



THE LOST
STORY DUET
BOOK ONE

My
MAFIA KING

A MAFIA ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

SHAYNE FORD

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C ARMINA

IT'S ABOUT one o'clock in the morning when I shake Tina's tiny shoulder, waking her.

She jumps upright—we all do it in this house—and looks at me with saucer eyes.

“Shh...” I whisper, pressing my forefinger to her lips before she has the chance to talk.

Her eyes widen even more.

She swings her legs over the edge of her old twin bed and tears my hand away from her mouth as if knowing.

“What's going on? Is he back? Is he drunk again?”

The words shoot like bullets from her lips, her voice still quiet yet very much drenched in fear.

The fear that permeates our brains all the fucking time.

I hate it.

It's like a bad rash that never goes away, mold that can't be removed, or an ugly nightmare you can never wake up from.

She can't stop trembling, her collarbones sticking out through the opening of her raggedy pajamas.

At twelve, my younger sister, Valentina, is in a continuous battle with herself, and her life and circumstances, as kids are when they're too young to face a shitty situation like this.

I was the same at her age.

Too young. Too fragile. Too fearful.

She doesn't know anything else.

And I didn't know anything else.

We've both been at our father's whims who's thrown fits and grounded us for nothing.

Yes, things have been a bit better since he brought home his new girlfriend, but that's hardly the foundation for a better future.

Sometimes, the women have a good influence on him. Other times, they don't. And most of the time, they don't last for long, and things only get worse.

I'm barely eighteen and no better equipped than my sister to deal with this kind of life. But ready or not, I need to do something about it because this can't continue.

Things have gotten worse over summer with me barely making ends meet with my low-paying jobs and no real prospect of leaving home or helping Tina and myself.

I have to do something significant.

Disruptive.

And put an end to this.

Dire times call for drastic measures.

So this is it.

I've been waiting for this moment for the past four years.

Since it became more and more evident that our lives would never get better, and our father wouldn't spare us the abusive language, and threats.

I experienced most of his abuse since I'm his oldest daughter and also developed a habit of talking back at him.

Tina has paid a price, too.

And it's worse for her because she's younger and witnessed everything, feeling even more vulnerable than I have.

I've thought about this development the entire summer while working two jobs and dealing with a nasty, so-called boyfriend.

You know what they say... Nasty father. Nasty boyfriend.

Well, maybe they don't say that, but if they do say that, I totally get it.

It's not like I went out there and looked for someone like Beau. I call him Dick. Everybody calls him Dick, sometimes behind his back, and yes, it has to do with his character, not his genitals.

Truth be told. I needed a way out. And he was it.

Most men who had approached me were too soft, and the ones who weren't soft were much older and reminded me of my father. And I wanted to forget about him.

Beau 'Dick' Anthony reminded me of my father, too, but I thought I could have a smidgen of control over him since he was only five years older than me and convinced me he wanted to be serious about me.

I believed him for a second.

That...

And I also needed a way out, as I said before. The worst possible way out if you ask me.

And then there was the '*Maybe I can fix him*' thing, some stupid idea I'd come up with before realizing I was about to derail my life just like my father did after my mother's death.

'Dick' has been a dick this summer, cheating on me and making me break up with him, and now I'm ready to make some big changes in my life.

So, yeah... I may be able to pull away from everyone—my father, Dick, and his thuggish existence—but Tina is too

young to follow me on this crazy journey.

So, for this to work, it must be more than that.

More than me buying a one-way ticket, hopping on a Greyhound bus, and ending up in a different state.

Texas, Florida, South Carolina, or New York.

If it were only that simple, or only about me, anything would do, but I can't be so far away from Tina.

I need to stay close to home, so Vegas will do.

That is only one part of the plan.

The other part is me making some serious money, and by serious money, I mean *'fuck you'* money.

No, not in that big sense when you have a lavish life style. I can't hope for that.

If I can pick up Tina, take care of her, and get lost so my father can't get to us, take her from me, and bring her back, that, for me, would be *'fuck you'* money.

'Fuck him' money, to be exact.

Money is essential.

If I stay, nothing will change.

We're dirt poor and the only help we have and our only relative left is our aunt, Edith.

My heart softens as I look at my little sister.

This is the most difficult part of my plan, and I try so hard not to let my tears roll and stain my cheeks and tell her the real story.

How leaving her here breaks my heart.

How I have no choice.

How I want a safe place for her, and that's not possible under the current circumstances.

How this is the moment when I, as a person who's primarily an adult only on paper, have to make an adult

decision, which, in essence, is choosing between two bad options.

Either stay with her and work long hours at my job, deal with my cheating ex-boyfriend, and try to strike an alliance with the woman my father calls his girlfriend.

And not be able to change anything.

Witness days and nights like this one when we jump, startled, and frightened every time the doors get slammed in the house, and his voice is loud, his speech slurred, and his short fuse brings upon us dire times.

Or leave.

Abandon her here, fearing that I may never see her again.

That my father might do something stupid.

That he might make a mistake.

That someone else might snatch her because he didn't pay attention to her while living in a daze, imbued with alcohol, or getting high.

Whatever heart-rending circumstances he might create would also get her.

Dark scenarios swirl in my head as I weigh my decision.

The risk is enormous, and this endeavor is fit for a real adult, which I'm not.

This is a test of maturity for me, and whether I pass it or not remains to be seen, but my decision has been made.

I haven't discussed it with her, and she is terrified as if she knows what this is all about.

My heart bleeds while hers beats with unsuppressed desperation in her wet blue eyes.

I bring my fingers to her face and gently brush a few long strands of dark hair away from her cheeks before tucking it behind her ears.

Her eyes glisten while her tears start sliding down, like pure gemstones spilling from her lashes.

“What’s going on, Car?” she asks again, her eyes moving over my face.

She takes inventory of my hoodie, sweatpants, sports shoes, and duffel bag.

I look like I’m going to the gym, although no one in our family has ever purchased a gym membership.

It has never been in our budget, so she knows this is not about me working out.

Besides, it’s the middle of the night.

She wants to talk, yet she can’t suppress the quiet sobbing rocking her chest.

It’s a miracle I’m not sobbing with her.

Inside I am.

Warm rivers of tears flow down my cheeks in my head while my face stays dry and my lips are pressed together as I watch the kid in front of me breaking my heart with every twinkling tear marring her smooth skin.

I wrap my arms around her and hold her like that for a few long moments while she sobs uninterruptedly against my chest.

When we finally straighten our backs, she brushes off her tears, and I run my fingers over her cheeks while she seems more resolute.

That is my little sister.

Like me, she doesn’t have much going for her, yet she has a stubborn resilience, which helps her survive.

“Where are you going?” she quietly asks.

“Vegas,” I say in a clipped voice, and her eyes delve into mine, searching for more answers. “I’m doing this for both of us. All right?” I murmur, stroking her hair with calm tenderness.

She tilts her chin down in acknowledgment.

“He’s not going to hurt you,” I say. “As long as Stella’s in the house, he won’t lay a finger on you. He was never aggressive toward you.”

The more I talk, the more I sound like I’m trying to convince myself that none of the crap that had happened to me could happen to her too.

She knows that, so she sheds tears again.

I sound desperate, which is not how I want to come across.

“Can I call you?” she asks, whimpering at the same time.

Still stroking her hair, I smile, yet her eyes are tipped down so she can’t see my grin.

“No, you can’t,” I say.

She tilts her head up and stares at me, and her eyes look like two scoops of moonlight tucked between her lashes.

I go on.

“You don’t have a phone, and I’ve ditched mine. I don’t want him to track me down. I’ll get a burner and call Jen. We’ll communicate through her. She’ll come by our house or meet you at school. If not, you can always stop by the restaurant. She’s still working there.”

She splays her hand over mine.

“What if something happens to you?”

“Nothing will happen to me. I’ll make sure of that. Just try to stay alive...” I say, injecting some dark humor into my voice while a lump the size of my fist is lodged in my throat.

My tears are like flaming little dragons burning my eyes, yet I still manage to push them back and lock them behind a determined, stoic look I’ve carefully rehearsed in front of the mirror these past few months for moments like this.

This is what a parent would do—I thought.

And what am I if not a parent to my younger sister?

“All right,” I say, shifting my position and checking the time on my plastic wristwatch. “I have to go now. I’ll drive for

the next few hours so I can get there in the morning. I have a job interview tomorrow morning.”

Worry builds over how harsh and final my decision sounds, and it glints in her eyes.

“Where did you get the car?”

“I bought it from a mechanic at a shop two blocks away from Jen’s house.”

She struggles to smile.

“How does it look?” she asks, making me flash a tense smile.

We’ve never had anything in our lives besides the basic necessities, and I’m loosely using the terms *‘basic’* and *‘necessities.’*

We had some clothes on our backs and not much food.

A car is a big deal, and it wouldn’t have happened had I stayed home and not worked this past summer.

I only drove my father’s old car.

Mostly when he was too drunk and needed a ride home from wherever he had been stranded.

Or when I had to buy groceries.

Other than that, I caught a ride. Beau picked me up a few times. If not him, then it was Jen, my only friend.

Buying a car was part of my plan. I needed to be able to move and, basically, reach my destination.

I also needed a place to sleep until I got my first paycheck and rented a room at a motel or something.

And hopefully, that first paycheck will come fast, as the money I still have after paying for my car is nowhere close to what I need to survive.

“It’s okay,” I say, talking about my car.

“What color is it?”

“Navy.”

We chat about it, mostly to forget that I'm about to leave.

This is probably the most important thing that's happened to us.

We've never been apart.

Since my mother brought her home from the hospital after giving birth, I've always been by her side.

She was a tiny baby—I was too when I was born, my mother said—and quite happy.

Less moody than I was, my mother had also said. But then my mother passed, and I've been my little sister's solely support since she was six.

I helped her with her homework and tried to make things better for her.

It didn't always work, but now it will.

Things will be different.

I will make this work even if it's the last thing I do on this earth.

She scrunches up her nose.

"You don't like the color?" I murmur.

"I like red more."

"Red is not a good color if you want to blend in," I say, smiling.

"Is it an old model?"

"It's a cheap model. And it runs. Hopefully, it will get me there. We'll see what happens after that."

"Okay," she concedes, pushing to her feet.

I rise, too, proud of the strength she shows in this difficult situation.

"Is Stella in?" she asks quietly. "Did you see her?" she murmurs, moving her focus to me.

I nod.

“She’s in his room. Sleeping.”

“And him?”

I shrug.

“I have no idea. I don’t think he’s back from his trip.”

“Go then. What are you waiting for?” she says silently, smiling.

I commend her for her courage.

“I’m not afraid,” she says, although I notice that her voice and hands begin to tremble.

I take her face in my hands and look her in the eyes.

“Look at me, Tina.”

She lifts her gaze to me, her courage swiftly disappearing.

“We’ll get through this,” I say. “We will. I won’t let you down. I promise you that. You won’t need to wait to be eighteen to leave this house. I’ll help you. And we will have our place far away from him. We’ll decorate it for Halloween and listen to your favorite music in the evenings. Bring over your friends. And dance and tell jokes.”

“And have money,” she says, joking, although not entirely.

“Yes. And have money,” I say seriously, my voice breaking. “Get in touch with Jen. I’ll call her when I have news and send messages through her. I need to know you’re okay, so talk to her. Not now. After his fury sizzles out. If it gets to that. You know the drill. Just stay safe.”

“His madness won’t sizzle out.”

“I know. But he’ll grow tired at some point, and then he’ll want to drink, get high, and gamble whatever money he has left. He’ll try to forget.”

I pause before speaking again.

“Say *‘hi’* to Stella for me. No. Don’t. She doesn’t need to know that you and I have talked about this. She seems a decent woman, but you never know with these women. Even if she doesn’t tell him about us, he has his methods to get more

information from her. So no. Don't do it. Act surprised. Or better yet. Give them your poker face."

"This?" she murmurs, and a mask slides over her face, her expression becoming unreadable.

I chuckle quietly.

"Yes. This," I say and lean to her and kiss her cheek just as the roar of a truck echoes in the distance.

"Oh, fuck. He's already here," I say and jolt up. "Go back to sleep. He won't know I'm gone, and tomorrow, go to Edith. She doesn't have to know a thing about this. Not now, at least. Nothing. No one needs to know. He'll come after all of us if he suspects something. You don't want to get caught into this."

"Go," she says, her eyes illuminated by two shafts of light coming from outside. "Where's the car? It's not nearby, is it?" she asks.

"No, it's not. I love you," I toss at her before winding my arm around her neck, pulling her small frame into mine, and kissing the top of her head. "Be strong. And don't forget about the things I've promised."

The car engine is quiet now, and the lights die out before the door cracks open, and I step away from her.

Walking backward, I reach the small window and peek outside.

A massive silhouette slides out of the driver's seat and slams the door shut before I climb the window sill.

I wait for him to push through the main door, look at my sister one last time, wave at her, and climb out the window.

My heart is with her, tattered at her feet.

This is harder than I thought.

Tense, I slide down the wall, step onto a ragged roof, almost twist my ankle, and fall to the ground, a cloud of dust lifting as I pull upright.

I yank my bag higher on my shoulder, hide my hair inside my hoodie, and start running.

Like I run for my life, and I sure do.

C ARMINA

LAS VEGAS

THE NEXT DAY

FUCK, it's hot.

It's not like I'm not used to the warm weather.

I've lived in LA my entire life, but this is more than I expected, and trying to look fresh after spending the night in my car at a truck stop—how ironic, I know about this place from my father—doesn't help me in one bit.

I freshened up, showered, washed my hair, put on some makeup—mostly mascara and lip gloss—and did my best to look '*all right*'—clean and rested before squeezing my limber body into a skintight dress and putting on my heels.

They're all Jen's size and fit me like a glove.

Okay.

Surprise, surprise.

I'm not interviewing for a manager position, and the job I'm looking for needs to start tonight.

I could live out of my car for a week, maybe two, but not more than that. The weather is hot in September, and my AC is busted, blowing hot air.

But I do my best, walking on my heels, as I look at the piece of paper in my hand with the hotel's address where Jen's cousin worked over the summer.

She went back to LA, looking for a different job as she was expecting, but she swore I could find something here—probably not in the casino, as I needed some training for that—but maybe in a fancy restaurant.

If not, they might need dancers and entertainers. I can do that. I can bust a move and look pretty. I can surely do that.

The tips are good—she said.

And I had no reason not to believe her.

Honestly, after talking to her, I was convinced dancing would be my best bet. Quick money. No training. The only requirement was to look good.

I can do that, too.

Blowing a strand of hair away from my face, I set my high-heel clad foot down and straighten out of my seat.

As I said...

Fuck, it's hot.

My pink dress has grown tiny, famished, sticky fingers that are now clawing at my flesh, the stretchy fabric melting into my skin. And my body responds with pearls of sweat that only make everything worse.

I'm hot and so stressed out that I might have a body odor problem.

Like I needed that. To stink as I haven't showered in days.

The sun glares mercilessly at me, and I look at the horizon, making a quick calculation in my head as to how soon I could see it dip below the horizon when my long dark hair fans out over my back like a cloak, making me sweat even more.

It's like wearing a coat at the height of the summer.

Tina and I have inherited our hair from my mother, who had long, thick, raven hair, olive skin and dark eyes.

Our father is fair-skinned and has dirty blonde hair and gray eyes. None of us have picked the color of his eyes or skin.

Tina is paler than me and has blue eyes, but they are nothing like our father's.

His are shot and washed out.

Hers are clear and alive like drops of mountain water.

I must've picked the color of my eyes from some ancestor since they're a mix of sparkling green and warm hazelnut. Like a meadow washed in light. Or a sunny porch. Or a lazy afternoon outside.

The colors go well with my dark hair. And my hair always steals the show because it curls at the tips, and it looks like a flood tumbling over a hill in the middle of the night.

It's like a knight's cloak.

Or raven wings flapping in the wind.

Speaking of that...

A gust of wind runs its fingers through my hair, bringing dust to my lips.

"Fuck this, too," I quietly say, promising to myself to get this job, or a similar one, and enough money to rent a room and never have to get outside.

I only want to go to work and then to my place before sleeping in my little box.

That's all I want.

There won't be any sightseeing for me anytime soon.

I'm slightly unsure of myself as I walk across the street, heading to the hotel entrance and mumbling stuff under my breath.

I eventually compose myself, straighten my spine, push my bottom out, and walk self-assuredly how I've seen women doing it on TV, or when walking into the restaurant on Saturday nights.

The kind of woman I'd prepared drinks for before men got cocky with, talking their ears off or simply paying for their drinks and leaving me tips.

I sunk all those tips into my beat-up car, but hey. It's gotten me here? Yes, it has.

Catcalls trail me, and I have no idea where they're coming from.

Shielding my eyes, I shoot an annoyed glance to my left.

Construction workers give me their best smiles and words I can make out as I wave them off.

They laugh.

I ignore them.

Suddenly, a bunch of cars pull up in front of the hotel, and as much as I'd love to step inside and have some cold air over my face, I'm trapped here, slaloming through rows of luxurious rides.

People climb out while a swarm of valets has been deployed to move the cars away, and well-built bellboys pick up their suitcases.

It's getting even busier as I cut my way through the crowd, and just as I walk through the glass doors and the nice cold air finally whooshes over my face, I have this strange feeling that someone's staring at my back.

I pull up to a sudden stop, and the people behind me stumble into me.

A woman and a man. They look like tourists. Light summer clothes, phones in their hands. The woman takes pictures or records a video, perhaps, a buffed-up bellboy wheeling in their suitcases.

My eyes fall to her turquoise necklace as I clumsily murmur an apology before spinning around and walking back into the heat.

It's like stepping into the mouth of a dragon. Like hands of fire move rapaciously over my skin. Hopefully, my mascara isn't smudged, and my lipgloss is still on my lips.

Absently, I run my fingers under my eyes and bottom lip while pulling to the side and watching the flow of people climbing out of their limousines and strolling into the hotel.

There must be a convention of sorts. Or there's *also* a convention. Several events must be taking place here.

I'd been warned this was a huge hotel, which fueled my optimism that I might find some work.

For now, something else bothers me, though.

I swing my gaze over the cars and people and even look across the street. The construction workers are gone.

So it can't be someone from that crew looking at me.

I am paranoid, but can you blame me?

If I think logically about it... No one knows where I am.

There's no way my father already does.

The only person who knows exactly where I am is Jen. And Jen is the kind of woman who doesn't run her mouth and can hold her own. Maybe she's overdoing it in some instances.

But still... I don't want my father's wrath on her.

Despite all that, she wouldn't talk.

No, for sure, she wouldn't.

With that pacifying thought, I glance around the area one last time before sucking in a long breath and walking inside.



CARMINA

THE PERSON I need to speak to about a job opportunity will be here in about ten minutes—I'm told by the girl at the concierge desk—so I step to the side and wait.

She signals me to move closer and points to a small bar not far from me where complimentary drinks await the guests and employees.

“If you're thirsty,” she says, smiling, and my first thought is that I look thirsty, and by that, I mean in disarray.

I thank her and slide closer to a full-length mirror and the bar in question.

My face looks good, my hair behaves, and there is no telling sign I'm living out of my car.

A small bag with my car keys, wallet, government-issued ID, cash, and burner dangles from my hand.

Aside from my car and another set of clothes, this is pretty much all I have to my name.

The cold mango juice is a nice break from the panicked thoughts swirling in my head.

The condensation on the glass, the sweet flavor, and the yellowy-orange color remind me of the plumage of a cockatoo, taking my mind away from where I am, why I'm here, and what I am about to do.

A good feeling flickers through my chest, and a soft smile pulls at my lips as I think about Tina and how, one day, I'll bring her here.

We'll drink fruit juice and hang out by the pool, soaking up the sun and lazily sitting in our lounge chairs while wearing colorful bathing suits and oversized sunglasses.

She'll wear a red swimsuit, while mine will be white.

I don't even have one, but I plan to get one. A bedazzled one at that.

Or maybe it will be yellow like my mango juice.

A smile still creases my lips as I imagine all that. It looks so real in my head my heart warms.

“Are you done?”

A male voice resonates behind me, and I realize I’ve hold up the line, so I murmur an apology in return, grab my drink, and walk away, slowly sipping juice and looking around the room.

The fresh drink does its magic, cooling me off.

Once I’m done with it, I place the empty glass onto a side table and glance in the mirror again when a man’s back catches my attention.

He stops in front of the concierge desk and my face drops.

It’s not the back of his hair that clues me in. It’s the edge of his tattoo—an ugly piece of art covering the top of his shoulders, visible against the neat edge of his white tank top.

“What the fuck...?”

I can barely unclench my teeth, and my voice is shot.

Is this some kind of weird coincidence?

What is Beau ‘*Dick*’ Anthony doing here?

This cannot be a coincidence? Can it?

No.

No, no.

I skitter away, moving quickly toward the side of the lobby, my gaze glued to the back of his neck and shoulders.

He’s talking to the same girl I talked to, and she starts to look around, and my last shred of hope that he is not here looking for me completely vanishes.

How?

How did he find out?

Did he follow me?

I took a ton of precautions. I didn’t use my phone. I bought an old car. Jen didn’t tell him.

Plus, we broke off.

He fucked that woman at the tiki bar two blocks from where I used to work.

She was the one who told me about their hookup. And other people said the same thing.

I didn't want that for myself.

If there was one thing I couldn't take—well, two—it was him cheating on me and being subjected to physical and verbal abuse.

He was good at both.

Why is he looking for me?

And who does he think he is?

Oops.

He swivels his head, looking around the room, searching for me, and I'm like that cockatoo with my flashy bright pink dress.

It looks fantastic against my skin and jet-black hair but does nothing to make me look inconspicuous.

I quickly move behind a tall, bushy plant, a marble column, a row of velvet armchairs, and loud groups of people.

I swear I can feel his dark eyes on my frame despite all the obstacles I try to put between us.

Sadly, they fail to keep his attention away from me.

My last chance is a bellboy pushing a stack of suitcases past me, so I crouch and tiptoe behind him, not caring that the man looks at me like I've lost my mind.

If only I didn't wear this bright color.

That's how Beau Anthony had spotted me. He must've been outside, waiting for me, when I walked in.

That's why I had that feeling that I was watched.

This is terrible news for me and my plan.

Oh, fuck him.

I move as quickly as possible and dash around the first corner I encounter and down a corridor just as I hear his thundering voice behind me.

“Carmina??”

No way.

I won't stop to talk to him.

Only for a brief moment, I lean back against a wall to pull off my shoes before sprinting away.

Someone talks over him, and several voices buzz behind me.

A man tries to stop me, and another security guy attempts to block him.

I doubt he has a chance.

A muffled thud follows, and someone barks more orders no one abides by. It's not Beau, for sure. And then more people bark at the employees, requesting backup.

But no one can stop Beau Anthony.

What a stupid name.

This must be the mismatch of the century.

He doesn't look like a Beau. Or an Anthony. He's a thug. And I was an idiot for thinking that he could help me.

I'm not as much as glancing over my shoulder.

Beau is athletic, fast, and dangerous.

Jen had always suspected he was part of a gang, and I laughed the idea off in the beginning.

Everybody's in a gang in LA when they want to pick up a certain kind of woman.

I might not be that kind of woman, but I wanted to impersonate one for a moment there because I knew one thing.

When you face a predator, you need a bigger one to take them out.

And that's what Beau was to me.

Or that's what I thought he could be. Someone my father would have no leverage against.

Well...

It didn't quite work as planned. And what am I supposed to do now?

Instead of removing a predator, I have two on my tail.

Wouldn't it be crazy if my father and my ex had ganged up on me and colluded to bring me back home and put a leash on me?

This is not as far-fetched as it sounds, and it scares the shit out of me.

That would be a disaster.

It already is with this nutcase following me closely.

Desperately, I push through a few doors before reaching a quiet area and scanning it for an exit.

I can't find it, yet the sound of an elevator makes me dart in that direction.

Heavy steps ring behind me, and I pray this is not one of those crazy scenes when the elevator doors don't shut before the perpetrator gets in and kills the fugitive.

That would be me. *The fugitive.*

Oh, the horror.

A blood stained dress wouldn't flatter me in the slightest, and pink would look terrible in a casket.

I dismiss my horrific thoughts and count the seconds, repeatedly hitting the panel with a clenched fist.

Luckily, he doesn't get to me before the elevator starts moving, his big hand hitting the metallic doors, his curses ringing outside.

If I remember correctly, there wasn't another elevator next to this one, and looking at the numbers on the panel, I realize this takes me straight to the top of the hotel.

Panting and apprehensive, I slide off the wall and wait for the car to reach its destination.

C ARMINA

I PROP my hand against the wall to steady myself, catch my breath, and put my shoes on.

The silence is sobering, making me painfully aware of my clipped breaths.

Silently exhaling, I study the area.

Polished marble with a medallion design lines the floors while a crystal chandelier dangles from the ceiling.

All right.

Where is the exit?

I start walking, hoping to find the door to the stairwell, since the elevator is no longer an option.

Beau must be waiting for me downstairs.

Unless he's making the trip up as well.

The thought puts a spring in my step. I need to get out of here as quickly as possible, and then I remember that I have a job interview.

Or at least *I had one*.

I'm already late and curse quietly as I can't believe I blew it. But how will I work here if my ex knows where I am?

He couldn't stand the idea of seeing me with other people, especially men.

He won't be more agreeable to the idea now.

No way. He can't be here. Or I can't be here.

Panic soars through me.

How am I supposed to find a job then?

I make peace with the idea that my entire plan is now ruined as I walk down the hallway, sunk in thought, cussing him and my bad luck.

Fuck him.

Fuck. Him.

Before long, footfalls echo outside the walls, and for a second there, I can't tell what's happening.

Several doors line the walls.

Most of them look like hotel rooms, although there is a sign on one of them.

That must be the door to the stairwell, and the person climbing the stairs two steps at a time can only be him.

Beau Anthony.

The door opens, and his burly silhouette fills my view.

His eyes fall to my dress first.

He's never seen me dressed like this. And if there's anything about him, he's always taken issue with how I dress.

Especially if it's something that sets off my body, like this dress with a revealing neckline and built-in cups for my medium-sized breasts.

They jiggle as I pull to a sudden halt and clasp my hips, something I've never tried with a man but I've seen other women doing.

Women dressed like this.

"What are you doing here?" I throw at him, my small purse dangling from my wrist.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he says, unimpressed with my acting performance.

Nothing goes unnoticed by him.

A scar splits his brow, which is creased into a frown now.

His eyebrows are pinched together.

“What are you doing here?” he asks again, and his voice is firm and low, sounding louder than it actually is.

“Dressed like a whore...” he throws at me, not hiding his disgust with how I look.

I tilt my gaze down, checking the item that annoys him, and then I flick my hair over my shoulder—another trick I’ve seen women doing—and it’s all to buy some time and come up with a new line.

Strangely, it fleetingly works as he looks at me, baffled and mesmerized at the same time.

But the anger is dense in his eyes, and the only thing stopping him from wrapping his hand around my neck, dragging me downstairs, tossing me into his car, and taking me back to LA is that he doesn’t know how to go about it.

There’s an element of surprise in this story, something he hasn’t seen in me before, and right now, it makes him curious.

“I’m meeting my new boyfriend,” I deadpan, my hand back on my hip after tugging at my hair.

He finds me extremely entertaining, an incredulous smile sliding over his face, narrowing his eyes.

Both are bad news.

And they are bad as his presence is here.

“New boyfriend? What have you been smoking, woman?” he shoots at me in derision, pushing his eyes over my body and taking inventory of my mini dress, legs glistening from the lotion I have used, and sexy heels.

He’s only seen me in my waitress uniform, my sweatpants, or my shorts and a yellow washed-out T-shirt with a cheeky

quote printed across.

My hair has never fallen down my back in dark crests of silky ink, and my eyes have never been set off by mascara-coated lashes.

My lips have never glistened dirty as they do no.

So, yeah... The man is surprised.

He's also about to lose his temper.

What he had considered an afterthought is now at the front of his mind, wrecking havoc.

Like my father, Beau, aka Dick, has an impulse control problem, and even though he's smiling, I can see the anger in his eyes.

He feels like I owe him a lot.

My body. My sanity. My V-card.

He's waited for me to make up my mind while he spent time with other women.

He thought he was doing me a favor that once in a while, he stopped from fucking them and 'groomed' me, getting me for a life with him.

Let's say...

I didn't know any better.

But now I do.

Because it isn't only about me. It's about Tina too.

And let's say my first plan—getting involved with him—didn't quite work. And now, my second plan—getting a job in Las Vegas—is ruined because of him.

He folds his arms on top of his chest.

“What new boyfriend?” he asks again, a twisted grin creasing his lips.

Of course he's not buying it.

He may be unsophisticated, but he's not stupid.

He knows my life like the back of his hand.

He knows how my life has consisted of going to work and spending some time in a modest room in my father's house.

How could I find a boyfriend in such a short time when I couldn't even get out of the house except for work?

"A boyfriend," I say as if the situation is not tense enough. "He works here," I say, my voice stripped of emotion. "Who told you I was here anyway?" I ask nonchalantly as if my heart doesn't shake in my chest.

Honestly, I'm only trying to figure out what he knows and if he's talked to my father.

"I'll only tell you if you tell me more about your boyfriend," he says, grinning wickedly.

I look straight into his eyes.

"Sure. I'll tell you about my boyfriend. You go first."

He's not used to me lying because I usually wouldn't do it.

I lied many times to protect Tina and myself, but other than that, I never lied to other people aside from my father.

He has a sly glint in his eye, and something tells me he has followed me.

"How did you know I was here?" I ask.

He uncrosses his arms and reaches inside his pocket before extracting a small object.

"I know the guy who sold you the car. I placed this inside your tire. Easy peasy."

A fucking GPS tracker??

I feel like smacking him.

"Why would you do that?"

Does he know—the fucking dick—that he's destroyed my younger sister's chance to a better life?"

"Why wouldn't I?" he says, tucking the small device back into his pocket. "Where did you think you'd go? And does

your father know about this trip?”

Oh, no. Not my father.

Please don't bring him up in the conversation.

I freeze, trying to put two and two together. There is some good news in his stupid remark.

My father doesn't know that I'm gone?

I doubt that.

But even if he does, Beau is asking me about him, which means my father didn't make waves.

Didn't go to the restaurant. Or to my aunt's place. Perhaps he thinks I'm with Tina.

Maybe he's drunk, high, or took his woman on a trip and has no idea where his daughters are.

It wouldn't be the first time it happened.

Although he likes to keep us under his thumb, especially when we try to pull away from him.

Jen didn't say anything about him trying to get in touch with her. My father doesn't know her well. I dropped her name once or twice, and I seriously doubt it stuck to his brain.

My father doesn't care.

He never does.

So, it's good if he doesn't know where I am.

Maybe.

Tina is safe right now, and that's the most important thing. All I need is to deal with the man in front of me.

“Yes. Of course, he does,” I lie about my father. “He knows about my trip and my new boyfriend. And he approves of him.”

“Huh.”

He leans against the wall, his pecs bulging while he crosses his arms over his chest again and squeezes them to look bigger.

“Did he know everything about me too?”

“Of course he did,” I lie again.

I don’t even know everything about him.

“Then why didn’t you invite me to your place?”

“Because we weren’t there... yet?”

“No kidding. Are you ‘there’ with this new guy?” he sneers. “When did you meet him?”

“Uh...”

The timeline that I have sucks.

Things wouldn’t make sense if I told him I just met him.

And if I tell him I’ve known him for a while, he’ll get angry and make inquiries about him. And in the end, he’ll realize I was lying because I couldn’t hook up with someone, especially from Vegas.

“I’ve known him for a while. It’s just that we’ve recently met again.”

“Seriously?”

He makes fun of me, chuckling, entertained.

“Yes. Seriously.”

“What exactly does he do?”

“He works here.”

“And you seemingly work here too,” he says, his forefinger moving up and down, accusatorially pointing at my attire as he pushes off the wall, and his expression changes completely, his smirk and amusement replaced by vicious determination.

“You fucking cunt. I have no idea who’s filled your head with this fucking nonsense, but you won’t suck dicks on the strip before I fuck you first.”

His hand darts to my hair, and his fist latches onto my mane before he pulls it down.

I yelp, bending at the waist and stumbling a few times while he drags me toward the door he has walked through.

I start screaming, putting my fists into his iron-hard thighs, but nothing stops him.

And then the door we move past suddenly cracks open, and a man decked out in a suit steps outside, seemingly unaware of what's going on.

He seems casual as he slips out the door.

I notice the intricate ink on his fingers—symbols and letters— and his tailored suit, denoting an impeccable taste in fashion.

He's taller than Beau, with hard muscles filling his high-end suit like chiseled boulders.

There is something about him and how he moves and runs his fingers through his hair, oozing poise.

I've never seen such confidence in a man. Not at work and not at home. And for sure, not in the man dragging me down the corridor.

That kind of self-assuredness is unique, like him.

There is something of a big, dangerous feline in his step, reminiscent of a panther's unwavering intent and dizzying intensity before pouncing.

I'm silent. And Beau is quiet, something making him tear his hand away from my hair.

For sure, the presence of this stranger and the undesirable prospect of being questioned by the Las Vegas police are strong deterrents, even for someone like him.

Perhaps, Jen is right, and Beau has a rap sheet, and this is not the moment to fuck with his life.

Released from his grip, I straighten at once, pondering how to use this situation to my advantage.

Running a hand over my skirt, I smooth my dress, checking the stranger out.

His dark hair is buzzed short, but not too short, while his tan complexion is similar to mine.

A sexy ring is wrapped around his finger, and expensive shoes complete his look. He is sharply dressed, and I would gape at him a little longer, but my current situation is quite precarious.

My ex is about half a step in front of me as we edge closer to the stranger.

He fills the doorway, ready to step out of the hotel room, when I rush past Beau, intently leaving him behind while prompting the stranger to flick his gaze to me.

His eyes glint with a quick assessment, and for a second, I'm completely frozen in front of him while he makes a gesture I can't quite understand, and suits rustle hysterically behind him.

He makes another gesture, and three burly men freeze behind him.

They all have swift reactions comprised of smooth, rehearsed moves, and I don't have time to figure out what they mean when my eyes slide to the stranger's face.

His gaze meets mine with a hint of curiosity and deliberate purpose.

His focus is sharp while his eyes glint with questions, and he collects his own answers from how I look and how the man accompanying me behaves.

Moving his gaze from Beau Anthony to me with a concerned, steady expression on his face, he probably notices the invisible tendrils of tension flailing around us.

I use the brief reprieve to step toward him, and the suits behind him rustle once again with threatening impatience when he repeats his clipped gesture, and they draw still.

Their shoulders are broad like his, and their eyes are divorced of any human compassion—not that the man in front of me has any, although he seems more concerned with what is

going on while they seem blind at everything except his quick commands.

“There you are,” I say in a sweet, playful voice, and he quickly catches on I’m acting.

Taken by surprise, Beau spins around to face us when I press myself against the stranger, run my fingers up his neck, and make him tilt his head to me so I can kiss his lips.

He’s cold like a statue. A stone angel in a cemetery or at the entrance of a tomb.

“You’re my boyfriend,” I whisper in his ear. “Can you play along, please?”

My fingers move over his neck while I mumble words next to his ear, lingering a little longer before he snaps out of his frozen state and coils his arm around my waist.

“I was looking for you,” I say, smiling, my shoulders pulled back a little, his arm still looped around my waist, my hands connected to his hard chest.

He gives me a smile as if he finds this stimulating enough to participate, and his expression shifts as he swiftly walks into his role.

His expressive eyebrows pull together into a playful look, his lips crooked into a naughty grin.

“You were? Where were you, honey?” he says in a delicious husky voice.

His grin cancels out the natural sternness embedded in his features, setting off his arched lips, piercing dark eyes, and masculine jaw.

Lips carved out of firmness speak even when they stay quiet.

The tattoos on his fingers are paired with artistic lines peeking from under the crisp collar of his dress shirt.

Holding a wicked smile with something scary woven in it, he tilts his chin toward Beau, who witnesses everything with a stunned look.

“And who the fuck is this, darling?” he tosses at me while staring at my ex, who widens his stance aggressively.

“Who are you?” Beau retorts.

“Her jealous boyfriend. Now get the hell out of here before I drag you down the stairs with a bullet in your head.”

His words drip with poison, his eyes no longer smiling, painted in the darkest tones of madness.

His reaction is so unexpected that both Beau and I look at him, our mouths agape.

The man means business, but the truth is so unbelievably outrageous that Beau has a hard time accepting it.

Something tells him the man is the real deal, though, and a change of attitude would be in order.

He didn't believe this man a second ago, and for sure, he didn't believe me, but something has changed his beliefs.

He looks at me as if seeking an urgent confirmation.

“I told you,” I murmur as the stranger's hand rests on the small of my back.

Beau seems to embrace the idea that he needs to leave and forget about me when the stranger looks at me.

“Who is this motherfucker?” he asks quietly as if talking to me for real and not solely pretending.

“He is the ex I was talking about.”

“Is he bothering you?”

Beau is already shifting toward the exit, but not without listening to our conversation.

He even glances over his shoulder, curious to hear what I have to say.

“Not now. He doesn't.”

The stranger's eyes snap toward Beau.

“Move,” he barks like he owns the hotel. “And make sure I don't see your face again.”

He takes my hand and doesn't let go of me, and I start to get worried now.

“What would you like to do now, sweetheart?”

He adjusts his tone for me, and I appreciate that, yet his eyes move down over my chest and legs before flicking to my face.

He drinks me in—all of me—and his eyes linger on my eyes, my hair, and my lips. How I looked helped me compel him to play a character for me.

And now I don't know what to say.

I'd like to leave.

I need to track down the man I have a job interview with, Jen's cousin's connection, and then...

Things are in the air with Beau.

If I know anything about him, he'll wait for me outside or slash my tires just to make sure I can't leave this town or have a place to sleep.

He'll also make sure I pay for this—for his humiliation in front of this man—and I'll never get a job in this town and never get back to LA unless he takes me back.

He'll also tell my father about my new adventure and fuck my life and Tina's in perpetuity.

If my father gets word that I've attempted to pull away from him and take my little sister with me, he'll stop at nothing to crush me like a bug.

“Are you hungry, baby?” he asks softly, and I glance at him, startled.

He talks to me again—like he really talks to me—and I mumble a yes. A little food won't hurt, and I'll have time to think this through.

He listens to me, his focus split between me and my ex.

“Look forward, motherfucker,” he barks again, his eyes throwing flames in Beau's direction as my ex seems to have

hit a snag and lingered for too long in front of the door for my new acquaintance's taste.

“Do you want to have my people escort you out of the building?” he asks when Beau swings his eyes back to us, and the men behind my new friend become restless again.

Beau raises his hand.

“I'm gone.”

“Keep it that way,” my friend says in a tone that fits him perfectly as if he's born to bark orders that people obey.

Beau does just that, although he's procrastinating, hoping to hear the rest of my conversation with this man who glances at him one last time before breaking away from me and reaching inside his jacket.

“I said out,” he snaps, and Beau vanishes like he's never been here and the door has never closed so quickly behind him.

Smiling, satisfied, the man turns to me.

It was a joke for him—I can see that—and I'm glad he thinks it was funny.

I wonder how I'll feel when that motherfucker comes back, swinging at me and seething with fury while seeking revenge.

It's only us in the corridor when the door to the hotel room opens widely, and I see his men.

They wear suits but look rough.

They don't attend a convention in town and don't look like accountants or lawyers.

They're all in their late thirties, while the man in front of me appears younger than that.

The flicker in his eyes gives away his age, although it's a cruel dark glint.

He stretches his hand out.

“What's your name, sweetheart?”

I give him my hand.

“Carmina.”

He holds it, his eyes diving into mine.

“Your last name?”

“Leto. Carmina Leto.”

Still holding my hand, he looks in the direction of his men and mainly at one particular man—a guy with a cross tattooed on his cheek.

He is the shortest and bulkiest one.

The man in front of me tilts his chin toward him, and I don't know what that means.

“What is your name?” I ask since he's still holding my hand, and we're not done introducing ourselves.

“Damaso.”

He gives me a slow smile as he takes me in again.

“Damaso Salla. Lunch, then?” he adds quickly, gently squeezing my hand.

“Yes.”

He slips his arm through mine, holding my hand captive while tossing words over his shoulder.

“Vito, call the people downstairs. I need a table for two in the Pavilion.”

With that, we're returning to the elevator that had brought me here.

C ARMINA

THE ELEVATOR DESCENDS with a quiet rumble, highlighting the silence around us.

My arm is still tangled with his, and our fingers are still laced together, and from afar, we look like a couple, yet the tension in his frame makes me feel like a prisoner.

My *'baby'* intuition tells me he'd block my retreat if I sprinted to the doors when they pulled open, and I have every reason to believe it.

But so far, the man has saved my life, and for this fleeting moment, I am safe.

There may be a price to pay, but that's inevitable these days.

My mind goes to my albeit untested philosophy on life.

When dealing with a predator, you must find a bigger one to remove the first one.

The key is not to become collateral damage, and right now, that's how I feel. *Collateral damage*.

I study him in the mirror, trying to confirm my suspicion, and something tells me he is aware of my untethered curiosity.

Despite him staring vacantly at the elevator doors and keeping his expression blank and his body still, a voice blares in my head he could finish me in a second.

But why would he do that?

My eyes move over his face like tiny drones collecting information.

His bedroom eyes look sexy like hell.

He is a handsome man—I'll give him that—and his clothes fit him amazingly, but something wild and cruel lies dormant behind that polished look.

I noticed how he barked at Beau.

And Beau may be many things, but he's not a wilted flower. He is scary in his own right.

Beau is a bully, and people fear him.

Most don't want to deal with him, and he usually gets his way because people don't want to antagonize him.

It's just not worth it.

And Beau is not easily impressed.

Not many things scare him. He's unscrupulous. A thug.

Now I learn that these 'protectors' can go from good to bad in a split second. Nobody is your real protector.

They all want something from you.

And this man who has my hand locked in his grip can't be that much different.

Damaso Salla.

His eyes twinkle with a secret smile, and every time he does that, the mask of roughness dissolves, sliding off his face, and his charm increases.

I have to look away to escape the effect he has on me, although I can't say he's doing it for me.

His magnetism is effortless.

I'm sure he's not even thinking about me as much as I'm convinced he's forgotten about Beau.

He didn't seem impressed with my ex.

I don't think anything can impress this man.

But Beau...

Yeah.

Going back to Beau.

It's not like him to be disarmed so quickly.

Not knowing what to do, how to react, and being forced to do something against his will.

Moments ago, he was so invested in collecting me and treating me like his property, and I'm sure he's still plotting how to get me back and even get back at this stranger.

Beau is an egomaniac like my father.

These men like to inflict pain, and they are driven by their egos.

You have to tiptoe around them.

And life always sucks when you're around them.

They have a knack for putting so much misery into other people's lives, and Beau is right there with them.

So, yes, that passing moment when he's been humiliated... That will come back to haunt me. There's no doubt about that.

Momentarily, I'm 'partly' safe and 'partly' on high alert.

Beau won't touch me as long as I'm in Damaso's company, but that won't last for long.

I don't think so.

Disheartened, I tear my eyes away from him, although his face is a captivating story I don't have time to delve into.

There are no real protectors if they want something in return.

I'm my only protector, and I need to act accordingly.



CARMINA

THE ELEVATOR DOORS glide open before he takes my hand and leads me out.

I was right.

His grip on me is not casual, limp, hesitant, or optional. And the men who've moved impatiently upstairs are not gone. They follow us from a close distance.

And they were waiting for us when we exited the elevator.

I look around, trying to spot Beau.

There is no trace of him.

Good.

He's probably waiting for me where I parked my car.

Oh, the thought of having to go there and face him, fend for myself, and survive another day makes me shake with fury.

Speaking of that.

"Hey..." I say as we move toward the concierge desk. "I need to talk to that girl," I add, glancing at Damaso. "I had an appointment with someone here today and missed it. I need to reschedule it."

He listens to me intently, his head slightly tilted toward me, his eyes scanning the area around us and the space in front of the hotel.

"Appointment?" he murmurs.

"Yes."

It sounds like he's questioning the truthfulness of my words as nagging suspicion lines his voice.

"For?"

"A job."

He flicks his eyes to me.

“A job?”

Our eyes stay connected as I get distracted by his face.

I’ve rarely seen features like his.

Decisively set, strong, and sensual, making it so easy for him to express a large variety of emotions, from the sternest look—his favorite—and sharp focus to amusement and ferocity.

His gaze slides.

“What kind of job?”

I think he knows what kind of job. That’s why he’s looking at my body again.

“Honestly, I don’t know.”

“What kind of work experience do you have? You’re like... what? Eighteen, nineteen?”

His questions come back to back at a dizzying pace, and I do my best to answer.

“Eighteen?”

He cocks an eyebrow at me.

“You are?” he tosses at me incredulously.

Now he doubts me?

“Yes. Why? I don’t look like I’m eighteen?”

He drops his gaze and stares down, not because the answer is written across my stomach, hips, along my thighs, or at the top of my cleavage.

“I don’t look older, do I?”

I’m suddenly concerned with how I look? And so vain about my age?

“Chill, baby. You look great. You’re young,” he murmurs rather absently, and for the life of me, I don’t know what fuels his disappointment.

“I’ve worked as a waitress,” I say, supplying another answer and taking him by surprise.

He looks at my face this time, sliding back into our conversation.

“For how long?”

He’s all business again.

“This summer. So, a few months. ”

“And you want to work as a waitress?”

He’s setting me up. *Seemingly.*

His face tells me he is convinced I want to work as a stripper.

“Not necessarily. I want to make more money than I made at my old job.”

The urgency in my voice is obvious, as is the curiosity in his eyes.

His stare is heavy with wonder, and again, I have this feeling this is not a regular man I just happened to run into.

Most people I know have mastered the art of not making eye contact, hiding things about themselves, and not being interested in knowing about me.

Not this man.

He lives inside me and checks things out while holding my eyes.

I don’t know if I have much to offer to satisfy his interest in me.

“Is there a special reason why you need more money?” he quietly asks as people go about their business, swarming the luxurious lobby.

Guests are moving in and out of the hotel, expensive cars pulling up in front of the flashy entrance before gliding away, and the staff busy with the everyday needs of an establishment of this size.

The crew that has followed him is still here, somewhere, and nothing seems to move without him moving.

“A reason?” I answer like I’m in school.

“Mm-hmm,” he pushes through his tense jaw, his eyes not leaving mine.

I break eye contact several times. And every time I bring my gaze back to him, he’s there, waiting for me patiently.

My throat is dry, and I could use more of that cold mango juice. I’m a little nervous as I ponder my answer.

On a scale from zero to ten, I’m a six when it comes to making conversation.

My life experience is limited, and aside from coming in contact with people at school, at home—forget that—and at work, there hasn’t been much material to develop my conversational skills.

So, I’m trying to come up with a good answer. Should I be truthful with him?

Maybe not.

What can I gain from telling him my story?

“I just want to make a living and support myself. Life is pretty expensive these days.”

He tips his gaze down, expressing displeasure for reasons that escape me.

And then he tilts his chin to the concierge desk, inviting me to go there and take care of my business.

He lets go of me, slides his hands into his pockets, and watches me move to the woman behind the desk.

I glance at him over my shoulder quite often, and every time I do that, I meet his eyes.

His stare burns holes into my back when I finally swivel my head and look at the woman.

I quickly learn the man I was supposed to meet is no longer available for a job interview.

Not today, anyway.

I'm apologetic and a bit desperate as I hear the news.

Although she's hardly the decision maker in this situation, she advises me to call the hotel in the morning and try to schedule a new appointment with him before ten.

The phone rings on her desk.

She picks it up and murmurs a few silent words in response to the person on the other end of the line while moving her eyes to the man behind me.

"The table is ready, sir," she says curtly while his hand comes to my arm.

"Let's go," he says, and it dawns on me he has been within earshot all this time and most likely heard my conversation with that woman.

Silently, we walk down a corridor that's beautifully encased in glass walls.

The afternoon light drips through the sheets of glass, highlighting the impressive view.

The more we walk away from the concierge, the fewer people we encounter.

And it's mostly staff members. People who ensure everything looks sparkling clean and is neatly organized.

He shows me to a large room that looks like an event room.

I've never been in one of those.

My stomach clenches as a different thought swirls in my head, and Tina comes to mind.

I fear these flashbacks.

I'm not superstitious, but they're never good.

Sweat lines my palm as I feel my way around my purse.

"Is everything okay?" he asks, swiftly noticing that I struggle.

“Yes.”

He pulls the chair out for me, flicking his chin toward my purse.

“What’s in your bag?” he asks before signaling the servers to bring the food.

The man multitasks with ease.

“Open it up,” he says as I fail to answer. “Toss the contents on the table,” he continues, and I look at him a bit baffled before moving my focus to the pristine tablecloth, buoyant floral arrangement, and the light hitting everything at a flattering angle.

More than ever, I’m convinced this is a wedding room.

It’s nicely decorated even now, although we are the only two people here, except for the servers.

The tablecloth is done in a faint shade of lavender, and white lilies sit on the table.

They pair up well.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“Yes.”

He slides into his seat across from me and shrugs out of his suit jacket.

His sleek vest fits him perfectly, highlighting his hard torso, muscular neck, broad shoulders, chiseled arms, and white shirt that runs smoothly over his flat abdomen.

His eyes hold a fascinating mix of coldness and interest, and his gaze stalls on me, expressing sincere admiration as if he’s suddenly discovered something of significance in me that he has missed before.

I become more acutely aware of his presence as I pull my shoulders back, straighten my spine, and reach for my purse.

“Slowly...” he says, hinting it might be a joke, although nothing with him is.

His eyes relay that, slightly narrowed and glinting with a perfectly concealed smile behind the rim of his glass as he takes a swig of hard liquor.

I don't know what he means by that, but I put him at ease, fulfilling his request.

I pick up my purse, turn it upside down, and '*slowly*' unzip it. The few things I have are falling onto the table one by one.

My shabby cheap wallet, burner phone, car keys, lip gloss, and mascara.

"That's it?" he asks, setting his phone down.

"Yes."

"Why a burner phone?" he asks, not spending too much time studying my cell phone.

"Uh..."

"Thinking about lying?" he tosses at me, and I shift my eyes to him.

He has that look on his face that things could go either way, depending on my answer.

I don't trust his smile, although he seems very much entertained by grilling me about my behavior.

"I was trying to get away from my ex," I say, which is true, although my phone is a different story.

"It didn't work, did it?"

He goes silent as the servers, two men and a woman, set the food down.

The last time I sat down and other people brought food to the table and asked me to eat, I was five.

My mother used to do that when I was little.

Things changed when I got older.

As the servers walk away, he moves his gaze to me, signaling he's waiting for an answer.

“He slipped a magnetic GPS tracking device inside my car. Probably inside the fender.”

“So you’re not only looking for a job,” he says, pointing to the food on the table. “Eat before it’s getting cold. You’ve also run away.”

“We broke off, and he wasn’t happy.”

Fidgeting, I set the linen napkin on my lap.

“Where are you from?” he asks.

“LA,” I say, looking at him. “You?”

A faint smile colors his expression.

“New York.”

“Are you here with business?” I ask.

“You can say that.”

He looks down, and I do too.

The appetizers look delicious. I taste the burrata, cherry tomatoes, and marinated olives before indulging in the artichokes coated in olive oil, spices, and grated parmesan.

Before long, a server brings grilled Mediterranean Branzino and sea scallops served with risotto to the table.

I’m overwhelmed by the variety of food, and for a moment, I forget about my host, enjoying it.

Things are not that good otherwise.

What can I say? It’s been an eventful day, and I haven’t gotten much done.

A few minutes later, the desserts are brought to the table—vanilla mouse, passion fruit sorbet, coffee, and chocolate cake.

I opt for the cake, although I’m full and have to eat it slowly.

“Thank you so much for the food. It’s delicious,” I say, chewing slowly.

“Where are you staying?” he asks before sipping his espresso from a small porcelain cup.

That's a hard question.

Lying would get me caught, and saying I've spent the night in the car looks bad.

"Um... I just got here and booked a motel room down the road."

"Uh-huh."

He puts his coffee down.

Everybody knows habitual liars give generic answers. And people usually follow up with concrete questions, so the liars get caught.

He doesn't do it, and I'm grateful for that.

"All right... Carmina. Here is my phone number."

He reaches inside his suit jacket that is now draped over the back of his chair and retrieves a business card.

"You call me if anyone bothers you while you visit this town. All right?" he says, sliding the business card toward me.

I pick it up.

There's no name, only a phone number.

"Is that you?" I ask.

His smile is tense.

"Yes. That's me. Use it judiciously. I'm not giving it to every person I run into."

A blush spreads over my face, and I feel like I need to return the favor.

I push to my feet, smoothing my skirt out of reflex, only because he pulls out of his chair and collects his jacket before sliding it on.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" I ask, waiting for him to pivot to me.

"Not much, but I appreciate the intent."

His grin is forced again and strikingly bland, like a polite, run-of-the-mill smile. I don't mind it.

The man lets me go, which is good news—I was concerned there for a moment. And, plus, I have his phone number.

That is a big deal from what I can tell.

I'm not gonna lie.

I feel relieved.

His tight grip on me when we walked here made me a little nervous.

I'm more relaxed now and regret not asking more questions and finding out more about him.

“You don't have to leave,” he says, gesturing at the table. “Finish your food. There's still time. I need to go now.”

My hand falls to my side, my fingers curling tight around the linen napkin.

“It was nice meeting you,” I say, nervous, my cheeks burning with a blush again.

“Same wise,” he tosses at me evenly, and then he does the most unexpected thing, erasing the space between us, bringing his hand to my neck and lowering his lips to my cheek.

“See you soon, *gattino*,” he murmurs casually and gives me a soft wink and a faint smile while I turn to stone.

Kitten.

D AMASO

THE LAST TIME I saw a girl like Carmina, I was seventeen and spent the summer in Sicily.

I didn't want to go to Italy that summer.

Like every other kid I'd known, I wanted to spend the summer with my friends in New York. My father insisted, and my mother refused to side with me on that one.

They were both enthralled with the idea of visiting our extended family.

Me? Not so much.

I knew little about Italy. I spoke Italian because my parents had taught me, and I knew my cousins, aunts, and uncles, but I wasn't born there.

I was born in New York. Long Island, to be exact.

That summer, I didn't know that two years into the future, I'd lose my father and shortly after, my mother.

My father was a decade older, and his health could've been better.

My mother died of a broken heart after his passing, which I never thought would be possible, but it was.

So that particular summer, my father and I fought a lot.

Who wanted to spend all that time over there?

Not me, anyway.

I knew that place. I didn't like the pace and that people were different. The kids were different too.

Even my cousins were different.

I didn't have much in common with them.

I liked the food, slept well, and the weather was nice, but it was summer.

Summer was nice everywhere.

Yes. Italian blood coursed through my veins, but was that enough to bond with the locals? I didn't think so.

The first week, I didn't leave the house. And then, we went to church on Sunday morning and visited some friends a little later.

It was a gathering with food and drinks and noisy people around the table. They were chatting, drinking wine, and laughing, except for one girl.

She was tall, willowy, and shy.

Shy girls had never been my thing, but something about her had caught my eye. One of my cousins had told me she lived with her mother down the street.

Her father died in an accident, and her family owned some land and a modest house.

My cousin also told me they struggled to stay afloat and make ends meet.

I knew little about that topic back then, and not because my family was necessarily wealthy but because we never talked about our struggles.

My father worked long hours like everybody else, and my mother worked hard, too. We sort of knew everybody had difficulties, but it was part of life.

Back then, I considered myself lucky to have heard that girl's story. And after hearing all those things about her, I

became even more fascinated with her.

She didn't speak much. Just kept her eyes down and stayed focused on her meal.

And that was the other thing about her.

The way she carried herself ignited my curiosity.

The girls I knew back in New York were loud and chatty. They liked to talk my ear off.

I liked them. They were confident and fascinating in their own right, but this girl... She was different than everything I knew.

And I did everything I could to get her attention.

And I spectacularly failed.

We didn't sit next to each other. And she always had someone by her side.

It was either her mother or some relatives of hers.

I suddenly became shy myself, which wasn't even in my genes, and all I did was observe her.

She wore a long white dress with some tiny print on it.

The skirt covered her legs while her top obscured most of her shape.

She was skinny—I'd say that now—with not much of a chest or anything else going on for her, and her lips were delicate like blooming flowers.

That caught my eye.

She looked like she was made of silk or the petals of a flower. That's what my mind had conjured up back when I was only seventeen.

Her hair was midnight black. And she had a flower in her mane.

She'd never smiled that evening, or maybe I didn't catch her doing that, and my cousin told me she was younger than me and attended a local school with a few other kids. She was sixteen.

Kids often consider themselves grownups. And that's how I felt at the time, so I didn't regard her as a kid.

Although we both were.

To me, she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen, and no matter how much I'd tried to catch her attention, she stubbornly kept her focus on her food.

It was like she was fully aware I was staring like an idiot and wanted to protect herself from my prying eyes.

Before long, our dinner was over, and once I got home that evening, I forgot about her.

The following day, I left the house, moved around, and talked to people.

And she came to mind again.

I knew where she lived—my cousin told me—but I thought it was weird enough staring at her the night before that strolling past her house would make me look even worse.

We met again the following Sunday.

It wasn't like we really met each other.

We attended church and saw each other but never had the chance to talk.

There wasn't any dinner party that evening, so I started to do the legwork and ask questions about her to find out where she hung out and if she had any friends I could mingle with.

Two weeks later—it was late August if I remember correctly—I found myself in a large olive orchard with some people. Harvesting olive trees had begun, and I knew nothing about picking olives by hand, but I offered to help and did it.

That's when I finally caught her eye. I put on a nice shirt and had my hair neatly brushed back that day.

And I'm not gonna lie.

I'd had some success with the ladies before. I had a reputation even back then, but that day wasn't about that.

She was a girl, and I was a boy, and all I wanted was to talk to her. I just wanted to hear some words coming out of her beautiful mouth and maybe, if I was lucky, get a smile.

I never dreamed of getting more than that. I had imagined her voice was soft and quiet.

She glanced at me several times while I was working hard at getting noticed.

And finally, while on a break, I realized she looked at me. Our eyes had met for the first time, and I was over the moon.

She had a red scarf around her neck that day, her dark hair draped over her shoulders.

She pulled it all back into a ponytail.

Several silky strands of hair had broken free and slipped away, giving her a hard time, and that's when I headed to her and asked her if she needed help.

Sitting on a woven basket, she looked at me, and I instantly puffed out my chest and pulled my shoulders back, boastfully hinting at my athletic shape.

A few months earlier, I started to get that nice V-shaped torso the girls went crazy over.

My shoulders got wider, and my chest got harder and fuller as I started pumping iron. Not to mention how much it enhanced the muscular definition of my arms.

The more I'd worked out in the gym and spent time in the boxing ring, the more chiseled my torso had become.

I was proud of it and wanted to show her my best assets. Or what I thought was of great value at that time.

She wasn't that impressed—I don't think so.

If she was, she surely didn't hint at that.

So...

She nodded in response when I offered to help, and I was a little pissed that I still didn't hear her voice.

I'd never heard her talk while I was there, and I'd begun to think she wasn't talking, actually.

Trying to suppress my conflicted emotions, I averted my gaze and put my knee down while she turned her back to me and handed me the red scarf.

Of course, that piece of fabric couldn't hold in place the wild mane tumbling down her back.

Her shoulders looked fragile like everything else about her, and because of that, I liked her even more.

Honestly, I'd never been more lost for words in the presence of a girl.

Spellbound, I moved my fingers, trying to make the impossible possible, and for sure, it didn't work.

Her hair was like a bunch of dark, crazy, wild snakes.

Every time I thought I had the situation under control, another strand of hair escaped the tight ring of red fabric.

I asked her how she'd dealt with it before.

She glanced over her shoulder, and her eyes reflected the warm late afternoon sun, and I froze in place, studying them as if I'd never seen eyes in my life, and in a way, it was true.

I'd never looked at someone's eyes the way I looked at hers.

They were green and golden and occasionally dark.

They took after the weather, reflecting whatever was happening behind me as the sun glided toward the horizon.

Even the sun wanted to glimpse more of her, and because of that, it lingered a little longer, weaving its light into her hair while dripping golden tears into her eyes.

And then she smiled.

She smiled at my stunned expression, I think.

She smiled because I looked defeated, unable to tame her hair.

Or maybe she smiled because I was so stubborn and determined to tie her hair back with that crimson scarf.

Later, she praised me for my effort and admitted her hair had never behaved. To make things sweeter and bearable for me, she invited me to sit next to her.

A blanket was packed in that basket, and we pulled it out and laid it on the ground before sitting down and talking.

My Italian was good, and her English wasn't bad, and we made it work somehow.

As she talked, I realized her voice was exactly how I'd imagined it.

Soft, melodious, calm, and lined with faint smiles from time to time. She never gave me a bright smile. Never. Her grins were subtle, subdued—tiny stories in themselves.

Some were sad, and some were tender, and I was ecstatic when she said she wanted to know more about me and my life in New York.

I was convinced I had a few good stories to tell, and she enjoyed them fully.

Later, we resumed working and continued to chat.

We talked about Sicily and olive trees.

How some of them were a thousand years old or more.

How olives needed to be used within days from harvesting—ideally three days—before oxidizing and going sour.

I learned a lot about olives and that girl that day.

I studied how she conducted herself and tilted her chin when she wasn't convinced I was telling the truth, although it had never crossed my mind to lie to her.

And then how she narrowed her eyes and smiled.

She sucked me into her world so quickly that by the end of the day, I was ready to move to Sicily and spend my life over there, picking olives and listening to her stories.

Her mother was grateful for all the help her daughter had gotten and invited all of us to have lunch at their place after church on the following Sunday.

My parents were happy that I'd done something useful and nice for once instead of busting someone's face in at the school or in the neighborhood.

I wasn't a bad kid.

It's just that I couldn't stand fools, and there were plenty where I lived.

After finishing eating outside that Sunday, the adults remained at the table and chatted for a while as we, the kids, moved around.

The girl I was smitten with had showed me around the house before inviting me to follow her outside.

We returned to the olive orchard and sat on a blanket under a tree.

I could swear it was the same blanket. It looked the same, anyway.

And then she started to talk and tell me about her family, how they'd lost her father and struggled to work the land and support themselves.

And I heard every word coming out of her mouth, yet I couldn't make sense of anything she was saying.

I was so affected by her presence.

I couldn't take my eyes off her as she finally came out of her shell and showed me that she liked me as much as I liked her.

We became friends and confided in each other.

And I immediately felt like she'd have my back if something bad happened, and my mind ran away with that idea.

And for the first time ever, I imagined someone like her to have a family of my own with one day.

Have a wife and children.

And it quickly dawned on me how impossible that was.

Like her hair being tamed, sitting nicely in her ponytail, it was simply impossible.

I had a family and a life.

And I was there on vacation.

While she was living there.

A Sicilian.

A girl.

A beautiful girl who liked to pick olives and chat, wearing oversized dresses and fighting her hair into submission.

We lived on two different continents. That was a fact. And I was a visitor in her life. And she was a visitor in mine.

That made everything bittersweet.

I wanted to kiss her that day.

I'd planned that for a while, but I couldn't find the right moment and didn't want to scare her.

I didn't have something sexual in mind. Like an open mouth kiss and my hands moving over her lithe body.

No.

That's not what I had in mind.

Despite being sexually active since I was fourteen and becoming restless that summer, I just wanted to feel her peach-like skin under my lips and feed on her reaction.

Experience the tremor in her frame.

I was sure she'd never been kissed before.

I don't know why I wanted to believe that.

Maybe because it suited me.

I wanted to be her first. First everything. First story. First kiss. First good memory. I thought she needed it.

Although I needed it just as much.

I no longer hated that I was there with my family, away from my friends.

Summer turned out to be magical.

So I didn't kiss her.

And in retrospect, I don't think she wanted to be kissed by me. She was too scared—I bet she was.

And she wanted me to be how I was. A beautiful promise.

So it didn't happen that day or the next, despite spending the entire summer together.

We were linked at the hip.

Inseparable.

And then the day of my departure came, and my heart wept.

I was so caught up in that girl I didn't realize she was my first love.

Sometimes, something good comes your way, and you can't see it for what it is, and only later you understand what it truly is.

She was a good story with a bad ending, and looking back with mature eyes, I know it was meant to be that way.

Not more or less.

Although I did kiss her that last day I spent in Sicily, and her reaction was exactly how I'd anticipated it.

She blushed and quivered, and her eyes softened.

She kissed me back, and we ended up kissing for real.

I regretted that I couldn't be hers and she couldn't be mine. Maybe her life would've been different.

I'm not so sure about mine.

That's who Carmina Leto reminds me of.

If I didn't know the other girl was gone, I'd swear Carmina was her spirit playing tricks on me.

The woman has the same hair, eyes, and a mix of daintiness and toughness.

To mess with my head even worse, Carmina is young, much younger than the other girl had she been alive.

We promised ourselves to keep in touch—the Sicilian girl and me—but life moves quickly when you're seventeen.

I came back and rolled with my friends. School, sports, and soon after, women occupied most of my time.

I had a dire hunger in me for bodies.

Sexy, luscious, ripe bodies, good for sex that never ends.

So, the memory of that girl began to fade, and eventually, it got locked in a dusty drawer of my memory.

We hadn't tried to reach each other, and I thought she had forgotten about me.

I never asked about her when I talked to my Italian cousins, and I didn't travel back until my parents died and I had to take care of some family business.

The area looked the same as if not a day had passed, but not all people were there.

I caught up with that chatty cousin, and he gave me the rest of the story, and it wasn't good.

The year after spending my summer there, the woman and her daughter moved away. She couldn't keep up with the responsibilities of their farm, and the harvest wasn't enough to keep them afloat.

It became unmanageable, so she sold it.

I don't know how much money she'd gotten from selling her property, but whatever it was and whatever else she could scrape together went back into paying their debts.

It was bad all and all.

And then her daughter caught some local mobster's eye, who made her mother a proposal.

Her daughter in exchange for a roof above their heads and some protection.

Had she not done that, someone worse than him would've grabbed her daughter and perhaps trafficked her.

The woman thought it was a good deal, so she handed her daughter to him. She was barely seventeen. And I don't know what happened to her after that.

Frankly, I don't want to know.

She got married and began her life with that man. He was close to her father's age had he been alive.

Later, people said she was kidnapped and eventually trafficked anyway.

Others said she'd been executed with her husband after he got into a bad deal with some nasty people.

Whatever it was, she was gone.

My cousin directed me to the cemetery, where fresh flowers sat on her grave, and her picture was encased in the tombstone.

My heart stopped when I saw her.

She was even more beautiful than I remembered her.

Her long, unruly hair framed her face, and her lips were curved into a soft smile. Like she was smiling at me.

As if she knew I'd be there one day, looking at her and recollecting those hours I'd spent with her.

I had a hard time believing she was dead.

I had a hard time convincing myself I was truly looking at her burial place.

It was insane. Her story was insane.

And I sat there and tried to understand why life would go so bad so fast.

How that summer that seemed like any other summer would be the last good thing before tragedy struck.

Only a few years back, she was this pretty, soft-spoken girl who needed a friend. And I was friends with her that summer, and then our story pulled away from us as life had different plans for us.

I lost my parents. She lost her life.

As much as it pained me, I tried to imagine her life with that older man and the suffering she had gone through.

Vindictive anger and senseless madness had ravaged my soul. I felt responsible for what had happened to her and enraged to the point of insanity because I couldn't foresee it.

But who could see that far into the future?

I couldn't. And no one else could.

Not my father. And not my mother.

Not that girl, for sure.

A warm wind blew that day, sweeping away the perfumed flowers from her grave. And I couldn't pull away from her as I was still talking to her in my mind as if sitting on a blanket under an olive tree.

That day, standing by her grave, I told her about my life.

About my parents and what I had become.

By then, I was a made man.

My life was different.

Wild. Crazy. Merciless.

There were ups and downs, and to me, it was the logical thing to do. My uncle was part of the mafia and introduced me to his boss.

I fit right in.

I had nothing before that, and then I had everything.

And I was good at it.

I could finally control who and what was a part of my life.

But a tiny part of me had always wanted something different.

And I wanted her. I didn't know that until I found myself in front of the tombstone bearing her name and her picture, telling me about who she had become.

I almost scraped her picture out of the stone but didn't do it in the end. I figured she wouldn't like that.

That was her place. And her life story, as short and tragic as it was, had a place there.

My story wasn't much better, but I was alive, and that came with a lot of perks, especially power and money.

By the time the sun went down, I'd pulled away from the cemetery and the air imbued with timelessness, a fresh scent of flowers, and mixed memories, and headed to the small town, where I found a place to eat and someone to talk to.

The man I chatted with had lived there all his life and knew a thing or two about the other people's lives.

The house belonging to the woman's mother was unkept as the new owner couldn't afford the expenses, and not many people were willing to work the land for free.

He gave me the owner's name, and I contacted him and offered to buy the house and the land the very next day.

He agreed to sell the property, and I bought it for next to nothing with no real plan to live there.

All I wanted was to have someone clean it up and fix the house. And later, I wanted to lease it in case those people were interested in tending to the olive trees.

I knew nothing about olives and orchards, so that was that.

From the same man, I learned more about the woman's deceased husband. He was part of the Sicilian mafia, and his wife had been kidnapped and trafficked before he got her back.

And then he got into a war with those people, and he and his wife lost their lives.

Life was rough, and I knew that well since I was part of that kind of life.

Back then, I didn't have any special thoughts about my future.

As a mafia guy, I learned to live in the moment and never plan for a future that might never come.

I also learned how not to live in fear of losing everything, my life included.

Any mobster worth his salt would say the same thing.

Our power comes from fearlessness. Not submitting to the fear of losing our lives is what separates us from the rest.

Some of us live.

Some of us die.

Some of us grow old and get to tell our stories.

And some of us only get to see our kids when they are babies.

Whatever life has in store for us, we worship the power bestowed on us, and nothing stops us.

No man.

No fear.

And for sure, not the promise of a future.

But one thing we have, though.

And I had it, too.

I wouldn't have let that happen.

I wouldn't have waited to get picked up at my house and witness the execution of my family.

Like it happened in her case.

The people who did that to her would've been dead before they touched her.

I would've made them regret the day that they were born.

This is how I ran my business back then.

And this is how I run it now.

D AMASO

I BARELY WALK OUT of the event room, where Carmina Leto indulges in her food when Vito and Gianni tear away from the cushy armchairs in the hallway and head my way.

“How was it, Boss?”

“Fuck you, Gianni. That’s how it was.”

He grins and winks at Vito while I run my fingers through my hair, smiling, still walking, not stopping to chat with them.

At once, they spin around and follow me.

“Where is the motherfucker who was supposed to interview this woman?”

“The club manager?”

“Are you clever with me now?” I toss at Vito, who struggles to keep up with me as I move briskly toward my office. “I thought you knew everything about her by now,” I say.

“I do.”

He reaches inside his pocket despite knowing my vehement aversion to phones.

Anything digital makes my skin crawl as it’s such an expenditure and an around-the-clock operation to keep us safe.

We use digital things in our legit businesses, like security cameras and, yeah, some phones.

I was about to say the safe–deposit boxes, too.

No, not really.

One can argue anything can be broken into.

Yes.

No.

Not if that motherfucker can't get close to that thing, and in this case, I'll make sure they won't.

“No phones.”

“No phones, Boss.”

He flicks his eyebrows up. And he's so damn comical with his bushy eyebrows and creased brow.

He looks no different than the high school kid who used to play soccer in Long Island.

Vito '*Big Nose*' Mancini is the same guy, only now, he packs more muscle and can make people disappear faster than a magician.

“Why?” he asks. “Is she someone important?” he murmurs as I push the doors open, and a vast area stretches out in front of us.

Three walls of glass usher in the scenic view of the sky and mountains.

The colors bleed red as the afternoon gets hijacked by the early evening.

I remove my suit jacket, toss it onto the leather couch, round the desk, and sink into my chair. The bulletproof glass obscures the view for anyone who tries to spy on us from outside the building.

I rest my elbows on the desk and casually glance at the large screens feeding live streams from around the hotel.

The casino, the club, the restaurants, and pretty much every corner of the establishment.

Things run smoothly.

I move my focus to Vito, who makes himself comfortable in a chair in front of me.

Gianni, *'The Quiet Cat,'* slides onto the couch just as the door opens, and Louie *'The Bird'* enters the room.

“Don’t get too comfortable,” I say, tipping my eyes to the screens.

One of them gives me a glimpse of the Pavilion.

Carmina is still at the table, her gaze hovering over her plate before moving to the view.

She looks like someone who has nowhere to go.

Eventually, she picks up her phone and fiddles with it briefly before making a call.

Her face is unreadable, and she only speaks a few words.

It’s business-related, if you ask me.

His face is long, and her eyes are vacant.

I wonder who the person at the other end of the phone line is.

She quickly ends the call and slides another piece of cake onto her plate.

I’m certain that she has no place to go.

“I’m listening,” I say as Gianni looks at me.

I quickly remember he’s asked me a question.

“In what way important?” I ask.

He gives up on getting a real answer from me.

“She could be anyone. I have to make sure she’s not someone’s spy,” I say.

“She ran into you,” Louie says, propped against the back of a chair, his arms crossed over his chest.

“She did,” I say, leaning back into my seat. “And I want to know who she is. And while you’re at it, fire the people in

charge of stopping them from getting into that elevator. This could've been a real headache had these two been involved with that motherfucker gangster from LA. What's his face? Lizard something?"

They all laugh.

I chuckle, too, because it's funny.

The line of men trying to replace me or take over my territory is a mile long.

Let's be frank. I'm not in the business of making friends, and I had a couple of contracts put on my life.

We clashed. I won. They're dead.

It was about the money—it always is—but some people are sour losers and take it personally while for others, it's a matter of survival.

If I'm gone, they get their chance at occupying this territory, at least until the next Capo takes my place.

I didn't ask to run this part of the country. I was told where to go, and I came here to run our business.

The Underboss, my uncle, asked me that. He runs our criminal organization *de facto*. And yes, things have changed since I became a made man. We've both moved up.

I had no problem coming here. I don't care where I go. Besides, I like this life. The clubs. The gambling. The women.

I even like the weather, although I'm not an outdoorsy guy. Not these days, anyway.

There's only one thing I don't like and never do. Trafficking innocent people.

Delivering a gangster? Sure. No problem. I'm in the delivery business, but the women working for us must do it willfully or not at all.

And that pet peeve of mine extends to the people doing that for a living, too. I have a special thing for them. And it's partially because of my past and the girl I lost.

My uncle, who plans to have me replace him at some point, likes everything about me.

How swiftly I solve a problem.

How smoothly I run this business, and, more importantly, how efficiently I make money for our organization.

So he's given me free rein to do whatever I want.

'Lizard' Joe is the kind of guy who does shitty stuff that goes against my beliefs, so I'm itching to put him out of business, but my boss—read 'my uncle'—reached an agreement with his boss and I was forced to pull back.

That doesn't mean our animosity for each other hasn't soared and is not fueled by occasionally getting wind of the crap he's doing.

And also, occasionally, he must tiptoe around my business.

I'd be surprised if he hadn't talked to his boss and tried to sell him the idea that they could do more business if someone other than me was here.

They'd even put down a good chunk of money if they knew they could trade living things that come in the shape of beautiful, vulnerable women like that girl, Carmina Leto.

My eyes go back to the screen, and I catch her just as she pushes her chair back, picks up her purse, looks around the room, and makes a beeline for the exit.

The staff walks in to clean the table while she looks for her way out.

"Vito?" I murmur, my eyes still pinned on the woman.

He starts to speak.

"Carmina Leto lived all her life in LA at the same address."

I glance at him, making sure he's not reading shit from his phone. He peeks at a scrap of paper where he's scribbled down the information.

“She has a family. A father. A sister. That’s all I know. My man needs to go there and check their place,” he says, lifting his gaze.

I raise my hand, my eyes going back to the screen as I curiously look at the woman cutting her way out of my hotel through groups of people.

“No need to,” I say, focused on the screen.

My guys start talking to each other while I surveil the room she’s strutting through.

She reaches the crowded lobby when a silhouette tears away from the wall, and I straighten in my seat.

“What’s going on, Boss?” Vito asks.

“The motherfucker is still in the hotel.”

Their clothes rustle as they all move at once. Vito gets closer to the desk. Louie follows him closely. Gianni pushes off the couch.

“Do you think he’s one of Joe’s men?” Louie asks.

I ponder.

He was in the hotel upstairs when I walked out and ran into that situation.

And that was a *situation* for sure.

I don’t know what the fucker did to her, but her hair was in disarray, and her cheeks were flushed.

Her dress didn’t sit right.

And I didn’t want to think he had planned to fuck her on that floor.

It was weird that they were there, to begin with.

They weren’t supposed to take that elevator, and if they did, the security should’ve come after them.

At first, I thought it was a setup. They were lucky they didn’t get killed.

And that was all thanks to her.

Carmina Leto.

She didn't look like a guest.

And despite her *'fuck me'* dress, she didn't look like a prostitute or a strip dancer, either.

She might aspire to be one, but that's a different story.

I get it that she's desperate for money.

Who isn't, after all?

People come here to have fun. And some hope to make a killing, while others arrive here and get killed.

She looked like she had hopped onto the wrong bus and ended up on the wrong side of town.

That's how she looked to me.

And that made me stifle my impulse to let my men pull them into the room and make them disappear.

The man she had with her...? The jerk keeping her company?

I know his kind. The type of man exploiting his women without the slightest remorse.

He surely fitted the description.

She seemed innocent and clueless, while he appeared willing to sell her for a buck.

If that's her ex. I don't know what to think. For sure, things weren't good between them.

If I had a dollar for every woman who wanted my protection, I'd have a nice stash of cash for my retirement.

"I don't think he's one of Joe's men," I say, talking about Joe *'The Lizard.'* "He might dab into some nasty shit, but he was here for her. Neither of them knew who I was, although he seemed to have suspected it toward the end. He's not up to date on who's running what, and he followed her from LA. Regardless of their connection, I need eyes on her."

I look up.

They all stare at me.

“Gianni goes. I need someone smooth. I don’t want to scare her off. I just want to know what’s going on with her. He’s on her tail again, and I’ll take it personally if she ends up dead or he trades her off for some cash.”

“What about me?” Vito protests.

“There’s plenty to do here. I got word we have guests tonight.”

They all peer at me, waiting.

“For real?”

“For fucking real. All men need to be on standby. Although I’m sure we’ll handle them without much fuss.”

My eyes move from one to another before my hand hits the smooth surface of my desk.

“Good,” I say, pushing out of my seat and looking at Gianni. “Make sure no one’s touching that girl. And keep me posted. She’s supposed to come back tomorrow morning for an interview. Find that manager and put him on notice. Fire the security on block A and replace them at once. I don’t have time for investigations. Oh. And that manager. He needs to give her a job. Boss him around a little,” I say, lifting my chin. And smiling. “Make sure he understands he needs to put in the work, or he needs to pack his bags. I hate owing favors. Nepotism drives me nuts.”

I yank my suit jacket from the back of my chair, slide it on, reach inside, and pull out a cigarette.

I frown at it before tossing it in the garbage.

I’ve been doing this for the past few months, and it’s working.

I stopped smoking, although I kept buying cigarettes and throwing them away.

Hey.

Whatever the fuck works.

“Go now.”

They leave the room, and I linger a little longer to gaze outside and just go back in time.

Flashbacks from the past flicker in front of my eyes.

I see myself as a seventeen year old boy with that Italian girl on a blanket in the orchard, talking stupid shit like kids do.

I liked that part of myself, and I know it's in there somewhere, buried deep in my soul.

Traveling back in time, I remember my parents and a different life and understand that walking this path, being a part of one of the most notorious mafia families in New York has helped me forget everything else.

It's intense and demanding, and there's no time for anything else. And that can simply be a blessing sometimes.

Thinking about those times, I see this woman, Carmina, superimposed on that Italian girl's image.

And I think about it for a moment.

If only I could be that boy again, but just as fast, it dawns on me that it could never happen again.

Besides, women often come with pain.

Sometimes, because you love them.

And sometimes because you lose them.

And sometimes because you make mistakes because of them.

If I'd learned anything from that Sicilian woman and what had happened to her and her husband, it was that women are our weakest spot.

We, gangsters, can do a lot with our focused brains and deadly bodies, but having warm feelings toward someone makes us vulnerable.

In the end, we need to choose.

Get someone we love and face that risk. Or choose someone we have no feelings for and fuck some on the side.

Whatever we do, the circumstances are not perfect because life never is, and for sure, *'this life'* never is supposed to be.

C ARMINA

EARLIER

I LOOK at my plate before peering at the view outside, filled with dread that I need to return.

Sure, the man said I could stay a little longer, but how long is that?

Besides, I'd rather go back to my car before the night sets in.

"Fuck..." I murmur quietly, running tense fingers over my brow.

I like it here. The temperature is nice. The view is beautiful, and the food is good. I look at the plates of food on the table.

I wish I wasn't stuffed. Ignoring that, I eat more food to hold me over until I return to the hotel tomorrow morning.

Beau is surely waiting for me where I parked the car if he hasn't moved it already just to fuck with me.

He doesn't need my key to do that. The guy who sold me the car could've given him a copy of my key.

Although Beau knows how to hot-wire a car.

I murmur another ‘fuck’ under my breath and sigh.

Adulthood sucks. I can say that much. Who needs this crap?

I don’t have the answers to my problems.

And I don’t know who to trust and where to go.

Can I trust the man who paid for my meal?

He didn’t even pay for our food, and no one had stopped him from leaving the room.

Which makes me think he is more than a guest in this hotel. Or an employee.

The only thing I can do right now is call Jen and ask her if things are good back home.

Although she’s probably at work and might not answer. Or maybe her shift hasn’t started yet.

I look out the window.

It’s still early, judging by how the lights hit the mountains surrounding the valley.

I slide my hand into my purse, scoop out my phone, and dial her number.

She answers right away.

“Hey,” she says, panting.

I tense up.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, yeah,” she says, a smile lining her voice. “I just got in, and I’m putting on my work clothes. I have a few minutes left before my shift begins. How are things with you? Did you get the job?”

I tell her what happened.

That I didn’t talk to the manager and ran into Beau.

“No fucking way. Oh, the fucking prick. He and the man you got your car from. How can they be such dickheads? I’ll go there and give that guy an earful.”

“No, no. Don’t do it. It doesn’t matter,” I deadpan. “It’s done.”

“Where is the fucker?”

“I don’t know. Someone threw him out of the hotel. I think. I hope.”

“Who?”

“Some guy I met. Beau and I had an argument. Well... It was more like he was dragging me out of the hotel when I ran into this stranger, and he stepped in. I asked him to. Anyway, I don’t want to talk about it. Do you have any news from Tina? Is anything going on at my place?”

“Not that I know of. Your father left. He’s on another road trip, heading to Louisiana. So things are quiet. He didn’t even notice you were gone. Can you imagine that?”

I suck in a long breath and exhale slowly.

“Uh... Yeah... I can. Well, things are good, then. As long as no one’s looking for me or clueing him in that I’m gone, we’ll both be fine. What about Stella? Is she still there?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen her. He might’ve taken her with him. That woman, though...”

“Don’t even go there. She does what she does. She doesn’t know any better.”

I pause, and then I speak again.

“Okay. I’ll call you when I have more news. Hopefully, I’ll meet that manager tomorrow. Wish me luck.”

We end the call, and I glance out the window, filling my mouth with chocolate cake and pondering the conversation I just had.

Interesting... Beau didn’t go to my place? He could’ve gone there, run his mouth, and done a lot of damage.

Maybe it didn’t cross his mind. He could still do it out of spite if nothing else. He is the vengeful type.

Fuck him.

I need to focus on my problems.

The day draws to an end, and I become aware I can't stay here for much longer.

So far, no one has asked me to leave, but I need to get out and return to my car.

Make sure it's still there, and Beau hasn't slashed my tires.

Tense, I pick up my purse, rise to my feet, and tear away from the table.

Surprisingly, I'm not getting lost while making the trip back.

I reach the lobby and try to sneak out.

The doors slide open, and the hot air of the desert rolls over my face.

My cheeks burn, my eyes sting, and my lips are dry.

Beads of sweat dot my brow while my dress feels too tight.

I'd give anything for spending five minutes in a shower, but it's too risky to roam around and try to find one now.

First, I need to do this fucking thing.

It's things, actually.

Get to my car, make sure I'm not getting killed, secure that fucking job, and take care of everything else.

The most appealing thing about this job is that I'll head to work right away, be able to rent a cheap motel room and save up some cash for a better place later.

Maybe I could get a room in this hotel. Jen's cousin said it would be possible. Maybe. Who the fuck knows?

I look to my right. And then to my left. The road is clear.

I struggle with my heels but make it to the sidewalk, and after walking past a long line of cars, I cross the street and make a beeline to the parking lot where I left my ride.

The warm weather and lack of sleep make my pulse race, and even more so when I can't spot my car.

The sweat comes in waves now.

Where is it?

I check the area.

I'm positive this is the spot.

I may not be good at orienting myself, generally speaking, but this is the area.

I swivel my head, look around, and find nothing.

I quickly realize this parking lot looks identical to the one I've left my car in.

I turn right and then left, and I can't believe my eyes.

Since no one can see me now, I take my shoes off and run as fast as I can, careful not to step on a nail or a piece of glass.

Occasionally, I glance over my shoulder, grappling with this strange feeling that I'm being followed.

I see no one behind me.

The only thing sweeping my back is the sunset, a mix of pink, red, and orange hues.

Heaving, I reach my car, fumble through the contents of my bag for my keys, and unlock the door.

Oh, my. I can't believe this. I need to move away from here as quickly as possible. That jerk knows exactly where I am, and I don't believe for a second that he went back to LA.

Yeah. Damaso was scary. But was he scary enough to make Beau change his mind?

Did Beau believe me when I said I had a boyfriend? I don't think so.

He must've been a little puzzled.

And maybe he's watching me right now, trying to figure out if I have told him the truth. But as dumb as he can be sometimes, he knows a thing or two about me.

He knows I'm not that kind of girl.

More importantly, he took one look at Damaso Salla and instantly knew he was not the kind of man who hung out with virgins who had no idea how to please a man.

I move fast. Start the ignition, turn my car around, and leave, making sure no car is following me.

I have no idea where to go, but I move closer to the hotel, thinking that if something happens, I can run to the lobby and find someone to help me.

With that thought in mind, I park my car, turn off the ignition, crack the window open—not too much so someone could slide their hand in—and recline the driver's seat.

Finally, I can breathe.

The temperature drops slightly, making breathing more comfortable.

A thought zips through my head.

I should've used the restroom before leaving the hotel.

My planning sucks.

Even so, I can find a public restroom tonight, change my clothes, and use their bathroom.

I lean back and rest.

The more I relax, the heavier my eyelids get, and I realize how exhausted I am.

Struggling to stay awake, I ponder this little plan of mine. Find a gas station or a truck stop.

But maybe I should just take a nap and do all that later when it's dark outside—take off my dress, put on my sweatpants, and get some sleep.

My plan sounds good. They always do. And then they never work.

I try to ignore that thought, rays of sun playing on my face until I fall asleep.



CARMINA

MAYBE THIS IS A DREAM, although I doubt it.

If this is a dream, it's a loud one, for sure.

It's like someone's scratching or rubbing something. And then something tickles the top of my head.

Is this some sort of twisted dream? A premonition?

I wish I knew.

All I know is that a voice calls my name in my head, and I jolt out of my sleep.

I instantly know a man is trying to reach inside my car, and I jerk back and scream.

And just as fast, I figure out it's Beau. And I surely know why he can't unlock the door.

I'm sure he has a key, or maybe he got sloppy and didn't get a copy.

Whatever may be the case, he couldn't open the door because the little fucker gets stuck when you lock it from the inside.

He cusses at me, and our exchange becomes quickly violent.

I knew he'd come back.

“Go the fuck away, motherfucker. I'm not coming with you.”

His maniacal chuckle tells me what I need to know.

Even if I don't grasp it all, he's spelling it out for me.

“You're such a fucking piece of shit, my dear Car. Fucking Karma, Cara, Car.”

Every time we used to have an argument, he'd call me Karma.

And this is not him joking. He is fucking pissed, and I try to roll the window up and crush his fingers.

“Go the fuck away,” I snarl.

He retrieves his hand and puts his fist into the window.

My car jolts.

“You know what I'm gonna fucking do. I'm gonna take you back, and I swear to God, I'll sell you to the first fucking pimp I cross paths with in LA. I'll pick the worst guy so you can learn what life on the street really means. You have a fucking boyfriend??”

Boom.

His fist meets the window again.

“You can't have a fucking boyfriend. Real men don't waste their time with women who don't fuck.”

“You fucking did. Oh, I forgot. You're not a real man, motherfucker, or you wouldn't fight me, a woman half your size. Who fights a woman, motherfucker, huh?”

Boom. Boom. He doesn't stop, fuming.

I collect my shoe, and although I can't afford to ruin it and walk barefoot to my interview tomorrow morning, I start hitting his fingers with the heel whenever he sticks them inside and tries to push the window down.

“Go away,” I bark.

He doesn't, and I see myself in that precarious situation in which I'll need to move away from this place.

However, this time, he'd probably follow me, and it wouldn't serve me well to drive farther away from the hotel.

What the fuck am I supposed to do?

He puts his elbow through the window, and the frame finally gives way. The car groans, and the window busts open before he slides his hand inside despite me fighting him.

Eventually, he opens the door and drags me out, and I fall to my knees and feel the pain in my scraped skin as it oozes blood.

“I hate you,” I shriek, looping my arms around his calves and sinking my teeth above his ankle straight into his flesh.

The man groans in pain and grabs the back of my hair with such force that I feel like he might end up wearing my scalp as a trophy by the end of the night, and then something else happens.

A thud ripples through the air, and his hand gets removed from me while his body lurches forward, his head going straight through the cracked window.

Shards of glass fall to my knees as two beefy men deal with him, and a baseball swings to his back.

One guy handles the baseball bat while the other slams my ex’s head into the broken window.

I’m thinking we’re getting robbed, and I’m next.

And then, I’m thinking they have some shit to settle.

And then, I hear them cussing him while hitting him with passion, mumbling something about being chivalrous with a woman.

That would be me.

Their New York Accents give them away, so I fall back to my rear and look up.

These are Damaso’s men. They finish Beau and lift him up.

He’s about to crash to my feet when one of the men rubs his hand over his brow like he’s done a good job.

And I can’t argue with him. Or them.

Beau is out—a mass of bones and muscles.

“You’re coming with us, buddy,” the man says, and then the other one turns to me, slides his hand under my arm, and pulls me up.

“You okay?” he asks curtly, pushing his gaze down. “Have shoes?” he says, pointing to my bare feet.

“Yes.”

“Pick up your stuff. You’re coming with us, too.”

The tone he uses with me is different.

They have hate for him, not so much for me.

“Am I coming back?” I ask, picking up my purse, keys, and the little things that go into my tiny handbag.

“Probably not,” he says, reaching inside and collecting my duffel bag.

He slams the door, but the twisted metal prevents it from getting closed.

“He did that?” he asks, looking at me.

I nod.

“Uh-huh.”

“Yo, Louie. Look what your boyfriend’s done,” the man clutching my elbow says, tilting his chin toward my car.

They laugh, amused, and the man named Louie gives Beau a few smacks upside the head, earning a grunt from him as he gets dragged toward a big, black, shiny car.

“What the fuck did I teach you, motherfucker?” Louie says, hitting Beau again. “These fuckers never want to learn how to treat a lady.”

I shake badly as we edge closer to the car.

A man sits behind the wheel, smoking a cigarette and talking on the phone, smiling, completely oblivious to what’s going on, having a flirting expression on his face.

“Hey, Boss? Mind putting your phone down and helping? This motherfucker’s heavy, and he has baby deer legs right now.”

The man behind the wheel, who is also part of Damaso’s crew, makes an obscene gesture.

“*Vanffanculo*,” he says before continuing his phone conversation.

Fuck off.

“Hey, princess,” Louie says to the man behind the steering wheel, propping Beau against the car, who’s slowly beginning to slide down. “Our Boss will cut our balls off if we drag our feet, and he gets wind you’re using your phone—you know you’ll be grounded. Put that damn thing down and help me with this motherfucker.”

The man in the driver’s seat checks us out, still murmuring words before covering the microphone.

“I’ve worked on getting this woman for a while and just made some progress. If you cock block me this time, Louie, I swear I’ll cut your balls off.”

“Get in line,” Louie says while the man handling me opens the back door and places my bag on the farthest seat.

“Watch your mouth,” the same man says to the driver. “We’re not alone, as you can see.”

He also makes a soft gesture, inviting me in, while the driver pivots and tilts his head to check Beau.

“Uh... No. He’s not getting in. I just had the car cleaned,” he says, pointing at Beau, who’s propped against the car, blood dripping from his chin. “I can’t fucking believe it. His blood is dripping on my car.”

Annoyed, he brings his phone to his ear.

“I have to call you back, darling. Something’s come up.”

The woman talks at the other end of the phone line.

“Uh-huh... Later.”

He ends the call while I slide into the back seat, trying not to make a mess in his car.

His ride is clean, and I’m not in great shape with all that dirt and blood smearing my knees.

“I always have to take care of everything,” the driver says, sliding out, stepping to the back door, and inspecting my legs.

“What the hell did he do to you?”

“That’s something you’ll need to explain to your boss,” Louie says, just as he grabs the driver’s phone, pulls out the sim card, and tosses the cell phone out in the street.

“Oh, motherfucker. You didn’t just do that.”

Louie gives him the sim card.

“I just saved your life. Stop complaining.”

“Where do you want him?” the third man asks, tilting his chin toward Beau.

“Bring him here,” the driver says, opening the car trunk and leading them there. They pull Beau up and shove him into the trunk, but not before the driver puts a blanket and a plastic bag down so he doesn’t stain his car.

Other than the mess they created on Beau’s face, the men are sticklers for cleanliness.

They slam the trunk shut and round the car.

Louie sits in the front while the man who’s carried my bag climbs in and sits next to me.

He pushes the duffel down to his feet, and the driver offers me his handkerchief and an ice-cold bottle of water.

“To drink and maybe clean up some of that mess,” he says, gesturing at my legs with his index finger.

“You good?” he asks after watching me drink some of that water.

“Yes,” I say.

“All right.”

He slides back into his seat, and the car slowly rolls away while no sound comes from the trunk.

D AMASO

EARLIER

“SO WE’RE LOOKING at the tables thirteen and twenty-five,” I say.

Six of my men are in the room with me.

And six big screens transmit live the activity inside the casino.

“The guy with the white shirt. And the one with a cap,” I say.

We’re all looking at the two men in question.

“Two? That’s it?” Vito mutters.

“They’re the brains of the operation. There are probably three or four men. Maybe more. Perhaps they have girls with them, too. These soy latte-drinking dudes have made the rounds these months and fucked with the system. The other owners couldn’t prove they’d been stealing. And by stealing, I mean...”

“I know what you mean, Boss,” Vito says, crossing his arms over his chest. “What do you want me to do?”

I round my desk and crash into my seat before leaning back and clasping my hands at the back of my head.

All the men in the room look at me as I speak again.

“We teach them a lesson. I don’t know if they’re stupid or they’re stupid. Considering they’re trying to defraud the house, they sure don’t know—or didn’t do their homework—who they’re trying to steal from. Or maybe they know and do it regardless, thinking they’ll get away with it. It’s not gonna happen now.”

I shift in my seat and set my arms on my desk.

Tipping my gaze down, I slowly run my fingers through my hair before lifting my eyes to them.

“You collect them and show them some good time,” I say, somber, not smiling. “No recycling.”

Which means no bodies to get rid of.

I go on.

“For now. I don’t want to see these fuckers again or other losers like them who think they can dip their greedy hands into my business. You round them up discretely when I give you the signal. Special croupiers have been assigned to those tables. You’ll get my message through them. Don’t make a show of it, but pick them up at once so they know we’re onto them. Toss them around a little and make them soil themselves so they get a taste of what they’re stepping into. You know, for shits and giggles,” I say, smiling this time, and Vito knows what this kind of smile means, and so do the others, so they all chuckle.

“All right, Boss,” he says before they all leave the room.



DAMASO

EARLIER

“DINNER, SIR?” the woman says, looking at me from the doorway, her hand latched onto the stainless steel food cart she’s about to wheel in.

A smell of freshly cooked food permeates the air.

“Sure. Go ahead,” I say, tipping my chin toward the table in the corner.

Silently, I watch her set the table.

She places a white linen tablecloth, napkins, plates, sparkling silverware, and fresh flowers on it before handling the food and setting the appetizers, pasta, and steak on the plates.

“Let me know if you need anything else.”

I nod before she spins around and exits my office, and then I pour myself a drink and put on some music.

It’s not any kind of music.

Within minutes, I’m sitting at the table, enjoying my meal and listening to the opera.

I’ve been doing this since I was a kid.

That’s how I grew up.

My parents used to put music on—it was never loud, always in the background—whenever we gathered around the table and had dinner.

It reminds me of them and helps me step away from the present.

Tosca plays in the background—*Vissi d’arte*—and I drink red wine when someone knocks on the door.

“Come in,” I bark.

The door opens, and Vito and Louie swagger in.

I move my eyes from one to the other, running a napkin over my lips.

“It’s done,” Vito says while Louie slides the door closed. “There were eight. The soy boys spilled it out within seconds.”

Smiling, I look at my plate and continue eating.

“Proven methods always work. Where are they?”

They crash onto the couch in front of me.

“Had dinner?” I ask, lifting my gaze.

“We ate downstairs,” Louie says, reaching inside his jacket.

“Not here, Louie. I’m not smoking in here. You won’t do it, either.”

“I forgot, Boss,” he says, grinning.

I flick my eyes to Vito.

“They’re in a van, tied up, gagged, and stripped of their goodies. I let them marinate before releasing them back into the wild.”

Chewing, I give him a small smile.

“Good thinking,” I murmur, gesturing with my knife. “You found something on them?” I ask seriously this time.

“Nope. They were clean,” he says, running a hand over his brow.

His clothes look sharp, and I can’t spot a bruise or a scratch on his hands. That’s what I like about him.

He is efficient and never leaves clues behind.

“Heard from Gianni?” I ask.

He shakes his head.

It’s been a while, so I glance at my watch.

“Go check on him,” I say before emptying my glass of wine.

I barely finish my drink and put the glass down when someone else knocks on the door.

They’re already pushing up.

“This must be him,” Louie says.

Gianni has a particular way of knocking on the door. It’s like a secret message. Knock, knock. Pause. And then another knock.

I don’t know what the hell it means.

But we all know it’s him.

I tip my chin toward the door, and Vito closes the distance with a few large strides.

I push my chair back, rise, and saunter to my desk just as the third man enters the room.

Shrugging my suit jacket on, I study him.

His expression is bland, yet his eyes can’t entirely suppress his concern. I know Gianni and can read him even when he refuses to let anything out, which is practically all the time.

I don’t feel like sitting, so I move around my desk, collecting a cigarette from inside my pocket and playing with it.

Not lighting it.

I never light them.

Not lately.

“What’s the story?” I ask, itching to slide my cigarette between my lips, run the flame over the tip, and take a drag.

It’s an exercise in discipline, and I win every time, although the struggle is real.

“That woman, Carmina Leto, lives out of her car. She’s parked two blocks down the road on the other side of the street behind a building.

I look at him, expressionless.

He waits for me to say something.

“Go on.”

“The fucker was hot on her trail, and I thought he’d get to her and try to talk to her. He followed her for a while until he

made sure she went to her car, and then he turned around and headed to a gas station down the road. He's driving a sports car and made some fuss at the gas station, arguing with the clerk. I don't know what his beef was with that guy, but he looked pissed overall. He bought some food and beer and went back to his ride. Later, he smoked a joint and talked on the phone. It looked important as his face was all bunched up, and he gestured a lot. I thought he'd leave. He didn't. Not immediately. And for sure, not back to LA. He pulled out of the parking lot and turned left on the road, making the trip to where she'd parked her ride."

He pauses, and you can hear a pin drop.

"I don't know what the fucker did. He waited for sure. He couldn't tell whether she was in her car or not. Not from where he sat. But she was there. He must've known she had nowhere else to go. I assumed he did. I couldn't see her either, so I moved closer and tried to get a glimpse of her. He didn't move, and I figured he was there either waiting for the sun to go down or to follow her around and learn more about her business. Which didn't make sense to me. I thought he'd jump her bones as soon as she exited the hotel."

They all look at me before I glance outside.

It's getting dark.

As much as I hate wasting my time with some small-time crook, I can't just let it slide.

"Go get him," I say. "And meet me downstairs."

They cheer me on. They know what downstairs means. It's another version of sitting in a van tied up and gagged, only it's more theatrical, and I participate.

Their clothes rustle as they rush to the door, and I watch them disappear before pondering whether to light the cigarette.

And then I tuck it back into my pocket.

I win every time. Don't I?

D AMASO

‘DOWNSTAIRS’ is the mob version of my regular office.

I run my business from several spots in this hotel.

One is the top floor, where I stumbled into Carmina. That level is reserved entirely for me and my crew.

The second one is my real office—where I had dinner.

That space oozes an air of sophistication with its hand-carved desk, leather sofas, vintage art, a walnut coffee table, and bottles of old scotch.

The glass walls, digital screens, and electronic devices add a modern vibe to it I have nothing against, yet those devices are checked around the clock.

The gym, which is not officially a place I do business in—although it’s happened to make an exception to the rule—is located on a lower level.

It’s a large space with a weight-lifting room, a covered swimming pool, and a boxing ring.

And then there are the back rooms tucked in the strip club, where I’m headed right now.

A maze of corridors leads me to where the adjacent space looks like a fully equipped facility with regular rooms.

Some of the shadiest deals have been cut in these rooms, and some of the most toxic alliances have been made here.

Not to mention that some of our VIP guests have paid handsomely to have their dicks sucked on this floor, although they've never wandered that far away from the club.

The VIP rooms line the back of the club.

They go there, have a drink, select their favorite woman, and have a room set up in the back. Easy peasy.

I wanted these areas to be relatively close to each other because the club is a distraction, and what's going on behind closed doors is entirely different, and nobody has the time to figure out what's what.

Large metallic doors separate the areas, and my men guard the entire floor, but especially this side, which is soundproof—there's a reason for that—swept for bugs, and generally speaking, impossible to listen in on conversations no matter where you are.

We always have fun '*downstairs.*'

We also make indecent amounts of money in these rooms.

Five men stand by the wall as I walk down the corridor with purpose, heading to the last door on the right.

The door opens, and Louie's smirk snags my eye from a mile away.

He notices me and pushes the door to the side. I step in and drag my gaze around the room.

The place has no windows, and it's roomy and well-ventilated.

In fact, it's cold in here, and the first thing I see is Carmina shaking in her seat.

Her knees are smeared with dirt and dried blood, and a few strands of damp hair are stuck to her brow and neck.

Our eyes meet, and I notice fear in her gaze, among other things. She's not only young but she's never seen the inside of a room like this in her life.

I doubt she's seen so many men around her, either.

A gray dusty duffel bag lies at her feet next to the chair she sits in with her arms folded over her stomach.

Hugging herself, she holds my eyes.

Next to her is the man who doesn't seem to want to let go of her.

His eyes are swollen, his face is bruised, and his lip is split.

His arms are covered in ragged lines of dirt and dried blood like her knees, and he attempts to smirk at me while tilting his head back in defiance.

He has no idea how lucky he is to still be alive.

Vito notices the direction of my gaze, catches a glimpse of the fucker's grin, and smacks him with the back of his hand.

The man groans.

"What's your name?" I ask, taking off my jacket and draping it over Carmina's shoulders.

She looks up at me, her eyes glinting with disbelief as if she's never had a man in her entire life doing that for her.

My focus moves swiftly to the tattooed man tied to a chair in the middle of the room.

One of the guys walks out and shuts the door behind him.

It's only me, Vito, Louie, and Gianni in the room.

"Name?" I thunder.

The man looks at me like he can't grasp the meaning on my words.

Louie smacks him upside the head, and he reacts, pulling at the ties.

That's all it takes, and the three men in front of me violently push him back, his head lolling from their jabs.

I lift my hand, and they stop.

"He won't talk if his jaw is broken," I say.

Huffing, annoyed, they step back.

“Name, motherfucker,” I say again.

The woman seems frozen in her seat.

Except for the flicker of light in her eyes and the pale pink color across her cheeks, she looks like she’s carved out of cold stone.

Her frame is tense, and her fingers are crooked around the lapels of my jacket. Something about her fingers digging into my expensive suit messes with my focus for a second.

“Yes?” I say, shifting my attention to the man.

“Beau. Beau Anthony.”

The faces of my men go long with surprise before they chuckle.

Slightly more subdued, Gianni grins, amused.

“Beau?”

He nods.

All right.

I won’t hold it against him.

Parents make bigger mistakes than that.

Clearly, they didn’t think their kid would grow up to be an asshole when they picked his name.

“What’s your story, Anthony?”

I can’t make myself say his first name.

Saying his first name while having him in front of me would put a smile on my lips, and that would chip away at my authority.

“No story, man.”

“Don’t fucking *‘man’* me,” I say, and Vito swiftly reaches inside his jacket, swings his arm in Anthony’s direction, and presses a gun to the man’s temple.

“Think carefully before you speak,” he says.

I move closer and flick my chin to Vito, who steps back, his gun still pointed at the man's head.

I'm not in the habit of being uselessly violent in front of women.

Men?

That's a different story.

Carmina?

No.

She's experienced enough, judging by her parted lips and how she shakes.

I signal to Vito to put his gun away.

He gets my message and conceals it inside his jacket.

"Why are you here, Anthony?" I ask. "What is your true connection to this woman?"

"I'm her boyfriend."

A small smile tickles my lips.

"Are you? Really?"

"Yes."

I cross my arms over my chest and pivot slightly to look at her before moving my focus back to him.

"She told me you were her ex. What business do you have with her if you're no longer with her?"

"What business do you have with her?" he retorts.

Vito's fist comes so fast it almost yanks Beau's nose off his face.

The truth is, most people are too stupid to be thugs.

You can tell by how hard it is for them to follow simple instructions like this one.

Blood drips from Beau's nose, and Vito curses, searching for a towel. Cupboards, shelves, and drawers are stocked with all kinds of things, yet he has a hard time finding a towel.

He eventually grabs one and cleans his hand.

It's not like we haven't been through this type of situation in this room with people like Beau Anthony before.

"Look what you've made me do?" Vito mutters, annoyed, swiveling to him and soaking up the blood.

It stops dripping.

"Why is Carmina running away from you, Anthony?" I ask.

"She's not running away from me. She's running away from her old man."

He looks in her direction while she stares at him, horrified.

"That's it?" I ask, moving my eyes to him. "And you came here to patch things up with her?" I say, sarcasm lining my voice.

I grab a chair, spin it around, place it in front of him, and straddle it before resting my elbows on its back and raking my fingers through my hair.

The silence thickens before I move my eyes to the man.

"I'm listening," I say as he suddenly no longer feels like talking, as if it's finally registered with him what is going on.

"As I said before, she said you were her—" I murmur.

"We had a fight," he cuts me off.

"What kind of fight?" I ask, looking at Carmina.

Her eyes flicker with a random thought, but her lips don't move.

I swing my eyes back to him.

"What kind of fight, Anthony?" I ask him.

"There was no fight," she says, her voice quivering with desperation. "We're just no longer together. That's it," she adds as we all focus on her, except for the man in front of me.

"You heard her," I say when I lock Anthony's eyes. "That's one," I add, flicking my index finger up. "Now, let's get to the

other stuff. What did I say to you when we met upstairs today?"

I no longer smile since this is no longer about the woman. It's about him and me.

He stares at me, defiant, ignoring my question.

"You said you were her boyfriend," he says to me, flashing a smirk. "You're not her boyfriend. She's never been with a man."

"Clearly," I say, tilting my chin in his direction. "A real man wouldn't assault his ex-girlfriend and let her live out of her car, not to mention make her have blood on her knees."

"That's a different story."

"Is it?" I say before suddenly pushing to my feet, bending over, locking my hand around his muscular neck, bringing my eyes close to his and uttering words in a menacing voice. "Listen to me, motherfucker. The only reason you are here, and you're still alive," I murmur quietly, "is that *she is still alive*, and I'm trying to figure out what you are to her. Or if you mean anything to her. *Capisci?* Do you understand? I have no problem scattering your remains in the desert. And no one—and I mean no one—would even find a scrape of you. I'm sure no one would mind that you were gone, either. And maybe I'm going out on a limb here... But people would probably dance on your grave if they knew you were gone for good. So don't fuck with me or my patience. You've already taken up too much space in my life. And I've wasted too much time with you. I have better things to do than playing detective with you."

He gasps in my grip before I tear my hand away from him and push him back.

Vito catches him so he doesn't fall backward.

It's a miracle my white shirt is still crisp and not stained.

"Why is it a different story?" I ask, falling back into my seat.

"She has some problems back home."

“With her father.”

“Yes. Her father. He’s an idiot, so she tried to run away from him.”

I glance at Carmina over my shoulder.

“Is that true?”

She says nothing, looking like a scaredy cat. She would leap out of the room if she had the chance.

I gaze at him again.

“And you’re helping her by roughing her up?” I say.

“I didn’t want to rough her up, but seeing her dressed like a whore in a hotel made me lose my temper. The woman is fucking mine...”

I lift an eyebrow, a satisfied grin tugging at my lips as if he’s just given me another reason not to let him walk out of this room alive.

“Okay. Maybe she’s yours now,” he corrects himself, “but that doesn’t change my past with her. “I’ve tended to her sweet ass the entire summer, and nothing happened in the end. She didn’t put out,” he says. “Maybe you’ll have better luck with her.”

He doesn’t believe that.

He doesn’t care whether I’ll have luck with her or not.

He’d slice my chest open if he had the chance.

“No way,” I say, amused, fooling him for a moment.

He either thinks my acting is that good, or he stupidly believes I’m siding with him.

And then my glare catches his eye, and he goes mum.

“This strange moment of sincerity on your part moves me to tears,” I say coldly. “Where did you learn to treat a woman like that? You’re forcing yourself onto her? Is that what you do?” I snark, darkly amused, looking at my men. “My evening just got better now that we have found this piece of shit. He’s the gift that keeps on giving.”

They share a peal of laughter.

“I wouldn’t laugh if I were you,” the little shit says, and the room goes quiet as if a wet blanket just fell over a fire.

My men tense up, and their eyes go to me as they’re waiting for my signal.

“What was that again?” I shoot at him.

“You heard me.”

He holds my gaze, and I lift my eyebrows in response.

“Get her out of the room,” I say, not looking at her before Louie spins around and grabs her.

“I don’t want to leave,” she says.

I flick my eyes to her.

“It’s not optional,” I retort.

“You don’t have to kill him because of me. I’ll do anything you want me to do. Just don’t kill him.”

The men in the room move their eyes from her to me.

“What would you like me to do with him, darling?”

She shrugs, not a tear glinting in her eyes, and I find her determination astounding.

I look back at Anthony.

“Do you realize how much better than you she is, you stupid fuck? Unlike you, she has a good heart. She’s concerned even with someone like you. It fucking blows my mind...” I say ironically before shooting him a stern look. “This is your second strike, dickhead. And don’t think for a second that there will be a third one. If we get there, nothing, and no one—not even her— can save your life.”

I rise from my seat and push the chair to the side.

“What do you want me to do with him, Carmina?”

She stares at me.

“What are my options?”

I ponder while everybody in the room is tense and quiet.

“He could go home. Alive... Sort of. Or he could spend the night in the desert.”

“Is that an option?”

“It sure is. The trunk of the car he has traveled in is an option, too.”

Vito is about to protest.

Yeah, yeah...I know how much he fusses about his car.

I grab Anthony’s hair and turn his face to her.

“Apologize to her first.”

He looks at me, sincerely baffled.

“For what?”

“Oh. *Vaffanculo—fuck you*. You can’t be that stupid. Are you that stupid? Huh? Are you?” I shoot at him, slapping his head.

“I could apologize, but do you think she’ll understand? She’s only a kid. I’ve always had to dumb down my conversation so I can talk to her.”

Carmina’s eyes widen in disbelief.

“What? How can you say that, you fucking jerk?” she lashes at him, earning chuckles from everyone in the room except me. “You had to dumb down your conversation?? How about me? I had to listen to your nonsense the entire summer. Fucking jerk.”

She’s so damn cute when she’s angry, but I need to focus on the man in front of me who is about to say something else.

My hand goes up fast, and he turns to stone.

“So you’re saying she’s good for fucking, yet she’s too stupid to hold a conversation...?” I toss at him, getting to a point with him where him getting out of here alive is highly unlikely.

And then a sharp voice tears into the silence.

“You fucking piece of shit,” Carmina says, leaping out of her seat, her eyes shooting flames, her lips trembling, her hands balled up.

Before I can do anything to stop her, she lunges at Anthony, and I bet the fucker hasn’t counted on her doing that.

A shower of fists falls over his face, and expletives shoot from her lips while he laughs like an idiot.

My jacket slides to the floor as she sinks her fists into his face.

I loop my arm around her waist and pull her back into my chest while she kicks him with her legs, oblivious to anything around her.

These vile emotions must’ve been bottled up for some time.

Her fury is so visceral and raw her chest heaves and her skin burns, and I have to turn her around and lock her in my arms to make her stop.

Shame glints in her eyes before she presses her brow against my chest and begins sobbing, which is a whole lot of things wrapped into one.

Maybe she’s upset with her stalker, her family situation, or the lack of money.

Whatever it is, I press my hand on the back of her head and shush her quietly.

By now, Vito has the man out of the chair and his gun connected to his head again.

Regardless of how I’d like this evening to play out, we constantly get to the point where his life hangs by a thread.

Him staying alive is seemingly not in the cards.

With my hand splayed over the back of her hair, I wait for her to quiet down.

Within seconds, she straightens her back and tears away from me, her gaze tilted down.

I lift her chin and look into her eyes.

Her sadness is bigger than the Hayford Peak, her tears looking like diamonds on her face.

I run my thumbs under her eyes and brush her hair away, revealing her face.

I'm gentle with her, and while there's nothing sexual in my gesture, this is more than me doing a good deed.

She reminds me of that Sicilian girl I met when I was a boy. They very much look the same.

But this is also more than her reminding me of someone else.

Aside from being a stunner, she seems misplaced, not belonging.

What is this woman doing here?

Really, now?

I've seen girls like her before.

They come here often.

Some are on vacation with their families or travel with friends.

Sometimes, they have their boyfriends with them.

Or their husbands.

Some girls are looking for work. Not all of them want to work in hospitality, but some do. Cleaning the rooms, working in the kitchen, and serving at the bar.

There's nothing wrong with that.

And then there are the ones looking for shortcuts.

They want to make money dancing for the clients.

No one is forcing them to do that.

Some even enjoy that kind of life. They find pleasure in it, and the money is rewarding.

But the woman standing next to me is different than the others.

She wouldn't be here on vacation, gambling in a casino, shaking her butt for cash, or sucking someone's cock for a nice designer dress.

Her so-called ex just ratted her out that she wasn't into sex.

Maybe she wasn't into sex with him, and looking at him... Can I really blame her for that?

I still don't understand how these two have gotten together, to begin with.

They have nothing in common.

That he maybe was misguided and wanted to fuck her... I can see that. The little head doesn't always make sense, but what was she doing hanging out with him?

They couldn't be more different, yet here they are, stranded in my hotel while it's bestowed upon me to impart some justice.

"Gianni?" I mutter.

He looks at me.

"Find a room for Carmina. She's staying here tonight. And make sure no one enters her room. Other than maybe the housekeeper or the server who brings her food."

I turn to her.

"You go with him. No one will put a finger on you, all right? And tomorrow morning, you go to that interview."

She nods twice.

"I don't have any money on me," she says quietly, only for me to hear.

"I didn't expect you to, baby. We'll take care of that later. All right?"

She nods her head again.

"Good," I say in a different voice as Gianni collects her duffel bag. "Call someone to clean her wounds," I say. "A

woman,” I add. “No man touches her under my watch.”

“Okay, Boss,” Gianni says through locked teeth, not a muscle moving on his face.

Reluctantly, she pulls away from me, not knowing what to say. Eventually, she swivels away before stopping and looking at me again.

“Thank you,” she murmurs.

“You’re welcome,” I say, rolling up my sleeves.

We all peer at the door as she steps out, silent like a ghost. All except for Beau Anthony.

When I bring my eyes to him, he’s pale and cold like the wall.

“Now, let’s go back to what you said moments ago. Who the fuck do you think you are to threaten me?”

I flick my gaze to Vito.

“Untie him. I don’t want to hit him while he’s tied up.”

C ARMINA

THE RUG LINING the floor muffles the clicking of my heels as we make the trip to what I believe to be the lobby.

The man assigned to take care of me doesn't spare a glance in my direction.

He only shows me the way as we navigate an intricate maze of hallways separated by thick doors.

At some point, we are deep in the dimly lit underbelly of the hotel, and I clench my jaw to prevent my teeth from chattering.

So many things have shaken me to the core and put a strain on my body.

What happened to Beau. The men who came to my rescue and our trip to that room, where I frankly didn't know what to believe.

I didn't know what to expect.

I thought they'd leave us there—Beau and me—and maybe deal with us in the morning.

The prospect of being with Beau in the same room scared the shit out of me.

I didn't know how much longer I could rely on these people to create a buffer between Beau and me.

I honestly think the more moments like this Beau and I will have, the more vengeful he will become.

He can't wait to get his hands on me and make me pay for the humiliation I have put him through.

I don't even know how to do this at this point.

Even if I get the job—and I need to get that job—Beau knows I'm here. And I'm sure he'll tell my father.

I'm surprised he hasn't done it already.

Maybe because they didn't see eye to eye, and my father never cared much about him. Or knew a lot about him.

Beau Anthony was a friend of mine as far as my father was concerned, one he couldn't stand because he couldn't accept anything that had to do with my life outside our home.

And Beau knew little about my real life, although he knew enough to run his mouth in front of Damaso.

I felt so humiliated when he talked about my personal life in public. And then... To add insult to injury, he had to say that stupid shit in the end.

He dumbed down his conversation? Really??

He's dumb as a rock.

Yes, he's a thug and sly enough to have that going for him, but other than that, the man has the sophistication of a box of rocks.

I so regret getting involved with him, especially now that he's messing with me, ruining my efforts to fix my life and Tina's.

What a piece of deplorable shit.

We enter the lobby, and the man accompanying me makes a beeline for the concierge desk while keeping an eye on me.

He talks to the girl behind the desk, and she makes a few phone calls, her eyes occasionally flying to me.

My resolve dissolves as I realize I'm tired, hungry, and ashamed that my knees are scratched and dirty. I purposefully face the concierge so no guest can get a glimpse of my marred legs.

Patiently waiting, I mull over this mess that takes a psychological toll on me and ponder ways to keep Beau Anthony away from me and Tina.

And us safe from my father.

He'll be a huge problem when he finds out where I am and what I'm about to do.

Maybe this was a stupid plan to begin with.

Maybe leaving Tina at home was not as smart as I thought.

How can a twelve-year-old fend for herself? And how could I fool myself into believing that Stella would protect her from my father?

These dickheads only get more irritated when things don't go their way.

Look at Beau '*Dick*' Anthony.

The man is unrelenting.

Hopefully, I'll get that job, and I won't leave this hotel until I make some money, fix my car, and only return to LA to pick up my sister.

My plan is questionable at best and quite childish—I'll be the first to admit—but it's the best I've got.

"Let's go," the man says, spinning away from the concierge desk and showing me to a different part of the hotel.

I'm grateful we're moving away from the busy lobby. The more we walk, the more peaceful and beautiful the place becomes.

I can't wait to lie in bed after I take a shower.

The thought gives me a small boost of energy, but I keep quiet, following the man to the elevator.

Two levels up, the car stops, and the doors open.

He points to a corridor, and moments later, we halt in front of a door, and he opens it for me.

“Your room,” he says, inviting me in.

I stroll in without the slightest hesitation.

“A man will guard the elevator at all times. He’s there for your protection. No one can access your room without walking past him. For all your needs, you use this phone,” he says, pointing to the landline phone on the nightstand. “You have all the phone numbers you need next to it.”

He picks up a small card and shows it to me before dropping it back in place.

“That’s it,” he says. “Questions?”

“No questions. Thank you.”

“Good,” he says.

He doesn’t waste much time before spinning around and heading to the exit.

And then he stops and turns around.

“Everything you need is in there,” he says, gesturing at the bathroom. “I’ll send someone to take care of your knees. A woman.”

Under any other circumstances, his words might’ve been tinged with humor, but not tonight, not here, and for sure not coming from him.

The man doesn’t smile and only looks at me like I’m someone he needs to take care of.

“Thank you,” I say.

He nods and walks away.

Moments later, he vanishes out the door, and I set myself in motion, go there, and lock it—out of reflex, if nothing else—before turning around and finally inspecting the room.

My first trip is to the wall of windows.

Oh, how beautiful this is. I have a balcony. A balcony? I can’t believe it. I open the door and walk outside.

My heels echo against the concrete, highlighting the quiet evening. Despite the chaos swirling in the city not far from me, the night is silent up here.

The view showcases the mountains' outline, the glowing lights of the city, and the stars looking like dust across the sky.

It's not like I've never seen a starry sky before, but not from the balcony of a hotel.

The lights adorning the balustrade are so pretty.

I've always liked the strings of lights bringing out the magic of a place in the evenings.

I liked them even when I worked at the restaurant.

And then I remember Tina loves them too, like so many other insignificant things.

I wish I could hear her voice.

I wish I could have her here right now.

All the precautions taken don't mean that much right now.

All my efforts were for nothing.

I was so paranoid about this trip that I didn't want Tina to use my phone. My old phone. The one I'd used for everyday business.

I canceled my phone service and disposed of my phone before I bought the burner.

I thought it would protect her because my father wouldn't be able to make the connection between my absence and her.

The good it did.

I'll need to come up with something different in the future.

But still, I don't want to put her in harm's way, no matter how much I want to communicate with her directly.

Downcast, I spin around, stride inside, and grab my bag.

I don't have many spare clothes with me, but even so, I want to get out of my dress and put something on that is more comfortable.

With that thought in mind, I move quickly.

I order food, go to the bathroom, remove my dress and shoes, and shower.

The smell of shampoo fills the large bathroom while condensation drips down the glass booth.

I wash my hair and spend a few minutes blow drying it before digging into the drawers and pulling out a few little things for my face and my body.

Creams and lotions and makeup cleaning oil.

I've rarely used stuff like this at home.

When all is said and done, I smell like fresh raspberries, and my hair is warm, heavy, and shiny, sliding over my back.

My knees look bad, though.

No matter how gently I've cleaned them with only soap and water, the abrasions are still red and painful.

Someone knocks on the door, so I shrug a plush bathrobe on and dash to the exit.

It's the woman tasked with checking my legs for cuts.

She quickly notices my knees as I sit on the edge of the bed. They seem redder now after taking the shower.

She asks no questions as she inspects them.

She makes sure I have removed all the dirt before applying a topical antibiotic ointment and covering them with wound dressings.

She gives me extra bandages and a topical ointment and walks out of the room a few moments later, right after the food arrives.

I've got everything I ordered.

Macaroni and cheese, a large burger, fries, and apple pie.

I indulge in the baked apples' sweet and sour flavor, staring out the window and completely forgetting about my legs.

It's a nice place.

And just like that, Las Vegas is no longer the annoying cousin of LA, and it's more like that good aunt who feeds you well when you stop by her place.

And also has a nice bed for you.

Speaking of a nice bed...

Chewing, I gaze over the king bed, plump pillows, carved headboard, and smooth sheets.

One day, I'll have a bed just like that.

Something you always want to sleep in, not only when you're home coming from work and you're exhausted but also on a Sunday afternoon or a Saturday morning when you can't wait to take a nap.

When the blinds are closed, yet not closed enough not to let in the sun. And you wrap your body in cold, crisp sheets, feeling guilty, although not entirely, that you're in a relationship with your bed while other people are out and about, doing things outside their homes.

Hmm...

I find myself smiling as I imagine that sweet life and the moments when I'd sleep just because it felt good and the bed was so soft and comfortable I couldn't resist the idea.

I swallow the last piece of pie, clean up the table, and dispose of the boxes before going to the bathroom and brushing my teeth.

Later, I come back and ponder whether to put on my sweatpants. I decide against it since they're not clean.

I remember that my dress is not clean either, and I check out the phone numbers on my little card to see if they offer cleaning services.

They do.

I call the number despite being late, and they answer right away. They assure me my dress and everything else would be ready for me in the morning.

Minutes later, a man picks up my clothes. I thank him and close the door before making a beeline to the bed.

I'm spent.

Half smiling, I crash on the bed, face down, my arms spread over the nice-smelling covers, and I close my eyes.

It smells so good. And I'm so tired. *So tired...* A quiet voice repeats in my head. I'm almost at the point of falling asleep, even thinking I have already had a wink of sleep, when a firm knock on the door pushes me back to reality.

I jerk up and glance over my shoulder, my heart beating in my throat.

Who the fuck is this?

I haven't asked for anyone else.

D AMASO

EARLIER

“I KNOW who the fuck you are,” Beau mumbles through his swollen, blood-stained lips.

“Then why the fuck are you here?”

“I’m not dealing if that’s what bothers you,” he says, desperation beaming in his voice.

“Color me unimpressed. I don’t care whether you’re dealing or not. You won’t fuck with my women or threaten me. You’re lucky you’re still alive—I’ve told you that already. But your luck won’t last forever. Do you know why people like you never work for me? Because they can’t get anything done. They always get caught up in some shit. Like you, motherfucker,” I say, washing my hands in the sink and rolling my sleeves down.

He’s wrapped in towels as Vito is still very much concerned with the floors more than anything else.

“What do you want me to do with him, Boss?”

Drying my hands with a towel, I ponder.

“Clear the fucking van of those losers and put him in. Let him contemplate his life for a while, then send him home.”

I drop the towel on the edge of the sink before moving closer to him and picking up my jacket from the floor.

I inspect it and put it on.

“Listen to me carefully. I don’t care whether you’re some gang member. I don’t care whether you’re a small-time crook or Joe Lizard’s right-hand man. You stay out of my face. And don’t think for a second he will start a war because I’ve made you disappear. He’s not stupid. He has no business being here. And you, on the other hand, have nothing to do with Carmina Leto. Get it into your head. Do you understand?”

He peeks at me through his good eye. The one that is not swollen.

“Her father will come looking for her,” he says. “You can’t keep that woman. She’s trouble. Besides, you don’t want that kind of attention from the police or the FBI. The man is nuts, and you have no idea how much noise he can make when he’s drunk or high. I did my research. I know what kind of man he is.”

I crack a smile while making sure my suit jacket sits right.

“Let me give you a piece of advice, Anthony. Try not to stick your nose into other people’s business. It doesn’t serve you well, as you can see. Well, you can’t see. So never mind. Just forget about her and where she is. If I get word you didn’t keep it to yourself and you ran your mouth about her and her whereabouts, I’ll put you out myself. And when it comes to her father, I can’t wait to have a word with him, too, if he has nothing better to do than show up at my door.”

With that, I gesture at my men to take him out of the room.

Shortly after, the cleaning crew comes in. The real cleaners.

I leave the room before they start working and head straight upstairs. The club manager, the one Carmina has had an interview with, runs into me and wants to talk to me.

I tell him I don't have time for him and also remind him he has an interview tomorrow morning.

On second thought, I turn around, call his name, and give him instructions about tomorrow morning.

He flicks his chin in acknowledgment, and I head straight to the elevator. No matter how clean my clothes seem, they still stink of blood and violence. Or so I think.

So I go way up to my suite and shed my clothes as soon as I enter my place. I shower, run a towel over my body, and head to the walk-in closet.

It's too early to call it a night.

Most nights, this is when I get out.

So I select a different suit, a new shirt, shoes, and boxers.

Content with how I look, I run my fingers over my jaw before my eyes go to my watch.

It's late, but not that late, so I exit my place and go to Carmina's room, telling myself it's to make sure she's okay.

Something I've never done in my life. Not since I lost that girl in Italy. Or what I thought it was my girl.

And that should be a sign to me that this is something new to me and she is different than the others.

This isn't about making sure she's getting a good night's sleep, tasty food, and a job tomorrow morning.

This isn't even about making sure she won't lose her life or get in trouble with her ex.

Or her father.

This is about reliving something I'd lost many years ago and wanting to know if it was possible to relive that thing again.



CARMINA

I TIPTOE my way to the door and press my ear against it.

There's no use for that as I can't hear a thing.

"Who is it?" I ask.

"It's me."

His voice has become familiar to me.

It's like I've lived his low, raspy tone in my ears for a while now.

I can't say I'm not nervous.

I struggle to tie my belt and pull my bathrobe over my collarbones.

I'm as nervous as I can be, and there's fear in my bones.

It has to do with life pulling the rug from under my feet too damn often and leaving me holding the short end of the stick more times than I can count.

I haven't learned many lessons in my life, but I've nailed one. I know not to trust anyone. People are eager to help you one day, and then they turn against you the next.

What if it's the same with him?

Let me be clear here.

No one is fooling anyone.

I've seen enough things until now. How they operate, picked me up, and interrogated Beau. Everybody in that room had something in common. They were all villains.

Yes, Damaso and his crew wear suits and behave when they need to, but just because their clothes are high end and the cologne they spritz on their necks is expensive doesn't mean they're not as bad if not worse than Beau Anthony.

My belief that you need a more vicious predator to deal with a predator has just been confirmed.

It works despite coming with undesirable consequences.

It's why I'm alive and not tucked in Beau's car.

It's also why I'm scared. Predators are predators for a reason. They need to feed themselves. All the fucking time. And I'm as juicy as they come. Small, young, vulnerable, inexperienced, and dependent.

I depend on other people's goodwill to survive.

And sometimes, like now, I might just reap the benefits of being targeted by different parties.

But then I might just need to pay a price.

So I'm a little scared when I unlock the door, crack it open, and look through the small opening like he's there to deliver something.

Words of encouragement, news, or a surprise.

Good thinking, Car.

A surprise. Sure. Why not? Pff.

"Yes," I say, hiding behind the door.

He's changed his clothes. How do I know? They look fresh, not that the others looked bad, but he has that air about himself like he's about to go out and meet someone. A woman, perhaps.

I don't think that woman is me.

My eyes slip a little as it's impossible not to notice how good he looks.

He's a ten—through and through.

I don't know what ten means, but I bet it looks like him.

His eyes glint in the dimness, and despite the faint light, they discreetly move over my face.

He's never looked at me that way—like I'm interesting.

How many people have found me interesting? In that way?

None.

Beau wants me for himself the way he wants his bacon. Fresh, crisp, and quickly in his belly.

He doesn't give a damn about me as a person.

"Is the room fine?" he asks, and his casual question sends a signal to my brain that I'm utterly impolite, forgetting I'm here, in this five-star hotel, living like a princess, because of him.

Had he not offered me shelter, food, and the possibility to shower, I would've slept in my car and woken up with my face all wrinkled and my skin smelling like overheated plastic.

And that's the better scenario in my head.

Had Beau snatched me up, I would've been bloodied—perhaps to death—hungry and folded into a pretzel in his car on my way to LA.

"I love it," I say quietly, as if people outside the door listen to our conversation.

I step back a little and open the door wider.

"I was about to go to sleep since I have an early morning appointment, but... Would you like to come in for a moment?" I ask as if it's my place, not his.

"Sure."

To say I'm overwhelmed is like saying I'm in Vegas.

It goes without saying.

It's not like I'm not used to people. I've worked as a waitress, not for long, but long enough to get used to reading people, ignoring their bad jokes, and not minding their quirks.

But this man?

Depending on the situation and time of the day, he knocks the air out of my lungs without the slightest effort.

And this is one of those situations.

He walks in while I furtively hyperventilate, trying not to clue him in on how affected I am.

After spending those intense moments downstairs... With me losing it, and him holding me in his arms and letting me sob against his chest, where I could've stayed forever.

And now being here only with him?

This is a huge adjustment for me.

I don't want to talk about what happened downstairs. In fact, I hope he has forgotten about that. Although, why else would he be here if not to check on me?

The moment is awkward.

Should I ask him if Beau is still alive?

It wouldn't serve me well to know what happened after I left. I'd already witnessed too much.

"It's a beautiful view," I say, sliding onto the bed and pointing to the window, although he can't see me gesturing since he edges closer to the wall of windows and glances outside.

"It is, isn't it?" he murmurs contemplatively as if he's personally picked the view along with everything else in this hotel.

"Have you lived here for long?" I ask, stiff as I try to find a position, relax, and not get muscular cramps.

"Not that long," he says, sounding like he's not eager to share more information.

It doesn't matter.

I'm only making conversation, anyway.

"How are your knees?" he asks, pivoting to me and undoing his jacket before sliding his hands into his pockets.

"They're good."

I flick my bathrobe open above my thighs to show him the bandages.

"They hurt," I murmur.

"They'll get better," he says as if he is in the health and wellness business.

"Yes. probably."

I sound hesitant because I am, suddenly remembering my dress is too short to cover the marks on my knees, and I need to wear it in the morning at my job interview.

“What happened?” he asks, noticing the change in my voice.

I gesture as if it’s nothing without looking at him.

“It’s about my dress. It would expose my knees.”

Why am I telling him all this?

“You’ll get a new set of clothes. Don’t worry about that.”

I shift my gaze to him, not knowing how to respond to that.

“Thank you,” I finally say.

He muses over something before he speaks again.

“About your father’s situation—”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I say curtly, interrupting him yet doing it in a soft voice.

The stern expression on his face suggests he’s genuinely interested in what’s going on in my life.

I shake inside.

“I can’t go back without some money.”

A frown mars his brow while he removes his hands from his pockets and crosses his arms over his chest.

He tilts his chin down, his jaw locked.

“Do you need to make money for your father?”

I shake my head.

“No. I need to get away from him.”

“Okay,” he says softly and more relaxed, although that’s always relative with him.

I don’t know him that well to tell for sure.

“I can’t say more than that,” I mutter in a quivering voice.
“It’s important to get that job. That’s all I can say.”

He uncrosses his arms and straightens as if getting ready to leave while I suck in a long, tense breath.

“All right,” he says, appearing to be set on walking out when I speak again.

“Are you working?” I ask.

He swings his gaze to me.

“Are you working now?” I ask, suspecting that he is.

He could also be on his way to a different hotel room where he might fuck someone.

I don't know what makes me think I'm an expert in reading Damaso Salla's expressions.

I guess trying to avoid dangerous situations with my father has sharpened my perception.

It's a survival mechanism, I suspect. Trying to stay alive and telling the bad guys from the good guys.

I'm not an expert, but I rely on my budding intuition.

He doesn't answer.

Or maybe he's looking for an answer.

“Would you mind staying with me a little longer?” I ask in a wavering voice. “I have a hard time falling asleep.”

And that's the truth.

These past twenty-four hours have been a rollercoaster. A race for survival. I've been up, and I've been down.

I thought I could fall asleep and rest, but now I'm back to being on high alert. And I'm more alert than I've ever been.

And truth be told, I want to sleep, not toss and turn the entire night. Him staying with me a little longer might ease my anxiety. That's all I need. A tiny break.

Someone with me in the room.

Someone who doesn't ignore me or assault me.

Who would've thought he might be that person?

“Just sit with me for a few more moments,” I say, pushing to my feet and rolling the covers to the side so I can tuck myself in.

I get in bed without waiting for his answer or removing my bathrobe.

My head hits the pillow while he looks at the chairs in the room.

Eventually, he removes his jacket, drapes it over the back of a chair, and lies beside me in bed.

Unlike me, he lies on top of the covers.

His shoulders meet the headboard while a pillow offers his back some support.

He sits upright and undoes another button at the top of his neckline before propping his head against the headboard and closing his eyes as if wanting to unwind.

I stare at him for a few moments, still mesmerized by how handsome he is and what an unlike friendship we have struck.

If we can call it that.

It’s more like an alliance.

Not even that.

We’re like two passengers on a train, sitting next to each other and traveling together for a while.

We don’t mind each other, although in our case, the things connecting us run deeper than that.

I roll onto my other side so I have my back turned to him and I’m not distracted by his presence, and then I notice the rustling of his clothes as he moves his hand and threads his fingers through my hair. He doesn’t move them.

He just rests his hand on the back of my head, creating trust.

That’s how it feels.

Whatever he’s giving me makes me feel at peace. And I no longer feel like a runaway. I’m only someone who is about to

fall asleep.

And that does it for me.

Within seconds, my eyes feel heavy, and my heartbeats slow down. My breaths roll slowly in and out of my lungs.

And just like that, I'm gone, falling into the deepest sleep and resting like I have never rested before.

C ARMINA

THE MORNING COULDN'T BE MORE different than last night.

The phone starts ringing, the noise drilling into my brain. It's a courtesy call from the concierge, and I shoot up and glance at the digital clock on the nightstand.

It's 7:AM sharp.

In all fairness, I've asked them to call me and wake me because I didn't want to risk sleeping in.

So I thank the woman, crash back, and roll over, enjoying a few more moments of peace.

My cheek is pressed into the pillow as I lie on my stomach with my eyes closed. Before long, the memory of last night comes to me in vivid colors.

I push my head up at once and look at the other side of the bed.

The pillow is propped up where he leaned against it, and the covers are creased where he sat.

Damaso Salla.

He stayed with me last night. And those few moments we had had before I fell asleep were some of the best in my life.

I can't think for long about that special feeling when someone knocks on the door.

Oh, my clothes. The concierge woman has said something about that.

I roll off the bed, fixing my bathrobe.

"I'm coming," I say, sprinting to the door and realizing my bandages barely dangle from my knees.

I rip them off and tuck them in my pocket before I open the door.

A man and a rack of clothes await me.

He wears a uniform and greets me before dipping his gaze to my body and estimating my measurements.

"Pants or skirt?"

"Uh... Skirt?"

"You're not sure?"

"How long is it?"

"It hits below the knee," he says, picking up a black pencil skirt with a short metallic zipper and a kick pleat at the back.

He picks up a skirt hanger and shows it to me before holding it against my body.

"It fits me. I'm smaller under this robe," I murmur.

"I thought so," he says. "I'll leave them both. You'll probably wear them anyway. These are your uniforms."

'Uniforms for what?' I wonder, but I don't ask anything.

"You'll get more clothes if you get hired," he says, picking up two crisp cotton shirts, both white with a nice embroidered logo on the chest, and a pair of fancy tailored pants with a belt.

He puts them in my arms.

"Shoes?"

"I have shoes. Well..."

I check the fine quality of my clothes.

My heels may have paired well with that dress because I had a different kind of interview in mind, but my shoes look cheap now, like my dress, and don't quite work with the clothes he's handed me.

"What's wrong with your shoes?" he asks.

"They don't match these," I say, pointing to my clothes.

"Here," he says, bending at the waist and checking the shoe boxes. "What are you? An eight? Seven?"

He pushes upright, holding a shoe box in each hand.

"Seven and a half."

"Okay."

He picks up a different box and hands it to me.

"This is what you need. And, um... Good luck with your job interview," he says.

We struggle to connect hands.

He moves around the rack while I drape my outfits over my arm.

We manage to shake hands, and he gives me a friendly smile.

I thank him and return to my room.

'My room.'

The sound of it makes me smile. I wish I could spend another night in this room.

And that bed? Mmm. That was the best I had.

And the man? No comment.

I can't talk about that man. He's powerful, handsome, and brutal when he needs to.

He is so kind to me, though.

For now. Remember what I just said. Never trust anyone.

Still smiling, I set my clothes on the chair and make my bed.

It's a beautiful sunny day outside, and I can't wait to get to that interview. Later, I'll need to figure out what to do with my car, but for now, I'll focus on getting a new job.

A better-paying job.



CARMINA

“SERVER?? ARE YOU SURE?” I ask, unable to stifle my surprise.

Is this all I'm getting after all the shit I've been through?

I've almost gotten myself killed for this??

To work as a server?

Didn't I just quit a job like that?

The man in front of me studies my face for the fifteenth time. And no, he's not studying my expression.

He simply can't take his eyes away from me. I don't know what I've done or if I've done anything to have him so interested in me.

Other than brushing my hair, putting some product in it, and amateurishly styling it.

I'm trying to look my best, with my hair bouncing down my back and my eyes highlighted by mascara and dark eyeliner.

I put on some makeup and did my hair, but I didn't expect to stop the traffic with my appearance.

He likes what he sees and tries to be as professional as he can be, not crossing the line, but he is still very much obsessed with my face.

I wonder if I could have the same effect on everyone else.

But back to being a waitress. Again. I have nothing against serving food.

I've done it already, and it's my work experience—so far—but I have hoped for something different.

Something with bigger tips.

“Is there a problem?” he asks while concern gnaws at my edges.

“No. No problem. How many hours can I work?”

If nothing else, I'll work longer hours.

“It's not so much about the hours. You're on call and cater to our VIP guests. The pay is good, and they are excellent tippers.”

“How good?” I ask, having a feeling I might be wrong and this job might be the lifeline that I need.

He peels off a sticky note and writes down a number.

I glance at it and try to read it when he folds the piece of paper and slides it across his desk.

I pick it up, unfold it, and look at it. And then I lower it in my lap and peer down, so he can't see my expression.

Eventually, I tilt my head and stare at him.

“Two hundred fifty dollars a day, no matter how many hours I work?”

He tips his chin down in response.

“Yes. And anything extra is on top of that. You can make between five hundred and a thousand per event. It won't be every day. But essentially, yes. That's how much you can make.”

I stare at him, frozen, unable to move my lips and speak, and he uses the opportunity to study my face again.

I don't mind him, honestly, as thoughts spin at light speed in my head. I could surely save some money and get Tina away from my father.

What am I saying? We could move out of LA for good.

But I know... Oh, I know that once I have made that kind of money and it's everything that I need, I won't work here anymore.

It's just that simple.

Maybe Tina and I will have to use fake names. Who knows what else?

Maybe there are some ways to become her legal guardian.

But I know how these things work. They're never a done deal, and you can never tell whether you win in the end or not.

And honestly, we've been through so much that spending another day, week, or month legally fighting my father and experiencing that stress is not worth it.

She's already been robbed of her childhood, and the last ten years have also been horrible for me.

We need to live like normal people do.

Feel safe in our homes.

Decorate our place for Halloween.

Even get a dog or a cat.

And have friends.

She can't even have friends of her own age.

So, yes. It will be a bold move, and I need all the money that I can get.

"You can use the room you have right now," he continues, just as I start thinking about a new place to live. "The costs will be deducted from your pay."

"How much is it?"

"You're getting an employee discount, so it's about the same as it would be if you rented an apartment. Plus, you're getting all the amenities and perks that come with it. The food, gym, and pool are all included."

Pool?

Do I get to go to the pool?

This surpasses my expectations.

Plus, I won't need a car for a while, and that will also put some money into my pocket.

I'll do anything to earn that kind of cash.

Speaking of that.

"Is there anything in particular that the VIP guests need?" I murmur.

Let's be honest... I was ready to do anything when I came here—I was that desperate—but now that I'm here, and this seems such a great opportunity, I'd rather not be dancing naked for a client if I could.

He slides his pen inside his jacket and gives me a small smile.

"These clients always want special things. That's a given. They want to be pampered and feel powerful. These ones, in particular, like to enjoy life in every aspect of it. You won't take care of those needs," he says, and I surreptitiously let out a sigh of relief. "Okay," he says, pushing his chair back and rising to his feet. We have a training session today at ten. That's an hour from now," he says, checking his watch. "Someone will be with you shortly to give you the paperwork you need to fill out. Oh... There's also a non-disclosure agreement you need to sign. It's standard for all the employees. Other than that, welcome on board," he says before shaking hands with me.

Moments later, he walks out of the office while a woman saunters in.

She asks me if I want coffee or water.

I say no to both.

I haven't had breakfast because I was too nervous to put anything into my mouth this morning, and this won't do much for me.

Then, she goes over the paperwork with me.

I still can't believe that this is happening to me.

D AMASO

LATER THAT DAY

I ROUND the corner and enter the largest gambling room in the back of the casino.

The place is packed, the crowd is loud, and the money flows. I signal to Vito to follow me, and we walk down the corridor and enter one of the chambers.

My eyes fly to the screens.

“How many do we have?”

He crashes into a chair while I round the desk, claim my own seat, and check out the livestreams.

“About twenty.”

I lift my eyes and lock his gaze.

“Any problems so far?” I ask.

“No. They behave. Boris will be here tonight.”

It’s not the first time the Russians have paid us a visit.

We don’t mix business with pleasure and mostly cut deals and try to get along.

I don't mind them in my casino.

They are big spenders and like our women.

They are too flashy for my taste, but I don't care about that part and have no problem taking their money.

The business we discuss has mostly to do with staying out of each other's territories. Once in a while, some clean-up is needed in the aftermath of a mafia war.

As I said before, we tolerate each other for the common good, but I won't be in business with them any time soon.

I don't trust these motherfuckers. So now they are here, spending money and being obnoxious and loud.

I don't know what their end game is. All I know is that we have some meetings lined up, and one of them is with Boris, their boss.

I suck in a long breath and lean back in my chair.

It groans under my weight.

"I don't want any shootout matches tonight, so pay attention to the people entering the casino. This isn't only about the Russians. It's also about who they're talking to. Have the back rooms ready with plenty of drinks and exotic dancers. I need them to unwind while I talk to Boris."

Boris and I have met several times before.

We aren't fond of each other, but that has little significance.

My uncle asked me to put him away.

Not *'away'* away—the way I'd prefer—but just make him go away.

I know Boris wants a slice of Vegas. Who wouldn't?

It won't happen, but these are still difficult circumstances. No one wants to be in business with them.

I know he's poking the bear, trying to get a reaction from me, and leveraging his position when negotiating with me.

“Everything is ready,” he says, and I shift my eyes back to the screens.

The servers bring cocktails to the tables, and my mind drifts away.

“How’s our lover boy?” I murmur, not looking at him.

“He’s been released into the wild,” Vito says, amused. “The others have been picked up and released too.”

I flick my gaze to him.

“Did they get the message?”

“The nerds? Maybe. I’m not sure about the stalker.”

“He won’t stalk her anymore.”

“That’s for sure. But he has a thick skull, and things are personal now because of you and that girl.”

I notice the nuance in his voice.

“What about me and that girl?”

Vito flashes a knowing smile while I grin, entertained.

“Come on, Boss. We’ve all seen her wrap her arms around your body.”

I breathe a chuckle.

“The woman was scared. You would’ve been too had you been in her shoes.”

He laughs.

“I’d never do that. You know that. Besides... How many women have done that lately, anyway?”

“Shut up. It’s not your business who wraps what around me.”

“I wasn’t talking about their lips,” he says, and we find it amusing, so we both chuckle.

“Speaking of that... Gianni has told me you chatted with that woman again,” I say.

He makes a dismissive gesture.

“I’m so sick of her,” he mutters, anger flashing through his voice.

“That’s not what he said.”

He shakes his head, his eyes going down.

“He also said you were using a new phone,” I drone on, sounding serious this time because I am.

He lifts his gaze and searches my eyes, trying to determine whether I’m mad or not.

They know how I am when I’m mad.

I’m not like other people.

I won’t throw a fit or bark since I’ve perfected the art of putting people on notice by using my normal voice and asking questions like now.

This is more effective than yelling at people.

He knows I have a good reason to be mad with him. He is aware of how set I am against anything that can be tracked.

Life is so much more difficult for us because of all these electronic devices keeping records of us all the fucking time.

You never know when some shit that means nothing in the beginning brings down an entire crime family put on a trial.

“It was a burner, and I’d just gotten it. He got rid of it, anyway.”

“That’s not the point,” I say. “You know better than that. And do you know what ruins a man almost all the time?”

His eyes glint, yet he stays quiet.

“Bad women and greed,” I say.

“I’m done with her.”

“Good. It’s better to be smart and alive than stupid and dead. Now go out there and make sure things run smoothly,” I say in a more relaxed voice.

Without a word, he pushes out of his chair and makes a beeline for the door.

Vito is one of the better ones. And as I said before, he's not stupid, but he can be foolish around girls.

His loyalty to me weighs more than anything else right now.

Had it not been that way, our conversation might've ended differently.

The space is quiet as he walks out the door and closes it behind him, and I stare absently at the screens.

That woman comes to mind.

Speaking of women. Was I talking only about him? Or was I thinking about myself as well?

Carmina is not a bad woman. But good women can ruin a man just as quickly, and it's not because they want to.

Like her.

Most of the time, they're not even aware they are doing it. What happened last night disarmed me completely.

And that's where their power lies.

This is true in life, business, crime business, or for women like her. No matter how good you are at the game, you can swiftly get obliterated by someone who doesn't even play that game.

I've had tons of people in my life, and many were women.

Most of the time, most of the people fear me.

It comes with the territory, the type of business I am in, and being at the top of the food chain.

So, I'm getting different flavors of submission from men and women.

And I'm not talking about the sexual aspect of it. I'm talking about people trying to please me and having a shtick when dealing with me so they can stay alive.

I have a strategy too, and it has become my second nature.

I can go from being friendly to being menacing and lethal at the drop of a hat.

I can end someone in a second. And to be clear, I'm not doing it for pleasure. I'm doing it out of necessity.

Some things need to be taken care of quickly because there is no room for errors in this business.

The rules and a certain type of conduct are the backbone of our existence.

Once there's a glitch, things become a gamble, and loss is unacceptable.

We all know we are bound by those rules.

We, the made men who have taken omertà oaths.

Soldato.

Caporegime.

Underboss.

Boss.

It doesn't matter who we are.

We can all get bullets in our heads.

We know that, accept that, and live with that.

We act in a certain way, our interactions dictated by the foreseeable consequences of our words and actions.

People living outside our world know that and approach us with great care. Most have fear and a visceral need to make things good so they can survive.

There is a certain fascination with us, too.

Maybe because we're caught between life and death all the time, and living wildly like us is freeing as much as it's intense.

Whatever it is, we expect certain things to be done a certain way and people deliver.

If they don't, there are repercussions.

In that sense, we have a lot of power.

So when Carmina asked me to stay with her so she could fall asleep, she destroyed the usual dynamic I have with people.

I don't want her to be scared of me.

I don't want women to be scared of me, in general, but making her feel safe is the antithesis of everything I am and know about myself.

What struck me as unusual was how much her request had resonated with me. I knew what she was talking about.

We are the kind of men who sleep with our guns next to our pillows. Or on the nightstands. Or in the drawers. Or sometimes even clutched in our hands.

I'm familiar with wanting to have someone watch over you while you're asleep.

But... In real life. In my life. In *'the life'*, that thing is impossible. I can't trust someone to the point that they replace my guns.

That's a fact.

So, while that particular feeling is not new to me, I've never been asked to do that for anyone.

I'm usually the man people lose their sleep over, not the one helping them to sleep.

But things are different with her.

She didn't see me like that man. Maybe she didn't want to. Maybe she couldn't. Or maybe her instinct told her something else.

After having that nice chit-chat with her ex and her having a breakdown over what had happened, there was no secret about what kind of business I was in.

I'm counting on her to keep her mouth shut.

I'd hate to be forced to make a decision I don't want to make and would thoroughly regret for the rest of my life.

So, I don't know what was in her head.

I think she was genuine.

I could tell she was tired.

She'd been roughed up by that dickhead, not to mention the things she'd witnessed downstairs.

And that goes back to what I said before.

As perfectly unaware as she was, as powerful as she was without even knowing.

And there was something else.

I was impressed with how bold she was.

She was who she was with me, and for once in my life, someone had talked to me like I was just another guy.

It was a nice break from my usual life.

I have to admit.

When I pressed my back against the headboard, and she put her head on the pillow, I knew exactly what she longed for.

I could see through her. And that made me feel something I hadn't felt in a while. Not in that form, anyway.

I cared. That doesn't happen every day.

Sure, I care about things. Money. The business I run. The dickheads I'm dealing with. Sometimes, the dark justice I impart.

But I don't care about another person the way I care for her.

When I placed my hand on her hair, her shoulders relaxed, and I could hear a sigh of relief leaving her lips.

Life was good for her again, and that was a powerful moment right there.

It gave me a taste of a different kind of power. Something I'd never experienced before.

I'd brought peace and calm to someone's life. Something I don't remember happening before.

Usually, it's the other way around.

The fear of death rams through people's frames every time I touch them.

How she reacted to me was striking, and that stayed with me.

As soon as I put my hand on her, it was like I put a spell on her. She became a different person, and she was no longer haunted by her past.

Her hair tickled my touch as we sat there, bringing comfort to each other.

It made her feel all right, and she also made me feel all right.

Initially, I wanted to stop by and see if she was okay.

I had other stuff to do but couldn't refuse her request. I gained a lot staying.

It gave me peace, which is a real treat these days.

I suspected she'd fallen asleep immediately, and I liked that I had that effect on her.

I also liked that she'd let herself be guided by her instincts.

After dealing with men who wanted to harm her, she thought I was the good guy. Her instinct was spot on. I wouldn't harm a woman unless she was a criminal and needed to be sanctioned because she wronged me in some way.

Other than that, I'm not violent against women and can't stand the men who do that.

It's why I dislike pimps and traffickers. And anyone who forces themselves onto a woman.

A faint smile pulls at my lips.

Last night was something to be treasured for reasons I don't quite understand.

Her falling asleep empowered me in so many ways. I never thought that would be possible.

For once, I was free from my sins and hopeful for redemption.

C ARMINA

AN HOUR before

“JEN. Jen... Listen. Things are fine. I’m okay. You don’t have to get crazy over it.”

“Are you sure?” she says at the other end of the phone line.

I put her on speaker and move my focus to my clothes.

This is my first night on the job, and aside from Jen being highly strung for what I think is nothing, today has been a fantastic day.

I filled out the paperwork, had lunch with my co-workers, participated in training, and even got a glimpse of the pool.

I don’t have a bathing suit, but I’ll buy one when I get my first pay.

So yes... Things are good.

And here I am, getting ready for my job.

Holding two of my dresses up, I carefully inspect them and get easily distracted.

“Car?” she murmurs.

“Uh... Yeah. What were you saying?”

I put the black dress on the bed while the other one goes back into the closet.

“Are you sure things are all right?”

“Yes, I am. I don’t know who told you what—”

“It’s not about who told me what. It’s about you. That man is back,” she says while I slide onto the bed, bend my knee, lift my leg, and start painting my toenails.

“You saw him?”

“No, I didn’t see him,” she says, losing her patience. “I was off today.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah...” I mumble, still unable to focus. “Sorry, I forgot. The other girl had seen him, and she called you.”

“Yes. He came to the restaurant, and he was all bruised up. He looked horrible, and everybody stared at him while he was scanning the place.”

She sounds frightened, and that detail finally makes me stop and pay attention to her.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean? He knew you were in Vegas, so surely he wasn’t looking for you.”

“Do you think he was looking for you?”

“It’s crossed my mind.”

She sounds pissed.

“Why would he look for you? It makes no sense.”

“That’s why I’m telling you all this. What did you tell him, Car?”

“About me? Or you? Nothing,” I say, secretly concerned with this development.

“About your life in general. Does he know about your situation at home?”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Yeah... Okay. That’s what I thought.”

She seems disheartened.

“Why does it matter so much?”

She stays silent for a few good moments.

“Listen. This is serious stuff,” she says. “He didn’t look too happy.”

“No one would be happy if someone whooped their ass.”

“It’s not only about that. Whoever whooped his ass stirred him up as well. He didn’t seem so taken with you when you were here. But now he feels rejected. Maybe it’s that, and also the fact that you got away and those people in Las Vegas have protected you.”

“They’re still protecting me.”

“Yeah. They are. But without them, you’d be crushed by this douchebag and his buffoons. He wasn’t alone—I was told. Two men accompanied him. They looked even scarier than he did. I honestly think they were looking for me to get to you. And by you, I mean your family. And by your family—”

My heart stops.

“I know what you mean.”

Stiff, I shift my position and lean back against the headboard.

“Why would he do that?” I murmur, frozen against the bed.

“Because he wants revenge and to stir shit up. Whatever he couldn’t get in Vegas, he now wants here. I told you this piece of shit was into some gang activity. He can’t get you right now. That’s why I see him messing with Tina.”

I can’t breathe.

“He won’t go that low.”

“Won’t he?”

“Why would he? It’s not like we are in love or something.”

“You’ve played this man.”

“No. He cheated on me. People break up all the time because of that.”

“Not in his head, they don’t. He feels entitled to get whatever he wants however he wants it. You can’t break up with someone like him. Anyway. Whatever happened happened. What happened in Las Vegas surely has affected him, and now he is more determined than ever to punish you. If he gets Tina....”

She sighs and continues.

“I don’t even want to think about it. He could blackmail you. And that’s not even the worst thing he could do to you.”

My hands shake.

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. You have no idea why he was actually after you. Why he played so cool when he was your boyfriend. He was grooming you, Car. I don’t believe he was genuinely attracted to you. No offense. It has nothing to do with you. It’s just that the man lacks the capacity to feel for someone else. He’s a blob of muscles with little brain and no sophistication. He had a plan with you and tried to fool you. Maybe there was something else. I don’t know. Something that compelled him to pretend he was someone he was not. And then suddenly, things got real. He fucked someone else. Fucking big deal. It means nothing in his world. And I know it didn’t mean much to you either. I know you thought it was your way out. And it was... Normally, it would be if he didn’t have a secret plan. This was never about you. As in him and you. It was about him grooming you and passing you on to someone else. You have no idea who might had their eyes on you. Virgin or no virgin, you could’ve been in some shit hole by now, sucking some drug lord’s dick or being fucked in front of him by someone else for his pleasure.”

My hackles rise.

This may sound like a dark story in a book, but she’s not that far from the truth.

“You got away...” she goes on. “And I’m sure he thought it was nothing. Maybe he thought he could bring you back. He had no idea you had a plan that wasn’t only about you moving on but also about getting away, doing something with your life, and protecting Tina. Seriously, now, the guy is stuck on you like wet toilet paper. He’s freakish and stubborn, like a bounty hunter. He clearly can’t move on. And him coming to your old job and looking for something or someone now tells me this might also be business for him. You don’t know what he was supposed to deliver and if that something was you or not. And since you are no longer available for whatever reason, he might save his butt by bringing Tina in.”

My arms are covered in goosebumps because she’s right. Everything she says rings true.

A few moments pass.

“Anyway... This is what’s happening here,” she murmurs. “I don’t want to go to work this weekend. In fact, I expect him to show up at my place any day now.”

“What if...” I say, my jaw locked. “What if you take a few days off and go stay with Tina at my aunt’s place. You know... Until things settle down and we figure out what this is.”

“I had considered taking some time off and called my boss tonight. He didn’t get back to me. But I’m hoping he’ll say yes.”

We both sigh.

And I speak next.

“Listen. Go. Don’t wait. What can happen? Say you don’t feel well or something. You can’t risk being home and having him show up at your door. No one knows about my aunt except my father, but he won’t be back until next week. He may be coming back at the end of the week, I think. If I know anything about him is that he doesn’t give a shit about anything until it affects him, so he won’t be in a hurry to find out where we are. What I’m saying here is that Tina will be safe there for a while, and you will be protected, too. In the meantime, something else might come up and whisk this prick

away. I'm talking about Anthony here. If it's a pressing matter as it seems to be, he'll have to make a different plan," I say, hoping that I'm right.

The more I think about it, the more I wish I'd taken Damaso Salla up on his offer and have Beau Anthony finished and abandoned in the desert.

That would've solved so many of my problems.

It's possible that fact alone would've brought more dangerous men to my door, but that seemingly happens anyway.

How can this go to hell so damn quickly? How? And it's all because of this man.

"What say you?" I murmur, afraid I wasn't convincing enough, and she might change her mind.

Her answer comes after a few seconds.

She sounds like she's away from her phone.

"I'm packing as we speak," she says, and a warm sensation sweeps through me.

"How long would it take you to get there?"

"Half an hour...? I'm walking out of the house right now."

"Can you not use your car? Get a cab or something. You know the fucker put a tracking device on my ride."

"I didn't plan to use my car anyway," she says.

"Good. Listen... Can I call your phone and talk to my sister in about an hour? Before I go to work?"

"Sure."

"Try to take her out of the house when I call. I don't want my aunt to be there. She has no idea what's going on. And it's better that way for her safety."

"No problem. Don't worry. I know what to do."

I hang up and silently stare at the window. It's getting dark outside, and I suddenly have a bad feeling about everything.

It's something I can't explain.

One thing I know, though.

It's the opposite of what I'd felt earlier today.



CARMINA

ALL DRESSED UP, with my hair rolling lusciously down my back and my eyes pinned on the mirror, I ponder the things that have already happened, and the ones I fear might happen.

Absently, I run my eyes over my body.

The black dress fits me like a glove, and it's something I'd positively not wear under normal circumstances.

Not that the one I wore last night was different.

But this is a sexy cocktail dress with a revealing cleavage, a sleeveless design, and a skintight fit. The cut and color make me look more mature. Fancy stilettos complete my look.

I put on some eyeliner, mascara, and lipgloss and have a tiny metallic badge clipped above my left breast, which is the only indication that my dress, as sassy as it is, is still a uniform.

I'm nervous for a million reasons.

Some have to do with hearing my sister's voice and possibly running into Damaso tonight, while others have to do with an uncertain future.

Things happen fast, changing from one moment to another, making my head spin.

I glance at the clock on the nightstand before snatching up my phone and dialing my best friend's phone number.

Moments later, her phone rings, and she answers right away.

“She’s here,” Jen says, and they talk in the background before Jen tells my sister to join her outside.

Seconds later, I have Tina at the other end of the line.

“Hello...”

“Hi, Tin-Tin. How are you?” I ask, so happy to hear her voice.

“I’m good,” she says quietly, a smile lining her voice.

“How are things with Edith?”

“Things are fine. How are you?”

“I’m good. I got the job. And I’m working tonight.”

“Yay. I’m happy for you.”

“I’m happy too. Can you stay there a little longer?”

“Uh-huh. Edith said yes.”

“Have you heard from Stella?”

“No.”

“That’s good. Hopefully, she keeps him busy, so he leaves you alone when he returns.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” she says, worried, making more sense than I do.

Of course, he’ll notice that we’re gone.

The only circumstance in which, maybe, he wouldn’t notice we were gone would be if he had a new stash of drugs or didn’t need me.

He doesn’t need my sister, for sure. He’ll look for me before asking about her.

It’s hard to believe he’s still working, considering his crazy life. He’s always motivated to get cash so he can blow it on alcohol, drugs, and his girlfriends.

Regardless, he’ll know I’m not home.

And that’s what I fear the most.

“Listen. We’ll get out of this. All right? If things get dire, I’ll have someone pick you up. Or have Jen bring you here.”

“Can you do that?”

Oh, the excitement in her voice is killing me.

“I might be able to do that, but then you’ll need to go to a different school.”

“I can do that,” she says in a breath, and my heart hurts.

“You won’t miss your friends?”

“What friends, Car? Tell me... What friends?”

The sadness in her voice overwhelms me.

She’s right again. There are no friends. Not the kinds you want to spend a lot of time with.

“I can go to any school. I don’t care where I go as long as I’m with you.”

Her desperation breaks my soul.

“We’ll find something. I don’t know how these things work. I don’t think he’ll just let you come here and stay with me. For sure, he wouldn’t. So we’ll need to start a new life someplace else. And for that to happen, I need a little bit more money. I don’t have much now. But I’ll make more money. I promise you that. This job pays well. Extremely well. It’s more than I’ve made at the other job, so I hope we’ll have a nice amount of money in a few weeks to get this new life started.”

“A few weeks?”

She goes silent.

“So many things could happen in a few weeks,” she says, disappointed, more crippling desperation soaring through her voice.

“Don’t worry about this, Tin-Tin. I’ll take care of it. Somehow, we’ll get away from him and live a better life. You just focus on school. All right?”

It takes her a few seconds to murmur words again.

“All right,” she says softly.

A lump forms in my throat, and that bad feeling rams through me again, but I crush it because that’s what I’ve heard real adults do. They always try to keep things in balance and solve problems. And I’ll need to solve this problem too.

The best I can, anyway.

“I love you, Tin-Tin.”

“I love you too, Car.”

With that, I end the call, and I still have my phone clutched in my hand while running my fingers below my eyes to wipe away my tears.

C ARMINA

THE CLUB IS spectacular at night.

I saw it when I toured the place today with the rest of the new hires, and it didn't look like now.

Aerial dancers perform, flashing their limber bodies, supple muscles, and sequined costumes.

A huge dance floor spreads out in the middle, and mirrored walls reflect the lights, tables, two packed bars in the back, and exotic dancers on the platforms.

The lights alone are a show in itself, and the bursts of confetti make everything look like a joyful celebration.

But what is Las Vegas, if not that?

Impressive bouncers keep a tight eye on the crowd and everything under control, whether it's the people approaching the entrance or the patrons inside.

I get the hang of it quickly, taking orders, bringing the food to the table, and pocketing the tips. Around eleven, my direct boss signals me to go in the back.

Those rooms are less noisy and more private, and people gamble over there, so the vibe is different.

I enter a corridor when a woman approaches me.

“You’re Carmina, right?”

“Yes,” I say, smiling.

“You’re not going there. Here. Take this.”

She hands me a smooth golden card similar to the one Damaso gave me when he met me. This one has nothing on it, and it’s definitely not a credit card or a keycard.

“You show this to the security. They’ll guide you.”

Frozen, I look at the card.

“Is there a problem?” she asks, as I don’t move.

I lift my gaze.

“No. Is it a different type of place? The room I’m going to?”

“No. It’s just quieter than the others.”

Whatever that means.

“It’s the same. Go,” she says sternly.

I have no choice, so I spin around and move.

Pacing that way, I realize I have my phone with me. I reach inside my pocket and turn it off before running into the first security guard.

He looks like one of Damaso’s men. He is broad-shouldered and expressionless. No surprise there.

He checks my card, runs it through a reader, and gives me a quick pat down that is not invasive.

He shows me to a different hallway, and I pull away.

The more I walk, the thicker the silence is, and I get spooked a little.

It’s like a tomb.

A second man greets me at the end of the corridor.

By the time I talk to him, my skin is cold, and I quiver inside.

If anything—and I mean anything—goes wrong, I don't even know how to find my way back.

His lips move, giving me instructions, and I can't hear a word. Wide-eyed, I bob my head like a human-size doll before he gestures to his right, where I'm supposed to go.

I pull away from him, moving mechanically, my eyes hovering over the doors.

I have no idea what he has said to me, and now I regret not paying attention.

Eventually, I make it to a big door and pull to a stop. Is this the one?

I move my fingers over the lock and shift the handle.

It's unlocked, so I push the door open and walk in. It's a large room with massive sofas and armchairs, a crystal chandelier, an old bookcase, several lamps, and a desk.

It's cold inside. Colder than in other parts of the hotel.

Looking around, I notice the old classical club style.

The only thing missing is a group of men with short glasses of whiskey and thick cigars.

I wonder if this is where I'm supposed to be right now.

There's no one here, so I don't know if this is the right place.

What was that man saying again?

I can't remember.

Okay.

It's probably not this room.

I'm fairly sure it's not, but I linger a little longer, sliding my hand over the bookcase.

Leaning against the bookcase to touch a book on the top shelf, I set off a switch, and the wall opens in front of me.

What the...?

What is that?

I peek inside. It's dark. I wish I knew what was there, but I'm too cautious and frankly too scared to walk there.

I don't want to get trapped inside.

What if it's nothing? Yeah, who builds secret doors in their house to hide nothing?

Without stepping in, I feel my way around the wall inside and press a light switch.

The lights come on, and I notice a safe-deposit box in front of me.

Okay.

I need to go back.

I struggle to turn off the lights when I realize I don't know how to close this room and put the entrance back together as if it hasn't been touched.

And just as beads of sweat grow along my hairline, a muffled noise comes from behind a wall.

I turn to stone.

The sound must come from the corridor.

Horrified, I look at the entrance and also the bookcase.

Male voices inch closer, seemingly arguing.

My hope that they'll just go away vanishes completely when the men stop in front of the main door.

Oh, fuck. Fuck.

What am I supposed to do?

I look around the room. There's nowhere to hide.

I could step out, but then I'd need to explain why I was here.

I could tell them the truth.

Yes.

Of course, I could.

I could say I was looking for the room where I was supposed to work.

Cool.

And how could I explain the secret vault?

This makes me look like a thief.

My window of opportunity narrows quickly as someone pushes the door open.

Without pondering much, I slip inside the vault and desperately try to slide the bookcase shut.

I wish I could credit my ingenuity for accomplishing just that, but it was merely luck.

I must've pressed something by mistake and closed it.

My heart is just beside itself, jumping up and down in my chest. There's not a smidgen of light in here, and the room looks like a frozen grave.

And I have nothing on me to help me with that.

Wait... My phone.

I slide my hand inside my pocket and pull it out. The bluish light of the screen is not a lot, but it's still something.

I shouldn't use it now, though.

I need to stay put until they leave before I look for that switch, open it up, and get out of here.

What a terrible turn of events.

I put my phone back into my pocket, spin around, and press my spine against the sealed entrance, listening to their voices.

They're in the other room.

All men.

Heavy steps, baritone tones.

They don't sound like customers or employees.

Hopefully, they'll finish their business quickly so I can get out of my spot.

I swear I'll never do this again if I get out of here unharmed.

Stupid, stupid move on my part.

Someone barks orders in the other room, and I straighten at once, tense.

My hair stands up as what sounds like an altercation unfolds outside.

And then, out of nowhere, laughter fills the room as it's one of those crazy situations when you never know which way things go.

I barely breathe a sigh of relief when a loud noise makes me jump away from the wall.

The bookcase groans, shakes, and moves while a flicker of light slips inside. I stare at it with widened eyes, horror sweeping through my bones.

What am I supposed to do now?

Frantically, I move my palms over the wall to my left, looking for a place to hide.

But what do I expect, really? It's a room with a safe-deposit box. There is nothing else in here.

And then, through some miracle, I find a little cranny as the bookcase begins to slide, and I manage to squeeze myself in, my back pressed against the wall, my front squished against another wall, my feet crammed inside the enclosure.

I can barely breathe and can't move my arms. Lift or flex them. I have to keep them down with my palms pressed against my hips or the wall behind me.

My head is tilted back as I struggle not to hyperventilate and make myself pass out.

Footsteps resonate against the floor.

"Don't ask me next time, all right?" Damaso says.

I see nothing, but I can recognize his voice.

“I cleaned up the space for you,” another man says with a Russian accent.

“You didn’t need to. I don’t need your hitmen. You know that,” Damaso says, his voice somewhat misleading.

On the one hand, he seems annoyed with his interlocutor.

On the other hand, the exchange sounds like banter.

I have a hard time establishing which is which.

“It’s pure pleasure for you, motherfucker,” Damaso continues. “And I’m financing it,” he says, and they both laugh.

“You’re financing it...?” the other man says. “You’re loaning me money and get it back with interest before I spend it here and hire more people to clean up the streets for you. Since when is the Mafia farming out this kind of shit?”

“Since jerks like you want to make a killing.”

The Russian laughs.

“I’m making a killing? What about you? You’re not even lifting a finger, and here you are, shoving money into your safe–deposit box.”

“This is pocket change for me, and you know it. Besides, I’m a businessman,” Damaso says with self-deprecating humor before the door to the safe–deposit box clicks unlocked, and I can only suspect he puts some money in there.

Another click follows.

“You need me more than I need you,” Damaso says. “I don’t mind lending you money as long as you hold your end of the deal.”

A pause follows, and I grow hot in my little space, my breaths getting shallower and faster.

“You know...” the Russian says. “We could do more than these little side deals. You know I don’t need your money,

Salla. But I like your style. Get me a meetup with your boss to discuss some serious business.”

Another pause ensues. And I tip my head to hear Damaso’s answer.

It doesn’t come for a while.

“I’m not in that kind of business,” he says.

“I know... I know,” the Russian says. “But money talks. And it’s always about the money. None of us are doing these for the accolades. No statue has been erected with our names on it. We won’t make history. Not the legit kind, we won’t.”

A few seconds pass.

“You know my answer,” Damaso says firmly.

“Yeah, yeah... I know,” the other man murmurs and his steps echo around the room.

As he moves, more men shuffle their way into the chamber, and I hear everything.

Their shoes against the floor, the rustle of their suits, and even the clinking of their belt buckles.

I almost suffocate inside my hiding spot and shift my position toward the room to breathe a little easier when the footsteps stop.

The silence becomes unbearable with every passing second.

“What the fuck is that?” the Russian mutters, his voice exploding inches away from my ear.

C ARMINA

HE'S NEAR ME, although I can't quite see him.

Something hits the tip of my shoe, and I yelp, my toe crushed underneath.

And then a calloused hand wraps around my neck, and I get yanked out of my spot, my pain growing beneath his fingers.

A few things happen at once.

People move around the room with their guns drawn as I fight the hand cutting off my air supply.

“What the fuck is this, Salla? Are you spying on me? Is she working for you? Or is your house not in order?”

The man drags me away while I squeeze his grip with both hands, trying to escape his clutch.

Someone moves closer, and a voice barks orders while a strong hand unclasps his from my neck.

“Let her go,” Damaso demands.

The Russian lets go of me before Damaso pushes me behind him.

“What the fuck is this, Salla?” the man in front of him says, his brow creased into a frown.

The Russian looks at me and then at Damaso, whose eyes could cut through glass.

Panting, I notice eight men in the room. The ones working for Damaso and a few others who look like the Russian.

They have scarred faces, cold gray eyes, and bulky frames.

Damaso's men have guns.

A scar splits the Russian's upper lip. He looks rough, void of emotions.

Next to him, Beau Anthony looks like an angel.

"Do you know this woman?" he asks, staring at Damaso, baffled.

"She works for me," Damaso says, moving away from us.

I can't see his face, but his voice suggests he's angry, disappointed, and concerned.

"Works for you?" the Russian says, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Is she clean? Are you sure her presence here doesn't have anything to do with me?"

His smirk is long gone when he flicks his arm, grabs the back of my hair, and pulls it down.

I stumble, my hands clawing at the air.

"Are you with the FBI? Who are you darling?" the Russian barks, everything happening in a second.

His eyes are dipped in poison, while I am scared, shitless.

It's not as if I haven't had a ton of bad experiences lately, but nothing comes close to this.

"Let her go," Damaso snarls, shoving the Russian back, his eyes dark like boiling tar, his jaw tense like a slab of concrete.

The men in the room wrestle in response, Damaso's crew pushing the Russians back.

They cock their guns.

"Nobody moves," one of Damaso's men thunders. "Let them sort things out."

The Russian seems thrown off by Damaso's violent reaction and lets go of me.

"Who is this woman, Salla?" he asks, his eyes pinned on Damaso, who steps back, sucks in a long breath, and runs his fingers through his hair, not looking at the Russian.

"I told you. She works for me."

He reaches inside his jacket and pulls his hand out empty, his gesture creating more commotion.

"Chill out, for fuck's sake, or I'll chop your balls off and bury them in the desert," Damaso says, fuming.

The man in front of me tips his eyes to me, unwilling to let go. He wants answers, and Damaso doesn't have them while I wait my turn to speak, but no one's asking me why I'm here.

The Russian's eyes drop to the logo on my dress.

He touches my dress and pinches the logo, grazing my chest, and out of reflex, I swat his hand away.

The gesture is so unexpected it puts a smile on his face, and the men behind him seem amused, too.

Damaso is not amused at all, moving quickly toward us despite all of us sitting on a powder keg.

He takes my hand and drags me away from the Russian.

In retrospect, he'd probably say this was a big mistake, as his gesture had offered clues about how he felt about me and the whole situation.

Even I notice the shift in the Russian's expression.

He mulls over something, a knowing smile creasing his lips.

"What kind of work does she do for you, Damaso? And why was she tucked in there? She just witnessed our entire conversation," the Russian says, no smile on his face this time.

Damaso turns his head to me.

"Why are you here?" he asks evenly.

And finally, I get the chance to speak and come clean.

“I was assigned to a certain room. And I was looking for it when I found this place and walked in. Now I’m convinced it was the wrong room.”

I stop talking, still holding his eyes.

Even now, despite everything going on around us—the guns, the Russians, and their crazy boss—I notice a glint of humanity in Damaso’s eyes.

It might be misleading—I don’t know—but it’s more than I’ve seen in other men’s eyes.

And if it comes to this... To violently have my life ended because of some stupid mistake, I’d rather have him do that and his face in front of my eyes when I draw my last breath.

“Why are you here inside this secret room?” he asks.

Which is not that much of a secret anymore, is it?

“I opened the bookcase by mistake and didn’t know how to put it back together. Before long, you and your men were outside, and I had nowhere to go. I was afraid I might be found in here and taken for a thief. I may be many things, but I’m not a thief. That’s why I’m here,” I say as if talking to him only.

And I do talk to him. I also can’t lie to him.

What he thinks of me is important to me.

Besides, it wouldn’t serve me well if I wasn’t be truthful with him.

My life is on the line.

“It wasn’t my intention to listen in on your conversation. And it doesn’t matter anyway. I didn’t understand what you had said.”

Now that’s a lie, and the Russian laughs behind me.

“You can’t possibly believe that bullshit, Salla,” the man says, and that’s a sly move on his part.

He questions Salla’s authority and, for the second time this evening, makes him put his reputation on the line for me.

He's forcing Salla to reveal more about our connection or do something about me.

Damaso turns to the Russian.

"She won't talk," Damaso says curtly.

His expression reveals nothing.

"You're fucking with me now," the Russian retorts.

"No, I'm not," my boss says, unfazed.

The Russian ponders his answer before erasing the space between him and Damaso, who doesn't flinch.

"Listen to me, Salla. She's lucky you didn't allow us to bring our guns to this meeting, or she'd be dead. She's also lucky I didn't break her neck. I'm not in the cleaning business—and you know what I mean by that—for nothing. I never leave loose ends like this. This woman will talk. And I'm not saying she wants to talk, but people are not as gentle as you and I—that's a joke, of course—and they'd be happy to make her talk. Maybe the FBI agents get to her and convince her to become their informant. I won't leave this room without settling this issue with you and her, so take your pick. Are you removing her? If not, I will. I won't risk being taken down by some woman who's walked into the wrong room."

"She's not your problem," Damaso says. "And this is my business. I'm not telling you how to run your business."

"No. You're not. But you wouldn't say that if this happened to you. And I wouldn't have a problem taking that person out right there and then. Do you think I don't know you?"

A grin curves the man's lips.

"You're asking me to do something you'd never do, Salla," he says. "Listen," he murmurs, moving his eyes to me. "She seems like a fine woman. What about we do that? I buy her from you."

My stomach hurts.

I look at Damaso, whose face seems carved in stone.

“And before you say anything,” the Russian adds, raising his hand and checking my body. “I’ll give you a good price for her. A really good price. You know I own this market,” he throws at Damaso.

My legs are feeble, and my heart is flapping like a bird as I move my eyes to Damaso, aghast.

I can’t tell what’s in his mind.

Suddenly, my past comes to me in painful flashbacks.

Of all the ways my life could go to waste, this, sadly—insert sarcasm here—wasn’t one of them.

My life didn’t begin on a high note, and it won’t end on a high note either. My first few years of life were the best. And by that, I mean they weren’t the worst.

I still had my mother, and she protected me from my father.

I indulge in the memory of her, the humbleness of our lives, and our hope for a better tomorrow.

That never happened, and no matter how determined I was to make it happen later on, it seemingly wasn’t in the stars for us.

If the only reason to go through all that crap was to end up like this, then fuck my fate. I’m not afraid of what’s to come.

I’d slash anyone’s neck open before being forced to suck their dick.

But this isn’t only about me.

It’s also about the conversation I have had with my sister. It’s still fresh in my memory.

All those promises I had made and the hope I had tried to instill in her... It was all for nothing.

She’ll hate me.

And she’ll end up just like me. Not like me here, a bargaining chip for these two men. But like me, a woman without options.

And then I remember she could end up like me if Beau Anthony had grabbed her. And realize I need to stay alive through any means.

I beg Damaso with my eyes, but he doesn't look my way while the Russian speaks again.

"I'll give you a million dollars for this woman," he says, and my jaw hits the floor.

What the fuck is this?

I am suddenly some hot commodity? One million dollars? What made my value increase overnight?

I've meant nothing to most people all my life, and now I'm some coveted prize? An investment? A trophy?

"You sell this woman to me, and I'll make sure she keeps her mouth shut," he says, moving his eyes back to me, hunger glinting in his stare. "Trust me, her mouth will be busy for a while."

C ARMINA

THE TENSION IS SO thick it feels like a clap of thunder is about to detonate in the room.

“And don’t worry,” he goes on, although no one knows what he means by that, and looking around the room, no one seems to care, let alone be worried about him. “I’ll get my money back. When I’m done convincing her it’s in her best interest to stay silent, the right client will pay me double to take ownership of her.”

My stomach clenches with apprehension.

No matter how much I try to keep my cool, I feel like I’m about to die. Images of me being tossed around from one crazy, disgusting man to another while living a life of abuse and servitude and condemning my little sister to a similar fate bring bile to my mouth.

I feel so sick I stagger on my feet, and all I need right now is to bend over, hold my hair back, and discard all the food I had for dinner.

The fear simmering in my veins is like nothing I’ve ever felt before. The thought that this man would get to touch me makes my skin crawl.

My hope is gone as I don’t see a way out of this when Damaso’s voice echoes in the room.

“I’ll pay you double to end this conversation,” Salla says, and all the people in the room flick their eyes at him, myself included.

Again, he doesn’t glance in my direction.

Like I’m not even in the room.

Like this isn’t about me, and I haven’t suddenly become a contentious issue for these men, who honestly have nothing to do with me.

I wouldn’t be here today had I not tried to get away from that jerk, Beau Anthony, and run into Damaso Salla.

Although, in Damaso’s case, I wouldn’t have a job if it wasn’t for him. Or this kind of job. Or him as my boss, although that might’ve happened anyway.

Oh, fuck it.

It was bound to happen. My fate was sealed, and there was no way around it. People like me only exist to get into this type of stupid situation. It’s a given.

And when it comes to these men?

They’re like vultures, and I can’t escape them.

The Russian looks at Damaso with a crazy expression on his face.

I’m unsure whether he’s annoyed that my boss has placed a higher bid or not.

And is he for real? My boss? Would he really pay this guy two million dollars so I can stay and make him go away?

What has the world come to?

It doesn’t matter how much money gets spent so I can stay or not stay. My fate will be the same.

And if it won’t happen today, it will happen in the future.

The end of me is so damn predictable I want to cry.

I won’t make it out of here alive. I don’t see how.

And why didn't I pay attention to the guy who'd given me directions?

Although something tells me I was supposed to cater to them—the men in the room.

It was so unfortunate that I had to touch that bookcase.

One time, I touched a stack of books, and I almost lost my life because of it.

How ironic.

“You're serious?” the Russian murmurs.

Irritated, Damaso signals all of us out of the room.

“No, no. I want to discuss this,” the Russian insists. “I don't want this woman roaming loose. If you keep her, she better keep her mouth shut, or you take care of her. If not, I will. I don't care how much money you spend to make our conversation go away. Still...” he says, moving his focus back to me. “You're spending a lot of money for her little ass.”

I want to smack him.

He swings his gaze to Salla.

“I'm serious. You keep her close to you. And if I go down because some FBI agent pinched her and made her talk, I swear to God, I'll take you down with me, Damaso.”

Salla flicks his chin.

“Tell your men to walk out,” he says, and the Russian turns to stone.

“Vito?” Damaso barks, spinning around and signaling to his men.

They instantly start pushing the Russians out.

“Boss?” one of them says, looking at the man in front of me, who watches Damaso go back to the—deposit box.

“Go,” Damaso says to him, and they all leave the room.

It's only Damaso, me, and the Russian.

My boss reaches inside the safe—deposit box and pulls out two big stacks of one hundred dollar bills wrapped in plastic.

He tosses them to the Russian, who catches them, an avaricious smile on his face.

He nods, satisfied, as if he's planned to get the money he'd previously handed to Damaso all along.

He tucks them under his arm and flashes a full-mouth grin that makes me nauseous.

“It was nice doing business with you,” he says.

Damaso says nothing.

The Russian flicks his eyes to me.

“Try to stay out of trouble, *kukla*,”

Doll.

He winks at me, and I'm about to throw up in my mouth.

He shifts away, about to leave the room, when he stops and turns around.

“One last thing before I go...” he says, looking at Salla. “Make her strip. I want to make sure she's not wearing a wire.”

Is this man for real?

I shoot my eyes to Damaso, who weighs the situation while we wait for him to speak.

He looks like he's about to empty his gun into the Russian's head. There's no love lost between them. That's for sure.

Slowly, he emerges from his frozen state and heads to us.

He nudges the Russian to the side and stops in front of me.

My heart beats in my mouth as I look at him with fearful eyes.

His gaze glints when he locks my stare.

“Turn around,” he says emotionlessly.

I do as I'm told.

“Put your hands on the wall and spread your legs.”

“What...?”

The word falls, limp, from my lips.

“Do as I say,” he barks, and I spin around and reluctantly position myself for a pat down, my soul shaking.

The thing is, not many men have touched me.

Okay. Let me rephrase that.

Not even Beau Anthony touched me.

We haven't slept with each other, and most of the things we did together weren't sexual in nature.

There was a lot of stringing him along.

I'm not going to lie. He was many things to me, but he didn't put his hands on me.

He thought he'd do it, but he didn't and was foolish enough to believe me. No wonder he resents me because I didn't want to sleep with him. The man considers me his property.

He had blue balls because of me more times than he could count and a long list of grievances with me.

He must've felt duped. And he was.

Also, male hands on my body hadn't happened before Beau.

There were boys before him, but kisses leading to nothing wouldn't count.

I couldn't let them do their thing. I had an innate distrust for men and disliked the idea of being physical with them.

Doing that with anyone was a big deal for me.

Yet this is not that. I mean, this could happen at the airport. Right?

But no matter how I spin it, this done by Damaso is an entirely different matter.

So, no wonder my nails scrape the wall, and my legs shake when he pulls up behind me, and his body heat rolls over me.

Electrical currents zip through my skin while his body heat makes me sweat despite the air conditioning in the room.

It's like the air between us has created a magnetic field that pulls us toward each other and me back into his chest.

A mix of fear, anticipation, and unfamiliar titillation sweeps through me.

I've been close to him before.

I asked him to stay with me last night so I could sleep.

He lay on the bed next to me, and his hand rested on my head.

I felt things back then. A lot of things, but nothing of this nature. I felt protected and calm, while now I'm tense and almost aroused.

Being aroused is not something I've thought about lately.

When you're in the middle of an endless existential crisis, there is no space in your head for things like this.

The stress of living robs you of the pleasure of living. It's a known fact.

But fear and sexual pleasure are odd cousins, the first one occasionally fueling the second one.

And then there's the other man in the room. I don't know if he gets a kick out of this. Maybe he does.

Hey, things could've been much worse had he patted me down.

Damaso leans down a little, moves his hand up my skirt, and starts between my knees.

My reaction to him—I slightly jerk back—goes unnoticed by the third person in the room.

At least, I hope it does while Damaso moves his fingers up.

Of all the ways I've ever imagined having a man's hand up my skirt, this is not one of them.

A man like Damaso, a kingpin, for sure didn't pop into my head.

I am so focused on where his fingers go that I completely forget where we are, why I face the wall with my hands up, and have a witness in the room.

Damaso's touch is neutral.

He doesn't make it sexual in the slightest.

He's not feeling me up.

He's just running his hand up between my thighs to convince the jerk in the room that I am not a rat and make him go away.

Peacefully.

Without having his blood splashed over the beautiful, shiny, safe-deposit box.

He stops before reaching my panties and goes the other way.

Despite him not making it all the way to my panties, a burst of needy pleasure swirls between my legs.

I can't be touched in certain places, and that is one of them.

The intense sensation doesn't get any better when he drags his touch around my hips, runs his hands down, and then up my back, under my hair, and to the front under my breasts.

By the time he's done, I'm finished.

I've never felt something so erotic in my entire life.

There is only one more area that needs to be checked.

His hands slide down across my stomach and then below my navel, and by the time he checks the line connecting my hipbones, ensuring my panties stay flat underneath, my brain is aroused, my nipples are hard, and tiny waves of pleasure lap at my sex.

His breath fanning over my shoulder doesn't help in the slightest.

I honestly don't breathe as he touches my lower abdomen, maybe an inch above my slit, and then separates his hands and goes over my pockets.

He notices something bulky in one of them and extracts my phone.

"What's that?" the Russian asks, curious to see what Salla has found.

Damaso hands him my phone without a word.

"No," I bark, my reaction taking them by surprise.

If anyone had this type of reaction, they'd surely look suspicious, and I am no exception.

Damaso uses the opportunity—now that I've pivoted to move his fingers over my collarbones and earlobes.

"She has nothing else on her," he says, unperturbed, trying to play down my reaction.

"He can't have my phone," I say, Damaso's fingers still at the root of my neck.

"Let him have it. You'll get another one."

"But that's my phone," I protest, all kinds of scenarios playing in my head.

What if he figures out the numbers that I called, and that puts the people back home at risk.

Jen.

Tina.

My aunt.

Jen just left her house to get away from Beau.

"What's up with your phone, sweetheart?" the Russian says, erasing the space between us.

Damaso loses his patience and snatches it up from his hand.

He opens it up in front of him.

“There’s nothing in it,” he says, his patience running thin.

He opens his hand and places everything in the Russian’s palm.

I bite back another protest.

I so hate these people.

Eventually, the man walks out, and Damaso grabs me by the elbow and drags me out of the safe–deposit box room.

We enter the main room, he crashes his fist against the wall, and just like that, the bookcase slides closed.

By then, it’s only us in the room, and voices echo outside, some moving away.

Vito enters the room before I have the chance to pull away from Damaso, who doesn’t even look my way.

“Show her out,” Damaso says.

It sounds like I’m fired.

Forget about lodging a complaint about my phone.

It sounds like I need to start packing.

And I should probably consider myself lucky.

I could’ve been in the Russian’s car just about now.

“No,” Damaso says, changing his mind, the new thought making him squeeze my arm even harder.

His tight grip makes me think the new thought is not that good.

There’s tension and a lot of anger in his hand.

“Take her to my suite,” he says. “And have someone bring her things up. Set up the guest room for her. She’s one of us now. If I’m not around, she’s your responsibility. And Louie’s. And Gianni’s. And so on. You...” He looks at me. “Go with him,” he orders before letting go of me.

“What about the money?” Vito asks, and I’m sure he’s talking about the money Damaso has shelled out to keep me

here.

“Don’t worry about the money,” Salla says, a frown marring his brow. “He’ll gamble it all tonight, and we’ll get it back.”

“That’s it?” Vito asks.

His eyes slide to me, and I have a feeling that’s not it, whether it concerns me or the Russian.

“For now,” Damaso says, briefly locking Vito’s eyes.

Yes. I’m no fool. There’s more to what he said.

He might want some things that have to do with me. I can’t read Salla that well, but he is not happy with me—to put it mildly—and why would he be?

Everything that happened tonight put him in a bad light and the fact that he had to choose between handing me to the Russian and having everyone witness the deal they had struck only made things worse.

I’m sure in his world, no life is worth the headache, and the fact that he’s spared mine creates unnecessary complications for him.

I don’t know why he acted the way he did.

Why he chose that instead of handing me over and being done with it.

Is he a man of principles?

I doubt he can afford to be that kind of man in a world like his.

Does he like me?

The idea is simply laughable.

Men like him squash their feelings, so it’s not even a remote possibility.

Whatever has prompted him to do that, I bet he regrets it already.

Putting his reputation on the line for me, and now having to babysit me?

This is not even about that.

I don't know how he looks at it, but I consider myself a captive. And what's worse? I don't see a way out.

I fully understand, though. It was either this or death. Or sexual slavery and death.

So he chose for me, but that doesn't mean the other options are entirely off the table.

D AMASO

THE ROOM IS cold as I take my jacket off and put it on the back of my chair behind my desk.

Quietly, I move around the room, going through the motions, thoughts spinning in my head.

I've made a mistake.

I don't regret it. I'm just aware of it and the fact that there may be consequences.

Amber-colored liquor slides into my glass at the bar before I take a swig and saunter back to my desk.

I settle into my seat and move my eyes to the computer screens.

Without thinking twice, I reach inside my jacket, and for the first time in a few months, I pull out a cigarette, search inside a drawer, retrieve my favorite metal lighter, and light it.

I take a long drag and instantly hate it.

I don't like the smell, the taste.

I thought it would give me some clarity, a boost of energy, and some relief.

Instead, it fucks with my brain.

That's what happens when you take a break from something.

Annoyed, I put the cigarette out, toss the pack in the garbage, and slide the lighter into the drawer.

"So much for fixing things..." I mutter before my fist crashes against my desk, and a curse falls from my lips.

I suck in a long, strained breath, lean back, clasp my fingers behind my head, and plop my feet onto my desk, my gaze trained on the screens.

This is better.

Before long, I spot Boris and his men. He sits at a table, a pile of chips in front of him.

I was right.

I'll get my money back. That's not the problem, though.

A few more moments pass before I slide my feet off and reach inside a lower drawer, scoop out a new pack of cigarettes and my lighter from the top one, and try it again.

I slide the cigarette between my lips, light it, and take a drag. It doesn't feel that bad this time, so I toss the lighter onto my desk and resume my position.

With my feet up, eyes on the screen, back lining the chair, and cigarette dangling from my fingers, I look at the people in the room.

My mind wanders, going back to what happened downstairs.

Before long, the door opens, and Vito and Gianni enter the room.

We lock eyes briefly, their gaze going to my cigarette.

"I'll quit next week," I say.

My thoughts are mixed as I'm partly focused on this place and partly reliving what happened in the safe-deposit box room downstairs.

This is not only about me.

Anything I do has consequences for my crew as well.

My grip tightens on the cigarette while the two men claim their seats in front of me.

“I need updates,” I say as if nothing happened this evening.

“She’s in your suite,” Vito says.

I dismiss his words with a flick of my hand.

“I don’t want to know about her.”

“The rest is on the screens. He has a quarter million left. The money’s back as you have predicted.”

“Watch them closely. They might not be that happy to leave it on the table. Not after what happened this evening.”

A few moments pass.

I take another drag off my cigarette and blow out the smoke in a long stream.

“What would you like to do?” Gianni asks.

“You both know what I want. It’s just that I can’t do it now.”

They both nod their heads.

I continue.

“They’ll be in town for a while. And if they go, they’ll come back. Maybe. They’ll lose more money. They don’t care. He’ll get a loan from me again and put it all on the gambling table. He’ll win and give it back to me with interest. But he is not in town for nothing. Everything he did this evening hinted at that. And he’s not here to discuss territories. He’s here to destroy or take over some territories. But... That won’t stop me from making money off him before we’re done.”

“Okay,” Vito says.

“Anything else?” I ask, sliding my legs off and my elbows onto my desk.

“You said you didn’t want to talk about her,” Vito says.

“What about her?”

“Her car is in the shop, getting fixed.”

“She won’t need it. Put it into one of our garages when it’s done.”

He nods, and then we talk about something else.

Minutes later, I’m alone in the room.

I put my jacket on, empty my drink, and leave my office, heading to the casino.



CARMINA

I STARE at the view outside while the man and the woman set the guest room for me behind me.

“Do you want me to leave the lights on?” the woman asks, and I glance at her over my shoulder.

“No. Turn them off, please.”

She does that, and they both exit the room.

And then I hear them talking in the living room before their voices trail away, and soon after, there’s only silence.

The sole light in my room comes from outside, and it’s not much.

I shift my focus back to the city.

You know those times when people are convinced that everything is fixable.

And things always turn out great in the end.

Well, color me incredulous.

The only reason I don’t put my fists into the wall or scream out my frustration is that I’m numb.

How could I move away from an uncertain life only to become a fugitive and then a kingpin's captive?

And when I think about it... The man just saved my life.

My emotions are so screwed, I laugh at first at how ridiculous this sounds, and then cry because of how broken I feel over this.

I don't see how I can turn this around.

I owe Damaso my life, and because of that, I am his now.

Not only that...

Who knows how many other things I risked tonight? And who knows what could've happened had he not been around?

Would his men protect me if he wasn't there?

No. I don't think so.

I'm not even sure I'm safe with him.

Would the Russian suddenly forget about me.?

Let's be honest.

That incident wasn't only about finding me in that nook and witnessing their conversation.

I landed smack in the middle of that stupid story, but my feeling was the two men had shared animosity before.

Nobody likes nobody for real—I'm talking in real life here—let alone the people living dangerous lives in a volatile world like them.

The Russian used me to get stuff from Damaso and fuck with him.

Everybody knows you don't fuck with people like Damaso.

It's true. I, personally, haven't been so smart when I fucked with people like Beau '*Dick*' Anthony. At least, I was desperate, and that was my justification at the time.

The Russian wasn't desperate.

He acted all surprised and antsy, yet in the end, he was mostly amused. Especially when he collected the money.

I saw how Salla looked at him.

Any street-smart dick could tell you *that* was a death stare.

The Russian didn't care. Or maybe he was convinced Salla wouldn't do shit to him. I don't know if Damaso would gain anything from finishing that guy.

Maybe that's why the Russian wasn't afraid.

It may have to do with how he has positioned himself in their world.

But my fretting isn't about him.

It's about me and how I'm stuck here without a car, a plan, or a real possibility of escape.

I have to sleep on it, and maybe I'll get an idea of how to proceed tomorrow morning.

First, I need a new phone, and then I need to collect my car.

And also, I need to know what Damaso plans to do with me.

Is he going to do what the Russian wanted to do in the first place? Finish me?

Maybe not.

Because the damage to his image is already done. He stood his ground, and now he has to keep his word.

He's made a compromise to keep me alive, and now he has to find something for me to do so he can justify his unusual decision.

The thought makes me shiver.

And then, there is something else that makes me shake inside. What happened downstairs when he put his hands on me, my reaction to him, and that strange thought that my end would be sweeter if it came from him.

That's not like me.

It was irresponsible to have that kind of thought.

My life isn't only mine.

Other people depend on me.

So yes, I need to come up with a plan.

With that thought in mind, I head to the bathroom, and an hour later, I walk out wrapped in my bathrobe.

I can't sleep and already miss the balcony I had at the other place. And I miss my job.

So much so for working in the casino and making money.

Will I be allowed to work from this point on?

Who knows?

I can't sit still, so I leave my room, walk around, and check out the place.

It has a large living room and a master bedroom with a small gym in the back.

I don't dare to enter his space.

I've done enough stupid things this evening, and he hasn't been very specific about what I am allowed to do.

I find a refrigerator tucked in a room at the end of the corridor.

There's nothing in it besides water.

I grab a bottle and walk back.

Moving around my room, I locate a similar space beside my bathroom.

It has a coffee machine, a refrigerator, a counter, cupboards and drawers.

It's not what I would call a kitchen, but I find some stuff in the cupboard, like snacks, coffee, and tea.

I make myself a passion fruit tea and open a bag of mixed nuts. Snacking on roasted salted cashews and almonds, I move around my room this time, inspecting everything.

From the crisp cotton sheets to the soft rug, the large mirror lining the wall across the bed, the armchairs tucked in the corners, the coffee table, the nightstands, and the windows.

Pulling the drapes to the side, I realize there is a balcony right here, in fact.

“No way,” I murmur, happy that it’s tucked behind the drapes.

I crack the door open and peek outside.

It’s bigger than my old balcony, and the view is breathtaking and scary at the same time.

Enthralled, I take a long breath, my nostrils flaring as I look around and think about what happened.

I have to find a way out.

I have to.



CARMINA

A TINY SOUND makes it to my ears.

It sounds like chimes, but I doubt it’s that.

Half asleep, I push up and look around the room.

Swiftly, I become aware of my surroundings painted in vivid colors.

I drop back and hide my face in the pillow when I hear that noise again.

It’s like someone’s touching chimes or Christmas bells.

It sounds like a soft melody, and it must be some device going off from time to time.

The place goes silent, and my eyes feel heavy, like I’m about to drift off to sleep again.

And then I hear his steady footsteps moving across the other room. They are not loud, quite the opposite, but they are firm, and he must be sunk in thought.

I listen to him as he spends a few moments in the living room before moving away, and I can only imagine he's headed to his bedroom.

This is going to be strange as fuck.

I try not to think about it.

Well, good luck with that. The more I try to do that, the less I can focus on anything else.

This feels odd.

Minutes pass.

And then, half an hour.

It feels like an hour, and no matter what I do, I can't sleep.

I should listen to my conscience and go there and speak to him.

It must be late, and this is not the best time to approach him.

I look at the clock.

It's 3:23 AM.

No good conversation starts at 3:23 AM.

I give up and roll onto my back.

My eyes go to the ceiling.

Perhaps I should go there and see if he's awake.

Maybe he can't sleep, too.

Maybe he needs something.

Or there's something I can do for him.

My mind is made up when I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and push to my feet.

Barefoot, I walk to the door. My steps are silent as I move toward the other end of the corridor.

As I walk through, the living room appears highlighted by a subtle bluish glow.

My heart races a little as I walk down the corridor leading to his room.

I'm also a little scared. What if he's not alone? Why wouldn't he be alone?

He's not bringing women here.

Sure.

He's brought me.

More like he hadn't had a choice.

I push the door to his bedroom open.

The same bluish glow I spotted in the living room moves over the walls in his bedroom.

Sheer curtains stretch across the windows, and the view showcases pure wilderness, while all the human activity is down below.

I move my eyes to the bed.

He's there and seems sound asleep, lying on his back with his arm folded under his head.

A white sheet covers his body up to his abs.

His muscular frame is chiseled to perfection, and it dawns on me how misleading those expensive suits are, concealing that.

Tattoos crawl up his arms.

He has the face of a warrior god.

Beauty and determination are locked in the riveting tale of his face.

I move closer without making the slightest noise, mesmerized when he jerks upright like he hasn't even been asleep and automatically grabs his gun from the nightstand.

"Stand back," he barks, pulling upright before realizing that it's me.

I'm staring at the barrel of a gun, my hands up, my robe opening.

I have tiny pajama shorts and a cropped tank underneath, my legs bare, my breasts moving frantically as I try to convince him as quickly as I can that it's me and I have no intention to harm him.

"I'm sorry. It's me. I didn't mean to scare you."

Scared him?

He doesn't seem scared in the slightest while I might need to use the bathroom before I soil myself.

Shaking, I look at him while his gaze slides over my exposed front.

"I couldn't sleep and heard you when you came in," I mumble. "And then I heard some music. It's nice music, by the way. And I wanted to see if you were okay. Please don't shoot me."

My words make no sense.

He has no intention of shooting me, but I've run out of words and can't stop talking.

He places his gun back on the nightstand before crashing into the pillow.

"What are you doing here, Carmina?" he asks, covering his eyes with his forearm.

"I told you. I was—"

"What are you doing here, Carmina?" he barks, like someone who hasn't slept in a while and wholeheartedly resents late night visitors like me.

I pull the sides of my robe together and stall, not knowing how to proceed.

I take a step closer and sniff the air.

"Have you been smoking?" I ask softly, and magically, his arm slides off his face.

He tilts his eyes to me, a bit amused.

“Yes. Do you have a problem with that?” he asks, a bit fascinated with my brazenness and still madly entertained.

“No. No problem. I have no problem.”

He breaks his stare away from me, slides his arm under his head, and closes his eyes.

I don't move.

“Are you still here?” he murmurs.

“Yes. I can't sleep.”

“What do you want?”

“To talk.”

He doesn't say anything for a few good moments.

“You know... There are other places in this hotel where you could sleep,” he says.

“I'm not trying to bother you.”

“Say that again,” he dares me, and I know better than to run my mouth again.

Quietly, I kneel next to his bed, set my arms on the edge of the bed, and rest my chin on them, surreptitiously studying the tattoos on his arms and the broadness of his chest.

He doesn't move, although he's perfectly aware I'm here, sitting on my knees on the floor, looking at him.

“I know what you did for me,” I say.

“You do...” he throws at me coldly, skepticism tinging his voice.

“Yes. Yes, I do. And I know you've considered all the options, including getting rid of me.”

I suck in a clipped breath.

“I also know that all the options can be back on the table at any given time. And you might need to get rid of me, anyway. Whether you want it or not. I know it's a sacrifice.”

He opens his eyes and tilts his gaze in my direction.

Our eyes lock.

“You have no idea how much I regret that I have no control over my life,” I say quietly, tears sliding over my eyes, blurring my vision. “Every little thing that happened to me since I came here was the opposite of what I wanted. I don’t want to bore you...” I say, lifting my head, trying to pull back.

“You don’t,” he says. “Go on.”

“I want to work because my situation is dire at home. I know Anthony and his crew are looking for my friend back home. They’re not after her. They’re after my little sister. My younger sister. I’ve been trying to protect her and keep her out of harm’s way. It doesn’t always work the way I want it. And as you can see, life fucks with me every time I try to accomplish something. My friend in LA thinks he wanted to get his hands on me and sell me to some human trafficker. Like that man. The Russian. I don’t know why these people do what they do. What I wanted to say is that... I don’t care what happens to me. I just don’t want something bad to happen to my sister. And the other thing is... If you decide that you need to take me out. I’d rather be taken out by you than be exploited and demeaned by them. That’s all I had to say...” I murmur, pulling up when his hand comes to my wrist and locks it.

He reads my eyes while I look at him, surprised.

“You shouldn’t have been there, Carmina.”

His tight grip hurts me.

“I didn’t want to. I swear. I got lost and—”

He flicks his hand up, and I turn to stone.

“It doesn’t matter how you got there. The outcome is the same,” he says, on his back again, his fingers wrapped around my wrist, his other hand brushing over his face, his expression torn.

“Are you going to kill me?” I ask seriously, strangely not afraid.

“I can’t kill you now, can I?” he tosses at me, looking straight at me.

His gaze moves over my face.

“Why?”

“Because I stood up to him and bought you back. It would make me look weak, and people would be suspicious of my intentions. The thing is, both options made me look bad, and I picked the one that kept you alive.”

“I’m sorry.”

His teeth clench, and a muscle pulses in his jaw.

“Stop saying that. I don’t want to hear that word from you again.”

Biting my lip, I nod in agreement, although disagreement soars through my blood.

I sincerely didn’t want that to happen. And I had a lot to lose, too.

“Is there anything I can do to straighten things up?”

“There is nothing you can do. You’ll work for me from now on.”

Goosebumps pop on my skin.

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I just said. You’re working for me now. You do whatever I say, no questions asked. You swear loyalty to me and only me. You never talk to anyone, and no matter what happens, you always have my interests at heart. You become my shadow and never disregard my orders, or I’ll forget I wanted to keep you alive at some point.”

I look at him without blinking.

“You have no choice. Really,” he says. “I can’t let you go. Even if I do, people will come after you and kill you. Or, depending on how you look at it, do something much worse to you.”

I ponder for a few seconds.

“I need a new phone and my car.”

“You can’t have any of them,” he says, letting go of me.

My blood starts moving again, as my blood vessels are no longer collapsed, and the pins and needles sensation begins to subside in my hand.

“I need to stay in touch with my sister. You don’t understand.”

He cocks an eyebrow at me, and I feel like I’m not grateful.

As if he’s done enough for me already by sparing me my life, and now I’m asking him for more.

This is not something he wants to discuss with me right now.

And this is not something I can let go of.

“I’ll do everything you want me to. I’ll even kill people if you think I’m fit for that job.”

There’s a shred of self-deprecating humor in my voice that doesn’t surface, though.

“But I can’t let her be abducted and trafficked in my place. Also, my father is not much better. He sucks at being a human being. He won’t sell her to other people, but—”

“I need to sleep,” he just me off. “And I suggest you do the same. We’ll wake up early.”

“Do I get paid?”

“Go to sleep, Carmina.”

The way my name has rolled off his lips hints at more than him being frustrated with me.

He could barely unclench his teeth to speak, and my name weighed heavy on his lips.

Seemingly, I’m more than a headache for him.

“Okay. I’ll go. How do you want me to dress?”

“You were dressed just fine this evening,” he murmurs, rolling onto his side.

I pull away from his bed and look at his back. A canvas of muscles defines his V-shaped torso.

“I’ll be your everything, Damaso.”

“Go,” he says, tucking his arm under his head and trying to sleep.

His voice is no longer angry, as if he’s given it some thought and got used to the idea that he’s stuck with me.

And I don’t know why, but that thought makes me smile.

Like a shadow, I slide down the corridor and enter my room.

Moments later, I tuck myself under the covers and swiftly fall asleep.

C ARMINA

THE NOISE in the other room wakes me.

I jump up and check the time. It's six o'clock in the morning.

I press my ear against the wall.

There are people in the living room.

Without wasting another moment, I dash to the bathroom and get ready.

I shower, wash my hair, blow-dry my hair, curl my hair, and pull on a dress similar to the one I wore last night.

It takes me five minutes to put on my makeup. Lipstick, eyeliner, and mascara.

My cheeks are naturally flushed from the effort.

Moments later, I slide my heels on and walk out of the room. By the time I reach the living room, the place is empty.

Shit.

Have I messed it up already?

It would really help to have a phone and communicate with my boss.

I head to the door.

“Where are you going?” a voice thunders behind me.

I spin around, my hair moving down my back.

“Oh. You’re here,” I say, and then I stop, thunderstruck.

He wears a three-piece gray suit, a white shirt, and black tie and shoes. He has a metallic watch around his wrist and a silver or platinum ring on his right hand.

“What happened?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

“You seem spooked.”

“I’m not spooked.”

He pushes his gaze down, taking inventory of my dress and shoes. I remember how he moved his fingers over the same parts of my body he’s scanning now, and I tense up.

I don’t know if he can tell.

“Did you have breakfast?” he asks, pulling me out of my head.

“I don’t eat breakfast.”

“Perfect. That makes two of us. Let’s go. I need to take care of some business.”

My ears perk up, and I’m eager to ask a question.

Before I can open my mouth, he wags his finger at me.

“Remember what I said last night,” he says, and I clamp up before I talk again.

“I didn’t want to say anything.”

“Keep it that way.”

With that, I shut my mouth and follow him out of the room.

He wasn’t joking when he said I would become his shadow.

I am his secretary, event planner, office manager, delivery person, and communications specialist.

I'm far from being good at any of these and wing it most of the time, but I'm learning fast.

As fast as someone would learn if they wanted to stay alive.

Which is really fast in my case.

This part of Damaso's business is like any other business.

It's where I've been hired initially.

This is about the hotel resort, the restaurant, the casino, the transportation company, the bars. The employees and the guests.

It's the opposite of what I thought I'd be doing, and frankly, he has an entire management department running it as smoothly as possible, but he is very much involved.

It's his business, after all, and whatever else he runs on the side is buried underneath.

Does he need me?

I don't know.

He'd done well without me before I arrived.

It's a matter of making things easier for him. In that regard, I am helpful.

He just says he needs something, and I'm on it with the typical enthusiasm of someone who doesn't know any better.

By the end of the day, I'm spent.

He also said I'd always be with him, and again, he wasn't joking.

His schedule is far from normal.

After running meetings and checking his business operations all day long, he heads to his hotel suite with me in tow.

He showers and changes his clothes while I wait for him in the living room.

Later, he walks out wearing what looks like a runway suit that could stop traffic. Black pants, jacket, shirt, and vest.

His watch, belt buckle, and ring complement his attire, while his slight stubble gives him a sultry look.

I don't know whether I'm too hormonal, but I can't peel my eyes away from him.

“Aren't you going to change?”

“Change?”

“Uh-huh,” he says, pointing to my dress. “We're spending the night in the casino. I need you to be dressed differently.”

“Yes. Uh... Differently. Give me a second.”

I zip out of the room before he has the chance to say something else.

We're spending the night in the casino.

How?

I could hit the bed right now and sleep ten hours straight. Today has been intense. What am I talking about?

Every day has been intense since I left home.

It's like I don't have time to catch a breath. And I don't.

I want to do whatever he wants me to, show him I'm valuable, and maybe ask him for a new phone again.

I rush into the bathroom, shed my clothes, shower, get out, pat myself dry, put on some makeup and butt naked, go straight to the walk-in closet.

“Put on something sexy,” he says outside the door while I'm bent over, scouring a drawer for a new pair of panties.

Startled, I push out a clipped scream.

“Aaah... Stay there. I'll be right out.”

“Are you all right?” he asks from behind the door.

“Yes, I am. Sexy... What do you mean by sexy?”

“What?”

“What do you mean by—”

The door opens, and I fall back, grabbing the first dress I put my hands on and holding it in front of me to cover my naked body.

My heart beats in the most awkward parts of my frame when he walks in, smelling like cologne and a hint of smoke.

“You don’t have the entire night to pick a dress,” he says, without acknowledging that I’m naked.

He moves away from me and walks to the other side of the closet.

He picks up two dresses from a rack I haven’t noticed.

One is black and one is pink.

They are both party dresses, and that’s news to me.

I didn’t even realize I had two categories of clothes in my closet. Were they even there last night?

“Which one?” I ask. “Do you have a preference?”

“It’s whatever you like.”

Since when?

He wants me to wear a sexy dress. That’s not for me. It’s for him. And perhaps, it’s not even for him. It’s for his entourage, his friends, and his enemies. The people in the casino. The image he projects.

Or maybe he just wants to send a message that I’m his, so the lowest and highest ranking member of his organization understand that, and no one even thinks about touching me.

Maybe I’m going too far with this.

Maybe I’m not that important.

I grab the pink dress and invite him to leave the room.

He spins around, and I stare at his shoulders before quickly putting on my panties and my dress.

I can’t believe this man was here with me only a few seconds ago.

I can't believe a big first just happened.

It's actually my second first with him.

The first one was last night when he was touching me.

And the second one just happened now when he was inches away from me, and I was hiding clumsily behind a dress.

The tension inside me only grows before lapping at my senses.

And then again.

Why am I so horny?

Why do I feel things I never thought I'd ever have the time to feel?

It's sudden warmth across my skin, goosebumps on my arms, and painful tension in my nipples.

More tension in my body, down to my abdomen.

It's growing with every moment spent with him.

It's like some weird magic happens every time he walks past me.

What is it?

Is the fact that he is handsome?

Of course he is.

Could it be possible that he can get any woman that he wants without much effort?

Of course he could.

Would I be one of those women?

No, no.

Of course not.

No?

Would he be interested...? No. Of course he wouldn't.

He just considered whacking me.

Maybe he didn't, but how far away from that point was he really?

And then...

Fucking me and whacking me are not entirely exclusive.

They can happen one after another. But he doesn't look at me in that way.

Does he?

I think I'm messing with my head.

I put the pink dress on.

It's nice and flashy. It's not something I would normally have in my wardrobe, but this is not the first time I've done something different with him, is it?

None of the clothes I've put on since I came here are part of what I'd call my regular wardrobe.

The fabric is stretchy, and so molded to my body that everything seems enhanced. The swell of my chest, the tapering of my waist, and the arching of my hips.

Or I'm horny.

My boobs seem slightly bigger, and my butt seems rounder.

Hard and round, it looks so juicy.

The heels give me those extra inches that make everything look more *'grown-up.'*

The color is vibrant but not quite bubblegum pink. I don't look like a giant popsicle, I think. And my long dark hair balances out the big blob of vivacious pink.

I walk out quite happy with how I look.

He shoots me a side-eyed glance and reaches inside his pocket.

A necklace dangles from his hand.

"Turn around and lift your hair."

I do as I'm told, and he fastens the necklace around my neck.

It's cold against my skin as I touch it with my fingers.

I don't know what to think, but for a second there, it crosses my mind it's only a prop.

Something cute you pick up at the mall.

"Make sure you don't lose it. It's about two million dollars."

My mouth drops, and I freeze as if he just put a spell on me.

I touch the big, beautiful, multifaceted pendant.

"Is this a diamond?"

"It sure is."

"Why?"

"Why is it a diamond?"

"No. Why?"

"I said no questions."

"This isn't about me, right?" I drone on, unable to stop. "I mean, not only about me."

"No, it's not."

I lift my gaze, and our eyes lock.

"You don't like that man," I say, referring to the Russian.

"I'm not in the business of liking people," he says, tilting his chin toward the door.

He likes me. Something tells me that he does.

He stayed with me that night when I couldn't sleep. And then he risked a lot to save my butt. And no matter how he tries to spin it, this is something true to a degree.

Would that save me if he needed to make me disappear?

No.

But I can't be too picky, can I?

I'm here because of him.

Annoyed that I don't move, he walks back and takes my hand.

"You've done so well today, don't fuck with me right now," he says, hauling me to the exit.



DAMASO

SHE STRUTS before me at some point as we navigate a maze of corridors, and whatever reality I have wrestled with these past twenty hours it comes back to haunt me.

I would've picked the black dress. Because that dress would've concealed most of the woman I have in front of me.

But I've already seen her dressed in black.

And I just tossed the dice by giving her another option.

She went for it, and now I stare at her as she walks in front of me. The shape of her body makes it difficult for me to stay focused.

But I knew that.

I sort of knew it and ignored it the first time she bumped into me. And then I overlooked it, thinking it wouldn't matter.

I'm surrounded by beautiful women. They are part of my business and my life whenever I need them in my bed.

I tried not to look at Carmina in that way, and yet... I can't find my way away from her. How ironic.

Fate doesn't seem to want to help us either.

When she said what she said last night, I knew she didn't mean for that to happen—her getting caught and Boris making a big fuss for nothing.

But there was one thing I'd never heard her complain about or have regrets about.

My hands up her skirt in front of the Russian.

She never said anything about that, and I had no reason to bring it up. I've never felt a woman so tense under my touch since I was a boy. Yes, women are nervous. Sometimes. Not all the time. They anticipate stuff. Some fear me, not knowing where I go, but that kind of tension, like she was absorbing every ounce of my touch through her skin... That was mind-blowing. And no matter how lightly I touched her, I could feel the tremor in her body and how she had lived on the edge of pleasure for me.

Was I hard?

I fucking was, but I dismissed my reaction because I wanted to ignore it.

I didn't want to think about her like that. Like she was a piece of meat, and my dick couldn't tell the difference.

It almost felt like it was a taboo thing to do—thinking about her body in that way and how nice it felt in my hands.

Her skin felt warm everywhere my touch had hovered.

Under her hair, along her neck, over her collarbones, and mostly between her thighs.

I could feel her pussy yearning for my touch, although I stopped inches away from it.

Of course Boris wanted her, and his best second choice was to trick me into paying him good money so I could take her back and make him go away.

We both knew that.

He set me up, and I paid up.

He'll pay for that, though.

And now I have this on my hands.

Without stopping, she glances at me over her shoulder.

I've said no questions, yet she seems to have forgotten that. Her eyes twinkle with a thousand questions.

I want her quiet because I want my dick tucked in my boxers. Not up all the fucking time.

Every time she talks, she barges into my brain, opens the door to my soul, and starts looking around.

She doesn't know what she's doing to me.

She just is the way she is.

The way she talks and walks and does and says the craziest things.

She says something now, and I see her lips moving, but the words? The words don't make it to my ears.

I nod to whatever she's asked me while my eyes go over her face and hair. What am I doing with this woman?

She's trying to run away from a bad life, and I'm pulling her into something worse.

The question is, does she have a choice?

Do I?

She moves her focus away from me while we head to the back room, where my inner circle gambles.

She looks taller, and her shape is even more enticing, while her hair is driving me wild.

I think I'm talking myself into looking at her differently.

She no longer stares at me like a little wild kitten I picked up off the streets.

My hand goes to the small of her back as I guide her to the room.

Coming from the side, Vito, Gianni, and Louie join us.

She doesn't notice them, yet they spot her right away.

Surprise slides over their faces before they realize it's her, and Vito moves his eyes to me, his gaze reading mine.

Saying...

I knew you were looking for trouble.

I was looking for trouble. And I've surely found it.

Although it had found me first.

C ARMINA

WHATEVER HE WANTED TO ACCOMPLISH, he definitely succeeded in accomplishing.

People look at me like I'm a trophy girl. I keep my mouth shut and do not move away from Damaso.

Not even an inch.

For one, the thought that I wear that expensive little thing around my neck gives me shivers.

And then, it's like that magnetic field between us has been activated once again, and my body wants to be as close as possible to his.

Now, that has proved to be an unforeseeable complication.

I can't not think about him.

And him?

I don't know what goes through his head.

He seems in control.

All the time.

His focus is on the patrons.

He talks to the people, laughs with them, and even sits down with them at a table, having drinks with them.

He doesn't pay much attention to me.

As in, you know, when two people are together.

We're not together.

We. Are. Not. Together.

He bought my butt back from some mobster, and now he's trying to convince everybody that he has satisfied his whim and has a call girl on his arm.

A pretty face.

An enviable trophy.

The last thing he wants to put out is that he has a weak spot for me or he's shown poor judgment and jeopardized his business by antagonizing some thug for a woman.

I look around the room, searching for some woman who might have some history with this man.

Former girlfriends. Escorts. Hopefully, not wives.

He never struck me as the type who'd tied the knot. As if I know all this shit.

I'm a kid playing dress-up, wearing grown-up clothes.

I'm not that young.

But I'm not that old either, and you usually learn a lot of this stuff from older people who are close to you.

There weren't that many in my case, so my knowledge is questionable at best.

Playing it by the ear is my favorite pastime.

I notice some women who might fit the profile, but nothing indicates they know him well.

He either gets rid of the women he is involved with.

Or doesn't mix business with pleasure.

Or has different arrangements for sharing a bed with a woman, like summoning them straight to his suite and them never having the chance to mingle with his crowd.

That would keep things neat and organized.

And that would fit his personality.

He's quite a riddle, Mr. Damaso Salla.

I get carried away as I remember how good he looks naked in bed.

I bet he was naked under that crisp cotton sheet.

And he didn't bat a lash when he found me naked in the closet.

We're keeping it professional so far.

If this qualifies as that.

An hour later, loud voices ring out on the floor.

His eyes flick to the entrance as his men assume positions behind him.

He doesn't flinch as our mutual acquaintance, the Russian, and his men enter the room.

Damaso cocks an eyebrow at the group without moving from his seat.

The Russian approaches us, and his first words are about me.

"Look who's here," he says, taking me in. "This must be my lucky night."

He looks at Damaso.

"You're showing her to the world," he jokes, and his goons laugh on demand like it's not the most excruciatingly stupid joke I've ever heard. "Keep this woman close, and give her a good pat down every night. She surely enjoys them."

He winks at me, stretching a knowing smile, and I grimace at him, filled with disgust.

Damaso glances at me, and I move away from my gaffe, flashing a neutral expression like him.

He nails it, by the way.

“You wanna sit?” Damaso says, flicking his chin to our gambling table.

The Russian chuckles.

“I’m not that stupid, Salla. You always win. It’s time for me to win some money, too, so I’ll sit over there if you don’t mind,” he mocks.

Damaso looks at him poker-faced, and I almost see his thoughts in his eyes. I don’t know what plans he has with the Russian, but they are not of the good variety.

Salla moves his eyes to Vito, who seems just as skilled at reading his boss’ mind.

“Have some of our people sit at Boris’ table and take Carmina upstairs.”

I stare at him, surprised.

He doesn’t spare a glance in my direction.

“Do it now,” he says quietly, and I sense the tension in his voice.

He shifts his eyes to me.

“Go with him.”

I want to ask him if he’ll come upstairs shortly.

If I’m supposed to wait for him or fear for my life.

Whatever the scenarios, they stay tucked in the folds of my brain while I mechanically rise out of my seat and, moments later, follow Vito out of the room.



CARMINA

NORMALLY, I should be happy that I’ve left the casino and headed to my room, but that’s not the case.

We reach Damaso's suite, and Vito doesn't follow me inside.

It's reassuring that the floor has so much security.

There are armed men and secured doors, and the area is inaccessible from the outside. And for added security, several other exits could be used in case of an emergency.

I enter the place and look around.

Normally, I'd also be ecstatic that it's cold inside and smells like him—masculinity and freshness—and a good night's sleep is in the cards for me.

Normally, I wouldn't spend a second thinking about what could happen downstairs.

I'd go to the bathroom, take off my clothes, spend some time in the tub, eat and drink something satisfying, and go to sleep.

But 'normally' had left my life a while ago.

Nothing is normal these days, the least of which is how I spend my nights. And as much as I would love to give in to the idea that I'm safe with a two-million-dollar necklace around my neck and a vast space at my disposition, I'm actually a nervous wreck.

I don't even dare to unfasten the necklace.

The piece has played a role in sending a strong message that I'm important to Damaso Salla and no one is to mess with what's important to the boss.

But that's not what I'm concerned with right now.

My mind spins crazy thoughts about what might take place downstairs. About guns being drawn and people getting killed.

I saw how Salla looked at Boris.

He would've slashed his throat open if his disappearance didn't create a headache for Damaso.

Maybe Boris is a necessary evil, a part of some crooked deal that may or may not make sense but comes with rules

they both need to abide by.

Whatever the circumstances, Damaso had a good reason to send me upstairs.

A sigh falls from my lips as I stare into the space in front of me and contemplate my life.

The emptiness of the place gets to me as I struggle to unwind and not care about these men.

Especially Damaso.

But, I don't go to sleep—I can't—and wait for him regardless, wearing the dress and necklace he wanted me to wear, all anxious and frazzled.

Eventually, I stroll to my room and go through every step I need to go through to make myself feel a little better.

I take my clothes off, shower, and toss on a bathrobe before lying on the bed, studying the necklace for a few moments, and sliding it into a drawer.

Nothing helps me to feel less crippled by not knowing what is going on.

Hey... As long as sirens don't blare in the distance, things must be good.

His place has no TVs or landline phones. By design, I suppose.

Regardless of how tense and torn I am, lying on the soft bed helps me drift off to sleep.

I can't tell how much time has passed when I get pulled out of my sleep by loud noises.

A door slams shut, and footsteps move across the living room.

I push upright and listen. The room goes quiet, and for a second there, I doubt what I heard was real.

Is someone in the suite?

I slide off, fasten my belt, and shuffle to the door. Slowly, I open it and look down the corridor.

I can't see much, although a light is on, and I don't remember leaving it on.

My steps are soft and silent, and my head is tilted so I can see around the corner when I get closer to the room.

Damaso is in, undoing his cufflinks, and as I look down, his otherwise crisp white sleeves are stained with blood.

"What happened?" I ask, moving quickly toward him.

"Nothing," he says. "Go to your room."

He doesn't look at me, and I quickly notice the blood dripping from his hand.

"I can help."

"Go to your room, Carmina."

I bite my lip in frustration.

"You'll get an infection if you don't clean your hand."

He flicks his head up and his eyes toward me, telegraphing me a stern look.

"Mind your own business," he mutters before moving his eyes back to his sleeve.

"I just want to help."

"I don't need help. Besides, I didn't get hurt. It's not my blood. Now go."

I sigh and don't move.

"Why are you sighing?" he asks.

"Why did you slam the door if you didn't want to wake me?"

He finally tosses his cufflinks on the table and removes his jacket.

"That's a nice jacket," I say, looking at it and thinking it's probably ruined.

"I'll get it cleaned if it makes you feel any better."

My gaze moves to his face, but his eyes don't come to mine to erase the sarcasm of his words.

"Is this about the Russian?" I go on.

Irritated by my insistence, he pivots to me so fast that he startles me before sliding his hand into my hair and pulling me closer.

I smell like flowers from the hair shampoo, while he smells like spicy cologne.

"Go to sleep, Carmina," he says in a quieter voice, tilting his head down so he can murmur in my ear. "I don't want you to be a part of this."

My legs almost fold under me when I feel him close, his breath touching my cheek.

He breaks away from me, holding his jacket, and moves toward the other side of the suite, where I hear the bathroom door opening and closing.

He doesn't want me to be a part of this?

Is that even possible?

How can I not be a part of this? I already am.

I wait for him to get out of the bathroom, although his warning couldn't be more clear.

Eventually, he walks out.

His footsteps trail the corridor and enter his bedroom, and when he slams the door, it's clear to me he doesn't want me anywhere close to him.

C ARMINA

THE FOLLOWING day

I DON'T KNOW what happened last night after I left the casino.

Some sort of a scuffle, I guess, but I have no one to ask.

The early morning hours come with bubbling anxiety that pushes me out of bed.

Tomorrow is Friday, and it's been two days since I talked to Jen and Tina.

My father will be back this weekend. If not, then sometime next week. Whatever the case, I need to call them and make sure they are all right.

I could use one of the regular phones in the hotel.

Yes, I could.

But if my father gets ahold of Jen and the information on her phone, we're all screwed.

And then, Beau is another risk.

He might tell my father where I am, and what's worse, he could do bad things to Tina.

The thought that I haven't talked to them in two days makes me grapple with swirling, panicked thoughts.

So, I wake up and craft a plan.

First, I'll do my best to please Salla, and then I'll talk to him about the things I need from him.

He's not in the suite when I wake up, and I don't have any instructions about what I have to do today.

I spend the morning in before a woman shows up around eleven.

She tells me where to go and meet my boss. Okay. I thought I was supposed to work for him 24/7.

With little time to spare, I get ready to leave.

Today, I wear a navy skirt, a white shirt, and red heels.

Moments later, I walk to the first floor, saunter across the lobby, and head to the dining area overlooking one of the private pools.

A round table with flowers and sparkling glasses, silverware, and porcelain plates for about eight people awaits there.

A woman greets me and informs me I'll be serving food.

I can't say I'm not surprised by the news.

I have nothing against serving food, but things don't make much sense to me. Have I been demoted overnight?

Last night, I played the role of a trophy call girl, and now I'm waiting tables?

In all fairness, he warned me I'd work for him around the clock in different capacities, doing all kinds of tasks.

He never said I'd only do one thing. Or that I'd be his fake girlfriend.

Strange things happen.

So basically, he's showing the world he can do whatever the fuck he wants, which shouldn't surprise me.

And that's despite paying two million dollars for me.

He even hinted two million dollars is nothing for him. The necklace around my neck is valued at two million dollars.

That doesn't mean I am important to him.

Why does it rub me the wrong way?

"What time will the lunch be served?" I ask.

The woman checks the time on her phone, and I am tempted to ask her to let me call my friend.

I actually begin to talk when voices echo behind us, and Damaso's crew walks in.

That's three people.

"You should get ready," the woman says before I have the chance to ask her a favor. "You're the only person serving food today," she reminds me.

I break my gaze away from the three men and look at her.

There's nothing else on her face.

There is no hint as to why I am the only server.

"Okay," I say and follow her into the kitchen.



CARMINA

THINGS WORK SMOOTHLY, and as the lunch unfolds, I learn why he wanted me to do this job.

This lunch is not about his regular business. Aside from Vito, Gianni, and Louie, four other sharp-dressed men join Salla.

One is older than everybody else at the table, and he is the only one who seems interested in me, so he asks the question.

"Who is she?"

They are between the appetizers and first course when the man asks the question.

Damaso answers, chewing softly.

“I bought her from Boris.”

At first, there is no reaction around the table, and then the man starts laughing, and everyone else does too.

Damaso cracks a smile.

“You trust her?” the same man asks.

I move my eyes from him to Damaso while setting the first course on the table.

His eyes lock mine briefly.

“I trust no one. But since she owes me her life, that’s a good incentive to keep her mouth shut.

More laughter rings around the table.

My jaw is locked as I move around the table and inch closer to Damaso.

His unmistakable smell tickles my nostrils as I set the plate of food down and collect whatever needs to be removed.

My skin is warm as his gaze drifts down, studying my body.

When we lock eyes again, it dawns on me he has been waiting for me to look at him.

I may not be an expert in non-verbal communication, but the man pushes my buttons.

There is no smile on his face, only genuine curiosity for me.

It fuels the tension between us that now almost feels like animosity. Where that stems from is a mystery to me.

Their lunch lasts into the early afternoon hours, and as they get ready to leave, and a few staff members show up to clean up the table, Damaso summons me to him.

“You can take the afternoon off,” he says. “And I need you with me at the casino tonight.”

“That’s it?” I ask, a bit spunky.

A flicker of interest beams in his eyes.

“Yes.”

“I need to call my sister,” I say, holding his eyes. “I can’t wait any longer. I need to make sure she’s okay.”

My knees weaken from his stare before he reaches inside his jacket, takes my hand, flips it over, and places a new phone in my palm.

“It’s a burner,” he says when I tip my gaze down. “Let me know if there are any problems with your sister.”

I look at my new phone, not believing my eyes. And then the words he just said were not what I expected from him.

My reaction is swift as I lift my eyes and simply wind my arm around his neck, push onto my toes, and kiss his cheek.

“Thank you so much,” I say, breaking away from him, my fingers gliding down his jacket. “You just made my day,” I add, smiling. “I’ll be forever grateful. And don’t forget... I’ll do anything for you. Anything,” I say, carried away and deeply touched by his gesture.

“Don’t be so quick at saying this, *gattino*, I might hold you to your promise.”

He flicks his eyes away and checks the pool before bringing his gaze back to me.

“Go swim,” he suggests, and I’m about to say I don’t have a bathing suit, when he speaks again.

“There’s a shop inside the hotel where you can buy stuff. Ask the woman at the reception to direct you there. Here,” he says, reaching inside his jacket and handing me some cash.

Brand new one hundred dollar bills. The stash is thick, and there is way more money than I need to buy a swimming suit.

I take it and look at him.

“Keep the rest. You might need it. You’ve done a great job so far,” he says, giving me a soft wink.

He surely is in a better disposition today.

“Thank you,” I say, suppressing my need to wrap my arms around his neck and thank him by kissing his cheek again.

C ARMINA

“THE PURPLE ONE and the blue one,” I say, leaning over the counter and pointing to the swimsuits displayed on the mannequins.

“All right,” the woman behind the counter says. “I thought I had them displayed in the front. “Let me get you one of each. Anything else?” she asks.

“I’m looking for a summer dress and some shorts.”

“Everything is over there,” she says, pointing to the left.

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

I peruse the clothing racks and end up with a red dress with narrow straps that tie on my shoulders, white shorts, two cropped tops, and flip-flops.

“Are you an employee?” the woman asks while ringing up my items.

I hesitate for a moment.

“Uh... Yes. But I don’t have the badge with me.”

“No problem.”

She gives me the employee discount, and I’m happy about it.

Despite all that, I opt against the blue swimming suit since I still consider it a splurge, and I walk out of the boutique with a shopping bag and a lot of cash in my pocket.

There were forty one hundred dollar bills in that roll of cash. And that's quite a bit of cash still left for me.

Having money in my pocket feels good. And I was serious when I said I'd do anything for him if I could continue making this kind of cash and make my plan work.

Once in his suite, I put my money in a shoe box, change my clothes, and head downstairs.

Clad in my red dress, flip-flops, and purple bikini swimsuit, I enter the dining area, which is now empty.

Voices ring in the background, most likely in the kitchen.

I walk past the tables set for the next lunch or dinner party and reach the pool area.

The sun dives into the water, and I can't wait to slide in and feel both against my skin.

What an unexpected treat.

I love water, and being here today feels like a miracle, so I plan to enjoy every second of it.

I pick up a towel from nearby, set my things on a lounge chair, remove my dress, and dive into the pool headfirst.

I swim underwater for a few long moments before emerging and filling my lungs with fresh air.

To say I'm ecstatic about how today has turned out to be is an understatement.

That's how freedom must feel.

I try not to let negativity get to me while enjoying the water and the sun.

Later, I walk to a vending machine and come back with a bottle of ice-cold water, a chocolate bar, peanut butter cups, and a bag of salty snacks.

Pretzels and nuts, mostly.

I lounge in my chair for about twenty minutes, eating snacks and drinking water, having the time of my life before drifting off to sleep.



DAMASO

“WHAT’S THE PROBLEM, BOSS?”

Vito’s voice vibrates in the room.

I glance over my shoulder.

Gianni walks behind Vito before I shift my focus back to the pool downstairs.

My office is way higher, but even so, I see Carmina soaking up the sun in a lounge chair with an arm folded under her head and a knee pulled up.

She wears a two-piece bikini swimsuit, some combination of dark purple and golden details, and her skin has a nice sheen.

Her dark hair fans out over the back of her chair.

She looks asleep.

I’ve been watching her for the past twenty minutes. Her silhouette cutting through the crystal clear water, her arms moving, her hair fluid.

I thought sending her away and not having her with me all the time would diminish my fascination with her.

Quite the opposite has happened.

But my fascination with her didn’t start today.

If I am to be honest, she captured my imagination the first time I met her, and things became serious after that.

There were ups and downs—of course there were—and I was furious with her. I truly was. But now that I have her with

me all the time, I look at her differently.

Last night was eventful, and I had a good reason to send her upstairs. I knew there'd be trouble the second Boris and his men had entered the room.

Whether it was with me or someone else, it didn't matter.

The Russians are trying to sabotage my business, and it doesn't take a genius to figure that one out.

He's been circling the area, seeking opportunities to weaken my position.

Sure, he's losing money left and right, and I end up collecting it, but I'd rather not deal with him.

He picked a fight with someone at the bar after Carmina left last night. One thing led to another, and half an hour later, we had a brawl on our hands.

I hate it when that happens.

It's not good for our image and my business overall because it affects my bottom line.

His shenanigans might be part of a bigger plan. And if this is what I think it is, I'll have to talk to my uncle in New York and do something about it.

She wasn't on my mind when I entered my suite last night. I didn't want to think about her.

It was enough that I observed her the entire evening.

How she held her chin high and took everything in.

How she studied the place and the other people.

How she was curious about so many things.

It was interesting to watch. I don't know what was going on in her mind. Whatever it was, she kept it for herself.

So when I got back to my place with my shirt drenched in blood, she was the last thing I had in mind.

But that changed when she came into the room.

I've never lived with someone, so having her with me is a unique experience.

And she is someone special to me because she doesn't know much about life, and her reactions are candid and unscripted.

We sounded like a married couple at some point.

Her instinct tells her to take care of things. Be concerned and all that crap. And I can't be mad at her.

By the same token, I know how vulnerable her having a pure soul makes her. And there are other things about her.

So, yeah.

Every day, I see her for what she is—a butterfly hovering over the flames of hell—and I know this isn't the place for her.

So many places aren't for her, including her home.

I watch her find pleasure in everything that doesn't hurt her.

Things can't get shittier than that.

But the more dangerous your life is, the more intense the moments of peace are.

I know that. I live like that. And that is about the only thing we have in common.

Although there may be more.

"There's no problem," I murmur when the leather couch squeaks as they slide into their seats behind me.

Reluctantly, I take my eyes away from the beautiful woman and her tiny swimsuit and turn around.

Gianni locks my eyes first.

"Got something for yourself that might pull your mind away from the Russians, Boss?"

Smiling, I lower myself in my seat.

"You're looking for trouble," I joke.

"What did I miss?" Vito asks.

“It’s nothing new,” Gianni offers. “He likes that woman.”

I gesture dismissively.

“There’s nothing to like.”

They go quiet, and there’s no way they believe me.

When I lift my gaze, they both flash knowing smiles.

“I don’t want to hear a word. She could be the biggest headache I have ever had.”

“It’s up to you if she’ll be a headache,” Vito comments.

“Yes. It is. Speaking of that. What’s her ex doing?”

“See, I knew it,” Vito says, elbowing Gianni.

They both laugh.

“Did you bet on me saying that?” I toss at them.

Vito tilts his chin down, acknowledging softly.

“He owes me money. I said you’d ask about it first.”

“It wasn’t that hard to guess. How could you bet against me?” I throw at Gianni.

“I didn’t think you’d be so obvious about it,” he says, reaching inside his pocket, retrieving some cash, and handing it to Vito.

“This is not about her.”

They don’t seem to believe me.

“It’s not,” I say again, moving my eyes to Vito. “So?”

His smile fades.

“Beau Anthony and two other men broke into the house of a Jennifer Morrow. She wasn’t home, although her car was there. They left and met with R.J., aka our friend, Joe *‘The Lizard’* later that night. They met at a secret house and didn’t walk out of that place until the next day. It wasn’t Joe’s residence for sure, my men said. And after that, they vanished.”

“They’re most likely at another ‘*secret house.*’ Who is this Jennifer Morrow? Current girlfriend?”

“No. She works at a restaurant not far from Venice Beach. Carmina Leto worked there, too.”

“So that’s her friend.”

“It looks like it.”

“Okay. Keep an eye on that guy and his reptile friend. I have a feeling they’re trying to pull this woman into something nasty. This is more than Carmina’s jealous ex-boyfriend trying to get back at her.”

My mind goes adrift as I stare blankly at the table.

“You can never tell with these people...” I murmur, having a feeling Boris and Joe Lizard have something in common.

It’s not unusual to have people gang up and try to blow up my territory.

This wouldn’t be my first war, for sure.

But it would be the first war we’ve started because of a woman.

“Okay,” I say in a different voice, regaining my focus. “I’ll see you tonight. I’m sure we’ll have fun. Any luck with that woman?” I ask, tilting my chin toward Vito.

They both push to their feet.

Vito gives me a playful smile.

“He’s making progress,” Gianni says. “She doesn’t want him because he’s not too serious about her.”

I smile.

“Serious about her? How can he be serious about her? He doesn’t even know her,” I say.

“That’s exactly what I said,” Vito murmurs, still grinning.

“You like her?”

“Mm-hmm. This might be the time to settle down.”

“You might be right about that.”

They're all older than me. Not by much, but they are.

Louie tried to get married once. The woman wasn't familiar with the Mafia life and shortly after left him.

Vito never tried to get serious with anyone. Him saying that is a first. And Gianni?

He lost his wife in an ambush. The killers were after us, and Gianni swore he'd never get married again.

He may change his mind at some point. I don't know. I don't blame him for feeling that way.

And me?

I've never thought about it. But I begin to see how certain things are not possible in the life we're living.

Even when we're trying to live like normal people do, the price we're paying if something goes wrong is way too high.

Living with the idea that we could go at any moment is one thing, but putting the people we love at risk is quite another.

"I'll see you tonight," I say.

"All right," Vito murmurs before heading to the exit and vanishing out of the room.

Gianni lingers while I go back to monitoring the pool and the woman working on her tan.

"You shouldn't think so much," he says, standing behind me while I face the wall of windows.

"What are you talking about?" I murmur, sliding my hands into my pockets.

"You know what I'm talking about."

A slow smile tilts my lips.

"Carmina Leto?" I murmur.

"Yes."

I glance at him over my shoulder.

“What exactly do you have in mind, Gianni? Do you know how old she is?” I say.

“Yes, I do.”

I break my eyes away from his and look out the window again.

“She’s barely eighteen and ran away from home. I already had to buy her back from Boris and remove her from her ex’s hands. And you’re telling me not to think too much about it? What holds me back in your opinion, Gianni?”

My voice is silent and paced.

“Is there anything to hold me back?” I ask again as he stops next to me and tips his gaze down.

I’m jealous even of him seeing her in a bathing suit. He checks her out briefly before shifting his eyes to me.

“I know she has risk written all over her face. But whether you’re trying to protect her or not, consider her too young or not, risk having your heart broken or not, you will regret it anyway. No matter how it ends, pain is part of this story. You’ll have regrets and pay a price one way or another. There is no way around it. She’s caught your eye. There isn’t much to do to change the outcome.”

I say nothing.

“Maybe you think you’re protecting her that way. Standing back and doing nothing,” he says. “I saw how she looked at you last night and how you studied her every time she looked away. She’s not broken in. I can tell that, and I’m sure you know that, too. If she wants you, I’d say go for it. Don’t waste your time overthinking everything. Go down there and talk to her. It hurts no one.”

He pats me on my back and tears away from me.

Soon after, the door closes behind me while I watch the woman in the lounge chair soaking up the sun.

C ARMINA

IT'S like someone's watching me. Am I dreaming?

I jolt out of my sleep, nervous that someone is staring at me.

Rubbing my hand over my face, I prop myself on my elbow and look around. There's no one but me.

It's hot, and my cheeks burn when I reach for the bottle of water and check the time on my phone.

I push upright and call Jen.

Good thing I memorized her number, or I'd be screwed.

It rings and rings, but she doesn't answer, and now I'm worried that something bad must've happened.

"Come on, Jen. Come on..."

My call goes unanswered, but I insist.

I'm just about to give up when someone answers the call.

The person doesn't talk, and I tense up.

"It's me," I say.

And then her voice explodes in my ear.

"Oh, damn it. You've scared the shit out of me," she says.
"I didn't know it was you. Where are you?"

“Where are you?” I ask, still very much tense.

“I finished work, and I’m on my way to your aunt’s house. I’m trying not to get killed,” she jokes.

“What?? What happened? Is Tina okay?”

“Yes. Everything’s fine. We’re laying low, although I had to go to work. It’s good that I left that night. Anthony came to my house with two men—a neighbor told me.”

“What did they want?”

“My neighbor couldn’t tell. She got a glimpse of them when they left. They looked suspicious. Tell me about it. They were in the back. Or they came from behind the house. I couldn’t make myself go there the following day, so I went there yesterday to get some clothes and things I needed. Everything looked all right. They didn’t break into the house, and my car was still there. I didn’t touch it. I’m using cabs now. They didn’t come back, and none of them came to the restaurant, so I don’t know what they are up to. I also talked to Stella. Your father comes back next week.”

“Okay... How’s Tina?”

“She’s all right.”

A smile lines her voice.

“I keep telling her you’re coming back to get her. You might need to get me too if things don’t get any better,” she jokes again, but neither of us laughs. “What’s going on with you? Is this a new phone?”

“Yes.”

“What happened to the other one?”

“Nothing. It’s a long story,” I say quietly.

“Why are you so sad all of a sudden?”

I lean back in my seat.

“It’s what you said about you and her and those idiots who came to your place.”

“You can’t control what people do.”

“I know,” I say. “I’ve made some money,” I continue. “Well, I got lucky. I’ll try to make some more and come back home as quickly as possible. How far do you think I can get with ten grand?”

“Ten thousand dollars?? Are you serious?” She laughs at the other end of the phone line. “If I had that kind of money, I’d quit my job, move someplace else, and find myself a nice guy to start a life with.”

“So you think it’s enough to start a new life?”

“There isn’t such a thing as enough. Nothing is enough, but you can start somewhere. For me, it would be more than enough. And for you, it would be a starting point.”

“Thank you for saying that. It gives me hope.”

A few moments pass as we both think about our stuff.

“Don’t lose hope, Car. Things will get better.”

I sigh.

“I also need a lawyer to help me with becoming Tina’s legal guardian. That will cost me, too.”

“You’ll do everything you need to do. You’ll see. I have faith in you. You already made some cash, and you just got there.”

If she knew.

“Did you get a place to stay?”

“I have a place to stay.”

“Is it nice?”

“Yes, it is. I can’t take pictures to show it to you, though.”

“Don’t worry about the pictures. I’ll get to see it someday.”

“Hopefully.”

“I’m sure I will.”

We stay quiet for a few moments.

“I’m on a break right now,” I say. “I’m at the pool.”

“No way...” she says, beaming with excitement.

“Yes. It’s only me here, and it’s nice. I swam.”

“Mmm... I wish I could swim right now. What kind of work do you do? And did you talk to that man? My cousin’s connection?”

She pauses.

“Uh... Yes. I did. I started as a server, and now I’m working for some boss. I’m doing pretty much the same thing. Or almost the same thing. Today, I had a table of eight. And tonight, I’ll be working in the casino.”

The silence grows, and I’m thinking about Tina and me, and the piece of jewelry I had around my neck last night.

How valuable that diamond was.

With a fraction of that value, my life would be so different.

Tina and I would have a home, a cat, and a dog. A nice car, and phones. And friends. We would go on vacation. And I could run a nice boutique like the one I bought my dress from this afternoon.

She’d go to school.

Life would look completely different.

If only I had that...

My thoughts become grayer and grayer, so I move away from that story. There’s no point in teasing myself with something that might never happen.

Moments later, we end our conversation, I lean back, and root my eyes to the sky.

I try not to think about what we just discussed, and then I have that sensation again that someone’s looking at me.

I flick my eyes to the glass separating the pool from the event room and peer inside.

The light hits the glass at an angle, and the glare makes it impossible to see inside. I struggle and shield my eyes before the doors slide open and Damaso walks my way.

I instantly pull upright and almost rise to my feet like I'm in school.

He looks away, avoiding my gaze, and I have the chance to study his appearance.

His dark hair shines under the sun, and his muscular shoulders fill the starched white shirt magnificently.

His trim waist and flat abdomen are nicely emphasized by his tailored pants and narrow belt that is fastened with a shiny buckle.

His sleeves are rolled up, and his tanned forearms are on full display.

The sun makes his wristwatch gleam as he walks toward me, the bright light highlighting his tanned skin, raven hair, and the artistic edges of his tattoos.

I have a feeling he purposely evades my eyes, and he might be doing it because he has something to hide.

I'm curious, so I keep my stare glued to his face.

He edges closer and finally brings his eyes to me.

They narrow against the sun and hold a look that's different than what I routinely see on him.

"Things all right?" I ask when he pulls an armchair closer like we're about to have a talk.

"Yeah, yeah..." he says, although a shred of tension is woven in his voice.

My eyes slide to his chest since his shirt is open at the neckline.

His skin is smooth over his pecs.

"I saw you talking on the phone. Is everything all right?" he asks, gesturing at my phone.

"Yes. Everything is fine."

"Your sister?"

"She's fine, too."

My voice is less upbeat this time, and my eyes trail away from his.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. She misses me. And I miss her too,” I say, bringing my eyes back to him, and I catch him looking at my body.

Suddenly, my swimsuit feels too small, covering too little, and his eyes are way more powerful than the sun, creating a small outburst of thermal energy across my skin.

I get hot in a weird way. Something that is very unfamiliar to me, and it doesn't help that he looks away.

When he does that, I want his eyes to come back to my body and undress me. Even more than I'm already undressed.

I don't only want his eyes.

My gaze tilts to his hands. The same hands that he moved over my body when he parted my thighs that night with his touch and grazed the side of my breasts with his fingers.

Everything he did to me is still carefully preserved in my memory next to a beautiful image of him. A snapshot of how he is right now

Sexy, powerful, and dressed to impress.

Suddenly, he's out of words, or maybe he's having a hard time keeping his eyes away from the small triangle of fabric between my thighs and the matching triangles concealing my breasts.

The wind blows, and my hair swoops over my face.

His hand comes to my cheek as I try to brush my hair back, and I get invaded by his smell.

It's so predictably sultry, and I know I shouldn't think about this.

This is not the time to get infatuated with this man.

I can't even think about him touching me. If that happened, I'd be drowning in happiness. Maybe happiness is not the word, but I don't have a better one to describe it.

What Damaso's touch does to my skin fuels something wild and dark inside me.

Something I know nothing about.

I imagine him holding me the way he did when he inspected my body the other night.

I also imagine him looking at me with curiosity, a bit of awe, and concealed lust.

The way he does it right now. Is Damaso Salla really lusting after me?

I want to believe he is.

Am I lusting after him? The attraction is there.

Every time he looks at me, my body vibrates, and things happen to my skin. Goosebumps dot my arms, and my nipples push against my bra, hard like pebbles.

My frame is tense, and my center is warm and slightly pulsing.

I've never had that sensation when a man was that close and looked at me. But they never looked at me like him.

Those bedroom eyes do naughty things to me.

The way he parts his lips like he's in awe when watching my body makes me want to be a naughty flirt as well.

I'm not doing any of that stuff, but I wish I did.

And then the way he tears his gaze away from me only to immediately bring it back as if he's struggling makes me want to feel his touch on me even more.

But this...

This is a terrible idea.

Normally, men like him would scare the hell out of me.

I'm not scared of him like that, but he is frightening in other ways. He can change me and do things to me that will stay with me forever.

And forever is a very long time.

But the story is there, waiting to happen.

I don't know if it will, but it's bubbling under the surface as our eyes meet and pull away in a hypnotic dance that makes me forget who he is and why I'm here.

It also throws a veil of forgetfulness over the other big things in my life. The changes I'm seeking. The one I was talking about with Jen moments ago.

He speaks again.

"We'll have dinner at seven and then go to the casino."

"Okay. I'll be there. Is there anything I need to do?"

He thinks about it for a moment.

"No."

And then he suddenly looks conflicted.

And I know that feeling very well since I often experience it.

With some effort, he ends our conversation and pushes out of his seat, when out of nowhere, I rise to my feet and step toward him.

We are inches apart, and I don't know what to say.

Or if I should say what I'd really want to say.

"Thank you so much for my new phone... And everything else," I murmur, not tearing my eyes away from his.

"You're welcome," he says quietly, his eyes slipping to my lips.

Mine drop to his lips as well.

And I do that without thinking, refusing to admit this might pull us onto a path we might not be able to come back from.

Falling into a trance, I loop my arm around his neck and lean closer to him.

He tilts his head down while I kiss his cheek, and then I bring my lips next to his ear.

“Thank you again,” I murmur. “For saving my life.”

I wish I could stay there a little longer, with my chest pressed against his torso and my heart filled with hope that he might react to me. And he does, snaking his arms around my waist, holding me against his frame, tilting his lips to my ear, and saying quiet words.

“We can’t do this, baby... You will hate me if we do this.”

I swiftly retreat and meet his muscular arms that don’t want to let go of me.

He wants to make sure I understand what he’s saying to me.

I don’t know what *‘this’* means.

It’s not clear to me.

Or maybe I don’t want to think that it’s not possible. But he’s right. The wisest part of me agrees with him.

Yet it’s hard to pull back, and he doesn’t make it easier by holding me in his arms and making me hot in all the wrong places.

I wish I could vanish right now yet still take him with me.

“Do you understand?” he asks, and I nod several times, more than I’d normally do to convince someone of something I personally have a hard time believing.

“I do. Yes, I do. It’s a bad idea. I’m sorry...” I say, and he finally lets go of me, and there is space between us again and a kernel of normality.

I feel like my cheeks have been engulfed in a blaze of fire when he looks down, taking me in one last time and lodging that memory of me in his brain.

It’s bittersweet, but it’s the right thing to do, and we both know it.

Without another word, he spins away, and I look at his shoulders and the back of his hair as he vanishes out of sight while I’m still pondering what he just said to me.

C ARMINA

I PUT a lot of effort into making sure I look fantastic tonight.

Maybe it's because I'm still wrestling with frustration.

Maybe it's because I'm still horny.

And maybe it's because I want to regain my dignity.

It's not like I really made a move on him—frankly, I wouldn't know how to pursue men—but his comment was more than telling.

It stung a little. I must say.

I haven't even tried to do that with high school boys.

That part of my life has never happened.

Have I thought about having sex, losing my V-card, and all that crap?

Quite a few times, but it just didn't feel right.

When the other girls were having sex, I was trying to stay alive.

So yes, it has never been a priority of mine.

Can anyone blame me? No. I don't think so.

I'm still confused when it comes to Damaso Salla and the things he does to my body. Sometimes without even touching

me.

But I'm not confused when it comes to the dress I want to wear tonight.

The black dress he'd picked the other night lies on the bed.

I put on black lingerie that is all lace and frills, and I slide my skintight dress on.

My skin is warm from the sun, and I've slathered some lotion on my legs and arms, and now I smell like bergamot and nectarines. The citrusy aroma lifts off my skin every time I move my arms.

I struggle with the zipper at the back of my dress and slide my straps in place.

Cute bows adorn the straps.

My outfit features a tailored design with princess seams, the scoop neckline outlining my chest, the cut revealing my arms, collarbones, neck, and the top of my back.

My hemline stops beneath my knee.

I use red lipstick to add a smidgen of color to my look.

I slide on a pair of fancy shoes and fasten the two-million-dollar necklace around my neck.

Before dinner, someone enters Damaso's suite, and I'm convinced it's him, so I exit my room to greet him but find Gianni in the living room.

He glances at me, expressing no emotion.

"Are you ready?" he says.

"Uh. Yes. Let me get my purse."

I spin around, rush back to my room, pick up my evening bag, and shoot one last glance in the mirror, inspecting my hair—it slides over my back in dark waves—and dress before exiting my room.

"He's waiting for you downstairs," Gianni says, holding the door for me.

"Thank you," I murmur, stepping outside.

We take the elevator down, navigate several corridors, and enter a room with tables covered in perfectly ironed linen tablecloths.

Aside from the few tables, there is a flashy bar with a mirrored wall and a stage for live music.

The floral arrangements and crystal chandeliers give it a luxurious feel, but there is no one here except for the staff and band playing on the stage.

A table is set for two.

For Damaso and me—I suppose.

Gianni walks me to the table, pulls out the chair for me, and retreats smoothly after reassuring me Damaso will be with me shortly.

I order the appetizers.

I haven't had lunch, so I unfold my napkin, place it over my lap, and as soon as the food arrives, I start eating.

Damaso catches me with my mouth full and apologizes—which is unexpected—before taking a seat across from me.

Moving his eyes down, he takes me in, and I detect a hint of admiration in his gaze.

I press the napkin against the corner of my lips and swallow.

“I'm sorry. I was hungry.”

“Don't worry,” he says before signaling the staff to bring the rest of the food to the table.

Before long, we indulge in delicious food.

Spaghetti with anchovies, roasted red pepper, fresh cherry tomatoes, cappers, and nuts. Risotto with pesto and nuts, and grilled meat with roasted vegetables.

I don't touch the meat as I'm not a huge meat eater, but I go for the dessert. Chocolate tart.

The food is a nice treat—I have to say—and I do my best to eat like a lady. Take small bites and chew slowly, but the

hungry version of me is too impatient for that.

“How do you like it?” he asks, observing me.

I straighten my back and try to swallow before answering.

“The food?” I murmur, my eyes hovering over him.

The man looks fantastic. I don't know if he does it on purpose, but he makes me lose my train of thought every time I look in his direction.

He seems genuinely fascinated with me, and we spend increasingly more time alone with each other.

He also seems different when he's with me, which I understand. He must project a certain image when he's with others so people don't mess with him.

I'm not saying he's not scary. Or frighteningly powerful. He is one hundred percent that man.

I studied his demeanor and the way he leads and works the room. He is intransigent, pays attention to the details, and nothing goes past him.

He sanctions everything that needs to be sanctioned, and there is no room for error with him.

All that gives me a better understanding of our dynamic and makes me appreciate him even more.

“The food is excellent. The best I've had in a while.”

A soft smile tilts his lips, erasing the stern expression on his face.

I drink him in while he tips his gaze down, bringing his drink to his lips and avoiding my stare.

“What's the problem with your father?” he asks, and I'm not ready to give him an honest answer.

I refused to talk about my father in the past, and I'm not more comfortable doing it now.

“I know you don't want to talk about him, but I'd like to know.”

His voice is calm and firm, suggesting he expects an answer.

How could I give him one?

I've lived in shame my whole life because my family was how it was.

I was convinced it was my fault and had to do with something I had done. I feel less even now because of how my father treated me and my sister.

I don't have time to analyze my feelings toward my father.

The only two things I know are that I don't like to talk about him and want to get away from him and never have to deal with him again.

I look down, pondering.

What can I tell him?

"I don't think my situation is that rare. Maybe it's not common, but it's happened to other people too."

The introduction is for me more than it is for him.

He listens attentively while I struggle to say more.

"He has neglected us—me and my sister—and threatened us many times that he would harm us and throw us out. I just want to make sure his threats never become reality," I say evenly.

"Where is your sister?" he asks, his eyes tipped down for a second.

"She's staying with a relative. She's safe for now," I say. "I just need to..."

I stop, realizing this is where things get complicated.

If I tell him the entire story, I must tell him I'll leave as soon as I get more money.

"Yes?"

"Nothing. I told you I don't want to talk about it. It makes me feel bad."

He studies me for a few moments before checking the time on his watch.

“We need to go,” he murmurs before rising to his feet and offering me his hand. “They’re waiting for us in the casino.”



DAMASO

WHEN I WALK with her in the casino, time stops, people freeze, and the animation fades, everything becoming a muted scene with no life in it.

I used to get all the eyes in the room when I walked in.

I get them now, too, but not before they take her in first.

Carmina has no idea what’s going on.

Her cheeks are flushed. Maybe it’s from the sun today, or maybe it’s from walking next to me.

Her hair and eyes steal the show.

I’ve never seen someone more magnetic in my life, and I’ve seen women covered with glitter, clad in sequined costumes, wearing feathers and tiaras.

I run the kind of business where magnetism is instrumental in making money.

People like to be distracted, see magnificent things, and fully experience them.

That’s what makes this even more fascinating.

The way she draws people’s eyes to herself without even knowing is astounding.

Even I’m distracted by her dress.

Not only that.

I couldn’t think straight the entire day.

The image of her almost naked in that lounge chair, with only her tiny swimsuit, her eyes gleaming, her thick lashes barely shielding her from the sun, her lips parted every time I looked at her or spoke, has haunted me these past few hours.

But nothing has affected me more than saying no to her.

She followed her instinct and came to me, and I said no to her.

Her instinct made her hug me and say words to me that helped me realize I had a soft spot for her.

'No' was the right thing to say.

I can destroy this woman.

I don't want to.

If I touch her, so many things will become impossible.

Like letting her go, for instance.

And that would be the most important one.

If I'm not touching her, I'll release her at some point, making sure she's safe, away from Boris's claws and her vengeful ex.

That scenario isn't less complicated than keeping her, except I wouldn't ruin her.

If she stays... There is no turning back.

The outcome is predictable.

We either share a life of crime, and she perishes before her time, or she has her heart broken.

Men like me don't live normal lives. They die young in brutal circumstances.

If that's not the case, they get arrested and thrown in jail. Very few live long lives and die of old age in their beds.

And those are the exceptions.

History is filled with men like me living violently and inflicting pain.

The women weaving their destinies with ours are tough and enduring, but even so, is it all worth it?

Life is hard even without doing what we're doing.

So, no, I wouldn't want to bring someone like her into that kind of life.

I haven't thought about these things before, but now I do.

She doesn't know all that.

She's too young and inexperienced, a troubled kid fighting her fate and the cruelty of life.

If we, the grown-ups, can't change a thing, what makes her think she can?

I don't know how life is outside my bubble, and I'm not interested in finding out.

It's a mixed bag of good and bad like everything else, I suppose. Something I'd do if I had to.

But I know how my life is, and she doesn't know much about that, especially how quickly it could end.

Sadly, this life is in my blood, and I have a hard time imagining myself living differently.

With that being said, it almost happened in the past with that Sicilian girl.

Maybe we needed something more for that to happen. Something we didn't have back then.

We'll never know.

But with Carmina, I do know. I'm more experienced. I know what to touch and what not to touch.

And I like this woman. I like her too much, I guess, but at some point, I'll need to let her go so she can live her life, find someone nice, and just enjoy everything.

There's no place in my life for someone like her.

And I feel bad because if there's one thing I want for her, it's her having a different life.

No more gangsters at her door.

No more fearing for her life.

No more desperation in her soul.

I want her to be safe.

But safety is relative, isn't it?

And that will probably be the most difficult thing to accomplish once she's no longer with me.

Should I try to get her ready?

I don't know if I have the time to prepare her for that kind of life.

She's already well on her way to becoming the strong person she needs to be. She's just not old enough. But she's courageous and has guts.

For now, I enjoy having her with me.

And it's strange that the more I think about letting her go back to her life, the more I want her to stay with me, know more about her, and make memories with her so I can have something to think about when she won't be here with me anymore.

Carmina Leto is a girl who stumbled into me. Fate played a role in all this, and I understand why it happened that way.

What I don't know is how to make it less traumatic for her.

I may have power and a code of honor I abide by, but I'm far from perfect.

I know who I am and what my limits are.

I may be corrupt, but she is one thing I want to get right.

C ARMINA

A LOT IS HAPPENING around me.

And I mean a lot.

There are so many people, voices, lights, and sounds.

The crowd is having a good time while I try not to stumble and make a fool of myself.

I pay attention to how I walk, sit, and speak.

Well, I don't speak much. I mostly take in the world swirling around me.

It's strange and intense at times as everyone seems to be a bad joke away from shifting from joyful exhilaration to having a nasty argument.

This world is theatrical and volatile, yet Damaso doesn't seem to be like that.

He observes everything with undisguised thoughtfulness, reading the clues and participating in the conversations, yet still keeping his cool and being reserved.

I think he's seeing what I'm seeing.

And maybe I'm learning from him to just sit and listen and, more importantly, read the room.

I furtively glance at him.

His eyes move around the room, but all I see is his magnetism. Pure testosterone flows through his blood, fueling his power over me.

Despite keeping my distance as much as I can and only having a business relationship with him, I find it difficult.

Something in him stimulates my brain and charms my heart. I admire this man, and that's a first, considering how difficult my relationships with men have always been.

I find myself looking at him, wanting to be like him.

He is not perfect and must do reprobable things, or people wouldn't fear him the way they do.

I wish I wasn't so mesmerized with him. And I wish I didn't feel so attracted to him.

How will this turn out? It's anyone's guess.

At some point, Vito approaches our table, and I notice a change on Damaso's face.

His expression goes from amusement to dark concern, and his eyebrows pull together while he asks questions before Vito murmurs words in his ear. Damaso's eyes darken even more.

It doesn't take a mind reader to realize he just received some bad news.

I read his lips as he says, '*All right,*' although nothing seems all right.

Vito straightens and makes a clipped gesture to which about a dozen men I haven't noticed in the room before move coordinately toward the exit.

Before long, Damaso pushes to his feet, and my heart gallops ferociously as something tells me he might be exposed to danger.

That's part of his life and something I need to ignore.

He seems so disconnected from the room when he pushes out of his chair that he doesn't even glance at me, yet just

before leaving, he talks to a woman and flicks his hand in my direction.

My palms get sweaty.

If something happens to him, things could also happen to me.

He strides away, and I wrestle with disappointment.

Once they leave the room, everything seems too loud.

The voices, dialogue, laughter, and music.

Even the lights are too bright.

The woman he's talked to is one of the employees, and apparently, their conversation has had nothing to do with me.

I'm left to my devices, so I entertain myself by studying the crowd.

Things don't go well, my apprehension only growing, and the citrusy drinks I frequently order and maniacally sip don't do much for me, either.

I barely feel their taste.

An hour passes before I consider going back.

I don't quite feel safe here, for whatever reasons, and the fact that I don't know what to expect fills me with dread.

The evening started so well, and now it's become a nightmare.

I search the room, looking for that woman. She's gone, too.

And then I have this foreboding sensation that something is about to happen.

Moments later, an annoying noise swirls in the room.

It registers like voices and clamor at first, and then I realize it's more than that.

Suddenly, a few people leave the gambling tables. Men. Women. Groups of people.

I don't even know who to talk to about this.

Most people seem unfazed, enjoying their drinks and continuing to gamble, while my gut tells me I need to leave as quickly as possible.

I push my chair back when a hand wraps around my bare arm, and I look up and see that woman.

“You need to leave. I’ll take you to his suite.”

She shows me to a different exit.

The noise stays behind as we follow an intricate maze of corridors to the other side of the building.

Eventually, we take the elevator up, step out, move past the bodyguards, and make a beeline for his place.

She opens the door for me and invites me in.

“Wait for him here. He left clear instructions for you not to leave this place before he returns.”

And I finally get to ask the question that’s been burning my lips.

“Is he all right?” I ask.

“He’s fine,” she says, her eyes sliding away from me.

She’s lying.

“Are you sure?”

She flicks her gaze to me, a bit annoyed. Like I’m the last person she wants to deal with and babysit right now.

She looks like she has no patience for this kind of nonsense.

“You have everything you need right here. His men can also help you in case you need them.”

It sounds like Damaso will be away for weeks.

I look at her suspiciously.

“That’s all I can say,” she murmurs in response to my questioning look. “Consider yourself lucky,” she mutters, only adding to my confusion.

“How am I lucky?”

“You’re not targeted by those people.”

“What people?”

She waves me off without answering my question.

I’m sure she thinks she’s said too much.

What people?

I’ve been targeted by people.

My ex.

The Russian.

And I expect my father to track me down and ‘*target*’ me as well. It’s not like I’m unfamiliar with being targeted.

Who’s targeting Damaso right now?

It could be anyone.

One’s relevance is defined by the number of enemies.

I promise myself not to get disheartened by this twist of events when the woman spins around and vanishes out the door.

But I’m far from pretending that nothing happened and just going about my life, removing my clothes, taking a bath, and getting ready for sleep.

Sleep is not in the cards for me tonight.

The tension in my chest and stomach tells me that.

I need to know what happens because a lot of it will affect me one way or another.

This uncertainty is a poisonous snake giving me a fatal bite.

I’m not much of a coffee drinker, but I go for a cup and put on some music before sitting at the table in the living room.

My phone is useless in terms of finding something to entertain myself with.

There is nothing on it, and no one I could call right now.

I check the time.

It's late.

Too late to call Jen.

She's probably at work, so I won't be able to talk to her or my sister.

A sigh leaves my chest, and my eyes fly to the window.

I wish I could go outside—have some fresh air.

I push my chair back and walk to the wall of windows.

Lights play outside in a magical dance of perdition. I slide the glass doors open and walk onto the terrace.

The evening air gives me a chill, and it's cooler than I expected. My eyes move to the world outside, the cars and people on the sidewalks.

I could be right there right now. Getting lost in that crowd and forgetting that I can't get any sleep.

What if I go down there?

The idea sounds crazy, especially since, apparently, I have no business being there. But... I would be outside only for a few minutes.

Half an hour, maybe.

I spin around and go straight to my room, where I remove my necklace and deposit it in the drawer before picking up a jacket from the closet.

The problem is... How do I get out?

I'm sure I can't use the elevator without running into his bodyguards.

I'll find a way.

I collect my purse and quietly sneak out of the apartment.

I turn left instead of right in the hallway, trying to avoid the elevators.

I know there are emergency exits.

They must be here, somewhere.

Luckily, the rugs absorb the noise of my heels, and before long, I notice a few doors. A couple of them are locked, but the third one is not.

I slide it open and find myself at the top of a well-lit stairwell that connects the floor to the one below.

Steadily, I move in that direction and find another door.

I open it, and I'm fairly sure this is the hallway I ran into Damaso that fateful day when we locked eyes, and I asked for his protection.

I walk down the corridor and locate that door when a weird thought makes me try it.

It's locked.

Okay.

I try to remember how we got out of here that day, or more precisely, how Beau got out when Damaso barked at him to get lost.

There was a door. Where is that door?

I move my gaze around and find the exit door.

This is it.

I'm out.

And sure enough, a few minutes later, I enter the lobby through a side door and look at the majestic entrance of the hotel.

Oh... Things don't look that great. What is this?

Black SUVs block the exit with their lights flashing. Is this the police?

Or is it the FBI?

A cold shiver sweeps my back, a strong feeling of dread swirling inside my chest.

Is this why Damaso left in a hurry and ordered me to go upstairs?

This is serious.

I freeze by the door and jolt out of my paralysis when someone's shoulder brushes mine.

The woman tosses an apology in my direction, and I mumble something back, not knowing what to do.

The wise thing to do would be to go back.

On the other hand, I feel like getting out of here and never looking back. That's probably not the best course of action.

First off, I have no idea what kind of mess I might be getting myself into. And secondly, all my stuff is upstairs.

I'm not seriously planning to get away, am I?

Then I remember the woman's words about me being lucky and not being targeted. She must've meant by the police. That's good and bad news at the same time.

It's fantastic that I'm not a target. It's not that great that Damaso Salla is a target. If he goes down, everything else goes down with him, and I'd be easy picking for his enemies.

I move away from the side door, my eyes on the cars, and later, I slide past the concierge, where a girl with a tight bun at the back of her neck keeps her eye on what is happening outside.

No one pays attention to me as I walk straight to the pool where Damaso had lunch today with his men. I don't know what I'm hoping to find here.

For sure, not answers.

The more I move away from the front of the hotel, the quieter it gets. Lights glow along the hallway, taking me to the large event room that is now empty.

I walk across, heading to the kitchen. The place is clean, with only a few dim lights glowing around.

I easily spot a back exit, which must be regularly used by the employees, and luckily, I open it and walk out without setting off the alarm.

Fresh air greets me outside, and a starry sky above.

Mmm... This is nice.

It's a nice change, and my body de-tenses somewhat.

A few cars are parked in the back, a swift reminder I don't know where my ride is.

I walk onto the narrow concrete slabs and look around, hoping for a miracle.

It wouldn't happen to find my car here, would it?

I know it's been repaired and stored away, but I've never been told where. My eyes go over the cars parked here before I notice the stairs at the end of the parking lot.

I reach that spot and look back, making sure I've scanned all the cars. And then I notice a few more parked farther away in the back.

Why would they park their cars over there when there is so much space next to the exit?

I go there, having a hard time with my heels.

Moments later, I walk past several cars.

The last one in the corner is mine.

I'm gleeful for a moment, and then the memory of that night when Beau wanted to take me back to LA quickly sobers me up.

The door is fixed, and my car looks better than it did before.

I slide my hands into my purse and locate the key.

Old habits die hard. I've been carrying this key around despite not knowing whether I'd ever see this car again.

I slide the key in, and the door opens smoothly.

They did a really good job.

The interior looks great, too. They detailed the car, and it shows.

Let's see if it runs. Of course it does. I remove my blazer and my heels and settle in my seat.

I slide the key into the ignition and start the car. The engine purrs. I love the things that work. This baby has never run so smoothly.

Even the AC works—I quickly learn—and let it on, pondering what to do next.

Maybe just having a moment by myself, thinking about what happened lately and what to do from now on.

This... Depending on so many things that aren't in my control gives me a splitting headache.

What happened tonight has put things in perspective so damn quickly.

This man.

My whole existence revolves around him.

He saved my life. Yes, he did. And people won't try to do anything to me while he's around.

Yes.

I am protected.

And taken care of, including getting some money.

Yes.

And yes.

But...

This is not only about me.

I have a plan. I need to do what I'm supposed to do.

Not to mention if something happens to him, I'm fucked.

So then, I also need a contingency plan.

Plus, the consequences of my leaving my home haven't even surfaced yet. The damage will be evident when my father realizes I am gone.

Maybe I should send the money that I have to Jen. She could use it to... What?

What could she do with it?

She can't just take my sister and leave without my father's approval. And Valentina won't be able to live permanently with my aunt.

It works for now. But depending on my father's mood, when he returns, he might drag her back.

I fold my arm over the steering wheel and press my forehead into my forearm.

I stay like that for a few good moments before realizing I need to go for a drive.

Maybe I'll come up with an idea of what to do.

Right now, I'm torn. I'm anxious and nervous on one hand. And angry on the other.

I'm not in a good mood. The uncertainty of this eventful evening only complicates things even more.

D AMASO

I PUSH the door to my office open and barge in, almost knocking a painting off the wall.

“Who the fuck was it?” I ask, removing my jacket, pissed.

Vito looks at me, his expression dark, relaying more bad news.

Some stupid dick brought the FBI to our door.

One of the things that I always do. And I always need to do. And I always ask other people to do, is not to have this kind of heat on our tails.

It messes with our bottom line and fucks everything up.

I’m doing my due diligence to prevent it, and then I get this kind of shit?

Why?

I’m paying the right people not to have FBI agents at my door.

Vito looks at me without answering.

“I can’t get in touch with my people right now. I don’t know who’s ratted us out or why.”

Yes, it could be the FBI agents who are on my payroll. Maybe they have become susceptible to blackmail.

Or maybe there is a new player in town, overbidding me. Offering more.

This is not about the money, after all. I have money. I've already given them too damn much, but I could up that sum.

This is about power.

"That Boris guy..." Vito says, his voice trailing off as he unbuttons his jacket and slides into an armchair.

"Yeah... I know." I mutter, reaching inside the drawer and going for my pack of cigarettes.

I retrieve one and put it between my lips.

Fire goes through my veins, and I'm so tense I could easily break someone's neck.

I crash into my seat and light my cigarette.

"I knew it was all a diversion," I say around my cigarette before taking a long drag and forcefully pushing it out.

"It's not only him. It could be someone else. Or maybe it's no one. Someone new is on my tail, and I haven't even gotten word of it?? Really? I need to fucking know," I thunder. "Is it some politician wanting to score electoral points? Or is it some newly appointed prosecutor? A new agent? Or whatever?" I bark, and it's unlike me to lose my cool, but something doesn't feel right.

The timing of it gives it away.

First, it was Boris.

Then there were the usual jerks distracting me and keeping me occupied, like those fucking losers planning to rob my casino.

And then the casual thug comes from nowhere.

The man who roughed up Carmina.

He's not only her loser ex. He's some low-ranking gang member slash drug dealer.

Whatever.

I know how these stupid dicks work.

They may be dumb as rocks, but boy, aren't they good at messing things up when given the opportunity?

He vanished and started to track her family down.

Maybe there's more to that story.

Maybe this is not only about getting back at Carmina now that he knows who I am.

And for sure, that Joe Lizard guy, or whatever the fuck his name is, can use an opportunity like this to claim a part of my territory.

The door opens, and five men enter my suite.

"Things are good, Boss," Louie says.

"Yeah. For now, they are. One of you go fetch Carmina," I say, my gaze tilted down as I stare vacantly at the table, my mind spinning thoughts.

There's silence in the room.

I flick my gaze up, and Vito sets himself in motion.

"I'll go," he says.

"Good thinking," I murmur before taking another drag. "You... Go out there and make sure things run smoothly. Throw out any dick who as much as thinks about doing something funny. And anyone who looks suspect gets kicked out as well. I don't have time for this," I say, gesturing at them to leave the room.

They walk out, and I head to the bar, where I pour myself a drink when the door opens, and Gianni enters the room, followed by Vito.

I read their faces.

Gianni seems frozen, but Vito's concern gives it away.

"What's going on?" I ask, noticing there's no Carmina.

"She's gone," Gianni says.

“What?”

I put my drink down and go straight to the screens.

“She wasn’t in your suite,” Vito says.

“Did you have time to go there and check?”

“He didn’t need to. I was there,” Gianni says.

“Why?” I ask.

“You said to look for clues on the FBI story.”

“And you thought about her?”

“I didn’t think about her. I just considered every possibility. And I’m not talking about her as much as the people who are after her. I don’t think she’d do anything bad to you. It would contradict everything I know about her. So it wasn’t about suspecting her of any wrongdoing. Regardless, she’s not there,” he says, his irritation obvious in his voice.

“Maybe she’s somewhere...” I say, unable to come up with an explanation, my eyes going to the screens.

I’m going back to the moment I left the casino, and I follow her every step.

She spent some time there before being escorted to my hotel suite.

Unfortunately, the security feed doesn’t capture my place.

I’m so paranoid about this type of surveillance I’m convinced it makes me vulnerable instead of protecting me.

Every access path is covered and surveilled around the clock. No one can get in without being recorded, not to mention being handled by my people.

“What about my bodyguards?”

“They didn’t see her.”

I suck in a strained breath and check another recording.

“The only way out is the secondary exit, but why would she go that way?” I murmur.

I don't want to think she'd done it on purpose. That she'd have something to do with what happened tonight.

That they got to her without me even knowing.

Maybe she called her friend and something happened to her sister.

Maybe they set her up, and she's on her way to meet her.

Maybe they set me up.

Maybe this is a trap.

A partial recording of the lower level catches her leaving the premises. She has her purse and a jacket on her shoulders. She looks like she's planned to go out.

I put my cigarette out and watch her vanish through a door.

I don't have any other view of her.

"She must've left the hotel," I say when the view of the lobby fills the screens.

I can't spot her.

I use the landline to call the concierge and talk to the woman who's worked the entire evening.

It takes her a moment to stifle her surprise, and after a few seconds of mumbling and struggling to contain her emotions, she admits she didn't see Carmina.

She was too distracted by the SUVs outside.

Fucking great.

I end the call and ponder.

"What did she say?" Vito asks.

"She didn't see her."

"Maybe she's in the casino," he says.

"I doubt it. She wasn't supposed to leave her room. That's one. And secondly, she looked like she wanted to go out."

My eyes stay on the screen until she enters the view again.

She strolls across the event room, not looking like she's trying to get away. In fact, nothing in her demeanor raises any suspicions.

She looks normal, although there's nothing normal in her roaming around.

And she knows that.

I look at the time stamp.

This happened a few moments ago.

"She's gone," I say, pushing up and yanking my suit jacket off the back of my chair before putting it on.

"Where are you going?" Vito asks.

"I'm going after her."

"Where?"

"I don't know," I say, shrugging and sliding my pack of cigarettes into my pocket.

I fucking hate this shit.

I take it out and push it back into the drawer.

They look at me when I lift my gaze.

"I don't need you."

"Are you serious, Boss?"

"Yes. I fucking am. There is so much going on right now that me going after that fucking girl matters to no one."

With that, they stay behind while I head straight to my suite.



DAMASO

FIRST, I check her room.

There are things in my head. Things I couldn't say out loud.

So, I want to make sure I was right about her and didn't lose my touch.

I walk in and make a beeline for her room without as much as glancing around.

The door hits the wall when I push through.

I first notice that everything is in order, which says a lot about her state of mind. There is no trashing anything, which usually is a sign that things are flying off the handle.

I check the nightstands, the drawers, and her closet.

A sigh of relief falls from my lips when I find her expensive necklace tucked neatly in its box. That necklace alone tells me more than anyone else could.

She's not a thief.

And she's not gone for good. I don't think so. If she is, it's not through her own volition.

I know how much she needs the money, and after tonight, she might get it if I find her, and she can prove to me that she has nothing to do with all the bad things that have come my way.

There is no easier way to get out of here than grabbing that necklace and trading it for a pittance of money that would be enough to solve her family problems.

She is not gone.

She is out—I try to tell myself.

Of all the hard choices that I have to make, she shouldn't be one of them.

I just don't want to be forced to do something bad to her.

I spin around and go through her things in the closet again. Up on the shelf, I find a shoe box, and inside, I find most of the cash I've given her.

Another sigh of relief leaves my chest.

This girl wouldn't have left without her money.

I'm glad I can cross that off the list.

Let's make sure my beautiful girl is not someone's prop, mole, or tool.

I would be extremely disappointed. And that would be a horrible ending for her if, in fact, she hadn't run into me by mistake.

If I'd been set up way before I started to think I was set up.

If that's the situation I'm dealing with, I have to say my enemies have gotten way more brazen and smarter.

Still, if she's someone's tool, she wouldn't bring all this fire onto her. She wouldn't want me to suspect something was wrong.

She wouldn't disregard my instructions.

And that brings me to my next point.

Why the fuck would she do that?

She has nothing to gain and everything to lose.

What's going on in her head?

What made her walk out? She knows she's not safe. I thought she'd known better than that.

I exit her space and go to the living room. A half-empty cup sits on the table.

All right.

She came upstairs, had coffee, and then what?

I look around the room.

Did someone call her?

Her phone is not here.

That may be a possibility, and if that's the case, the odds that she's walked into someone's trap only increase.

I notice the door to the balcony is open. I go there, trying to figure out what had gone through her mind.

I walk out, and the evening air rolls over my face. The view is phenomenal, and I wonder how much time she had spent here before she decided to go out.

Maybe that's what it was.

She couldn't sleep.

The coffee that she had didn't help her either. She must've been nervous. And then she just didn't know any better, and for fuck's sake, why did she have to leave?

A strained breath enters my lungs as I turn around and go straight to the exit.

Moments later, I replay the film of her walking out, step by step.

She didn't use the elevators, so she must've turned left.

I walk to the end of the corridor, take the stairs down, and enter the hallway.

Yeah.

I think I know what happened.

A few minutes later, I walk out of the event room and make a beeline for the parking lot in the back.

I don't need to go there to know.

She found her car and left.

Fuck.

I stare in the distance where her car has been parked when voices ring behind me.

"Someone saw her come this way," Vito says.

"Yeah. I know."

"Do you want me to go out there and get her? She can't be far."

"No. She'll come back."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Yes, I am," I say, spinning around.

“What if something happens to her?” he throws behind me as I spin around and walk back.

“She’s a big girl now. She can handle herself. If not, she’ll have to learn a harsh life lesson and never do that again.”

“Boris might get her,” he insists, walking behind me.

“He won’t. He must have other things on his mind right now.”

Without another word, I go inside and, later, head to the dimmest bar I can find in the hotel. I need a drink or two and something to take my mind off her.

C ARMINA

THE BRIGHT WORLD of Las Vegas ends where the desert begins.

If you turn your back to the city and just look into the night, your whole life has a different feel.

You forget about the angst of living and ugly people making your life unlivable at times.

I don't remember a time in my life when I felt so alone.

I miss my home, and I miss Tina and Jen. I even miss my old job with its grueling hours and rowdy crowds.

I wish I could go back to that without facing my father's wrath, but that's not possible.

And he is no longer possible.

He has no place in our lives.

I stare at the starry sky, wishing so many things for myself and Tina, most of which seem impossible.

And then I look back at the brightly lit city, and it's like staring at my destiny.

And I'm not sure I want to go back, but on the other hand, I know I can't fight it.

So I go.

After spending a few more moments enjoying the view, I make the trip back.

I arrive at the hotel around midnight and park my car in the same spot before putting my heels on and draping my jacket over my shoulders.

There's no rush in my step as I go back.

Spending the night alone in that apartment doesn't appeal to me, so I wander into the hotel and go back to the casino.

No one stops me as I enter the room, hoping to see someone from Damaso's crew.

There's no one I know.

And then, I go a step forward and start asking about him. No one had seen him. And the woman who took me upstairs is not here to answer my questions.

I return to the concierge and ask the man working there.

He hadn't seen him either. But someone else working here says he just walked into the club.

"Tonight?" I ask, not believing my ears.

"Yes," the woman says.

"Do you remember when?"

"About an hour ago."

They both give me directions on where to go, and I head that way.

The lobby is quiet, and no black SUVs are in front of the building.

It looks like just another night at the hotel.

I find Damaso in an intimate bar with round tables, low lights, and a piano player who fills the air with a sad instrumental tune.

Damaso's back is turned to me as he sits at the bar, and a scantily dressed dancer is propped against the counter, keeping

him company, or so it looks.

I edge closer and take a seat next to him.

He doesn't turn to me, yet the woman smiles and walks away.

I meet his eyes in the mirror. He is dark.

"Where were you?" he asks, his voice cutting into me like a knife.

He shifts his eyes from the bar mirror to me and locks my gaze. He has a drink in front of him and looks rough.

Like he's about to kill someone or he has done it already.

The sweet aroma of alcohol and smoke comes to me, and then his hand slides up to me.

He wraps it around the root of my neck, stares into my soul, and murmurs quietly.

"What did I tell you?"

He squeezes me a little, and my breaths are clipped.

"Don't get mad," I whisper.

"Don't get mad?"

He flashes an incredulous smile that is heavy with anger and grief.

"Don't get mad, Carmina? Did I tell you that you could go outside?"

"No."

"Do you know why?"

I struggle to suck in air, and he de-tenses his grip but keeps his hand around my neck.

"I didn't plan to go out."

He tilts his head to the side, giving me a questioning look.

"I couldn't sleep. I suspected something bad had happened and didn't know what to do."

“I left instructions about what you needed to do,” he says sternly, and it’s like reliving snippets from my past when I couldn’t reason with my father.

The memory affects me so badly that I try to tear his hand away from me while sliding off the chair.

“I need to go,” I say, my voice breaking a little. “I’m glad that you’re fine and you’re back,” I add, pulling away from him.

He doesn’t let go of me.

“Look at me, Carmina.”

I find it difficult to meet his eyes. Eventually, I do. And beyond his indisputable severity and demanding behavior, I notice something else. Concern. He’s been worried.

“You cannot pull away from me. Do you understand? This is not only about you. It’s about us. You can get picked up for no reason other than being associated with me. And it can be anyone from law enforcement to regular thugs or my enemies. This is a matter of life and death. If you do something like that, you also make me vulnerable, and I can’t afford that. Or not to take measures to fix that.”

I don’t need to ask him what he means by taking measures.

I can imagine.

“I just wanted to be by myself for a few moments. I didn’t know that I’d find my car and I could take it for a drive. It was great. I was by myself. Got a breath of fresh air. I knew I had to come back. But I wasn’t hurrying to return because I feared something bad had happened to you.”

Our eyes stay locked for a few seconds before I lean closer to him, my breasts touching his chest, my arm pressed against his.

“Do you know...?” I say quietly in his ear. “I thought about you being gone when I saw those cars—the black SUVs—and realized that bad things would happen to me, too. I’d tried to run away from all the bad things at home, and there

I was... I knew you going away would make my situation worse.”

I pause, and then I speak again.

“I need to go back home...” I say. “You can’t keep me here forever. I have to take care of my little sister. Without her, I have nothing. In the same way, I have nothing without you if you get in trouble. I can’t stop you from doing what you need to do if that’s the best course of action for you... And I’ve already told you I’d do anything for you and wouldn’t mind if your face was the last thing I saw if we’d gotten to that. But if you don’t need to do any of that... To end me... Then you have to let me go.”

His eyes glint with quiet determination before I lean to him and place a soft kiss on his lips.

He doesn’t move like he’s carved in stone, and I break away from him this time without him stopping me.

I’ve never kissed a man like him before. I’ve never kissed a man.

They kissed me, and they were boys.

My ex included.

As I pull away from him, he doesn’t move, yet the heat of his body curls around me as if wanting to make me stay.

His eyes burn like his skin, fueled by his turmoil.

“I’m going to sleep,” I say. “It’s been an eventful evening.”

I pull away from him for good without looking back, and all I feel is the heat and his clothes rustling as he rises from his seat and follows me.



I NAVIGATE the corridors with ease. Alone. Wherever he went, he wasn’t with me.

My feet take me to the elevator. I take it up, greet his bodyguards, and head to the suite.

This time, I'm ready to go to sleep.

I'm tired and can't wait to hit the bed.

The door slides open, and I walk in and make a beeline for my room.

I take off my jacket and put it on the hanger and my purse on a shelf.

The main door opens and closes.

It can only be him. But I go and check.

The corridor is empty.

"Damaso? Is that you?"

The echo of my voice trails me as I move toward the living room.

He is not there.

I enter his bedroom.

He is not there either.

What the fuck?

I get spooked.

I spin around without looking and bump into him in the doorway.

Startled, I pull back, a scream falling from my lips. His eyes burn holes into mine.

"I didn't see you," I explain my reaction.

He walks in and moves past me.

"How much money do you need?" he tosses at me.

"Excuse me?" I throw behind him.

He takes his jacket off and drops it on a chair.

"How much money do you need?"

He touches the wall, and a panel slides to the side, revealing a safe-deposit box.

“Uh... About the same,” I say without thinking. “Five more grand. It would cover the first few months.”

Standing in front of the deposit box, he punches in the passcode, blocking my view.

“What’s your plan?” he asks curtly.

“Pick her up, leave LA, and go someplace nice. A small town or something. Get lost and start from scratch. Get a job while she goes to school. Then hire a lawyer to help me become her legal guardian so she doesn’t have to deal with my father again. That’s pretty much it.”

He turns around, his eyes cold, his face unreadable. The cash seems to be more than I requested.

“You have one hundred thousand dollars. Here.”

My mouth drops.

“No way. Are you serious?”

My reaction is childish and somewhat comical. A smile even pushes to my lips, but he doesn’t even crack a grin.

“Lawyers are expensive. I wouldn’t tell them I had that kind of money if I were you. Lawyers and crooks are the same when it comes to picking your pockets.”

He hands me the money, and I stare at it, still not believing my eyes.

It’s so unexpected that my emotions overcome me.

Hours ago, it didn’t even cross my mind.

Hours ago, I thought he was gone.

Even minutes ago, I thought we’d have an argument.

I never thought he’d let me go.

Not even when I pleaded with him, I didn’t think that.

I’m still looking at the money when I speak.

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me.”

I look at him, my eyes flooded with tears.

“Listen... I don’t know what made you do that, but I’m grateful. I’ll leave tomorrow morning if that’s okay with you.”

“You leave when you want to leave. I don’t have a problem with you staying or not staying.”

“All right. I’ll do that.”

Whatever *‘doing that’* means.

I may need to talk to Jen first and then figure out when to go back. This turn of events is so unexpected I need to let it sink in.

He locks the safe–deposit box and slides the panel closed before snatching up his jacket.

He puts it on, and my heart drums.

“You’re leaving?”

He nods.

“There’s something I need to do.”

I have a bad feeling about what he needs to do, but I have no right to pester him.

The money in my hand still doesn’t make sense to me.

He’s long gone, and I’m still in his bedroom, holding it in my hand, trying to think of things I could do with this kind of cash.

Never in my life have I had so much money.

The thought makes me nervous. It makes me feel even more responsible.

I need to do the right thing and, more importantly, make sure it doesn’t get into the wrong hands.

Later, I go to my room and put it in the shoe box next to the rest.

Hesitating, I put the lid on and exit the closet before pivoting to the bed.

I ponder for a few moments, and then I turn around and walk down the corridor until I reach his room. I push the door open, walk to his bed, take my shoes off, and lie down.

This might be my last night here, and I just want to spend it here, close to the memory of him.

Something tells me he won't come back tonight.



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A Self-Made Billionaire Dark Romance

JADEN (Dark Heart Series #1)

WILD JADEN (Dark Heart Series #2)

JADEN'S HEART (Dark Heart Series #3)

LOVE IS WAR SERIES

A Billionaire Romantic Suspense

FALLEN (Love is War Series #1)

BROKEN (Love is War Series #2)

TAKEN (Love is War Series #3)

OWNED (Love is War Series #4)

WILD HEART SERIES, A Complicated (MMF) Romance

JAGGER (Wild Heart Series #1)

LOVING JAGGER (Wild Heart Series #2)

LOVING BRAXTON (Wild Heart Series #3)

WILD NIGHTS (Wild Heart Series #4)

FINDING HOME (Wild Heart Series #5)

STEEL SERIES (A Rock Star Romance)

A Rock Star Romance

Layla's Story

River Steel (Steel Series #1)

Loving River (Steel Series #2)

River's Story (Companion Books to Layla's Books)

River (Steel Series #3)

River's Heart (Steel Series #4)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shayne is a voracious reader and a prolific writer. She writes what she likes to read, and people who share her taste devour her books. Her love stories are layered, character-driven, have a dash of mystery, and a lot of depth. They feature hot-blooded men and adventurous, soulful women.

Genres:

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