

**THE DON'S**  
*Hacker*

AMBER ROW

# **The Don's Hacker**

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**An Enemies to Lovers Mafia Romance**



Amber Row



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# Chapter 1

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## Loren

***L*** *oren*

When I was seven, my father told me that his favorite smell in the whole world was the smell of a Las Vegas casino. At the time, I thought they probably smelled like cigars, body odor, and liquor, so I informed him that he needed to get his nose checked.

But as I take a deep breath now, I can see what he meant. Unlike other gambling halls across America where I've honed my unique skillset, Vegas casinos all have distinctive clean, sweet, floral smells. They do it on purpose—making it smell nice and luxurious so people stay and play longer. They're like ritzy flowers, luring in bees to empty their pockets as long as possible.

And among all those flowers, the Golden Flame Casino is the most alluring.

God, I can't wait to scam this place and get out of here.

I toss my hair over one shoulder. Normally, it's blonde, but I use temporary sprays or rinse dyes to change it between the casinos my team targets. Right now, it's a rosy hue, and I've carefully contoured my makeup to make me look different—tanner and more mature than my twenty-one years. I also have colored contact lenses to make my eyes brown instead of blue.

Between those changes and the blue backless dress that dips daringly low in the front, I know my own mother wouldn't recognize me right now. Which is a good thing because if she knew what I'm mixed up in, she'd probably feel like a failure.

*Sorry, Mom.* But a gal's gotta do what she's gotta do.

I eye the slot machines as I walk past, trying to decide on the right one. Any would do, of course—hacking into these things feels like it gets easier by the day, despite all the security measures the best casinos take.

And the Golden Flame Casino takes a *lot* of security measures.

No less than three slot attendants are wandering around, smiling at people, and cameras are capturing nearly every inch of the busy casino floor. People are chattering and laughing and cheering, enjoying the weekend in Vegas.

I beam innocently at one of the slot attendants checking me out as I slide into the seat of a machine—one angled in just the right way so any cameras won't quite catch smaller, lower movements of my hands as I work. For a minute, I just pretend to get comfortable, setting down my bag and fluffing my curls.

An older gentleman pulls one machine over, and I grin at him when he glances over. “Any luck?”

He grunts. “Not with this one. Gonna try the next one. You know, you can’t stick with one machine too long—messes up the odds.”

I just nod like that makes sense, even though he’s wrong. Slot machines have a computer inside that is constantly generating a random number. The exact moment someone pushes the button is when the next number generates, determining the spin and the wholly randomized payout. Pulling the machine even half a second earlier or later results in a totally different outcome.

Even the “loosest” slot machines in the world have literally no pattern. There’s no rhyme or reason. So it’s a legitimate gamble.

That is until I get my hands on them.

I never gamble. I hack, I scam enough to satisfy my team without raising the eyebrows of casino owners, and then I cash out and vanish.

Simple.

“There’s no skill to these damn things,” the old man adds with a huff, moving to the machine directly beside me as he loads in more coins. He’s balding, and his suit is ruffled, but otherwise, he looks pretty well put together, despite the fact he’s clearly frustrated.

I push away the thought of how something about this older gentleman reminds me of my own father, who also used to frequent this same place. I laugh lightly.

“So I’ve been told! It’s all Luck—so it’s a good thing I’ve brought my lucky coin,” I gush, pulling it out of my wallet and twisting it in my fingers with a grin.

“Well, I hope it does you some good,” he huffs when he loses another pull.

The truth? It’s not lucky at all. I don’t really even believe in Luck.

No, the coins I make are just very *special*, though they look like any other.

But tonight, I won’t be using my little creations, so I slip them back into my purse and play the slot machine as any other casino-goer would for a few minutes.

It will be challenging to use my particular skill and hack this machine with him standing right there, but it won’t be the first time I’ve done that. I happen to be stellar at the art of misdirection. In fact, his being right beside me will make my winnings tonight look that much more honest, so bring it on.

While the older man beside me is distracted, watching the spinning gamble on his screen, I glance around. The nearest slot attendant is chatting with a casino guest several machines down the line, and no one here is looking at me. Swiftly, I slip my handy dandy little hacking device from my purse while I

pretend to grab more money for another pull, and with nimble fingers, I slip it into place in the machine.

I reprogram my device all the time. Right now, it's set to rig each slot game for small, varied winnings, manipulating the random number generator in the machines to turn the odds in my favor just slightly with every pull.

It's subtle but highly effective. I rarely go for big jackpots all in one go—too conspicuous.

After a while, I've accumulated a few thousand dollars in winnings. Whenever the machine comes out "randomly" in my favor, I clap and chatter excitedly, playing my part perfectly.

The older man beside me raises bushy brows. "That lucky coin of yours must really work."

I notice a slot attendant wandering over and smile wide at the old man beside me. "It wouldn't be lucky if it didn't, now would it?"

The slot attendant stops beside us, and I adjust myself in the most natural-looking way possible so that my body blocks the small device still doing its job behind me. But like I said, it's all about misdirection—so I put on a dazzling smile and lean forward as I greet the attendant. As expected, his gaze drops to my cleavage, and he looks me over with appreciation.

"Looks like you've got Lady Luck on your side tonight, Miss...?" the attendant prompts, still checking me out.

"Paige," I fib with a bright laugh. "I know, right? God, I'm so excited! This is my first time trying slot machines, and the

bachelorette party I'm here with told me I wouldn't make jack, but look at me go! I'll spend some of this on a round of drinks tonight just to rub all their faces in it."

All lies. There's no bachelorette party—just my team of undercover, cutthroat, elite, highly dangerous hackers, and no way is a dime of my winnings going toward buying them a drop.

The slot attendant smiles at me, charmed by my bubbly chatter, and he totally buys that this is my first time, so of course, he recommends that I keep playing the slots to see if I can "double or even triple" my winnings. He's really slick with his words, and I'm sure if I really was an amateur, he'd be making the house some serious bucks by getting me to play until I lost everything.

But the Golden Flame Casino has already taken too much from me, just like any other casino.

As the attendant keeps chattering, I get the feeling someone is watching me, and I glance across the room. The vaulted second story of this place has an indoor balcony looking down on the casino floor, where more people are chattering, and security guards and attendants stand in their places, but the man I catch watching me is none of those things.

Though I do not react, my heart jumps when I realize who the guy watching me is.

It's evident by the way he holds himself, arrogant and sure, his hands tucked into his suit pockets as his steely dark eyes remain trained on me from across the room. He's tall and

almost painfully handsome, and even from here, I can see tattoos peeking out of his finely tailored suit. His shoulders are broad, his dark hair styled perfectly—but while he looks like the picture of the sleek Vegas businessman, there's an edge of danger to his entire countenance that is absolutely unmistakable.

*Mafioso.*

Everyone who's anyone in the hacking underbelly of Las Vegas knows which casinos are owned by the mafia. The Golden Flame Casino is right at the top, owned by the notorious Caputo family—and this guy watching me? I'd bet my "lucky" coin that this is the Domenic Caputo I've heard about. The heir of the Caputos, an unforgiving and brutal don whose business acumen is almost as legendary as his family's fierce, proud reputation. He's the son of the casino owner.

I should probably be nervous that he's watching me so closely. After all, it could mean he's suspicious of the winnings I've accumulated.

But instead of feeling fearful under his penetrating stare, my skin warms.

I bite my lip and look back at the slot attendant, who's now demonstrating placing varying bets on another type of slot machine. It's difficult not to laugh in this guy's face—if only I could tell this chump that I've scammed enough money from machines like this to buy a couple of houses in the Bahamas.

But I got only some of that money because the team I work with comes with a price. Some amount of security always



comes at a cost.

And speaking of my team, I really need to wrap it up here and give them an update. Especially if the dark-eyed, gorgeous Domenic Caputo is still watching me...which he is.

Every now and then, after the slot attendant has wandered away, I glance over to where the mafioso chats with others on the second floor. He moves around a little, checking in on the operations of his casino, but every time I glance over at him, his eyes move back to me. As if he can sense me as much as I feel his presence in this building.

By the time I've worked several different slot machines, I've subtly rounded up almost twenty thousand in winnings. It's a big chunk of change, but there were no jackpots and nothing to tip off attendants *or* Mr. Caputo, what I was up to.

I'm feeling pretty good about myself. Why not be smug, having successfully scammed *the* one and only Golden Flame Casino out of so much without even an eyebrow raised in my direction?

"Good luck," I tell the older man from before when I pass by him again on my way out of the slot machine area of the casino.

He glances at me. "Which machine did you just leave? Maybe I'll give that one a go."

I point the direction and can't help feeling slightly bad when he scrambles over to it. He's clearly desperate to get something out of this place, and I don't have the heart to watch

yet another person fall for that. He's getting false hope from my "string of luck," which should really be attributed to the clever little device I designed, now tucked safely back in my purse.

Still, I know from firsthand experience that no one can stop a gambler's trajectory but themselves.

Sighing, I call it a day and decide to take my winnings to the bar. I may as well get myself a drink before cashing out and leaving the Golden Flame Casino to hack again another day.

As I leave the area with the slot machines, I glance over my shoulder again. Domenic Caputo isn't looking now. Instead, he's speaking with a couple of older, richly-dressed men who look almost as serious as he does.

It's a good thing he's not looking because, in the next moment, a hand brushes against my back and redirects my steps, guiding me into the blackjack area.

I don't say a word—I already knew Ace would be looking for me soon. Still, I try to ignore the painful hammer in my chest at this guy's proximity as he walks languidly beside me, keeping a hand firmly on my back.

I have no idea what Ace's real name is. No one does.

All I know is that he's the leader of the Wild Seven—the group I work with. The highly-revered, elusive group of black-hat elite hackers is notorious for taking down machines and casinos. Each one of us has our own specialty. Some of them count cards like savants. Another one of us, who goes by

Glitch, hacks into and takes out security systems like it's a breeze.

Me? Obviously, I'm the slot machine expert.

I started as a computer hacker before designing my own equipment, especially for ripping off casinos, and Ace found me not long ago. When this terrifying man offered me a place in *the* Wild Seven, I didn't believe him at first—but now here we are, ambling through a casino together while I try not to panic at how quiet he's being.

Ace isn't scarred or tattooed or even very big. He's a slim guy with long pale fingers and a quiet voice. But that doesn't make him less terrifying. I've seen him do some shit that I really wish I could unsee.

"Following the rules, kid?" he murmurs, barely audible.

Ah, yes, the rules. The Wild Seven's rules aren't really so different from my own. Never hit the same place twice in a week, always wear a disguise, and never accept an offer to stay at a casino's hotel after winning a jackpot.

And many casinos do try to get jackpot winners to stay so the house can get some of that money back. But I always cash out and leave. It's just common sense when you've been rigging slots as often as I do.

"Of course," I reply to Ace, still not looking at him as we move around a blackjack table to backtrack. I keep my voice low. "And before you ask, yes, I hit the target amount. I'll

meet with you later at the spot we always do to divvy up winnings. No worries.”

He finally drops his hand, and I’m walking back toward the bar when I barely hear him quietly say, “If you’re late, you’ll regret it.”

I don’t doubt that. He’s made it *very* clear that he’s not a man I want to cross.

It’s moments like this, trying not to think about the frightening caliber of people I work with, that I question why I’m doing this. But then I take a deep breath of the unique Las Vegas casino scent, remember my father, and square my shoulders to get a drink.

## Chapter 2

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## Domenic

The men I've been speaking with know precisely who I am, but unfortunately for them, they don't realize today has been particularly taxing. That means I'm feeling less like tolerating their bullshit than usual. They're on dangerously thin ice as I wait for them to finish with their rambling.

“—which is why we'll need that extension, of course,” the second man fumbles.

“Two weeks,” the first suggests. “We can have the paperwork sent over.”

Idly, I imagine what my father would do here. He's excellent with snap decisions, which is one reason he, like most of my forebears, has made the Caputo family top dog in Vegas for so long.

But I don't like snap decisions. I like cold calculations and hard answers.

Like the contract these men want to change so close to its end. It's annoying. There are rules in business, even for a mafioso

like me, and they *know* I don't bend deadlines, yet they still came here flexing for all their worth and reminding me of the value of their services to the Caputo family.

"Three days," I tell them. Before they can speak, I add, "Protest, and it will be one. You both have five minutes to leave my casino, or I'll pull the entire agreement and send Big Luck to collect what is already past due."

They pale. They've clearly heard of my closest friend and enforcer. His real name is Lucas Bellini, but only people on the inside of my family know that. To the rest of the world, Big Luck is a hulking mass of terrifying mobster muscle, perfect for enforcing shit when airheads like this don't get the picture.

The men scurry away, and I gaze again at the casino floor, searching. The weekends are always busy, and tonight the Golden Flame is particularly crowded. Still, I deduce quickly that the beauty with pink-toned curls is no longer playing the slots.

She had quite a string of fortune. Not enough for me to approach her and get a closer look—her winnings appeared hardly enough to strangle my family's casino out of any real pocket change. Still, I'd wanted to keep an eye on her, if only because she was so easy on the eyes.

And I appreciate anything easy on the eyes after a day like today. I sigh and roll my shoulders back. My father has been adding pressure lately for me to take on the family business. Looking at my surroundings, I again rue my indecision. My

hesitation in taking over has nothing to do with my lack of understanding of the casino or the Caputo family. I'm sure I know everything I need to run things better than ever.

Rather, it has to do with not knowing what the hell I *do* want. This is all I've known.

Deciding that I've had enough of mulling over my position, especially given the other nuisances that have been plaguing me today, I make my way toward the club attached to the casino. It's an ornate, dimly-lit club full of people laughing, clinking glasses, and dancing to the sensual music, they typically play.

"Negroni, straight up," I tell the bartender the moment their eyes snag on me. He knows who I am, too, and scrambles for the ingredients.

"Yikes. Not even on the rocks, huh?"

I glance slightly at the woman sipping a martini a couple of stools away until I see the pink hair. It's the woman I was watching earlier. Despite the dimness of the club, I can get a better look at her here, and she really is a stunning creature. A teasing smirk graces her lips, dark freckles peek through her makeup, and her blue dress plunges in the back and the front, hugging soft, slight curves and drawing the eye of any hot-blooded man around.

She grins, and I realize I've been perusing her, obviously. "You like?"



I turn back to the bartender as he slides the Negroni to me, and I debate walking to some other lonesome part of the club. But I doubt there's a quiet corner to be had here, given the crowd, and this pretty little gambler still looks amused by my need for alcohol to take the edge off, so I turn towards her and arch a brow.

“What's not to like?” I say, looking over her meaningfully as I drink from my glass.

She laughs and lifts her martini. “Back at you, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Broody.”

This woman isn't shy, something I appreciate. Blushing girls lose their intrigue quickly for me, but she doesn't even bat an eye as I join her.

Instead, she nods over her shoulder and says, “Don't look now, but someone's about to pop the big question.”

I look anyway, and sure enough, a man drops to his knee on the dance floor and proposes to the woman who's been grinding against him. People all around clap and cheer as she accepts, and then the two begin kissing as if the honeymoon starts tonight.

“Do you know them?”

The woman shakes her head and tosses the olive from her martini glass into her mouth. “Nope. He's been a nervous wreck all night. I'm surprised he wasn't slipping around on all that sweat he's been leaking. I noticed the outline of the ring box in his pocket when he came to get a few shots of some

liquid courage a couple minutes ago. Obviously, he wants a real Vegas affair.”

Impressive deductions.

“It won’t last,” I mutter, downing more of the Negroni.

She giggles. “You’re a real ray of sunshine.”

“I’m a realist.”

“That’s a synonym for a *pessimist*. Besides, maybe they have a romance of the ages,” she argues. “The kind of love people dream about all their lives. That soul connection that just can’t be faked. Maybe—” She glances over her shoulder at them and sighs. “No, you’re probably right. He’s checking out her best friend. Well, at least she’ll get a pretty wedding out of it—I’m sure her daddy will spare no expense. So that’ll be fun.”

As I study the woman beside me, I fight a smile, something I rarely have to do. She catches my attention firmly on her and doesn’t look away, instead clinking her empty glass against mine.

“Well?”

“Well, what?” I ask quietly.

“Oh, come on. What’ll it be? Are you going to get me a drink or take me dancing?”

Now I’m really fighting a smile. She’s confident and sassy. I can’t pinpoint her age, but she’s obviously several years younger than me—though she doesn’t act like it, and she

certainly seems more intelligent than most people I cross paths with in my father's domain here at the casino and club.

"Give me your name, and I'll let you pick."

She pretends to think it over, and as she does, she slips the drink from my hand to finish it off. I almost laugh at the face she makes, handing it back and muttering, "God. That'll put hair on your chest any day of the week."

"Name."

"No need to be so bossy or serious. Although, admittedly, it's really working for me. If you glower at me, you might even get lucky," she adds, bouncing her eyebrows.

I press my lips together to keep them from turning up. But I don't glower. How could I? She's charming.

"Call me...Loren."

"Is that your actual name?" I challenge, picking up on her hesitation.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she laughs and surprises me again by grabbing my hand to pull me away from the bar. "But it wouldn't be smart to tell a stranger my real name, right? Especially when he's not volunteering *his* name. And maybe I'm not always the smartest, but I always say yes to dancing, so come on."

I allow Loren to pull me into a string of dances for nearly the next half hour. When she waltzes with me, I press her closer because she is both fascinating and fucking beautiful. When the music is more upbeat, she moves to it with ease, brushing

her body against mine and laughing. Occasionally, she stands on her tiptoes to say something in my ear, her lips brushing against my skin and sending desire thrumming through me.

She's interesting. Different from what I'm used to, and somehow, being with her makes the pressure and frustration that I've been consumed with evaporate. Soon, I'm leading the dances between us, pulling her closer than before and whispering In her ear.

"Tell me now if you want a drink. Last call."

She flicks her gaze to the bar. "I don't think it is. Seems like this place will be open for—"

"Last call for *us*," I clarify, pressing a kiss just below her earlobe.

Loren's breath hitches—I can feel it against me. Her fingers trace up my arms to intertwine behind my neck, and then I almost groan when she drags herself against me on the way up to whisper In my ear.

"I think your Negroni was more than enough for me. How about you tell me *your* name, and we introduce ourselves somewhere a little less filled with overheated, sweaty people everywhere?" Then she nips my ear and pulls back to give me a sexy smile that goes straight to my dick. "Don't get me wrong, there can still be overheated, sweaty shenanigans going on...as long as it's just the two of us."

*Fuck yes.*

I generally avoid one-night stands or impromptu relationships, but I need this. She makes the weight on my shoulders lighter than it's been in years. I want more of her sensual smiles. I want to see her fall apart in my arms.

Without another word, I lead the stunning woman out of the crowded club, veering around the casino. I should wait until I find a spare room—there are cameras everywhere at the Golden Flame Casino—but her hand keeps tracing up my arm, and I finally turn and press her against a wall, kissing her deeply.

Loren makes an adorably surprised sound before kissing me back, her lips following my every command as her arms wind against my neck. Our tongues brush, and her perfect, irresistible body melts against me, sending need through me.

She smells like cherry blossoms, and I finally break the kiss, hearing her gasp for air as I explore her neck and clavicle. She's so soft. So perfect.

“We're giving people a show,” she giggles breathlessly.

God, I like hearing her laugh like that.

But she's right—casino-goers are wandering past, and they keep looking over at us. I want Loren all to myself. Before she can protest, I scoop her up and move quickly, using my copy of the casino's master key to commandeer a vacant suite before locking the door and dropping to the bed with her.

Loren roughly pulls me down for more desperate, hunger-laced kisses. I more than reciprocate, desperate to taste more

of her and feel her against every inch of me. I groan when she grinds her hips against mine, fingers tangling in my hair. My hands move of their own accord, exploring her sides and hips before coming up to cup her breasts.

*So soft.* I knead her body everywhere, loving how she feels.

She breaks our kiss to whisper-laugh, “Copping a feel so soon? Introductions are in order, remember? I want to know what name you’re about to have me screaming.”

God, I fucking love the way she thinks.

“Domenic.”

I begin kissing down her chest, aching to get her out of this damn dress and take her hard and fast. We can take each other slowly again later until we’ve exhausted ourselves, but I really fucking want this woman, and I’m quickly throwing my usual patience out the door.

Loren arches against me when I move her dress aside, finding no bra, and kiss her nipple, teasing it slowly. I do the same to the other, and then she and I are shucking clothes and kissing, a tangled storm of need—and then finally, I press her into the sheets with nothing between us, relishing the feeling of her curves against me.

Her hand slips down to brush against my throbbing cock, and I hiss, “*Cazzo, si.*”

“Meaning?”

“Fuck, yes. Touch me more, Loren.”

“You really are so bossy,” she says breathlessly, and then she begins tracing the tattoos spanning my chest and neck, leading down to my stomach.

Loren squeezes my length again, and I grit my teeth.

God, I had no idea how badly I needed this. I hardly live like a monk, but work and my position in my family have been taking a toll on me, and I’m so turned on by her light touches and teasing, delicious lips that I can’t even think straight.

I kiss my way down her neck again before insistently parting her legs beneath me. Then I slip down to lick her slowly, groaning with approval when Loren gasps and arches hard against me, swearing and whimpering as I explore her sweet little pussy without giving her a break.

I know what she wants when she starts tugging on me insistently, and her whispers turn into pleas. She and I need each other right now so intensely that I don’t hesitate a moment longer, sliding back up her body and grinding my swollen cock against the outside of her wetness.

She inhales sharply and pulls me in for a kiss before whispering a ragged, “Purse. Condom. I—I think I have one somewhere in there.”

Fuck, she’s right. I should have considered protection first, but every inch of me is burning to pound into Loren until she’s shaking and gasping my name. Protection never crossed my mind, and I’m glad she hasn’t apparently lost her mind with need the way I have yet. I quickly grab her purse from where

she dropped it near the bed, but when I go to unzip it, she sits up and yanks it away, laughing.

“You don’t just go rummaging in a woman’s purse, Mr. Impatient.”

I give her a dark smile as I hand the purse over, capturing her chin in my fingers so she is forced to look at me.

“I’m only impatient because I’m aching for you, Loren. Get the damn condom, so I can fuck your perfect pussy the way a good girl like you deserves.”

Her pupils dilate, and she breathes, “Oh. Shit. Yes. God, you look good when you smile. You should do that more—at me.”

As she searches her purse, I can’t keep myself from touching more of her. I run my hands over the curve of her hips, over her stomach, kissing every inch and licking my way up her delectable cleavage as she groans.

Finally, she hands me the condom, and I quickly roll it on. Then, hungry for her and mindless with desire, I kiss Loren hard and thrust into her simultaneously, lifting her knees to make her wrap her legs around me in a position that gives me all the access I’m so desperate for. The gasps and moans she makes as I fuck her hard are ecstasies on the ears, and I lose myself in this beautiful woman who makes me forget who I am and the pressures in my life.

She cries out and buries her face in my neck, and I groan at the feeling of her clenching so tightly around me. I want more.



I'm not done with this mesmerizing beauty, and I lift her knees again so that her legs rest over my shoulders.

We both groan at the sensation of this new position, and soon, she's repeating my name between panted moans as I pound into her, whispered Italian escaping me as I forget to stick to English. I worship her in my family's mother tongue, chasing the mounting need between us until she comes undone around me again.

I follow closely behind, blinding pleasure flooding my body until I finally turn her on her side and pull her close, kissing her bare shoulder and neck as we catch our breaths.

"That was..." she breathes.

"*Sorprendente,*" I murmur against her skin. "Amazing."

"I like your tattoos. And the rest of you. And—God, I'm going to be so fucking sore."

I would say I'm sorry, but it would be a lie. I could tell by the sounds she made and the way she kept clenching around me that she liked how rough I was. And I can see the smile on her pretty face now, so I just grin against her hair, breathing in the smell of cherry blossoms.

I hold her close for several long moments and think about none of the stressors that tax my soul so much every day. I don't think about the violence or the cutthroat business world. I just exist in the moment with Loren, whose body fits so *perfectly* against mine as her breathing evens out.

“I should really get going,” she whispers, the sound of it slurred with exhaustion.

“You should stay right here with me,” I assert, tucking her head under my chin and shutting my eyes. “Just know I’ll wake you soon.”

She lets out the curstest grunt I’ve ever heard as if she’s offended. “Why ask me to stay if you’ll just wake me up again?”

I nibble her earlobe teasingly. “Because I’m too much of a fucking realist to believe I’ll get another perfect night like this with you, and I need it. I need to hear you scream my name again, little spitfire. I’m not done with you.” I pause. “I’ll even smile at you again if you want, as long as you stay.”

Loren laughs softly, but she must have had a tiring day because she’s asleep in my arms before long. I rest alongside her—but I mean precisely what I said. I already know that I won’t be satisfied with just one night with her. Not by a long shot.



The hotel room is quiet and serene, and I’d like nothing more than to stay pressed against this gorgeous woman.

Unfortunately, my day always starts early, and I need to check in with my men about everything that happened while I was away last night, enjoying every moment I possibly could with Loren.

But as I quietly detangle myself from the sheets and the beauty sleeping so peacefully, I accidentally knock Loren's purse from the bedside table where she'd left it the night before. I grimace when it hits the floor, but when I pick it up, something in the spilled contents makes me freeze.

It's a device so out of place among the wallet and lipstick.

*A hacking device*, I realize, picking it up as my other fist clenches at my side.

Loren's string of good Luck yesterday wasn't Luck at all—she's a fucking hacker. She was scamming everything she “won” from my family's establishment.

I grit my teeth and look at where she's still resting. She looks so angelic and precious, so gloriously ruffled and naked in this bed. Seeing her this way would be a lie, as if everything I did to her last night didn't affect me in a very primal way.

She made me feel better than I have in a very long time, and it wasn't just the amazing sex. I genuinely like Loren. Last night, I wanted to find out where I could take things from here with her, but now?

If my father found out about this, she would be snuffed out without a second thought.

That realization makes me grimace. I don't want him to know about this—about *her*. If he found out someone could hack the games in our place, he would force her to tell him exactly how, either by threatening her loved ones or through torture, and I can't let that happen. But I also can't pretend to be fine with her scamming money from my family and then *sleeping* with me.

Loren is sharp. Now I'm certain she knew who I was all along—a mafioso, not someone to be messed with. So it doesn't matter if the idea of sending her packing with a violent threat makes my chest hurt, and it doesn't matter that I wish things were different.

In the end, it is what it is. I can't let her near this place again. I need to make myself forget about her.

## Chapter 3

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## Loren

*If you ever return, you'll wish you were never fucking born. Stay away from the Golden Flame like your life depends on it. And don't worry. I will inform every Vegas casino of your antics and ensure you are blacklisted. You have ten minutes to get out of here.*

I swallow back my emotions as I stand across the street from the Golden Flame Casino, arms wrapped tightly around myself because, despite the heat of Las Vegas, the chill of Domenic's words is still sinking in. My hair is still mussed, and I'm sure I look like the epitome of the walk of shame.

He was so *angry*. So cold. Nothing like the man who had taken me over and over again last night, roughly and then so gently and then roughly once again, whispering sweet things in Italian that I wish I understood.

But Domenic Caputo is a mafioso. What else did I expect?

Last night had been something incredible—something I knew I couldn't walk away from when his beautiful dark eyes

captured me in that bar. He was so stoic and intense, yet everything about him had drawn me in and left me wishing for more.

Obviously, more can't ever happen. I'm never going in there again, not when Domenic made it clear he and his father would "get rid of me" for hacking and cheating their games. He also made it abundantly clear that he was being lenient. Letting me go this time with nothing but a severe warning was absolutely not going to happen again, and if they see me there again, I'll be in deep shit.

But then... I'm already in deep shit.

I swallow when the dark car slides to a stop at the curb before me. No one gets out, and no windows are rolled down, but the small red sticker on the rearview mirror—an ace of spades—tells me this car belongs to the Wild Seven. I have no doubt that not getting in will result in far worse consequences than if I do.

I get in.

Ace says nothing beside me as the dark car pulls away, slipping through Las Vegas traffic like oil making its way up through water. It finally stops in a dark parking garage on the outskirts of town, and I swallow.

"I know. I missed the meet-up we agreed on last night. But I still cashed out—"

"You broke a rule."

His voice is like smoke, and he's right. I stayed the night at a casino hotel after scamming it, and I'm never supposed to do that. If he knew Domenic Caputo himself had found out what I am and what I do, I'm 100% certain that Ace would put a bullet between my eyes right this second.

Instead, he nods his pointy chin at the door. "Get out."

I really don't want to get out. I can see the massive figure out there already, and I feel sick to my stomach. But waiting in this charged, suffocating silence with this dangerous man certainly isn't better, so I get out.

I barely recognize the big man as one of Ace's walking muscles before the lumbering figure grabs me with frightening speed. I try to get away, to jump backward, but his big, meaty hands both wrap around one of my thighs and then—

*Snap!*

I scream and crumble to the cement, choking on the pain shooting up and down my leg. I'm vaguely aware that the big, hulking meathead has tossed my purse to Ace.

They're going to take it, I realize—all that's in there is a bit of makeup, a wallet with a fake ID, my "winnings" from last night, and...my device. Not that they'll know how to use it, and I have plenty more like that, but I'm still furious as I try not to cry audibly over the pain of my broken femur.

"You're out of the group. Just remember that I know where your mother lives," Ace says icily. "If you ruin the hacking terrain in our territory, you better hope you have enough



hacked dough saved up for a nice funeral for her. Fritz, break her arm to make sure she gets the message,” he adds.

The giant beside me leans down, but I scramble away, unable to see clearly through the heated blur in my vision.

“No! Please, I get it! I get it,” I sob, voice hoarse and strangled with pain.

Ace grunts, and then his brute gets into the Wild Seven’s car, and it drives away, leaving me broken on the filthy parking garage ground with tears streaming over my face. I can barely breathe. My heart is still aching from Domenic’s disgust earlier, and now?

After everything I’ve worked for, I have nothing but myself.



### **Three Years Later**

I take a deep breath before opening the email on my laptop.

*Dear Miss Rally,*

*Thank you for your application and interest in this position.*

*However, we regret to inform you that—*

I groan and close the email, not interested in reading the rest of the rejection. It’ll be like all the others, after all. Either I don’t

have the right experience, or it's because I have no formal education, or it's both. If only I had a portfolio I could show off—but I doubt any HR reps would give me a fighting chance if they found out I'd spent the last seven-plus years of my life hacking machines for quick cash and running from trouble left and right.

Not that I feel like I have a fighting chance, anyway. I sigh deeply, glance at the pile of overdue bills on the desk, and then leave my laptop in my room, walking into the rest of the tiny apartment my mother and I share. She and I moved here immediately after my “accident” with my broken femur. She thinks I fell from a balcony, and I won't tell her I made her move here with me both to support her and to make sure the Wild Seven no longer know where she is.

This place isn't much. It's small, constantly strewn with toys and blankets, and I remind myself that I need to move laundry over before I head out because it's not fair to expect my mom to clean Evie's pajamas for tonight.

Evie...my daughter, Evelyn.

I spot her sitting on the couch, sucking on two fingers in her mouth as she listens to my mom chatter on the phone with one of her friends in the kitchen. My daughter is like a model baby. Seriously, she could be a poster child for some charming Italian brand. Her hair is dark as ink in little ringlets around her face, and her big, dark doe eyes fringed by impossibly long eyelashes light up whenever she sees me walk in.

She's my whole world.

As fucking hard as life has been since that unforgettable night, I'd never call what happened a mistake because I got my little Evie out of it. I squat down and straighten the pink bow she loves wearing so much, booping her button nose.

“Hi, cutie pie. Are you going to be good for Gammy?”

She grunts, reaching out to grab at my glittering necklace. It's not worth anything—just for show, like everything I wear to make me look the part as I work the same way I have for years.

“Can you say ‘bye’ for me?” I coo, kissing her round, pink little cheeks.

Evie toddles off the couch and reaches, making a grabby motion like she wants up, but she doesn't speak. She never really does.

She's the sweetest, most adorable thing in the world, but I'm concerned that she doesn't even babble incoherently like the other two-year-olds in the mom groups I've joined. Other kids chatter or even get sentences across, but Evie mostly observes everything with her dark, pretty eyes and keeps to herself around other kids. My mom says we should take her to a specialist, and maybe that wouldn't hurt, but there's no way I can afford it.

But I'm more optimistic than my mom is about it, overall. I'm positive that Evelyn is just more introverted than anyone in my family, including me, has ever been.

She'll be fine. I'll make sure of it—I will *always* make that my priority.

I pick her up, swinging her so she'll give me one of her cute little twinkly-eyed baby smiles, and then I kiss her head again and hand her over to my mom, who's now hung up from her call. I thank her again for watching Evie and explain that I'll return a little after midnight.

She thinks I have a late shift at a local diner. That might've been true a couple of weeks ago when I still worked there.

But I had only been working there for a month or so before it became clear that the guy who owned the place was shorting his employees, especially in tips, and that I wouldn't be able to support us if I stayed there. My mom works as a hairdresser occasionally but doesn't make enough to keep up with expenses. So for her and Evie, I've returned to...making my own Luck.

Instead of my mom's beat-up old car that's almost as old as I am, I get a rideshare and step out at the strip of casinos I've been thinking about for two weeks. My hand tightens on my purse—inside are a couple of my “lucky” coins and a smaller, more efficient version of the device I used to use.

These days, I'm still one of the top hackers around on top of being a mom. I'd love to not resort to this nearly every weekend, but long-term jobs have evaded me with the job market the way it is.

And then there are some newer, amateur hackers trying their hand in Las Vegas every now and then—they've made this shit

way harder for the rest of us than it needs to be. I pay close attention to which casinos have given recent flaggings for hackers and which ones are most likely to kick me out at the slightest sign of significant “luck.” After careful consideration and examining all the nearest betting halls, my search has brought me...back here.

The Golden Flame Casino looks almost the same as it did the last time I set foot inside just over three years ago. It’s oozing class, and high money, the kind of markers experience Vegas hackers can pinpoint as signs of the mafia’s influence.

I haven’t come anywhere near this place since that day, especially not after discovering I was pregnant. This has been the stretch of casinos that I’ve totally ignored, and lately, they’ve seemed like the only places in town without any other hackers muddying the water. Given the Caputo family’s unforgiving reputation, I’d been determined to avoid it at all costs. If he told his father, the casino owner, anything about me after that night...

But maybe he didn’t.

And I’m getting desperate. Between close calls, while hacking other casinos and the endless bills piling up, this is the best way to get some cash to pay for the things my mom and Evie need. Like doctor’s visits and food and rent...

It’s just necessary. Plus, I seriously doubt that gorgeous mafioso will be here, and even if he is, he probably doesn’t even remember that one little night with a stranger whose name he wasn’t even sure was real.

Not to mention, I look different than I did three years ago. My hair is slightly shorter, undyed, and back to being bright blond. I have no contacts, and I've done my makeup differently. The simple black dress I'm in is far less daring—meant to avoid attention through blending in rather than misdirection like the last time.

And this time, I'm operating alone. I don't have to worry about breaking someone else's rules, just my own—and no way am I ever doing that again.

I can totally get away with this. Also? I'll be getting that tiny, satisfying sliver of revenge on the source that turned my father to drink and gamble himself into an early grave.

I take a deep breath and psych myself up as I walk across the street with the rest of the well-dressed crowd at the crosswalk. Is this dangerous? Yes, extremely. Operating alone means the *team* I once was part of could find me and hurt me for running hacks in this area. The casino people could hurt me if they figure out what I'm up to and I have no backup.

I'm in a tight spot, but the good news is that I'm great at getting out of those.

I can do this.

This is for Evie, and I'll always do whatever it takes to ensure she has what she needs. Eventually, I'll find a way to get a real income and give her everything she needs in life to succeed, but until then, I'll just do what it takes to keep the world from burning down around my precious little angel.

Walking into the Golden Flame is disconcerting. It looks so much like it did that day—the same rich vibe, chandeliers, clinking glasses, and flashing lights. And the smell, of course. The sweetest in Las Vegas, fresh and crisp. It's a slap in the face as if I never left. I promptly ignore it as I amble behind a group of laughing couples towards the slot machines.

I almost stop in my tracks when I see the exact same old man from that day, pulling a machine repeatedly and grumbling to himself. His hair is far thinner, and his suit is a different shade, but it's absolutely the same guy.

He glances over at me, noticing my stare. "Honey, either pick a machine or move along. This ain't a peep show, so there's no need to stare."

I laugh nervously. "Right. You're right. I'll just...pick a machine. Super easy."

I sit down at a machine like I have so many hundreds of times before, but my eyes are scouting the area. The Golden Flame Casino has clearly updated security over the last two years, and it had already been formidable before. There are more cameras. More slot attendants. More eyes and ears and people and—God, I'm panicking.

I can't afford to start slipping tonight. This is just a one-time hack when I really need it, nothing more or less. I need to keep my head on straight.

I fall easily into my usual pattern, chatting with anyone passing by to make it seem I'm completely relaxed, even while I subtly get my device in place. I programmed it for smaller

wins tonight than usual, making the odds less in my favor than last time. Last time I took nearly twenty thousand, and all of it went into the pocket of the Wild Seven.

This time, I'll settle for just a few thousand, the amount I calculated we needed before coming out here tonight. That will be enough to make ends barely meet for another two months, and that way, I won't be drawing any attention.

My nerves steady, the tally goes up on the machine, and everything seems to be going well—until it's time to get the device out of the machine. I reach for it carefully, glancing around, but then I make solid eye contact with the biggest, burliest security guard I've ever seen. There's no way he isn't mafia, and he just saw me slipping my device back into my purse.

“Hey! Stop!”

He's pretty far across the room, but I still hear him loud and clear over the music and crowd.

Shit.

I bolt. I've blown it, and there's no way to cash out now. I just need to escape this alive and take a road trip to Reno to get the money we desperately need.

I rush through the casino as quickly as I can without full-on running since I'm trying to avoid the attention of more security. Unfortunately, that doesn't work because they're all tuned in to the earpieces, and I can hear the security guard



after me shouting into his, telling them where I am and that I need to be stopped.

I can see security moving towards the front doors, so I veer into the crowd of people, recalling the map of this place I'd double-checked before coming here tonight. There should be an emergency fire exit in this direction, and if I can just get there—

“Oof!” I grunt as I slam into a solid chest.

A solid, suited, broad chest...connected to the last person I wanted to see.

*Domenic Caputo.*

He looks every bit as devastatingly handsome as he did that night, his dark hair styled back and tattoos creeping out of the collar of his fine suit. Penetrating dark eyes the same shade as Evie's bore down into me, and I almost jumped out of my skin when his hands gingerly grasped my waist to steady me on my feet after I ran into him so hard.

He still emanates power and raw attraction. But this time, my pulse spikes with fear.

Oh, God. *I should have never come back here.*

## Chapter 4

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## Domenic

Recognition floods me an instant before surprise does. Of course, I'm also begrudgingly impressed. Only right this moment do I realize just how clever my little hacker was on that night I think about so often.

At the time, I'd didn't bat an eye at her pink hair, but it's clear now that she was in disguise that night. Now, she doesn't appear to be. Her eyes, without contact lenses, are a soft blue, fringed by long lashes. Blond hair gleaming in the casino lights frames her face, freckled by those few memorable freckles mostly on one cheek. She looks flushed and tense, almost...scared. I can tell she's hoping I don't recognize her.

Unfortunately for Loren, I would recognize her face anywhere, makeup and disguises be damned. I'd seen the woman slipping quickly through the crowd of my casino and stepped in front of her without hesitation, and now I'm glad I was the one who stopped her instead of one of my men.

Speaking of, two of them stop just behind her, and Big Luck joins us, panting and glaring at the beauty who is well and

truly trapped.

“She had something in one of the machines, Boss. I think she was—”

“Shut up, Luck,” I tell him smoothly.

I don't need these other security guys, who are also in the Caputo family, to know what she was up to. I already knew she was hacking again, and I can't have them running off to someone else in my family and running their mouths—especially not to my father.

But why the fuck did Loren come back here? She's sharp as a tack and wouldn't be back here to scam slots for the hell of it or to prove a personal point or anything like that. I study her eyes because, to her credit, she still hasn't looked away from me.

She must have needed something to show up again when she was clearly afraid of me. Still, she swallows and lifts her chin. As if she's ready for whatever punishment I'll dole out.

It would be charming if she didn't put herself in this situation.

And I should punish her. She was fucking banned. If it was my father still running The Golden Flame, she would already be in one of the back rooms with a couple of mobsters torturing her for the details of exactly how she hacks the machines before they left her corpse somewhere out in the desert.

The idea of that happening to her makes me beyond uneasy. Besides, my father isn't running this casino anymore. It's

mine, and I have decided on a much more efficient way of handling our little hacking problem.

Skills like hers shouldn't be wasted.

"Return to your stations," I instruct, finally looking at the guys behind her.

They know better than to question me and swivel around immediately, leaving us alone, but Big Luck scowls at me. My friend is on edge, glaring at Loren and folding his arms as he towers over her.

"But Boss, she's a fucking ha—"

"What did I just say?" I give him a look.

"To shut up," he grumbles, making a face at her. "Fine, but are we taking her to the back rooms, or aren't we?"

I look her over slowly, noting how her cheeks warm. She looks good in black, and if anything, her curves have only gotten more pronounced over the time that's passed since I last saw her. Loren finally looks away from my gaze for the first time to make a face back at Big Luck.

"Too bad brains aren't a muscle, or I'm sure you could figure out the answer yourself."

There she is. The same sassy, sharp woman who enchanted me that night three years ago.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he growls.

"Just pointing out your very muscle-focused...everything," Loren gestures at him. "Shouldn't the answer be obvious? You

caught me fair and square.” Then she looks back at me, and I catch the fear on her face again before she tries for an awkward smile. “Look...mister, there must be some way to forget about this since I never even cashed out—”

“Why are you calling me mister?” I demand.

She looks away, unwilling to accept that I’m making it clear I remember her. “Oh, you know, just a sign of respect to a stranger...unless you’d prefer I call you sir or something.”

Irritation prickles at me, and I lean forward to speak into her ear so Big Luck won’t overhear. Her cherry blossom fragrance envelops me as I do, and it’s staggering how quickly it makes me remember that night and how it felt to have this little minx all to myself.

“I’d prefer you to call me the same name I made you scream out three years ago, and don’t you dare call me mister again, *fiore di ciliegio*.”

*Cherry blossom.*

A fitting nickname for Loren. But I can see by her wide-eyed expression that she doesn’t seem to have learned any more Italian over the last three years, and she obviously knows now that I remember *exactly* who she is.

“Shit,” she grimaces.

Big Luck is looking between us, raising a bushy brow at me. I nod at him to signal that he should stay behind us, and then I look at Loren.

“Follow me. If you make a run for it, remember that Big Luck is faster than he looks.”

She doesn't make a run for it. Instead, Loren looks like a nerve-ridden lamb being led to the slaughter as we leave the casino floor, and I unlock the highly secure employee-only doors that lead into the back of the gambling hall to the areas where the security feed is constantly being watched by the Caputos who know security better than anyone.

As we pass through the warmly lit hall, I glance down at Loren. Given her caliber as a hacker, I would be surprised if she didn't know about my family and its connection to The Golden Flame. She definitely knows, just like she knew who I was that night.

But I wonder if she knows how dangerous it truly is for someone like her among members of my family—mobsters who take cheating and hacking the same as they would murder or blackmail.

Big Luck, I trust more than the others, so long as he keeps his mouth shut. I'll have a word with him about it when I get him alone later. In the meantime, I stop just outside the security room, turning to face the hacker, who is wringing her hands and trembling a little.

I don't enjoy seeing her so frightened, but her reaction tells me that she's at least taking this seriously.

“Is your name actually Loren? Don't lie.”

“Yes,” she admits, barely audible and not meeting my eyes.

“Tell me your full name.”

“Loren...Rally.” She obviously tenses at her surname, gaze flickering to me like she’s worried I might recognize it.

I don’t. Instead, I lead her into the security room, where several of my people stand, wondering why I’m there. One of the more recent hires, Tristan, eyes the way her dark dress clings to her far too much for my liking. When he notices my glare lingering on him, he sits quickly back down and clears his throat.

“Loren, this is part of my digital security detail. They always have eyes on the casino floor and communicate directly with all other teams at the Golden Flame, including Big Luck.”

Loren rubs her arm. Clearly, she’s unsure where I’m going with this. “Um...okay?”

One of the girls on the security detail frowns. “This is the one you guys were just trying to stop. What was that about, Big Luck?”

To my friend’s credit, he just glances at me. “Well...”

“This is Loren Rally,” I introduce casually. “She’s a well-versed specialist in the world of casino hacking, and as of now, I am hiring her to join this team.”



## Chapter 5

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## Loren

Wait. Domenic is hiring...me?

I thought for sure that when we walked into this room, it would be one of those *special* back rooms that other hackers have passed on rumors about over the years—a place with no cameras and soundproofed walls so the casino’s muscle could go to town on a hacker and get answers before deciding whether to let them off the hook, charge the hell out of them, or leave them in a gutter somewhere.

But this room is filled with high-def screens, cushioned seats, and even a little coffee bar at the end of one room. There are six people in here, along with another security guy, all of them looking at me curiously after what Domenic said.

I just put a smile on my face ASAP and pretended I knew all about this. “Right. Nice to meet you all.” I guess.

“Didn’t Big Luck tag her as a threat?” the girl who spoke before asks, brow furrowed as she examines me. She has dark

hair and eyes, and I'd be shocked if she wasn't somehow related to Domenic.

Actually, come to think of it, everyone here is probably connected to the Caputo crime family in some way or other—by blood relation or loyalty. That thought has me even more nervous. I want to just bolt through the doors, flee, and never come back because there's no way Domenic Caputo is telling the truth about *hiring* me when he knows who I am and what I do now.

“It was a small test. A sting operation, if you will,” Domenic shrugs. “I approached Miss Rally recently for help fine-tuning our security measures since she specializes in helping casinos mitigate against hacking. She wanted to challenge our current methods, the old-fashioned way to determine the best ways of improving things. I was in the know but gave no forewarning to Big Luck or anyone else to preserve the integrity of her experiment.”

Damn. Domenic thinks fast, and every word he says is said with such surety and authority that everyone in the room nods as if this explains everything—except for Big Luck, who stays silent because *he* was right there to see how surprised Domenic looked when he saw me. He must realize Domenic is pulling all of this out of thin air.

I wish I could say I'm just as quick on my feet. But I'm still a little shaken by being caught in the first place, so when everyone looks at me again, I just stare back.

“Care to share what you’ve found, Miss Rally?” the gorgeous mafioso beside me murmurs.

I glance at him and swallow. There’s a clear ultimatum in his sinfully dark eyes. Either I accept this totally unexpected job and help him spot holes in his security for hackers like me, or I get dealt with like any other hacker.

Haven’t I been looking for a job, anyway? I want to ask questions. For example, how much would I be paid for this? *Am* I getting paid for this, or is this just how he expects me to repay the casino I once stole from? How much would I need to be here at the casino? I don’t like to leave Evie alone with my mother all the time.

Oh, my God. Evie.

For a second, it hits me that I’m standing next to the father of my precious little girl, and he has no idea about it.

And I can’t let him find out—for one thing, he could respond some horrible way, or hell, he’s clearly well off, and he might want to take her away from me to raise her somewhere better. I have no doubt someone with his deep pockets and connections would easily win custody of Evelyn in court.

But that would destroy me. I can’t lose Evelyn, so he can’t know about her. Therefore, it would be a *very* good idea to turn this down and run for my life.

On the other hand...we need money. Badly. My father’s gambling debts have been burying us alive ever since he took his own life, and it’s only getting worse with interest every

single day. Between that and rising living expenses and my mother getting to retirement age with no real money or savings to her name...

Whether or not Domenic intends to pay me for helping with this, I can figure something out so long as I'm not punished the way some other hacker would be.

I can do this. It's just another challenge, and I'll overcome whatever challenge comes my way until I can get out of this rut I've been in for the last seven years and give Evelyn a good life.

Only a second has passed between Domenic's prompt and my thoughtful silence. I turn and face the security team eyeing me and decide to fake it until I make it.

Bring it on.

"The slot machines used at the Golden Flame Casino are fairly up to date, but simple modifications to the interior and to the overall programming of the machines will perfect the RNG where it matters the most: timing," I say firmly, looking at each of them in turn.

They just stare back, some of them curious and others looking doubtful.

"I'm sure you all know that each pull is determined the second a customer hits the button, but one full second is more than enough time for a well-designed device to hack into the machine's settings and adjust the random generation until it's not so random anymore. Any good hacker worth their spit can

slowly but surely rig exactly what amount they need out of the slots and get away scot-free without raising a single flag. I could do it with my eyes shut, but I'd really like to make it more of a challenge for people coming in here with...ill intentions."

Now they all look surprised by what I've said, and a couple glance at each other. I almost melt on the spot when I catch Domenic's eye because he almost looks...impressed.

On the other hand, Big Luck is glaring at me like he knows I'm exactly the type to come in here with *ill intentions*.

"No one can really hack a slot machine," one of the security guys, who was checking me out when I came in, argues. He motions at the screen showing several players there, including the older man who reminds me so much of my father. "They'd have to set up an entire system to program per every machine pull and at least have their phone out to make changes to that programming. There's no way they can just score the jackpot —"

I snort, rolling my eyes at him before I can help it. "Oops. Sorry. Didn't mean to laugh at you. It's just that programming is *easily* done beforehand. It's not a perfect system, but that's actually what hackers prefer most of the time because scoring a jackpot raises all kinds of flags. Believe me, your adversaries know how to nickel and dime you to death without anyone being the wiser."

"And...you think you can help stop that?" the girl asks dubiously.

“I know I can,” I correct with a wink.

Apparently, faking it until I make it is paying off because none of them look like they want to argue.

I don't dare look back up at Domenic, even though I can still feel his eyes on me. I also feel every inch of space between us in both the best and worst ways possible—part of me wonders if I should step away, and the other part of me wishes I could lean against him to find out if he's as muscled and hot and perfect as he was three years ago.

*Get a hold of yourself. You're still in deep shit.*

“As you can see, Miss Rally will be a boon to the casino,” Domenic says. “She will begin work here tomorrow. I expect her to be given access to security measures gradually while she is trained on our systems bit by bit. Moving on. Vivian, give me the updates for the night.”

One of the other security team members begins giving him an update on the general proceedings of the Golden Flame today as they've seen it from this room, but I take a second to tune out and take a deep breath.

My nerves are still screaming because of how tense I am, but at least the security team seems to buy who I am and the story Domenic offered for me running like that earlier.

And honestly, if what Domenic claims is true and he wants to hire me to use my expertise to mitigate against hackers at the Golden Flame...well, it makes sense. It's like consulting a

retired professional bank robber for advice on how to stop a bank robbery from happening.

But at the same time, I can't fully bring myself to believe he really means this. I mean, why wouldn't he treat me like any other hacker?

Surely it can't be because of that night over three years ago. I was shocked enough that he recognized and remembered me at all—but there's no way he was doing this to protect me. He was pretty damn pissed when he found out what I'd been doing back then, so I wouldn't consider him *attached* to me by any stretch.

Perhaps he's been looking for someone to consult about the hacking spike in Las Vegas casinos. But will he really trust me to run any kind of security operation in this place when he knows I took from it once before?

He'll definitely be watching me closely if he does. *Too* closely.

And I don't want him keeping such a close eye on me because he might see things about my life...like Evie.

I'll keep her a secret. Everything about me is off the table—I'll just come in here, do a damn good job, and hopefully get paid, and I'll leave every day without giving in to the temptation to just hack a quick buck and run.

"...because the Wild Seven wiped those feeds," Vivian says.

Immediately, I tune back in, my heart hammering in my throat at the mere mention of my old team. I missed what she said before but wish I'd caught it now.



Domenic swears surprisingly colorfully under his breath. He rubs his jaw as he examines one of the screens displaying fuzzy static. He looks thoughtful but pissed, and I think it's fair to say that he *really* doesn't like the Wild Seven. In fact, whatever Vivian said, it looks like Domenic really hates them.

This makes me realize that not only do I need to keep my precious little daughter a secret from this powerful, terrifying mafioso don, but he absolutely *cannot* find out about my past. He can't know why I came to Las Vegas with a vendetta against casinos, and he certainly cannot find out that I was once a part of the Wild Seven that he hates so much.



Telling my mother that I've scored a job in security at *the* Golden Flame Casino is a big bonus to my new, unexpected situation. She was over the moon. She danced in the living room to eighties music and told me I'd hit a turning point in my life, and she was really excited for me.

I'm less enthused.

Don't get me wrong. I'll probably do well in casino security, seeing as I've been bypassing it for years at countless

gambling establishments. But part of me thinks I shouldn't have even told her where I'm "working" now because it still feels surreal and...dangerous.

Partly because before I left last night, Domenic Caputo warned me that he'd track me down himself if I didn't show up for my new job today. Yikes. He'd been cold and severe and really fucking scary.

But my mom has been really down lately, so I told her just so we could stay up late in our little apartment and celebrate this small win with box wine while she showed me the cute pictures of Evie she took last night while I was away.

Now here I am, pulling into the back parking lot of the Golden Flame, dressed in the most professional clothes I own—a dark gray pencil skirt and blazer over a soft blue blouse and neutral pumps. I'm a bundle of nerves as I take a few deep breaths in the junky old car my mom and I share, wondering if this is all a big trap.

What if I walk in there and someone on the security team has researched my background and discovered who I am? Or what if Domenic has changed his mind, and I'm about to be beaten up by some big, hulking mafiosos while dressed like Secretary Barbie?

This is a bad idea. I should go.

My phone buzzes, and I glance at it. My mom sent another message with a picture attached. It's Evelyn eating oatmeal for breakfast and trying to build a snowman out of it, wearing the shy smile so characteristic of her.

*We're rooting for you. Evie even said 'mama' a couple of times after you left.*

God. Of course, she had to send something to make me so emotional. I quickly swipe away my tears and fix my makeup with my emergency purse stash before taking a bracing breath and walking up to the back of the casino.

I realize I need some kind of work ID to get in, and I'm about to stand here awkwardly, trying to figure it out, when the door swings open.

I immediately flush at the sight of Domenic Caputo first thing in the morning. He's dressed to perfection as always, and his dark hair is still wet from his shower but is styled perfectly. I still remember what it looked like that night three years ago, mussed and falling over his forehead as I ran my fingers through it, his soft moans against my ear—

*Oh, my God. No. Are you insane? Absolutely no thinking about that.*

I clear my throat and smile brightly, hoping to get off on the right foot despite the very unordinary situation we're in. "Thanks for letting me in. I guess I should get a security card...thing."

He says nothing, keeping his perfect face as enigmatically composed as ever. I scurry past and internally pinch myself for how bad I am with words. He walks with me down a long hall toward the security rooms, and I try again because I'll be damned if it's this awkward the entire time I work for...my baby daddy.

*Yeah, this situation is all kinds of fucked.*

“How are you today?” I hazard.

“Just as opposed to small talk as ever,” he mutters.

The snort escapes me before I can help it, and when he shoots me a look, I face forward quickly and hope my amusement isn't too noticeable. “Right. Not a small-talk kind of guy. If I recall right, you're a *realist*. A.k.a., a pessimist. Which is fine—there's already plenty of sunshine on this Las Vegas morning. We wouldn't want to overdo it.”

He sighs. It's a weary sound. “There is no *we*.”

Suppose he's trying to set a clear, professional boundary line between us. In that case, he doesn't need to resort to that because *I am not* about to get caught up in the allure of Domenic Caputo again. Not with so much riding on me, keeping all my secrets far away from him.

“There never has been,” I reply chipperly, and when he narrows his eyes at me as we stop outside the security room, I lower my voice and face him. “Look, I know showing up here again is a pain in the ass for you. And...for the record, I'm sorry about that. But I do really appreciate that I'm here with the potential to do something else with my life instead of... you know. Dead in a ditch somewhere with my fingerprints burned off.”

His lips twitch, and he looks away. I can't be sure what he's thinking, but he doesn't seem intent on addressing anything

I've just said. Maybe Caputos don't do the whole *gratitude* thing.

"You'll be in charge of ensuring hackers cannot infiltrate the systems of my casino in all departments, not just in the slot machines. I trust you have experience with other hacking forms as well?"

"A decent amount," I admit with slight embarrassment. Then I blink. "Wait. *Your* casino? Are you officially in charge of it, then? I didn't realize you took your father's—"

Domenic cuts me off. "From now on, there will be no standing and chatting around first thing in the morning. Go in and work with the security team. You have an hour's break at lunch, and you'll be paid weekly. No overtime."

With that, he turns and strides away, looking as devilishly handsome as he is untouchable. I take a deep breath and ignore the little pinch of hurt in my chest because, *of course*, he'll be the unattainable, no-bullshit-allowed kind of Boss. He's a mafioso, one I've crossed, and I need to get my head in the game and prove myself an asset or move to some other overnight with my mother and daughter to stay out of his sight.

Since the latter option is impossible, I brace myself and enter the security room. Small introductions are made between these team members and me since they're not all the same as last night, and then I get to work learning everything I can about the Golden Flame Casino's security measures.



For the last week, I've learned a lot about the operations of the Caputo's casino. I've learned about every security measure taken, from the blackjack tables to the hotel rooms to the attached club to the kitchen staff. It's been exhausting learning everything so quickly, and I'm still getting the hang of how they run things to hopefully help them find more people like... well, like me.

But one thing I've learned the most is that Domenic Caputo is a tough, ever-present boss.

The man runs like a fucking clock. He shows up at the same times every day, twice in the morning and five times after lunch, until late at night, checking how security is going. And when he's not chatting with other security personnel in the room with me, he's usually in the casino itself, on one of the security screens for me to ogle to my heart's content.

And how could I not ogle him? It's infuriating how handsome he is all the time.

He brushes shoulders and shakes hands with big wigs all day. Famous people come into his casino occasionally, and he handles all situations that arise with a prompt intelligence that's downright impressive.

He only leaves the casino rarely, and it seems to be for stuff related to his *family*—stuff I probably don't want to know anything about. He's constantly up late working. Every morning, he's clean-shaven and dressed perfectly, looking like he was up hours before I rolled out of bed groaning and grumbling.

Does the man even sleep? I'd honestly think not if I hadn't once slept beside him.

Besides seeing how efficient and powerful the stoic mafia don is, it's been hard not to notice the pull I still feel toward him. We've hardly spoken a word since that first morning when he let me in, but every time he's in the room and wherever he goes, it's exactly like that first night I saw him. Like I can just *sense* where he is because his magnetism toward me is just that strong.

It's getting difficult to ignore, but I still pretend I haven't noticed it.

I'm too busy to give it a single thought, anyway. Work is taxing, and I've barely gotten any time this week with my sweet little baby, which has been like taking a hundred punches to the gut every day, emotionally speaking.

That must be why I'm so emotional when Friday rolls around. I see that I was paid early this week by direct deposit. I'm on my lunch break, munching on baby carrots in my car because I'm too nervous to chow down in the fancy casino break room when I see the money has appeared in my account.

I'd never asked how much I would make, but I'm positive it wasn't supposed to be this much. I nearly choke on a carrot and then have a minor freakout.

I'm used to large sums of money in cash or casino credits. I've hacked more than my fair share of thousands. No way was I supposed to make this in a week.

Shit. Is this some sort of test of my integrity? I get out to pace outside of my car, frustrated. I could *really* use this money to fend off the endless bills for another week or two.

But I should tell Domenic there was some mistake, even if I've avoided talking to my once-upon-a-time one-night-stand.

After agonizing over the decision for the rest of my lunch break, I creep back into the casino and stiffen when I see that Domenic Caputo is also standing in the hall on the way to the security room, talking quietly but firmly with Big Luck.

When I get a little closer, I see Big Luck has blood smeared on his jaw. It doesn't look like his. When he catches me looking, he squints at me.

"You're still here, huh?"

"Luck," Domenic warns.

They appear to have some kind of friendship built up beyond their obvious mobster loyalties, and the big brute sighs before disappearing down an adjoining hallway. I straighten and put on a bright smile as I stand alone with the father of my secret baby, willing myself to not chicken out.

"Hi. Sorry to bother you, sir, but—"



“No.”

I swallow my words. “Um. No, what?”

“You don’t call me sir.” His gaze is unnervingly firm, almost chastizing. He might’ve looked frustrated if he wasn’t so well put together.

“If I can’t call you sir and I can’t call you mister, what am I left with? Oh, captain, my captain?”

The corner of his mouth looks like it wants to move up, but it doesn’t. “I told you. Domenic.”

It feels too intimate to call him just by his first name, given how I once moaned and screamed it all night. Just remembering that and how he’d whispered my own name like a prayer makes my thighs clench and my ears feel warm.

I pretend I’m totally unfazed and forego using his name altogether. “Right. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know there was some payment mistake. I got...well, more than I should have, and I wanted to be upfront about it—”

“Why did you come back?”

Shit. I wasn’t prepared for him to ask it outright like that. I fumble and wring my hands, but he doesn’t look like he’s about to let it go. I’m not sure what to tell him.

*I needed money. I wanted to see this place again to remember that night. I had to get what I could from the place that ruined my father. I’m buried in my father’s debts, and I feel like I can’t breathe, and I thought one last hack here would cut it because I’m an idiot.*

Instead of saying any of that, I shrug and say something else that's true but less fraught with danger. "I assumed you forgot all about that night."

Domenic's gaze heats so unexpectedly that I don't have the wherewithal to step back when he moves slightly closer.

"Believe me. I wish I could have," he says so low I almost don't catch it. "But I never forget anyone banned from the Golden Flame. I don't forget faces easily, least of all yours."

*Least of all yours.* Is Domenic saying that because he was so disappointed with mine after he learned the truth, or is it because he's thought about that night all the time the way I have over the last three years?

I can't afford to ask that question no matter what the answer is, so I finally step back and clear my throat.

"Why are you even asking about that now?" I point out. "It doesn't matter, right? I just came to let you know about the payment issue."

He studies me, his face unreadable as he tucks his hands into his suit pockets. "It does matter. I think you came here because you *needed* to, despite the danger. It was a desperate last resort. You were in some kind of pressing bind. A financial one, I take it."

I flush. "I—I..."

I don't even know what to say to that. In fact, I'm thoroughly humiliated.

“Just call it an upfront bonus and focus on making my security ironclad.”

I huff. “So it’s some kind of bribe or something? Or are you trying to give me charity? Because I really don’t want—”

“Loren.” Domenic’s voice is almost a growl. “My time is stretched thin enough as it is. I need to get back to my rounds. Either accept the money and continue working here or send it back and get out.”

Sheesh.

I give him a cold stare-down, showing him his snippiness doesn’t frighten me. “Fine. I’ll drop the topic and get back to work. But a word of advice? Act like less of a stubborn, immovable ass when dealing with your higher-up clients in the casino, or they’ll go to someone who understands the concept of *catching more flies with honey*. It won’t kill you to smile at a few people. Who knows? Maybe you’ll even enjoy yourself.”

I go to pass him and then hesitate. Then, glancing up, I mutter, “And...thanks. Again.”

Before I slip into the security rooms of the busy casino, I hear him mutter, almost so quiet that I don’t catch it, “You’re welcome, *fiore di ciliegio*.”

## Chapter 6

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## Domenic

“Every day, businesses fail. It’s always the ones no one expects.”

I make no response because my father doesn’t need to make it more clear how he feels about how I’m running things at the casino. Profits from The Golden Flame fund much of our family’s other assets and pursuits. He calls it the heart of the Caputos.

He’s smoking a long cigar across the table from me, gazing out the window with a frown at the heavy Vegas traffic below. People tell me we look alike, something I’ve never considered a compliment despite how popular my father has always been with women. His dark hair is streaked with gray now, and he has far more worry lines etched into his stern, mature face, but admittedly, we have the same eyes and build.

But our personalities and personal ideologies couldn’t be more different.

“I’m aware,” I reply.

“We can’t let our Golden Flame be one of them, Nic. We simply can’t. It’s all on your shoulders now, and things should be going better than they have been.”

I’ve always disliked the nickname *Nic*. It doesn’t suit me, but I’ve never told my father so because I doubt it would stop him from using the term.

Three years ago, he was constantly breathing down my neck, demanding that I take the reins of the family and step in as head don. Most mafiosos in my position, the sons and heirs of the most powerful crime families, wait with baited breaths for the day they get to take charge.

I was indecisive. I’ve never known if *this* is what I want or if it’s merely what I was raised to do.

Perhaps that doesn’t matter now because I accepted the position as head don two years ago, and now my father can’t seem to get over his old position. He’s made it painfully clear that he disagrees with most of my methods. He likes to point at the successes of him and the other Caputo predecessors who have been running the Golden Flame Casino for several generations, all wildly successful in their time.

It doesn’t matter that the casino is thriving compared to others in today’s economy. It doesn’t matter how highly lauded the establishment is ranked, top of the best casinos in Vegas with reviews and recommendations and high-profile figures sweeping in every day of the week.

All my father sees is that, unlike in his day or his father’s, I haven’t made my mark. I’m not the best of the *Caputos* who

have run The Golden Flame, and it's something he won't let go of.

"There's so much you could be doing differently," he mutters, puffing smoke. "It's not the way of our family to keep our playing cards so close to the vest, you know. Caputos are proud. We don't tolerate indecision. And by your age? Better to be settled down in the eyes of the public. Have all the women around all you like, and have your fun, but *appearing* tied down is the important thing. People like the idea of a family man. That might improve the business, hmm?"

I give up on my own cigar, setting it in the ashtray and standing to button my suit coat. I know we're done talking business when he's opened this can of worms. If I stay any longer, I'll lose my patience, something I refuse to do around him anymore.

"Nic," he protests, standing and grunting from the pain of his bad knees. Too many times, other mafiosos came after them, along with plenty of scars hidden beneath his suit. He's had all the best surgeries, but the violence of our lifestyle always takes its toll in some way or another. "We have more to discuss."

"Tomorrow."

He scoffs and follows me to the door of his penthouse office. "You won't come back tomorrow. You only stop by a couple times a week. You know it's lonely, only having one son who's busy doing God-knows-what."

*Busy running the casino that you were so fucking insistent that I take over.*

I want to snap at him, but too much of my life has been spent trying to get my father to see reason the way I do. Some people don't perceive life the same way, let alone organized crime or how I should spend my time.

I face him with a slight smile. "I'll be back Thursday. Your doctor mentioned your high cholesterol again. Watch the red meat and dairy."

He scowls after me, but I've already stepped into the elevator, and when it starts to descend, I breathe out and rub my neck and temples. I've been trying to keep the business together the way I see fit, and while so many would look at my handling of it and see careful, calculated gains, my father sees it as failing.

If only his opinions and disappointment didn't affect me.

I've tried ignoring it. I tried telling myself that he was an older man now, softer, not the same powerful figure I looked up to as a boy and marveled at. But no matter his age now, I often still feel like that boy watching him come home smoking a cigar with blood on his fists and a smile on his face.

I thought I wanted to be like him. It's how I was raised. I'm not afraid of violence. I've gotten my hands dirty as a mafioso ever since I was eleven years old, and my parents gifted me a gun and a set of pocket knives for my birthday, telling me it was time I got into the family business.



It hardly fucking matters if I still want this life. There's no *out* in families like mine. I just need to show my father that I know what I'm doing, even if he doesn't have the patience for it. One way of doing that is making sure the casino hacking problem in Las Vegas steers clear of my establishment.

Which means checking in on the woman I haven't managed to keep out of my head for the last week and a half.

After I told her to keep the money, Loren returned to barely looking at me whenever we were in the same room. She's a hard worker, arriving early every morning and leaving only when the head of my security does. She has admirable focus and looks damn tempting every second of every day. Still, I sense her unease whenever I'm around. It bothers me more than I care to admit.

I don't want Loren to be uneasy around me. Too many others are put off by my personality. I want her to smile warmly, giggle, and joke around the way she did the night we met.

And I want to find out why she returned because I know she skirted around the truth when I asked. She's too smart to have returned merely because she thought she could escape it.

It's unlikely, but perhaps she returned to see if I was still around. I try to ignore how much I like that idea. Loren having any interest in me would be dangerous because I still haven't forgotten how it felt to worship her body over and over, hearing her soft gasps and feeling her fingers tangled in my hair.

That night replays in my mind, as does her crestfallen face the next morning when I threatened and banned her for her own safety.

I scowl at myself for lingering so much on something Loren clearly has no intention of repeating as I walk into the back hall of my casino, headed toward the main security room. It's late in the day, and there's every chance she's already left. I have no reason to be back here right now, yet I can't stop using every excuse I can to get near her.

When I step inside, there are only a handful of my security staff—and Loren. She's in one of the office chairs, black high-heeled feet propped up on a desk as she pores over printed documents with an adorable furrow in her brow, chewing her lower lip. Her hair is falling out of the messy braid over one shoulder. She's so distracted she doesn't even glance over, not noticing that I've come in.

Instead, I resist the temptation to stride over, reach out, and smooth the frown on her pretty face with my lips. It's certainly not something I can do when other security members are chatting quietly and keeping one eye on the cameras and one on me, their boss.

I ignored them and approached Loren directly for the first time since hiring her. I keep my voice quiet enough that no one else will overhear our conversation—they already see nearly every move I make in my own casino. My words with Loren aren't their fucking business.

“Working late?”

Loren jolts upright so fast that she nearly falls out of the chair, cheeks pink.

“God. Hasn’t anyone told you not to sneak up on someone in a room full of security cameras?” Then she makes a face. “On second thought, the fact that you could sneak up on me in here, of all places, just reflects badly on me. Sorry, I lost track of time, but I know you said no overtime, so I’ll get out of—”

“Have you eaten?”

The words are out of my mouth before I realize it, but I can’t help it. I know Loren takes a break at lunch every day, but given how late she’s been staying to work, she’s missing a regular dinner time by a mile. It hasn’t escaped my notice that she avoids the lavish break room stocked with plenty of free food for my other employees. Despite her past, it tells me she doesn’t want to risk being accused of taking things she doesn’t deserve.

I don’t make a habit of caring when people around me do or don’t eat, but the idea of her going hungry just to work sets my teeth on edge.

“I’ll eat when I get home,” she shrugs.

My jaw tightens, and then I nod, deciding. “Follow me.”

She looks anxious, like she wants to argue, but doesn’t ask questions as I lead her from the security room and walk through my casino. It’s not as busy as it usually is this time on a Wednesday night, but the ambiance is still rich and crowded with laughter and music all around.

Loren follows me into the connected club where we had danced three years ago and then into the back kitchens where the typical flurry of chefs is at a steady crawl. I exchange a nod with the head cook and order two plates of the most popular dishes, ignoring Loren's protests and insistence that this is unnecessary.

Minutes later, we're standing in a portion of the back kitchen reserved for extra busy nights, so we're alone. She stares at the plates in front of us and then at me.

"What is this?"

"Fried calamari, eggplant parmigiano, and tuna Tartare. Pick one."

Loren grimaces, and her face is flushed from what I recognize as embarrassment. "Domenic, I can get my own damn food. Why are you doing this?"

It's a good question. I ignore it and wait for her to pick. She scowls at me, but when it's clear I'm serious, she slides one of the plates closer to herself and takes a bite of shrimp and salad as if it's a chore. Then she moans as she digs in, and the sound sends heat through me.

To distract myself, I eat the other plate of food. I had expected to eat at my father's place since he was so insistent on it, but since I left early, this was as good a time as any to get fuel into my system before continuing with work until late at night.

I typically eat alone in my office on the top floor of the casino or with stuffy business associates or dangerous mobsters. As

such, my meals usually come with a side of irritation or boredom.

Not this one. Though we're standing in the back of the kitchen late at night, both of us after a long day, something about merely being next to her eases the tension in my shoulders.

Loren seems to realize she's been lost in her meal and clears her throat nervously. Her tongue flicks out to run along the seam of her lips, and I watch the movement, forgetting entirely about my own food as my mouth waters.

I still remember how she tasted. It's fucking maddening to know that and have her here now, close but not to be touched.

"The chef here makes a mean salad, and I'm officially a fan of calamari," she says, setting down her fork. "But I'd appreciate it in the future if I could just eat at home. I can pay for my—"

"Why do you keep staying so late?" I interrupt, dismissing her idea of paying for any of this altogether. She's admirably independent, but I won't hear of it. Instead, I fish for the answer to something that's been gnawing at me since the moment I saw her again over a week ago. "Surely you have a life outside what you do. Friends. Hobbies. A lover."

If Loren has a fucking boyfriend, that jackass isn't taking care of her. If he was, she wouldn't have come back here, putting her life at risk. She wouldn't be exhausting herself at work every day, forgetting to eat. I clench my fists in my suit pocket at the idea of some deadbeat taking this intelligent, devastatingly sexy woman for granted.

No matter her past of hacking, she deserves more. Far more.

To my relief, she laughs brightly and shakes her head. “No, no, and big no. My family takes up all of my time when I’m not here.”

Same here, though I doubt her *family* is anything like mine.

“I just want to be thorough,” Loren adds, shrugging. “Some hackers are so subtle that it’s hard to pick up on their patterns, and I want to make sure I’m not missing anyone who comes in here regularly. Some of them show up a little late every day, so I stick around for that. I think you might have one hacker, in particular, causing a problem and going undetected.”

Then she arches a brow at me. “And you don’t really have a place to get off saying I should have a life outside of work. I’m almost certain you never sleep. You’ll work yourself into an early grave at this rate, you know.”

“Early graves run in my family.”

“You don’t have to be like the rest of your *family*.”

Her words cut close to things I’ve been mulling over for as long as I can remember. I examine her slowly because it’s clear she knows I’m speaking about the Caputo crime family, yet she’s not shying away. Instead, she just shrugs and offers a knowing smile.

I don’t know if I’ve ever met someone else as vibrant. Even after a long day of hard work, she’s all warmth and soft sass. She’s addicting.

“Tell me. Why *don’t* you have a lover?”

Loren covers up her surprise with a laugh. “Every time you say *lover*, I picture my grandmother describing her beloved, sordid, bodice-ripper romance novels—may she rest in peace. Call them boyfriends or fuck buddies, but please stop with *lover*.”

I fight a smile. “Fine. Why don’t you have a fuck buddy?”

“Because they’re so overrated when I can take care of myself just fine,” she says meaningfully, wagging her eyebrows.

That mental image has my cock swelling in my pants. Her levity is a breath of fresh air and exactly what I’ve missed for three years. I smirk at her before leaning to speak into her ear, breathing in the scent of cherry blossoms that is so *her*.

“You think so, but I could take care of you so much better.”

Her breath hitches, and when her eyes meet mine, it’s the same crackling heat—that draw between us, which was so hard to ignore three years ago. I realize one of my hands has moved of its own volition to rest on her hip, and her gaze drops to my mouth. When she licks her lips again, it’s a challenge not to pull her against me and lick them myself.

But when Loren leans slightly into me without seeming conscious of it, I give in and step into her slowly, relishing how she doesn’t back away. She’s pressed against me, and I’m sure she can feel my hard erection, my neediness for her. I didn’t realize I’d leaned toward her so much until our noses brush slightly, and her eyes fluttered closed as her breathing picked up.

I want to taste her again. Kiss her until her knees give out and then take her hard against a kitchen counter until she's screaming my name again the way she did back then.

But things are not what they were three years ago. Now I know she's an experienced hacker—and I'm her boss. Not to mention a Caputo with responsibilities my father won't stop reminding me about. Loren appears to be in enough trouble on her own without me factoring in, and if I crossed this line, I certainly would cause her trouble.

Before I can make myself back away, Loren seems to remember where she is and who she's with because her eyes pop back open, and she steps away quickly. Her face is flushed as she doesn't meet my steady gaze.

“Right. Uh—thanks for dinner. I'll just pay the chef—”

“No. Go home. You've stayed late enough as it is,” I say crisply, straightening and feeling bizarrely unsure of where to put my hands now that she's stepped out of my grasp.

I'm never unsure. I don't like the feeling, and I quickly place my hands back in my pockets, keeping my face composed.

Perhaps it's the tension thrumming between us, but Loren doesn't argue for once. She just nods and starts to leave.

I see her intended direction and stop her by calling out, “There's another entry to the employee level of the casino's parking garage closer by. Turn left as you leave the club.”

She glances over her shoulder. “Huh? Oh, I don't park in the parking garage.”



Does she park behind the building? I dislike that idea. It's not under as much surveillance and is a popular place for family members to meet up—enforcers, younger members itching to prove themselves, and street thugs who like to pretend they're associated with the Caputos. Loren is gorgeous, but she is all alone when she arrives and leaves.

“You should be parking in the garage.”

She snorts. “I've avoided parking garages ever since—”

She cuts off, and I raise an eyebrow. “Ever since what?”

“I just... don't particularly like them.” She raises a hand when I open my mouth to argue about the safety measure of it. “But I'll start doing that if you really insist because if there's one thing I've learned about you, Mr. Caputo, it's that you're one big, bossy boss man.”

I almost growl at her calling me *Mr. Caputo*. Loren sees the displeasure on my face and flashes an impish, small, completely unapologetic smile before leaving.

Once she's gone, I feel the stressors and anxieties of my day-to-day returning to plague me again. Being near Loren seems to keep the taxing nature of being a don and casino owner at bay, and this break with her was nice. I should take it for what it was and not want more with her.

And yet I do.

## Chapter 7

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## Loren

Last night I came way too close to kissing Domenic Caputo.

That would be the stupidest, most reckless thing to do, considering how much I'm trying to keep secret from him. I'm supposed to be giving him a wide berth, doing my job tracking whoever is hacking his casino, getting paid, and keeping my head down.

When he insisted on making me eat dinner—and a fucking *delicious* dinner, at that—it was hard not to melt a little. At first, I thought he was just behaving like a controlling alpha male, but he'd seemed almost bothered that I was missing dinner, which was sweet.

But that didn't mean I could just plant one on the gorgeous mafioso the way I was so tempted to.

This means that today, I'll be avoiding him as much as possible, and in order to do that, I'm taking my lunch break away from the casino for the first time.

After ensuring Domenic is still making his rounds in the casino, I slip out of the security room to the parking garage and the employee level where I'm parked.

I didn't like parking in here, given my last experience in a parking garage with my femur snapped cleanly in half, but if I had resisted Domenic on this, he might've pressed me on it. This was the lesser of two evils.

I drive out of the parking garage and out into the Las Vegas traffic. I don't have enough time to go somewhere far, and I'm still watching my budget like a hawk to make sure I'm paying the countless bills my mother is swamped with from my father's past gambling addiction, so I'm not planning on going anywhere fancy.

Just away from here and the dark-eyed, smooth-talking, enigmatic Caputo that I really need to stop having dirty thoughts about.

I ended up eating at a small Chinese food place ten minutes away from The Golden Flame Casino. It's a small splurge to treat myself to this, and I decide I'll swing by later again to bring something home for my mom since she's been an absolute saint watching Evie all day, every day that I've been working.

Which just makes my chest ache. I want to have more time with my sweet little nonverbal angel. I miss her shy smiles and how she falls asleep for naptime sucking on two fingers.

I'm so distracted thinking about wanting more time with my daughter as I walk back to my car that I'm not as alert as

usual. It immediately bites me in the ass when a hand clasps tightly around my throat, and I'm shoved hard into the side of a semi-truck parked two parking rows over from my car.

Immediately, I scramble for purchase, trying to use all the self-defense I know to break away from my attacker. But then I see the face of the beefy guy cutting off my airway, and I go still in fear.

It's Roulette.

That's not his real name. They called him that because he's a massive Russian man who speaks little English—or at least he didn't back when I knew him, over three years ago, as a part of the Wild Seven. And standing beside him is Jack, with his too-bright smile and perfectly coifed hair. Jack is a hacker like me, also part of the Wild Seven.

*Shit.* They've found me.

They both laugh at the fear that must be clear on my face, but I stop struggling so much because I know they'll only find it more amusing. I go still and pray that Roulette won't choke the air out of me completely. My lungs are burning, and tears prick my eyes, but it's all made so much worse when another voice murmurs, "That should be enough."

*Ace.*

He hasn't shown his face in Vegas for years. Not since he kicked me out of the Wild Seven. His absence in the area has been evidenced by the increase of amateurs—they wouldn't

dare raise so many flags in the same city where he's working otherwise.

Fear claws at me. He's back, and he's found me. This is so fucking bad.

Roulette releases his hold on my throat but slams me back against the semi-truck again, making my head ring. I choke and gasp for breath, trying not to cower but also trying not to look at Ace directly. Jack bares his teeth at me.

“Long time no see, lucky little Loren. Ace's been wondering what happened to you. You're not out there spilling our secrets, are you? If you are, Roulette gets to choke you to his heart's desire—kinky thing, isn't he?”

Roulette chuckles, but one look from Ace shuts him up. One look from Ace would shut *anyone* up. I try not to flinch as he steps closer to me. He's dressed sleek, like usual, and if I was a regular citizen with no idea of what he's capable of, he would almost come across as non-threatening.

*Almost*, except he has that smile. That creepy, slim, talk-wrong-to-me-and-I'll-destroy-you smile.

“Well?”

“Well, what?” I manage.

My voice is ragged and hoarse, my throat still burning. I wipe my nose on the back of my hand and still try not to look pathetic. I'm not sure it's working.

“Jack asked a question. You know what we do to snitches.”

I know it too well. When I'd first joined the Wild Seven, he made me watch as they punished a recent ex-member for opening their big, fat mouth. I'd seen some violence before, working as a hacker from state to state at the time, but that? I shiver. So much blood.

That was the first time I saw internal organs up close, and I'd waited until I got home to throw up and try to forget I saw any of it.

I'm sure I'm pale as fucking paper right now, but I manage to shake my head and croak, "Why the hell would I snitch? I can't have them knowing what I do, either. I haven't breathed a word about any of you to anyone. You guys know I'm not like that."

Ace moves closer, and my stomach clenches with nausea when he reaches out and caresses my neck. As if he's trying to soothe the ache there with his clammy, skinny fingertips. He rubs my clavicle and hums while I force myself not to shudder or shy away.

"It's good you're not like that," he croons. "Hard to believe it's been three years, but then you always were so hard to pin down. I'd have liked to pin you down sooner, Loren. You always were on the beautiful side for all your trouble."

He's insinuating a lot with his quiet whisper, making me want to bolt. Getting hit on by Ace is fucking unnerving. It's not the first time it's happened, but I saw how he treated his women back when I ran with the group and stayed the hell away from that situation.

I glance at my car. It's parked closer to the road, where passing traffic would have a clear view of me and where they wouldn't actually dare hurt me in the general public's view. Right now, the semi-truck they have me backed against is blocking me from view, keeping me in danger, but if I could just slip out to where I can be seen.

"Go ahead," Ace says with a low laugh. "Try to get out where you can be seen. We'd all love to see you put up a fight. Always more fun that way."

"What do you want from me?"

"Thought you might want your job back."

I go still. He'd...let me back into the Wild Seven? That wasn't what I expected at all.

Jack is still beaming at me. He could probably drown a small army with how much teeth bleach he must use yearly to keep his pearly whites so damn *white*.

"That's right. We'd hate to see a skilled beauty like you scrounging around for crumbs forever. It's pathetic. We can take pity on you. Ace seems to forgive you for blowing your shit last time."

It's always been weird to me how he speaks on Ace's behalf all the time. Such a brown-noser. And Roulette, as usual, is just a big, silent meathead with muscles literally meant for killing. I'm not surprised other members of the Wild Seven aren't here for this—they rarely show up in the same place at



the same time. I'm even sort of surprised these three are here together at once.

But joining them again...I don't want to entertain the idea.

It's like a siren call back to my past, when things were less tough, and I was living big on wins and playing the casinos of Las Vegas like a violin day and night. It sated my need for revenge. If I think about it too long, I might forget the bad parts, including the ending.

Outright refusing them might offend their egos, so I carefully shake my head. "I'm working a boring-ass desk job—haven't hacked shit for months. I doubt I'm good enough these days to be part of the group, gentlemen. I'm out of practice."

Ace's eyes narrow. At least, I think they do. Hard to tell because I'm mostly looking at his nose, so I don't have to make direct eye contact because he scares the shit out of me.

"Speaking of the desk job," I say quickly. "I should really get going. Don't worry, I remember the rules and I'll forget I ever saw you. If someone asks questions about you, I'll shut them up myself. Excuse me."

Roulette cracks his knuckles, but just as I manage to sidestep the three of them and take the first few steps back to my car, Ace speaks again.

"You dare try to fucking lie to me?"

The sound of a gun clicking makes me go still, eyes on the road. People can see me from here since I'm fairly close to my car, but the members of the Wild Seven are still hidden by the

semi-truck. Ace could shoot me and have Glitch wipe any security cameras from the restaurant's parking lot, and the Wild Seven would simply vanish. I've seen him do it before.

Fuck, I can't die in this Chinese restaurant's parking lot. Their kung pao chicken wasn't even that good.

"Once a hacker, always a hacker. It hasn't been months since your last play. You've been in the game ever since I kicked your sorry whore ass out three years ago. Lie to me again, and I'll put a bullet in the back of your pretty head."

I don't dare move. I can barely breathe. I can't see the gun pointed at me, but I know it's there, and I can hear Jack and Roulette laughing at my obvious terror.

I've witnessed Ace kill like this before and did nothing. Sure, most of the people he's killed have been skeevey, sickening individuals, but still. Maybe it's karma that I'll die in the same way.

Before I can speak, a sleek, hella expensive black car pulls up to the curb just in front of the parking lot I'm standing in.

My pulse skyrockets further when Domenic Caputo himself steps out, deep brown eyes on me and brow furrowed.

"Loren. Why are you just standing there?"

He can't see Ace and the others. I'm positive of that, and I'm also positive that Ace isn't going to shoot me with a witness—let alone a Caputo—watching. So I summon all of my acting skills and clear my throat, putting on the breeziest smile I can

manage and walking past my car to where Domenic is standing.

No way am I about to get in my car and risk being alone again. The Wild Seven might track me, and so far, I bet they don't *know* which car is mine. If they know my license plate, they can track me. Find my mom—find *Evelyn*.

I can't let them know anything about me or where I live, and Glitch would be able to hack all of that info if I give them the faintest idea of which junky car belongs to me.

“As a matter of fact, I was just about to call you,” I say quickly to Domenic, not quite meeting his eye. “My car isn't starting, and I could use a ride.”

“Is that why you're so late getting back?”

Am I well over my break time? Is that why he's driving around out here—was he looking for me? I push away the idea and nod.

“Sorry about that.”

“Get in,” he says simply, opening the passenger door to his car for me.

I didn't realize how badly I'm shaking until I tried to buckle in, and it took seven tries. Luckily, Domenic is circling the car to get into the driver's side during that embarrassing display, so he doesn't notice.

He pulls away into traffic, and I keep my hands tucked under my thighs as I stare straight ahead. My heart is still pounding

double-time, and I have no doubt that I might've been dead right now if Domenic hadn't found me the moment he did.

The Wild Seven are back, and now that I've turned Ace's job offer down, I'm sure I'm just further on their bad side. My gut is churning with anxiety and fear.

I'm so distracted by what just happened that I gasp in alarm when Domenic swears viciously and breaks hard, pulling over into a parking spot in an area nowhere near the casino. I turn to him to ask what he pulled over for when I see his dark eyes pinned on my throat. I'd forgotten all about the bruises probably already forming there.

Instinctively, I reach up to try to cover the marks, but he grabs my hand to stop me and meets my eye with a blaze in his own that takes me off guard.

“Who the fuck touched you?” he snarls.

He can't find out. I can't let him figure out who I used to run with, everything I used to do.

I shake my head quickly, forcing another smile onto my face and brushing off his concern.

“Relax. You're overreacting. I'm fine.”

## Chapter 8

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## Domenic

She's not fucking fine. Her throat is bruised.

*Bruised.*

Anger is coursing through me. Some fucker laid a finger on Loren, and she's trying hard to show it, but she's trembling. Her eyes keep shifting out the window, and I don't think she realizes her breathing is far from even. She's terrified.

Something is wrong.

I'm going to find out what happened. Then I will make whoever fucking touched Loren suffer until they beg me to end them. I can't pull my eyes away from the redness and light blue ringing Loren's neck. I'm going to break whoever did this.

"You're not fine," I practically spit. "Tell me."

She won't meet my eye. "You know, if you keep veering over to park in the middle of heavy traffic like this without using your signal, you'll cause a—"

*”Loren.”*

She flinches at my voice. I hate that. Something has really shaken her, but I won’t back down until I find out what it is.

“Look at me.”

Her soft blue gaze meets mine, guarded. She’s wringing her hands again. “I said I’m fine.”

“I heard, and you better not repeat that lie again. Tell me who did this. It must have happened after I saw you last night, and you’ve been fucking avoiding me all day, so either it happened last night or today. Did this happen at home?”

New rage fills me at that idea. What if she was lying about not having a boyfriend? What if she’s with an abusive asshole? I’m going to kill him.

“Tell me where you live,” I growl.

“No,” Loren practically yelps. “It wasn’t at home. It—it was today.” She sinks into the seat and swallows, obviously pained by the action. Her voice doesn’t sound right, and that makes me livid. “Earlier.”

My patience is at zero, which must reflect on my face because she heaves a sigh and rubs her face, still shaking. “Look, I just...I crossed paths with some dangerous people back when I was hacking casinos a lot more.”

“Was this another casino owner?” I press. If so, fuck being friendly business competition with them. I’ll rip whoever did this to shreds. I might seem calm and collected when I’m

angry most of the time, but this is not something I'll be calm about.

“No.”

“Give me names.”

“I—I can't. They're really dangerous, Domenic.” Her voice rasps, and she sounds miserable as she looks at me again. The moisture in her eyes hurts me. “If they know I breathed a word about them, any of them....”

Loren shudders, but my brain catches up with my anger. She's talking about a group. Apparently a highly dangerous one. Plenty of rings of dangerous hackers take cracks at Las Vegas casinos from time to time. Still, I remember what Vivian told me about the recent security feed hacking of various casinos, including mine, by the Wild Seven.

Is that who Loren is so terrified of? Did she wrong them somehow? That elite, elusive, almost legendary group of hackers is a pain in the ass. They're also really fucking violent, based on some of the messes my family has stumbled upon at their hands.

And that's coming from a mafioso who's made his fair share of messes.

I study Loren as she keeps her mouth shut tight, unwilling to say another word. I'm sure I must be right. And if I am, then this poor, beautiful, brilliant woman really does have something to be afraid of if she had a run-in with that group of psychos.



Her residual terror softens something in me that I usually keep iced over. I almost don't recognize the gentle tone in my voice when I reach out to tuck some of her blond hair behind her ear, careful not to spook her.

"Tell me where you live."

She shakes her head hard. "I already told you it didn't happen at home. It was just—"

"I just want to take you home, *il mio fiore di ciliegio*," I say as gently as I can, with anger like this burning in my gut.

*My cherry blossom.*

Loren doesn't look any less tense at that idea. She's putting up a decent front, but I wonder how close she came to being hurt far worse today by the group she's hinted at—or even killed.

That has my hand tightening on the steering wheel, and I have to steady my breath before offering her a small, comforting smile. I only hope it's comforting. This is far from my forte.

"If you don't want me to press you for more answers, you will let me take you home."

"I need to get back to work."

She's quiet. Hugging her chest tightly. Not at all like her regular sunny, bright self.

When I track down the Wild Seven, I will remember this little quiver in her voice and take it out on them tenfold.

"You'll have the rest of the day off."

"But—"

“No. You’re fucking *going home*.”

My voice is too sharp, and I exhale before trying again, taking her chin so she’ll look at me. God, she’s so wary, and I want her to stop looking at me like I might be the next one to hurt her because it physically hurts.

“Loren. Catching whoever is scamming the Golden Flame can wait. Right now, my priority is your well-being. I’m going to take you home, and I want you to run a warm bath, soak and unwind, and drink soothing tea to help your throat. If the bruising worsen tomorrow, you’ll have the entire day off with pay.”

She blinks. “I... that’s too much. I’ll be back in tomorrow.”

I give up on resisting and let my fingers glide down her jaw to her throat, barely brushing the skin with how light my touch is.

“No. You won’t. You need to recover.”

“But—”

“Argue, and it will be three days. You’re not coming back in until the bruising fades. And if at any time while you’re at home, you feel frightened or like whoever *they* are might pose a threat to you, you will dial my number and keep me on the phone until I get there and take care of the fucking problem. Understand?”

Loren looks away, whispering, “I can take care of myself.”

“I already told you. I can take care of you better.”

She’s quiet for a long moment. I’d almost forgotten that we’re in my car, parked off to the side of the road when I’m running

behind on a million things today. But right now, none of that matters. All I can think about is that someone fucking hurt Loren, and now she's scared, and I'm not going to let her brush it off.

“Okay. Thank you, Domenic.”

Much better than *Mr. Caputo* or the other things she keeps trying to call me.

She gives me her address, and I drive her back to her house in silence. She has her purse with her and says she didn't leave anything important at the security room in the casino for me to drop off for her later. Otherwise, we sit in silence until I pull up to an old apartment complex toward the city's edge.

I almost let loose a string of curses at the sight of it. This complex is run-down, and the security is probably shit. This is the exact kind of out-of-the-way place where cops have given up that my enforcers and other Caputos love so much because they can get away with literal murder in these areas with next to no risk.

She's not staying here for long. Not on my watch.

Still, I don't say a word as Loren gets out of the car and thanks me again quietly. She doesn't go directly to her apartment, though. Glancing over her shoulder at me as though she doesn't want me to know which unit is hers, Loren instead ducks into the shared mail room and doesn't come out. I'm sure she won't until I'm gone.

Why does she have to be so smart, gorgeous, and fucking stubborn at once? Have I not made it clear that hurting her is the last thing I would ever want?

I drive away. As I do, I call Big Luck.

“Yeah, Boss,” he answers, and I can hear him crunching on some snack on the other end.

“I have a new security assignment for you.”

“Not at the casino, you mean?” he asks, confused. “You know I’m there with you most of the time. Haven’t been on a regular Caputo security assignment since you took over. What’s changed?”

“Loren Rally needs protection.”

I will keep a closer eye on her from now on, whether I’m there or not, because I don’t want this to happen again. Seeing her pale with terror and refusing to talk to me when she’s typically lively and sassy was something I didn’t want to see again.

“The hacker?” Big Luck groans. “Bad enough you employed her, man, but now you want me watching over her like a hawk? You know she’d probably scamming money from behind the scenes now, don’t you?”

I’d kept a close eye on her in the few days since hiring her. I’d triple-checked everything she was slowly given access to day by day, and I’ll keep doing it just for peace of mind, even though I know deep down Loren isn’t going to steal from the casino now—not when she has a real job.

“Are you arguing with me?” I ask quietly.

He must tell I'm already pissed by the sound of my voice, and the crunching stops on the other end. "No. Nope. I'll keep an eye on her."

Another thing nags at me as I turn onto the road where The Golden Flame Casino is lit up, drawing customers left and right. "While you do that, find out why she's so uneasy around me."

"Everyone is uneasy around you," he points out chipperly. "You're Domenic fucking Caputo. If she wasn't uneasy, she'd be an idiot."

Loren is my opposite in so many ways—personality especially—but like me, she isn't an idiot. Yet she's been so cautious around me, despite her usual ease in chatting with people. It makes me feel as though there's something I'm missing. Something beyond the night we spent together three years ago and beyond her hacking and my mobster lifestyle.

"Just keep an eye out," I mutter.

"Sure thing, Boss."

## Chapter 9

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## Loren

“I see you, you little hellion,” I mutter, scrolling through more numbers on the computer in front of me.

When Dominic hired me to mitigate against hacking in general, I doubt he realized one particular hacker was taking his casino for a ride.

Whoever they are, they’re careful. Cunning. If I wasn’t trying to turn over a new leaf, I’d probably even admire whoever is pulling this off. Unfortunately, I haven’t found anything to track down an identity, but it’s only a matter of time.

After being choked, threatened, and nearly shot by the Wild Seven almost a week ago, I’ve been on high alert. Everything on lockdown. No going out to restaurants or anywhere unnecessary, and no being outside without a hat, sunglasses, and other small ways of keeping my face hidden.

My mom went to pick up my car from the Chinese place the day after the ordeal—the day that Domenic insisted I take off to recover. I’d spent all of it with Evelyn, reading her books,

lounging beside her during her nap time, and laughing at her cautious and methodical way of playing with her many toys.

Being threatened by Ace was fucking terrifying, but getting a day to love on my precious little toddler helped me calm down and realign myself.

At the very least, the Wild Seven is probably on the lookout for me now. So I'll be cautious, find this hacker for Domenic, and help scam-proof his casino. Then, hopefully, I'll have made enough to pay off my and my mother's more pressing bills.

Maybe I can even get a reference from Dominic for finding a job elsewhere after that. For once, I feel like there's a chance to shake off the past and go somewhere new to keep raising Evelyn in secret. A change of pace would be good for me, Evie, and my mom, and it would keep the Wild Seven far away.

And a tiny part of me thinks that perhaps if I do a good job and win over Domenic's trust...maybe I should tell him about our daughter. The adorable, dark-eyed little cutie who's the result of our passionate, all-night-long one-night stand.

But that's a bad idea for so many reasons I don't want to linger on. It's not something I should daydream about—especially not at work like I am now.

I frown as I keep scrolling through ones and zeroes, reading the computer code algorithms as someone else might read a book. There's something off here.



I pull up a similar record and scroll again, but I keep finding things that are off. Not “off” like someone is doing small hacks—I’ve found plenty of those—but more like...

A virus.

There’s some kind of virus in The Golden Flame Casino’s intricate, state-of-the-art security programs.

“Oh, shit. Come to mama,” I whisper as I excitedly scroll through more data records to identify the pattern and track it down.

“What’d you say?” Vivian pipes up from her chair on the other end of the room as if I’ve broken her train of thought. “Something we need to look at?”

“Not yet,” I say in a sing-song voice, fingers moving at lightning speeds now.

I created a sandbox system that mirrored the casino’s programs a few days ago to give myself room to understand it better without affecting real-time data. I launch it and begin typing in my own programming to identify differences between how the clean system would run and how it’s running right in front of me on the work computer, scrolling with numbers.

“What is all of this?”

Domenic Caputo’s quiet voice behind me isn’t enough to startle me from my excited search, even though I’ve carefully avoided him since he unwittingly saved my life days ago.

“It’s a hunt.”

“For?”

I flash him a smile. “You have a virus.”

Vivian and a couple of the others in the room hear that and move to watch from behind me, just as Domenic is. One of them, named Tobias, scoffs loudly.

“You know how much training we’ve gone through to look for something like that? We’d know if there was a virus floating around the systems. We have so many antivirus systems in place that—”

“It stemmed from one of those systems.”

He protests, but then I pull up two side-by-side examples of programming and carefully outline the places where the virus is oh-so-subtly altering things in the tiniest ways, so carefully it almost seems manual, but I can tell it’s not.

The next hour is a flurry as people in the security room rush to look for themselves and begin hunting down the security threat, but I’m way ahead of them.

I find that virus, and I make it my bitch.

Everyone is there to see the careful tracking and repairs to programming I make as I erase the virus from the system. Finally, I relaunch things and am surprised to hear some of the security team whoop and cheer, clapping me on the shoulder or high-fiving me.

Even Vivian, who’s always lukewarm to me at best, offers me a begrudging nod before returning to her own work.

I'm excited about my small breakthrough in the world of casino security, and I can't help hopping up from my chair to stretch and do a small victory dance simultaneously.

A low chuckle surprises me, and I'm even more surprised to see that it's from Domenic. He's watching me bent over, touching my toes to stretch my upper back with smoldering heat in his gaze.

I straighten and beam at him, too excited to stop my mouth from spouting off. "Well? I'm waiting."

He arches a dark brow, moving closer. "For?"

"A thank you. I want a big, dramatic, make-everyone-clap-for-me-again thank you from you to me for fixing that, Mr. Caputo. You should be celebrating for me."

His eyes flash, and then I almost gasp when he moves to place his lips against my ear, voice nearly a growl.

"Domenic. You call me Domenic and nothing else. And I'd much rather celebrate by bending you over again and fucking you until *you're* the one thanking *me*."

Heat floods me at his words, and my thighs clench. God, he smells good, and I want to throw myself at him right here, right now. His proximity always does this to me—makes me feel like we're two ends of a magnet pulling to each other, narrowly missing each other each time as the tension builds and my heartbeat quickens.

No one else in the room is looking at us, but I still pull away to ward off suspicion. Then my weaker side, the part of me that's

been desperate for this dangerous mafioso ever since before I stepped back into his casino, rears its head.

“Go on, then. Thank me exactly the way I know you’re picturing, *Mr. Caputo.*”

Domenic’s eyes flash again, and he takes another step closer, like he’s close to snapping and grabbing me right here despite all the security members chatting in the room.

“If you don’t follow me out of this room right now, you’ll earn another one.”

“Another what?”

“Spanking,” he growls under his breath.

Oh, God. I flush at his words, excitement pooling through me and heating my skin.

“Follow me,” Domenic demands, and then he leaves the security room.

I know he’s out there waiting for me right now, and I allow myself an evil little smile while I take my time, grabbing my purse, powering off my computer, and casually telling the others I’m taking off early for an “appointment.”

By the time I get into the hallway, Domenic is smoldering. He could melt steel with his eyes.

He doesn’t move for me since there are cameras in here, but I see his hand flex like he’s already imagining it against my ass. That arouses me even more—this older, dangerous man who’s

always so in control being so tempted to spank me here and now.

“Sorry, did I keep you waiting?” I tease, winking as I brush past him toward the parking garage.

He stays silent as we walk beside one another, the tension building even as we remain mindful of the cameras posted all over the Golden Flame and the attached parking garage.

When we reach my car, he stops me with a hand on my arm and leans in to whisper gravelly, “Get in, pretend to start it and feign it doesn’t work. Don’t actually use your keys. Then you’re getting in my car, I’ll say I took you home, but I’m taking you to my place, and I’m going to fuck you all night, Loren. Right after I spank your naughty, delicious little ass.”

I’m breathless from arousal as I do exactly as he says for the benefit of the camera and the team watching us. Soon, I’m in Domenic’s car again, only this time, instead of being scared, I want to drive him wild.

I want to make my mafioso boss lose his careful control for me, the same way he did three years ago.

The drive is a blur as I kiss along his neck, unbuttoning his shirt to lick more of his tattoos as Domenic swears softly and tries to focus on driving. I tease him by squeezing the bulge in his pants, nibbling his earlobe, and whispering how much I want him in me. I get creative and enjoy seeing him get sexually pent-up more than I could have imagined.

We don't make it to his house. I have no idea where the Caputo heir lives, but he decides it's "too fucking far for this torture." We end up in a hotel room once again, him ripping my clothes off as he kisses me with a hunger that turns my knees to Jell-O.

I get his shirt all the way off of him, but before I can do more, he sits on the bed, grabs me, flips me over his knee, and slaps my ass through my skirt and panties. *Hard.*

"Fuck!" I gasp, struggling. "Domenic, that's too—"

"You're the one who fucked around, and now you face the consequences," he chuckles darkly, stripping off my skirt and panties before running his hand soothingly over my skin there with a pleased sound.

I squirm again and then shriek when his palm connects with my ass again, sending a shock of both pain and pleasure to my core. He spans me five more times, gently caressing my ass after each one, and by the time he's done, I'm so wet and aroused that I'm literally begging.

"Please. Fuck, Domenic, *please,*" I huff, biting my lip and clenching my thighs.

His fingers dip into my wetness for the first time, making me gasp and arch into his touch.

"You're dripping for me," he groans. "Good girl. Tell me. Have you thought about this over the last three years, Loren?"

"You spanking me?" I giggle as he finally allows me to straighten and straddle him.

I capture his lips and grind against the rock-hard erection in his pants, gratified when he lets loose a tortured moan. His hands go to my hips, and he runs his nose down my neck, kissing it so gently that I know he's thinking of the marks he saw there nearly a week ago.

"Us in bed. Me fucking you. Everything we did and wanted more of."

I close my eyes as he strips my shirt and bra off of me before kissing and licking my nipples one by one, hands running up and down my sides as he worships my chest and body.

"All the time," I admit in a breathless whisper.

"Good girl," he smiles against my breast before nipping me there and making me jump a little. "How about when you were *taking care* of yourself? Did you think about me while you touched your pretty pussy?"

God, I forgot how delicious Domenic's voice is when he talks dirty. Of course, it's always delicious, but when he's saying things like this, I can't help whimpering and grinding harder against him.

"Yes."

He turns and sets me on the bed even as he finishes stripping, releasing his thick, throbbing cock from his pants for me to marvel at.

"Good," he growls, pushing me against the bed as he kisses my throat and stomach.

For a split second, I worry he'll notice the faded stretch marks there that definitely weren't the last time we did this. To distract him, I scoot up slightly and slip my fingers into his hair, pressing down to make him lick my pussy.

Domenic makes a hungry, pleased groan when I do this, and then he goes to town, eating me out until I come undone, gasping and clutching at him because I'm unsure if I want him to stop or keep going. I'm so sensitive and turned on that both sound like torture.

He slides up my body, tasting and nipping the entire way back to my mouth until we're kissing again, both breathless but unwilling to pull away as we grind against one another, heat filling us and the air around us.

“Did you ever think about me? The hacker you had to get rid of?” I finally hazard, kissing a particularly violent tattoo on his muscled shoulder.

All of Domenic is so deliciously muscled. He's not scarred like so many other mafiosos—he's clearly too careful to be caught up in many fights he can't win easily. And his tattoos are all over—on his back, his torso, crawling up his neck and down his arms.

I fucking love it.

He captures my gaze with his burning, dark eyes. “Yes. I thought of you all the time, and not just as the hacker I had to protect by banning. I thought of you that night, how I took you again and again. The way you tasted, smelled, sounded—how



you screamed my name just like I'm about to have you screaming it again.”

“Oh, yes. Please,” I groan when he places his cock at my primed entrance, teasing and so hard and amazing.

Then he pauses. “I have a condom in my wallet—”

Oh, God. The irony. I'm not about to tell him just to what extent condoms were *not* enough the last time we did this.

“I mean, wrap it if you want, but I have an IUD,” I say quickly. “And I'm clean.”

Very clean. My dating life has been a joke for the last three years because I haven't given it much chance.

Domenic reaches down to tease my clit, making me arch against him.

“I'm clean, too,” he promises, kissing down my neck. “Are you sure this is fine, *il mio fiore di ciliegio?*”

His Italian is so smooth, so rich. He has no accent in the day-to-day, but I almost wonder whether English was his first language. And whatever he's calling me, I really like it.

“I'm sure,” I say, impatient and horny out of my mind. I whisper against his ear. “Please just fuck me, Domenic.”

He groans and thrusts deep inside, making me gasp and scratch my fingernails up his back. He made sure I was nice and ready, but still—the stretch was intense and insanely good. I groan and gasp as he begins to fuck me slowly and deeply.

Domenic's pace picks up gradually as he whispers things in Italian that I don't know but drive me wild all the same. He kisses me fervently as his thrusts become fast and hard, my legs wrapped around his waist as I arch to take him deeper. I scream his name when my orgasm hits me hard, sending sparks through my body and curling my toes.

He follows right after, groaning and grinding into me mercilessly until finally, both of us are panting, exhausted, and completely content. I could practically die happy right here in this hotel room because this gorgeous mafioso just dicked me into paradise.

I realize I must have said that last part out loud when Domenic laughs loud and hard, startling me as he pulls me against his chest, twisting onto his side.

"I like your laugh," I giggle. "I've never heard it before."

"Most never do."

"You know, if you keep being so serious all the time, you'll develop some kind of chronic gastrointestinal disease."

Domenic laughs hard again and shakes his head, kissing my neck. "You're something else, Loren Rally."

"The *something else* you're talking about is called being realistic. Pessimists like you get all kinds of health problems related to stress. Gastrointestinal diseases are among those, so watch your back. Or rather, your butt, I guess."

I really like making him laugh, and he seems to be a thousand times more relaxed than he usually is, holding me close to him

as he is now. His inky dark hair falls slightly over his forehead, and he keeps pressing light kisses to my shoulder, neck, cheek, and upper back. It's mesmerizing.

After long moments of comfortable silence following our explosion of desire, Domenic runs his fingers through my hair and whispers, "Tell me something. What got you into hacking slot machines?"

I feel myself shutting down, my guard coming back up immediately, even as I grow sleepy in his arms.

"You want to ruin my afterglow by asking about the mistakes in my past, huh?" I ask softly. "I'm ashamed of things I've done, Domenic. I don't like talking about it."

He's quiet for a moment.

"Okay. I understand that" he finally murmurs. "I've done things I'm not proud of, too."

I'll just bet he has. As fucking scary as the Wild Seven can be, they have sizeable competition in the Caputo family. As the heir to that legion of organized crime, I know the man I'm cuddled up against has had a dangerous, likely violent past.

That doesn't mean I want to tell him all about mine, though. I have a lot of secrets to keep from him in that department—and at the very top of that list is the sweet little toddler my mother is watching right now. Before leaving the casino, I'd sent her a text letting her know I'd get home late tonight. Now that Domenic is bringing up the past, this might be the best time to

bounce because I'm not ready to breathe a word about Evelyn to him.

Because as much as I want him and as safe as I feel in his arms right now, Domenic Caputo is a powerful, dangerous man. The kind of man who could take Evie away from me permanently because he can easily afford to give her everything I'm working so hard to try and earn for her.

I can't let that happen.

"I should go," I whisper.

But he pulls me closer, keeping me right there. I'm surprised by the vulnerability in his whisper against my skin.

"Wait—stay. Loren, I just..." He presses his face into my neck. "I just need tonight with you. Please."

It feels so damn good to be held like this by him. It's exactly what I've fantasized about for three difficult years and ever since he hired me. Is it so wrong to give in for just one night?

I already learned the answer to that when I lost so much three years ago in this same situation. Still, I don't move from this perfect place, and soon, Domenic's breathing steadies behind me, with me still tucked closely against him. Like he's protecting me even in his sleep.

I let myself drift off not far after him, content for the first time in a long time.

## Chapter 10

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## Domenic

The buzzing of Loren's cell phone wakes me. She's still deeply asleep beside me in the dim early morning light, her blond hair wreathing her head and her beautiful bare body against mine.

She's so gorgeous. And I don't doubt she needs her rest after I woke her up again during the night, desperate to be in her because the deeper intimacy of sleeping so peacefully beside her turned me the fuck on.

Careful not to wake the beautiful woman beside me, I grab her phone from the nightstand to glance at the screen, trying to gauge if it's important enough to wake her.

The image on it is a middle-aged woman with short blond hair and a crinkled smile. She looks enough like my cherry blossom that I recognize her as Loren's mother.

She begins calling again. I sigh and kiss Loren's shoulder, smoothing her hair away from her face.

*"Il mio fiore di ciliegio?"* I whisper.

“The fuck are you saying? That’s not English, is it? Am I just that out of it?” She yawns and stretches, giving me a mouthwatering view of her curves under the thin sheet as she does.

I smile. “It’s Italian for cherry blossom.”

*My* cherry blossom, to be precise.

She peers at me, adorably groggy and confused. “Why are you waking me up to talk about cherry blossoms? It’s not bright enough outside for it to be time to get to work.”

I hand her the phone while stealing another kiss, far too pleased by how it feels to wake up beside Loren. It’s something I could happily get used to. Something about this sassy, bright-spirited woman soothes my worst days and stress in a way I’ve never experienced before.

She sees the missed calls and sits up with a frown, tugging the sheets up to cover her breasts despite my sigh of protest. She calls her mother back, anxious as she waits, eyeing me almost shyly.

Which is amusing. After the things we did to each other last night, we’re *far* past being shy.

“Hey! I know. Sorry. Look, I really am sorry,” she says into the phone, rubbing her face. “Well, uh, there was a thing at work, and then I went out...celebrating with a coworker,” she says carefully.

I almost laugh at how she’s bending the truth, and Loren shoos me away as she gets out of bed and begins dressing. I sit back

and enjoy the show. This is ordinarily the time I enter the casino early to get started on things or when I check in on Caputo business in other places of Vegas.

But being late one morning won't kill my productivity.

She's nearly dressed when she bolts upright, the panic on her face making me tense as well. "What? God, Mom, why didn't you tell me this last night? No—I know you didn't want to worry me, and I appreciate it, but...fuck, how high is her fever?"

Her voice is panicked, and she's rushing now, nearly ready to bolt out the door. I'm on my feet, dressing quickly to take her wherever she needs to be. Concern tugs at me while I listen to her conversation.

"Okay. Okay, I'll be right there. I'll call the ped—" Loren glances at me. "Don't worry, I'll call the doctor. No, don't do that. I'm coming right home."

She hangs up and wrings her hands as she looks at me with borderline pleading. "I need to be late today. To work, I mean. I'm sorry, but—there's this friend of mine, and she's sick, and \_\_\_"

She's frantic. I hate seeing that, and I quickly capture her hands to calm the way she's about to wring the life out of them. I kiss her lips lightly and finish dressing, grabbing her purse and my keys and taking her hand to pull her out of the hotel. If she's this worked up, we're not sticking around another moment. I can check out later.



I drive straight to her apartment, and Loren's knee bounces with nerves the entire time. Despite the wonderful night together, she has an unhappy set to her plump lips. Dozens of questions are trying to force their way out of me, but I keep myself from prying.

Is she truly so frantic over the fever of a friend? I find that unlikely, but I have no other guesses and doubt she would answer any questions I might pose.

When I pull up to the sorry apartments, Loren thanks me profusely and pauses momentarily in the passenger seat to consider me, worrying her lip.

“About last night...it was just a celebration, you know? A big breakthrough at work. I think we both needed it, and we're adults, and we can go back to just being an employed ex-hacker and her stoic mafioso boss, right?”

She's not wrong about me needing last night. I don't want to say that I'm already becoming addicted to the idea of doing all of that again, so I just nod.

“I'll be in at work later, I promise. I just—”

“Take the day off.”

Loren hesitates. But she doesn't argue before thanking me and closing the door after herself. She doesn't even duck into the mail room—she goes right to her apartment number and slips inside, making my concern spike only more.

She's such a cautious type. While we've undoubtedly grown closer since she showed back up in my life, my little cherry

blossom hacker wouldn't just give away her home like that without the matter truly being pressing.

A car pulls up to park beside mine, and I don't need more than a glance from my peripheral vision before rolling down my window.

"Well. I know what you did last night," Big Luck chuckles. "And by what, I mean who. And by who, I mean the fucking hacker. Is this why you wanted protection placed on her? You've got a fling going on?"

I give him a look that makes his teasing grin disappear. "At least you're here," I sigh, looking at the apartment door again. "It tells me you're doing your job keeping an eye on her. Has she noticed?"

"Nope."

"Good. Keep watching her. She's worried sick about someone with a fever, and I want to know who and why."

Big Luck grunts. "It's probably her kid."

Kid?

"What?"

"Her kid. Loren has a kid," he shrugs. Then he frowns at me. "You didn't know? See, this is why you shouldn't go sleeping around with slot-hacking women without doing a little digging first, Boss. You never know what you're getting yourself into if—"

"Luck," I mutter, thoughts cascading as I stare at the door.

“Yeah?”

“Shut up.”

“Sure.”

Loren has a child. I let that sink in. This explains some things, like her need for money and extreme defensiveness toward me or others coming near her home. It explains why she’s so tight-lipped about her life outside of her work and even why she was so beyond terrified of the group threatening her days ago. She was likely worried they might track her down and hurt the kid.

Is it a boy or a girl? How old? Did she have the kid before we met, or...

I quickly veer away from the next train of thought and decide Big Luck is right. I need to do some digging into this.

I leave Loren at her apartment and return to the casino, showering in the suite beside my office that works as a second bedroom at work on nights when I’m too tired to drive to my house in Green Valley Ranch. When I get out, I see a missed call from my father, one from an uncle, and plenty of messages from other Caputos and business associates.

It’s going to be another exhausting day of putting out fires and directing my crime family as its head don and leader.

I rub my face and ignore everything for a moment to send a message to one of my most trusted confidantes, an old friend outside of the Caputo family with a knack for tracking down

information. We often talk, especially when I'm looking for blackmail to use to twist arms and get shit done.

He responds immediately, letting me know he'll look into all the details about Loren Rally—and most importantly, the child she has that she hasn't spoken a word about to anyone, least of all me. I'm sure Big Luck only knows about it because he's been keeping a close eye on her, and I wonder how I could have missed such a big part of her life myself.

As I anticipated, the day was arduous. Family hounds me at every turn, and if it isn't a blood relative bringing up some new mess for me to clean up or some asset to buy or fund, it's older businessmen trying to schmooze and dine me as they play in my casino.

And as always, I keep my composure, never make split decisions, and scare the shit out of anyone who questions my methods—because what I'm doing fucking works, whether my family will admit it or not.

Strangely, sometimes I feel like an outcast among other Caputos. Almost a failure. I'm not what they envisioned as their don, and they don't like the more dialed-down approach I have to things. They prefer flexing their power at every chance to bring in money as fast as possible, no matter the long-term toll or the danger of authorities noticing or the high death rate in our younger members.

I'm methodical. Controlled. My family hates it, and I know it, and it's too fucking bad for them because I'm calling the shots. But just like my father, sometimes I feel it would be nice if

one of them, if *someone*, could see things the way I do. My endgame is just as profitable, but it'll leave fewer widows and fewer bodies to be buried in the desert.

By the time the day has passed, and I'm tired as I watch the casino's ground floor from my preferred place one floor up, I've given up pondering the dynamics of my family, and—as usual—my mind has wandered back to Loren.

I still remember seeing her in my casino for the first time, just down there. The pink hair and devastating dress clinging to her decadent body.

I don't know everything on her plate, but I do know she doesn't need the complications that being involved in my family would entail. I'd be wise to stay away from her and leave her to her quiet little family life in peace after I hunt down the group that has her so scared.

Still, I keep remembering her fingers brushing over my skin last night. She was so excited about her success at work, but I was the one who felt rewarded for it. Being unguarded for once, alone with her where the weight of the world was off my shoulders, was fucking intoxicating.

My phone buzzes, and when I see the message, I return to my secondary room to open my laptop, pulling up the information my old friend sent over.

It's not much. Loren is brilliant, and I'm sure she's done plenty of her own hacking to make this information as sparse as possible to the public eye and to other hackers alike.

All I can see is that she has a girl—a two-year-old. No pictures could be found of her, not even any hospital records for the birth, just some instances of pediatric appointments and receipts indicating Lauren has bought baby clothes and other things over the last couple of years.

Still, as I stare at this little bit of information...the girl is two.

The math adds up. We were together three years ago.

I quickly fight that thought again. I don't want to jump to conclusions. Beyond the fact that we definitely used protection and it was just one night, Loren could have been with other men in the months before or after me. That thought irks me, but she may have a baby daddy out there running around.

Maybe it's even one of the people she's afraid of running into. I hate that thought even more.

This isn't something I should be lingering on, and I quickly close everything down and get ready for bed, early for once, despite knowing I'll struggle to sleep with this on my mind.

As I lay and try to sleep, my mind keeps wandering back to Loren's bright smile and the spark of intelligent wit in her blue eyes whenever she's about to let her sass loose.

I wonder if her daughter looks like her and takes after her. I doubt I should bring up the girl to her at all, given how she's scrubbed most records of the baby from things and has been so fiercely protective already.

I like that she's so protective. Honestly, I like too much about the enchanting hacker, and I can't help wanting to learn

everything there is to her. She said she just wanted that one night of celebration, but I already can't fucking wait until we have something else to celebrate so I can get a repeat of everything between us.

## Chapter 11

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## Loren

Evie's sudden high fever scared the hell out of me, but after a trip to the pediatrician and another day off of work, I felt okay leaving her with my mom again. My mom has been supportive and encouraging regarding my new job, even though I still haven't told her all the details.

I certainly haven't told her that I just so happen to be working for Evelyn's father, a casino owner and a mafioso with a reputation for being both calculative and dangerous.

When I was first pregnant, limping around with a giant cast on my broken leg as I moved things into the new apartment, she had tiptoed around the question of who the father was. When she finally asked me outright, I'd said it was just a one-night stand, and there was no chance of the father ever being in the picture. Not even slightly.

Which is still true. Still, I wondered, as I slept tucked against Domenic's side a couple of nights ago, what he might think of Evie.

She's put on weight finally. When she was born, she was so small that it terrified me. Now she has the most adorable little belly poking out of her frilly clothes. Her dark hair curls around her head, and she observes the world like she's trying to solve an endless puzzle. She's so serious for such an innocent, young age. She's obsessed with my jewelry and toddles all over the apartment, silently looking for me when I'm not there, and she absolutely hates anything apple flavored.

In short, Evelyn is everything to me.

So while I might have wondered how Domenic might have looked at his little daughter if he knew the truth, I still don't trust him. He has money and influence and everything else I don't have. Any court in the world would give him custody of my little angel in a heartbeat, and then I'd be broken all over again like I was in that parking garage the day after my life changed forever.

Speaking of parking garages, I'm still on edge whenever I walk into the one connected to the Golden Flame Casino. As I walk through it now, toward the very end where my car is parked, I try not to jump at every shadow or look obsessively for the security cameras to ensure I'm in full view of the security room.

It's late after another long day of running through numbers and testing ways of stopping hackers in the casino's systems. I'm more than ready to get home, bathe Evelyn, feed her dinner,

eat whatever is lying around, and then tuck her in to cuddle and sleep for the night.

I wonder if my mom has been following all the doctor's suggestions for Evie after her fever. She's supposed to be staying very hydrated, and although she's finally gaining weight, she needs to be eating more.

The pediatrician brought up her not talking again. It really is something I'm worried about. Maybe I should—

Abruptly, the lights all around flicker, and I go still. I faintly hear an alarm in the distance, as if I'm hearing it from inside the main area of the casino.

Is something going wrong? Some kind of hazard? Domenic is still in there. He was just talking to Big Luck and headed toward the security room when I'd quickly ducked out so I wouldn't have to face him after our impassioned night a couple days ago.

If something is wrong with security, I need to get in and find out what it is.

But before I can take more than a few rushed steps back toward the door that will take me down to the security hall, a thick, meaty hand grasps around my arm and yanks it so hard I shriek in pain.

The brute knocks me off balance. Out of pure instinct, when I hit the ground, I roll away from my attacker and scramble to hide behind one of the vehicles nearby. I peek around it and

see Roulette lumbering towards me with a grin on his big potato face.

*Shit.*

“Come on out, Loren,” someone else sings, and I flinch again because I recognize this voice, too.

She goes by Twilight to Wild Seven, but she’d once confessed to me that her name is really Chloe. She likes knives. Like, a lot. I’ve seen her carve people up, and she’s tattooed all over with the damn things. I’ve never seen her *not* carrying a small arsenal of freaky-ass, custom-made pocketknives. Not to mention, she’s a coding mastermind, a real boon to the Wild Seven’s trademark black hat shenanigans.

“We never pinned you as a traitor, but Ace is *really* pissed with you now that we know you work here of all places,” she croons.

He knows I’m working here? I try to swallow back my terror, but all I can focus on is the alarms going off somewhere in the distance. Roulette starts to round the car that I’m cowering behind. I make a mad dash for another one, desperate to get away from them and into the casino to see what’s going on. They wouldn’t dare attack me in there with the chance of others seeing and IDing them.

But just as I close in on the door leading down toward the security hall, a blow to my side sends me falling, skidding across concrete that rips at my exposed arms and legs while the air is knocked from my lungs. I hit the side of my head and am vaguely aware of blood creeping down my face, but I’m

already lunging away from Roulette when he swings for me again.

I can see Chloe now, grinning as she sidles around a car to get a better look at me. She laughs.

“God, you’re more pathetic than ever. To go from being such a badass slot hacker to *this*? Honey, you picked the wrong side. I can’t believe you’re working in fucking *security*,” her voice turns into a snarl. “How much have you told them about us, huh?”

“Nothing!” I snap, throwing one of my high heels at Roulette to buy some time as I scramble to my feet. “I haven’t said anything, and I swear I won’t. I already told Ace I wouldn’t. I’m not trying to get in your way. I just—”

Roulette is faster than he looks, and his thick hands wrap around my arm. I gasp and scramble, desperate to get him off of me before he can snap my bone like a twig again.

But then I hear the door behind me burst open, and a deafening gunshot splits the parking garage. I scream. Roulette staggers and drops my arm, grabbing at his massive bleeding shoulder and snarling at none other than Domenic Caputo.

Domenic turns his pistol on Chloe next, but she has the good sense to duck behind cars and slink away as fast as possible. Roulette is thicker in the head and takes his time backing away, hissing something in Russian that I don’t understand.

Big Luck also comes running out the parking garage door, which seems to convince Roulette to get out of there before

he's recognized. The dim, flickering lights have been giving both him and Chloe some cover from the security cameras, but if Luck or Domenic get close, those members of the Wild Seven could be identified.

One moment I'm watching Big Luck chase after Roulette, and the next, I'm being scooped up and carried swiftly back into the casino. I gaze up at Domenic in a daze as he marches inside, arms flexing around me as his jaw clenches. His face looks like an invitation for death itself.

A very handsome invitation, at that. He's clearly furious, but he looks so good even when he's angry.

His dark eyes flick down to me, and he snarls at whatever he sees. I blink when a few moments later, he steps into a suite at the top of the casino. It's enormous, with a glass wall overlooking the sparkling Vegas strip, complete with a sitting space, a minibar, and a glimmering chandelier overhead. This is ritzy.

He sets me down on one of the plush couches of the sitting space and then gingerly tips my head to one side, grinding his teeth together as he looks at my forehead near my temple. I realize that's where the blood dripping over my jaw is coming from—my head.

That's unfortunate. I'll probably have a little scar there now.

Domenic swears colorfully and meets my gaze. "Why didn't you fucking tell me?"

I feel shaky and raw after another brush with danger at the hands of the Wild Seven, so I just shake my head, waving off his confusing question.

“Alarms were going off. Is everything okay? What happened?”

“They hacked our security to make those alarms go off. Sent every customer in here racing out, and now I’m beginning to think they did it simply to get to *you*. Why didn’t you tell me you’re running from the Wild Seven?”

I flinch away when he gently prods the area around my hairline where the blood is matted. “I have to say, you really have a knack for timing. How did you know they were attacking me? Another second and they would have killed—”

He cuts me off with a sharp look as if he’s pissed I’d even say the words. “I saw them attack you on the security cameras. I’m sure they thought I would be too distracted with the mayhem in my casino to notice what they were trying to do.”

He swears again and slips off his suit coat to press it against my head to soak up some of the blood. I’m pretty sure his suit costs a hell of a lot, but I don’t say a word because I’m feeling remarkably lightheaded.

“You might need stitches,” Domenic finally murmurs, voice a low rasp.

I look at his face again and watch his anger as he checks my arms and legs, cataloging each scuff and road burn on my skin.

Truly, the damage isn't too bad. I'm sure the scrapes will heal up in a couple of days, and although it feels like I have a concussion, I'm sure it won't last long.

"I hate going to doctors," I mutter, closing my eyes against the throbbing in my head. Now that the adrenaline of the attack is fading, I'm beginning to feel the bruising in my side from where Roulette hit me, along with everything else.

Domenic's fingertips lightly brush over my arm, and then he grumbles something under his breath that I don't catch. I can still practically feel the fury radiating off this drop-dead gorgeous man, but he still hasn't left me to go deal with the shit that just went down in his casino.

"No doctor needed if you don't want one. I can stitch it myself," he finally says quietly. "It would only be a couple of stitches. I've done it plenty of times. Would you trust me?"

There's another layer to his question. He wants to know if I would trust him in general, not just with this. I consider it for a long moment, staring up into his beautiful dark eyes before I finally nod.

"Sure. Stitch me up, Dr. Caputo."

I try to make my voice light, but I'm sure I sound as drained from the unexpected fright as I feel. And I know there is no real levity in the fact that I just gave him that inch of trust he was asking for.

It's not something I should be doing, trusting a man like this. He's a mobster, a slick and cunning businessman who could



ruin my family and me in the blink of an eye if he chose to. But would he choose that? If he knew about Evelyn, what would he do?

I feel unnervingly safe as Domenic gently and expertly stitches up the cut on my head while I grip the front of his shirt and try not to squirm or sway from my lightheadedness. He's gentle with me. So careful. Though he keeps swearing under his breath, obviously angered at the sight of my blood and the marks on my skin, he comforts me with small touches on my jaw and shoulder as he finishes patching me up.

I never imagined a mafioso like him could be so...tender.

Telling him about Evie is on the tip of my tongue, but I bite it back as he puts away his considerably extensive first-aid kit. I'm sure he uses that kit on himself sometimes—danger, pain, and injuries are just a part of his lifestyle, and most people in crime families like his don't like popping in at the local doctors or hospitals. So I'm not surprised he's so well-versed in caring for a little injury like my head wound.

I allowed him some trust, but I wondered...does Domenic trust me?

It seems impossible, considering I was scamming money from him when we met. He might trust me enough to keep a close eye on me while I work in his security department, but if he knew about our sweet little daughter, would he trust me to raise her well, or would he take matters into his own hands?

I don't know, and not knowing is what keeps my mouth shut.

But a big part of me doesn't *want* to keep my mouth shut about Evelyn anymore. It's the same part of me that feels guilty that this dynamic, quiet, powerful man has no idea that he's the father of such a precious little angel. I've kept it from him to protect my little family, but Evie is technically his, too.

Despite how much I've fought it, Domenic and I have... bonded. Just a little. And obviously, I trust him some—at least enough to weave a needle through my skin, which is a lot. But just because we've bonded doesn't mean he doesn't see me as a scammer and hacker before he sees me as anything else. Certainly, before he sees me as being the ideal mother of his child.

But I could change that. I could win his trust, his regard...I could help him capture the Wild Seven, even. There's a lot I could do that could win over his confidence, and for the first time since he hired me off the bat, I'm tempted to use my shameful past to my advantage.

He can't *know* I was a part of the Wild Seven. He hates them so much, and I don't need him to have another reason to take Evie away from me if he knew about her. But suppose I can get them off the streets and hackers away from his casino without getting into more trouble than I'm already in. In that case, maybe then I could tell him about Evelyn.

“Loren.”

I blink up at him, realizing I've been zoned out *hard*. “Hmm?”

Domenic examines me, gently trailing a finger near the new couple of stitches near my hairline by my temple. “You need

rest.”

“So do you. I know you’re about to march back into your casino to troubleshoot everything that just happened, but it’s late, and you look drained.” I squint at the blood on his shoulder, realizing it’s from me. “Shit, the security feed in the parking garage will show everyone what happened. They’ll start asking questions and find out about the Wild Seven are after me and—”

“The feed will be wiped. But why are they after you?”

I shut my eyes and sigh as I recline on the couch, suddenly fatigued beyond words at night’s events. “They consider Vegas their territory, and they don’t like other hackers here. I’ve just crossed paths with them sometimes, that’s all. They’re like this to everyone else, too.”

It’s not a total lie, but it is a stretch. The Wild Seven are terrible to “trespassers” in the territories they claim, but I’m their number one enemy right now for other reasons.

But Domenic can’t ever know they think I betrayed them or that I was one of them. Not even after I tell him about Evelyn —if I ever feel like I can without risking losing her.

I should be getting out of here to get home and check on her, but my eyelids weigh tons, and my lightheadedness is transitioning into slowed breathing.

Domenic murmurs in Italian somewhere nearby, something comforting and smooth in his low voice that eases some of the residual worries from my shoulders. I feel the ghost of his lips pressing against my forehead before I slip into a deep sleep.



One week has passed since the unexpected attack at the casino, and I'm getting the weirdest feeling I'm being followed. The thing is... I don't think it's the Wild Seven tailing me.

The Wild Seven is unmistakable. They're threatening. After what went down at The Golden Flame, with Big Luck narrowly missing out on nabbing Chloe and Roulette, I'm on high alert expecting Ace or one of the other members to find me again. After all, they know where I work. Yet no move has been made, and instead, I feel like the eyes on me are a protective measure.

Which makes me think it has something to do with the Caputos. As in, someone on Domenic's side. Is he protecting me after that close call? He has no reason to do that. Aside from our little hookup over a week ago, we've managed to keep our hands off of each other, and I'm not going to kid myself into thinking he cares for me outside of my usefulness as a security asset.

I may have gotten a glimpse of Domenic's gentle side when he stitched up the cut over my temple, but I'm not about to let that make me think he has any inclination to worry over me. For all I know, he has someone keeping an eye on me to try to find and get rid of the Wild Seven now that he knows I'm on

their bad side. This could be entirely beneficial for him, and not to try to keep me safe.

But deep down, I do feel a tiny bit safer with the Caputo crime family looking out for me. Simply because Domenic is in charge.

I step out of my apartment and lock the door while flicking a look over my shoulder. Sure enough, that car is parked far down the road. I've seen it now and then over the last week. While its windows are tinted, and it's a fairly basic car, I'm positive that it doesn't belong to the little old lady whose house it's currently parked in front of.

After the attack, I woke up alone in a quiet, peaceful little hotel room connected to The Golden Flame with anything I might need at the bedside—painkillers, water bottles, food. It had been early in the morning, and I'd driven home immediately to get back to Evie, thinking I must be paranoid because I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was tailing me just out of sight.

But once again, just as it's been for the past seven days, as I get into my car and drive to work, I catch glimpses of the car far behind me in traffic. A silent escort to the casino.

It should probably freak me out that a member of the fucking mafia is looking out for me, but since they're at Domenic's beck and call, I find it...reassuring. God knows I might be too shaky to get out in that parking garage every morning if I didn't sense eyes tracking my every move from that car and from the security room.

But today, I don't feel like parking in the parking garage and clocking in early like I usually do. Instead, I circle around to enter through the front of the casino like everyone else, meandering as I absorb the sounds, sights, and unique scent of The Golden Flame.

I can't help it. Today is special in a morbid and painful way.

It's the anniversary of the day my alcoholic, abusive, gambling-addict father killed himself. The day my mother got the call and cried herself sick repeatedly as I held her hair back and tried not to let my world shatter. It's the anniversary of the day I decided to get revenge by using my significant coding and hacking skills to get back at the establishments that ruined my father and family.

Like the Golden Flame. It's odd that I work here when I hated this place so much. Maybe a tiny part of me always will because it represents everything wrong in my childhood.

As I walk past a row of slot machines, I clench my teeth at the sight of that same old man placing his bet and pulling the machine again. He rubs the balding spot on his head and grimaces at whatever comes up. While he still looks put together enough, today, of all days, he just reminds me so much of my father it physically hurts.

I almost want to walk right up to him and tell him to get a grip and leave before his addiction fucks up his entire life. I want to shake him and everyone else in here by the shoulders while I scream that in places like this, the house always wins, and they're a bunch of idiots to entertain themselves by leaving their fortunes up to pure chance.

Today, every person here reminds me of Dad. I see his face in the men playing blackjack, the women laughing by the poker tables, and everyone playing craps.

“Fucking casinos,” I mutter, fingers itching to hack into one of these machines, scam the hell out of this place just like it deserves, and high-tail it out of here.

But I wouldn't do that now. Not with a steady paycheck finally easing some of the crushing financial burdens my father left behind for my mother to shoulder alone. Not when I have Evelyn to think about and when I've been on the other end of these cameras and set up systems for someone exactly like me to get caught doing exactly this.



Old habits really do die hard. I'm still tempted despite everything.

I stare at one of the slot machines, a scowl on my face. The old man who reminds me of my father calls, "Hey, I know you. You're the lucky coin girl, right? Got any lucky coins to spare?"

My hand goes to my purse, where I keep a small stash of my custom-made, carefully programmed "lucky" coins zipped away in a hidden pocket. My temptation mounts—I may have beefed up security for hackers here, but even with all the new security measures put in place, they wouldn't be able to track my little inventions.

As a matter of fact, I'm really proud of my "lucky" coins. Most of them are one-offs, pre-programmed similarly to my old hacking device, and able to temporarily screw with slot machines to get a sizeable win without raising eyebrows every time. I know which coins will be big wins and which will be smaller, and after they're used, they're useless—they'll look just like every other coin in the pile. It's a technology that I'm still tinkering with.

I haven't told a soul about what my lucky coins really do because, for me, they're oddly very personal. They're *my* lucky coins.

If I put that technology out today through the black market or some shit, it would wreak havoc. People would try to copy what I've made, security measures would have to advance to catch up, and everything would be blown wide open. Plus, it might come back to bite me on the ass, which I'd rather not have happen after the long line of shameful hacking and scamming in my past.

“You good?”

I realize the older gentleman is still speaking to me and put on a tight smile quickly. “Sorry. Just...distracted. No coins to spare, but I hope you get a win sometime soon.”

“You and me both,” he grunts, taking a long sip of his drink.

I open my mouth to tell him he should get out of this place before his addiction worsens, but Domenic's voice speaks directly behind me before I can. It makes me jump despite his quiet tone as he leans toward my ear.

“Is this man a security threat? Did something tip you off about him?”

It makes sense he'd ask that. I'm standing here chatting it up with a customer instead of in the security room, where I

should be by now. I realize how out of place I am and shake my head quickly, not meeting Domenic's eye as I veer around him and march away.

"Loren?"

He catches up with ease and eyes me as he walks at my side through the casino. Now and then, affluent people will look over and greet him by name, and he nods politely or says a crisp word or two, but I can feel those dark eyes on me as I try to ignore him.

I leave the casino and enter the security hall, but his firm hand on my arm stops me before I get too far. I face him with a harsh huff. I'd love to remind myself that just because this day is the special anniversary of everything I hate doesn't mean I should let my temper take over, but it's too late because something on my face makes Domenic's eyes narrow, and his jaw clenches.

"Something has upset you. Tell me what happened."

"Nothing happened. I'm fine."

"You're angry. Why?"

"I just told you *I'm fine*."

My bratty tone doesn't deter Domenic. He just examines me as if looking for signs of harm, his deep chocolate eyes resting on the two small stitches that I have under a band-aid by my hairline. "Were you threatened again?"

I roll my eyes and put on a sickly sweet smile. "Listen, I appreciated you sewing up my face, and I'm sure you don't mean to be a pushy ass. But I have work to do, so please go back to draining the general public of their hard-earned money and haunting your casino like a bad, cold, domineering rash."

Shit. I'm not mad at him—I *know* that, yet the words just snapped out of me because this day is the fucking worst every year, and it always puts me in a sour mood. What happened between us in the past doesn't matter at all. I should not be talking to my boss this way, and definitely not when he's a dangerous mafioso with such a chilling reputation.

Domenic's jaw tics. He adjusts one of his suit sleeves without breaking eye contact. "I'm surprised you're judging me for running a casino, considering your past actions."

I flinch at that, and his face immediately softens. Before he can offer an apology—and I'm almost sure he wasn't going to—I turn away to stride toward the security room.

“Fuck off, Domenic,” I mutter under my breath, still angry at everything in my path today.

He moves quickly to stop me again. This time his hand on my waist pulls my back against his front so he can murmur in my ear. “You don’t need to enjoy my profession. Simply agree to have dinner with me tonight. Whatever has put you in this mood, I know I can put you in *another* mood. One we’ll both enjoy.”

A flutter breaks through the irritation plaguing my heart, but I quickly push it away and look up at him.

“It was just a celebration, what happened between us a few days ago,” I insist. “Not the gateway to anything else. Just a one-night thing.”

“Two nights, considering the past.”

I snort and try to step away, but his arm snakes around me, and goosebumps skitter all over my body. Someone could walk out of the security room or into this hallway at any time, and here he is, pressed against my back with his face in the crook of my neck.

“We’re not doing this,” I say, trying to make my voice stern instead of breathy. “Isn’t there a rule or something about

workplace relations? You're my fucking boss."

*Not to mention the secret father of my child. Oh, and the man I've spent the last three years wondering about constantly.*

Plus, I think about him in the shower and lying alone in bed every night, especially when I feel worked up. I wore out a vibrator from all my times fantasizing about Domenic Caputo giving me the exact look he is now.

His lips brush the shell of my ear, sending a pleased sensation careening in my stomach. "You said you trust me. Does that not count for something, *fiore di ciliegio?*"

Cherry blossom. Isn't that what he told me it meant? I use cherry blossom scented shampoo, conditioner, lotion—everything I can get my hands on. It's my favorite scent of all time, and he's clearly fond of it too, drawing in a deep breath of me and placing featherlight kisses against my uninjured temple and down to my jaw.

He's so warm at my back, and I just want to lean back into him and ignore just how many significant secrets I'm trying to keep away from this stoic yet magnetic man. God, this is so frustrating. The night we spent together after I tracked down the virus in his system had been everything I didn't know I needed so badly. Right now, I'm feeling so weak and

vulnerable on this horrible anniversary that I just want to feel like that again. Safe and treasured in this mafioso's arms while he makes me orgasm over and over again and whispers naughty things in my ear.

Would it be so weak of me to give in to this pull between us just once more?

Yes. Probably.

But fuck it, I'm weak right now. The idea of being held by Domenic, of going to dinner with him and getting my mind off of my tragic father and how topsy-turvy my world has been for my entire life, is something I just can't pass up.

My decision must reflect on my face because Domenic's mouth curls up in a wicked smile, and he murmurs against my ear.

"Good. You'll leave with me today."

Ah, shit. "I can't."

"You can and you will."

God, I like when Domenic is demanding. But he doesn't know what today is for me or how badly my mother copes on this

day, either. He doesn't know that she's probably a wreck at home while Evelyn draws on the wall or toddles around practically unsupervised until I get home. I need to be there for them today, but that doesn't mean I can't take a rain check on my weak moment, does it?

Because I really want just a little more of my mafioso boss. He's dangerous, the number one person I should be avoiding like the fucking plague, yet I can't seem to get enough of him.

"Tomorrow," I tell him, slipping away before he can argue. "And for God's sake, smile a little at the people in your casino today. Remember, flies and honey and all of that. Try it, and you might even like it, *il mio stressato capo*."

I think that's supposed to mean *my stressed boss*. That's all I've managed to learn in Italian, but eventually, I want to know a whole slew of Italian swear words to throw at Domenic whenever the need may arise. In the meantime, maybe I'll research how to say something dirty to him.

Who knows? It could come in handy tomorrow.

Domenic's low laugh follows me as I leave him alone in the hall. For once, on the anniversary of the worst day of my life, I find a small smile teasing my lips.



## Chapter 12

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## Domenic

I'm like a man possessed as I groan and thrust harder into Loren's tight, wet warmth, my control long gone as my fingers dig into her perfect hips, and her beautiful cries fill the room.

"Yes! God, yes, please. *F—fottimi forte,*" she gasps.

*Fuck me hard.*

My God, I love hearing Italian on her tongue. It's stilted and jerky from the pace I'm setting, and her accent would make me scoff with laughter in any other context, but here? In my bedroom of the luxury mansion, I own on the outskirts of Las Vegas, Loren in my bed as I'm buried deep inside her, hanging onto my control by a thread?

I love it. I fucking love that she learned just these tiny bits of my family's mother tongue just to tease me.

And she's teased me all night. Loren wouldn't speak of whatever upset her so much yesterday. Still, tonight as we sat at a Michelin-star restaurant, she wore that same backless blue dress that dipped low in the front, her intoxicating body like a

fucking beacon for my eyes every second of our meal. She was gorgeous, but it was torture to wait patiently and watch her sip wine and laugh while giving me fuck-me eyes and knowing smiles.

The dinner conversation was all witty banter. This woman knows how to keep me on my toes, despite my best attempts to hide that fact. She's everything I'm not—warmth, giggles, and sass, where I tend to be reserved and skeptical.

We shouldn't make sense. I should let the hacker be, but this draw between us is something I'm quickly realizing I don't care to fight. Not when she makes me feel something I've never experienced before every fucking time I look at her.

“Fuck,” I grit out when Loren clenches tightly around me, her third orgasm within the last ten minutes.

She grips my sheets and looks so goddamn perfect coming undone beneath me, her hair a halo of gold framing her pretty face and her tits heaving with her pleasure—and I lose myself right after her, fucking her deeply and slipping into Italian by accident as I groan my own release.

Finally spent, I drop beside her in my firm California king bed and pull her tightly against my side as we both catch our breaths. I feel better than I have since I woke up with this stunning woman at my side over a week ago before I had to rush her back to her apartment.

Being with her like this lightens the perpetual weight on my shoulders and takes my mind off of the things about my life—about *myself*—that I don't always like. I kiss her cheek,

frowning at the two stitches above her temple. She keeps a little band-aid there that is just barely visible in the dim lighting of my room, but I still dislike seeing the reminder of the Wild Seven trying to attack my cherry blossom.

It makes me livid to think about that ogre of a man who was grabbing her in the parking garage. She had been so shaken. And hurt. When I find the Wild Seven, I'll hurt them far worse, but I still dislike that this happened to her at all.

Loren catches the frown on my face, and her brows go up. "Shit. I thought that was pretty damn good, but you look all dangerously sexy and stormy. Honestly, it's giving off mixed signals. Does that expression mean round two, or are you regretting this whole night?"

I keep my smile at bay. "I've never regretted anything between us."

My bit of raw honesty seems to take her aback, and she studies me, propping up beside me and reaching out to run small fingers through my hair. I shut my eyes to enjoy the sensation.

"Not even the morning after that first night, when you figured out what I was doing at your casino?"

"No."

Her fingers trail down to lightly brush over my jawline. I open my eyes to see her with a contemplative expression on her face.

"I didn't regret any of it, either," she murmurs. "Don't get me wrong, there's a lot in my life I regret. A *lot*. But that night and

everything else between us...yeah, you're right. Oddly enough, I don't have regrets there, either."

I'm glad to hear that.

"What was bothering you yesterday?" I ask.

Loren gives me a stern look. "There you go again, trying to ruin our post-coital relaxation time with questions neither of us wants to deal with. Just let it go."

She's wrong. I do want to deal with whatever was making her so unhappy. She looked borderline murderous yesterday as she glowered at my casino and snapped at me, which makes me wonder if something is amiss in her home.

I've had protection posted everywhere Loren goes, and Big Luck is still following her from a distance to ensure the Wild Seven doesn't try to get a jump on her again, but I still don't like the old, dilapidated apartment she's living in. It's not safe enough. She must be stressed about the security there, too, considering her daughter is there much of the time.

At the thought of Loren's child, I consider asking for details, trying to see if I can gather anything without letting on that I know about the two-year-old. Perhaps I could find out who the child's father is—surely Loren knows.

*And if it's me...*

It's not. The chances are next to nothing that the kid is mine, but I still feel the questions nearly burning my tongue with the desire to ask before my phone buzzes on the nightstand.

I glower at the invasive device. Speaking of our “post-coital relaxation time” being ruined...I should really answer it, considering my status as the don of my family. Caputos could be contacting me about any number of things. Or it could be regarding the casino or my other business pursuits. It could even be my father, but I want nothing to intrude upon these moments with Loren.

She smirks when she sees my irritation and then promptly scoops up my phone and places it against my chest, pressing a brief but sensual kiss against my lips.

“I wouldn’t want to be the reason *the* Domenic Caputo didn’t tend to business as usual,” she murmurs. “Plus, this will give me a chance to clean up before I get out of your hair.”

I don’t fucking want her out of my hair. I want to rest deeply with Loren in my arms again and wake up beside her as I did before, but she’s already out of my bed and ignoring my protesting scowl as she winks and goes into my bathroom.

Reluctantly, I answer the call. “Calvin. What is it?”

Calvin is one of my enforcers, and he sounds winded on the other end, his voice tight. “Boss, you might want to get over here. Someone left a fucking corpse outside the casino, and the media is having a heyday.”

I swear and begin to dress quickly. “I’ll be there soon. Don’t give any statements.”

Loren is humming in the shower, and my gut clenches at having to leave her. It’s a weak reaction—the kind of reaction

a don shouldn't have. If I don't watch myself, she'll become a genuine weakness for me, making me go soft when the Caputos need a ruthless leader.

I leave the keys to my Porsche on the bathroom counter in case she needs them and leave, determined to resolve this and finish my night with Loren back in my arms.



The Wild Seven are a real pain in the ass.

After arriving at the scene where reporters, police, and a slew of other unwanted attention was simmering, I quickly resolved things as smoothly as possible. I make regular payments to corrupt law enforcement leaders in the area, so I'm less worried about cops than I am about the crowd that was trying to get close and see the body bag deposited by the Golden Flame Casino.

Luckily, I have the Caputo family claws in pretty deeply with local media outlets, too, so running damage control for this shouldn't be too bad. The corpse was a nobody to me, probably someone who owed the Wild Seven money, but I'll know more after the autopsy report.

In the meantime, I finish interrogating a particularly spirited Vegas drifter who knows a lot of shit about the Wild Seven. I walk out of my insulated back room with my fists bloodied and a cut on my jaw. It's small, something that likely won't leave a scar, but I have to begrudgingly admit that I didn't expect that vagrant to be hiding a little Exacto blade up his sleeve like that.

He's in bad shape, but he gave me what I needed: I know for a fact that the Wild Seven are to blame for the unwanted publicity of a body bag outside my casino. And I know they're here with a vengeance—he mentioned one of their leaders, someone named Ace, looking to tear down establishments like mine because he's a greedy little motherfucker.

Now I'm pissed that they're trying to stir up trouble for me in the eyes of the general public. As if I didn't already have enough reason to hunt down these hackers for attacking Loren.

At the thought of Loren, I check the time. It's after midnight, and I'm exhausted from the last three hours of handling don shit and juggling the public image of my family's casino. She's probably long since fallen asleep, but I find myself getting back into my Bugatti and leaving the parking garage to drive toward her apartments anyway.

Big Luck or some other Caputo is stationed to keep an eye on her complex at all times, but if I can't hold her in my arms, I just want to be near her proximity, just for a bit. Just to try to get that same sense of being able to breathe through my regular daily stress, which I usually have when she's with me.



I park just outside Loren's apartment complex and scowl at it again. There are approximately four streetlights in her entire parking lot, and one is burned out. Despite the late hour, someone is blasting music from a downstairs unit, and people are out smoking on their balconies while sirens blare in the distance. This isn't a good part of town.

What's keeping her here? Why didn't she move out the second she had a steady paycheck? I should put down a downpayment somewhere else to get her out of this shithole as quickly as possible. I'll call it a work perk.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I blink when I see that it's Loren herself.

"Still awake?" I answer.

She snorts on the other end. "Please. I'm not a grandmother. One in the morning isn't *that* late, you know. I was just calling because...well, I don't know if you took care of whatever you needed to take care of, but I'm pretty sure we can't leave your Porsche parked where I live. It'll get broken into."

I eye my Porsche, which is parked nearby, and clench my teeth. "You shouldn't live in a place where decent cars are default targets. You're moving."

Loren sighs. "No, I'm not. Just come get your car before—"

As if on cue, I watch as a figure scurries away from my locked Porsche, and the car alarm goes off. They failed at breaking in, but Loren can hear the alarm on my end, too, because she cuts off with a surprised sound.

“Are...wait, are you at my apartment complex? What the fuck?”

I exit, lock my car behind me, and stride toward her apartment door. Now that I know she’s awake and she knows I’m here, I have no reason to leave her be the way I probably should. “I am.”

“Why?”

“You said to pick up my car.”

“Right, but there’s no way you showed up so quickly when—”

I hang up and knock, glaring over my shoulder at the blaring car until her door unlocks quickly, and she throws it open. When I see her again, it’s immediately like a cool compress to a sunburn. Loren soothes me. Warms me until I feel I can breathe evenly again.

“Use the key fob to turn off the alarm,” I advise, eyes dropping to her pajamas. She’s in short shorts with an oversized tee shirt, her blond hair falling out of a messy clamp. It’s absolutely charming.

But Loren’s brow furrows, and she points at my jaw. “What happened here?”

I reach up to feel it, almost having forgotten the cut there, and she makes a strangled sound.

“Your fists, too? God, you’re like a fucking animal. Get in here before someone decides to try jumping the first guy they’ve ever seen in a tailored suit—you’d probably break their kneecaps or something.”

It's true. I would.

Loren lets me enter her apartment as she wrestles with the Porsche's key fob to finally turn off the alarm. As she's occupied, I look around swiftly. It's a tiny space. Old. I can tell she keeps it up as well as she can, but there's no way to polish shit, and that's what this old apartment is: shitty. Despite the small colorful decorations and homey feel here, I don't like my cherry blossom living in a place like this.

My eyes fall to a child's drawing in crayon pinned on the small fridge. It's a mess of colorful scribbles. There's a pair of small, pink shoes forgotten on the counter and a matching bow on the kitchen table beside an abandoned little bowl of macaroni and cheese.

I also spot scrapbooks. A handful of them are shelved beside photo albums near a stack of cookbooks on one of the kitchen counters. If I open those photo albums, will I learn more about Loren? She's tight-lipped about so much that the idea is tempting.

"Here," she says finally, shoving the Porsche fob into my hands and grabbing a small first-aid box from somewhere else in her apartment. Her eyes keep flicking to the back hallway as she does, and I realize that must be where her daughter is since she seems so nervous.

I again debate asking Loren about her daughter but change my mind as she pulls out the antibiotic ointment and wipes and quickly cleans up the little cut on my jaw, grumbling under her breath at me and scoffing at the blood on my fists.

“I see you make a habit of getting your fancy-ass suits all bloodied up,” she huffs.

“Occupational hazard.”

“No shit.” She smirks up at me, but her smile drops away when she sees my gaze wander back to the drawing on the fridge. I can see her visibly tense, and I dislike how uneasy she is—just another reason not to bring up the child who so obviously lives here. Before I can feign disinterest, she clears her throat. “My young niece is here. Visiting. I’d appreciate it if you could keep your voice down to not wake her up.”

I know for a fact it’s no niece. It’s the child my contact told me of. Still, I nod. It’s understandable that she wouldn’t want to place her daughter in danger, and here I am, a mafioso standing in her cramped kitchen with blood on my fists.

Despite our recent bonding and the fact that I was buried to the hilt in her earlier, basking in the sounds of her pleasure, Loren has the right to withhold whatever information she wants from me.

Even if I don’t like it.

“There,” she mutters as she finishes cleaning up my fists.

There are a few gauzy bandages over the broken skin on my hands, and she checks to ensure the cut on my jaw isn’t bleeding any more. Her proximity makes my cock react, and I instinctively wrap an arm around her to pull her against me, enjoying the way her face pinkens.

“Feel something you like?” I murmur.

Loren smiles at my words and tries to extract herself, but I keep a firm hold of her to press a kiss to her soft lips, teasing them apart to brush my tongue against hers. God, she's so sweet and smooth all over. Something about her reminds me of sunlight.

She pulls back with another furtive glance over her shoulder and then hisses, "Get out before *both* your cars get broken into."

I ignore that and nod at the photo albums on her counter. "I want to see those sometime."

"My old pictures?" She makes a face. "I think not."

"Why not?"

"Because our little *tête-à-tête* earlier tonight was another one-time thing. That was it. I told you, it's not a gateway to anything else. Obviously."

She gestures between us as if to emphasize a point. Because she, like me, knows that we don't make sense. A secretive hacker turning over a new leaf, with a mafioso who never intends to turn over a new leaf for the rest of his miserable, cold life?

I should leave her be, at least for tonight. I was too caught up earlier in how it felt to finally feel like I could breathe fully again in her presence, in how holding her close allowed me to take down the walls I always keep up around others.

But Loren is right. *Obviously*.

I move for the door and then pause. “You *are* moving out of here. As soon as possible.”

“I told you to let it go, Domenic Caputo.”

I fix Loren with a look. “Too bad for you, I don’t take orders. Begin packing your and your niece’s things within the next week. Good night.”

And then I leave before she can try to argue pointlessly.

## Chapter 13

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## Loren

I'm distracted at work. It's not the first time it's happened over the last couple of days since the night I patched up Domenic Caputo in my kitchen while praying he didn't ask questions about the cacophony of signs in my apartment pointing to a child living there.

We spent two days thinking back on our little stress reliever after our dinner date. His hands on my skin. His mouth on my pussy. And God, his voice—I feel like I'm thinking about his dirty mouth every second of the day, which is just a terrible idea because he occasionally stops in the security room, and I hear his *actual* voice, and it's somehow always better than I remember it.

The man is a force of fucking nature.

It's not fair that I need to keep resisting my attraction to Domenic, but I do. There's just too much between us—he's a mafioso, a dangerous man who owns the casino I once hated with a flaming passion, and now he's the father of my baby, and he can never know about it. We're polar opposites. Not to



mention, he's actively trying to hunt down the group of hackers I used to run with.

God, if he found out...

But I won't let him discover I was part of the Wild Seven. I'll figure out how to track them down and hand them to the Caputo heir on a silver platter. They're certainly a group to be reckoned with, but surely he can take care of them, and then I won't have to worry that my Caputo watchdogs will vanish and I'll be held at gunpoint once again.

And if we do manage to stop the hackers converging in Vegas and get rid of the Wild Seven...well, then maybe I could tell him about Evelyn.

*Maybe.* I'm still torn. I can't and won't risk losing her, no matter how much closer I feel to her gorgeous mobster father.

"Did you get that, Loren?"

I blink, realizing I missed one of the other security team members relaying a message to me. "Sorry. Come again?"

They repeat it, and I nod and focus back on work again, scrolling through numbers and flagging potential leads as I create a pattern to interpret, so I can determine where the hacker might be. Others try to scam the Golden Casino on occasion, but they usually only walk away with meager winnings around the amount that the average person walking through the doors does, so they don't worry me.

What worries me is that I've caught onto the tail of a very slippery, skilled hacker who seems to be two steps ahead.

Every time I realize that I'm seeing the signs of their telltale careful scamming game, they're gone. They're almost good enough to be part of the Wild Seven—almost, mind you.

I'm seeing little signs of them again today. Frustrated and my eyes blurred from staring at numbers for so long, I stand and stretch, glancing through all the security feeds. Aside from casino hotel rooms, bathrooms, and high-security places like Domenic's "interrogation" rooms that most normal casinos definitely *don't* have, almost every inch of the Golden Flame is watched at all times.

So why are they so hard to find? Are they messing with cams somehow?

Deciding to take five, I leave the security room to stretch my legs and wander out into the main casino floor, looking over the many people laughing and chatting in there, drinking or pulling slots. There's a ruckus near the pool tables, like usual, and roulette seems popular today. If the slippery hacker is here and I wander around in view of the cameras and go through it later, would it give me a hint as to what they're doing, if they're affecting the feed?

Only one way to tell. I start wandering through the casino, careful to keep track of what cameras I'm in front of while glancing up now and then to try to get a glimpse of Domenic. I know he's somewhere on the upper floor, chatting with important, lucrative customers. Probably celebrities.

He's a busy man, and I shouldn't expect our eyes to meet across the bust room just because we've hooked up a couple of

times. I mean, I've made it *very* clear to him that they were just little celebratory, blow-off-steam hookups and nothing else. And after declaring that I was moving, he hasn't said much to me over the last two days. Just looked at me with his heated gaze and made me think all kinds of deliciously inappropriate things about him.

I focus again. After all, I need to catch this hacker as soon as possible. Then I can focus on the Wild Seven and then on to determining how to broach the subject of Domenic's adorable little daughter. I'm still freaked out about possibly telling him about her. Still torn on whether I could ever actually do it.

Someone accidentally bumps into me.

"Sorry," I say idly, going to step around them.

"Loren Rally?"

I hesitate and then examine the person closer. It's a sleek middle-aged woman dressed in a skirt suit with her ginger hair up in a twist. She looks me over, as well, with an analytical eye.

"Sorry, do I know you?" I ask.

"I'm with the Commercial Adjustment Bureau. In debt collection," she adds meaningfully.

Debt collection. Shit. This has to do with my father. He committed tax fraud, borrowed from countless loan sharks and bookies, and apparently, he managed to piss off this woman somehow before kicking the can because she's giving me a disapproving look.

“Uh...nice to meet you,” I say around a thick throat. “How did you...recognize me?”

“We’ve been trying to contact your family for a long time, but our letters have gone unanswered. Your father owes a great deal to my organization. Would you please come with me so I can get updated contact information for you? We can bill a different address if you’ve moved within the last three years.”

I grimace. Part of me wants to bolt back to the security room and declare her a threat just to avoid this unpleasantness, but this is hardly the first time a debt collector of some kind has found my mother or me and demanded we start making hefty payments.

Great. Looks like money is going to get really tight around home again.

Caught up in calculating how much more we can afford to make in monthly payments with my new income and my mom’s occasional gig, I follow the debt collector to the front of the casino, where it’s less crowded and noisy. She leads me outside and down the sidewalk before I can wonder where the hell we’re going.

By the time, I do, it’s too late. A familiar car pulls up to the curb, marked with an Ace of Diamonds on the rearview mirror.

*Fuck.* I turn to run, but the woman blocks me, shoving me toward the door with a huff.

“Please get in, and this will all be easier for you.”

If I get in that car, they'll kill me. I'm sure of it. The back window rolls down, and Ace's eyes meet my wide ones. The corner of his lips tugs up, and I try not to flinch. He's not pleasant when he smiles.

"I'll not hurt you. Promise. Get in, and we can merely talk."

"If I don't get in, you'll just force me," I grit.

He lifts his hands as if to show he's unarmed, which is laughable because I'm sure he's packing. Ace is always carrying, just like Chloe, who rolls down the passenger window, is always carrying a small collection of knives. She smiles widely at me.

"We won't force anything, honey. Walk away right now if you really want to. And I promise there are no bad feelings after your little stunt in the parking garage, 'kay?"

I take a step away, and Ace nods at the woman standing behind me. "That wasn't just a ruse, by the way, Loren. You owe this woman money. Tell you what. Get in to talk, and we'll pay off the several grand your old man owed her organization. Right here, right now."

It's a bribe. I still think about the endless bills my mother and I have been drowning in since my father offed himself, and the idea of *more* outstanding payments with insane interest rates makes me almost want to weep. We're barely surviving as it is, and I need to start getting Evelyn into speech therapy before she's old enough for school.

That thought has me reluctantly opening the door, gritting my teeth as I slide in next to Ace. I don't recognize their driver, but Chloe gives me a shark smile as Ace makes some digital payment on his phone that has the debt collector woman nodding and leaving quickly, not looking back at the car.

The Wild Seven's car pulls away from the curb and meanders through the city in no rush, seemingly with no destination.

"So. Working with a Caputo now, are we?"

I don't answer Ace. Instead, I stare forward, tense and itching to open the door handle and fling myself out. But they haven't hurt me yet. They paid what I'm sure was a shit ton of money just now to talk to me, and surely they wouldn't do that if they were just going to kill me. Right?

"We've decided something," Chloe says chipperly from the front, pulling out a knife to clean under her manicured nails. "You working in security at *the* Golden Flame Casino, of all places? It's a pretty fucking big break for us, you know?"

"Could be for you, too," Ace notes, his eyes trailing over the buildings we pass in something like boredom. "Right now, you're a wild card, Loren. You're no security expert, and you're no longer really a hacker. But you could be very useful. Hope you've given some thought to our generous offer for you to join the Wild Seven again."

I fold my arms. "Pretty sure that offer was revoked when Roulette and Twilight came for me in that fucking parking garage."

“Their choice. The rest of us had nothing to do with it. The offer still stands.”

I’m about to scoff when Chloe turns around with a bright smile.

“Oh, come on, Miss Lucky Loren. Don’t you remember how good it felt? Getting into trouble, talking yourself out of it, winning big, and fleeing before anyone could pin you with shit? You were fucking *golden*, honey. We’ve never had a slot hacker before you, and no one does it like you, either. You could be unstoppable like that again with our protection.”

Ace finally turns to look at me again, his gaze unnerving as ever but his tone even. “All your father’s debts. If you ran with us again, with a contract to stay, your family’s financial burdens would be gone.”

That’s a temptation I wasn’t expecting. I try not to let my face show how much he’s piqued my interest. But deep down, I imagine a world where my mother isn’t stressed to the point of physical pain and where I can pay for Evelyn to have nice things and go to nice schools. A world of financial security, not wracked with constant bills from the father who used to come home drunken and angry, throwing fists at anything that moved—including me.

I want to leave that behind. Those memories. The debt.

*Get your heads out of the clouds. This is the Wild Seven, Loren.*

Sure, they abide by their contracts, and they have the means to wipe out my debts if I join their side again. But breaking their rules equals them breaking bones. Crossing them means crossing all your family members, putting them in the target of the dangerous hacking team. They're trouble, just like I used to be trouble.

"Your father build quite an empire of debt," Ace drones quietly. "The interest alone would bury a normal citizen. But we're not normal, are we, Loren? You and me, people like us, we *need* to scam the games that scam everyone else. It's not just about the money. It's the revenge. You won't get that anywhere but with us, Beautiful."

I sit in silence, a weight on my chest. He's right about the revenge. It's something I used to need, like I need air. I couldn't stand the idea of the establishments that ruined my father and turned him into the drunken tragedy that he was—I wanted to make them pay in the same ways they make everyone else pay up.

And Chloe was right about how good I was at it. It had been thrilling, running with the Wild Seven. In their good graces, I was under protection. Unstoppable. Slippery. No casino could pinpoint me, and the money rolled in every night, soothing my family's financial problems at the time.

But that was then. This is now.

Now, I have Evelyn to think about. What if I did get caught? I'd go to prison, my mother would be left with the mountain of debt, and Evie would be left without a mother.



And Domenic...I can't stop thinking about that gorgeous man, not even now when my heart is racing in the back of Ace's car. He's dangerous in his own right, and I know I'd be wise to run the moment I can, but Domenic makes me feel secure in a way I've never felt before. He makes me feel wanted, needed and protected. He's cold to the world but so warm and tender with me sometimes that I can't help wishing I could always be with him.

But that's a daydream for another time. Right now, I must extract myself from this situation without pissing off Ace or Chloe.

"I want more time to think," I tell them.

Chloe's shark smile turns into a glare. "What's there to think about? He's offering you fucking everything. You think Ace has promised to pay off all my debts? You're getting the princess treatment, bitch. Take it."

"You're right—it's a really generous offer," I say quickly, trying to put on a convincing smile despite being unable to meet Ace's eyes. "I just...need to figure out if I'm still practiced enough to be useful to the Wild Seven. I'd hate to get the princess treatment and then be a dud. I haven't been doing as much hacking, you know? Security is boring as shit. I just need to try my hand somewhere, see if I'm still good enough for you guys."

Ace's eyes narrow on me. "The Golden Flame. Scam it and bring us the winnings, and we'll call it a day."

I'm shaking my head before I can think better of it. "I—no, not that one. I'll find somewhere else. Can't I just—"

"Golden Flame or nothing. This is a loyalty test, Loren. Pass, and you join. Fail, and I track down wherever you've hidden that little family of yours and let the bullets fly."

Nausea explodes in my stomach. I've hacked the hell out of any records of where my mother and Evelyn and I live, where we go, our vehicle records—everything. All in an attempt to keep the Wild Seven from tracking us down. But if they did...

"I just need more time," I swallow.

His gun is out before I finish speaking, and the cold barrel of it presses against my temple, just below my stitches. "Fine. You've got thirty seconds to agree."

"You said we'd just talk," I blurt, beginning to really panic as I edge toward the door. We're in the middle of a busy, slow-moving street full of people. Surely, he wouldn't shoot me if I could just get out of the car.

Right?

I have no idea, but I need to try.

"Fifteen seconds. Think faster, Loren."

I can't think. All I can do is panic. If I grab the door handle, he'll pull the trigger anyway. I've seen him kill in a car before. He says it's a nice and easy cleanup. Oh, God, I'm about to be an easy cleanup. They'll shoot me here, drive the car off into some bay somewhere, and then—

*Boom!*

I scream, thinking the gun has gone off, but then I realize that the car I'm riding in has been T-boned by another vehicle. They were driving just fast enough to push us out of our lane and into another car, jolting us to a stop. Honking breaks out all around, and I can hear loud cursing.

Thank God the impact didn't make Ace pull the trigger. Instead, he looks out the window in time to see a massive figure rip the back door open and reach inside.

I startle when I realize it's Big Luck. He's got a savage look on his none-too-handsome face, and he snarls at the members of the Wild Seven as they promptly flee the car wreck, too worried about being identified. Ace vanishes quickly after the others—he's always been the slipperiest of the group. I probably couldn't count the number of aliases that man has on all my toes and fingers.

"You hurt, hacker girl?"

I swallow hard, then once again. I'm shaking. "N—no."

"Good. Get out. I'm taking you to Domenic, and you better be ready to face him after this shit you're obviously involved in."

## Chapter 14

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## Domenic

*She's with the Wild Seven boss in their car. They're having a nice, long chat.*

That's what Big Luck told me mere minutes ago, but it still takes time to sink in.

I clench my teeth as I pace back and forth in front of the floor-to-ceiling glass window in my grand suite at the Golden Flame. My day went smoothly until I saw Loren walk out with a woman in business clothes without going on her lunch break or saying a word to me. Big Luck had followed her, of course.

Good thing he did. Now I know she's in cahoots with the very people she told me she was being threatened by.

She's going to double-cross me. Maybe she reached out to the Wild Seven herself after they attacked her, giving up the security of my casino in favor of her own protection with that group of fuckers. Maybe they made the offer to her, but it doesn't matter because she clearly accepted it.

Or maybe she's been with them all along...

No. I don't believe it goes back that far. But riding around with the Wild Seven? What the fuck was she thinking?

I was beyond worried when Big Luck first told me she got into a Wild Seven car. It made me angry when he told me they were talking, but it hasn't stopped the residual worry over Loren's safety. They're a group of criminals far worse than my family. The Caputos have codes and protocols. We may be violent and do plenty of wrong, but family never betrays family.

The Wild Seven? They're fucking lawless and dangerous, and I'm pissed that Loren dared get into that vehicle with them. Big Luck said she got in with no visible threat forcing her to do so.

I can't let her see how much the idea of her betrayal affects me. I force composure to wash over me as I adjust my suit and tie, breathing in deeply to fend off the concern for her welfare that's still clawing at my insides.

Loren was going to cross me, I'm sure of it. And I won't tolerate disloyalty. There's only one course of action.

The moment she steps through my suite door with Big Luck at her back, I say coolly, "You're fired."

Her eyes go wide, and she lets out a shaky breath. All of her seems shaky, in fact. She's hugging herself and is altogether too pale and frightened-looking. I remind myself it's probably a ploy—she must have come in here determined to seem innocent, and I can't be swayed by her vulnerable appearance, no matter how much it makes my chest pinch.

“Fired?” she repeats, brow furrowing. “But why—”

“Next time you willingly associate yourself with a group of lowly criminals, you will need to do so outside of Vegas because you will not find work in this city again,” I inform her, turning away so that there is less chance of her shaken appearance softening the anger in my chest. “You have five minutes to gather your things from the security room and get out. Once again, Miss Rally, never return to my casino. And if I find you’ve given that group any edge on my security, I will track you down and make you pay in ways the Wild Seven could never dream up.”

It’s quiet for a long moment. I know, Loren. Normally, her temper would flare, and she would use her smart mouth to deliver hell if she felt she was being unjustly treated. But her silence tells me she isn’t arguing with how I’ve read this situation. Surely that’s what it must mean.

Loren says nothing before I sense her leave the room and hear the door click as it shuts again.

Big Luck sounds uneasy. “Should we... triple-check security? See if she’s made some kind of adjustments for the Wild Seven to get into our systems?”

“I already told the security room to run a thorough check,” I mutter.

I didn’t tell them it had anything to do with Loren. If I tipped them off about her in any way, they might decide it necessary to look further into her past and uncover her illegal hacking.

Despite my threat to her just now, I don't want her life any more difficult than it appears to be for her.

That doesn't mean I'm not still upset.

Beyond upset. I feel betrayed and irritated. The least she could have done was tell me precisely what she was doing with the Wild Seven. Was she threatened by them after all? Will she get heat from them because of this?

That thought has my running hands through my hair, squeezing my eyes shut. "How did you get her away from them, Luck? Did they drop her off on a street corner?"

"Ah...right. About that. I sort of totaled that family car I've been riding around in lately to get her away from that group of motherfuckers."

I blink open to stare at him. "Excuse me?"

"Yeah, I know it's a pain in the ass, but it was an old car, and I figured—"

"I don't give a fuck about the car. You said you totaled it to get her away from them. Did you—" I break off and turn to face him, the scald in my voice making my largely built friend hunch his shoulders. "Did you fucking *crash* into the woman I've been having you protect?"

He grimaces. "Look, Boss, they weren't stopping with her. I wasn't about to let them slip out of traffic and disappear like they always do when they had your girl in there, and she could have been giving out all our security secrets like free candy."



I try to calm my breathing, but it doesn't work. "Was she hurt?"

"Don't think so."

"You don't *think* she was hurt? Didn't you check?"

God, she was so shaky. Did she hit her head again? What if she was in pain, and I fired her right when she needed to visit the doctor? Not waiting for Big Luck's reply, I growl and leave my suite to go after the hacker I just can't stay away from, no matter how hard I try.

## Chapter 15

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## Loren

I feel broken.

Not physically. I have nothing to stitch up again, no broken femur, no physical injuries. The car crash rattled me, but it didn't really affect me more than my close call with the Wild Seven—and certainly not more than being fired outright by Domenic like that.

He was so furious. So cold again, just like he was the morning he kicked me out of the hotel three years ago.

*Next time you willingly associate yourself with a group of lowly criminals, you will need to do so outside of Vegas because you will not find work in this city again. Never return to my casino.*

Does he know about my past with them, then? Or was he just angry that I got in that car in the first place? I didn't know, and I didn't want to ask. When it comes down to the bottom line, he's not wrong to fire me. Sure, I protected his security from the virus, and I've gotten close to pinpointing the elusive

hacker hanging out at his casino, but none of that makes up for my shameful past.

I'm a failure. After living big working with the Wild Seven, I'm going to keep paying the price for my actions for the rest of my probably-short life. God, I just wish I could do more for my mom and Evelyn.

And I really wish my chest didn't ache so severely remembering Domenic's furious, dark eyes.

It was just a fling, the two nights we spent together. Three, counting the one three years ago. He and I were consenting, attracted adults, despite our slight age gap, and there was nothing else to it. So I shouldn't keep thinking about how he whispered that I should stay with him, or how he calls me *cherry blossom*, or the way the corner of his lips twitch whenever he doesn't want to find whatever is coming out of my loud mouth amusing.

I pull up into my apartment complex and grimace at the state of the parking lot. It's always dirty here, despite the regular tenants like me trying to clean things up. People smoking weed in the apartment below mine wave as I make my way to the stairs, and I keep my eyes down as I pass other apartment doors of people who make me nervous.

I don't feel safe where I live. I never really have, especially now that Ace and the Wild Seven gave me the ultimatum to join them. And now that he's pissed and never wants to see me again, I doubt Domenic will send Caputo mafia members to keep an eye on me all the time.

That must have been why Big Luck found me when he did. It was good timing, despite the unorthodox interruption. I doubt he even saw Ace holding the gun to my head because he and Domenic clearly believe I'm still working with those guys.

And wasn't I tempted earlier?

Yes. So I'm no better than I was three years ago.

My chest aches as I unlock my apartment door. Evelyn and my mother aren't home right now. My mom had an appointment doing hair at a client's home and brought my toddler along to play with that client's child. They'll probably be gabbing while she puts in highlights or some shit for the next three hours.

As soon as I'm inside my apartment with the door closed, I feel moisture pool in my eyes as the panic fully sets in. God, what am I going to do? I have no income now. I can't hack here in Las Vegas, not with the Wild Seven here, ready to find me and end me or force me to join them again. We need to get out of here, but we have no funds, a mountain of debt from my father, and no other family members nearby willing to help us.

It's not the first time in my life I've felt helpless. I used to feel this way whenever my father came home, fueled by alcohol and anger at losing too much at one of his favorite casinos. He would storm in, shout, slur, and scare my mother before throwing a tantrum. She and I would sometimes hide in her bedroom under the covers on the bed with the door locked as we tried to ignore him, and I always hated seeing her cry.

Now I find myself crying as I sink into my kitchen chair and curl up, sniffing and feeling downright pathetic.

I'll allow myself just ten minutes of this. Ten minutes of tears, and then I will figure out where to hack some quick cash and leave Vegas. Debt will follow us, and danger probably will, too, but I can't be here anymore. It's home, but it's not safe. There has to be *something* we can do.

A loud knock on my door has me shrieking and ducking under the table. For a moment, I tremble, thinking Ace has found me here. I shut my eyes tight.

“Loren. Open the door.”

My chest constricts. It's Domenic. Why is he here?

Did he come to question me more? He doesn't trust me, so that must be it. I don't want to let him in, so I debate pretending I'm not home.

“I saw your car,” he says through the door. “You're home. Let me in.”

Damn it.

He wouldn't hurt me. I know that deep down in my bones—despite his threats, anger, and coldness, Domenic Caputo would never hurt me. Maybe his family members would, but the man who so tenderly stitched me up and whispered warm Italian in my ear in his bedroom wouldn't lay a hand on me.

Still, I hesitate, not wanting to look weaker in front of him than I already have.

”*Loren.*”

“Go away.”

“No. I need to know if you’re hurt.”

He’s being protective now, of all times? I scoff and get out from under the table, my temper finally rearing its familiar head along with the broken, crushed sensation lingering in my chest. I crack the door open slightly to give him a dark look, ignoring that he looks so fucking handsome in his suit with his dark hair styled and that tic in his jaw.

“Am I hurt? You really want to know?” I snap.

“Yes.”

He tries to push through the door, but I left to top latch in, the chain preventing the door from opening. He scowls at me, and I lift my chin, letting him see how angry I am beneath the pain in my chest.

“You asked if I trusted you. You’re a fucking mafioso, Domenic. We both know we’ve done things we’re not proud of, but I still *trusted you*. And now here I am, finding out you don’t trust me. So yeah, I’m a little hurt. But physically, I’m right as rain, so get back in your fancy-ass car and get the hell out of here because I don’t want to see you right now.”

He examines me long and hard, something softening slightly in his dark eyes. “I do trust you.”

“Bullshit. You fired me without asking a single question.”

“Loren, you willingly got in that car. You were cruising along with the fucking Wild Seven. I had no way of knowing what you were talking about, and they didn’t harm you, so it was natural to assume—”

He’s not wrong about his assumptions—I *do* have a past with them. But right now, I’m so fed up with everything going wrong in my life, including that he just assumed the worst of me, that my mouth unleashes itself before I can think twice about it.

“I willingly got in that car because the Wild Seven offered to pay off one of my father’s debt collectors on the spot, and they did,” I snap. “Was it stupid? Yes, but it was necessary because I can’t keep raising my daughter in these conditions, and there’s so much fucking debt left behind by my father that I can barely *breathe* half the time. And for your information, before your *friend* decided to drive smack into the side of the car I was already trying to get out of, one of those assholes had a gun to my head and was about to blow my brains out. So no, they didn’t harm me, but you don’t get to assume a single damn thing about me!”

My small blow-up ends with me sucking in a breath and rubbing my temples, realizing I just made the massive misstep of being vulnerable to Domenic Caputo, of all people.

And I mentioned *my daughter*.

God, can this day get any worse?

I don’t realize I’m crying again until I hear the cracking of wood, and then Domenic pulls me tightly against his chest. I



fight him at first, frustrated and not liking how fragile I feel, but he's so solid and sure as he embraces me. I go slack against him, and he holds me while I get control of myself again, steadying my breathing.

He hasn't said anything, and I should find a way to backtrack everything I just said. I can't just let this mobster comfort me, especially not after he literally ripped my chain bolt lock from the door frame.

"I'll kill them." His voice is comforting, low against my ear like a person hushing a child. But there's an undertone of anger to his sure words. "For daring to threaten you again, they'll die. I promise."

"No. I don't want promises from you," I grumble against his chest.

"What do you want from me, Loren? Tell me, and it's done."

Domenic is being gentle again. So careful. He's holding me tightly and running warm fingers down my arms and through my hair, and I find it's helping calm my shakiness. In fact, his proximity is making my core warm, and my knees feel a little weak. He smells like fine cologne, and everything about him is so sure and comforting right now—he's the man I couldn't resist three years ago and the one I can't stop thinking about today.

And like always, when I'm feeling completely unmoored, I don't even want to try resisting him.

I pull away enough to whisper, “Right now, I just want you. Please.”

## Chapter 16

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## Domenic

I hate seeing Loren cry.

She's not the type. She's strong and bright and damn sassy. When she opened the door of her godforsaken apartment, she looked so broken and miserable that I knew I needed to stay with her, no matter the shit we had to work through.

Now, she looks up at me with her soft blue eyes and quiet plea for me...I could never say no to her. Not when she needs me, and I need her.

I quickly capture her lips, kissing her deeply and winding my arms around her. She's still trembling slightly, so little that someone else might not notice, but I do. And I vow that when I find the Wild Seven, I will take my time inflicting pain on every group member for scaring her the way they have—but especially whoever dared to put a gun to Loren's head.

I feel like an idiot because I had no idea about her father's debt. No inkling that she was facing what she just told me about. That she slipped up and mentioned her daughter tells

me how much she really must be struggling right now. These are all things to discuss with her at length later, but right now, all I want to do is make her feel better. Make her feel good.

She was right. I asked no questions, and I was a fool to fire her so quickly when she gave me her trust so willingly mere days ago.

But perhaps I can make up for adding to her terrible day by pleasing her until she's screaming my name again. Then I'll inform her she's not terminated from my casino, and I'll get her the hell out of this dump that she evidently doesn't feel safe in.

I need Loren to be safe at all times because she's kept a part of my heart ever since the moment I met her three years ago. I've learned all my life that it's a danger to feel too deeply for anyone—it's why my father married multiple times and constantly had women coming and going in his life. But he's miserable. Half the Caputos are miserable because they don't allow themselves to feel for anyone the way I do for Loren.

Maybe it's dangerous, but I don't fucking care. I can't resist my spitfire cherry blossom.

"Domenic," she whispers against my lips, finally breaking our heated kiss as she threads her fingers into my hair. "I need—"

"Me," I growl against her mouth, scooping her up and carrying her through the damn apartment, down the hallway, and into a bedroom.

She doesn't protest, and I know it's her room by the cherry blossom scent lingering in here, so I pin her to the twin-sized bed and kiss her again, unbuttoning her blouse as I kiss my way down her body.

I take my time with her breast, adoring her soft cleavage and remove her bra to lick and suck at her peaked, pink nipples. My cock rages against my zipper as I groan against her supple skin, nipping at her stomach on my way down.

"Take off your pants and panties before I rip them off," I command Loren, loving how her chest is heaving and her face is flushed.

She starts to comply, and then her delicious mouth quirks to one side. She sits up, takes me by the jaw to kiss me long and hard, and finally whispers, "Or what? You'll spank me?"

*Fuck.*

"Yes," I grit, not hesitating. Loren gasps as I flip her over on her bed and yank off any remaining clothing separating me from her perfect ass, legs, and pussy. I stop to run a hand over her skin, then deliver a firm slap against her rear, and she gasps and bucks in my lap.

Three more times, I spank Loren, soothing each slap with gentle fingers and drinking in the sounds of her aroused gasps and squeals. She's clenching her legs together, and I can see how wet her pretty little pussy is. I flip her over again, lips finding hers, while I slide two fingers into her roughly.

Loren groans against my mouth and begins riding my hand, her own hands still twisted in my hair and occasionally roaming down my neck and shoulders. I tease her clit with my thumb, and she nearly arches off the bed, panting and writhing.

“Domenic,” she whispers.

“Don’t put yourself in danger again,” I command her firmly, biting her lower lip and then nipping her earlobe as I whisper in her ear. “Understand me, *il mio fiore di ciliegio*? My cherry blossom doesn’t get in cars with anyone who might hurt her. And you’re not living here anymore. Tomorrow, you move in with me until you find somewhere else you like.”

She squirms as I finger her harder, her grip tightening on my shoulders as she gasps and grinds against my hand. “God. No, I can’t just—”

I stop touching her clit, and she scowls up at me, looking so goddamn adorable and flustered, desperate to get off. I grab her chin so she has to look up at me. “No. You’re moving in with me because I can’t fucking sleep knowing you might be in danger. Understand?”

“Domenic,” she whines.

“Just agree, Loren,” I murmur, kissing down her face and kneading her tits, my cock throbbing in my pants.

“You’re still dressed.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

She huffs, sexual frustration making her voice breathy and beautiful. “Damn it, you’re supposed to be fucking me. Take your fucking clothes off NOW! Or just touch me—please?”

I’m not budging on this, and she seems to see it in my eyes because my gorgeous spitfire gives me a haughty look and tries to reach down to touch herself, desperate for her orgasm. I easily pin her hands over her head with one hand and begin slipping out of my suit coat and unbuttoning my shirt with the other, heat building in me at the delicious sight that Loren is sprawled out on her bed like this.

“God, you’ve touched yourself here thinking about me. About us, haven’t you?” I whisper.

She bites her lips and nods, arching her back again. “A lot, recently.”

I groan at that mental image and make quick work of the rest of my clothes until I can move between Loren’s spread legs, cupping her face in my free hand to kiss her deeply again.

“You’ll move in with me, and I’ll make sure those motherfuckers don’t lay a finger on you again,” I murmur against her soft lips.

She falters, her beautiful eyes worried as she examines me. “I—I can’t. I have to think about—”

“The daughter you mentioned,” I finish for her, kissing her cheek and jaw.

Loren pushes me away as she pales. I’m not sure if it’s fear of someone finding out about her child or fear of me specifically



finding out, but she immediately begins shaking her head.  
“I...”

“Is that the only other person living here? There’s a second bedroom,” I point out in an effort to distract her from the moment of blatant panic I just saw her experience.

“M—my mom.”

I nod. “They’re welcome in my place, too. It’ll be safer for all of you there.”

Loren looks beyond wary. She’s even closing her legs and beginning to sit up, and I can’t have that. She still needs me, and I’m far from done with her. Better to brush over all of this, ease her mind, and then give us what we both want. We can discuss finer details later—I don’t care if she has a whole horde of people living with her. I won’t let that keep her in a place where she’s not safe or comfortable.

Especially now that I know Loren has been singlehandedly trying to shoulder the debt that some deadbeat father left behind for his family to deal with. I make a mental note to look into that detail later and press her back down into the mattress with another heated kiss, trying to convey how bad I want her. How bad I always fucking want her.

She relaxes again, and soon we’re back at it, tangled with one another until I finally slide past her warm, slick entrance with a low groan. Loren feels incredible, and I’m addicted to how her hands feel on my skin. She traces my tattoos while we moan together, my fingers pressing harder into her hips as I increase my thrusts.

She locks her legs around me and buries her face in my throat, whimpering my name. “*P—più veloce,*” she manages. “*Per favore.*”

*Faster. Please.*

God, I love that she’s made an attempt to learn my native language. I never stopped wanting Loren when I learned the truth about what she was doing in my casino three years ago. It was true that I was frustrated with her because I disliked hackers as a rule. But Loren was something else to me even then, and I had been far more frustrated by the idea that she might have been ungentle with me that special night. She might have viewed me as little more than a lay with the casino owner’s son at the time.

But I know how genuine she is now—how real *we* are. Everything about Loren calls to me. The fact that she’s taken the time to learn tiny bits of Italian, even merely to tease me? It’s more than any other woman I’ve spent any amount of time with has done.

She understands me on a level my family doesn’t.

“Domenic,” she whispers against my skin, kissing down my jaw.

I groan and take her lips with mine again in an attempt to keep my words from coming out, but they still do anyway. I whisper against her mouth. “*Me e te. D’ora in poi, io ti proteggo. Da qui in poi, sei tutto mio, fiore di ciliegio.*”

*You and me. From now on, I will protect you. From here on, you're mine, cherry blossom.*

“I’m not nearly that fluent,” she half-giggles, half-groans as I thrust harder, seeing her nearing her edge.

“You’ll get there.”

I kiss her until she tightens and comes undone around me. When she breaks our kiss and her head tips back, gripping my shoulder with a cry, I join her with a powerful orgasm that leaves me gasping against the top of her head.

After a moment, I place a kiss there. “It’s settled. You’re moving in with me.”

She untangles herself from me and bites her lip, still looking gloriously flushed as she considers my words. “Okay. Fine. But it’s temporary—just until I find somewhere else suitable.”

I’ll have a say in what is or isn’t suitable. Because obviously, at some point, Loren considered *this* place suitable, so I can’t trust her to make the best judgment call there. But I don’t say as much because she might argue and resist the entire idea once again, and I’m glad that she’s finally agreed in the first place.

Truly, I will sleep far better having Loren close by and in a safe location. But I would be lying if I didn’t see it as a way to continue getting closer to this woman who makes me feel far warmer and more alive than I have felt in years.

“Good. Start packing. You’re not spending one more night here.”

## Chapter 17

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## Loren

**W**hat was I thinking?

When I agreed to move in with Domenic, I may have been in somewhat of a lust-induced haze. I was scared of the Wild Seven finding me again, and he had been dominant, persistent, and annoyingly hot. Yet simultaneously protective and soothing.

But now, standing in front of his mansion of a house, I'm kicking myself for my lapse in judgment. I can't live *here*. This is the kind of sprawling, sleek luxury desert house that gets advertised on magazine covers, complete with immaculate landscaping and a hefty plot of land separating it from the other affluent-looking buildings in the area. I don't even want to guess how much a place like this costs, let alone step foot here.

And then, of course, there's the matter of explaining it to my mother. Right now, she's standing speechless beside me as she gapes at our temporary arrangement. Evelyn is asleep in my arms, draped half over one of my shoulders as I stand at the

entrance of the long path leading up to the modern mansion's front door.

A—are you sure this is the right address?” my mother squeaks, glancing over her shoulder at our beat-up car filled with everything of value we own in the world. Which isn't much, obviously, since it fits mostly into one car.

Yesterday, Domenic was insistent on me moving out of that dumpy apartment as soon as fucking possible. He said he would pay for any costs, cover everything, and hire movers—but I just couldn't jump in right away like that. My family and I stayed in a nice hotel room after packing all our shit into the car, and I waved off all of Domenic's offers to help with that process. I'm humiliated enough as it is that he saw me so vulnerable when I had that little outburst.

*And told him about my daughter.*

I look at the toddler in my arms and swallow. “Yeah, this is the right place, Mom. There are a couple of guest bedrooms we're allowed to use.”

She furrows her brow at me, but I can barely see her eyes through her thick sunglasses. “Loren, sweetie, I'm not so sure about this. You said this is a man you work with? Is he your... boyfriend?”

“No,” I say quickly. “He's just helping us out. Offered up his free space, and besides, with a steady job like the one I have now, I'll find a better place for us in no time. Seriously.”

“And you trust this man?”

I really do. I know I shouldn't—he's a fucking Caputo. A dangerous mobster. Plus, he fired me without question yesterday before he saw me have a minor breakdown and took it all back. Maybe it *is* a little crazy of me to bring my family here, to the house of a Caputo...especially since he's the father of the darling child, I'm clinging to.

All I know is that I feel safest with Domenic.

The Wild Seven are after me, and they've threatened my family once before. My hacking skills wouldn't be enough to protect us long-term. Suppose they'd found me in that dilapidated excuse for an apartment. In that case, I have no doubt they would kill my family and me and split long before anyone called the cops.

They won't find us here. Even if they did, Domenic has his place heavily secured both by typical means and through the steady watch of the Caputo family. Like all crime families, they protect what's theirs and take their don's safety seriously. Even now, I'm aware that there might be eyes on my mother, Evelyn, and me as we stand here, bracing ourselves to go in.

I asked for work off today to get settled in. Since it's Thursday, Domenic said to take tomorrow off and make it a long weekend—with pay. I keep overhearing from others at work that he's a hell of a strict boss, yet I can't help feeling like he's constantly cutting me slack I don't necessarily deserve. When I argued that I just needed a day to move, he wouldn't hear it.

He's a domineering, bossy alpha don.

And I like it. A lot. I also like him far more than I want to think about.

When we finally get inside the house using the multiple security codes Domenic gave me, it's no less impressive than the outside suggests. Everything about the space is no-nonsense and minimalistic, yet luxe. It's spacious, with enough floor-to-ceiling windows to fill the place with bright sunlight. The kitchen is massive, a massive cerulean pool glitters in the extensive backyard, and the guest rooms Domenic told me about are right where he said they'd be.

It's similar to a mother-in-law suite and connected to the rest of the mansion through a long hallway. There are four guest rooms, two bathrooms, a kitchenette bigger than our entire former apartment, and a living room overlooking the pool. All the furnishings are ten times nicer than anything I own, but I'm still looking forward to moving our stuff in here to make it feel less...well, foreign.

Not that I don't like the luxury surrounding me, but I feel entirely out of place. My family has had to scrimp and scrounge my entire life, barely making ends meet. Domenic's house oozes money and class. I worry about breaking something because I cannot afford to replace this kind of stuff.

My mom looks like she's walking in a dream. I feel a bit of the tension in me calm when I note that, except for some confusion, she seems excited to be here. I put Evelyn down for her nap in one of the guest rooms, fidgeting nervously the



entire time my mother and I work to get what little we have out of my car and into our new space.

Domenic is at the casino, of course. I kind of wonder if he won't come here at all while we're staying here. After all, I know he sleeps in the suite set aside for him at the casino hotel when he's too busy to drive out to this place. And I feel strangely disappointed to think he might just do that until we get out of his hair.

Not that I want him to meet my mom—or Evelyn. God, if he sees our daughter and puts two and two together, what the hell am I going to do? I'll just have to hope he keeps being a workaholic for however long it takes me to find a new place. Maybe he won't even venture to this part of the house, and we'll never have to cross paths here.

Though I find that unlikely.

I'm back in the mother-in-law suite's living room, setting down the laundry hamper full of odds and ends when Evelyn wakes up and toddles in. Her curly dark hair is wilder after she naps, her cheeks pink, and she's sucking on her knuckle as she observes her new surroundings with wide, dark eyes. She hurries to me, and I scoop her up, laughing when she buries her face in my neck.

“Not sure what to think of all this, cutie pie?” I kiss her forehead and try to tame back her hair, poking her nose with mine. “We'll just be here a bit. Look! See the pretty pool? Yeah, mommy's not letting you anywhere *near* that. Can you say *okay*?”

Evie makes a high-pitched grunting sound and grabs at my necklace with wet fingers.

I sigh. “Okay. We’ll get you to a speech therapist soon, cutie.”

“Loren!”

My mother’s panicked hiss makes me turn to shield Evelyn defensively as she rushes into the room from the hall with eyes bigger than dinner saucers. “What? What is it?”

“There’s a—a man here.” She fans herself from her run, looking flustered and panicked at once. “I just bumped into him by accident on the way in. He was in the kitchen and asked if we were getting settled in—I forgot to introduce myself entirely. I was so surprised—he’s *handsome* but so intimidating, and I just—”

She’s forgetting to breathe again. I soothe her and ask her to take Evie with a reassuring smile before I hurry down the hall myself, wringing my hands.

It’s not even lunchtime, so why did Domenic take a break and come here? Was it to check in on me? Surely not. I’ve seen his softer side, but he’s a busy man, and there’s absolutely no reason for him to check in on me on top of his over-the-top generosity so far.

I hesitate at the end of the hall, trying to compose myself before I turn the corner to enter the sprawling living room attached to the kitchen. But just as I step out, Domenic rounds the corner, and I gasp as we smack into each other.

Immediately, he has me steadied up against his hard, powerful body, his hands on my hips. I swallow when he doesn't move to release me, simply holding my gaze captive with his dark eyes. A hint of tattoo peeks out over the white collar of his suit, and I try and fail to forget kissing my way all over that tattoo only yesterday.

I can't think about him like that. Not if I'm trying to maintain some distance. Right now, I need some distance because his proximity makes my heart pound.

"S—sorry," I manage, extracting myself. I don't know why I'm such a flushed, awkward mess right now. Maybe it's because I usually see him in my work clothes, at the casino, and not with my hair falling half out of a messy braid in old cutoffs and a T-shirt that keeps slipping off one shoulder.

Domenic tucks his hands in his suit pockets as he regards me. "I didn't see a moving truck."

"We fit everything in the car just fine," I shrug, then quirk my lips to one side. "By the way, nice crib. This place could have its own zip code. Or township. You have *very* expensive taste in furnishings—did you just give your interior designer free reign to your credit card, or what?"

He arches a brow. "I decorated it myself."

"Wait, really? Why?"

"Trying to convey my tastes to a decorator who doesn't know me would have been a complete waste of time and money. I'm particular."

A giggle escapes me before I can help it, and I'm pretty sure I see his lips twitch. "I think the right word is *pessimistic*. But, you know, for someone who clearly doesn't put his faith in others, you sure do have a very bright, happy little...er, big home. Though I absolutely cannot imagine *you* browsing through Hobby Lobby," I add with a snicker at that mental image.

Domenic glances over my shoulder down the hall, and something about his expression changes ever so slightly. I look back, and my throat goes dry.

Evelyn is back there, peeking around the corner as she sucks on her fist again. My mom has fixed her rumpled dress and hair, but her round cheeks are still pink from her nap, and she's cooing something unintelligible. She toddles off quickly, probably back to see the rest of the suite she's been too shy to check out.

*Shit. Please don't see the resemblance.*

My heart is about to break through my ribcage. Could Domenic tell just by looking at her? My mother says Evie looks like me aside from her dark hair, but I don't know, and now I'm panicking. I can't even bring myself to look him in the eyes when I turn back, shrugging and looking out one of the windows into the backyard, pretending it's no big deal to me that he just saw her.

"About taking off work tomorrow, I'm really almost all settled in, so there's not really a need—"

"Your daughter. What's her name?"

I break off and force myself not to fidget because that would be incriminating. “Evelyn. I call her Evie.”

I finally meet his gaze and sense that he’s debating asking the one question I don’t want him to. I know he can do easy mental math and gauge that her age matches up with the first night we were together three years ago. If Domenic asked me outright if Evelyn is his daughter, I think I would snap, and then he might take her away from me eventually, and I absolutely can’t have that.

But it was one time, three years ago. We used protection. Right now, he has no reason to suspect that protection failed. So I’m panicking for no reason.

Summoning my considerable acting skills from years of scamming casinos, I smile and lie through my teeth like my ass is on fire.

“Her dad wasn’t interested in being in the picture when I told him the news. Which I’m fine with. I’m sure he’s still...you know, partying with frat boys or whatever. Just your typical party guy.”

It’s the biggest lie I’ve ever told on multiple accounts, but it’s all I have as a defense right now. If Domenic buys that he had nothing to do with Evelyn’s paternity, surely he’ll ignore her while we’re staying here. He has no obligation toward a child who isn’t his. No reason to look further into it.

A muscle jumps in Domenic’s clenched jaw as he examines me for a long moment. I don’t so much as bat an eye. I’m a

good liar, and I know it, so I keep my pose relaxed. He looks out the window.

“I see. And what’s *his* name?”

Oh, God. The undertone in this mobster’s voice is serrated ice, more savage than I’ve ever heard before. Is he angry about believing there’s no chance he’s Evie’s father or is he mad about the idea of some other guy walking out on us? There’s no way to tell, but I just scoff and wave off his question.

“That’s really not important. Anyway, back to what I was saying—”

“No. Tell me.”

I fold my arms and level him with a look. “Domenic. Just drop it.”

His eyes narrow. We stare off momentarily before I hear Evelyn cooing again in the suite and falter, wondering if I should go back to check on her. I hear my mom talking to her, though, and I finally clear my throat and go on as if nothing happened.

“I don’t need to stay home from work tomorrow. I only have a couple more things to grab from the car, and the three of us are low-maintenance, so I’m sure we’ll be fine until the weekend as far as moving stuff goes. Also, I’d really like to get back to examining those patterns.”

“Patterns?”

I nod and tell him about the signs I’ve been seeing of *one* hacker in particular in the system, subtle and skilled. I explain

that I haven't been able to pinpoint an actual person despite my best efforts, and then I tell him my newest theory: a dark web hacker. Someone who is damn hard to track because they don't *physically* show up but who knows how to manipulate numbers and coding just right to get money from the casino without tipping it off.

"It's meant to look like ordinary hacking, should it be noticed at all," I explain. He follows me from his mansion to my car, which admittedly looks ten times junkier, parked on his smooth, dark driveway. "But I think it's all digital. No one is actually coming in. They're not hacking a bank account or tripping any security measures, but they're still using the casino as a small source of income. My guess is they're using a few casinos like this to make their bank account nice and fat—which would be an offshore account, probably routed through several places."

Domenic listens to all of this with his lips tight. "Is this something you've had experience with?"

I open the trunk as I frown at him. "As in, have I pulled similar shit? No. I've worked as a hacker, not a deep web thief."

"I meant, is this something you can put a stop to? Is this in your wheelhouse?"

"I want to try. I feel like I'm already getting close. Whoever they are, this person is really good. But I don't think they have a clue I'm on to them yet, so there's that, at least."

As I gather a couple of random things left over in the car, a photo album slips out of my arms to the road. Domenic picks it up and briefly examines the cover, his lips twitching.

“This is you as a baby?”

I glance at it and wrinkle my nose before laughing. “Yeah. I made Porky Pig look like a supermodel, huh? I can’t help that I was the chubbiest baby in existence. Don’t tease.”

He doesn’t. Instead, he helps me get anything left in the car and brings it inside, but I insist on him leaving it on the kitchen counter for me to bring into the mother-in-law suite myself. I go drop off the stuff in my arms in one of the guest rooms.

When I return, Domenic still holds the photo album as he stands by the kitchen island. But now he has a deep scowl on his face.

And just like that, I remember my pregnancy photos are in that album. His stormy eyes fly to my face, and for one heart-stopping moment, I wonder if he’s seen something that tells him the truth about Evie.

*Damn my mother and her love for scrapbooking and photo albums*

But Domenic just flips the album around, and points at a picture of me captioned “three months pregnant.” I’m standing in my old kitchen with a thick cast on my leg and a crutch under one arm.

“What happened?”



I scratch my arm. “Oh...the leg? Yeah, that was....”

*From Roulette. Snapping my femur in half the morning after you banned me from your casino. Leaving me to crawl out of there in agony.*

Recovering from a broken leg while pregnant had been miserable. I'd needed to be on my feet for jobs to cover our loss of income from working with the Wild Seven, so I had to use stupid crutches for what felt like forever. It hurt and itched, and the doctor said it took even longer to heal than more clean breaks he'd seen like that.

“I fell from a balcony,” I supply, the same excuse I once told my mom. “It wasn't a super tall balcony, so there were no other injuries, but it still hurt like a bitch. Happened not too long before I got pregnant. *Super* unlucky timing, huh?”

Another lie. This time I can tell Domenic doesn't seem to buy my words completely as he glowers down at the photo album in his hands.

“A balcony,” he repeats quietly. Unhappily.

“Yep.” I grab the photo album from him and grab the rest of the stuff on the counter, throwing the breeziest smile I can manage over my shoulder as I walk back to the suite. “*Anyway*, like I said, I'll be at work tomorrow. Thanks again for everything, Boss.”

I know he's insistent about me calling him by his first name, and the exasperated scowl he gives me has me snickering as I escape my sexy mafioso's presence once again.

## Chapter 18

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## Domenic

“It’s important to the board that I be at the meeting. I’m established—years of experience. That’s something they can’t argue with, Nic. Surely you see that.”

Another long day of running the casino has left me with little in the way of patience when dealing with my father. He called just as I was getting into my black Mercedes, and I forgot to check the caller ID. I had been too distracted with wanting to go home earlier than I typically do to see Loren since she avoided me at work again today. After how much we’ve come closer recently, it’s irked me that she’s still so standoffish about her past.

So here I am, stuck on the phone with my father while waiting in Vegas traffic.

I say nothing in reply to him because what is there to say? I know he doesn’t like my less old-fashioned, less bloodied methods of running the family.

The Caputo family itself has a problem with me now, too. They might not say anything directly, but they obviously take my father's whispers about me being "soft" to heart. It would be easy to get my hands dirty and show them through some broken bones and tests of loyalty that I have exactly *zero* tolerance for bullshit lately, but then what? I'd be just like my father.

The casino has done immensely well in the eyes of the public, but the hackers who have plagued Vegas still affect the Golden Flame, despite Loren's best efforts. Maybe it's the dark web hacker she mentioned doing most of the damage. Whatever the case, I'm not doing things the way my father did, so he sees me as inadequate.

Perhaps I am inadequate. After all, the board of directors—mostly Caputos with some corrupt businessmen from other industries—*did*, in fact, ask my father to attend the upcoming meeting. His involvement in running our family's top business pursuit is a shadow on me, the very thing that made me hesitate so long about stepping in as the new don when he began to pressure me into it.

"Nic?"

"I'm here."

He huffs on the other end. "Should I take your silence as a disagreement? It's best I'm there. We both know it. The Golden Flame is hemorrhaging money, and they want a familiar presence."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes as I finally pull through the gates of my property and park in the driveway. He's exaggerating more than a touch. If I presented him with a side-by-side comparison of the profits from the casino when he ran things compared to how I do it today, maybe he would be forced to admit it's scaled in its returns just fine. More than predicted, in fact.

He lived in the heyday of mafia activity. Things are different for organized crime today, something he ignored for the most part. While my father ran the Golden Flame, it was seedier. The crowd spent a hell of a lot, but they weren't affluent people. They knew about the Caputo family's connection to drugs, racketeering, and everything else we've done in the past.

I began making changes well before I became don. I made things more official, more high-end. Worked my ass off making connections with people in higher circles than ours. Now on average, the people who walk through the doors of the Golden Flame have deeper pockets. They come for an experience. Celebrities and politicians aren't afraid of being seen here, despite the rumors about my family, which has deep roots in organized crime, being involved.

I've made the casino more *legitimate*.

And when it comes to everything else the Caputo family does—all the pursuits, the blackmail, the extortion, or whatever the hell needs to be done to keep things running smoothly...sure. I

let us do things the old-fashioned way. I was raised to not have a problem with that shit.

So I'm not fucking *soft*. I'm just trying to use business smarts while my father undermines me.

"A familiar presence," I repeat quietly, pinching the bridge of my nose. "Why not."

"You sound like you've got a problem with that," he gripes. The rumble in his voice tells me that if I was there with him, he'd be puffing out his chest and proudly showing the sneer he's mastered over decades. "This isn't the time to be fucking around. You know, the guys at the casino, they've mentioned you seem off your game. Something about a hot little thing you put under our family's protection, and they can't figure out why."

Anger flares through me, turning my voice to ice. "That so?"

I'm going to have a talk with my men. One they won't enjoy.

"Tried grilling Big Luck for details, but that blockhead insisted it was nothing," my father grunts. "I hope he's right. Wouldn't want to see you let yourself get weak over some pussy."

I hear a pop in my jaw from squeezing it so tight. I learned long ago that exploding or giving my father any significant reaction to work with is precisely what he wants. So while telling him to fuck off in much more colorful, furious language is sorely tempting, I make my words even and steady. I give him a glimpse of the family leader he likes to pretend he doesn't see in me.

“You insist on being at the meeting? Fine. I’ll see you there. But don’t expect me to be weak. You are no longer the don. If you fracture the loyalty of our family any more than you already have by stirring up more shit, brace yourself. You will get no special treatment from me because I don’t fucking tolerate disloyalty, not even from my own father. I may run things differently, but I enjoy the older forms of Caputo punishment. Remember that.”

His words are angrily choked out. “You’re threatening me? I’m looking out for the good of the family! This is a matter of pride! If you were half the Caputo you ought to be by this point in time, you would be more established, you’d be continuing with the way we used to—”

I hang up. I don’t necessarily regret my veiled threat, but letting my temper affect me where he’s concerned was unwise. Though admittedly, it was satisfying to hear his shock and fluster.

My father and I have a complicated relationship, but it’s not so twisted that I would actually harm him. If he crosses me in any real way outside of his small slandering, I’ll find a punishment befitting him. Sent away under protection to some other state, or perhaps off to an island full of retired people his age.

Still, I said what I said because he needs to stop comparing me to him. I have no intention of being a carbon copy of the Caputos who came before. Brute force got my family far in the past, but it’s a quick way to an early death, especially for

newer members. I want long-term payback. I want a gilded empire that outlasts the old mafia ways.

I also want to ignore all that ambition and my failed expectations for another moment of peace in Loren's arms. I've been thinking about her all day, and now as I step into the house I used to so often ignore, I glance around for any sign of her.

I gave her the mother-in-law's suite, knowing she would perhaps be more comfortable with that. It means we could avoid each other entirely if we wanted. But I don't want that, yet I also don't want to intrude on the safety I want her to feel here.

A screech cuts through the quiet of the rest of the house, and I startle, hand jumping back to the gun tucked in the waist of my pants, hidden under my suit. I don't always walk around my casino armed, but I have made a habit of it ever since Loren was nearly attacked in the parking garage.

Then I realize the squeal came from a child, and I move hesitantly through the dim kitchen, flipping on lights until I can peer down the hallway toward the suite.

As if on cue, a half-naked toddler—Evelyn, she said her name was—rushes from the back rooms. Her infectious giggles bubbles through the air. She has a skirt on, and her dark hair is a chaotic swirl over her head.

I find myself completely mesmerized as Loren appears, chasing after her daughter with a heart-melting smile on her face. She doesn't see me as she scoops up the adorable girl and



swings her up high, kissing her cheeks and blowing a raspberry on the child's little round belly.

More infectious laughter. God, it's so bright and innocent. So foreign, but in a pleasant way. I've never heard a baby laugh in person. I've hardly been around children in general, being a single child to a selfish mafioso father in a family of ruthless criminals. And since the casino is not a place for kids, I find myself fascinated by the image in front of me.

Loren looks at Evelyn like that pudgy little angel hung the moon, sun, and stars. She wrestles a shirt onto the girl and places another kiss on her head, settling her on her hip. Then, before she turns to go back into the rooms, her eyes snag on me, and her eyes go wide as she stills.

"H—hi," she fumbles, swallowing and turning as if to hide her daughter from me.

She's fiercely protective of Evelyn. I knew this already, and yesterday it was more evident by how she momentarily panicked over me seeing the little toddler as she was moving in.

And perhaps I understand that protective instinct to a degree. Because when Loren told me some fuck boy jackass knocked her up and ran from the responsibility, I almost choked on rage. I still plan on tracking him down. I have the same contact who looked into Loren's background in the first place working on this right now. The moment he finds the guy, I'm going to make that fucking idiot's life hell if I decide to let him keep it at all.

Because Loren deserved all the support she can get. Especially now that I know more about her past. Speaking of, that contact of mine also gave me information on her father.

An alcoholic. Gambling addict. Two stunts in jail. Suicide.

I want to know more about her relationship with him. It's a heavy topic, but I need to know just how much Loren has been trying to shoulder on her own for so long. I'll need to broach the subject carefully, so she doesn't shut down at the line of questioning and run.

"*Buonasera*," I reply, tucking my hands into my pocket and approaching in the least threatening way I can manage.

"Good evening," she translates with a slight smirk. "Watch out. Sometime in the future, you'll try pulling Italian on me, and I'll whip out an entire poem in your mother tongue or some shi—" She catches herself, glances at Evelyn, and clears her throat. "Something like that."

I bite back a smile. Loren watching her language around her daughter is entirely too charming to me. So far, she hasn't ushered Evelyn away or hurried off, so I examine the girl again with curiosity.

She's examining me in return with large, dark eyes. Her cheeks are flushed, tiny fingers curling in her mom's shirt. Most children jabber, but she doesn't make a sound as she considers me.

I find myself smiling despite myself. "*Ciao, tesoro.*"

*Hello, sweetheart.*

Evelyn glances between Loren and me as if to see what her mom thinks of me before passing her own judgment. I don't dare come closer because Loren is already glancing surreptitiously over her shoulder at the guest rooms where her own mother is chatting on the phone with what sounds like a friend.

She clears her throat. "She doesn't really...talk."

The way she says that makes it clear that Loren is a bit frustrated with this. I have no idea the average age for children learning to speak. I just shrug.

"Talking is less important than observing."

She sighs. "That sounds like some wise old adage, which is fine, but Evie is behind. By quite a bit, actually. I'm... I'll take her to a speech therapist," she winces. "I've just really been hoping she'll get more vocal on her own, but with the chaos of the last few months, job-wise, I just..."

An undertone in her voice makes it clear this was a financial issue. I'm sure she would never say a word about it to me. Still, I make a mental note to look into speech therapists and how much they cost. Loren would fight me tooth and nail if I suggested helping, but I'm already learning her fierce need for independence hasn't made her burdens easier. Especially when her financial obligations come from her parents and a bad hand drawn in life.

"I didn't speak much as a child," I say, trying to ease her obvious worry.

Loren looks at me sharply in a reaction I don't understand. "Well, I did, and her father seemed the chatty type."

The reminder of that asshole makes my insides burn with resentment. She said he was a frat boy. He's probably her age—or far closer to her age than I am. Some boy who doesn't have the balls to man up. The sooner I find him, the better.

Not for him, obviously. He'll wish he never laid a single finger on Loren. Perhaps I'll break every one of them to drive the point home.

But I keep my face composed as I shrug again, looking her over briefly. Loren is in blue yoga pants that show off her legs and a white tank top. No bra. Hair in a messy bun.

God, I want to fucking devour her. Today has been as tiring as the others, especially with my father and the looming board meeting. The temptation to sweep Loren away to my room for rough sex and blissful moments together is overwhelming.

Her blue gaze becomes heated, and I realize she must read the desire on my face because she clears her throat and looks away with pink cheeks, adjusting Evelyn on her hip.

"Uh—so I made some progress at work today. I'm positive the hacker we're up against has physical ties in Las Vegas. I still don't think they've set foot in the Golden Flame themselves, but whoever they are, they're not on the other side of the country or in Russia or some shit."

My lips twitch. I tip my head at Evie, who reaches up to pat her mom's face with soft baby gibberish.

Loren grimaces. “God, when she does learn to talk, I just hope she doesn’t have the mouth of a sailor. All the other moms I run into are going to judge me so fuc—so hard,” she amends quickly.

A laugh is trying to crawl up my throat, so I clear it and settle for smiling and shaking my head. “They won’t dare. It’s obvious you’re a wonderful mother.”

Her eyes fly to mine in surprise before she looks away with her brow furrowed. “You’ve barely just learned I’m a mother at all. I’m sure you’re just saying that to be nice.”

“We both know I’m not the nice type. I’d never pretend.”

Loren grins and rolls her eyes. “Okay, fine. Then maybe you just don’t know what good parenting is supposed to look like because I’m a hot mess. All the time.”

Hot, yes. A mess? I don’t see it.

We’re interrupted by Loren’s mother poking her head out of the guest rooms with a curious expression. When she spots me, she has the same reaction she did yesterday—widened eyes, a flushed face, shrinking back. Perhaps she doesn’t know I’m a mafioso the way her daughter does, but Loren’s mother has clearly seen rough people in her lifetime. Her deceased husband may have even been one of them.

That thought sticks in my head with a twist in my gut. My childhood was practically nonexistent. My father considered me a Caputo first and a son second. But Loren’s upbringing

might have more darkness than anyone would guess looking at this brilliant, warm, smiling woman.

“O—oh! Hello, Mr...what was your name?” Loren’s mother asks in a squeak.

“Domenic.”

“That’s right! Do you go by Nic or Dom or anything?”

I offer a polite smile. Loren clearly dotes on her mother, but part of me is irritated at this woman for allowing her young daughter to shoulder so much of the debts left behind by her husband. Does she know Loren’s past in hacking? Or that she was being targeted by the fucking Wild Seven?

Perhaps not.

“He prefers just Domenic,” Loren says, grinning over her shoulder at me as she retreats back to their rooms. “And he was just going to bed. He runs a tight ship, don’t you, *Boss?*”

She knows she’s asking for a spanking when she calls me anything but my name. I don’t want to scare away my cherry blossom, but I’m determined to have her in my bed as soon as fucking possible.

## Chapter 19

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## Loren

“Thanks, Mom.”

I accept the little cut-out picture she hands me of Evelyn. It’s an adorable photo of her. She’s sitting in bright lighting on the living room floor, and the picture was taken of her mid-giggle with one of my kid-friendly necklaces in her hands. She looks like the most precious little jewelry thief in the world.

My mom is a scrapbook and photo album fiend. So despite telling her I have about a billion pictures of Evie on my phone, she insists that having a physical copy is always better “just in case.” Suppose there’s ever an en masse technological crash in the world. In that case, she’s ensured we have physical copies of each other—especially Evelyn.

I slip the picture of my little girl into my purse and peck Evie on the cheek. She’s playing with a collection of brightly colored wooden blocks in one of the guest rooms, but she watches me and even makes a grabby goodbye motion to me as I leave again.



The weekend was weird. I tried my damndest to keep to our little mother-in-law's suite area, and I caught up on random errands as an excuse to stay out of Domenic's house when I knew he was there. He seemed to keep busy with the casino, but I didn't miss the heat in his gaze whenever we *did* cross paths.

Last night, I'd fantasized for a good two hours about tiptoeing from my bed to his room, calling him to come home from the casino, and fucking his brains out.

God, this is driving me crazy. I can't be with this man, not with the secrets from my past trying to swallow me whole, yet I can't fight the pull between us. I don't even like trying to fight it, truthfully. Something about being with him just eases the constant do-what-it-takes-to-survive mentality I've grown up with. When his hands are on my skin, he makes me feel precious. Wanted. *Needed*, even.

As if a powerful individual like him would ever need me. This rekindled desire between us can only lead to one thing: him moving on from me eventually. And if he figures out the truth about our daughter, he'll take Evelyn with him when he does.

Or...will he?

Parking in front of the casino where I have been ever since the attack in the parking garage, I chew my lip as I stare up at the Golden Flame.

*Would* he try to take her away from me? He called me a wonderful mother. I even told him about Evelyn's delayed speech issue, and he seemed unconcerned. Was that just

because he doesn't think she's his kid, so he doesn't care? Or was it because he trusts my judgment with her?

I recall the gentleness on his face as he'd smiled at her the other night. That tender tone of voice that I'd never heard him speak in before.

*"Ciao, tesoro."*

A growing part of me wants to see him around Evelyn again. To gauge his reaction to her on the whole. Would he love her as powerfully as I do? Would knowing he's her father change his reactions toward her at all?

I do trust him. Maybe more than anyone else. Honestly, I *want* to trust him with this.

Perhaps I just need more time to build that trust. Then maybe telling him would enter my realm of possibility just a little more.

Inside the Golden Flame, I make my way quickly to the back of the gambling house, slipping into the security room with a tight smile at Vivian, who looks sternly at me for being a couple minutes late. As usual, the room is buzzing with people watching camera feeds and murmuring into walkie-talkies of Caputos and other security personnel stationed all over in the casino.

I settle into my place and glance at the screens that capture the second floor overlooking the main casino area. That's where Domenic is now, looking sexy as hell in his suit, as usual. He's chatting with some kind of minor celebrity based on the

reactions and comments of the other security team members observing the interaction.

She's a woman older than me, probably closer to his age. Drop-dead gorgeous and laying it on *thick* as she practically eye fucks him right there by the railing.

I fight a smile at the cool demeanor Domenic gives off. She might as well be a walking, talking wall of bricks. As always, he's polite and detached. Nothing more, nothing less. And when the woman reaches out as if to adjust his tie, he gives her a steely look that has the little celebrity hurrying off with her friends, who appear to be live-streaming the entire thing.

*That's right. Run, bitch. He's mine.*

The thought startles me, and I quickly dive into work to avoid analyzing it. Because I *cannot* start thinking of Domenic Caputo as mine. What the hell am I thinking?

Hours later, after carefully tracking another line of bizarre patterns in the system, I feel a knuckle graze my cheek and jolt a little, blinking up. Domenic is standing beside me, and his lips twitch as he pulls his hand away and nods at the screen before me.

“You're focused.”

“Well, I was until you so kindly distracted me,” I sass, grinning and pointing at the screen. “See here? And here? This is the pattern I was talking about. I have dozens of screenshots of shit like this. Actually, I've gathered enough data that I think I can—”

“Have you eaten?”

I give him a longsuffering look. “Come on, not this again. I’ve been busy. Let me finish. It’s not really—”

Domenic pulls out his phone and ignores my huff as it dials. “Big Luck. I’m leaving early tonight. Keep an eye on that couple that was flagged near roulette.” He pauses. “No. I’ll look at it tomorrow.”

When he hangs up, I give him a withering stare, waiting for him to apologize, but of course, he never does. So I sniff and fold my arms.

“If you’re done, Oh Mighty Casino Owner. Wouldn’t want to mess with your schedule. I’m sure you’re fully booked for interrupting people simply to make ten-second calls. You could have just sent him a text, you know. Or maybe you don’t know, you dinosaur.”

His smirk is dark and sensual, and I feel a tingle in my stomach. He’s so stingy about his smiles, especially around other people, and it makes me realize we’re nearly alone in the security room right now. The feeds are constantly recording, and oftentimes, security personnel take a break from the screens while in-person security is at its heaviest. There’s a handful of people in here now, chatting on the other end of the room.

“Finish what you were saying,” he tells me.

“I don’t think I will. Not until you say please.”

Domenic leans closer, a glimmer in his eye. “Please, *il mio bel fiore di ciliegio.*”

God, his voice is just *so sexy*. He could whisper Italian to me 24/7, and I wouldn’t get tired of it. But I still give him a testy look.

“Didn’t catch that.”

His lips are now at my ear, and I shiver when his warm breath brushes over my neck. “I said please, my beautiful cherry blossom.”

Oh. *His* cherry blossom?

I try to swallow and form a response, but my heart is going berserk, and I can’t remember what I was trying to explain to him.

“You’ve been so focused, you’ve lost track of time, Loren. You were supposed to clock out half an hour ago. I told you no overtime, and now we’ll be late bringing something home for dinner for your mother and Evelyn. Now go on. Finish what you were saying.”

*Home. My mother. Evelyn.*

In the perfect fantasy world, it really would be my home, and we’d be...well, a family. I’d crawl into this man’s bed every night—or more likely, he would toss me onto it and pin me down with kisses—and we would be safe and content in our little bubble.

But this is the real world. Where he’s a fucking mobster, and I’m a hacker with a past. That past is riddled with shit that I

compartmentalize and ignore, and I'm sure Domenic has his own baggage besides the obvious. Not to mention, he doesn't know about my work with the Wild Seven in the past. And even if he accepts Evelyn, won't he be furious at me for lying about her?

I quickly turn to the computer, tearing myself from his deliciously dark gaze. He's my boss right now. Just my mobster boss, nothing else.

"Right. Uh...I was saying that I've collected enough data that I think I could...." I hesitate and glance up at him. "Well, you do illegal shit all the time, right?"

"I'm a Caputo."

That's apparently his only answer. Which is fair, considering I've heard plenty of rumors about his crime family.

"Okay. Well, this is kind of a big, highly-skilled, potentially dangerous fellow hacker I'm dealing with," I say, lowering my voice despite the distance of the others in this room. "Would you be opposed to me doing something not-strictly-legal? The kind of thing that, I don't know...results in up to ten years prison time with some hefty fines if some amateur catches me?"

Domenic stares at me for a beat. Then he surprises me by gently taking my chin in his hands. "Firstly, no one would catch you, and if they did, I would remedy that. Secondly, the idea of you breaking laws for me, while tempting, is not going to happen. You've already told me you have regrets about your past."

That...was not the response I was expecting. I frown at him. “But it might be necessary for catching this dark web *someone*, and it would be the fastest way to—”

“No. I have enough illegal activities on my hands with my family. You’re out of the hacking game, and you’ll stay out.”

“Domenic. Be realistic.”

He arches a brow playfully. “I thought you said I was a pessimist.”

“It’s just hacking. This person is slippery as hell, but I can do serious damage. I could get a location. This person is stealing from your casino, you know—subtly, but it’s there. Don’t you want to stop that?” I reason.

He hesitates. “What got you into hacking in the first place?”

I didn’t expect that question. I shuffle in my seat. “Well, I was self-taught, like pretty much all hackers. I really liked coding. In high school, it just clicked for me. The numbers, computer languages...it just made sense. I got really into it, especially after my dad....” I grimace.

He sits in the rolling chair beside mine, eyes intent on my face. It’s like we’re in our own private space. “Tell me.”

I don’t talk about this with anyone. Not even with my mom. But his presence is so comforting and protective, and the words come out before I can stop them.

“After my dad killed himself,” I say quietly, looking away. “Don’t give me pity, please. I wasn’t close to him. He...was terrible, actually. When he wasn’t drunk off his ass and

terrorizing my mom, he was terrorizing me. He spent most of his time at casinos and always chose them over us.” Then I look Domenic in the eye. “Including yours.”

He doesn’t look away, reading something in my eyes. “You got into hacking for revenge,” he says quietly.

“Yeah. I did.”

“It was an addiction, Loren. Alcohol and gambling are mild distractions to some. Harmless in doses. For others, they become crippling diseases. To get to the point he did, I’m sure your father believed he had little in the way of choices.”

“Are you defending him? He put himself in that situation in the first place.”

“Yes, he did. I’m saying this to point out that you *do* have choices. You’re not an addict, and your father’s misdeeds are not your burden.” He hesitates. “You began hacking to scam the institutions that did you wrong. I’m sure it became about money. You’re not legally obligated to pay off your parents’ debts.”

Great, now I’m getting legal advice from a mobster. The irony.

“What’s legal hardly matters to the *many* people my father borrowed from,” I mutter. “Look, if you don’t want me using my skillset like that to catch this fucker, that’s fine. Maybe we can find some other way. Subject dropped.”

He’s quiet for a moment, watching me as I close out the many tabs and systems I had opened on the computer. I’m about to



stand and march huffily out of the room when he speaks so quietly that I almost don't hear him.

“Did he hit you?”

I pause. Then I clear my throat.

“He was unpredictable when he was drunk. Sometimes it meant he got irritable and let the odd hand fly. My mom—” I tuck my hair behind my ear and check his face before looking away. The others can't overhear this at all, but I still don't enjoy discussing it. “I put her through therapy a while ago. He was nasty to her, mostly verbally. Sometimes I caught shit from him, too, but she protected me more than I ever realized until I got a little older.”

I stand quickly, slinging my purse over one shoulder and not meeting his eyes. “So yeah. Now and then, he'd hit us. But I hit him back.”

Domenic stands, too, face unreadable as he studies me. “You still mourned him,” he murmurs. “Wanted revenge on his behalf.”

“So?”

“So you're far more compassionate than I am. And despite everything that asshole has put you through, you're the strongest, most vibrant person I've ever met. You're a fucking force to be reckoned with, Loren.”

I swallow and look away. He doesn't know the group I used to run with. The things I saw and never said a word about. Even though the people the Wild Seven punished were often

horrible individuals, I couldn't handle it. He might think I'm compassionate, but I'm not. I'm just fiercely protective of my family because I'm scared of losing them like I lost my father.

That thought burns in my chest momentarily before a small weight lifts off my shoulders. I thought all this time that I was looking for revenge on my father's behalf despite how much I hate him, but I realize...I don't hate him.

I felt sorry for that man. He was still my father. We had good memories before all the bad ones, and the real reason I was so mad about him giving up like that was that I wouldn't ever get more good memories with him. He'd left when shit was tough, but there could have been more good after we got through stuff together. I'll never know now, but I can't go on feeling so angry and bitter about him when Domenic is right—he was sick. Addicted. I'm sure he hated himself in ways I didn't understand, and I won't share that sentiment anymore.

Moving on will take time, but maybe I can forgive him someday. In the meantime, Domenic is also correct that I started hacking from a dark need to retaliate. And where did that get me? Trouble. Non-stop trouble and danger.

Hell, the only reason the Wild Seven is after me now is because of my choice to join them in my quest for "vengeance." I'm the one who put my family at that level of risk. Not my father.

I think of the "lucky" coins in my purse. I created them in the height of my heyday with the Wild Seven, when I was determined to bring every casino that my father frequented to

its knees. They're every slot player's dream hacking device. They're powerful, just like my anger, hurt, and pain.

I kept digging my hole deeper for a long time, but not anymore. Just like I made my own luck through those coins, I'll make my own choices going forward. No more hanging on by a thread. I'll help Domenic catch this other hacker without breaking more laws or endangering him or my other loved ones.

And then I'll move on. I'll keep making my own luck. This time, I won't do it for revenge, but for love of the people I still have around to make memories with.

"Thanks," I whisper to Domenic.

He's a man of few words, but he seems to know me better than anyone else. That soul-deep connection I sensed between us the first night we met is still there, even if I keep trying to run from it. And I'm so tired of running from it because the dangerous man now escorting me from the security room is the safe haven I never knew I needed.

And I fight the thought, but it's still there.

*Maybe he really can be mine.*



Yesterday night was like a dream. Or something out of the Twilight Zone, but in the best way possible.

Domenic and I had picked up Italian food from one of his favorite restaurants to take back to his house, with him insisting on covering all of it. I even tried slipping my debit card to the girl at the counter, and he shot me a stern look that made me laugh out loud.

Back at his place, he had shown me, Evelyn, and my mother to his home theater. Which, for the record, is bigger than some theater rooms in *actual* theaters. We'd eaten dinner in there with the dimmed lights and a family-friendly movie playing that captured Evie's complete attention until she fell deeply asleep. I swear I got lucky because my daughter's sleep schedule runs like clockwork.

It was all so strangely easy and casual. Domenic didn't say much throughout the evening, but then he's the stoic type. Observant, considerate, finding every small excuse to touch me...

And God, I wanted to let him touch me more. I was beyond tempted to pursue my little fantasy and slip out of the mother-

in-law's suite to his room. But apparently, my mother very much noticed our traded looks and stolen brushes of our hands, and the moment we got to the guest rooms, she had a full-on interrogation.

Am I sure we're not dating? Have I been "doing the deed" with this man? Where does he get his money from? Is he dangerous? Is he a debt collector? Why haven't I told her more about him?

I groan and rub my face as I sit at my desk. It's after lunch the next day, and I'm struggling to stay awake in the security room. After the deep heart-to-heart Domenic and I had in here yesterday and the dreamlike little evening where he stepped away from the casino, and I let down my defenses, I'd seriously thought we would end up in bed.

Or on a table. Hell, a counter would have done fine.

I'd also thought I would tell him about Evelyn, maybe. I was going to feel it out and decide in the moment if I trusted him to that extent.

Instead, I answered a bajillion questions from my mom. No, we're not dating, but we've done some...fooling around. He gets his money from working, like anyone else—although I left out just *how* he works or who his family really is. I said he was as dangerous as he needs to be, which clearly didn't comfort her.

But the real kicker is that I told my mom the truth. She knows Domenic is Evelyn's father. It had just popped right out of my mouth before I could stop it. I nearly gave the poor woman a

heart attack, and I still can't believe I lost control of my mouth like that.

It's fine. She can know, and I'll work my way up to telling him.

"We're going to the break room. Want to join?" Vivian asks me.

I realize I've been zoned out and glance over the handful of security personnel who are ambling out of the room. "Oh. Uh —I'm good. Thanks."

She shrugs and walks out, so now it's just me in here with a couple of other people taking their breaks at different times. One looks ready to fall asleep like I was just about to, while the other is dutifully watching the security feed for the front of the casino.

I pull up more feedback and data from the main floor on my computer. I'm looking for more signs of the hacker I've been tracking messing with the casino's systems when I notice a strange blip on my screen.

"Huh."

I know there are security cameras in the electric room of the casino, where the mainframe computers are. We're tapped into them this room. They're extensive systems suitable for the setup of the massive amounts of computing necessary for the casino to run smoothly. But something just isn't adding up right. I examine the blip on my screen and glance at the cameras that show that room is completely empty.

“Is anyone stationed at the mainframe?” I ask.

The guy about to doze off yawns and pretends to type on his computer. “The...? Do you mean the electrical room? It’s locked by some pretty intense security points. We have someone go in there once or twice a week to ensure everything in there is running smoothly and dusted. It’s not a place to be stationed.”

It contains a lot of important shit, though. Massive amounts of data are produced every day by the casino. My stomach clenches uneasily as I examine my computer. I can’t pinpoint precisely what doesn’t feel right. All I know is that *I* could probably hack my way into that room.

Could someone else?

“I’m going to check it out,” I tell the other two loudly.

They wave me off like I’m just going on a tour for fun. Whatever. I grab my purse, which has my old hacking device zipped up right alongside my lucky coins, and then I slip from the room and make my way through the back halls, down a couple staircases towards the electrical room.

I think about all the important-looking people who showed up here earlier. Men in suits as crisp as Domenic’s, women with no-bullshit stares, Caputos...including an older man in a suit who walked with a weighted cane. Domenic greeted him personally when he arrived, and I’d seen the resemblance. His father.

They're all in a meeting with Domenic on the top floor of the casino. I watched them go up there on the security feed myself, although there are no cameras in the important conference room they're currently in.

If something was wrong in the security feed, something to do with the electrical room, I could get to him pretty quickly. I think.

But maybe it's just in my head. If anything, this gives me a little brain teaser as I practice getting into this locked-up room full of information storage.

I stop in front of the big door and examine the keypad lock and other security measures in place. It's not unimpressive. No surprise—I'm sure Domenic prioritized this room, even if the other people in the security room seem unconcerned about it. After all, there are so many places to target in a casino, and this is not at the top of the list. Not normally, anyway.

But if someone wanted to mess with data or do some serious hacking...

The room looks sealed, but I can't ignore the inkling in my head. After glancing over my shoulder at several cameras in the hall behind me, I give in and pull out my hacking device. I doubt the others have returned to the security room yet, and the other two won't be looking at me here.

All things considered, I make quick work of the locks. My device slips smoothly into place, I connect my phone, and I'm off. It's like solving a puzzle made of ones and zeros, and I'm



almost in a trance as I bypass security measures and grant myself access.

Finally, the heavy door clicks, and I swing it open, stepping into the electrical room as my brows bounce up. The massive mainframe computers in here are sleek and dark, lined up row after row with subtle blinking lights here and there. It's dim in here but not dark, and due to the computers humming all around, it's fairly warm.

I listen for a long moment and hear nothing. Seems fine. Do I really need to walk further back into all those rows? This place seemed sealed, nice and shut.

I'm about to turn and walk out when I catch the smell. It's not like the rest of the Golden Flame, with its unique floral scent. Instead, it's the faintest aroma of cinnamon gum and a particular brand of aftershave. One I recognize.

My heart pounds as I peek around one of the rows of mainframe computers. A hacker I recognize is standing there, a gadget plugged into one of the mainframe doors with bleach-blond hair in a man bun on top of his head.

*Glitch.*

Glitch has been a member of the Wild Seven longer than most. He's been with Ace since the beginning—and he's really fucking good at what he does. When I first met him, he'd told me I was ahead of where he had been at my age regarding coding and hacking. I'd taken it as a massive compliment because he's a god when it comes to shit like this.

He's also incredibly violent. Something else I had the misfortune of learning when an acquaintance of the Wild Seven tried to backstab them. Glitch hadn't hesitated to smash in that guy's brains with a crowbar before returning to his chill and easygoing default.

*The Wild Seven is making another move.*

They're targeting the Golden Flame for reasons beyond revenge on me. God, of *course*, they'd target this casino. This is one of the most successful in all of Vegas, and it's no place for amateur hackers, so of course, the Wild Seven would want to bring it down, steal it all, and leave it in the dust like they have so many other places.

I try to take a step backward, but a firm hand wrapping around the back of my neck makes me suck in a sharp breath. I'm turned around to face Jack, whose white smile is neon-bright even in the dimness.

“Well! If it isn't little Lucky Loren. *Lucky* timing, huh? I love finding pretty girls in dark rooms. Especially ones who deserve to be broken for the shit they've pulled.”

His hand tightens around my neck until it starts to cut off my air supply. My eyes flick over to see Glitch staring at me with no sign of emotion, just an eyebrow raised.

“Nice work getting in here, kid. Took me a second. Guess you noticed that I was messing with the feed in that security room you're all so proud of, eh? Not bad.”

Jack laughs. “Yeah, how is it sitting in that room, Loren? I bet you feel nice and validated there. Such a waste of skills. You used to be fucking hot, running with the rest of us. Could get out of any situation with that pretty little smile of yours. Now, look at you.”

He spits on me. I begin to squirm, and when the pressure in his fingers doesn't let up, I remember that these guys have no reason not to kill me here and now. They left a corpse in front of Domenic's casino mere weeks ago—what's to stop them from doing it again, and this time making it me?

I need to warn Domenic. The Wild Seven are here, and they're messing with massive systems integral to the casino. It'd take them a while to make the whole place go dark, but they'll get there if they're not stopped. And then they'll have access to a shit-ton amount of data—names, transactions, credit card numbers. Far too much for them to wield.

I'm not about to get killed here. No way.

With a grimace, I twist my right arm until my purse slides down. Then I swing it as hard as I can. It's full of plenty of shit, and usually, I complain about it getting heavy, but today? Today I'm really fucking grateful that I might as well be hauling a pile of bricks wherever I go because my bag smashes up into the side of Jack's head, and he staggers.

I turn and bolt away, but not before he recovers enough to snag at my purse. I try to yank it back—my lucky coins are in there along with all my other important shit—but when I do that, many things topple out. Lip gloss, a gum packet, receipts, my

wallet, a couple of necklaces that Evelyn broke, and I've been meaning to fix. The picture of Evie.

Well, they can have my wallet. It's not like there's much in there. I just can't let them get their hands on my "lucky" coins because that tech would be too monumentally destructive in the hands of the Wild Seven.

Glitch and Jack are after me as I scramble for the door with a shout. I don't know how they got in here unnoticed, but they're clearly running a big play right now, and they're not about to let me stop them.

But I'm also not about to let them catch me.

I slip out the door just as Glitch narrowly misses grabbing my arm, and then I'm booking it back down the hall, shouting at the cameras. I hope they turn on some alarm.

Nothing happens, and as I hear Jack and Glitch still somewhere behind me, I realize with a start that *all* of the security feeds are probably being hacked.

"Get your ass back here, Loren!" Jack shouts.

I'm far from the security room. Far from the stairs that will take me up, up, up to the conference room where Domenic is. I didn't realize how far down under the casino the electrical room is, but now I'm pumping my legs hard as panic claws at me. If they get me, they'll kill me.

"Been looking for *you* for a while," Glitch calls. "Scrubbed your records online, huh? Smart, but someone else has been

looking into you lately. They tipped me off. Some private detective or some shit. Tell us, have you got a kid, Loren?”



Ice fills my veins. *Evelyn.*

Jack’s voice is an echo. I don’t hear them pursuing anymore, and I’m positive they’re about to wrap up whatever they’re doing and disappear.

“That’s right, Loren. Run. We’ll find your kid, we’ll find you, and you’ll fucking regret the day you turned on us. Ace wants your fucking head, you bitch.”

The stairs are just ahead, and then I’m taking them two at a time, flying up to the same level as the security room. As I round a corner at a full sprint, I slam into a solid wall of muscle and immediately begin to fight it, sure that Roulette is about to crack my bones.

“Hacker? What the fuck?”

I blink up at Big Luck. Logically, I know I should open my mouth and tell him that there are hackers in the casino.

Dangerous ones that could go toe-to-toe with born and bred mafiosos any day of the week. They're experts at disappearing in broad daylight, out from under anyone's nose. I should warn him.

But the terror is catching up with me. They know about Evelyn. Somehow, they know, and they'll find her. I need to tell Domenic. I need to—

"Tighten the security measures," I tell Big Luck quickly. "Go to the security room and tell them to reset the system. Total system reset. Doesn't matter that there are people in the casino, and it'll go dark for a sec—I don't fucking care. *Total reset*, and then they need to troubleshoot like no tomorrow. Okay?"

I don't wait for the big lug's response as I dart away out of the backrooms of the casino. I'm getting looks from finely dressed customers as I dash past and up the stairs, ignoring both them and the elevator.

When I get to the top floor, it crosses my mind that I should hesitate. These are important people in here, not to mention Domenic's fucking *father*. Another Caputo and another dangerous man I probably don't want to be on the wrong side of.

But our daughter is in danger. His casino is in trouble. I just need to tell him, and I need to tell him now because if the Wild Seven finds Evelyn—

I can't. I can't lose her. God, no.

I barge into the company meeting, and a dozen pairs of eyes flick to me as they make sounds of displeased surprise. My gaze latches on Domenic. He sits at one end of the table, a stunned expression on his face.

His brow furrows, and he begins to stand. “Loren? What—”

“Hackers,” I blurt, heart racing and tongue not working fast enough for everything I have to say. “I—I hacked into the mainframe. I just had a feeling, and there they were. They’re—something is about to go down. I said a total system reset, and I don’t know if Big Luck will get to the security room in time, but—God, they know about *Evelyn*.”

“What the hell is this about?” one of the people at the table grumps.

“You *hacked* our mainframe?” Domenic’s father growls.

Domenic doesn’t spare them a glance, his concern growing as he takes in my appearance and settles on the red marks around my throat from Jack choking me. He begins to round the table, but I don’t have time for his concern about *me*.

I’m panicked about my daughter.

“Domenic,” I start again, but I’m cut off by his father also standing.

He has a disgusted look on his face. “You’re just letting this woman burst in here, a sobbing, emotional wreck? What is a fucking hacker doing in my casino? This is pathetic, Nic. This is an important meeting. Now get her out of here and behind bars or in the back rooms for interrogation.”

Domenic's eyes flash, and he grits his teeth as his head snaps in his father's direction. "This is my meeting. Not yours. As of now, I'm rescheduling. Anyone else have a problem with that?"

The others at the table exchange unsure glances, clearly not wanting to upset either don, but Domenic's father makes a sound of disgust.

"*This* is why I need to get involved. You preach about showing control and being a part of the new way things are done, but you're just following your dick, aren't you? You've had this hacker bitch under our family's protection? That's a waste of resources. Get her *out* of here."

I'm so flustered and shaky that my panicked look simply returns to Domenic. He sees my terror clearly and turns back to the table. Leaning forward with his hands braced there, his voice becomes a low, dangerous murmur that I feel in my bones.

"If you want to talk wasted resources, we'll discuss cutting off a retired don who doesn't adapt to change from the family's generosity later. In the meantime, keep your mouth shut about the woman I love and get the fuck out of my meeting."

Wait. What? Did he just say...

*Love?*

That breaks through my panic long enough that I gaze at him in surprise. Domenic looks equally as surprised when he realizes that slipped out, but then his expression hardens into



that familiar persistence I've seen on it before. He may have said it by accident, but he's not backing down from this. He's owning it. He meant it.

I can't even breathe. Domenic Caputo *loves* me? How the fuck did this happen?

And...do I love him?

*Yes.*

He's my safe place. My polar opposite who somehow balances me. Domenic makes me feel protected, worshipped and adored. He's intimidating, but I love that about him, and he gives me a reprieve from my past that I didn't even know I needed.

I open my mouth to tell him how much I love him when his father's huff of disbelieving laughter makes us both look over. The older man shakes his head.

"You *love* a hacker? She did just admit to being a hacker, so there's no denying it. Spare me. Have your fun with her and move on to something more serious. We've talked about this. You need to be established—I'm sure everyone here would agree that you being settled would be good for our image."

Again, the people at the table exchange looks. Most of them are Caputos, and I can see their reluctance to agree with the older don. But they're not sticking up for Domenic, either.

Well, fuck all of them. I've only known his father for all of three minutes, but I already know Domenic is the superior

leader. This other man is vying for power that my mafioso seems to ooze without trying.

“I love you, too,” I whisper, and Domenic’s dark eyes bore into mine.

Before I can add to that or before he can tell off his father again, the lights overhead snap off. People in the room shout and get to their feet. Even with the conference center door closed, we can hear the muffled alarm of the customers at the Golden Flame Casino.

“The hackers?” Domenic checks with me in the dark, hands on my arms to steady me.

I can’t see him, but I nod. “T—the Wild Seven. They’re here, and they threatened Evie. They said they would find her, and if they find her, I’m going to—”

Warm, soft lips capture mine in the total darkness. This room either has no windows, or they’re covered by blackout covers, but either way, I find myself kissing Domenic back hard. For just a moment until I break away and take a deep breath.

“Big Luck might have already gone after them. If he did, he’s in danger because the two guys I’ve seen here are no joke.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Domenic’s father is complaining loudly, scowling.

Others in the room are murmuring, but I realize most of them have headed to the door with their phone flashlights, apparently okay with rescheduling the meeting. The only one who seems decidedly not okay with it is Domenic’s father, but

Domenic and I promptly ignore him as we rush from the room together, hand-in-hand.

Back in a space softly lit by daylight and nothing else since the casino has lost all power, he and I navigate the crowds toward the security room. Some people in the casino appear frustrated over the “no power” situation, while others are waiting patiently. Even more are simply walking out of this casino to find another with working games.

“They were in the electrical room?” Domenic asks me as we wind towards the entrance to the back halls where the security room is.

“Yeah.”

“How did they get in?”

“I hacked my way in, and I imagine they did the same.”

Just as we step out of the crowd and into the back hall, the lights come back on again. There’s more commotion in the casino as people talk over each other about the sudden lack of power. But just as I’m beginning to feel relieved—because a power outage that brief has got to be merely the result of the total reset that I told Big Luck to demand—Domenic’s phone rings.

He answers it without looking. “Yes?”

And then I run into him as he freezes in place. His jaw tics and he swears colorfully before hanging up and turning to me. I only take one look at his face before I know what it is, and I

feel like my stomach just dropped out of my body. I'm going to throw up. My voice is weak and ragged.

“W—who was it?” I whisper anyway.

Domenic clutches my arm. I can see his careful composure chattering, despite his effort to soothe my terror. “Two of the Caputos I had stationed by my house were killed. The one remaining called to inform me that...the Wild Seven was there. They took...”

*They took Evelyn.*

He doesn't say it, but I feel it deep in my bones. A sob escapes me, and then he wraps me up tight to his chest as I fall apart.

“I know.” Is it just in my head, or is he shaking too? But with him, it seems as if it's from anger instead of pure terror, as it is with me. “Shh. Breathe, Loren.”

“They told me this would happen. If I'd just done what they wanted—I could have stopped this—I choke, sobbing and shaking as I try to breathe.

“This is not your fault, *fiore di ciliegio*. Breathe and think. Why would they take Evelyn? Do you think they would try to ransom her? Why?”

That's just it. I don't know why they would take her. They told me they would kill my family. So what changed?

As if on cue, my cell phone rings. I sniff and frown, barely able to see through the blur in my eyes that it's my mom calling. More panic spikes my blood pressure as I scramble to answer, brushing my hair from my face.

“Hello? Mom? Are you okay? God, please tell me you’re okay.”

“Your mother’s still alive.”

Ace’s voice makes me go perfectly still. I don’t even want to breathe.

“Wh...where is she? Where’s my daughter?” I shout.

“Cute kid, your daughter. Don’t worry. We haven’t hurt her yet.”

*Yet.*

“Please,” I whisper hoarsely. “Ace...”

“We might not have to if you cooperate. See, Glitch called me with some interesting news. Said you had a picture of your daughter in your purse...course, we already knew about her thanks to his recent research. But he thought she looked kinda interesting. Wanna know why?”

I already know why. Domenic is tense beside me, and I can tell he wants to grab my phone, but he doesn’t. He can clearly hear what Ace is saying, and while I’m sure he wants to take the phone and go all alpha mafioso, snarling to bring Evelyn back, maybe he can sense the big reveal coming on the other end because he waits with a furrowed brow at me.

Ace goes on. “Glitch was working that night. The one where you fucked up. Had him hacked into the feeds, so he had a nice view of you getting touchy-feely with the heir of the Caputo family. That’s how I knew you broke the rules. It’s how we knew you couldn’t be in the Wild Seven anymore.”

I close my eyes because I can't stand to see the look on Domenic's face.

“One big mistake three years ago at the Golden Flame...it was an even bigger mistake than you realized, huh? I guess I didn't need to have Roulette break your leg to remind you, since you had the runt for that. She looks like her father.”

“Loren.” Domenic's voice is quiet, hoarse, and filled with darkness beside me.

I still don't open my eyes. He knows now. *He knows everything I was trying to hide.*

“Are you going to ransom her?” I demand, hot tears dripping over my cheeks.

He laughs on the other end. An unpleasant sound. “We could try, I'm sure. Find out if the papa will pay for the baby he probably never wanted. Or we'll just go with what we have now—giving the kid over as leverage to the Gallo family. I'm sure you know they're another crime family, rivals of the Caputos. We've been working with one of their guys. I'm sure you've noticed his handiwork while sitting pretty in that useless room full of cameras.”

The other hacker is a...Gallo? An enemy of the Caputos?

That barely registers over the rushing sound in my ears. They have Evelyn and plan on handing over my two-year-old child to a crime family. As fucking *leverage*.

Ace's voice hardens into something truly chilling on the other end. “Watch your back, Loren. Because the next time I see you

again, and I will, I really am going to put a bullet in your pretty little head.”

The line goes dead.

I’m furious and frozen at once. I’m terrified. And when I open my eyes, Domenic is storming away from me.

## Chapter 20

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## Domenic

*She looks like her father.*

How did I miss it?

The new strand of rage coursing through me is unlike anything I've experienced before—and my family's line of work comes with rage in spades. Dealing with my father's fickle confidence in me and his wayward sense of pride for years has taught me to conceal my real emotions carefully. People know when I'm angry without seeing it firsthand.

But right now, I'm not hiding anything. I'm fucking furious, and the second I find the man Loren called "Ace," I'll feel his neck snapping as I squeeze that motherfucker's life out with my bare hands.

I can hear Loren following behind me, still sobbing but silent now.

That pisses me off, too. I hate her tears.

Bursting into the security room, I ignore the squeaks and gasps of everyone who leaps out of my way as if a rabid tiger was

just released in their midst. It must be my expression that makes them shrink into their seats or vacate the room altogether.

“Vivian.”

She bolts up from her chair, looking pale. “Y—yes, boss?”

“The Gallo you flagged two months ago. The one who was blocked from entering the Golden Flame. Pull up any footage we have of him. Get me his name and a fucking address.”

The Wild Seven might be elusive to a legendary degree, but Ace said they were working with this asshole. Finding him means finding a pressure point that can lead to the Wild Seven’s whereabouts faster than any other idea I have.

She gets on it right away as I bark out more orders to the only remaining Caputos with the spine to stay in here. They’re not working fast enough, though. The security room had already been a flurry of chaos because of the total reset Loren mentioned, telling Big Luck.

As if summoned by my thoughts, Big Luck appears at my side, takes one look at my face, and swallows.

“Okay. Whose head are we about to bash in and why?”

The words won’t come out because I’m still trying to catch up with everything just revealed to me. *The Wild Seven have my daughter.*

My daughter. Evelyn.

It's so much to take in. Normally, I would analyze how I feel about the truth bomb that just went off through Loren's phone. She lied to me about her daughter's—*our daughter's*—paternity. She was once with the Wild Seven and kept that from me. I'm a fucking father, and I've missed two years of my little girl's life. Shock, wonder, betrayal, and a dozen other emotions war with the fury pulsing in my chest.

But now isn't the time for me to overanalyze. I can't ponder the best course of action at length as I do with so many other big decisions involving my family. I'm not the type to act first and bear the consequences later, but at this moment, I can't think clearly, let alone fucking strategize.

*They hurt my Loren. Broke her leg, threatened her, terrified her. They took our Evelyn.*

I'm going to fucking kill them.

Once again, I'm struck by the fact that Loren hasn't said a word since she followed me into this room. I turn, expecting to find her behind me, but then I realize she's sitting at her computer, and her fingers fly across the keyboard with blinding speed. One look at Vivian tells me that my Caputo cousin is not having luck, but perhaps Loren is.

She stiffens noticeably when I step behind her but doesn't stop her intense work. I can't make sense of her screen. Numbers, occasional letters, brief searches of websites that she navigates as if she's seen them hundreds of times. It's all a static-like blur, and I realize she's breaking laws right before me, hacking in the exact way I told her not to.

But right now, I couldn't care less. I'd do the same thing if I knew how. My attention pins on her.

"Loren."

She doesn't answer, simply pressing her lips together. My cherry blossom is normally so bright and chatty, but right now, it looks as though a gust of wind could break her. I'm violent by nurture, not nature, but seeing her like this makes me ache to spill blood and burn everything down.

"Loren."

"I know you're mad," she snaps, her voice breaking. "I get it. I'd be mad at me, too, if I was you. But just let me fucking do this right now. You can take her away from me for good and throw me in prison for working with the Wild Seven later, but I *have to do this*. I have to get her back."

Her words turn over in my fury-addled brain, making no sense. But beside me, Big Luck's eyes go wide and he splutters.

"You're one of them? I knew it! I knew when they picked you up that something was going on. I bet you told me to do that reset to help them get into our systems, huh? Well, the Caputos are going to make you regret—"

"Luck," I snarl at him, whirling on my hulking friend, who shrinks back in surprise. "Shut the fuck up and contact all street teams to be prepared for a chase. The Wild Seven took my daughter."

Big Luck's brow creases and he looks at me with immense confusion before his eyes flick between Loren and me.

“Oh. Holy shit. I'm on it, Boss.”

He's immediately making calls and rushing from the room while everyone else scrambles to get the information I need. Loren beats them to it, and soon, we have a name and an address for Ricardo Gallo.

I vaguely remember the name. He'd tried to get in with the Caputo crime family shortly after being cast out of his own family for squealing something to law enforcement. But no crime family worth their salt would let a squealer in their midst—and certainly not a hacker as he was known to be. It seems he was a more skilled hacker than one would guess, and he's been scamming my family's casino as a small retribution as the dark web entity that Loren has had trouble pinning down.

Now it seems Ricardo Gallo is trying to use my daughter to get back on his family's good side. And I know they'd accept his fucked-up show of loyalty. The Gallos hate me and the rest of the Caputos because this is leverage they could use to twist my arm clean off my body.

Loren was right about the hacker being in Vegas despite not physically being allowed into the Golden Flame. With his address locked down, my gun at my back, and my phone in hand, I quickly have Caputos gathering around his premises to keep the Gallo there while Loren and I get into my car, and

Big Luck drives. He burns rubber getting to the hacker's address.

I sit in the back by Loren, anger still throbbing in my veins. Still, my cherry blossom doesn't say a word. Her jaw is clenched, and she stares out the window as she hugs her purse to her chest with a haunted expression. The tears have stopped, but now she looks practically ill.

What she said earlier has sunk in enough by now that I finally turn to her.

"You were right. I am mad. I'm fucking livid, Loren."

Her blue eyes sweep to me and then away as she rubs her arms. In the driver's seat, Big Luck is swerving around other cars and breaking speed limits like no tomorrow.

"I...I just didn't want to risk...God, you're a don, and you said not to come back and—I know you hate me for hiding it from you, for lying and—"

"I wasn't finished," I cut off her attempt at an explanation, trying to tame my temper as I take her hand. She doesn't wince away but still doesn't look at me. "I'm not upset for the reasons you think. I'm pissed as fuck that they took Evelyn. Our kid. No one touches what's mine and lives."

Big Luck swears at someone on the road and changes lanes. We're nearing the location we got from Loren's hacking.

Loren swallows and peers at me through teary eyes, no longer looking quite as shut down as she did moments ago.

“You’re...not furious with me for keeping Evelyn a secret from you?”

I recall the morning after our first night together three years ago. I’d banned Loren, threatened her, and forced myself not to go looking for the intoxicating hacker after that passionate night. Of course, she wouldn’t come knocking on my front door with an invitation to a baby shower. It also goes without saying that she might be conflicted about having me, a fucking mafioso, as the father of her baby.

She didn’t trust me. She lied to be about the Wild Seven, about everything.

But she did it to protect Evelyn.

“I understand your reasoning,” I whisper, reaching up to brush away the remaining trail of tears on her beautiful face. “I’m not angry *at you* for doing what you felt was necessary to keep our baby safe. Any good mother would have done the same. Right now, I’m furious that they dared lay a finger on you or her. But I’m also beyond unhappy that you kept your past involvement with the fucking Wild Seven a secret.”

She grimaces and opens her mouth to say something, but Big Luck hits the brakes hard. We squeal to a stop in front of a suburban house surrounded by Caputos, but on the street in vehicles and waiting outside.

Whatever Loren has to say to defend her past will have to wait.

“Wait here,” I tell her, getting out of the car.

“I’m going in,” she argues. “I need to know where Evie is. He needs to tell us everything.”

I give her a look that makes her halt getting out of the car.

“Believe me,” I say darkly. “I’ll make this squealer squeal. We’ll know where Evelyn is, and we’ll get her back. But unless you have a stomach made of steel, you won’t enjoy my interrogation methods. So wait here.”

She stays put, and I march across the street, passing enforcers and street teams of Caputos who eye me warily as I pass. They look nervous to see me like this, bloodthirsty and ready to break every bone in a man’s body.

Good. Let them see I’m not the soft leader my father keeps claiming I’m turning out to be. Because until my daughter and Loren are safe again, I don’t care about loyalty—if anyone so much as looks at me wrong, I’m going to fucking lose it.



Less than fifteen minutes later, I emerge from the house with my suit smeared in blood. The screaming stopped a while ago, not long after Ricardo Gallo told me everything he knows about the Wild Seven and their plan for getting his “chance at redemption” to the Gallo crime family.



I killed him for calling my daughter that. The fact that he'd been using his hacking skills to steal from the Caputo family for months also made pulling the trigger easier. Not to mention, I hate disloyalty of any kind, and squealers have that in spades.

The Caputos present on the street back away from my appearance even as I give them a sharp look.

“Every vehicle the Caputo family owns is to be on the road to the airport immediately. Split up to cover every possible route. Look for vehicles marked with a red ace of spades either on the side-view mirror or beside the license plate. We're taking out the Wild Seven before they dare make a play at our casino or our family members again. If you catch one, keep them alive until I can interrogate and kill them myself. *Capiche?*”

As they bolt to their vehicles, they shout their confirmations and hearty agreements in Italian. Only a couple of my men stay behind to clean up the mess and frighten any civilian witnesses into silence. Meanwhile, I slide back into the backseat beside Loren, and Big Luck takes off immediately, having heard me through his rolled-down window.

Loren's sky-blue gaze flicks over my suit, my hands, and the bit of blood splattered on my face. If she wasn't already keeping the truth about Evelyn from me to shield her from having a mafioso as a father, this would be the moment she decided to.

But without a word, she grabs tissues from her purse and hesitantly reaches out to wipe the redness off my face.

Our eyes lock as she does. And although fury over my daughter's compromised safety is still sizzling in my veins, I get a wave of that same sense of peace I feel whenever I'm holding Loren close. The weight on my shoulder lifts a little, and the panic squeezing at my heart loosens its grip ever so slightly.

I'm a casino-running don, a born and raised mobster with gray morals and no patience for the idiocy of others. For me, the glass is always half empty. I'm not a good man.

But with Loren, that's all different. *I'm* different.

There are so many things about us that shouldn't work. We're polar opposites. I'm too old for her. She has a history with hacking that I'm only just beginning to see clearly, something that would deter any other casino owner. I have blood on my hands, both figuratively and literally.

So many reasons we shouldn't work, yet we do. Whatever happens next, I need Loren, and I won't let her walk away from me again. I drove her away three years ago, and she's been through hell. We both have.

From now on, my cherry blossom will want for nothing, and I refuse to lose her or our daughter again.

## Chapter 21

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## Loren

Domenic's dark, beautiful eyes hold mine, and for a moment, all the panic, anger, and fear turn into background noise in my head. My mafioso still has blood on his hands, suit, and neck—but I'm not afraid of him. Not even a little, like I once was.

I thought he was livid at me for not telling him about Evelyn. While I was hacking into Ricardo Gallo's shit like no tomorrow, I'd been so sure that the moment we got my daughter back, Domenic would take her away from me for good. After all, now he knows I used to be part of the Wild Seven. He's seen firsthand how I've struggled to provide all alone and how I'm basically one never-ending mess.

*I'm not angry at you for doing what you felt was necessary to keep our baby safe. Any good mother would have done the same.*

He's only mad I didn't tell him about the Wild Seven. But the way he's looking at me right now isn't angry. It's tender and intense at the same time, and he finally leans forward and

brushes his lips against mine so lightly it's like the brush of a butterfly wing.

“We're getting her back. I promise.”

I don't care if I'm crazy for trusting Domenic Caputo more than anyone else. He makes me feel safe and secure and...I love him. God, I love him.

The realization hits me hard, and I want to say it out loud, but now is not the time. Right now, I need to search the cars around us for signs that they might belong to the Wild Seven. So I pull away from him, heart pounding, to do just that.

In the driver's seat, Big Luck swears again and huffs at the cars on the busy road all around us. We're making killer time to the airport, but just as he's making another turn, my gaze snags on a dark car one lane over that seems familiar. It makes the turn at the same time we do, and their side-view mirror is marked with a red ace of spades—so small anyone else might've missed it.

“There,” I exhale hard. “That car. Oh, my God, they might have Evie in there. We need to get closer, get in their lane —“Then I tense, turning toward Domenic with wide eyes. “But if she *is* in there, we need to be careful!”

“We'll follow without tipping them off,” he says in an all-business tone that somehow soothes me.

He nods in the rearview mirror at Big Luck, who carefully maneuvers through traffic, trying to get one car behind the Wild Seven vehicle without being noticed by them. It's

challenging with the speed at which everyone else is going on this road.

But just as he's switching lanes, the Wild Seven vehicle veers hard into another lane, driving another vehicle out of the way. It crashes into another, and the deafening sound of several more collisions behind us makes me flinch. Meanwhile, Big Luck swerves around breaking cars, trying to follow the Wild Seven's vehicle as it takes an unexpected exit.

"Where are they going?" I gasp.

Domenic says nothing. His teeth grit, and I see that he's watching another car behind us, a dark one that's picking up speed and keeping up even as we pursue the other car. We're in an actual car chase, and my heart hammers as we flash past other vehicles to try to keep up with the one in front of us.

The car tailing us switches to the left lane as we leave the main road, and soon it's directly beside us with a window rolling down. I see the handgun flash under the bright daylight before I grab Domenic's shoulder and try to tug him down with me. The sound of gunfire goes off, making me scream, but though I can hear the impact of the bullets against the car, no glass shatters.

"Your car is fucking *bulletproof*?" I ask.

"Yes. I'm a pessimist, remember? One can never be too careful," Domenic mutters.

Then he pulls out his own gun, rolls down the window, and fires a shot. It's calculated and swift, and then the tire of the

vehicle gunning for us blows out, and they veer off the road, colliding into cement.

“But Evelyn—” I begin as terror claws at me.

“She wasn’t in that one,” he cuts me off, looking forward again. “It’s the one in front of us.”

I don’t know how he’s so confident about this, but the car we’re chasing screeches to a halt so suddenly that Big Luck slamming on the brakes only locks them. I smell burning rubber and squeeze my eyes shut as we barrel toward the stopped car. Domenic’s shout is followed by Big Luck getting off the brakes and wrenching the wheel hard, and then we narrowly miss the other vehicle and come to a hard, rocking stop.

Domenic is out of the car before I can do more than blink. I shriek when I hear more gunfire going off. My self-preservation instincts are screaming at me to get down and stay down where I’ll be less likely to catch a stray bullet, but I can’t just hide. They have Evelyn, and Domenic is out there raining down hell.

I hear a man scream and the honking of the other vehicle’s horn which doesn’t stop for a long moment, as if a dead weight is stuck on it. Calling my courage and ignoring my ringing ears, I stagger from the back of our car just as Big Luck also gets out and launches himself toward none other than Roulette. The two men smash into each other, all flying fists and bellows of anger. If I wasn’t shaking and desperate to

catch sight of my daughter, I might've been intrigued to see which of the two goliaths came out on top.

Domenic is wrestling with Jack, their guns a short distance away on the asphalt. There are two dead bodies of other Wild Seven lackeys nearby.

Then I hear a feminine laugh behind me. I tense right as Twilight—Chloe—lurches toward me with a knife gleaming in both hands. I manage to avoid both by some miracle as I scramble away, but two things quickly become apparent. First, she's trying to get me away from the other car stopped in this vacant parking lot we're fighting in right off the side of the busy road. Second, she's determined to stab me.

I jump back again, adrenaline pumping through my veins as I avoid her manic swipes and slashes at me. "Where is my daughter?" I snap at her despite our dangerous dance.

She doesn't reply, but the next time she comes at me, one of her knives finds purchase, slashing across the top of my right shoulder. I gasp at the pain, but I also manage to catch that hand of hers. This takes her by surprise, and I don't hesitate before kicking her hard in the stomach, sending her back to the ground with a smack of her head that makes her swear.

I look up at the stalled Wild Seven car again. Whoever was killed at the wheel has apparently been moved because the honking has stopped, and now I see him. Ace. He's moving to the driver's seat with a chilling look at me. He doesn't seem bothered by his team's dead members, but I know he's not



really a coward. He's only trying to escape because *Evelyn must be in that car.*

Confirming my terror, I hear my usually quiet child crying over the grunts and thuds of the men fighting to my right.

*I need to get to her.*

My momentary distraction is dangerous. Chloe has gotten back to her feet, and now a much longer, more serrated knife is in her hands as she gives me a wicked grin. But just as she steps toward me, another gunshot goes off, and I scream and jump away as blood sprays from her chest. She drops to the ground, twitching before going motionless.

My eyes flick up to find that Domenic has bested Jack, who also now lies dead. Somewhere far in the distance, I can hear police sirens, and I'm sure someone must have seen this from the busy road and called the cops. Behind me, Roulette grunts, and there's a loud thud on the ground. Big Luck's labored breathing is pained—he must be hurt.

But my mafioso doesn't falter. He's a mask of cold anger and determination as he shoots twice more, taking out the front two tires of the car that Ace just started to drive away in.

The Wild Seven's vehicle comes to a halt, and their leader is out less than a second later. Only now, he's holding a squirming Evelyn with the gun pointed to her head.

My blood turns to ice. I can't breathe. Never in my life have I felt this brand of pure, unadulterated fear.

And fury.

*He can't hurt my daughter. No matter what it takes, I won't let him.*

“I’ve heard that you Caputos are a force to be reckoned with. Impressive, I admit,” my old boss drawls, glancing over at where Jack has bled out onto the asphalt. He tips his head as he listens to the wail of police sirens still far away. Then he smirks at Domenic, ignoring Evelyn’s crying and tears as he hefts my struggling toddler up higher in his arm. “Tell you what. I’ll cut you a new deal. Instead of giving this damned loud runt to the Gallos, I’ll make it a simple ransom after all. Five million, or I pull the trigger.”

Domenic isn’t moving, but his aim remains trained on Ace’s head. He looks so stoic and powerful, but I can see his fury bubbling under the surface. He might be the dangerous type, but he’s not reckless. I can practically see him weighing his options in his head.

But I’m not about to wait. All he needs is an opening to end Ace without running the risk of that motherfucker shooting Evelyn. So I bolt toward Ace, running at him in a full sprint.

His face transforms into surprise, then anger, and he turns his gun on me. I feel like I’m watching all of this happen in slow motion, and all I can think is, *thank God* he isn’t pointing that damn gun at my daughter anymore.

Another deafening gunshot rings through the air, but surprisingly, I don’t feel any pain. That’s when I realize Domenic fired first, right into Ace’s head. More blood sprays,

and the sight of it so close to my daughter makes me want to retch.

But I don't stop running. Soon, I'm grabbing Evelyn from the dead hacker's arms and pulling her close, listening to her terrified screams as she grabs at her ears.

Her face is bright red, and she's hysterical. Her eardrums must hurt after hearing all these gunshots. Did they hurt her? Is she in pain? God, she's going to need therapy. She'll need—

Domenic's arms wrap around Evelyn and me, and suddenly we're both in his protective embrace. It's like a shield just went up between us and the rest of the world, and my spiral of hysteria calms down enough for me to remember to breathe. Evelyn is still crying. Big Luck is still groaning where he's bleeding on the asphalt, the cops are still on their way, and we're surrounded by gore and dead bodies.

Yet somehow, my world is balancing in a way it hasn't before. I look up into Domenic's eyes through my blur of tears, but he's not looking at me. His awed, *loving* gaze is on Evelyn as she makes grabby hands at her father for the first time, still crying but reaching for him. I hand her to him and watch as he murmurs sweet, soothing things to her in Italian, hushing her and kissing her forehead.

“She's beautiful, *fiore di ciliegio*.”

I love that he calls me *cherry blossom*. Despite everything that's stood in our way, I love everything about Domenic. I squeeze his arm tightly and bury my face in his chest to listen to his heartbeat for a moment.

“I love you,” I whisper.

His lips brush the side of my face before he kisses Evelyn again. She’s calming down. I sense his hand touching me near where Chloe nicked me with her knife. It’s not a deep wound and only stings, but he swears low at the blood there.

“I love you, Loren. For three years, I’ve thought about you. I’ve missed out on our daughter, and I plan to make up for lost time with the both of you.” Then he hesitates. “I want to be a good parent. Besides you, the best parent, but you’re already so perfect.”

God, I can’t get enough of this man. Who knew a mafioso could be so heartfelt and sweet?

“No,” I murmur, standing on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek. I offer a shaky, watery smile. “I’m a mess. And you’re a mobster. So I doubt we’ll ever be *perfect*, but maybe perfect is overrated. But I’m going to change a lot going forward. No more hacking, no more running, no more fucking up—”

His brows go up, and he glances at Evelyn. “Your mother needs to watch her mouth, doesn’t she, *tesoro*?”

*Sweetheart*. I looked that one up after he called her that the other day.

I bite back a grimace even as a breathy laugh escapes me. “I’m allowed to swear after we all barely escape with our lives. Or—wait, have we escaped?” I look over my shoulder, concerned at the sirens getting closer. “We’re in deep shi—*trouble*, aren’t we?”

“No. Messes like this are well within the Caputo family’s ability to clean up and gloss over in the eyes of the public. Trust me, *fiore di ciliegio*. I’ll take care of everything for you. Always.”



Trusting Domenic is getting easier and easier, but I’m still impressed by how he resolves the entire chaotic, terrifying ordeal with practiced ease and authority.

We leave the scene of the fight for the police to investigate since there were so many witnesses, but he assures me that he has connections and corrupt cops in his back pocket and nothing will come of it. They’ll release some statements about the alleged Wild Seven being caught in an unfortunate “rival gang” fight, and it won’t mention the Caputos.

Big Luck took a beating from Roulette, and it seems he also caught a bullet in his left leg. The giant of a man complained to Domenic the entire time we drove away from the fight, but he also begrudgingly told me that if I’m his “boss’s girl” now, then he’ll call me Loren instead of just “hacker.” Which I suppose means we’re on our way to being friends.

Evelyn is unharmed. She's resting deeply in the guest room of Domenic's house, which now has about ten Caputos guarding it. Despite the danger passing, Domenic insisted on heightening their guard until he can bulk up his security to a level he's satisfied with. He's even mentioned possibly moving to a new address that hasn't been compromised. I tried telling him that with the Wild Seven gone and the dark web hacker also no longer around, there's no more looming threat to us—but my overprotective mafioso didn't listen to a word. He's a bossy, dominating asshole like that...which I love.

Domenic is currently away from home, dealing with the cleanup of all the shit that just went down in the Caputo family and at the casino.

Now I'm with my mother. Besides being tied up and traumatized by seeing two Caputo mobsters killed right in front of her by Ace and the Wild Seven, she was otherwise unharmed. She does seem to be in quite a bit of shock, though.

To be fair, a large part of that might be my fault. Since I just came clean about everything. *Everything*, everything.

"You're...a hacker?" she repeats.

"Yes."

"And you worked with this *Wild Seven* group," she swallows and shivers, clearly remembering them. "The ones who killed Domenic's men—and he's a mafioso...."

She was slightly freaked out over that part for a bit. My mother has seen enough of dangerous people greedy for

money to last a lifetime, thanks to the sorts of people my father borrowed far too much from before leaving us to deal with the fallout. But she must have liked Domenic more than I realized because she seems confident that while he's not necessarily a *good* man, he just protected us all. He has points in her book as Evelyn's father since she knows I never told him about Evie.

But she's really struggling with my confession of who *I* used to be.

"Yeah. I did. I wasn't really like them, not the way you saw them today," I tell her, taking her hand and giving her an earnest look. "But Mom, we needed money. After Dad...you know, I needed to get cash quickly. I learned fast and got *really* good at hacking, especially slots. Do you remember how we were doing a bit better financially over three years ago? I told you I had a good job at a bank, but I was working my ass off to get cash quick from scamming the same institutions that ruined Dad. I needed money to pay off debt collectors as fast as possible."

Her gaze softens. "Sweetheart. You've always worked so hard, but I wanted more for you. You're brilliant—you should have gone to college, started a tech startup, or done something else *you* wanted. Your father's debts—"

"You needed me," I tell her. "I wasn't going to just leave you with all that."

"It wasn't your responsibility," she says gently, then hugs me tightly. "But...I don't know what I would have done without

you. Thank you for staying. I'm sorry it hasn't been easy, Loren."

I smile and hug her back. "No, it hasn't. But it'll get better."

"Yes, it will," Domenic's voice says.

My mother and I pull away and glance up to see him leaning against the doorframe of the guest bedroom we're in. He looks effortlessly dashing and powerful, despite the overtly taxing day. His tie is loose around his neck, and his suit is unbuttoned, a small show of disarray, unlike his usual sleekly groomed appearance. He changed out of his bloodied clothes earlier and must have washed off all traces of his "interrogation" and the ensuing fight, so now he just looks like the most gorgeous casino owner alive as his eyes hold me in place.

"I'm going to go check on Evelyn and try to get sleep," my mother says and leaves the room with a small thank-you to Domenic.

He sits beside me on the bed, and then his lips are suddenly on me—on my mouth, my cheek, my neck. His hand smooths over where I bandaged up the cut Chloe gave me using his stash of First Aid supplies earlier.

"They shouldn't have hurt you. Ever," he growls against my lips. "I'd kill them again if I could."

"Maybe I deserved it," I whisper, kissing down his jaw.

Domenic pulls back with a fierce look. "What the fuck would make you say that?"



“I was one of the Wild Seven, Domenic. I mean—I was never as bad as the rest of them. I just hacked for them, paid up, and kept my head down for the most part. But I still benefited from their protection and connections. I still *worked* with people who were capable of some really fucking horrible things. I was so blinded by my need for money and revenge that...God, I’m just so ashamed.”

He tilts my chin up so I’ll look at him. “You were trying to survive any way you could. Desperation makes people do a lot of things they regret. I fucking hated the Wild Seven, but I still wish you had told me about your connection with them.”

I shrug and swallow. “I was already trying to win enough of your trust, with you knowing I was a hacker in the first place. I didn’t want to give you another reason to...take Evelyn away from me,” I admit, trying to look away.

Domenic doesn’t let me, but his gaze softens. “No one will take her from you. Or from us, ever again. I promise.”

“Do you really want this?” I check nervously. “To be a parent? A dad? I know it came as an unpleasant surprise—”

“No. It came as the best surprise of my life.”

I gaze at him in wonder for a moment, but the sincerity in Domenic’s eyes is impossible to argue with. He’s studying me like I’m a beautiful piece of art, and the tension I can usually sense in his broad shoulders is gone. Besides looking a little tired from the hellish day, he seems...happy. Content, almost.

“She’s my everything,” I tell him warmly. “But so are you. Like I said, we’ll probably never be the perfect family—hell, it’s still surreal to me that I won’t have to look over my shoulder all the time for the Wild Seven anymore—but... it’s what I want. You and me and Evelyn. And my mom,” I add, shrugging a little. “She would never ask, but I know she still needs my help with everything my dad left behind.”

“It’s gone.”

“What’s gone?” I frown.

“The debts. All accounts your father had open. I had an associate of mine get me access,” Domenic shrugs as if this is the easiest thing in the world. “Everything is paid off, courtesy of Ricardo Gallo’s considerable wealth, which is now being claimed by the Caputos. I won’t allow you to be haunted by your father anymore, Loren. So it’s gone.”

I stare at him, stunned. I already knew I loved Domenic, but this...this is too much, even from him. I can’t just accept it all to be taken care of. But he stops me with a tender kiss when I start to argue.

“I love you, *fiore di ciliegio*. I love our daughter and can’t wait to be a part of her life—of both of your lives. Say you’re mine.”

I kiss him deeply, and before I know it, my hands are tangled in his hair, and Domenic has rolled, so I’m pinned to the bed by his deliciously hard body.

“I fucking love you,” I tell him, peppering his face with kisses. “And like I said once upon a time...it really works for me whenever you get all bossy and serious.”

“Say it,” he growls, already stripping my shirt from me, careful of my shoulder. He kisses the bandages and gives me a heated look that sends flutters through my core.

Something about overcoming everything standing in the way of *us* has me feeling giddier and lighter than I’ve felt in God knows how long. It makes me feel more like *me*. Like I can tease this pessimistic, powerful, gorgeous, amazing man to my heart’s content. So I quirk my lips to the side and wiggle my eyebrows at him.

“Make me.”

Then I yelp as Domenic flips me over. Without another word, he smacks my ass hard and fists my hair, groaning against my ear when he leans down to it. “You’re in trouble.”

“I *am* trouble,” I correct, and then I turn my face to kiss his cheek. “But I’m also yours. All yours. And you’re mine, Domenic Caputo. From now on.”

“From now on,” he agrees, gently peeling my clothes from me as he worships my body with featherlight kisses down my neck and back.

Soon, his warm, large hands are smoothing over my skin, and he’s nipping the side of my neck, keeping me pinned to the bed as he grinds his erection against my ass. It’s making me wild with need. I press myself harder against him, gratified

when he hisses out a breath and flips me back over to kiss me in the most consuming way possible.

I quickly strip him from his clothes until I can see all of him, from his muscles to his tattoos to the fire burning in his gaze as he takes in all of me. I grin and pull him down, whispering against his lips another phrase I learned in Italian. I'd learned it just for the sake of knowing...and also because I already knew how I felt for Domenic Caputo when I slipped back into his life after three years of dreaming about my gorgeous mobster don.

*“Ti amo, amore mio,”* I tell him.

*I love you, my love.*

He groans and buries himself in me, making us both gasp with pleasure. Being with him just feels so *right*.

*“Mine, Loren. I’m yours, and you’re mine. Ti amo, fiore di ciliegio.”*

## Chapter 22

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# Epilogue

Loren

*”Dove vai, mamma?”*

*Where are you going, Mommy?*

I fight my smile as I turn to ruffle Evelyn’s wild, dark curls while she peers up at me curiously. She’s four now and speaks both English *and* Italian at an impressive rate compared to her peers. At home, she easily swaps between the two, to Domenic’s utter delight. Sometimes I feel like *I’m* the one behind in learning Italian, though I keep up pretty well with my two dark-eyed loves.

Evie has her father irreversibly wrapped around her pinky finger. As head don of the Caputo family, he’s adjusted leadership positions so that Big Luck runs the casino most days, and he can spend far more time at home—especially now that we’re only a couple months away from meeting Baby Number Two. It’s another girl—God help us all because now my gorgeous and loaded fiancé is going to spoil *two* precious baby princesses.

“I’m just going to stop in at work. Your grandma is here to keep an eye on you, and Daddy and Mommy will be home really soon.”

Evelyn nods, and her eyes drop to my rounded stomach. She tips her head. “Can the baby be here soon?”

She’s *very* excited about meeting her sister.

“We have a couple months left,” I laugh, kissing her forehead. “Now, be good for Grandma. I’ll be right back with Daddy, okay?”

“Okay.” She scampers off.

I maneuver my pregnant body into one of the three cars in the massive garage. Our new house is gorgeous and just as mansion-like as the one Domenic lived in alone before, but I’ve added far more of my style to this one. Colorful pillows, Evelyn’s artwork on the fridge, wax warmers and rugs, and a dozen other things warm up the space and make it into a home. There’s a mother-in-law’s suite attached to this one, as well, and my mom is there now.

Despite the traffic, I make good time getting to the Golden Flame and barely stop myself from rolling my eyes when the Caputo security guards at the front entrance practically run to my side as I get out of my gleaming Porsche—another present from my fiancé. Admittedly, he spoils me almost as much as he does Evelyn.

Domenic has told me about the division that was going on in his family when everything went down with the Wild Seven

nearly two years ago. How his father was stirring up disloyalty because he disapproved of Domenic's more even-handed method of running the crime family he was born and raised to inherit. But after we nearly lost Evelyn, he adjusted how he ran things at the casino and with his family. He still takes his time to mull over big deals and prospects and whatnot, but there's an underlying hint of *don't fuck with me* in everything he does that keeps everyone in line.

Including his father. Who he's meeting with in person for the first time in a couple of months ever since he sent him to a semi-forced retirement in Puglia, Italy. As far as I can tell, it's done wonders for his father—the man is far more relaxed, and at peace with the way the Caputo family runs now, even from the distance he mostly keeps from it.

Meanwhile, I'm still working in security, and I genuinely enjoy it. It's always a fast-paced puzzle, creating security measures and systems to keep out other hackers who think like I do. I'm happy to brag about all the ways I've evolved the Golden Flame Casino's systems, not to mention the extensive consulting I've done with other casinos in Vegas and other cities. My shady past with the Wild Seven doesn't come up... partly because I still do some intensive hacking to keep my and my family's online data highly guarded and minimal. Domenic isn't the only protective one.

The last two years have been fantastic. Like I told Domenic, it's not perfect. He's still a mobster, and I'm still, well, me. I can be a mess sometimes.



But the mistakes and ghosts of past expectations that have haunted each of us are gone, and now there's just the future together in our blissful little family, dealing with each day as it comes along.

It's taken me a while to get to this point, but I feel like I make my own luck these days. It's time to let go of the past fully, which means that the "lucky coins" that I've kept carefully concealed for so long... I'm ready to be done with them.

As I mosey over to the slot machines, I inhale deeply. As always, my fiancé's casino smells unlike any other place in Vegas. It takes me back five years to when we first met, but it also reminds me of the burning anger I held this place responsible for after my father's death. It's why I invented my lucky coins in the first place. Instead of mourning the man who I was never close to, I had holed up in my room for two weeks designing these high-tech little coins, determined to take hacking to another level and destroy any place my father had ever stepped into.

I don't have that anger now. Instead, I focus on the good memories we shared and what I have now. While I hardly have an orthodox life, as the ex-hacker fiancé of a mafia don who would literally kill anyone for crossing me... I'm happier than I've ever been. So damn happy.

It's time to let go of this for good. For a time, I considered selling the technology or telling Domenic about it. But as much as I adore my protective mobster, he's still a mobster. He's already spent much of his life beholden to his ability to

heighten profits for his family. These days, he's far less concerned with that, but I don't want this to be another thing he must handle. These lucky coins are mine alone, and I don't want them to go on. I just want to be done with the part of me that they symbolize.

As I'm examining the different slot machines, my gaze snags on an older gentleman, and I blink.

"Still here, huh?" I blurt before I can stop myself.

It's the man who reminded me of my father from the first day I stepped into this place. He's fully bald now, has more age spots, and is holding a different drink as he places another bet. I've seen him here over the last two years and said hi now and then. I've learned his name is Harold, and he always calls me the same thing.

"Ah—Lucky Coin! Good day for slots. You should try the machine next to me."

I snort and approach with a smile. "It's never a good day for slots, Harold."

"Well, now I don't know about that. Had a pretty good day yesterday." He glances from his machine down to my stomach.

"Due soon?"

"I wish. This morning I woke up craving corn dogs dipped in vanilla ice cream."

Harold shudders. I nod emphatically. Then I take a deep breath.

"You know...you remind me of my dad."

“That’s nice,” he says absentmindedly, obviously distracted as he considers his next bet.

It’s not really nice. It’s sad. I pity this man who clearly suffers to a more minor degree from the same sort of *disease*, as Domenic put it, that my father once did. My father could never overcome his string of terrible luck and never-ending debt. He constantly dove deeper into his addictions and gave up on wanting to resurface to be with my family again.

But Harold doesn’t seem as severe a case. He’s just here for a win. And while I can’t control his actions after this, I still want him to consider that one win might be enough.

“Here,” I tell him, pulling out one of my more significantly programmed lucky coins and handing it to him with a bright smile. It looks like any other coin he’s putting in. “Maybe you should give my lucky coin a try.”

He blinks at me. “Really? You’d let me use your lucky coin? Oh, I don’t know if I should....”

He definitely wants it—he’s already eyeing which machine to try it in—but at least he has the decency to look hesitant.

“Just take it, Harold.”

I press it into his hand. The older gentleman gives me a shrug and a smile, and then he pops it into the slot machine in front of us and pulls it. A ringing sound fills the air, along with a scrawling congratulations on the screen—and five-digit winnings.

His mouth drops, and his eyes bug out of his head. He's stuttering as he turns to me.

“Hot damn, it really was lucky! These winnings—well, they're yours, and I couldn't take any of this from you, Lucky Coin, especially not with you having a kid on the way—”

I laugh and wave off his words. “Believe me. We're more than well off, and we'll be fine. But, tell you what—I'll make you a deal. I won't claim a cent of these winnings as long as you use them to do something you truly want. Something that will get you out of this rut,” I gesture at the casino around us. Then I lean closer with a more serious expression. “Or maybe use it for something you really need. Pay off debts, or...you know, get a lot more family time. That's the real jackpot, believe me.”

He's on Cloud Nine as he accepts everything I've said, shakes my hand, and finally leaves the Golden Flame Casino. I watch him go with a small smile.

“Hacker,” Big Luck growls beside me, making me jump and look over with a sheepish grin. “Do I need to have Domenic's security team take a look at that man's *good luck*? Did you have something to do with it?”

“Relax, Luck. It was just a lucky coin.” And a whole lot of catharsis.

Then a sexy-as-sin voice washes over me, and I feel a warm, muscular body press against my back as solid arms wrap gently around my stomach. “Toying with my slots again, *fiore di ciliegio*?”

I grin flirtatiously at him and bounce my eyebrows. “No, but if you’re lucky, I’ll let *you* toy with *my* slot later.”

Big Luck makes a gagging sound, lifts his hands as if in surrender, and hurries away. I giggle at him and at the expression on Domenic’s face. He’s trying not to smile, but the telltale twitch at the corner of his lips tells me that my polar opposite lover thinks I’m more amusing than he’ll let on.

“How was the meeting with your father?” I ask. “Should I say hi?”

He does smile now. “You just missed him, I’m afraid. He’s on his way to the airport, but it went well. He loves Italy. Met a woman about his age. Perhaps he’ll finally learn as I did that are things in this world far more valuable than our family’s profits.”

He strokes my cheek lovingly, then leans down to kiss my ear and murmur. “You know I dislike you driving anywhere alone, Loren. You should have told me when you were leaving so I could send an escort with you.”

So protective. I give him my best bedroom eyes. “Should I have? I guess you’ll have to spank me later or tie me up and teach me a lesson. Maybe I can have my mother take Evelyn out for dinner so we can get some alone time.”

Domenic groans and pulls me more tightly against him to kiss my temple, right where my little scar from the attack so long ago is faint beside my hairline. “God, yes. I need you.”

“And I always need you, Mr. Caputo,” I whisper, turning in his arms to kiss him.

He growls, and I laugh until he kisses me back. “You’ll pay for your sass, Loren Caputo.”

My heart thrills at the sound of what my name will change to in under six months. I can’t wait to be married to this man. Who knew that five years ago, I’d fall for the mafioso casino owner in one single night and love him ever since?

I kiss him again. “I’m counting on it.”

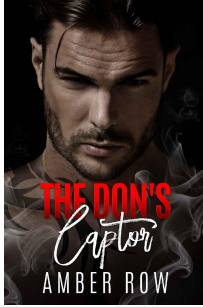
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**I was taken by him. That doesn't mean I'm his...**

Discovering I'm pregnant should be one of the happiest days of my life.

Especially since the loser sperm donor skipped town.

Only my joy ends when a black bag is thrown over my head and I'm tossed into the trunk of a car.

My scumbag father sold my unborn child to the Italian Mafia. And they're looking to collect.

*Ha! Over my dead body.*

Cue Armando: mysterious, dangerous, extremely hot.

And my jailer for the next nine months.

He thinks I'm going to be a good little girl and sit around getting fat.

He has no idea who he is dealing with.

I don't care how many people he's killed,

or how good he looks naked.

He's not getting my baby or my heart.

I just have to bide my time and play along, until I can escape.

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## About Author

Amber Row is an author of steamy mafia romances that are guaranteed to keep you up all night. These sexy mafioso's definitely bring the drama, passion, and danger that will keep you wanting more. Before playing with words, Amber got two bachelor's degrees, one in Network Security and the other in Piano Performance, a Master's in Information Technology, and a Master's in Business. Apart from being an author, she is a classical pianist, piano teacher, amateur photographer, and portrait artist. She lives in Sacramento, Ca, where she loves to spend evenings reading next to a cozy fire with a fine bottle of wine and diligently working on her next novel.



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