



A SAPPHIC
MAFIA
ROMANCE

HER MAFIA QUEEN

PERSEPHONE BLACK

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BIANCHI FAMILY DUET: BOOK 2

PERSEPHONE BLACK

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CONTENT WARNING:

This is a Mafia romance, which means there's a cavalier attitude to things like murder and crime, and our heroines get their hands bloody, too.

This book contains guns, violence, fatal car crashes, muggings, suicide, fatal drug overdoses and emotionally-distant parents. Skip it if you don't think that's your thing.

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CHAPTER 1

JUNO

Manhattan glitters before me, the lights of skyscrapers flickering like stars against the inky night. I stand alone in my study at home, gazing out through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Below me, Central Park is cloaked in unbroken white frost, the leafless trees scratchy black shadows. It's the dead of winter, and the city itself seems hushed.

I wrap my arms around myself, seeking warmth despite the fact that the room is almost stuffy with heat. But a cold chill has seeped into my heart over the past weeks and I cannot shake it, no matter how high I turn up the thermostat. My father's murder was the beginning of the end, it sometimes feels. I can still hardly believe Carmine Bianchi is gone.

My relationship with my father was always complicated. As his only child, I was groomed from birth to one day take over the family business. Carmine ruled the Bianchi Family with an iron fist, commanding respect and fear wherever he went. I idolized him as a child, wanting nothing more than to make him proud.

But as I grew older, the pressures of being his daughter began to chafe. Sometimes I resented the way he tried to control my life, molding me into a carbon copy of himself.

Still, I knew that one day the empire he built would be mine to rule.

That day came much sooner than expected. My father's sudden murder just weeks ago has left the Family reeling, grasping for stability. The mystery around my father's violent

death still haunts me. The police ruled it a Mob hit, but I have my suspicions that the truth is more complex.

I need to discover the truth, but for now the secrets died with my father. And I, Juno Bianchi, am head of the Family at just 30 years old. The leader of a sprawling criminal empire spanning New York...and beyond.

The magnitude of it weighs on me. The pressures and responsibilities, the looming threats that circle like sharks smelling blood. I was always meant to rule, but *with* my father's steady hand guiding me.

Now I am alone.

The Ice Queen, they call me, cool and hard at all times. And when they don't call me that, they call me the Bianchi Bitch, as though I didn't relish the title. But I cannot show weakness, cannot reveal the doubts that gnaw at me in these dead hours of the evening when I'm alone and have time to think.

A soft meow startles me from my thoughts. I glance down to see my sleek black cat, Nero, twining between my ankles. I bend to scratch behind his ears, allowing myself a small smile.

"Hey there, handsome," I murmur. "Keeping me company?"

Nero meows again and leaps gracefully onto the leather sofa along the wall. The familiar comfort of his presence eases some of the tension coiled within me. Not all of it, though. Not even close.

Because when I am alone with only my thoughts for company, they inevitably turn to *her*.

To Titian hair like silk between my fingers, eyes blue as the summer sky. A laugh that could outshine the sun. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out the memories, but they flood through me regardless.

Caitlin O'Sullivan.

My wife in name only now.

A wave of longing crashes through me at the thought of her. With Caitlin in my arms, I felt intoxicated, reckless, alive in a way I'd never known. She made me believe impossible things

—that I could be more than *the Ice Queen*, more than the Bianchi Boss.

That I could love and be loved in return.

But it was foolish to think we could outrun fate. My father's murder and my abrupt ascension to power changed everything. To keep Caitlin safe, I had to let her go.

It broke both our hearts, but it was the only way. My world is too dangerous for someone as vibrant and full of light as her.

I can't allow myself to think of her, can't allow myself to dwell on flashing smiles and tender caresses. On the passion that ignited between us as burning and unexpected as a summer lightning strike. But it's winter now, and I made my choice, for better or worse.

Love is pain. It's better to rule alone.

I repeat the words like a mantra, trying to ignore the hollow ache in my chest. Caitlin's absence is an open wound, still raw and bleeding. Part of me wishes I could go to her, plead for her to return. But I cannot show such vulnerability. As Bianchi Family Boss, any perceived weakness of mine could prove fatal. And besides which, it would only prove to our enemies that she is an effective target—that killing her would in turn kill me.

My musings are interrupted by a brisk knock at the door. I straighten, my expression smoothing into impassivity.

“Come in.”

The door opens and Angelo Vanzetti steps inside. My Consigliere and the only one I can truly trust in the viper's nest of the New York underworld. His long years of service to the Family are unparalleled. But today Angelo's face is grim, mouth set in a tense line. Clearly he brings news to burden me further.

“What is it?” I sigh.

“I'm sorry for the late hour, Juno, but there have been some developments that require your attention. More of our supply

shipments from Mexico have gone missing near the border crossing. It's the third one this month."

I exhale slowly, clenching my jaw. Our family relies heavily on the flow of imports controlled by our cartel connections closer to the border. If the supply lines continue being disrupted it will critically impact our bottom line.

"Any indication of who is behind the disruptions?" I ask.

Angelo shakes his head, his expression hard. "Our contacts are keeping mum. Could be the Bratva moving in on our territory, or the Triads, but nothing concrete yet."

Other criminal organizations encroaching on our business is the last thing I need, but they were likely emboldened by my ascension to Boss under such chaotic circumstances. I make a mental note to reach out to our cartel contacts down south, apply some tactful pressure.

"Very well, keep investigating. I want answers, Angelo, and quickly."

He nods. "Of course."

I wait, seeing the hesitation in his eyes. He's holding something back. My voice drops lower, rich with unspoken warning. "What else?"

Angelo's jaw works before he speaks. "We've also received word of increased FBI surveillance on our clubs and casinos. They're sniffing around, getting bolder."

"Damn it," I hiss, turning away. This compounds the other issues, piles on more pressure. The FBI has been trying to build a RICO case against us for years. My father always managed to stay one step ahead of their investigation, but since his death turmoil within the family has left us exposed. Vulnerable.

I can't show Angelo the claws of fear sinking into my chest, shredding my composure. He's watching me closely, and I keep my face carefully blank.

"Monitor the situation," I say dismissively. "Challenge any warrants they put forth. You know the drill."

“Of course.” Angelo hesitates again. “But perhaps we should consider taking preventative measures. Disrupt their investigation more aggressively before they get too close. I have some contacts I can work through, put some heat on the lead agent—”

“No.” My response is sharp, final. “We walk a delicate line to avoid outright war with the Feds. I cannot risk provoking them. Not...now.”

Angelo looks unhappy but doesn't argue. He clears his throat again. “There's one more thing. Your cousin called earlier today as a reminder about the benefit gala tomorrow evening. She expects your attendance and support.”

I release a slow breath. My cousin, Alessa de Luca. Of course she would be calling about her pet charity project, demanding my presence. I have no desire to go play nice with a bunch of Manhattan's elite and wealthy. But Alessa is family, and the women's shelter the gala is raising money for is a legitimate and worthy charity.

Besides, maintaining positive public connections and influence is crucial right now.

“Yes, alright. I haven't forgotten about the benefit. I'll be there.” I pause, thinking. “Any updates on security measures there? I'd rather not have an attempt made on my life while we're politely clapping speeches. Alessa will throw a fit if anything disrupts her party.”

Angelo's mouth twitches in a hint of a smile. “Not to worry, the benefit is clear. I've taken precautions.”

I nod, satisfied. One less thing to fret over. I know I *should* ask Angelo for more about the updated report on the FBI's RICO investigation into our family's businesses, but I'm too exhausted for more bad news. It can wait until morning. But there's one thing that can't.

“Caitlin,” I say. “Any news?”

With a shake of the head, Angelo says, “Paulo reports no tails, no disturbances. Caitlin seems to be safe where she is.”

“Very well. That’s all; get some rest, we’ll start fresh at sunrise.” I turn back to the windows.

“As you say.” The door shuts quietly behind him.

Finally alone again, some of the rigid control slips from my shoulders. I close my eyes and rub my temples, trying to ease the burning tension headache building behind my eyes. My father made this look so *effortless*. Carmine Bianchi ruled New York with an iron fist sheathed in velvet. His power and influence were absolute, and everywhere he went, respect and fear attended him like a cloak.

I never realized just how much he shielded me from. How the crown I so eagerly sought would be so *heavy*, so many sins piled upon it, threatening to crush me beneath their weight.

And with Caitlin gone....

No. I grit my teeth and open my eyes. I will not splinter. I am Juno Bianchi, and I bow to no one and nothing. There are too many enemies circling, wolves eager to drag me down and tear out my throat.

I must be ice—cold, impenetrable, unforgiving.

Love is only pain. I know this intimately now. Caitlin O’Sullivan brought out something wild and reckless in me, something I never knew was there. For a handful of stolen moments, I felt the ice around my heart fracture. But no more. I will freeze and harden into diamond, flawless and unbreakable.

I force my mind away from Titian hair and indigo eyes. I turn away from the window and the distant memories it evokes. Sleep will not find me tonight, that much is clear already. I gather up reports from my desk to review instead, preparation for the day ahead. The work is endless, but I will not surrender.

I am Juno Bianchi, and I bow to no one and nothing.

Certainly not love.

CHAPTER 2

CAITLIN

The morning frost on cars is dull outside, the icy sheen a reflection of my heart. I stare out my bedroom window, cursing how much this gloomy view reminds me of her: cool and sharp as a dagger's edge.

Juno Bianchi.

Even her name freezes up my brain these days, as I stare into nothing.

I force myself away from the window with a scowl, my combat boots thudding heavily across the creaky floorboards. This cramped Bronx walk-up may not be much, but it's still mine. No high-rise penthouses or fancy brownstones for me, not anymore. Just home sweet home: a sagging couch, mismatched dishes in the sink, faded Red Sox pennant on the wall. My own private hell away from Park Avenue and the Bianchi empire.

Juno tried to keep me nearby, lock me up in a gilded cage again, but I only lasted a few days. When I realized she was sticking to what she'd said—that she didn't intend to come back and grovel at my feet like she damn well should, begging me to take her back—I wasn't going to stick around.

Angelo Vanzetti made a big noise out it easier to protect me where I was, but I don't need protection in the Bronx. This is O'Sullivan turf, and I have protections of my own, don't I?

It's been three weeks since Juno kicked me out like yesterday's trash, three endless weeks of dragging myself through each miserable day. I fill my hours at Sal's Auto Shop,

trading quips with the boys under the hoods of muscle cars and Harleys. My hands buried in grease and steel are the only time my mind goes quiet nowadays. But the numbness never lasts.

Sal's been good to me, giving me as many hours as I want. The work is honest, even if the clientele isn't always. Plenty of made men bring their cars into Sal's for modifications and repairs. I don't ask questions about the special features some of them request. As long as I get to tinker with the engines, I'm happy. Or I pretend to be, at least.

At night, the dreams come, visions of her: raven hair spilling over her face, full lips curving into a wicked smirk, dark eyes flashing as they pin me in place. I jolt awake aching and empty, soaked in sweat as if breaking a fever. Yet the fever still rages in my blood, that damn wanting she sparked in me.

I should hate her after how she cast me aside, but this traitorous heart of mine won't quite let me get there. Still, I'll settle for rage, and that's easy enough.

Curse you, Juno Bianchi. I hope Nero scratches the fuck out of your legs.

I throw on my leather jacket and head out the door, the chill wind snapping against my cheeks. Danny's waiting below, leaning casually against the lamppost across the street. His bright grin lifts my mood a fraction.

"Top o' the mornin' to ya, Caity," he teases in an exaggerated brogue.

I elbow him playfully. "Keep it up, dipshit, and your next tattoo's gonna be a shamrock on that pasty Irish ass."

He laughs. "Promises, promises." His sharp blue eyes soften with sympathy. "How you holdin' up?"

I shrug, scuffing my boot along the sidewalk cracks. "I'm breathing, aren't I?"

"That's not nothing," he says gently. He doesn't push me for more. Danny's always known better than to poke the bear. We fall into easy silence as we walk, my thoughts churning.

When I'm not at the shop, I've been catching up with Danny. He's still my best friend, but my time with Juno changed me, and our nights out dancing and blowing off steam just aren't the same anymore.

Today he wanted me to go look at his cousin's motorbike, and we have to do it when his cousin's not on shift and not asleep, so this ungodly hour of the morning it is. I know Danny's just trying to keep me busy, though. At his urging, I've also been spending more time with my brother Declan lately.

My older brothers have always been overprotective, especially after Mom died. As the youngest O'Sullivan, they treat me like a child even though I'm 23 years old, and the best street racer in the Bronx. I know my brothers mean well, but their smothering concern only makes me crave freedom more.

As for Declan, until recently he was always my rival both in and out of cars; currently I'm leading our head-to-head racing score, and I know he wants a chance to even up. But I can't race him until this hot rage in me has subsided—even I'm not dumb enough to race when I'm hopped up on anger like this—so he's had to find other ways to satisfy his competitive streak. Mostly by challenging me to increasingly absurd dares and games. Just yesterday he convinced me to go ice skating with him in Central Park. I thought I'd fall on my ass the whole time, but somehow I managed to keep up with his jumps and spins.

Declan's been different since I came back, almost like he's trying to take care of me. I don't know if it's pity or just simple concern for his little sister. Maybe a bit of both. Either way, it's been good reconnecting with him. Even if we're still rivals on the streets.

"Hey Deccy," I answer, cradling the phone between my ear and shoulder and holding up a finger to Danny to tell him I need to take the call. "Let me guess. You've come up with another crazy way for us to try and kill each other?"

Declan's laughter echoes through the phone. "Not today, Caity. But I'll keep brainstorming." His voice takes on a more serious note. "I'm calling about this weekend. The last race of

the year is happening, cause after tonight, that snowstorm's gonna hit."

My pulse picks up at the mention of street racing. God, I miss it. The speed, the danger, the thrill of adrenaline pumping through my veins.

The freedom.

Danny and I pause at a road, waiting for the lights to change.

"That's great Deccy, but I'll sit this one out," I say, trying to sound casual. "Haven't had a chance to get my car prepped or anything."

"Come on, Caity. I know you're itching to get back out there. Don't even pretend otherwise. Hell, you can drive my car, if that'll get you out." Declan's voice drops, softening a bit. "Or look, just come watch if you want. No pressure to join. But it could be good for you to be around the scene again."

Declan sounds so damn hopeful. And Danny is making eyes at me, nodding encouragingly as we walk along. I hesitate, conflicting emotions churning within me. I *have* been craving that taste of reckless freedom again. But the thought of racing now also fills me with a strange sense of guilt, like I'd be betraying Juno somehow.

I sigh. "Yeah, maybe. Not racing though."

"No pressure," Declan says soothingly. "Just...think about it, yeah? Could be your last chance before the snow sticks."

I grunt noncommittally.

"See you tonight then, Firecracker."

The childhood nickname makes me smile despite myself. "See you then, Lucky Charms." As I end the call, Danny side-eyes me, one brow raised.

"We going?" he asks.

Damn him and his ability to read me so easily. I scowl, shoving my hands into my jacket pockets.

"Might stop by," I hedge. "Not for long though."

He grins, blue eyes sparkling with mischief. “Long enough to smoke Declan’s ass?”

I can’t help but laugh. “You’re terrible.”

“Maybe so.” He bumps my shoulder playfully. “But admit it, you miss the thrill.”

I don’t answer him, but it’s true. The scream of the engine, the blur of the crowd, that recklessness thrumming in my veins as I push the needle past 120. It used to make me feel so alive.

Now I just feel numb.

We arrive at his cousin’s house and I get to work on his bike, my mind still ticking over Declan’s invitation.

I want to go.

I want to race.

But I know Juno Exclusive Games

CHAPTER 3

CAITLIN

The familiar smells of motor oil, hot asphalt, and engine exhaust wrap around me like a hug. Bodies crush together, shouting and shoving for a good view. I spot Declan's broad shoulders in the center of the throng. He's impossible to miss at six foot five, with hair as red as mine. I weave my way towards him with Danny on my heels.

Declan's stern face splits into a grin when he sees me. "Well, well, look what the cat dragged in. Wasn't sure you'd show, Firecracker."

I force a cocky smirk. "And miss my big brother getting his ass handed to him? Not a chance."

He barks out a laugh and pulls me under his arm. The bulk of him is comforting and familiar. We banter and talk shit as the racers rev their engines, psyching themselves up. I find myself relaxing, soaking up the contagious thrill in the air.

When Declan's race comes up, Danny and I stake out a spot at the finish line. I can hear when the cars take off, and close my eyes, imagining myself behind that wheel: heart hammering, adrenaline surging through my veins as I push the pedal down, the smell of rubber and road...

A cheer erupts from the crowd and I open my eyes as Danny hugs me, jumping up and down. Declan shoots over the finish line, crossing first by a hair. He coasts to a stop in front of us, engine purring like a happy tiger until he finally cuts it.

"Not bad for an old man," I tease as he climbs out. A group have gathered around the car, talking shop, lifting up the hood

to check under it. Declan obliges; he likes to show off his weird creation, cobbled together from a bunch of different cars.

“Old man, my ass. I smoked ‘em.” He grins, eyes gleaming. “But I bet you could take a half-second off my time.”

I hesitate, shifting my feet. “Nah, I’m outta practice.” And it’s not like I need the money these days. Juno makes sure my bank balance says stuffed like a turkey on Thanksgiving, even though I make sure everything I buy is within the limit of my wages from Sal’s Auto.

I don’t want Juno to think she’s doing me any favors.

“C’mon, Caity,” Declan wheedles. “One last ride before the snows start.” He dangles the keys enticingly. “Whaddya say?”

Aw hell, why not? One race can’t hurt. An eager grin tugs at my lips as I snatch the keys from his palm. I run my hand over the sleek blue paint job on his Frankensteined-together car, imagining the speed and power that awaits.

“Get ready to kiss that record bye-bye, Deccy.”

He laughs, rough and full-throated. “Now that’s my girl. Get moving, Firecracker.”

I circle to the driver’s side, adrenaline already thrumming through my limbs in anticipation. The roar of the crowd fades to background noise as I slide behind the wheel. This feels right. Like coming home again. No expectations, no rules. Just me and 400 horsepower of pure American steel.

I sigh as I slide the keys into the igniting, tensing myself for what I know is about to come: the vibrations tingling along my spine, the acrid tang of exhaust fumes, the sweet melody of pistons firing in harmony.

My nerves thrum with euphoria. Oh, how I’ve missed this.

I turn the key, and then...

Nothing.

I try it again, a few times, and then I pull the keys out altogether and look at Declan, who is staring back at me, just

as confused.

What the hell?

I don't get long to ponder before Declan is at my window, face twisted in concern. "Uh, Caity, you okay?"

"The car won't start."

It takes a minute to get him to believe me, but by the time I pop the hood, I already know I'm not going anywhere. Declan mutters curses and slams a fist against the chassis in frustration.

"Some fuckin' piece of shit cut the ignition wires!" he snarls. He turns to the murmuring crowd, eyes blazing. "Alright, which one of you fuckers messed with my ride?"

Uneasy glances skitter between them but no one steps forward. My eyes narrow, scanning the familiar faces for any tells. Most look genuinely confused...except for one. I spot a figure in a black jacket slipping along the fringes of the crowd towards the shadows of a dark alley.

"I'll be right back," I murmur to Declan before taking off, shoving through the crowd. I chase the retreating figure into the cover of a dingy alley.

"Going somewhere, Paulo?" I demand.

He stiffens before turning, face carefully neutral. "Evening, Ms. O. Fancy meeting you here."

"You sabotaged Declan's car. I want to know why."

"You know, this is a real dumb move, ma'am," Paulo says. "Following some asshole into a dark alley. You need to be smarter than this."

"Cut the bullshit." I step closer, eyes blazing. "Tell me."

He scrubs a hand over his hair, lips pursing. "Wasn't personal. Just following orders."

My fingers curl into fists as fury ignites in my core. "Juno," I spit. That controlling, manipulative bitch. She doesn't get to keep interfering in my life, not after she threw me out like trash. "I'm going to *kill her*."

Paulo winces like I slapped him. “Now, listen , let’s not talk like that—”

I slam him back against the brick wall, forearm pressed to his throat, even though it would be easy enough for him to shove me aside. “Why, Paulo? Explain it to me real slow.”

He raises his hands in apology, dark eyes pleading. “Juno wants to keep you safe, is all. She knows how dangerous these street races can be. And if something happened to you...” He trails off. “Well, she’d kill me.”

“*I’m* going to kill you!”

“I mean, maybe, but *she’d* make it hurt worse.”

I release him with a shove. “Juno doesn’t get a say in my life anymore. *She* chose that. Made it *real* clear.” Acid drips from each word.

Paulo rubs his throat, regarding me with sympathy. “She still cares for you, you know that? A hell of a lot more than she’ll admit.”

I scoff bitterly. “Right. Is that why she kicked me out?”

I’ll never forget the things Juno said to me that night.

You are a liability.

I’m not capable of love.

I must put Family first.

All those little knives driven into my heart, designed to bleed me dry...

And now she thinks she can keep tabs on me?

Paulo sighs. “I don’t mean no disrespect, Ms. O. But you gotta understand, what happened between you two...” He shakes his head. “It tore her up inside, sending you away, even though she pretends otherwise. And I know it, because she won’t risk losing you again. Even if it means watching from a distance.”

My chest aches at his soft words, but I force my spine to go rigid. I will not crack. She doesn’t get my tears or my rage.

I’m nothing to her now, and she is nothing to me.

“You tell your Boss if she wants to play voyeur, she picked the wrong woman,” I snap. “Now stay the hell out of my life.”

I storm off before he can respond, ignoring his pleading calls. Declan’s waiting when I return, brow creased in question. I just shake my head, the fight drained out of me.

“Sorry about the car. Juno bullshit.”

He shuts his mouth with a snap, exchanging a loaded glance with Danny. “It’s no big deal,” Declan says with false cheer. “Louie fixed me right up. Had some spare wires.”

Suddenly the cold of the night feels unbearable. “Can you take me home, Declan?”

He opens his mouth to argue but must read the defeat in my eyes, and so he just pushes me gently into the car. My thoughts churn the entire ride home.

So much for my escape. But if she thinks she’s caged me for good, she’d better think again. I’m done being the obedient little wifey. If Juno wants a war, I’ll bring her one right to her front door.

I know how to make her hurt, and this Firecracker’s just had her fuse lit.

CHAPTER 4

JUNO

The weak winter morning sun cuts through the floor-to-ceiling windows of my office, casting everything in pale light and long shadows, echoing my mood. I stand with my back to the glass, arms crossed over my chest as I stare down Angelo.

“She made contact with Paulo last night at the street races. Confronted him about tampering with Declan’s car, which he disabled to prevent her racing,” Angelo says.

I keep my face impassive even as irritation wells up. Of *course* Caitlin went back to that world the first chance she got. Of *course* she cornered one of my men, heedless of the danger.

Reckless as always.

“Paulo shouldn’t have allowed himself to be caught,” I reply coolly.

Angelo’s jaw tightens, a rare break in his usually deferential demeanor. “With respect, you can’t ask us to keep close watch on Ms. O’Sullivan’s activities and then reprimand the men when she catches a glimpse.”

“I decide what I can and cannot ask of my soldiers, Angelo.”

He inclines his head. “Of course, Juno. I only mean to say, perhaps a gentler approach might allow Ms. O’Sullivan to—”

I slice my hand through the air, cutting him off. “I do not require your advice regarding my marriage.”

Even after everything, that word—marriage—sends a treacherous pang through my chest. I’m careful not to let it show. Angelo may fancy himself an expert on relationships,

but I know better. Love is a liability. A weakness to be exploited. I learned that lesson long ago.

And Angelo should know it too. His daughter, Lucia, married my cousin Enzo several years back, against her father's wishes—and against *my* father's, too. The news of it was broken earlier than they hoped—by Enzo's bodyguard, Paulo, who always remained loyal and obedient to my father.

I was impressed by Paulo's difficult choice: report to my father regarding the unsanctioned marriage, or keep quiet and pretend ignorance? In my mind, he chose well, and so when Caitlin needed someone who would protect her without question, but report to me when needed, he was my first pick.

As for Enzo and Lucia, their relationship was turbulent, and ended tragically when Lucia died by her own hand not long after the wedding. Angelo was a changed man after the loss of his only child, and it was the only time I ever saw or heard him argue about with my father.

Angelo insisted that his daughter had been murdered by Enzo. My father refused to believe it. Enzo's death in a car crash not long after was the only thing that settled the matter.

I've wondered before whether my cousin's death was accident or design...but it's ancient history now. The Family has moved on.

Yet that death haunts me sometimes, when I think about Caitlin's love of cars and speed.

"Caitlin is suffering," Angelo says quietly to me, bringing me back to the present. "It is cruel to keep her distanced from you, yet give a glimmer of hope by sending men to watch over her. You should—"

"That's enough." My voice lashes out like the crack of a whip. "We have more pressing matters than my personal affairs. The FBI is looking into the restaurants again. Have you spoken to the accountant?"

Angelo hesitates only a moment before smoothly changing tacks. "Yes. He believes we can avoid charges, provided the FBI forensic accountants do their jobs within the confines of

the law, as required. Our legitimate businesses check out on paper.”

“Good.”

I turn my back on him again, a clear dismissal. I hear him move to the door. His Italian loafers sink into the plush cream carpet, soundless as a panther. He pauses on the threshold.

“This treatment of Caitlin...it could end tragically. For both of you.”

My hands curl into fists behind my back. I don't trust myself to speak. He must be thinking of his own daughter, I remind myself. A father, still grieving—I can forgive his insolence. I must.

I keep my mouth shut, and after a fraught moment, the door clicks shut behind him.

Alone again, I release a slow breath.

God, this street-racing nonsense. I know Caitlin loves it. I know *that* is the world that owns her heart. No silk sheets or diamond jewelry could ever compete with the growl of an engine, as far as she's concerned.

But I also know that it's much safer for her to be street-racing than it is for her to be anywhere near me. Still, I promised her father she'd be safe, and I keep my promises.

I look again out over the cold clarity of a December morning in New York. Clean, precise. The kind of morning I prefer.

The limousine glides through the snow-lined streets of Manhattan, the buildings passing by in a blur of glittering lights. Alessa chatters on about the gala but I can barely focus, my thoughts drifting back to Caitlin despite my best efforts. I smooth my hands over the sleek satin of my evening gown, as blue-black as a frozen midnight sky, while the tailored bustier bodice is peppered with real diamonds that seem like stars.

Alessa's dress is a vibrant red, an ostentatious ruby necklace drawing attention to the plunging neckline that suggests the firebrand temptress beneath the polished philanthropist hosting tonight's event. "Earth to Juno," she says, snapping manicured fingers in my face. "Am I boring you over here?"

"My apologies," I reply. "I'm distracted this evening."

She smiles knowingly. "Thinking about a certain wild Irish rose, are we?"

I school my features into impassivity, though inside, her words make my heart twist. "I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, Juno," she sighs, "you need to lighten up. Darkness doesn't suit you nearly as well as you think it does. Anyway, don't insult my intelligence. I know you're miserable without her." Her smile softens, sea-green eyes searching my face. "How are you really doing?"

I turn to look out the snow-flecked window. "I'm fine."

"Have you talked to her at all?"

I don't need to ask who she means. There's only one *her* that matters.

"No. It's better this way."

"Better for whom?" Alessa challenges. "Lord, if I had a woman like that, I'd never let her out of my bed. You're a fool to behave this way."

I turn to her. "Are you forgetting who I am, little cousin?"

"How could I?" she retorts. "You remind me often enough. Anyway, this isn't about me. This is about you, you and Caitlin. You're torturing her for no reason, and yourself as well. I know you think you're protecting her, but—"

"Drop it, Alessa," I snap, harsher than intended. She recoils. I force a deep breath, softening my tone. "Please. I can't talk about this right now."

She studies me a moment, then nods, patting my hand gently. "Okay. But Juno...don't wait too long. Life is short, especially in our world. Don't waste the time you have left with pride."

As we drive, I stare unseeing out the tinted windows, thoughts consumed by Caitlin.

Angelo's warning replays in my mind and I purse my lips. Perhaps I *have* been too harsh in keeping Caitlin at arm's length. But any closeness between us puts her at risk. As head of the Bianchi family, I have a target on my back. I cannot expose Caitlin to that bullseye, no matter how much I might wish otherwise.

Fortunately, the limo slows to a stop outside the Chatsworth Regency Hotel, where the winter ball is being held in the opulent grand ballroom.

I step out into the cold kiss of winter, inhaling the fresh chill. Paparazzi clamor behind velvet ropes, cameras flashing. The carpet is lined with burly security guards, guests funneling between them. We pause for the photographers, Alessa beaming while I offer the barest hint of a smile. Then I glide through the chaos, Alessa by my side, my chin high. We are soon swept inside, into the warm glow of the grand ballroom.

Crystals shimmer from the chandeliers like icicles above the polished dance floor. Ice sculptures tower over lavish hors d'oeuvres tables decorated tastefully with imported white roses. Guests mingle, champagne glasses glinting. An orchestra plays softly on the stage beneath soaring marble columns. Waiters in white gloves circulate with trays of champagne. Manhattan's upper crust are draped in fur and jewels, greeting each other with air kisses. It's a glittering scene straight out of the pages of a fairytale.

An elegant masquerade hiding ugly truths. No one here is what they seem to be.

I follow Alessa through the room. As I pass, conversation hushes respectfully. More than one set of eyes slide over me with unveiled desire—and envy—at the figure I cut in my gown.

We stop to speak with a city council member and his wife. Their pleasantries wash over me unheard as I stare blankly at the diamonds in her ears.

“Juno.” Alessa’s nails bite into my arm. “Are you listening?”

I turn back to the councilman with an apologetic tilt of my head. “Forgive me. My thoughts were elsewhere. You were saying?”

He chuckles. “I was just telling my wife that you’ve been doing an admirable job leading your, ah, family business.”

“You’re too kind,” I say smoothly. “Though I can’t take all the credit. I have an excellent team supporting me.” Including a six-foot-four bodyguard watching the perimeter who could snap the councilman’s neck without breaking a sweat. But I keep that thought to myself.

We chat for a few more minutes about the city’s latest infrastructure projects and the homeless crisis and then, blessedly, Alessa leads me away to my table.

She re-introduces me to my dinner companions for the night—an assortment of philanthropists and socialites. I exchange practiced pleasantries, allowing them to ramble about themselves while gathering tidbits that may prove useful later. Knowledge is power, after all.

Once Alessa moves on to greet other guests, a server appears with a glass of cabernet sauvignon. I accept it with a nod of thanks. The bold red fills the glass like spilled blood. I take a slow sip, letting the complex flavors roll over my tongue. A lesser quality than my own private stock, but passable.

The lights dim, signaling the start of the program. I tune out the speakers, having fulfilled my duty by showing my face tonight. Instead, I ponder the latest business developments in my territory. The Sabatino family recently moved product through the docks without my permission. Such insolence cannot go unanswered...

A flurry of movement at the ballroom entrance catches my eye. I glance up, then do a double take at the woman framed in the double doorway. She steps forward into the room and pauses, looking around.

My heart stops.

Caitlin O’Sullivan stands in a halo of light, her flame-colored hair swept back from her face to reveal the long column of her throat. Her emerald gown has a neckline slashed down to the waist, revealing her creamy white skin, while the daringly high side slit gives a glimpse of toned leg. Lush lips curve as she surveys the room like a lioness seeking her prey.

When our eyes meet, her smile widens, sending a bolt of heat straight through me.

My wine glass nearly slips through my stunned fingers. What in hell’s name is my wife doing here? I watch, dumbfounded, as she breezes into the room with a coy smile as though she didn’t just throw a lit match onto a pile of dynamite.

All hints of boredom have vanished from the guests’ faces now. Whispers follow Caitlin’s path like contrails from a jet, a mix of fascination and scandalized gossip.

She’s a blood-red flame moving through their monochromatic world.

I stand abruptly, nearly knocking over my chair, and one of the servers hurries to catch it. But Caitlin has the eyes of the room as she pauses to snag a champagne flute, casual as can be, from a server’s platter. Meanwhile, my heart throbs against my sternum, emotions at war within me—shock, anger, longing. I start forward, intending to intercept her, when Alessa appears at my side.

“Juno,” she says, “what the hell is going on?”

“I...I don’t know.”

CHAPTER 5

CAITLIN

The ballroom of the Chatsworth Regency is dripping with more diamonds than the Crown Jewels tonight. I'm momentarily blinded by the glare as I push through the golden doors, my heels clicking on the marble floor. Leave it to my darling cousin-in-law Alessa to transform a fundraiser for New York's homeless women into a lavish spectacle worthy of the Met Gala.

I scan the sea of evening gowns and tuxedos until my gaze lands on a familiar icy stare. Juno. She's seated with a bunch of no doubt very important people, crystal flute in hand, looking supremely shocked. Her inky hair is swept back into a sleek chignon, and she's poured into a midnight blue gown that pushes up her smooth white breasts into mouth-watering mounds.

That dress must have a license to kill.

I take a breath. I'm here for one reason, I remind myself.

Juno's eyes widen as I start sauntering towards her, grabbing a glass of champagne on the way. I'm *so* glad I decided to wear this slinky emerald number with the plunging neckline.

Eat your heart out, Bianchi.

She stands, her chair flying back into the waiting hands of a quick-thinking server, and I arrive at her table with the attention of the whole room on me.

"Caitlin." Juno regains her composure quickly, as though this isn't the first time we've spoken since she dumped me. "This is a surprise."

I flash her a dazzling smile. “I don’t think it will be a pleasant one.”

She arches one brow.

The murmur of conversation fades around us as I step closer, right into Juno’s personal space. She tenses, shoulders rigid above her shimmering gown.

“I wanted to show up to support the women’s shelter,” I say, pitching my voice to carry in the sudden hush. “It’s such a worthy cause.” I turn to the room. “In fact, my darling wife here is so committed to the cause that she has personally pledged to match the full amount of all donations made tonight.”

There’s a murmur of approval and I have to wait for the applause to die down before I add, “So *do* make sure you spend up, won’t you all?”

There’s a ripple of laughter and Juno’s mouth thins, but she doesn’t protest. To an outsider, Juno probably looks as cool and unruffled as ever. But I see the muscle feathering along her jaw, the tension in her neck.

She’s rattled.

If we were alone, she’d probably have me pinned to the wall by now with her hand around my throat.

Was that a twinge low in my belly?

I lower my voice, speaking so only Juno can hear me. “I see you didn’t keep a seat for me, *darling*, but that’s alright. I’m more at home at the bar anyway.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Alessa go quickly to the microphone, where she smoothly begins her own welcoming speech, steering guests’ attention back toward the front. I’m glad. This crowd might be avid for drama, but I have no intention of hurting the charity event.

I want Juno to hurt.

But *only* Juno.

I'm already walking toward the bar when I feel Juno's iron hand on my upper arm. I shake out of her grip and take a huge gulp of my champagne, savoring the bubbles dancing on my tongue, and hop up on one of the barstools, where I signal for another champagne from the blonde bartender.

In the background, the guests are applauding Alessa's speech. She suggests that they visit the items in the silent auction, creating yet another distraction as the noise of a hundred chairs shuffling around drowns out any potential argument between Juno and me.

Juno steps closer to me, whispering angrily. "I don't know what kind of game you're playing here, but if you wanted to talk, you could have just asked."

I laugh out loud at that; I can't help it. Juno's brows draw together, lips pursing in annoyance. Does she really not get it? For such a supposedly brilliant strategist, she can be incredibly dense sometimes.

"We're way past talking, Juno," I say flatly, taking one big gulp to finish my champagne. The alcohol sparks through my veins, fueling my anger. "You made damn sure of that when you froze me out. Cut me off completely with barely a word."

A few more people are beginning to come to the bar now, pretending that they're there for drinks. Really, they're just looking for gossip. One of them in particular, a woman with a sharp chin, a poisonous smirk, and a pink gown, is listening without shame.

"Why don't you pull out your phone and start recording?" I snap at her. "That way you can post for clout on social media later, right?"

The woman turns away, pretending to be shocked and outraged at my words, while Juno drops her voice even lower. "It was for *your own protection*," she hisses at me.

I slam my empty glass down on the bar top, relishing the sharp crack. "Don't give me that crap. You freaked out because you felt something real for once. Something you couldn't control."

“That’s not—” Juno begins heatedly before visibly regaining her composure. “This is neither the time nor place for this discussion.”

“Oh, I think this is the perfect time and place.” I smile sweetly and nod my thanks at the bartender for the fresh glass of champagne. “Since everyone believes I’m just the poor abandoned wife anyway. Might as well give them the real story, right?”

I slide off the stool, looking out over the party, when Juno’s hand darts out to my waist, drawing me close to her. I stiffen at the electric thrill that races over me from that simple touch. Damn traitorous body.

“Don’t do this,” she murmurs in my ear, her lips almost touching me. “Please.”

“Ms. O’Sullivan?” A familiar voice speaks from just behind me. “How lovely to see you. I didn’t know you were coming?”

Angelo. I haven’t seen Juno’s handsome Consigliere for a long time. My throat tightens at the concern crinkling his eyes as I face him. He was always kind to me, almost like a surrogate father in that strange Italian world. Juno told me once that she thinks I might remind him of his own daughter, Lucia, who had curly auburn hair, a little like mine.

Juno answers before I can. “Caitlin is leaving.”

“No, I’m not, Juno.”

Angelo’s eyes flick between us briefly, soft with understanding.

“Caitlin,” Juno begins through gritted teeth, but I just glare back at her.

“The only thing I plan to do tonight is to bid all your money on these bullshit trinkets,” I snap. “And if you think you can control me, Juno Bianchi, you haven’t been paying attention. If you’re lucky, I *won’t* tell everyone here tonight exactly what you don’t want them to know: that you’re *not* the perfect marble statue of a Mob Boss with a lump of ice for a heart. That you’re a living, breathing, human *woman*.”

We're staring at each other, seething, until Angelo steps in between us, and I blink at him, almost surprised. I'd actually forgotten he was there.

"Ms. O'Sullivan, I think perhaps—"

"Forget it," I snarl. "I'll finish my drink and then I'll leave. I know when I'm not wanted."

I lean past him, grab my champagne, and I make it halfway across the ballroom, weaving between clumps of vapid, gossip-hungry socialites as I take a long drink from my glass, before Juno catches up to me. Of course. She slides in front of me and forces me to stop dead. The champagne sloshes dangerously in my glass, but doesn't spill.

"I don't know what you hope to achieve here tonight." Juno's voice is a sharp-edged blade, all signs of vulnerability carefully stripped away. "But this spectacle ends now."

I jerk out of her hold, sloshing more champagne over my wrist. Droplets tremble on my skin like tears. I raise my wrist to my mouth and lick them off, a show of vulgarity. "I'm just getting started, sweetheart."

Juno steps even closer, eyes glacial. "Do not test me, Caitlin," she warns softly.

A shiver dances down my spine at the silken menace in her tone. But I just press my lips into a smile.

"Test you? Too late for that. You already flunked the final exam." I sidestep her and keep walking, tossing over my shoulder, "The only thing I regret is ever believing we could make a life together."

CHAPTER 6

JUNO

I stare helplessly after Caitlin as she weaves through the crowded ballroom, her words slurring as she grabs the arm of a senior socialite. Caitlin is like a hurricane—beautiful, destructive, and impossible to control. For the first time in my life, I feel completely out of my depth. I’m used to strategizing, calculating risks, manipulating outcomes. But Caitlin operates on pure emotional impulse.

I have no idea how to handle the force of nature that is Caitlin O’Sullivan.

Angelo appears at my shoulder again, his expression tense. “What should I do?” I ask, hating the pleading note in my voice. I sound weak, and as a Bianchi, I can never show weakness.

Angelo’s eyes flash with exasperation. “Go after her,” he hisses under his breath. “Before she embarrasses herself, and you. *More.*”

He’s right. I straighten my spine and stride through the crowded ballroom, my evening gown swishing around my legs, cursing the tightness of the bodice that seems to make it hard to breathe. Or perhaps that’s just the tightness in my chest. Guests part before me like the Red Sea, noticing the lethal purpose in my gait.

I’m Juno Bianchi, after all, and these people fear me.

I spot Caitlin up ahead. She’s leaning against a marble column, one hand wrapped around a champagne flute, the other clenched in the silk lapel of a mink-clad society matron.

“You...you don’t know,” Caitlin slurs, swaying on her feet. “You don’t know anything about her...”

The matron’s heavily-lined face creases in distaste as she tries to detach Caitlin’s white-knuckled grip from her fur coat. I quicken my pace, alarm rising. Caitlin’s movements are sluggish, her words slurred. How much has she had to drink, for God’s sake?

And as I watch, her knees buckle and she collapses, the champagne flute shattering on the marble floor. With a curse, I sprint forward the last few steps in my stiletto heels and catch her before she hits the ground, sinking with her but keeping her safe. Her slender body is limp in my arms, head lolling back to expose the vulnerable line of her throat.

“Well, really!” the matron huffs, straightening her rumpled jacket. “That’s no way to behave in public.” And then I hear her mutter under her breath: “Irish trash.”

Rage ignites inside me, white-hot and visceral. How dare this hag speak about my wife that way? I pin her with my eyes. “Say that again, and I’ll carve your wrinkled face off with a shrimp fork.”

The matron blanches and scurries away without another word.

I cradle Caitlin close, brushing tangled scarlet curls back from her pallid face. Her skin is clammy, breaths shallow. What’s happened to her? This isn’t just alcohol. A reaction to medication? *Poison*? My mind races through possibilities, each more chilling than the last.

Angelo materializes before me, face grim. “Is she drunk?” he asks.

I shake my head, panic clawing at my throat. “She’s been drugged. Help me get her somewhere private.”

Angelo barks out orders to my men stationed around the ballroom. They discreetly form a human barrier, shielding Caitlin from the curious stares of the partygoers, while the largest of them hefts Caitlin in his arms. We make our way swiftly to a side room down a deserted hallway. The heavy oak

door muffles the lively music and conversation from the ballroom.

I direct my bodyguard to lay Caitlin gently on a velvet couch. Her eyes flutter open, glazed and confused. “Juno?” she whispers. “Why don’t you love me anymore?”

Her words slice through me like a stiletto blade. I cup her face in my hands, willing her to understand. “I do love you, Caitlin. I’ll always love you. That’s why I had to let you go.”

Because I can’t let my enemies use you against me. Because the darkness inside me will swallow up your light if you stay.

Caitlin’s eyes well with tears. “But I miss you...”

My heart fractures. I press my lips to her clammy forehead, aching to gather her in my arms and never let go. But I can’t give in. Not when we’re in danger. I take a deep, steadying breath and turn to Angelo.

“Find a doctor. She needs to be examined.”

Angelo nods and slips out. I resume my vigil, perched on the edge of the couch and clasping Caitlin’s limp hand in both of mine. Her eyelids flutter closed again, face drained of color. Who has done this to her? And how?

The door opens and Angelo returns with an elderly gentleman in a tuxedo. I recognize Dr. Aldridge, one of Manhattan’s most elite physicians. He asks me to step aside and conducts a quick but thorough examination of Caitlin.

After a tense few minutes, the doctor straightens. “It appears she’s ingested a strong sedative, perhaps slipped into her drink. She should sleep off the effects in a few hours.”

I let out a shaky breath, weak with relief. Angelo clasps my shoulder bracingly. At least she’s in no immediate danger.

“Thank you, Doctor. Please rejoin the event with my thanks. I would appreciate if you could be discreet regarding—”

“Of course, Ms. Bianchi,” he says at once, as though shocked I even have to ask, and then he quietly takes his leave. I turn my focus back to Caitlin, who seems to be drifting in and out of

lucidity. I need to get her home immediately where I know she'll be safe.

“Angelo, bring the car round back,” I instruct. “We’re leaving.” No need to fuel the gossips’ whispers if Caitlin is seen in this state.

Angelo hurries off to do my bidding. I lean down and brush my lips against Caitlin’s ear. “I’ve got you, *mia cara*,” I murmur. “You’re safe with me now.”

She stirs faintly in response, perhaps soothed by the endearment she hasn’t heard from me in so long. My bodyguard once again gathers Caitlin’s limp form effortlessly into his broad arms. She seems small as a child in his hold.

Angelo has the sleek black town car idling at the delivery entrance. My bodyguard lays Caitlin gently across the plush leather backseat. I slide in beside her, cradling her head in my lap, and Angelo gets into the front seat beside the driver. “Home to the townhouse,” I command. “Quickly—but carefully.”

The driver puts the car into motion and we glide out into the night. I stroke Caitlin’s vibrant curls as the city lights flicker past in a blur. Her chest rises and falls softly with each breath. The sedative seems to have relaxed the perpetual tension in her body, erasing the scowl she’s worn since I sent her away. She looks peaceful now. Young and unguarded.

My heart aches with a bittersweet blend of love and regret. Perhaps it was foolish to think I could live without her. That either of us could be happy apart. But it’s too dangerous for her with me, as tonight has shown.

We arrive at the stately townhouse I’ve called home since inheriting control of the family. One of the house guards carries Caitlin inside.

“Take her upstairs and put her to bed,” I tell him. “See that she’s comfortable.” He nods and lugs her up the grand

staircase with care while I turn to confer briefly with Angelo.

I find him in the study where I hold meetings sometimes. “Did you see anything?”

“No. I’ll question the guards, of course.”

“Yes. And call Alessa,” I order. “Have her pull the security footage from tonight. I want to know if anyone tampered with Caitlin’s drink.”

Angelo nods. “Consider it done.”

With a curt nod, he heads out to begin the investigation. I make my way upstairs to the guest suite, and panic rises anew when Caitlin is not in there.

“In here, ma’am,” the guard calls from down the hallway. I run to my own bedroom, my breath catching when I open the door.

The guard has placed Caitlin atop the king-sized four-poster bed in the middle of the room. *My* bed. The one we briefly shared as wives. And she looks like she belongs there, her vibrant beauty a striking contrast against the crisp white linens.

I suppress the surge of longing the sight evokes. “I meant for you to put her in the guest room,” I tell the guard sharply.

He shuffles his feet, abashed. “Apologies, ma’am. I thought... she might be more comfortable here.”

Comfort has nothing to do with it. But I don’t have the energy to reprimand him further. “Go take your post downstairs,” I sigh. “I’ll watch over her.”

“Yes ma’am. Let us know if you need anything.”

Then he quietly takes his leave, closing the bedroom door behind him. Silence settles over the room, broken only by Caitlin’s rhythmic breathing.

This is my own fault, really. I should have known she would do something reckless to provoke me. To punish me for sending her away.

Slowly I circle the bed, gazing down at her serene face. She looks impossibly young like this. I barely recognize my fiery

spitfire full of insolent retorts, bratty comebacks—and seductive invitations. My Caitlin is a crackling livewire, a burning flame. Not this diminished, drugged echo of a woman.

Rage simmers beneath my steely control. Someone will answer for this insult. No one harms what is mine. And whether Caitlin likes it or not, she is still my wife.

My responsibility.

Careful not to disturb her, I slide onto the mattress and stretch out alongside her supine form. Propped up on one elbow, I smooth back the hair from her forehead and let my eyes run over her relaxed features: the elegant arch of her brows, the cute scatter of freckles across her nose. The full curve of her lips, slightly parted as she breathes. I'd forgotten how beautifully crafted she is.

“What have they done to you, *mia cara*?” I whisper. She stirs faintly at the sound of my voice but remains fast asleep.

I should have her moved to the guest room. I should keep my distance and rebuild the walls she's tried tonight to dismantle between us. But I'm tired of denying myself this. Denying the magnetic pull I feel toward her, even now. Especially now, while she's vulnerable and in need of my protection.

So I give in to selfish impulse and stretch myself alongside the length of her smaller frame, wrapping one arm securely around her waist. She melts into me on instinct, head nestling beneath my chin, breath warm on my collarbone. The tension eases from my body at her nearness.

Tomorrow I will become the Ice Queen again. I'll rebuild my defenses and face our enemies head-on. But for now, I take comfort in the simplicity of holding Caitlin close, keeping her safe through the long hours until dawn. Despite everything between us, this still feels right.

She still feels like home.

CHAPTER 7

JUNO

I slowly open my eyes, adjusting to the morning light filtering in through the curtains. For a moment, everything seems calm, peaceful even. Gold beams glint off the chandelier crystals hanging from the ceiling and warm the antique rosewood furniture. The silk sheets are a tangle around my bare legs. Disoriented, I stare around until my gaze falls on tangled red hair splayed across the pillow next to me.

Caitlin.

The memories of last night come flooding back. Caitlin's dramatic entrance at the fundraiser, our heated confrontation, her collapse into Angelo's arms. The terror I felt at seeing her limp and unresponsive.

I carefully examine her now, assuring myself that the rise and fall of her chest means she's just sleeping. Relief floods through me. She's okay.

I stay propped up on one elbow, watching her sleep. Even with faint smudges of mascara under her eyes and hair in disarray, she is beautiful. Peaceful in a way I've never seen when she's awake, her usual restless energy dampened, but without that horrible, unnatural stillness from the drugging last night.

And then she stirs, her blue eyes blinking open sleepily. They widen in alarm as she registers my presence and she scrambles upright, clutching the sheet to her chest, even though she is still fully dressed from the gala.

"What the hell?" she exclaims, bolting upright. Her voice is hoarse with sleep. "Where am I? What have you done?"

Her accusatory tone stings, but I maintain my composure. “You’re at the brownstone. In my bed, to be precise. And I haven’t done anything except ensure your safety after you were...unwell last night.”

She shakes her head sharply. “That doesn’t make any sense. I haven’t talked to you in months. The last thing I remember, I was at the auto shop...” Her words trail off uncertainly.

I sigh, steeling myself to explain. “You confronted me publicly at the gala last night,” I say gently. “At first I thought you’d simply had too much champagne.” She stares at me as though my words haven’t registered. “But someone slipped something into your drink, Caitlin. You collapsed and I brought you here to recover, where I could keep an eye on you.”

“You *drugged* me?”

“Of course not,” I snap. Why must she be so consistently unreasonable? “*Someone*—I don’t know who—drugged you. But I plan to find out.”

Caitlin shakes her head in disbelief. “No way. I think I’d remember something like that happening.”

“I assure you, it did. But you were barely coherent last night. The drug may have affected your memory.”

She still looks suspicious, fingers worrying the silk sheet. I resist the urge to take her hand in mine and reassure her. “Despite our...complicated history, I hope you know I only want you safe. Don’t you trust me?” The words slip out before I can stop them, layered with vulnerability I hadn’t intended to reveal.

“Of course not,” she snaps. But then her expression softens, just for a moment. “I...I mean, I don’t think you’d *drug* me. And I guess it makes sense. Some of those society types can be nasty pieces of work.” She gives a weak, nervous smile, showing me that she’s joking.

But it’s much more serious than she seems to understand. That worries me. Still, I feel a glimmer of hope at her concession. “I’m relieved you’re alright. I was...concerned about you.” The admission feels foreign on my tongue. Expressing care

has never come naturally to me. But seeing Caitlin in danger brought those protective instincts roaring to the surface, catching me off guard.

Caitlin studies me curiously, as if seeing me for the first time. “Huh. So the Ice Queen really does have a heart.”

I feel a pang in my chest. I want so badly to see her smile again, hear that husky laugh, watch the dimple flash in her cheek. But the angry stranger sitting opposite me seems indifferent to my presence.

“So, what’s the deal?” Caitlin asks abruptly. “Can I go now, or are you planning on keeping me prisoner here against my will?”

Her confrontational tone sparks my own defensiveness. “Don’t be absurd. You’re free to leave whenever you wish.”

“Great. See ya,” she says briskly, swinging her legs off the bed and standing up, but her hand flies to her head as she sways for a moment. I leap out of the bed myself and go around to her, ready to catch her if she falls again.

All I get is a glare for my chivalry.

“I’d prefer if you stayed, at least for today,” I tell her evenly. “To make sure there are no lingering effects from the sedative.”

She snorts as she shakes out her skirt and smooths it down. “Yeah, no thanks. I don’t need a babysitter.”

Before I can think about it, I catch her wrist. Her head jerks around, eyes narrowing dangerously. I soften my voice, injecting a pleading note. “Please, Caitlin. Just stay until tomorrow. For my peace of mind.”

Caitlin tugs free, eyes flashing. “Oh no. No way. I have work to get to. And zero desire to spend a minute longer around *you* than necessary.”

Frustration wells up inside me. Doesn’t she understand I’m trying to protect her? But I swallow it down and soften my voice. Honey, not vinegar. “Please, Caitlin.”

She stills, surprised by my unusually polite request. The hint of vulnerability in my tone finally seems to reach her.

“God, *fine*,” she sighs. “One day. But don’t think for a second you get to order me around just because you’re some high and mighty Mob Queen.”

I can’t help the small smile that tugs at my lips. “Duly noted. Perhaps you should get some more rest. I’ll have breakfast brought up shortly. Make yourself comfortable.”

Caitlin’s defenses slam back up. “Yeah, I bet you have lots of important stuff to take care of bright and early.”

I hesitate in the doorway. I expected my job to be a problem between us, but not quite in the way it seemed to happen. I thought Caitlin would object to the more unsavory aspects, but her issues were always more with the hours. “Actually, I was planning to stay in today. To keep an eye on you.” I take a breath before adding, “And I was hoping you might help me review security footage from the fundraiser, see if we caught who slipped you the drugs.”

A crease appears between her brows, confusion flitting across her features. For just a moment, her guard drops, and I glimpse longing there, quickly shuttered.

She clears her throat gruffly. “Fine, I guess. If you’re gonna insist on keeping me prisoner here today.”

A small smile tugs my lips. “Far from a prisoner. But I appreciate you agreeing to help identify anyone behind the attack.” I move back toward her slowly. “I’m just relieved you’re alright, Caitlin.”

“Yeah well, it’ll take more than some amateur spiking my drink to finish me off.”

There’s the fierce spirit I know so well. Unable to resist, I reach out and brush a lock of messy hair off her cheek. She goes still, eyes widening. I let my fingertips linger for just a heartbeat against her silken skin before dropping my hand.

“I know you’re tough,” I say softly. “Still. Please be careful.”

Caitlin just snorts in response. “I should call my brother. He was supposed to drop his car off at the shop today, and he’ll wonder where the hell I am.”

“Of course. You do that. I’ll head down to ask the cook to prepare your favorites.”

I turn away again before she can react, slipping out and closing the door quietly behind me. I pause in the hallway, shoulders slumping as I let the mask fall away completely. Being so close to her is far more difficult than I expected. My fingers still tingle from my audacious touch. I want nothing more than to pull her into my arms again, re-learn the taste and feel of her. Feel her fiery hair slip through my fingers, her smooth skin under my hands...

I close my eyes and center myself with effort, rebuilding the icy composure brick by brick. There are still enemies on all sides, I remind myself harshly. I cannot afford to be distracted or vulnerable right now.

I can’t resist pausing as I hear the low murmur of Caitlin’s voice within. She must be on the phone. Which brother is she calling, I wonder? I shouldn’t eavesdrop, but...

I carefully lean closer to the door.

“...I’m at Juno’s place.” A pause. “Yes, *that* Juno, Declan. Yes I’m aware it’s fucking weird, you don’t have to shout about it,” she says in an irritated tone. “Someone slipped me a Mickey last night.”

There’s a pause again as her brother responds through the phone.

“No, it wasn’t Juno,” she sighs. “No. *No.*”

Why is she calling Declan, of all her brothers? He’s the one she chafes against most of all, the one with whom she has the most intense rivalry—both as a street racer, and everything else.

“I’m not getting back together with her!” Caitlin bursts out, sounding offended. “I’m only here until I get my feet back under me, then I’m outta this mausoleum so fast—”

She breaks off, listening to Declan's continued tirade. When she speaks again, her voice is uncharacteristically small. Vulnerable in a way I rarely heard even when we were intimate.

"I know, Deccy. Trust me, I'm well aware she's bad news."

My breath leaves me in a sharp exhale, fists clenching at my sides. *Bad news*. I knew our split couldn't have improved her opinion of me, but hearing that bitterness directed at me still cuts deep.

Of course she's desperate to get away from me. And that is what I wanted, after all: Caitlin kept at arm's length, so that no one would see her as a target.

Only that plan hasn't worked, has it?

Pushing down the hurt, I make my way to the kitchens and politely request the cook prepare Caitlin's favorites—pancakes, crispy bacon, and freshly squeezed orange juice.

The cook smiles broadly. "Right away, ma'am. We're so delighted to have Ms. O'Sullivan back with us again."

I blink in surprise as the kitchen staff smile amongst themselves excitedly about Caitlin's presence. On my way back upstairs, even the house guards seem cheerful in a way I haven't seen since she left.

I...hadn't realized how much the rest of the household missed her too.

An unfamiliar warmth fills me at the realization of how much Caitlin touched the lives of those around us in the short time she was here. Her inner light is infectious, drawing people helplessly into her orbit.

No wonder I couldn't stop thinking about her, no wonder my bed felt so cold and empty without her in it. She slipped past all my defenses, melting the ice around my heart before I even realized it was happening.

But Caitlin has made it abundantly clear she has no desire to stay.

Still, if my enemies are still targeting her—if she remains unsafe no matter how near or far she is...

Squaring my shoulders, I re-enter the bedroom with a composed smile. “Breakfast will be up shortly. I hope you’re hungry. I asked chef to make all your favorites—though if you can’t face pancakes and bacon, I can request something simpler.”

Caitlin gives me an odd look. “You remembered my favorite breakfast?”

“I remember everything about you,” I reply softly.

A charged look passes between us before Caitlin glances away. “Well, I guess we’d better get started reviewing that footage. And remember—I’m only staying until I feel a hundred percent.”

I grimace to myself as I turn away to set up the laptop on the table set in the other corner of my room. *Our* room. But what does anything matter if Caitlin only sees me as the enemy now?

I knew giving in to my feelings for her would only lead to pain. I have no one to blame but myself for that.

But I also have a duty to keep her safe, and I intend to carry it out.

I may have destroyed my chances with this remarkable woman, but I’m grateful for this chance to try and make it up to her. Perhaps if I can catch and punish whoever was responsible for drugging her...

Well, whatever time we have left, I plan to make the most of it.

CHAPTER 8

CAITLIN

It feels strange to be back at the brownstone after all these months. The air still has that familiar musky scent of cedar and jasmine that always reminds me of Juno. As I turn to shut the bathroom door I pause a moment, staring at the unmade king-sized bed with its maroon satin sheets and too many pillows. This room holds so many memories, for better or worse. I take a deep breath and shut the door, turning to survey the bathroom.

And then I'm surprised to see the mirror has been smashed, making my reflection a jagged kaleidoscope of pale-faced doppelgängers.

Strange.

I shouldn't be here. The hollow feeling in my gut has nothing to do with being forcibly drugged. It is this damn house, these memories, the gravitational pull of the black hole that is Juno Bianchi—it all leaves me unsettled.

It all makes me ache for the things left broken and unspoken between us.

When I come out again, breakfast has been served, and Juno is sitting at the little set of table and chairs in the corner in front of it, along with two mugs, her burgundy silk robe gathered tight around her curves.

"I asked for some ginger tea. For your stomach," she adds. Her usually bold voice is hesitant.

"Thanks." I take the mug from her outstretched hand, avoiding eye contact as I sit down. The earthy, spiced aroma from the

mug does help settle my churning insides.

Juno sits quietly beside me, cradling her own mug. The silence between us becomes deafening. I sip my tea just for something to do besides get lost in the tumult of emotions in those espresso-colored eyes. Damn her flawless bone structure.

I poke at the pancakes and take a few mouthfuls, but my stomach is too unsettled still to really eat much.

“How are you feeling?” Juno asks after a while.

I nearly laugh. “How do you think I’m feeling? I got knocked out and woke up in my ex’s bed. I don’t belong here.”

Juno winces, looking down into her tea. “I know. This situation is far from ideal. But I promise you’re safe here.”

Safe. What a joke. I was anything but safe with this woman who shattered my heart into pieces.

More silence. Maybe I shouldn’t be so hard on her, not after she took care of me all night. But it’s easier to cling to bitterness than address this tangled mess between us.

Juno clears her throat delicately. “Did you and Declan sort things out? I heard you two had been talking more lately...”

I bristle at her prying. “My relationship with him is none of your business now. You gave up the right to ask about my personal life when you threw me out.”

Something flashes in her eyes as they drop to the floor. “You’re right. I apologize for overstepping.”

I sigh, looking away. Better to keep this professional if we’re going to be stuck under one roof for now. “Let’s just focus on finding out who drugged me.”

Juno looks relieved at the change of subject. She turns the laptop so we can both see it and pulls up the security footage from last night’s fundraiser.

We watch the grainy video replay of the glittering social event, scanning for any shady behavior around the bar area. Juno keeps pausing and rewinding the footage, muttering about pathetic camera angles and poor image resolution.

“Typical. The one time we actually need these useless security feeds,” she grumbles.

I have to fight back a smile at her irritation. Even now, that cute little crinkle still appears between her brows when she’s annoyed.

Focus, O’Sullivan.

The problem is, no one goes near the drink except for me, Juno, and I guess Angelo Vanzetti, who was trying—and failing—to help calm me down. It’s pretty embarrassing watching myself silently snarling at Juno, but I’m determined not to say anything about it.

Juno deserved it, I think fiercely.

We identify the female bartender, a pretty blonde in a leather bustier dress, as *one* potential suspect besides us, since she’s the one who made the drink. Still, she’d be pretty dumb to do it, since she’d also be the prime suspect.

“She works at The Ruby Realm,” Juno remarks, “though I don’t know her name. Alessa brought over some staff with her for this fundraising night. I’ll ask her about this bartender, find out whether she’s trustworthy or not—though as you say, she’d be quite foolish to put anything in your drink, as the only obvious person with access to it.”

“Do you think she could be working for one of the other Families?”

“Potentially.” Juno frowns. “Although slipping someone drugs requires a level of access and, frankly, a subtlety that would be unusual. Usually when a hit is carried out, it’s about sending a message.”

“And usually,” I point out, “the person ends up dead. Right?”

“Right,” Juno confirms after a moment. “Anyway, as I say, I’ll look into her background.”

“What about...”

“What about what?”

“Angelo,” I say, but I feel like a fool even suggesting it. I might not trust Juno to keep me safe, but Angelo has gone out of his way to make me feel secure. And if he wanted to hurt me, he’s had multiple opportunities in far less public places. “Forget it,” I add quickly.

But Juno, to my horror, looks like she’s still considering it. “Unlikely,” she says at last.

“*Very* unlikely.”

“He cares for you a great deal, Caitlin,” she says softly. “I can’t believe he would do something like that, not to you.”

I chew my lip, thinking. My memories of last night are still blurred, but I latch onto a fragment. “What about that woman I was yelling at right before I collapsed?” I ask. “The one in the pink gown with the tiara. She was giving me serious stink eye all night and then—” I point at the video still, at the sweep of skirt in one corner of the video. “That’s her right there. She’s not close, but she’s not far off, either.”

Juno shifts uncomfortably. “That’s Gabriela Martinez. Her family runs an investment firm. She’s...friendly.”

“How friendly?” I raise an eyebrow.

Juno hesitates. “She’s...expressed interest in the past. But I’ve made it clear I’m not available.”

Interesting. So Little Miss Priss has the hots for my wife. Ex-wife, I guess, or at least *ex-something*. But still. The surge of jealousy takes me by surprise.

“We should pay Ms. Tiara a visit then and see how she reacts if we tell her we’re back together,” I suggest. Juno’s eyes soften, until I add, “Only for appearances, of course. If it helps keep our enemies off-balance, we can fake being back together. But please don’t think I want that any more than you do.” I avoid her searching gaze.

“Perhaps that’s a good idea,” she says at last. “And you’re right. Gabriela may know more than she let on.”

“You know what, I’m feeling fine. I should really get going. I have work this afternoon.” I stand up from the bed, eager to be

free of this place.

Juno catches my fingers, her touch both firm and plaintive. “Caitlin, wait. I know I’m probably the last person you want to be around right now. But I’d feel better if you stayed here at the brownstone again until—until we figure this out. Whoever drugged you was bold enough to do it right under my nose at a highly secure event. Until we find them, I can’t guarantee your safety out there alone.”

I yank my hand away, anger coiling hot in my chest. “Oh, that’s rich! You didn’t give a damn about my safety when you threw me out and cut me off!”

Juno winces, but she doesn’t deny anything. “I handled our split badly, in so many ways.”

Wait. I know that tone. Juno’s deflecting. “You have people following me still,” I say slowly. “Don’t you? That’s how you know Declan and I are talking more these days.”

She just looks at me. My hands curl into tight fists and I have to fight the urge to scream.

How dare she?

“I’m leaving,” I say shortly. “I’m not going to let your control freak act take over my life again, Juno.”

Her hands flutter out as though she wants to touch me but doesn’t dare. “Caitlin—*please*. I fear for you, truly. I still have no idea who murdered my father, and now you’re being targeted too, even though—” Her voice cracks on those last words. I averted my eyes from the sheen of tears visible in her dark irises.

It would be too easy to fall under her spell again if I let myself feel sympathy.

“Why should I trust you?” I demand. “Even if I do, the second things get dangerous, you’ll just freeze me out.”

“You have every reason to doubt me,” she says quietly. “I know I’ve destroyed your faith in me. I...I would like a chance to make it up to you. Let me prove myself an honorable woman, Caitlin. Please.”

Her raw sincerity gives me pause. She's stripped of her usual armor, this powerful leader laid bare. I don't even know exactly what she means. Prove her honor?

How? By keeping me alive?

Or...

There's no way we're getting back together. I'm not a woman who forgives easily. But her presence still calls to a piece of my soul, as much as I wish it didn't. Perhaps she deserves this chance to redeem herself, even if it's not about patching up our marriage.

And hell, I'd like to stay alive.

"If I stay...you *swear* you'll be honest with me?" I ask slowly. "No more secrets or hiding things to 'protect' me? If I'm here, we're investigating this drugging together. You don't get to tell me 'It's Family business' or any of that bullshit."

Hope flickers in Juno's eyes. "Yes. Complete openness about this investigation. I promise you that. And you will stay here, so I can ensure your safety?"

My instincts are screaming to run, to protect my heart. But my heart...my damn foolish heart...

"One week," I relent. "I'll stay here for one week while we investigate. But if you shut me out again, I walk. Deal?"

"Deal." Juno's shoulders sag in relief. "Thank you, Caitlin. I know how hard this is for you."

I just nod silently. The thought of being under the same roof with her again leaves me unsettled and dizzy with memories. But we have bigger problems than the past.

Juno rises and takes my empty mug with her. "I'll give you some space. Rest today, if you can. I'll deal with business for now—let Angelo know I will be taking some time to look specifically into this drugging—and perhaps over dinner we can plan our next steps."

She leaves me alone with my conflicted thoughts. I ease back onto the plush bed, clutching one of the satin pillows as if it

could shield my heart from further pain. Juno's subtle perfume still clings to the fabric.

I agreed to stay here to escape whoever targeted me, yet I feel myself drawn back into Juno's life-threatening orbit, powerless to resist. I pray I don't come to regret this.

For now, wary trust will have to suffice. But if she thinks I'll fall willingly back into her arms, she's got another thing coming. My soul may crave her, but my mind knows better, and I'll be letting logic lead the way from now on. I close my eyes, clinging to that last fraying thread of anger as sleep claims me.

One week. I just have to survive one week without drowning in everything left unsaid between us.

CHAPTER 9

JUNO

I head downstairs, where Nero slinks around my legs before disappearing back up the stairs. He knows something is afoot. I pause at the bottom of the staircase, gazing up toward the bedroom where I know Caitlin lies once more in my sheets. God, if only I could...

My heart aches with a longing so sharp it steals my breath.

Enough. There's work to be done if I want to keep her safe.

With effort, I tear myself away and head for town car waiting for me outside, which will drive me to the office. I give a nod to Paulo, waiting there by another car, and he nods back.

He's here because Caitlin is here.

She was angry when she realized she was still under my protection, but she didn't demand that I withdraw it. I'm happy she has a sense of pragmatism under all that fire.

The streets are quiet as my driver takes me to the Bianchi Family offices. I need to speak with Angelo and update him on the situation with Caitlin.

When I enter the offices, Angelo is already in, sipping an espresso at his desk. He rises as I walk in.

"Good morning, Juno," he says.

I nod in greeting and take a seat opposite him, declining his offer of an espresso. "I came to let you know I will be handing the business reins to you for a few days. Caitlin will be staying with me for now. I'm going to personally oversee the investigation into her drugging."

Angelo frowns, setting down his cup. “Is that wise? This sort of thing is best delegated within the Family.”

I fix him with an icy stare. “It was a direct attack on my wife. I won’t pawn it off to someone else.”

He sighs, rubbing his temples. “And what of your... relationship with Caitlin? Are you thinking of reconciliation?”

I’m not sure I like his probing tone. “Caitlin’s safety is my first priority, Angelo. You know that well. For now, she’ll remain under my protection *and* under my roof.”

Angelo looks unconvinced but doesn’t press further. Our conversation turns to business matters, though my thoughts keep wandering back to Caitlin.

After finishing up with Angelo, I place a call to Alessa. She answers on the second ring.

“Juno! To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I need more information. The blonde bartender who was serving drinks at your fundraiser. What’s her name?”

“Bartender?” Alessa sounds confused. “You mean Devon? She’s worked events for me for years.”

My grip tightens on the phone. “Can she be trusted?”

“Absolutely. All my people at The Ruby are loyal, you know that.” She pauses. “Why the sudden interest?”

I hesitate before answering. “Caitlin’s drink was spiked last night. That’s why I asked for the security footage. And now I’m exploring all possibilities.”

“Wait, what?” Alessa’s shock sounds genuine. “Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. But I’m going to find who’s responsible.” My tone leaves no room for doubt.

“Let me know if I can help. But don’t go harassing Devon, she’s a sweetheart.”

I promise her I’ll be discreet, though privately I don’t intend to let it go so easily. I jot down a note to Angelo, asking him to do a background check on this bartender.

And then I call around my social contacts to find a location for Gabriela Martinez. Somewhere discreet but public, and with possibilities of intimidation as well.

Early in the afternoon, I return to the townhouse. I find Caitlin curled up on the sofa in the study, watching an action movie. She's wearing leggings and one of my old college sweatshirts, looking cozy and comfortable. She mutes the TV when I enter.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

She gives a shrug. "Okay. A doctor came around. You sent him, I assume?" She gives me an almost accusatory look.

"I wanted to make sure there were no after-effects." She says nothing, and turns her eyes back to the television. "I have a lead," I announce, taking a seat beside her. "Gabriela Martinez, is having dinner tonight at the Mandolin downtown. If you're up to it, I was thinking we could go."

Caitlin arches an eyebrow, brushing back a lock of her red hair. "You still want to pretend we've reconciled?"

"It's a good cover," I say with a cool shrug that suggests indifference. If only Caitlin could read my heart. "We can observe her reactions to us up close in an intimate setting."

Caitlin considers this for a moment before nodding. "Fine. But I'll need to get some clothes from my apartment. I had to borrow this from you—sorry." She gestures at the sweatshirt.

"You are welcome to anything of mine you want to wear. Perhaps you could find something for tonight?"

She rolls her eyes. "No, thanks. There's plenty of time. And if I have to stay for a week, I want my own damn clothes. And speaking of staying here, I'll be sleeping in the guest room while I'm here. I already got the staff to set it up."

"Of course. Whatever you prefer." I hesitate. The Bronx isn't safe for her right now. "Returning to your apartment could be

dangerous. I could send Paulo to pack you a bag, if you give me a list of what you need.”

Caitlin bristles. “Absolutely not. I don’t want Paulo pawing through my underwear, thanks all the same. I’ll go myself.”

“Caitlin—”

“I don’t need you controlling my every move, Juno!” she snaps. “Bad enough that I’m stuck in this house with you again.”

I flinch at her words. But she’s right, of course. I need to give her space.

“Alright,” I say gently. “I apologize. Please just...let Paulo drive you, at least? For my peace of mind?”

Caitlin considers this, then nods. “Fine. But I won’t have him lurking inside my apartment. He can wait outside.”

It’s a small concession, but I’ll take it. This détente between us is fragile, but my heart lifts at this minor victory. If we’re to investigate this together, we’ll need to rebuild some of the trust we’ve lost.

Baby steps, I remind myself. Baby steps.

Later that night, I’m adjusting the skirt of my sleek black cocktail dress in the foyer when Caitlin descends the stairs. She’s wearing a strapless burgundy dress that clings softly to her athletic frame. The color makes her hair shine like molten copper. My pulse quickens at the sight.

“You look...nice,” I manage, hoping my face isn’t flushing.

She arches an eyebrow. “I clean up okay when I want to.”

I suppress a smile. Some things never change.

We ride to the restaurant in tense silence. I want desperately to bridge this gulf between us, but I don’t know where to begin. Strategy and logic are my strengths, not heartfelt conversation.

At the restaurant, the maître d' leads us to an intimate table near the windows overlooking the glittering Manhattan skyline. I requested a vantage point with a clear view of Gabriela's table. Sure enough, she's seated nearby with a group of socialites, laughing gaily at some shared joke. Her tight black dress shows off her curvy figure.

A server takes our drink orders. Once he steps away, we exchange subtle glances, silently establishing our covers. To any observer, we appear to be reconciled lovers enjoying an intimate dinner. Under the table, my fingers brush Caitlin's knee. She doesn't pull away.

"She's watching us," Caitlin murmurs, eyes averted from Gabriela's table.

I slide my hand lightly up Caitlin's arm, leaning in as though whispering sweet nothings. In my peripheral vision, I see Gabriela observing us, her painted lips pinched sourly. Interesting. Perhaps she *did* hope to catch my attention at the fundraiser after all.

We pretend to chat amicably through the appetizers, letting tension build. But then suddenly, during the main course, Caitlin sets her fork down sharply.

"I need some air," she snaps, shoving back her chair. The nearby tables turn to stare as she storms toward the entrance, heels clicking angrily on the tiles.

I wait an appropriate interval before following, avoiding the stares of the other patrons. Gabriela tracks me with undisguised curiosity. Good—the drama has hooked her attention.

Outside, I find Caitlin standing stiffly beneath an awning, arms crossed. "That was quite the exit," I try.

For moment, I think she really is angry,, but then she smirks. "I thought it sold the tension well."

I force a chuckle. "It definitely did. Gabriela watched the whole thing."

Caitlin glances sidelong at me. "So what now? Confront her directly?"

“Not yet. Let’s see if she approaches one of us first.” I check my watch. “Give it five minutes, then go back to the table alone. I’ll come in a few minutes later. With any luck, she’ll make a move.”

Caitlin nods. “Got it.” With that, she slips back inside, leaving me alone with my tangled thoughts. This ruse, pretending to be back together with my wife, is more difficult than I anticipated. It...it *hurts*, somehow. To be so close to what I wish for, and yet know it’s just a charade...

After a sufficient interval, I follow Caitlin back into the restaurant. I pause at the entrance, surveying the scene. Caitlin is back at our table, stabbing irritably at her seared tuna. A few tables over, Gabriela is still ensconced with her friends, though her posture seems oddly rigid.

As I draw nearer, snippets of conversation reach me over the ambient noise of the restaurant.

“Can you believe she made a scene like that last night?” Gabriela is saying with a scornful glance at Caitlin. “No class at all.”

I bristle, fury spiking through me. How dare she insult Caitlin? But I force myself to move casually to my seat as though I haven’t overheard.

“Everything okay?” I ask mildly.

Caitlin smiles tightly. “Just dandy.”

We pick at our food, listening surreptitiously to Gabriela’s snide commentary. The more she derides Caitlin, the harder it is to restrain my anger. This empty-headed socialite knows nothing about the woman Caitlin truly is—her spirit, her complexity, her deeply passionate heart.

Finally, I can bear it no longer. I set my napkin down with quiet precision. “Excuse me a moment.”

Before Caitlin can react, I’m striding over to Gabriela’s table. She looks up with feigned surprise.

“Juno, what a lovely—”

“Let’s have a chat,” I interrupt coolly. Taking her elbow in an iron grip, I steer her from the dining room to a secluded alcove nearby. She tries to pull free, but my fingers only tighten in warning.

When we’re alone, I slam her none too gently against the wall. She gasps, eyes widening.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“Making something very clear,” I enunciate coldly. “You will never speak about my wife in those terms again. Do you understand me?”

Gabriela stammers meaningless platitudes. I lean in closer, radiating menace.

“Insult her again, and you’ll learn exactly why my name is so feared. Am I clear?”

Mute, she bobs her head rapidly.

I pause, thinking back to the fundraiser. “One more thing. Caitlin’s drink was spiked last night. I don’t suppose you had anything to do with that?”

Gabriela’s eyes widen. “No! Of course not. I would never—”

Studying her panicked expression, I believe her. She’s many things, but she’s not *that* foolish.

“Good,” I say calmly. “Then we understand each other. I’d prefer this incident remain strictly between us, yes?”

“O-of course,” Gabriela stammers. “My lips are sealed.”

Satisfied, I release her and turn on my heel, leaving her shaking in the shadowy alcove. Let her ponder that warning.

When I return to the table, Caitlin reads my expression and correctly surmises what transpired, based on the roll of her eyes. Still, amusement flickers in her face.

“Feel better?” she asks.

“Much.” I signal for the check, ready to be done with this place.

Once we're seated back in the car, the atmosphere between us seems to relax slightly. Streetlights slide fluidly over Caitlin's pensive features.

"You didn't have to do that, you know," she says finally. "I don't need you charging to my defense."

I choose my next words carefully. "I know. But the thought of anyone speaking ill of you...I found I couldn't tolerate it."

She absorbs this quietly. I sense no recrimination in her silence now, only contemplation. The rest of the drive passes in thoughtful silence. When we return home, Caitlin touches my arm lightly before ascending the stairs.

"Goodnight, Juno."

I savor the warmth of that simple contact long after she's gone. "Goodnight, Caitlin," I whisper into the empty foyer.

There are still walls between us, a hundred rooms shrouded in shadow. But tonight, a light came on in one small chamber, brightening a space once dark.

It's a start.

CHAPTER 10

CAITLIN

The morning light filters in through the curtains, stirring me from sleep. I blink a few times, getting my bearings in the lavish bedroom. Yesterday when I woke, I was in my old bedroom. Today I'm in the guest room. By choice, of course.

Still, the room smells vaguely of Juno. Cedar and jasmine.

Yesterday comes flooding back in a rush. The tense dinner with Gabriela, the forced smiles and stilted small talk. Juno's hand possessively on my lower back, radiating heat even through the layers of my dress. The confrontation afterward, Juno's clipped questions and Gabriela's indignant denials. I'd been so sure Gabriela was hiding something, but Juno was convinced of her innocence. Just another dead end.

With a sigh, I haul myself upright, running a hand through my tangled curls. Living with Juno again has been its own special brand of torture. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, for her to kick me out once more. The only reason I'm here at all is because someone out there—apparently—wants me dead. Or at the very least, knocked out and kidnappable? And as much as I hate to admit it, I'm safer with the Ice Queen's protection than on my own.

After washing and getting dressed, I head downstairs. My steps slow as I near the kitchen, picking up on the clinking of dishes and sizzling food. I pause in the doorway, watching Juno move efficiently around the kitchen. She's standing at the stove flipping pancakes, dark hair swept up in a smooth twist. There's a smudge of flour on her black silk blouse.

“Morning,” she says without turning. Of course she heard me coming. “There’s coffee if you want some.”

“What are you doing?”

“I am making pancakes,” she says, as though it were the most normal thing in the world.

I pour myself a mug in silence, leaning against the counter. Juno stacks a few pancakes onto a plate and holds it out to me.

“Thanks,” I mutter. I’m not ready to pretend we’re some happy couple again. Juno’s mouth tightens, but she doesn’t push it. We both know what a disaster it would be if I lost my temper right now.

Juno clears her throat delicately. “Did you sleep alright?”

“Fine,” I reply curtly, taking a scalding sip of coffee.

She drums her fingers on the counter, the studded rings glinting in the sunlight. “Well, let me know if you need anything. Extra blankets, a different room...”

“I told you I’m fine. And the guest room is more than adequate.”

Juno’s jaw flexes, but her voice stays carefully neutral. “If that’s what you prefer.”

Silence settles between us again. I finish my coffee, wishing I was anywhere but here. Trapped together in this house full of memories, navigating the jagged edges left behind from our relationship. It’s like walking barefoot across broken glass.

Juno clears her throat again. “So...today we need to figure out our next move. Any ideas?”

“Only that bartender. Don’t know who else could’ve drugged me.”

“Right. Well, we’ll pay a visit to the Ruby Realm for her next shift.”

God, this is unbearable. I turn to leave, but Juno’s voice stops me.

“Caitlin, wait.”

I pause, looking back at her. She steps closer, expression intent.

“I know things have been...difficult, between us,” she says haltingly. “But I mean what I say. I want to keep you safe, no matter what’s happened in the past between us.”

I cross my arms, hackles rising. “And is that why you dumped me, too? For my own good? Is it why you’re guilting me into staying here with you now?”

Juno presses her lips together, a furrow forming between her brows. “I won’t apologize for wanting to protect you. But perhaps I shouldn’t have pleaded that you stay.” She meets my gaze unwaveringly. “If you want to leave, truly leave, then I won’t stop you. You have my word.”

I stare at her, caught off guard. I wasn’t expecting her to back down, especially not so quickly. Her sincerity throws me. Maybe she has changed, even just a little. The thought leaves me oddly unsettled.

Clearing my throat, I glance away. “Well...I’ll stick around a bit longer. At least until we figure out who’s after me. It’ll give Paulo time to rest his eyes, huh? If all those other guards can help keep watch.”

Juno’s shoulders relax a fraction. “Thank you. I know you don’t want to be here.”

I shrug, avoiding her too-perceptive gaze. “It’s whatever. I’ve stayed in worse places.”

An awkward beat passes. Juno clears her throat again.

“I’ll be home today again, but I’ll make sure to give you some space. I’ll be in my study, or the library, should you need me. And now I’ll let you get on with your day.” She leaves the kitchen, and I sag on the kitchen bench, hands over my face.

This temporary cease-fire between us is so difficult. But it’s better than open hostility and constant biting remarks. If we’re going to be stuck together, we need to find some kind of neutral ground. As much as I resent being forced back here, she *did* most likely save my life the other night.

I suppose I can try to dial back the antagonism a bit, at least when she's not being a controlling jerk.

Maybe Declan's right, I reflect as I retreat to the guest room. Perhaps it's time I start letting go of the past, stop holding on to old hurts. Easier said than done, of course. Trusting Juno again goes against every self-preserving instinct I have left.

But for now, keeping the peace seems like the smartest play. The rest I can figure out as I go.

I spend the next few hours binge-watching trashy reality shows, carefully avoiding anything about love or romance. I call down for lunch to be sent up. By early evening, though, boredom is setting in. I'm debating whether or not to brave the gym downstairs when there's a knock at my door.

"Come in," I call, muting the TV.

The door inches open and Juno leans in, looking uncharacteristically hesitant.

"Sorry, I can come back..."

I wave her in impatiently. "What's up?"

She steps inside, gaze flitting around the room before settling on me. "I just wanted to let you know, I've given the staff the rest of the day off. Figured we could order in, have a quiet night..." She shrugs. "But that's up to you, of course."

I consider her offer, admittedly tempted. Chinese food and mindless movies does sound pretty good right now. I could do that in here, of course, but...being alone together...

Well. Maybe it's not the worst idea in the world. We could brainstorm new angles on this who-drugged-my-drink conundrum.

I'm not even convincing to myself.

"Yeah, alright," I say, before I can talk myself out of it. "But I get to pick the movie."

Juno smiles, small but genuine. "You've got yourself a deal."

Soon we're settled on the couch with heaps of takeout, queued up on one of the Die Hard movies. I dig into my cashew

chicken as the opening scene starts, hyper aware of Juno sitting just a foot away. But as the movie progresses, we both get absorbed in the action, laughing and gasping in equal measure. I don't think Juno has ever seen Die Hard, so it's fun watching her reactions.

After the movie ends, I shift on the leather couch, trying to stretch out a stiff shoulder. I must've slept on it funny last night.

Juno instantly notices my discomfort. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, just a sore shoulder." I rotate it gingerly, trying to work out the kink.

"Here, let me."

Before I can protest, she slides around behind me on the couch. Her fingers dig into the tight muscles, finding every knot with practiced ease. I bite my lip, suppressing a groan as the tension starts melting away despite myself.

"Better?" she asks after a minute.

I make a vague sound of agreement, not trusting my voice. Her hands eventually still, though she doesn't move from behind me. The moment hangs suspended, both of us unsure what to do next. I'm very aware of her breath against my hair, her knees framing my hips.

"Juno," I say when her fingertips graze my shoulder again. I'm not even sure what I want. For her to back off?

Or...

She pulls back abruptly. "Sorry." Clearing her throat, she slides out from behind me, collects up the empty containers and heads to the kitchen. I release a shaky breath once she's out of the room, dragging both hands through my hair. That was way too close for comfort.

But by the time Juno returns, I've got my equilibrium back. She eyes me thoughtfully as she sits.

"So, I had an idea," she finally says. "Why don't we head out for a bit? Alessa won't tell me when this bartender, Devon, is on shift, but we could show up anyway. Take a chance."

I raise a brow, surprised by the suggestion. “You want to go to the Ruby Realm?”

Juno shrugs, going for casual and missing by a mile. “Yeah, why not? It’s the only lead we have. If the bartender’s not there, well, at least we could have a drink.”

I study her, looking for any angles I’m not seeing yet. But the earnest hope beneath her neutral expression gives me pause.

“Alright, the Ruby it is,” I decide impulsively. “But I’m keeping an eagle eye on anyone pouring my drinks.”

Juno’s smile flashes, there and gone. “Of course. I’ll have the car brought around at ten. That should give us time to change, yes?” She heads upstairs, calling over her shoulder, “Wear something nice.”

CHAPTER 11

JUNO

The sleek black town car glides to a stop outside the discreet entrance of the Ruby Realm. I take a deep breath and steel myself before stepping out into the cold night air, the click of my designer heels sharp against the pavement. Caitlin emerges behind me, her eyes flashing in anticipation.

I nod to the receptionist inside the foyer, and she inclines her head. “Ms. Bianchi, it’s a pleasure to see you. And Ms. O’Sullivan, welcome.”

Alessa is good; her staff are even better. Caitlin has never been here before, and I’m sure I don’t know this receptionist, but she certainly knows us.

“Please go on through,” she says with a smile, gesturing to the inner door. The thick wooden door swings open easily at my push, releasing a wave of warmth, mingled perfumes and sensual jazz music into the foyer. I smooth my hands down my figure-hugging little black dress, watching from the corner of my eye as Caitlin runs a hand through her wild red locks. She’s dressed in a shimmering gold spaghetti-strap top that I itch to yank off her shoulders, and tight leather pants.

She is absolutely divine, and I believe she knows it.

Shoulder to shoulder, we step into the main room of the club. All eyes swivel to us, conversations fading to a hush. Powerful women lounge on plush velvet sofas or murmur intimately in curtained booths. A hum of recognition ripples through the room as they take in the infamous Juno Bianchi—and is that Caitlin O’Sullivan with her? I can practically hear the gossip.

I keep my expression neutral, meeting the appraising stares with cool confidence. The reactions vary: admiration from some, envy and judgment from others. The shadowy underworld of my empire elicits fascination mingled with distaste in these elite circles. But none would dare voice their disapproval to my face. My name commands respect, and fear.

And half the women here owe their careers to me—or my father.

I note the movers and shakers mingling tonight as Caitlin and I move deeper into the club. Celebrities, politicians, CEOs. A nod to a popular actress, a subtle smile to a Manhattan senator. Caitlin bristles almost imperceptibly beside me, chafing at the pretension. But she holds her tongue for once, perhaps cognizant of our purpose here.

But to the women of the Ruby Realm, we are simply a powerful couple enjoying a night out.

Alessa glides towards us, raven hair spilling over one shoulder, ruby lips curved in a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. She embraces me briefly, ever the consummate hostess. But tension simmers beneath her words.

“Juno, how lovely that you could join us tonight.” She air-kisses my cheeks before turning to Caitlin, clasping her hands warmly. “And you look as stunning as always, dear. I'm so pleased to see you both. *Together.*”

Her charm is flawless, but her dark eyes convey a silent message: she thinks my treatment of Caitlin unconscionable. I allow no reaction to show on my face.

“Is Devon here?” I ask. I'm not here to play games.

“No.”

“Are you lying?”

Even Caitlin looks a little surprised at my forthrightness. Alessa doesn't like it much either. “Why don't you go and see for yourself?” she suggests, looping her arm through Caitlin's. “In the meantime, Caitlin, I'd love to show you around...”

As she leads Caitlin away, I catch the subtle warning in Alessa's departing glance.

Careful, cousin.

Devon is not at the bar, which is why Alessa was so comfortable leaving me alone to do my worst. Instead, I mingle solo for a time, exchanging pleasantries with the elite patrons who watch me with veiled curiosity. Many have heard rumors of the turmoil within the Family—indeed, within my marriage—but they know better than to pry.

At the bar in the nightclub area, where Devon is still definitely not on duty. I nurse a glass of merlot, observing the elegant dance floor where female couples sway intimately. Laughter peals from a nearby lounge area where Alessa entertains a group with animated stories, playing the vivacious hostess. I spot Caitlin with her, dazzling a new circle of admirers with her brash wit.

For a moment I simply watch, appreciating her radiance, a bittersweet pang in my chest.

Finishing my wine, I weave through the tables towards her when Alessa appears at my elbow, heading me off.

“There you are! Come sit over here.” She guides me firmly towards another lounge.

“I want to see if my wife is—” I begin coldly, but Alessa waves it off.

“Caitlin's fine. Very popular. Don't worry, she can hold her own, and I'm just dying to hear all about your little tiff with Gabriela last night.”

I tense, clamping down on a flare of anger. Word travels fast, it seems. Maintaining a pleasant facade, I reply, “Just a minor disagreement, easily resolved.”

Alessa tsks as we sit in a private booth, the one where she likes to hold court usually, though now it's just the two of us.

“Now, now, no need to be modest,” Alessa says. “I heard you nearly took poor Gaby's head off.” She laughs gaily as heat rises in my cheeks.

I keep my tone light. “Perhaps you heard exaggerated rumors. Although I did feel the need to clarify where Ms. Martinez stands with Caitlin.”

A coy smile. “I’m certain she understands *perfectly*, now.” More laughter. My cousin is going to drive me insane. “Honestly though, is threatening socialites truly necessary? It hardly seems wise when you already have a target on your back, my dear.”

Her words land like a blow. Staying calm requires effort. “I assure you, I can handle any threats aimed my way.”

“Of course you can! I just meant with all the unrest lately, it’s best not to antagonize potential allies.” She pats my hand. “I only say this as someone who cares for you.”

“Enough of this,” I snap, pulling my hand away. “You know why I’m here, Alessa, and it’s not so you can irritate me by dangling Caitlin in front of your patrons. Is Devon here or not?”

Alessa’s eyes flash with annoyance. “Devon again? I’m afraid she is...unavailable at the moment. Her dance card is quite full.”

“I see.” Devon is with a client, is what Alessa means. But she *is* here. “Perhaps you could pull her from whatever private room she’s in, just for a moment. This won’t take long.”

Alessa laughs sharply. “Don’t be absurd. I won’t disrupt a client’s experience for a trivial matter. Devon’s time is extremely valuable.”

I grab Alessa’s wrist. “This is not a trivial matter,” I snarl, and for the first time, I see doubt in Alessa’s eyes as she wonders if she has pushed me too far.

Before I can say any more, though, Caitlin appears behind me. “There you are. Come dance with me, I love this song.”

Taking my hand firmly off Alessa’s wrist, she pulls me up and leads me away. I’m too stunned to resist.

On the dance floor, Caitlin clasps me close. “For God’s sake, stop letting your cousin get under your skin,” she murmurs.

“She *is* here. Devon. Alessa finally admitted it.”

“Then eyes on the prize tonight. We get what we need from Devon, then we’re gone.”

I let out a shaky breath, refocusing. She’s right. I cannot let Alessa provoke me into acting rashly.

Caitlin pulls me into her arms as a bluesy song pours through the speakers. “We get what we need from the bartender, then we disappear,” she murmurs in my ear. “No more drama. We’ve had two public confrontations this week. Let’s not give these rich bitches any *more* ammunition.”

I sigh, the rage ebbing away. She’s right. For now, I’ll let her lead.

We sway together for several songs, the crowd fading away until it’s just her body against mine, her breath warm on my skin. Despite our troubles, I’m helpless to resist her pull. Being close to her settles my raw nerves, reminds me of sweeter times between us.

We move together, her hands firm on my hips. The crowd fades away, conversations blurring to a low hum. There is only Caitlin, her fiery hair brushing my cheek, her breath warm against my throat. In this moment, we aren’t on opposing sides of a broken marriage. I feel...

Whole.

The song shifts into something slow and sensual. Caitlin’s palms slide up my back, pressing me closer. Our bodies melt together, soft curves aligning with toned muscle. My pulse quickens as her thigh slips suggestively between mine.

We aren’t fighting anymore. Aren’t trading barbs or glares. Her blue eyes gaze at me with naked vulnerability, seeking a lifeline to pull her from the tumult.

My hands reach up, fingers tangling in her hair. Our lips hover a breath apart as we sway, the rest of the world fading away. All the pain and anger falls away, leaving only this feeling, like coming home—

Caitlin turns her head abruptly. “There. The bartender.”

Reality crashes back in. The noise of the club refocuses around us. I spot the blonde bartender, Devon, slipping through the crowd, hand-in-hand with a striking brunette in a sleek pantsuit. A very famous Congresswoman, if I'm not mistaken.

I step back from Caitlin, smoothing my dress. "You're right. Let's do this quickly and get out of here."

Squaring my shoulders, I start towards the bartender, Caitlin following closely. The answers we seek might be within reach.

CHAPTER 12

CAITLIN

I follow Juno through the busy club, noting how she draws both appreciative glances and envious stares. Me, I get a wider berth. Maybe it's the don't-mess-with-me vibe I'm giving off. Good. I need them out of my way.

I spot our mark—the sleek blonde head moving through the crowd. Devon. She laughs at something her companion says, flashing a brilliant smile. And then I recognize the brunette on her arm—Congresswoman Alicia Crane, a rising star. Now what's a politician like her doing in a place like this?

Before I can ponder further, Juno is gliding forward, angling to cut them off. She catches the Congresswoman's gaze and smiles, soft and intimate. Leans in close to say something about a donation that makes Alicia Crane's eyes widen. She laughs, placing a hand on Juno's arm, clearly charmed by whatever clever line Juno has opened with.

I shake off the strange clutch in my belly as I stare at her hand on Juno's arm. This is my opening. I slide up to Devon just as Juno and the Congresswoman reach the door that leads, according to Alessa's tour, to the private rooms in back. My hand darts out, clamping around Devon's elbow before she can follow Clark inside.

Devon whirls, startled. Up close, her delicate features are striking—wide-set gray eyes, sharp cheekbones, a diamond glinting in her nose. Her platinum hair is choppily styled, mussed but still elegant.

“Hey!” she exclaims, tugging at my grip. “What gives?”

I fix her with an uncompromising stare. “We need to talk.”

Recognition flashes across her face. She tries again to pull away, scowling now. “Look, I’m *working*. I don’t have time —”

My fingers tighten just shy of painful. “*Make* time.”

She leans in, voice lowered. “You know who I work for. Do you really want to piss off Alessa on her own turf?”

I snort. “I think she’ll forgive me. Now are we talking here, or somewhere more private?”

Her defiant facade crumbles. She sags back against the wall with a huff. “I have a few seconds before Alicia notices I’m missing, I guess. What do you want?”

“The truth. The other night at the Chatsworth Regency, I was drugged. Did you see anything? Anyone near my drink?”

“No.”

“Did *you* drug me?”

Her eyes flash with indignation. “You really think I’d do something like that?” I merely lift a brow. She shakes her head sharply, nose ring glinting under the lights. “No way. I like this job, and Alessa treats me well. Plus I’m not suicidal enough to piss off Juno Bianchi.”

I shrug, unmoved by her protests. Loyalties shift easily when real pressure comes into play.

Devon’s voice drops further, her words clipped and urgent. “I swear to God, I didn’t see anything, alright? I was slammed behind the bar all night. Never looked up till you keeled over.”

I study her face, seeking any hint of deception, but her indignation seems genuine. I won’t get anything more from her tonight.

I release her elbow. She shakes out her arm, scowling, as I march through the door to the private rooms. They’re in the hallway, still engrossed in conversation. Juno gestures elegantly as she speaks, and the Congresswoman hangs on her

every word. Say what you will about Juno Bianchi, but the woman knows how to keep someone's interest.

Movement catches my eye—Alessa herself coming through the door behind me with a straight mouth and laser-eyed focus on me. For a second, the resemblance to her cousin Juno is a tad bit too strong for my liking. I guess Devon told on me.

Before I can even open my mouth, Alessa seizes my arm in a surprisingly firm grip. I'd resist on principle, but curiosity wins out as she pulls me back toward the club proper. Besides, I glimpse Juno's scowl as she watches Alessa dragging me away.

Let her stew for a bit.

Alessa guides me to another door, marked *Private*, then down a dim corridor to an unmarked door—her office, judging by the sleek modern decor inside. Glass desk, leather chairs, tidy in a way that surprises me given Alessa's appetite for chaos.

She shuts the door and faces me, arms crossed. "Well? What's your excuse for harassing my staff?"

I sink into one of the plush leather chairs, making myself at home. No point standing on ceremony with Alessa. "Just asking a few questions. You know that's why Juno and I came tonight."

Anger flashes in her dark eyes. "Devon said you accused her of drugging you. You could have asked me if you want to know: Devon's ambitious, not stupid. She'd never risk her future over some petty prank."

I scowl. "This was no prank, Alessa."

Alessa sinks slowly into the chair across from me, her anger dissipating. "I know," she says quietly. "And I'm sorry for that."

I study her warily. What's her angle here?

She sighs, leaning forward. Dark waves of hair spill over her shoulder as she meets my gaze. "Look, I know you and Juno are having issues right now. Honestly? I think she's being an idiot."

My guard rises at the mention of Juno. “It’s none of your business,” I snap.

Alessa holds up a conciliatory hand. “You’re right. But I also know you make my cousin happier than she’s ever been. Happier than she deserves, really.” She smiles wryly.

I take a seat, then shift in it as Alessa keeps looking at me. I’m increasingly uneasy with where this is headed. “Doesn’t matter,” I say. “We’re through. Soon as I figure out who spiked my drink, I’m gone for good.”

Sadness flickers across Alessa’s face. “I suspected as much. And as for Juno...I think it’s good that you push back with her. She needs that, even if she doesn’t like it. And I want you to know, you have complimentary lifetime membership here at The Ruby Realm. Anyone who can put Juno in her place is alright in my book.”

Despite my wariness, I feel a flicker of gratitude. But this conversation has dredged up too many raw emotions. Time to end it.

I stand abruptly. “Thanks, but it’s not my kind of place.”

If she’s offended, Alessa doesn’t show it. She simply rises and opens the door for me. No fuss, no pushback.

Gotta respect that.

As we emerge from the back hallway, I immediately spot Juno at the bar, spine rigid, scowl at full force. Her deadly glare could curdle dairy as she pins Alessa with it. She *really* didn’t like me being whisked away. Petty pleasure flickers through me at the thought.

Alessa turns to me, warmth in her smile as she says loudly, “Please don’t forget: the Ruby Realm will always be open to you, Caitlin.” Then her smile turns hostile as she regards Juno. “*Ciao, cugina.*”

I can’t contain a smirk at Juno’s still-murderous expression. Messing with Juno Bianchi and living to tell about it? Now that’s entertainment.

But Juno's temper looks fit to boil over. Time to make a discreet exit before things get messy. As we head outside, the pulsing music fades behind us.

I take a deep breath of the crisp night air, grateful to be free of the cloying atmosphere inside. Juno is silent as we climb into the waiting car, tension radiating from her rigid frame.

"Well?" is all she asks.

"The bartender didn't see anything, and she insists she didn't do it herself. Alessa backed her up."

Juno stays silent the rest way back. Fine by me. I'm in no mood for conversation, either.

Back at the brownstone, I make straight for the gym Juno has set up in the basement, itching to unleash some of this restless energy. If I'm stuck here under Juno's watchful eye, might as well take advantage of the facilities.

I wrap my hands and take my frustration out on the punching bag. The rhythmic smack of fists on leather fills the air as I settle into the familiar routine. All my focus narrows down to this singular purpose. Nothing exists right now except for me and this bag.

I lose track of time down here, sweat dripping as I dance around the swaying bag. But eventually my muscles begin to burn, the adrenaline fading. I unwind the wraps from my throbbing hands and head upstairs to wash off.

The hot water sluicing over me washes away the last clinging tendrils of tension. By the time I towel off and dress in a loose tank and shorts, I feel centered again, mind clear and focused.

It's past one a.m. but I'm not tired, and I bet Juno's awake still, too. Time to go over what we've learned so far.

I find Juno in her study, frowning at a stack of documents on the desk. Her dark hair is twisted up in a messy knot, the overhead light glinting off the reddish highlights at her temples. She's shed her sleek black dress from earlier, swapping it out for silk pajamas and a matching robe that likely cost more than my monthly salary.

Speaking of my monthly salary, I need to get word to my boss, Sal, that I'll be out for a few more days.

Juno glances up as I enter, eyes skimming briefly over my bare legs before snapping back to the papers. A frown creases her brow. "We've run out of leads. The bartender was a dead end. We have no other suspects."

I sink cross-legged onto the leather couch, grabbing a notepad and pen from the side table. "Let's go over what we know again. Build a timeline."

Juno's frown deepens, but she sets aside the documents. "Very well." She steeple her fingers, gathering her thoughts. "You arrived just after eight o'clock..."

She walks me through the events of that night, precise as always. I take notes as she speaks, jotting down details. The catering staff, the other guests and donors. Anyone who might have a problem with Juno—or with me.

There are a lot of names.

"What about the drink itself?" I ask. "Could it have been doctored at the source?"

Juno considers this. "The alcohol was provided by Alessa's regular vendor. They underwent a thorough screening when she started contracting with them."

"Easy enough to jab a hypodermic in a sealed bottle."

"True. But in that case, other people would have been affected also. Still..." Juno's gaze turns distant, mentally sifting through possibilities. "I'll have our people do sweep of the vendor, dig deeper into their staff. See if anything shakes loose."

I nod, noting this down. We work our way systematically through, leaving no angle unexplored. My respect for Juno's sharp, analytical mind grudgingly grows. Whatever else she is, the woman knows how to think logically.

It's nearly 3am by the time we exhaust all new possibilities. A massive yawn cracks my jaw. The lateness is catching up with me, the day's tension leaving me drained.

Across from me, Juno looks similarly worn, though she's clearly trying to hide it. She reaches for the stack of documents. "You should get some rest. I need to read the reports Angelo has been sending through."

I snort, plucking the pages deftly from her hand. Ignoring her noise of protest, I set them back on the desk, well out of her reach.

"Bed," I declare. "Now. The paperwork will keep. Don't make me drag you."

I bite my lip at the words, but Juno only goes quiet and, tying her robe together, she turns obediently toward the door.

I follow a few paces behind, unable to contain a smirk. Alessa was right. Sometimes getting Juno Bianchi to cooperate just takes a little judicious use of pushback.

On the landing upstairs, Juno pauses, looking suddenly awkward. "Well...goodnight then."

I mumble my own goodnight and shuffle off to collapse onto blessed softness in the guest room. As I drift off, thoughts swirl hazily through my mind...machinations and betrayals, enemies lurking in shadows and in broad daylight...

But one mystery eclipses all others—the enigma of Juno Bianchi herself.

What secrets lie hidden behind those dark eyes? And why does unraveling them seem to matter more to me than even this threat to my own life?

CHAPTER 13

CAITLIN

The loud banging on the front door the next morning jolts me from my coffee. Who the hell is pounding on the door of the Bianchi townhouse at 9am? I glance at Juno, who shrugs, puzzlement crinkling the corners of her eyes. She's relaxed, casual even, in a black cashmere sweater and jeans.

"Are you expecting someone?" I ask. Juno shakes her head, eyebrows furrowing.

More loud knocking, practically vibrating the door on its hinges. I rise from my seat. "I'll get it."

Juno reaches out, grabbing my wrist. "Let security handle it."

I gently pry her fingers off. "It's fine. They would've gotten rid of whoever it is already if it was a threat." This overprotectiveness is suffocating. I don't need her hovering every second.

The banging continues as I stride down the hall lined with imposing oil paintings of Bianchi ancestors. I fling open the door, the bitter winter air biting my cheeks.

"Caitlin!" Declan barrels past me into the foyer before I can react. He scans the space with a scowl, seeming to assess for any threats. His gaze settles on me and his shoulders relax fractionally.

I shut the door and turn to face him. His unexpected arrival has set me on edge. "Good morning to you too, Dec."

He drags a hand through his brown hair, mussing it. His eyes bore into mine. "What the hell are you still doing here, Caity?"

I fold my arms across my chest. “I could ask you the same thing. Showing up unannounced like this?”

Declan rolls his eyes. “Don’t deflect. Why are you back with her?” He jabs his finger over my shoulder toward the hall.

Back with her? I bristle at the accusation. “I’m not back with her. I’m staying here while we investigate who drugged me the other night. I told you all this.”

Declan snorts derisively. “Oh yeah?” He steps closer, voice dropping to a fierce whisper. “She’s playing you, Caity. Once she’s got her hooks in you again, it’ll be even harder to get away.”

My hands ball into fists. Who the hell does he think he’s talking to? “You need to back the hell off,” I say lowly. “Now.”

Before he can respond, footsteps echo from down the hall. Juno appears, eyebrows raised. She sweeps her gaze over Declan and me, assessing. “Is there a problem here?”

Declan whirls around to face her. “Yeah, there’s a problem. You dragged my sister back here when you know she wants nothing to do with you anymore.” He advances toward Juno, who stands her ground.

She regards him coolly, unruffled. “Mind your tone. You’re on my property, O’Sullivan.”

Declan bares his teeth. “Duly fucking noted. We can take this outside if you prefer—or are you as much of a coward as Caity tells me you are?”

Yikes.

Juno inhales sharply through her nose, going pale. She looks two seconds away from vaulting over to throttle him.

I quickly step between them, hands raised. “That’s enough!” They both fall silent, blinking at me in surprise. Jesus, watching them fight is giving me a migraine. The stress, combined with the late night...I press my fingers to my temples, trying to soothe the building pressure. “You both need to calm down.”

Juno recovers first, smoothing her sweater and schooling her features back into that icy mask. “You’re right, Caitlin. Fighting won’t resolve anything.” She clasps her hands behind her back. “Though certain parties seem determined to provoke one.”

I give her a warning look before turning to Declan. He watches Juno through narrowed eyes.

“Dec, I’m fine. I don’t need you as well as the whole damn Bianchi Family on my tail, okay?”

“I’m not going to leave you alone until I’m satisfied that you’re safe,” he insists.

“You’ve got some nerve showing up here pretending to care about Caitlin after the things you’ve said about her behind her back.” Juno’s voice could freeze lava.

Declan’s eyebrows shoot up. “The hell?” He looks between me and Juno, utterly lost. “What is she talking about?”

Juno’s glances at me, regret flickering across her face. “I shouldn’t have said anything. It’s between the two of you.”

Declan is having none of it. He whirls on me, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Well? You gonna explain what the hell she meant?”

I sigh, squeezing the bridge of my nose. “Brendon told me years ago how you were always talking shit about me to your friends. Saying I wasn’t as good a driver as you, or something. It’s fine, though. I mean, it’s not fine, it’s asshole behavior, but it was so long ago now...” I shrug. “I don’t even care anymore.”

But Declan’s eyes widen. He takes a step back, looking like I sucker punched him. “Are you fucking kidding me? I’d never say anything like that!”

I hold up my hands in a placating gesture. “That’s just what Brendon told me. And when I asked you about it that one time, you got really defensive—”

“Because it was bullshit, and I thought you were being ridiculous even suggesting I’d say that!” Declan explodes. He

scrubs a hand down his face, exhaling harshly through his nose. His shoulders slump as the fight bleeds out of him. “Caity, you’re a way better driver than me. I’d have to be a damn fool to deny it.” His lips quirk into a grudging smile. “And we both know I ain’t no fool.”

He’s telling the truth. I can see it in his eyes. I pull him into a hug, relieved the misunderstanding is cleared up.

“I’m sorry, Dec. I guess Brendon had things mixed up.”

He returns the hug fiercely, though he growls, “Bullshit. Brendon loves sowing discord, haven’t you noticed that over the years? I’m gonna have *words* with our dear brother.” He pulls back, hands gripping my shoulders. “I expect to see you back racing soon, yeah? Don’t leave me hanging.”

I give a small smile. “We’ll see. No promises.”

That seems to satisfy him. He releases me and turns to Juno. They size each other up for a moment before Declan mutters, “You better take care of her, or you’ll answer to every O’Sullivan brother.” Before Juno can respond, he strides out, the door slamming shut behind him. The sound echoes through the quiet foyer.

Juno clears her throat delicately. “Well. That was certainly... dramatic.” She smooths her sweater, not quite meeting my eyes. “Shall we continue breakfast?”

I nod, suddenly drained. My legs feel like jelly as I follow Juno to the kitchen. I slump into a seat at the kitchen island as she busies herself preparing coffee. The rich aroma usually comforts me, but today it turns my stomach. I stare blankly at the steaming mug Juno sets before me, replaying the confrontation with Declan in my mind.

“Are you alright?” Juno asks quietly. She takes the stool across from me, brow furrowed in concern.

I meet her gaze. “Just thinking about how Declan and I nearly ruined our relationship over a stupid misunderstanding.” I wrap my hands around the warm mug, soaking in its heat. “If he hadn’t shown up today...” I trail off, shaking my head.

“But I can’t think that Brendon did it on purpose. Why bother?”

Juno traces her finger around the rim of her own mug. “Some people just enjoy chaos, as Declan said. And misunderstandings have a nasty tendency to fester when left unaddressed.” Her voice holds a bitter tinge. “But regret serves no purpose beyond reminding us to communicate better in the future.”

I raise an eyebrow at that. “Speaking from experience?”

She presses her lips together in a thin smile. “You could say that.” She takes a sip of coffee before continuing. “I’ve never done well with...complicated emotions. It’s easier to view things through the lens of logic and facts. Clean, neat. Unclouded by messier factors.”

Messier factors. I’m what she’s tactfully referring to. *I’m* the complication that muddies her pristine logical framework.

I stare down at my hands wrapped around the mug’s curved handle. “Not everything fits nicely into logical boxes,” I finally say. “Sometimes things get messy. That’s life. And avoiding it won’t make it stop—or go away.”

I meet her gaze again. Her dark eyes are conflicted. “We should have talked more before I...before I asked you to leave,” she admits. “My reasons seemed clear from a logical perspective, but I see now that was a failure of mine, thinking only about the facts. Trying to ignore the...the feelings.” She inhales shakily. “I’m sorry, Caitlin.”

My throat constricts around the sudden lump inhabiting it. She’s never apologized so openly before. I blink rapidly against the stinging in my eyes and take a sip of coffee to steady myself. The bitter heat scorches my tongue.

“Why didn’t you *talk* to me?” My voice comes out hoarse. I clear my throat and try again. “Help me understand.”

Juno traces her thumb down the side of her mug. “I thought distancing you from the Family’s conflicts would ultimately keep you safer. But clearly that was misguided, considering recent events.” She huffs a mirthless laugh. “As for why I

didn't talk to you about it, well. It's easier to make decisions based on facts and logic. Easier to destroy than to create."

She lapses into pensive silence. I watch her over the rim of my mug, examining the minute shifts in her expression. The creasing of her brow, the tightening of her jaw. Her touches of vulnerability are so rare. I want to capture this moment between my hands and hold it close.

"I'm not very logical myself," I finally say. "But carrying all this hurt just poisons us both. If we keep letting it fester..." I exhale shakily, meeting her gaze. "I don't want to hate you, Juno."

Her hand covers mine, squeezing gently. Her skin is cool against my knuckles. "I could never hate you, Caitlin." She ducks her head, trying to catch my lowered eyes. "Do you believe me?"

I turn my palm up beneath hers, lacing our fingers together. The touch is familiar, intimate. "I believe you mean it," I say carefully. "But there's a lot that went wrong between us. I don't know if it can be solved. If you even *want* to solve it?"

Juno nods, blinking hard. "I do. Oh, Caitlin, I *do*. But I know I've hurt you deeply. I'll spend every day proving myself if that's what it takes." She brings our joined hands to her lips, brushing a feather-light kiss over my knuckles.

The delicate contact sends sparks skittering across my skin. My heartbeat quickens as I meet her solemn gaze, but I take my hand away gently. "Let's take this slow. And—just *talk* to me," I plead softly. "No more shutting each other out, okay?"

The corners of her mouth lift. "Okay."

For now, it's enough.

After breakfast, I help Juno clear the dishes away. We move around each other in easy synchrony, the domestic chore creating a sense of closeness. As Juno finishes rinsing the plates, I make a decision.

“I should call Sal and let him know I won’t be in at the garage again today.”

“Alright. Then we should review the footage again.”

I bite back a groan. “There’s nothing there that we haven’t seen a million times before. I think we need to widen the investigation. The same people who did this are probably the same people who killed your father. Right?” I regret saying it so casually when I see Juno wince.

“It’s a possibility,” she says.

Juno never cried after his death, not all through the funeral or after, either.

I push off the sink and grab her hand. “Come on. Let’s go check the damn footage again.” I lead her upstairs to her office, where I settle onto the leather couch lining the right wall as she pulls up security footage on her tablet from the night I was drugged, then comes to sit next to me.

“Like I said, Devon denied involvement,” I say as Juno skips through innocuous clips of caterers and guests mingling. “She seemed to be telling the truth. And she said she didn’t see anything.”

Juno makes a noncommittal noise, eyes glued to the screen. “Perhaps, although anyone can feign ignorance. We must examine all possibilities.”

I bite my tongue against a snippy retort. Of course she assumes the worst of people. Although given her Family history, I can’t entirely blame her.

I scoot closer, peering at the screen. We watch my interaction with Devon play out. She prepares my drink efficiently, movements smooth and unhurried. No furtive glances or sleight of hand. Nothing overtly suspicious.

Juno rewinds and watches again. And again. By the fifth repetition I’m ready to snatch the tablet away from her.

“This is pointless,” I snap. “You’re obsessing over one possibility.”

Juno's mouth thins into a dissatisfied line. "We can't dismiss her without being certain."

"Oh my god." I rake my hands through my hair. "Use some damn sense! Why would she risk her job to drug me?"

"Money," Juno says flatly. "Or leverage. Or perhaps someone threatened her."

"This paranoia is exactly why we're in this mess." I stand abruptly. "I'm done staring at the same five minutes of nothing. Let me know if you manage to extract anything useful."

I'm halfway to the door when Juno's voice halts me. "Caitlin, wait." I turn, and the stress etched on her face gives me pause. The creased brow, the bruise-like smudges under her eyes. Exhaustion lingers in her slumped posture.

"I'm listening," I say more gently.

Juno's throat bobs as she swallows. Her gaze darts between mine uncertainly. She seems younger like this, stripped of her usual bravado. Vulnerability doesn't come naturally to her. "You're right," she says at last, with a rueful twist of her lips. "I become...fixated at times. Thank you for your patience."

"So we can move on from this now? Figure out another lead?"

"Yes. Let's do that. Together?" Her hopeful smile warms me like the first rays of sunlight after a long winter. Cautious optimism takes root within my heart. With care, with trust, we might nurture this fragile reconciliation into something new.

I'm not ready to forgive—not yet.

But one day...I might be.

CHAPTER 14

JUNO

As much as we hoped to dig up another lead yesterday, nothing came of it. Caitlin and I ended up watching more movies, after she told me I needed to improve my pop culture knowledge, and we were both so exhausted from the previous night that we went to our—separate—beds early.

And now Caitlin casually announces over the remnants of breakfast this morning that she needs to go to Sal's Auto Shop to pick up her paycheck. I tense, the urge to forbid her leaving nearly overwhelming.

But the memory of our last explosive argument over this very issue rings clear in my mind. I *can't* control Caitlin's actions, no matter how strong the desire to protect her burns within me. She chafes under any restrictions on her independence, needing the freedom to make her own choices, even if they terrify me.

So I take a slow breath, clamping down on the immediate objection rising in my throat. If I try to impose my will and restrict her movements, Caitlin will only rebel harder. We've only just begun to rebuild the fragile trust between us. I can't jeopardize that progress by reverting to my domineering ways, no matter how justified they seem to me.

Caitlin watches me closely from across the kitchen table, her jaw tight, no doubt braced for an argument herself. I know she's testing me, waiting to see if I'll try to control her decisions and restrict her freedom like I did in the past. I struggle to keep my inner turmoil from showing on my face, maintaining a calm demeanor.

“Take Paulo with you at least,” I say evenly, keeping my tone free of command. Caitlin’s eyes widen slightly in surprise. Clearly she expected more resistance from me. “I’d feel better knowing you have protection out there,” I try, and she seems receptive. “Please.”

I resist every instinct urging me to make it an order, instead appealing to her emotions and understanding. If it were anyone else, I’d have my way without question. But Caitlin has always been the fiery exception to my iron-clad rules, defiantly challenging my authority.

In fact, she’s the only one able to openly defy me and live.

Caitlin studies me silently across the table for a long, tense moment before nodding slowly. “Fine. But just Paulo, no other goons trailing my every move. Plus...” She takes a breath. “I want to take the Ferrari. I assume it’s still in the private lot nearby?”

I bite my tongue about that, knowing it will only start a fight. “Of course.”

“Then I should give her a run. It’ll be good for her.”

“It’s a car, Caitlin, not a dog.”

She gives a small smile. “Cars need running too, Juno. Besides, I’ve missed her.”

I refuse to get jealous over a car. “Fine,” I say. “But Paulo goes with you.” This compromise is the best I can hope for without risking open conflict. As much as it pains me to leave her safety in the hands of just one man, I know I have to respect her needs.

But before Caitlin leaves, we are interrupted by Angelo’s arrival. He smiles to see her, and she gives a shy, embarrassed smile in return. “You’re still here,” he says with surprise.

“Yeah, I...” She gives a shrug.

“Caitlin and Paulo are headed off to Sal’s Auto,” I say, hoping that Angelo might insist for me that she not go without more guards. But he just gives me a troubled look.

“Is that wise?”

Caitlin grits her teeth. “I need my coat,” she says brightly, too brightly, and runs upstairs, where I imagine she’s screaming into her pillow.

Angelo looks at me. “Juno, you told me your priority was to keep Ms. O’Sullivan safe.”

“And so it is.”

“You also convinced me that the best method would be to keep her away from *you*.”

“I have not asked for your advice, Angelo,” I warn him.

He sighs. “No,” he says heavily. “You have not.”

Caitlin is coming back down with her coat and a fixed smile. “Okay, well—the Ferrari’s calling,” she says with a fake smile. “I’ll see you later, Juno.” And she tries to slip past both Angelo and me.

“Wait,” Angelo says, “you’re driving yourself?”

Caitlin stifles a groan as she turns in the doorway. I can practically see her swallow it. “Yeah, Paulo and I are going to just nip around the corner, grab the Ferrari, then be on our way.”

“It’s a sunny morning for once,” Angelo says, “and I only came to drop off my report to Juno.” He hands it to me as he speaks. “Perhaps I’ll walk with you and Paulo to the private garage. Stretch my legs a little.”

Caitlin agrees with only minor reluctance, slightly taken aback. But I’m pleased, even though I try not to show it. Angelo isn’t in the prime of life, but he’s no stranger to self-defense. I like knowing that she’ll have protection on the street as they walk. Once she’s in the Ferrari, I know without a doubt that she’ll be able to out-drive anyone who tries to attack her on the road. She saved both our lives with her driving skills, after all.

From the window, I watch Paulo and Angelo, with Caitlin between them, setting out in the brisk morning air until they disappear from view.

This is her choice, I remind myself. I need to start trusting her instincts.

But ten minutes later, when the deafening boom of an explosion shatters the silence, it only takes a second for my mind to associate it with Caitlin.

In that suspended moment, all I can envision is *her*—broken, burnt, lifeless amidst carnage—my worst fears come true.

I'm through the door in seconds, sprinting heedlessly down the sidewalk with several guards racing after me, shouting. I nearly knock over startled and confused pedestrians who are running away as I run toward the blast.

None of them matter. Only Caitlin.

As I round the last corner, the sight before me stops me dead in my tracks for an anguished moment. A towering pillar of black smoke billows from the overturned, flaming wrecks that were once cars—and there I see Caitlin's beloved Ferrari, too. The vehicle is one of several, the shape of it making it recognizable, though it's been blown onto its mangled roof by the force of the massive blast.

She can't have been in there. She *can't*. Life cannot be so cruel to me, surely—

Frantically I scan the bystanders, searching a sea of unfamiliar faces for any sign of her fiery red hair as the acrid smoke stings my eyes.

"Caitlin!" I scream desperately over the din as I push through the people. All I can focus on is finding her, making sure she's safe. She has to be here. I can't lose her now, not after everything we just survived together.

"Caitlin!" My normally commanding voice breaks with fear. The heat from the flaming debris presses against me as I search every face intently.

Still no response.

Panic is threatening to choke me as I imagine the worst. I'm seconds away from tearing into the smoldering remains of the car when a flash of red through the haze catches my eye.

Relief floods my nervous system, leaving me unsteady on my feet as I stumble forward—toward Caitlin’s disheveled form leaning heavily against a nearby lamppost for support.

I reach her in seconds, hands running over her automatically in frantic inspection. “Are you hurt? Talk to me, please,” I beg raggedly, terror in my voice. I need to hear her, to reassure myself this is real.

Caitlin blinks at me dazedly as the chaos rages on around us, our own private island. “I’m...I’m okay, Juno, just shaken. Angelo pushed me out of the way just in time. But Paulo...”

I follow her stunned gaze to where Paulo lies unconscious, Angelo leaning over him. He gives me a somber nod as I catch his eye, telling me that Paulo is still alive, at least. He stabs an urgent finger back toward the townhouse, clearly ordering me to get Caitlin out of here. The ambulance and police and fire department are all on the way, nearly here, judging by the closeness of the sirens.

Caitlin sags against me and I wrap a supportive arm around her waist protectively, then start leading her away, back towards the safety of the townhouse. She can walk alright, but still seems dazed.

Once home, I gently settle Caitlin onto the living room sofa, draping a soft blanket around her. The doctor is on his way, and now that the immediate urgency has passed, the full weight of what almost happened settles over me.

I almost lost her today. The thought leaves me unsteady, palms braced on my knees as I kneel before her.

“Caitlin,” I gasp out unsteadily. Caitlin’s eyes widen in surprise at the tears I don’t even try to restrain anymore.

“Oh, Juno...” she breathes, reaching for me tentatively. I cling to her almost desperately in response, the words spilling out in a fervent rush.

“I love you. I’ve always loved you, Caitlin, even when I couldn’t show it. If I’d lost you today, I...” My voice cracks at the overwhelming rush of emotion. “It would have destroyed me. You’re *everything* to me.”

Caitlin's hand comes up to gently brush away the tears streaking down my face, her own eyes shimmering with emotion. "I love you too," she whispers. "And I'm right here, Juno. I'm right here. We're together, and we'll—we'll work everything out."

I crush her fiercely against me then, so relieved to feel her solid and real in my arms. Euphoria washes through me in dizzying waves as we cling together. The world has tried so hard to tear us apart, but we keep surviving, keep coming back to one another. Now we're stronger than ever.

The creak of the stairs alerts me moments before Angelo appears in my periphery. I raise my head slowly to meet his knowing gaze, no doubt taking in my tear-stained face. "The doctor is here, but I'll give you two a moment," he says quietly.

"Wait!" Caitlin calls. "Paulo?"

"He's on his way to the hospital now."

I wipe away the tears from my cheeks and rise to my feet, sniffing. "Bring the doctor in," I say. "I want to make sure Caitlin is alright."

Once the doctor has given her the all-clear, and we are along again once more, the guards doubled outside and all Family members alerted, I sit next to my wife on the sofa. Paulo's condition is stable, I've been informed; a concussion, and an overnight stay in the hospital, but he'll be released quickly.

Caitlin's hands come up to frame my face as she searches my eyes intently. "Talk to me, Juno. Tell me what you're thinking right now." Her thumb strokes my cheek, grounding me.

I let out a shaky breath as I put my arms around her, afraid to let go. "You're my greatest weakness, Caitlin. My enemies know that now more than ever. As long as you're near me, you'll be a target." My voice catches on the difficult truth.

Caitlin's jaw sets stubbornly at that, some fire returning to her eyes. "If you think you're going to send me away again—"

"No," I say. "No, never. I...I couldn't. It would kill me."

She gives a sigh of relief. "Listen, Juno," she says after a moment, "*I* decide what risks I take, no one else. I'm done running from this, from us. I'm not leaving your side again, no matter the danger."

Despite everything, her defiance brings a hint of a smile to my lips. This is why I love her, that fierceness, that determination. "I know better than to try and stop you by now," I admit wryly. I tuck a lock of hair gently behind her ear. "But I need you to be safe. I can't lose you, Caitlin. You're my world."

"You won't lose me. We protect each other now, that's what love really means. Partners, remember?" Caitlin rests her forehead against mine, her nearness soothing my lingering fear.

"Partners," I echo in agreement, strange and unfamiliar emotions welling up. "Always."

We stay curled up together as the winter sun sinks low in the sky, drawing comfort simply from each other's presence. The world has tried so hard to tear us apart, but we emerged stronger for it. Ready to stand united against anything.

As I hold Caitlin close, her steady heartbeat and warmth grounding me, I know without doubt that together we can survive whatever our enemies unleash. As long as we stand side by side, partners against it all, our love can overcome the deadly world we inhabit.

But soon our enemies will witness the lengths I'll go to keep this woman. They will regret the day they threatened to destroy my world.

I'll make certain of it.

CHAPTER 15

JUNO

Once night has fallen, and I ask for the hundredth time, “Are you sure you’re alright?”, I feel a little shift in the atmosphere between us.

Caitlin shrugs this time, eyes fixed on the ornate Persian rug. “I’m fine,” she says. “Really. You don’t have to keep asking.”

Gently, I tilt her chin up until our eyes meet. Hers are clouded, storms brewing beneath the surface. Fear and doubt gnaw at my insides.

“What is it?” I ask softly.

“It’s just...” She sighs. “Admit it, Juno. This bomb today, it changes everything. You’re going to keep me in bubble wrap, trapped in this gilded cage. I know you.”

I flinch, but only because her accusation isn’t wrong. My instinct, borne from bone-deep terror, is to do whatever it takes to protect her from further harm.

But I already know where that road leads. To heartbreak and estrangement. And I cannot lose Caitlin again.

So I push down the panicked voice clamoring to lock her away, safe and untouchable. Take a deep, steadying breath. Clasp her delicate hand between both of mine.

“Caitlin.” My voice wavers slightly. “I know you must think I’m about to clamp down, tighten the leash. But I promised you I’d do whatever I needed to do to make things right.” I search her face beseechingly. “I need you to understand where

all this over-protectiveness comes from. Why I am the way I am.”

Caitlin’s eyes soften marginally. She doesn’t speak, just continues watching me steadily. I take that as my cue to continue.

“You have to know, I wasn’t always like this.” I give a faint, rueful half-smile. “When I was young, really young, I was a normal kid. Carefree. Happy.”

Unbidden memories surface: my mother’s silvery laugh, my father tossing me gleefully into the air. A familiar bittersweet ache blooms in my chest.

Caitlin’s fingers tighten around mine. “What happened?” she asks gently.

I stare down at our joined hands, focusing on the contrast—her smooth alabaster skin under my tanned fingers.

“As you know, my mother died when I was seven.” Even after all these years, saying the words out loud still feels like shards of glass in my throat. “After she passed, my father...changed. His light went out.” I swallow hard. “He became cold, withdrawn. Obsessed with preparing me to take over the family empire.”

I look down again, unable to bear the pity in her gaze.

“He would tell me, ‘Emotions make you weak, Juno. Don’t let anything touch your heart.’ And I learned his lessons well. Built walls around myself.”

“Oh, Juno.” Caitlin’s voice is thick. She frames my face gently in her hands, and I have to close my eyes against the surge of emotions. “I’m so sorry.”

A lump rises in my throat. I clutch her wrist like a lifeline, struggling to articulate words that have remained locked away for over two decades.

“Losing my mother shattered me, Caitlin,” I rasp finally. “When I lost her, it felt like losing a piece of my soul. I thought that love would only ever bring me pain. So I learned

to rely only on myself. I can't..." My voice hitches on a sob. "I can't survive that kind of loss again. I can't lose you, too."

And then her arms are around me, holding me close, one hand gently stroking my hair as the tears fall freely. I cling to her slender frame like a castaway to driftwood.

Eventually the storm passes, leaving me wrung out and empty. I remain curled against her, soaking in her warmth, her steady heartbeat.

When I finally lift my head, shame prickles my skin. "I'm sorry," I rasp, wiping my eyes. "I didn't mean to fall apart like that."

Caitlin tilts my chin up firmly. "You have nothing to apologize for. I'm honored you trusted me enough to open up."

Her unwavering acceptance soothes my fraying nerves. I give her a watery half-smile. "What about you, little hellcat? Your childhood was no cakewalk either, I'm sure."

Her full lips quirk up. "Now that's an understatement." Her amusement fades as quickly as it came. "It's something we have in common, unfortunately. My mother died when I was only a little older than you. And after that, it was pure chaos. My dad drowned himself in work. He was always out—never home—and my brothers tried to fill the void, but..." She shakes her head, red waves spilling over her shoulders. "They smothered me, those boys. I felt so..." She wraps her arms around herself. "Trapped. Like I didn't even own myself. I acted out because I was so desperate for freedom. The danger, the thrill...it made me feel alive. And Dad used to get *so mad* about it—it was the only thing he ever paid me much attention, when he was telling me off. The only memories I have of him throughout my teenage years are of him shouting at me for messing around with cars, or telling me he didn't have time for my nonsense because he had to go to work."

Reaching up, I tuck a fiery strand behind her ear, letting my thumb linger on her delicate cheekbone. "I'm sorry. He *does* love you, you know."

“Maybe,” she says, sounding unconvinced. “But he has a funny way of showing it. I think that’s why I got so angry when *you* worked so hard.” She sighs. “I’m sorry for that, Juno. I know you’re important, I know you have a whole empire resting on your shoulders—”

“*You* are the most important thing to me. I never meant to make you feel second best, Caitlin. I thought...I thought I was making us stronger. More secure. I told myself I was working for a future for both of us, but—like your father—I was using work as an excuse. I think we’re more alike than either of us realized, Caitlin. I wish...I wish we’d talked like this before.”

“Me too.” Caitlin bites her lip. “I need this marriage to be a partnership, Juno. Equal in every way. I can’t go back to feeling powerless or caged.”

Her ultimatum resonates deep in my bones. She’s right. For this to work, for us to move forward, things need to fundamentally change.

I lace our fingers together, meeting her resolute stare head-on. “I know I’ve been overbearing, trying to shield you from all harm. The thought of losing you...” I squeeze my eyes shut briefly against the visceral fear clawing up my throat. “It terrifies me. But loving you has only made me stronger, not weaker.”

Caitlin’s eyes shine like the sky on a sunny day. She frames my face in her hands, touch infinitely gentle. “Please don’t shut me out anymore. Let me carry some of the burden with you.”

My lungs constrict. “I’ll try, Caitlin; I can promise you that. I’m so used to handling things on my own. But I don’t want to hide anything from you anymore.”

She smiles tenderly. “We’re in this together now. Your struggles are my struggles too.”

I can only nod, afraid my voice will crack if I try to speak.

We talk more, making practical plans to improve communication—no more retreating after fights, and more sharing of Family business matters with her. In return, she

promises to be patient when duty calls me away on short notice, and to remember that I will always return to her as quickly as I can.

The atmosphere lightens as we crack open a bottle of wine between us and trade stories of our wedding day, first impressions, first surprises. “You never promised to be obedient,” I point out. “I should have taken you at your word.” But I run a fond hand through her hair as she laughs, not at all embarrassed at the memory.

I wouldn’t have her any other way.

Later, when we are both exhausted, I ask Caitlin if she will come to bed with me. “To sleep,” I add quickly. “But by my side. I’ve missed having you close to me, so much...I haven’t been able to sleep well since...” I trail off.

But Caitlin’s smile lights up my heart. “Yeah,” she says. “I’d like that.”

For the first time in a long while, the path ahead looks bright.

CHAPTER 16

CAITLIN

I wake late the next morning, and Juno is propped up on one elbow, watching me sleep. “Good morning,” I yawn, curling up against her.

“Good morning.” Her hand comes up, tentative, to land on my arm. “Did you sleep well?”

Her breasts are pushed together in an inviting, creamy valley, and I have a hard time dragging my eyes up from them to look into her face. “Uh. Yeah.”

I’m very aware, suddenly, of the fact that I’m only wearing a set of silk pajamas of hers, no underwear, only a thin piece of material between me...and her.

We’re staring at each other, faces only inches apart, and she’s just as perfect and beautiful this morning as she was when she lay down to sleep.

I clear my throat. “Last night was...good.”

“Yes.”

“We talked out a lot of shit, huh?”

“Yes. I’d like to think so.”

“Um. One thing we didn’t mention was...” I pause, and Juno lifts one brow in expectation. “We have a tendency to, uh, to use sex to deflect. Have you noticed?”

Juno’s perfect, plump lips curl into a tiny smile. “Well,” she says, “so far in this marriage we have certainly been better at fucking than talking, wouldn’t you agree?”

I suck in a breath at her words, feel the spark of lightning shoot straight to my clit, just like it always does with her. “I mean, yeah,” I falter. “But communication is important.”

“Oh, it is.” Her fingers are moving, very slightly, rubbing small circles on my upper arm. “Communication is very important. But the sex was still great, right?”

“The sex was amazing.”

We stare at each other a few more seconds, and then I can’t stand it any longer...

I move in and kiss her, tasting those sweet lips that I’ve been dreaming of, pining for, ever since the last time I got to kiss her. When I pull back, her deep brown eyes are wide awake and filled with an unmistakable hunger. She trails her fingers up my arm, bolder now, stroking over my collarbone and slowly moving down again, stirring something primal within me.

“Juno...” I whisper, my voice reedy and breathless.

She leans in, her eyes two molten pools, her desire for me clear as day. “Tell me you want me, *tesoro*.”

“I want you,” I breathe out, my nipples tingling in anticipation as her hand traces back up to my pajama collar, toying with the first button.

“And I will die if I don’t have you,” she sighs. “I have been thinking of this moment, wishing for it, for so long...”

It’s been months since we last fucked, months of pent-up desire boiling inside me, and now her touch ignites my skin as she opens that first button and slides a finger over my cleavage. I’m drenched for her already, pussy clenching around nothing. “Juno,” I moan, arching into her hand. “*Please*.”

Her fingers dip lower, lower, cupping me lightly as my legs fall open for her. “Ah, you’re already soaking wet for me,” she purrs. “So eager, my beautiful girl.”

Her husky voice in my ear sends a jolt of heat straight to my core. Her hand is barely touching me, stroking only against the

wet fabric of the pajamas and giving no friction. I whimper in frustration.

“Please.” I rock my hips, chasing the pressure of her hand.

“Patience, *tesoro*,” she purrs, her fingers finally pressing against my pussy and a wicked smile playing on her lips. “We have all day.”

Her hand disappears, making me groan impatiently, and she unbuttons my top, exposing my breasts, teasing my already-budding nipples into tight peaks. Evidently she remembers all too well how sensitive my nipples are, caressing them with a maddening lightness until she leans down to take one of them into her warm mouth, sucking gently while her fingers dip back down, finally inside my pajama bottoms, testing the wet seam of my slit.

“*Juno*,” I gasp, feeling as if I’m about to come undone. Her skilled fingers glide *juuust* over my swollen clit, teasing me mercilessly, while her tongue flicks around my nipple, sending shockwaves of pleasure throughout my entire body. “Please, Juno—just fuck me.”

“Your wish is my command,” she smirks, leaning in for a deep, passionate kiss that leaves me breathless and yearning for more. Her fingers delve deeper, exploring the slick heat between my legs, while her eyes are fixed on my face, cataloguing every reaction. “God, you’re so wet for me,” Juno murmurs, her voice husky with arousal. “And we’re just getting started.”

“Stop teasing me,” I beg, my voice barely a whisper as Juno’s fingers continue their torturous exploration. My body is on fire, and I feel like I’m going to lose my mind if she doesn’t touch me properly soon.

“Ah, but *cara mia*,” Juno chuckles, her words hot against my ear as she leans in close, “I’m in charge of your body right now.” She punctuates her statement by trailing her fingers over my clit, making me shiver and moan. “You just need to let go and trust me to set the pace.”

Her dominance has always been one of the things that attracted me to her. The way she can take control of a situation—or my body—with such ease and confidence is unbelievably sexy. Relinquishing control isn't something I do easily, but with Juno, it feels natural, even thrilling.

“Alright,” I breathe out, surrendering to her will. I spread my legs wider, giving her access to everything she wants. “Take what you want, Juno.”

“Oh, that's my good girl,” she murmurs, and the sound of those words thrills me, makes my head spin. Juno's fingers press more firmly against my clit, rubbing slow circles that make me squirm with need. Her other hand snakes up to my breast again, capturing my nipple between her thumb and forefinger, squeezing gently.

She smirks down at me, eyes glinting with lust, with *possessiveness*, and another shiver of need runs through me at the intensity in her gaze.

“What do you want, *tesoro*?” Her voice is soft and dangerous, like a velvet-wrapped knife.

“You,” I say breathlessly. “I want you inside me.”

Juno kisses me, hard and claiming, and when she pulls away I'm panting. “As you wish.” Two fingers plunge into my depths, and I give a moan at the sensation, my inner walls clenching greedily at her. She curls her fingers experimentally, stroking smooth and sweet with every turn of her wrist, until I'm already shaking.

“Who do you belong to?” Juno asks me, twisting her fingers to sink deeper.

“You,” I gasp, grabbing at her still-clothed arm. “I belong to you.”

Juno smiles in satisfaction, eyes burning into mine. “That's right, my darling, you're mine in every way that matters.”

Her thumb presses against my clit and starts moving in fast, tight circles, pushing me rapidly toward the edge. I'm writhing under her, body taut as a bowstring, heat and pleasure swirling through my veins. And then—

She stops.

I cry out in protest as her fingers withdraw, and she chuckles. “You’re so lovely,” she murmurs, nipping at my earlobe. Her fingers slide through my folds again, gathering wetness, and I moan softly at the sensation. “So desperate to be filled.” Her fingers circle my entrance, not pushing in but teasing, and I rock my hips up with a whimper. Juno gives a hum, the sound dark and pleased. “What is it, *tesoro*? Do you need something?”

I glare at her balefully. “Don’t tease.”

“I won’t tease if you ask nicely.” Her eyes gleam with wicked promise. “Beg for me, just a little, hmm?”

I squirm under her touch, torn between arousal and irritation at her game. But I know from experience that Juno will drag this out as long as she likes, keeping me on the edge until I give in.

With a sigh, I meet her gaze. “Please, Juno.”

“Please what?”

“Please fuck me,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Good girl.” Juno pushes two fingers into me without warning, and I cry out as she sets a hard, deep pace. Her thumb finds my clit again, rubbing in tight circles, and I’m on the edge of shaking apart under her touch.

“You’re so wet for me,” Juno tells me, twisting her wrist to sink deeper. “No one else can satisfy you like I do, can they?”

“No,” I gasp. “Only you, Juno, only you.”

“That’s right.” She kisses me fiercely, tongue tangling with mine. “You’re mine, Caitlin, always.”

But she continues to tease me, pushing me closer and closer to the edge without ever quite letting me fall over. I focus on the sensations coursing through my body. The slickness between my legs, the heat of her breath on my neck, the way she’s pinching and rolling my nipple in time with her strokes—it’s all so intense, so exquisite.

“Can you feel how much I need it?” I pant, unable to keep the desperation out of my voice.

“Of course I can,” Juno replies, her words dripping with honey. “And don’t worry, *cara mia*, I’m going to give you exactly what you need...but not quite yet.”

Her fingers leave me empty again, but a moment later they’re tugging my pajama pants down. The fabric peels away from my soaked core. As she tugs them free of my legs, I feel every inch of my skin exposed to her heated gaze.

“Arms up,” Juno commands, and I comply without hesitation. She takes my soaked pants and wraps them around my wrists, not even tying them off, just something to remind me of my submission. The scent of my arousal fills the air between us as Juno leans in and presses a soft kiss to my lips.

“You’ve been such a sweet girl for me,” she murmurs against my mouth, “that I can’t resist tasting you.” She makes a slow descent down my body, lips meeting each curve and dip of my form, with tender kisses and soft bites that leave me burning with anticipation. I can’t help but arch into her touch, craving more of her attention.

Juno reaches the apex of my thighs, her breath ghosting over my wet center before her hands part my thighs even wider, granting her full access—and I let her, gladly. I’m entirely hers, eager for whatever pleasure she decides to bestow upon me.

“Juno, please,” I whisper as the seconds tick by, my voice breaking with need.

“Shh, I’ve got you,” Juno reassures, her voice rich with desire. Then, without further warning, she dives in, her tongue lapping at my soaked folds. A strangled moan escapes my lips as she expertly teases and tantalizes me, exploring every bit of my tender flesh, working me until I’m writhing around beneath her.

“Ah, fuck, Juno!” Her tongue zeroes in on my clit, flicking it with precise, rhythmic strokes. My hips buck instinctively,

seeking out more of that delicious sensation, but Juno's firm hands anchor me in place.

"Stay still, Caitlin," she orders. "This is all about you."

It's a complete sensory overload—the scent of my arousal and hers, the exquisite pressure of her tongue on my clit, the gentle constriction of my bound wrists, and the knowledge that I am entirely at her mercy.

"I-I can't hold on much longer," I stutter through clenched teeth, the pleasure building within me like a tidal wave. My body trembles, caught between the urge to resist, to draw this out, and the desire to surrender completely, to let myself be swept away. "Juno—*please*—"

"I told you to have patience, Caitlin," she murmurs against my wet folds, her voice low and sultry. "I'm going to keep you right on the edge until you're desperate for release."

"I'm desperate now!"

"Not quite desperate enough, tesoro. Besides, you are delicious." Her mouth descends on me again, one hand reaching up to grasp my sensitive nipple, tugging it firmly while her tongue continues its merciless assault on my clit. The dual sensations leave me squirming on the bed, my bound hands clenching together above my head.

"God, you're so fucking sexy like this," Juno tells me, pausing briefly in her ministrations to admire her handiwork. "I love to have you at my mercy. But I can see that I'm going to exhaust you too soon if I don't give you a little reward. So tell me again how much you want it." Her eyes lock onto mine as she strokes my throbbing clit, her other hand still pulling and twisting my nipple.

"I-I want it so badly," I stammer, struggling to find coherent words amidst the sensory overload. "Please, Juno, let me come."

Her dark brown eyes narrow, considering my plea for a moment before smirking devilishly. "Alright, *cara mia*, you've finally earned it."

CHAPTER 17

CAITLIN

Her skilled tongue returns to my clit with a renewed fervor, her fingers pinching and rolling my nipples in time. It's all too much, my entire body tensing as the pleasure crescendos to an unbearable point.

I choke on my own cries as the orgasm tears through me, powerful and unrestrained. Wave after wave of it until it's almost painful, and I wriggle away from her tongue. She lets me, laughing, and I'm left panting and completely spent, the sheets soaking beneath me.

"Your pleasure is so beautiful," she sighs, her fingers deftly unwrapping my wrists from the silky fabric of my pajama pants. As soon as I'm free, she takes my right hand, guiding it down between her own legs. "Now, let me show you how I much *I* want it."

With her hand on mine, Juno guides my fingers to her clit, demonstrating the exact pressure and rhythm she craves. Our fingers work in tandem, moving in sensual circles around her hot, swollen bud. "Oh, yes. Perfect," Juno tells me, capturing my lips in a searing kiss that leaves us both breathless. Her tongue explores my mouth with a hunger that mirrors my own, tasting of both our desire.

As we kiss, her whispers fill my ear, soft promises that send shivers down my spine. "I'll always take care of you, Caitlin," she says, her voice barely audible amidst our passionate embrace. "As long as you'll let me."

It's a thrilling idea—this assertive, dominant woman who rules a vicious empire with an iron fist, promising to protect and care for me.

And I know that she will.

“Juno,” I murmur against her lips, “we both know I can take care of myself. But letting you do it is much more fun—in life *and* in bed.”

“Now who's teasing, *tesoro*?” Her breath hitches as my fingers continue to work their magic on her clit, and she lets her hand fall away, lets me take full control. I can feel her body tensing beneath my touch, the telltale signs of her impending climax building within her, her eyes squeezing shut in concentration.

“I've got you, Juno,” I whisper, and she opens her eyes to meet my gaze. The raw vulnerability I see there steals my breath.

“Yes,” she says. “You always have.” She pulls me in for a hot, needy kiss. “Make me come,” she demands, her voice strained and desperate. It's rare to hear Juno like this—so open, completely at the mercy of another—and it only serves to fuel my desire to bring her pleasure. My fingers circle around and around her clit, keeping a steady pace as she tenses hard.

“Ca-Caitlin!” she gasps, her entire body shuddering as her orgasm washes over her, powerful and consuming. I keep my fingers on her clit, prolonging her pleasure until she finally collapses onto me, spent and sated as she devours my mouth again. “God, I love you,” she tells me after. “I hope you—I hope you know that, *amore mio*.”

My heart clenches, filled to bursting by this woman who holds my heart so completely in her hands. “I love you, too. So much. Let's—let's not fight again.”

“Never,” she swears.

“And promise me one thing?” She cocks an eyebrow. “I'll stop complaining about you working such long hours as long as you're home every day to share dinner. Agreed?”

A lovely smile blooms across her face. “Agreed. And know this: I have no intention of disappointing you ever again.”

We finally drag ourselves out of bed. The coffee is the perfect temperature this morning as I take a sip, the bitter taste waking up my senses, which had been thoroughly exhausted by a long morning of making love. And now that things have improved between us—now that we understand each other—it’s time for me to bring up a topic that I know Juno won’t be happy about.

I lean back against the counter and casually mention, “I’m thinking of going to the street races in the Bronx tonight.”

Juno’s head snaps up from the newspaper, eyes narrowing. “What? Why?”

I shrug, keeping my tone light. “I haven’t been in months. Could be fun to see some familiar faces.”

Juno folds the newspaper neatly, buying time as she chooses her words. I can see the tension in her shoulders, the hesitation on her face.

“Caitlin, you know how dangerous these races can be,” she says finally. “Especially now, with everything that’s happening. Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Well, it’s a big change from a flat-out *No*. “I won’t be driving this time. Just want to watch.” I give her a reassuring smile. “I’ll take Paulo with me, and any others you want me to take. I’ll be safe, I promise.”

Juno sighs, rubbing her temples. She’s always hated how little control she has over the dangers of the street-racing scene. But she also knows how much it means to me.

“Alright,” she concedes. “But promise me you’ll be smart.” Her expression softens. “I have to meet with the Sabatino family tonight. Border disputes; a tricky negotiation. I suppose we may as well both have a late night—though I think yours will be more fun.”

The realities of her new role still sound so bleak to me. Juno has the weight of the entire Bianchi Family on her shoulders now. “I wish I could help.”

“I wish you could, too. But I don’t want you that close to these people.”

I don’t want *her* that close to these people, but I don’t say that. I know Juno can handle herself. And I can too. “I’ll stay safe,” I say gently. “Make sure that you do, too.”

We share a lingering look, a new understanding passing between us. Juno smiles.

“I will. Enjoy yourself enough for the both of us, *cara mia*.”

The smell of burnt rubber fills the cold night air as I step out of the car. The abandoned lot is flooded with people, the rev of engines and pulse of music electrifying. I spot Declan’s tangle-haired mop through the crowd and make my way over.

“Well, well. Look who decided to grace us with her presence,” Declan teases, pulling me in for a quick hug.

“Had to see if you’re still as slow as I remember,” I joke. Danny appears behind Declan, face lighting up when he sees me.

“My favorite O’Sullivan!” he exclaims dramatically, sweeping me up in an exaggerated waltz. I’m laughing as he twirls me around, the sounds and smells of the races washing over me like a time machine. For a moment, everything feels just like it used to.

We settle against a nearby brick wall, watching the scene unfold around us.

“Does, uh...Juno know you’re out tonight?” Danny asks, his smile fading slightly. Declan shoots him a look.

“Yes, she does, and she’s not my keeper,” I reply breezily. I know they’re just looking out for me. “But I’m under strict orders to be smart. Paulo’s around here somewhere, plus a whole bunch of other bodyguards, making themselves invisible. Don’t worry.”

Declan nods, seemingly satisfied. “You know we’ve got your back, too, Firecracker.”

I grin. “Well, let’s pray things don’t get *that* bad, Lucky Charms.”

The familiar rumble of an engine cuts through his laughing protest as two sleek sports cars pull up to the makeshift starting line. The crowd presses forward in anticipation. Declan grins, giving me a playful nudge.

“What do you say, for old time’s sake?”

My eyes follow the cars as they take off, tires spinning and engines screaming into the night. The pull of nostalgia tugs at my heart. What I wouldn’t give to get behind the wheel again. To feel that rush of adrenaline as the world blurs around you. I turn to Declan, an impish smile spreading across my face.

“Nah. But next race is yours. I want to see my big brother leave ‘em spinning their wheels.”

Declan’s laugh rings out as he moves off toward his car, cracking his knuckles dramatically.

“Make sure you get your bet on me!” he calls out with a wink.

The crowd has thickened as more drivers arrive, their flashy cars gleaming under makeshift floodlights. I scan the scene, nostalgia warming me from the inside, when a gruff voice sneers from behind.

“Well, if it isn’t Little Miss O’Sullivan. Slumming it with us small timers?”

I stiffen, lips pressing into a thin smile as I turn to face the speaker. He’s tall and wiry, tattoos covering his arms and neck. The arrogant smirk tells me everything I need to know. Another punk looking to prove himself.

“Good to see you too, Jimmy,” I reply evenly. “Here to lose more money?”

His smile twists. “Didn’t know they allowed girls to race. Shouldn’t you be home baking cookies or something?”

“Get bent, moron,” Danny groans. “You’re just pissed because Caitlin beat your slow ass last time you had the nerve to show up here.”

The people around us glance nervously between us, the tension crackling. I tilt my chin up, refusing to flinch.

“Well? Why don’t you put your money where your mouth is?” I challenge. Before he can respond, Declan is back, eyes blazing.

“Problem here, Jimmy?” For once, his protective tone eases the tightness in my chest. Jimmy regards him coolly.

“Just explaining racing rules to your girlie here,” he sneers. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

Declan steps forward, crowding into Jimmy’s space. “My sister could outrace you with a goddamn scooter,” he hisses. “But if you’re so sure of yourself, why don’t you put your car up against mine? Winner takes all.”

The gathered crowd murmurs excitedly. Declan holds Jimmy’s stare, unyielding. After a tense moment, Jimmy steps back with an icy smile.

“You’re on, O’Sullivan.”

He turns and stalks away. I grab Declan’s arm, worry creasing my brow.

“Declan, what are you doing?” I hiss. “You don’t have to do this for me.”

He grins. “Who said anything about *me* doing it?” He grins. “I know you’ll smoke him. Right?”

He drops his keys into my palm and closes my fingers over them. For a moment, I hesitate, looking between Declan and Danny. Danny gives me an encouraging nod.

My anxiety melts away and I pull Declan into a fierce hug. “I’ll kick his misogynistic ass.”

“Oh, I know you will.” He winks, pressing the keys into my hand. “Now go win me a car, Firecracker.”

My heart starts pounding as I slide into the driver's seat, the worn leather molding to my body. Jimmy revs his engine tauntingly from my left. I draw in a long breath, letting the familiar smells of gasoline and leather wash over me. *It's just another race, I tell myself. Shut everything else out. Focus.*

I turn the key, half-relieved when it comes to life, and I savor the engine's throaty roar. Adrenaline floods my veins, my senses heightened. Every sound magnified. The world narrows down to this single moment, this perfect line of asphalt stretching out before me.

My fingers curl around the gearshift in anticipation. An electric current runs through the roaring crowd as the flag holder steps forward. I inch the car forward, poised on the edge of a knife.

The flag snaps down. I slam the gas, tires spinning and engine screaming as the force slams me back against the seat. The crowd's cheers fade into the distance as I focus everything on the road ahead.

I push the car to its limits, my reactions pure instinct. I can't even see where Jimmy is; all I'm focused on is the finish line. I pour everything into it, coaxing every last ounce of speed until it's time to hit the NO2. The engine picks up, and with one final surge, I slingshot forward, my front wheel crossing the line microseconds before Jimmy's.

The sound comes rushing back as the crowd erupts. I bring the car to a skidding stop, adrenaline and euphoria crashing over me. In my rearview mirror, Jimmy slams his hands against the wheel in frustration. I don't bother holding back my grin.

Still got it.

The celebrations are in full swing already as I open the car door, music and cheers welcoming me. Jimmy is not a popular man, and there are already a lot of people happy to see him stalking off in a tantrum, after throwing his keys at Declan's feet. Declan sweeps me up in a crushing bear hug as my friends descend, slapping me on the back. The thrill of victory courses through me and I give myself over completely to the joy of this perfect moment.

Amid the chaos I don't notice Brendon until he's right beside me, a calculating look on his face. "Brendon?" I exclaim. "What are you—"

"Well done, Caitlin." His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Can't say I'm surprised, really. You've always been..." He pauses, as if searching for the word. "Reckless."

My euphoria dampens at his tone. I glance around for Declan but he's occupied, collecting cash from a few disgruntled friends of Jimmy's.

"Just having some fun," I reply lightly. "It's been awhile."

Brendon hums. "Does Juno know about your fun?" He tilts his head, regarding me with that unsettling stare. "Seems rather dangerous, after everything."

His emphasis on that last word makes my skin crawl. There's an undercurrent to his words I can't quite place.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask sharply.

Brendon holds up a hand. "No offense intended. Just concerned for your safety, that's all."

I'm about to respond when Declan strides over, brows drawn together.

"The hell are *you* doing here?" he asks gruffly, eyeing Brendon.

Brendon smiles placatingly. "I was just congratulating our Caitlin on a tremendous win."

He squeezes my shoulder, his grip lingering too long for comfort, until I pull away. Declan's jaw flexes, but he simply gives a curt nod and turns to me.

"Quite a race, Caity. Couldn't have done it better myself." His pride is evident, but when I turn back to see Brendon's reaction, he's already moving away through the crowd.

"What was that all about? And since when did Brendon ever show up to races?" The only time Brendon's ever mentioned street-racing was when he was feeding me tales about Declan dissing me. I still don't understand why he did that. Declan

insists Brendon's always been that way, likes to stir up shit between all of us in the family, but I don't like thinking poorly of him.

He's the only one who seemed to oppose my marriage to Juno, which at the time, I was grateful for. Now, of course, I'm grateful that the marriage went ahead.

Strange how perspectives can change...

Declan's jaw is tight, his eyes stormy. "Guy's always been a weasel," he says. "Don't let him get to you."

I used to take Brendon's side against Declan merely because I wanted to annoy Declan. How childish that seems, now. And how much closer Declan and I have become. "Don't let him get to *you*, Lucky Charms," I tell Declan, giving him a grin.

But inside, I'm starting to wonder about Brendon. Wonder if he really has had my interests at heart as much as he's allowed me to think...

I scan the chaos of the scene, catching sight of Danny on the fringe. Grabbing two beers from a nearby cooler, I make my way over to him.

"Hey," I say, handing him a bottle. "Weird question: have you noticed anything...off with Brendon lately? I mean, more off than usual?"

Danny's brow creases in thought. "I mean, maybe? Now that you mention it, yeah. He's been showing up in strange places—like tonight." His eyes narrow. "Why, what's up?"

"I don't know. Just a feeling." I lower my voice. "Think you could do some digging? Follow him around for a few days?"

Danny stares at me, his expression somber. "You serious?"

"Danny, I'd do it myself, but I'd have a trail of Italian muscle behind me. Please?"

"I wouldn't mind a trail of Italian muscle behind *me*," he says with a smirk, but it drops as he realizes how serious I am. "Yeah, okay. If it means that much to you, I'm on it." He pulls me into a quick hug. "Try not to get too paranoid, huh?"

Maybe Danny's right. Maybe Juno's world has made me paranoid.

I hope that's all it is.

CHAPTER 18

JUNO

Caitlin and I sleep in the next morning, after both coming home late—she later than me, but I had to wait up for her, nervous despite no red alerts from her guard. Also, what I told her after the bombing was true: I slept poorly during our separation.

And when she wakes the next morning, I think about the fact that the week she said she'd stay—the week she originally agreed to—that deadline passed. I haven't mentioned it before, because I didn't want to risk breaking the magic building back up between us, but I can't take the uncertainty any longer.

We're lying on our sides, smiling at each other, and Caitlin has just woken.

“Good morning,” I say.

“Good morning.”

I take a breath and get all my courage together. “Caitlin...I'd like you to come home,” I tell her. “If—if you'd like to.”

Surprise flickers in her blue eyes. “Home,” she says. “You mean—come back here? Permanently?”

“Yes. Here. Permanently.”

Home to this brownstone that we once shared, until things fell apart between us. Until I pushed her away, for reasons that seem so foolish now. Caitlin gets up on one elbow and looks around the room, taking in the familiar surroundings.

“Give up my Bronx apartment?”

I nod, holding my breath. This is uncharted territory for me, laying my heart on the line again after vowing never to make myself so vulnerable. But Caitlin has always brought out my reckless side.

“I want us to try again,” I say quietly. “I want you to come home.”

The words hang in the air between us. Caitlin bites her lip, considering. Outside the window, silent snowflakes drift down, enveloping the city in a hush.

Finally she meets my gaze again. “Okay,” she says, a new smile tugging at her lips. “Let’s give this a real shot. Though frankly, Juno, if you knew how shitty my Bronx place is, you’d’ve known this wasn’t ever going to be a hard sell.”

I laugh in relief as she rolls on top of me, kissing me all over my face. Then Caitlin hops out of the bed, stretching out luxuriously, eyes bright with renewed hope when she turns back to look at me.

“Well, we’d better pack up my place in the Bronx today before this snow *really* sets in. Shower first. You coming?”

Shower? With my gorgeous wife, naked and wet?

The hounds of hell couldn’t stop me.

The steam from the hot water fills the shower cubicle, and not for the first time I’m glad I insisted on installing this massive, two-headed shower in my *en suite* bathroom. Caitlin’s blue eyes study me with a mixture of lust and curiosity, her wet red curls plastered against her head. The sound of the water splashing against our bodies drowns out any other noise.

“Juno,” she murmurs, leaning closer. My heart races as I feel her breath on my lips, and I close the gap, capturing her mouth with mine. As we kiss, my hand slowly trails down her body, stopping at her hips before slipping between those smooth, velvety thighs. I find her pussy wet with more than just water, and I smile against her lips, knowing that she wants me as

much as I want her. My fingers dance over her clit, teasing it until she moans into my mouth.

“You know I love eating your sweet pussy,” I murmur in her ear, my voice low and sultry, “but there are other places I haven’t gotten to taste yet.” She shivers at my words. “I’m going to devour every inch of you, starting with those beautiful, sensitive nipples.”

Her breath hitches, and she lifts up eagerly, arms around my neck. I take that as my invitation, moving my attention to her breasts, caressing them gently before latching onto one nipple, suckling it as the warm water cascades over her flesh.

Caitlin’s hands slide into my hair. “Juno, please,” she begs, her voice desperate and needy. “I need more.”

I release her nipple with a pop and capture her mouth again. My fingers slip inside her, tease her hot, swelling clit, and Caitlin’s moans grow louder, more desperate, building up my own desire. Her wet hair clings to her face, framing those beautiful blue eyes that seem to see straight through me.

“You’re teasing again,” she complains, her hips grinding against my hand, seeking the release she craves.

“I’m not teasing. I’m reminding you who is in control. All you have to do is surrender and let me set the pace.” I watch as her defiant gaze softens, her eyelids fluttering closed, giving in to the sensations I’m creating within her.

She’s always so headstrong, so fiercely independent, that to see her yielding to me like this, trusting me with her pleasure, is intoxicating.

I want her even more.

My mouth moves to her breasts again, my tongue swirling around one tight, pink nipple, the water from the shower mingling with my saliva as I lavish attention on her. I lose myself in the act, my fingers moving over her clit in rhythm with my tongue, teasing, tantalizing, bringing her ever higher.

Caitlin’s desperate moans fill the shower, echoing off the wet tiles. That fiery nature of hers that I’m so drawn to is at my

mercy, and it sends a thrill through me. I pull my fingers from her dripping pussy, watching as she shudders with need.

“Face forward,” I instruct her, my voice firm yet laced with desire. “Lean over. Yes, like that. Now spread those beautiful asscheeks for me.”

Caitlin obeys without hesitation, her hands gripping her own cheeks, pulling them apart to reveal her tight, pink asshole. My hand snakes around her hip, keeps rubbing at her clit, ensuring she remains on the edge of ecstasy.

And then I kneel behind her, the sight of her vulnerable, exposed body fueling my arousal. I begin to wash her down slowly and thoroughly, allowing the suds and water to cascade over her sensitive skin. And all the while I do this, I tease her puckered hole with gentle touches and soft grazes, eliciting gasps and whimpers from her.

“Juno...oh fuck, please,” Caitlin begs, writhing as I continue to torment her.

“Just let yourself feel it. Let me pleasure you,” I tell her, before dipping my head down, pressing my eager tongue against her asshole.

As I lick and suck at her, tasting her most intimate area, I work my fingers back into her slit, pumping them in and out, driving her wild with desire. Her moans grow louder, more desperate, as I pleasure her from both ends.

“God, it shouldn’t feel so good,” she pants, her body trembling under my touch. It sends a surge of satisfaction through me, knowing that *I’m* the one to elicit such responses from her. My tongue works tirelessly, swirling around her tight hole while I finger her relentlessly. Her beautiful cunt clenches hard around my fingers, and I can tell she’s close.

I press my tongue hard against her hole, wiggling the tip into her, and just as she’s about to explode, I stop, retreat. Her plaintive cry tugs at my heart, but there’s so much more I want to do to her...

“Sit,” I tell her roughly, getting to my feet as I point at the tiled ledge to the side of the shower, large enough to be a

comfortable seat. Caitlin obeys, her blue eyes never leaving mine, her pale skin glistening with water.

“Stay.” I give her a wicked smile, and then I turn my back on her, delighting in her moan of frustration as I wash off my face. I need the break more than she knows; I’m so hungry for her that I need to regain a little control, tease out the moment as long as I can. It’s a strange delight knowing how desperate I can make her.

At last I turn around once more, slick back my hair, and smile at her. “Good girl. Now present those pretty little tits for me.”

Her trembling hands reach up to cup her breasts, her fingers pinching her tight nipples, presenting them to me like an offering. My clit throbs at the sight. I need to take the edge off my desire so that I can better serve hers.

“Look at me,” I order, stepping closer to her. She lifts her gaze to meet mine, and I can see the hunger in her eyes, as well as a hint of vulnerability. It’s true satisfaction to see this wild woman is submitting to me so willingly.

I raise one leg up onto the ledge next to her, positioning her between her spread thighs, my hand moving between my legs to find my swollen clit. I guide Caitlin’s right nipple to my throbbing bud, pressing it against the sensitive flesh, all the while maintaining eye contact.

I sigh at the exquisite sensation of her soft-skinned nipple sliding over my clit. Caitlin’s chest rises and falls with each panting breath, her own arousal evident by the way she squirms and rubs her thighs together. Her hard, budded nipple plays over and over my clit, the gentle friction quite enough for the fire already built up within me. My breaths come in short gasps, the intensity building as I edge closer to my climax.

“Look at me,” I repeat, needing to see her eyes as I come undone. Caitlin’s gaze locks on mine, and I can tell she’s just as entranced by this moment as I am.

The orgasm is sharp and sweet, an almost painful throb spreading out from my core to the tips of my fingers and toes.

“Oh, Caitlin,” I pant, leaning down for a searing kiss. “You have no idea what you do to me. But now it’s your turn, *Bellissima*.” I kneel, spreading her thighs apart, revealing her glistening pussy, swollen and desperate for attention. My heart races as I reach for the showerhead, adjusting the water pressure to a pulsing massage setting.

“Ready?” I ask with a grin. I’m simply *full* of goodwill after such a lovely orgasm.

“God, yes,” she moans.

“That’s my good girl.” I bring the showerhead close to her clit, directing the pulsing water onto her sensitive flesh. The sudden sensation elicits a gasp from Caitlin, her back arching and fingers gripping the tiled bench.

“Fuck, Juno... please don’t stop,” she whimpers, and I watch with delight as her chest heaves, her body writhing in response to the stimulation.

“Tell me what you need. Beg for it.”

“Make me come, Juno. *Please*.”

I can’t bring myself to make her wait any longer. I set the showerhead aside and lean forward, my tongue taking its place, swirling around her clit. The taste of her arousal, a tantalizing blend of sweet and salty, drives me wild. I can’t get enough, and I plunge my face further into her slick folds, eager to savor every last drop. I can feel her body trembling, the telltale sign that she’s on the edge of release.

And then she’s there, her body convulsing as pleasure crashes through her. Her delicious cream floods my mouth, warm and thick, the perfect reward for making her lose control. I continue to lap at her, greedily swallowing her down until her shaking subsides and she’s left panting and spent on the bench, half collapsed.

I stand, rinse off my face under the main showerhead, and then turn back to raise one eyebrow at her, still supine and smiling lazily at me. “What are you lying around for?” I ask with a smirk. “We have a whole apartment to pack up today.”

And with that, I bounce out of the shower and start toweling off my hair. By tonight, I'm determined to have Caitlin O'Sullivan back in my home, back in my life, back in my *bed*. Officially and completely.

CHAPTER 19

JUNO

Later that day, we're at Caitlin's small Bronx apartment, surrounded by cardboard boxes and mess. Caitlin is buzzing around, sorting through her eclectic belongings with infectious enthusiasm. I lift a heavy box marked 'BOOKS' with a dramatic groan.

"Did you ransack the local library, *cara mia*?" I tease.

She sticks her tongue out at me playfully over a tower of heaped novels.

"Not all of us get our kicks sniffing expensive wine and listening to classical music, grandma."

I roll my eyes in mock offense. Before I can fire off a retort, a knock sounds at the door. Caitlin opens it to find Danny on the other side, bearing coffees and a box of assorted donuts.

"Hey, hey! Heard my bestie was shacking up with the Ice Queen again so I came to dish and help pack!" He breezes inside, air kissing Caitlin loudly on both cheeks. Then he turns to me with a coy look.

"Juno! Don't you look domestic carrying that little box."

I raise an eyebrow but can't help smiling. Danny's over-the-top nature irritated me the first time we met at the wedding, but now I only find it amusing. Besides, I sense he's testing me, gauging my reaction.

"You brought me a coffee, too? And here I thought you didn't like me," I reply drily.

He shrugs, eyes twinkling. “I’m willing to reconsider if you make my girl here happy.”

I smile. “That’s my intention.”

Seemingly satisfied, Danny gives me an approving nod then launches into helping Caitlin sort through her chaotic piles of *stuff*. Watching them banter and bicker fondly, I find myself almost jealous—but not of Caitlin.

I never had any close friends growing up. There was Alessa, of course, but she was—then, as now—as much a rival as a friend.

My thoughts are interrupted by another knock. This time it’s Declan, who gives me a suspicious look when I answer the door.

“Hey, Firecracker,” he greets Caitlin warmly, brushing past me, then begins to help with packing up her books. The chill aimed in my direction is palpable.

“Declan, may I say something?”

He pauses, looking at me warily. They all do.

I clear my throat. “I wanted to apologize for the way I spoke to you last time we met. I was unwelcoming. But you are Caitlin’s family, and I should have respected that.”

Declan’s eyes widen in surprise.

“I let my pride get in the way sometimes,” I continue sincerely. “I know that you were just concerned for Caitlin and I was very ungracious. I’m sorry.”

A charged silence follows. Declan’s eyes, so like Caitlin’s, search my face. Then he nods slowly, his expression thoughtful.

“I accept your apology,” he says at last. Then the barest hint of a smile tugs at his mouth. “Doesn’t mean I have to like you.”

I let out a short laugh, nodding in understanding. “Fair enough.”

The atmosphere lightens perceptibly after the tense moment. Declan and I share a look of mutual understanding. There are

still issues to resolve between us, but it's a start.

“And you two,” Declan goes on, flicking a finger between us, “you should know I'm under orders to invite you to Sunday dinner tonight. I expect you to be there, otherwise Dad will take it out on me.”

“We'll be there,” Caitlin says at once. She glances at me. “Right, Juno?”

“Of course. I wouldn't miss it for the world.”

Caitlin touches my arm when I pass by, thanks shining in her eyes. My heart lifts. Maybe I can find a way to fit into all parts of her world after all.

We continue packing up the apartment, the mood significantly brighter. Caitlin keeps up a steady stream of chatter while Declan and I break down her furniture. Danny flits around like a hummingbird, making the tedious tasks entertaining with his one-liners. Watching Caitlin joke and banter with her brother and friend, I feel a twinge of envy at the easy dynamic they share. I never had such easy relationships growing up. But I remind myself that I have Caitlin now.

She is my family.

As the afternoon sun sinks lower in the sky, and the snow flurries get a little more serious, we finish hauling the last boxes down to Declan's truck. Caitlin does a final sweep of the little apartment that's been her haven these past months. I know this is hard for her in ways I can't fully grasp. But she turns to me with a brave smile.

“I'm ready,” she says softly, taking my hand. Together, we walk out the door.

That night we arrive at the raucous O'Sullivan family dinner, greeted by the mouth-watering aroma of hearty Irish cooking. Caitlin's father, Sean O'Sullivan Sr., sits at the head of the table, surrounded by her crowded brothers and their own families—wives, girlfriends, and too many children to count.

Loud laughter and playful ribbing bounce off the walls of the cozy but chaotic space.

This is a world apart from the elegant restraint of Bianchi gatherings.

I hover awkwardly behind Caitlin for a moment, clutching a bottle of fine Italian wine I'd brought as a gift. The boisterous scene feels strangely intimidating. But Caitlin glances back at me with a smile and tugs me forward.

"Everyone, you remember my wife Juno."

A chorus of greetings ring out, ranging from polite to bemused. At least a dozen pairs of keen eyes size me up with frank curiosity. Sean's gaze is especially sharp, like a hawk assessing a mouse. I've never felt quite so much like prey before. I resist the urge to smooth my black silk dress and instead lift my chin, meeting his stare directly. I will not be intimidated.

Caitlin makes introductions while her brothers and their partners study me with interest, clearly not having expected my return. Then she pulls me down into a seat beside her. The table is soon loaded with dishes brought by each brother—hearty stews, roasted meats, cheesy casseroles, loaves of soda bread. Everything smells incredible. My mouth waters despite my nerves.

As wine is poured and ravenous appetites are satisfied, spirited conversation resumes. I find myself drawn in, trading jokes and jibes with Caitlin's brothers. Their playful camaraderie is so different from the rarified ambiance of Bianchi family dinners, but I discover I quite enjoy matching wits with them. The O'Sullivans are far cleverer than I realized. All those years my father underestimated them were clearly a mistake.

Even the children, once they get over their shyness, are interested in talking to me. I'm a little awkward at first—God knows I've never had much contact with tiny human beings—but by the end, I seem to have won them over, and I enjoy hearing them call out to me as "Aunty Juno."

As the evening winds down, I step outside to the small backyard for some air. The cold night breeze helps clear my fuzzy head. I reflect on the dinner with a sense of accomplishment. Yes, despite a rocky start, the boisterous O'Sullivans seem to have welcomed me into their fold. It feels like a promising step forward.

I know that family is important to Caitlin. And I...

I think it's important to me, too.

The door creaks open behind me. I turn to find the imposing figure of Sean O'Sullivan Sr. observing me solemnly. After a pause, he moves to stand beside me, looking out over the sleepy street.

"You've got grit, Juno Bianchi, I'll give you that," he rumbles at last. "You've earned my respect tonight."

I blink in surprise at this gruff praise. "Thank you, sir. Your family has been very kind."

Sean snorts. "Kind? This pack of heathens?" But his tone is affectionate. He glances at me, his weathered face thoughtful.

"We've not had much to do with each other, you and me. But Carmine spoke very highly of you. Now I can see why."

My throat tightens at the mention of my father. Hearing I had his esteem...it means more than I can express. Sean reads the emotion on my face and nods in understanding.

"He was proud of you, lass. Proud of the woman you've become."

I have to turn my face away as tears sting my eyes. Sean kindly pretends not to notice me discreetly dabbing at the corners.

"We may have had our differences, but Carmine was an honorable man," he continues solemnly. "I valued his friendship. And I want you to know, I was very sorry to hear of his death. If the O'Sullivans can be any help in bringing his killers to justice, you only need ask."

I bite my lip to keep back a sob, and whisper a heartfelt, "Thank you." Sean gives my shoulder a fatherly pat.

After a moment regaining my composure, I meet his gaze.

“I intend to do right by your daughter,” I tell him with quiet conviction. “I know I’ve made mistakes that hurt Caitlin deeply. But I swear to you, I will spend every day from now on trying to make her happy again.”

Sean studies me for a long moment as if peering into my soul. Then he gives a single nod of approval.

“See that you do.” A rare smile crinkles the corners of his eyes. “But you’ll find it’s not such a hard task, if you let her lead the way. She’s got a fire about what matters most in life; fire that people like you and me, well, can benefit from.”

I think back to Caitlin’s unconventional vitality that so vexed me once. How I wished I could tame her spirit. Now I see how wrong I was to ever want that.

“Yes,” I say softly. “She does.”

Sean claps a heavy hand on my shoulder. “Welcome to the family, lass—again. I’m glad Caitlin has you back. It’s good to see her smiling again.” He pauses, looking a bit emotional himself for a moment. “And I’m delighted to have gained another daughter to even out my big brood of sons. Know that you have a place here with us.”

With that he heads back inside, leaving me stunned and blinking back still-unfamiliar tears. I came here determined to prove myself, but I wasn’t expecting such whole-hearted acceptance. Especially from the guarded O’Sullivan patriarch himself. It seems even an old hawk can be tamed by time and patience.

I take a final, deep breath of the cold night air before following Sean inside. Caitlin is waiting just inside the door, eyes bright, suggesting she must have overheard at least some of our conversation. Without a word she pulls me into a fierce hug. I cling to her tightly, letting the last remnants of walls between us finally crumble away.

Tonight we start building something new atop the ruins.

And this time, we build it together.

CHAPTER 20

JUNO

I'm sitting at my desk going over reports about the Sabatino Family's most recent sins when my cousin Alessa slips into my office dressed like some 1930s *femme fatale*, and looking uncharacteristically nervous. Alessa rarely shows any hesitation, so her demeanor immediately puts me on edge. Something big must be going on for her to come to me directly.

"What is it?" I ask, setting the paperwork aside and giving her my full attention.

Alessa fidgets with the puff of netting that hangs over her eye from the fascinator fixed to her hair, pulling it lower as though she might be recognized—even though we're alone here, and the Bianchi offices are swept twice daily for all surveillance tech.

"You know I never share anything I overhear at the Ruby," she begins. "Information is currency there, not to be spent frivolously."

I nod slowly, wondering what I'm about to hear. Alessa has built an empire off discretion at her exclusive nightclub. Her reputation for keeping secrets is ironclad.

"But this is about family. About Carmine." She takes a deep breath before continuing. "Juno, last night I heard the name of the assassin who killed your father."

Shock courses through me at this revelation. I've been searching for that name for months, ever since my father was gunned down on the street. I lean forward intently, my full

focus now on Alessa. She seems relieved to finally be unburdening herself of this critical information.

She softly recites a name: Joseph Palmero. It's not someone I'm familiar with personally, but Angelo will be able to dig deeper into his background and connections. I don't ask who dropped the name at the Ruby, or in what context. I have no desire to push for more than my cousin is willing to give.

"Thank you, Alessa. I know this wasn't easy for you, but I appreciate you coming to me." I give her hand a grateful squeeze. Blood bonds run deep, even where Family is supposed to trump family.

After months of fruitless searching, we finally have a solid lead. Alessa looks relieved, as if a great weight has been lifted from her shoulders now that she's passed the name to me. We embrace briefly before she heads off.

I immediately call Angelo into my office to share the new information. Angelo jots down the name, his expression grave. And within hours, he returns looking weary but determined. The news he brings makes my blood run cold.

"Palmero's dead," he states flatly. "Executed gangland style out in the Bronx, less than a week after your father's murder. Someone's tying up loose ends. For what it's worth, Palmero wasn't a made man, or even an associate, though not for lack of trying. But he was too brash and too loose-lipped for any of the Families to show interest."

I pace my office as I process this unsettling development. This reeks of a cover-up by whoever orchestrated my father's assassination. They're eliminating witnesses, erasing tracks that could lead back to them. But we finally have a thread to pull on.

"Dig into Palmero's financial records," I direct Angelo. "Look for any major transactions in the timeframe surrounding my father's death. That money trail could tell us who hired him for the hit."

I try to refocus on Family business while waiting for Angelo's return, but my mind keeps drifting back to Palmero's

mysterious demise. All I can think about is finally identifying the shadowy forces responsible for my father's murder.

Late in the afternoon, Angelo reenters my office looking grim. Wordlessly, he hands me a folder containing bank statements and wire transfer records. I scan through them rapidly, searching for the payments Angelo mentioned.

And there they are: two major deposits into an offshore account registered to Joseph Palmero. One made the day prior to my father's assassination, and the second dated the day after. My heartbeat quickens as I look up at Angelo.

"Where did the money come from?" I ask, although I already fear that I know the answer.

Angelo meets my gaze steadily, his expression bleak. "The originating account is linked to one Sean O'Sullivan Senior."

His solemn words land like a physical blow. Sean O'Sullivan. Caitlin's father. My supposed ally.

I sit in stunned silence for a long moment as the implications wash over me. This revelation will crush Caitlin if it proves true. But vengeance knows no partiality, even when blood is involved. I cannot ignore evidence, no matter how difficult it will be to confront.

After dismissing Angelo, I sit alone in my office as dusk falls, weighing my options. My first instinct is to shield Caitlin from this ugly truth until I'm absolutely certain of her father's involvement. But Caitlin and I promised each other honesty from here on out—no more secrets between us after all the damage they've caused in the past. With a heavy sense of foreboding, I decide transparency and trust is the only path forward, however painful it may be in the moment. She deserves to at least know the accusations that will soon be leveled against her family.

When I arrive home, I find Caitlin relaxing in front of one of those car-racing movies that she likes, a peaceful smile lighting up her face. She glances up as I enter, pausing the TV.

"You're home early for once," she observes, a teasing lilt in her voice. But her smile fades as she takes in my grim

expression.

I sit down on the sofa close beside her, steeling myself for the difficult conversation ahead. There's no way to cushion this kind of devastating blow. I take her hands gently in mine before quietly explaining everything. Alessa's tip-off at the Ruby Realm, the damning paper trail leading back to Sean Senior's offshore accounts, the implications swirling in my mind.

Caitlin's whole body goes taut, and she shakes her head emphatically. "No. There has to be some kind of mistake. My father would never have ordered a hit on Carmine. They were *allies*. My father would have seen it as an inviolable bond."

I grasp her hands, trying to soothe away the anguish. "Believe me, I don't want to think Sean capable of betraying us either. Not just for your sake, but because the alliance between our families is so important—and so fresh. I don't want to do anything to endanger it. But I need to fully investigate this lead, wherever it takes me. I promise you, Angelo and I will uncover the whole truth before making any formal accusations against your father."

Caitlin withdraws her hands, flashing me a wounded look. "You know how ruthless our rivals can be with misinformation." Her voice trembles slightly with emotion and I ache to comfort her, but reason must prevail right now.

"Caitlin, look at me," I implore her gently. "I'm on your side, remember? We're in this together. But we can't stick our heads in the sand when it comes to evidence. Let me keep investigating before we jump to any conclusions either way. Please—trust me to be fair and thorough."

After a tense moment, the fight seems to drain from her body. She buries her face in my shoulder and I hold her close, wishing more than anything that I could protect her from the ugliness and ambiguity of this situation. But the die has been cast. My only option now is to pursue justice, wherever that path may lead.

The next day starts out deceptively calm, but it doesn't take long for the fragile peace to shatter.

I'm meeting with several of my Capos—Vinnie, Tony and the man I've only ever known as Tommy Two-Tone, called that for long-forgotten reasons—in my study at the brownstone, along with Angelo and a few other key men, when an agitated young house guard bursts into the room.

“Ms. Bianchi—Big Bobby's dead! They whacked him in an alley over in Hell's Kitchen, shot him right between the eyes.” His words slice through the room like a blade.

The reaction is immediate uproar. Big Bobby was a top earner for us, but more importantly, he was well-liked by the men—and he was a made man, which means this is a death that *must* be avenged.

And Hell's Kitchen is O'Sullivan territory.

Vinnie slams a meaty fist down on the table, face mottled with rage. “We need to hit those Irish bastards back twice as hard! No one disrespects us like that and lives!”

A rumble of agreement goes around the room. Tommy cracks his knuckles, practically snarling. “Say the word, Boss. We'll make them pay for this, send a message once and for all.”

I raise my hands, trying to placate the room. “Everyone stay calm. We need proof before we retaliate. For all we know, this could be a set-up to try and spark a war between our families.”

But my pleas fall on deaf ears. The men are whipped into a fury, demanding blood in return for Big Bobby's death. I feel control of the situation slipping through my fingers. And truth be told, I'm furious at the insult to my Family, as well.

This murder could be the spark that finally ignites a full-blown conflagration, one that will leave casualties on both sides.

And despite my explicit orders to stand down until we have more information, an unauthorized group from our side

crosses the line that very night. Incensed by Big Bobby's slaying, they take matters into their own hands and vandalize one of the O'Sullivan's' most profitable establishments at the outskirts of Hell's Kitchen.

The news is waiting for me when I arrive at my office the next morning, along with a string of irate messages from Sean Sr. I curse under my breath, knowing swift retaliation is all but guaranteed at this point. Our alliance seems to have gone up in smoke overnight.

I request an immediate sit-down with the O'Sullivan patriarch. I need to look him in the eye, try to take the temperature of his response. An associate conveys the message, and to my surprise, Sean begrudgingly agrees to a meeting on neutral ground that afternoon.

We sit across from each other in a dingy warehouse downtown, staring each other down. Gone is the warm man I last saw at the O'Sullivan Sunday dinner. This will be a delicate dance. We both want to project strength without provoking an irreversible reaction from the other side.

Sean launches into a blistering tirade right off the bat, excoriating me for my men's "unprovoked attack" on his business and questioning my control over my own Family. His face is mottled red with fury, and spittle flies as he rails at me.

"How dare you authorize such an assault against my livelihood and reputation? You have any idea of the losses I incurred from your thugs' little rampage last night? And on what grounds, may I ask? My hands are clean in all of this!"

I raise a hand, refusing to be cowed. "Mr. O'Sullivan, you know as well as I do that nothing happens in your territory without your consent. Maybe you didn't directly order it, but Big Bobby's death has your tacit approval written all over it. And I'd like to know if it was only made to seem that way—or if you were, in fact, involved." I keep my tone cold and matter-of-fact, but the implication still lands as intended.

Sean's eyes flash dangerously. "Is that an accusation I hear? Because you better have concrete proof to back up claims like that against my Family. If you cross me again, friend or not,

daughter-in-law or not, you'll see exactly what I'm capable of."

The conversation devolves from there, both of us trading increasingly sharp barbs across the scratched metal table. I warn him not to underestimate me or the lengths I'll go to get justice for whoever orchestrated the hit on my father. Sean pushes right back, refusing to be intimidated or back down an inch in defending the honor of the O'Sullivans.

Despite our bitter arguing, an undercurrent of hesitation lingers between us. This brewing feud will hurt us both, but neither of us can afford to appear weak by making the first concession. The meeting ends in a tense standoff, with the rift between our families wider than ever.

We both know what's coming on the horizon. And I'm not sure either of us can stop it.

When I return to the solitude of my office, I allow myself a moment of honest despair. If there was any way to shelter Caitlin from the blood that's about to be spilled on both sides of this feud, I would move heaven and earth to make it happen. But it's too late now.

All I can do is brace myself and hope love proves strong enough to endure what's coming.

CHAPTER 21

CAITLIN

The icy chill of the winter wind cuts through my jacket as I wander aimlessly through Central Park, lost in thought. All around me families bustle along the frozen pathways, bundled in colorful scarves and hats, but I feel detached from their cheer. A heavy weight has pressed down on my spirit ever since Danny first told me he would look into Brendon, see if he was up to anything.

And apparently Brendon *is* up to something, because Danny asked me to meet him here in public, to pass on information he was reluctant to share over the phone.

Things have been tense at home with Juno. Her meeting the other night with Dad went poorly, and I'm heartbroken to think that—if there's a war coming—I'll be forced to choose between my family and Juno.

I can't make that choice. It would kill me.

I crunch over the frosted grass of Central Park, hands shoved deep in my pockets, trying to unwind the tangled knot of emotions within me. Hot anger wars with icy betrayal, confusion clashes with disbelief. I'm afraid to hear what Danny has to say, but I have to hear it.

If Brendon is pulling strings behind my father's back...

Even the thought of it takes my breath away. It would mean that Brendon has betrayed us. Betrayed *me*.

And for what? Power? Money?

The sound of boots scuffing on icy pavement shakes me from my brooding. I glance up to see Danny leaving the path and walking toward me briskly, bundled against the biting chill. His eyes dart around warily before settling on me with a look of concern.

“Caity, where are your bodyguards?” he asks, frowning. “It’s not safe to be out here alone right now.”

I wave a hand dismissively, forcing cheer into my voice. “Paulo’s lurking around here somewhere. I asked him to give us space. He’s never far though.”

Danny doesn’t look convinced. He tilts his head meaningfully. “Still, we should keep moving. Too exposed otherwise.”

I nod and fall in step beside him as we meander along the path. “So what’s with all the secrecy, why couldn’t we meet at Jack’s like usual?”

Danny shoves his gloved hands into his coat pockets, looking uneasy. “Not sure the bar is secure enough for this conversation. And I don’t want to risk being overheard on Irish turf right now.” He drops his voice lower, barely over a whisper. “Trust is getting thin these days, Caity. Your wife is making things difficult.”

My stomach sinks at the reminder of why we’re here, alone in the icy park. Danny chews his lip, seeming to weigh how to break difficult news. His breath mists in the frigid air.

“I followed him again last night. Brendon. You want to know where he goes, late at night? He likes to meet up with a Sabatino crew down by the shipyards, late as hell.” Danny’s voice is flat, devoid of doubt. “That’s what he did last night. Just like all the other times.”

He lists off details—dates, times, locations, specific names of the Sabatino men that Brendon secretly met. Each new damning revelation lands like a sledgehammer blow as I desperately try to align this picture of a traitor with the brother I hold in my heart. My knees go weak and I have to steady myself against a frozen park bench. Danny keeps talking, but

his voice seems to come from far away over the roaring in my ears.

“...passed him an envelope, looked like it was full of cash. Then they shook hands and parted ways. And your Dad knows nothing about this.”

Danny finally pauses, seeing that I’ve stopped walking altogether. I stare at him wildly, grasping for any straw of hope.

“But are you absolutely *sure* it was Brendon? Couldn’t it have been someone else?” My voice breaks pathetically.

Danny puts a steadying hand on my shoulder, meeting my gaze with pity and certainty mingling in his eyes. “I know this is hard to hear, Caity. Hell, it’s hard for me to tell you, because I know what a terrible position it puts you in. But I wouldn’t tell you if I wasn’t a hundred percent positive. It’s definitely him. In fact...” He sighs. “I can show you.”

He pulls out his phone to show me photos of Brendon and a dark-haired man in conversation, a man that Brendon tells me is a high-ranked Sabatino Capo. Their faces are small and grainy, the photo taken from some way away but zoomed in—but it’s undeniably Brendon. The concrete evidence mocks me on the tiny screen. I have to look away, blinking back hot tears that burn in the winter air.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph.” I run a shaky hand through my hair, exhaling plumes of frosted breath. “Have you told anyone else yet?”

Danny shakes his head. “I came straight to you. Frankly, I’m not sure who to trust at this point.” Sympathy fills his voice. “Just want you to stay safe, Caity. You’re like a sister to me.”

I manage a wobbly smile, emotions threatening to choke me. Danny grips my shoulder tighter, voice hardening.

“But we need to make a plan here. Decide what to do next.”

I swallow hard. “I should talk to him. Tonight.” Even as I say it, I know it’s a terrible idea. Danny looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“Whoa, whoa, hang on. You can’t meet with him alone after this.” Danny grabs my arm, forcing me to face him. “Brendon’s clearly dangerous, Caity. Unpredictable.”

I try to shake him off. “I just need to hear his side, give him a chance to explain—”

“Explain what?” Danny cuts me off sharply. “How he betrayed the family? Put us all in danger? Sold us out to the enemy?” His eyes blaze into mine.

I open my mouth but no words come out. A part of me knows that Danny’s right. Meeting Brendon alone is reckless, now more than ever. But the rest of me recoils from the idea.

Despite it all, Brendon is still family.

Danny’s voice softens, but remains firm. “Look, I think you need to tell Juno about this, and I’ll go to Connor.” Connor, my other brother, is Danny’s Lieutenant. And Connor will be as horrified as I am, I know.

But at the mention of Juno, my gut twists uncomfortably. The thought of bringing her into this, of splintering my family further...it makes me feel ill. I shake my head, pulling away from Danny’s grip.

“If I tell her, she’ll...” I trail off.

Danny watches me pacing anxiously. “Cait, think about it. If you can’t trust your own wife with this, what’s the point of it all?” His words slice through my messy emotions. “Juno loves you. I know it. The whole damn city knows it. And she wants to keep you safe.”

I stop pacing, his simple logic penetrating the chaotic maelstrom in my mind. He’s right. Shutting Juno out would only hurt our marriage again, feed any lingering doubts. This isn’t just about Brendon now. My marriage could suffer, too, if I try to handle it alone.

I take a deep breath and meet Danny’s worried gaze. “Okay. Okay, you’re right. I’ll send the staff home and tell Juno everything tonight.” Saying it out loud eases some of the tightness in my chest. Danny looks very relieved.

“Thank you. It’s the right call, hard as it is.” He pulls me into a fierce hug. “And I’ve got your back Caity, no matter what shakes out. Never forget that.”

I cling to him for a long moment, emotions threatening to spill over. But the cold winter air helps me collect myself as we eventually part ways. I manage a small smile, gratitude welling inside me for his steadfast friendship.

Paulo falls into step with me as I head home, mentally preparing for an agonizing conversation with Juno. One that will shake the foundations of my family, no matter the outcome.

“All good, Ms. O?”

“No,” I tell him truthfully. “All very fucking awful, actually.”

He gives me a sympathetic glance. “Anything I should know?”

“I want to tell Juno first.”

He nods approvingly. The familiar brownstone is in view now, the house guards waiting there as they always are. When we reach home, Paulo holds the door open for me, glancing sharply down both ends of the street before following me inside. He pulls off his gloves and looks at me intently.

“Anything I can do? You look pretty upset, if you don’t mind my saying.”

I shake my head. “No, nothing. I...it’s better that Juno hears it first.” Paulo’s eyes bore into me for a moment before he nods.

“Right, then. Let me ring her for you.” He pulls out his phone to dial Juno’s number. But before he can connect the call, heavy footsteps echo suddenly from the hallway, getting louder.

Paulo tenses instantly and steps in front of me, hand hovering near the gun under his suit jacket. Fear spikes through me as the ominous footsteps approach.

Has someone come for me?

A tall shape fills the doorway a moment later: Angelo Vanzetti. He pauses there, taking in the scene before him with

raised eyebrows. Paulo scans him warily, hand still poised to draw.

“At ease, soldier.” Angelo raises both hands in a calming gesture, an easy smile on his face. “Just me. No need for heroics, Paulo.”

He claps Paulo on the shoulder, moving further into the room. Paulo hesitates a moment before stepping forward from me, though his eyes stay watchful.

“Apologies, sir,” he says to Angelo. “Can’t be too careful with things so tense lately.”

Angelo nods. “A valid concern. Perhaps you should take a walk around, verify the perimeter is secure.”

“Can’t do that, sir. My remit is to guard Ms. O.”

“Then perhaps you could at least take a glance outside,” Angelo says, gesturing casually to the window, “because I would like a private word with Ms. O’Sullivan.”

Paulo glances between us, and I give him a little nod.

Paulo moves to the window facing the street. He peers through the curtains intently. And then, while Paulo’s back is turned, Angelo pulls a handgun from his coat so fast I barely track the motion.

Before I can react, Angelo has stepped forward to pistol-whip Paulo hard across the back of the skull. A sickening crack echoes in my ears. Paulo drops limply to the floor without a sound.

And I stand there frozen. Silent.

Everything seems to slow, my mind struggling to process the nightmarish scene before me. Paulo lies crumpled and unmoving, blood pooling under his head. Rage and nausea churn inside me, and I run over to him.

Angelo’s easy smile has been replaced with grim focus. “My apologies for the unpleasantness, Ms. O’Sullivan. But he was a traitor, you see.”

“What?” I choke out, kneeling by Paulo’s body. “That’s not true! He never hurt me, he protected me!” Desperation strains my voice.

Angelo just shakes his head. “I’m afraid Paulo has betrayed the Bianchi family. For your safety, Juno insists you come with me.”

I open my mouth to argue, to fight, but the words lodge in my throat. Paulo’s lifeless form seems to reproach me for letting this happen. My hand creeps to his neck, finds a weak but steady pulse.

Thank God.

But still Angelo stares at me. “You need to come with me. Now.”

“No. I need to call an ambulance.”

At last, Angelo lets the charade drop. He turns the gun on me. “I’m sorry, Ms. O’Sullivan. But you will be coming with me. Quietly, now. Let’s go.”

My pulse pounds loud in my ears, fury and fear twisting in my gut. But one thought rings clear through the tempest brewing inside me: I won’t be controlled again. Not by Angelo, not by Brendon. Not by anyone.

“No,” I tell him. “I will not come with you, quietly or otherwise.”

He looks genuinely sad to hear it. “Oh, Caitlin,” he sighs. “Very well. Have it your own way.”

CHAPTER 22

JUNO

The sun sinks below the New York skyline as my driver pulls up at the brownstone. After a full day of tense meetings with rival families, I'm eager to unwind at home with Caitlin. Ever since our reconciliation a few weeks ago, I've felt lighter and happier than I can remember being in years. Something about her playful smile and devilish laugh makes me feel truly alive.

I step out of the car into the quiet evening. Too quiet. Even from outside, I can sense the house lacks its usual warmth and bustle.

And where in God's name are the house guards?

My bodyguard obviously feels it too, pushing me back toward the car. "No," I say sharply. "You find the guards—have a look around. I..." I need to find Caitlin, a sick and cold fear already tugging at my heart.

I run up the stone steps and find the door unlocked. Inside, the foyer is dim and silent, absent of its familiar comforting energy.

There's no Nero to greet me, either.

"Caitlin?" I call up the stairs, straining for any hint of sound. No thudding footsteps, no muffled rock music filtering down from her room. No sound of the television from the living room.

And I know she should be home by now.

I move quickly through the first floor, senses heightened. In the kitchen, dishes are stacked neatly in the sink. The staff are

nowhere to be seen, though their workday doesn't end for several more hours.

Unease twists my gut. Something isn't right here.

I climb the stairs with quiet footfalls, praying Caitlin is just lost in her art, headphones muting the outside world. But as I nudge open the bedroom door, I see that the room sits untouched, bed neatly made, everything exactly as we left it this morning.

No trace of her vibrant, chaotic energy remains.

Retreating from the bedroom, I will my hands not to shake, mind racing through possible explanations, even as I hear my bodyguard stomping through the house, calling out for the guards.

"No one's here, Boss," he hollers up.

I pull out my phone, cursing myself for being so stupid as to only think of this now, and dial Caitlin.

And from somewhere in the house, I hear her phone.

I run downstairs, back into the living room, the hairs at the back of my neck bristling as I see her phone on the coffee table.

Then I see it—a leg, protruding from behind the couch. Rushing over, the sight makes my blood run cold.

Paulo lies sprawled under the window, eyes closed, face pale.

Mere seconds later, footsteps thunder into the house, and I hear my bodyguard come running down the stairs, shouting, "Where the fuck have you motherfuckers been?"

"In here!" I shout, voice shrill in my own ears. Guards flood into the room, their expressions mirroring my own dismay. They gather around Paulo, checking vitals, applying pressure to his wounds. I lean over, wanting to help somehow, but one of them puts a gentle but firm hand on my shoulder, guiding me back.

"Give us space, Ms. Bianchi." I want to resist, to take control of the situation, but the desperation in their eyes stops me

short. These men know Paulo as more than a subordinate. To them, he is a brother in arms. So I stand back silently, pulse racing, watching them work desperately to stabilize him, staunch the flow of crimson staining the pristine carpet.

One of the taller guards stands and meets my gaze, obviously readying himself to take questions. “Well? What happened here?” I demand. “Where is my wife?”

He hesitates. “I guess she left with Mr. Vanzetti? He was here approximately fifteen minutes ago. We assumed you were aware, ma’am. Mr. Vanzetti—he said you had asked him to pick up Ms. O’Sullivan, and he sent us around the corner—urgent—said there was a group of Irish coming...” He rubs a hand over his face. “We had no reason not to believe he was telling the truth, Boss.”

All strength leaves my body. “That’s impossible,” I hear myself say distantly. “There must be some mistake.”

But in my gut, I know mistake is not the right word.

Betrayal. Deception. Treachery.

These are the monsters invading my home, architects of this living nightmare.

I take out my phone again with trembling hands, nearly dropping it twice before managing to pull up Angelo’s contact. He doesn’t pick up on the first ring. Or the second. By the tenth unanswered chime, I can barely think.

Somewhere in the distance, sirens blare, snapped back into focus by the paramedics bursting through the front door. They swoop in like vultures, loading Paulo onto a stretcher, shouting stats and vital signs. One tries to check me for shock, but I push him off. Sinking into the nearest chair, I stare down at my hands, still sticky with Paulo’s blood.

This is all my fault. I swore to protect Caitlin, vowed no harm would come to her as long as I drew breath.

Somewhere in the chaos, I hear Paulo cry out, jolting me back. The paramedics are wheeling him out of the room, but he fights them weakly, eyes seeking me out. I rush over, leaning

in close as he grips my arm with surprising strength. His breaths are labored, words barely a whisper.

“Vanzetti...”

His hand goes slack before I can respond, eyes fluttering closed. My chest constricts so tightly I can scarcely draw breath.

So it’s true. It’s Angelo.

Angelo has Caitlin.

I think back to the night Caitlin’s drink was drugged at the charity event. I watch it unfold again in my mind—the bar, the way she and I were glaring at each other, oblivious to everything else. And all the while, Angelo hovering nearby, watching, biding his time...

He stood right in front of her drink. I see the security footage in my mind’s eye: the way he glanced over his shoulder. I thought he was checking to make sure that Caitlin and I were not attracting too much attention.

But he was making sure no one was watching *him*.

There was a moment when Caitlin and I moved, swayed in front of him, blocking the camera. That must have been the moment he did it. And we...

We had never even allowed ourselves to consider it.

Bile rises in my throat. Angelo Vanzetti played me for a fool. As my closest advisor, mentor, almost a father figure, I handed him the keys to my kingdom, laid my weaknesses bare. He acted the part flawlessly while deceiving me at every step.

Angelo *knew* how much I relied on him. My faith in him blinded me—and it left Caitlin exposed and vulnerable.

I force myself to take one steadying breath, then another. Caitlin needs me. I spent my whole life pushing down inconvenient emotions. God knows I will need that talent now.

Standing slowly, I turn to address the guards.

“Notify all Capos and crews. Full emergency protocol is now in effect.” My voice echoes, amplified by the high ceilings.

“Comb this city inch by inch. Tap every informant we have, search every warehouse, depot, and bolt hole until she’s found. Angelo Vanzetti has betrayed this Family and abducted my wife. And he will suffer dearly for it.”

The guards spring into action, hastened by the ice in my tone. In moments the house is abuzz with activity, our full arsenal primed for war.

“I’m coming for you, *cara mia*,” I whisper to my reflection when I take a moment alone. “On my life, I swear it.”

Somewhere out there, Caitlin is waiting. And I will not let her down. Darkness falls over the city, but it does not frighten me.

I am the thing that men fear. I will be the vengeance that tracks down Angelo Vanzetti and repays him in kind. No force on this earth will stop me from taking back what is mine.

For Caitlin, I would burn this city to the ground and rebuild her an empire atop the ashes.

So let the hunt begin.

CHAPTER 23

CAITLIN

I slowly regain consciousness, my head throbbing. As I blink open my eyes, it takes a moment for them to adjust to the dim lighting. I'm in a small windowless room, lying on a bare mattress on the cold concrete floor. The walls are rough concrete as well, with peeling beige paint that does little to brighten the gloomy space. A single exposed bulb hangs from the low ceiling, providing the only weak light. The heavy metal door looks like it belongs in a prison, with rivets lining its edge and a small sliding slot at eye level. There are no other furnishings except for a bucket in the corner that I assume is for waste. The room is musty and damp, with a chill that seeps into my bones.

Where the hell am I?

Fear shoots through me as the memories come flooding back. I was at home—Paulo was calling Juno for me—

Angelo Vanzetti.

Oh, God.

I refused to go with him...but Angelo had been prepared for that, too. He pulled a cloth from his pocket and—grabbing me when I tried to run, tried to scream out—he pressed it over my nose and mouth. I held my breath, but the sickly sweet chemical smell overwhelmed me. My lungs burned for air and finally I gasped reflexively, inhaling the fumes.

The last thing I saw before everything went black was the sad look of regret in his eyes.

The metal door suddenly swings open with an ear-splitting creak, the rusted hinges protesting loudly in the silence. I flinch at the harsh noise, heart leaping into my throat as I'm yanked back to the present. Against the shaft of dim light now streaming into the small room, I make out the looming silhouette of a man filling the doorway.

Yes. It's Angelo.

Shock and confusion war within me—Angelo has always been fiercely loyal to Juno. He's been by her side since she was a child. So why would he kidnap me?

I gingerly push myself to my feet, my head spinning. "Angelo? What the hell is going on?" My voice comes out hoarse and shaky.

He steps into the room, face impassive. "Don't worry, Ms. O'Sullivan, you're safe. I'm not going to hurt you."

His calm tone sends a chill down my spine. I take a wary step back until I feel the cold concrete wall behind me. "Safe? You drugged and kidnapped me! Let me go, now!" I try to inject as much command into my tone as I can muster.

Angelo shakes his head, the corners of his mouth turning down. "I can't do that. It's for your own protection."

"Protection? That's bullshit!" I snap, hands balling into fists. Fear is quickly being overtaken by anger.

"Language, Lucia," Angelo chides gently. "I'm only trying to keep you safe."

I freeze in confusion. Did he just call me Lucia?

His daughter's name?

She died years ago, didn't she? Some sort of overdose?

A creeping unease settles in my gut along with the anger still simmering inside me. Something is very wrong here. I need to tread carefully until I figure out what's going on in Angelo's head. Taking a slow breath, I soften my voice. "Angelo...why did you call me Lucia?"

He looks startled, as if just realizing his mistake. Pain flashes across his face, his eyes taking on a faraway look. “I...I’m sorry, Ms. O’Sullivan. For a moment, you reminded me of her. My Lucia.” His voice cracks on her name.

My fear and anger melt away at the grief in his voice. Maybe if I can get him to open up about Lucia, it’ll give me insight into why he’s acting so erratically.

“It’s okay,” I say gently. “Will you tell me about her?”

He hesitates, emotions warring on his face, before sinking down to sit on the edge of the mattress. After a moment’s hesitation, I lower myself down next to him, keeping a bit of distance between us. For a long moment Angelo just stares down at his weathered hands, looking much older than his years.

When he finally speaks, his voice is thick with emotion. “Lucia was my only child. Her mother died in childbirth, so it was just the two of us growing up. She was so full of life, my little girl. Always laughing, singing, getting into mischief.” A wistful smile tugs at his lips. “Spirited, just like you. And so clever. She wanted to be a writer.”

My chest aches, hearing the love and loss in his words. I stay quiet, letting him continue his memories.

“She used to slip little poems and stories she wrote under my door as surprises,” he continues with a sad chuckle. “They were quite good. She dreamed of writing fantasy novels filled with adventures.” Angelo’s smile fades. “But then she fell in love. In love with the wrong man. The very *worst* of men. She deserved so much more.”

His head bows under the weight of his grief, shoulders slumping. I have to resist the urge to reach out and comfort him.

“Enzo Bianchi,” he spits out. “Juno’s cousin. And Carmine’s nephew. A man of violence—and no honor. He seduced Lucia, but only because he thought it would strengthen his claim to the Bianchi throne. He thought to use my daughter as a bargaining chip with me, that I would speak on his behalf to

Carmine, convince him to name Enzo as his heir instead of Juno. A crazy plan—and I told him so. But he and Lucia had already eloped. It was too late to stop the marriage. Soon after...”

He stops, and I begin to worry he’s too caught up in his memories. “Juno told me...she died?” I say gently.

Angelo’s head snaps up, eyes blazing with renewed fury. “Murdered. By Enzo Bianchi, and with Carmine’s blessing.” He spits out the name like it’s poison.

I flinch back, stunned. “What? How can you say that?”

He surges to his feet, pacing agitatedly in the small space like a caged lion. “I know what they did! I know that Carmine must have given his blessing, allowed Enzo to kill her and make it look like a drug overdose.” His hands clench into fists as he speaks. “My girl never would have turned to drugs. She was murdered in cold blood!”

My pulse is racing as I take in his claims. I know the Bianchis can be ruthless, but surely they wouldn’t kill an innocent woman? And besides, if this Enzo was as terrible as Angelo seems to think, would he really have sought Carmine’s permission?

I ask Angelo that, straight out, and regret it immediately as it provokes another rage-filled outburst.

“Of course it was Carmine! When I went to him and told him—when I demanded vengeance—he refused! Why else would he refuse if he hadn’t been behind it himself?”

Because Carmine thought Angelo was crazy—but I’m not dumb enough to say that out loud. But Angelo clearly believes every word. Between his overwhelming grief and desire for vengeance, he seems to have had some kind of break with reality. Attempting to reason with him is pointless right now.

I need to be smart and play along if I want to get out of this alive.

I shuffle over on the mattress, moving towards Angelo like one would approach a spooked horse. “Angelo, I’m so sorry. Lucia must have been a wonderful person to inspire such love

and devotion, even now.” He nods jerkily, eyes shining with unshed tears. “No one should ever have to suffer such a tragic loss of someone so young and full of promise.”

I reach out cautiously, laying a gentle hand on his arm. He goes very still, some of the manic energy leaving his frame. “Enzo is dead, though,” I go on carefully.

“Dead in some car crash,” Angelo spits. “I planned something far worse for him. I wanted to make him suffer as I have suffered.”

“It’s understandable that you wanted justice for your daughter. I can’t begin to imagine the depth of your pain and anger.” I swallow hard. “If someone took Juno from me, I don’t know how I’d cope.”

At my words, Angelo’s face crumples as though a mask has slipped away. Acting on instinct, I pull him into a hug, blinking back tears of my own. He collapses against me with a broken sob, clinging to me like a drowning man clutching driftwood. Shocked, I slowly wrap my arms tighter around his heaving shoulders.

He smells of blood and sweat and smoke.

“I’m so sorry, Lucia, I couldn’t protect you,” he chokes out between sobs. “Can you ever forgive me?”

I squeeze my eyes shut against a surge of sympathy. This broken man is still lost in his illusions, but his grief is achingly real. I don’t dare shatter those illusions yet, not when I’m still at his mercy. So I simply hold him, letting him grieve, murmuring soft reassurances.

After several long minutes, Angelo’s sobs subside. He pulls away, scrubbing a hand down his face. “Forgive me—Ms. O’Sullivan, I…” He clears his throat. “It seems my grief got the better of me.” He gets to his feet, visibly pulling himself back together. I marvel at how swiftly he can switch between torment and calm. “You must be hungry. I’ll bring in some food shortly.”

“Thank you,” I say, trying to inject warmth into my tone despite the unease twisting my insides. Have I just witnessed a

moment of clarity, or was that merely a new facet of his delusions?

With a short nod Angelo turns and leaves the room, the heavy door clanging shut behind him. The sound of the bolt sliding home hits hard.

I'm locked in again. A prisoner. In a real prison, or something that certainly feels like it.

Pressing a hand over my racing heart, I move back to sink down onto the filthy mattress. My emotions are in turmoil, sympathy warring with fear. I took a gamble showing Angelo compassion, and it seems to be paying off so far. As long as he continues to see me as Lucia, I have a chance of gleaning useful information from him. Anything that could aid in my escape, or at least get a message to Juno.

She must be worried sick right now, though she'd never show it openly. The image of her beautiful face, so often an impassive mask, flickers through my mind. But I've glimpsed behind that mask. I've seen the passion Juno keeps so carefully restrained. She won't stop until I'm safe.

The thought of her strengthens my resolve. I will find a way back to her, no matter what it takes.

I rub my arms briskly, trying to chase away the pervasive chill that has nothing to do with the ambient temperature. But when I think about Juno, I feel her love wrap around me like the warmth of the sun, even from afar. I close my eyes and hold onto that feeling with all my might.

I just have to be patient. And very, very careful.

Still...I don't understand everything yet. Vengeance for Lucia? I can see why Angelo might have killed Carmine Bianchi, if he truly thought the Bianchi Don was responsible for his daughter's death.

But why am *I* here? Does he mean to kill me, simply to hurt Juno? And if so...*why?*

What has Juno ever done to him?

CHAPTER 24

JUNO

The biting wind whips my coat as I stride towards The Shamrock, deep in the Bronx. I feel almost naked despite my coat and scarf, because I am alone. *Truly* alone. No driver, no bodyguards...

It was the only way Sean O'Sullivan Sr. would agree to the meeting.

Sadness and fear are my only companions—fear for Caitlin, and sadness over how quickly those tentative familial bonds with the O'Sullivans shattered, destroyed by my own Consigliere.

I find the pub, loud and busy, and hurry inside, immediately spotting the O'Sullivans clustered around a table in the back corner, untouched beers growing warm in front of them. There is quite a moat of empty space around them; obviously people know to give them a wide berth. Sean Sr. sits unsmiling at the head of the table, flanked by his first-born sons, Sean Jr. Connor is there too, and Declan. I expected all of them, and I'm not sure if it's a good thing or not that only half of them are here.

Declan is the only one to stand respectfully at my approach, and he gestures to a chair they've kept free for me. Danny Doyle is here, too, standing a little way from the table, watching the pub. Ah, he's working security. But he gives me a slight encouraging nod as I walk past. I fight to keep my face impassive as I approach, giving away nothing of the anguish raging inside me.

“Mr. O’Sullivan,” I say coolly.

“Ms. Bianchi.” His eyes are flinty, his jaw tight. No warmth in his voice. Only bitterness and accusations left unsaid.

“Not all of your sons are with you, I see.”

“Half of them are out tonight cleaning up Italian messes—thanks to you.”

The brothers shift uneasily beside their father. But there will be no mediators, no bridges built between us tonight. We are on our own, O’Sullivan and I, circling each other like wolves over the bloodied carcass of our alliance.

I lay out the unvarnished facts. Angelo’s betrayal, his abduction of Caitlin from our home. I explain that I do not know his reasons, only that he has broken trust irreparably.

But Caitlin is what matters now.

“I propose a temporary alliance between our families to get her back safely, by any means necessary.” My words are concise, emotionless.

Sean’s lip curls. “A fine offer, given it was your incompetence that lost my daughter in the first place.”

I do not allow myself to react. He’s right, after all. The blame lies squarely on my shoulders. I promised Sean I would protect Caitlin, swore she would be safe as my wife, secure within the formidable stronghold of the Bianchi empire.

I’ve failed catastrophically in my duties. And now the woman I love has paid the price for my mistakes.

“You gave me your word, Bianchi.” Sean jabs an accusing finger at me. “Yet Caitlin was ripped from your house right under your nose. Explain to me why I should trust anything you say or do now?”

“Dad, that’s not fair—” Declan begins, but Sean slams a fist on the table, silencing him.

Anger surges molten hot inside me at the insult, the sheer audacity of this man questioning my strength, my capability to lead. I crush it down, clinging to the frayed ends of my

composure. Sean wants a reaction from me. I won't give him the satisfaction.

Instead, I meet his gaze evenly. "I don't deny I failed Caitlin as her wife by allowing this to happen. But I will not fail her as head of the Bianchi Family. With or without your assistance, I will move heaven and earth to bring her home."

My voice does not waver. I mean every word.

But Sean scoffs. "What are you—a little girl playing at running an empire? A real Boss protects Family at any cost. Sure an' your father would've taught you *that*."

The barb hits its mark. Memories flash through my mind—my father guiding my hands on the trigger of a Beretta as a child, while patiently explaining the intricacies of the family business to me.

A real Boss protects the Family.

I slam my palms on the table, rattling the myriad pint glasses. Sean's eyes widen in surprise. In my periphery, I see Connor reach reflexively for his holster. But I only have eyes for the man who would dare question my capability to lead.

"I am Carmine Bianchi's daughter," I rasp. "I watched my father spill blood and move mountains to keep his Family safe. Do not make the mistake of thinking I am unwilling to do the same. As for you, O'Sullivan—let's not forget who traded his daughter to my father in the first place for this very alliance."

My chest heaves, fists still planted on the scarred tabletop. The pub falls silent except for the pounding of my heart. Sean's face is purpling as we regard each other across the divide. Two wolves with teeth bared.

Before either Sean or I can speak again, Declan leans forward, meeting his father's gaze. "With all due respect, Dad, Juno is not just the Bianchi Boss. She's Caitlin's wife. That makes her family now."

Danny steps forward, having listened to the whole exchange, and seems a little nervous at his own daring. "We've got a chance to save Caity if we work together, Mr. O'Sullivan. That's what matters most here."

Bless them for being voices of reason when Sean and I are ready to tear each other apart. Families are complicated, but the bonds of love run deep.

I take a breath and look Sean dead in the eyes. “I know you have no reason to trust me. But believe this—I love Caitlin more than life itself. I will do what I need to do to get her home safely, with or without your help.”

My raw admission seems to give Sean pause. For all his gruffness, I know he loves Caitlin fiercely, too. After a tense beat, he jerks his chin in a nod and says, “Then let’s hear what you’ve got planned, Boss Bianchi.”

The relief that washes over me leaves me lightheaded. There’s too much at stake for my pride to stand in the way any longer. This alliance is Caitlin’s only hope.

I outline what I know of Angelo’s patterns, his financials, his preferred hideouts. Locations he may have taken her. Approaches we could take to draw him out into the open. In the end, logic suggests where Angelo has taken her—a compound in New Jersey—and a quick call to one of my Capos out there confirms it fifteen minutes later.

Piece by piece, we build the skeleton of a strategy. My every instinct screams to charge in, storm with guns blazing to rain down hellfire on anyone who dares keep Caitlin from me. But this cannot be a blitzkrieg. Angelo must be expecting retaliation. Our only advantage lies in stealth, coordination, and patience.

And *then* a hell of a lot of explosives and guns.

I meet Sean’s eye with grim resolve. He nods, tilting his beer in a silent toast. The past rivalry between our families still simmers beneath the surface, but tonight, we share a purpose. Neither of us will give up until our girl comes home.

At last I take my leave, but outside, I pause on the sidewalk to let the cold slap a little reality back into me. And as I stand there, Danny and Declan come sliding out after me, a look of purpose in their eyes.

“Juno,” Declan says. “Hold on a minute.”

“What is it? Does Sean need—”

“It’s not about Sean,” Danny says. “It’s about Brendon.”

“Your brother, Brendon?” I clarify, looking at Declan.

He nods grimly. “There’s something else you need to know. Something that my father doesn’t yet.”

“Then you must tell him first,” I say at once. “O’Sullivan business is none of mine.”

Danny reaches out to touch my arm. “No, Juno,” he says softly. “It’s also about Caitlin. And we’re telling you first, because we’re not sure if Sean will be able to bring himself to believe it. And if we’re working on this rescue together, then at least some of us need to be aware that there’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing among us.”

“What are you talking about?”

Danny glances at Declan, who nods at him. “I’ll do better than tell you,” Danny says, taking out his phone. “I’ll show you.”

CHAPTER 25

CAITLIN

I don't know how long I've been here in the cell. Angelo brought me some sandwiches and even allowed me the dignity of a toilet break, but it's hard to tell whether it's night or day down here.

And so I'm asleep when the first explosion shakes the walls, dust raining down around me. I lurch to my feet, pulse kicking into overdrive. The detonation came from the west, and the message is clear—invasion is imminent.

I press against the door, straining to hear any activity in the hall over the blood roaring in my ears. There are shouts and screams—but they're so far away.

Still, I know that it's begun.

Juno—she's come for me.

I sag against the door, a chaotic swirl of hope and dread warring within me. I've prayed for this moment, but the violence closing in chills my spine. I feel such a terrible sympathy for Angelo now. And Juno—fierce, ruthless Juno, who'd raze cities for the ones she loves—will show no mercy in retaking what's hers.

Another percussive blast rocks the building, closer this time. I brace myself as the structure groans. Plumes of smoke waft beneath the door, trailing the acrid stench of explosives.

Heavy footfalls approach my cell. There's a metallic scrape as the door unlocks. Then Angelo hurtles inside, slamming it closed behind him.

His eyes are wild, face gaunt and pale. He paces the small space like a caged animal, tangling shaking hands through lank, graying hair. This is not the man who oozed charm as Juno Bianchi's trusted Consigliere. No, this is the broken, half-mad grieving father beneath the polished veneer.

And I'm scared that he's more dangerous than ever.

"Angelo, listen to me." I keep my voice low, measured. "You need to get out of here. If Juno's forces find you—"

"She'll flay me alive," he rasps, haunted gaze finally focusing on me. "A painful, bloody demise befitting a traitor."

His lips twist in a gruesome imitation of a smile. We both know how this ends if he stays. My gut twists with pity. Angelo turned down a dark road when his daughter Lucia died, but there are still flickers of the man he once was. I have to try to reach him.

"You still have a chance," I urge. "But you have to run, now, before it's too late. *Please.*"

The walls shudder under another blast, the sharp crackle of automatic fire drawing closer. Angelo drags a trembling hand down his face.

"Oh, my Lucia," he whispers. "I've failed you, my girl."

My breath catches. Lucia—of course. To him now, I am the daughter whose death broke him irrevocably so many years ago.

I swallow down the instinctive denial. If pretending to be Lucia gets him out of here alive, so be it.

"No, Papa, listen to me." I pitch my voice soft, soothing. "You can still honor me by living. Please, run while you still can."

Angelo's wild eyes cling to me, a drowning man grasping his final lifeline. "You're right. You were always the wise one, my angel." He tries to smile but it comes out as more of a pained grimace.

I offer him a tremulous one of my own. "Go. *Now.*"

He crushes me in a bruising embrace. I tense, then force myself to relax, bringing my arms up to return it. Finally, he releases me. With one last searching look, Angelo turns and hurries from the room, leaving the door open. His footsteps fade rapidly down the hall until even my straining ears can't pick them out amidst the surrounding chaos.

I sag back against the cinderblock wall, pity and regret swirling through me. If only he had seen reason instead of vengeance. If only grief hadn't twisted him into a ghost of the man I can see he once was.

I hope against hope that he'll escape. I don't think I could bear it if...

A thunderous blast shakes the building's foundations, jolting me from my thoughts. The gunfire is deafening now, shouts and screams echoing right outside the door, but I don't want to go out into the corridor—what if they shoot at *me*, mistakenly? So instead I brace myself against the shuddering walls, heart hammering against my ribs.

Please, let this end.

Please let her find me.

As if conjured by my desperation, the metal door bursts open. Backlit by smoke and flickering light, hair escaping her braids in wild wisps, Juno looks every inch the avenging warrior queen. Her frantic gaze lands on me.

"*Caitlin*," she gasps, like it's been ripped from her soul.

She crosses the space between us in two long strides, her arms wrapping around me as she crushes me against her chest. I cling back just as desperately, fistings shaking hands in the back of her shirt, breathing deep of her scent.

She came for me. I knew she would, and she did.

"You found me," I whisper into her neck. It comes out half laugh, half sob.

Juno pulls back far enough to frame my face in both hands, eyes roving every inch as if to reassure herself that I'm real.

That I'm whole. That I'm alright. I read the whirlwind in her gaze: relief, love, desperation.

"I will *always* find you." Her vow sinks into my core, easing the icy dread that's gripped me these past few hours. Days? Who knows.

Who *cares*.

I crush my lips to hers, hard and hungry, pouring every ounce of longing and fear of the last days into the contact. She returns it feverishly, kissing me with enough force to bruise. As if she could fuse us back together through sheer will alone.

By the time we break apart, gasping raggedly for breath, the world has dissolved around us.

"Let's get you out of here," Juno laughs.

We move swiftly but carefully out of that hated cell, senses alert for threats on every side, her Beretta loaded and ready. We emerge into an open courtyard filled with billowing smoke and running men.

"She's here!" Juno calls.

My brother Declan is across the way, alongside Danny. Even from here I can see the tension bleeding from Declan's shoulders when he spots me. He runs to me at once. "*Caity*, thank God—"

Juno allows him to hug me, and Danny, too, then hurries me out the front of the building. I can see now it's an old compound filled with warehouses. Dazed, I ask, "Where *are* we?"

"New Jersey," Danny tells me. "Bastard took you over state lines."

"He'll get what's coming to him," Juno says softly.

I grab her back. "Wait—Juno—about Angelo—"

Declan gives a harsh laugh. "He ran, right? Coward. But we'll get him."

I tense. Does he mean that Angelo managed to escape in the chaos? I hope so.

Before I can ask, my brothers Connor and Liam have flown to me, embracing me fiercely. I cling back just as hard.

Then a broad hand grasps my shoulder. I turn to see my father's craggy features softened with undisguised relief. He searches my face with wet eyes.

"Oh, my girl. I'm so sorry. So sorry for all of it." He gathers me close. I cling to his sturdy frame, eyes burning.

I can't remember the last time we embraced like this.

The tender reunion shatters under a derisive laugh. We break apart to see Brendon dragging a battered Angelo Vanzetti along by the collar of his shirt. Angelo's hands are bound behind his back, face a bloody, swollen mess.

He didn't make it.

Brendon shoves Angelo to his knees before us. "I found this rat slithering away from the south gate." Brendon's lips are curled in a smug grin. His eyes dart around, soaking up the attention like a sponge.

Waiting for praise for bagging the infamous traitor, Juno's conduit to betrayal.

How very convenient that he was the one to find Angelo.

"I say we kill him now," Brendon says, casually lifting his gun to Angelo's head.

Rage ignites within me, burning away any lingering chill from captivity. How dare he swagger in here, acting the conquering hero? When it was his schemes and manipulations that helped enable all of this?

Almost without thought, I grab the Beretta from Juno's holster. Before anyone can react, it's leveled squarely at my brother's broad chest. "Drop the gun, Brendon."

His smug grin melts. Shock widens his eyes as they dart from my face to the unwavering gun and back again. He licks his lips. "What the hell are you doing, Caity?"

I marvel distantly at the preternatural calm descending over me. The steady aim of my outstretched hands. I flicked the

safety off without even thinking.

“There’s something you all need to know about perfect Brendon here.” I flick my gaze to Danny, jerking my head at Brendon. “Go ahead. Tell them.”

Danny’s mouth settles into a grim line. “We already did, Caity.”

And that’s when I see that I’m not the only one with a gun on Brendon. All my brothers—my father, too—are holding guns on him, just like I am.

Brendon licks his lips again, glancing around frantically. But he finds only pitiless gazes surrounding him. Even Angelo regards him with interest through grotesquely swollen eyes.

“Come on, Dad,” Brendon wheedles desperately. “I don’t know what nonsense that Italian bitch has been filling your head with, but—”

“How dare you talk that way?” Dad roars. “Put that goddamn gun down and we’ll talk, son. But we’ll talk on *my* terms, not yours.”

He must see the implacable intent on all our faces because sudden desperation twists Brendon’s features. He surges forward, hands raised pleadingly. “Think about what you’re doing! I’m your—”

I shift my aim a fraction and squeeze the trigger. The snap of the hammer punctures the hanging silence.

Brendon recoils with a strangled yelp as the bullet punches a smoking hole in the dirt an inch from his boot. He collapses to his knees before me, hands raised in surrender. Or possibly prayer.

I stare down at him, pulse thundering in my ears, and I lock the sights on Brendon’s bowed head—

Until feather-light fingers graze my wrist. I turn to meet Juno’s knowing gaze.

Wordlessly, she takes the gun from my trembling hand. Warm breath tickles my ear as she bends close. “Not you, *cara mia*. I want no blood on your hands. And I want to take you home.”

I search her eyes, then nod, all the frantic energy bleeding from my body. “Don’t let them kill Angelo,” I whisper. Confusion flickers over her face, but she nods, and then I let Juno guide me away from everyone without a backward glance, as she calls out instructions to her guards to take Angelo into captivity, but to keep him alive.

There will be a lot of fallout to deal with, but for now...

I just want to go home.

CHAPTER 26

JUNO

The dim room crackles with tension as Angelo Vanzetti sits bound to the chair before me, his eyes darting around in fear. We are in a Bianchi stronghold, the place where our interrogations take place. I fold my arms across my chest, steeling myself for what is to come. This man was once my father's Consigliere, not to mention my own trusted advisor. Now, I intend to uncover the full truth behind his betrayal.

It's been a day since Caitlin's ordeal, and she told me everything that Angelo admitted to her. My rage has cooled—only a little, but enough for me to be able to think more clearly.

Sean O'Sullivan Sr. stands grimly beside me, since this infiltration struck not just my family, but his. The sting of such duplicity runs deep. I meet his eyes briefly and we exchange a slight nod. We both know what must be done.

I turn my gaze to Angelo. His breath comes in short, panicked gasps despite the bravado he tries to portray. He's weakened now, stripped of his power. Perhaps his sanity. A man who only a few days ago seemed larger than life itself now cowers before me.

"Why?" I ask simply, my voice low but carrying the promise of retribution. Angelo's eyes dart away from mine.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," he whispers. I resist the urge to strike him. His platitudes mean nothing to me now.

"You betrayed your oaths when you conspired with someone outside the Family. When you killed your Don—when you

killed *my father*. When you kidnapped my wife. You betrayed us *all*,” I hiss. “Your intentions do not matter. Only your actions.”

Angelo swallows hard. When he speaks, his voice wavers. “It was never meant to go this far. But when Lucia died, I...”

At the mention of his daughter’s name, his composure finally cracks. Tears fill his eyes even as he tries to hide them. I feel my anger falter ever so slightly. His thirst for vengeance has festered all this time, twisting him, driving him to unspeakable evils. This much I understand already.

Yet his motivations alone cannot excuse his crimes. My father lies cold in his grave because of this man’s madness.

“You believed my father was responsible for Lucia’s death,” I say bluntly.

Angelo nods. “I knew your father wanted to smooth things over quietly. Wanted to protect his own, at the expense of justice for my daughter.” He spits out the words like venom. “But I knew the truth. I’d warned Carmine countless times what Enzo was capable of, but he did nothing!”

Carmine had walked a difficult line, and now I know just how difficult. Killing Enzo in revenge—with no proof—would have destabilized the entire Family.

“So you sought your own justice,” I say. Angelo raises his eyes to meet mine defiantly.

“I bided my time. Watched and waited.” His voice takes on a strange zealous tone. “When Brendon O’Sullivan came to me, wanting my help to break the increasing bonds between the O’Sullivans and the Bianchis, I saw my chance. Brendon had plans of his own, starting with unsettling the alliance.”

“Are you saying Brendon O’Sullivan planned to have his father and older brother murdered?” I demand. “Be clear, Angelo.”

He looks at Sean Sr. next to me, and shrugs. “Whatever I might have done, it was done for love of my daughter. It would appear that your son has no love for you.” His candid words send a chill through me. Brendon’s ambition runs

deeper than I'd ever imagined. He would stop at nothing to further his own ends.

Even utilizing the love of a grieving father as a weapon in his game of power.

“Brendon masterminded this?” Sean speaks for the first time, his voice trembling with barely controlled fury. Angelo gives a jerky nod.

“He was tired of waiting for power. Tired of being under his father's thumb.” Angelo's eyes dart between us now. “He saw a route to destabilize, undermine...then kill. It would have left him in charge. He just wanted a little help to see it through.”

“And he used you to do his dirty work,” Sean growls. Angelo's face twists in a pained grimace but he says nothing.

“But why Caitlin?” I ask. “She was an innocent in all this.”

Angelo's head jerks up and he nods. “Yes, an innocent—that's why I wanted you far away from her, Juno. She was in danger so close to you—Brendon saw her as the main bond between the Bianchis and the O'Sullivans. When I realized how far Brendon was willing to go, after he killed off Palmero...I knew I had to make sure she was safe. That's when I started planning.”

“So,” I say slowly, “you drugged her at the gala. What did you hope to achieve?”

He looks down. “A few of my own sleeping pills, that's all. It was all I had on hand when she showed up so unexpectedly. I hoped you would see that being anywhere near her spelled danger.” He gives a bitter sob. “All it did was make you pull her close again. Then after the car bomb, I knew I had to take her away completely. Brendon would not stop until all ties between the Bianchis and the O'Sullivans were severed.”

Oh, Caitlin. Her face flashes in my mind, steadying me.

Sean's enraged voice rises at the mention of his traitor son. “How long?” he demands. “How long has Brendon been plotting against his own?”

Angelo sighs, a bone-deep weariness settling over him. “Years, I think. He’d been sowing discord among you. He was just biding his time until the harvest came due.” He peers up at Sean, a hint of sympathy entering his eyes. “I am sorry it came to this. Truly, I take no pride in any of it. But I did want to keep Caitlin safe. That’s why I took her. Brendon...he is committed. Relentless. I’ve seen men like that before. Once an idea roots in him, he will not stop until it comes to fruition. He was no different to Enzo Bianchi.”

Sean closes his eyes, pain etched across his features. I recognize the bitter sting of a father’s disappointment, and also a Don’s sorrow at betrayal from within his ranks. In this, we share a wretched kinship.

But I have more to say. I cross to Angelo and kneel down by his chair, speaking softly. “Angelo. I want you to know that Paulo is alright.”

“Ah. I’m happy to hear that.” He certainly looks relieved, at least.

“And I want you to know something else. Paulo was once Enzo’s bodyguard—you know this.”

Angelo’s weary eyes focus on me and he frowns. “Yes. What of it?”

I put my hand on his. “My father did listen to you, you know. About Lucia. He listened and he believed. And he took care of the problem—though you were determined not to see it.”

“What—what do you mean?”

“The car crash,” I say, dropping my voice even lower. I do not want Sean O’Sullivan to hear this. It’s Bianchi business, after all. “It was no accident. Paulo told me himself, just today, when I went to see him. To ask about his memories of Enzo Bianchi. He admitted it then, to me. My father gave him the order, and swore Paulo to secrecy. Eliminating his own nephew would have ripped the Bianchi Family apart, and my father knew it. But he did the right thing, nonetheless.” I stand now, tired of it all. “And now, at least, there are no more secrets.”

Angelo's face is filled with relief, but his eyes fill with tears. "So it was all for nothing," he chokes out. "All of this."

I don't know how to answer him.

I don't know what to *do* with him.

And I don't have it in me to decide now.

I turn to Sean, who is waiting, turned away respectfully. "Mr. O'Sullivan," I say, trying to keep the exhaustion from my voice. "I think it's time we spoke to your son."

Once Angelo has been taken away, Sean O'Sullivan Jr. drags Brendon into the room, shackling him to the same chair. His face is stoic, but there's a hint of disgust in his eyes as he subdues this particular prisoner.

Brendon's hands are bound, but his gaze holds steady as he meets his father's stare. Only the slightest twitch of his eye betrays the fear I know he must feel at his duplicity being exposed at last.

"What's she doing here?" he asks, nodding at me. "You've never needed a woman to tell you what to do before, Dad." He gives a sneer, but I can see the terror lying underneath.

"You watch your tone, boy," Sean growls.

"Or what? You'll kill me? I know you plan to anyway. Get on with it."

Sean takes a step forward, but I raise my voice, trying to inject some calm into the situation. "I am here as an observer only. Your father and I agreed that each traitor—Angelo Vanzetti and you—would face the justice of their own Family," I tell Brendon. Brendon's eyes widen fractionally at the mention of his co-conspirator, but he stays silent. "So my advice to you, Brendon, would be to beg forgiveness from your brothers and your father, if you want to live."

His nonchalance remains, but it is a thin veneer over the tension coiling through his body. He knows the reckoning has

come.

“Did you truly think this would work?” Sean asks quietly. Brendon’s throat bobs as he swallows but he says nothing. Always the smooth talker when spinning his deceptions and schemes, yet strangely mute now that the truth has emerged.

“Why?” Sean asks, echoing the first question I put to Angelo. The similarities between Brendon now and Angelo mere minutes ago strike me. Both betrayers stripped of their hubris, awaiting judgment.

But they are different, too. Angelo at least had reasons for his treachery. Reasons that I can understand.

This man before me? I cannot understand him—and I’m glad of it.

For a long moment, Brendon simply stares back at his father in defiant silence. Then he seems to deflate before our eyes, his composure finally cracking.

“You know why,” he grinds out through gritted teeth. “Always stuck standing in the shadows. Anything I accomplished, it was never enough.” His words come faster now, his voice rising. “Perfect Liam, dutiful Sean Jr, reckless fucking Caitlin. Even Aiden held more sway than me, just by flashing those dimples of his.”

“Mind yourself,” Sean warns as Caitlin’s name passes Brendon’s lips. But Brendon seems beyond caution now, his grievances flowing forth unchecked after years of silence.

“I spent my whole damned life playing the role of the quiet brother. The patient one. The *understanding* one.” He barks out a bitter laugh. “I even made my own father believe it. But playing that pathetic part was corroding me from the inside, year after fucking year!”

His chest heaves from the force of his tirade and his eyes blaze wildly. Sean watches on, clearly rocked by the vitriol coming from his son.

“So Angelo presented you with an opportunity,” I state flatly, unwilling to indulge his theatrics any longer. Brendon’s head jerks toward me, a humorless smile twisting his lips.

“I knew Dad would hand power to Sean Jr.” His voice drips with disdain over his brother’s name. “But Sean is *weak*. And stupid, God, so stupid. If he was out of the picture, I’d be next in line. And then I thought—why wait? Why not remove all obstacles while I was at it? But I wouldn’t have done anything if he hadn’t started buddying up to you fucking Italians. *I* could see it—the inevitable result. The O’Sullivans were bound to be swallowed up, reduced to servants, when we could have been players in this city.”

“So just like that, you decided to murder of your own flesh and blood? Went ahead and eliminated a powerful Don, a man with more honor in his little toe than you have in your whole body?” Sean asks, horror in his rough features.

Brendon shrugs, attempting casual indifference but the fury still simmering in his eyes belies his nonchalance. “I did what needed to be done. But you, Dad, you cling too tightly to your outdated notions of family and loyalty.” He shakes his head as if disgusted by Sean’s principles. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“You’re right. I don’t understand any of this, Brendon,” Sean whispers through clenched teeth. “Sean is your *brother*. I’m your father, for Chrissakes!”

“And what does that even mean?” Brendon retorts contemptuously. “You talk about loyalty as though it means anything. Look at Caitlin, throwing her lot in with the Bianchis at the first bat of Juno’s eyelashes. Look where all your damned ideas have landed you—trading your own daughter to the enemy!”

“You will not speak my wife’s name again,” I snap, unwilling to allow him to disparage Caitlin any further. Brendon’s lip curls derisively but he falls silent. The depth of his ambition is clear to me now. He will raze anything and anyone on his path to power. Family or not.

I turn my gaze to Sean. His eyes reflect the devastation wrought by Brendon’s betrayal. But I know the O’Sullivan name means everything to him. He must be the one to handle this blight within his own ranks, as I must with Angelo. Our

alliance holds strong, but justice in our own Houses is paramount.

“I have agreed that the traitor Vanzetti will be released into your hands,” he says slowly. “I trust you to deal with him as befits his crimes against your Family. I promise to do the same with my—with this traitor.” He hesitates. “But I think Caitlin must be part of that decision.”

I don’t want Caitlin anywhere near this, and my first instinct is to immediately refuse.

But it’s not my place to refuse for her, and I know that her father is including her out of respect. A final admission that she is just as important as all her older brothers.

And especially the traitor in their family.

I nod. “I will pass on the message. It’s up to her whether she agrees to do it.” Without another word, I turn on my heel and depart the makeshift interrogation room. Glancing back over my shoulder in the doorway, I see Brendon’s eyes locked onto mine, his hatred unconcealed.

He can hate me all he likes, because the alliance with the O’Sullivans stands strong again.

And Caitlin is *safe*.

CHAPTER 27

CAITLIN

The heavy silence in The Shamrock's basement presses down on me like a physical weight.

I stand apart near the back wall, arms wrapped around myself, as my brothers, and the other senior Bianchi family members, gather in a loose circle around Brendon.

Brendon sits hunched on a wooden chair in the center of the room, his wrists bound behind him. His usual cocky demeanor is gone, replaced by dull resignation. His square jaw is dark with stubble and his eyes fix somewhere near the floor.

He looks diminished. Broken.

Part of me wants to stride over there and shake him until his teeth rattle. Demand how he could betray his own family after everything we've been through together.

The other part just feels hollowed out and icy cold, like someone has taken a melon-baller to my insides. Is this how Juno feels? Or felt, at least, before I came into her life?

It's not pleasant.

I don't want to be here. When Juno gave me my father's message, I laughed in shock. *Absolutely not*, I said.

She told me to think about it. And now two days later, here I am. I'm not even sure when I decided to come...but I'm here.

I wanted to look Brendon in the face one last time.

"There's only one fate fit for a traitor," Liam growls from across the room. He clenches and unclenches his hands

repeatedly, the corded muscles in his forearms flexing. Out of all my brothers, Liam took Brendon's mentorship most to heart. This cuts him deeper than the others.

Murmurs of agreement ripple through the group like wind through graveyard grass.

Brendon closes his eyes, exhaling slowly. His shoulders slump another inch. In this moment, he looks so much like the big brother who used to sneak me sweets when I was just a skinny kid, who patiently taught me how to throw a punch, who lifted me up so I could decorate the Christmas tree...

Before he apparently decided stabbing us all in the back was the way to go.

"Maybe exile would be better than death," Aiden suggests, scuffing one polished loafer against the concrete floor. He keeps shooting little glances at Brendon from under his brows when he thinks no one is looking. Despite Brendon's actions, I know that part of Aiden is still hoping for another way out, a chance at redemption. "He *is* our brother, after all."

"*Was* our brother," Paddy corrects in a voice like granite. He stands with his arms crossed, face set in the same stony mask he wears when dealing with enemies of the family.

I risk a glance at my father. He sits to the side, shrouded in shadow. His craggy features are set in their usual unreadable mask, but his shoulders slump beneath his jacket in a way I've never seen before. This betrayal has hit him harder than any of us.

"Caitlin?" Declan prompts gently from his spot beside me. "You've been very quiet. What are your thoughts?"

Suddenly all eyes swivel my direction. I shift my weight under the scrutiny. "Brendon betrayed his family," I say finally, proud when my voice comes out steady. "He betrayed us for nothing more than a promise of money and power." I chance a look at Brendon now. His chin sinks lower but he doesn't lift his gaze to meet mine. "And he's nothing like Angelo." My voice catches slightly over the name. I clear my throat and continue. "Angelo was motivated by the love of his daughter.

His methods were wrong, but at least he was trying to avenge someone he loved with all his heart.”

Around me, my brothers are nodding, all of them except Aiden and Declan. And Declan looks so sad to hear my words.

He hates Brendon, I know. But he loves him, too.

“He is a traitor,” I go on, “but he is our blood,” I say. “It would be a terrible, unholy thing for us to shed his blood. I think...if we can find another way...we should take it. And that’s all I have to say. I’m going now.”

I turn abruptly and head for the basement stairs before my stoic mask shatters completely. As I climb up, the echo of my boots on metal accompanies the roaring in my ears.

It’s up to my father, now.

Me, I have another visit to make.

I wave off the man on duty and step up to the bars of the cell where Angelo Vanzetti is being kept while Juno decides what to do with him. Angelo sits hunched on the edge of the cot, but lifts his head at my approach. Surprise flickers in his bloodshot eyes when he sees me standing there.

“Caitlin,” he rasps, voice rough. “You shouldn’t be here. It’s no place for innocents.”

Despite everything, I feel a deep sorrow for this broken man. “I’ve come to see how you’re doing.”

Slowly, Angelo rises from the cot and comes to grip the bars with both hands. His eyes search my face, wary and confused.

“Why?”

I wrap my hands over his on the cold metal. “Because I understand.” I meet his gaze evenly. “Why you did the things you did.”

Pain spasms across Angelo’s face. “I loved my daughter,” he whispers. “My beautiful Lucia was my whole world. When

she was killed, something vital inside me died too.” He slumps against the bars, pressing his forehead to the metal. “Nothing I did brought her back. All I did was cause more pain, more suffering.” His voice breaks on a quiet sob. “I’m so sorry, Caitlin. So very sorry for everything.”

My vision blurs with tears. Juno told me the truth earlier today, how her father Carmine did indeed send Paulo to eliminate Angelo’s hated son-in-law Enzo, out of some twisted code of vengeance.

All that blood spilled. And for what?

“I know you’re sorry,” I murmur. I hesitate, then reach through the bars to put a hand on his shoulder. “Angelo, listen to me. It’s still not too late to try and make things right.”

Angelo looks up at me, his eyes bloodshot and haunted. In this moment, with all his masks stripped away, I can see flickers of the man he once was. A man who loved and lost and let his all-consuming sorrow twist him into someone—*something*—dark and unrecognizable.

“No. It’s too late for me,” he says softly. He takes a shuddering breath, then lets go of the bars and retreats to sit on the edge of the cot, looking utterly wrung out.

I tell him goodbye and then turn and hurry back to the brownstone before I lose my nerve. Once there, I go straight to Juno, who is in her study wrestling with this very decision, and take both her hands urgently in mine.

“Let Angelo go free,” I plead. “Give him money and papers for a new life abroad. He’s lost and broken, but he’s not beyond redemption. I know he—he killed your father, and that’s a terrible thing. But he wouldn’t have done it if your father had been honest with him.”

Juno searches my face intently. I see the struggle in her dark eyes, her innate desire for justice and vengeance warring with her love for me.

“Caitlin, *cara mia*, it’s not just about my father. Angelo drugged *you*. He kidnapped *you*,” she says quietly. “I cannot simply forget that.”

“I’m not asking you to forget, or even forgive,” I clarify. “But he was motivated by the love of his child. Surely we can show him a shred of mercy? Grant him the gift of a second chance, far from here—for Lucia’s sake, if not his?”

Juno looks into my eyes for a long, weighted moment. Then she leans forward and presses a gentle kiss to my forehead.

“For you, my love, I will try. Very well. We will provide transport to get him out of the country, set him up somewhere new.” Her voice hardens slightly. “But he can never return. If he does, his life is forfeit.”

“Agreed.” I let out a slow, shaky breath. The icy bands around my chest loosen slightly. Juno and I, at least, did not repay vengeance with more vengeance today. Perhaps that counts for something in this dark world we inhabit.

Juno calls the trusted Family accountant, giving instructions for Angelo’s travel arrangements and financial set-up. I try not to think about Brendon, abandoned for the moment as we focus on Angelo instead. Whatever fate awaits him, I hope my father chose wisely.

Once the arrangements are made, Juno wraps her arms around me and I cling to her, breathing in her familiar scent of sandalwood and jasmine.

“I’m proud of you, Caitlin,” she murmurs against my hair. “You have a generous heart. Never lose that. I need it to temper my own.”

It’s just after midnight when I stand with Juno beside a sleek town car at the Teterboro private airport in New Jersey, watching silently as Angelo boards a small chartered plane. His shoulders remain slumped, his steps slow and heavy. But when he pauses at the top of the stairs and glances back, I think I see the faintest flicker of hope rekindled behind the sorrow in his eyes.

The engines roar to life, blasting us with hot exhaust. The plane taxis down the tarmac, faster and faster until it lifts gracefully into the velvet night sky. Juno slips an arm around my waist and we watch together until the lights vanish completely from view.

Whatever redemption awaits Angelo in his new life, I find myself hoping desperately that he finds it. That tonight marks a step, however small, toward healing for him. For us all. Because in the end, we're all bound by our humanity.

Juno's breath grazes my ear as she leans in close. "I love you, Caitlin O'Sullivan," she repeats softly. "Never forget that."

My eyes sting with fresh tears but I blink them back. I turn and bury my face in the curve of her neck. "I never will," I vow fervently. "And Juno—I love you, too."

Her arms wrap around me, solid and safe. Together we turn from the empty sky and walk back to the waiting car.

On the way home, despite the late hour, I get a phone call from Declan. "Deccy?" I say, quickly answering it. My heart beats almost painfully fast and my stomach flips over.

I'm about to find out Brendon's fate.

CHAPTER 28

CAITLIN

“Hey, Caity,” Declan says. He sounds as exhausted as I feel. “Is Juno with you?”

I put him on speaker and tell him to go ahead.

“I asked Dad if I could be the one to let you both know about this,” Declan goes on. “And Juno—I’m not sure if you’ll like it. But we agreed in the end that killing Brendon was far too easy a fate. Instead, he’s being sent abroad.”

“A vacation hardly seems like a punishment,” Juno says drily, though I nudge her. It’s not far off from Angelo’s fate, after all.

“Oh, this is no vacation,” Declan says. “We have strong ties to the motherland, Juno, just as I’m sure you have to yours. And there are plenty of places over there where a treacherous man can be locked away with his ilk for quite some time, left with the scum to consider his sins. It won’t be fun for Brendon, to say the least—and *we* won’t have his blood on our hands.” Declan’s voice fades a little. “Truth be told, Caity...when it came down to it, none of us could pull the trigger. Perhaps we’re cowards—”

“No,” I say fiercely. “There’s nothing cowardly about mercy. There’s been too much death and destruction these last few months. I’m glad that Dad prefers exile to execution.”

“It is an honorable decision,” Juno agrees. “Please let him know he has my full support.”

After I hang up, I lean into Juno’s arms and we watch the bright lights of New York come closer and closer.

“Oh!” I say, sitting up as we cross into Manhattan.

“What is it?” Juno asks, alarmed.

I turn to her with a smile. “It’s Christmas next week. I actually *forgot*.”

She laughs out loud, and pulls me back into her arms. “At least this year I can tell Santa without lying that I have been a very good girl. And so—” she kisses me “—have you.”

The kiss turns passionate, but then Juno pulls back. “I’m sorry,” she gasps out.

“What on earth are you sorry for?” I demand, my head spinning.

“It’s too soon, perhaps,” she says awkwardly. “Too soon to...”

Since the moment she rescued me, I’ve been dying to make love to her again. To affirm that I’m still here. That I’m *still alive*.

And she’s been kind and considerate and respectful and...

And it’s past time.

I take her face in my hands as the car pulls up in front of the brownstone. “Juno, if there’s one thing I will *not* let anyone take away from us, it’s the absolute bliss of having sex with you. You hear me?”

“I hear you,” she says, eyes limpid as she smiles at me. Then her expression turns ferocious. “Then let’s go upstairs. What I want to do with you, I can’t do here in this car—not enough room.”

I button up her blouse so quickly that I miss a few, but neither of us care. “Then come on, wife,” I tell her. “I need you. *Now*.”

With that, I kick the car door open and yank Juno up the steps, giggling at the embarrassed face of the night guards as they immediately pick up on the vibe.

“Home,” I sigh dramatically, kicking the door shut behind us.

Juno pushes me up against it, kissing me again.

“Home,” she agrees afterward. “And now—*bed*.”

When we get up to the bedroom, Juno goes over to throw our coats somewhere toward the huge walk-in closet, and then turns on her heel, staring at me for a moment. She stalks back toward me, hips swaying, and yanks me against her body into a passionate embrace.

Christ, she’s so *warm*. I groan when her thigh slips between my legs and rubs against my core. Her hands slide under my shirt, fingertips dancing over my ribs. My breath hitches as Juno palms my breasts, pinching my nipples. Sparks of pleasure-pain shoot through me and I buck into her touch with a whine.

“Always so responsive,” Juno purrs, rolling my nipples between her fingers. “I’m going to ruin you tonight, *tesoro*.”

Ruin me. *Yes*. “I’m yours,” is all I can say.

Her mouth crushes to mine, tongue thrusting inside, possessive and hungry. I moan into the kiss, dizzy with desire, and fist my hands in her silky hair. She pushes me gently to the bed, lays me out before her like a feast as she strips off my layers until only my panties are left. Her dark eyes gleam as she prowls over my body, trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses over my flushed skin.

My heart races in my chest, pounding out a single word.

Yours. Yours. Yours.

Let’s face it, I’m already ruined.

Need builds between my legs, an aching throb that makes me buck my hips up in search of friction. Juno ignores my silent plea, continuing her leisurely seduction. By the time she reaches the waistband of my underwear, I’m trembling with desire. Juno hooks her fingers under the lace and drags them down my legs, baring me to her gaze.

I flush under her scrutiny, trembling with equal parts arousal and shyness. No one has ever looked at me like I'm a feast to be devoured, new every time we get naked together.

Juno's eyes gleam. "Exquisite."

She's not in the mood to tease tonight, as she spreads my thighs, settling between them, and drags her tongue through my already-slick folds. I cry out, back arching, as she circles my clit with teasing flicks.

"Juno!" I gasp, fisting my hands in the sheets to keep from grabbing her. I'm already wound so tight I might unravel with just one more stroke of her tongue.

She slides two fingers into me, crooking them as her lips close gently around my clit. The dual sensations rocket through me, shattering my last shreds of control. My climax is sudden, intense, wringing a sob from my throat. Juno works me through the aftershocks, her touches gentling but not ceasing until I collapse, boneless and sated.

She crawls up my body and kisses me, the taste of my release on her lips making heat curl in my belly once more.

I smile against her mouth. "Your turn."

I roll Juno onto her back, my hands roaming over her body, tracing the lines of lean muscle and soft skin. Every inch of her is perfection.

Her breath hitches as I palm her breasts, teasing her nipples into hardened peaks. "Caitlin." My name is a plea on her lips. I love hearing her say it.

I kiss a path down her torso, nipping and sucking, leaving tiny love marks on her skin. The evidence of my desire, proof she belongs to me, just as I belong to her. Her hands tangle in my hair, urging me lower. I pin her hips to the bed, holding her in place as I avoid the one place she wants me, lavishing attention on her inner thighs instead. I intend to leave them bruised and tender, a reminder for her for the next few days.

"My little tigress," she gasps, writhing against my grip.

I flick my tongue over her clit, once, twice, before pulling away. "Patience," I tell her, a mocking lilt to my tone.

A snarl curls her lip. She surges up, reversing our positions with a swiftness that leaves me breathless. Juno straddles my waist, desire burning in her gaze. "You want to play games, *Bellissima*?" Her tone holds a hint of danger that sends heat pooling between my legs. "I'll show you games."

She captures my wrists, pinning them above my head as her lips descend to my throat. Teeth scrape over my pulse point, sharp enough to sting, as her thigh presses hard against my slit. I moan, rocking my hips for more friction. Juno's thigh provides pressure but not nearly enough.

"Please," I gasp, echoing her earlier plea.

Triumph lights her eyes. "Patience."

Damn her.

But with a smile, Juno releases my wrists, her hands trailing down my arms to cup my breasts. Her thumbs graze over my nipples, sending jolts of pleasure straight to my clit again.

"Juno, please."

"You want something?" She rolls her hips, grinding her thigh against me. "Tell me what you want, Caitlin."

"You," I gasp. "I want you."

"How do you want me?" Her fingers pinch my nipples, sharp and sweet.

"Inside me. I need your fingers inside me. Now."

She grins, wolfish, and her hand slides down my stomach, goosebumps erupting in its wake. I spread my legs wider, an invitation she doesn't hesitate to accept. Three fingers sink into me, no slow tease this time, and I hiss as I clench around her.

"That's it, *tesoro*. Take what you need."

She fills me so perfectly, always knowing exactly what I need. My clit, still sensitive, is a little traitor as her fingers work in

and out of me, straining out for contact. I'm balanced on the edge within moments, suspended in exquisite torture.

"Come for me again, Caitlin." Her command is my undoing, along with the sure caress on my aching clit. Pleasure erupts through my body and I come with a long, happy groan. She gentles her strokes, drawing out my orgasm as long as she can. Then she withdraws her fingers, glistening with my essence, and sucks them into her mouth. Watching her taste me sends a shudder through my body.

I reach for her again, and she allows it, stretching out beside me.

"You're trouble," she murmurs, brushing a kiss over my shoulder.

"You love it."

"I do."

I capture Juno's mouth in a searing kiss, tasting myself again. Our bodies press together, heat and desire flowing between us. My hands roam over her body, relishing the feel of firm muscle and soft skin. I roll her nipple between my fingers, drawing a gasp from her lips.

"More," she demands, and I eagerly comply.

My mouth descends to her breasts, sucking and biting her nipples until she's writhing beneath me. Her hands are in my hair, holding me in place. But I wriggle away, make my way down the bed until my mouth is in range, my tongue tracing over her wet seam. She lets out a long sigh and falls back on the bed, letting me explore thoroughly, sliding my tongue all over her before I thrust it inside.

The sound of it fills the room, slick and obscene, sparking eroticism in me once more. I can't get enough of the sight of her as her thighs fall wide open, of the feel of her wet flesh under my mouth. She's close, I can feel it, so I focus on her clit, rubbing tight circles around it with the very tip of my tongue until she trembles, cries out—

I lap her tenderly through the waves, and then I crawl back up with a triumphant smile. "Did you enjoy that?"

“Oh, yes. My God, yes. But now, are you ready for more, *caramia?*”

“*More?*”

“Much more. I told you I was going to ruin you, didn’t I?”

I cling to her, shaking with laughter now. “You’re going to kill me,” I tell her, nuzzling into her neck.

Juno chuckles too, but she doesn’t stop touching me. “But what a way to go, no?” I melt into her embrace, and she strokes my hair, her touch soothing. “You are so beautiful when you come undone for me. Watching you come apart is the most erotic thing I have ever seen.”

I turn my head to capture her lips in a soft kiss, then say softly, “I love you.”

Juno’s eyes soften, all traces of wicked humor fading. “And I you, *tesoro*. You are the most captivating creature I have ever known, Caitlin.” She brushes her thumb over my lower lip. “Your passion, your fire, the way you live so fully and freely—you have bewitched me, body and soul.”

Tears prick my eyes at her heartfelt confession. “Juno,” I breathe, overwhelmed. “I-I never thought I could feel this way for another person.”

Juno smiles, radiant and free of shadows, a sight more beautiful than any work of art. “Nor I, *amore mio*. You have ruined me for any other.”

I laugh, blinking back tears of joy. “Well then, we’re ruined together.”

“Nothing could please me more,” she murmurs, and kisses me again.

CHAPTER 29

JUNO

The grand crystal chandeliers bathe the ballroom in warm, flickering light. Bouquets of hothouse lilies, hydrangeas, and roses decorate the linen-draped tables in vibrant bursts of color. A four-piece jazz band fills the space with smooth melodies from the corner stage. Laughter and lively conversation echo through the vast room as people celebrate the season together.

It's Christmas Eve. And what a Christmas Eve! Both the Bianchi and O'Sullivan Families—and families—brought together as one.

At last.

After so much tension and conflict, it's refreshing to see them all mingling freely, past grievances set aside for the evening, and hopefully for good. The older gentlemen gather around the oak bar trading stories and jokes while their wives chat nearby, exchanging family photos and recipes. Younger couples whirl across the polished dance floor, joy radiating from their smiling faces. Rambunctious children weave in and out, immersed in games of tag and make-believe adventures.

I pause for a moment to take it all in. The very sight of our families coming together like this, former rivals now bonded in friendship, fills me with hope.

Even Alessa took time out of her busy schedule to be here, and she has been flirting outrageously with every single woman over eighteen and under sixty in the room—not that any of them seem to mind. I've just finished speaking with Siobhan,

one of the many O’Sullivan cousins, who has generously agreed to head up the new community health program funded by the Bianchi Foundation. As I glance around the room, I see that Caitlin is entertaining some of the children with a tale of beating her brother Declan at street-racing. I smile, and begin heading over, but then I notice Sean O’Sullivan Sr. sitting alone at the far end of the bar looking thoughtful.

Squaring my shoulders, I weave through the lively crowd, exchanging warm greetings along the way. “Good evening, Mr. O’Sullivan,” I say graciously as I approach the empty seat beside him. “It’s good to see you, sir.”

He turns, his somber expression breaking into a smile. “Juno, my dear! What’s this ‘Mr. O’Sullivan’ nonsense. We’re well past that. It’s Sean.” He clasps my hand fondly. “Come, join me for a drink.”

He signals the bartender for two whiskeys as I get settled.

For a moment we sit in easy silence, observing the festivities around us. I can certainly see where Caitlin gets her spark.

Sean raises his glass, his sharp eyes crinkling at the corners. “Quite a celebration we’ve got here. It’s a shame what we’ve gone through to get here, but it’s worth it.” I meet his piercing gaze directly as he continues. “But you’ve proven yourself a strong leader, one deserving of my respect. You’ve got iron in your bones, lass, and a good head on your shoulders. I’m proud to call you family.”

I dip my head gratefully, touched by his words. “The honor is mine. The O’Sullivans are as loyal and resilient as they come. I look forward to building a bright future together.”

We clink our glasses and take a bracing drink.

Sean sets down his glass, his expression thoughtful. “I know I gave you a hard time at first. But watching you stand by Caitlin through everything, seeing the love between you...” He shakes his head ruefully. “This stubborn old man was wrong about you. I’m glad Caitlin has you by her side.”

I laugh lightly in return. “No need to dwell on the past. And frankly, I may have overstepped at times. But I promise you,

Caitlin's happiness means everything to me."

Sean gives my shoulder an affirming pat, his eyes kind.

"You're good for her. She's always been one for adventure—too much for her own good sometimes." He chuckles. "But with you, I see her becoming the woman she was meant to be."

I blink back sudden tears at his heartfelt words. After so much loss and heartbreak, this quiet moment means the world.

Just then, the jazz band transitions into an upbeat swing number. The crowd cheers as lively notes of the trumpet float through the air.

Sean grins and gestures to the dancefloor. "Now go on, enjoy yourself! We'll talk business another time."

I smile gratefully and make my way back through the energetic crowd, lifting my skirt to avoid a shrieking flock of children. The atmosphere here is so vivacious compared to the subdued formality of most formal Bianchi gatherings. But I find myself preferring this boisterous joy.

It's been too long since I've let loose.

Near the ornate bar, Liam and Connor face off with Tony and Paulo in a rowdy drinking game, punctuated by raucous laughter and the occasional shout of triumph or dismay as money changes hands. Off to the side, Rosa, wife of one of my senior Capos, and Amanda, Aiden O'Sullivan's girlfriend, and chatting amiably. Couples of all ages sway blissfully across the polished dance floor, some practicing choreographed steps while others simply cling together, lost in their partner's eyes.

In the far corner, a gaggle of kids acts out some imaginary adventure involving aliens and hidden treasure. Their youthful energy and innocence lift my spirits. So much life and love pulses through this place. It's a testament to the alliance we've built and the trials we've overcome together.

I wanted to find Caitlin and pull her onto the dance floor, but I can't see her among the crowd. So instead, I slip away to an empty balcony for a breath of fresh air.

Out here, the lively music fades to a distant melody. The cool night breeze kisses my cheeks as I rest my hands on the ornate railing, taking in the view. From up here on the top floor, the lights of Manhattan blur into a glittering quilt stretching to the horizon.

I'm reminded of all that's transpired these past months: the pain and loss we've shouldered, the sacrifices we've made, the love that's seen us through. In the peaceful stillness, I close my eyes and whisper a prayer of thanks for bringing us to this moment.

Soft footsteps sound behind me, then familiar arms wrap gently around my waist. I lean back into Caitlin's embrace, safe and content.

"Quite a party you're missing in there," she remarks playfully, her chin resting on my shoulder.

I turn and cup her cheek, brushing a loose curl behind her ear. "With you here, I've got everything I need."

Her crystal eyes shine back at me, vivid and bright. We share a tender kiss beneath the stars and for a long moment, we simply hold each other close as a cold breeze swirls around us.

I know the coming days will bring new challenges. But with Caitlin by my side, I have no fear.

We are stronger together.

At last we turn back to the skyline sprawling before us, the city lights flickering with promise.

"How do you like your empire?" she murmurs.

"It may be my empire, *cara mia*, but you are its queen. So tell me: what kind of city shall we build together?" I ask softly, lacing my fingers through hers.

Caitlin grins, her gaze distant and dreamy. "One filled with mercy, where we help people in need. Let's make this a city where children can play freely, without fear or want."

I gaze at this bold, brave woman beside me, once so reckless but now tempered by wisdom. My heart swells with love and pride.

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” I tell her.

Hand in hand, we look out upon the vast horizon of New York,
so many possibilities laid out before our feet.

And as a soft snow begins to drift down, delighting us both, I
realize that my heart has never felt so warm.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Persephone Black likes Ice Queens who melt behind closed doors, Underworld Empresses who protect what's theirs, and Bad Girls who stay bad to the end...but win the love of a good woman.

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