politely at a passing waiter. He accepts champagne from the next one who wanders by and hands me a glass. “Here, so we can use these to conceal our lips when they move.”

“*Shit.*”

“What?! What is it?”

I’ve spun around, turning away so that my back is to the front of the room. Stitches turns along with me after surveying our surroundings.

Thirty feet and at least a dozen people separate us, but it doesn’t make my heart pound any less inside my chest. I lower my voice to barely above a whisper, as though at any moment he’ll storm over.

“My father just walked in,” I say carefully. “Don’t look. He just entered with Lena.”

“Shit is right.” Stitches stands as still as I do, our backs to him.

A wall of people remain as our buffer, though the party ebbs and flows. The room is a constant migration of people shuffling around, coming and going. We’ll have to make sure we stay as far away as possible while not drawing his attention in our direction.

“Do you want to go to another room?” Stitches asks.

I sneak a subtle glance over my shoulder.

Dad tosses his head back in a hearty laugh as he chats with Channel Nine news director, Jeffrey Garcia. Both of the men's dates smile vacantly on the sidelines.

"No, not yet. He's just socializing," I say. "We should be fine."

"I'm sorry, I don't think we've met," comes a smooth, controlled baritone I've heard a few times before. Damon Thomas grins broadly at me and offers his hand. "Damon Thomas, CEO of Thomas Tech."

I glance at Stitches and then give the tech CEO a quick handshake.

I can't say I'm a fan of his, considering it was his company that designed the spy device Dad used for my rose necklace.

"Hey, how you doing?" Stitches interjects in an exaggerated Italian American accent. "I'm Geno Romanetti. I'm in the trades business. This is my girl, Sasha."

Damon Thomas's upper lip curls in distaste as he takes a swill of champagne. "You make an interesting pair."

"That's your way of saying she's too gorgeous for me, eh? Don't worry, I spoil her so good, she'll never go anywhere. Ain't that right, doll face?"

I paste on a smile and nod along. "Which reminds me, baby, why don't we go get some fresh air? It's feeling kind of stuffy in here."

"Actually, I'd love to know more about you, Sasha. I've never seen you in these circles before, and it's so... rare to see a woman like you here tonight. Why don't you go get us some fresh champagne, Geno?" Damon pushes his empty glass into Stitches' hand and steps in between us to form a wedge.

I'm about to object, but then I notice how the dynamics in the rest of the room have shifted—Dad's no longer chatting with Jeffrey Garcia. He's moved *closer*. Only a few people away. If I cause too much of a scene he'll surely look over, or Damon might get too suspicious and press for more answers.

My best bet in the immediate moment is to go along with Damon's suggestion and then find escape at my first opportunity.

Stitches doesn't leave without my permission. I give him a subtle nod, the go ahead for him to walk off and retrieve our champagne.

Damon wastes no time with his sales pitch.

"A beautiful and delightful young Black woman like yourself caught my eye the moment you walked in," Mr. Thomas says. He smiles, his teeth pearly white and identical to his son's. "I'm sure your boyfriend—what's his name—treats you decently enough, but you have to think of optics, Sasha."

Of course.

He's searching for a wife for Chadwick.

The Thomases never stop their pursuit. Damon doesn't even realize he's speaking to the same woman he and his son have harassed several times over the years.

But I play along, offering him a well-practiced, gracious smile.

"Optics?"

"One look at him, and I can tell he's unclean. The trades business? I bet he's involved with some funny business, alright. Probably the Belinis."

I laugh airily. “Mr. Thomas, that’s hilarious. Geno wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Sasha,” comes Salvatore’s voice in my ear. “What the hell are you doing? Where’s Geno?”

I have no choice but to ignore him while staring up into the long face of the tech CEO. If I answer Salvatore, he’ll notice.

“You may think Geno wouldn’t hurt a fly, but I know his type,” Damon goes on. “Sasha, what family did you say you’re from? Just when I think I know every wealthy Black family in the one percent, I meet you! There are only five in Westoria.”

“Errr... my family’s from Lunbury.”

His brow creases. “Then you must be a Newton. Of course, Sasha Newton—Clive’s granddaughter. But, wait, wasn’t she missing? Or was that his niece?”

“It was a misunderstanding,” I say, fighting to maintain my perfect smile. “I’m visiting Geno here in Northam and he brought me as his plus one.”

“Ah. Interesting.”

But Mr. Thomas has that same suspicious air Dad develops whenever he’s thinking over information he’s been given.

“I’m coming to get you,” Salvatore says. “Stay where you are.”

“Well, I have a son who would love to meet you. I wish he were here tonight, but perhaps we can set up a dinner between you two. He’s an assistant district attorney in Easton. Very handsome and polished. Tall, unlike me.” The tech CEO pauses to laugh at his own joke. “Now that he’s in his thirties, he’s ready to find a wife who will be great on his arm and

bearing his children. You have no idea how perfect you two would be.”

“Mr. Thomas, I have a boyfriend.”

“One dinner can’t hurt.”

“No thank you.”

“You can meet him and then decide.”

My temper is rising, my smile faltering, as I try to force myself to play along. Somehow, Mr. Thomas is even more persistent than his son. Just as I’m about to snap at him, he drops the matter altogether.

Someone else appears in his line of vision, coming up from behind me, and distracts him.

“Ernest! Long time, no see!”

The tone in the room shifts at once. My irritation with Damon Thomas vanishes, becoming inconsequential as my heart leaps in my throat, and I’m darting between other party guests.

“Excuse me, I have to use the ladies room.”

“But I was about to introduce you to—”

I don’t hang around long enough for him to finish his sentence. I’m squeezing through a crowd of others, putting as many people between us as possible. Many grunt and gasp, expressing offense over my rudeness, forcing my way through.

Manners simply don’t matter right now.

I don’t slow down until I’m sure I’ve blended in enough. It helps that I’ve fallen behind a group of men in tuxedos who stand above six feet, discussing the stock market exchange

amongst themselves. With slow caution, I peek around them to where only seconds ago, I stood with Mr. Thomas.

He's engaged with Dad and Lena. The conversation seems cordial. Lena's even smiling more sincerely than she was earlier.

Another relieved breath leaves me.

"Where are you?" Salvatore asks in my ear.

"I had a close run in with my father," I whisper.

"And Geno? He's not answering his mic."

I glance around. Where *is* Stitches? He was supposed to grab us champagne...

I'm swept away before I can answer. The group of men along with a few others, begin walking in unison and I fall into step with them without even trying. We're leaving the main party room. As we reach the archway, I slow down and turn to go back, but the people behind me keep walking toward me.

All of them are animated, chatting away in audible excitement. Behind their masks, their eyes glitter. Where are we going?

I half consider shoving my way out of the mobile group, then decide against it—the alternatives don't sound much better.

Salvatore's on a different level altogether. Stitches is nowhere to be found. Dad and Mr. Thomas are in the main party room.

None of us have even really begun looking for my attacker.

The primary reason we're here tonight.

It's possible I can find him by exploring wherever we're headed. I have my earpiece and mic and can contact Salvatore and Stitches if I find him.

We file into a glass elevator that takes us up four floors. The bright chandeliers and pristine marble of the main party floor disappear for moodier, woodier decor. We emerge on a floor that's dimmer and smells of expensive oak and warm smoke.

Everyone steps off confidently and sets off down the hall. I hover, staring down the passage lined with different doors and crushed velvet carpeting, debating if I want to go back.

It's not an option.

The elevator's already departed, sliding down the cables to go transport whoever else in the building has called upon it.

Cheers echo from the first door down the hall. I follow the sound only after I'm sure the elevator isn't returning for another minute or two.

People gather around a game table watching as two players toss chips and wage their bets. One man with a handlebar mustache loses the pot and slams his fist down in a fit of rage. The other man, half his size, earns the applause of the audience as he wins the hand and collects the chips.

This must be some sort of gaming floor.

Wandering a few doors down confirms this. Each room features a different game. Different players gambling and spectators watching them do so.

It seems harmless enough.

I turn and hurry back as the elevator finally returns.

Thankfully, it's empty.

“Jon,” I say.

“Yes?”

“Where are you?”

“Looking for you in the main room. You’re gone.”

“I got carried away. I’m upstairs on the game floor. I’m coming down now.”

“Geno’s still nowhere to be found. That’s concerning.”

I hear his words, though they fall on deaf ears. I’ve become distracted by the buttons on the elevator panel.

None of them make sense. They’re all symbols that can’t possibly be the floor we’re on.

“Jon,” I say slowly. “What floor is the main party room on?”

“The ground floor. Level one.”

My stomach lurches with unease. “That can’t be.”

“Phi, what’s wrong?”

“There is no level one.”

“What do you mean?”

“In this elevator. There isn’t a level one on the panel.”

“Choose ground floor.”

“Jon, the levels are *symbols*. There’s a triangle and a star. An X.”

“What kind of elevator did you take? Get off right now. I’m coming up for you.”

I hurry to push the button that’s supposed to open the doors, but the elevator’s been called elsewhere. With a

mechanical crank noise and the X button lighting up, it begins to move. The glass box drops, taking me down.

“Oh my god, Jon.... I don’t know where I’m going. It’s taking me to the X level,” I say. “Where is that? Could that be the ground floor?”

I can hear the edge in Salvatore’s voice—he’s pissed. Not necessarily at me, at the situation going awry and being outside his control.

“I’ll be there as fast as I can. Wherever there is. Don’t go anywhere.”

Judging by the gasps and rustling in the background, he’s forcing his way through the party.

I breathe in and out and calm myself. The elevator hasn’t stopped. The glass box takes me lower and lower, my stomach bottoming out, feeling like a journey to the pit of the earth.

The worst part is watching the other floors zip by. Because the elevator’s made of glass, the other floors are partially visible as the elevator sinks down each level.

At one point I’m certain we bypass the atrium where Stitches and I walked through earlier and nauseated security.

Which means... I’m going beneath the ground floor.

The calming breath I inhaled moments ago becomes a shaky one as the journey finally ends. The elevator reaches its destination with a jerk of a stop, making me stumble in place. The glass doors slide apart and cool air rushes inside.

I feel as if I’ve taken an elevator into some sort of underworld.

The hall before me is black.

Obsidian walls, floors, and ceiling. The only lighting comes from the sparse sconces spaced out every few feet along the wall.

“Jon,” I whisper. “Can you hear me?”

No answer.

“Jon... Jon!”

But he doesn't answer me—being underground, there's no signal for the earpiece to work.

I keep trying anyway, the panic expanding inside me. He said to stay put, but what if he can't find me? What if I wait inside the elevator and someone calls it back up? I could get even more lost on a different floor.

“Welcome!”

My internal debate is interrupted by none other than Gene. He appears grinning ear-to-ear with his arms open as he approaches in wide strides.

“Oh, I remember you! I didn't peg you as being interested... and by yourself. Very adventurous of you. Follow me.”

He grabs my arm and wrenches me from the elevator. I dig my heels into the floor and pry it away.

“Don't touch me!” I scream. “I came down here by mistake. I don't know where I am. Please help me get back upstairs... to... to the rest of the party.”

“You came down here by mistake?”

“Yes, there were only symbols on the panel. No floor numbers.”

The grin falls off his face. “I see.”

Goosebumps skim across my arms noticing the change in his features. His eyes harden and his brow lines. The toothy grin that's disappeared has made way for his lips to flatten into a deep frown.

I take a step back. I need to run like hell back to the elevator.

Gene cinches hold of my arm as I spin around to do so.

“No you don't!” he grunts, dragging me toward him. “You think I don't know what you are? You just revealed your hand without knowing it!”

I have no clue what the hell he's talking about, but I don't care. I'm focused on freeing myself. I drop my wristlet and go into survival mode, trying to fight him off.

His hold's too tight. He's latched onto me from behind and dodges every attempt I make at elbowing, head butting, and stomping.

When I try to slam a fist into his groin, he retaliates by squeezing my torso within his arms, crushing my ribcage. I cough as the aching pain erupts all over.

“You're not a member of the society,” he growls. “A member of the society would know how to use that elevator.”

I can't even speak. Any attempt I make comes out as a sputter from how hard he crushed my ribs.

“Please,” I gasp. “Please.”

“Please, what? Do you know what we do to intruders? You're coming with me.”

Gene drags me along, holding me within his crushing grip. The elevator slips into the background as we set off down the

black hall and I scream—or as close to as I can considering he’s squashing the air out of my lungs.

I have no choice but to bear witness to the shocking sights within each room we pass.

In one room a pudgy man in a pig mask bends over on all fours, naked as the day he was born, as a scowling, domineering woman I recognize as none other than South Valley District Judge, Anita Herrera, stands behind him and punishes him with a crop. For every lash he receives, he whines and oinks like the pig mask he wears.

She gladly brings down the crop again and again.

Another room seems to be a lounge of some type where businessmen sit bored, sipping drinks as naked women prance around and have sex with each other—and the many toys available in the room—for their viewing pleasure.

There’s a room that’s eerily empty with medical devices and a chair with stirrups, the lights off, and shadows long and sweeping.

We pass by the largest room yet that seems to be some sort of aviary. Rows of cages on either side line the room, though Gene drags me by so quickly, I don’t get a good enough look at what’s inside the cages.

But a second later, it doesn’t matter.

Nothing else matters, because I hear *his* voice.

The deep cruelty of it. The bite in it when he told me to shut up and grunted as he forced his way inside me.

Hearing the sound while being suffocated in Gene’s clutches stirs something inside me.

Not fear or panic. Not even pain.

Rage.

Instant, overwhelming rage that washes over me and blinds me. That has me jerking in Gene's arms with renewed vigor. He struggles to keep hold of me, caught off guard by my latest fight for freedom.

The voice is coming from the room with the cages. He's in there. He's speaking to someone about a purchase of some kind.

I have to get to him.

Suddenly, I've forgotten about my promise to Salvatore.

We're supposed to confront him together—we're supposed to take him out together.

But he's finally so close. He's mere footsteps away.

This could be my only chance.

“ARGH!” Gene howls.

At last, I've managed one of my escape shots. I've slammed the shit out of his groin with every ounce of strength I have.

He lets go, and I tumble to the ground, hitting it with a thud. I'm pushing myself up just as quickly, sprinting down the hall toward the room with the cages.

It shouldn't surprise me, yet it does.

People sit inside the cages. Rows and rows of them. A wide collection of different people, I'm guessing designed to suit various tastes.

My heart shatters in my chest taking in the scene. They have some of the saddest, most vacant eyes I've ever seen...

“Then you’ll have to pay extra,” *he* says. “She’s a new product. Has barely been broken in. They don’t get any newer than this.”

“Hmmm. How do I know? You could be lying.”

“Look at her. Does this look like a whore who’s been used? If you really want, we give them all full medical exams. We can provide the results of that too, proving she was brand new. But that’ll be another extra cost.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. She does appear to be in mint condition.”

Hearing them speak about another human being so casually, as if bartering over merchandise, makes me feel sick to my stomach.

My rapist traffics people. He *sells* people.

No wonder he thought nothing of what he did to me.

Dad had said it was an *initiation*.

I’m caught between nausea and anger as sweat gathers on my brow and my dark impulses reflect in my unblinking stare.

My stiletto will have to do as far as weapons go—

A hand encloses around my upper arm and yanks me sideways. My body stumbles along, colliding with theirs. It takes me only a split second to realize it’s Salvatore.

He’s dripping sweat and out of breath, as though he’s been running.

“We have to get out of here,” he says.

“But he’s here. He’s in there.”

“We have to go.”

“My rapist. He’s right there—Jon!”

I’m vetoed. Salvatore ignores me, folding my hand inside his, and taking off at a brisk pace. Gene’s finally recovering from the blinding pain in his groin and yells out to us. We make it to the elevator.

Salvatore smashes his finger against the button with a circle and then pulls out his gun.

“My rapist was in there,” I snap. “He was in that room, and you pulled me away.”

“Our cover is blown. We’re seconds away from being ambushed by every guard in this party. We have to get the hell out of here. This mission’s aborted.”

The elevator stops, the doors open, and he tugs me along onto yet another floor I don’t recognize.

When a security guard rounds the corner, Salvatore shoots. The man drops dead. We step over his body and continue briskly down the hall.

“Where are we?”

“This is some sort of administrative floor. I came across it earlier when I was looking for you. There’s an emergency exit. It’s our best chance at getting out unnoticed.”

“And Stitches?”

Salvatore’s expression darkens. “I’m not sure.”

A heaviness follows us the rest of the way as we make our escape from the party.

delphine

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“WHERE THE FUCK WERE YOU?” Salvatore growls the second Stitches reappears.

He doesn't show up in the best of shape—he's sporting a black eye and busted lip. His nose leans more crookedly than usual with a gash across the bridge. When he smiles to show us his teeth, they're bloodied from many hits to the face.

“I got the shit beat out of me.”

My hands fly to my mouth. “Is that what happened when you went to get champagne?”

“It's what happened when that *cazzo* sent me off to go get champagne.”

“Are you saying—Mr. Thomas had you—oh my god, Francis. I'm so sorry!”

“I went over to the champagne and refreshments. Next thing I know, two armed guards are escorting me out. Next *next* thing I know, I'm outside in some alleyway being pummeled nonstop. They KO'd me. I woke up a whole half hour later to alley cats licking blood off my face. One of them was even trying to gnaw on my nose.”

“You can get anything you want at a party like that,” Salvatore says as we enter his compound. “Mr. Thomas

probably put in a request with the Buyers Block to have you roughed up.”

I shudder. “I never want to attend one of their events again. Now I understand why my mom always stalled whenever she had to go.”

“Sorry for leaving you with that old fart, doll face.” Stitches winks at me in jest. “Hopefully he wasn’t too insufferable.”

But as we make our way through the compound, I’m more distracted by Salvatore. His behavior since we left the party has been short-tempered and abrasive. It hasn’t lessened since arriving at his compound. If anything, it’s grown more noticeable.

As Stitches and I converse about the evening, Salvatore strides a whole pace ahead of us and ignores every word.

I say goodbye to Stitches outside the medical room, where he plans to stitch himself up, and chase after Salvatore.

“Will you slow down? Are you in a rush to get somewhere?”

Right away I know it’s me he’s angry with—the energy rolling off him is palpable, hot and combustible like a deadly electrical charge.

I don’t back away. I keep pace with him as we enter the weapons room and he takes apart his beloved Walther PDP pistol.

Neither of us say a word, so the only sound in the room are the sounds of the thuds, clicks, and clanks of the metal being disassembled.

He's wearing the same expression he had on at the party when he turned up on the X level. His brows are drawn and his gaze focused, the blue and green that make up the color in them, darker than usual. Because he's shaved his beard, his jaw is more pronounced and distinct as he bites down and carries tension.

I'm done waiting on him to make a move. I'll light the fire.

"You can be pissed at me if you want, Jon."

He places the disassembled gun away and then moves on to storing his ammo, turning his back on me.

"But I'm pissed at you too. My attacker was there. He was in that room, and you dragged me away."

"What part of the mission being aborted did you misunderstand, Phi?"

"You decided that. I didn't. No one was around except Gene. We could've taken out my attacker."

"And when we returned to the elevator and found a group of armed guards had tracked us down? Then what?"

Salvatore tosses the magazine from his gun into a bin full of them. The next thing to go is the holster he's wearing. He unhooks the leather strap with quick, jerky movements, flinging that too.

His white dress shirt and black trousers that remain look strangely rough despite their traditionally designer wear—or maybe it's the intense, furious Mafia boss donning them that's giving the formal apparel its edge. His dark hair has reverted back to its usual styling, slicked back away from his handsome, composed face; the same face whose jaw carries enough tension that it makes even my body feel tight.

How he manages to look emotionless yet pissed as hell at the same time is beyond me. It's a skill he's perfected over the years.

But I know him better than anyone. I've memorized his tells.

The mélange of blues and greens that make up his gaze reveal his heated anger.

He pushes up the sleeves of his shirt, revealing thick forearms decorated with tattoos and protruding veins. But it's his knuckles that give him away—how he can't resist grazing the fingertips of one hand over the scarred knuckles of the other as if tempted to tear them open himself.

His thirst for blood.

Salvatore hates losing. He doesn't like loose ends and unfinished business. The very fact that we aborted a mission feels like both.

I don't bother hiding my study of him as he finishes in the weapons room. He bangs shut more cabinets and locks up the firearms, radioing one of his men to come down and do an official inventory later.

His bad mood has officially rubbed off on me. The longer he avoids looking in my direction the fouler it becomes.

Second to second I'm switching between irritation over how he's acting and my desire to simply feel his body pressed against mine.

It's been a long night, and after some of the things I learned and saw, the latter seems necessary. The former is more so an inconvenience at the wrong time.

I'm leaning against the counter opposite him, still making up my mind, when he does it for me.

He stops, looking over at me, and says, "If you're waiting for an apology, it's not coming. We had to leave."

"I never said I was waiting for an apology. But I *was* hoping you'd be less of an ass!"

"I'm an ass because I wasn't joking with you and Francis about him getting the shit knocked out of him?" He grunts out a lone, rough chuckle as if to mock our earlier conversation.

My arms tighten around my chest and I stand up straighter. "Tell me what it is. Why you're so pissed—and don't say you're not, because you are. What did I do? Was it talking to Mr. Thomas? Was it the elevator? Or that I had the audacity to want to stay behind an extra minute and take out my rapist?"

"Tonight was your idea."

"And?"

"And it was a complete fucking shit show, Phi! What do you mean 'and?' Tonight was a fucking mistake that I won't be letting happen again," he explodes suddenly, his voice booming. It bounces off the walls at a rare volume for Salvatore. He's normally not the type to yell. Even when angry, he's the type to terrify with his calm and collected, quiet rage. Seconds later, he grits his teeth, catching himself, though the anger burns no less hot in his eyes. "Do you have any idea how bad tonight could've gone once shit went left?"

My skin warms, though I stand my ground. "You act like Stitches and I wanted things to go wrong. Things happen, Jon. *Mistakes* happen."

"Do you know how outnumbered we were? Do you know how fucked we would've been the second our cover was

blown? And Francis is wandering off fetching fucking champagne like he's a waiter and you're riding elevators up and down like you're on some fun amusement park ride. Neither of you stuck to the plan, and you screwed tonight up because of it!"

"I didn't ask you to come with me. I told you about the party because I wanted to be honest with you. I would've been fine going alone—"

"That would've ended better for you, Phi," he interrupts dryly. "You did so well winding up on that underground floor. About to be taken who knows where to do who knows what."

A burst of anger crackles inside me like a sudden firework.

Glaring at him, I uncross my arms for a more defiant stance. "I found *him*, didn't I? That's more than you've ever been able to do in a year of searching. I would've taken him out myself, but you decided to stop me. Abandoning our mission and running away was more important."

As soon as the words leave my lips, I know I've made a mistake. I've said the wrong thing.

Salvatore's smoldering gaze darkens, and he takes a step toward me. If his face held tension before, it's chiseled by it now as he looms tall and foreboding. I move to step away, in hopes I can still make my way to the exit, but he snatches me by the wrist to hold me in place.

My heart's racing and the rest of my body stiffens as though pricked by pins and needles.

Shit.

I'm in trouble. Possibly deserved.

I dig my hole deeper anyway. I struggle to free myself, pulling at his hold on my wrist. He doesn't let go. His grip tightens and I put up a fight despite his attempt to reel me closer. We're both half successful—I manage to free my wrist while he manages to yank me toward him by the hips.

My body jerks and my ribs ache from earlier, though I refuse to give up. I slam my palm against his shoulder and wrangle myself out of his clutches as best as I can. Ironically, some of the techniques he's shown me come in handy.

This sudden aggressive game between us takes another rough turn. I scramble free and make it to the other side of the table. A feat as far as I'm concerned, considering who I'm up against.

My escape is short-lived.

Salvatore captures me with the force of his hard, muscled body. His arm hooks around my waist and he whips me around, trapping me against the table.

Half bent over it, my palms flat on the wooden surface, his larger hands holding mine down just like his larger frame braces mine within his own, I'm caged in. His heavy, almost beastly pants of air brush against my ear before his lips do.

Enough to make me shiver in place.

And cause my pussy to clench.

“Let's get one thing straight,” he growls. “Nothing's more important to me than finding the piece of shit who attacked you that night. There's not an hour of the day I'm not thinking about it, and there's not a moment I'll stop searching 'til I do get him.”

The tension's too much. Too overwhelming as he clinches me within his arms.

His husky voice next to my ear, so deliciously violent and thick with arousal, sends vibrations through my body.

It speaks to the black part of my soul, unlocking the dark impulses in me only he seems to understand.

Only he knows I have.

“I made you a promise that he dies. I intend to keep that promise,” he says, pressing himself against me. His front to my back. The solidness of his chest and the strength of his biceps. The hardness of his *erection* as it prods my ass. His voice strains at the contact. “Don’t you ever fucking imply otherwise. Is that clear?”

Dazed, speechless, and soaking wet, I nod.

Our battle resumes—just as aggressive and frantic, but with a shared end goal.

Salvatore spins me around and we’re back to fighting. I shove at his chest and then fist my hands into his shirt. He kisses me hard and bites my lip. We tear, twist, tug out of our clothes. His arm slips under my thighs and he hoists me up off the floor.

Our kiss never ends. I toss my arm around his neck and meet the lash of his tongue with one of my own. He slides my panties off, then drops me on the tabletop. My bare ass smacks into the wood maybe harder than it probably should, but neither of us care—I’m spreading and he’s wrenching my hips toward him.

“Fuck, Phi, you’re so wet,” he groans when he rubs my pussy and finds me glistening. He licks his fingers and grips my thighs and then rams into me.

I cry out as if I’ve been split in two.

The sudden fullness is enough to overwhelm.

He feels soo good buried inside me, I can't take it.

Right now I'm so sensitive and on edge a few flicks of my clit and deep enough strokes and it's game over. I'm done.

My pussy pulses of its own accord and squeezes him tighter.

He groans and gathers me closer, forcing my legs even wider apart and teasing with kisses. His dick's wedged between as he gives a few shallow, teasing thrusts. "You're such a damn tease, Phi. Keep squeezing that sweet little pussy like that. Keep fucking around, trying to drive me crazy, and find out what happens."

I find out what happens.

Salvatore unleashes himself on me. He goes wild and drills into me.

Fast. Mercilessly. With brutal and carnal abandon.

There's no holding back—Salvatore fucks me with everything he has, leaving me no other choice but to keep my legs spread and ride out every fast and hard stroke. No other choice but to scream out in breathless pleasure as I rub my clit and take it.

It's like our fight still hasn't ended. We're still warring, only in a different way: with the passion fueling our bodies.

The tension fraught in the air is no less caustic. It's merely being handled more... creatively.

At some point, Salvatore flips me over with a primal growl. It makes me wetter as I twist to try and get away and regain some control, but I never do.

He's too dominant, too aggressive as he positions me exactly like earlier. Half bent over the table, spread out and wide, imprisoned under him and his impossible, powerful frame.

For as much as I snap and squirm, my pussy pulsates and my heart skips with excitement. I *like* when he slams down my hands on the table and holds me in place using little to no effort; something inside me burns even hotter for him as he demonstrates how easily he possesses me.

Grabbing my throat, he sinks back into me whole. I arch against him, standing on tiptoe from the intensity of it, like some amateur ballerina.

He grabs me by the thigh with his other hand and flexibly raises it up on the table, opening me up to newer, deeper angles.

I'm too overcome to last long. A few skillful, violent strokes from Salvatore, and I'm gushing.

Coming on his dick and seeing double of everything.

I claw at the table and lose my voice from how desperately I cry out.

Salvatore bites my shoulder, licks my salty skin, only driving deeper. "That's right, Phi. Let everybody in the city know your sweet little pussy's being fucked. It feels fucking amazing when you come on my dick. But guess what? I'm not through with you."

A whimper leaves me as he pushes me down, cheek pressed into the table, and buries himself to the hilt.

The split-second calm before the final storm crashes in.

Salvatore curls over me and slams into me like a madman. His heavy, muscular body pinned atop me, every ragged drag of air from his lungs and twitch of his dick tells me he's in the last stretch.

I close my eyes, my bottom lip between my teeth, and enjoy the ride.

Being held down, dicked down by Salvatore 'til he fucks me so good I come again and he comes too, filling up my pussy.

It happens within a moment—Salvatore's powerful hands clench my hips and he jams his dick into me as he groans out his explosion.

The warm, wet feeling of his release and his twitching dick send me over the edge once more.

I orgasm much softer, with a small sigh and tremor of my body. My hand finds my sore, swollen pussy, and I can't help delighting in the mess we've made.

Salvatore kisses my neck, shoulder, back, and wherever else he can. He pulls out and turns me over, drawing me against him for a lazy, spent kiss on the lips.

“Don't ever think that again,” he says, wrapping a lock of my hair around his hand, tugging hard enough to force my attention. “That I'm choosing not to go after him. I need you to believe me when I say it's important. Because it is.”

“I believe you. I know it is. I shouldn't've said it.”

“And you were right. I was being an asshole.”

I smirk. “Aren't you always?”

“More than usual. I was pissed at tonight going left. It was a very close call. Maybe our closest yet.”

“That floor I was on. They were selling *people*, Jon.”

“That floor was called the Mill. It’s where members go to act out their fantasies.”

I shudder against him at the memories of things like the medical room and the oddity of the man in a pig mask with a district judge who was partaking, punishing him. Worst of all, the cage room. “I want that place shut down. The whole society. If I were still ADA, I’d open an investigation—”

“We’ll figure out a way. Tonight was a failure... but it was also a success.”

My right brow arches. “As in?”

“Your attacker. If he works on that floor, then he’s a trafficker. That narrows it down considerably. We might even be able to set him up another way—set up a fake actor to pretend they’re interested in a purchase.”

“You will never stop trying.”

“Of course not. We’ll get him, Phi. It just has to be smart... and safe.”

“I still want to be involved. I still want to confront him.”

He grabs my clothes off the floor and hands them over. “He won’t be killed ’til you get to see him and get your closure.”

I barely register he’s handed me my dress back. I’m more focused on him and the emotion welling up in my chest.

It takes over in the next moment.

My arms fly out and I throw myself at him in an affectionate embrace, my face angled into his neck and my lips

kissing the stubble of hair that's already started growing from the last time he shaved.

"I love you so much," I whisper. "You're the only person who understands me. And you don't quit on me. You never quit on me."

He hugs me back, his arms warm and comforting along my naked spine. "I could say the same about you, Phi. That's what makes us belong together—we're the only two who see the other for our real selves."

I pull back and peer up at him, so in love and in awe I'm speechless for a second.

I want everything with Salvatore Jonathan Mancino.

Marriage. Babies. Long lives growing old. Many nights sleeping in each other's arms.

The gravity of it makes me lightheaded and grateful we're embracing. Otherwise I might need to sit down somewhere.

Almost as if he's reading my mind, he slides a hand up my cheek and drops a soft kiss on my mouth. "Soon, Phi. Just a little bit longer. Then our future can begin."

Soon.

The word echoes inside my head as its own form of motivation. Soon we'll be through the thick of it, the darkness we're facing, and we'll be on the other side.

I smile up at him with my heart full in the best way. "Soon."

salvatore

. . .



MOST NIGHTS DELPHINE nods off after a couple minutes. Even when she waits up for me, on nights I'm working at Nirvana and I come home late, she's out once we're settled in bed.

The opposite happens for me—my brain decides it wants to run rampant. I lay alert in the dark and stare up at the ceiling. I slip out of bed and stand by the window for some fresh air.

The lows hit the thirties many November nights, so I don't crack it open much. Just enough for a quick brush of cold air, then I ease it shut.

Delphine sleeps undisturbed as I leave the room. I've moved on from after-hours gym sessions. My latest middle of the night hobby is studying Stefania's photo albums.

Shutting the door to my office in the loft, I resume where I left off the other night. Florina and Marsia weren't kidding when they said it had a lot of photos. Many basic portrait-type photos taken of Stefania when she was younger.

These make me roll my eyes and turn the page. Leave it to Stefania to fill her photo albums with glamour shots from the days she modeled.

I'm more interested in the other photos that come in the years after. One in particular catches my attention. It's a candid polaroid, wrinkled from age, of some private dinner. From the looks of it, the affair seems to be in honor of Marsia's birthday. The redhead sits at the table beaming behind feathered bangs, posing for the camera.

At first glance, this photo seems boring. It seems out of place—the only one where Stefania's not the focus. The background reveals why she's kept this photo for over thirty years.

I reach into the laminated sheet and pull the picture out for a closer look.

A handful of couples slow dance. Stefania being one of them. She's standing close to a man with black hair and a black suit that's jarring against his pale skin.

Because he stands with his back to the camera, his face is out of view.

But I know one thing. That's definitely *not* Lucius.

Stefania's smiling up at him. I've never seen her look so happy... and sober.

It's almost unsettling, like I'm seeing a different woman entirely. Some sort of alternate universe version of her—what she could've been if she hadn't been chained to Lucius for the rest of her miserable life.

He really is a cancer on everybody. Stefania wasn't perfect by any stretch of the imagination. She never would've won any mother of the year awards, and she was always vapid and irritating, but she was mostly harmless.

Lucius has always been another story. Exactly why I must destroy him.

My jaw tenses as I turn over the wrinkled photo and read what's scribbled on the back. One single word:

Solnishko

Real interesting.

The contact I'm supposed to find in Stefania's phone. I tuck the photo into my wallet for future study and return the photo albums to a wall shelf in my office.

That's next on the agenda—tracking down whoever the fuck *Solnishko* is. It means 'sunshine' in Russian... so was Stefania's lover her Russian sunshine? That seems off, but why else would she have that scribbled on the back of her photograph?

I intend on finding out.



“Psycho, you asked to see me?” Stitches crosses the club dance floor and drops into the booth I'm reclining in. “Why're you down here?”

I hold up my whiskey highball. “Waiting on you. Want a drink? I had Linq come in early.”

He tosses a glance over his shoulder toward the bar area, where Linq wipes down the counter.

“I've still got bleeding gums from that beatdown. I'll pass.”

“How's the black eye feeling?”

It's a real shiner. The guards at the Neptune Society's party weren't messing around. Mr. Thomas must've really told them to fuck Stitches up.

But it's alright. Because tomorrow night, on his way home from his company, Mr. Thomas will get a taste of his own medicine. Fabio and a couple more guys will rough him up a little. Make him regret his cheap shot from the night of the party.

Stitches pulls off his wire-framed glasses. "About as shitty as it looks. Why'd you need me?"

"I've been thinking about my next few moves. Which means I've got tasks for you."

"For which of our main endeavors?"

"Both."

Wariness wrinkles his brow. "Alright."

"I found a photograph of interest in Stefania's photo album. Her and another man." I slide it across the table at him. "We need to find out who this is. On the back it says *Solnishko*, which means sunshine in Russian."

"Wasn't Leandro allies with Kozlov?"

"From what I've learned, yes."

"Maybe this guy's a relative. Or... it could be *the* Volchok."

"That thought crossed my mind too. But the ages don't match up. Volchok was Lena's father. Lena's only a few years younger than Stefania. This man doesn't seem much older, if at all."

Stitches shoves his glasses back on and squints at it. "I guess not."

"Run this through that facial recognition software. See if it can at least get a read on his profile."

“It usually needs a full face.”

“Give it a shot anyway,” I say. “If we can get his name by this photo, then we might not need Stefania’s phone... which would save us a potential shitshow.”

The wrinkle on Stitches’ brow deepens. “Uh oh. Shitshow?”

“You’re being very negative today. Is it the black eye and bruises? Yes, shitshow. If we don’t figure out who this *Solnishko* guy is, we’ll need to get her phone for his contact info. It’s saved in there. So Florina and Marsia claim.”

“And where’s her phone?”

“At Lucius’s summer home.”

“Psycho,” Stitches bemoans. “How the hell would that work? How would we possibly get the phone from his house?”

“How else? We’ll break in and take it. He’s not there this time of year. It’s manned by some guards and other staff, but we’ll plan it out.”

“Then I guess I’m hoping this recognition software pulls off a Hail Mary, ’cuz Madonna knows I’m in no shape for breaking into no mansions.”

“You work enough magic, and you won’t have to.”

“What’s the other thing?”

“Phi found her attacker. He’s one of the sellers at the Mill.”

Stitches’s face fills with confusion for a brief second before understanding flashes in his gaze. “The place where all the sex stuff happens?”

I nod, sipping from my highball. “We had to leave before we got to him. But it’s enough of a clue that we can narrow it

down. The club only has so many of them.”

“So... what do you need from me?”

“We need somebody to pose as a buyer and lure him. Find me someone. Reach out to our usual contacts on the street and see who’ll be a good fit.”

Stitches begins fiddling with his glasses. He takes them off again and pretends like he’s wiping them off on his shirt and inspecting the lenses. I watch him for a while with mounting impatience and irritation ’til finally, the back of my neck’s heated, and I snap at him.

“Do we have a problem, Francis? You seem to have an attitude this afternoon. Speak your mind and tell me what’s got you so in your feelings.”

“Psycho, I’m not trying to shit on your plans...” he sighs, his narrow shoulders lifting up and then down in a lethargic shrug. “It’s just... you know... I’ve got *concerns*.”

“Which are?”

“The Five Families’ gathering is less than a month and a half away.”

“I’m aware.”

“You don’t think we’re being set up?” he asks, his light brown eyes larger than usual from behind his Poindexter glasses.

“Set up, how?”

“It’s all feeling off. I can’t explain it. But I haven’t felt right since that party.”

“You got fucked up. You were jumped by six guys. It’ll screw with anybody’s head. If you need time off to regroup,

then say something. I'd rather you tell me than you letting it affect your performance in the middle of an important job."

"It's not that. It's just... Psycho, Lucius took out Leandro Crotone."

"He was my grandfather, Francis. I'm well aware he betrayed him and took over his family."

"He took out the Pizzutos and the Viscontis. Wiped both out like nothing. Don't you think if he wanted, he could squash us in one go? Yeah, we've ramped up our numbers in recent months, but we're still just a crew that broke off from his organization. We're a fourth the size of either of those families."

"Are you saying he's faking us out?"

Stitches nods, looking pale and sick, like he'll puke up his lunch.

I'm unsurprised. I swallow more of my whiskey. "Francis, don't you think I've given this thought? Remember when I told you I felt like he was being too quiet? *Of course* he's faking us out. He's waiting for me to get my hands on the other half of that tape."

"Why not get it himself?"

"He hasn't been able to. He's tried."

"I guess... it just... feels like there might be something we're missing."

"What's this about the party that has you so convinced?"

He blows out another breath, scratching his head. "I kinda saw somebody when I was lying in the alley—well, I'm *pretty sure* I saw somebody. De Trolio was pulling up in a town car.

He had a mask on, and I had just got my ass kicked by six goons, but it looked a lot like him.”

“He’s a member of the Neptune Society.”

“Yeah, if I had to guess. He was attending the party.”

“Most in certain tax brackets are. Including members of different crime families. We’ve been aware of this, Francis. Families used to host meetings at the fucking clubhouse back in the day.”

“I was more so thinking something else... what if Ivan Volchok is the leader of the club? What if Lucius and Ivan have some kinda alliance going? It explains why nobody knows who heads the club, and why Volchok was behind paying Azeria and Mirra.”

My head slants to the side. “You’re suggesting Lucius asked Volchok to target Delphine.”

“Psycho, Lucius plays dirty. My pop was in a crew with him when he was coming up. He’s... he’s very creative. The things he did to rise up the ranks and eliminate competition. Cutthroat was putting it lightly.”

“That contradicts what her father said. The club was initiating her as they do all members of the elite.”

“Then maybe he’s in on it too. I don’t fucking know, Psycho. I’m just saying this feels like some deep level shit and we’re going in with blinders on.”

“I’ll consider everything you’ve said. But understand we’re retrieving the second half of that tape regardless. I’m destroying Lucius regardless. Even if I destroy myself in the process. That’s the bottom line.”

“And Miss ADA? Don’t you think we should have a contingency plan? We’ve got to be real about it. She’s a weak spot by no fault of her own. It might be a good idea to... go your separate ways as the clock winds down.”

My expression tightens. “Phi and I talked about that. She won’t be directly involved, but I’m not leaving her in the dark. We’re a team.”

“It’s not just your life on the line, Psycho,” says Stitches. “You’ve got dozens of guys looking to you for direction. You go down, we all go down. Lucius won’t leave any survivors. He never does.”



In the past, going for rides was a way in which I cleared my head. If there was too much noise or I was having certain urges, like the bloodlust that often courses through my veins, I’d hop on my sports bike and take off for a couple hours.

Sometimes, even leaving Northam altogether.

Less in the colder months, but so far, this November hasn’t been unreasonable.

Delphine tags along. She’s grown to love riding on my bike so much, I can’t turn her down.

We set off with her arms tight around my ribcage and our gear shielding us against the cold air that whistles the faster we go.

I decide it’ll be a long ride. I take us outside the bounds of Northam and ride across the bridge connecting to Westoria.

Where we’re headed, even I’m not sure, but the possibilities feel limitless.

This late on a Sunday evening, the traffic's nonexistent and the road's clear. We've got another twenty to thirty minutes before the sun sets for good and twilight falls.

I pull over in an empty lot—once upon a time it used to be a drive-in movie theater. In recent years it shut down due to low attendance and plummeting profits. The old cinema screens are still up, giant blank canvases that rise up twenty feet high.

Delphine slides off the bike and lifts her helmet. “The old drive-in. Any reason we came here?”

I shrug. “I was just riding. Figured we'd stop for a few minutes. Then head somewhere else.”

“There's a lot of nostalgia here.”

“You could say that again.”

She walks toward me, her hips so sexy and curvy in the tight jeans she wears. I reach for them, loving how grabbable she is—her hips, thighs, ass, tits, it's a shame I've only got two hands.

We come together in a slow, tender kiss, my hand on her ass, hers in my hair. She draws back and sifts her fingers the rest of the way through my strands.

“What's the latest?” she asks. At the subtle shift in my expression, she smirks. “Don't look at me like that. I know you're plotting. I heard you and Stitches earlier. How can I help?”

My mind hovers on the recent chat I had with Stitches. “You're not involved.”

“We agreed my fight is your fight... and vice versa. You might as well keep me informed. I'll find out anyway,” she

says, brushing her lips to mine. “Stubborn and clever, remember?”

I end her teasing by tugging her to my mouth for a deep kiss. You’d think with the evening chill in the air, we’d be cold, but anytime we’re being passionate, we’re our own heat keeping us warm.

“We’re going to be breaking into my father’s summer home. I need to retrieve Stefania’s phone. It has a very important contact on there.”

Her brows knit and I recognize the look—she’s thinking.

“What if,” she says slowly, “I could get you into his home legally? Well, technically, his staff and he would *believe* it’s legally.”

The corner of my lip twitches as I can sense her trademark brilliance revealing itself. “I’m listening.”

delphine

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THE OLD DELPHINE would've been appalled by what I'm doing—beyond just breaking the law, I'm breaking the oath I took as a former assistant district attorney sworn by the court.

But that Delphine was under her father's spell. She was living a life that was a lie without even knowing it, wearing not only rose-colored glasses, but a rose pendant around her neck that doubled as a means of control.

That Delphine was asleep at the wheel.

I'm awake now. More than aware it's necessary to bend the rules sometimes. In this case, it's to help Salvatore in his war against his father.

I meant it when I said his fight against Lucius Mancino is my fight. I'll do everything in my power to help him win, which means pulling whatever I can from my bag of tricks.

At first Salvatore objects to my idea. Expecting him to turn it down on the sheer fact that it could be dangerous and it directly involves me, I'm prepared with a counterargument I present so convincingly, even he's won over.

I'm sent with enforcers—Fabio and several other handpicked men Salvatore uses when he wants to send an

extra intimidating message. The result is terrifying to others, but amusing to me in a twisted sort of way; a five foot, four-inch-tall woman strutting in front of a group of giant, muscly men who look savage enough to eat nails for breakfast.

Judge Anita Herrera's secretary pops to her feet at the sight of us. "Excuse me, what do you think you're doing? Who are these men? You don't have an appointment—you can't just rush into the judge's chambers!"

"Tell her it's former ADA Delphine Adams. We need to talk."

"That may be, b-but the judge is appointment only—do not touch!" the judicial secretary snaps at one of Salvatore's men. Her horn-rimmed glasses slant sideways onto her face as she wrestles the desk phone out of his hands.

I haven't slowed down. I'm headed straight for the judge's chamber doors. "She'll make time today."

The secretary's outraged gasps fade once I'm through the doors. My muscle goes where I go. Except for a guy nicknamed Guerriero—the same one who stole her desk phone—he stays behind. I'm assuming to ensure the secretary behaves herself.

Judge Herrera's no less startled than her staff member. The tan-skinned woman with a close-cropped pixie and luxurious robes, snaps upright in her cushiony office chair. Lines crinkle around her eyes and mouth as her expression takes on a sour quality.

"Ms. Adams, I thought I heard a racket out there. Interesting friends you've brought with you. May I ask why?"

"I don't want to be in your hair very long, your honor. Pay no attention to my company. They're here as an extra

precaution.”

Her lips pucker even tighter, her eyes slitting narrower. “I see.”

A second of silence passes where she glares and I stand coolly before her, and though neither of us says a word, it’s clear we’re on the same page.

Herrera was around during Dad’s tenure as DA. She’s run in circles alongside Mayor Bernstein and Commissioner Flynn, among many others. They’ve done as they pleased in Northam while she’s done the same in South Valley.

“How can I help?” she asks slowly, carefully folding her hands on her desk. Her gaze shifts beyond me to my enforcers. A shrewd woman, no doubt she recognizes they’re Mafia guys.

I step forward, approaching her desk, and toss the file I’ve prepared. “I need a signed search warrant for Lucius Mancino’s property. You’ll find affidavits from two separate informants providing credible evidence that Mr. Mancino allegedly poisoned his deceased wife, Stefania Crotona Mancino, and is currently in possession of a cellular device that would corroborate this.”

Herrera sticks her reading glasses on her face and flips through my file. “You expect me to sign a search warrant for one of the most violent crime bosses in the area?”

“You don’t *have* to sign it,” I say, leaning onto her desk until I’m halfway sitting atop it. “But just keep in mind, Lucius Mancino isn’t the only violent crime boss in the area.”

“Is that a threat?”

“That’s for you to decide, your honor. We have free will to do as we please at the end of the day. By the way, how was the

Mill? I wonder how the public would feel about some of your more... inappropriate proclivities.”

Her eyes bulge then shrink back into thin slits. “I’ve heard rumors about you and the, *ahem*, special man in your life. Your withdrawal from your campaign for DA and resignation from your position as ADA have sparked many of them. This confirms those were more than rumors.”

“Sign the warrant, judge. Or don’t and deal with potential consequences that may come with that decision.”

It takes another drawn out moment for the judge to sign. After several more venomous glares directed at me and then Salvatore’s men, she whips out her pen from a drawer in her desk and scrawls her loopy signature across the warrant.

“Pleasure seeing you as always, your honor.” I tuck the warrant away in the manilla file.

“Be warned, Adams. You may feel emboldened with your criminal goons—I’m assuming that’s why you’ve brought them to my chambers—but tactics like these can only go so far. You might want to think about the road you’re headed down.”

“I’ll take advice from you the day you stop frequenting a place that keeps human beings in cages. Good afternoon, judge.”

Pivoting on my heel, I lead the way out of Judge Herrera’s chambers with the hawk-eyed woman glaring in my wake.



“Do I want to know what you did or said to get this?” Salvatore asks later in the evening. He clutches the signed

warrant in his tight grip and peers at me with his head cocked, the barest hint of a grin working the corners of his mouth.

I answer him with a mysterious smirk of my own, standing at the stove in my kitchen.

It's one of the rare nights we're spending at my apartment in Centennial Village. As tensions between Salvatore and his father ratchet up, we've decided it's best for me to officially move back into his loft. We're spending the evening in my place, packing up my things and indulging in one of our favorite pastimes—cooking a disastrously bad meal together.

His men stand posted outside my front door. They've earned more than a couple strange looks from my neighbors, but I couldn't care less.

I dim the heat on the burner and turn away from the bubbling pot. Tonight we're having an old-fashioned beef stew recipe we're crossing our fingers comes out halfway decent.

"Don't worry about it," I say. "I did what I had to do to get it. Judge Herrera had no other choice."

He sets the warrant down on my countertop and approaches me with slow steps and a playfully scolding stare. "You've got me wondering if I've created a monster. Something that's crossed my mind before."

"I learned from the best."

"Hmmm. I seem to remember I wanted you kept away from everything."

I mirror him, tilting my head to the side as his hands grip my hips. "I seem to remember you loving how fiercely determined and stubborn I am."

“More like that drives me crazy about you. How’s this stew coming along? Will we be ordering some last minute pineapple pizza when it goes belly-up like the homemade chili we tried to make?”

He walks past me to the pot on the burner and lifts the lid. I can’t help following his direction with a roll of my eyes.

“The chili wasn’t that bad. It was edible, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t remember. I was too distracted by how good the chef looked in an apron.”

We continue teasing each other until Salt and Pepa meow for our attention. The rest of the evening plays out in similar casual fashion—us enjoying each other’s company, boxing up many of my things, and dealing with the cat’s demand for attention.

“This makes it official,” Salvatore says, sealing a box of my clothes up with shipping tape. The sharp ripping noise almost drowns out his words, though I catch them as I glance over my shoulder at him.

“Makes what official exactly?”

“You’re mine,” he answers. “You’re in my home. For good.”

My brown skin warms at the insistence in his low, normally controlled tone of voice. He means what he says; as far as he’s concerned, my moving in is for keeps. He won’t ever let me go.

As hard as I’ve fought against the feelings I have for him, I’m relieved. We’ve finally reached a place in our relationship where we’re so united, we no longer need to fight what’s undeniable any longer—we’re made for each other, which means we belong together.

I drop the sharpie marker in my hand and wander over to him wearing a soft expression. He understands what it means and tells me this in his tender kiss.

“You’re my home, Jon,” I whisper. “I don’t want to ever be apart from you again. Twelve years... was twelve years too long. We’ve already lost so much time with each other.”

His arms enclose around me, tight and secure. The most comforting warmth to sink into as I rest my head on his chest and feel his hand sweeping up my back.

“We’ve got plenty of time left. A lifetime’s worth. We’ve just got to get through this fight with Lucius first.”

“*We*,” I repeat. “I like that.”

He plants a deep kiss on my mouth. “You make me stronger. You make me fight harder. Because at the finish line, I’ve got our future waiting for me.”

Gooseflesh springs up on my arms despite the warmth of his embrace. I simply squeeze myself tighter against him and relish in small homey moments like this.

Tomorrow begins another dangerous chapter in our fight against Lucius, but we’ll never give up. Our future really is waiting for us... just across the finish line.



Salvatore schedules a brief for his men participating in the mission at Lucius’s summer home. He’s allowed me to attend for informational purposes.

Stitches is second showing up to the conference room in Salvatore’s compound, catching us being affectionate before it begins.

“You two really need to keep it in your pants,” Stitches says, shaking his head. “Not all of us are getting some and here you go flaunting it every chance you get.”

“Whatever happened to Candy?”

My expression contorts into a baffled frown. “Who’s Candy?”

“The escort Stitches met off Tinder.”

“Hey, whoa! She’s no escort. She’s a paid companion. Thank you very much.” He folds his arms as he slides into a chair at the conference table in the center of the room. “She tried doubling her prices. Can you believe that? Highway robbery. She was good, but she wasn’t that good.”

Salvatore merely shakes his head while I look between them. I’m about to ask more questions, but more men arrive, signaling the meeting is about to commence. Though my part in the mission is over, Salvatore has agreed to keep me involved in the logistics and execution.

He stands at the front of the room and briefs the men on the plan. They’ll be posing as South Valley police officers with a signed warrant to search the premises of Lucius Mancino.

Because Lucius only visits his South Valley home in the summer, manning at the property is minimal in the fall and winter months. The staff will be overwhelmed and overrun, scrambling to get in touch with Lucius, who is slated for several business meetings all the way in the business district of Northam.

It would take him almost two hours to make it to South Valley. By the time he or any of his main crews do, it’ll be too late. Salvatore and his guys will be long gone, in possession of Stefania’s phone.

The plan should be executed without a hitch.

Salvatore asks the men if anybody has any questions. After answering a couple, the men are dismissed to go change into their South Valley police uniforms. The room empties, Stitches is the last to leave, then it's just Salvatore and I again.

"You okay with everything about to happen?" he asks, pulling me close like earlier.

I nod. "I'll be cheering you on from afar."

"Any plans?"

"Medjine asked me to brunch at the Garden House. It's been a while since we've caught up."

"You and that rabbit food. Sounds like I'll have to take you out for a giant juicy steak for dinner." He kisses me goodbye, squeezing my ass in jest.

I head up to the loft to spend some leisure time with the cats—Salt and Pepa surround me with scolding meows and wind themselves along my ankles—and then I get ready for lunch with Medjine.

She calls me as I'm being escorted to the car I'll be taking.

"Running a little late," she says sounding breathless.

"Is everything okay?"

"Damage control. I've been repping Bernstein with this nightmare of an investigation, but no amount of PR spin can save this sinking ship. He's done for."

"That tends to happen when you spend decades preying on children."

"You're right. I wouldn't have even taken the job had my boss at my firm not forced my hand. Anyway, I'll be there

about fifteen after. Order me a ginger kombucha. Double on the ginger. I'll need the extra boost.”

I laugh as she hangs up. Arturo drives me up to the door before he swings around to find parking. Even after months of having private security, it's no less strange at times. A necessary precaution considering who I'm dating and who I've potentially made enemies with (Mafia families like the Belinis and organizations like the Neptune Society), but it can feel intrusive sometimes.

I can't remember the last time I stepped out in public alone.

The server seats me at the table Medjine has reserved for our lunch. The Garden House hasn't changed in the months since I've last been—on a Tuesday at noon, it's full to the brim with people's massive egos and the flowery garden scenery that surrounds them.

I shoot off a text to Salvatore to check how the mission is going.

He replies with a thumbs up emoji that makes me smirk.

In other words, he's busy and too tied up for specifics. He'll fill me in later tonight over those big juicy steaks he promised for dinner.

I'm smiling to myself as I slide my phone back into my purse. Arturo shows up from parking the car and takes up the seat on my left.

“Medjine should be showing up any second. If the server comes back, can you order her kombucha? Extra ginger. I'm going to the ladies room.”

Arturo waves me off, distracted by the menu. His skin has paled, and disgust has curled across his mouth as he eyes the

lunch selection many carnivores like him would call ‘grass and flowers.’

Over the next few minutes, I disappear into the ladies room, touching up my make up and making brief conversation with the bathroom attendant.

When I emerge, I don’t expect to be confronted mere footsteps outside the door. The carefree vibe in the air evaporates. My gaze lands on the face of the man blocking my passage.

A man I’ve never seen before but immediately know is bad news. Average build and height. Middle-aged. Thick, hairy unibrow that accompanies a leering stare.

Behind him stand two other men with brawny arms and scowls on their faces. His back up.

He holds out his hand like we’re old friends. “Assistant District Attorney Delphine Adams, I don’t think we’ve met. But I’ve heard so much about you. Ray De Trolio. You’re Psycho’s gal, right? How about a friendly chat?”

salvatore

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MY MEN RIDE into South Valley in cop cars we've remodeled at a local auto shop to resemble the cruisers SVPD use. The region is known for its thousands of miles of green hillsides and vineyards. The city portion rises among the dips and peaks, like some small modern borough of shops and businesses plopped down in the middle of wine country.

The men going into the house look the part; they're donning police uniforms.

I'll be hanging back, supervising via earpieces and micro cameras.

We've got to be quick about it. The staff will only be frazzled for so long. Several factors of the situation could go either way, like the amount of time it'll take them to get a hold of Lucius, and how easy it'll be locating Stefania's cell phone.

There's always the chance some wrenches might be thrown into the situation, like some guards we didn't count on being present. The guys Lucius typically mans his summer home with during the winter months aren't guys he considers his best; most of them have never come into contact with mine.

We don't need our cover blown.

Lucius's mansion emerges beyond the green vineyard that precedes it. The property's what he's always proudly called his *casa lontano da casa*—built of stone with facade details that mimic Italian architecture back home and surrounded by fountains shooting water that arcs through the air. The giant mansion might be one of the few things Lucius loves.

My men pull up with their patrol lights flashing and get out carrying themselves like they're real cops.

The smug sense of importance comes through even as I watch through the micro camera.

The next part goes according to plan. They bang on the door.

The mansion's head caretaker answers. She clutches her chest and gasps as they brandish the warrant and flood through the door.

Poor lady. I don't even know her name—Lucius fired the last one, Xavia.

This one's fairly new and she looks like she's on the verge of a heart attack. Considering she's at least fifty, going by her bun of messy gray hair, she might want to have a seat and calm down.

Through the camera, I'm able to gauge enough of what's happening with the staff.

The caretaker shows the head of security on duty. Naturally, he gets on the phone, presumably to call Lucius.

Meanwhile, my guys tear his house apart. Shit's flying everywhere. No different than that afternoon so long ago where Lucius had sent his men to destroy my loft, terrorizing Delphine and the cats.

A petty, vengeful sense of satisfaction fills me up watching it happen.

Payback, Pop. Feels good, doesn't it?

I switch cameras to where Stitches is. He's made it to the master bedroom, along with Oscar. The two divide and conquer. Oscar takes care of the drawers in the room, yanking them open and digging inside. Stitches heads for the closet.

As we guessed, Lucius foolishly decided to place it in the nightstand on Stefania's side of the bed. Oscar holds it up so I can see it in view of the camera lens and then hands it over to Stitches.

Grinning, I congratulate them for doing it in under five. "Nice work, gents. Now time to get the hell out of there. Grab the others and wrap it up."

My own phone vibrates, notifying me of a text. It's Delphine checking in. I send back a thumbs up; my way of telling her it's good and I'll brief her on more details once we're officially out of the blast zone.

When it vibrates a second time, I'm thinking she's texted *again*. Usually we're good at communicating during these type of situations. She should understand what my thumbs up means.

Then I realize it's not a text that's come through. It's an incoming call.

Lucius is calling me.

My stomach muscles clench. I bite the bullet and answer before the third ring. "Afternoon, Pop."

"Salvatore, care to share your good news?"

I pause. "And what good news would that be?"

“Your victory. I bet you’re already thinking about tonight’s celebrations. I haven’t seen you smile like that since you were a little snot-nosed boy playing with your favorite toy. The question is, will you be so happy when you find out you have something of mine, but I also have something of yours?”

My hold on my iPhone tightens ’til my knuckles go white. I sit up in the backseat of my Audi and carefully glance around, barely turning my head—I’m being watched. How else would he fucking know I just grinned?

“Where are you?” I ask slowly.

“Closer than you think,” he answers, amused. “I do have to give credit where credit is due—a *signed* search warrant. I know a dum dum like you didn’t come up with a plan like that. *She* did. What an asset.”

The inside of the Audi launches into a tailspin. The seats, the ceiling, the luxury carpeting, all of it’s spinning around me. I’m the only thing immobile, stuck in place as it washes over me what’s happened.

How horribly fucking wrong this has gone.

Then everything stops spinning and I’m crashing back down into the moment with a heart that’s beating in an out-of-control panic.

“What do you want?” I ask. “The phone back? You can have it.”

He croaks out a laugh. Husky and mocking. “Who said I’m interested in trading? De Trolio should be on his way with her as we speak. I’m looking forward to finally meeting. My own son hiding his girlfriend from me. Tsk, tsk. I’m thinking I’ll set up a nice dinner, you know, to welcome her to the family.

Hopefully she's not easily spooked. We can be a very... violent bunch."

"Don't you fucking dare... if any of you... if you fucking try anything—let her go right now! This is between us!"

I can't even finish a full sentence, my temper's got me about to blackout. My men have emerged from the mansion and returned to the patrol cars. I barely register Stitches headed for the Audi with a proud beam on his face.

They have Delphine.

The thought repeats in my head in a scream of panic and a howl of rage.

"You sound upset, Salvatore. What's the matter?" Lucius laughs some more. "I don't give a shit about the stupid fucking phone. Why do you think I made it so easy for you to find? I knew you'd come for it. You're very predictable, *scarafaggio*."

"What do you want?" I repeat through gritted teeth.

"You already know. Two things. The tapes and your surrender."

"I only have the first one. I haven't located the second."

"Sounds like you better move fast and find it ASAP. I expect your surrender. Then she might be returned. Mostly in one piece. I can't promise what De Trolio is doing. He can be very... hands-on. Your girl doesn't know how to listen, so he might have to teach her how to obey."

Stitches opens the driver side door to the Audi, launching into excited talk about the mission, only to stop the second he spies the murderous look on my face. "What's the matter?"

I don't answer him. "You want the VHS tapes? You got it. And my surrender. But you give her back first."

"Give who back?" Stitches asks, then his jaw drops. "Not Miss ADA?!"

"You don't call the shots, *scarafaggio*. I do. I'm in charge. I'm the fucking king and I'm about to show you just how fucking stupid and arrogant you've been. I warned you, didn't I?" he asks, amid the sound of ice chinking against glass. "I told you, you didn't know the hell I'd bring to your life. Five p.m. The Northam bridge. Bring both VHS tapes. Come alone. We'll make the exchange. You try anything funny, I will hurt her before your eyes."

"I'll be there," I snap, my pulse racing, fists balled up. "But how do I know you'll keep your word? You'll do as you say? You'll let her safely get away? I get to bring somebody who will make the exchange and take her."

Lucius spends a good ten seconds laughing.

It makes me sick. I'm sweating, for once lost as to how the fuck I'm going to get out of this situation. Just moments ago, it seemed like I had a winning hand.

Lucius interrupts his own laugh with a cough and then sputters out, "What do you mean somebody's called in a disturbance? How the fuck—YOU MOTHERFUCKERS!"

Click.

The line goes dead.

I'm left listening to the dial tone, lost as to what the hell just happened.

"Psycho, what's going on?!" Stitches asks impatiently. He's shifting weight from foot to foot like he's ready to go

tearing off if necessary the second I say the word. “Did that sound like I thought it did—Lucius has Miss ADA?”

“I... I don’t know,” I answer dazedly. “De Trolio got his hands on her somehow. When she was out to brunch. Lucius was demanding my surrender. But then he hung up on me. Something about somebody calling in a disturbance.”

As I shake off the shock and rush of other emotions that have made it near impossible to think, I know we’ve got to get moving.

“We need to try and intercept De Trolio somehow. Any way we can locate Phi through her phone?”

“Leave it to me!” Stitches fumbles, grabbing his own phone. “I’ve got an app that tracks the general vicinity of mobile phones so long as their GPS feature is on.”

We’re speeding off in the next second. According to the app Stitches used, Delphine’s still in Northam. The rest of the crew of guys I’ve brought with me today follow. I call up my other men in Northam and alert them too.

Lucius never calls back. When I try to call him, he doesn’t answer. It goes straight to voice mail.

What the hell is going on? Why would he demand my surrender and the VHS tapes only to hang up? Did something go wrong?

I have my answer in the next few minutes, as we’re speeding over 120 mph on the highway. My phone vibrates and the Caller ID reveals it’s Delphine calling.

I’m lightheaded answering, my adrenaline reaching new heights. “Phi!? Phi!?!”

“Jon,” she gasps. “Jon!”

She sounds shaken. Like she's been through hell.

"Phi, where are you? Are you safe? Who's with you?"

"Some guy named De Trolio showed up at Garden House. He took me as I was coming out of the bathroom, without Arturo and Bernie even knowing it. I tried to fight him off, but he threw me in the back of his car."

I clench my teeth. "You're away from him now?"

"Jon, he was taking me to your father. He kept saying I was a bargaining chip. I tried to escape two more times, but we were driving too fast. Then cop cars started following us, flashing their lights."

"*Cop cars?*"

"Yes, real ones. Medjine saw them kidnap me!" she says, distress in her voice. "She was walking up to Garden House right as De Trolio shoved me into the car. She called 911 and then hopped in a cab to follow us. When the cops pulled him over, they found me bound in the trunk."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm with Medjine at the police station on Bromwell. Please hurry. Jon, I think your father's already placed some calls to bail De Trolio out. He's being questioned now."

"Stay there, Phi. Stay with Medjine and the cop who rescued you. I have some guys a few minutes away. They'll be there in five."

Delphine mutters a shaky 'I love you' that sends a pang of guilt through me—not because of the words themselves, but because of the shake in her voice and how close we've come to a tragic ending. I say the three words back and swear to her I'll be with her as soon as possible.

“She’s okay?” Stitches asks from the driver’s seat up front.

My nod is slight, my heart heavy, and chest tight. “As okay as can be given what happened. De Trolio tried to kidnap her. Lucius was going to use her as a bargaining chip.”

“It was a matter of time.”

“You were right,” I sigh. “What you said last week. It’s a weak spot for me. He knows it and will exploit it. This is only the beginning.”

Stitches’ expression in the rear-view mirror looks as heavy as mine. “We’ve got to figure out how we’ll combat that.”

“It’s time,” I say, an ache starting up inside. “There’s no other option. I’m going to have to send her away.”

salvatore

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“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” Delphine smiles, the satin blindfold covering her eyes.

“It’s a surprise,” I say. “I figured we’d do something special for the holiday weekend.”

Her brows push together. “You hate surprises.”

“But you don’t. You love them. So I wanted to surprise the surpriser. Payback for all the times you pulled a fast one on me.” I drop a kiss on her cheek and take her hand.

Our first chance to stretch our legs in over four hours.

We’ve been cooped up in the backseat of a car the entire afternoon.

Several times Delphine attempted to cheat and sneak a few peeks out the tinted windows. I wouldn’t let her, reminding her our excursion was supposed to be a surprise.

A couple’s weekend in Asbury, a quaint, peaceful, obscure sister town of the larger, overshadowing Lunsbury.

It’s just the kind of break Delphine would love. Even better that we’re mostly alone except for security.

I’ve booked our own villa overlooking Asbury’s famed purple ash trees and the lake that sits in the center of the small

town, like a compass.

Quiet, private, scenic, and relaxing. All things that'll be needed.

She'll like it here.

I walk her up the front steps with her hand clinging to my forearm. On the fourth step up, she misjudges how high to lift her boot and sways.

“Almost there,” I say, hiding my amusement. “Three more steps.”

“You try walking up them blind.”

“I won't let you fall—and I *did* offer to carry you.”

“My legs are numb. I need the exercise.”

“You'll get plenty of exercise later tonight.” I grin at the expression she makes. The blindfold covers her eyes, but she's rolling them—the way she holds her mouth, attempting to fight off her smile tells me all I need to know.

I scoop her up anyway to her shriek, walking through the door and over the threshold like I'm hauling in a sack of potatoes.

Except this is more like a groom bringing his bride home for the first time.

Delphine rips her blindfold off the moment I set her down, and attacks. Throaty laughter rings in the air as I don't bother fending her off. She swats and shoves at my chest and scolds me for pulling so many tricks.

Then she stops and notices where we are.

I've got to scrub my jaw to keep from grinning.

Delphine's shock comes in levels that rise second to second 'til the puzzle forms a full picture.

First it's the glance around the open-spaced entryway of the villa. She moves on, rushing to the front door I've left ajar and stares across the grassy path and row of overgrown willow trees across from us, their long branches wilted over to show off wild violet-tinted leaves.

A choked gasp catches in her throat and her hands fly to her mouth.

She turns to me like she's expecting me to snap my fingers and reveal it's some simulation.

I stop holding back my grin and husk out a laugh. "What's that look for?"

"You've brought me to Asbury?!"

She ambushes me at this point. I'm releasing another laugh, opening up my arms to catch her as she proceeds to wrap all four limbs around me and then kiss me all over.

We walk back inside like this, with me kicking the door shut and her lips on my jawline.

"How is it possible a Mafia crime boss who hates everyone is the best boyfriend I could ask for?" she teases, wrapping tight arms around my neck.

"I save all the good parts of me for you."

It's basically true.

But it's what she deserves—Delphine is one of the few genuinely good people I've ever known. She could've easily believed everybody else when they said I was some fucked up psycho who was out to be a replica of my crime lord father.

Instead, she gave me a real chance. She saw enough good in me to date me, show me how things could be if I was willing to open up enough to let her in, though I hadn't understood. It took me a long time before I did...

I grab her hand. "Want to tour the house? Something tells me you'll love the window in the study."

A beam lights up her face as she gives an eager nod.

We're off just like that, hand-in-hand, going room-to-room in the antique villa I knew she'd find charming. It has too many special details and notes of character for her not to fall in love with the place—and she does, as she gasps at the vintage wallpaper and the many books in the study.

The window overlooks the lake with the tall willow trees and their wild violet leaves that she's always wanted to see in person.

Now she can read by the window with a clear view of them.

The surprise becomes too much for her and she gives me a surprise of her own.

We barely make it halfway into our tour of the villa before Delphine's fighting with my belt and sinking to her knees. For the foreseeable future, we're on a hiatus from touring the house. It ends in the bedroom. The best outcome to a tour I ever could've anticipated.



We eventually give up our lazy afternoon in bed for a long shower, clouding with hot steam. Not that we behave

ourselves any better or that our hands are on each other any less—we don't and they're not.

My mouth stretches into a grin as Delphine loops her arms around my neck and decides she's going to tease the hell out of me. She kisses her way up my neck and jaw and ends with my lips, kissing away the grin that's just formed.

We're wet and slick, our naked bodies covered in suds. The air smells of the clean notes from the soap we've used; the bottle describes it as bergamot and amber. But I'm much more interested in the natural scent of Delphine's skin—even now I can pick it up, separate every other scent like some sort of hound dog.

Some kind of pheromone that I'm wired to love.

My hands slide along her bare, curvy hips and draw her closer against me. A groan tumbles out of me by accident when my dick brushes her thigh.

Delphine's teeth catch my bottom lip and she tugs, so fucking sexy and naughty. Her hand reaches down and closes around my dick.

Her soft, sensuous grip applies just the right amount of pressure.

All while she kisses me. Her lips return to my neck and she sucks at my skin like we're teenagers again. I taught her how so many years ago—always a fast learner, she was always excellent. One of the best, considering I was her only practice.

She's going faster, stroking me up and down. Her grip firmer.

My eyes shut as my breath sputters out. "Phi... fuck, I'm going to come."

“Then do it. Come for me,” she whispers. “Right on my tongue.”

She lets go and drops to her knees, wasting no time resuming her efforts. She sucks me into her mouth and bobs up and down. I’m so thrown by how fast this has gone down that I can’t even fight how fucking turned on I am—how sexy she looks on her knees in the shower, her warm brown eyes on mine, her mouth stuffed with my cock. Naked and on display, her normally fluffy curls so drenched, they’re stretched and flat along her shoulders.

My cock jerks and fulfills her request. My release spills onto her tongue. She swallows most of it, only a few droplets escaping.

“Mmm,” she moans, sucking my head.

I groan when I notice her hand’s even snuck between her legs. At this rate, we might never make it to the other activities I have planned for the rest of our special evening.

“The bench.”

An order that’s simple, straight, and to the point.

I hold her hand, helping her up. The glass shower box in the ensuite bathroom is huge enough that water has barely reached the other end where the bench is situated. Delphine braces herself carefully on her hands and knees and I drive into her from behind, serving as her anchor, steady and solid, keeping her secure in place.

I’m buried deep enough in her pulsing tight heat that another pleased groan leaves me. Her body trembles beneath mine and her spine arches. Her ass pushes back against me, and I grip her hips harder and pump into her at an instantly relentless, impatient pace.

I fuck Delphine so damn good, she keens for five minutes straight. I laugh after the fact at how much she sounds like a kitten.

We finish our shower, still high off orgasms. Our bodies are so sensitive even the hot caress from the water makes us shudder more than it should. We towel off and begin getting ready for the evening.

I'm done long before she is. Between hair stuff and other women things, she's got her hands full. I wait on the bed, entertaining myself by taunting Salt and Pepa with their favorite mouse on a wand.

Finally, in my periphery, Delphine appears in the white dress I've picked out for the evening.

I glance.

And then I glance again.

I stop and I *stare*.

She emerges in the doorway, her slim curves poured into the satiny white dress I've chosen for her. The delicate fabric fits just right, cinching at the waist and pulling slightly at the flare of her pear-shaped hips and round, ample backside.

When the light catches the satin at the right angle, it sheens. So does her brown skin—it's dewy and radiant as she smiles at me, and her warm dark eyes meet mine, her zigzag curls framing her beautiful face.

A goddess in the flesh.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise as I'm struck by a jolt of invisible electricity straight down my spine.

She's the most divine sight I've ever seen, robbing me of the breath in my lungs and making it so that it's damn near

impossible to process any real words. I forget about the cats and stand up to meet her, thrown by the woman in front of me.

The woman I love more than life itself.

The woman, as of tonight, I consider *my wife*.

Whether she realizes it or not—tonight is no regular outing. It's much more than that. It's symbolic in many ways, though I can't possibly tell her how, or it'd crush her. I need her to enjoy this, to have this night as a perfect memory of us.

I pull her into my arms and inhale her dizzying light, feminine scent. "You are so damn gorgeous."

She leans closer, kissing my neck, allowing my hands to slip to her backside. "Thanks, handsome. Can I add that you have good taste?"

"Yeah, I do." I tease her, squeezing her ass.

She giggles. "You know what I mean. I meant the dress. It's exquisite—and very expensive. What are we doing? Why the special clothes? It's *Thanksgiving*."

"I told you already. Why not?"

She still doesn't seem all the way convinced as I grab her hand and lead her out of the room.

My men wait outside to usher us into the backseat of the car we'll be taking. This time of year, the sun disappears below the horizon at an early hour. Only remnants linger in the twilight that streaks a line between the fading daylight and the oncoming darkness hanging above it.

We watch from the car window as we speed by, and the glowing line grows thinner 'til it disappears altogether. The light goes out and the darkness takes over like ink spilling

across a canvas. Night settles in and the only light comes in the form of a half-moon and some dotted stars.

Delphine leans against me and I welcome her closer with an arm around her shoulders.

This is how we spend the car ride—embracing, enjoying the landscape Asbury has to offer. It's a far cry from what we're used to in Northam. All the big city sights and sounds are gone and replaced by softer, gentler notes like rustling leaves and stone buildings in the town that Delphine calls 'historic.'

Our driver brakes outside a winery. The stone building sits in the front of a long stretch of green fields.

We could dine inside the winery's steakhouse, but it'll be more intimate to do so outdoors. I've arranged for a seating area to be set up for us on the back terrace—a table and chairs under the night sky with strung lights and candles that create a romantic feel.

Fitting for an occasion like tonight.

Delphine's hand clenches tighter in mine. The bright bulbs shine in her dark eyes. "This is so... romantic. Jon, you... you didn't have to..."

She doesn't finish her sentence because emotion takes over. I keep hold of her hand, helping her out of the car, leading her toward our table.

Dinner arrives plated in artistic culinary fashion. Tender ribeye cooked medium rare like Delphine prefers, swimming in a creamy, garlic mushroom sauce and plated with a rainbow of sautéed veggies.

A night like tonight—under twinkling stars and bulbed lights alike—I could've arranged for something more

aesthetically pleasing to be served. Maybe a roast duck or baked salmon on a neat bed of arugula.

But I opted for a steak that drips some blood when you cut into it because...

While prim and proper Delphine Rose Adams might be the woman known to the world, the woman in private moments with me likes to let loose. She likes to *indulge*.

She loves a good steak and glass of red wine. A hearty meal that traditional high society etiquette would claim is unladylike.

I appreciate this about her—that she has this side nobody else gets to see except me.

When the server delivers our plates, her eyes light up and then flick across the table to mine. Her delicious lips quirk at the corners.

“You... get me,” she laughs, unfurling her cloth dinner napkin. “So many men would’ve chosen differently. They would’ve ordered a salad or some baked salmon.”

“What can I say? You like your meat.”

“Why does everything sound so X-rated coming out of your mouth?”

“Maybe you have an X-rated mind, Phi. Ever consider that possibility?” I suggest, picking up my steak knife and fork. I hold her hostage with my amused gaze from across the table and then begin slicing into my ribeye.

She does the same, wearing an elusive smirk on her heart-shaped mouth. The power shifts between us. Rather than me holding her hostage, she steals my thunder. She’s holding *me* hostage with that mouth of hers—I can’t stop staring at it and

its full shape, remembering how her soft, plush lips feel pressed to mine—

I clear my throat and shove a forkful of steak into my mouth to chew on. My sex drive has always been high, even for a male in my age bracket, but there's something about Delphine that drives it up an extra hundred notches.

Something I've realized boils down to our chemical makeup. Our bodies simply being so compatible, they crave each other on a cellular level at all times.

Even sitting across from her at dinner, watching as her tight curls billow in the wind and the thin strap of her dress slips only half an inch down her otherwise naked shoulder, I'm turned the fuck on. I'm thinking about how I want to shove the plates and silverware off the table and pin her down, tear the satiny dress she's wearing right off her.

Make her feel so damn good she whimpers my name...

One more time tonight before I do what I have to do.

But, as her dark, twinkling eyes catch mine and a smile glows across her gorgeous face, I'm also thinking about how much she means to me.

This woman I met so many years ago on a night that started off with me being an asshole.

My objective was to piss off Lucius. Not meet the love of my life.

I'd thrown a huge party, inviting the whole senior class at Westoria Prep, uncharacteristic of me, but worth it considering the carnage I'd caused. Never had I expected for the sweet, innocent daughter of Northam's DA to turn up.

But there the girl was—I stepped out onto the balcony of my bedroom, and she was standing up to fucking Brett Gannon and the entire senior class. All on her own. Maybe, subconsciously, I fell in love with Delphine that night. Even if I didn't know it yet. Some part of me certainly became... obsessed with her.

I've never told her before. The whole truth of it.

As we sit and gaze out at the night sky, sipping wine and enjoying a well-prepared steak, the compulsion strikes me. Tonight's no regular night. Tonight's... tonight's...

That thought ends there.

Clearing my throat, I set down my knife and fork. "Phi... there's something I want to tell you."

"Okay," she says, repeating my action. She puts down her utensils and sits poised, awaiting my news, the pedigreed background on display in moments like this. Her posture is straight and shoulders perfectly aligned. Her expression soft and neutral.

She's so beautiful and graceful. How the fuck have I gotten so lucky? How the fuck has a woman like this fallen for a violent psycho like me?

Not only that, but followed me into this fucked up world of mine where certain death lurks around the corner?

It weighs down on me, pressing onto my chest harder than a steel anvil. I breathe through it and carry on.

"Phi, something I've never told you before... when I first met you. I wasn't all the way honest. My intentions with you. I'm ashamed to say it now. But I was trying to get revenge on your father."

FUCK!

As soon as the words tumble out my mouth, the weight builds. It *crushes* me.

My chest cinches with tension to the point I grit my teeth and fight to power through it. Her expression shifts slightly, morphing from neutrality to knitted-brow confusion. I rush to explain.

“But everything I ever told you was true—I respected you for being an individual. For standing up for yourself. You had guts. And I thought you were cute. You were a beautiful girl. I... I just... hated your father... and I thought... what better way to... get back at him than to...”

“Use me?” she finishes for me. Her tone is quiet and vague.

I blow out a breath and run a hand through my already slicked back hair. “I’m not proud of it. Which is why I’ve never mentioned it. But that was my original plan—yes. That first time I broke up with you? I should’ve known something was up even then.”

“Salvatore—”

“Phi, you don’t understand. You, in tears. You had me. I was lost as fuck. I wanted to put my arms around you. I wanted to hold you and comfort you. Be your fucking boyfriend. *That’s* when I knew I had to break up with you,” I explain. “You were having some kind of real effect on me, and I was powerless to stop it. Then, when we got back together? Do you... do you realize how... *obsessed* I was with you? I thought about you. All the time.”

“Why are you telling me all of this? Why now? After so many years?”

My fingers slide through my slicked strands some more and I take another second to think about it. “Because, you should know how I feel about you. That’s what you’ve always wanted, isn’t it? Me to be honest about it?”

Her unreadable expression shifts a third time—this one the clearest of them all—a small, tender smile. “So, basically,” she says slowly, with a choked laugh. “You fell in love with me while trying your damndest not to?”

“I’d never loved anyone, Phi. The more obsessed with you I became—the more I loved you—the more I convinced myself it was my revenge scheme against your father. Francis insisted otherwise, but I told him to shut the fuck up.”

Her laugh blossoms in volume. It grows louder as she tips her head back slightly and her shoulders lift up.

In moments like this, Delphine’s a sight to behold. It’s a reward to witness her like this. The way she lets go, so bright and alive, is something few get to see.

Seconds pass by before her laugh dies out and she takes in another sip of wine to cool down.

“I think,” she says with a slight pause, “a part of me... *sensed* what you just told me. That you were out for revenge against my father. It was something I considered.”

Of course she would. Delphine’s sharp. She’d think of all possible angles.

“But I felt you were being real with me too,” she goes on. “I always felt safe with you. Even at our low points. I never felt you’d intentionally hurt me. Even when you broke my heart, like my first year of college, a part of me still felt like you were up to something. You were acting too cold. Too distant. Even for you.”

“I remember your suspicious stare out the window as I drove off.”

“I guess my instinct was correct.”

I stretch my arm across the table and engulf her hand with mine 'til its tucked inside. “I could never bring myself to hurt you. Not if it was avoidable. Breaking up with you was torture. I hated myself for doing it. But I knew you were at your wit's end. You'd only be trapped between me and your father. It would stress you out and damage your performance at school. Those twelve years apart... you have no idea.”

Her smile changes. It sharpens, her lips stretching. “I have my own version. It was rough, Jon. I resorted to calling my parents in hysterics.”

I remember. I was spying.

Delphine was a mess. She was heartbroken. Her birthday weekend ruined, she returned home, and even took a brief leave of absence from her spring semester to recover.

The only time in her academic career she ever pressed pause.

Our breakup caused that much distress for her.

I'd almost reached out. *Almost* begged her to take me back.

By the end of the summer, she'd met someone new. Duane Phillips, the guy who would become her college boyfriend, maybe the only other guy she's ever dated who I considered a real threat. Even with Garrett and their engagement, I knew she didn't really love him. The engagement was more formality than anything else.

Duane was the first guy she said she loved. He was the first real long-term boyfriend she had. The first she was

intimate with after me. It killed me knowing some other guy was winning her heart when she belonged to nobody else but me. But there was nothing I could do. They broke up at the beginning of law school because he made the decision to study abroad, and they decided they needed a break. I was more than a little relieved.

For almost four years I had been forced to endure the reality I had broken up with the only girl I wanted, only to have some other guy come in and sweep her off her feet. While I was stuck in a hellish cycle of nameless club girls, all I really wanted was *Delphine*.

Yet, I couldn't go to her. I had to stay away.

Instead, I was transferred to South Valley, where I had to watch from afar as she lived her life.

"It's in the past. I think we're together when we're supposed to be. The times we were together when we were younger... things were... they were too complicated. It tore us apart because we weren't ready yet. But we're ready now," Delphine says with finality to her tone. She's tossed her cloth napkin on her plate, signaling she's done with her plate of food. A brightness has developed about her. More than her usual glow, it's an aura that encircles her as she smiles wide enough, she shows off her set of pearly straight teeth.

I can't resist smiling back. A rarity for me except when I'm with her. I stand up from my seat, her hand still enclosed within mine, pulling her along with me.

She doesn't protest. As I get up out of my seat, so does she. I reel her toward me in a fast spin that might make her a little dizzy. My arms are ready to catch her the second she twists within reach, wrapping around her, bringing her close.

Air rushes out of her lungs as her gaze rises up to meet mine. She looks flushed. Her pupils are dilated, her brows high and surprised and her lips parted and kissable. I can't resist taking her up on such an offer—I indulge in tasting those lips for myself, so fucking sweet that I let out a throaty noise of approval.

Delphine leans into the kiss. Her lips melt into mine. It's an unhurried kiss, yet passionate at the same time. Deep, as our tongues meet and we patiently explore. The night air nips at us, but we don't let it interrupt us.

We create our own kind of dance—a slow, unhurried sway in place with arms loose around each other and too engrossed to notice anything but each other.

Delphine buries her face in my chest when our kiss naturally ends. “I almost don't want tonight to end. It's too perfect.”

My hold on her hand tightens and I squeeze her hip.

Me neither. You have no idea.

“I've been so stressed,” she confesses. “With everything that's been going on, it feels like we're playing with fire. But we're finally reaching the finish line. We just need to cross over. I just want to make it to the other side.”

Fear threads itself into her tone whether she means for it to or not. It even changes the cadence of her breathing.

“Listen to me,” I say, drawing her even closer against me. “I will always protect you. Even when I'm not around. Do you understand? You're going to live through anything that happens.”

Her bottom lip dips into a frown. “Jon, we're sticking together. I told you I want to stay by your side.”

The fierceness and determination behind her words, lives on her face. It solidifies in her voice and rolls off the energy she exudes.

The woman I'm in love with is equally as in love with me. She has every intention of seeing this through to the very end no matter what happens to us.

And it's for this reason I've got to do what I'm doing. It's what makes tonight so special even if she doesn't understand why.

I let myself indulge in her, cupping her face with one hand as we sway. The soft curve of her cheek fills my palm, and under the moonlight and strung-up bulbs, one of my favorite small details about her is visible—the subtle flecks of gold that sometimes appear in her brown eyes when the right light hits them. Just one of the many small things I've memorized about her.

Another being how her tongue pokes out to lick her bottom lip. I prove this habit of hers when my thumb travels to meet it, gliding across the plump curve just as her tongue appears. Her nose wrinkles and she moves as if to draw back, but I pull her closer 'til my mouth is on hers.

“Jon,” she breathes, fisting my dress shirt.

I kiss her thoroughly, overwhelming her senses. The heat between us runs hot despite the cold November air. No late-night wind can put it out. No rain or snow, not when it's ignited by the natural chemistry of our bodies.

Adrenaline rushes through me. The effect of Delphine's soft lips and body pressed against me.

We're both sporting that dazed sort of vibe and look when we do separate long enough to breathe. Any trace of her

lipstick is gone, which means it's likely on my face—not that I give a shit—and she's gripped my dress shirt so hard it's wrinkled with prints of her fingers. The wind's tousled her curls and we've been swaying in the same circle for minutes now.

A slow, crooked grin crosses my face. “You need to keep your hands to yourself.”

“Me?! You started it—you always start it!” She laughs, slapping me on the chest.

I hook her by the waist and keep us swaying to nonexistent music. “Have I ever told you I love it when you get mad?”

“I figured that out a long time ago, Jon.”

“Don't act like you haven't figured out how to drive me crazy. All those times you rub your ass on me in your sleep.”

She rolls her eyes despite how she tries to bite away her smile. “I'm *asleep*. Which means I don't know what I'm doing.”

“Uh huh. Convenient.”

“Is this what it's going to be like?”

“What what's going to be like?”

She smiles prettily, tipping her chin up to look at me. “After. Us. Married. You're going to be one of *those* husbands. The kind whose mission it is to tease their wife nonstop and drive her insane.”

“Hmmm. It *is* a fun hobby of mine.”

“So that's a yes.”

I squeeze her hip and then dig into my pocket with the other. “I've got a surprise for you.”

As the night winds down, it's time to reveal my special gift for her.

I reveal the surprise from within the smooth velvet box, a delicate white-gold ring with tiny diamonds along the narrow band. A larger pear-cut diamond crowns the ring, sparkling under the string lights dangling above us.

A promise ring sealing our fate. That we're going to have a future together.

Except it's not really a promise ring.

In my head, this is our wedding night, in case we don't ever get to have one. Delphine might not know it in this exact moment, but if tonight's our last, then this final memory will be of our union.

Tonight's the night we married. If I die taking out Lucius, I'll die knowing I married the woman I love. Even if I only got a couple hours with her in this way.

She's my wife.

I take a knee and hold up the ring.

“Will you marry me?”

Her smile brightens, if that's at all possible. Clueless she's really saying yes to more than an engagement—in my mind, as far as I'm concerned—she nods and chokes out, “Yes! Jon, of course!”

I slide the ring onto her finger and taste her sweet, smiling lips.

Several times she pulls away to glance at the ring and then at me with a shocked smile.

I almost tell her the truth. But... Delphine would cry. She would protest. She would never let me leave.

What I have planned is the only way.

“I should’ve known,” she whispers. “Of course you’d do something like this tonight.”

“Take you by surprise?”

“That’s an understatement.”

“You realize you’ve agreed to be my wife, right? There’s no take backs now,” I say with a throaty laugh.

She glances down at her hand, staring at the ring. “I’d marry you tonight, Jon.”

You already have, Phi. In my heart. In my soul.

If souls exist. I’ve never been the kind of guy to believe in them... ‘til I realized I fell for Delphine, and hers and mine were joined...

Under the starlit sky, we sway some more in each other’s arms. She’s beautiful and glowing in the satiny white dress that shows off her curves as she looks up at me with warm, loving eyes. I’m memorizing it all.

If I could stop time and make this night endless, I would.

Eventually, regrettably, my men arrive, and remind me of the schedule I’ve given them. Time’s run out for our dinner date.

I hold Delphine’s hand on our stroll to the car. “We’ll have a good rest of the night.”

Even if it’s our last.

salvatore

. . .



DELPHINE DISAPPEARS into the bathroom the moment we make it to the villa. Fine by me, since I use the time to pour us some wine and slip a sedative for later in Delphine's glass (a necessary evil considering my plan). Then I light a fire in the fireplace of our bedroom. I'm stoking the burning wood and sliding the gate into place when the bathroom door swings open and Delphine appears in my periphery.

It's the second time in a few hours I'm doing a double take looking up at her. The first time was in awe of how beautiful she looked wearing the 'wedding' dress I'd picked out for her. This time, I'm left drinking in the sight of her with much dirtier thoughts.

My body heats up standing by the fireplace, but not from its burning flames.

As it turns out, I wasn't the only one planning a surprise tonight.

I set down the fire poker and realize my next inhale sounds ragged in my chest.

For good reason—Delphine's changed into a sexy piece of red lingerie that has me about to swallow my fucking tongue

like a dumb *cazzo*.

The bodysuit molds itself to her incredible body, highlighting every last curve of hers in the most erotic fashion. The top half resembles a bustier, encasing her breasts in sheer lace that teases dark brown nipples I want to suck into my mouth. The lower half is no less tantalizing, a high-cut type of panty that reminds me how plump her pussy is.

But the biggest surprise of all is once she starts strutting toward me, slow and sexy in heels I didn't even realize she has, and then stops in front of me. I reach for her only to discover my palms slide over her fat, bare ass.

"Phi, you fucking tease," I groan, easing her around, my gaze falling to the bodysuit's thong-cut in the back. I smack my hand to her behind, a light and quick punishment for her deception. "You're not supposed to *try* to drive me crazy."

She turns around, her lips quirked. "Surprise."

"This is what I mean—just like you love rubbing that ass on me in your sleep. You do stuff like this then play innocent."

The little giggle she releases is so damn adorable on top of everything else. Yet another contrast to how sexy she is and how alluring she's behaving that I wrap an arm around her and draw her into a deep, appreciative kiss.

Right away, she's sliding hands up my chest and curling her body into mine. Her breasts press into me, soft and full at the same time. We're lost in each other's kiss, forgetting about the roaring fire and glasses of wine waiting for us. Instead, we indulge each other on our own timetable, taking our time.

I grip her ass and enjoy how her lips feel against mine. Deep kisses might be one of Delphine's hugest turn ons, but I'm hardly any different—ironic, considering I've rarely had

patience kissing any other woman. I'm usually just trying to fuck so I can get it out of my system and then move on.

But, with Delphine, our lips and tongues teasing each other turns me the hell on. That's *before* I've even really touched her. Passion's so infused in our deep kisses that it takes my mind to the same dirty places it goes whenever my hands are on her.

And they *are* on her.

As we kiss some more, switching up our angle, and going for shorter, more punctuated kisses, I let my hands roam her supple curves.

Even now, after everything we've been through over the years, I marvel that she's mine. That she wants to be mine. Tonight, she agreed to marry me.

She *did* marry me.

This is our wedding night, and I intend on wreaking so much pleasure from her body, she'll never forget this moment.

But I also want to savor it for as long as possible, which means—

“If we keep on like this, you're going to make me come,” I tell her, dropping a final quick kiss on her lips. I pull away and turn to the wine glasses I poured.

“I don't see a problem. I want you to come. On me. In me. Down my—”

“Bad girl,” I scold, smacking her behind again. I hand her the glass of wine and keep my own. “Let's at least toast first and *pretend* we're civilized.”

“The man nicknamed Psycho preaching civility. I've seen everything.”

Her teasing draws the slightest grin from me. I watch her as she sips from her wine and wanders over to the fireplace. Just when I'm wondering if she'll carry on being playful or switch up, she catches me off guard with a question.

“So are you going to tell me the real reason for this trip?”

“I told you. It's the holidays and I wanted to surprise you.”

She holds out her hand and studies her ring, the other still holding her wine glass. “I never expected you to propose tonight.”

“Is that a good or bad thing?”

“You had your answer when I said I'd marry you tonight.”

You already have.

I set down my glass and follow her to the fireplace. “And start our future tonight?”

“As in?”

“Phi, if you're going to be my wife, you're going to have my babies. Which means we've got to get started tonight.”

“So much for civilized.”

My grin that flitted across my mouth a mere minute ago returns. “You're the one who just pointed out I'm called Psycho—and you walked out wearing this.”

She stills at my touch. My fingers glide along her shoulder to toy with the strap of her bustier top. I rub the thin, delicate fabric between my fingers and then tug it further down her shoulder 'til it's hanging off the side. Her breath stalls as I lean close and press my lips to the smooth patch of skin.

Doing so only intoxicates me on her scent. The natural sweet scent of her skin. No descriptors do it justice but to say

it's simply Phi. The scent that's unique to her and gets me going on a single inhale.

One kiss turns into two. Two into three. Three into four. Before I know it, I'm kissing my way across her shoulder, up her throat. I'm capturing her lips again, meeting her for a kiss she eagerly reciprocates.

So much for civilized, indeed.

I gently ease the wine glass from her and place it on the mantel of the fireplace. It frees us up to do what we really want to do: lose control with each other.

My hand comes up to finger the other strap of her bustier 'til that ones down too. The cups cling to her breasts on their last lifeline, sinking lower, revealing more of the full mounds of flesh, and creating cleavage that makes me want to bury my face in them.

Delphine seems to share my sentiments. She reaches behind herself and fiddles with the hooks in the back. I break away from our kisses long enough to turn her around and help her. The hooks pop free one at a time by my quick fingers. The bustier slips down the front of her torso, no longer skintight and molded to her.

Her breasts set free.

Our mouths join again once she's back around. My hands fill with her breasts. Hers fall to the belt of my pants. While she's unbuckling me, I'm tweaking her nipples and massaging the soft, bouncy mounds that feel so damn good in my grasp.

Finally, she undoes my pants and then slides her hands up my solid abdomen. Next she works on my shirt buttons. Delphine being Delphine takes her time touching and feeling.

You'd think by how slow she's moving and I'm moving, this is our first time exploring. The thing is, it could be the millionth time, and we'd still act like it was the first time.

I lose my shirt and I tug the rest of Delphine's sexy tease of a bodysuit off her. She's nude before me in nothing but her heels.

My dick jumps inside my pants and demands I unleash it from its constraints. I'm heated, my skin warm, and my insides even warmer. To say I'm erect and aroused would be an understatement—I'm having to consciously keep myself in check so not to pounce on Delphine here and now.

But... it's more important to go slow. Savor every last second.

Make tonight last as long as possible.

"Get on the bed, Phi," I say, kissing her lips in between my command. "Get on the bed and show me how you want me to touch you."

She moans yet obeys. Her round ass draws my full attention as she turns around and walks to the bed, slipping off her heels, before crawling on. I'm not sure what to expect, though I know whatever she'll do will turn me the fuck on; she could get in bed and pull out a book to read, and it'd make me harder if she was naked while she was doing it.

Delphine rests on her knees and props herself up by her elbow. Her other hand reaches between her legs and she begins playing with her pussy.

The view is unmatched—Delphine glowing like a fucking goddess in the firelight, beautifully naked and arched on the bed in front of me. Her perfect round ass and curvy thighs on

display and her pussy lips peeking in between, glossed with her arousal.

She only arches more the more she plays with herself. She falls flat onto her stomach on the bed, her hand trapped between her thighs, and writhes against the sheets as she gets herself off.

It's like watching art in motion. This gorgeous, uninhibited woman flaunting her sexuality just for me. Pleasure flickers across her face. Her brows knit and her lips part and then she buries her face into the sheets. Her ministrations grow furious, faster and faster.

She rolls onto her back. Her legs fall open without shame and I'm gifted with the sight of her fingers dipping inside herself.

I'm panting. I've pulled out my cock and started fisting myself. At some point I've wandered from the fireplace to the edges of the bed, standing over her for a front row view.

When I can't stand it another second and she's a couple flicks of her clit away from coming, I give in. I join her on the bed, pinning her arms at the sides of her head and kissing her. My mouth lands on hers with a level of hunger that's unsurpassed.

Our bodies curl into each other. Our limbs entangle. Hedonistic desire heats the air a hotter temperature than the fireplace ever could. It manifests between us as we roll over and kiss and tune ourselves into the moment until it's what we become—two lovers wrapped up in passion and pleasure.

I taste every part of her within reach. My mouth devours hers and then explores. She's doing the same, gripping me, grinding her pelvis into mine before I'm even inside her. Our

movements are unhurried but no less fueled by the heat between us.

I enter Delphine as we're locked in deep, affectionate kisses and greedy caresses. She shudders against me, her legs banding around me. I curse and bury my face in her neck, holding myself still to truly memorize the moment.

Ingrain it in my memory banks for what's coming sooner than I want it to.

The feel of her. Scent of her. Sound of her. All of it as I hold still and slick heat clenches around me.

I begin to move, slow but with purpose. Deep, dragging strokes that are almost more tortuous for her. It's in how her breath shallows and she moans. Her head falls to the side and the rest of her body arches up into mine.

She's feeling what I'm feeling—the intense sensations washing over us as every movement, no matter how slow and calculated, brings us closer to climax.

My thick cock slides into her and ignites a thousand pulses of pleasure throughout the rest of my muscled body. I fight to keep going, take my time, soak in the moment alongside her.

She's so wet and tight that every stroke is like sinking into velvet heaven.

I bury a hand in her tiny, zigzag curls and tug 'til I'm angling her head, turning her face back up to mine, and crushing my lips to hers.

We've returned to our deep kisses, simultaneously developing the perfect rhythm. We rock together, our limbs everywhere. Her arms and legs interlocked with mine and mine with hers, our bodies joined in every sense of the word.

My pelvis aligned with hers, her clit's stimulated. She mewls at the friction and grinds her hips into me. I help her, scooping an arm under her thigh and coming in even closer, so that I can feel her gushing wet pussy lips and clit mashing against me. No fingers involved. She loses it.

Delphine comes with a deep quiver and rake of her nails down my forearms. She clutches to me as we continue rocking, continue the delicious, tortuous friction that's just pushed her over the edge.

That pushes me over the edge.

I let go as she does. Our penchant for shared orgasms unmatched.

I can hear the huskiness in my voice as I grunt and buck into her several more times. My muscles twitch and my balls tighten.

"Fuck!" I yell out as I plant myself and spill my release into her.

She hasn't let go, clinging to me, legs still flexibly banded around my hips in a crisscross.

I'm spinning for who knows how many seconds. I'm swimming in the same sea of ecstasy as she is. A full-body tremor wracks through me and leaves me spent and shaken. I'm lucid enough to recognize the beautiful glowing face looking up at me.

I crack a smile and kiss her on the lips.

In the kind of adoring way a man kisses the woman he loves.

I might as well be drunk. I don't know what's happening other than I'm momentarily the happiest man on the planet,

wrapping my wife up in my arms.

In this moment, she's mine. I'm here, and nothing can change that.

“Phi,” I blurt out, intoxicated as fuck. “I want you to stop taking your birth control.”

She giggles at first then stops when she sees the expression on my face. “You’re being serious?”

“If you took the last one yesterday, I came in you today, could you still get pregnant?”

“Jon, where is this coming from? Why do you want me pregnant?”

Because I want you to have my child... even if I'm not around to experience it...

I slide my hand along her spine ’til it rests at her tailbone. “I really want that future with you, Phi.”

“We have time. When this is over with your father, we’ll figure out how to move forward. I want to start that life with you... *our* life together.”

Her eyes close as I press my lips to her forehead. “You’re going to be amazing. When do you do become a mother. You’ll be great.”

“You’ll be there,” she says, giving me a funny look. “Why are you saying it like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re speaking about me only and not you.”

“Because I can’t wait for you to bear my children.”

“And you’ll be there to raise them with me.”

I grab both her wrists and pin them on either side of her head at the same moment I swoop in for quick kisses—kisses designed to serve as a *distraction*.

It works like a charm.

For the next hour, we lounge in bed and watch the flames in the fireplace. We drink the wine and talk. I give Delphine more hell about our hypothetical married life. Frustrating her really is a fun pastime. One I'm saying goodbye to, but intend to enjoy in these last moments.

“Why did I agree to marry you again?”

“Too late. No take backs. We've been over this.”

She snorts. “Talk your shit now, Jon. I'm going to have you in Christmas sweaters and we're taking couple photos and we're going apple picking.”

“The fuck we are.”

“I *bet* you would. For me.” She snuggles closer with a pouty mouth and shiny eyes that I can't resist and I know it.

She's well aware of the truth—most times, I can't say no to her.

Besides, I enjoy the couple stuff. Even if I've never admitted it aloud. As with everything, it's different with Delphine. Enjoyable with her.

I let her imagination run wild. Mine does too.

We spend the time lying in the warmth of the fire, our wrinkled bed sheets strewn across our hips, and we map out a whole hypothetical future we'll have together. Complete with a home sweet home, three kids (we agree it's a good number), and summer vacations to tranquil places like Montbec Island.

My heart swells with an unnamed emotion listening to the hope in Delphine's voice.

Then the drowsiness as the sedative I slipped into her glass of wine kicks in. Sneaky and underhanded. Not at all something I wanted to do, but necessary given what I *have* to do.

"You comfy?" I ask, stroking her curls.

She murmurs unintelligibly, so sleepy she's beyond words. Her soft, pliable curves have contorted into my hard, solid body, and my dutiful arm keeps her there. I watch, wide awake, as she drifts off into a peaceful sleep.

This is how I'll remember her... for the foreseeable future.

Her face calm, her expression vacant. Her eyelashes kiss her cheeks and her heart-shaped lips hold no tension, no feeling. She's too deep into her dreams for anything else.

It takes everything I have to get up out of the bed. Untangle myself from her body and get dressed in the dark silence. Make my feet move and walk toward the door.

I pause the closer I get and take another long, selfish look at her tangled in the sheets that smell of us and our lovemaking. She has no clue that she'll wake up to me gone tomorrow; she'll be so confused...

I inhale a struggling breath and turn my back. Walking away from Delphine, possibly for good this time, is like ripping my fucking heart out of my chest, and leaving a gaping hole in its place.

The most difficult thing I've ever had to do in my life.

Say goodbye to my wife.

delphine

. . .



I CAN'T REMEMBER the last time I slept in so late, the afternoon sun burned through my closed eyelids. But as I lay heavy as lead in bed, the sunlight pierces my closed lids to the point I can't keep facing the window any longer. I roll over and squint, opening my eyes in hopes I'll gradually adjust to the brightness.

My head spins.

I feel like I'm hungover. Salvatore and I had a few glasses of wine, but this... this isn't that.

This feels markedly different.

This feels like... like... I got drunk off my ass. Completely faded, blackout drunk—or worse, not drunk at all.

It feels as if I was—there's no possible way.

I rub my face and kick away the bed covers. My mind struggles even with basic thought and my body's no better with even the simplest movements. I lurch my way to the bathroom, realizing I'm alone in the bedroom.

I'm alone.

Salvatore's side of the bed is untouched. Then I do a double take glancing at the closet.

His things are gone.

“What the...” I mutter, backing away from the closet only to overhear voices trailing from other parts of the villa.

Voices that are not Salvatore’s.

I rush from the room with lurching movements and his name on my lips.

“Jon!” I call out, skipping steps down the stairs.

Pepa greets me at the bottom with a gentle meow. She sits as if in wait for me, her eyes bright and curious.

What is Pepa doing here?!

Salvatore mentioned nothing about Salt and Pepa coming with us, and when we’d left yesterday, they were under the care of Stitches...

I pass by her without stopping. Uncharacteristic for me, but I’m too worked up to stop. I need to know what is going on.

Men’s voices. The kitchen. Who the hell—

In my desperation to find out what’s going on, my legs spread into longer strides. I make it down the hall with Pepa trotting in my wake, probably looking like a lunatic as I jog in a negligee only Salvatore ever sees me in.

Fabio and another guy who frequently works security named Lev sip coffee at the kitchen counter like they’re on their morning break. The two men, who resemble stereotypical *soldatos* as they’d be called, with their muscle-tight t-shirts, tattoos, gelled hair, and goatees, couldn’t seem more relaxed. By the looks of it, their morning couldn’t be better!

Yet here I am, confused as hell, wondering why I've somehow been mindfucked overnight.

My teeth grit and I move to rush over and confront them.

A hand clamps around my elbow and stops me. I'm turned around by a concerned Stitches with his wire-framed glasses low on his nose, his brow furrowed.

"Miss ADA," he says. "What's the matter? You came running downstairs? You're... you're not dressed."

His ears redden and I tug the hem of my negligee further down my thighs.

"Follow me," I say. He does as I ask, coming up the rear as I lead the way upstairs. "What the hell is going on, Stitches? I go to sleep last night in bed with Jon in our villa. Just the two of us. I wake up in the afternoon alone with Salvatore and his things gone, a crew of men here, and Salt and Pepa personally delivered to me."

He peers out the window while I disappear into the closet and throw on the first sweater and pair of jeans I find. I emerge more adamant and pissed than ever.

"Well?"

A sigh leaves him as he drags his eyes from the window. "You're gonna be staying here a while. It's for your own good."

"How long?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Where's Salvatore?"

"I can't tell you that either."

"I want to speak to him."

“I can’t let you.”

My glare darkens. “I’m not asking for your permission, Stitches. I’m *going* to speak to him.”

“Look, Miss ADA, you can’t. It’s... it’s not allowed.”

“Excuse me? You’re testing the wrong one today, Stitches. We’re friends and you’re my security. We’re on good terms, but you don’t hold any authority over me. I’m going to talk to him regardless of what you want. Honestly? Fuck off if you think it’s your place to try to stop me.”

I stride over to the nightstand table where I usually charge my phone overnight.

My iPhone is gone. It’s nowhere to be found on the nightstand and when I go look, it’s not in my purse.

It’s nowhere because it’s been confiscated.

“Stitches,” I growl. “Give me back my fucking phone!”

From behind his wire-framed glasses, his light brown eyes fill with apology. “I can’t, Miss ADA. Strict orders. No communication with the outside world. That includes cellular devices.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Psycho’s orders. I told you. You’re... you’re in hiding. You can’t go anywhere, and you can’t talk to anyone. You’re to stay here with us, your security. It’s for the best while everything goes down.”

A cold chill that can only be described as dread courses through me. “You’re saying Salvatore... that he... secretly... he put me in hiding so he could go...fight his...”

“That’s right. It was for the best. You’re a liability, Miss ADA. At no fault of your own. But if you got captured, it’s over for us all. Best course of action was to take you completely off the table. Let Psycho and his father handle it man to man. Then, when it’s all said and done, we’ll move on.”

“And if Salvatore doesn’t return?”

My question goes unanswered.

A heaviness fills the empty space and turns the atmosphere dark and ominous.

Stitches rubs the back of his neck and returns his gaze to the window.

Suddenly, I’m wild with panic and impatience again, taking a step toward him. “Stitches, answer me! He’s going to take him out, right? Salvatore’s got the upper hand and he’s going to take out his father?!”

“He should. He should win.”

“Should or *will!*?”

“Miss ADA, I can’t... I’m no fortune teller.”

“Oh my god,” I whisper as the heartbreaking reality collapses on me. I twist my fingers in my curls without caring how I mess up and tangle them. “Oh my god,” I repeat in shaky panic. “That was the last time I’m ever going to see him. What if he never comes back? What if he doesn’t make it? What if his father kills him?”

“Hey, calm down! Don’t panic like that. You’ll make yourself crazy—” Stitches ditches the window as I begin pacing.

A habit of mine when I'm falling deep down a black hole of overthinking. Usually, it's due to some stressful work or academic situation, but this time it's out of debilitating panic and anguish as tears water my eyes and my body quakes.

"*Delphine!*" Stitches yells. He reaches for me, but I'm beyond listening.

I'm spiraling.

It's like I'm in my own world. I couldn't stop the meltdown if I wanted to.

Then my mind turns to last night, and another devastating realization smacks into me head-on. I stumble to a stop mid-pace, my stare going scarily vacant.

"Last night. The special occasion. He... he knew he was leaving me."

"Delphine, it tore him up. He didn't want to. But he had to. You should've seen him. He wasn't himself."

"He asked me to marry him knowing there was a real chance he'd never return," I whisper, my heart squeezing with the painful realization. It can only take so much pain; surely it'll burst open if it's squeezed any more. And yet it keeps going, tighter and tighter 'til every beat is pain.

"You're his wife. He told me that. Last night... he married you."

I can't stand still. The room sways. My legs buckle and I'm falling. Stitches rushes over, but I catch myself before he can make it. I grab onto the side of the bed, half upright, on bended knee, swimming in a wave of dizziness that leaves me nauseous.

He's gone. He's gone.

Salvatore's... gone...

Jon.

The tears come. They flood me at once in an ugly, raw cry that rips through me and rings through the air.

I collapse the rest of the way. I let my body crumple to the floor like I'm no longer solid.

So much about last night makes sense.

The special trip to Asbury. The white dress he'd picked out. The ring and dancing. The proposal and way he'd looked at me, like he was truly savoring the moment. Even our passionate lovemaking in bed felt different...

"I can't breathe," I gasp. "I can't breathe."

"Yes, you can. You're having a panic attack. I'll help you through it. One breath at a time, okay?" Stitches says gently, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Slow and deep, from your belly. Repeat after me."

Holding his gaze with tears in my eyes, I do as he says. He breathes in and out in a gradual, coaching manner until my own breathing settles.

The dizziness remains. My chest still aches, and my stomach roils with nausea. The tears have distorted my vision to such a point Stitches appears as nothing more than a blur. We sit in silence for a while, glum and pessimistic, both with thoughts on Salvatore even if we don't admit it aloud.

Though I do anyway.

"Tell me the truth," I say, my voice hoarse. "It's a real possibility, isn't it? That he's not going to make it? That he's not going to win? I'm never going to see him again? He knew, didn't he, and that's why I'm here?"

Stitches pauses long enough for a sigh. “Yes.”

salvatore

. . .



THE MEETING between the Five Families is officially less than a month away. It finally feels real when there's a countdown going. I can't look at a calendar or a clock without thinking about it.

But it's most noticeable when I let my mind wander to the last night I spent with Delphine.

The moment I watched her slip off to sleep and said goodbye. Possibly for the last time.

Either I'm going to win, or I'm going to die.

There's no in between—no longer do I consider it a win if I take out Lucius and die alongside him. How can it be a true victory if I don't get to return to the woman I love?

Stitches, Fabio, and several other of my top men specializing in security have broken off from my main crew. Their task for the foreseeable future is to serve as Delphine's guard while she's in hiding at an undisclosed location. Should me and the rest of the crew fail in our mission to take out Lucius, they've been given explicit orders to evacuate the country. Get Delphine out to another undisclosed location overseas, where she'll live a new life under an alias, never to return to the States.

It's the only way to guarantee her survival.

It's the only comfort I'd have if I do lose this last battle against my father. It would turn our story into some kind of romantic tragedy, but at least she'd be alive and taken care of.

These worst-case scenarios are thoughts I force myself to bury away.

Now is the time to focus. I can't be caught slipping again.

Lucius outplayed me once. I got cocky and overplayed my hand. The irony was embarrassing as fuck—me thinking he was underestimating me when I was really underestimating him.

In reality, he was carefully pulling strings.

Lucius went after Delphine.

That fact unsettles me to my core. I have never uttered a word about Delphine to Lucius. We've never exactly been close, the type of father and son to talk about anything but our disdain for each other. He doesn't give enough of a fuck about me to ask about my personal life.

It's not like he was the kind of father asking about my friends at school or the girls I was interested in growing up.

And Delphine and I have always been more or less *secretive* about our relationship.

While she was present in my loft when his men broke in, and we've recently been more public about dating, it's still unsettling he'd know to go straight for her. That he'd know of her value and priority. It doesn't help the paranoia that's been making me question everything around me.

"Everything is as good as can be," Stitches says vaguely when we speak over our secured devices. He and our computer

guy set up military-grade encrypted mobile phones for us to communicate with as extra layers of protection. Our calls are untraceable and anonymous. “She’s not happy. That’s putting it lightly. But... we knew that.”

“And the rest?”

Stitches briefs me on everything else about the safe house. Nothing happening beyond security patrols and standard measures being taken is good news—or at least it should be. As we hang up, though, paranoia pinches at the side of my neck.

I roll my head on my shoulders and try to get rid of it.

“Are we doing this?” Omar asks, coming up on my left. “You sure this *Solnishko* is reliable?”

“He said he’d give us what we need.”

“Who is he?”

“Somebody Stefania knew that Lucius didn’t want her knowing. The address he provided is all the way over in Heinsberg Park.”

“Not the best neighborhood.”

“They never are. C’mon.”

We roll out in several armored cars. These days we’re beyond the cockiness of assuming anybody we deal with isn’t trying to do us harm. With the countdown clock to the Five Families get-together winding down to zero, everybody’s a suspect. Everybody’s an enemy. Guilty until proven innocent.

Stefania seemed to trust *Solnishko* enough to have him saved in her phone. Lucius wanted to keep that piece of info hidden enough to steal her phone. Florina and Marsia both thought it important enough to warn me about it.

But who's to say what's really going on? If *Solnishko* is really a friend or a foe?

The address I've been provided has us pulling up in front of an old restaurant.

The Voronezh was a Russian eatery that closed many years ago. Nobody ever bought the property and thought to reopen it either as a second shot at success or as a revamped version of something else. The squat building sits unoccupied and miserable with graffiti-tagged boards in the window and trash scattered across the floor.

The door's not even all the way closed—it creaks open on wobbly hinges and reveals what can only be described as a dumping ground.

The place is littered with signs of its use over the years. Used needles and other paraphernalia. Broken liquor bottles. More graffiti tag. Shopping carts stocked with scavenged junk. Even a few stale, used up condoms that make our stomachs roil.

The abandoned restaurant has been put to use for many purposes beyond eating... though that's been going on too. A couple rodents have taken residence. They scurry by, clutching their finds from whatever dumpster they raided.

“Where the fuck is this *Solnishko* guy?” Arturo asks, shuddering after another rat dashes through. “I don't like all these rodents being around.”

“It's a rat. Shut the fuck up or I'll feed you to it, *codardo*.”

“Do we know if this guy has any ties to the Bratva? He's got us standing in a whole Russian restaurant,” Omar says.

It's something I've considered—this could lead us back to Kozlov, who I have been slowly attempting to establish an

alliance with. It could even *finally* lead us to Volchok, which would intrigue me most.

All clues regarding Volchok point to him being involved with Delphine's attack. He paid off two of the men involved in targeting her. He's a member of the Neptune Society, possibly a *high-ranking* one at that. Nobody anywhere has seen him in years. If he's targeting Delphine and Lucius is targeting Delphine, then why would Stefania consider him an ally? Why would Lucius consider him a threat?

None of it makes sense.

The gentle pad of footsteps reaches our ears. Me and the others aim our guns at the back door. Whoever it is—that somebody being *Solnishko*—they were smart enough not to come through the front. Which means they wanted a chance to see us before we saw them.

I'm expecting all sorts of things. Even possibly Lucius in another fucked up twist of events.

But the last thing I'm expecting is for Lena Burtka to walk up donning giant sunglasses that take up half her ghostly face.

We all stare at each other for a second. My men don't lower their guns, nor do I tell them to.

She snuffles and then glances around the trashed restaurant which reeks of piss. "The last time I was here they served very tasty dumpling soup."

"That must've been a decade ago. You fucking with us or are you really *Solnishko*?"

A frown etches onto her pale lips. "*Solnishko* is dead. He has been dead for a very long time. I thought you understood this."

“I don’t give a fuck either way. I told you what I want. You said you had it.”

“Americans,” she huffs, clutching both sides of her winter coat together. Though the sunglasses she wears cover half her face, she pulls off a haughty expression well enough with how her nostrils flare and she tilts her chin up. “I did not say I have what you want. I said I know where it is. And if you expect me to tell you then you should have your men be respectful enough to refrain from pointing their weapons at me!”

Fair enough.

I throw a quick glance over my shoulder to signal for them to stand down. But that’s about as much courtesy as Lena Burtka—Lena fucking Volchok—is going to get from me.

“I’ve got a few questions, Lena,” I say. “I know you’re Volchok’s daughter. You’re Ernest Adams’s mistress. You’ve been deep in his back pocket. Even supporting his campaign for mayor. How do I know this isn’t a set up?”

“Daughter? Mistress?” She repeats the words with a sudden lilt to her stern Russian voice. Apparently, the accusation’s amusing enough that she rips off her huge sunglasses for the laugh that makes its way out of her. “You are very much in the dark. I believed I was dealing with someone who knew more. This is a waste of my time.” She moves to go.

“Don’t fucking move. You said you have info about what I want. You’re going to provide that info to me right now,” I growl, my patience snapping in half. “Spit it out or we’ll do things the hard way!”

Lena Volchok’s not intimidated by Mafia threats. She smirks, her translucent blue eyes raking me up and down. “I

have never fucked Mr. Adams. You can tell his daughter that. She is very upset about it.”

“Something I’ll remain skeptical about. The info you have. Now.”

She takes a step closer. “Volchok was not my father.”

“The records show differently.”

“The records are wrong. Doctored. We were not related in any capacity. That was merely a cover we were given when we began working together. Volchok would handle Kozlov’s business dealings. Quite often I was a part of the... deal.”

The way she utters the word ‘deal’ lets me know all I need to know about the use they found in Lena.

But it’s none of my concern, so I let her know this.

“I don’t give a fuck. The info. You have sixty seconds or I’m moving on to other means of extracting info.” It’s me who takes the step this time, stalking toward her. My hand draws my trusted Balisong knife, a favorite of mine during interrogation sessions.

I usually avoid getting rough with women, but if the situation calls for it—if she’s withholding information she has—I’ll do what’s necessary. Most times, they give it up almost immediately. Though Lena seems like the type to hold out ’til the bitter end as her smirk lingers, and her gaze never falters from mine.

“*Solnishko* was in Stefania’s phone because it was her nickname. She saved it in there as a reminder. She loved him very much,” she goes on calmly as if I haven’t just threatened to injure her very badly. “I have his phone. Which is why when you texted him, you texted me.”

“That’s the story you’re going with? Ernest isn’t going to like that I cut up his mistress’s face.”

“If you were smart, you would pay attention to the information I am giving you. If you think none of it plays a part in the evidence you are looking for, then you are more foolish than Mr. Adams says you are. You will surely fail against a man as ingenious as Lucius Mancino. You are no match for him. How disappointing.”

I’ve had enough of her games.

As she turns a second time to leave, I wrench a hold of her by the arm and drag her over to the nearest table. Her frightened shriek fills the air as she twists and thrashes to set herself free. My grip is ironclad against any struggle she puts forth. I slam her down against the table with her head turned to the side, her cheek pressed into the moth-eaten tablecloth. Her short, white-blond hair is strewn across her face, a disheveled mess that’s fallen in her eyes.

She continues fighting, flopping against me. I merely push her back down and brush the hair away from her cheek, making sure plenty of skin is available.

“Shame I’ve got to do this. Scars like these never go away,” I say, twirling my knife between my fingers in my free hand. “Hold still or I might *really* do some damage—”

“STOP!” she screams, squirming under my grip. “Let me up. I will tell you. I swear on *Solnishko’s* life.”

“Considering you just told me he’s dead, that means nothing to me. Whoever he is.”

“It is my life on the line if you get that tape. And he finds out. It is... it is me who will be... it is me who will pay.”

“And how’s that?”

She clenches shut her eyes, a pained expression on her face. “Because it... it was me. I was the one who filmed it.”

I release Lena and take a step back.

Now that she’s made her confession, it makes sense given everything I know.

From what I’ve seen of that night—from what went down on the first half of the tape—Lena stood out like a sore thumb—some young Russian escort in a room full of mostly Italian Mafia and their women. As everybody socialized the night away, Lena hovered in the background with shifty eyes, always seemingly on edge. I’d assumed it was because of her age and discomfort with being around people she couldn’t understand.

“You filmed it,” I repeat slowly. “For what reason?”

She nods, straightening her coat. “I was hoping to blackmail Mr. Mancino.”

“And how did that work out for you?”

“Not quite so well. I suffered many years for what I did.”

“Prove it. Tell me something only the person who filmed it would know.”

“I set the camcorder inside the vase of flowers across from their table to capture their conversation during dinner. The second one I put in the interrogation room. That was for the confrontation I knew would happen.”

My eyes narrow into a scrutinizing appraisal. “Where is it?”

“The old police station on Warren and Thelm. That is where it was being held as evidence.”

“If we find out you’re lying, you’ll be sorry.”

Those are my parting words to Lena as me and my men leave her standing where she is in the middle of Voronezh. We’ve wasted enough time on her when I don’t know for sure if she’s been fucking with me or if what she’s said is reliable.

For half a moment I considered forcing her along, then changed my mind the more I thought about it—I don’t like the idea of involving her too deeply in our operation, even if she’s the one who supplied us with the information in the first place.

But make no mistake, if she lied to me, she’ll pay.

For real this time, by the blade of my Balisong.



Lena Burtka—or Volchok—chose death.

We follow her lead only to discover the bitch was lying. We scope out the old police station on Thelm Boulevard only to find the evidence lockers empty. As an extra precaution, we explore the rest of the cob-webbed station riddled with unused office furniture and dimmed ceiling lights powered by some backup generator.

“Now, what?” Arturo asks, wiping dust from his hands.

I grit my teeth. “We pay the bitch a visit. I told her what would happen if she was fucking with us. She only has herself to blame for the pain about to come her way.”

“We’ve got her address. She’s only a few blocks away,” says Omar.

We waste no time confronting her—busting in the door to her shitty apartment in Northam’s East Village.

With somebody that's a wild card like Lena, none of us know what to expect. She might scream and cower, plead with us to spare her life. She might have some sort of trap set up, luring us deep into trouble. Or she might have done something elusive and unpredictable, knowing we're coming for her, and skipped town.

None of these things are what she chooses to do.

We barge into her apartment and come across her seated at a foldable table by the window. She's calm, though rosy splotches mar her pale skin. In one hand she lifts a cigarette to her lips and in the other she clutches a bottle of vodka.

I exchange a glance with Omar and Arturo.

"Hello," she slurs. Her lips curl into a small, ironic smile. "Here to kill me? You have discovered my deception."

"Look," I growl between gritted teeth, "whatever stupid fucking game you're playing, I've got no patience. I warned you what would happen if you lied."

"I am sorry... but I was telling the truth. Partially. The second VHS tape *was* there. Mr. Ernest hid the tape at that station, because it was abandoned and he thought to keep it for insurance."

"There was no damn tape!"

"But there was... until I took it earlier today. Before I met with you. I had plans." She rises from the chair she's seated in and lumbers over to her kitchen that's not really a kitchen—the sink, stove and mini fridge are a single connected unit attached to the yellow-tiled wall. She pulls open the stove and withdraws a VHS tape from inside. "I made a mistake. A very, very bad one. I called Mr. Lucius. I hung up, but he will trace it back to me. I was going to make my confession and give this

to him. I was hoping he would spare me despite what I did. That maybe he would go after you instead. But... I could not do it. I could not betray Volchok.”

I stride forward, my gait fast and uncompromising with power in each step. I reach her in no time and snatch the tape out of her thin fingers.

There’s a catch. This can’t be it. Lena can’t be trusted. She’s setting us up—then again, I have the tape in my grasp, and looking down at it, it seems legit.

Its labeling matches the first tape.

I glare at her. “You still don’t get to live. You fucked up by lying and sending us to that police station. You think just ‘cuz you confess now you’ll get a pass? I’ve got some bad news for you, sweetheart.”

“Do as you wish.” She takes another swig of her vodka and wanders back over to the window.

Strangely enough, something about her reminds me of Stefania in this moment. It’s in how she lurches when she moves, slurring her words, eyes filled with deep longing and regret. I don’t give a fuck to know more of her story, but it seems clear something’s weighing on her.

“I doomed him,” she whispers a second later. “Everything that has gone wrong. And it is my fault.”

“Save the tears. Arturo.”

He slings back the hammer on his gun and levels it in her direction.

“You can kill me. But they will kill you.”

Arturo’s face screws up in confusion. “This bitch really is crazy.”

“Outside. We have company. Just as I thought. Quicker than I anticipated. They have come for me. He always gets his way.”

I move to the window, nudging her out of the way. Omar and Arturo do the same.

Sure enough, Lena’s finally telling the truth—three of Lucius’s vehicles are parked along the curb and a gang of men have gotten out and shot toward the building entrance.

We’re outnumbered twelve to three. At least.

“Shit!” I grunt, my mind racing with possible scenarios on how this’ll play out.

Omar and Arturo are no different.

“What do you want us to do?” Omar asks. “You hear that? It sounds like they’re already in the hall.”

“Stay here.”

They start to protest, but I don’t give them the opportunity to, disappearing into the one other room in Lena Burtka’s shitty studio. The bathroom is the only place where I can maybe get away with stowing it. My gaze flicks up to the ceiling tiles infested with mold.

The commotion outside intensifies. Omar and Arturo call for me. Lena slurs something about pulling the trigger.

My heart’s hammering away in my ribcage as I emerge to the sight of the studio door being blasted open. As if us kicking it in wasn’t enough, they’ve blown a hole through the door.

“Fuck!” yells Arturo. Omar’s no less panicked.

Meanwhile, I'm calm and composed, knowing there's no way we're escaping. Not without a lot of bloodshed and some kills. I've got my pistol and my knives, though the odds are stacked against us.

That's putting it mildly.

But it's Lena's reaction that's the most extreme—she screams at Arturo one last time to pull the trigger, begging him to shoot her. When he doesn't, too busy aiming at Lucius's men flooding the studio, she takes matters into her own hands.

“I will not return to the Mill!” she screams in drunken hysterics. “I will not let them bring me back there!”

Before anybody can make sense of what she means, she smashes the half full bottle of vodka she's clutching and uses one of the large glass shards to slit her throat.

Blood splatters and her body stumbles half alive, half dead to a collapse on the floor.

None of us have a chance for any kind of reaction—we've got a bigger matter at hand with Ray De Trolio breezing through the door. His unibrow raises and lips spread in delight.

“Look, who it is, fellas! It's Psycho... and the dead prostitute, but who gives a fuck about her? We've been looking all over for *you*.”

“What a coincidence,” I say coolly, me and my two guys against their dozen. “I've been waiting for a chance to kick your ass.”

De Trolio's smile spreads. “We'll see about that.”

delphine

. . .



HOW'S IT possible that I've never felt so far away from Salvatore yet so connected to him at the same time?

I toss and turn through the night, unable to sleep.

Something is wrong. Deeply, horribly, unsettlingly wrong.

I don't know how I know this. I can't put it into words or make sense of it. For all I know, it could be another bad case of paranoia rearing its ugly head.

Every time I tell myself this, it comes back ten times stronger than before. I wake up sweaty and breathless in the middle of the night, shaken to my core. A sickening premonition pits inside my stomach, and I feel helpless and bound by invisible restraints.

A prisoner inside a heavily guarded home.

In theory it's for my own safety.

But what about Salvatore? What about *his* safety?

The days and nights have melded together. I haven't bothered keeping to a routine, though it goes against my nature—I can't bring myself to when nothing about this situation feels right. I sleep for hours on end and then lay despondent, lost in a maze of my own confusing thoughts.

Stitches and the other men never budge whenever I badger them about letting me speak to him. They insist we have no communication.

Salvatore's orders.

It's easier this way.

"Easier on whom?!" I snap before I storm out.

Any available pastimes fail as distractions. The villa has an entertainment room with a big screen TV and recliners, and another room that's a study stocked with hundreds of books. Neither have appealed to me less than they do now. Even playing with Salt and Pepa feels hollow; the cats must sense this, because they give me plenty of space, slinking off and finding friends in some of the men on the crew.

The sheets are damp the next time I jolt awake in the middle of the night. The temperature outside reads as twenty-four degrees. Ice frosts the windows and the roads, yet I'm sweating bullets as my lungs convulse and I gasp for air.

It's like my nightmares all over again.

After my rape, I'd had nightmares for months. I'd often wake shaken and terrified in the middle of a scream or thrash in bed.

The violently sick feeling is the same. The feeling that I'm not okay. I've been... hurt in some way.

Except this time, it's not me I'm feeling it for.

It's him. He's hurt. I know he is.

A difficult breath stalls in my lungs. I can hardly bear it. I bow my head, drawing my legs up to my chest, and wrap my arms around my knees. How much longer can I withstand this?

They're leaving me no choice. They're forcing me to go against them. I will if I have to...

Dawn trickles into the room a couple hours later. I'm still awake. I've moved from the bed to the windowsill—tightly secured by a range of locks—and I stare out at the scene outside.

The locks on the window are just another obstacle impeding my escape. I'll figure something out.

“Miss ADA,” Stitches says, tapping on the door. “You awake yet?”

“Yes.”

The door cracks open. The first thing visible is Stitches's long, skinny nose and the wiry frames of his glasses. “Breakfast? Coffee?”

“No thank you.”

“You need to eat.”

“I ate last night.”

“Three bites of dinner ain't exactly eating.”

“Stitches, you might be overseeing this safe house, but you don't oversee what and when I eat.”

He frowns. “Sorry, Miss ADA. I'll set out a plate for you in case you change your mind.”

Mild guilt flutters through me the second the door snicks shut. The more days go by trapped inside in this villa, the more short and rude I become with Stitches. It's nothing personal against him—it's against what he represents within these four walls.

He's carrying out an order that's preventing me from seeing Salvatore.

Good as his intentions may be, at a time when I don't know if he's alive or dead, it feels heartless and cruel.

I could've said goodbye to the love of my life, *my husband*, and not even have known it. I yawned and dozed off, thinking we'd wake in the morning with sleepy smiles, in each other's arms...

My heart clenches, tears glossing my eyes.

I can't live like this. Holed up in this safe house, trapped within these four walls, kept out of whatever it is that's going on. All while I'm plagued by deep, unsettling premonitions that Salvatore's in grave danger; he's in *severe pain*.

The images that flash through my mind are too morbid. I jump up from the windowsill and rush out of the room.

It's the official cue I've been alone with my thoughts for too long. I'll take Stitches up on breakfast, even if it's begrudgingly.

His voice and Fabio's echo from the kitchen. I'm halfway down the hall when I slow down, choosing to eavesdrop.

"We haven't heard from them in over two days. Something's up."

"Last update was that they were close to getting their hands on it. They could be busy making final arrangements."

"Nah, they've kept us in the loop. He'd make time to call. He was calling multiple times before. Just to check on her and everything else."

I have to clap my hands over my mouth to stifle my gasping breath.

So Salvatore *has* been in touch—he’s been calling in often it sounds like. He wouldn’t go no contact without warning. If he’s stopped reaching out, there’s a reason.

This, more than anything else, shoves me over the edge. The final devastating blow that he’s been in touch and now has truly disappeared, wrecks me. Abject pain that deals the hardest, cruelest squeeze to my heart yet and causes it to burst.

I’m shaking as I spin on my heel and rush down the hall, suddenly in a trance-like state, running fast up the stairs, several at a time. I’m so out of it, it’s lost on me that I’ve alerted Stitches to the fact that I’m about to leave the villa.

But it doesn’t even matter. I’m leaving right now.

With or without his approval. He’ll have to physically stop me.

“Delphine!” he shouts in gobsmacked horror as he stumbles into the bedroom.

I’m shoving my feet into boots and shucking myself into a leather jacket.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going? You can’t—”

“Get out of my way, Stitches.”

“I can’t let you leave. Calm down. You’re hysterical.”

“I said get out of my way!”

Desperation pulses through me. I drive forward and sweep my leg fast enough to catch him off guard and knock him down. He’s lucky I didn’t do worse.

Though I do steal his weapon. As he crashes to the ground on his back like a crustacean momentarily stuck on its shell, I hold him down with my thighs and snatch his M9. When he

tries to wrest it away, he's greeted by the base of my palm to his nose.

"Sorry," I pant, leaping up. "You've left me no other choice. I'm getting the fuck out of here."

"Miss ADA... you can't... GET BACK HERE!"

Stitches summons enough speed to throw himself toward the door. His shoulder drives into it, cutting me off mere footsteps away.

"I can't... his orders..." he wheezes.

I cock the hammer and point the M9 at him. "Stitches, move out of the way."

"You wouldn't?"

"I need to go. You need to let me."

"I can't. I promised him. You have to stay here. It's... it's for your own safety."

A distressed breath quivers its way out of me. "This isn't about me—it's about Salvatore! You've been keeping things from me. You haven't heard from him in days!"

"It was always a possibility. We're not sure yet what's going on."

"Which is why I need to find out."

"You'll leave over my dead body. I vowed I'd look after you so long as I'm alive. So pull the fucking trigger!"

I glare at Salvatore's right hand—and for all intents purposes, his best friend—and even through my wild panic, grief, and anger, I can't do it. I can't hurt Stitches. He's been nothing but a devoted and loyal friend.

My hand's shaking as I lower the gun and then drop it altogether. My tears return with a vengeance.

"Miss ADA, you're frustrated. I get it! We all are, alright?" Stitches holsters his M9 and moves to slide an arm around me. "But we've got to see this through. We've got to carry out Salvatore's wishes. This is how he wanted it. We've got to be patient and wait."

"He's hurt, Francis. Something's wrong."

"I'll... I'll try reaching out again after breakfast. Maybe he's just been busy. I'm sure that's all that's going on."

But even he doesn't sound like he believes a word of his reassurances.



The next day and a half is torture. I'm back to lying despondently in bed as Stitches begs me to eat or get up and stretch my legs. Salt and Pepa make their own attempts to cheer me up. The two fluff balls paw and swat at me as if hoping they'll goad me into defending myself if they're combative enough.

I'm checked out. My mind's on Salvatore and the premonition I've been having that something is deeply wrong.

Stitches and the rest of the safehouse crew have been unable to get a hold of him. No one has speculated what that means—at least not to my face—but the brutal reality hangs unspoken in the air.

My eyes sting with tears. Stitches knocks insistently at the door. "Delphine, come down. We've got dinner. Authentic

lasagna. Oscar's made it using his mom's recipe. All you can eat—"

"STITCHES, GET THE FUCK DOWN HERE! CODE FIFTY!" Fabio roars from downstairs.

Faster than I can blink—than I can inhale my next breath—Stitches is gone from my bedroom door. The villa seems to erupt into chaos. More than half a dozen feet pound the floor as the crew reacts to whatever emergency code Fabio has called. The click of weapons being readied and loaded and the clash of their voices are just some of the other sounds that fill up the house—so many conflicting sounds it's impossible to tell what's going on.

I catch only a few random sentences here and there.

"Who the fuck is this?!"

It's Lev who says it. I recognize the pitch in his voice.

My legs take me to the bedroom window, and I discover what he's talking about.

Several unmarked white vans have pulled up outside and a team of men have descended upon the front of the house.

Clean cut and uniformly dressed. Some with sunglasses. Tight-lipped expressions and a cockiness to their walk as they stop in front of the door and beat their fists.

Both my brows knit as the late afternoon takes another puzzling turn. Are we being raided by law enforcement?

delphine

. . .



“RUN!” Stitches yells the second he sees me.

So I run. No questions asked.

I’m mid-step when given the command. The hall crowded with Salvatore’s men changes course like the tide in the ocean. At once a powerful wave of solid men built of muscle surges toward me. I spin around so fast my ankle bends at an impossible angle.

There’s no time to protest with a crew of men barreling my way.

I stay a couple paces ahead, along with Stitches, running from whatever the fuck has showed up on our doorstep.

It can’t be anything good. The men looked like some type of government agency.

Perhaps not local law enforcement, but potentially FBI. Salvatore was already being investigated for Ralph Mirra’s murder—did Dad take it a step further and elevate the criminal case against him?

BOOM!

The thunderous noise rocks the foundation of the house itself. The first time it catches me off guard enough that I

almost trip and lose my balance. The second time, as the sound reverberates and the villa shakes, I realize what's happening.

Whoever's at the door is slamming a battering ram against it. One that must be triple the size of a standard ram.

Their second attempt is successful. The door crashes in and they swarm into our once safe house.

Gunfire explodes between their side and our side. I crouch lower, tossing my arms up over my head.

“Keep running!” Stitches shouts. “We've got an emergency escape truck out back.”

He and Lev provide me cover, occasionally pausing to return fire, as we navigate the halls of the home.

I'm running in such a mad panic that everything blurs together. It's similar to a slip of consciousness. In a single moment I shift from rounding a corner with the violent bangs of gunshots mere feet behind me to diving inside the emergency truck Stitches described. Lev slams on the gas and we shoot across the lawn.

Face flushed and disoriented, I struggle righting myself. I've landed upside down on the floor of the truck, wedged between Stitches and the dash. He helps pull me right side up by the arm.

“Stay down,” he says. “This truck's bulletproof, but it ain't invincible. Fabio and some of the other guys are trying to get out.”

“Are we on the run from the FBI?” I gulp down some air, trying to twist from the floor of the truck.

“FBI? That was no FBI.”

“That couldn't have been the local police—”

“Ha!” Lev grunts, gripping the wheel as he spins us into a wild turn.

The wheels screech and I’m forced to grab onto Stitches’s knee or be thrown backward. I’m sitting too low to see out the window beyond the roofs of buildings and the pale blue of the sky and the occasional power line that stretches by.

Lev honks his horn and another car nearby honks theirs. Other traffic sounds surround us as he drives like a maniac, weaving through different lanes, and cutting abrupt turns.

“If it’s not the FBI and not the police, then who is it? It wouldn’t be CIA. DEA? DHS? It couldn’t be—I know everyone jokes about it with the Al Capone stuff—but there’s no way that was the IRS?”

“Delphine,” Stitches says, “it wasn’t anybody legal.”

“Lucius?”

Stitches’s eyes close and he peels off his wire-framed glasses in an exhausted manner I’ve never seen out of him. He wipes them on the hem of his shirt, the expression on his face screwing up as if pained by a terrible migraine.

“This is such a fucking shitshow,” he blurts out under his breath.

The sick feeling I’ve had for hours returns at full strength. I can barely swallow without feeling like I’ll cough up everything inside my stomach, which isn’t much considering I’ve barely been eating. Lev’s madman style of driving isn’t helping.

“Francis, tell me what’s going on.”

“I don’t know what’s going on. That’s the problem. Everything... everything’s been thrown all out of whack.

Nothing we've planned for... it's all been.... Delphine, it's been almost four days since we've heard from Salvatore. He *disappeared.*"

A coldness blows through me. A frigid kind of coldness that's so affecting it leaves me numb. I give no other reaction beyond staring at him as if he's said nothing. I'm looking at him, barely blinking, as Lev hooks a hard left and then zigs and zags between more cars.

My body jerks along with the erratic movements of the truck.

But none of it registers with me.

He disappeared.

We all know what that means. Men in Salvatore's lifestyle don't just disappear.

They've got him. Lucius has him... and he's probably hurt him very badly by now, if he's even still alive.

Though as vile and savage as Lucius is, he's probably decided to make him suffer. Make it a slow, miserable, tortuous death. From what Salvatore described of his abuse as a child, his father would show no mercy, he'd drag it out and turn it into a sick and demented game where he delighted in his son's pain and suffering.

The coldness inside me intensifies until my lungs freeze. I'm back to being unable to take a breath.

Stitches clamps his hands down onto my shoulders and shakes me back to reality. "Listen to me. I grabbed the escape bag we put together for you. We're headed to the airport in Lunsbury. We're getting you out of the country. Salvatore set up an alias for you. I can't tell you where. A whole new life

under a new name. You'll have new protection too. It's what he would've wanted."

It's what he would've wanted...

...because he's dead.

HE'S DEAD.

The disturbing train of thought has me staring off blankly once more, like Stitches hasn't shaken me.

"Delphine, do you hear me? Our priority is getting you out."

One of the unmarked white vans flies toward us from a side street. Lev curses and swerves the truck to narrowly avoid a T-bone collision. In doing so, we almost cause a collision of our own, crossing over into the lane to our left side where a school bus of children erupt into a chorus of terrified screams.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Lev yells. "These fuckers somehow caught up. Hold on tight—it's gonna take some work shaking 'em off!"

What ensues is probably one of the most dangerous car chases in recent history.

Lev speeds up. The van chases after us. Stitches opens fire. They retaliate. Lev swerves again in an attempt to trip them up. Instead, he clips the tail end of another car and our truck spins out of control.

We're sent into the opposite side of traffic as the van continues spraying bullets. Several of which chink the truck's armor. One cracks the glass. Another gets all the way through and nails Stitches in the side of his torso.

I'm still on the floor of the truck, wide-eyed and numb. Spinning along with the truck as Lev fights against the

steering wheel to regain control.

He rights us and takes us in the opposite direction. We're crashing over sidewalks and fire hydrants, trampling over the neat grass of the local park. Pedestrians jump out of the way. The van struggles to follow, not as equipped to deal with off-road type of terrain.

We come out on a different street with a considerable lead.

"Fuck yes," Lev breathes, wiping sweat from his brow. He accelerates, the truck barreling for the highway entrance. "You okay, Stitches?"

"These fuckers got me good..." Stitches grits his teeth, his hand pressed into his bloody side. "Remember, if I don't make it, get her to the airport."

"No! Francis!"

I feel so... disconnected. Even as I call out to him and try to sit up, it's like I'm muted. I'm submerged underwater and can't make my way to the surface.

Numb. Breathless. I'm dead too.

A second van pops up and cuts Lev off from the highway entrance. He improvises with a sharp right at the next street corner and then swears again.

"Fuck, here's the other one! Is there more than we thought?!"

Another turn, down another street. This one a smaller street.

The second van appears at the front end. The first from behind.

Lev hits the brakes, and we slam to a hard stop. We're trapped. They've got us.

"Stitches?" he asks, grabbing both his guns from his holster. "Ready?"

"Ready as I'm gonna be bleeding like a leaky faucet."

"No," I say as they make to get out of the truck. I'm still reeling as if we're still driving, dizzier by the second.

Nothing feels stable. The truck's moving. I'm moving. They're moving.

Fast and slow at the same time. When I rush to take hold of Stitches's arm, I miss by several inches, and it feels like falling forward for an eternity.

My whole body jerks and my arm swipes, my equilibrium off.

Stitches interrupts my uncoordinated effort, grabbing my shoulder. "Delphine, see that side alley? While we're handling them. You run in there. You disappear inside one of those buildings. You take this bag. Everything you need is in here. Passport, bank card, cell phone, even some weapons and ammo. Call yourself a taxi. Take it to the airport. It's another hour away."

I'm given no option or time to adjust. I'm still caught up in a tilting world of dizziness when I'm shoved out of the truck and the two sides blast each other.

Bullets fly at near invisible speeds, stinking up the air more than rotten eggs. Men dive for cover. Others collapse to the ground with eyes that have remained open in death. In the heat of battle between the two sides, Stitches was right—nobody notices me as I stumble on stilted legs toward the narrow alleyway.

The bag slung over my shoulder, I'm not sure where I'm going. If someone were to try to stop me right now, I'm not even sure I'd fight back.

He disappeared.

He's gone, like he never existed.

I'd let them take me. I'd let them ki—

With a sobering blink, I realize I've wandered halfway down the alley.

And I'm not alone. Someone's calling out to me from the open door of the building on my left.

"Delphi," Dad says, with a beckoning hand, appearing like a mirage in the desert. "There's no time to waste. I've got to get you out of here. They're here to take you. Just like I warned you they would."

"D-Dad?" I don't move a step closer, though my heart leaps into my throat. "They?"

He gives a solemn nod. "Who else? The Neptune Society."

ernest

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december 1993

"DADDY! LOOK WHAT I DREW!"

My copy of the *Northam Tribune* is torn away by tiny fingers. No more am I staring at a wall of text discussing the latest shifts in Northam's stock market exchange, but instead a bright-eyed, round-cheeked toddler with two curly puffs at the top of her head. She holds up a piece of paper for me to review.

There's a house with a chimney and scribbles for plumes of smoke. A block-shaped family with smiley faces and dots for eyes—four of them, representing a father with a tie, a mother with a dress, a son with headphones, and the smallest of all, a daughter with puffs that look curiously familiar.

She's even drawn some fluffy clouds and a sun (also with a smiley face).

I smile too, bellowing out a deep laugh. "Delphi, baby, it's a masterpiece! Did you draw this or was it Picasso?"

"Meeee!" she squeaks, jumping up and down.

I reach for her, hoisting her up off her feet and setting her down on my knee. "You sure? What color is this?"

"Green!"

"And this one?"

"Purple!"

"My baby girl's a genius," I say proudly.

“Daddy, did you know...” she clutches a crayon in her hand, fiddling with it as she pieces together the information she’s dying to tell me. My girl who’s like a sponge even at age two-and-a-half. “You can use colors, Daddy... to make other colors.”

“Really? Like what?”

Marcel wanders into the breakfast room and catches the tail end of our exchange. For once he’s lowered the headphones to his Walkman long enough to listen to something other than his music. He rolls his eyes, plopping down in his usual chair at the table.

“Not this again,” he says, sighing, grabbing for the box of cereal. “She won’t shut up about the color mixing stuff.”

“What have I told you about being nice to your little sister?”

“But she’s just so... so *annoying*.”

“Marcel.”

“She got her little sticky fingers on my Tupac tape. Now it won’t play right.”

“Good. You know I hate when you listen to that filth.”

Delphine bows her head, sniffing at her older brother’s words, picking at the wrapper around the crayon. I drop a kiss on her brow and tell her not to worry.

“Tell me more about mixing colors,” I say. “What colors make what?”

Marcel rolls his eyes before he disappears behind the box of Frosted Flakes. For the next five minutes, Delphine tells me everything she’s learned about mixing colors, pausing here and there to think up another nugget of information.

I cherish moments like these.

Moments I get to be a devoted father. Marcel's entering that age range where he's too cool for his family, but Delphine's a daddy's girl. Leontine tells me about how she tries with all her might to stay up past her bed time each night, waiting on me to get home. Eventually, she nods off, and Leontine tucks her into her bed with a soft chuckle.

Most nights I don't make it home until Leontine herself is seconds away from nodding off. That's if I make it home at all.

On nights I work too late, I stay in Northam and sleep at my old bachelor pad high-rise apartment, located across from the Northam City Park.

It's far from easy missing out on so many moments with my wife and kids, but sacrifices must be made when you have career ambitions like mine.

Leontine understands. This is how things have to be for the foreseeable future.

"I see she's told you about the colors," my stunning wife says. She sweeps into the kitchen like the graceful swan she was the first night I saw her perform on stage. A genteelness about her but a distinct, unshakeable confidence I've always found captivating.

On our first date, Leontine made it known she wasn't impressed by me or my position as assistant district attorney. In fact, she told me to my face she thought I was a hack who was a part of a corrupt system that criminalized the poor and coddled the rich and powerful.

Every word fell from her ruby red lips as she sat perfectly poised, her tight ballerina bun in place, as she cut up the

eggplant Parmesan she had ordered.

What a woman.

My dozen roses meant nothing. My extravagant dinners at five-star restaurants. My many attempts to impress her fell flat.

Yet the more attracted I became. The more I had to have her. Winning over Leontine took me longer than a man of my means and background is used to, but I did it—I *won* her, married her, and she's given me two incredible children.

Both of whom will go on to carry our legacy.

Leontine pauses to drop a kiss on my mouth and then stroke Delphine's puffs. Her long, satiny robe billows as she next glides over to Marcel and disregards his attempt to shrug her off. He gets his kiss too, right on his cheek, where he wipes it off with the back of his hand.

"Mom!" he groans.

She laughs, then turns to me. Her eyes twinkle. "Will you be home for dinner tonight?"

"It's Christmas Eve, isn't it?"

"It is. But you're you, and that means more than what day it is."

I husk out a breath and nod along. "Fair enough. But this year will be different. I promise I'll be home tonight in time for family dinner. Just the four of us. Then this one can tell me more about the colors."

Delphine giggles when I tickle her belly. Her grain-sized teeth are still showing as Leontine scoops our effervescent toddler up into her arms. I rise too, easily towering over everything in the room with my dominating height.

“You got this,” Leontine mutters. Her three short words serve as a combination of ‘I love you’, good luck and goodbye every morning.

I kiss her in answer, grateful for the encouragement—and with the silent promise I *will* make it my mission to be home for dinner tonight.

Battery in my pack, I’m ready to tackle the day.

I’ve begun my campaign for district attorney. In eleven months, I could achieve the dream I’ve been working toward most of my life.

According to a political columnist in the *Northam Tribune*, it’s mine to lose. I’d have to recklessly involve myself in an illicit scandal or be incompetent enough to fumble a high-profile case at trial to lose my campaign for DA.

Neither of which I plan on doing.

I’ve never been incompetent a day in my life, and I’ve never been stupid enough to be reckless *or* involve myself in scandal.

My record is squeaky clean. As the columnist in the *Tribune* pointed out, I’m Northam city’s Great Black Hope—a breath of fresh air after decades of the same old, same old.

I’ll be the first African American District Attorney, a sign of change and dynamic times to come.

A man of the people.

While my education might be Ivy League and my family itself prestigious, I’m nothing like the many before me. Unlike the others, I’m *incorruptible*. I’m a family man seeking to clean up the streets and make the city a better place.

I'll do anything to make that happen. But today, for once, I'll do anything to make it home on time for Christmas Eve dinner.



My train ride into Northam takes an hour. I finish reading today's paper. My copy is wrinkled after Delphine snatched it away earlier; each time I turn the page and catch a crease furrowed down the center, I can't help chuckling.

My baby girl didn't give a damn that she was interrupting me. She demanded my attention and demanded it right then and there. Only two-and-a-half-years-old and already so full of personality. So bright and intelligent, but also so gutsy.

I can sense it in her—she's going to take after me. I'll mold her that way, set her up for success to carry on my legacy.

My chest swells with pride so much that by the time the train pulls into the Northam station, I'm the Ernest Adams the day will require of me. I stride down the platform in my well-fitted suit with my briefcase in hand, and garner stares as I pass people by.

Now that's a power walk.

The city is an urban wasteland. The downtown streets lack color and vibrancy. The buildings are drab with peeling paint and faded brick. Smog pollutes the air so everything is filtered in a smoky haze. Construction monopolies like Crotone Co. won't stop building concrete monstrosities that only seem to get taller and more suffocating. I make it three blocks down the busiest streets in downtown Northam, walking among

dozens of people, before I see a single person's lips twitch into a smile.

A depressing reality.

Trashed. No good garbage.

The city's in a serious state of decay. I'm going to be the man who saves it.

Northam's Great Black Hope.

The title's grown on me in an ironic sort of way. I'll be their savior all while they hand me the keys to the city without even realizing it.

But, apparently, some *have* realized it—these days, they follow me almost everywhere I go. As I stop at the crosswalk along with a group of other pedestrians, an unmarked white van pulls up to the red light. I do what I always do.

Ignore them.

The second the crosswalk light blinks, I'm on the move. They coast with me, though it's without a word. They've long ago given up on any verbal communication. I threatened them with an investigation into their club's finances.

No looney tune, ultra secret, rich and powerful community will sink their hooks into me.

That's how it begins—they indoctrinate you into membership, curry your favor, and then, the next thing you know, you're trapped. You're their puppet.

As far as I'm concerned, the Neptune Society is as big a threat as any organized crime family. Someday, I'll take them down. Just like I'll take them all down. Every last corrupt vermin in this city. Then we can have color again.

My lips spread into a warm smile thinking of Delphine.

“Morning, Mr. Adams. You have a visitor,” says my legal secretary, Agnes. She hands me my folder of pertinent documents to review and then briefs me on important phone messages she’s taken.

We part ways outside my office door where I thank her for the cup of coffee she mentions she left on my desk and then twist the knob.

“Joe,” I say, setting down my briefcase and coat. “Merry early Christmas. To what do I owe a visit this close to a holiday? Don’t you and Martha usually go out of town for the next two weeks?”

Deputy Mayor Bernstein is best described as a penguin. From his waddle of a walk to his beakish nose, the man is bald and round too. He hovers over the chair he’s sitting in at the sight of me until he realizes it’s too eager and sits back down.

The two of us attended Dupoint Law together many years ago. The difference being I was at the top of my class. Joseph, barely average. I went on to practice law while he pussyfooted around for a few years and then found his calling in local politics and governance.

“Martha and I aren’t going on Christmas vacation this year. It’s more important I speak with you, Ernest. If you have a free moment.”

“My morning is quite full. But I can spare about half an hour for you.”

“Excellent. You should have a seat. This is a serious one.” His fat fingers tug and pull at the wrong end of his necktie and he clears his throat, somehow failing to grasp that he’s choking himself.

I sit down at my desk and sip my coffee. Still hot, medium roast, with a single scoop of creamer. Agnes made it just right. “What’s it about?”

“I... well... I need your help,” Bernstein says nervously. He yanks again on his tie and then coughs. Patches of pink splotch his skin. “I’ve... well... I’ve gotten myself involved in a very, very serious mess. And I don’t know how to get myself out of it.”

“What kind of mess, Joseph?”

“I’ve been set up. They... they set me... I should’ve...” He sighs.

“I won’t be able to help you unless we have full transparency. That’s *if* I’m able to help you at all. Who is they?”

He glances around as if we’re being spied on. “The Neptune Society.”

Of course. I should’ve figured.

“I see.”

“Those parties. They’re... they’re designed to get you into trouble. They intentionally lure members with different kinds of temptations.”

“Joseph, with all due respect, you are a fully-functioning adult, are you not? Do you not possess free will? Are you not able to make your own decisions at your age? You *are* the deputy mayor of the city.”

He flinches as if I’ve struck him. His eyes squeeze shut. “I did resist. I did make my own decisions. I tried very hard, Ernest! But what can I say? After a while... they got me. I made a mistake.”

The way he drifts off there, his round cheeks blushing bright, tells me it's something humiliating. Something that's probably enough to end his career.

I'm not sure I even want to know—I've heard rumors of what goes on there. The prostitution and other niche services that play into fantasies many would be too ashamed to ever admit to in the light of day. Much darker things that some have alleged, though no direct proof exists.

With another swallow of coffee, I say, "Go on. Again, full transparency is needed."

"I... I have partaken in the Mill. Just a time or two."

"The Mill?"

"It's what they call..." His broad, penguin-shaped chest rises and falls from his next deep inhale of breath. "It's what they call the place you go to purchase sexual experiences. I have participated with a couple of the women for sale."

My expression and tone remain neutral. "I see. So, you had sex with prostitutes. How many?"

"That's, uh, that's not it."

"Joseph, what the hell did you do?"

He winces despite the fact I haven't raised my voice. "They let you make special requests. *Very* specific requests. They have it all. Anything you could ask for. So much variety you'd never get sick of the selection."

"I don't care to hear about all the different prostitutes they have for sale—"

"Including those that might be a little... younger if you catch my drift."

Silence takes the place of our conversation for a moment that stretches on. He's returned to choking himself by yanking on the wrong end of his tie and my expression has finally shifted from neutrality to disgust.

"Get out of my office," I say.

"Ernest—"

"Get the hell out of my office!" I bark, leaping to my feet. "How dare you come to me expecting me to bail you out of such depravity? I am a *father!*"

Bernstein bursts into weeping tears. The pink on his skin darkens to red and he covers his face in shame, repeating, "I know, I know, I know."

Over and over again he repeats it like a chant.

"If you're expecting mercy, there is none to be had here. I want nothing to do with you. Get out of my office or I'll call Erick the security guard up to haul you out. Mayoral candidate or not."

"B-b-but—"

"OUT!" I roar with the ferocity of a lion in the jungle.

Bernstein practically falls out of his chair scrambling to make it happen. He trips over the leg of the chair and winds up on his hands and knees before he's able to come to a wobbly stand. From within his suit jacket, he withdraws a black envelope with sapphire-blue embossing.

"I... I was told to leave this for you... if... our conversation didn't go well. G-goodbye, Ernest."

He snuffles, turning and waddling away.

I'm seething on the spot to the point I do nothing but glare after him, watching him go. The unmitigated gall of him to turn up in my office and seek my assistance for his wretched after-hours activities!

A level of anger pumps through me that's rare during my workday. I'm not a hothead and I don't let most people get to me. Even when they do, I take the strategic approach. Always calm and collected, I form a full-proof plan on how to address whatever the situation is.

Anger and rage—hot, quick tempers—are for intellectually lazy people.

It's much smarter to bide your time, formulate a strategy, and strike at the most opportune moment.

That's how you deal with anger. That's how you seek *revenge*.

Yet, in the wake of Bernstein's departure, I'm fuming harder than a chimney. If it were physiologically possible, I'd be emitting smoke too.

I force a calming breath through my lungs and turn to the coffee Agnes made me. He's not going to ruin my morning—it's *Christmas Eve*, for god's sake.

A couple of swallows of Peruvian roast later, I'm regaining my senses. Silly of me to allow Bernstein to rile me up to such an extent, but he knew what he was doing coming by with such a request. If there's one thing I would never condone, it's preying on innocent children.

My gaze lands on the photo frames arranged along the outer edges of my desk. One is a family photo of Leontine, the kids, and I during our last summer vacation at Montbec Island. We went up and stayed at our beach house for a week (the

longest vacation I've taken in years). The second photo is of our wedding day. The last, a candid polaroid taken at home of Marcel and Delphine this past Halloween—he was a Teenage Ninja Mutant Turtle and she was a kitty cat. I put this one on my desk along with the others, because of its ability to make me smile.

I'll do anything for the kids. Anything for Leontine.

The black envelope just beyond the photo frames comes into focus. The sense of ease the Halloween photo brings me dissipates as I stare at the envelope Bernstein left before I kicked him out. He'd mentioned he was told to leave it if our conversation didn't go well.

I believe in ripping off bandaids in instances like this. The unknown irks me.

Why wait to find out whatever the hell he's put in the envelope when I can know right this instant?

I tear it open and pluck out what's inside.

Whereas moments ago sheer anger flamed through me, the sensation I'm left with now is the cold trickle of dread.

It pours over me like a bucket of ice water, robbing me of my next breath. My next thought.

I can only gape at the photograph in my hands.

With time, the film and stock quality have declined, but there's no mistaking it's realness—three men in tuxedos at a social event that's decadent even for the early 1970s timeline. Some gala for the elite, hosted by the Neptune Society.

All three I recognize.

One, Cornelius Starch, former well-renown Mayor of Northam when I was a teenager. The other is Leandro Crotone,

Don of the most powerful crime family the city's ever known.

The last is Huxley Adams.

My father.

They smoke cigars and share in animated conversation by the looks of it. Three powerful men in their own right. Three elites. All basking in their status.

My desk phone rings. It's such a stark contrast to the heavy silence in the room, I flinch. Then feel foolish for being an easy mark. Snatching the phone off its base, I snarl at whoever is on the other end.

"Ernest Adams," comes a digitized voice. "The rooftop of the Northam Bank building. Seven-thirty. Bring the photo."

"No," I snap. "You pieces of garbage think you'll blackmail me like the others? I'm incorruptible! So my father was part of your stupid club? I'll never be!"

"Northam Bank building. Be on the rooftop at seven-thirty. Bring the photo."

Click.

The line dies in my ear.

I roar for the second time this morning and toss the entirety of my desk phone against the far wall. It smashes into dozens of smaller, broken pieces of plastic, resembling Lego shapes on the floor.

The door flies open and Agnes scrambles through, eyes wide and alarmed. "Mr. Adams, is everything okay?! I heard a commotion!"

"Take my messages. Cancel my meetings. No visitors."

"But you're due at Judge Kodjoe's chambers in an hour—"

“I said cancel my meetings!” I yell over her.

It’s the first time I’ve ever yelled at Agnes in the seven years she’s been working for me. Her mouth clamps shut and she blinks away the immediate onslaught of tears. My instinct is to apologize, but I tamp that down in another spate of irritation, pacing around my desk. Finally getting the hint, she eases the door shut.

I don’t hear a peep from her the rest of the day.

What the hell do they mean meet on the rooftop of the Northam Bank?

I am *not* owned by their ridiculous society! I’ve vowed to never let myself be!

Their threat is clear—if I don’t comply, they’ll release unsavory information about my father. It’ll tarnish our family name and reputation. Potentially ruin my campaign for district attorney.

While my record is squeaky clean, I can’t say the same about Huxley Adams, my late father.

In fact, almost everything the public believes they know about him is a lie. Everything Leontine and the kids know about him.

And Mother... she’d be so upset if the truth got out. After so many decades, she’s convinced herself he was a good man. She still wears his rose necklace...

My hands come up to my face and I dig the base of my palms into the hollows of my eyes. The pressure behind them feels unbearable, like I’m liable to pop a blood vessel at any moment.

What the hell am I supposed to do?!



It's Christmas Eve night. Rather than keeping my promise to my wife and kids, I'm begrudgingly breaking it, as I step off the subway escalator and peer up at the towering skyscraper.

Flakes of snow have begun falling in slow motion.

Festive holiday lights twinkle from every direction. They're wound along street lights and lamp posts. In trees and store windows. Cheerful and bright.

Only a few blocks away, the Christmas market knows its most crowded night of the year. Many deep in the city make a tradition out of visiting the night before the real thing.

Meanwhile, other traditions fall by the wayside; Leontine is probably shaking her head at home, standing in front of the extravagant feast prepared for tonight's family dinner. If I know my wife well, she's dressed up and so have the kids. The house is probably resonating with Christmas music and carrying pleasing notes of pine and cedar.

And here I am, breaking their hearts.

I heave a deep sigh, and with a rueful shake of my head, I plunge onward. Dressed in my trench coat, suit, and briefcase, I put on the same power walk I had earlier when navigating my morning. These cronies aren't going to shake my confidence.

I'm Ernest Huxley Adams.

I always come out on top. I always win. One way or another, I'll make sure of it.

The elevator ride up to the top is forty-seven floors. It dings once it reaches the top level, the doors parting down the

middle. I take in a final breath and then stride forward.

Being minutes before seven-thirty in the evening on Christmas Eve, the place is a ghost town. The staff and executives are nowhere to be found.

I don't encounter a single soul my whole journey to the roof.

They're waiting for me when I arrive.

Men I don't know but have seen before—the faceless, nameless nobodies who do the Neptune Society's dirty work. They're dressed primly in suits and ties with expressions that give nothing away.

They watch as I approach them. I stop only a few feet away, wrench the photo from my pocket, and toss it at their feet. The winter air catches it, slowing up its descent, letting it drift to a gentle fall on the ground.

“Your photo,” I say with audible loathing. “My acquiescing to any requests ends here. You sickos have the wrong idea if you think you'll be able to get me. Go ahead, leak whatever you have on my father. I don't give a damn. It won't make me bend to your will.”

A hideous man with a jagged scare on his cheek stands in the center of the other two and appears to be the spokesman. “You don't want what we have to get leaked to the public.”

That's true, but I refrain from telling him that.

“I don't care,” I say.

“You do. You care very much,” he replies. He steps forward to pick up the fallen photo with long fingers, his nails chewed up. “What if I told you we're willing to make a deal with you? In exchange for your membership?”

“Why does my membership matter so much?”

“You know why.”

“So you believe because you blackmail the others in high places, you can do the same to me?” I ask coolly. “What if *I* told *you*, I won’t back down? I don’t give a damn what deal you’re trying to make. He can shove that deal where the sun doesn’t shine.”

“Is that really what you want, Ernest?”

The voice comes from behind me. The lackeys confirm this with their attention shifting to someone beyond my shoulder. I decline to give whoever it is any form of deference by turning around to acknowledge them.

Instead, I stand firm. I let him come to me—and he does, the unhurried pad of his footsteps sounding from behind until he’s completely in view.

Three more men.

Two, I recognize. The third, I do not.

Leandro Crotone might be ages past his prime, but he carries a certain cache about him. A relic of his time, he’s what we in the criminal justice field call an ‘old school mobster.’ He never goes anywhere without a snazzy suit, usually slate gray and pinstriped, and he’s often seen with a hat perched atop his bald head, the sparse gray hair he still has on the sides peeking out.

When he enters a room, you notice. He does so with an air of certainty earned over many years. Respect isn’t to be asked for, it’s to be given.

Unfortunately, I don’t play by Mafia rules. Old school, new school, any school in existence.

As far as I'm concerned, they're equally as reproachful.

He comes to face me with Lucius Mancino and the unknown man on either side. His face sags with age, wrinkles slashed wherever possible: along the sides of his mouth and around his eyes, lined on his prominent forehead. He wears an expression that's permanently admonishing, lacking satisfaction in a way that likely makes people want to please him all the more.

Then there's Lucius Mancino, a fast-burner in the criminal world. Fat, squat, and unpleasant to look at, he's risen up the family ranks faster than most. He's pulled off a marriage to Leandro's one and only daughter, and in turn, gained even more prestige. That's still not enough for him—a desperate hunger lives in his beady eyes as he stands by his boss-turned-father-in-law's side and watches me like a vulture ready to pick apart a carcass.

But it's the last man that truly seizes the spotlight.

Tall, broad-shouldered, pale, with dark hair as dark as his suit. He possesses an unblinking gaze that's a strange swirl of oceanic colors. Somehow, he's even more unsettling than Crotone and Mancino, whoever he is.

"This is the worst mistake you've ever made," I say, matching their moxie. I take up a hell of a lot of space too. I stand as a king among them, unintimidated despite being outnumbered six to one. "The moment I leave here, I will be opening an investigation on your club, your family, and everything in between."

"That won't be happening," says Leandro smoothly. "Perhaps you are still confused. The Society has graciously agreed to meet with you. It's important you understand the arrangement going forward."

“What arrangement?” I spit. I glare at each one of the men standing before me. “You thugs have gotten away with more than you ever should’ve. It ends tonight. Right now.”

With my patience run out, I set off toward the roof exit. They don’t wait more than a few footsteps before proving once again how barbaric and ruthless they are.

“Hello?! Who’s there?”

A female voice crackles over radio transmission. The staticky sound aside, there’s a frazzled element to her tone of voice.

“Hello!?”

I freeze, tension twisting its way through the seventy-seven inches of my body. Then it explodes into a torrent of fury. I whip around with the same sudden ferocity I had earlier with Bernstein in my office.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing!?” I growl. “Why are you recording my wife?”

One of the lackey’s holds up a handheld radio through which Leontine’s voice was transmitted. There’s a click like a door shutting and then just crackling silence. Someone was at the door. They knocked and then radioed her answer.

They’re watching her. The kids. The house.

I take more furious steps toward them and their smug faces, for once on the verge of losing my cool. “Answer me!? What are you doing outside my house!?”

“I don’t know about you,” Leandro says placidly, with a subtle incline of his head. “But it sounds like carolers. Maybe they knocked and had the wrong house. *Or*, maybe, they have

the right house. Do they have the right house, Ernest? You tell me.”

“Don’t you ever think to come to my house and harass my family!”

“A little late for that. We’ve been there a while, Ernest. Your lovely wife has been setting up your special dinner for hours. And your children—Marcel and Delphine, right? Adorable kiddos. She let them out earlier to play in the snow. See for yourself.”

A different lackey steps forward to show me candid photographs taken only a couple of hours ago, before the sun set. Sure enough, the outfits they’re wearing match what they had on earlier. In the photos, Leontine smiles as she stands at the terrace door and watches Marcel try to walk Delphine across our snowy backyard.

Bundled up in their snow jackets and beanies, the photos are a flip book of each move they made. The first photo is Marcel holding Delphine’s little hand. The next photo is of the two’s snow boots sinking into the soft snow. The third photo is of them covered in white flakes with mouths open in laughter.

A play by play of their time outside, shot by some kind of far-off camera lens used to spy on them.

Leontine had no clue. It’s evident by the way she smiles and then helps them back inside she didn’t even know. There are others. Photos that offer clear enough shots through our house windows, of Leontine in the kitchen, Delphine in her playroom with her alphabet blocks, Marcel and his headphones passing in the foyer.

Their threat is clear. This goes beyond exposing my father. They’re willing to hurt not just my family name, but the

members of my family.

“I hope that clears up any confusion,” Leandro says. “You’re going to participate, Ernest, like the others. The Society has been nice enough to agree to wipe your slate clean. We’re all friends here, after all.”

But as I glare back up at them, I’m not sure what to make of the peculiar combination of men. Leandro’s in mafia boss mode while the other two are polar opposites. Lucius is seconds away from salivating. The mystery man’s face remains as stoic and blank as ever, giving nothing away.

It wouldn’t surprise me if they care for Leandro as little as I do. Rarely is honor to be found among thieves.

Criminals.

“Now that that’s cleared up,” Leandro says. “Your first task was sent to you this morning. Bernstein needs your help. He is the mayoral candidate that will win the election. Just like you’re the candidate that will win DA.”

Of course. It’s rigged.

“I want nothing to do with the position if you people are involved.”

“That’s not the answer that’s in your family’s best interest, Ernest. Think again.” Leandro’s calm confidence transforms into a sharper, more intimidating energy in the air. The lines on his face deepen with the nasty curl of his mouth. “You’re going to help Bernstein or your family name is no more. And your wife? Your son and baby girl? They’ll be no more too.”

My heart sinks. For once, staring into the faces of evil, I’m speechless.



The lights are off by the time I make it home. I trudge up the stairs, one heavy foot at a time. I've lost count how many times I checked and rechecked the locks and our home security system. On my ride home, I phoned a friend of mine who runs a private security firm about setting up heightened measures for ourselves and our home.

Starting tomorrow, we'll have security on the premises 24/7. I will have personal security and so will Leontine and the kids.

But it's not enough. It'll never be enough for what I'm facing.

I stop outside Marcel's room and crack the door open. He's knocked out on his bed, his headphones lopsided around his head, his Walkman and comic book strewn across the comforter. I walk over and take both, setting them on his bedside table. Barely eleven, and he's had his life threatened by ruthless gangsters.

The next room I visit is Delphine's. My baby girl is sound asleep in her princess lair of stars and sparkles. Her angelic face is at complete ease, dreaming away about a future I know will be special. I pull her blanket up higher and then kiss her cheek.

I'll do anything to protect them. Even if those actions may not always make me proud.

You can't fight fair when you fight the devil. It's impossible.

The last room I enter with a resigned sigh. Leontine is up, reading under the dim light of her bedside table. She doesn't dignify me with any acknowledgement as I undo my tie and slip off my shoes. She merely turns the next page in her book.

"Honey," I say on a rare note of defeat, "I'm sorry I didn't make it."

"You promised. Ernest, you *promised*."

"I know. I know. Something came up. It... it was important."

"More important than your family?"

"That's not what I... will you cut me some slack, Leontine? For heaven's sake, I'll be here with you and the kids all day tomorrow."

"Your daughter cried for you. Your son shrugged, so used to you being gone, he disappeared into his headphones. Do you know what kind of family you're raising?"

"It's not on purpose—"

"You're raising a family that's used to their father being gone more often than he's present. That's not what I agreed to when I married you."

"I'll do better. I... I promise."

"You promised this morning. You promised on Halloween... and Marcel's jr. football games. And when I went into labor for Delphine. You'll forgive me if your promises don't mean shit, Ernest."

My eyes close in exasperation. I can barely argue her point when she's right. I have promised... and I have failed.

Many, many times before.

But tonight, it was different. Though I can't begin explaining why. She and the kids need to be kept separate from this. I'll have to handle it on my own.

"I'm sorry," I offer weakly. "Honey, you have to believe me."

She shakes her head, the disappointment dripping off her as she takes off her reading glasses and closes her book. They're placed on the bedside table before she twists off the lamp and rolls over. I'll be given nothing but her back tonight.

Another sigh tumbles out of me. It's deserved, but that doesn't make it sting any less.

I go into our generously-sized, his-and-her walk-in closet and finish undressing. It's as I'm unbuttoning my dress shirt that a jingle plays from within my briefcase. The noise sounds loud in the silence of the house, spurring me to rush over to turn it off.

City officials are typically given IBM cellular devices for work purposes. Most, uninterested in the technology, don't bother using them. The things are the size of bricks and feel clunky hauling around. I stick mine in my briefcase and ignore it more often than not.

Who in the world could be calling me at this hour? And for work purposes?

"Hello," I say in low tone, peeking at the closet door. I'd prefer not to disturb Leontine. Seconds pass and nobody answers me on the other end. "Hello? Who is this? Is this some immature practical joke?"

"Ernest Adams," comes a male voice that's restrained and heavy with a Russian accent. "Are you free to speak?"

“Who the hell is this?!” Then it dawns on me, and I scowl. “You have some nerve calling me at this hour on this number!”

“I have information to provide you,” he interrupts in the same drab monotone. “Information you may find useful.”

“And what makes you think I’ll trust you? That I want to hear your ‘information?’”

“You want the same as I do. For the Neptune Society to be destroyed and men like Leandro Crotone to perish. We have much more in common than you think.”

delphine

...



present...

I'M NO LONGER sure what's real and what's a figment of my imagination. Precious seconds pass us by, Dad and I staring at one another from where he stands in the doorway, and I've stumbled to a stop. His impatience grows as the bullets ricochet and rebound and the gruesome fight wears on.

He latches onto me by the forearm and drags me toward him. You'd think I'd fight him on it; we're not on good terms. The last time we spoke was weeks ago in his office at city hall when I'd issued a threat, warning him to leave Salvatore alone, and he'd had the audacity to tell me Mom would be 'so disappointed.'

I've stopped considering him my father.

Yet, here he is, showing up at a moment's notice, seemingly to rescue me—or possibly with some other nefarious intention in mind.

Once the door has swung shut behind us, I wrench my arm free of his hold.

“What are you doing here!?”

“I found out the Society was coming for you. I had to get to you first.”

My gaze narrows with suspicion. “You found out or helped them orchestrate it? What's your role in this?”

“You can't possibly be suggesting that I'd—for Christ's sake, you're my *daughter*. My role is your father, to protect you. As I have done every day of your life, whether you

realize it or not, Delphine. I love you, and even though we're no longer close, I will always love you. I will do anything to ensure you're okay."

I turn away from him. My arms come up around my torso in a hug to myself. I'm too weak for this, to deal with these mind games he wants to play right now.

Every breath feels like a struggle. My body's cold and numb. I want so badly to collapse in a dark, secluded cave somewhere and... close my eyes.

Without care for when they next open, or if they ever do.

My head hurts and every moment is like floundering in a current so powerful, it drowns out whatever fight that could possibly exist inside me.

Salvatore overestimated me—he assumed I'd be strong enough to make it out of the country. That I could go on and start over like nothing ever happened. Instead, I feel like a wounded animal limping off in search of a private den where I can properly lay myself to rest. For however long I want. Undisturbed and alone in my grief and heartbreak.

If Dad's here to use me as some bargaining chip, then so be it. I don't care anymore...

"Delphi," he says after a long pause. He reaches out, his large hand heavy on my shoulder. "You don't look well. You're clammy."

Probably because I haven't eaten or slept much in days. Or because I just lost the love of my life and went through a hail of stray bullets after a dangerous high-speed chase.

It's been a crazy week.

I lean against the wall for leverage, eyes closed, head tilted back.

“You’re sick. I’ll get us out of here. I’ve never let the Society win. Today’s no different.”

Dad moves to wrap an arm around me, but I shove it away. Even though I’m depleted enough to give up altogether, a small kernel of stubbornness refuses.

Salvatore wouldn’t trust him. He’d question his motives.

So should I.

“Tell me the truth,” I mutter, half opening my eyes to peek at him. “All of it. No more secrets.”

“Delphine—”

“Or I will never trust you. You might as well leave me here to die. Because I won’t go with you.”

His chin hardens and his nostrils flare with the unmistakable reluctance of a man used to being in control. He concedes by nodding, his expression tight.

“Alright. I’ve told you a good part of it. I’m a member of the Society. But I’ve been working from the inside to take them down. It started years ago, when you were just a little girl. I was running for DA. Bernstein came to me for help... with his issue.”

“That’s one way to describe it.”

“I refused. It was appalling he would even consider I’d help him. I was a *father*.”

“But...” I breathe, sinking into a crouch. Standing requires too much energy at a time when everything only seems to spin.

“But he was acting on behalf of the Society. They had been after me for months, trying to force me to join. As I told you, once you occupy a position of leadership, you’re sought after. I had refused for months. They sent Bernstein to trap me, knowing I’d vehemently object given what he was into,” Dad explains. He crouches along with me, gingerly sliding an arm around my waist and guiding me up with his support. “You need water and rest. You’re shaking.”

So I am. I haven’t even noticed. Another cold shudder racks through me as he walks me through the building—what building I don’t even know. I’m so out of it, I barely recognize my surroundings, squinting against the lights and the stretch of hallway in front of us. Dad keeps talking.

“The Society couldn’t find any dirt on me. I was squeaky clean. But the Adams name... not so much.”

I choke on my next breath, hobbling at his side. “What do you—”

“Delphi, my father was not a good man in the traditional sense. He was a ruthless, cutthroat man who recognized sometimes he had bend the rules. Particularly, at a time when our race was maligned, *regardless* of how much money we had in the bank. My father fought fire with fire and got where he did because he stepped on the backs of others. He played dirty in a lot of ways... including enlisting the help of organized crime syndicates to get ahead in the business world.”

I can only let my silence convey my shock. I never met my grandfather. He died before I was born. Everyone in the family has always pretended he was a great man...

“So I’ve been lied to,” I mutter. “Again.”

“I know what you’re thinking. But he wasn’t all bad. He sometimes had blood on his hands and he had affairs on my mother... but he had a few redeeming qualities. He donated millions to charities. He was active in the civil rights movement. He was a devoted father and ensured I had every opportunity available. He just... allowed his greed to take over at times. No one could talk sense into him. He associated more and more with crime families. Then one night, a group of men broke into my parent’s home. The official story in the media was that they were burglars who stole my mother’s fine jewelry and the other valuables they kept in the safe. My father tried to stop them, so they shot him.”

“What was the *real* story?”

Loathing clenches onto Dad’s face. “The mafia killed my father. Leandro Crotone, to be exact. It is my belief their alliance fell through and my father tried to dissociate his business from the Crotone name. Leandro didn’t take that lightly, and so he had my father murdered. The men that broke into my parent’s home, they were there to kill him.”

“My grandfather was corrupt like everyone else,” I mutter. “I can’t even be surprised anymore.”

“I’m not corrupt. Why do you think I made it my mission to clean up the city? I saw what corruption did to my father. I saw what those lawless gangsters did to him.”

“And then you decided to join an elite club where people are sold like merchandise. You went to extravagant parties and drank champagne with the people who bought them,” I spit bitterly. “You fraternized with the Society that had me *raped*... all as you spied from the secret camera you tricked me into wearing, since I was a girl naïve enough to trust you. I see no difference between you and them.”

Dad sighs. “It was a means to keep an eye on you, Delphi. Something that was extremely crucial at the time given the danger you and our family was in. The Society has been after us for many years. I had no other choice.”

“Let me guess. You helped him. Bernstein.”

As out of it as I am, I recognize the difference in Dad’s posture. It stiffens as he steers me down the hall. I don’t need him to answer to understand what it means.

“They had you,” I croak weakly. “After you helped Bernstein. His dirt was on your hands too.”

“That’s right. They only had more dirt on me. I was associated. I had no choice but to join. The Society—it only further sinks its tethers into you from there. The threats should you not comply are constant. I was protecting our legacy and my position as district attorney, but I was also protecting your mother and you kids. They... they threatened to harm you.”

His voice chokes up, sounding gruffer to my ears.

I’m unsure what to make of any of it. The information overloads me, causing my brain to feel like it’s malfunctioning. I barely register the cool afternoon air touching my skin and the asphalt beneath my feet.

We’re outside. Dad buckles me into the passenger seat of a car.

All the while he’s been telling me more, feeding more of the truth I’ve asked for. I can’t say I’ll remember the details when I’m in a better condition. My head slips to the left, dangling limply off my shoulder, only partially listening.

“I knew then I had to do something about the Society. I had to play the game. Attend the events and socialize—*seem* like I belonged. Integrate myself into a space where I was

different. I had been doing so my entire life. I did it seamlessly. But I never stopped plotting. I kept an eye out for an opening. A small window that would give me what I needed.”

At some point, I fall into unconsciousness. My lids lower, and the next time they open, we’re driving on a highway and Dad’s still talking.

I’ve missed whatever he’s told me. He’s hardly noticed, his attention trained on the traffic ahead as he prattles on. My neck aches and my eyelids still feel unreasonably heavy. I press my brow into the cool glass of the car window and dizzy myself with the scenery whipping by.

Everything hurts. Everything feels so useless.

So... *meaningless*.

I finally understand Salvatore’s sense of indifference toward life. I should want to keep fighting, but there’s no energy left in my cold, stiff body. My heart’s died with him, and I have nothing left to give. Nothing left to motivate me or keep me going.

What’s the point?

We lost. It’s over.

“So you see, Lena was my informant,” Dad rambles. “We never had a relationship, though I allowed it to be spun that way purely to protect our mission. It worked in our favor if our interactions were dismissed as a man with his mistress rather than a DA working with an informant.”

“Informant?”

“That’s right. The plan was to take down the Neptune Society and the hold of deplorable crime lords like Leandro

Crotone. Then Lucius Mancino. But things did not go the way we hoped they would. I grew complacent in my position. More preoccupied with the optics of fighting crime than actually fighting crime. Besides, I had you, your mother and Marcel to think about.”

My temples throb trying to parse through his many words. “You gave up?”

“I lost sight of things. A joint decision made by Lena and I. She had suffered enough. But it was a foolish, cowardly decision to give up. To grow complacent. An ally Lena and I had turned out to be a traitor. We found out the truth about him and his family background. We didn’t want to risk our lives any longer. I had too much to live for, and Lena hadn’t yet lived at all.”

“And yet you kept this from us. The family you claim you lived for.”

“Your mother knew, Delphi. That’s why she took me back. I told her everything.”

My face clenches as if in pain, trying to make sense of what he’s telling me. More lies, more deception, more pieces of my life revealed to be a false reality. Why would Mom let me believe Dad had cheated on her?

Mom was ultimately in on the lies too...

“Why?” I whisper.

“Because I’m a selfish man,” he answers sadly. A frown comes to his face. “I couldn’t stand Leontine leaving me. So I took the chance and I told her. I let her in on what was going on. She paid the price for it with her life. The Society killed her to punish me for my retirement and dissociation from their club.”

“They killed her in revenge?”

“Yes. Because I refused to let her go. And now they’re after you. They want to take you too.”

“No.”

The feeble word warbles out of me in a pathetic cry. The numbness evaporates like a stage curtain being pulled, and instead a barrage of emotion unloads on me at once. I break apart as if I’m made of the most fragile material known to man, splitting into tiny little fragments of heartbreak and grief.

Over Mom.

Over Salvatore.

Over everything that’s come to be.

I’m inconsolable to the point I make myself lightheaded again as I drown in tears and choke on air. At some point, I crouch forward and bury my face into my lap, unable to bear the pain that’s lancing through me.

The Neptune Society murdered my mother. They took away a beautiful, graceful, loving woman from this world simply to punish a man they viewed as too defiant—and in the process, forever punishing me, her daughter.

Lucius Mancino took away the man who won my heart. The man who loved me with every bit of his own. Torturing his son through childhood wasn’t enough, he sought to destroy his very existence. *He made him disappear.*

As if Salvatore never existed. As if he didn’t mean the world to me.

And now it’s my turn. I’m next.

My heart constricts trying to beat as normal, but there's nothing normal about any of this.

"Delphi," Dad says. "Did you hear me? I'm not going to let them win. Not this time. He's gotten away with enough."

My mind barely registers a word of what he's saying. I'm too disoriented, too checked out.

"We're here."

Dad shifts gears into park. We're in the parking lot of a thirty dollar a night motel, located right off the highway between a gas station and some storage garages.

"We're biding our time here overnight. As soon as the sun's up, we're back on the move."

Dad checks us in with utmost discretion. You've been to one highway motel, you've been to them all—the springs dig into your spine when you lay on the mattress and the carpet has cigarette burns. The heater attached to the wall sputters out dusty, lukewarm air and the box TV only has six channels.

I take the bed, exhausted and sick.

Dad sets up camp in a chair by the window, insisting he'll keep watch through the night.

"They'll never stop trying," he claims, peering through a narrow part in the curtain. "They're trying to track you down as we speak."

I hum in answer, completely spent and depleted after the last twelve hours. If the Neptune Society were to bust the door down and raid our motel room, I couldn't put up a fight. I can barely hold my head up.

"It's time we talk about Salvatore, Delphi. That you finally know the truth about him and his family," Dad says suddenly.

A grim expression sprawls onto his face. “I know this is not what you want to hear... but it’s for the best that he’s gone.”

“No,” I whisper, feeling shaky. I sit up on the bed. “You’re not doing this to me. Not right now. How dare you?”

“You think you love him. You think he loved you. But if you only knew the truth—”

“HOW DARE YOU?” I howl in an eruption of anger, jumping up. “I’ve just lost him and you think now’s the time to bring up your pathetic feud?! How could you... I should’ve known... I shouldn’t have left with you. I’d rather be out there alone being hunted down by the Neptune Society than deal with you and your pitiful vendetta!”

“It’s important that you know Salvatore was out to hurt you. His whole family is involved, Delphi. Leandro and Lucius and Vol—”

“He’s dead—DEAD!” I scream over him until I’m lightheaded and swaying on my feet. Angry tears stream down my face and my breathings out of control. “I wish it were you. I wish it were you instead of Jon. Why couldn’t it have been you?”

I don’t feel bad for the harsh words. After all the lies, all the deception, and pain he’s put me through, he doesn’t get to try and manipulate me about Salvatore. Mere hours after I’ve found out he’s likely dead.

The lightheadedness goes nowhere. The room begins to feel like it’s shifting. I sit back down on the bed.

Dad finally takes the hint with a resigned sigh. “Suit yourself. You refuse to know the truth. Just... just get some rest.”

Even if I wanted to stay up, if I wanted to leave out of protest, I'm physically unable. I've reached my limit. My body won't allow it as my head touches the lumpy pillow and I'm out cold for hours. The last thing I remember is Dad at the window, peeking out with a creased brow at the parking lot. What seems like the next moment, I'm groggily rolling over to an empty motel room swamped in shadows.

The only clue it's morning comes from the light peeking through the edges of the curtains and the space beneath the motel door.

Where's Dad?

I sit up, yawning, my body sore.

A few hours of sleep has me feeling significantly more put together, though on the inside I'm a volatile wreck over everything that's happened.

Crawling out of bed, I wander into the bathroom for a quick shower. Dad hasn't returned by the time I emerge a few minutes later, wearing the same sweater and jeans I left the safe house in. What could be going on? Where could he possibly—

The key card for our door lights up and the door itself flies open. Dad darts inside and slams the door shut. He's panting, sweat staining his v-neck sweater and beading along his brow.

"They're here," he huffs. "They've found us."

"What? How?"

"There's no time. We have to get out of here. Come. Now."

I don't have a chance to grab anything. I flee only a few steps behind him with the same speechless shock that had seized me yesterday when the safehouse was under attack. We

dash across the cratered parking lot at the same moment the familiar white vans screech onto the scene.

The Neptune Society wastes no time letting us know they're not playing games; as we make it to the car, they open fire, narrowly missing us.

"I should've known they'd find us here," Dad pants, jamming the key in the ignition. "We should've left earlier, but I was trying to let you rest."

"Rest? When we're being hunted by some extremely powerful club of elites? You should've woke me up!"

"No time for arguing. Hold tight."

I grip the overhead handle as Dad stomps his foot on the gas and we spin out of the motel parking lot.

There seems to be no rhyme or reason to where we're going. We're hustling down a street with a sign that reads 45 mph, doing an easy 65.

We cut cars off and run a red-light to honks from a semi-truck that narrowly avoids colliding with us.

"Where are we going?" I yell as Dad tensely grips the wheel. "They're tailing us. I don't think it's such a great plan to go veering off with no end in sight. They have more resources than we do."

"We'll head to the airport. Try to buy a flight somewhere. That's what your trusted boyfriend wanted, wasn't it?"

I ignore him and the bitter inflection of his voice. Dad's never changing. He'll hate Salvatore 'til the day he dies... even if Salvatore's only ever protected me.

For miles, we carry on breaking the posted speed limits. Dad clumsily keeps our car intact despite the wild maneuvers

he pulls off getting us onto the highway and forcing his way into the fast lane. The white vans barrel behind us, steadily tracking every move we make.

Even if we do make it to the airport, they'll simply accost us there.

"I have a plan," Dad says. "I've been thinking... we need a diversion. Somehow get you inside the airport."

"And what about you?"

He doesn't answer straightaway. When he does, he's explaining the finer points of his plan. "I'm going to try to lose them near the parking garage. It's the perfect chance to use the dark environment to our advantage."

I repeat my question only to be drowned out by the van tailgating us ramming into our rear end bumper. My grip on the overhead handle tightens and my heart leaps into my throat. Dad almost loses control of the car, but corrects himself as it jerks to veer into the next lane.

Ahead of us the huge sign welcoming us to the local airport slips into view.

"Ready?" he asks, pressing harder on the gas. "I told you to hold tight, Delphi. This is... very dangerous."

Just what he means by 'very dangerous' is something I discover a split second later.

As we're headed for the entrance into the departures lane, he hooks the sharpest left possible. So abrupt, so unexpected, we're crossing onto the wrong side of the airport traffic, and diving straight into the tunnel that leads to the parking garage.

Before the van can even register what we've done, they're already stuck in the lane for departures, cordoned off by a

cement barrier.

I scream and push myself against the carseat as Dad goes over 50 in the tight, dark enclosed parking garage. He whips the car around a narrow corner, clipping a parked SUV, and then slams on the brake.

“Get out!” he yells. “Grab your emergency bag in the back and run for that elevator over there! Now, quickly, stick to the shadows, away from the light posts. I’m going to distract them.”

I’m scrambling to do as told. I have the emergency bag Stitches said would have everything I need, and I stumble slinging it over my back, preparing myself to run.

“But, Dad—”

“Here they come, GO!”

I do as told. I back away and then take off. I crouch behind the many rows of cars in the dark, scarcely lit parking garage. In the background, car tires screech and scrape against concrete as Dad’s car whizzes by, closely followed by two white vans.

It worked!

They don’t seem to notice I’ve gotten out of the car. Hopefully, Dad will be able to shake them off...

My wishful thinking is dashed only footsteps later. As I scurry toward the elevator at the end of the parking garage level, gunshots break out. The kind of final gunshots that end a commotion that’s in-progress. Once the gunshots sound, there’s no more tires screeching. No more growls of car engines being pushed to their limit.

The parking garage goes eerily... silent.

“Dad,” I croak, stopping where I am. For a moment longer than I probably should, I stand alone in the dark of the garage, staring out at the sea of parked cars.

Should I go find him? What if they’ve shot him? What if he’s lying bleeding and they’re about to—

I shove aside the thoughts. Dad wanted me to make it to the elevator. Salvatore would want me to get the hell out of here. I have no other choice but to get the hell out of here. Then maybe I can regroup and devise a plan.

My legs carry me the rest of the way without my conscious thought. I smash a finger to the up button outside the elevator doors, my heart pounding in my ears. The ding noise echoes in the eerie dark silence and the doors slide open. I rush to get on and then falter to a halt.

“Hello Delphine,” says a man with a hideous scar on the side of his face. He raises his hand, clutching the barrel of his gun and strikes me with the butt of it. “I knew we’d meet again.”

salvatore

. . .



LIFE IS GIVEN new meaning when spent in captivity.

If you can call time spent in captivity life at all. I go into it knowing what to expect—the absolute worst cruelty humanly possible. Nothing short of what the devil himself is capable of. I should know; I was given a taste of it for years.

But that was just it.

A taste.

When I'm taken, it's with the damning knowledge I'm a dead man. I'm about to be put through hell. I'm going to suffer as much as a human can possibly suffer before their body gives out and can take no more.

I fought like no other. The whole time, knowing I wasn't going to win. Me and two of my guys against a whole crew? Even I'm not that good.

But I put up a fight. I gritted my teeth and swung my fists. I fired my gun. I lodged my Balisong knife in the eye socket of a soldier or two. Their blood splattered on me, and I counted it as a trophy like I always do. I worked my way through 'til the odds became insurmountable and I was toppled. They finally overpowered me.

I was dragged before Lucius beaten, bruised, and bloodied.

He sat back in his big leather chair, a glass of whiskey in his meaty palm, and he *laughed*.

“Who stabbed him?” he asked.

“That was Donatello, Boss,” De Trolio said, gleaming with pride at his soldier’s work.

Lucius nodded his approval. “Take him to his cell. No food. No water. No nothing. Let him sit on the cold, hard ground and think about how he’s a piece of shit. Fucking *scarafaggio*.”

Hate poisoned his voice. Hate burned in his glare as he looked at me like scum on his shoe.

Nothing new, always expected, but packing an extra punch given the circumstances.

Two men gripped my limp body by my arms and dragged me away like a lifeless dummy. I was tossed inside a dark, wet cell made of concrete and reeking of piss and stale air. My body smashed into the hard surface as I landed on my side. Not the good side either, the side with the broken ribs.

For who knows how long, I laid there, barely able to breathe, ’til I worked up enough energy to roll myself over. My eyes slipped closed. I fell asleep for what felt like a second but what must’ve been hours, because I coughed being woken up.

One of the guards kicked me hard in the side. Still not the good side, the side with the broken ribs. He laughed doing it, repeating the action two more times, the acute pain making it so that my side felt like I’d never inhale a normal breath again.

“Get the fuck up, bitch.”

Another thing I've had to grow used to—being talked to as subhuman. I'm nobody within these walls.

The most rookie guards get to beat the shit out of me, treat me like I'm the garbage they toss away each day.

That guy in particular dragged me out my cell for what they call in-processing. What's otherwise known as humiliation to any person with dignity. Stripped naked, hosed down, I'm paraded like that. Naked 'til they toss a worn pair of pants at me to wear. Nothing else, no socks, no shoes, certainly no luxuries like a shirt.

I'm chained like a fucking dog to the pipes in the boiler room.

“Where the real fun starts,” the guard taunts as he yanks on the chains connected to my wrists. “You're property now, which means you've got to have the mark. Rules are rules. Hopefully we get it right the first time.”

He did not get it right the first time.

I was chained to the boiler, forced to stand stock-still or risk burning the rest of my body against the steaming hot pipes, as a smoking iron pressed into the back of my shoulder. My skin *sizzled*. It fucking melted as the burning hot iron fused with it, branding my flesh with the Mancino logo, reflecting ownership.

Property, as the asshole guard called it.

My teeth clenched and my muscles flexed, my body bracing for the pain. But there was no preparing for it—the heat seared into my flesh unlike anything I'd ever felt before. I inhaled the sickening stench of burning flesh.

My burning flesh.

But I didn't give them a real reaction. I bore the extreme pain in silence. I was knocked down to the ground, kicked in my side. He called on his friends, who eagerly joined in. A group of them circled me and got their laughs in, jamming their steel-toe boots into different points of my bruised body.

One sick fuck, who I learned was named Gilbert, voiced aloud how he thought it'd be fun to take the iron to other parts of me. Really mutilate me, *really* do damage.

"Maybe next time. Orders are orders."

I was flung back into my cell and left to rot for who knows how long.

I coughed up blood and laid crumpled on the concrete floor, experiencing the full ache of my bruises all over. Too weak and disoriented to move much, yet too prideful to show any real signs of just how deeply pained I was.

Instead... I disappear into my head. Each and every time, I choose stubborn silence. I lay bruised and broken and force myself to retreat into a false reality.

As my physical body lays cold and blue on concrete, I'm warm and clothed in my head. I'm on my bike, racing through the city at sunset with the golden horizon bursting before me. In my ear are the softest, most addictive breathy sounds I've ever heard. Around my torso, the trusting squeeze of arms that have latched onto me seeking security.

In my head I'm taking Delphine for an evening ride to Rose Hill.

We're coming up on the Northam River as sun sets, smiling at the sight, embraced together with a happy calm over us.

If I'm happy in this memory of mine, then it's still possible... then I can still hold on.

That's the deluded kind of thinking I descend into. The kind of nonsense I tell myself to keep going.

Hold on. If it's in your head, it can be real again. You can make it happen.

Hours, days, weeks.

I don't know how much time passes. Eventually, they feed me food a dog probably wouldn't eat and let me have some water. That's as good as it gets—the lows keep coming.

I'm tortured, taken out every so often for questioning.

Apparently, Lucius still hasn't found the tapes. He thought he had when he sent his men to capture me at Lena's apartment, but he didn't count on me hiding the tapes, nor me shooting a cryptic text to my guys about their whereabouts. That's if any of them are still alive to get their hands on where it's hidden in Lena's ceiling.

So, in desperation for some answers, Lucius resorts to the usual Mafia methods.

Waterboarding me. I'm beaten several more times by several more men. Some threats are waged as they take me to the edge of death, pointing a gun to the temple of my head and telling me if I don't speak in the next sixty seconds, my brains will be blown out.

My right hand's smashed with a hammer. It's broken three different ways.

Lucius shows up for some action. He moves me to an interrogation room and proceeds to play a game I'm familiar with from childhood—him and his knives and twenty-one

questions where he progressively unravels and grows more and more erratic.

“This could end,” he says, dragging the blade of his knife along my throat. It’s with enough pressure that beads of blood bubble to the surface. “I could put you out of your misery if you tell me now. No more suffering.”

I scowl at him. “Fuck you.”

“You’re only making it worse.”

“I don’t care what you do to me.”

He jerks his knife away from my throat. “No, you don’t, do you? This is what I mean when I say you’ve always been a little smug piece of shit. Right from birth, I wanted to squash it out of you. You always thought you were tough shit.”

My stare meets his beady eyes, mine void of anything. Empty so as not to give him any real satisfaction.

His shrewd eyes only shrink further. He raises the blade of his knife high enough in the air that it glints in the light, and then he brings it down on me.

Straight into my shoulder.

I’m taken by surprise. A grunt of pain grinds out of me. I clamp my mouth shut to stave off any other sound as the blade digs into my upper arm and blood pools to the surface. The sharp, piercing pain throbs and joins the pain in many other parts of me.

Lucius smirks and twists the knife. The blade cuts through my muscle and more sharp pain shoots through my shoulder and bicep. More blood leaks from the wound. I grit my teeth and square my jaw and try to remain as unaffected as possible, but I’m human.

Somebody stabbing you hurts like hell. Even if it's only in the shoulder.

Lucius plucks the blade free with a throaty laugh. "Where else?"

"Fuck off."

"See," he says, laughing. "See what I mean? You're a cocky son of a bitch. You deserve every misfortune coming to you—and believe me, there are many. This is only the beginning, *scarafaggio*. By the time I'm through with you, you will be begging me. You will ask me to kill you."

Never.

Lucius crouches in front of me. His pudgy face shines with glee studying my bruised, swollen face. "Remember what I said? I'm your god, Salvatore. You have no idea how I'm about to show you."

"I said," I wheeze out in my aching voice, "fuck off."

"You're really not going to give up the location of the tapes?"

I hawk up as much spit as I can—which isn't much considering I'm dehydrated—and spit at his feet. "Fuck off, you fucking *mutante*. Give me an opening. Give me one single chance to get free, and I'm going to make you fucking pay. Count on it."

The cocky smile drops off Lucius's face. The monstrous severity that replaces it reminds me of a time or two I'd really pissed him off growing up. He means business. His fat, stubby fingers stretch out and grip me by my chin. Peering into my unyielding glare, the hatred in his own stare oozes from his every huge pore.

“You’re going to regret this,” he tells me. “Just remember. I will show no mercy. Not even *when* you beg.”

I have no clue what the fuck he’s talking about as he lets go and stands up. His shoes echo on the concrete, a lone tapping sound that’s ominous as he walks out. The door swings shut with a decisive clang of steel.

He’s going to make me pay. Probably torture me some more. Maybe move into real gruesome, demented shit like destroying my body—he’ll want to mutilate me and turn me into a freak show like him.

But I won’t beg.

I refuse. Nothing he can do to me will make me beg for mercy.

The cold concrete bites me as I crawl to the corner opposite the toilet and huddle up for another long, freezing night.

“You won’t last long.”

The voice comes through the crack in the concrete wall to my right. The cell next to mine. Somebody’s occupying it—something I found out soon after I was placed here.

At night, in the dead silence of everything, I can hear the rasp of his snores. Sometimes, when the guards deliver him his daily ration of food, they taunt him. Though he never gives in, even allows a reason for them to mete out punishment.

His voice being raspy with a natural creak to it, he sounds like he’s got age.

“You don’t know shit,” I snap.

“I know all the shit,” he says, and then... nothing.

My ears pick up on the rasp that follows as he rolls into a snore and deep breathing. He's fallen asleep mere seconds after issuing his prediction. I shake my head and close my eyes, trying to force myself into a sleep that doesn't come easy.

Not even when I try to disappear into my head, where pleasant memories exist, like the one of taking Delphine for a bike ride to Rose Hill at sunset.

Instead, no matter how exhaustion sinks into me, I'm stuck in a loop of paranoia.

You won't last long.

delphine

. . .



A BLINDFOLD COVERS my eyes and zip ties secure my wrists when I regain consciousness. I'm unsteady on my feet, swaying between two structures larger than myself—this I know because my body wilts left and connects with something hard and immovable. The same happens as I'm sent in the other direction and discover it's equally as solid.

I might as well be a flower blowing in the wind, my stem trapped between concrete.

It's a long time before I realize what's happening.

Before I'm able to orient myself enough to realize I'm swaying for a reason. The ground is moving. Everything around me is being lifted up, steadily higher by the second.

It ends with a *ding* and jerking motion that makes me stumble. The two solid entities I'm wedged between don't let me fall. Their viselike grips seize hold of me and put me back in place in between them.

We're in an elevator.

The doors slide open with a whoosh. Their grips seem to tighten if that's possible. I'm hauled along at a pace that's double my natural stride.

The tile is glazed plastic that feels like stepping on ice. It doesn't help that I'm barefoot.

Panic clogs inside my chest and sets me off. I buck in their hold. My struggles make no difference, but it makes me feel like I'm doing something—I'm putting up a fight against wherever they're taking me.

Whoever *they* are.

I jerk and twist and kick out my legs. At certain points both of my feet leave the ground altogether and I'm being *carried* by these unknown people at my side. They're holding me off the ground, still walking forward as if I'm just a bag of supplies or some other object to carry somewhere.

A strangled scream leaves me. My desperation grows alongside the panic.

I don't like this. I don't want this. Where the hell am I going? Who the hell are these people and why the hell are my wrists bound?

Why the fuck am I wearing a blindfold? Where the fuck are my shoes?

My tantrum must agitate them. The one on my right grabs the nape of my neck and pinches the skin between strong fingers. An insect's pinchers would hurt less. I cry out as pain sears in the spot he's gripped, and they drag me onward. No obstacle will stop them.

A depressing fact I realize as they shove me into a room.

Still blindfolded. Still bound.

A brutal cold rushes past me as I stand in what feels like a darker, more enclosed space, and shiver.

Then bright, fluorescent lights flick on. Even with my blindfold on I can tell.

I'm trembling, my bare feet standing in a wet puddle of *something*.

Hearing becomes the only real way to tell what's going on. The steady stream of running water meets my ears. Am I in a bathroom?

My blindfold is torn away from me.

I'm face to face with a wiry-haired woman with a severe scowl slashed across her thin lips. She can only otherwise be described as gray—at least as I squint against the bright light and try to make sense of what's happening—gray hair, bland and muted clothes, skin so pale it might as well be its own shade of gray.

She reaches for me with pointy, gnarled fingers, cold like a corpse. Her grip is stronger than I expect as she yanks me forward.

Every moment with her feels like an annoyance. My mere presence bothers her. She throws me filthy looks up and down and then cuts my zip ties. I'm barely registering what she's doing before she shoves me toward a concrete wall lined with shower heads and drains.

“What—”

I interrupt myself with a scream as she tears away the robe that I've been changed into. My arms fly up in an attempt to cover myself, but it's no use. The woman anticipates my modesty, smacking my arms away and shoving me back again.

My feet slip on the slick surface, and I try to catch myself before hitting the floor. I save myself from the fall but wind up

smacking into the concrete wall instead. The shower head spurts on and drenches me in icy water.

So does a hose the woman withdraws, spraying me down with chilling water that pricks my skin like glass shards.

The air leaves my lungs. I gasp and sputter, back against the concrete, so ambushed I can't even shield myself. Let alone *cover* myself.

But that's by design. The faucet to the shower head is twisted off, the heavy stream from above disappearing, as I cough and my ribs clench. My sinuses are flooded, and I can barely breathe. I'm freezing cold, skin pruned, my body shaking on the spot.

Too weak to protest as I'm jostled into the next stage.

The woman yanks me forward and towels me off. No time is wasted on being gentle. The Terrycloth scrapes against my skin in the most abrasive fashion possible. Private parts aren't spared. I'm shoved and herded along.

For the first time, I'm aware I'm not the only one being subjected to this kind of inhumane treatment.

On my way out, I hear snippets of other women suffering the same handling—shocked gasps and the sudden spray of water, their splashed footsteps as they struggle to maintain balance in the shower area.

I can't see any of them. But they're here... somewhere close by...

I'm not the only one who's been taken captive.

That sobering revelation makes the situation feel so much worse. Significantly bleaker as I'm prodded along as though

part of an invisible assembly line. These people do this often; they have a streamlined process.

I'm one of many. Just another number in whatever system I'm being forced into.

Easy to get lost in. Easy to be buried in.

The gray woman never stops with the pushes and shoves. I'm draped in another robe, wrists bound once more in a ziptie, and then flanked by men that I've never seen before but are familiar. The men who escorted me in the elevator guide me into synced steps alongside them.

Finally able to see, I glance up and study their features.

Both are unremarkable. Dark hair and eyes, skin that needs more sunlight. Tall and broad and strong. Though anyone would be jostling me along as I fumble on weak knees and bare feet.

The mystery men shove me into yet another room and slam the door shut.

This one drastically different from the shower room.

A parlor of some sort, with maroon papered walls and an oak table and chairs anchored in the center. Other details pepper the room, like some vases made of what looks like expensive porcelain and portraits showing off black-and-white memories from the past, but none of these things matter to me.

I want answers. I want them now.

Wrists zip-tied together, I shuffle toward the table and chairs.

I'm in the custody of the Neptune Society. It's the only thing that makes sense. They'd been hunting me down when Stitches and I escaped. Then when Dad showed up and saved

me. They tracked us down and then ambushed me at the airport.

The numbness that's become second nature won't let up. For once I'm grateful. At least I can't feel the true horror of what's about to happen—what I'm certain, even if it's only in the back of my mind, I'm being placed into.

It allows me to dissociate from myself and my feelings.

From the broken, aching heart in my chest.

The door opens and in strides a tall man with a slicked ponytail. His eyes are on me from the first step, the glint of familiarity that lives in them unnerving. He has a jagged scar on his cheek and long, spindly legs that allow him to cross the room in only a couple steps.

I recognize him immediately as the man in the airport elevator. The one who knocked me unconscious.

It seems the next time I'm blinking he's clamping a hand down on my shoulder and shoving me down into a chair.

His touch.

It makes me jerk. My insides knot. My intuition blares its alarm bells.

I've never felt so disconcerted so immediately. The way my body tenses as its forced into the chair is no mistake.

This man is my enemy. I'm certain I hate him with every fiber of my being.

I'd know this even without our brief encounter in the airport elevator.

“You gave us a lot of trouble,” he says in a voice I've heard before. He leans close, his long body caging over me in

my seat. “But it was always going to come down to this. You were stupid to think otherwise.”

He plants his hand down on the tabletop. His hand, flat on the oak surface, draws my gaze the second it’s within view. A cold chill ices through me and freezes me into the chair I’m sitting in.

Long, grimy fingers and chewed up nails. A sapphire-gemmed ring with a silver braided band.

The night that changed my life descends on me and takes me away for the millionth time. I’ve lived and relived it so often it shouldn’t affect me anymore. Yet this time is different, breathing the air he breathes, staring at the same hand that planted itself on the cold, dirty asphalt as he jammed himself inside me.

I’m going to be sick.

He’s hovering close enough that I can sense his spreading grin. “What’s the matter? Anything on your mind?”

On mute, I shake my head.

He chuckles. “Shy all of a sudden? You weren’t so shy that night. You sure made a lot of noise. Those grunts and groans of yours. You were enjoying yourself, weren’t you?”

My teeth clamp down on my bottom lip. The rest of me can’t sit still, shaking in my chair. I’m unable to do anything except sink deeper into my trauma, replaying that night over and over in my head, tears wetting my eyes.

The worst part is that there’s no escape. My wrists are bound, and I’m being held here against my will.

He’s enjoying this. Just like he enjoyed that night.

“You barely put up a fight when I came for you then,” he taunts with another laugh. His fingertips trace the curve of my cheek and I jerk away. “You were so defenseless and weak. But you’ve tried not to be now, right? You wanted to learn to defend yourself.”

I’m forced to sit there as the room fills with more of his demented laughter. Maybe the sickest, most nauseating sound I’ve ever heard.

He refuses to stop touching me. For every jerk of my body, resisting the stroke of his fingers or caress of his hand, he has ten more.

“This is only the beginning,” he whispers into my ear. “You don’t know who I am, do you? But I make sure shit around here happens. Our products get sold. You’re going to be a very fun product to sell.”

I’m at the Mill, where they package human beings and sell them for any services requested.

Brenda went through this. Many others have too. Who knows how many thousands?

The door opens, though I can’t see who walks through. My rapist stands up straight and addresses the guy, telling him he’s gotten me ready for my meeting with Volchok.

What little air exists in my lungs evaporates. Salvatore had been so certain Volchok was linked to everything that was going on. He had believed Volchok was even an integral part of the Neptune Society itself.

It seems he was correct.

“He’s coming,” says the guy from the doorway.

“Good. She’s here. He’ll have all the time he wants with her.”

My rapist walks into my line of vision, stopping at the opposite end of the table. He’s exactly as I remember him—tall, lean, his hair slicked only into a ponytail. His hands glide along the oak surface and his menacing gaze never leaves my face.

If it were up to him, he’d devour me right now.

He’d do whatever he wanted.

The next time we’re alone he probably will.

“Here he is,” he says, straightening up. He puts on a fake smile. “The man of the hour. Volchok.”

A pair of heavy-footed feet pound into the room.

I twist in my chair for a look. I’m not sure what I’m expecting, but the man that comes through the doorway isn’t it—he’s not Volchok.

My brain aches trying to make sense of what I’m seeing versus what I know to be true.

Lucius Mancino in the flesh. In a suit, with a devilish smirk, and a glint in his beady eyes, surveying me like I’m meat to be served up on a platter.

“Delphine Rose Adams. Precious daughter of Ernest Huxley Adams. The great love of Salvatore Jonathan Mancino. You have no idea how many years I’ve been waiting to meet you.”



My first instinct is to run. Salvatore always told me he wanted me far away from his father. He wanted him nowhere near me. He had made it clear he wanted to keep us as far apart from each other as possible due to the pure sinister nature of him.

Seeing him now sets off every fight or flight instinct inside my body.

I leap up from my chair to make an escape. I don't get so far as a few steps before I'm slammed back into my seat.

My attacker providing cover. He clenches my shoulders within his grip and brushes his lips to my ear. "Where the fuck do you think you're going, DA? Volchok wants to see you. Try something again and I'm going to brand that ass of yours. Give you something real to cry about."

Lucius strolls across the room as if I'm not a woman captive in his presence. This is a normal occasion for him. He seats himself in the chair across from me with hands folded on the table and an excited grin on his flabby face.

His gaze is no less cold. No less inhumane.

I'm entertainment for him.

Silence stretches on and on. We stare at each other the entire time. I'm not sure what to expect or think looking into the face of evil. The devil who's taken Salvatore from me.

Just when I begin wondering if he'll say anything at all, he speaks.

"You fascinate me," he says. Then he stares for several more seconds, drinking me in. Mild irritation flickers in and out of his face when I don't accept the compliment and thank him. "You're the only one who has ever made him feel anything. You know that?"

I blink, my heart racing. “Where’s Salvatore?”

“He’s like a zombie. Even as a fucking kid. Nothing really phased him like it should. You won’t believe the things I did to him. Sure, he’d scream or grunt in pain, but it wasn’t like a normal person... he never begged for mercy. He never asked to live. He just... he let me do it. Whatever I wanted to do to the sick little bastard.”

“Please... I don’t...” I whisper, turning the other cheek. Pain shoots into my heart hearing him brag about the abuse he subjected Salvatore to as a child. I can’t stand to hear the details. Not from him in his proud voice with his evil smirk.

He leans closer, watching me. “It upsets you, does it? You love him, don’t you? And he loves you. That’s what’s so... interesting. You two should’ve been smarter about this. I expected more from Miss District Fucking Attorney. Miss Ernest Fucking Adams’s Daughter. You’re all fucking pathetic.”

Still with my gaze elsewhere, I grit my teeth. “You’re not Volchok.”

“I *am* Volchok. For all intents and purposes. This cushy club your big, bad daddy belonged to? Guess who he was under all this time?” Lucius laughs, leaning back in his chair. His grubby fingers dig into the pocket of his suit jacket and withdraw a cigar. “I’ve got to admit, the society club might’ve been the best thing Leandro ever did. He started it up way back when. As covert means to connect the goody-goody rich and powerful in the city with the not-so-goody-goody rich and powerful in the city.”

“You mean people on the right side of the law and people on the wrong side. Both corrupt.”

“Just one side hiding in plain sight,” he finishes for me, lighting up his cigar. In seconds, the room fills immediately with the earthy stench of tobacco. He blows smoke across the table at me like I should be honored to choke on his ringlets. “There’s a reason who runs the club has always been kept hush-hush.”

“And the name Volchok? Where does that come in? A fake alias? A made-up figurehead?”

“I assure you, Delphine sweetheart, Volchok was—*is*—very real, and always has been. The thing is, I own this fucking city. I mean it when I say it. This Neptune shit is more smoke and mirrors. Everybody fell for it, hook, line, and sinker. Your daddy too.”

“He knew,” I growl, anger rushing me, leaving me lightheaded. “He always suspected something was up with this vile club.”

Lucius’s fat lips twist into a nastier smile. “Devoted daughter to the end. How’s it feel to know your two big protectors failed? They both swore they’d keep you safe. Yet here you are. As vulnerable as ever. I’ve played each one of you like a fiddle. It’s been fucking fantastic.”

“Why?” I choke out. “You had me raped. You came for me that night. Why?”

He laughs, the sound loud and abrasive. “Delphine baby, you’re still not getting it! It’s got *nothing* to do with you and *everything* to do with them! You are, and always have been, collateral damage.”

“You knew it would make Salvatore even more protective of me. He’d insist on being in my life again.”

“That’s right.”

“And you knew it’d draw my father out too. He’d vow to do what he didn’t before—back when he gave up and tried to live a quiet life. You knew he’d come for the Society again.”

He husks out another darkly amused laugh. “Bingo, baby girl. None of you understand what kind of fucking games I play. I go deep. I play levels ahead of anything you’re able to comprehend. Every single move you idiots made, I knew you would. The whole fucking time!”

He slams his large hand down on the table in a riot of evil laughter.

A bone-chilling shiver courses through me at the knowledge the last year and a half of our lives have been carefully orchestrated. Maybe even longer. Just what has Lucius done in the past to subtly control things?

Suddenly, I’m questioning everything. Every minute moment.

“You wanted to let Salvatore believe he had a fighting chance,” I whisper.

He blows more smoke, his beady eyes glittering. “Uh huh. I could’ve squashed the arrogant fuck a long time ago. If I really wanted to. But I’ve got to admit, he was entertaining sometimes. Both of you were. He’s crazy about you. Crazy fucking stupid about you. His obsession made me a little... *obsessed* myself.”

I lean back in my chair as he leans forward across the table. His beady eyes bore into mine, a hazel shade that seems to transition depending on the light. No matter the color, all I see is evil as he peers at me and then reaches his meaty hand over.

“Please...” I mutter. “Just... just....”

“What? Kill you?” He rises, gripping my face. “I could. Right now. Run a knife through you and end your misery. All that shaking your pathetic, sorry ass is doing. But I won’t. Because that would be no fun.”

He’s right to call me out on my shaking. My knees bounce in my chair and my hands twist in my lap. My shoulders and torso won’t sit still. The only reason my face does is because he’s holding it roughly within the squeezing palm of his hand.

His touch is as repulsive as my rapist. A coil of disgust twists inside me.

“I’m going to have a lot more fun making you suffer,” he says. His eyes light up, a golden shade about them. “But, first, let’s get the ownership piece out of the way. Cesar, this is your big moment. What you’ve been waiting for. Have the guys bring it in.”

Cesar’s face lights up with a cruel grin and he arrows straight for the door.

I have no idea what’s going on, but it can’t be good if Cesar’s happy about it. The panic sets in, increasing my heartbeat, and making me finicky. I twist in my seat only for Lucius to bark at me to sit perfectly still.

But I can’t. I can’t sit still when I know something horrible’s about to—

“This will be fun,” comes Cesar’s voice. His footsteps thud back into the room with the clink and clang of what sounds like some sort of metal device. He stops at the table and lays down a long iron rod of some sort.

Then my gaze falls on the stamp-like end of the rod in the shape of the Neptune Society crest, and it clicks what’s about to happen.

I scream. I lose every last shred of composure and attempt to make another escape. Halfway across the room, I'm caught by the waist. Cesar's wrapped arms around me in a bearhug and lifts me off the ground. I'm kicking, thrashing, desperately trying to hurt him in some way.

My wrists are bound. I'm weaponless. Exhausted and alone.

For as much of a fight as I put up, it's no use. I'm flung against the table, pushed down 'til my cheek is touching the wooden tabletop.

Directly next to where Lucius sits, calm and composed with his drink.

I'm forced to stare into his inhuman eyes. He stares back as though watching paint dry.

This is nothing to him.

"Please," I sob, choking on my own breath. "Please, don't... PLEASE!"

"Told you she's a begger," Cesar cackles from behind.

"Is that right?"

"You should've heard her that night. I still laugh my ass off thinking about it." He sticks the stamp-like end of the iron rod into the fizzing flames of the fireplace and then rips down part of my robe. My bare shoulder exposed, I can feel the heat before the branding rod even touches my skin.

I'm coming down from my hysteria. Quiet tears slide down my cheek and slant along the bridge of my nose. A glaze sort of effect takes over me as I slip out of the present and check out of the moment. Much like I had the night in the alley.

Now is no different.

Cesar presses the iron into the back of my shoulder blade and a sick sizzling noise fills the air. The pain makes my body twitch and muscles clench. My nails dig into palms and my toes dig into the ground. My mouth drops open in a soundless cry of agony at what feels like a hole burned into my skin.

When he's done, he yanks me up like a rag doll and then roughly pulls my robe up over my shoulder. I'm shoved back into my seat, where I sit still in my catatonic state.

Lucius's beady eyes glint. "Was that so bad, Delphine? It was only a few seconds of suffering. You'll have my mark on you forever. You're my property now. I can do what I want with you... and, believe me, I will."

I bite down hard to stifle the noise of panic in my throat, though he senses it, anyway.

"But," he says in a mock-gentle tone, "because I've got a heart, I'm gonna do something nice for you. How about a treat? How about I take you to see him? The guy you love so much. My piece of shit son that I can't stand, but who has risked heaven and earth for you. We're going on a field trip."

salvatore

. . .



“YOU’RE IN FOR A TREAT TODAY.”

The silhouette stops in the entryway of my cell, shrouded in shadows. I don’t move from where I am—the far corner is the safest place to be, like my own self-created territory within a territory that couldn’t be further from my own.

I’m on enemy soil. But this corner, it’s mine.

I don’t move unless made to. The smarter way to go about things would be to obey. Go where asked and do as they say.

Rules have never been my thing. It’s no different in captivity. If they want me, they’re going to have to come and get me. Come and make me.

Fuck him. Fuck them. Fuck the rules.

So, I stick to my corner. I take the extra beatings and punishments that come with my defiance. However many days and counting, and still I won’t break. My skin, my bones, my body might, but not my mind.

I will never give in. He has to know it. Every visit of his, the dissatisfaction twists onto his ugly, pudgy face.

“Did you hear me?” the silhouette asks. He takes a step into my cell. His knuckles tap against the concrete wall, twice

as loud in the quiet, boxed-in space. “I have a special treat for you.”

Finally, his face falls under the measly streak of light that’s poured in from the hall. Ray De Trolio watches me with the kind of twisted interest a mad scientist would use on one of his experiments. I didn’t need to see his gloating grin to know it was him standing in the doorway; Lucius assigned him my main tormentor for a reason.

He gets on my last nerve and knows I can’t do a damn thing about it.

“Don’t you want to know what it is?” The tempo of his knuckle-tap increases, like he’s creating his own playful melody as he stands over me, huddled in a corner, bruised and beaten up.

This couldn’t be more fun for him.

Yet I don’t answer. I give him the same reaction I’ve given every other moment I’ve been here.

Silence and my glare. Both sealed with homicidal rage and the promise that if I’m ever given even the slightest opportunity, I *will* kill him.

De Trolio’s not a fighter, but so long as the power dynamic remains the same, he finds it funny. Surveying me from under his bushy unibrow, he laughs.

“How’s the hand?”

Silence.

The hand he’s referencing rests dead in my lap. Just about every bone broken, capillaries busted, skin tinged blue and purple from the extreme trauma and bruises. It could be permanently disfigured.

Though I never gave him the pleasure of letting him know my pain. I took it in silence, like now.

“It’s disrespectful when you don’t speak,” De Trolio says. His knuckles play another tune on the concrete slab as if he’s thinking on something. Mind made up, he drops into a crouch that brings us closer to eye level. “You know, the Boss said I could do whatever I wanted. I’ve been going easy on you. I could *really* fuck you up.”

More silence.

His unibrow furrows, his teeth clenching despite his grin. “You think you’re such a fucking badass, don’t you? Too cool to let anybody know you’re in pain.”

De Trolio rises and swings his leg back. The bottom of his loafer smashes into my nose from the kick he delivers to my face. The pain is immediate and intense, burning my nasal passages and throbbing across my cheeks and bridge of my nose. It wouldn’t surprise me if he’s broken it.

That’s his intention—he swings his leg back for another go.

His loafer careens straight at my throbbing face, only to be stopped. I catch it with my good hand and shove it away, throwing him off. He staggers back and almost loses his balance altogether.

Ray De Trolio isn’t so amused anymore. Not when I show him how lucky he is I can’t really fight back. Regaining his balance, he straightens his suit jacket and attempts to play up a sense of coolness he’s lost.

Too late. The agitation reddens his ears and tightens his voice.

“See, always thinking you’re such a fucking badass! I should break out the flogger and cut open that back of yours again. Make you stand in a puddle of your own blood. But I’ve got a better idea.”

By the way he grins, it must be something he’s spent time cooking up. He’s proud of himself.

“You might be too much of a badass to let everybody know you’re in pain. But not everyone’s like you, Psycho. Maybe we’ll listen to someone else’s pain instead. Fellas, grab him.”

Two of the soldiers standing guard on my cell rush into the room and remove me by force from my corner. They jam a bag over my head to keep me from knowing where they’re taking me. I’m dragged out of the cell by my arms; they don’t care that I don’t stand up. My body’s dragged down several halls before I’m deposited in another room.

De Trolio yanks the bag from my head. Sight restored, I look around, expecting torture devices and other instruments of pain.

Instead, I discover I’m in an empty room. Just me, De Trolio, a chair, and a glass pane that stretches several feet wide across the wall—a two-way mirror.

I glance up to notice how closely De Trolio’s watching me. He’s waiting on my reaction, trying to see if I understand.

My breathing’s slowed. The situation’s an unknown.

My instincts tell me something’s happening. Something that’s so much worse than anything else that I’ve experienced so far.

Then I hear it. On the other side of the two-way mirror. The door opens and several pairs of footsteps thud into the

room.

There's a man's voice.

“Should we tie her down?”

And a woman's scream. “No... please... NO!”

My body goes still at the sound. Yet the opposite happens with my heart. It speeds up inside my ribcage. I stare at the glass pane as ice-cold dread fills me.

It breaks through my composed, emotionless facade. Shows through on my face.

De Trolio spies my reaction and laughs. “*There* we go. Finally something to break down Billy Badass. Not so tough now?”

On the other side of the wall, the guys who have brought Delphine into the room yell at her to shut the fuck up. Their grunts and shuffled footsteps follow along with the rustle of bodies.

Is she fighting them? Struggling to get free?

SMACK!

“I said shut the fuck up!” one of them barks.

“DELPHINE!” I push myself up from the chair and rush toward the glass pane. “DON'T FUCKING TOUCH HER!”

My good fist and my broken one collide with the two-way mirror. Pain is of no consequence. I bang on the glass, caught up in a fit of rage, cracking my knuckles open, then smashing them into the glass even harder. If I have to break through this glass pane and concrete, then so be it—I'll tear this fucking wall down with my bleeding fingers—

“Restrain him!”

The soldiers who brought me in grapple me to the floor. They dig an electric cattle prod into my ribs, another device I've become familiar with in my captivity, and send electric bolts through my body.

I'm not done struggling. I fight and grunt against them. Delphine's name leaves my hoarse throat.

De Trolio steps over me and flicks a switch on the wall. The lights in our room dim and the glass in the two-way mirror transforms.

It's no longer showing us our reflection. It's showing us the other room—Delphine and the men who've brought her in.

I freeze mid-fight, this time my heart doing the same in my chest. I've stopped breathing.

Keeping track of time has been impossible while captive, but it's already felt like years have gone by. An eternity since I've last seen her.

Phi.

Only a few feet away.

Close enough that it feels like I can reach out and touch her. If not for the wall and glass that separates us.

But she's not in the condition I left her in.

Her eyes are sad and glassy. Her wrists are cut up and bound. She's wearing some kind of robe, and from the looks of it, nothing underneath. It hangs on her frame that looks less curvy and more frail—have they not been feeding her?

They've put their hands on her. There's two of them. The dipshit gripping her shoulder and making her wince, and the other who jerks his thumb at the chair and tells his colleague to sit her down.

On her cheek is the faintest streak of red on her brown complexion.

From the hard strike in the face he just gave her.

I erupt in another episode of rage and shove the guard with the cattle prod off me. The second guard latches on to me from behind and attempts to wrestle me back to the ground. I'm too quick for him, banging my fists again on the glass.

"Don't you ever fucking touch her!" I yell.

De Trolio clicks the hammer in his pistol and points it at my head. "Enough. One more word and I'll blow your brains out. Better yet... we will hurt her. Understand?"

I'm thrown back into the chair and strapped down with belts designed to secure me.

De Trolio steps into my line of vision and blocks out the glass pane from view. He doesn't like it when I crane my neck to see around him, trying to keep Delphine in sight. He swings the arm holding his pistol and whips me over the head with it.

"I said enough! You must want a difficult afternoon. When this was supposed to be a treat. She can't see or hear you, you fucking dumbass. There are mics and speakers in both rooms. The mic is on in her room. The mic is off in yours. Same for the glass pane."

I grit my teeth, glaring up at him. "Let her go."

"That ain't my call. You know that. I'm here to facilitate this treat."

"If you... any of you... hurt her..."

"Threats don't mean shit from the guy strapped down," De Trolio sneers. "Shall we begin?"

My body hardens from the tension that's corded through it. If today's 'treat' is anything like past sessions, then I'm fucked. I can block out the pain inflicted on me, withhold giving them the satisfaction of knowing they're getting to me, but if it's going to be turned onto Delphine...

How the hell has this happened?! Where are Francis and the rest of the men whose duty it was to protect her and see that she's sent out of the country at the first sign of trouble? How the fuck could they fail so spectacularly they've let Lucius capture her?

Or did Phi run away? Francis has mentioned multiple times she wasn't cooperating. She was deeply upset by my absence. Did she run off to come looking for me?

Phi, what the fuck have you done?!

I can't save her from this moment. Not like the dozens of times before this, where my security kept tabs on her and eliminated any threat. Even other dangerous situations like the Belinis coming for her, I could do something.

I could use my resources and my men. I could use myself. I had the means to protect her.

Sitting here strapped to a chair, I have nothing. I can do nothing. All I have left is the maddening rage and fury that's burning my insides. Useless without any sort of level playing field. I don't even have my fucking hands.

De Trolio grins watching me watch the glass. The dipshits have forced Delphine into the chair. I don't like the way they're touching her—almost like it's intentional how their rough hands linger along her shoulders and waist. The one I'm certain slapped her lets his hand fall onto her thigh for a

fleeting second before he steps in front of her and grips the armrests of her chair.

“Pay attention to me,” De Trolio says, snapping his fingers in front of my eyes. “I’m going to ask you the same questions I always ask you. Let’s see if you finally answer. Where are the tapes?”

The hatred in my unblinking glare is clear.

De Trolio shrugs. “Have it your way. Fellas.”

He taps into the mic attached to the lapel of his suit jacket.

The dipshit who touched Delphine’s thigh stands up before her and grips her chin. “I told you we were going to have some fun. We have to get you ready for the sales floor. We don’t like sending out products that haven’t been tested first.”

“NO!” My body bucks against the belts tying me down. “I told you! Get your hands off her!”

“Let’s see if that mouth feels as good as that pussy.”

“NOOO! DON’T FUCKING TOUCH HER!”

I’m driven insane with horror. My body twists violently against the binds. The leather straps cut into me with little to no give, but I buck and push back anyway. I pull and bend and fight ’til one strap busts, and then another. I’m leaping out of my chair in a rush of rabid, distressed breaths and screams of her name.

The men pile on top of me again.

But I fight some more. With everything I have. Every last ounce of strength I have left.

On the other side of the glass, the depraved scene continues. The man’s grabbed a handful of her curls and

ordered the other guy to unbind her. He's pushing her down to her knees.

I've never felt so fucking useless.

I fight harder, throwing fists. Both of them, despite the left being broken and disfigured. The cattle prod digs into my back and electricity fries my spinal cord. I twitch and jerk, adrenaline pumping, my teeth gritted as I refuse to be beaten down.

The one with the cattle prod gets his face smashed into the concrete floor. I climb over him, wrestling with the other, throwing more jabs at his skull. Any part of him I can. They'll damage me permanently for this. Maybe finally remove a body part.

Blinded by homicidal rage and sickened horror, I don't give a fuck.

I have one mission and one mission only in the moment—getting to Phi.

It's as I knock out the second guard and push myself up that it dawns on me De Trolio hasn't interfered. He's let the brawl carry out in brutal, bloody fashion. His expression unreadable, he gestures to the glass pane with his pistol.

I'm heaving for more air, gulping down what I can take in. I turn my head to follow his direction.

Delphine's staring right at the glass, too. She's still on her knees. The dipshit still has his fist in her hair. They're both staring at the glass, at us.

She can see me now. They've turned off the feature on her side too.

"Phi!" I pant. "Phi, can you hear me?"

“Jon!” she cries.

“Phi... Phi... fuck... why are you here? Why’d you let them... you weren’t supposed to be here.”

“But she is. She is here now, and she’s here to stay. Just like you. You’re making her life a lot more difficult,” De Trolio says calmly. “Cesar, continue. Keep going ’til he sits obediently in his chair and watches the treat like a good little captive. I want her to see him as she sucks you off. I want him to see her as she does it. Make it really hurt.”

My good fist, busted knuckles and all, clenches shut tight. I almost tackle De Trolio and swing on him. The urge is so strong, I’m shaking, heaving another breath into my lungs.

Then I look back at the glass, to the other side where Delphine’s kneeling.

If I punch De Trolio, he’s going to punish her.

They’ve found my weakness. They can exploit it to make me do anything.

He’s won. We’re all dead. It’s over.

I stumble backward into the chair, sinking down.

De Trolio gives a pleased nod. “Cesar, go on. Make sure he understands. Every time he refuses to obey, we’ll make use of our newest little toy.”

The dipshit doesn’t need to be told again. He tightens his hold on Delphine’s hair, giving it a savage tug that makes her fall forward on her hands and knees. His laugh follows, taunting in a way that tells me he’s enjoying every second.

Already I hate him more than any other tormentor I’ve dealt with since I’ve been here.

He's put his hands on Delphine. He's relishing the chance to violate her, laughing at her as he unzips his fly.

"Remember that night?" he asks. "I had you on your hands and knees then, too. You begged me like a sad little bitch. Offered to give me your fucking bank card."

The other guard laughs at that.

The sickening revelation has me suspended in time—this guy forcing Delphine to her knees is the same piece of shit who raped her in the alley.

The man I've been hunting for over a year now.

He's bragging about it. He's about to do it again.

A violent tremor rocks through my body and I throw myself out of the chair. Ready to black out. Ready to wreck him and everyone else. Ready to slaughter them all.

De Trolio raises his unibrow from where he stands. It's in warning. A clear threat if I act out again.

Go ahead and try. See what happens. She'll pay the price.

That's what he's telling me. They'll only keep doing it. Somehow make what Cesar's about to do even worse.

It's the most fucked up thing I've ever had to do—sit back in the chair. Sit and watch as sickness churns my stomach and I blink against the hot moisture in my eyes.

How will we ever overcome this? Even if by some impossible miracle we're able to escape, how can we possibly move on from this moment?

Delphine refuses to beg when he demands it of her. Tears slide down her cheek and her hand trembles taking hold of him.

“Firmer,” he barks, readjusting her grip. “Haven’t you ever held a dick before? I know you’ve sucked and fucked him plenty of times. Don’t be timid now.”

Bile rises in my throat. The fury remains in my glare. It takes everything I have to remain in the chair. Every last cell in my body burns to make them suffer.

I will slaughter them. I won’t take my last breath ’til they’ve taken theirs. Death can only have me once I’ve ripped their hearts from their fucking chests and I’m holding up the gory, sputtering organs up like a trophy.

“No teeth,” Cesar warns, fisting Delphine’s curls. He takes half a step closer to feed himself to her.

I’m holding my breath, my body clenched in my chair, soaking in the agony of what I’m being forced to watch—and Delphine’s being forced to endure.

The door to my room swings open. The twisted show about to start, stops.

Cesar holds Delphine by her curls only inches away from himself as he looks up at the glass pane. De Trolio turns around with a less startled vibe, like he knew what was coming. I choke out a breath, my lungs aching.

I’ve never been happier to see Lucius. He’s brought backup. A handful of his private security. His suit is smooth and wrinkle free on his round, paunchy frame. A cigar dangles from his fat lips as he glances from me to the soldiers I knocked out on the floor.

Finally, he cuts a glance at the glass pane and sniggers. “I see the party started without me.”

“You were just in time for his punishment.” De Trolio holsters his gun, motioning his head in the direction of Cesar

and Delphine. “He cracked real easy. The second we brought her in.”

“Unsurprising.” Lucius strolls into the room puffing out cigar smoke. You’d think he was touring an art gallery the satisfied way he admires every detail about the situation. He stops in front of me in time to blow another cloud of smoke and choke me up. “But I have one last deal to offer him.”

“What? Boss, you can’t—”

“Shut the fuck up, Ray,” Lucius snaps. “If I want to offer my piece of shit son a deal, I’ll offer him one. You got that?”

De Trolio nods.

“Cesar, let the product go. And for fuck’s sake, put that dick away. Yours won’t be getting sucked anytime soon unless your little bro Ray wants to volunteer.”

Neither man looks happy. In particular, Cesar, who glowers and reluctantly lets go of Delphine’s headful of curls. He tucks himself back into his pants, though doesn’t help her up from her collapsed position on her knees.

“Contrary to what you and others may believe, *scarafaggio*, I have a heart,” Lucius says, smirking down at me. “I look at two lovers being separated, and it doesn’t seem right. Not in such a fashion.”

All I can do is glare—this is another trick. Another fucked up game of his. If anything, he’s about to make things ten times worse.

It’s in the sick way his lips twist around his cigar, wisps of smoke curling into the air.

“Why don’t you two say goodbye?” he says. “Go ahead. Uninterrupted. I’ll give you... how about... sixty seconds?”

Cesar, bring her here.”

No. I don't want her in this room. Within arms reach of him.

Panic sweeps through me in the form of cold sweat. De Trolio forces me up into a stand. Cesar appears, shoving Delphine along from behind.

The clock starts. Our sixty seconds. Despite my trepidation, the second she's in front of me, I can't help myself.

Fuck everybody who stands and watches.

I pull Delphine into my arms, turning us around so my body serves as a buffer. Anything to keep him away from her.

Otherwise, it's intense relief consuming us both. Just to be back in each other's arms, we're shaking and clinging to each other.

I cup the back of her head and tilt her face up to mine. Our brows touch and tears wet our skin. Whose tears, we don't know or give a fuck.

“Phi, you should've gotten out. You were supposed to get out,” I rasp. “Why didn't you get out when you had the chance? Why couldn't you listen?”

“I knew they had you. I knew you were hurt. Oh my god, Jon... what have they done to you?” She clings to any part of me she can. Her hands slide up and down my battered body as if she's hoping to heal the bruises and wounds. My broken hand makes her gasp in open horror.

I yank it out of her grasp. “Never mind that. I want you to go. The next chance you have to get out. Get the fuck out. Do you hear me, don't worry about me—”

“Time’s up!” Lucius interjects in a tone that’s overjoyed. Brighter than his usual moody croak. “As touching as that was, I’m afraid my heart has run out of compassion. Say your goodbyes, lovebirds.”

“Wait... WAIT!” I shout as Cesar wrenches Delphine away.

“Jon, I love you!” she cries out, stumbling to keep up with the asshole.

“I love you too, Phi. Remember what I said. Get the fuck out the second you can—”

“That won’t be happening,” Lucius says smoothly, plucking his cigar from his lips. “Delphine Adams, our newest product for sale at the Mill. You won’t believe the kind of business she’ll attract. Plenty of guys around the city would love a chance to fuck that uppity little ass of hers. Remember all those pencil skirts she used to prance around in? Not so fucking cocky now, are you?”

He and the others break out into a sickening chorus.

“This is between us! This has nothing to do with her, you fucking fat freak!” I roar, in another outburst that has me throwing myself at him. Fists raised, I don’t give a fuck if they shoot me, maim me, or do whatever else to me—I need his blood on my hands.

De Trolio intercepts me. I crash into him instead. My body against his like a football play. We tumble to the ground. The laughter cuts short. Delphine screams. Lucius goes still, watching me wrestle De Trolio on the floor.

It’s a losing effort. Cesar and the other guards in the room point their weapons at me.

Lucius holds up his hand to silence the commotion. “What’s the matter, *scarafaggio*? You’re upset your precious love is going to become a whore? Is that it? You want me to... spare her?”

I grind my teeth. “She has nothing to do with this. This is between us. Fight me like a fucking man. Involving an innocent woman who has nothing to do with this? You’re a fucking joke—a pathetic, disfigured freak who’s angry because his—”

“Shut the fuck up!” Lucius jabs a finger at me so hard he nearly drops his cigar. His beady eyes flash and his face purples. “Don’t you fucking talk about disfigured. I’m not done with you yet. By the time I’m through, you just might be just like me. But you know what? You’re right. This is between me and you. It has nothing to do with her. How about I let her go?”

Delphine’s head whips in his direction, her brows knitted. Even she knows it’s a trick.

“On one condition, of course,” says Lucius. His evil smirk returns. “I want you to beg, *scarafaggio*. Beg me for it. Beg me for mercy. Beg me to let her go. Ask me nicely, and I just might do it. Get down on your fucking knees and tell me how I’ve won. Tell me I’m your god.”

Of course this would be his demand.

He’s promised I would—I’d be forced to beg him for mercy.

An egotistical monster like Lucius feeds off shit like this. It plays into his false image of himself, allowing him to pretend deep down he’s not an insecure, puny excuse for a man.

If that's what it takes. I'll do anything.

My hands clench into tight balls and I give a curt nod. I bend onto one knee, then the other. At his mercy, in a completely subservient position, I glare up at him more humiliated than I've ever been in my life.

Lucius drinks in the sight. I've never seen him grin so wide, puffing on his cigar.

"Look at that. My *scarafaggio* son finally knows his place. On his knees before me. Go on. Beg. Make it good."

"Please," I grit out.

"Please, *what?*"

"Have mercy. Let her go free. She has nothing to do with this. Do whatever the fuck you want to me. You're in charge. You win."

"And? I'm your..."

"God. You're... my god." My tongue presses into the roof of my mouth at how unnatural that sounds. But I have to do this.

Tears shine in Delphine's eyes as she and the others watch on.

"You sound sincere," Lucius admits. He thinks on it blowing smoke ringlets. "Kiss my shoe."

"You're fucking with me!" I growl without thinking.

"See? See how quick you become an ungrateful smug asshole I'd love to make suffer? Words mean squat. Kiss my fucking shoe. *That* proves something."

As if this moment couldn't be more humiliating. I avoid Delphine's gaze as I steel myself to do something I never

thought I'd do. Broken and emasculated, I'm fucking pathetic. I lost this war and now I've been brought to my knees.

I bend forward and do it. Press my lips to the toe of his leather dress shoe for a brief split second before I'm back up, as defiant and hateful as you can be in a position as degrading as this.

The other men in the room share amused glances and chortle among themselves.

Lucius looks pleased too. His pleasure glints in his eyes. "You really are my bitch, Salvatore. That seals the deal. You're fucking pathetic."

He's only echoing my own thoughts. I can't deny it. But at least it wasn't in vain.

I've set Delphine free. That's if he keeps his word.

Lucius pops his cigar back into his mouth. "Take him back to his cell. I'll deal with him later."

"And what about her?" Cesar wrings Delphine's arm.

"You already know. Prepare the product for sale. She'll bring in a lot of profit."

"NOOOO!" I explode.

I lose it. For real this time. Worse than the other times that came before it.

The room descends into chaos. Delphine's dragged away by Cesar.

I'm a feral animal, hysterical in my desperation. I'm defying the rules of gravity, launching myself over the guards in the room. Clawing and punching. Kicking and snapping. Superhuman strength and adrenaline burst through me. It

allows me to get as far as I do—which is yet again impressive considering I’m one man, bruised and broken, without any weapons.

Except one good fist.

I put it to use ’til I’m being slammed to the ground. It takes four of them to restrain me and hold me down. They beat me.

But I keep fighting. I’m screaming at the top of my lungs, veins protruding in my neck, lost in a whirlwind of madness.

“GET OFF ME! DON’T YOU FUCKING TOUCH HER! I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU IF YOU FUCKING TOUCH HER! GET OFF ME! DELPHINE!”

Finally, I’m knocked out cold by the butt of a rifle. It takes a few strikes, but it does the trick and ends my hysteria.

I blackout to the sight of Cesar tugging Delphine out of the room.

Out of my sight.

For the last time.



My head’s throbbing and my right eye’s swollen shut. I’m physically ill even as I lay still on the cement ground. Though I don’t need to move to know I’m fucked up real good. They must’ve beat the shit out of me.

Another second goes by before I realize I’m not alone.

Lucius is in the cell with me. Sans his cigar this time. He lights up noticing I’m awake.

“I thought I’d hang around ’til you came to,” he says. “That was a real show you put on. Reminds me of those

meltdowns you'd have when you were a boy. Remember when I'd come for you? You'd always try to hide. Then I'd drag you out from under the bed and you'd cry and scream like a little bitch."

I spit at him. "Fuck you!"

"The only one fucked is you, *scarafaggio*. You waved the white flag. You admitted I'm your god. You kissed my fucking shoe. To think I ever called you my son. You disgust me!"

His rage isn't about me. I learned this a long time ago. As a boy he'd rant and rave at me like I destroyed his life. None of it made any sense since I mostly stayed out of his way—I hoped he'd never notice me, though he always did.

No matter how well I hid or how small I made myself.

It wasn't until I grew older that I realized his hatred was all about himself. I was merely a reflection he didn't like.

"I disgust you?" I rasp. "*You* disgusted *her*. Isn't that what she told you?"

"Shut the fuck up!"

"She didn't want you. She never wanted you. Nobody could want you. You're a *freak*."

A feverish sweat breaks out on Lucius's brow. He grabs my face and bares his teeth. "I said shut the fuck up! You've lost, *scarafaggio*. Now your love is going to suffer for it. Do you know what happens to the products we sell? To the girls at the Mill?"

I know Lena Burtka offed herself rather than go back...

The sick feeling returns, if it ever left. I can't turn away. He won't let me, gripping my face.

“Allow me to tell you all the fucked up details. They get sold to whatever customer’s interested. Brought to a playroom where that customer gets to do whatever they want. Whatever they paid for. The more popular products—and yours will be popular given her reputation around the city—get fucked fifteen, sometimes twenty times a day. In whatever hole the customer, or *customers*, want it. I’m not going to kill her, Salvatore. I’m going to *ruin* her. She’ll never be the same. And it’s all your fault. You’re the worst thing that’s ever happened to her.”

Lucius lets go of my face and stands up, tugging on the lapels of his suit jacket. He winks at me as he turns to go.

“Sleep tight. I’ll let you know how it goes. Maybe we’ll make you watch the footage. Some of our customers like it to be recorded. You know, to have a play-by-play for memory.”

The cell door clangs shut. Total darkness descends on my cement hell hole. I’m left on the cold, biting ground where I finally give into the sickness in my stomach. Bile spews from me at the same time anguish unfurls from every corner of my being.

So far, I’ve made it through my time in captivity by disappearing into my head. Tuning out my brutal reality and tuning in to fantasy and pleasant memories.

But I’m no longer able to. The brutal reality’s infected my brain now, making it so that every time I close my eyes I’m subjected to depraved images I never wanted to imagine. All things that might be happening to Delphine at this moment as I lay uselessly on the ground.

You’re the worst thing that’s ever happened to her.

salvatore

. . .



WHAT THE FUCK'S *going on outside?*

Irritated, I get up off my bed and pry open the doors to my private balcony. Downstairs, my dumbass classmates have moved on from binge drinking in the parlor and tossing around Stefania's Fabergé eggs to even more binge drinking on the lawn and stripping down to their underwear.

They jump in and out of the pool and guffaw like hyenas.

The fucking morons think they look cool. Because everybody knows the epitome of cool is shivering in the tighty whiteys your mom bought for you.

"Pathetic," I mutter under my breath. I turn to go back inside before another loud noise rings out.

A girl's scream.

No concern of mine.

Except out of the corner of my eye, the cause for her scream becomes clear—she's been picked up by pig-faced Brett Gannon and is seconds away from being chucked in the pool. Judging by how desperately she twists in his arms, this is the last thing she wants. She probably can't swim.

Again, no concern of mine.

Except I notice who it is—the daughter of my second arch nemesis on this planet, Ernest Adams.

Little Delphine struggles in Gannon's arms; she puts up one hell of a fight given their size difference.

But she's no match for him. His sheep followers egg him on, guffawing and whooping at the air. They want him to toss her in.

I should mind my fucking business—

I choose confrontation. Gannon gapes at me like a dumb oaf. One intimidating glare and threat, and he's releasing her. She's stumbling, disoriented by the turn of events. Her top's torn. I grab her hand without thinking on it.

She has no business here.

Though other thoughts fill my head. Ways Ernest Adams's precious baby girl can actually serve a purpose. As she lets me tug her along, I make a split-second decision.

She changes into one of my shirts, wanders out onto the balcony connected to my bedroom, wearing such an innocent look I can't help grinning. Despite the little tough act she puts up, she's just a lost lamb; a silly girl with no clue what she's gotten herself into.

I invade her space. I make her shift and suck in some air. Her hand comes up to my chest as I peer into her eyes, getting close like I'm about to kiss her—it's not the worst idea, considering she's a cute girl with nice, full lips.

"Am I making you nervous?" I ask her.

She bites the bottom lip I'm thinking about tasting for myself. "Yes..."

"Why?"

“Because... because you’re not supposed to be this close,” she whispers.

So this really will be fun. The bad kind. Fucking with her to get to Ernest Adams. The girl won’t know what hit her by the time I’m through...

Ice-cold water pours over me, jolting me awake. My body aches and my lungs shake. I’m squinting up at a fuzzy figure looming over me with a bucket.

“Get the fuck up,” snarls one of the soldiers. One I beat up who knows how long ago. He’s sporting a busted lip and black-and-blue bruises elsewhere. I’m in far worse condition, but it’s satisfying seeing the damage I caused on these minions.

He must read my mind, picking up on my pleasure at his injuries, because he kicks me hard in the ribs.

Ribs I’m certain are already broken. I cough and curl up as sharp pain seizes me in my side. It spreads to my chest, making it that much harder to breathe.

I’ve never been in worse shape; every part of me hurts. My injuries are so extensive they cover a mile-long inventory list. I lost track sometime after the severe beating I took following what happened with Delphine.

By the time they exacted their revenge on me, I was numb. I didn’t feel a thing as they took turns swinging, kicking, electrocuting me. They suffocated me during another waterboarding session, and then I was flogged ’til my back was torn open (again). Afterward, they dumped me back in my cell, where I’ve been laying for who knows how long.

You’d think I’d beg for death.

But I've been dead silent since they took her away. Too lost in my head.

Lucius ruined my ability to escape into fantasy. The *good* kind of fantasies like before. Instead, I've just been replaying moments from the past. *Not* the good kind, but the ones I wish I could change.

The night I entered Delphine's life; the night I decided I'd use her and make her fall in love with me.

It's my fault. Everything she's been through. If I'd just left her alone...

You're the worst thing that's ever happened to her.

I'm out of it again. To the point that, the next time I blink, I realize I've been removed from my cell. My near lifeless body hits every step they heave me up and bears the cutting pain of every crack in the cement ground. I'm dragged into another interrogation room where we play the same games.

By the time I'm dumped back in my cell, I'm coughing up blood. My skin's cold and I can't still myself. I'm twitching as if I'm still being electrocuted.

I crawl to the corner before collapsing into another feverish dream.

"Psycho," Stitches says in my ear. "Don't you think you've done enough? Don't you think you should leave the lady alone? How long are you gonna stalk her?"

My teeth grit in warning. "I've told you. It's in her best interest."

He raises a skeptical brow. "She could just hire her own security."

"We're her security, asshat. And I'm not stalking her."

I'm definitely stalking her—but it's rationalized in my head. Delphine is mine and I've been away for too long. Twelve fucking years too long.

It's time I come collect. She'll realize she still craves me in the same way I crave her. She just needs... a little convincing.

"Bernie contact you with an update?"

"Not yet. He hasn't answered his phone. You know how he can be. He's a Gen X guy who acts like a Boomer."

Stitches chuckles at his own joke. I've moved on to pouring myself another drink at the minibar in the club office.

Delphine stood me up for dinner at Grimaldi's. She's probably still at work. It's tempting to stop by and interrupt her—see the frustration bloom across her beautiful face at the same time desire heats her caramel skin.

Last night when I visited her office after-hours, she was flustered just like she was a teenager again. I'd wanted to kiss her so badly...

"Make sure you get a hold of him."

"It's almost nine. She should be leaving the office by now. He's probably tailing her."

The next day, I find out about the fuck up with her security detail. Bernie's kid was hit by a car and Oscar didn't make it on shift to cover in time.

Visiting Delphine's apartment, she's clearly shaken. She's not herself.

My stomach pits. Something very bad has happened. Though she's vague, providing me some bullshit story about a purse snatcher. I don't buy a word of it. Her injuries don't match up and neither does the hurt in her glassy eyes.

It's another few weeks before I find out what really happened. Another failure.

If I'd gone to her office like I'd thought about...

Wild, guttural screams jar me enough to pull me out of my head. I don't jerk or flail this time, but my eyes do pop open, and I inhale a sharp, painful, gasping breath.

The screams are coming from the other side of the cinderblock wall. The guy in the cell next to mine.

I guess I'm not the only one tortured. But his seems to come sparingly, with long periods in between. I've been subjected to who knows how many rounds, and this is the first time I've ever heard him... beyond the time he tried to speak to me.

My body protests my movements. I try to sit up and wince as my ribs rattle and the sliced-open flesh on my back burns. My arms are too weak to support myself, and my left hand's so fucked up, it'll never be the same.

“She's gone!” someone laughs. “She's fucking gone!”

The screaming continues. A raw, maddening level of panic similar to my own that day in the room with the glass pane.

The contrast between the sounds—absolute horror and sick amusement—makes my skin slick with sweat. I'm not even the one being tortured, and I feel it. How fucked up whatever it is that's happening is going on. Though it's unsurprising.

I'm trapped in hell on earth with the devil in human form.

The man in the cell next to mine is too.

Eventually, I slip away. But only after endless minutes listening to the man's breakdown and the torture that follows; by the sounds of it—hissing noises—it seems like he's been

scalded with some kind of iron. The burning smell that permeates the air, even into my cell, confirms it.

My mind goes somewhere pleasant for the first time in a long time. Rather than drowning in grief and guilt over Delphine—and the nightmare she might be subjected to in the very moment as I lay in my cell—I'm waking up to the scent of rain.

It's wet earth and a saltiness from the ocean air.

It's soothing, along with the cool breeze that brushes over my skin. I fell asleep on the deck, lying on one of the lounge chairs. Unlike me considering I don't spend much time on them; Delphine's the one who comes out here to read.

Then I hear it—Delphine's voice inside.

I'm jumping up and sprinting through the glass doors. I'm calling her name.

Salt and Pepa meet me at my ankles and trot along with me, meowing and swishing their tails. A grin almost breaks out onto my face; these two fluff balls really do think I'm their daddy.

"Jon!" Delphine smiles prettily as she spins around and sets sights on me.

I come to a jerky stop, speechless. "Phi... what are you wearing?"

She glances down her front then back up at me, still with her bright, pretty smile. "The dress you picked out for me, remember? We're getting married. Hurry up, we've kept the pastor waiting long enough!"

It is the dress I picked out for her. The satiny white dress with a sheen quality when caught in the right light; even in

this odd fantasy, it fits her just as perfectly as in real life. As she clutches a bouquet of flowers, her curls framing her face, she looks as gorgeous as that night in Asbury.

I approach, realizing I'm in a suit. She grabs hold of my arm and pulls me closer to her side.

Turning to face forward, she says, "Go ahead, pastor. Please proceed."

For a moment, I'm caught up in the fact that she's alive and well at my side. If I could stay like this, stay asleep in whatever fantasy this is, I wouldn't give a shit what happens to my body.

"Where were we?" rasps the reverend in a tight, throaty voice that sends a chill down my spine. "Ah, yes. Do you, Delphine Rose Adams, take this scarafaggio to be your lawfully wedded husband, in sickness and health, rich and poor, life and... death?"

My head snaps forward and my blood freezes into ice at the sight of him—Lucius standing before us, a cold-eyed, devilish grin twisted on his lips. He's looking right at me, with that deep level of hatred he's always held for me, like he longs for the moment he'll be able to destroy me in every way.

"Phi," I choke, grabbing her arm. "We've got to get the fuck out of here!"

But I realize a split second later, she can't come. As I move to drag her along, the satin gown she wears soaks itself in blood.

It spreads, fanning out across her stomach, staining the perfect snow-white fabric with its morbid red liquid.

Delphine sinks to the floor at the same time I reach out and grab her. The piece of shrapnel sticks out from her midsection,

having sliced straight through her. I can't think. I can't function. I'm left crumpled on the floor with a dying Delphine in my arms.

A large shadow falls over us. The presence that accompanies it, sinister and inhumane.

"I told you so," Lucius laughs. "I fucking told you so, scarafaggio. I am your god. Now, beg for mercy. Kiss my shoe."

"DELPHINE!"

I'm woken up by my own screams. Fitting, since I fell asleep to somebody else's.

Otherwise, there's nothing but silence. Nothing but darkness and shadows engulfing every corner of my dank, cold cell. I spring upward and shove myself against the cinderblock wall, husking out difficult and ever-increasingly painful breaths.

It felt so real. Too fucking real. From the blood soaking her to the light in her eyes the first moment I saw her.

He's gotten so deep in my head I can't escape him. Every memory I have is tainted; every last shred of happiness I was holding on to, streaked in blood.

I run my good hand through the slicked, damp mess that's my hair. My lungs won't let up, sucking desperately for some air to breathe; my ribs might be broken to the extent they're incapable of functioning at all anymore.

That, or I'm in the middle of a soul-depleting panic attack.

"Calm down. They will not kill you. Not yet."

The voice comes through the crack in the concrete wall. From the man in the cell next to mine who, only moments ago,

was screaming as if he hoped the whole world would hear.

Tonight marks the second time he's spoken to me. The first he'd pissed me off and I'd made it known. This time, I'm too fucked up, too disturbed by everything I've experienced to even think of being an ass.

"How do you know?" I ask.

"Because," he answers after a pause, his tone dull. "He will not kill you... 'til he kills me."

"Is that supposed to clear things up? I don't know who the fuck you are."

"Is it true what I have been told? Is it true that she is dead?"

I go still, feeling sick. "Who's dead?!"

Please... no... please don't tell me Delphine's...

"Stefania," the man answers. And for the first time, though faint, I detect an accent. "It is true that she is dead?"

"Yes. For months now. She died this past summer. Who are—how did you know her?"

At least a minute goes by where the man says nothing. I'm beginning to think he's either fucking with me or he's dozed off when, finally, he speaks again.

"We can do it. We can make it. We can... escape."

I lean closer to the cold cinderblock wall. "Escape how?"

"There is only one way out," he says simply. The more he speaks, the more pronounced his voice and accent becomes—distinctly Russian. "The question is, do you really want it? Are you willing to die for it? *Burn* for it?"

volchok

...



october 2003

I AM a man who has always done well in the shadows. For many, the dark is a foe, but for me, it is a friend of mine. From an early age, I was groomed to do well in such conditions. In the dark, you do not see the horror. In the dark, you are *free*.

It is why I am so adept at lurking out of view. I do so on a night that Americans call Halloween. We do not have Halloween in Russia. If I had it my way, the occasion would not exist at all.

Lurking would be significantly easier without tiny children scurrying by in plastic costumes.

Nevertheless, I am among the night's many shadows, tucked away behind the neat hedges of million dollar homes.

I could be waiting hours. Possibly all night long. On occasion, he does not return home. He works late enough that he stays in the city.

It is my hope tonight he bothers to come home. My luck has not been very good tracking him down at city hall. Most times, once security discovers who I am, I am shown the door. Other times, I am not allowed past the door at all.

I check the time and then refocus on the house I am watching for the foreseeable future.

Every light is on despite the fact that only one person is home. The rest are staff.

Leontine Adams spends the evening sipping wine and chatting on the phone with her sister. She wanders the pristine

halls of the home, coming into the wide view of the window whenever she moves from one room to another. The woman is quite used to being home alone. Over the years, from the spying I have done, she has resigned herself to tolerating her husband's career and his frequent absence.

Two young female voices sound from the sidewalk nearby. I take a step further into the shadows and keep still.

Ernest Adams's daughter is making it home.

She is too old to dress up like the small children, but by the looks of it, she attended a celebration for the frivolous Halloween. She and her friend both wear cat ears as they stroll down the sidewalk and chat away.

Far too loudly that anyone lurking such as myself can easily overhear, though girls their age do not think of such things.

"I can't believe I kissed Chester Bailey," says the friend of Ernest's daughter. She shudders with her tongue out in disgust. "His braces are sooo gross!"

Ernest's daughter Delphine gives her friend a sympathetic look. "At least he didn't try to stick his tongue down your throat like Tommy Rufford did to McKenna Fuller. Now *that* was gross."

"But Tommy's cute!"

"You think every boy's cute."

"Except Chester. Which is why the universe made me kiss him! UGH! I have the worst luck with boys!"

Delphine stops midwalk. "Ash, you're twelve."

"Thirteen in three weeks."

I almost chuckle at the eye roll Delphine gives her friend as the two begin walking once more. They stop again directly in front of the path leading to her house.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come in? My mom wouldn’t mind,” Delphine says, taking off her cat ears. “There’s probably plenty of food from dinner. You know my dad never really makes it and Marcel had a football game.”

“Nah, that’s okay. I should probably get home or my dad will freak out. I’m supposed to be grounded, remember? I snuck out for the spin-the-bottle party.”

Delphine shakes her head in more disbelief before wishing her friend goodnight.

I stand an arms length away as the twelve-year-old girl passes by me and walks up the path to her house.

More nefarious men would use the moment to force Ernest Adams’s hand. It would be so easy—the girl has no idea she is being closely watched as she wanders up to the door and fiddles far too long with her keys.

The door swings open first and Leontine engulfs her daughter in a welcoming hug. Both are so clueless to the potential danger lurking in their hedges.

...*if* I wanted to cause harm.

Amazing that Ernest Adams would leave his wife and daughter exposed in this way. They have no clue of what danger could come to them at any moment.

...if I were a bad man. I am not a bad man. But if... it truly would be so easy...

Another hour passes before the next Adams arrives home.

This time in a flash of headlights and rowdy screams. A large sports utility vehicle pulls up full of college-aged individuals seemingly intoxicated. His son hops out clutching a football and wearing what Americans call a letterman's jacket. He grins at his truck full of intoxicated friends and then jogs up the front path.

"Good one, Adams!" shouts one of the guys from the window. "You killed it tonight!"

I lurk, carefully observing Ernest's only son. He greatly resembles him—the same tall, wide-shouldered build and smooth dark complexion.

He would pose a challenge.

If I were a bad man seeking to do bad things.

Admittedly, I am more tempted watching him than I was with Ernest's wife and daughter. They would be too easy.

His son, however...

I decide against it. He has done no wrong to me and should not be held accountable for the actions of his father. The door closes after he disappears inside.

The night wears on. Several hours pass.

It is well past eleven p.m. when he finally comes home. I watch the man who has ignored every phone call of mine for months as he strolls in his suit and briefcase. Footsteps away from reaching his front door, I intercept him.

Revealing myself from the shadows, I step into view. "I have been trying to get a hold of you."

He halts on the spot and barely contains his agitation from showing on his face. "Just what are you doing here?"

“I have spent the night waiting. Your wife and kids—they came home hours ago—”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to watch my family!?” he snarls in a sudden bloom of anger. No more than a second later, he remembers his location, and throws a furtive look at the front door of his house. His wife could hear if we remain where we are.

Mr. Adams does not wish to involve his family in any way.

He beckons me to follow with a sharp pivot of his heel. I do so with the intention of getting the answers I seek.

We do not stop until we reach the gate that leads to his terrace. He promptly unlocks it and then mentions we will talk in his pool house.

“You have been ignoring my calls,” I say. He has closed the door and I am only footsteps into the smaller, yet luxurious space. Only Americans would have a separate house designated for the logistics of their private pool.

“I have been ignoring your calls because I have nothing else to say.”

“I have told you. That is not acceptable.”

He grimaces. “What’s not acceptable, Volchok? That I no longer wish to speak to you, or that you’ve served your purpose? Because they are one in the same.”

“We agreed. We would be allied for this. It is not over.”

“As far as I’m concerned, it is,” he answers, setting down his briefcase. “This was never a real allyship. You are not trustworthy.”

“I believe you are speaking of yourself when you say that.”

“Believe what you want. You are no longer needed. Your loyalty is to him, not us.”

“What did she tell you?” I snap, stepping closer. “She has turned you against me.”

“She has paid the price. You have not. It is that simple.”

“Are you in love with her?”

Ernest Adams is not a man who often loses the capability to speak. My accusation is enough to render him without words. His face contorts into another grimace and he breathes as though he will exhale fumes.

“No,” he answers with clenched teeth, “I am not in love with Lena. You betrayed her and allowed her to be sold. You then kept from me your family ties. You are not trustworthy. If there are no further questions, get the hell off my property.”

“He is going to win if you do not proceed forward! Do you not see how foolish you are being?”

“We have made our decision. This is not a cause we wish to pursue anymore.”

“You have decided you are comfortable where you are. You are content to remain a member of the society you claimed to detest. You are like all of the rest. And she is the whore that I have always suspected she is—”

Ernest’s fist collides with the side of my head. I fall a couple of footsteps back from the power of his punch, though I am not affected for long. Any pain I tune out. I go into a reactionary mode that results in me demonstrating I am not to be trifled with.

I dodge his attempt at a second hit, then swing my knee up to collide with his stomach. With the wind knocked out of

him, I throw an elbow out and smash his face. He releases a howl of pain as he falls over.

Ernest Adams is a tall and well-built man, but he is not a fighter.

I am.

It was not in his best interest to make the situation physical.

“You are making a grave mistake,” I warn him. “You are the law. If you wanted to, you would destroy him with the evidence that you have.”

He lifts himself up onto one of his knees and glares at me, blood on his lips. “And you’re his brother. If you wanted to, you would’ve destroyed him a long time ago. Nobody’s hands are clean. Most of all, *yours*.”



I have known Lucius Mancino longer than any human alive; I have known him so well, he is not, and never will he be, Lucius Mancino to me. He is *mladshiy brat*. Though he does not want me sharing that piece of information with anyone. He would not want any of the information I know shared. The people from our past who have known him are no more.

Either dead of natural causes, or at the hands of his men.

Except for me.

In the weeks following my visit with Ernest Adams, I am certain I will join the rest. The list of souls lost in *moy brat's* quest for greatness.

Every move I make, as I go into deep hiding in Old Northam, I am questioning if today will be my last. The time he finally comes for me now that my betrayal is all but known.

It was not always this way.

We *endured* together. We shared the same dark spaces, and discovered the same freedom in that darkness.

My mother was not an innocent woman. A member of the Kozlov organization, she lost her standing when her husband, my father, was murdered in a violent gunfight against an Italian crime family known as the Crotones.

We found ourselves destitute. I was small. At my age, I did not understand what was happening. I was simply content to be with Mama. We lived in many villages, moving often with what little belongings we had.

Though she managed to keep me clothed and fed as a cook, she knew she could not be alone. Not if she were to raise me.

So she searched for a way to change her life and found it in a man that was visiting the country on business. He stopped by the shoddy café where Mama worked and delighted in the Russian foods she prepared for him.

Mario Maldini was what *La Cosa Nostra* call a *capo* in the Crotone family. In time, the Crotones and Kozlovs had worked out a truce to end their violent feud and agreed to join forces and flourish as allies. My mother was grateful when it dawned on her that she had caught the eye of another powerful man.

Even if it were one from a once rivaled crime family and a man not of Russian descent.

One of my first memories is of him. Someone was at the door of our weathered cottage, and I hurried in my boyish

excitement to answer. Mario Maldini was on the doorstep, a round, tall man with a bulbous nose and grimace for a smile.

He told me to ‘scram’ and invited himself inside in search of Mama.

I did not like him. He had an evil spirit and beady eyes.

My childish instincts told me to run. For me to get away while I could.

But Mama loved him. Every time he showed up, she devoted attention to him. If I made myself a nuisance, she locked me in the closet, and told me to go to sleep. I listened until I could not sleep anymore—*someone* was twisting the knob to come inside.

I liked Mr. Maldini’s visits even less after that.

Eventually, he invited Mama away. He said that we could live a very different life if we left with him. Mama had so little to her name, she agreed. I had never been to America. It represented a whole new world for us.

Though, I did not like my new step-father, I stayed out of his way. I hid in dark spaces and prayed he would not find me, though sometimes he would.

Closets did not make me invisible. Neither did the dark.

Hope came in the form of Mama’s full belly. She was *pregnant!*

I asked every day for a little brother. Nine months later, my prayers were finally answered.

A round baby brother almost a spitting image of his father. Beady eyes and a round body. What to name him?

Mama begged for his last name. For my baby brother to carry the Maldini name. She was denied. He was Volchok.

Aleksander Volchok.

Mr. Maldini would not even allow his first name to be after him. It was soon after that Mama discovered she was not the only lover in Mr. Maldini's life. She was just the *newest*.

He had other mistresses. He had a wife and children elsewhere.

We were not his family.

The same applied to baby Aleksander. Mr. Maldini did not truly see him as his son. He was Mama's son.

A bastard son as it is so often called.

But he was *moy mladshiy brat*, and I loved him as such. He was the one who suffered by my side in the dark closets, because eventually, he too sought to hide. If Mama knew, she pretended she did not.

Alek and I may have only shared the same mother, but we survived together. We kept each other going.

And when we were old enough, we decided to make Mr. Maldini hurt in a more fatal way than he made us hurt. We made it so he suffered for every dwindling breath he took. By that time, he was long disgraced—the alliance between the Kozlov and Crotone family was strained once more.

Mr. Maldini had been ousted, revealed as a spy for the Kozlov family. The business he had been on in Russia when he first met Mama was not legitimate. The trip had not been authorized by Mr. Crotone.

It was discovered Mr. Maldini was playing both sides to his advantage.

As the eldest, I sought work. Mama cooked and cleaned homes for small sums.

Alek... *disappeared*.

The boy he was, the young man he was coming to be, did not handle our diminishing status in life well. The things we had gone through affected him differently than it did me. Our dark moments we survived in the closet and the humiliation of being dirt poor once Mr. Maldini was disgraced and we murdered him, left Alek yearning to be someone else.

Someone very desperate to be something. Anything but the humiliating love child of a perverted man that was his father.

For several years, I believed he died. He had disappeared without a trace. That was not true. Alek merely decided he would not settle for a life as a disgraced Mafia *capo's* son. I did not know then what he was capable of.

That the darkness we bore and survived had affected him differently than it had me.

Now, as I count the days for *moy brat* to get his revenge, I am unsure if I am afraid, or accepting of my fate.

My name and reputation has been smeared. The elusive businessman Volchok that I am known for, is highly fabricated. A persona that was created in my own quest for revenge. Initially, not against *moy brat*, but against Leandro Crotone.

The defunct Crotone family was responsible for the death of my birth Papa.

It was Leandro I initially wanted to tear down. Never did I imagine Aleksander would reappear in my life with equally ambitious desires.

Two half brothers seeking to destroy the man who destroyed their fathers—mine through violent bloodshed and his by humiliating banishment. We shared a common goal and should have been closer, more bonded than ever before.

Except, while he yearned to tear down Leandro, he also yearned to seize power. He wanted to do what his disgraced father had not been able to do, and rise up the ranks to run his own crime family.

The flip phone I have bought for discreet communication vibrates on my table, interrupting my thoughts about the past.

It is a text from Lena.

Would u like to meet? The Voronezh?



I met Lena Burtka when she was only sixteen. She was a teenage prostitute that often traveled with Vladimir Kozlov. Often used as a gift when conducting business deals, the girl had sad eyes and a depressing aura about her.

I was almost twice her age, slowly involving myself in criminal circles after Mama's death years ago.

It was easy to pity the girl. Kozlov treated her as merchandise to lend out. We became aligned not because we liked each other, but because I pitied her, and we shared common enemies. Being prostituted and sold by men like Vladimir and Leandro, she desired nothing more than revenge.

As I arrive to the Russian café Voronezh located in the most dangerous pockets of Heinsberg Park, my eyes meet Lena's. She's sitting by herself at the table in the far corner.

The rest of the café fills with locals, mostly Russians from many different parts of the city. Voronezh has the best borscht available for miles.

I stroll up and slip into the seat across from the pale blonde.

“You are late,” she says.

“You deserve it.”

“Tell me your problem. Mr. Adams says you put your hands on him.”

I stare for a moment. “He would do well to tell the whole story.”

She sighs, a bored expression on her face. “I expected you to be more interesting.”

“You have formed your alliance and decided to leave me in the dark. Do you believe that is wise?”

“I believe I am trying to live my life.”

“At what costs?”

“Why is it my concern to worry for others? Others did not worry for me when I was suffering.”

Lena falls silent, making no attempt to elaborate. She does not believe she owes any explanation. After what she has suffered, I can not say she is wrong for being selfish. However, there are people still suffering the same fate at the hands of the same institutions she vowed to bring down.

It seems now she and her close ally, Ernest Adams, are fine with letting it go.

“Do not judge me,” she snaps suddenly, as though reading my mind. “You did not help me when you could.”

“Lena, I looked out for you. Did I not?”

“You were busy falling in love with... with... her.”

I swallow mouthfuls of the coffee that has been delivered by the server. The bitter taste is better than the bitterness that is radiating from Lena.

“I was living my life. As you are free to do.”

“I was not free then.” Her lips pucker. She glares out the café window.

Another point I cannot argue. She is right when she makes it; in those days she was not free.

But I did what I could to help her.

Lena... she... fell in love with me.

She has never stated so. But that is what happened when she saw me as the hero that would save her from her life as a piece of property. I do not believe she loved me as a person. She loved me as the person able to protect and free her.

It is why she has soured on me to this day. It is no mystery, even as I sit across from her and watch her glare out the window. I betrayed her by falling in love...



I met Stefania Crotone during the period of my life I met Lucius Mancino. Aleksander, *moy brat*, was no longer who I knew him to be.

Half Italian, half Russian was not ideal.

He could not gain entry into the Crotone family this way. Nor could he gain entry by revealing his father was Mario Maldini, a disgraced former *capo*.

In order to fix this problem, he simply... recreated himself. In the years he went missing, he lived a criminal life. Very young and not yet a man, *moy brat* was in the streets. He was studying how he could best infiltrate the real criminal world he craved, the one he believed he belonged to him by birthright of his father—*La Cosa Nostra*.

But how?

Aleksander Volchok ceased to exist. *Moy brat* ceased to exist.

Adopting Maldini would not work. It would reveal he was a bastard son of the disgraced *capo*.

Thus, Lucius Mancino was born. His first name was stolen from his father's middle name. His last name was an invention, a name that was vaguely similar, but not quite the same. No one was able to connect the dots when a young, pot-bellied Lucius Mancino showed up to the nightclub owned by the Crotone family, and offered himself up as an associate.

For years, he worked. He proved himself. He was what they call 'made.' During this time, I had no idea.

I was making myself too, but in other ways. In the wake of Mama's death, I learned the ins and outs of American business and capital. I became known for the lofty business deals I cut, which garnered the attention of Vladimir Kozlov. I did not know *moy mladshiy brat* was in the same underworld I was dabbling in.

It was not until a chance meeting, where I attended an event as a business associate of Kozlov's, and he attended the same event as a soldier of Crotone's, that we met for the first time in years.

Two brothers who grew in darkness, who suffered irreparable atrocity at the hands of a dead man we killed before we were ever men ourselves.

I blinked and stared when I saw him. *Moy brat* wore a fine suit with gold rings on his fingers and his sparse hair greased down. He looked and acted just like the Italian men who had been born into the Crotone family from birth.

He looked at me and made no attempt at a reunion. But he knew. He recognized me, as I stood towering, lurking in my solitude as I did often.

Not a soul knew of Alek. They knew nothing of who his father was or of his mother's affiliation with the Kozlovs.

For a couple years, we played this dangerous game. Half-brothers who had once shared a dark time in dark closets, affiliated with rival families. Each with our own objectives. Neither voicing aloud who we were to each other.

I was Ivan Volchok, an up-and-coming Russian businessman as far as Americans were concerned. Alek was Lucius Mancino, an ambitious soldier rising up the ranks of the Crotone organization in speedy time.

"You keep hanging around," Lucius said one evening, a couple years after our discovery of each other in the tight, deadly circles we operated out of. He came up to me as others mingled and I stood at a buffet table of assorted foods. Popping an olive into his mouth, he nudged me out of the way, and disguised his speech by chewing. "I don't know what the fuck you think you're doing, but you're not fucking things up for me. I'll sooner end you."

I watched in silent amusement as my chubby *mladshiy brat* gnashed through some deli meats and cheeses. My silence,

along with my calm and patient demeanor, always angered him. Even as boys.

“Stay quiet all you like,” he said with a crude curl of his lip. “Nobody’s keeping me from that throne.”

“Except that you are not who they think you are, *moy mladshiy brat*.”

“What’d I just say?! Didn’t I just tell you to know your place? If you’re gonna make problems, then I’ll solve them—and you ain’t gonna like my solution, *brat*.”

“No need to be upset. You are not my enemy.”

He scowled, standing up straighter. “Watch yourself. And find a different operation than sniffing around *mine*.”

He stormed off, bumping shoulders with whoever was in his path. I let him go without protest, though I amused myself by reaching for the same deli meats he had. My baby brother and I would always share, even if he did not realize that was still happening.

Lena was off entertaining Mr. Crotone—and by ‘entertaining,’ I mean she was tasked to sit in his lap and pretend she was somewhat attracted to a graying man old enough to be her grandfather. As time passed, she had grown tired of our mission; tired of being passed around as necessary.

I understood her frustration. Which is why I made promises perhaps I should not have. I pledged I would set her free. If I could succeed at sabotaging Leandro Crotone and helping the Kozlovs, I could reason that it was earned.

Lena could have her new start like she dreamed. The sight of her in Leandro’s lap made me too sick to bear witness.

I turned away, busying myself with more of the buffet table.

That moment changed the course of my life, though I did not realize it until later.

“Cesar, I said I’m not interested. You keep getting pushy, I’ll have to tell my Pop on you.”

“C’mon, Stefania. Just one night out. You know you want it.”

“I said no, Cesar. Scram!”

The soldier named Cesar eyed her with a sour expression before stalking off.

The delicate, willowy woman had come up to the buffet table to escape the man harassing her. I pretended to be interested in the meats and cheeses when truly, her flowery perfume became a distraction.

She was stunning. A woman art was created in the name of, with a swan neck and long, golden hair.

I had never felt nerves around the opposite sex until that moment. She picked at the food selection with rosy cheeks and puckered lips.

“Is your evening an enjoyable one?” I asked suddenly.

She flinched as if pricked by a needle. “Huh? What was that?”

“Your evening. Is it enjoyable?”

“Oh. Not really. No. Just... just more of the same.” With a deep sigh, she glanced over her shoulder at the center table—Leandro Crotone sat with Lena in his lap and the man who had just harassed Stefania joining him for drinks. Her eyebrows

pushed together and the pucker of her sweet lips grew. “No wonder he won’t leave me alone. He knows he can get chummy with Pop and nothing’ll happen to him.”

“Next time, swat him on the nose like a dog,” I said. “Carry a rolled-up newspaper with you.”

“Excuse me?!”

“The man who bothers you. Hit him on the nose... or spray him with a water bottle. It has the same effect.”

At first, it seemed my humor fell short. Stefania continued staring at me as though I were speaking Russian and not English. The case of nerves inside of me deepened. I assumed others would find my calm, observational humor amusing.

But Stefania did not.

“Have a good evening,” I said, about to depart.

“No, wait... that was funny,” she said, holding out a hand and touching my arm. “I’m sorry I kinda had a delayed reaction. I’m out of it. Lots of problems. But you’re right—maybe I will carry around a newspaper to whack him real good on that schnoz of his!”

The color deepened on her cheeks.

I yearned to tell her how beautiful it made her look. Though I held back when I caught the eye of Lena in the background. She begged without words for rescue. The guilt was far too much to ignore.

“Pardon me.”

Stefania remained where she was at the buffet table. I interrupted the gentlemen seated with Leandro and Lena, inviting myself into the conversation. Leandro liked that I was composed yet calm regardless of the situation.

His favor made it easy to infiltrate his family and carry out the Kozlov's sabotage.

Minutes later, when I looked up at the buffet table, Stefania was gone.

I believed it would be my last time so close in her presence; I did not expect to encounter her so soon after.

Later that night, I went out for a smoke on the veranda. The scene I walked onto was similar to the one from earlier.

“Cesar, I really mean it... get your hands off me!”

Only this time the pushy man had cornered her, entrapping her against the side of the building.

It was not my concern. If I were as smart and strategic as I should have been, I would have walked away.

But witnessing her struggle, her golden hair swinging as she pushed at him, was my undoing. I was hurrying over with a clenched fist before I gave it any thought. I grabbed the pushy man by the shoulder and struck him down.

Then, as he tried to swing back at me, I produced my trusted pocket knife and slashed him across the face. He grunted and threw his punch anyway, to which I responded with a block of the clumsy fist. I struck him again, harder on the second punch, and he crashed to the ground in humiliating defeat.

Turning to Stefania, I offered my hand. She hardly hesitated, slipping her hand in mine despite the bloody knuckles and bloodier knife.

We stepped over him, walking away.

“Are you alright?”

She brushed hair from her face and nodded. “Mostly. But I’m getting real tired of these guys thinking they can touch me like that. All ‘cuz my Pop’s marrying me off.”

“Why?”

“What d’you mean why? I’m his daughter! He’s got no son. Which means my only value is who can he marry me off to,” she said in a shrill voice. “I’m nothing but a bargaining chip. He’s got to pick his successor in the guy who I marry. I’ve got little say in it.”

“That... does not sound fair.”

“Fair’s just about the last thing my Pop cares about.”

“Well, you should swat him on the nose too.”

She spent a second staring at me with a side look, then she smirked. “Is that your solution to everything?”

“It is if you will smile like that.”

“That’s a line if I’ve ever heard one.”

“What is a line...?”

This made her laugh—she threw her head back and clapped her hands together. “If you’re gonna live in America, you need to pick up the lingo better. How about we do this your way? *Ty ochen obayatel’nyy muzhchina.*”

I stopped in place. “You know Russian?”

“A little. I speak five languages. Not too smart, but... but I’ve always loved learning languages. I’ve traveled here and there thanks to a few years modeling and my Pop’s money. Maybe one of the few perks of being his daughter.”

“You are smart if you know five languages. I know one and a half.”

Her eyebrow raised higher. “What’s the half?”

“Is it not obvious? Broken English.”

My ‘line’ made her laugh again. The loud, joyous sound chased away the nerves inside my stomach.

We wandered to the other side of the veranda. In doing so, we did not think to check who may have been watching.

“You’re a real interesting guy, Volchok.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Why not?”

“It is not a name personal acquaintances should call me.”

Her face eased into a smile. “Is that what we are? Personal acquaintances?”

“Yes, in my mind as of tonight,” I explained in a feat of daring. “You may call me V. It is discreet but less formal.”

“V. I like it. And you can call me—”

“I already know what I want to call you. Is that too forward?”

“Yes, considering I just met you. But I’m nosy. So tell me.”

“*Solnishko.*”

Her lips shifted into a smile as beautiful as she was. “The morning sun? Really?”

“Your hair is golden like the first sun of spring.”

“Since when are Russians romantics? And here I am getting groped by *soldatos.*”

“*Vy boleye chem krasivy snaruzhi. Ty prekrasna vnutri.*”

“I’m more than beautiful on the outside. I’m beautiful on the inside,” she translated in awe. I nodded and she shook her head. “You’ve gotta stop. You’re gonna ruin me for all other men.”

I could not resist tucking some hair behind her ear as we came to a stop. “Perhaps that is my goal.”

“Perhaps I won’t stop you.”

That night I was scolded by Vladimir for disappearing for two hours. Lena was not happy either. Time did not matter when in the presence of a woman as beautiful and engaging as *Solnishko*—a pet name she adored by the time we parted ways.

I did not realize the forbidden trap I was setting. For it became impossible to walk away the more secret rendezvous moments we shared.

As others chatted and drank in the clubhouse, *Solnishko* and I were often sneaking away, enjoying each other’s company. We disappeared to corners engulfed in shadows and private rooms with sturdy locks. We placed quiet, whispered phone calls when possible and traded secret love letters.

In months, we fell in love. Perhaps fast, yet truly real.

No woman brightened my careful, composed life of espionage and sabotage like Stefania. We were different in many ways, though that was no issue as we found fascination in each other.

But it was something that could never be. No amount of love and passion could sustain a forbidden romance flourishing in the dark—Stefania was to be married off.

To *moy mladshiy brat*. To Alek.

Lucius Mancino.

A man who hated her. He spent thousands of dollars winning her over, buying sparkling jewels and paying string quartets to play music for her. None of these things were from true feelings, just flashy gestures to appear that way.

Stefania saw what he was and begged Leandro to choose another suitor.

I almost interfered. I almost interrupted at the wedding—I would reveal the secret I knew. Lucius's true identity, his scheming and lying to get to where he was.

Half Russian, all fraud with a fake identity.

It was revealed she was several months pregnant not very long after they married. A controversial revelation if timelines are to be observed.

Moy brat forbade that topic of discussion from taking place.

I have had to learn to let her go. The hardest thing I have ever done.

More than ten years later, it still pains me to say I said goodbye for no other reason than *moy brat* desired to rise to power. I gave him what he wanted at the price of what I wanted. At what was best for Stefania.

But what other option was there?

I was not powerful enough to fight him. Leandro had not yet discovered his deceit. I had no means to save her, or destroy him—not yet. When Lena and I devised our plan that fateful night, that was our hope.

We could destroy *moy brat* and in turn, free Stefania (and Lena from servitude). Unfortunately, Leandro punished Lucius greatly... and then suffered his revenge only a few days later.

Our plan backfired.

Lucius, *moy brat*, became more powerful than possibly imagined.

And I have disappeared into anonymity. Lena into worse servitude than we anticipated, a product of the Neptune Society, sold at their whim.

Ernest Adams was supposed to salvage our efforts. But he was a coward like the rest.

As am I.

I glance over my shoulder at the unfamiliar faces on the street and hold my breath whenever starting the engine of my car. Years have gone by since the last night I slept soundly... without waking at different times to check the locks on the door.

That is because I have slowly become someone who has accepted defeat. A man who has decided to give up his life so his younger brother can thrive in a life that is not his own.

There is no alternative; he is too powerful.

My fingers fumble with the keys to my rat-infested apartment. The small space has water stains on the ceiling and cracks on the wall. It's located in the worst part of Old Northam and often gunshots can be heard late at night, but it is the only place I can afford on my meager earnings. No more am I a lucrative businessman cutting deals for rich and powerful mafia bosses.

The door to my shithole apartment creaks open and I enter to the fumes of a burning cigar.

My apartment is so small and meager that one cigarette or cigar can fill up the atmosphere with smoke. I have no air

conditioning. No ceiling fan. My only windows are in my bedroom and kitchen—both with prison cell bars.

The smoke hazes in the air, disguising the man responsible behind its thick cloud. However, his large, round outline reveals enough.

“*Moy brat*,” I say plainly. I pull off my coat and set down my keys and hat. “I did not expect a family reunion out of the blue.”

“Shut it, Ivan. Don’t put on some fucking show.”

“Show? What show? I am simply wondering to what I owe the honor?”

“It’s time,” he says, a mysterious figure behind his cigar smoke. “I’ve been more than fair. But you think you’re gonna fuck me over. And it ain’t happening. *Brat or no brat*.”

“Fuck you over,” I repeat in my monotone voice, my accent thick. “I do not know what—”

“Cut the shit!” Alek—Lucius, as he demands to be called—slams his giant fist on my dining room table and makes the cheap wood wobble on its four legs. “I know you’ve still been plotting. You must think I’m real stupid. You think I don’t know about that visit to Adams?”

“That was to discuss a different matter.”

“Bullshit. You just came from seeing the Russian whore. You smell like fucking borscht. Now,” he says, putting out his cigar. “You’re either coming peacefully. Without all the theatrics. Or my men will take you. Since you are my only real family, I am giving you a choice. This once.”

What other option do I have? Go willingly or be dragged by force?

I have no money. No allies. No fight left.

I am middle-aged and alone.

I lost the woman I loved years ago. I have nothing.

I am nothing.

“Alright, *moy brat*,” I sigh. I hold out my arms for the restraints. “If this is what you want. Then I will not put up a struggle.”

He chortles, then shakes his head. “Pitiful. No wonder his face pisses me off so much. I broke his nose yesterday just for looking at me the wrong way over dinner. Did you know that? The little piece of shit couldn’t be more like you—he just took it. Didn’t even fight me back.”

I grit my teeth. “He is a child.”

“*We* were children when we fought back. You never would’ve done it without me. You would’ve just let him keep doing it to you, wouldn’t you have? Fucking coward.”

Before I can protest, I discover we are not so alone after all. The door to my apartment flings open and his men file into the room. I am knocked upside my head and I fall to the floor still half awake, though with agonizing pain in my skull.

Moy brat stares down at me with a cruel grin and tells me this is the end.

It is over.



For twenty years, my life became fuzzy, numbing agony. Broken days and long nights where I was reduced to a shell of

a man who simply fell in love with the wrong woman and withheld his brother's secret from the world.

I have suffered every moment, well aware that *moy Solnishko* was paying the same price in the outside world.

Moy brat made sure of it. That she was destroyed enough to become a shell too. Drunk and depressed as she lived in a fog. He took pleasure in what he did to the woman he knew his brother deeply loved.

He has taken even greater pleasure in what he's done to the son he claims she bore him. The boy's life has been dedicated to suffering. Severe physical pain for no other reason than being born to the wrong man. Because every moment of the boy's life he's reminded of the truth.

Every time he looks at him.

Every second I sit here with the knowledge that he has not only ruined me. He has ruined the woman and the son that are truly mine.

I have suffered, burned for my sins.

Now, it is time for him to suffer, to burn for his.

delphine

...



present...

“YOU BETTER HOPE this bruise goes away in time for the showcase. You’re not supposed to mark up new products. Certainly not ones as anticipated as this one,” scolds the gray woman. She clicks her tongue at Cesar, the Handler. The look of disapproval she gives him would be touching if it were on my behalf and not due to the fact that he’s ‘damaged’ what she considers merchandise that’ll soon be for sale.

Me.

When Cesar backhanded me in the interrogation room, it was a hit that left me reeling, seeing stars before my eyes. It was hard enough that it’s bruised and caused noticeable swelling along my cheek.

A problem if I’m to be put up for auction in a few days.

“It’ll heal,” rasps Cesar, giving me an unconcerned once over.

I’m in a medical gown, awaiting the doctor that’s supposed to come give me a full exam. I protested to the bitter end... until they dragged me into the medical room furnished with an exam table and plenty of medical equipment, *including* stirrups.

“And if it doesn’t?” the gray woman asks with a nasty grimace on her pallid, unremarkable face.

“Then have one of the flunkies that do make up cover it up. I don’t know what the fuck you want me to say, Theresa. The bitch put up a fight. I had to put her in her place.”

I'm left alone with the gray woman—whose name is apparently Theresa—and we wait out the last few minutes for the doctor to show.

He's as unfriendly and uncompromising as every other employee at the Mill. I question his qualifications to no answer. He doesn't provide any answers regarding anything that goes on during the examination, simply giving plaintive directions, like telling me to take a deep inhale when listening with a stethoscope, and ordering me to hold out my forearm when withdrawing blood.

I'm given a full STD panel and pregnancy test. I'm injected with an implant into my arm.

By the end, Theresa escorts me out by rebinding my wrists, and leading me to what's become my new home.

A cage.

A large, human-sized, metal-barred cage that's one of dozens. At the Mill, the humans that have become 'products' as they like to call us, are each assigned their own cage. I'm told there's an entire floor with halls lined by cages. Each one is filled up with dead-eyed, broken-down people who have all but given up at any other kind of existence than this.

Theresa shoves me inside my cage and swings it shut, locking it, and walking away without sparing a look.

I've wound up on the floor, having tripped from the hard shove. A slow, dejected sigh leaves me as I sit on the cold, concrete ground, and survey my new reality.

The others in the cages shrink away from the bars. They each seem to exist in the farthest corner of their cages, eager to be as forgotten as possible in their four by five foot space.

At least in the time they're not due to be sold. Schedules exist for everyone held captive.

From what I've gathered, on the days they're forced to be sold, they're off from other duties. On the days they're not scheduled to be sold, they're tasked with various menial jobs around the Mill.

That's if they're not dragged away for some unknown reason.

More than once I witness the cage door of someone in my hall being cranked open, only for the poor woman inside to be dragged out, kicking and screaming.

They're never seen from again when that happens.

My stomach roils watching the latest hysterical woman hauled off despite her desperate protests. I stand at the bars, gripping them, chewing on my tongue to keep from speaking out.

I've never been good at watching others being victimized. Even as a girl, even when outnumbered, I've always had a deep belief to stand up for what I felt was right.

Standing by helpless as the atrocities take place inside the Mill is indescribable; it's being forced to bear witness to the worst kinds of human evil imaginable.

"Shame, I liked her," says the woman in the cage across from mine. She's the only one other than myself who's ventured closer to the metal bars. Her dull emerald gaze snaps to mine from her side of the hall. "Don't look so upset, ADA. She'll be replaced within a day. Tops. No money lost, right? That's all that matters to the rich and powerful."

I blink, taken aback by her direct address. "You... you know me?"

“Everyone *knows* you. Anyone who has been in the city for more than five minutes. What *I* want to know is, how does someone like you wind up here?” she asks, clicking her tongue and shaking her head. “Silver spoon and fancy clothes. What’d you do to get put in here? You must’ve pissed off somebody important—”

I turn away from the bars, unable to bear her growing zeal. It only builds until she’s calling out conspiracy theories with loud fanatical laughter from her cage. One of the guards finally catches wind and shuts her up with an electric cattle prod. She doesn’t speak for the rest of the night.

I sink to the ground in the far corner and fold my legs up to my chest. I’m simultaneously exhausted and full of anxious energy all at once.

My heart aches with the depressing knowledge I’ll likely die here. Salvatore will likely die where he is, trapped inside the prison cell, from the cruel torture Lucius subjects him to.

It’s the end. All hope is lost.

I fade into sleep with these morbid thoughts. If I were never to wake, I’d be fine with it. How can I not be when reality is bleaker than dying?

On my third and fourth days, I’m tasked with menial jobs like many others. I’m placed on the crew whose job it is to clean the floors. For hours I’m bent on hands and knees polishing the floorboards under the constant threats issued by the guards who are assigned to watch us.

By the time I’m thrown back into my cage, I have blisters on the palm of my hands and my knees have been rubbed raw.

On the fifth day is the big showcase that’s been talked about. I’m wrenched from my cage and escorted to a level I’ve

never been on before—the floor where the product prep happens. Even the mention of ‘product prep’ evokes deep nausea in me.

“Sit down,” snarls Theresa. She jams me into a salon-style chair and then grabs a hold of my chin. “That bruise hasn’t faded all the way. If it prevents you being profitable there’ll be hell to pay. We might have to discount you. Maybe come up with a special. Two customers for the price of one.”

My brows connect and I open my mouth, about to question how that possibly makes sense—how I can possibly be punished by being put on ‘sale’ for a bruise I didn’t ask for. Digging my fingernails into my thighs, I resist the urge, tamping down on my backtalk with the knowledge it’ll only cost me more than it’s worth.

There’s no reasoning with these people. There’s no appealing to their humanity.

They have no humanity or sense of reason or decency. They’re evil; every last one of them.

For the next hour and a half, I’m cleaned up. A stylist flat irons my hair into straight sheets along my shoulders and a full-face of make up is applied. I catch a quick glimpse of myself in the mirror. Not only has the bruise been covered by heavy foundation, but I’ve been done up in make up I’d never wear myself—a bold red lip, heavy smoky eye shadow and a severe contour and highlight.

It’s too much. It’s too garish. Too... unlike me.

The dark reality sinks that it’s intentional. It’s nothing like me, because I no longer have any personhood. I’m no longer someone in their eyes. Just something to be sold.

The stylist turns her back to fish in her make up case for more products. I snap out of my depressing reverie and glance again at the woman in the mirror. I barely recognize her, already feel as though I'm losing touch with myself, and what I'll be forced to do tonight...

Then I notice a pair of beauty scissors on the vanity countertop. My eyes flit up to check on the stylist. Her back's still turned on me. The scissors are an arm-reach away. They're not sharp enough to truly use as a weapon of escape, but they are enough to escape in other ways...

By the time she turns back around, they're no longer on the counter top. I sit obediently with my hands in my lap, and wait out the rest of her styling.

The Handler comes to collect me. His sickening grip clenches shut on my upper arm and he yanks me out of the chair without giving me time to set a proper stance.

"C'mon," he says. "We've got to get you dressed and ready for the stage."

By 'dressed', I discover he means lingerie. A short, tiny scrap of lace that barely covers my most intimate parts up. I try to do so with my arms, but he smacks them out of the way, his lecherous gaze sliding up and down my body.

"Who knows?" he grunts. "I just might buy you myself. No rules against employees partaking in the showcase auction."

I give no reaction, though on the inside, I'm sick enough to feel faint. He barks at me to put on my shoes—a pair of uncomfortable, too small five-inch stilettos—and he checks the time.

“Starts in ten minutes. Your first up. Our big opener. Former Northam Assistant District Attorney turned whore. We expect you to be *very* busy tonight. And *very* sore tomorrow.”

His twisted laugh is the final nail in the coffin. I can’t stand it. I can’t do it. I can’t—

“I need to use the restroom,” I blurt out. “May I please be taken?”

He grits his teeth, his hideous, jagged scar more pronounced along his cheek. My request is granted, only because he mumbles something about a former product pissing herself on stage, and how it affected sales.

“I’ll be outside and this door has no lock. You have sixty seconds. Make it quick.”

The door slams shut.

The instant I’m alone, I pull out the beauty scissors I’ve swiped. My heart booms in my chest in a toxic cocktail of feverish anticipation, anxiety and fear. I’d been so sure only seconds ago, but as I wrap my fingers around the scissors and hold out my wrist, I freeze up.

My mind goes to Salvatore and what horrors he’s enduring. How he’s preserved and still hasn’t allowed himself to be broken.

Even when he gave in and let Lucius humiliate him, it wasn’t for himself. It was for me.

His unending love for me made him do it. He’d been hoping it’d set me free.

How can I take the easy way out when Salvatore hasn’t? How can I leave this earth knowing I’m abandoning him,

quitting on our fight when I promised I'd stick by his side to the end?

It would break him if I did it; if I went through with this, and he discovered I'd ended my own life. He'd never forgive himself.

The scissors shake in my hand as tears fill my eyes and a gasping breath leaves me. As hopeless as I feel, as traumatic as this will be, I can't give up. I can't let them break me.

I have enough sense to hide the scissors the second before my minute is up and the door flies open.

"I didn't hear no piss," Cesar growls, almost dragging me beside him. "Let me find out you're up to something and I will make you suffer in ways you can't imagine, you little snotty bitch. If you thought that night in the alley was bad, you've got no idea what I'll do to you."

My eyes close listening to the depraved threat. I don't notice until I'm shoved forward and locked into a giant cage that I'm being set up for the stage.

The curtain lifts and bright lights blind me.

Rows upon rows rise up so high the top levels are practically out of view. Almost every table and chair is filled with people dressed in their finest black tie garb, luxurious masks covering their faces.

A thousand murmurs breaks out at the revelation. At the sight of me, former Northam ADA Delphine Adams sitting perched in a cage, ready to be sold.

It's the most humiliating moment of my life.

I bow my head, though it does nothing to stave off the panic quickly spreading. My breaths grow short, then sharp,

then nonexistent as I struggle to breathe, and my throat feels like it's closing up.

I can't do this. I can't handle this. I can't take this.

Please. No.

An announcer speaks over a surround sound type system, asking the many Society members if they have an opening bid.

It spirals from there—before he can even finish asking his question, a man in the front row's bid five hundred dollars. Another man challenges him by doubling his bid. Others soon join in, barking out their higher bids.

One thousand. Two thousand. Five thousand. Eight thousand.

I blackout. The moment overwhelms me to the point my psyche cannot handle the soul-crushing details of what I'm being forced into. I blink to find myself being collected off the perch in the cage. I'm being led into a hall by one of the Mill's many guards.

It's happened.

I've been sold.

He takes me upstairs via elevator and deposits me in what they call a playroom. My customer is already waiting. The door's locked behind me. I don't move, anyway, staying put by the door.

The man is in a suit and tie like the rest, his hair short and cropped, and his build average. Possibly his early-forties. He carefully reaches up and takes off his mask wearing a wide grin.

My next breath sticks to my airway. I back up further against the door.

“Stephen?!”

“I don’t know what’s happened to you, or how you’ve wound up here, but I couldn’t believe it when they brought you out.”

I gape in horror at a man I’ve met only once before. Years ago at one of Garrett’s work functions. I’d still been determined to be a supportive girlfriend and had taken to being on his arm at his work events. Stephen Talbert was a guy who worked at Garrett’s bank. I can’t even remember his job or anything else about him.

But the way he’s approaching me, his grin widening, tells me he doesn’t give a damn that I’m the ex-fiancée of his coworker.

I’m a product he’s purchased for a very specific purpose.

“Don’t,” I warn. “Don’t come any closer.”

He chuckles. “So you’re as feisty in the bedroom as you are in the courtroom. I like it. Garrett always said you were boring in the sack.”

“I don’t care. Stay away.”

“He used to come here too, you know. He’s out of the country right now, but wait ‘til I tell him you’re here. I’m sure he’d love another chance with you for old time’s sake.”

He lunges for me. I dive out of the way, escaping him by mere inches.

The horror and panic that’s been plaguing me disappears.

Instead, I go into fight mode. I get mad. Furious at the situation and what’s being done to me.

I won't let this happen. I won't give up and let them make a victim out of me. They'll have to tie me down and take it by force.

Stephen grabs a hold of my arm. I surprise him with the pair of beauty scissors I've kept hidden. I jam it into his arm and he releases a hoarse yelp of pain before letting go.

But the scissors don't do much. He's barely bleeding and they're not sharp enough to cause him real injury unless he holds still enough. For me to truly lodge them into a more damaging location of his body.

My attempted stabbing only pisses him off more. He charges at me and tackles me to the bed.

I scream. He slaps a clammy hand over my mouth. Bucking and twisting against him, we roll off the bed and tumble to the ground with a hard thud. I throw an elbow back and hit in the head.

Despite the direct jab, he doesn't let go of me. He holds on as I squirm and struggle some more.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he pants. “I paid twelve thousand dollars to fuck you. Any way I want for the next two hours. I expect my money's worth! Lay down and open those legs or I'll get the—”

Stephen stops talking.

As he claws at me and tries to drag me back toward him, I'm scrambling to freedom. I'm snatching off my stiletto heel and then spinning around. I'm coming down on him, jamming the sharp heel into his eye.

A second passes where he doesn't seem to register what's happened. He's stopped talking but lays still and lets silence fill the playroom.

Then comes his sheer horror at what's happened. His scream at the top of his lungs and his shaky hands as he feels his face and the stiletto sticking out of it.

I stand back, breathless and shocked but unapologetic. While I'll suffer for my disobedience, I'd do it again.

I *will* do it again.

Before I can process what my next move is, the choice is made for me. Suddenly, the bloody fight inside the playroom seems like a small-scale confrontation compared to the outbreak of screams and gunfire beyond the walls.

The door springs open and a face I never imagined I'd see again appears, bloodied yet smiling.

"Delphine!" Brenda exclaims. "There you are!"

delphine

. . .



“B-Brenda?” I stammer.

This has to be a dream. There’s no way...

“What did you do?” she asks, peering around me, at the incapacitated guy on the ground with a stiletto sticking out his eye socket.

I blink in disbelief. “What did I do? What are *you* doing?! How are you here?!”

“We’re breaking you out. Hurry!” She beckons me with the handgun in her grasp, then spins around and takes off.

Only another second passes before I rush to follow. I have no clue what the hell is going on, but if Brenda can help me escape this living nightmare, I’ll gladly accept the assistance.

The last time we saw each other, we weren’t on the best of terms. Months ago, I had been blackmailed about a dark secret of mine—of which turned out to be an orchestrated effort by Brenda and an old school classmate named Chester Bailey, hoping to bring down the elite in Northam. They claimed I was being targeted for recruitment purposes, though I can’t say I trust anything they said.

By the end of the night, two grisly murders had taken place, and I’d warned Brenda to leave the city and never

return.

Clearly, she's broken that agreement to my favor.

I rip off my other stiletto heel and run after her. I've used one of these sharp heels as a weapon once. It'll have to do the trick again as we attempt our escape.

Brenda blasts a security guard that rushes toward us from the other end of the hall. Elsewhere, gunfire cracks louder in the air and more screams accompany the abrasive sounds. *Who* is shooting up the rest of the club?

It can't be Chester. He's dead.

Unless there were even more people posing as NorthamNeptune, seeking to dismantle the secret society of elites...

"Brenda," I pant as we race down the hall, "who are you with? Who's breaking me out?"

She tosses a glance at me from over her shoulder. "Your friends. The guy with the Harry Potter glasses and some others. *Mob* guys, I guess."

"Stitches?!" My chest expands with hope for the first time in weeks. It's such an uplifting feeling that I almost stop running from the bright surprise of it, though at the next crack of bullets, I remember where I am, and what's at stake.

No time for slowing down. We have to stay on the move.

We reach the elevator at the end of the floor.

It's as we file inside and Brenda goes to press a button for the ground floor that I stop her.

"We have to go to level five," I say.

"What? Why?"

“The cages! People are *trapped* in them.”

“Delphine—”

“We have to at least try. Brenda, you were one of them once before. You know what it’s like. We can’t just leave them.”

She huffs out a difficult breath and then gives a terse nod. The elevator takes us down to level five, where we run out and discover we’re not the only ones with the same idea.

Fabio and Lev are already on the floor. The dozens of cage doors hang open. They’re herding the many captives out the emergency exit. They nod the second they catch sight of us.

“See, they’re getting their freedom,” Brenda says, about-facing in the opposite direction. “We’ve got to make it out of here. Your pal Stitches says we only have a few minutes before we’re outnumbered by reinforcements.”

“Define a few minutes.”

“Not enough minutes to make pitstops along the way!” Brenda pauses long enough to aim at two guards who in turn are dragging a man in tattered clothes, a ‘product’ they’ve caught trying to escape in the chaos. She fires two shots, landing one and missing the other.

We dive for cover behind the nearest wall as the guard she’s missed goes on the offensive.

“Have I mentioned I’m not the best shot and I’m running out of ammo?”

“Hand it over.”

I trade my stiletto heel for her handgun. From there, we work to double team the guard we’re up against. As he approaches the corner of the hall, Brenda readies herself to use

the heel while I do the same with the gun, my finger on the trigger.

The moment he springs up on us, we strike. Brenda slams the stiletto into his face while I pull the trigger and shoot him in the abdomen. He's barely hit the ground when we're already jumping over him and rushing the rest of the way.

We carry on like this, tag-teaming any guards that come into our escape path, or attempt to stop us.

The elevator's blocked off as an option. Many of the same people freed by Fabio and Lev have flooded the mode of building transportation. By the looks of it, they've reached max captivity as the elevator doors close and it lurches going down.

We pivot to the stairwell close by. Only a couple more levels and we'll be on the ground floor.

I'm halfway through the door when I spot him—the Handler darting into another room, disappearing out of sight. His gaze meets mine even at a distance, a knowing twinkle in them.

I freeze, locked under his taunting spell. He's escaped retribution many times, including the night we attended the Neptune party. Salvatore pulled me away before I could act.

But Cesar's here now. I'm here now. I'm *armed*.

Two bullets remain in the chamber.

“Delphine, what are you—”

I'm sprinting off in his direction, a vengeful dose of adrenaline kicking in, and fueling my every determined step. It rises to the same level of hatred Salvatore harbors for Lucius,

the kind of deep loathing where you'll gladly sacrifice yourself if it means exacting the revenge you're seeking.

Brenda's feet pound behind me and she calls my name in her attempt to keep up.

I burst into the room Cesar escaped into. My eyes wildly scan the room, shifting from wall to wall, combing over every crevice in search of him.

He's gone.

Nowhere to be found. The only evidence which exists of his presence is in the bookcase that's been shoved aside. It leads to some sort of secret entrance...

I move to follow, but Brenda grabs my arm.

"No!" she snaps. "No more detours! We have to go. *Right now.*"

In the distant, logical recesses of my mind, I recognize that she's right. As thirsty and desperate as I am for revenge, escape is more important in the moment.

Suddenly, Brenda takes charge. We've reversed course back the path we've come, returning to the stairwell for the last few flights of stairs.

On the ground floor, we encounter a dizzying stampede of Neptune Society members running for their lives and the people held captive by their organization running for freedom. Sprinkled throughout are a mix of security guards attempting to establish authority and a handful of Salvatore's last remaining men.

"Stitches!" I gasp. "How are you possibly alive?"

"Escaped that shootout by the skin of my teeth. You were already gone. I'd hoped you'd gotten out of the country, but

when we tracked your steps, we found your father's shot-up car at the airport and the escape bag we gave you."

Stitches leads the charge the rest of the way out of the Mill. Brenda and I, along with the other men in the group, pile into a large truck, and we're off. I twist my body to peer out the back window.

The enormous structure known as the Mill resembles a factory from the outside. Shrouded by artificially planted trees and down a road without much traffic, it's no wonder they chose a location embedded in the city that still offers enough discretion.

As we drive in one direction, a barrage of unmarked white cars zoom past us going the opposite way, likely the reinforcements Stitches anticipated. They're clueless to the fact that the people in the truck they just drove by were the very same they've been sent to confront.

The Mill sinks out of view and I twist back around in my seat.

Relief crashes over me like a powerful wave and renders me lightheaded.

I'm free.



Stitches and the others bring me to a location I've never been. I'm told it's a backup property Salvatore owns in case of a rainy day, much like our current scenario. Since his captivity, Lucius has seized ownership of his other properties—the compound with the loft and Club Nirvana have become part of his monopoly.

This backup piece of land, a significantly smaller property near the wharf district, isn't nearly as equip as his main compound, but it does the trick for the few of us that have survived.

I demand answers. I want to know everything.

That evening, I'm sat down, and briefed on what I've missed. Stitches and Lev survived the shootout. Fabio and Oscar were the only two remaining men from the attack on the villa; they've managed to keep Salt and Pepa with them. The cats meow their hello the moment they spot me in the compound, trotting over to check it's really me.

Brenda I'm told joined the effort by chance. Apparently, she never left Northam, and has spent the last few months quietly plotting how else she could get revenge. She approached Stitches when she caught wind of rumors I was in the Northam Society's clutches.

Stitches checks me out to ensure I haven't sustained any serious injuries. Wanting no trace of my time at the Mill remaining, I request he removes the implant inserted into my arm. I show him the branding mark on the back of my shoulder in hopes he'll be able to do something about it.

His mouth dips in a sad bend. "Geez, Miss ADA. They... they *branded* you."

I blink against the mist in my eyes, managing to keep my expression vague. "Is there anything you can do?"

"Unfortunately... not with something like this. Your best bet is to... maybe get it covered up with a tattoo. I'm sorry."

"I figured," I mutter, my voice cracking. I pull my shirt back up over my shoulder. My mind works to shove the

complicated feelings to the back burner and instead focus on the next important matter at hand. “We have to get Salvatore.”

“We’re already working on a breakout plan. We got you out first because it’s what he would’ve wanted.”

“What’s the plan?”

“You’re not involved—”

“Don’t,” I interrupt sharply, shooting him a warning glare. “Don’t you dare start with that bullshit. We’re *all* involved! Salvatore is my fucking husband and I want him home immediately, safe and in one piece. I will do anything in my power to make sure it happens. I’m a part of this and you will deal with the fact that I am!”

Stitches answers me with stunned silence. Then, slowly, he rubs the back of his neck, and gives a nod. “Okay,” he says simply, “okay, you’re right. We bust out Psycho together. But I’m telling you right now, he won’t be happy about it.”

“Stitches, I’ll be too relieved to have him home to care.”

salvatore

. . .



“ONE OF US IS DYING TONIGHT.”

Volchok tells me this as we time the shift change between the guards. With no clock and no concept of what day it is, we’re forced to rely on basics like counting out the minutes in between. Not the most accurate way of telling time, but our only means given our fucked up circumstance.

“Maybe both of us,” he goes on after another twenty seconds passes. “We both may die tonight.”

I grit my teeth, ignoring him long enough to count the minute we’re on. Dying has never been something I’ve feared—from the time I was a teenager making trouble in a suburb from hell like Westoria, I was okay with death. I was aware I’d die if I exacted revenge against Lucius.

That was never a problem. So long as I got my payback and the last laugh, death seemed a lot like life.

Pointless. Meaningless. Something I didn’t care about.

It wasn’t ’til recently I began wanting to survive. I started thinking about a real future with Delphine and what that could mean. But if destroying Lucius and taking down his operation means I’ve got to die in the process, then so be it.

...so long as I ensure Delphine gets her freedom.

Then she can move on. She can live the long life she's always dreamed about, well into old age like she deserves. Even if it's without me.

“Are you okay with this?” Volchok asks.

I'm on the third minute. The two guards who were outside our cells have gone to the end of the hall to brief the pair coming on shift.

They average six minutes on these shift changes. The longest has been seven minutes and forty-nine seconds. The shortest five minutes and thirty-three.

We need a miracle if we're ever going to make a break for it; we'll have to be in and out in the amount of time they're distracted.

“Six minutes and about twenty-four seconds,” I whisper when they're done.

The pair now on shift march with dutiful footsteps toward our cells. The heavy door in the hall swings shut, signaling the others have left.

“You are not okay with dying,” Volchok says from his cell. His calm rasp travels between the jagged crack in the concrete.

I ignore him, listening more closely to what's going on outside the cell than inside—studying the guards and their habits is a lot more important than answering his stupid questions about life and death.

Volchok is not okay with being ignored though. He keeps pushing.

“You will need to be okay with it. You will need to make peace.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I grit out. “Let’s focus on what we’ve got to do.”

“Accepting death is focusing on what we have to do—I told you we will make it out of this cell. We will choose the moment and then we will make our escape.”

He’s been so sure. He has a planned escape route figured out. One he’s held onto for months, biding his time, waiting for the right moment. Why he’s chosen to include me on his breakout plan isn’t clear beyond the fact that we share a common enemy in Lucius. He’s claimed the door we’ll need to escape through is too heavy for one man.

Though I’ve agreed to go through with it, I don’t trust him. I don’t know if what he’s told me is true or if he’s even who he’s said he is. For all I know, this is another trap set up by Lucius and his four-dimensional, chess-minded brain.

There’s no other choice but to go along with his plan. Other than do nothing and stay a prisoner.

At least I stand a chance with the breakout attempt. If Volchok tries to betray me, I’ll handle him... and everybody else who stands in my way.

In between our tedious sessions of counting minutes, I’ve been resting. I’ve been eating every last crumb of the gruel they feed me and licking every last drop of the water they provide me to drink. My body’s still battered and my energy levels are lower than what they should be in order to function, but I’m in as good of shape as I’m going to be.

It’s now or never.

“The next change over,” I say, my voice low. “They’ve averaged over six, but we’ll aim to keep it under that. You sure the door across the hall is going to be unlocked?”

“Yes.”

“How so?”

“It is the door leading to the boiler room down below. It must stay unlocked. American building code—exits to such rooms remain unlocked at all times.”

My teeth grind. “You’re relying on Lucius to obey building codes?”

“It has always remained unlocked.”

“You said you knew for certain.”

“I have been in that room many times. I have suffered many times in there. Now, *shhh!*”

I tense up. My hard gaze snaps straight ahead to the cell door.

No sign of the guards picking up on our conversation, though Volchok’s right to shush me. I had raised my voice even slightly, which poses a risk.

We want them unsuspecting; we want them thinking their shift tonight’s like any other.

Teeth still clenched, I speak slowly and carefully. “You better be correct. Or else your prediction will be true. One of us will die. You. By *my* hand.”

Volchok grunts as if caught by laughter he then disguises into a cough.

The guard outside his cell bangs his cattle prod against the steel door. “Hey, shut up in there! Ain’t nobody told you to cough!”

My good fist curls up. These low-level flunkies think they’re hot shit. Just wait ’til I’m able to show them they’re

shit alright—the same as fucking dog feces on somebody’s shoe. They need to be put in their place.

Soon. Assuming everything goes right.

Another couple hours pass. We lull them back into their false sense of security. They allow it the more their shifts wind down and they see the finish line.

I tap the cement wall. Subtly in the two-time pattern we agreed was our signal.

“You there?”

“Always.”

“Next shift change. We’ll do it.”

“Yes. Okay.”

We fall silent again. I divert my attention to the steel door, straining my ears to pick up any of the sounds going on in the hall outside. My insides fill up with a rarity for me—a pool of twitchy nerves as I build resolve and muster up energy.

This is it. What’ll probably be our only chance at freedom.

I can’t fuck this up. I’ve got to make it happen. One way or another. Even if it means I’ll die in the end. So long as I’m able to take out Lucius and set Delphine free, I can accept death.

As if the dipshits guarding my cell know what’s on my mind, they break out in casual talk. They know I’ll hear. They’re aware it’ll fuck with me.

“Did you hear what happened during the last showcase at the Mill?” one asks.

“You mean all the buyers or what happened after?”

“What happened after’s none of my business. I’m talking about all those buyers. Record-breaking profit was made.” He whistles and the other one laughs and says something indistinct.

The deep, sick feeling that’s plagued me whenever my mind wanders to Delphine starts to take over. I clench my jaw and close my eyes, forcing myself to tune out from what they’re saying. The second I let myself go down that dark road is the second I lose focus and fuck up on this breakout.

I can’t think about what’s happening at the Mill. Whatever horrors she’s been subjected to. Not right now.

It’s a matter I’ll be forced to deal with when I see her again, when I set her free.

These dipshits just want to fuck with me—they want me agonizing over whatever went down at the showcase. I won’t let them get to me.

The time arrives where their shift ends and a new one’s about to start up. I tap on the cement wall in the same careful, practiced fashion Volchok and I have agreed upon. A second goes by before he taps back. His confirmation this is happening.

Volchok sets things in motion. I sit and wait as he begins groaning out in pain. His feet collide against the cement floor in his rush toward the iron bars. He grips them and yells out between his suffocating sputters for air.

The lone guard remaining behind while the others swap out must notice him. I stay where I am, biding my time, so I don’t *see* him do so—only based off Volchok calling out do I know this is the case. The guy must glance down the corridor at him.

“Please!” Volchok groans. “I can’t... breathe... my chest... the pain...”

A loud thud resounds from the cell next to mine. Volchok’s collapsed. The guard takes another uncertain moment before approaching.

I sit and listen as it happens. He passes by my cell, clutching his gun, and stops in front of Volchok’s.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Please... my heart...” Volchok chokes out. “A doctor...”

He must be convincing enough. The amateur unclips his handheld radio and calls in the emergency.

“We’ve got a situation, guys!” His voice rises in volume as his panic sets in. “I think the guy’s about to be done! Something about his heart. Maybe a heart attack or something? Hurry the hell up!”

“Please!” Volchok cries. “My heart cannot... take it!”

“Whatever you do, don’t let him croak! The Boss will have your head on a pike if he does! He wants him alive for now,” comes the radioed transmission.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

The soldier fumbles with his jangling ring of keys and wrenches the heavy steel door open. He’s expecting to find Volchok weak and feeble on the ground. Instead, he’s surprised by the crack of an elbow to the face and a knee to the gut.

More groans of pain echo, yet the sound’s no longer from Volchok. It’s the dipshit amateur hitting the ground as he realizes too late the script’s been flipped.

Volchok steals his keys, weapon, and radio. The cell door he leaves hanging open—an invitation to lure other soldiers inside. A further distraction for when they do make it down the hall and rush toward his cell.

Mine slides open, the steel door scraping along its hinges. Volchok appears, a skeleton only an inch or two taller than me. Cheeks and eyes hollow, hair thin and scraggly, he looks like death.

But there's something else about him that gives me half a second of pause—his features. The taut shape of his jaw, the swirl of colors in his eyes, and the dark hair he once had which has now mostly grayed. Even the build I can tell he once had, his frame that even malnourishment can't take away.

He must sense why. The faintest glint of amusement flickers in his gaze.

“Coming, *moy syn?*” he asks.

For half a second I'm wondering what he's said, but there's no time to waste.

I shove down my momentary shock and rush for the door.

We set off in the opposite direction the guards come from. Straight for the door that Volchok says leads to the boiler room. After sustaining so many injuries and being starved and left to rot away in the dank darkness of a cell for who knows how many weeks, I'm not moving as fast as I'd like. My body aches in protest as I push myself harder.

Volchok's no speed runner either.

He hobbles a couple steps behind me as we make it to the steel door marked with a capital B.

We pry it open and then rush inside in the same second the guards flood the corridor on the other end. It's unclear if they see us, but they must hear the door slam shut.

We don't hang around long enough to find out—we hit the staircase, leaping down several steps at a time, descending deep into what feels like a pit of darkness.

Either this will lead me to freedom as we planned, or it could be the biggest mistake of my life. It could mean the end.

“We must hurry,” Volchok croaks. “They will be down here any second.”

He's wheezing, barely able to keep up.

It's no wonder if he's been held captive for as many years as he's claimed. If I'm struggling at half his age and with only a few weeks of malnourishment, there's no telling what it's like for him.

The farther down we make it, the more he wheezes, slowing down.

“C'mon,” I growl. “Almost there. We'll make it.”

“Only one.”

I ignore his comment and push on. If I can pull it off, we're both getting out of this hellhole tonight.

Once we make it down another narrow hall, sparsely lit by blinking light bulbs dangling from the ceiling, we've reached our final destination—the boiler room Volchok's told me about.

I grip the cold steel handle to the door. He claimed this door is so heavy it requires two men to pull and hold it open. However, as I grip the cold steel handle, I'm prying it open with relative ease.

“You said—”

“No time! GO!” he barks between another sputter for air.

We dart into the room and draw the door shut with a twist of the lock. I catch snippets of footsteps from above, meaning the guards have figured out we’ve escaped and have already begun chasing us down here.

“The window,” Volchok says, pointing a damaged, fleshy hand across the stuffy room.

It’s the first time I notice them in a good enough light—the burn marks all over him. The glow from the boiler casts him in a good enough light. He’s disfigured... some of his skin melted off, from his neck to parts of his ear and his hand. Probably his whole body.

Years of torture while in Lucius’s captivity.

The truth’s staring me in the face. Everything that’s happened and why we’re here.

Why he’s brought me down here and what his intention is.

“You knew you weren’t going to make it out,” I say, the closer he stands to the levers on the boiler. “You never planned on making it out. You could’ve done this alone. You didn’t need me.”

“But *you* needed *me*.”

“You knew who I was. From the moment I was brought here.”

The same glint from earlier lives in his blue-green gaze. “I did not expect you. For many years I have been fed lies—your arrival made me see what has been stolen from me. If only I had not given up. I stopped fighting.”

“Let’s go. They’ll be busting through any second.”

But Volchok doesn’t move toward the window as I do. He stays where he is, his gnarled hand wrapping around a lever.

“It is up to you now. Climb out the window. Run to the trees. Run as fast as possible. I will hold them off for a minute. Two at most. Then we will all burn. And you will be free again.”

“You don’t have to blow up anything—and who’s in this building—”

“Only soldiers are here overnight. They will all burn too. Get away now.”

“We can both make it!”

“Make him suffer, *moy syn*. Do as I never did for myself and *Solnishko*. Do what I could not and save your *Solnishko*. You are the only one who can defeat him.”

I step away from the window as feet pound outside in the hall. My heartbeat roars in my ears, hammering just as hard inside my chest. “You can’t be my... he’s not really my... why didn’t Stefania ever—”

“GO! GET OUT!” he yells as the soldiers make it to the boiler room door.

Without another second to spare, I shove down the rest of my protests and hoist myself up onto the large steel cylinder under the window. It’s hot to the touch, burning the palms of my hands, though it’s not enough to slow me down.

The window’s a tight squeeze. The dimensions weren’t made to accommodate anyone bigger than someone runt-sized, let alone an adult male. The hardest part is fitting my shoulders past the narrow opening, twisting and angling ’til

I'm able to force myself through. Once my torso passes through, it becomes about using my arms and hands to prep myself for the fall on the other side.

The door finally busts open and Volchok's confrontation with the soldiers begins with him making it clear they're to stay where they are if they don't wish to blow up, cranking the lever that fills the room with more gas than necessary.

Which in turn makes the furnace shake.

It works. They pause, but I don't.

I grip the wall on the outside of the building, wrench my lower half through, and drop to the ground with the intention of my legs and feet touching first.

It's only a few feet down.

My legs buckle anyway, my balance lost. I hit the ground only to force myself back up a split second later.

There's no time to fuck up, to spend on falls and potential injuries. Volchok said I've got a minute to get the hell out of the area before the explosion.

I take off for the tree line some twenty feet away. A barbed wire fence cuts off the compound with the trees surrounding the area. Serrated pieces of wire aren't enough to stop me after everything I've been through.

I sprint to the far corner where typically there's less sharp wires, climb up the fencing, and do my best leaping over. Some of the wire slices into my flesh and cuts me up. All that matters is I make it. I land with another thud just as Volchok can't hold them off any longer.

Heat simmers in the winter air and changes the atmosphere.

It's a tangible feeling in the second leading up to the massive blast. The explosion is deafening and the flames are immediate. I take cover in the woodland, gritting my teeth against the threats from my body telling me I can't make it any farther.

Volchok's words serve as my motivation. This is my shot. My only chance at freedom. My last chance at revenge.

It's all on me.

Make him suffer, moy syn. Do it as I never did for myself and Solnishko. Do what I could not and save your Solnishko. You are the only one who can defeat him.

I won't try.

I will.

delphine

. . .



I HAVEN'T HAD a moment's rest since the bloodbath at the Mill. Call it the post-traumatic stress disorder from what I've experienced, the soul-stirring level of grief I'm racked by, or the pure hatred and murderous thirst for revenge I'm motivated by every moment I'm breathing—the result is essentially the same.

I cannot—and will not—rest until my world is restored.

Or I make those who made it impossible, suffer to the fullest extent humanly possible.

Stephen Talbert, the man who bought me, thought he'd have his way with me. Instead I had my way with him... equipped only with the stiletto that was once on my feet. I lodged the sharp heel into his face, his eyeball, and his *brain*, and a sick feeling that was borderline orgasmic washed over me.

Comparable to the first time I killed. Only so much better.

Knowing I was inflicting lethal pain on a man who sought to hurt me was as good as any other pleasure that's been inflicted on my body. Even better that I was in total control, deciding when and how I jammed the stiletto heel into his eye

socket, driving it as deep as it'd go, watching the blood squirt out, staining my fingers.

But that's just it—I want more. More blood. More pain. *More suffering.*

And I won't rest until it happens. Regardless of what anyone says.

“You need some shuteye,” Stitches says. “We're all human. Humans need sleep.”

I ignore him, studying the map we've confiscated of one of Lucius's compounds. It's the compound in Old Northam, where we believe Salvatore is being held. I've technically been, though I wasn't made aware of the location as a 'product'; I was bound and blindfolded, taken wherever was dictated at the time.

“Delphine,” Stitches says slowly. His hand clamps shut on the curve of my shoulder. “You need rest just like anybody else. Put the map away. We're gonna save him.”

I shrug off his touch. “I go to bed when I want to go to bed. You already know this.”

Stitches stands still behind me. His urge to object is palpable, its own mood in the air. He resists without uttering another word. His hand drops from my shoulder and he turns away, walking out of the room.

I don't draw another breath until he's gone and I'm alone again.

Some would say I'm losing it; I'm fixated to an unhealthy extent. They'd probably be correct—but it's been a week and we're no closer to rescuing Salvatore.

Planning out the logistics of a rescue mission takes longer than the mission itself.

While Stitches and the other men loyal to Salvatore insist on mapping out every detail, I'm ready to rush in, guns drawn and blazing. He won't last much longer.

I know this deep in my being. If we don't act soon, I'll lose him forever.

Lucius will kill him... or he'll finally succumb to the inhumane treatment he's been subjected to.

It sickened me, seeing him. Salvatore has always been dominant, unendingly unbreakable in both how he presented himself and the strength of his body. He was a different man inside the walls of Lucius's compound—his skin was decorated with bruises and his body no longer bore the exquisite cut of healthy muscle, similar to a masculine sculpture made of hard stone.

He was sick. Injured. Starved.

His skin was cold and pale and as desperately as his build clambered to hold onto its muscle, when I touched him, for the first time, I felt *frailty*.

They were... destroying him. Lucius was destroying him, relishing in every moment he withered his son away into nothing but a shell of his former, powerful self.

Even more heartbreakingly, he'd wrapped his arms around me. Held onto me as though *I* were the fragile one in need of protection—and maybe I was, in his eyes. I was bruised and clammy and shaken.

But in no capacity was I as tortured as he was. I was only just entering captivity. He had been there... for weeks...

I close my eyes the more my mind delves into what happened that day. I had almost been forced to service Cesar—*in front of Salvatore.*

The ordeal at the Mill and what happened the day in the interrogation room will have lasting effects on me. I can sense how it's impacted my psyche, my very being, though so far, I've refrained from concentrating on it. I'll deal with the trauma of it later.

Right now, as my gaze sweeps across the map of the compound, I can't rest. I can't give in until—

“Delphine,” pants Fabio. He's been in bad shape since the attack on the safe house. He was shot twice and came close to death (so I've been told). His left arm rests in a sling and he's been using his right to walk with a cane due to the gunshot wound to his thigh, which had almost hit his femoral artery. He appears in the doorway with eyes wider than saucers. “You've got to follow me.”

I acquiesce without question, following him down the hall. He leads me around the back of the compound where one of the emergency doors is. Before I can protest and ask what he's doing, I slow up and my demeanor changes.

The anxious energy pinging through me disappears. The air in my lungs does too, no longer existing in a capacity helping me to breathe. My mouth opens and then closes, and I blink staring at the approaching ghost before me.

Tears come. They blur my vision. My legs develop their own mind, breaking out into a desperate sprint.

I run to him.

Arms outstretched and curls wild in the night wind.

I collide with Salvatore with the full impact of my body, not considering he might be injured or weak. My arms fly out and then latch around him and his do the same, curling around my waist.

He doesn't budge, even with the force at which I smack into him.

“Salvatore,” I gasp, burying my face in his neck. “What... how... you're here...”

He holds me tightly, as desperately as I cling to him, but he doesn't speak. I can feel the changes in him—the trauma he's endured and the injuries he's sustained. His torso feels soft and his ribs tender. His arms no longer hold the same solidness as before, like he's been stretched thin, simply too worn to be the pillar he once was.

Almost too unsteady on his feet.

But it's okay—I'll be his pillar if need be.

I wrap my arms around his waist and press my face into his chest. I inhale the earthy scent of him, however raw and rugged, and pray that when I open my eyes, this will still be real. He'll be here and not a figment of my imagination.

“Jon,” I whisper. “How...?”

More men arrive. Fabio's collected backup. Bernie and Oscar arrive to ease Salvatore from my hold and help him toward the doorway. He needs immediate medical attention. I rush in their wake, suddenly a ball of nerves.

What have they done to him? What kind of atrocities has he suffered?

His body is a roadmap of black-and-blue bruises and red lines and punctures. He's been beaten, stabbed, and who

knows what else...

“Delphine, give me some space,” Stitches says when I come to the room being used for medical purposes. He grips the doorknob and blocks my entry. “He’s... not in good shape. Severely dehydrated and he’s got.... a lot of injuries. Broken bones and neglected wounds. I’m not sure how long it’ll take me to patch him up. But I need space.”

The door slams shut in my face.



I get my first few hours of uninterrupted sleep outside the door of the medical room. I slide down the wall, knees folded into my chest, and I fall asleep. The door opening for the first time in almost five hours wakes me.

Stitches has tasked Omar to collect Salvatore. Arm swathed over his shoulder, he helps support Salvatore on his walk down the hall.

I’m up on my feet, about to follow. Stitches interrupts by stepping in front of me.

“Delphine, he’s not himself,” he says with a somber bend to his mouth. “He can’t be overstimulated right now. He’s... he’s... almost not there... mentally.”

My eyes narrow, the result a sharp glare. “What do you think I’m going to say to him, Stitches? Do you think I’m going to make things worse?”

“That’s not what I’m saying... I’m just trying to be cautious is all. He’s been through hell, Delphine. None of us know the extent.”

Every emotion that's been trapped inside of me since Salvatore and I were separated wells up until I can't hold it in anymore. They burst free in a pained, angry cry.

"I... I love him... s-so... much..." I croak, my chest aching. "And you think I'll damage him?"

"You're being sensitive when all I'm trying to do is warn you... to be careful. Mindful of what he's been through."

"You think I won't be mindful? That I'll ignore what he's been through and make it worse? I don't need your advice, Stitches. Nor did I ask for it."

"Fuck off, Stitches!" I snap, pivoting on my heel. "I don't need your advice. Nor did I ask for it."

I'd never do anything to hurt Salvatore. He should know that.

If he's not himself, that's okay. I just... want to be near him. Breathe the air he breathes. See him and know he's alive. Exist as he exists, whatever that means in the moment.

For Stitches to 'warn' me, it's as if he believes I'll do damage, like I won't be able to accept he's changed. Even if his intention wasn't to be offensive, it's how it feels in the moment.

I seek him out, tracking down the room they place him in. The room is secluded, tucked away in a corner of the top floor.

"Jon," I murmur, knocking gently.

No answer.

I knock again and wait another minute.

When there's still no answer, I try the door. Whether the brass knob turns out of sheer force of will or the door's simply

unlocked, I'm not certain. All that matters is that the door opens and I'm able to slip inside.

The window curtains are drawn and the bed's empty.

My eyes spend a couple seconds adjusting to the dark. I scan the room to no sign of him anywhere.

Not on the bed or at the desk or any other corner of the room.

The ensuite.

The door leading into the attached bathroom is shut but light glows through the crevices. My feet pad across the room as I approach with a flip of nerves inside. The way I'm moving it's as though there's a rabid wild animal on the other side and I'm about to expose myself to his fury.

At no fault of Salvatore's.

But it's been weeks since we've truly seen each other and after what he's been through, it's impossible to know what to expect.

Stitches seemed to think it was bad enough to warn me.

Inhaling a cautionary breath, I enter the bathroom, creaking the door open.

I stutter to a stop at the sight of him.

It's the back of him I see first. My eyes track him, starting at the top. First, his hair that's longer than it's ever been having gone weeks without a cut; it's past his ears, messy and untamed in a feral manner worthy of someone subjected to barbaric conditions.

It reaches the nape of his neck. The same I've put my arms around and kissed so many times—times that feel like a

different lifetime altogether given everything that's happened.

My quiet study continues.

Past his neck and then across the hard, masculine line of his shoulders.

Down his back.

A pit of sadness hollows inside my stomach. I've seen Salvatore's bare back more times than I can count, have run my hands down the length of it with love and affection and scratched it up in moments of pure lust and passion.

I'm familiar with the sculpted ridges and divots of muscle and how unbreakable he feels under my touch.

I've memorized it all—the sight, the feel, even the scent of him while wrapping my arms from behind and burying my face into him.

I remember every inch of porcelain skin and dot of ink from his tattoos, so vividly I can close my eyes and paint a perfect picture.

But it's no more. He's changed. *They've* changed him.

I blink trying to hold off tears that wet my eyes. The sick feeling from weeks ago in the safehouse returns and sends bile rising up my throat—not out of disgust at him but *for* him.

...what have they done to him?

His back is no more. Not in a human sense. It's been stripped away—the flesh itself torn off all over to make way for a network of red streaks. Deep, bloodied gashes that travel up and down. Crisscross and side to side. Some older and already scarring. Others fresh and shiny. All the way to his lower half where his waist and pelvis meet. All of them the true marred horror of what he's been through.

He stands at the claw-footed tub, naked and bared. If he's heard the door open, he gives no sign either way.

I stand there for who knows how long, tearing up, sickened to my stomach. Somewhere even farther inside me, dark and furious this was done. It's almost drawn out to the surface, like it was at the Mill, where I'd blacked out and jammed a stiletto into my would-be rapist's eye.

Every person who had a hand in doing this deserves the same. They deserve so much worse. To be beaten to a pulp in an even more savage way than what they did to Salvatore... 'til they're nothing but pounds of broken, irreparable flesh.

Those dark, twisted thoughts get pushed to the side. For now.

He needs me.

I go to him. Without giving thought if he'll reject me or snap at me, or if my presence is even wanted at all.

As he stands in front of the tub and twists on the hot water, I come up from behind and touch him. A gentle, soft hand to his nape, the touch simple and small, but after being apart for so long it sets off a nourishing sense of relief inside me.

Just to feel him again. It doesn't matter that he's different...

He tenses at my touch. Otherwise, he gives no discernible reaction. It's as though he's trained himself to resist me, like he's already decided he won't respond to me at all.

Rather than feeling hurt, I feel desperate.

If he'd only let me in... he'd see nothing's changed. Except my love.

I love him more.

“Please,” I murmur, blinking against more tears. I grab the washcloth from his grasp. “Let me.”

Salvatore says nothing. He stands still, his battered body stiff and tense. For several seconds the only sound that fills the room is the trickling water from the faucet into the tub. My hands come up to his face. The rough hair from his unkempt beard scratches my palms, his skin warm under my touch.

Finally, he lets himself look at me. My heart aches meeting his eyes.

Dead, haunted eyes that no longer hold the intensity they once did—still a mélange of blue and green, yet riddled with a savage storminess. Another signifier of the harsh reality of the brutality he’s faced.

But recognition lives in them. As he peers at me and I clutch his face, I can see it buried deep in the blue-green depths.

The Salvatore from before. The Salvatore he still is. Even if he’s broken and pained right now.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper, stroking my thumb along the hollow of his cheek. I’m not sure what I’m apologizing for except reality itself. Our dark circumstance and everything we’ve faced. “Let me do this.”

Salvatore gives a stiff nod.

He sits on the ledge of the tub, and I set to work cleaning him up. With the damp washcloth, I clean his wounds. My hands shake as I do, though it’s not from nerves. More like immense relief he’s right here and I’m caring for him.

His torn up back isn’t the only damage that’s been done. Wringing out the washcloth of blood and water, I tend to other parts of his body. His torso’s a roadmap of pain. I let the

washcloth travel the healing stab wounds in his shoulder and bicep and the severe bruising along his ribs (he winces, telling me they're fractured).

His lower half is no better. It's decorated with more of the same.

I kneel before him and do my best to relieve his pain any way I can. We're silent as I do, though his eyes are trained on me. Occasionally, I glance up at him. I've stopped blinking back the tears, letting them fall instead.

There's nothing to hide. Not his battle wounds and not the tears they bring me witnessing the aftermath.

Every one of his scars is mine. Every bruise, gash, and lash mark. They might as well be marring my flesh and not his.

I'll make them suffer for this. He has to know I will.

But it's his left hand that might be in the worst condition—Stitches did what he could with it, bandaging it up, but one look, even as someone with no medical training, I can tell it'll take a very long time to heal. If it ever heals fully at all.

It's broken and lifeless, like the bones inside have been extracted. He lets it rest limply in his lap, not once trying to move or use it. He's accepted the morbid fate of it—his hand, one of his favorite instruments as a fighter, might never be the same.

That doesn't mean it can't feel. *He* can't feel.

I set down the bloodied washcloth and run my hands through the running faucet of the tub. Then, with slow movements under his unblinking study, I strip off my top. I slide down my yoga pants until I'm almost as naked as he is, with only my panties remaining.

Back on my knees before him, I look up at him, and take his limp hand. I'm in control of it as I bring it to cup my breast. His palm fills up with the bare mound of flesh and brushes my nipple. Even though I'm leading where this goes, his touch still makes me moan. The sound's a light, strangled one I can't help releasing.

"Feel me, Jon," I say, pressing kisses into his chest. On the few parts of his unscarred skin but also the many marked up parts too. My hand over his hand, I squeeze my breast, feeling its soft weight. "It doesn't matter... you can still feel... every part of me."

His moan comes in a similar strangled fashion as mine. As his limp palm fondles my breast and I rub his thumb over my pebbled nipple, a thick groan escapes his throat. His eyelids lower, the colors of his eyes darkening with unmistakable desire.

I want to make him feel so good, he forgets the pain. Even if it's just for a few minutes.

I can sense he needs it. To feel something other than pain. Other than numbness at the brutality he's faced.

He needs to remember how *good* he can feel.

The moment transforms. The uncertainty and mistrust fades away. It's replaced by the heat and intensity that burns between us no matter our circumstance.

My hand wanders his body, moving over the faint traces of his lean, sculpted (what remains after captivity). I let it travel down to the thick, silken cock I've grown more than acquainted with over the years.

The switch has been flipped—a needy, hungry pulse awakening inside me.

I lick my lips, becoming a woman lost in a spell of lust and desire.

All I want is him. To taste him, fuck him, pleasure him until he's completely spent.

Salvatore has always teased that no one alive knows the real me except him. That I'm a 'bad girl' as he affectionately calls it. The thing is, he's the only one who knows how to bring out the other sides of me.

The sensuous, sexual woman who craves him like my lungs do air.

No one can make me feel the intense things he does by his mere presence alone.

I seduce him with heavy-lidded bedroom eyes, my hand skillfully working his length. Soft, knowing fingers that grip him, fingers curled in a circle, applying the right amount of pressure. On the upstroke, my thumb rubs across his head, then spreads pre-cum along the rest of his erect shaft, squeezing him as I do.

Salvatore's jaw clamps down on a groan. His good hand flies out, tangling in a fistful of my curls in the process, but I'm already a step ahead of him—I'm bending forward to take him in my mouth.

My lips seal over his thick length, sliding down until he's reached the back of my throat.

His many delicious inches that choke me once inside.

My god, does it feel amazing to have him in my mouth again—smooth velvet for skin with the rigidness of steel and the light salt unique only to him.

I savor every second of it, my tongue curling, twisting, twining around him. I show him how much I've missed him with each lick and swirl. I tell him so as I suck his tip and then devour him whole.

His head tilts back and relaxation flickers across his usually composed face. The sight only encourages me. I engulf his dick with the heat and wetness of my mouth and play with his balls. I massage them with my attentive touch, stimulating the sac that's full of what I want pouring down my throat.

All as I watch him let go and my heart swells with a mix of affection and desire knowing I'm the one who can do this—I'm making him feel human again.

Like a man lost in the fiery throes of passion.

Everything he experienced in captivity is no more. He's alive and I'm showing him that he is. He can still feel, he can still *come*. His heart's beating more than ever as his scarred, muscular chest tenses and splotches of flushed redness colors his skin.

Salvatore tries so hard to hold on. But my mouth and hands are too good at pleasuring him. He lets go and comes with another strangled groan. His fingers tighten in my curls. I clamp my lips shut on his tip and suck hard.

He's a goner within seconds. His release slams into him with a jerk of his hips. I welcome the hot streak of cum that fills my mouth.

His eyes open and connect with mine—startlingly intense in their mélange of green and blue, burning me up, spurring me on as I taste every drop of his seed. I don't want to let go, swirling my tongue across his head as though hoping for more.

He realizes a second later he's still clutching my curls, forcing my head down, and lets go. He's out of breath, his body both tense and relaxed. His expression dazed yet hardened once he spies the small smirk starting up at the corners of my mouth. I lick my lips and fingers of any remnants of him and then begin kissing other parts of him.

This isn't over. We're just getting started. I intend on fucking him so good he'll be knocked out and sleeping like a baby by the time I'm through.

"Fuck, Phi," he groans as I tease him. I'm kissing his stomach, still massaging the sensitive sac that's his balls. "What the fuck are you—wait—"

"Relax, Jon," I purr. "Let me take your mind off things. Don't you want to feel me?"

I step up from my kneel before him, naked except in my panties, delighting in how his gaze follows me. It skims up the length of my body and I can see the spark in them—to say he likes what he sees would be an understatement.

But there's still an element of hesitancy. Some sense of reluctance. He might not say a word of it aloud, though he doesn't need to. I can read him and know.

He's feeling... *unworthy*. Defeated. Self-deprecating, maybe due to his injuries and scars and what he seems to deem a failure.

I couldn't disagree more; I've never wanted him more than I do right now. Which is why my body thrums in desperate desire to show him. Heal him and make him feel unspeakably good any way I can.

I lead him by the hand into the dimly lit bedroom. We don't bother turning on more lights—the moment's about

experiencing each other with feel and touch.

I stretch up and meet him halfway for a hot kiss on the mouth. We indulge, immediately giving in to the passion we find with no finite end in sight. In a flurry of entwined arms and roving hands, eager lips and more eager tongues, I kiss him and he doesn't hesitate to answer with his mouth.

As if coming alive, he wraps an arm around my lower back and kisses me until I'm momentarily forgetting my seductress mission. He knows my weak spots, remembers how deeply to kiss me if he wants to seize control and make me shudder with arousal.

But tonight's not about me. It's about him.

I break away, dodging his mouth, and ease him down on the bed. Climbing onto him, I trap him between my thighs. My hands come up to cup my breasts and tug the hardened brown beads that are my nipples for his viewing pleasure.

With a soft moan and gyration of my hips, I tell him how badly I want his dick in my pussy.

"Fill my pussy up with your cum," I whisper in his ear. "Fuck a baby into me."

His jaw clenches and the *look* he gives me is hot and intense. The burn of his eyes so dark and sexy, it makes my pussy ache in needy desperation.

I'm just as deprived as he is. No more evident than right now.

I grind against his cock, my panties the only barrier between us, and feel him start to harden mere minutes after our last round.

Salvatore grips my hip with his good hand before reaching around to my backside. His palm fills up with my ample curves, giving a squeeze, and then holding me against him. I can't escape, positioned directly over this dick. The friction as I wind my hips and build up a rhythm makes us both breathe heavily.

We could probably come from just this alone.

I make it worse in other ways. My hands run along his scarred, battle-worn body. I kiss the hard ridges of his stomach and lick his nipples. My tongue swirls along each one and he doesn't bother hiding his pleasure with thick, masculine sounds of approval. Hot and slow my mouth moves, making it up to his neck and jaw. My hands glide and stroke, tortuously soft touches lighter than a feather—I know just how to drive him to the edge.

“You have no idea how much I've missed you and your huge dick,” I tell him, my hand snaking between us. I'm trying to tug my panties down with as little maneuvering as possible, lifting my hips to get them off.

Salvatore has a better idea—he reaches between us and shreds the delicate fabric in a raw flex of power. It tears in half, no longer a barrier between us. If my pussy was wet and throbbing before, it's spasming in desperation to feel him now. Any last part of me trying to play seductive and coy falls away.

I just want to fuck him. Right now.

I sink down on his engorged dick without further preamble. The moment is deeply satisfying, my soaked pussy stretching to fit his girth.

But more than the sudden fullness that makes me shudder and feel complete, is the intense intimate feel of the moment. Emotion charges the air, a presence of its own. My eyes flick to his and his to mine, and I know the same solitary thought occupies both of our minds while all others have been chased away—we thought we'd never be lucky enough for this.

We thought we'd never see each other again much less be afforded the chance to make love ever again.

It's what we communicate to each other as my pussy pulses around him and he grips my thighs and husks out a deep, rough breath. I bend over him, taking his lips in a passionate kiss that he readily accepts. His large hand comes up and cups the side of my neck, gluing me to him as if he never intends on releasing me.

The kiss is hot and urgent, with his tongue plundering my mouth and making me clench tighter. My hips begin rocking of their own accord, adding yet another dimension of pleasure.

We're eager and playful, our lips locked in a game of fervent, deep kisses. Instead, our bodies do the talking for us. They speak the many words we've been unable to say after being apart for weeks. After the deadly situations we've been subjected to and the trauma we've sustained.

Salvatore grips my ass and helps me along. His dick embedded in my pussy, never fully leaving, as we stroke deep, then deeper, and then a retreat that's never completed—he's out until only the head's in before slotting back into my clenching, wet heat.

The sawing rhythm leaves my clit brushing up against him. I whimper the faster we go and the more friction grinds between us.

I'm so keyed in to the sensations washing over me, I don't have any other thoughts. Just how Salvatore feels and how he makes me feel.

Just how in love with him I am.

The man I want as my husband and father of my children. I'll stick by his side no matter how dark things get, and I'll nurse him back to health when he needs me most. There's no turning back from our deep bond, nor do I ever want to.

Salvatore grows more heated, more insistent as the rock of my hips does. He clenches my backside within his dominant grip almost to the point of pain—mind-numbingly complementary with the pleasure pulsing through me—and drops many other kisses wherever he can. He kisses my lips before moving to my neck. He bites my shoulder, his teeth scraping against the skin in an almost primitive, animalistic display of love.

My pussy throbs and tingles, my clit swollen and hypersensitive. It's enough to send me spinning into a wave of pure ecstasy. I cry out and then bury my face in his neck, my hips tilting, their motions frantic and uncontrolled.

Salvatore rolls us over as I'm lost in these orgasmic waves. The next thing I know, I'm on my back, my legs are shoved wide, and he's balls deep inside me. My mouth drops open and I bow up at the sudden change and new angle at which my spasming pussy's being stimulated.

Half disoriented and fresh off orgasmic bliss, I almost protest. My hand reaches up to his sweaty, muscled chest, and I almost give him a nudge. But when I search my brain for the words to tell him *I'm* supposed to be fucking *his* brains out, I come up short.

My lungs run out of air.

And Salvatore's in savage mode—the sexiest sight I've ever witnessed. His body a god-like display of flexing and clenching muscle that gleams with sweat. Even after the captivity, his physique is one to behold, making my mouth water and my pussy moist too. His face remains tight and controlled yet somehow gone to the same intense pleasure I'm feeling—it's in his eyes as they burn with an unquenchable passion.

He'll never have enough.

But he'll certainly try. His pelvis snaps in vicious thrusts that go as deep as they do hard. When he bottoms out, it starts all over again. He grips my legs far apart and slams himself into me, forcing another whimper from my lips and pulse of my sore pussy.

That's when it occurs to me in a hazy, post-orgasm epiphany. He needs this. The aggression, the savagery, the freedom to unleash the extent of every pent-up emotion he's held in for the last few weeks—negative or positive—his pleasure comes from the control and the dominance.

I happily submit, letting him express his brutal desire. He fucks me with the relentlessness of a man long denied. More sweat drenches us and drips off our bodies. The sounds we emit are strangled and unintelligible, grunts and desperate pants for breath. Not once does his burning gaze ever leave me.

It bores into me, making my skin flush and heart feel like it'll bust from my chest.

He's insane... insanely in love with me, and as he fucks me, I become lost all over again. I'm on my way to another

moment of surrender.

My hand creeps to my clit and greedily rubs the throbbing nub. He decides it's not how he wants me to come though. He my hand pries away, coming in so close our pelvises align and his dick sits impossibly deep.

With the same good hand of his, he grips my throat and grinds against me. The swirl of his dick deep inside lights me up. My pussy tingles and throbs, regardless of how aching and spent it felt mere seconds ago.

Salvatore reaches another pleasure spot, *the* sweetest pleasure spot, grinding into me, and sends me rolling straight into another orgasm. His name falls from my lips. I writhe and my eyes almost slip shut, but he squeezes my windpipe, signaling to keep them open. He wants to hold my gaze as I come, his own blazing with hot passion.

“Tell me what you want,” he orders. “Let me hear the words, Phi.”

We've played this game many, many times.

My heart sings at the familiarity, at how fundamentally unchanged and unbreakable our love is. I'm Phi and he's Jon and no one can take that away from us.

I'm breathless, my voice hoarse. “Fill me up, Jon. Fuck a baby into me.”

He kisses me, open-mouthed with the same level of passion alive in his eyes.

Then he fucks me. He withdraws until the tip before slamming back into me and my convulsing pussy. He fucks the rest of his urges away, exerting his dominance to the very last deep thrust, where he buries himself and gives in.

Salvatore coming has always been a wondrous sight.

Now's no different as I watch a man always so composed, so in control, *lose* that composure and control. He grunts and curses and his muscles twitch. Finally, he's consumed in enough pleasure that he closes his eyes and empties himself inside me.

We lay collapsed on the bed with heaving breaths and spent bodies for who knows how long. I don't even have the energy to close my legs... which is okay, because Salvatore grips my thigh and drags me toward him.

"Fuck," he says, nuzzling my face with his, our noses touching. "I never thought we would..."

I smile, sore but as sated and happy as humanly possible. "I know. Me neither."

"There were so many times I thought about you. But it wasn't real."

"This moment is."

"It feels almost... it's too good..."

"It isn't. We're real, Jon. I'm real and so is what you feel," I say, nestling closer, my palm on his chest. "So is what I said earlier. Remember the night you asked me about my birth control? I haven't taken it since."

A rare grin flashes onto his face before he wrenches my mouth to his and kisses me fiercely.

"Thank you," he says afterward, and within another moment, he's out for hours.

delphine

. . .



“TELL ME,” Salvatore says late into the night, his voice hoarse, “what they did.”

It’s the first real words he’s spoken since waking up. After some time spent lying beside him, basking in the weight of him by my side and in the slow, steady cadence of his breath, I fell asleep too.

Waking up, I rub my eyes and grapple for my phone... only to realize he’s been awake. Drowsiness is too slow wearing off to question him in time. He reaches for me first, his arm curling over my hip to draw me back across the mattress.

I’m pulled close ’til my body aligns with his. My pelvis presses into his and our limbs tangle. One of my thighs is trapped between his while my hand lands on his chest, right over his beating heart.

He’s just a dark silhouette, yet I can feel his stare.

“Salvatore,” I murmur.

“Tell me what they did.”

As short and vague as the request is, I understand what he’s asking—in the wake of his captivity, he’s concerned about mine. Probably making mental notes for seeking revenge.

I let a moment pass, considering how best to answer. It's unimportant to our reunion as far as I'm concerned, but Salvatore won't let it go until he knows.

A quiet sigh puffs out of me. "I'll show you."

I disentangle myself from him and swing my legs off the bed, sitting up. The light on the bedside table blinks on when I twist the tiny knob on the side.

We're no longer creatures in the dark. The bedside lamp sheds enough light that my bare back is exposed for his viewing—I feel his eyes rove over the length of my spine... and the immediate anger that tenses the air once he does.

"Lucius requested for it to be done," I say, ignoring the icy shiver that courses through me at the memory. I close my eyes and shut it out. "He said... he said all 'products' have them. The Handler gladly listened."

"The Handler..."

"Cesar. The man from the interrogation room. The one they almost made me..." I trail off there in reference to that depraved afternoon.

"Did he?" he asks. "The night in the alley. It was him?"

I nod, suddenly craving my robe, suddenly understanding Salvatore's urge to hide away. Feeling overexposed sets me at unease, even as I should feel safe and relieved to be alone with him.

And I do.

But it's the mark. It'll always be with me. An ugly scar of my own from the time I was almost sold into a system that would've taken my bodily autonomy away forever.

I'd rather we not talk about it. There's more important things, like the weeks Salvatore suffered, and what we're going to do to make them pay. Take down Lucius and his operation once and for all.

"Where is he?"

"I'm not sure. He escaped the attack at the Mill. I tried to find him... but he got away. I was purchased," I say matter-of-factly with great effort to keep emotion out of my tone. "There was an auction. One of Garrett's coworkers at his bank paid to have me. But I killed the man before he could... do anything. Stitches and the others rescued me. The Mill's been taken out. All the sex slaves were released."

"Phi, look at me."

At his request I realize I'm still sitting up, legs hanging off the bed. I'm speaking as if there's an invisible person standing in front of me. Not once have I turned around or made an effort to settle back in bed.

I do as asked, crawling into position so I'm lying beside him. Salvatore does for me what I did for him earlier—lets his good hand wander, gliding it up the curvy outline of my body. He doesn't stop 'til he reaches my face. I find myself nestling closer, in need of his body heat.

"We're going to get him," he says with utmost certainty. The intensity I've known since I was fourteen suddenly blazes in his blue-green gaze. "Just like we're going to get Lucius. It's still not over. *I* will make them pay."

"You need rest."

"After they suffer. Then I'll rest for good."

"I don't like the way that sounds. Jon, I want you. More than I want revenge."

“There’s no turning back. The only way out is through. That’s the only way we get our ending.”

I flinch at the honesty. Though I know he’s right and have even shared his feelings and thirst for the most savage revenge possible. It still feels different hearing him say it aloud. It makes it real. Something we can’t back down from.

Something we’re going to have to face. Whether we live or die trying.

That’s where this is headed. We both know it.

He said it succinctly and it’s the truth—the only way we get our happy ending is if we fight for it. Kill for it. Destroy the people who have done their damndest to hurt us in the worst ways. Only, we proved unbreakable no matter how hard they tried.

“Then?” I croak, feeling overwhelmed yet unable to look away.

The swirls of oceanic blues and greens in his eyes are mesmerizing. Always have been.

A rare, though faint, smile twitches onto Salvatore’s lips. “Then we get to be happy. We get to be together.”

“Our puppy.”

I almost smile myself at the brief shift of Salvatore’s head, as though he’s tempted to tilt it to the side despite lying down. He doesn’t need to when his confusion is clear.

“The beach house. Have you already forgotten our deal?” I ask, amused. “We’re getting Salt and Pepa a brother or sister in canine form.”

“They tear mice’s heads off. You really want to subject a puppy to that?”

“*Toy mice.*”

“Same difference.”

“They missed you. Salt and Pepa.”

“I guess I really am their daddy.”

The corner of his lip quirks in another near smile. His hand leaves my cheek to explore the rest of me. Slow and appreciative, demonstrating how sensitive I am and always will be to his touch.

“It’s practice,” I tease. “For the future.”

Our arms and legs wind up twisted together again as I become entrapped between him and my pillow. I couldn’t mind less, and neither could he. His fingers splay out along the side of my hip and then reach around, cupping my ass.

My own trace the veins in his forearm and through his long, unkempt hair. We’re doing what I told him to do earlier.

Touching. Feeling. Savoring.

Bonding in a way we’ve been denied for weeks but what’s really seemed like an eternity.

“I thought about you,” he says, kissing my lips. “I was able to get through it by thinking about times we spent together. The rides I used to take you for on my bike and all the nights we watched your black-and-white movies.”

A soft laugh bubbles out of me. “*My* black-and-white movies? Like watching *Casablanca* wasn’t your idea!”

“From your influence. You’re a bad one.”

“Sounds familiar. Except you have it backwards.”

He cups my chin and openly stares at my lips. “Phi, we’ve established it’s you. The real bad influence. A bad girl.”

“Don’t start!”

We spend more time like this, talking about nothing and everything, enjoying each other until we eventually fall back asleep.

The first decent night of sleep I’ve had in weeks.



The Five Families meeting arrives. In the week and a half leading up to it, we’re shut-ins at Salvatore’s secondary compound. Rarely does anyone leave, and security is on alert every moment of every hour.

We’re doing little better in numbers. We’re down to our last handful of men loyal to Salvatore’s cause, and we can’t afford to lose anyone else.

In this final fight against Lucius and the Mancino organization, we’re greatly outnumbered. It’s not even close.

But in its own way, it’s an advantage.

Lucius and his men underestimate us. Even though Salvatore and Volchok took down his compound in Old Northam and me and the others did the same to the Mill, he believes we’re so beaten down we’ll never recover in time for the major event between the Families.

He couldn’t be more wrong—for as broken and scarred as we are, we’re determined.

Every last one of us.

Fabio with his cane and arm in a sling. Stitches, still healing from the gunshot he took during the car chase. My psychological wounds and the trauma of what I went through

at the Mill. Salvatore and the monstrous treatment he was subjected to for weeks on end.

And everyone else who has managed to survive alongside us.

Even Brenda, who just seems to want more bloodshed.

Salvatore devises our plan. He's still healing, many of his wounds preventing him from being in the shape he's used to being in, but if anyone fights through physical pain, it's him—more than once I catch him training in the makeshift gym in the basement. Broken hand and all, he refuses to stop pushing himself.

“But how will we know they'll stay out of it?” I ask of the other Families. I'm huddled with Salvatore and Stitches as we review our plan for the thousandth time in days.

“They're not loyal to Lucius. They're obedient. But obedience can quickly be cut short if they think he's losing his standing. That's where the tapes and truth about him comes in,” Salvatore explains.

“But the tapes... isn't it too risky to retrieve them? That's how they captured you.”

“Except they're no longer outside our possession.” Stitches aims a proud smirk at Salvatore. “This guy thought ahead.”

“Lucius figuring out what I was up to that day with Stefania's phone was the final straw. I knew I had to move the tape in the library.”

“You already have them,” I say, and then I gasp as it dawns on me. “*We* had them! At the safehouse. That's what was also so important. It wasn't just me being guarded. It was the tapes.”

“That’s halfway right. You had the first one. The second one, I retrieved thanks to Lena. Then I hid it somewhere I hoped they didn’t think to look.”

Before I can make another guess, we’re interrupted. Brenda darts into the room, pushing the doors open wide with an air of impatience and manic energy.

“When are we doing this?! I’m ready to see some more heads roll. Pretty sure that unibrow guy was a sick bastard from my days in the cages. I call dibs.”

Salvatore glances at me, curiosity in his expression. I placate him with a shrug.

“Brenda’s... very angry. She’d like some more revenge.”

“Get in line, sister,” Stitches says. “I’ve been waiting to get my hands on Ray for years. The ass bullied me all the time when I was a rookie soldier.”

“We’re sticking to the plan. Every one of us.”

Salvatore rises from where he’s seated. His authoritative declaration goes unquestioned. The severity of the situation and what’s on the line isn’t lost on any of us.

We need to win this. We can’t fuck this up.

“Get some sleep,” he says. “Tomorrow’s going to be a very... *violent* day.”

salvatore

. . .



D-DAY ARRIVES. The gathering between the Five Families. The first one in five years and the opportunity I've been waiting for.

You'd think I'd be excited. Finally, my opportunity to humiliate and destroy Lucius once and for all. Do what I've been working toward for more than half my life—and I am.

But it's also surreal.

At any moment, I might blink and realize I'm still in the cell. I never escaped. That was all a figment of my imagination and foggy brain. In a twisted way, some part of me almost wishes that were the case. If only to avoid confronting the very real possibility I'm leading everybody to their deaths tonight.

Stitches, Fabio, and the handful of others.

Delphine.

Everything boils down to tonight. We're either living or dying. Every last one of us.

If we fail, we don't survive. We *will* be killed.

As confident and as thirsty for revenge as I've always been, my last failure rocked me. Broke me down in a way I've

never been broken down, almost to the point I'm different. Irreparably, permanently different.

These things are things I haven't voiced out loud. Not even to Delphine. Though she senses it—she always senses it. I see it in her small, almost bittersweet smile whenever I look over and catch her staring in my direction. Her lips quirk slightly, her brown eyes warm with love, yet also a sense of sadness.

She knows it too.

We could die tonight.

I give her an out—all of them an out—but none of them take it. We're in this 'til the bitter end. If we go down, we go down together; we *die* together.

So long as Lucius dies too. Using Omar's explosives expertise, I've devised a backup plan to the backup plan that guarantees no matter what Lucius is dying today. Even if I do alongside him.

The Five Families gathering is always held at the same place. Inside the main conference room of the Northam Bank building, one of the largest skyscrapers in the city. It's considered a neutral enough location that offers the desired amount of discretion.

Despite the fact that Lucius is top of the food chain, the other Families aren't spineless. They've held strong on certain aspects of what's a fragile alliance between everybody. A neutral location for the meeting is one of those.

To the public, nothing's disclosed. The bank execs accept their under-the-table payoff in agreement they'll keep the transaction as hush-hush as requested. They get money and we get use of their building for the night. They know better than to choose otherwise; they'd wind up decapitated with their

heads on display at the bank teller windows come morning if they didn't agree.

Call it an amicable deal... but a coercive one. That's one commonality among the Families—do not cross them or be prepared to be fucked up in some form.

The building's emptied by five o' clock. Employees are herded off and management evacuates not long after. It's another hour before the Families arrive. One by one, in a discreet limo or luxury vehicle, they pull up to the back entrance of the building. Their private security escorts them inside.

We're already on the scene. At least Arturo and Lev are, posing as security guards.

Both are more recent additions to my crew, from my days after I separated from under Lucius's thumb. Neither of them is well known within the Mancino organization. Which makes them the perfect guys to stand in as security.

We've paid off the real security guards. Kept one of them and dismissed the other two. The guy we've kept agrees to help for a cool half million bucks. More money than he's ever seen in his life. His only stipulation being that he gets to evacuate as soon as the violence starts up.

A fair enough trade I agree to.

"What's the latest?" I radio in. From my vantage point in a building across the street, another fancy car worth more than most people's annual salary has pulled up. The doors spring open and out comes petite-sized Botan Saito and his closest advisor. I track them into the bank building with my binoculars.

“Only waiting on Lucius,” answers Arturo over the radio transmission. “He’s last to arrive. The others were just talking about it in the conference room. Apparently, he’s running late.”

“Out of the ordinary. We’ll have to look into that. And Kozlov?”

“Seated inside and waiting. We’re watching him on the security cameras now. He’s getting impatient and starting to complain. ‘Disrespectful’ was the word he used.”

“Keep monitoring them. We’ll be coming in soon.”

I switch off the radio and turn to the other four. Delphine’s closest. She takes the binoculars from my grasp and then presses them to her eyes for a close up. Stitches is next, his pair of glasses low on his skinny, crooked nose. By the puzzled expression on his face, we’re on the same line of thinking.

“You think he’s really late?” he asks.

“You mean is this another play by him?”

Stitches nods. “Seems convenient is all I’m saying.”

“Who cares?” Brenda asks. “If he’s not there, then we can show these tapes to the other Families. Ambush him when he arrives.”

“Pipe down, Xena, Warrior Princess. It ain’t that simple,” Stitches snaps. “You’re new to these types of situations. We can’t just burst in there and commandeer things. It needs to be handled a certain way.”

Brenda blows out a sigh and rolls her eyes. “Says who? You guys are criminals! You make up your own rules—”

“How do we know he’s not really running late?” Fabio interjects. He’s off at the table of the office we’ve camped out in. Some law office across the street from the headquarters of Northam Bank. He’s got his cane with him, though he insists he’s good for tonight.

I ignore all of them, accepting the binoculars back from Delphine.

“Plan moves forward as is,” I say. “If this is a ploy, then he wants us to switch up. He’s counting on it.”

“So the solution is to do nothing?” Brenda asks, sounding incredulous.

Delphine answers before I can. “Don’t you see? It’s a classic chess strategy. He’s trying to throw Salvatore off last minute. He’s counting on him to change our plan. That’s part of the trap, thinking a step or two ahead of your enemy to get them to make the move you want.”

“And if he has a trap set either way?”

“We’ll set a trap for him,” I say, peering out the window at the towering bank building. “We’ve got to make *him* paranoid. That’s where you could be of some assistance, Brenda.”

She jabs herself in the chest with her finger. “Me?!”

“Yeah, you. You’re the most unknown in this group. How good of an actress are you?”

“I fooled everyone around me about NorthamNeptune. Sorry, Delphine.”

Delphine smirks at her. “If you’re about to help save the day, we’ll call it even.”



I explain to Brenda and the others how we're going to throw a wrench in any plan Lucius has. Brenda agrees even after I stress how extremely dangerous this could be—she could be shot on the spot. She could be tortured or maimed.

“I've got nothing to live for except getting him back,” she says bluntly. “I need this.”

That seems to be the mindset everybody's settled on for our mission. Including myself.

The high risk and danger are worth the potential payback.

Lucius arrives almost half an hour late. His stretch limousine crawls to a lazy stop outside the main entrance—so arrogant he doesn't even opt for the back like everybody else—and his driver opens the door for him. He's seemingly gotten rounder since the last time I saw him, a huge blob without binoculars.

His most trusted crew of men escort him inside, heralding him like some kind of fucking king.

I grit my teeth, watching and waiting. I'm biding my time.

We deploy Brenda only minutes into Lucius making it to the conference room.

The meeting hasn't even officially begun yet.

Though the room buzzes with conversation as the Families mingle and exchange strained, forced pleasantries. It doesn't take long before Lucius pisses everybody off—dismissively ignoring the female assistant Nick Giancola brought with him and then outright insulting Saito over his accent. The other

heads of Families exchange looks whenever Lucius is too pompous to notice.

Nobody can stand him. They simply don't do shit about it because he's too powerful.

But if they had a nudge in the right direction...

The security guard we've paid off helps Arturo in getting Brenda where she needs to be. Before any of the security Lucius has brought in can descend on her in the lobby, they swoop in, insisting she's another advisor of Saito's. She's simply arrived late.

The guys on Lucius's payroll take one look at her, exchange glances at each other, and then let them pass.

The ignorant fucks don't seem to notice that Brenda's Chinese, not Japanese, and wouldn't belong to the Yakuza.

From the second the elevator doors open on the conference room floor, Brenda's in character like I hoped she'd be. She rushes toward the conference room doors as if harried, her arms flapping and her eyes and mouth wide with panic.

The final security guard attempts to stop her, but she ducks under him, yelling about how she's running late. His attempts to stop her fall flat. She makes it through the double doors to the conference room.

Right away, all the heads seated around the long table snap up. Lucius sits at the front, meaning he doesn't need to shift. He's staring straight at Brenda once she's stumbled inside the room.

"*Sama Saito!*" she cries out, her bob-cut hair slapping her in the face. "I am so sorry for being late!"

Everybody's heads flip in the same direction—they turn from Brenda in the doorway to the other end of the room where Botan Saito sits beside his trusted advisor. Both men knit their brows and mutter to each other under their breath. Probably conferring what the hell's going on.

That doesn't slow down Brenda. She makes it all the way over to Saito and his advisor before somebody demands to know who she is.

De Trolio jumps up from his seat with both hands gesturing to her. "Anybody care to explain what the fuck's going on?"

"Who is this?" Saito asks.

Brenda dismisses the questions with an airy laugh. "Don't you remember? You hired me, *Sama!*"

"No, you are mistaken," Saito answers. He looks to his advisor, who stands and attempts to usher Brenda away.

For an amusing minute, there's chaos. Saito and his advisor tell Brenda they have no clue who the hell she is while the others seated at the table break out in sidebars. De Trolio yells over everybody, still with impatient demands to know what's going on. Kozlov has started outright complaining about his time not being respected.

However, the only person to sit back and do nothing is the most powerful man in the room.

Lucius sits there and observes the insanity with his stubby sausage fingers stippled. His eyes track everybody's movements in the room, beady and shifty, and his composed expression tells me he knows what's going on.

That this is nothing but a distraction. Stalling on our part in hopes we'll throw him off.

We have to be fast—we're already making our next move.

Stitches has hacked into the network to set it in motion. Meanwhile, I'm leading the charge on our big arrival.

“Enough!” De Trolio shouts over everybody. He draws his pistol, cocking the hammer, and pointing it at Brenda. “You've got five seconds to tell me who the hell you are, or I'm painting the walls with your brains, sweetheart. And... go.”

Brenda squeaks, still in character, holding her arms up in alarm. “Is this not the Northam Bank quarterly meeting on budgetary expenses? My apologies! I have the wrong meeting. Hehehe. You'd be surprised how often that happens—”

She's bustling toward the door, but several of the enforcers present, some Mancino and others Giancola, step in her path and block her off.

“What'd you say, Boss? What should we do with the bitch? Clearly, she's got nefarious intentions,” says De Trolio.

Lucius peers at Brenda long and hard, his eyes as beady as they can go. “Let's keep her. Sit her down. She's among friends.”

His choice shocks the others. Several of them hesitate as if daring to wonder if their ears are playing tricks on them. Then they swallow down any objections and follow through, shoving Brenda down into one of the few empty chairs.

Even she's shocked. Her complexion pales, and for the first time, she's breaking character. Lucius wouldn't keep her for any good reason—*he knows*.

But it's too late. We've infiltrated the building, let in through a side entrance thanks to Lev and the turncoat security guard.

“Now that everybody’s here, even our special guest,” Lucius says to everybody gathered around the long table. “How about we go ahead and begin?”

“At last,” Kozlov mutters under his breath.

Lucius pins his fellow criminal peer with a beady-eyed glare. “You’ve got somewhere else you want to be, Vlad? This is a rare occurrence, the five of our Families coming together. I hope it’s clear how important this meeting is.”

Reluctantly, Kozlov nods, his lips thin and tight.

Lucius grins. “Now, anybody else got any objections, or can we begin?”

Nobody says a word. A few share cautious looks from where they’re seated, but nobody dares speak up. The silence pleases Lucius even more. His mouth twists into an even wider grin and he leans back in his chair, snapping his fingers.

Within seconds, he has a cigar delivered to him by one of his guys. Puffing on it, still surveying everybody else as though they’re shit stains he can’t stand, he says, “Good, good. Seems like we’re all on the same page about who’s really running things. Which brings me to the first topic of discussion this time around. There’s going to be some... changes to this arrangement the five of us have. I’m restructuring some of the territories. Some of you don’t need as much land as you have.”

Immediately, everybody breaks out into a chorus of confusion. Giancola half rises out of his chair to argue with De Trolio, who tells him to shut the fuck up. Saito and his advisor whisper amongst themselves in Japanese, so nobody else can decipher what’s being discussed. Michael Frausto, representing the Belini family, pulls out his iPhone and places

a call to somebody undisclosed. Kozlov remains still and stoic, though the venom translates, anyway—he's not happy with the announcement.

Lucius, in true Lucius fashion, doesn't have a fuck to give. The more the other Families react in outrage, the more amused he becomes.

The chaos amuses him, much like it had with Brenda's surprise appearance. He picks her out of the crowded room.

“You,” he says, pointing at her with his cigar. “You're recording me, ain't you? You don't think I know who you are and why you're here?”

Brenda stammers answering, fidgeting in her seat. Two of Lucius's men aim their weapons at her, ready to fire at his command.

But they don't get the chance. The lights dim and the projector attached to the ceiling whirs as the machine starts up. It projects onto the large polyester canvas draped across the wall behind Lucius. Static flickers in and out on the screen just like when played on the box TVs in the abandoned library in Old Northam.

After a few seconds, the camcorder footage sets in and the twitchy static goes away. In the corner, the date stamp shows up in neat yellow text: **April 1994**

The scene is familiar—the wood-paneled walls of the Neptune Society Club and the sea of tables littered throughout the dining room and the dozens of criminals socializing.

One by one, everybody falls silent. Any conversation drops off as the other Families watch the beginning of the footage with aghast eyes and furrowed brows.

Lucius is the last one to comply. He freezes up, recognizing the sounds recorded on the tape, and then spins in his executive-sized leather chair.

“You fucking piece of garbage,” he growls under his breath, rising up to his feet.

“Not so fast, Pop,” I say from the doorway.

All the heads whip away from the projector screen and over to me, like they’ve planned on synchronizing. Almost two dozen stares fixed on me and my crew flanking me. I ignore each and every stare except one—me and Lucius locked into expressing our mutual hatred and loathing, so focused on each other nobody else exists in the room.

“It’s time we all sit down and watch a movie,” I say, holding up the remote. “And you’re going to sit like a good fat fuck and watch along.”

De Trolio sneers from the sidelines. “Or else—”

“Or else we’re all going to go BOOM. Want to try me? See this remote right here? It’s not to the projector.”

Lucius’s nostrils flare and pure hatred clenches on his face like never before. I almost smirk, though I hold my composure and let my eyes do the communicating. The flicker of amusement is enough.

He knows. He knows I’ve got him. He’s fucked.

Everybody’s going to see it. And there’s nothing he can do about it.

Revenge at last. Even if death comes after.

lucius

...



september 1972

I HAVE NEVER LIKED the dark. It's evil and scary. But Pop twists the key and locks us away for our own good.

That's what he says.

We sweat in the summer. Our bellies ache and our tongues beg. Food and water are a luxury, or so we're told. We wait. We behave. We're good boys.

But there's always a reason. There's always something we do wrong.

Then we have to *earn* forgiveness.

I don't like earning forgiveness. It doesn't feel right. Even if I get fed afterward. Even when I'm told it's for my own good.

Ivan doesn't like it either. He's older. He knows more than I do.

I trust him when he says... maybe... it's no good.

But Ma says nothing. She doesn't say a thing. Doesn't ever say it's happening.

So Ivan and me deal with it. The dark spaces, when we do manage to hide, become where we want to be. If we hide good enough, he can't find us.

We disappear.

Our latest spot in the *sottotetto* keeps us hidden for days. We snuggle up there the minute he gets home.

When he finds us, dread makes it hard to breathe.

But we survive. We survive for years like this... 'til the day we've had enough, and we get him before he gets us.



In his sleep, we do it. Ivan holds up the knife, but I steal it from him and plunge it into his belly. Then we stand back and watch the struggle unfold. He begs us. He pleads, asking us to call for a doctor.

We don't react.

We watch. We stare at the blood soaking his clothes and listen to his desperate gasps for breath. Ma won't even know 'til the next morning—she's asleep in their bed.

My father dies pleading like a bitch, lying on a sofa, his face gray.

A pathetic ending to a pathetic man who let himself be turned into what he is. No money, no power, no nothing.

Just the blame he aims at us. He didn't expect us to turn it back on him.

His rasping, dying breaths go still. So does his body. His eyes remain open.

I don't give a shit.

Good riddance.



I can't live like this.

My father was mediocre. My mother is mediocre. Ivan settles for mediocre. But I refuse to be more of the same.

I'm not like them. I'm not somebody who lets life happen to me. I make life happen.

At an early age, I know this.

I know because the times I *let* things happen, were the times I lost. Probably the most valuable lesson of my life.

Maybe that's what Pop was trying to teach me, in his own twisted way.

So, that's what I do—I make shit happen.

For years.

It's a slow-moving process. Magic ain't real, and if it is, it doesn't happen overnight.

For over a fucking *decade*, I work my ass off. I'm nothing. A nobody. Scum on somebody's shoe.

But it won't always be that way. I know it as I enter certain circles. I volunteer to help small-time, meaningless endeavors that prove myself to the Crotone organization.

Why the Crotone organization?

Why *not* the Crotone organization?

They shamed my Pop. They striped away his power. They're the reason—Leandro is the reason—I'm having to start at the bottom.

At the fucking gutter-level.

Humiliated and poor.

“What's your name?” a big, barbaric kind of guy asks. He's nicknamed Rhino. One of the more powerful *capos* in the family.

I think on it. “Lucius.”

Up to now, I've been 'hey you' and 'some guy.'

"Lucius what?" he asks, puffing on a cigar.

"Mancino," I answer. It's fake, not real, just a name that's Italian, but similar to my Pop's.

He surveys me under intense judgment. Seconds go by. Sweat breaks out under my armpits. I'm practically ready to back out, wondering if I'm caught. Am I being too damn obvious?

Rhino cracks a grin. "Lucius Mancino. I like you. I'm gonna keep an eye out."

That's only the beginning. Rhino's eye out turns into Leandro's piqued interest.

Which turns into me worming my way into the organization, working my way up.

Again.

It takes years.

It ain't something that happens overnight. But, once one person buys into Lucius Mancino, others do too.

I get questions.

Stuff like, 'The Mancino family. Never heard of it. Where you from?' and 'You sure you're full blooded? Looking sorta pale.'

But I own it. I stand in my lie and craft a whole damn backstory, complete with government documents and identification (things I buy on the black market). By the time five years go by, I'm a made soldier, and I'm on a first name basis with Leandro.

A privilege only *capos* tend to receive.

The thing is, Leandro, and everybody else, doesn't even realize who the fuck I am. Why the fuck I'm here. What the fuck I'm up to.

The fucking threat I pose.

This ain't no hero's journey. I'm no hero. I'm a bad guy, and I'm out for revenge.

Leandro besmirched my Pop. He stripped away his rank and made him useless in his organization.

It's my pleasure to come out of nowhere, and do the same.

Karma's a bitch.

Nobody needs to know my origin. Nobody needs to know I ain't full Italian, I'm half Russian, and that my *capo* father was deemed a traitor.

None of that's relevant.

What's relevant is that I'm coming up the ranks. I'm squeezing my way in.

I'm gonna show Leandro he can't do whatever he wants with no consequence.

I'm gonna make life happen. I'm gonna step out the dark and take control.

Just like Pop showed me.



Stefania's a slut. The bitch is pregnant. She doesn't know I know. My own fucking fiancée, spreading her fucking legs for whomever, whenever—and not just any whomever either.

My fucking brother.

She won't let him go.

Hard-headed as hell.

The dumb bimbo won't accept that she's not his. She's mine. My whore.

And my whore doesn't get to go around fucking other men. It takes some work, but I stamp it out of her. Make it clear she's nobody and I'm the somebody she answers to. She should be grateful—if I wanted to, I'd carve that bastard baby right out of her swollen stomach.

I'm nicer than I get credit for. Even agree to raise him as my own. A mistake I soon realize.

The little shithead cries and cries. Every time I glare at him, his eyes fill with tears and he opens those pink lips of his and blares out a wail like a fucking alarm system.

He shits all day long and chokes on his own spittle. He's fucking weak and pathetic, and looking into his little face, I've never hated somebody more.

His face... it's just another reminder. He looks just like him.

The man my wife *really* loved.

She's barely ever let me touch her. Of course, I do it anyway. But it's not as if there aren't issues. I've always had... problems in that area.

There's a rumor in our circles that I'm a sweaty, lazy, *shrimpy* fuck. Some kind of tall tale one of the bitches I dated in the past started and circulated and everybody believed. Stefania chooses not to dispel the rumors—she could easily tell everybody I've got her satisfied.

Yet she never does.

When those moments between us happen, she's quiet as a mouse. Her face goes blank and she's a dead fucking fish. Actually, a belligerently drunk fucking fish is more like it. As if I can perform when she's giving me nothing!

But she gave *him* plenty. That's what it always comes down to, my whore wife is in love with another man. In love with my damn brother of all people.

If I let myself focus on it, I'd go crazy.

So I concentrate on my big ambition. I'm promoted to *capo*, and I'm close enough with Leandro that I've got his most personal number. My brother lingers in our circles, some kind of business associate of Kozlov, who has also earned the respect of Leandro. I won't let him fuck shit up for me. He can hang in the background like the loser he is. I don't give a fuck.

The bottom line is that I'm gonna take over Leandro's empire and become the most powerful man in Northam.

I've already drafted up the detailed plan.

When I'm exposed, I'm more surprised than anybody. Leandro's been fed the truth about me, likely at the hands of my pathetic brother, who has to be jealous I've taken his woman from him. No wonder he'd spill the details on me!

That I'm not full blood Italian. That I'm part Russian. That I'm not really Lucius Mancino.

Leandro stares at me with unnerving detachment when it comes out. It's a night that feels like any other social event we've had, hosted at the Northam Society club, where we drink like fishes and smoke like chimneys.

The Neptune Society that Leandro created decades ago was a cover for his schmoozing with the powerful elite in the

city. People like the mayor and police commissioner and the many CEOs in the business district.

But it's one big trap.

At the end of the night, Leandro changes like a light switch. His warmth and humor vanish and he turns to me with the rest of his men surrounding us.

“I know the lie you've been telling,” he says plainly. “You let me marry my daughter off to you. You let me welcome you into my inner circle. You made me believe you were worthy of my empire. A fake fucking Italian like you. A Russian *scarafaggio* I'll crush myself.”

When a Don turns his undivided attention on you, you're as good as dead.

My nerves kick in and bullets of sweat soak me. I blubber and beg and think fast as to how I'm gonna explain my deceit.

Any second Leandro can order somebody to put a bullet in me and finish me off.

Instead, he regards me with the same eerie emotionlessness, and then orders his men to collect me. Never would I have imagined the ordeal would be recorded—my emasculation is gonna be caught on tape.

They bring me to a room. The torture room they use to torment guys from the outside who they wanted to punish.

I am that guy.

An outsider that nobody knew about at first. That they've found out about now.

I'm stripped naked, my out-of-shape, pudgy body revealed for anybody attending to see.

They strap me down and roll in a table of different torture devices.

Leandro comes up to the side of the table and peers down at me. “You are the worst kind of a coward,” he says. “The lying, deceitful kind. Your father—Mario—stood in his deception. But you have tried to trick us. Therefore, you deserve to be made into nothing.”

“Please,” I choke out.

The guy on the other side of the table is dressed in medical garb—a surgical gown, a mask, and a cap on his head. There’s a flashlight attached to his forehead as he picks up a rusty hacksaw.

“Don’t do it!” I plead, fixated on its sharp edges.

Leandro smiles. “You’ve deceived me, *scarafaggio*. I gave you my daughter. I entrusted you to be my successor. But that has been built on a lie. Like Maldini, you’ve proven to be nothing but a cockroach. Now, you must pay.”

“DON’T DO IT!” I scream as the guy with the hacksaw, the fake fucking doctor, bears down on my groin area.

“Don’t worry,” says Leandro. “I hear you’re nothing satisfactory. My poor daughter has been forced to copulate with you. If only I had known giving you her hand was punishing her. By the looks of it...” He pauses, his gaze raking over me. “That rumor is correct. Cut it off.”

I scream into the night. I thrash against the leather binding. My body goes numb to any pain, though blood gushes out, pooling on the floor.

I’m hysterical as the flashlight from the fake doctor blinds me. He hacks away, sawing into me like I’m a rump of fucking meat at the deli counter of a supermarket.

My testicles go first. Then the rest of me.

The inferior part of me that apparently everybody's belittled me for. The part that wasn't enough to pleasure Stefania.

I wasn't good enough for her but my brother sure was.

As if now I won't be subjected to more torment, bearing the knowledge that I'll never...

No heir. No manhood to produce my own...

I scream until I pass out.

Until it's over, and I wake up a new kind of man. The worst kind of man. A man emasculated in the worst, most permanent way.

All recorded. Caught on tape for fucking shits and giggles.

You'd think I'd be hurt and traumatized. I'd be devastated.

Instead, I get angry. Really angry. Crazy angry to the point I'll do anything to anybody involved.

Leandro. Stefania. Ivan. My shithead fake son.

Every person who has ever made me suffer is gonna suffer tenfold.

For the rest of their miserable lives.

They don't know who they've fucked with. I'll make them cry tears of blood and beg me as I show them there's no stopping me. There's no keeping me down.

When you've been humiliated and disfigured like I have, you've got nothing left to give a fuck about but making everybody else suffer even worse.

I won't let them keep me down, let the fucked up circus that is life happen to me. I will make my life happen. I will destroy them all.

salvatore

...



present...

NOBODY UTTERS a word when the tape finishes playing. The stunned silence is pervasive, its own presence cloaked over the room. On my right Delphine stiffens, equally as speechless. Stitches on my left is no better.

It's the sound of discomfort. Unease. *Pity*.

Lucius's men are no different. His most trusted crew cringe, the muscles in their faces and bodies acting of their own accord, recoiling in disgust from what we just watched.

But I'm paying most attention to Lucius—he's facing the now blank projector screen, his back turned to everybody. He stands stock-still, though his pudgy face colors into the deepest plum shade I've ever seen.

A color beyond embarrassment. A color of pure, unfettered humiliation.

Which brings me a twisted sense of satisfaction. I allow my grin to form, watching him soak in it, observing him feeling what it's like.

To feel truly powerless.

Humiliated and less than. Treated as if he's some disgusting vermin nobody can stand the sight of.

It's how he made me feel every day of my existence. As a small boy, defenseless and unable to stick up for myself, forced to take whatever beating—and other kind of abuses—he doled out. Always on a whim, always dependent on how he was feeling in that moment.

Whatever fucked up punishment his equally fucked up brain thought of.

Now he knows what it's like to feel like nobody.

Nothing.

All over again.

Some might say it's fucked up of me. I've gone too far. I'm no better than he is.

Maybe they're right. The thing is, I don't give a damn. I never have.

This was always my end goal. Tear him down 'til I've crushed him and destroyed him. I can die knowing I've accomplished my life's mission.

The pin-drop silence wears on.

It becomes clear what we're all waiting on—a real reaction from Lucius. Everybody sits in their chair and stares at his wide back in horrified anticipation, waiting for him to explain. Others, like Kozlov, have got questions.

“Well,” I say finally. “Got anything to say for yourself, Pop? Or should I say Aleksander Volchok? Like how you pretended to be full blood Italian to infiltrate the Crotone family, win Stefania's hand, and betray Leandro to take over? How about like how you've spent the last twenty years lying to Kozlov about Ivan Volchok, your own brother—to everybody about him and his whereabouts—when, really, you had him in a prison cell?”

My questions land on another thread of prolonged silence. It doesn't stop me from continuing, firing off more inconvenient questions that demonstrate his fuckery.

“Stefania wanted nothing to do with you. She was pregnant by your brother. My real father. It destroyed you to know that, didn’t it? You weren’t man enough for her. She recoiled at you... even though you forced her to marry you. Then, when Leandro found out what you’d done, and he fucked you up real good, you couldn’t handle it. You couldn’t take it that even as the new boss, you were still *nothing*. Stefania still wanted Ivan. I was still his son. And you were a disfigured eunuch who was a *fraud*. Every moment of your life is a humiliating lie.”

For another second it seems the heavy silence is only going to give me another pass to keep taunting him, but then—

“MOTHERFUCKING COCKROACH!” Lucius roars. His explosion is sudden. It’s volcanic in its eruption. He whips around with his baseball mitt fists raised into the air and unleashes the extent of his fury in a long, guttural scream that’s rough enough to make ears bleed.

Everything spirals from there.

Lucius’s men take cues from him, demonstrating their loyalty even if their powerful boss has been revealed to be a puny, insecure, lying loser. They open fire on the rest of the room. The other Families aren’t taking that lying down—they draw their weapons, and the Wild, Wild West shootout begins.

I grab Delphine and wrench her to the floor. In doing so, the remote slips out of my grasp (and my fucked up hand doesn’t help, even with the cast and splint).

I grit my teeth and go after it. Brenda collects it first, giving me a reassuring wink.

The room is dizzying. People moving in every direction. Bullets flying and whizzing by. The voices of almost two

dozen people competing. The five most powerful crime Families duking it out for supremacy.

That's what this has become. A fight for the new crime king.

I search the fray, my eyes peeled for one person and one person only.

Lucius.

He hasn't moved. He's got several of his men shielding him from real harm, taking out anybody who dares come at him.

His eyes are for me only. No surprise there. He's always hated my guts. But we've ascended to a new, demented level. Something in the basest element of who we are, obsessive and maddening and destructive.

Lucius will kill me even if it means killing himself.

That's the kind of hatred living in his hard, beady glare and the subtle, evil twist of his fat lips.

I'm no different—I'll gladly die if it means I destroy him. If he goes down too.

Before either of us makes a move, in the raging war that surrounds us, somebody else does first.

Cesar, the Handler, finishes off one of Saito's security, and then beelines for a side door in the conference room.

It's enough to snap me out of my stare down with Lucius for one reason and one reason only.

Cesar escaping means Delphine going after him. She spots Cesar dashing through the door at the same second I do.

"Phi, don't!" I shout over the errant gunfire.

Too late.

Delphine being naturally nimble and my fucked up hand, even with the splint, not able to grip tight enough, means she slips away from me. Her thirst for revenge is as deeply-rooted as mine. A thirst that isn't always rational, isn't usually safe, and almost always dangerous.

“PHI!” I move to run after her, but then pause for half a second.

Lucius hasn't moved, though if I leave and follow Delphine, he'll take control over the situation—he'll twist the chaos around us to his benefit or escape long enough to formulate a plan like he did with Leandro.

SHIT!

“I'll go cover her!” Stitches yells from my other side. He opens fire at another enforcer from Lucius's crew and lands a shot in his neck. “Cesar's gutter-level, Psycho. He knew she'd follow. He *wants* her to follow.”

“No, I'm going after her. You and Fabio track Lucius. Don't let him pull anything.”

Before Stitches can protest, I'm taking off in the direction Delphine went in. I leave the conference room behind unscathed, despite being shot at a couple times. One bullet comes close, piercing the wall behind me a split second after I pass through.

Occasionally, I fire back.

I sprint down the empty hall outside the conference room with my senses on alert. Where the fuck did Cesar go? Where did he lead Delphine off to?

I could've let Stitches cover Delphine, but that's what they wanted.

They *want* to separate us.

There's no other reason for him to break off from the main crew when he's one of Lucius's most trusted guys. He went in the opposite direction to draw Delphine away, counting on my hatred for Lucius to blind me. For it to keep me occupied and distracted as Delphine surely followed him.

Lucius likely counted on the same, which is what he was waiting for.

They're setting a trap.

That knowledge only spurs me on. My arms and legs pump harder. My feet pound against the ground. I make it to the end of the hall.

A scream travels high-pitched and panicked from what sounds like the stairwell. I turn a sharp left and push myself to reach the door leading to the stairwell in half the strides it'd normally take. Wrenching the door open, I throw myself into the stairwell with my gun drawn.

If this piece of shit dares lay another fucking *finger* on her, much less a hand—

The thought cuts off there on a beat of pure rage.

Nothing has ever been more important to me than my revenge against Lucius. It was my life's mission. The only thing I lived for. The only purpose of my life.

That's why they thought I'd choose the same today; I'd opt to go after Lucius rather than follow Delphine.

But that's where they're wrong.

I love Delphine more than I hate Lucius.

A concept none of them, Lucius most of all, understands. He's never loved anybody. He's never cared for another human being to such a degree he'd do anything for them. It's the opposite for him—he's cared about himself and himself only to such a degree, he'd do anything to prosper.

I promised Delphine we would kill the man who hurt her. Today, I'm going to keep that promise. *Even if* it means sacrificing the revenge against Lucius I've worked toward for twenty years.

I leap down several flights of stairs 'til I hear them.

What sounds like the cold echo of Cesar's laughter. But I don't hear Delphine.

Shoving open the door on that floor, rage consumes me. White-hot fury that flares through my body and takes me to a place that isn't even human. Instinct takes control. Pure, maddening, animalistic instinct where I'm a rabid beast snapping forward with teeth bared and a feral growl tearing from my throat.

Homicidal tunnel vision.

Cesar and Delphine are locked into a battle. He's managed to entrap her within his arms, though she fights like hell to free herself. She's been giving him hell since going after him. That much is clear by the blood spots under his nostrils and the bloody grin he gives me as he tightens his hold around her and attempts to choke her out.

I charge at him, forgoing my gun altogether, and opting for my hands.

My hands that will beat the shit out of him. I collide with them.

Delphine's knocked down. Cesar sails backward, my good fist balled in the front of his shirt. We crash into the wall. Cesar tries to break my hold. I don't let him. I draw back my broken fist and introduce it to his face.

Over and over again.

'Til my knuckles bleed and ache. 'Til my hand's broken again from breaking his face.

I take him down to the ground with my Balisong knife now in my grasp. Cesar sputters up blood and manages to grip my wrist. He drives a knee into my ribs.

It becomes a tussle. Him trying to throw me off him. Me showing him I will slaughter every part of him.

I jam the blade of my knife into his cheek. The scream he lets out is the personification of pain—it's weak and desperate, almost childlike in how he sounds boyish, crying out for his mother, or anyone who can help.

There's no help coming.

I withdraw the knife and then lodge it into his eye, blinding him. An even more anguished shriek leaves him. His body twists and jerks in an onslaught of unbearable pain.

It's only the beginning.

I stab him in his throat. Then in his gut, ripping the sharp blade through his insides. He's a fish flopping on dry land. His body twitches and struggles as I pin him down and make him bleed out. Make him feel every stab wound, helpless and pained.

The same way he made Delphine feel that night.

His dick gets the blade too. Driven straight through the crotch of his pants.

His throat is so hoarse, he can barely make any sounds beyond gurgles, spitting up more blood. He'll be dead any second now.

“Let me.”

The voice draws me out of my murderous fury long enough to recognize what I'm doing. That I'm slaughtering a man like some savage human butcher.

Delphine's standing next to where we are on the floor. She wears a composed expression, the blood and gore seeping around us seems to have no effect on her. Cesar's blood and guts are welcomed sights as far as she's concerned.

She holds out her hand. She wants my knife. I hand it over, then move back.

There's no hesitation on her part. As soon as she has my knife, she climbs on top of him, looking him in the face despite the fact his eye sockets are gouged.

“Beg me for it,” she tells him. “Beg me to end it like the weak little bitch you are.”

He gives a feeble cry, his body in bloody, twitchy ruins.

“Not good enough! BEG ME!”

“P-please...” he gurgles. “P-p-please...”

Delphine smiles, slipping my knife into her back pocket. “No. The same way my begging was ignored, yours will be too. You will die right here, a slow, painful death like you deserve.”

She stands up, watching him jerk and gurgle. The winced pain on his slashed face. He cries, or as best as he can given the fact that he's got a hole in his throat and a mouthful of blood.

“Phi,” I say, reaching for her. “We have to get out of here.”

Her brows push together; she’s coming to her senses. She blinks almost dazedly and looks at me. “But Lucius. Salvatore, we have to get him—”

“I humiliated him, revealed to everybody who he really is, and we’re both alive. I consider that a win. The longer we stay here, the longer things can go wrong.”

We escape to the stairwell. The frenzy of gunfire has quieted for the most part as we make our way down the flights of stairs. Every so often another bang rings out and somebody howls in excruciating pain.

But, otherwise, things have gone eerily quiet. I haven’t let go of Delphine’s hand. I pull her along, going as fast as possible down the stairs.

Several of the members from the Five Families have escaped to the lobby. It’s as we push the door open and cross the vast open space that I spot several of them rushing off to their limos and luxury cars.

Saito and his advisor. Kozlov and a couple of his men—all of them stained with blood and wearing the unmistakable expression of violent wrath on their faces. When his gaze catches mine, he gives me a nod.

Simple, but it speaks volumes. An acknowledgment from him there’s no ill will between us. In fact, we both have enemies in Lucius. My real father was one of his allies, and on a technicality, I belong to the Kozlov family as much as I do the Mancino. A potentially interesting alliance opportunity going forward.

Delphine and I make it halfway through the lobby before we’re stopped.

Before the thick croak of the man I hate with every bone in my body stops us.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going? You thought I was going to let you two skip off, happily ever after?” Lucius asks. He appears with men flanking him. He’s got a gun out and trained on us and so do they. His lips curl into a nasty smile. “No, *scarafaggio*. I already told you. I’m your god. I gave you life. I will take it away.”

I ease Delphine behind me. Otherwise, I don’t bother attempting any defense. We’re outnumbered ten to two. But I do bother mouthing off, doing what I do best, getting under his skin to piss him off.

“You didn’t give me life, Pop,” I say. “Your wife fucked a different guy. *They* gave me life. You were the freak on the side, not man enough to make it happen.”

“You motherfucking ungrateful piece of shit!” he spits. “Shoot them! Shoot her! Kill her and make him watch!”

My arms spread out at my sides, my attempt to keep Delphine as hidden behind me as possible. Being human, there’s only so many bullets I can take before I go down and she meets the same fate.

We’re screwed.

“NOBODY MOVE!”

Brenda emerges from the elevator looking like she’s been through hell. Her hair’s disheveled and she’s got blood smeared across her face and neck. She’s on her feet and moving though. Even more importantly, she holds up her arm and shows everybody what she’s got on her.

My remote.

My backup plan to the many other backup plans.

The remote is rigged to the explosives throughout the building. Including the ones on the first floor in the lobby.

“Brenda, don’t!” Delphine shakes her head.

Brenda merely smiles, then turns to Lucius and his men. Her thumb hovers over the button in warning. “Remember when your club bought me? I was only fourteen. Your men put me in a cage. Many of them took advantage of me. Then the mayor did.”

“I’ve got no clue who the fuck you are!” Lucius snaps, teeth gritted. “Put the fucking remote down, you crazy bitch!”

“You’re right,” she says, smiling wider. “I *am* a crazy bitch. Which is why I’m going to take you down. Even if I go down too.”

“Brenda—”

“Delphine. Salvatore. Run.”

It’s all the warning I need. Brenda presses the button.

I’ve got Delphine by the arm, barreling for the lobby doors. The bomb goes off. The world around us upheaves itself ’til it feels like nothing’s stable anymore. Not even the earth. Glass shatters and entire floors and walls begin crumbling. The flames roar and engulf the lobby.

We spill out onto the city street, barely escaping the brunt of it. Cut up by flying shards and with ears ringing, but we make it out.

Lucius is not so lucky.

delphine

. . .



2 WEEKS LATER...

“Happy New Year,” Salvatore says. He stands in the doorway, backlit by the hallway light. He pads into the room with unhurried footsteps, taking his time on approach.

I push myself up, heavy-lidded and drowsy with the book I had been reading still in my lap. I must’ve fallen asleep without even realizing it.

In the past, I preferred celebrating a New Year—attending a celebration of some kind or even an intimate gathering at home. Last year I spent the occasion alone in a hotel room mourning the death of my relationship with Salvatore.

This year, when asked how I wanted to spend it, I said doing nothing.

For the first time, I had no desire to celebrate the holidays. A normal, quiet night at home, ignoring the occasion altogether, was more appealing.

Normalcy feels like a luxury given the past year and a half.

Salvatore stops by the accent chair I’m seated in and takes the moment to peer out the window at the flurries of snow

drifting in the night wind.

“You missed your favorite part, the ball drop. I almost woke you up. But you looked like you were getting some good sleep.”

I give a shrug and clap shut the book in my lap. “I’m probably the last one who needs it. You could use some though.”

“Sleep’s never been high up on my priority list. Except...”

He trails off, his jaw tightening. Despite the steep shadows engulfing most of the room, I can make out the outline of it. Tension sets in, the masculine shape more pronounced even from a profile view of him.

Salvatore’s always carried his tension and rage in his jaw. The rest of his face could be bone-chillingly vacant and composed, but the set of his jaw and intensity in his blue-green eyes always give him away.

Things haven’t been easy.

We’re on the same page in terms of our relationship, deeply in love and committed. It’s everything else that has us struggling: adjusting to daily life, dealing with the aftermath of what we’ve been through.

Still trying to be who we are at our core.

No surprise that we’re handling things differently. I’m searching for meaning, ways I can reframe the events in a healthy manner so I can move on. The book resting in my lap is titled *After Trauma: Eight Steps to Brighter Days*

Salvatore’s seeking to bury it down and pretend things are like they always were. He doesn’t talk about his time in captivity nor specifics regarding his father. He refers to him as

‘he’ and changes the subject when I probe. My trauma is no different—he shifts and zones out whenever I offer too many details about the Mill and the Handler.

In his view, it happened, it’s over, thus it’s time to move on. Regardless of the many residual effects haunting us.

He’s fine ignoring them. After years of being forced to do so as an abused child, I understand where it stems from. I just wish... I knew how to handle the situation we’ve found ourselves in.

Six self-help books later, I’m still lost and anxious.

I reach out and touch his forearm. “Except when, Jon? When was sleep a priority?”

He subtly denies my touch, slipping his hands into his pants pockets and angling toward the window. “I got plenty of sleep for weeks.”

In his cell.

That has to be what he means—with nothing but cement walls and chains binding him, he lived in darkness and squalor for weeks. Pain and humiliation. The abject terror everything he’d ever fought for was in vain.

I swallow against the sore lump in my throat. Thinking about what he went through chokes me up. The tears are usually soon behind. Both things he hates, which is probably why he’s so distant in moments like these. He already knows how I’ll react.

Is it strange I miss the days I used to be able to hide behind a mask just as Dad taught me from a young age?

Dad.

Though his body was never found, his car was, riddled with bullet holes and smeared with his blood. It's believed the men after us disposed of his body in typical mafia fashion.

His funeral is next week.

Another devastating topic I don't know how to deal with...

I shut my eyes and breathe out slowly. "You should come to bed with me. *For sleep.*"

"Phi... get as much rest as you need. Don't feel bad on my account. I'm not tired."

"You're human. You're exhausted."

His jaw clenches again. "I don't need to be told what I am. Not even by you. Get some rest."

He turns away from the snow flurries shimmying in the window and strides for the door. It snicks shut a second later, dispensing more darkness in the room. If not for the light from the nearby table lamp, I'd be sitting in the pitch black.

I sigh, my gaze dipping to the delicate ring on my finger. My old habit of fidgeting with my rose pendant has transferred over into a compulsion to twist the ring around. I do it lost in thought until I get up and follow.

Salvatore sees me approaching and sighs. "I don't know how to do what you want."

My brows connect. "Do what?"

"What you do... what people do. Process these kinds of things. Instead, when I think about it, I become angry. I *failed*, Phi."

"Lucius has been defeated. The Neptune Society has been taken out. So has my rapist. We lived. We made it through."

The muscle in his jaw bounces. He's gone from glaring out the bedroom window to glaring out the living room window. The snowy flurries offer a relaxing view, but he's peering at them as though the white flakes enrage him to no end.

It's not really about the snow or the outcome of his war against Lucius. It's about the details.

"None of it was your fault."

"I appreciate the fluffy words, Phi. Thanks for trying to salvage my ego. But I don't need to be told I did my best. I don't want your pity *or* comfort."

Shaking my head in confusion, I say, "It's the truth. You gave it your all—"

"And it wasn't good enough!" he barks so loudly, so suddenly, I flinch at the sheer volume. He whips back around and returns to his angry glare out the window. "You want to sit and pick at every last detail of all the fucked up shit that happened to us, Phi? Fine! Let's get it over with—my father was in the driver's seat all along! For years, I thought I had him where I wanted him, some big plan to take him out, but all along, it was his game! He controlled the board, he moved the pieces, he played me like a fucking chess piece, and I let him, every step of the way!"

I'm taken aback, speechless and frozen. A coldness has seized me, blowing through my lungs, making me feel like I've been pricked by sharp icicles. As Salvatore shouts and rages, I'm rooted in place, unsure what to say, or how to possibly help.

No number of self-help books can arm me for this. No articles online or canned therapy sessions with Alicia Keeney will do the trick.

There's no protection from the raw, ugly truth of Salvatore and what he's been through.

So I stand there and experience it all. Every angry word, bitter note in his voice, frustrated glare out the window, and violent clench of his fists—the good one *and* the broken one.

It's a look I recognize and have seen before. He's surrendered to his baser, violent urges. The part of him that earned him the moniker Psycho.

“He used me! He used you! He orchestrated almost every last fucking thing that's happened in our lives, Phi! Don't you get it?” he growls. “From sending me away to South Valley to your attack that night! He sat back and watched as I fooled myself into thinking I ever stood a chance! And when I got my hands on that second tape, like he's always wanted, he finally did what he'd been waiting to do all along!

“He threw me in a cell alongside my own father... my *real* father! Maybe the only other man he ever hated more than me. Just so he could torture us both. Once and for all, his fucked up, twisted payback for feeling inadequate and disfigured! And he destroyed me... he fucking destroyed me in every way he could. I was a kid again. Weak and powerless.”

“Salvatore,” I croak, taking a step toward him. “You couldn't control what happened—”

“THAT'S THE PROBLEM!” he roars in answer, and my step forward changes into two back. Veins protrude and pulse in his thick neck, the sheer rage contorted on his face is enough to make my heart boom in my chest. “Don't you get it, Phi? I FAILED! I was a fucking failure who couldn't even protect my own people, who couldn't even put up a real fight! I lost more than half my men. I lost my operations. The

fucking club and loft. I lost you! I let them—*him*—take you! After I promised it'd never happen!

“Do you understand what that was like for me? Sitting in that cell? Knowing how I'd failed? How I was probably never going to see daylight again or breathe in fresh air? That my men had depended on me and wound up dead. That you were... that they were... going to...” His breathing spirals out of control, ragged and rough with deep inhales and his sculpted chest heaving. He runs frustrated fingers through his hair and forces in several more desperate breaths.

I recognize what's happening, experiencing many of my own over the past year and a half—Salvatore's having a panic attack.

I rush over, putting an arm around his back and a hand to his chest. “Jon, stay with me. I'm not going anywhere. We're okay and we're breathing. Just breathe. In and out.”

For a couple footsteps, I'm propping Salvatore up as I walk him to the sofa. We plop down with his breaths still erratic and his complexion paling. The tension that cords through him is tighter than I've ever felt it, his shoulders, arms, and chest more solid than steel.

But he breathes with me. Together, we watch each other, and we inhale slower and slower breaths 'til his heart has calmed and the panic recedes. Even if only slightly.

He's still tightly wound, his skin pale and sickly. He leans back into the cushions, his eyes squeezing closed.

I'm racking my brain for what else to say. How to possibly make this better.

Salvatore is riddled with guilt and feelings of failure. I don't blame him and neither do any of his men. My tongue

itches to repeat this to him, though I hold off.

That's not what he wants to hear from me. He knows I don't blame him—in fact, it almost seems the less I blame him, the more he blames himself.

Instead, I caress his face, stroking his jaw and touching his cheek. I bring our faces close together, my brow to his, and I tell him I love him.

The truest, sincerest words I can tell him at a time like this, where he's fallen into an endless spiral of self-hate and blame.

My lips brush against his as I do. Then they sweep, softly and gently, across other parts of him—his cheek and jaw, his neck and ear. I hold his face and meet his confused gaze, my own reflecting in his. My love and warmth living in his as he absorbs how I feel and settles into a quiet sense of calm.

His hand comes up and covers mine at rest on his cheek. He guides it to his lips and kisses my palm. As he does, he feels the ring on my finger, a reminder to himself of how joined we've become.

His suffering is mine. Mine is his.

“Thank you,” he rasps. “For being you. For being mine. My wife.”

I smile. “Always.”

delphine

. . .



“THIS... IS UNUSUAL,” Salvatore says later that night. He puts his arm around me as we walk onto the dark street “You sure you’re good?”

Frost puffs out in the winter night’s air. Our breaths caught in the cold. Weather forecasts predicted it would be the coldest New Year’s night in over a decade.

You’d think I’d want to be bundled up inside. Most of the city rang in the New Year over an hour ago. People have already started heading home.

And we’re just getting started.

I plunge both hands into my coat pockets and smile up at Salvatore. “I’m good. Are you?”

He chuckles. “Yeah, Phi. I’m good. Where to?”

I think before answering.

When I suggested we do something spontaneous, I had no real idea *what*. I was feeling lost and despondent and Salvatore avoidant and angry. He lost his temper and vented maybe more than he ever had before—a real breakthrough in the aftermath of what we’ve suffered.

I don't know why or how it came to my mind, but in that moment, I felt we needed something different. Something fun and rebellious, almost like we were teens again. We've just escaped certain death and are more alive than we've ever been.

So I suggested we go out, after all. Not for New Years. But for ourselves.

For our own enjoyment, like we used to when we were younger.

"Well?" Salvatore asks when I take too long answering.

I nibble on my bottom lip, then cast him an uncertain look. "It's very... unexpected."

"Phi, this whole night is unexpected. You forget you were in sweats with Pepa on your lap just twenty minutes ago?"

"Even more unexpected than my first unexpected idea."

He shakes his head, his expression a cross between amusement and exasperation. "You lead the way."

Even though I've Salvatore, he's still surprised when I do as he suggests and lead him to the destination on my mind.

We come to a stop outside the shop. The flashing neon sign in the window reflects in our eyes. The word 'OPEN' glows at us. Below that an advertisement reads '2 for 1 Special'.

Salvatore slowly turns to me. It's begun flurrying again, tiny flakes swirling around us. Some of them land in our hair, our eyelashes, on our clothes. He stares at me for a moment with the flakes dusting the shoulders of his leather jacket.

"Phi..." he says. "You can't be serious."

"You don't have to do it. But I want to. I've always wanted one... and it's the only way to get rid of it."

His cheek twitches subtly. So does the left corner of his mouth. “You really are such a goody-goody.”

“Excuse me?!” I gasp.

“You know what I mean. This reminds me of the time you stumbled into Nirvana. A real lightweight.”

“I was eighteen!”

“We went to school with alcoholics and drug addicts. Rich ones, but drunks and druggies just the same, Phi. *You* were one of the few goody-goodies.”

I roll my eyes and put my hands on my hips. “How can I forget? It’s why you pursued me.”

“You being cute didn’t hurt. Neither did those little dresses you wore.”

“Are you coming in with me, or not?”

“I’ll come in with you. I’m not so sure about this two for one special.”

Without further preamble, I step forward and push the shop doors open. The buzz of electric needles meets my ears the moment I set foot inside.

The tattoo artist is bent over a client, finishing up what looks like a colorful, intricately patterned design of a tropical bird. He wipes off some of the ink from the woman’s thigh and then arches a pierced brow at me.

I lose half my nerve. Salvatore’s right—tattoo shops have never been my type of scene. Inhaling a breath, I tell him what I want.

“I’m looking to cover up a mark. It’s about two by three inches on my back shoulder. Do you think you can design me

something that'll disguise it?"

"You ever get a tattoo before?" he asks back. By the incredulous way he's staring at me, he already knows the answer. In fact, if I didn't know any better, I'd guess he knows exactly who I am.

I glance at Salvatore, then back at the artist. "No..." I admit. "But... but..."

"We're both getting one," Salvatore interjects, slipping his arm around me. He's clearly much more comfortable in the tattoo shop than I am, peering around at the designs on the wall with his usual casual, composed vibe. "Where's your design book?"

"Over there." The guy juts his chin at the bookcase in the corner, where other oddities like a replica of a human skull and a glass jar with a dead scorpion are perched on the shelves.

Salvatore swipes the book off the shelf and plops down in one of the waiting chairs. I slowly sit down next to him, much less relaxed as second thoughts enter my head.

The artist says it'll be another thirty minutes before he can start on us.

The incessant buzz of the needle returns. The woman lying on his table scrolls through her phone as he works on her, a bored expression on her face.

"You don't have to get one," I say. "I'm not even sure I should get one."

"Too late. We're doing this." Salvatore flips through the many pages of the design book like it's some kind of entertainment magazine. "This guy's work is decent. He does good illustrative pieces. Look at these."

“I’m thinking dragons aren’t the direction I want to go in.”

Salvatore arches a brow at me. “I could see you with a giant one across your back.”

I take his teasing in stride, shaking my head. “You’re enjoying this. Me being so out of my element.”

“More like I’m realizing this’ll be good for you.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah, it’ll give you some control back,” he says, his hand scooping up mine, letting it rest in his lap along with the design book. “You’re right. That mark shouldn’t get to live on your beautiful skin. It’s better you cover it up with some beautiful art.”

I soften, my doubts vanishing. “That’s the perfect way of thinking of it.”

“Anyway, choose wisely. I’m getting what you get.”

“Jon, you don’t have to... that’s crazy. I told you it’s fine if you don’t.”

“There’s a two for one special. I’ve got to. Besides, what kind of husband would I be if I let my wife get her first tat alone? It’s a team effort.”

A light laugh rolls off my tongue. “I’m not so sure that’s how tattoos work. But suddenly your dragons suggestion makes a whole lot more sense.”

“It’d make you look like a badass. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I’m not sure I’ve ever *wanted* to look like a badass. I was an assistant district attorney. I’ll probably get something simple. Maybe like this sun and moon.”

“Sun and moon. I can deal with that.”

“You don’t have to get what I get.”

“Sure, I do. I’ve got sixteen of them, Phi. It doesn’t matter to me. They’re all fucked up anyway after what happened and all the scars I have. I’ll need to get some of them redone. Why not have the same tattoo as you? We were both marked, weren’t we?”

That’s true.

I wasn’t the only one branded. Salvatore had suffered the same fate—as ‘property’ of Lucius Mancino, he too had been subjected to the sizzling-hot iron.

The half hour passes quickly. The tattoo artist finishes up on the woman and pencils her in for her next session. She walks out with the bell above the door dinging.

“You ready?” the artist asks, wiping down the table with disinfectant.

I take in a deep breath and then nod, rising from my chair. I’m not even sure what I want as I approach with Salvatore behind me in a show of moral support. I’m half a second away from blurting out something about the sun and moon I saw in his design book when the artist gestures to the rose necklace around my neck.

“That’s a cool necklace,” he says. “I like the roses.”

My hand finds my throat, fiddling with the rose pendant I’ve worn every moment of the day since Salvatore gifted it to me months ago. “I never take it off.”

“Those your thing? Roses?”

The question elicits a slow, epiphanic smile out of me. “Yes, they are. I love them.”

“I could probably sketch you something similar. Gimme a sec.” The artist grabs a sketchpad and sits down in his chair, crossing a leg over his knee as he drafts something up.

I watch on nervously, still fiddling with my rose necklace, then the ring around my finger.

Salvatore’s hands find my shoulders from behind. His touch soothes me, warm and familiar, his palms sliding along the curve of my shoulders and then down my arms. I shoot him a private smile and then lean back into him.

“A roses tattoo,” he says into my ear, low enough only I hear. “Very sexy. Very you.”

“And you?”

I’m uncertain asking, tilting my head back to glance at him again. His eyes gleam, waiting for me, already on me as my gaze meets his. He squeezes my shoulders and says, “And me. It’ll be like having a part of you on me.”

The tattoo artist shows me what he’s come up with, and I gasp. It’s beautiful, a sketch of roses in bloom among a leafy backdrop. I glance at Salvatore for his input, and he nods along.

“Let’s do it,” he says.

I go first. I sit in his client chair and pull off the coat and sweater I’m wearing. Salvatore swathes both over his arm and holds my hand with his free one. I lower the strap to my tank top, revealing the full extent of my mark.

The tattoo artist studies it for a moment, stroking his goatee. “Should be able to completely cover it. You’ll never be able to tell. You can even come back at a future date if you want me to add color.”

The buzzing starts up again, but this time I'm the one on the other end of the needle.

The first time the needles prick me, I almost flinch before reminding myself I'll have to sit completely still. Salvatore's hand helps. I hold onto it and smile at him in gratitude.

After a while, I stop noticing the prickling pain at all. I adjust, used to the feel of the needles poking at my skin.

Because it's not the biggest tattoo and tonight I'm only doing black ink, the artist finishes in about forty minutes. Salvatore and I swap places when it's his turn.

For him, the artist alters the design with a few different touches. The design of the roses changes to something less delicate, more masculine with extra shading and added thorns on the leafy vines.

Though he doesn't need it, I hold Salvatore's hand anyway. Something that seems to touch him, even if he doesn't show it—I know him well enough to tell what the look in his eyes says. Our fingers intertwine, and I run the pads of mine over his scarred knuckles with thoughts of how special tonight has turned out to be.

A night where I said I didn't want to do anything. Where I wanted to avoid celebrating New Years and bury myself in self-help books and sleep under the covers. Where Salvatore wanted to stew in his rage and self-blame for the recent events in our lives.

But, like with everything between us, we've found a way to overcome it. We've used the earlier argument as a means to reconnect. Though our issues are far from solved, the anxiety that clenched in my chest only an hour ago has receded.

For now, I'm present in the moment, not haunted by the past.

I'm holding the hand of the man I love and enjoying yet another memorable night that we'll treasure for the rest of our lives.

I know this as we finally emerge from the tattoo parlor at well past 2 a.m.

It's freezing cold and the city street is empty. Lights glitter and leftover flakes float in the wind. Our skin chills and we walk closely, steps in sync and a quiet contentment about us.

"That wasn't so bad," I say. "I imagined it'd hurt a lot more."

"Careful. Ink can become addictive. You blink and next thing you know you've got five."

I laugh. "I'll worry about getting this one colored in first. I was thinking reds and purples. Green for the leaves."

"I know I'll enjoy looking at it... when you have nothing on."

"You just couldn't help yourself!"

"Alright, we've done something you wanted. Time to do something I want."

I stop short, my hand still in his. "Should I be worried?"

"This something we can do at the compound. C'mon, it's freezing out here."

"If this is something in the bedroom..."

Salvatore merely grins and then pulls me along.



We stand in the basement outside the heavy steel door that's guarded by two of Salvatore's men at all times. As far as I know, it'll be the first real time he's been inside since he first set up the room two weeks ago. So far, he's let his men handle the situation.

Shivers run through me, straight down my spine. I look up at him.

Something's shifted in his expression. His jaw's hardened and his features have contorted into what can only be described as cool, composed rage. It darkens in his gaze as he stares ahead of us at the steel door.

"You don't have to come in with me," he says.

I squeeze his hand and step into him. "Of course I do."

"I won't be myself in there. I will be violent... I might lose control."

It's a dark confession that hangs ominously in the air between us. I follow his gaze to the door, my heart beating faster. While I'm trying my damndest to leave behind some of the darker impulses that have taken over me in the past year and a half, it's a reality that it'll always be a part of Salvatore.

Even in the aftermath of what we've been through—his language has always been blood and violence.

I've long ago accepted it as a part of him. As part of what he does when necessary. In situations where he must for the lifestyle he lives. Other situations where he must for survival and for revenge for what's been done to him.

...and me.

“Okay,” I say quietly. “He deserves it. Anything you do.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with that? With me keeping him here? So close?”

“I trust you and your men. I feel safe. And I want him to suffer for what he did to you.”

“Open the door.”

The guy on guard nods his head and does as instructed. Using the long, jagged key on his ring, he sticks it in the lock; it clicks as he turns it and draws the heavy door open to reveal a pitch-black hole.

Salvatore steps inside first. I follow right behind. He flicks the switch and the bulb dangling from the ceiling turns on, casting the half dead man crumpled on the floor in pale light that blinds him.

“Hello, Pop... or should I say *scarafaggio*. How’re you holding up?”

Lucius lies in tattered clothes, the burns that cover his body a sight that’s difficult to witness. From my time as ADA, I’ve been on my share of gruesome crime scenes, but there’s nothing like watching Lucius flop on the floor in true lifeless, disfigured fashion.

It’s a miracle he’s even alive. All of his men died. So did Brenda.

Lucius received a full blast of the explosive Salvatore had Omar make. He should’ve suffered the same fate as the others.

I’ve heard from a few of the guards that he wishes he had. He’s mumbled—part of his tongue is missing from biting into it during the blast—that he’d like to be killed.

Of course, his wish hasn’t been granted.

Though Salvatore hasn't said what his plans with Lucius are, I have a feeling he'll be taking an approach similar to mine with my rapist.

He wants him to suffer as long as possible.

Lucius slurs an answer to Salvatore's question. He flops over onto his back and lifts up his stub for an arm. I catch the words 'fucking' and 'shit'.

Salvatore walks over, his arms behind his back, and stares down at him. "You're pathetic. You told me I didn't know what kind of hell you'd bring to my life. And you were right—you brought a lot of hell to mine. You almost broke me, Pop. But you failed. Now I'm going to break you. In every way imaginable."

I stand back along the outer edges of the room, a silent observer.

Salvatore can be terrifying in moments like this. A cold, homicidal mask on his face, he's a man fueled by the violence he yearns to cause and the blood he thirsts to shed. The other side of me couldn't feel more different as I observe him; my darker impulse stirs, as destructive and hungry as his when I let it free.

We're truly a case of perfect symmetry in this way.

"Last chance," Salvatore says from over his shoulder. He produces a knife from the pocket of his jacket. "Phi, if you want to leave."

A moment of tense silence passes, where my gaze falls on Lucius writhing on the floor. Then it rises to the love of my life, who stands over the man who abused him so many times, it's an atrocity of the deepest kind.

I stop censoring myself. I let the dark impulse overtake me. It crawls over me like a second skin, changing my expression into one of focused bloodlust.

One last time.

“I want to help,” I say simply.



Dawn chases away the night sky by the time we make it up to our bedroom. We shower, scrubbing our skin clean, watching the red-tinted water slip down the drain, and then towel off.

I’m yawning, dropping down onto my side of the bed. Salt leaps up and curls himself into my lap. Never one to be left out, Pepa follows suit, wedging herself wherever she fits. I scratch their little furry heads and notice Salvatore hasn’t joined me.

He’s gone to the window to peer at the street outside. Much like he had last night when I woke up after midnight.

I frown. “Jon, please come to bed.”

He’s shirtless, his muscled back exposed for my view—the many scars he’s sustained still mar his body like a map of pain; the only difference being the translucent film that’s placed over his back right shoulder, covering the tattoo we got a few hours ago.

Something’s still bothering him.

“Jon?” I say when he doesn’t answer me. My stomach sours with worry.

“I don’t want to be like him.”

“What...? Jon...”

“Phi,” he interrupts, his tone one I’ve never heard before. Regret? Shame? Guilt? “You’re a good person. You have a good heart. Stitches told me about how you insisted you and Brenda free the other captives at the Mill.”

I narrow my eyes staring at his back, confusion scrambling my features. “I’m not following. What does that have to do with anything?”

He sighs. A deep one that carries a sound. “What if I do? What if I become him?”

“That would never happen. You’re nothing like him.”

“That’s what I tell myself. But then... there’s moments. Sometimes, I’m so lost in my rage, I’m so deep in the bad things I do, that I wonder if I’ll be able to turn it off. Lucius brought me up the way he did for a reason—his father was an abusive piece of shit too. Did you know that, Phi?”

My heart clenches in my chest. I’m at a loss for words.

“He was trying to mold me. I never understood why he treated me the way he did. But it was for a reason.”

“He was trying to make you pay for something his brother—your real father—did. That’s all.”

“That’s part of it,” Salvatore says heavily. “The other part is... I think he thought he could *make* me his son. Squash out the traits from Volchok and instill his traits into me. Some kind of twisted tough love. It used to enrage him when I wouldn’t fight back. As a kid, I just... I’d freeze up. I was afraid of him. And the more I didn’t react, the more it seemed to make him hurt me. But, what if all this time, he was hoping to turn me into him?”

I shake my head, fighting off the emotion that washes over me whenever hearing of his abuse. “Jon, you can’t try to make

sense of what he did to you. No matter what he thought he was doing and why, it was wrong.”

“You don’t get what I’m saying. What if it worked... if he *has* turned me into him?”

“No, you’re nothing like him.” I stand up from the bed so quickly, Salt and Pepa leap from my lap with scandalized meows. I go to him, crossing the room with the intention to make him understand. Make him see what I see in him. “I’ve told you. You’re a great man... I wouldn’t be with you if you weren’t. You’re loyal and protective and you love me so much, you sacrificed yourself in every way. You’re nothing like a monster like Lucius. *Nothing.*”

“If I married you, if we started a family,” he says, and for the first time, I detect fear in his voice. “If I ever hurt you or our children—”

“Stop!” I snap. My own temper emerges, earning a look from him. But I don’t back down. I stand my ground, glaring at him, affronted on his own behalf. “Stop that right now, Jon. You know that’s not possible. You’d never do that. You’d never be anything like him. You’ve done nothing but care for me... even when you thought you were ‘using’ me. Instead, *you fell in love with me.* Do you know how much that speaks to the man that you are?”

My arms slide over his shoulders and I stare earnestly up at him, hoping he sees the truth. He sees himself the way I do.

“Lucius never loved anyone,” I say, touching his face. “He took what horrible things happened to him as a child and he became horrible himself. He was evil, incapable of caring about anyone else but himself. The fact that you’re standing here feeling guilt, worrying over this, shows you could never

be him. It shows your *humanity*, Jon. You couldn't be more different."

He nods, lost in my eyes. I know this because of how deeply he looks into them. His Adam's Apple bobs in his throat and his hands come to rest on my waist.

"Your belief in me means a lot. That's what makes me realize I'm not. Your judgment. Because I trust it more than anything."

I smile in relief. "Good. So listen to me when I tell you, I want to be your wife. I want you to be my husband. And I want you to fuck babies into me."

He laughs and then pulls me closer, bending his head to nuzzle my neck. "Who knows? It could happen any day now?"

"Careful what you wish for. There could already be one in here." My hand goes to my stomach.

Though I'm being playful, Salvatore's gaze drops, and his hand follows, covering mine. The wonder that passes over his normally stone-cold, composed face is heartwarming. It only makes me smile more.

"I want it," he says. Then he smiles back at me. Maybe the lightest smile I've ever seen of him. "I want that for us. The future we've talked about—marriage and kids. *Our family.*"

"Me too. You have no idea."

He grabs my hand that's on my stomach and together we start for the bed. "Then, let's make it happen."

salvatore

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6 MONTHS LATER...

When the city's biggest crime family goes down in a fiery explosion, it's anybody's guess what'll happen next. Will some other trusted associate of Lucius's emerge from the flaming wreckage and takeover? Will another family seize the opening and take over as the dominant force?

There's the chance that more mayhem breaks out—Families duking it out for supremacy. With a lot of the corrupt elite taken out thanks to the dissolution of the Neptune Society, there's even a chance no crime family will reign supreme.

That Northam will finally get its shit together and end the rampant citywide corruption. That the deputy mayor that takes over in the wake of Ernest Adams's death and Joseph Bernstein's resignation, will be a good guy that wants to make the city prosper. That DA Polk will do the right thing and prosecute the right people.

None of those things happen.

I'm the one that steps out from the smoking carnage and claims the throne as my own. I'm the one who takes over

what's left of Lucius's empire, merging his with mine.

The new Mancino crime family.

And though I'm not a Mancino—and neither was Lucius—I keep the name.

Why?

Because it's what Lucius detested, what he feared. The idea I'd steal his thunder. I'd do what Volchok did and prove I'm the better man. I'm superior and he's inadequate. It's a final *fuck you* to the asshole who hates my guts from the moment I came into the world. I took it all: his position, his family, his operations, even his damn *name*.

"I'm your god," I sneer whenever I visit his broken down, half lifeless body in the basement. I laugh about it whenever browsing his old office. I chuck a knife at a portrait on the wall he had hung up of himself, some old photograph of him meeting with a congressman at Grimaldi's. A cigar dangles from his fat lips and greed shines on his ugly, pudgy face. My knife lands where I want it, nabbing him in his beady eyes. "What's yours is mine, Pop."

I still haven't decided what to do with him in the long term.

For now, I've been enjoying making him suffer, keeping him chained up as my little disfigured pet I go play with every so often.

My first order of business as head of the Mancino family is calling another meeting between the main Families.

I have one goal in mind—establishing a new order that's a far cry from the tenuous alliance Lucius relished in.

I've got no problem with any of the other Families. Except the Belinis, but even our beef was squashed when I murdered Hector and Giorgio in cold blood for coming after Delphine. Frausto seems much more sensible and keen on the idea of minding his business.

The five of us establish a way forward. Still with the Mancino's at the helm, but with the others satisfied with their territory and level of power. The Giancolas and Saitos depart the meeting with respectful nods and quiet murmurs. Frausto shakes my hand and tells me he's good with how things are panning out.

It's just me and Kozlov left. Our enforcers backing us both as I sit at the head of the table and he sits a few chairs down.

The stoic man gives no clue as to how he feels. His icy dark eyes are dead and unblinking. His grizzled beard conceals part of his tight-lipped mouth. After another moment of drawn-out silence, he rises from his chair and holds out his hand.

"We can be allied," he says. "It has been many years since the Crotones and Kozlovs were cordial. Lucius destroyed the relationship we built."

I rise to meet him face to face, accepting his handshake. "That sounds like it would be mutually beneficial. We'll continue employing your contractors."

"And we'll continue utilizing your club for our business dealings."

"But understand," I say coolly, sticking my hands in my pockets. "The first sign of a double-cross, and I *will* kill you. I might not be an insufferable tyrant like he was, but I am

nobody to fuck with. I will ruin your life if you even think about it.”

Kozlov’s mouth shifts unnaturally, his lips spasming into a distant smile. The first I’ve ever seen out of him. He could be told he’s won a billion bucks and he’d still have a flat, somber expression. Yet here he is, doing his stoic Russian impersonation of a smile.

“You are Volchok’s son,” he says with a nod. “You are part of my family as much as you are part of the Crotone.”

It’s true. Though I have allegiance to myself and my men more than anything. I couldn’t give less of a fuck about family alliances beyond keeping ours on top and keeping theirs in line.

“If you knew he was alive all these years, you would’ve waged war, wouldn’t you?”

“For Lucius and the lies? Yes,” answers Kozlov in his thick, gritty accent. “I would have killed him myself for what he did.”

“He died so I could make sure Lucius went down. Stefania’s death was the last straw.”

“That comes as no surprise. However, it seems it has worked out in a way that has righted wrongs.”

Kozlov walks off with his burly crew of mean-faced Russian enforcers.

Stitches whistles and pulls off his glasses to wipe on his shirt. “Would it kill them to smile a few times a day? Talk about taking yourselves too seriously. *Sheesh.*”

I raise a brow at him. “You could use taking yourself more seriously.”

“Very funny. If anything, we need more laughter these days! It wouldn’t kill you to smile more either.”

For as much shit as I give him, Stitches is right. After fighting the battles and winning the war we have, we all could use more laughter, more good times, right now.

It’s something on my mind as the months go by and the weather heats up. I’m busy with the transition taking over Lucius’s empire, but that doesn’t mean I don’t make time for other things.

Delphine and I agree we need help—*professional* help.

Rhino’s ex-wife, Aria, happens to be a former therapist. I give it a try. It’s nothing I’ll do permanently, but Aria’s able to get me to hash out my childhood issues that still factor into my behavior nowadays; she’s able to get me to *sleep*. No more am I staying up for twenty, twenty-two hours a day on high alert, paranoid shit might pop off at any moment.

In time, I work through accepting what happened in that cell. Both the physical and psychological torture I endured.

Most importantly, it helps my relationship with Delphine.

She does her own work, grieving the loss of her father, processing the things she’s been through in recent years, and figuring out her future.

Our future.

Delphine toys with the idea of still practicing law. Only for her own firm. She selects the clients and the cases she accepts. The causes she’ll fight against.

Just because she’s no longer assistant district attorney doesn’t mean she’s not fighting against corruption. The

difference being, she'll have more freedom to move around, no longer weighed down by her official city position.

As summer approaches, she decides on her first case. Defending a prostitute who is being brought up on charges for murdering her pimp. It's exactly the kind of justice Delphine would pursue, recognizing that not everything's black and white.

More often than not, things are gray. A lesson we've both learned through the years.

Another lesson I learn is to stop wasting time. We've known each other for more than half our lives. We were separated for twelve long years.

Enough fucking waiting. Enough imagining a theoretical future when we can make that future our present.

I marry Delphine for real. On the first day of summer.

It's a small wedding. Only our true inner circle. Almost as intimate as the first one, where it was just me and her under the stars, and she didn't even know what was happening. We choose Rose Hill, among the blooming array of roses and overlooking the shimmering Northam River in the background.

The location of our first date so many years ago.

This time, it's official in the eyes of the law. We exchange rings, vows, and an affectionate kiss to the joyous applause of the likes of Stitches, Medjine, Fabio, and even Rhino, who turns up out of retirement for the occasion. Salt and Pepa even attend as a joke—yes, they're the ring bearer and flower girl despite the fact they both scamper off to chase a squirrel up a tree.

Our fingers intertwine and I grin at her as confetti is tossed at us walking down the center of the makeshift aisle.

She smiles back, almost too beautiful to bear in the flowing, breezy white gown she's wearing. So gorgeous I can't help staring.

Soon we'll be off on our honeymoon—a whole month in the Caribbean. While I'm still not a beach and water guy, Delphine in a bikini and sex on, or at least near, the beach are more than enough to convince me.

It's not as though I'll be letting her out of our hotel suite often anyway. I want her all to myself.

We come together for a dance during our reception. Just like I'm not a beach guy, I'm also not a guy who dances. But, for Delphine, and considering the occasion, I sweep her along, flush against me.

“Be honest,” she says as we dance and everyone in attendance watches. “Did you ever see us here? Coming this far together?”

“You mean from when we first met?”

She nods. “That night so many years ago. The night of your party.”

I think on it as we sway, my grip possessively on her. Then, again, when isn't it?

“Yes,” I answer simply. No explanation provided.

She smiles a little, almost quizzically. “Yes?”

“Yes,” I repeat, my hand sliding along her tailbone. Just above her delicious round backside.

“Care to elaborate?”

“I don’t need to, Phi. A part of me always sensed it.”

“Always?” Her smile spreads, so damn bright it lights up her whole face.

I cup her face and kiss her lips. “Yes, always. Even when I was obsessed and lying to myself. I said I would never fall for you... but what I meant was always. Right from the beginning.”

epilogue - delphine

...



3 years later...

ON THE ANNIVERSARY of her death, I visit Mom's grave with fresh flowers. It's a tradition of mine from the time she first passed and I struggled with my grief. I used to visit her grave often, at least once a week, where I'd break into silent tears and talk to her as if she could actually hear me.

Though I no longer visit as frequently, I still visit on the day I lost her. When I do go, hers isn't the only grave I'm visiting.

The plot of land next to hers, with a gravestone as large and ornate, gets its own bouquet of flowers. Even if our relationship was more complicated and messy at the time of his passing.

A sad smile comes to my face as I stare at Mom's and Dad's graves and speak to them about my life. I tell them about the renovations Salvatore and I are doing on our home and the latest client I've taken on at the firm. I update them on Marcel and the latest girl he's dating—I don't think they'd approve, though I make sure to leave that bit out.

"Salt and Pepa are slowing down," I say. "Which is funny because Olive couldn't be more hyper. We've potty trained her and she's learned to walk on leash. She drives the cats crazy."

The wind sighs as if they're answering me. My bittersweet smile spreads. I carefully place the bouquets at their graves.

Mom *already* has a bouquet of fresh flowers on hers, likely from Aunt Beatrice, or maybe another close friend of hers who

has visited frequently.

I tell them I'll try to come by more often.

“Marcel’s coming for the holidays. He’ll visit you too.”

I stand up carefully, cognizant of the fact that if I seem to struggle too much, Stitches will hurry over and help me. He insisted he do so anyway, but I told him I wanted privacy. I didn’t need him watching over me like a hawk.

He does regardless—I can feel his gaze on me from twenty feet away, as he stands with his hands shoved in his pockets and his wire-framed glasses low on his nose.

I cast a quick glance in his direction before returning my attention to their graves.

“I should get going,” I say. My voice strains as I battle the grief that I’ve learned to live with. That I’ve accepted is a natural part of life when you lose those you love. “I love you, Mom. Dad...”

With a deep inhale, I move to turn away, and then stop at the premonition that trickles over me. Instead of seeking out Stitches’s watchful gaze, I’m searching for the other pair of eyes I can feel on me. I look up and around, surveying the otherwise empty cemetery.

No one else is here.

Until I reach the faraway gate just past the rows of gravestones.

A funny, unnameable feeling twinges inside me. Almost like I’m aware the moment’s surreal and I might as well be dreaming.

A man in a tailored suit who approaches a town car, his hand sliding down his tie as his chauffeur holds the door open

and he gets inside.

Tall and broad-shouldered. Dark brown skin. A lemon yellow tie that's part of his twenty-six tie rotation.

I blink and he's gone. The town car's disappeared down the road and I'm left staring at no one.

"You ready?" Stitches asks, coming up on my side.

"Did you see anyone else here?" I ask.

Stitches goes into alert mode, his ears perking up. He glances every which direction. "No. Nobody. Why? Somebody dangerous around?"

I stare at the same spot where I'd seen the mirage, past the cemetery's gates, and then shake my head. "Let's go home."

"Good idea. It's supposed to start drizzling any minute."

Salvatore's in his workshop when we get home. It's steadily become one of his favorite rooms in the house. If he's not in the gym working out, in his office catching up on some business, or in the bedroom doing his best to devour me in any way I'll let him, he's in his workshop.

At first it was a hobby he took up at the suggestion of his therapist, Rhino's ex-wife. She had told him it'd be a good idea to channel his temper into a hobby. His natural pick was the gym, in his training as a fighter, but she suggested he choose something less obvious.

He picked carpentry. A hobby that allowed him to use his talents with sharp and blunt objects while at the same time

forced him to focus and channel his energy into creating things. As it's turned out, he's discovered he's a natural at the hobby.

So far, he's built me a desk for my office at the firm and some shelves in our private library at home.

His workshop started out as a small corner of the garage, but once it grew and he developed a taste for the pastime, he moved into the basement. He erected soundproof walls and filled the space with so many machinery, tools, and other devices that when I visit, I feel like I'm at a hardware store.

I cautiously descend the stairs leading into his workshop and stop on the bottom step.

The second he notices, he turns down the heavy whir of the drill he's using, and pulls off his safety glasses.

He's worked so hard he has a sheen about him. Shirtless and muscled in his jeans, he could go pose for some sexy men's calendar and fit right in.

I lick my lips and feel my skin warm. It'll never stop amazing me how we could be together for as long as we have, and yet I still crave him like I do. At a level that makes me ache for him, fills my head with the dirtiest of thoughts, and has me endlessly flustered in moments like this.

He grins at me and wipes his brow. "I thought I told you to stop surprising me down here."

"I wanted to see you."

He tosses his workman gloves aside and then strides toward me.

So fucking sexy, I shakily inhale a breath watching his dominant, muscled form close in on me. All chiseled muscle

and toned abs, his lean physique is decorated with scars and tattoos I've memorized in perfect detail. I've run my tongue over many times or raked my nails over. As he reaches for me, it's on my mind.

A quickie down in his workshop.

It wouldn't be the first or last time.

Though with how protective and particular Salvatore is these days, he'd never allow it.

He draws me in for a kiss before he teases me. "You missed me?"

"Yes," I answer softly, resting a hand on his hard chest. "You've been down here all day. What are you working on?"

When I crane my neck to look around him, he blocks me. At my quizzical brow raise, he lifts his own—his brow raises right back challenging me in such a fashion it makes me laugh.

"Fine," I say. "It better not be a minibar like Francis has been saying."

"What's wrong with me building a minibar?"

"Jon, we have two of them in the house! We don't need another."

"You can never have too many minibars."

I roll my eyes only to have him interrupt me with another affectionate kiss. He grabs my hand and leads me up the stairs from his shop.

Since we married, we've moved out of the loft at his compound and into a larger home on the outskirts of Westoria. The suburban nightmare Salvatore hated when he was a teenager, but we're in our own neck of the woods, so on the

edge of the community that it hardly feels like we live in Westoria at all.

Salvatore had an impenetrable fence put in around the house to separate us even further.

The move out of the city and into a calmer environment was his idea. The environment is better for the future we have planned.

“Jon, where are we going?” I ask as he helps me up the basement stairs. Just when I believe we’ll turn into the den, he keeps walking, taking me upstairs to the second floor.

“I want to show you something.”

When we reach the long hall, he stands behind me and covers my eyes. I start to protest until he orders me to walk. Blind and trusting in him, I shuffle forward with no idea what’s going on. He directs me to stop and then reaches for a doorknob—something I know due to the jiggle noise of the brass handle.

The door whooshes open and he positions me a few steps past the threshold.

“Okay,” he says, his lips near my ear. His breath sends a frisson of naughty excitement through me. He uncovers my eyes and kisses my cheek. “Surprise.”

I gasp. My hand flies up to my rose pendant—the same one he gifted me years ago when we discovered the truth about the one my father tricked me into wearing—and I admire the wonderful sight in front of me.

“So this is what you’ve been up to,” I say, glancing at him. “How long did it take you?”

“Well... I haven't let you in here for weeks, have I? I wanted to finish as much as possible.”

“And downstairs. That's what you were working on.”

“Some shelves. For when you read to him. Right here.”

Salvatore moves further into the nursery and gestures to the space next to the wooden rocking chair by the window. There's an excited aura about him, like he's proud to show off each piece of furniture he's crafted himself.

“What do you think? Should the bookshelf go here?” he asks.

I smile softly. My hand instinctively goes to the protruding bump I'm sporting. “It would look great there. I can't wait to fill it with books.”

“Stitches already got him one,” he says, pointing out the baby blue gift bag on the rocking chair. “Quantum Physics for Babies. Its tongue in cheek.”

I raise a brow and then laugh. “Of course he would.”

My attention shifts to the beautifully crafted crib in the center of the room. Salvatore's already decorated it with a mobile of zoo animals like zebras and elephants. The animal theme continues with the gentle, powdery blue wallpaper covering the walls.

“You... are... excited,” is the only thing I can think of saying. I let out another light laugh. “Jon, I'm not due for another two months.”

“It's never too soon. Which reminds me, you need to take off those clothes.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve been dressed up all day running everywhere. Even when I told you not to. Time to unwind. So, take them off.”

He’s serious. He grabs me by the hand and leads me straight to our bedroom, which is directly across the hall. I barely register what’s happening before Salvatore’s stripping me of my maternity shift dress that’s professional enough to wear in the office. My low-heel pumps go next and then my panty hoses. He kneels before me and carefully slips my feet out of them. Rising back up, he unhooks my bra and sets my sore breasts free.

He fills his hands with them, giving me a light massage as he kisses the side of my neck.

“I’m running you a bath,” he says in his sexy, authoritative tone. He’s not asking, he’s telling. He leads me into the bathroom where he proceeds to do just that—he fills the tub with a soothing lavender bath bomb and epsom salt.

I stand and watch, my hand on my belly, naked except for my panties.

He never ceases to make me feel loved. Never forgets to put me first or care for me. As my pregnancy winds down, and we get close to welcoming the life we created into the world, I know he’ll be an incredible father.

Salvatore loves with everything he has. Perhaps because he was never loved himself.

He turns to me when the water is warm enough and helps ease me into the tub. I slide into the warm, soapy water with a soft sigh and every muscle in my body relaxing at once. He sits on the edge of the tub and finds excuses to touch and caress me.

Starting with a gentle wash of my shoulders and back.

“That feels... oh. Jon, that feels so good,” I whisper, shuddering.

“Wait ’til you see what I have planned next.”

My eyes have closed, a serene smile curved on my lips. I sink further into the warm water and hum in answer. I could fall asleep like this.

“A vintage movie marathon,” he tells me. “And your favorite. Pineapple pizza.”

Laughter bursts free as my eyes pop open and I splash water at him. “You’ll never let me live that down! It takes really good. You need to try it.”

“Nope. Never. It would be a betrayal to my ancestors. Italians never intended for *pineapple* to go on pizza, Phi.”

“You’re not even full Italian!”

“Shhh. Nobody needs to know that. I’m in the fucking mafia.”

We both laugh this time. I reach for him, slipping my hand into his.

“Your secret’s safe with me. So long as you tell nobody about my thing for pineapple pizza.”

“So long as our baby boy has better taste in pizza than his mother.”

We spend the rest of bath time like this, a lighthearted mood that involves trading playful banter. For us, it might as well be foreplay—it leads straight into Salvatore revealing another surprise he had lined up. Intense, passionate

lovemaking that reminds me how deeply he desires me no matter how very pregnant I am.

By the time the sun's setting, we're cuddled up on the sofa with *Mahogany* playing and the cats snuggled on the cushion next to us. At our feet, Olive has finally ran out of energy and has collapsed on Salvatore's feet for a puppy nap.

I scoot closer and rest my head on his chest. His arm curls around me and his hand comes to my swollen belly, where he rubs our baby in slow, gentle patterns.

I smile. This is what we've fought long and hard for. This is what we were willing to die for. But our love proved to be stronger.

Our family.

savage roses playlist



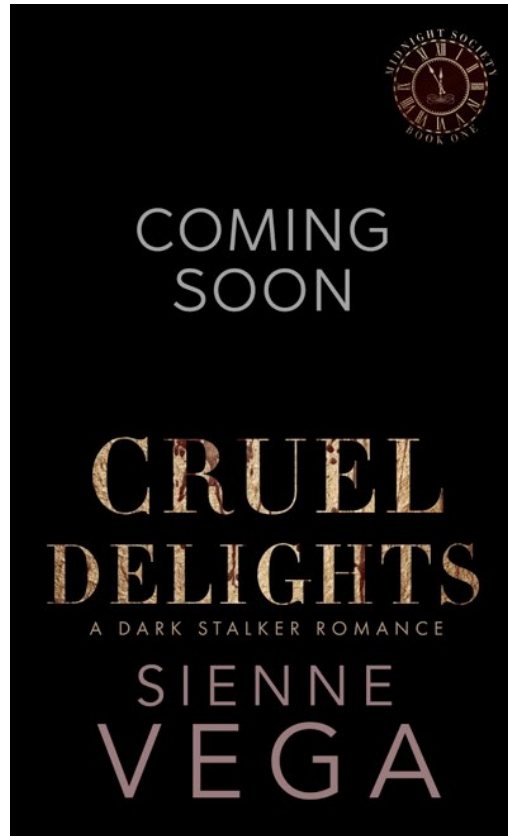
Salvatore:

1. Seven Nation Army - The White Stripes
2. Suns Have Gone - Jean-Michel Jarre
3. Last Night on Earth - Green Day
4. Man That You Fear - Marilyn Manson
5. The Way - Zack Hemsey
6. FOREVER - VEDO

Delphine:

1. Snow on the Beach - Taylor Swift featuring Lana Del Rey
2. An Eye for an Eye - Rina Sawayama
3. Pieces - Goapele
4. I am not a woman, I'm a god - Halsey
5. Xtasy - Ravyn Lenae
6. By Your Side - Sade

Listen to [Salvatore's](#) and [Delphine's](#) playlists on Spotify!



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about the author



Sienne has a thing for dark and brooding alphas and the women who love them. She enjoys writing stories where lines are blurred, and the romance is dark and delicious. In her spare time, she unwinds with a nice glass of wine and Netflix binge.