

A man and a woman are shown in a close, intimate embrace. The man is shirtless, with a beard and dark hair, looking down at the woman. The woman has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a red top, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark and indistinct.

FORCED MARRIAGE
MAFIA ROMANCE

THE MOBSTER'S SECRET BABY

MESSINA MOBSTERS

ISLA BROOKS

THE MOBSTER'S SECRET BABY

Forced Marriage Mafia Romance

Messina Mobsters Book 1

Isla Brooks

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Chapter 1 - Elena

I never thought the day of my wedding would be this miserable.

“Elena, give me a smile! It’s for the memories.” Mom holds up her phone and gestures at her own wide and unnatural smile as if telling me to repeat after her. It makes the tight feeling in my chest grow stronger, but I do try to smile a little harder.

It’s the only thing left for me—follow my family’s orders and try not to do anything stupid like turn away from the forced marriage and escape the life of abuse and power. Russian Bratva doesn’t let go of their prey so easily even if it is one of them.

“You look like you’re going to pass out.” Aunt Olga joins us with a look of worry on her face. Not that she actually cares about my feelings. Nobody here does.

“Have you noticed it, too?” Mom adds, shaking her head and looking at me with a reprimand. “Lenochka, you can’t show up at the altar like this.”

“Everyone will be watching you.”

“You have to look happy, sweetheart.”

For a moment, their words make me sick. Olga raises her hand to touch my cheek, and I instinctively sway back from her—before forcing myself to stay still. I have to remember my place, and the cold look of disapproval reminds me of it. As if to make sure I’m as obedient as they want me to be, Olga does place her palm on my cheek, and it feels like someone drops a pile of rocks on my shoulders.

“You’re gonna smile and be nice there, right?” Olga forces me to look into her eyes, and I see the reflection of my own there. The dark blue color of our eyes is the same, but the

truth of our hearts is different. “Elena, don’t make us regret our decision.”

I raise my chin and hold her gaze openly, feeling a surge of heated protest in my chest. *I don’t care about your decisions. I don’t care about your family business. I don’t care about you!*

But I care about Max—so I bite my tongue, push my protests deeper inside, and nod. “Yes, Auntie.”

Olga’s face lights up with a smile. “Good! Now, make yourself pretty, darling. The first impression is very important, and your husband should see you in all your glory.”

This time, I try a bit harder to smile like I mean it, and both Mom and Olga let out noises of approval and share a quick look. I guess they’re happy with it. But it’s difficult to keep my mask on for a long time, so as soon as Olga turns away, I quietly breathe out and let my shoulders drop. *God, will this ever end?*

The corners of my lips turn down, and I look away from Olga—only to catch Mom’s gaze.

We look at each other for a moment, and I know she can see the exhaustion and misery in my eyes. I hate it here. *Let me go.* But like the rest of my family, Mom shows no mercy. Her gaze lingers only for a couple of seconds before she turns away to follow Olga to the tailor. What, do they want to fix the dress again?

I bite my lip to stop myself from rolling my eyes and turn on my heels to the window. They all want the wedding to be perfect as if it’s not a goddamn masquerade. My gaze drifts over the rows of flowers and lavish decorations right outside of the hotel. I can even see the snow-white arch of the altar from here, and it makes me scoff as my hands grip the white silk of my dress tighter.

Just a farce. All of it. God, how can I get out of—

“Look, Mommy! It’s black and yellow! Can I take it?”

I turn around, gathering the folds of my dress in a hurry, just in time to see Max pause in the doorway and look around with an awkward smile. He still isn't used to the grim faces and expectant glares of my family. Technically, they're *his* family, too—but I would give anything for my son to be excluded from them forever.

“Yes? Let me see.” I smile in encouragement and go closer to Max before any of my relatives let out their snarky comments. They don't like him—partially because of his soft and caring nature. Can you imagine a boy collecting flowers among the biggest Mafia family of Chicago?

Max breaks out into a wide smile and runs over, holding out a daisy with yellow petals and a black middle. His dark eyes twinkle in excitement, and I instinctively pull him closer to hide him from the glances of the rest of the room.

“Here. Isn't it pretty? It looks like a daisy!”

“I think it is.”

Max furrows his brow funnily and looks up. “Why does it look like this?”

He looks so cute and childish that I can't help a smile as I ruffle his hair. “Some flowers have many varieties. But they remain the same even with different colors and shapes on them.”

Max's eyes widen, and he looks at the daisy with renewed interest before perking up with an exciting idea. “Mom, I think it will be beautiful in your hair! Can you hold it? Please!”

He looks at me with an excited smile, and I'm almost ready to agree—when I see Mom look at me over Max's head. She quirks an eyebrow in a silent and threatening question, and I feel my heart tighten. So now they aren't happy with the flowers, huh? I purse my lips, but in the end, there's nothing I can do.

“Maybe not today, baby.” I look at Max again and run my hand over his hair. “Next time, okay?”

Thankfully, Max is not one to hold grudges. He nods and turns around on his heels, ready to bolt out of the room, when a voice stops him.

“Maxim.”

He stops like the good boy that he is, and my heart tightens as I follow his gaze and look at Olga. She eyes him for a moment before gesturing at the flower. “Where did you get it?”

“Outside, ma’am.”

“Did you pick it from a flower bed?”

Max glances at me and clears his throat. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t you know it’s not allowed here?” Olga’s eyes narrow. I can see the disapproval in her eyes grow stronger, and my own heart picks up its pace. Max may not be aware of the power his great-aunt holds, but he fidgets uncomfortably, and I can see his cheeks turn pink with shame.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not enough. What kind of punishment do you—”

“It’s just a flower.” I stop Olga before she finishes the sentence and step forward, pulling her attention to myself. She’s like a shark in this room, and I’d rather have her teeth tear me apart than touch my son. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

She quirks an eyebrow, and I notice a cold glint in her eyes. “Is that how you raise him? That boy has no sense of self-control. You have to teach him proper manners.”

“But he is *my* boy, and yes, that is how I raise him.” I hold her gaze and straighten my shoulders, hiding the tremble in my tightened fists. “He is my son, and I decide what to teach him, not you.”

“Elena,” Mom says with a quiet warning, and I glance at her, my chest tight with nervousness.

I know, *I know!* I shouldn’t get involved with the woman at the head of our family, but I’ve already been

obedient enough. If they want to play me like a doll, I don't care—but it doesn't mean I'm gonna let them have their twisted ways with my son.

The room goes still and silent, and even the tailor barely moves her hands over my veil. Olga watches me with her face void of any emotions, and I know that look so well. It means danger, and it means power. Shit. I think about everything they can do to Max for my misbehavior, and my heart drops—when I hear heavy steps from the hallway.

Sergei, my distant cousin, stops in the doorway, and it takes him one glance of the room to frown deeper and lay a hand on the gun under his belt. He has only recently arrived from Vladivostok, and when he opens his mouth, a mixture of Russian and English flows out. “Is everything good?”

My breath gets caught in my throat when Olga eyes me for a second, and my heart flutters in panic—but in the end, she looks away and gives Sergei a small smile. “Yes, it is fine. Lenchka is showing her tiny claws.”

They both chuckle like it's a joke, but at least the tension in the room dissipates. I glance at Max and notice that the daisy has gotten crumpled in his tight fists. He looks at it with a sad frown, and I move toward him when Sergei's voice stops me in my tracks.

“The Messina is here. We start in fifteen minutes.”

Fifteen minutes—and my life as it is will be over.

I feel a rush of goosebumps down my spine and close my eyes for a second to recompose myself. My mind goes through the last few months in a rushed attempt of finding a way out of this situation, but there's nothing.

I signed my own sentence eight years ago when I escaped my family to save myself and Max.

What do you think Russian Bratva, the feared and powerful Mafia family of Chicago, would say if they found out that one of them got pregnant after an unlucky college graduation? You bet, it wouldn't be anything nice. At best,

they would have kicked me out themselves; at worst, they'd have forced me to get rid of Max even before he was born.

I didn't want any of this—all I wanted as a college graduate was a peaceful future far from the bloody business of my family. So when I found out that I was pregnant, I ran away without a direction in mind. I knew I had to be unpredictable for Bratva not to find me, so I didn't go to any friends or, God forbid, family members in other states. I blindly drove up North—and that was how I ended up in Wausau, a city in the middle of Wisconsin.

I had some savings at the time, so I rented a room and found an easy job at a local supermarket. But of course, I knew that it wouldn't be enough to take care of my child, so I doubled my efforts. It was the most difficult year of my life—but at the same time, I finally felt free. I was allowed to do whatever I wanted without being afraid of getting shot or arrested, and that was all I could ask for at the time.

In the end, I did find a place for myself at a local marketing company, and with my knowledge and willingness to work, it didn't take long until I was able to earn enough for myself and Max. That was what our life looked like for the past eight years. It was simple and quiet; difficult at times, but nevertheless, good. That is, of course, until my brother showed up on my doorstep.

Two weeks ago, when I came back home after work, I found my door unlocked and the lights in my apartment turned on. Perhaps, I should've run away—I knew it was *them* right away. But Max was at home, so I ran inside instead of turning away. Pavel was there, in the middle of my kitchen, calm as if nothing had happened while Max sat on the floor with his textbook open and his scared gaze fixed on my brother.

I knew Pavel wanted something from me, but I didn't know just how bad it was.

They wanted me to burn my life into ashes and start anew—but not as a member of Bratva. My family decided that it was time for me to pay for my escape, and instead of simply

bringing me back, they wanted me to “fulfill my duty” as Pavel put it.

Yuriy Pushkov, my uncle and the head of Russian Bratva, had made a deal with his lifelong enemies—the Messina Clan of the Italian Mafia. What deal? I still have no idea. But my name was on that paper. The new Don of the Messina Clan wanted to have me as his wife to prove that the agreement between our families was not only on paper but in blood. He wished to have power over me to make sure that Bratva wouldn't betray him, and my uncle agreed. Without my word, of course.

I never had a say in the whole ordeal, but I refused to believe it at first. I'd already forgotten what it was like to deal with the Mafia.

I told Pavel I wouldn't do it and even threatened him by calling the police—but he pushed me into the wall and twisted my arm even before I pulled out my phone. Mercy had never been a thing in our family. So it didn't matter how much Pavel would hurt me, I'd taught myself resilience when I was a child. But I couldn't let him touch Maxim, and he knew it just as much.

It hurt like hell when Pavel almost broke my wrist, but it was only when Max started crying and Pavel switched his attention to him that I truly got terrified. I couldn't hide it, and it took Pavel just a few steps in Max's direction and a firm grasp on his neck to make me freeze. The last thing I wanted was to drag my son into the underworld, so I begged Pavel to leave him alone—which only made it worse.

Pavel threatened to take Max away whether I came with him or not, and it awoke a surge of panic and terror in me. I screamed and tried to attack him, but Pavel had a gun with him. Of course he did. What choice did I have? I was shaking, Max was sobbing, and Pavel was unyielding—it was either me or my son who would go with him.

I took my only chance at saving Max from this. If I did what they wanted, perhaps they'd let him go someday. So I left

my life behind and came back to Chicago with Max in my arms to marry our enemy—but if only that was the only problem.

“Are you ready?” Mom fixes my hair as I grip the bouquet of white roses tighter. We stand in the shade of an alcove while guests and members of two Mafia families murmur behind the green hedges. It’s rather cool here among the trees and fragrant bushes, but I feel a rush of nausea at the thought of going out there.

“No,” I tell her honestly, and Mom finally looks me in the eyes. Her smile is only half genuine, but it’s already something.

“It’s going to be alright, dear.”

No, it really isn’t, but it’s too late to think about it. Because the musicians start playing, the hum of voices goes quiet in anticipation, and Mom nudges me to go toward Uncle Yuriy.

I sway slightly as soon as I step out of the shade and into the line of sight of all those people, and my hand automatically grabs Yuriy’s elbow. He only glances at me with this ever-present small smirk of his before we both turn to the altar where the Don is already waiting.

My future husband. My nightmare. My first love.

Riccardo Messina.

Chapter 2 - Riccardo

“So what do you think?”

Paolo glances at me with raised eyebrows. It’s been twenty minutes of silence in the car, so I guess he has the right to be surprised. “About what?”

“About Jorge.” I meet Paolo’s gaze, silently reminding him about the interrogation. “Do you think it’s worth keeping him there?”

He catches my thoughts right away—like he always does—and hums. “He knows more than he shows. We have to give it another shot tomorrow.”

I nod to myself and turn away to the glimmering width of the ocean running behind the car window. Looks like Mamma has chosen a pretty place for my wedding. Well, I should’ve expected that. I lean back into my seat as my thoughts drift away and my fingers start scratching the surface of the cup holder. They’re still sore from working my dagger into the skin of the Mexican, and there’s just a bit of dry blood under my thumbnail.

Damn it. I curl my hand into a loose fist and look up at the windshield. I should’ve finished with him today. Why the hell do I even need to be there in person? As if the whole deal with the Russians hasn’t been decided already. I click my tongue, unable to keep my frustration at bay.

“What, are you thinking about your happily ever after?” Paolo asks with a smirk in his voice, and I quirk an eyebrow and look at him.

See, he’s too good at reading me. I don’t know if it’s because we’re brothers or because our lives are tied to each other so tightly. Paolo has always been by my side—in every operation, every family gathering, and every piece of business we work on. Even before Father died, we’d been everywhere

together, and since I took over our family business Paolo has become my right hand.

“I’m thinking about how to get it over and done with,” I say with a low voice, but Paolo doesn’t buy it. He only chuckles and eyes me for a moment.

“Aren’t you excited to spend the rest of your life with a Russian princess?”

Princess, huh? I scoff and look into his eyes. “You sound almost jealous. Would you like to take my place at the altar?”

Paolo immediately bursts out laughing, and I can’t help a smile of my own as I watch him. He’s only a year younger than me, but I’ve always felt as if the difference in our ages was larger.

“I wouldn’t get involved with those whitewashed freaks even for a chance to spit at them.” He shakes his head, mindlessly watching the cars passing by, and the smile on his face quickly turns into a grimace of disgust. All I can do is breathe out slowly and look away.

Russian Bratva has always been a nuisance in our lives. When I was a child, Father used to warn me about people with blond hair and gray eyes that would watch me on the streets sometimes. Other times, they would try to hurt or kidnap me, but well, growing up as a member of the Messina clan is never easy.

The older generation of our family hates Russians. They had to fight them with sweat and blood to get our territories and establish control over the Eastern part of Chicago, and naturally, I grew up with the same thoughts. Russians are enemies, and the only deal we can have with them is the one written with their blood.

But you know, life is changing—especially when you have an enemy to share.

Over the last year or so, the underworld of Chicago has been growing unstable and hard to handle. There have been

fight and disagreements between gangs outside of our control. We've kept losing our people in the slums, and whispers of new rivals have been louder than usual. But my father—Cassio Messina, the Don of Messina Clan—didn't pay attention to those signs of upcoming betrayal, and I will never forgive myself for not forcing him to listen to me.

Three months ago, I came to Father with information about a gang of Mexicans that had gathered too many people and too much power. I tried to warn him, but Father chuckled and chose to look the other way. Russians are our biggest concern, he said—but it was Mexicans who killed him a month later.

They had found their way even into our family. One of the cooks, who had spent her life working for us, chose to betray our trust for promises of money, power, and drugs. She told them about Father's favorite restaurant, and on the only day in a year he chose to go there—my mother's birthday—the Mexicans blew the whole place up. Seventeen people died there. Cassio Messina was among them.

It took one night for the Mexicans to turn from a nuisance at the back of my mind into the most important prey for me and my family. On the day of Father's burial, Mamma, my brothers, and I swore to each other to wipe out every last Mexican daring to step into our territories and wash the soil of Father's grave with their blood.

But it turned out to be harder than I had thought. While we were distracted by quarreling mobs and Russian spies, the Mexicans had gathered enough strength and connections to become a serious force. I refused to admit it at the time, but they did become the third largest syndicate right under our noses.

Could we defeat them on our own? At first, I believed we could. The heritage of my father and the strength of my family blinded me, and I made a few reckless moves that cost the lives of our men. It was only after my cousin got injured

that I came back to my senses and realized that the war with the Mexicans required more than muscles and guns.

As the new Don of the Messina Clan, I had to keep my head cool and find a solution that would save our place and the lives of my family. I was the first to think of the Russians as a source of help. We had been enemies for too long, and the heat of our hatred had died down by the time I grew up. Perhaps, Yuriy Pushkov would agree to help me—but even if he did, would I be able to trust it?

I shared my concerns with Mamma over a glass of wine in her house. After some thought, she hummed and asked about the person I had been trying so hard to forget: Elena Pushkova.

Everyone knew that she had long disappeared from all our radars, and even if Bratva still kept an eye on her, chasing Elena was too much of a bother for us. I was surprised that Mamma still remembered her. Why would she bring up Elena all of a sudden?

Because the Russian and Italian families needed a tie to make it work, and the only way to find trust in each other is through blood—whether on your hands or in your heart.

In the life of the Mafia, it's as simple as that: you either kill or marry to prove your intentions. Not that love has anything to do with our business. A marriage of convenience is nothing more than that—a convenience for both sides. A final seal on the deal that merges two families into one. That was exactly what I was looking for, so why was I so reluctant to agree with Mamma?

Probably because Elena was the last woman on my list of potential partners. A wayward niece of Bratva's boss who had been too scared of the world around her to stay loyal to her own family. Wouldn't Elena betray me and run away just like back then? Having her as my wife promised to be nothing but trouble—but it was the only way to fulfill my oath and kill the Mexicans.

As soon as my brothers heard about the deal, they stood up against it. How could we trust the Russians? How could I bring one of them into *our* home? The announcement made a big mess that day—but I had already made the decision and shook hands with Yuriy Pushkov.

I would marry his niece to make our families stronger than ever—or at least, that was what I told everyone else. As for my own thoughts...I still can't quite figure them out. I mean, it's obvious that the whole marriage is nothing more than a good deal with the Russians. But why does my mind keep coming back to Elena and the last time I saw her?

The pastel colors of sunrise and the flutter of her black dress flash before my eyes again, and I clench my fist, forcing the memories away. I thought I'd locked them deep enough to never return to that night, but ever since Elena's name appeared in my life again, I've lost my control over them.

Well, it doesn't matter. I sit up straighter in my seat, listening to our driver checking our surroundings. It doesn't change anything, right? Whatever memories I still have of her, everything that has ever connected us remains in the past, and I plan to keep it that way.

“It's clear, sir.”

Theo pulls into the parking lot of an old and fancy hotel, and I can't help a whistle when I get out of the car. Every open space in and around it is full of cars, guests, or decorations, and I can't help but wince slightly when my gaze darts over the abundance of balloons and flowers. God, Mamma really went all out for this wedding.

“Oh,” I hear Paolo sigh as well, and when I follow his voice, I notice him linger with the car door open. Paolo follows my gaze, studying the hotel with a growing smirk, before turning to me with a mischievous glint. “Do you think she did it to piss them off?”

I chuckle and shut the car door. “Absolutely.”

You see, Russians can be too serious sometimes. They have their own family gatherings and celebrations where they get drunk, loud, and cheery—I've never been a part of one, but I've spied on them plenty of times. So I know that they *know* how to be open and talkative. It's just that they never show it to strangers, including us.

Instead, most of Bratva's members look like mannequins. Blond hair, bright eyes, pale skin, and a look of complete indifference on their faces. They may smile at you or even shake your hands in a gesture of politeness, but in their eyes, you see nothing but the cold of their motherland. An exciting circle to get yourself into, huh?

“Ricco! Finally!” Louis, my cousin and best friend, spots me first and hurries over while the rest of his group respectfully lingers behind. “Aunt Emilia is waiting for you. Everyone is ready.”

“Then, it's time to start.”

I don't want to waste any time on preparations. I arrived late exactly to avoid that.

It doesn't take long to gather everyone on the rows of white seats in the middle of the hotel garden. The altar bathes in the soft light of sunset, and the white flowers covering the delicate arch seem to glow from within. My gaze mindlessly drifts over them while Grandma dusts off my shoulders and murmurs old Italian curses under her breath. She isn't happy about the marriage at all; the Russians killed her first boyfriend when she was nineteen.

“*You're getting yourself into trouble,*” Grandma murmurs in Italian and shakes her head, finally looking at me. Her thin palms linger on my chest, and I carefully wrap my hands around them.

“*Trust me. It's for the best.*”

She looks me in the eyes for a few seconds, and I see the reflection of Father's eyes in hers. *Would he approve of this alliance? Would he be proud of me?* I hold Grandma's

gaze until she sighs and looks down at our hands, running her thumbs over my skin.

“*You’re still a bebè.*” But it sounds too affectionate for me to take it as anything more than a soft reprimand. I know she’s worried about me, so I lean forward to press a quick kiss to Grandma’s hair and smile when she swats my shoulder. Maybe she will understand me someday.

Paolo calls me, then gestures at the altar, and I finally notice that almost everyone has already taken their seats. The priest stands at the altar, the aisle between the seats is empty, and the musicians look around for a cue. Grandma lets go of me with a last sigh and goes to take her place next to Mamma. I meet her gaze, and she tips her head with a silent question.

Are you ready?

I take a deep breath and nod, making my way to the altar. Of course I’m ready. It’s just a formality, why would I care? Yet when I finally stand at the altar and the sound of music fills the air, I feel a buzz of something in my chest responding to it. Maybe it’s adrenaline. Maybe it’s my own heart following the rhythm of the music.

I try to ignore it and focus on the Mexican that Paolo and I have left in the warehouse. *Why did he come into our territory? What was he looking for?* But no matter how hard I try to direct my thoughts somewhere else, the jittery feeling in my chest doesn’t go away. In fact, it only grows stronger with every passing second—until I see movement from the corner of my eye and turn to look at the aisle.

A young boy walks between the rows of seats, throwing around white and pink petals with a happy smile on his face, and behind him... I take a deep breath, forcing myself to stay still. Behind him, Yuriy Pushkov offers his elbow to a woman before both of them turn to face me—and the fluttering feeling rises all the way to my throat.

For the first time in nine years, I see Elena Pushkova.

Chapter 3 - Elena

Is this a dream or a nightmare? I grasp Uncle Yuriy's elbow tighter as I take the first step toward the altar. My throat is dry, and my heartbeat is so loud I can barely hear the sound of music and the whispers of the guests. I don't know if it's fear, anger, or excitement that fills me from within, but the combination is so overwhelming I can barely breathe.

God, I can't pass out. Not now.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes for a moment, relying on Yuriy to guide me forward. My feet are so heavy I can barely move—but I force myself to walk there. Closer to *him*.

Damn it. I didn't know that just seeing Riccardo again would affect me so much. Does he feel the same? Of course not—but I involuntarily open my eyes to see his reaction. Does he remember me at all?

As always, Riccardo's face is a mask of calm and arrogance—but it's as gorgeous as ever. I can't see him clearly through the veil covering my face, but I can feel his stare in my bones. He doesn't move and simply watches us as Yuriy and I linger by the edge of the altar.

"You're gonna be a good girl, aren't you?" Yuriy lowers his voice to ask me over the tender waves of violin and piano. I automatically look up at him and see that Yuriy is looking at me with a smile that sends chills down my spine. He's not that scary at first glance—but it's the knowledge of his power that makes me feel small in his presence.

I give him a nod, unable to move with the tension holding my body still. Yuriy smiles a little wider and pats my hand before turning to Riccardo. Their eyes meet, and a silent agreement passes between them as Yuriy nudges me to walk up to the altar.

I swallow and glance at Riccardo, gathering the fabric of my dress in cold fists. Step. Another step. It feels like my legs are frozen, but somehow I make my way up the altar without a single stutter. Only my breath doesn't feel right, but I swallow it down and stand straight before my future husband.

For a moment, Riccardo and I simply look at each other through the thin fabric of my veil, and my heart slips into a frantic rhythm. I try to see the look in his eyes and find the answers to my questions. Does he remember me? Does he remember *everything*? I hold my breath despite myself while Riccardo raises his hands to my veil. Do I want him to remember?

I don't know—but it doesn't matter anymore. Because as soon as Riccardo lifts my veil, my heart drops. Our eyes finally meet, and I see it. I don't know how, but I see that he knows me. He *remembers* me.

Oh, it's gonna be one hell of a marriage.

“Dearly beloved, we have gathered here today, in the presence of God, to join Elena Pushkova and Riccardo Messina in holy matrimony. Despite and in celebration of our differences, we are here to share...”

The priest's voice is muffled in my ears, reaching me like an echo from the distance, while my mind travels farther away from the present. My unfocused gaze drops to the waves of Riccardo's black hair around his ears, his sharp cheekbones, the slight stubble on his jaw, and finally lingers on his neck.

I can't find it in me to look him in the eyes right now. Everything about his appearance sends me back to the past—to my college years full of humiliation, misery, and heartache. All because of *him*.

“Elena! Elena, hurry up, he’s—here. Let’s go!” Rachel almost bumps into my desk, leaning on it and trying to catch her breath while I look up at her with a frown. What is she talking about? I’ve just come here to study for the biology test.

Rachel reads confusion in my eyes and groans, gesturing wildly. “Riccardo! I saw him right there. They’re coming here.”

Oh. I blink and sit up straight. Shit. He’s supposed to have his soccer practice or whatever. What is he doing here?

I look around the classroom, trying to look calm with my heart jumping into a frantic pace. Damn it. There’s no one here except for a freshman, but what is he gonna do against the goddamn fratboy?

“Come on, Elena! You’re gonna get in trouble.”

Rachel grabs my shoulder to tug me toward the door, and I instinctively yank my arm back. Dad has taught me to never let others touch me without permission. Not that anyone would care about it in college. Here, I’m not a princess of a Mafia family. I’m not a threat, not a fighter. I’m just nobody—at least, for most of them.

“Okay, I’m getting out of here.” Rachel crosses her arms and purses her lips, looking at me with worry and a plea. She doesn’t like it when I get hurt. “Are you coming?”

My gaze darts to the open door behind her. I hear the deep voices of Riccardo and his band laughing at someone, and a wave of adrenaline finally jolts me out of my stupor. *God, what am I doing?* Mom’s gonna be so mad if I show up with torn clothes again. She’s still not over the second place I took at the English olympiad last week.

“Okay, okay!”

“Finally! Hurry up.” Rachel raises her voice, running before me to the door and waving her hands for me to come closer. “I think they’re going to smoke, let’s go!”

I hastily throw all of my stuff into the bag and hurry after her, almost tripping over a chair and dropping a pen on the way. Shit. I glance at it but don't stop. I can get a new one. I have to get out of here first. Rachel grabs my hand as soon as I reach her, and we both sneak into the hallway.

The echo of Paolo's voice reaches me, and I lower my head and pick up my pace, grasping the straps of my bag tighter. My palms are sweaty, and my stomach is tight and aching from nerves. *God, please. I really don't want to—*

“Oh, look there! Hey, baby, where are you going?”

Fuck. I feel Rachel's hold on my hand tighten, and we both break into a run—but how can we beat the winners of every soccer competition in the state? We barely make it to the corner when I feel a sharp tug on my shoulder, a burst of pain in my back—and the next moment, I'm already pushed into a wall with Rachel's yelp ringing from the side.

“Did you think you could run away like that?”

I open my eyes with a wince and meet Riccardo's scornful gaze. He's right in front of me, and his hand is still squeezing my shoulder, holding me against the wall. His grip is so tight it hurts, but I barely notice it behind the stomachache that grows even stronger in his presence. My whole body tenses up, and I feel a rush of heated adrenaline under my skin as I stare right into his eyes. *God, how much I hate them.*

I purse my lips, not saying anything, and only Rachel raises her voice as she tries to get out of Paolo and Drake's grip. “Let me go! Leave her alone!”

She's loud, the fight is obvious, and there are people on the other side of the hallway—but nobody cares. They never do, not when Riccardo and his band are involved.

I swallow and glance at Rachel, but Riccardo immediately grips my jaw and forces me to look back at him. “Looking pretty today, huh?”

He swipes his thumb across my lips, smearing the lipstick all over my chin, and I feel the heat of embarrassment and anger rise to my cheeks. I did steal it from Irina, my sister, but why the hell does it matter? I clench my hands and try to push Riccardo away from me, but it only makes him chuckle.

“Is your family so desperate that you have to sell yourself like that?” Riccardo lowers his voice so that the others don’t hear him clearly, but I feel his mocking chuckle on my skin as he leans in. I turn away, avoiding his gaze, but it doesn’t stop him.

He only needs one arm across my shoulders to pin me to the wall while the other slips to my thigh, pinching me through the skirt. Colin laughs lewdly somewhere behind Riccardo while Paolo pulls out his phone to take a photo. It’s painful, dirty, and humiliating, and I feel tears rise to my eyes as Riccardo’s hand continues to grope me.

“Too bad nobody’s gonna look at a Russian whore like you.”

“Fuck off,” I manage to spit out, and I turn to glare at him, pushing down every choking feeling in my chest. If there’s anything I’ve learned from my family it’s that, wherever I am, I’m a part of Bratva. I can’t be weak, not with someone like him.

It only entertains him, though. Riccardo grins widely, looking at me with dark eyes, and my heart lurches in my chest. “Oh, did I offend you? I’m sorry. Of course, you’re gonna be a good whore for the dogs of your family.”

His hand slips further down, raising the edge of my skirt, and it becomes too much to bear. I gather strength and kick under his knee, simultaneously pushing him away. Riccardo sways back in surprise, but a moment later the look in his eyes burns with anger. He lets go of my shoulder to squeeze my throat and push me back into the wall.

“Do you think your claws can do any good?” His voice is almost a hiss, and I shut my eyes, trying to breathe, but his

grip is too strong. I can hear Rachel scream louder, and her voice is just enough to cover his whisper. “You’re gonna spend the rest of your life on your knees for me after we burn your house into ashes.”

“How are you gonna get to my house if you can’t even protect your own whores?”

The fire of resentment burns me more than Riccardo’s grip on my throat, and I open my eyes and chuckle into his face. Dad and Uncle Yuriy recently raided one of Messina’s brothels, wiping it to the ground, and I know that Riccardo knows what I’m talking about. For a second, his face distorts into a grimace of rage, but he quickly takes control of it and straightens up with a mask of calm on his face.

“Don’t worry, there will always be a place for you.”

It takes him a mere second to grasp the collar of my shirt and tear it down, sending the buttons flying to the ground. Rachel cries out and finally pushes Paolo to the side when a hoard of people start coming in. The guys startle, looking around, and only Riccardo keeps his cool. Our gazes hold each other, burning with hatred, before he finally turns away.

Rachel rushes to me, holding me while I try to catch my breath and hold the sides of my shirt together. “That fucker—we should seriously think about reporting them. They—he can’t do something like this! It’s—God, Elena, are you okay?”

I nod automatically, leaning on the wall, while my eyes follow Riccardo to the stairs. He doesn’t look back. He never does, but for some reason, I always keep looking. My heart is pounding, my cheeks are red and stained with tears, and my mind is a complete mess—but there’s something that keeps coming back to me.

He noticed my lipstick.

God.

Riccardo Messina called me pretty.

“...to honor and comfort her, to keep her in sickness and in health for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.”

The sound of Riccardo’s voice pulls me out of my memories, and I blink. My gaze automatically darts to his face, but he doesn’t really look at me. The look in his eyes is too indifferent to see his real thoughts behind it. Or maybe he actually doesn’t care about the marriage. Why would he? It’s all just a formality.

“Elena Pushkova.”

My heart stutters, and I turn to the priest, struggling to keep my focus. God, this is it. This is actually happening. A cold tremble runs through my body, followed by a wave of panic. I can’t marry him, I just can’t.

“Do you take this man to be your husband? Do you swear to love him, to honor him and comfort him, to keep him in sickness and in health for as long as you both shall live?”

I don’t. *I don’t!* But my mind is louder than my heart, and my fear is louder than my protests. I glance at the guests before us, and my gaze immediately finds Max in the first row. He looks at me with a wide grin and eyes full of awe, and next to him, Mom sits with her perfect posture and her arms crossed on her chest. She raises an eyebrow expectantly as the guests and music go quiet.

My heart aches, but I have no choice. I look at Max’s chocolate eyes, high cheekbones, and dark wavy hair. Is there anything I wouldn’t do for him?

“I do,” I finally say, and turn to Riccardo. My gaze darts to his face, and I see it so clearly at that moment. Dark chocolate eyes, high cheekbones, and black hair curling on the tips.

Max does look like his father.

Chapter 4 - Riccardo

I can't help the pinch of relief when I finally hear Elena say it out loud. For a moment of silence, I thought she was going to ruin all of our plans for the sake of her own pettiness. That distant look in her eyes makes it so damn clear that she remembers me.

Does Elena remember *everything*, though?

I raise an eyebrow slightly, looking into her eyes—but she doesn't show me her thoughts and looks away to the priest who hurries to continue his speech. That momentary pause from Elena really put everyone on their tenterhooks, and I can't help but smirk a little, thinking what the poor guy would do if she said no. Not that Elena herself would have more than a few minutes to celebrate her own pride.

“...Now, Don Riccardo, hold the bride's hand and repeat after me.”

Oh, right. I reach out to get her hand, and Elena tenses up as soon as I move toward her—but hey, it's not like I really want to do it. I ignore the way her fingers refuse to yield to mine and remain curled and frozen even as I wrap my hands around them.

The priest starts the vow then, and I repeat after him without a second thought, but my mind keeps drifting to the touch we share. It doesn't feel like holding hands with Grandma or Teresa, my niece. Perhaps, because it brings up too many memories from the past.

Elena's hands aren't just frozen in one position—they're actually cold, and I run my thumbs over her skin before I can catch myself. She blinks at that and looks me in the eyes, and I end up with the last words of the vow spoken in the space between us.

“...to love and cherish you till death do us part.”

Elena's eyes haven't changed at all since the last time I saw her. They're as bright blue with a tint of gray steel as I remember them. She always looks so cold and collected—but I know what it's like to make her cry and break apart in my arms. An unwanted memory makes its way into my mind, and I feel my heart respond to it with a sudden jolt. Damn it. Not the best time.

“Elena Pushkova, now, you repeat every word after me,” the priest keeps talking in the meantime, and I can see Elena swallow and take a deep breath as if she's getting ready to plunge into something deep and dangerous.

“I, Elena, take you, Riccardo, as my husband.” Her gaze remains on me as she starts repeating the vow, and for some reason, it feels special.

It feels real, as if we are getting married of our own free will—which is stupid, of course, because why would we ever? Yet I can't help the feeling, not when Elena's fingers finally move in my hold, grasping my hands—but it's not a careful hold. It's not the hold of a woman who loves. It's the clutch of a woman who hates, and as soon as I think about it, the intense look in her eyes suddenly makes sense.

Of course Elena would be damn livid to spend the rest of her life with someone like me—which brings a smirk to my lips. Oh, I've always loved tormenting her for a reason. I can't wait to see that fiery look Elena has when I finally reach her limits.

The priest and Elena finish her vow, and it's time to exchange the rings. Paolo brings them forward, and I can see that he's barely holding back a chuckle when our eyes meet. Yes, of course, this whole ceremony is very funny—but he's like that sometimes. I don't blame him. It is a circus.

I have to let go of Elena's hands to get the rings, and I absentmindedly notice just how quickly she pulls away from me. It makes something old in my chest flare up again. Why the hell is she being so cocky? Acting like she's better than me. I clench my jaw, sending her a warning glare, and Elena's

eyes widen slightly when she sees it. Good. She should be scared.

“I give you this ring as a symbol of my love and devotion,” I repeat after the priest, keeping my voice low and cool. My gaze is fixed on her hand in mine, pale and elegant, as I speak the words of love and lie. “With all that I have, I promise to support and care for you from this moment until forever.”

I raise my head as I put the ring on her finger, and Elena looks up at me a moment later. I can’t read the expression in her eyes—they hide her heart from me. But I notice the unusually pale tint of her skin and the way she purses her lips and blinks a few times as if forcing herself to stand upright. *God, she’s not gonna pass out, is she?*

I squeeze her hand a bit tighter, and Elena blinks out of it with a hurried nod. Her eyes focus on the ring Paolo holds up for her, and I can see that she repeats after the priest automatically. Her voice is void of emotions, and the expression on her face is just...empty. Is it so bad to be here with me?

I feel another rush of heated frustration—but I catch myself a moment later. Damn it. Why does it affect me? Why do I care? It’s just a business deal, so I force my emotions under control and keep my gaze on her while Elena herself reaches to take my hand in hers. She’s slow and careful in her movements as if delaying the inevitable.

“...I promise to support and care for you from this moment until forever,” Elena repeats and finally slides the ring onto my finger, confirming that which was decided a few weeks ago. The deal is sealed.

The Messina Clan and Russian Bratva have officially tied the ends of their families together.

The thought itself and the wave of excitement that follows it take over my mind, blurring the noise of the priest’s speech and the applause of the guests around us. I wonder just

how many of them wish this moment had never happened. It's gonna take a long time for us to get used to each other, but what's important now is—

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. Groom, you may kiss the bride.”

Oh. Shit. I forgot about that part.

I focus back on the present moment and the woman in front of me. Judging by the flash of panic in her eyes, Elena didn't think we would get here either. For a second, we just stare at each other in silence—but hell with it. It's a tradition, so I push back every feeling in my chest and pull Elena in for a kiss.

As soon as our lips touch, I feel a wave of memories blind me—the intoxicating smell of her perfume, the sighs and moans escaping her mouth as Elena writhed under my hands, pushing closer. Damn it. Warmth spreads through my body, and the memories take over me so quickly that it takes me a moment to realize that Elena has pulled away from me.

She stares at me, tense and heavily breathing, and as soon as I catch her gaze a rush of blood muffles my ears. *Who the hell does she think she is?* I feel a heated surge of rage, and before anyone has the time to realize what just happened, I grip the back of Elena's neck and force her into another kiss.

For a moment, Elena doesn't move, frozen against me like a doe; it's only when I push harder into her lips that Elena finally gives in. The tension doesn't leave her body, but she yields to the kiss and even kisses me back. She does it harsher than I expected, and I realize that she's trying to prove something. What, does it make her feel like she has any power over me?

The thought makes me chuckle into the kiss, and I grasp her neck tighter and bite her lip hard before pulling back. Our gazes meet as soon as I open my eyes, and I see that fiery look I've been waiting for. Elena's eyes turn so dark and blue when she glares at me with this mixture of anger and

hatred that I can't help the desire spreading in me. Damn it. Now I see why I was so addicted to it in college.

The thunder of applause and congratulations pulls me back into reality, and I instinctively turn to the rest of the crowd with a grin on my lips. What a gift to have a Russian princess as a wife—in addition to the power of her whole family. My gaze darts to Yuriy, and I see that he's laughing and clapping as well, looking pleased with himself. It is a good deal, indeed.

Without looking at Elena, I reach for her hand, grasping it tighter than needed in case she decides to do something stupid again. *You're mine now.* I glance at Elena, but even though she doesn't meet my gaze, I can feel the heat of her anger in the way she digs her nails into my hand. *Are you feeling desperate already?* I can't help but smirk as I meet her glare.

No matter how hard Elena tries to hate me, I know just how much desire is hidden behind it. She showed it to me once, and she can't trick me again.

I remember so clearly just how quickly her shouts of fury turned into whimpers of pleasure, and how easy it was for my hands to leave her pliant and asking for more. For years, Elena had been a gray mouse growing in the shadow of her family. And despite all that, she'd had enough boldness to push me away. But after that college graduation, I was unable to look at her the same way. Her smile, her dress, her confidence, everything about her was just—

Wait.

Damn it.

Why am I thinking about this again? I purse my lips, forcing myself to focus on the present, and tug her forward—too sharply, I guess, because Elena stumbles a little in her step. But when I turn to look at her, she only gives me a quick glare and straightens her posture, taking her place next to me. *God, she's so—*

I refuse to finish the thought as frustration builds up in my chest. I should keep Elena out of my mind. There are way more important things that need my attention.

Thankfully, I'm not the only one aware of that. As soon as we reach the parking lot, followed by shouts of congratulations and a shower of rice, the crowd gathers around us with a mixture of Russian and Italian. There are too many people demanding my attention, but it is Louis' grim look that finally pulls me out of the chaos.

"Should I wish you a long and happy marriage?" Louis pats my shoulder in a resemblance of actual wishes, but I only roll my eyes. He's been my my side for as long as I can remember—he knows just how little this whole marriage means to me. Or at least, I'd like him to think so.

"Better tell me what happened." I lower my voice and look around, noticing that our men have spread across the perimeter with their attention on the road leading to the coast. They look too tense for a calm wedding night, and I know Louis too well to not see the crease of a frown on his forehead.

He immediately switches off his teasing demeanor and clears his throat. "Someone tried to sneak into the garden from the coast. A Mexican, apparently. We spotted him before he got too close to the hotel, but he escaped before we opened fire."

Shit. No one outside of the families was supposed to know about the ceremony—least of all, the Escarra gang.

"Our boys are all over the beach, but no one has found him yet," Louis adds, gesturing in the direction of the ocean, and I automatically follow his gaze.

"I assume none of you recognized him," I say matter-of-factly as my gaze drifts back to the bustling crowd of guests.

The Russians and Italians have split into groups; some of them have mixed in an attempt to find a common language, but mostly everyone sticks to their family and only glares at

the others as if we were still enemies. It doesn't surprise me—it's gonna take a long time before they learn not to be wary of each other. What does surprise me, though, is that Elena doesn't seem to be a part of them either.

Her white dress catches my gaze, and I find her a few feet away from her family in the company of the boy that was carrying the flowers at the ceremony. Right. Sometimes I forget about it, but Elena does have a son. I think Yuriy called him Maxim, and apparently, the boy doesn't have a father. What a great addition to the family, huh?

My gaze lingers on them as I watch Elena crouch next to the boy and pinch his cheeks, earning a giggle. It makes her smile, too, and I suddenly realize that it's the first time I've seen her smile today. It looks...pretty.

It's pointless to deny it, really. Elena is a beautiful woman with her long blond hair, round features, plush lips, and slender figure. I can barely recognize the girl who cared about nothing but textbooks and grades. Everything about her used to be so pitiful that I couldn't just pass her in the hallways, but now—

As if feeling my attention, Elena looks straight at me and immediately stands up, holding my gaze. There's not a trace of a smile on her lips anymore. She protectively wraps an arm around her son's shoulder and quirks an eyebrow with a silent question.

Why am I looking at her? Well, it's a good time for Elena to get used to being my wife. I'm gonna keep an eye on her—but I'm not going to explain that to her now. I only hold her gaze for a second longer before lowering it to her son. God, how old is he?

Maxim is looking at me, too, but I don't see the same defensive anger that's oozing off his mother. He looks at me with wide eyes and parted lips. What, am I that amazing? I chuckle, and the boy smiles at me as well before Elena shushes him and tells him to turn away. But I don't look away,

not yet. There's something about the boy that disturbs something in my mind, but I can't quite place it. What is—

“Are you done ogling your wife already?” Louis' voice forces me back to my senses, and I blink and turn back to him only to see a shit-eating grin on his face. Only then does the meaning of his words settle in, and I chuckle.

“At least I have someone to warm my bed tonight.”

But while Louis dramatically complains, I can't help but steal another glance at Elena and her son. Maybe I'm being paranoid, but something doesn't feel right.

Chapter 5 - Elena

Where's the sound of bells? Where are the "Happily Ever After" banners? I huff under my breath, staring out the car window with my chin propped on my palm. They could've gone further with the image of an actual marriage. Why stop now?

The scenery passing outside is nothing short of breathtaking: the dark width of the ocean barely hidden behind green hills, and mansions big enough to hold a small parade. Even though the sun is barely seen above the horizon, bright windows and street lamps keep the street alive. You wouldn't see something like this in Wisconsin—but god, I'd give anything to turn around and never witness it again.

I hated the hot sun and blazing luxury back when I escaped these lands—and now, I realize that nothing has changed. Chicago still makes me sick, and I let out an irritated exhale and look away from it.

The driver probably hears the noise but misunderstands it for impatience because a moment later, he clears his throat. "Almost there, miss."

Well, I'm missus now, aren't I?

The thought is bitter, so I say nothing in response and lean back into the seat with almost childish petulance, even crossing my arms for good measure. I don't know what else to do, to be honest. Fight? Run away? I purse my lips and glance at Riccardo's man in the front seat. Like I have any chance of escaping.

The dress is tight and uncomfortable, and I find myself writhing and trying to find a better position for myself when I catch a glance of the Italian guy in the mirror. I wonder why Riccardo sent him in the first place. Was he worried I'd jump out of the car rather than spend a night with him?

“What?” I glare at the guy, trying to fidget to a place where the ties of my corset wouldn’t be digging into my back. “I’m not doing anything.”

He says nothing and only murmurs something that sounds like an Italian curse under his breath. Or not a curse, I don’t know. Everything in Italian sounds like they’re swearing at each other. What a dumb language!

I gather the folds of my dress into fists and look outside, feeling the ambers of anger glow in my chest. Every little thing just keeps irritating me, but hey, I’ve just sold my life to a goddamn Mafia don, so I have every right to be displeased.

Mom didn’t let me take Max with me, and that only adds up to my nervousness. I had to send him with Irina—she’s the only one I still trust in this family. Even though she still hasn’t forgiven me for not warning her about my escape eight years ago—but I don’t think even Irina would have understood me back then. No one would.

My thoughts lose focus, remembering back to the time I was frantically packing my things and sneaking out of reach of my personal security. I feel like maybe that was one of the things that made my family so mad—I did manage to escape from under their noses. But it had taken me a long time to prepare for it.

Almost three weeks had passed between the day I found out about my pregnancy and the day I stole my car from the family garage. It was a scary, detailed, and once-in-a-lifetime plan, but I needed it. I wanted my child to survive.

My heart grows with fondness when I think about Max, and I feel the tension in my body slightly let go. I don’t regret a single thing I did for him—and the way my family reacts to him only proves that I made the right choice. They wouldn’t have let me keep the son of an enemy.

“Signora Elena,” the Italian calls me, and only after that do I realize that the car is slowing down. “We have

arrived.”

Oh. Already? I automatically turn to the window—and yes, it would be hard not to recognize it as a residence of the Don of the Messina Clan.

It’s really impossible to call it a house; the building before me looks more like a castle. Its three floors rise high above the ground, overlooking the parking lot that circles a big fountain in front of the main entrance. Soft lights illuminate it, dancing on the sprinkled droplets and emphasizing the gentle murmur of flowing water.

I can’t see too much of the land around the mansion even when I get out of the car, but I notice trees surrounding it from every direction. I guess Riccardo doesn’t like to be at the center of attention. I have just enough time to notice the blue lights of a pool behind the mansion and a few other cars in the parking lot before Riccardo’s guy turns to me and gestures at the entrance.

“This way.”

He rushes to the stairs, and I can’t help but quirk an eyebrow as I watch him. Of course, it’s easy for a man to run wherever he wants, but what about my stilettos? Does he expect me to run up there like a damn mountain goat? I don’t even budge and only place my hands on my hips, raising my chin just enough to remind him of my status when the Italian finally realizes that something’s wrong and turns around.

“Signora?” He sounds genuinely confused, and I can’t help a cold chuckle before I gesture at my dress.

“I’m not Cinderella, Signor. I’m not going to run up there on my own.”

Yes, maybe I sound a bit more arrogant than I actually am, but I can’t let them forget who I am. Uncle has never disowned me. I am still Pushkova, and I’m not gonna let them treat me like anyone else.

“Are you sure you’re not Cinderella? Because I’ve heard you have a habit of running away.”

I purse my lips and turn around as a wave of annoyance washes over me, prickling under my skin. Of course Riccardo has to show up exactly now. He walks away from his car with that indifferent look on his face that makes him look like he's better than everyone else. Oh, I know that expression so well. It used to haunt me in my dreams—but if Riccardo thinks he can affect me now, I have a surprise for him.

“I do.” I stand up straighter as he lingers next to me and looks me over with cold curiosity. “Because I’ve never met a prince who would make me want to stay.”

Riccardo watches me for a second before a smirk tugs at the corner of his lips, and he looks away. “I’m afraid you don’t have a choice now. Marco, be a gentleman and give the Signora a hand. I have more important things to do.”

With that, Riccardo walks up the stairs and disappears behind the doors without a single look my way. God, what an arrogant douchebag. I glare after him, ignoring the heat in my stomach, and only after Marco obediently comes down to offer me his hand do I come back to my senses. Damn it. How am I supposed to spend another day with him?

Or should I say, another night?

The thought disturbs something in my head, and while I push back the memories from the past, I can’t help the premonition of the future. Does Riccardo actually want to spend the night with me? I don’t know if the thought is frightening or aggravating, but I know for sure that I don’t want it to happen. Last time we had sex, it sent my whole life to hell.

As I finally reach the entrance—hand in hand with the guy who seems to be so unused to holding a woman that he almost stumbles a few times—I see the entrance hall in all its glory. It is huge, bright, and made of marble that almost glows in the light of artificial chandeliers. There are more stairs leading to the second floor, and while I’m looking around with

a mixture of awe and caution, a young servant hurries down and toward us.

“Signora Elena.” She gives me a low nod that looks almost like a bow, but even when she straightens up, I notice that she keeps her gaze on the floor. “My name is Alice, I will be serving you to the best of my abilities. Your room is ready. Would you like to follow me?”

As Riccardo said, I don’t really have a choice. Besides, I can’t wait to finally take off this dress and be alone with my thoughts. I need a second to breathe and think about what to do next, and “my room” sounds like a good place for it. I mean, I’m not gonna share it with Riccardo, right?

“Yes, thanks.”

Alice nods as soon as I accept her offer and gestures for me to follow her. She turns back to the stairs, and my gaze automatically follows them to the second floor. Damn. Isn’t Riccardo rich enough to have an elevator or something? I look at Marco, who stands still in my grip, and reach for his elbow. Riccardo told him to help me, right? He didn’t say it was only to the entrance.

A few seconds later, Marco does yield to my grip, and I pull him after Alice who is patiently waiting for us at the base of the stairs. She looks so young, petite, and almost innocent. How on earth did she end up here? Although I should know better than anyone that looks can be deceiving. I used to be the same in college, and—*Ah, why do I keep thinking about it?*

I shake my head to get rid of the thought with a wave of frustration. Ever since I saw Riccardo at the altar, the memories of our past keep coming back to me, and I don’t want them, okay? I don’t want to remember the night that left me with nothing but misery and a son without a father.

I don’t let myself think about it further and, instead, distract myself with the wide windows to my left and the huge painting on my right. Everything here looks more expensive

than my apartment in Wisconsin, and I feel a streak of resentment in my heart. My family home is no less blaring and luxurious, and the similarities make me hate both of these places even more.

“Here, Signora.” Alice finally guides me to a white door at the end of a passage and opens it before I reach for the door knob. “Your bedroom.”

Of course, it’s as fancy as the rest of the mansion if not more.

While Marco promptly rushes back to where we came from, I step into my bedroom to see the palette of colors clearer. The whole room consists of white lines, dark furniture, and intricate patterns of blue and gray. Is it an allusion to the colors of my family? Probably, but I have to admit that I like the vision. Not enough to feel like I belong here, though.

“Signor has sent a present for you,” Alice murmurs, pulling my attention, and only then do I notice a thin package on the bed. A present from Riccardo? I frown and glance at Alice, but she doesn’t meet my gaze and only stares at her own hands. “Is there anything I may help you with?”

“No.”

“If you need me, just press the button.” Alice gestures at some kind of control panel on a bedside table and finally looks me in the eyes. “I will come back later to assist you, Signora. Feel yourself at home.”

At home? I chuckle and turn away from her. “Good joke.”

At last, Alice leaves the room, and I feel like I can breathe again without the daunting presence of the Italians and their pawns. I didn’t feel comfortable even with my family nearby, but here, it’s even worse. I take off my stilettos and drop myself onto the edge of the bed with a sigh. God, I miss Max. I miss our tiny apartment with the view of a local dog park. I miss my old life where I could be whoever I wanted to be.

I run a hand over my face and exhale before forcing myself to sit up straight. Now is not the time for weakness. It won't be long till Riccardo shows up again, and I have to be ready. I spot a bathroom door in the corner and move to stand up when my hand bumps into paper. Ah, the present. Of course.

I look at it for a second, wondering if I should just throw it into the bin right away, but I quickly catch myself. It's my first night here. I should try and keep it simple between us. Besides, what is it that Riccardo felt the need to give to me right away?

My heart feels tight and cautious, but in the end I give up to my curiosity and open the package—only to see an intricate pattern of silk and lace. *What the hell?* My brain refuses to believe his audacity, and it takes me a moment to understand what it is.

It's goddamn lingerie.

That fucking...

I throw the set away as soon as my mind processes it fully, and a wave of fury runs through me with a tremble. *God, I can't believe him.* Does Riccardo think I'm gonna wear that for him? Does he really—*Wait.* I grasp the folds of my dress and hurry to the wardrobe, and yes, of course. It's empty. None of my clothes are here.

Shit. I close my eyes for a second to stall myself and feel the heated waves of anger under my skin even clearer. So Riccardo thinks he can play with me, huh? Well, he's in for a ride.

By the time Alice knocks on the door of my room, I'm already out of the wedding dress and the shower. I've been waiting for her on the edge of my bed with my hair wet, my legs crossed, and my hands on the sheets. Completely naked, yes, but they left me no choice. I'm gonna play by my own rules only.

Alice only glances at me before her cheeks turn pink and her voice stutters. “S-Signora, I’ve brought fresh towels.”

“I see that, thanks.” She doesn’t seem to be able to move in my direction, so I stand up and walk over to yank the towel out of her hands. “Where’s my stupid husband?”

“Oh, you mean—Yes, Signor Riccardo is waiting for you.” Alice looks at me again only after I wrap the towel properly around me. “Do you need time to, uh, get dressed? I can help you, Signora.”

“No need for that. There’s not a single damn thing in this room.” I pull my hair out of the towel, combing my hand through it for good measure, and gesture at the door. “Are we going to him?”

The fire of anger truly pushes me forward, and at this point, I have no care about Riccardo’s power over me. I want to see his stupid face and tell him everything that I think about him. It’s not the first time anyway. He can curse me, he can hurt me, but there’s nothing he can do that would catch me off guard.

Looks like Alice catches my spirit because she doesn’t even try to protest and simply tells me to follow her. I walk out of my bedroom in just the towel and immediately notice a man next to my door. He seems to be on guard, not even moving when we pass him, but I notice the way his eyes widen for a moment. Good. I want Riccardo to feel the same.

It takes a good minute to reach his bedroom in this parody of a castle, and I almost start losing my anger when Alice finally stops next to a door, glances at me, and carefully knocks on it. “Signor, Elena is here.”

“Let her in.”

God, Riccardo sounds arrogant even through the door.

Alice opens the door for me, and I gather my strength and straighten my shoulders before marching inside with my head held high.

The first thing I notice as soon as I step inside is the abundance of dark brown and black. It looks like Riccardo sticks to the same patterns he used to like in college.

The walls of his bedroom are off-white, the furniture is the color of dark chocolate, and the curtains, the sheets, and everything that carries a color are black with streaks of white. Riccardo himself sits in an armchair, wearing a brown bathrobe, and it takes me a moment to spot his figure. Damn.

The colors around him kinda suit him, emphasizing the tan of his skin and the dark ambers of his eyes that find my figure a moment later. With my pale skin, blond hair, and white towel, I probably look like a doll in this room.

“I see you didn’t like my present,” Riccardo says a moment later, putting away a tablet from his lap, and for some godforsaken reason, my body reacts to the deep notes of his voice. Shit. I came here to fight him, not actually share a bed with him.

“The worst one I have ever received. Did you really think you’d be able to force me into that thing?”

“Not really.” He shrugs with a note of carelessness. “I expected you to get mad and do something like...*this*.”

Riccardo pointedly runs his gaze over my body, and I swallow. Damn it. *Is he bluffing?* He must be bluffing. There’s no way he knew I’d be mad enough to do this—but at the same time, doesn’t he know that side of me? I purse my lips in displeasure, and Riccardo lets out a low chuckle.

“What, did you think you could trick me, Elena? What reaction did you expect?”

I don’t know myself. I wanted him to be shocked, annoyed, or maybe even disappointed—but it looks like I’m the one to get all those feelings instead. Damn it. I purse my lips, refusing to look at Riccardo, but from the corner of my eye I notice his movements. He stands up and walks over without a hurry, but I raise my head before he reaches me—and Riccardo obediently pauses.

“I want to leave,” I say into his eyes. It comes out harsh and demanding, but it’s better than pleading with him for anything.

Riccardo immediately laughs out loud and shakes his head. “You can’t. You’re my wife now, Elena. This time, you can’t escape.”

“But you don’t love me. I don’t love you. Why should we live together?”

Riccardo’s smile fades at that, and it looks like he’s actually contemplating my question for a moment, making my heart beat faster. *God, what if—*

“Because I have to keep an eye on you.” He takes a step toward me, holding my gaze. “You are my wife now, and I don’t want you to get yourself into trouble.”

Oh. I can’t help but smirk, ignoring the way my pulse quickens when Riccardo moves even closer into my personal space. “Don’t tell me it’s your way of caring about me.”

“I care about everything that belongs to me.”

Before I have the time to understand what he’s doing, Riccardo suddenly grabs the back of my neck and pulls me toward him, forcing me into a kiss. I hum into his lips, trying to pull back, but he doesn’t let me. His kiss is not a romantic gesture, not an expression of love. Riccardo forces me to surrender to him, and it’s his way of pushing me into my place.

I grab his wrists, trying to get away from him, but I can’t find enough power in me to do that. His grip awakens something primal in me; old feelings rise in my chest, spreading through my body in waves of warmth. I hate it, I feel sick for giving up to him—but Riccardo is the only one who knows how to play with my body.

When he finally lets go of me, I immediately gasp for breath. My grip on his wrist has turned into a clutch with my nails digging into his skin, but Riccardo doesn’t seem to care.

He catches my gaze, and I see only satisfaction and hunger in his eyes as he tightens his hold on me.

“You didn’t think you could escape the wedding night, did you?” Riccardo murmurs almost sweetly while his hand roughly tears the towel away from me. I can only gasp, blindly trying to catch it, but my gaze is fixed on Riccardo as my body reacts to each word with a tremble.

God. What’s wrong with me? But with Riccardo, I don’t have to think about it because each of his gestures is a response to the desires so deeply hidden under my mask of morality.

“I don’t want you,” I try to protest, tugging his hand away from me, but it sounds meek even to my ears. Riccardo grins wider, and in his eyes, I see the reflection of the same wildfire that burns in me.

“Too bad you’re mine now.”

I don’t have time to react or say anything before he grasps my waist and picks me up off the ground, earning a surprised yelp. It seems to please him, and I hate the warmth in my belly at the sight of satisfaction in his eyes. God, it’s been eight years. Why should I be so damn weak for him?

I have a chance to get out of his hold then; if I gathered enough strength, I’d be able to kick him and writhe out of his arms. But it takes me too long to realize that, and Riccardo drops me on the bed before I can do anything. The cool sheets sprawl beneath me, and I feel the heat of my own skin and the impatient trembles of my body.

“Are you still gonna pretend you don’t want this?” Riccardo hovers over me with a daring smirk, sliding his hands over my thighs, and I try to move up the bed and away from him. Or at least, I pretend to try to do that.

“I still hate you.”

“That’s not an answer.”

That goddamn—

But the rest of my thoughts drown in a gasp when Riccardo licks a stripe between my thighs, harshly pushing them apart. God, is he really going to do this? I bite my lip to stop myself from letting out any noises and look at him. Riccardo has already pulled his robe out of the way, and now I can admire the smooth lines of his muscles and the contrast of his tanned hands against my skin.

And yes, god, *yes*, he really is gonna do this. I close my eyes and dig my teeth into my lip, releasing a shaky exhale, when Riccardo lowers himself between my thighs. It's been so long since I had sex with someone. It's been so long since it was with someone who knew my body so well.

Riccardo pushes my thighs up with so much strength it almost hurts, but I revel in the feeling. The note of pain only makes the pleasure he gives me that much sweeter, and it doesn't take long until my moans find a way up my throat. I press my hand to my mouth, but it doesn't help. It feels too good to hold myself back.

"You're always like that, huh? Too prideful to get what you want." Riccardo slaps my thigh all of a sudden, and my whole body jerks, another moan escaping my lips. Damn it.

I crack my eyes open, trying to catch my breath in the break that he's giving me, and it gives me a perfect view of his pecs and abdomen. Riccardo sits up on his heels, pushing my thighs up and apart, and I can see the sheen of sweat on his skin and the whole length of his erection. *Oh god*. I slump back against the sheets and allow my body to follow his lead. I know it's gonna feel so good, but...I was supposed to fight him, wasn't I?

As if hearing my thoughts, Riccardo chuckles and raises his head to meet my gaze. His hands run down my thighs and to my stomach, his palms making my muscles quiver. "I know you want it, Elena. Why do you keep fighting it?"

"Because I—"

“Hate me, I know.” His palms slide to my waist, holding it tighter, and I can feel the tip of his erection press against me. Riccardo still holds my gaze, smirking at the way my lips part in response to the feeling. “Haven’t you found another lie by now?”

Riccardo thrusts into me before he finishes the question, and I can see his face twitch with pleasure. My own body immediately tenses up, his words sending a wave of anger through me. My mind tries to keep me away from the pool of pleasure, but the mixture of hatred and desire is too hot to let me hear the voice of conscience.

God, why does Riccardo have to be so good?

Every movement of his hips, every touch of his hands, every slap that he gives me makes me hiccup and whimper, moans of pleasure making their way through my tightly sealed lips. Every time I stop myself, Riccardo chuckles and pushes deeper inside of me, forcing my mind to lose every last ounce of focus.

He handles me with ease, stroking me just enough to keep me on the edge of pleasure before pulling himself out of my body and rolling me on my knees, my side, and my stomach. I lose myself on his bed, blindly following the silent orders of his hands, and Riccardo rewards me with slaps and murmurs that turn my mind into a melted pool of honey.

I have no control over my body—but it feels so damn right. How long can I keep going? My throat is sore from moans and frantic breaths, my muscles are tight, my body is covered in sweat, and the only conscious thought I have is how much I want to reach the peak. With him.

“Is that what you want, baby?”

Shit. I didn’t realize I was blabbering out loud, but it doesn’t matter anymore. It doesn’t change anything. I want it so badly that I nod into the pillow, arching my back to get him deeper—and instead of laughing at me, Riccardo lets out a sound that can only be described as a purr.

“Good girl.”

His words make my whole body clench in pleasure. Yes, yes, I want to be good for him.

His hands slide down my back to my hips, and I can feel his grip tightening and his rhythm going faster. He slams into me with renewed vigor, and I can't handle it anymore, it's too much. My body tenses up and freezes before shuddering with a wave of orgasm. It's so strong that it wipes everything else in my mind, and through the haze, I can hear his choked groans.

Oh, so we did come together. I hum, too out of my mind to form any proper thoughts, and slump onto the bed. How romantic, for such a messed up couple like us.

Chapter 6 - Riccardo

I feel a quiet rustle and a movement next to me, and my brain jolts me out of the nap. Where is the danger? Is anyone here? I open my eyes and move up to the headboard, tense and alert. It's my bedroom. There should be no intruders here.

Oh, wait.

It takes my mind another second to calm down enough to remember last night. Right. I glance at Elena curled on the other side of the bed and rub my temple. So *this* happened.

It's been so long since I let someone sleep in my bed that my body still refuses to relax. Damn it. I should've sent her back to her own bedroom—but I couldn't find it in me to wake her up. Elena passed out as soon as I finished with her, and her completely relaxed and warm body was too tempting to let go of. She was so vulnerable at that moment; there was no danger in leaving her by my side.

I guess my own mind was still glowing in the post-orgasmic euphoria because, if I'd in my right mind I'd never have done it. My bedroom is the most secret place of all. How could I let a Russian girl sleep there after less than twelve hours of marriage?

I close my eyes for a moment and curse under my breath. I shouldn't let Elena affect me like that—but damn, last night was too good to think straight. Everything about that graduation night remained in my memories for the same reason.

There's something between us that just *works*, you know? I can feel it in her body whenever I touch her and hear her moans—but I feel it in mine, too. The heat of her gaze last night awoke something in me, and it filled me with the urge to *have* her. Wasn't it the same madness that had taken over on graduation party? The sensation of her soft skin and trembling

muscles under my palms, the pure desire in her stuttering moans, the way Elena moved with me and for me—

I shake my head and open my eyes. What did I just say? I shouldn't let myself be so damn distracted by her. I glance at Elena mindlessly, and it's hard to imagine that she can do me any harm—but in a life like ours, you shouldn't trust anyone. She is still the niece of an enemy.

My gaze drifts over her bare shoulder, the line of her neck, and the expanse of blond hair on my black sheets. I didn't have a chance to admire her beauty after college, but now it stands before me so clearly. Elena is beautiful, and no man in their right mind would think otherwise. Well, no man my age. When I was in college, I was blind to it like everyone else—or rather, I was blind to my own attraction.

God, it's been eight years, huh? I chuckle quietly and look away, staring at the faint light of the morning between the curtains. Eight years we spent without each other—and yet, we made a whole circle and came back to the same point. Why did I waste so much time? Why did she leave? What if I'd had enough common sense in me to ask her—

I shut my eyes and force myself to stop. Too many thoughts. There are too many unwanted and unneeded thoughts in my head, and the woman beside me is the main reason. I have way more important things to focus on, so if my mind refuses to work properly, I have to be the one to get out of here.

I could wake Elena up and send her out of my bedroom, but...my gaze finds her again, and I notice that she slightly scrunches her nose in her sleep when she frowns. Damn it. I turn away and move to the edge of the bed. It's time for me to get up anyway.

I move around the room without much care, but it seems that Elena is too deep in her slumber to care about the noise around her. Well, I guess the last few days have been rough for her—but haven't they been for all of us? I glance at her sleepy form on the bed. She only fidgets once when I open

the door to the wardrobe and the soft light from inside falls on her face, but even then, Elena only rolls on her other side and lets out a deep sigh.

I didn't expect to exhaust her so much last night, but my own body is still sore and full of lingering pleasure. After I run a comb through my hair one last time, I walk to the door of my bedroom but linger there for a second with a sudden thought. Will I be able to get the lustful beast out of Elena again? I glance at her and smirk to myself before finally leaving her behind.

The morning greets me with a cloudy sky and a weight of humidity; there's a promise of rain in the air outside of the house. I step out onto the terrace only for long enough to get a sip of my morning coffee and let my mind focus on the present. It's hotter than inside, almost to the point of unpleasant, but there's a certain sense of peace in the woods and hills surrounding me that I can't find even in the silent hallways of the house.

"Signor," I hear no more than two minutes later, and I tighten the hold on my cup for a second. See? There's no place to enjoy loneliness here. "Signor, I apologize for bothering you, but I wanted to let you know that Maxim has arrived. We will guide the boy to his room until Signora is ready to meet him."

"Alright. Thanks, Alberto."

The butler leaves as soon as I let him, but I linger behind with my thoughts weirdly swirling around his words. So Maxim is here. It is, actually, good that Alberto warned me; I can't predict my reaction if I saw a strange boy running around the house. Not that anyone would let him do that here, but children can be unpredictable, and something tells me that Elena is not a strict mother.

How could she have been careless enough to give birth to a child without a father?

I shake my head and turn back to the house. Elena truly is full of surprises, but I can't say that I find it charming. I prefer to keep all secrets outside of the family; in this house and in my life, I can only afford to have people I can trust. Sometimes, it is a matter of life and death, so by the time I reach the cabinet, I've already sent my cousin a message:

Check out Elena and Max. Send me everything you find.

Everything?

Yes.

Got it.

Matteo is good at this. I block my phone and pause in front of the door to my cabinet just a moment before an echo of Elena's voice reaches me, accompanied by the squeak of her son. They both sound as happy as if they were apart for months. I listen to their voices for a few more seconds, waiting for something interesting to slip out of Elena's mouth, but all I gather is that she calls him Max, and they are going to eat breakfast. Fascinating.

But that's enough distractions for today—it's time for me to focus on my duties. On top of the whole mess with the Mexicans, I have an important deal with a new supplier coming up, and it's not a good time for me to let my thoughts wander.

I receive a message from Paolo half an hour later, and it's a signal that I should join him in the warehouse. It's an old building in the half-ruined parts of the Mountain View area that used to be a storage facility for the local farm machinery company. It's been a few years since they lost all their dignity, money, and lives to Father, and the warehouse has been our main place of business ever since.

"He says he wants to talk to you," Paolo says through the phone, and I hum, striding down the stairs. Quite a bold demand for a man chained to a chair for more than a day.

"It better be something important."

“Do you think he’s in shape to joke around?”

I scoff. “You know Mexicans. They’re fucking—”

What the hell?

I catch a weird movement from the corner of my eye. It gives me only a fraction of a second to react, and I follow my reflex, sharply turn around, and throw my arm out to catch the danger. Because, of course, it must be something dangerous. An attack! Why else would anyone sneak up on me in my own house?

And it’s only when I hear a startled yelp and realize that I have missed the aim—because it’s too damn *short* for what I’m used to—that my brain takes over my instincts. I look down and see the boy from yesterday lying on the floor, his big eyes staring up at me in a mixture of horror and awe.

“Max!” Elena’s cry follows him, and a moment later she runs out of the dining room so fast her bare feet almost slip on the floor. She only glances at me before rushing to the boy, her loose hair and the sides of her robe swaying from the motion. “What have you done?”

“I—I’m sorry, Mom.” Max barely tears his eyes away from me to look at his mom with an apologetic pout. “I didn’t mean to!”

“What happened?” Elena finally looks at me, crouching next to Max to help him sit up, and I raise my eyebrow when I see an accusation in her eyes. Is it my fault that he appeared out of nowhere?

“I showed your son what happens when he runs around the house without thinking,” I say calmly, but it doesn’t look like she believes me.

Elena rushes to check Max for any signs of injury, murmuring something in Russian under her breath, and I shrug and move to turn around. Paolo has been on the line the entire time, I’m pretty sure he has questions. But before I walk away, I feel a gaze on me and glance behind.

It's Max who is staring at me over his mom's shoulder. Elena pointedly ignores me as if last night didn't happen, but her son seems to be more than curious. When our eyes meet, Max hurries to look away, and I catch a glimpse of fear in him. Did she tell him to stay away from the big bad guy? I chuckle, and Max glances at me again, unable to tame his curiosity.

Max reminds me of Paolo when he was younger—the same dark and mischievous eyes, curly hair, and talent for getting into trouble. I catch his gaze for a moment and, unable to stop myself, wink before finally turning away to the door. You know, I kinda like him.

Paolo does remain on the line even as I leave the house, but I ignore the teasing tone of his questions and simply say that Elena's boy was playing around. For some reason, Paolo thinks that it's funny that I have to live with her. I don't know if we're supposed to fall in love or what, but knowing the books he reads in his free time, I wouldn't be surprised to hear a scenario like this.

The drive to the warehouse doesn't take long, but a drizzle of rain has enough time to turn Chicago gray and humid. When I reach the interrogation rooms, Jorge is waiting for me exactly where I left him yesterday—sitting on a chair with his hands chained behind his back. The room stinks of blood and urine, and the fan below the ceiling barely has enough power to make it more bearable.

When a guard opens the door for me, my first thought is that Jorge is unconscious. His body is slumped against the back of the chair, black threads of dirty hair are covering his eyes, and his breath is raspy but stable. Shit. Did I come here for nothing? But when I step closer to him, the Mexican slowly raises his head and gives me a bloody smirk.

“Don Riccardo.”

Disgusting. I meet his gaze and pull my hands out of my pockets. “You said you had new information for me.”

Jorge bares the remnants of his teeth in a grin. “Yes, I wanted to talk to you, oh almighty Don—”

I hit his cheek with the back of my palm, losing patience. He’s going through the same fuckery again, and I’m not gonna listen to his blabbering all day. “Information.”

“Oh, but it wasn’t anything new! Did I say I’d give you something new?” He glances at Paolo, and I follow his gaze and see a note of confusion in Paolo’s eyes. Damn it. It’s another stupid joke.

Jorge chuckles, sensing our confusion, and raises his head as much as possible with a twisted shoulder. “All I have to offer, Don Riccardo, are my congratulations on your marriage! Sadly, I wasn’t there to cheer for you in person, but I’m sure your wife was as beautiful as they say.”

“Who says?” I frown, but Jorge ignores me. His gaze starts swaying across the room, and I’m not sure his mind is still able to process what I’m saying.

“It must have been a grandiose ceremony!” Jorge’s smile suddenly drops, and he closes his eyes, breathing harder through the effort of his speech. “What a shame...that so soon, Elena will have to...will have to change her white for black.”

What the hell? My hands curl into fists despite myself, and I push his chair with full force. “What are you talking about?”

But he says nothing after that, no explanations for that mess of a speech. I slap him again to bring him back to his senses, but Jorge only groans in response as his whole body convulses from pain. It sends more blood gushing from the wounds in his stomach and arms, and the sound of his breath turns raspy again.

Is there anything that can make him suffer even more?

I eye him for a second, breathe out, and turn to Paolo. “There’s nothing we can get from him.”

He nods with a look of disappointment on his face. We caught Jorge near our docks the other day; he was good enough to get there on his own, so we had high expectations for him. Perhaps we should've used him as bait instead, but it's too late for it now.

“Do you want me to get rid of him?” Paolo reaches for his gun, but I shrug, take out my dagger, and turn to the half-broken human in front of me.

“It's not worth the bother.”

The dagger lands in the side of his neck. Jorge widens his eyes and gasps for breath, but only blood fills his throat—until his body loses the last bit of life.

Chapter 7 – Elena

I'm listening to Max's voice repeating math formulas after his teacher when my phone buzzes in my hand. A new message from Irina:

Black Cat at 5.

I glance at the clock and then at the door of Max's room. It's twelve past three, we have plenty of time. Maybe I should take a walk around the house or spend some time under the sun outside. It sounds better than sitting here for another hour—but I don't want to leave Max alone. Or maybe I don't want to *be* alone, either.

Don't get me wrong, the house itself is quite nice. It's been a couple of weeks since I moved in, and I've already become familiar with the servants, cooks, and guards around the house. They aren't members of the Messina clan and don't even count as pawns in their games, so it seems like their life here is pretty stable. I've never seen them leave the house, though, but that's a given. You can't have a life outside of the Mafia world.

I've naturally become the closest with Alice. She helps me with everything, from getting dressed to taking care of Max, and I've grown fond of her smiles which are still a rarity. She is young but not enough for me to be worried. Alice has mentioned that she's only nineteen, but you know, at least she's not a minor working around guns and prostitutes. (I've never seen one here, but it doesn't mean they aren't kept in other places.)

I still don't know how she ended up here, but Alice keeps her lips sealed, and I don't question her too much. If Riccardo keeps her around, Alice is good enough to be trusted; everything else is her business, not mine.

I wish I could spend my days with the servants and Max only, but unfortunately, we are not the only ones

occupying the house—and I'm not talking about Riccardo. The members of his clan show up as frequently as he does, and it keeps me on tenterhooks. Whenever I enter a room, I don't know if I'm gonna find another Italian with a grim frown and a hand on his belt. Sometimes, they don't even talk to me, just watch me silently until I exit the room. And how am I supposed to feel comfortable here?

And let's not forget about my damn husband. Riccardo hasn't done anything to me since the wedding night; he mostly ignores me, too deep in his business to care about the world around him. But sometimes, oh, sometimes, I do catch his gazes on me—dark or teasing, heated or cold like ice—and they make me shiver from inside.

Riccardo is dangerous in many ways, and I know I should stay away from him. Being involved with him is never a good idea, and my own life is a prime example. It's not only the pure power to break my life and do whatever he wants with me—it's the frantic rhythm of my heart whenever I meet his gaze that scares me.

I refuse to admit that the years of my youth can be so easily brought back to mind by one night with Riccardo—but that is exactly what's been happening lately. My nights are full of thoughts and memories, so I spend my days avoiding him and not giving him any excuse to touch me and make it even worse. I've been staying in Max's room since the second night simply because I don't know if I'll be able to reject Riccardo if he demands me again.

God. I cover my eyes with my hand when I realize that my heart is pounding in my chest from these thoughts alone. How can a woman be so stupid? It's as if I don't remember Riccardo tormenting me for years.

In college, Riccardo wouldn't let me pass without calling me, pushing me, insulting me, or making me trip over my feet. He had no mercy for me—Riccardo saw me as an enemy, and a weaker one at that. How could he not use it to

please his own teenage ego? And how did I manage to fall in love with such a jerk?

The thought makes me feel sick. There's probably something wrong with me—and that's why I shouldn't even think about getting close to Riccardo. He used to be brutal and hotheaded when we were teens, and I don't want to test him now. I don't want him to show the true face of a Mafia killer in front of Max. *God, if Riccardo ever finds out the truth about him—*

“Mom! Mommy, it's over! Can I go out now?”

Max's voice pulls me out of my thoughts, and I startle when he suddenly places his hand on my shoulder, jumping around. He's grinning brightly, so happy to be done with the lesson, and I can't help but smile back at him. Max likes it here; the big and scary men fascinate him, and the brightly lit ocean is so different from the hills and lakes of Wisconsin. Isn't that all that matters?

I allow Max to play outside, but I follow him closely; I never let him roam around the house on his own. Riccardo might have been patient the few times we have stumbled upon him, but other members of his family may not react well to an eight-year-old bumping into them on the way to the bathroom. I mean, that's why the dwelling place of a Mafia don is not the best place for kids, huh?

We spend some time among the palms and ponds behind the mansion, and Max even grabs enough time to jump into the pool. He used to be intimidated by it at first, but now he's more than happy to spend hours near the water. But I don't let him, not this time. The evening is approaching, and it's time for us to get ready for the drive into the city.

The sky's still a bright blue when we finally leave the mansion, and it feels weird to be able to relax and simply watch the scenery outside. Riccardo has assigned me a driver, but I still can't get used to it. Max doesn't seem to like it either—he was waiting for so long to be big enough to ride without his car seat, only to be forced to spend the rides in the back

again. But well, it's not like Riccardo cares about our opinions on the matter.

We arrive at Black Cat just a few minutes before five, and even the quiet part of the city greets us with live music from the nearby park and the laughter of thin crowds. Irina has chosen this place because it's a part of the neutral territory—the tension between our families has gone down but hasn't disappeared entirely. Neither of us would want to provoke another conflict by stepping into the other's territory.

"I'll be around, Signora," the driver pulls my attention when I lay my hand on the door. "I'll pick you up as soon as you're ready."

So basically, he's gonna stay close and "keep an eye on me" as Riccardo put it once. What, are they worried I'm gonna run away again? I chuckle and nod at the driver through the rearview mirror before motioning for Max to follow me out of the car. If I had a chance to escape, I'd have done it already; it's Max who stops me, not their watchful eyes.

The driver's words leave a trail of annoyance in my mind, but as soon as I see Irina through the cafe window, my heart feels lighter. The gorgeous waves of her blond hair and elegant profile are visible from afar, attracting glances from every man passing by, but Irina is more focused on her phone than strangers around her.

Who could imagine that I'd get married before her? Certainly not me.

Irina is an important communicator in our family, so it's rare to see her without a phone in hand. She only notices us when we are a few steps away from the table, but even then I think she looks up from her glasses only because Max lets out a squeal of joy.

"Auntie!"

He breaks into a run in just a few steps, and Irina only has enough time to put her phone away before his arms wrap around her shoulders. They've only seen each other a couple

of times since we arrived in Chicago, but Max and Irina quickly took a liking to each other. He likes to share stories, and she likes to listen, so when I left them on their own once, Max spent a whole hour telling her about our trips to Lake Michigan.

“Hi, sweetie.” Irina looks at me over Max’s shoulder, and I see a hint of a smile on her face. She keeps a lot of her emotions to herself, so whenever I see something genuine it always makes my heart warm. “How was the ride?”

“Not bad.” I shrug as I take a seat opposite her, but Irina is too attentive to let it slip.

“What happened?”

“They don’t let me go out on my own.” Ah, I didn’t mean to sound so petulant, but I guess I do feel offended. I’m not a child, after all. I can take care of myself!

“Interesting.” Irina tilts her head and pats Max’s back to get him on the ground. “Tell me more.”

It takes me a while to tell her everything, but I do my best. Even just a couple of weeks have already become an endless source of stories: from the one about Riccardo calling me Cinderella to Max finding a gun in the dining room. Irina listens to everything with the attention of an eagle, and even though I know that she captures every bit of information for her own records, I don’t mind.

What I don’t mention in my stories, though, is how I spent my wedding night—but my sister is not that simple. After I skip right through it, Irina doesn’t shy away from asking me directly how it was—but I lie to her without a blink of an eye. If there’s anything my family has taught me, it’s the art of deception.

“Well, it looks like everything is better than I imagined.” Irina leans back in her seat and taps her fingers against the table, adding in a careless tone, “Do you know that guy?”

I smile a little, not allowing my tension to slip through, and keep my eyes on her. “The one watching us?”

“Yes.”

“No, he’s not with me.”

“Interesting.” Irina hums and runs a hand through her hair, inconspicuously glancing at the man from the corner of her eye.

I noticed him some twenty minutes ago when I turned to look at Max playing with a cat and saw a man hurriedly looking away. It was enough to ring a bell in my head. In the life of a Mafia family, suspicion becomes second nature. I’ve glanced at him a few times since then, but the man remained turned away from us.

“He’s Mafia,” Irina murmurs a second later and looks up at me. She wears the same calm, indifferent expression as before, and only her eyes are unfocused as she calculates something in her head. “And he’s been watching Max, too. Are you sure you don’t know him?”

I glance over my shoulder, but the man isn’t looking my way. Instead, his gaze is directed at Max, and the sight itself sends a jolt of anger through my body. Is this another one of Riccardo’s jokes? Because I don’t want to play his games. His men should stay away from my son, I’ve told him already.

But what if he’s not one of us?

I turn to Irina with a grim look and tension creeping into my body. We’re not the only two families in Chicago, and if someone found out about the marriage—and I’m pretty sure the rumors went around really quickly—they’d want to use it against Riccardo. Damn it. Why didn’t I realize it right away?

“I’m gonna take care of it.” I immediately get up from my seat with my heart hammering in my chest. It’s been a while since I had to deal with actual danger, but that doesn’t mean I’ve lost my grip.

Irina looks over her glasses with curiosity. “Do you need help?”

“Just look after Max.”

I glance at him and notice that another boy has joined him on the bench. Max easily makes new acquaintances, and it seems that their chat is going pretty well. Good. He needs friends here—as long as he doesn’t tell them where he lives.

I pointedly walk past the man to Max and pat his shoulder. “I’m going out for a minute. Be good and listen to your aunt.”

He looks at Irina, making sure she’s still here, and nods at me before turning back to the boy. I glance at his new friend, too, and offer him a smile, although the boy looks wary of me. He is Hispanic, probably one of the Mexicans from across the border, and I’m not even sure if he understood what I was saying. He asks Max something in Spanish as soon as I turn away, but Max doesn’t understand a bit and asks him to repeat.

I leave them to it and, not looking at the man, go out of the cafe and onto the lively street. The colors of sunset have already painted the sky orange, and the air around me is glowing in its light. But I don’t pause to enjoy it and turn in whatever direction, just away from the cafe and Max. Is the driver around? *Maybe he could do something actually useful and help me here?*

The car doesn’t appear, however, and it doesn’t take long until I find a turn to a narrow alley between the buildings. It’s dark and empty, leaving the bustling life of Chicago outside of its walls, and my whole body tenses up with a rush of adrenaline. My heart picks up its pace as I look around, quickly getting familiar with my surroundings. I don’t have much time to find the best place for a counterattack, especially when I hear steps behind me and a raspy male voice.

“Where are you—”

I sharply turn around and rush toward him without a second of delay, ready to dig my nails into his face. Dad has taught me that the best defense is an attack, and I'm not going to let his lessons go to waste. I may not be as physically fit for a fight, but I'm gonna do all I can. It's better for them to hurt me than touch Max.

The guy's eyes widen for a moment when he realizes what I'm doing, but it takes him no more than a second to avoid my fury. He steps to the side, and I immediately turn to him, pushing him into the wall with all my strength. Thankfully, he's not as big as some of the guys I've seen in Riccardo's mansion, but he's full of muscles and resilience.

“Elena, you're being—”

I don't listen to him, lashing out all over again and this time reaching him just enough to scratch across his face. He winces, and I use the moment to kick his knee, sending him into the wall and feeling quite proud of myself. It may not be a win, but I did get him. The lessons of my childhood didn't go to waste.

“Who are you? What do you want from me?” I glare at the guy, and even I can hear that my voice is seething with anger.

I don't care that he's stronger than me, I don't care that he may knock me out with one punch. If he came after me, then he knows who I am and whose protection I carry. If he wants to get in trouble with both Russians and Italians, I don't mind.

The guy turns to me with a grim frown, holding on to his cheek, and I only have enough time to blink before he catches both of my wrists and shakes me a little. “Signora Elena, I'm here to protect you.”

Huh? I blink a few times and breathe out, focusing on the man's face. Shit. He does look Italian.

“Who the hell are you?”

I yank my wrists out of his grip and glare at him, not allowing embarrassment to show on my face. It was stupid of me to lash out without question, but goddamnit, can they warn me next time?

“I’m Louis,” he says slowly, keeping his eyes on me as if worried that I’m gonna start punching him again. “It’s too dangerous for you to be so close to the Mexicans’ territory, so Riccardo sent me here to keep an eye on you.”

I frown. “What Mexicans? Mount Hope is a neutral territory.”

“It used to be, but Mexicans have laid an eye on it.” Louis lowers his voice, and I realize that he’s serious. “Your sister wouldn’t save you if they found out you were here.”

“Well, isn’t that why you sent the driver with me?” I gesture in the direction of the street with annoyance and worry in my chest. I’ve already forgotten what it’s like to watch my step wherever I go. The rights and wrongs are different in the underworld.

Louis frowns and looks at me with more attention. “What driver?”

“My driver. The one who brought us here.”

“Signora, there were no drivers assigned to you today,” he explains slowly, watching my reaction. “That’s why Riccardo sent me here, to not leave you—”

“Wait, wait, what do you mean there were no drivers?”

I feel my heart going cold at the thought of it. It’s wrong. It’s so wrong. I see that Louis shares my fear because we turn simultaneously—only to see a Mexican couple waiting for us at the entrance of the alley.

“Have you lost your way?” The woman tilts her head, watching us with raised eyebrows, while the man steps forward. A wave of adrenaline rushes through me, and I curl my hands into fists—when I see people on the street start to run.

I hear a gunshot, screams of women, and among all that, a distinct childish cry.

“Mommy!”

Chapter 8 - Riccardo

I skim through the photos on Paolo's tablet and stop at the one that shows all forty packs of drugs. It doesn't look bad for the first batch, especially as they promise more with each consecutive one, but the thing is...

"I don't like the guy." I turn around, handing the tablet to Paolo, and look at Matteo. "Have you found something on him?"

I have to have aces in my sleeves before starting the game with a new player.

"Federico Bianchi." Matteo pushes his papers on the table toward me before leaning back into the armchair. "He's been climbing the ladder for the last two years and has gained a reputation in the local circles. Federico has ties among local police officers and the staff of Naples' airport, so—"

My phone buzzes on the table, forcing Matteo to pause, and I gesture for him to wait before checking the screen. Louis. Goddamnit. Didn't I tell him to keep an eye on Elena? Why the hell would he bother me now, two hours before the arranged call with Federico?

I'm even tempted to decline the call, but at the last moment, I do answer it. "I hope it's something important."

"You bet it is." Louis sounds out of his breath, and I frown and tense up. Paolo and Matteo exchange a glance and sit up straight while Louis audibly hisses before continuing, "Fucking Mexicans stole the boy."

What the hell?

I breathe out sharply and lean on the table, rubbing my forehead. This is the last damn thing I need right now. "When?"

"Just now. They lured him onto the street while two other bastards sneaked up on us, and—"

“On us?”

“Me and Elena.” Ah, sure. I clench my jaw but say nothing, giving Louis a way to keep going. “Max was with her sister, and they shot her when she tried to take him back.”

I hear a displeased female voice in the distance, and Louis huffs. Are they joking there? I pinch the bridge of my nose, struggling to keep myself calm. “What about Elena?”

“She’s fine, too. Just, uh, distressed.”

Oh, so she’s *distressed*?

“Where was she looking? Why wasn’t she with him?!” I can’t stop myself from snapping in a flash of rage because goddamnit, Elena is his *mother*. I’ve been doing all I can to protect them from the Mexicans, but the only time she leaves the house she manages to get both of them in trouble!

Louis goes silent for a fraction of a second, and please, god, don’t tell me she was the one to mess it up.

“It was my fault,” Louis says all of a sudden, and I can’t help but blink in surprise. He’s always been very diligent with his duties. “I didn’t let her know I was here, so Elena took me for a stranger following them.”

“What, did she fight you?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

God, that woman. I let out a deep breath while my thoughts scatter in every direction, looking for a way to get Max out of there. Those bastards knew what they were doing, so they aren’t gonna let Max go anytime soon. Where would they take him?

“Okay, Louis. Send Paolo your location, we’ll send someone to pick Elena up.” I pause as a sudden thought makes me wince, and I lower my voice. “She’s not hysterical, is she?”

“No, she’s just...different.”

As soon as I hang up, Paolo and Matteo turn to me at once like a couple of wolves only waiting for a cue to attack. They've both already heard enough to become tense and serious. They know I wouldn't get so heated for nothing, so I don't waste time going into details and get up from my chair.

“The Mexicans have stolen Max.”

Paolo curses in Italian and follows me to the door while Matteo lingers in the armchair. “What about the deal?”

“Forget about it.” I pause in the doorway only for long enough to turn to him. “Check Louis' location and send Marco to pick Elena up. Paolo, you take care of the chase. I want to get my hands on those fuckers by midnight.”

“What about Elena? Where should they bring her?”

“Here.” I crack my knuckles and turn to look at the floor of the warehouse below us. “I'm going to talk to our guests.”

The warehouse has many rooms for many purposes, and that's what I like the most about it. You never know what you'll find in the cells and hallways of the basement unless you know what you're looking for. While Matteo and Paolo follow my orders, I gesture for Omero, one of the guards on duty, to join me on the way down. It's not that I need protection, but it's never safe to be on your own amidst your enemies.

“Good evening, gentlemen.”

I fake a smile as the door creaks, and I walk into a small and crowded room full of moisture and sick scents. Only one of the air vents works properly, and its steady hum fills the room with constant noise mixed with shuffles and coughs. The old lightbulb right under the ceiling gives barely any light, and it dances on the dirty walls and puddles of water in the corners.

When I enter with Omero's flashlight illuminating the room, the shadows inside fidget and let out weak groans. It's hard to say whether they're cursing or pleading with me for

something—I don't know Spanish well enough to recognize their mumbles. There are six men inside: the unlucky remnants of our recent raid on one of the Mexican gambling points. They all were claiming that they were only players there, not members of the Escarra family, so we decided to keep them until they were ready to tell us the truth.

“How are you feeling today?” I walk over, glancing at the row of their chained wrists and stains of urine. One of them moves his legs away to give me some space as I step over him, and I tilt my head, pausing next to him. “I hope you're ready to give me some answers because I am not in the mood for bullshit. I've been kind to you so far, but your men have done something really bad and really stupid today. So trust me, I have no care for your lives anymore. Is that clear?”

I don't know how much of my English they understand, but they huddle as close as possible together and stare at me with dark eyes. They look like rats from this angle—poor, pathetic, and so easy to break. One of them opens his mouth to tell me something, maybe even beg for mercy, but as soon as I hear Spanish coming out of his mouth, I quirk an eyebrow. The man immediately shuts up. Wise.

“Is that clear?” I repeat, taking my dagger out of my inner pocket, and the men exchange a few glances and nod. “Good. Omero, bring the interpreter. Gentlemen, who wants to be first?”

But despite their exhausted and broken looks, the men turn out to be more resistant than I imagined. One by one, I go through them with my usual tactic: warn, hurt, ask, then hurt again. It gets loud and bloody very quickly.

I don't like bloodying my hands, but I almost enjoy the trembles and grimaces of my victims when my dagger digs into their flesh. Cold weapons give you the power of pain that no firearm ever will.

The Mexicans, however, refuse to give up. No matter how many screams and pleading cries I get out of them, all six of them keep insisting that they don't know what I'm talking

about. Even when I start calling them by their names—because, honestly, it didn't take us long to find all the information on them—they refuse to admit that they are pawns of the Escarra family.

It takes me a while to reach the point where they feel the breath of death on their necks and their resolve starts to waver. No matter how loyal men are to their masters, when their lives hang by a thread, they take the last chance to think about their values again.

“Wouldn't it be easier to just tell me where they took the boy?” I look at the blood running out of the corner of Pedro's mouth before raising my calm gaze to his eyes. They're already glassy, barely holding on to the last flickers of life, and I sigh. This one goes to waste.

I wipe my dagger off on his shirt and stand up, shaking my head. “Do you see what happens when it takes too long to ___”

“Signor.” I pause, switching my attention to Omero's voice. “Signora is here.”

Who? Oh. I blink and look back at the door. Elena has finally arrived.

She stands in the doorway right behind Marco, and I can see that she's not her usual self. The look on her face is grim and detached, her blue eyes dimmed with thought, and only when Marco steps to the side to let her in does Elena blink and look up at me. But I still feel like I'm looking at a porcelain doll rather than the woman I left in my house this morning.

“Elena?” I turn my body toward her, unable to keep a surprised note out of my voice. I did order Marco to bring her to the warehouse, but I didn't expect her to show up *here*. It's not a place for someone who has detached herself from the Mafia world—but Elena doesn't seem to care.

She takes one look at the scene in front of her, and the muscles of her face don't even twitch. Her gaze lingers on the

Mexicans instead, and the only change I notice is the way Elena clenches her jaw. Is she mad at me for doing something like this? Shit. She really shouldn't be here.

I turn to Omero with an order to take her away on the tip of my tongue when Elena finally opens her mouth. "Have you gotten anything out of them?"

Her voice is as cold as her eyes when she looks up at me, and I realize that there's not a trace of displeasure in her features. Elena doesn't seem to be mad or surprised by my cruelty. She looks calm and completely indifferent to the suffering of people in front of her, and I suddenly realize that Elena isn't just a woman.

She was born and raised the same way I did, and it looks like even the eight years she spent away from Chicago didn't change her that much. Elena is still a Princess of Russian Bratva, and the power of pain is closer to her than the weakness of mercy.

Elena quirks her eyebrow expectantly, and I realize that she's still waiting for an answer. She's silently nudging me to reply like a teacher waiting for a student to answer, and I have to be annoyed by such boldness—but for some reason, it makes me excited. I've never seen that side of her, but shit. It's kind of hot.

"Nothing worthy of mentioning," I say after a moment of silence, just to make her more impatient, and glance at the bodies of Mexicans behind me. "They claim they don't know anything."

Elena hums and turns her body toward them, her nose slightly scrunching in disgust as her gaze darts over the pool of dirt, urine, and blood. But she doesn't step back—she only steps forward and tilts her head with cold curiosity.

"And you think they do know something that can help me find Max," Elena says calmly, not looking at me, and I can see only her profile as she walks toward my victims. Or should I say, our victims?

Because it looks like Elena is ready to take over, make them suffer, bring them pain, and... Shit. I swallow. Why does this thought make me so excited? And why do I want to see Elena do all of that so badly?

I clear my throat to catch a moment to collect myself. Damn it, Riccardo. This is really not a good time for lust—but when Elena looks over her shoulder to catch my gaze, I can't help the surge of heat in my body.

She has the eyes of a killer, and I suddenly remember how I would make her uncomfortable and on verge of crying in college. A gray mouse has turned into a cat, huh?

I smirk as a melted pool of desire trickles down my body the longer I hold Elena's gaze. God, I can't wait to see her claws.

Chapter 9 - Elena

“They’re all we have right now,” Riccardo says with a smirk that looks almost smug and gestures at the Mexicans. “Do you want to give it a try?”

Is this an invitation?

I raise an eyebrow, and my gaze lingers on him before I nod and turn away. Well, I’m not gonna refuse. If even the almighty Don of the Messina Clan can’t force a few rats to speak, I have to dig my own hands into their blood.

I step forward, studying the Mexicans to find the weakest spot. It’s almost scary how indifferent I am to the demonstration of misery and suffering in front of me—but even eight years away from my family couldn’t take away everything they planted in me when I was a child.

Others are only a tool in getting what you want. You should use them, stomp on them, and build your way up on the bodies of those who aren’t yours to care about. Only those who share your blood get to receive mercy.

And right now, I don’t care a goddamn bit about Mexicans, Italians, Americans, or whoever the hell stands in my way to Max. I was stupid and reckless enough to let those bastards steal my son, but I’m not gonna let them get away with it. The more blood spills under my hands, the sooner I’ll get to see Max, so I step up to the hostages without an ounce of sympathy.

“I see you aren’t scared of death.” I pointedly nod at their companion whose lifeless body is already being dragged away by Marco.

While the interpreter translates my words, I look at the Mexicans one after the other, making sure to meet each of their gazes. They’re wide and petrified, full of unspoken pleas, and I can see the urge to deliver their thoughts in each of their gazes. They must think that I’m a young one, I’m a woman, so

I'll be merciful to them—and well, maybe I will. I don't like Riccardo's way of beating the truth out of them. It clearly doesn't work.

“What is it that can make you speak, then?”

I walk to the one who looks the weakest and crouch in front of him, unafraid of his attack. One of his hands is chained to the wall, the other is slumped on the ground and swollen, and when I put my knee on it, it earns a cry out of him.

The Mexican immediately starts murmuring something in an unrecognizable mixture of Spanish and English, and I understand what he's saying even before the interpreter repeats after him. “Signora, it is a misunderstanding. I'm not a criminal, I'm not the one you need. I don't know anything, I promise.”

I hum, eyeing him with cold curiosity. “What's your name?”

“Diego.”

“Do you want to live, Diego?”

He nods as soon as the interpreter translates it and fidgets to sit up straight despite the pain of the movement. Hope truly is the most powerful force out there, and I smile a little in an attempt to reassure him. He's younger than others. More scared, too. Perhaps he'll be able to get out of here indeed.

“Are you ready to help me?”

Diego hesitates for a second and glances around. “I don't know where your son is, I'm sorry.”

“That's not what I'm asking. Are you ready to help me?”

In the quiet of the room, the interpreter translates my words, and Diego slowly nods again, earning my satisfied smile. I can feel Riccardo's intense gaze on my back. I'm sure he doubts I'll be able to do it, and I'm not confident in my

skills either. It's been years since I took part in an interrogation, but I can still hear Olga's voice instructing me.

Find a weak spot.

"Good, Diego, very good."

Become the last hope.

"If you are able to help me, I will make sure to keep you alive."

Make them beg for it.

"Yes, Signora," Diego mumbles with a heavy Spanish accent, writhing to get himself closer to me.

Use them till the last breath.

I pat his shoulder with an encouraging smile and lean in to his ear. "You understand me, don't you?"

"Little."

"Good. I'll keep it simple. Do you know them?" I whisper and pull back just enough to point at the remaining four Mexicans with my eyes.

Diego follows my gaze, visibly swallows, and nods. A drop of blood runs down the side of his head from a scratch on his temple, and I wipe it away with an almost careful gesture.

"Are they family?"

He shakes his head. Perfect.

I turn around and beckon the interpreter closer. I don't want the rest of the room to hear our conversation, but I don't want to miss any details either. The interpreter hesitates, glances at Riccardo, and only after a nod of approval from him does she walk over. Of course, only the Don can give orders here.

"Now, Diego. It is your last chance to survive, so you better be obedient, alright?" I look into his eyes, and as soon as the interpreter finishes the question, he nods. Well, here we

go. “So you either tell me where my son is or you give me everything I want about these friends of yours.”

Diego’s eyes widen, and he glances at them with a look of hesitation and refusal in his eyes. He doesn’t want to betray them, and that’s natural. So I pat his knee almost gently and, as soon as our eyes meet, raise my eyebrows in a silent reminder. It’s his *last* chance.

“Don Riccardo is not gonna wait for you to make up your mind,” I murmur so that no one but the interpreter can hear us. “Are you ready to talk to him again?”

Diego is weak, it’s clear in the grimace of terror and the shudders going through his body. It doesn’t take long for him to make the right choice, so I ask him for all the details I need. The others’ names, families, children, places of living; Diego doesn’t know everything but he is diligent enough to provide me with a good foundation.

I can take care of everything else on my own.

As soon as I turn away from him, I see a look of interest on Riccardo’s face. He looks into my eyes with a silent question, but I don’t have time to explain myself to him. I’ve wasted enough time here, I don’t want to let Max stay in the clutches of enemies for even a second longer.

“Ramon, how is your daughter doing?”

I turn to one of the Mexicans curled on the floor, looking into his eyes with fake curiosity. The man immediately moves up and further away from me, frowning deeply. He glances at Diego with fury and hurt in his eyes, but I clear my throat, walking closer.

“Would you like me to bring her and chain her to your dead body? Or are you gonna speak now and save my child and yours?”

His eyes widen, so I leave Ramon to give it a thought and turn to another one of the Mexicans. “Carlos, your grandfather is in the hospital, isn’t he? I’m so sorry to hear about his condition.”

“You aren’t,” the guy spits out in broken English, trembling—this time, from anger, not from pain. I don’t mind it.

“At least I’m trying to be polite. I don’t want him to go through another heart attack when I bring your body to his bed.”

And so, I go through each of them one by one, asking, offering, and threatening them in order to get what I want. Riccardo could’ve easily killed all six of them, but that would’ve left us with nothing. You can’t scare a Mafia member with pain and death—family is our weakest spot, and I’m ruthless in using it for my own.

But they keep their lips shut for long enough to piss me off, so a few minutes later I breathe out a huff and straighten up. “Well, then, it’s time to go from words to actions. Signor Riccardo, when would you be able to bring Gabriella Cano here?”

I turn to my husband, catching a weirdly fond look in his eyes, when Edgar raises his voice in panic. “No, stop! Don’t touch, I—I will tell.”

I hold Riccardo’s gaze for a moment and smirk a little. See, you have to learn from *me*. Riccardo’s gaze darts to my lips, and for a second, it feels like he’s gonna step closer—but I turn away before he can do anything. I can’t waste my time on deciphering him.

“There is a secluded place in our territory. It’s an abandoned boat rental on the shore, close to the border. Close to home.” The interpreter translates Edgar’s stuttering mess without a hitch, and my heart picks up its pace despite the cool mask on my face. “I don’t know if that’s the place...but Father could have taken your son there, Signora.”

“Can you show it on the map?”

Edgar shakily nods, ignoring the curses and furious glares of the other three; only Diego remains quiet, glancing at me from time to time. It’s always easier to go down the route

of betrayal, so Edgar barely hesitates before pointing at the exact place on the map on my phone. That's enough for me, and I get up on my feet and turn to the door. It's gonna take some thirty minutes. *Shit. Still too much, but—*

“Hey, where are you going?”

Riccardo catches my elbow when I'm already in the hallway—as much as a narrow passage in the labyrinth of a basement can be. I purse my lips and turn to him sharply.

“Where do you think? I'm going to get my son.”

“You can't go there on your own,” Riccardo says with intensity in his words, holding my gaze as if trying to read me. “It's too dangerous. Wait until we gather enough people.”

Dangerous. I chuckle joylessly and shake my head, yanking my elbow out of his grip.

“I am going to get *my son*,” I repeat every word, glaring at him. “While you're gathering your pawns, they may be torturing Max like we did to them.”

I wave my hand at the door behind which the Mexicans' screams grow louder. Riccardo has ordered Marco and Omero to keep only Diego alive, and my heart tightens at the thought of Max going through the same on his own. I shake my head and look at Riccardo again.

“I don't care if it's dangerous. Edgar sold his life for his fiance. I will do the same if it means my son will be free.”

It looks like Riccardo wants to add something, but I don't have time for bickering. We're not in college anymore. He can be mad at me later—right now, I need to save Max, so I storm out of the basement before he can try and stop me again.

It's already dark outside when I rush out of the warehouse and stop in the middle of the parkway. *Shit.* I forgot that I don't have my car here. How am I supposed to get there? I look around, considering which car would be the easiest to steal, when one of them suddenly flashes its lights. The door audibly clicks open. *What?*

“I can’t let my wife get into trouble on her own. It’s too much of a bother to search for another one.”

That cocky bastard. I huff out loud and, without a glance Riccardo’s way, go to his car. I climb into the driver’s seat out of habit, but he holds the door before I can close it and beckons me to get out.

“I’m driving.”

What? I stare at him for a moment. “I’m not gonna wait for your men.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” Riccardo grabs my wrist and tugs me out of the car until I’m standing right in front of him, our chests almost touching. I look up at him, too stressed and confused to think properly, and he catches my gaze with that smug stupid look of his. “I’m going with you.”

Oh. Okay. I have no say in it anyway, so I choose not to waste any more time and rush to take the passenger seat. If he wants to drive, even better. It gives me time to send one important text before we take off.

Thankfully, Riccardo turns out to be a good and quiet driver. He doesn’t slow down, and he doesn’t care about the rules, driving as fast as possible without hitting anyone on the night streets of Chicago. The rush hour is only just starting to dissipate, so Riccardo manages to find better routes than the navigator, keeping our destination in his mind.

Both of us keep silent, not bothering each other with more than a couple of short orders or questions. I like it more than Riccardo attempting to distract me with some meaningless chatting. He wasn’t particularly talkative even in college, and now his status and life experience must’ve taken away the last keys to the doors of his heart.

Why does the thought feel so bitter? I shouldn’t care about him at all, and I swallow the growing lump in my throat and switch my attention to the bright lights behind the window. I can already see the shoreline from here, and it makes my heart tighten. *God, please, let Max be safe.* For

whatever reason they stole him, please, let them be gentle with him. Let them be *humans*.

“Your son,” Riccardo says all of a sudden, breaking the quiet hum of the car, and I startle a little and glance at him. We’re almost there. What does he want to talk about now? “I’m curious about him.”

I swallow and look away out the window again, curling my hands on my lap a little tighter. Is this good or bad? Something tells me that it’s the second one—although maybe I’m just thinking too much.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you see,” Riccardo begins with a carelessness that sounds too fake to be true. “I’ve told Matteo to find all the information there is on you and your son. Where you lived for the last eight years, how you got there, where you worked, and what school Max used to attend. We know about his art classes and your vacations in Florida.”

With every word leaving his mouth, I grow tense to the point that my breath becomes heavier. Shit, shit, *shit*. This is something I’ve been scared of since I stepped foot in Chicago. The Messina Clan has enough power and connections to dig out everything on me—but was he able to find my secret? I glance at Riccardo from the corner of my eye, and as if feeling it, he chuckles.

“We’ve found everything except for the only thing that was truly important to me.” He raises his index finger off the steering wheel, and in his voice, I hear notes of his heart. “No one seems to know who Max’s father is. No one—except for you.”

Damn it. I bite my lip and look away, ignoring the obvious pause that he leaves for me to speak up. But I am not going to do this, I’m—*No. Not now*. So I keep my lips sealed as if the silence doesn’t grow heavier with every passing second.

“Elena.” I refuse to budge, keeping my unfocused eyes on the glittering darkness of the ocean outside. “Eight years ago. Did you have anyone else but me?”

I close my eyes as my heart jumps into a frantic rhythm. I can’t say it now, I can’t—and the world hears my plea because the next moment, we hear the quiet beep of the navigator.

“Your destination is on the right.”

Chapter 10 - Riccardo

The place is too dark and too quiet. Even as I pull my car off the road to park, I'm already scanning the surroundings—and I can't say that I like them. The boat rental looks completely empty, but the question is whether it actually is empty.

Could the guy have lied to us?

I glance at Elena as we both linger by the car. Her blond hair stands out even when there's no light except for the stars in the sky. She would look ethereal if not for the smudge of Edgar's blood on her collar and the grim and concentrated frown on her face. Elena has the look of a killer in her eyes, and when I move closer to her she only glances at me quickly.

"It's strange," she says in a low voice as her gaze darts all over the place. Elena is tense all over, barely keeping herself from rushing inside right away—but even her instincts tell her to stay back. Damn it. Isn't this exactly why I told her to wait for more people?

I nod and open my mouth to tell Elena to stay in the car when, all of a sudden, she starts toward the docks with the same damn determination I saw before. She really can't think logically, huh? But it is her son we're here for, so I can't really expect her to be coolheaded. I only huff under my breath, watching the pale outline of her figure, before following Elena into the darkness.

There is a gun tucked under my shirt, and I reach for it instinctively even before we reach the uneven rows of boats. There's a rickety wooden shed, half absorbed by the moonlight and shadows, standing a dozen feet away from us. Its door is wide open to the rusty boats thrown over one another on the shore, but the doorway is too dark to see what's hidden inside.

Without a word of agreement, Elena and I direct our steps to the shed and all the while my gaze keeps darting over

the boats. They're a perfect shelter for anyone who would want to attack us out of nowhere, and I grip my gun tighter whenever I catch movement from the corner of my eyes. Of course, it turns out to be dried seaweed or a plastic cover fluttering in the wind every time, but that makes me all the more aggravated.

My ears are tuned into every noise around us, but the rustle of waves and the occasional rattle of boat chains muffle everything else. It really is too good of a place to lay a trap, and the closer we get to the shed, the clearer I feel a sense of danger in my chest. Shit. I shouldn't have let Elena come here at all.

"Wait," I finally say when we're just a few feet away from the door, and I catch her elbow. "I think—"

But I don't get to finish the sentence because, at the same time, my ears catch a new noise. It sounds like a scratch of something against wood followed by a squeak of the panels under someone's feet. The shadows inside the shed start moving, and I barely have enough time to pull Elena behind me before we hear a snuffle.

"Mom?"

I hear Elena's gasp, and I have to use all my strength to keep her from pushing past me to the door. My own heart jumps up with a rush of relief when I hear Max's voice, but I can't let her run to him, not yet. Because it's not only her son who appears in the doorway.

Holding on to Max's shoulder and slightly limping in his step, a man walks out onto the front porch of the shed and stops there, visibly holding Max from getting out of his grip. The man is old, short, and clearly of Mexican descent. He looks relaxed and almost rejoiced to see us. The look of his dark eyes is calm as he eyes us for a moment, and the smirk on his lips only grows wider when I finally meet his gaze.

"Don Riccardo." He tilts his head in fake respect. "It was a pleasure to know your father."

As soon as the words leave his mouth, I can feel my blood boil. My grip on my gun tightens, and I have to take a deeper breath to stall myself. How dare this bastard speak of my father? As if he himself didn't give the order to kill Cassio Messina.

Of course, I recognize the Mexican before us right away—even though it is the first time I get to meet him in person. It's hard to confuse the father of the Mexican gang with someone else.

Nicolas Escarra has always kept himself away from our eyes, trusting his sons and nephews to carry the violence in their hands, but Matteo did manage to get a few blurry photos of him. He has never looked intimidating to me—just an old man who knows how to do business better than the rest of his family.

But now, Nicolas does look menacing. I don't know if it's the relaxed posture or the smirk on his lips, but his confidence is blaring in a way that makes me uncomfortable. It's impossible for him to be here on his own, isn't it?

My gaze automatically darts to Max, and something in my chest tightens when I notice just how tight Nicolas' grip is. In the night shadows, it's hard to see if the boy has any bruises or other injuries—but it is clear that he's scared to death. Max is panting and trembling, weakly leaning into Nicolas' side, and his eyes are fixed on Elena with the look of a lamb in the claws of a lion.

“Let me go,” Elena hisses behind me, trying to tug her arm out of my grip. She's too reckless to be left to her own devices, so I open my mouth to tell her to be quiet when soft laughter interrupts me.

“Don Riccardo, show some mercy. The mother and son should be together.” Nicolas demonstratively pats Max's shoulder and grins at Elena. It makes her shiver, I can feel it under my palm. “You can come and take him, Signora.”

Despite my protests and her own obvious fear, Elena pries herself out of my grip and forces herself past me. Shit. I clench my jaw as I watch her every move. Does she have at least an ounce of common sense? I guess it wakes up in her mind when Elena lingers at the base of the porch with a wary glance Nicolas' way—but Max holds out his arm toward her, and she immediately rushes to him.

“Mom! It was so scary—” Max buries himself in Elena's embrace, and even I can hear a cry of relief as she wraps her arms around him.

“I know, baby, I know, I'm so sorry.”

“I didn't know—where were you?”

“I'm sorry, Max, I promise, it will never happen again.” Elena catches his face in her hands, wiping tears off his cheeks—but I don't hear the rest of their whispers. Because there's something way more important for me to focus on.

Even with Elena at arm's reach, Nicolas doesn't move and only watches the scene before him with a small smile—and for a second, I stupidly allow myself to believe that it's not a trap. A muffled scratch of a rusty surface quickly pulls me back to reality. I immediately look around, and I see the shadows all around us coming to life.

Shit.

I fix my grip on my gun as I watch more and more people appear from behind the boats and out of the darkness of the shed. There are a dozen of them at least, and I don't have to look at their faces to know that they're Mexicans. I don't have to see their eyes to know who they're looking at.

It is a trap—but not for Elena.

She notices the gang members a second later and sharply turns to me, holding Max to her chest, and I want to tell her to get closer—but I swallow the words before they leave my mouth. Nicolas doesn't even budge in her direction. The grudge is between his family and mine. They won't touch

her and Max, and I want to keep her out of the reach of their bullets.

“You look caught off guard, Don Riccardo. Is it so hard to accept your defeat?” Nicolas says with a calm note of politeness, and I straighten up and look him right in the eyes.

“Do you think I am going to surrender?” I chuckle mockingly, but it doesn’t seem to have any effect on him.

Nicolas shrugs. “I think it would be a wise thing to do. After all, you can’t count on your family to help you.”

“I can always count—”

The sound of a gunshot cuts off my words. It echoes from afar, and another one follows immediately after. The sounds of screeching of tires and screams come from the direction of the road, and I glance there automatically. It can’t be my brothers, right? It can’t be another trap. But it does look like everything has been prepared well in advance.

The Mexicans played their cards very well.

“You shouldn’t worry about them,” Nicolas says and looks down at the porch under his feet, carefully stepping toward me. “My boys are going to take care of them. Right now, I want to talk to *you*, Don Riccardo.”

“Why would *I* want to talk to you?” I quirk an eyebrow, watching Nicolas limp down the porch, and a few of his guys impatiently shift in their places. What, do they want to shoot me so badly? What an honorable way of killing your enemy—but it’s not like the Mexicans know anything about honor.

But Nicolas ignores the scoffing tone of my voice and only smiles. “Because you have no other choice.”

He stops in front of me a few seconds later and raises his head. He’s a few inches shorter than me and definitely a lot weaker; no matter what position Nicolas holds in the Mafia world, his age is taking its toll. I feel like I could send him flying into the wall of the shed with just one push, but Nicolas

doesn't have to say anything out loud for me to know that the second something happens to him, they'll open fire at all three of us.

He is right, I don't have a choice, so I silently stare back at him. *What do you want from me?*

Nicolas squints a little as if trying to see something in my eyes before shaking his head with a sigh of disappointment. "Don't you see it? You're playing a game too big for you, Riccardo. You don't even know how to fight. The Messina clan has been losing power for years, and even Cassio couldn't prevent it."

"Don't speak of him."

"But it's true! Look around." Nicolas gestures at his people surrounding us as if it's supposed to impress me. "You've pushed yourself right into our hands, and you have no one to help you. Would a true leader make such a mistake? Would a powerful man stand on his own before me?"

That bastard. A hot wave of rage runs under my skin and leaves my whole body taut and quivering. I'm ready to jump on him, grasp his neck, squeeze the last breath out of him—but I have to hold back. There's one thing Nicolas is right about: I am all-too-easy prey here. I shouldn't give them a reason to—

"He's not alone," Elena raises her voice all of a sudden, and I look at her over Nicolas' shoulder with my heart jolting up in distress. No, don't attract their attention. *Stay quiet!*

But even if I said it out loud, Elena wouldn't listen.

"His family is here."

She gets up from the floor, taking hold of Max's hand that tries to pull her back down, and her eyes focus on Nicolas. They're cold like ice, piercing right through him, and Nicolas slowly turns to look at her with a dismissive smile. The members of his gang follow his lead, turning their attention to Elena, and it makes something in my chest freeze.

“Elena, stay out of this,” I try to warn her, but it’s too late.

“Are you ready to call yourself a Messina?” He turns to face her properly, giving me a perfect view of his back, and if only I could hide Elena and Max from their bullets, if only I could—

“I will always be a Pushkova, whether I want it or not,” Elena says calmly, looking down at him from the porch. “But I have sworn to love and care for my husband till my last breath, and Bratva never throws words to the wind.”

The last part of her sentence drowns in the deafening screech of tires on the edge of the road and a few words yelled out in Russian. Before anyone catches up, Elena drops herself to the ground, pulling Max with her, and it takes only a second before a series of gunshots tear the silence.

That’s damn good timing.

I manage to lower myself at the last moment, and I hear a bullet flying right above my head and missing just an inch from Nicolas’ shoulder. He curses loudly in Spanish and turns around to give orders to his family—but he doesn’t get enough time for that. My bullet reaches him first.

But the Mexicans don’t need any orders to begin a firefight, and in the mess of it all, I hear Max crying and begging for help. One of the Mexicans is already looming over them, reaching to grab Elena’s hair, but I aim at his head and release a bullet a moment before my own arm bursts with pain.

Shit. I have to get them out of here.

“Elena!” I grasp her wrist as soon as I reach them, and Elena instinctively tries to yank it away before she realizes that it’s me.

I don’t have time to talk, so I just tug her and Max closer to me, keeping my eyes out for any Mexican willing to stop us. They’re too busy looking for a place to hide, but one of them notices us, yelling out something to others. Shit, shit. I

fire at him and cover Elena and Max as much as I can, guiding them to my car.

Max stumbles in his step at some point, Elena screams, but I pull him up and close to my body, keeping the gun away from his shoulder. The scratch on my arm bleeds on Max's t-shirt, but he says nothing and pushes himself closer to me, making something in my chest roar. Is that what Elena was talking about? Because right now, I feel like I could do anything just to keep them alive.

“Drive as fast as you can,” I yell over the thunder of gunshots, pushing my keys into Elena's hand as we get close enough to my car. “Wherever you want. Just be safe.”

I help Max get into the passenger side while Elena takes the driver's seat and only then pauses to look at me. “What about you?”

“I'll find you later.”

Her eyes widen. “You can't stay here!”

“I'll find you—”

A bullet cuts me off, piercing the door of the back seat, and both of us instinctively bow down. Without pushing myself up, I shut the door and bang on it. Hurry up! And only when she finally takes off do I breathe out and look around.

Bratva's cars keep circling the boat rental in a clear attempt to lure the remaining Mexicans out of their hideaways. The shock and chaos they brought have already dissipated, giving way to methodical gunshots and hurriedly arranged tactics. Well. I wipe the blood off my elbow and grip my gun tighter.

That only means there's plenty of dirty work to do here—but I know I can handle it. Especially when the rumble of engines lets me know that my family is near.

Chapter 11 - Elena

It's late. It's *too* late. Why aren't they back yet? I grip my shoulders tighter, staring out the windows of the second floor. From here, I can see the road leading to the house better.

"Signora, you need some rest." Alice hovers behind me, unsure of what to do with herself in the middle of the hallway. "I have prepared a place for you in Max's room. You could take a nap there."

"Thank you, Alice, but I don't need it," I mutter without turning to her. "You can go if you want. Have some rest, too."

In the reflection on the window, Alice looks hesitant. She glances at me, then at the stairs leading down, and her shoulders tense up—before she releases a long exhale and remains where she is. Alice is worried, too. The whole house is silent and brimming with tension, and I can hear other servants shuffling around the first floor.

Everything is so empty without the Messina family around. Riccardo has left a couple of guards to keep an eye on us, but they are just as restless as the rest of us. I can see their dark figures making circles near the entrance, tiny specks of light showing the never-ending cycle of cigarettes.

Damn it. I glance at my phone. It's already two o'clock. *Where are they?*

It's good that at least Max has already passed out. The encounter with the Mexicans left him shaking and exhausted, but at least he was mostly unharmed. I found a few bruises on his wrist and neck where they'd held him too tightly and dragged him in and out of their car as Max explained to me. He told me everything, actually, while I was inspecting his body to see if there were any injuries.

As it turned out, while I was gone, the Mexican boy invited him to play outside of the cafe—or at least, Max

understood that much of his Spanish. So they sneaked out of Irina's line of sight and got out onto the street where the boy immediately grabbed Max's wrist. Everything else happened so quickly that even Max's memories turned into a blur. A few strange men appeared out of nowhere and picked him up, Irina ran out of the cafe, and Max screamed and tried to get out of the strangers' grip.

Irina had her pistol with her, so she tried to shoot the Mexicans, and they opened fire and wounded her right on the street. The panicking crowd didn't let me and Louis reach them in time, and Max and the Mexicans were already in the car by the time Louis raised his gun. It was too late. They took off in a moment, and even if one of Louis' bullets reached them, it did nothing to stop them.

Apparently, Max's head was covered with a dark bag all the way to the shore where they forced him into the boat rental. The old man was nice to him and promised that his mom would be there soon. So Max behaved nicely and waited for me to come after him, and the old man and his helpers didn't touch him.

How did the Mexicans know that I'd find out where Max was? I bite my lip, staring at the window with unfocused eyes. The more I think about it, the more I feel that today's events were their plan all along—which makes it even harder to stop myself from worrying.

What if they'd expected Bratva to show up as well? What if there had been more people in the shadows, enough to defeat two Mafia families at once? I don't doubt the power of my uncle even for a second, but...ah, I just can't help it. Why aren't they coming back?

I start spiraling down the same path of distress and anxiety when I catch a flicker of light in the distance. I inhale sharply and lean forward, staring at the dark snake of the road—and I catch it again. There is a chain of car lights moving toward the house, and I hold my breath in excitement and nervousness.

It should be *their* cars.

Riccardo is finally here.

I can barely keep myself from running down the stairs like a sixteen-year-old me in a rush to see him again. I have to make sure that Riccardo is safe and alive.

On the first floor, the servants are already preparing everything in a learned pattern that suggests it's not the first time they're welcoming the Messina Clan after a clash. Some of them quickly gather tables with drinks and food while others prepare bottles of ointments, painkillers, and bandages—just in case, I hope.

Alice joins them a moment later, and I feel like everyone around me knows how to be useful except for me. The guards and servants are clearly familiar with the procedures, and I have no idea how to help them, so I just linger at the base of the stairs, unsure of what to do. I want to be a part of it. But am I willing to be a part of this family?

The voices from outside distract my thoughts, and I turn to the entrance just in time to see Riccardo walk through the door with Paolo by his side. Louis holds the door open for them, and my heart skips a beat when I realize that Riccardo has a bandage on his arm and a slight limp to his step. He's not unharmed—but he is alive, and well enough to look as calm and collected as ever.

“...to clean the bar. It's the first place they'd use to catch their breaths, and we can't let them have it,” Riccardo says, going straight to the table with drinks as if it's just a regular evening for him.

“Do you think that's necessary?” Paolo glances at their men following them inside the house. Most of them are wounded in one way or another, and something tells me there are more lying in the underground hospital right now. “The Mexicans are weak but so are we. Maybe we should gather strength first.”

“If we give them time, they’ll cross the border and slip out of sight.” Riccardo stops and turns to the rest of them with a grim look. “For everyone they’ve taken from us, we have to burn them in their holes until there is not a single trace of the Escarra family left in this city.”

Paolo casts his gaze to the floor and slowly nods. “Alright. I will check who is ready to fight, and we’ll take off in the morning.”

He doesn’t look his best either—with a broken lip and blood dripping from under his shirt—and I notice Alice anxiously glancing at him. As soon as Riccardo confirms Paolo’s words with a quick nod, the rest of his men spread around the living room in search of medications or a quick snack. Alice catches the moment to bring Paolo a towel and a pack of ice, before my attention switches to Riccardo.

From the corner of my eye, I see him stumble slightly in his step, and without a thought I rush toward him, ignoring the glances of those around me. Riccardo himself instinctively tenses up when I take hold of his elbow to support him, and I notice surprise in his eyes before it shifts into something unreadable.

“You’re here,” Riccardo murmurs in a half-questioning tone, and I chuckle, feeling nervous all of a sudden.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

But I know what he means. Riccardo gave me a way out of his life when he handed me the keys. If I wanted to escape him, I could have gotten out of the city before anyone would even think about looking for me. I had a chance to save Max from this life of danger and myself—from the marriage I had been dreading all my life.

Why didn’t I take it?

Because a life of freedom means a life of loneliness. It takes away every pillar that has ever held you up and leaves you on your own with every blow that life throws your way. And when I look Riccardo in the eyes and tighten my grip on

his elbow, I don't know which one of us is supporting the other. But I for sure know that I'm not ready to let go of him.

I don't know what exactly Riccardo can see in my eyes, but a few seconds later, he clears his throat and looks around. The living room looks much calmer now with most of the men moving to the dining room, but a few people still linger behind to patch themselves up or share a drink. It's not the best place for any private conversation right now, and Riccardo clearly sees that as well.

"I wonder if you, uh, could help me get up the stairs?" He looks at me, and I can't help a small smile tugging at the corner of my lips.

It is a big deal for the head of a Mafia family to admit his weakness, and I almost want to tease him—but at the last moment, I catch the look in his eyes. Riccardo is clearly uncomfortable with asking for my help, but he did open up to me. It's a big deal, huh? It feels wrong to use it just for a joke.

"Of course." So I smile at him instead and nod in the direction of the stairs. "Let's go?"

We walk to his bedroom in complete silence, and while my thoughts revolve around everything I want to tell him, Riccardo seems to be deep in his mind as well. What is he thinking about? I glance at him from time to time, but Riccardo's unfocused gaze remains trained on an invisible point in front of him. I can't read him now, but well, could I ever?

"What happened to it?" I nod at his leg as I help him sit down on his bed. His bedroom hasn't changed a bit since the last time I was here, and the memories of our wedding night make my heart beat faster. *God, my body is such a traitor.*

"I had to climb into Matteo's car on the run." Riccardo shrugs like it's not a big deal and rolls his feet to test it. "It's just a sprained ankle. The doc has already wrapped it up, so it's gonna be fine in a few days."

I quirk an eyebrow. It doesn't really look like it but okay.

“Do you need help with it?” I linger in front of him, not knowing what to do. At this point, it just feels like I'm looking for a reason to stay, and...yeah, I guess I am.

“Are you worried about me?” Riccardo looks at me with a teasing smirk, and damn, why do I want to even talk to him? I purse my lips and put my hands on my hips, ignoring the warmth rising to my cheeks.

“No, I hope you slip in the shower and die a miserable death.” I demonstratively turn on my heels to walk away when I hear a soft laugh behind me.

“It's so easy to rile you up.”

I huff and look at him over my shoulder. “Is that your way of getting my attention?”

Riccardo shrugs, and I see a surprisingly fond smile on his face. “Maybe. I've never been good with girls.”

“Are you sure?” I quirk an eyebrow, hinting at the college years Riccardo spent with numerous girlfriends. The seat next to him was rarely empty.

He chuckles, probably catching my hint, but then his expression shifts into something solemn. “Well, I didn't get the one that I loved, so...”

I swallow and turn back to him despite myself, losing my own teasing smirk. Why is he saying this? What does he mean? My heart immediately picks up its pace, desperately hoping to hear that I was “the one”, but...but it's stupid, right? Riccardo used to hate me. Of course it would be someone else.

The pause turns long enough for it to feel uncomfortable, so I clear my throat and glance at the door. It's time for me to leave, I guess—but Riccardo suddenly calls my name. “Elena, could you stay for a bit?”

I look at him in surprise, and Riccardo immediately gestures at his wounded arm. “The doc told me to check the

scratch before going to bed, but I'm not...that good with it?"

God, why does that sound like a lie, and why am I so ready to believe it?

"Sure." Not that I've dealt with any serious injuries in the last few years. Max has never gotten himself into trouble—until we came here, at least.

Any thoughts about Max leave my mind just a second later because, goddammit. Without any warning, Riccardo just takes off his shirt—to give me better access to his wound, I guess. It's not an invitation to have sex with him. It doesn't mean anything, Elena, so stop staring. It's *nothing*—but it's hard to keep calm when I end up just a few inches away from him.

But I force myself to focus on the bandage, and it does distract me. I unwrap the gauze carefully so as not to disturb the wound, and it takes up so much of my attention that I startle when Riccardo raises his voice.

"Were you the one to send Bratva to our location?"

Oh. I blink and clear my throat in an attempt to hide my awkwardness. Yeah, well, technically... "No."

He doesn't say anything, but I can feel the disbelief in his eyes without looking up. Damn it. He's not gonna be mad, right? They saved his life, after all.

"I mean, I texted Irina where we were going, and she *might have* let others know." Riccardo hums at that, and for some reason I feel the need to add, "It's not that I didn't trust you, I just—I wasn't sure if you'd be willing to risk it. You know. For Max."

"Why wouldn't I?" I hear a frown in Riccardo's voice. Shit. I didn't mean to offend him!

"I don't know, he's just—no one else cares about him, you know?" I finally raise my head to meet Riccardo's gaze. It sounds harsh, but it's true. Even my family doesn't want to

accept Max as Pushkov, so I didn't expect Riccardo to care about him at all... which, apparently, wasn't fair.

"He is your son." Riccardo looks into my eyes with genuine confusion as if he can't understand why I would think so lowly of him, and I feel the burn of shame on my cheeks.

It would be the perfect time to say something like, *but not yours*. But I can't bring myself to do it, not when Riccardo is looking right into my heart, so I cast my gaze to his arm instead and murmur, "Thank you."

We spend the next few moments in silence as I finish unwrapping his bandage and reveal a graze bullet wound underneath. It doesn't look very bad—more like a very deep scratch—and I breathe out in relief, carefully stroking his elbow. It's gonna heal soon. He's gonna be okay.

"Should I change it?" I look up at Riccardo, momentarily forgetting about the tension between us, but the look in his eyes immediately reminds me about our conversation.

There's something in the intensity of his gaze that makes me freeze. Has Riccardo been watching me all this time? A wave of premonition runs through me, making me shiver from inside, but I don't feel threatened. I just feel like I don't want to know what is going through his mind right now.

Something tells me he has questions I don't want to answer, so I attempt to get away from him before it's too late. I look around and hastily nod at the bathroom door. "Do you have bandages—"

"Elena."

I stop in the middle of the sentence, but my gaze remains fixed on the door.

"Eight years ago. Did you have anyone else but me?"

Shit. I purse my lips as if my heart isn't pounding like crazy. Does he expect me to give him the answer right away?

I sit there for a couple of seconds before getting up and going to the bathroom. Riccardo still needs a fresh bandage, and I need a moment to pull myself together. My fingers are trembling as I search through the cupboards in his bathroom, and I can feel his gaze on me. Riccardo doesn't say anything, though, and just silently watches me.

"Found it," I mutter as if nothing is wrong, and reach for the first aid kit in one of his cupboards. It has clean bandages, gauze pads, and an antiseptic cream, so I pick everything up and take it back to the bed.

Riccardo hasn't moved at all since I left him, and even as I start caring for the wound with as much confidence as I can muster, he remains quiet. But I'm grateful for this surprising expression of patience. It gives me a chance to gather my thoughts without hurry, and figure out if I have enough courage to speak the truth.

I mean...Riccardo will find out sooner or later, right? And if I want to stay here, I can't lie to him. Not anymore.

"How could I be with anyone else?" I murmur, not daring to look at Riccardo. "I've always been so stupidly in love with you that I wouldn't even think about anyone else."

I feel more than hear the shaky exhale escaping Riccardo's lips. "Does that mean Max is my...?"

"Yeah." I chuckle joylessly and glance at Riccardo. Ah, I guess I can be proud of myself—it's the first time I've seen such genuine surprise on his face.

"Why did you never tell me?"

"Why would I?" I shrug and pretend to focus on his wound instead. "My family wouldn't have let me keep him anyway. Not even Bratva needs a son without a father."

"I would have claimed him," he blurts out, and I let out a laugh.

"Do you hear yourself?"

But Riccardo frowns like a petulant child. “I wouldn’t have left you on your own.”

“You were eighteen!”

“And so were you.”

I hum, refusing to look at him. Somehow, I feel lighter now that the secret is out of my heart. “I would have rather died than let my family get rid of him. Would you have done the same for the son of an enemy?”

“I would have done the same for my son.”

“And if they were the same person?” I shake my head and look up at Riccardo, placing my palm on top of the bandage. He looks almost devastated, and I suddenly feel bad for him. I’ve never given him a chance to be Max’s father—but no matter what he says, it would never have worked out.

“If you had told your father that a Pushkova carried your child, what would he have said?”

Riccardo blinks, and it looks like he finally realizes just how serious it was for me. His gaze darts to the side, and I have the privilege of seeing Don Riccardo in disarray, but I can’t say the sight brings me joy. For some reason, I feel almost bitter. Despite everything, the eighteen-year-old me had hoped that Riccardo would chase after her, but...we were never meant to be, huh?

I let out a deep sigh and shake my head. Whatever. It doesn’t change anything now, and it’s time for me to leave anyway. I finish the rather clumsy bandage on Riccardo’s shoulder and force a joyless smile.

“Well, that’s it for tonight. Try not to fall off the bed, okay? I don’t think your doc would—”

My voice trails off into a surprised hum when I feel Riccardo touch my hand. He covers my palm on his shoulder with a gentleness that is so unusual for him that it’s almost clumsy. And I can see that it’s not easy for him to express it. He’s not a gentle person, but he’s trying very hard right now,

looking at our hands with a concentrated frown, and I feel something in my chest melt into fondness.

“I’m sorry,” Riccardo murmurs a moment later, slowly looking for the right words. “I’ve ruined your life...in more ways than one. And I’ve never done anything to make it better. I’ve never treated you the way you deserve, and I know that I have no right to ask for your forgiveness, but...I am sorry, Elena.”

Oh.

I stare at him, unable to believe what I just heard, and all the while my heart turns into a complete mess. Did Riccardo actually apologize to me? Did he just...*say all that*? It’s so hard to put together the soft and almost vulnerable look in his eyes with, quite literally, everything I know about him.

It feels like Riccardo has just pulled off the mask of a Mafia don to show me the human underneath it. Has he ever opened himself like this to anyone else? I don’t know. I don’t dare to think that I can be that special to him—but when Riccardo tightens his hold on my hand and looks me in the eyes, searching for my heart, I feel like there’s no one else in the world for him.

I feel like he sees the world in my eyes, and oh, how could I ever resist it? No matter what a douchebag Riccardo is, I’ve only ever had eyes for him since I was fourteen.

“I know why you treated me the way you did—and maybe, if I were you, I’d have done the same.” I shrug with a joyless chuckle and look down at his hand on mine. “Uncle has taught me to be ruthless with the likes of you, but I’ve never had it in me to go against you.”

Riccardo murmurs something in Italian under his breath, and I catch a note of self-deprecation. I don’t want him to feel like I’m blaming him, so I carefully move my hand into his lap until we can hold each other properly.

“Because, even with all the hurt and anger I went through at your hands, I could never be in love with anyone

else.” I look up at Riccardo and hear the soft sound of his exhale. His eyes widen, and I feel like he doesn’t even realize that his grip on me tightens. “Only you could understand my life as it was and all the pain and hardships that came with it. What other boy could do that? Who else would be able to earn my respect and my heart?”

I shake my head, holding his gaze, and I can see the surprise and awe growing in Riccardo’s eyes. Maybe not acceptance of my feelings, not yet, but the *realization* that I still love him.

“And even after I left and settled into *normal* life, I still couldn’t take it out of me.” I glance to the side, remembering the harsh years of forcing myself into a society I wasn’t used to. “I tried dating a few times, but it was—god, it was a disaster. Have you ever been with anyone outside of, you know, our world?”

Riccardo looks confused by the mere suggestion. “No, I haven’t.”

“Well, it sucks. People out there...they just don’t get it. They don’t have to think about crossing the borders of other families or being kidnapped in a dark alley. They don’t know how to use a gun. That constant feeling of danger is unfamiliar to them, and you can’t even explain it to them because... they’ll just run away from you. Not before calling the police, of course.”

I’m unable to hold back a sigh, thinking about my “friends” there who didn’t even know my real name. I became Helen as soon as I left Chicago while Elena remained in the dark memories of the past. Or at least, that was what I’d wanted to believe until Pavel showed up on my doorstep.

My brother had brought back the power and violence of my last name, and no matter how much I hated Pavel at that moment, I felt a wicked sense of relief. Because I wasn’t crazy. My childhood wasn’t a figment of my imagination. The danger had been following me through the years, and I could

finally allow myself to be who I was—with the man who was ready to see and accept it.

The thought makes my heart even warmer, and I can't help but smile at Riccardo, feeling so grateful all of a sudden and so loved.

“I'm not afraid of you, and I don't want to hide myself from you. My place is by your side, Riccardo—as your wife and as a part of your world. And I'm glad to take it because it feels right.” I turn my hand in his hold, entwining our fingers with my gaze holding his. “So if you...are saying what I think you're saying, then we can make it work. I forgive you for our past, and for the future...well, you still have time to become a better husband.”

I chuckle, and Riccardo instinctively does the same, but I can see that he's rather shaken by my speech. It doesn't look like he expected to hear so much, and for a moment, I feel a rise of nervousness. Maybe I shouldn't have—

“What I'm saying is that I love you,” Riccardo says carefully, looking into my eyes as if he's still unsure of my answer, and I let out a euphoric laugh.

“Good. Because I'm trying to say the same thing.”

Riccardo's eyes immediately light up, giving him such a boyish look that I let out an audible coo. The feelings in my chest are so bright and overwhelming that I can't keep myself quiet. *He said he loves me. He said he loves me!* I giggle like a silly girl and cup his cheek, leaning forward just enough for our foreheads to touch.

“Elena,” Riccardo murmurs into my lips, and I close my eyes, reveling in the bliss of the moment. For the first time in my life, my heart is so happy to hear my name.

It feels so right then, so natural to close the distance between us, and I part my lips to reach for him—when Riccardo does it first. He suddenly moves forward and catches my lips in a kiss, not giving me a chance to escape. And I

don't want to, of course, I don't want to escape—but something in me rises to test him.

Before I can think about what I'm doing, I try to pull out of the kiss with a teasing chuckle—but Riccardo quickly lays his hand on my neck. He grips it tightly, not allowing me to move away, and my body glows with satisfaction. I am his. His arm wraps around my waist, sharply pulling me closer to his side, while I let my palm slide down his cheek to his neck.

“Riccardo,” I whisper as he kisses his name off my lips. “God, I love you.”

His reaction to my words is immediate; his hand grabs my waist tighter and forces me to move forward until I have no other choice but to move into his lap. Riccardo's hand pats my back then, giving me a signal that he's satisfied, and I light up from within. I fidget on top of him, making myself comfortable, when Riccardo winces all of a sudden, pausing in the middle of a kiss. Shit. I forgot about his injuries.

“Is it your ankle?” I look into his eyes with worry, weaving my arms around his neck and trying not to move too much.

“It's just an inconvenience, don't worry about it.” Riccardo smirks and pushes his hands under my shirt, sending a wave of shivers up my back. “It's not gonna stop me from having you, baby.”

Ah, damn it. His words send a wave of heat straight down my body, but I do my best to look unimpressed. Still the same cocky bastard, huh?

“But if the doc told you—”

“He didn't tell me anything,” Riccardo cuts me off with a rather strong tug that makes me gasp as he pulls my body flush against him. “I know what I'm doing, so just relax and—”

This time, I cut him off with a kiss. I can't let him keep interrupting me like that, okay?

I even nip his lip a little just to tease, and Riccardo immediately slaps my butt, making me choke on my breath. His hands slide over my ribs to my breasts, squeezing them through my bra, and I feel trapped in his embrace. His arms are crossed over my back, not allowing me to move away from him, and the growing heat of his erection makes my own body long for him.

“So you said your ankle is not gonna stop you, right?” I murmur, almost panting into his lips. God, why is it so easy for Riccardo to undo me with just a few kisses?

His gaze finds mine, and I can see the growing fire in the darkness of his eyes. Riccardo smirks, tightening his hold on me, and I feel the power he has over me—but it doesn’t scare me. It fills me with this sick desire to follow him and let him do whatever he wants with me. .

“Are you needy already, baby?”

Suddenly, his hand reaches down to slide between my legs, and I instinctively move away from it before I can control myself. Or at least, my body tries to move away—but Riccardo keeps me in one place, not allowing me to move even an inch. He holds me like a doll in his arms, and the thought hits my mind with a wave of embarrassment and arousal.

Damn it. I lick my lips, pushing my thighs apart for his hand. I hate being so weak for him—but I love that Riccardo knows how to use it. He keeps rubbing me and teasing whimpers out of my lips until my whole body feels like a lighter. I feel the hot bolts of desire running under my skin from every touch of his fingers, and I start trembling in his arms and wordlessly begging for more.

“Riccardo,” I mumble into the kiss with a pleading note, and Riccardo shushes me, stroking my hair in a gesture that feels both loving and teasing.

“You are a good girl, Elena.”

Does that mean I can get my reward? I squeeze him between my knees, melting into his body, and Riccardo lets out a husky chuckle.

“You want me to fuck you so badly, huh? ”

Oh shit. My whole body shivers at the commanding tone of his voice, and I nod frantically. “Yeah.”

“Yeah?” Riccardo repeats, just to tease my out-of-breath voice, and I swat his shoulder. He immediately winces in pain, and I freeze—I didn’t hurt him, did I? But I see a smile in the corner of his lips and roll my eyes, slowly coming back to my senses.

“I can’t stand you.”

“You’re not the first person to say it.”

We share a chuckle before Riccardo taps my hip, and I force myself to pull away from him and stand up with my thighs slightly quivering from weakness. God, it’s almost embarrassing how obvious my body is—but I want him to see it. I want Riccardo to know just how much I desire him.

I want to be good for him..

It’s the third time I’ve had Riccardo so close, but it’s the first time I feel the actual closeness in every touch. With our feelings fueling our bodies, I feel like I’m glowing from the inside, and it makes the connection between us so much clearer. My body instinctively follows his touches, warming up from the murmurs of praise, and I readily straddle him, looking out for his injured limbs .

“Is this okay?” I can’t help the worry in my voice as I notice him wince for a moment when I lower my weight onto him. But Riccardo laughs and pushes a strand of my hair behind my ear, looking into my eyes with a grin.

“It’s perfect.”

Ah, damn, so he can be romantic, too. Warmth rises all the way to the tips of my ears, and with a stifled sound of

shyness, I lean in to press a kiss to his lips. God, why do I want him even more now?

And it looks like Riccardo wants me just as much. His erection is trapped between our bodies, and I can feel just how hot and hard he is for me. The sensation itself makes me shiver, and I unconsciously rub myself against him until Riccardo bucks his hips upward. The movement makes me lose the last remnants of my patience, and I whimper into his lips.

“Riccardo, I—I want you, ah, I want you so much.”

His body reacts to my pleading voice with a slight thrust upward, but Riccardo’s dark eyes remain trained on mine. “You have to ask for it nicely.”

Ah. I swallow and push my face into the crook of his neck, mindlessly rocking myself on top of him. If I wanted, I could easily take him in without permission—but I can’t even think about it. I have to earn it first.

“Please, ah, please, Ricca—Ah!”

He moves his hips but not enough to slide inside of me, only teasing with his hand sliding down my side. “What do you want?”

“I want—I want you to take me.”

He hums with satisfaction. “Aren’t you mine already, Elena?”

“I am, I am, ah, I am yours,” I whisper frantically, following the hold of Riccardo’s hands as they grip my hips and push me down—to take him to the base.

My whole body arches from the bolt of pleasure that runs through me, and I let out a loud moan that almost muffles Riccardo’s voice.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, stroking my back and thighs as if encouraging me to keep going.

He can't really push himself upward without moving his ankle, but he still manages to keep control of the rhythm. His hands grip my hips, guiding me up and down while I choke on my moans, barely keeping my arms straight as I hover above him. My hair slips off my shoulders, touching the sides of his head, and I hold his dark gaze as I take him as deep as I can.

Riccardo raises his hand to my face, runs his thumb over my lips, and I part them with another moan, allowing him to slip his thumb into my mouth. *God, I want him everywhere.* My eyelids grow heavy, and it becomes harder to keep up the rhythm as my muscles grow tired and my body becomes weaker with pleasure.

"You're doing so good, baby," Riccardo praises me, stroking my waist and thighs as I pause to catch my breath.

His eyes are fixed on me, and I quiver as I meet his dark gaze, feeling the spiral of pleasure all the way down to my toes. My whole body clenches with the need to have him deeper, have him *more*, and Riccardo grimaces in pleasure. Yes, *yes*, I want to see how good I make him feel. It gives me the energy to pick up my pace again, and both of us moan in unison, pushing toward each other with new force.

It feels as if every muscle of my body tenses up with the pure focus of taking Riccardo deeper and chasing the pleasure he gives me. My mind goes completely blank, and my hips move in sharp and instinctive thrusts, filling me with so much pleasure my toes curl. *God. I want to have him till the end of my life.*

"I'm all yours, Elena."

I didn't even realize I'd said it out loud but damn it. Riccardo's deep and husky voice murmuring confessions into my heart is the last thing that pushes me to the edge. My body shudders and clenches with the wave of pleasure, forcing all of my muscles to tense up. But even through the weakness of my orgasm, I keep moving in fast and deep thrusts as I feel the heat of Riccardo's release inside of me.

His hands grasp me, pull me closer, force me to take him—and I slump on top of him and let him have me whole. We have already reached the peak together, but if there’s any pleasure my body can give him, I want to give it all.

“God, Elena,” Riccardo mutters a moment later into the dim lights of the room, raising a hand to rub his face. He looks just as wiped out as I feel, still struggling to catch his breath, and I giggle and prop my chin on his chest.

“Aren’t you lucky to have a wife like me?”

He chuckles and pulls his hand off his face to look at me with a glint of adoration. His eyes are almost sparkling, and correct me if I’m wrong, but Riccardo seems to be smitten by me. But that’s good—because I’m completely smitten by him, too.

“It’s dangerous, you know. To have a wife like you.” He slides his palm up my back, making me shiver and press closer into the warmth of his chest. I tilt my head with a questioning frown, and Riccardo grins wider. “Dangerous for the rest of Chicago.”

Ah. I huff and lay my head on his chest. “Who cares about them?”

The steady rhythm of his heartbeat under my ear coaxes me into closing my eyes. A moment later, I feel his hand raise to my head, and Riccardo gently strokes my golden hair. I hear him murmur something in Italian under his breath—and it makes me smile.

My heart warms up, and I raise my head and press a quick peck to his lips. Because there aren’t many phrases I know in Italian, but this one is familiar even to me.

Ti amo.

THE END

About the Author

Ever since she was in her teens, Isla has relished the escapism romance novels offer, becoming obsessed with the genre. She feels there is something comforting and at the same time liberating in knowing that, no matter the trials and tribulations her favorite protagonists may go through, a happy ending always awaits them.

In her own writing, Isla enjoys the process of creating complex characters that are captivating and seductive, even when tested by the rollercoaster that is life. She loves intermixing adversity and setbacks with hot and steamy scenes, before giving her creations the happily ever after they deserve.

Isla describes herself as a hopeless romantic and lives in Boston, Massachusetts, with the love of her life, Andy. Isla and Andy share a big circle of friends and never miss an occasion to organize fun get-togethers, delicious cookouts and laughter-filled karaoke nights.

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